

2007 European Year of Equal Opportunities for All

The European Union (EU) has every reason to be proud of its **anti-discrimination legislation**, one of the most extensive in the world. In 2000, the European Union adopted two very wide-ranging laws to prohibit discrimination based on racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation in the workplace and, as far as racial and ethnic origin is concerned, in other aspects of daily life. These texts build on the extensive provisions at EU level to promote equality between women and men.

However, calling for equal rights and adopting laws to try and guarantee them is not enough to ensure that equal opportunities are enjoyed by everyone in practice. Incentives have to be given to bring about a change in behaviour and mentality. Steps also have to be taken to tackle the intricate patterns of inequality suffered by certain groups and communities in Europe, such as the Roma, while examining the roots of these problems. Finally, we have to acknowledge that our societies are changing. Examples of this are the EU's ageing population and its increasingly multiethnic makeup. The ever-growing **diversity** sets new challenges that we have to meet more effectively, while offering myriad opportunities that we have to seize.

The 2007 European Year of Equal Opportunities for All is an initiative leading the way to a bolder **strategy** seeking to give momentum to the fight against discrimination in the EU, as the Commission explained in a document, published in June 2005, called '**Framework strategy for non-discrimination and equal opportunities for all**'. During the Year, all discrimination grounds have to be treated in a balanced way and the different ways in which women and men experience discrimination on the grounds of sex, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation have to be considered as well.

The Year aims to:

- * make people more aware of their rights to enjoy equal treatment and a life free of discrimination – irrespective of sex, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age and sexual orientation*
- * promote equal opportunities for all*
- * launch a major debate on the benefits of diversity both for European societies and individuals*

Activities during the Year will be organised around four key objectives: rights, representation, recognition and respect:

- * Rights – Raising awareness on the right to equality and non-discrimination and on the problem of multiple discrimination*
- * Representation – Stimulating debate on ways to increase the participation of groups in society which are victims of discrimination and a balanced participation of men and women*
- * Recognition – facilitating and celebrating diversity and equality*
- * Respect – Promoting a more cohesive society*

Rights – Raising awareness on the right to equality and non-discrimination and on the problem of multiple discrimination

All people in the European Union are entitled to equal treatment, irrespective of their sex, race or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation – this is the key message that the Year will strive to put across not only to the general public but also to individuals or groups that suffer from discrimination or are potentially exposed to discrimination.

The idea will also be to show that equality does not mean sameness. The implementation of the equality principle has to take into account differences and diversity so as to ensure that each individual genuinely enjoys equal treatment.

Representation – *Stimulating debate on ways to increase the participation of groups in society that are victims of discrimination and achieving balanced participation by men and women.*

Women are in the minority in our parliaments and ethnic minority MPs are even scarcer. Disabled people tend to be sidelined in society. Against this background, the Year will launch a series of debates on how to make it easier for under-represented groups to participate more in society, while ensuring a balanced involvement of men and women in all sectors and at all levels. The business community and the political sector are set to be key targets under this heading.

Rather than confining itself to eliminating discrimination, an equal opportunities policy also has to try to provide all individuals with opportunities for becoming fully involved on the same footing in society. Certain communities, such as the Roma, are so deprived that positive action might have to be taken for them so as to eliminate this inequality, which is so deeply rooted in society. The advisability of taking positive measures to promote equal opportunities will also give rise to several debates and activities throughout the Year.

Recognition – *facilitating and celebrating diversity and equality*

Another aim of the Year will be to make public opinion and the people concerned aware of the positive contribution each party can make to society as a whole, irrespective of the person's gender, race or ethnic origin, religion or beliefs, disability, age or sexual orientation. During the Year, action will be taken to involve the general public in an open debate on the meaning of diversity in contemporary Europe and ways of valuing differences in society.

Respect – *promoting a more cohesive society*

Action will be taken during the Year to raise awareness among the public and the people concerned to the importance of eradicating clichés, stereotypes and violence, and promoting good relations among all members of society, particularly young people. The Year will strive to promote and disseminate the values underlying equal treatment and the fight against discrimination.

http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/eyeq//index.cfm?cat_id=EY

The Role and Functions of the Equality Authority

The Equality Authority is an independent body set up under the Employment Equality Act 1998. It was established on 18th October 1999.

The Equality Authority replaced the Employment Equality Agency, and has a greatly expanded role and functions. The Employment Equality Act, 1998 and the Equal Status Act, 2000 outlaw discrimination in employment, vocational training, advertising, collective agreements, the provision of goods and services and other opportunities to which the public generally have access on nine distinct grounds.

These are:

- * gender;**
- * marital status;**
- * family status;**
- * age;**
- * disability;**
- * race;**
- * sexual orientation;**
- * religious belief; and**
- * membership of the Traveller Community.**

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