



WIDENING CAREER CHOICES FOR WOMEN AND MEN - EQUAL achievements in education and training

1. GENDER GAPS IN EDUCATION ARE CLOSING, BUT CAREER CHOICES REMAIN TRADITIONAL

The European Commission's Gender Equality Report 2005¹ confirms the trend in recent years²: educational gender gaps are closing in the EU and in most Member States **women attain better qualifications than men**. Girls are less likely than boys to leave compulsory (lower secondary) school without a certificate and are in the majority in upper secondary education – with considerable variations ranging from 80% in Finland and Sweden to under 60% in other countries. Yet, there are very systematic tendencies across Europe. Young women are more often enrolled in general education programmes, whilst boys tend to opt for vocational courses and fewer girls than boys drop out of upper secondary education. Consequently, more women than men go on to university and female students are in the majority in both occupationally-oriented and academic programmes. The majority of graduates at first-level (56%) in the EU are female but at advanced research level, men represent 61% of graduates.

The study choices show a traditional gender stereotyped pattern. Between 70% and 80% of course participants in engineering, manufacturing and construction, as well as in science, maths and computing, are men. On the other hand, more than two thirds of students in educational sciences and humanities, in arts, health and social work studies are women. Even if EU- level figures show a larger female than male participation in continuing education and training, **the access to these avenues to life-long learning is often difficult for women** due to work-life-balance problems and a lack of suitable offers in the sectors where they work.

EU POLICIES: JOBS AND GROWTH REQUIRE A WIDER USE OF FEMALE POTENTIAL

These facts and figures show that much remains to be done if women are to realise their full potential and thereby make an even more significant contribution to economic development and growth. Based on the decisions of the 2005 European Spring Council, the Commission has adopted a Communication presenting "Integrated Guidelines for Jobs and Growth"³. This emphasises that the EU should "invest in knowledge to ensure the dynamism and vigour of the whole European economy. The realisation of the knowledge society, based on human capital, research, education and innovation policies is the key to boost (our) growth potential and prepare the future." EQUAL's approaches to overcoming traditional career choices and to educating and training both women and men in areas where they are underrepresented are helping to meet this challenge.

2. EQUAL DEVELOPS THE FULL POTENTIAL OF WOMEN AND MEN

EQUAL good practices in overcoming the gender segregation in economic sectors and occupations are making a valuable contribution to diversifying and improving the skills of the European workforce. In many countries, these good practices incorporate strategies to change the traditional gender-related attitudes not only of boys and girls and women and men, but also of key players such as teachers, trainers, career counsellors and the responsible political decision-makers. Those EQUAL approaches that stimulated most change are those which have integrated different elements of successful de-segregation policies.

¹ [Report](#) from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on equality between women and men, 2005; COMM (2005) 44 final;

² Eurostat: The life of women and men in Europe, A statistical portrait, 2002;

³ Commission of the European Union: [Integrated Guidelines for Jobs and Growth \(2005-2008\)](#), Communication from the President in agreement with Vice-President Verheugen und Commissioners Almunia and Spidla; COM 2004 (141 final)

2.1. BIOGRAPHICAL APPROACHES

Addressing the full life-cycle of women and men through “biographical approaches” has generated many positive results. EQUAL has developed and tested schemes that are widening choices in education and training from as early as kindergarten, all the way through primary and secondary school to vocational training, university education and beyond. The close cooperation of different key actors in the world of education and training was a decisive success factor. Besides bringing the decision-making authorities on board to accompany the implementation of new approaches, the involvement of parents, teachers and career guidance staff and teacher-training institutions for teachers proved to be an efficient strategy to disseminate both innovative teaching methods and the various materials and tools developed by EQUAL. In many cases, working with universities and research institutions enabled the **integration of these models into new or existing curricula**. Moreover, the models are becoming **integral elements of teacher training and staff development**.

2.1.1. Pre-school and Primary School Age

EQUAL made significant efforts not only to **address gender stereotyping from an early age**, but also to develop policies and practices that **foster excellence in education** as an investment in future human resources. Joining forces with the relevant ministries and public authorities, EQUAL partnerships have also worked with teachers and parents. They have developed pedagogical approaches, materials and tools that help to dismantle perceptions, for instance, that girls lack technical interest and skills or that boys lag behind in terms of literacy and communication. In addition, visits to companies have proved to be an excellent way of challenging gender stereotypes. The pupils were asked to carry out surveys on the jobs performed by women and men, which triggered questions about the causes of inequality and ideas about how the children envisaged their own adult life in a more egalitarian society.

In a few countries, EQUAL has set out to **break the predominantly female influence in kindergarten and pre-school education** and thus to challenge stereotypical attitudes. In Ireland, for instance, a university institute for gender studies worked together with childcare centres and the National Training Authority and developed a training scheme that opened up jobs for men and older people in these centres. The idea was to provide young children with new role models to promote positive attitudes towards gender equality, not only in the children, but also in the staff and parents as well. Children and adults are now seeing men and older people in a different environment and light: men in a caring role and older workers providing, as opposed to receiving, care. This is a particularly relevant experience for children who are being raised by lone mothers or when older members of the extended family are not part of the child’s everyday life.

2.1.2. The teenage years

The approaches developed for secondary schools resulted in **more girls choosing non-traditional subjects, training or education** and owed much of their success to their organisation as an on-going process, and not just as single events. This has been achieved in Spain, for example, by creating innovative curricula, which challenge traditional gender roles and the subtle integration of the related stereotypes into science and technology. Rather than offering extra general courses on equal opportunities, the programmes used household processes, such as cooking, baking or ironing to explain certain phenomena in chemistry and physics. Young people learned, for instance, about the different aggregate states of materials - solid, liquid or gas - by producing chocolate, cocoa and ice cream. At the same time, the **model** led youngsters, particularly boys, to realise the value of unpaid female work and to accept more responsibility at home. The scheme has created a lot of media attention and prompted much discussion amongst teachers and parents, which has led the competent authorities to consider adopting EQUAL’s approach.

Other successful test runs include **specific ICT courses for girls, Internet clubs and summer camps** for “**young female inventors**” or taster weeks in enterprises that were involved in the partnerships. Young women who have “made it” into male-dominated occupations played an important part as role models and mentors.

2.1.3. Supporting young people in initial training and education

Accompanying the learning progress of young women in [non-traditional initial training](#) and tertiary education has significantly reduced drop-out rates and increased the number moving directly from training to employment. [Mentoring programmes](#) providing professional and personal support in the early stages of training and/or employment emerged as potent methods of promoting desegregation.

In a small number of countries, EQUAL's educational efforts were entirely focused on young men. Often these efforts were built on research which had indicated that male students had a more egalitarian vision than the previous generation, when it came to role and task sharing at home. However, due to various barriers, they did not act accordingly later in their lives. In the Netherlands, EQUAL tested ways of addressing parenthood and gender roles in secondary and tertiary education. A group of engineers who are actually combining work and care was trained as "[ambassadors](#)" of a **new male role model**. As visiting lecturers, they passed on their experience to the students. These experiences were synthesised and integrated into teaching materials and tools, including a training module as part of technical education programmes at universities. The new resources are now in great demand in a growing number of educational institutions.

2.1.4. Continuing training and life-long learning

"Comprehensive pathways" which combine skills assessment, counselling, guidance, training, coaching and work placements provided the most effective approach to helping mature women access employment in a male domain. Training was tailored to the skills requirements of companies, but also acknowledged prior learning and informal competences.

For example, in [Germany](#), EQUAL demonstrated how training jobless university graduates as experts in knowledge management, by covering the technical aspects related to retrieval, categorisation and systematisation of knowledge in a course, could explicitly build on the women's capacities for multi-tasking, communication and team work. These skills proved to be a solid base for stimulating and guiding learning processes in organisations. Work experience placements convinced employers of the quality of the new profile, and most participants received job offers before the end of the programme.

It is often more difficult for women who are juggling work and family tasks than it is for men to participate in continuing training and thus to broaden and up-date their skills, which is crucial in holding on to their jobs. A French example demonstrates how a partnership resolved the problems of women working in precarious jobs within a large supermarket chain. To increase both the quality of work and job security, the project offered basic ICT training to the employees to help them meet the most essential skills requirements for cashiers and stock-clerks. However, the women explained that they could not afford the time necessary for this training. An innovative scheme changed this situation: **employees could barter each hour they spent on training for an hour of housework, supplied by a local social economy enterprise and paid for by the company.**

2.2. TURNING TEACHERS, TRAINERS AND GUIDANCE STAFF INTO AGENTS OF CHANGE

EQUAL has been working successfully towards changing the attitudes of people who are playing vital roles in the process of women's and men's career choices and development. Although the issue of equal opportunities is included in the training of career advisers in many countries, evidence suggests that it is not transferred to the work situation. Often, guidance provided to young women and men is "**gender blind**". A procedure which is believed to be neutral, but which intrinsically reflects gender stereotypes, is being applied and is failing to help young women and men to make the most of their potential. Developing "**gender conscious**" counselling and guidance has made a difference. This involved continuing education for career advisors and also the training of trainers to educate future counsellors. In [Denmark](#), EQUAL good practice inspired political decision makers when they were drafting and passing the new Danish Act on Educational and Vocational Guidance in 2003 and it provided input for the new diploma programme for vocational counsellors implemented in 2004.

EQUAL gender equality courses enabled managers, lecturers, trainers and support staff from further and higher education and work-based training, **to meet the learning needs of women when studying in male domains**. For example, 400 career counsellors and 500 lecturers and trainers in 100 organisations throughout the UK were trained to create a learning environment which was conducive for women. The [training](#) package examines the learning styles of women, curriculum

content and recruitment and provides examples of practice that enhances self-esteem and confidence. The package has met with a huge demand, particularly from work-based training providers that have to comply with national targets for workforce development, which include gender and diversity.

To fill the alarming skills gaps, EQUAL partners [in Denmark](#) have been **attracting men to work in the care sector**. A group of male care workers was trained as “ambassadors”, dismantling myths about women being predestined for this kind of work. A combination of awareness raising and training for vocational counsellors, teachers and senior care staff, succeeded in introducing change in an entirely feminine training and work environment. The Danish experience shows how a push for the recruitment of men to teaching positions and on-the-job guidance can increase the presence of male role models - a pre-condition for overcoming gender segregation in this sector.

2.3. WIDER PARTNERSHIPS ARE BOOSTING EQUAL’S EDUCATIONAL STRATEGIES

Forging partnerships with other local, regional and even national players has clearly maximised the impact of EQUAL on education and training. Wider cooperation has often helped to improve the delivery and effectiveness of the existing mainstream provision - not only for the benefit of women but also of men. Successful examples include:

- **Linking new education and training approaches to the priorities of territorial employment policies** resulted in a smoother transition for women (and men) from education/training to work. Involving local or regional employment offices and other relevant public authorities from an early stage enabled EQUAL partnerships to tailor their training and education schemes to existing skills gaps and labour shortages. This has greatly enhanced the job opportunities of the EQUAL target groups. At the same time, these alliances have led employment related key players to value and use the potential of women or men for broadening the skills-base of the workforce in gender segregated areas of the labour market.
- **Cooperating with companies, employers' organisations and trade unions** helped to secure work-experience placements for students and/or trainees. Often those placements proved to be real stepping-stones to a career in a non-traditional field of occupation. In [Finland](#), an employers' organisation organised and financed a national competition and award for young inventors who had to develop “technologies for everyday life” in mixed teams of boys and girls. Other companies donated time with managers or technical specialists acting as teachers or trainers in some of the EQUAL projects. In the face of the up-coming demographic changes, all these activities helped employers to attract more women to form a greater part of the workforce of the future.
- **Gender equality bodies and NGOs were important partners for teachers, trainers and career counsellors** when it came to designing and implementing strategies to reach the target groups whose special needs EQUAL sought to address. In particular, women from ethnic minority communities who are often difficult to reach through “official channels” could be contacted through networks and meeting points which had been established by gender equality bodies, women’s organisations and grass root groups. Moreover, when incorporating a gender dimension into training and education schemes, EQUAL partnerships in many countries benefited from the knowledge and expertise of these agencies and groupings.

The examples mentioned above represent only a small part of the wealth of good practices generated by EQUAL throughout Europe. Based on these good practices, the **European Thematic Group on Equal Opportunities (ETG 4)** has constructed the European Model of comprehensive approaches to gender equality, which combines strategies and concepts to dismantle the gender gaps and segregation of the labour market; to improve the reconciliation of working and private life for women and men; and to overcome traditional gender roles and stereotypes. The model incorporates all the ingredients required to design and implement comprehensive gender equality policies and practices in a territorial context. It presents the “ideal” composition of avenues to gender equality which – so far – cannot be found in any Member State. The model can serve as a blueprint for all policy makers who are committed to making gender equality a reality for women and men in their territories. More information can be found on the [gender equality pages of the EQUAL website](#).

http://europa.eu.int/comm/employment_social/equal/activities/etg4_en.cfm