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BUSINESSEUROPE's response to the European Commission consultation on the roadmap for equality between women and men 2006-2010 and follow up strategy

I. Introduction

1. The European Commission's roadmap for equality between women and men adopted in 2006 runs until 2010. European social partners and stakeholders are therefore consulted on the future orientation of the follow-up strategy to be pursued.
2. The timing of this consultation process coincides with the adoption of the European social partners' evaluation report on their joint Framework of Actions on Gender Equality. This response should therefore be read in parallel to the evaluation report due to be adopted before the end of 2009.

II. General remarks

3. There has been over the course of the past decade encouraging progress when looking at the situation of women on the labour market. Whilst marked differences exist between Member States, female employment rates have steadily risen until 2008 (up to 59%). Looking at other parameters, for example the proportions of women entrepreneurs (just below 10% of women employed, 2007) and female managers (32.6% in 2006) in the EU, further progress is possible and challenges remain on several levels.
4. At the macro level, increased female labour market participation and enabling women to fully exploit their skills and competences will help to stimulate economic growth, to face demographic ageing, and to ensure the financial sustainability of social systems. Any future strategy striving to promote and reinforce equal opportunities between men and women must address these challenges.
5. In the short-term, urgent measures are also needed to pave the way for a smooth recovery and to combat wherever possible the negative social consequences of the ongoing economic crisis. It is especially important during the crisis that the common principles of the flexicurity approach are implemented. One of the key aims must be to bring people who have been laid off back into the labour market as quickly as possible.
6. At micro level, companies need to increasingly tap into the unfulfilled potential of women on labour markets. Higher levels of educational attainment of women, notably in tertiary education, do not yet translate into a more balanced representation of both sexes at managerial level. The present pattern shows that despite having strong qualifications, women tend not to climb so far up the career ladder due to, among other factors, the lack of opportunities in the reconciliation of personal, professional and family life and / or they choose occupations where pay is relatively lower. Whilst this is likely to change as the services sector expands and as manufacturing shrinks, perceived family-related constraints should play a smaller role in career decisions than they do today.



7. The most effective strategic approach to promote equality and to combat gender stereotypes is through positive and voluntary action. Such is the diversity of practices and circumstances when comparing Member States that no one-size-fits-all approach would be appropriate at EU-level. BUSINESSEUROPE strongly believes that further legislation at European level on equal opportunities is not needed to complement the already substantial body of law.
8. BUSINESSEUROPE is also opposed to establishing quotas to promote gender equality, notably as a means to increase the proportions of women in decision-making positions.
9. The Commission's Roadmap has complemented many existing processes set in motion in parallel at EU and Member State levels but could have benefitted from improved visibility in order to be more effective.
10. European social partners adopted in 2005 their joint Framework of Actions on Gender Equality, identifying 4 very similar priorities to those of the Roadmap:
 - i) Addressing gender roles;
 - ii) Promoting women in decision making;
 - iii) Supporting work-life balance; and
 - iv) Tackling the gender pay gap.
11. The annual reports of 2006, 2007, 2008, as well as the forthcoming evaluation report, provide a wealth of material and examples of good practice addressing the four priorities.

III. Specific responses to the questions for consultation

(1) ***Overall assessment of the performance of the Roadmap for equality between women and men 2006-2010***

Do you think the Roadmap 2006-2010 has made a difference and contributed to more equality between women and men?

12. The Roadmap has provided the catalyst for many discussions on equal opportunities between women and men and specific actions on gender equality undertaken at national level. It has also undoubtedly made a valuable contribution in terms of raising awareness and stimulating actions in this field.
13. Given the wealth and breadth of mandatory and voluntary actions and initiatives that exist in Member States, many of which preceded the Roadmap or have been set in motion independently, it is difficult to evaluate both qualitatively and quantitatively the real impact of the Roadmap in and of itself. However, it is fair to say that improved visibility would have helped to increase the effectiveness of actions undertaken in the context of the Roadmap.

(2) ***Future challenges for gender equality***

What are in your view the main medium and long term challenges that a new strategy for gender equality should address?

14. The majority of Member states together with social partners still need to address the effective implementation of policy reforms to increase female employment rates. This remains a considerable challenge for most countries and is paramount



for Member States to address demographic ageing. Tackling this challenge will require a mutually reinforcing mix of policy initiatives in several areas, such as improving work life balance, putting in place flexible working arrangements, and developing childcare facilities.

15. Gender discrimination on labour markets does exist and should be combated wherever it occurs, but the main underlying reason behind the gender pay gap is gender segmentation. The focal point for future policy and action has to be on better understanding the reasons for segmentation and addressing them through better informed education and career choices for both women and men.
16. The skills women bring to the labour market are and will increasingly be a key resource where there is a great deal of untapped potential that remains. Employers regard the promotion of women in decision-making as an investment for a more productive and stimulating working environment for a better economic performance. If Europe is to increase female labour market participation it must not only improve the proportion of female talent in managerial positions, but also attract women to traditionally male-dominated professions, and vice versa. Such developments should lead to gains in productivity, competitiveness and should also contribute in narrowing the gap in relative earnings between men and women.
17. Attracting women into technology-intensive, scientific and technical professions remains a key future challenge. Parents and the social environment remain the dominant influences in career choices from a young age. Traditional gender roles and stereotypes therefore continue to have a strong influence on career choices. This in turn continues to have an impact on the division of labour between men and women at home and at the workplace. It is therefore of utmost importance to promote gender-sensitive education in schools and universities, and to enhance the effectiveness of non-stereotyped career advice and guidance services, targeted at both women's and men's choices.
18. A precondition for such an approach is to increase cooperation between schools and enterprises, to maximise early exposure to and knowledge of real working environments and the full range of careers available in certain sectors / industries. For example in Austria and Germany, a successful tradition of 'Girl's Day' programmes exist where 1-day work experience is available in specific technical professions where women are underrepresented, together with initiatives such as 'Industry gets female' and 'techwomen'. The main objective of these initiatives is to tackle gender stereotyping and stimulate non-traditional career paths. Several other countries have very similar initiatives.
19. Companies can and do play a role through marketing strategies and the shaping of opinions of pupils, parents, teachers, employers and politicians to this end. Such practices are not yet pervasive throughout Europe but BUSINESSEUROPE members and companies are increasingly active in contributing to more informed education and career choices.
20. Given the demographic projections in the majority of Europe, greater efforts are needed to improve work-life balance so that more women choose to have children and to keep working. Strong signs of encouragement emerge from evidence in many countries (e.g. Sweden) that higher rates of female labour participation and well developed childcare services are often synonymous with relatively higher birth rates.



21. Striking the right balance in the mix of policy measures to promote the reconciliation of personal, professional and family life varies considerably between member States. Nevertheless, to have a positive impact on the segmentation of labour markets, this necessitates an improvement of the availability of care facilities, the take up of leave arrangements, and the promotion of flexible forms of work. To make full use of the pool of female talent, Member States need to tackle the obstacles that make it difficult to combine work with having children.
22. European social partners have recently concluded the revision of their Framework Agreement on parental leave of 1995, whereby several improvements have been made: one extra month of parental leave (from 3 to 4); strengthening of parental leave as an individual right by making a part of it fully non-transferrable; offering workers the right to request flexible working arrangements when returning from leave; and establishing notice periods when taking leave. All of these innovative changes are designed to improve the reconciliation of personal, professional and family life, taking into account the needs of both workers and companies, by introducing elements that strive to recognise increasingly diverse family structures and to promote a more equal sharing of family responsibilities.
23. However, it must be borne in mind that granting more leaves cannot be a panacea for the lack of care supply. It would instead run contrary to the objectives the EU is pursuing in the framework of its growth and jobs strategy. It would be detrimental to the goals of reaching financial sustainability of social security systems and of increasing employment rates, as it runs the risk that people will become more detached from the labour market.
24. Anti-discrimination legislation at EU level exists, and is necessary, but further legislation in this field will not in and of itself help to address the challenges of labour market segmentation, reducing the pay gap, and addressing gender stereotypes. It would instead be detrimental in terms of raising costs, enhancing red tape and increasing legal uncertainty for companies, running counter to the EU's better regulation agenda and negatively affecting the EU's efforts to become more competitive. BUSINESSEUROPE is therefore firmly opposed to further EU legislation in this field.
25. BUSINESSEUROPE also believes that there would be little or no added value in widening the role and / or scope of equality bodies in the Member States.

(3) *Main policy priorities for gender equality*

(a) Are the six priority areas defined in the Roadmap still relevant?

26. The six priority areas remain relevant, of which four are almost identical to the priorities identified in the European social partners' Framework of Actions on gender equality (listed in the General Remarks section, above), namely:
 - i) Elimination of gender stereotypes;
 - ii) Equal representation in decision making;
 - iii) Reconciliation of private and professional life; and
 - iv) Equal economic independence for women and men.
27. There is no need to add additional priorities. There should nevertheless be a strong emphasis on attracting women to technology-intensive, scientific and technical professions, which tend to be male-dominated. Joint ventures between companies and schools, such as Jet-Net in the Netherlands, can be multiplied to



help schools enhance the appeal of their science curriculum and give students a better understanding of career prospects in industry and technology.

(b) How can gender mainstreaming and specific actions be made more effective?

28. BUSINESSEUROPE believes that the effectiveness of policies and actions to promote equal opportunities between women and men lies in the more general implementation of the flexicurity principles – all of which are pertinent, but most notably in this context the objectives to overcome labour market segmentation and to promote gender equality. What is vital to such an approach is a holistic approach and society-wide understanding of the complementary roles, skills and opportunities of both men and women to dismantle stereotypes.

(c) In what policy areas could new gender targets be defined? Which targets should be quantified?

29. The use of a limited number of focused indicators is useful. Regarding the targets, what is useful is the critical analysis of national policies by Member States, not the multiplication of targets at EU level.
30. European employers actively promote the dissolution of negative and discriminatory attitudes and practices towards women on the labour market, notably through diversity management and positive action.
31. Career progression must be gender-neutral and must be based on merit and competences. Tackling the issue of gender stereotypes should be understood as an ongoing pervasive process that will take time to achieve as it relies on changing attitudes, beliefs, practices and traditions. As highlighted already, quotas would not be the right way to address such highly complex issues.
32. Companies are increasingly aware that more gender-balanced management structures tend to produce better results. Such mixed compositions of decision-making personnel often display a greater array of skills as well as better problem solving, team building, innovation, creativity and communication processes. Many companies are actively setting strategic objectives and targets to achieve a better gender balance to this end. While such structures cannot and should not be artificially prescribed to all contexts, greater awareness of these trends should be spread.
33. In many European countries, overall tertiary education attainment is higher for women than for men. However, targets could be formulated to increase the number of female graduates in the STEM subjects (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Maths). In 2005 for example, 44 % of male graduates in the EU were in science and engineering programmes compared to just 14% of women.

(d) How can complementarities and synergies between the Commission's initiatives, the actions by the Member States, the actions by Social Partners and organisations representing civil society, both at European and national level, be achieved?

34. There are already many existing synergies between all the relevant stakeholders. For example the European social partners' Framework of Actions on gender equality shares most of its priorities with the Commission's Roadmap.



35. Bearing in mind that the causes of inequalities on labour markets are complex, European social partners have adopted a joint approach where finding appropriate solutions requires integrated strategies. This particularly includes actions at different levels to desegregate labour markets, both in occupational and vertical terms, in a manner that addresses gender roles in society, while tackling barriers for better compatibility of work and family life for men and women.
36. Member organisations of European social partners committed to take actions during 4 years (2005-9) and to report annually on what has been done in their countries.
37. European social partners have also contributed by concluding agreements to promote flexible forms of work that can facilitate reconciliation (agreements on telework in 2002 and part-time work in 1997).
38. In 2008, European social partners provided a joint evaluation of the progress made by Member States in promoting better reconciliation of professional, family and personal life covering the period 1998-2008. In 2008 they also sent a joint letter to support the implementation of the Barcelona objectives on childcare, as there is still a significant gap between supply and demand of good quality, accessible and affordable childcare infrastructures, which acts as a disincentive to work for many potential second earners in couple families as well as for single parents.
39. In 2009, they have also successfully revised their 1995 Framework Agreement on parental leave, due shortly to be transposed into a EU Directive.
40. BUSINESSEUROPE Member federations are also directly involved in numerous fora to promote gender equality. Interaction and cooperation between all the relevant actors (public authorities, education and training institutions, individuals, trade unions and companies) are necessary, in order to address the diverse needs and tensions generated between the household, the community and individuals.

(e) What types of improvements should be aimed at concerning the monitoring and the reporting on progress made?

41. There is already a considerable amount of reporting being undertaken in all fields. No further administrative burdens are desirable in this regard. The focus of attention should instead centre on reinforcing synergies and cooperation between the key actors. A mutual understanding and consensus-building remain the strongest foundation for any coordinated and effective strategy.

IV. Conclusion

42. It is paramount to emphasise that achieving greater gender equality in the workforce works as much in the interests of business as for women and men. In this regard business should be encouraged to implement actions and initiatives in a voluntary manner according to their characteristics and context.
43. The future Roadmap should therefore follow this line as opposed to adopting a one-size-fits-all approach through legislation that would not be beneficial.