

Cross-cutting issues for the gender equality agenda 2015 and beyond

By Trudie Knijn

Today's concerns about gender equality have to be placed within the framework of three devolutionary trends.

Firstly, the EU and its member states are still coping with the aftermath of the financial and economic crisis, the effects of economic decline, flexible labour markets and work insecurity, social insecurity and the mobility of (young) migrant workers. In this process, the impact of an imbalance between the economic forces of the EU – particularly the free trade in goods, people and services – and social citizenship rights that are still mainly derived from the nation state demand serious attention. This imbalance raises new cross-cutting gender-equality issues, and implies work and income protection for vulnerable groups in the labour market such as mobile youngsters of both sexes and mainly-female migrant care workers. Rights related to family formation and reproduction are additional core issues for this growing population of cross-border workers that demand policy attention.

Secondly, devolution refers to processes of scale. Member states and their political elites appear to be increasingly hesitant to upscale policy responsibility to the EU. By contrast – and for budgetary reasons, retrenchment and austerity – there is a tendency to downscale policy responsibility to local or regional governments.

Thirdly, gender equality as a policy aim appears to be losing priority. Once a 'catch-all principle' – to provide a labour reserve and resources for increasing household income, contribute to the knowledge economy and maintain fertility – gender equality today is seemingly being sacrificed as a high-priority policy aim.

Against this backdrop, it may be necessary for the EU to shift attention as well as governance to those aspects of gender-equality policy that worry many of its populations. In fact, the percentage of women on company boards, in parliaments and in higher education is not the real cause of concern. To frame it positively: the EU might gain support for its gender equality policy if it succeeds in developing gender-related human and social rights policies that foster labour- and income-related social protection as well as family- and care-related social rights that support the reconciliation of work and care. These are not new policies – it is what the EU has done in the past (1980s and 1990s) – but this time the economic and governance context is different, and it remains necessary to highlight examples of good practice.

European governments have reacted to financial and economic crises in different ways. The EU does not speak with a single voice on the strategy required to overcome the effects of the crisis and preserve the European Social Model, or on the preferred outcomes for its populations in terms of at least maintaining pre-crisis levels of gender equality. From this perspective, it might be useful for the governance tools for benchmarking gender equality from 2015 onwards to address the impact of the crisis, and the reforms introduced in response to it.

Questions that could be addressed are:

- How have EU member states reacted to the crisis, did they invest in or retrench public services, and what effect has this had on female employment?
- How have member states reacted to the crisis in terms of social protection, and what impact has this had on poverty rates among (young) men and women?
- How do member states monitor the gender effects of decentralising responsibilities (to local governments) and outsourcing them (to the market or non-profit organisations)
- How do member states mitigate the effects of flexible labour markets, and what impact do they have on gender?

Governance tools might include not only dates and figures or EU committees and stakeholders, but also an evaluation of the way in which member states have considered the gender impact of policy reforms. As in the past, EU agencies should demand that member states report on the gender effects of public service and social security reforms. My inspiration for this comes from my own country, the Netherlands, where budget-inspired reforms have left daughters, wives and mothers struggling once again to juggle work with responsibilities to care for children and the elderly (see Box 11).

It is hard to define the target groups for action on gender equality from 2015 onwards. Although the aim is to reach all levels of society, for obvious reasons the recent focus has been on women at the top. In my country, for instance, in academic circles we lose 10% of women at every step in the hierarchical ladder: over 50% of masters' degree-holders are female, at the PhD level the figure falls to 40%, assistant professors 30%, associate professors 20%, and full professors less than 15%. The figures for women on company executive boards are also alarmingly low.

However, the EU should also be aware of the shrinking middle classes and the increasingly unprotected lower classes. American-style polarisation is undermining the European social model, with a severe impact on social cohesion, social well-being and (not least) beliefs about what the EU means for people's lives. Just one example to illustrate this: if the loss of tens of thousands of female jobs in public services are blamed on EU-driven reform policies, women will forget that the EU once implemented directives for equal payments and pensions. Hence target groups for further evaluation of gender equality should include women on welfare, poor families and those on temporary labour contracts, with or without social protection.

There needs to be a strong focus on the core EU policy of free movement of goods, services and people. So far, this policy has not included social protection directives (or at least these are contested) or family-related legislation such as recognition of family formation and reproduction variants (same-sex marriages, abortion, recognition of children born out of wedlock, etc.). Member states are of course autonomous in setting their own criteria for social protection and family law, but discrepancies between free trade and freedom of movement and how this plays out in individual country's systems and regulations have to be considered – otherwise resolving such conflicts will be left to the European courts.

Another target group that is increasing in importance and scale are migrant care workers. Here, two issues are at stake. Firstly, migrant care workers themselves: how their rights are protected, what contracts they have, who is protecting their social rights, whether they are paid at least a minimum wage also when working in private households, etc. Secondly, the risk of 'care drain' from EU member states that have invested in their training to countries that benefit from this training and

need migrants to reduce the costs of caring for the elderly without reducing employment opportunities for their own female workforce.

So far, the EU debate on these issues has been very much an internal one, with a huge gap between the neo-liberalist EU approach and what the populations of the EU member states had hoped for.

Addressing these issues is not easy. Communication on gender equality might be improved by explaining the problems instead of advertising what are sometimes minimal results, making people confront the real issues; by encouraging young journalists to take part in internships, workshops and seminars; and by funding an exchange programme for the new generation of journalists in the member states.

Finally, it is my conviction that the main problem at the moment is that gender equality - to which the EU made a major contribution before the start of the 21st century - is being poisoned by the neo-liberal route the Union has taken since then. The focus on getting higher-educated women in top positions illustrates such a perspective and undermines public identification with the EU as well as its credibility. It also devalues the Union's meaning and importance in the hearts and minds of the population.

If the EU does not succeed in reaching the 'common' woman - and man - gender equality objectives stand no chance of being reached. For this reason, we need to focus on tensions and dilemmas, on reforms and their outcomes, on complexities instead of on straightforward results, on conflicting interests and - in the end - on the gender impact of the recent reforms.

Box 11. The Dutch example

Wide-ranging public service reforms are having a significant negative impact on female employment, caring for children and the elderly, and reconciling work and care, with the burden falling mainly on adult daughters of frail elderly women and the mothers of young children.

The Dutch government has implemented austerity measures that primarily hit women working in public and already commercialised sectors. In the field of care for the elderly, the government endorsed the 2014 EU recommendations that the quality and accessibility of long-term care needs to be monitored and maintained at an adequate level. In the Dutch National Reform Plan of 2013, it highlighted the 'wide range of measures' it had presented to make funding for long-term care more sustainable. Like its predecessor, this government's aim is to develop a more tailored system of health care, with more care being provided closer to home. The proposed measures will yield savings of approximately 3.5 billion euro and, as a result, despite the growing demand for care, spending on long-term care is not expected to rise in the period 2013-2017.

Various measures came into force on 1 January 2013. For example, patients in the two lightest categories of residential care have been transferred to outpatient care; the target group for the personal health care budget has been scaled back; and the funding of geriatric rehabilitation has been transferred to health insurers (delivering total savings of 0.7 billion euro). Patients' financial assets will also weigh more heavily in determining personal payments for residential care, with clients required to make a higher personal contribution, which will generate additional income of 80 million euro a year.

Implementing these measures will cut female jobs in residential care for the elderly and disabled by 10,000 to 55,000 (estimates vary). These reforms in care for the elderly are paralleled by reforms in youth care and social work introduced from January 1 2015. Moreover, moving to local budgetary responsibility for these areas will cost thousands of (mainly female) professional jobs. Finally, the reduction in tax deductions for childcare costs has resulted in 30% of parents withdrawing from (mainly commercially provided) childcare since 2010. Quality and tax relief go down and prices go up - a reason for parents to either reduce their working week or find informal solutions.