Achievements and Challenges 20 Years after Beijing: A View from Switzerland

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This contribution is published as part of the Think Piece Series- Let’s Talk about Women’s Rights: 20 Years after the Beijing Platform for Action. In this series, leading feminist thinkers discuss achievements in the field of women’s rights and gender equality; identify the challenges faced in implementing the Beijing Platform for Action; and consider ways of moving forward. They offer both critical insights and highlight opportunities for realizing women’s rights after 2015. Please share your thoughts on this article in the comments space below.

"The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action are as relevant today as they were 20 years ago..." Despite being one of the world’s wealthiest countries and most modern economies, Switzerland has a long way to go towards realizing gender equality and meeting the Beijing Platform for Action’s targets. Paid maternity leave, legal abortion, and an increase in women’s educational attainment are some of the milestones achieved since 1995, when the country was one of 189 states to adopt the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action at the Fourth World Conference on Women. This means both strengthening gender mainstreaming policies in foreign policy and in international cooperation, and also promoting gender-sensitive targets and indicators in other goals.

**Remarkable progress, but many challenges remain**

The Platform for Action for children faced a fertile environment in Switzerland in 1995, with a favourable political context for promoting gender equality after historically slow progress. Switzerland accepted women’s suffrage in 1971, for example, and only in 1981 did women and men obtain equal rights in the Swiss constitution. But a range of long-overdue milestones were achieved subsequently. In 1985 the legal recognition of same-sex marriages replaced the equal partnership in marriage. Under the influence of a strong women’s movement, specialized agencies for promoting gender equality were established (between 1985 and 1995). A social democrat and women’s activist, Ruth Dreifuss headed the Federal Department of Home Affairs between 1993 and 2002. And Switzerland ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1997.

In 1996 Switzerland introduced the federal law on equal pay by gender. It prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex and promotes gender equality de jure and de facto in the workplace. Since then around 800 legal cases have been brought against unfair remuneration, sexual harassment or other discrimination in the workplace. Women are entering the labour market in increasing numbers; today six out of ten women are employed. But women’s employment differs significantly from men’s. Part-time work is typical, with eight out of ten employed women with children under 15 working part-time, whereas only one out of ten men does so. This results in women being overrepresented in lower paid, flexible and precarious positions. Even if guaranteed by corollary and law, in 2012 women in the private sector still earned 18.8% less than men on average. While education level or position can explain some of this difference, 8.7% is due to wage discrimination amounting to a shortfall in women’s earning of 7.7 billion Swiss francs (CHF) a year. In other words, structural discrimination persists in the Swiss economy and workplace. Logically, software developed by the federal office for equal opportunity, provides a tool for employers to check their remuneration policy and to prove equal pay when applying for public procurement.

Since the adoption of the Swiss Action Plan, women’s education level has increased. Whereas 13.6% of women held a university degree in 1999, 30.2% did in 2012. This increase is reduplicated by horizontal and vertical segregation that persists in education and employment. Women are now present in 23% of senior jobs in the federal public administration, in 44% of academic chair and 45% of professorships, in 38% of scientific positions. Women: in Switzerland it is estimated that 2.8 billion working hours a year are devoted to care of children and adults, and that 80% of this work is unpaid. This unpaid care work amounts to over 80 billion CHF per year if paid at market rates.

The participative review process of the Swiss Action Plan in 2014 identified the following areas for further action:

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- Better social protection of care work, actions against wrong incentives, individual taxation and special measures to absorb the risk of poverty are needed.
- Efforts have been made in the field of immigration, technology, engineering and mathematics. However, the higher the career level, the fewer the number of women. Among all employees in management positions only a third are women; in the 100 biggest companies women represent only 13% of board members; and just 3% of CEOs are women. Rigid gender stereotypes are still widespread.

Women’s equal representation in political decision making is a choice as much as a task as their representation in the economy. A continuous increase of women in parliament that began with women’s suffrage in 1917 came to a halt in 2007 and subsequently decreased. At cantonal and city levels, women do not make up more than one third of parliamentary representatives; at the national level the proportion is closer to one in ten.

Confronting responsibility and mobility issues while working towards equal gender is key to achieving gender equality in every country. In Switzerland a public referendum finally introduced paid maternity leave in 2004. After more than 60 years of struggle. While women now have the right to 14 weeks of leave paid at 80% of their salary, paid parental (i.e., paternity) leave is still not available. Since the implementation in 2003 of an incentive programme to fund childcare facilities, public childcare costs have increased and about 50,000 new places have been created. This has also significantly improved the possibility for women and men to reconcile employment and family duties. Despite these changes, the supply of public childcare remains very modest in international comparison. Full-time places are available for only 11% of all children of pre-school age and for 8% of school-age children. Strikingly, many regions also lack any form of public childcare facilities. Furthermore, public costs for private childcare—compared with other countries—are very high, setting wrong incentives for parents for not increasing their paid employment. Elderly care also remains a significant challenge, in particular as demographic shifts coupled with public pension systems impose an increasing burden on the crucial paid (and unpaid) work that is mainly done by women. Although men are taking on more responsibility for care work, the majority of the work in the family is still done by women: in Switzerland it is estimated that 2.8 billion working hours a year are devoted to care of children and adults, and that 80% of this work is unpaid. This unpaid care work amounts to over 80 billion CHF per year at paid market rates.

Steps have been taken in recent years to ensure that women’s leadership is not limited to home and family responsibilities anymore. The introduction of domestic violence legislation in 2004 and 2007, women no longer had to report their cases to police. But the battle is far from over. The Domestic Violence Act of 2010 recognizesitate domestic violence, thus entitling victims to protection orders and the removal of people. With the signing of the Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention) in 2013, Switzerland confirmed its intention to prevent violence, protect victims and prevent perpetration. Violence in intimate relationships remains a severe challenge, however, with more than 7,000 offenses reported by police in 2013. It is estimated that real numbers are much higher, with 25-44% of all women experiencing violence in intimate-relationships. This causes tangible public costs of CHF 144 million or 287 per year per police and judiciary, loss of productivity and support services.

Finally, Switzerland has intensified its foreign engagement promoting sexual and reproductive health and rights and women’s bodily autonomy—long-time conflict of the women’s movement. Nearly 75% of those who voted in the public referendum accepted the right to legal abortion in the first 12 weeks of pregnancy.

An important shift has also started in the public perception of *domestic violence*—from a private matter to a public one. After the introduction of new domestic violence legislation in 2004 and 2007, women no longer had to report their violent experiences to police. But the battle is far from over. The Domestic Violence Act of 2010 recognizes domestic violence, thus entitling victims to protection orders and the removal of perpetrators. The Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention) in 2013, Switzerland confirmed its intention to prevent violence, protect victims and prevent perpetration. Violence in intimate relationships remains a severe challenge, however, with more than 7,000 offenses reported by police in 2013. It is estimated that real numbers are much higher, with 25-44% of all women experiencing violence in intimate-relationships. This causes tangible public costs of CHF 144 million or 287 per year per police and judiciary, loss of productivity and support services.

Further action is needed

Twenty years after Beijing, the claims of the Platform for Action have lost none of their visionary power or necessity. The facts and figures described above show both that much has been achieved in Switzerland, and that many challenges remain to full achievement of the commitments made in Beijing.

While Beijing there were many factors that were more or less powerful for promoting gender equality, the historical and political context changed later on. The stagnation of women’s increase in political decision making went together with the strengthening of Right-wing parties (with low representation of women). Specialized agencies for promoting gender equality faced growing pressure and cuts in resources; some even had to close. In international comparison, Switzerland today is characterized by the absence of the state in family and equality policies—this is heavily criticized by the UNDP. What is left is individual responsibility, and the quality of the solutions and arrangements often depend on income and social status.

The participative review process of the Swiss Action Plan in 2014 identified the following areas for further action:

- Switzerland needs a national programme on promoting gender equality engaging all stakeholders, including government on all levels and civil society. This programme must be rooted in human rights standards and equipped with adequate and sustainable financial and human resources.
- As a basis for all action, more gender-specific research as well as research with a gender perspective is necessary. Monitoring of progress needs to be based on sex-disaggregated data and a robust accountability system.
- In order to tackle the root causes of gender inequality, including gender stereotypes, education is key. Parents, teachers, parents, pre-school staff and training staff should play a key role in gender-just education and change in gender-typical career choices.
- The labour market must promote economic independence of women and men. The main issues here are decent work, fighting wage discrimination and promoting the reconciliation of employment with care duties.
- The social security system also needs to adjust to changed realities and biographies. Better social protection of care work, actions against wrong incentives, individual taxation and special measures to absorb the risk of poverty are needed. Special attention must be paid to multi-sectoral and intersecting forms of discrimination.
- Health and life with gender equality need to be placed at the centre of gender equality activities.
- The fight against gender-based violence, and to support and protect victims, must continue and intensify.
- Action is also needed to ensure full and equal participation and leadership of women in decision making at all levels and in the public as well as economic or political sphere.
- Finally yet importantly, Switzerland needs to extend its foreign engagement promoting gender equality, both in multilateral and bilateral forums. Examples include the adoption of a gender mainstreaming policy in development cooperation, and the elaboration of a national action plan on women, peace and security. With respect to the post-2015 development agenda, Switzerland advocates for a stand-alone goal as well as cross-cutting integration of gender-sensitive targets and indicators in other goals.

**REFERENCES**

1. The Swiss Action Plan, its elaboration and implementation as well as the Beijing+20 report—ona website of the Swiss Gender Equality Office (in German and French).

**FOOTNOTE**

1. The authors’ Conclusions, Beijing+20 Regional Review Meeting of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, 6-7 November 2014, Geneva.

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1. The Swiss Action Plan, its elaboration and implementation as well as the Beijing+20 report—ona website of the Swiss Gender Equality Office (in German and French).
Swiss data and statistics cited in this article can be found on the website of the Federal Office for Statistics.

Information on the 59th session of the Commission on the Status of Women on Beijing+20, together with information on the Regional Review Meetings and the national and regional review reports on Beijing+20, can be found on the CSW website.

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