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Gender - sensitive and women friendly public policies:
a comparative analysis of their progress and impact

Deliverable 8: **Policy Briefings**

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Policy briefings

The EQUAPOL project, supported by the EC's 5th Framework Programme (DG Research), assessed the progress and impact of integrating gender into public policy in Europe. It focused particularly on social policies prioritised by the European Social Policy Agenda. Policies, and policy structures and processes, in eight countries and at European level were studied between 2002 and 2004. The five-partner research team was led by the Department of Social Policy at Panteion University in Athens. More information is available at www.equapol.gr

Emerging from the EQUAPOL findings are a number of conclusions and recommendations for national and EU policy on gender equality, which are summarised in a series of policy briefings.

Policy briefing 1: Gender mainstreaming as a strategy for promoting gender equality

Research findings:

- Progress in implementing a gender mainstreaming approach has been slow and uneven across the EU.
- Some countries have made important progress in introducing gender mainstreaming in public policy, with Sweden in the vanguard. In other countries, gender mainstreaming efforts are highly fragmented, confined to particular policy programmes or domains and often short-lived in duration. Countries with fragmented gender mainstreaming practices are those where a coherent and elaborated governmental policy on gender equality is either missing (as in the UK) or do not follow the principles of gender mainstreaming (as in Spain).
- A “transversalist” approach is evident in many countries (e.g. Belgium, France, some Spanish regions), whereby gender is added on as an additional objective or consideration, albeit across a range of policies.
- There is little evidence as yet of any systematic integration of a gender equality perspective into mainstream policy processes, or of policy outcomes that are more “gender-sensitive” or “women-friendly”.
- There has been much innovation in developing tools and methods to support the integration of gender in policy-making, encouraged in part by EU and international developments. However, pilot projects abound, and the focus has mainly been on policy analysis, leaving mainstream policy-making processes and decision-making largely untouched.
- There is evidence of a convergence of approaches across countries, mainly in the mechanisms and institutional set-ups. Convergence in relation to understanding of the policy problematic and objectives is more difficult to discern.
- Importantly, gender mainstreaming has not replaced previous approaches to gender equality, and legislation and positive action remain important tools to progress gender equality. Indeed, there is a strong defence of the importance of these tools by gender policy actors in many countries.
- Key factors in explaining progress are the extent to which there is a broad-based, structural understanding of gender inequality and the existence and activities of “champions” of gender equality policy, both individuals and collective groups.

- With very few exceptions, there is a general lack of commitment on the part of governments and decision-makers to mainstreaming gender in policy-making. Rhetorical support for gender mainstreaming has not yet been followed through with the resources and measures that are required to establish and sustain gender mainstreaming across the policy spectrum.

Policy conclusions:

- ✓ A much clearer vision of the objectives of gender equality is required, especially concerning social (rather than purely employment) goals and outcomes.
- ✓ Winning broad-based support for gender equality requires much better understanding and communication of the benefits of gender equality, for different groups and for society as a whole. Clearer connections need to be made between gender equality and other policy priorities, such as social integration or economic growth.
- ✓ Gender mainstreaming must not be abandoned, but more robust efforts are needed to strengthen its implementation. Going “mainstream” is vital; there should no longer be only pilot projects and “stand-alone, short-term” initiatives.
- ✓ Establishing strategic priorities and focusing efforts on priority areas are essential. This means identifying strategic “entry points” for gender that have the greatest chance to progress gender equality, rather than spreading efforts too thinly or in areas that have little importance for real improvements in gender equality.
- ✓ More systematic use should be made of gender analysis and gender budgeting in the context of mainstream budgetary processes and policy reviews.
- ✓ More systematic monitoring and evaluation of the gender aspects of public policy is needed, supported by data and information. Qualitative research, especially on how gender inequalities are maintained and on the intersections between gender and other identities, are needed to support policy-making.

Policy briefing 2: Governance and gender equality

Research findings:

- Progress in implementing gender equality policy and gender mainstreaming has been advanced by the actions of, and alliances between, individual women in power, civil society organisations and gender experts, but hindered by inadequate institutional structures and mechanisms.
- Progress has often been made as a result of alliances between – and the actions of - individual women in positions of power as well as civil society organisations and gender experts. Where government commitment on gender equality is weak, these coalitions and alliances play a vital role.
- While all countries have a specific government department or unit responsible for gender equality policy, these structures do not have sanctioning powers and cannot oblige any other department of the administration to implement gender equality policy.
- The attachment of gender equality to a central ministry is rare (Sweden); more generally gender equality institutions are located at the periphery. Their generally low status and level in the ministerial and institutional hierarchy further reduces their ability to influence other departments to follow through on commitments to gender mainstreaming.
- Gender equality institutions with sanctioning powers exist in some but not all countries, but these are responsible for the enforcement of equality legislation, and have no powers in the area of gender mainstreaming in public policy.

- Gender support units or research bodies provide important supporting functions to gender mainstreaming policy making in some countries.
- A high level of government ownership of gender equality policy in Sweden is one factor in explaining gender mainstreaming progress at national level – but may also be a weakness in implementing gender mainstreaming beyond the domain of national policy and at local level.

Policy conclusions:

- ✓ Centrally-located, high-level structures with robust remit to promote the implementation of gender equality across the policy spectrum are required, backed up by mechanisms to monitor and ensure implementation of gender mainstreaming commitments.
- ✓ Well-resourced support units attached to these structures are vital, to provide essential knowledge and expertise in gender policy analysis, information and data.
- ✓ Progress in gender equality policy and gender mainstreaming requires the involvement of a much wider range of stakeholders in policy dialogue and policy-making. Structured mechanisms for engaging stakeholders - from both inside and outside the state and parliament – in policy dialogue are essential. Parliament and Government committees on gender equality should involve stakeholders from civil society and the private sector.
- ✓ Much more rapid progress on implementing commitments to the equal participation of women and men in decision-making is vital.
- ✓ Dialogue must be two-way, not merely one-way consultation. More participatory methods of gender analysis and policy development should be used, involving women’s organisations, gender experts and researchers.
- ✓ Stronger alliances are needed, across the political spectrum and across different types of stakeholder (civil society, private sector, research, government, parliament). In this way, the knowledge-base required for gender-aware policy assessment and formulation can be strengthened, and links can be better made between public policy and other actions on gender equality.

Policy briefing 3: Addressing gender equality within a broader equality approach

Research findings:

- Although most strongly evident in the UK (especially in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland), a number of countries are moving towards the development of gender mainstreaming as part of a broader approach to equality in public policy. This is particularly evident in countries, such as Ireland and the UK, with a strong equal treatment approach and where the revision of existing equal treatment legislation has created a space for new reflections on equality policy and structures. The shift is evident too at EU level.
- A generic approach to equality is regarded by many gender actors as a potential risk and obstacle to the advancement of gender equality, because it may make it more difficult to highlight and address the specificities of gender inequality, and may sideline gender equality compared to other forms of inequality and discrimination with a higher profile (ethnicity, disability). Gender inequality is about particular types of power (patriarchy), rendering it different from discrimination on the basis of ethnicity or disability.

- Some experiences suggest, however, that it may be possible to advance gender equality in policy within a generic approach. In Scotland, for example, the Equality Strategy adopts a mainstreaming approach and aims to tackle discrimination on a range of grounds, one of which is gender. The Strategy is implemented in partnership with a wide range of actors, and addresses the specificities of gender through a specific gender equality unit.

Policy conclusions:

- ✓ Embedding gender equality policy and implementation within a broader approach to equality may have significant benefits, making it possible to better address multiple discrimination and identities and increasing the political support and resources to tackle inequalities. Moreover, it may be easier to build alliances across different “identity intersections” (e.g. race and gender, gender and age).
- ✓ However, gender equality must not be absorbed into a broad equality approach so that it becomes invisible and stripped of resources, and most not be treated as merely an issue of “discrimination”.
- ✓ Specific gender equality mechanisms (legal, institutional) and procedures (for dialogue, analysis and policy design) must be maintained, as well as positive actions to empower women and promote gender equality.
- ✓ Targeted resources, expertise in gender and gender-specific knowledge and information are also required.

Policy briefing 4: European support for gender mainstreaming

Research findings:

- In general terms, EU gender equality policy has supported gender equality policy developments at national level, and has given gender mainstreaming efforts legitimacy and credibility. In some countries, the EU has been a driving force in efforts to integrate gender into government policy.
- EU gender equality legislation has had a particularly important influence at national level, both in more advanced countries and in the new member states. However, actors in Lithuania, for instance, feel that EU directives are leading to an overemphasis on economic considerations at the expense of much needed attention to other areas that are of great concern to women. More generally, gender actors across the EU observe both a softening in the use of legislation and a trend towards a less progressive EU equality agenda.
- Financial support for positive action and gender equality measures, particularly by the European Structural Funds, has been a particularly strong influence on national policy development and programmes in many countries and in certain policy domains.
- Many actors involved closely in gender equality policy at national and EU levels express considerable “disappointment” and “discontent” about the recent direction and pace of EU gender equality policy.
- Support for positive action at EU level is observed to have waned, and some leading gender experts argue that gender mainstreaming has been associated with a curtailment in the use of positive action as an instrument of gender equality policy.
- In some policy domains, the influence of EU policy is considered weak, and in some case negative (e.g. social security and pensions policy in Greece and Lithuania).

- Concerning the future, there is pessimism about the future role of the EU in leading on gender equality policy. In the words of one respondent in Spain: “the EU has stopped functioning as a reference for gender equality”. There is a noted decrease in the ability of the European Commission to negotiate policy at European level, and to provide informed insight on gender equality issues and policy.

Policy conclusions:

- ✓ Much stronger implementation of commitments to gender equality policy and gender mainstreaming at EU level are needed, to sustain previous efforts and to regain the EU’s status and influence.
- ✓ Equality legislation and positive action continue to be important instruments in advancing gender equality and require stronger support at EU level.
- ✓ The European Gender Institute provides an important opportunity to strengthen the knowledge-base and to support networks and alliances in support of gender equality policy at all levels (EU, national, regional, sectoral). However, this must not replace the European Commission’s important role in leading and coordinating on gender equality policy and gender mainstreaming across the spectrum of EU policy, and in monitoring and enforcing gender equality legislation.
- ✓ Changes in how policy is shaped and implemented in the European Union (particularly the use of the Open Method of Coordination) and the general shift to “softer” laws means that new approaches are needed to advancing gender equality policy and the integration of gender across the policy spectrum. The Open Method of Coordination, and use of targets and indicators, could help to reinvigorate gender equality policy, and involve a wide range of stakeholders in policy dialogue and development.
- ✓ Stronger and more sustained support for gender studies in universities and continued European funding of gender, and gendered, research are needed.