

Social mobility in the EU

Introduction

Across the EU, citizens and governments of Member States are becoming increasingly concerned that – for the first time in decades – younger generations will have fewer opportunities for upward social mobility than preceding generations. This concern is shared by those on low incomes and the middle classes. This report sheds new light on the debate on social mobility in EU Member States and provides new evidence on patterns of intergenerational social mobility. It examines to what extent family background has determined people’s prospects for social mobility over the last few decades. It identifies key barriers to social mobility and reviews policies aimed at facilitating upward social mobility and equal opportunities specifically in the areas of childcare, early education, schooling and the labour market.

This report is the first to examine patterns of social mobility across all 28 Member States. It considers absolute social mobility (the extent and nature of structural, occupational change and societal progress) as well as relative social mobility (or ‘social fluidity’) – people’s chances of moving between certain occupational classes. Unlike many previous works in the field, the report analyses quantitative data regarding patterns of social mobility for men and women separately, underlining the increasingly important gender dimension. The qualitative information highlights the most pressing issues in terms of policy debate, the key barriers to social mobility, and policies for fostering equal opportunities and social mobility. In these analyses, occupational status is taken as the key indicator for measuring social mobility.

Policy context

The Europe 2020 strategy views social mobility essentially in terms of equal opportunity: ‘It is about ensuring access and opportunities for all throughout the lifecycle.’ The European Commission has put the issue of fairness among its top priorities. The ongoing European Commission consultation for the European Pillar of Social Rights points to the negative impact of widening inequalities on social

mobility, identifying unequal access to childcare, education and health as key barriers to achieving equal opportunities.

The research identified the most common drivers of the debate regarding a ‘fair society’ in the Member States – one in which people have equal chances to enjoy good living conditions and have access to resources – as: widening income inequalities, diminished access to public services, persistent inequalities in education, intergenerational transmission of poverty, widespread gender inequalities, integration of immigrants, nepotism and corruption and growing regional disparities.

Key findings

- Structural changes (change of occupational structure, and size of population in various occupations) enabled upward social mobility across three generations in the 20th century.
- More recently, structural shifts have resulted in the level of absolute social mobility among men and women becoming more similar.
- Levels of relative social mobility in EU Member States have converged over the 20th century: they are more similar for the cohort born 1946–1964 than for the cohort born 1927–1946. However, for those born after 1965 a slowing down of convergence – if not divergence – between countries is visible.
- In six countries, social fluidity has been continuously increasing over the three cohorts examined: Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Greece, the Netherlands and Slovakia.
- In four countries, the cohort born 1965–1975 has experienced a decrease in social fluidity: Austria, Bulgaria, France and Sweden.
- In four countries, social fluidity (relative mobility) has remained stable over the period examined: Germany, Ireland, Poland and UK.
- Social fluidity among men has decreased (especially for the 1965–1975 cohort) in Austria, Bulgaria, Estonia, France, Sweden and the UK.

- Social fluidity among men has increased in Germany and Spain. It has also increased in Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Greece, the Netherlands and Slovakia – countries where social fluidity is high for both sexes.
- Social fluidity has in general changed less for women than for men. It has increased in Belgium, the Czech Republic, Finland, the Netherlands and the UK. In contrast, it has decreased in Austria, Germany, Spain and Sweden.

Policy pointers

The policy debate on social mobility should be carefully framed in order to distinguish absolute social mobility from relative social mobility and to understand what these concepts mean for policy. The interpretation of research results for policy measures must take into account the characteristics and quality of data, the population assessed and how mobility is defined by other methodological issues – all these make a substantial difference to results. As the findings show that social background continues to have a profound effect on life chances, policymakers at EU, national and regional levels should recognise its importance and implement measures to promote equal opportunities for upward social mobility so that everyone, regardless of background, has the opportunity to realise their potential.

Furthermore, policymakers should reflect on the indicators of social mobility: most common indicators to measure social mobility, including both income and occupation, have been chosen to capture standards of living. One drawback is that they relate to people who have a mature occupational or income status. Stakeholders could examine the need to adjust and develop the indicators further to reflect changes at earlier life stages, such as education or employment status.

Reflect on the indicators of social mobility: Most common indicators to measure social mobility include either income or occupation. Stakeholders could reflect on the need to adjust and develop the indicators further to take into account changes taking place on the labour market (for example, changing jobs structure and new forms of employment) and broader societal developments (for example, the growing importance of wealth).

Investigate the reasons for success or failure in promoting social fluidity: Six countries (Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Greece, the Netherlands and Slovakia) have managed to maintain high levels of social fluidity for both men and women over the last decades. Research should examine the

key drivers behind this, and investigate the reasons for stagnating – even decreasing – fluidity in many countries (especially among people born after 1964).

Prioritise men of Generation X in policymaking: More attention should be given to the decreasing life chances among men born after 1964, whose prospects have significantly deteriorated in many countries. Policies should be put in place to reverse this trend.

Identify and combat barriers to equal opportunities: Institutional barriers can be addressed by increasing the openness of closed occupational groups or professions, creating fair and transparent access to occupations and countering nepotism. Meanwhile, social investment can boost equality of opportunity – through, for instance, improving the quality and coverage of early education, providing compensatory funding for disadvantaged pupils and enabling better access to healthcare.

Ensure that the most economically advanced Member States maintain their policy focus on equal opportunities: Social fluidity is not likely to continue indefinitely upwards; it may have stagnated in the most developed EU Member States. These countries should still strive to remain socially fluid and ensure opportunities for newcomers (ethnic minorities and immigrants).

Organise educational tracking to benefit all pupils: Early selection and tracking is a potential barrier to social mobility. However, when based on objective standards and monitoring, it can also prevent early school-leaving for less academic children. The focus of the debate, therefore, should not be on early selection as such, but on ensuring that it is organised so that students of all abilities benefit from it.

Strive to moderate residential segregation: The concentration of disadvantaged households in particular areas negatively affects people's life chances. Policymakers, especially at the local level, should pay more attention to the creation of areas with more mixed housing and different types of schools. Such mixed developments can mitigate the effects of social and economic inequalities.

Build social mobility into the country-specific recommendations: Given that the broad objectives of social mobility are to promote fair and equal life chances, the main elements are in keeping with the recommendations of the Annual Growth Survey 2016 regarding investment in people and services. The country-specific recommendations should consistently seek to address inequalities and promote equal opportunities.

Further information

The report *Social mobility in the EU* is available at <http://bit.ly/efmobility>

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