

NEW CHALLENGES FOR GENDER EQUALITY IN EUROPE 27/28 JUNE 2016 – ST. PÖLTEN

Notes and opinion on the conference from a non-expert point of view

I went to this conference with few expectations. Policies and training in gender equality are not something I know much about, although they obviously affect me a great deal. I arrived with an open mind ready to soak up all the information I could, thinking of my role as more of a passive information sponge. As the conference progressed and we were set in groups to discuss specific topics I found that I wanted to chip in. I wanted to be able to participate in this discussion that I had the privilege to attend. So among the experts from all over Europe, from Iceland in the far north to the newest European Union member country, Croatia, in the south, I found myself immersed in the world of people trying to make this world a fairer place.

We discussed the status-quo of gender policies and gender training, the good practices in this field, the challenges we face, our progress at tackling them, strategies to solve them and objectives for the future. I do not wish to write an encompassing, informative and descriptive text about all this but rather focus on what caught my ear, and the questions and observations I am left with. This text is based on the notes I took during the conference and is merely a summary of what I retained from it.

MEDIA

Early in the conference the role of the media in making the world more gender equal, or less, became very clear. You think immediately of the ads depicting beautiful women in their bikinis pasted at every bus stop and billboard after billboard flying past your head on the roads. Or the perpetuation of male/female stereotypes in TV ads where the perfect housewife gets stains off her kids' clothes with a miraculous washing powder while looking fabulous. Yet, what about female politicians and air time? In Iceland, at the beginning of the election campaign, polls were clearly giving the male candidates the lead, yet as soon as the TV debates started and candidates were all given air time and a voice, the polls showed an increase in the female candidates' positions.

MEN

A widely discussed topic was the role of men in achieving gender equality. I do not know exactly how many men participated in this conference but I have to say that they were greatly outnumbered by women. We talked of male role-models in leadership positions and how there should be more men taking a stand. Without women, only half of the talent pool is accessed. Is it not then smart to allow and encourage women to join in whatever field? Men usually do not think of gender equality as any of their business, which is a tad bit silly, considering what I just stated and the fact that they too suffer from gender stereotyping. Men are expected to be masculine, yet masculinity, widely associated with strength, bravery, being the bread-earner, logic and earnestness, leaves men in a dire position for they are often criticised or ostracised for being more sensitive and compassionate or when they are depressed or sad. This is associated with the higher rate of alcoholism and suicide among men that lose stature or are not able to fulfil these expectations.

WORKPLACE

The workplace... I guess this is one of the places that makes women feel gender inequality the most. I know I have. From subtle harassments to the more obvious pay gaps. In a work group I took part in, we discussed quotas. How state and big private businesses have quotas of say 30% or 40% for women on their boards or high positions. When we think of quotas for women, some of us can't help thinking, oh great, so she got that job just because she is a woman. Instead of, she got the job because she is qualified, and she is a woman. Changing perspectives, he got that job

because he is qualified and he happens to be buddies with the boss. Women should be allowed to be incompetent without that being blamed on their gender, as it too often happens. Quotas are powerful as temporary measures to balance something which is biased and unbalanced. They can also be used for tackling multiple discrimination as South Africa has shown us in its post-Apartheid measures.

How are men and women affected at work by parenthood? Becoming a father has a positive impact for men at work. Becoming a mother brings negative consequences for women at work. Men who are fathers are more likely to be employed than men who are not. It goes without saying that mothers do not benefit from the same positive discrimination.

LAW AND EDUCATION

Legal action is indispensable to attain a gender equal society. Governments must incorporate laws that give men and women equal opportunities and access to education, work and leadership positions. Without this, as well as the incorporation of gender education and sensitivity into our school systems, we cannot hope to reach gender equal societies.

GENDER TRAINING

There is quite a lot being done, in certain countries, to train people on the issues of gender. Good practices in gender training were widely discussed. We talked about how trainers should be privy to the field of work of the people they are training. Gender training in the army will not focus on the same issues as in a corporation. Competence can only be achieved by the combination of knowledge and practice, either one alone will not achieve the goal. Often a gender training is quite short, lasting a day or so. A follow-up a couple of months later is a great practice to ensure its consolidation.

ROOT

So where does this inequality come from? I still don't know. History and tradition would be my best attempt at an answer. In my opinion, also Biology, but this wasn't really discussed. I'm guessing it is part of the curriculum of Sociology and gender studies and therefore my fellow conference goers know it much better than me. I can only focus on my limited knowledge of Biology and Evolution to assume that it has roots not only in "nurture" but also in "nature". Nonetheless, we are a normative society where we very often set man into a so-called A category and women into an opposing non-A category. Just as we do for healthy/disabled individuals, natives/foreigners, heterosexuals/homosexuals and the list goes on. We think of the prior as the norm and the latter as what is different to the norm, that needs our special attention. Yet if you were to oppose the number of individuals of the different categories of A and non-A, you would find that all the minorities of non-A added together would make up the majority, opposing A as a minority. A however is the group usually making the decisions and the group for whom the decisions are made. Think, in the western world, of middle-aged, white, healthy, heterosexual men still making up the majority of decision-making positions, both in the private and public sectors.

How do we, as the average good people that are in general against discrimination and injustice in all its forms, perpetrate the idea of discrimination? Why do we let this happen? It might be that we are not conscious of our privileges. Taking the stairs is the norm for you, until you can't. So as long as we do not change the perspective from which we look at things we cannot hope for a more inclusive society.

KNOWLEDGE

We cannot attain a gender equal society if we do not even know that we are being discriminated against. In certain places and occasions people do not even realise that they are being discriminated against, the norm is too strong and rooted. Basic knowledge of one's rights as well as mechanisms to secure them are essential in dealing with inequalities. For example, people who are trafficked often do not know their rights in the countries which they are trafficked to, which with the aggravating factor of cultural and language barriers leaves them afraid and ignorant. Then again, if the legislation in place is not enforced, with consequences for perpetrators, it might as well not be there in the first place.

One of the participants of this conference reminded us of our ignorance when it comes to Islam. There is a strong and growing prejudice in the western world concerning Islam and the role of women in Islam. We were reminded that a better knowledge of the Islamic culture is crucial to a better understanding and a harmonious relation between us Europeans of different religions and cultures.

CONCLUSIONS

The way I see it, we should focus more on the pull of GE, while still pushing it where needed of course. If only we could show people how much better the world would be for all of us if we had a fairer society. On this dreamy note, we can show studies, for example, one that fathers who are more involved with their children are happier, which leads to happier children, and therefore happier mothers, and it forms a net and everyone is happier in the end. On a less dreamy note, there is a study that shows that in Sweden, the father is the fifth adult a child goes to if he has a problem, the first being the mother.

Throughout the conference there was not much mention of non-binary gender identities and policies that include them, which I found rather surprising seeing that it is a very pertinent issue when we are discussing the new challenges of gender equality. I would have also liked to hear about more failed strategies and bad practices as I believe we can learn a lot from what went wrong. Of course we can also learn a lot from the great practices that are being implemented such as the creative and daring approach of a Croatian organisation that has a prize for the most sexist comment from a politician. I think bringing humour into any matter makes it more appealing yet no less important or credible, if done in a sensible way.

If we want to reach a more gender equal society we have to focus on all levels, from the micro level of intricate personal biases and stereotypes to the macro level of legislation. Nonetheless, if we each set ourselves on a mission to change the world, be it in a big or small way, some progress will be achieved. If you and I stop allowing injustice to occur in our domains and within our areas of expertise, whether we are the ones doing it or just complying with it, we the law-makers, we the business owners, we the waitresses, we the marketeers, we the journalists, will we not end it?

Harriet LB Smith