

ÉVA FODOR

Gender mainstreaming and its consequences in the European Union

Gender mainstreaming is a phrase that haunts politicians in the new EU member states. Following a declaration by the UN's World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, and building on earlier legislation and principles enshrining similar sentiments, the European Commission adopted the notion of "gender mainstreaming" in 1996. Mainstreaming simply means that the objective of gender equality must be explicitly integrated into all social and economic policy, rather than being handled in isolation.

During the enlargement process, candidate countries had to demonstrate their adherence to the EU's equality acquis. They were required to pass equal opportunities legislation, establish agencies promoting gender equality, and provide legal remedies to those who could prove discrimination. They also had to carry on data collection in a harmonized, sex-disaggregated way, on everything from poverty to participation in athletic activities.

The gender mainstreaming requirement came as an unpleasant surprise to many East European policy makers. Ironically, and perhaps not accidentally, West European governments and transnational organizations started to insist on instituting gender equality just when East Europeans were ready to abandon the notion of women's emancipation altogether.

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So what is gender mainstreaming, and what social ills is it supposed to remedy? Does it have any relevance for the post-communist countries? How efficiently is the EU achieving its social goals, through using gender mainstreaming?

Let us start with a brief comparative overview of labor market gender inequality in three post-communist societies.

Gender inequality in East European labor markets

Gender mainstreaming and other EU gender-related regulations primarily address labor market inequalities between women and men.

While almost everything the state socialist governments did became discredited after 1989, women's emancipation seems to be an unrecognized exception. East Europeans and their policy makers often argue that the problem of gender inequality is solved in this part of the world. They claim that unlike in Western Europe, women suffer no major disadvantages in finding, keeping and getting remunerated for work. No political attention is thus needed, the argument runs.

In making these claims, they disregard data collected and published by their own statistical offices. If we take a closer look at these numbers, three points become glaringly obvious.

First, there is significant gender inequality in the labor markets of all East European countries. Second, there are observable differences in the level and patterns of gender inequality, even among post-state socialist societies otherwise at similar levels of development. Finally, the degree and pattern of labor market gender inequality in Eastern Europe has converged to, and does not significantly differ from, that observed in western developed countries.

I will discuss these points by comparing three countries: Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic².

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Aspects of gender inequality in labor markets

Labor market gender inequality is measured by a handful of conventional indicators. The most often used is women's labor force participation rates - the proportion of women who are working or actively looking for paid work.

This indicator shows a sharp decline in women's presence in the labor market since 1990, and a significant gap between men's and women's participation. Women in all three countries are 10-30% less likely than men to be economically active, and less likely to have paid work. Once unemployed, women tend to take longer than men to find a new job.

This is where recent changes are the most tangible. While in the late 1980s, 75-85% of working age women were engaged in the labor force in the three countries, today this rate is around 70% in the Czech Republic, and about 50% in Poland and Hungary.

Researchers have repeatedly found that it is not persuasive to argue that women outside the labor force do not even want to work (Aswin and Bower 1997). They do, if for no other reason than because European societies are increasingly built on a dual wage-earner model. Few men make enough money to provide for their families alone.

Women "choose" not to work when conditions make paid employment unfeasible or costly - for example, when there is no child care available.

Not only is there gender inequality in access to paid work, there is also a significant difference in the quality of jobs men and women hold. The region's labor markets show deep gender segregation. Men and women tend to work in different industries, in different occupations and in different jobs.

Unrelated to productivity, skill or effort invested, the work women do is valued less than what is usually done by men. Nurses make less money than janitors, not because nursing

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is an “easier” job, but because it is usually done by women. We find a roughly 20-25% wage gap between men and women in all three countries.

Even when men and women do the exact same work at the same or similar companies, a recent analysis of data from the Czech Republic found that men still make 5-10% more than women (Petersen 2006).

Interestingly, patterns of segregation can change along with changes in the labor market. Women are forced to withdraw from sectors and jobs when wages rise. Over the past ten years, as the finance sector has gained more prestige and salary levels have increased, the proportion of women who work in that area has decreased in all three countries. In the Czech Republic, about 70% of all workers in the finance sector were women in the early 1990s, but only 62% in 2000. Simultaneously, the wage gap between men and women deepened from 67% to 52%.

Women are moving out of the high prestige, well paid finance sector, and those who are staying behind must make do with the lowest paid jobs, the ones that pay 50% less than those held by men. Many women may seem to be leaving these jobs “on their own accord”, as the requirements of a career in the banking sector are increasingly formulated in a way that makes it impossible to balance work and family obligations.

For the same reasons, women are significantly less likely than men to occupy positions of power in an organization. In a survey done for the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, researchers found that men are twice as likely as women to hold managerial positions where they have at least ten subordinates in Hungary and the Czech Republic. In Poland, they are almost three times more likely (Pollert and Fodor 2005).

Women’s increasingly problematic participation in the labor market indicates an ongoing reorganization of the

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world of work since the early 1990s. It is becoming less and less tolerant toward workers with outside responsibilities, and cannot accept non-standard career patterns.

Since women spend significantly longer time doing domestic work, and are generally overall responsible for it, they find it hardest to adapt to these norms.

Employees are required, implicitly or explicitly, to work more and more hours. It is becoming difficult to return to work after even a short break. It is also becoming company policy to require full devotion and identification with the job and the corporation. Along with these trends, the labor market is being “re-masculinized”. It is being reorganized in a way that supports a sharp division of labor between men and women, with women taking inferior roles (Kispéter 2006).

Sustaining this level of gender inequality has serious social costs for both men and women.

First, women’s level of human capital is, on average, higher than that of men. They are more likely to have university degrees, language and communications skills essential in a global economy, have the same level of work experience, and are more likely to participate in adult education courses and training. If only half of all women of working age have paid jobs, the human capital of a significant portion of the population goes wasted on doing menial work, either in the household or in odd jobs in the informal economy.

Second, women’s unequal access to paid work has consequences for the wellbeing of the most vulnerable segment of the population, children. Poor children are often found in single mother households, because mothers are less likely than fathers to hold jobs which guarantee a living wage. Most poor children, however, live in nuclear family households, where women do not work for pay. If women do not have access to paid jobs, or can only get underpaid, unstable employment, the number of poor

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children will increase – as is the case in all three countries, to a varying degree.

Third, researchers in all three countries, but especially in Hungary, have found a shockingly high mortality rate for men between 45 and 55 years of age. They attribute this to self-destructive behavior related to anxiety, caused by men's inability to fulfill their role as breadwinners (Kopp and Réthelyi 2004). If gender roles were not as strictly observed as they are now, if it were acceptable for men to relax and spend time with their children, and if women could replace men as breadwinners without serious social and financial consequences, men's death rate may decline. This is also a form of gender inequality, with tangible consequences for both men's and women's wellbeing.

Finally, women's labor market disadvantage leads to their overall social vulnerability. The quality of paid jobs held is the best indicator of long-term life chances in our world.

There is an interesting paradox here. When asked in opinion surveys, people in Hungary and Poland claim that women's most important role in life is at home, bringing up their families. Indeed, one reason why politicians can afford to not care about labor market gender inequality is because most people believe it to be irrelevant for women's wellbeing, which is primarily determined by their family status.

Yet the divorce rate is climbing, marriage and birth rates are declining sharply in all three countries, and the gap between the life expectancy of men and women is huge, to women's "advantage."

As a result, opinion surveys notwithstanding, a growing proportion of the population, most of them women, live a significant portion of their lives in single adult households. Many may do so against their desires, but these women must nevertheless support themselves, and must save enough for old age – both of which are difficult at the current level of gender inequality in the labor market.

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Differences across countries

The points mentioned above are relevant for all three countries. Yet important differences are emerging in the patterns and levels of gender inequality.

Some researchers emphasize the similarities between these countries, due to the state socialist legacy, geopolitical position and timing of entry to the world market (Pascal and Kwan 2005). Others point to the differences, which result from historical differences across the countries, as well as the varying trajectories they took towards the global economy (Haney 2002).

Table 1 summarizes the two most obvious dimensions of gender inequality in the labor markets of the three countries. Even after looking at these fairly trivial indicators, we see three different patterns emerging.

Table 1: Two dimensions of gender inequality in the labor markets of the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland

	Access to jobs	Gender gap in job quality	Principle of women's participation in the labor markets
Czech Republic	High	Medium	"inclusion with discrimination"
Hungary	Low	Lower	"selective inclusion"
Poland	Low	Higher	"exclusion"

In the Czech Republic, a high proportion of women work, and the gap between men's and women's labor force participation rate is the lowest. But the quality of women's jobs is perceivably lower than those of men.

Social policy (such as the regulation of parental benefits or the availability of child care places) supports women's labor force participation, but does little to alleviate discrimination. The wage gap is high in the Czech Republic, and women's managerial chances are lower than in, for example, Hungary. In other words, Czech women experience less resistance to their entry to the labor market than in other countries, but

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once there, they face significant disadvantages compared to men.

While in the Czech Republic we find 94 women with paid work for each 100 similar men, the corresponding number in Hungary is 77. The difference in women's and men's labor force participation is much higher here, and parental leave policies, a conservative gender ideology, and early retirement options encourage Hungarian women to stay inactive.

The small number of women who do enter the labor force, however, are in a better position to compete with men. Of the three countries, women have the best managerial chances in Hungary, and the wage gap seems to be the lowest here.

Labor economists argue that a selection bias operates here: those who are on the labor market possess higher levels of human capital, and more ambition and determination, than those who are left behind.

In Poland, an altogether different type of gender regime is emerging. The proportion of working women is low, women's unemployment rate is high in absolute terms and it is significantly higher than that of men. Social policies here relegate women to the household and to an overall dependence on their families.

One glaring difference among the three countries is the proportion of children over 3 years of age who attend kindergarten. Almost all children do in the Czech Republic and Hungary, but only about a third do in Poland.

The unavailability of affordable child care prevents many women from entering or re-entering the labor force. In addition, women who work experience excessive discrimination: the wage gap is quite high, and of the three countries, Polish women have the lowest chances for managerial positions. In this country, therefore, women's primary experience is exclusion, while I have characterized Czech

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women's experience as "discriminative" and Hungarian women's as "selective" inclusion.

While there are many similarities in the three countries with respect to their emerging gender regimes, the differences are also pronounced and may be suggestive of future trends.

There are a number of factors which contribute to the patterns. They include the legacies of state socialist policymaking, the type of transformation the labor markets underwent in the past 15 years, and gender ideology. Even data collection techniques might be different.

The above patterns of gender inequality are not altogether different from what we observe in the western parts of the EU. Women's labor force participation rates are quite similar in east and west. So are job segregation patterns, women's participation in decision making in the economic sphere, and the wage gap. The real difference is in the historical trajectory through which the countries arrived here. Over the past decade, women's labor market position has weakened significantly in post-state socialist societies, while it strengthened to reach this level in the west.

Interestingly, this experience of sharp decline does not produce any type of social protest. It is seen as an improvement over the shady state socialist past.

Equality policy at work

There may be one ironic reason why an overall erosion in women's labor market position does not produce social protests on a large scale. Namely, the hope that the EU is making sufficient efforts to reduce gender differences at work, through its gender equality and mainstreaming policies.

Indeed, the principle of equal treatment for men and women is included in the founding treaty of the Union. Since 1997, gender mainstreaming is one of the explicit

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objectives of the European Employment Strategy as well. Briefly, in this field the main goal of the EU is to increase women's labor force participation, and to reduce gender inequality in the quality of work men and women have access to. To do so, it set specific targets for the proportion of women with employment for 2010 (60%) and for the availability of child care places for children (90% for those over 3 years of age and 33% for younger children). In addition, the employment strategy requires that the implications of all policies be considered separately for men and women, and that specific legislation should be implemented which targets historical disadvantages between the genders. This includes, for example, promoting entrepreneurship among women, and training women for leadership positions.

For an East European, the ways in which the EU seeks to reduce gender inequalities harks back to the emancipation program of the communist parties. There are many similarities, which are not even vaguely acknowledged by EU policy makers or women's lobbies, even though the lessons from Eastern Europe could help future policymaking.

A first major similarity is that the EU's gender mainstreaming strategy targets a single aspect of gender inequality: women's position in the labor force. Article 119 of the Treaty of Rome, the EU's founding document, calls for equal access for women and men to employment and vocational training. Ever since, these have been the main areas of action.

EU policymaking only recently and marginally started addressing other areas, such as the division of labor in the household, violence against women, or the need to provide genuine representation for women in high-level political bodies.

The focus on labor market issues is not accidental, given the legacy of the EU as primarily an economic union. But it certainly places constraints on the success of realizing broader social goals, such as reducing gender inequality.

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Second, the ambitions of EU policymaking in the area of gender equality are hardly radical, just as the state socialist emancipation campaign fell far short of a true reorganization of gender roles or of the division of labor between men and women.

The stated goal of EU equality policies is to include women into the existing, global capitalist labor market without changing the main principles of this labor market, therefore without redefining our understanding of what it means to work or to have a career. These concepts are defined in a way that fits the life course of people who can devote their full time and energy to their careers, typically men. Women, who are more likely than men to take care of others (and even when they do not, are seen as “time bombs” who may start doing so), do not really fit this mold. As a result, women cannot participate in the labor market on an equal footing with men.

Clearly, individual women who are particularly fortunate in redistributing their reproductive responsibility to family members, or women who decide to shun reproduction altogether, may succeed. But overall, gender inequality is carved into the very structures of the capitalist labor market – as it was, to a lesser extent, into the state socialist labor force.

EU policies which promote women’s participation without changing these structures will not reach gender equality. They can only offer small and limited progress toward this goal, because of their inability and lack of interest in transforming the world of work in a radical, more inclusive way. Arguably, when women enter the labor market in large numbers, they will reshape the world of work and empower themselves and other women to keep doing so. Some argue that this may be the only available route to fight against gender discrimination. Indeed, it is possible to detect a few small signs of workplace transformations. Note

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the appearance of “family-friendly workplaces”, the concept of “work/life balance” and “non-standard forms of employment”.

This is very little, however, and often a dubious achievement. Such measures – such as, for example, the possibility to work part-time – are often used to relegate women into the most marginal jobs available in a company.

At the moment, the EU gender mainstreaming policy has achieved exactly what its state socialist counterpart did 20 years earlier. It managed to change the behavior of women, who may now super-exploit themselves in order to achieve some measure of economic independence. But it barely changed the behavior of employers. It certainly did not even dare target the behavior of men, as husbands and fathers.

There is a third similarity between the EU’s attempt to reduce gender inequalities and the way the communist regimes tried to do the same thing. The implementation of gender mainstreaming is sabotaged at the local level, just as the state socialist emancipation policy was.

The archives of the communist parties are full of documents which set targets for women’s representation in various areas, and reports that monitor the satisfaction of these targets at the level of companies and municipalities. Gender focal points report on their achievements. There is statistical data collection to create the right indicators. There is also an obsession with documenting success in numerical terms.

All this is quite reminiscent of EU policy making and discourse.

As numerous studies have shown, EU directives in the field of gender equality were successful in forcing new EU member states to adopt laws regulating non-discrimination, establishing agencies which supposedly monitor this, and adopting politically correct language in policy documents (Fagan et al. 2005). Implementing these laws, however, is

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left to the political will in each country. When this political will is missing, the existence of the whole “gender equality machinery” becomes not only meaningless, but parodies the whole enterprise of promoting gender equality – much as it did in the early 1980s in state socialist Hungary, Czechoslovakia or Poland.

Women’s lobbies may seem numerous in the EU, but they have little power to achieve any systematic enforcement of their political agenda.

And fourthly, just like during socialist times, gender equality is legislated not primarily for its own sake, but in order to serve a higher social end, and serve “more important” social priorities. Some of these are clearly stated goals, which may include lifting children out of poverty, or achieving greater productivity in the labor market.

Indeed, achieving greater equality for women would contribute to all of the above. But it is possible to conceive of gender equality as a value in and of itself. In that case, legislation may focus on women and women’s needs explicitly, rather than indirectly through the needs of others.

In addition, the discursive struggles around gender inequality in Europe and elsewhere are used to further various, less obvious, political goals.

For example, researchers argue that citizens of what used to be East Germany rely on references to pre-1989 gender relations and what they saw as women’s emancipation in the East to establish their identity as East Germans, in contrast to West Germans. Along similar lines, in the Cold War era and afterwards, differences in women’s social roles between the communist and capitalist parts of the continent were used to legitimize political authority and to argue for the good or bad of a particular regime (Gal and Kligman 2000).

Today, discourse and policymaking on gender relations often serve a similar goal: to construct and legitimize the

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hierarchical relationship between “east” and “west” and establish the inferiority of the “east”.

A straightforward example of this is the campaign waged by the EU and other transnational organizations, directed at teaching East Europeans about gender inequality issues. This was done without regard to the fact that the level of inequality, as I have argued above, is no different from the west, or to the long history of gender inequality policies in this part of the world.

By implying that westerners know how to do this better, the inferior position of the ‘east’ is sustained, and the slow and uneven progress in the western part of the EU is masked.

In sum, gender mainstreaming and other aspects of EU policymaking bear great and unacknowledged similarities to the state socialist emancipation campaign.

It should be pointed out that women achieved significant progress toward economic independence during the state socialist era, so there is reason to expect gender mainstreaming also to work toward improving women’s position. Yet the limitations of the state socialist emancipation campaign should give optimists pause. In the end, it was designed to advance the political and economic goals of the ruling strata, and to reduce gender inequalities only to the point where it did not threaten the social order. The fear is that the EU’s gender mainstreaming may also end up being limited to this role.

Conclusion

There is significant gender inequality in the societies of both Eastern and Western Europe. In fact, there is a strong convergence in this respect between the two parts of the continent.

Unfortunately, this convergence means a leveling down process. Over the past 15 years, women in Eastern Europe have become more vulnerable in labor markets, while – per-

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haps a related trend – West European women have improved their positions.

The EU has a number of policies and directives that target the reduction of gender inequality. The strategy of gender mainstreaming is the most popular nowadays.

The existing set of policies are often ineffective and their implementation leaves much to be desired. They offer solutions with a limited scope, and may distract attention from the real causes of gender inequality.

It is conceivable that these policies, and the demand for female labor, will lead to an empowerment of women, who can then affect real changes in the labor market and social policy. This, however, is likely to be a slow and arduous process.

FOOTNOTES:

¹ For a long and careful discussion of the political implications of the term “eastern Europe” see Gal and Kligman 2000. I will use this term to designate the new member states of the EU which used to have state socialist governments. I call the three countries, which I focus on here, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland “East-Central European”.

² For the arguments below I am using data from Eva Fodor. 2005. “Women at Work: The Status of Women in the Labour Markets of the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland” UNRISD occasional papers.

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