



Economic crisis and gender equality in Europe

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The EU-wide gender gap in the employment rate has gone down some 3.2 percentage points from a 14.1 points before the crisis to 10.9 points in the first quarter of 2012. Under-representation of women in manufacturing, construction, and some financial branches where male employment suffered heavy losses, protected female employment, overall.

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The gender pay gap decreased at European level: the unadjusted gender pay gap declined in 16 Member States. Cuts in overtime and performance pay components contributed to the decline. Such components are traditionally more important for men's pay.

Men in a worse mood. Having a job is no longer optional for women, who behave on the labour market much more like men. But the crisis affects them differently: proportionally more men became discouraged workers and, in the 17 countries covered by the data, men voiced more frequent complaints about heightened job insecurity, cuts in pay and having to accept less interesting work. The crisis also appears to have adversely affected health behavior. Drug addiction, smoking, and heavy drinking appear to have been on the rise in more than one European country, especially among men.

Female employment pays a heavy price. Despite the leveling downward of employment and pay gaps, the integration of women in the labour market has been rolled back. At peak employment values, just before the recession begun, 10 Member States were above the 65% employment rate mark for women aged 15 to 64, but the number was down to 6 in the first quarter of 2012. In the Mediterranean and in the Baltic countries high education didn't shield women against unemployment. With many families no longer able to afford the price of care related services, unpaid work is likely to have gone up and women are likely to have shouldered the largest increase, though the evidence is slim.

On the surface, the gap between men and women is being bridged , but under the surface things are more complex and effects diversified among men and women. Gender gaps are closing not because women improved their situation but because men saw theirs getting comparatively worse. It is men's position leveling downward as they are becoming more "women like". For now.

Working conditions deteriorated during the crisis with, for example delays in wage payments and occupational downgrading, violations of health and safety regulations and of parental rights.

The crisis reinforced differences in access to rights. As unemployment and atypical employment expanded, the access of women to fundamental rights, such as maternity benefits, restricted. Non standard forms of employment as well as unemployment prevail among young men and women in their family formation years.

Where is fiscal consolidation leading?

Gender mainstreaming has been sidestepped both at the policy design and the implementation stage. No prior gender impact assessment was done before the implementation of fiscal consolidation packages.

Is fiscal consolidation making gender equality 'affordable' only in the North of Europe? Cutbacks to welfare provisions in the first years of the crisis were contained, albeit uneven. Up until 2010 the general trend has been for countries to preserve the provision of services relatively more than cash benefit schemes. But developments for those services that affect gender equality were uneven, with, for example coverage for childcare for very young children worsening in several countries (Belgium, Bulgaria, Greece, Italy, Lithuania, Romania and Spain).

In countries with moderate fiscal consolidation programmes such as Finland or the Netherlands welfare cuts were limited; or there was attention to partly compensate for adverse effects of fiscal consolidation on women or the poorest. Bye bye welfare. In contrast, recent evidence for Spain, Greece and Ireland is alarming: mounting poverty and some groups of women especially hit; downsizing of the equality machinery, retrenchment in health and care provisions, elderly care in particular, and much more.

Recommendations

1. The risk that fiscal consolidation erodes welfare provisions and public services is materializing fast in the countries burdened by the largest austerity packages. Welfare cutbacks in the wake of fiscal consolidation should be closely monitored at European and at national level.
2. Social expenditure should be channeled to prioritise quality services over cash benefits to ensure a fair distribution of austerity programmes and alleviate the care burden for women. Recovery funds, in particular, should be channeled towards social and care infrastructure - health and care provisions, education and training, research and development, communication - and not only towards physical infrastructure.
3. The European Social Fund should be strengthened, and its procedures reviewed, so that it can serve to compensate for cuts in local provision and to sustain Europe 2020 goals, particularly in Member States with low female employment levels.
4. Income support schemes should be gender mainstreamed. Tax and social expenditure should focus on advancing women's financial independence.
5. Member States should be encouraged to adopt gender budgeting systems for key policies, in particular recovery plans and expenditure reviews.
6. A 'critical mass' female representation in key European financial bodies should be ensured and financial literacy initiatives targeting women should be supported.
7. New gender equality indicators should be developed to track progress over time, for example some measure of distance between the current and a desired employment rate.
8. Surveillance of violations of maternity and leave rights should be increased and public awareness of this issue should be heightened.
9. The disproportionate burden of employment flexibility on young people and the poor integration of migrant workers should be addressed.

For more information see the report of the European Network of Experts on Gender Equality (ENEGE), “THE IMPACT OF THE ECONOMIC CRISIS ON THE SITUATION OF WOMEN AND MEN AND ON GENDER EQUALITY POLICIES”, available at http://ec.europa.eu/justice/gender-equality/document/index_en.htm

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