

FAR AWAY, YET SO CLOSE
Gender Equality in Austria and Portugal

Claudia Dal-Bianco and Sofia Branco report

Portugal and Austria, two countries close in terms of population, seem to be on different edges. But in what accounts for equality between women and men the scenario is not that disparate. According to the Gender Equality Index (GEI), developed by the European Institute for Gender Equality, both countries face the same challenges: power is equally a men-dominated structure, in politics and especially in economics; and women are less paid for the same job. Both countries also have similar records on the domains reflected by GEI: power, time and knowledge are the three areas where women are less equal than men in Austria; the order is time, knowledge and power in the case of Portugal. What are the reasons behind such similar results when the richness of both countries is not the same and how much damage has gender inequality caused to a more sustainable economic development?

The departure point for this work was to observe if the effects of economic crisis and austerity measures had an effect on gender equality, by comparing two countries in different economic scenarios. We believed that the rights of women could be suffering from the crisis, but was it to explain all the persistent inequalities?

As we interviewed policy makers, academics, trade unions and NGOs in both countries, we soon realized that gender equality was also not good before the crisis. It may have worsened, but what is still lacking, in times of austerity or prosperity, is a structural change. Gender equality takes more than money and social protection, though these are important. What it really requires is a mind-set reset.

And regarding that, there is not much difference between Austria and Portugal. In both countries, women are discriminated in several domains: they receive less money for the same job, they are accepted in less social valued jobs, they have difficulties on returning to the labour market after having children, they are more subject to precarious work (Portugal) and part-time work (Austria), they are the main doers of unpaid housework, they are the ones taking care of children, elderly; and people with disabilities.

Saying this, not one of our interviewed experts in Austria and in Portugal disregarded the specific effects of social cuttings, contained in austerity measures, on women's lives. May be women are keeping their jobs more than men (the most affected sectors by the crisis have more male workers), but they are working for less money and precarious conditions, and are more vulnerable to harassment. Though, both in Portugal and in Austria, women are better educated than men, sectors dominated by female workers are less paid. For example, the income for technological or social jobs (health, education, care) is distinct, because the societies value them differently.

We looked at gender equality from the perspective of different social actors – government officials, members of the parliament, trade unions, NGOs and civil society, academics and researchers.

Independently of the perception of the crisis effects, the focus has clearly changed: it's all about economy now. Gender equality is now taken as an "economic investment from which the whole society benefits, which is a strong but ambiguous argument, because women have to be supported independently of their economic value", warns Claudia Thallmayer, coordinator for the NGO Women in Development Europe (WIDE).

"Corporations cannot replace the State", she points out, recalling "the public duties", and underlining that "this restricted approach fits the economic model, making the system look more sensitive".

Sara Falcão Casaca, sociologist at the Lisbon School of Economics and Management, highlights: "The progress has been slow and we see now that the achievements cannot be taken for granted."

Gabriele Michalitsch, gender expert at the institute for political studies, in Vienna University, sees "deeper gender inequalities" now. The structural problem was aggravated by the crisis. "This neoliberal transformation was a backlash for women, with privatization, less public responsibility... The best gender equality plan would be not to have austerity measures", she argues.