

## Social change and inequalities

Current social change in Europe brings both more opportunities and choices and more risks and constraints for all its citizens. Young people, wherever they live and perhaps more than ever before, will need to gain and be able to use life management skills and the capacity for critical judgement. Many young people still do not have sufficient opportunities to do so, and this is a major challenge for youth policy in the coming decades.

Failure to acquire formal certificates and qualifications is an ever-surer route to economic and social exclusion in today's Europe. In the poorest and most unsettled countries, school failure rates have risen in the past decade. In the most affluent countries, it is becoming increasingly difficult to recoup the effects of school failure, which is concentrated amongst the most disadvantaged groups. Credential inflation aggravates the situation: those at the bottom of the qualifications hierarchy have the fewest employment options. Furthermore, in CEE/CIS countries access to education and training beyond compulsory schooling is increasingly dependent upon the ability to pay.

Young women educationally out-perform young men, but participation rates still tail off at the upper levels and study choices remain gender-linked, especially in vocational education and training. Socialisation, schooling, occupational segregation by sex and the difficulties of combining paid work with family responsibilities influence these decisions. In the future, well-qualified young women may draw advantage from new and changing demands for skills and demands for competences. Unqualified young men are at particular risk of social marginalisation and exclusion, whereas unqualified young women are more likely to withdraw into traditional family life.

Youth unemployment rates in EU member states are generally twice as high as those for adults. In CEE/CIS countries, they are generally twice as high as the EU average, underlain with an emerging north-south gap. For those in employment, contractual conditions and pay levels have deteriorated, with increased rates of temporary, part-time and casual employment. This in itself leads to lower levels of social protection for employees.

Children and young people are over-represented amongst the poor, whatever the starting-point for the definition of poverty. When young people leave the parental home, their standards of living are likely to drop, and when their material circumstances are unfavourable from the outset, the risk of falling below the poverty line is very real. This risk is highest for those young people who are unable, in such circumstances, to rely on families, relatives and social networks for additional support. Young people in CEE/CIS countries are particularly heavily reliant on their families for financial support.