

Better Business – Creating a Gender-Equal Europe
Results of the conference from a Polish point of view

In the conference I participated as one of the activists of new member-states' non-governmental sector, representing one of the numerous Polish women's organisations – the Women's Foundation eFKa from Cracow.

The conference in Munich brought forth the possibility of comparing the experiences of the representatives of so-called "old" and "new" European Union member-states in reaching equality between men and women in the economic dimension of social life. Panels, lectures and workshops during the conference created space for communication between invited entrepreneurs, representatives of business and non-governmental organisations as well as researchers to exchange ideas and also gave an opportunity to establish informal networks of cooperation. It also allowed for planning of prospective cross- and trans-border joint activities and formal or informal alliances between participants' organisations active in the field of gender equality in the sphere of economy and market relations. The conference was also a means of pointing out clearly how the issues of gender have so far been omitted from traditional, men-centered economic theories. The question of women was not present in the discourse that concentrated on the male norm in market-based economics. Another important dimension of the conference was the focus on women's household work and on their cultural capital as a macro-economically important factor, something usually left out of previous discussions on ways of strengthening market processes and sustaining economic growth. The "Better Business – Creating a Gender-Equal Europe!" conference made possible a broad exchange of points of view concerning equalizing the chances of women in the European economy. The diversity of perspectives and approaches to women's entrepreneurship, their activity on the labour market and ways of reaching real equality was particularly inspiring. The meeting in Munich thus became a space for describing the experiences of women acting for gender equality in different countries; the experiences connected to their individual geographical, historical, political, cultural frameworks.

The whole conference, and especially its workshops provided an opportunity to explain to the participants from Western Europe the genesis of the unique myth of equality under the communist regime and its current implications, not least in the sphere of economics. Even today this theoretical equality of rights creates a situation in which actual inequalities are invisible in the system. It is not only ordinary people who fail to take into consideration differences in treatment of men and women, even politicians treat the issue as unimportant or even funny. Perceiving women's role in society only (or mainly) as one strictly and unavoidably connected to their reproductive capacities, members of Polish Parliament generally regard dealing with issues of equal status as unnecessary, and ignore questions of (un)equal treatment of men and women in the economy. With their attention focussed only on the biological dimension and on rights already existing in the legal system, politicians undermine the importance of women's presence in the public sphere, including the sphere of business. Women have had to pay for the fictitious "equal rights" in socialist countries with the so-called 'double burden'. In addition to full-time work in the labour market women were at the same time responsible for performing all household duties, without significant help from the state or even from their partners. My initial impression of the conference was that I found myself in the constellation of issues, gender questions that have already been posed in Poland but in a very "shy" way and with only few attempts to answer them.

Although the women's movement in Poland has been functioning openly for several years now, gender issues have only recently become a part of broader discussion in the public sphere. Nonetheless, I believe that what was discussed widely in Munich, with the participation of representatives of ministries, European institutions, politicians and researchers, couldn't still not be discussed on the same level in Poland. I was astonished by the openness of the discussion, by the fact that participants extensively used their right to give their opinions on the prospective subjects, and that they were not afraid to ask difficult questions to the invited guests and lecturers. I could directly see the conference as being a lively, functioning platform of construction of new equality mechanisms, for example, the debate on already existing solutions such as the Lisbon Strategy. On the basis of the Strategy for the development of a more competitive and better functioning European economy, Poland is obliged to create nursery school places for 90 % of children aged between three and six by the year 2010 (at the moment only 37 % of children of this age attend nurseries) as well as creche places for at least 33 % of babies and small children under the age of three (2 % of whom are currently covered by this kind of day care). Another obligation the Polish government has undertaken to fulfil is to increase women's employment rate to 60 %. It currently stands at about 42 % and the rate of unemployment amongst Polish women is one of the highest in the entire EU, reaching 20 %. It was more than important to me as a participant from a "new" EU country to hear diverse opinions at the conference concerning the Lisbon Strategy from the viewpoint of the "old" EU representatives as it is seen as one of the possible ways of equalizing women's chances on the Polish labour market. But in the Polish debate on the Lisbon Strategy its gender dimension is frequently ignored together with other social aspects. The emphasis is placed on economic priorities as for the majority of Polish analysts the question of gender equality doesn't seem to be linked in parallel with economic growth. It struck me during the conference that "old" Europe is committed to economic development with social awareness, including acting for gender equality. The adjustment of social standards to meet those of the "old" EU member-states is seen by most Polish politicians as not being as important as the economic criteria of the Lisbon Strategy and other European guidelines.

In this context it is quite evident that equal rights laws have been introduced to the Polish legal system primarily under the pressure of the EU institutions, and not as it might be hoped as the result of a rational analysis of the advantages connected to women's participation in market processes, let alone considerations arising from the ethical value of implementing such laws. The cultural and social capital of women has only recently started being treated as an essential element of economic growth. The deconstruction of the myth of equal treatment of men and women in communist society was not only important as a means to show social mechanisms at work in EU accession countries. It was also valuable in that it concentrated on still existing market inequalities of the "old" EU countries, where equal treatment mechanisms were introduced some years ago but are still not absolutely efficient. There was opportunity to reflect on the fact that claiming that the goal of reaching equality was successfully completed makes real inequalities invisible. Again and again, new activities should be undertaken so as to enhance the awareness of discrimination against women and to raise the level of consciousness. These two factors are the most efficient in fighting against inequalities in all spheres of society including the economic sphere.

A further important conclusion to be drawn from the conference was the emphasis that equality is the concern not only of women. We cannot deny that the status of men is

changing on a similar basis to that of women. The changing role of men should be taken into account – it will be another method of creating a gender-equal and balanced society in Europe. It seems to be the future challenge for women's movement in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

Most interesting for me as a conference participant was the possibility of gaining a better knowledge and understanding of new, feminist economic theories. They are not largely promoted or even visible in the Polish economic discourse. Although some publications on feminist economics have been published in my country, economics in Poland is still a male preserve. Such a radical viewpoint on women as being at the centre of economic processes is highly refreshing and has the power to astonish when seen in comparison with traditional theories that focus mostly on men's participation in the market sphere.

This topic was especially interesting for me because of the fact that women's participation in general entrepreneurship is the key question in Poland these days. Recently the World Bank report has confirmed that the rate of women's entrepreneurship in Poland is one of the highest in Europe (32 % in the year 2002 and almost 40 % in the year 1997 – the highest rate in the EU). The rate differs significantly between the "old" and "new" EU countries. In post-socialist states the rate is similarly high, paradoxically, owing to the very difficult situation of women on the labour market and due to the extensive discrimination against them. As the debate during one of the conference plenary discussions showed, there is an important difference not only in the rate of entrepreneurship, but also in the very origins of women's businesses across the continent. While women in "old" Europe have usually inherited their businesses, women in Poland created them from scratch, as the only way of escaping from the discriminatory situation on the labour market after the fall of communism in 1989. In my opinion this characteristic of Polish women – their enormous engagement in the free market economy – should be considered a national treasure. Nevertheless, it is not stressed enough in Polish public debate. Moreover, it lacks strong legal provisions that would enhance the very presence of women in the economy and encourage them to become important participants in the market processes in Poland as an EU member. That is why the perspective of feminist economics, stressed so significantly during the conference, should be taken into consideration as putting women at the centre of economic theory and practice.

As the workshop "Equal pay for equivalent work: Can gender mainstreaming bring us closer to an old target?" showed, public awareness of for example the gender gap in wages, the glass ceiling phenomenon, the feminisation of lower-paid parts of the labour market can be and indeed must be improved. The conference proved that feminist economics offers mechanisms needed to dispose of the gender inequalities. One way of introducing such change could be through direct questioning of present relations between men and women on the market. Thus the transformation and construction of awareness will come from the economic sphere. This domain has been noticeably influential in bringing about changes in many other aspects of social existence. Norms of mutuality, honesty, trust and keeping agreements were at first constructed in the economic sphere, then transferred to the general social order and democracy.

The conference was based on the idea of sharing experiences and building mutual consciousness of problems that appear when efforts to reach actual equality in Europe are undertaken. Let us intensify our efforts as far as the economy and women are concerned – it will be our contribution to bringing equality to the whole European society.