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BUILDING BRIDGES TO DEVELOP FEMALE POTENTIAL

LINKING GENDER EQUALITY TO REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

FUTURA is an acronym for “Frauen, Unternehmen, Technik und regionaler Arbeitsmarkt” (women, enterprises, technologies and the regional labour market) and the name of a German EQUAL Development Partnership (DP). Based in the north-western part of the Land of North-Rhine-Westphalia, FUTURA is building bridges: between women and technology; between women and enterprises; and between women and vocational counsellors, training providers, municipalities and employers. Led by Berufsbildungsstätte Westmünsterland GmbH (BBS), a rural vocational training centre, the DP incorporates three other training providers, an ICT company and three organisations focusing on the labour market situation of women and their access to future oriented jobs.



The DP covers two geographical areas, Westmünsterland and the Dortmund agglomeration, which are really quite different from each other. Whilst the first is a vast rural area that is still marked by its predominantly agricultural past and is home to a large variety of SMEs, the latter shows clear traces of its history in mining and metallurgy, and its companies are larger and include multinational corporations. Both areas emerged from structural change better equipped and stronger than other regions in Germany, with growth clusters in ICT, robotics, electronics, transport and e-logistics. There are, however, pockets where economic development has been much less successful, which have persistent long-term unemployment and decreasing numbers of businesses in trades and crafts. In addition, the regional job market, which had been developing for the previous two decades, has been on a down turn since 2002, affected by the general high level of unemployment in Germany. At the same time, recently-created and well-established businesses operating in new growth sectors were not always able to find the qualified workforce they needed.

The challenge identified by the DP was to promote gender diversity and thus to contribute to local and regional development. This means that the DP’s partners have committed themselves to convince employers of the potential of women of different ages, educational backgrounds and life situations, and to train and support these different female target groups to access new, mainly male-dominated growth areas and to improve their careers prospects.

A LIFE-CYCLE APPROACH

The DP runs eight sub-projects that are targeting crucial stages in a typical female life-cycle. The first cluster of these activities is reaching out to girls and young women. It includes vocational information and guidance workshops at the end of lower secondary school, a training scheme for teachers to support them in encouraging non-traditional vocational choices, coaching and mentoring for female apprentices in technical occupations and a “training management” programme to help trainers to provide optimal support to trainees.

The second cluster serves the needs of mature women. The offers range from counselling and guidance for jobless women and those returning to the labour market after having raised a family,

to career development seminars for employed women. Up-skilling, retraining and support for business creation or for the take-over of existing companies are also provided.

The sub-projects are adapting their activities to the needs of women and enterprises in the two regional areas. The larger companies in and around Dortmund are more open than the rural SMEs, to incorporating gender equality issues into their human resource development policies. In Westmünsterland, traditional gender roles and stereotypes are more persistent and the DP is using all the contacts and networks of its many partners to push for change.

STARTING EARLY IS PARAMOUNT

“It is important that girls are supported in considering a large variety of vocational choices and this should happen as early as possible,” says Christine Beuker, who heads up the sub-project that targets girls during the last years of secondary school. *“We had been stimulated by our former Swedish transnational partners who run activities focusing on gender and career choices in kindergartens and primary schools and originally FUTURA aimed to start earlier than it actually does. But such an early start seemed to be a far cry from the labour market and therefore was not accepted by the school authorities.”*



The guidance workshops offered by the DP last for ten weeks and take place in the afternoon after the end of lessons, always on the premises of the schools that have opted to participate. This is much longer than the usual one-day information events, which are organised jointly by schools and local employment offices, and in which gender issues are confined to a slot of one or two hours. On average, a dozen girls take part in the workshops, many of whom have no clear ideas about their professional future. Christine Beuker believes that the fact that they dedicate so much of their free time to the workshop shows that they realise the importance of

this decision-making process during the last stage of their school years.

Each workshop consists of a number of components which include:

- Planning life and career path: “My life in ten years...”;
- Assessment and testing of talents and skills and the exploration of vocational profiles that match these capacities, as well as the interests of the girls;
- Visits to companies: male and female domains;
- Acquiring a more realistic idea of the cost of daily life: what is the price of rent, food and leisure compared to the income of an apprentice and, later, of a qualified employee;
- Self-assertiveness training;
- Mothers telling the story of their own vocational choices and training;
- Summing up and revisiting life and career planning.

Particularly in the rural areas, the girls’ dreams of a satisfying adult life tended to be centred on a husband with a good income, a family with two children, a comfortable house and a car. Their visions of future work were fairly narrow and focused mainly on sales and medical assistance jobs or hairdressing. There was a strong desire to ensure that the chosen occupation would offer good opportunities for part-time work, since this was seen as the key to reconciling work and family life. At the end of the ten weeks, the ideas about jobs and career paths had changed somewhat, and the girls had become more open to looking at other training opportunities, including crafts, electronics and ICT. This broadening of horizons also had an empowering effect on the choice of work experience placements which pupils of this age must undertake. The girls were more courageous and keen to explore non-traditional fields. A factor which also made them reconsider their choices was the pay gap between typical female jobs and technical posts.



TOWARDS MAINSTREAMING AND SUSTAINABILITY

In order to ensure that the new model could be used by secondary schools on a regular basis, the DP developed a continuing education programme for teachers. Participants came from both Hauptschule and Realschule (the lower and middle levels of German secondary education) and they found that the scheme helped them to take account of the gender dimension in vocational guidance, which is not normally part of the curriculum in North-Rhine-Westphalia. Both the girls' and the teachers' schemes stand a good chance of being mainstreamed at different levels. One school decided that the vocational choices workshops should be one of their optional courses from which students must choose a certain number during their last two years at school. Other schools are about to follow suit. Joining forces with a "Learning Region" project that is funded by the mainstream ESF and includes teacher training also turned out to be a good move. Thanks to this cooperation, the two projects succeeded in making their work known to a larger number of schools.

SUPPORT DURING TRANSITION AND INITIAL TRAINING

Another component of the DP's activities for young women is the needs-tailored support that accompanies school leavers who are seeking an apprenticeship within the German Dual System. These schemes also provide advice on alternative options if the women cannot find a training place in a company. Furthermore, the project offers counselling and coaching for women undergoing initial training, either inside or outside enterprises. At the same time, trainers, HR managers or owners/managers of small companies are invited to take up the DP's offer of counselling and training. The idea is to help both trainees and companies to make the most of initial training and to prevent low performance and drop out. It is not easy to convince companies of the value of this method. Many declined the offer, arguing that the use of this support service by apprentices and trainers during working hours would be too time consuming and costly.



When it comes to other forms of initial training in schools or training centres, the approach works much more successfully. Melanie, who is in her second year of training in system electronics, is a good example of what continuous support can achieve. She is the only woman in the whole ICT section of a vocational training centre. Inspired by her father, who is an ICT specialist, she started to develop a passion for computers that has influenced her career choice. The fact that she could not find an apprenticeship in the Dual System had discouraged her. Now, Christine Beuker acts as Melanie's coach. She makes sure the young woman gets extra support in subjects such as maths, whenever necessary. She has also helped her with role play to overcome her shyness and to strengthen her ability to deal with conflict and problems. Melanie says: *"It is very good that Christine is always there, listening to me and guiding me in finding my own solutions."* Asked whether she feels she can match the boys in terms of knowledge and skills, she replies: *"Yes I can, but I sometimes lack confidence. Working with Christine helps me to become stronger."*

AN INNOVATIVE RETURNERS SCHEME: NEEDS-TAILORED SUPPORT FOR MATURE WOMEN

After the so-called family break, women in Germany tend to return later to the labour market than in other EU countries. *"In our area, returning to gainful employment is particularly difficult,"* explains Mia Senden, from the Berufsbildungsstätte Westmünsterland (BBS) who, together with Torsten Henseler, coordinates the EQUAL project. *"This is due to the lack of childcare and also to very traditional family patterns. This means that there is a great risk of women's professional skills becoming out-dated and being no longer in demand. There is a huge need to help those women returners adapt their personal competences and qualifications to the state-of-the art in the jobs for which they had been trained years ago. Indeed, many have to consider retraining for a completely different occupation, because certain types of work no longer exist."*

Despite the growing demand of local SMEs for employees with skills that are crucial for their competitiveness in new growth areas, training providers operating in the area are having problems catering for these needs. *"Making training measures cost-effective and eventually eligible for funding by the employment offices requires a large enough group of participants,"* says Torsten Henseler, *"for women living in a rural environment and heading for non-traditional jobs this is almost impossible. We just cannot ever recruit enough women for training"*

programmes that lead to recognised qualifications in a specific occupation.” FUTURA has found a solution to this dilemma that serves both the women wishing to return to the labour market and the companies seeking to attract skilled labour with qualifications that match their needs. The DP has created a model that is based on the possibility of “individual company-based retraining” that is granted by German legislation to adults who want to acquire a *Berufsabschluss*. Similar to initial training in the Dual System, the practical part of retraining takes place in a company, whilst the theoretical aspects are covered by vocational schools that the trainees have to attend once a week. Adult trainees can opt for full-time or part-time training, the latter extending the duration from two to three years. Their income is either a “trainee salary,” which is paid by the employer or a “training and living allowance,” which is provided by the employment office. At the end of the training they have to sit an exam at the relevant Chamber which is a craft or trade association.

FUTURA designed a pathway approach that supports women in choosing from the 230 recognised occupations requiring initial training (*Ausbildungsberufe*) that exist in this area of Germany. This approach emphasises the promising career prospects in new and so far male-dominated fields, and also helps the participants to find an employer willing to accept them as trainees. During a preparatory phase of six to twelve months, the participants are offered help in catching up with the necessary basics of general education that had originally been acquired a long time ago. This “prep-scheme” provided by the BBS training centre incorporates group learning and individual lessons tailored to the needs of each woman and it creates a sound foundation for ICT and occupation-specific skills. Once hired as trainees, the women continue to receive individual support to master all the challenges both in the workplace and at the vocational school. Finally, the support scheme includes preparation for taking the examination.

So far only four women have embarked on this ambitious pathway and they are heading for occupations that are slightly less non-traditional than the project team expected - media design, office management, foreign trade and industrial administration. This retraining is an enormous challenge for the women. They work the usual eight hours in the companies that increasingly treat them as fully-fledged employees and then in the evening, they have to do homework for the vocational school and attend their support lessons. All four are spending copious amounts of time on commuting between home, workplace, vocational school and the BBS training centre. Reconciling this busy life with family responsibilities is more than difficult but flexible childcare offered by BBS from seven in the morning to seven in the evening helps to reduce stress levels. The same is true of the transport service that picks up children from school and also there is the opportunity to have the older children looked after at the BBS childcare centre until each mother is ready to take them home.

However, the participants are coping with all these challenges. For example, one 26 year-old single mother had trained successfully as a baker, but had to leave her chosen career path because of a flour allergy. She went back to school, did her A-levels and then studied chemistry, but she did not complete her degree. Retraining as industrial clerk in a company that produces raw materials for the food industry is exactly what suits her. *“I am proud to be hired for retraining in this company”, she says, “my boss is very satisfied, because I know the technical aspects of the job and my few semesters of chemistry are more than useful. I merely need to concentrate on the commercial and business administration part of the training. The employer wishes to keep me after the exam. I will work fulltime, but will be granted flexible working hours.”* All of the trainees have been praised by their employers, who are likely to keep them on the pay-roll after the completion of retraining. Even if they do not, the job perspectives for these highly qualified women are excellent. Meanwhile the trainees are becoming role models for other women who are contemplating a new beginning on the labour market after family breaks, divorce, rehabilitation or the loss of a job.

MANAGING CHANGE TAKES TIME AND PERSISTENCE

Despite a promising first round of outcomes from its sub-projects, the FUTURA partners are facing new difficulties in making many small steps towards social and cultural change. This is due to the recent changes in national labour market policy and their implementation of these changes by employment offices and/or municipalities. Measures and placement efforts are now concentrating mainly on unemployed people who have only recently lost their jobs. Those who have been out of work for more than a year are mostly offered short-term schemes, which is a problem for some of FUTURA’s female target groups that need longer and more costly pathway approaches. When it comes to labour market integration schemes, the financial restrictions for women, who for family reasons have not been gainfully employed for years, tend to exclude

these returners. Since in Germany, EQUAL co-financing comes mainly from employment offices, these changes have meant that getting funding for some of FUTURA's activities has become much more difficult.

The approach of the DP's formative evaluation has helped to keep the DP on-course towards the objectives it initially formulated. Even during the early stages of the project, the external evaluator worked with all the partners to ensure that these objectives were operational and viable and that the aims and means of the sub-projects formed a meaningful combination of elements that would be able to uphold the common vision of wider and better career opportunities for women throughout the life-span of the DP. Special workshops ensured that the ambitious goal of gender diversity was broken down into concrete steps. These included, for instance, the preparation of the first telephone contact and meeting with a company or role plays on how to market the sub-projects to different target audiences. Marion Wulf, the evaluator, works closely with another external expert who is the gender advisor that the DP has contracted. Together they organise sessions that help DP members assess the progress and problems in their sub-projects and in the DP as a whole. *"Hiring an external gender advisor, even if, as in FUTURA, there is already a lot of gender expertise provided by some of the members, is an innovative and smart idea. Many problems appear in a different light if seen from outside and this external perspective is particularly helpful when new challenges arise. We can influence the DP's reasoning and decision-making"*, says Marion Wulf and explains that *"this is part of our concept of accompanying the process on which the different partners have embarked."* These sessions proved to be extremely valuable when it came to adapting the DP to the new situation. However, despite many efforts, the changes in labour market policies led to the painful decision to reduce the number of the planned activities.

Existing and newly created networks and strategic partners help to maintain the momentum of the DP's development. Gradually attitudinal changes and more openness towards gender diversity are becoming visible. Through cooperation with craft chambers and professional organisations at local, county and regional level, craft masters and SME owners are turning into advocates for gender diversity within their own spheres of influence. *"Girls and young women are top performers"*, they say, *"We cannot afford to let this potential go unused. Women also improve the social climate in the workplace and have a positive influence on the behaviour of male apprentices and colleagues."* Moreover, FUTURA forms part of a county-based working group on gender equality that has established good working contacts with the local press. At regular intervals, women who are training and working in non-traditional sectors and occupations are being featured as role models for other women. Slowly, gender diversity is becoming an issue in the public debate. Taking the women's concern about the persistent problem of reconciling work and family life seriously, Ahaus, the little town where BBS is located, has joined the Federal Government's initiative to promote local coalitions for reconciliation. FUTURA's good practices and the expertise of its partner organisations are highly appreciated in this context and make an important contribution to this alliance that links local government, employers, trade unions, training providers, care institutions and NGOs.

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