

TACKLING GENDER GAPS = TACKLING SKILLS GAPS

WOMEN IN THE LABOUR MARKET: INCREASINGLY SKILLED BUT STILL UNDEREMPLOYED

In most EU Member States, women are outperforming men when it comes to successful completion of upper secondary education. Women are forming the majority of university students and also increasingly breaking into male domains, such as mathematics, science and civil engineering. According to research, women possess many qualities that are appreciated by personnel departments, including persistence and discipline, social skills and an outstanding talent for languages and communication.

However, all those inroads and assets are not yet mirrored by women's position in the labour market. Both sector specific and occupational segregation are persistent and continue to be a major obstacle to equal treatment of women and men in employment and pay. Almost half of the women (48%) gainfully employed in the EU in 2000 worked in only four areas of activity: health care and social services; education; public administration and retailing. By contrast, in the same year, only one third of men worked in four sectors of activity: construction; public administration, retailing and business services.

MITIGATING THE DEMOGRAPHIC 'TIME-BOMB'

For years policy makers at all levels have been emphasising the need to maximise the economic contribution of women in sectors where they are under-represented - with poor results. The consequences of the "demographic time bomb" - i.e. a significant lack of labour supply and increasing skills gaps - can already be felt in a number of economic sectors, such as science, technology, engineering and construction, and - the health and care sectors. Companies, in particular those striving to be global players, are having difficulties in broadening their skills base and in becoming more competitive.

DEVELOPING THE FULL POTENTIAL FOR WOMEN AND MEN

EQUAL "good practices" demonstrating effective ways to tackle sectoral and occupational gender gaps are making a valuable contribution to diversifying and improving the skills of the European workforce. EQUAL approaches that are showing particularly encouraging indications of bringing about change are those which have integrated different elements of successful de-segregation policies.

Biographical approaches

Addressing the full life-cycle of women and men through "biographical approaches" has generated many positive results. EQUAL has developed and tested schemes that are widening choices in education and training from as early as kindergarten, all the way through primary and secondary school to vocational training and university education, and beyond. Whereas in the past, projects were only able to target one or two steps of an educational life-cycle EQUAL has demonstrated ways and means to cover them all. Involving institutions that had never worked together was key to overcoming compartmentalised thinking and paving the way to concepts of life-long learning that will survive the lifespan of EQUAL.

Kindergarten and primary schools

EQUAL made significant efforts not just to address gender stereotyping from an early age, but also to develop policies and practices^[1] that would foster excellence in education as an investment in future human resources. Working with teachers and parents, EQUAL helped to dismantle perceptions that girls, for instance, lack technical interest and skills or that boys lag behind in terms of literacy and communication. In addition, visits to companies proved to be an excellent way to challenge gender stereotypes. The pupils were asked to carry out surveys on jobs performed by women and men, which triggered questions about the causes of inequality and ideas on how the children envisaged their own adult life in a more egalitarian society. Those models are now becoming integral parts of teachers' training and continuing education.

Secondary schools

The approaches developed for secondary schools resulted in more girls choosing non-traditional subjects, training or education and owed much of their success to their organisation as an on-going process, and not just as single events. This has been achieved in [Spain](#), for example, by creating innovative curricula, which challenge traditional gender roles and the subtle integration of the related stereotypes into science and technology. Rather than offering extra general courses on equal opportunities, the programmes used household processes, such as cooking, baking or ironing to explain certain phenomena in chemistry and physics. Kids learned, for instance, about the different aggregate states of materials as solid, liquid or gas by producing chocolate, cocoa and ice cream.

Other successful test runs include specific ICT courses for girls, Internet clubs and summer camps for "young female inventors" or taster weeks in enterprises that were involved in the partnerships. Young women who have "made it" into male-dominated occupations played an important part as role models and mentors.

Initial training and education

Accompanying the learning progress of young women in non-traditional initial training and tertiary education significantly reduced drop-out rates and increased the number of those who moved directly from training to employment. Mentoring programmes providing professional and personal support during the early stages of training and/or employment emerged as potent concepts of desegregation.

Continuing education for adult women

"[Comprehensive pathways](#)" which combined skills assessment, counselling, guidance, training, coaching, work placement and networking provided the most effective approach to help mature women access employment in a male domain. Training was tailored to the skills requirements of companies, but also acknowledged so-called "women-specific" competencies. For example, EQUAL in Germany, demonstrated how training jobless university graduates as experts in knowledge management, by covering the technical aspects related to retrieval, categorisation and systematisation of knowledge in a course could explicitly build on women's capacities for multi-tasking, communication and team work. Those skills proved to be a solid base to stimulate and guide learning processes in organisations. Work experience placements convinced employers of the quality of the new profile, and most participants received job offers before the completion of the programme.

Turning teachers, trainers and guidance staff into agents of change

EQUAL has been working successfully towards changing the attitudes of people who are playing crucial roles in the process of women's and men's career choices^[2] and development.

Although the issue of equal opportunities is included in the training of career advisers in many countries, evidence suggests that it is not transferred to the work situation. Often, guidance provided to young women and men is "gender blind", i.e. a procedure believed neutral, but intrinsically reflecting gender stereotypes is being applied and failing to help young women and men to make the maximum of their potential. Developing "gender conscious" counselling and guidance made a difference. This involved continuing education for career advisors and also training of trainers to educate future counsellors. In Denmark, EQUAL good practice inspired political decision makers^[3] when drafting and passing the new Danish Act on Educational and Vocational Guidance in 2003 and provided input for the new diploma programme for vocational counsellors implemented in 2004.

EQUAL gender equality courses enabled managers, lecturers, trainers and support staff of further and higher education and work-based training, to meet the learning needs of women when studying in male domains. For example, 400 career counsellors and 500 lecturers and trainers in 100 organisations [throughout the UK](#) were trained to create a conducive learning environment for women. The training package examines the learning styles of women, curriculum content, recruitment and provides examples of pedagogical practice that enhance self-esteem and confidence. The package has met with a huge demand, particularly from work-based training providers that have to comply with national targets for workforce development which include gender and diversity.

To fill the alarming skills gaps in the health and care sector, EQUAL partners in Denmark have been [attracting men to work in elderly care](#). A group of male care workers was trained as

"ambassadors" in myth dismantling about women being predestined for this kind of work. Awareness raising and training for vocational counsellors, teachers and senior care staff, succeeded in introducing change in an entirely feminine training and work environment. The Danish experience shows how pushing for the recruitment of men in teaching positions and on-the-job guidance can increase the presence of male role models, which is a pre-condition to overcoming the gender segregation in this part of the labour market.

Winning employers over as pro-active partners

Arguing the case of equal opportunities from a social justice perspective has failed to motivate companies to redesign their personnel and human resource development policies. Only hard data on the business advantages to be gained by using untapped female resources are creating this kind of change. EQUAL success stories in terms of increased recruitment and promotion of women are mainly due to the growing need for skilled labour in specific economic sectors. Moreover, the EQUAL experience showed that the competition between companies to attract and retain the most qualified workforce tends to work to the advantage of women who had been trained in former male domains.

EQUAL proved that involving employer organisations as active partners is essential to opening up non-traditional careers for women. In the UK, the Engineering Construction Industry Training Board disseminated an EQUAL scheme designed for auditing recruitment practices and work environments, which enabled enterprises to develop more women-friendly policies. The scheme is currently being [transferred to training boards in other economic sectors](#). To fill the expected 90,000 job vacancies in Sweden's construction sector in the coming decade, the leading social partner organisations have, for the first time, joined forces to promote gender equality and diversity. Tested by the partnership, [new recruitment and training approaches](#), but also flexible family-friendly work arrangements on constructions sites are becoming a key issue in collective bargaining.

EQUAL also worked successfully with "flagship" companies to trigger snowball effects, since more of them feel compelled to follow suit if competitors or market leaders set an example. In Greece, for example, EQUAL has supported large corporations operating nationally in banking, transport and the media to introduce or improve positive action plans stipulating women's access to non-traditional jobs. The schemes helped the companies to fill skills gaps in management and technical occupations.

It is still too early to assess the long-term impact of these achievements. Yet, in [Portugal](#), five years after similar pioneer work was carried out by a NOW-project helping women to access qualified jobs in the car and electro-technical industries, female employment has grown from almost zero to about 20 percent. Employers claim that the increased gender balance has enhanced the social climate in the workplace and led to more productivity.

Territorial desegregation centres

The development of local and regional resource centres, or "desegregation hubs", are a significant EQUAL achievement. These "hubs" unite the experience and resources of women's training centres, employers' organisations and companies from the most gender-segregated sectors of the labour market, mainstream training and educational institutions, careers services and equal opportunities bodies. EQUAL has proven that partnerships of key stakeholders can successfully orchestrate a multitude of the activities described above and also stage sophisticated campaigns for attitudinal changes. In some countries transfer and mainstreaming are well underway:

- In Sweden, eight pilot programmes, each including several interlinked projects, were carried out in three regions. Led by regional task forces, the activities have been targeting women (and immigrants), employers, education and training providers and the public-at-large. Other regions have already signalled their interest in using the models.
- In the UK, the National Government is mainstreaming EQUAL achievements by entrusting the establishment of a National Resource Centre for Women's Training in Science, Engineering and Technology (SET) to a successful EQUAL partner.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Successful desegregation strategies which have the capacity to tackle skills gaps require the lasting commitment of all players. EQUAL has generated concepts to build and strengthen such co-operations, which, if undertaken together, can bring about change.

National Governments and Legislators should:

- Review gender equality legislation and ensure that it is not only binding for the public sector but private companies and organisations as well
- Monitor trends in gender segregation in sectors and occupations, and the representation of women and men in management positions on a regular basis.
- Enforce the integration of the gender dimension in vocational guidance, education and training and include relevant skills in training curricula for career counsellors, teachers and trainers.
- Include good practice, successfully tested in the framework in EQUAL, in the National Employment Reports (NAPs) and thereby put a process in place that is monitoring progress in desegregation and enabling benchmarking at European level.

Employers should:

- Establish or improve positive action plans by using goals and timetables systems to promote desegregation.
- Include gender equality as a criterion when applying schemes for total quality management.
- Increase their credibility as equal opportunities employers through gender proofing and auditing personnel policies and pioneering employer networks in their sector or region.
- Improve work environments for women by sensitising male colleagues.

Social Partner Organisations should:

- Sensitise and train decision-makers and staff on how to ensure desegregation issues are included in collective agreements.
- Work towards a gender balance in their decision-making bodies and in collective bargaining.

Training providers should:

- Establish recruitment and selection procedures that improve the gender balance in mixed training in male domains.
- Address alarming gender gaps in certain sectors or occupations through specific actions for women.
- Increase the number of female or male teachers and trainers in highly segregated areas of labour market training.

Gender equality bodies and relevant NGOs should:

- Help to disseminate EQUAL good practices and include them as models into their awareness raising and lobbying strategies.
- Work in co-operation with National Governments and Legislators to help them implement the above recommendations.

Endnotes

[\[1\] Kindergarten and primary schools](#)

[\[2\] Turning teachers, trainers and guidance staff into agents of change](#)

[\[3\] Gender mainstreaming in guidance](#)