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**REPORT FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN
PARLIAMENT, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND
THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS**

Equality between women and men — 2009

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1. INTRODUCTION

At the request of the European Council, the European Commission reports each year on progress towards gender equality and presents challenges and priorities for the future. 2008 was the midpoint for the implementation of the Roadmap for Equality between women and men, which confirms the Commission's commitment to promoting gender equality. The Member States mirrored that commitment in the European Pact for Gender Equality. Shared efforts have produced positive results, particularly as regards female employment, but overall progress is still too slow in most areas and gender equality is far from being achieved. More women have entered the labour market, bringing the Lisbon objectives within reach, but the quantity objective ('more' jobs) has not been matched in quality ('better' jobs). Women still work part-time more than men; they predominate in less valued jobs and sectors; they are on average paid less than men and they occupy fewer positions of responsibility.

This report is adopted in the context of a global economic slowdown¹ linked to the financial crisis, with negative repercussions on growth and employment in the EU. To confront the economic downturn it will be more important than ever to invest in human capital and social infrastructure, enabling both women and men to use their full potential. In the Renewed Social Agenda² the Commission reinforced its commitment to creating more and better jobs within the framework of the European Strategy for Employment and Growth. Gender equality is a key factor for this strategy to succeed, and a necessary contribution to responding to labour shortages and new skills needs³. Today women account for nearly 60% of all university graduates in the EU, but their percentage of science and technology degrees remains low. However, there are still barriers preventing women from using their full potential and gaining access to jobs and positions for which they are qualified. The difficulty of balancing work and family life is one of the main barriers to women's employment and career advancement. Persisting gender stereotypes restrict women's and men's study and career choices, leading to a gender-segregated labour market. Moreover, the economic slowdown is likely to affect women more than men, because women are more often in precarious jobs.

This report addresses the challenges and the policy responses for removing barriers to women's and men's full participation in the labour market. It also addresses the importance of correcting the gender imbalance in decision-making, especially as 2009 will entail major changes in the composition of decision-making structures at EU level, including the European Parliament and the Commission. Although the economic slowdown has changed the context, it is important to continue to strengthen gender equality policies. Decades of shared efforts have not only improved the situation and rights of women but also underpinned the economic and social development of our societies.

¹ COM(2008) 800.

² COM(2008) 412.

³ COM(2008) 868.

2. MAIN DEVELOPMENTS

2.1. Gender gaps

Equality between women and men is not just a goal in itself: it is a precondition for fulfilling the overall EU objectives of growth, employment and social cohesion. Increased participation by women in the labour market offers both a guarantee of their economic independence and a substantial contribution to economic development and the sustainability of social protection systems. As women are overrepresented in precarious jobs based on short-term contracts, they are more likely to be affected by the economic downturn on the labour market. It is crucial to pursue and reinforce gender mainstreaming in the area of employment and social policies, including flexicurity arrangements, and to continue efforts to remove barriers to women's and men's full participation in the labour market.

Female employment in the EU is now close to the Lisbon objective of 60% by 2010, having increased from 51.1% in 1997 to 58.3% in 2007. However, there are major differences between Member States, with figures varying from 36.9% to 73.2%. The average gap in employment rates between women and men is narrowing, and fell from 17.1 percentage points in 2000 to 14.2 points in 2007. But if one compares the **employment rate of women and men with children** under 12 to care for, this gender gap is almost doubled. Also, the employment rate of women falls by 12.4 points when they have children, but it rises by 7.3 points for men with children reflecting the unequal sharing of care responsibilities and the lack of childcare facilities and work-life balance policies.

The percentage of women employees working **part-time** was 31.2% in 2007, four times higher than for men. Although part-time and other flexible working arrangements may reflect personal preferences, the **unequal share of domestic and family responsibilities** leads more women than men to opt for such arrangements. In the EU more than 6 million women in the 25 to 49 age group say they are obliged not to work or to work only part-time because of their family responsibilities⁴.

Better reconciliation of work and private life for both women and men is essential not only to achieve gender equality, but also to reach the Lisbon objectives. The development of affordable and quality childcare facilities is vital for enabling both parents to combine work and family life. To meet the targets set by Member States for the development of childcare facilities, the so-called Barcelona objectives⁵, a lot remains to be done to achieve satisfactory levels of childcare provision, particularly for children under 3 years of age. Reconciliation policies are also important in terms of responding to the demographic challenges. The Member States with the highest birth rates are currently those which have also done the most to improve work-life balance for parents, and which have a high rate of female employment.

⁴ Eurostat, Labour Force Survey 2006.

⁵ In March 2002 the European Council, meeting in Barcelona, invited Member States to 'remove disincentives to female labour force participation and strive, taking into account the demand for childcare facilities and in line with national patterns of provision, to provide childcare by 2010 to at least 90% of children between 3 years old and the mandatory school age and at least 33% of children under 3 years of age'.

Women have also made progress in **education**: they accounted for 58.9% of university degrees in the EU in 2006 (56.7% in 2004). However, gender differences remain as regards the fields of study, especially in engineering (18% female graduates) and computing (20%), while women predominate in business, administration and law (60%). Women are still lagging behind men in the use of new technologies and have difficulties in accessing more specialist ICT-related jobs.

Women's high level of education is not directly reflected in the positions they hold in the labour market. Women are mainly working in 'feminised' sectors and professions and remain in lower job categories with less access to senior positions. **Occupational and sectoral segregation** has remained almost unchanged in most Member States over the last few years, indicating that the increase in female employment has taken place in sectors already dominated by women. A better gender balance across studies and occupations could contribute to meeting future skills and labour market needs.

One of the consequences of gender segregation on the labour market is the persisting gender **pay gap** (17.4% on average in the EU⁶), partly due to the fact that women are concentrated in less valued jobs and positions than men. Because women are more likely to work part-time and interrupt their career for family reasons, they are likely to face negative consequences in terms of pay, career advancement and accumulated pension rights. This also has an impact on the risk of falling into poverty, especially for single parents, who in most cases are women (the at-risk-of-poverty rate is 32%), and for women over 65 (the at-risk-of-poverty rate is 21%, i.e. 5 points higher than for men). Women are also more at risk in times of rising unemployment since they are more often on fixed-term contracts than men (15% compared with 13.9%).

Despite the fact that more and more women are highly qualified and the labour market participation of women is on the increase, they are still largely outnumbered by men in positions of responsibility in politics and business, particularly at the top level. The number of **female managers**⁷ in the EU has remained stable over the last few years, averaging 30%, and figures are even lower in a majority of Member States. The proportion of women directors of top quoted company boards is 3% across the EU, while one in ten company board members is a woman. There are no female governors of the national Central Banks in the EU, while they account for only 16% of the highest decision-making bodies of these institutions. This is paradoxical when female students outnumber male in business, administration and law.

In politics, there have been positive developments in most EU countries over the last decade, but progress is slow and overall figures remain low. The average share of women **members of national parliaments** increased from 16% to 24% between 1997 and 2008, but national figures range from 9% to 46%. Eleven Member States are above 30%, which is deemed to be the minimum level necessary for women to exert meaningful influence on politics. In national governments, one out of four **senior ministers** is a woman, but variations between Member States range from zero to 60% female ministers. There has been some progress within the **European**

⁶ Eurostat, 2007 (figure based on a new harmonised EU-source) – see statistical annex in SEC (2009) XXX

⁷ Directors and chief executives and managers of smaller enterprises.

Institutions, but women are still underrepresented in top positions. Only three out of ten members of the European Parliament are women.

2.2. Policy and legislative developments

One of the main initiatives in 2008 for achieving gender equality was the adoption by the European Commission of several measures aiming at supporting **better work-life balance**⁸. One proposal concerns the amendment of Directive 92/85/EEC on maternity protection⁹. The main changes proposed include increasing the minimum maternity leave from 14 to 18 weeks, in principle without loss of earnings. The Commission also proposed to strengthen the provisions of Directive 86/613/EEC¹⁰ for self-employed workers and ‘assisting spouses’ in family businesses. A Commission report¹¹ has reviewed progress in developing childcare facilities in Member States, concluding that most Member States will not meet the Barcelona targets by 2010.

Following a two-stage consultation launched by the Commission, the **social partners have started negotiations on family-related leave** other than maternity leave. Cooperation between Member States continued within the **European Alliance for Families**, which provides a platform at EU level for discussion between Member States on family policies and work-life reconciliation issues. Most Member States have recognised the importance of reconciliation policies in terms of responding to economic and demographic challenges. Several measures have been introduced, including wider availability of childcare services (Germany, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands), better leave arrangements notably for fathers (Sweden, Germany, Greece, Lithuania and Spain) and awareness-raising about the role of fathers (Slovenia).

The Commission continued to collect comparable data at EU level on women and men in decision-making, and a recent report confirmed that women remain strongly underrepresented despite positive developments¹². Several Member States have implemented measures to promote a better gender balance in leadership positions (e.g. Spain, Finland, France, Portugal, Austria, Denmark, Poland and Cyprus). An **EU network to promote women in economic and political decision-making positions** was launched in 2008 to provide a platform for exchange of good practices between existing networks at EU level.

The equal participation of women and men in political decision-making was a priority topic under the Slovenian Presidency, as part of the follow-up to the Beijing Platform for Action. In June 2008 the Council of Ministers adopted conclusions on women in political decision-making, and on eliminating **gender stereotypes** in society; this was a priority theme of the Trio Presidency programme (Germany, Portugal and Slovenia). At the end of 2007 the Commission launched a training and awareness-raising initiative aiming to inform companies, particularly small and

⁸ COM(2008) 635.

⁹ COM(2008) 637.

¹⁰ COM(2008) 636.

¹¹ COM(2008) 638.

¹² http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/publications/2008/ke8108186_en.pdf.

medium-sized enterprises, of the benefits of tackling gender stereotypes. It also runs a campaign to attract young girls and retain women in ICT-related professions.

EU legislation on **equal treatment** between women and men is also contributing to progress in this field. In 2008 the Commission closely monitored the implementation of Directives 2002/73/EC¹³ and 2004/113/EC¹⁴ and took the necessary steps to verify the timely and correct transposition of these directives in the Member States. The Commission engaged infringement proceedings against a certain number of Member States for incorrect transposition of Directive 2002/73/EC and 20 procedures remain open. For Directive 2004/113/EC, infringement proceedings for non-communication of national transposing measure were initiated against twelve Member States, seven of which are still open at the end of 2008.

The Commission is also in the process of reviewing the adequacy of EU current legislation on **equal pay** to tackle the gender pay gap, in line with the 2007 Communication¹⁵, and it has launched a campaign to raise awareness on the gender pay gap. Several Member States have addressed the gender pay gap through specific initiatives, for instance in the UK (gender duty on public authorities and Women and Work Commission), France (inclusion in wage bargaining at social partners' level), Finland (national equal pay strategy), Sweden (compulsory annual plan of action for equal pay for all companies with at least ten employees) and Belgium (annual reporting and introduction of gender-friendly job evaluation systems).

The **European Institute for Gender Equality** is in the process of being set up. Once up and running, the Institute will provide new technical assistance to the Community institutions and the Member States.

3. CHALLENGES AND POLICY ORIENTATIONS

The overall challenge is to find efficient and sustainable responses to the economic slowdown and reduce the multiple short- and long-term consequences, including on the labour market. Women's employment has been a major driving force of the EU labour market since the launch of the Lisbon strategy. Therefore, gender equality concerns need to be integrated into the responses given to these challenges, because women and men might be affected differently. Gender equality policies have proven to be efficient responses to these challenges, and Member States should continue investing in a better use of both women's and men's skills and resources, including strengthening the gender dimension of flexicurity policies.

Persisting gender gaps confirm the importance of eliminating barriers to women's full participation in the labour market. It is important to combat deep-rooted gender stereotypes which shape women's and men's roles in society and influence the gender imbalance in paid and unpaid work. The unequal sharing of family

¹³ Directive 2002/73/EC amending Directive 76/207/EEC on the implementation of the principle of equal treatment for men and women as regards access to employment, vocational training and promotion, and working conditions.

¹⁴ Directive 2004/113/EC implementing the principle of equal treatment between men and women in the access to and supply of goods and services.

¹⁵ COM(2007) 424.

responsibilities may induce women to a greater extent than men to opt for flexible working arrangements and to take career breaks, and may thus have a negative impact on their career development, income, pension rights and economic independence. Policies for promoting women's participation in the labour market must therefore have an integrated approach, including strategies for eliminating gender stereotypes and measures for improving the work-life balance of both women and men.

Gender stereotypes and difficulties in balancing work and family responsibilities also hamper women's access to positions of responsibility and leadership, in addition to visible and invisible discriminatory practices and structures. Policies aimed at promoting equal participation of women and men in decision-making processes and positions therefore need to be multifaceted and tackle the main causes of the problem. Areas where action is needed are outlined below.

3.1. Encouraging equal sharing of private and family responsibilities between women and men

Reconciliation policies are key responses to long-term economic and demographic challenges, and should therefore be reinforced to stimulate growth. A better work-life balance for both women and men requires a more equitable share of time spent on paid and unpaid work. Women's time is more tied up in domestic and family responsibilities than is the case for men. Reconciliation measures need to target men too, since the promotion of gender equality implies changes and new opportunities for both sexes.

- The development of affordable, accessible and quality care services for children and other dependants will allow more women to enter and remain in the labour market and to facilitate the work-life balance of both women and men. The potential of the Structural Funds and EAFRD¹⁶ for the financing of quality services should be fully utilised.
- Reconciliation policies need to allow for individual choices for both women and men as regards flexible working and leave arrangements. Measures such as paternity leave can encourage men to share parenting and other care responsibilities equally with women.
- Reconciliation policies need to be implemented at all levels in the workplace, so that a more equitable use of women's and men's time becomes the norm and attitudes to both women's and men's need to balance work and family life are better attuned.
- The proposals reviewing the two directives¹⁷ on maternity leave and rights of self-employed women need to be adopted swiftly by the legislator. They represent a concrete contribution to improving work-life balance in the EU.

¹⁶ European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development
¹⁷ See footnotes 9-10.

3.2. Tackling stereotypes to enable women and men to use their full potential

Gender stereotypes are cultural and social attitudes towards what is traditionally considered ‘male’ or ‘female’ roles and functions. They may influence women’s and men’s choices of studies and jobs, and may lead to a gender-segregated labour market. These stereotypes influence the unequal sharing between women and men of working time, income and family responsibilities; they also constitute barriers to women’s career advancement and appointment to decision-making positions. Combating gender stereotypes therefore means tackling the root cause of persisting gender gaps in the labour market.

- Children and young people need non-stereotyped role models of women and men in society. Discriminatory practices and attitudes should be removed from educational material and methods, teaching and vocational guidance.
- Training and awareness-raising at the workplace can eliminate gender-based prejudice and thereby change stereotyped working cultures as regards the roles and abilities of women and men, including attitudes towards women in leadership positions.
- The media, including the advertising industry, should be encouraged to transmit non-stereotyped images and content, in particular of women in decision-making positions.

3.3. Promoting equal participation of women and men in decision-making positions

An equal participation of women and men in decision-making processes is a democratic and economic necessity. In the current economic situation it is all the more important to mobilise all talents. This is not the time to waste skills and production potential because of outdated perceptions of women’s and men’s roles and leadership abilities. Findings¹⁸ point to a positive relationship between women in management and financial and organisational performance. Investing in gender balance in business and management can improve corporate governance and profitability.

- The promotion of equality between women and men in decision-making needs stronger commitment and partnership at all levels: governments, regional and local authorities, political parties, social partners, business managers, human resources teams, NGOs, educational institutions, media, men and women.
- A more balanced participation in decision-making requires specific policies and effective measures in order to succeed, including where appropriate positive action, equality plans, mentoring and targeted training. All appointments, recruitment, job and skill evaluation, salaries and promotion should be transparent and gender-unbiased. It is important to work systematically to fight against discrimination and moral and sexual harassment.

¹⁸ For instance, Mc Kinsey Women Matter Report (2007); Vinnicombe, Susan, Singh, Val (2003); Catalyst (2004)

- The collection, analysis and dissemination of comparable data existing at EU level broken down by sex must be improved in order to support the monitoring of gender equality in decision-making. Quantitative and qualitative studies are needed on the outcome of strategies put in place in the Member States, including positive measures such as quotas. The exchange and dissemination of good practice should be promoted, including the development of networks of women in leadership.
- Electoral systems have an impact on women's involvement and representation. Political parties and European and national parliaments should be encouraged, in accordance with their respective responsibilities, to take specific measures to involve more women and improve the balanced representation of women and men on voting lists and in nominations for elected offices.

3.4. Creating higher awareness and better understanding of gender equality

Political commitment to gender equality has increased over the few past years both at EU and Member State levels. However, this commitment needs to be transformed into action and progress towards gender equality in all Member States. This requires knowledge and understanding among all actors about the factors leading to gender inequalities and the mechanisms and tools for reducing them. Adequate resources and structures are vital, and gender mainstreaming capacities need to be improved. More and better communication should create awareness and make gender issues more visible and understandable at all levels of society.

- Gender mainstreaming needs to be reinforced by intensified training and capacity-building for those involved in policy-making, aiming at more efficient use of this tool for integrating the gender perspective into all policies and actions.
- The development of gender statistics and indicators based on existing data, including the integration of a gender perspective in policy analysis and monitoring, will support such capacity-building.
- Better knowledge and understanding of gender issues at all levels of society, including through communication activities, will raise awareness among both stakeholders and the general public.

4. CONCLUSIONS

This report sets out the main progress recorded in the area of equality between women and men in 2008 and outlines the future challenges. The following need emphasising in this context:

- The importance of reinforcing the positive results in terms of political commitment to gender equality and of guaranteeing the basic principles and rights of all citizens through the correct implementation of EU legislation, including Directives 2002/73/EC on equal treatment in employment, 2004/113/EC on equal

treatment in the access to goods and services and 2006/54/EC recasting seven equal treatment directives¹⁹;

- The two proposals amending Directives 92/85/EEC on maternity protection and 86/613/EEC for self-employed workers and 'assisting spouses' in family businesses;
- The negotiations initiated by the social partners to conclude an agreement on other family-related leave;
- The continuation of efforts to meet the Barcelona targets on the provision of childcare facilities and the development of other services for facilitating the work-life balance of both women and men;
- Support for the active promotion of balanced representation of women and men in the elections to the European Parliament in 2009 and the appointment of women to top political positions in the European Union institutions;

In view of the contribution that gender equality can make to growth, employment and social cohesion, the Commission invites the European Council to urge the Member States to respond without delay to the challenges outlined in this report by reaffirming their commitment to integrating the gender dimension in all policy fields in partnership with the social partners and civil society.

¹⁹ Directive 2006/54/EC on the implementation of the principle of equal opportunities and equal treatment of men and women in matters of employment and occupation (recast).