

Social Europe: where does it go?
Towards a progressive society: Social Europe and the parity agenda
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Dear Guests, First of all, I would like to thank the Fondazione Iotti for the kind invitation to participate at this exciting exchange of ideas. I was unfortunately not in the position to accept this invitation and be present personally – but I hope that some of these thoughts will contribute to an inspiring debate during the event.

I would like to start by quoting one of the speakers from our gender equality workshop at last week's FEPS Renaissance for Europe event. She said "*renegotiating relations with Europe would mean less workers rights, less maternity less – in sum, less women's rights.*" This phrase was very much applauded and was one of the most retweeted messages from the workshop. Still, I could not help, but wonder: is this still really so?

What has happened recently in Europe concerning gender equality? The flagship initiative for this term of the Commission was the proposal on board quotas – something very important symbolically, but a proposal that only favour a small group of women, already being in a privileged position. It neglected the vast group of women who were hit hardly by the austerity measures – no support has arrived for them. What is more, these measures undermined important achievements concerning gender equality, as they often lead to the dismantling of the employment and social protection system. The paternity leave directive is stuck at the Council level. Instead of a progressive report, a much more conservative counterproposal was adopted in the European Parliament on sexual and reproductive rights and health. And just a month ago, the annual report on gender equality was rejected in the EP again.

These are not just various parts of different events by chance. This is a trend of a Europe becoming less and less reluctant to transform society to be based on gender equality. Some cosmetic changes, small steps are down. But the principle of subsidiarity is often used to prevent transforming action in the field of gender equality – just see the example of the report on sexual and reproductive rights and health. We should note that ironically, the very same principle was used in jurisdiction of

the European Court of Justice to allow for the gender equality legislation of the EU to begin with.

At the same time, we can witness backlash in several EU Member States. The heated debate about Spain's proposal for a restriction on the abortion law is just the tip of the iceberg. The desperate labour market situation of Greek women pushes them back to the private sphere, leaving the public sphere entirely to men. Similar trends are happening in Hungary, where merely 9.55% women were elected to the parliament at last Sunday's national election. In Italy, the number of women on the labour market might be increasing – but this increase does not come from a conscious choice of Italian women, it is rather a necessity. This is not something, that women will perceive as a joyful, liberating experience of empowerment.

Does this mean that Social Europe and the parity agenda is gone from the forefront of the EU agenda for good?

If the above-mentioned trend continues, unfortunately, there is a high risk that indeed, this will happen.

But for European progressives, Social Europe is not merely a set of legal texts, limited by the principle of subsidiarity. It is our pledge, our vision of a society offering a fulfilling life for everyone. Hence, it is the core of the Europe we would like to establish.

Hence, the question of our panel “Social Europe: where does it go?” – this is exactly the issue at stake at the upcoming European elections.

For a successful strategy to be able to push the parity agenda at the forefront of the next Commission's work plan, we will need to face several challenges – but these challenges can indeed be tackled. As coordinator of the FEPS research programme Woman up! on enhancing gender equality, I have been privileged to stir the process of the Transatlantic gender dialogue. Its fifth edition took place in March 2014 with the support of the Fondation Jean Jaurès and the Boston University – and I would like to bring in to this debate some of the ideas linked to the promotion of the vision of Social Europe and mobilizing women for the progressive cause.

First of all, feminists and progressives need to break the dangerous link with neoliberalism – as Nancy Fraser said. Some argue that the neoliberal agenda used to be very useful for the feminist agenda. But in fact, this has brought only some benefit to some women. However, on the harmful side, it created competition between women and broke the link of solidarity, the feeling of a common mission towards creating a better, fairer society. I often hear the question, why young women do not feel the need to push collectively for the parity agenda? There is of course, on one hand, the issue of the illusion of equality. But more importantly, there is the lack of a common experience. For the previous generations, Beijing had an amazing unifying force. For the generations after, this unifying force is missing – where should we find inspiration, when the only issue at the international agenda is now to actually prevent a new Beijing event, as it would be a risk of losing many of those achievements 20 years ago? Without this strong link of solidarity, it is also difficult to mobilise European women for the progressive cause – and to point out that the European elections in May are actually about the choice between different visions for the future.

In the enhancement of the progressive vision for a Social Europe, we need to engage a large societal basis – hence the need for broader alliances. There is a wide perception that feminism and the parity agenda in general has become a cause scattered around multiply single issues – and again, their concurrence is induced by the neoliberal approach. The contradiction between the single issue and multi-issue strategy needs to be overcome, and all these causes be united for the mission of putting parity at the core of European policies. Social Europe is about the empowerment of all citizens – taking into account the various needs of these citizens. To give a concrete example: the introduction of board quotas should not be in concurrence and should not receive more emphasis, than for example the enhanced protection of women domestic workers and the valorization of care work. The parity agenda we need to demand from the next Commission needs to be a comprehensive strategy: addressing all societal groups and needs.

In terms of building alliances, there has been a major focus on involving more men for enhancing the parity agenda. We can even say that this focus has been rather disproportionate, if we take into account the fact that with this strategy, we fail to get on board and target those who are in fact suffering the most from gender discrimination: women. We are

facing the risk that again, we take into account women's support for the cause. In fact, the ever decreasing number of women at the European elections points out that this support is also diminishing.

Hence, finally, we also need to reflect on the dynamics of change that we fighting for. Can we achieve to push to the forefront the parity agenda from within our outside of the system? Will the political sphere determine where Europe will go and how the vision for a Social Europe is shaped – or will the alternatives, like the increasing number of social movements, take over the lead? Should we concentrate on the political sphere or should we rather concentrate our efforts on fighting from civil society organisations and influence the political from outside? These were among the most provoking questions at the last Transatlantic gender dialogue. I believe that there is no alternative to the political – but again, the increasing number of women turning away from politics indicates that others might consider different alternatives. As long as the European political sphere will not be able to take on board the request of feminist groups, Europe will be perceived as an exclusive institution ran by a few gray-haired men in privileged positions – and will not inspire women to contribute to the development of such a Europe.

To conclude, I would like to underline that currently, the direction of Europe to become a Social Europe depends on the mobilising force of the progressives and the left for the upcoming elections. The recent manifestations that were organized in solidarity of Spanish women fighting the introduction of the new abortion law show that there is indeed a potential for mobilization for a politicised parity agenda – also at a European level. So it is by no means a mission impossible.