

EQUAL PUSHING GENDER INTO THE MAINSTREAM

SNAIL'S PROGRESS?

Even if the “family photos” of European Councils are no longer an all male affair and reflect more gender balance in Europe, disparities between the situations of women and men persist. This is true in almost all societal spheres and particularly in political and economic decision making, in education and training and in the labour market. More progress can be observed in the quantity and quality of childcare but in many Member States the existing provision simply does not meet the demand and also care services for the elderly leave much to be desired. No wonder women face continuing difficulties in reconciling professional and private life. Too few employers offer family friendly work organisation and the unequal division of domestic tasks adds to the problem. The solution chosen by many women is reflected in 33% of them working part-time, compared to 7% of men - a pattern that hampers female career prospects and financial security in old age.

Both the [2007 Report on equality between women and men](#)ⁱ and [the Joint Employment Report](#)ⁱⁱ indicate a snail's progress: slow, but steady, with occasional reversals. Referring to the implementation of gender equality within the renewed Lisbon Strategy for growth and jobs, the documents state that gender gaps in employment and unemployment are gradually disappearing. However, occupational and sectoral segregation and the gender pay gap have barely changed. In its [comparative review of gender mainstreaming \(GM\) of employment policies](#)ⁱⁱⁱ the EU Expert Group on Gender, Social Inclusion and Employment (EGGSIE) argues that systematic GM has lost momentum and is far from being an integral part of policy making in the framework of the Lisbon Process.

A EUROPEAN POLICY PRIORITY

Clearly, there is an urgent **need for comprehensive approaches to gender equality** that address all of these problems and challenges. The [Commission's Roadmap for Equality](#) between women and men and the [European Pact on Gender Equality](#), which represents the commitment of the Member States, both urge decision makers at all levels to adopt or reinforce GM as a tool to make gender equality a reality.

This entails the obligation to integrate the gender perspective into the planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of all policies and actions. Consequently, GM will be applied by the new programmes of the European [Structural Funds \(2007-2013\)](#), as indicated in the General Regulation. This commitment is further specified in the provisions of the [ESF Regulation](#), which requests Member States to promote, in their Operational Programmes, gender equality and equal opportunities and to report on how GM and any gender specific actions are organised throughout the policy cycle.

EQUAL: TEST BED AND MOTOR

Across the EU, EQUAL Development Partnerships have tried and tested a multitude of approaches to integrating the gender dimension into project and programme levels. These included applying GM not only in projects focusing on the gender equality themes of desegregation and reconciliation but also as a transversal principle in projects operating under all the other EQUAL themes. EQUAL has assisted local communities, regions, economic sectors or education, and training and research institutions to introduce GM into their respective policy areas. Moreover, GM approaches born in one country have often been optimised through transnational cooperation. In all these different contexts, a wealth of tools have been generated that can help newcomers to GM avoid “reinventing the wheel” and having to go through lengthy developmental processes before taking action.

KEY PRINCIPLES AND SUCCESS FACTORS

Although it is still too early to evaluate the sustainability and lasting impact of the EQUAL GM good practices, a few principles and methods stand out as being particularly successful.

Well structured models leading the way

The pathways from the decision on introducing GM that led to its actual implementation varied, but they always incorporated a number of steps that were crucial if the end product was to be both systematic and sustainable. The first step involved a **gender impact assessment** of the chosen policy field to find out how women as compared to men benefit from existing, and might benefit from intended, policies and practices. This procedure required gender disaggregated data. Based on the outcomes which usually revealed gender gaps and discriminatory practices, **gender equality targets** were formulated and **action plans** drawn up. The next stage involved the anticipation and analysis of obstacles that were most likely to hamper progress and a consideration of options that had the potential to reduce or remove the obstacles. Often this was followed by a **SWOT analysis** or another method that aimed to find the most **realistic and viable solutions** in terms of cost benefits, available time and organisational context. **Implementation** of the selected option was the next step, which in the most successful cases **integrated the gender dimension into the management and control systems** of the participating organisations. Last, but not least, effective **monitoring and evaluation** were key ingredients which ensured an on-going improvement of gender equality performance.

Placing the emphasis on difference

The gender impact assessments carried out under EQUAL confirmed that there is no such thing as gender neutrality. Placed under the microscope of the projects, the various fields of action revealed discriminatory practices, which mostly affected women, but sometimes also men. The City Government of [Graz](#), which was a partner in a project committed to **integrating GM into regional and local policies**, discovered that girls and women did not benefit equally from its cultural and leisure time activities. Thus, one of the city's re-formulated equality goals was to change its provision to take account of the different female, as well as male, interests. For instance, the sports programme now contains not only football and athletics but also gymnastics and dancing and this has increased female participation.

When setting out on a gender impact assessment private companies, which were partners in EQUAL projects in [Belgium](#), [Styria](#), [Finland](#) and other countries, were astounded to discover that the same procedures in **personnel policies had different effects on male and female staff**. They found that women were disadvantaged in terms of career advancement, usually because of difficulties in balancing professional and family life. They often could not afford to spend additional hours on training in new skills or to put in the amounts of overtime which are typical for people trying to climb the corporate ladder. Also, the selection mechanisms were marked by gender stereotypes such as a "father and family man" being seen as reliable and hard working, whereas "mothers" were seen as frequent absentees and lacking in dedication. Employers also came to realise that their strategies for attracting and retaining qualified female staff tended to fail because of a lack of childcare and family friendly working conditions. Under EQUAL, these shortcomings were successfully addressed by **equality plans** that supported women in aspiring to senior management positions and/or to jobs in male domains. For instance, the development of a **gender fair assessment centre** helped to improve recruitment and selection. **Public-private partnerships** of companies and municipalities invested in **flexible quality childcare**, and this alleviated the daily pressure of reconciling parenthood and career. These are only two of the many EQUAL examples that are currently being adopted by other enterprises and local authorities.

Win-win situations overcoming obstacles

Although gender equality has been on the policy agenda of local communities, regions, enterprises and organisations for a long time, EQUAL partners often had to overcome their reticence to committing themselves to more than occasional, specific actions for women. Pleading the business case for GM enabled EQUAL to overcome this lack of political will. Success stories that proved how **integrating the gender dimension into policies and practices boosted territorial development** were real eye-openers. In fact, GM has mitigated the consequences of the demographic changes

and population decline and created favourable environments for business investments and economic growth through making cities and regions **better places to live and work for both women and men**. In [Austria](#), [Spain](#), France, and [Italy](#) concepts included stimulating the cultural environment and providing family support services such as care for children and other dependants,. This was combined with flexible work organisation and all together became important “soft factors” in territorial development. These efforts raised the interest of younger people with children, or those planning to become parents, in settling in the region. Also women, who had been unable to access the labour market or to hold on to a career because of family responsibilities, are encountering fewer difficulties. In [Denmark](#), [Austria](#), [Ireland](#) and [Flanders](#) guidance and employment services tailored their counselling, training and placement services more closely to the individual needs of women and men and this, in turn, broadened the skills-base in regions and districts and helped employers to find and retain qualified female employees.

Such **business cases** worked best when the good practices were **recommended by another company, public administration or political decision-makers**, as they were perceived as being more credible when presented by counterparts. For instance, [a Scottish model](#) that had involved local policy makers in the extension of broadband and in establishing “communities of practice” in rural areas was transferred to Spain. The idea of **making learning more accessible** to those that are disadvantaged on the job market due to geographical isolation and/or care responsibilities was “sold” as a business case by Scottish mayors to their Spanish equivalents. Thanks to **peer advice and support** the gender dimension was integrated into this spread of broadband. This furthered equality of access for women, whilst promoting economic development through equipping companies to take advantage of e-business opportunities and local government to keep in contact with its rural communities.

Top-down, bottom-up and the role of middle management

The implementation of these EQUAL GM measures would not have been possible without the firm **commitment and backing of senior decision-makers**. EQUAL has designed strategies to secure the active support of key people. Successful approaches have included the formation of groups of **“ambassadors” or “advocates” for GM** who contacted policy makers, senior managers and business leaders and pointed out both the necessity and the advantages of systematic gender equality policies. A particularly smart move was the **GM coaching of individual leaders** in the Swedish Armed Forces, Police Service and the Association of Swedish Officers. The coaches came from JÄMO, the National Gender Equality Agency, a management consultancy, universities and even large enterprises such as Volvo. Increased gender knowledge and expertise generated through the coaching led to more gender fair decisions and helped the participants of the scheme to stimulate and monitor GM in their areas of responsibility.

Also, sustainable GM was greatly enhanced through enabling middle management to drive the process. EQUAL and ESF projects in [Germany](#), [Ireland](#) and [Spain](#) trained executives from different operational areas as **gender agents** or **equality advisors** who would initiate and manage GM. Experts emerged from these programmes who had the capacity to introduce and coordinate the necessary changes within their own organisations. According to projects’ evaluations, these in-house activists were particularly successful when it came to making a lasting impact. EQUAL also supported pilot projects in private and public organisations, which were **test runs for equality planning** and often resulted in a wider process of GM. The promotion and dissemination of these activities has led to **an ever increasing demand for GM training**. Candidates are now coming from federations of municipalities and regions, employer organisations, chambers of commerce, trade unions, local development agencies and business consultancies and [transnational cooperation](#) has triggered a demand for similar initiatives in other countries, especially in the new Member States.

Making the **GM process transparent** to everybody concerned, whilst valuing all contributions from all levels, has been the motor of change. In [Finland](#), the GM model kicked off by setting up an **equality team** in any organisation embarking on the type of equality planning that is required by national legislation. Team members represented all categories of personnel and women and men of different ages. The teams studied the theory of equality planning and led a first discussion about the practical steps that might be necessary. Then, members kept work colleagues posted about progress and fed their reactions back to the full equality team, which strengthened GM by ensuring **bottom-up approval and support**.

FORWARD LOOKING STRATEGIES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

GM is a complex and long-term process which requires an innovative spirit, persistence and the firm political will to move from the test bed into mainstream policies and practices. Although the aim of the EU is to apply GM to all policy areas and all levels of planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation, experience shows that this cannot take place all at once through a single process.

- To **mainstream GM** and to engender lasting impact, all key players must **identify the policy areas that are marked by particularly huge gender gaps and most in need of GM**. Working towards improved gender balance and integrating the gender dimension into all actions can be greatly reinforced through [EQUAL's transversal principles or building blocks](#). At local, regional or national level, policy makers and leaders within the realms of business, education or research can benefit from using these principles in combination with GM, as outlined below, to achieve sustainable progress and improved governance in their respective areas of operation.
- Forming pro-active **partnerships for GM** strengthens the commitment of all players and the sustainability of change in the chosen policy field. The success stories on territorial pacts for equal opportunities that engendered local and regional development are the living proof of how political decision-makers, senior and middle managers in administrations, enterprises and social partner organisations can cooperate to make large cities, smaller towns and even whole regions better places to live and work, whilst increasing the innovative potential, productivity and competitiveness of the territory.
- Making the most of **transnationality** optimises gender equality policies. There is a wealth of good practice that can help policy makers and other stakeholders learn about the positive results of importing GM approaches from other countries and about embarking on future transnational cooperation to induce transfer, adaptation and mainstreaming.
- Including GM in strategies and programmes for **innovation** opens up fresh perspectives from a gender viewpoint. New models of employment and career policies, work-life-balance for women and men, and solutions to childcare and elderly care that combine institutional and home-based approaches would not have emerged without a commitment to GM.
- Stimulating the **empowerment** of women and men so that they can develop their full potential is not only about individual advancement. Using GM empowers the different players to becoming change agents working towards a more egalitarian and diverse society and also create a pool of expertise that can offer advice and assistance to a range of organisations and enterprises.

To share and develop the GM good practices and tools that have emerged from EQUAL, a group of seven Member States have launched a [Community of Practice](#) (co-financed by the European Commission) that will anchor GM in the programmes that will be implemented during the next ESF Funding Period of 2007-2013. Led by Finland, the group organises face-to-face events and runs a communication and networking [platform](#) that has been designed as a hub for all those involved such as ESF programme managers and promoters, gender equality bodies, experts and policy makers. The Community is open wide to all players who wish to benefit from mutual learning. It welcomes and values contributions from throughout the European Union that can help to root gender equality in policies and practices. These kinds of exchanges have already been experienced through the organisation of two peer reviews in [Graz](#) and [Dublin](#). Two more are planned in [Florence](#) and Ghent.

ⁱ European Commission: 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 Council of the European Union: Joint Employment Report 2006/2007 – 6706/07

ⁱⁱⁱ EU Expert Group on Gender, Social Inclusion and Employment (EGGSIE): Gender mainstreaming of employment policies- a comparative review of 30 European countries. The coordinators' synthesis report for the Equality Unit, European Commission, July 2007