

Equal opportunities for women and men: the liberal way

Document adopted by the ELDR Party Congress in Bath, 17 October 2002

A liberal policy on equal opportunities is based on two principles:

- 1. Every woman is entitled to full enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms*
- 2. Liberals should insist on equal rights and opportunities for both women and men with the active support of society, as the whole of society benefits when women can contribute on equal terms*

The Beijing Platform for Action, at the IV World Conference on Women in 1995, identified 12 critical areas for priority action to achieve the advancement and empowerment of women in the world. The ELDR welcomes this achievement and wants to adapt and implement these actions at European level, in the framework of the existing policy on equal opportunities for women and men.

The critical areas

1. Equality in economy

Economic independence is the basis for the independence of women.

The ELDR welcomes the growing presence of women on the labour market but deplores that women's employment is still too often characterised by lower pay, atypical, part time and more insecure work and poor career prospects. Especially in some economic sectors and for some activities, women are still segregated. Too rarely they are represented in top-level positions.

The ELDR supports positive action in favour of women if the candidates are equally qualified.

The advancement of women's entrepreneurship must be encouraged and facilitated.

The ELDR strongly supports Community action such as the employment guidelines on equal opportunities between women and men.

The ELDR deplores the continuing existence of pay inequality, reaffirms the importance of the principle of equal pay for work of equal value and will work towards removing all remaining obstacles for equal pay. The value of service work and other socially important work at home should be regarded as socially profitable, therefore the ELDR welcomes a review of the value of work in all its various forms.

The ELDR stresses the importance and the high value of a gender perspective in the development of macro-economic policy, in particular to increase the employment rate in the European Union.

2. Equality in education and training

Education and training, especially life-long learning, are the key actions for achieving gender equality. The access to all levels and types of education and vocational training, especially life-long training, must be guaranteed to young girls and women. Access to education must allow women to have equal access to qualified jobs, with a particular focus on women from ethnic minority groups. Female migrants and ethnic minority women are individuals and not only part of their families. They should be treated as such. Their education needs special emphasis as the way to integration into society and to their economic and social independence.

Gender-based occupational stereotyping in schools is the most important obstacle to gender equality and to access to the labour market. Action must be taken to suppress the use of gender-based stereotypes in education material. The participation of women and men in fields where they are respectively under-represented should be encouraged. New technologies are a vital factor in development, but could also lead to a new form of discrimination and exclusion of women who are already disproportionately underrepresented in this sector. They should therefore be encouraged to have a technical or an IT education. Women should also be encouraged and supported in developing their entrepreneurial skills. Men should be encouraged to enter the fields traditionally occupied by women, such as teaching, health care and child-care.

Training for persons returning to work after a parental leave or after another interruption, is an important measure to promote women's employability. Equal access to training and courses must be guaranteed as a means to better career opportunities for both men and women.

3. Reconciling work and family

Developing policies and practices for a better reconciliation of work and family life is one of the main challenges of the European gender policy. Awareness activities should target both women and men. In fact there still is insufficient encouragement for men to reconcile professional and family responsibilities. Both women and especially men should be encouraged to take parental leave. Mothers and fathers should be able to share the responsibility for their children on an equal basis.

The quality, availability and flexibility of child or family care services, as well as flexible work, is the main means of reconciling work and family life. Moreover, measures should be taken to encourage the modification of the gender roles in families and the sharing of responsibilities within the home. The ELDR pleads for more flexible legislation on shop and public service opening hours with a view of facilitating reconciliation of professional and family life.

Increased female participation in the workforce and changing patterns of family life have profound implications for Europe's employment and social protection systems. It has a strong influence on the development of caring and providing for children, the sick and for the elderly. On the other hand the supply of care services is strongly affected by the need for budgetary discipline and the incentives encouraging a better distribution and quality of health care.

Both women and men must be given more flexibility at work while their children are small. Having children and taking care of them must not prevent career advancement. The attitudes at work must change. Parents taking care of children during parental leave at home should not suffer from a negative impact on their pension.

4. Gender balance in decision-making

The objective of balanced participation of women and men in decision-making and the sharing of responsibilities between men and women in every sphere of life constitutes an important condition for equality between women and men. ELDR stresses 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.

Women are under-represented in higher positions in politics, public and private institutions and generally in posts where decisions are taken, with exceptions in some Member States. The active presence of women in political parties is crucial to the presence of women in political decision-making and must be encouraged. Women must be encouraged to be candidates in general elections. The ELDR Group could contribute to this aim by setting up a mentor programme focused on young women starting in politics.

In general, the ELDR supports positive action that promotes the representation of women such as targets, personal voting, zip system and others. Political parties should be asked upon to stand women for election on equal preference on the list and as many as men. Methods of positive action could be applied during a transitional period until a satisfactory level of equality is reached.

5. Institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women

In many countries agencies charged with responsibility for monitoring, research and evaluation have been created. They have advisory functions on policy development and they promote gender equality through gender mainstreaming and specific actions in favour of women.

The ELDR support the institution of such agencies in every country and at different levels, in particular with the aim of supplying gender specific data which help the evaluation of gender policies.

Committees and experts groups where possible, should be composed of equal numbers of men and women at national and European level. For liberals emancipation cannot be achieved by government policies alone, to us equality of and equal opportunity for women and men is also an individual responsibility of free citizens united voluntarily in political parties and social organisations. Government policy should facilitate free choice and equal starting positions for women and men in society but should not dictate which personal decisions free women and men should take to shape their future.

6. Human rights of women

The human rights of women are integrated into the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights and into the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms of the Council of Europe. The prohibition of discrimination and intolerance is a principle accepted « de jure », but not yet implemented completely « de facto », particularly in the access to justice for migrant women and women from ethnic minorities.

The European Union should enforce the principle of non-discrimination in every sector, at internal and international level, and promote it in the EU applicant countries as well as in developing countries and the rest of the world. For the ELDR eradicating the trafficking of

women is an absolute priority. Trafficking of women both for the purpose of labour exploitation and for the purpose of sexual exploitation is one of the most severe violations of human dignity and human rights.

In their efforts to resolve the problem of trafficking in women, the EU and the candidate countries must work together. Besides the repressive measures against this trans-national organised crime, the ELDR believes that governments of the EU and the candidate countries should tackle the underlying root causes for this modern form of slavery in the countries of origin: poverty, lack of education, unemployment and the lack of equal opportunities and lack of awareness of women's rights in the countries of origin. In that respect, the ELDR believes we should encourage the candidate countries to adopt and apply the *acquis* as soon as possible in the field of equal opportunities.

Finally the ELDR believes it is equally important to develop a strategy to provide assistance and protection to victims of trafficking. More especially, full protection by the authorities should be guaranteed and granted to victims of trafficking willing to testify and prepared to cooperate in investigations against those who exploited them. ELDR considers that the EU, in conjunction with the Member States and the applicant countries, has to take effective actions to prevent and combat trafficking in women and calls for more to be done to encourage the setting-up of networks and partnership between decision-makers and NGOs and to protect victims of trafficking.

Governments should ensure that they sign and ratify the 1949 UN Convention on the Suppression of Traffic in Persons and of the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others, and subsequent resolutions.

7. Women and poverty

Gender inequalities and disparities in economic powersharing, unequal access to capital, resources and labour markets, as well as harmful traditional and customary practices, still constrain women's economic empowerment and exacerbate the feminisation of poverty. The ELDR strongly supports all those programmes made by NGOs together with Governments or other associations that integrate gender perspective into their policies.

Women living in poverty, in particular in rural areas must have access to new financial systems like micro-credit, a successful strategy to enable women to escape economic isolation.

Elderly women and single-parent families are generally more affected by poverty. Liberals should promote the individualisation of social security rights and promote services, which provide safety nets strong enough in case of ageing, sickness, unemployment etc.

8. Violence against women

The ELDR considers all kinds of violence against women as a human rights violation. Domestic violence is a crime and should not be tolerated. Awareness-raising campaigns to combat domestic violence should not only target women, but also men. Women must be supported by special health services, counselling and hot lines. Liberals are in favour of introducing training programmes for police officers and judges dealing with female victims of violence and encourage recruitment of female police officers. Justice must go hand in hand with a real right of victims which guarantees their full recognition as protagonists throughout the judicial process,

starting with the recognition of their condition, including their attendance at the police station, up until a fair and swift compensation.

Female genital mutilation should be considered as a criminal action. ELDR supports legislation that allows prosecution of people involved in female genital mutilation, even if the mutilation was perpetrated in a third country. Educational material for women and public awareness campaigns must be organised together with women's organisations and NGOs in those countries where traditional practices still keep women in a state of slavery.

All forms of gender-based violence in the work place, be it psychological violence, sexual harassment, professional isolation or preventing women from achieving high level promotions, reflects the inequality of women and men and should not be tolerated.

9. Women and armed conflicts

The ELDR calls on the Member States to encourage the participation of women in decision-making in diplomatic conflict resolution, peacekeeping, post-conflict reconstruction at all levels and observance of international humanitarian law by all parties to a conflict.

The Rome statute of the International Criminal Court provides that rape, sexual slavery and other forms of sexual violence are war crimes against humanity. The ELDR strongly supports this treaty and calls upon Member States to ratify and enforce it.

10. Equality in health

The ELDR considers that the specific problems linked to women's health, particularly sexual and reproductive health problems, eating disorders, osteoporosis and breast cancer should be taken into account in the framework for action at European and national level.

Research and technology still lack a gender-based approach. Member States are encouraged to gather more data concerning health problems specific to women, paying particular attention to improving women's quality of life. Women researchers are still underrepresented in the field of research and technology. Women must be encouraged to seek this kind of career opportunity.

11. Women and the Media

The ELDR recognises the media can play a crucial role in giving a balanced and non-stereotyped presentation of women and men in society.

Increasing the number of women in media production could have a major impact on the nature of media content and in the decisions taken about programme genres that tend to be determined more by financial necessity to the detriment of a correct vision of women and men.