



Opinion of the advisory committee on equal opportunities for women and men on **the social agenda**



Advisory Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men

The opinion of the Advisory Committee does not necessarily reflect the positions of the Member States and does not bind the Member States.

Original text in French



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The Lisbon European Council in March 2000 set a new strategic aim for the European Union for the coming decade: *"to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion"*.

The French Presidency was directed to start work *"on the basis of the Commission Communication, with a view to reaching agreement on a European Social Agenda at the Nice European Council in December, including the initiatives of the different partners involved"*.

The Advisory Committee for equal opportunities for men and women welcomes the fact that it has been invited to deliver an opinion on the Commission's Communication as part of the French Presidency's wide-ranging consultation process following that carried out by the Commission. All the opinions gathered will be submitted to the Employment and Social Policy Council for incorporation in the report which will be put before the European Council in Nice.

The Committee is pleased to see that the Commission's Communication on the Social Agenda, which reiterates the aims set by the European Council in Lisbon, is informed by the premise that Europe's economic strength and its social model are closely linked and sets out to reinforce the role of social policy as a productivity factor. Combined action on the social, economic and employment policy fronts will make the most of the mutual benefits accruing.

The Committee fully supports the introduction of a positively based multi-annual social agenda, i.e. with targets extending from the short term to the long term and thus enabling intensive activity to be sustained.

The Advisory Committee welcomes the Commission's Communication on the Social Agenda and approves of the approach which it adopts. The Communication emphasises the **enhancement of quality in all spheres**: full employment and quality of working life, quality of social policy and quality of industrial relations.

It provides for **active participation by all the players involved**, whilst respecting their powers and responsibilities: the institutions of the European Union, the Member States, regional and local authorities, the social partners, civil society and enterprises.





This diversity amongst the players will be mirrored by a **wide range of activities**: transparent coordination method, legislation, social dialogue and collective bargaining, Structural Funds, programme, political analysis and research, etc. Mainstreaming will be strengthened and developed. These types of intervention will be combined to ensure that the priorities outlined in the agenda and set for the areas targeted are met.

The Committee welcomes the fact that the Communication opens up a **wide scope of action** for the future Agenda: employment, work, the knowledge-based society, mobility, social protection, social inclusion, equality for women and men, basic rights and combating discrimination, social dialogue, enlargement and international cooperation.

The Committee notes that regular reports will be made on equal opportunities for men and women as political analysis and research is carried out. The production of gendered indicators and statistics is a must to enable progress to be measured, and the Committee insists on the need to include them in such analysis and research.

In the same vein, the Committee attaches particular importance to prompting the necessary discussion of the European gender institute, for which a precise feasibility study needs to be carried out. The institute may be able to provide the resources required for preparing gendered indicators and impact studies.

1. INTEGRATING EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES...

The Committee appreciates the fact that the Commission has included in the Agenda the Lisbon targets on increasing the rate of employment amongst women to 60% by 2010 and on the quality of employment, stating explicitly that combining family and working life is a factor which can contribute to meeting these.

It notes that an entire chapter (4.2.3) of the Agenda is devoted to promoting gender equality.

It also notes with interest that gender issues appear in other chapters, either as targets or as activities to be implemented. The chapter on more and better jobs (4.1.1) thus proposes measures to restructure the market, in particular with regard to segregation of the sexes, and integrates equal opportunities into work organisation. The chapter on exploring the possibilities offered by the knowledge-based society (4.1.3) calls for the gender gap to be



closed and for new forms of organisation of work to be promoted in the new economy. The chapter on modernising and improving social protection (4.2.1) covers targets, indicators and exchanges of experience and practice, which also include the gender dimension. The chapter on promoting social inclusion (4.2.2) also incorporates the gender perspective.

The Committee is pleased to see that the part of the Agenda devoted to the quality of social policy includes the dialogue on equality as a strategic issue to be taken up by the Commission and the NGOs and as a subject of common interest in the dialogue between the social partners and the NGOs and one on which they should prepare initiatives.

Finally, the chapter on enlargement (4.4) states that equal opportunities must be integrated in the pre-accession strategy.

2. ... NEEDS TO BE STEPPED UP IN SOME AREAS

An integrated approach to equality

The Committee notes with satisfaction that equality is a thread which runs through the entire Agenda.

However, it wonders what reasons there were for including equal opportunities in one chapter rather than another. For example, there is no mention of equal opportunities in the chapter on adjustment to the new working environment (4.1.2) nor in that on the promotion of mobility (4.1.4). It thinks that the impression given of a "sprinkling" of equal opportunities is unfortunate and might suggest that it has no importance except in the chapters where it is explicitly mentioned.

The Committee would have liked to see a more ambitious approach, incorporating equal opportunities for women and men in a more comprehensive and integral fashion along two lines: specific activities and incorporation of equal opportunities for women and men (gender mainstreaming) in all areas in compliance with the Peking Declaration and the Amsterdam Treaty.

The Committee points out that this approach would have been perfectly consistent with the European employment strategy, the European Social Fund regulation and the proposal for a fifth programme on equal opportunities for women and men.



This integrated approach should have featured in the introduction to the Agenda, specifying that:

- the principle of equal opportunities for men and women must inform all action in all the areas covered by the Agenda. The methodology for integrating equal opportunities should have been mentioned at this point and, in particular, the carrying out of an impact study of action, measures and programmes on the respective situations of men and women. Moreover, the gender perspective should also feature in the assessment and monitoring of policies;
- action under chapter 4.2.3 comprises specific activities to promote full participation by women in economic, scientific, social, politic and civic life and strike a new balance between women's and men's roles, particularly with regard to reconciling family and working life.

The chapter on promoting equal opportunities for men and women

The Committee is pleased to see that the Commission's Communication contains some particularly innovatory aspects. It welcomes the fact that there is a chapter dealing exclusively with equality, including targets and action. Promoting equal opportunities for men and women must be seen as a key element in creating a society where there is full employment combined with improved job quality and quality of life in the knowledge-based economy, as described by the European Council in Lisbon.

The Committee welcomes the legislative action set out in this chapter, namely the framework Community strategy, including a directive to be adopted on equal treatment outside employment on the basis of Article 13 of the Treaty, adoption and implementation of the 5th programme on equal opportunities and review of the 1976 Directive on equal treatment in employment. It would even like to see legislation reinforced to enable social security rights to be maintained in atypical work and during parental leave¹.

It also welcomes the links forged with other Community initiatives, such as monitoring and reinforcement of the fourth pillar of the employment strategy and the framework strategy on equal opportunities.

¹ UNICE, UAPME and the CEEP are not in favour of a review of the 1976 Directive on equal treatment in employment. This is because they believe that the existing directive provides sufficient legal protection against gender-based discrimination in employment. They also feel that sexual harassment should not be equated with gender-based discrimination. They believe that the debate on maintenance of social security rights is a matter for Member States and should not be separate from overall discussion of social protection reform.



Involving the social partners at all levels in promoting equal opportunities through equal treatment, reduction of sexual segregation in the labour market, including through lifelong learning and professional enhancement, and reconciling family and working life is a very positive step. However, the Committee points out that there are areas where there is still no social dialogue and that the above issues do not come within the remit of social dialogue alone. Here, a variety of the resources and players mentioned should be combined. The importance of small and medium-sized businesses should be highlighted, given their potential for creating jobs.

The Committee would also like to draw the Commission's attention to the fact that the Agenda treats reconciling family and working life as an exclusive concern of the social partners. It reminds the Commission of the recommendations in the Resolution of the Council and of the Ministers for Employment and Social Policy meeting within the Council on the balanced participation of women and men in family and working life, adopted on 29 June 2000, and of the Evora conference of 19 and 20 May 2000, in which it was emphasised that responsibility was shared between the State, enterprises and civil society. If better reconciliation of family and working life could be guaranteed, the aims of the Lisbon Council with regard to the rate of employment and also quality of life could be met. What is more, the Resolution notes that equality of men and women in the public and private domains is acknowledged as a condition for democracy and a guarantee of individual autonomy and freedoms.

Reconciling family and working life for both men and women cannot be confined to the problems of organising work. It also depends on the supply of services or help for childcare or care of elderly persons. Robust policies to improve the situation on this score are necessary to ensure women and men really do have a choice when it comes to reconciling their family and working lives. In more general terms, the Committee emphasises that the problems in this area result from housework, upbringing and care of children and dependent persons not being shared. Here, the Committee thinks that specific measures for men could be envisaged so that they can acquire the informal skills too often attributed solely to women. And greater support should be forthcoming for the growing number of single-parent families in Europe.



Such difficulties can also be exacerbated by the fact that the way towns are run still does not make due allowance for individual movements and patterns of behaviour. This is something which needs to be discussed collectively.

The Committee also wonders why there is no specific action with regard to equal pay. It thinks that a concerted effort should be made with the social partners to close the persistent pay gap, whose reduction over the past few years seems to have stalled.

In the specific areas of vertical and horizontal occupational segregation and equal pay, the Committee emphasises that increased vigilance is necessary in the emerging sectors, such as new information and communication technologies, to ensure that they do not reproduce the same inequalities as in the more traditional sectors.

The Committee would also like to see more ambitious action on decision-making than in the Agenda and not merely in public administrations. It wants the Agenda's aim of promoting full participation of women in economic, scientific, social, political and civic life to be implemented by specific measures. Balanced participation of women in decision-making posts and positions of responsibility in the public and private spheres, particularly in management posts in businesses, is a key element of democracy and social and economic progress.

The Commission has been the architect of some considerable progress in this area, but the Committee would like to point out that the Commission's report on implementation by the Member States of the 1996 Recommendation illustrates the need to sustain and renew its efforts here.

The Committee would like the situation of spouses helping in agricultural organisations and small craft businesses to be looked at closely. They often make an unseen contribution to the economic wealth of enterprises and to local development. This contribution could be assessed and the attendant social rights discussed.

With regard to social protection, the Committee would like to see the question of individual rights dealt with in the Social Agenda.



Finally, the Committee stresses the need for women and for men to enjoy high standards of health protection and safety at work, particularly - in the case of women - with regard to maternity-related matters.