

# Women's participation in ESF:

## Notes from workshops held during November 2012

John Bell

Policy Editor, ESF-Works.com

### 1 Background

ESF Division (ESFD) organised two workshops in November 2012 to consider what action could be taken to increase the female participation rate to 51% for the second half of the ESF programme period.

The current ESF programme has had to respond to economic and financial changes that could not be foreseen when it was first designed. These include the sudden onset of the economic downturn and the subsequent increase in unemployment. The consequence of these changes in the programme led to considerably more unemployed individuals being supported by ESF over the programme period than originally planned.

Although, in absolute terms, ESF in England has already supported more women than was intended, the proportion of female participants is **below the 51% target**. The female participation rate was 38% at the end of the first half of the ESF programme period (2011). The primary explanation for this shortfall arises from the flexing of the ESF programme in order to support the increasing number of unemployed people – most of whom were male.

Notwithstanding this, England's ESF Programme Monitoring Committee, with the encouragement of the European Commission, is seeking ways to boost the level of female participation up to the end of the programme. There is a commitment to ensure that ESF support is made as widely available as possible to those with the potential to benefit from it. Equality of opportunity is an important principle, and the England programme is expected to respond in any ways which are consistent with eligibility and legislative requirements. The two workshops described below form part of a package of responses.

### 2 The workshops

The workshops were organised by ESFD and aimed to explore how the female participation rate of 51% could be achieved for the second half of the ESF programme period. The workshops included representatives from: ESFD; Co-financing organisations (CFOs); CFO providers; and sub-contractor projects. Representatives from the European Commission were also present, as were

members of the ESF-Works.com team who helped facilitate and record the proceedings.

Both sessions began with presentations from key stakeholders on the background context and responses to date. Presentations were given by:

- the European Commission - on the overall background to gender equality in the structural funds, and proposals for the next programming period;
- ESFD - on how equal opportunities and gender equality is mainstreamed in the England programme;
- DWP's ESF evaluation team - on the figures for female participation to date; and
- CFOs such as the DWP, Skills Funding Agency, National Offender Management Service (NOMS), London Development Agency (LDA) and; Central Bedfordshire Council - who each described their current performance and approach to promoting female participation in the ESF programme.

The presentations include a wealth of detail and are available from ESF-Works.com.

The second half of the workshops focused on an exchange of views, ideas and issues amongst the participants. John Bell, ESF-Works' Policy Editor, facilitated these discussion sessions which focused on identifying the barriers to increasing female participation and the opportunities that are available for encouraging more women onto the programme.

Table 1 below summarises some of the inputs made by representatives during the facilitated discussion sessions.

The **top-down** perspective looks at issues from the point of view of the overall programme, the Managing Authority, rules and macro scale issues. The **bottom up** perspective, by contrast, comes from: the point of view of women; communities; local contexts; and the perspective of front line staff and local providers.

**Market** issues arise from the nature of ESF's delivery, largely through competitive, contract based provision by providers paid to deliver specific services and/or outputs. **Managerial** issues by contrast relates to the processes and procedures by which the programme in operation are managed.

**Table 1: Barriers to female participation and possible responses to help women overcome the barriers**

'Top down' barriers	'Top down' responses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• DWP families programme has potential, but slow build up of numbers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Remember there are still three years of delivery left to run – time to respond exists</li> <li>• Scope out what might be achieved within existing parameters and derive targets / expectations</li> </ul>
'Bottom up' barriers	'Bottom up' responses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Women's caring responsibilities.</li> <li>• Cultural barriers to women's participation.</li> <li>• Multiple barriers for women.</li> <li>• Travel – car ownership, willingness and ability to use public transport seen as 'risky.'</li> <li>• Additional costs associated with working with women (e.g. childcare) make some provision uneconomic.</li> <li>• Has anyone actually asked women what they want?</li> <li>•</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Design provision to be more responsive to women.</li> <li>• Focus on 'pre-contemplation' – the early stages of decision making.</li> <li>• Careers advice and earlier outreach.</li> <li>• Reach out to engage female relatives of male participants.</li> <li>• More women targeted provision.</li> <li>• Projects with high rates of female participation tend to be small scale and 'niche' – can they be scaled up?</li> </ul>
'Market' barriers	'Market' responses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Women's participation 'targets' are not contractually binding.</li> <li>• Terms and conditions are already set, as well as funding available for measures – limits scope to enhance provision.</li> <li>• Penalties focus on the non-achievement of overall participation rates and are not gender-specific.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus provision on obvious gender relevant careers / jobs.</li> <li>• Use bonus payments to encourage higher performance – example from LDA - or look at other incentives.</li> <li>• Develop market for delivering more specialist services.</li> </ul>
'Managerial' barriers	'Managerial' responses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of specialist Equality and Diversity advisors.</li> <li>• Referrals are in the hands of others, no opportunity to select.</li> <li>• Male domination of match numbers the result of 'legacy' benefits.</li> <li>• Fixed delivery models with little scope for change.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Look closely to referral processes and routes – can the likelihood of referral be increased?</li> <li>• Increase sharing and idea exchange for providers.</li> <li>• Improve training of key players in process.</li> <li>• Clarify equality law and explain exemptions regarding gender-specific support.</li> <li>• Consider how MI data relating to match-funded provision can more accurately reflect provision 'on the ground' for women.</li> </ul>

### 3 Synthesis

This final section of the workshop report considers what action might be taken, and by whom, to improve women's participation in the remainder of the programme.

ESFD and the ESF Gender Equality and Equal Opportunities Sub Committee are invited to consider the issues and ideas suggested below.

#### Strategic issues

1. The female participation rate is clearly affected by factors such as the alignment of the ESF in order to add value to domestic employment programmes and the impact of the increase of unemployed people in the labour market following the economic downturn. In many instances ESF and match providers have no opportunity to influence the flow of participants onto ESF provision, particularly when it is match funded mandatory provision. Given that the flow of participants has a significantly higher proportion of men within it, under current conditions, increasing the proportion of female participants would require significant changes to the structure of the programme. This is probably unrealistic given that the contracting rounds for the second half of the programme have now mostly been completed.
2. Although most of the current CFO provider contracts do not have binding gender equality targets, the relationship between CFO staff, including contract (or relationship) managers and their contractors, does provide an opportunity for adapting delivery arrangements to help increase female participation rates. Contracts include standard clauses on the importance of promoting equality of opportunity and complying with equality legislation. Asking and equipping CFO staff, including contract managers, to address this issue during review and performance meetings with providers **might** impact on performance. Providers may well at present be unaware that the programme's female participation target of 51% is an issue of importance. The contract monitoring and management process could offer an important opportunity for CFOs to give clear and unambiguous messages as to what is needed and expected of projects in terms of helping to meet this target.

For this to happen, CFOs could take specific actions, for example, as described below.

- CFO staff (including contract managers where possible) to be instructed to introduce this issue into their contract management processes with providers, with supporting training, examples and resources to back them up
- ESFD to clarify the legal position with regard to the use of positive action and other anti-discrimination measures (such as marketing and targeting).
- Contract managers should be provided with detailed information on the participation performance of individual contractors for use in dialogue with them (contract managers present at the workshops reported that they do not always have this information available to them).

- ESFD should continue to make it clear to CFOs that it expects them to take actions in this sphere.
- Differential performance is also notable in different parts of the country. Although this will in large part reflect local labour market conditions, it may also be indicative of different practices. It would be useful to draw these out, and if appropriate lead to a higher degree of local priority setting for example to bring 'poorer' performing areas up to the higher levels.

### **Practical issues**

Notwithstanding the structural issues discussed above, a wide range of ideas were discussed at the workshops relating to practical issues and opportunities.

A number of possible areas for action were identified and these included the need for:

- senior managers within CFOs to communicate the importance of the 51% female participation target to provider and project staff in their supply chain;
- projects to consider the impact of their delivery arrangements and how they could be improved to encourage more women to join ESF, for example: greater use of care cover; outreach; use of specialist advisors; greater publicity to participants of the range of tailored support;
- projects to research and pay greater attention to the attitudes and needs of women as expressed by themselves;
- CFO providers to involve a wider range of specialist groups and organisations in the outreach and referral process;
- front-line Jobcentre Plus and other referral agency staff to be equipped with details of local ESF provision that can help support women in terms of finding work or learning new skills;
- encouraging women to seek ESF provision in the first place, and in particular, at the 'pre-contemplation' stage; and
- better information sharing, dialogue and exchange within and between CFOs - including further workshops targeted at local providers and front line advisors and other professionals.