



Recommendation 1700 (2005)¹

Discrimination against women in the workforce and the workplace

Parliamentary Assembly

1. One of the basic rights of women is not to be discriminated against in the workforce and in the workplace. This right is enshrined in international law, such as United Nations conventions, International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions and the revised European Social Charter, as well as in the national law of all Council of Europe member states and in European Community law. Unfortunately, however, reality does not always comply with the law, and even in Europe women continue to be discriminated against in manifold ways, both in the workforce and in the workplace.
2. The first problem which women encounter is a lack of access to the labour market. In most Council of Europe member states, the labour force participation rate of women is lower and the unemployment rate of women higher than that of men – although there are strong regional variations. In general, far more women than men work in part-time jobs (not always of their own choosing) and many women are overqualified for the work they do. In addition, many women are what the ILO calls “discouraged workers”: workers not included in the unemployment statistics of their country because they are not actively seeking work, although they do want to work, because they feel that no work is available to them or they face discrimination or structural, social or cultural barriers.
3. The second problem is the wage gap. Women are often paid less than men for the same work or work of equal value – on average at least 15% less (up to 25% to 30% less). High educational achievements are no safeguard. In many countries, the better the woman is educated, the greater the wage gap. In general, women also earn less than men in their lifetime and thus they have less advantageous pension insurance conditions and also receive smaller pensions when they retire, although they live longer than men.
4. The third problem is the “glass ceiling”. Women are routinely passed over when it comes to promotions. The higher the post, the less likely a woman – even one as qualified as or more qualified than her male counterparts – is to get it. Women who manage to break through this so-called “glass-ceiling” into decision-making positions remain the exception to the rule as even in female-dominated sectors where there are more women managers, a disproportionate number of men rise to the more senior positions.
5. The main reason for all three problems – lack of access to the labour market, the wage gap and the “glass ceiling” – is discrimination against women. In most cases, women pay a gender penalty as actual or potential mothers. Many employers wrongly fear the cost and hassle motherhood may entail. In fact, according to recent ILO research, the additional cost of hiring a woman is less than 1% of the monthly gross earnings of women employees. But women are not only discriminated against for economic reasons – they are mainly discriminated against because of stereotyping and misguided preconceptions of women’s roles and abilities, commitment and leadership style.
6. These stereotypes lead to women often being offered employment that is precarious, badly paid, without any possibility of career advancement and not gratifying, as it does not allow for the full development of their abilities. Women are often excluded from informal networks and channels of communication (the “old boys’ network”). In addition, some of them suffer from an unfriendly corporate culture and can become victims

1. Assembly debate on 27 April 2005 (13th Sitting) (see [Doc. 10484](#), report of the Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men, rapporteur: Ms Curdová). Text adopted by the Assembly on 27 April 2005 (13th Sitting).



of moral and sexual harassment, bullying and mobbing. Finally, in many Council of Europe member states, family responsibilities (housework, childcare, looking after elderly relatives) are not equally shared between women and men, leading to additional barriers which prevent women from entering and staying in the workforce and having a career.

7. In the end, women's lower participation in the labour force and higher unemployment contribute to the economic loss and inequality which forms the basis for a broader inequality between women and men and can translate into economic dependence and poverty (particularly in old age) for the women affected. However, it is not only women who suffer when they are discriminated against. Discrimination against women in the workforce and the workplace contributes to lower economic growth, diminishing tax income and higher outlays in unemployment and social security benefits. The elimination of this discrimination is thus also a sound economic policy goal and improves social cohesion.

8. The particular situation of handicapped women and women belonging to minorities should also be addressed, as they often suffer from double discrimination.

9. It is necessary to point out that discrimination at work will not vanish by itself ; neither will the market, on its own, see to its elimination. The elimination of discrimination requires deliberate, focused and consistent efforts and policies by all parties concerned over a sustained period of time.

10. The Parliamentary Assembly thus recommends that the Committee of Ministers :

entrust the competent intergovernmental committee to set up a project to combat discrimination against women in the workforce and the workplace inviting governments to :

- a. revise and devise laws and treaties which not only prohibit discrimination in law, but which also provide for a positive duty to prevent discrimination and promote equality ;*
- b. ensure a better implementation and enforcement of existing laws, rules and regulations at the national level which counter the discrimination of women in the workforce and the workplace ;*
- c. put into place effective control mechanisms at international and national levels, ensure their smooth functioning and garner support for them by all actors in the marketplace, including employers' associations and trade unions ;*
- d. set concrete targets at national level for women's labour force participation and unemployment rates, as well as for a narrowing of the gender wage gap, and take specific measures to ensure that these targets are met ;*
- e. create and encourage the application of affirmative-action programmes on the national level to fight against the inherent prejudice against women in senior positions, so that female candidates are hired or promoted in the case of equal merit ;*
- f. start and support campaigns at all levels against the existing gender stereotypes in society (the traditional division of roles in society, the family and the workplace) and promote a better division of household and caring responsibilities between women and men ;*
- g. facilitate the conciliation of professional and private life for both sexes and invest in care facilities for children and the elderly with appropriate opening hours ;*
- h. support projects which help women who have been discriminated against to take their case to the competent authorities and ensure that the burden of proof in cases of discrimination based on sex is shifted to employers ;*

head an awareness-raising campaign to stamp out gender stereotypes and preconceptions relating both to the economic cost of hiring and employing women and to women's roles and abilities, commitment and leadership style in the workplace.