

EUROPEAN COMMUNITY

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

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BACKGROUND NOTE

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WOMEN AND THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITY

"I believe that we should all work for a new world based on the sharing of responsibilities and opportunities between men and women," said Patrick J. Hillery, EC Commission Vice President responsible for social affairs, speaking at the United Nations World Conference of the International Women's Year in Mexico City June 27. Hillery, himself a strong supporter of women's rights, led the Community's delegation to the conference.

Although many countries have granted women equal rights with men through legislation, "...Traditional attitudes and prejudices will need to be broken down. This is why so much stress needs to be put on improving information -- to make women more aware of their rights; to promote solidarity among women, and to convince society as a whole how much it stands to benefit from the wealth of talent which it has up to now largely neglected," the Commission Vice President said.

Europe's Working Women

The European Community's action in the field of equality of employment -- the Competence of the Community's institutions in women's rights is restricted to employment and working conditions -- is of vital importance to the 36 million women who make up one third of the labor force in the European Community. For those of the 129 million women in the European Community (52 per cent of the total population) who don't work outside the home, Community action -- such as vocational training and retraining programs -- also hold a special interest if and when they choose to enter the work force.

Most women working in the Community do jobs that are traditionally "feminine" -- nurses, teachers, waitresses, and salesclerks, working mainly in the service sector. As many as two-thirds of the women working in EC member states Italy, Ireland, and the Netherlands are married. Marriage can be a handicap to the working European woman -- it is often assumed that women work merely to supplement their husbands' incomes and consequently they are not accorded the attention and respect given to their male counterparts.

Women usually hold positions subordinate to men -- no Community country has even 1 per cent of its women employed at managerial and executive level jobs.

The EC headquarters in Brussels is not even an exception to the unequal balance in job opportunities for women. Women working at Commission headquarters number 2,500, 44 per cent of all personnel. However, there are no women commissioners, and only one woman holds the rank of "director" as compared with 112 men in that position. Women hold only 6.2 per cent of the top decision-making jobs.

The European Parliament has a minority of women as well. Eight of the Parliament's 198 seats are filled by women -- two Italian, two English, two Germans, and one each from France and Luxembourg.

The situation in the member state legislatures is somewhat more encouraging. In 1975, Denmark claimed 16.8 per cent female representation in the lower house. Women in the lower houses of the other member states totaled: 6.1 per cent in Belgium, 1.8 per cent in France, 5.8 per cent in Germany, 3.8 per cent in Italy, 12.7 per cent in the Netherlands, 3.5 per cent in Ireland, and 4.3 per cent in Britain. Women hold 1.7 per cent of the seats in Luxembourg's single house legislature.

Europe has some women "senators" -- in France, the Community country with the highest percentage of women in the upper house, 6.3 per cent of the Senate seats are held by women.

At the government level, women held one cabinet post each in Belgium, Germany, and the Netherlands; two in Denmark, and three in France in 1975. Ireland, Italy, and Luxembourg did not have a single woman cabinet member.

Community Helps Its Women

The treaty setting up the European Community pledged the member states to "ensure and... maintain the application of the principle that men and women should receive equal pay for equal work." However, the translation from law to practice is not always rapid and effective. Furthermore, Commission-sponsored comparative studies of the situation of women in different countries -- the first such study by an international organization -- indicated that the Community's responsibility should extend beyond that of the treaty's Article 119 referring to women and equal pay.

Through legislation, the Community hopes to ensure equality between men and women in access to employment and necessary training, to ensure equal work conditions and pay, while at the same time reconciling family obligations with the professional aspirations of today's European -- by helping to finance day care centers, for example.

For this reason, the Commission has put forth a directive which would oblige the nine member states to

- abolish all discrimination based on sex, marital, or family status and provide women with equal opportunities in employment, vocational training, and working conditions
- abolish provisions preventing equal access to jobs for men and women
- provide equal opportunities in education, vocational guidance, training, and retraining
- provide equality in promotion procedures
- provide equal working conditions for men and women

- introduce measures necessary for legal action in cases of alleged discrimination
- ensure that no reprisals follow complaint or action at law
- provide information on provisions relating to equal action.

Decision on the directive is expected by the end of this year. If and when approved, the provisions should enter into force in all member states within a year.

The Community's Social Fund is also a vehicle for assistance to working women. It can provide funds to aid training programs for women over the age of 35 years who want to return to the work force, and for young workers of both sexes below 25 years of age. The Commission is studying possible uses of the Social Fund for financing special projects specifically aimed at increasing employment opportunities for women.

The Commission feels that women should be made aware of their rights and opportunities, but that this awareness should be followed by concrete action to assure this equality -- not only in the field of employment, but in all aspects of their lives. It will therefore continue to strengthen and to contribute in its field of competence to any action necessary in the Community and its member states.