

### From women through gender to unconscious bias: changing terminology about gender equality in the EU

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# **The Future of the European Union**

Feminist Perspectives  
from East-Central Europe

ESZTER KOVÁTS (ED.)

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ANDREA PETŐ

## From women through gender to unconscious bias: changing terminology about gender equality in the EU

The 7<sup>th</sup> August, 2017 is an important date in gender equality policy in Hungary. In 2009, a government decree included teaching about gender stereotypes in kindergartens which were omitted in 2010 when the Christian-Conservative Fidesz-KDNP government took office. In the past seven years there has been rhetorical presence of anti-gender ideology, but there has not been any policy implications so far. There has been obviously politically driven non-compliance with international provisions on the side of the government based on the CEDAW reports, but not any explicit backlash on policy level so far. It even looked at a certain point that Hungary could avoid the violent and hateful campaign around the concept of gender unlike Poland or Slovakia (Kováts & Pető 2017). But on this August day, the deputy state secretary of education announced that the concept of gender will be deleted from the national curriculum (Csejk 2017). This shift in the language and policy on the national level is not unprecedented either on national or on European Union level. In Poland the new PiS government swiftly moved against gender in the field of education and policy making (Grzebalska & Pető 2016).

On European Union level the very same process is happening regarding the gender equality policies. I served on the Advisory Group on Horizon 2020 on Gender in Brussels together with a group of European scholars, policy makers, for-profit organization members for six years, to advise the European Commission (EC) on how to shape a relevant research policy of the European Union. This paper, also based on my personal experiences, aims to illustrate the major shift in terminology from women's equal opportunities through gender equality to unconscious bias, and asks the question how this process fits into the general process of redefining gender equality in the European Union.

## Gender as a category of analysis and a tool for social engineering

The scholarly literature on gender equality is mostly focusing on how gender is integrated in EU institutional operation and policies. The EU was representing an integrationalist approach: integrating women and gender issues into different already existing policies.

Gender equality policies have been developed on two levels. First is the national legislation. From the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, national legislation has secured suffrage and has been protecting female workers in different frameworks, and later constitutions were declaring equality between male and female citizens. The social democratic movement and trade unions were framing the question differently than political Catholicism. The former is pinpointing collective and structural discrimination, the latter fights for undivided dignity of every human being. The second level is that of different international organizations. From the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, national women's organizations formed international institutions to promote their agenda, to lobby and to secure knowledge transfer. After the First World War, internationalization seemed to be a remedy for bloody international conflicts. The League of Nations was the institution where different organizations, including different women's organizations, lobbied to push their agenda through. After 1945, the UN became the main site for promoting women's rights, however, it did not happen till the setting up of the series of World Congress on Women in Mexico City in 1975 to develop a secular, human rights based equality discourse, which successfully influenced transnational policy making and, through this, also the national level. This equality discourse was adopted not only by transnational organizations such as ILO, IMF or World Bank but also the European Union. The ambiguity around gender equality policy has been caused by the fact that normativity was implemented via organizations promoting economic growth first and foremost.

The site and framing of the policy implementation had an impact on the value of gender equality itself. First, gender equality became a soft norm as the values promoted are actually regulated by national level legislation. Second, four framing strategies of gender equality were identified by Lombardo, Meier and Verloo (2009): fixing, shrinking, bending and stretching serving as implementation strategies, which are challenging gender equality and its transformative impact. The meaning of gender equality has been renegotiated due to 'fixing' of gender balance to define gender as a dichotomist social dimension to the categories of men and women. 'Bending' gender equality means bending policies towards increasing economic growth, while 'stretching' of gender equality means 'broadening the concept' and 'incorporating more meanings of it', e.g., multiple inequalities. 'Shrinking' gender equality is a simplified understanding of gender equality that only focuses on 'women' as human capital contributing to economic growth and to formal equality between men and women.

Scholars have observed, activists have experienced these different strategies which make stakeholders critical to the achievements of implementation of gender equality, as

it has been always embedded in the logic of the market (Elomäki 2015). It is difficult to criticize the most sophisticated and institutionalized mechanisms of gender equality so far.

To make this critical stance even more complicated, the three models of gender equality policies at EU: equal treatment, positive action, and gender mainstreaming, are representing three very different, even self-contradictory policy areas as far as aims and policy tools are concerned: “the previous definition and practice of equal opportunity as equal treatment handled public policy as gender neutral which is challenged by the concept of gender mainstreaming” (Manners & Pető 2006: 100).

The problems and challenges of implementing gender equality had several reasons (Vida 2017). Firstly, equality is a utopian value: it cannot be reached fully as there always will be another inequality to fight against. Secondly, women as subjects of policy have broadened to include other groups and also to involve diversity, later intersectionality, as it was called ‘stretching’. As Lombardo and Meier observed “the EU has broadened its approach to gender equality, such as gender mainstreaming, the widening of the EU-political discourse on gender equality has not led to a deeper framing of the issues in the terms of gender equality” (Lombardo & Meier 2008: 2-3). Thirdly, the broadening of the agenda happened in parallel with the proliferation of rhetorical actions which are serving as different forms of individual and institutional resistance. This resistance was happening on two levels: national and EU levels, but very often in relation to each other.

The triple economic, security and refugee crises starting in 2008 made the already existing contradictions more visible, as more emphasis was given to the economic framing of gender equality on all levels, also on the policy level, and the human rights based framework has been weakening. The logic that “what has not been counted does not count”, together with the language, policy and way of gender equality, were even more translated to neoliberal gender equality policies (Elomäki 2015). Also, the normative power of gender equality has changed in several ways due to the triple crisis.

Firstly, it increased its visibility, especially defining European values against migrants. Different political regimes were using gender equality as a value to differentiate between good and bad Europeans, or even migrants. Secondly, due to the rise of anti-gender movements, new political directions are being searched. Anti-gender movements constitute a neoconservative, populist response to the crises of neoliberalism. These movements are offering a viable, liveable, desirable alternative to neoliberal values, and also strategies of implementation by using complementarity and essentialized definitions of men and women. These transnational movements are also attacking gender studies as a discipline and basically everything which has anything to do with the term “gender.” These movements are also posing a challenge to conservative political parties as they are also pushed to define, clearly and openly, what is the stance of their party to gender equality. Uncertainty is visible not only among progressive actors but also among conservative politicians as far as the future of gender equality policy is concerned (Grzebalska 2016). ‘Gender became a

symbolic glue', a proxy for the rejection of the current societal order, redefinition of citizenship and a key rhetorical tool for neoconservative actors who aim to build a new common sense about what is normal and legitimate (Grzebalska & Kováts & Pető 2017).

The rise of 'gender as symbolic glue' and the increased presence of public debates about gender equality have had two major impacts as far as the implementation of gender equality policies is concerned. The first reaction is the return of the 'woman' as a policy actor to avoid using gender as a concept. The second reaction to the political attacks on gender is the integration of the neutralised language of human resources about unconscious bias into gender equality documents. The term 'bias' means a biased response in brain activity in quick decision making, judgement and assessment based on cultural environment, personal experiences, background, attitudes, stereotypes and prejudice without realising.

Gender bias can be based on physical characteristics: e.g. women are shorter than men, social roles: men are good in STEM, or psychological characteristics: women are more caring. This latter process fits into the de-gendering process to neutralising gender issues to avoid addressing structural root causes in a global context (Jalusic 2009). It does not investigate how these differences were constructed but focuses on the individual who needs to be changed and who should be encouraged to make these biases explicit. De-gendering can also be achieved with making gender a cross cutting issue, a form of mainstreaming where the policy is losing its location, and gender will be everywhere and nowhere. But the strategy the Hungarian deputy state secretary of education is using, simple omission, is also a form of neutralization.

### **Gender or gender bias: what difference does it make?**

Gender as an analytical and descriptive category has a long and complex history. The complicated intellectual and political translation of gender into different languages has been discussed by academics together with the consequences how gender arrived to 'New Europe' with the wrong passport (Smejkalova 1996). The three intellectual homes of gender described by Joan Scott in her seminal article *Marxism, psychoanalysis and deconstructivism* were met with hostility in post-1989 Central Europe and, to make the situation worse, it also awoke historical, conservative antifeminism (1999). However, different definitions of gender can be found in policy documents: the Council of Europe used different definitions than the UN. One of the main rhetorical strategies of the anti-gender movements has been saying that they "do not know what gender is" – ignoring the previous definitional attempts of policy makers. To handle the political pressure, the European Commission speaks about women and men, defining it as gender. It is also very telling that the EC does not have a gender equality strategy any more (see Gregor in this volume) but a mere Strategic Engagement document, even though using the concept of gender equality. On the other hand, it moves away from gender based discrimination to the concept of



unconscious bias: from an institutionalized legal framework to personal trainings and workshops. Using the term unconscious bias will not solve the problems of translation with gender equality as it is equally difficult to translate into the different languages. The term also comes from the Anglo-Saxon scholarship just like gender. But gender as a concept was born as a result of meaningful interdisciplinary and intellectual discussion with and within the emancipatory movements. Unlike gender, the term unconscious bias is coming from neoliberal economics about institutional decision making. Works of psychologists like Daniel Kahneman or Gerd Gigerenzer are popping up as references instead of critical feminist scholars in discussions about bias to understand individual choices. Supporting the inclusion of bias also renders decades of gender studies scholarship invisible. Using unconscious bias results in focusing on the individual as a subject of engineering who can be equipped with an adaptive toolbox and can be changed. This change happening in the individual behaviour can again be measured and quantified. Attitudes, stereotypes, and prejudices are discussed and measured without any structure or social context. This makes unconscious bias a great tool for policy makers to be included into the EC policy making and training. It further reinforces the neoliberal logic of focusing on the individuals and it believes in superficial change achieved via internet training. We can add another strategy to bending, fixing, neutralizing omitting, resisting, stretching, and shrinking – and that is biasing.

As a gender studies professor who experienced the euphoria of 1989 and the hopes attached to EU accession, it is troubling for me to see the preparation for a major paradigm change in the worst possible historical moment, when major political, economic and cultural transformation is happening as a result of the triple crises. When firm and straightforward statements and innovative practices are needed, we see uncertainty and individualization instead of addressing structural transformative issues. If the tendency of watering up the issue of gender inequality continues with the variety of implementation strategies and non-strategies at EU level, this will overshadow the problem itself.

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