



PES WOMEN ANNUAL CONFERENCE

Women, Religion and Culture in Europe: Will women be the cultural battle ground of the 21st century?

Wednesday 24 May 2006, 12.30-19.00

Copenhagen Jazz House

Roundtable 1: The Conservative backlash in Europe and the Christian Right (13.30h)

Hello, good morning to all of you.

I am really glad to be here and, first of all, I would like to thank our colleague Zita Gurmai and all the colleagues for holding this event.

As Ania has already explained to us, it is quite true that, politically speaking, the Socialist Women have today in Europe a worse situation than the one we had some years ago. We are now 25 European Member States, and the right governs in too many States. Comparing with some years ago, when the Socialists were the majority, it is obvious that we cannot feel happy. However, after the elections in Italy and in Hungary, where the socialists have won the rolling parties in government, now the socialists are already present in 13 governments -coalitions included, as in Germany, for example-, and the right-wing governs in 12. So we start to overcome the negative political situation, and we should start also to improve the socioeconomic situation of people in general, and of women, in particular.

Actually... what do we have now?

As our paper clearly points out, there have been significant increases in the participation of women in the labour market. However, the Commission's Joint Employment Report (2004/2005) states that although the female employment rate is still increasing, progress has slowed and to reach the 60% Lisbon target by 2010, the annual increases since 1997 must be maintained each year.

This progress is unevenly spread and the disparity with men's employment and earnings is still glaringly apparent in most cases. While the highest female employment rates in the EU are

found in Denmark and Sweden, where they stand at over 70%, the lowest rates are found in Greece, in my country -Spain-, Ireland, Malta, Poland (Malta with the lowest at 32.7%), all of which are below 50%. However, employment rates in most countries are on the increase and have shown steady improvements over recent years. But in general, the average unemployment rates for the EU 25 and EU 15 are higher for women than men.

Despite the fact that women are outperforming men at school and university, the gender pay gap is persistent and stands at 15% (EU 25). It is mainly due gender segregation in the labour market and to direct discrimination in the workplace (women getting paid less than their male counterparts). The second phenomenon contravenes the 30 year old European Directive on equal pay for equal work.

The gender pay gap also has its roots in gender stereotypes during education because, in fact, women are under-represented at university level and in the workplace, in maths, science and engineering, and thus very often concentrated in under-valued and low-paid jobs.

There are also significantly more women in part-time work than men: 32.6% of women in employment, compared to only 7.4% of men.

As I have mentioned before, we have had until now in Europe a majority of right-wing governments. And that can also explain the current situation. In fact, governments on the left have made several choices to improve gender equality and increase the number of women in work. In Spain, for example, the government of our colleague, José Luís Rodríguez Zapatero, has prepared a very positive law, which I will comment.

Following the PES Women believe that amongst the various measures to be taken to increase women's employment rates, there should be a renewed, concerted effort in two policy areas: childcare and parental.

The lack of childcare provision in the vast majority of member states and also in Spain, makes it economically unviable for one of the parents to work. Only five EU member states¹ have met the first Barcelona childcare target of 33% coverage for 0-3 year olds (Belgium, Denmark, France, Sweden and the Netherlands). At the other end of the scale, in several countries childcare coverage is still below 10% (Spain, Austria, Czech Republic, Germany, Greece, Lithuania, Italy, Hungary and Poland).

¹ European Commission: Reconciliation of work and private life, a comparative review of thirty European countries.

Too in my country, there are also strong cultural barrier to mothers' taking up childcare provision, in some member states. In these countries, negative attitudes to maternal employment, such as "good mothers stay at home to look after their children", still abound.

Provisions have tried to encourage men to take their share of parental leave. However, 75% of men were aware of their right to take parental leave 85% of them said that they would not take it.

In fact, the persistence of the gender pay gap contributes to this phenomenon in the frequent cases in which the father earns more than the mother. This is why parental leave schemes which encourage the father to take up part of the leave and compensate wage levels need to be put in place.

And the Socialist Women and all the Party, especially from the socialists' governments, must pressure to work towards these targets.

All of I said it is absolutely true in Spain and this explains that the Government of our colleague Zapatero has made a new step forward to make the equality between men and women become a reality.

Even though the principles of this law will affect all the political, social and legal domains, it will put a special emphasis in the work area and in the health and security sector, thanks also to the support of the major trade union Spanish centres: CC.OO. and UGT.

The main aims of the law are:

- to remove all kind of discrimination against women;
- to create conditions to make possible the right to conciliate the professional and personal life;
- to finish with the sexual harassment
- the Social Security will protect the maternity of all the women employees; and
- to promote a balanced representation of men and women in all the domains of the Public Administration.

In the different concerned areas, the law will establish several rules. In the work sphere:

- it will set up measures of positive action to help the women's access to an employment, and to remove discriminatory situations in their work conditions. (Here, I must say that the government will give time to the companies to adapt to the demanded situation of having a 40% of women in their Executive Boards);

- new measures to make possible the conciliation of the professional and personal life, such as: the right of the employee to adapt the duration and the distribution of his or her work; the right to reduce it between an eighth and a half to take care of children under eight years old or persons with disabilities; the recognition of the father's right to have the maternity permission in case of death of the mother; to extend the maternity permission two weeks in some cases (adoption or birth of disabled children), and the recognition of an autonomous permission of the one of the mother of 8 days in case of birth, adoption, etcetera.

In the Social Security sector:

- the government will recognise the paternity permission;
- it will create a new pension of maternity; and
- it will also acknowledge the pension of maternity and the paternity permission to the autonomous workers.

Finally, the new law will also propose a balanced representation of men and women in the electoral lists and in the nominations of the public sector and government. Also, the equality principle will be mainstreamed in all the education and health policies, and the media will be obliged to guarantee a non stereotyped image of women, and the use of a sexist language will be condemned.

In this case, the power of the church and of the religion in politics has been less than the one that they exerted in the case of the reform of the education (making the religion optional and not compulsory), and concerning the right of the homosexual couples to get married in equality of conditions to the heterosexuals, some months ago.

But, to sum up -in my opinion- the law will let take more profit of the power and capacity of women, and this will have positive effects in the economy as well as in the other areas of the humans' life.

Nevertheless, we need to be aware that, since in the advanced and developed countries -in general-, the law proclaims the equality, the inequalities are still very much practised with subtleness.

Social democrats should strive to give women the option to return to the labour market after having children. Currently some member states choose to provide more generous parental leave or child benefits, thus subsidizing women to stay at home.

In terms of economic efficiency, it simply does not make sense to waste the potential of half of the workforce. This case becomes much more urgent against the backdrop of Europe's demographic challenges, since an ageing population is due to decline from 2025 onwards.

This ageing population has implications for the public purse. Our economies and welfare states are not sustainable if there are more people in retirement and fewer people in work, unless there is pension reform, an increase in birth rates and an increase in numbers of people in employment. Empowering women economically holds the key to two out of three of these solutions.^{current} This puts several demands on women. Therefore the key element of a progressive view of gender equality is that women and men should be enabled by the state to combine work with parenthood. Therefore, social democrats must tackle the prevalence of women's pensioner poverty of today's and tomorrow's pensioners.

Women are more at risk of poverty than men in almost all most member. According to the EU average in 2003, 15% of women, compared to 13% of men, are at risk of poverty after social transfers. And single mothers and children of single parents (predominantly mothers) have higher risks of being in poverty.

Ethnic minority women are more vulnerable to social exclusion due to their lower participation in the labour market and in some cases due to additional cultural and socio-economic barriers to gender equality.

Poverty risks for older people is a constant phenomenon and women, without exception, are at greater risk of poverty than men. The average risk of poverty in the EU amongst the over 65s is 15% for men and 20% for women². The principal reason for this is that women take on the vast majority of caring responsibilities (for children, elderly and infirm relatives) and thus spend more time out of work and less time contributing to their pension. Most pension systems do not adequately recognise and reward unpaid caring work. Moreover, women live longer than men on average but state retirement ages are usually lower which also contributes to lower pension entitlements for women.

Member states across Europe are currently re-thinking and reforming their pension systems. In our discussion today, it is important to remark that elements of the labour market such as a persistent and significant pay gap, more women in part-time work, women still doing most of the caring and taking career breaks, will affect the pensions of tomorrow's women pensioners.

From a European dimension, it is true that Member states have set themselves a number of targets in this field, for example:

² European Commission's Synthesis Report on Adequate and Sustainable Pensions, February 2006

60% participation rate

- of women in labour market by 2010.
- Childcare provision targets: 33% for 0-3 year olds, 90% for 3 years+.
- Gender equality is also a cornerstone of the original Treaty (of Rome) and so is equal pay for equal work.

You will all remember that, two years ago, in 2004, José Manuel Durão Barroso included Mr. Rocco Buttiglione on his list of nominees for the European Commission, with a designated portfolio of Justice, Freedom and Security. As a Roman Catholic, he said that homosexuality is a sin, and that "the family exists in order to allow women to have children and to have the protection of a male who takes care of them". Well, I think that it is not needed to comment anything on that. Of course, reactions came from the parliamentarians and public opinion in many European countries. And finally, Frattini was officially appointed. However, although the final result was that he was censored for his words, the importance of that statement was that he dared to do it, as it were a normal thing to say in these days... By reminding this I mean that we still have a long way to go ahead in the near future.

And here it is where the Socialist -women and men- must make all the efforts to change this situation, as much politically as socially. Therefore, we began now to be in the good way.

Thank you very much.