Assessment of the National Action Plan for Employment 2002 from a Gender Perspective

Ireland

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Involvement of Gender Equality Bodies in National Employment Action Plans (NEAP) Preparation

The main national body with a recognised role in representing gender equality issues in the Irish policy making process, the National Women’s Council of Ireland (NWCI), was involved in a consultative process in the preparation of the Irish Employment Action Plan 2002. Building on its involvement over the last eight years in the social partnership process which has resulted in a number of key national agreements on economic and social policy, the NWCI was invited to make a submission and participation in a consultative forum around the NEAP. The partnership process was extended over this time period to include a new pillar of representation known as the community and voluntary sector (encompassing organisations of women, people with disabilities, unemployed, older people, lone parents and others) alongside the traditional social partners – business interests, trade unions, farming interests and government. The traditional social partners continue to occupy key central positions in the partnership process in a context in which pay and taxation agreements take precedence over broader social and economic policy agreements, which tend to be more aspirational than specific and targeted.

A draft National Action Plan 2002 was prepared by the Department of Enterprise and Employment and circulated to the various organisations involved in the consultation process. A day long consultation meeting was arranged and participating organisations were asked to prepare submissions on the Plan which were circulated in advance and spoken to and debated over the course of the meeting. The Department then prepared a revised Report which was then adopted by Cabinet and sent to the European Commission. Submissions from the Community and Voluntary Pillar and the Irish Congress of Trade Unions and Employers Organisations were published as appendices to the Irish NEAP. While the consultation process provided an opportunity for various organisations to express their views on employment policy issues, there was no commitment or onus on government to integrate these views into the NEAP. However many of the aspects of employment policy covered by the Action Plan are also addressed by the different working groups established under the most recent national agreement the Programme on Prosperity and Fairness negotiated and monitored between the social partners.

National Employment Policy in Context

This section of Ireland’s NEAP examines the Irish economy over the past year using a number of specific indicators such as growth in Gross Domestic Product, employment
growth, change in unemployment, inflation etc. Emphasis is on the maintenance of recent high levels of employment growth and the reduction of unemployment levels, both average unemployment levels as well as long-term unemployment. In relation to gender there is a recognition in this section of the plan of the significance of women’s employment growth to the strong performance of the Irish economy in relation to employment growth over the last five years. The growth in women’s employment rates is seen as critical to the achievement of a positive increase in the average employment rate and is also seen as the key to future growth.

“…broad labour market policy…remains valid i.e.
- to promote employment growth and employment for all who seek it;
- to mobilise labour supply, including through increased female participation, equal opportunities and a balanced increase in immigration, in order to contribute to a consistent, strong, sustainable and non-inflationary level of economic growth;
- to enhance labour quality through education, training and in particular lifelong learning in order to strengthen the employability of individuals and to promote competitiveness and adaptability in firms;

However where it moves to a consideration of the main elements of employment policy the emphasis is on traditional approaches to increasing employment, reducing the numbers of registered unemployed, preventing the drift into and bringing down the level of long term unemployment. Key elements of this strategy are increased investment in training and employment programmes and an intervention programme aimed at preventing the drift towards long term unemployment among certain age groups based on a Local Employment Service. There is little focus on specific policies to further activate women’s latent labour supply or to improve the conditions of employment among women currently in the paid workforce.

**Actions to Raise Employment Rates and Improve Quality at Work**

Significant changes in employment rates, particularly among women, are highlighted in Ireland’s NEAP 2002. A five percentage point increase in the average employment rate driven largely by a strong rise in the employment rate of women and older people are revealed in the following data included in the Plan:

**Employment Rates 15 – 64 years of age**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>1998</th>
<th>1999</th>
<th>2000</th>
<th>2001</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>60.5%</td>
<td>63.2%</td>
<td>65.1%</td>
<td>65.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>48.9%</td>
<td>51.9%</td>
<td>54.9%</td>
<td>55.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Older</td>
<td>41.6%</td>
<td>43.7%</td>
<td>45.3%</td>
<td>46.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Growth in the Irish labour force is analysed as the result of two main factors firstly the natural increase in labour supply due to population change and net immigration and secondly the rise in women’s labour force participation rate. A slowdown in the rate of employment growth is anticipated for 2002 linked primarily to a reduction in the rate of economic growth. Against this background specific measures are identified to encourage employment growth such as intervention among registered unemployed (referred to above) tax reform aimed at strengthening the welfare to work approach, increased investment in education and training, targeting of high skilled immigration and increasing female participation. There is an absence of a gender perspective in the measures taken to address unemployment through an intervention programme, in the resourcing of training and employment programmes and in the increase in targeted immigration.

Certain measures do reflect a definite gender dimension and are as follows:

- a move towards individualisation within the taxation system linked to a system of tax credits
- removing of significant numbers of low paid from the tax net
- additional investment in childcare infrastructure
- new legislation aimed at improving the position of part-time workers
- establishment of working group on the gender pay gap under the Programme for Prosperity and Fairness
- launch of a new EQUAL initiative including the funding of a small number of projects on women’s labour market inequality.

The Irish NEAP does not establish national targets for employment rate growth but does restate a commitment to the Lisbon and Stockholm targets on average, female and older peoples employment rates while stating that “achievement of the Lisbon targets will not be easy” - a situation which it attributes to a downturn in the growth of the global economy.

Two new pieces of legislation introduced during 2001 will have important implications for women workers in Ireland, the Carers Leave Act 2001 and the Protection of Employees (Part-Time Work) Act 2001. The Carers Leave Act provides for employment leave of up to fifteen months (65 weeks) for the purposes of caring for people in need of full-time care and attention. Employment rights are protected during this period of leave. By the end of 2001 it was estimated that 1000 employees had applied for carers leave. Part-time employment has increased by 10% since 1997 in Ireland, the vast majority of these additional part-time workers are women. During 2001 nearly 10,000 additional female part-time workers were recorded in employment while male part-timers are estimated to have fallen by 2,000. The new legislation on part-time work transposes the EU directive on part-time work and is aimed at removing discrimination in employment against part-time workers.

In addition, the National Minimum Wage was increased during 2001 to Euro 5.97 per hour and is set to increase further to Euro 6.35 per hour in October 2002. A survey
carried out in 2001 estimates that 7.3% of women employees are paid at the National Minimum rate compared to 2.7% of male employees.

Response to Recommendations of EU Council of Ministers

EU Council of Minister’s recommendation in relation to Irish employment policy include the following gender specific recommendation:

“Pursue further its comprehensive strategy to increase labour supply and employment rates. Particular efforts should be undertaken to mobilise and integrate further into the labour market economically inactive people, in particular women, by removing tax barriers, increasing the number of affordable childcare places and taking action with the aim of reducing the gender pay gap.” EU Council of Ministers Recommendation 2001

The Irish NEAP 2002 outlines a number of new measures taken over the past year, partially in response to the gender equality recommendation of the EU Council of Ministers 2001. These are as follows:

- Equality for Women Measure with a budget of Euro 29 million over the six years period 2000-2006 funding projects addressing gender occupational segregation women’s access to training and education, gender pay gap and provision for older women.
- Further taxation reform aimed at removing the disincentive to spouses from re-entering the workforce, based on widening the standard rate tax band and placing it on an individualised per-person basis.
- FAS, the national training authority, introduced an allowance for childcare for those taking up training for the purposes of returning to work.
- Establishment of Consultative Group under the Programme for Prosperity and Progress drawing on recent research on the gender pay gap to carry out sectoral studies funded under the EU Gender Equality Programme 2001-2005.
- New legislation providing for protection of employment rights of temporary carers and removing discrimination against part-time workers (see above).
- Increased investment in childcare services to the value of Euro 437 million over the period 2000-2006 aimed at establishing 450 new facilities, upgrading 680 facilities and increasing the number of childcare places by 30% (12,200).
- Increases in National Minimum Wage Levels (see above) for April and October 2002.
- Publication of a Draft National Plan for Women which is currently undergoing a process of consultation with the objective of publishing a final plan in October 2002.

Among the measures detailed above the most significant are the new legislative measures and the increased investment in childcare services. Childcare service provision in Ireland in particular is at a very low level. This new investment continues to target service provision at geographically disadvantaged areas but falls far short of providing
comprehensive pre-school or other childcare services. Other measures such as the
Equality for Women Measure support important individual projects under a range of
headings but the broader question of economy wide gender pay gap and occupational
segregation are unlikely to be much affected. Taxation reform and increased Minimum
Wage levels are important, in particular to women returners and to women workers with
high private childcare costs, but the absence of comprehensive childcare provision
continues to act as a significant barrier to further growth in women’s labour supply.
While the Irish NEAP pays important attention to taxation reform under the principle of
individualisation, little attention is paid to the achievement of individualised entitlements
under the welfare system.

Progress Report

No new measures for gender mainstreaming were introduced during 2001. Equality
legislation introduced in 1998 and 2000 resulted in the investigation of nearly 150
complaints of gender discrimination. Equal opportunities was adopted as a horizontal
principle of the Irish National Development Plan launched in 2000 and covering the
period to 2006. A Gender Equality Unit established under the Dept of Justice Equality
and Law Reform carried out a preliminary training programme with implementing
agencies during 2001.

Women account for an estimated 54% of participants on training and employment
schemes but continue to be severely under-represented on certain programmes, for
example apprenticeships. An important area for high participation of women is under the
Community Employment Scheme which was seriously cut-back during 2001 in the
context of falling levels of unemployment. A consequence of this policy shift has been to
remove funding from important community based activities and may potentially threaten
important childcare and other social provision despite a stated government commitment
to its enhancement.

The Irish NEAP contains no gender specific measures on entrepreneurship, lifelong
learning or IT training. There is some reference to promoting women’s participation in
enterprise training but without any specific measures to achieve it. There is a statement
that a ‘women in business’ initiative piloted in Kilkenny is to be extended nationally but
no budget or timescale is allocated to this process. A range of measures on lifelong
learning and increased skills and qualifications are outlined in the Plan but without a
gender perspective. There is an unstated assumption that such measures are gender
neutral.

Statistical Information

There has been an improvement in the provision of gender disaggregated statistical
information in the Irish NEAP 2002. However under certain headings, for example
lifelong learning, educational attainment and human resource investment, no gender
disaggregated data is presented. These represent key areas of policy which require a
detailed gender analysis in order to inform the policy making process. A number of
indicators are included in the Plan, particularly in relation to employment rates, but it lacks a comprehensive set of indicators as requested by the European Commission. Indicators which are included are predominantly labour market indicators covering such areas as sectoral employment growth, employment rates, educational attainment, unemployment rates, expenditure on training and taxation rates. Of these only the employment and unemployment rates are gender disaggregated.

**Examples of Best Practice**

The published Irish NEAP contains no examples of best practice.

**Conclusion**

The Irish NEAP 2002 contains some important new measures which will benefit women workers, in particular new legislation changes protecting the employment rights of part-time workers and temporary carers as well as taxation reform towards greater individualisation and the implementation of a minimum wage system. There is a lack of a comprehensive or systematic approach to gender analysis and gender equality measures in key policy areas such as measures to tackle registered unemployment, support for lifelong learning, training, upskilling, entrepreneurship and flexibility. Gender equality measures will benefit important groups of women but will not tackle structural gender inequalities imbedded in the employment system. Women’s labour force participation rate has continued to rise significantly over the last years in Ireland in the context of high economic growth. However the gap between women’s and men’s employment rates remains significant, as is the gender wage gap and given the predicted slow down in economic growth it is likely that women will face new barriers in accessing employment opportunities. A critical area is childcare provision and while some improvements have been made including the allocation of additional resources, the level of provision remains extremely low forcing women to rely on high cost private services. Given the concentration of women in low paid and part time employment the absence of comprehensive affordable childcare will likely prove a major barrier to further increasing women’s employment rate in the context of a slow down in employment growth.