

**INFORMATION NOTE ON A COMMUNITY PROGRAMME
ON GENDER EQUALITY FOR 2001 - 2005****UNICE'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE PRELIMINARY DEBATE****Introduction**

1. UNICE has noted the information note of the European Commission "Gender Equality: a joint approach for a new programme (2001 – 2005). It welcomes the organisation of a preliminary debate at an early stage of definition of the 5th gender equality programme and would like to contribute to this debate with some preliminary reactions to the ideas set out in the information note.
2. European employers share the Commission analysis that, despite the progress made, important gender gaps remain due to the structural character of gender inequality. They believe that this gap should be addressed for reasons of both equity and economic efficiency. They therefore welcome the proposal to launch a new gender equality programme at EU level.

I - General comments on the proposed approach

3. According to the Commission note, this programme would take the form of a framework programme proposing an integrated approach mainstreaming gender equality in all EU policies and specific actions targeting women, and would be underpinned by an action programme with a specific budget line based on article 13.
4. The Commission proposes to build its framework programme around five strategic objectives corresponding to crucial areas of life:
 - equality in economic life,
 - equal participation and representation,
 - equality in social life,
 - changing gender roles and stereotypes,
 - equality in civil life.
5. Genuine equality requires changes in society as a whole. UNICE believes that the Commission rightly aims at covering the crucial areas in life and agrees with the five strategic objectives proposed. However, in order to create win-win situations, it is important to take into account economic requirements, not only when dealing with equality in economic life but also for equality in social life.

6. Regarding the tools and methods to be used, the Commission intends to propose operational objectives, taking the form of benchmarks against which progress could be judged and target actions with specific deadlines to reach these objectives. These actions could comprise legislation, networking activities, development of specific structures, awareness-raising campaigns, partnerships between economic, political and social actors, etc.
7. When defining the operational objectives and target actions to reach the five strategic objectives, it is essential to start with an in-depth analysis of the underlying causes of persistent gender inequalities.
8. In UNICE's view, the underlying causes of persisting gender inequality should not be attributed to a deficit in legislation. The necessary legal framework to combat gender discrimination has been put in place. It has provided a useful basis for significant progress in gender equality in Europe and led to a continuous increase in women's participation rate on the labour market over the last ten years, and improvement of women's career prospects. During the 1994 –1998 period, 65% of the new jobs created went to women, of which a large proportion were in high-skilled occupations. However, the existing legislative framework needs to be applied consistently over time to redress imbalances in statistical terms. Moreover, not all the underlying causes of gender inequalities can be addressed by legislation. It is therefore necessary to complement existing directives by other types of actions.
9. The underlying causes of the remaining gender gap vary from country to country as the situation of women is deeply enshrined in national specificities. The efficiency of target actions will depend on their adaptation to each national situation. It will therefore be important to leave the main responsibility to each Member State of defining operational objectives and target actions to each Member State within the new EU framework programme.
10. Concerning the action programme with a specific budget line based on article 13, the Commission's document refers to initiatives that cannot be financed under other budget lines, such as the structural funds. However, it does not clarify the scope of this action programme, in particular by specifying how it will differ from and complement relevant structural funds measures such as the new initiative EQUAL. UNICE believes that precise information on the tasks between the action programme and other EU-funded initiatives should be specified.

II - Comments on the promotion of equality in economic and social life

11. The Commission's document refers to "*fairer distribution of resources between men and women*". UNICE would like to have more information on what the Commission covers under these terms. Moreover, it recalls that one of the major reasons for persistence of pay differences between men and women is vocational segregation on the labour market. This problem needs to be addressed. However, using pay policies to bring about change in society without taking account of economic considerations on the labour market would be misguided. As recommended in a social partners joint opinion on women and training in 1993, the answer should rather lie in measures to diversify educational and professional choices of women, in particular through vocational guidance, to improve women's access to new occupations.
12. Division of family responsibilities is a key-element for integration of women in the labour market. In the context of the 5th gender equality programme, organising exchange of good practices in this area may prove very useful to disseminate ideas on how to deal with this

issue across Europe. However, a key element for success also lies in the gradual elimination of cultural stereotypes through awareness campaigns in Member States, for example to encourage men to carry out more family tasks.

13. In order to promote accession of women to decision-making positions, UNICE believes that particular emphasis should be placed on promotion of business creation by women. experience shows that this is a useful and successful approach not only to equal opportunities but also for job creation.

In addition to specific measures to develop women's entrepreneurial skills, improving the general business environment is also essential. For example, reducing the administrative burden on businesses is particularly important for women entrepreneurs who are still disproportionately affected by burdensome procedures due to the persistent imbalance between women and men in relation to family responsibilities.

14. UNICE agrees that participation and representation of women in decision-making bodies should be encouraged and promoted at all levels, including in decision-making and advisory bodies at EU level. However, it does not believe that this should be done by imposing quotas, which are often inapplicable and has the disadvantage of casting doubt about the competence of women in decision-making positions.

III – Concluding remarks

15. UNICE notes the willingness to confer central role to the Advisory Committee for Equal Opportunities between Women and Men in implementation of the proposed gender equality programme. However, if this is to be achieved, the operating procedures for this Committee should be clarified and improved.

16. In addition, UNICE recalls that consultation of the Advisory Committee cannot replace the official two stage consultation of social partners required by the social chapter of the Treaty for initiatives based on articles 137 and 141 of the Treaty. Moreover, for non-legislative initiatives on gender equality issues in the areas of responsibilities of social partners, UNICE believes that consultations outside the Advisory Committee on Equal Opportunities should also be carried out, regardless of the legal basis used.
