

PARTICIPATING ON EQUAL TERMS?

The gender dimensions of direct participation in organisational change

A marked difference in the positions of men and women is a key feature of European workplaces – yet the sexual division of labour is often overlooked in discussions of organisational change. A report based on the findings of a 1996 survey of 5,800 workplaces in ten European countries shows, however, that innovations in the workplace raise important issues for equal opportunities. While the main focus of the EPOC survey (Employee Direct Participation in Organisational Change) was on other aspects of direct participation, this report – summarised here – set out to analyse the gender dimensions of such initiatives.

Key Findings

- Although men and women are equally involved in the practice of direct participation, this takes place in a context of pronounced horizontal and vertical occupational segregation of the sexes. Women are found in particular industries and occupations, often with poorer working conditions than their male counterparts. Low-skilled and repetitious work, for example, is much more likely to be a characteristic of female-dominated establishments. Similarly, workplaces employing women in large proportions are particularly likely to emphasise their reliance on part-time work. They are also less likely to make large capital investments.
- Mixed-sex establishments are the most active practitioners of direct participation in organisational change. These are the workplaces which are most likely to practise multiple and/or high-intensity forms of direct participation; they are therefore implementing more integrated forms of organisational change.
- There is scope for mixed-sex workplaces to improve equal opportunities, through, for example, the introduction of mixed-sex teamwork in gender-typed areas of production and services; the flattening of male-dominated hierarchies; multiskilling for men and women; and the greater utilisation of the social and communication skills of women.
- Despite this potentially promising scenario, there is no evidence of direct participation being practised with the aim of pressing home equal opportunities objectives in Europe's workplaces. Direct participation has no influence on gender segregation in jobs and working conditions; in some companies, its use even leads to a 'de-feminisation' of the labour force.
- Improvements in economic performance due to organisational change are most likely in male-dominated companies.
- The provision of training for direct participation indicates that equal opportunities objectives are not being strongly pursued. Training is generally provided along gender-stereotyped lines: training in technical skills is mostly offered in male-dominated settings, while 'soft', human skills training is most prevalent in female-dominated environments.



Approach

The report presents an analysis of the 1996 EPOC survey data as they relate to gender composition and the use of direct participation in European workplaces. It addresses two key issues: first, equality of access to direct participation; and second, the effects of direct participation on equal opportunities and particularly on gender segregation in European workplaces.

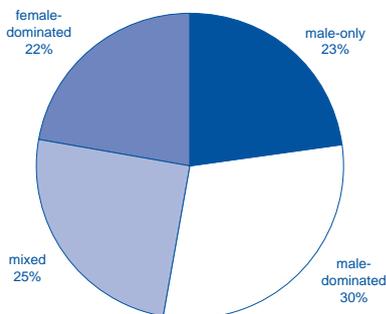
The reports starts by examining the overall characteristics of these workplaces, and thus the conditions in which men and women are employed. This initial discussion provides the context within which the practice of direct participation is considered. The patterns of direct participation practised in workplaces of different gender composition are scrutinised, and the opportunities for the two sexes to be involved in direct participation are explored. The second part of the analysis concentrates on the effects of direct participation on the training provided to employees; on employment itself, and on economic performance in organisations of different gender compositions. This provides an indication of the equal opportunities outcomes of direct participation.

Methodology

The key points can be summarised as follows:

- The analysis of the gender dimensions of direct employee participation was based on a secondary analysis of the EPOC survey data.
- Ten countries were involved in the EPOC survey: Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom.
- The unit of analysis was the workplace and its largest occupational group. The respondents were workplace general managers or the manager deemed most appropriate. Employees as individuals were not the subject of the survey.
- In order to examine the sexual division of labour in the survey establishments, a measure of the gender composition of the largest occupational group was developed. Establishments were differentiated according to the proportion of women in their largest occupational group.

Figure 1. *Proportion of establishments by share of women in largest occupational group*

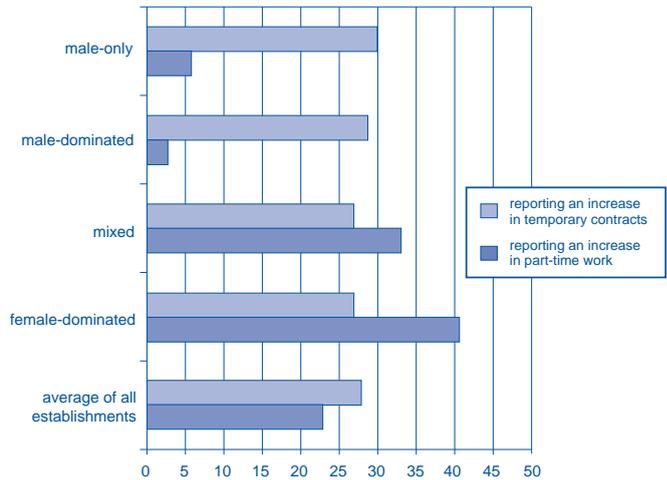


Gender and the workplace

The gender structures of the EPOC workplaces confirm the established contention that women are segregated into a relatively narrow range of business sectors and a few occupational groups. Repetitious and routine work seems

to be more associated with female-dominated employment, and there are significant areas of the economy where women are not found at all. Moreover, developments in 'atypical employment' (the growth of part-time work, temporary work, sub-contracting and other forms of 'flexible' employment) are firmly gendered. Part-time employment contracts are growing particularly rapidly in areas where women work (although temporary work is growing in establishments where both sexes work).

Figure 2. *Gender composition of establishments reporting increase in part-time/temporary contracts*



The capital intensity of companies is also associated with gender composition. Firms which make strong use of female labour seem less likely to make capital investments, perhaps because they have less need than those which employ still relatively expensive male labour. Male-dominated and mixed-sex workplaces are much more likely to invest in new technologies than female-dominated establishments. Work which demands high qualifications is also much more a feature of male-dominated establishments; women are employed in jobs requiring lower skills and qualifications.

These findings have important implications for women's access to direct participation and for their ability to benefit from the process of direct participation. They raise questions about whether women are located in the sectors and jobs in which direct participation is practised and whether direct participation alters their conditions of work and access to skills and training, and indeed, the segregation of employment.

Women in direct participation

Women's involvement in direct participation is an important indicator of the effectiveness of such practices, particularly in responding to an equal opportunities agenda. The report considers the extent to which women are involved before examining whether their involvement translates into positive workplace reorganisation initiatives which prioritise equal opportunities at work.

The EPOC survey shows that 86% of mixed-sex establishments practise direct participation. This makes those establishments the most assiduous practitioners of direct participation, and, by implication, women within these establishments are involved in direct participation initiatives. Mixed-sex workplaces are also important practitioners of all forms of direct participation, second



only to male-dominated establishments. They are leading practitioners of ‘face-to-face’ individual consultation, probably because this involves techniques which are widely used in the public sector where mixed-sex workforces are particularly dominant. Importantly, they are also leading practitioners of multiple (between four and

six) forms of direct participation, and lead in the practice of high-scope participation. Workplaces with a mixed workforce therefore have the highest diffusion, strongest integration and most developed practice of organisational change in Europe.

Table 1. *The incidence of multiple forms of direct participation by gender composition of establishments*

Number of forms of direct participation practised	Gender composition of establishment (%)				
	Male only	Male-dominated	Mixed	Female-dominated	Average (N)
None	24	18	14	20	19 (990)
1 form	23	17	18	19	19 (1008)
2 forms	21	22	18	20	20 (1067)
3 forms	14	19	18	20	18 (934)
4 forms	10	12	19	11	13 (688)
5 forms	7	9	8	8	8 (423)
6 forms	1	4	6	2	3 (166)
	100	100	100	100	100 (5276)

However, looking more closely at the gender composition of groups involved in one specific form of direct participation – group consultation and delegation – we find that around a quarter of all establishments either exclude women from the groups altogether or do not include them in proportion to their overall participation in the workforce. (On the other hand, women are overrepresented in 7% of the workplaces.) Thus, despite the importance of mixed-sex workplaces as practitioners of direct participation, their female employees are not always properly or fully represented in the participation process. Moreover, the qualification requirements for direct participation in mixed-sex and female-dominated workplaces are generally low, particularly compared to male-dominated direct participation.

the training topics, however, that gender inequality is revealed – in training for particular skill sets. Women are still predominantly trained in ‘soft’ skills which are perhaps designed to help them function better as employees who improve the interpersonal relations of the workplace. Yet it is precisely the full range of ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ skills which are required if there is to be an improvement in access to different types of work.

In addition, there is the overall dimension of coverage. The wider workplace coverage offered by group participation provides a more precise picture of the inclusion or exclusion of women in organisational change. Comparing coverage of the whole workforce in group work with the share of women in those groups shows that women are equally represented in 55% of the establishments, underrepresented in 25% and overrepresented in 20%. Women’s under-representation is particularly marked in industry; their over-representation in the public sector.

Do women benefit?

The effects of direct participation also vary. Male-dominated establishments are most likely to report improvements in economic performance on the one hand, but a reduction in employment on the other. Female-dominated establishments are the least likely to report improvements in economic performance. This simple finding in itself has implications for equal opportunities, because the strategies for improved economic performance often entail retraining and the use of new skills on the part of the workforce, for example in teamworking, self-management and intergroup communications. Women do not appear to be significant beneficiaries of these initiatives in the EPOC survey workplaces. Neither is the sexual division of labour itself much changed in organisations practising direct participation. On the contrary, the survey shows a slight retrenchment of gender segregation with the implementation of direct participation in Europe’s workplaces.

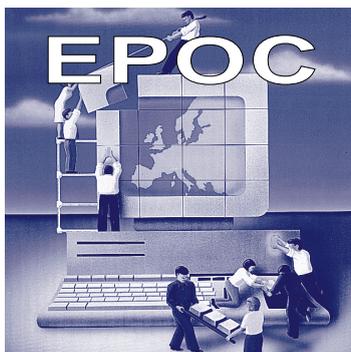
Training and qualifications

Examination of the training dynamics of group consultation and group delegation does not give cause for optimism in relation to the attainment of equal opportunities objectives, but neither is the picture a wholly bleak one. Overall, men and women train in preparation for direct participation for much the same periods of time, and this is the encouraging message of this survey. It is in

The report *Participating on Equal Terms? The Gender Dimensions of Direct Participation in Organisational Change* was prepared for the Foundation by Juliet Webster, Trinity College Dublin, Ireland, and Annette Schnabel, University of Mainz, Germany.

Table 2. *Topic of training for group consultation by gender composition of establishment*

Topic of training	Male only	Male-dominated	Mixed	Female-dominated	Average
Data collection and analysis	35	31	25	17	27
Presentation skills	16	23	23	24	22
Interpersonal skills	23	28	30	34	29
Group dynamics	26	18	22	25	22
Total (n)	100 (356)	100 (940)	100 (768)	100 (689)	100 (2752)



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FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

For further information on this project please contact:
Ciara Doyle,
Information Liaison Officer, Work Organisation/Industrial Relations
Tel: + 353 1 204 3125
E-mail: ciara.doyle@eurofound.ie

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European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions,

Wyattville Road, Loughlinstown, Co. Dublin, Ireland.

Tel: +353 1 2043 100

Fax: +353 1 2826 456/2824 209

E-mail: postmaster@eurofound.ie

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