



European Commission
Justice

Exchange of good practices on gender equality

Implementation of gender mainstreaming

Belgium, 17-18 May 2011

Comments paper - Cyprus

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This publication is supported by the European Union Programme for Employment and Social Solidarity - PROGRESS (2007-2013).

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Gender Mainstreaming in Cyprus

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1. Brief Assessment of the Policy Context

Cyprus does not have a long tradition of, or commitment to, gender equality. Rather, gender policy is largely influenced by EU directives and Conventions for the promotion of gender equality such as the CEDAW and the Beijing Platform for Action. This lack of 'gender politics' can be attributed to a great degree to the identification of politics in Cyprus with the "National Problem" (the Turkish invasion and the de facto division of the island since 1974 between Turkish Cypriot north and Greek Cypriot south). The dominance of the national issue in the political agenda has also contributed to an environment that is not conducive to human rights activism, and thus the women's movement in Cyprus is weak and suffers from lack of funding and expertise.

Thus, mostly due to Cyprus's harmonization with the *aquis communautaire*, but also to bring legislation in line with relevant international instruments, an impressive number of legislative measures relating to gender equality have been passed including the Equal Treatment of Men and Women in Employment and Vocational Training Law, 2002, the Equal Pay Between Men and Women for the Same Work or for Work of Equal Value Law, 2002, the Maternity Protection (Amendment) Law, 2002, the Parental Leave and Leave on Grounds of Force Majeure Law, 2002, and The Equal Treatment of Men and Women in Professional Social Insurance Schemes Law, 2002 among others. Furthermore, all National Development Plans since 1979 have declared as part of their objectives the improvement of women in economic activity and society and the combating of discrimination against women.

Despite Cyprus's legislative framework on equality between women and men, the fulfilment of women's rights requires more than the removal of formal barriers there remain political, socio-economic, and cultural barriers to the advancement of women in Cyprus. The most important barriers for the purposes of the incorporation of gender mainstreaming in policy processes are political. As mentioned above, Cyprus does not have a long history of gender equality and there is no broad political agreement on gender equality policy. There is a lack of gender balance in almost all walks of life and thus masculine models throughout decision-making in all social and political structures and processes including government and political parties, parliament, judiciary, economy, and mass media as well as weak implementation and monitoring mechanisms.

The Ministry of Justice and Public Order is the competent Ministry in Cyprus for the overall promotion of gender equality and the protection of women's rights. Gender policy is coordinated by the National Machinery for Women's Rights (NMWR), a body set up in 1994 by the Council of Ministers Decision no. 40.609, dated 16.2.1994, as a continuation of the Permanent Central Agency for Women's Rights (established in 1988). The role of the NMWR is strictly advisory and it has no executive power. It advises the Council of Ministers on policies, programmes and laws promoting women's rights; monitors, coordinates and evaluates the implementation and effectiveness of these programmes and laws; carries out information, education and training programmes on relevant issues; supports and subsidizes women's organizations and serves as a cooperation channel between the Government and NGOs.

The priorities of the NMWR refer to the major objectives of EU policies for gender equality and the implementation of the goals set by the CEDAW Convention. However, the imperative of producing reports which reveal national progress towards the implementation of the CEDAW, often leads NMWR to a diplomatic tactics rather than reflective political change. This is mainly due to the Machinery's lack of executive authority and independence. Furthermore, the process of preparing and presenting such reports is usually non-transparent and NGOs, which are potentially the real carriers of change towards gender equality, participate in this process as observers rather than as real partners.

Gender mainstreaming in Cyprus is neither fully understood nor implemented at any level. A number of National Action Plans have been adopted foreseeing concrete actions to address various gender equality issues such as employment, family violence, trafficking in human beings, poverty and social exclusion, integration of third-country nationals and so on. However, these are not accompanied by the sufficient political will and sufficient resources for their full and effective implementation. More importantly, gender analysis and gender mainstreaming are lacking in all these policy documents despite the inclusion of gender-disaggregated data (particularly with reference to employment, violence, and poverty and social exclusion) and, in some cases, stated gender equality policy priorities.

The most important national policy document that makes reference to gender mainstreaming is the National Action Plan on Equality between Women and Men (2007-2013). In this document several references are made to gender mainstreaming ("η ενσωμάτωση της διάστασης του φύλου") although the principle of gender mainstreaming is not clearly defined, nor implemented in the policy frames and structure of the Plan. This mirrors the frequent use of the term in policy discourse on gender equality, demonstrating that gender mainstreaming is often confused with gender equality or 'women's issues' and not understood as a reorganization of policy processes to promote equality between women and men.

Despite the above, some small yet important developments for the incorporation of gender mainstreaming in policy formulation are the development of gender-disaggregated statistics and more systematic data collection and in all areas, with the Cyprus Statistical Service playing a leading role in this effort. Despite this, it is unclear how this data actually informs policy formulation. Research has also been developed on gender equality issues by academic institutions, NGOs, and women's organisations, and the NMWR has actively supported these efforts. Again, it is not clear how this knowledge feeds into gender equality policy, if at all. However, it should be noted that all development projects implemented in Cyprus with the support of the European Structural Funds are evaluated and certified by the National Machinery for compliance to national and European gender equality laws and policies.

Although gender budgeting at the national level has not yet been introduced, the first steps have been taken in this direction on the initiative of the NMWR that organized an information seminar on the issue in 2008 with the involvement of relevant stakeholders such as the Ministry of Finance and the Parliamentary Committee on Finance. Unfortunately, there was never any follow-up to this initiative and with the onset of the economic crisis, the issue fell further down the list of priorities.

To conclude, efforts at gender mainstreaming in Cyprus have been sporadic at best. There is a lack of general political will and consensus on gender equality policies, coupled with a lack of expertise for the effective structural integration of the gender dimension in policy processes.

2. Are the Belgian and Swedish examples transferable?

Within the political context described above, it is questionable whether the good practices described and evaluated in the Swedish and Belgian discussion papers are transferable to the Cyprus context.

Similarly to Cyprus, equality policies in Belgium have been greatly influenced by European and international policies on gender equality. In both countries there seems to have been a 'top down' approach to equality issues. In contrast, Sweden has a long tradition of gender equality with broad political consensus on equality issues in general, and on gender mainstreaming as a strategy to achieve equality goals in the long-term. Also important is the strong awareness among the Swedish public that gender equality is necessary and desirable for an equitable and just society. Another crucial aspect of the Swedish context is the theoretical basis on which Swedish gender equality policy is based. As the Swedish expert points out, the knowledge of the relationship between gender and power is essential in the development of gender mainstreaming. This theoretical understanding is completely lacking in Cyprus due to the weak feminist movement as well as the lack of gender expertise within academia, civil society, and among public officials responsible for formulating and implementing gender equality policy. For these reasons, it is my opinion that the Swedish example, that the Belgian expert refers to as 'integrated approach', cannot be easily transferred to Cyprus as they require clear understandings of notions of gender equality and gender mainstreaming and a deep commitment to their values.

In both examples, the first step in the introduction of gender mainstreaming was the introduction of a specific law (in the Belgian case) or legislative provision (in the Swedish case). However, both the Swedish and Belgian practices demonstrate that explicit and continuous political backing is necessary for the success of any initiative to promote and develop gender mainstreaming. Such political will has been lacking in Cyprus which has resulted in any progress resting on individual goodwill rather than concrete policy initiatives. Nevertheless, it is my opinion that the Belgian example of a specific law on gender mainstreaming would be the first step forward in developing gender mainstreaming policy in Cyprus. Despite slow progress in Belgium, the law seems to have laid the groundwork for the development of structures, processes, and procedures for the structural integration of gender mainstreaming in policy formulation and implementation. It provides for a holistic and comprehensive policy toward gender mainstreaming that covers institutional, administrative, and procedural issues while at the same time providing for the necessary gender expertise through the Gender Institute. This transversal approach is better suited to the Cyprus context where gender mainstreaming is still a new and little understood concept, in contrast to Sweden where it is firmly institutionalized.

2.1. Transferable Aspects of the Belgian law

The Belgian example provides for an interdepartmental coordination group composed of high-ranking members of ministerial cabinets. This is one aspect of the law that is highly transferable and necessary in the Cyprus context. Currently, each ministry and municipality, and often services within such bodies, implement gender equality initiatives with little if any consultation or coordination. This has resulted in a large 'catalogue' of initiatives and actions without any policy dialogue and/or deliberation and

often with no involvement of women's organisations and NGOs. It is often unclear what the objectives of the policy initiatives or actions are, what their connection to gender equality is, and there is rarely any follow-up or evaluation.

Another aspect of the Belgian law that would assist in the development of a holistic and integrated gender policy in the Cyprus context is the requirement for a global commitment by the government on strategic objectives as well as specific commitments on gender equality objectives. This would provide the necessary impetus and direction that is currently lacking in the implementation of gender equality policy in each individual ministry and government department, but also within the public administration as a whole in Cyprus.

As noted above, one of the major weaknesses in the implementation of gender mainstreaming, and gender equality policy more generally in Cyprus, is the lack of political backing, as well as the lack of human and other resources, of the National Machinery for Women's Rights. In the Belgian case, the law on gender mainstreaming foresees the establishment of the Gender Institute that supports the implementation of the law by providing the necessary expertise including research, training, and the development of guidelines and tools. This aspect of the law, if adopted in Cyprus, would provide the necessary political backing for the National Machinery for Women's Rights, or similar gender equality unit, to carry out its mandate. It would also assist in the development of gender expertise that is currently lacking in Cyprus. Of course, as noted in by the Belgian expert, the success of the Gender Institute in carrying out its mandate is heavily dependent on financial resources which are not provided for by the Law. Based on the Cypriot experience, depending on the various ministries and government departments to allocate a budget to gender mainstreaming has not been a successful tactic due to lack of political will, particularly in the current financial climate. Gender budgeting, as pointed out by the Belgian expert, could ensure that financial resources are allocated but the implementation of gender budgeting could be a lengthy and complicated process requiring specific knowledge and expertise.

3. Conclusion

As discussed above, Cyprus does not have a long history of gender equality policy and there has generally been a top down approach to equality issues with developments largely taking place in response to EU and international commitments. The political agenda has, since independence in 1960, been dominated by the Cyprus problem of ethnic conflict creating an environment non-conducive to civil society activism falling outside this framework. Within this context, there has been a distinct lack of feminist activism and mobilization on issues other than the national problem. At the same time there is also a lack of understanding and expertise on gender equality issues and gender mainstreaming in particular.

In the absence of real political dialogue on gender equality issues involving all relevant stakeholders including women's organisations and NGOs, I am reluctant to fully support the transfer of the good practice examples described and evaluated by the Belgian and Swedish experts. It is my opinion that in order for such policies to be successful, there needs to be broad political support and understanding of the objectives of such policies.

In conclusion then, I would say that Cyprus needs first to start discussing these issues, to bring gender to the policymaking table and to seriously engage in systematic

research and policy dialogue before any policy on gender mainstreaming is formulated and enacted.

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