Fighting for fairness
LAURENCE ROSSIGNOL
French Minister of State for the
Family, Elderly People and Adult Care

In the context of increasing life expectancies, Laurence Rossignol talks to International Innovation about her work supporting children, women and elderly individuals and explains how France is taking the lead in adapting to the growing needs of an ageing population.

Can you provide some information about your professional background?

Politics has always been a passion of mine and I have been an active member of the Socialist Party since 1981. My strong feminist commitment led to my involvement with women’s affairs from 2006-08, when I became the Party’s national secretary for the environment. I was also Vice-President of the regional council of Picardie and was elected Senator representing Oise, a department located to the north of Paris. During my term in the Senate, I was a member of the sustainable development commission and the ‘rapporteur’ – author in charge of writing a parliamentary report on a designated issue – for the commission created to tackle prostitution.

How do your past experiences help you fulfill your role as Minister of State for the Family, Elderly People and Adult Care?

On a personal level, I am the mother of two children who have brought me great joy, questions and difficulties that, just like most parents, I had to meet and welcome. I went through a divorce, am now in a reconstituted family, and my mother has Alzheimer’s disease and lives in a care home.

Professionally, I have specialised my studies on social law cases and then worked for many years in community health where I was in charge of prevention issues.

You took up your current role in April last year. What has been the focus of your activities since then?

I have been fighting to reform the doctrines, practices and policies designed for the family, elderly people, childcare and child protection in France.

I presented a proposal for new legislation on adapting society to the ageing of individuals at the National Assembly in September 2014. This text’s main goal is to change the perception that society has of older people – and that older people sometimes have of themselves. The text also sheds light on the incredible work done by carers and introduces a ‘right to rest’. When it is implemented, this legislation will bring about an increase in the Allocation Personnalisée d’Autonomie – ‘dependency benefits’ – a form of means-tested subsidy granted to elderly people lacking autonomy and struggling to live by themselves in their homes. I have led this fight at the National Assembly and look forward to opening the debate with Parliament again.

Furthermore, in order to help professionals who are providing home support to elderly people, in December 2014 I announced that professional carers will see their wages upgraded when they work in non-lucrative structures.

In terms of family policy, child benefits have been reformed. Historically, they have been uniformly distributed, but the expense does not have the same marginal cost to all
The French population in numbers

**Elderly Dependency Ratio**

54.7%

**Fertility Rate**

2.08 births per woman

**Life Expectancy at Birth**

84.91 years for women

78.55 years for men

**Percentage of Population Aged Over 65**

17.9%

Source: CIA World Factbook – figures are 2014 estimates

households. With the measure I implemented, child benefits are now both universal and means tested: all families will keep receiving a subsidy, but the richest 12 per cent of households will receive less than before. This measure symbolises vertical solidarity and will not have any impact on France’s high fertility rate.

The other major achievement that I wish to highlight is the reform of parental leave towards ensuring equality between women and men. Going forward, parental leave granted for the first child can be split equally between the two parents. So, for instance, the first six first months can be taken off by the mother and the next six by the father. This will help women return to the labour market sooner. This is very important as we know that the longer one spends away from work the harder it is for them to find a job in the future. After the first child, parental leave will be split as follows: the first two years for one parent and the next year for the other.

Finally, I am also actively working to improve children’s rights. In November 2014, I signed into effect the third optional protocol of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. This enables children to bring complaints about violations of their rights directly to the UN Committee if they have not found a solution at the national level.

**What are your priorities for families, elderly people and adult care in the coming year?**

I have different priorities for my different fields of competence. First, regarding elderly people, at the forefront of my political agenda is the presentation at the Senate in March of the new legislation mentioned above. I also aim to further encourage the expansion of the silver economy sector.

Second, in the field of childcare, the government is committed to developing early education, opening more nurseries and helping the early-years sector thrive. I am also about to launch a strategy for the professionals of childcare which will reform the content of some of the main diplomas of the profession, modernise the structure of nurseries and encourage professional training in this sector.

Finally, regarding child protection, my priority is to ensure that every child has equal life chances. Indeed, although progress has been made by local agencies and departments, great geographical inequalities remind us that a lot still needs to be done. I have therefore decided to consult the main stakeholders and engage in a constructive dialogue, in a participatory and transparent way. So far, we have met individuals who were once taken care of by services of child protection, the departments, judges, social workers, NGOs, parents or foster families, and I will soon meet health professionals and many others. Following this broad consultation, I will be able to improve local practices and establish a national strategy for child protection.

In what ways is the ageing population having an impact on the French economy, healthcare and social sectors?

I appreciate that you are talking about an ageing population, and not about an ageing society. I would rather even talk about ageing individuals. Indeed, if many people are growing old and living older, society as whole stays, and will remain, a dynamic entity. The French fertility rate is high (two children per woman), which means that the different generations will be in equilibrium. This is not to deny the obvious ageing trend but to stress that if individuals are indeed living longer, this says nothing about how autonomous they are. Ultimately, it is the decrease of autonomy that cause a society to age.

Having said that, the increasing number of ageing individuals does have an impact on the French economy, healthcare and social sectors. This calls for us to take a fresh look at our policies in all domains of life and rethink our approaches to things we once took for granted. We need to rethink public transport, informal and professional care, distribution of goods, housing market, third sector services, and even some financial products – such as life annuity. As a society, we need to adapt to our older counterparts to help them stay autonomous for as long as possible.

Intergenerational solidarity does not just go one way. Ageing individuals also have an impact on French society in that there are now more people engaged in charities. For instance, NGOs in which retired individuals bring educative support to school pupils – who could otherwise be falling behind – are flourishing. Older people do help the young fragile ones and civil society is growing thanks to increased life expectancy.

**What policies has the French Government implemented to mitigate the burden of the ageing population?**

Since 2012, and the election of President François Hollande, many new policies have been implemented, not only to mitigate the burden of an ageing population, but also to support elderly people and prevent the decrease of autonomy.

We have introduced a programme against the exclusion of elderly people (Monalisa), the rights of residents of residential and nursing homes have been strengthened; transparency in the fees charged by these structures has been introduced; 15,000 private homes per year will be modified and adapted to meet old people’s needs. Means tested subsidies will be granted to households to do so; the home-care services sector has received €130 million to restructure itself, and has also benefited from a State-designed strategy to enable the workers to receive the recognition that they deserve.

Finally, an industry contract has been established between the State and the main actors involved in the silver economy sector – aimed at supporting people growing old. It helps them all along their life course, while generating growth and fostering employment, and reinforces intergenerational solidarity. This sector has been acknowledged as the ‘sector of the future’ and should lead to 300,000 new jobs by 2020. It aims to meet old people’s needs, which results in technological and organisational innovations.

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