

The role of the European Employment Strategy (EES) in the promotion of gender equality in the labour market. A critical appraisal.

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The chapter will address the issues of the role of female employment in the European Employment Strategy (EES) and the need for developing /strengthening a co-ordinated and comprehensive equal opportunity employment policy.

Integrating equal opportunities into employment policy is essential for boosting the overall employment rate of the EU, but it has also crucial for the pursuit of equality. Progress towards a higher employment rate requires more than changes within the labour market system, it requires progress towards equality in the care, welfare and household system.

The EES, launched in 1997, has been reformulated in 2003 and again in 2005. The question addressed in the paper considers these changes (in formulation) with respect to the original commitment to promote gender equality through the development of equal opportunities policies and gender mainstreaming.

The paper will (briefly) consider the evolution in the EES over the last decade (in terms of both its “official” formulation, the way in which it has been translated into national policies, the outcomes). The analysis will be carried out considering two possible distinct aims for commitment to promote equal opportunities (within the EES):

- (i) promote gender equality per se (responding to the demand for social justice)
- (ii) promote gender equality as instrumental to increase the overall employment rate (responding to the need for economic efficiency).

A preliminary analysis (published in Italian, in 2009) suggested that as the EU as a whole has been approaching the so called Lisbon target (i.e. a female employment rate of 60% by 2010), the focus of policy makes (in particular, those influential in the shaping of the EES) has been shifting from issues of equity towards issues of efficiency. As a consequence, the idea of “mainstreaming” all policies from a gender perspective has been losing ground. This interpretation appears to be confirmed by the analysis of the employment policies adopted during the economic crisis.

To sum up, I will try to shed light on the implications (positive as well as negative) of the evolution in the formulation of the EES for the promotion of gender equality in the labour market. In particular, the following two trends (envisaged in the official formulation of the EES) will be considered:

- from “job quality” to “adaptability”
- from issues of “equity” (gender equality) to issues of “efficiency”.