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A European approach to women's problems

The need for equal treatment for working women in Europe and indeed, the importance of evolving a European approach to this problem was the subject of a conference held in Manchester from May 28 to 31.

The conference, organised by the Commission of the European Communities and the British Equal Opportunities Commission, aimed at providing those responsible for formulating and implementing policies for the emancipation of women, and in particular of women workers, with an opportunity to exchange views on ways of drawing up a medium-term action programme on this question.

Delegates to the meeting evaluated the effectiveness of the provisions and arrangements already in force, particularly those relating to equal pay and equal treatment at work. New initiatives were also discussed.

Eurofocus this week deals with the situation of working women in Europe and looks at what the Community institutions have already done in this sector (see article on page 6).

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Four out of every ten women in the European Community between the ages of 14 and 59 either have a job or are actively in search of one. But 43 % of jobless Europeans are women ...

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RAW MATERIALS : The glass mountain

It may seem hard to believe, but the average person in the European Community uses about 35 kilogrammes of glass bottles, jars, and other containers a year. The energy and raw materials used in the manufacture of these glass containers are becoming increasingly scarce and expensive.

The 35 kilos per inhabitant in reality represents only the tip of a veritable mountain of glass in the Community. First of all, the total, which amounted to 9 million tonnes of glass containers, was for 1973 and there is a strong probability that the amount has actually increased since then. What's more, the glass containers were only part of a total of 15 million tonnes of glass used in the Community countries. That's why more emphasis is being placed on the need to save the raw materials, energy and manpower used in the glass production process.

For instance, while collection and re-use of bottles has been carried out for years, it has been estimated that some 6 million tonnes of glass, mostly containers, could be recycled for use later.

An international seminar in Brussels recently noted that something of a boom had developed in recycling in the Community in recent years in beverage containers, mainly because of the raw materials and energy that could be saved. In some states, however, such schemes are only beginning and much more could be done.

In Germany, the amount of recycled glass went up from 150.000 tonnes in 1974, to 370.000 tonnes in 1978 with the prospects for 1980 and 1981 put at 450.000 tonnes. In France, 220.000 tonnes were recycled in 1978, 300.000 in 1979 and the forecast for 1983 is 600.000 tonnes. In Belgium, 100.000 tonnes were recycled in 1978. In the United Kingdom, two glass manufacturers have decided to set up plants capable of recycling 50.000 tonnes of glass. In the Netherlands, recycling programmes based on regional and local collection systems are under way.

Apart from the benefits for the natural environment, the industry believes that recycling of 10 percent of the glass used results in energy savings of 2 percent and that 1.2 tonnes of raw materials are saved for each tonne of glass used. In Denmark, France and Germany there is legislation to encourage the increasingly important recycling process.

The European Commission in Brussels also plans a study this year to update statistics and knowledge about the amount of recycling carried out.

ENERGY : The problem of radioactive wastes

While European leaders agree on the necessity of developing the nuclear energy sector, the problem of radioactive waste disposal is far from being resolved. The European Commission is hoping that a definite solution will be found by the end of the century, when the problem is expected to become particularly critical.

The problem, however, is already with us today. Several thousand cubic metres of liquid wastes are stocked in France, the United Kingdom, and to a lesser extent, in Germany; that is, in the three EEC countries which possess nuclear reprocessing plants.

In order to avoid the corrosion of reservoirs where these wastes are temporarily stocked (in the long-term this corrosion could lead to the leakage of radioactive liquid), EEC countries currently have a system whereby these reservoirs are provided with double linings. A constant check is kept on possible leakages between linings, and a second reservoir is available for transfer to the radioactive waste if an emergency situation does arise. Promising solutions involving the disposal of solid-waste - which is highly radioactive - in deep geological formations are currently being considered. However, experimental pilot plants will have to be constructed to verify the safety of such procedures before this disposal system can be introduced on the market.

Other radioactive waste management measures have yet to be perfected. These include the freezing of spent fuel in stocking containers, the reprocessing of spent fuel, the temporary stocking and freezing of liquid waste, its solidification, and finally, its transport.

Whether we like it or not, the future of the EEC nuclear energy sector, and indeed, security of energy supplies, depends on the solution of these waste disposal problems.

PARLIAMENT : Continuing the fight against poverty

However serious the current economic crisis might be, there is no denying the fact that average living standards in Europe have improved significantly since the end of the Second World War. Given this happy state of affairs, there is a tendency to forget that the benefits of economic progress have not reached several million European citizens. Today, one out of four Europeans lives in a state of "relative" poverty, while eight million people in the EEC live in what can be called a state of "absolute" poverty. It is therefore necessary to recognise the fact that poverty in Europe is not a marginal phenomenon. It affects, in varying degrees, a wide range of social

groups : older people, the handicapped, the unemployed, migrant workers, ethnic minorities, single parents, etc.

For the European Commission, poverty, is a "relative condition". Whatever their absolute standards, people feel poor and are seen to be poor when their lack of resources cuts them off from the living patterns of the mass of society.

In 1975, the EEC Council of Ministers decided that specific measures needed to combat poverty would be one of its priority actions. The Commission was given the responsibility of implementing this mandate by drawing up and undertaking a series of pilot schemes.

Since 1975, the European Commission has financed pilot projects which have allowed for the testing and development of new methods of helping people beset by or threatened with poverty in the Community. Studies have also been undertaken to improve understanding of the nature, causes, scope and mechanics of poverty in the EEC.

The results of this programme will only be evaluated in 1982, and will undoubtedly influence the Nine's future policy on this issue. However, the Commission has also forwarded to the EEC Council a new draft regulation which sets out a series of interim measures needed to continue research and actions to combat poverty in the EEC.

The European Parliament has given its complete backing to these new Commission proposals, indicating growing concern among parliamentarians on this question. Several members of parliament stressed, in fact, that the programme to combat poverty should be intensified and that more funds should be made available to it.

#### EXTERNAL RELATIONS : Chasing up butter packets

In protest against Soviet interventions in Afghanistan, Europeans decided earlier this year to limit their farm exports to the Soviet Union. For butter, the limit was set at 70.000 tonnes (the average for the last three years).

Since the beginning of this year, 30.000 tonnes of butter were sold officially to the Soviet Union. But, it would appear that additional quantities of butter have been sold to the USSR in the form of small packets, which have escaped normal checks. The European Commission is expected to take action aimed at putting an end to this traffic, which threatens the effectiveness of sanctions against the USSR.

IN BRIEF : When figures speak louder than words ...

- The Community as bartender to the world : alcoholic beverages produced in the European Community are very much in demand the world over and sales are flourishing. Whisky leads all sales : in 1979 alone, the European Community sold 416,658 tonnes of whisky from an overall total of 670,504 tonnes of alcoholic beverages. Cognac is second on the list, followed by liqueur wines, gin, rum, vodka and white spirits (eaux de vie).
  
- Unemployment still on the rise : the average unemployment rate within the Community in the first quarter of 1980, expressed as a percentage of the overall working population, was 5.6 %. This is exactly the same figure as the one for the first quarter of 1979. But there are enormous differences in the situation within each Member State. Belgium is first on the list with 8.8 % of its working population currently unemployed, followed by Ireland and Italy (7.6 %). At the other extreme, the unemployment rate is as low as 0.7 % in Luxembourg, and 3.1 % in West Germany.
  
- EEC/ACP trade trends : for the first time since 1976, the European Community ran a trade deficit with the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries which are linked to the EEC through the Lomé Convention. The balance of trade of the EEC with the ACP countries, in fact, showed a record deficit of 1.8 billion pounds. This situation is explained by an increase of about 25 % in EEC imports from the ACP countries, accompanied by a fall of 7 % in the Community's exports to these countries.
  
- Steel by the millions : 32.5 million tonnes of crude steel were produced in the European Community during the first quarter of 1980, instead of the predicted 34.5 million tonnes. This fall in production was due to the prolonged strike which hit the British steel industry, although this was compensated for somewhat by increases in production elsewhere in the EEC. EEC crude steel production is estimated to reach 32.8 million tonnes during July, August and September, 1980. This figure compares with production levels attained in the Summer of 1979 : 34.7 million tonnes. The fact that the Summer of 1979 also saw an upsurge in internal and external demand (particularly on the American market) has to be taken into account, however.
  
- Increase in nuclear energy production : European Community nuclear energy production in 1979 increased by 10.3 % compared with 1978 figures to reach 127 billion of KW. Nuclear energy's share in the EEC's total energy production reached 11 % for the Community as a whole (and 16 % in France).

THE CONTINUING STRUGGLE FOR EQUAL RIGHTS FOR WORKING WOMEN
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The struggle to give working women the same opportunities and treatment as that accorded by society to their male colleagues would seem to be a never-ending one. The problem is, of course, worldwide, as various United Nations reports have pointed out often enough. Women in the developing countries are the worst off, but although progress in this field has been made in the industrialised countries, including the European Community, the road to complete equality between working men and women promises to be long and arduous, even in the industrialised West.

This is a surprising state of affairs, in view of women's growing numerical importance in Europe. There are 130 million women in the European Community, today, representing 51.6 % of the EEC's total population. Out of a total working population estimated today at 100 million, women account for 38 million (35.9 %). In practical terms, this means that four out of every ten women in the European Community between the ages of 14 and 59 either have a job or are actively in search of one.

The number of working women, shown as a percentage of the total active population, however, varies from one EEC country to another. Women are most active in Denmark, where they represent 42.8 % of the total working population, followed by France and Britain (38.7 %), Germany (38.4 %), Belgium (36.3 %), Italy (32.5 %) and Holland (28.4 %).

But while representing such a high proportion of Europe's working population, women are still much too often treated like "second class citizens".

They are often poorly paid, given less access to vocational training than their male counterparts, and unfortunately are the first to be hit by an economic crisis : today 43 % of jobless Europeans are women, often victims of the fact that their vocational training is not in keeping with the needs of a changing economic system.

Europe's female labour force is also concentrated in a limited number of sectors and professional categories - generally, the least qualified, worst paid and with limited prospects for promotion and advancement. Typical examples are textiles, certain processing industries, and the service sector. EEC figures show that, for the Community as a whole, 65 % of the working women are to be found in the services sector, 28 % in industry and 7 % in agriculture.

There is, however, a bright side to this rather dismal picture. The fight for equal opportunities for working women is being backed solidly by Community

institutions, inspired no doubt by the oft-quoted article 119 of the Treaty of Rome, which sanctifies the principle of equal pay for men and women. In February 1975, the Nine adopted a directive aimed at ensuring the practical implementation of the principle of equal pay, and giving any work the right to take an employer to court if there was evidence of discrimination based on sex.

But despite support from the European Court of Justice which in a judgment given in 1976 upheld complaints by a Belgian air hostess who believed she was being discriminated against in relation to her male colleagues, the EEC rule on equal pay is not being implemented correctly in a number of EEC countries. Similarly, the EEC directive on the implementation of the principle of equal treatment for men and women as regards access to employment, vocational training and promotion and working conditions adopted in 1975 has still to be implemented effectively. The European Commission has complained to Germany, the Netherlands and Luxembourg on laxity on this issue.

Differences between men and women also exist in the field of social security, both in the public statutory systems and in private schemes.

In a directive adopted in 1978, the Nine agreed to eliminate such differences in the social security systems that cover risks of sickness, invalidity, old age, accidents at work, occupational illnesses and unemployment.

Meanwhile, the Community's Social Fund is also authorised to finance vocational training operations directed specifically towards women. In 1978, 12,000 women benefited from such schemes for a total amount of 4.7 million pounds, which rose to 11 million pounds in 1979. Priority under this fund is accorded to training operations which have sure outlets, as well as sectors where women are traditionally under-represented.

But one major complaint made by women concerns those very Community institutions which are working to improve the condition of working women. To date, there has never been a woman European Commissioner, although a recent report submitted to the European Parliament called for a "feminine presence" in the next Commission.

The Parliament itself today counts 67 women members, and although this is more than any other parliament, in percentage terms (almost 17 %), this is seen as quite "inadequate" by one member, Yvette Roudy, who feels that the number is not sufficient to exert any real pressure. She feels that there ought to be at least 30 to 40 % women in the parliament.

An ad hoc committee on women's rights has also been set up to study, as a priority issue, the question of employment. The committee's final report on the question is expected to be ready by the end of the year when it will be presented to the European Parliament.