

A JOB MACHINE FOR WOMEN: EQUAL CONTRIBUTES TO IMPROVING FAMILY SERVICES

GENDER DISPARITIES IN THE EUROPEAN LABOUR MARKET

Unemployment and the gender gaps in employment are burning economic issues. In order to tackle these problems, the EU must tap its largest pool of unused potential: women. Whilst there has been a gradual increase of women in the labour market over the last decade, from less than 50% to 55.6%, there are still large disparities between women and men in employment. Women with low levels of education and older women show significantly lower employment rates, as is the case for women with children and care responsibilities for other dependants. The sharing of family duties is still far from being a reality for most couples and in many Member States women continue to be more vulnerable to unemployment and inactivity than men.

The lack of adequate care services is one of the most crucial obstacles to labour market access for women with young children and/or ageing parents. This statement has been repeated in all [Joint Employment Reports](#) since 1998.

CARE SERVICES CENTRAL TO BRIDGING THE GENDER GAPS

Both the [Employment Task Force](#) and the [European Spring Summit 2004](#) emphasised the importance of the gender dimension for employment growth. In order to reach the [Lisbon](#) target of an overall employment rate of 70% by 2010, the specific target of 60% for female employment must be achieved. By the same deadlines, the number of childcare facilities in each Member State should be increased to 33% for 0-3 year olds and to 90% for children of 3 years up until mandatory school age.

Whilst a number of Member States are already meeting the childcare targets for pre-school children, the provision for babies and toddlers is alarmingly poor. In most cases the existing services cover less than 10% of the demand. Even countries with good track records in childcare are - due to increasingly irregular working hours - experiencing an urgent need for more flexible services, longer opening hours and after-school care.

In view of the ageing population, care for old and frail people is becoming a policy priority throughout the European Union. Between 2000 and 2010 the number of persons of 80 years and over will increase by 35%. By 2010, only 10% of persons in this age group will be living in a collective household; 44% will be living alone.

WIN-WIN SITUATIONS FOR WOMEN WITH AND WITHOUT A JOB

EQUAL partnerships that focus on gender equality have developed [good practices](#) that can help to raise female employment rates. The creation of new care and other family support services has generated a **double effect: jobs for unemployed women with no/low formal qualifications and labour market access for other women** - unemployed or inactive - who previously could not seek gainful employment due to the lack of care services.

Particularly in Belgium, France, Italy, Luxemburg and Spain, EQUAL was able to create this kind of change through using a **multi-faceted approach** that consists of various tried and tested elements. The decisive factor is the combination of several or all of the following components.

Laying the foundation for equal opportunities: basic training and accreditation
Integrating assessment and the validation of informal skills (Accreditation of Prior Learning - APL or Bilan de compétences) into basic training for both childcare and elderly care has significantly contributed to sustainable labour market integration of long-term unemployed and inactive women. Valuing and certifying skills, acquired, for instance, through raising a family and running a household, led to recognised educational credentials for a target group that does not meet the requirements for regular care training carried out in tertiary education. The approach not only supports employment prospects, but also creates opportunities for further education and life-long learning.

Amongst the approaches specific to long-term unemployed and inactive women, some were especially successful:

- Using a **portfolio method**, where prior learning and new achievements were collected in an individual progress record and recognised as equal to the requirements of formal education and training. In some cases this led to a lower secondary school certificate and in others to a qualification allowing for access to higher-level regular care training.
- To accommodate the needs of inexperienced learners, the **schemes were modular and shorter than regular training**, but by no means a low-level version of the established syllabus. They were **focused on the needs of specific age groups**. For instance, training for after-school care was explicitly designed to enable women to run attractive programmes for school children including subjects such as environmental protection, gardening, recycling, handiwork, music, theatre, body expression, popular games and sports. Elderly care training gave participants the skills to carry out tasks such as basic nursing, preparing dietary meals or doing housework, which are complementary to mainstream care services.
- The schemes were highly work-based and combined practical training with theoretical instruction. Work placements in either existing care facilities or in new infrastructures, set up thanks to EQUAL, enabled women to immediately apply their new competencies and interact with more experienced care staff. On-going supervision, networks allowing for exchange and support amongst colleagues and - in the case of elderly care - meetings with the professional care-givers that had helped the same old person or couple, further strengthened the performance of the new carers and created a sound basis for a lasting relationship with the "customers", i.e. senior citizens or parents.

From training to the workplace

Past experiences have shown that training women from disadvantaged groups and supporting them on the open labour market is not enough to secure lasting employment. Therefore EQUAL has combined training efforts with the setting up of additional care services, both institutional and home-based, thus creating a large number of new jobs. To prevent disadvantaged women from falling back into unemployment or inactivity, the partnerships managed to have the new facilities running as soon as the training was completed. Close cooperation with local governments helped expand the services of existing care centres and establish new service enterprises. Positive outcomes were greatly facilitated by:

- **Involving not only the social service departments, but also those for economic development.** Their insisting on skills gaps and company needs influenced municipalities in favour of more and better care. EQUAL partners successfully convinced authorities to extend the opening hours of their childcare centres and to open new centres for very small children and/or elderly persons in a number of local communities situated close to busy industrial and commercial areas with unmet labour needs.
- **Joining forces with economic development agencies and business consultants** to support social economy enterprises or micro companies from the very early stages through to start-up phase and well beyond. Besides accommodating the specific needs of individual women with entrepreneurial potential, EQUAL encouraged local NGOs to launch service cooperatives to avoid placing excessive business responsibilities on a group of women that are ill-equipped to take on that challenge.

Linking care to other family support services

Preliminary studies helped to **explore how the organisation of care and other family support services could boost female employment** and help improve the work-life-balance of parents. Providing services to alleviate daily housework and suitable transport proved very effective ways to achieve this goal:

- Professionally led service agencies, set up thanks to EQUAL in France, Italy and Spain, turned **domestic tasks into regular jobs with social security coverage**. The same approach worked successfully for so-called odd jobs ranging from minor household repairs to accompanying children or old people to leisure activities or doctors' appointments. The service agencies have an increasing demand for many small tasks and hire the service workers for regular part-time or full-time jobs. Another solution is to

help the women find customers, and help these customers with the necessary administrative procedures, such as calculating wages and formulating work contracts.

- In areas that are not well served by public transport, EQUAL has supported **new ways of commuting**. In one remote rural area an EQUAL partnership bought mini vans and trained unemployed women as drivers in order to help them start a regular service. A similar venture was launched in France, but also introduced car sharing and bicycle rentals as low-budget alternatives. In both cases jobs were created and filled with formerly unemployed women (and men), whilst increased mobility opened employment prospects for others.

Creating public-private-partnerships for sustainable employment

In the face of increasingly tight public budgets, new financing models developed in the framework of EQUAL were key to ensuring the sustainability of the new services mentioned above. Many projects launched public-private partnerships, involving local and regional authorities, employers, social partners, NGOs and users. The EQUAL partnership approach proved to be an ideal way of soliciting the commitment of all those players.

- Benefiting from increased productivity and reduced absenteeism led employers to understand that **financial support to needs-tailored care is a good business investment**. Large companies contributed to set-up and running costs of local facilities, or, less frequently, created company-based childcare subsidised by the municipality. Even SMEs that had found such solutions beyond their means became partners in local care cooperatives. Tax incentives, as introduced in Italy, also played an important role.
- Realising that **adequate transport enabled people to take advantage of "more distant" job opportunities** stimulated key players to take action to ensure the survival of the services. Companies, local associations and tourist agencies became regular customers and thus helped to consolidate the new ventures. In a rural area with high unemployment, EQUAL was instrumental to creating a legal framework that allows small municipalities to sub-contract transport services to the new businesses.
- EQUAL developed and strengthened two **promising financing models**: one is working with State service vouchers for disadvantaged families and single parents, the other is marketing commercial services for people who can afford to pay for this kind of support. In a few countries, partnerships have succeeded in convincing companies to include these services in the benefit packages they offer their employees.

Mainstreaming equal care work approaches

EQUAL partnerships were very aware of the risk of splitting the labour market into two tiers by introducing a job category for care workers with lower qualification levels. Integrating the new approaches into regular training and pay systems was therefore central to their activities. Success factors for those mainstreaming strategies included:

- Action plans with National Governments that included **new vocational profiles for workers** in childcare ("day mothers"), in elderly care ("social care or care assistants") and in family support services ("daily life assistants") **in the regular care training provision** of countries where no APL systems exist. In Luxembourg, for instance, the Government will use the basic childcare training with inbuilt APL as a model for training in other economic sectors.
- **Involving social partners in the recognition process from early on** facilitated the negotiation of proper working conditions and pay. Trade unions also played an important role in developing agreements that became part of local or regional strategies to combat unemployment, inactivity and low pay traps, as well as the informal care market and its precarious employment conditions.
- **Transferring and adapting models** from Member States, such as France or the United Kingdom that have established APL systems and using their good practices as stepping stones to provide access to higher-level education in the social and health care sector for disadvantaged groups.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

EQUAL good practices, including a wealth of curricula, methodologies and tools, are available to support governments at national, regional and local level that seek to tap into yet unused female potential. Governments are encouraged to link their strategies for increasing women's employment to economic development and educational policies. This is in line with the obligation of the Amsterdam Treaty to integrate gender mainstreaming into all policy areas. Yet, given the gaps between female and male employment rates, specific actions for women must still be considered as part of the approach. The EQUAL results form a solid foundation for the development of crucial strategies:

- **Review education and training systems** and **ensure** that they contain "**low threshold access routes**" to recognised qualifications for people with no/low formal skills. Introducing basic training as a recognised stepping stone to other and more qualified education in the social and health care sector is only a first step. Attracting men to the care sector should be part of the strategy and efforts should be made to ensure that these occupations become promising career paths.
- **Set up a National Action Plan for childcare** oriented at the numerical targets of the Lisbon Process and ensuring affordable, good quality services. Tax incentives for employers who create company-based childcare, provide financial support to services offered by local communities or "buy" places in social economy enterprises or small businesses are recommended as a key element of these plans.
- **Exploit the employment potential of domestic services** by establishing agencies that function as employers of service workers and have the capacity to tailor real jobs from the variety of tasks requested by customers. Service vouchers for disadvantaged families, but also for senior citizens in need of home-based daily life support, provide a viable base for start-up, particularly during the early stages of developing a market for the services
- Include a **gender dimension in the publicly subsidised support packages for business creation and entrepreneurship** and require the relevant agencies to develop women-specific approaches to help unemployed women develop sound businesses offering care and other family support services