EGGE – EC’s Expert Group on Gender and Employment

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

Sweden

Copyright Disclaimer: This report was produced as part of the work of the European Commission’s Expert Group on Gender and Employment (EGGE) and was funded by the European Commission. The European Commission has granted permission for this report to be published in this website. The opinions and views expressed in this report remain the responsibility of the authors and authors alone, and should not be taken to be representative of the views of the European Commission.
The guidelines for 2002 cover areas for improved employability, entrepreneurship, increased adaptability and increased equality of opportunity. Despite the fact of Sweden adopting gender mainstreaming as an official strategy, this year’s report lacks an explicit gender perspective in the first three areas, especially in entrepreneurship and increased adaptability. Gender mainstreaming does not involve the exclusion of specific measures towards increased gender equality. Instead, gender perspectives should be in the fore when assessing questions affecting single individuals and when analysing consequences of changes for women and men. Perhaps the gender perspective is so well integrated in the process that it is regarded as redundant to state it explicitly, i.e. included but not outspoken.

A large number of players, especially the social partners, have participated in the work of producing this year’s NAP.

Employability

High labour force participation and high employment in all groups in society is regarded as a priority in order to maintain economic growth and secure financing of the public welfare systems. The report in general focuses primarily on increasing the supply of labour, especially among those born abroad, young people and people aged 55 to 64. These three groups are regarded as a potential labour reserve since they have low employment rates compared with the labour force as a whole. No explicit differentiation between women and men seem is to be found within these groups. Yet, the entry phase, especially for women, in the labour market is moving up in age. The average age for leaving the labour market is higher for women than men. Finally, women who are born abroad show a lower employment rate than men in the same category.

Nevertheless, the report pays some attention to women in regards to employment rate. Female over-representation among those on sick-leave and part-time employment is regarded as a threat against high labour force participation among women in the future. Women’s labour supply has also fallen lately due to early retirements.

Education policy is regarded as an important part of the government’s efforts to increase the employment rate. Efforts are made to improve the active labour market programmes, to make them more effective so that they meet the quantified targets set by the government.

The government is encouraging more people to remain longer in the workforce and stimulate new employment of older unemployed and early retired, primarily through further training. The reformed pensions system is also regarded as an incentive to continue work. The pension is now based on the entire life income so a person receives higher pension through additional years in paid employment. Early retired people are now also being able to return to work without losing their right to early retirement pension. Since women are over-represented in the group of early retired people, these measures might affect women in particular.
The tax and benefit systems are also regarded as important aspects in order to increase the labour supply and stimulate work. The introduction of the maximum fee that parents pay for childcare is new to be evaluated but since the charges for childcare are now generally lower, an increase in labour supply, especially among women with low incomes, can be expected. The reformation of the tax system in order to reduce the marginal effects of the tax and benefit system has been carried out and a third step of the reform was taken in 2002. Wage earners are now compensated for three-quarters of the general pension contribution, which is payable in form of tax reduction for the individual. The reform has led to reduced marginal and average taxes and increased marginal wages. Especially women with low incomes are expected to benefit from these measures and increase their labour supply. The government is also planning to present, in the fall of 2002, an assessment of whether the economic situation provides scope to further reforms and reductions of marginal taxes in 2003.

Skills development is also regarded as an important measure in order to combat part-time unemployment. Furthermore, opportunities to take part in the activity guarantee are also offered to part-time unemployed who receive unemployment benefits. From May 2001, the National Labour Market Board also introduced a special procedure. All part-time unemployed in health care and social services must now show a certificate from their employer that desired working hours cannot be offered.

The Swedish labour market is still quite gender segregated and there are gender imbalances to be found. According to the NAP, 69 percent of the “underemployed” were women in February 2002. The national Labour Market Board has therefore been given the task of reducing partial unemployment, primarily focused on skills development, work organisation, working environment and information initiatives. The government has also proposed a prohibition against discrimination against part-time employees, covering wage conditions, pensions, work benefits etc.

During 2002, the Council for the European Social Fund in Sweden will have equal opportunities as a special theme, with development partnerships focusing on breaking down gender segregation.

Entrepreneurship
Regarding women’s entrepreneurship, the government estimates that a total of SEK 42 million will be used to promote women and those born abroad to start and run businesses. In sum, the government has initiated several important measures in order to encourage and facilitate entrepreneurship. However, an explicit gender perspective is miniscule.

Adaptability
The objective and work of breaking down gender bound educational choices are continuing through study and occupational guidance. The proportion of women is increasing in male-dominated courses but the increase of men in female-dominated areas is limited. Follow-ups of the targets set for 2001 will take place in 2002.

The social partners have stated in most agreements that they will continue to take responsibility for developments in the field of working time. At the same time, a parliamentary commission is producing proposals for rules in order to increase influence of employees over working time. Intensive work is also been carried out to reduce sick leave and
improve health in working life, especially through the “11-point programme for Better Health in Working Life”.

The Riksdag has allocated SEK 300 million over a three-year period for measures towards reducing part-time unemployment. Focus is on testing new work organisations and working methods to create full-time positions.

Equal Opportunities Policies
The Swedish government is working towards improving the strategy of mainstreaming and a project has been started aiming at developing gender budgeting. The NAP states that the choice of gender mainstreaming as a strategy does not exclude a continued prioritisation of special measures for women. The NAP can therefore be criticized for lacking gender perspectives.

The project “Men and Equal Opportunities” will produce a report during 2002. The project aims at identifying obstacles for men to become involved in equal opportunities work. The government’s ambition is not only to facilitate for women to combine work and family but also to get men to take greater responsibility for their family.

A working group at the government’s office has found a positive correlation between equal opportunities work and high birth rates. That is, increased female participation in employment has been accompanied by higher birth rates. Analysis of possibilities of equal opportunities branding continues. The government has also taken initiatives to make possible use of an “anti-discrimination clause” in public procurement.

The equal opportunities ombudsman started a project in January 2002 called “The European Project on Equal Pay”. The project includes informing employers and trade unions of methods and tools for gender-neutral pay systems.

A new law on equal treatment of students came into force on March 1, 2002.

The National Institute for Working Life has been instructed to consider if employment protection for employees on paternity leave needs to be strengthened.

The government has announced a new ceiling in income, conferring entitlement to sick pay (SGI) from July 1 2003, if the public finances is permitting. With the new higher ceiling, compensation when parental benefit is taken out will increase. The amount of people with income in excess will decrease from 20 percent to 8.

In sum, among the measures mentioned in the NAP 2002, in regards to equal opportunities, the majority was already included in last year’s NAP.