

Statements and Comments on Women's Return to the Labour Market

Alexia Panayiotou
University of Cyprus
and Mediterranean Institute of Gender Studies

Introduction

The purpose of this report is to examine the transferability of the German *Perspektive Wiedereinstieg* Programme (Vocational Reintegration as a Perspective) to Cyprus as a tool to aid women's return to work after family-related breaks in employment. The report will provide a brief assessment of the relevance of the German policy to the Cypriot context, an assessment of the similarities and differences of the German policy with the experience of Cyprus, the likely conditions surrounding the possible transferability of the policy to Cyprus and, finally, the questions this transferability would raise given the different culture and policy context of Cyprus. While the two countries share many similarities in regard to gender equality (for example, the large gender pay gap, the above-Lisbon target employment rate for women, the similar effects of employment on men and women with children, the male breadwinner model for families) they also have different experiences which relate to the number of women in part-time work, the governmental approaches for helping women return to work after family-related breaks, as well as significant cultural differences. I begin with a brief discussion of the Cyprus context in regard to women's employment patterns and needs.

The Cypriot Context

Cyprus has a high level of economic development, with GDP growth at 4,4% (EU27 was 2,9% for 2007), and rates of inflation and unemployment relatively low (3,9% in 2007). Cyprus's employment rate is relatively high, standing, according to the Labour Force Survey for 2007, at 71%, matching the national target and exceeding both the Lisbon target of 70% and the EU27 of 65,4%. In fact, Cyprus has exceeded all the targets set by the Lisbon Strategy for 2010 and in some cases even exceeded national targets which were more ambitious. In the case of women's employment (for ages 15-64), the rate reached 62,4% in 2007 (compared to 58,3% of EU27, up from 60,3% in 2006 and above the Lisbon target of 60%). This rate is still somewhat lacking from the national target of 63% and is significantly lower than the rate for men (80% in 2007) but the advances made since 2000 are noteworthy—women's employment has risen from 53% in 2000 to 62,4% in 2007 while men's rates went from 78,6% to 80% in the same time period.

The employment rate for older people (55-64) shows a higher gender disparity with the male rate being 72,5% in 2007 and the female rate being 40,3% (a difference of 32,2 percentage points). The smallest gap in employment (3,1 percentage points) is found among young people. Young women and rural women also seem to face a higher unemployment problem while relatively high unemployment for women aged 35-44 may suggest that women returning to work after a period outside the labour market face additional difficulties. In addition, we see a high disparity among men and women with a low educational level (43,5 percentage points), indicating that age and

educational attainment are important when discussing employment figures. Overall, women's unemployment is higher than men's at 4,6% versus 3,4% respectively in 2007.

The pay gap is still large at 25% (see also Panayiotou, 2006) although provisional data for 2008 show that the gap may have decreased to 22,8%. Also according to Eurostat, Cyprus holds the last position among all EU countries in regard to women in top managerial positions (14%) and job segregation remains very high (see Christofides and Vrachimis, 2007; Panayiotou, 2008a).

Despite the seemingly impressive employment figures, it should be noted that women in Cyprus still encounter inequalities in the labour market—one of these is the different employment patterns held by women and men with children. The number of children negatively affects women's employment status; for example, according to the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (2006), the employment rate for women aged 20-49 with one or two children under 12 years old was 72% while for those with 3 or more children the employment rate was 52%. The reverse effect is seen for men: when men become fathers, not only are they more likely to be employed, they also increase the number of working hours (whereas women decrease the number of hours worked). To be more specific: in regard to the average hours worked per week by men and women (aged 20-49) with children under the age of 6, the rate for Cypriot men is similar to the EU25 average for 2004 at 43 hours. For women in Cyprus this figure is at 37 hours per week, a number which is, nonetheless, much higher than the EU25 average of 31. In addition, it may be interesting to note here that having children (0-6 years) means less hours for women (compared to those without children aged 20-49) but more hours for men in the same category. Thus, while the effect of a young child means about 2 hours *less* per week for women, for men in 2004 it meant almost one hour *more*. What this finding from Eurostat indicates is the traditional makeup of the Cypriot family where a mother is expected to spend more time with her children (or at home) and less time at work while a father is expected to work more and bring in more money to the household.

These statistics are backed up by an interesting study that recently came out on a related issue.¹ One of the motivations of the study was to see what types of problems working mothers face. An important finding is that mothers are primarily responsible for helping children with their studies (51% vs 17% for fathers), for looking after children in the afternoon (42% mothers vs 12% fathers, 19% grandparents, 2% foreign housekeeper/nanny and 4% daycare), and for the children's afternoon activities (including driving to private lessons) (56% mothers, 24% fathers, 4% bus, 4% alone, 5% do not have activities, 5% rely on grandparents). What the study shows then is that women are still largely responsible for the general welfare of the children and need to be "around" in the afternoons for the children's activities, including school work and extracurricular activities. In light of these findings, it may not be so surprising that women are opting for certain occupations and certain positions that allow them to do this-- women are least likely to work in senior positions and more likely to work in part-time and lower-paid jobs.

Another study conducted under funding by EQUAL (Ellina, 2007) revealed that girls' assumptions about hoarding the greater responsibility for children, the home and elderly parents are indeed

¹ The study was conducted by a local consultancy agency (RAI Consultants) for GODIK (the women's section of DIKO, the centre party). In the absence of academic work on the subject, I am noting here some of the findings of this research which was conducted mainly in the light of reconciling work and family life and in which 600 women ages 18-45 were asked about how they spend their day, how much time they devote to children, work, cleaning etc.

reflected in wider social reality: women in Cyprus are primarily responsible not only for the care of babies, infants and elderly parents but also for anything concerning children's welfare and the household: homework, driving to and from private lessons, children's entertainment, taking care of children during vacation time, buying necessary items for children, medical needs of children, discussing children's educational progress with teachers, etc. When talking about housework, again it seems that women devote much greater time to this than men. Specifically, the data shows great inequality in how much time is spent by men and women on house work: while 34% of men questioned said they spent almost no time on housework, 29% of women said they spent nearly all or all of their time on work around the house. When the question concerned spending more than half (up to three quarters) of one's personal time on housework, 20% gave a positive answer versus only 7% of men.

At the same time, the aforementioned study did not show significant differences in the work schedule of men and women, although a greater number of men worked overtime (48%) than women (35%). In other words, the study did not show significantly less hours worked by women outside the home, although their share of responsibilities within the home seemed much greater than men. Again, this seems to confirm the idea that women in Cyprus are burdened with a "double shift." As is expected then, when asked whether the time spent with children and/or for one's self was "adequate", more men answered positively than women. In general, women were less satisfied than men when it came to balancing all the important things in their lives (including time for one's self).

In addition, I should note here that the childcare system in Cyprus is in need of overhaul—hence the governmental commitment to provide childcare facilities for 90% of children between 3 years of age and the mandatory school age by 2010.² Currently, 82% of children ages 3 to the mandatory school age are in day care (or kindergartens) and only 12% of those under the age of 3. Efforts are being made to implement a comprehensive public scheme covering children until the age of five (the compulsory school age) since this gap is currently being filled by private schools at considerable economic cost to households (Christofides and Vrachimis, 2007). Most private schools have inflexible schedules and the number of places is very limited (Panayiotou, 2008b). Given that part-time work is not really an option for many families (and this is shown by the small numbers of women working part-time in Cyprus compared to other countries) and flex time is very new (and again not really an option), a child will usually be in care every day of the work week for, more or less, the same number of hours each day. This role is often taken upon by the grandparents—typically the grandmother—so when looking at women's employment patterns in Cyprus it is also important to note that one of the reasons older women do not enter or re-enter the labour force is due to family obligations yet again. Another interesting finding when looking at Eurostat-LFS data for 2006 is the reason given by older persons (55-64) for being economically inactive. Whereas for men, the main reason is retirement or illness / disability, for women the main reason is family responsibilities. Of the older women who are inactive (62% of all women in this age group) over 2/3 give family responsibilities as the main reason for not working. Interestingly, only 4% of children ages 3 to the mandatory school age are cared for by their parents and even for the 0-2 age group this percentage is very low at 28% (Panayiotou, 2008b).

² No targets have been set for the under-3 group because of the unavailability of data on the needs of families participating in childcare programs.

In Cyprus apart from operating a small number of State-run care services and inspecting services provided by the private sector, the Social Welfare Services promote the development and operation of family support services by not-for-profit voluntary organisations, in response to local needs. Services include day-care centres for pre-school and school-age children, as well as day-care, home-care and residential care for older persons and persons with disabilities. This is achieved through the Grants-in-Aid Scheme, which provides technical advice and monetary support, in the form of grants, for the establishment of needed services on a local level. In this way, flexibility and diversity of service provision is achieved for families in both urban and rural areas, social cohesion is enhanced through the active involvement of community bodies in identifying and meeting social needs, and pressure on public spending is reduced.

It must also be noted that in the period 2005-2008, new care services were developed through a project co-financed by the European Social Fund, which encouraged partnerships between not-for-profit voluntary organisations and local authorities for the rational use of human and financial resources. Furthermore, in the context of the 2007-2013 programming period of the EU Structural Funds, the Social Welfare Services have submitted a proposal for co-financing a new project for the promotion of care services within the framework of reconciling work and family life.

Transferability of the Proposed Measure

What the aforementioned discussion has shown is that women in Cyprus have very different employment patterns than men: they need to balance work and family obligations more so than men and in this light their employment is negatively affected by the presence of a child. Women with children tend to work less hours than those without children, they opt for occupations that will allow them a better balance and, since most of these professions are stereotypically feminine, they end up “trapped” in pink collar occupations that pay less and offer less opportunities for advancement (such as the care professions). Women also face greater challenges when re-entering the job market after a break to raise children either because they are looking for flexible time schedules or because they need retooling. The government of Cyprus has addressed some of these issues by establishing a pilot program to encourage women (and employers) to adopt Flexible Work Arrangements (FWAs) and by providing training to women returnees through the Human Resource Development Authority (HRDA). These programs have not been adequately examined however to establish their success rate.

The proposed measure *Perspektive Wiedereinstieg* with its stated goals could be beneficial for Cyprus. Specifically, I believe the following aspects could be utilized:

1. It is important to see returning to work *not* as an event but as a process that will also require support both to the women going back to work and to their families. The perspective that men should be in a position to actively encourage (and support) their partners to return to work is important and the idea that a “successful return to work calls for rearrangement of existing structures and a new approach to organization within the family” should also be emphasized.
2. An online portal to advertise the existence of such a program (in the form it may be implemented in Cyprus) and, most importantly, a website that assists women returning to

work about “where to start” would be beneficial. This should be done in conjunction with the Federal Employment Agency-- in Cyprus, this is the Public Employment Services or PES. It should be noted here, however, that internet use is not so widespread in Cyprus with estimates of only one in four people using the web. Taking this into account, the government of Cyprus could incorporate two suggestions: (a) provide specific trainings about internet use to women returnees or even unemployed women in general (through the HRDA) given that the digital divide is significant in Cyprus (b) encourage the use of the internet through PES. Currently there are self service facilities for internet use in all PES offices—allowing users to access all governmental departments and information on available positions and relevant trainings—but this presupposes knowledge on how to use a computer and the web.

3. The provision of childcare (at a local level) to women opting to retool in order to go back to work after a family break could help women attend specific training classes. This could be offered in conjunction with HRDA.
4. The entrepreneurship program and funding provided by the Cypriot government for women should be advertised and women should be further encouraged—through training and support—to start their own businesses (encourage self-employment).
5. The proposed Information Fairs for women would be an excellent idea for Cyprus especially if they target all women, from all age groups and ethnicities.
6. The information days described in the PW are also an excellent idea. These could be coordinated by various agencies including the Ministry of Labour and Social Insurance, the National Machinery for Women’s Rights, local businesses, the University of Cyprus, gender equality NGOs, etc.
7. More research is indeed needed in this area, especially as it relates to women’s attitudes and behavior patterns about returning to work.
8. Local businesses must be made partners in the effort to help women return to work so in this respect awareness campaigns are needed but also specific programs to highlight incentives for the businesses. These incentives could be in the form of funding or awards—for example, to the most family friendly company, etc.

Conclusion

While Cyprus and Germany may have significant differences in regard to size, history, and culture among other things, they seem to share similar indicators in regard to women’s employment patterns and behaviors—similar rates of employment, a high gender pay gap, obstacles to employment, and the traditional male breadwinner model for families which presents women as the “second or supplementary earner.” Women in Cyprus and Germany face similar impediments when opting to return to the labour market after a break to have a family, including stereotypes against them, the need to retool, the need to balance work and family obligations, the need for childcare, etc. One additional factor older Cypriot women face is the cultural “obligation” to look after their grandchildren so that their daughters (typically) can go back to work after the birth of a child. In this light, the proposed measure PW is worth examining in the Cypriot context with the

added dimension of looking at older women as well, not just young mothers who are ready to go back to work. Since Cyprus has just submitted its National Reform Programme for Employment and since gender equality is of tantamount importance in this plan—with the high gender pay gap a point to watch (PTW)—I believe that encompassing a plan similar to PW could be beneficial for women returnees and their families, especially if the cultural dimension is taken into account.

References

Christofides, L. and Vrachimis, K. (2007). *The Gender Wage Gap in Cyprus*. Economic Analysis Papers, University of Cyprus Economics Research Centre, No. 10-07.

European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (2006). *Employment Developments in Childcare Services for School-Age Children: Cyprus*.

Ellina, C. (2006). *Research on the Gendered Social Map of Cyprus*, part of EQUAL initiative, “Elani” project.

Eurostat (2007), *People outside the labour force: the downward trend continues*, manuscript 122/2007, Statistics in Focus (author: Omar Hardarson).

Panayiotou, A. (2006). *The Gender Pay Gap in Cyprus: Origins and Policy Responses*. External report commissioned by and presented to the EU Directorate-General Employment and Social Affairs, Unit G1 ‘Equality between women and men.’

Panayiotou, A. (2008a). *Gender segregation in the labour market: roots, implications and policy responses in Cyprus*. External report commissioned by and presented to the EU Directorate-General Employment and Social Affairs, Unit G1 ‘Equality between women and men.’

Panayiotou, A. (2008b). *The Provision of Childcare Services in Cyprus*. External report commissioned by and presented to the EU Directorate-General Employment and Social Affairs, Unit G1 ‘Equality between women and men.’