

Equality between women and men in the European Union — 2010

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PURPOSE: to present the Commission report on equality between women and men - 2010.

CONTENT: in this year's report, the Commission notes that the current economic crisis has raised concerns that the achievements in gender equality in the EU are at risk and that the effects of the recession will put greater pressure on women. The downturn could be used as a reason to limit or cut gender equality measures, and analysis of national responses to the crisis confirms this risk. However, these times of crisis offer a unique opportunity for change, given that gender equality is a precondition for sustainable growth, employment, competitiveness and social cohesion. Policy makers have the opportunity to implement policies to make the labour market and society more gender-equal in the future.

Although the economic and social context has changed, the crisis has not altered the underlying challenges, such as the better functioning of labour markets, the sustainability and adequacy of social protection, the ageing of society. Gender equality policies are part of the response to these challenges but the crisis reinforces the need for these policies to demonstrate their cost-effectiveness.

Main developments

With regard to **gender gaps**, the report notes that this is a longer term challenge and progress is slow. Gender gaps persist as regards employment rates, pay, working hours, and positions of responsibility, share of care and household duties, and risk of poverty. The increasing participation of women in the labour market is a positive development, representing an important contribution to economic growth in the EU, accounting for a quarter of annual economic growth since 1995. The female employment rate increased by 7.1 percentage points over the last decade and reached 59.1 % in 2008, which is close to the Lisbon target (60 % in 2010), though this rate varies between Member States, from below 40 % to above 70 %. The average gap between female and male employment rates fell to 13.7 percentage points in 2008 from 18.2 points in 1998.

Interrupting this positive trend, however, the economic crisis has had serious repercussions on the labour market and unemployment figures. Between May 2008 and September 2009, the unemployment rate at EU level rose more rapidly for men (from 6.4 % to 9.3 %) than for women (7.4 % to 9 %). The male-dominated sectors of industry and construction have been hit hard. However, in recent months female and male unemployment rates have been increasing at the same pace, reflecting probably an extension of the crisis to other sectors, more gender-mixed than the ones first hit. Moreover, in a dozen Member States, unemployment remains higher among women. As **women's jobs are concentrated in the public sector, they could be disproportionately affected by job losses due to budget cuts**. Experience from past crises shows that men's employment generally recovers more quickly than women's. For persons who become unemployed, the risk of not being re-employed is higher for women. Women are more likely to have a **disadvantaged position on the labour market** e.g. due to higher incidence of precarious contracts, involuntary part-time and a persistent unfavourable pay gap (17.6 % on average in the EU in 2007), with repercussions on their lifetime earnings, social security protection and pensions, resulting in higher at-risk-of-poverty rates, especially once in retirement.

Women with children work less (-11.5 p.p. in the employment rate) than women without children, while men with children work more than men without children (+6.8 points). This strong influence of parenthood on employment participation is linked to traditional gender roles and the lack of childcare facilities in many

Member States. Despite an increase in the provision of childcare over the last few years, in line with the European targets, the coverage rates remain below these targets in many countries, especially for children under 3 years of age. **Caring for other dependants** also has a strong influence on the possibility of women and men remaining on the labour market, a challenge aggravated by the ageing of the population.

While there has been an increase in the number of **women involved in decision making** or appointed to decision-making posts in the EU over the last years, power is still firmly in men's hands in the political and economic spheres. Some progress came after the 2009 elections to the European Parliament, where the share of women rose from 31 % to 35 %. In the economic sector, figures are less positive and, for instance, women represent only one out of 10 board members in European blue-chip companies and 3 % among the leaders of the boards.

The report goes on to describe **policy and legislative developments**, noting that recent analysis of national responses to the crisis confirms the risk of downgrading the status of equality policies or reducing budgets allocated to these policies, and possible future cuts in public budgets may have a negative effect on female employment. It also notes the Council's political agreement on the proposal for a directive implementing the revised framework agreement on parental leave concluded by the European social partners, and the Commission's adoption of a proposal for a Council Framework Decision on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings, and protecting victims.

Conclusion: in view of the contribution that gender equality can make to sustainable growth, employment, competitiveness and social cohesion, the Commission considers that the gender dimension should be strengthened in all parts of the post-Lisbon strategy. It invites the European Council to urge Member States to respond without delay to the challenges outlined in the report, in particular the following:

- strengthen the gender dimension in all parts of the [EU 2020 strategy](#), including more efficient use of gender mainstreaming, and specific actions and targets for gender equality within the European Employment Strategy;
- reduce the gender pay gap through specific strategies combining all available instruments, including targets where appropriate;
- ensure that diversity in boards of listed companies fosters a balanced and long-term oriented decision-making environment and that women are encouraged to take on the challenge of board membership in listed companies;
- improve reconciliation measures for both men and women, including family related leaves, care services, flexible working arrangements, and encourage equal sharing of private and family responsibilities, to facilitate full-time employment for both women and men;
- intensify efforts to prevent and combat gender-based violence;
- ensure that policies pay attention to women in particularly vulnerable positions — for example, women in precarious jobs, older women workers, single parents, disabled women, migrant/ethnic minority and Roma women;
- ensure that the gender perspective is mainstreamed in the responses to the recession at the European and national levels, taking into account the differentiated impact of the crisis on women and men;
- renew the commitment taken by the Member States in the European Pact for Gender Equality and reinforce partnership and synergy between the European institutions, social partners and civil society.

In 2010, the European Commission will renew its commitment to promoting gender equality by adopting a gender equality strategy to follow up the current Roadmap for equality between women and men. The Lisbon Strategy for Growth and Jobs will also be updated and it is important that gender equality is consolidated in the EU 2020 strategy. 2010 is also the European Year dedicated to combating poverty and social exclusion, which will highlight the need for effective measures to include vulnerable groups. Lastly, it is the 15th anniversary of the Beijing Platform of Action when progress under the different areas for action will be assessed. This opens up the possibility to create stronger synergy between the different strategies to be revised in 2010.