

## DOES EUROPE NEED A GENDER MAINSTREAMED AGENDA FOR THE FUTURE?

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### **Abstract**

*The list of European problems is long: the Greek debt crisis, refugees in the Mediterranean, a war in Ukraine, another war in Siria, excessive bureaucracy of the European institutions, or the rise of nationalist parties from Paris to Budapest. On the other hand, relatively speaking, Europe is doing fine in regard to gender equality. What does then gender equality have to do with Europe's overall problems of today or tomorrow? A whole lot – this will be the answer this article will give. Europe's success in the area of gender equality is haunted by various potential failures. I will bring forward some arguments that prove that addressing gender equality better is still important for overcoming a myriad of other issues in Europe, that still exist explicitly, but also implicitly. New forms of gender inequalities may in fact be a problem in Europe, holding societies back from unfolding their fullest and truest potential, and gender mainstreaming future agendas of Europe should be seriously taken into account.*

**Keywords:** gender mainstreaming, equal opportunities, gender inequality, intersectionality, feminism

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### **1. Introduction**

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The list of European problems nowadays is long: the Greek debt crisis, refugees in the Mediterranean, a war in Ukraine, another war in Siria, excessive bureaucracy of the European institutions, or the rise of nationalist parties from Paris to Budapest, the Euro zone, etc. From the perspective of gender equality, relatively speaking, Europe is doing fine. In the last decades important changes took place to the benefit of women. Nevertheless, no country, worldwide or within the EU, has established even remotely the equality between women and men. Europe's leading country in most gender statistics, Iceland, only holds a score of 87 (with 100 being complete equality), while Finland and Sweden clock in at the low 80s. The EU average on gender equality, according to the Gender European Index (GEI), lies

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slightly below 53, meaning that, on average, gender equality in the EU is only halfway achieved. To anyone caring about such equality, this is bad news. To anyone caring about Europe's future, this is bad news, too. To anyone carrying for Romania this is even worse - as Romania is on the last position among all 27 EU countries.



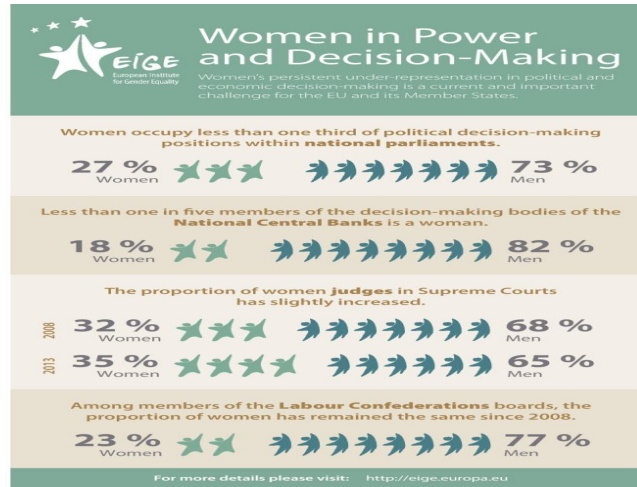
Figure 1. EIGE-Gender Equality Index, 2014<sup>2</sup>

Gender equality is not fully achieved in any of the major fields. In politics for example women occupy less than one third of political decision making positions within European parliaments although plenty of efforts have been made to improve these unbalanced representations (e.g. quota systems in many countries).

Gender equality is one of the common values and founding principles of the European Union, and yet, according to the *EIGE Gender Equality Index*, the average woman earns 16% less than a man in the EU; even though 60% of EU university graduates are women, they are later heavily underrepresented in senior and top positions in the world of work; women have limited access to lifelong learning and have more fragmented careers, they are still often victims of gender-based discrimination and violence. Only 59% of women participate in the labour market as opposed to 70% of men; 32% of women work part-time compared to 8% of men; although women are more likely to have a qualification in tertiary education – 25% of women compared to 23% of men – on average, they earn less

<sup>2</sup> The **Gender Equality Index (GEI)** is annually drafted by the European Institute of Gender Equality and compiles factors used as indicators (i.e. knowledge, money, work, time, violence, power, health, and intersecting inequalities) to determine differences between women and men. For 2014 the top-ranking countries are Sweden, Finland, Denmark, the Netherlands, and Belgium, with Romania, Slovakia, Portugal, Greece, and Bulgaria ranking the lowest.

than men and are less represented in management positions (*Eurostat*, 2011); more than six million women in the European Union state that they cannot work full-time due to family responsibilities (*European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, Family life and work*, 2010: 3); only 16% of board seats at Europe’s largest companies are filled by women (*European Commission*, 2013)



**Figure 2 Women in Power and Decision Making, EIGE, 2014**

Global projections estimate that, at the current rate of change, it will take almost 30 years to reach the EU’s target of 75% of women in employment, over 70 years to make equal pay a reality, over 20 years to achieve gender balance on the boards of Europe’s largest publicly listed companies and almost 40 years to ensure that housework is equally shared between women and men. (*The World’s Women’s 2015. Trends and Statistics*).

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## ***2. WHY gender inequalities still persist?***

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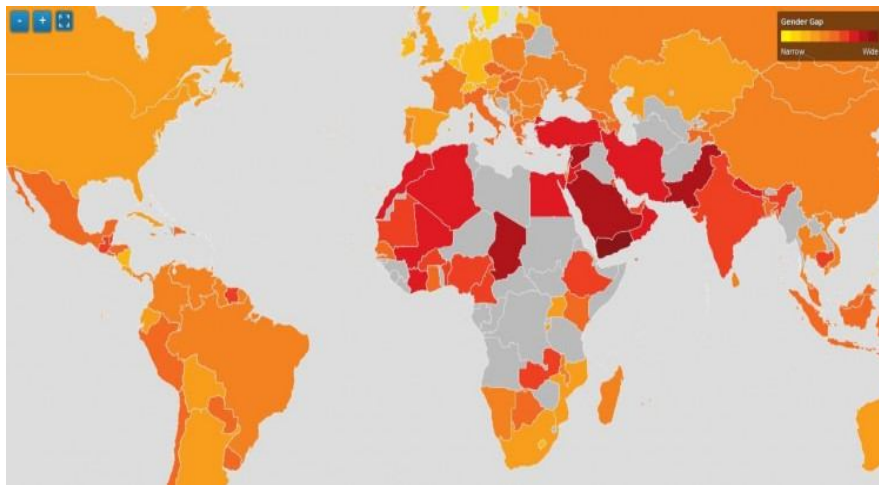
Why, although important changes took place, gender equality is not achieved and today, in the complex social-economical and political European context, it is not even considered to be a priority for decision makers?

Perhaps, one may argue within a conservative paradigm, our society has reached its “carrying capacity” in terms of the labor force involvement of women. That is, if children are to be cared for as society requires, perhaps women cannot go much further in their commitments to success in the workplace or politics.

Gender inequality's staying power could also derive from people's long lasting use of sex/gender together as a primary frame (infused with stereotypes/biases) for organizing the most fundamental activities (Ridgeway, 2011: 12). As long as the dual dichotomic model of gender persists, the functionalist type of building gender roles and relations will continue diminishing the individual and collective desire for redefining social arrangements in society. Changes in cultural beliefs about gender equality follow but usually behind changes in material areas belonging to gender equality. So, even if the normative framework changes and many more concrete rights are achieved, mentalities about gender roles are still conservative allowing little space for inner profound changes.

Hostile attitudes towards gender equality could be additionally explained by the fear of change. Gender equality is about major change. It is about disturbing the substantial micro and macro transformation at the level of both individual and institutional arrangements. It takes us all-women and men alike, from the comfort zone and places us in an unknown territory of renegotiation of our private and public roles, needs and aspirations. And especially in societies with high levels of uncertainty avoidance (such as Romania) pushing for such change is much harder (G. Hofstede, 2012).

We are somehow the victims of our successes. It depends on how one sees the glass: half empty or half full. The same data mentioned in the beginning of this article could be interpreted within a more optimistic code. We may read differently the map below. A lot of countries are far away from achieving gender equality (brown and red areas on the map)...but the same map is saying that many countries are close to this objective (yellow areas)!



**Figure 3. Global Gender Gap Index, World Economic Forum, 2014**

We have *almost* done it. In 2006, 56% of the economic participation gap was closed; in 2014, 60% of this gap was closed. In 2006, almost 92% of the educational attainment gap was closed; in 2014, 94% of this gap was closed. We talk today of reverse gender gap in education. In 2006, 14% of the global political empowerment gap was closed; in 2010 16% and in 2014, 21% of this gap was closed. Comparing to a global level, the top five for the EU are also part of the top 15 worldwide, with Romania, the EU's lowest-ranking country, still ranking at 70 out of 136. Most EU countries easily make the first third of the list, giving the EU a comfortable global standing for the GEI (*Global Gender Gap, 2014, World Economic Forum*)

In terms of human rights the progress is also obvious. The normative frame changed dramatically. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) –the women's bible with respect to their rights, opened in 1979 for signing. Sweden became the first state to deposit the treaty on July 2, 1980. In 1981, 20 states ratified it and as of May 2015, 189 states have ratified or acceded to the treaty (most recently South Sudan on April 30, 2015). Over the past 20 years, an increasing number of countries have adopted legislation providing maternity and paternity benefits (e.g. Romania), enabling workers to meet their responsibilities outside work. Over half of all countries currently offer at least 14 weeks of maternity leave and 48 per cent of countries have provisions for paternity leave. There are also improvements in the national and European legislations concerning important issues such as domestic violence or sexual harassment.

We are doing better than ever before, but we are still unsatisfied with the rhythm of change. It seems to be a paradox: the more we know, the less we are satisfied; the more we have, the more we need and want. Durkheim or Tocqueville have explained long ago the social processes by which increase in the collective well-being may come with decrease in individual satisfaction and how improvements of everybody may determine an increase of dissatisfaction (Boudon, 1998: 24).

Beyond unprecedented progress, new macro, meso, micro gender inequalities are "discovered". We discuss today about new forms of gender discriminations such as the glass ceiling, the sticky floor, the leaking pipeline, work-life unbalance, sexual harassment, mobbing, neosexism, cissexism, etc. We undertake today the analysis of gender inequalities within a new theoretical and practical paradigm- the multidimensional nature of inequalities (the intersectionality of gender equality). We have complicated our approaches by focusing not only on gender as such, but on "gender and"- meaning that we now combine gender with other social categories of analysis such as age, nationality, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc. In the spirit of the post modern environment, we are part of the political, theoretical, methodological confusion on the need to give equal weight to every type of women

and men defined by race, class, culture, sexual orientation, ethnicity, age. The emergence of multiple gender diversities fundamental challenges of the societies we inherit. Once people become free to express themselves along the male–female continuum depending on internal and external circumstances – more democratic and fairer societies will result. These societies will have flattened hierarchies, be more integrated and diverse and exhibit qualitatively different human–nature and human–human relatedness. But there is a long way in front of us in order to achieve this. For the moment we acknowledge the complexity of inequalities, but we do not have the methodological tools to investigate thoroughly these new realities and consequently we are lacking adequate gender sensitive politics to handle such new problems.

One other cause of the resistance to combat gender inequalities could be what marketers call "the decoy effect" (the asymmetric dominance effect). Portrayal of more empowered women in the media creates a decoy effect, giving the illusion that women have 'made it' by focusing too much on the top. Instead, feminism should focus on breaking down stereotypes, to show that there is more than one way to be a woman/man – and reflecting the realities of growing up and growing older in today's world.

The rhythm of change may also be too slow because the efforts have been concentrated much more on formal, procedural gender equality vs. substantive democracy/equality, because of fewer efforts invested in improving content and more energy invested in creating institutions and procedures. There is, from this perspective, a need to move from the rhetoric of equality to de facto (gender) equality.

There are also some perverse effects of some gender equality politics/rhetorics. Certain gender ideologies (e.g. *political correctness*), or gender sensitive practices (e.g. *affirmative action politics*) could be the cause for some of the negative feelings of what some even called "GE dictatorship".

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### ***3. Bringing gender to the negotiation of future Europe-scapes***

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What should we do? First let's fully understand the promise of gender equality as stipulated by the EU Charter years ago. For women, this means not being satisfied with an almost-equal status. Everything less than equal is not only wrong, but dangerous. For men, this means stepping up and combating sexism – the root of inequality – wherever it is. As men, there is a need to drop the apprehension of the word "feminist" and realize that it stands for nothing else than somebody who truly values equality between the sexes.

We should also find the "right" discourses, practices, policies on gender equality to be sustained in the diverse world of today, where, although there are still gender gaps, many consider the issues of gender equality as solved or marginal. It is the question of finding the accurate approaches within the context of the contradictory messages coming from society: on one hand plenty of data showing the persistence of gender segregations, inequalities and discriminations but, on the other hand, plenty of data showing a collective perception reticent to gender equality policies, to "excessive" demands from women, to feminism(s). Getting out from this paradox is not easy.

A gender mainstreamed agenda could look similar with the one presented in the figure below. It should be a holistic perspective within which gender issues should be present at all levels of public and private life.



**Figure 4 GM vision**

(Source: Report, EC, June 2015, *Forum on the future of gender equality in the EU*)

Another possible suggestion would be to start gender the non-gendered domains, to extend the agenda envisaged to be gender mainstreamed by focusing on those areas less approached up to now. From family, education, politics, the media - domains quite well researched from the perspective of gender, maybe it is time to investigate more steadily the gender dimension of certain non-gendered areas of research and practice such as: trade, transport, budget, foreign policies, global security, war, migration or the environment.

It is also necessary to be an active part in the nowadays discussions and negotiations, to infuse consistently and in real time gender perspectives on hot debates of our times such as: the economic-wealth inequalities debates (e.g.

Thomas Piketty's theory); the migration problems; the new (reproductive) technologies, etc.

Adapting creatively and efficiently to new cultural and political environments could be another good practice approach. For example, one should take into consideration that as "sexism" is less socially desirable within the European Union—people are less open to show/express their sexist attitudes. Consequently there is a need for new methodological frames and gender-friendly political strategies to capture this new reality. Alternatively, the prevalence of the specific language of contemporary individualism (women do not try enough to overcome social, political, economic barriers and find ways/means to overcome these assumptions) is an impediment in promoting gender equality policies at a larger scale and should be properly considered.

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#### **4. Conclusion**

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Should gender mainstreaming be a priority? This should be only a rhetorical question. There is still a need to invest in gender mainstreaming for many reasons. For example it is clear that neoliberal policies, the economic and political crisis have a negative impact on life conditions, health for the elderly population (of which the majority are women), on monoparental families (the majority, women), on domains such as education, health, social services (highly feminized). Gender mainstreaming is necessary also because high scores on social indicators correspond with high scores on economic indicators. Higher gender-parity scores strongly correlate with higher levels of development, as measured by GDP *per capita* and the degree of urbanization. Gender equality can also contribute to the Lisbon objective of a growth that is smart, inclusive and sustainable. For instance, OECD projections show that gender equality would result in a 12.4% increase in GDP per capita by 2030. The most developed regions of Europe and North America are closest to gender parity, while the still-developing region of South Asia has the farthest to go (OECD, 2014). Moreover, it is a powerful way of consolidating our democracies and paving the way to fairer societies.

The bureaucratic correct answer in favour of the power of gender parity would be that women's equality is directly linked to Europe's overall well-being. Only by overcoming gender inequality can we truly lay the foundations for the continent's future. But the ultimate answer for bringing gender to the negotiations of the future of Europe is a simple one. It was already given by the new prime minister of Canada Justin Trudeau on the occasion of the public presentation of the new cabinet of ministers: gender equality is necessary ...because we are in 2015!



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