

A LOOK INTO AUSTRIA – MONEY CAN'T BUY GENDER EQUALITY

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I confess: I was expecting more from Austria. Firstly, we, in the South of Europe, have always looked to the North expecting progress in social relations and gender roles. And secondly, the crisis had less impact, if compared to the situation in Portugal.

The first two lessons quickly took form: I had a lot of preconceived ideas and stereotypical assumptions about Austria; women have differential treatment everywhere, and always for the worse.

Part-time – more disadvantages than benefits

The employment rate in Austria has been decreasing since 2009, the year when everything started to change. Among the workers, women are more vulnerable, because more subject to precarious labour relations. With the crisis, “more men than women have lost their jobs”, but “it’s still hard for women to get full time jobs”, observes Dinah Djalinos-Glatz, from the Austrian Federation of Trade Unions. This is also the case in Portugal: at the same time men are losing jobs, women are offered poorer working conditions to preserve theirs.

Part-time jobs are the hot topic in Austria. As in Portugal there is no tradition of part-time work, I was very curious to know the arguments for it. I was expecting it to be more beneficial to women, especially mothers. After all, the disadvantages seem to overcome the benefits.

The part-time work has an effect on income, pensions, career progression. “40% of women of working age are part-time employed. Women are pushed into part-time jobs and it’s hard for them to find full-time jobs, even though they could”, explains Isabella Guzi, from the Austrian Federation of Trade Unions. “Part-time work has increased a lot and it’s mainly done by women, either because they want to or because they have to”, adds Claudia Thallmayer, coordinator for the NGO Women in Development Europe (WIDE).

“Part-time is not clearly good or bad, there are advantages and disadvantages”, these ones being less income and lower retirement pensions, explains Thomas Horvath, working at the Austrian Institute for Economic Research.

Ines Stilling, working for the Ministry of Women's Affairs, recognizes there is “a gender segregation in the labour market”, where “most women work part-time and very few hours a week”. But she adds: the government has promised part-time workers would start to be consulted if there is any new full time position in the company they are working at.

Gender pay gap - jobs for boys and jobs for girls

The gender pay gap in Austria (around 20 per cent, more than in Portugal) is among the highest in the European Union. This is “partly because of the high shares of part-time” but also because the country faces “a strong problem concerning gender specific labour market segregation”, states Horvath.

“Women disadvantages in the labour market remain solid”, recalls Ewa Dziejcz, Green Party MP, calling for “more money” for education and social infrastructure. “Austria is clearly not a leader in the field of gender equality”, she thinks.

Only companies with 150 employees or more have to report on men and women incomes, but trade unions are fighting to reduce it to 100 employees and for compulsory external assessment of income reports.

When gender discrimination is at stake, Austrians can return to Ombud for Gender Equality. The number of complaints "has been stable" – 3/4 are presented by women –, but "reconciliation is getting worse" and "345 cases of sexual harassment are registered per year", says deputy director Sandra Konstatzky.

More women are aware of their rights, but "some don't act because they are afraid to lose their jobs", she acknowledges. They are also "downgrading their qualifications to get the job", she adds. As it is "very difficult to prove discrimination", most cases of labour disputes on gender discrimination get "friendly settlements", also because a court decision can take two years.

Women can have their pension lowered 41 % if compared to men, which has a direct effect on social benefits and in the levels of economic independence. At the same time, the retirement age is different for men and women (not the case in Portugal), but instead of protecting women this makes them count with less when they are old.

Apart from income differences, gender plays a role in work's value and Austria is now emphasizing on this. The State is also having campaigns to challenge the prejudices of jobs for boys and jobs for girls.

Though, as in Portugal, women in Austria 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 Austrians value them differently, so the unions are not only demanding the same salary for equivalent works, but also a revaluation of employment, so that the social sector workers payments increase.

Places for children

Women are still the first responsible for unpaid housework. Foremost, they are taking care of children, elderly and disabled people, often at home, so to spare money. The improvement on sharing family life responsibilities has been "slow", admits Stilling.

Of all the infrastructural problems, find a place for children in kindergarten, and the opening hours of these facilities, are a matter of national concern. Only one in ten Austrian children has a place in a public or a private kindergarten in the whole country.

There has been "an increasing emphasis on bringing women to employment after long periods of childcare", observes Horvath. The government promised to invest up to 400 million euros in programs for children, including childcare (more kindergartens, more places available, extended open hours), but there are still no effects on daily lives.

It's all about economy

The economic crisis has "strongly" and "directly" affected gender equality programs in development cooperation, states Thallmayer. The budget of the Austrian Development Agency was cut almost in one third and probably projects ending will not be resumed, causing a "big backlash", because gender equality has to be addressed on a regular and permanent basis, she recalls.

Independently of the effects of the 2009 crisis, the focus has clearly changed: it's all about economy and entrepreneurship. 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 Thallmayer.

“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”. As a consequence of the crisis and the funding cuttings, the women's movement response to this has been weak, she observes.

What future?

Some aspects of gender equality have improved, but “numerous disadvantages persist” and “gender inequalities are deeper”, sums up Gabriele Michalitsch, gender expert at the institute for political studies, at the University of Vienna.

“The quantity of full time jobs has not changed, precarious employment is growing...” she points out, recalling that “women's affairs have different resources from men's affairs”.

There is a structural problem, 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.

“Women are definitely the losers of the economic crisis and that affects almost all levels”, agrees Dziedzic.