Empowering women in the EU and beyond: Labour market

Equal access to the labour market is recognised as a cornerstone of women's economic independence and participation in public life. The EU and its Member States have obligations to integrate those excluded from the labour market (Article 151 TFEU), advance gender equality in employment (Article 153 TFEU; Directive 2006/54/EC), and ensure equal pay for work of equal value (Article 157 TFEU). All EU Member States have ratified the 1979 UN Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women, which upholds women's rights to work, equal opportunities and social benefits (Article 11).

Over the past two decades, there has been a continuous upward trend in women's employment rate, showing that women now make up an increasing proportion of the total workforce across the EU. Despite the economic crisis, the gender gap in labour market participation is narrowing, although analysis suggests that this is not so much because women's situation has improved as because men's has become comparatively worse. Concerning the EU target of raising the employment rate of 20-64 year-olds to at least 75 % for both women and men by 2020, there are significant variations between Member States. Despite women's rising educational attainment, men's employment rate remains higher across the EU-28. The transition from school to work is a defining moment, with women overrepresented amongst youth not in training or employment ('NEETs'). Parenthood also marks a significant change in many women's career life, ranging from total withdrawal to a shift into 'non-standard' employment (such as part-time work).

This gendered pattern of career interruptions or non-standard employment may be voluntarily chosen, but it can also reflect the specific barriers women face in balancing paid work and unpaid care and household labour, for which they remain disproportionately responsible. Discontinuous employment, together with gender segregation of the labour market, contributes to women's lower earnings and the persistence of a gender pay gap, with implications into old age. Social policies, including paid parental leave for men and women, provision of accessible, high quality childcare and work-life balance measures, can have a positive influence on women's prospects and experience of work.

This briefing is part of a series 'Empowering women in the EU and beyond'. The others cover education and reproductive health, leadership and conflict resolution and economic and financial power.
Employed women (20 - 64)

By education (in million persons)

- Females: 46, 37, 98
- Males: 97, 35, 114

By economic activities (% of 20 - 64 employed population)

- Wholesale and retail trade: 15%
- Scientific activities: 10%
- Public administration: 12%
- Education: 19%
- Manufacturing: 15%
- Human health: 21%
- Others: 21%

Women in part time employment (20 - 64)

- Females: 4.5, 4.7, 5.9
- Males: 6.1, 6.6, 7.3

Reason for working part time

- Percentage of total employment

- Looking after children or elderly: 21%
- Own illness or disability: 16%
- In education or training: 15%
- Other family or personal responsibilities: 9%
- Could not find full-time job: 8%
- Men usually work part-time because they cannot find a full-time job (42.5%), while women do so primarily because of child-care (28%).

Women with children (15 - 64)

- Females: 2.0, 1.4, 1.7
- Males: 2.6, 3.5, 5.4

Gender pay gap

- Percentage of active population

- Males: 6.3, 9.4, 13.7
- Females: 4.0, 9.3, 14.2

For every € 100 men earn, women earn € 83

Some 2 million young EU women (aged 15-24) are unemployed. This is 19.5% of the EU's active population, with differences between Member States ranging from 6.5% to 55%.

Overall, there are 12.3% female NEETs among the EU population aged 15-24 years; this figure ranges from 21.4% to 4.7% among the Member States. Even though at EU level the percentage of female NEETs is slightly higher than that for male ones, this is not the case in all Member States: in Romania, there are far more female NEETs (a 6.4 percentage points difference), while in Croatia it is the opposite (5.2 percentage points more men than women).

Women aged 25-64, employed as scientists and engineers

Within the EU, there are 15.6 million 25-64 year-old persons who are employed as scientists and engineers. Taken as a percentage of the active population, this constitutes 6.3% for women and 8% for men.

In ten Member States, the employment rate for scientists and engineers among women is higher than among men. Conversely, Finland has far more men (14.9%) than women (6.5%) working in these domains.

Data in this paper refers to EU28 and year 2015, unless otherwise stated.
Long-term trends in the EU

Social and cultural attitudes towards the involvement of women – particularly mothers – in paid employment, and towards men's participation in childcare and domestic work, vary across the EU and are likely to be a factor in determining national-level policy. In addition, the gender implications of emerging employment trends will need careful consideration in the coming years. One such implication has to do with non-standard employment – a phenomenon that is expected to grow as production methods become increasingly flexible – examples of which are on-call work (including ‘zero-hours contracts’), temporary agency work and work in the on-demand or ‘gig’ economy. Currently, compared to other population groups, women, young people and migrants are more likely to be working under non-standard arrangements. Although such arrangements allow more workers to integrate into or return to the labour market, they also pose challenges due to insecurity, economic instability and lower entitlements, including maternity benefits. Another challenge will be to ensure that EU women are able to take full advantage of higher paid and higher quality jobs in expanding sectors such as science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM), by encouraging their training and recruitment and preventing them from dropping out over their careers.

Global outlook

In September 2015, during one of its historic summits in New York, the United Nations adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Resolution A/RES/70/1). The 2030 Agenda is binding for all UN member states; its SDG No 8 aims to promote inclusive economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all. According to the UN Secretary-General’s report Progress towards the SDGs, unemployment affects the world’s population differently according to gender and age. Women and youth (aged 15 to 24) are more likely to be unemployed than men and adults aged 25 and above. Moreover, women and girls are more likely to engage in unpaid work, such as care giving, cooking and cleaning. On average, women report spending 19% of their daily time on unpaid activities, while men report spending no more than 8%. Women’s engagement in unpaid and domestic work, combined with their paid work, implies higher work burdens and sacrifices in terms of time for self-care, learning and studying.

European Parliament position

On 13 March 2017, the European Parliament will be debating a motion for a resolution on equality between women and men in the European Union in 2014-2015, based on an own-initiative report from its Committee on Women’s Rights and Gender Equality (FEMM). The report calls for EU and national action and investment to support women’s employment in good quality jobs, including urgent steps to ensure equal pay and measures on Women’s Rights and Gender Equality (FEMM). The report calls for EU and national action and investment to support women and men in the European Union in 2014-2015, based on an own-initiative European Parliament position.