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The Leveling out of Women's Economic Independence – One of the Vectors of Gender Non-Discrimination Policy in the European Union

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**THE LEVELING OUT OF WOMEN’S ECONOMIC
INDEPENDENCE – ONE OF THE VECTORS
OF GENDER NON-DISCRIMINATION POLICY
IN THE EUROPEAN UNION**

The more than fifty years of the European Union’s actions aimed at equality of women and men have certainly contributed to considerable improvement in the women’s situation. In the 1950s the EU’s interest in equal treatment of women and men was more motivated by fear of unfair competition than concerns about the disadvantageous situation of women in the labor market (Van Doorne-Huiskes 2003: 137). However, as early as mid-1970s the EU began to build legal and institutional foundations for implementation of the policy of gender equality in its Member States (Firlit-Fesnak 2005: 50; Wiktorska-Święcka 2009: 161). Unfortunately, in spite of the growing involvement of the Union in the issue of gender equality, in the ensuing decades we could still notice persisting disparities, especially as far as remuneration received by women and men, their access to professional training and career and women’s participation in decision-making processes (KOM 2008: 2). That is why the EU Member States have been obliged to eliminate inequality driven by the gender factor by ensuring better jobs for women, curbing segregation in the labor market and combating the phenomenon of feminization of poverty (KOM 2009 :8).

Full equality of women and men is deemed necessary for their full exercise of human rights. Also, it constitutes an instrument to enhance economic growth and social cohesion. According to a report by Women’s Rights and Gender Equality Committee (FEMM), the EU Member States must not promote programs that are based on an out-dated division of labor that ceased to reflect the reality after women had entered the labor market. Moreover, the Member States should foster women’s presence in the knowledge-intensive and innovation-based segments of

their labor markets. They should aim at balancing responsibilities of women and men in the public and private spheres as well as enhancing reconciliation between their personal and professional lives (FEMM 2010: 6).

The gender differences visible in the European labour market concern both professional segregation and salaries/wages. The division of labor between women (used to be relegated to housework) and men (who used to be busy working outside of their households) was known already in prehistoric societies. Even though throughout the human history both women and men have actively shaped their social and economic environment, their roles in the process differed (Klimowicz 2009: 86).

As a result, intellectual development and professional advancement are still viewed by society as exclusively male domain. Those women who invest in their education and move up their professional ladders are frequently seen as insufficiently feminine. For example Eugenia Mandal's research indicates that both women and men have wary attitudes toward so called women of success. Men are most often afraid that their female partners' professional success will prevent them from having a happy family life since in their opinion women should prioritize family in their lives. Also, many men stress that they do not like dominant women. Similarly, convictions typical of women, which are a product of their traditional upbringing, prove that they do not have enough courage to turn into entrepreneurial women (*kobiety przedsiębiorcze*). In their overwhelming majority, if the women have to make a choice, they typically choose sacrificing themselves for their family as a result of being under their immediate milieu's pressure. Women who occupy important positions more often than men describe their professional achievements in terms of an „accidental career” („kariera mimo woli”), stressing that they themselves did not aim at the high positions but rather their candidatures were promoted by someone else or the positions were just offered to them. Such views are still present in the social consciousness that make women feel that they break some social rules if they want to make a career, fight for prestigious positions, reach for power and desire high salaries (Fuszara 2005: 265).

The situation of women in the labor market is to a large degree dependent on men as members of their families, employers or loan contractors. In spite of the fact that both men and women feel a need to improve the balance between their professional and family lives, policies aiming at the reconciliation of those two spheres are focused on the

women's role of mothers. Meanwhile, social changes and relations between women and men necessitate the elimination of causes underlying the inequalities that have accumulated over the years. One of the instruments that are to contribute to this aim is the gender non-discrimination policy (EQUAL 2005: 7).

The first phenomenon that requires to be changed is the inequality of salaries/wages earned by women and men. Job income differentials between women and men (the average difference between the [gross] rates paid by the hour to, respectively, women-workers and men-workers calculated across all sectors of the economy) continue to oscillate around 17,5% on average (such is the average job income gender differential in the EU-27), which further translates into different incomes from pensions and into the feminization of poverty. Women are also more often than men affected by indirect discrimination, which increases unemployment rates for women and girls (FEMM 2010 :7).

The biggest job income differentials between women and men have been noticed in Estonia (30,9%), Czech Republic (26,2%), Austria (25,5%) as well as Cyprus, Lithuania, Slovakia, Germany, Great Britain and Greece, while the smallest ones – in Italy (4,9%), Slovenia (8,5%), Belgium and Romania (9%). In Poland the job income gender differential was calculated at 9,8% (Eurostat 2008).

Searching for the root causes behind the existing disparities between women and men, the job income indicator should be linked to other indicators depicting the labor market. In most of those countries where the overall indicator of women employment is low (Malta, Italy, Greece), the job income differentials between women and men are lower than the average. Big differences between salaries/wages earned by women and men are as a rule typical of labor markets with strong segregation along the gender lines or those where a considerable number of women work only part-time (Germany, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Austria, Sweden). Also, institutional mechanisms and systems to calculate salaries/wages can influence the job income disparities. However, it needs to be noticed that the equal pay indicator does not take into account individual features of employees, which partly explains the job income differentials.

Nonetheless, participation of women in the labor market is still lower than that of men, which might be explained by a number of factors. Firstly, women are associated with their basic role – that of a mother. Their decision to come back to the labor market is dependent on the available level of salary/wage, their education and the number of

children that a woman has given birth to. At this point some regularity needs to be emphasized. Namely, women with tertiary education are better adapted to the labor market demands, earn more and therefore are better motivated to try and enter the labor market again. By contrast, the more children a woman has given birth to, the more difficult it is for her to get a job.

According to the European statistics, being a parent of small children (under 12) means that women are more vulnerable to job redundancy and less likely to get a new job. The rate of employment for the category of women aged 25–49 who have children under 12 is 65,6% as compared to the rate of 77% for women not having any children. Meanwhile, the situation of men looks the reverse – the period in which they have children is for young fathers the best period in their careers. In the case of men aged 25–49 who do not have any children the employment indicator equals 81,8%, while for fathers – 90,32% (*Report... 2011: 22–23*).

Women in the social democratic welfare states (the Nordic countries) have the least difficulty in reconciling their professional careers with childcare since those countries have organized extended systems of social services to support parents who combine professional careers with child care (Matysiak, Słoczyński, Baranowska 2010: 138). What is more, those are the states dedicated to egalitarian treatment of the social roles performed by the genders.

Liberal welfare states are ranked second (such as Great Britain and the United States), where the social policy model is based on the least state interventionism, with support provided solely to the poorest and a minimum assistance for working parents who are then forced to buy childcare services on the market. At the same time the conflict between professional careers and childcare is softened in their case by flexible labor markets which do not hinder the processes of going in and out of employment.

The Central European states, such as France, Germany and Austria, should be classified as conservative welfare states where the state has for a long time supported the traditional division of labour between women and men. Their policies have resulted in an inadequate number of childcare establishments that are combined with state support for women who are not active in the labor market – for example in the form of tax reliefs.

Some researchers have distinguished an additional category of so called familial states where care for the weaker members of the house-

hold is required from other household members; where there are big barriers that block the entrants to the labor market and where the level of approval for women's professional careers is low. By the above listed criteria, Austria and Germany should be included in this category since in spite of their labor market reforms the share of women participating in their labor markets is still lower than in the Nordic states. Until lately, these two countries offered long but low-paid childcare leaves.

The situation looks the worst in Southern European states which are characterized by poor access to childcare establishments, a low level of social approval for professional employment of women and big barriers faced by entrants on the labor market. Taking into account data for Poland as presented in the report titled „Zatrudnienie w Polsce – praca w cyklu życia” [Employment in Poland – work in the life-cycle], the poor availability of childcare establishments has been identified as the main obstacle faced by the Polish women while continuing their professional employment after child-birth. According to data provided by the Central Statistical Office as of 2008, only 2,6% of the Polish children under 3 attended a small child care establishment as compared to Denmark where this indicator equals 64%, Sweden where it equals 48%, and Belgium and France – ca. 30%. As far as kindergarten care, in 2008 65% of children aged 3–6 attended a public kindergarten in Poland as compared to countries such as France, Denmark, Belgium and the Netherlands where this indicator surpasses 90%. These data evidence Poland's rather poor record in the discussed respect. In addition, in the case of families with small children (under 5), the rate of their mothers' employment is by 20% lower than the rate calculated for women aged 25–44 who do not have any children. At the same time, the rate of employment for fathers is much higher than in the group of childless men (Matysiak, Słoczyński, Baranowska 2010: 139).

Women are often thought to be individuals who by definition have fewer professional skills than men, which is caused by longer periods of being unemployed because of the necessity to take care of their parental and household duties. The longer absence of women in the labor market translates into their *sui generis* qualifications delay and contributes to their negative image in the employers' eyes (Gosk, Huszcza, Klaus 2006: 12). At the same time, regulations protecting women because of their special motherly role (including safeguarding their employment during their pregnancy period and a child-care leave) frequently discourage the employers from employing women and investing in their women-employees (Open Society Institute 2002: 32).

Another important problem that has an impact on gender inequality in the labor market is linked to the women's dominance in the traditionally feminine and less paid sectors, mainly in health care, education and public administration. Moreover, even within those sectors and within particular firms women's work is less appreciated and less paid. In addition, the care for children and other persons requiring care is still believed to be predominantly women's responsibility, which is why women who experience some difficulty in reconciling their professional and private lives are likely to opt for part-time employment.

According to the European Commission's data, the average rate of women's employment in the European Union, even though it is not equal to that calculated for men, rose by 7,1% over the last decade, reaching the level of 59,1% as of 2008. The actual rates differ, however, considerably, in the particular Member States, oscillating between nearly 40% and more than 70%. The trend to the positive changes has certainly regressed because of the current economic crisis. From May 2008 until September 2009, the rate of unemployment in the EU rose both for men (from 6,4% to 9,3%) and women (from 7,4% to 9%). Taking into account experiences produced by the previous crises, it is to be stressed that the risk of not finding a job is bigger in the case of women (KOM 2009: 4–5). Therefore, the European Commission noticed in its report a need to curb the negative consequences of the economic recession on the equal participation of women and men in the labor market. To this end, the policy-makers should base their proposed instruments on such labor market analyses that take into account the gender factor.

According to the Eurostat data for August 2010, the total rate of employment for citizens aged 15–64 in the EU-27 systematically grew from 62,4% in 2002 to 65,9% in 2008, but in 2009 it fell to 64,6%. The employment rate for women also grew in the preceding years (53,7% in 2002, 59,1% in 2008), but in 2009 it fell to 58,6% (Eurostat 2010).

In all Member States the rate of employment for men in 2009 was higher than that of women except in Lithuania where the rate for women was by 1% higher than that for men (60,7% as compared to 59,5%) and Latvia where the rate of employment of women and men was almost equal (60,9% as compared to 61%). The smallest differences between the rates of employment of women and of men could be noticed in Finland (1,6%) and Estonia (1,1%), while the biggest disproportions could be seen in Malta – 34%, Greece – 25% and Italy – 22%. According to the data presented in the 2010–2015 roadmap for equality between women and men (KOM 2010: 4), the average rate of employ-

ment for women in the EU increased in 2010 reaching 62,5% – in accordance with the objectives formulated in the Lisbon Strategy concerning employment. The bigger participation of women in the labor market gradually helps to balance the negative effects of the shrinkage of the working age population, relieves the public finance and social security systems, strengthens competitiveness and enriches human resources. However, targeting the rate of employment for women and men at the level of 75% in the EU, which is envisaged in the *Europe 2020* strategy of growth (KOM 2010: 5), will make it necessary to take into account the gender factor in all of the implemented programs of actions. Also, it will make it necessary to stimulate changes in the perception of social roles ascribed to the two genders.

In spite of the fact that the rate of employment for women as compared to that of men has surpassed 60%, it is still the women who are responsible for most of the housework and chores related to child-raising (KOM 2008: 4). Ensuring a better balance between women's and men's professional and private lives will thus depend on more modern work organization and the availability of attractive (in terms of price) child-care establishments but – most of all – it will depend upon the mode in which housework is divided between women and men. Chances to reconcile the housework duties with professional employment have a direct impact on women's position on the labor market, on their earnings and the level of their old age pensions. The EU Member States' main objective in this area should be to encourage men to share some housework and child-care duties and consequently – enable the men to do so (KOM 2009: 9).

The Council's directive has had a big influence on facilitating the reconciliation between professional and private lives (Council Directive 2010/18/EU of 8 March 2010 implementing the Revised Framework Agreement on parental leave concluded by BUSINESSSEUROPE, UEAPME, CEEP and ETUC and repealing the Directive 96/34/EC). It contained a framework agreement that referred to accepted minimum conditions offered to working parents that were intended to help them to reconcile their professional careers and home obligations. This directive applies to both women and men who, in the light of this directive, are entitled to at least four months of parental leave following childbirth or child adoption. In order to support equal opportunities for women and men, at least one of those four months should be available for men (fathers) without an optional transfer to the other parent. This provision is motivated by the need to encourage a more balanced use of

parental leave. However, at present, not many men in the EU take advantage of their right to parental leave or part-time job (7,4% of men as compared to 32,6% of women). Therefore, men's fairer share in the parental obligations is to be encouraged by incentives offered to them in case they make use of the opportunity to take advantage of the parental leave that has been reserved for fathers (KOM 2006: 7).¹

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¹ Since January 2010 the Polish law envisages parental leave for fathers that could last for one week in 2010 and 2011 and for two weeks beginning since 1 January 2012. This leave is not mandatory but at the same time it is not transferable to the child's mother or any other family member (DzU 1974 nr 24, poz. 141 z późn. zm.).

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