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17 March 2009

### **PANEL DISCUSSION “RECONCILING PROFESSIONAL, PRIVATE AND FAMILY LIFE”**

**Brussels, Bavarian Representation to the EU  
17 March 2009, 19.00**

#### **ADDRESS BY STEVEN D’HAESELEER, DIRECTOR, SOCIAL AFFAIRS**

- Thank you firstly for inviting BUSINESSEUROPE to this topical debate.
- The issue at stake is an important even though we are currently going through difficult times. The crisis should not lead us to lose sight of the long-term challenges facing Europe.
- In the longer-term context of insufficient labour market participation of women and of demographic ageing, we need to continue efforts to encourage more women to become or remain professionally active. Allowing women and men to combine professional and family responsibilities is certainly one key element to tackling this challenge.
- Analysis of the labour markets in Europe shows that there is a general trend of narrowing gaps between women and men in employment and education. But women’s difficulties in reconciling family responsibilities with employment persist.
- However, we should not forget that progress has been achieved as, according to recent data of the Dublin Foundation, 80% of workers say they are satisfied with their work–life balance.
- In terms of future actions, a one-size-fits-all regulatory approach from the EU level will not provide an adequate response to the challenge of the reconciliation of work, private and family life.



- Exchange of good practices can be useful and targets defined by the European Council in Lisbon in 2000 and Barcelona in 2002 are crucial. But the concrete actions to meet these targets have to be taken in Member States: at national, sectoral, regional and/or company levels. The focus of these actions may differ from country to country depending of the national situations and specific challenges to be met. For example in some countries, more effort might be necessary to expand the availability of child care facilities whereas in others, priority might be given to alleviating constraints on the use of flexible forms of work.

### **EUROPEAN SOCIAL PARTNERS' WORK**

- Social partners have without any doubt an important role to play in allowing men and women to balance their work and family life.
- Cooperation with public authorities is also crucial, especially to promote campaigns and educational programmes aiming at a change in mentalities regarding gender roles and the participation of women in labour markets.
- European social partners have tackled and continue to tackle the issue of reconciliation from different angles, in the remits of their competences. Four examples include:
  - 1) We have concluded agreements to promote flexible forms of work that can facilitate reconciliation (agreements on telework and part-time work).
  - 2) We adopted a framework of actions on gender equality in 2005. One of the four priorities is to support work life balance. The member organisations of BUSINESSEUROPE, UEAPME, CEEP and ETUC committed to take actions during three years and to report annually on what has been done.
  - 3) Last year, we submitted a progress report to the Tripartite Social Summit on our views regarding the progress made by the EU Member States in promoting better reconciliation of professional, private and family life during the last ten years. We also indicated how best to further promote reconciliation in Europe. We sent a joint letter on childcare to Commissioner Spidla last year and to the Czech EU Presidency earlier this year.
  - 4) Last but not least: we are currently negotiating a revision of our framework agreement on parental leave (of 1996).



## **KEY POLICY AREAS**

BUSINESSEUROPE, and the other social partners for that matter, insist on **5 key points**

### **1) MIX OF POLICY MEASURES:**

- In order to boost work-life balance and at the same time have a positive impact on the segregation of labour markets, a mix of policy measures is necessary. The improvement of the availability of care facilities, of take-up of leave arrangements and the promotion of flexible forms of work should be put at the same level of priority.

### **2) SUPPLY OF CARE FACILITIES:**

- The supply of care facilities plays a crucial role: Quality childcare facilities have enabled an increasing number of women to enter the labour market and to work full time. This is the main reason for the high employment rates of women in the Nordic countries for example. On the contrary, in some European countries the lack of care infrastructure is the greatest hinder for women's and men's equal participation in the labour market, for example in Spain. Allowing women to return on the labour market after having given birth is instrumental in the fight against labour market segregation and the gender pay gap.

### **3) ADDRESSING GENDER STEREOTYPES AND DIVERSITY MANAGEMENT**

- Also a key objective of reconciliation policies. It needs to be addressed in Member States, through the promotion of a culture of equality and the fight against stereotypes.
- More generally, a lot remains to be done to fight, from an early age, the segregation of our labour markets in Europe. Education initiatives must be taken from an early age in schools to encourage girls and boys to take unbiased decisions regarding their studies and career choices, their career development as well as the way they will share family responsibilities. For example, in Germany or Austria, companies organise regularly “girl days” to raise awareness about the career prospects of engineering professions for women and encourage them to take up scientific studies.

### **4) FLEXIBLE WORK OPTIONS:**

- At work, workers with caring responsibilities are also more and more demandeurs of flexible work options. It is therefore important to engage into discussions on flexible work at the level of the company, where the needs of employees and the enterprise can best be identified.



- Companies do what they can to meet the demands of their employees. However, this is not always easy taking into account company needs, team needs or customer demands.

## 5) LEAVE ARRANGEMENTS:

- Leave arrangements: Maternity leave, parental leave, paternity leave, adoption leave, leave for urgent family reasons or to care for a dependent family member ... a huge diversity of arrangements exist. Some of them stemming from EU regulations.
- At EU level, the Commission is proposing new EU legislation on the need to extend or revise some of these leaves, notably maternity leave. BUSINESSEUROPE is firmly against additional legislation at EU level. And this for the following reasons:
  - It would lead to additional costs for companies *in several countries*, which we now more than ever need to avoid;
  - It will add to further strain on health insurance / social security systems;
  - In some countries, certain types of leaves are more extensive than others, and the combination of possibilities for leave complement one another. Revising maternity leave in isolation would damage this balance in member states.
  - Several of its more technical provisions are badly-conceived and will harm companies' competitiveness such as the prohibition of all preparations for dismissal. This goes too far!
- We must not fall into the trap of thinking that granting more leaves could be a panacea for the lack of care supply. Indeed, that would go contrary to the objectives the European Union is pursuing in the framework of its growth and jobs strategy. It would be detrimental to the goals of rising employment rates and of reaching financial sustainability of social security schemes.

## Closing remark:

- The debate of work-life balance is not new. But recent initiatives from the social partners as well as from public authorities on family policies, flexicurity etc. give a new impetus to our discussions. In this sense, the opportunity given to us by this seminar to exchange views and practices is both timely and, I hope, fruitful for our future actions on the ground.
- Thank you for your attention

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