



Republic of Bulgaria
ECONOMIC
AND SOCIAL COUNCIL

OPINION

on

FAMILY, GOOD PARENTING AND EQUAL GENDER OPORTUNITIES

(on its own initiative)

Sofia, 28 May 2007

The agenda of the Economic and Social Council's work in 2007 includes the drafting of an opinion on its own initiative concerning the following issue: Family, Good Parenting and Equal Gender Opportunities.

The President of the Economic and Social Council assigned to the Standing Commission on Social Policy to draft the Opinion.

Ms. Yanka Takeva was appointed Rapporteur.

At the proposal of the Commission, the Council requested and received institutional opinions in writing on the topic from: the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, the Ministry of Education and Science, the National Council on Ethnic and Demographic Issues at the Council of Ministers, the Child Protection Agency.

The Commission drafted and submitted the draft Opinion for the approval at the plenary session.

The Economic and Social Council approved this Opinion at its open Plenary Session on 28 May 2007.

I. INTRODUCTION

The problems relevant to the family, good parenting and equal gender opportunities are considerable and determine the demographic situation, economic growth and social cohesion in the country, as well as Bulgaria's development prospects as an equal EU member state. The family, good parenting and equal gender opportunities concern every person's physical survival and personal development as well as the preservation of nationality and national identity.

The changes in the forms of family life over the last years draw particular attention to the problems of the family and children, raised there. In the context of demographic processes of declining birth rate and ageing population, it is more and more important to give people the chance to bring up and raise as many children as they want to, providing for their well-being, education and emotional living conditions.

Cohabitation without marriage is widely accepted – 65.7 % of people accept it. There are considerable differences between generations in relation to all issues concerning marriage and the family¹. The young more often regard marriage as an outmoded institution.

In 2006, 50.8 % of alive-born children were born out of wedlock. Family values and age-old traditions handed down from generation to generation are being destroyed. This happens in the context of low birth rate, negative natural population growth and a demographic crisis in the country as well as in Europe.

Social polarisation is growing stronger, since the predominant part of the families – where the mother is the head of the family – live on the poverty line. Juvenile crime and domestic violence towards children are on the rise, while inequality in the opportunities given to the two genders is increasing. These trends result from economic and social, national and global, objective and policy-generated reasons, or from inaction on the part of the state in relation to different aspects of the problem. A number of social funds, based on generation solidarity are seriously stricken. There is growing need for the evaluation, adoption and enforcement of good practices having proved their efficiency in other countries – EU member states.

For the last decade, the problems of the family, good parenting and equal gender opportunities have received constantly growing public attention in the country, at public and expert debates, legislative initiatives that are an inseparable and immutable part of EU policies in the economic and social field. They are even more topical now in 2007, the year of equal opportunities.

The problems mentioned above are to a great extent beyond the control of society and the state. Taking them for granted without any effort to address them, causes serious concern for the future of the Bulgarian nation and state. On 14 March 2007, the European Economic and Social Committee passed an opinion on *The Family and Demographic Change* (SOC

¹ The sociological research 'Generation and Gender Relationships', Atanas Atanasov (resp.), 2004, Institute of Sociology. The respondents totalled 13,000 people, according to a joint methodology with the Max Planck Institute, Rostock, Germany. Cohabitation without marriage is widely accepted – 65.7 %, those who do not accept it are 13.2 %, people who abstain from opinion are 21.1 %. More than the half (87.6 %) of the group aged between 18 and 24 are convinced that "A couple has the right to live together without having entered into marriage".

245) which highlights that EU member states should implement family policies, gender equality policies as well as measures enabling the reconciliation of professional and family life (article 1.4.1). **The reasons** determined by national priorities and the country's EU membership, led the Economic and Social Council – as a mouthpiece of the interests of organised civil society in Bulgaria – to the idea of drafting, adopting and submitting to the institutions concerned an Opinion with an evaluation of the situation of the family, good parenting and equal gender opportunities as well as proposals for the prevention and handling of negative processes in the coming years and decades.

The Economic and Social Council took the responsibility to draft an Opinion on its own initiative due to the following interrelated reasons as well:

First, the problem of the family, good parenting and equal gender opportunities is crucial and serious on national as well as Pan-European scale.

Second, the problems of the family, good parenting and equal gender opportunities are an inseparable part and a logical result from the global issues of demographic change and the challenges to Bulgaria's demographic policy, on which the Council drafted an Opinion on its own initiative in March 2005 and subsequently submitted it to the competent state institutions.

Third, the sensitive and interinstitutional discussion related to the numerous unsolved problems related to the demographic crisis, the insufficient practices and policies in support of parenting and the family and various discrimination forms concerning equal opportunities for genders.

The natural starting point for the Economic and Social Council to express its concrete opinion is civil society's authentic position. The discussions on the problems of the family, good parenting and equal gender opportunities in Bulgaria have taken into account the opinions, positions and proposals of structures authorised by the law and civil society representatives. The Council pointed out that **this Opinion** is the product of meetings and discussions organised by the Council's Social Policy Commission with the participation of established experts in the field of legislation, social practices and scientific circles.

The Council's Opinion **aims** to draw the attention of the public, state bodies, political parties and scientific circles to these **problems and challenges** that concern every Bulgarian citizen as well as to put forward possible **measures for their solution**.

II. MAJOR TOPICAL PROBLEMS OF THE ISSUE DISCUSSED.

WHAT IS THE SITUATION IN BULGARIA?

Based on the information of various studies as well as latest official statistics of both local and foreign analyses and forecasts on the development of the family and equal gender opportunities and evaluation papers on demographic processes and trends in Bulgaria, the Economic and Social Council holds that there are extremely serious reasons for concern in society and state institutions in relation to the problems and challenges to the family, good parenting and equal gender opportunities.

Significant parameters that have an impact and decisive influence on the conditions, trends and forecasts for the future development of the family, good parenting and equal gender opportunities include: the demographic crisis, declining birth rate, ageing population.

In this respect, the Economic and Social Council gives the following facts;

First, there is evidence for **demographic collapse** according to the European Commission's definition of 2004. The collapse means an extreme crisis that is developing exponentially and cannot be curbed and which regularly leads to disaster effects. The demographic trends whose effects will appear in the coming decades are becoming more visible.

After 1989, the population size of Bulgaria decreased by over 1.2 million down to 7.7 million people, which represents almost a catastrophic plunge for such a small country. As early as the 1960s, **due to a drop in birth rates and the slowed down pace of population growth**, there emerged a steady, objective and upward potential trend towards a worsening demographic situation. Bulgaria's birth rate fell from 12.1 per 1,000 in 1990 to 9.6 in 2006, which is comparable to fertility rates in Greece, Hungary, Italy, Austria, Poland and Switzerland. In the early 1990s, Bulgaria moved from slowed down population growth to intensive decrease. The trend was promptly reinforced after 1990-1992. The total fertility coefficient of about 2.2 in 1970-75 dropped to 1.38 in 2006.

The trends in Bulgaria's **death rate and life expectancy** are equally rather alarming. As of the end of 2006, preliminary National Statistical Institute data show that Bulgaria's population amounts to 7,679,290 people with an average density of 69.3 people per sq km. For one year since deaths outnumbered births, the population size went down by 39,460 people or 0.5 %, Bulgaria's death rate records the highest level compared to EU countries. The death coefficient stood at 11 per 1,000 as of 1990, and grew to about 14.7 per 1,000 for 2006 – compared to 8.4 in France and 6.6 in Ireland. 2006 saw 113,483 deaths compared to hardly 73,978 births. For most European countries, including Greece and Malta, the death rate ranges from 500 to 600 people per 100,000, while in Bulgaria it is over 1,102.62 people. The situation with children's death is disastrous – about twice higher levels than the EU's rates – 9.7 compared to 4.5 promille. *Natural population growth 2006 was -5.1 and this is the lowest level among EU member states.*

In the country, there is evidence for a continuing **aging population process**, which naturally leads to rise in the indicator determining the population's average age. In 2000, this indicator was 39.9 years of age, while in 2005 – 41.2. Now the average age of the population for the whole country stands at 41.4. The process of ageing is seen in villages as well as in cities, and in villages the average age of the population is higher than the levels recorded in cities. In cities, the indicator amounts to 39.7, while in villages – 45.3 years of age.

Life expectancy of men and women in Bulgaria is by 7 or 8 years shorter than the respective indicator for EU-15 countries. For 2004-2006, the average life expectancy in the country at birth was 72.6 years. For men, it is 69.1 and for women it is seven years longer – 76.3 years.

The Economic and Social Council believes that the demographic collapse has multifaceted *expressions, having an impact on the family and responsible parenting*, the major ones being:

The extreme demographic crisis is a **social problem**, generated by changes in the economy, and influences the government's income policy and results in catastrophic effects: it hinders

the reproduction of the Bulgarian nation which directly corresponds to the family, good parenting and equal gender opportunities, reduces the quality of Bulgaria's workforce and respectively – inevitably impedes economic development; brings about loss of the identity of the Bulgarian system of government and discontinues the national tradition of the Bulgarian state.

The ethnic dimensions of poverty are a major problem. According to UNDP data, the population share living below the internationally recognised poverty line amounts to 11 % of the ethnic Bulgarian population and 51 % of the Roma population. The poverty line in Bulgaria (EUR 639 a year) is 2.8 times lower than the level established for the 10 new EU member states and 13 times lower than the 15 EU member states. Even when calculated on the purchasing power parity basis, the poverty line is still twice lower than the level in the new member states and 5 times below the level of the old member states.

The fertile contingent is critically shrinking. The number of young cohorts is dramatically plummeting and they are currently twice fewer than the ones needed for normal reproduction. Marriages and births have turned into something luxurious that not everyone can afford them if being responsible. **The age for marriage is going up** – from 28.8 for men and 25.5 for women in 2004, it climbed to 29.3 for men and 25.9 for women within two years only. Sociological data give evidence for mass trends towards birth postponement. A steady **trend of delayed births** is recorded. In 2006, the average age of the Bulgarian women who give birth to a child was 26.4 years, while for giving birth to a first child – 25.2.

Emigration is a continuing process. For 16 years only, the country's population shrank by over 1.2 million people, 900,000 of them having emigrated from the country due to economic and social reasons.

Sociological research shows that **every fourth child does not complete his/her secondary education.** The greatest number of students drop out aged between 10 and 15 – 50 %. The same phenomenon but to a lesser extent is recorded in relation to students over 15 – 42 %. In most cases dropouts are Roma children – 70 %.

In Bulgaria, **there is lack of education balance among various ethnic groups.** Specific educational problems can be seen in all ethnic groups, but in the case of the Roma, the situation is really dramatic. According to pieces of research carried out by various agencies, illiterate adult Roma representatives amount to 18.1 %, those who have not completed basic education are 24.2 %, people of basic education only – 41.1 %, of incomplete secondary education – 2.7 %, of secondary education – 12.2 %, of higher education – 0.7 %.

The Bulgarian Academy of Sciences' research *Demographic Development of the Republic of Bulgaria*, carried out by a team in 2005, among ethnic Bulgarians the share of university graduates is 16 %, in the Turkish community it is about 2 %, among the Roma it is next to zero (0.2 %). Among teenagers aged between 15 and 19, those who have completed but the 4th grade, that is practically illiterate, are as follows: among Bulgarians, they are 9 %, among Turks – 24 %, the Roma representatives – 64 %.

The different ethnic groups show differences in relation to the stage of the education process at which children drop out of school. A study recorded that some 60 % of Roma children drop out of school in the early stage of education or before turning 11. The opposite trend is seen

among Bulgarians and Turks – the majority (63 % of the Bulgarian children and 54 % of the Turkish) drop out of school over 11 years old – after they complete primary education².

The same study comments on two types of reasons for the poor motivation of Roma families for their children's education – poverty and ethnic and cultural issues. The impossibility to cover the expenses for the child's education is the major reason among parents to let students drop out of school³. Poverty is quoted as a reason for school dropouts by half of the teachers and over two-thirds of social workers. Or in this respect there is agreement between the major parties involved in the problem and its solution. And yet teachers to a greater extent point out parents' poor interest in children's education as a reason for students to drop out of school.

In large Roma families, parents decide which and how many of the children should go to school. The lack of obvious progress in the child's knowledge can have a negative effect. This factor affects not only parents but also children. Early marriage is a reason for dropping out of school for 12 % of those who give the answer "I married". When it comes to Roma families, experts discuss the reasons for dropouts as "parents are afraid to let their children go to school because someone can kidnap them" and "lower value attributed to education". Each of these reasons has to be considered in a responsible way, which means that they should be granted the same importance as they receive in the ethnic community and the respective preventive measures should be taken.

If the current education trend remains steady, it is highly probable in the coming 15 years *half of the Roma to be practically illiterate. The rise in illiteracy among the Roma* plants a dangerous time bomb for entire generations belonging to this ethnic group. This threatens not only the Roma, but also the whole society. Education is the key to the opportunity to get out of the ghetto.

Society is becoming polarised – the chasm between the extremely rich, those of very high standard of living and the extremely poor, illiterate and demoralised, whose chances for prosperity are next to nothing without a long-term, active and consistent policy on the part of the state for their education, training and socialisation.

The problem of deteriorating health and working capacity is more and more widespread, and ill people and families who live in extreme poverty and misery cannot raise healthy, able to work and motivated young people.

Well-educated people of profession more and more often postpone the moment to start a family and give birth to children for the benefit of their career and individual development. In order to reconcile work and family, it is important to adopt policies for their flexible compromise.

The structure of society is dramatically changing. Family structures are different – there are more and more "old workers" (aged 55-64), elderly people (aged 65-79) and very old people (over 80), fewer children, young people and active working people.

² Reasons for School Dropouts in Bulgaria, Andrey Nonchev, Pierre Mondon, Maria Donkova, Valentina Milenkova, Lilyana Strakova, Ralitsa Ruseva, the Ministry of Education and Science, with the financial assistance of UNICEF, Sofia, 2006, p.15.

³ 41 % of parents believe that they do not have funds to provide for clothes and food for the children, while 30 % say they do not have enough money for textbooks and notebooks.

The bridges between the different stages in life are becoming more and more complex – this is valid to a great extent for the young who go through certain events later in their life – first job, first child, etc.

The Economic and Social Council pays attention to the direct relation between the economy and birth rate, between the economy and demography, as well as on the *general economic role of the family and marriage* that represent the natural link between the generations. The interrelation between the demographic crisis and the economy has its macrodimension – the reproduction of work resources, the structure of professional and well-trained workforce, motivated to work in the country, but it has also its extremely important microdimension. This is the household and the family as an economic environment and factor.

Second, the willingness to ensure equal opportunities for children in society can serve as the basis of family policy according to the Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee (245, art. 7.4). Social stability and prosperity require that assistance is lent to people deprived of good family environment; to children who suffer from the negative pedagogical impact on the part of parents and family.

As for society it is extremely important for the level and structure of birth rate to lead to fulfillment, socialisation and social inclusion of young generations, while reproduction as a whole – to social integrity and economic working capacity.

This is all done by families and determines the limited dependence between:

- the current situation of the family in Bulgaria and the country's economic development in the future;
- families and the discontinuation of the demographic collapse and the self-preservation of the Bulgarian nationality and nation;
- modern family, individualisation and transition to the *emotional-family* model that influence the changes in the class and social structure of society.

There are two polar situations in support of the free forms of cohabitation – highly educated groups and of uneducated groups. The statement “A couple that has not entered into marriage has the right to live together” is accepted by 53.3 % of university graduates, 51.4 % of high-school graduates, by 36.8 % of those with basic education, 34.7 % of those with primary education and 39.2 % of those who have no education. This opinion is shared by 48.4 % of the majority in the population, 37.3 % of Turkish representatives and 51.0 % of the Roma. These facts are to be taken into account in relation to the enforcement of family policies measures at company level.

People – 94 % of respondents – strongly support the idea that *the child needs home with a mother and a father in order to be happy*. However, they show tolerance to various personal situations, such as “a woman can have a child without being married or without a stable relationship with a man”. And yet parents from different ethnic or educational groups do not have the same opportunities to bring up their children on their own, or their ideas of the ideal number of children in the family, their readiness for planned and wanted maternity and parenting differ widely.

In 2006, 32,773 marriages were started, equal to 728 fewer on the previous year. 79.6 % of them were entered into by people in cities. The number of new marriages in villages amounted to 6,672.

In 2006, the number of registered divorces totalled 14,828 and it is close to 2005 figures (14,676). The majority of them (12,144 divorces) concerns cities. Half (52 %) of divorces in Bulgaria for 2006 were due to mutual agreement, 26 % were due to disparate natures, while for 10 % the reason was factual separation.

Equal gender opportunities. Women (51.5 %) outnumber men in the total population size. In 2006, 1,000 men corresponded to 1,064 women. According to National Statistical Institute data, in the fourth quarter of 2006, there were over 1 million and 600 thousand women in active age (15-64), and women's economic activity coefficient is 60.8 % – or 9 % lower than the indicator for men.

Bulgarian women's employment coefficient is considerably lower than figures for women in the European Union. Working women in Bulgaria are nearly 1 million and a half of (48.8 % of the total number of the employed), and the employment coefficient of women aged between 15 and 64 is 51.7 % and is by 9 percent points lower than men's. According to this indicator, Bulgaria is significantly lagging behind the average levels for EU countries, where in 2005, **women's employment coefficient reached 56.3 %**, given that the Lisbon goal is 60 % in 2010. The employment rates for women aged between 55 and 64 are by 8 or 9 % lower, taking into account that the employment coefficient for the 25 member states is 33.7 %.

Women in Bulgaria are less likely to work part time as compared to other European countries' women due to poor pay and insufficient offer of such schemes by employers. Bulgaria ranks last among the 27 member states with about 2.7 % women working part time, given that the average for the other member states is 32.9 % of the women, and nearly 75 % for the Netherlands.

Bulgarian women represent nearly 70 % of unpaid family workers, 36.7 % of self-employed and only 23 % of employers. This is solid evidence for inequality in employment. **There is – though declining – a difference in women's pay which to a large extent is due to the above mentioned unequal position of the woman on the labour market.** Preliminary data for 2006 show that women's average pay amounts to BGN 325 and is lower than men's by 15.2 %. There is evidence for considerable cohesion in remuneration as compared to 2000, when the difference accounted for 24.5 %. Of course, here we should not neglect the influence of undeclared salaries without social insurance in the private sector.

Women account for 53.4 % of people with a university degree, 53.5 % of PhD holders, but barely 22 % of professors. From 53 to 57 % of those who graduated from Bachelor's, Master's and PhD degree programmes in academic 2002/2003 were women.

Women and their children constitute two-thirds of the poor. Statistics show that in the country households, with a woman as a head of the family (21.4 % of households in Bulgaria) are poorer by some 25-30 % than those with a man. Poverty risk among women aged over 65 is about 20 % and is equal to the EU's average, although considerable differences occur in separate member states. The enumerated inequalities on the labour market lead to the fact women's personal pension is significantly lower; in 2005, it was 49.4 % lower than men's pension,

The reconciliation of professional, private and family life is much more difficult for the Bulgarian woman than for her European counterpart. With a working week ranging between 40.6 and 40.9 hours for women, and respectively, 41.1 and 41.3 for men, women spend a daily average of 278 minutes in housework or some 4 hours and a half, while men use up 149 minutes or 2 hours and a half. Meanwhile, the problem of the lack of enough places at kindergartens and nurseries has become acute. This deprives mothers from employment opportunities, leisure time for personal development and after all, impedes the balance between work and family.

There is evidence between gender inequalities within the family. Taking into account the close shares of working women and men and the bigger involvement of women in unpaid housework and the impact that this fact has on women's positioning in paid labour, this leads to factual inequality. Gender is extremely important when it comes to children's upbringing.

The existing inequality between men and women is proved by the measurement of time budget. One-third of women spend more than 30 hours a week of their time taking care of children. On the contrary, the predominant part of men devote between 1 and 10 hours a week to their children⁴.

Mutual assistance between generations in children's upbringing in Bulgarian families is traditionally high. Women's mothers help – in 54.6 % of the cases, and on a weekly and unpaid basis at that. In the light of the answers, the idea of a paternity leave is rather topical, in relation to coping with traditional labour division and responsibility for children's cares in the family, shared by the man and the woman. The recommendation made in the EESC's Opinion "to consider to what extent grandparents who are still working might be able to work flexible hours so that they can spend time with their grandchildren". (art. 8.8) has its equivalent in the Bulgarian practice.

As a whole, the attitude to sharing the responsibility for childcare in Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey is towards the bottom of European scale. Although women in Eastern Europe have been on the labour market for decades, 67 % of respondents in Bulgaria believe that care should be shared, corresponding to 95 % in Sweden⁵. In respect to all activities concerning children in the family, Bulgaria inevitably ranks last but one, followed by Turkey. This undermines the widespread opinion on the existing gender equality in Bulgaria as a value already achieved. In the country, in France and Germany there are differences in views on children's upbringing according to people of higher education and those of secondary education, while in Poland, Slovakia and Italy, differences occur between people of basic and secondary education.

For most people the reconciliation of family and work is problematic. Many do not make it, give up having children or have only one child. Mothers' prospects to go back to work after the birth are decisive for their choice. If 82.9 % of women of higher education rely

⁴ International research carried out in 25 countries including Bulgaria. Respondents are mostly managers at various organisational and management levels of small, medium-sized and big enterprises. Matilda Aleksandrova, UNWE, BNR/ Bulgaria Radio, 30 November 2006.

⁵ Fertility and Family issues in an enlarged Europe 2004, European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, p.61, 64.

on going back to work, among women of secondary education, the share stands at 69.1 %, while for women of primary schooling – 25 %. 61 % of men and 39 % of women work without a contract of employment. In the group of the youngest, aged 18-24, 50.2 % work under an indefinite contract of employment and 15.3 % – without a contract as compared to 25-34 year-olds, where the percentage is respectively 71.6 % and 6.3 %⁶. These are alarming facts because the young age is the stage in which one completes one's education and moves to active employment, starts a family and has children.

In society, there are **general** processes of dehumanisation and “instruction” in the culture of hostility towards the other. Aggression and indifference towards children gradually replaces humanism and responsibility to them. From a population where the family and the mother, children and their future were highly estimated as a value, we are becoming a population where cold attitude to children is widespread, with instance of homeless and abused minors; violence towards children and all its forms; children brought up by one destitute parent – five times more recurrent a mother or grandmother; irresponsible paternity of already a menacing number of men – fathers; insufficient tolerance and lack of effective measures for the inclusion of disabled children.

Bulgaria has faced the problem of “child labour”. This is shown in *national research into the problems of child labour in the conditions of Bulgaria's transformation* carried out in the country in 2000 by a research team of the Institute of Sociology at the Bulgarian Academy of Science and the Institute of Social And Trade Union Research (ISTUR) at the Confederation of Independent Trade Unions in Bulgaria with the financial assistance of the ILO and IPEC, which has been the only study of its kind so far on the issue in the country. It found out that:

Nearly 6.4 % of children aged from 5 to 17 are economically active. One-sixth of them work more than 30 hours a week. Children usually are used as a workforce in: agriculture, deepwater fishing, trade, tourism, construction, the textile and carpet-making industry.

About 32.3 % are employed in the household, 5.8 % of them work more than 30 hours a week as unpaid family workers. 41.8 % are hired in the housework.

Child pay is low – 43.3 % of economically active children get between BGN 10 and 30 as a monthly pay.

94.1 % of economically active children work without a contract of employment, 4.4 % are self-employed, while only 1.5 % work with a contract. Over 56 % of children say they have worked under an oral agreement. Child labour is used mainly in the private sector, where the amount of the pay is determined by the employer.

If children's economic activity is stopped, this would be equal to a collapse for every fifth Bulgarian household, for every fourth Turkish and for more than the half Roma families given the not so stable balance of the standard of living. The sharp decrease in income and the standard of living, on the one hand, cause difficulties for a great deal – at least 30 % – of families with school age children to cover education-related expenses (textbooks, notebooks, transport, etc), and on the other hand – particularly in some ethnic groups – they put pressure on the early involvement of children in the family's breadwinning activities.

⁶ *Relations Between Generations and Genders*, 2004, Institute of Sociology.

The predominant part of children have to cope with simultaneous school and employment tasks. The research shows that 34.4 % study, are economically active and work for the household; 39.4 % study and are active in the household; 5.1 % study and are employed part-time, 3.4 % do not study, are economically active and busy in the household; 9.4 % - do not study and are unemployed.

The early admission of children on the labour market represents a serious danger for their education, says the research. Children who do not start school at the established age and those who drop out early amount to some 7 %.

Data show that 1.8 % of children have given the answer that they have health problems related to the performance of their work.

The research shows that there are serious problems in relation to the implementation of the ILO's Convention No 182. 5.4 % of economically active children have done hard manual work, 4.2 % or 5,000 of the surveyed children have performed activities in conditions harmful to their health. Begging is a daily and visible problem. Child prostitution, which according to experts is a real problem, covers children from all ethnic groups and already belongs to organised crime. About 3.3 % of economically active children have prostituted. Over 90 % of annually convicted children have been convicted because of illegal activity, related to theft done upon someone's request.

Offences related to labour offences of minors represent 13.6 % of all registered cases breaking the labour law, according to the national campaign on *Control on the Application of Labour Code Regulations Related to Labour Relations and Protection of Minors' Labour*, held by the General Labour Inspectorate from 1 July to 31 August 2006. 2,432 of the total number of registered offences have been committed against minors, accounting for some 10 % of all offences detected throughout the campaign. In relation to the guarantee of healthy and safe working conditions of hired people under the age of 18, 1,311 offences were found out (8.16 % of all violations of the law). Out of this number: 130 cases of lack of risk assessment for the places where the under-18 persons are employed; 294 cases of lack of measures for the removal or mitigation of the estimated production risk of working places of under-18-year-olds; 102 instances of risk assessment without measurement of the factors of the working environment at the places where under-18-year-olds are employed; 211 violations of the organisation and training in safety, labour hygiene and fire safety; 35 cases of lack of working overalls; 28 instances related to the introduction of a physiological regime of labour and break for persons under 18.

The national campaign showed that most often juvenile persons are hired by employers in the hospitality industry and the retail sector. As a whole, employers are trying not to expose juvenile employees' life and health to risk. In most cases, offences are committed by employers in small businesses.

Domestic violence can be seen in all countries around the world, without sparing any social class, age group or gender. Studies and analyses of the Child Protection State Agency show that domestic violence is a topical problem for Bulgaria – 77.4 % of registered violence instances are in a family environment.

In 2006, were filed 2,855 complaints of violence against a child. The cases where protective measures are laid down in the Child Protection Law have risen by 22 % on the previous

year. In the registered cases of family violence, the prevailing share is negligence – 41 % of domestic violence, followed by physical violence – 34 %. Some 18 % of the instances of domestic violence have to do with psychological violence over a child, while in 7 % of the cases, it is sexual. Unfortunately, in many cases it is difficult to prove guilt in violence against a child – physical, psychological and sexual; and such cases do not reach the court proceedings stage.

The problem is not that there is violence but that there are no prerequisites for curbing it – values, rituals, factors for reducing the number of children who are victims of violence. Parents, instructors, schools and communities were intermediaries between children and the surrounding environment in the near past; but now they lose ground as a buffer and modulators.

The pace of social change is going faster and makes different generations' means as well as expectations for rewarding social fulfillment disparate. The transfer of experience and values between generations is broken and as a result parents' experience becomes more inapplicable to problems and life choices their children face. That is why the family has acquired a more important role and responsibility for children's socialisation and for identifying the methods of their learning to make choices and to cope with their aggressive impulses. Family values among which children grow up are also of great importance as well as the attitude and attention they receive from parents, and the conditions in which they develop.

Often parents are not able to solve their problems with the children and to perform well their parenting functions. When parents are in conflict or are authoritarian and restrict children's independence even resorting to different forms of violence, the instructive functions of the family are strongly undermined; children grow up in an environment of aggression, lack of closeness and confidence, irresponsibility, lack of a positive model. In this situation children often become alienated within the family.

Children need adults they can rely on. The most important thing in ensuring the child's good development opportunities is the existence of a relation and dedication on the part of the parent.

Parents and teachers' role is to be the irreplaceable mediators between the child and the world so that children are able to cope with various challenges in life.

Nowadays about 30 % of the few children that are born in the country live in risk - these are children in poor health, abandoned, homeless, addicted to drugs and alcohol, entrapped in crime, prostitution, begging, dropouts and some have never been to school. We are turning into a population helpless to mass and organised aggression towards children through: drugs, street violence, alcohol and cigarettes, early and aimless hypersexuality, prostitution and profanisation of moors and instruction in rudeness.

Smoking and alcohol abuse represent a serious threat to the health of the young – *the share of smokers among the young aged between 15 and 24 has gone up to 41.3 % compared to 38.8 % in 1996. Meanwhile, 86.6 % of children in Bulgaria are unwillingly exposed to tobacco at home. 70 % of students consume alcohol. Nearly half of teenagers aged 15-18 drink strong alcohol (including 18 % on a regular basis) and three-fourth of the young aged 19-25 (including one-third on a regular basis).*

Drugs are a serious threat to the young's health. Every tenth young person under 18 has already tried drug substances. The spread of HIV/AIDS is on the increase, and so are sexually transmitted diseases, while 41 % of registered cases belong to the age group of 20-29-year-olds and 7 % are aged between 14 and 19.

Drug addiction has turned into a serious problem for Bulgarian society, according to research into the issue. The fact that the age limit is extremely low, covering fifth graders, is rather alarming. Along with that there is a trend towards growing use of drugs by students. Among ninth graders, the percentage amounts to 16 %, while among twelfth graders – to 25.9 %. The number of students who have tried drugs at least once is on the rise. The average data say that over 28 % of students are curious and would try a different drug. This percentage is going up with every upper grade and reaches nearly 40 % among twelfth graders. There every third has already made the first step to drugs, and this is the most important one, experts say.

There is evidence for a **sharp increase of early pregnancy** – births and abortions **in the age between 15 and 19** amount to nearly 77 per 1,000 people; the age of sexual life beginning is going down. According to data of the National Centre of Public Health Protection and Control, Bulgaria ranks after Ukraine and Russia in terms of the number of school age abortions and births. Teenagers aged 17 or 18 already have sexual experience (65 %), but only 35 % of them use condoms. However, 65 % of students who have sex do not use protection. Data show that 37 out of 1,000 school age girls have had an abortion, and every second 17-year-old has already had sex. 36.7 out of 100,000 have syphilis in the age up to 17.

Nearly 14 % of children and young people suffer from **some long-term disease or permanent physical disability** (*diabetes, hypertension, asthma, allergy, chronic bronchitis, etc*). One of the problems among the young is the lack of physical activity, leading to sharp deterioration of their health, which has negative effects on their prospects for fulfilling life and realisation.

Primary disability is becoming more widespread and reached 20.2 out of 1,000 in 2004 for persons over 16 and 5 out of 1,000 for children under 16. The major reasons for disabilities are: blood circulation diseases (41.9 %); diseases of the skeletal and muscular system and of conjunctive tissues (14.4 %); diseases of the nervous system and the senses (10.2 %); neoplasms (9.5 %) and endocrine glands, digestion and metabolism diseases (8.1 %). For the last ten years, we have witnessed deterioration in the indicators for the physical development of children and adolescents. This speaks for disorders in the formation of the skeletal system – a fact that puts them in the conditions of higher risk for their health. Adolescents who are of low physical activity levels are in particularly unfavourable situation. There is a trend giving evidence for more unfavourable disbalanced development of the processes of physical growth and formation of body indicators (stature, weight, chest measurement in pause and exhaling, curve of the spinal cord and the arm, etc).

The socio-economic reality is determining for the level of healthcare in every country and for the opportunities for every citizen to make informed decisions on his/her health. Analyses on diseases, death rate and other health and demographic indicators show a dependence of the main determining factors of health, biological and other factors for health risks. Poverty is one of the social determining factors of health. The World Health Organisation defines it as the major cause for health risks. Its influence on individual and public health is multi-faceted. For example, poverty is related to the lack of education. Mostly people of basic and secondary education are identified as poor. On the contrary, people with a university degree are economically active and have the necessary financial resources to take care of their health.

Another determining factor for healthcare is the environment where one lives, works and has social contacts. It also depends on a person's economic resources. As a whole there is a direct connection **between quality healthcare, social and economic environment** in a country. Therefore, in order to achieve positive results, actions in the three aforementioned directions are required.

Behaviour factors (unhealthy eating habits, smoking, low levels of physical activity, alcohol abuse, etc) account for 50 % of the structure of mortality risk factors. The population's eating model, including children and adolescents, is unhealthy: with high levels of fat consumption; insufficient intake of fresh fruit and vegetables in winter and spring; poor intake of milk and milk products, fish and other; higher consumption of salt. Low levels of physical activity of the population is constantly on the increase.

The lack of health culture and bad living conditions of the Roma have turned into a reason for **Roma children to become a risk contingent**. Often children are underfed or do not feed properly which results in health problems and they are eventually admitted to hospital. In a good percentage of the cases parents do not take their children thereafter and hence a protective measure has to be applied – to take them in a special institution.

Kidnapping and the **adoption business** remains a risk factor for children. One of the options is an adoption from a children's home. The second option offers the so-called professional "parents". They signed on an adoption refusal paper, against certain percent from the deal. Thus the kid turns out to be "ill" or "unwanted" by Bulgarian adopters and under the law has to be offered to foreign applicants. In practice, this is child trade with absolutely healthy children. The rates of such services are said to range from USD 15,000 to USD 20,000.

It is important for the state and society to take urgent, comprehensive, long-term and efficient measures in order to reduce promptly and sharply the number of affected children's contingent.

Thirdly, today in Bulgaria good parents are to a large extent left to cope with difficulties and risks on their own. *This is due to the tolerance of the law and society to irresponsible parents and the lack of sanctions for those who allow for violence and abuse children. Many parents do not have a proper health, contraceptive and sexual culture. That is why the encouragement of responsible, good parenting is an important necessity.*

Family income taxation has been in force for two years. Good, though occasional, are the following practices: the establishment of an efficient network for alternative care for orphans; programmes for the increase of number of children in schools; reinstatement of school healthcare and the increase of the number of school psychologists.

The Economic and Social Council believes that there has been inaction and social indifference on the part of the state during the transition period. They are predetermined by the ongoing watershed and large-scale processes of the transition towards market economy that have been underway for 17 years now without finding a solution at a suitable level to problems concerning the normalisation of the population's standard of living as a prerequisite for the normal processes concerning the family, responsible parenting and equal opportunities for the genders.

That is why it is important to point out that these processes are not known in the necessary degree and the majority of politicians do not attribute the necessary attention to them, or underestimating their comprehensive nature. The media rarely try to inform of and debate on the issues of the family, responsible parenting and equal gender opportunities which is one of the serious reasons for the lack of agreement in the public opinion and civil pressure on the authorities and administrations for the consistent solution for these problems.

III. WHAT SHOULD BE DONE? MAJOR CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Contemporary values in policy concerning the family, responsible parenting and equal gender opportunities in the European Union's member states and in other developed countries, are related to:

- creating favourable conditions for the normal reproduction of the population;
- incentives for the establishment of stable families as well as for encouraging the social environment of the families;
- comprehensive protection and encouragement of maternity;
- social investment and social environment for responsible and fulfilling parenting;
- equal opportunities for all children;
- modern legislative frameworks for the guarantee of equal gender opportunities.

The Economic and Social Council shares the opinion that the problems concerning the family, responsible parenting and equal gender opportunities in the country, have been amassed for decades, will emerge in the long run and can be solved over a long-lasting period. For that purpose the Council is convinced that it is necessary for researchers, politicians and statesmen, the media and society as a whole to join efforts. Bulgaria's policy in relation to the family, responsible parenting and equal gender opportunities **should be a national priority over the coming decades.**

After an indepth analysis on the problems in the field of the family, responsible parenting, equal gender opportunities and the reconciliation of work and family, taking into account the positions of experts and representatives of groups represented at the Council, prioritising

the rights and interests of Bulgarian citizens and in performance of its function and role to express the interests and will of organised civil society and to provide consultation to the state bodies on problems of the country's economic and social development, the Economic and Social Council hereby gives the following major recommendations and proposals:

First, since the way we bring up children is important there is a necessity for **policy in support of the family** as well as a quality complex strategy for state policy targeting the family, children, parenting and equal gender opportunities. The need to curb the demographic collapse and to restore the full reproduction of the Bulgarian nation, burdens the family with the responsibility to contribute to life in society.

The **existence of political will to prioritise the problems of the family and parenting** is a must.

Second, the Council is convinced that the state policy in relation to the family, responsible parenting and equal gender opportunities should be **coordinated and focused, drafted and implemented by the competent state institutions**.

There should be drafted **an annual report on the situation of the family, responsible parenting and equal gender opportunities**.

Third, the implementation of the policy in the long-term aspect requires political consensus over and above political parties. Crisis emergence of the problems require that urgent measures should be taken. Based on their clear-cut and quality evaluation as well as development prospects, **a long-term state strategy on the family, responsible parenting and equal gender opportunities** should be drafted, discussed, adopted and coordinatedly implemented.

Fourth, particular policies and measures should be drawn up based on the document and in line with widely accepted principles:

- promotion of contraceptive culture, expansion of the family planning programmes;
- introduction of European forms of family income taxation;
- establishment of systems of incentives for economic development and breadwinning in the country's regions endangered by demographic collapse.

Preventive measures for the provision of the quality of life and environmental conditions, favourable to better health on the workplace as well as beyond, should go along with improved cooperation between the key figures in public healthcare, education, the media and labour organisations for the achievement of better life expectancy in *good health*.

In line with the Lisbon process, factors such as good education and suitable skills will continue to be central to long-term employment. In the context of the ageing population it is extremely important to ensure quality education for the young so that they can meet the needs of the labour market and of knowledge-based society as well as to develop a lifelong learning system with a view to preservation of human capital.

In education and human capital development, the government's efforts should be channelled into three directions: the reduction of the number of dropouts and the integration of those who dropped out of the education system early; improvement of the quality and efficiency of education and training through the reform of the education system in line with the needs of the labour market; development of lifelong forms of learning.

Policies should be focused on three general aspects, whose goal is to redress inequality in relation to the prospects for citizens with or without children, to offer general access to parent assistance services and in particular services targeting education and care for small children, and to devise an employment system granting men and women better opportunities for lifelong learning and proper balance between personal and professional life.

It is necessary to develop policies aiming to **boost employment** – especially among certain groups of the population, such as women, the young and the elderly – and also innovations and strengthening productivity.

Moreover, we should further modernise social protection systems, in particular the pension one, so that social and macroeconomic security are guaranteed and to cope with ageing.

The EU recommends higher employment rates, especially for women and the elderly, encourages investment in human resources and enhanced productivity through economic reforms, research and innovations. More efforts should be made for the integration of the young on the labour market and support for the search of an “unlinear” profession and career, combination of work, studies, resignation and acquisition of further qualification for the benefit of upgrading one's skills.

There should be opportunities enabling the elderly to combine work and retirement; ensuring easier access to long-term training that can be guaranteed for everyone and especially – for poorly-qualified persons, living in unfavourable conditions. These problems are not new but relevant social and demographic processes turn them into priority investment in the future.

Fifth, the improvement of the situation of the family and of children can be achieved to some extent also through the improvement of public healthcare. Its structure has to be optimised in order to meet current needs. The efficient prevention measures against obesity, smoking, alcoholism and mental disorders should have a positive effect on health condition, work productivity, improvement of people's social status and reduction of healthcare expenditure. The application of new technology in the field of healthcare can contribute to the improvement of health conditions and healthcare expenses.

Of particular importance is the development of individual programmes for children's special medical care in line with their condition and needs, encouragement of the involvement of NGOs in child care, better care for children relating to the prevention and promotion of their health.

The modern model of healthy lifestyle should develop the principle of delegation of rights and responsibilities on the part of the state and active support and partnership with NGOs and sports organisations.

Sixth, the state policy attributes particular attention and priority to the preparation of children and adolescents not only for sexual life and contraception but also for family and parenting partnership, for shouldering personal commitments and responsibilities through:

focused attitudes cultivation and establishment of their own biographical planning to starting a stable family and respectively – good and responsible parenting; curbing the excess of individualism and consumerism; prevention of deviations of early promiscuity and other.

Seventh, the necessary policies for overcoming the involvement of children of all forms of strenuous hard work are:

Enforcement of legislation – governments should play the leading part in the abolition of child labour through the introduction of protection laws and **efficient application** of the provisions relevant to labour and education. Improvement of the regulatory framework through *enhanced control and sanctions in the event of offences*. Updating of the list of prohibited hard, harmful and dangerous jobs for children.

Enhanced public responsiveness – especially among employers and the workforce – implementation of changes in the social climate, such as recognition of children's rights and understanding and responsiveness to the impact of child labour on their health and on their development.

Organisation of *child labour monitoring* systems. They require the establishment of an integrated system including: first, identification of child labour and monitoring of children to reconfirm that they are beyond danger and have positive alternatives; second – outline of child labour tendencies in different sectors. The *creation of capacities* in countries around the world through conducting research, recognition of the problem and development of policies; prevention and early warning; evacuation of affected children; protection of older children.

Promotion of *prevention culture* in labour, that is to address the problem before its emergence. The goal is to have all workplaces in line with adopted standards, and employers and employees should regard this as social responsibility,

Maximum cooperation and efficiency of the coordination between all stakeholders involved in the process – state institutions, labour inspectorates, employers' organisations and trade unions, NGOs.

Special attention to the communities and children of the street, orphans, the sick, retarded and disabled children, subject to discrimination in employment and professions, raising the level of their training, equal inclusion in society.

Organisation of media and advertising *campaigns* to encourage the coverage of these issues in the media, to enhance the responsiveness of parents and their information on child labour problems and long-term dangers that threaten children in some areas of employment.

Comprehensive programmes and activities targeting fast *economic growth* in the conditions of macroeconomic stability and based on that, rise in the employment rate and higher income. Overcoming children's problems, harsh forms of unemployment and eradication of poverty. *Legalisation of the private business* and bringing the grey economy to the light. Activisation of private and public investment as a major source of economic growth and factor for boosting the employment rate.

The development and application of *programmes for the eradication of social inequalities* among children – with a focus on educational policy and healthcare, as well as the adoption of an efficient social assistance system.

Systematic control over dropouts of the education system, registration and introduction of *alternative forms of continuing education*. The education level is an influential factor for the prevention of poverty and social exclusion.

Eighth, the European Union clearly outlines the framework of the activities relating to equal opportunities. The previous policies targeting gender equality, such as equal treatment, equal opportunities, positive discrimination, the policy of today is developing and focusing on the so-called *gender mainstreaming*, which stands for the inclusion of gender equality in all policies, at all levels and stages of their development – drafting, introduction, assessment and monitoring.

As a European Union's member state, Bulgaria's government, social partners and NGOs should be actively committed to the enforcement of the legal framework and policy of attainment of efficient equality and equal opportunities for men and women.

Challenges are currently significant and are to further emerge, although for the last years, a number of steps have been taken in the country for the approximation of the Bulgarian legislation with the European laws in the field of gender equality and prevention of discrimination.

The Equal Opportunities Law, subject to long discussions and rejections, as well as the respective strategy in the field have to be urgently adopted.

Another serious challenge is the development of a complex of policies for the reconciliation of professional, personal and family life. In this respect, we are aware of our and employers' responsibility for the offer of flexible working time regimes, creation of kindergartens at enterprises and strengthening the role of social dialogue and collective negotiations.

Gender equality policy covers also the development and application of the idea of paternity, paternity leave, gender equality within the family that includes sharing household tasks and child care.

A sociological survey has to be carried out in relation to the draft Prostitution Law in Bulgaria before the document is adopted. We call for the adoption of the National Programme for Countering Human Trafficking as well as the Guarantee Fund for Co-funding of NGOs under European Projects.

Family care requires not only financial relieves and assistance, maintenance of good infrastructure of child care institutions but also assistance to people in different stages of their life, taking into account specific difficulties groups of people face – newly-established families, the elderly, singles, parents, single parents, families with disabled children.

Particular measures are also needed concerning families with twins (double maternity, etc), families with a disabled member (encouragement of municipal services, health services assistance, etc) and families with elderly members (daycare centres, foster families, etc)

A positive family policy followed by the state should ensure opportunities for lifelong learning for families, tax relieves for socially-committed businesses, sanctions for irresponsible parenting.

Ninth, a draft **Law on Family Support** should be tabled, based on the following **principles**: family stability, equality within the family, good upbringing, responsibility between generations.

This law **targets**: to ensure the reconciliation between work and family life; to develop competences, education and creative abilities of different generations; equal rights; good parenting; continuity and solidarity between generations.

Tenth, if there is a key to success, it would be: stable family – good, responsible parenting – high value attributed to human life. Traditional marriage cannot be anachronistic, but increasingly widespread forms of cohabitation without marriage should not be neglected. To guarantee equal gender opportunities, responsible parenting and good socialising environment for children in these cases, it is necessary to find a new approach to the registration of the new forms of cohabitation. The high value of human life as a guarantee for sustainable future is imperative.

Eleventh, the state policy should encourage families so that women and men can reconcile family life and work and can be responsible parents.

This requires information and awareness raising as to the necessity of these measures. That is why there should be **political commitment, social assistance, services, studies of the characteristics of information society and for the needs of policies efficiency assessment, training of managers and HR employees in companies on the measures for the support of parents' career** at the workplace.

Other countries' policies should be considered. The successful practice in a developed country such as Germany is *Alliance for the Family*, which combines medium-term initiatives for better connections between family and work. Under the motto *The Family is a Success Factor. Let the Company Win.*, are found solutions for the benefit of a working environment favourable to the family as part of sustainable and consistent family policy. As a result, family policies should turn into an important issue on the management's agenda, as well as into a symbol of the company and **socially responsible businesses**. The first goal of the initiative is to make 1,000 companies publicly declare their readiness and effectively implement family policy.

There is also a network of the *Family is a Success Factor* enterprises, offering to companies and institutions concerned a platform for the exchange, topics and contacts relevant to the problem.

The certification of companies conducting family policy is carried out by the Hertie NGO, after a social audit for the company policy in support of the family. Companies are evaluated according to the number and type of measures they apply in their practice. In Germany, a study has been conducted on managers' attitudes to family support issues.

The measures for the support of the family on the part of companies included in the audit are:

- financial assistance to the construction of a kindergarten with certain number of places guaranteed for parents employed in the company;
- summer holiday for employees' children;

- ensured work for people who benefit from a maternity or paternity leave;
- development of family competences through parents' training;

Twelfth, employers should be interested, motivated and supported in the company family policies they apply:

- *flexible working time* within the day and week, throughout the year and the individual career, sharing of the workplace, individually negotiated working time;
- *distance work*;
- parental leave, parents' care, return to work after the leave, inclusion in programmes for further qualification of people on a parental leave; special measures for satisfying the needs of parents; women's support programmes; concrete programmes adapted to women's professional development; support for fathers;
- *support for children* – kindergartens and nurseries at the enterprise; payment of part of the places in another childcare establishment; support for other types of child care (financial, paid daycare help); granting leave to employees when a child is ill beyond the legal regulations;
- *services for parents and families* – services for the household tasks; healthcare services; health programmes; canteens for employees' children; organisation of leisure events for employees and their families; legal advice (for example, on the opportunities for part-time job during a parental leave).

Encouragement and assistance of responsible parenting and guaranteed support for children at a state level: child benefits for every child without an income differentiation; guaranteed access to kindergartens and nurseries for every child: new social services for child upbringing; equal access to healthcare; equal access to education and introduction of obligatory all-day classes for students; incentives for talented children. Children should rely on **the best possible living conditions. The child's origin cannot determine his/her chances to study and be successful in life.**

The policy targeting the family, good and responsible parenting should be based on concrete policy in support and encouragement of socialised maternity and responsible paternity. Through a system of incentives and protection of good parenting and a system for the resocialisation with sanctions on irresponsible parents.

Thirteenth, there is need for better coordination in the efforts of state institutions on the problems of the family, children and gender equality through:

Defence of the family and family values

Real estate tax exemption for the dwelling of residence for families of three and more children under 20 years of age.

Tax relief for young families (under 35 years of age), if they have children. Introduction of tax relieves for young people to help them in the first years after they leave their parents.

Establishment of State Fund to cover partly interest rates (in case of a single rate) on real estate, consumer and entrepreneurship credits for young families with at least one child.

Allocation of grants for every child of a mother who studies as a regular student at a university or is enrolled in a PhD programme if they do not receive any other remuneration or assistance for raising the child.

Allocation of a paid leave for a father when the child is born, to take care along with the mother for the baby on the first days after its birth.

Provision in the Family Code of a regulation on out-of-wedlock settlement of relations between partners who live in cohabitation.

Encouragement and assistance of responsible parenting

Allocation of benefits for the upbringing of children until they turn one under the form of social investment, if the mother is under 18. The Child Protection State Agency and the Social Assistance Agency should introduce services for patronage over juvenile mothers (under 18 years of age) and their children.

Introduction of benefits for parents (instead for mothers only) with small children – flexible and part-time working time, possible annual leave on several occasions throughout the year (currently restricted by the Labour Code to twice a year), flexible employment (work at home).

Extension of the network of childcare centres in big cities.

Introduction of obligatory all-day classes for primary school students, if parents want it.

In this Opinion, the Economic and Social Council expresses a consensus position of civil society structures represented in the Council on existing problems relating to the family, responsible parenting and equal gender opportunities and the possible measures to address them.

Taking into account that the problems of the family and parenting concern the interests of every citizen, the Economic and Social Council insists on the duly continuation of the dialogue with the representatives of the executive and legislative power with a view to the achievement of solutions acceptable for the whole society.

Although it appreciates the country's achievements in the adoption and implementation of the Demographic Development Strategy, the development of legislation in support of the family, the Council is convinced that through the adoption and improvement of policies and measures relevant to the issue discussed, Bulgaria has all prerequisites to turn into a good European example for family protection, family values strengthening and encouragement and assistance to responsible parenting. That is why the Economic and Social Council will lend its support to all actions of the Bulgarian government and Bulgarian parliament channelled into the family, responsible parenting and equal gender opportunities.

Meanwhile, the Council will continue the dialogue and consultations with other, nongovernmental structures of civil society in order to draw maximum public support.

The Economic and Social Council encourages the state institutions, political parties, organised civil society structures, representatives of scientific circles and the media to draft and implement a long-term strategy, urgent policies and concrete measures related to the issues of the family, responsible parenting and equal gender opportunities in line with world and European standards.