

## **GENDER EQUALITY POLICY FOR WOMEN AND MEN IN BULGARIA**

**Lazar LAZAROV**  
**Advisor of the Minister**  
**of Labour and Social Policy**

The State policy for equal opportunities for women and men is elaborated, coordinated, implemented and monitored by the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy. The Ministry is responsible to coordinate the actions of the governmental institutions and to organize the elaboration and implementation of annual National Action Plan for equality of men and women and to maintain the dialogue with social partners with the objective of gender equality.

In 2004 a National Council for Equal Opportunities for Women and Men with the Council of Ministers was established. It involves experts, representatives of the state institutions, social partners and NGOs, dealing with the issues of the equality of women and men. The National Council advises the government in the development and implementation of the national policy of gender equality. Its activities are assisted by the established in 2003 Consultative Commission for Equal Opportunities for Women and Men, an advisory body in the area of employment under the scope of the Minister of Labor and Social Policy.

In compliance with the international engagements of Bulgaria and with the financial support of the European Commission and MATRA Program of the government of Netherlands, our next step is to introduce gender mainstreaming as a means for the accomplishment of gender equality, adopted with the Beijing Platform for Action.

We are striving to implement an integrated, unified policy for gender equality and a common policy for social inclusion of the women from risk groups in the society. The uniform gender policy is guaranteed by the Law for Protection against Discrimination, which includes many different signs for discrimination. The existence of the Commission for Protection against Discrimination allows the different aspects of multiple discrimination and the causes, leading to discrimination of women from varied groups, to be studied and researched, as well as the different types of discrimination practices to be pinpointed and juxtaposed. That gives a clearer distinction and identification of the discrimination and taking effective decisions for its eradication.

Collecting statistic, sociological and other data supporting the introduction of appropriate mechanisms, guaranteeing effective protection and observation of the fundamental human rights of women (for example, how parents exert pressure in case of pregnancy, a denial or even prohibition for a marriage with person of different ethnic or social origin), we promote the social inclusion of women in our society.

Women and young girls from the ethnic minorities are in a more vulnerable situation and in jeopardy of abuse, violence and discrimination. We plan to delve deeper into these issues, in order to get profound knowledge of their problems and to develop positive actions and measures in the direction of growing respect for their fundamental human rights. For that purpose we grant funding through the National Action Plan for Promotion

of Gender Equality, which unites the joined activities of the Government and the non-governmental organizations.

Regarding social inclusion, we implement programs and projects for drop-outs and early school leavers – trying to grow teenagers’ awareness for the benefits of education – and for prevention of early pregnancy, which hinder the personal development of the teenage girls.

Regarding the integration of ethnic minorities’ women we support women’s organizations (NGOs) of ethnic groups that make efforts to overcome the traditional customs and practices with negative influence on women’s personal development.

Our activities for social inclusion of women on the labor market are aimed to:

- Provide best possible conditions for increasing women’s economic activity by creating adequate social infrastructure, encouraging their realization in synergy with their family and professional responsibilities;
- Applying flexible forms of employment, supported by a system, assisting long life learning;
- Developing preventive measures against the discrimination on the labor market that will eliminate the obstacles and barriers hindering their professional realization (stereotypes, customs and beliefs in the respective community).

In close co-operation with non-governmental organizations, Bulgarian Government proposed a Draft Bill on Gender Equality, which is currently discussed at Bulgarian Parliament. The draft bill envisages the Gender Mainstreaming approach to be implemented in the temporal positive measures for labor market inclusion and integration and for overcoming women’s social isolation of. Special attention is paid to the women of ethnic minorities and the women from rural regions, where the unemployment rate is very high. Considering factors as differences in the language, low educational and professional level, cultural and religious barriers and customs, etc., we have started to apply measures to promote integration through literacy, awareness, knowledge and better vocational training.

Together with the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, a project for co-ordination and harmonization of dialogue on the policy for overcoming poverty, is carried out. One of the objectives of that policy is the elaboration of gender indicators and measures to overcome social exclusion and decrease poverty. We continue to diversify social services for families of low incomes and transform family allowance in social investment in children, ensuring better access to education, high-quality healthcare and services.

Simultaneously with these measures we implement programs and projects, aiming to eliminate the stereotypes regarding the roles of women and men, respectively girls and boys that will improve the realization of women’s economic potential.

We continue to improve the administrative capacity for policy implementation. At the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy the Demographic Policy, Social Investments and Equal Opportunities Directorate was established, with a separate Equal Opportunities Sector, responsible to elaborate policy, guaranteeing:

- Equal proficiency and abilities by the means of opening new possibilities for education, especially for the women of ethnic minorities;
- Equal access to resources and possibilities through economic empowerment of women, etc.

Our efforts are concentrated on ensuring the women with wider access to economic resources and employment that will contribute to their independence and economic empowerment. For that purpose we apply strategies for increasing the economic resources for women through provisions of micro credits and funding, through programs for daycare centers for children, so that they will have more time and opportunities to expand their economic activities.

We promote the role of the civic and social dialogue, supporting the empowerment of women in the working environment, which will allow them to realize their power and to negotiate personally the most appropriate terms of employment for them; to negotiate their working conditions – salary, working hours, flexibility, etc.; the opportunity for vocational training and re-training, their career growth and professional development.

In addition, our efforts are focused on sharing the knowledge and experience in the exchange of cultural values, habits, customs, abilities in relation with the ways of a certain ethnic minority or group at risk, so to eradicate the gender stereotypes, to heighten the sensitivity and the awareness of the society on the abovementioned issues, preventing their equipollent participation in international projects.

The Ministry of Labor and Social Policy participates in several Projects, financed under the European Community Framework Strategy on Gender Equality (2001-2005), which are aimed to raise Bulgarian society's awareness, sensitivity and knowledge on the issues of gender equality. As the institution in charge under the PROGRESS Programme, the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy is to continue to carry out projects, aimed to provide equal rights for all and for women and men, in particular.

### ***European Year 2007 – Equal Opportunities for All***

One of the first initiatives, where Bulgaria participates as an EU Member State with a National Strategy and numerous activities organized and carried out by various organizations, is the ***European Year 2007 – Equal Opportunities for All***. The Bulgarian Strategy is entitled „For more inclusive society”, which perfectly describes its main focus and motto. Our efforts are aimed at:

- Changing public attitudes to ethnic minorities, which are not to be perceived as a marginal or a privileged group;

- Public awareness of the existence of discrimination in certain community by the very group at risk members, which reinforces the preconditions for multiple discrimination;
- Perceiving people with disabilities as full-right members of the society, who have specific abilities;
- Removing gender barriers for personal and professional development.

In the area of equal opportunities in social, economic and political life, certain success has been achieved: the political and social rights of women and men have been protected, the equality in employment is promoted, the remuneration of labour and social insurance, professional qualification and career growth, private and vocational life reconciliation, the right of parental leave, social investments in children and family, responsible parenthood, gender roles and new family parents are also promoted.

The process of mainstreaming of gender issues is promoted when evaluating policies and measures, aimed to achieve gender equality and full-fledged participation of the two genders in social, economic and political life. The attainment of effective gender equality has direct effect on quality human resources. The equal participation of men and women – in public labour distribution and in domestic labour distribution, as well, - provides the grounds for full participation of the two genders in the fulfillment of professional and family roles. The guaranteeing of gender equality includes not only equal participation of women in public labour, but equal participation of both parents in children's raising and up-bringing, too.

Multiple discrimination is the phenomenon of the accumulation of discrimination against a person or a group of people (e.g. a single mother of Roma origin with several children, illiterate, living in a region with high unemployment rate and underdeveloped social infrastructure). The danger is that when the different grounds for discrimination are considered independently, the multiple discrimination effect remains unidentified. That leads to more ineffective prevention of discrimination and might create hierarchy of grounds. It is also important to be aware of the fact that belonging to one minority does not automatically mean positive attitude towards other minorities. Therefore it is important to be aware of the fact that social status gives remarkable protection against discrimination whereas people with low social status have a higher risk to become discriminated against. A weak position in one field of life (e.g. unemployment) increases the risk of exclusion in other fields and at the same time multiplies the impact of possible discrimination.

The European Year of Equal Opportunities for All is a good chance to unite all efforts to combat discrimination and to build a just and equitable society.

## ***Good Practices - Projects Promoting Women's Professional Realization***

### ***Back To Work Project***

The Project ensures women's equal access to employment through improving their employability. It is targeted to women who go back to work after a maternity leave – for pregnancy or raising a child up to 2 or 3 years. They have the chance to enroll in vocational training courses up to two years after they have returned to work and in case they wish to improve and upgrade their knowledge and capacities, in order to continue their professional and career growth. The Back To Work Project provides also training to registered at the Labour Bureau unemployed women, especially over the age of 50, which is aimed to provide them equal access to employment through better employability.

### ***The Encouragement for Women's Start-ups in the Services of Raising Children Project***

The main objective of the Project is to encourage entrepreneurship of unemployed women by providing information, advisory services and support for their own start-up business in the field of child care services. In the same time, due to the development of family care and childcare services, the project provides for the labour realization and professional growth of the parents. Registered at the Labour Bureau unemployed women with the following vocations have priority to enroll in the Project: nurses, school teachers and women with certain experience in providing social services. The Project Activities include training for unemployed women, involving:

- Motivational training;
- Training in SME management;
- Training in raising children at private kindergarten, private daycare (for children from first to sixth grade), at home, taking children to and from kindergarten, school, etc.

### ***Family Centers For Children Project***

In 2005 an alternative form of raising children was launched, aimed to promote parents' employment. The Ministry of Labour and Social Policy elaborated a Project providing employment to unemployed women who have opened Family Centers for raising children aged 1-5. In 2005 the pilot project was launched in several districts in Bulgaria and since 2007 it has national coverage. These Family Centers provide part-time or all day care for up to three children in family environment. Municipalities are the employers of the unemployed women who have opened Family Centers under that Project. They provide funding needed to renovate and furnish carers' homes according to healthcare requirements.

### ***When This Is a Man Project***

The Project is funded by the European Commission within the European Community Framework Programme on Gender Equality. Partners in the Project are Poland, Denmark,

Italy and Bulgaria. The idea is exchange of expertise and good practices in EU Member States, a new Member State and a state in process of EU accession negotiations, in order to widen the range of men's gender roles, to break up some of the most distributed gender stereotypes and to redefine gender-marked supplements to some jobs and some patterns of behavior at the labour market and in the family. The project supports the idea that the future of enlarged Europe is connected with offering new roles and opportunities for men and women. At the same time the political and socio-economic development requires even more persistently essential changes in the conduct and attitudes of both genders. Important contribution of the Project was that it conducted a comparative analysis of the problems in these four countries, supporting the need a strategy to change gender roles in Future Europe to be drafted.

### ***Support for Maternity***

Since the beginning of 2007 a new policy in support of maternity is implemented. In order to stimulate birth-rate and to provide effective support of mothers with social insurance, ***the term of paid maternity leave was prolonged from 135 to 315 days***, until the ***child turned 9 months of age***. During that period, which is 2.3 times longer, the socially secured mother receives pregnancy and maternity benefit amounting to ***90% of her remuneration***. According to Bulgarian legislation, there is also the possibility the maternity leave to be followed by a paid leave to raise the child until it reaches the age of twelve months. In addition, social security aids are granted for a period of two years if the mother decides to stay home to raise her child. If the mother returns to work, she is entitled to receive half of that compensation. If after the expiry of that 315 days socially secured mother goes to work, instead of receiving 50 per cent of the benefit for raising a small child, she is entitled to point a person she has selected herself, who is also appointed by the Employment Agency, to take care of her child. The remuneration of that person and the employer's security contributions are covered under the special program "In Support of Maternity", which is part of the National Action Plan on Employment - 2007.