

# LinkAge

Labour market integration  
of vulnerable age groups  
through social dialogue

**Olga Jubany (coord.)**





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Universitat de Barcelona

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# Summary

1. The LinkAge research: aims and methods <i>Olga Jubany, Juan Arasanz</i> . . . . .	9
2. Convergences and divergences in six national contexts <i>Miguel Pajares</i> . . . . .	17
3. The effects of new forms of work organisation on young and older workers <i>Fabio Perocco, Tania Toffanin</i> . . . . .	23
4. Age discrimination and diversity within the vulnerable age groups <i>Carey Burke, Ajmal Hussain, Karen West</i> . . . . .	27
5. Gender equality among young and older workers: the role of social dialogue <i>Isabelle Carles</i> . . . . .	33
6. Inclusion of vulnerable age groups through membership <i>Adam Gliksman, Jana Machacova, Caroline Manahl</i> . . . . .	37
7. Intergenerational dynamics: understandings and social dialogue awareness <i>Olga Jubany, Juan Arasanz</i> . . . . .	41
8. Information Exchange and reflexive approach <i>Francesca Carrera</i> . . . . .	47
9. Innovative practices from the ground and proposals for the future <i>Edited by Olga Jubany</i> . . . . .	51
Acknowledgements . . . . .	61





**Olga Jubany  
Juan Arasan**

The current intersection of long-term economic restructuring and demographic developments across Europe, have been producing significant changes in the patterns of inequality in the labour market. One of the most distinctive features of the different period of the employment crisis over the course of the last three decades has been its uneven impact depending on the age of workers. The simultaneous expulsion of older workers together with the blockage to occupational integration of youngsters has resulted in a dramatic decline in labour market participation rates at both ends of the age distribution. In the 'greying' of the European workforce, we find an increasing number of older workers not in employment, but also not eligible for access to a pension; a phenomenon that has spread in Europe over the past two decades, to a large extent due to the pension reforms in many member states. These reforms have focused on increasing the age of retirement and on tightening the criteria for access to early retirement. This trend has become exacerbated in recent years in countries such as Italy and Spain as a consequence of corporate restructurings resulting in massive layoffs affecting senior workers with higher labour costs.

In addition, the significant rate of youth unemployment of a structural nature has emerged in all EU member states, with unprecedented levels in Italy as well as in Spain, and a clear pattern in countries such as the UK and Poland. Furthermore, young people in employment are subject to an increasing precariousness, reflected by the cases of Spain and Poland where at least half of all young workers are employed on a temporary basis. Thus, all too

often, younger and older age groups fall into the category of ‘vulnerable workers’.

Also fundamental in this equation are pension reforms, currently under strong austerity pressures to reduce the average value of benefits and extend working life. In this regard, although the promotion of ‘active ageing’ has become a key priority in the EU’s social agenda and in the context of the Europe 2020 Strategy, the policy responses of European states to these challenges have been rather fragmentary within traditional policy domains.\* In times of downturns like the current one, with high unemployment rates, the tendency is not towards protection, but towards the reduction of older workers’ posts as a way to create jobs for younger people.

In this context, trade unions’ representation of old and young workers interests and rights is fundamental, as it is only through ensuring the access and opportunities for workers of all ages throughout the life cycle that social dialogue may become stronger as an inclusive institution. Furthermore, taking into account the fact that social dialogue has a history of favouring the employment of young workers and early retirement of older workers as a means of employment redistribution between generations, the question raised is to what extent Social Dialogue and trade unions are actually dealing with the issues of vulnerable age workers in an inclusive way.

To this end, the LinkAge project calls for the need to analyse the extent to which trade unions are addressing the interests and needs of young and older workers in the context of changing dynamics in the labour markets of six European countries. This is an analysis that addresses many broad and challenging questions such as:

- What is the impact of welfare retrenchment policies concerning young and older workers?

\* Walker, A. (2002). A Strategy for Active Ageing. *International Social Security Review*. Vol 55. 1/2002.

- Is a zero-sum approach, by which one person's employment means the unemployment of another, being applied as a cost-distribution strategy in the labour market across Europe?
- What measures and strategies are undertaken by unions and employers' representatives to tackle multiple discrimination related to age and gender?
- To what extent is 'active ageing' recognised and promoted in employment, as well as included in collective bargaining agendas?

## **LINKAGE ANALYTICAL AXIS**

From a multidimensional approach across six European states, the LinkAge investigation is grounded on five primary analytical axes. These have been established as initial indicators gathered from the background research, which have then been used to structure and guide the fieldwork and ethnographic analysis throughout the project. Such guidelines have allowed a deeper transnational look into specific key areas, moving beyond the standard national-oriented analysis and reporting, and can be summarised as follows:

### **Age discrimination and diversity within the vulnerable age groups**

Within this theme, we were interested in exploring age discrimination in terms of labour market access and experience in work for both sets of vulnerable age groups. Of particular interest is the question of whether there is something specific we might call age discrimination. If so, can it be understood in the same way for both age groups? How might emerging employee engagement practices and work-based practices produce discriminatory effects indirectly? How is an age diverse workforce viewed and managed?

**Inclusion of vulnerable age groups in social dialogue: membership and structures**

This analytical dimension has explored issues concerning forms of inclusion, such as the creation of intrinsic programmes addressing vulnerable age groups, the ways in which their interests are represented, and the creation of solutions which encourage workers to join trade unions, and which allow for successful assertion of proper working conditions for those groups.

**Gender equality among young and older workers: the role of social dialogue**

This thematic indicator has examined key issues in relation to the identification of the activities undertaken by trade unions in support of gender inequalities related to age, such as activities aimed at supporting female workers through their working life cycle, the mainstreaming of a gender perspective by unions in combating discrimination and promoting opportunities for young and older female workers; and the unionisation, participation and representation of young and older female workers in trade union decision-making bodies.

**The effects of new forms of work organisation on young and older workers**

Assuming a correlation between new forms of work organization and new vulnerabilities, this indicator has sought to explore the effects on young and older workers, through analysing issues such as: which are the main new forms of work organization and division of labour emerging in the last decade? What have been the effects of these new forms of work organization on the employment level of young and older workers and on their working conditions? How have trade unions and employers managed the effects of these new forms of work organization on young and older workers? Has the theme been included in the social dialogue? With

regard to policies, what impact have the new forms of work organisation had, and how have specific policies been implemented in this regard?

### **Intergenerational dynamics: understandings and social dialogue awareness**

Different issues concerning older and younger workers may lead to tensions or conflicts between the generations and need to be taken into account by trade unions, which should represent the interests of all age groups. This analytical dimension has had as its objective to analyse if and how intergenerational dynamics both in terms of solidarity and conflicts are considered, internalised and promoted by trade unions, employers' representatives and in social dialogue; as well as how the older and younger age groups perceive each other and the idea of intergenerational solidarity.

## **LINKAGE METHODOLOGY AND FIELDWORK**

The research project used an innovative qualitative approach through a range of methods and indicators, including in-depth ethnographic insights gathered from experts, trade unions and employers' representatives, and younger and older workers, across Europe. These interviews were triangulated with information exchanges to include key stakeholders. LinkAge analysed over 174 in-depth interviews, creating a picture of vulnerable age groups' relationships with trade unions across a range of clearly defined indicators.

Given the aims of the LinkAge project to better understand the relationships between trade unions and younger and older workers in a period of economic crisis in Europe, we chose to collect data from in-depth interviews with 60 experts, union and employers' representatives and 114 younger and older workers. As there is very limited existing research on the actual experiences of young and

older workers in periods of economic decline, we feel that this is one of the innovative contributions of the LinkAge project.

Before starting qualitative interviews, each partner carried out a literature review of existing research on the employment trends in the national economy and the concept of vulnerability over the last two decades, the emergence of the issues of youth unemployment and precarious work and of 'older workers' in the labour market and in national social dialogue. Each country report included a chapter on intergenerational discourses and good practices developed for promoting youth employment and to support older workers and presented statistical data on demography, economy and union and employers' organisations.

The aim of the interviews with social dialogue actors and experts has been to obtain a general picture of the situation of vulnerable age groups and actions by social partners in this regard, based on in-depth interviews with trade union and employers' representatives, as well as with stakeholders, policy officers and experts. The objective has been to find out what actions and what policies are being developed by social partners for the benefit of the two groups of workers defined for this study: workers under the age of 25 and over 55. The perception of unions on the discrimination faced by these workers has been investigated in order to assess the importance given to it, and the extent of the actions they take to combat it has also been evaluated. In addition, other aspects have been included in the analysis, such as gender, the effects of demographic changes and intergenerational dynamics.

At a second stage of the fieldwork, between 16 and 24 in-depth interviews were conducted by each partner country with young and older workers. The aim of this research task was to collect real-life stories through in-depth younger and older workers' interviews exploring the effects of demographic changes and intergenerational dynamics on working life and to gather data on levels of awareness and involvement of the two vulnerable ages groups in social dia-

logue; their vulnerability in terms of employment/retirement status as well as unemployment, under-employment and redundancy; and to gain an understanding of ways of coping with/negotiating vulnerability. The objective is to generate a picture of the experiences of both vulnerable age groups themselves in accessing and participating in the labour market, as well as their views on the roles of various actors who were interviewed before.

LINKAGE SAMPLE TABLE

		AUT	BE	IT	PL	ES	UK	EU	Total sample
<b>Social partners</b>	Trade union reps.	6	9	7	8	8	3	2	43
	Employer reps.	2	1	3	3	2	2	—	13
	Policy officers	1	2	4	4	2	2	1	16
	Experts	1	—	—	—	2	4	—	7
<b>Groups of workers</b>	Workers aged <25	8	9	10	12	8	7	—	54
	Workers aged >55	8	10	10	8	8	14	—	58
<b>Total sample</b>		<b>26</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>191</b>
									<b>Interviews conducted</b>





The economic crisis started in 2008 after decades of transformation of labour relations in Europe. Over the past 30 years, the employment rate has grown, especially in the case of women; however, employment has increased mainly in the service sector at the expense of the industrial or manufacturing sector, where unions were fully established, meaning that the number of companies with a low union presence has increased. Along with this change in occupational settings, there have been other changes detrimental to union power: the increase in part-time employment; the diversification of labour contracts, leaving many people without collective bargaining; the growth of permanent job insecurity; and the expansion of the underground economy in some countries (in the South). Altogether, the presence of unions in companies has diminished and union membership has declined. In short, we can say that the changes in the labour market in recent decades have led to a decline in the importance of collective bargaining, and the continuing loss of union strength.

In this context, the project studies the action of trade unions in relation to two groups differentiated by age: young (up to 25 years) and older workers (over 55). Furthermore, there is a specific demographic situation, marked by the ageing population, which is already a reality, but which will be reinforced over the coming decades. Younger workers are vulnerable because of their lack of work experience, but so are older workers because they participate less in training processes, and, hence, are more affected by long-term unemployment. Furthermore, due to the ageing of the population, the

difficulties in exiting working life with good labour conditions are accentuated.

In relation to young people, the main problem they face is unemployment, a problem which has grown during the crisis, but which existed before. The reports of the countries participating in the study show that there is a close relationship between level of education and unemployment, so that those most affected by unemployment are the less educated young people (except in Italy, where youth unemployment punishes the most qualified more). In addition, young people experience a rate of temporary employment much higher than the average (especially in Spain, where two-thirds of contracts are temporary).

With the crisis, these problems, which were already structural, have intensified. In all countries, the youth unemployment rate is growing faster than the general unemployment rate. In Italy it has reached 35.3%; in Spain it is over 50%; in Austria it is quite low at 10%, but almost three times the average; in the UK it is higher than 31%, and so on. The young suffer more than the general population from the consequences of the lack of employment policies and job training. But the most significant issue indicated in the reports is that the importance of the level of educational attainment has been accentuated: a lower educational level means fewer possibilities to get out of unemployment. In groups without studies or with lower qualifications, unemployment is much higher and is easily converted into long-term unemployment. This takes place without any major public debate; neither have unions formulated any significant policies in this regard. In recent years, however, unions have begun establishing campaigns and proposals on youth employment, but their weakness in this area is clear.

Public policies for youth employment have started late and are sparse. In some countries, the focus is on increased training: in Austria, young people are maintained in the educational system as long as possible; in the UK the introduction of policies in relation to edu-

cation and training for young workers is planned; in Italy, Spain and Poland, little has been done in this area (in Spain the participation of young people in vocational training courses has been declining in recent years). Financial incentives for hiring young people have also been implemented (in Belgium it is the main measure to boost youth employment).

Unions are part of this weakness of youth employment policies, but in recent years union proposals in this area have increased: in Italy, measures have been proposed to big businesses for the recruitment and training of young people; in Austria, the focus is on training. Furthermore, union participation of young people is declining (except in Belgium, where it is still high), as was already the case before the crisis, and this does not contribute to the unions focusing on youth issues. In social dialogue, trade unions have made some proposals, but these do not form part of the core of their demands.

As regards older workers, for many years the main debate has evolved around retirement from working life. Before the crisis and the accompanying budget cuts, many workers could retire early with relatively generous pensions, and unions focused their actions on defending the best retirement conditions, while supporting early retirement. Currently, public authorities encourage a delay in exiting the labour market and, hence, develop policies in that direction. In all countries participating in the study, governmental measures in this regard have been detected, based on hindering early retirement and delaying the retirement age. In some countries, such as Belgium, measures have also been adopted to promote the employability of older people, some in the field of training and others building on incentives for the recruitment of older workers.

Unemployment does not plague older workers as much as younger ones. When a worker over 55 becomes unemployed without being able to benefit from early retirement, however, there is a high risk that he or she will fall into long-term unemployment. On the other hand, although it is not as high as that of young people, the unem-

ployment rate has also increased for older workers during the crisis (in Spain it has doubled).

There is some awareness of discrimination against older workers, at least with regard to the possibility of being laid off in favour of younger workers. Some stereotypes still seem to exist in this sense: older workers are less productive than younger ones, do not adapt to new technologies, need more sick leave, etc.

Some countries have proposed measures to combat discrimination against older workers (the UK) and, especially, to improve their employability. In Belgium, hiring subsidies have been implemented and the training of older workers has been enhanced, work schedules adjusted, etc; all this aiming to make them stay as long as possible in the labour market. Also in Austria, companies that hire older people are financially supported, and part-time working is applied to keep older people active in the labour market. But the most common measures in all countries, are those aimed at increasing the retirement age and avoiding early retirement. Overall, it can be argued that active policies specific to older workers have been scarce, and the most recent policies focus on extending the working age. Very little has been done in the field of working conditions or the training of these workers.

Neither has this been a prominent issue for unions. While young people have special union structures which safeguard their interests, older workers do not, although some unions (the Belgian and the British) have departments for diversity in which age is taken into account. What seems to be common in the countries participating in the study is that it was not until very recently (in various countries not until 2011) that unions began to consider the situation of older workers as a topic of interest. While the focus had previously been on retirement, unions are now putting forward proposals that revolve around issues such as the adaptation of working hours and conditions to facilitate the maintenance of older people in employment, support in their access to training, and demands for financial

support from the state for their recruitment. The increase in the average age of trade unionists themselves also facilitates a greater focus on these issues.

Trade unions are to some degree taking into account the struggle against stereotypes that favour generational conflicts. For example, in several countries (United Kingdom, Italy, Austria) the younger generations perceive a strong transfer of resources to the 'baby boom' generation to which pensions have to be paid; or young workers believe that their careers are being slowed down by older workers. Unions are also supporting programmes that help explore the usefulness of the experience of older workers, as well as linking them to social organizations or programmes to promote self-employment of older workers. There are some good practices in this area, but these are very limited (the exception is Belgium, where unions are active in the fight against age discrimination).



## The effects of new forms of work organisation on young and older workers

**Fabio Perocco**  
**Tania Toffanin**

In all six national contexts, there are, even if in different terms, common problems in relation to the effects of new forms of work organization on young and older workers. These problems are the following: de-industrialisation processes that mostly affect manufacturing industries; the introduction of new technologies and the effects on the labour processes; the de-regulation of labour law and the introduction of new employment contracts marked by a high instability and an increasing precariousness. In addition, those processes have combined with other dynamics such as: ageing of population; the increase of the educational level among the younger generation; reductions in welfare provisions, especially for labour policies; and social shock absorbers.

### **The impact of these processes on younger workers**

Young people in the six national contexts analysed are experiencing an increasing precariousness. Access to a stable employment position is becoming more difficult for many young people, especially for those who live in countries affected by a structural economic crisis such as Italy and Spain where youth unemployment has reached the top in the European Union (28 members). Since the 2000s, in the six national contexts analyzed, permanent positions in the labour market have been reducing while fixed-term contracts have hugely increased. As a matter of fact, the request for flexibility, in order to reduce labour costs and increase firms' competitiveness, has produced growing difficulties in accessing regular employment among

young people. In addition, their staying in the precariousness trap is preventing their emancipation from the family of origin, with many consequences also for the postponement of their adulthood. Young people interviewed have also pointed out the difficulties in accessing the labour market with fixed-term contracts, and, moreover, their lack of confidence in their future, especially in Italy and Spain.

In order to explain the impact of new forms of work organisation on younger workers, one should consider also the increasing mismatch between labour supply and demand: younger people are better educated in comparison to past generations and in many cases they are overeducated in relation to their country's economic structure and firms' requirements. As a consequence, many young people interviewed have admitted searching for any kind of job, notwithstanding the lack of career opportunities or the impossibility of gaining a stable position. This issue should be one which stimulates states to increase the skills required by firms: policy makers interviewed are aware of this issue, but in times of crisis, state financing is converging on income support mechanisms rather than on industrial policies.

### **The impact of these processes on older workers**

In the six national contexts analysed, the restructuring activities, mostly involving manufacturing industries, are harming, even if in different terms, older workers, especially those with low skills. Among older workers, the risk of vulnerability is increasing because of the dismissals that produce the loss of permanent positions and the scarcity of opportunities to re-enter in the labour market with the same positions. For older workers interviewed –those who have lost their job as a consequence of the current economic crisis or the restructuring of companies due to business strategies mostly related to financial activities– the perception of their increasing replaceability is hindering the search for a new job. Moreover, the introduction of new technologies has radically modified the work organisation pat-



terns of some industries, e.g. the graphics industry, but also many sub-sectors of the metal industry where the loss of jobs is due to the elimination of human labour. Thus, the economic crisis is having direct consequences on the building sector and less innovative manufacturing sectors. In the sectors above mentioned, job losses are mostly unavoidable while the creation of new jobs requires firms' investment and national policies: in any case, older workers need to be supported by special programmes of training activities in order to acquire new skills. Among policy makers interviewed, this issue relates to the difficulty of anticipating and managing such changes. Difficulties are also related to the economic structure of the national context: in countries such as Italy, Spain and Poland, small sized and family-based enterprises have played a crucial role in the economic growth of the past decades that can no longer be played in the present situation. Among unionists interviewed, these countries are experiencing a structural loss of jobs which will be not regained when the recession ends: this perspective has emerged also during the interviews with the policy makers who have highlighted the dilemma due to the reduction or lack of financing to create new jobs and the need to support older workers who are too young to retire, but too old to be employed again.



**Carey Burke**  
**Ajmal Hussain**  
**Karen West**

## **Direct discrimination and discriminatory effects**

There appears to be a general hesitation of social dialogue partners in labelling certain practices in relation to the hiring and dismissal of workers in vulnerable age groups as discrimination. There is, however, a certain sympathy among employers' representatives, policy organisations and trades unions that certain practices can be discriminatory in their effects. It may, therefore, be more appropriate to talk about the experience of discriminatory effects rather than acts of overt discrimination.

Nevertheless, while we may hesitate to label such practices as overtly discriminatory, there is certainly evidence of ignorance and myth on the part of employers, particularly in relation to older workers. There seems to be an almost universal assumption that older workers are more prone to sickness, are less productive, that they will expect higher wages and are over-aware of their statutory rights. For younger workers, there do not seem to be such entrenched assumptions, but this does not mean that they do not face the discriminatory effects of a whole raft of practices such as the general casualisation of labour and the escalating demands for experience and skills that are out of all proportion to the actual demands of the job.

## **Discrimination and disadvantage in accessing employment and re-employment**

The different problems faced by older and younger workers are neatly summarised by one Spanish worker:

They (older workers) have the experience, but lack qualifications; we (younger workers) have the qualifications, but lack the experience.

There are a number of employment practices that might be deemed to be discriminatory in their effect, even if not in their intention. These are different for younger and older workers. For younger workers, the main issue is that employees' high requirements in terms of work experience effectively rule them out of even applying for many jobs. As one Austrian younger worker put it:

As a young person you are often confronted with a lack of work experience. And if you read a job application, [employers] prefer to hire someone who is 25 years old but who has 30 years of experience. At least this is my impression.

And as one Polish worker stated:

The employers' expectations often go beyond their needs and abilities. A college graduate, for instance, is expected to have 5-6 years of professional experience, which, with the current system of education in Poland and the condition of the labour market, is unrealistic.

This then sets in train a series of other practices, which produce discriminatory outcomes. For example, to acquire the necessary experience, younger workers are often forced to take on unpaid or very low paid work (e.g. voluntary work, internships or apprenticeships). Not all can afford to do this, or have the social capital which is often

necessary to access such opportunities in the first instance. Across the board, there is a sense in which employers are differentiating between younger workers with similar qualifications on the basis of acquired experience and training, often irrespective of the level of skills and experience actually required for the job.

Again, across the board there is evidence that younger people are having to accept degraded forms of employment contracts ('junk contracts' as one Polish worker described them) to gain access to the labour market. In the UK, for example, there has been an alarming rise in the use of the so-called zero-hours contract.

Older workers face disadvantage and prejudice when they seek re-entry to the labour market following redundancy or periods of absence. As noted above, there is a perception among employers that older workers are less adaptable, more prone to ill health and absence, will demand higher wages and work-based rights. Even in cases where workers offer to work for lower wages and on a more casual basis, they are often told that they are over-qualified. Conversely, they may face discrimination because of a perception that the skills they have acquired in one work environment are ill-adapted to a different work place, particularly where IT skills are demanded.

There was some evidence that practices that could be deemed to be discriminatory against older workers applied also to workers who were significantly younger than 55. In Austria, for example, older interviewees reported that they had faced difficulties in regaining access to the labour market because they were deemed to be over-qualified, to be demanding higher wages or to have too many accumulated entitlements, even as early as 45. Similar observations were made by older workers in Spain.

### **Discrimination in work**

Our research has found that there are issues related to what we might term insufficient differentiation between age groups of workers. For example, older workers may find it hard to negotiate reduced work-

ing hours or may be expected to continue to carry on with the same demanding shift patterns into older age. This is particularly so where companies have undergone restructuring and layoffs and the work is redistributed among remaining workers. Younger people, on the other hand, often find themselves being judged in the workplace by the same standards as older workers with much longer experience. Their performance may be seen as lacking relative to more experienced workers. In either case, this lack of recognition of different capabilities and capacities results in a certain disadvantaging of both vulnerable age groups. Belgium is notable here for its awareness of the differential needs of an age-diverse workforce. Employers have very specific requirements to develop age diversity management plans, which, while perhaps a blunt instrument in encouraging age diversity in the workplace, is at least beginning to generate an awareness of the issues.

A reduction in levels of in-work training appears to compound discriminatory effects. It must be said that there are differences between countries here in perceptions of employer training. In Austria and Belgium, our younger worker respondents seemed to be broadly happy with work training, although in Belgium there was also a perception that older workers had fewer opportunities to engage in work training. In Poland, the observation was made that those on fixed-term contracts are not taken as seriously by employers, or given training opportunities, compared with those on permanent contracts. In the UK, there was a pervasive feeling that employers were scaling back on in-work training which affected younger and older workers alike. In Italy, there was a widespread perception that levels of training are persistently poor, affecting younger and older workers alike. Certain employers are of the view that it is a cultural deficit on the part of older workers, that they have been complacent and have failed to refresh their skills and knowledge. This was notable in Poland, for example. With levels of in-work training in decline, young people facing high performance expectations have fewer op-

portunities to enhance their performance to expected levels. For older workers, lower levels of training hamper their ability to adapt to changes in technology and IT. The discriminatory effects of myths and prejudice are, thereby, compounded by lack of training.

### **Discrimination between workers within generations**

Findings from the country investigations also show that it may be over-simplistic to think of discrimination solely in terms of older versus younger workers. Within the category of younger worker, in particular, there are stark differences between the low skilled and the qualified younger worker. Somewhat counter-intuitively, there is some evidence that more highly-qualified younger workers (notably graduates) may face additional discriminatory effects. In Belgium, for example, youth employment policies are aimed primarily at the very low skilled and, in the perception of more qualified workers, pay insufficient attention to their needs. In the UK, those with higher skills reported that they were finding it difficult not only to find work that matched their skills, but also to be offered work deemed to be beneath their capabilities, whereas those with low skills were offered low-paid entry-level jobs. In Belgium and Austria too, similar observations were made. As one young Belgian worker puts it:

I could not find a job in my field. So I looked for a job in a restaurant. But employers told me that I did not have enough experience, even though all the jobs I had held when I was a student were precisely in restaurants! I have decided to return to university and I am sure I will find a job easily, even in a restaurant because I will be a student. Employers pay lower social charges for student jobs.

There is, then, clearly a need to understand more how current employment and engagement practices produce different discriminatory effects within the same vulnerable age group, and to explore further the insight that it is not necessarily those with the lowest skills and qualifications that face the greatest challenges.

**Intersections with other forms of discrimination**

Young women may face the assumption that they are not worth hiring or training because they will leave to start a family.

The often excessive requirements for prior work experience and training, as we have noted above, have the effect of forcing younger workers to take unpaid or low-paid work prior to entry into the paid labour market. This is discriminatory in terms of age, but also translates into social discrimination in so far as the facility to find and take up such opportunities may differ according to socio-economic status.

**General observations**

Clearly these mechanisms are amplified in their discriminatory effect according to the level of unemployment in each country. Discriminatory effects for both vulnerable age groups are most notable in the Southern European countries, but it is also noteworthy that in the UK, where levels of unemployment are generally much lower, younger workers are nonetheless experiencing discriminatory effects in relation to labour market access and in respect of a stark diminution in the quality of jobs (for example, the prevalence of internships and zero-hours contracts).



## Gender equality among young and older workers: the role of social dialogue

**Isabelle Carles**

At the European level, it is acknowledged that along with the ageing of the EU population, the number of people facing multiple discrimination based on age and gender is on the increase, among older as well as younger age groups.

All the gender inequalities emerging during the working career –such as difficulties for young women to enter the labour market, part-time jobs, flexibility– have had an impact on pensions: older women are recognised as a vulnerable group that will fall victim to a gender pension gap. They are penalised for the time they spent out of the labour-market caring for children and other family members or dependents.

Reconciling work and family life is therefore still challenging for women, whatever their age, due to the male-dominated life-cycle model that still rules the European job market. The specificity of female workers' integration into the labour market during the whole life-cycle also has an impact on their participation and membership of trade unions. However, their specific needs and problems are rarely taken into account by trade unions.

### **Specific problems encountered by women belonging to vulnerable age groups**

The difficult access to employment for young people (men and women) is accentuated for young women. The biggest obstacle they suffer is rejection by employers in relation to maternity leave. This is compounded by the concern that women may leave work completely: some employers fearing that they will be providing training for work-

ers who will leave the company as soon as they become mothers. These concerns of employers affect the employability of young women. For this reason, young women have greater difficulties at multiple levels: in access to employment; in achieving a permanent job (for temporary employment it is less difficult) and in promotion within the company.

Older women also face more problems in addition to those suffered by the general group of older workers. They may have a greater need to adapt their schedules and working conditions, and the difficulties in achieving such an adaptation may result in an early exit from the labour market. The UK report highlights the fact that women experience greater pressure than men to retire from work, especially when they have family members who require care. With the crisis, these problems have been accentuated. In some countries, unemployment is affecting more men than women, but women are suffering more from increased job insecurity and declining working conditions. There is a higher incidence of women in part-time jobs and temporary employment. Although some respondents also note that, in the current context, part-time work serves as a way to stay in the labour market when there is no option for full-time work.

Another pressing issue concerning older women is the question of the level of the state pension and the raising of the state retirement age.

However, these differences based on gender are not differentiated by age group, and hence, are not very enlightening for the purposes of our study.

### **Unionisation and participation of young and older women in the life of unions**

Generally, unions do not have statistics crossing gender and age. As a result, it is not possible to have a clear view specifically on membership of younger and older women.

However in all the countries investigated, it is noticeable that the number of women with trade union membership has increased in

parallel with their entering the labour market. However, women are still under-represented compared to female employment rates. Women's under-representation in the trade union field can be explained by a series of external structural factors such as the characteristics of female employment (precariousness, flexibility, part-time work) and the difficult implantation of trade unions in sectors where women predominate. Unionism is also historically not very open to women, as unions often mirror traditional representations of gender roles. This has had an impact on the role of women in union structures. They have often been directed towards specific groups composed of women, while gender issues have been marginalized instead of making them central to the entire organization.

The trade union membership of women differs strongly depending on the sector the respective trade unions represent. It has an impact on participation in the life of trade unions, e.g. in trade unions representing sectors dominated by male employees, women are less represented in the decision-making process. In contrast, in companies or sectors with a high presence of women, the major union positions are typically occupied by women. However, in some countries such as Italy and Spain, the presence of women is guaranteed by the use of specific quotas.

### **Activities intended to improve the situation of younger and older women at work to reconcile family and working life**

The union members interviewed in the six countries, when asked to address gender discrimination or vulnerability in the age groups of our study, have highlighted the crucial issue as the balance between work and family. This is an issue that has been very important in union culture in recent years and is very much present in union proposals at all levels, although the actual achievements still leave much to be desired.

The need for reconciliation of work and family life, in practice, has encouraged proposals which include: the adaptation of working

hours; reduced hours; part-time or non-continuous work, etc. The problem is that such proposals for reconciliation are being raised exclusively for women, as if only women need to reconcile work and family, and this, ultimately, involves sacrifices for them. Some interviewees have stressed that reduced working hours affect promotion opportunities for women and pensions and risk producing new inequalities among the female workforce. Some female workers interviewed have the impression that the compatibility of work and care largely depends on the goodwill of employers. In addition, the policies implemented up to now aiming at achieving a work-life balance have not been based on age. As a result, measures to reconcile work and family life (where implemented), have facilitated women staying in the labour market. But, as such measures are applied only to women, they can also have a negative impact making women lose opportunities for promotion in companies and pension contributions for retirement.

Beyond the issue of reconciliation, unions have proposed various initiatives to improve the situation of women, such as promoting their access to positions of responsibility; promoting equal rights when re-entering work after maternity leave, etc. Some union initiatives are related to the internal workings of the union, as unions are also committed to improving the participation of women in their internal management structures.

However, in all these initiatives, no references have been found with respect to different age groups. There is, therefore, a need to formulate policies to deal effectively with issues of gender and age as part of a comprehensive strategy addressing demographic change. The great diversity in the group of younger and older women and the different problems they face implies specific measures taking into account their different situations and tackling the discrimination they suffer on a daily basis.

**Adam Gliksman**  
**Jana Machacova**  
**Caroline Manahl**

This project dimension examines to what extent social partners are able to successfully identify issues concerning the vulnerable age groups of workers, to represent the interests of those groups, and to introduce those issues into the negotiation system constituting the framework of social dialogue institutions in particular countries.

A considerable lack of official data on the unionization of vulnerable age groups was observed (presumably due to sensitive character and data protection) and only limited information related to the division in vulnerable age groups could be collected during the interviews with social partners.

Based on the opinions of interviewees, it can be stated that there is a high turnover of membership in unions and in several countries (e.g. in Spain) a decreasing share of young members compared to the total union membership can be observed. In addition, generally, the presence of unions in companies has diminished and union membership has declined. It can be assumed that economic crises and changes in the labour market have led to a decline in the importance of collective bargaining and in the continuing weakening of unions' strength. Also, it is worth noting that institutional frameworks for unions' representativeness and collective bargaining coverage do not provide incentives for membership.

Established structures for younger and older employees within social partner organisations differ significantly from country to country. There are youth structures/departments operating within social

partners' organisations in the majority of investigated countries, while similar structures for older employees are often missing. Belgium is the only country which has structures established for both age groups. On the other hand, there are no specific union structures for young and older workers in Italy. Also the representation of interests of vulnerable age groups and their inclusion in the decision-making process takes place at national, regional and company level. In the case of Austria, the inclusion of youth organisations in decision making in union structures at the national level is highly formalised.

In the majority of countries investigated, no special attention is paid to the inclusion of certain age-groups in decision-making processes in union structures. For example, in the case of Italy, young workers under 25 are not formally represented during negotiations or during consultations. Nevertheless, there appears to be a tendency for mainly older persons, often working in executive positions, to have greater influence on decision making.

In most of the countries observed, the work of unions is very often associated with terms such as 'historical' and 'outdated' rather than with 'modern reality', and is, therefore, of little interest for primarily young workers.

The interviews show that young workers see little potential/benefit in joining a trade union. In general, knowledge about trade unions is quite limited among young workers, whom are the most challenging age group to unionise (except in Belgium) because of sectoral and occupational segregation of young people in the labour market. The low youth membership and commitment to union activities may be linked with the weak position of young people in the labour market or the unions' position in economic sectors where young people especially are employed (e.g. retail, catering/hotels). Young people are often afraid to join a trade union before they have a permanent contract. Several respondents thought that if they were working part-time or in a temporary job, it could be detrimental to join a union.

It is observed that, in some cases, young workers treat trade unions instrumentally – they decide to join unions only when they expect to receive some benefits in the workplace (long-term contract, protection), but when the trade unions have met their needs, they leave. (e.g. in Spain, Belgium). This also restricts the activity of trade unions in attracting younger workers. Several representatives of age-vulnerable groups indicated that they prefer individual agreements to the collective regulation of working time flexibility, and therefore they do not intend to join a union.

A limited presence of vulnerable groups was observed in the political negotiations concerning their position in the labour market. Even though there are numerous debates amongst social actors and governments including both age groups, focusing on demographic challenges in Europe and reforms of pension systems, the concerns of the younger workers are not so strongly voiced by representatives of their generations.

Interestingly, the main role of union structures is generally seen in the preservation of jobs, the reduction of job losses and protecting people in the most difficult situations (e.g. during maternity leave and returning to labour market; during economic crises; against the risk of exploitation from employers etc.). However young and older workers often pointed out that unions are not fulfilling their roles to a great extent and that they should use their infrastructure and provide free advice and conduct information campaigns.

## UNION MEMBERSHIP IN VULNERABLE AGE GROUPS

	<b>Austria</b>	<b>Belgium</b>	<b>Italy</b>	<b>Poland</b>	<b>Spain</b>	<b>UK</b>
<b>Young workers</b>	no data available	45 % (< 30 years)	10 % (< 25 years)	no data available	7 % (16-24 years)	8% (16-24 years)
<b>Older workers</b>	no data available	43 % (> 50 years)	80 % (> 55 years)	no data available	20 % (> 55 years)	27% (> 50 years)

Sources: Belgium: Van Guys, 2010. Italy: Estimates indicated by unionists interviewed, 2012.

Spain: National Institute of Statistics, 2010. UK: Estimates indicated by unionist interviewees, 2012.

## STRUCTURES FOR YOUNG / OLDER WORKERS WITHIN TRADE UNIONS

	<b>Young workers (&gt; 25)</b>	<b>Older workers (55 &lt;)</b>
<b>Austria</b>	Youth Organisation of the Austrian Trade Union Federation (ÖGJ) with similar structures in trade unions under the umbrella of Austrian Trade Union Federation (ÖGB)	—
<b>Belgium</b>	CSC: structures for young workers and young unemployed people FGTB: group for students and structures for young workers recently merged into one structure ETUC Youth Committee	CSC: group composed of pre-pensioners, pensioners and older unemployed persons (similar structures as well in FGTB)
<b>Poland</b>	Youth Forum of the FZZ, the Youth Section of the NSZZ “Solidarność”, the Youth Committee of the OPZZ	—
<b>Spain</b>	Youth organisation of the Workers’ Commission in Catalonia (similar youth structures in all Spanish trade unions)	—
<b>UK</b>	Young Workers Forum, executive committees of Unite and Unison trade union	—

Sources: LinkAge project.



## Intergenerational dynamics: understandings and social dialogue awareness

**Olga Jubany**  
**Juan Arasan**

The issue on the intergenerational dynamics both in terms of solidarity and competition in the context of ageing societies has recently been the core of debate in the midst of the current economic downturn and the pension reform process in Europe. This does not refer to the foreseen impact of long-term demographic trends on the sustainability of pension systems, but rather focuses on the problems that became more relevant as most of the structural reforms of intergenerational transfers are being rushed through as a consequence of the deep crisis in the labour market.

According to EU Institutions, the policy focus of the ‘Intergenerational solidarity’ approach should be on ensuring access and opportunities for workers of all ages throughout the lifecycle. That is, the design and the implementation of measures to prevent the early exit of older workers together with measures targeting the entry into the labour market of young people. However, the extent to which national social partners understand how these two policy targets are compatible may vary from country to country.

### **The impact of established patterns**

As the LinkAge findings reveal, social partners hold different views on issues such as ‘active ageing’ and the management of intergenerational dynamics in the labour market. Specifically, many national trade unions understand that there is a conflict between the delaying of retirement and the employment chances of young people. From the unions’ point of view, promoting active ageing does not neces-

sarily require raising the statutory retirement age, as established in the recent pension systems reform process of many member states, but implementing preventive measures that will enable and encourage older workers to remain in the labour market. The latter means changing a widespread culture of early retirement to which social partners have contributed in the last three decades as a means of employment distribution between generations. This is while preventing competition between cohorts of young and older workers with different productivity levels. As pointed out by two employers' representatives:

There was such a widespread culture of early pensions in Belgium that employers do not see the value of keeping them at work.

In general, employers in the UK are living in a world where they are rather quite fearful of people working longer or as long as they can, and they're worried about default retirement age having an adverse effect on productivity.

In this regard, it is interesting to look at the reforms to early retirement schemes in Austria and Spain. Austria reformed the partial retirement option further to be a genuine part-time work model for older workers, whereas in Spain, the minimum legal age of access and the minimum contribution period required have been increased.

### **Labour market segmentation as a determinant**

The LinkAge analysis also exposes how unions' main concern with regard to intergenerational dynamics in the labour market perceives the risk of substitution of older workers with younger ones with lower employment standards in a context of mounting unemployment rates. Senior workers are targeted in employers' restructuring strategies not only because of their age, but mainly because their wages tend to be higher than those of new (younger) entrants. Some

of the unions' bargaining strategies in restructuring processes, however, have contributed to a certain extent to the unequal distribution of their impact between generations.

One of the factors that may be hindering the development of 'solidaristic' intergenerational approach is closely linked to distinct patterns of labour market and occupational segregation on an age basis. Young and older groups of workers do not tend to work in the same sectors of activity and occupations. Hence, vulnerability may arise from the sectors in which particular age groups are concentrated. As different age groups of workers meet in the workplace, there are different arrangements to protect the employment status of older workers at the expense of the employment conditions of younger workers. This is reflected in aspects such as career development, training opportunities, working hours, etc.

As the fieldwork clearly reveals, young workers tend to be perceived as the natural buffer or 'social absorbers' when companies face demand fall because they can easily be made redundant, as most of them are employed on a temporary basis or on apprenticeship schemes with lower dismissal costs (*last in first out*). Some employers' strategies are aimed at playing off age groups against each other, but in many cases union bargaining strategies do contribute to reinforcing this segmentation of employment conditions in the labour market. This is the case in double pay scales which apply for new entrants under agreement with workers' representatives, a quite widespread practice in Spain, for instance. On the other hand, there are also intergenerational cooperation arrangements aimed at balancing the labour market by the inclusion of young workers together with maintaining the employment of senior workers. That is the case of '*Contratto di solidarietà*' in Italy as a defensive job security agreement which, in order to avoid collective redundancies or in order to permit the hiring of new personnel, provides for a reduction in the working hours and pay of all the workers already employed in the company.

### **The implications of kinship arrangements**

Young and older workers may be segregated in the labour market and in terms of employment conditions, but they obviously meet up in the home. In this way, the traditional locus of intergenerational solidarity is to be found within family networks. Distinct kinship arrangements at national level are still playing a key role in offsetting the intergenerational imbalances in the labour market. The household circumstances of the young and older unemployed clearly affect their vulnerability to the crisis. Most of the young people under 25 still live in the family home with their parents, which provides an important element of protection against unemployment or low earnings. The widespread use of temporary contracts and the extensions of atypical forms of employment in the last three decades have resulted in an unequal redistribution of employment and unemployment risks between generations. These tend to be represented in public discourse by the opposition between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’. The better employment protection awarded to senior workers (typically identified with male breadwinners) is at the expense of greater employment instability amongst the younger cohorts in the labour market (sons and daughters) and also wives who entered the labour market into a vulnerable status. This singular estimate of labour market risks between different cohorts of workers has been interpreted as the result of an ‘Intergenerational agreement’ under which the social costs and conflicts of labour market flexibility become internalized within households. Social dialogue and collective bargaining contribute to this institutional arrangement by providing different ways for easing the exit of older workers from the labour market as a form of redistribution of employment policy between generations. Lastly, this ‘intergenerational agreement’ explains the absence of major social conflicts in spite of high youth unemployment rates in countries such as Italy and Spain.

However, as the LinkAge data shows, this 'traditional pattern' of labour market risk distribution between generations is drastically changing in the current recession. This accounts for the increasing percentage of young people living in households with very low work intensity and the raising of poverty rates.

The future viability of such an intergenerational pact is being seriously questioned by the raising of the retirement age set by recent pensions reforms in most of the member states. Whereas, tighter criteria for access to early retirement and the concurrent increase in unemployment levels among the younger generations are affecting the historical intergenerational balances and heightening the potential for intergenerational 'conflict'. Many European societies are witnessing increased competition between two generations of workers who find themselves competing for scarce employment opportunities, but, in contrast to previous episodes of economic downturn, the older generation is not in retreat. Many trade unionists acknowledge the fact that intergenerational dynamics in the current state of labour market and austerity measures run the risk of a deadlock owing to the difficulty of supporting senior workers into retirement, and at the same time of boosting the employment of young workers. This is raising union concerns about the risks of young workers substituting older workers in a general downward spiral of wages and working conditions. As a Polish unionist put it:

A company made some of the older workers redundant and employed younger people in their place. The latter accepted significantly lower salaries. That resulted in a situation in which identical work duties performed by the younger workers were rewarded with salaries half those paid to older workers.

This trend is clearly summarised by one Spanish trade unionist:

Here, there is going to be a change where the son will take the father's place for half the price. This is where the labour market is going to.

On the whole, 2012 was the European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations, which meant that the issue we are addressing in this section had some resonance in the public debate and also highlighted the need for the rebuilding of intergenerational solidarity on a new basis. The LinkAge research has identified some of these innovative practices in the labour market, such as the generational relay (*Staffetta Generazionale*) in Italy and the achievement of Collective Bargaining Agreement No. 104 on an employment plan for older workers in Belgium. Still, findings also reveal that there is a broad consensus on seeing these as short-sighted measures. In other cases, the implementation of such innovative measures has been left aside because of the current economic crisis that poses a great obstacle to long term policies concerning active ageing and the extension of working life. This is the case of the Spanish Global Strategy for the Employment of Older Workers. On the other hand, many national employers' associations show their aversion to any regulations or compulsory measures which may affect companies' competitiveness.

In the LinkAge investigation, an important phase and one key dissemination tool was the structured ‘Information Exchanges’ aimed at sharing of information and best practice across the range of identified trade unions, experts and policy makers within the established partnership/member states and networks. In this way, the project promoted the exchange of knowledge between those actively involved in working with vulnerable age groups and trade unions from different fields and perspectives, reconciling an in-depth conceptual debate with a pragmatic evaluative framework.

These exchanges addressed and engaged a wider audience, including workers’ and employers’ representatives, key policymakers, stakeholders who were selected from the stakeholder and contact list drawn up by each member team at the regional, national, European and international levels.\*

The Information Exchanges provided the primary forums for public awareness of the project. The objectives of these exchanges were:

- 1) to share information, findings gathered, best practices and to collect reviews and comments from a range of identified

\* The National Stakeholder Lists include policymakers, policy advisors, social partners as well as main national trade unions, relevant national NGOs, key employer stakeholders, as well as employers’ and sector representatives at national levels and representative groups providing ‘on the ground/grassroots’ support to direct beneficiaries. The European stakeholder list encompasses policymakers and policy advisors such as European Parliamentary as well as European social capital contributors and social partners, relevant European NGOs and academics.

- stakeholders within the established partnership/member states and networks via informal and formal dialogue;
- 2) to facilitate the flow of information between younger and older workers, trade unions, experts, stakeholders and researchers and the collection of views of European and National Experts on how trade unions can contribute to the inclusion of vulnerable age groups.

These events provided or facilitated opportunities for a reflexive approach based on a constant dialogue with social partners and social policy makers who need to respond to societal changes and shifts by designing responsive mechanisms to maintain and promote the quality of life of younger and older workers and their families. These exchanges also offered the opportunity to discuss social cost, social capital and capacity-building initiatives and programmes, strategies and action plans to achieve real integration of younger and older workers within the labour market.

These events were organised at the end of each project meeting. The first Information Exchange took place in September 2013 in Brussels and provided an opportunity to present and discuss the project's *progress results*. The project results presented were discussed in the speeches of the speakers, who were invited representatives of three important structures/organizations at European level. The first speaker was a representative of the *Age Platform Europe*, the second belonged to the Youth Bureau of the European Trade Union Confederation (*ETUC*) and the third was a representative of the European Economic and Social Committee (*CESE*). Furthermore, in this Information Exchange, national and local stakeholders (from Belgium) including representatives of third sector structures, research institutes and local authorities were present and took an active part in the debate.

During the meeting there was an intense debate that allowed us to deepen conceptual insights with elements of pragmatic assess-



ment. The contents of the debate focused on the role that social dialogue can play in improving the condition of vulnerable workers and their families, summarised as follows:

- Strengthening the *role of negotiation and collective bargaining* involving front-line unions and employers both at European and national level. The bargaining should ensure an adequate level of social security for all workers and should ensure quality of work. An example in this area is the '*Framework of actions on Youth employment*' developed by the ETUC with BUSINESSEUROPE, UEAPME and CEEP. The document is the first priority of the Work Programme on Social Dialogue for 2012-2014. The European social partners intend to promote solutions to reduce youth unemployment in Europe and invite the national social partners, public authorities and other stakeholders to work together and achieve concrete results for youth unemployment through policies targeted at specific areas of policy such as: learning, transition into and within the labour market with efficient unemployment insurance and social safety nets which are financially sustainable in the longer term, employment and entrepreneurship.
- Promoting and strengthening the *dialogue between the generations* through the exchange of practices and experiences in and out of the labour market between younger and older workers. An example in this area is the strategy promoted by Age Platform Europe 'Age friendly in Europe' within the European Year of Active Ageing (2012).
- In the light of demographic changes, especially the ageing of the population, and in the light of changes in the labour market, national policies need to be geared to supporting a greater *active participation of older people* through the implementation of various initiatives, such as: targeted training to prevent the risk of professional obsolescence due to the introduction of new tech-

nologies, the support of part-time work for retirees, the use of the elderly in voluntary initiatives, recognition of informal care provided by older people (CESE).

The final Information Exchange will focus on the presentation and discussion of final results, outcomes and impacts. Several speakers from different organizations have been invited to participate in the thematic sessions and round table of the final conference, whose results will be an integral part of the LinkAge final report.

Based mainly on the experiences of workers, the LinkAge investigation has gathered illustrations of actions and measures addressing the needs and demands of young and older workers in relation to their active inclusion in the labour market. These also reflect workers' representatives and the views of experts, brought together during the course of the fieldwork. For the purpose of this paper, such practices and strategies have been divided according to the level of design and implementation (macro, meso and micro levels) and illustrations include cases from all the countries involved. The end of this section also includes some proposals on strategies for change, that have been put forward by the different actors involved in the LinkAge fieldwork with regard to the contribution of social dialogue towards the protection and promotion of young and older workers.

## **Pan-European and national strategies**

Here we refer to innovative practices addressing the issues of integration, protection and promotion of older and younger workers, at a national and European level. In this context, it is vital to refer to the 2012 European Year for Active Ageing which has definitely raised awareness of the need to increase labour-market participation of older people among national social partners, but the effects of this framework have not always been positive. This is because most of the recent reforms on pension and benefits on behalf of 'active aging' are responsible for the increasing vulnerability of this age group of workers. Hence this scheme has had some strong opposition from trade unions at European and national levels.

Specifically at the national level, recent measures, as seen in the case of Spain, have addressed the issue of age discrimination by increasing the costs for companies for lay-offs, where older workers might be disproportionately affected.

Another common practice is to provide financial incentives aimed at the re-entry of older workers into the labour market. This is the case, for instance, of the project focused on the outplacement of unemployed executives aged over 50 led by the Italian Ministry of Labour and Social Policy. This promotes the implementation of actions for re-employment through the activation of specific financing for companies.

Along the same lines, another innovative instrument was also recently adopted in Belgium with the aim of keeping older workers in their jobs. This is the case of the National Labour Council agreement on 'the implementation of a plan for the employment of older workers in companies' (CCT 104). This Agreement requires that private companies with more than 20 employees, have an annual or perennial plan with at least one employment measure regarding skills development through access to training, career opportunities, flexibility of working hours and conditions, recognition of acquired skills, etc. The Belgian federal government has also put in place programmes targeted at the inclusion of young workers as for instance with the First Job programme for workers under 25 that are no longer subject to compulsory education. The programme aims to integrate them into the labour market through two main instruments: a quota system to ensure balance (certain employers are required to hire young people); and financial incentives for hiring young workers.

In terms of inclusion through membership of Social Partners Structures, some Belgian unions promote an intergenerational approach within their own structures. This is the case, for example, of the CSC/ACV where the specific group of young people and pensioners meet and interact on their respective claims. In addition, one of the aims of the intergenerational alliance is to change the power

balance within the union structure and between affiliated unions and specific working groups at an inter-professional level.

As a practice at the national level, we can also refer to the case of the UK where a number of trade unions have recognised young people's interests as priority political issues. This has been reflected in campaigns against public spending cuts and 'zero-hour contracts'. Through these, UK unions at a national level have sought to harness young people's enthusiasm and activism by creating spaces for them to organise and by fostering links into broader political campaigns.

### **Strategies at regional and sectoral levels**

For the purpose of the research, we refer to strategies and practices that take place in the regions or by sectors, as the meso level. This level is found to be the most suited for the development of innovative practices because of the proximity to the needs of young and older workers.

At the regional level, Austria presents some very interesting cases, amongst which we should highlight the network WAGE 'Wining Age, Getting Future'. This is a programme for social partners and business organizations to get involved in providing instruments to the management of companies to improve employment opportunities for older workers through innovative measures. In the same way, in Italy, the Cofindustria employers' association from the Veneto Region has in place the 'Sam' (Senior Age Management) project and the Ifoa institution in the Emilia-Romagna Region has the project 'Active ageing, competences and training', both aimed at supporting enterprises in the implementation of new patterns of work organization in order to prevent the early exit from the workforce of the over 50s.

Also at the regional level in Italy, it must be noted that several areas have arranged special programmes to promote youth employment and have funded specific projects focused on retraining and re-employment. For instance, the Tuscany region has financed the project 'Giovani Si' with the aim of ensuring incentives, and provid-

ing grants and financial support to young people wishing to attend training courses, buy a house or start a business activity. In Spain, where powers on active labour market policies are decentralized to the regional level, the Catalan Public Employment Services have developed specific programmes aimed at improving the employment prospects of the young and older unemployed. The re-start project (*Reinicia't*) combines different employment guidance and training activities aimed at unemployed people over 50 years old. Addressing the issue of NEET youngsters, the Initial Vocational Qualification Programme (PQPI) is aimed at young unemployed workers under 25 years old who have not obtained the graduation certificate from compulsory secondary education, in order to provide them with vocational training adapted to the qualifications requirements of the local labour market.

Finally, it is worth mentioning the Flemish region in Belgium, where in 2012 the government and social partners signed a new employment agreement entitled 'Career Agreement'. This focuses on two groups of workers at risk of exclusion from the Flemish labour market: young people leaving school without qualifications, and older workers aged 50 and over. This agreement covers financial incentives for employers to recruit workers from these groups and includes measures such as career guidance and training for workers.

### **Practices gathered from specific companies**

In terms of practices and strategies at the micro level, most of these are those developed and implemented at the company level. The development of such practices is being hindered by the fact that most of the companies tend to be averse to the adoption of any regulation or compulsory measures which may affect their competitiveness. That is why most of these practices tend to be 'voluntary' adopted by companies as a part of the promotion of social corporate responsibility programmes, but these are prioritised on their collective bargaining agenda. On the other hand, sometimes the demands

of vulnerable groups, such as young workers and women, are being left apart from the main trade union demands and are considered the weakest groups in the bargaining process.

In terms of specific illustrations at this company level, a number of interesting experiences of mentoring of younger workers by older ones have been reported by partners from Austria, Belgium and Italy. This is the case of the Belgian organization 'Duo for a job' carrying out intergenerational mentoring by matching young people residing in Brussels who are experiencing difficulties entering the labour market because of their ethnicity and/or geographical origins, with experienced senior professionals who can support and assist them in their professional project (education, training, employment). With this initiative, this organisation aims to reduce inequities in access to the labour market of immigrant youth by highlighting the value of seniors, eradicating age segregation, reinforcing ethnic diversity, encouraging intergenerational actions and combating stereotypes and xenophobia by recreating social bonds.

Another case of intergenerational cooperation through union structures is put forward by the UK, illustrated by an interesting initiative to bolster participation between younger and older workers in community membership schemes. In this case, community members can join the union for just 50p per week which entitles them to all the benefits of union membership except industrial representation. This is perceived as a positive way to involve unemployed people whilst providing access to job opportunities by offering them IT training courses and CV development, etc.

In terms of involving workers, a further enriching experience, in this case addressed to young people, is to be found in Italy. This relates to the opening of specific social spaces to promote participation of young people, driven by the CGIL, located in Bergamo - the Toolbox; in Padua - the Reset; in Lecce - the Spazio Sociale del lavoro, and in Florence - the Plas. These local spaces are devoted to the encouragement of young people to get involved in social bargaining, as

a means to claim their rights and needs, providing guidance to access to training and paid work and awareness about social security and other rights.

Finally, a very interesting case revealed by the investigation is the London based Older Peoples' Forum, set up and run by retired workers from ethnic minorities. This is a voluntary community venture aimed at assisting vulnerable people in their own homes and creating communal spaces for these people to come together in a London borough. The Forum uses networks within the local authority to assure resources to provide for the services, and also involves some younger people in providing awareness about the service and IT support, as well as providing regular interaction with all members. Interestingly, an unintended consequence of this initiative has been the exchange of skills and experience between the older people who were active in organising the service, and the younger people who have joined in to get experience.

## **PROPOSALS FOR THE FUTURE**

Stemming from the LinkAge fieldwork, a set of broad suggestions and specific proposals have been put forward by different project actors and stakeholders, reflecting their concerns and expressing their views of possible ways forward. Together with the innovative practices mentioned, this section is aimed at contributing to the debate on the development of collective bargaining and Social Dialogue towards a greater inclusion of vulnerable age groups and social cohesion.

The majority of recommendations or proposals that have come out of the interviews and ethnographic work across the different six member states involved are addressed to trade unions. This is in part due to the fact that unions are more aware of the particular vulnerability of young workers, and so their potential initiatives within this



age group tend to be more consolidated and inclusive. For instance, unions have traditionally been campaigning to improve youth membership through the establishment of specific union bodies related to youth. On the other hand, however, unions have begun to regard older workers as a vulnerable age group much later, and some still do not perceive them as especially vulnerable. Also, historically, unions have supported training and apprenticeship contracts and employment on a temporary basis as a means for easing the entry of young workers into the labour market, whilst these forms of employment are judged as being responsible for the deterioration in the labour rights of young people in the last two decades. Currently, it seems unions have incorporated the need to promote fair contractual arrangements, ensuring that learning contracts include training activities, together with the promotion of awareness of employment rights among young people in order to prevent abuses.

A main issue and proposal for change revealed by the LinkAge findings in regard to unions roles, is the need for unions –and social dialogue in general–, to break the mutual negative stereotypes and perceptions of younger and older workers and prevent generational conflicts: older workers may believe that they are being made redundant in order for young people to be hired, since these are cheaper to employ for companies, whereas young people may perceive that the current restrictions on early retirement of older workers is blocking their access to employment. These stereotypes contribute to increasing the vulnerability of both groups, and so combating them is one of the tasks that has been raised by both unions and NGOs, and is a task which should be further developed in the future.

In this regard, there are several initiatives which have launched in relation to intergenerational dialogue in companies and on other levels, which could be taken as examples for future changes. This includes the addition of age and intergenerational dialogue in the diversity management plans and training activities, and the encouragement of involvement of older people in the training of younger

workers, in order to facilitate the access of youth to special jobs for which they would otherwise not acquire the skills or knowledge required. In this regard new technologies and innovations in work organizations are producing discrimination amongst senior workers with low skills and many of the social partners' representatives interviewed called for the need to establish a real policy. The proposals put forward suggest that unions and employers' associations should actually care about these measures in order to improve the quality of health and safety at work.

It is interesting that several Belgian interviewees called for an increased policy interest in intergenerational dialogue based on knowledge transfer; a transfer that should take the form of projects involving both older and younger groups of workers, encouraging the involvement of older people in the training of younger workers. As proposed by the actors involved, this engagement would facilitate the access of young non-experienced workers to specific job posts for which they would otherwise lack the expertise required. Therefore, it is strongly suggested that intergenerational dynamics are incorporated within social dialogue to ensure promotion of intergenerational understanding and awareness of the vulnerability of both age groups.

In addition, awareness campaigns are perceived as a main tool for other concerns of these groups of workers. In the case of Austria, for instance, it is proposed that awareness-raising campaigns focus the advantages and benefits of joining unions, in order to balance the under-representation of young workers in unions' membership. An equality of age backgrounds and communication patterns between unions' delegates and workers are perceived to be important to engage young people, focusing on non-members and increasing their knowledge of the unions' influences and activities.

This is linked to a proposal that has come from the ground asking trade unions to open themselves to non-members, both employed and unemployed. Experts and workers argue that expanding

the unions' offer with activities related to additional consulting, training, instructional meetings, providing advice or assisting prospective employees in finding employment, would be fundamental. What's more, this would also contribute to positive undertakings, thus elevating their efforts in the public view. In addition, it is suggested that unions expand the diversification of the negotiation system, in order to appropriately differentiate between the needs of employees of various ages, specifically opening up to younger employees allowing them actual influence on the unions' activities.

Finally, some suggestions look at the work of NGOs and policy makers, calling for these actors to develop and support programmers for vulnerable age workers across Europe. This is to develop strategies that represent the real problems of these collectives and promote resolutions encouraging workers to join trade unions, allowing for a successful claim for fair working conditions for those groups. This points to the need to develop training policies and prevent long-term unemployment of each age group, as well as to give more attention to early school leavers, and offer programmes and schemes that combine training and employment in one 'package'.

Overall, all suggestions, proposals and even specific recommendations gathered from this investigation have highlighted how social dialogue is indeed a main framework by which unions and employers can and should take action to ensure representation of all vulnerable workers. It is only through addressing the needs of all working people on equal terms, that the ethos of solidarity on which unions are founded can be lived up to. LinkAge has shown how representation, engagement and active inclusion in relation to age groups especially vulnerable in current labour markets are a fundamental challenge that must and can be met, adopting a rights based rather than a needs based approach, in whatever conditions are being faced across Europe.



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The current intersection of long-term economic restructuring and demographic adjustments across Europe has produced major patterns of inequality in the labour market, with a distinctly uneven impact depending on the age of workers. The dismissal of older workers and the blockage of occupational integration of youngsters have led to a dramatic decline of labour market participation at both ends of the age spectrum; a context in which trade unions have become a vital inclusive instrument. *LinkAge* analyses the extent to which social dialogue represents the interests of younger and older workers in a mapping of six European countries, addressing challenging questions such as: What is the impact of welfare retrenchment policies for these workers? Is a zero-sum approach applied as a cost-distribution strategy? and What are unions' approaches to tackle age discrimination? Relying on the ethnographic insights from workers, experts, trade unions and employers' representatives, the research explores the effects of demographic and intergenerational dynamics on the working population, and society as a whole.