

Can men do it? The work-life balance is an issue for men too!

This was the challenge addressed by the opening event of the “GENDER CHECK” project, a campaign aimed at promoting a greater balance between work and private life for women and men in Europe, which attracted over 30 experts and disseminators to Brussels on 6 and 7 February 2006.

At the initiative and under the overall control of the ARBEIT UND LEBEN federal working group, this project was put forward and accepted as a proposal of the European Training Network (ETN) within the framework of a programme set up by the EU Directorate General for Employment, Social Affairs and Equality. Other participating organisations include the CESEP (Belgium) and the Fédération Leo Lagrange (France), which are members of the network.

The focus is on the development, testing and dissemination of a tool to promote balance in all areas of life – the GENDER CHECK. For this purpose, a catalogue of questions was developed and a series of multiple choice answers drawn up. The check is available electronically and should include evaluation software. Special consideration will be given to the role of men and fathers.

As the opening event, the European Conference had the specific task of pinpointing the variety of existing campaigns and experiences in Europe and of examining, in particular, the role of men in the promotion of equality.

This task was entrusted to experts from six European countries, who were invited to Brussels to report on the social and economic situation in their respective countries, to give an overview of the legal regulations, salary and internal agreements and other regulations and thus share their experiences. These contributions were preceded by an introductory talk by Iva Lanova, a representative of the EU Commission, who spoke about the underlying issues and goals in this policy area. She stressed the fact that the social model in which the man is the sole breadwinner of the family has, to a great extent, become obsolete, yet it is still mainly up to women to reconcile career and family. The fact that the percentage of working women with children is 14% lower than the number of working women without children offers clear proof of the difficulties faced. While, on the other hand, the employment rate is 10% higher among men with children than among men without. The aim of European policy is first of all to bring about a change in the attitudes of individuals and in the corporate climate.

Anne-Marie Dieu from the University of Liège, who has recently headed research into the possibility of reconciling career and family among female workers in Belgium, stressed in her talk that the systems introduced in Belgium do not go far enough. The issue of reconciling work and private life should therefore be discussed within the overall context of the reorganisation of “social times”. In other words, working time, school time, leisure time and the time taken to travel to work or to carry out compulsory administrative tasks should be harmonised with a view to making reconciliation easier. In Belgium however this debate is not regarded as a priority by employers or employees. It is an issue overshadowed by concerns about longer working hours and protecting jobs.

For Thomas Gesterkamp, author and advocate of a new role for fathers, the topic has become a central political theme in Germany, despite the failings in this area, which he puts down historical factors. The “fathers” issue may still be marginal, but there are some initial signs of change. He puts his hope not only in structural changes, such as the parental allowance, which is currently under discussion among politicians, but also in the breaking down of established roles and rigid structures. Furthermore, due to the demographic situation, there is finally talk in Germany about the family friendliness of companies. It is not only society as a whole, each individual employer has a long term economic interest in facilitating the reconciliation between various areas of life in order to keep well-educated employees in companies.

Peggy Buhagiar, who is employed by the Paris City Council “Bureau du Temps”, emphasised in her contribution about France the well-developed childcare facilities, which are however above all a means for women to reconcile career and family. Yet the introduction of the 35-hour week, despite its increasing erosion, offers good structural chances of giving greater consideration to the role of fathers in this context. One of the aims that the “Bureau du Temps” has set itself is to lessen the inequality between men and women in particular, and to combat social exclusion.

Rosario Morillo Balado works in the research department of the Comisiones Obreras in Madrid and in her talk focused on the special role played by the multigenerational family when it comes to the reconciliation between career and family in Spain. She placed particular emphasis on clarification of the situation of single parents and migrants, who because of their specific situation or their social status are confronted with problems which can often only be solved by giving up any social life. Basically, financing, reconciliation of career and family, acceptance and flexibility are the necessary preconditions to reduce working hours for men and thus make it easier for them to place more emphasis on their private life.

As an economic scientist at the University of Sofia, Katia Vladimorava has also taken an interest in the work-life balance. She pointed out that the social conscience in Bulgaria is still very much associated with the specific socialist model of equality between men and women, characterised by the simultaneity of obligation and liberation. While Bulgaria used to have a very high full-time employment rate among women, this has now been replaced by a greater concentration of part-time employment. To date, men have hardly been involved in the balance debate.

Oystein Holter, a scientist at the “Work Research Institute Oslo” and author of the book ‘Can Men do it? Men and gender equality – the Nordic experience’, an expert on the role of fathers, spoke about the large number of empirical results from a EU project on the correlations between greater inclusion of men in leisure time and household tasks, on the one hand, and economic successes and higher birth rates, on the other, and described the success of the equality efforts in Norway.

The aim of the working groups that closed the conference was to allow discussion and the exchange of experiences about the situation in the countries and institutions participating in the project. The themes included childcare facilities, working hours and the organisation of part-time work, family policy and values and the effectiveness of role stereotypes.

As a European project, the Gender Check will be tied in with the results of the conference and accompany change processes with the development and dissemination of this tool which will make the reconciliation of work and private life a social reality, not just for women, but for men as well.

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