

Reconciling work and family life within the framework of policy of equal opportunities for men and women in the Czech Republic

(Position paper of the Czech Republic for the Council of Europe's Conference of European Ministers Responsible for Family Affairs)

The Czech Government began to treat systematically the problem of equal opportunities for men and women only at the beginning of 1998, in connection with the process of the Czech Republic's accession to the EU and other international commitments as well as under pressure from non-governmental women's organizations.

At the beginning of 1998, Minister of Labour and Social Affairs was entrusted by the Government decree with co-ordinating equal opportunity policy. At the same time all ministers were set a task to co-operate with non-governmental women's organizations. Minister of Labour and Social Affairs was also entrusted with creating the National action plan for this area of Government policy.

In April 1998 the Czech government approved a programme document "Government priorities and procedures in promoting equality between men and women". It is directed to 7 most important areas in which barriers that keep women from achieving a status comparable to that of men still exist. Individual ministers or heads of central bodies of the state administration are set tasks with definite terms of their fulfilment. The above National action plan is not unalterable. It will be evaluated every year and updated in dependence on the current needs of the society. In 2000 it has been evaluated for the second time.

One of 7 main areas to which the National action plan is directed is also a problem of the equal social status of women and men caring for children or dependent members of families.

This provision is being implemented step by step e.g. through a newly introduced parental leave in an amendment to the Labour Code. The aim of the amendment is to create equal conditions for fathers and mothers in order they may use their leave for taking care of a child in his/her early childhood. Through a partial amendment to the Labour Code within the framework of the above mentioned amendment the status of employed mothers and fathers of small children was equalized in the following areas: sending out persons for business trips, the transfer of employees, the termination of employment and the possible arrangement of working hours.

Enhanced employers' possibilities of introducing flexible forms of employment which meet better the adequate requirements of employees caring for children on the arrangement of working hours are taken into account in preparation of a new Labour Code, which will start in 2001.

The network of state and public pre-school care facilities and facilities providing care of children in their free time meets partly the demand on this kind of services. The care of small children ensured from their birth to the age of 3 years is provided in nurseries, which are included in the system of health care facilities.

The care of needy members of families of employed citizens and families in difficult situations is ensured through

- 1) social care services aimed at removing barriers which have resulted from social disadvantages due to a handicap and at equalizing opportunities of persons for their equal participation in economic and social life. These services are provided mostly for a long-term period.
- 2) social intervention services aimed at easing or eliminating temporarily unfavourable social situation which has resulted from a personal or relationship crisis or from the way of life. These services are provided temporarily as usual.
- 3) services of a community character, contributing to an improved quality of life. At present, developed are the types of services enabling members of a family who take care of a child in his/her early childhood not to lose competitive position in the labour market.

Social services provided by the state have mostly an institutional character. Other services are ensured by district offices, communities and municipal magistrates as well as by the quickly developed non-governmental sector.

The aim of social services is to support families in their difficult situations and to strengthen their own competence. They should be considered as a reaction to an unsatisfactory situation of families, not as a direct prevention of the existing burden.

In 1999 a Republic's Committee for children, youth and family was established, which as an advisory body of the Government has formulated priorities in public services for endangered families, their future and the future of their children – see Appendix No.1.

In order to prevent possible limitations of the development of a child caused by the environment, an interdepartmental definition of socio-cultural discriminating environment was given. This is such environment which does not enable a person to develop his/her capabilities and skills and has resulted from insufficient qualification of parents, their serious illness making it difficult to care for a child and the household, insufficient social integration, insufficient securing of maintenance and clothing, unsatisfactory housing conditions, violence against or abuse of children or drug abuse. The system of public services responds to these situations which influence the development of a child by providing services aimed at the support of a family and services promoting development of the potential of a child. The area of social services will be treated by the Act on Social Services (which will come into force from January 1, 2003).

Parents taking care of children have also financial support provided through **the social security system** (benefits of the pension system and the sickness insurance system, social care benefits) and through **the state support system**.

From sickness insurance maternity allowances are provided, which are payable for 28 weeks (37 weeks for single mother and multiple births) including at least 6 weeks before confinement.

The state participates partly in covering child care costs through the system of state social support. Child care requiring interruption of employment, taking of paid and unpaid

maternity leave results in the decrease in the income of a family, which is compensated most of all by state social support benefits.

The basic principle of the whole **system of state social support** is a principle of participation. This means that the Government subsidises families in certain social situations, which they are unable to resolve by their own force or through their own resources. The state social support is aimed at strengthening incomes of families in predefined situations in which the incomes of families relatively decrease or their costs increase.

The unified concept of benefits is based on the minimum living standard (MLS) stipulated by law from which individual benefits and grants are calculated. The minimum living standard is defined according to household size (number of the household members) and age profile of the household members. The amount of benefits based on the minimum living standard is kept at a real level related to the development of the cost living. If the minimum living standard changes, all benefits (allowances and grants) are recalculated without the necessity to file a new application.

Some individual types of state social support are provided with and some without testing the applicant's incomes. Currently, **the group of income-tested benefits** includes child allowances, maintenance benefits (support of families of those in compulsory military services), housing allowance and transportation benefit (to assist children commuting to school, partially tested), **the group of non-income tested benefits** includes parental benefits, charitable benefits, foster care benefits, birth grant, funeral benefit. About 66 percent of these benefits are subject to income testing.

State social support benefits are financed from the state budget.

At present two amendments to the Act on State Social Support are under preparation. The first one (discussed by the Government) is intended for increasing the amount of the birth grant and for removing the requirement on the limited income from profit-making activity as a condition for entitlement to this benefit. The idea of the second amendment of the above-mentioned Act, which is under preparation at the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, is that child allowances should be paid to all children and a new one-time benefit (for buying schoolbooks and stationery necessary for school attendance) will be introduced. In addition, the transportation benefit should be cancelled and instead of it reduced tickets for school children should be introduced.

If the income of a citizen and dependent members of his household is not sufficient to cover their necessities, he can apply for **social assistance benefits**. Social assistance benefits consist of a) social need benefit aimed at supplementing household income (including benefits from social support programmes) to ensure that it reaches at least the minimum living standard, and b) benefits provided to households with special needs, in particular due to disability. Benefits can be paid in cash or in kind. There are more than twenty kinds of such benefits, some of them being one-time benefits, others recurrent.

Social care is financed from the budgets of regional authorities, e.g. from the budgets of district offices and communities. Their funds for this aim come from state subsidies and from their own resources. **Social need benefits are financed from the state budget, social services from both the sources.**

Protection of disabled people and seniors

Families with disabled children have relative advantages in the system of state social support. A family with a disabled child is supported by social additional payment from the state social support system. Its amount depends on the degree of health affliction of a child. Health affliction is taken into account also in payment of foster care benefits. Parental benefits in the case of a disabled child are paid up to seven years of his/her age (instead of 4 years of age). Disabled children are entitled to various social care benefits defined in regulations on social security.

Families caring for their elderly members or for disabled persons are paid benefits for the care of a relation or another person. This benefit is paid to a person ensuring personal, all-day and proper care to a person with prevailing or entire incapacity, to a person over 80 years with partial incapacity or to a person over 80 years who needs all-day care. The above benefit is also paid to a parent or grandparent who cares personally, all day and properly for a child over 1 year of age with a long-term severe health affliction.

Initial theses of the Section of the Republic's Committee for children, youth and family aimed at supporting family and children in difficult situations of life

- to create a system of public services for endangered families which will respect the dignity of users, lead to independence through the strengthening of competence of endangered families and help to raise their social and economic participation;
- to ensure that adults and children are protected against low levels of care;
- to define the term “domestic violence” and to ensure that people who may be endangered by this violence are given adequate protection, assistance and support;
- to offer clients a choice that is in harmony with their individual needs and circumstances and to maximize the utility of services for users through sufficiently wide and reasonable offers;
- to ensure through qualified multisectoral assessment that multisectoral services are provided consequentially, are targeted and differentiated according to the level of necessity and lead to timely assistance;
- through timely recognition and the flexible ensuring of the needs of communities, towns and regions which require desirable support for families and children in difficult situations of life, to protect the aforementioned communities and to prevent social exclusion of individual families or their members;
- to reduce the number of children placed in institutions and through a system of interconnected and comprehensive services to support the leaving of children within their natural environment, where their needs will be professionally evaluated, adequately satisfied and examined further. If they cannot be relocated into their natural environment, to promote the development of substitute family care;
- to ensure that children are protected against emotional, physical and sexual abuse and against indolence, both in their natural environment and in institutional care;
- to ensure that children with specific needs resulting from health (physical, sensuous and mental) and social disadvantages live in families or in other suitable substitute environments in which their needs will be professionally evaluated, adequately satisfied and monitored further;
- to ensure that children who cannot live with their own families are carefully entrusted in time to the care of people who are able to provide for them kind and safe care throughout their whole childhood;
- to ensure that children with specific health and social needs, as well as children living in institutions and foster families have the best possible conditions of education, health and social care;
- to ensure that young people who leave institutional care or foster families upon reaching adult age will not be isolated, to ensure they are able to integrate themselves into society and start their own families.