



"Mind the gap – women are underpaid all over Europe"

[03/03/08] **Equal pay for equal work is a fundamental principle of justice. This is one of the core standards of the International Labour Office (ILO) and a central provision in the agreed treaties on economic and social rights, including the European Social Charter. However, surveys demonstrate that salaries of women continue to be considerably lower than those of men and that the trend towards closing the gap is slow. This is a symptom of structural injustice that should be tackled much more forcefully by responsible politicians than has been the case so far.**

Last year the European Commission presented a report showing that women in EU countries earned on average 15 % less than men - compared to 17 % ten years earlier. In some countries the gap was even wider, for instance in Cyprus, Slovakia, Estonia, Germany and the United Kingdom.⁽¹⁾

There is less statistical data available for other parts of Europe but it seems clear that the pattern there is more or less the same.

These are facts which have to be analysed. There are still cases of blatant injustice in the sense that women are less paid than men in identical jobs. Such gaps are often "disguised" through different job titles or job classifications while the actual work is the same – this should be seen as nothing but false cosmetics.

A major factor is that large job sectors dominated by women are less paid than typically "male professions". Though some of these stereotypical dividing lines are now being penetrated – not least through advances in the education system – there is still a need to reassess the inherent importance of some professions, for example, in the health, child care and education sectors. The skills, competencies and responsibilities required for these jobs must be fully recognized.

Other forms of indirect or hidden discrimination have crept into personnel policies in too many work places: gender biases in the methods of job evaluation as well as in the grading and remuneration systems.

The well-known phenomenon of the "glass ceiling" is based on outdated attitudes. Though there has been an important break-through in some countries, women continue to be grossly under-represented in higher level positions. It is still relatively rare that women are welcomed in management jobs. This is not only unfair but also a tremendous waste - great competence is lost today, not least in the private sector.

The other side of that coin is the fact that men in general still take a limited responsibility for household obligations and the support of their children. One EU report showed that while men on average spent seven hours a week for such unpaid work, women invested much more time in this area: 35 hours by those who worked part-time and 24 hours by those with full-time employment.

Another negative tendency, though often more difficult to identify, is that women are denied promotion or employment because male managers or employers fear that they may become pregnant or have to stay at home sometimes with sick children. Such discrimination should just not be accepted.

A reflection of the gender difference regarding the care of children is that many more women work part-time than men. This in turn affects careers and wage levels. The availability of day care services for children is therefore also important for the development towards gender equity on the labour market.

It must be possible to combine paid work and child care – for both women and men.

A real challenge is to ensure that women who take leave for child-bearing are not disadvantaged in their professional future. Provisions for paternity leave, where existing, have had positive effects in encouraging parents to share responsibility for the upbringing of children. These should be extended. In many countries paternity leave for fathers is restricted to two weeks.

In other words, the gender pay gap is both an injustice in itself and a symptom of other injustices towards women. As these phenomena of discrimination to such a large extent rest on deep-rooted attitudes, good laws are not sufficient. There is a need for a comprehensive, political approach based on clear signals from the executive powers.

The authorities in their role as employers must set an impeccable example. They must implement fully the principle of equal pay for work of equal value within the government administration at all levels; tackle the problem of the "glass ceiling" for females; and promote reforms in the labour market with a child-care friendly profile.

Private employers and their collective bargaining partners should be called upon to develop gender-neutral salary scales and set up procedures to detect gender discrimination in pay scales.

Tackling the gender pay gap problem is urgent for the whole society – for women, men and children.

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Note

► 1. See COM (2007) 424 final. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: "Tackling the pay gap between women and men".

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