

**The gender equality challenge: women and
stakeholders assess the performance of the 2000-2006
European Social Fund**

by

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1. Introduction¹

By the late 1990s, when the 2000-2006 ESF resources were being allocated, the employment status of women in the European Union (EU) was unsatisfactory, and it constituted a major political, social and economic problem as women represented the majority of the EU population. The problem was recognised as being multifaceted, given that across Member States women were present in the workforce in smaller numbers, filled lower paying jobs, tended to lose them sooner, had fewer career advancement opportunities, and encountered greater obstacles in securing their first job. In 2000 even the EU's Lisbon Strategy, among other Community actions, acknowledged the gender inequality challenge and incorporated it into its own 'competitiveness' and 'growth' challenge when it emphasised the efficient employment of all human resources for the future of the EU economy in the globalizing world. The Structural Funds resources were to play a central role in the implementation of the Lisbon Strategy. In particular, the European Social Fund's (ESF) strategic approach for 2000-2006 specifically mandated that Operational Programmes (OPs) have a developmental focus on women and work and, therefore, on how to best ameliorate the multifaceted problem by leveraging the potential of women as economic actors.

This paper first highlights the significance of the challenge of gender equality in Europe in terms of its historical evolution, and then it proceeds with the analysis of the views of stakeholders and women as participants in OPs, views that assess the extent to which ESF supported measures during the third programming cycle of 2000-2006 have contributed to meeting the challenge of facilitating women's access to the labour market and increasing their opportunities for advancement within it. In its conclusions the paper reflects on the deep and ongoing economic crisis that since 2008 has ravaged EU regional labour markets and its profound impact on the employment prospects of European women.

The research behind this paper is part of the ex-post evaluation of the 2000-2006 ESF that covered all 25 Member States (excluding Bulgaria and Romania) and drew from the secondary data available. More specifically, the paper draws from the sample of regional case studies that examined in detail the performance of the ESF with regard to the gender equality challenge. The case studies constituted the innovative element of the ex post evaluation in terms of the essential primary data that they yielded on regional institutional performance in the programming and implementation of the ESF OPs and their projects targeted to improving the status of women in the labor market.

2. Women and work: the scope of the gender equality challenge in the debate

¹ This paper is based on research carried out for 'The Ex-Post Evaluation of the European Social Fund 2000-2006' project. The author was a Senior Researcher at the Esoclub (www.esoclub.eu) and served as Principal Investigator of the 'gender theme' of the ESF evaluation project, as well as Senior Advisor for the other members of the evaluation Consortium, led by Vision&Value. The project was funded by DG Employment Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities and coordinated by LSE-Enterprise Ltd in 2008-2010

Across Europe women have long been challenged when it comes to employment opportunities and the quality of life rewards they afford to women and their families. However, historically the nature of the challenge, its causes and social impacts have been remarkably different across Europe. If one takes the end of WWII as the beginning for the analysis of the trends of women in the labor market, and traces the trends through the 1980s with the break up of the Soviet Union and the fall of the Berlin Wall, and up through the 1990s, one observes that three clear divides emerge across countries in Europe: Est-West, North-South, urban-rural.

The Est-West divide during the period under consideration is the most outstanding, both for the very large number of women impacted as well as for the glaring political implications of the differences in the employment status of women in Europe's centrally planned versus market economies. While in Eastern countries labor force participation was quite high and women contributed to it by maintaining high levels of employment across economic sectors, in Western European countries their participation declined below the levels during the war when women had temporarily filled 'men's jobs'. This trend was particularly accentuated in countries as diverse as the UK and Germany but where the war effort had brought the national government into the labor market by the launching and overseeing of women's employment programmes in the war industry and in the countryside for food production. For example, in 1991 labor force participation in East Germany was still almost 20% higher and female participation was almost 30% higher than in the Federal Republic (Riphahn et al. 2001). As another example, Czechoslovakia experienced a large rise in women's participation, especially in the 1970s when generous maternity leave policies were adopted (Adam, 1982).

The North-South divide and the urban-rural divide in women employment trends during the period parallel Western Europe's economic reconstruction after the war. In this regard, significant differences characterize the six founding Member States of the European Economic Community. For example, in 1957 Italy was in the middle of the 'economic miracle' phase that in a couple of decades transformed her economy from agricultural to industrial, with the contribution of millions of men, mostly from rural communities, who emigrated to the country's Northern regions and to the mining and industrial areas of Italy's Northern neighbors. Incrementally, families followed North bound the workers, but for years large number of women in Italy's Southern small towns were the heads of household and local breadwinners working in agriculture.

The two economic recessions of the 1970s impacted heavily on European women, according to the principle of 'first hired, first fired', but also because they put a break to economic growth. This context in turn opened the way to neo-liberal policies that came to characterize the decade of the 1980s together with the take off of the new phase of globalization of the world economy, prompted by the communication and information revolution. It is in the 1990s that the imperative of the 'knowledge economy' (Cappellin, Ferlaino, Rizzi, 2012) emerges with force, partially redefining the traditional divides.

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political, social and economic problem because women represented the majority of the EU's population. The problem was recognised as being multifaceted, given that women were present in the workforce in smaller numbers, filled lower paying jobs, tended to lose them sooner, had fewer career advancement opportunities, and encountered greater obstacles in securing their first job (EGGSIE, 2006 and 2005; Braithwaite, 2000).

But the EU was neither alone nor unique in assessing the terms of the problem of women in the workforce. Ample literature had already been produced on the several inter-related issues that contributed to it (Stadelmann, 2008; Olivetti, 2008; Van der Vleuten, 2007). By the late 1990s, in EU policy circles where resource decisions were made, the essence of the gender debate and how to intervene with effective policy proposals was informed by the following three key arguments.

Overall national measures. Human resources development, and therefore women and work, is still primarily a national issue, on which the EU bears in terms of guiding principles and setting of standards. Taking stock of the incidence of women in the workforce at the level of the Member States should therefore represent one starting point for any comparative assessment and estimation of trends associated with female employment. The literature on women and employment in the EU underlines this fact, and points out that part of the challenge at the EU level is to improve the collection of data and make it as systematic as possible.

Coherent with this, the two questions² pertaining to the gender theme in the ex post evaluation—questions V.a (improvements in gender oriented activities) and V.b (the impact of other ESF activities on gender)³--were investigated together for the purpose of obtaining the most comprehensive set of data possible, across the Member States.. The difficulty of evaluating how the gender challenge had been addressed by the ESF was underlined by three compelling reasons.

- a) First is the complex nature of gender inequality. When it comes to women nowhere within the Member States are they a 'minority' in the same sense as are other sub-population groups targeted by the EU social policy initiatives.. Thus, the many reasons that are associated with labour market discrimination of the majority population are deeply seeded and often hidden. They range from traditional cultural views of women's role in society to the avoidance of costs of

² The two gender evaluation questions that were addressed and answered in the study were questions V.a and V.b.

V.a To what extent and how have the ESF-supported activities contributed to equal opportunities for women and men in accessing the labour market, and in the workplace? (gender and the labour market)

V.b. Apart from gender-specific activities, to what extent have the rest of ESF-supported activities been managed in order to maximise the ESF's potential impact on gender equality?

³ While question V.a asked about the improvements made on this issue by specifically gender-targeted ESF-supported activities (gender-oriented), question V.b explored the impact of all other ESF supported activities (mainstreaming). Both questions were to have an important bearing on the future direction of the ESF, because the policy debate on 'gender-oriented' versus 'mainstreaming' approaches was still open in light of the fact that the inequality gap affecting women had clearly not been filled. In EU circles it had become clear that the debate could only be advanced and ultimately settled on the basis of actual empirical performance results.

- maternity leave and child care and more. Altogether, they make it a very complex challenge to bring to the surface in its components and to address.
- b) A second reason is the novelty that in several Member States the gender equality issue represented in the political debate which surrounded the formulation of the 2000-2006 ESF. This was precisely so, notwithstanding the emergence of the 'feminist movement' during the last several decades across Member States, because the visibility the movement had gained had often been restricted to academic and social circles and had failed to translate adequately into policies and into equality gains for women in the labour market.
 - c) Related to the second, a third reason is the inevitable scarcity in all Member States of secondary data on gender inequality in the labour market. A long standing problem that had not been perceived and even less acknowledged as such meant that discontinued, un-systematic and superficial information had been produced in many Member States on it.

Territorial differentiation measures. At the same time, women and work comprises a territorially specific set of issues, that take on greater or lesser significance according to the strengths and weaknesses of the various regional labor markets. Thus, an important aspect of the debate, and the consequential assessment of employment policies and actions, was on the need to take stock of the significant differences across areas/regions in terms of: sector specific access points to jobs, job stability, pay and benefit equivalence, career paths, and skill improvement opportunities, among others.

Facilitating or constraining factors. Women and work is also a social context specific set of issues, whereby the influence of the cultural dimension also makes a difference. The argument was that multiple factors contribute to facilitate or constrain the presence and advancement of women in the workforce. The policy role that institutions in different territories were able to play mattered, whether pro-active and innovation-prone or not; so did prevailing social mores and values in different societies and their local communities, as well as the response of people to inherited and transformative structural conditions of the economy of different places.

3. Conceptual framework and methodological approach

On the basis of an extensive literature review, a careful contextual analysis of places was carried out, specifically of NUTS II regions of the 25 MSs, in order to acquire the knowledge of the 'universe' of territorial cases from which to select the regions for the study, and as a consequence the regional Operational Programmes (OPs) to analyse. To this end, the methodological approach to the assessment of the gender challenge by the 2000-2006 ESF was twofold: the contextual analysis and the sampling of territorial cases where OPs had been implemented.

The contextual analysis unfolded over five comparative dimensions: political-institutional regimes; welfare regimes; economic base; socio-cultural traditions; and geographical-infrastructural endowment. The two-step sampling approach, first selected a limited

number of Member States whose characteristics made them especially representative of the whole membership of the EU and then it selected regions within them.

When applied to the Member States of the EU in the period under consideration, the two comparative analytical dimensions of political-institutional regimes and welfare regimes sketched out four fundamental geographical aggregations or country clusters:

- the three Northern EU Members (Sweden, Denmark and Finland),
- eight Central EU Members (the UK, Ireland, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, Austria, Luxembourg);
- four Southern/Mediterranean Members (Italy, Spain, Portugal and Greece); and
- the 10 New Members of Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean that joined in 2004.

As Table 1 shows, out of the total of 25 Member States, a sample of eight States were selected on the basis of the three comparative analytical dimensions of economic base, socio-cultural traditions, and geographical-infrastructural endowment: one Northern State (Sweden); two Central States (the UK and Belgium; two Southern States (Italy and Spain); and three Eastern States (Poland, Hungary and Estonia). A further criterion that was taken into account when defining the sample was country size, so that a balance could be kept among large, mid-sized and small Member States.

Table 1. Sampled Member States and Regions

Geographical Aggregation(s)	Member States	Regions
Northern Members	Sweden	Vastsverige Södra Skogslän (Mellersta Norrland) ⁴
Central Members	United Kingdom	West Wales and the Valleys Lincolnshire Inner London Highlands and Islands
	Belgium	Bruxelles-Capitale Hainaut
Southern Members	Italy	Piedmont Umbria Basilicata Sicily
	Spain	Galicia Madrid Andalusia
New Members	Poland	National Level
	Hungary	National Level

⁴In the current period of programming the region Södra Skogslän is more or less equivalent to the region Mellersta Norrland. This is due to a change made in the administrative division of the ESF support in accordance with the NUTS 2 regions.

	Estonia	National Level
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Moreover, Table 1 shows the sample of regions within the selected States, which was also undertaken according to three dimensions: economic base, geographical-infrastructure endowment and socio-cultural traditions. A total of 15 regions were selected. To note is that no regions were selected in the Eastern States, because they only had one national OP in the programming period under analysis. This is also the reason why the findings did not include ‘regional level’ data generated through interview techniques in the Eastern Member States. Ultimately, in depth case studies were carried out in the 15 sample regions in the 8 Member States.

Because the data to address the gender challenge questions were scarce and not always appropriate for the reconstruction and understanding of what worked well in the formulation and implementation of the ESF, the case study methodology in its comprehensiveness was well suited to produce information otherwise not available. Conceptually first and then empirically, through the case studies it was possible to deconstruct and reconstruct:

- ‘*good practices*’: in the evaluation the term was defined and used to refer to OPs of high quality to be taken as ‘model’; and
- ‘*best practices*’: in the evaluation the term was defined and used to refer to individual projects of high quality within OPs.

The analytical dimensions that singled out *good practices* and *best practices* in the evaluation were the significant impacts they produces in terms of institutional performance, programmatic innovation, and socio-economic outcomes for women. .

The case studies made use of various methods, including personal interviews, focus group interviews and content analysis of OPs. A significant number of people were directly reached in the 15 regions⁵. Altogether, the various methods employed aimed to obtain converging explanations of what, why, how, as well as for whom and for how long positive results from the expenditure of ESF resources had occurred for women. Thus, the ‘case study’ methodology allowed for the creation and gathering of appropriate primary data and was a suitable tool for elaborating an in-depth analysis of the data collected on the specific cases.

Specifically, the case study unfolded through three sequential steps.

1. The first was the analysis of the national/regional OPs, to identify the ‘measures’ (sets of projects) which were gender-oriented as well as other gender-related

⁵ The fieldwork in the 15 regions reached a total of 166 people. In particular, the fieldwork yielded a total of 108 individual respondent interviews (at the national and regional levels), while eight focus group interviews were held with final recipients (with a combined total of 36 people). Additionally, when the minimum number of participants per focus group was not available, final recipients were interviewed as personal respondents, for a total of 22 individual interviews

- measures. For this analysis, from the Management Authorities and the measure managers the most up to date secondary data relating to expenditure levels, distribution across the various actions, and number of final recipients were gathered. In essence, this step was taking stock of the implementation of the gender relevant parts of the OPs.
2. The second step focused on the ‘intermediate bodies’ (institutional implementators) and consisted of personal interviews with the Management Authorities and the measure managers. The responses allowed to reconstruct the process of the implementation of the OP and their gender relevant measures. Respondents were also asked to help identify the ‘best practices’ in terms of a particularly significant project-level ‘action’ regarding female employment and advancement, which had been carried out in the region.
 3. The third step was the assessment of ‘best practices’. A ‘best practice’ would have represented, for example, the case of a large or small enterprise having adopted an innovative, replicable, and sustainable approach to female employment and advancement within a particular ESF sponsored project. At this stage, field work consisted of focus group interviews with final recipients, that is, with women who had been beneficiaries of the project. Women, of different ages and lines of employment, were organised into one/more focus group(s) as appropriate from which personal self-assessment as well as group discussion primary data were collected. Additionally, at the work site entailed personal interviews with key respondents (stakeholders), such as personnel manager, trade union representative, and the firm owner were conducted on the nature of the project⁶.

While the open ended questions asked of the respondents provided narrative information on the content and process which produced and implemented the OPs and their gender measures, the closed questions yielded variable-based evaluative information which was translated into three ESF ‘performance indices’, assessing the ESF’s

- o *efficiency*
- o *effectiveness* and
- o *sustainability*

in directly fostering gender equality in the job market as well as inducing gender mainstreaming throughout social policy fields. Additionally, the close-ended questions generated the data for the construction of three ESF’s ‘gender equality indices’ on:

- o *conciliation of work and family;*
- o *equality in the workplace; and*
- o *women’s empowerment.*

Moreover, a ‘gender mainstreaming index’ was produced by the analysis of the close-ended questions.

⁶ In terms of instruments used, a set of ad hoc questionnaires was prepared to hold semi-structured interviews, with ‘open ended’ and ‘close-ended’ (pre-coded) questions targeted to the different kinds of respondents.

A general hypothesis and a territorially specific hypothesis⁷ guided the gender theme work of the evaluation study. At a general level, it was tested the hypothesis that the ESF-supported measures across regions and Member States, both directly and indirectly, materialised into effective interventions, which made a measurable and lasting impact in terms of changing the lives of scores of women, by affording them work as well as self-improvement opportunities which would not have accrued otherwise. For the scope this paper the general hypothesis is the cogent one.

However, more specifically, the analysis also looked at whether the ESF-supported measures made a territorially differentiated contribution to the improvement of the condition of women in the labour market, because they would have been more common, effective and innovative in higher growth, more urbanised and culturally less traditional regions. In regard to the gender mainstreaming measures the assessment was made of whether the maximisation of the gender equality impact of non-gender specific actions or activities was driven by the application of the gender mainstreaming perspective in the ESF.

4. Cohesion Policy mandate: equal opportunities and social inclusion

The background to the 2000-2006 ESF evaluation study necessarily included the reflection on the historical importance of the ESF itself and of the expanding scope of the EU's Cohesion Policy, whose mandate for Member States and regions had come to encompass the twin principles of equal opportunities for and social inclusion of all EU citizens. When the ESF came into existence in 1957 it was the one and only structural fund provided for by the founding Treaty of Rome that created the European Community (EC). It is historically significant to recall that a primary EC's policy focus was on workers and labor markets and that the ESF's resources were targeted to facilitate workers's movements from one member country to another.

Overtime the aims of the ESF have evolved with the expansion of European responsibilities in the field of training and broader social policy aims⁸. The major change in the scope and financing of the ESF took place in 1989 with the launching of the Cohesion Policy whose primary goal was to contribute to the reduction of the development gap between the Community's most and least developed regions. The ESF was given the task of assisting in the training of the unemployed and younger people in finding employment and over the years other priorities were added, including the gender

⁷ General hypothesis: ESF-supported measures across regions and Member States, directly (gender-oriented measures) and indirectly (gender mainstreaming measures) have made a significant contribution in terms of meeting the challenge of improving the condition of women in the labour market

Territorially specific hypothesis: ESF-supported measures have made a greater contribution to meeting the challenge of improving the condition of women in the labour market in higher growth, more urbanised and culturally less traditional regions of Member States.

⁸ Of great importance in this evolution is the Community Charter of Fundamental Rights for Workers, of 1989 and the principles it endorsed, together with the policy outcome standards it mandated for Member States in matters, among others, of gender equality. Its principles were integrated into the Amsterdam Treaty of 1997.

challenge, closing the gap between men and women in terms of access to employment, advancement in the workplace, equal pay for equal work and sanctioning the discrimination and violence towards working women.

The other main focus for the ESF is to increase the inclusionary nature of Member States's national employment and social policies in relation to the disabled, migrants, and the elderly. It is on the inclusive scope of national social policies where Cohesion Policy and ESF's aims had converged by the end of the 1990s. Though the ESF represents one of the three main pillars of the EU's current Cohesion Policy-- along with the ERDF and Cohesion Fund-- its mission is of essence for the Member States because the ESF's reach is not territorially confined to less developed regions. ESF's, geographical reach is broader, also including all other regions sharing problems of unemployment, underemployment and social exclusion of sub-population groups.

A parallel policy development with Cohesion Policy at the EU level came in 2000 with the launching of the Lisbon Agenda that in its highlighting of 'growth and competitiveness' aims for the EU it identified an enhanced role for ESF. The ESF was to help supplying the EU's labor market with the necessary skilled workers that are vital for the creation of a more competitive and dynamic EU economy. The 2005 revision of the Lisbon Agenda (the so called Lisbon II), brought into better alignment its aims with those of Cohesion Policy (Leonardi, 2012). The role of the ESF was expanded to include the tackling of the visible problem of social exclusion that was affecting many of Europe's metropolitan areas. Social exclusion having among its causes the duality of labor markets as a byproduct of growth policies as well as the mass migration from countries outside of Europe, especially from North Africa and the Middle East. But ESF by then also had to tackle problems associated with minority populations within EU Member States facing discrimination and exclusion. These issues were particularly acute in some of the new Member States, for examples in relation to the Roma in Central Europe and the Russian minority populations in the new Baltic States.

According to the 2000–2006 Regulation of the ESF its general scope was to "... support and complement the activities of Member States directed towards developing the labour market and human resources". This scope was articulated into aims for five different policy fields:

1. developing active labour market policies to combat and prevent unemployment with a particular reference to long-term unemployment and unemployment of young people;
2. promoting equal opportunities for all in accessing the labour market, with particular emphasis on those exposed to social exclusion;
3. improving the quality of the supply in offering training, education, counseling, mobility and lifelong learning;
4. promoting an adaptable workforce and adaptability in the organization of work as well as developing entrepreneurship and boosting human potential in research and science; and

5. endorsing specific measures to improve women's access to and participation in the labour market, including their career development, access to new job opportunities and starting up businesses.

The Regulation also stressed that the above aims for the ESF must be pursued by taking into account: a) the 'local' dimension of the employment strategies', b) 'the information society' and c) the necessity to 'mainstream' the gender priority. While these were the clearly articulated aims of the ESF for the 2000 – 2006 period, the evaluation that assessed the extent to which they had been realized singled out the disproportion between the high expectations associated with the ESF and its resources⁹ Against this scenario, the evaluation found that during the 2000-2006 period significant advances were made in reducing the overall unemployment and increasing the employment rates among women. In 2000 the average female employment rate for the 27 Member States was at 53.7% of the potential female labour force: seven years later it had risen to 57.3% and continued to rise over the following two years until the economic crisis hit in 2008-2009.

5. Assessing ESF performance: gender equality findings

As explained, three indices of ESF performance were constructed on the basis of the stakeholders' responses to ad hoc closed ended questions of their questionnaire: 'Efficiency (I-EFFY)', Effectiveness (I-EFFS), and Sustainability (I-SUST). The three indices aimed at assessing the regional OPs' employment impact relative to the gender equality challenge, capacity to organize and harness resources to meet it, and financial and manpower ability to longitudinally sustain such efforts.

5.1 The ESF's 'performance indices'

The performance of the Efficiency (I-EFFY) index is shown in Figure 1. The Efficiency (I-EFFY) index assesses the capacity of the regional OPs in the 2000-2006 cycle to respond to the gender equality challenge. Specifically, *efficiency* was defined in terms of the gender measures

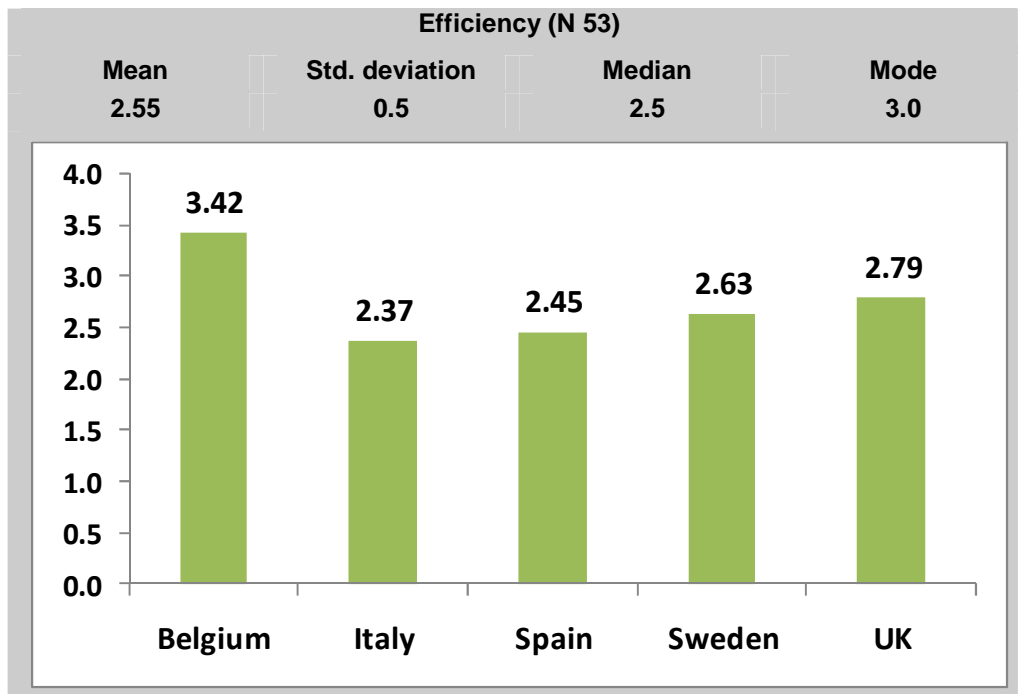
reaching out to women, incorporating family support services, linking up with schools and universities, and coordinating with infrastructure improvement measures to facilitate women's access to the workplace.

Stakeholders deemed gender measures to have been relatively efficient, but not very much so.. Three countries, Belgium, Sweden and the UK, were assessed to be above the mean of 2.55. While Belgium scored the highest at 3.42, Italy scored the lowest at 2.37 in reaching out to women and expanding the breath of the measures. When the stakeholders' quantitative overall assessment of efficiency is nuanced by relating it to the

⁹ The level of resources was €120 billion for these seven years, which is about half of the money spent per year on labour market policies by Member States and represented approximately 10% of the EU budget for the seven year programming cycle.(see chapter on 'utilization of resources' in the final report of 'Ex-post evaluation of the 2000-2006).

extensive comments they offered in the open-ended questions part of the interview, the conclusion is that the value judgment stakeholders contributed is that the 2000-2006 ESF gender measures were valuable ice breakers rather than road builders. Out of metaphor, it means that gender measures made inroads and achieved results but were also stymied in doing more by their being novel and competing with traditional outlooks as well as rooted vested interests. Also, the inroads made by gender measures in more traditional societal and differentiated institutional settings such as regions in Spain and Italy were even more appreciated by their respective stakeholders because the level of the challenge was higher and results could not taken for granted at the time.

Figure 1. Index of Gender Equality Efficiency in the assessment of stakeholders (I-EFFY)



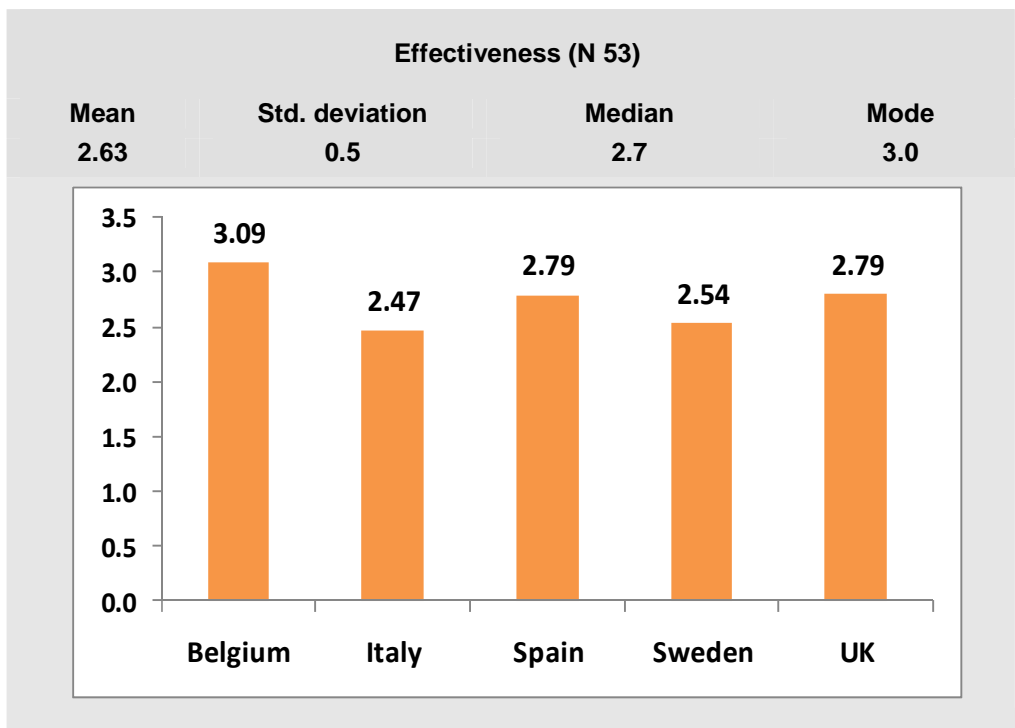
Results of the Effectiveness (I-EFFS) index are reported in Figure.2. The Effectiveness (I-EFFS) index of gender measures was expressed by its

employment impact, in terms of: job placement of women, broken down into the younger, adult, and older women age brackets; creation of female entrepreneurship, women training women, and women's advancement in jobs.

The index shows less variation across Member States in comparison to the Efficiency index, but a similar result of only relative effectiveness, with regard to the capacity that their gender measures showed to place women in jobs and to advance them in their jobs.

Belgium again scored the highest at 3.09; below the mean Italy remained the lowest scorer at 2.47, while Sweden dropped to 2.54. When this assessment is related to the responses of stakeholders to the open ended questions, the modest employment impact created by the 2000-2006 gender measures was more positively explained in terms of its ground-breaking function when it came to the model performance of the ‘best practice’ projects. ‘Best practices’ in their adoption of more comprehensive approaches designed to balance family and work responsibility for women were judged to be more effective in obtaining employment and other results for women. At the same time, ‘best practices’ represented the smallest number of projects within the gender measures of the 2000-2006 OPs, therefore the scores on the I-EFFS index were contained everywhere and not just so in the more traditional countries as would have been expected. It was not possible in the short term, stakeholders said, to undertake a revolution either in people’s attitudes’ (including the self-perception of employers or employed women) or even less to overturn their patterns of behaviour. Progress comes in increments and good efforts need to be sustained, was a common judgment express by stakeholders.

Figure 2. Index of Gender Equality Effectiveness in the assessment of stakeholders (I-EFFS)

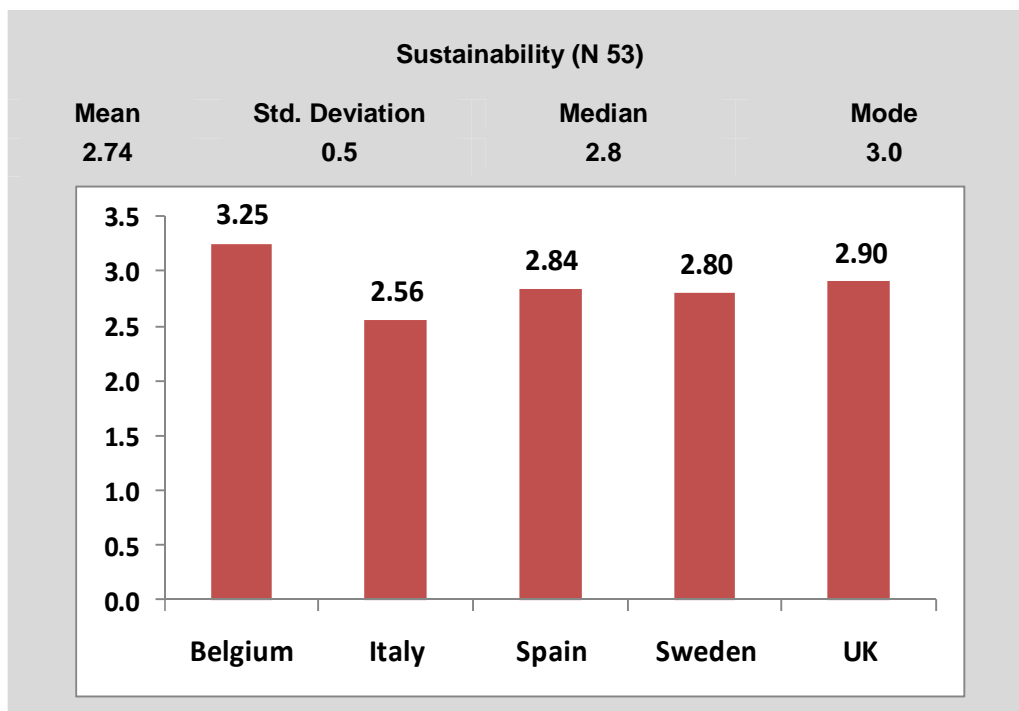


The performance of the Sustainability (I-SUST) index is reported in Figure 3. The Sustainability (I-SUST) index of gender measures was defined and constructed on the basis of

the quality of the skills learned, the equality of treatment on the job, on the job training, the ‘transferability’ of the good practice projects, and the continuity in time of the benefits.

The mean here is higher, but the variation across Member States remained low and similar to previous indices. Belgium, UK, Spain and Sweden were higher and closer scorers, while Italy scored lower at 2.56. Stakeholders’ scores of the sustainability of gender measures were fairly solid and promising. The scores on this index, perhaps the least expected in terms of predicted findings, were the most comforting in that they spoke to the likelihood that the results of gender measures achieved in the 2000-2006 programming period would continue and, even more importantly, be improved. This conclusion was reinforced by the stakeholders’ answers to the open ended questions that often underlined the acquired importance of the gender issue across different types of regions and the related commitment of regions to pursue with greater force and efficacy the goal of gender equality. In essence, the gender challenge had been politically and socially accepted, if not programmatically met yet.

Figure 3. Index of Gender Equality Sustainability in the assessment of stakeholders (I-SUST)



5.2 The ESF’s ‘gender equality indices’ and ‘gender empowerment index’

Three other indices, appropriately termed equality indices, were derived from the responses given by the women who were the final recipients of the gender measures: Conciliation (I-CONC); Workplace (I-WRKP); and Empowerment (I-EMPW).

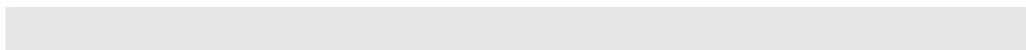
The first two (I-CONC and I-WRKP) assessed the OPs' success in terms of their capacity to improve conditions of women in the workplace, thus leading to the decrease in the gender gap, respectively by bridging family and work responsibilities and by availing women of equal pay and advancement opportunities at work. The third equality index (I-EMPW) assessed the OPs' performance relative to the greater empowerment of women it had produced, that is the increase in confidence in their own abilities that women experienced through training and work and the related positive change in views about their own future and in their capacity to make choices

Because the three gender equality indices were informed by the responses of the women as final recipients, it is appropriate to explain that the women were the participants in 'best practice' projects, and not just in any projects supported by the ESF. Therefore, the indices represent assessments of how far, in terms of quality of content and impact, the 'best practices' on gender equality had come during the 2000-2006 programming cycle¹⁰. The performance of the Conciliation (I-CONC) index is shown in Figure 4. In terms of its content, the Conciliation (I-CONC) index assesses the capacity of the gender measures at the point of delivery, that is at the job site, to help women into such jobs. Specifically,

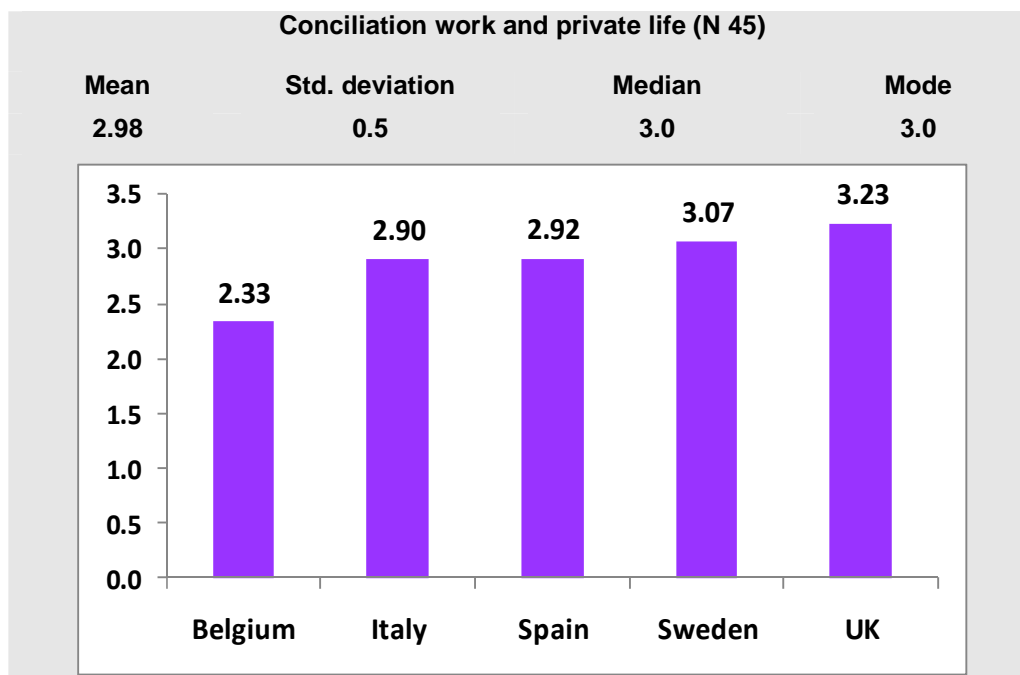
conciliation of work and family spheres was defined in terms of the accessibility of the job site, flexibility of work schedule, and availability of child care.

Women scored gender measures higher than stakeholders had in the previous indices, and the pattern of scores across countries is closer. The UK was the highest scorer at 3.23, but the other countries were close behind, and Belgium the lowest at 2.33. The insights into the significance of these scores come once again from the open ended part of the interviews. Women generally felt they had been appropriately helped in pursuing the choice of seeking employment and supported throughout so that the condition of work allowed them to keep employment, a choice which could not have been possible otherwise, because of family and/or personal circumstances. In this regard, the highest praise by the women interviewed was for the committed civil society partners which were the beneficiaries of ESF support and had conceived and implemented the integrated development projects on the ground.

Figure 4. Index of Gender Equality Conciliation in the assessment of final recipients (I-CONC)



¹⁰ The decision made to focus on 'best practices' rather than on the total range of projects in the gender measures of the sample OPs, was because it was deemed important to single out and assess the significance of the positive cases, given the novelty of the gender social policy area in that programmatic cycle.

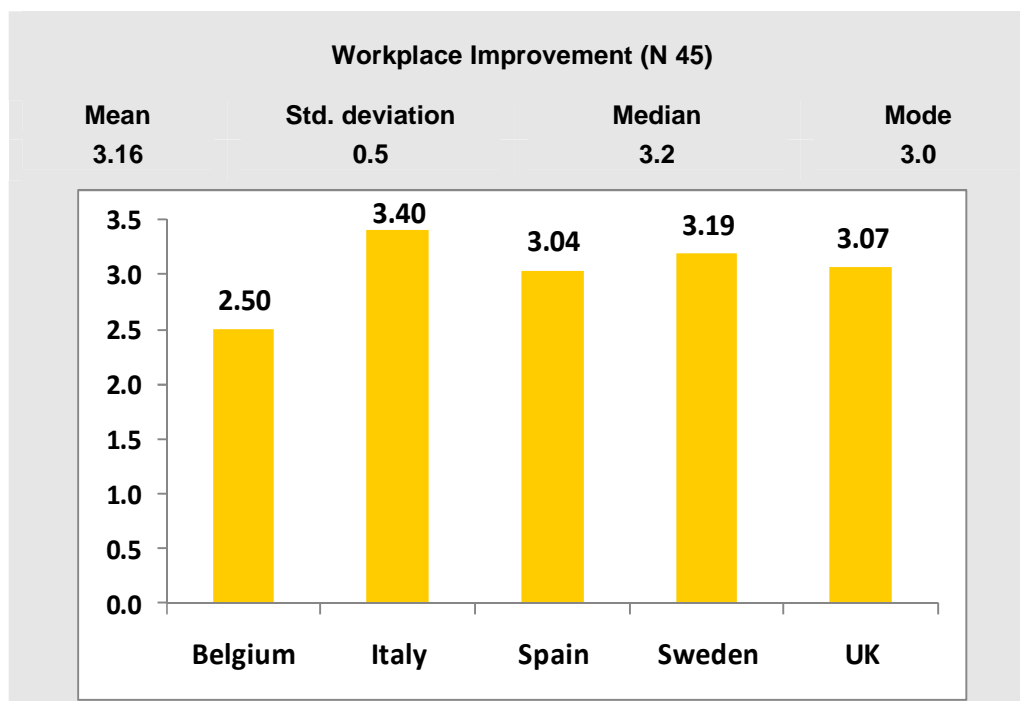


The performance of the Workplace (I-WRKP) index appears in Figure 5. The performance of the Workplace (I-WRKP) index of the gender measures was expressed by

the characteristics of the job site, helping women to upgrade skills, and treating older and younger female workers with respect and fairness.

It indicates a higher score again by women in comparison to stakeholders, but also a different distribution across Member States, with Italy being the highest scorer at 3.40, though the other countries were close behind. The index scores assessed the conditions in the workplace of best practices as being positive for women. Comments to the open ended questions explained how often the projects were experimental in nature and geared to work with the employers at the site or accompany self-employed women onto a journey of sustainability, including within this goal the ability to progress professionally. The clear indication from comments by women to the open ended parts of their interviews was also that employers should be involved from the beginning of the programming activities in order to make them confident senior partners with Managing Authorities and the beneficiary stakeholders in the projects, rather than uncertain and even reluctant end-recipients of trained female workers. The inter-connection between project and workplace and the support of the project for the workplace have to be there from start to finish.

Figure 5. Index of Gender Equality Workplace in the assessment of final recipients (I-WRKP)

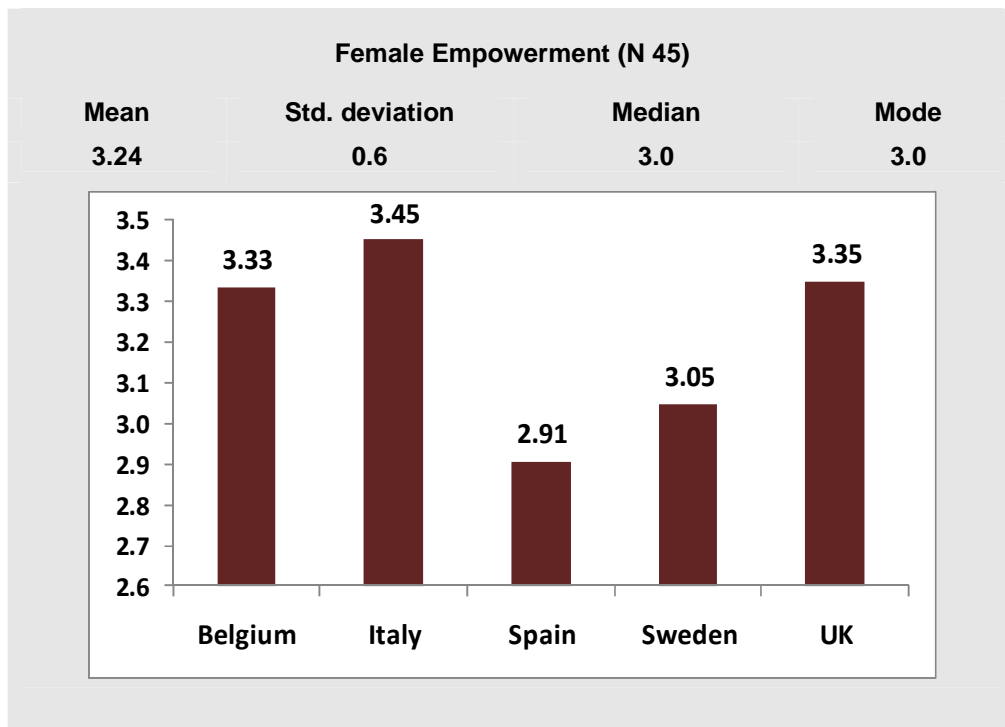


The performance of the third index based on the final recipients' responses, the Empowerment (I-EMPW) index is shown in Figure. 6. The Empowerment (I-EMPW) index quality of the gender measures at the job site was underscored by the encouragement of women to cooperate, to rely on others for help, and to be relied upon by managers in terms of substantive inputs. It is a measure of

the life change that women experienced, and of its translation into a sense of empowerment on the part of women because they have acquired a higher degree of control and choice over their future.

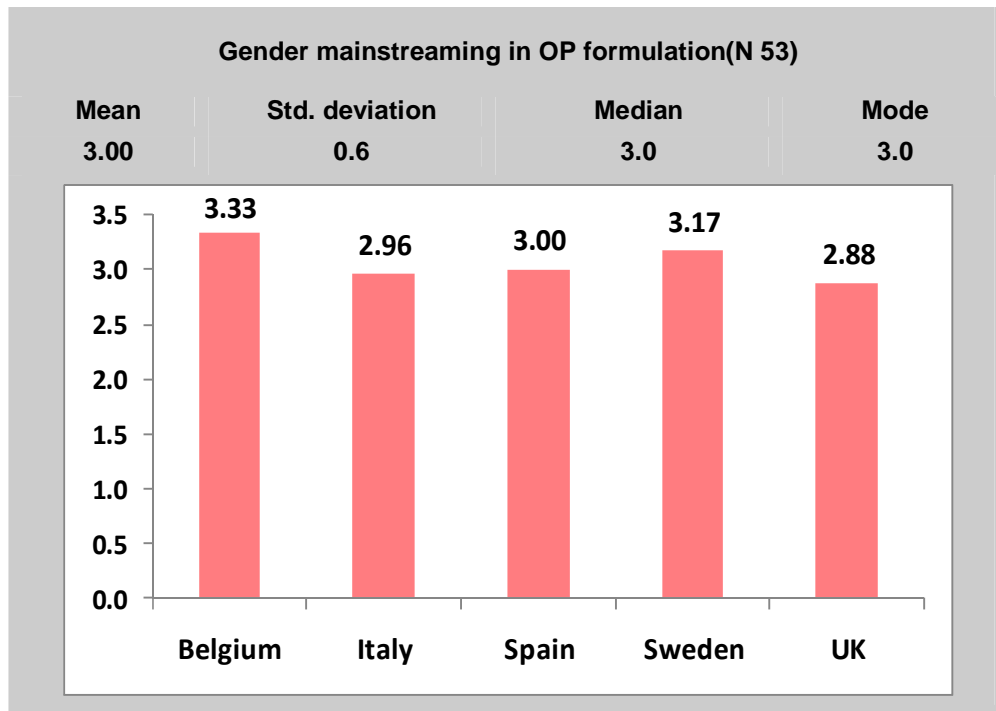
Very significantly, this index has a higher mean score of all six indices, of 3.24, and Italy is again the highest scorer at 3.45, on a range of scores which are less close together. Spain shows the lowest score at 2.91. To understand this contrasting result between two countries that are relatively traditional, it is important to draw from the open ended interviews. In Italy women who were final recipients in innovative best practice projects indeed reported a higher degree of satisfaction and sense of accomplishment in light of their experience. The explanation they tended to give was the public acknowledgment of the project as a 'model' and, as a consequence their acquired status as 'model' workers. In Spain, while the findings had also been generally positive, there were more references made to their personal struggle in gaining self confidence and assertiveness on the part of women in difficult personal and family situations, as well as comments on the persistent 'male control' of the work place.

Figure 6. Index of Gender Equality Empowerment in the assessment of final recipients (I-EMPW)



To complete the discussion of results relevant to the gender challenge we return to the stakeholder interviews, and specifically to two summary questions aimed at garnering their views on the extent to which the 2000-2006 regional OPs had incorporated gender equality into their overall formulation, as well as in the implementation and monitoring of all their measures, which is the essence of gender mainstreaming.

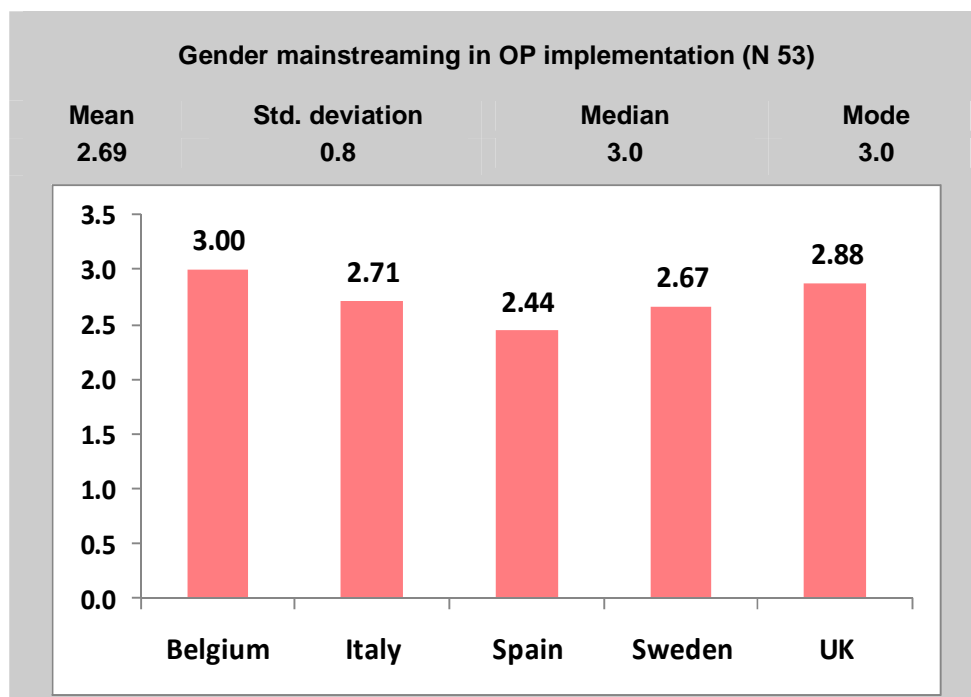
Figure 7. Gender mainstreaming in OP formulation in the view of stakeholders



The stakeholders' assessments of gender mainstreaming in the 2000-2006 OPs' 'formulation phase' are reported in Figure. 7 while their assessments of gender mainstreaming in the OPs 'implementation phase' are reported in Figure.8.

The comparison between the two sets of results shows a higher degree of gender mainstreaming incorporated into the content of the OPs (mean 3.00) than is the case with the actual implementation of the OPs (2.69). According to the attentive stakeholders in the sample, in that programming cycle there was greater capacity to frame the gender inequality issue as a horizontal issue and design measures which reflected it, than there was to actually translate such a mandate into significant accomplishments achieved by projects across non gender-specific measures. In other words, gender mainstreaming is a hard result to reach, but in 2000-2006 it was somewhat easier to achieve it in terms of the formulation of what to do and less in terms of how to do it. In terms of programme formulation capacity, the mean is 3.00; the highest scorer was Belgium at 3.33, but the other countries were close behind. In terms of programme implementation capacity the mean is a lower 2.69 while there was also no particularly prominent divergence across Member States. Belgium at 3.00, UK at 2.88 and Italy at 2.71 were the highest scorers. In a supportive vein to these assessments, the interviews very often brought to light this same discrepancy between the 'conceptual and proposal' capacity (formulation) and the 'doing and result' capacity (implementation), to the detriment of the latter.

Figure 8. Gender mainstreaming in OP implementation in the view of stakeholders



6. Conclusions

This paper has focused on two sets of participants in the 2000-2006 regional OPs: stakeholders as ‘final beneficiaries’ of measures and women as ‘final recipients in best practice projects’. It, examined their assessment of the extent to which ESF-supported measures contributed to equal opportunities for women in accessing the labour market and in the workplace. The paper also briefly reported on their assessment of how the rest of ESF-supported activities helped to increase the ESF’s potential impact on gender equality.

It was found that participants perceived that ESF supported measures across regions and States made a significant contribution to meeting the challenge of improving the condition of women in the workforce. Such measures did more so in terms of the visibility they have afforded the issue of gender inequality than of the gains they made in bridging the gap between male and female workers. While measures changed the lives of scores of women in ‘best practice’ projects, by affording them work as well as self-improvement opportunities which would not have occurred otherwise, those numbers were contained. Four main conclusions were reached:

- Experimental, innovative, integrated projects are effective. The experimental and innovative nature of ‘best practice’ projects directly designed as integrated projects to accompany women in either their family-to-work journey or their better-job-seeking journey, did succeed and were effective in different regions.

- Leveraging role of ESF gender oriented measures. The rather novel focus on gender of gender-oriented measures and other ESF measures everywhere had just begun to serve the cause of gender equality in the labour market.
- Important role of civil society's stakeholders. Evidence was convincing in regard to the beneficial role played and to be played in gender measures implementation by civil society's stakeholders, in particular by those keen on experimenting with new approaches
- Similar degree of difficulty across regions in innovating. While cultural and institutional factors inhibiting or facilitating the adoption of innovative, gender-oriented projects were different across regions, ultimately the degree of difficulty in innovating was not very dissimilar across traditional and less traditional regions. Given that the gender challenge in employment calls for innovation in project responses, this remains an overarching issue and a focus of future ESF measures should be on it.

We close devoting a reflection on the impact of the economic crisis on the condition of women and work. ESF supported measures in the current 2007-2013 OPs may well have built on the legacy of the 2000-2006 OPs that had highlighted the significance of the imperative to close the gender gap in order for the EU to increase the competitiveness of its economy. However, the crisis appears to have stalled, and even begun to reverse, the trend that over decades had seen gains across Member States in meeting the gender equality challenge. In the short term, Structural Funds resources have been diverted from their original development purpose to 'emergency measures' to cushion against the impact of the crisis (Nanetti, 2011). Looking at the longer term, as scholars and operators concerned with development issues and strategies, we underline that the objectives of gender equality are being reaffirmed in the ongoing negotiations surrounding the budget for the 2014-2020 Structural Funds. And we lend our support to this outcome.

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