

ESTABLISHING A CULTURE OF GENDER EQUALITY IN THE BUSINESS WORLD

EQUAL supports employers and social partners in becoming agents of change

THE UNTAPPED POTENTIAL OF WOMEN

Due to demographic change and declining populations of working age, companies in many EU Member States are facing difficulties in attracting qualified employees. Maximising the economic contribution of women is a crucial strategy to meet this challenge but too few employers are aware of the untapped potential of women.

In the last decade, female potential has increased considerablyⁱ. Throughout Europe, women are outperforming men in completing upper secondary education successfully. They represent 59% of all university graduates and are gradually breaking into male domains, such as mathematics, science and civil engineering. However, these inroads are not mirrored by their position in the labour market. Women's jobs are clustered in a restricted number of economic sectors and occupations such as education, health and social care, as well as public administration and retailing. Female employment rates are 15 percentage points lower than men's and women continue to face a pay gap of 15%. Men are still twice as likely to hold managerial positions and over three times as likely to be senior managers.

Women with care responsibilities for children and other dependents are often hampered in their career. 33 % of women, compared to 7% of men, are opting for part-time and thus, have fewer opportunities for career progression, lower salaries and reduced access to supplementary payments and social protection benefits. Those who work full-time face the daily struggle of reconciling employment with their roles of mother, partner and homemaker. This overload can have an impact on women's job performance and cause absenteeism and unwanted staff turnover. Employers, who understand how family-friendly work organisation can enhance the overall performance of a company, are still in a minority.

EU- POLICIES: ADVANCES – BUT INEQUALITY REMAINS

The European Commission's [Gender Equality Report 2007](#) shows that, whilst women are driving the EU's job growth, they encounter barriers in realising their full potential. The report stresses that the increased integration of women into the workforce will help to release the productive capacity of the EU and strengthen its social cohesion. In addition, confirming the objectives of full employment and social cohesion of the Reformed Lisbon Strategy, the [European Spring Council 2007](#) urged governments to honour their commitments to the targets of the European Employment Strategyⁱⁱ and the European Pact for Gender Equality, and reminded Social Partner Organisations and employers that they should play a more pro-active role in establishing gender equality in the work place.

EQUAL CREATES WIN-WIN SITUATIONS FOR EMPLOYERS AND EMPLOYEES

In many Member States, EQUAL has paved the way for a new culture in companies and in the social dialogue that involves integrating a gender dimension, whilst at the same time generating business advantages in terms of improved productivity. This change process required a multi-faceted approach to dismantling the gender gaps on the labour market. Activities developed helped to boost employment and career prospects for women and men. Other key elements of these approaches included work-life-balance programmes as part of future oriented personnel policies and strategies to overcome traditional gender attitudes and stereotypes.

SOCIAL PARTNERS AS MOVERS AND SHAKERS

Strong self-interest and, in particular, the pressing need to mitigate the consequences of demographic change motivated Social Partner Organisations to take the lead in designing, testing and disseminating the various EQUAL activities.

[The Libra project](#), which was created by major Social Partner Organisations from the Swedish construction industry, is a good [example](#) of this strategy. Until now, both blue and white collar jobs in that sector have been dominated by men of Swedish origin. With an increasing number of the current workforce nearing retirement, this staunch domain of “white males” is facing a dramatic reduction in its traditional labour supply. It has been estimated that the industry will need to fill 90.000 job vacancies in the coming decade. Similarly, the trade unions in this sector will need to attract 120.000 new members if they are to maintain their status and role as social partners. This situation stimulated **employers and unions to commit themselves, jointly for the first time, to combating discrimination and labour market segregation**. In the framework of EQUAL, they have convinced numerous construction companies, including market leaders, to participate in their efforts. Together they have tackled negative attitudes of co-workers and managers towards women and immigrants, created work environments that facilitate the retention of women in the sector and attracted young women and immigrants to career paths in construction.

An example from the [United Kingdom](#) demonstrates a similar motivation. The National Training Institution of the UK transport sector targeted private companies and helped them to understand the need to embrace gender equality and diversity policies. Whilst the employers acknowledged the moral and legal case for such policies, it was the demographic data, which “shocked” them into action. In the knowledge that by 2010 only 20% of the workforce would be white, male and aged less than 45 years and that over 80% of the workforce growth would be female many companies grasped the opportunity provided by EQUAL to develop **new recruitment and selection procedures**. Sector specific data, such as the estimated shortfall of over 75,000 vehicle drivers by 2010 unless firms diversify their workforce, further strengthened their willingness to create and share **concepts for attracting new groups of workers**.

In [Denmark](#), HK, the Trade Union of Commercial and Clerical Employees, played a crucial role in tipping the scales in favour of improved gender balance in senior management. An HK-led EQUAL partnership focused on eliminating one of main the reasons for this gender gap - the limited pool of female human resources in middle management from which recruits are drawn. Women working at this level of the corporate hierarchy were offered training and coaching designed to develop leadership skills, personal growth and a strong will to promote their careers. Participation in the programme was free, but the women’s **employers had to make a financial commitment** in kind by granting their employees 28 working days to be spent on the programme’s training and coaching sessions. **Coaching was carried out by specialists** who had a nationwide reputation as management consultants and “master coaches”. They also trained trade union staff to become coaches, which produced a mainstreaming effect within HK itself and a certain peer pressure for other unions to follow suit.

GENDER IMPACT ASSESSMENTS AS A DECISIVE STEP

Assessing the different impacts of work environments, job profiles and work organisation on women and men laid the foundations for the introduction of gender equality plans in public and private companies. Particularly in Southern Member States EQUAL Partnerships focusing on this approach have been led by Trade Unions. They have often succeeded in integrating these plans into **collective agreements at company or sectoral level**. The priorities addressed included training, recruitment and selection procedures and also the reformulation of criteria for career progress and promotion. The agreements refer to all categories of workers, but frequently include specific actions to improve the situation of female employees.

A [Portuguese Partnership](#), coordinated by the National Trade Union Federation, assessed the realities of working life for men and women in 19 companies. In most cases, women suffered from discrimination as a result of factors such as restricted access to certain jobs, fewer career opportunities, lower pay and loss of workers’ rights as a result of taking maternity leave. At first, the employers refused to accept the existence of any discriminatory practices. However, two companies that had previously been partners in an ESF project were able to demonstrate how recruiting women with good educational credentials for technical jobs had greatly improved their performance and productivity. This [example](#) of **good practice provided by peers helped the other employers to understand that personnel policies based on gender equality could generate business advantages**. As a result, the Management Boards of all 19 organisations successfully negotiated collective agreements with their Works Councils and trade unions.

Based on the outcomes of a gender impact assessment in 100 companies in the Barcelona region, a [Trade Union-led project](#) developed a [work-life balance model](#). Ten large companies

were selected for test runs, which included **more flexible, family-friendly working time arrangements**, leave schemes and a “lights off” policy after 8.00 p.m. to ensure that overtime did not conflict with family responsibilities. In addition a **variety of direct services were offered to employees**. These included washing, shopping and home deliveries, home maintenance and repair and also childcare, support for elderly dependents and transport facilities. Accompanied by awareness raising and training seminars for managers and trade union representatives, the schemes improved the job performance of women with care responsibilities and reduced absenteeism. These new solutions to reconciling work and family life were introduced into collective agreements.

In [Finland](#), EQUAL initiated a joint venture between social partners in the technology industries and supported companies in introducing the kind of **equality planning** that was required by national legislation. Guided by equality experts, the enterprises used a **six-stage model that led to an on-going process of improving the working life of women and men**. Step 1 required the formation of an equality team bringing together male and female employees from all job categories and age groups. This team played a key role that included carrying out an analysis of the organisation’s gender equality performance and specifying the areas of equality promotion. The next stages involved setting up an equality plan with goals and timetables for two years. Priority issues were zero tolerance policies to combat gender based and sexual harassment, equal pay and gender fair recruitment and promotion procedures. Managers were made responsible for taking things forward in their respective areas and were carefully monitored by the equality team. After the two years, the results were evaluated and necessary corrections and new targets and measures are being implemented in a follow-up plan. [Companies](#) have come to appreciate that equality planning can improve the social climate and wellbeing in the workplace, whilst increasing the productivity and the income of the enterprises.

PILOT ACTIONS IN COMPANIES AS THE TURNING POINT

EQUAL offered employers a unique chance to experiment with new personnel policies to **attract and retain qualified staff**. In many cases, the testing of flexible working time arrangements to accommodate the needs of parents and other workers with care responsibilities was a real success. Involving senior and middle management, trade unions and work councils in the development of the new models ensured that they were tailored to the specific situation in each company. To gain the lasting commitment of these key players, projects organised **briefings for decision-makers and training for the staff of human resource departments**.

An [Irish Partnership](#) established working groups in six major organisations which brought together the management and trade unions. These groupings developed **flexible working time arrangements that went far beyond the well trodden path of part-time work**. The schemes included 4-14 weeks of leave that could be used during school holidays and also for education or travelling, job sharing as a recruitment tool to attract women, compressed working weeks and e-working. Over 7000 employees participated in the pilots of which 54% were men. The management in all six organisations agreed that the new models **improved work satisfaction and productivity** and did not have any negative impact on business operations. Today 80 to 90% of all personnel policies on work-life-balance that have been adopted in each organisation are based on the EQUAL achievements.

In France, a [Partnership](#) was initiated by a major hotel chain that was seeking to reduce the alarming turnover and absenteeism of its female staff. This company piloted new work schedules geared to **tackling disadvantages resulting from the high level of flexibility**, which is often a requirement of jobs in this sector. For example, a new solution was found for receptionists who had to cover two rush periods – one in the morning when guests were checking out and another in the evening when new arrivals were piling up. The free hours in between did not really help to improve family life, since employees had to leave for their second shift just as their children or partners were returning home. A **multi-skills programme** changed the situation. Employees were trained for more than one job and, as a result, a person can, on the same day, work first as a receptionist and then as a waiter. HR managers now offer **full days instead of “broken” schedules**, and this approach helps employees to develop their career and earn more pay.

TERRITORIAL PARTNERSHIPS AS IDEAL FRAMEWORKS FOR CHANGE

Joining forces with other key players in their territories helped both enterprises and Social Partner Organisations to reinforce their gender equality policies and many of the initiatives described above would not have been possible without involving other partners.

Employers and Social Partners seeking to attract young people, women and ethnic minorities to sectors that are encountering skills gaps worked successfully with career guidance services, schools, universities and vocational training centres. **Companies “adopted” schools and other educational institutions in their community** and offered taster weeks or summer jobs, thus enabling pupils to get a clearer view of a variety of possible occupations. [German](#) and [UK](#) examples prove how work experience placements for students and trainees can become stepping stones to employment or a new career. Alliances with decision-makers and practitioners in employment policies, particularly at regional and local level, were another lever used by companies to improve the work-life-balance of their employees. For instance, whilst helping employers in [Italy](#), [Austria](#) and [Estonia](#) to introduce reconciliation policies, EQUAL supported municipalities in reducing unemployment in their local areas and managed to **establish a broad variety of care and other family services**. These services, whose costs were shared between enterprises and public authorities, **created many jobs for unemployed and inactive women**.

Last, but not least, EQUAL enabled or strengthened **cooperation between the business world and gender equality bodies and NGOs**. This was particularly important for SMEs that, unlike large corporations, rarely have an in-house equality advisor. In the Italian regions of [Lombardy](#) and [Veneto](#), EQUAL set up a system of interlinked resource centres for gender equality. Besides supporting women of all age groups and different educational and ethnic backgrounds to access the labour market and build a career, they provided **counselling and expertise to employers** who were interested in improving their equality performance. Examples from [Scotland](#), [Austria](#) and [Spain](#) highlight the crucial role of gender equality bodies and NGOs in **tackling the gender pay gap**. Campaigns were initiated that helped employers to carry out pay audits and establish [action plans](#) that addressed inequalities in pay. These actions committed trade unions to making equal pay a priority and also empowered women to challenge pay discrimination.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

To secure Europe’s productivity and competitiveness, enterprises must become more flexible in responding to sudden changes in their markets and, particularly, to the increasing demand for quality. Their capacity for flexibility is related to providing a satisfying work-life-balance for women and men and to taking due account of their employees preferences for career development. EQUALⁱⁱⁱ has generated concepts which, if applied jointly by relevant key players, can bring about positive change. It is vital that policy makers and stake-holders should be made aware of the opportunities provided by the new ESF programmes (2007-2013) to continue to work in that direction.

- **Employers** are encouraged to **build on EQUAL good practices** and to make use of the variety of business cases, diagnostic tools and support materials that have been created.
- **Social Partner Organisations** should integrate **gender equality and the promotion of gender mainstreaming into the process of collective bargaining**. This requires awareness raising and training of those involved in the negotiation of collective agreements at company, sectoral or regional level.
- **Local and Regional Governments** should play a more pro-active role and initiate **territorial alliances for gender equality**. This is particularly relevant to SMEs, which often lack the resources to develop such policies on their own.
- **National Governments and Legislators** should review the existing legal frameworks and consider amendments that would remove the obstacles to, and raise the attractiveness of, equality planning for employers and employees.

ⁱ Report from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Social and Economic Committee, and the Committee of the Regions on equality between women and men – 2007, COM (2007) 49 final;

ⁱⁱ By 2010 an overall employment rate of 70% and an employment rate of 60% for women must be achieved and by the same date the childcare facilities in each Member State should be increased and offer places to 33% for 0-3 year olds and to 90% for children of 3 years up until mandatory school age.

ⁱⁱⁱ More information can be found on the [gender equality pages of the EQUAL website](#).