

Mind the gap

The EU must address gender inequality issues if it is to have any chance of tackling poverty and social exclusion, writes **Myria Vassiliadou**

Poverty affects 85 million, or almost one in five, Europeans. Coming as a result of inequalities, it is not surprising that poverty and social exclusion affect more women than men. However, the gender dimension is often masked and the most fundamental of structural causes of poverty and social exclusion are ignored.

We speak of poverty in old age, but most pensioners living in poverty are women. We speak of the third of single parents who face poverty – up to 90 per cent of them are women. One in five women is a victim of domestic violence and 63 per cent of those who flee their partner end up in poverty or on the street. More than half of the women and girls who become homeless do so because of violence or sexual abuse.

If poverty and social exclusion are to be tackled, the underpinning structural inequalities must be recognised, and dealt with. These are complex and multifaceted, but unequal positions in the labour market is just one issue that must be addressed. The most direct cause of women's economic vulnerability is their comparatively disadvantaged position in the labour market. While women account for 59 per cent of university graduates in Europe, their average employment rate is under 60 per cent, with figures as low as 37 per cent in Malta.

Women represent two thirds of the 63 million adults classified as 'inactive'. When employed, they earn on average 18 per cent less than men, and 31 per cent of women work part time compared to less than eight per cent of men.

Certain groups of women are particularly vulnerable, facing more obstacles in the job market than their male counterparts. For instance, 63 per cent of 55-64 year old women are unemployed, compared to 45 per cent of men. Women with disabilities are half as likely to be employed than men with disabilities. Women living in rural areas, of migrant background and Roma women are also especially vulnerable.

The greatest challenge to female employment in Europe continues to be reconciling work and family life. Women's employment rate falls by 12.4 per cent when they have children under 12, while it rises by 7.3 per cent for men. Some 40 per cent of these mothers, compared with 10 per cent of fathers, are unemployed. Some 30 per cent of European women say they work part time to care for children or other dependents, and would like to work more if care alternatives were available.

Excluded from the labour market or with more precarious incomes, women have lower savings, less social protection and poorer pension entitlements. In the UK for example, men's pensions are on average two thirds higher than women's. Too often, the absence of individualised taxation and social protection compounds this disparity, rendering women dependent on their partners and masking their high poverty risk. Unpaid work in the home, including as assisting partners in family businesses, continues to be ignored and unprotected. In cases of separation, divorce or death of a partner, a woman's risk of poverty is estimated at 36 per cent, against 11 per cent for men.

The high levels of inequality in Europe are intolerable. This is a human rights as well as an economic issue. Eliminating these gaps would not only reduce poverty levels, but increase the prosperity of society as a whole. The EU has a duty to protect the most vulnerable, promote equality and invest in its people – women and men alike. In voting for strong maternity and paternity leave provisions, the European parliament recently took a step in this direction. We trust this is just the start, and that together, step by step, we will work to achieve a more equal and just society, free from the scourge of poverty and social exclusion. ★

Myria Vassiliadou is secretary general of the European Women's Lobby

European parliament backs maternity leave increase

MEPs last month backed plans to extend maternity leave on full pay from 14 to 20 weeks. The proposals will also mean a revision of EU rules on the health and safety of pregnant workers, with provisions for minimum maternity and paternity leave. Going beyond the commission's plan for 18 weeks maternity leave, parliament also adopted amendments to ban the dismissal of pregnant workers.

There was a mixed reaction to the news among MEPs, with ALDE deputy Liz Lynne, a member of the parliament's employment committee saying "MEPs did not see sense and voted to adopt 20 weeks on full pay, proposals which would be damaging if implemented but this is only the first stage of a long negotiation." Former chair of the committee on women's rights Anna Záborská said, "Overall, the voting outcome of this report is reasonable and we look forward to working closely with the council, with the sole objective of improving the health and safety of women at work."

However, PES president Poul Nyrup Rasmussen described the result as "a significant step in...guaranteeing the same rights for all workers, regardless of their gender". Dutch Greens MEP, Marije Cornelissen welcomed the vote as a "major improvement on the current situation." The European Women's Lobby, which had been pushing the proposal from the very beginning, said they were "absolutely thrilled" with the vote. Secretary general Myria Vassiliadou told the Parliament Magazine, "We are extremely happy with the results. We realise that it is only the first reading, but it is the initial step for the rights of women, human rights and longer term economic prosperity."