

TRADE UNIONS AND EMPLOYERS JOINING FORCES FOR EQUALITY

The Portuguese Development Partnership (DP) Agir para a Igualdade does exactly what its name says: it acts for equality! The DP's work is coordinated by the National Trade Union Federation (CGTP) and it has successfully negotiated 19 positive action plans that are currently being implemented in companies and organisations throughout the country.

The DP brings together all the major players that are in a position to disseminate and mainstream its results. In addition to CGTP, these include the National Commission for Gender Equality in Employment, the National Institute for Vocational Training and Employment, the National Institute for the Development of Working Conditions and Labour Inspection and the National Centre for Vocational Training and Technological Innovation. It also involves municipalities and vocational schools and the renowned Centro de Estudos para Intervenciao Social (CESIS) is in charge of the monitoring and evaluation of its activities.

GENDER MAINSTREAMING AS A BASIC PRINCIPLE

Through collective agreements at company level, the DP aims to implant a gender dimension in HR policies and practices. These agreements are designed to promote the integration of women and men into sectors and occupations in which they are underrepresented and to dismantle gender discrimination in the workplace. The selection of the companies targeted by the DP mirrors that approach: about half of them are employing a predominantly male work force and the other half belongs in "feminised" sectors, where despite the overwhelming majority of employees being female, leadership positions are almost entirely in male hands. The dual strategy of Gender Mainstreaming is at the heart of the DP's approach. It introduces specific actions for women while at the same time helping companies and trade unions to incorporate gender equality into all their operations.

MOVING FROM DIAGNOSIS TO ACTION

The first step in this direction was a thorough analysis of the job situation of women and men in each of the participating organisations. The results showed that in most enterprises and agencies, women suffered from discrimination, as a result of different factors including:

- Restricted access to certain jobs;
- Fewer opportunities for career development;
- Lower pay for job categories where women were in the majority;
- Loss of workers' rights, as a result of taking maternity leave;
- Offers of precarious short-term contracts, as distinct from permanent contracts.

Some discriminatory practices were also discovered that affected all the employees, both women and men, particularly in relation to levels of pay, precariousness of employment and the unsuitability of working conditions. The findings were presented to the Management and Work's Council in each organisation. At first, the employers refused to accept the existence of the discriminatory practices that had been detected. Unequal treatment was blamed on higher rates of female absenteeism resulting from the competing demands of their other roles as mothers and homemakers. However, two companies that had previously been partners in a NOW project were able to demonstrate how recruiting women with good educational credentials for technical jobs had greatly improved their companies' performance and productivity. This example of good practice provided by their peers helped the other employers to understand that gender equality was an integral part of personnel policies and could generate business advantages. As a result, all of the Management of the 19 organisations successfully negotiated collective agreements with their Work's Councils and relevant unions. Each of these agreements was based on a proposal developed by the DP that was subsequently tailored to the specific needs of the employees and employers concerned.

The signed agreements stated that all categories of workers must have equal access to the benefits that the gender equality action plan would produce. They also establish concrete goals and measures for the achievement of these benefits. Priorities being addressed include training, recruitment and selection procedures and also the reformulation of criteria for career progress and promotion. In many cases, the plans include specific actions to improve the situation of female employees such as tackling gender gaps and the introduction of family friendly flexible working time and improvements in parental leave schemes. Awareness raising and training for employers, HR staff and union representatives is another major aspect of all the action plans. In addition, the agreements contain a commitment to a continuing review of progress focused on six-monthly monitoring meetings.

MUCH REMAINS TO BE DONE

Two major aims of the DP are not yet reflected in the action plans. These are tackling the gender pay gap and introducing a gender dimension into strategies for improved health and safety at work. Specific working groups have studied these two issues and have produced a survey on health and safety conditions and another on the wages paid to women and men in the 19 organisations. Both surveys reveal that legal obligations are generally being respected. There were only few cases of discrimination that related to levels of pay, but in-depth case studies indicated that there was a need to address the principle of equal pay for comparable work. There were more obvious concerns about health and safety issues. It appears that when women are worried about the security of their jobs, they may be prepared to accept working conditions that are harmful to their health. In one factory, the survey discovered pregnant women dealing with toxic agents and in another female workers were regularly lifting iron bars weighing over 30 kilos. Then, there was a problem with a ceramics company in which women were prohibited from working close to the ovens and this restriction blocked their access to better paid jobs. The problem could have been resolved if the employer had purchased new safety equipment but he felt he could not make the financial investment. However, there were encouraging responses from three enterprises, which were immediately prepared to redress the deficiencies highlighted by the survey. In addition, five companies with particularly problematical health and safety conditions agreed that the DP should carry out a second analysis in greater depth and, if necessary, negotiate appropriate improvements with the Work's Council.

IMPROVING THE CLIMATE FOR CHANGE

It is still too early to assess the full impact of the DP's activities but the process of change is well underway. Training materials and tools created by the project are enhancing the visibility of the equality action plans and stimulating other employers to follow suit. These organisations then have access to a CD-Rom that presents and explains the experience of the original 19 companies and agencies in tackling discrimination and improving the job situation and working conditions of all their employees. Thanks to the leading role played by the National Trade Union Federation within the project and the country at large, the agreements and action plans are setting new standards for collective bargaining.

THE ADDED-VALUE OF TRANSNATIONAL COOPERATION

Agir para a Igualdade has transnational partners in [Austria](#), [Italy](#) and Hungary. The Italian DP is working on life-long-learning and the Hungarian project aims to increase the employability of the Roma community. Transnational exchange has generated a learning process that is helping all partners to take more account of the needs of ethnic minorities and to integrate a gender dimension into their activities. Building on the Portuguese experience, partners in "Igualdade.Sociale@it.hu.pt" are producing a guide to support enterprises in introducing equality plans covering both dimensions of gender and ethnicity.

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