



Equal opportunities



Editorial

"The greatest injustice" wrote Aristotle, "is to treat equally things that are unequal". The theory that opportunities and jobs are naturally distributed

on an equitable basis is an illusion – precisely because it involves treating equally things that are not equal.

We have to combat all forms of discrimination with the same determination as ever - but we need to approach the issue from a new perspective. What justification is there, for example, in excluding a large number of our fellow citizens from the job market, as is currently the case with disabled people or members of ethnic minorities? Why should we miss out on all this diversity when, within the AER, we are demonstrating the beneficial effects of policy-based promotion of diversity? Both in ethical terms and from a pragmatic point of view, such discrimination makes no sense at all.

The same goes for equality between men and women. Women's place in society may inevitably be determined by certain factors such as the challenge of combining motherhood with working life, but they are still the victims of various types of discrimination. They are still more likely to suffer violence, to be less well paid than men and to be under-represented in positions of responsibility or in political life. Luckily the situation has improved somewhat over the last 60 years, but we should not lose sight of the fact that discrimination still exists. Further improvement of the position of women would benefit society as a whole.

Several regions in Europe today are taking joint action on these issues, successfully pursuing policies aimed at promoting equality of opportunity. Perhaps the new perspective needed in the fight against discrimination could take the form of a regional approach to the issue? <

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AER Vice President

Vice President of the Region Ile de France-F

Equal opportunities - might is not right

BY PROMOTING DIVERSITY AND EQUALITY AND EFFECTIVELY COMBATING DISCRIMINATION, THE REGIONS OF EUROPE ARE HELPING PROTECT THEIR CITIZENS AND BUILD A MORE HUMANE EUROPE. THEY ARE SHOWING THAT EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY NEED NOT BE AN EMPTY SLOGAN BUT CAN ACTUALLY BE TRANSLATED INTO REAL POLICIES.



Regions are an essential link in achieving equal opportunities

For many years, promoting equal opportunities consisted of introducing reforms to the welfare state with the aim of achieving "equity" – in some cases by suspending the principle of universal and free access to social benefits in order to offer more to those who had less. In other words, a specifically political definition of the right of access to state benefits or to the job market was drawn up. Nowadays, equality of opportunity, where attempts are being made to achieve it, involves a whole raft of specific measures aimed at bringing the disadvantaged up to the same level, combating discrimination and promoting diversity.

Where discrimination has long since become rooted in political and social structures to an extent that it is virtually regarded as part and parcel of "normality", it is not enough just to rely on legislation to resolve the situation. To break through prejudice and give victims of discrimination the feeling that they have a legitimate role to play in society, there is a need for robust, far-reaching policies to help break out of the vicious circle and increase representation of individuals who have traditionally been regarded as "undesirables".

It is no longer just a question of proclaiming their legal rights – equality has to be established in practice as well as in theory.

There are, for example, various laws aimed at combating discrimination of disabled people. And yet organisations for the disabled complain of a woeful lack of specific practical measures. Neither has gender equality yet been achieved when it comes to women's representation, earnings or position in society. And in the case of violence against women it would be wrong – indeed in some cases positively criminal – to believe that current legislation and "changing attitudes" have been sufficient to alter the situation of women. Ethnic minorities, too, are not properly recognised and are caught in a vicious circle whereby lack of representation results in a lack of social commitment, which in itself leads to even greater under-representation. And this is despite the fact that they are an important part of the rich diversity of Europe and its regions. This dossier describes some of the measures being taken on these issues by the regions of Europe. It provides examples of robust, practical policy initiatives based on a regional approach.

Photo: European Commission

Equal treatment of the disabled: combating prejudice

THE LATEST STATISTICS INDICATE THAT 14.5% OF THE POPULATION OF THE EU15 SUFFERS FROM SOME SORT OF DISABILITY, 25% FOR THE 12 NEW MEMBER STATES. A NEW APPROACH IN FAVOUR OF EQUALITY IS NECESSARY, A REGIONAL APPROACH.

According to studies carried out by Eurostat in 2001, 14.5% of the population of working age in the EU of 15 (apart from Sweden) suffers from some sort of disability, and the figure is 25% in the 12 new member states. The studies also show that there is a correlation between age and disability. An ageing population in the EU, combined with ongoing progress in medical science and standards of care, means that the number of people with disabilities is steadily growing and will continue to do so in the future.

The studies also found that a mere 42% of disabled people are in employment compared with 65% of non-disabled people, and 52% of disabled people are totally inactive compared with 28% of non-disabled people (figures again from Eurostat - 2001). These figures offer proof – if any were needed – that disabled people have enormous difficulties in finding employment, are victims of discrimination and – what's more – represent an untapped resource for European economic development. There is a crucial need to sensitize companies to the question of the disabled, especially in the context of their social responsibility. Employers will be all the more willing to go down the path of greater diversity if others offer proof of the positive impact that diversity has had on their company: diversification of services, corporate image etc. Such positive experience can be effectively communicated so as to ensure a transfer of good practice models via organisations such as the Assembly of European Regions.

Achieving equal opportunities for the disabled involves four main objectives: considering their special needs, even if this means adopting measures that appear to give them favourable treatment compared to those without disabilities; combating discrimination and unfair treatment; furthering their full participation in public life; combating prejudice.

The region of Steiermark-A, for example, has taken up the cudgels for the disabled and is combating discrimination and actively furthering integration by organising public meetings at which the “able-bodied” put themselves in the place of handicapped people in everyday situations. Having to find your way through town in a wheelchair or with your eyes blindfolded gives people – admittedly only for a short time – an insight into what it is like to be disabled. Offering this sort of experience is an excellent way of raising awareness of the many obstacles that hinder the daily lives of these people.

With the same objective in mind, the county of Hampshire in the UK has adopted a policy of mixing disabled and non-disabled children in its schools. Such an approach is not only an act of prevention and education but also, at the same time, a pragmatic choice – it is a much more efficient way of combating inequality to open up so-called “normal” schools to disabled children, and it also costs less than setting up “special schools” or other such structures.

When it comes to employment, the so-called “Jobcentre Plus” maintains direct contact with organisations for the disabled in a bid to gain a better understanding of their needs. Organisations are also invited to provide information about the obstacles that still prevent disabled individuals from finding jobs. The idea is that existing prejudices about disability and employment can be reduced and information can be gathered that enables financial problems to be understood and resolved. In this way the authorities are determined to do something about the “income paradox”, whereby disabled individuals often receive a lower income in employment than if they were on state benefits.

The county's Disability Equality Scheme 2006 -2009 also caters for disabled organisations to be involved in all relevant decision-making processes. Thus the County is working directly with orga-



nisations like the “Hampshire Coalition of Disabled People” and “Southampton Centre for Independent Living”, in order to remove existing physical, financial or perceptual barriers and ensure that accessibility regulations are applied in all new public or private projects. The associations are invited to identify and report barriers and obstacles, and the University of Birmingham has been commissioned to act as an independent monitor of the response to and effectiveness of the campaign. The police, fire brigade, district councils, local authorities and hospitals are all directly involved in the process of removing obstacles – because at regional level they have direct contact with those affected.

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www.a-e-r.org/events/health-social-affairs-committee/2006/seminar-r-plenary-com-b.html



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Gender equality, some way still to go

TO CHANGE THE WORLDS OF WORK AND POLITICS, TO CHANGE MENTALITIES AND COMBAT VIOLENCE, WE NEED ENGAGEMENT AT ALL LEVELS.



The world of work

Women are playing an increasingly prominent role in the labour market. Following the Second World War their desire for greater independence, combined with a shortage of labour, meant that greater numbers of women underwent training and took up work. They also benefited from a long period of economic growth – while at the same time contributing to it. Gradually, from a position of having been relatively invisible, they became an integral part of the labour market. Nowadays, however, the labour market has radically changed, as have family structures. We are now confronted with a new phenomenon that mainly affects women: insecure jobs and the risk of poverty.

When women find themselves in “unstable” employment (short-term contracts, temporary employment etc.) or “reduced” employment (shorter working hours imposed by the employer) they risk getting into econo-

mic difficulties and slipping into poverty. The danger is particularly great if their marriage breaks up, as the additional burden of caring for the children is usually added to a precarious employment situation. But poverty is not the only problem. Other issues are poor career prospects, career interruptions and difficulties in entering or re-entering the world of work.

It is clear that the main blame for this insecure position of women lies with gender inequality. Not that insecurity and poverty are confined to women alone – some jobs held by men are similarly insecure. But unequal treatment means a higher proportion of women is affected, and the risk of getting into such a situation is increased.

The principle of equal pay for equal work has, in one form or another, been enshrined in European law since the 1950s. And the idea that women should receive the same pay as their male colleagues is also largely accepted. But the application of the

principle has proved to be an enormous task. Women still earn, on average, 25%* less than men – despite an increase in the proportion of women employees over the last 15 years. In other words, women are overrepresented in the lower wage categories, and men are more likely to come into the category of higher earners. 77% of low wages in the EU are paid to women.

This discrepancy is picked up by the Kiruna Declaration, adopted by the AER in March 2006 at its VIth conference on equal opportunities for men and women. The document draws attention to the goal of achieving a 60% employment rate amongst women by the year 2010 and the undertaking to set up childcare facilities for 90% of children under the age of three by the same date. To demonstrate its commitment to action rather than words, the AER has applied these principles within its “Social Policy and Public Health” Committee, and requires there to be both a male and female candidate for the post of Committee President. →



Photo: Värmland

Interview

Monica Ekström

“Prevention should take place at all levels”

Monica Ekström is County Commissioner of Värmland-S, the lead partner of the project “Prevention of Intimate Partner Violence – a Public Health Approach”

Nicolas Schirrer: What are nowadays, in the 21st Century, the mechanisms of domestic violence?

Monica Ekström: Freedom from violence is a human right... I think that the patriarchal perception of women and the conviction that men have the right to possess, control and exert power over women are the basis of domestic violence. This structural violence is wholly unacceptable and we, as regional politicians, should stand up to our responsibilities and take action. Abuse has many consequences, going beyond an individual's health and happiness and having an impact on the well-being of a

community as a whole. Living in a violent relationship affects a woman's self-esteem and her ability to participate in society.

N. S.: In addition to education and communication, what must be done in order to improve the options available to victims in terms of receiving support and/or care?

M. E.: Actions for prevention of domestic violence should take place at all levels; a multi-sectoral approach is absolutely necessary. Värmland County Council has adopted an Action Plan for combating domestic violence and its impact

on health. Referring to the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child, I would also like to emphasise the impact that domestic violence has on children, as they often witness domestic disputes. When watching (or listening, or even sensing) daddy hitting mummy, a child's image of a caring parent is distorted: there is a real danger that in growing up these children will develop psychological problems and that they will repeat these patterns of violence.

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www.preventabuse.eu

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The world of politics

At the Kiruna conference the region of Bruxelles-Capitale-B had an opportunity to present the various measures it had taken for achieving gender equality. The region had set itself a number of goals: to promote the participation of women in positions of power, to provide information or training – if required – to respect existing legislation on equality of opportunity and, finally, to create reliable instruments for assessing the extent to which women are represented in local authorities. These efforts bore fruit: for the 2006 local elections a regulation came into force, laying down that the number of male and female candidates on each list should not differ by more than one and the top two candidates should consist of one man and one woman. The result was that the number of female candidates, the number of women at the top of the list and the number who were eventually elected increased by 5 to 10%; today 42% of the region's elected representatives are women.

Combating violence

The project "Preventing domestic violence – a public health approach" offers a good example of inter-regional cooperation. Its aim is to prevent or combat violence against children, young people or adults and to offer protection to victims and high-risk groups. Since April 2004 the regions of Värmland-S, Steiermark-A, Hampshire-UK and Devon-UK have been pooling their expertise and sharing best practice within their health systems.

Specifically the project involves special training for hospital staff and social workers in dealing with and caring for the victims of violence. Seminars and advisory sessions are also organised on treating the perpetrators of violence. And at the level of prevention, measures aimed at promoting freedom from violence are organised with children, while teaching staff is offered advice and training on the issue. With this proactive, innovative approach, prevention of violence has been successfully incorporated into the public health agenda.

* (DG EMPL - 12/2001)

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www.a-e-r.org/main-issues/equal-opportunities

Equality irrespective of origin: diversity as the overriding principle

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES POLICIES TARGETING ETHNIC MINORITIES SHOULD BE DEVELOPED FURTHER: TODAY WE NEED TO ACT FOR DIVERSITY, FROM THE GLOBAL TO THE REGIONAL LEVEL

The last 30 years have demonstrated that it is not enough merely to proclaim equality of opportunity for it to become a reality. Social and professional mobility in some EU Member States is no greater nowadays than in the 1950s, and there are severe limits to the idea that school education can boost social mobility, irrespective of ethnic background. Official proclamations of legal equality can no longer hide the discrimination – particularly racial discrimination – that is now acknowledged to exist to a hitherto unsuspected extent.

None of the statistics available from the 27 EU Member States adequately describe the current diversity of ethnic minorities. Europe is like a melting pot, with one flow of migration succeeded by the next – yesterday, today and tomorrow. Such diversity poses complex problems that call for an approach at the level most appropriate for ethnic minorities – the regional level.

The Roma, for example, currently form the largest ethnic minority within the EU of 27. A past study of the situation of the Roma within the enlarged EU already identified the huge obstacles they face in the fields of employment and education. The latest Eurobarometer survey on discrimination, published in January 2007, identifies significant differences in the countries concerned with regard to people's perception of whether the Roma constitute a disadvantaged group. 90% of those questioned in Sweden, for example, were convinced that the members of the Roma community were disadvantaged in Swedish society, whereas the figure for the new accession states of Bulgaria and Romania was only 60%.

The region of Baranya-H is currently working with German, Polish, Czech, Slovak and Romanian regions on an exchange of knowledge and experience related to the marginalization of the Roma community in cities. This project, which is co-financed by the structural funds under the INTERREG IIIC programme, has underlined the need to adapt state provisions to the particular needs of

the Roma community, in particular when it comes to childcare, education, health and administrative formalities. Such an anti-marginalization policy is linked to a wide-ranging initiative of urban renewal, as there is an urgent need to remove the ghettos that still exist.

In its Pécs Declaration of March 2007, the AER underlined the need for comprehensive, but above all tailor-made policies. The goals are clear: better integration of these minorities into political life and the media, and promotion of diversity across the board, from education to employment. Cooperation within practical projects should be encouraged, and supported. Of course these are not the only challenges to be faced – there are others too – but each individual success can have a positive knock-on effect.

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How EU citizens perceive discrimination in their respective countries
Eurobarometer January 2007

