

Reconceptualising the Notion of Equal Opportunities and Rethinking the Policy Aims and Instruments - a Joint Effort of Women's (Gender) Studies in the Academia (research and training) Policy Makers and Women's Organisations.

The Scope of the Project

I. Introduction

This document is meant as a clarification of what is expected of the different participants, and was written in the follow up of the Lund conference, the workshops, the meeting with the participants and bilateral dialogue with participants in the project.

In spite of the dynamics of the second feminist wave that was in the end responsible for setting up all kinds of Institutional Mechanisms in different countries, we ascertain that in many countries the Equal Opportunities Policy is a follow up of ad hoc measures, trying to take care of the most urgent themes that were expressed by the women's movement through legal actions to either ban discriminations directly or international recommendations or action plans to further the advancement of women.

In many European countries Equal Opportunities Institutional Mechanisms are linked to ministries of labour or social affairs, as labour has been recognised as an important lever for the emancipation of women. And also the whole European Union framework for women's emancipation is situated in the social affairs, which is imperative for the outcome of measures towards the different members.

In practice we see that this leads to an incoherent set of measures that does not really encompass all of the needs of women. Many Institutional Mechanisms are limited by their own position within the framework they were set up in, and have therefore no real power to coördinate e.g. the mainstreaming activities of a government, because they are embedded in only one policydomain.

The different positioning of these institutional mechanisms in the different countries also explains why the definition of the Equal Opportunities Policies is such a blurred concept, that creates a lot of confusion for all actors in the process. What exactly do we mean by an Equal Opportunities Policy ?...

II. Defining the Playing Field

If we want to bridge the gap between the three actors and if we want to reconceptualise the Notion of Equal Opportunities, it is necessary that we define the playing field within which all participants in the project can share their expertise towards a coherent concept and clear policy aims and instruments.

The playing field can be visualised as some sort of matrix in which the different themes, actors, domains and levels of policy are linked to each other or play separate roles. If they play only separate roles, at least this will be clearly shown.

III. Scope

1. Themes : All issues, themes that are brought up by women or that concern the life of women must be taken into account. This means that participants can either work on different themes or bring in specialised expertise on only one theme (e.g. violence on women, or women and decisionmaking)

As a starting point for the themes we can take the 12 critical areas of concern of the Beijing Platform for Action (PFA) : women and poverty, Education and training of women, women and health, violence against women, women and armed conflict, women and the economy, women in power and decision making, institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women, human rights of women, women and the media, women and the environment, the girl-child.

But even as the PFA is an incoherent document in which several domains overlap or themes might be forgotten, we should think about eventual new themes that deal with women's inequality, or we can create a new framework for the themes. The aim here is to deal with every single possibility for discrimination of women throughout their life.

2. The actors : we start here with the "velvet triangle" meaning three kinds of actors who each have a specific role to play in the advancement of women.

- the policymakers : in this category two kinds of actors can be distinguished : the politicians who actually make the decisions and the civil servants who prepare the decisions to be taken; as this are different roles within one category the implications must be considered carefully in the roleplaying and definitions if we want to bridge gaps...
- the women's movement : in all its diversity of theme oriented organisations, general organisations, different philosophical and political ideologies, supporting structures, local, national or international organisations ... working methods...
- the researchers : also here we have a great differentiation of working fields and methods

We might consider a fourth category within the triangle : in many policy discourses the role of men is discussed and considered essential. Nevertheless the men involved in the processes can also be considered as taking part in one of the three other categories : as what do they join the process ? policymakers, civil society, or researchers... and is there a difference between actions of male or female actors in the same processes ?

finally within this category of the actors we may not forget the role of the media and the way in which the three actors of the velvet triangle gather and use information as an important element to consider.

3) the domains : with the domains we mean the different fields of action in which we can undertake any action to improve women's position in society : e.g. education, labour market, culture, welfare, environment, ... and that are usually used in the different countries to structure their governments or ministries.

The different domains that become defined for the government structures will alter throughout time, based upon societal evolutions (like the upcoming importance of media and ICT and the declining importance of agriculture..).

Women throughout their life have to do with all of these domains so discriminations must be banished in each of these domains.

For many Equal Opportunities Policies here lies the heart of the incoherence. Locking Equal Opportunities within one or two of these domains puts limit to the possibilities for

change.

4) the levels of governing: As working on the elimination of discriminations (and surely de facto inequalities) is a very complex process – all different levels of governing people in our society should take part in the efforts. We distinguish here the international level, national, regional, provincial, municipal or whatever levels that are invented within a country and whose actions interfere with women's lives.

Each level has its own merits and obstacles : the international level e.g. is far enough away for politicians from their home towns to enable them to make decisions that will be less popular and thus not get punished directly in elections. On the contrary the local level has a great impact on people's daily lives, that is felt clearly and where genderactions also have a more direct impact. But local governing always acts within national or regional frameworks....

IV. Final Remarks

All of the participants in the 3B activity have their own scope (field) of working. Within this matrix we will try to identify which pieces can be filled in (via the inventory of expertise) and which will remain open for new participants to come into the discussion.

The final aim is to evaluate all parts of the matrix and to reconceptualise what is felt to be wrong for the future, in order to create a coherent "action plan" or picture for the emancipation of women in our society in all phases of their life!

We can concentrate within the velvet triangle on the gaps between the actors, between themes, within themes, within or between domains ... between contradicting interests.

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