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GenderMainstreaming



Gender equality – the key to a sustainable, smart and inclusive society:

# Thematic report on youth and gender in the European Social Fund



Authors: Manuela Samek & Remery Chantal  
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## Introduction

The EU has formulated the ambitious goal to become a smart, sustainable and inclusive economy by 2020 (EU2020). Within this context seven flagship initiatives have been defined. One of these is “Youth on the move”, a comprehensive package of policy initiatives on education and employment for young people in Europe. The European Social Fund (ESF) plays an important role in facilitating and supporting projects for youth, and integration of young people into the labour market has been defined as an investment priority (European Commission 2014). However in the policy debate and in the measures taken to fight youth unemployment, gender differences seem to be ignored. This gender-blindness might endanger the effectiveness of implemented policies and reinforce gender-inequalities.

In this paper we address the main gender issues regarding gender differences in youth employment and socio-economic conditions. The paper is largely based on the results of the comparative ENEGE report *Starting fragile – Gender differences in the youth labour market* (2013), edited by the authors, together with Janneke Plantenga, for the European Commission.

## 1.Youth and Gender: How it is addressed in EU policy documents

The crisis has hit young people particularly hard, with many experiencing long spells of joblessness and facing a high risk of inactivity and exclusion. Socio-economic research<sup>1</sup> indicates that long periods of unemployment or inactivity at the time of entry into the labour market can be associated with persisting lower employment prospects and wages for many years thereafter (the so-called “scarring effect”) with high costs also for the economy and social cohesion at large (Eurofound, 2012).

For this reason youth policies are becoming a central feature of European Union policy-making both at EU and national level. A large number of recommendations and resolutions have been enacted and studies have been carried out on the issue. However, in most cases they lack a gender dimension. Apart from general considerations, most research and policy documents rarely tackle gender differences, even if attention to this issue has been increasing in recent years.

*Europe 2020* is the main strategy framework for EU socio-economic growth in the 2010–2020 period. Its aim is “to turn the EU into a smart, sustainable and inclusive economy delivering high levels of employment, productivity and social cohesion” (European Commission 2010a: 5). One of the Strategy’s seven Flagship Initiatives is “*Youth on the Move*”, which aims “to enhance the performance of education systems and to facilitate the entry of young people into the labour market” (ibid.: 5). To increase participation rates, the Strategy emphasizes the importance of policies to promote gender equality and to support the combination of work and private life. However, the topics of youth and gender are hardly linked. The flagship initiative “*An Agenda for new Skills and Jobs*” (European Commission, 2010b) also supports gender equality and non-discrimination in the labour market, and mentions the ESF as a possible co-founder/supporter of measures to reconcile work and private life, gender mainstreaming, and actions for tackling gender-based segregation in the labour market.

The *EU Youth Strategy (2010–2018)*, directly targeting young people, includes among its key areas of intervention the following: education and training, employment and entrepreneurship, health and well-being, participation, voluntary activities, social inclusion, youth and the world, and creativity and culture.<sup>2</sup> Promoting gender equality and combating all forms of discrimination are key issues of the Strategy, which calls for Member States and the Commission to launch initiatives within their respective areas of competence to address gender and other stereotypes via formal education and non-formal learning. No other targeted initiatives are described, apart from mentioning the important fact that the promotion of opportunities to reconcile work with family life is considered a priority for both young men and young women.

The 2012 *Youth Employment Package* is the follow-up to the actions for young people laid out in the wider Employment Package that includes, among other things, a proposal that EU countries establish a *Youth Guarantee* to ensure that all young people up to age 25 receive a quality job offer, continued education or training, or an apprenticeship or traineeship, within four months of leaving formal education or becoming unemployed.

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<sup>1</sup> See for example : Arulampalam et al. (2001); Cockx, B. and M. Picchio (2011) ; Nordstrom, 2011

<sup>2</sup> Council Resolution of 27 November 2009 on a renewed framework for European cooperation in the youth field (2010–2018), OJ C 311, 19.12.2009. [http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32009G1219\(01\)&from=EN](http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32009G1219(01)&from=EN)

*The European Social Fund* will support the implementation of the Youth Guarantee and the other measures to tackle youth unemployment. Indeed, “sustainable integration into the labour market of young people, in particular those not in employment, education or training, including young people at risk of social exclusion and young people from marginalised communities, including through the implementation of the Youth Guarantee” is one of the ESF investment priorities listed in Article 3 of the ESF Regulation for the 2014–2020 programming period.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore the same ESF Regulation provides for additional funds to be specifically allocated to the Youth Employment Initiative and matched with funding from the ESF in the regions most affected by high youth NEET rates.

The Council Recommendation on Establishing a Youth Guarantee<sup>4</sup> requires that “*gender and diversity of the young people who are being targeted*” be considered in the design of the schemes. The background analysis of the Staff Working Document provides indications of gender differences in entering and remaining in the labour market. Furthermore the *European Youth Report*, recently adopted by the Commission, and its Staff Working Paper on the situation of young people in Europe, includes information on gender differences (European Commission 2012a and b).

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<sup>3</sup> REGULATION (EU) No 1304/2013 OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 17 December 2013 on the European Social Fund and repealing Council Regulation (EC) No 1081/2006 [http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv:OJ.L\\_.2013.347.01.0470.01.ENG](http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv:OJ.L_.2013.347.01.0470.01.ENG)

<sup>4</sup> Council Recommendation of 22 April 2013 on Establishing a Youth Guarantee (2013/C 120/01) <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2013:120:0001:0006:EN:PDF>

## 2. Youth and Gender: Main gender issues

As shown in the table below, the gender gap in the youth employment rate declined between 2007 and 2013, due to a greater decrease in young men's employment than women's, and the unemployment rate is currently higher for young men than for young women (aged 15–29). Young men are also experiencing higher long-term unemployment rates than women. But this is largely due to the fact that long-term unemployed women are more likely than men to leave the labour force and become inactive, especially if they are low skilled.

### Main labour market indicators by sex and age (2007–2013) EU28, youth aged 15–29

	2007			2013		
	Men	Women	Gap (W-M)	Men	Women	Gap (W-M)
Employment rate (ER) by age	40.3	34.1	- 6.2	34.1	30.4	-3-7
Temporary employees as percentage of total employees*	30.4	31.6	1.2	30.8	32.0	1.8
Part-time employment as percentage of the total employment*	12.5	27.0	14.5	16.6	31.6	15.0
NEET rate by age	10.2	16.2	6.0	14.1	17.7	3.6
NEET rate (inactive) by age	4.4	11.2	6.8	5.1	10.7	5.6
Unemployment rate (UR)	11.6	12.6	1.0	19.0	18.3	- 0.7
Long-term unemployment rate	3.6	3.6	0.0	7.5	6.6	- 0.9

\* EU27

Source: Eurostat, LFS

NEET rates, measuring the share of young people who are not in employment, education or training, are a more complete indicator than the unemployment rate of youth because they also take into account those young people who are inactive but are not participating in education or training. Even though male NEET rates increased sharply between 2007 and 2013, young women's rates (15–29) remain higher in the majority of EU28 countries, reaching 17.7% in the EU28 average for 2013, compared to 14.1% for young men. Female NEET rates are particularly high (above 20%) in eastern European (BG, HR, RO, SK and HU especially) and southern European (EL, IT and ES) countries. Only in some countries (ES, HR, CY) are NEET rates for males slightly higher than for females due to the increase in unemployment among young men. NEET rates and gender gaps are higher among young non-nationals (i.e. citizens of another country) than among young nationals.

In the majority of Member States female NEET rates and gender gaps tend to increase with age, as more young women have children and leave the labour market. In the 25–29 age group more than one out of four young women are NEET (25.4%), compared to one out of six young men (16.5% 2013 data). The increase in the gender gap with age is largely due to the inactive component: two thirds of NEET women aged 25–29 are inactive (41.7% not wanting to work and 22.8% wanting to work) compared to males of the same age group. The inactivity component for women aged 15–29 is particularly high in eastern European countries (especially RO, CZ, BG and HU) and the UK, as well as in countries such as the Netherlands and Finland, where the overall NEET rate is very low. The high share of inactive NEET women results in a greater persistence of NEET status and a lower turnover among young women than young men, especially in southern and eastern Europe.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Calculations based on the EU-SILC longitudinal data.

There are also large gender differences in the reasons for not seeking employment. Family responsibilities are a key issue for young women, while the proportion of young inactive discouraged NEETs (i.e. those who consider it not worthwhile to seek employment because of the lack of opportunities) was almost twice as high among young men than among young women.

Level of education plays a crucial role in being NEET, especially for women. NEET rates are particularly high for young women with low education in Mediterranean countries (ES, IT, MT and PT), Bulgaria and Romania. The economic crisis has however increased the probability of moving into NEET status even for highly educated young people, especially women; this is the case for the Mediterranean countries, as well as for BG and SK where more than one-fifth of young women with secondary and tertiary education were NEET in 2011

Even when employed, young women face worse employment conditions than employed young men. They are more likely to hold involuntary part-time and/or temporary jobs than young men and the higher incidence of part-time and temporary jobs largely explains the higher share of low-paid workers among young women than among young men.

On average in the EU28, one third of young employed women, compared to only one sixth of young men, held a part-time job in 2013. Part-time work is widespread in northern Europe and especially in the Netherlands where 75% of young women hold a part-time job. On the contrary, short working time arrangements are rare in eastern countries for both genders, and are not common in southern Europe. According to estimations based on EU-SILC data, women are more likely to continue working part-time for an extended period, while, on average, 40% of young men move to a full-time job after one year working part-time, and almost none of them stay in a part-time job for four consecutive years.

Young women also have a higher incidence of temporary employment than young men and are more likely than young men to enter the labour market with a temporary part-time contract. They are more likely to be employed under the less regulated and protected contracts that are widespread in Mediterranean countries (PT, SP, IT), as well as in Slovenia, Poland and Sweden, and are less likely than young men to be employed in apprenticeship contracts, which usually guarantee high transition rates to permanent employment, especially in Germany and Austria.

The reasons for working part time or with temporary jobs are different for young women and men and across EU countries. Taking care of family and children is reported by one out of five young female part-time workers, compared to only 2.6% of males. In many northern countries youth working part-time (especially males) are mostly students, while in the other Member States with high rates of part-time work, such as the UK, IT, ES and FR, involuntary part-time is more widespread, the main reason, for both males and females, being not having found a full time job (in IT only for females).

### **School-to-work transitions: gender differences**

The transition from school to work is an important step towards an autonomous adult life. This transition is not gender-neutral. Data from the ELFS ad hoc module Entry of Young People into the Labour Market (2009) show that the transition from school to work has become more dynamic in the last decades, involving more switches and detours and often non-standard jobs. The share of young persons who started working within one year after graduation is higher among recent graduates than

those who have graduated earlier. In addition, more young people have already left their first job as well. We have analysed the type of contract (permanent versus temporary) of the *first significant* job, which we defined as a job lasting at least three months. The proportion of temporary first jobs differs greatly across European Member States, with relatively low shares in eastern European countries such as Romania and the Baltic states, and larger shares in Spain and Slovenia. It appears that gender differences in type of contract are small. However, young women do more often start in a doubly fragile position, that is, a temporary, part-time job. For example, 20% of young women in Sweden and 17% in the Netherlands start in a temporary part-time job compared to 8% and 9% of young men respectively.

In addition to the type of contract for the first significant job, another indicator is the general transition path from school to work. For a large group of young people, a considerable amount of time passes between their graduation date and the start of the first significant job; 14% of the graduates report needing more than three years to find their first significant job. In addition, the transition phase is often not completed with the first job. A minority (about 40%) enter the labour market with a permanent contract immediately upon graduation. The share of young men is slightly higher than that of young women, but the difference is small. This implies that for many young workers, it might take a couple of transitions between labour market states for a stable position to be reached. We have studied possible transition paths between three different states: unemployed/inactive (NEET), in temporary employment, and in permanent employment. The ELFS ad hoc module provides data on a maximum of four points in time, so a maximum of three transitions could be analysed. These transitions have been sorted into successful paths (that is, leading to a permanent contract), paths in which no clear pattern is visible, and unsuccessful paths (ending in unemployment, inactivity or a temporary contract). It appears that women more often than men are in the unsuccessful paths. This is the case in all EU Member States, with the exception of Ireland and Lithuania. In addition, there are indications that women experience more transitions than men. Additional analyses show that the number of transitions seems to have a negative impact on labour market outcome: persons who experienced more transitions, have a lower probability of having a permanent contract and a higher probability of being unemployed.

Similar results are found by Mills et al. (2014) who show that in the school-to-work transition young women have a significantly slower transition to their first job than men. Men and women have a similar speed of transition to their first job only in the first few months after leaving education. After this time, the differences between men and women continue to diverge, with men having a higher likelihood to find a first job than women across all time periods (Mills et al., 2014).



### **3. Determinants of gender differences in the youth labour market**

Young women are more likely than young men to be NEET-Inactive and to hold part-time or temporary low-paid jobs when employed, even when they have a high educational level. This might be due to their having greater care responsibilities than young men, skill mismatches caused by gender segregation in education and training patterns, poor access to information channels and job search mechanisms, and labour market discrimination. The different positions of men and women (in the labour market and in the social security system) might also imply that there are differences in the effects of employment, education and work–life reconciliation policies which need to be addressed in order to design effective policy measures.

#### **Family composition and child care**

Being married and having children is an important influence on gender differences in the labour market starting from a young age. In all countries, being married and having children correlates with a much higher NEET rate (inactive component) for young women. Country differences in female NEET rates mainly concern married young women, and are related to the availability of care services and the prevalent social values. Similarly, the presence of children increases the gender gap in employment and in part-time employment and affects the duration of the school-to-work transition, with women without children showing markedly faster transitions than those with children (Mills et al., 2014).

#### **Education and training**

Educational level is one of the key factors in determining the employment status of young people, as well as the speed and quality of labour market transitions and job matches, with the transition period being shorter for highly educated individuals. Education is particularly important for women; women with a high level of education have a faster transition to their first job than women with low or medium levels of education. In addition, education seems to partly counterbalance the negative effect of having children on young women's employment situation, because even when they have children, women with tertiary education have shorter out-of-work spells than other women.

Young women are on average more educated than young men. The proportion of 20–24 year-old women who had completed at least upper-secondary education in 2013 was 83.8%, as against 78.4% for men, and 41.2% of women in the 30–34 age group had tertiary education compared to 32.7% of men. Young women are also less likely to drop out of education and training. On average in the EU-28 in 2013 the early school leaving rate was 13.6% for young men (15–24) and 10.2% for young women, with wide differences among EU countries.

However young women choose fields of studies that may translate into lower wages. They tend to choose the Education, Health and Welfare, and Humanities and Arts (EHH) fields, while they are less likely to be enrolled in technical and scientific fields. In addition, young women are less likely than men to have completed VET-oriented education, which, according to recent studies (Cedefop 2012; Mills et al., 2014) leads to better labour market outcomes than general education, especially when it

includes workplace training. Young women are also less likely to receive on-the-job training<sup>6</sup> and to be employed in apprenticeship contracts.

### **Gender stereotypes and discrimination**

Gender differences in the labour market may also be due to gender discrimination. In the presence of equal pay legislation, employers might use gender differentiated criteria in the recruitment process. These criteria may penalize women, not valorising their professional skills or education level, due to women's high probability of leaving employment for care (Azmat et al., 2006). Gender discrimination may be added to racial discrimination, thereby especially affecting women from specific ethnic groups. Furthermore, employers may find it easier to discriminate on a gender basis during a recession; when unemployment is high it is easier for discriminating employers to hire on a gender basis with no negative consequences in terms of profits (Azmat, et al., 2006). Indeed a recent Eurobarometer survey "*Women and gender inequalities in the context of the crisis*" shows a very clear difference in the criteria adopted by employers in the recruiting process for women and men. While for men professional experience and qualifications score high among recruitment criteria, for women the criteria of having children, being able to work flexible hours, and appearance are reported as more important.

### **Labour market regulation and policies**

Individual and family characteristics do not completely explain the wide country differences in gender gaps. Policy regimes and economic conditions are other important factors. Important factors are labour market regulation and policies, particularly when they reduce the incentive to hire or retain workers with lower levels of human capital and/or who are less attached to the labour market. According the economic literature, employment protection and working time regulations are likely to reduce incentives to hire young entrants in the labour market and women. Rubery (2011) argues that employment protection and working time regulation can only promote gender equality in the labour market if other issues, such as labour market segregation, gender gaps in access to social security, taxation systems, gender pay gaps and the under-valuation of women's work, are addressed as well. Higher levels of employment regulation restrictions (either on temporary or permanent contracts) also result in a significantly slower transition to first job. A stricter regulation of temporary contracts prevents youth from entering the labour market more rapidly (Mills et al., 2014). Other important employment policies are those affecting the work-life balance, such as incentives for part-time work, flexible working time arrangements, parental leave, and tax and benefits systems (Jaumotte, 2003).

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<sup>6</sup> According to Eurobarometer results (2011), men are more likely than women to have participated in training over the last 12 months (by a margin of 24% to 21%); they are also more likely to receive funding from their current employer (60%, as opposed to 50% of women) and to have completed a traineeship (37% vs 32%), while young women more often than men take part in non-formal learning activities.

## 4. Consequences of gender inequalities

One of the targets of Europe 2020 is to promote an inclusive society and to reduce the number of Europeans at risk of poverty. However a fragile start may have very negative consequences on a person's possibility to live an independent life and on the risk of poverty during the life course, particularly for women, given gender inequalities in this respect.

Living an independent life is important for several reasons. As the European Council (2011: p. 2) stresses "young generations have an essential role in influencing the future of the European Union and its social, economic, cultural and environmental development." In addition, "increasing the labour market participation of young women and men is crucial for achieving the headline employment target of the Europe 2020 Strategy and for supporting smart, sustainable and inclusive growth" (ibid. 3). Finally, we can argue that living an independent life is also an important goal in its own right.

### Economic independence, poverty and exclusion

In almost all EU Member States more young persons (18–24; data for 18–34 not available) are at risk of poverty or social exclusion than the total population. This applies to both men and women. To give an indication of this, out of the total population 23.6% of all men and 25.4% of all women are at risk of poverty or social exclusion. In the 18–24 age group, the shares are 31% (males) and 32.6% (females). The differences between countries are large, with the highest rates found in Bulgaria, Greece and Romania. In addition, the in-work poverty among employed persons is generally higher among young people (18–24) than the working-age population (18–64) as a whole.

An important gender difference with implications for income concerns amount of working hours; women work more often part-time, and this is also the case for young women. Though terms of employment, including wages, are not necessarily worse in part-time jobs, working fewer hours implies a lower income. In addition, part-time jobs do have worse terms of employment in many EU countries (Eurofound 2011).

### Access to social protection and labour market policies

Most EU countries have a system of social protections to ensure that citizens have a certain minimum income. However, most of them also have thresholds in social security that limit the young people's access to unemployment benefits, and social assistance is rather limited. There is no direct discrimination between (young) men and women with respect to access to/coverage by social security. There is, however, an indirect impact of type of contracts. Because women more often work under temporary and part-time contracts, it is more difficult for them to become eligible and their entitlements may be lower. In the longer term, periods of unemployment generally have a negative impact on pensions. For women, this adds to the negative impact of working part-time or interrupting their career for the sake of care responsibilities.

Though many EU Member States have implemented labour market policies to tackle youth difficulties, comprehensive approaches like that in Germany, where social protection is available in combination with active labour market programmes, are not common. Moreover, very little attention is usually given to gender differences.

## Starting a family

Temporary contracts and (long-term) unemployment may also have severe implications for the personal lives of young people. Between the ages of 20 and 30, many young people would like to start a family. The relationship between unemployment and family formation is rather complex. Different factors affect this relationship, and the impact of these factors differs for men and women and across countries. Raising a child is time-consuming, time that cannot be spent in the labour market (Becker 1993). For this reason, unemployment reduces the opportunity costs of parenthood and therefore may have a positive impact on fertility. Having a child, however, is costly and unemployment generally results in lower income. This implies a negative impact of unemployment on family formation. Given the traditional gender division of labour, the specific impact is likely to differ between men and women. Unemployment may lower the female opportunity costs, perhaps making unemployed women more inclined to start a family. This is particularly the case for low-skilled women; highly skilled women will probably focus more on reintegration, as they face greater loss in terms of skill degradation and lost opportunities (Schmitt 2008). The decision to start a family is also influenced by factors such as the housing market. In several EU Member States the share of young people living with their parents is rather high, and in all of them the share of young men living with their parents is higher than the share of young women. Cultural differences play a role, but having sufficient income is evidently also very important in this respect. In addition, in most EU countries young people face shortages of affordable housing to buy or to rent. This is reinforced by more strict criteria for receiving mortgages.

To summarise, the impact of a fragile start seems different for men and women, with women more often in precarious jobs, with lower and more insecure incomes and less social protection. Moreover, there is a group of women, particularly the low-skilled, who might opt to be full-time carers. As a result their distance from the labour market will increase, hampering their career and income prospects in the long term.

In order to realise a real inclusive economy in 2020, one where both men and women participate and are able to live independent lives, it is important that gender differences are taken into account. The next section will outline some policy options.

## 5. Recommendations: What should be done

Most of the measures recently adopted in Member States to support youth employment do not address gender differences, and this reduces their effectiveness in tackling gender gaps. To enrich the policy debate on youth and support the implementation of more effective policies it is crucial to develop a gender perspective.

For example, *preventive* measures currently mainly address early school leaving, a predominantly male phenomena, while little attention is paid to gender stereotyping and segregation in education and training. *Reform of curricula, particularly regarding gender stereotypes, setting targets for gender balance in courses, career guidance measures, and media campaigns to tackle gender stereotyping at a young age and encourage girls and boys to consider a wider choice of educational paths and occupations* are needed to reduce gender gaps in employment opportunities and reduce educational mismatch. Attention to these issues has increased in recent years, however the economic crisis and budget constraints are rapidly reducing public funding for these programmes.

*Labour market policies often lack gender-specific measures.* Young women are much less involved than young men in active labour market policies and are less supported by passive ones. In 2010 the average coverage rate in ALMP was 32.3% for young women and 42.3% for young males. The gender gap in coverage rates is particularly high in training measures (17.1% for young women compared to 26.8% for young men). Only 18% of young unemployed women are supported by unemployment benefits, compared to 28.4% of young men. In order to increase the involvement of young women, gender differences need to be considered in the design and implementation of labour policies, for example by providing care services during training, or ensuring that employment services' opening hours facilitate the work-life balance. As for *reintegration measures* targeting NEETs and early school leavers, the validation of informal learning acquired outside the classroom could be important in a gender perspective, as girls may have a number of opportunities to get practical experience outside of school.

*Measures to facilitate the school-to-work transition* with school-work alternation and apprenticeship schemes can be very effective in supporting youth employability, as shown by the experiences of Austria and Germany. In order to reduce gender gaps, they have to be complemented with measures to reduce gender stereotyping in career choices and to increase the involvement of young women in on-the-job training and good quality apprenticeship and internship programmes.

Policies addressing the *recruitment and retention mechanisms in companies* as well as *working time patterns* can also be effective in reducing gender stereotypes and gender gaps in employment.

*Measures to support entrepreneurship* should address the specific constraints young women face in starting their own businesses, as compared to young men, for example in access to financial support and to business networks and training.

*Work-life balance* policies are particularly important for reducing youth gender gaps and at the same time improving the labour market conditions of young women. Nordic countries, with their well-

developed and affordable support for balancing work and private life, have much lower gender gaps in youth labour conditions than other countries, as well as higher employment rates and lower unemployment and NEET inactivity rates for both young women and young men. Affordable child care services are especially important, as they not only improve the employment opportunities of (young) mothers but also reduce the risk of poverty for their children. Childcare costs are a critical factor in parents' employment decisions (OECD, 2011), as the costs of childcare can consume a third or more of family budgets and become unaffordable, especially for young low-income families and single parents.

On a more general level *employment protection legislation* and *the working time regime* need to be revised in order to create more diverse employment and working-time patterns that can be adapted to the changing needs in the life cycle.

A final challenge is to bring the *system of social security in line with the new reality of flexible and insecure jobs and with life cycle needs*. Current trends in social protection reforms, with increasing emphasis on costs containment and fiscal consolidation, seem instead to be reducing support to young persons and particularly to young women (Bettio et al., 2012).

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