

## The Return of Women to the Labour Market

Céline Simonin

Confederation of Family Organisations in the European Union (COFACE)

First of all, COFACE would like to thank the organisers of the peer-review for inviting COFACE to participate as a stakeholder in this peer-review. It is the very first time that family organisations are consulted in such a way.

### I. Relevance of the policy to other countries in the EU

COFACE first would like to welcome the recent shift of Germany's family policy towards a model meeting the three parts of a family policy triangle, with a gender equality perspective: more time, a supportive services infrastructure and income support. A similar family policy model should be established in all EU Member States. The *Perspective Wiedereinstieg* Action Programme which is under scrutiny reflects this shift of paradigm, even though some points would need to be strengthened.

#### 1. Problems addressed

COFACE believes that the *Perspective Wiedereinstieg* Action Programme has some strong relevance for other countries in the EU, in view of its three short-range objectives:

- Make it easier for women to return to work after a family-related employment break;
- Make employers more aware of the potential benefits to them of women returning to work;
- Persuade men to do more to support their partners when they return to the labour market.

Indeed, in most Member States, women face difficulties to return to work after a family-related employment break, and as a result, as data show, women in family formation years and in the aftermath have, in general, lower employment rates than men. In the EU more than 6 million women in the 25 to 49 age-range say they are forced into not working, or can only work part-time, because of their family responsibilities<sup>1</sup>.

These difficulties, though they may vary in importance depending on the country concerned, are the same in almost all countries: difficulties to reintegrate a career path after an employment break (issues such as job search, training, gender equality in employment, including employers' attitude, etc.), and difficulties to reconcile work life and family life (issues such as availability and cost of quality child care, organisation of public times, role of men in the family, etc.).

The three objectives mentioned above cover many of these issues. Such objectives should be endorsed by all Member States. In particular, the COFACE project 'Men and Families' showed

---

<sup>1</sup> Eurostat, Labour Force Survey 2006

how important it is in the EU to engineer equality between men and women in the family sphere through greater involvement of men in order to achieve gender equality (and reciprocally).<sup>2</sup>

COFACE also strongly agrees with the medium and long-term objectives of the *Perspective Wiedereinstieg* Action Programme, i.e. changing role models, ensuring financial security for women and stabilisation of family income, and tackling the gender pay gap.

## 2. Strong points of the good practice

The *Perspective Wiedereinstieg* Action Programme, as described in the Host Country Paper, seems to address in a strategic way the issue of reintegration of women into the labour market as such, i.e. in terms of advisory and support services and training. In particular the bridge between the national and local levels is very important.

The fact that funding measures include integrated childcare provision is key. Women in training, looking for a job or in the process of starting their own business, need to be able to free some time to carry out all these activities even if for the time being they remain the primary carer of their children. This means that childcare services must not be restricted to children whose parents are already in employment. This also means that childcare services must be available on a different basis than a permanent basis for these parents who do not wish/need to entrust their children to care services on a full-time basis.

The integration of local alliances for families is another very positive feature. Such local alliances should be created and promoted in other EU Member States.

## 3. Points to be strengthened

The Host Country Paper does not give much indication on the measures implemented to persuade men to do more to support their partners when they return to the labour market (except for public relations work). The measures to make employers more aware of the potential benefits to them of women returning to work (visit of enterprises, commitments of associations of enterprises) are interesting but could be more diversified.

A bigger emphasis should be put on these two aspects, which are key to ensure a long-term reintegration of women in the labour market after a family-related employment break. The COFACE recommendations stemming from the above mentioned project 'Men and Families' should inspire the design of the programmes. These recommendations advocate a number of measures which could easily fit in a *Perspective Wiedereinstieg*-like Action Programme, for instance:

- A stricter respect of gender equality in employment through measures like the establishment of quality certification to reward good practices at company-level;
- Company information campaigns to make employers and male and female workers aware of the importance of the role of men in the family and workers' right (in some countries) to request flexible working hours; public information campaigns putting across the same message;

---

<sup>2</sup> COFACE project 'Men and Families': <http://www.coface-eu.org/en/basic424.html>

- Promotion of gender balance in pre-school and school courses, including encouraging boys to enter care and education professions the same way girls are encouraged to enter innovative, employment growth industries;
- Training for health workers and educators to deal with all issues concerning children equally with the father or mother;
- Set up of local advisory or training services to help men understand the value of their being at home and with their children, and the need to share with their wives or partners the domestic and family tasks that are essential to their well-being and self-fulfilment;
- Set up of time coordination services to align the different public times.

The measures aimed at employers must not only be workable with large companies but also with small and medium enterprises.

It is not clear also which role is assigned to the use of ICT in order to make it easier for women to return to work after a family-related employment break. Distance learning and online services to support job seekers are key instruments to enable women in the process of returning to work to deal also with their family responsibilities. This means in the first place that these women must be able to access online services (development of public Internet access points, affordable access to the Internet at home, and at home IT training).

Finally, one must not forget that men also face difficulties to return to employment after a family-related employment break. Therefore any *Perspective Wiedereinstieg*-like Action Programme must not only look at the reintegration of women into the labour market but also at the reintegration of men. If men know that they will receive support after a family-related employment break, they will be more likely to use their right to parental leave.

## II. Potential transferability of the policy to other EU countries

COFACE does not foresee any major obstacles to the transferability of the *Perspective Wiedereinstieg* Action Programme in other EU countries.

The main obstacles are likely to be funding obstacles. This is why such programmes should benefit from ESF-funding, as is the case for the *Perspective Wiedereinstieg* Action Programme.

Other obstacles are likely to be gender stereotypes, which are more or less strong depending on the countries. This is why a bigger emphasis should be put on measures aiming at changing the public, men's and employer's mindset (see above 'Points to be strengthened'). Cultural changes are a lengthy process and can only be managed if supporting policies are implemented simultaneously.

## III. Important questions raised and debated in family organisations

All the questions raised by the German programme are essential for family organisations, in relation with the key issue of reconciliation of work life and family life. As already mentioned, COFACE and its member organisations have dedicated a specific project 'Men and Families' which links very closely to the theme of the peer-review.

One issue debated is children's well-being. The Lisbon objective regarding women's employment should not be made to the detriment of the child's best interest, which means in particular that families should have access to affordable and quality child care services, meeting and going beyond the Barcelona objectives. Measures must comprise childcare provision for children aged 0-6, but also childcare for children in school age (out-of-school childcare provision, sick children sitter services).

Another issue debated is care for elderly and other dependent persons. Efforts must not only be made to support women's return to work, but also to prevent women's dropping their careers to take care of an elderly relative. This means that a favourable environment must be created to enable older workers to continue working while providing care to an older person (filial leave, flexible working time arrangements, long-term care services, etc.). Information campaigns should prevent stigmatisation of such workers by their employers. Men's awareness should be raised not only in relation to their fatherly roles but also in relation to their family responsibilities towards dependent relatives.

COFACE is also currently looking at the link between poverty and social exclusion and the issue of work-life balance. This link is very tangible (unemployment and part-time work mean less income, reduced social security rights and pension rights) and traditional reconciliation instruments such as leaves, flexible working time arrangements and childcare services have a key role to play. Quality employment and decent wages are key first and foremost. Remuneration and social security rights during leave must be improved. Part-time working must be upgraded (remuneration, social security rights, desegregation of the labour market). Quality care services must be made affordable to all families (making work pay) and discrimination with regard to access to services must be tackled. COFACE does not advocate specific measures for lone parent families, but rather adequate support for families with low income, whether made of a lone parent or two parents.

#### **IV. Potential contribution to National Strategy Reports on SP/SI**

As outlined above, there is a clear link between difficulties to achieve work-life balance and poverty and social exclusion. Policies aiming at reconciling work life and family life should be integrated in all National Action Plans on Social Inclusion (NAPs-Inclusion). This includes action programmes such as the German *Perspective Wiedereinstieg* Action Programme.

In particular, a link should be made with national active inclusion strategies. Women seeking to return to work after a family-related employment break fall within the categories of people excluded from the labour market. In this respect the German action programme falls within the second and third pillars of active inclusion (i.e. inclusive labour markets and access to quality services). Besides, an active inclusion approach of the issue of women's return to the labour market offers the right mix between an active employment policy and the degree of social inclusion policy necessary to help the target group overcoming specific obstacles.

## V. Key issues and main questions proposed for debate at the review meeting

- What is done by Member States to make employers more aware of the potential benefits to them of women returning to work?
- What is done by Member States to trigger men's greater involvement in family roles (while respecting the private sphere)?
- How do Member States intend to integrate the issue of women's and men's return to the labour market after a family-related employment break into their national active inclusion strategies?
- How do Member States intend to tackle the growing pressure on working family carers in the context of the ageing population?