



Peer Review in Social Protection and Social Inclusion and Assessment in Social Inclusion

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Germany 2008

# Return of women to the labour market

Short Report



On behalf of the  
**European Commission**  
DG Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities



The Peer Review took place in Nuremberg, Germany on 17-18 November 2008, hosted by the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ) with the support of the Federal Employment Agency (FEA). Beside the host country, seven peer countries took part: Cyprus, Denmark, Italy, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands and Poland. There were contributions from three stakeholders: EUROCHILD, the Confederation of Family Organisation in the European Union (COFACE), and the Association of German Female Entrepreneurs. The 'thematic expert' and a representative of the European Commission's DG for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities both contributed their expertise.

## **1. The policy under review**

*Background:* While women's employment in Germany has increased from 45% in 1950 to 62.2% in 2006, this still falls below the male employment rate of 72.8%, and there is a large discrepancy between the numbers of working men and women and the volume of work they do. Women's share of the *volume* of employment has indeed declined, and now stands at 75% of that of men.

This occurs as nearly 70% of women aged 18-65 years take a break from their working life to have children, and Germany's labour force participation rate for mothers with two or more children stands at 56%, below the OECD average of 60%. Full-time employment for mothers dropped considerably between 1976 and 2004, with many opting for part-time work or marginal employment, particularly among the lower-skilled and lower-paid.

Role assignments do not only affect women and men, they also influence the behaviour of the employers assuming that men will be more available for work than women.

Family-related employment breaks and the associated role assignments have resulted in a gender pay gap of 23%. In addition, women when retirement comes are receiving smaller pensions than their male counterparts.

### **Perspektive Wiedereinstieg Action Programme**

Perspektive Wiedereinstieg Action Programme is designed to ease mothers' return to the labour market by:

- changing the traditional stereotypes;
- encouraging men to support their wives and partners in their return to work; and
- heightening employers' awareness of the benefits of employing skilled personnel.

The PW Action Programme's long term aim is to strengthen women's financial and social security, stabilise the family income and narrow the gender pay gap.

It emphasises that returning to work is a *process*, not a single step, and part of achieving a sound work/life balance. It takes time for the rest of the family to adjust their views about the mother's responsibilities, and employers must adjust their expectations on how employees fit into the company work schedule.

In the context of this programme different strands of already existing measures were gathered into a more holistic approach.

The Action Programme has four main elements:

- **Programme I – Vocational Reintegration – a European Social Fund-based Programme.** Up to ten projects will be selected to: create regional networks, set up contacts with the target groups of women, boost connections with employment agencies, advisory services, enterprises, and offer coaching, further education and other training measures. It is supported by ESF funds, based on a cooperation agreement between the BMFSFJ and the FEA.
- **Online portal.** This pilot portal is being launched in January 2009 for a three year period. Women can go online to discover what is available, get a ‘map’ of advisory services, ‘portraits’ of women who have successfully returned to work and other news. It is based on a cooperation agreement between the BMFSFJ and the FEA.
- **Local level projects.** These integrate women’s concerns into local events like ‘information days’ and ‘information fairs’, where workshops, lectures, etc. are held to empower women and inform them about topics such as the work-life balance. The ESF-programme ‘Local Social Capital’ (LOS) will include promotion of women returning to work after a family-related employment break as well. In addition, the issue will be integrated into ‘local initiatives for families’ and ‘multigeneration homes’ – two further projects of the family-ministry.
- **Work with employers.** This work consists of visiting companies to heighten their awareness about women returnees, and show-casing those which have successfully implemented measures for more ‘family-friendly’ employment conditions. There will be measures to persuade business associations to a joint statement to encourage women to return to work.

## 2. Key lessons and aspects of transferability

The peer reviewers discussed the main lessons from the German experience, and identified aspects that could be transferred to other countries.

### Return to work a process

- Participants agreed with the ‘lifecycle approach’ that emphasises that a mother’s return to the labour market is a *process* that needs support from the spouse, other family members and from employers.
- It was agreed that women who return to the labour market have different profiles, so every woman needs a tailor-made solution, including training and upgrading opportunities, flexible working arrangements, availability of quality child care and care for the elderly, as well as other social elements.

### Working with other actors

- Ensure that **men** are included in these gender programmes, so that women do not carry the 'double burden' of employment and household duties.
- Work with **employers** to persuade them to provide more flexible working – such as flexible working hours or teleworking.

### Employment policies

- Participants agreed on the importance of flexible working hours, discussing the Dutch approach of a four-day week for all working family members. It was felt that a side-effect of this will be that the male breadwinner takes up more caring responsibilities.
- Try to make labour markets more flexible in terms of working hours, home-working, etc, in order to help women and men reconcile work and personal life regardless of the type of the work contract. Denmark stressed that their approach is that the workforce of women is needed for the economy and the labour market. The women should be seen as the actors, not as victims to be protected.
- Too many women's jobs are 'precarious' or marginalised, so women should be helped to find 'secure jobs' ("make work pay")

### Fighting poverty and employing lower-skilled women

A number of peer-review countries stressed that programmes to encourage women back to work should be placed in a wider context – as a means of fighting female – and family – poverty. Yet, having a job does not any more guarantee that households are not at-risk of poverty (in-work poverty)

- Any action programme should not just be aimed at well-educated women, but should also target lower-skilled women, to help fight poverty. For example, women in Germany are the main breadwinners in 20% of multi-person households, so getting them back to work helps them avoid the poverty trap.
- Overcome the digital divide – as many marginalised women do not have computer skills, there should be training on how to use and access the Internet so they can take advantage of it and benefit from relevant Internet Portals (for example, the online portal of the German action programme). In this regard the visit to PS-Akademie Nuremberg was extremely innovative and could continue to focus on women with low or no IT skills.

### Family care

- The lack of childcare can be one of the biggest barriers to women returning to work, so there needs to be universal care for children below school age, plus 'after school' provision for older children, in addition to involving men in a more meaningful way.
- Women and men also need access to flexible childcare when they are seeking work.
- The stakeholders emphasised that all childcare must be of the highest quality.
- Give support to women who have to take time off work/are not able to work because they have to care for elderly relatives and also involve men more.

**Financial measures**

- Ensure that the tax-benefit system, services and gender equality policy are consistent so that women can be more economically independent, and men participate more in care duties.
- Ensure that the tax-benefit system dovetails into parental and maternity allowance provision.
- Ensure that tax benefit schemes do not act as a deterrent for lower paid workers returning to work. Participants stressed the issue of working poverty as an important element in this regard.

**Linking up with other policies and different levels of government**

- Promote a more holistic view of employment policies to increase women's participation by taking other aspects of life into account (life circle approach) - for example by making structures and services (e.g. transport) and amenities (e.g. shopping) more accessible to, and usable by, working parents.
- Encourage more coordination and cooperation between regional and local levels of government, and between different government departments.
- EU Member States need to develop an inclusive approach to labour market policies, building on the Commission's active inclusion approach.

Overall participants were very impressed by the German Programme, which they felt was innovative and an example of good governance as it brings together a variety of structures and stakeholders and ensures that policies at different government levels are properly coordinated.