

STRENGTHENING EQUAL WORK-LIFE-BALANCE APPROACHES THROUGH NATIONAL THEMATIC NETWORKS

France and Ireland

1. LINKING GENDER EQUALITY AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Improving the work-life-balance of women and men with care and other family responsibilities is not only a must when it comes to implementing gender equality. According to recent research¹ policies and practices that help to reconcile working and private life can boost female employment, which in turn is a prerequisite to tackle the labour shortages and skills gaps emerging due to demographic changes. In addition, working conditions that allow people to find a better balance between paid work and other spheres of their life improve work satisfaction and job performance of employees and thus raise the productivity of companies. To make optimal use of new work-life-balance approaches generated by EQUAL Development Partnerships (DPs) almost all Member States established National Thematic Networks (NTN) whose work focused on EQUAL's Theme G: "Reconciliation of working and family life".

This theme has been part of the [European Employment Strategy \(EES\)](#) from the [very beginning](#) in 1997. Three major aspects have always been at the core of reconciliation strategies that were incorporated in the Guidelines as requirements to making gender equality a reality in the daily lives of women and men:

- The provision of easily accessible, affordable quality care for children and other dependants;
- Flexible work organisation and working time arrangements allowing women and men with care responsibilities to have both a career and a satisfying private life;
- Opportunities to return to gainful employment for those (mainly women) who have left the labour market to raise children and/or take care of ailing family members.

In the face of globalisation and demographic changes, both the EES and the [renewed Lisbon Strategy](#) link gender equality to the priorities of European labour market and economic policy which is aimed at "delivering stronger and longer lasting growth and more and better jobs"². For instance, the [Lisbon](#) target of an overall employment rate of 70% by 2010 has been confirmed, and in order to reach that goal, the same is required for the specific target of a 60% rate for female employment. By the same deadline, the number of childcare facilities in each Member State should have been increased to 33% for three year olds and under and to 90% for children between three years of age and mandatory school age. Both, the "[Report on Equality of Women and Men 2005](#)" and the "[Employment in Europe 2005](#)" report underline the economic relevance of reconciliation policies. Flexible, family-friendly working-time arrangements are emphasised as being a key to improving quality and productivity at work.

These policy priorities are mirrored by hundreds of reconciliation concepts developed and implemented by the first generation of EQUAL DPs, and it appears that more will be emerging as

¹ For instance: Prognos AG : Betriebswirtschaftliche Effekte familienfreundlicher Maßnahmen, Kosten-Nutzen-Analyse Aspekte; Published by Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend, 2004; Holding a job, having a life; American Institute of National Policy (Eds), 2000; Rethinking Life and Work: Towards a better future, Ford Foundation (Eds), 1996.

² Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament: Common Actions for Growth and Employment: The Community Lisbon Programme, Com2005_330.

outputs of second round projects. Frequently, work-life-balance DPs orchestrate several, interrelated components, typically linking the provision of more and better care for children and other dependants to a whole range of other family support services and the introduction of flexible, family-friendly work organisation in public and private organisations. These comprehensive approaches are also including a mix of strategies for attitudinal changes targeted at key players such as employers, social partners and public authorities, but also at convincing men to take a more even share of the unpaid work at home.

The results of the European Thematic Group on Equal Opportunities (ETG 4) have confirmed that those combined approaches to reconciliation are particularly successful in a local context, since it is at the local level where individuals are trying to juggle the different spheres of their lives. The work of ETG 4 has also shown that reconciling job and career with raising children and other family duties is still mainly perceived as a “women’s problem”. EQUAL approaches have made inroads towards more role and task sharing between women and men. In many cases, there is also a visible trend to view and develop work-life-balance schemes as desirable concepts to improve the quality of life not only for people with care and family obligations but for everybody.

2. SYNERGIES - AN ASSET OF NATIONAL THEMATIC NETWORKS

Many Member States (AT, D, E, F, GR, I, P) have opted for NTN that exclusively focused on work-life-balance issues. Others (IRL, UK, SW) have invited their gender equality DPs to participate in NTN concentrating on other themes thus integrating the gender dimension into their work³. In any case their remit was to establish a platform for cooperation and exchange between those projects and to identify, validate and disseminate their good practices and products in a perspective of enabling their transfer into mainstream policies and practices.

The following two examples from France and Ireland belong to different categories of NTN. The French network concentrated on the multi-faceted aspects of reconciliation, whereas the two Irish DPs with their focus on work-life-balance joined the work of the Adaptability NTN. Yet, in both cases the NTN have demonstrated how this kind of networking can be instrumental to creating links between the concept of reconciliation and other policy priorities. The emerging synergies helped to enhance local development, productivity and competitiveness of enterprises, but also to develop strategies to tackle the imminent demographic changes and to shape the work places of the future.

3. MAXIMISING THE ACHIEVEMENTS OF EQUAL WORK-LIFE-BALANCE MODELS IN FRANCE

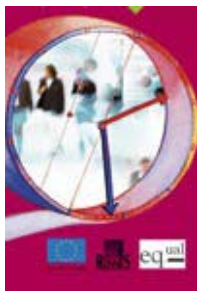
As a matter of principle, the French NTN brought together all 20 Development Partnerships (DPs) which worked on work-life balance issues within Theme G and two ESF Objective 3 projects with a similar focus. Key players such as the National Ministries of Labour and Social Cohesion and of Agriculture, Fishing and Rural Affairs, the National Body for Women’s Rights and Gender Equality and the National Agency for the Improvement of Living Conditions were represented in the network.

Besides exchange of experiences and mutual support amongst the DPs, the network aimed to disseminate EQUAL good practices related to work-life-balance and to capitalise on both the results of the individual member DPs and those of the network as a whole. Target groups for the policy messages emerging from the NTN were key territorial actors who are in a position to make use of the EQUAL achievements. This included local and regional authorities, employers, social partner organisations and NGOs; political decision-makers at local, regional, national and European level; researchers; and French and European media.

³ Sometimes this decision was due to the small number of gender equality projects (IRL, UK), but in the case of Sweden the idea was to integrate gender mainstreaming into all NTN, instead of organising a specific network related to gender issues.

3.1. GENDERING THE USE OF TIME – A NEW APPROACH TO RECONCILIATION

“Articulating professional and personal life times “ was the overarching theme of the French NTN. This term puts the spotlight on an approach that goes beyond the concept of enabling a better reconciliation of working and family life.



In the report⁴ that documents the experience of the French projects and their cooperation in the framework of the NTN Rachel Silvera, the gender equality expert who accompanied the network, explains why the term “articulation” rather than “reconciliation” was chosen: *“Reconciliation suggests that this whole problem is something to be dealt with by women. In fact, it is a concept that aims to help reconcile the different female roles. (...) Speaking of the articulation of life times allows to leave this logic behind and to start thinking in a true gender perspective.”*

The EQUAL strategies enabling this improved articulation of life times, which are dedicated by women and men to gainful employment and career, care and other family duties, but also leisure, cultural and civic activities could build on the new concept of time policies that was “invented” in France during the last decade. Time policies take account of the changes caused by moving from an industrial society with synchronised work patterns, to a service and information society with rhythms increasingly out of sync. i.e. working hours tend to become more and more irregular, but the “times of the city” - opening hours of local authorities, stores and other service providers, childcare facilities and schools and the schedules of public transport systems, are slow to follow suit. This makes it difficult for people to balance the conflicting pressures of their daily lives. Taking the brunt of care and household duties, women suffer more from this battle against time than men. In France, local governments are taking the lead in supporting women and men to cope with this challenge. An increasing number of municipalities have established time agencies or bureaux whose remit is to harmonise the times of the city and thus help people gain time that can be spent with children and partners, friends and the extended family, but also for other priorities in one’s personal life

3.2. THE MOST SUCCESSFUL OUTPUTS

Three avenues towards a better articulation of life times concepts developed thanks to EQUAL were particularly successful:

3.2.1. Gender equality as key principle of territorial time policies

Combining territorial time policies and comprehensive approaches to work-life-balance is what really makes the difference in the daily lives of women and also of men. *“To bring about change”, explains Pierre Dommergues from the DP “Coordination des temps de vie dans les territoires” and one of the early movers and shakers in time policies, “you have to push on all fronts and to work in all domains at the same time. In the professional sphere the challenge is the introduction of more family friendly flexible working hours. In the context of public policy the authorities must be led to improving their services. And in the private sphere the biggest problem is to overcome traditional gender roles and to convince men to share parental and homemaking responsibilities. After all, what is the benefit of new working time arrangements allowing a woman to spend more time with her family, if her partner does not change his behaviour at home?”*

When EQUAL was launched, ten time bureaux existed in France and not all had a gender dimension. Most of them became partners in local and multi-regional DPs and this involvement has clearly strengthened their position and widened their agenda. At the end of the first round of the EQUAL initiative the number of time bureaux has increased, including even Paris, the country’s capital, Le Havre, Versailles, Marseille, Taverny and the département of Essone. Throughout France policy makers in municipalities, départements and regions are showing a growing interest in time policies which integrate various components of work-life-balance approaches. This is particularly true for new solutions to transport such as flexible minibus services, car and bike sharing or even a mobile driving school operating in remote rural areas as

4 Rachel Silvera, Nadja Buseyne, Vicki Donlevy : Articulier vie professionnelle et vie personnelle – Les expériences des projets Equal français 2001-2004, Les Cahiers de Racine, 2004.

well as for needs-tailored care and other family support services that can be provided thanks to innovative financing models including public-private partnerships.

3.2.2. More and better childcare

New models of childcare which are outstanding in terms of availability, quality and flexibility were developed thanks to EQUAL and are now in many parts of France helping parents and especially single mothers who are working atypical hours to lead a more balanced life. Several DPs have tested innovative forms, offering schedules outside the usual opening hours of public day care institutions. They launched inter-enterprise childcare centres which adapt their opening hours to the work schedules of companies. Often cooperating with several municipalities, the companies contribute to the setting-up and running costs of these facilities. Emergency childcare for parents in temporary work and even around the clock home-based childcare were successfully experimented and have now become part of the regular provision in many territories.

For example, the “Gepetto” DP managed to gain recognition from the National Family Benefits Agency (CNAF) for its so-called “Relay Childcare” programme which complements normal school hours or the usual opening hours of day care facilities. In the framework of EQUAL this scheme has been tested in eight different locations. In six of them the local or regional branches of CNAF, the so-called CAFs, have already guaranteed that the programme will continue beyond the lifespan of the project.

3.2.3. New working time arrangements benefiting employees and employers

New working time arrangements that improve the situation of those workers whose atypical schedules allow for the growing availability of services at all hours have been at the heart of a whole cluster of French projects. These service jobs are mostly organised as part-time employment and often organised in broken-shifts, one early in the morning and another in the late afternoon or evening. For women with care responsibilities this kind of work organisation makes it almost impossible to cope with work and family requirements.

EQUAL has introduced positive change for employees in supermarkets, restaurants and hotels and also in cleaning services. In some cases DPs succeeded in reorganising the working time so that it amounts to normal full-time shifts without interruptions. Up-grading and/or multi-skills training helped women to access other jobs that are more compatible with raising a family. And last but not least work-life-balance packages assembling a wealth of practical tools and information on all kinds of support services ranging from childcare to transport and domestic tasks contributed to making life easier for people with care responsibilities. Those packages also functioned as an eye opener for employers who came to understand that by more actively supporting employees to balance job and care responsibilities they can more easily attract and retain much needed qualified staff. Triggered by EQUAL, this is for instance what happened in the hotel, restaurant and catering sector, where 60,000 jobs cannot be filled every year.

3.3. THE ROLE OF THE THEMATIC NETWORK IN ENHANCING THE IMPACT OF EQUAL GOOD PRACTICES

The above concepts are being disseminated in France by the large cluster of DPs that had been specifically aimed at developing and testing those models, but also through the activities of the NTN. It appears that the most successful approaches are quickly taking root, particularly at local level. However, some are also on the way to securing the political and/or financial support of key organisations operating at regional or national level.

Clearly, the main efforts to transfer EQUAL achievements into mainstream policies and practices were undertaken by individual DPs. During its lifespan of almost three years, the NTN has directly and indirectly contributed to this process and supported the projects in their dissemination and mainstreaming activities.

3.3.1. Learning together and from each other

True to its remit, the French NTN proved to be a reliable and highly valued support system for all participating projects. Jointly with a gender equality expert, the National Support Structure (NSS) ensured that all DPs acquired state-of-the-art knowledge of French and European gender equality legislation and policies. The EQUAL Managing Authority had emphasised that the DP partners of theme G DPs should not only include typical gender equality promoters. This strategy was quite successful and encouraged companies, employer organisations and mainstream training institutions to get involved in EQUAL. Their reasoning was usually related to tackling labour shortages or bridging skills gaps and not in the first place to gender equality concerns. Participating in the NTN meant, as several of them put it “*to become experts ourselves of the equal opportunities theme through learning from other projects and from the network gender expert, with the help of Racine and the other key actors associated in the network*”.

For other participants the most positive point of the NTN was the training provided by Racine on evaluation and mainstreaming. “*This contributed to the formulation and dissemination of our results*”, says Anne-Karine Stocchetti, the coordinator of the Gepetto DP, “*which was crucial for the recognition of our childcare model as a regular provision.*”

3.3.2. A network of networks

Involving all Theme G DPs in the NTN meant assembling not only the project coordinators but also reaching out to the very large number of key actors that were partners in the 20 DPs. All those local and regional authorities, companies, social partners, universities, research institutions, NGOs and a variety of national umbrella organisations have their own formal and informal networks into which the NTN successfully channelled the EQUAL good practices.

Trusting the experience of peers, be it amongst local governments, employers or trade unions, often turned out to be the first step towards seriously considering the adoption of new policies and practices.



The “*Equilibre*” DP, which was led by the IBIS hotel chain, is a good example of how this mechanism was reinforced through the NTN. The DP, which had been operating in five regions, generated solutions to training and life-long learning, working time arrangements, childcare, housing and transport services for employees in the hotel and catering sector where atypical working hours are common. In each region, a guidebook was developed that assembled all kinds of useful information for employees and employers. In one case the emphasis was on services for parents and people with other care responsibilities, in another the publication focused on training opportunities, including schemes that recognise and validate informal learning and life experience. The DPs work-life-balance packages gained additional credibility through the support of the UMIH (Union des métiers et des Industries de l’Hôtellerie) the national employers organisation, which invited the project to join its national campaign dedicated to attracting young people and women to the sector. “*The initiative of the Equilibre project came at the right moment*”, says Danièle Deleval, the president of the Lille branch of the UMIH which has actively contributed to drawing up one of the guidebooks. “*At a moment when many hotel and restaurant owners called their own practices into question*”, she says, alluding to high levels of absenteeism and unwanted staff turnover which the industry is facing.

“*Stimulated by the ideas and experiences of Equilibre they can now prove that they are not indifferent to the problems and challenges of their employees who need to reconcile their professional and family obligations.*”

Within the NTN this DP was the only one that specialised in activities in this sector. Yet, the NTN assured that the DP’s publications and tools reached employers and their umbrella organisations in other economic sectors.

Another example of this “mushrooming effect” is the communication strategy of the “Coordination des temps de vie dans les territoires” DP that focused on time policies and gender. It was coordinated by Afet (Association française de l’excellence territoriale), an NGO that advocates a “societal dialogue”, i.e. an intensive, open minded consultation process for territorial development that involves the civil society, social partners and policy makers. Besides publishing its own and other DPs’ good practices in its regular newsletter, Afet produced a special issue on strategies enhancing the articulation of life times in a gender equality perspective as implemented in France and other European countries. More than 500 key actors who are part of Afet’s network have thus received this information. Furthermore, in the framework of the “Ecole des temps”, a continuing education programme, organised by Afet and supported by DATAR (Délégation à l’aménagement du territoire et à l’action économique régionale), the Government agency for territorial organisation and economic development, those achievements were analysed and fed into the programme which trains and accompanies territorial key actors to plan, test, implement, monitor and evaluate time policies.

3.3.3. Joint ventures for dissemination

For a number of DPs sharing ideas and experiences in a group also led to intensive bilateral cooperation. For example, two projects which had both developed specific training programmes for women (and men) working atypical hours joined forces when it came to disseminating their good practices. The policy message they conveyed to both enterprises and training providers was that training is more effective for both employees and employers if tailored to the individual needs of people and that the recent new legislation strengthens an individual’s right to training. The “[Cityctac Tac-Tic DP](#)” that involved a huge supermarket chain created a training package to suit the needs of female employees who, due to their triple work load as workers, mothers, homemakers and often single parents, had first claimed to be unable to afford the time for training. The package offered the women the possibility of bartering each hour they spent on training for an hour of housework, supplied by a local social economy enterprise and paid for by the company. In the second case, a multi-skills training programme enabled the receptionists of the afore-mentioned IBIS hotel chain to also work in other service areas. This improved their career prospects and helped them to work more regular hours. The common dissemination campaign of the two DPs⁵ reached a large number of employers who are now signalling their interest to learn from the EQUAL achievements.

3.3.4. Creating and strengthening business cases as a mainstreaming strategy

Be it to make EQUAL approaches sustainable after the end of a DP’s lifespan or to transfer them to similar contexts and institutions (horizontal mainstreaming), powerful arguments are needed when undertaking to convince decision-makers to adopt new models and to embrace change. Obviously, each DP created its own business case as part of its mainstreaming strategy. But through an on-going peer review in the framework of the NTN many business cases could be enriched and improved.

Champions in the group were projects that could present hard facts on the added-value of work-life-balance schemes in terms of both gender equality and other policy priorities such as local development, productivity or competitiveness of companies, cities or even whole regions. The most impressive example is probably the [reorganisation of working time](#) of the city of Rennes’ cleaning staff - from a broken work day with one morning and one evening shift to regular full time jobs carried out either in the morning or in the afternoon. Not only were the individual workers enabled to find a better balance between work, family and personal life; the cleaning service experienced an enormous boost of productivity and the absenteeism dropped by 40 percent within the first six months after the introduction of the scheme. This proved to be a success factor when the DP tried to stimulate other employers and particularly those in the private sector to follow the example set by the city of Rennes in the framework of its “Egalité des temps” project. *“Of course the improvement of working conditions and quality of life for our own staff is an important concern, but we are also committed to achieving the same for the whole population through improving the performance and quality of our services(...)”*, writes Jocelyne Bougeard, member of the City Council and responsible for women’s rights, gender equality and time policies, in a recent publication⁶. She explains how working in partnership with companies,

⁵ Funded under Action 3.

⁶ Afet : Bulletin de la coordination national et transnational, numéro special 13/14 , printemps 2005.

trade unions and NGOs has generated highly flexible care and transport services for people working atypical hours, but also new cultural and leisure time activities whose schedules are compatible with the busy lives of working mothers (and fathers). *“This kind of partnership creates a real dynamic of good will throughout the Rennes agglomeration, in both the public and the private sector. It also raises the awareness of all citizens about gender equality as a fundamental democratic principle. Also, it emphasises that women who represent 53% of the population should be able to actively participate in the life of the city to the same degree as men. This is a question of equality and social justice and therefore requires a major political engagement which will always be in a process of improvement.”*

The work of the NTN generated even more visibility and the first steps towards horizontal mainstreaming outside of the Rennes region. The Report⁷ presenting the work of the network which contains also detailed descriptions about all the DPs is an excellent tool for disseminating their special achievements and advertising their products. Several thousand copies were sent out to key players at all levels and the DPs could order copies which they offered to people and institutions that had a strategic interest to them. The booklet met with an enormous demand and was reprinted twice.

The NTN has thus enabled a dual effect: through its publication it succeeded in demonstrating the value of EQUAL good practices to potential users in other regions and contexts. At the same time, the common work process has provided all DPs with enough detailed knowledge about each others' approaches and results so that they can now use all those business cases for their own ends.

3.3.5. Influencing policy at all levels

It is still too early to assess the impact of EQUAL DPs and their national network on new policy. But it is safe to state that together projects and NTN have succeeded in triggering a process that tends to bring about change in a number of policy areas and not only in the field of equal opportunities for women and men.

3.3.5.1. An example of vertical mainstreaming

At national level, the National Fund for Family Allowances ([Caisse Nationale d'Allocations Familiales](#) – CNAF) has recognised the form of childcare developed by [GEPETTO](#) for children aged 0 to 13 years, now officially called "accueil en relais" (relay between parents and childcare providers). This form of individualised childcare has been identified as the "missing link" in overall provision.

CNAF is now working on introducing it in its 3-year budget planning system. But meanwhile, as this system of family allowances operates through decentralised services, with autonomous branches (CAFs) at *département* level, the DP approach is now being disseminated in eleven départements. The arguments used to convince each CAF are the same as those having been successful at national level. DP director Anne-Karine Stocchetti: *“Social equity requires that working parents who are all contributing to the Caisse, must be able to benefit from the same or equivalent services.”* This refers to the fact that the CAFs contribute to financing the public childcare provision which usually cannot meet the needs of parents working atypical hours, but have so far not supported individualised, home-based services such as those created by Gepetto.

Another most convincing argument is related to parents', and in particular single mothers', access to employment: *“This form of childcare removes an important obstacle to getting or keeping a job. Why should people have to put up with choosing between a job and caring for their children. (Pourquoi dois-je choisir entre garder mon emploi et garder mon enfant ?) At this point”,* says Anne- Karine, *“ the EQUAL partnership approach played an important role. One of our partners was the Direction du travail (local services of the Ministry of*



⁷ Rachel Silvera, Nadja Buseyne, Vicki Donlevy: Articulier vie professionnelle et vie personnelle

Labour) which actively promoted the argument of access to employment.”

In the second round of EQUAL the former Gepetto DP is taking the idea of the "missing link" in childcare even further. In two regions comprehensive territorial approaches to childcare will be developed that secure cooperation between all the providers of those services and the different funding agencies: CAF, local authorities in charge of public crèches, associations in charge of private crèches, and last but not least, companies such as the French Railways (SNCF), the Postal Services and Adia Temp Work. The first steps are almost completed: mapping out all forms of childcare for 0-13 year olds, setting up a communication system amongst all key actors, pooling human resources and informing parents. Bringing the enterprises on board is a strategy that was encouraged by the NTN, which had always emphasised the importance of working with firms. The new EQUAL project (ALICE) is now making use of that lesson.

3.3.5.2. Bringing about change in regional and local development

Getting the attention and support of elected political decision-makers at local and regional level from early on, has led in some cases to the integration of the gender dimension and/or the articulation of life times approach into the political agenda of those players. This has resulted in the fact that several territorial pacts for sustainable development do now contain those elements, without labelling them as gender equality related, but rather as strategies to improve the competitiveness and capacity of the territories to attract both business investors and a qualified workforce⁸.

In a similar vein, another DP⁹ based in the Finistère area in Brittany has convinced the General Council of the Finistère Département to adopt gender mainstreaming as a general rule for the approval of public subsidies, i.e. gender equality criteria are being used amongst others to decide, for instance, whether companies will be awarded subsidies to buy new or improve existing production facilities. Currently the Region of Brittany is considering following suit.

The examples show how different levels and categories of decision-makers can stimulate and entice each other to make use of the EQUAL lessons. Based on the common work experience in the NTN, DPs invited strategically chosen fellow projects for territorial events such as parliamentary hearings, seminars or conferences to strengthen their own messages. Needless to say the project manager of the Finistère DP was invited to a good number of events across the country.

Another successful avenue towards both horizontal and vertical mainstreaming was to share contacts with important key players. In fact, DP partners such as the Association of French Mayors, flagship companies including France Telecom, Accor or Monoprix and powerful NGOs like the Federation of Rural Families functioned as door openers for EQUAL to top level national events which attract the highest ranking political decision-makers every year. Thus the NTN report was featured at the "Conférence de la Famille" and specific EQUAL approaches including the home-based childcare model of Gepetto were presented. Other projects that had focused on improving the work-life-balance of women (and men) living in rural areas were invited to make an appearance at the high profile annual conference on rural development.

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⁸ Achieved by the following DPs : « Coordination des temps sur les territoires » and « Articuler les temps pour développer les compétences ».

⁹ Développement des conditions favorables à l'activité des femmes en Finistère

4. EQUAL RECONCILIATION APPROACHES CONTRIBUTE TO THE NATIONAL WORKPLACE STRATEGY IN IRELAND

Ireland has opted for a very different set-up and procedure to disseminate and mainstream EQUAL good practices. The National Authorities in charge of the Community Initiative decided to establish an EQUAL Mainstreaming Policy Group (MPG) with high-level representation from relevant Government Departments, Agencies, Social Partner Organisations and other relevant bodies. The MPG is seen as a key aspect of EQUAL in Ireland. It provided a forum where relationships and contacts were developed and where critical lessons and mainstreaming proposals were discussed.

The Irish mainstreaming strategy is directly supported by the Equality Authority (an Agency of the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform), acting as joint chair of the MPG with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment. The MPG is led by a Steering Committee which assembled the ESF Head of Mission, the EQUAL Managing Authority, the Equality Authority, the Technical Support Structure (TSS) and other experts as required.

In addition, two NTN were created. One assembled the DPs working on employability and the other those with a focus on adaptability. The two gender equality DPs that were both concentrating on work-life-balance issues joined the Adaptability NTN.

Given the level of representation of government portfolios and agencies, the MPG was in a good position to enable policy actions in the areas identified as priorities¹⁰:

- Helping the unemployed and inactive to find a job – preventing long-term unemployment;
- Promoting adaptability of workers and firms to change;
- Providing more and better investment in human capital and strategies for lifelong learning (LLL);
- Promoting integration of and combat discrimination against disadvantaged groups.

4.1. STRENGTHENING THE GENDER DIMENSION IN THE WORK OF THE NTN

During the early stages of the NTNs the DPs were asked to associate themselves to the above priorities as well as to the relevant Guidelines of the EES and the objectives of the European Inclusion process. The work programme of the Adaptability NTN mainly reflected the last three of priorities. It was agreed that the network should also address the issues specifically mentioned by the Council in its recommendations for Ireland, i.e.:

- Lifelong Learning: in-company training and the development of a coherent system of lifelong learning;
- Gender Equality: addressing the situation of those who are economically inactive, particularly women;
- Better governance: working in partnership and delivering on empowerment.

Given that meetings of the Irish NTNs always started with a short educational input, the Adaptability network took advantage of the presence of the two gender equality DPs which provided gender training and basic information on gender mainstreaming. Also, the gender dimension was emphasised in many of the group's discussions which enabled an understanding of adaptability which includes work-life-balance.

4.1.1. The specific input of the work-life-balance DPs to the NTN

The two DPs – the National Flexi-work Partnership and the “[Work-Life-Balance-Network](#)” (WLBN) shared the commitment of improving the reconciliation of working and family life through policies and practices which benefit both employees and employers. Their activities, however, hardly overlapped, but were complementary to a high degree. Whilst the Flexi-work Partnership worked mainly with private sector enterprises and emphasised the importance of involving SMEs, WLBN

¹⁰ http://europa.eu.int/comm/employment_social/equal/mainstreaming/ma-ireland_en.cfm

was aimed to roll out ambitious work-life-balance initiatives in six major semi-state and private companies and parts of the public sector. Both projects were closely cooperating with IBEC, the Irish Business and Employers Confederation, and with ICTU, the Irish Congress of Trade Unions. Yet, the Flexi-work partnership being itself coordinated by the Centre for Gender and Women's Studies at Trinity College Dublin has also joined forces with the world of research, FAS, the National Training Authority, and with civil society organisations such as Age Action Ireland representing older people and AWARE advocating the interests of people with mental health difficulties.

Both DPs have established links to national policy priorities. Family friendly policies are part of the objectives of the National Development Plan. The Government has also set up a National Framework Committee for the Development of Family Friendly policies to tackle problems such as the lack of childcare and the predominance of rigid patterns of work organisation, a priority which is also reflected in recent Irish NAPs. Under the National Programme for Prosperity and Fairness Unions (ICTU) and Employers Organisations have committed themselves to encourage and promote family friendly workplaces in every practical way.

4.1.1.1. Cultural change in major organisations

WLBN established partnership groups in those six organisations that brought together representatives of management, trade unions and employees. These groupings became the driving force for the development of a variety of pilot schemes that were all adapted to the specific needs of the participating companies and experimented multi-faceted, flexible working time arrangements that went far beyond the well trodden, traditional path of part-time work.

These schemes included term-time working with 4-14 weeks leave that can be used during school holidays and also for education and training, job sharing as a recruitment tool to attract women, compressed working weeks and e-working. Some 7000 employees took part in the pilot projects and 54% of these were men. According to the evaluation, the managers in all six organisations agreed that these new work-life-packages had not had any negative impact on business performance – in fact the reverse was true, as they had actually improved work satisfaction and productivity.



Today, 80 to 90% of all the personnel policies related to work-life-balance that are adopted in each of the six organisations are based on these initial EQUAL achievements.

Another key feature of WLBN was the development of a model for a “continuum of change”. The idea is that organisations move through four stages that are described as formative, broadening, deepening and mature. While at the first stage a company may be complying with the relevant legislation and offering a small number of family-friendly measures mainly for women with children, the second stage extends those measures to a wider group, involving fathers or more generally people with care responsibilities. During the deepening stage a more consistent combination of policies is emerging and becoming available to all personnel. Policies are now seen as a response to business needs and to attract and retain staff. At this point relevant HR skills are being developed and the up-take of programmes monitored. When reaching the mature stage an enterprise is meeting its organisational goals and its employees’ work-life-needs without either side suffering.

The work-life-balance groups established by the DP in the participating organisations embarked on this “continuum of change”. They applied the work-life-balance criteria that are based on research and good practices collected earlier and identified the stage of the continuum from which to start moving. A [diagnostic tool](#) produced by the DP successfully assisted the organisations during this evolutionary process. This toolkit for firms helps to address information deficits/awareness of work-life-balance and to assist organisations to adapt policies and adopt new approaches. In the framework of EQUAL the tool has been piloted in some semi-state companies which are part of the DP. All partners involved agree that thanks to these pilot schemes cultural change is well underway and that their organisations look considerably different than at the beginning of the endeavour. Both the “continuum approach” and the toolkit have then

been disseminated by the National Framework Committee on work-life- balance established under the Programme for Government.

At the EQUAL conference that took place in spring 2005 in Warsaw, Maria Cronin, Director of Strategy and EU affairs at the Irish Business and Employers Confederation, summed up why this approach has been so successful and why it is now being transferred to other enterprises: *“Putting a toe in the water, finding out what works best, can only make you win. Which it did, and the obvious business advantages led a group of senior managers to spread the message amongst their peers in other companies. Given the low unemployment rates in Ireland, work-life-balance policies are now perceived as being an asset in attracting and retaining a qualified workforce, which is a pre-condition to meet the challenges of globalisation.”*

4.1.1.2. Work-life-balance approaches for specific target groups

The “National Flexi-work Network” has also been breaking new ground through five pilot projects. To get a better understanding of the nature of the barriers to flexible working patterns, it undertook a nationwide representative study, examining the objective factors surrounding work-life-balance issues and the subjective perceptions of men and women, young and old, with lower and higher socio-economic status or living in rural or urban areas. In addition, in depth research focused on the needs of older workers and people with mental health problems. The outcomes were fed into the design of the pilot projects that took place in a variety of companies and were carefully monitored and evaluated.

The pilots included a test run with a wide choice of working time variations for parents and people with other care responsibilities employed in non-management positions and also for parents and other carers who were seeking to return to the labour market after a longer absence, such as parental leave. A second scheme experimented flexible working time solutions suited to the needs of both female and male managers caring for young children or other dependants. It has significantly contributed to shatter notions that flexible work is an unrealistic option for managers, as their work load and responsibilities require a full-time commitment. Having been relieved of their major sources of stress, the daily effort to balance work, family and care obligations, the beneficiaries of both programmes experienced greater job satisfaction and productivity. Employers realised that flexi-time arrangements can contribute to attract and retain a qualified female workforce.

Two more pilots adapted various flexi-time options to the needs of other target groups. The first resulted in making the workplace more welcoming to people with mental health problems by testing part-time, job-sharing and personalised flexible working hours. This last solution, for instance, proved to be greatly helpful to women and men suffering from depression. It is based on the fact that between the recurrent spells of the illness, people have periods when they are well enough to work. The experience showed that they can gain a lot of satisfaction and be empowered to lead a more balanced life from this experience of work. In all of the enterprises involved in this scheme, the DP trained supervisors and/or HR personnel to develop their competencies in handling mental health issues in the workplace.

The second programme successfully convinced employers of the value of older workers as a human resource and enabled solutions to gradually phasing out their commitments to the company through the introduction of flexible working arrangements. This approach helped enterprises to meet the emerging skills gaps due to demographic change and to transfer the knowledge and skills of older workers to the next generation.

Last, but not least, a particularly innovative staffing approach in childcare centres involved the recruitment of older males and females and also younger men, as part-time childcare workers. The new recruits received on-the-job training whilst being employed in crèches or other pre-school facilities. The DP views this pilot as a gender mainstreaming strategy targeted at early childhood when the most formative impressions of gender roles are being created.

Three advisory committees, representing older workers, people with mental health difficulties and working parents were set up. They assembled individuals, relevant NGOs and advocacy groups and provided valuable input on research, design, programmatic aspects and were also cooperating in mainstreaming efforts. The DP ensured that participation in the Advisory Committees was not prevented by childcare and transport problems or disability. E.g. Committee

members requiring it got full subsidies for childcare or for transport respectively, if they could not use public transport. Locations and schedules were tailored to peoples' needs.

Furthermore, a Working Group of Employers was convened, which was cooperating closely with the members of the project staff who were implementing the pilot schemes. *“Setting up that group was greatly facilitated by the EQUAL partnership approach”,* reports Margaret Fine-Davies, project manager and head of Trinity College’s Centre for Gender and Women’s Studies. *“Without EQUAL we would not have been able to develop the kind of working relationship with IBEC which – as a partner – took on the task of recruiting a good mix of employers for the Working Group. IBEC also opened doors to companies as sites of our pilot projects. It co-hosted workshops for employers to facilitate the transfer of knowledge between large enterprises and SMEs, and thus maximised outreach and impact of its own National Round Table on Family Friendly Practices and Work-Life-Balance issues.”*

4.2. JOINING FORCES FOR MAINSTREAMING

Besides working in parallel on the thematic priorities of employability and adaptability, the two networks joined forces in some of their efforts to disseminate and mainstream good practices. Together the most active members of the NTN prepared the submission of an EQUAL contribution to a nationwide consultation process entitled “The Workplace of the Future”. This process involved a Forum that was initiated and run by the [National Centre for Partnership and Performance](#), a government agency established to support and drive change in the Irish workplace.

“What we thought would be a brief submission began to take a life of its own”, reports Anna Gunning, one of the members of the working group, *“not least as a result of a flood of contributions from our work-life-balance sisters.”* Work-life-balance issues and their capacity to respond to diverse needs of an increasingly diverse workforce and thus to shape the workplaces of the future, became one of the corner stones of a highly comprehensive paper, which otherwise included the EQUAL concepts and tools as valuable ingredients for the intended Government strategy: partnership approach, awareness raising, equality training and e-quality marking, job rotation, but also diagnostic tools and staff handbooks. The group emphasised that the proposed lessons were based on structured analysis and “laboratory” type testing. *“The document is also a representative of the power of EQUAL when we work together as it is directly informed by the contributions of the DPs working under the Adaptability, Employability and Equal Opportunities Pillars. This coalition allowed us to cover a lot of ground from a lot of angles and suggests that more of the same will assist the collective mainstreaming effort.”*



On the basis of that submission EQUAL DPs, including the two gender equality projects, were invited to present their good practices to the plenary session of the Forum. Both the submission and the presentation were very well received and have been incorporated in the final Report of the Forum. Gender equality and work-life-balance issues hold a prominent place in that report and a number of evidence-based EQUAL achievements can be traced.

This is true for the innovative models which do not only involve a variety of flexi-work options for women (and men) with care obligations, but also tested and proven concepts to induce a management culture that ensures that those who avail of these arrangements are not disadvantaged in their career advancement.

Some of the major achievements of the gender equality DPs were thus channelled into what is now called the Irish National Workplace Strategy. This strategy was launched at a high level conference in Dublin in spring 2005. In her opening speech Lucy Fallon Byrne, the Director of the National Centre for Partnership and Performance emphasised the importance of mobilising women to access the labour and to develop their full potential if Ireland is to meet the challenges of the future: *“Overall, Ireland will need approximately 420.000 additional workers up to 2010”,* she said, *“workplace policies are now needed to encourage more female participation, at present*

20% below that of men, and to encourage older workers to remain at work, as well as a coherent economic immigration policy. Barriers to women's participation in the workforce should be removed and practical solutions for the provision of childcare supports and family-friendly working time arrangements put in place."

Prime Minister Bertie Ahern announced the speedy implementation of the workplace strategy through a high level Implementation Group chaired by the Minister of Labour. In his speech he underlined that the same energy that has been invested to date in Ireland's economic transformation must now be brought to the transformation of the workplace and of the individual working lives of employees. *"There is a clear competitive advantage to be won from better deployment and development of our workforce. And there are huge societal benefits to be gained from an improved quality of life for individual workers.(...) The aim of this Strategy is the creation of a climate which supports change and new forms of work organisation at both national and organisational levels. This climate in turn will promote a better quality of work, higher productivity and an improved work-life-balance."* The Prime Minister stressed the areas of life long learning and childcare as issues of concern to society that go far beyond their workplace implications, but also as priorities for an inclusive and innovative workplace and called for more creativity when it comes to using the so-far untapped potential of women.

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5. GENDER EQUALITY LESSONS FROM NATIONAL THEMATIC NETWORKS

The quest of making gender equality a reality that goes beyond the legislative framework created by the EU over the past decades is not exactly a success story. This is not the place to elaborate on all the persistent structural and attitudinal obstacles, which EQUAL is addressing with encouraging results. Concerning the reconciliation work and family life those good practices are making a real difference for women and men with care responsibilities. Flexible, high quality care for children or old and frail family members combined with personnel policies that take account of women's and increasingly also men's family commitments have proven their capacity of improving peoples' quality of life. At the same time companies, economic sectors and frequently local areas and regions have benefited from those EQUAL work-life-balance approaches. Thanks to EQUAL countless pilot programmes were implemented, monitored and evaluated throughout the EU. These test runs have proven that sound reconciliation policies and practices are clearly an asset of economic development and growth in terms attracting and retaining qualified staff; reduced absenteeism and staff turnover; better business performance, productivity and competitiveness. But will all these insights and achievements really initiate a move towards the general adoption of the new models generated by this Community Initiative?

The Irish EQUAL Management Authority sees positive indications: *"Unlike previous Community Initiatives and existing mainstream labour market interventions, which focus on labour market disadvantage such as skill, capacity or competency deficits, EQUAL takes a broader view. It focuses on addressing the barriers – context, situational, dispositional and institutional etc. – that discriminate against and effectively unequally treat particular sections of our society in terms of labour market access, participation and progression."* In an article on innovation and mainstreaming published in the Irish EQUAL newsletter and highlighting 2004 as the crucial year of mainstreaming, the authority argues that EQUAL is clearly about challenging and changing process and practice. *"Mainstreaming", it continues, "is therefore an implicit function of engagement within the programme. Effectively it is what EQUAL is about."*

The achievements of the two EQUAL NTN presented here are examples of this “implicit function” that drives processes of change. Strategies that helped to multiply and transfer EQUAL work-life-balance concepts to mainstream policies and practices include:

- Using the EQUAL partnership approach as a principle within the NTNs tends to engender horizontal and sometimes even vertical mainstreaming. Whilst in the Irish case establishing the Mainstreaming Policy Group as a mechanism to identify and transfer good practices via a group of well chosen key players, the French NTN was geared to trigger cross-fertilisation between the EQUAL DPs, which created a new type of partnership between the projects enhancing their mainstreaming capacity.
- Integrating gender equality related issues such as work-life-balance into other thematic priorities and thus inducing a process of increased awareness and inclusion of the gender dimension.
- Linking the case of equal opportunities from a social justice perspective to the business advantages to be gained by using concepts such as work-life-balance as part of local development and/or personnel policies. This has helped to move issues such as care for children and other dependants as well as family-friendly working time arrangements from the gender equality agenda to the employment and economic growth agenda, which is usually given higher priority by top decision-makers in both politics and business world.
- Following the hot issues on the national policy agenda and proposing EQUAL contributions that can help governments to tackle current and future challenges.

In the face of the long history and slow progress of reconciliation policies to really impact positively on the daily lives of women and men, EQUAL DPs and NTNs may well have contributed to reach a “point of no return”, when it comes to making work-life-balance an integral part of mainstream policies and practices. The authors of the French NTN report observe this process of sustainability concerning the role of the State and in particular that of territorial decision-makers and authorities: *“Policies for new flexible working time arrangements and the harmonisation of city times as well as the development of public care and other family support services are now well anchored. There is no turning back. But in addition to financing those infrastructures, there is still a huge need to reflect and discuss a whole range of crucial issues: the quality of those services (for children, people with disabilities and senior citizens), the ways to recognise and accord professional status to existing services; the creation of new and additional ones and – last but not least – the equal access of all families to these services.”*

The work-life-balance agenda is far from being fully covered. The NTNs see a whole range of future priorities to be addressed both inside and outside of EQUAL. These include a more balanced role and task sharing of fathers and men at home, more focussed strategies to make businesses, particularly SMEs, and trade unions understand that reconciliation is not a private problem of women, but one that concerns them as well. Companies and social partner organisations being convinced of the advantages of work-life-balance policies that can make everybody win, employers and employees, women and men, are still a minority. A huge field to plough for second round EQUAL NTNs!