

EUROPEAN UNION



Committee of the Regions

ECOS-IV-005

Brussels, 19 December 2006

OPINION

of the

Committee of the Regions

of 6 December 2006

on the

Communication from the Commission to the Council, The European Parliament, the European

Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions

A Roadmap for equality between women and men 2006-2010

COM(2006) 92 final

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS,

Having regard to the Communication from the Commission to the Council, The European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions *A Roadmap for equality between women and men 2006-2010*, COM(2006) 92 final;

Having regard to the decision of the European Commission of 1 March to consult it on the subject, under the first paragraph of Article 265 of the Treaty establishing the European Community;

Having regard to the decision of its Bureau of 25 April 2006 to instruct its Commission for Economic and Social Policy to draw up an opinion on this subject;

Having regard to its Opinion on Women and Poverty in the European Union (CdR 151/2005 fin);

Having regard to its Opinion on Modernising Social Protection for More and Better Jobs – a comprehensive approach contributing to making work pay (CdR 94 /2004 fin);

Having regard to its Opinion on the Proposal for a Council Directive on Implementing the principle of equal treatment between women and men in the access to and supply of goods and services (CdR 19/2004);

Having regard to its Opinion on the Process of drawing up a Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (CdR 327/1999 fin);

Having regard to the stated wish of the European Commission to advance gender equality on the basis of the Roadmap for Gender equality and of the CoR to give practical meaning to the values and aims of this Roadmap, and in view of the fact that 2007 has been dedicated as the Year of Equal Opportunities for All;

Having regard to its Draft Opinion CdR 138/2006 rev. 2 adopted on 20 October 2006 by its Commission for Economic and Social Policy (Rapporteur: **Ms Claudette Abela Baldacchino**, Deputy Mayor, Qrendi Local Council, MT/PES);

unanimously adopted the following opinion at its 67th plenary session, held on 6 and 7 December 2006 (meeting of 6 December).

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1. The Committee of the Regions' views

Priorities for the Committee of the Regions

- 1.1 The Committee of the Regions has identified the issue of gender equality as one of the top priorities for 2006. The launch of a roadmap for gender equality concerns the basis of the European social model. Promoting equal opportunities and combating all forms of discrimination are among the CoR's key policy priorities.
- 1.2 Concrete proposals should now follow on how to achieve gender equality and improve the situation, particularly of women in the member states, in particular in the context of the year of equal opportunities for all 2007. The gender pact, agreed to by the governments of several member states, like the gender equality road map, sets out a number of targets and aims, but concrete proposals are now urgently needed on how these policies can be implemented. However, the nature and effect of the measures should be sustainable, and, in the context of the gender equality roadmap 2006-2010, should run over a longer period.

Targets for the Committee of the Regions

- 1.3 Gender equality has to come to be universally espoused as a desirable objective for citizens using the services provided by local and regional authorities and a central pillar of policy for governments and politicians of all persuasions. Regional and Local authorities have a key role to play in this respect because they are closest to their citizens and to the issues that concern them. Therefore they must help to set a positive example of non-discrimination, in particular also in their role as major employers in the EU and as key providers of services which have a direct impact on gender equality (see below).
- 1.4 Thus, local and regional authorities should act as catalysts, as supporting and facilitating bodies. Their prime objective is to strike a balance between genders. Therefore all those who need it are to be supported with the necessary means to strengthen their position in society and to gain access to the labour market.
- 1.5 To adhere to this, the CoR must ensure that there is political commitment for :
 1. Decentralisation of Roadmap Objectives
 2. Enabling conditions to reconcile family and work commitments
 3. A robust and well-enforced legal framework
 4. Gender Equality in Decision-Making
 - 5 Changing cultural norms - Equality

The Committee of the Regions, and the local and regional authorities it represents, are ready to make their contribution to realising these objectives through concrete action. This should be done with a view to the year of equal opportunities for all - 2007, but the nature and effect of the measures should be sustainable, and, in the context of the gender equality roadmap 2006-2010, should run over a longer period.

General Remarks on the Six Priorities of the Roadmap

- 1.6 The CoR welcomes the initiative of the European Commission to launch a new roadmap for equality among genders which follows a series of other documents setting out the general aims of European policy to achieve gender equality. In a previous opinion¹ the CoR has expressed the need for a coherent and inclusive strategy to combat gender inequalities throughout the European Union. Gender equality is a fundamental right and a common value, it is not subject to any negotiations or restrictions. It does require, however, also concrete political action at all levels of governance to be realised.
- 1.7 It is generally agreed by the European institutions that the success of the European project depends on the ability of the EU and its institutions to address people's concerns at grass-root level. Hence the success of the Roadmap depends greatly on the ability of EU institutions to mobilize to its advantage the intimate expertise and resources of regional and local governments in its implementation. There are a number of examples of successful local and regional level equality initiatives that are worth disseminating. This appears to be lacking from the present Roadmap strategy.

Improving Governance for Gender Equality

- 1.8 The CoR welcomes the Roadmap vision to support the European Institute for Gender Equality. The CoR would like to follow the debate on the exact mandate for this new agency and how it is supposed to translate the general policy aims into concrete action. The Committee of the Regions stresses the need for reliable and comparable scientific data on the situation regarding gender equality at the different levels of governance, and believes that the Institute for Gender Equality will have an important function as a tool to create networks for the collection and exchange of such data. It also believes that another important function of this institute would be to monitor gender education policies and practices across the EU and to make recommendations and offer suggestions for improvement.
- 1.9 The CoR insists that in these efforts, a strong emphasis must be given to involving the regional and local level. Monitoring developments at the levels closest to the citizens and exchanging best practices are key to maximise the impact of the Institute. To this end, the Gender Equality Institute should be looking into ways to de-centralise its activities and should be given the necessary means to do so.
- 1.10 Another key aspect to improve gender equality policy at EU level is the need to improve governance of the EU institutions working in this field. This concerns in particular the improvement of coordination between different parts of the Commission to strengthen the implementation of gender mainstreaming across policy areas. It also requires efforts to

¹ CdR 151/2005 fin; Opinion on Women and Poverty in the European Union.

improve training and education for officials as well as for trainers and educators at all levels to sensitise them to gender equality issues. This should include the language used in all documents, particularly that referring to women as minorities, making such documentation more reflective of a gender neutral regime.

Decentralisation of Roadmap Objectives

- 1.11 A re-examination of the hierarchy of the priority areas as defined by the Commission should be considered. An effective roadmap focus on both economic and social equality to address the glaring inequalities that still exist today in gender participation in decision making and political life generally. There is a growing understanding across Europe that gender equality is vital for Europe's economic well-being as well as being an important goal in its own right. For example, despite the fact that Europe today boasts a standard of living that is a model for the rest of the world, it is also true that not everywhere in the EU has economic well-being been translated into gender equality or greater well-being for women. For this reason it is important to stress that it does not follow automatically that economic well-being will automatically result in gender equality. A direct route is needed, as well as the necessary means, if Europe is to reach its final destination of gender equality.
- 1.12 Regional and Local Authorities, being closest to the people and responsible for most of their important social, educational and economic aspects of their daily lives, have the capacity to translate the values and structures inherent in the Roadmap into effective reality. The European Commission, too, recognises this in its endorsement of the European Charter for Equality of Women and Men in Local Life, which was drawn up by the CEMR within the context of the European Commission's Fifth Community Action Programme. The values of the Roadmap must become an integral part of policies being implemented at Regional and Local level. The aim to eliminate gender stereotypes in education, training and culture and the strengthening of governance for gender equality can be best achieved at this level as much as the effective monitoring of the process.
- 1.13 There is tendency for institutions of the EU, National, Regional and Local level to discuss gender issues merely in terms of statistics. While reliable and comparable statistics are useful and necessary to understand today's situation, there is a danger that statistics may be used to justify policies which are mere "tokenism". It is therefore necessary to ensure the accurate interpretation of statistics in order to translate them into appropriate concrete action. A breakdown of statistics by gender will allow for a better evaluation of data and the current impact, or lack of, gender policies being pursued across the EU and at Regional and Local Government levels.

Enabling conditions to reconcile family and work commitments

- 1.14 It also appears that it would be at the Regional and Local level that new funds and other initiatives can be employed effectively towards the implementation of the values and the

provision of the necessary structures for the realization for the Roadmap. The development of "Social Community Plans" can be a management tool to assist Regional and Local authorities to examine the needs of the local community, and based on scientific research, address the needs of targeted disadvantaged groups.

- 1.15 It is clear that the attainment of the Lisbon objectives required the contribution of both sexes, not least women. This includes their participation in the labour market, greater family responsibility to be assumed by men, and the possibility for both men and women to reconcile family and work commitments, which is likely to have a decisive impact on the future demographic development in the EU.
- 1.16 In order to achieve this, one crucial aspect is the need for effective measures that would encourage men to assume an equal share of family responsibility, and for better and more childcare facilities which are accessible and affordable for those who need use them. Many EU Member States need to make greater efforts to achieve the Barcelona 2002 targets in this respect and they should work closely with their local and regional authorities towards this goal.
- 1.17 The value of the long term political objectives would depend on the drawing up of concrete policies, with appropriate funds, where every member of the community would be appreciated and benefits. Alongside, new initiatives to eliminate gender stereotypes in working, private and political life also need to benefit and be encouraged.
- 1.18 The CoR believes that the fundamental task is to ensure that concrete opportunities exist which would make gender equality a reality. It is the existence of opportunities that will ultimately make the difference. The market is concerned with profits and pricing policies , but also with the quality of provided services. Gender equality can only be achieved when essential services, that is good quality services, are available to all citizens. The social agenda of the EU should consider these aspects.

A robust and well-enforced legal framework

- 1.19 It is now several decades ago that Europe agreed on equal pay legislation. Today we are still a long way from equality². There must be a strong political commitment by the EU institutions to enforce already existing legislation/directives, even to the extent of taking court action, against Member States which continue to ignore present and future legislation/directives. The EU must take note of present circumstances and work for a firm commitment from EU member states to gender equality. The gender equality has to become a real priority in all Member States. This would also increase EU's position when addressing gender issues in international fora.

² Gurmai, Z. (2006). Roadmap has no fast lane. PES Statement.

- 1.20 The same is true also for the urgent need to reinforce action against human trafficking. Regional and local authorities must be helped to combat the scourge of human trafficking and the economic abuse of irregular immigrants. Human trafficking has become a problem of vast proportions and must receive attention quickly. Attention is also required to ensure that illegal immigrants, but especially women and children, held in detention have their dignity and their rights respected. The Committee of the Regions will make it its aim to work to encourage and increase greater cooperation among its members in the fight against these abuses. This will increase the effectiveness of EU cooperation against these grievous crimes which inflict extreme suffering and hardship and are an affront to human dignity. It will also provide a stronger base for international cooperation at all levels of governance, which should be increased.
- 1.21 Sex-related violence is usually a matter of male violence against women. This is a serious societal problem and a threat to women's and children's health, welfare and lives. It is a crime against the fundamental right to life, security, freedom, dignity and physical and emotional integrity. The most important preventive measure involves disseminating expertise and working actively on values and attitudes. By working actively for greater equality we can create societies in which boys and girls are given the same chances and rights, one in which girls and women are not subjected to male violence. Local and regional authorities, which are the level closest to citizens, have a major responsibility in these areas, but they also have a lot of experience, with best practice and programmes targeting both the victims and the perpetrators of crime.

Gender Equality in Decision-Making

- 1.22 To achieve genuine gender equality, the problem of under-representation of women in political and economic decision making must be tackled. Local and regional authorities have a key role to play here because gender equality in participation in politics and in economic life should be built from the bottom up. In this context, the CoR suggests that the idea of quota systems should be discussed at the different levels of governance. However quotas by themselves cannot solve the problem of inequality and discrimination, but they may be one element of a broader and integrated strategy to break up existing structures which exclude women from decision making at the moment.
- 1.23 Considering that the upcoming year is dedicated to "Equal Opportunities for All", the CoR must stress on Members States the obligation to ensure parity in national delegations represented in the CoR.
- 1.24 The political groups in the CoR are encouraged to take active part in the discussion regarding gender equality. As part of its commitment to the "Year" the CoR itself should draw up a strategy detailing how it will work with national delegations and political groups to address the issue of gender imbalance within the membership of the CoR.

- 1.25 The CoR, through its commissions, should also commit itself in ensuring that future opinions of this body are based on equal input and participation from both women and men and that parity in all work of the Committee of the Regions should be its aim.

Changing cultural norms - Equality in a Gender Neutral fashion

- 1.26 Local and regional authorities throughout the Member States and non Member States vary in size but not in mission, in their enactment dates but not in principle. Above all, they are a change agent because they have the knowledge about local and regional needs and are in pivotal positions to ensure that services provided are designed around the needs for the enhancement of the well being of their communities.
- 1.27 A key challenge lies in having an open debate for all citizens, as this concerns both men and women, and in the concrete steps towards gender equality.
- 1.28 From their end local and regional authorities should seek to promote equality between women and men through projects financed by either themselves or through the availability of funds by the EU at the early stages of primary schools, even by sharing success stories achieved between different countries.
- 1.29 Political authorities at all levels have the potential to change the dominant discourse and thus the cultural norms. This could be achieved by strategies which would include targeting the community through educators, employers and employees, national and international institutions and above all the media for a more effective realisation of gender equality. In concrete terms, this means for local, regional but also national and EU institutions that gender equality should become an element of all their own communication with the citizens. This in turn requires appropriate education and training of those responsible within the institutions, but also of media representatives to sensitise them to gender issues. In the context of the ongoing debate about the future of Europe under the Commission's plan "D" for democracy, debate and dialogue, to which the Committee of the Regions wishes to add the fourth "D" for decentralisation, gender equality issues should be included as a crucial element of bringing Europe closer to its citizens.

2. The Committee of the Regions' recommendations

- 2.1 In addition to an exploration of educational, economic and social factors, the EU would need cooperate closely with the media and show itself willing to establish codes of practice which, while leaving established freedoms and creativity untouched, roots out those elements which defeat the priorities set out in the roadmap. The media may be a means for disseminating the values of the roadmap but entrenched vested interests have the potential of covertly putting obstacles in its path. Thus, fulfilling the objectives of the roadmap may ultimately be a test of the ability of the EU to create a European society which pays more than just lip service to gender equality.

- 2.2 Democracy, to be effective and meaningful must ensure the possibility of full participation by citizens over the final binding decisions that touch on their everyday life. As long as gender inequality in decision making remains, democracy within the EU will also remain not fully attainable. CoR and EU institutions must engage together to speed up the reform of democratic processes in member states and propose ethical standards of political governance for an increasingly globalised world. Gender equality is one such ethical standard.
- 2.3 The issue of domestic violence and especially of men against women needs to be addressed also at EU Commission level in an effort that greater cooperation between members will facilitate prosecution of individuals accused of domestic violence even if they have changed their country of residence.
- 2.4 Gender equality may well be harder to achieve until services which allow women to take their rightful place in decision making structures are made widely available. If the aims of the roadmap are achieved, women will have a better chance of entering the job market and enhancing their chances of being economically independent.
- 2.5 Regional and local authorities in their role as major employers should lead by setting high standards of gender equality. One way of ensuring this would, in many cases, be to ensure gender equality on recruitment panels. This is very often ignored as a crucial element in decision making.
- 2.6 A further step in this direction is to seek that the CoR should project itself as a role model to local, regional, national and European institutions, whereby ensuring that recruitment policies take full recognition of the understanding of gender issues by future applicants and in sensitising current employees even through training and retraining.
- 2.7 The CoR does not have gender balance among its membership and therefore can not be seen as a model of good practice for local and regional government in the EU. Using 2007 “The European Year of Equal Opportunities for all” as the catalyst it should work with National delegations and political groups represented in the CoR to draw up a strategy of how it will work towards achieving gender parity and publish that strategy in 2007.
- 2.8 Other areas in which gender inequalities have a negative impact on the attainment of agreed objectives by their tendency to delay or obstruct full and equal women participation in every sphere of life need to be addressed firmly. Glaring examples may be found in many areas of social policy, which include health, education, social security and housing, etc., which are not sufficiently sensitive to gender based differences.
- 2.9 For more family-friendly measures to ensure that women and men alike have equal access to paid employment and services, local and regional authorities can seek to embark on partnership initiatives *with private and public entities* that would seek to further access

childcare facilities, for which funds could be attained through structural funds and/or the new PROGRESS programme. The Committee of the Regions should serve as a role model, both for its political structures and employees. In order to do this it needs to become a leader in the provisions of child care facilities given that its premises are in constant use by its employees, associations of every sort and political people.

- 2.10 It is for these reasons that great consideration should be given to the potential of local and regional authorities as they are in a better position to implement the roadmap while keeping in full view the cultural and socio-economic milieu in which it has to be implemented. This opinion is of the view that the aims of the Roadmap cannot succeed if the process of gender equality is not worked from the bottom-up with the full participation of citizens at the regional and local level. In this context, a useful reference point for all local and regional authorities is provided by the CEMR's Charter for Equality of Women and Men in Local Life, which gives a concrete structure to the objectives of the Roadmap, in accordance with the competences of local and regional authorities. Indeed, Regional and Local governments should not only be directly involved through a decentralised roadmap. The CoR and its members must promote, support and act as guardians of gender equality.
- 2.11 If agreed by the CoR's budgetary authorities, the CoR should organise an annual Equality Forum in order to bring together local and regional, public, private and voluntary sector powers to engage in exchanges of methodology, expertise and experience. Costs should be kept down in order to encourage broad participation.

Brussels, 6 December 2006.

The President
of the
Committee of the Regions

The Secretary-General
of the
Committee of the Regions

Michel Delebarre

Gerhard Stahl
