

‘Depending on political will’ – Gender Equality and the EU on the FES conference

On the 15th of October the Budapest Office of Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung jointly organized with Hungarian Women’s Lobby a conference, focused on the European Union: on the advantages of the accession for East-Central-European countries for gender equality, and on the fields where future efforts are necessary. The event, which attracted a great number of visitors and generated heated debates, consisted of two panels: the first part in the morning discussed gender mainstreaming, and the second part in the afternoon – including an even more exciting clash of perspectives – focused on feminist economics. Both of them were streamed online. Except this report, two video summaries will be available as well.

Jan Niklas Engels, director of FES Budapest gave an opening speech, in which he told that according to a recent Eurobarometer survey only 49 percent of Hungarians are Euro-optimistic. Compared to other countries, this number is small, and economics is a field where Euro-pessimism is typical. There are a lot of programs evaluating the accession itself, but there are very few which examine it from a gender perspective, and with this event the Foundation intended to fill this gap. Engels, finally, congratulated Borbála Juhász, leader of the Hungarian Women’s Lobby, who has just been elected vice-president of [European Women’s Lobby](#).

1. Keynote lecture: gender equality after the EU accession in regard of CEDAW reports

The opening speech was given by Lithuanian expert **Dalia Leinarte**. The UN CEDAW Convention (The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women) has been ratified by 188 countries, thus it has become the second most accepted of the nine core UN international human rights treaties. State parties have to submit their respective periodical reports to the CEDAW Committee, which, in turn, provides an evaluation with recommendations.

Leinarte, being a member of the CEDAW Committee, presented and evaluated developments and drawbacks in gender equality since the EU accession in Lithuania, Hungary and Poland on the basis of the evaluations of the CEDAW Committee. In case of Lithuania, according to the Committee, the latest report was of too general nature to permit the Committee even to evaluate the specific situation of women. Concerning Hungary, the Committee found the definition of ‘family’ discriminative and too narrow, and the portrayal of women exclusively as mothers (with the inadequate explanation of population growth as a purpose) insufficient. As for Poland, the lack of an antidiscrimination law including the prohibition of gender-based discrimination poses a problem. All three countries lack a sufficient institutional system for gender equality. Gender policies in our region, the lecturer concluded, are focused more on families rather than on women’s rights, and more on formalities rather than structural changes. All in all, there is a drawback, and, in Leinarte’s opinion, the lack of an authentic women’s movement contributes to this. She mentioned neoliberal feminism (which, like Sheryl Sandberg’ *Lean in*, argues that the individual is responsible for her oppression) among the negative examples.

2. First Session: Gender Mainstreaming – Institutional frameworks and political reality

The section was introduced and chaired by **Borbála Juhász** (president of Hungarian Women's Lobby and newly elected vice-president of the European Women's Lobby). She referred to a recently published Hungarian volume of studies in social politics, which argues that ever since the regime change, no political power in Hungary was aware of the significance of gender equality. The budgetary constraints of neoliberal economic policy also negatively affect gender equality. Juhász argued that, in spite of the fact that there is still much work to be done, we've come a long way: in 1914 we didn't even have the right to vote, and now in 2014 the 50% gender quota is approaching. She is optimistic about the relatively new discipline of feminist economics, and about the new global movements.

Joanna Maycock, secretary general of the European Women's Lobby addressed the audience in a video message. She sees some development in education, in participation in politics and, in her opinion, the wage gap is also closing. Among the negative tendencies she mentioned that the far right, conservatism and populism are gaining more and more ground, and there's a decline in women's reproductive rights. She also urged for more attention to multiple discrimination (intersectionality). Finally she introduced EWL's new volume of recommendations: [*From Words to Action*](#), which was published one year before the 25th birthday of EWL and 20 years after Fourth World Conference of Women in Beijing, 1994. Women, she insisted, cannot and should not wait for another twenty years to fully enjoy their fundamental human rights.

Andrea Krizsán (CEU) held a lecture with the title 'Comparing the East-Central European countries: Improvements and backlashes' and she focused on gender equality institutions and structures, including anti-discrimination laws and their effects. In response to the Race and the Employment Directives in 2000 all countries in the region introduced new anti-discrimination legislation, and in a few years equality bodies were established to address complaints. In these integrated laws, however, gender (if present at all) is only one (and often marginalized) among several other inequality categories, and experience shows that there are few gender cases. Furthermore, in some cases already existing gender institutions (Poland) were incorporated into the integrated institution for equal treatment.

As for the effects of EU accession on consultation, participation as an EU principle, and empowerment as a key element of mainstreaming reinforce each other. Some East-Central-European countries had some form of consultation earlier; these are strengthened with EU accession and membership (e. g. Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Slovakia). All in all, however, their effectiveness depends on local context: the Polish women's congress in 2009, and creating the women's shadow government is a positive example, but Hungary is a negative one: here, the Gender Equality Council (with civil participation) hasn't been summoned since 2010. Effective cooperation with the civil sector, even with the introduction of EU legislation, depends too much on the local government's good will.

The fate of the institutions responsible for the execution of gender equality principles is similarly contingent. The revised directive prescribes them straightforwardly, but the EU, however, has no immediate influence in this field.

Krizsán concluded that gender equality appears only as a side effect of the EU membership. The solution does not arrive from upwards, and depends too much on local structures, participants and opportunities. Furthermore, the economic crisis meant another drawback.

The next speaker, **Olga Pietruchová** from Slovakia (Director of the Gender Equality Department, Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs) delivered a lecture entitled ‘Slovakia between mainstreamed structures and serious backlashes.’

In order to meet EU expectations, Slovakia has strengthened its legislative and institutional frameworks for gender equality. The anti-discrimination act includes the prohibition of discrimination based on (biological) sex, gender, and gender identity, and prescribes preventative measures as well. Since the 2012 Amendment it permits all public administration bodies and legal entities to adopt temporary affirmative actions on grounds of gender and sex.

Just like Hungary, Slovakia also has a number of strategies and action plans aiming at achieving gender equality and preventing violence against women, and the Statistic Office publishes yearly statistics book called *Gender 201x*.

As for the cooperation with the civil sector, the Government Council for Human Rights, National Minorities and Gender Equality is a permanent advisory body to government for areas including the promotion of the principle of equal treatment and the principle of equality including gender equality. This Council has 6 committees, one of them is Committee for Gender Equality with 60 members, half of them from NGOs.

She listed a number of challenges, one of them is the small number of women participating in politics (national parliament: 15 %, EP 38%). Progression is also hindered by the debate on the so-called ‘gender ideology’: there was also a protest against signing and ratification of the Istanbul Convention, because it includes the term ‘gender’.

In Slovakia, gender mainstreaming is not a reality yet but there are some developments. For example, the reduction in the gender pay gap is a significant result: since 2005 the gender pay gap in the unadjusted form of in hourly earnings between men and women was 26.7%, by 2013 it had fallen to 17.9%. Furthermore, legal documents have an obligation to assess the gender impact or impact on gender equality (the outcome is, unfortunately, often very formal). All in all, EU antidiscrimination provisions give an opportunity for progress, but the outcome depends on the presence of political will in the state parties.

The lectures were followed by a question and answer session.

A member of the audience asked about the possible ways of involving men, as well as members of the public who are not experts but average citizens. According to Olga Pietruchová we should follow the Austrian example, where gender equality is built into public education. She experienced that public interest (even that of men) can be raised by very practical and palpable issues like the wage gap, on which she has just finished a successful campaign. The public is not interested in more abstract and theoretical themes like gender mainstreaming.

Andrea Krizsán argued that the more extreme and striking a sexist attack is, the more people will pay attention and act. She mentioned the Women’s Riot group and action from 2012 September, induced by a male MP István Varga who claimed that women should bear more, possibly 4 or 5 children, and then married couples would appreciate each-other and domestic violence would not exist. This incident led to a successful online and offline protest.

Borbála Juhász added that there are already efforts going on to involve men. The most obvious manifestation of this tendency is the fact that by now we speak of Gender Studies and gender politics, instead of Women’s Studies and women’s politics, in order to emphasize that we should examine the sexes in relation to each other. This generates a debate even within feminism: for example, using the term ‘gender-based violence’ might hide the fact that in

most cases men commit violent acts against woman victims. According to Leinarte, we should definitely speak of 'women's rights'. In Pietruchová's opinion these terms do not exclude each other, and it always depends on the context which one is more effective to use. She also mentioned that in Slovakia a new human rights strategy is being made, which includes a separate chapter on women's human rights.

Another participant asked how the lecturers think the government can be persuaded to adhere to the convention in practice. Dalia Leinarte suggested taking more cases to court, to CEDAW or ECHR. Perpetrators should be punished, and by a growing number of cases such a level of publicity can be achieved that the government will have to act.

The next question was how important a separate gender equality institution is.

According to Leinarte, the unanimous CEDAW standpoint is that the issue of gender equality and other anti-discrimination issues must be kept separately, because in case of integration gender may be marginalized. Pietruchová, on the other hand, argued that the answer depends on how effectively the already existing integrated institution works.

Krizsán said that in the past 8 years incorporation took place almost everywhere, and a possible pro argument is intersectionality: this way, individuals suffering from multiple discrimination (like Romani women) can be helped more effectively. However, in most cases this remains on a theoretical level: even in integrated institutions separate departments (who don't talk to each other) may deal with different forms of discrimination. In Krizsán's opinion the ultimate solution would be dealing with gender issues separately AND in relation to other forms of discrimination as well. She remarked that she doesn't know about any European country where it works really well.

3. Second session: 10 years of EU membership – gender and economy

The second session involved five experts and was introduced by **Beáta Nagy** (Corvinus University). In her view, joining the EU advanced the institutionalization of gender equality as well as creating a framework of thinking about this issue. In her opinion, the most important are the following:

- directives of employment, including the regulation that action plans must include their effect on gender equality;
- Gender Equality Roadmap (2006-2010) and National Strategy for the Promotion of Gender Equality – Guidelines and Objectives 2010-2021 – at the time of their creation, much could be expected from these documents (but in 2010 a right-wing government was elected, which ignored all these efforts) and
- the appearance of feminist economics.

It seemed that in spite of the weak and unsponsored civil society, favourable impulses could infiltrate the decision making from above, from a supranational level.

The list of drawbacks, however, is longer in her opinion:

- After the regime change the transformation of economic structure did not take place, regarding competitiveness, we are still lagging behind compared to the optimistic vision of the early 90s. The size of marginalized, disadvantaged social groups increased, and they are constantly reproduced on the level of insufficient education.
- The economic crisis since 2008 (the first wave of which, statistically, affected men to a greater extent) worsened the situation, Central-Eastern-European countries are still suffering

from its effects. The situation of the sexes drew close to each-other in the way that everybody's went worse.

- Ensuing financial restraints, the curtailment of services statistically affected women to a greater extent (e. g. closing nurseries, halting developments, having to pay Kindergarten fees);
- The appearance of the so-called 'gender ideology' (with contrasting gender equality and family as a mistaken and unfair starting point!) was another step back;
- Neoliberal economic policy put women as employees in an even more difficult position: even for a low income it is expected of them to be at the employer's disposal any time. Meetings, teambuildings, company parties are not timed and organized in a family friendly way.

Gabriele Michalitsch from the University of Vienna talked about 'Views of the feminist economics on the economic order of the EU'. She began her lecture with the claim that in her view, even feminist economics is not a homogenous discipline, it involves several perspectives. Her theoretical starting point is the work of Butler and Foucault.

The neoliberal restructuring of economics, which was a detriment to gender equality, began in most European countries in the '90s. Its disadvantageous effects include:

- horizontal and vertical segregation of women in the labour market;
- precarious employment forms, primarily affecting women (e. g. jobs not (or not fully) included in the social security system, mini jobs, etc.);
- cutback of public services, which isn't gender neutral either, and affects women more than men: in case of economic crisis it is not the army where the cutbacks take place (see Greece). Reduction of the public childcare and healthcare is all the more typical, e. g. expelling patients earlier from hospital, creating an additional burden for the private household, usually for women.
- As a consequence, there's a regression towards traditional gender roles and unequal sharing of housework, childcare and care of the elderly. A further problem is, that the unpaid work of women is invisible in statistics, although it does contribute to the production of profit, the greater proportion of which is – and it is also rarely examined from a gender perspective – possessed by men.
- Flat tax, characteristic of neoliberal economic policy further increases social differences. Taxes of wealth have been reduced or eliminated all through Europe – further increasing the gap between the situation of the sexes, since women are not wealthy. The increase of the VAT affects women to a great extent. A progressive income tax would contribute a lot to redistribution.

Ewa Rumińska-Zimny from Poland (professor of Warsaw University of Economics, former leader of the UN program Gender and Economics, member of the organization board of Polish women's congress) talked about 'EU membership of the East-Central European countries from a gender perspective.' She agreed with Michalitsch that statistics are not gender neutral, and that gender wage gap has increased but she disagreed with her in terms of the nature of feminist economics. She argued that it does have one definite theoretical frame.

Feminist economics starts out of the fact that economics is not a gender neutral discipline (either), and the greatest problem with mainstream economics is that it does not include women's unpaid work and reproductive sector itself in the discussion of national income. Furthermore, concerning the spending of national income, the proportions to which the army or the social sector benefits from it are not examined.

Since 1956 there is a (formal) commitment to gender equality as a core value at the highest policy level in the EU, manifesting itself in directives, strategies, employment regulations, and an expectation of gendered statistical data. Newly accessed countries tend to

introduce progressive measures in the first few years, but this enthusiasm fades after joining the EU. All over East-Central-Europe there are problems in women's employment (and employment in general), as well as in the child care system. The EU average of gender wage gap is 15%, but in Slovakia it's over 30%. Only 1-3 per cent of men take the opportunity of 'father's child care leave.'

Rumińska-Zimny thinks that the main cause of these social drawbacks is that the EU is a (neoliberal) *economical* project, with a primary focus on monetary policy. It has merely „soft” power over gender as a human rights/ social issue, its positive effects in these fields depend on political will. Mainstream neoliberal economic thinking is, furthermore, biased, and involves several stereotypes which reinforce traditional gender roles.

According to her conclusions:

- there is an urgent need to rethink aims and priorities: the focus should be replaced from consumption to non-market factors like care;
- unpaid care work should be included in economic analyses;
- the redistribution of sources should be aimed at eliminating gender-based (as well as ethnical, class-based, etc.) social inequalities.

According to Rumińska-Zimny, the economic crisis makes it inevitable to rethink the future of the EU from these aspects.

Zoltán Pogátsa came from University of Western Hungary and his lecture was entitled 'EU membership and prospects of the EU economic order: another heterodox perspective.'

There is a closing-up in GDP, but there isn't any in the social sense, he said. His methodological argument was that Western-European average is a better source for comparison than the EU average. On the basis of this, we could see that our entire region is below the Western-European average concerning employment rates, thus, no development took place from this aspect. The rates of unemployment among young people aren't better either.

Nominal consumption is also low. Purchasing power parity (PPP, price level) is lower in our region, that's why from this aspect the regional situation may seem better, although Western-European prices, concerning their proportions and compared to people's wages are *not* higher. The lecturer at this point called the attention to another potential methodological failure: in his opinion, the usual way of calculating price indicators is inappropriate, since staying at hotels or going to restaurants is not the part of an average person's everyday consumption. The figures immediately change if we take the prices of food, clothing or public transport; furthermore, it must also be added that price level indicators are also distorted by including prices of state services.

In Hungary, approximately 4 million people live below the subsistence minimum. After Bulgaria, the proportion of child poverty is the second biggest in Hungary: as much as 36%. 45% of people between 18 and 35 are forced by their financial status to live with their parents, and 75% of them is unable to make savings, and even the average saving of the rest is not more than 9529 Fts (30 Euros).

It is important to keep in mind, he stated, that the European Union is an economic organization. It is about free trade, customs union, single market, monetary union – and it is not a political union. It is not a social institution, although sometimes it attempts to appear so. Its employment policy contains a hint of social aspect, but as for its significance, let us consider that Hungary is allowed to oppose it directly, without any punishment.

Pogátsa finished his lecture with the opinion that the left-wing does not realize that the EU is not theirs. Being Euro-sceptic is not the same as being against the EU, but it means a constructive criticism. According to Pogátsa, the left is unwilling to take a Euro-sceptic stance because then a comfortable assumption will have to be dismissed: that is, the previous generations have already created a social Europe – although it still has to be achieved.

The last lecture of the day was held by **Márton Csillag** of Budapest Institute, and its title was ‘Prospects of female employment in East-Central Europe.’ Female employment, before the great economic recession, increased EU-wide, and between 2008 and 2011 it stagnated.

There are notable differences across East-Central-European countries:

- large rise before recession in Baltic states and Bulgaria, sharp fall during recession;
- slow and steady rise in Poland;
- stagnation in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia.

The employment rate of women since 2007 is the lowest in Hungary among East-Central-European countries. The employment of women over 50 increased in Western-European countries, but did not improve in our region. The employment of low-educated women slightly deteriorated.

Child rearing, unfortunately, still entails a so-called employment penalty (primarily for mothers, not for fathers): in Hungary, only 25% of the women rearing children between 0 and 5 years are employed (whilst in Spain or the UK this rate is around 50%). For this difference the shortcomings of the child care system are to be blamed. Furthermore, conservative societal norms also affect the situation. A survey in Hungary (Blaskó) shows that the majority of women (80%) consider it optimal to stay at home with children at least for 3 years. But 60% would accept a woman to return to part-time work when the child is aged 2, and 75% if this could be done from the home. The availability of adequate day-care is also a factor that determines opinions: among those who consider it optimal for mothers to stay with their children until age 3, 40% would still accept to return to work if there were enough nurseries.

Csillag also dwelt on changes of the near past: women’s employment rate has recently grown, but it hasn’t been examined how (if at all) it relates to recent measures. A task of the future is to determine this, as well as to create family friendly workplaces, making father’s child care leave more popular, and modernizing gender roles.

The conference was finished with a long and lively debate.

Answering a question, Michalitsch explained that she does not claim that feminist economics has no grounds, she only claims that it is not homogenous, it has several directions. Rumińska-Zimny prefers the term ‘gender economics.’ The earlier presupposition was that gender mainstreaming and the enforcement of human rights is a burden to the budget, which we cannot afford. (‘We cannot afford being Swedish.’) But Asa Löfström, a Swedish feminist economist pointed out that gender equality correlates with GDP growth. Thus, gender as a source of growth was brought into economics. Michalitsch questions exactly this framing of problems in neoliberal terms.

Pogátsa expressed his opinion that gender debates should not be carried out within economics.

The question was also raised whether gender equality remains a 'soft' topic. According to Csillag it is very important, but he defended statistics. Michalitsch had not suggested throwing it away, she just argued for a careful interpretation of data. Employment rates, for example, may represent women with minijobs as active.

Who should pay for women's unpaid work, it was also asked. Rumińska-Zimny raised the possibility of full-time motherhood, but according to Michalitsch, this totally opposes the concept of feminism, and she would prefer not to focus on women's fertility, but (and Csillag agreed) involving men as fathers and caregivers as well. For Michalitsch it is unthinkable to support an option in which a woman lives only for her family and children, but Rumińska-Zimny talked about the Polish women's congress where very progressive feminist like Gabriele sit at the discussion table with more conservative women.

Rita Antoni