

ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN AND MEN

OPINION ON THE GENDER PERSPECTIVE ON THE RESPONSE TO THE ECONOMIC AND FINANCIAL CRISIS¹

10 June 2009

Background

Major challenges have been created by the unprecedented international financial crisis, which deepened and broadened in autumn 2008 with significant impact in the banking sector. In the last six months, the impact of the crisis on the economy throughout Europe has become more evident. A number of countries have declared themselves in recession and are experiencing increasing negative effects in key industries and labour markets. It is anticipated that further impacts will be felt in the coming months including the ramifications of increased unemployment, possible reductions in public expenditures, including social services, and possible increases in economic and social vulnerability.

The financial and economic downturn is likely to have a differential impact on women and men, given their differential position within economic and social spheres. It will also have a differential impact among different groups of women and among different groups of men, depending on their position in those related spheres. It is important to ensure that, where women are differently affected to men, these differences are addressed by both national and EU policy responses.

Some important policy measures have been undertaken at national and EU levels to tackle the cause of the crisis on the financial level and to address its economic and social impacts. This includes the European Economic Recovery Plan, agreed in December 2008, to arrest the pace of the downturn and create the conditions for an upturn². It also includes changes to the European Structural Funds and to the European Global Adjustment Fund³. There are plans to refine this work in the coming months, with preparations being made for the June European Council to focus on improving the global financial and regulatory system and supporting balanced growth in global markets⁴. Very recently, the Employment Summit was held in Prague to assess the impact of the crisis on employment and to stimulate co-ordination of actions between the Union, its Member States and social partners⁵.

¹ The Opinion of the Advisory Committee does not necessarily reflect the positions of the Member States and does not bind the Member States.

² See : COM(2008) 706 final and COM(2008) 800 final

³ See: Social Agenda, Issue No. 20, March 2009

⁴ COM(2009) 114/Provisional

⁵ EU Employment Summit, 7 May 2009, Prague

However, in the urgency of the crisis it appears that, to date, little attention has been given to ensuring that gender is taken into account when formulating policy responses. This may be due, in part, to the fact that the full impact of the downturn has not yet been felt. It may also be due to limitations in the gender-sensitivity of existing measurement frameworks.

This situation needs to be addressed. It is vital that the European Union and the Member States demonstrate clearly the commitment to work towards greater gender equality, as provided for by the provisions of the European Treaty which establish the promotion of gender equality as part of the mission of the European Union (Articles 1, 2, 141). The Commission's Roadmap for Equality between Women and Men (2006 – 2010)⁶, together with the Gender Equality Pact agreed in 2006⁷ also provide a clear impetus for actions to be taken to address any adverse impacts on grounds of gender from the outworking of the crisis and/or the implementation of measures to ameliorate the effects of the crisis. Attention to equality of opportunity and social justice, fundamental principles of the European Union, is particularly important in times of recession and must be addressed together with economic and financial measures. Gender inequality is a cost we simply cannot afford. Thus, it is important not to reduce the public and private resources allocated to policies and action aimed at achieving gender equality.

EU Members States must also stand by their International commitments. The UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) explicitly acknowledges and calls upon State parties to address discrimination against women, including their exclusion or restriction of their activity, on the basis of their sex, in the economic field. In addition, the UN Beijing Platform for Action calls on Governments to take strategic action to address existing inequalities in macro- and micro-economic structures, policies and programmes. Furthermore, women's economic empowerment is central to achieving the Millennium Development Goals.

There are at least two dimensions linked to gender equality to be considered: first, the possible differentiated impact on women and men on the labour market; and, secondly, the impact of the economic and financial crisis on policies directly or indirectly affecting gender equality, including in terms of public spending.

The context in which this Opinion has been drawn up is one which has seen a focus of attention being given at a global level to measures to resolve the crisis and including discussions between Heads of State at the G20 Summit meeting in London (April 2009)⁸. We have also seen a growing focus/interest in analysis of gender implications of the crisis, at UN level, EU level and

⁶ Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: A Roadmap for equality between women and men, 2006 – 2010, COM(2006) 92 final.

⁷ European Pact for Gender Equality, Conclusions of the Presidency, 7775/1/06/Rev 1, May 2006

⁸ ILO Newsletter No 4/2009

national level, including during discussions at the Annual Meeting of the UN Commission on the Status of Women⁹.

In preparing this Opinion, the Working Group has drawn on an examination of the actual or potential impact of the economic and financial crisis on the situation of women in the labour market and on the policy support given to gender equality. It has been supported greatly in this by information provided by Advisory Committee members and others sources such as the Analysis Note: Gender Equality and Recession commissioned by the European Commission.¹⁰ Work signalled by the European Platform of Women Scientists, a group of international experts from academia, politics, business and civil society institutions was also noted.¹¹

The Opinion makes recommendations to ensure that women are not disproportionately affected by the impact of the economic and financial crisis in the labour market. It also makes specific recommendations to ensure that a gender perspective is incorporated in the policy responses to the crisis and that gender equality policies remain visible despite the effects of the economic recession.

The Advisory Committee trusts that the Commission and the Member States will find this Opinion useful in developing responses to the economic and financial crisis at EU level.

Current situation

The impact of the financial and economic downturn continues to unfold, with pressure on global financial markets, increasing unemployment, and weakening of major industrial sectors. The global economy is facing its worst recession since World War II and the economic and inflation outlook is subject to considerable uncertainty¹².

Impacts on labour and employment

The most recent data from across the EU show that labour markets are starting to react to the economic downturn¹³. In the media there is a constant stream of news from companies announcing job losses or special measures because of declining business. Employment difficulties are now being experienced across many sectors as consumer confidence continues to fall¹⁴, and European unemployment rates are now beginning to rise with many

⁹ Gender perspectives of the financial crisis expert panel, March 2009. See The Global Economic Crisis, Its Gender Implications and Policy Responses, S Seguino, 2009

¹⁰ Analysis Note: Gender Equality and Recession, Mark Smith, Grenoble Ecole de Management, May 2009, commissioned by the European Commission

¹¹ EPWS, Press Release, 5 March 2009, www.epws.org

¹² European Commission Spring Forecasts 2009, IP/09/693, 4 May 2009

¹³ *ibid*

¹⁴ Europe in Recession: Employment initiatives at company and Member State level, European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, EF/09/20/EN, www.eurofound.europa.eu

countries officially in recession¹⁵. The outlook is for a further deterioration in the labour market with rising unemployment expected in the months ahead. Employment specifically is expected to contract by about 2½% in both the EU and the Euro areas this year and by a further 1½% in 2010, resulting in about 8½ million job losses over two years¹⁶.

The role and impact of this downturn on women is likely to be markedly different from past recessions, not least because women now account for a much greater proportion of the labour market.¹⁷ Their greater integration into the labour market makes women a more central player to the contribution to household incomes with an increasing percentage of them fulfilling the role of sole or main breadwinner. Indeed, the growth of dual earning means that many more households rely on two incomes for economic viability. The impact of either female job loss or male job loss is likely to be significant overall and the impact of labour market inequalities thus felt by the whole household.¹⁸

High profile job losses in the male-dominated construction, transport and manufacturing sectors have also been accompanied by significant losses in sectors previously more insulated from the effects of recession and, importantly, more gender-mixed sectors such as related professions, financial services and retail/wholesale. The rapidly changing economic situation and the scarcity of detailed statistical data make it difficult to assess short-term trends.¹⁹

Furthermore, the unemployment rate measure does not necessarily capture the full impact of the changing economic conditions on both women and men. Indeed national data confirm that falling employment rates for women are not necessarily accompanied by similar rises in unemployment rates. Or, put another way, female unemployment may be seen to actually decrease in this period in some places. But this does not mean that there will be a change to traditional gender roles since, even in families where women are the main or sole breadwinner, they continue to carry out the majority of domestic tasks.

The difference in the types of jobs that women and men do plays a role in shaping the impact of the recession. For example, women frequently tend to be concentrated in part-time work, lower-paid jobs, jobs with shorter tenure and flexible jobs that are also often lower paid. As such they may have a reduced ability to build up financial reserves to cope with job loss. Furthermore, they may also be more likely to be excluded from unemployment benefit systems since they may have broken employment histories or may not have made sufficient contributions. Women, including immigrant women, may also be concentrated in the informal sector, which may on the one hand serve

¹⁵ Smith, supra note 10

¹⁶ European Commission Spring Forecasts 2009, IP/09/693, 4 May 2009

¹⁷ Smith, supra note 10

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

as a buffer in a recession, but may also be a source of disadvantage and insecurity for both women and men.²⁰

In short, both women and men are affected by the crisis – at times in different ways, depending on their position within social and economic spheres. This differential impact between women and men, as well as *among* women (and among men) must be acknowledged, understood, measured and addressed in policy responses.

Impact on policies related to gender equality

The effects of the economic downturn on policies related to gender equality are just beginning to emerge. It is possible that severe reductions in tax revenues will have an impact on State budgets. How Governments will allocate funding in light of possible reduced revenue remains to be seen, but it is likely that this will have ramifications in many areas including social service provision.

Stimulus packages may target some sectors more than others, directly affecting women's and men's employment. Reduced tax revenues and possible budget cuts may lead to reductions in public expenditure, with public services, such as education, training and social care likely to suffer in the medium term, as are users of those services. Public sector employees (which includes a large concentration of women in the labour market) are also likely to be affected, although whether this will be positively or negatively depends on individual Member State policies (i.e. cuts in or investment in public sector employment). Any changes in pension provision through restrictions on caring credits may promote further inequalities between women and men. Gender based stereotypes may also exacerbate inequalities. For example, the 'male breadwinner' model which still predominates in many countries, may lead to a priority being given to men's jobs and a reliance on women to provide a social safety net through informal paid and unpaid work²¹.

The risks of changes in government policy and/or organisational policy present additional threats for women, particularly changes that jeopardise advances made in women's employment or the enhanced status of equality in recent years (for example, flexible working).

Initial reports by Member States on the impact of the downturn on public expenditures are mixed. Some report reductions in public expenditure but many have not made any changes to planned expenditure. Other Member States report a mixed response by reducing public expenditure in some sectors but increasing or maintaining spending in others, notably social protection. And still other Member States report an increase in public spending, in areas like health, education, welfare and labour.

²⁰ Rake, K., Are Women Bearing the Burden of Recession?, Fawcett Society, March 2009

²¹ Seguino, supra note 9: Smith, supra note 10.

The impact of the financial crisis and the related global economic recession is having a serious and widespread impact on the real economy and on the real lives of people, particularly in developing countries. In light of this, the European Commission and Member States must consider the gendered implications of any changes in overseas development assistance.

Limited role of women in financial and economic decision-making

It is clear that fewer women than men are involved in financial and economic decision making. The European Commission's 2009 Report on Equality between Women and Men indicates that the Central Banks of all Member States were led by a male governor and its 2007 Report indicated that on average, the highest decision-making bodies of EU central banks include five men for every women. At European level, all three of the financial institutions (European Central Bank, European Investment Bank and European Investment Fund) are led by men and women account for only 16% of the highest decision-making bodies of these institutions.²² A number of commentators consider that increasing the proportion of women decision makers in these sectors may contribute to promoting a more gender-sensitive analysis of related responses.²³ It is also clear that decision makers generally need to be sensitive to the gender dimension of their work.

Measures taken to date

EU responses to the economic downturn

Since autumn 2008, governments across Europe have taken extensive coordinated action to stimulate their economies and help reduce the severity and length of the global recession for families and businesses. This has added significant value to the individual efforts of Member States.²⁴

In December last year, EU Heads of Government took the unprecedented step of agreeing an economic recovery package worth €200 billion with a mix of coordinated national and European spending with the aim of directly boosting employment.²⁵

Member State Responses

The Opinion has been informed by inputs to the Advisory Committee Questionnaires, outlining measures taken to date by some Member States to

²² European Commission, Report on Equality between women and men, 2009

²³ Seguino, supra note 9; Rake, supra note 20

²⁴ Employment Summit, 7 May 2009

²⁵ Communication from the Commission to the European Council, A European Economic Recovery Plan, COM (2008) 800 final

respond to the financial and economic downturn. These measures have focused on select areas of intervention including provision of direct support to the financial sector, large industries and businesses, employment focused assistance, and direct and indirect financial support to individuals to stimulate spending.

While indicative only, these measures include:

Support to industry/business

- providing support and/or credit/rescue package to key sectors, including automotive industries, agriculture and fisheries, or specialised industries such as tourism.
- investment in infrastructure
- providing investment to small and medium enterprises
- providing contributions/stimulus to employers, and self-employed in order to maintain employment (to support job retention through funding to mandatory health insurance and social security contributions).
- creating statutory framework for reduced working time to mitigate lay offs

Employment focused assistance

- creation of new employment, in particular for those who have been dismissed as a direct result of the crisis;
- investing in specific programmes to support women's employment, including training projects for rural women and women who wish to return to the labour market after time out for family reasons.
- assistance for unemployed and job seekers including labour market training and skills development, labour office services (i.e. training, training loans, subsidised transport/accommodation in relation to work training for a wider range of clients, as well as introducing time and contribution caps on unemployment benefits;
- raise competitiveness for unemployed people including training and re-training.
- supporting young people including in education and employment access professional training for young people up to 35 years age and support to companies to hire young people; increasing number of places in professional university and high schools

Direct and indirect financial support to Individuals

- offering housing rescue packages and provision of favourable loans
- investment for urgent interventions to support weakest groups with major housing difficulties; schemes for provision of housing loans at favourable terms for low income families; special rescue packages for housing.
- provision of tax reduction/tax relief eg cuts in sales tax,; tax relief on productivity bonuses; tax credit & social security tax reductions for workers over 45 years of age
- provision of one-off payments to vulnerable sectors, bonuses paid to families, workers, pensioners and disabled persons.
- pension investments

- support to social benefits including unemployment benefits (i.e. supporting families with unemployed people and pensioners; increase in social benefits and an improvement of the standard of living especially for vulnerable groups.

Financial and budgeting measures

- Gender budgeting and gender impact analysis.

It is too soon to assess the effectiveness of such measures on mitigating the impact of the crisis. The beginning of the new fiscal year and the related release of national budgets will provide additional information about public expenditures, with the impacts in terms of policy decisions coming increasingly clear over the medium and long-term.

The majority of Member States characterised the interventions to the economic and financial downturn to date as being 'gender neutral', with only a select number of States reporting the carrying out of gender impact assessments when developing new policies.

Closely related to conducting such assessments is the importance of developing an evidence base and developing indicators to monitor progress and impact of said policies. Several Member States noted that preliminary research is underway to assess the impact of the downturn on equality issues although it is too early to assess the medium and long-term impact of the downturn.

Looking towards the future

While it is important to ensure that policies designed to address the immediate crisis identify differential impacts on vulnerable groups, it is also important to look to the future and identify the world that we want to emerge from the current crisis. We need to act now to challenge inequalities and discrimination, so that in the recovery we draw on the talents, skills and energies of the widest possible cross-section of society.

The particular barriers facing women suggest that there is a need to look at issues such as:

- access to training and apprenticeship opportunities, ensuring that they are available to both women and men at various stages of their lives, and include the skills needed for new jobs in the future;
- up- or re-skilling and lifelong learning for people throughout the life cycle for both those who have lost their jobs and women who have taken time out of the labour market for caring and family purposes;
- careers advice throughout life which gives women clear information on possible career options;
- measures to promote and facilitate sharing of caring responsibilities between women and men;

- allocation of public resources in such a way as to promote gender equality; and,
- measures to work with business to facilitate and support the growth of
- more flexible working opportunities, contributing to gender-sensitive employment creation.

The economic and financial crisis offers an opportunity for Member States and the European Commission to take measures to correct the market and provide solutions for women's employment, to address the gender pay gap and to promote women's participation in decision-making.

Recommendations

On this basis, the Advisory Committee recommends the following for action by the European Commission and Member States.

The European Commission should:

- emphasise the importance of maintaining the current commitment to gender equality, as reflected by the provisions of the European Treaties which establish the promotion of gender equality as part of the mission of the European Union (Articles 1, 2, 141), by incorporating a gender perspective into all policies and measures being planned or implemented to alleviate the crisis.
- take into account the gender dimension in future initiatives taken to counteract the crisis or limit its impact.
- ensure that a gender perspective is built into the future revision of the Lisbon Strategy after 2010, including the European Employment Strategy and that the differentiated impact of the crisis on women and men is taken into account in that context.
- shape its forthcoming strategic framework for gender equality after 2010 (successor of the Roadmap for Equality between Women and Men) with a clear priority on measures to promote gender equality in addressing the economic and financial crisis and maintaining commitment to equal pay so that pay gaps do not open up further.
- ensure that all proposed policies are subject routinely to gender impact assessment, as a matter of good policy making, and undertake gender impact assessment of the measures currently being taken under the European Economy Recovery Plan, the European Global Adjustment Fund and others.
- analyse and publish key employment data by gender, to improve understanding and monitoring of the gender impact of the economic and financial crisis, and to facilitate the identification of measures to ameliorate adverse impacts.

- target policies in a gender-sensitive way, including recognising that women may be exposed to additional financial insecurity as a result of lower pay, broken employment histories and limited financial reserves
- build a gender budget mechanism into its work, to increase gender equality by correcting negative consequences of revenues and expenditures and to improve governance and accountability, in particular in respect of the forthcoming financial perspectives, targeting and future budgets. The EAC Opinion on the Future of the EU Budget, adopted in June 2008, recommended the inclusion of gender experts in the EU budget reform process and the development of formal links between the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission in relation to budgetary decisions, to facilitate gender budgeting processes and tools in the European budgetary processes²⁶.
- make efforts to improve women's participation at all levels of decision-making, especially in the areas of budgets and in respect of governance arrangements for European financial systems, including the European Central Bank
- continue to support the EU Network of women in decision-making in politics and the economy launched in June 2008, aiming to provide a platform at EU level for successful strategies to improve gender-balance in decision making positions, and pay close attention to its first report, due in 2009, which will highlight examples of best practice and summarise the exchanges and debates between the Network members²⁷
- consider further adaptation of the European Structural Funds, to focus on additional support for areas of women's employment likely to be affected by the crisis, and support for childcare, training and access to employment in a lifecycle perspective; there could also be greater support for women entrepreneurs. Issues such as the timing of release of funds and other procedures should be examined to increase accessibility of funds. Also, the provision of a financial reserve within each fund for equal opportunity activities with additional support for cross programmes and other special initiatives; gender expertise to be built into implementation measures and audit and monitor participation by gender²⁸.
- continue its work to combat stereotyping, including addressing outmoded assumptions about men being 'family breadwinners' which may impact on women's experience of the crisis; considering the fact that more and more women are main breadwinners, there should be a focus on encouraging greater sharing of domestic labour so that women do not continue to carry the majority of domestic tasks.

²⁶ EAC Opinion on the Future of the EU Budget, June 2008

²⁷ EU press release, European Network set to boost women in power, 2 June 2008. See also EAC Opinion on women and decision making, 2007.

²⁸ See also EAC Opinion on the gender dimension in the next programming period of the Structural Funds 2007 -2013, July 2006

- continue its focus on reconciliation measures and take steps to promote these as good practice for both men and women including improving the status of part-time work.
- recognise the impact of multiple disadvantage in the context of addressing the economic crisis, and ensure that measures pay attention to women in particularly vulnerable positions – for example, older women workers, single parents, disabled women, migrant workers. This will involve consideration of a range of statistics broken down by sex and other factors such as age, disability, race, ethnic origin²⁹.
- encourage the European Institute for Gender Equality to undertake an analysis of the gender impact of economic crisis and other EU institutions, such as the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working conditions to address gender issues in their ongoing work.
- recognise and support the contribution that civil society can play in addressing the financial/economic crisis, particularly given their representative role with those that are directly affected by the economic downturn.
- provide additional resources, particularly in the framework of PROGRESS, to enable civil society organisations, especially women’s organisations, to identify ways of contributing to economic recovery and to combating poverty and social exclusion.

Recommendations for Member States

Member States should:

- shape their responses to the economic and financial crisis in a way which is sensitive to its differential impact on women and men and demonstrates commitment to gender equality, including a gender dimension in national recovery plans.
- ensure that all proposed policies are subject routinely to gender impact assessment, as a matter of good policy making, and undertake gender impact assessment of the measures currently being taken at national level.
- disaggregate key employment data by gender to improve monitoring and analysis of the gender impact of the economic and financial crisis, and to facilitate the identification of measures at national level to ameliorate adverse impacts.

²⁹ See EAC Opinion on the gender dimension of the inclusion of ethnic minorities, November 2007

- recognise that women may be exposed to financial insecurity as a result of lower pay, broken employment histories and limited financial reserves and target policies in a gender-sensitive way and be sensitive to the possible gender impacts of public investments decisions, including on infrastructure, and on the differential impacts of social security and tax systems on women.
- consider whether a gender budget mechanism might increase gender equality by correcting negative consequences of revenues and expenditures and improve governance and accountability, in particular in respect of national budgets.
- make efforts to improve women's participation at all levels of decision-making, especially in the areas of budgets and in respect of governance arrangements for financial systems at national level.
- pay attention to the first report of the EU Network of women in decision making in politics and the economy launched in June 2008, aiming to provide a platform at EU level for successful strategies to improve gender-balance in decision making positions. This is due in 2009 and will highlight examples of best practice and summarise the exchanges and debates between the Network members³⁰
- encourage appropriate accessibility to and provision for the release of loans by financial institutions to support for women's entrepreneurship.
- work to combat stereotyping, including addressing outmoded assumptions about men being 'family breadwinners' which may impact on women's experience of the crisis; considering the fact that more and more women are main breadwinners, there should be a focus on encouraging greater sharing of domestic labour so that women do not continue to carry the majority of domestic tasks.
- continue a focus on reconciliation measures and take steps to promote these as good practice for both men and women including improving the status of part-time work. There are real opportunities at national level to look at maternity leave, paternity leave, parental and childcare provision – not just automatically encouraging women to take longer leave.
- recognise the impact of multiple disadvantage in the context of addressing the economic crisis, and ensure that measures pay attention to women in particularly vulnerable positions – for example, older women workers, single parents, disabled women, migrant workers. This will involve consideration of a range of statistics broken down by sex and other factors such as age, disability, race, ethnic origin³¹.

³⁰ EU press release, European Network set to boost women in power; See also EAC Opinion on women and decision making,

³¹ See EAC Opinion on the gender dimension of the inclusion of ethnic minorities, November 2007

- ensure full implementation at national level of European Structural Funds to address the effects of recession through retraining and up-skilling initiatives. On the basis of article 14³² of the General Regulation, article 6³³ of both Regulations of the European Social Fund and the European Regional Development Fund, set up a financial reserve within each fund for equal opportunity activities with additional support for cross programmes and other special initiatives being funded separately under technical assistance. Develop mechanisms for equality governance to include gender expertise within Governmental Departments and other agencies that implement measures within cohesion and structural funds and promote women's organisations and networks.
- ensure that the body designated for the promotion of equal treatment at national level is sufficiently resourced and supported to act independently and effectively to provide independent assistance and advice to individuals with potential complaints under equality laws and to provide advice to employers and others on the requirements of these equality laws.
- ensure that the gender dimension is effectively mainstreamed in the work of national administrations and, in particular, ensure that those with responsibilities for gender equality in national administrations are effectively supported and resourced.
- encourage research institutes to analyse the gender impacts of the economic and financial crisis on an ongoing basis to document and monitor they short, medium and long term impacts.
- recognise and provide support for the contribution that civil society can play in addressing the financial/economic crisis, particularly in the light of the European Year on Poverty and Social Exclusion.

³² Confirms the gender equality principle

³³ Article 6 of the European Social Fund : Member States shall ensure that Operational Programmes include a description explaining how gender equality and equal opportunities policies are pursued in their programming, implementing, monitoring and evaluating phases. This should also be applied to the European Policy of rural development in relation to the target "improvement of life quality in rural areas and diversification of rural economy". Article 6 of the European Regional Development Fund, refers to the financing of initiatives addressed to promote gender equality and equal opportunities – with reference to the Cooperation objective