2002 brought an important milestone concerning children living with them face severe challenges and increased risk of poverty in case of separation and divorce. Two partners in case of divorce, and furthermore, credits can be granted for (non-remunerated) care-giving. However, due to the still rigid structures of the social and economic setting as well as remaining legal inequalities, women and the women’s equal representation in political decision making as a key to tackle 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 parliamentarians in Switzerland; at the national level the proportion is closer to one in five.

Reconciling family responsibilities and employment outside the home 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 acceptance has 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 costs for public 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 demographics shifts coupled with public pension systems increasingly put on this 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 field 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 paid at market rates.

Important steps have been taken in regard to social security. Improvements have enabled the economic situation of (care-)giving women, who can now receive individual retirement pensions. The retirement pension balance can be split between the two partners in case of divorce; and furthermore, credits can be granted for (non-remunerated) caregiving. However, due to the still rigid structures of the social and economic setting as well as remaining legal inequalities, women and the children of families remain challenged and increased risk of poverty in case of separation and divorce. 2002 brought an important milestone concerning sexual and reproductive health and rights and women’s bodily autonomy—a long-term central claim of the women’s movement. Nearby 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 been achieved 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 violence alone and their home was now safe. Rather, they were encouraged to speak up (and call their local police). The criminal law is now explicitly linked to gender identity and violence. 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 punish perpetrators. Violence in intimate relationships remains a severe challenge, however, with more than 7,000 offences registered by police in 2013. It is estimated that real numbers are much higher, with 20-40% of all women experiencing violence in intimate relationships. This causes tangible public costs of CHF 146 million to 287 million per year for the Swiss cantons.

This means both strengthening gender mainstreaming policies in foreign policy and in international cooperation, and also promoting specialized and gender-specific activities and programmes to target root causes of discrimination. Therein the aspect of care-work needs to be considered and addressed as a core structural challenge.

Footnote


References

The Swiss Action Plan, its evaluation as well as the Beijing+20 report—and a wealth of other information on gender equality in Switzerland—can be found on the 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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