

## **Benefits of gender equality - Some remarks on the EU policy for women**

### **The EU looks at gender equality from an economic point of view**

Regarding the benefits of gender equality, we should be aware that right from the beginning, gender equality has been a far-reaching challenge in the process of the European unification.

Right from the start in the 1950s, the core of the European alliance was the establishment of a common market that would stimulate the development and growth of production and trade. In order to avoid distortions in competitiveness between hitherto segregated economies, it was necessary to align the different systems of remuneration to the principles of market efficiency. On the other hand, the issue of wage equality was considered to be a concern of social policy. All citizens of the European community should have the same opportunity to participate in the envisaged increase of wealth and quality of life.

The Treaty of Rome (1957) called for equal pay for equal work. Principally, Article 119 aimed to narrow the gap between male and female wages and to align it internationally. It also aimed to prevent competitive disadvantages for countries where gender equality had already been implemented (like France). In this respect, the new rule signified a truly economic perspective. Wages had to reflect performance instead of representing social arrangements based on culture and tradition.

### **The economic approach of gender equality fails to reach out to women's needs**

Nevertheless, not only women considered Article 119 of the Treaty of Rome as the starting point for the gradual transformation of equal rights into equal opportunities in a much broader sense. The new rule seemed to be the gate to utopia. Unfortunately, the economic as well as the public sphere proved to be rather resistant towards comprehensive gender equality. It turned out to be mainly the task of women to tackle the many-sided opportunities of the new era.

For many years there was little change. In most of the member states women continued to be either homemakers or remained stuck in low-pay service jobs, crowding at the lowest level of institutionalized hierarchies. It was evident that more action was needed to fulfil the promise of social progress. Following its economic perspective, the European Community went ahead and demanded non-discrimination in employment. Issues like private and family relations between men and women were left aside.

On the other hand, national legislation modernized civil rights and marital conditions in order to comply with democratic constitutions, but also to enable both women and men to benefit from the economic upturn. The Treaty of Amsterdam (1997) finally implemented new targets on positive action for women (Article 141), which intended to overcome constraints rooted in the social sphere, including family and other non-economic matters.

### **Gender equality bridges the gap between economic and social matters**

Formerly, among economists and politicians, social issues had often been blamed for the slow down in economic growth and the distortion of the outcome of economic progress. Moreover, there was consent that the unimpeded functioning of the common market would by itself advance equality between the members of the labour force.

This view ignored that for centuries women were not supposed to earn money of their own, but were seen as belonging to a family, maintained by a male householder. As individuals women were invisible, as was their work; home-based production was considered economically unproductive, consuming resources that could otherwise be invested for more profitable purposes.

Their efforts for the well-being of other people were attributed to femininity or motherhood as the missing link between masculine superiority and the basic needs of the human species as a whole. While the economic tools of industrial economies (and hence the accounting sheets of GDP) are still focused on the production of material goods, the economic stature of paid and unpaid caring and provisioning has remained precarious. Still, care work is suspected to create costs, which might be avoided.

In the present multifaceted crisis, national economies in the industrialized world try to redress the balance between economic yields and social costs by cutting the latter. This means reducing the economic resources of the non-economic area, i.e. the families, forcing women to do more care work with little or no financial return. There is no doubt that all in all, women are more adversely affected by current austerity measures than men.

Especially single parents, who function simultaneously as breadwinners and carers for young children, are in danger of becoming entangled in crumbling social conditions and poverty. Gender equality stabilizes societies, on the household level as well as in employment and social policy, and helps to mitigate diminishing solidarity between the generations.

### **Economic and social change call for the advancement of gender equality**

Although the policy of gender equality of the European Union, starting out from a narrow economist concept, has been broadened step by step to include aspects of social reproduction, mainstreaming gender into EU policy still focuses on the economic field. Substantially, not even the concept of reconciling work and family makes a real difference. It is primarily directed towards raising female participation in paid work.

In order to reach out to the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, broadening the scope of economic analysis is unavoidable. Neoclassic economic theory is based on the 19<sup>th</sup> century idea of *Economic Man*. The founders of the industrial era conceived the *homo oeconomicus* as an autonomous individual functioning as the breadwinner for his dependents. This image is unfit for the realities of today's societies.

It is the pattern of the economic system itself that accounts for fundamental inequalities between men and women. Policies of gender equality must be embedded in an economy acknowledging that human needs exceed the production of tradable goods and services. Economic and social sustainability require a new model of *the economic agent*, which transcends the imaginary autonomy of *Economic Man* as well as the consistent marginality of a *dependent woman*.

### **Conclusion**

The European Union pursues the goal of attributing equal rights and equal opportunities to every citizen of its member states. Beyond all kinds of non-discrimination, **Gender equality** requires a new concept of connecting production and care, paid and unpaid work in regard to the individual. Replacing the traditional concept of the paternal household unit with one of individual women and men, EU policies could enhance progress for the European member states as well as for the European people.