



European Economic and Social Committee

SOC/151
Equality men/women –
Promotion of European
Organisations

Brussels, 10 December 2003

OPINION

of the European Economic and Social Committee

on the

**Proposal for a Decision of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing a
Community action programme to promote organisations active at European level in the field
of equality between men and women**

COM(2003) 279 final – 2003/0109 (COD)

On 10 December 2003 the European Economic and Social Committee, acting under Rule 29(2) of its Rules of Procedure, decided to draw up an opinion on the

*Proposal for a Decision of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing a Community action programme to promote organisations active at European level in the field of equality between men and women
COM(2003) 279 final – 2003/0109 (COD).*

The Section for Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 25 November 2003. The rapporteur was **Ms Wahrolin**.

At its 404th plenary session (meeting of 10 December 2003), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 109 votes to five, with four abstentions.

1. Introduction

1.1 The aim of the proposal is to adopt a basic instrument for awarding operating grants for the years 2004-2005 to the European Women's Lobby and to other organisations active at European level in the field of equal opportunities between men and women.

1.2 The Commission communication is of a technical nature and is motivated by a structural change to budget document requirements.

1.3 A basic instrument became necessary following the adoption of Council Regulation No. 1605/2002 of 25 June 2002 on the Financial Regulation applicable to the general budget of the European Communities. The decision to base the manner in which the Commission's budget is constructed on the Activity Based Budgeting approach involved establishing basic instruments for a number of grants previously funded under administrative appropriations (Part A) of the Commission section of the budget (section III).

1.4 Grants awarded to the European Women's Lobby and to other organisations active at European level in the field of equal opportunities between men and women come under the appropriations for which the legal basis needs to be amended (budget lines A-3037 and A-3046). These organisations play a major role in promoting, monitoring and disseminating Community measures aimed at women. Their work serves the general European interest.

1.5 Equality between men and women is a fundamental principle of Community law and of the case-law of the Court of Justice of the European Communities. The Community has a duty actively to promote equality between men and women in all fields of Community action.

2. Content of the proposal

2.1 The proposal contains an Explanatory Memorandum, a proposal for a Decision of the European Parliament and of the Council with fifteen recitals, eight articles and an Annex. A legislative financial statement is also included.

2.2 The legal basis for the proposal is Article 13(2) of the Treaty establishing the European Communities, according to which the Council has the power to take appropriate action to combat all discrimination based, *inter alia*, on sex. Article 13(2) and Article 251 of the EC Treaty govern the procedure for adoption of Community incentive measures.

2.3 In addition to references to EC Treaty articles and to the Charter of Fundamental Rights, the proposal also refers to experience of action at Community level where promoting gender equality has required, in practice, a combination of measures, in particular, legislation and practical action designed to be mutually supportive. The proposal also refers to the Commission's White Paper on Governance, which advocates the participation of citizens in shaping and implementing policy, the involvement of civil society and civil society organisations, and more effective and transparent consultation of interested parties.

2.4 The proposal also addresses the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995, which adopted a Declaration and a Platform for Action calling on governments, the international community and civil society to take strategic action to eliminate both discrimination against women and barriers to gender equality. The proposal also refers to the fact that in December 2000 (Decision 2001/51/EC), the Council adopted a Community action programme relating to the Community framework strategy on gender equality, whose actions should be supplemented by support measures in the areas concerned.

2.5 The proposal involves the establishment of a Community Action Programme to provide support for the European Women's Lobby and for other organisations active at European level in the field of equality between men and women. The general objective of the programme is to support the activities of these organisations whose ongoing programme of work or specific measures serve the general European interest in the field of equality between men and women or pursue an objective that is set in the European Union's action programme for equal opportunities between men and women.

2.6 Under the proposal, the programme is also to be open to the countries set to join the European Union in 2004, and to the EFTA/EEA countries, Romania, Bulgaria and Turkey.

3. General comments

3.1 The Committee endorses the Commission's view that there is a need for a basic instrument for awarding operating and action grants. The Committee feels it is appropriate to establish a Community Action Programme to promote organisations active at European level in the field of

equality between men and women. It is very important to be able to support – via the programme – the commendable work carried out by these organisations.

3.2 The programme covers the period 2004-2005. However, in order to safeguard the work of the European Women's Lobby and of other stakeholder organisations, it is important to continue to provide support after the programme period has ended.

3.3 The Committee would refer to the March 2003 Spring European Council, when the Council welcomed the strengthening of the implementation, coordination and follow-up of gender equality and gender mainstreaming in the European Union and – in order to monitor progress – called on the Commission to prepare, in cooperation with the Member States, an annual progress report on gender equality together with gender mainstreaming guidelines, for submission to the 2004 Spring European Council. The Committee sees this action programme as an important contribution to the annual report.

3.4 According to the proposal, the European Women's Lobby plays a special role in this work and should be awarded a special operating grant without having to go through any specific application procedures.

3.5 The Committee is pleased to note that point 2.1 of the Annex specifically provides for respect for the freedom of the European Women's Lobby to select its members and pursue its activities. The Committee considers it positive that respect for the independence and integrity of grant-receiving organisations should be spelt out in this manner.

3.6 The Committee also endorses the idea that it is important for European women's organisations and other organisations active in the field of equal opportunities between men and women to be able to secure operating and project grants under the programme, as provided for under the proposal.

3.7 The Committee believes that further clarification is needed of the guidelines for awarding grants in respect of underrepresented groups of women and girls, e.g. those with disabilities; and for women and girls that are discriminated against for multiple reasons.

3.8 The Committee would draw the Commission's attention to the need to ensure the programme is also open to other European organisations whose work partly involves promoting gender equality. Furthermore, the Community sets great store by any initiatives that promote cross-sectoral cooperation between the wide variety of civil society organisations, and calls on the Commission to take this into account.

3.9 The Committee would also stress that, in addition to organisations whose main purpose is to work for equal opportunities between men and women, it is important that a broad range of organisations should be involved in gender equality efforts and for the European Community to support this. Gender equality is a human rights issue for boys, girls, men and women, and is a

fundamental freedom for men and women regardless of race or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation.

3.10 The Committee feels, however, that the wording relating to which other organisations active in the field of equal opportunities between men and women are entitled to apply for grants needs clarifying. While the proposal specifies the geographic area of applicability, the Committee would appreciate further clarification of "European level", given that the number of countries represented in the applicant organisations and the geographic scope of project activity is certain to vary. Any lack of clarity in the rules will hamper implementation. There might be some uncertainty as to how many Member States an organisation needs to include for it to be deemed "European", or when an organisation is regional/subregional.

3.11 The EESC feels it is important that the special action programme should be adopted as a complement to other targeted programme initiatives. It is also essential to push ahead with gender equality mainstreaming in all Community programmes and initiatives, where civil society organisations active in the field of equal opportunities between men and women can also be given the opportunity to contribute and secure project grants.

3.12 The proposal covers the two-year period 2004-2005 and the total allocation proposed is €2,222,000. When finalising the budget framework for the period it is important to take into account the demands made on organisations active in the field of equal opportunities between men and women by enlargement and the wide geographic area, both in terms of administration and programme/project activities. Grants to the European Women's Lobby and to other organisations active in the field of equal opportunities between men and women have not kept pace with their increasing workload in connection with enlargement and mainstreaming.

3.13 Consequently, the EESC believes there is a real need to increase financial support by raising the global allocation and setting a higher percentage rate. The Committee endorses the Commission proposal that organisations should be allowed to apply for both operating grants and project grants, or just one of these.

4. Future action programmes

4.1 The Committee would point out some shortcomings in the Commission proposal that it would like to see remedied in future programme proposals:

4.2 The EESC would like to see a more clear-cut definition of a "European organisation active in the field of equal opportunities between men and women".

4.3 The EESC would like the Commission to clarify whether the proposal covers all types of organisations that are active in the field of equal opportunities between men and women, or just women's organisations.

4.4 The EESC would also highlight that key policy areas are missing from the priorities. The Committee believes, however, that it will be possible to address these issues during the programme period, when the follow-up programmes are being drafted.

Brussels, 10 December 2003.

The President
of the
European Economic and Social Committee

The Secretary-General
of the
European Economic and Social Committee

Roger Briesch

Patrick Venturini
