

Gender-sensitive regional development - A necessary strategy for rural areas in Austria

Gleichstellungsorientierte Regionalentwicklung – eine notwendige Strategie für die ländlichen Regionen in Österreich

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Zusammenfassung

Im Jahr 2004 werden zahlreiche mittel- und osteuropäische Länder der Europäischen Union beitreten. Im Zuge der Europäischen Integration muss der Aufrechterhaltung sowie der Weiterentwicklung der ländlichen Regionen in den Beitrittsländern besonderes Augenmerk zukommen. Es wird als wichtige Aufgabe der Regionalentwicklung gesehen, insbesondere durch ökonomisches Wachstum eine möglichst hohe Aufenthalts- und Lebensqualität für die Bevölkerung zu schaffen. Integrierte und nachhaltige Entwicklungskonzepte für ländliche Regionen sollten sowohl alle Wirtschaftssektoren als auch alle Bevölkerungsgruppen in ihre Entwicklungsbemühungen mit einbeziehen. Geschlechtersensible regionalpolitische Analysen in Österreich haben aufgezeigt, dass sich die geschlechterspezifischen Ungleichheiten in der regionalen Entwicklung im Zuge sozioökonomischer Veränderungen verstärken, wenn nicht entsprechend durch eine inhaltliche Neuausrichtung der Regionalpolitik unter Einbeziehung der Strukturkategorie „Geschlecht“ entgegengesteuert wird. Im nachstehenden Beitrag wird die Notwendigkeit für eine solche Strategie dargelegt.

Schlagnworte: Gleichstellungsorientierte Regionalentwicklung, Gender Mainstreaming, Frauen in ländlichen Regionen.

Summary

In 2004 many middle- and eastern European countries will access to the European Union. In this process of European integration it is of big importance that rural areas will be maintained and further developed throughout integrative and sustainable development strategies. One vital task of regional policy is to ensure a high quality of life for the population in rural areas mainly through economic growth. Such comprehensive regional policy approaches for rural areas have to integrate all economical sectors and social groups. Gender-sensitive regional analysis in Austria show that gender specific inequality in regional development is increasing in times of socio-economic changes if there is no tendency to counteract e.g. through taken the structural category "gender" into consideration. In the following contribution the necessity of a gender-sensitive strategy of regional development will be discussed.

Keywords: gender-sensitive regional development, gender mainstreaming, women in rural areas.

1. Introduction

The accession of many Middle- and Eastern European Countries to the European Union in 2004 will be a further big challenge for the rural areas in these countries since the fall of the iron curtain. In times of huge political and economical changes the discussion about the way, the extent of implementing gender equality in the society is not on the top of the important political issues. As experiences in the last decade have shown, women are to a larger extent affected by these changes than men e.g. in loosing their job or decreasing child care services in rural areas etc. Because of these circumstances it is of big importance for the welfare of these societies that women (can) participate in all spheres of life and that their knowledge, their potentials and their power are used for the further development of rural areas (OEDL-WIESER, 2001, 68ff). Therefore it is a big challenge for the regional policy in these countries to involve and empower women in their strategies of rural development.

After the accession of Austria to the European Union in 1995 an upgrading of regional policy and regional subsidies took place. During this dynamic process many new actors on different spatial levels emerged and the professionalization and a higher quality of regional policy due to the framework of EU-programme planning could be ob-

served (STEINER, 2002, 757f). Beyond these encouraging experiences the promotion and the implementation of equality between women and men in the EU-structural fund programmes – in the sense of gender mainstreaming¹ – has become a great challenge and an important commitment for the Austrian regional policy. Regional actors are explicitly requested to contribute within their work to the equality between women and men (OEDL-WIESER, 2002).

To integrate questions of equality between women and men into regional policy requires a focus on women and men – their needs, abilities, potentials, their relation to each other, but also the discriminations they experience belonging to a gender-group. The unequal realities of life chances of women and men hardly find the appropriate consideration in the central fields of action of regional policy and gender-specific effects of many regional measures are not perceived. Therefore the primarily male actors at local and regional level do not regard gender-equality-oriented measures as a priority of regional policy. However it is not clear yet how equality between women and men can/should be implemented in the field of regional policy. Answering this main question it is necessary to consider previously the following questions: (i) Why is it necessary to integrate the structural category “gender” in regional development? (ii) Why is gender equality not a constituent part of regional policy till now? (iii) What are the advantages of integrating “gender” in regional policy?

2. The necessity of gender-sensitive regional development

The requirements on gender equality/gender mainstreaming laid down by the European Commission constitute an enormously important impulse for the coverage of equality issues in the framework both of regional development and of the policy areas influencing it. These requirements of the European Commission for the implementation and enforcement of gender mainstreaming processes – which focus on equality in the sense of equal opportunities – are currently decisive for action in Austria (AUFHAUSER ET AL., 2003, 5). The clash of different

¹ Council Regulation (EC) No 1260/1999 of 21. June 1999. Laying down general provisions on the Structural Funds, ABl. L 161 vom 26.6.1999

notions of “gender” and “equality” amongst the different actors in this policy area causes irritation that so far has not been given sufficient attention in the context of the discussions on gender mainstreaming and equal opportunities. The implementation of gender mainstreaming processes in policy is currently strongly influenced by the learning processes that have already taken place through the embodiment of gender mainstreaming in the fields of labour-market and employment policies. Corresponding learning processes to likewise embody an equality perspective in regional economic policies, technology and innovation policies, but also in agricultural policies, have only just begun.

2.1 Principal positions, instruments and strategies for equality between women and men

The discussion of the issue of equality between women and men is characterised by terms and concepts that are understood and interpreted very differently by different persons. Since female and male actors from a wide variety of institutional and social contexts meet and interact in the field of regional policy, it is particularly important to ensure mutual understanding and communication concerning equality through clear awareness of these differences (AUFHAUSER ET AL., 2003, 17ff). The feminist discourse is currently distinguished by three principal positions regarding the possible interpretation of female and male gender roles, suitable ways of reshaping gender relations and, starting from this basis, a catalogue of key concerns of equality policy.

“Gender equity” position: upholders of this position assume that women and men are or should be equal as human beings/citizens and that the significance still assigned to gender difference by society is a manufactured one. Key political demands include the granting and safeguarding of equal rights for women and men (*legal equality*), *equal treatment* of women and men regarding access to different social positions, the creation of *equal opportunities* for women and men by removing barriers impeding the equal participation of both sexes in different areas of society, priority given to the disadvantaged sex (*affirmative action*) as well as the proportionate distribution of social resources (*justice*).

Typically, this position informs the actions of persons working towards greater equality between women and men either within institutions

(companies, organisations, administrative bodies) or from institutions vis-à-vis the outside world. The equality policy pursued by the European Union, too, focuses primarily on the safeguarding of gender equity and in this connection has been repeatedly and explicitly aiming at creating equal opportunities.

“Gender difference” position: upholders of this position assume that fundamental differences between women and men exist, as do gendered qualities, skills and potentials. The central point of their criticism is levelled at the dominance of male values and concerns in the shaping of social life. Differences between women and men should be viewed positively and endowed with equal social rights and resources, it is argued. Key political demands focus on the promotion, recognition and improved social integration of women, of women’s skills, needs and networks and of “typically female” assets in general.

Seen historically, the emphasis on gender difference is on the one hand closely linked to conservative (“bourgeois”) philosophy but on the other hand also underlies the concerns and demands of the autonomous women’s movement. The latter group is interested in breaking up the social hierarchy between women and men that was and still is tied to the conservative institutionalisation of gender difference.

“Gender diversity” position: upholders of this position assume that binary categories of thought, i.e. “female” – “male”, as well as the institutionalisation of this manner of thinking have prevented, impeded, hidden, and entailed ignorance of the many diverse ways in which femininity and masculinity are lived and experienced in our modern societies. In order to be able to perceive and recognise this diversity more effectively and in order to give it “leeway”, it is necessary to uncover (“deconstruct”) and rethink the processes that have led to the social construction of the pair of opposites “man” – “woman” and its hierarchic interpretation. The key political demand is to enable manifold ways of being and living as a woman or as a man and of conceiving of female and male roles (gender diversity). For this purpose, it is essential to launch social processes that do not by necessity entail any binary ascriptions in the life concepts of women and men.

It is assumed that equality between women and men can only be attained by lowering the barriers to the equal participation of women and men in all areas of society (equity aspect of equality), reevaluating and improving the social recognition of “typically female” assets (dif-

ference aspect of equality) and eliminating binary approaches embodied in categories of “typically female” and “typically male”(diversity aspect of equality).

The long-term result of a society based on true equality is “*gender democracy*”. In this design for a democratic society, the same rights are enjoyed by different social groups. Primarily, this signifies the dismantling of the conditions of male supremacy. The implementation of the objective of gender democracy calls for a new gender culture whose values, standards and social practices are able to tap into the potential of all members of society. Women and men must enter into a meaningful dialogue to be able to participate actively in the processes of change.

2.2 What does the term “gender-sensitive regional development” signify and how could it be implemented?

“Gender-sensitive regional development may be understood as a concept for the design of spatial development processes aimed at bringing about the co-existence of women and men on an equal footing and in particular at contributing towards the improvement of the possibilities of female self-determination and participation. Concepts that require precise definition include gender equality, the characteristics of regional development as a policy area and the points of contact between equality between women and men on the one hand and regional development policy on the other hand.”

(AUFHAUSER ET AL., 2003, 46)

In Austria, the number of actors in the field of equality policy has increased dramatically over the past 15 years. Inter alia, this has entailed a palpable process of decentralisation, regionalisation and localisation of equality-policy institutions. The spatial multi-level system that is increasingly determining regional policy is thus increasingly finding its counterpart in a multi-level system of equality policy.

Tab. 1: Embodiment of equality policy in the multi-level political system of Austria

Spatial level	Gender equality position
National level	Gender equity position
Local level	Gender difference position
Regional level	Gender diversity position

Source: AUFHAUSER ET AL., 2003, 174

Gender-sensitive regional development as outlined above aims at adapting and broadening the interventions of regional policy so as to ensure that they will contribute towards the implementation of sustainable gender democracy. In this, the concept must focus on the promotion of all dimensions of equality that are essential for the co-existence of women and men on an equal footing: self-determination of the individual irrespective of gender-based role expectations, recognition of equal rights and opportunities for women and men, recognition of manifold gender identities, protection against violence, equal treatment of women and men in all fields of public and private life, equal participation of women and men in the shaping of society, a just distribution of social resources and tasks, social revaluation of specific female activities and skills, recognition of female (as well as male) authority, abandoning masculinity as the dominant pattern of social structuring, involvement of women *and* men in the transformation and redesign of gender relations.

Amongst the actors in the field of regional policy, there still exists great scepticism regarding the possibility and necessity of linking a type of gender policy aimed at greater equality between women and men to a form of regional policy primarily interested in initiating and safeguarding socio-economic processes of innovation at the regional level. However, many reasons today advocate placing efforts towards greater equality between women and men on the agenda of regional policy action as well:

- In the past decades, gender relations have begun to shift in Austria as elsewhere. Inter alia, regional policies that increasingly aim at “learning processes” should also learn to ensure the best possible fine-tuning of social and economic development processes. For this learning process, it is absolutely essential to address the changes in “gender images” and the new dynamics of the gender-based life situations of different cohorts and social groups in the individual regions.
- Compared to other European countries, gender segregation at the workplace is relatively marked in Austria. The regionally differentiated processes of economic restructuring typically have thus very marked gender effects. As a result, highly different gender-based problems and development potentials emerge in different regions,

which should definitely be given more attention in regional policy that was the case in the past.

- In many institutional policy bodies, women are still markedly underrepresented. This entails an extreme dominance of male actors, in particular in regional policy bodies determined by municipal representatives (mayors) and representatives of management and labour. If policies are made and adopted without women, these policies tend to follow, for pragmatic reasons, a highly simplified image of women that does not do justice to the actual and increasing variety of female lives. This, too, in the end markedly reduces the relevance, efficiency and effectiveness of regional policy interventions.

2.3 EU accession: a chance for “more” gender equality?

The process of enlargement brings about new challenges for the accession countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEEC). They are required to bring their economic, legal and democratic standards in line with those of the EU and step by step adopt EU legislations in their national laws (EDELHÄUSER ET.AL., 2003, 9). The principle of equal opportunities for women and men as well as the strategy of gender mainstreaming are part of these requirements. Therefore, the accession to the EU also means a step towards the institutionalisation of gender equality in the new member countries. Furthermore, the EU offers new possibilities for the funding of women’s projects, trans-nationally as well as nationally, and opens new opportunities for the promotion of women at different levels.

The economic transition and democratisation processes in the CEEC had/have different effects on women and men. Prior to 1989 the majority of women in the CEEC were involved in full time employment and the level of female participation in the labour market was supported across the CEEC by several policies facilitating the reconciliation of work on family (BREHERTON, 2002, 6f.). Since the fall of communism in 1989 social services e.g. child care facilities have eroded steadily and led to a decreasing female participation in the labour market, resembling those of the West more and more.

The expectations of women and gender experts in the new EU member countries of Central and Eastern Europe are diverse: the economic development and the integration of women in the (enlarged) labour market is regarded to bring about positive impacts for women. Further-

more, several anti-discrimination laws have been launched e.g. in Poland in the pre-accession period. Nevertheless, issues as e.g. domestic violence on women, prostitution or abortion can hardly be found in the public discourse. Despite the fact that more advantages than disadvantages of the EU accession are perceived by women, some critical aspects remain. Within the process of accession negotiations gender equality has not been put on the political agenda.

3. Gender based inequity structures at the regional level and its dynamics

On account of the different living and working conditions of women and men in our society, appropriate approaches, strategies and measures are needed in regional development/regional policy. The following “problem zones” identified through a gender-sensitive regional analysis in Austria illustrate what happens if there is given less attention to the gender-aspect in regional development (AUFHAUSER ET AL., 2003, 117ff):

- In many regional contexts, the spatial segregation of female and male workplaces is intensifying. This development reproduces and cements not only the horizontal and vertical segmentation of women and men in the labour market, but also complicates a fair distribution of family and household care-giving work.
- Regional policy interventions such as support for cluster formation, the promotion of young entrepreneurs or the establishment of technology centres as a rule tend to strengthen the development of male-dominated work situations. Women benefit from such interventions to a disproportionately small degree, at least in their capacity as entrepreneurs.
- Many regions are characterised by a growing gap between female and male incomes. This is in particular true of regions pursuing economically relatively successful regional policies chiefly focused on export, technology and innovation. While women do participate in the economic upswing of such regions by tapping greater earning opportunities, they increasingly find themselves in social-service workplaces, where incomes tend to fall rather than rise, which do not ensure a reliable livelihood, whose existence correlates markedly with economic purchasing power and which therefore are extremely jeopardised in phases of economic recession.

- A similarly growing differentiation between female and male training structures may be likewise perceived in the field of education. In particular the areas of higher education in rural-peripheral regions are characterised by an increasing “feminisation” of general and commercial training curricula, while young men tend to undergo more specialised educational programmes. This process is currently intensified by the increase in the number of specialised higher technical colleges (“Fachhochschulen”) and the cluster formation process planned for the educational sector.
- Regional location development often neglects the “human resources” women dispose of. In particular young women, who meanwhile have obtained excellent qualification levels, find only few adequate workplaces in many regional contexts.
- Women tend to leave regions that do not provide adequate opportunities or refuse to return to these regions after having completed a higher-education curriculum. The result of this development – not only in the Alpine, more agricultural regions, but also in industrial areas such as in Styria – is a growing “surplus of men” in the important age groups concerned with establishing a partnership and starting a family.
- Many regions continue to neglect the development of infrastructure in the area of social services. Since family care-giving is still considered primarily a female task, this fact prevents the fully-fledged integration of women in the market of gainful employment.
- At the local and regional levels, we find only very few women who are political decision-makers. The social acceptance of women in such positions and functions is still very low in most Austrian regions.
- When starting a family, even highly skilled women tend to move to outer districts or the urban periphery. Since the few workplaces “on site” that would correspond to the skill level of these women are still largely taken by men, more and more of these women are forced either to forgo an income that would be adequate in view of their educational attainments or else to commute to their “old” workplaces – sometimes over long distances – following maternity leave.

Neglecting the different impacts of regional policies on women and men has not only negative consequences in regards to democracy and morality; it also can lead to economic disadvantages of regions.

3.2 Social costs of gender-based inequity and benefits of increasing gender-sensitivity of regional development

In the ongoing discussion about implementing equality between women and men or gender mainstreaming in regional policy many actors are asking: "How can regional policy benefit when they are intensifying their commitment to equality between women and men?", or "Which costs will arise if they fail to do so?". Taking account of gender sensitivity is often handled as an additional task by political and regional actors. It is seen as a requirement that should be met in the development and implementation of regional programmes, guidelines, strategies, measures and projects in addition to other issues, such as e.g. environmental impact analyses. In economically difficult periods, political actors often do not find it necessary to treat the gender aspect as primarily issue. Gender-sensitive approaches are suitable for times of economic upswing, many of them believe. Yet numerous international examples show that gender sensitivity and a commitment to equality, apart from political and social benefits, above all entails economic advantages for the development of a country, region or enterprise.

Equality between women and men and equality between different social groups correlates directly with the economic growth of a nation or a region. This is a mutual effect: while economic growth is seen to improve equality between women and men in general, also gender equality entails economic growth (LÖFSTRÖM, 2001, 4). Each society needs the participation of all its members to develop optimally. Thus, if women obtain better access to the labour market, when the female employment rate rises, economic productivity will increase as well. In times of dwindling birth rates and a growing number of old age people, the participation of women in gainful employment, and hence in economic productivity, is becoming more and more important.

For regional policy the gender dimension becomes relevant if effectiveness and efficiency of public subsidies are called into question (FRIES, 2000). In case of the Structural Fund policy of the European Union the optimum use of human potential is seen as a key concern. To ensure the best possible effect of the Structural Funds, regional economies

should involve all actors of regions into the planning and implementation of interventions. Moreover, involving the widest possible share of the population in the definition of objectives and the planning of measures increases the effectiveness and sustainability of regional development processes because the different needs and interests of different groups of population are better represented through broad participation.

Improving the life quality for the regional population is regarded as one of the central tasks of regional development. To create the highest possible quality of facilities and services for all inhabitants of a region also means preventing the exodus of certain population groups e.g. young people, highly qualified workers, women, etc. and thus keeping and fully tapping the available human potential in the region. Above all politicians tend to use the argument that equality sensitivity will duly entail higher quality of life. In this, the emphasis lies on the welfare of all inhabitants and on the legitimacy of implemented policies under participation of all interest groups.

However, it should be pointed out that win-win situations are not always possible in the case of reorganisation of gender relations on regional level. In many areas, resources and power should be redistributed to give a fair share to formerly disadvantaged groups – which often include women. Economically speaking, men might be the losers here if we assume that increased participation in care-giving work might entail a reduction of their income. However, from the social perspective, men will rather be winners, as greater involvement in care-giving work may also mean increased social competence, exactly as a reduction of the volume of paid work may lead to greater quality of life and more leisure time. Generally, the objective should be an improved social balance between women and men in the regions.

4. Best practice: trans-border cooperation of women in rural and urban regions

Several initiatives have been launched to strengthen women's position in regional decision making processes. In the following section two projects are presented, which aim to connect women in Austria and the Central and Eastern European neighbour countries. Integrating the strategy of gender mainstreaming in all fields and levels of cross-border cooperation by involving all relevant institutions is the aim of the project *GEKO*. The east-west women's network *Milena* operates as a

platform for information and communication within the “Europa-region” of Austria, Slovakia, Czech Republic and Hungary.

4.1 GEKO – gender-sensitive co-operation in cross-border regional development

The aim of the project GEKO in the region “Weinviertel” in Lower Austria is: Integrating the strategy of gender mainstreaming in all fields and levels of cross-border cooperation by involving all relevant institutions and actors in an open and creative learning process (HÖFING, 2002, 11ff.). Women are regarded to be crucial actors in cross-border cooperation. They already manage a bigger part of cross-border projects, but they rarely take leading positions within decisional structures. Issues like gender-sensitivity are not taken into account within the daily project work. The project coordinator - regional management Weinviertel - points out several potentials of women not being used effectively for their work so far: (i) the handling of differences in culture and mentality, (ii) language skills, (iii) ability for self-organisation. Several specific problems of women in the border region of Weinviertel/ South Moravia/ West-Slovakia are identified: (i) different role models for women, (ii) traditionally coined family-orientation of women in rural areas (iii) big distances between the place of residence and the place of work or education, (iv) limited possibilities for mobility of women in peripheral regions.

The aims of the project can be subsumed as the following: The bracing of Gender Mainstreaming in the “Euregio” at all levels – at the decision making level, in the working programme as well as in cross-border co-operation. The whole region shall be sensitized regarding gender issues. And several specific measures and projects for the promotion of equal opportunities shall be introduced.

4.2 Milena – the East-West women’s network

The Milena network, launched by the City of Vienna in 1997, institutionalises communication and co-operation between women’s organisations and political and administrative decision makers in a transnational region, which initially comprised Austria, the Czech Republic, Hungary and the Slovak Republic. Milena is designed to accommodate the full spectrum of topics involving or concerning women, women’s lives and their position in society. Members of the network are women in politics, the administration and the economy, professionally

engaged in dealing with political, economic and social issues from a gender perspective or interested in such a perspective and wishing to know which steps towards the equality of women are being taken in other towns/regions/countries. Women in NGOs and NPOs committed to women's interests, who can input practical experience and are interested in co-operating with women and women's organisations in other countries. Women engaged in scientific, research and media work, who can lay down the theoretical framework for and the principles of communicating on the priority topics, and who can, by means of comparative evaluation, help to identify the region's potential and are interested in the practical impact of their work.

Policies and measures to improve equality and to promote women are not always easily implemented. Therefore it is important to make maximum use of all the experience gathered in different countries and thus to avoid wasting time on "reinventing the wheel". One of the aims of this network is to make the exchange of experience and best practice and the transfer of know-how across borders as easy and as attractive as possible. A current project of the Milena network is milena.media. The project has been launched as a communication and information platform for journalists dealing with gender, feminism and women's topics in the partner countries of the "Europaregion", i.e. Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and Austria. The aim of project is on the one hand to promote a women's and gender perspective in the media coverage of the enlarged European Union. On the other hand, it is to connect female journalists to enable them to support and consult each other for the advancement of women in media professions.

Networking of women across borders can help to enhance medium- to long-term structures for the institutionalisation of women's interests in regional development and decision making processes. Furthermore, projects addressing the public opinion and altering the images and clichés about traditional role models of women and men can be regarded as important promoters for the equality of women and men not only in rural areas.

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