

**Commission on the Status of Women
Fifty-third session
New York, 2 – 13 March 2009**

INTERACTIVE EXPERT PANEL

Capacity-building for mainstreaming a gender perspective into national policies and programmes to support the equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men, including care-giving in the context of HIV/AIDS

Written statement*

Submitted by

**Giedre Purvaneckiene
University of Vilnius, Lithuania**

* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

Equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men:
Reflections on European policies

Equality between women and men is vital to the harmonious development of our societies. It is an essential value of the European Union that has remained high on its political agenda for more than 50 years. On the one hand, development of societies requires the economic and intellectual input of all citizens, men and women, their equal and full participation in the labour market and economy as a whole. On the other hand, men and women have to be able to enjoy the same rights and opportunities and at the same time, they must equally share responsibilities and tasks, including domestic tasks. Women traditionally are much more involved in care-giving, both within and outside the family, and this is one of the major obstacles to full gender equality. It is therefore necessary to promote and implement appropriate measures aimed at reconciliation of work and family life, including family leave arrangements, flexible working arrangements, including flexible work time, easily accessible facilities for child care, care for elderly and disabled, also sick persons. These should include flexible opening hours and affordable care services for children, disabled persons and the elderly, in order to support an effective reconciliation of work, family and private life of women and men.

Work-family balance has been on the European political agenda since the directive on Parental Leave was adopted in 1996. The European Union considers that the issue of reconciling work, private and family life is fundamental in achieving gender equality. Since 1999 the Council of the European Union has been reviewing the implementation of the critical areas of concern of the Beijing Platform for Action by the EU Member States and the EU institutions on a regular basis. A wide set of indicators and corresponding conclusions have been adopted and relevant actions towards implementation taken.

Enhancing reconciliation of work, private and family life is one of the six priority areas of action of the EU “Roadmap for equality between women and men for 2006-2010” and measures in this area are closely linked to the related priority of achieving equal economic independence for women and men. This priority was echoed in the European Pact for Gender Equality, agreed by the March 2006 European Council. In 2007, the Council of the European Union, in its Conclusions on balanced roles of women and men for jobs, growth and social cohesion, acknowledged that women are still often forced to choose between having children and a career, in particular because of the persistence of gender stereotypes and unequal sharing of family and domestic responsibilities between women and men.

In December 2008, the Council of the European Union in its Conclusions on the progress of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action on reconciliation of work and family life called on its Member States, inter alia, to continue to take the necessary measures to encourage men to share family and domestic responsibilities on an equal footing with women, and to promote measures to eradicate gender stereotypes, so as to change the representation of the roles of men and women in work, family and private life.

In Europe, demographic problems are also linked to gender equality. An ageing population, low fertility rates, changing family forms, and single-parent families (which are in danger of poverty) are directly connected with women’s participation in the labour market. Total fertility rates in almost all European States (and in all EU Member States) are below replacement level. But there is positive correlation between fertility rates and women’s participation in the labour market. Therefore full employment of women and men is regarded as one of the most important targets in the EU. The Lisbon strategy of 2000 aimed to raise the overall employment rate in the EU to 70% by 2010, and the percentage of women in employment to 60% by 2010. Taking these targets into account, the question of reconciliation of work and family obligations is of crucial importance. The main provisions in this regard

include, affordable childcare, proper maternity and child care leaves, flexible working time arrangements, “flexicurity,” part-time work, and employer’s involvement. Although many positive developments have been achieved, there is still much work to be done.

Employment rates of women in many European countries exceed or are close to 60% participation levels, the highest being in the Nordic countries, and the lowest – in southern European countries. The Baltic countries, one of which I represent here, already reached 60%. The Nordic and the Baltic countries also have low gaps between male and female employment rates contrary to southern European countries which tend to have much larger gaps. In Lithuania, the gap between women’s and men’s employment rates is one of the smallest – the third smallest in the EU. Even more, Lithuania has one of the best indicators of employment rates of women raising children below 12 years of age. But very often the mothers carry the double burden of working full time at work and at home.

The significant structural difference in the participation of men and women in the labour market is related to the gender composition of the workforce in different sectors and professions. Men and women tend to work in different sectors and fewer than one in four workers is employed in sectors that are more or less gender-mixed. A large majority works in sectors that are either predominantly male (construction, manufacturing, agriculture) or predominantly female (education, health, social services). As a rule, earnings in male dominated sectors are higher than in female dominated ones resulting in the gender pay gap. One of the reasons for gender-segregated labour markets are traditional gender stereotypes, which remain deeply rooted in the Baltic countries.

Another question is part time work. A much higher proportion of women work part-time: 29% of women compared to 7% of men (in 2005). While part-time work is generally seen as positive from a work-family-life balance perspective, it may adversely affect the career path: part time jobs are typically more monotonous with fewer opportunities for learning or formal training compared to full-time jobs. And finally, part-time jobs are connected with lower income and, consequently, lower pensions.

And the last point - development of equality and family friendly enterprises and mainstreaming of gender equality into corporate social responsibility of companies. This modern trend in the EU led to the creation of a network of equality enterprises. In Lithuania, criteria and indicators for gender equal enterprises were developed in 2005. Since then an annual selection of gender equal enterprises has been arranged where enterprises are nominated as Equality Enterprises. The network of gender equal enterprises involves 50 companies already. In 2007, a family friendly enterprise model was created and tested in one of the Lithuanian Universities. It was then presented to the social partners; who have been trained to apply this model, including through incorporating relevant provisions into collective agreements.

Care facilities and services are extremely important in the lives of working women and men. This applies, in particular, to childcare services as care responsibilities constitute the main obstacle to (full) employment. At the 2002 Barcelona Summit, the European Council set targets for Member States to provide childcare by 2010 to at least 90% of children between 3 years of age and the mandatory school age and at least 33% of children under 3 years of age. About half of the European countries have already met the Barcelona target for children above 3 years of age, but childcare coverage for children below 3 years of age remains much below the target in many countries. The best childcare coverage is in northern and western Europe, the lowest – in southern Europe and in post-socialist countries, including the Baltic States. But alongside with the question of coverage, there are questions of affordability and flexibility of working hours. In this respect, a wide variety of different forms of arrangements exists across the countries.

The question of availability of child care facilities is directly connected with variety of leaves: **maternity, paternity, parental (or child care) leaves**. The minimum standards of these leaves are determined by two directives of the European Commission, setting the minimum length of 14 weeks of maternity leave before and/or after the birth of the child, and the individual (non transferable) right of the father and the mother of not less than 3 months of unpaid parental leave. Compensation of earnings during the maternity leaves varied from 55% in Slovakia to 100% in many countries (2004). It should be noted that some countries use a ceiling for these benefits. Paternal leave provisions also vary greatly: from 3 months unpaid leave to up to leaves extending until the child is 3 years of age with a high level of compensation for lost earnings. The payments during the parental leave are: flat-rate benefits or compensation of earnings at some percentage. Very often they are also combined: some period is covered by compensation, and the rest – by a flat-rate benefit. Compensation of earnings is more typical for the Nordic and post-socialist countries. At present, the longest parental leave with the highest level of compensation of earnings is in Lithuania. Parental leave can be extended until the child is 3 years of age, the compensation for the first year's earnings is 100% (a ceiling does exist, but it is very high), for the second year it is 85%, and during the third year parents are entitled to a low flat-rate benefit. Recently a new social guarantee was introduced for a parent using parental leave: parental leave can be combined with part-time work. In this case, the parental benefit covers the difference between the current salary and the full benefit. This option allows the mother (or sometimes) the father not to lose their qualifications.

As noted earlier, all these provisions are mainly used by women. In connection with the tendency of increasing the length of paid parental leave in many countries, and particularly, in the Baltic countries, there have been serious discussions about its impact on women's careers and fertility. In spite of the right of both parents to parental leave, most of those who use this right are mothers. One of the reasons why fathers do not use their right to paternal leave is the higher income of men. If benefits are low, the loss of income is higher. In these circumstances, the longer the parental leave lasts the higher the probability for women to be considered "secondary earner in the family", reinforcing the role of the man as "main income earner." If parental leaves are too long, not only do they have a negative effect on the careers of women, but they also could lead to a decrease of fertility.

There are several measures used by European countries to attract men to child care. In Finland, the possibility was recently introduced to shorten both parents' working hours and combine part-time work with the parents' sharing of the parental leave. This seems to be a very good solution from the perspective of the child's well-being. It would lessen women's risk of becoming second-class employees. But in practice very few families took advantage of the new part-time parental leave. Three Nordic countries (Iceland, Sweden and Norway) use the so called "father's quota" in parental leave, i.e. some part of the parental leave should be taken only by the father or otherwise it is lost for the family. In Iceland, this part of parental leave comprises 3 months, in Sweden – 2, and in Norway 1 month. The Icelandic scheme of parental leave is usually regarded as the most successful example. Since 2000, in Iceland parental leave of 9 months is comprised of 3 non-transferable months each for the mother and the father, and 3 months for both parents to divide at will. The parental leave benefit constitutes 80% of the salary with no "ceiling" (later on, in 2004, a ceiling was introduced). It should be noted that the absolute majority of fathers use the "father's quota", moreover many of them use longer period than the minimum right of the parental leave. It should also be noted that these new arrangements of parental leave stimulated an increase in fertility, bringing Iceland to the second place in Europe (after Turkey) according to the fertility rate.

In the Baltic countries (as well as in some other European countries) another measure for involving fathers in the care of children is used. Fathers are entitled to paternity leave during the mother's maternity leave. In Lithuania, paternity leave is of one month duration and with

100% of compensation of earnings. Paternity leave has become very popular among Lithuanian fathers, and is used increasingly. But the difference in philosophy behind shared parental leave in the Nordic countries and paternity leave in the Baltic countries should be noted. In the Nordic countries, shared parental leave is based on sharing of responsibilities, but in the Baltic countries the paternity leave is devoted “to assist women” during their maternity leave. The Nordic countries regard women and men as equal caregivers, but in the Baltic countries mothers are regarded as primary caregivers, and fathers as assisting and helping them.

In recent years, “flexicurity” has become very popular as a tool for promoting and achieving work and life balance. Flexicurity (a new word for “social protection for flexible work forces”) enables an employee to combine paid work with other social obligations and responsibilities. This refers to diverse leave schemes (parental or educational), flexible working hours, reduced hours schemes, etc., while preserving social security provisions. Flexicurity brings additional security, but does not automatically enhance equal opportunities for women and men in the labour market and private sphere. If women alone will continue to take career breaks and reduce their working time to take up caring responsibilities, this will only reinforce the role of women as primary caregiver and secondary earner.

It is important to note that in all countries women work more hours than men when paid work and unpaid domestic work are considered together. This is even the case for women who have part-time jobs. Data from a European working conditions survey in 2005 show that, on average, in 27 European countries women work 35 hours in paid employment compared with 42 hours of men. But they devote three times more hours than men to domestic work. And when unpaid domestic work is taken into account, it becomes clear that women work significantly longer weekly hours than men. In cases of families with children, mothers more often shift to part-time work, while fathers tend to work longer weekly hours in paid work. Unequal sharing of responsibilities has negative impacts on women’s opportunities in education and labour market, participation in public life, and, finally, leisure time usage. Therefore, on the European level, the work-family balance paradigm is shifting to work-life paradigm.

Gender stereotypes reinforce inequality in the distribution of responsibilities and division of paid and unpaid labour. Stereotypes are based on perceptions of women as natural care-givers and men as ideal workers and deficient care-givers. The impact of gender stereotypes in the process of socialization of children is great, and quite often is reinforced by families, religious institutions, and the media. Therefore, European countries emphasize the role of education. Many countries have revised curricula at all levels of education, including teacher’s training. In 2008, the European Parliament adopted a resolution with the goal to end gender stereotypes in marketing and advertising. Many countries have launched awareness-raising campaigns to address gender stereotypes, particularly in the media. A number of innovative projects aimed at the elimination of gender stereotypes, especially in areas such as education, science and employment, have been supported by the EU initiative EQUAL. In Lithuania, stereotypical and negative treatment of women in advertisements is forbidden by law and monitored by the Equal Opportunities Ombudsman. Elimination of gender stereotypes is one of the six priority areas of the EU Roadmap for equality between women and men. Consequently, the Baltic countries made a choice to receive support from the EU structural funds for the elimination of gender stereotypes. A number of trainings have been carried out for labour market institutions, teachers and lawyers. Nevertheless, the predominance of gender stereotypes is a deep problem and its solution needs strong and long-lasting activities in order to change our minds towards more egalitarian gender roles. Existence of gender stereotypes negatively influences and hinders efforts to reach gender equality goals, and therefore should be eliminated.

To summarize, this short overview of European policies to promote equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men shows that all measures and provisions to implement these policies should be equally available to and equally used by women and men. If only women use these provisions, only women will tackle the contradictions between work and family obligations. Gender inequality, however, will not be eliminated. To achieve the goal of equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men, the full participation of everyone, men and women, is required. This is not the concern of women alone.