

## DISMANTLING THE ROOT CAUSES OF THE GENDER PAY GAP



“Equal pay for equal work“- who would not agree with this simple principle? “Klar”, say the Austrians with emphasis, and the name of the EQUAL Development Partnership

(DP) “KLARA!” alluded to this fact. However, the exclamation mark and the feminine “a” at the end of the project’s name indicate that things are not as simple for women. In fact, Austria belongs to the group of EU Member States that have the highest gender pay gaps. In certain regions and occupational fields, women earn up to 40% less than men. According to recent research, this gross imbalance can only partly be explained by differences in education, age or job category. In fact, in Austria these studies show that 82% of the income difference is caused by sheer discrimination.

The KLARA! DP worked on this complicated phenomenon from an holistic perspective and sought to analyse the interlinked policies and practices that are influencing income differences. This included looking at the distribution of the paid and unpaid work of women and men, their access to training, higher and continuing education, the lack of care services for children and other dependants, the societal acceptance or non-acceptance of working mothers, and also the existing legal situation and practices of collective bargaining. The DP was led by the [Netzwerk österreichischer Frauen- und Mädchenberatungsstellen](#), the umbrella organisation of 40 counselling and support centres for women and girls operating in all parts of the country. KLARA! carefully monitored equal treatment policy measures with regard to their impact on income differences and, in parallel, developed solutions to be implemented at the different levels of policy and practice. Creating a system of indicators to study and evaluate equality policies and their effects on equal pay was an important part of this task.

### A MULTI-LEVEL APPROACH TO TRIGGERING CHANGE

KLARA! structured its activities into five sub-projects, or modules that addressed the major causes of pay discrimination. The modules were implemented by appropriate organisations and NGOs. At regular intervals, the DP’s steering group brought these operational partners together with its strategic partners. These included the Head of Unit responsible for equal treatment in the private and the public sector at the Ministry of Health and Women, a member of the Office of the Federal Attorney for Equal Treatment of Women and Men in the World of Work, representatives of the social partners and of the gender equality unit at the University of Vienna. *“Our strategic partners made invaluable contributions to the project”,* said Hannah Steiner who was one of the coordinators of the counselling centres’ network and also the DP manager, *“ they provided time, expertise, useful contacts and also resources such as hosting seminars and events in their locations or acting as trainers and speakers. They really shared our concern about the pay gap and they have come to co-own the DP’s various activities.”*

The five modules (M1 - M5) were organised in parallel and the following results were emerging at the end of the project’s lifespan:

- M1 succeeded to strengthen the capacity of the Austrian counselling and support centres for women and girls by extending their expertise so that they can now respond to the growing demands related to gender equality and particularly to pay discrimination;
- M2 investigated and validated equality policies with special attention to their impact on equal pay;
- M3 developed and implemented a continuing education programme that enables gender equality specialists to acquire recognised qualifications as “equal pay agents;”
- M4 was entirely dedicated to alleviating the situation of disadvantaged women who are fighting for daily survival, as they suffer from alarming pay discrimination. It offered a

mentoring programme that made a real difference for women immigrants and asylum seekers.

- M5 targeted decision-makers and key actors, as well as the public at large. It used different dissemination strategies including an itinerant exhibition, advertising, widely disseminated free (post)cards that carry equal pay messages and movies.

## CREATING GENDER POOLS ACROSS AUSTRIA

An essential idea of KLARA! was to strengthen the potential of the existing women's resource centres and NGOs. This was done through staff training and the development of tools to promote gender mainstreaming and equal pay issues, which helped to transform them into regional competence centres for gender and pay equity. KLARA! called them "Gender Pools" and was working, in particular, to increase the capacity and outreach of three centres that are located in remote areas.

The Gender Pools are now better able to respond to the increasing demand of women who feel powerless in the face of pay discrimination and are in need of information, counselling and support. *"Moreover, the centres can provide equal pay related knowledge and expertise to mainstream organisations, enterprises and key players such as trade unions and works councils in their region"* said Itta Tenschert, the coordinator of the Gender Pools. Thanks to EQUAL, a whole range of awareness-raising and training materials has been developed and adapted to specific regional contexts and needs. Compiled as a "Gender Kit", it is a valuable resource, as is the analysis of job-specific women's networks and information on financing models for equality projects which are available in the "Resource Guide" on KLARA!'s homepage.

## FOCUS GROUPS REVEALING CAUSES AND SOLUTIONS



Led by Marion Breiter, who is part of the coordination team at the Vienna-based headquarters of the counselling centres' network, three focus groups met at regular intervals. They brought together gender and equality experts from Vienna, Styria and Tyrol. Their tasks were to identify the obstacles to equal pay, to find examples of viable solutions and to make recommendations to key players and policy makers.

KLARA! imported the focus group method from its Spanish transnational partner and found it to be an efficient way of gaining a lot of insights in relatively short time. One of the results of those groups is a questionnaire that was used to interview personnel managers from different sized companies, business consultants, trade unionists, representatives of employers' organisations, researchers and NGOs. The interviews helped to deepen the understanding of practices and experiences. *"Sometimes the interviewees are amazingly open about how they discriminate against women,"* reported Marion Breiter, *"some of them said that for a company it is convenient that women usually ask for less money than men and why should the employer then run after them and tell them they were entitled to more."* According to KLARA!'s partners, this kind of treatment is not only common in the service and retail sector but also in continuing education, where many women work part-time or on fixed-term contracts. Combating pay discrimination is not so easy because, in Austria, people don't talk about money and keep their income and financial situation strictly under wraps. *"There are even enterprises that oblige employees to not discuss their income with colleagues and have included this obligation in their work contracts. The Federal Attorney for Gender Equality is currently investigating whether the inclusion of such a clause is legal... To break this pattern we have created exercises to help people "unlearn" being taciturn about money and we ran them in all our modules"*, said Marion. She added that Austria should improve its legislation and follow the example of Sweden where companies are required to publish the incomes of their male and female employees. The National Gender Equality Agency in Sweden checks these annual reports and if it discovers pay gaps that are extremely wide and appear to be unjustified, it undertakes further enquiries and can force the enterprise concerned to establish an action plan for equal pay.

In 2007, the focus group exercise was completed, the results evaluated and a Gender Pay Forum established. It has meanwhile become a permanent, high profile platform with key actors reaching out to convince peers of the necessity of action for equal pay.

## EQUAL PAY AGENTS – A NEW PROFESSIONAL PROFILE

*“The phenomenon of gender pay gaps is so complex and has so many interlinked causes that, even for well seasoned gender equality experts, it is difficult to master the issue”,* said Kerstin Witt-Loew from the [SOFIA Institute for Holistic and Applied Social Research](#).

On behalf of the DP, this institute developed a curriculum to enable people to gain this specific expertise. The concept also laid the foundations of a new professional profile - the equal pay agent. The training programme reflects the steps that are required for the work of such an agent. These include the analysis of the situation, the decision to intervene in a situation assessed as discriminatory, the implementation of a solution or remedy and the marketing and dissemination of the approach. The scheme is structured in blocks of three-day seminars spread out over one year. In addition, periods for self-study, work in peer groups and the development and evaluation of concrete equal pay projects were scheduled. Issues on the agenda included legal information, macro-economic developments and their impact on women, gender mainstreaming and gender budgeting. More practically oriented aspects of the curriculum focused on equal pay actions and interventions at company level, negotiation, self-marketing and public relations skills, as well as networking and lobbying. The scheme was piloted within the continuing education programme of the University of Vienna and is now offered in cooperation with Federal Institute for Adult Education.



*“The approach is interdisciplinary and really innovative”,* explained Kerstin Witt-Loew, *“we are working on the pay gap from different perspectives, looking at it from a legal, economic, political, historical, sociological and psychological point of view. So far experts have studied and dealt with the issue from a political or legal angle. Our approach also takes account of the different fields of equality work from which our participants come.”* In fact, the 15 trainees represented public gender equality bodies, trade unions and works councils, research institutions, business consultancies specialising in gender equality, political parties and NGOs from throughout Austria. The demand has been very high and even after the end of the project there is still a waiting list of people who are eager to take part in future courses. However, the happy 15 were highly motivated and cannot praise enough their ambitious programme: *“Our lecturers were carefully selected. I had the feeling to be learning from the best experts in the country and that I was part of a future-oriented, pioneering process”,* says Maria Schwarz-Wölzl, Senior Researcher at the Centre for Social Innovation, and she continues, *“I am convinced that the empowerment potential will lead me from a future-oriented vision to concrete action in the near future.”*

The test run was quite successful. The combination of theoretical and practical work focusing on the different thematic aspects of equal pay was well balanced and obviously enabled participants to understand the interconnections between the individual, organisational and societal problems to be tackled. They not only valued the opportunity to design and implement their own concrete projects, but also the feedback and networking amongst equality workers from different backgrounds.

## MENTORING FOR EQUALITY

Implemented by [Orient Express](#), a Vienna based counselling centre for migrant women, Module 4 focused on the situation of women who are often denied access to paid employment and equal treatment on the labour market. The innovation of M4 is to use mentoring, which is better known as a tool for career development, as a low-threshold strategy to empower migrant women, supporting them in getting to know and use their rights and enabling them to take their lives into their own hands. Astrid Strießnig, a counsellor at Orient Express, sums up the experience of the programme. *“At the beginning we intended to test our mentoring approach with women working in the low wage sector. We also thought that mentoring could benefit unemployed or inactive*

women migrants by accompanying them during job hunting and the early stages of employment and settling into the world of work. We discovered that many candidates had participated in the so-called labour market orientation courses of the employment office without ever finding paid work. They had no clue about mentoring and said they would only participate if we guaranteed them a job. Obviously we are quite unable to do that, but we also found that our offer met the interest and needs of women asylum seekers who are almost entirely excluded from the labour market. In the end, we decided to divide our nine places for mentees between migrants with recognised legal status and work permit and asylum seekers who live in permanent insecurity, between hope for a permanent stay in Austria and fear of being sent back to their country of origin.”



Thanks to Orient Express’ networks within the migrant communities and its experience with counselling and supporting migrant women, Astrid Strießnig was able to recruit nine female mentors, two thirds with an migrant background who have “made it” onto the Austrian labour market. Despite the thorough preparatory training, the mentors often found it hard to provide the kind of support they thought their mentees needed or expected. They encountered situations which they felt were beyond the help that they could provide such as women who feed large families with a tiny salary from a cleaning job, or women putting up with mobbing and racism in the workplace or doing unpaid overtime until they broke-down, driven by the fear of losing their job. The Orient Express team offered extra-time and all their expertise to support these mentors through individual coaching. After nine months, “successful itineraries of small steps” were appearing that showed that the approach is working, even for women whose cases had been labelled as hopeless. Astrid talks about a success story of a Turkish craft master who runs her own hairdressing parlour and whose commitment and support has opened up a new life to a 22 year-old Armenian asylum seeker. *“At first the mentor was desperate, because her mentee spoke only a few words of German. They had no common language and had to communicate with hands and feet, as we say in Austria. But the message that there was sympathy and support must have come across, as well as the push to do something about the language. The young woman improved her proficiency in German at amazing speed.”* It turned out that she had an upper secondary school certificate and some experience in fashion design. Her certificate was not recognised and, as an asylum seeker, she was not entitled to undergo training and there was no hope of employment as long as Austrians and other EU citizens could be found to fill any job she might have applied for. The crafts master used all her contacts and enquired relentlessly about possible loopholes in the regulations. Her labours bore fruit, as she found that not only could asylum seekers who are under 15 go to school but so could young people in their twenties. Also, whilst asylum seekers are not permitted to undertake initial vocational training, they can benefit from work experience placements. Kerstin tells the happy ending to this story *“the successful mentor located a school with a programme for young adults that included a scholarship. The successful mentee was accepted and while she was waiting for the course to begin, she experienced working life as an intern in her mentor’s shop.”*

The experience of KLARA!’s mentoring programme confirms research findings which indicate that the majority of migrant women who have found employment are working far beneath the level of their qualifications. One engineer worked as a nursing assistant in a care institution, and she had been severely discriminated against for years. The mentoring was able to empower her to deal with an extremely difficult and challenging process. Her mentor accompanied her both emotionally and practically in leaving her job, filing a court case through the workers chamber and finding a new job where the pay takes account of her education and work experience.

Mentors and mentees had their own group meetings and networks that, according to the DP, not only helped them to support each other, but also to build bridges between the different ethnic communities. The project’s firm insistence that the mentoring couples had to come from different cultural backgrounds and to use German as a common language led to many contacts and friendships that had previously been unthinkable. Together with other EQUAL DPs that were also focusing on the mentoring of disadvantaged women, Astrid Strießnig pushed her way into the illustrious Mentoring Club of the Minister for Health and Women. In a joint effort, these DPs succeeded to make policy makers and other key players understand that mentoring is not only a tool for female career advancement, but also for groups of women whose potential is often hidden. Promoting their empowerment requires regular financing of specialised projects or infrastructures and cannot rely on unpaid work and the commitment of mentors. Thanks to

EQUAL funding, KLARA! was able to pay a fee to its mentors and, through its strategic partners, it succeeded to convince the relevant authorities at national, regional and local level that encouraging institutions such as Orient Express to provide mentoring is not enough, and that appropriate and reliable funding is necessary.

## **MAKING A DIFFERENCE AT NATIONAL AND TRANSNATIONAL LEVEL**

It may take more time to identify the sustainability and lasting impact of KLARA!'s approach, but, what is already evident is the strong empowering effect on all of the organisations and people involved. Women's resource centres and NGOs and the different strategic partner organisations are all benefiting from the capacity building provided by the EQUAL project. Their passionate advocacy for equal pay is coupled with well-founded knowledge and skills and they can tap into a closely knit network of gender experts. This wealth of special expertise is increasingly in demand by policy makers and other key players, which is a good base for mainstreaming strategies.

**Die Berufswahl entscheidet über das Einkommen.**



**Frauen verdienen mehr!**

The task of the last sub-project was to disseminate the products and tools KLARA! has developed so as to bring on board more key players who are in a position to mainstream the DP's achievements and to raise the awareness of the public at large about pay discrimination. This included a series of events, spots displayed in movie theatres, a movie and [free cards](#) disseminated through the counselling centres' networks and the media contacts and channels of the DP's strategic partners. There was also a national campaign for equal pay, and an [exhibition](#) that continues

to travel through all of the Austrian Länder. The slogan of the campaign, "Frauen verdienen mehr", is based on word play. It can be read as "women earn more" but also as "women deserve more," as the German verb "verdienen" has both meanings. The various spots and free cards bear the alarming message that women deserve more than they are actually paid and they are intended to encourage key players and the women themselves to work together for a future in which they will finally earn more and pay equity will be established.

Equal pay campaigns are also an element of KLARA!'s transnational partnership, [WEGA](#), which linked EQUAL DPs from four more Member States: [Spain](#), [Italy](#), [Slovakia](#) and [Slovenia](#). Besides the issue of the gender pay gap, the WEGA Network focused on multiculturalism, quality criteria for gender training and gender tools and on gender budgeting. More information on [WEGA's](#) activities and achievements can be found in a separate document.

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