



EZA Kick-off Seminar 2020

Inequality and exclusion mechanisms on the European labour market:

what are the causes and how can we tackle them?

Opening speech

Luc van den Brande, EZA President

(check against delivery)

An inclusive labour market is a labour market that allows and encourages all people of working age to participate in paid work and provides a framework for their development. At present, groups such as migrants, women, young people, older workers, people with disabilities of various kinds often experience lower employment opportunities or remain underemployed in many activity sectors. They face higher risks of (in-work) poverty.

Since its foundation in 1985, the European Centre for Workers' Questions (EZA) has been committed to promote the integration of particularly disadvantaged groups into the labour market and into society – with the help of its educational activities in the European Social Dialogue.

As we have already heard from Bart Gaublonne opening this conference, this year's kick-off seminar is also dedicated to particularly disadvantaged groups on the labour market; we will focus in particular on the situation of women, LGBTQ+, migrants and persons with a (work) disability.

Political context / policy initiatives

In November 2017, the European Commission, the European Parliament and the European Council endorsed together in Gothenburg the **European Pillar of Social Rights**. The Pillar builds on, and complements, EU social and employment policy in order to guide policies in a number of fields essential for well-functioning and fair labour markets and welfare systems.

For many years EZA has been conducting seminar series on selected topics relating to the social policies of the European Union in order to give workers' representatives from all over Europe the opportunity to exchange views on important issues in this field. In particular, the role that workers' organisations can play in the further implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights has been of outstanding importance.

An important element in the framework of the EPSR is the **European minimum wage**, a topic on which EZA also carries through seminars. On 28 October 2020, the EU Commission proposes an EU Directive to ensure that the workers in the Union are protected by adequate minimum wages allowing for a decent living wherever they work. The current crisis has particularly hit sectors with a higher share of low-wage workers such as cleaning, retail, health and long-term care and residential care. Ensuring a decent living for workers and reducing in work-poverty is not only important during the crisis but also essential for a sustainable and inclusive economic recovery.

Gender mainstreaming i.e. including a gender perspective in all policy areas, at all levels and at all stages of policy-making is an important concern of EZA and its member centres. In order to promote the thematic cooperation in this area, EZA has founded the International Platform for Equal Opportunities, which also contributed to the preparation of the contents of this kick-off seminar. For EZA, the new **EU Gender Equality Strategy** is an important milestone on the way to real equal opportunities for women and men on the labour market.

I would like to thank the President of the European Commission for having launched this Strategy in her "Agenda for Europe" and Commissioner Helena Dalli for having presented a concrete proposal for action.

Currently

- women in the EU earn on average 16 % less than men per hour;
- only 67 % of women in the EU are employed, compared to 78 % of men;
- on average, women's pension are 30,1 % lower than men's pension;
- 75 % of unpaid care and domestic work is done by women.

Therefore, policy measures promoting the labour market participation of women are necessary and policy should – together with the social partners – ensure that women and men receive equal pay for the same work and for work of equal value.

An important target group of EZA are also **young** people who have been facing particular difficulties on the labour market for many years. From the point of view of our member centres, the **European Youth Guarantee** which had been set up after the economic and financial crisis in 2008 should be used as a permanent instrument to combat youth unemployment and to promote the transitions of young people from education into employment. Since 2014, more than 5 million young people made use of the Youth Guarantee on a yearly basis, of which more than 3.5 million accepted

the offer. In its October 11 plenary session the European Parliament has just voted on a reinforced Youth Guarantee to ensure that young people who register for the Youth Guarantee are offered quality, diverse and tailored jobs, training or internships.

Cindy Franssen, MEP, who will speak at the end of this conference day will certainly tell us more as she had been one of the negotiators.

Current challenges / The COVID-19 crisis

(Sources: Eurofound: Research report: Living, working and COVID-19.

ILO: The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on jobs and incomes in G20 economies)

In response to the crisis, the European Union and its Member States have introduced many measures to tackle the social and economic consequences of the pandemic. At the centre of the efforts lie measures that aim to rebuild national economies, safeguard jobs and promote social cohesion.

On 10 November, the negotiators of the Council, under the German Presidency, and the European Parliament reached a political agreement on the comprehensive **recovery fund** to fight the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as on the **MFF 2021-2027**. I would like to stress that it is important that the payment of funds is made conditional on members adhering to the rule of law and I sincerely hope that Poland and Hungary will live up to their European responsibility and to European values and will not veto the EU budget!

By September 2020, over 600 measures to support citizens and business during the pandemic had already been implemented at Member State level. Some 40 % of the initiatives adopted from February to mid-September 2020 focused on supporting businesses to stay afloat, while around 20 % of the responses implemented to date provide income protection to workers beyond short-time work.

The crisis also shows the importance of income protection – the EU framework for national minimum wages is about to be introduced as part of the implementation of the EPSR – and underscores the need for urgent action to tackle unemployment, especially youth unemployment.

Job and income losses have been particularly severe for women. Many women still working have been on the frontline in providing essential services while risking exposure to the coronavirus.

The COVID-19 crisis presents a serious risk of rolling back decades of gains achieved in gender equality. The unintended consequences of measures put in place by governments in spring 2020 in an attempt to control the spread of the pandemic has been to increase considerably women's share of unpaid work. In this regard, teleworking has also proved to be burdensome for many working mothers as they juggle work, home-schooling and care, all in the same pocket of space. While some of the gender-unequal impact of the current crisis might be temporary and could reverse at a later stage, others could have long-lasting consequences. It is essential,

therefore, that the economic and social inclusion of women is at the core of recovery measures.

Youth have been hit hard by school closures and the closing down of entry-level jobs in the labour market as well as internships and apprenticeships. High and persistent youth unemployment and underemployment in the aftermath of the global financial crisis showed that once young people have lost touch with the labour market or become marginalized in informal and precarious jobs, re-connecting them with good jobs can be very hard with potentially long-lasting scarring effects.

The pandemic has exposed deep-rooted labour market fragilities and structural inequalities, with low-paid workers, young people, women, ethnic minorities, the self-employed and informal and fixed-term workers among the hardest hit by the crisis.

Thus, policymakers must begin to think beyond policies for the recovery and start on the task of building a future of work that is safer, fairer, greener, and more effective in cushioning the consequences of future crisis on jobs and incomes. This calls for increased policy coherence, in particular between economic, employment and social policies and a whole-of-society approach. It also requires that support reaches those most in need and that improving the situation of the most disadvantaged and vulnerable groups in the labour market receives the highest attention to avoid a further rise in inequalities.

In fact, there are **tangible concerns that the COVID-19 pandemic will foster an increase in inequalities – both between different socioeconomic groups and across Member States**. It is worthwhile observing that the extent to which the COVID-19 pandemic will lead to an increase of disparities among Member States may also have an impact on the stability of the European Union project and national institutions. In this regard, the political promise of the EU balanced and sustainable economic growth, as well as social and territorial cohesion and upward convergence (a reduction in disparities between Member States accompanied by an improvement in their performance) is the aim of the EPSR. Persistent divergent performances as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic would potentially undermine the political support for maintaining or deepening economic and political EU integration.

Responses / concrete requests for action from EZA seminars and research projects:

Social dialogue in crisis recovery:

(Source: seminars of various trade union confederations as, for instance, NSZZ "Solidarność")

Social dialogue must be involved in all policy decisions on crisis recovery that concern employment. Exercising social dialogue is an effective way to design balanced and acceptable policy responses at the sectoral and national level and shape sustainable recovery paths in the medium term.

Social dialogue in the area of inclusion policies:

(Source: research project – EZA/HIVA)

Social partners can play an important role in actions and policies against discrimination and /or to promote diversity and equality at different policy and sectoral/company levels. For instance, they can organize and support awareness-raising campaigns. They can also actively participate (or give expert advice) in diversity policies, in the formal compliant procedures and in enforcing anti-discrimination legislation. They can play an active part at sectoral/company level by implementing anti-discrimination procedures and/or diversity management.

Gender Equality

(Source: AFB/IPEO seminars)

The gender perspective should be systematically taken into account in all policy areas and the discrimination against women and gender stereotypes should be effectively fought against.

With regard to reconciling work and family life, the “50/50 time-sharing” should be anchored in the use of flexible work schedules, parental and caregiving leaves. A legal or collective bargaining framework for company agreements is urgently needed, as individual employees find it difficult to negotiate appropriate working time arrangements for reconciling work and family responsibilities.

The Covid-19 pandemic has acted as an amplifier of the male bread-winner paradigm in society. A package of measures should be defined without delay to remedy the gender inequalities that have come to light.

Young people on the labour market:

(Source: seminars of various EZA member centres, EZA Platform for young workers, and research project/Fondazione Adapt)

Workers’ organisations in Europe should support: good quality vocational training and its recognition throughout Europe, the adaptation of the content of vocational training to the current needs of the labour market, first-time entry into good quality employment, the fight against precarious short-term contracts and more participation of young people in workers’ organisations. Two elements in particular should be taken into account during the crisis: On the one hand, the focus needs to be placed on digital skills and on the other hand, the practical part of vocational training should not be negatively affected by the impact of the pandemic.

Labour market integration of older workers and workers with chronic diseases and/or disabilities

(Source: research project – EZA/HIVA)

As Europe’s population ages, more people with chronic diseases and disabilities are part of the population at working age. Sustainable employment of and decent work for persons with disabilities, with adequate remuneration, job security, motivating tasks, career perspectives, and further training opportunities becomes the new target.

New forms of employment in the digital age can offer possible opportunities for people with disabilities but also include new challenges for the inclusion of people with disabilities in the labour market.

LGBTQ+

Last but not least I would like to say a few words on ex- / inclusion of LGBTQ. I have to admit that this group has not been in the focus of the work of EZA in the past. Though it is an important issue and I am glad that we are going to discuss it during these two days.

Just a few days ago Commissioner Helena Dalli and Commissioner Vera Jourová presented the “first-ever EU Strategy for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, non-binary, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ) equality” (which was also announced in Ursula von der Leyen’s Agenda for Europe). *[we do not yet know whether Dalli will tackle this issue also in her videomessage]* I can only endorse what Commissioner Dalli has said:

“Today, the EU asserts itself, as the example to follow, in the fight for diversity and inclusion. Equality and non-discrimination are core values and fundamental rights in the European Union. This means that everybody in the European Union should feel safe and free without fear of discrimination or violence on the grounds of sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression or sex characteristics. We are still a long way away from the full inclusion and acceptance that LGBTIQ people deserve. Together with the Member States, I trust we can make Europe a better and safer place for all. In this regard, the strategy calls on those Member States that do not have national LGBTIQ equality strategies to adopt one, addressing the specific equality needs of LGBTIQ people within their country.”

I am very much aware that this is a very sensitive issue. Some persons and some countries feel their Christian values, their national cultural traditions offended. EZA is a network of workers’ organisations that are dedicated to Christian-social values. The dignity of a human being is at the core of our believes. We have always been fighting for the values laid down in the Social Teaching of the Church – which is about equality! Even Pope Francis has recently spoken up in defense of homosexual families.

In this regard I am looking forward to our exchange and debates these two days with open hearts and in mutual respect.

Thank you!

Königswinter, 19.11.2020