

**Statement on**

**WOMEN, WORK, FAMILY AND CHILDREN**

**Alghero, Italy, 26 June 2003**

**by Anna Diamantopoulou,  
Commissioner responsible for  
Employment and Social Affairs  
European Commission**

At the Lisbon summit in 2000, the European Union leaders set the goal of Europe becoming 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 European Employment Strategy targets include an overall employment rate of 70%. For women the targeted employment rate is 60%. Since Lisbon we have already created at least 5 million additional jobs, with a majority of them being taken by women. For instance, almost all of the recent job increases in the banking sector have gone to women.

This is a measure of success. But much more remains to be done.

More than 15 million new jobs need to be created by 2010 to achieve the Lisbon targets. This will be even more difficult in the context of an ageing working population. Important additional efforts will be needed to increase labour participation.

A successful integration of women in working life will remain the key pathway towards a successful social inclusion. Equality between men and women implies equal access to labour market and equal pay for the same work. The promotion of equality must not be confused with the simple objective of balancing the statistics. It is a question of promoting long-lasting changes in parental roles, family structures, institutional practices, the organisation of work and family life, taking

into account men's and women's personal development and independence. It must be understood that reconciliation of family and work life also concerns men and the whole of society, in which it can encourage progress and be a token of democracy and pluralism. Social change and economic change are creating new models and patterns of work, family and social life. European families' well being is based on parents right to parental leave on an equal basis. We must not forget that children have also a right to their parents. Children need their fathers in the families as much as their mothers.

Everybody knows that there is a fertility gap in Europe. We do not have enough children today. Against the common assumption, in those member states where women are in the labour market, the number of children is greater than in those member states where women predominantly stay at home.

We have to facilitate women's access to labour market. This implies the abolishment of the major burden of reconciliation of work and family life which still lies on women. The European Social Fund is the EU's main financial support tool for the European Employment Strategy. Most initiatives to reduce gender inequalities focussing on employment and funded by the European Union's Structural Funds are available for this purpose. The funds provide large-scale financial aid to develop skills, promote jobs and support regions in need. Gender equality is a key objective.

In 2002, 6% of the European Union's Structural Funds total spending went to the initiative called "Women's access to and participation in the labour market" in all the 15 member states. An example of good practice is the joint effort made by eight regions in Spain to use some of their Structural Funds money to improve women's employability and promote reconciliation of family and work. The actions include training (mainly in sectors where women are under-represented), financial aid to companies hiring unemployed women, support for women's enterprises, campaigns, research and promoting women in decision-making positions.

The Community Framework Strategy on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men for the years 2000-2005 has a priority theme for each year. The priority in 2002 was reconciliation of family and working life. Reconciliation policies are key components of the gender dimension in the European Employment Strategy and the Social Inclusion Process aimed at ensuring favourable conditions for women and men to enter, re-enter and remain in the labour market.

This includes access to affordable and high quality care services, equal share of care and household responsibilities, encouragement for fathers to take up parental leave and possibilities for flexible arrangements for both men and women. Special attention is given to problems met by women in low income groups. Only 12% of women in the 16 to 64 age group are in full employment and 8% work part-time, while 66% of them are inactive compared to 35% of the men in low income groups.

It is also important to take reconciliation measures into account when reforming their pension systems to prevent jeopardising the pension entitlements of those women and men who take time off to care for their children.

Legislative initiatives have been introduced in a number of Member States during 2002. In Austria, a new Family Care Leave Act was introduced in labour law in order to allow better care for dying family members and for children who are very sick. The Act provides to any worker the right to reduce working hours or to take unpaid leave with the employer's consent. In January 2002, the Dutch Government proposed a Bill in Parliament which introduces a scheme for statutory long-term care leave. In Finland, the government submitted a report to the Parliament in April 2002 on child-related policy and evaluation of methods to reconcile work with family life. As a result it plans to expand the right to paternity leave up to four weeks from the present 18 days. The Spanish province of Catalonia has established by law the right of its employees to reduce their working-day schedule by one third for eight months, with no reduction in salary, after the 18 weeks' maternity leave. This measure was provided, in principle, only for women, but will be extended to all civil servants regardless of sex. The Danish parental leave and child-minding leave rules have changed considerably. Under an Act of March 2002, there is no longer a separate child-minding leave in addition to parental leave. The German *Job Active Gesetz* ensures as of January 2003 that

persons on parental leave are able to benefit from unemployment insurance upon their return.

National courts decisions are also very encouraging with regard to reconciling work with family life. The German Constitutional Court rejected a claim opposing the extension of primary school hours in Saxony Anhalt. The general idea behind the schedules is to make primary school times more convenient for working parents. In the United Kingdom, the Court of Appeal decided that an employer had indirectly discriminated against a woman on the grounds of sex by selecting staff on fixed-term contracts for redundancy before those on permanent contracts. Finally, in Italy, the Tribunal of Venice held that under national law parents are free to choose the period in which they wish to make use of their parental leave on the sole condition that they give prior notice. Employers cannot refuse or postpone parental leave on the grounds that the demands of the job do not permit it.

The implementation of the Council decision on the provision of childcare has thus given good results in the member states. That is our specific target. But this is not enough. The burden of reconciliation should be divided between men and women. Labour markets should be made more friendly to families. It implies also setting labour standards for part-time work and temporary work. Maintaining and extending family friendly policies.

Since we launched the Social Policy Agenda in 2000, we have been working to strengthen the triangular relationship between economic

performance, employment and social policy. Working to update and modernise our European model. So that economic and social policies not only work together, but are relevant to our new social, family and work environment needs. By combining our efforts we are making Europe a better place for men, women and their children as well as other dependants to work and live in.