

Life for women in Europe is not bad. But 'not bad' is not good enough, said Helena Dalli, EU Commissioner for Equality in her video message to participants of this year's EZA kick-off seminar. "Mechanisms of inequality and exclusion in the European labour market: What are the causes and how can they be addressed?" was the topic of this seminar and it included the aspects men and women, migrants, LGBTQ+ and people with (work-relevant) disabilities.

The seminar, which was organised together with EUROMF and the International Platform for Equal Opportunity (IPEO) and with the support of Beweging.Academie, Europees Forum and ACV BIE Internationaal, was held on the 19th and 20th of November 2020 and was supported by the European Union.

Approximately 100 representatives from workers' organizations and the scientific community discussed possible solutions. A special feature of this year's event: Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the kick-off seminar was held online for the first time.

Exclusion must be turned into inclusion, said EZA President Luc Van den Brande in his opening address. Since it was founded in 1985, EZA has promoted the integration of disadvantaged groups in the labour market. The situation of younger and older workers, migrants, the pay gap between men and women, the ratio of paid and unpaid work - these and many other aspects related to this topic are regularly discussed by the EZA member centres in their seminars. Much progress has been made at the European level - but in the current COVID-19 crisis, many of these achievements are in danger of being lost. Notwithstanding all other efforts currently under way, it is also important that we continue to focus on securing social cohesion - at the national level and across the EU. Every person in the EU should feel free and safe. No one should be excluded from the human family.

Equality of men and women in the labour market

Lesia Radelicki, a member of Helena Dalli's cabinet, underlined the importance of the Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2024 for the European Commission and also noted the search for gender-sensitive responses to the COVID-19 crisis. Achieving fair pay and respect for women requires not just legislative but also other measures. A task force has been established to ensure that the entire European Commission is gender-sensitive, and it also includes the Gender Equality Representatives of the Directorate Generals. All commissioners are asked to collaborate more closely in this context. The objective: to ensure that everyone in society has equal rights. No one shall be discriminated against. The European Union must pursue a coherent approach both internally and externally. The importance of this issue is also reflected in the multi-year financial framework. Civil society plays a very important role in all gender equality-related questions in Europe.

Social Dialogue in Europe

Jörg Tagger, Division Head "Social Dialogue" of the Directorate General Employment, Social and Integration of the European Commission, explained the adjustments to EU labour market policies due to the COVID-19 crisis. Extraordinary circumstances required extraordinary measures, said Tagger. This is reflected in the multi-year financial framework (which also provides additional funds for EZA) and the reconstruction plan for Europe. All social partners must be on board so that the effects from the crisis can be managed together.

He highlighted the initiative on a European minimum wage as a beacon initiative by the European Commission, which is primarily designed to address the current imbalances. Furthermore, the European Pillar of Social Rights will gain additional momentum with the planned May 2021 summit in Porto, which will focus on the concrete implementation of the same.

Gender equality

Jeroen Lievens presented a case study on shorter working hours - a project by the women's network of beweging.net, Femma. As part of the study, 58 employees had the option of reducing their working hours to 30 hours a week for a whole year (with full wage adjustment), in order to find a better balance between paid and unpaid work and to be able to show more appreciation for family work. The result: a better quality of life and more satisfaction in both their personal and professional lives.

Marieke van den Brink, Professor for Gender Equality and Diversity at Radboud-Universiteit Nijmegen, gave a presentation on organisational processes for creating a more equitable work environment. Depending on the sector, there are different gender imbalances in the workplace. There are still very few women holding leadership positions and many more women than men work in precarious jobs, work part-time and take parental leave. She presented a number of theories to achieve more equality in the workplace, and she emphasised that this required organisational structures and inclusive leadership. Diversity must be allowed so that the advantages can become visible.

Cindy Franssen MEP said that real change can only be achieved by doing away with outdated ways of thinking. Basic rights are non-negotiable, everyone must be able to enjoy them and the glass ceiling must continue to be shattered. She welcomed the European Commission's current initiative on gender equality, even though many inequalities still remain. What is needed are sustainable and viable workplaces that are accessible to all, as well as the involvement of workers' organizations.

LGBTQ+

Ellen Delvaux introduced IDEWE, an external service for prevention and protection in the workplace, and she provided an overview of the legal framework in the EU. She looked at the LGBTQ+ group as a risk group for mental stress at the workplace and highlighted how this group is disadvantaged when it comes to career entry, career opportunities and wages.

Ellis Aukema from the Flemish umbrella organisation of LGBTQ+ organisations named education and the development of problem-awareness as the key for more societal acceptance, and she also introduced the PREVENT project.

Both speakers agreed that both LGBTQ+ workers and their colleagues felt uncomfortable in their workplaces. Inclusive leadership can be used to create a favourable work atmosphere. A mind shift across society is essential in this regard.

Migrants

Patrizia Zanoni, Professor for Organization Studies at the University of Utrecht, provided an overview of migration in the EU. Many economic migrants work in precarious jobs and/or part-time, and many do not enjoy any representation. Particularly migrants from outside of the EU are at great risk of poverty. Economic

migrants face permanent pressures, and as a very heterogeneous group they are also very vulnerable overall. The mobilisation of migrants is a big topic for workers' organizations. Workers' organizations wishing to retain their political significance must become more diverse, and a balanced representation of workers is also needed.

Dirk Van Laethem introduced the project "In de zorg – uit de zorgen" - a project in which refugees are trained as health care staff, and which was organised by the association Familiehulp in Flanders (Belgium) in conjunction with partners from Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium.

People with (work-relevant) disabilities

Eline Jammaers, Professor at the Catholic University Löwen, reminded participants that one out of six people in the world has a disability. People with disabilities are exposed to many stereotypes and discrimination. Many work environments are not set up to accommodate disabilities, so that very few people with disabilities are able to find a job. Employment quotas for disabled employees, which already exist in some central European countries, can be helpful in this regard. Similarly, financial support for designing workplaces that can accommodate disabled employees is also important. It is essential that people's understanding for each other and their skills for dealing with each other are improved. Here too, inclusive leadership is an advantage.

Concluding remarks

Heidi Rabensteiner from the International Platform for Equal Opportunity demanded that time taken off for childcare and providing long-term care should be taken into account for pension benefit calculations, and that career opportunities for women in leadership positions should be improved. Flexible working hours for women and men to achieve a better division of family responsibilities, along with equal opportunities for jobs and pay, are also essential. Unpaid work must also be distributed more equally between the genders.

Sigrid Schraml, EZA's Secretary-General, called on workers' organizations to continue their advocacy of disadvantaged groups in the labour market while also increasing their focus on hitherto neglected groups such as LGBTQ+. It is important that people treat each other with mutual respect and tolerance, and that the dignity of each and every person is protected.