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Combating poverty

Opinion¹

Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men

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A. Conclusions of the committee

1. The Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men congratulates the rapporteur of the Social, Health and Family Affairs Committee, Mr Luca Volontè, on his excellent report and supports the draft resolution and draft recommendation.
2. The committee agrees that poverty hinders the full enjoyment of human rights. At the same time, it points out that more respect for human rights would help alleviate poverty. Gender equality is a clear example of this two-way dynamics: women cannot fully enjoy human rights because they are poorer, and more at risk of poverty. However, if there was more gender equality in the economic field, women's contribution would bring more wealth and economic growth.
3. While wholeheartedly sharing the views and concerns expressed in the report, the committee wishes to make some amendments to the draft resolution and draft recommendation, to emphasise some gender-related aspects that are particularly relevant to the subject.

B. Proposed amendments

In the draft resolution:

Amendment A (to the draft resolution)

In the draft resolution, after paragraph 4, insert the following paragraph:

"Reiterating its [Resolution 1558 \(2007\)](#) on the feminisation of poverty, the Assembly recalls that women have a higher incidence of poverty than men and that their poverty is more severe. Tackling the root causes of women's poverty, namely de facto gender inequality and discrimination, is not only a human rights obligation but also a way to make full use of women's economic potential and contribution to economic growth."

Amendment B (to the draft resolution)

In the draft resolution, after paragraph 5.1, insert the following sub-paragraph:

"take action to combat the poverty of women and adopt a gender-specific perspective as a key component of all policies and national programmes to eradicate poverty and combat social exclusion;"

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In the draft recommendation

Amendment C (to the draft recommendation)

In the draft recommendation, after paragraph 4.6, insert the following sub-paragraph:

“ensure that its policies and programmes in the field of poverty and social exclusion take into account the gender-dimension;”.

Amendment D (to the draft recommendation)

In the draft recommendation, paragraph 4.7, after the word “relevant” add the words “, gender-disaggregated”.

C. Explanatory memorandum by Ms Ferić-Vac, rapporteur for opinion

1. General comments

1. I wish to congratulate Mr Volontè on his excellent report, which deals with an issue which is particularly relevant to the situation of women.
2. I particularly welcome the fundamental human rights approach of his report: poverty is a barrier to exercising human rights. Political, civil, social and cultural rights are all affected by poverty. There cannot be genuine enjoyment of human rights unless poverty is addressed.
3. I would like to add that, at the same time, the full respect of human rights, including gender equality, can have a direct impact on the reduction of poverty, and help transform a vicious circle into a virtuous cycle. A small example will suffice to explain this dynamics: according to recent studies, eliminating the gender gap in employment would allow a gain in gross domestic product of around 30% in the European Union countries.²

2. Women: a higher incidence of poverty

4. Women have a higher incidence of poverty than men and their poverty tends to be more severe. In addition, poverty among women is on the rise. In the European Union, 17% of women are in poverty compared to 15% of men.³
5. The Parliamentary Assembly highlighted these phenomena in its [Resolution 1558 \(2007\)](#) on the feminisation of poverty, in which it stated that preventing and eradicating women's poverty was an important part of the fundamental principle of social solidarity. It also invited Council of Europe member states to regard gender equality not only as a condition for social justice, but also as a condition for the promotion of development.
6. The incidence of poverty is even higher when one considers specific groups, such as single mothers, elderly women and migrant women.

3. Causes of women's poverty

7. Women's relative poverty a single deep root: the inequality and discrimination to which they are subjected.

3.1. Unemployment

8. Because of inequality and discrimination, women face barriers in entering the labour market and often find themselves in a situation of economic dependence on their partner or other family members.

2. Å. Löfström, “Gender equality, economic growth and employment”, 2009. This report was presented at the conference held under the Swedish European Union Presidency “What does gender equality mean for growth and employment?”, Stockholm, 15-16 October 2009: <http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=3988&langId=en>.

3. Eurostat, “At-risk-of-poverty rate after social transfers by gender”: <http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/tgm/refreshTableAction.do?tab=table&pcode=tsisc030&language=en>.

9. Data on employment rates show a remarkable gap between women and men. In 2008, in the European Union, this gap ranged from less than 5% in Italy to 30% in Estonia, with numerous countries showing figures around 25%.⁴

10. Recent trends show that the gender gap in the employment rate is decreasing, as a result of an increasing proportion of women entering the labour market in most European countries. However, these figures should not deceive us, as a large proportion of women are employed part-time or accept jobs for which they are overqualified, in an attempt to reconcile professional life and family commitments.

3.2. Part-time and fixed-term work

11. Women's participation in the labour market is largely characterised by a high share of part-time work. Their share of home duties is generally larger than men's and their employment is more often based on part-time and fixed-term contracts.

12. In 2008, in European Union member states, the share of women employees working part-time was 31.1%, while the corresponding figure for men was 7.9%. Female part-timers exceeded 35% in Denmark and Luxembourg, 40% in Austria, Belgium, Germany, Sweden and the United Kingdom and even exceeded 75% in the Netherlands. Conversely, the share of part-timers among women workers was very low in most central and eastern European countries and in the Baltic countries. Overall figures of women part-timers are increasing.⁵

3.3. Women's interrupted work cycle

13. Women's careers are often less linear than men's and punctuated by interruptions linked to the need to care for children or other family members. This is not always a free choice. While some women choose to leave their work and be full-time carers, others are compelled to do so by the absence of care facilities. Child care is still considered largely a woman's task. A number of European countries do not have paid paternity leave and paid parental leave, which would encourage men to take a shared responsibility for caring tasks.

3.4. Wage gap

14. The gender gap is striking when it comes to wages. On average, women earn 18% less than men. The pay gap varies in European Union countries, ranging from 5% to 23%. The latter figures refer to Germany, where recently published data show that the pay gap, expressed as the percentage difference in average gross hourly earnings between women and men, has been constant over the last few years.⁶ This can be only partly explained by segregation and different work cycles: women still earn less than men for doing exactly the same job.

15. In its [Resolution 1715 \(2010\)](#) on the wage gap between women and men, the Assembly reiterated the call for equal pay, a right first proclaimed sixty years ago which remains widely and systematically violated – without even receiving much attention. The Assembly also recommended that the Committee of Ministers give this subject the priority it deserves in the field of fighting discrimination against women, and reinforce its efforts to guarantee that the right to equal pay for work of equal value is respected in all member states so that the gender wage gap may be eliminated. This should apply both to the public and the private sector.

3.5. Economic dependence

16. A number of women find themselves in poverty following a divorce, when their former spouses, who are in general economically stronger, do not fulfil their post-divorce financial obligations. Even during marriage, and even among the poorest, the household income is shared unequally to the disadvantage of women. Expenditures are also unequally shared among the household members, as men tend to spend for their personal needs, whereas women spend more for their children.

4. Eurostat, Gender pay gap statistics:
http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics_explained/index.php/Gender_pay_gap_statistics#Gender_pay_gap_levels.

5. Source: Eurostat, *Labour Survey*, 2009.

6. Source: Destatis (Federal Statistical Office).

4. Categories particularly at risk

17. Poverty is particularly common among elderly women (about 23% of women over 65 in Europe live in poverty)⁷ both because of the way they were treated while employed – as they accumulated lower earnings in comparison to men over their life-cycle – and, in any case, when they have never been employed.

18. The way retirement pensions are structured also has an impact of the situation of elderly women: pension schemes are now proving outmoded, as they were originally designed for men and they are not adapted to women's careers.

19. Last year's report of the Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men on "Decent pensions for women" recommended revising traditional pension systems which favour the linear career paths of men and are disconnected from the realities of present-day society. It asked for positive measures in favour of women, in order to take into account career breaks and the different career patterns of women and men, such as guaranteeing a personal pension entitlement. It called, among other things, for a greater solidarity between women and men when earned pension entitlement is insufficient, and recommended measures to help elderly persons, such as granting a minimum pension or an overall income which should be at least equal to the national poverty threshold.

20. Household structure can also increase the risk of poverty. Having dependant children and living alone are factors that can lead closer to or below the poverty line. Recent studies on the "working poor" (people who have a job but are nonetheless in poverty) in Europe show that the most vulnerable categories are monoparental families and those that consist of only one employed member with dependent children.

21. The main element to be considered is the work-intensity of the household, that is, the number of workers in the household in relation to the number of members. The risk-of-poverty rate among single parents is 33%, almost double that in the general population. It is worth underlining that 80% to 90% of single parents are women: Eurostat data show that out of the 200 million private households in the European Union in 2009, 4% were single mothers whereas only 0.5% were single fathers.

5. Recommendations

22. The consequences of poverty are often dramatic. Research consistently finds that strong links exist between suicide, attempted suicide and poverty. Besides these most extreme cases, poverty ultimately undermines the social fabric. People at risk of poverty or currently under the poverty line tend to be excluded from decent housing and their children have more difficult access to education.

23. I cannot but support the call made by the Social, Health and Family Affairs Committee on the Committee of Ministers to review its programme of activities and to introduce transversal actions aimed at combating poverty and improving access for people experiencing poverty to all human rights – civil, political, economic, social and cultural.

24. Considering that women are particularly affected by poverty, it is crucial that initiatives and measures taken in this field are based on a gender-specific approach. All policies and programmes to eradicate poverty and combat social exclusion should be designed with a gender-specific perspective, at international and national level.

25. In addition, the example of the Scandinavian countries shows that it is possible to increase women's participation in the labour market also by devising and implementing a far-reaching social policy. For instance, this progress was made possible, amongst other things, by making childcare services available free of charge or at affordable rates. Parental and maternal leave schemes are also factors contributing to women's substantial participation to the labour market.

26. In this context, I would like to recall the relevance of the resolution and Action Plan on "Gender equality: bridging the gap between *de jure* and *de facto* equality", adopted in 2010 at the 7th meeting of the Council of Europe Conference of Ministers responsible for Equality between Women and Men in Baku.

27. This text calls on the Committee of Ministers to develop specific gender equality policies and measures, in particular positive action, including temporary special measures, to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women and bridge the gap between *de jure* and *de facto* equality. It also recommended measures in

7. European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC), 2007.

respect of the organisation of working time, the abolition of discrimination between women and men in the labour market and especially the gender pay gap, and the development of adequately financed services in favour of families.

28. Council of Europe member states should do their utmost to implement these recommendations and support the Action Plan. Achieving de facto equality between women and men is one of the core goals of our Organisation and at the same time is instrumental to ensuring that Europe becomes a fairer and richer society.