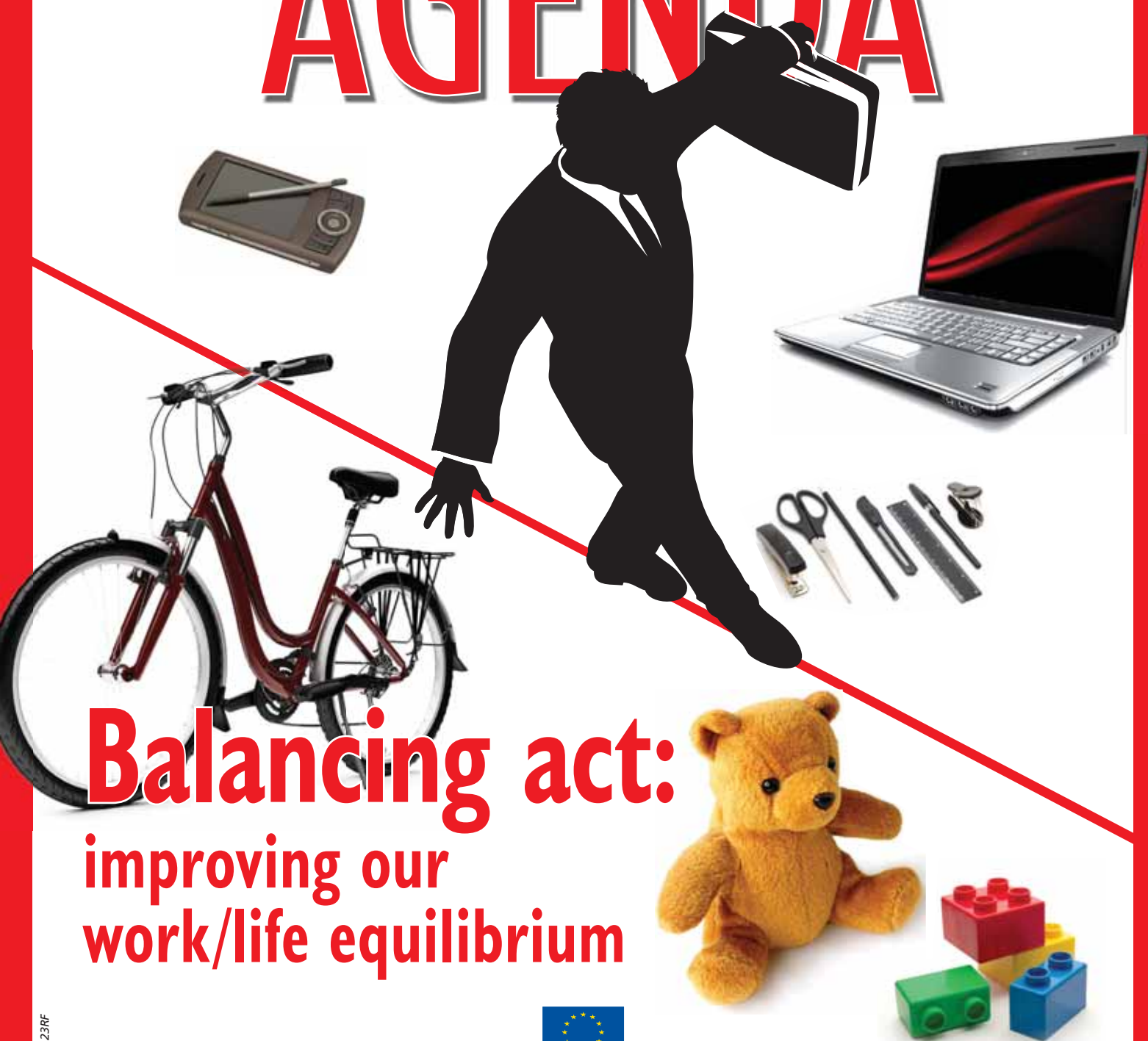


SOCIAL AGENDA



Balancing act:
improving our
work/life equilibrium



Juggling work, family and private life is a huge challenge for millions of Europeans, both women and men alike. But the price that women pay is all too often much higher – sometimes costing them their income and their job prospects. The figures help illustrate this: only 62% of women with dependent children are in work, compared to 91% of men.

In a move to improve the work-life balance for all Europeans, the European Commission unveiled a package of measures in October. A proposal on maternity leave aims to increase the minimum period of leave from 14 to 18 weeks. It would also improve the conditions, in terms of what percentage of their salary women get paid and how much flexibility they have regarding when they take the leave. A separate initiative in the package would also improve the situation of self-employed women by providing equivalent access to maternity leave, on a voluntary basis.

In this edition's "Special feature", which begins on page 15, we take a close look at the work-life package and what it will mean for individual citizens. One article studies what the proposals will mean for pregnant workers and women on maternity leave. Another looks at a report on childcare services, issued as part of the work-life package.

Elsewhere in the magazine we examine the issue of poverty, as the EU begins preparing for the 2010 European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion, and look at what Europe is doing to support

people with disabilities. The subject of this issue's feature, meanwhile, is the continuing problem of the pay gap between women and men.

Our regular interview, this time with global financier and philanthropist George Soros, addresses the situation facing Roma people in the EU. And in our "Other Voices" feature on page 26, European Youth Forum president Bettina Schwarzmayer talks about young people in the EU, and why so many aren't realising their full potential.

The Commission's proposals to improve maternity leave will go a long way towards helping both women and men achieve a better balance between their work and family responsibilities.

"Only 62% of women with dependent children are in work, compared to 91% of men."

But the potential benefits go beyond individual people's lives: the initiatives we are proposing should help increase women's participation in the labour market; but they will also help us confront the challenges of demographic ageing that our societies are facing – because studies show that countries with higher female employment rates also have higher birth rates.

The European Union's role in this area is relatively limited and primary responsibility for developing and promoting reconciliation measures belongs to the Member States. But while national policy choices and traditions have to be respected, legislation at EU level would create a basic common standard – upon which individual countries can build.

Nikolaus G. van der Pas



Special feature Work-life balance

Package of initiatives aims to help people combine the professional, private and family aspects of their lives more successfully. p.15



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A number of EU employers are working to tackle the gender pay gap. p.7



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GENERAL

- 30-31 October:

The European Commission and French Presidency of the European Union, in partnership with the EU Committee of the Regions and Association of French Regions, held a conference in Paris on territorial cohesion and the future Cohesion Policy. Danuta Hübner, Commissioner for Regional Policy, and Vladimír Špidla, Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, both addressed the event, which provided the first major opportunity to debate the Commission's recently published Green Paper on territorial cohesion.

- 3 October:

50 young jobseekers who were offered a first job placement in another European country met to share their experiences at a dedicated event in Paris. They were joined by employers and job mobility advisers from EURES – the European network of employment services.

- 27 September:

The flagship event for the European Job Days took place at the European Commission headquarters in Brussels and attracted close to 10,000 jobseekers and 60 employers. During September and Octo-



Commissioner Spidla at the European Job Days flagship event in Brussels.

ber, some 500 events took place all over Europe, ranging from recruitment fairs to seminars and lectures on job mobility.

- 18 September:

The Commission approved four applications from Italy for assistance under the European Globalisation adjustment Fund (EGF). The funding will help almost 6,000 workers in the textiles sector back into employment. The applications – for a total of €35,158,075 – concern workers made redundant in a large number of mainly small enterprises in four different Italian regions: Sardinia, Piedmont, Lombardy and Tuscany. The applications are currently under consideration by the budgetary authorities.

EMPLOYMENT AND EUROPEAN SOCIAL FUND

- 9-10 November:

The employment ministers of the 27 European Union countries and 16 Mediterranean partner states met for the first time in Marrakech (Morocco) to discuss employment, employability and decent work. In particular, the ministers highlighted the prospects and challenges resulting from globalisation, climate change and technological development as well as social and demographic changes. They took stock of the region's socio-economic situation, especially in the context of the financial crisis and its effects on employment. The meeting looked at concrete proposals to promote job creation, labour market modernisation to improve the ability to react to changes, and development of human resources geared to the needs of the labour market. The ministers emphasised the importance of an integrated approach combining employment policy with economic, tax, social and environmental policies, as well as education and training policy. At the end of the conference, the ministers adopted a framework for action to strengthen dialogue, joint measures, and exchanges of best practices. The next Euro-Mediterranean conference of ministers of employment and labour is scheduled for 2010.

WORK ORGANISATION, WORKING CONDITIONS AND SOCIAL DIALOGUE

- 22 October:

The European Commission welcomed the decision by the European Parliament to approve the proposal for a directive on Temporary Agency Work. The European Parliament voted to support the Council's common position – adopted in June 2008 – without amendments so it can now become law. Over three million temporary agency workers currently working across the EU will benefit from better protection of their working conditions. EU countries are now required to incorporate the provisions of the Directive in their national law. It will then come into effect within three years.



Funding from the European Globalisation adjustment Fund will help textile workers in Italy back into employment.

- 16 October:

The European Commission sent a letter of formal notice to Greece for failure to comply with EU rules on maximum working time as regards doctors in public health services. The EU Working Time Directive limits working time to 48 hours per week on average, including overtime, to protect workers from the health and safety risks caused by excessive working hours. The Commission had received numerous complaints that Greece had suspended its working time laws for the public health sector, so that doctors in Greek public hospitals could be legally required to work excessive hours. The complaints also suggested that minimum rest periods were not being respected. Greece does not make use of the possibility of derogating from the 48 hours week existing in the Directive.

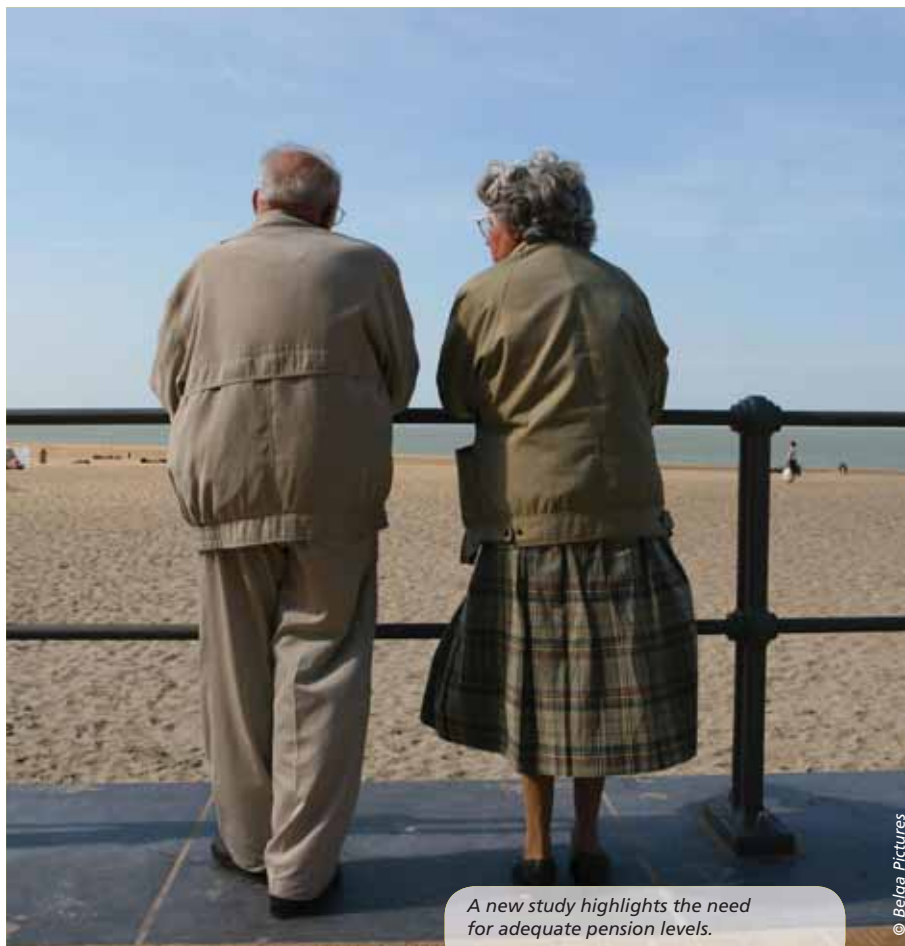
PROMOTING AN INCLUSIVE SOCIETY

- 20 October:

A new study was released by the Commission confirming the trend towards more private pension provision in the EU, but highlighting the need for inclusive coverage and adequate pension levels. The study identified large variations in coverage and contribution levels between EU countries, reflecting the diversity of schemes in place. The analysis aimed to help EU countries learn from different national experiences under the 'open method of coordination' – the EU's system of common objectives, reporting and exchange of best practice.

- 16 October:

On the eve of the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty, ministers from around the EU held a high-level meeting in Marseille, France dedicated to fighting poverty and promoting social inclusion (see related article on page 25). The year 2010 will be the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion and the meeting marked the kick-off for preparations across Europe. NGOs, local authorities and everyone working



A new study highlights the need for adequate pension levels.

© Belga Pictures

against exclusion is invited to participate in the campaign. The initiative will have a budget of at least €26 million, including €17 million of EU funding.

- 3 October:

The Commission put forward a set of common principles to help guide EU countries in their strategies to tackle poverty. The Recommendation is based around three key aspects: adequate income support, inclusive labour markets and access to quality services. National governments will be encouraged to refer to these common principles and define policies for 'active inclusion' on this basis so as to step up the fight against exclusion from society and from the labour market. (See related article on page 25.)

- 29 September:

Some 400 high-ranking delegates discussed the next steps in the EU's strategy

to tackle discrimination at the second annual European Equality Summit in Paris. A key element of the discussions was the European Commission's proposal (from July 2008) to extend existing EU protection from discrimination to areas like access to goods and services, education and healthcare. Equality ministers and stakeholders – NGOs, social partners, companies and independent equality bodies from around Europe – were able to give their views on the proposal, and also follow up on the commitments made by EU countries as part of the European Year of Equal Opportunities for All in 2007.

- 16 September:

The Commission launched the first EU-level summit devoted to improving the situation of Roma communities across the Union. The event, which took place in Brussels, aimed to promote a joint commitment by national, European and



A set of common principles will help Member States tackle poverty

civil society representatives to tackle the widespread discrimination and exclusion faced by millions of Europeans of Roma origin (see related article on page 21).

GENDER EQUALITY

- 3 October:

The Commission unveiled proposals that would mean millions of women throughout Europe will be entitled to longer and

better maternity leave. A separate proposal would also improve the situation of self-employed women by providing equivalent access to maternity leave, on a voluntary basis. The two initiatives, which form part of a package of measures to improve work-life balance for all Europeans, aim to update and improve existing EU legislation. Following discussion by the European Parliament and national governments, it is hoped that agreement will be reached during 2009. EU countries would then have two years to introduce the legislation into national law. (See Special Feature beginning on page 15.)

- 3 October:

A report by the European Commission showed that childcare services in EU countries are failing to respond to the needs of parents, despite some progress. The report found that most countries have missed the targets for childcare provision – for 90% of children between three and school age and 33% of children under three – that EU leaders set themselves at Barcelona in 2002. The report formed

part of the broader package of measures by the Commission to improve work-life balance for Europeans (see other news item and Special Feature, page 15).

INTERNATIONAL EMPLOYMENT AND SOCIAL ISSUES

- 14-15 October:

Employment ministers from 45 countries in Europe and Asia met to discuss the social dimension of globalisation and global employment issues. The second Asia-Europe (ASEM) Labour and Employment Ministers Meeting in Bali, Indonesia helped contribute to broader cooperation between the two regions on improving living and working conditions. The ministers discussed global employment issues including training and employability, labour migration, social protection and Corporate Social Responsibility. They also discussed concrete projects to reinforce this cooperation, such as exchanges of expertise and good practice in areas like skills, health and safety at work and social security.

Meeting of the Employment and Social Affairs Ministers

Employment and social affairs issues were discussed in Council on 2 October, 2008, under the presidency of Xavier Bertrand, French Minister of Employment, Social Relations, Family and Solidarity. The European Commission was represented by Vladimír Špidla, Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities. The main points on the agenda were:

Horizontal directive against discrimination

The Commission proposal to extend protection from discrimination on grounds of age, disability, sexual orientation and religion or belief beyond the workplace, was discussed by ministers with a view to moving forward with the negotiations on the text. The new directive would ensure equal treatment in the areas of so-

cial protection, including social security and health care, education and access to and supply of goods and services which are commercially available to the public, including housing.

Interim oral report on the Mission for Flexicurity

The Commission reported on the results of recent visits by the Flexicurity Mission to France, Sweden, Finland, Poland and Spain. The visits helped raise awareness of flexicurity issues and examined how different countries implement the 'flexicurity' principle.

Proposal for a revised directive on European Works Councils

The Council took stock of progress on this proposal, which aims to improve the

role of the European Works Councils (EWC).

Coordination of social security systems

The Council took stock of progress on this proposal for a Regulation which implements the provisions of Regulation 883/2004, the modernised and simplified Regulation on the coordination of social security schemes.

European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion

The Council designated 2010 as the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion. The initiative, with a €17 million budget, will give increased visibility and effectiveness to EU efforts to foster a more inclusive society.



More and more EU companies are tackling the gender pay gap

Differences in salaries are still widespread, but many employers are working to improve equality

The pay gap between men and women is an issue that surfaces regularly – in the European press as well as in the debates and conversations between EU policy-makers. It is a sensitive subject, about which many feel very strongly, and others are dismissive: a recent report in the UK, for instance (“Should we mind the gap?” by Professor J. R. Shackleton), concluded that “we should make far less of a song and dance about the gender pay gap”.

Whatever your take on the subject is, the fact remains that women still earn on average 15% (2006 figures) less than men. The EU has done a lot in recent years to raise people’s awareness of the discrepancies between men’s and women’s salaries. In 2007, the European Commission adopted a strategy to tackle the gender pay gap. And it appears to be paying off in the places where it is most important: companies.

A number of employers around Europe are trying to tackle the issue of the pay gap, and make their companies fairer places to work.

Job titles

A little while back, the Delhaize supermarket chain in Belgium began to realize that there was mounting frustration among its female employees, who knew they were earning less than their male colleagues and weren’t happy about it.

“The women in the food section and the men in the food section are paid different salaries and there is an enormous difference: the women earn €122 less per month than a man in a full-time job,” says Delhaize employee Liliane Parent.

This sort of pay gap is not unusual in Belgium – or in many countries throughout the European Union. Part of the problem is that, while there are laws prohibiting pay inequalities (the EU legislative framework guarantees equal pay for the same work or work of equal value), there are ways of getting around them. “A common example of getting round the equality at work laws is to make the name of the function different according to whether a job is done by a man or a woman,” says Francoise Goffinet of the Institut pour l’Egalite des Femmes et des Hommes in Belgium. “So we still have companies where the woman who cleans the offices is called a cleaning lady and the man who cleans the supermarket or the business pushing a little machine is called a surface technician”

Awareness-raising campaign

In 2009, the European Commission will launch an awareness-raising campaign on the gender pay gap that should be addressed to all employers and employees, the social partners, decision makers, NGOs and the general public. Each of these actors has their own role in tackling the pay gap. The campaign will try to emphasize the benefits for companies if they take measures against the pay gap: a better and more motivated workforce and a better social image. The role of the social partners is also important because they can orientate and inform workers.

Delhaize, which employs about 16,000 people – two thirds of whom are women – became one of a growing number of Belgian companies to try and rectify the situation by using new job classifications which are more gender-neutral. They are supported by an Equal funded project developed in this field in Belgium (EVA).

“We redefined all the jobs in a super-market and then we weighed the jobs, not just according to whether they were manual tasks – which was perhaps more the case in the past – but also in terms of responsibility,” says Thierry Vermeire, Senior Manager, Social Affairs at Delhaize. He adds that this gave them “a system which is much fairer, which no longer makes any distinction between men and women but which really looks at the contents of the job.”

‘Reconciliation’ policies

Other European companies are also taking steps to make their working environments more equal. One example is La Caixa, Spain’s biggest savings bank. The company has, for many years now, had a policy of equal pay and has always tried to remove the barriers that hold women back. Recent, ambitious new equality legislation in Spain (stipulating that unions and employers must negotiate equality plans in the workplace; introducing paternity leave for the first time; and establishing that large Spanish companies must incorporate women in economic decision-making in the next few years) is making its mark on the country and its companies. But the banking group is going even further than the new law, offering career breaks and extended parental leave, for instance.

“There’s a cultural issue in our country that domestic work tends to be more often done by women than men,” says Jaime Larnasa, Human Resources Director at La Caixa. “We as a company can try – and we do try – to facilitate the home life of an employee with a whole series of measures which help to reconcile private and professional life.”

Budgeting for equality

In France, meanwhile, insurance company AXA France signed a company-wide agreement in 2006 that set aside a budget of €250,000 per year for a period of three years to help narrow the wage gap between its male and female employees. Thanks to this initiative, 113 women saw their salaries increase in 2007. And an agreement at Electricite de France, where the pay gap between men and women stood at 4.9% in 2002, stipulated that women should be given – for the duration of the agreement – a range of individual pay rises corresponding to an advancement rate of 1.5 points on the total workforce in the current pay system.

All over Europe, in varying degrees, countries are trying to give women a fairer deal. Sweden introduced legislation as long ago as 1980: any company with more than 10 employees must have an equality action plan and equal pay. France has recently introduced new legislation and President Sarkozy has said that the issue is a priority for the French Presidency of the EU. The 2006 Equality Act in the UK, meanwhile, places “a statutory duty on all public authorities to have due regard to the need to eliminate unlawful discrimination and harassment and promote equality of opportunity between men and women.”

Reasons for the gap

There are a number of reasons for the persistent discrepancy in men’s and wom-

en’s wages. First of all, there is labour market segregation: women continue to be largely confined to certain lower-paying sectors and jobs. More than four in ten employed women work in public administration, education, health or social activities, compared with fewer than two in ten men. Added to this is the so-called “glass ceiling” – that invisible barrier that keeps women out of the higher-paying management positions. Prejudice and fields of study (there are fewer girls in the areas of engineering and economics, for instance) play a role here, as do job classification and pay systems that are more favourable to men. There is also the issue of juggling work and family responsibilities: many of today’s management positions are not flexible and therefore cannot be combined with caring for family members, a role that is still primarily assumed by women. A lack of accessible and affordable childcare is another problem – many women either have to leave the labour market when they have children or opt for part-time work. Other issues play a role too, such as discrimination based on prejudices and stereotypes.

Meanwhile at Belgium’s Delhaize supermarket, female employees are happier now their jobs have been reassessed and they will finally (following a new salary negotiation next year) get the same pay as the men.

“When I started 35 years ago there was really quite a lot of discrimination,” says Ms. Parent. “But in recent years it has become better.”



ESF in Malta – mothers at work



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Malta has the lowest female employment rate in the European Union. In 2006, only 35% of women worked, compared to 75% of men, a rate far below the European average of 57%. So what is keeping Maltese women away from work?

Of Bulgarian origin, Mariela has lived in Malta for most of her life and has built a career as systems manager within a governmental organization. But when Elena and later Giorgio came into their lives, Mariela Cassar and her husband Tancreed faced the same dilemma as many other parents: what to do with the children while they were both at work?

“My husband knew that I wanted to continue to work because I had a very good position so there was no discussion whatsoever,” says Mariela. “But I was very worried when Giorgio came along and I didn’t have a kindergarden.”

Help was at hand, however, in the form of Kidstart, a childcare project in Valletta co-financed by the European Social Fund. “In our research we had found that facilities for newborn to 3 year olds were few and there were a lot of centers with low standards, even when it came to hygiene, safety and the ratio between carers and children,” says Kidstart founder Lorraine Spiteri. “So when we opened this center we applied for and obtained some support from the European Social Fund to refurbish the place and buy materials to help the children’s development.”

“Giorgio has been here since he was one year old, so 8 months now,” says Mariela’s husband Tancreed. “We feel really happy with this place.”

To encourage women to fully participate in society, the ESF is also working with the Maltese authorities to promote flexible arrangements such as teleworking.

Paula Gouder works at Malta’s Institute for Tourism Studies. In the mornings, she is in the school with the students, but in the afternoons she moves to her virtual office, at home. Paula loves her job, but with her husband working abroad two weeks a month and daughter Julia demanding much of her attention, without the possibility of teleworking, she wouldn’t have coped. “It would have been a disaster,” she says. “I couldn’t have gone to work and I would have had to resign.”

The company’s teleworking programme, which is co-financed by the ESF, has helped Paula fulfill her twin desires for motherhood and a professional career, something she wants to transmit to her daughter when she grows up. “I believe that in this society children have to have an idea that a career today is important and so if she sees me working and at the same time taking care of the household she can understand better the realities of life.”



Europe's policy response to the issue of disability

What is the EU doing to improve the lives of people with disabilities?

People with disabilities represent a significant, untapped potential for the European labour market and economy. The EU has a working-age population of some 300 million people, 50 million of whom have some sort of disability. Many of these people are willing – and able – to work. Despite this, the employment rate of people with disabilities currently stands at only 50%, compared with over 68% for non-disabled people. Furthermore, people with disabilities are almost twice as likely to be inactive, meaning neither having a job nor even looking for one.

Yet, with a little more help, millions of disabled Europeans could find work. This is all the more important given that there are likely to be more people with disabilities in the future: Europe's popu-

lation is aging and, of course, the likelihood of disability increases with age. So it is essential for the EU to follow both a preventive approach and also to address the needs of jobseekers with disabilities in order to allow them to better integrate into the labour market and to play a more active role in society. Another issue to bear in mind is that people with a disability often need some form of assistance or care. The provision of such services also generates employment – for carers and other similar service providers – and this in turn benefits the economy as a whole.

In the area of disability, employment – the bedrock of the Lisbon Strategy for more and better jobs – is an important policy issue for the European Commission, although not, of course, the only

one. Social inclusion in general and equal opportunities, particularly for people with disabilities, are also high on the agenda.

Annual conference

Once a year, a meeting is held in Brussels to discuss the most pressing issues in this area. "Acting locally for a society for all" was the theme of this year's conference, which was organised by the Commission, in close cooperation with the European Disability Forum (EDF), on 1 and 2 December 2008 to mark the European Day of People with Disabilities. The event focused on how EU activities and legislation reach the local level and provided examples of disability mainstreaming.

The conference is held every year around 3 December to coincide with the International Day of Persons with Disabilities, set up by the United Nations in 1992. The conference brings together people with and without disabilities, including policy-makers, academic experts and the media, along with other people involved in the field of disability. The conference forms part of the EU's efforts to promote the mainstreaming of disability issues, as set out in its Action Plan for

Equal Opportunities of People with Disabilities. It also stimulates the exchange of good practice in areas that are crucial for the active inclusion of people with disabilities, and allows networking between key players in the disability policy field.

Each year the conference focuses on a theme that addresses a different aspect of disability. Previous years have highlighted education, combating violence against people with disabilities, design for all, finding and keeping jobs, living together in society, and youth. The findings and conclusions of these conferences feed into the European Commission's biennial reports on the overall situation of people with disabilities. These reports provide the basis for the Commission to define its priorities for future action under successive phases of the EU Disability Action Plan. As this Action Plan will come to an end in 2010, this year's conference also heralded the beginning of the consultation process, which will help define the Commission's strategy in the field of disability from 2010 on.

The year 2008 saw substantial policy progress and the Conference focused on how this is experienced by individual people. Air travel, for example, has become easier, with a Regulation (1107/2006/EC) – which fully entered into force in July – ensuring equal treatment of all air transport passengers. Airlines can no longer refuse to accept a reservation or allow someone to embark on the grounds that they have reduced mobility or a disability. What's more, a disabled person has the right to receive proper assistance without any extra charge. The Regulation also improves their rights regarding the transport of assistive devices, information and complaints. Other modes of travel are likely to see similar progress, as Regulations are being planned or have already been adopted in rail and maritime transport as well as bus and coach travel.

Equal rights

The process of conclusion of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which entered into force on 3 May 2008, is well under way. The

Convention acknowledges that disability is a broad human rights issue and a matter of law. This means that people with disabilities have the same right to equal access to goods and services as anybody else, and are equally entitled to contribute to society and the economy. Ensuring that disability issues are taken into account in all policy areas is one of the main goals of the Convention – and the inclusion of the local level is absolutely necessary if it is to be successful.

The Slovenian Presidency, in its Conclusions following the second informal ministerial meeting on disability issues, specifically encouraged compliance with and strengthening of non-discrimination legislation, the implementation of the UN Convention and the inclusion of stakeholders in the policy process. Therefore in 2008, the Commission proposed a new Directive to complete the EU anti-discrimination legislative framework. The Directive aims to ensure non-discrimination on the grounds of disability, religion or belief, age or sexual orientation outside the field of employment, namely in education, social protection, and access to goods and services. It complements

the Employment Directive (2000/78/EC), which prohibits discrimination in the area of employment, harassment and instruction to discriminate, and contains an obligation for all employers to provide 'reasonable accommodation' for people with disabilities. The new proposal for the Directive, once adopted, will facilitate the legal interpretations of similar provisions of the UN Convention at European level and will provide for uniform and minimal protection with reference to the relevant obligations of the UN Convention.

While disability policies are mainly the responsibility of individual Member States, the EU's policies complement and support national developments. The European Structural Funds play a key role. By supporting relevant actions at a national, regional and local level, they help the EU realize its policy objectives. The projects financed by these funds need to be accessible for people with disabilities. Together, the Funds represent a substantial amount of the European budget and by meeting the accessibility needs of people with disabilities they can have a real impact and contribute to improving the situation of people with disabilities in Europe.



ESF in Latvia – extending a hand to the blind



“I’m not sure I would like to be able to see. Being blind is part of who I am,” says Sarmite Gromska, a 21-year-old university student at the University of Latvia in Riga.

Blinded as a baby due to a tragic medical error, Sarmite has no memory of vision. Today, she finds it difficult even to imagine what it would be like. “I was born prematurely, at about seven months, and then was placed in a special room, a kind of incubation cell. That caused me to go blind. It was an accident, nothing more.”

Living with her parents and two brothers in Riga, Sarmite is an inspiring example of how far one can get with determination and support. She spent her early years at a special boarding school for the blind, where she learned to read and write in Braille. Continuing her studies at university, she distinguished herself as a student and was awarded a grant. She also has musical talent and played saxophone in a youth band. Although Sarmite still plays occasionally, she says she is leaving music for the moment to concentrate on university.

Sarmite needs specialised equipment in order to study, and she is extremely proficient at writing with either a ‘slate’ or with a special Braille typewriter, as well as a computer fitted with voice-recognition software.

To get all her university course materials translated into Braille, she depends on the Latvian Library for the Blind. However, as Gunta Bite, the head of the Library’s Braille Department, explains, “Braille transcription is prohibitively expensive. We can only do this work in-house thanks to EU funding, which helped us to set up our Braille department.” The aim of the project, she explains, was to provide blind and visually impaired people with a variety of services and materials, ultimately helping them to integrate into society and the labour market and to live more independent lives.

The EU, through the European Social Fund, made it possible for the Library to acquire equipment and training so that it could start to print books and other documents for the blind. Braille readers from across Latvia now have access to

a whole new range of reading materials, free of charge. And they can request specific texts when they have the need.

Today, the department also employs blind and visually impaired people to work in the preparation of texts. Sarmite explains: “It was working for the Library one summer that convinced me I wanted to be a Braille editor,” a career she is now working towards at university.

For most of her life, Sarmite has been almost completely dependant on her parents. But she knows one day she’ll be alone and will have to stand on her own feet. “Yes, I was nervous about starting university,” she says. “It was a major step to take, both on an academic level and on a personal level. I’m still very dependant on other people and especially my family, but I have to learn to be strong and to survive.”

“The Braille library has made a big difference in my life and, I know, in the lives of other blind people. I’ve definitely gained a lot from the European Social Fund project. Being able to print out all the materials I need for my studies means I can continue the process of growing, moving forward and becoming a productive member of society.”





Job search: workers from the new Member States have helped ease labour shortages.

© Getty Pictures

Free movement of workers after the recent EU enlargements

Workers from the new Member States have made a positive contribution to economic growth

The free movement of workers – a basic right enjoyed by EU citizens that allows them to work and live in a Member State other than their own – is a cornerstone of a truly European labour market. It was introduced gradually in the six original Member States of the European Economic Community between 1958 and 1968, with temporary restrictions allowed for workers from Greece, Portugal and Spain when these countries joined the Union in the 1980s.

With the last two EU enlargements, Member States were again given the possibility to temporarily restrict access to their labour markets: for a maximum of 7 years after accession, Member States may ask workers from 8 of the 10 countries that joined the EU in 2004 (“EU-8”) and from Bulgaria and Romania (“EU-2”), which joined in 2007, to comply with conditions of national law if they want to work in their country. Member States may not, however, apply such restrictions to workers from Cyprus and Malta. The overall transitional

period of 7 years is divided into 3 phases (2+3+2 years), and different conditions apply during each phase.

Limited time frame

The transitional arrangements for workers from the EU-8 Member States are currently in their second phase (which started on 1 May 2006). By now, 11 of the EU-15 Member States have already opened their labour markets. This figure includes the United Kingdom, Ireland and Sweden, which opened their labour markets immediately after enlargement. Presently, only Austria, Belgium, Denmark and Germany still restrict access to their labour markets, having, however, simplified procedures or eased access conditions to varying degrees, in comparison to those in place at accession. Hungary applies reciprocal measures: it restricts access to its labour market for workers from the EU-15 Member States that restrict access of Hungarian workers – but it has also eased conditions.

Restrictions on the free movement of EU-8 workers should end with the second phase on 30 April 2009. Member States that still apply restrictions may maintain them after that date only if there is a serious disturbance (or the threat of one) to their labour market – and only after notifying the Commission. Following this, all restrictions must be lifted by 30 April 2011 at the latest.

The transitional arrangements for Bulgaria and Romania are nearing the end of the first phase on 31 December 2008. Currently, 15 Member States restrict the labour market access of workers from Bulgaria and Romania while 10 have opened their labour markets. For the 15 Member States restricting access, diverse national measures mean that legal procedures and conditions for labour market access can be very different – although 8 of them are applying simplifications.

From 1 January 2009, the second phase of the transitional period will start; Member States that want to continue to apply transitional measures must notify the Commission of this before that date. All transitional arrangements must come to an end by 31 December 2013.

Member States' concerns

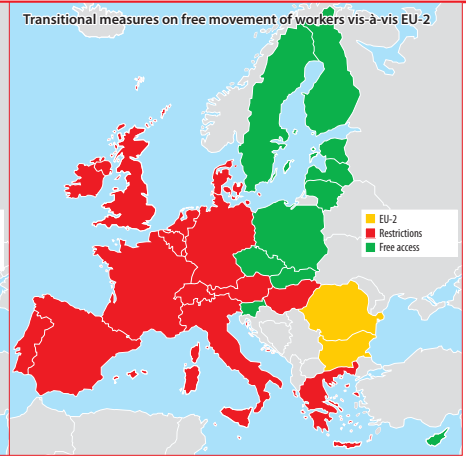
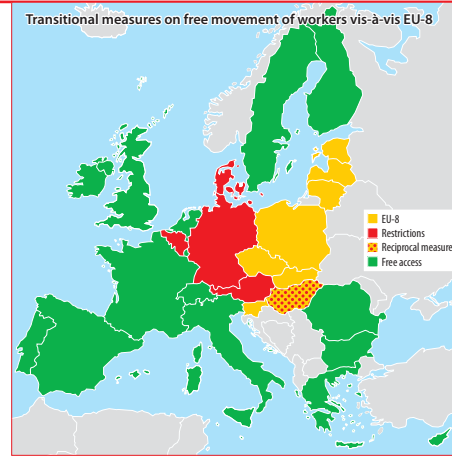
The latest two rounds of EU enlargement brought concerns that large differences in income and unemployment rates could lead to a massive flow of workers from the 'poor' newcomers to the 'rich' older members of the EU. A number of Member States were worried that a looming migration shock might lead to serious labour market imbalances by pushing local workers out of their jobs, driving down wages and putting a heavy burden on the welfare systems of the host countries.

Yet, four years after the EU's 2004 enlargement and over a year after the accession of Bulgaria and Romania, fears of a massive surge of workers from the EU's new Eastern and Central European Member States to the 'old' EU-15 Member States – and most of the associated concerns – appear to have been unfounded, according to the recently published Employment in Europe 2008 report.

Between 2003 and 2007, the average population share of EU-10 foreigners resident in the EU-15 has increased from around 0.2% to 0.5%. During the same time the population share of Romanians and Bulgarians resident in the EU-15 rose from 0.1% to 0.4%, a process that already started well before 2007. By comparison the population share of EU-15 nationals resident in another EU-15 country grew from 1.6% to about 1.7% and that of non-EU-27 nationals from 3.7% to 4.5%.

Positive impact

This is not to suggest that east-west mobility in the course of EU enlargement has been moderate. In absolute terms, available statistics suggest that the number of EU-10 residents in the EU-15 has increased by over a million and that of Romanians and Bulgarians by over



900,000 since 2003, all within a relatively short period of time.

Moreover, recent mobility flows have not been spread evenly across the EU. Over the past four years, the majority of workers from the new Member States that joined in 2004 – mostly from Poland, Lithuania and Slovakia – came to Ireland and the UK, while Spain and Italy have been the main destinations for Romanians and Bulgarians.

But workers from the new Member States have gone to where their services were in demand, helping to address labour shortages in their host country labour markets. Rather than making demands on the welfare state, they have made a significant contribution to sustained economic growth over recent years.

At the same time, the vast majority of studies available conclude that workers from the new Member States have not displaced local workers or driven down their wages to any significant extent, even in those countries where the inflows have been greatest.

What next?

Looking to the future, there seems to be no reason to expect that there will be a further surge of labour mobility from the new Member States. Migration flows to the UK and Ireland appear to have peaked in 2006, significantly declining in 2007 and the first quarter of 2008. There are in fact indications of an increased return migration of those migrants who are already living in the UK. Furthermore, the opening of labour markets for EU-8 workers in most of the other EU-15 coun-

tries since 2006 may have lead to a limited diversion of migration flows to some other Member States, but has not resulted in a substantial additional inflow of labour from the new Member States.

Examples such as Sweden, Finland, Greece, Portugal (free early labour market access, but low labour inflows) and Germany and Austria (restricted access, but relatively high inflows) suggest that transitional arrangements on labour market access only have a limited influence on the distribution of intra-EU mobility. Ultimately, mobility flows are driven by other factors such as general labour demand, language or network effects through already existing foreign populations. On the contrary, as experience has shown, access restrictions are likely to exacerbate problems, such as the incidence of undeclared work, false self-employment or the violation of labour standards.

Furthermore, all of the main EU sending countries have seen a rapid rise in national income per capita, earnings and employment over recent years. There is some evidence that this is already dampening the incentive to migrate and is likely to contribute to a further decline in labour supply from the new Member States. In addition, due to a substantially shrinking young generation, the pool of potential mobile workers from the Central and Eastern European Member States is shrinking and likely to act as a brake on geographical labour mobility within the EU.

Further information:

http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/free_movement/index_en.htm

http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/employment_analysis/employ_en.htm



Juggling act: how the EU is helping people improve their work-life balance

How will pregnancy and childbirth affect my career? If we are both working full time, who will look after our children? Am I entitled to paternity leave?

These are some of the dilemmas facing many women and men across Europe. And while the choices that people make when combining the professional, private and family aspects of their lives are primarily personal, the way in which they balance these competing demands has direct consequences for public policy. It influences, for example, the number of children people choose to have, or if they decide to work or not. At the same time, public policy itself influences these choices: the existence of public provision of care for children and other dependents, for instance, or legal rights to family related leave.

With a package of measures, unveiled in October, the European Commission is hoping to improve the work-life balance for millions of people throughout the EU. The proposals offer longer, better maternity leave and also improve the situation of self-employed women, by providing equivalent access to maternity leave on a voluntary basis. As part of the same package, the Commission also issued a report on the provision of childcare in the European Union as well as the performance of each Member State with regard to the targets set by EU leaders in Barcelona in 2002. (See separate articles.)

The Lisbon strategy for growth and jobs underlines the importance of tapping the enormous potential that women represent on the labour market. It is in-

creasingly clear that making it easier to balance professional, private and family responsibilities will encourage more women to work – and to continue working, even after they have children. There is also a definite, positive correlation between birth rates and the quality of childcare facilities, for example, and flexible working arrangements.

The work-life balance package – which aim to update and improve existing EU legislation – is made up of separate proposals and reports. The articles that follow take a closer look at the different initiatives and the issues surrounding them.



EU calls for longer, better-paid maternity leave

Proposed law would give women greater flexibility and protection

For working women across Europe these days, having children does not seem like a very smart career move. The facts speak for themselves: on average, having one or more children under 12 permanently reduces the employment rate of women to just 65.5%. This is in stark contrast with the employment rate for childless women, which averages almost 80% for the EU as a whole.

Men's work prospects, on the other hand, are not significantly affected by parenthood. Quite the opposite, in fact: the average employment rate for men actually rises by seven points to 91% when they have children. Women, in many cases, have no choice but to give up working altogether.

At the same time, birth rates in the European Union remain stubbornly low – more so in those countries with relatively low numbers of women in employment.

Taking all this into consideration, the picture that emerges is not a comforting one: at a time when the European Union is striving to create growth and raise employment rates, especially among the female population, women continue to represent a vast untapped potential which our labour markets can no longer afford to ignore.

Given the impact that having children has on women's labour market participation, the Commission is taking steps to try and make it easier for them to successfully combine their professional and family lives.

The starting point is an adequate maternity leave provision for the mother. Current EU legislation provides for a minimum level of 14 weeks of leave with a payment which should be at least equivalent to sick leave. This represents of course the minimum obligatory standards: Member States are free to go beyond them, and many do. Maternity leave provisions across the EU show marked differences, though: they range from 14 to 55 weeks, with payments which go from 55% to 100% of pay, with or without a ceiling.

The Commission is proposing to increase the minimum period of maternal leave to 18 weeks, and to ensure that women are paid 100% of their salary. The new provisions would allow women more flexibility regarding when to take the non-compulsory part of their leave (before or after the birth). There would be stronger protection against dismissal and the right to return to the same job or an equivalent one after maternity leave. Finally, a right to ask the employer for flexible working patterns during or after the end of maternity leave would be introduced – although the employer will have the right to refuse the request.

Will this make a significant difference? Many EU countries already meet the standards introduced by the proposal, and some even exceed them. But several others will need to adapt their maternity leave provisions, increasing the length of the leave, the level at which it is remunerated, or, in some cases, both. If, as the Commission hopes, the directive is adopted in 2009 and transposed by EU countries into national law within two years, by 2011 millions of women throughout Europe would be entitled to longer and better paid maternity leave – smoothing the path to a successful return to their jobs.

The proposal still needs to be discussed by the European Parliament and the Member States, and it is hoped that an agreement will be reached during 2009. EU countries would then have two years to introduce the legislation into national law.

Maternity leave in the EU

Member State	Duration	Obligatory period	payment
AT	16 weeks	8 weeks before and 8 weeks after	100% of average earnings
BE	15 weeks	1 week before birth, 9 after birth	Dependent on SPF ('Sécurité sociale')
BU	315 days	45 days before and 95 after birth	135 days are paid at 90% of average income, the rest at social security benefit
CY	No info received	No info received	No info received
CZ	28 weeks	no	69% of average income of 12 months with ceiling
DE	14 weeks	6 weeks before, 8 weeks after birth	100% of last earnings
DK	18 weeks	no	According to most collective agreements: 100% of salary
EE	140 calendar days	No, but maternity benefit decreases if maternity leave starts less than 30 days before expected date of birth	100% of average earnings of preceding calendar year
EL	17 weeks	7 before, 9 after birth	100%
ES	16 weeks, transferable to partner	6 weeks after birth for mother	100% of calculation basis
FI	105 working days	2 weeks before estimated birth	Payment is dependent on previous earnings (decreasing after the first 56 working days after birth) minimum amount is 15.20 EUR per day, otherwise dependent on collective agreements
FR	16 weeks	2 weeks before and 6 weeks after	100% of earnings in last 3 months with ceiling
HU	24 weeks	As a recommendation 4 weeks before birth	70% of the former salary (sickness pay)
IE	42 weeks	2 weeks before birth, 4 weeks after birth	26 weeks are paid at a level of 80% of earnings with ceiling
IT	5 months	2 months before, 3 months after birth	80% of average daily remuneration paid in the month preceding leave
LT	126 calendar days	yes	100% of average earnings
LU	No info received	No info received	No info received
LV	112 days	2 weeks before and 2 weeks after confinement	100 % of average earnings
MT	14 weeks	4 weeks before, 6 weeks after birth	Full pay
NL	16 weeks	4 weeks before and 6 weeks after birth	Full pay
PL	18 weeks (parts of which can be taken by father)	8 weeks after birth	100% of average earnings
PT	120 days	6 weeks after birth	100% of the base salary
RO	126 days	42 days after delivery	Maternity allowance on the basis of 85 % average income
SE	Seven weeks before and seven weeks after confinement, then until child is 18 months old	2 weeks before or after confinement	390 days are paid at 80% of earnings, 90 days are paid at a minimum allowance
SI	105 days	28 days before due birth date	100% of average earnings
SK	28 weeks	14 weeks	55% of daily assessment basis, upper limit 15 000 SKK (about 500 EUR)
UK	52 weeks	2 weeks after birth	Employer pays 90% of former income for first 6 weeks, then lump sum (about 151 EUR)

Europe's shortage of childcare facilities

Report shows Member States are not providing the services parents need

As part of its work-life balance package, the Commission issued a report on the provision of childcare in the European Union and the performance of each Member State with regard to the targets set by EU leaders in Barcelona in 2002.

The report showed that childcare services in EU countries are failing to provide the level of childcare, particularly for the under-3s, that parents need. Furthermore, it finds that most Member States are likely to miss the so-called 'Barcelona targets', which set the goal of providing 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 the age of 3.

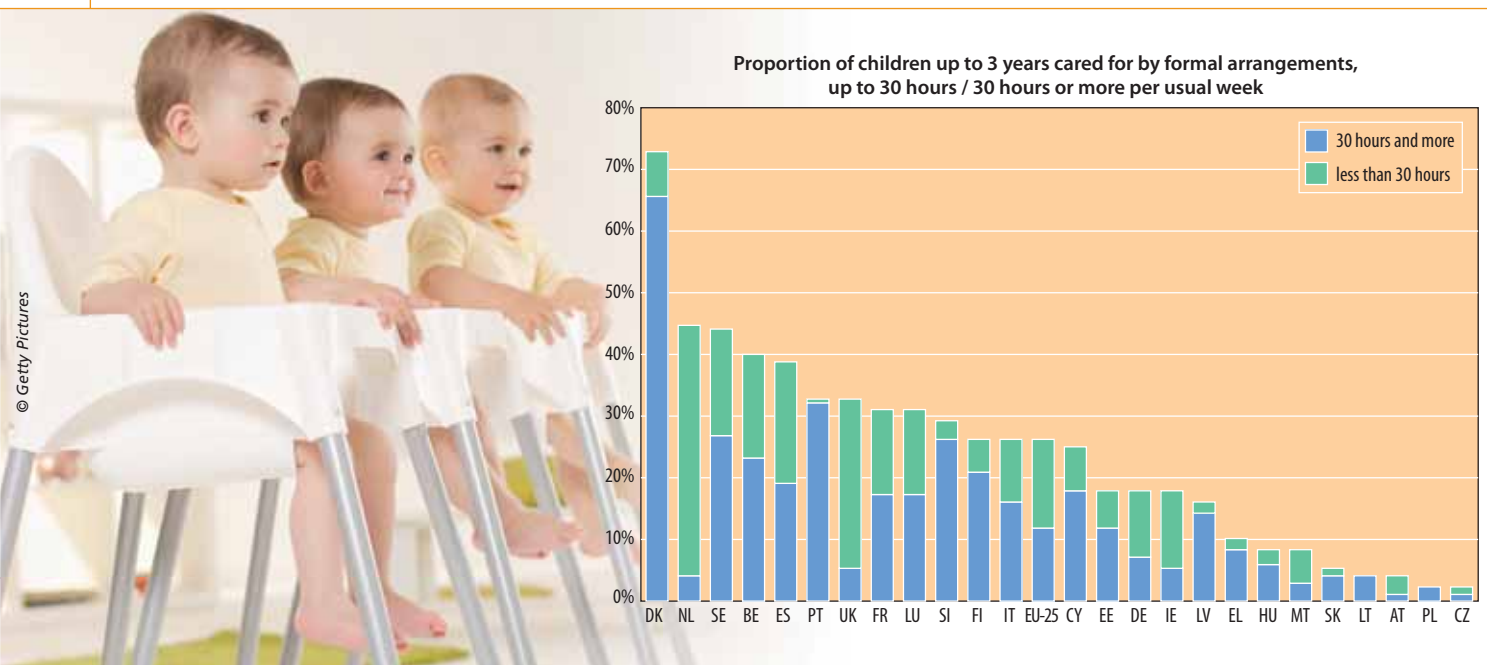
Progress varies greatly from one country to another, but overall the EU is far

from reaching the targets set. For the lower age group (children under 3), only five Member States (DK, NL, SE, BE, ES) have surpassed the 33% coverage rate. In most of the other countries, a great deal still remains to be done – in some, the coverage rate is just 10% or even less. For children between 3 years old and the mandatory school age, eight Member States (BE, DK, FR, DE, IE, SE, ES, IT) have surpassed the 90% coverage rate. A further challenge is the fact that in many countries, a high proportion of childcare facilities for this age-group operate on a part-time basis only.

There is a direct link between the childcare available to parents and whether they are able to work or not: across the EU, more than 6 million women aged between 25 and 49 years old say they are prevent-

ed from working, or can only work part-time, because of family responsibilities. For more than a quarter of these women, lack of childcare facilities – or their cost – is the main obstacle. Janneke Plan-tenga, who works as a professor at the University of Utrecht in the Netherlands where she holds the chair in Welfare State Economics, says that this is a particular problem for the youngest age category. "For children aged 3 up to the mandatory school age, supply is higher but the opening hours of the facilities may not always match working hours," she says. "Moreover, in most countries there are marked regional differences."

Apart from the benefits improved childcare can bring to individual parents, there are other, more general advantages. For instance, the availability of good, affordable childcare is an incentive to plan a family, which in the context of the current demographic slowdown in Europe is increasingly important. Studies have shown that the Member States with the highest birth rates are also those which have done the most to make it easier for parents to combine work and family responsibilities. These countries also tend to have a high female employment rate.





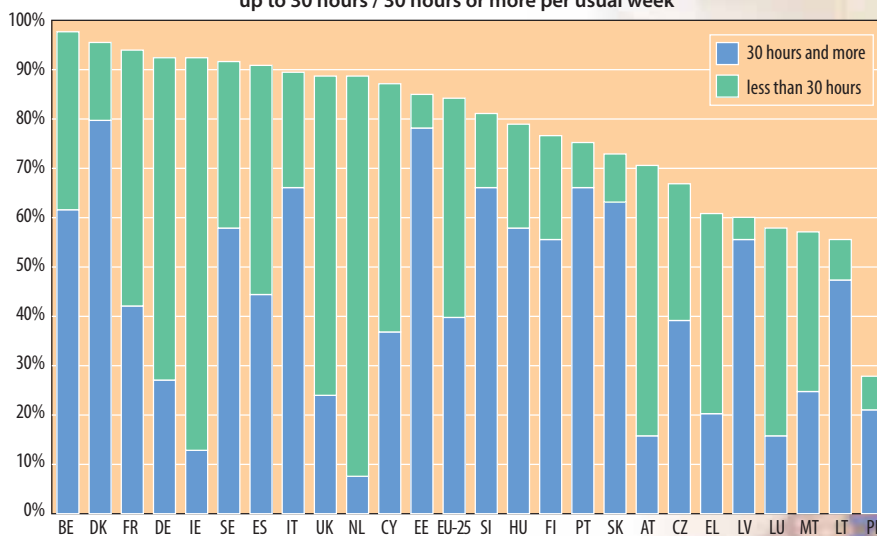
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What can be done to improve the standard and availability of childcare in the EU? Opening new facilities is one obvious answer, but professionalising informal childcare – for example by setting quality standards, improving conditions of employment and remuneration, and

staff training – is another option. It is also important to ensure that the more specific needs of parents with atypical working hours or sick children are being met. “All countries need to reconcile the interest of the parent, the child, the employer and the state in a way that is both efficient and just

from a social, demographic and economic perspective,” says Ms. Plantenga. “A coherent point of view, providing a continuum in the provision of money, time and services, seems absolutely crucial in this respect.”

Proportion of children (3 years to mandatory schooling age) cared for by formal arrangements, up to 30 hours / 30 hours or more per usual week



© Getty Pictures



Bringing up baby

Why are so many men unwilling to take parental leave, and what can be done to improve the situation?

The European social partners have begun negotiations to review and amend EU provisions on parental leave. The original directive, now over ten years old, was itself the result of an agreement between social partners at EU level.

Having the possibility of taking a period of parental leave to look after young children is a mainstay of so-called “reconciliation” policies. Furthermore, it also contributes to gender equality: while maternity and paternity leave are, by definition, taken by the mother or the father, parental leave is open to both, effectively allowing both parents to share the burden – and the rewards – of child-rearing.

Or so the theory goes. In practice, as is often the case, things are invariably quite different. Although parental leave can be taken by either parent, it is usually taken by women. According to a 2004 Eurobarometer survey for EU-15, 84% of men said they had not taken parental leave, nor were they thinking of doing so. Rates of men taking parental leave were highest in Sweden and Denmark, with 18% and 11% (respectively) of fathers hav-

ing taken or considering taking parental leave. This compares to a 2004 average for EU-15 of 4%.

A comparative review of reconciliation policies in thirty European countries, published in 2005, noted that the main factors affecting take-up of parental leave are the level of payment (which affects whether the leave will be taken and by whom); organisational culture (the report suggested that both sexes suffer from unsupportive organisational cultures when it comes to the take-up of parental leave); flexibility (take-up is more likely if the leave can be taken in instalments); labour market sector (take-up seems to be higher in the public sector), and educational level (men with higher educational levels are more likely to take parental leave).

According to the 2004 Eurobarometer survey, 42% of fathers reported that inadequate financial compensation was the main reason they did not take parental leave. The survey also showed that 31% of fathers said they feared that taking parental leave would adversely affect their careers, while higher financial compensa-

tion during the period of leave and better guarantees with respect to their careers would encourage them to take leave. The fact that in the majority of cases only women take parental leave perpetuates traditional gender stereotypes, both within the family and at the workplace.

So, as the social partners renegotiate the directive, one of their most pressing tasks will be how to make parental leave more attractive to fathers. Several suggestions were put forward by the European Commission in its consultation document, from making such leave strictly non-transferable between the parents to setting aside a minimum period of parental leave to be taken by the father, or even granting parents an additional period of parental leave if the father takes a specified minimum period of leave.

Finally, better financial compensation during the period of leave would represent an incentive, particularly in families where the father is the main breadwinner, as would the introduction of better guarantees in relation to job and career during and after the leave.

Time to act on Roma inclusion

Participants at the EU's first Roma summit call for new partnership for integration

More than 500 representatives from EU institutions, national governments, parliaments and civil society gathered in Brussels on September 16th to take part in the first ever European Roma Summit. Their aim: to discuss the situation of Roma communities in the EU and to find ways to improve it.

The event was organised by the European Commission together with the French Presidency of the EU, as a follow-up to a Commission report published in July 2008 on the EU instruments and policies available to support Roma inclusion. The report's conclusions called for a joint response to tackle Roma exclusion and discrimination in the EU.

In December 2007, EU leaders acknowledged for the first time that Roma populations face a very specific situation across the EU, and called upon Member States and the European Union to use all means possible to improve their inclusion. To this end, the Council invited the Commission "to examine existing policies and instruments and to report to the Council on progress achieved before the end of June 2008". The Commission responded in July 2008 with a Communication and an accompanying Staff Working Document, which set out a renewed commitment to non-discrimination in general, with an emphasis on action to improve the situation of Roma in particular.

The Summit constituted the following step in this process and aimed to support and promote a joint commitment by the Member States, the EU institutions and civil society. These aims were presented by Commission President José Manuel Barroso in his opening speech: "I am firmly convinced that this Roma Summit represents a unique opportunity for getting the problems of the Roma higher on the agenda than ever before (...) It is our

urgent task to ensure that this Roma Summit makes a difference. After all, it has perhaps the highest-level political participation in history and brings together also an unprecedented number of actors from Roma civil society. And there is, or should be, also a much more clear sense of direction than ever before."

Millions of Europeans of Roma origin are subject to persistent discrimination – both at individual and institutional level – and far-reaching social exclusion. Their situation is far more difficult than that of other ethnic minorities. In 2007 the High Level Advisory Group of Experts on the social integration of ethnic minorities and their full participation in the Labour Market (High Level Group on ethnic mi-

norities) identified 14 barriers to ethnic minorities getting a job. The problems of most ethnic minorities could be explained by a limited number of obstacles. Roma, however, were found to be affected by nearly all of them, namely: lack of education and training; lack of language skills; lack of recognition of skills and qualifications; lack of access to professions; lack of access to citizenship; lack of integration policies; stereotypes, prejudices and negative attitudes; industrial change; disincentives through welfare systems; discrimination; lack of information; labour market competition; and undeclared work. A Eurobarometer survey showed that 77% of Europeans are of the opinion that being Roma is a disadvantage in society, on a par with being disabled (79%).



© Belga Pictures

Still, the tools exist to improve the situation if the EU, Member States and civil society join forces to effectively coordinate their efforts. The Commission report found that there is a powerful framework of legislative, financial and policy coordination tools available and that these are increasingly used, but that there is still an implementation gap in the Member States. The EU's Structural Funds – including the European Social Fund (ESF) – and pre-accession instruments are crucial to overcoming exclusion. For example, in 2000-2006, €275 million of ESF funding was devoted to projects specifically targeted at Roma, while a further €1 billion was spent on vulnerable groups including Roma. The key to success is strong and effective coordination and the full involvement of civil society in the design, implementation and monitoring of EU action.

The EU has clear powers in the field of non-discrimination which it has used to

legislate (equal treatment irrespective of race and ethnic origin) and to monitor the correct transposition of EU law. However, the responsibility for most central areas for Roma inclusion lies primarily with Member States (e.g. education, employment, social inclusion). In these fields the EU can only coordinate Member States' policies, and support their implementation, including through the use of the Structural Funds.

Against this backdrop, summit participants discussed the need for a new partnership for Roma integration as well as the role of various stakeholders and actors in this partnership. As pointed out by George Soros, who led one of the panel discussions, there is a unique momentum to build a strong partnership for Roma inclusion that will include all actors: representatives of the European Commission, member States and the Roma themselves. And there is a need for the European Commission to exercise firm

political leadership to guide this process, by sending a clear political message to EU governments about the urgent need to act and by providing policy guidance and stimulating the exchange of good practices among Member States.

In order to do this, President Barroso and social affairs Commissioner Vladimir Spidla evoked the possibility of launching a "platform" for Roma inclusion. The platform would not be a formal body, but rather an open and flexible "stage" where the key actors – the European Commission and other EU institutions, Member States' governments (including authorities at the regional and local level) and civil society – can exchange their experiences on Roma inclusion and where political commitments to this end can be developed. It would also serve as a framework for monitoring and evaluating progress. EU leaders will examine this proposal at a meeting in December.



ESF in Spain – opening the door to employment



“I love my job because it gives me stability and the opportunity to learn new things,” says Amparo Navaja Maldonado, from Seville, Spain.

Speaking in the lobby of the upmarket hotel where she works, the 30-year old appears positive and contented. However, not so long ago her situation was very different. Having left school at the end of compulsory education with few qualifications, she says her life was “stuck in a rut”. She had trouble finding any stable work – just cleaning jobs from time to time. “I would get a two-month contract here, or a few days work there, but there were long periods when I was unemployed.”

Amparo grew up in a large family of Roma origin. Her parents made their living travelling from market to market selling fruit – a life that she saw was difficult, with little certainty. When she and her husband, Juan Manuel Gallego, had their first baby, Marco, just over five years ago, she began to

realise that she wanted a different future for her own family. “I wanted to do something different and change my situation,” she says, “I wanted a career and to be able to support myself and my children.”

Help came when she found out about the ACCEDER training course through a local employment centre. The course, co-funded by the European Union through the European Social Fund, aims to fight discrimination against the Roma communities and help individuals obtain the training and education they need to find permanent employment. It has been operating since 2000 and in its first six years helped more than 30,000 individuals to get employment contracts throughout Spain. The course enables people to gain the skills and experience they need to access job opportunities, allowing flexible training programmes. Courses combine the practical and theoretical and are tailored to the needs of individuals.

Through the course, Amparo trained as a chambermaid and went on to find work experience in a hotel in Seville. “The course gave me an extra qualification to help get jobs,” she says. But more importantly, she continues, the course increased her self-esteem and confidence. “I saw that I had more options. It opened many doors.”

Soon after finishing the course in 2004, she found a job as a hotel chambermaid with a fixed contract. Four years later, she switched to a position at one of the biggest hotels in the city where she has a permanent contract and has been promoted to a supervisory role.

She is now in charge of a small team of chambermaids, assigning work rotas and ensuring that standards are kept up. Amparo says that one of the things she appreciates most about her job is the colleagues she works with. “It’s great to work as part of a professional team.”

At a personal level, the stability of her position at the hotel enabled the young couple to buy their own home, around two years ago. With the latest addition to the family, baby Adrian, arriving in early 2008, the upturn in their fortunes has come just in time. “My life has changed dramatically, because now I am on the payroll. I was able to get a mortgage,” says Amparo. “We now have our own home and car and I feel financially secure.”



ESF in Greece – helping Roma find their place in society

Some 300 kilometers west of Athens, at the furthest point of the Peloponnese, is the village of Sagaika, in the municipality of Movri. Over a thousand Roma have given up travelling and moved here to find unskilled work on large local farms. Movri is also home to the “Rom Office,” a rural healthcare and welfare centre, which was set up three years ago in a former rural school and is supported by the European Social Fund.

The centre is one of many examples of a raft of initiatives that have been put in place by the European Union to help Europe’s Roma population, which is all too often subject to discrimination and exclusion. “The initiatives in question have been a resounding success, because the managers who work in the healthcare and welfare centres help these people in their daily lives,” says Katerina Giantziou, who works for the Ministry of Employment and Social Welfare, the ESF’s Greek partner when it comes to initiatives for helping the Roma population.

Olympia Kitsigkopoulou, who lives at a camp near the Rom Office where about 70 Roma families live, is a regular at the centre. “They give us clothes and school books for the children,” she says. “My son had failed his school year. So this summer, the children went to the centre to do their homework and that’s how they passed their exams. The centre has helped them a lot.”

The project increasingly concerns itself with the material situation of families, although healthcare and welfare follow-up remains its priority. The Rom Office employs a psychologist, a nurse and a doctor. “If this structure did not exist, they could not vaccinate their children free of charge, there would be no doctor’s surgery,” says Asimina Tsintoni, a doctor at the centre. “I see that these people have need of help and we can supply it to them.”

Dionisis Markoroulos is another example of someone who has benefited from the project. “I was an alcoholic for

years. I drank, and I was alienated by my relatives, my children and my family,” he says. “The people who work at the Healthcare and Welfare Centre supported me; for healthcare, and for psychological and family problems, for everything, everything, they helped me a lot.”

Dionisis, who has been living outside of the camp for several years, is an example of a Rom who has found his place in Greek society. With the help of the Rom Office, he has found a job and brought his family greater security. “Now we have a house,” he says. “We built our house – whereas we were travellers before.”

“The ESF helps enormously – through various European programmes which are implemented, either for employment or for education,” says Project Manager Maria Tzola. “We see that the EU is putting in a considerable amount of effort.”





A European Year to fight poverty and social exclusion

Many people in the EU are still living under the poverty threshold

On October 2, the Council approved the European Commission's proposal to designate 2010 as the European Year for combating poverty and social exclusion. As preparations begin across the Member States, the challenge now is to turn this into a dynamic project, which will bring together many different partners in each country and provide increased visibility for the fight against poverty and exclusion.

Combating poverty and social exclusion is one of the main objectives of the European Union and its Member States. In March 2000, at the launch of the Lisbon strategy, Heads of State and Government promised to make "a decisive impact on the eradication of poverty" by the year 2010. Today, 78 million Europeans still live under the poverty threshold.

Poverty and exclusion are, needless to say, a problem at on an individual level. But they are also an obstacle to economic development for society as a whole. The EU hopes to reaffirm the importance of

collective responsibility when it comes to combating poverty. This obviously will involve decision-makers. But the European Year also wants to give a voice to those people who experience poverty and social exclusion every day.

Policy objectives

Four main objectives lie at the heart of this European Year:

- **Recognition:** to recognise the basic right of people experiencing poverty and social exclusion to live in dignity and to take an active part in society;
- **Shared responsibility and participation:** to promote public support for social inclusion policies, emphasising collective and individual responsibility in combating poverty and social exclusion, and encouraging commitment from all public and private stakeholders;
- **Cohesion:** to promote a more cohesive society – one in which people recognise

that society as a whole benefits from the eradication of poverty;

- **Commitment and practical action:** to renew the pledge of the EU and its Member States to combat poverty and social exclusion, and involve all levels of authority in the pursuit of that aim.

Practical organisation

The 2010 European Year has been given a budget of at least €26 million, of which €17 million is being provided by the European Union. This may be supplemented by funding from private sources. The European Year will see a wide variety of activities, from awareness-raising campaigns, discussions and conferences, to competitions highlighting achievements relevant to the theme of the European Year.

A wide range of stakeholders will be involved in the conception and implementation of the European Year: civil society organisations and groups defending the interests of people living in poverty, social partners and local and regional authorities. Indeed, the involvement of civil society and the overall commitment of all will be essential to success.

At a national level, a programme will be developed to help adapt the European-level joint policy guidelines to the specific issues and characteristics of each country. Activities will be identified and carried out by a national implementing body appointed by the participating countries.

At the European level, a committee of representatives from the Member States will assist the Commission in supervising and implementing the European Year activities. A vast information and public-awareness campaign will be set up. The Commission will publish a number of surveys and studies, to aid discussion at European level and in the participating countries.

For more information:

<http://ec.europa.eu/2010againstopoverty>
<http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=437&newsId=407&furtherNews=yes>

Contact :

2010againstopoverty@ec.europa.eu



Is Europe's youth achieving its full potential?

Stable employment is vital for the social inclusion of young people

Paradoxically – given that they are the most educated generation ever – young people in the European Union face more difficulties than ever when trying to find a decent and stable job.

Young people in the EU represent 38.5% of the total unemployed population and some 4.6 million people aged between 15 and 24 do not have a job. This jeopardizes their autonomy and prevents them from being fully included in society, especially if they come from disadvantaged backgrounds.

This situation prevents young people from achieving their full potential in life. And not being fully integrated in society, they cannot enjoy, to the full extent, their basic human rights.

Furthermore, the lack of decent or stable jobs for young people prevents them from being able to successfully combine their private and professional life, which can be directly linked to the decrease in fertility rates across Europe and therefore puts the sustainability of the pension systems and the overall European Social Model at risk.

In fact, facing increasing difficulties when trying to enter the labour market,

and often faced with precarious working conditions, the lack of quality jobs for young people in Europe has led them to become part of the working poor population – people who, despite having a job, have salaries and working conditions that do not allow them to live above the threshold of poverty.

A staggering example is the exponential increase of internships in Europe.

The European Youth Forum acknowledges that when they are part of education curricula, internships are a positive tool to facilitate young people's access to employment. However, the learning dimension of internships has been reducing significantly with a majority of interns working on issues that will not allow them to progress in their professional development, while entitled to very low or inexistent pay and very low or inexistent social security.

The continuous lack of autonomy young people face prevents them from making plans or investments in their own life. And autonomy signifies that young people have the necessary support, resources and opportunities to choose to live independently; enjoy the possibility

of full social and political participation in all sectors of everyday life; and are able to make independent decisions.

Access to employment is therefore vital if young people are to be able to lead autonomous lives. But not just access to employment – access to quality employment is what is really necessary; the kind of employment that allows young people to combine their private and professional life, to be integrated in society, to live above the threshold of poverty... and last but not least, the kind of employment that allows young people to enjoy their basic human rights and realise their full potential in life.

The European Youth Forum is absolutely convinced that for this to happen it is necessary to:

- Foster a smooth transition from education to employment by: fighting against early school leaving; recognizing the importance of vocational training and professional guidance; and recognizing the skills that are acquired through non-formal education and volunteering and which are key to the labour market;

- Promote entrepreneurship and self-initiative amongst young people;

- Strive for better jobs and not only pay attention to the number of jobs being created.

The European Youth Forum feels that it is time to reflect and rethink the role of European policies, commitments and strategies that impact the integration of young people in society and employment: the European Youth Pact, the Lisbon Strategy, the Active Inclusion of people furthest from the Labour Market, Flexicurity as well as the Open Method of Coordination in the field of Social Protection and Social Inclusion — and to explore how a new EU framework of cooperation on youth can contribute to the integration of young people in society and employment and enhance their autonomy.

— Contribution by
Bettina Schwarzmayr,
president of the European Youth Forum



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George Soros, global financier and philanthropist, speaks to Social Agenda magazine

You have been personally engaged in work to empower the Roma for the past 20 years. What are some highlights of this work?

As a firm believer in the concept of an open society, I established a network of foundations to promote open society principles in Eastern Europe starting in Hungary as early as 1984. The foundations took up the case of the Roma from their inception. We took a comprehensive approach. On the one hand, we sought to protect their human rights. To do this we founded the European Roma Rights Centre, which engages in strategic litigation. Perhaps its greatest achievement to date is the ruling this year by the European Court of Human Rights on a case in Ostrava, Czech Republic, which established that the segregation of Roma children in schools constitutes unlawful discrimination. On the other hand, we sought to improve the capacity of the Roma people to participate in society on equal terms.

Which areas or issues did you focus on particularly, when working to bring greater equality to Roma people?

dangerous remained unchanged. Now, well-educated young Roma are more willing to embrace their Roma identity and speak out for change.

Why is the plight of the Roma such an important issue for the European Union?

I personally have seen that many Roma families and communities live in sub-human conditions. An unacceptable reality gives rise to a negative stereotype, and the negative stereotype makes the situation of the Roma worse. The net result is the worst case of discrimination and social exclusion based on ethnicity in the European Union. Most of the Roma population is concentrated in the new member states of Eastern Europe and the Balkans. Their living conditions have deteriorated from what they were during the communist regimes. It's no wonder that many of them migrate to the West, but this has aroused racial prejudices in other member states. Such incidents of discrimination and ethnic-based violence should be of concern to the European Union and its individual

member states, and they must develop strategies aimed at avoiding a recurrence of such events.

How can the EU help to address the enormous challenges that Roma face in education, health and employment?

The European Commission, along with the World Bank and young Roma activists, helped us inaugurate the Decade of Roma Inclusion in 2005. Since then, the Structural Funds have been – and continue to be – very important in moving this initiative forward. The Decade brings together civil society and governments. Each country draws up a national action plan for improving education, healthcare, housing, and employment opportunities for Roma, and the Roma organizations themselves, in true civil society fashion, review progress toward achieving the goals that have been set. However, governments invariably find themselves in a difficult situation because helping the Roma is not popular politically. It's not an issue where you can obtain quick results that can help you get re-elected, so consequently there is very little incentive for governments to deal with this issue. But getting support from the EU Structural Funds is an incentive for governments to get engaged. I would say that the Structural Funds are the motor that has driven the Decade of Roma Inclusion forward.

European Commission President, José Manuel Barroso, recently put forward the idea of a European Platform for Roma Inclusion. What are your thoughts on this?

I support President Barroso's idea of a European Platform for Roma Inclusion, which would serve as a working instrument to help EU-allotted funds be more efficiently funnelled into national policies that are aimed at Roma inclusion. In my opinion, this could be a valuable extension of the Roma Decade and bring on board the member states that do not have a large enough Roma population to develop national action programmes on their own.

Recent publications



Biennial report on social services of general interest

The First Biennial Report on Social Services of General Interest (SSGIs) is a monitoring and dialogue tool which had been announced in the 2006 and the 2007 Communications. The report provides an overall picture of SSGI in the EU. It describes their socio-economic situation and the major economic and societal changes to which they have to adapt. It also looks at the way in which these services adjust to evolving needs and constraints and how the changes affect the organisation, financing and provision of social services of general interest in terms of relevant EU rules. It is available in English, French and German.

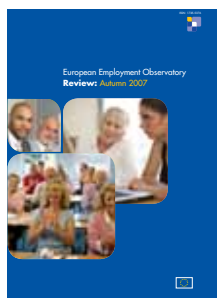
Catalogue No: KE-AT-08-001-**-C



Employment in Europe 2008

Produced annually by the Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, the Employment in Europe report analyses the performance and evolution of the labour market in the EU and candidate countries. It is targeted at the general public, including experts in employment and labour market analysis, decision-makers, academia and social partners. The 2008 report contains chapters on the impact of recent third country migration, geographical labour mobility post-enlargement, measuring the quality of employment, and the link between education and occupations. The report has been published as paper version in English only.

Catalogue No: KE-AH-08-001-EN-C



European Employment Observatory Review: Autumn 2007

This autumn 2007 report of the European Employment Observatory is devoted to the theme of 'lifelong learning' with a special focus on age and gender. The Observatory works to support the development of the EU's employment strategy by providing information and comparative research on employment policies and labour market trends. The report is targeted at the Observatory's network and Member State ministries responsible for employment, education, business and industry. It is available in English, French and German.

Catalogue No: KE-AN-07-002-**-C

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New ESmal e-newsletter format available

After more than 80 issues sent out since 2001 to more than 13,000 contacts, ESmal, the e-newsletter of DG Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities now comes in a completely revamped format. Readers can receive the newsletter in a clear and attractive HTML-based layout in their mailboxes. To subscribe to ESmal, please visit http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/emplweb/news/esmal_en.cfm

Useful websites

The home page of Commissioner Vladimír Špidla: http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/emplweb/spidla/index_en.cfm

The home page of the Commission's Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities: http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/employment_social/index_en.htm

The Commission's thematic Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities web site: http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/index_en.html

The website of the European Social Fund: <http://ec.europa.eu/esf>