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Save Maternity Leave

Directive on gender equality and women's rights cannot be scrapped



The Directive on pregnant workers and workers who have recently given birth, also known as the **Maternity Leave Directive**, was first adopted by the European Parliament by a large majority in October 2010. 4 years later, the passage of this Directive remains blocked in the European Council by opposing Member States. Making matters worse, the European Commission has recently put a shelf life on the Directive: in the Commission's working programme for 2015, it is stated that if an agreement is not reached within 6 months the proposal will eventually be withdrawn. This would be a major step backwards on the issue of women's rights and gender equality in Europe. After two years of discussion, the European Parliament finally reached an agreement on the Maternity Leave Directive. Adopting a more ambitious position than the one presented by the Commission, it extended the minimum maternity leave from 14 to 20 weeks with full pay, gave the same rights to domestic workers and adoptive mothers; and included a paid paternity leave of at least two weeks. The threat to the Maternity Leave Directive, a piece of legislation which was democratically agreed upon, is completely unacceptable. It demonstrates a lack of respect for the European Parliament's decision. And it also shows that the Commission has conceded to business' demands at the expense of gender equality, health, safety and labour legislation, which guarantee equality and high standards of living. At present, women in the EU are still earning on average 16.4% less than men. Many women in Europe receive no pension, and those that do receive it are faced with an average pension gap of 39% in comparison to men. If Europe cannot guarantee a decent salary during maternity leave, women will continue to suffer financially for choosing to have children, further widening the EU gender pay gap and seriously affecting their pensions. Although all Member States have laws which protect pregnant women, women are still being discriminated in the work place during pregnancy and after birth. Even if it is forbidden by law, young women are still asked during job interviews about their intentions for starting a family. In 2008 the EU needed and still needs now more than ever, a common legislation protecting and strengthening the rights of all women during pregnancy and

after birth. The fact that the EU has still not succeeded in ensuring a sufficient set of measures protecting women is unthinkable. One of the main arguments used by Member States blocking the Directive is the belief that 14 more weeks of maternity leave would drastically weaken a woman's position in the labour market, while also implying a "financial burden" not affordable to Member States in times of economic crisis. However, this is far from true. Take Scandinavian countries for example: it is clear that the more generous maternity leave schemes are for women, the less they feel that a career is incompatible with having children. The outcry of employers' organisations and Members States about the huge costs of the proposal is also refuted when the Directive impact assessment is taken into account, a study proving that a rise in female labour participation of 1,4% would cover the costs of the whole proposal. Member States have agreed to the EU 2020 strategy, which has among its objectives a 60% to 70% increase in female labour participation. With this in mind a 20 week maternity leave and two week paternity leave is not just affordable, but furthermore a unique opportunity to improve the working conditions of women and mothers. Paternity leave has proved another bone of contention in the discussion. Although 19 member States have already introduced paternity leave to their national legislation, having it accepted in the Council presents quite the challenge. Paternity leave is a vital measure for gender equality. If we want to increase the number of women in the labour market, it is essential that men embrace the role of caregiver within the family unit. Studies clearly show that when a father takes paternity leave immediately after the birth of the baby, this increases his involvement in the care of the baby. The sharing of family responsibilities is very important in promoting real gender equality. A European maternity leave would represent real progress in the protection of working mothers, both from the perspective of gender equality, and in terms of the sustainability of the labour market. The health, welfare and labour rights of mothers and fathers cannot be sacrificed for the sake of business interests or the priorities of certain Member States. We are all responsible for applying pressure on the European institutions, and for making our voices heard. We must tell the Commission, the Council and especially the blocking Member States, that the Maternity Leave Directive has to be kept on the table.

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