Gender Mainstreaming and Women’s Employability in EU countries

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I. Key facts, issues and challenges

There has been a steady and continuous upward trend in women’s employment in most advanced countries with the exception of the transition economies. There is, therefore, an argument to be addressed that women’s employability issues have or are being overcome and that no particular specific policies are needed to promote employability. For some, women have specific advantage in the era of the service economy as their apparently higher social and communication skills are in demand. Women are outperforming men in education in many countries, at least up to first degree level (DULBEA 2003) and the restructuring of sector and occupations in principle provides opportunities to develop employment structures that are not embedded in outdated value systems and discriminatory practices. Moreover, more women are moving into positions of key importance within the family economy, becoming the sole breadwinner, particularly in the growing number of lone parent households and also acting as a major contributor to household wage income resources in couple households (Freeman 2001; Rubery et al. 2001; Harkness et al. 1997). The notion of a single male breadwinner household model is thus no longer valid across many UNECE countries.

However, against this positive argument we need to consider a raft of evidence of continuing disadvantage faced by women in both gaining access to employment and in particular access to quality employment. The problem is not only that gender discrimination continues but that also it may reappear in new forms and guises. Thus, while for women in some countries and some social positions the main problem is to gain access to the labour market in the first place, in other countries and for women in other social positions, the problem is more one of achieving greater equality within employment and converting an entry level job into a path to a sustained and rewarding career. Women’s options are constrained by patterns of segregation but at the same time desegregation of an occupation may lead eventually to new patterns of segregation, as jobs that were traditionally male become associated primarily with female labour (Reskin and Roos 1990; Crompton and Sanderson 1990). Moreover, while women’s earnings have undoubtedly become a key element or the main element in many household finances, that reliance on female earnings has not necessarily been matched by opportunities to earn a high or continuous wage income. Women, and their dependent children, may therefore be losing the ‘protection’ of male earnings while not gaining 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 the domestic division of labour and women’s responsibilities in the domestic sphere. Here there is little evidence of change in the gender division of labour per se (Women’s Unit 2000), 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).

From this analysis of the continuing and emerging problems associated with women’s employability, it is clear that consideration has to be given to both issues of access to employment and issues of job quality. Furthermore, the relationship between household structures and systems and women’s employability has to be considered, both in relation to the importance of women’s employment to social inclusion strategies and in relation to the continuing influence of the gendered domestic division of labor on women’s chances in the wage labour market.
I.A  Employability and the gendered labour market

I.A.1  Access to employment

Women constitute some 71% of mobilisable labour resources in the OECD (OECD 2003: 78). Most mobilisable labour is found among the inactive (92%) rather than unemployed (8%). The main means by which the catch up is likely to be achieved is through the mobilization of inactive women, particularly in the Southern European countries (except for Portugal), the transition countries of Europe, and Turkey and Mexico. Women also provide the main reserves of additional educated labour even though women account for an even higher share of low-educated labour reserves. It is also low employment rates among women immigrants that is primarily responsible for the perceived problem of low employment rates among immigrants. For example, at the OECD level, the average gap between nationals and non-national employment rates was only 4% for men but 8% for women (OECD 2003: 86-89; see also CEC 2003: tables 61, 63).

Promoting access to employment for women requires policies to address both demand and supply-side obstacles. Women’s access to employment is still shaped by strong and even in some respects intensified, patterns of gender segregation. The intensification is associated with a growth of employment forms, such as part-time work, that are specifically associated with women’s employment, although the incidence of these forms varies between countries. Segregation protects women’s employment by generating female-specific labour demand but also restricts access to better jobs. Moreover, while over recent decades it has been women’s job areas that have expanded, in future women’s employment may be vulnerable to new phases of restructuring. There is already evidence of major restructuring, downsizing and even outsourcing of female clerical work (for example call centres to India). Downsizing and job loss in male employment sectors such as car plants or shipyards are often treated as issues of major national importance, requiring programmes to assist in smoothing redundancy and redeployment (Rubery et al. 1999). In contrast the rundown of female-dominated sectors such as clothing and textiles, and more recently financial services and banking, passes almost without comment. Segregation not only shapes access to employment but also patterns of job loss. Indeed one dimension to segregation is the concentration of women in jobs that are more precarious or less subject to social protection (for example, when organised as temporary or fixed-term jobs). Women may be particularly prone to cycle between employment and periods of inactivity, fueled by both problems of combining work and family and by the precarious nature of the jobs available to women returners (OECD 2003).

Access to employment is also a problem from the supply-side perspective. For women wage work is most likely to be combined with, rather than a full substitute for, domestic work and care work. This combination of activities has a number consequences; firstly it may lead to a greater risk of labour market quits at times when the care work becomes more intensive, unless there are arrangements in place such as leave entitlements and care facilities. By becoming labour market outsiders, women face increased risks on re-entry.
Table I: Gender Differences in the Occupational Distribution of Employment by Age, Presence of Children and Education, 2000

(Relative Dissimilarity Indices *)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source: OECD Employment Outlook 2002:91</th>
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) Ratio of the dissimilarity indices (DI) for the two groups indicated below multiplied by 100. A relative index greater than 100 indicates greater occupational segregation by gender for the group in the numerator than for the group in the denominator. DIs have been calculated over the population of wage and salary employees based on 26 sub-major occupational groups of ISCO-88 (excluding the Armed Forces). For Sweden and Switzerland the dissimilarity indices are based on 9 major occupational groups- 1-digit level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>By age **</th>
<th>By presence of children **</th>
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<td>Austria</td>
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<td>Germany</td>
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<tr>
<td>United States</td>
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<td>124</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: OECD Employment Outlook 2002:91

*) Ratio of the dissimilarity indices (DI) for the two groups indicated below multiplied by 100. A relative index greater than 100 indicates greater occupational segregation by gender for the group in the numerator than for the group in the denominator. DIs have been calculated over the population of wage and salary employees based on 26 sub-major occupational groups of ISCO-88 (excluding the Armed Forces). For Sweden and Switzerland the dissimilarity indices are based on 9 major occupational groups- 1-digit level

**) By age: ratio of DI for the age group 25 to 34 years to DI for the age group 35 to 64 years; by presence of children: ratio of DI for employees with children to DI for employees without children; by education: ratio of DI for employees with less than upper secondary education to DI for employees with a tertiary qualification

as the jobs available to them may be lower paid, less secure (Walby and Olsen 2002; Waldfogel et al. 1998) and more segregated than those for women who manage to remain connected to the labour market. This is suggested by the higher level of segregation for women with children (see table 1). However, if women select their initial occupation according to the opportunities it would offer for work-life balance if they were to have children, the effect would be to further reinforce segregation and gender pay inequalities.

Another consequence of women’s combined career and earner roles is that they are regarded as second income earners within the household. Household-based systems of either taxation or benefits create disincentives for second earners to enter or re-enter the labour market. These
disincentive effects in practice tend to be much stronger for families in receipt of household-means tested benefits because of the high rate of benefit withdrawal in many of these systems (OECD 2003:119). More households are affected the disincentive effects of household-based taxation systems, but these may not be sufficiently strong to deter re-entry (Vermeulen et al. 1994). Of more significance may be the cost of childcare if this cost is considered as a charge against the second earner’s wages. Such an approach may lead to households making ‘wrong’ decisions with respect to the lifetime participation patterns as 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), but for individual households, faced with high marginal tax and care costs on the additional earner, the decision to provide the care at home may seem the only economic solution available.

I.A.2 Job quality

Our discussion of problems of access to employment has necessarily identified continuing problems of job quality. Differences in job quality both reduce the attachment of women to the labour market and reduce gender equality for those in work. The persistence of gender inequalities in pay undermines the scope for women to become an equal or the main or even sole breadwinner in a household, whatever their individual preferences and choices. The designation of women as second income earners within the household and as primary carers fuels a process by which they become trapped within low paying sectors where either their skills are not acknowledged or valued or where they are underemployed relative to their talents and educational attainment. The underdevelopment of women’s talents is further identified by restrictions on access to training and lifelong learning- in part because women are less continuously in the labour market were such training is normally provided-and because there may be less access to training in women’s jobs (OECD 2003: 243). Recent evidence from the OECD supports this latter proposition, as not only are women identified as a group that has less access to employer provided training but also as a group- particularly those working part-time, where they are no necessarily able to take up all the training on offer due to time constraints. The association of insecurity with women’s jobs (particularly re-entry jobs and non standard employment), together with evidence of restricted access to training and lifelong learning, mean that promoting women’s employability requires a great deal more than simply improved access to employment, regardless of the quality.

Improvement to job quality requires action on four fronts:

i) better initial access to employment,

ii) better employment opportunities if returning to work from a break,

iii) more opportunities to remain in continuous employment or continuous attachment to the labour market even over the period of childbirth

iv) better opportunities for vertical progression when in employment.

Improvement in initial access requires reductions in discrimination by employers, expanded subject and career choices by women (contingent of course on action to assist in initial access and in continuity of employment and career progression) and a re-evaluation of the skills and values of the jobs undertaken by women in the labour market. Action on points ii) and iii) may need to be combined if, for example, it is easier to improve women’s opportunities to retain access to quality employment by offering rights to reduced working hours in the job they held before taking a break than requiring women to quit the labour market and seek a new job if they wish to rebalance their wage and non wage work for a time. Appendix Table 1 reveals the major differences between
countries and between women with low and high education in their current tendencies to work continuously when mothers. These differences also manifest themselves in different propensities to work full or part-time; no one solution is therefore necessarily appropriate for all countries and certainly not all women wish to work part-time. However, action may also be needed to change work cultures among men as long hours of work in full-time jobs create barriers to women continuing in full-time work and to the creation of high quality part-time jobs, particularly if employers are relying on long hours of unpaid overtime by full-time professional and managerial staff.

To improve access to promotion at work it is necessary to act on a number of fronts- to create more promotion ladders within female dominated segments, which is part of the process of valuing women’s skills more effectively and appropriately, reducing discrimination against women in promotion systems and making promotion more attractive in itself to women- by reducing the clash between holding higher level jobs and participating in private and family life and by expanding the range of approaches and skills that are valued within managerial and higher level work.

I.B Employability and the household system

I.B.1 Social inclusion

Women’s employability is an increasingly important element in a social inclusion strategy. The four key reasons for this are as follows:

- Social inclusion has historically relied on the insertion of men into stable career jobs that provided family wages, but the labour market opportunities for men have become much more uncertain so that the risk factors of relying on one breadwinner have increased. Two earner families have much lower risks of poverty than one-earner families (Marx and Verbist 1998)
- Household and family structures have also become much more unstable so that people move between relationships and women are more likely to find themselves as the sole breadwinner either as single people or as lone parents
- Women’s earnings have a more direct link to the welfare of children than do men’s earnings; thus women’s employability can help to reduce the risks of child poverty
- One of the main groups that is exposed to poverty and social exclusion is the elderly; this group includes a disproportionate share of women and it is women who are most vulnerable to poverty in old age as they are less likely to have good pension entitlements due to their shorter and less well paid employment careers.

I.B.2 The domestic division of labour and reconciliation at work.

The main changes in the domestic division of labour have been associated with the reductions in fertility and the increased use of external services- both publicly provided services and services