

Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on:

- the ‘Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions “Towards a Community framework Strategy on gender equality” (2001-2005)’, and
- the ‘Proposal for a Council Decision on the programme relating to the Community framework strategy on gender equality (2001-2005)’

(2001/C 144/14)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS,

having regard to the Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions ‘Towards a Community framework Strategy on gender equality’ (2001-2005) and the Proposal for a Council Decision on the programme relating to the Community framework strategy on gender equality (2001-2005) (COM(2000) 335 final);

having regard to the report from the European Commission on the implementation of Recommendation 96/694 on the balanced participation of women and men in the decision-making process (COM(2000) 120 final);

having regard to the Council Presidency Report 11829/1/99 of 8 November 1999 reviewing implementation by the Member States and the European institutions of the Beijing platform for action;

having regard to the decision of the Council of 24 July 2000 to consult the Committee of the Regions on the subject, under Article 265 § 1 of the Treaty establishing the European Community;

having regard to the decision of its Bureau of 13 June 2000 instructing Commission 5 ‘Social Policy, Public Health, Consumer Protection, Research and Tourism’ in cooperation with Commission 7 ‘Education, Vocational training, Culture, Youth, Sport & Citizens’ Rights’ to draw up an Opinion on the subject;

having regard to the Supplementary Opinion of Commission 7 on the subject (Rapporteur: Christine May (UK-PSE) (DI CdR 315/2000);

having regard to the draft opinion (CdR 233/2000 rev. 2) adopted by Commission 5 on 23 October 2000 (Rapporteur: Diane Bunyan (UK-PSE),

adopted the following Opinion unanimously at its 36th plenary session (meeting of 13 December 2000).

The Committee of the Regions

is still being undermined by the fact that women and men do not enjoy equal rights in practice’.

1. Strongly welcomes the European Union’s long-standing commitment to gender equality and the extension of the equal opportunities competence in the Treaty of Amsterdam.

3. Welcomes the broad strategy contained within the framework but considers that the Communication does not contain enough detailed information about the way in which the strategy is to be implemented.

2. Agrees with the European Commission assertion that ‘considerable progress’ has been made in the promotion of equal opportunities but that ‘gender equality in day-to-day life

4. Acknowledges the action taken to date by the implementation of past Community Programmes, legislation, and the development of co-operative policies which have made a major contribution towards human rights for women and feels that further action should be taken.

5. Welcomes the mainstreaming approach adopted in the Communication. The COR stresses the importance of a gender equality dimension across all Community policies but emphasises the need for the monitoring and evaluation of all Community policies in terms of gender equality.

6. Believes that mainstreaming could be more easily achieved in the European Commission if the gender Equality Unit of the European Commission was relocated to a more strategic place within the Commission structure.

7. Accepts the need for further strategic interventions in the areas of: economic life, equal participation and presentation, social rights, civil life and gender roles and stereotypes.

8. Considers that the actions and budget outlined in the action programme are inadequate to tackle the problems associated with gender equality; underlines the role of local and regional authorities, which represent the foundation of a democratic society, and which are essential to decision-making processes and the implementation of policies for equality.

9. Expresses deep concern about the small number of references to local and regional government in the European Commission Strategy and at the lack of inclusion of their actions. It should be recognised that collectively, local and regional authorities are the largest employer and has a major representative role in the European Union across all the member states. They have an important function in decision making which affects the everyday lives of millions of women and men. They have a key role as providers of education, training and economic development within the European Union and the capacity to have a major impact.

10. Regrets that the involvement of trades unions and non-governmental organisations in gender equality work has been omitted. Trades unions and NGO's work closely with government at all levels, many have research officers and facilitators and are able to bring their expertise to this work. Social Partnership working should be considered to promote and develop the strategy.

11. Generally supports the emphasis on greater opportunities for women but stresses the fact that boys and men need to be considered in the strategy; Gender equality concerns the relationship between the sexes as groups in society and it is therefore important to highlight this relationship and the conditions experienced by both sexes in all spheres of life. For instance, attention needs to be paid to the situation of young

males from social groups with low expectations for work and inclusion, along with the problem of the generally lower educational attainment of boys. In addition, the low educational attainment of boys needs to be readdressed. It is important that values and attitudes in education systems are revised to reduce gender gaps.

12. Emphasises the important role played by education and training in the promotion of equal opportunities and welcomes progress made in the training and education of women through the structural funds, Leonardo, Socrates and Women into Science programmes and recognises the need for funding to be increased and widened to ensure the continued effectiveness of such programmes.

13. Believes that many women may face other forms of discrimination, due to other factors as set out in Article 13 of the Treaty. The COR is disappointed that the new anti-discrimination programmes have not been integrated with the new gender equality strategy and feels that such links must be developed if the European Commission is to develop a mainstreaming approach.

Draft Charter of Fundamental Human Rights

14. Believes that gender equality is a fundamental human right and that this right should be incorporated into the Draft Charter of Fundamental Human Rights. The COR entirely supports the Commissions' proposals to promote women's rights as human rights in the section of the strategy promoting gender equality in civil life.

Mainstreaming

15. Welcomes the commitment to mainstreaming in the Communication and the move away from the past practice of compartmentalising activities; however, the Committee of the Regions recalls that mainstreaming can best achieve results when accompanied by positive actions. Mainstreaming policies require strong leadership, determination and the recognition of the need to address gender equality issues. All actions need to be accompanied by extensive training so that staff without a background in equal opportunities can integrate equality into their policies.

16. Considers that good practice needs to be identified and work on policies in European, national, local and regional government needs to be carried out to ensure gender mainstreaming is included. In addition, the Commission is encouraged in all areas to develop gender mainstreaming approaches which are not solely policy-based.

17. Considers that good practice may be achieved by the setting of small achievable goals, in stages, which will lead to the ultimate goal of full participation of women and men which can be obtained over a period of time and at the pace which best suits different Member States.

18. Believes that some Directorates General have made excellent progress in mainstreaming e.g. DG Research's Initiative 'Women in Science', but a determined commitment is now needed to be made by all Directorates-General.

Labour Market Issues

19. Welcomes the inclusion of equal opportunities actions in the Guidelines for the European Employment Strategy and National Employment Action Plans, and the recognition of the work of regional and local government in promoting local entrepreneurship and enterprise. However, the European Commission has identified large gender gaps in national employment policies and strategies which indicate that a number of Member States have a great deal of work to do in the promotion of equal opportunities in national labour markets.

20. While recognising the progress that has been made in the integration of equal opportunities within the structural funds, it would like to emphasise the importance of Member States annual implementation reports in terms of monitoring progress in equal opportunities.

Recalls moreover that, in spite of legislative progress, there is still a need for initiatives in favour of women in the area of employment, particularly in order to:

- obtain employment and preserve it,
- have equal access to vocational training and professional promotions,
- ensure the reconciliation of work and family life for both men and women,
- have a balanced representation in different occupations as well as among the different levels of responsibility,
- encourage entrepreneurial undertakings by women,
- have the same working conditions, notably equal pay for work of equal value,
- have a working venue, organisation and conditions that are equally adapted to women and men,
- underlines that all levels of decision-making — European, national, regional, local and intermunicipal — must

inscribe equal opportunities in their policies, particularly in the area of employment and vocational training. The use of the structural funds, and in particular the European Social Funds via the implementation of the Equal programme, should strengthen the support for local initiatives promoting this equality.

Social Inclusion

21. Considers that many groups of women who cannot be active in the labour market or are single parents, without adequate support facilities, experience high levels of social exclusion. Acknowledging that the EU is currently developing its policy on social inclusion and many Member States are refining their national policies, the COR believes that the promotion of gender equality in civil life and the equal access and full enjoyment of civil rights are important aspects in ensuring that women feel socially included.

22. Considers that policy makers should recognise the social exclusion faced by many groups of women, including those who are in the groups set down in Article 13 of the Amsterdam Treaty, and promote gender equality in policies devised to promote social inclusion. These objectives are key parts of the strategy and the COR supports the actions under these objectives. In particular, the Committee of the Regions stresses the importance of the STOP and Daphne programmes.

23. Urges the European Union to integrate equal opportunities into its revised public procurement Regulations as a way of promoting women's employment and recognises the role of women in local government in this process.

Governance

24. Welcomes the Council Recommendation (96/964/EC) on the balanced participation of women and men in the decision making process. The Commission's implementation report on this recommendation states that the under-representation of women in decision making bodies 'is a persistent phenomenon requiring long-term and multi-faceted strategies'. The commitment to funding the European Women's Lobby in the action programme is welcomed, but the Committee of the Regions feels that the framework needs to consider more actions to promote gender balance in decision-making, including the local and regional spheres of governance.

25. Recognising barriers to women's access to decision making posts at all levels and in all areas of political activity and the need to tackle the obstacles (for example lack of support, lack of information, inaccessible meeting times) as part of the strategy, emphasises that the continued under-representation of women — who constitute over half the population — in political life in all spheres of governance is unacceptable in modern democracy.

26. Acknowledges the role of local and regional government as an important point of access to decision making processes for women and urges the European Commission to instigate a qualitative examination of decision making by women and men in all spheres of governance (European, national, local and regional), to identify how women and men are impacting on decision making processes and to draw up a strategy to address imbalances. To recommend this practice to all members of social partnerships i.e. trades unions, NGO's and enterprises.

27. Calls on the Member States to fully apply the European Council's Recommendation of 2 December 1996 on the balanced representation of women/men in decision making in all spheres of governance.

28. Underlines the importance of the exchange of experience and best practice between representatives of local and regional authorities in attaining equality at sub-national level.

29. Undertakes to produce or commission a comparative study into gender-balance in decision-making in local and regional government in the applicant countries and in the existing Member States, with a view to identifying best practice and stimulating exchange of experience, to be published by mid-2001 as a contribution to the enlargement process.

Indicators, monitoring and evaluation

30. Welcomes the proposal to adopt a performance management approach in the Framework Strategy characterised by clear assessment criteria, monitoring tools, benchmarks, gender proofing and evaluation. The COR believes that these techniques must be rigorously applied if gender equality is to be a reality rather than just a policy aspiration.

Targets

31. Agrees that common indicators and benchmarking need to be developed to improve the gender balance in

decision-making at all levels, and to ensure effective and efficient monitoring, these to be determined in a staged fashion to ensure maximum participation and encouragement.

Action programme

32. Expresses concern at the limited nature of the action programme both in terms of the type of activity that will be eligible under the programme and the size of the budget. The Committee of the Regions is particularly concerned that the majority of the budget is devoted to awareness raising and regrets that, after four EU equal opportunities programmes, this should still be the focus of activity, e.g. the funding of the Presidency events, an Annual European Week and meetings of experts.

33. Expresses concern that many actions in the programme seem to concentrate on dealing with elites instead of facilitating the development of gender equality at grass-roots level. Calls on the Commission to strengthen the strategy by upgrading the evaluations of the consequences of policy measures in order to convert these into strategic interventions rather than comments on the status quo.

34. Believes that the focus of the programme should be on capacity building, partnerships, exchange of experience, and on support for innovative projects which can demonstrate transferability across the EU Member States.

35. Calls on the Commission to evaluate the educational attainment of women, their choice of education and their opportunities to participate on an equal footing with men in working life and in the political decision-making process.

36. Calls on the Commission and the Member States in particular to see how new sectors, such as information and communications, can create new job opportunities for women. However recognises that educational opportunities need to be considered as well as an information campaign to encourage more women to enter this sector.

37. Acknowledges that men have a major role to play in the equal opportunities process on many levels. Beginning with home responsibilities as a first step, for example, sharing child-care, promoting and taking up the opportunities offered in work-life balance strategies. Calls on the Member States to establish more equitable entitlements to paid parental leave, to enable fathers to play a more supportive role in parenting. Calls on the Commission and Member States to ensure that legislative measures do not have adverse implications for the involvement of women in the labour market.

38. Considers that the actions outline in Strands 1 and 2 are extremely ambitious in view of the budget that is available. For instance, the budget for the annual European Week is only EUR 1 million. In addition, Strand 1 will only fund transnational initiatives of no more than EUR 250 000 in the five-year programme. The gender equality policy area is a large one and the Committee of the Regions regrets that the action programme does not outline in greater detail the areas that it wants to develop in term of awareness raising.

39. Strongly supports the actions in Strand 2 to improve the collection of data and the development of benchmarking so that equal opportunities policies can be compared across the European Union. However, the Committee of the Regions is concerned that the budget allocated to this Strand may not be sufficient to carry out the important actions in this part of the programme. The COR would like to work closely with the European Commission in the creation of benchmarks and performance indicators.

40. Expresses deep concern about the European Commission's change in attitude to the funding of gender equality projects. Local and regional partners were the beneficiaries of

a number of project grants under the fourth action programme which successfully took forward the issue of mainstreaming and came up with extremely practical ways of improving gender equality at the local and regional level. However, the new action programme marks a distinct move away from small innovative projects to much larger projects. In supporting the actions of Member States, the European Commission needs to ensure that projects in the new programme includes players at regional and local levels.

Implementation

41. Calls on the Commission to invite a representative of local and regional government to participate in any expert or consultative groups in the design, implementation and evaluation of actions associated with the programme.

The Committee of the Regions

42. Reaffirms its earlier resolutions on gender-balance in the composition of national delegations to the COR; equal opportunities in the COR secretariat; and mainstreaming equalities issues in the work of its commissions.

Brussels, 13 December 2000.

*The President
of the Committee of the Regions*
Jos CHABERT
