



09 May 2010

The Benefits of European Union for Women

Europe's Day 09 May 2010

Sixty years ago, on 9 May 1950, Robert Schuman delivered his famous declaration calling for a united Europe based on peace and solidarity between its peoples, which led to the creation of what is now the European Union (EU). Today, equality between women and men is at the core of this Union, which is bound in all its activities to 'eliminate inequalities, and to promote equality, between men and women' (Art. 8 TFEU). Over the last six decades, here is what the EU has done to implement that promise:

1. The EU has adopted legislation to protect women from discrimination and promote equal opportunities and equal rights for women and men in employment and beyond.

- **Ensuring equal access to jobs and trainings and protection from discrimination in employment and beyond:**
Since 1976 European legislation guarantees women equality in access to jobs. The legislation covers selection criteria, vocational training, career advancement, working conditions, and dismissals. In all cases of discrimination, the burden of the proof lies with the defendant, making it easier to protect women's rights. In 2004, new legislation widened protection from discrimination for women to cover access to and supply of goods and services. More recent legislation has gone further, protecting women and men from discrimination on the grounds of age, disability, race, religion or belief and sexual orientation.
- **Fighting the gender pay gap:**
The requirement of equal pay for women and men was included in European Law as early as 1957. Beyond the legislation, the EU has also launched a '[gender pay gap](#)' campaign across the EU to raise awareness about the outstanding 18% difference in hourly wages, and created a [gender pay gap calculator](#) to measure inequality in your workplace.
- **Ensuring the equal rights of part-time and self-employed women workers:**
The European Social Chapter provides the same rights for part-time workers (four out of five of whom are women) as full-time workers. Since July 2000 part-time workers have benefited from minimum wage guarantees, equal rights to pro-rata paid leave, pensions, maternity rights, access to training and other company benefits. Self-employed women also benefit from protection of their equal rights since 1986.
- **Ensuring women's equal rights to a pension:**
Pensioner poverty is a real problem for women, many of whom have lesser access to company pension schemes because they worked part-time or had career breaks to have children. EU laws in principle prevent pension discrimination and guarantee equal rights for all to social security benefits.

2. The EU has promoted better balance between professional and private life for women and men

- **Guaranteeing maternity rights:**
Discrimination against pregnant women has been outlawed in the EU since 1976. Since 1992, all women in the EU are entitled to 14 weeks paid maternity leave. Also, a woman's job must be held open so she can return to a post without loss of pay or status. Currently, negotiations are underway to hopefully increase the maternity leave period to 20 fully paid weeks.



- **Promoting parental leave:**
Since 2002, any parent with children under 5 has the right to a minimum of 13 weeks parental leave to be taken whenever they choose over the 5 year period. That extends to 18 weeks for any parent of a disabled child under 18.
- **Ensuring paid holidays and a shorter working week:**
Since 2000, workers have been given the automatic right to 4 weeks paid annual holiday, and a guaranteed at least one day off per week. And under the Working Time Directive, employees can no longer be obliged to work more than 48 hours per week, are guaranteed breaks and night shifts are restricted to 8 hours. The Working Time Directive limits the average working time for employees to 48 hours.
- **Setting targets for the provision of childcare:**
In 2002 the EU agreed on targets for the provision of childcare for at least 90% of children between three years old and the mandatory school age, and at least 33% of children under three by 2010. Although many Member States have not met these targets, they remain an essential accompanying measure for the realisation of gender equality.

3. The EU has increased the protection of women from violence

- **Protecting women from sexual harassment at work:**
Since 2002 EU legislation requires employers to take measures to prevent discrimination including harassment and sexual harassment in the work place and employment related areas (training, etc).
- **Combating trafficking in women:**
Since 2004 the EU has put in place measures to tackle human trafficking, the vast majority of which concerns women being trafficked for sexual exploitation.
- **Granting asylum to women who have faced gender-based persecutions:**
Since 2004, the EU has recognised explicitly gender-specific persecutions (such as forced marriages or Female Genital Mutilation) in the countries of origin as a legitimate basis for asylum claims.
- **Funding projects that fight violence against women:**
The Daphne programme, established in 2000, has funded hundreds of projects helping to address violence against women.

The progress for women brought about by the EU is significant, but the potential of EU-level action for further concrete advances for women's rights and gender equality in Europe remains vast. Also, to be effective, much European legislation needs to be fully implemented at national level, and by the private sector. The European Women's Lobby (EWL) is dedicated to lobbying for legislation, policies and programmes at European level that will bring about real change in the lives of women across Europe and beyond, and their full and effective implementation. Among others, the EWL's demands include stronger action from the EU to ensure women's equal participation in decision-making, binding targets to close the gender pay gap, binding measures for delivery on the provision of care services, and legislation to protect all women from all forms of male violence.