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[Gender - sensitive and women friendly public policies:  
a comparative analysis of their progress and impact](#)

Deliverable 11: **Executive  
Summary**

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## Abstract

The EQUAPOL project sought to assess the progress and impact of integrating gender into public policy in Europe. The project focused on social policies prioritised by the European Social Policy Agenda, which had also called for the mainstreaming of a gender perspective in all relevant policies. Policies and policy processes in eight countries and at European level were studied by the five-partner research team, from 2002 to early 2004.

Progress in implementing a gender mainstreaming approach is found to be slow and uneven across the eight study countries, although there has been much innovation in developing tools and methods to support the integration of gender in policy-making. Sweden remains in the vanguard of countries adopting a gender mainstreaming approach, while elsewhere a “transversalist” approach is more in evidence, whereby gender is added on as an additional objective or consideration albeit across a range of policies. There is evidence of some convergence of approaches, mainly in the mechanisms of gender equality policy and institutional setup, but convergence in relation to understanding of the policy problematic and objectives is more difficult to discern. While concern for the structural and cultural roots of gender inequalities is present in rhetoric, it is little evident in practice. At national level mainstreaming has not replaced previous approaches to gender equality – notably legislation and positive action – but has rather led to a broadening of the targets of equality measures and a more complex mix of policy approaches.

The influence of European gender equality policy on national approaches has been significant, particularly where European funding provides significant resources for policy implementation (and where gender mainstreaming is a condition of EU funding). While EU policy in the form of the *acquis communautaire* has brought significant changes to legislation and institutional setup in the new member states, Lithuania’s experience indicates that the EU has been a weak influence on gender equality policy and practice, this role being played more strongly by international and regional bodies. In some countries the EU’s influence is seen as negative by key gender equality actors, undermining previous gains in some policy areas through its pursuit of a neoliberal economic agenda. Across all the study countries, the EU’s influence is seen as weakening in recent years, with a narrowing of gender equality objectives and a waning of effort and resources to implement EU policy commitments on gender equality.

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

The EQUAPOL project is subtitled “Gender-sensitive and women-friendly public policies: a comparative analysis and assessment of their progress and impact”. Since the mid 1990s the European Union and national governments in Europe have adopted a gender mainstreaming approach, which aims to make all public policy sensitive to gender differences and responsive to women’s needs. This approach implies a significant transformation in the treatment of gender equality in public policy across Europe, extending it well beyond the traditional domain of labour market policy and, at least in theory, addressing structural and systemic causes of gender inequality.

### 1.1 Aims and scope of the research

The aim of the research was to assess the progress and impact of the integration of a gender dimension on public policy formulation and design, especially in social policy fields prioritised by the European Social Policy Agenda. This Agenda, approved by the European Council in 2000, had identified a number of policy challenges, including low levels of personal incomes, low employment rates especially of women, an increasingly high dependency ratio and significant weaknesses in qualifications and skills required by the knowledge-based economy. One objective of the Social Policy Agenda is: “The long standing commitments on equality between women and men at European level should be broadened and a gender perspective should be mainstreamed into all relevant policies”.

The specific objectives of the EQUAPOL research were:

- to identify, analyse and assess how the mainstreaming of gender in public policy formulation and design is proceeding across the Union;
- to identify and assess to what extent and how the integration of gender serves to improve the impact of these policies on the relative wellbeing of women and men and the reduction of gender inequalities;
- to identify, analyse and understand how the integration of gender acts to alter policy-making itself, in particular to identify the added-value of a gender dimension;
- to identify, analyse and understand the synergies between EU and national policies on gender equality/gender mainstreaming and to identify the different approaches to gender equality and gender mainstreaming;
- to catalogue and compare examples of good practice of gender-sensitive and women-friendly policies and policy-making approaches.

Policies in the following eight countries were studied: Belgium, Spain, France, Greece, Ireland, Lithuania, Sweden and the United Kingdom. Thus, the study covered countries such as Sweden, which have an indigenous tradition of gender equality in public policy and have led the way in the development of gender mainstreaming, as well as those such as Greece, Ireland and Lithuania, where the introduction of gender mainstreaming has been primarily the consequence of external influences.

The project aimed to assess the integration of gender equality in two broad policy fields in each country: income distribution, in particular tax, pension and welfare policies; and

education, in particular skills and qualifications in the knowledge society. For education, this was possible in all countries. For income distribution, this was possible in only two countries: Greece and Sweden. In the other countries, the lack of examples of explicit efforts to integrate gender into tax, pension or welfare policies led to a more general focus on gender mainstreaming policy.

## **1.2 Project partnership**

The five partners of EQUAPOL are:

- The Centre for Social Morphology and Social Policy (KEKMOKOP), Panteion University, Athens, Greece, which led the project and undertook the country research in Greece
- School of Sociology and Social Policy at Queen's University Belfast, UK, which undertook the country research in Ireland, UK and Spain and was responsible for the cross-country comparative analysis.
- The Department of Applied Economics, Université Libre de Bruxelles (DULBEA), Brussels, Belgium, which undertook the country research in Belgium and France.
- The Gender & Technology Division, Department of Human Work Sciences, Luleå University of Technology, Sweden, which undertook the country research in Sweden.
- The Institute of Philosophy, Sociology and Law, Lithuanian University of Law, which undertook the country research in Lithuania.

The management team involved the lead scientists from KEKMOKOP (Dr Maria Stratigaki, Dr Mary Braithwaite and Prof. Nikos Kokosolakis) and Queen's University Belfast (Prof. Mary Daly). The scientific committee involved the responsible scientific officers from all five partner organisations.

## **1.3 Research methodology**

Following the initial literature review, an initial survey of policies in each study country was carried out, so as to select the policies to be studied. Similar policies at European and international levels were also identified. These phases of the project allowed the research objectives, concepts and scope to be refined, in line with the emerging evidence of the current state and progress in integrating gender equality in public policy at EU and national levels. Analytical, conceptual and methodological frameworks were elaborated for the country research, which was based primarily on interviews and focus groups with a range of stakeholders in the policy processes being studied and analyses of key documents. The findings of the country case studies were subjected to comparative analysis, focusing on comparisons between countries and between national and EU levels.

The research findings have been disseminated through a European conference and a series of national seminars, as well as by means of published articles and conference presentations.

## Chapter 2

### **Main findings of the comparative analysis at national level**

The comparative analysis focused on the approach and practice of gender policy across the eight study countries, identifying key trends and differences. The factors explaining variations across the countries were also explored.

#### **2.1 Summary**

The results suggest that progress in implementing gender mainstreaming is slow and rather patchy. While there has been much innovation in developing gender mainstreaming, progress has been uneven within and across countries. Three of the eight countries in the study – Belgium, Ireland and Sweden – can be said to show clear evidence of having introduced or being in the process of introducing gender mainstreaming. However, there is significant variation amongst them also, with Sweden clearly in the vanguard. In the other countries, especially France and the UK, and to a lesser extent Greece and Spain, gender mainstreaming efforts are present, but are highly fragmented, being confined either to a particular policy domain or to a specific programme within a domain and disconnected from general governmental policy on gender. Lithuania is a case apart by virtue of its particular history and the steepness of its transition.

There is some evidence of convergence across countries. In particular, there are three components of gender mainstreaming policy that are being extended - to a greater or lesser degree - across all the countries in the study:

- the setting up of dedicated gender mainstreaming units staffed by people with skills to provide technical support as required to various parts of the administration (and in some cases such as Ireland to civil society groups as well);
- the introduction of policy evaluation and monitoring mechanisms, particularly gender impact assessment methods and regular reporting mechanisms;
- changes in the way that policy is made, in particular an increase in social dialogue with the voluntary sector through the institutionalisation of consultation practices, the creation or consolidation of advisory bodies representing women's groups and equipping women's representatives with the necessary skills to participate in policy making.

However, any findings of convergence need to be qualified. Even those countries which have made similar levels of progress tend to follow quite different strategies. Furthermore, convergence tends to be limited to the mechanisms of gender equality policy and the institutional set up. Convergence in relation to understanding of the policy problematic or the objectives of policy is more difficult to discern. Indeed, both the understanding of the gender equality problematic and the objectives of policy show a significant level of fragmentation, not only across countries but also across different government departments (and policy domains) within countries. For instance, although it is true that countries tend to use a similar line of rhetoric regarding the need to attend to the structural and cultural roots of gender inequalities, in many of them there is a significant gap between rhetoric and practice.

## 2.2 Progress in Gender Mainstreaming

All countries examined by the EQUAPOL project have made a formal commitment to implement a gender mainstreaming approach to gender equality. However, there is evidence of a significant level of variation, first, in the extent to which such a commitment is being, or has been, fulfilled and, secondly, in the methods or strategies that are being utilised to realise this commitment.

### 2.2.1 Some Significant Trends

Looking across the eight countries, there are commonalities and general trends to be observed but as the following brief analysis of emerging trends will demonstrate, there are also significant differences.

One general trend is for countries to spread responsibility for gender across units or departments. In some countries ‘decentralisation’ is being achieved through the revision of equal treatment legislation in order to involve all public bodies in anti-discrimination policy (Ireland, UK); in others it is being achieved through the design of ‘transversal’ action plans on gender equality (Belgium, France, Greece, Lithuania and Spain), while in a third scenario it is being achieved through the systematic use of gender analysis tools in the design and implementation of all policies (Sweden).

Transversalism, albeit in different forms, is quite a widely-used response or strategy, especially through action plans that assign responsibility to different units for the delivery of different objectives. The research underlines the need to scrutinise transversalism carefully. While it appears to be synonymous with gender mainstreaming, it is somewhat of a different phenomenon. First, it involves no necessary change in policy-making structures or practices and, secondly, gender equality continues to be designated as a distinct or separate policy space (even though each department or unit under transversalism might come to be assigned gender equality objectives). Transversalism does not integrate gender into the core of policy, but tends to add it on as an additional objective or consideration.

Another trend is for countries to treat gender mainstreaming in an ‘a la carte’ manner, adopting selectively some of the components of gender mainstreaming, especially some of the tools or techniques, without an overall framework. Sweden is the exception in this regard in that it has in place an entire ‘package’, including prioritisation of gender equality as a goal of policy in itself and integration of the range of relevant procedures of gender mainstreaming across different levels of administration. In terms of which components or methods are favoured, the research reveals that gender mainstreaming is regarded as more or less synonymous with gender analysis of policies.

The fact that gender mainstreaming is to be found in each of the countries, albeit varying in degree and meaning, should not be taken to infer that the other approaches to gender equality have been supplanted. Far from it: the evidence for each country is for a mix of approaches. Indeed, equal treatment and positive action remain relevant approaches to achieving gender equality. For example, in some countries positive action measures, which were originally targeted on women’s employment and human capital endowments, are now being applied to the private sphere (such as domestic violence in Spain) and more widely in the public sphere beyond education and employment. Positive action measures are in

addition being used as a key tool to address structural inequalities (such as institutional bias in recruitment procedures in Belgium). Apart from this, the target of positive action measures has broadened to include measures specifically targeted at men (for example boys' development programmes in Ireland) or at both women and men (gender stereotyping interventions in France, Greece and Spain).

Equal treatment legislation has also undergone important development. Thus, in many countries such legislation has been reformed to broaden both the concept of discrimination to include indirect discrimination and the sphere of application to include, for example, public services and facilities, aside from education and the workplace. In effect, the three approaches should be seen as evolving simultaneously. The contemporary mix of policy is more complex than it was in the past and the distinctions between different approaches have become less clear-cut.

### 2.2.2 Countries' Progress in Implementing Gender Mainstreaming

One country that stands out clearly from the rest in the extent and reach of gender mainstreaming is **Sweden**. The main goal, and also the rationale, for adopting a gender mainstreaming approach in Sweden is to combat the structural roots of gender inequality in society. This is regarded as a challenge that other approaches such as equal treatment and positive action have failed to meet. This kind of objective is far-reaching: its achievement requires that gender mainstreaming be deeply embedded in different spheres of activity (social, political, economic). Sweden stands in stark contrast to the other countries where the structural dimensions of gender inequality figure but rarely among the objectives of gender mainstreaming. A second distinctive characteristic of gender mainstreaming in Sweden is its reach: it aims to go beyond incorporating the gender perspective into public policy, extending it to activities emanating from all public bodies (for example, public services) as well as to those of non-public organisations in the private sector, civil society, and so on. A third characteristic of the Swedish approach to gender mainstreaming is that it is the result of a wide consensus among the different social actors and is formally embedded in key political processes. Such a level of consensus is absent in the other countries. Lastly, the Swedish case is also characterised by a high degree of innovation. This includes, amongst others, the design of innovative methods for gender mainstreaming (3-R Method, a method for analysing gender differences in representation and resources, as well as the reasons for such differences, in local government operations), the prominent role given to experts in the policy process, the incorporation of a gender impact analysis into Budget Bills, as well as the implementation of novel gender mainstreaming projects in different departments (and levels) of the administration and other public (and also private) sector bodies or organisations.

A second pattern, less advanced than Sweden, characterises **Belgium** and **Ireland**, together with the regions of **Andalusia**, **Basque Country** and **Scotland**. All of these jurisdictions have gone beyond a purely formal commitment to introduce a gender mainstreaming approach, by taking steps towards its implementation. Such steps mainly consist of putting in place some of the components of gender mainstreaming (which could be conceived of as essential conditions for the implementation of a gender mainstreaming approach). These components are of three main types: techniques and procedures, structural changes and changes in the scope of the policy process, and changes in the range of actors involved.

In comparison to Sweden, all of these countries or jurisdictions are at a much earlier stage in the development of a gender mainstreaming approach. Another important point of contrast between them and Sweden concerns the objectives adopted. While in Sweden the chief objective of gender mainstreaming is to end the structural roots of gender inequality, in these countries the main objective seems to be to introduce a gender mainstreaming approach per se. In other words, in these countries gender mainstreaming is regarded more as an operational objective than as an approach, or strategy, to achieve gender equality. A related point to note is that these countries/regions lack a political concept of gender mainstreaming. Put differently, gender mainstreaming is generally viewed as a pragmatic rather than a theoretical or political matter. A third point of contrast relates to the fact that, in most of these countries, the future of gender mainstreaming remains quite uncertain (unlike Sweden where it is firmly institutionalized). In effect, the gender mainstreaming initiatives that are being carried out are new ventures; many are tied to the current Structural Funds programming period of 2000-2006 (Ireland, Andalusia) while others have but a pilot status (Belgium). In contrast, since gender mainstreaming in Sweden has become the main approach to gender equality, continuity is not an issue.

**France, Greece, Lithuania, Spain** and the **UK** represent the third grouping of countries. In all of them recent governmental documents explicitly refer to gender mainstreaming either as an objective or as a principle governing gender equality policy. However, despite these formal commitments to gender mainstreaming, except for a few initiatives, there is very little evidence that this approach is actually being implemented. Put another way: these countries show evidence of a significant gap between rhetoric and practice in relation to gender mainstreaming.

A second feature common to all of these countries is that the term ‘gender mainstreaming’ lacks a clear and concrete meaning and, therefore, often tends to operate as a catch-all term which is used to refer to varying approaches and activities. For example, it is not uncommon to find in these countries that the term ‘gender mainstreaming’ mainly functions as a new name to refer to ‘old’ policy practices such as positive action measures, transversal national plans involving different departments of the administration (even if such plans are clearly informed by a positive action approach) and even equal treatment legislation. Apart from this, there is also evidence in these countries that ‘gender mainstreaming’ is exploited to serve diverse political needs. For example, in France and Greece politicians and government officials conveniently use the term ‘gender mainstreaming’ to refer to a move from a focus on women to a more neutral focus on gender (which is simply understood as referring to both women and men) as the main concern of equality policy. On the other hand, in the UK the term ‘gender mainstreaming’ is cast in terms of sensitivity of public service providers to the diverse needs of their customers, a use indicative of the wider priorities of the New Labour government rather than of a commitment to a gender mainstreaming approach.

A third common feature is that gender mainstreaming initiatives in these countries tend to be fragmented, in that relevant efforts are confined to very specific domains and lack a connection with each other and the prevailing general policy on gender equality. For example, in France, Greece and Spain an imbalance can be observed between progress in gender mainstreaming in the domains of education and employment and other domains. A fourth common feature shared by initiatives in these countries is that they may be the result of a great deal of effort and perseverance from individual women in key positions of power

(e.g., ministers, senior civil servants, MEPs) or even women's organisations, rather than a decision, at high governmental level, to pursue a new gender equality policy approach.

### **2.3 Different Models of Gender Mainstreaming**

One of the key findings of the research is that gender mainstreaming has no fixed or static set of meanings. It is, as it is practised and implemented by different states and different jurisdictions, quite diverse. The actual content of gender mainstreaming practices therefore begs attention, and suggests that four models of gender mainstreaming are being pursued.

#### **2.3.1 The integrated model**

The first model can be called the integrated model of gender mainstreaming. Of the eight countries studied here, Sweden is closest to this model. In this model gender mainstreaming is seen as a strategy aimed at achieving a more gender-equal society. While in other countries such a general objective tends to be mainly rhetorical (if it exists at all), the Swedish example stands out in that policy discourse rests on a careful articulation of the notions of 'equality' and 'gender mainstreaming', as well as providing a clear rationale as to why the latter is the most suitable approach to achieve the former.

In Swedish policy discourse, the equality/inequality problematic is mainly understood in structural terms, as a problem of gendered patterns of power relations. Key to this understanding is the idea that gendered power structures affect all areas of human activity and human relations and cross the different social spheres (i.e., public as well as private). Such an understanding of the problematic signifies that gender equality policy must be designed to permeate all of these areas of human relations and activities if it is to have a real impact on the lives of ordinary women and men. In other words, gender equality policy must be all-encompassing. This also means that responsibility for gender equality cannot be confined either to a particular government body or to central government bodies but must, rather, be spread across departments and down to lower government levels that hold direct responsibility for a number of public services (e.g., health, social care, education). In addition, responsibility for gender cannot be limited to the public sector but must be shared with the private and voluntary sector as well.

#### **2.3.2 The transversal model**

The second model is called the transversal model of gender mainstreaming. Of the eight countries under study, this model is best represented by Belgium. However France and some Spanish regions like Andalusia also show evidence of this approach. In these contexts, the term 'transversality' indicates an involvement of different government departments or ministries in the implementation of a plan or programme of gender equality. Such plans require some level of cross-governmental consensus and coordination since they consist of the allocation of a number of specific gender equality objectives to each of the ministries involved. Such objectives can be quite varied, ranging from general commitments to integrate a gender perspective into the policies of a given department or ministry, to specific measures aimed at laying down the conditions for the implementation of a gender mainstreaming approach (such as for example the production of indicators and evaluation tools). The implementation of those objectives is usually supported by a dedicated agency or unit of the administration which can be either independent in status or else attached to a given government ministry.

The countries following this approach share a tradition of gender equality policy that is dominated by a positive action approach. This renders the transversal plans distinctive in a number of ways:

- In conjunction with measures that are more focused on the implementation of gender mainstreaming, these transversal plans also contain a significant number of positive action measures and, in many cases, constitute the majority of measures or actions;
- The majority of measures in these transversal plans (including some with a clear gender mainstreaming dimension) are specifically targeted at women;
- The boundaries between gender mainstreaming and positive action measures are quite fuzzy and, therefore, difficult to distinguish;
- These plans are often geared towards laying down the conditions for gender mainstreaming. In this sense, some of the relevant national or regional plans (like for example the Belgian plan) may be viewed only as a preliminary step towards the full implementation of a gender mainstreaming approach.

### 2.3.3 The EU-driven model

The third model of gender mainstreaming is called ‘the EU-driven model’. In the countries representing this model, the EU – especially through its requirement to integrate a gender perspective as a condition of EU funding (or, in the case of Lithuania, membership) - constitutes the main driver in the introduction of gender mainstreaming practices. Ireland is a prime case here and Greece and Spain can also be said to fit the model.

Such a dominant EU influence endows these countries with a number of interrelated features in relation to gender mainstreaming which are quite distinctive when they are put alongside the other countries. To begin with, gender mainstreaming is not part of a larger vision of gender equality as it is, say, in Sweden but is rather more of an end in itself. Furthermore, gender mainstreaming is generally understood in quite bureaucratic or technocratic terms, usually referring to gender impact assessments and other policy-making and policy evaluation procedures. A second characteristic is that, since such technical activities labelled as ‘gender mainstreaming’ are mainly confined to the context of the Structural Funds, where gender mainstreaming practices are being developed outside of these contexts (e.g., ‘coeducation’ in Spain and general equality mainstreaming in Ireland) alternative terms to ‘gender mainstreaming’ (like, for example, ‘transversality’ in Spain or ‘equality proofing’ in Ireland) are used.

A third characteristic shared by these countries is that gender mainstreaming objectives and practices have not been integrated into the mainstream of governmental policy. In effect, gender mainstreaming in the context of the Structural Funds is carried out in isolation from other elements of gender equality policy. A fourth common characteristic is that there is no evidence of inter-departmental collaboration, or indeed coordination, in the implementation of a gender mainstreaming approach. Striking examples of this are provided by both Greece and Ireland in their respective experiences in integrating a gender dimension in the education domain. In both countries, the agencies in charge of implementing gender mainstreaming in education policy are working in relative isolation from the other activities of the relevant ministry. One possible reason for such relative isolation is the fact, that in these countries, gender mainstreaming has not evolved from an indigenous gender equality policy. Finally, a fifth characteristic is that gender mainstreaming initiatives in these countries (with the possible exception of Ireland) are

greeted with some resistance by such actors as officials working in gender-dedicated agencies, academic researchers and feminist organisations. Thus, in both Spain and Greece actors interviewed claimed that the conditions in their respective countries were not ripe for the introduction of gender mainstreaming and warned of the negative impact that such policies might have on progress towards a more gender-equal society. An additional reason for such resistance to gender mainstreaming initiatives might be the fact that these are being developed within the Structural Funds programmes, and thus belong to a framework with the primary objective of increasing economic competitiveness and productivity rather than genuine gender equality objectives.

Lithuania deserves separate attention as a country where the EU influence on gender equality policy is being brought to bear mainly by women's groups which, as the key actors of gender equality in the country, have played an important role in lobbying an unsympathetic government to make progress towards the implementation of EU requirements in relation to gender, including gender mainstreaming.

#### 2.3.4 The generic equality model

The fourth model is more a model of mainstreaming equality rather than one of gender mainstreaming proper. However, under this model mainstreaming practices that are gender specific are being developed as well. This generic model is most evident in the UK - especially in the devolved governments of Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales. Some aspects of the model are also to be found in Ireland and, to a lesser extent, Lithuania.

In this model, gender mainstreaming practices are introduced as part of the development of a broader equality mainstreaming approach. Although there are some differences among these countries or jurisdictions in the depth and scope of equality mainstreaming practices, they mainly consist of the integration of an equality perspective into all public institutions and activities, including policy making, service provision and so on. In some cases, these developments have been triggered by the introduction of new equality legislation while in others they are the result of a broad commitment (involving government and civil society) to put equality at the heart of policy making. In the countries/regions following this model, an equality mainstreaming approach marks a new departure from the more traditional anti-discrimination approaches (the effectiveness of which was highly dependent on litigation) towards a more pro-active approach. Another common feature is a move from an equality policy that was centred on gender equality in particular to one where gender constitutes only one consideration or ground among many others (e.g., disability, race, sexual orientation and so on). As was evident from the interviews conducted in these locations, this is a contested development. A significant number of actors expressed a fear that gender considerations might be diluted or rendered less visible.

#### 2.4 Key Factors Affecting Progress

In terms of explaining progress, contextual or environmental factors are very important. These include for example, a country's or region's track record and history in addressing gender inequality, the extent to which there are champions of gender within the polity or in the public domain, the extent to which gender mainstreaming 'fits' with the dominant political ethos or the particular set of projects promoted by political actors. In relation to a country's track record on gender, it is not possible to say that the length or duration of a country's engagement with gender inequality is *per se* a deciding factor. Critical instead is

the nature of the approach and the depth of the analysis underlying the approach. In the latter regard what matters is the extent to which there is a structural understanding of gender inequality, i.e., an analysis that is based on an understanding that structures and value systems in society contribute to the creation and persistence of gender inequality. Progress in implementing gender mainstreaming is also affected by the existence and activities of ‘champions’ of gender equality policy. These, sometimes individuals in influential positions, sometimes collective interests or groups, can be key in either turning the political spotlight on gender or keeping it on it.

In terms of the third factor – the extent to which gender mainstreaming ‘fits’ with the prevailing political climate – gender mainstreaming does not necessarily command wide support and yet unless there is a political commitment at very high levels it is unlikely to succeed. There are examples of countries where gender mainstreaming has been embraced by government but has not been realised in policy because of a lacking commitment. In addition, the apparent neutrality of the term ‘gender mainstreaming’ and its dissociation from feminist politics allows it to be exploited by decision makers as a catch-all term that fits different purposes (different to gender equality).

One can put such points differently: that the realisation of gender mainstreaming requires a series of conditions to be met. These include, in addition to those mentioned above, expertise in terms of knowledge and skills and the systematic use of evaluation and monitoring tools in policy making and a wide consensus about the objectives of gender equality between all stakeholders (in order to give the process some stability). In some countries, especially France, Greece, Lithuania and Spain, the absence of these conditions is especially striking. They particularly lack stability in the commitment to gender equality and their policy cultures are not sympathetic to activities such as evaluation and impact assessment. The fact that the conditions are not ripe heightens the likelihood that gender mainstreaming will be regarded with a considerable amount of suspicion.

A possible obstacle is a shift of gender equality policy (including gender mainstreaming) to more closely serve economic and especially labour market and productivity objectives. This is visible at both EU and member state level. Although arguably not new, an increased emphasis on labour market objectives is marked in France, Greece and the UK. This is to be seen in the objectives and content of policy (for example, gender equality initiatives in education policy in the UK) as well as in the naming of gender equality institutions (for example, renaming of Minister in charge of equality affairs in France). However, while in France and the UK this renewed focus on labour market and productivity issues is tied to national economic priorities, in Greece it is tied to the dependency that its gender equality policy has on EU Structural Fund Programming (which have a strong labour market orientation).

## Chapter Three

### Main findings at European level

One of the aims of the EQUAPOL project was to understand the synergy between national and European approaches to gender equality in public policy, particularly the influences of EU (and international) policy on national approaches and the similarities and differences between EU and national policies on gender equality.

#### 3.1 Influences on National Approaches

##### 3.1.1 EU influence on national approaches

In general, EU gender equality policy has given gender mainstreaming efforts at national level legitimacy and credibility, and has in some countries (e.g. Ireland, Belgium) acted as a decisive force of change.

EU gender equality legislation has had a particularly positive influence on national policy development, both in countries that had previously lagged behind in terms of sex equality legislation, such as Ireland and Greece, and in the more advanced countries. In the new Member States, the alignment of national law with the *acquis communautaire* has contributed decisively to the creation of institutional bodies and legal mechanisms that support gender equality objectives.

EU financial support for positive action and gender equality measures has been a particularly strong influence on national policy development in many countries and in certain policy domains (e.g. education). The European Structural Funds have been especially important as a positive influence on national programmes to support positive action and equal opportunities for women and men, notably in Belgium, Greece, Ireland, Spain and the UK. Support for positive action at EU level is, however, observed by a number of respondents to have waned, and some argue that gender mainstreaming has been associated with a curtailment in the use of positive action as an instrument of EU gender equality policy.

Concerning the influence of more recent EU policy approaches, the views of national actors become more varied, and more critical. Many of those involved in gender equality policy at both national and EU levels express considerable disappointment and discontent about the direction and pace of EU gender equality policy.

In some policy domains, the influence of EU policy is considered weak, and in some cases negative. In Greece, the influence of EU policy on gender equality in national pensions' policy is weak and indirect, but also negative for the situation of women in the pensions system. A similar situation obtains in Lithuania, where women's organisations identify negative consequences of EU policy on women in social security and pensions systems.

Concerning the future, there is pessimism amongst some actors who have good knowledge of EU policy about the future role of the EU in leading on gender equality policy. There is a noted decrease in the ability of the European Commission to negotiate policy at European level and to provide informed insight on gender equality issues and policy. Even actors

who are supportive of the concept of gender mainstreaming do not consider the EU as a source for a better understanding of the problematic of equality or inequality.

### 3.1.2 International influences on national approaches

The influences of international policy on national approaches to gender equality appear to be three-fold: the general influence on the introduction or reinforcement of gender mainstreaming of the Beijing conference in 1995 and the Platform of Action, to which all EU countries are signatories; international influences on the development of gender mainstreaming methods and tools; and more specific influences, especially in the enlargement countries, of international agencies and regional bodies, many of which have adopted gender mainstreaming as a strategy, but which also strongly emphasise women's rights, women's empowerment and positive action.

The Beijing conference in 1995, and the preparations leading to it, gave a significant impetus within Europe to progress on gender equality policy and gender mainstreaming in particular, both within the European institutions and across member countries. Coinciding with the accession of Sweden (along with Finland and Austria), the Beijing Conference marks a turning point in the character of gender equality policy and its implementation in the EU, and was a significant influence on the increasing congruence of gender equality policy at national and EU levels.

International approaches have also had an important influence on the development of instruments for gender mainstreaming, most notably tools for gender analysis and gender impact assessment and, more recently, the use of gender budgeting.

In Lithuania, positive influences on the development of networks, information, learning and sharing of knowledge in the areas of women's rights and gender equality are identified as a result of actions and support by regional and international bodies (UNDP, the Swedish International Development Agency, the Nordic Council, etc.). The approaches underlying much of this support suggest the existence in Lithuania of at least differing, if not contradictory, perspectives on gender equality as a result of these external influences. This may explain the critical views of many gender equality actors about EU policy and its economic focus.

## 3.2 Similarities and Differences between EU and National Policies

The variations in the current state and constituents of gender equality policy in the study countries are also played out at European level. The interdependence and interaction of the European and national systems within the overall system of governance in the EU, and the highly dynamic character of the latter since the early 1990s, inevitably mean a complex state of affairs, whereby similarities and differences change over time.

### 3.2.1 Policy objectives

Concerning policy objectives, the variations visible at national level amongst the study countries are reflected in the variations and contradictions evident in EU policy objectives on gender equality. The EU shares with Sweden the existence of overarching objectives on gender equality, to which all policies and programmes should contribute. Nonetheless, unlike Sweden, the objectives of gender equality in specific domains of EU policy, such as

education or social protection, do not conform to those at general level and are more similar to cases such as the UK where gender equality objectives are connected with other general policy objectives (notably employment and productivity). The timing of the formulation of EU objectives helps to explain this apparent anomaly, with the general EU policy objectives on gender equality being elaborated when the influences of international and Nordic approaches to gender equality were strong, whereas current EU policies on education and social protection (and social policy in general) have been elaborated in the framework of the Lisbon priorities, which are closely aligned with the dominant ethos of some national policies, notably, but not only, in the UK.

Concerning objectives on gender mainstreaming, EU policy is an amalgam of national approaches, ostensibly aiming to ensure that all Community policies and programmes contribute to reduced inequalities and improved equality between women and men and tackle the structural roots of gender equality (as in Sweden), but being implemented either as an objective in itself or to meet other – primarily labour market and productivity – objectives. The ‘productive’ aspects of gender equality have become increasingly dominant, in discourse and in practice, and the main progress has been in the areas of the European Structural Funds, Employment Strategy and women in science.

### 3.2.2 Medium of gender equality policy

One of the common media of gender equality policy at EU and national levels is equality legislation. Anti-discrimination legislation in employment and education, which are the areas addressed by the EU sex equality Directives, is at the forefront here. An interesting feature of recent developments in some countries is the introduction of equality legislation extending beyond employment-related areas, to cover public services and facilities (as in Ireland) and the private sphere (in Spain). These developments take national legislation in some countries beyond that achieved so far at EU level, where the long-proposed Directive on sex equality in goods and services was only approved (at the end of 2004) after considerable contestation by the industries concerned and following substantial reductions in its scope.

The inclusion in some national legislation of positive action (e.g. Greece and Ireland) also takes some national policies beyond the scope of EU legislation as interpreted by rulings of the European Court of Justice, which have made it difficult to pursue positive action and reduce structural inequalities between women and men, even in the field of employment and in spite of the new Article 141(4) of the Treaty of Amsterdam.

The use of plans for gender equality are also a common feature of national and EU media of gender equality policy. The Framework Strategy and annual Work Programmes of the Commission services started out as plans of action to be implemented and monitored, but they appear to have rapidly lost effectiveness as a tool for the implementation of gender mainstreaming within the European Commission or to inspire national initiatives. There are similarities here with some of the study countries, which have launched national plans as one-off events (e.g. Belgium and Lithuania) or have been unable to sustain follow-up once the launch was over (as in France).

Gender analysis and impact assessment, the main tool of gender mainstreaming in Sweden, has been a strong component of the gender mainstreaming approach at EU level. Gender impact assessment has most notably been used as an instrument of gender mainstreaming

in the European Structural Funds and as part of the ‘women and science’ strategy in DG Research.

Consultation structures increased at EU level as part of the implementation of gender mainstreaming, with additional intra-institutional mechanisms for coordination and monitoring introduced within the European Commission and more recently in the European Parliament, and an additional EU-national consultation mechanism introduced in the form of the High-Level Group on Gender Mainstreaming. However, consultation mechanisms involving non-governmental actors have not been strengthened at EU level, and opinions expressed through pre-existing consultation mechanisms involving national actors, such as the Advisory Committee and experts networks, have been increasingly sidelined. Moreover, there is a recent tendency to broaden the scope of some gender-specific equality mechanisms to cover issues equality in general.

### 3.2.3 Institutions and actors

The basic nature of the institutional set-up for gender equality is similar in the eight study countries and at EU level, with a specific unit or department responsible for gender equality policy, either in relation to policy formulation and/or implementation. As is the case at national level, the Equal Opportunities Unit in DG EMPL has no sanctioning powers vis-à-vis other services in the Commission, and is located at a relatively low level in the institutional hierarchy. There is no dedicated European Commissioner or even Commission Director for gender equality.

The variation between the study countries in terms of the administrative autonomy of the gender equality institutions has a parallel at European level in the proposed changes in institutional set-up. In particular, the future creation of a European Gender Institute is similar to some national structures, such as the Equality Institute in Belgium. It is intended to complement the existing structures within the European Commission. However, the Institute is being created with no new additional resources and, in a context of declining political support for gender mainstreaming within the Commission, could lead to a transfer of some of the Commission’s current functions of implementing and monitoring EU gender equality policy to an ‘arms-length’ agency, with a purely advisory role and with less ability to directly influence policy development and implementation.

With respect to actors, as at national level, the ‘government’ constitutes the main actor in EU gender equality policy. Other actors, such as the European Parliament, the European Women’s Lobby and the European social partner organisations give opinions and are consulted, but are (increasingly) peripheral to decision-making processes. In a sense, the EU appears to combine the situation in countries such as France and Spain, where government has a near-total monopoly on public policy on gender equality, and countries such as the Ireland, Sweden and the UK, where there are officially-recognised regional or national advisory bodies on women’s affairs or gender equality, which are consulted during the policy process.

As at national level, influential individual actors have played an important role at key moments in the policy trajectory at EU level, but without sustained institutional support and mechanisms, their influence can be short-lived and limited to specific policy domains. Academic experts have also played a role at EU level, as is the case in some countries, and the use of European networks of experts to provide knowledge and information and to

advise the Commission on the development of national gender equality legislation and policies was an important part of the institutional set-up of EU gender equality policy in the mid 1990s. There are now only two networks, with a more limited role.

### 3.2.4 Progress

Concerning progress in gender equality policy and in implementing gender mainstreaming, there are similarities between the EU and all of the study countries except Sweden. The EU has, like Belgium and Ireland and some regions of Spain and the UK, gone beyond a purely formal commitment to introduce a gender mainstreaming approach, and has set in place some of the components of this approach, including new structures, disaggregated statistics, assessment tools and administrative procedures to plan and monitor implementation. Unlike these countries however, the range of actors involved in EU gender equality has not been broadened, and has, in fact, been narrowed.

On more recent evidence, the degree of progress at EU level bears greater similarity to the situation in France, Greece, Lithuania and the UK, where, except for a few initiatives, there is little evidence that the approach is being implemented. As already noted, there are significant delays in implementing the Framework Strategy and annual Work Programmes. Instruments and procedures for gender impact assessment are not developed, or are not used, and there is a decline in human and financial resources allocated to the implementation of the strategy and action programme. Even in policy domains where significant progress was being made (such as science and research or the Structural Funds) recent evidence suggests a narrowing of gender equality objectives and a waning of effort in implementing previous commitments. In several policy domains, gender mainstreaming is being reduced to 'equal participation of women and men' in actions. This is already the case in education and is emerging as the future approach in science and research.

One also sees evidence of a similar fragmentation of gender mainstreaming efforts at EU level, with the most successful efforts confined to specific domains, predominantly those relating to the labour market (employment, the Structural Funds, education, science and research) and not yet reaching across the full spectrum of policy domains, as indicated clearly in EU gender equality objectives and gender mainstreaming strategy. Efforts to take gender equality into non-employment-related policy areas have faced considerable opposition within and outside the European institutions.

In effect, there is an increasing gap between the rhetoric on gender mainstreaming and actual practice at European level, making it similar in this respect to member states such as Greece and Spain. Although Lithuania differs from the other study countries in that gender mainstreaming is not part of governmental policy practices, this absence may result from the fact that negotiations on accession focused on adoption of the *acquis communautaire* (the binding sex equality legislation and mechanisms to support its implementation) and that, as part of the 'soft' and open methods of policy coordination and alignment, gender mainstreaming was not required. Recent evidence, such as the use of the gender indicators agreed as part of the gender mainstreaming approach under various Presidencies, suggests an increasingly 'hands-off' approach by the Commission where gender mainstreaming is concerned.

The reasons for the apparent difficulty in sustaining the gender mainstreaming approach at EU level differ in many respects from those in some of the study countries, such as Greece

and Spain. However there might be two common reasons: the difficulty of achieving collaborative work across departments or agencies due to power struggles and competition and the existence of a patriarchal culture within the Commission, whereby gender mainstreaming does not serve the interests of those in power. A specific factor at EU level is the narrower policy agenda overall compared to national level, the result both of the historic origins of the EU and recent political trends, and the increasing hegemony of economic policy objectives.

Changes in the broader policy and political environment have been other important factors. We point especially to two parallel policy developments since the early 1990s. On the one hand there has been a stronger development of social policy in general, with more robust policy commitments, as expressed in the Treaty of Amsterdam, a more systematic approach and support for action programmes. On the other hand, the economic agenda that led to the Lisbon goals and process was taking shape at exactly the same time. Supported by much more powerful forces, at both EU and national levels, the goals of economic and employment growth have come to dominate political priorities and processes, co-opting other 'policy priorities' as mere instruments of the higher economic goals.

This increasingly instrumental approach to gender equality parallels the direction that EU social policy as a whole has taken over this period. The guiding principle of the Social Policy Agenda, agreed at the Nice Council meeting in December 2000, is to strengthen the role of social policy as a productive factor. Gender equality has also been presented in the same light.

Moreover, in the context of joint processes of decision making and ever closer linkages between the administrations involved in policy implementation (particularly the case for social policy, which is the responsibility of the member states), EU policy objectives become more and more a common denominator or generic standard and less and less a way of raising national standards through the setting of EU benchmarks. The general move away from binding legislation to soft laws and open methods of coordination on policy, which require greater consensus at EU and member state levels, poses significant challenges for advancing gender equality, particularly when combined with political changes at national level and the hegemony of neo-liberal economic policies across Europe.

In this context, gender mainstreaming is well-adapted to serve the interests of EU social policy, through its focus on the integration of gender equality in policies and programmes (as opposed to their adaptation or transformation) and its methods (impact assessment, monitoring, evaluation) and instruments (indicators, statistics), which closely mirror those being used to implement the Lisbon goals. If applied as intended, and as laid out clearly in EU guidelines, gender mainstreaming does have the potential to reshape policies and programmes in the interests of gender equality. However, the implementation of gender mainstreaming thus far is not meeting policy commitments at EU or national levels.

## Chapter 4

### Policy conclusions

#### Progress and weaknesses of gender equality policy

Progress has been achieved over recent years, particularly in establishing important mechanisms for the design and implementation of gender equality policy at European and national levels. These include legal and institutional mechanisms, as well as mechanisms for shaping policy-making so that gender issues are taken into account. Progress can be identified across the EU, both in new Member States (particularly as a result of the *acquis communautaire*) and in ‘older’ Member States, including countries that have strong and weak traditions of addressing gender equality.

It is much more difficult, however, to identify progress in terms of the outcomes of gender equality policy; this relates partly to the absence of clear objectives and of monitoring and evaluation (discussed below) and partly to the fact that it may be too soon to judge the effectiveness of recent policy approaches, such as gender mainstreaming, which aim to effect structural change. The research suggests that gender mainstreaming is being treated largely as a procedure or technique, and not as a strategy for achieving structural change and empowerment.

EQUAPOL has revealed a process of horizontalism or transversability that involves gender being extended across a range of policy domains and sometimes institutions. However, there is breadth not depth. Under current arrangements the mainstream remains more or less as it was. There is no evidence as yet of the transformative potential of gender mainstreaming.

Moreover, in the current political and policy environment, which is widely considered to be negative for gender equality, particularly at European level, the potential of gender mainstreaming to produce ‘gender-sensitive’ and ‘women-friendly’ public policy is limited. This does not mean that progress cannot be made, but that new approaches are needed, both to secure the gains already achieved and to make further progress.

#### Vision and objectives of gender equality

One of the main policy conclusions is the need for a much clearer vision of the objectives of gender equality. One of the identified weaknesses of current approaches, most notably gender mainstreaming, is the focus on process at the expense of outcomes. While quantitative objectives have been elaborated (for example the gender indicators agreed under various Presidencies), particularly relating to employment, there is a near total absence of clear social goals and objectives relating to gender equality, even in countries such as Sweden where the principle of gender equality is strongly accepted in society and policy. This makes it difficult to win support for gender equality (what are the benefits, and for whom?) and to elaborate qualitative and quantitative indicators to measure achievements beyond specific policy areas or sectors.

### Gender equality within a broader equality approach

Concerning how to progress gender equality within the context of a broader equality approach, some policy conclusions can be drawn. Gender experts and feminists agree about the specificities of gender, and that gender inequality is about particular types of power (patriarchy), rendering it different from discrimination on the basis of ethnicity or disability. This means that specific gender equality mechanisms (legal, institutional) and procedures (for dialogue, analysis and policy design) must be maintained, as well as positive actions to empower women and promote gender equality. Targeted resources, expertise in gender and gender-specific knowledge and information are also required. However, this can be achieved within a broader institutional framework, which addresses various forms of equality and discrimination. Indeed, there may be advantages – as examples from Scotland and Northern Ireland suggest – in terms of increased political support and resources, and the ability to build alliances across different “identity intersections” (gender and ethnicity, gender and age). Gender equality must not, however, be absorbed into a broad equality approach so that it becomes invisible and stripped of resources, and must not be treated as merely an issue of ‘discrimination’. The issue is not so much if gender equality can or should be addressed within a broader equality approach, but how this can be done so that gender equality is adequately treated.

### Gender mainstreaming: more robust implementation

Concerning gender mainstreaming, the policy conclusions are clear. Gender mainstreaming has many strengths: it addresses structural change and gender relations (not just women and men); it challenges the neutrality of policy and has developed methods and procedures for assessing and amending policies; it implies a consistent, continuous process across all policy domains; and it engages a broad range of actors in its implementation. However, structural change takes time and more robust efforts are needed to strengthen the implementation of gender mainstreaming in policy. Firstly, establishing strategic priorities and focusing efforts on priority areas is essential. This means identifying strategic ‘entry points’ for gender - within a policy domain and policy cycle - that have the greatest chances to progress gender equality. Going ‘mainstream’ is also vital; there should no longer be only pilot projects and “stand-alone, short-term” initiatives. More systematic use of gender analysis and gender budgeting in the context of mainstream budgetary processes and policy reviews could bring significant benefits.

### Broader stakeholder participation and stronger alliances

One of the clear policy conclusions is that gender equality policy and gender mainstreaming cannot be left to policy-makers alone, and not to male-dominated policy-making structures. To progress gender equality, a much wider range of stakeholders needs to be involved in policy dialogue and policy-making, and many more women. This means establishing structured mechanisms for engaging stakeholders outside the state and parliament in policy dialogue, and promoting two-way mechanisms of dialogue not merely one-way consultation. Parliamentary and Government committees on gender equality can include stakeholders from civil society and the private sector. And it means making much more rapid progress on implementing commitments to the equal participation of women and men in decision-making.

More participatory methods of gender analysis and policy development should be used, involving women's organizations, gender experts and researchers. Stronger alliances are needed, across the political spectrum and across different types of stakeholder (civil society, private sector, research, government, parliament). In this way, the knowledge-base of policy assessment and formulation can be improved, and links can be better made between public policy and other spheres of action on gender equality.

#### Strengthening the knowledge-base on gender

A strong conclusion for the development of gender equality policy is the need to reinforce knowledge about gender and gender inequality, and about the impact of public policies on gender relations and gender equality. This means much more systematic monitoring and evaluation paying attention to gender aspects, supported by data and information. Qualitative research, especially on how gender inequality is maintained and on the intersections between gender and other identities and discriminations, is also needed to support policy-making. Even in the Nordic countries, where there has been considerable investment in gender research, there is a need for more research and information, particularly related to important policy areas. Stronger and more sustained support for gender studies in universities and continued European funding of gender, and gendered, research are needed.