

Contribution of Marie Rosarie Carfagne, Minister
“Conference on parental childcare and the employment policy”
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I would like to thank the Czech Presidency, the European Council, MEPs, the Premier, Minister of Labour and Social Affairs of the Czech Republic Mr. Petr Necas, the European Commission represented by Vladimir Spidla for allowing me to participate in the opening of this important Conference on Parental Care and the Employment Policy.

As the Minister for Equal Opportunities I have considered this agenda to be a key since the beginning of this mandate for many reasons, which I shall mention.

The family assistance policy cannot be based on the basic standing of women and the painful reconciliation of the ways and times of family care.

My vision of the position of women in our society is not old, on the contrary, it is deeply rooted in Italian and European reality; within this vision women are actors in family life on one hand, but on the other still greatly pushed into the role of maids of the productive society.

There is no doubt that unless radical measures are taken to resolve issues of the significantly low employment of women and the objective set out in Lisbon is reached, for example, i.e. a 60% employment rate, women will never become actual actors on the stage of this period.

That is why the Italian government as stated in the report of October 2008 on PNR wants to implement during the coming three-year period measures to increase the level of employment of women by at least five percent (which would be a great achievement) and to support not only the labour policy that would help this development, but also functional welfare strategies for expanding the employment base for women's manual labour and to give women an effective method of reconciling the development of their professional talent and the free development of their reproductive function, assistance and care not excluded.

Many estimates tell us that if the Eurozone countries were to align the employment level of women with the employment level in the United State, which is currently 68%, GDP would increase by 13%. In Italy, where the level is around 46.3%, GDP could be increased by up to 20%. According to some Italian analyses, the entrance of only 100,000 women to the labour market would result in the growth of GDP by 0.28 percent per year, which could provide financing for the 30% growth of public budgets allocated to families.

All analyses, in essence, underline the positive nature of the growth of the employment rate of women: the more women employed, the more positions there will be (approximately 15 positions per every 100 women employed), the higher the taxes levied, and there will be better security and family welfare. Furthermore, work positions created by this growth and implied by the offer of services for families are advantageous because they can exist on an almost local level, while also contributing to improvement of the economy in underdeveloped regions. Many analyses confirm that double-income families contribute significantly to consumption, savings and investments.

The decreased participation of women in the labour market and hence their lower employment rate is partly, by its characteristic quality, associated with maternity and the need to care for and look after children (see CNEL Report). According to one Italian survey (ISFOL PLUS) in 2006, one in nine women left employment after maternity and two in three women explained this choice either as voluntary or as necessary when comparing the financial situation with the need to care for and look after children.

For women living in a couple there is a literal drop in the employment level (between 25 and 44 years of age), when there is a transition from childless life to pregnancy (from 75.5% to 54.5%).

This phenomenon does not occur for men living in a couple, which is substantiated by the fact that in the division of roles the woman is still the person taking care of and looking after children. This tendency is typical of our country, where the fertility rate is still very low; however a turn-around has been recorded. Thus we may conclude that having children is an obstacle to the employment of women.

This thinking is not at all mistaken.

In countries with a high employment rate of women there is also a high fertility rate, i.e. the average number of children per women during the productive age.

This phenomenon is due to the "Family Friendly" policy along with welfare measures to support the family policy, which decrease the incompatibility of employment and childcare.

This view of the system must be reversed: mechanisms that help the family and which can be offered by governments must not be viewed as assistance measures, but as measures of significant assistance for national and international politics.

This is why the topic of 'reconciliation' has become the central agenda of the complex of systems reflecting family needs, focusing on parental leave, childcare and senior care, development of the environment and organization of work that would facilitate reconciliation between employment and family for women and men.

The topic of reconciliation as seen from this perspective involves and implicates many people (individual citizens, companies, the entire social system).

A conception shift must occur along with the transition from reconciliation considered to be an individual need to system reconciliation.

One of the agenda of our conference is parental leave.

This leave is a measure to recognize and implement parental functions in childcare and family care, however this measure is still being insufficiently used.

In fact data proves that only 24% of Italian mothers in employment used parental leave during the first three months of the child's life, while less than 10% used parental leave after the third month of the child's life, and only 3% of men entitled to parental leave took advantage of it. This is due to parental leave being associated with compensation that cannot make up for the decrease in income because of parental leave. If the mother's low income leads to her leaving employment, the low compensation during parental leave results in the father not drawing it at all.

Thus it is necessary to proceed in this direction within this difficult and international economic situation and to establish new strategies to support the employment of women so that women can enter the labour market and be able to leave it at a particular moment of their lives without unalienable disadvantages.

In association with this procedure as the Minister for Equal Opportunities I requested and succeeded in achieving enlistment to the National Plan of Reforms 2008 - 2010 in accordance with the amended Lisbon Treaty of a comprehensive plan for simplifying and deregulating labour, which without decreasing the level of protection of male and female employees is directed at increasing freedom for both companies as well as for the provider of labour activities on bureaucratic and formal measures of performance in terms of enabling employment, decreased indirect costs through a package of measures contributing to higher flexibility of working hours and shifts, starting with part-time employment by European standards and strengthening the services for individuals up to programs for the re-qualification of women returning to the labour market after a period of family care.

The Ministry is evaluating the possibility of establishing a National Fund for experimental reconciliation and implementing measures on the state, regional, and local level to facilitate the right to life, which would harmonize work and the family.

This fund should be used to remove structural shortages during the first stage of childhood, the elderly and those who cannot take care of themselves, and to assist the needs of families with young children who live in poverty and to help, by successful measures, in the employment of women.

The family division is already implementing the plan for nurseries to increase the number of nursery places in Italy, the division for equal opportunities supports, in its complementary function, the establishment of family nurseries.

This means establishing home nurseries throughout the state, organized in unions, in which some mothers would provide aid services to a limited number of preschool children (0-3 years).

Or the so-called 'tagesmutter' - women trained to care for and educate single or multiple children (up to a maximum of 5 children) in their own homes.

The work would be carried out in the household with the assistance of public authorities.

The next possible project evaluated by the Ministry is an annual benefit paid to grandparents in economically difficult situations who look after preschool children (0-3 years).

Another of the analyzed possibilities is to provide a type of sales coupon, which would enable holders to use, along with their personal contribution, reconciliation services provided by public and private facilities, such as nurseries, education services for the underage, summer camps, leisure centres, assistance services for the elderly and the handicapped.

These coupons would be distributed according to waiting lists by income and family and work situations (financed from the fund for politics, rights, and equal opportunities along with regional resources).

Another project to support women with preschool children being looked into by the Ministry is the project of harmonizing time for work and life, and along with the Ministry for Public Education the "Open Space" project for using educational facilities for additional or out-of-school activities, for activities commonly carried out by education, such as information, theatre, languages, music, sports and play/recreational courses to cover free time during the whole day.

We are striving to finance associations to care for the elderly, the handicapped, families with low incomes and we are supporting non-profit organizations that assist.

The last, but only from a time point of view, is the analysis of the project for updating and modifying the competencies of those who used parental leave or remained outside the labour market because of the incompatibility of employment and the family through expert retraining.

Thus, we are here today at this important international meeting to share our experiences and to receive the significant stimuli provided by such an opportunity.

Thank you for your attention.