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Bari : CIHEAM

Options Méditerranéennes : Série A. Séminaires Méditerranéens; n. 87

2009

pages 33-44

Article available on line / Article disponible en ligne à l'adresse :

<http://om.ciheam.org/article.php?IDPDF=801049>

To cite this article / Pour citer cet article

Ferreira V. **Employment policies from a gender equality perspective in Mediterranean Europe developments and challenges.** In : Ambrosi L. (ed.), Trisorio-Liuzzi G. (ed.), Quagliariello R. (ed.), Santelli Beccegato L. (ed.), Di Benedetta C. (ed.), Losurdo F. (ed.). *Women status in the Mediterranean: their rights and sustainable development.* Bari : CIHEAM, 2009. p. 33-44 (Options Méditerranéennes : Série A. Séminaires Méditerranéens; n. 87)



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Employment policies from a gender equality perspective in Mediterranean Europe developments and challenges

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Abstract. Gender equality is a priority of the European Employment Strategy but, according to key indicators, only two European Mediterranean Countries have so far reached Lisbon target for female employment. In European Mediterranean Countries there is a gap between men and women employment. Some indicators are presented to understand the complexity of the employment frame in EU Mediterranean Countries as the employment average in general, the education level, the fertility rate and the segregation rate. Many measures have been adopted by the European Commission to support the inclusion of women in the labour market such as: the implementation of children care services, family services, the reduction of pay gap (COM/2007/424) and the application of “flexicurity” principle (2007/359, promoting equal access to qualified employment entails measures to reconcile work and private life). The Roadmap for Equality between Women and Men was launched by the European Commission in 2006, but EU Mediterranean Countries adopted individual policies often resulting from a cultural model, still marked by the “male family provider”. The concept of flexibility, in the wake of North European Countries, will change the structure of societies and allow sharing roles between the sexes inside and outside the families.

Keywords. Legislation – Employment - Labour market – European Commission – Contract legislation – Education – Birth rate – Fertility – Social services.

Les politiques de l'emploi selon la perspective de l'égalité des sexes dans l'Europe méditerranéenne : les défis pour le développement

Résumé. L'égalité entre les femmes et les hommes constitue une priorité de la Stratégie Européenne de l'Emploi, mais suivant des indicateurs clés, seuls deux pays euro-méditerranéens ont à ce jour atteint l'objectif de Lisbonne pour l'emploi des femmes. Dans les pays euroméditerranéens, il existe un écart entre l'emploi des hommes et des femmes. Quelques indicateurs sont présentés pour illustrer la complexité du cadre de l'emploi dans les pays euro-méditerranéens tels la moyenne des emplois, en général, le niveau d'éducation, le taux de fertilité et de ségrégation. Plusieurs mesures ont été adoptées par la Commission Européenne pour soutenir l'intégration des femmes dans le marché du travail: par exemple, la réalisation de services de garde d'enfants, de services pour les familles, la réduction de l'écart des salaires (COM/2007/424) et l'application du principe de la “ flexicurité ” (2007/359, la promotion de l'égalité d'accès aux emplois qualifiés implique des mesures pour concilier le travail et la vie privée). La Feuille de Route pour l'Egalité entre les Femmes et les Hommes a été lancée par la Commission Européenne en 2006, mais les pays euroméditerranéens ont adopté des politiques individuelles découlant, le plus souvent, d'un modèle culturel prédominant, selon lequel « l'homme pourvoit aux besoins de la famille ». Le concept de flexicurité, dans le sillage des pays de l'Europe du nord, va modifier la structure des sociétés et permettre le partage des rôles entre les sexes dans et en dehors des familles.

Mots-clés. Législation – Emploi – Marché du travail – Commission européenne – Législation des Contrats – Education – Taux de natalité – Fertilité – Services sociaux.

I – Introduction

2007 was marked by several celebrations and important events for gender equality policy: the 50th anniversary of European gender equality policy; the European Year of Equal Opportunities

for All; the tenth anniversary of the signing of the Amsterdam Treaty, the basis for the European Employment Strategy and for gender mainstreaming in Community policies. It is, then, the right time to take the picture of women's situation in the labour market, and simultaneously evaluate the effectiveness of gender equality policies and their achievements.

In this presentation, I'll try to make a brief overview of women' status in the employment system, having as main focus the Mediterranean European Countries, namely, Greece (EL), Spain (ES), France (FR), Italy (IT), Cyprus (CY), Malta (MT), and Slovenia (LI). Portugal (PT) is not bathed by the Mediterranean Sea, but it is usually included in this group of countries.

After drawing a very rough and broad statistical picture with the last available data from EUROSTAT, I'll try to make a brief synthesis of some issues related to present trends both of developments in the labour market and, in case some time is still left, of challenges of gender equality policies.

1. Main developments in the labour market

The European Employment Strategy has been launched 10 years ago, putting an emphasis on gender equality, and indeed defining this as 1 of its 4 priorities. During this decade, efforts have been undertaken in order to increase women's participation in the formal economic life, and to lessen inequalities between men and women in the labour market. In spite of those efforts, however, many important gaps persist, namely in the countries we are focusing our attention, as we can see, following the behaviour of some key indicators, published on the Report on Equality between Women and Men, in January of this year, 2008 (EC, 2008).

The first key indicator is the employment rate of women and men aged 15-64, in 2006. In this chart, we observe a very distinct behaviour of the 8 Mediterranean Countries. There are 4 with higher employment rates, but only 2, Portugal and Slovenia had already reached the Lisbon target for women's employment rate in 2010. All the others are still behind the intended 60% rate, and Greece, Italy and Malta seem really far away of that objective, having the worst performance of all EU member-states on this issue.

In face of this, it is expectable that these same countries hold the highest absolute gaps between male and female employment rates (for 15-64 age group). Cyprus, Spain, Italy, Greece and Malta join in this group with worst performance. In Slovenia, France and Portugal the female employment rate is not so different from that of men. We must underline, however, that in both subgroups the absolute gap is narrowing (fig. 2).

Another characteristic that Mediterranean European labour markets have in common is the relatively low share of part-time workers in total employment, as compared to what happens in other countries with much higher female employment rates, as it is the case of all Nordic countries, plus Deutschland, Belgium, UK, Austria, Luxembourg, and Ireland.

In EU, more than three-quarters of part-time workers are women (76.5%), corresponding to one woman in three, as against less than one man in ten. This means that the responsibilities of reconciliation of working and family life are beard by women (fig. 3).

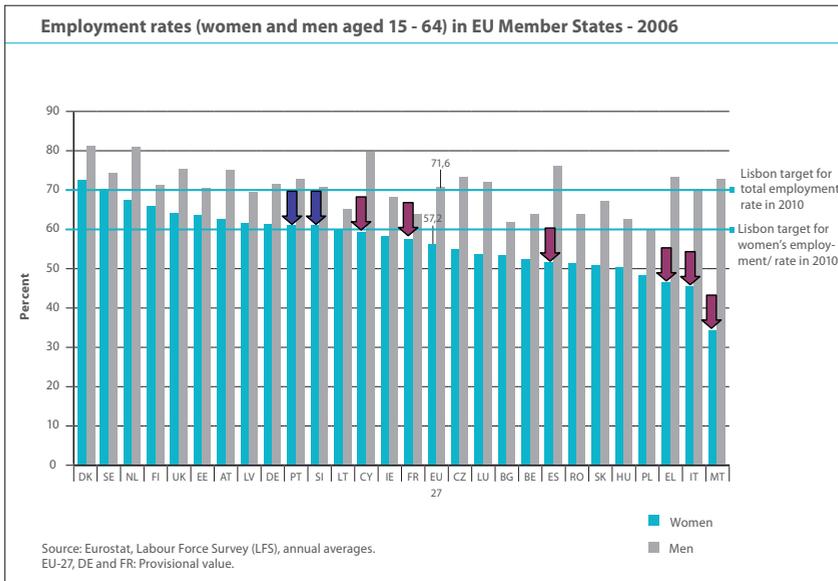


Figure 1. Employment rates (women and men aged 15-64) in EU Member States - 2006

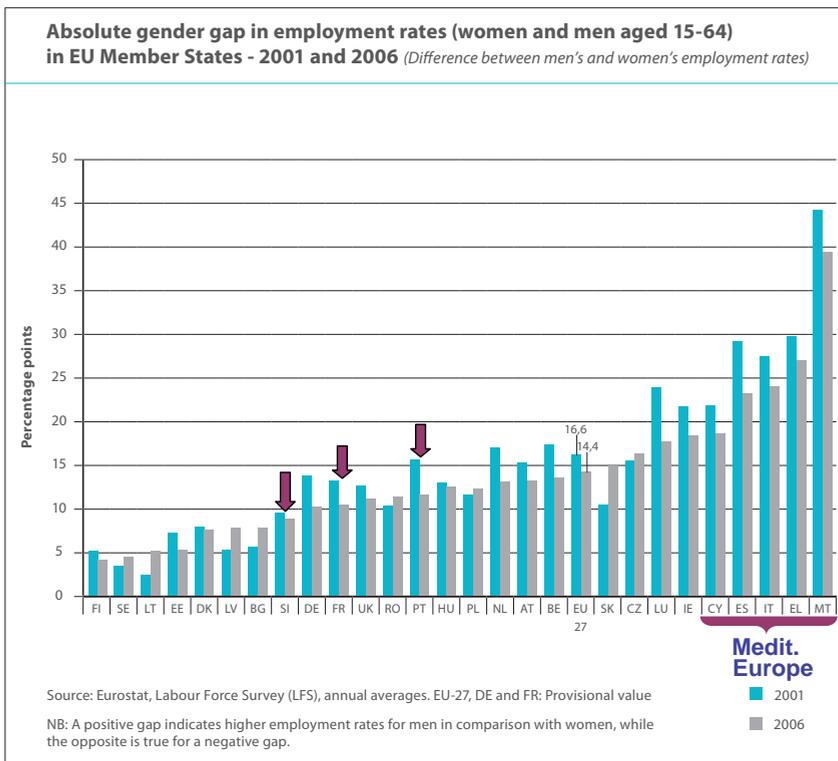


Figure 2. Absolute gender gap in employment rates (women and men aged 15-64) in EU Member States – 2001 and 2006

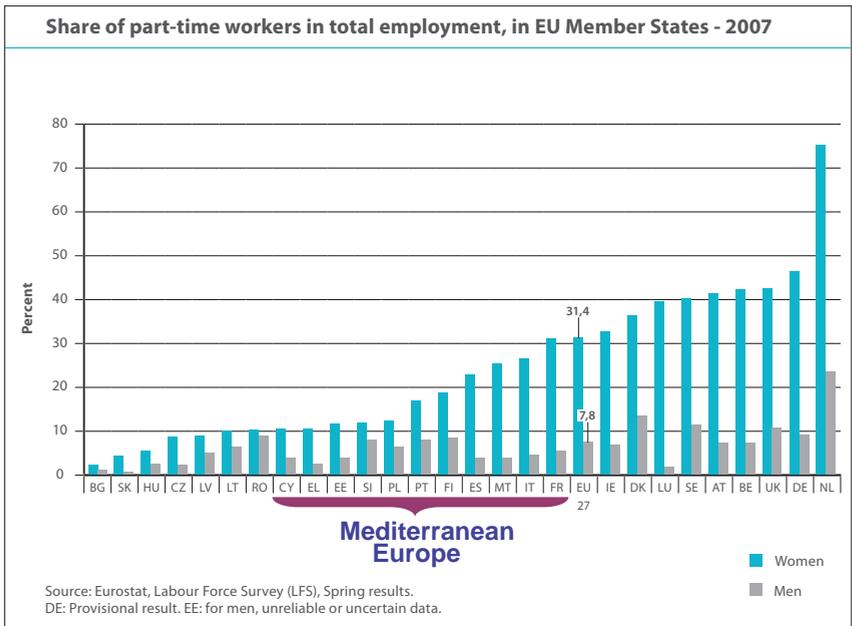


Figure 3. Share of part-time workers in total employment (EU Member States) - 2007

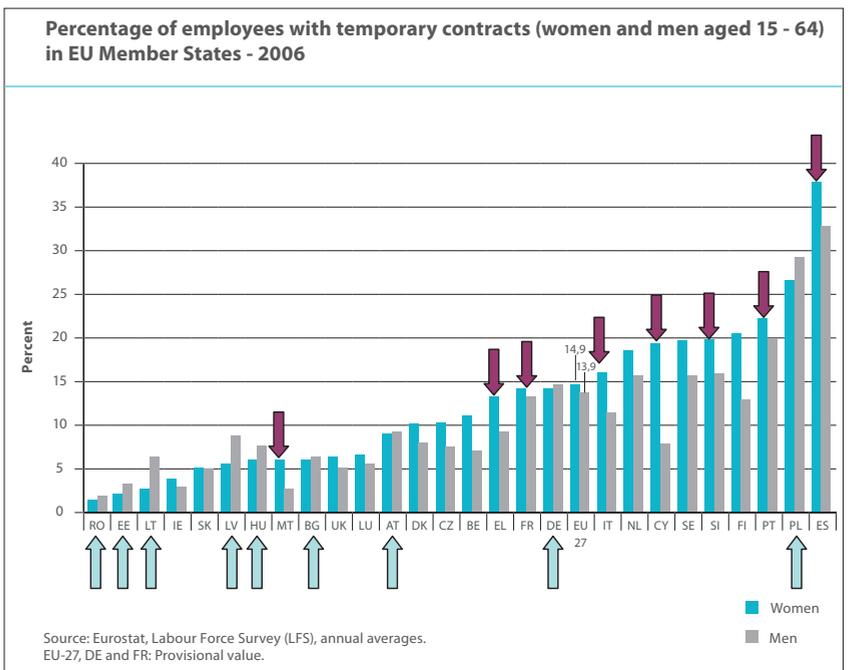


Figure 4. Percentage of employees with temporary contracts in EU Member States (women and men aged 15-64) - 2006

The last chart, I would like to put in evidence, shows under other criteria, our labour markets are pretty flexible, like for instance, the percentage of employees with temporary contracts (women and men aged 15-64), (EU, 2006), (fig. 4).

As we can see, 5 countries – Italy, Cyprus, Slovenia, Portugal and Spain are among the few 9 countries that had percentages above the EU-27 average, in 2006. As it is also illustrated in this chart, in all Mediterranean countries, contrary to what happens in the majority of Eastern European ones (Romania, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Hungary, and Bulgaria) and Austria and Deutschland, more women than men is included in this flexible employment modality.

The absolute gender gaps in unemployment rates between women and men aged 15 years and over have been declining, and they were narrower in 2006, than in 2001. The Mediterranean European countries are among those countries with the higher gaps, and in fact we find three of them occupying the three last positions – Italy, Spain and Greece. This means that if female employment rates are not higher in those countries it is because women can't find jobs. We should add, moreover, that among those few that hold part-time jobs, there is a large proportion of people that would like to work fulltime (fig. 5).

In what concerns the proportion of women and men aged 20-24 that had attained at least the upper secondary school, I would like to stress the heterogeneity that, hopefully, we found among this group of countries. In 2006, we found 3 Mediterranean countries in the three last positions again (Spain, Portugal and Malta). Italy is also below the EU average, but with a much better performance (around 70% of Italian boys as compared to 42% of the Portuguese, which have the highest school dropout of all EU member-states). The reality which is behind this indicator is in truth dramatic for these 4 countries, because this means deficit of qualifications, since this high level of dropout is not compensated by high rates of enrolment in long-life learning strategies. In knowledge based economies this is of course a powerful handicap (fig. 6).

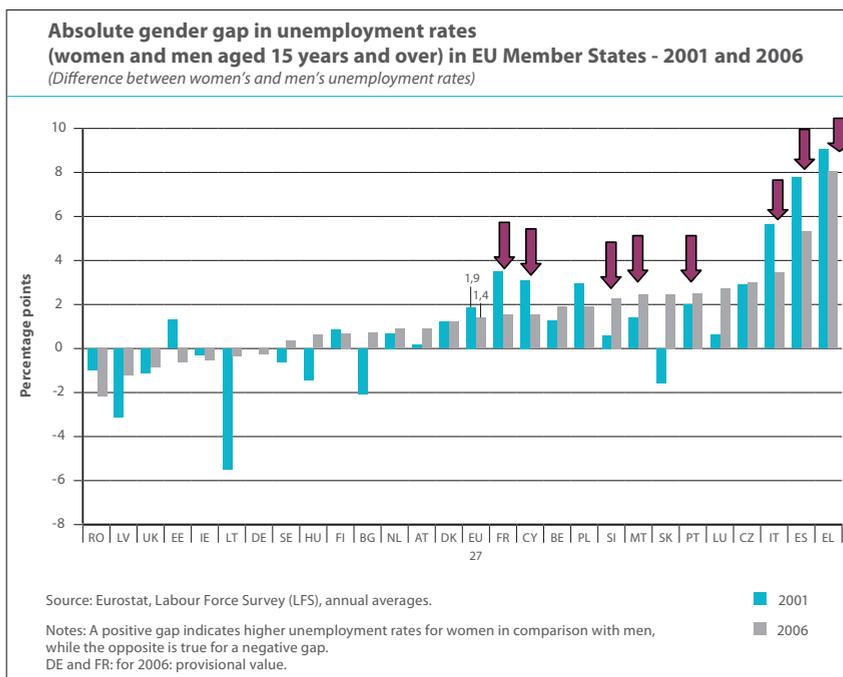


Figure 5. Absolute gender gap in employment rates (women and men aged 15 and over) in EU Member States – 2001 and 2006

This is more incomprehensible, at the light of the low fertility rates, this group of countries have Fig.7).

Finally, I bring to your attention the IP-Index, used to measure the occupational and sectoral segregation of labour market structures. In these 2 charts, we can see the trends in occupational segregation, by country (in the earliest and the latest years the data is available). It is pretty evident that: firstly, with the exception of France, these countries used to have a low segregation level; and that, secondly, this tends to raise, France being the only exception again (Fig. 8.1 and 8.2).

The fundamentals for this rise of segregation are multiple. We can think about the expansion of employment in the services sector, which is highly affected by gender stereotypes. This means also that women have been entering into the labour market but mainly for doing what other women are doing there already.

Relying on a vast collection of studies demonstrating part-time damaging effects of glass walls and glass ceilings, as well as of sticky floors, in professional careers, we would say that a low rate of part-time work indicates a full integration of women in employment, and, being so, it is a positive characteristic to be met in the labour markets of the Southern European countries.

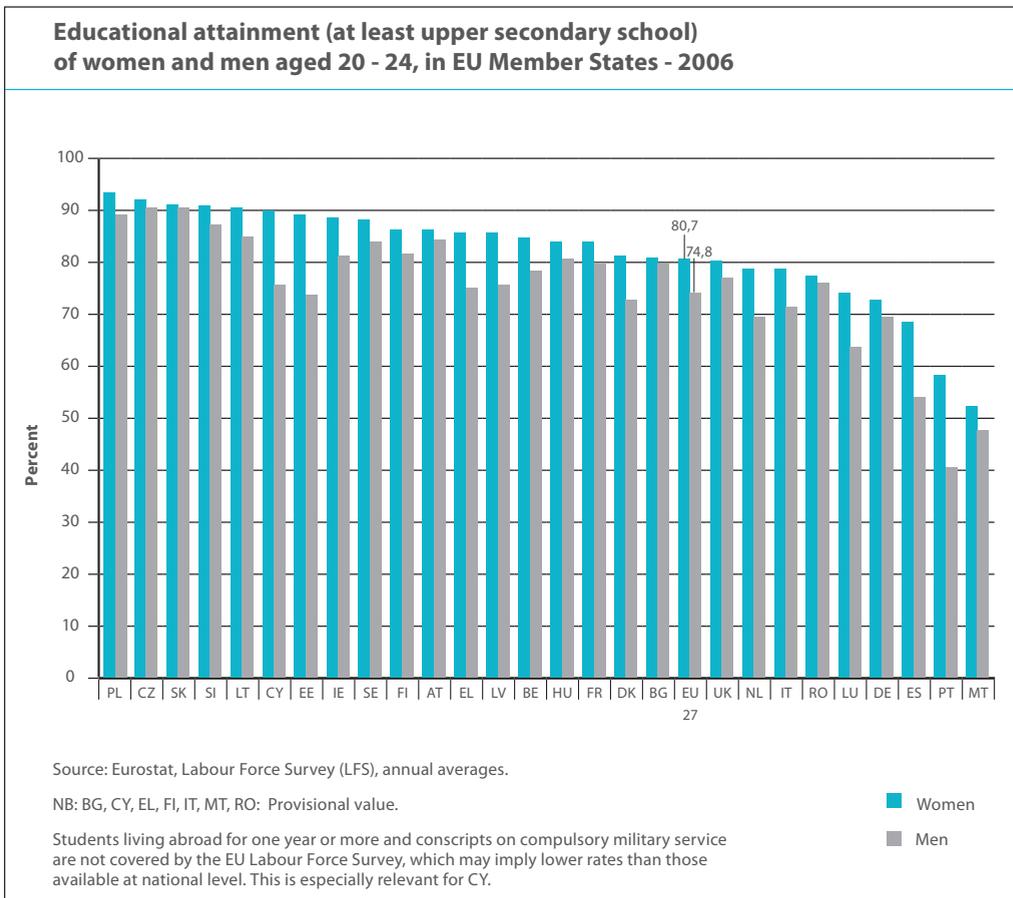


Figure 6. Educational attainment (at least upper secondary school) of women and men aged 20-24, in EU Member States - 2006

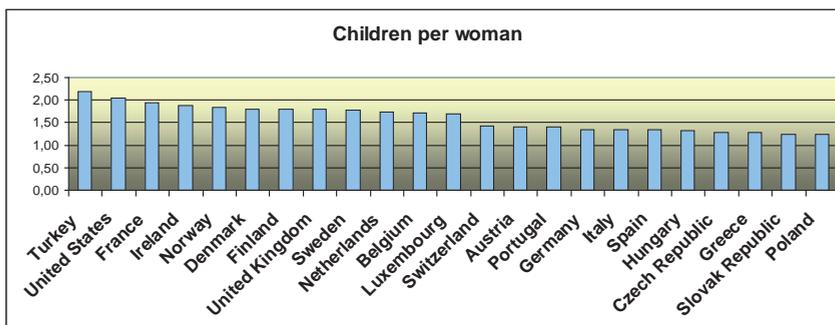


Figure 7. Fertility rates 2007
Source: Eurostat Population Statistics

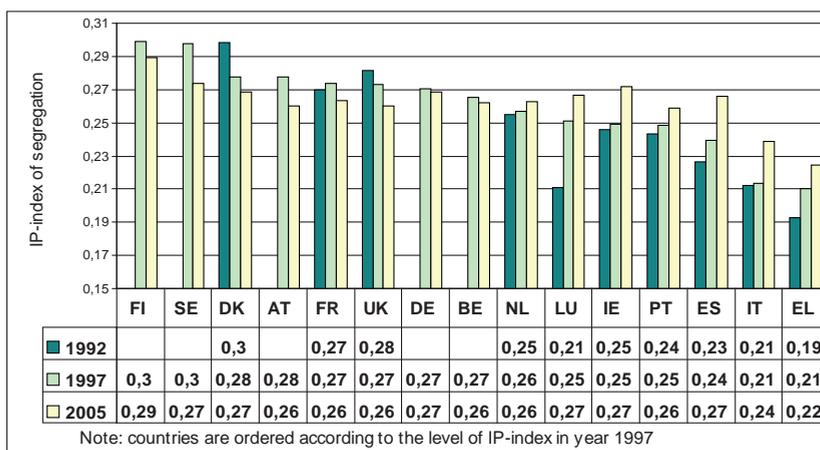


Figure 8.1. Trends in occupational segregation, by country (IP-INDEX)
Source: Bettio and Verashchagina based on Labour Force Survey (ISCO 3-digit, NACE 2-digit) (2008).

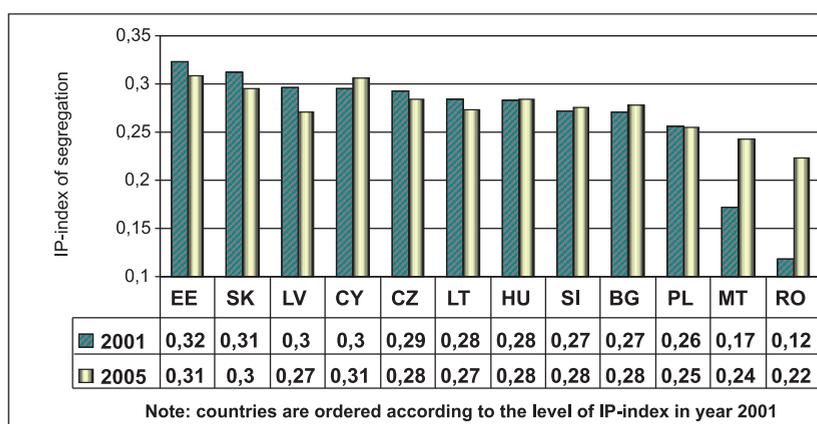


Figure 8.2. Trends in occupational segregation, by country (IP-INDEX)
Source: Bettio and Verashchagina based on Labour Force Survey (ISCO 3-digit, NACE 2-digit) (2008).

To be able to give this indicator its full heuristic value, however, we have to complement the analysis with other indicators. We have to look at the coverage rate of childcare and elderly care services, and to the fertility rates. Knowing that Mediterranean countries are among those that have lower coverage rates of care services and lower share of part-time jobs, we can understand why they also have lower rates of fertility and, at the same time, lower rates of female employment. This is something absolutely paradoxical. Actually, the low fertility is associated with low participation in the labour market. The countries with higher female employment rates are also those that have accomplished an increasing in their fertility patterns. This clearly runs against the common sense ideas about economic and reproductive female behaviour, that tend to see the association of economic activity with higher availability to reproductive work.

We may say, indeed, that the performances of all these indicators are intertwined. Some of them, however, condense up to a certain degree the situation in a more comprehensive way. That is clearly the case of the differential between men's and women's remunerations. In that gap we perceive reflections of a vision of the overall society and of the qualities of human beings. It's a vision that endorses the differences between males and females, the stereotyping of occupations and the horizontal and vertical segregation of the labour markets, as well as the male breadwinner model as reference for running family life.

That is why the reduction of the pay gap between men and women and the promotion of the work-life balance for both sexes have been taken up as the main challenges to be addressed by gender equality policy of European Union. Most of the recommendations put forward to the Member-States by European Commission focus on: 1. the growth of care services, especially for children, having in view the Barcelona targets of a 33% coverage rate of children under 3 years, and 90% of children between 3 years old and the mandatory school age; 2. the diminishing of the pay gap, through the campaign "More and Better Jobs for Women".

In particular, in a Communication adopted on 18 July 2007 (COM, 2007: 424), the Commission demonstrated its full commitment to tackling the pay gap between women and men. The idea is, and I'm still quoting, to improve the capacity to analyse the phenomenon, which remains complex and poorly understood, so as to develop targeted approaches and identify possible improvements to the existing legislative framework. Concerted action, especially in the context of the new cycle of the European Strategy for Growth and Jobs and common principles of flexicurity (COM, 2007: 359), will also be necessary in order to close the gaps which remain on the labour market.

As acknowledged in the 2008 report, however, "it would appear that the substantial efforts made in connection with the European Strategy for Growth and Jobs with a view to creating more and better jobs for women have proved more successful in terms of quantity than quality." As a matter of fact, we have to recognize that the primary aim pursued by European employment policies was to bring more people to labour market, envisaging the sustainability of social protection systems. In fact, the priority has been given to the creation of employments, mainly in the private sector, since the political tendency doesn't favour the growth of employment in the public sector. To bring women into the labour force, in order to get more contributors for the social security systems and to reduce passive beneficiaries, implied the creation of services supporting family life, which by its turn were occupied by women. These developments, without adequate policies of reconciliation of professional and family life in Mediterranean European countries, ended up in the growing of female employment, especially in low-paid jobs, and in low fertility rates.

Anyway, all over the Europe, trends are to some extent contradictory. We can't read them linearly as progressive. The 2008 report on equality, by EC, acknowledges the fact that "the pay gap has remained steady at 15% since 2003, and has narrowed by only one percentage point since 2000. Sectoral and occupational segregation by gender is not diminishing, and is even increasing in certain countries, as we have already remarked. The presence of female managers in companies has stayed at 33%, and the number of female politicians is rising only very slowly (only 23% of national Member of Parliaments and 33% of Members of European Parliament are women).

Furthermore, gaps between women and men may persist in all other aspects of work quality, e.g. reconciling professional and private life, working arrangements which do not fully exploit people's skills and in the field of health and safety at work

2. Employment and gender equality policies

In this second section of my talk, I'll focus on what's going on in the field of gender equality policies.

The official discourse tells us that the Roadmap for Equality between Women and Men (EC 2006), launched by European Commission in 2006, brought an important stimulus and substantial progress has been made in terms of gender mainstreaming in EU policies.

A closer analysis of the gender equality mainstreaming policies, however, leads us to more cautious conclusions. According to the European Commission (EC 1996), gender mainstreaming "involves not restricting efforts to promote equality to the implementation of specific measures to help women, but mobilising all general policies and measures specifically for the purpose of achieving equality by actively and openly taking into account at the planning stage their possible effects on the respective situation of men and women (gender perspective). This means systematically examining measures and policies and taking into account such possible effects when defining and implementing them".

A recent study, from which I quote or follow closely, on the mainstreaming of gender equality in employment policies of 30 countries, concluded that:

- There are large differences in the organisation and implementation of gender mainstreaming and gender equality. Though most countries have developed initiatives regarding gender mainstreaming, the focus seems rather narrow and patchy. Perhaps with the exception of the Nordic countries, a systematic and comprehensive approach is generally lacking and actual implementation is often problematic. Moreover, attention for gender mainstreaming may be sensitive for political changes, resulting in lack of consistency.
- The visibility of gender and the attention paid both to gender equality policies and gender mainstreaming in the national reports has declined, after the disappearance of the specific gender guidelines from the European Employment Strategy guidelines.
- In quite a number of countries, active labour market policies have not been developed with any explicit gender perspective or reference to gender equality and mainstreaming. This conclusion may not be problematic if gender inequality is rather modest, as it is in Finland, for instance. This is, however, a rather exceptional case as in most of the 30 countries studied register gender inequalities.
- Since 1999 that the steady closing of the gender pay gap has been part of the European Employment Strategy. Countries may implement (additional) legislation, favouring availability and dissemination of information, and initiatives with respect to job evaluation, or target the reducing of horizontal as well vertical segregation. Moreover, they can implement 'general' wage policies aiming at reducing wage inequality and improving the remuneration of low-paid and/or female-dominated jobs. In most countries, however, the gender pay gap has a rather low profile both in the public debate and in the policy agenda. The emphasis on deregulation and voluntary action by employers seems in some countries to restrict national policy options. One of the main problems appears to be that there is no real owner of the problem, as nobody feels responsible for the gender pay gap. Organising political support for closing the gap seems to be an important challenge for the near future.
- The assessment of reconciliation policies in 30 European countries indicates that although reconciliation is high on the policy agenda in quite a number of countries, actual policies remain

rather limited. The majority of countries are far from reaching the Barcelona target for children aged below 3. In addition, there seems to be no uniform trend with regard to childcare facilities. Also policies with regard to parental leave seem rather diverse. Depending on the different starting points, some countries report a lengthening of the leave facilities, others a shortening, an increase in the flexibility or a change in entitlements. Practically all countries report an uneven involvement of men.

In face of what seems to be a cadre of low effectiveness of policies, and underdeveloped strategy of mainstreaming, we have to search for another kind of reasons that can ground the tracked changes in course. Barbara Ehrenreich argues that the transformations, that gender relations are going through, are not only a result from women's claim for emancipation, but also the failure of the ethics of the "male family provider". That is, men's revolt against the expectations that they should share their high incomes with women and children through the system of "family wage": "men still have the incentives to work...but not necessarily to work for others" (Ehrenreich, 1983: 12). Arlie Hochschild (1997: 44) also characterizes transformation as a complex increasingly complex between what men and women feel about having a family and their personal needs of getting satisfaction from working outside home, exercising a variety of capacities and skills and diversifying their social networks.

Ironically, countries such as the Mediterranean European countries, with more traditional family structures and labour markets considered highly inflexible seem to be penalizing family life as much as or more than countries with highly flexible labour markets. Rigid labour markets severely reduce fertility rates and, indeed, flexibility needs family support – we have to ask who will take care of family when one has longer working schedules or unsocial working hours.

The problem is that within the framework of reconciliation of professional and family life, talking about care hides the sometimes hard work that is necessary to respond to personal needs of several members of households. The terminology we use obscures the fact that family, heterosexual or not, means work, which women have been assuring almost by themselves, beyond a just about merely rhetoric men's help that never reaches the point of real co-responsibility.

Within the scope of an assumed individualistic culture, Nordic countries understood that beforehand of Southern ones and implemented policies adequate to answer individual care needs. That's their advantage.

Flexibility needs then a public family structure that supports the desires of both men and women to forge identities that include working both outside and inside the households. Households, in the flexible work system, will be each time more "the central focus of productive and reproductive activities." (... Moreover) "flexible knowledge-based work system has its linchpin in the integration of households into learning networks" (Carnoy, 2002: 140). To achieve this is, with no doubt, the main challenge faced by gender equality policies in the Mediterranean basin.

3. Flexicurity

Talking about flexible knowledge-based productive systems, I would like, at the end of this talk, to add a final remark on Flexicurity.

Gender issues are rarely considered explicitly in discussions about this new and hardly definable buzzword in the lexicon of employment policies. There are, by now, many definitions of what flexicurity is all about. Finally, last year, however, the European Council has agreed the '8 Common Principles of Flexicurity', and the linkage with the Lisbon Process of the European Employment Strategy has been underlined in Principle n°1. In the second principle, we get the following definition of flexicurity:

2 - Flexicurity involves the deliberate combination of flexible and reliable contractual arrangements, comprehensive lifelong learning strategies, effective active labour market policies, and modern, adequate and sustainable social protection systems.

The general idea is that the major concern of flexicurity is on improving the labour market experience of weaker social groups and those outside the labour market, shifting from job security to employment security. It is rather evident that this focus has the potential to benefit women given that they are over-represented in these categories (Hansen 2007). Furthermore, in the sixth principle, it is stated that:

6 - Flexicurity should support gender equality, by promoting equal access to quality employment for women and men and offering measures to reconcile work, family and private life" (EC 2007).

This seminal statement contains the acknowledgement that the provision of unpaid care by women is the root of many of the inequalities they face on the labour market. However, it should go far away then this, and recognize the impact of the gendered effect. An example:

Improved job security in exchange for enhanced operational working time flexibility may be an acceptable trade-off for male employees but not for women with reconciliation responsibilities.

As Marie Jepsen (2005) notes, there are specific problems of accessing to independent income in case one is confronted with reduced working hours, segregation, and low pay. One impact of women's greater responsibility for reconciliation is that women make more adjustments and transitions between paid and unpaid work. As Smith and Fagan (2008) state, women's greater propensity to be in flexible jobs, to be responsible for the reconciliation needs of their household and to make employment transitions create gender differences in access to the security elements of the Flexicurity Nexus. Flexible working hours, career breaks and labour market mobility related to flexible contracts that are particularly sensitive to the gender equality issues.

We need:

- structures to support childcare and employability;
- income replacement to contribute for periods of childcare;
- individual empowerment and coordinated bargaining;
- coordination between transfers and labour market income.

As a framework for analysing and developing policies in this area the Expert Group on Flexicurity (Wilthagen & Tros, 2004; EC 2007) identify four areas where Flexicurity policies operate - Flexible and secure contracts, Active Labour Market Policies, Life Long Learning and Modern Social Security Systems. These four component policies provide a useful clarification of the types of policies that can address flexicurity concerns.

Many fear that the flexicurity model might be reduced to its flexibility dimension, being the security neglected. Most of Mediterranean countries, having designed their labour law in the seventies, thirty years ago, during pro-socialist periods, are said to have very rigid labour markets, which diminishes its competitiveness, because dismissals are difficult. The challenge here is to design policies paying attention to the particular situation of women and men in each of the components of flexicurity. We must avoid that the growth of female employment be originated to a large extent by the care services, or personal services in general, which are in general low-pay jobs. This trend would magnify many of the existent inequalities between men and women and reinforce labour market segregation.

All in all, every new employment policy should be evaluated *ex ante* to clarify its potential to reduce gender inequality or, on the contrary, the extent to which it risks reinforcing them. This is the essence of gender equality mainstreaming strategy, which the majority of Mediterranean

European Countries' governments declare to pursue but none applies in a systematic and effective way.

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