



Roundtable event

The parenthood penalty?

Work-life balance, pregnancy and parenthood related discrimination: equality bodies and MEPs contributing to new EU and national initiatives

Wednesday 20th April 2016
European Parliament, Brussels

INTRODUCTION

THE EVENT

Work-life balance, pregnancy and parenthood related discrimination, and gender equality in general, are key issues in the work of equality bodies. Equinet members report high-levels of discrimination in these areas.

[Equinet](#) has worked extensively on the situation of women in the labour market, focusing particularly on work-life balance (see the section “useful links” p.6). In addition, the [Equality and Human Rights Commission](#) (EHRC – British equality body and Equinet member) recently launched the [campaign and research #Worksforme](#). It shows that more than three quarters of pregnant women and new mothers, the equivalent of 390,000 women, experience negative and potentially discriminatory treatment at work each year in Great Britain.

In order to mark the launch of the EHRC final report and inform EU institutions on the work and challenges faced by equality bodies in this area, the EHRC and Equinet organised a roundtable event on “[The Parenthood Penalty: Work-life balance, Pregnancy and Parenthood Related Discrimination](#)”.



It was held at the European Parliament, in Brussels and was hosted by the [Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats](#) (S&D).

THE ORGANISERS

EQUINET - THE EUROPEAN NETWORK OF EQUALITY Bodies brings together **45 equality bodies** from 33 European countries. Equality bodies are public institutions set up across Europe to promote equality and tackle discrimination on grounds of gender, race, age, sexual orientation, religion and belief, disability or other grounds. They play a fundamental role in the non-discrimination architecture of the EU. As a **first point of contact for victims of discrimination**, equality bodies have an extensive understanding of how discrimination affects people in Europe. They also work towards the **better implementation of EU legislation** by monitoring and taking an active part in the implementation of the EU Directives.

The **EQUALITY AND HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION** (EHRC) is the British equality body and member of Equinet, working to create a fairer Britain through its mandate to challenge discrimination, and to protect and promote human rights. The EHRC regularly monitors developments and conducts research in the UK across all grounds of discrimination, including the ground of gender.



OPENING ADDRESSES



The roundtable event was opened by MEP **Clare Moody** (S&D, United Kingdom (UK)). She addressed the importance of **ensuring respect for women's rights in all the phases of motherhood, including before, during and after maternity leave**, through the implementation of flexible work arrangements and

adjustments. In this regard, trade unions play a pivotal role in assisting in promoting and monitoring the implementation of rights, as well as raising awareness among employers and employees. Ms. Moody also expressed her hopes to see a more ambitious approach from the European Commission, which should include provisions to ensure adequate social infrastructures for childcare and the involvement of men to share child caring responsibilities.

The floor was then taken by **Evelyn Collins**, Equinet Chair and Chief Executive of the [Equality Commission for Northern Ireland](#). She thanked all the participants for joining the discussion, in particular the S&D group for hosting the event. Having acknowledged the importance of the European Parliament in fighting discrimination in employment and based on gender, Ms. Collins introduced the work of Equinet and equality bodies. Over the years, Equinet has produced various publications and materials to engage with policy-makers and provide independent advice from the perspective of equality bodies. Examples of Equinet's activities on this topic are the Perspective on [promoting a better work-life balance for all](#) (2013) and the Perspective on [discrimination, harassment and inequality for women](#) (2015). She underlined that, as shown by the experience of the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, there was a very high incidence of pregnancy discrimination complaints received by equality bodies every year.

Caroline Waters, Interim Chair from the EHRC, stressed the need to ensure equality in the workplace, particularly considering that women are an increasingly critical part of the UK talent pool and majority of graduates. Today, 72% of UK women are working or actively seeking work, while 30% of the UK work force is made up of working parents. Losing this resource would have severe consequences for the economy and the labour market. The perception of working parents and pregnant women should change from business burden to business benefit. Additionally, while the impact on the economy is significant, it is important to remember that equality in employment is predominantly a moral imperative leading to the design of legislation and must play a role in ensuring no implementation gaps. Ms. Waters concluded her speech with a plea to **include men as change-makers in the decision-making process and to change the perception of women as the sole child carers**.

PRESENTATION OF THE #WORKSFORME PROJECT

Quinn Roache, EHRC project manager, presented the findings from the [research on prevalence and nature of pregnancy discrimination and disadvantage in the workplace in Great Britain](#). The research results were made available in 2016 and based on interviews with 3,034 employers and 3,254 mothers.

The main findings of the study shows that 84% of employers believe that supporting women in the workplace is an asset and that female employees are committed workers. However, the research also revealed that **77% of UK mothers reported negative experiences and possibly discrimination**. Drawing from the information collected, the EHRC proposed six [recommendations](#):

- 1. Leadership for change:** ensuring employers attract and retain talent. Employers and policy-makers should collaborate with the EHRC to raise awareness of rights and obligations;
- 2. Improving employer practice:** promoting family-friendly workplaces by improving communication between employers and employees in order to ensure rights are respected and employees are not discriminated;
- 3. Improving access to information and advice:** employers and female employees are unaware about their rights and reporting mechanisms;
- 4. Improving health and safety** to ensure more guidance on risk assessment and that women are not forced to choose between their job and their health or the health of their unborn child;
- 5. Improving access to justice** by ensuring accessible complaints mechanisms;
- 6. Monitoring progress** to track the pace of change towards creating fairer workplaces.

Outcomes of the project also include an [employer toolkit](#) and [employees and employers FAQs](#). Quinn Roache's full presentation is available on [Equinet's website](#).



#worksforme

ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

The floor was then opened for discussion **between MEPs and representatives of equality bodies.**



MEP Maria Arena (Belgium, S&D) addressed the gender dimension of poverty in which women tend to experience discrimination in their career paths and have more precarious jobs. She expressed disappointment that discussions about the Maternity Leave Directive within the EU institutions have reached an impasse due to the lack of compromise and concerns about subsidiarity.

Vice-Chair of the Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality João Pimenta Lopes (GUE/NGL, Portugal) reiterated that women are often left with the responsibility of child care and become most affected by unemployment and discrimination in accessing the job market. He also emphasised the increasing economic and social inequalities and the disastrous effects of austerity measures on the life of EU citizens. It is crucial for the European Commission to focus on the Maternity Leave Directive and ensure that equality is achieved through better income distribution among class and gender, collective bargaining and flexible working time.



Liesbet Stevens, Deputy Director of the Belgian [Institute for the Equality of Women and Men](#), underlined the fact that the statistics presented by the EHRC are also relevant to Belgium. She stressed the importance of good, quality and affordable care infrastructure, flexible leave and the involvement of the father, including through compulsory paternity leave, to ensure the achievement of the Barcelona Targets. She suggested that employers should have clear policies and plans for pregnant employees.



MEP Jean Lambert (Greens, UK) addressed the issue of multiple and intersectional discrimination in which women from minority groups or with disabilities are more vulnerable to discrimination. She also thanked the EHRC for providing the final recommendations based on the findings of their research, in particular for addressing the lack of access to redress mechanisms and lack of rights awareness.

MEP Agnieszka Kozłowska-Rajewicz (EPP, Poland) discussed the impact of parenthood on women and men's participation in the labour market, which often translated into gender discrimination, as women's employment tends to decrease by 10% once they have children, while men's increases by 12%. This divide is also reflected in the spread of paid and unpaid work between men and women, as well as in the gender pension gap. For these reasons, she concluded that the



Maternity Leave Directive should not only focus on the protection of women during pregnancy and in its immediate aftermath, but also on work-life balance in general and paternity leave.

Katarzyna Wilkołaska-Żuromska, Senior Counsellor at the [Office of the Polish Commissioner for Human Rights](#), talked about the mismatch between equality legislation and its implementation in the labour market in Poland, where discrimination based on stereotypes is still present. Additionally, she discussed the gender-pay gap as a reason why more and more women in Poland tend to stay home with children, while men continue to go to work as they generally earn more. She also advocated for more efficient flexibility at work with better infrastructure. Finally, she stated the importance of having independent and well-resourced equality bodies to ensure that they can adequately fulfil their mandates and handle complaints.



Theresa Hammer, Moderator of [Equinet Working Group on Gender Equality](#) and Lawyer at the [Austrian Ombud for Equal Treatment](#), addressed the problematic use of austerity measures which often lead to a precarious labour market and privatization of care work at the expense of women. It is thus important to make sure mandatory work-life balance standards are introduced by all Member States and implemented through gender-sensitive action plans, which also

include the involvement of men. She stressed the crucial need for standards to ensure independence, adequate resources and powers for equality bodies to fulfil this mission.

CONCLUSION

Anne Gaspard, Equinet Executive Director, thanked all the participants and speakers for the good quality of the discussion. She recalled the importance for equality bodies and MEPs to cooperate, especially in the context of the EC Roadmap on work-life balance (see the section "Useful links").

USEFUL LINKS

EQUINET

- * Webpage of the [roundtable event](#) with pictures and presentations
- * Equinet Perspective: [Equality bodies promoting a better work-life balance for all](#) (2013)
- * Equinet Perspective: [The Persistence of Discrimination, Harassment and Inequality for Women](#) (2014)
- * Summary of the [seminar on work-life balance and pregnancy and parenthood related discrimination](#) (July 2015)

EQUALITY AND HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION

- * Webpage of the [#WorksForMe project](#)

OTHER DOCUMENTS

- * European Commission – [Roadmap “New start to address the challenges of work-life balance faced by working families”](#) (2015)
- * European Commission – [Strategic engagement for gender equality 2016-2019](#)

