



EUROPEAN POLICY BRIEF



Impact of local welfare systems on female labour force participation and social cohesion¹

On the role and strategies of local policy actors in local political decision making

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INTRODUCTION

Objectives of the research

The overall aim of the FLOWS project is to analyse (1) how local welfare systems support female labour market participation and (2) the extent to which female labour market integration has contributed to strengthening social cohesion (and under which conditions).

The present Policy Brief focuses on one of the objectives of the project, which is to improve our understanding of the policies and policy processes favouring female labour force participation at the local level. The aim is to analyse the role of local actors in policy formation as well as the extent to which national and EU policy goals play a role in policy formation locally.

Scientific approach / methodology

A multi-method approach was applied, including a literature review, analysis of policy documents and local area case studies and interviews with key informants about the local policy process in 11 European cities: Aalborg (DK), Bologna (IT), Brno (CZ), Dublin (IR), Hamburg (DE), Jyväskylä (FI), Leeds (UK), Nantes (FR), Tartu (EE) and Terrassa (SP).

New knowledge and/or European added value

The comparative analysis of 11 European city case studies revealed that female labour force participation and policies favouring the entry of women into paid employment (e.g. childcare, elderly care, lifelong learning (LLL)) are not uniformly prioritised by local political actors. There are huge differences in the way in which local political actors perceive and interpret the necessity of increasing female labour force participation. Most often local political actors have a different perception and world view than the EU. Insights from the FLOWS data thus call for new strategies for engaging local political actors in the implementation of the renewal of the Lisbon strategy.

Thus, to reach the EU 2020 employment target, it is probably necessary to improve the political awareness of these issues locally, either by creating opportunities for more detailed consideration of EU employment targets and the role of local government or by imposing statutory or regulatory obligations on local authorities to become more active. Progress is not

¹ The views expressed in this deliverable are the sole responsibility of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Commission.

Key messages for policy-makers, businesses, trade unions and civil society actors

solely dependent on the “desires and wishes” of local policy actors, however. For policies to become efficient, it is also necessary to improve horizontal and vertical (local – national – EU) governance processes.

Publicly funded service provisions such as childcare, eldercare and lifelong learning are essential factors shaping the extent and intensity of women’s informal care responsibilities and their opportunities to enter, remain in, or return to the labour market. The city case studies, however, provide evidence of weak links between different policy areas (care and lifelong learning) relevant to female employment. Therefore, coordinated action through networking and involving relevant stakeholders in the spheres of labour market, social welfare and educational policy would pave the way to the more efficient entry or return to the labour market by women with care responsibilities.

KEY OBSERVATIONS

A State of the Art *literature review* and the FLOWS *research template* have been published on the project website (Kutsar et al., 2011). The review provides a synthesis of literature about governance, vertical and horizontal policy formation and the policy actors involved in the policy process. It also discusses the methodological issues concerning the data collection and formulates the guidelines for both desk research and the fieldwork.

National and local policymaking frameworks

The desk research analyses the frameworks of national and local policymaking in 11 European countries that might either support or discourage labour market participation among women. The analysis reveals the complexity and diversity of the legal frameworks and vertical governance structures and, thus, the roles, responsibilities, available financial resources and the actual opportunities for the local authorities/cities to formulate their own welfare policies and provide services for their residents

Based on the general vertical governance structures between national, regional and local levels, these 11 countries can be classified as having either a centralised (England, Ireland), multi-level (Italy, Spain, France, Germany) or decentralised (Denmark, Finland, Estonia, Hungary, Czech Republic) governance system. When considering each welfare sector (childcare, elderly care and LLL) separately, however, this classification changes and both the national regulation and role of local authorities look different in each specific sector. This probably makes the horizontal coordination of these policy fields more complicated, both at the national and local levels.

Women’s labour force integration as a policy issue according to policy documents

Overall, women’s labour market participation, informal care responsibilities that might limit their employment options, and opportunities to improve their employment position via lifelong learning do not represent major priorities in the national policies – and even less so on the local stage. EU policies on social care and LLL are closely linked to the promotion of employment and gender equality, but according to the analysis of national and local policy documents, female labour market participation is very much seen as a separate issue from the development of welfare services. The improvement of childcare services is connected to some extent to mothers’ employment, but elderly care services and lifelong learning are not discussed as gender issues or linked to women’s employment. There is no debate about what kind of a welfare system would support women to enter, re-enter and remain in the labour market in different stages of life and in different labour market and family situations.

Women's labour force integration as a policy issue according to key-informants

There is considerable variation in how women's labour force integration is considered in policies on child and elder care and LLL policies; in some instances, policies do not address the issue; in others, the issue is recognised but not afforded the necessary priority; and in a number of instances, policies do adequately recognise and promote women's labour force integration, but the city case studies revealed that even if the return of women to employment is not directly linked to the reconciliation of work and care, local policy responses can indirectly support women's aspirations.

Local policy practices

The analysis revealed marked variation in local practices as reported by the informants in the sample cities. The practices vary from the Mediterranean countries being more influenced by tradition and entrenched gender stereotypes to the Scandinavian countries, where very high levels of women's employment have become a cultural norm. The latter has been made possible by the wide variety of childcare and elderly care services offered by public, voluntary and private providers. Local practices in the sample cities in the new member states reveal mixed patterns. Interestingly, while international directives and guidelines (e.g. on gender equality and equal opportunities) possibly have a regulatory impact at the local level, they may paradoxically also be misinterpreted (e.g. misinterpretation of gender equal opportunities) which may possibly lead to a refusal to initiate measures (projects, services, training courses) addressed specifically to women. This provides an excuse for failing to implement policies which address women's needs.

International funding is the primary means by which international political values are put into practice. Thus, as the analysis demonstrated, informants in the cities in new EU member states indicated that ESF-funded projects had effectively addressed women's needs and had been related to their caring responsibilities and employment opportunities; as the actions were project-based, however, the sustainability of the actions depends on the availability of local funds and policy priorities.

Labour market integration opportunities of women with caring responsibilities

In the sample cities, women with responsibilities relating to the provision of care for children and/or elderly parents have very different opportunities for entering or returning to the labour market. To begin with, this phenomenon is affected by women's own mindset and the general cultural setting. Thus, generous regulations enabling mothers to remain at home with their young children or supporting women to care for an elderly family member requiring care may reduce their interest in returning to or entering employment in line with so-called "good" maternal or familial behaviour. However, where understanding of equal opportunities in the labour market is more developed, it is acknowledged that high quality childcare outside the home is in the interest of the child and, when combined with flexible services, enables mothers to return to their jobs with less difficulty. The recognition that elderly care is a public matter can be extremely helpful for women facing care-related dilemmas. In cultural settings in which female participation in the labour force is the cultural norm, women are not expected to be the primary caregivers for their older or frail family members, whereas elderly care is primarily the family's responsibility in more traditional policy settings (this responsibility traditionally falling on the women). Furthermore, women with care responsibilities need "carer-friendly" employment schemes (e.g. flexible job arrangements, the right to paid or unpaid care leave with job protection) and flexible services (e.g. opening hours, age at which children are accepted in childcare facilities). Last but not least, the cost of services is important: women with higher salaries (e.g. those in managerial positions) have a greater number of service options (e.g. more costly but flexible private childcare facilities).

Economic crisis impacting women's labour market opportunities

The recent economic downturn in most EU countries has had a major impact on the labour market as well as on welfare and educational systems. However, the impact of the economic recession on women's labour market opportunities has been varied and in some cases paradoxical. The economic recession has generally increased the pressure on women to provide informal care as public service budgets have been cut. The cuts to public services have also had a greater impact on women, given that many women work in these sectors. This has reduced the ability of the individual family to pay for childcare and further added to unemployment (with preference usually given to paternal rather than maternal employment); at the same time, increasing male unemployment increases the interest among women to find work to relieve the financial pressure on the family. The latter circumstances can sometimes lead to increased intergenerational familial solidarity, as informal care responsibilities are reallocated.

Responsiveness to grass-roots influence of the policy formation

Local policy formation focused on female employment opportunities is related to several socio-economic, political and cultural factors. The degree of policy centralisation can broaden or narrow the sphere of action for local actors. As revealed in the analysis, municipal civil servants can play a role in shaping the action – by defining the need for, scope of and means for implementing the policy, they set the general rules and standards which guide the contribution of public, private and voluntary service providers. The level of involvement of local politicians is rather low and the provision of care and training is probably the least politicised field in local politics. The 11 European cities all have different practices through which they involve target groups and the general public in the policy process. The current analysis is consistent with the findings of previous studies and confirms that Scandinavian and West European democracies are more responsive to grassroots influence than the Mediterranean and the new democracies in Eastern and Central Europe.

The city reports provide evidence of weak links between different policy objectives relevant to female employment. Concentrating only on higher opportunities in the labour market or on care and learning is not an adequate solution for reconciliation problems.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY-MAKERS

Key messages for policy-makers, businesses, trade unions and civil society actors

As regards the social cohesion goals, policy actors on the local level face several challenges with respect to opening the way back to employment for women with informal care responsibilities. Early recommendations from the FLOWS project are to:

- Determine what kind of welfare services might help women to enter, re-enter and remain in the labour market.
- Provide policy documents with gender-specific data and indicators.
- Consider the statutory requirement or obligation to make policies concerning women's entry or return to the labour market.
- Consider legislation as a policy response to motivate employers to create conditions which would support employees, women in particular, who are burdened by family responsibilities.
- Revise employment legislation so that it provides more flexible options, including more opportunities for women to have part-time work and work flexible hours.
- Encourage employers to take the reconciliation of family care and work into consideration in addition to parental leave being regulated by law.
- Start debating how to join policy and practice effectively. The key actors in policy governance, such as policy-makers, service providers, employers and civil society actors, should be encouraged to create and conceptualise links between employment, welfare and education policies that open up more opportunities for women with care responsibilities for labour force integration.
- Develop coordinated actions through networking and involving relevant stakeholders in the spheres of the labour market, social welfare and educational policy.
- Develop "carer-friendly" employment schemes (e.g. flexible job arrangements, the right to paid or unpaid care leave with job protection) and flexible services (e.g. opening hours, age at which children are accepted in childcare facilities) to meet the needs of women with care responsibilities.
- Design training in a manner which reflects the educational needs of women and accommodates their care-related responsibilities.
- Motivate LLL providers to direct resources to adult education and training in occupational fields in which female labour is most required and employment opportunities are good.
- Apply targeted policy measures to involve more women in the economic sectors where the employment opportunities are broader.
- Close the gap between periods of parental leave and guaranteed access to childcare, thus supporting women's entry/return to employment.
- Make all children eligible for subsidized childcare regardless of their parents' situation (e.g. working irregular hours, not being able to pay full childcare fees, wanting to return to work before the childcare is guaranteed) and as the right of the child.
- Apply the strategy of mixing sources and supporting different service providers, thus supporting diverse and flexible care facilities for children and the elderly.

RESEARCH PARAMETERS

Objectives of the research

The objectives of the research are:

1. To study autonomy or dependence on both national and international directives by mapping the policy frameworks in 11 European countries.
2. To explore the role of mindset (preferences, interests, world views and cultural orientation) and co-operation of the policy actors on the local level.

Three political focuses are taken: childcare, care for the elderly, LLL impacting women's informal care responsibilities and labour force integration.

Scientific approach / methodology

The starting point for the study was to review the literature about governance, vertical and horizontal policy formation and the policy actors involved in the policy process. The fieldwork combined desk research of national and local policy documents in the field (setting the legal and institutional playground for the local policy) with the qualitative interviews with local key informants about policy formation. The data collection focused on three policy areas – childcare, elderly care and education and training policies – and tried to concentrate on the policy measures and activities which actually (or potentially) lead to increased levels of female employment as an outcome.

The desk research concentrated on the legal regulation and responsibilities of different policy actors concerning service provision in the above-listed fields of welfare policies. The aim was to analyse the degrees of autonomy possessed by local policymakers in the context of national and international policy directives and laws related to the elaboration and implementation of local welfare systems on impacting women's labour force participation and social cohesion. In addition to national legislation, three major policy documents from the national and local levels of each country have been analysed in order to see how and to what extent international (EU) and national policy objectives are translated and transferred into local policies. The national teams interpreted the results of the document analysis in their national contexts and presented the generalised findings and expert assessments of the desk research for comparative analysis.

The interviewees for the qualitative study were selected by the national teams in the project from different levels and sectors and governance taking into consideration the actual governance structure of the sample city. The national teams carried out 112 semi-structured qualitative interviews in total, processed data analysis and submitted case study reports for international comparisons.

This extended case study method and multi-method approach enabled us to integrate the knowledge base of the policy documents and the key informants with the competence of local research teams into comparative analytical reports (Kuronen, 2012; Kutsar et al., 2012).

PROJECT IDENTITY

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Further reading	<p>Kutsar, D, Trumm, A., Kasearu, K. (2011) WP4: Literature review, methodological issues and template.</p> <p>Kuronen, M. (2012) Comparative report of international and national policy frameworks.</p> <p>Kutsar, D, Trumm, A., Kasearu, K. (2012) Comparative report on the role and strategies of local policy actors in local political decision making.</p>