*Feminist Economics* 11(3), November 2005, 1–26

# REFLECTIONS ON GENDER MAINSTREAMING: AN EXAMPLE OF FEMINIST ECONOMICS IN ACTION?

*Jill Rubery*

## ABSTRACT

This article reviews the experience of gender mainstreaming within the European Employment Strategy – an experience that merits evaluation not only for what it has and has not done for fostering equal opportunities in Europe, but also for the implicit lessons it provides in applying feminist economics in practice. The experience has been mixed: though the argument that increasing women's employment is critical to the achievement of Europe's aspirations for a higher employment rate has been widely accepted, there is a much weaker and more fragile commitment to improving the quality of work available to women. In part, this limited impact reflects the continuing gender blindness of most employment policy analysis and development; there is a clear need for continued parallel development of feminist theory and analysis and more practical experiments in integrating a gender perspective into policy programs.

KEYWORDS

Gender mainstreaming, European Union, employment policy

JEL Codes: J160, J200, B500

## INTRODUCTION

This article reviews the experience of gender mainstreaming within the European Employment Strategy (EES) (Janine Goetschy 1999, 2001). This experience merits evaluation not only for what it has and has not done to foster equal opportunities within Europe, but also for the implicit lessons it provides in applying feminist economics in practice. Since 1997, members of the European Union (EU) have signed up to a system of policy-making that requires governments to adopt a gender-mainstreaming approach to a major area of economic and social policy: employment policy. This constitutes a significant experiment in the introduction of a gender-sensitive analysis into economics in action. It has to be said at the outset that one of the lessons we have to learn is that policy-makers, and indeed economists, do not yet have the tools or the understanding for a full implementation of a feminist economics approach and, even more

*Feminist Economics* ISSN 1354-5701 print/ISSN 1466-4372 online © 2005 IAFFE
http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals
DOI: 10.1080/13545700500300876

importantly, may well lack the political will to move far along that path. Nevertheless, the experience provides insight into both the current obstacles to the application of a feminist economics approach and into what progress can nevertheless be made along that road.

## GENDER MAINSTREAMING AND THE FEMINIST ECONOMICS APPROACH

There are many parallels that can be drawn between the pursuit of feminist economics and the application of gender mainstreaming. At a basic level, both seek to make gender visible. Gender mainstreaming at a minimum requires visibility of the gender impact of policy through the conducting of a gender audit. The Beijing declaration at the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women stated that governments would ensure "that a gender perspective is reflected in all our policies and programmes" (United Nations 1995, para. 38). Moreover, governments were enjoined to "seek to ensure that before policy decisions are taken, an analysis of their impact on women and men, respectively, is carried out" (United Nations 1995, para. 240).

Doing feminist economics similarly requires, at a minimum, an identification of gender differences in inputs and outcomes. However, this can be considered only a starting point; one must go further to identify and "illuminate the ways in which assumptions about gender influence virtually all aspects of economic reasoning" (Edith Kuiper and Jolande Sap 1995: 4). Similarly, gender mainstreaming demands an investigation of gendered societal processes and outcomes, as embodied in policy design and implementation. It requires an appreciation and an interrogation of the more invisible gender influences and the application of a gender approach to areas not normally identified with gender issues. This fundamental reconsideration of the foundations both of economic theory and of policy-making creates the potential for both feminist economics and gender mainstreaming to be "transformatory" in their impact (Teresa Rees 1998). Teresa Rees uses this term to characterize a transition in equality policy from "tinkering" (associated with equality legislation) to "tailoring" (associated with positive action) and, ultimately, to "transforming" (associated with gender mainstreaming).

Rees's approach fits with the now widely cited definition (Mieke Verloo 2001) of gender mainstreaming offered by the group of specialists set up by the Council of Europe to define mainstreaming: "Gender mainstreaming is the (re)organisation, improvement, development and evaluation of policy processes, so that a gender equality perspective is incorporated in all policies at all levels and at all stages, by the actors normally involved in policy-making" (Council of Europe 1998: 13). The definition focuses on the potential for gender mainstreaming to reorganize and improve,

not simply to describe and make visible. Similarly, feminist economics has been linked with an approach to economic theory whereby "the point is not just to produce an interpretation of the world, but to change the world through practical actions" (Diane Elson 1995: 298). Making gender visible allows new connections to be made – for example, between the provision of caring and the operation of the labor market or between skill shortages and gendered attitudes and practices in education.

By linking the academic endeavor to an explicit policy agenda, feminist economics distances itself from the policy-neutral and "gender blind" stance of positivist mainstream economics. Given this goal, gender mainstreaming could be considered the counterpart to feminist economics in the policy arena. Moreover, if progress is to be made it is vital that there is action along both prongs. Without further development in theory, gender mainstreaming will not be supported by a strong analytical base, thereby permitting policy-makers to remain slaves of not only defunct, but also non-feminist, economics thinking. Policy commitments to gender mainstreaming should stimulate policy-makers' interests in analyses that eschew the narrow economistic approach and instead regard the economy as not separate from, but embedded in, social, political, and institutional structures. Committing to gender mainstreaming in policy could thus be viewed as a prerequisite for the generation of a strong momentum behind the feminist economics agenda. That being said, there is a danger that experiments with gender mainstreaming, should they be considered to fail, could lead to a questioning of the usefulness of the feminist economics agenda. For all these reasons, an assessment of the recent experience of applying gender mainstreaming across fifteen nation-states within an important area of economic policy – employment – should provide crucial insights into the current capacities and possibilities for implementing a feminist economics approach.

## THE CONTEXT TO THE POLICY EXPERIMENT: HOW GENDER MAINSTREAMING CAME TO BE INTRODUCED INTO THE EUROPEAN EMPLOYMENT STRATEGY

One of the main impetuses for the development of a common European strategy on employment was the recognition that Europe was falling behind its major competitors – particularly the United States – in creating jobs and maintaining a high employment rate, thereby causing concern over Europe's ability to sustain its social model, including social support for those out of work on grounds of unemployment or retirement (CEC 1994). There are different interpretations of the underlying motivations for the European project, in general, and the EES, in particular (James Wickham 2002). These range from the view that the European project is designed to bring about a more neo-liberal policy in Europe, including the development

of flexible and adaptable labor markets, to the view that the EES and associated strategies are a means to secure the survival of the distinctive European social model. While the survival of the European social model requires adaptation and modernization, the fundamental principles of the model, such as security and equality, should not be compromised (Maria Jaoa Rodrigues 2003).

The precondition for this policy initiative was the agreement in the Amsterdam Treaty in 1997 that employment was an area of common concern for EU Member States. This decision provided the competence at a European level to initiate the EES. The EES is notable not only for the content of the policy but also for its mode of operation. It constitutes the first in a series of policy initiatives that have come to be labeled the "open method of coordination" – that is, Member States agree to participate in a common policy process. The main elements of this process involve producing national action plans that follow commonly agreed guidelines, shaping the overall direction of the Member States' policy agendas. Within this common framework, Member States retain the right to adapt the policies and pace of change in line with their traditions, priorities, and economic and social circumstances (Jonathan Zeitlin, Philippe Pochet and Lars Magnusson 2005). Nevertheless, the action plans are subject to scrutiny by the European Commission (EC) and the Council of Ministers (which is constituted by the prime ministers of the Member States), the latter body providing feedback and recommendations to each Member State for improvements in the direction and implementation of its particular policies.

It is by no means coincidental that when the EES was launched in 1997, only two years after the end of the 1995 United Nations World Conference on Women, the strategy adopted an explicit gender-equality perspective, proclaiming equal opportunities as one of the four pillars of the agreed employment guidelines (see Table 2 below for an outline of the main policy areas covered by the guidelines). However, although the EU had played a major role at Beijing in promoting a commitment to the gender mainstreaming of all policies and had already made such a commitment in principle to apply gender mainstreaming to all EU policies (COM 1996/97), it was not until one year later that it accepted that each of the guidelines under all four pillars of the employment strategy – employability, entrepreneurship, adaptability, and equal opportunities – should be subject to gender mainstreaming.

Though the EU's engagement in the general political process at Beijing is a key factor in explaining the initial development of the gender-equality perspective in the employment strategy, the continued momentum behind the equality perspective must be explained by more proximate factors associated with the European policy-making process. These closer factors fall into three main types. First, and perhaps most important of all, was the increasing awareness among officials and political actors responsible for the

employment strategy that the achievement of the employment targets at the heart of the EES process was critically dependent on the behavior of women. This awareness was by no means immediate, but developed gradually. In fact, the Commission of the European Communities' *White Paper on Growth, Competitiveness and Employment* (CEC 1994) that kick-started the development of a common employment policy made no mention of gender. This omission was heavily criticized by an expert group set up to consider the equal-opportunities dimensions of the *White Paper* (Jill Rubery and Friederike Maier 1995). Not only did the Commission's analysis ignore the interests of women, but it also resulted in a misdiagnosis and misunderstanding of European employment problems. For example, the report described the tendency for most new jobs to be taken by the inactive rather than the unemployed as a puzzle to be explained by the rigidity of the benefits system or by the lack of skills or motivation of the unemployed. However, many of the new jobs were to be found in sectors associated with women's work and with low pay and part-time hours, making them more "suitable" to be taken by women returning from inactivity to employment than by the men displaced from manufacturing or heavy industry into unemployment.

The second set of factors explaining the adoption of an equal-opportunities perspective is more political and is found within the EC and among Member States. For the Economics and Financial Affairs directorate of the Commission, the focus was on the compatibility between employment policy and the financial and stability pact that underpins monetary policy in the EU (for Member States using the single currency). In contrast, the Employment and Social Affairs directorate, which has responsibility for the employment strategy, adopted an identifiably broader approach to the economy. Indeed, efforts have been made to identify how European social policy can be identified as "a productive factor" (see Jill Rubery et al. 1998 for a contribution to this agenda). The existence of these alternative perspectives on the European project within the EC itself is central to the understanding of how the attention paid to both employment and social issues rises and falls within the European agenda.

The importance of political processes is also evident within the series of European presidencies.[1] For example, the Austrian presidency of the Council of Ministers in 1998 played a major role in pushing for the adoption of the principle of gender mainstreaming in EES employment guidelines. Such input from the presidencies has continued to be important in the development of the equal-opportunities dimension to the EES. For example, it was at the Lisbon summit in 2000 under the Portuguese presidency that quantitative targets for both women's employment (alongside overall employment) and the notion of Member States setting individual targets or benchmarks for childcare were introduced. In 2002, the Spanish presidency set more specific childcare targets – namely, 90 percent coverage

for children over three years old and one-third coverage for children under three years old. The presidencies of Finland, Belgium, France, and Sweden also continued to call for more and better information, including indicators on gender equality, and the Greek presidency in 2003 asked the EC to produce an annual report on gender equality for the spring Council of Ministers.

The third and related factor in the development of the European strategy is the role of lobby groups in creating pressure at both the EU and the national levels for the development of gender equality policies. The women's lobby is a well-established pressure group at the EU level; at the nation-state level, pressure groups and political parties have used the commitment to gender equality in the EES and, perhaps more importantly, within the structural funds,[2] to lobby for more attention at the national level. Thus the process has, to some extent, gathered its own momentum as commitments at the EU level are incorporated into the lobby, opening up opportunities for national actors. While at the moment we address the question of why equal opportunities have been given so much prominence at the EU level, an equally important question, to which we return later in the article, is why that prominence has not led to evidence of sustained commitments to equal opportunities and gender mainstreaming at the national level. One major factor is that while national political processes may explain the taking up of equal-opportunities issues, they also explain their abandonment or neglect.

## GENDER MAINSTREAMING IN EUROPEAN EMPLOYMENT POLICY

The assessment of gender mainstreaming in European employment policy during its first five-year phase requires a multileveled approach. First of all, we consider the political dimension to policy-making – in particular, the distinction between policy at the EU level and that of the Member States, and the articulation between these two levels. In discussing the differences in commitments between the EU and each Member State, we also consider the degree of consistency between the overall employment strategy and the objective of promoting gender equality. Second, we look at the use of policy-making infrastructure, including the institutional arrangements and policy processes through which gender mainstreaming is implemented, the availability of appropriate expertise and information, and the mechanisms, such as training, through which technical and specialist knowledge is provided to the policy-making process. Without an effective infrastructure, to ensure commitment at a high level and to feed in appropriate expertise and understanding, gender mainstreaming will only remain a paper commitment.

Third, we look at the use of policy instruments such as tools to evaluate and audit policies and tools used to consider the importance of targets, differentiated by gender or otherwise. Here we also assess the

methodologies that have been adopted for determining the efficacy of employment policies from a gender-mainstreaming perspective. Fourth, we turn to the specific policy areas and identify to what extent and in what ways gender mainstreaming has been introduced into the different fields associated with the employment strategy. The discussion that follows draws primarily on the synthesis reports on gender mainstreaming in the EES that were produced by the coordinating team (Jill Rubery, Damian Grimshaw, and Mark Smith 2000; Jill Rubery, Damian Grimshaw, and Hugo Figueiredo 2001; Jill Rubery et al. 2003) of the expert group on gender and employment (EGGE)[3]; it also draws on the national reports from the experts, produced on an annual basis.[4] To simplify the presentation of the material, we refer here primarily to the experience in specific Member States without reference to the author of the national report; however, these national reports are available for consultation.

## The EU/national political dynamic

The differences we have already alluded to in the interpretation of the central dynamic behind the EES provide considerable scope for equally marked differences in interpretation of its implications for gender equality. The optimistic interpretation is that the policy is designed to modernize the European social economic model. Women's employment, according to this perspective, needs to be incorporated as a central and non-contingent element of the modern European economy.[5] This approach focuses particularly on two main elements: first, the need to expand the share of the working-age population that is employed, thereby boosting the fiscal base in order to support an increasing dependent population outside prime working age; and second, the need for Europe to develop as a knowledge economy, utilizing all its human resources and human capital, much of which is now invested in women. The pessimistic interpretation, from an equality perspective, is that the EES aims primarily at creating more flexible labor markets in Europe – an effort associated with more limited employment rights. Again, an essential element in this objective is the expansion of women's employment, as it is primarily associated with the development of flexible employment contracts and part-time working.

One problem in coming to a view as to which interpretation dominates is that it is undoubtedly the case that different agents engaged in the formation of European policy subscribe to different versions of the agenda.[6] Such complexity is greatly enhanced by the fact that European employment policy is effectively interpreted and implemented at the level of the Member States. While these states sign up to an apparently common agenda, the scope for nation-specific interpretations is not only extremely wide but also intended. Not only do the Member States base their policy approaches on different labor market objectives but also on different

conceptions of the notion of "gender equality." Most policy in Member States is driven by domestic agendas and is only, at most, re-orientated at the margin to fit the European common guidelines. This means that there can be no expectation of linear progress toward European common objectives as the policy agendas in Member States change according to national political processes, including changes of government.

From this analysis of policy formation, it could well be argued that it is unrealistic to assume that the EES and its gender-mainstreaming perspective have had any impact on actual policy in Member States. However, even though it is difficult to gauge the extent of impact, there are several reasons to suggest that gender mainstreaming, as one element of the package, has perhaps had at least some influence on policy – both its infrastructure and its practices. Support for this proposition is found in the impact assessment of the first five years of the EES where, when asked to identify areas where the strategy had made a difference, five of the fifteen Member States identified gender mainstreaming and seven equal-opportunities policies (COM 2002/416).

We will discuss later in this article the actual evidence for changes in infrastructure and in policy areas. It can be argued that, to some extent, the main impact has been felt in those Member States that, prior to the EES, had not developed any real tradition of equal-opportunities policy or gender mainstreaming. Where Member States are required on an annual basis to report on a strategy that they have not yet implemented, or perhaps not even considered, the identifiable impact is that the policy issue has at least been brought onto the agenda. Moreover, while the "open method of coordination" allows Member States considerable freedom to determine their own policy programs as outlined in their National Action Plans (NAPs), the EC does hold bilateral meetings with Member States to comment on their action plan and its achievements, and the Council of Ministers, following advice from the EC, issues recommendations to each Member State as to how to improve performance in the future. The frequent inclusion of gender-equality and gender-mainstreaming issues in the Council recommendations has been a particularly important issue for the development of gender mainstreaming, along with the consequent requirement that Member States comment on how they have responded to these recommendations in the following year's NAP.

Another means by which the EES may be said to influence policy at the Member State level is through the development of common targets. As we will argue below, the focus of the targets, at least at the EES's inception, was on actions to activate the unemployed. The lack of targets with any specific gender dimension during the first three years of the policy may have limited the impact on gender equality. The adoption in 2000 of employment rate targets for 2010, including a specific target for women's employment, may have helped raise the profile of gender-equality issues

within the employment agenda. A particularly good example of the impact of targets in boosting visibility and inducing change in policy areas relates to the childcare targets first developed in 2000 but refined and formalized in 2002. So, while the EES may be insufficiently powerful to bring about any major reorientation of Member States' approaches to labor markets or gender equality, the need for them to report regularly on specific policy approaches and policy targets, and to be accountable for these to the EC and the Council of Ministers, does provide some influence on the policy agenda, at least at the margin.

## Gender-mainstreaming infrastructure

Perhaps the strongest evidence that gender mainstreaming has had some impact on European Member States can be found in the range and variety of new institutional mechanisms for gender mainstreaming that were developed in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Table 1 outlines the main varieties of initiatives found in Member States with respect to gender mainstreaming. However, without further investigation, it is difficult to identify precisely which of these forms of gender-mainstreaming infrastructure is most effective in promoting the gender-equality agenda. Indeed, it is highly likely that the appropriateness of a particular form depends upon the characteristics of the political and policy-making system in the specific Member State. For example, in more federal Member States such as Germany and Belgium, gender mainstreaming may occur below the national or federal level of government due to the power of the regions within their political system. In the United Kingdom, there is in fact clear evidence of stronger commitment to gender mainstreaming in Scotland

*Table 1* Institutional innovations to promote gender mainstreaming of employment policies found in EU Member States, 1997–2002

- Ministries with authority in gender mainstreaming
- Inter-ministerial committees, steering committees or work groups, or committees at the office of the presidency
- Departments, units, or task forces with specific competences or evaluation and monitoring duties
- Parity or equality advisors on key committees or ministries; mechanisms for gender analysis of the budget
- New equal opportunities acts requiring mainstreaming; drawing up of national strategies or plans for equality
- Mainstreaming or gender assessment in individual ministries or areas of public services
- Methodologies or guidelines for gender mainstreaming of government policies or employment policies
- Gender assessment of all new pieces of legislation

*Source*: Rubery, Grimshaw, and Figueiredo (2001).

and Wales, where there has been a partial devolution of power, than in the national parliament. Where social partners are active in shaping employment policy, there is also a need to extend gender mainstreaming into these processes of policy-making, but in practice, action to develop gender mainstreaming has been focused primarily on government. France, however, has introduced new legislation requiring social partners[7] to promote gender equality through collective bargaining (Rachel Silvera 2001).

As the EES requires national responses, there is a need for some centralized mechanism to implement the notion of "gender mainstreaming" into government policy, but Member States differ in the extent to which gender mainstreaming is coordinated across government as a whole or left to individual ministries or activity areas. For example, France and Greece have gone in the direction of establishing inter-ministerial committees to promote gender mainstreaming across traditional policy divides, while Sweden and Finland focus more on introducing gender mainstreaming within individual ministries. For some Member States, mainstreaming has been implemented primarily in specific service areas; in Greece, Germany, Denmark, and Austria, the most progress has been made within the employment service. Here we can posit a direct impact of the EES, which has had as its primary focus the promotion of active labor market policies. There are also differences in the approaches to specialization: some Member States mobilize specific gender expertise and vest responsibilities in gender-equality bodies, while others give this responsibility to all of the different policy-making institutions and require all civil servants and policy-makers to implement mainstreaming. For example, Italy has used parity advisors on committees, while Finland has moved away from such a system, preferring instead, for example, to make it the joint responsibility of all officials drawing up the NAP.

Among all the Member States, a range of approaches to gender mainstreaming can be identified in the mechanisms used to develop the NAPs. In Luxembourg, there is a specific Ministry with the responsibility for overseeing gender mainstreaming in the plan. In other Member States, the gender mainstreaming is done as an integral part of the process of drawing up the plan, rather than introduced as a form of auditing the draft plan. In many cases, those bodies responsible for gender equality have very limited opportunities for involvement in the development of the NAP, and mainstream civil servants have not yet developed the political consciousness or expertise necessary to introduce gender mainstreaming into the initial plan. In recognition of this issue, some Member States (e.g., France) have engaged in training policy-makers in equal opportunities and gender analysis.

While the presence of institutional change is evident in almost all Member States, with most countries initiating some mechanism for gender

guidelines had developed this definition of what gender mainstreaming required:

> [T]herefore, the Member States will adopt a gender-mainstreaming approach in implementing the Guidelines across all four pillars: – developing and reinforcing consultative systems with gender equality bodies; – applying procedures for gender impact assessment under each guideline; – developing indicators to measure progress in gender equality in relation to each guideline. In order meaningfully to evaluate progress, Member States will need to provide for adequate data collection systems and procedures and ensure a gender breakdown of employment statistics. (CEC 2001a)

This definition provided a strong push for Member States to develop policy instruments, including evaluation tools and statistical information by gender, and implement this part of the strategy effectively. Yet the development of statistical analysis by gender has in practice been rather patchy. On the one hand, those Member States lacking gender-disaggregated information at the beginning of the process have in some cases made improvements in that direction; on the other hand, even Member States with well-developed statistical systems have often failed to include specific gender analysis within the NAP. Also, while a number of Member States have developed tools for auditing and evaluating policies by gender, many of these tools are not used specifically within the framework of the EES. Some are still in the process of being developed or applied more specifically within the framework of the structural funds policies. In general, Member States have shown an unwillingness to provide a systematic evaluation of the policies referred to in their NAP. It appears that only those evaluations that provide support for a policy promoted by a Member State receive specific mention in the NAP. For example, regarding the 2003 NAP, the Austrian expert Ingrid Mairhuber pointed out that the NAP did not mention an evaluation of the new leave strategy that suggested a major decline in women's participation; indeed, this policy was put forward as promoting equal opportunities (Ingrid Mairhuber 2003).

Here we come across one of the major problems of the open method of coordination. In principle the idea is that a Member State should assess its policies in relation to the common objectives and improve upon its performance. However, the action plans are produced within a political process and individual governments do not engage willingly, by and large, in self-criticism. Such reservation inhibits the application of tools that could be used for improving performance, and external evaluations of government policies are rarely mentioned within the NAPs. There is then the additional problem that even when policies are evaluated, there is still reluctance on the part of mainstream officials to analyze the effects by

gender. Moreover, many policies are still evaluated not by their effects on individuals but with respect to the impact on the household as a unit.

At the European level, though, there are opportunities to monitor the employment strategy through the use of appropriate statistics and indicators that have been disaggregated where possible by gender. One of the most effective ways in which the Member States are monitored is through the setting of explicit targets. Initially these targets related primarily to the provision of active labor market policies for the young unemployed and the long-term unemployed. To some extent, these deflected attention from the other dimensions of the employment strategy, including equal opportunities. The introduction of the new employment rate target in 2000 was aimed largely at raising awareness of the need for employment creation, not just assistance to the unemployed. As we have argued, the adoption of a specific target for women's employment, at 60 percent of the working-age population by 2010, alongside the overall target of a 70 percent employment rate, certainly reinforced the importance of women's employment to the overall strategy. However, the new employment rate target for the over-55 age group continues to be expressed and analyzed as an aggregate target, without disaggregation by gender, despite the fact that in this age group there are marked gender differences in both the causes of low-employment rates and in recent employment trends.[8] While for men the problem has been early retirement, for women it is more a low rate of return to employment after having children. The example of this age group suggests a need to disaggregate all targets by gender, rather than relying on policymakers to extend the lesson from one set of targets to another.

Among targets, perhaps the most successful from a gender-equality perspective have been those concerning childcare. In expanding their childcare places or in increasing the flexibility of provision, all Member States have made progress over the last few years. It is notable, however, that progress has been primarily in the quantity of childcare provided, in line with the specific targets, while little has been done to address either the issue of quality or, indeed, that of affordability, which appear in the overall objective as aspirations rather than as quantitative targets.

In addition to the targets adopted, the EC[9] uses a set of statistics and indicators to monitor progress towards the objectives. It is clear that improvements have been made in the availability and use of gender-disaggregated statistics; though again, difficulties related to political issues, statistical gaps, and lack of gender awareness still occur. On the political front, Member States oppose the collection and analysis of some statistics, fearing the results could be said to impose on them a common approach to the EES. The freedom these states currently exercise in their interpretations of how to implement the EES may, and often does, result in conflicts with the overall objective of promoting gender equality. So far, however, this problem is not considered sufficient to

require Member States to agree to stricter monitoring according to common definitions of objectives. The main example here is the continued practice of calculating employment rates on a headcount basis rather than a full-time equivalent basis. This approach allows Member States to reach targets for women's employment, even when very significant gender gaps in employment rates appear if these rates are measured on a full-time equivalent basis.

The inadequate availability of statistics remains a problem in a range of areas; notably there are only poor statistics on the availability of childcare, along with very inadequate information on the gender pay gap. The lack of gender awareness among some policy analysts further presents a barrier to effective implementation of the strategy. For example, the five-year impact assessment report (COM 2002/416), admittedly produced by external consultants, questions the desirability of providing incentives to work for the second earner in a household, as such work has potentially negative effects on children. This interpretation is in opposition to the stated European strategy of promoting women's employment. Also, in discussing the aging workforce, the same impact assessment failed to distinguish between the employment trends for women and men. Against these examples, however, it is possible to point to the development of more gender-sensitive and sophisticated employment analysis, found both in the Joint Employment Report[10] (the annual report to the Council of Ministers associated with the EES) and the annual publication, *Employment in Europe*. An example from the latter includes an investigation of the gender pay gap that casts doubt upon the appropriateness of dividing the gender pay gap into explained and unexplained parts, as the factors that appear to legitimize differences in pay, such as education, experience, and occupation, may all play a role in the wider process of gender differentiation and discrimination (CEC 2001b: 38).

This study, among others, suggests the importance of the choice of methodology adopted for making gender visible in employment strategy. Two examples can be used to illustrate this point. First, in the case of unemployment, Member States are allowed to decide the definition of the population of unemployed for whom they are expected to provide assistance and guidance in re-entering the labor market. Some Member States, notably the United Kingdom and Ireland, choose to limit the eligible population to those claiming unemployment benefits, thereby excluding the inactive who may be seeking work – a choice that reduces significantly the share of women within the target population. The second example relates to methods of analyzing the impact of changes in benefit systems. Here, the household is often also adopted as the unit of analysis, as this coincides both with the level at which many benefits are paid and the unit where information tends to be collected. However, this method ultimately obscures the intrahousehold gender effects of the benefits systems (e.g.,

impacts on incentives to work for the second-income earner are not recorded or analyzed).

### Policy areas

Even though in the first five years of the EES, the guidelines for the NAPs were organized under the same four main pillars, the areas targeted for employment action evolved significantly. In particular, there was a gradual process of reducing the emphasis on simply assisting the unemployed into work and increasing the effort expended on the wider tasks of solving skill shortages and improving job quality. To simplify our analysis of the policy areas, we have listed the main topics covered in Table 2, even though not all of these areas appeared as guidelines in each year of the strategy. Further complications arise in summarizing outcomes because of variations not only among Member States, but also within each state according to changes in political agendas. To streamline the information available, we have commented on each policy area, both on the main examples of gender-friendly policies introduced in Member States and on the main ways in which gender-inequality issues have been neglected or even intensified by the introduction of new policies. Where we know of no positive examples from any of the fifteen Member States, the box remains blank. Unfortunately there are negative examples aplenty, such that each of these boxes is filled. Further information on the details by Member State and by trends over time can be obtained by reference to the synthesis reports produced for the EC (Rubery, Grimshaw, and Smith 2000; Rubery, Grimshaw, and Figueiredo 2001; Rubery et al. 2003).

While the number of negative examples certainly exceeds that of the positive, it would be an error to overlook the areas where some progress has been made. Four areas in particular can be identified: active labor market policies, tax and benefit policies, entrepreneurship, and work-life reconciliation policies. There are perhaps a number of factors that can explain why these policy areas have been particularly susceptible to influence from the EES and its gender-mainstreaming requirement. Active labor market policies were the initial cornerstone of the NAPs – a situation reinforced by Member States being asked to meet specific targets for assistance to the unemployed. Thus, it is not surprising that, if a policy area were to be affected by gender mainstreaming, it would be active labor market policies. Indeed, several countries introduced targets or even quotas for women's participation, and several opened up their policies to women returning from inactivity, not simply to those registered for benefit purposes as unemployed. Some countries also provided extensive training to their employment service officials to improve gender awareness in placement and training efforts. What is perhaps more surprising is that some countries (in particular the United Kingdom and Ireland) have failed to change their

*Table 2* Gender mainstreaming in the main policy domains of the first phase of the European Employment Strategy

| Policy guideline | Positive gender mainstreaming | Neglect of gender issues |
|---|---|---|
| Active labor market policies | Setting of targets or quotas for women's participation in programs; attention to gender segregation in training programs or work placements; provision of childcare for participants | Eligibility for schemes limited to those claiming unemployment benefit, thereby excluding the inactive returning to work; concentration of women in programs less likely to lead to employment |
| Tax and benefit policies | Individualization of taxation and removal of disincentives to second-income earners; recognition of childcare periods for pension credits | Ignoring the disincentive effects of household-based benefits or taxes for the second-income earner in the household |
| Active aging | | Presumption that the low employment rate for older workers is primarily the result of male employees taking early retirement and not of women failing to return to the labor market |
| Lifelong learning and e-learning | Inclusion of non-standard or part-time workers within lifelong learning schemes | Limiting schemes to those in employment and even to those in full-time employment |
| Skill shortages | Specific schemes in male-segregated areas such as IT to promote women's employment or training | Ignoring problems of skill shortage in female-dominated sectors such as nursing and teaching; ignoring women as a possible source of labor to relieve the shortages in male-dominated areas such as IT |
| *Discrimination* | | Ignoring the gender dimension in other forms of discrimination – e.g., not differentiating between the employment rates of male and female ethnic minority groups |

(*continued*)

*Table 2 (Continued)*

| Policy guideline | Positive gender mainstreaming | Neglect of gender issues |
|---|---|---|
| Entrepreneurship | Specific schemes to assist women to enter self-employment, including help with finance, training, business advice, etc. | Limiting access to schemes to help people enter self-employment to those claiming benefit on grounds of unemployment |
| Service sector development | Promoting good practice with respect to employment conditions in schemes to generate a supply of local community services, many of which will be provided by women | Schemes for the unemployed to assist in the provision of community services in ways that may displace women already employed in such tasks |
| Tax burden | | Promoting a reduction in the tax burden, even at the expense of cutbacks in essential services to assist women to work |
| Modernization of work organization | Flexible working arrangements allowing women to reduce hours in their current job, thereby reducing the likelihood of women quitting or seeking a new, but often lower-paid, part-time job; providing rights for part-timers to return to full-time work | Policies that presume that more part-time work, whatever the associated terms and conditions, promotes equal opportunities; policies that do not identify problems with long hours of work for gender equality |
| Flexibility with security | Policies increasing the security and benefits associated with nonstandard employment | Policies that increase security and benefits, but primarily aimed at those types of nonstandard employment undertaken by men (e.g., part-time work as early retirement) |
| Gender mainstreaming | The disaggregation of statistics and the evaluation of policies by gender; the setting of gender targets; attention to male as well as female behavior | The assumption that gender issues are limited to allowing women to work on a part-time basis or to have access to leave or childcare |

(*continued*)

*Table 2 (Continued)*

| Policy guideline | Positive gender mainstreaming | Neglect of gender issues |
|---|---|---|
| Tackling gender gaps: unemployment, employment, segregation, pay | The promotion of women's employment through the removal of tax disincentives; policies to desegregate training systems and occupations, policies to promote equal pay, through, for example, minimum wage systems; job evaluation schemes and requirements for the disclosure of information on pay structures | Policies that promote women's employment, but without concern for the quality of work conditions; equal pay policies focusing primarily on women's deficiencies rather than on employer policies |
| Reconciling work and family life: leave and childcare provision | The provision of more paid leave, more flexible leave and more leave for fathers; the expansion of childcare provision and policies to increase its affordability | Increased unpaid leave without childcare provision at the end of the leave to facilitate return to work – thereby possibly reinforcing women's role as primary carers |

*Source*: Based on evidence provided in Rubery, Grimshaw, and Smith (2000); Rubery (2002); Rubery et al. (2003).

longstanding policy of targeting only benefit claimants, thereby restricting women's access to such schemes.

Reconciliation of work and family life is another area where targets can be found to have had a major impact, particularly on policies to expand the provision of childcare in an effort to meet the Barcelona target designating one-third of children under three and 90 percent of those between three and school age as requiring access to childcare. In addition, many countries have extended leave entitlements, though these are often on an unpaid basis. More positively, there have been many initiatives to at least extend periods of leave time reserved for fathers and to increase the flexibility of leave arrangements (Rubery 2002). Progress has also occurred in individualizing taxation, but it could be considered that the momentum behind many of the developments was located in the national policy agenda, independent of the EES. However, the process of taxation change is not uniform. Germany is the one Member State with a tax system that provides strong disincentives for second-income earners, largely due to opportunities the main earner has for splitting income with a spouse for tax purposes, but plans to change this system have so far been shelved. In the fourth area – entrepreneurship – positive developments can be detected,

perhaps as a result of the formal link between European Structural Fund (ESF) funding and EES priorities. Because the availability of resources from the ESF for assistance with entrepreneurship schemes is predicated on a matching with the EES concerns, gender-mainstreaming issues may have received more attention.

Against these areas of partial success, we need to consider those areas that have remained largely untouched by gender mainstreaming. A number of explanations can again be offered. First and foremost among these is the overall weakness of an employment strategy that has very limited leverage on the behavior of employers. This means that policies that require changes in the behavior of employers cannot be readily incorporated into the EES: a key example here is the need for employer action to remove the undervaluation of women's jobs as a way to close the gender pay gap. The main tactic of the EU to promote change within the workplace is to leave this space to the actions of the so-called "social partners" – that is, to achieve change through joint agreement and action between employers' associations and trade unions. Yet, in practice, the social partners have not been, for the most part, either able or willing to take up the challenge. Moreover, even when they have become involved, gender mainstreaming has not necessarily been their main focus of attention. For example, negotiations conducted by the social partners over working time, such as those that took place in Sweden, have not necessarily taken the gender issue to be central (Lena Gonäs and Annike Arberg 2001). In many of these policy areas, there appears to be persistent gender blindness for reasons that are not entirely transparent. It is indeed difficult to imagine why policy-makers persistently fail to identify gender issues in examining, for example, the low employment rates of older workers or ethnic minority groups when even a cursory glance at the statistics reveals striking differences by gender. Similarly, it is puzzling that, when asked to discuss strategies for addressing skill shortage, policy-makers rarely consider women as a possible additional source of labor supply along with immigrants. It is even the case that within the same NAP a discussion of skill shortage in information technology (IT) found in one section will make no reference to women, while in another part of the same plan new policies and programs to increase women's involvement in IT may be named as part of an equal-opportunities agenda (Rubery et al. 2003, section 3.3). It is perhaps more understandable that gender issues are not addressed systematically with respect to the issue of benefits as this would require a rethinking of how social security reform is assessed. In particular, many Member States are unwilling to address the issue of whether benefits should be provided as an individual right, rather than as contingent on the income of the household as a whole, or indeed depend solely upon the employment and earnings record of the main breadwinner.

## REFLECTIONS ON EXPERIENCE OF GENDER MAINSTREAMING FOR FEMINIST ECONOMICS

This sustained and relatively widespread experiment in gender mainstreaming provides a number of points for reflection. We start by considering the integration of a gender-equality perspective into employment policy, where we find a rather paradoxical situation. Despite the relative ease by which a gender perspective has been shown to be significant for the EES, pushing the recognition of gender effects beyond the superficial or simply descriptive has proved much more difficult. There is certainly resistance to the idea that structures and processes may themselves be gendered. We then move to a more direct consideration of policy processes. Here we reflect on the complexities of carrying through a gender analysis into policy strategy and policy implementation followed by a consideration of the limits to the "productivity" case for equal opportunities. We conclude by stressing the continued need to promote equal opportunities on grounds of social justice.

This particular policy experience has thoroughly demonstrated the notion that a gender perspective should provide insights into the ways in which economies and societies function. The adoption of equal opportunities as a fourth pillar coupled with the gender-mainstreaming guideline undoubtedly helped direct policy-makers' attention to the critical importance of female employment for achieving the stated goals of the policy. As the overall policy agenda began to focus less on the openly unemployed[11] and more on the employment rate, the quality of work, and the needs of the knowledge economy, the narrowness of concentrating all policy on only half of the potential workforce became ever more apparent. It is the women's employment rate target that was identified in an EC report (COM 2002/6707) as running ahead of its 60 percent target for 2010; however, what occurs in practice is that policy-makers, frustrated at the lack of progress in improving employment rates for older workers, tend to rely on the women's target being exceeded to minimize the shortfall below the 70 percent overall target for 2010.

However, while experience demonstrates that it is relatively simple to make a convincing case that women's employment is central to the strategy, the paradox remains that this lesson seems to have to be learned over and over again. The notion of differences in behavior between women and men, though recognized with respect to employment rates and employment trends, is not carried forward as a concept applicable to other dimensions of the policy, even, for example, to the case of employment policies for older workers or ethnic minorities, where marked differences by gender are to be found. Similarly, NAPs continue to discuss part-time work as if it is a neutral category, unrelated to women's employment, gender segregation, or low pay. This approach is particularly notable in

discussions of the relative success of the Dutch economic model in raising employment rates: here the very high rates of growth in part-time work are understood as an illustration of the flexibility of the Dutch model – not as a manifestation of the continued development of a particular form of gender relations in the Netherlands (Birgit Pfau-Effinger 1998).

This tendency to easily revert to a gender-neutral or gender-blind analysis suggests that current understanding of how gender is related to the operation of the labor market is at best superficial. Gender has not yet been integrated into either social science training or into the public conceptions of economy and society. Policy-makers still focus on descriptive accounts of the position of men and women within a given structure without providing an analysis or even the hint of an understanding that the structure itself may be gendered.

The EES remains a policy strongly oriented to supply-side economics, and as such, the gender issues engaged by it are limited to changing the labor supply behavior of women. The gendered employment structures and processes including recruitment, promotion, pay, or working time are hardly considered. Indeed, little connection is made between gender inequality and issues such as low pay. The Employment Task Force report of 2003[12] identified no contradiction between, on the one hand, promoting low-wage employment and, on the other, calling for reductions in the gender pay gap (CEC 2003; Rubery 2004). The EES has recognized that gender is embedded in current policy frameworks with respect to the welfare and tax system, but these are areas under the control of government and therefore are compatible with a supply-side approach. The EES has consequently explicitly advocated that Member States move from a household-based to an individualized tax and benefit system in order to reduce disincentives to work for second income earners. On its own, individualization could do more harm than good for women, as it might deprive them of any access to the higher pensions and benefit entitlements enjoyed by men because of their more advantaged position in the labor market.

The failure to engage with policies on the demand side may be noted as one weakness of the EES strategy for promoting gender equality. Another relates to the difficulty of presenting strong evidence-based cases for transformational change in policy approaches. Particularly problematic in this respect is evidence in relation to preferences as these are likely to reflect current arrangements and practices. Preferences for working-time or care arrangements, for example, can be expected to reflect current social norms and practice in relation both to the gender division of labor in the household and to the quality and availability of alternative care facilities. If there were to be changes, for example, in the provision of childcare, the domestic division of labor or even the attitudes to male part-time working, then individual and household preferences could well change

but in unpredictable and unmeasurable ways. The challenge for gender mainstreaming, and indeed for feminist economics, is not to lose sight of this longer term "transformational agenda" while seeking to remain credible with the mainstream by participating in its language and analysis. This also raises the issue of whether the promotion of equal opportunities is best served through the development of specialist expertise or through more general gender awareness training that would integrate gender mainstreaming into the work of all policy officials. One problem with the latter approach is that officials who have no specific agenda to promote change in the gender order may not pursue the longer-term transformational goals.

Gender awareness training raises the additional problem of how to ensure that equal-opportunities policies are included as a priority on the policy agenda. The identification of gender effects is only the first stage; these can be widely acknowledged but not considered a priority for action. Priority is more likely to be given when the gender-equality objective reinforces other aspects of the strategy: this reinforcement of goals could, for example, explain the relatively favorable response to the gender initiative of setting new childcare goals, as the provision of childcare was clearly identified with the overall strategy of improving the European employment rate and not with gender equality per se. Problems emerge, though, when the overall objectives are not compatible with gender equality: thus if the EES is primarily a policy to increase flexibility and potentially to downgrade the quality of work (and there are arguments both for and against this point of view), then not only is there a limited scope for more gender-friendly policies within this framework, but also, under these conditions, successful gender mainstreaming could be regarded as only a pyrrhic victory. This concern has recently become particularly pertinent to the assessment of the gender perspective as it has been engaged by the EES. The period we have assessed here represented the first phase of the EES that included both an equal-opportunities pillar and a commitment to gender mainstreaming. This phase ended, however, in 2002 and new simplified guidelines were adopted in 2003. While gender equality remained one of the new ten guidelines, the pillar disappeared and the strategy's commitment to gender mainstreaming was less visible (Rubery et al. 2003). In 2005, the EU simplified its criteria further by the development of integrated guidelines for economic and employment policy; even though gender mainstreaming and references to gender are still included in the guidelines agreed by the Council of Ministers in June 2005, they no longer even contain a specific gender-equality guideline (COM 2005/141). The impact of this change is not yet known, but it is clear that gender equality is now being promoted primarily as an integral part of the employment strategy rather than as a goal in its own right.

These recent developments suggest that although opportunities to promote gender equality as a means of modernizing the economy and the welfare state system should not be passed up, for it is arguments such as these that most excite policy-makers, we must nevertheless ensure that rights to equal opportunities are viewed as universal and non-contingent. Furthermore, the principal part of the argument for gender equality taken up by policy-makers is that the EES requires an increase in the quantity of women's employment, facilitated by increased provision of childcare. There is much less interest in the promotion of quality employment and thus the question must remain as to whether or not the adoption of this version of the productivity and efficiency argument will actually contribute to gender equality and improvements in the lives of children, women, and men. A particular concern here involves what has happened to the right to care as a result of EES changes. While women want the right to participate in the wage economy, in European governments' enthusiasm to promote an active workforce, the rights of adults to provide care and for dependants to receive it may be currently neglected. This applies especially to policies aimed at encouraging lone mothers back into the labor market as these policies often seem to take no account of the double burden of work and care carried by one single adult.

Finally we should note that, despite the disappointments and the evidence of fragility in commitments to gender equality, policy experiments such as the gender mainstreaming of the EES are vital for progress to be made within the feminist economics agenda. Without an interaction between theory and policy, progress in both is likely to stall.

*Jill Rubery, Manchester Business School, University of Manchester,*
*Booth Street West, Manchester M15 6PB, UK*
*e-mail: jill.rubery@manchester.ac.uk*

## NOTES

[1] The presidency of the European Council of Ministers rotates every six months with Member States taking up the presidency in turn.

[2] Structural funds are made available by the EU to assist in the restructuring of the poorer areas of the European economy or to assist disadvantaged groups.

[3] This article draws on the work that the author has undertaken as the coordinator of the European Commission's Expert Group on Gender and Employment (EGGE). This group acts as an advisory expert group to the Equal Opportunities Unit within DG Employment. It consists of an independent expert from each Member State (membership in 2003: Danièle Meulders – Belgium, Ruth Emerek – Denmark, Friederike Maier – Germany, Maria-Luisa Moltó – Spain, Rachel Silvera – France, Maria Karamessini – Greece, Ursula Barry – Ireland, Paola Villa – Italy, Robert Plasman – Luxembourg, Janneke Plantenga – the Netherlands, Ingrid Mairhuber – Austria, Maria do Pilar González – Portugal, Anna-Maija Lehto – Finland, Lena Gonäs – Sweden, Jill Rubery – United Kingdom) and from 1991 to 1996 and 2000 to

2003 was coordinated by Jill Rubery, together with colleagues at the European Work and Employment Research Centre, University of Manchester (Damian Grimshaw, Colette Fagan, Mark Smith, and Hugo Figueiredo). Since 2004, a new expanded network EGGSIE covering thirty countries has been formed and is coordinated by Colette Fagan, Janneke Plantenga, and Jill Rubery. The expert group is financed by the EC, but the views expressed here are those of the author alone and do not necessarily represent the views of either the EC or the other experts.

[4] All the reports up to 2003 are available on the same website (http://www.mbs.ac.uk/ewerc-egge). Reports for 2004 onwards for the new network are to be placed on the EC's Europa website (http://europa.eu.int/comm/employment_social/gender_equality/gender_mainstreaming/gender/exp_group_en.html).

[5] See, e.g., the social policy agenda communication where the gender gap in employment rates between the EU and the United States is highlighted as one of the main factors behind the strategy (COM 2000/379).

[6] Bernard Casey (2004) has compared the EES to the OECD Jobs Study and considers that the main differences lie not in their views of the labor market but in the EES's greater concern to integrate social policy objectives (and the awareness of possible negative consequences of the policy) and involve social partners.

[7] "Social partners" is the European term used for employers' associations and trade unions.

[8] In fact, the older workers employment rate for men was 50 percent and 30 percent for women in 2002, but the rate of increase has been much higher for women with an increase in their employment rate of 4.4 percent since 1997 compared to an increase for men of 2.9 percentage points (Rubery et al. 2003: Com 2002/6707).

[9] The Employment Committee, a committee established by treaty to assist the Council of Ministers in the employment strategy, has established a sub-committee that recommends a series of indicators for monitoring progress under the EES.

[10] See, e.g., CEC (2004) for a critique of the sole focus on work-life reconciliation policies in NAPs and the lack of attention to the gender pay gap.

[11] That is not including the inactive who would also like to work.

[12] The Employment Task Force was set up under Wim Kok, a former Prime Minister of the Netherlands, to report on how the EES could achieve its objectives; it reported in December 2003 (CEC 2003).

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