



ELECTION BRIEF 19-03

WORKING GROUP ON YOUTH EMPLOYMENT

GENDER INEQUALITY IN THE WORLD OF WORK

KEY POINTS

- YOUNG PEOPLE WERE PARTICULARLY AFFECTED BY THE CRISIS AND GENDER PLAYS A ROLE IN EXACERBATING SITUATIONS
- THE EU-LEVEL POLICY APPROACH FOCUSES ON FLEXIBILITY AND LIFELONG LEARNING, BUT FALLS SHORT OF HIGHLIGHTING GENDER-SPECIFIC DISADVANTAGES
- IN ORDER TO SIMULTANEOUSLY SUPPORT ECONOMIC PERFORMANCE AND GENDER EQUALITY, GENDER-SPECIFIC TARGETS SHOULD COMPLEMENT THE EXISTING STRATEGY

MARINA PAPAZOTOU
LEIDEN UNIVERSITY ALUMNA

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With the European Union's fundamental principle that everyone should be treated equally, gender equality constitutes one of the longest-standing social objectives in the European integration process. Since the signing of the founding treaties, it has become a core value and from its first explicit declaration in 1957 until today, it has shaped and occupied the agenda, supranational legislation, national policy-making and European case law. Gender equality, apart from its normative value, also has an instrumental economic role to play in a society that expects everyone to participate in the labour market¹. It has been proven that the equal participation of women in employment - in terms of entry to the job market and equal pay - has been a key factor in supporting economic growth for member states².

However, in light of the financial and economic crisis since 2008, austerity measures put forward by creditors, including EU institutions, have prioritised a reform agenda focused on short-term financial stability and competitiveness. This has led to undermine a gender-sensitive agenda and policy-making approach in recent years. The European Union's current long-term strategy, Europe 2020, seeks to promote 'smart and sustainable growth', but makes no specific mention of how this will tackle gender-specific inequalities in the labour market. Furthermore, the strategy does not mention gender mainstreaming, a policy tool that has been used extensively in the EU in order to improve sensitivity to potentially negative effects on women's interests throughout every area of policy-making. Does this mean that we have reached full equality, and there is thus no use in any new gender-specific agenda and no need to integrate gender-sensitive mechanisms? Or is it that given the crisis, the priorities have shifted to economic targets, sacrificing one of the most important social contributions of the European integration process?

In order to answer these questions, this Election Brief provides an overview of existing inequalities on the labour market and examines what the EU has done so far in terms of employment and social policies to address them. In that way, it will be made clear why it is still relevant to formulate gender-specific policies and what could be done in the future for the European project to claim its role in making the labour market work for everyone.

YOUTH AT WORK: GENDER ROLES

Since the outbreak of the crisis, the youth has been affected disproportionately by deteriorating labour market conditions. According to the OECD³, female labour force participation

in the EU28 between the years 2007-2017 has remained approximately stable at around 58%, peaking at 62% in 2017, while male labour force participation fluctuated around 70%. Unemployment among the total labour force in the EU28 increased from 7,1% in 2007 to 7,6% in 2017. By comparison, the youth unemployment rate has increased from 15,9% in 2007 to 16,1% in 2017 for women, while for men from 15,3% to 17,5%. Overall, it is clear that young people were disproportionately affected by the loss of opportunities in the labour market during the recession and the following austerity measures.

Considering the above, it might seem that the crisis has affected all young people uniformly, with no particular disproportionality regarding women. However, high unemployment is only the tip of the iceberg for young women, who - despite the fact that they are by far more educated than previous generations - face greatly unequal prospects and conditions. First, settling to part-time employment and forms of non-recognised labour is the most common problem. This results in a much slower career progression than their male counterparts, which can also entail barriers to leadership positions in the future. Secondly, young women are economically less favoured at work due to a gender pay gap still as high as 16% in the EU28 as well as unequal parental care systems, which highly varies among the different member states. Finally, occupational segregation also creates unfavourable situations for young women in the labour market due to their lower participation in high-skilled, high-paying STEM jobs (science, technology, engineering, math), innovation and entrepreneurship - fields that provide particularly promising career paths today.

GENDER EQUALITY AND THE EU

Gender equality is considered to be one of the social objectives of the European Union with the longest tradition. Since at least the 1970s, focus has shifted between phases of EU-level hard regulation and 'soft' coordination of national policy measures. With the re-launching of the Lisbon Strategy in 2005 and its continuation in the Europe 2020 strategy, there is the generally positive development in EU-level policy coordination of accounting for economic targets in conjunction with social objectives. This manifests through the introduction of integrated guidelines and the European Semester, the main instrument for coordinating and monitoring national level policy-making today. However, merging social inclusion with a broader policy document without any specific recommendations or budget planning could downgrade the first⁴. Further, the Europe 2020 strategy seeks to promote growth, which in the case of young people is manifested in provisions for mobility and flexibility. Considering though the vulnerability of young women in 'flexible' working positions as argued before, it is not made clear how job security will be achieved for them through the current approach.

With regard to recent gender-oriented considerations on the EU-level, steps have led to the European Commission's 2016-2019 'strategic engagement on gender equality'. The document introduces five thematic areas of equality that need strengthening, namely equal economic independence, equal pay, equality in decision making, combating gender violence and promoting equality beyond the EU. However, as stressed in the Commission's 2018 report on Gender Equality, there are major cross-country discrepancies in member states' performances in those five areas. A lot remains to be done. Despite recognising the setbacks from the crisis and setting an ambitious target of 75% female employment by 2020, the Commission doesn't announce any gender-specific actions or mechanisms, but only gender mainstreaming as a 'catch-all' approach.

However, feminist policy research has been divided about the usefulness of this approach. Gender mainstreaming is recognised by some as a governance tool that can shift policy paradigms, but disputed by others on account of failing to set a clear agenda that would take into consideration gender inequalities and failures in different areas of employment and social affairs. In fact, according to the European Commission, the strongest asset of gender mainstreaming is that it takes into consideration the interests of both men and women in every policy and measure of the EU, in order to overcome individual and systemic inequalities in all aspects of life.

Still, gender mainstreaming is not capable of overcoming the systemic inequalities in each member state, which in essence define the outcome of the EES⁵. Furthermore, a recent research by the European Parliamentary Research Service shows that the gender mainstreaming goals set by the strategic engagement have fallen short in certain fields, due to lack of concrete benchmarks. The latter is particularly evident as regards the budgeting which would help implement these goals, since resources are generally allocated without specific planning, left at the disposal of each member state and difficult to identify and monitor. The same analysis also stresses that gender mainstreaming policies had little impact on the gender pay gap, which still poses financial distress to women. In fact, it has been estimated that it will also cost the EU 240 billion Euro in GDP by 2030⁶. As a consequence to the above, there is room for the European Union's agenda to signal a renewed commitment to gender equality.

FOR GENDER-SPECIFIC TARGETS



So why is there such a reluctance to redefine gender policy on the European level, considering the shortcomings of the current approach? As mentioned above, after the financial crisis, austerity measures including debt reduction and cuts in public spending dominated policy-making rather than investment and job creation⁷. Given the pressure to sustain a viable eurozone, European leaders chose to prioritise macro-economic and financial stability, which has at times conflicted with improving young people's job prospects and experiences, especially those of young women⁸. Even more, there

is a political backlash against female empowerment, which also builds on changing men's attitudes and behaviour, as a result of conservatism and patriarchal mentality, undermining the prioritisation of an agenda in favour of equality.

Considering the little impact gender mainstreaming is shown to have on labour market situations, the European Union should make a renewed effort to play the positive role it has played in the past for gender equality. Therefore, a Europe 2030 strategy should include a renewed formulation of gender-specific targets that address inequalities in the working conditions and career prospects of women, as analysed above. For example, what could be particularly integrated into the strategy is the allocation of specific government funds to social infrastructure. This could free young women from the one-sided burden of family caring which impedes career progression and equal earnings. Also, specific provisions about public investment in gender dominated areas such as social care or counselling and in gender-segregated fields such as entrepreneurship would boost women's economic participation. Finally, gender targeted private investments could help equilibrate the post-austerity situation, which, as analysed above, has disproportionately affected young women. Therefore, as Bargawi, Cozzi and Himmelweit argue, what gender specific policies are missing is a balance between private and public investment in both physical and social infrastructure.

While integrating social policies in an economic strategy as it is currently achieved remains important, this development should be complemented by an approach that addresses the challenges unique to young women's labour market prospects. Such a reorientation would ultimately be a matter of political choice, signalling the European Union's ability to improve young people's quality of work, life and well-being instead of only focusing on aggregate measures of economic performance.

References

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