



EUROPEAN COMMISSION

SPEECH

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*Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort*

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Ladies and gentlemen,

I am grateful for the chance to speak about the Commission's efforts to help reconcile family life and work and to relate them to our employment and social policy aims, particularly in the light of the current crisis.

I was impressed by the title of your earlier session on the "rush hour of life and the life cycle approach".

Such a life-cycle approach is crucial to understanding and reforming social policy and preventing risks at various stages of life.

It is a fact that the traditional male and female gender roles are increasingly in conflict with people's expectations and aspirations.

Increasingly, both men and women want to be economically independent, which means being in paid work, and taking part in society.

However, only 62% of women aged 20 to 64 are in employment in the European Union. In the USA, the figure is 65%.

In particular Italy, Greece and some of the central and southern eastern Member States have low female employment rates. Member States will need to get their financial incentives right. But they will also need to do much more to allow for the reconciliation of work and family life. Creating and developing child care is key in this respect.

The Commission took an important step by adopting, as part of the Social Investment Package, a Commission Recommendation on fighting child poverty.

It highlights the importance of an approach based on children's rights that puts the child's interests first while fully supporting the family.

It looks at how to guarantee an adequate living standard for children and empower them from an early age.

The Recommendation underlines that:

- Work should pay for parents on low incomes. And access to affordable quality early-childhood education and care services should be improved.
- Efficient family and child benefits should deliver adequate income support while ensuring redistribution to those on lower incomes.

The Recommendation pays a particular attention to early childhood education and care. There is clear evidence that this is one of the most effective types of support for improving children's chances over their whole lives, and thus breaking the intergenerational transmission of poverty.

Conversely, children of parents facing difficulties have far worse access to childcare of any kind.

We know that early childhood education and care are also very helpful later on in life.

Many people, especially women, are discouraged from playing a full part in society by the need to stay at home to look after their young children.

Early-childhood education and care are crucial here too, in so far as they allow parents to participate in the labour market or take part in the life of the society in other ways.

In later stages of life too, there is much to be done. We know about the problem of population ageing and the increase in the number of elderly.

This has received much attention during the 2012 European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations.

Technical and social advances can allow people to continue living an active life for longer.

This does not just mean working longer, but keeping healthy and living independently for longer, even after you stop working.

This is important in itself, since it gives the elderly a better life.

But it also has an impact on family life and women, since it relieves the pressure on carers — both informal carers, who are often the daughters of the elderly, and formal carers, a majority of whom are also women. Personal and household services and the challenges facing the so-called 'white jobs' were addressed in our Employment Package of last year.

Ladies and gentlemen,

This quick glance at the various stages of life shows that support at one life stage has complex and often positive effects on people at other stages.

We need to tackle the challenges of long-term change in the way we organise our lives as individuals and as families.

This is key to the social investment approach as set out in our recent Social Investment Package.

The basic idea is that social policy should empower people from an early age, strengthen their ability to adapt to such risks as changing career patterns, new working conditions and population ageing, and improve opportunities for participating in society throughout their lives.

Social policy can yield a significant return over time and is an investment for growth that is inclusive as well as smart and sustainable.

In the current climate of crisis, governments are seeking to consolidate their budgets and boost growth *at the same time*.

This makes social welfare spending a prime target for cuts, which is why it is important to spend *not necessarily more, but more effectively*.

Well-designed reform should enable people to contribute to the economy and take part in society because this helps in tackling the social consequences of the crisis and meeting the Europe 2020 targets for employment and fighting poverty.

The social investment approach we propose helps address both long-term and short-term challenges.

By investing in people — to develop their skills and capabilities and ensure they have an adequate livelihood — we will equip them better as individuals — and by the same token, we will equip society collectively — to come out of the crisis stronger, more cohesive, and more competitive.

That is especially true given the structural labour market shortages that await us tomorrow.

With population ageing and falling fertility, a growing retired population and a heavier burden of pensions falling on a shrinking working-age population, we will soon need to call on all human resources available to keep our budgets sustainable and preserve our standard of living.

The Commission expects the Member States to report on how they have focused more closely on social investment in their national reform programmes as part of the European Semester.

It will monitor progress in implementing reform and, where relevant, propose country-specific recommendations in this area.

It will also offer the Member States guidance in making the best use of the EU Funds, and in particular the European Social Fund, to support social investment.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We are struggling with the crisis within the European Union, but the EU should not forget its role in fostering social progress and social justice on a global scale.

In its overseas development policy, the European Union supports our partner countries in meeting the Millennium Development Goals.

Target 1B refers to "full and productive employment and decent work for all, including women and young people".

That will inevitably improve life for families.

The Commission's "Agenda for Change", which sets out the future of EU development cooperation, focuses on vulnerable groups, including youth, as part of its drive for inclusive growth.

I would also recall that on 27 February the Commission adopted its position on the review of the Millennium Development Goals, the post-2015 development agenda and Rio+20 follow-up. It proposes a common and integrated approach for the EU's engagement relating to the formulation of Sustainable Development Goals and the post-2015 Development Agenda.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Reconciling work and family life is embedded in the EU's broader social policy aims, which include increasing employment, reducing poverty, bolstering social inclusion and improving skills and educational attainment.

The challenges raised by the balancing of work and family life reveal both the short and the long term challenges our societies are facing.

And we cannot face these challenges in isolation. In our increasingly globalised world, crises can spill over from one country or region to another. And progress in one country or region can also have positive spin-off for others.

Maintaining social cohesion and decent living and working conditions should therefore be a concern to all and not only to those countries most directly hit by the crisis.

Countries need to sustain investment in our children and families if we want our European social model to stay alive.

Thank you.