

Headwinds and Tailwinds: Implications for Gender Equality

Report on a Dialogue between Country Desk Officers, D.2 Gender Equality, DG
Justice and Consumers
and SAAGE Country Experts
held on Friday 5th May 2017



This report was financed by, and prepared for the use of the European Commission, Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers, Unit D2 'Equality between men and women', in the framework of a contract managed by Fondazione Giacomo Brodolini (FGB). It does not necessarily reflect the opinion or position of the European Commission or of the Directorate-General for Justice, nor may any person acting on their behalf be held responsible for the use which may be made of the information contained in this publication.



Background

The 2017 annual seminar of the SAAGE initiative explored current political and economic contexts across Europe and their implications for gender equality. The seminar brought together the SAAGE country experts and the country desk officers from the Gender Equality Unit in DG Justice and Consumers. Perspectives from six Member States, that captured the diversity of these political and economic contexts were presented. These presentations, in turn, stimulated a dialogue among participants about the implications of these different contexts for future directions for gender equality.

Current European Union Context

Current European Union developments were presented by Lucie Davoine and Emilie Jarrett of the Gender Equality Unit. The core framing document for current progress is the Strategic Engagement for Gender Equality 2016-2019 with its five priority areas.

The work life balance package is a key development. The legal and policy framework proposed is ambitious. It includes proposals for provisions on paternity leave, compensation for parental leave, carers' leave, and right to request flexible working arrangements. The European Pillar of Social Rights is now in consultation with the European social partners. This represents a broader advance in the European agenda with its focus on the labour market and social protection.

The Commission continues its work on follow-up to the pay transparency recommendation. Work on decision-making has focused on mutual learning and the 2012 Directive proposal in relation to women as non-executive directors on boards. Work on gender based violence has included a Eurobarometer on public opinion, a range of funding calls, and a number of umbrella activities.

The ensuing discussion raised the importance of a further focus on health and long-term care, reproductive health, school curricula, and on-line sexual violence. Action on social care, akin to the work done on childcare, was identified as a growing imperative. The difficulties in comparative data in relation to gender based violence were raised given the nature of the recording and the levels of reporting vary from country to country.

Political Headwinds and Tailwinds

Introduction

Politics across the EU is in a state of flux. Some political contexts present headwinds in their hostility to gender equality or in generating a popular disregard for equality goals. Some political contexts offer a tailwind of leadership and support for gender equality. In others, a shifting mix of headwinds and tailwinds is evident. This state of political flux and these different manifestations need to be explored for their implications for the promotion of gender equality if strategy and action for gender equality are to be context relevant and able to achieve an impact.

Presentations

In *Sweden*, the overarching goal of gender equality policy is that women and men have the same power to shape society and their own lives. This is significant in looking beyond equality in terms of opportunities to equality in terms of power. The political situation is complicated and unstable with power shifting from the social democrats to an alliance of the Liberal, Centre and Christian Democratic parties and back to a minority government of the Social Democratic and Green Parties and with the rise of the Sweden Democrats. Five of eight parties call themselves feminist parties and the current government identifies itself as feminist.

Progress, with different emphases from each of the coalitions, has been made on gender equality under the previous and current governments in relation to gender equal division of power and influence, economic gender equality, equal distribution of unpaid housework and the provision of care, and men's violence against women. Challenges for the future include the pension gap, the integration of migrants, and the lack of employment for men of low educational status.

In *France*, politics calls on a tradition of gender equality. There were advances in gender equality under Francois Hollande in particular the strengthening of the gender equality infrastructure and law and gender equality in decision-making. However, there were missed opportunities, in relation to individual taxation for example, and setbacks in relation to labour market reforms that penalised precarious workers, of whom women are a majority

In the presidential election final round, neither candidate had much to offer gender equality. The commitment of one to austerity measures and labour

market reforms poses threats to gender equality. The other had no concern for gender equality but pointed towards a reassertion of traditional gender roles. There are democratic challenges including to guarantee rights against the pressure to return to traditional roles and against the refusal to recognise family diversity. There are economic challenges including to ensure progress on gender equality in employment.

In *Poland*, gender equality policies were never strong but now encounter much greater difficulties. The political context has seen the Law and Justice party elected to government with an unusually strong mandate. The conservatism espoused by the Government is backed by that of a strong Catholic Church and there are strong ties between the church and the party. Public opinion on gender equality reflects a strong traditionalism and a limited acknowledgement of gender discrimination and a limited understanding of domestic violence.

Key policy changes include a diminution of the gender equality infrastructure and the financing of NGOs in the area of gender equality; lower involvement in promoting reconciliation measures, lowering and differentiation of the retirement age to 60 years for women and 65 years for men; attempts to withdraw from the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Gender Based Violence and refusal of financing for projects in this field; and attempts to ban abortion completely. The influence of international organisations in the country needs to be strengthened. Developments in the political scene are uncertain.

Dialogue

Overall, there was concern at current political developments and a pessimism dominated discussions with a sense that the pursuit of gender equality faces evolving and growing political headwinds. This was not unanimous with some expressions of optimism also evident. Nostalgia for a better past was not encouraged, however, given the gender equalities that characterised this past.

Public opinion interacts with the political domain in generating this context and, in turn, being shaped by this context. Austerity policies were identified as a source of concern for their capacity to generate popular fear for the future, anxiety and lack of hope. At a more optimistic level there was hope that recent negative political developments might stimulate a more open public opinion and a gathering of opposition forces.

The pursuit of gender equality was viewed as enmeshed in other social inequalities. Gender equality should be advanced hand-in-hand with these. The women's movement was identified as a key actor in reshaping public opinion and influencing political contexts. The importance of supporting this movement, engaging its various NGOs and finding a language to unite it was noted. The importance of communication was identified. This could focus on the role of women and the importance of gender equality. However, the risk of messages being manipulated was highlighted. There is a need for creativity in this communication to engage a hostile public opinion and political context.

A number of specific issues were identified as requiring attention in this context of growing political headwinds. These included the need for more women in decision making, to improve the labour market situation of women, and to address issues of education curricula. Teachers could be engaged with in relation to curriculum issues. The Directive on atypical work could be progressed to improve the quality of work available to women. Greater use of infringement procedures could be considered over the focus on incentives. Indicators relating to economic equality could be developed.

Economic Headwinds and Tailwinds

Introduction

Economic contexts differ across the EU. Some Member States have remained largely untouched by economic crisis, others are in a process of painful economic recovery out of crisis, while yet others remain enmeshed in the economic difficulties attendant on crisis. Economic strategies in response to situations of crisis have diminished the landscape of public sector provision and generated significant economic inequalities. These different contexts need to be explored for their implications for the promotion of gender equality if strategy and action for gender equality are to be context relevant and able to achieve an impact.

Presentations

In *Germany*, there is a strong economy but gender equality still moves at a snail's pace. Strong economic activity, a robust labour market with low unemployment, and strong consumption characterise the economic situation. This coincides with strong vertical and horizontal segregation in the labour market, a high gender pay

gap, and a lack of affordable childcare in some areas. There are different gender regimes in East and West.

The economic tailwind has a positive impact on the labour market and is good for employment opportunities for women. However, there are few steps to improve gender equality in care work as a result of a conservative welfare regime alongside conservative gender ideologies.

In *Ireland*, the still fragile economic recovery is characterised by significant employment growth and falling unemployment rates for women and men combined with persistent inequality evident in high levels of poverty and disadvantage. The consequences of the crisis continue to be felt in a wide range of social issues.

The unequal gendered division of care work limits women's earnings and labour market participation. The care economy is characterised by inadequate provision, high cost and poor working conditions. Precarious employment presents a further range of issues of relevance to women. Inequality was exacerbated under austerity and has persisted after austerity. There is a challenge to combine an emphasis on gender equality with an overall emphasis on economic equality. Current debate in Ireland is dominated by access to abortion and reproductive rights and not the economic questions.

In *Spain*, the economy is now one of the fastest growing in Europe and the public deficit is under control. Austerity has emerged as more an objective in itself to calm financial markets and EU institutions rather than as a means to reach any particular goal. It has led to indiscriminate budgetary cuts in essential services, including the gender equality infrastructure and care services, with a large impact on women and gender equality. The labour market has become more precarious.

Political change in 2015 has led to changed perceptions. More gender sensitive policies have been introduced. More public jobs are being created, gender based violence issues are being given some priority, a maternity complement has been introduced for contributory pensions, and improved parental leave arrangements implemented. A stronger gender equality infrastructure is needed, given how easily it was eroded under austerity. New strategic thinking is required and new gender equality strategies are needed for new times rather than seeking a reversion to the previous status quo.

Dialogue

Neither economic growth in a strong economy nor economic growth in a crisis recovery context were seen as guarantors of gender equality. Economic growth in a strong economy could create better conditions for gender equality outcomes but in practice did not necessarily reach into all areas required for gender equality, in particular the care economy. Economic growth in a context of crisis recovery suffered from diminished public infrastructure in its capacity to advance gender equality and cautious restoration of budgets was not adequate to address this barrier.

There is a need to explore the influence the crisis has left on gender equality and to address such legacies. One example is that of a labour market now characterised by precarious work. Another aspect is the relationship of gender equality with the wider legacy of economic inequality left by the crisis. This economic inequality is part of gender inequality and gender inequality is part of this wider economic inequality. Any post-recovery situation won't go back to pre-recovery settings. New gender equality strategies are required for this new context.

There is a need to strengthen the gender equality infrastructure in this regard. The pursuit of gender equality through this infrastructure must not be so dependent on political support. The relationship between gender equality and precarious work and economic growth needs further research if gender equality is to be effectively advanced.

A number of specific issues were also identified. These included the need to attend to addressing childcare needs and the care economy, the importance of a wider social care infrastructure, and the need to further explore gender equality within the family.

Conclusion

The European Union and the European Commission have key roles to play in this context of growing headwinds for gender equality. The European economic governance model needs to develop social goals that are now put ahead of economic goals and to create the conditions for the re-emergence of social Europe. The Social Rights Pillar and the accompanying concrete initiatives (as the work-life balance proposal) could usefully lead the way in this regard.

The European Commission offers an important leadership for gender equality. The Strategic Engagement for Gender Equality 2016-2019 provides an important framework in this regard. Particular and positive mention was made of the influence of European Commission through gender focused Country Specific Recommendations under the European semester and the Europe 2020 agenda.