

How can labour market policies reduce gender gaps in youth employment?

A Policy Brief

Despite significant improvements in recent decades, the employment rates and wages of women lag behind those of men in all European countries, although the magnitude of these gaps differs significantly across countries. This policy brief reviews policy measures that could reduce the gender gaps in the labour market. This issue has gained particular importance due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has been especially harmful for working women; and due to the war in Ukraine, which forced many women to flee to neighbouring countries, especially to Poland.

Young women face barriers on the labour market. These barriers and constraints include limited access to good quality childcare facilities, lack of part-time and flexible-time jobs, low engagement of fathers in childcare, and gender role stereotypes. These barriers often force women to remain outside the labour market, which makes it difficult to offer them policy support in job searches.

Reaching young women requires tailor-made strategies. The registration rate with the Public Employment Services (PES) is generally lower for female than for male NEETs (youth not in education, employment, or training), mainly due to their childcare and other family obligations. This implies that reaching out to inactive young mothers requires more effort, and a tailor-made approach. Even for young women who do not want to take a job in the near future due to their care obligations, PES could offer them training or other active labour market programmes (ALMP) that prepare them for a job in the future and prevent them from losing their attachment to the labour market, which could lead to long-term unemployment or inactivity.

Policies must ensure equal access to programmes for young women and mothers. Programme design and implementation must ensure gender equality in access to good quality labour market programmes.

Design of ALMP should reflect the specific needs of young mothers. The ALMP offered to youth should include support for accessing childcare to ensure that young mothers (and fathers) can engage in job searches, training, and can return to work. This support may range from offering advice and information to providing or subsidising childcare for programme participants. Counselling on work-life balance may also be beneficial. Mothers facing multiple barriers to employment (if, for example, they have been out of work for several years, have no prior work experience, or have a minority background) may need additional mentoring and counselling to gain self-confidence and job search skills. The internal rules and incentives of the PES should ensure that young women and men can participate in the programme that is the most helpful for them.

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Policies should ensure that firms promote gender equality. ALMP, such as on-the-job training, wage subsidies, and apprenticeship programmes, are often implemented in cooperation with private firms. Policies must ensure that the participating firms promote gender equality, avoid discriminatory practices, and offer flexible solutions (for example, making flexible or reduced working time available to both parents, offering arrangements for breastfeeding) that are suitable for young parents.

Need for adjusting the broader policy framework. ALMP are embedded in the framework of family policies, education, taxation, and social benefits. These policies directly affect the labour supply decisions and employment outcomes of women, and also interact with active labour market policies, influencing their potential impact. For example, the effectiveness of ALMP supporting intensive job search activities for mothers hinges on their access to childcare. This may necessitate an adjustment of national regulations to grant unemployed young women access to childcare on a par with that of their employed peers. In addition, the rules for combining or replacing welfare benefits with income from paid work should be designed to encourage mothers to return to work.

Address multiple barriers. The programme design of ALMP must address multiple barriers, such as the specific needs of mothers belonging to a disadvantaged ethnic minority group or of single mothers. Evidence suggests that when there are multiple barriers, complex programmes with multiple programme elements can yield the best results. Supplementary financial support may be needed to cover the costs of returning to work and/or mobility.

Employment policies should not take traditional gender norms as given. Social norms about gender roles play an important role in households' labour supply decisions, and may limit the scope for policies to influence labour market outcomes. However, employment policies can influence gender norms through communication campaigns and by introducing father-only paternity leave to promote the involvement of fathers in childcare. Employers should be encouraged to promote gender equality in childcare.

Need for further research on the gender dimension of ALMP. Empirical evidence on the gender differences in the impact of employment policies is mixed and the mechanisms driving the diverging results are not well understood. This calls for further studies on the gender dimension of ALMP, and especially on what works for whom and what factors are responsible for the observed gender differences.

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