

TEAMING UP FOR GENDER EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY

Five countries, five different labour markets and even more different ways of addressing the persistent gender gaps in employment were the points of departure for the Transnational Partnership (TP) “European Gender and Diversity Network”. It linked Development Partnerships (DPs) from [Germany](#), [Denmark](#), [Finland](#), [Lithuania](#) and [Slovakia](#). At the beginning of their co-operation, the partners discussed all of these differences and identified the common issues that could be used to build up a work programme and to share strategies for tackling major challenges such as:

- Inequalities in access to education and the labour market for unemployed, especially young and migrant women;
- Prevailing gender, ethnic and age stereotypes; and
- Gender gaps and segregation on the labour market.

Common concerns were the lack of awareness in policy and practice about the gender, ethnic and age dimensions of inequalities on the labour market. Increasing the use of gender mainstreaming in enterprises and developing corporate social responsibility were other important aspects. During the lifespan of the TP the transnational steering group has analysed and discussed the insights and benefits that were gained by the national projects, as a result of their cross-border cooperation.

The approach of the TP combined the exchange of information and the transfer of methods that have been developed within the DPs. In fact, export and import of innovative concepts followed by adoption of new approaches were at the core of the TP’s work programme, which also included study visits of experts, trainees, trainers and other staff.

IMPORT – EXPORT ACTIVITIES TRIGGER FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The majority of the DPs that joined forces in the European Gender and Diversity Network had been looking for transnational partners that could strengthen their own national activities. Not only similar aims were deemed to be important, but also the development of strategies and concepts that were complementary to what each project had planned “at home”. Even if the TP’s idea of transnational teamwork was close collaboration between all of its members, bilateral cooperation emerged as the most frequent and fruitful activity.

Here are some examples which show how innovative concepts were transferred from one project to another and how those at the receiving end took a variety of steps to anchor the new models in their own national, regional or local contexts.

INTERCULTURAL TRAINING GOES TRANSNATIONAL



The overarching aim of German DP [Women@Europe](#) was to tackle the gender segregation of the labour market and the project looked at economic growth areas where women are underrepresented. The scope of cross-border activities relating to the increasingly global markets turned out to be one of these promising fields. After professional skills, intercultural competencies and knowledge of foreign languages are indispensable for a career in an international context. By providing multi-faceted training programmes, the DP helped women to take advantage of this specific part of the job market. At the same time, the DP supported companies in settling into the new markets that have emerged due to globalisation and the recent enlargement of the EU. The idea was to increase the number of women with relevant skills in international trade and to secure

female jobs in companies that were internationalising their activities by providing counselling and support to these enterprises in human resource development.

Although Germany's economy was in a slump at that time and companies rarely hired new staff, the country continued to be a world leader in terms of exporting goods and services. Whilst this was reflected in large corporations which were looking for people with "international qualifications", SMEs hesitated to do business abroad. However, now that there has been a general economic recovery, this attitude has started to change. In Lower Saxony where the DP partners operate, the positive results of the EQUAL schemes are becoming visible. The fact that the project had encouraged SMEs to explore possibilities on international markets and supported them in improving their competitiveness gave those companies a head start and their female employees benefited from these new opportunities.

To further support the process of capacity building for international activities, Women@Europe developed a [training workshop for intercultural communication](#). This scheme incorporates exercises in performing tasks and solving problems as a multi-cultural team, cross-cultural decision making and trouble shooting by taking account of the cultural dimensions of a given problem, as well as rehearsing rules for cross-cultural communication. The DP offered this seminar to SMEs in its region and by the end of the project, VHS Göttingen, a major provider of adult education and the coordinator of the EQUAL partnership, had gained quite a reputation as an institution with outstanding intercultural experience.

In the TP, Women@Europe offered a programme on intercultural communication to all the members to improve people's expertise of applying an intercultural approach to various fields of vocational education, training and social work. Members of the German team worked with their counterparts from Denmark, Finland, Lithuania and Slovakia to professionalise counselling and educational work with multi-cultural groups. The programme started and ended with a face-to-face weekend seminar and in between there were six weeks of on-line learning. Participants were willing to be the "guinea pigs" that tested the Göttingen model in a real life situation. After all, they themselves were part of a multi-national, multi-cultural group that was exploring the challenges of inter-cultural communication. They reflected on their own cultures and studied cultural systems and models, norms and values. Together they pondered over the "strangeness" in intercultural encounters and learned about cultural filters which limit our awareness and create or confirm wrong perceptions and stereotypes. Also, the influence of time, context, environment, proximity and space were considered. Different approaches were discussed and tested that helped people to face and make the maximum of cultural differences.

"The web based intercultural communication training was much appreciated by participants," says Roberto Kohlstedt who works as lecturer und trainer at VHS. He was responsible for both designing the learning platform and the content management. According to Roberto, the active participation and the interest in sharing knowledge, skills and experiences depended on the needs of the actual EQUAL DPs for intercultural approaches. *"The stronger this need marked the professional activities of the trainees"*, he reasons, *"the more they got actively and passionately involved."* But nobody completed the e-learning programme without being touched by the insights and messages it conveyed. The transnational e-workshop has certainly left traces in the participating organisations, and sometimes such a "spark" can be revitalised much later to ignite a new project.

In addition to intercultural competences, participants acquired knowledge and skills that helped them develop their national activities. *"This workshop was very stimulating and inspired us to think not only about competences in international contexts"* said Zora Butorova, from the DP Plus for Women 45+, the Slovakian partner. *"It also helped us to master inter-institutional differences in building our own DP."* Jointly assessing the seminar in terms of new insights, learning progress and viability as an e-learning programme, helped the German DP to produce the final Internet version which is available on the [website](#) of the Göttingen EQUAL project.

EQUALITY PLANNING IN SMEs – LESSONS FROM FINLAND

Finland's pioneering role in equal rights and the fact that equality in peoples' daily lives is more marked than in other Member States offered a fascinating insight for the other members of the TP. As far back as 1906, when the country was still a dukedom of the Russian Empire, voting rights were granted not only to both sexes, but also to all national groups, regardless of their ethnic background.

In the Finnish “Monikko” project, equality is a wide-ranging concept. It concerns not only gender, but also age, ethnic background, sexual orientation, gender identity and family status. Innovative practices are being developed to promote gender equality at work, reduce gender segregation of work tasks, develop interaction between people of different ages in the workplace and erase discriminatory practices related to ethnicity. The project includes both research and practical activities.



An important part of the DP’s development work is a sub-project that supports SMEs in equality planning. According to Finland’s Act on Equality that was last amended in 2005, employers with more than 30 members of staff are now required to draw up an annual gender equality plan. The plan must contain a gender equality assessment, measures for improving the situation, if necessary, and a review of the results of implementing the plan during the previous year. Compliance with the Act is supervised by the Ombudsman for Equality who may bring unlawful practices before

the Equality Board based at the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health. This Equality Board can request an employer to establish an equality plan and can reinforce its request with a financial penalty in cases where employer has not yet drafted a plan. So far, equality plans have focused on wage structures, occupational health, parental leave, family-friendly policies, career development, job rotation and education and training.

During a study trip to Helsinki, TP partners learned about these recent developments and could observe their impact when visiting private companies and public institutions. The Slovakian and German partners were particularly interested in Monikko’s equality planning programme for companies and they set out, each in their own specific way, to make use of this approach.

Sensitising key players for gender mainstreaming in Slovakia

Supported by the Finnish Embassy, the Slovakian DP “Plus for Women 45+” organised an event in Bratislava that was dedicated to gender mainstreaming and equality planning. The idea was to raise the awareness of key players as a first step and then to convince them of the advantages that these gender equality tools can generate for both employers and employees. **Kaisa Kauppinen**, research professor at the Finnish Institute for Occupational Health and Head of the Monikko project explained why equality planning is increasingly used and valued by employers, “*In Finland it is generally recognised that equal opportunities are no luxury, but a business advantage in our highly competitive economies.*” Broadening the skills base of current and future workers by helping women and men to develop their full potential does not only improve gender equality, it can also boost the productivity and competitiveness of companies.



Assisted by two Slovakian colleagues who were acting as co-trainers, Sinikka Mustakallio, the Director of a Consultancy specialising in gender issues and a partner in Monikko, gave a hands-on workshop on equality planning, as it is implemented in Finnish organisations. Amongst the participants at the event were individuals who are in a position to disseminate and promote this concept including elected officials and political decision-makers and representatives of public authorities, women’s NGOs, academia and the media.

A model for SMEs in Lower Saxony

The German Women@Europe DP that had developed cooperation with several SMEs operating in the Region of Lower Saxony decided to convince one of them to test the Finnish equality planning. However, this was easier said than done. Unlike Finland, Germany’s equality legislation does not bind private enterprises to implementing equality plans. So, the project developed a different strategy to launch what was then called “the gender equality process”. The basic idea was to establish in each participating company a committed group of people who were interested in, and willing to push for, greater gender equality in the workplace. This group had members from all categories of staff and was supported by experts seconded from the EQUAL project. These experts provided information on gender equality measures in private companies and gender mainstreaming, as a personnel development tool, as well as training in presentation skills, conflict management and negotiation techniques.

The next step was to choose a company that could eventually become a model to stimulate others to follow suit. Mahr Ltd, a Göttingen based, globally acting technology enterprise agreed to consider seriously the integration of the gender dimension into their management and operational activities. According to Monika Wolf, Senior Manager at Mahr, her company *“is a great supporter of the DP’s idea.”* She said that it was clear from the beginning that the responsibility of launching and sustaining the gender equality process would rest entirely with the group of committed employees. *“The group consists of four women and two men, who initially, discussed whether equal opportunities existed at Mahr and, if not, what could be done to change the situation. We also explored the question of why young women tend to shy away from technology training. In the end, we decided to work on three issues that needed to be improved: initial vocational training and further education; career development for women; and family friendly personnel policies.”*

In parallel, an advisory board was set up which consisted of the DP Coordinator, the Director of an NGO and representatives of an employers’ organisation and of the support network “Women and enterprises”. Their main task was to monitor and assess both the process and outcomes generated at Mahr and to determine which of the approaches, methods and tools developed to respond to the specific needs of that company could be transferred and adapted to those of other enterprises. A dissemination campaign will follow and is expected to convince more employers in the region to adopt the model.



TRAVELLING FROM FINLAND TO LITHUANIA: SOCIAL MENTORING

Despite a series of problems related to the unemployment of women, the Lithuanian DP “Give me a hand” decided to focus mainly on two burning issues: the negative attitude towards women who have been out of work for an extensive period of time and the fact that women are leaving Lithuania to find a job abroad. Developing a Social Mentoring Network that supports women who wish to return to the labour market has made a real difference to this target group. The name of the project “Give me a hand” conveys exactly what it does. Women who have “made it” into gainful employment and have overcome difficulties and discrimination become mentors to other women who are struggling to do the same. In addition, the project has created three social mentoring centres in the counties of Utena, Kaunas and Vilnius.

With active supported from the Finnish partner, the Lithuanian project adapted a wide range of tested and proven international mentoring approaches to its national context and the needs of its target group. A total of 63 women were selected as potential mentors and together they travelled to Helsinki and learned how to organise a social mentoring process. *“To have a mentor means that well structured cooperation is organised with someone who is more experienced in some area of private or working life than oneself”,* says project manager Audrone Kisiliene, who explains further that, *“through mentoring a woman gets access to a richer source of information than she herself could tap into on her own. This means also discussions and negotiations with someone who is formed by another kind of life experience and therefore can see things and incidents from another point of view”.* To be able to offer this kind of help, the mentor-trainees had to acquire a number of important skills such as creating a relationship between mentor and mentee and preparing meetings which enable first “matchmaking” and then the mentoring process. They also learned how to define and set goals and to monitor progress. During a study visit to Finland, 30 mentors had the possibility of visiting a Women’s Enterprise Agency to meet employers and learn about the adaptation programme which provides mentoring for newcomers to the workplace. The experience of this programme shows that mentees who change jobs and were employed before moving to another company are more motivated and know their professional and personal goals better than unemployed mentees. To help this target group more effectively, social mentoring must be complimented by additional support, such as mobility training or the provision of care services for children and other dependants.

It is still too early to assess the impact of social mentoring on the employment situation of Lithuanian women. At an individual level, the project’s beneficiaries are the living proof of the DP’s slogan “First help your self and then help others”. Their self-esteem and career motivation have been strengthened, their professional skills up-dated and improved and already 37 of the 83 mentees have found a job. In addition, 51 new mentors have been trained and 31 have decided to dedicate some of their free time to mentoring other women. The DP’s partners hope that the three resource centres created, thanks to EQUAL, will continue their work as permanent

institutions and thus, contribute to creating better job opportunities for women which, in turn, will prevent them from leaving their country to seek a professional future abroad.

ADDRESSING AGE AND GENDER STEREOTYPES IN A EUROPEAN CONTEXT

The Slovakian DP “Plus for Women 45+” aimed to improve working conditions for older women. Coordinated by a research institution that also acts as policy think tank, it sought to combine research and awareness raising activities. The DP tried to remove barriers for women, on the one hand, and to introduce gender aspects into relevant research, on the other. Being very aware that dismantling stereotypes requires an understanding of their mechanisms and root causes, the project analysed gender and age stereotypes that were being propagated by daily newspapers, magazines and TV spots. The results showed a traditional perception of men’s and women’s roles and a dichotomy between public and private spheres.

To develop strategies for overcoming these traditional patterns, Slovakia teamed up with Finland and made use of the outcomes of the Monikko sub-project “Gender and Age”. Monikko’s studies on active ageing in Finland and the handbook “Gendering Ageing at Work” formed a good point of departure for bilateral cooperation. Together the two DPs organised a conference that concentrated on demographic changes and strategies to keep older workers in employment. At this event, Finnish experts presented the state-of-the-art in research concerning the ageing population and its consequences for European societies. This helped the Slovakian partners to identify areas of study that had so far not been covered in their country so that they could push for the integration of the gender dimension into any future research on demographic change or on the scenarios that might contribute to mitigating its consequences.

LESSONS LEARNED NEED TIME TO TAKE ROOT

When asked about the added-value of transnational cooperation, all the participating DPs agreed that they have gained a new perspective on their work at national or regional level through joint learning processes and by using the expertise of one or more partners. Everybody is convinced that even small incentives can trigger lasting impact.

Zora Butorova from Slovakia recognised that “*we all need time to translate inspiration into some more concrete outputs*”, but all TP members have been able to import new ideas, concepts and tools developed in other Member States and have started to apply them. “*For Lithuania we can already say that the added value of transnational co-operation will be integrated in the practical work of our DP. We have updated our strategy and are now also working with unemployed immigrant and non- Lithuanian women,*” reports the Project Director of the “Give me a hand” DP. They all feel that working together was also an eye opener in terms of the future, and at the same time helped them to develop proactive approaches to mastering the challenges that will arise.

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