

4.2. Finally, the Committee strongly recommends that the European Union, involving workers, employers and other relevant socio-economic interest groups, make a clearly focused contribution to the follow-up process of the Social Summit by selecting for coordinated, EU-wide action, a limited number of initiatives in the fields of employment creation, the fight against poverty, and social integration. Implementation of the Summit decisions will be a matter for individual governments. However, the Summit should, and probably will, stress the significance of regional cooperation in the implementation process. It is important for the success of the Social Summit that a major group of countries, such as those united in the European Union, set an example of such cooperation in their own region. The Commission is invited to work out a proposal on the basis of existing European Union policies on employment, poverty, and social exclusion.

Opinion of the Economic and Social Committee on the 'Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women'

(2000/C 168/11)

On 27 January 2000, the Economic and Social Committee, acting under Rule 23(3) of its Rules of Procedure, decided to draw up an opinion on the above-mentioned subject.

The Section for External Relations, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 14 April 2000. The rapporteur was Ms Florio.

At its 372nd plenary session (meeting of 27 April 2000) the Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion with 116 votes in favour and two abstentions.

1. Introduction

1.1. The UN Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing on 4-15 September 1995, adopted a Declaration and Platform for Action, defining objectives and strategies for the development, advancement and equal participation of women.

1.2. Five years after the Fourth Conference, the UN General Assembly adopted Resolutions 52/100 and 52/231, convening a special session on 'Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the 21st century', to be held in New York on 5-9 June 2000.

1.3. The purpose of the special session is to assess the progress made in implementing the Platform for Action adopted in Beijing, identify the main obstacles and recommend future action to combat gender-based discrimination.

1.4. In order to assess the extent to which the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action have been implemented, the session will of necessity have to take into account the reports on the World Conference on Human Rights, held in

Vienna in 1993, which were approved at the International Conference on Population and Development, held in Cairo in 1994, and at the World Summit on Social Development, held in Copenhagen in 1995.

1.5. The Vienna Conference on Human Rights of 14-25 June 1993 reaffirmed clearly that the human rights of women throughout the life cycle are an inalienable, integral and indivisible part of universal human rights.

1.6. The Cairo Conference of 5-13 September 1994 confirmed the key role women play in development and population growth issues. For the first time, the conference highlighted the need to improve the social and economic status of women, and launch education and training programmes to raise their awareness of their rights. Better access to education, information and healthcare is the sine qua non for an improved demographic policy.

1.7. The Copenhagen World Summit (6-12 March 1995) highlighted, for the first time, the 'feminisation' of poverty, and asserted the principle that sustainable development can only be launched by means of economic policies which take social factors and, especially gender differences, fully into account.

1.8. In addition to reaffirming the fact that women's rights are human rights, and cannot be considered in isolation, the Beijing Platform for Action posits three key ideas:

We must highlight gender differences: only true equality of rights and living conditions between men and women can ensure economic growth and fair, sustainable development. Another key point is empowerment, which should not only be considered from the social point of view, as in giving women power and responsibility in decision-making bodies, but also from a personal point of view, i.e. self-fulfilment, and boosting self-confidence and skills. Mainstreaming means including a gender perspective in all actions and in all political, economic and social decisions; rather than being the objective, the gender perspective informs all government action. It is to be hoped that the social partners, NGOs and civil society organisations as a whole will provide continual input and monitoring for mainstreaming issues.

1.9. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action identified 12 critical areas of concern: poverty; education and training; health and social services; violence; armed conflict; the economy; power and decision-making; institutional mechanisms; human rights; the media; the environment; and the girl-child.

1.10. Implementation of the Platform for Action measures is the responsibility of governments and of institutional and non-governmental bodies operating at national, sub-regional, regional and international level.

2. Implementation of the platform for action: obstacles and progress

2.1. Women and poverty: the acknowledgement of the feminisation of poverty has led many governments to promote initiatives in the field of social services, and health and education, which target women who are more socially vulnerable.

The lack of equality in access to capital, resources and the labour market remains, however, one of the determining factors, and this is often aggravated by economic reform policies which rein in social expenditure. This is all the more obvious in the transitional countries of central and eastern Europe, where radical economic restructuring has led to a deterioration in the situation of women.

2.2. Education and training for women: considerable progress has been made in this area, although there has been little investment to improve education infrastructure, and in many countries there is clearly a need for root and branch reform of the education systems.

2.3. Women and health: fewer women are dying in childbirth; greater use is made of contraceptives, and more attention is being paid to specifically women's problems, especially those of older women; and programmes to reduce transmission of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases are widespread. However, research and technology still lack a gender-based approach; public infrastructure has often proved inadequate, owing to a lack of human and financial resources; the general situation has deteriorated in many states, partly because services have sometimes been privatised without guaranteeing access for the weakest population groups; instruments for safeguarding and improving the health and safety of women in the workplace are still unsatisfactory. A case in point is the fact that some governments would like to see protection standards lowered in the forthcoming revised version of the ILO's 1952 Convention No 103 on Maternity Protection.

2.4. Violence against women: many governments have introduced stricter legislation to protect women from various forms of violence; they have set up specific departments and special units for women who are the victims of violence, and have prepared educational material and prevention campaigns; women's protest and support networks are on the increase. Genital mutilation is still widespread in southern countries and in immigrant communities. There is still a lack of data about the various forms violence takes, and information and prevention programmes are still inadequate. Governments pay scant attention to campaigns to recognise various forms of violence — including genital mutilation, ethnic rape and trafficking — against women as grounds for granting political asylum. Trafficking, which targets women and children in particular, is on the increase.

2.5. Women and armed conflict: the Statutes of the International Tribunals in Yugoslavia and Rwanda and those of the International Criminal Court include ad hoc regulations, and all international humanitarian legislation tends increasingly to recognise the different way armed conflict impacts on men and women, and to adopt a gender perspective, particularly as far as refugee status is concerned. The role women play in conflict solving and peacekeeping has not yet been stressed sufficiently. Ethnic rape, although considered a crime against humanity, still goes unpunished.

2.6. Women and the economy: many governments have incorporated international provisions on the economic rights of women into national law; many EU countries are introducing provisions on parental leave, and there are now more women in the labour market, particularly in the service sector. Unfortunately, progress has not been made across the board and there are still serious inequalities in the rural sector and informal economies; and there is still a wide earnings gap between men and women.

2.7. Women, power and decision-making: Many governments have adopted policies and actions in favour of women in this area, and have launched programmes — including training programmes — to make it easier for women to be part of the political and institutional decision-making process, inter alia by introducing measures to help men and women share family and professional responsibilities. However, true equality is still some way away.

2.8. Institutional mechanisms for promotion, analysis and assessment have been created and strengthened in many countries in order to encourage equal opportunities. However, these have often been hampered by their low profile, and lack of a clear mandate and adequate resources; these institutions have often tended to be sidelined, and have no real political autonomy.

2.9. Human rights of women: Women's rights are human rights. While the various national legislations now include provisions on human rights and women, particularly with regard to marriage, work and the right to own property, discrimination does still exist. In addition to discrimination in law, de facto discrimination as a result of cultural values, traditional attitudes and ingrained stereotypes, is rife.

Ratification of the Convention for the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women continues apace, but there is still a lack of consensus and some governments are uneasy about incorporating the provisions of the Convention in their legal systems.

2.10. Women and the media: recent years have seen the growth of women's information networks, thanks to technological progress which has made it easier for women to access the media, and multiplied the opportunities to spread female culture and exchange opinions; women are still under-represented in positions of responsibility in the media world; the press is still dominated by men and puts out a negative, stereotyped image of women; in some parts of the world, pornography is on the increase. Particularly worrying is the spread of pornography on the Internet, as is the lack of computer monitoring, filter and child-lock devices.

There is still, then, a need to open up the information sector to women, both in order to involve them in decision-making, and to spread non-discriminatory cultural models. It is increasingly clear that we need systems to monitor and filter-out degrading images of women.

2.11. Women and the environment: women are currently raising their profile in national environmental policies, partly thanks to eco-training, and partly thanks to the drive to create paid employment for women. Women are still under-represented in the policy-framing and decision-making stages. It is important to stress the vital work rural women do in agri-

environmental policy, within the framework of the multifunctional agriculture provided for in Agenda 2000. The role of women has not only been recognised in relation to strictly agricultural work, but also in connection with diversification of the rural environment, whenever they use environmentally-friendly methods and promote the quality and specificity of their produce and of the services they provide.

2.12. The girl-child has only quite recently become the focus of specific attention; ad hoc policies are being formulated but there is still a lack of adequate statistics which take account of gender and age differences, and which would allow policymakers to focus on the specifics of the problem and prepare more effective initiatives. There are virtually no training and information programmes to help counter the spread of drug abuse and all forms of teenage exploitation and sexual abuse. Many countries still do not apply the international standards established by the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 32) and by the International Labour Organisation as regards the elimination of economic exploitation of child labour.

3. Europe and the European Institutions

3.1. The conclusions adopted in Geneva (19-21 January 2000) by the Economic Commission for Europe's (ECE) Regional Preparatory Meeting on the 2000 Review of Implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, reaffirmed government commitment to tackling the 12 critical areas identified in 1995. The European Regional Conference, however, looks at five areas:

1. Women and the economy
2. Violence against women and children
3. Women and girls in armed conflict situations
4. Women in power and decision-making
5. Institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women.

3.2. Starting from the premise that women's rights are an inalienable, integral part of human rights, the Geneva Conclusions refer directly to the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women, to the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, to the Convention on Children's Rights, and to the Vienna Conference on Human Rights.

3.2.1. The document recalls the various UN-sponsored initiatives which have reaffirmed the need for an equal opportunities policy: the 1995 Beijing Platform, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the 1995 Copenhagen Declaration and Programme of Action; the 1997 Commission on

Women and the Economy, and its Resolution on Women and Poverty; the ILO's 1998 Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work; and the 1999 ECOSOC Ministerial Communiqué entitled 'The Role of Employment and Work in Poverty Eradication'.

3.2.2. For their part, the Members of the Council of Europe and the European Union reaffirmed their commitment to the 1992 Directive on Maternity Leave; the 1996 Directive on Parental Leave; the Recommendation on reconciling work with family life; the Declaration on Equality between Men and Women as a Fundamental Criterion of Democracy (Istanbul, 1997), the Council of Europe European Social Charter; and the EU Council Resolutions on the 1997, 1998 and 1999 Employment Guidelines.

These are the most important steps taken by the European institutions at various levels.

3.3. During the Finnish presidency (2nd semester 1999) a report was drawn up on indicators and benchmarks for 'Women in power and decision-making'.

3.4. The Portuguese presidency of the European Union submitted a written statement to the ECE Regional Conference, committing the EU Member States to implementing the Beijing Platform for Action in full. The fact that five priority areas have been selected to be addressed at the conference does not, however, obviate the need to embrace all 12 points of the Platform for Action.

3.4.1. Significant progress has been made since the 1995 Beijing Conference. This is borne out by the annual review of the implementation of the Platform for Action, carried out by the Member States and the European institutions. It is backed up by strategies and methods to facilitate mainstreaming of gender issues — especially as regards employment policy, the Structural Funds, women's access to a career and to decision-making, and the fight against violence.

3.4.2. Moreover, indicators and benchmarks are needed to highlight the benefits and shortcomings of equal opportunities policies in the political, economic and social fields.

3.5. In preparation for the ECE Conference, the Commission drew up an information note which reviewed progress achieved in the five areas addressed by the European regional conference.

3.6. The Amsterdam Treaty made equal opportunities policies one of the key objectives of the European Union. The most important instrument for equal opportunities programmes and projects is the European Social Fund, which has directly promoted specific actions, such as 'Employment Now'.

3.7. In addition to the European Social Fund, all the Structural Funds have been mobilised in promoting equality (1996 Council Resolution 'Mainstreaming equal opportunities for women and men into the European Structural Funds').

3.8. The employment guidelines chapter of the February 1999 Council Resolution reaffirmed the need to boost equal opportunities policies within the national action plans (NAP).

3.9. One of the specific instruments adopted at Community level is the fourth medium-term Community action programme on equal opportunities for women and men (1996-2000). The programme has six objectives:

- to mainstream gender issues;
- mobilise all stakeholders to achieve equality;
- promote equal opportunities in a changing economy;
- reconcile family and working life;
- promote gender balance in decision-making; and
- create optimum conditions for equal rights.

3.9.1. A fifth Community framework programme on gender equality is currently being drafted by the Commission. The programme will take on board the Beijing + 5 review process, and will be based on the mainstreaming strategy developed at EU level since 1995.

3.10. Other Community programmes focusing specifically on equal opportunities have also had a positive impact. These programmes (Daphne and STOP) aim to combat violence against women and children, and trafficking in women and children. Information campaigns targeting women have been launched in Bulgaria and Hungary, in cooperation with the International Organisation for Migration (this is the Commission's first programme on the subject).

3.11. The needs of women also need to be included in other policies such as external relations, including development cooperation, and education and training. The Leonardo da Vinci programme on vocational training focuses specifically on promoting equal opportunities between women and men as a means of combating all forms of discrimination. The fifth research and development framework programme includes a specific budget heading for 'women and science'. Gender issues have been mainstreamed in the EU's external relations policies, and especially in development cooperation (1998 Council regulation on integrating gender in development cooperation) and human rights policies through the European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights.

3.12. A campaign to combat violence against women was launched in 1998. The campaign focuses particularly on domestic violence and seeks to raise awareness amongst the public with a focus on men, in combating this kind of violence. The campaign aims to achieve zero tolerance towards violence against women and to involve various civil society stakeholders, including NGOs, in mainly preventive action. Violence against women can also be combated through regional cooperation programmes, including human rights initiatives (Latin America, Mediterranean countries, central and eastern Europe).

3.13. A feature of violence against women is the way they are affected by armed conflict, which sees them as both victim and hostage at one and the same time. On the other hand, important Meda Democracy initiatives and projects in Cyprus, Jerusalem, the Lebanon, etc. have shown the need to boost the role of women in the peace process. In 1998, ECHO launched an international campaign entitled 'A flower for the women of Kabul'.

4. General comments

4.1. The Committee welcomes the considerable progress which has been made in the five years since the 1995 Beijing Platform. The road to full equality between women and men is still long and strewn with obstacles. The Committee would therefore like to see a strengthening of the machinery which has been set up at various levels (national, European, global) over the last few years, and calls for the existing legislative framework to be applied consistently in all States.

4.2. By adopting a coherent policy for the reform of the major international institutions such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organisation, the European Union can help these important economic and monetary institutions to shape ad hoc policies and specific programmes to combat poverty and the ghettoisation of women.

4.3. In order to achieve this, the European Union and its Member States should work actively with these international bodies to promote a strong, high-level presence of women, especially in decision-making posts.

4.4. Inequality and discrimination are not just a social problem; they are also a structural problem. Reform of the European institutions will therefore have to take this into account.

5. Proposals and conclusions

5.1. The Committee believes it is essential to boost cooperation, information and activities between the European institutions, in particular with the Council, the European Parliament and the Commission.

5.2. The European Union will have to put in place ad hoc analysis machinery (data banks, statistics, research) which take account of gender and age differences, and ensure the information is disseminated as widely as possible. Moreover, it will have to frame further actions and initiatives which take account of the trend towards globalisation — a process which opens up new opportunities for some sectors of the female population, while excluding others.

5.3. An obvious example is the take-up of new technologies. This is a vital factor in development, but could also lead to a new form of exclusion for the poorer sections of society. The Committee considers that these people should also be guaranteed access to new technologies, so that they form a real development factor and generate new jobs.

5.4. For example, migratory flows create new job opportunities for women, but since they often elude any kind of control, they also conceal and nurture phenomena such as trafficking and the abuse that goes with it. The Committee believes that migratory flows need to be monitored, as the problem has now taken on worrying proportions, and efforts to tackle it should be stepped up (via programmes such as STOP and Daphne).

5.5. The Committee believes it is essential to give due weight to improving the employment prospects of women, bridging the wide pay gaps which still exist, and ensuring that women and men are able to balance career and family life. The social partners and collective bargaining have a vital role to play here.

5.6. The Committee believes that the two-fold discrimination which can affect women from the most vulnerable sections of society, including ethnic minorities, immigrants, the young, the disabled, and those who are discriminated against because of their sexual orientation, must be rooted out.

5.7. The European Union should commit itself to ensuring that all Member States sign the UN Convention for the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women, and the Optional Protocol. A European legal framework is needed to combat all forms of violence and abuse against women.

5.8. Demographic trends will also require adequate solutions to the problem of the ageing population, taking into account the different percentage of men and women.

5.9. Mindful of the high rates of female illiteracy, especially in the EU's lagging regions, and of the fact that education is a vital factor in the development and welfare of a society, the Committee calls for more robust support programmes to

promote female education and tackle the dropout rate. These programmes should focus particularly on girls.

5.10. Equality and human rights cannot just be decreed from on high. They require the full, democratic participation of the whole of society. Consequently, cooperation with the social partners and NGOs, and with citizens' associations and organisations at various levels, will be essential.

5.11. The Committee feels it is vital that the next UN General Assembly should launch preparations for a fifth UN World Conference on Women in 2005.

5.12. Turning to its own specific role, the Committee feels that it should be included in the Commission delegation to the forthcoming UN General Assembly Special Session.

Brussels, 27 April 2000.

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of the Economic and Social Committee*
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