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WOMEN’S EMPLOYABILITY IN NORTH AMERICA
AND WESTERN EUROPE

Progress and Challenges

Note by the secretariat

SUMMARY

Over the past decade progress has been made in promoting women’s employability and in developing new policy tools, particularly the adoption of gender mainstreaming within the European Employment Strategy. Women’s employability is now seen as not solely a social justice issue but also a means of achieving a productive and high employment society. However, the goals of gender mainstreaming have not yet been fully achieved; the approach remains partial, with insufficient attention paid to either improving the quality of women’s employment or bringing about the modernization of the employment and social systems that is required for a more gender equal society. More action is needed to improve women’s access to employment, to facilitate women’s continuity of employment; to close the gender pay gap and remove the disadvantages of part-time employment; and to promote shared parental leave and provide more affordable childcare.
Introduction

1. There has been a steady and continuous upward trend in women’s employment in most countries. Women appear to have specific advantage in the era of the service economy and are outperforming men in education. More women are increasingly major financial contributors to couple households or acting as sole breadwinners in single person and lone parent households (Freeman 2001; Rubery et al. 2001; Harkness et al. 1997).

2. However, there is also a raft of evidence not only of continuing gender discrimination but also of its reappearance in new forms and guises. For some women access to the labour market remains the main problem but for others it is the quality of employment and careers that is lacking. It is not just that women remain in segregated jobs and occupations but also that when they do move into new jobs or into male employment areas, new forms of segregation and disadvantage emerge as these jobs become associated with female labour (Reskin and Roos 1990; Crompton and Sanderson 1990).

3. Moreover, while women are becoming more economically independent and contributing more to family finances, they still suffer form unequal participation and pay in the labour market. Many women and their dependent children may be losing the ‘protection’ of male earnings but have still not gained the access to well-paid employment necessary for their and their children’s economic independence (Folbre 1994). A central theme to all the issues of women’s employability is women’s continued responsibilities in the domestic sphere. Here there is little evidence of change in the gender division of labour per se, but more evidence of the use of either substitutes for domestic labour- in the form of goods and services- and of reductions in the quantity of domestic labour required as a consequence of a falling birth rates (but offset by rising elderly dependence ratios).
I. EMPLOYABILITY AND THE GENDERED LABOUR MARKET

4. **Access to employment.** Women constitute some 71% of mobilisable labour resources in the OECD (OECD 2003: 78) and the main supply of underutilized educated labour. It is the mobilization of inactive women that is critical to the achievement of high regional employment rates. Women’s access to employment is still shaped by strong, and even in some respects intensified, gender segregation. The intensification is linked to a growth of employment forms, such as part-time work, specifically associated with women’s employment, although the incidence of such forms varies between countries. Segregation protects the demand for women’s employment but also restricts access to better jobs.

5. The protection afforded to women’s employment by the expansion of services over recent decades women’s job may disappear in the next phase of restructuring. Women are concentrated in jobs that are more precarious or less subject to social protection (for example, when organized as temporary or fixed-term jobs). Access to employment is further constrained by women’s continued responsibility for domestic work and care work. Quitting the labour market may be the only option if leave or care facilities are inadequate but returners face increased risks as the jobs available to them may be lower paid, less secure and more segregated (Walby and Olsen 2002; Waldfogel et al. 1998, OECD 2003).

6. Another consequence of women’s career roles is that they are regarded as second income earners within the household. Household-based systems of taxation or benefits create disincentives for second earners to enter or re-enter the labour market (OECD 2003:119), particularly if the cost of childcare is considered a charge against the second earner’s wages. Although the cost of women withdrawing or not reentering employment over their lifetime may be much larger than the short term costs of childcare (Joshi and Davies 1992, Rake 2000), for the individual household the decision to provide the care at home may seem the only economic solution available.

7. **Job quality.** Problems of job quality may reduce women’s attachment to the labour market as well as reducing gender equality in work. Gender pay inequality undermines the option of women taking on breadwinner roles, whatever the household’s preferences and choices. Women become trapped in low paying sectors where either their skills are undervalued or they are underemployed relative to their talents and attainment. Lifelong learning opportunities may increase inequality if opportunities are either only available to those in employment or are less often provided in women’s job areas (OECD 2003: 243). Increased job quality requires improvements in: initial access to employment (through reduced employer discrimination, re-evaluation of women’s jobs and expanded career and subject choices for women); employment opportunities for returners; opportunities to remain attached to the labour market; opportunities for vertical progression by creating ladders within female job areas and by changing work and hours cultures in male-dominated areas.

8. **Employability and the household system.** Women’s employability is an increasingly important element in a social inclusion strategy as job instability means that the risks of families’ relying on one breadwinner have increased. Increased marital and household instability also exposes inactive women to great economic risk. Women outlive male partners and constitute the largest group of the elderly at risk from poor pension provision. Women’s employment is also particularly important in reducing the risks of child poverty.

9. Women’s employability cannot be considered separately from their position in the family. Domestic constraints have reduced more through reduced fertility and service substitutes than by changes in the domestic division of labour. The transfer of domestic work to wage employment may be one of the main sources of additional employment demand, particularly for female labour but domestic constraints still act to constrain women’s upward career trajectories, where women may be faced with a choice between the so-called ‘mommy track’ or a male-type career that does not involve having children.
II. PROGRESS MADE

10. A range of policy approaches can be used to promote women’s employability, including traditional gender specific policies such as positive actions, equal opportunity and equal pay legislation, measures to assist reconciliation and gender mainstreaming measures, where specific gender issues are integrated into wider policies. Commitment to the latter type in principle within European Union countries, as gender mainstreaming has been adopted within the common European Employment Strategy. European countries vary in both the strength and form of their equality legislation- with in particular variations in the extent of positive action- but EU legislation and EU policy making, through the European employment strategy provides an overall framework within which gender specific policies and gender mainstreaming are enacted².

11. In Canada gender mainstreaming has been adopted at federal government level following the launch of Canada’s Federal Plan for Gender Equality in 1995 and has also been adopted by the provinces, but under varying institutional mechanisms (Status of Women Canada 2001). However the notion of gender mainstreaming has not been adopted in the US where the focus remains on gender specific action, such as positive action and individual litigation. Gender equality is linked to the civil rights legislation of the 1960s and there are requirements for companies seeking federal contracts to ensure they are compliant with the legislation by taking positive actions where appropriate (Rubery et al. 1996). While government in the US has not endorsed gender mainstreaming, there is widespread awareness that some of the major employment policy issues in the US such as welfare reform or the campaign for living wage ordnances have strong impacts on gender equality.

A. Access to employment

12. Active labour market policies. In response to concerns over high unemployment rates and lower employment rates than in the USA, the European Union and its member states have placed considerable emphasis on promoting the re-entry of the unemployed into work through active labour market programmes (ALMP). Promotion of women’s employment through such schemes requires access for the inactive, rights of access to childcare for scheme participants and measure to ensure that women are not marginalized or segregated into traditional female job areas, as a result of discriminatory attitudes of employers or scheme providers. There is evidence of some recognition of these issues in some European countries³. For example Germany, France, Austria, Greece- have set targets or quotas for the inclusion of women in ALMPs and several have extended childcare for participants in programmes (for example Austria, Belgium, UK, Germany). There have also been measures taken- for example in Portugal and Sweden- to give priority to the underrepresented sex in ALMPs for particular occupations.

Box 1. Active labour market policies

Austria. Equal opportunities for women and men is a horizontal objective of Austria’s Public Employment Service (PES), informing all its programmes and objectives, including gender specific annual labour-market targets within each programme. In May 2000, gender mainstreaming was declared an official key PES strategy and a commitment was made that at least 50% of participants in all co-financed promotion programmes with the European Social Fund would be women. Training on gender mainstreaming has been provided at all levels of the organization, with the participation of senior and junior management compulsory (EGGE Austria 2002c).

Netherlands. In 2002 a declaration of intent to help women return to work was signed by the Minister of Social Affairs and Employment and 8 organizations, from the private and the public sector. The initial plan was to help 70,000 women returners by 2005 but by 2003 the target had been scaled back to 50,000 as it was more difficult than expected to match available jobs to the returners’ time constraints (EGGE Netherlands 2002c, 2003a).

13. Tax and benefit policy. Employment-friendly tax and benefit policy or make work pay policies are increasingly seen as vital to employment policy agendas. Here the USA has also been active in
developing welfare to work policies, primarily aimed at reducing welfare dependency rather than at boosting employment rates. In the USA most welfare dependants are women as aid was traditionally limited to lone parents, while in Europe welfare has been available to all types of households and the main concern is to move long term male unemployed into work, along with lone parents in some countries. The USA example (box 2) illustrates that there is only a fine line between policies that are facilitating and promoting women’s employment and others that are primarily aimed at reducing state support for children even in the absence of two parents. Policies that provide incentives for men to work may have perverse impacts on the second earner, namely women, as they face high marginal tax or benefit withdrawal rates under household-based tax or benefit systems. Disincentives are strong if childcare costs are deemed the responsibility of the second earner; Sweden, however, takes childcare costs into account in adjusting the marginal rate of tax faced by people entering the labour market.

Box 2. Make work pay policies

**Ireland.** Initiatives to reform the taxation system since 1999 have individualized tax bands and applied rates of taxes to individuals regardless of marital status but these moves have been partially offset by the introduction in 1999 of a £3000 tax allowance for married couples with one full time worker in the home. This new tax allowance is contrary to a strategy of individualization and acts as an incentive for women to remain outside the labour market (EGGE Ireland 2002c).

**Belgium.** The Belgian tax system reform has promoted gender equality in three main ways: first it has improved incentives and rewards for working for those on low wages, mainly women and particularly part-timers. Increased tax credits on low wages have raised the minimum taxable income to increase, and as this is an individual tax credit there are no disincentives to women participating in couple households. Reduced personal contributions to social security for low wage workers also provides an incentive to women’s employment. Secondly it has adopted a tax neutral policy for different lifestyles, removing incentives and disincentives to marital status. Third the reforms provided a new tax deduction for lone parents (EGGE Belgium 2002c).

**United Kingdom.** The Working Families Tax Credit scheme was introduced by the new Labour government in the late 1990s; it extended in-work benefits and also introduced allowances for childcare costs. The policy mainly has positive impacts on work incentives for lone parents and for the first earner in households but there are perverse incentives impacts on the participation of married women. The scheme has subsequently been reformed so that all couples are now eligible but this extends the potential inactivity traps to married women without children (EGGE UK 2001a).

**USA.** There are two elements to the make work pay strategy in the US; the reform of the welfare system for lone mothers AFDC, replaced by TANF in the 1990s and the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) which provides an annual tax credit for those on low earnings (Brewer 2000). Although TANF can be paid to couple households the majority of claimants are female lone mothers and they can only receive welfare payments for a maximum of 5 years; the aim is to minimizing welfare dependency, not promote employment per se. Complex poverty traps operate due to other payments in kind such as Medicaid and food stamps and the EITC is only paid annually and therefore is less able to smooth a path to the labour market. The focus is more on pushing women off welfare than providing employment-friendly benefits.

### B. Job quality

14. **Lifelong learning.** There appears to be little action within European lifelong learning policies to take into account the specific needs of women as the focus is primarily on training for those in employment or unemployed and not the inactive. Moreover, those employed in part-time or temporary jobs appear less likely to receive training (OECD 2003).

15. **Pay gaps.** Women’s access to employment is restricted in part by the continued discrimination in pay which serves to reinforce the traditional gender division of labour in the household. Closing the gender pay gap is not just an issue of social justice but also a means of promoting women’s employability. In the USA women’s earnings are more dispersed (Blau and Kahn 1992), such that many
women are among the working poor but there are also more women with high earnings, above those of their male partners (Freeman 2001). However over recent years some women, particularly those in the public sector have benefited from the spread of living wage ordinances that significantly improve the minimum level of pay (Figart 2004). Canada has also, primarily at the province level, undertaken major pay equity reviews, particularly of public sector wages.

**Box 3. Closing the gender pay gap**

**France.** For private sector companies, a new law in 2001 introduced “a specific obligation to negotiate on occupational equality between women and men” at company and sector level every three years. The law also aims at creating an “obligation to mainstream occupational equality between women and men in all compulsory negotiations” in companies (pay, working time, right to expression) and in sectors (pay, grading, vocational training). (EGGE France 2002c).

**Sweden.** The Swedish Equal Opportunities Act requires employers to promote gender equality actively. All employers must inspect and analyze wages and other terms of employment for comparable groups of women and men on an annual basis and provide a plan for eliminating any unjustified wage gaps over a three-year time horizon. The employers have to give the union information on all employees’ wages. The Act now also reverses the burden of proof so the employer now has to prove that no discrimination by gender has occurred (EGGE Sweden 2002a).

**Germany.** In Germany Public sector trade unions have been challenging the job evaluation and assessment schemes embedded in collective agreements on the basis that they tend to favour male-dominated job-values and a male employment biography (for example better terms for those on leave for national service than for maternity). The trade unions set up an “upgrading commission” to develop concrete proposals for gender fair job evaluation, and a new classification/grading system has been proposed. The government has agreed in principle to negotiate public sector pay on a gender neutral basis but the task is complicated by the involvement of all levels of government- federal, regional and local- at a time of declining public finance (EGGE Germany 2002a).

16. **Segregation.** While gender segregation can both promote and inhibit women’s access to employment, dependent upon sectoral trends, it certainly acts to confine women to low quality employment. Segregation may result both in the undervaluation of women’s jobs and the confinement of women to jobs that fail to make use of their abilities and talents. The relatively high pay attached to women’s jobs in the Scandinavian countries has offset some of the disadvantages of segregation but the problems of vertical gender segregation and of women’s concentration in the public sector have proved more intractable. Box 4 provides an example from Finland on new policies aimed at these problems.

**Box 4. Segregation**

**Finland.** In 2001, the Ministry of Education set up a committee on “Equal labour markets” with the objective of drawing up short and long-term plans for measures to influence school and university students’ choices of sectors and courses and to draw up a plan for measures to influence the culture of workplaces such that the minority sex is both comfortable and is able to realize advancement opportunities. (EGGE Finland 2002c).

17. **Adaptability and working time/flex security policies.** One controversial dimension of job quality is the opportunity to work part-time. Some argue that part-time opportunities are necessary to promote women’s employment while others see the growth of part-time work as promoting gender segregation and low quality employment. Box 5 provides examples of policies to stimulate part-time jobs in Denmark and to promote more stable employment, both full and part-time in Spain.
Box 5. Promoting part-time work and flex-security

**Denmark.** Part-time jobs in Denmark have been decreasing and today most part-timers are either students or seniors in partial retirement. The Minister of Employment is proposing to allow for an employee and an employer to agree to provide part time work opportunities for an employee, without reference to collective agreements. This measure is argued to be gender neutral as it could allow the spread of part time work to areas dominated by men and give men, particularly those close to retirement, opportunities to work part-time. However, it could also increase the percentage of women working part-time, as women in the male dominated labour market would have more access to part time work (EGGE Denmark 2002c).

**Spain.** The Royal Decree Law 2001, aimed at promoting stable employment, introduced social security rebates for indefinite contracts with specific measures for women. Both have particular effects on the situation of women. Unemployed women 16-45 offered an indefinite contract are allowed a 25% social security rebate for 24 months with higher rebates for older women and for unemployed women in occupations where they are under-represented. The rebate can reach 100% for long term unemployed mothers of children up to 2 years old and for substitution contracts for maternity leave. Part-time employment on indefinite contracts is also subject to the social security rebates under the conditions just mentioned above (EGGE Spain 2002c).

C. Reconciliation

18. **Flexible work time.** Flexible working hours can allow the demands of family and work life to be juggled. Several European countries are promoting such solutions but there are variations between countries in whether the system is voluntary or statutory and whether it provides paid or unpaid leave. In Sweden it is now possible to take the paid parental benefit which allows for reduced hours working in amounts of one eighth or 12.5%, thereby making it possible to reduce time spent at work by one hour a day and still be reimbursed through the parental benefit scheme (EGGE Sweden 2003a). In the UK a new right to request flexible working hours has been introduced for parents of young children. Employers are obliged to give the request serious consideration and to give reasons for refusal (EGGE UK 2003a).

19. **Leave.** Maternity, paternity and parental leave systems are vital for reconciliation. Women in the USA, with its very limited maternity leave rights—namely twelve weeks of unpaid leave with employers of less than fifty excluded—are thereby disadvantaged. Canada has much longer entitlements up to 35 weeks for either parent and is introducing compassionate care benefits including 6 weeks for care of a dying family member. The impact of longer leave schemes is not, however, uncontroversial as they may reduce women’s attachment to the labour market and reinforce their career roles. Box 8 provides examples from Austria and Denmark.

Box 6. Care leave policies

**Denmark.** There is a new policy to employ persons for up to six months to care for disabled or very sick dependants. Men and women will be able to take leave from their normal job and enter employment as a career. It may be anticipated that women will use the arrangement more than men, which could negatively affect gender equality (EGGE Denmark 2002c).

**Austria.** Austria has introduced a new childcare benefit that can be claimed regardless of employment status previous to the birth of the child in contrast to the traditional social insurance benefit, dependent upon social security contributions and employment status. Childcare benefit can be claimed for up to 36 months, until the child’s third birthday (or 30 months if only one parent claims the benefit). Under the previous system claimants could work part time while receiving 50% of parental leave benefit, an option popular among parents who wanted to equally share childcare work but the new system does not provide for such a “half & half” option. (EGGE Austria 2002c)
20. Care Since the Lisbon summit in 2000, European countries have been under pressure to increase their childcare provision as it has been recognized that achieving higher female employment rates is unlikely to be successful without provision of a more extensive childcare infrastructure. Since 2000 there have been fairly widespread commitments made to improve childcare facilities in most European countries although many of the increased places have yet to come on stream and there has been comparatively little attention paid to the affordability of childcare (Rubery 2002). In contrast the government is not by and large involved in childcare policies in the US.

21. Gender division of labour. Few measures have been adopted to change fathers’ involvement in domestic work. In some countries paternity leave has been extended or dedicated leave for men or the second partner introduced, providing incentives for both parents to take leave. Portugal has espoused a wider policy, promoting a general duty and right of all persons to provide care but has not supported this with concrete policies (EGGE Portugal 2002c).

III. GAPS AND CHALLENGES

22. While we have identified some examples of gender mainstreaming and the design of policies to promote greater gender equality, these are offset by the more frequent observation of a lack of gender mainstreaming and the promotion of policies that will have at best ambiguous and at worst negative impacts on gender equality. A two-stranded approach is required as specific policies for women are still needed to overcome specific disadvantages on the labour market or in the household system but specific policies alone are insufficient as our examples of the gaps in gender mainstreaming of general employment policies will demonstrate.

A. Access to employment

23. Active labour market policies. Active labour market policies have been opened up to the inactive in some countries but in others, for example the UK and Ireland access is still restricted to those claiming benefits (Rubery et al. 2001), resulting in an under representation of women who are not in work but want to work, many of whom come from inactivity. Nor is the setting of targets for women’s representation within active labour market policies itself sufficient to promote gender equality: for example in France women are underrepresented in the programmes that are ‘closest the market’ and found more in schemes that do not involve employers (Rubery et al. 2001). In Germany the share of women in the active labour market programme is below the target but no remedial action is being taken (EGGE Germany 2003a).

24. Make work pay policies. The OECD has recognized that employment-friendly tax and benefit policies may create disincentives for some groups. Thus ‘income testing will increase effective marginal tax rates over the range of income in which benefits are withdrawn. …there may be groups, presumably in the lower half of the income distribution, who would receive lower returns from additional work effort than corresponding income groups in countries with higher aggregate levels of taxation’. (OECD 2003: 117). Married women will be one group that faces lower returns from working, particularly in household-based in-work benefit systems. ‘In both the United Kingdom and the United States, tax credits appear to be an effective means of encouraging entry or a return to employment by lone parents families and households where no-one works. But there is also evidence of the perverse effect that is expected among two-earner households with regard to the labour supply of spouses.’ (OECD 2003:118). As in-work benefits become more popular it is vital that these are constructed as individual not household entitlements as these result in even higher rates of marginal tax than household income tax. Even in taxation some problems still remain: for example Germany has yet to reform its income splitting system that does provide a significant disincentive for women to enter the labour market when in couple households.
B. Job quality

25. **Lifelong learning.** Over recent years it has been widely accepted that the education of girls should be given as high a priority as that of boys. Girls have begun both to outperform boys and to invest more in their education, through higher participation in universities. This equality in education has yet to be followed through into employment. Changes are needed in work organisation and career structures to ensure the full utilization and development of women's skills, as university training is only the start of the development of the knowledge economy. If changes are not made, skilled female labour may not be retained both because of problems of managing work and family and because of unchanging dominant male workplace cultures. Lifelong learning programmes need to focus on updating skills of those outside as well as inside the labour force.

26. **Pay gap.** Closing the gender pay gap requires policies aimed at changing the overall wage structure (Rubery et al. 2002). Women are by far the main beneficiaries of the recent introduction of national minimum wages in both the UK and Ireland, yet there is no gender mainstreaming of minimum wage policies and indeed general encouragement to widen differentials even though women dominate among the low paid. There is a need perhaps in Europe to consider developing campaigns around living wages as in the US if the gender pay gap is to be closed particularly for the lowest paid women. Even specific gender pay policies are rather sparse and many countries still hide behind a call for further research and have yet to develop effective policies to close the gap. Action is required to change employer and in some cases trade unions’ behaviour and actions with respect to pay policies but employment policies are primarily concerned with the supply-side of the labour market and little is being done to reshape the organization of work and pay.

27. **Segregation.** New policies to promote part-time work could also result in an intensification of segregation in the labour market. Recent policies to promote the development of so-called mini-jobs in Germany have resulted in 20% of women’s employment being located in these job areas (EGGE Germany 2003). Policies to promote desegregation tend to be disconnected from more general policies addressing skill shortages. Few European countries, in addressing problems of skill shortage in, for example, IT, consider women as a possible source of additional labour supply. Where positive action policies do exist to promote women’s involvement in IT these are seen as gender specific mainstream policies to address skill shortages in most countries, although Germany has developed some policies to promote women’s involvement in IT (EGGE Germany 2001a).

28. **Adaptability and working time/flex security policies.** To offset some of the disadvantages for women of working part-time, some countries have stressed not only the opportunity or right to work part-time but have also included rights to return to work full-time or at least to negotiate a return to full-time work (for example the Netherlands and Austria). More also needs to be done to improve the security of part-time and non standard employment; women in part-time and low paid jobs have a higher tendency to make transitions between employment and unemployment or inactivity (OECD 2003).

C. Reconciliation

29. **Flexible working time.** Workers who make requests to work flexibly need protection from less favorable treatment in promotion and careers. In some countries the long hours of work expected of full-timers make it more difficult for employers to grant requests for part-time work, without problems of equality between full- and part-timers becoming an issue. Changes to time arrangements should not simply be treated therefore as an individualized issue.

30. **Leave.** The dangers of extended leave arrangements is that there may in practice be a reduction rather than a cementing of mothers’ links to the labour market especially for women with insecure employment status (OECD 2003:115). These effects may be modified in countries such as Denmark and Sweden where long leaves are but one ‘part of a comprehensive family-friendly policy that helps mothers to combine family and work’. (OECD 2003: 133) Leave for care of other dependants is also a double-edged policy gender differences may intensify if women mainly take up the option.

31. **Care facilities** Although childcare facilities are spreading, not all childcare facilitates women’s employment as it is organized on a too spasmodic and part-time basis. Furthermore, childcare is not
necessarily affordable. Here there is a need to extend the Swedish approach where childcare is included in the calculation of marginal tax rates for individuals entering the labour market.

32. **Gender division of labour.** Unless men participate more in domestic responsibilities it is unlikely that gender inequality in the labour market can be resolved. Employment policy now recognizes the importance of women’s contribution to the achieving a high employment rate but there is little recognition of the need to change men’s behaviour inside and outside of employment if we are to move to a full dual earner/dual career society.

33. To conclude, equal opportunities and women’s employability have clearly taken on a higher profile in many EU countries, reflecting the importance of women’s employment to the general European Employment Strategy. At a nation state level, there is increasing recognition that women will continue to demand entry to employment and that programmes will be needed to support and improve such access. Employment policy cannot be narrowly conceived but needs to be linked into social and family arrangements, including childcare. It is primarily in the US where this link is not made despite high rates of female participation, induced in part by the absence of alternatives to wage income as the main means of support; childcare is treated as a solely private responsibility of parents and not as an area of public intervention. Even in European societies, there are still many shortcomings in policy viewed from a gender perspective. One problem is whether a more gender equal society is to be achieved through women changing their behaviour to meet male norms or through changes in the ways in which men operate in the labour market. There are already wide variations between EU member states in the extent to which women work continuously in the labour market and the importance of part-time work in women’s employment trajectories (see appendix table 1). Furthermore employment policies are still not being interrogated for their gender impact let alone designed with gender equality objectives in mind. Gender equality tends to be promoted where it fits with the overall goal of employment policy— for example a higher employment rate— and not where there may be conflict, for example actions to improve the quality of part-time work. Few policies are designed to change the behaviour of employers; instead policy focuses on changing the characteristics and behaviour of workers and removing obstacles to employment participation in tax and benefit systems. A final problem is that policy reversals are frequent, associated with changes in government.

V. **INSTITUTIONAL ENVIRONMENT**

34. To promote women’s employability new and more integrated policy approaches are needed. Gender mainstreaming introduces gender equality into the process of design, implementation and evaluation of all policies with relevance to employability, thereby providing an opportunity to discard or modify policies with negative effects before implementation and to develop a more proactive approach to gender equality within the overall strategic framework. A gender mainstreaming perspective could, in principle, provide a transformative perspective on policy and on the organization of society (Rees 1998; Council of Europe 1998) by promoting a more ‘joined up’ or holistic approach to government policy.

35. The mainstreaming of gender should, according to the EES, operate alongside and be integrated with the gender-specific policies required to offset specific areas of disadvantage in the labour market. Since 1999 all EU member states have been required to gender mainstream all policies included in National Action Plans for employment, a requirement that still applies, if in a less visible form, in the new 2003-6 phase of the EES. Some EU countries had their own dynamic of gender mainstreaming in process before 1999 but in many cases the EU has been important in kickstarting a process or in providing recommendations that more should be done to develop gender mainstreaming policies and capacities.

36. The development of gender mainstreaming as a tool of employment policy can be divided into three dimensions: the establishment of institutional arrangements through which gender mainstreaming can be introduced into policy processes; the development of gender-specific targets, supported by increased information on gender differences in starting points and policy outcomes; the development of tools and methods for assessing the predicted and actual gender outcome of policies.
A. Gender mainstreaming connected to the EES and to other pressures

37. Gender mainstreaming in Canada is supported and promoted by the organization the Status of Women, Canada that provides expertise and strategic advice to the Federal government on issues of women and gender equality (Status of Women Canada 2001). Some Nordic countries had well-established gender mainstreaming prior to the launch of the EES- for example Denmark mainstreaming its public employment service through equality consultants as early as 1981 (EGGE Denmark 2001a) and Sweden mainstreaming gender into all ministerial policy since 1994 (EGGE Sweden 2001a).

38. However, most EU member states started out in 1997 with at best a weak and often a non-existent base for gender mainstreaming. By 2001 almost all had put in place some formal mechanism for gender mainstreaming of employment or government policy more generally. Greece and Italy together with Ireland- countries which in the 1990s had rather weak traditions of equal opportunities policies and also low female employment rates- have all developed new gender mainstreaming initiatives since 1999. In Greece and Italy action was also spurred on by the Council of Minister recommendations to strengthen mechanisms for gender mainstreaming (EGGE Greece 2001a; EGGE Italy 2001a). The assessment of developments since that date is more problematic as less has been included, certainly in the 2003 round of National Action Plans, on developments in the institutions of gender mainstreaming. Moreover, progress is by no means a linear development; as we discuss further below, commitments to gender mainstreaming are highly contingent on the political programme of the government in power.

Table 1. Institutional innovations to promote gender mainstreaming of employment policies in EU member states 1997-2002

| - Ministries with authority in gender mainstreaming |
| - Inter-ministerial committees, steering committees/work groups or committees at the office of the presidency |
| - Departments/units/taskforces with specific competence/evaluation and monitoring duties |
| - Parity/equality advisors on key committees/ministries/mechanisms for gender analysis of the budget |
| - New equal opportunities acts requiring mainstreaming/drawing up national strategies or plans for equality; |
| - Mainstreaming or gender assessment in individual ministries/public services; |
| - Methodologies or guidelines for gender mainstreaming of government policies or employment policies; |
| - Gender assessment of all new pieces of legislation |

Source Rubery et al. 2001

39. This list provides a flavour of the range and diversity of institutional developments. It does not take fully into account more local or social partnership initiatives or those sponsored by the European structural funds where gender mainstreaming is required for funding. Certainly Ireland has made a much clearer commitment to gender mainstream its National Employment Development Plan linked to the structural funds than the NAP itself (EGGE Ireland 2001a). Gender mainstreaming may be more marked at the regional or local level: mainstreaming in the devolved governments of Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales is more advanced than in the central UK government (EGGE UK 2000a, 2001a). In France the social partners are playing a major role with a new law making bargaining on occupational equality compulsory (see box 3).

40. In comparing the development of gender mainstreaming processes, there are severe difficulties in distinguishing both between the rhetoric and reality of gender mainstreaming and between what are general statements of intent, including future commitments to new initiatives, and actual real policy change. Implementation of new approaches to policy making take time and evaluations of the impact of recent commitments to gender mainstreaming are premature, not just because of volatile political conditions but also because many policies have not yet been implemented.
B. Gender targets and gender statistics

41. Until the EU set a specific target for women’s employment at the Lisbon summit- of 60% by 2010- there was very limited evidence that EU member states were adopting specific gender targets in relation to employment policy. Now there is a tendency- but by no means universal- to at least assess employment performance against the specified targets. Perversely the UK has used the fact that its headcount employment rate is above the overall target to distance itself from the need to reduce the continuing employment gender gap or the concentration of women in short hours jobs (EGGE UK 2003a). Nevertheless, the EU-wide target has made member states more sensitive to gender specific performance analysis. A similar impact can be seen with respect to the setting of childcare targets, first at the Lisbon summit in 2000 and then in more specific terms at the 2002 Barcelona summit to reach a coverage of one third for children up to 3 and 90% for children from 3 to 6 by 2010. Childcare actions are now integrated systematically in the NAPs on employment. Where other targets related to gender have been set, these again have been quite closely related to specific suggestions in the employment action plans guidelines: for example several member states set targets or quotas for women’s representation in ALMPs, following the advice that women’s representation should be proportional to their share of unemployment. Some improvements in the provision of data disaggregated by gender can be observed, a necessary first step in the process of designing, implementing and evaluating data by gender impact. However, the provision and use of such data remains patchy, both in the NAPs and by national statistical offices.

C. Gender evaluations of policies

42. Perhaps the weakest element of gender mainstreaming has been the evaluation of policies from a gender perspective. Despite some development of tools and checklists, primarily to assist in structural funds project appraisal (Rubery and Fagan 2000), very few examples can be found of systematic gender sensitive analysis of policy programmes. Appendix Table 2 provides a check list developed by the EC’s Expert Group on Gender and Employment for their analysis of the NAPs and which formed part of a training session within DG Employment on gender mainstreaming. For such an approach to be effective, governments need to engage in a process of critical evaluation of their policy from a gender perspective. However, even within member states such scrutiny is only likely to take place behind closed doors. It is essential therefore for there to be some public or independent way of scrutinizing public policy.

IV. AREAS FOR FURTHER ACTION.

43. Interest in the development of women’s employability has certainly increased in Europe over the last decade with the widespread recognition- at the level of formal policy pronouncements- that women’s employment has a significant role to play in both EU and member state employment policies and strategies. However, there is still a need for further progress in meeting the challenges of women’s employability and developing a policy framework which both contributes to the productivity and economic success of the region and promotes gender equality.

44. Progress is particularly required on the following agendas:

- The development of a gender sensitive approach to employment promotion strategies that recognizes the specific position of women in the economy, by legitimizing the claims of the inactive as well as the unemployed for assistance in labour market re-entry and by taking more steps to facilitate women’s continuity of employment over the lifecourse.

- The promotion of job quality along with access to employment as continuing gender pay gaps, barriers to careers associated with horizontal and vertical segregation and poor quality part-time work are all obstacles to progress to gender equality in the home and in the labour market.
The development of policies to reconcile work and family life that provide for rights to care but avoid reinforcing gender divisions by focusing on changes in male behavior and male work norms and on sharing of caring responsibilities.

The development and promotion of gender mainstreaming of employment policy, defined broadly to encompass the full range of institutional transformations required to support the emergence of the dual earner, dual career society.

45. While this agenda is ambitious and would move the policy approach on beyond that which has so far been incorporated in the European Employment Strategy, the experience post Beijing proves that it pays to be ambitious. Without the agreement on gender mainstreaming in Beijing, the commitment to both equal opportunities and to gender mainstreaming would undoubtedly have been less strong. There is now a need to renew commitments to ensure that these fragile beginnings of gender mainstreaming of employment policy become firmly established and further developed in the employment policy-making field at international and national level.

References


EGGE (EC expert group on gender and employment) for reports see: http://www.umist.ac.uk/management/ewerc/egge/egge.htm (a,b,c used to indicate first, second, third reports on website by country expert by year)


Status of Women Canada (2001) *Canadian Experience in Gender Mainstreaming* Status of Women Canada-Gender-Based Analysis Directorate


## Annex

### Table 1. Checklist for Gender Impact Assessment of Employment Policies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policy area</th>
<th>Eligibility/access criteria and/or policy orientation</th>
<th>Integrated policy approach</th>
<th>Budgets/finance</th>
<th>Areas of likely weakness and possible remedies</th>
<th>Monitoring and evaluation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Active labour market policies</strong></td>
<td>Returners; Spouses of the unemployed</td>
<td>Childcare provision required Attention to segregation as well as employment effects. Need to preserve the right to care as well as rights to work.</td>
<td>Women to have equal or greater access to training and skills development programmes</td>
<td>Discrimination by private sector firms; specific attention paid to ensuring equitably represented on programmes involving private firm placements.</td>
<td>Longitudinal monitoring of outcomes required.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Training and lifelong learning</strong></td>
<td>Unemployed and inactive; those on atypical contracts.</td>
<td>Full-time permanent employees, Unemployed benefit claimants.</td>
<td>Financial incentives to ensure employers include those on atypical contracts etc in training programmes</td>
<td>Discrimination by private sector firms in both hiring and training. Changes to working culture required in some male dominated sectors.</td>
<td>Monitoring by subject as well as by programme required. Evaluation of impact of education, training on initial and longer term employment prospects. Monitoring of access to further training also necessary.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tax and benefit policies</strong></td>
<td>Individual basis; citizenship rather than employment record</td>
<td>Provisions for costs of childcare. Making work pay to be addressed by ensuring equal pay in the labour market and not just through household tax and benefit systems.</td>
<td>Tax credits/ allowances for cost of childcare. Spouses of benefit claimants to be allowed a reasonable independent income.</td>
<td>Potential conflicts between gender equality and poverty/social inclusion programmes e.g. in work benefit systems</td>
<td>Monitoring not only of employment participation but also of individual access to income and resources required.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Entrepreneurship</strong></td>
<td>Inactive as well as unemployed, employed; cooperatives as well as independent self employed</td>
<td>Need to provide access not only to finance but also to training, technical advice, childcare etc. Attention needs to be paid to gender segregation in areas of start ups.</td>
<td>Need to ensure women-only measures receive fair share of budget and/or that women receive fair share within mainstreamed programmes</td>
<td>Attention needs to be paid to fragility of start ups; women may be in more competitive areas, face more constraints in start ups.</td>
<td>Monitoring not only of enter into self employment but also of duration of start ups and long term profitability of women’s start up companies required.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The information society</td>
<td>Wide range of jobs; school students</td>
<td>Focused on technical job area and post higher education entrants</td>
<td>Need to address male techno culture in education system and in work system. Need to pay attention to job design to expand range of types of jobs within IT area.</td>
<td>Need to consider linking budgets and financial incentives to meeting specific targets on female recruitment</td>
<td>Both gender segregation in education and in work cultures may be resistant to change. May require positive action policies and more opportunities for women to shape the information society.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------</td>
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<td>---------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working time, flexibility and reconciliat. policies</td>
<td>Targeted at men as well as women; family friendly working time for all; all forms of flexible work provided with some level of security/ employment rights</td>
<td>Promotion of women only working time and leave arrangements. Exclusion of those in marginal/ flexible jobs</td>
<td>Leave arrangements need to be paid and need to consider specific entitlements for men to encourage participation. General working time reduction or flexibility programmes need to be devised, not specific programmes aimed primarily at women. Need to improve rights for those on atypical working time contracts.</td>
<td>Budget needs to provide for paid leave. Incentives needed for general working time changes, for the provision of security and to encourage changes to domestic division of labour.</td>
<td>Resistance by private sector to employee driven flexibility, especially if applied to men as well as women. Protection for those taking leave or reducing hours required and specific incentives needed for employers to participate in scheme. Security provision may reduce some forms of flexible work in the short term but may have longer term more positive effects</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Rubery and Fagan 2000
### Table 2. Continuity in employment status by gender, presence of children and educational attainment (1994-98)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>5-year period (1994-98)</th>
<th>Women without Children</th>
<th>Women with Children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Continuously employed</td>
<td>Continuously full time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Continuously employed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Less than upper secondary education</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portugal</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Unweighted Average</strong></td>
<td>60</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>University/tertiary education</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portugal</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Unweighted Average</strong></td>
<td>78</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** OECD Employment Outlook 2002:84 (ECHP database). **Definition:** Persons in each category, as a percentage of persons aged 20 to 50 years in the starting year, who have been employed at least one year during the period. An individual is classified as “employed full time” in a given year if he/she has worked at least 1,560 hours (30 hours per week on average), “employed part time” if he/she has worked between 52 and 1,560 hours (between 1 and 30 hours per week).

### Endnotes:

1. Jill Rubery, professor, Comparative Employment Systems, Manchester Business School, University of Manchester, Coordinator of the European Commission’s Network of Experts on gender equality in employment and social inclusion, was the consultant to the secretariat for this note.

2. Many of the examples given here are taken from the work of the European Commission’s expert group on gender and employment—see [http://www.umist.ac.uk/management/ewerc/egge/egge.html](http://www.umist.ac.uk/management/ewerc/egge/egge.html). This expert group is funded by the European Commission but the views expressed are those of the experts themselves and not of the European Commission. References to specific reports on this website in this paper give the year of publication, date and country.

3. Note the examples given here are not intended to be comprehensive, nor are they necessarily fully up to data as they draw on a range of evidence and reports prepared over the period 2000-2003.