Social partners and gender equality in Europe

Executive summary

Introduction

The growing participation of women in the labour market has prompted changes in the way European social partner organisations tackle gender issues. Their organisational and collective bargaining structures – historically dominated by men – have had to adapt to include gender equality issues. This report examines the extent to which gender equality is incorporated by the social partners in their organisations and in their policymaking at European and national level. It explores the differences between the priority given to gender issues between the social partners in different countries and the possible factors behind such differences. Finally, it examines the main challenges faced by the social partners when attempting to promote gender equality within their organisations and in the wider labour market. The findings are based on the contributions of Eurofound’s network of European correspondents, covering all EU Member States and Norway.

Policy context

Despite the implementation of gender equality principles both in the treaties and in policy objectives at EU level, gender differences are still evident in terms of access to the labour market, employment patterns and working conditions. The gender gap is visible in terms of horizontal and vertical occupational segregation, pay gaps, participation in decision-making and the unequal division of domestic tasks and care responsibilities.

In this context, the European social partners have an important role to play in the shaping of the European labour and anti-discrimination legislation and – in some cases – in implementing relevant policy initiatives. In 2005, the European cross-industry social partners BUSINESSEUROPE, UEAPME, CEEP and ETUC adopted the Framework of Actions on Gender Equality for implementation by their member organisations at national level. The Framework included four priorities for action:

- addressing gender roles;
- promoting women in decision-making;
- supporting work–life balance;
- tackling the gender pay gap.

Social partners at national level are able to exert influence in these and other policy areas that impact on gender equality by shaping legislation through tripartite consultation and through their role in bipartite collective bargaining at national, sectoral and company level – where they can work towards improving pay, working conditions and the ability of men and women to balance work and family life.

Key findings

The study shows that there are significant differences between countries in the level of priority accorded to internal and external gender equality actions by the social partners. In 17 Member States, social partner organisations reported relatively well developed internal and/or external policies, while in seven countries, gender equality activities were mainly limited to measures taken by trade unions. In four countries, neither employers nor trade unions had defined policies or priorities to address gender equality related issues.

The relationship between the level of commitment to the issue by social partners and the gender equality performance by countries (or, indeed, their industrial relations system) is not clear. While in some countries there is a strong association, in others, such as Greece and Italy, a high level of commitment by social partners to gender equality is not reflected in a
positive performance on the Gender Equality Index. Similarly, no specific pattern emerges in terms of industrial relation systems: well-developed gender equality activities are reported among social partner organisations in different types of social dialogue systems, both in the level of involvement in tripartite decision-making and in the centralisation of collective bargaining systems.

The study also shows that the social partners’ external strategies for gender equality are significantly better developed than their internal measures: for instance, promoting women in decision-making or mainstreaming gender equality in all social partner policies and processes. The research found that national peak-level organisations had carried out quite limited initiatives in the last five years to improve their internal equality performance and the representation of women in decision-making positions.

In general, internal action plans and strategies are usually more developed among trade union organisations than employer organisations: 13 Member States reported that their trade unions have such plans and strategies, while only five reported that employer organisations have them. The main tools developed by social partner organisations to support gender equality within their organisations are quota systems (both to increase the number of women in decision-making positions, and in collective bargaining), training, and awareness-raising activities, typically resulting in the production of handbooks and guidelines.

External actions tend to focus on campaigning and educational activities and the integration of gender equality and, in particular, work–life balance measures in national policies or collective agreements.

While in general the global economic crisis did not affect the social partners’ attitude to gender equality, progress on the issue was hindered in some countries. In other countries, the gender gap in employment has narrowed, mainly however as a result of worsening employment prospects for men, due to job losses in sectors traditionally dominated by men. The research shows that commitments to gender equality have been adversely affected in those Member States that have been worst hit by the economic downturn, due to a combined effect of fewer resources and competing priorities with other emerging issues.

Further information
The report Social partners and gender equality in Europe is available at http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications
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