

Assisting the State in adopting the necessary measures in the field of harmonisation of work and family life.

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"The existence of an equal family, the care of reproductive functions and all the other functions required by a family as well as the state protection of the family are preconditions for women's liberation. The opposite would result in keeping women in roles of submission."

Ana Cabre

It is known that gender remains a fundamental factor in occupational segregation between men and women and in characterising professions as "female" or "male" ones, thus remaining a critical problem for the European Union and the Member States. The professions that even nowadays are considered to be suitable for women are those that ensure the possibility of performing the prevailing social role of the housewife-mother. The latter is a social expectation that is often culpatory and conflictive for women and compels them to part-time employment, abandoning any ambitions of professional evolution or even relinquishing work altogether for the sake of family and children's upbringing. According to European Union statistics women who resort to this solution comprise 33% of female labour resources, while the corresponding male percentage is just 6%. Either way, though, men and women now coexist in the work place. The current socio-economic circumstances call for female employment and women's movements assert the elimination of predominant attitudes regarding the sexes and entrance into the labour market, their professional evolution in terms of equality and equal opportunities (a fact that nowadays is directly related to development), social coherence, but also the quality of democracy. The increased rates of development and competitiveness of the European market, the pursuit of social cohesion, the quality itself of the western type democracy have pointed out the fundamental necessity of women's entrance to the labour market and their stay in it, in terms of equality and equal opportunities as it has been pointed out (Journottes, 2003). Despite this widely accepted finding, however, women's relation to paid labour and self-employment is characterised by a network of prejudices and notions connected to traditionally patriarchal relevant attitudes, resulting in facing serious obstacles in their evolution and career¹. It is thus understandable why in the Roadmap for Equality, the reconciliation of family and professional life was itself one of the main six objectives of the European policy next to equal economic independence, and no longer a means for increasing women's participation in labour².

Introduction

The improvement, however, of women's position, the encouragement of their participation in the labour market and employment in general, as well as the

occupation with science, research and social issues in particular, entails a greater involvement of men in family obligations. But while women are actively joining the productive process and are participating on equal terms with their partners in the struggle to make a living, a respective participation of the men in the responsibilities of the house is not observed. Men in general are exempt of the arduous and time-consuming family responsibilities, such as childcare and upbringing, and the care of elderly parents, as well as housework. They focus on their professional career and success, resulting in them gaining positions of responsibility and higher positions in the hierarchy more often than women. On the contrary, women, in their effort to adequately meet what has been established as “family duties” - which are translated into matter-of-course unpaid housework - are thus orientated to seeking other forms of employment (e.g. part time employment, reduced working hours etc), which has no prospect of social acknowledgement, professional advancement and career with ambitious aims, while sometimes they withdraw from or completely abandon the productive process. It is not by chance that the female population is often pushed to the necessity solution of flexible forms of employment and reduced working hours, since it gives them the opportunity to combine paid work with unpaid housework, which the patriarchal society imposes on women (Gasouka and Kokkinou, 2010). It calls for a redistribution of domestic social roles, a redistribution of domestic time in favour of women as well, the acceptance of social motherhood and the redefinition of the paternal role – in short, it calls for a family of democracy and equality³. In order for the gap between the institutional framework and social reality to be bridged, at least in Cyprus, the social collective conscience has to accept that women's participation in the public sphere of life is as important as that of men and that it is their right, should they wish so, to transcend the boundaries of home and childcare. The state and social support of these choices, apart from being a sign of modernising the attitudes and beliefs of a society and its members, also improves the quality of labour.

A significant factor, however, in defining the quality of labour is the existence of regulations and practices for the facilitation of reconciliation/harmonisation of family and professional life of working people, men and women as well. Such regulations should acknowledge that the participation in family care is an equal responsibility of both men and women and serve men and women to the same degree (Griswold, 1993). It must be understood that a balanced participation of men and

women in the labour market as well as the family life is an essential element in the development of the society and that motherhood, fatherhood and children's rights are fundamental social values protected by the European Union and the member states. Therefore, the design and adoption of measures involve significant socio-economic agents such as businesses and employing organisations or the trade union movement. In essence however, they involve the State, its institutions and bodies that should objectively form the frame and relevant structures which will allow the harmonisation of work and family life. The present study aims at assisting the State in adopting the necessary relevant measures, by suggesting the establishment of an Observatory of Reconciliation, an institution and structure that is nowadays regarded as necessary and promoted in national and international level by the European Union.

The need for harmonizing professional and non-professional life (family and household tasks) has gradually gained importance in the last 20 years, because of the increased female participation in employment in all European countries (63% of the women in the E.U. is part of the labour resource), but also of the drastic changes in family models, changes that have led to the increased number of nuclear and single-parent families. The possibility of combining the conflicting demands between paid employment (not to mention a career) and the changing personal needs and non-professional duties often requires a huge effort in part of the individual, the woman in particular. This incessant struggle for the control of time has been mostly left to the exclusive responsibility of working people, especially women, even though it is gradually flagged as a priority sector for policy implementation in macro and micro level.

Philosophy and content of the reconciliation/harmonisation of family and professional life

The reconciliation of family and professional life is a new policy that comes to meet a certain social need which emerged quite some time ago. By the term reconciliation/harmonisation of family and professional life we mean that it is imperative for both men and women in the contemporary social, economic and cultural circumstances to assume multiple roles as employees, home- and family caretakers and these roles can no longer continue to conflict with each other (Evans,

2002). The reconciliation of family and professional life can also be expressed as the balance of professional and family obligations. The new term refers to the balanced, equivalent participation of both men and women in family responsibilities in such a way that they are allowed to meet their professional obligations, but also to optimise their creativity and skills at the work place (Dex, Smith & Winter, 2001). It is known that "According to the E.U., the organisation of labour and the balance between work and private life is one of the ten dimensions of labour quality and regards the assurance that work regulations, particularly in relation to time and in combination with the provision of auxiliary services and household support services, will allow a correct balance between private and professional life" (KETHI, in Gasouka and Kokkinou, 2010: 17). The couple's shared responsibility in the family and household tasks and the equal provision of opportunities to the two sexes at the work place, which will contribute to their professional evolution, are a precondition for the implementation of this new policy that comes to complement and advance gender mainstreaming. The actions planned towards this goal are:

Flexible regulation of work hours both for men and women. It is claimed that these policies assist the creation of a flexible economy while they improve the living conditions of the citizens. They also help people remain in the labour market by making the most of their potential. However, despite the positive aspects of flexible labour presented in the Commission's text, it is noted that these regulations have mostly to do with women causing inequality between the sexes, which has a negative effect on women's professional situation and their economic independence as well. At the same time there is a counter-suggestion of full-time employment as a precondition and critical factor of personal and family security and balance.

Increase and improvement of health services. Europe has to tackle a triple challenge in relation to the demographic issue: the shrinkage of the active population, the decrease in birth rates and the growth of the elderly population. The regulations that will lead to a better balance between work and private life are part of the solution of the demographic problem, offering economical and accessible infrastructures of childcare, as required by Barcelona's agenda. It has set a goal of achieving, by 2010, the provision of childcare for 90% of children aged between three and the mandatory school age and for 33% of children aged below three. It also proposes the provision of services that meet the needs of care for the elderly and the disabled. The quality of these services must be improved while at the same time there should be a

development and better evaluation of the qualifications of the relevant staff that will mostly be comprised of women.

Better reconciliation practices for women and men. The structures and services adapt very slowly to the contemporary state of things where men and women work. Very few men take up parental leave or have a part-time employment (7,4% compared to 32,6% of women). Women therefore have the main care of the children and other dependent family members. Men should be encouraged to take on more family responsibilities, mostly through greater use of parental leaves and paternity leaves (Warn, Solomon and Shelmit, 1999).

The reconciliation of family and professional life is, or at least should be a serious matter for both men and women. The difficulties that women, especially mothers, face in finding and keeping paid labour, the deeply rooted prejudices according to which women solely are responsible for the family care as well as cultural expectations that want men to be the main bread winners are factors that may deteriorate gender inequality. As mentioned above, men's participation in the combination of family and work life is a critical and difficult at the same time issue. Critical because without men's participation there cannot be an equal distribution of responsibilities and difficult because it is necessary to promote changes in society and the mentality of every man and woman. Already since 2000, the Ministers of Employment and Social Policy of the European Union (29/6) issued a resolution stating the view that the principle of equality between men and women entails the need for counterbalancing women's disadvantage regarding terms of access and participation in the labour market, but also men's disadvantage regarding the terms of their involvement in family life (Women's Institute, 2001). These disadvantages rise from social practices that still postulate that non paid labour for the family care is a basic responsibility of women, whereas paid labour that is closely related to the economical life is men's principal responsibility.

Therefore tools are needed that will help a greater sensitisation of the society and the authorities that are responsible for the implementation of the community legislation and the national regulations regarding the reconciliation of family and professional life, in order to facilitate changes in structures and behaviours and to develop new models of cooperation between women and men. The role of businesses and the selection on their part of business strategies that are friendly to family and women are considered to be of particular importance. In this way they go around

phenomena such as the "glass ceiling" and have the ability to make the most of all skills, talents and expectations of both men and women (Gasouka, 2007). Quite a few businesses have started to realise that quality human capital may prove to be a comparative advantage in modern market economy. It may also function as an important profit multiplier for a business, when it meets the necessary requirements and has the knowledge and skills to provide high level services ⁴. It is obvious that workers who have a normal family life and balance between home and work without particular problems are more productive and raise the competitiveness of the business. For this reason, medium and large businesses are invited to plan and implement actions that intend to make the most of human capital in relation to the harmonisation of family and professional life of employed men and women.

A centre role in this effort is played by workers' familiarisation with Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), Life Long Learning and the continuing vocational training of the resources of every business. Human capital and the investment in developing individual skills, in knowledge as inextricable elements of labour are the driving force for the development and productivity of a company. The introduction and utilisation of ICTs in businesses is expected to lead to a qualitative enhancement of human resources and to reinforce the competitiveness and profits of businesses decisively. The familiarisation of both sex workers by the use of the Internet and the development of e-business systems facilitate business activities. At the same time, despite whatever objections there may be in the relation of women and ICTs, they offer knowledge and qualifications to workers in order to meet the demands of the modern market and the information society. It is also important that ICTs can help workers organize their work time better to the advantage of their family/private life. The widespread use of the Internet, telework, the introduction of flexible work programmes that will facilitate working couples can be enhanced in order to offer businesses quality labour product on one hand and to facilitate couples of "double employment" harmonise their family/private and professional lives. Apart from that, in cooperation with Universities and other education agencies, companies can implement in job programmes regarding the continuing vocational education and training of their staff. The enhancement of skills of the human resources and the investment in skills and knowledge reinforce business productivity and shield it against the competition. At the same time, the role of workers who obtain the ability to manage information and new technologies correctly inside an ongoing learning

activity is clearly enhanced. As a result, together with the business, workers themselves regardless of sex optimise their skills, become more productive and reinforce their position in the productive process. This enables them to upgrade their role and position in every business and offers them a relative employment security. This fact is regarded as necessary for a balanced and functional connection between the professional and private/family life of workers of both sexes.

The Cypriot Experience

In light of the things mentioned above, it is advisable that there will be a formulation of a series of actions aiming at raising the difficulties in achieving a reconciliation/harmonisation of family and professional life and creating opportune conditions for the implementation of measures and actions to the advantage of this important issue, through the production of knowledge regarding the parameters of the problem. Through the experience existing at European and Cypriot level (as resulted from the realization of C.I. EQUAL (priority theme 2, measure 2.1), to contribute to the formulation and implementation policies on harmonisation of work and family life in Cyprus, a country in which the tradition, the modern life style and the collective social conscience are in close proximity, if not identified. Thus it results in formulating a set of proposals/measures that will be utilized both at an institutional framework level and at the level of socio-economic institutions of the public and private sector. The design and adoption of measures involve significant socio-economic agents such as businesses and employing organisations and/or the trade union movement. In essence, however, they involve the State, its institutions and bodies that should objectively form the frame and relevant structures which will allow the harmonisation of work and family life

Cyprus has already conformed its family law with the European data since 1995 (L. 19(1)1995), especially as far as children protection is concerned, although it was not a member of the European Union at the time. In 2003, law L.104(1)2003 modernized the institution of marriage by the establishment of the civil wedding among Greek-Cypriot citizens as well as among Greek-Cypriot citizens and others. A very significant aspect of this law is the fact that civil weddings between Greek-Cypriot and Turkish-Cypriot citizens are allowed for the first time (Gasouka & Tsoukala, 2007). During the procedure of adjustment to the European acquis, Cyprus also

proceeded to the adjustment of legislation relevant to maternity, which concerns laws related to parenthood and parental leaves, maternity protection (maternity leave, prohibition of dismissal of pregnant women, facilitation of breast-feeding), protection and care of childhood, creation of a family court etc. Of special interest is the institution of family mediation that concerns every family affair including parental care, children's maintenance and property relations between husband and wife etc. that complies with Recommendation R98 of the Council of the Ministers to the member-states. In Cyprus the actions concerning issues such as protection of motherhood, family and childhood protection, combating domestic violence etc., the treatment of which is a precondition of the reconciliation of family and professional life, are still under the jurisdiction of the National Mechanism for Women's Rights and several other equality institutions, NGOs etc.

In the overall effort – but for some occasional exceptions thanks to the Cyprus Employers and Industrialists Federation – there was no participation from the employers and especially the Cypriot businesses that do not yet systematically include gender dimension in their corporate environment and their business options, although most of them have a very powerful social profile. Over the past few years a broad debate is being held in Cyprus regarding corporate social responsibility at the initiative of the Employers' and Industrialists' Federation of Cyprus (OEB), which has caused great interest. However, the gender dimension in this context remains very weak. Cypriot businesspeople to one degree or the other still do not fully understand the importance of equality strategies and are not yet willing to link them to their social responsibility or their business profit. This was one of the main causes for the planning and implementation of the actions of project “Open Doors” of Development Partnership ELANI for the reconciliation of the professional and family life of workers and women above all. One of the main actions was the formation of a new professional profile, that of the Equality Adviser, in the Cypriot labour market, with the relevant training and awareness of 25 officers of the public sector mainly and of businesses, trade unions and educational organisations etc. After their long training - which enabled them to plan inter-business equality strategies with emphasis on those for reconciliation - the trainees proceeded to plan and implement Reconciliation Plans in businesses that accepted to cooperate with Development Collaboration ELANI.⁹ At the same time a powerful non-conformity is quite evident between the institutional framework and the social practice, as the patriarchal traditional perceptions on the

social roles of gender demonstrate significant historical endurance and unwillingness to differentiate, despite the formal public rhetoric which is relevant to gender equality and equal opportunities. However, nowadays there is common ground regarding the recognition of the significance that the promotion of gender equality with emphasis on the reconciliation of the employees' – and especially the women's – family and professional life has for the economic growth and the social cohesion of the Cypriot society. One should not forget that in the framework of interprofessional dialogue the European social partners are committed during the Spring Summit in March 2005 to a “Framework of Actions for the promotion of gender equality” with an implementation and consequences calculation deadline in 2008 (KETHI, 2007) and Cyprus, although recently a full E.U. member, will have to present its relevant national experience soon, in order to contribute to the design and dissemination of “proper practices and actions at national, sectoral, local and business level” (KETHI, 2007). At the same time, although the biggest part of the responsibility belongs to the State, the fact that the issue of gender equality more generally and reconciliation more specifically directly concerns both the employers and civil society, men and women, something that calls for direct changes in the collective social consciousness as well as the set of attitudes and beliefs related to gender is common ground. This particular study, drawing from both the Cypriot reality, the now rich European experience and the multitude of positive practices that emerge from it, results in a package of proposals that can be utilized by the State and the Cypriot social-economic institutions, which, although indicative, it is possible to direct future institutional actions. More specifically **some of them are:**

I. To the State:

- Immediate integration of the gender dimension in the educational procedure of the pre-school, primary, secondary and vocational (initial and continuing) education with a relevant adjustment of the curriculum, the school textbooks and simultaneous training/sensitisation of the teachers on issues of gender equality and equal opportunities..
- Training/sensitisation of the Ministry officials – and especially of the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Economics and the Ministry of Employment – for the integration of gender dimension in all policies and the possibility to evaluate consequences.

- Financing of research and studies by Universities and other institutions for the registration of gender inequalities in the Cypriot labour market, their causes and their qualities as well as specialized proposals for their elimination.
- Synchronisation of societal hours (city hours) and working hours.
- Regulation of insurance and pension rights and encouragement of men to make use of parental leave.
- Establishment of new childcare structures and improvement of the quality and accessibility of the already existing ones, with free provision of care, or – in the worst case – with services at so low prices in order to be affordable to the economically weak groups of the population.
- Financing from national and E.U. resources of businesses of every size in Cyprus for the development of actions such as the establishment of day-care nurseries in their facilities.
- Regulation of organisations', services', public and private businesses' professional working hours and legislative regulation of the correspondence of the working hours of the public and private services
- Provision of economic or tax incentives to public or private businesses and institutions in order to promote gender equality and reconciliation of family and professional life for their employees through defined actions (KETHI, in Gasouka and Kokkinou, 2010:18-19.).
- Adoption of incentives similar to the above that will contribute to changing gender-related stereotypes, highlight the new domestic and public roles of the sexes, emphasise on the importance of a new fatherhood for children and family.
- Development of employment policies aiming at informing the social partners and the businesses about the cost and benefits resulting from Reconciliation processes that integrate the gender dimension.
- Development of a recurrent campaign of sensitisation and informing the public opinion about the content and the philosophy of the importance of gender equality and equal opportunities. (Gasouka, 2008).
- Establishment of Structures for counselling women on employment, entrepreneurship and networking, some of which being mobile.
- Establishment of an Observatory for the Reconciliation of Family and professional Life, that is a documentation centre, aiming at the collection, processing and

utilisation of qualitative and quantitative data related to that significant social demand in Cyprus. (Gasouka, 2008) .

From all the above-mentioned, the fundamental role of the State to the accomplishment of Gender Equality and Equal Opportunities and especially Reconciliation is evident. For this study this role is the most important, while the roles of the social institutions and the civil society are exceptionally important but always complementary and auxiliary. And as the State shoulders this big social, economic and political responsibility, it also has to provide the necessary financial resources for its realisation.

II. To the businesses ⁶

- Design of business strategies of Reconciliation of professional and family life of the employees and especially of the women with gender dimension (Reconciliation plans).
- Improvement and enrichment of family friendly policies, where they already exist.
- Encouragement and promotion of radical changes in labour organisation and business mentality.
- Incorporation of the reconciliation of family and labour dimension in the collective negotiations' agenda.
- Establishment of childcare structures in the facilities of medium and large businesses or financing the parents for this reason.
- Establishment of a new type of work position and a new professional profile, that of the Equality Advisor with the responsibility of designing and realising actions concerning Equal Opportunities and Reconciliation.

Along with the businesses in the specific sector it is necessary for the employing organisations to take certain actions, such as:

- Initiatives of relevant information/sensitisation of their members on the institutional framework, the incentives and the positive European practices.
- Actions of enforcement of women's entrepreneurship and their promotion to managerial positions.
- Design of models of new types of work organisation, which take family needs into account.

III. To Trade Unions

The role of Trade Unions to the achievement of eliminating gender discrimination and the realisation of gender equality is of utmost importance. We should never forget that they often act as the voice of female (and male) employees in expressing and asserting their occupational demands. As mentioned, Trade Unions must actively participate in the promotion of regulations for the harmonisation of family and professional life, promote systematic measures of preventing gender or social discrimination or loss of protection, pointing out workers' relevant needs at the same time. However, the following should be added to these:

- Information/sensitisation of their members regarding the demand of gender equality in all areas of the social, economic and political life.
- Design of policies in order to highlight female executives in their frame and election of a significant number of women in their bodies.
- Adaptation of their modus operandi and their discourses to women's needs and life style, in order to render trade unions more appealing to women.
- Ensuring women's participation at all levels of collective negotiations.
- Firmness in defending full-time employment, as a dominant employment model for men and women.
- Integration of the gender dimension in all training activities of the Trade Unions and their scientific-training structures.
- Integration of the gender dimension in collective labour agreements and all the agreements included in the Collective Labour Agreements at all levels.

IV. To the Civil Society

It is obvious that the Civil Society and its institutions – above all women's organisations and equality institutions – act as pressure groups, but also contribution to the State towards achieving Equality and especially the Reconciliation. It is necessary that they actively participate in the design and development of all processes and regulations, especially those that reinforce the family and professional balance, but also women's human/social rights that are questioned even today under the pressure of the patriarchal commands. They should aim for dialogue, the exchange of positive and negative experiences, the dissemination of information, and if this is not possible, fight for it. They should promote networking with each other, and endorse the development of forms of corporativeness and networking with employing,

scientific, academic and other institutions, but also with institutions of the broader public sector, aiming at establishing measures and policies that promote gender equality and equal opportunities and especially the balancing of professional and family life of working people and – the emphasis is not accidental – especially women, that are still burdened by the multiple roles of the private sphere of life and their occupation.

Afterword

The combination of family and professional life is a fundamental component of gender perspective in the European strategy regarding employment and the process for social inclusion. It aims at promoting a more cohesive society by ensuring favourable conditions for men and women's entrance, re-entrance and stay in the labour market. At the same time it is related to the development of human resources, the achievement of business profit, but also transnational socio-economic growth. This important demand of our times urges the acceptance of the fact that whatever regulations towards the Reconciliation must acknowledge: 1) that participation in family care is an equal responsibility of both men and women and to serve them to the same extent, 2) that a balanced participation of men and women both in the labour market and family life is a necessary element to the development of the society and that motherhood, fatherhood and children's rights are essential social values protected by the society, the member states and the European Union.

In recent years there has been an evident participation of businesses in family policies and the relevant sensitisation of a number of employers appears to be raised. It is not certain that the majority of businesses have left behind the stereotypes regarding the role and usefulness of female employment. The tendency of some businesses, mostly small and medium ones, to reproduce obsolete attitudes and practices that maintain labour inequality between the sexes, undermines a couple's smooth family life (Dex, Smith and Winter, 2001). By attributing too much of importance to cases like for example the "cost of absence" of a working mother (maternity leaves, parental benefits etc.), business often fail to understand the multiple benefit that equal treatment entails for themselves. All research points to the fact that provision of equal work opportunities to men and women contributes to growth in business productivity and competitiveness (Gasouka, 2007). However the most important aspect is that policies of harmonisation between family and career form

"win-win" situations: a) workers enjoy a better work environment and gain more satisfaction and self confidence, b) businesses benefit from motivated, ambitious staff that has less absences and more productivity, c) the harmonisation helps create a flexible economy that uses all its human resources constructively (Evans, 2002).

At the same time it should be understood that family democracy is undermined by the exhaustion and frustration caused to women by occupational segregation inside the family, the abandonment of professional ambitions or the public sphere itself that often is imposed by this division.⁷ What also results from the above is the defining role of the State, that is fully aware that there cannot be economic growth, social cohesion, even democracy, if women remain at the margins of labour, an eternally reserve labour army, and if workers of both sexes experience a conflicting, stressful relation between their family and professional life (Pillinger, 2002).

Notes

- 1. Of course we are talking about women who finally manage to find employment, because we should not forget that the large majority of the unemployed and long-term unemployed people in Europe are women*
- 2. Several interesting proposals have been submitted regarding the improvement of balancing family and professional life. Commissioner Amalia Sartori, for instance, in the Draft Report she submitted regarding the Roadmap for equality between men and women (2006-2010) in the frame of revision of policies of combining family and professional life proposes to the committee to "ensure that the cost of motherhood is borne not by business, but by society as a whole" (so as to eradicate discriminatory behaviour at work and help boost the birth rate)"*
- 3. National policies should focus more on the establishment of a supporting institutional framework that would help lighten the negative consequences of the implementation of flexible labour forms and to ensure a greater control on time management to individuals working under these conditions.*
- 4. Apart from the aforementioned, gender research reaffirms that, in microeconomic level, staff policies that incorporate the gender equality dimension are beneficial not only for employees but also employers, since they contribute to a reduction in absences and growth in business productivity/competitiveness as well as the wider local and regional development in general.*
- 5. Based on the taught methodology that allowed: defining the profile of the business, recording the status of working women and the problems they are facing regarding their family obligations, recording the views of the workers regarding their needs etc.*
- 6. According to this political/social stance, companies voluntarily incorporate in their business actions and transactions, activities with a special social and environmental content.*

7. *The traditional attitude, which is still quite strong, imposes that a “good” mother should give priority to raising her children, abandoning or delaying her professional participation and advancement.*

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