

GENDER ISSUES IN REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT: A “NEW” APPROACH OR JUST CHANGING THE PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Basically gender issues in regional development are manifold and should be taken into account in all actions. The question is how to implement the cross-sectional matter of gender mainstreaming in regional development projects and decision making as gender mainstreaming is a strategy and there is no universal recipe for implementation.

1. Introduction

In 1999 the European Union declared with the treaty of Amsterdam gender mainstreaming as a main goal of their politics. Furthermore this cross-sectional matter was implemented in the structural funds for regional development (ERDF) – a major field for financing projects in all fields of regional development. Endogenous regional development includes also the gender perspective by definition. But history showed that taking into account the gender perspectives in regional development practice is far off mainstream. Women’s contribution to regional development is significant, but they are a minority in decision-making and planning so their influence is limited.

Achieving equality for women and men in regional development will take some effort. The society should continue to initiate activities to empower women to become active in the socio-economic development (e. g. by participation, projects, expertise and assistance). Some projects in Austria showed how gender mainstreaming works in practice for example a project manager for gender mainstreaming in the Lungau or the project “GEKO – gender sensible cooperation” in the EUREGIO Weinviertel-South Moravia-West Slovakia. A sustained effort by all actors in all fields to integrate equal opportunities into regional development will bring major benefits not only to lives of individual women, men and children, but also to the viability and sustainability of local economies and communities throughout Europe.

2. Background

The first step to a better understanding of gender issues in planning is to look at the present situation of women and men in regional development in Austria as well as the basic concept of the European Union to promote gender mainstreaming in their politics.

Women in poorly developed regions – a multifunctional role

The situation of women in poorly developed regions is not longer only affected by agriculture. Influenced by structural changes, the enforcement of the labour market in rural areas and the technological modernisation lead to a migration from the remote regions to

cities in general. This development has consequences especially on women. But rural women are not a homogenous group. Their needs and interests differ and they have different roles and occupations on farms and in family business. Therefore these economic and social changes do not affect all women in the same way: offering opportunities to some, to others they bring difficult challenges.

Inequality still prevails in many societies because of women's diverse activities, including their responsibilities for the home and children, stereotyped ways of thinking, restrict living, working and learning conditions for women. Therefore the role of women in poorly developed regions is related to socio-cultural, infrastructural and economic conditions.

As a fact of that women extremely depend on the local labour market. The infrastructural conditions are as follows: division of domestic work, supply of child care, the regional distances and the quality of the local labour market. Unemployment rates are generally high in most poorly developed regions and are often higher for women than for men. These figures, anyway, do not reveal the full number of women seeking work, but only those who are registered unemployed. Many women who have no right to benefits, or who do not register because there are no job opportunities, fall outside the statistics.

The "typical" women's work like for example assistance in family enterprises, community services, child care, domestic household, service for the elderly and the sick, etc. are often done in the background and not paid or even notified by the society. One part of women's multifunctional role that the society in general and women themselves have greatly undervalued and often completely ignored is the role of women in maintaining and consolidating the living countryside with its heritage and traditions. As a fact of that women are still not or too less involved into the regional development and its strategies.

Women are still seeking a better balance in the division of labour in the domestic household, need encouragement for their personal and professional development and more support in their bid to achieve financial independence and to participate fully in decision-making.

Women active in regional development

Women's contribution to the regional development is significant, but they are a minority in decision-making and planning. A frequently given reason for women not being more involved is a lack of spare time. Therefore every effort should be made to eradicate obstacles and ensure their participation. So it may be necessary to provide transport and childcare facilities, and men may need to encourage taking more responsibilities for family tasks.

Information about the respective roles and tasks and, thus, the different needs and priorities of rural women and men are an important part of the development process. Yet too often this kind of information is not available to planners and decision-makers.

From their traditional role women are family oriented. They only take part in special fields of the public life. As a fact of that they often are not integrated or take part in the decision making process of their communities or regions. Public life in rural areas is still traditional dominated by men like the community politic or clubs, regular's tables, festivities and many more. On the one hand men are very well organised and anchored into the structures and on the other hand women still are not organised probably. Therefore it's much easier for men to protect their interests and to participate in the decision making process.

The female point of view does not exist in the traditional decision-making process, caused by the absence in the public life. Therefore a better balance between women and men has to be achieved in making decisions that affect the life and economy of rural society, through the

active encouragement and involvement of women's associations and networks and the promotion of women in planning and managerial positions.

Especially local and regional authorities as well as development organisations and associations can actively encourage and support women in planning and decision-making.

With an eye to gender mainstreaming special steps could be taken:

- Establishment of associations and networks of rural women;
- Involvement of existing women's associations in committees and partnerships;
- Encouraging women's groups to apply for funding for development initiatives;
- Enhancing gender mainstreaming projects in regional organisations;
- Information for women's associations and networks about rural development programmes and projects.

European Community support – equality, a guiding principle

Gender mainstreaming is the current international approach to advance gender equality and equity in society. Gender equality is the opposite of gender inequality, not of gender difference. It is a concrete strategy, aimed to achieve equal opportunities. This implies that the differing circumstances and needs of women and men in all instances are taken into account. As a fact of that the gender perspective needs to be included into all policies, plans, programmes and projects. The advantage of the gender mainstreaming approach is that it allows for the advancement of gender equality and equity regardless of whether it is women or men who are disadvantaged and whose position needs to be addressed. Historically men are in more advantageous positions, especially in rural areas. Until these inequalities remains, women need to be the target group of support. In some regions and sectors, according to the gender mainstreaming approach, the disadvantaged people might be men.

Gender Mainstreaming started to get a worldwide political topic in the mid 90ies at the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995). In 1999 the European Union declared with the treaty of Amsterdam gender mainstreaming as a main goal of their politics. Therefore equality between women and men is incorporated into all Community policies and programmes. It provides a strong legal base and incentive for all Member States and the European institutions to further strengthen attention to equal opportunities issues.

As a fact of that this goal was also implemented in the structural funds for regional development. Besides that, most national governments in Europe developed on the federal as well as on the regional level top-down strategies to implement gender mainstreaming into politics and administration. These attempts started in Austria in the mid 90ies. Still especially in the poorly developed regions the situation has not really changed (f. e. only 2,5% of the majors on the local level in Austria are women¹).

As already mentioned women have always played an important role in rural development and agriculture. To maximise human resources in maintaining the social fabric of rural communities and revitalising local economies, the full involvement of women is vital. In some regions of Europe, economic recession and cutbacks in public services have led to further rural decline, remoteness and poor infrastructure. Young people, and above all young women, migrate to the towns and cities in increasing numbers.

Ensuring that women and men have the equality of opportunities is one priority of the European Union. As a fact of that gender mainstreaming must be systematically integrated in

¹ Source: "Kommunal", Nr. 4, April 2004, P. 30ff.

the design and implementation of rural development programs and projects, just to ensure that women and men can participate and benefit on equal terms. Integration of equal opportunities is no longer a choice, but an obligation to receive Community support for rural development in future. The member states of the European Union have to ensure that all the supported programmes contribute to greater equality, particularly in employment, enterprise, education and training, and the reconciliation of professional and family life.

European Union programmes have already provided significant backing to developments in rural areas that have benefited women. For example the LEADER initiatives have helped many women to develop activities in the fields of tourism, crafts and regional products. The European Social and Regional Development Funds have been used for co-financing training and economic development initiatives.

The principle of “mainstreaming”, which consists of taking systematic account of the differences between the conditions, situations and needs of women and men, is applied in all European Community policies and actions. This has important and immediate implications on regional development and projects, particularly on those financed through the Structural Funds, the European Agricultural Guidance and Guarantee Fund and Community Initiatives.

There is a strong synergy between the objectives of equal opportunities and Communities support for regional and rural development. The community initiatives 2000 to 2006 supporting equal opportunities and regional development are for example INTERREG, EQUAL and LEADER+.

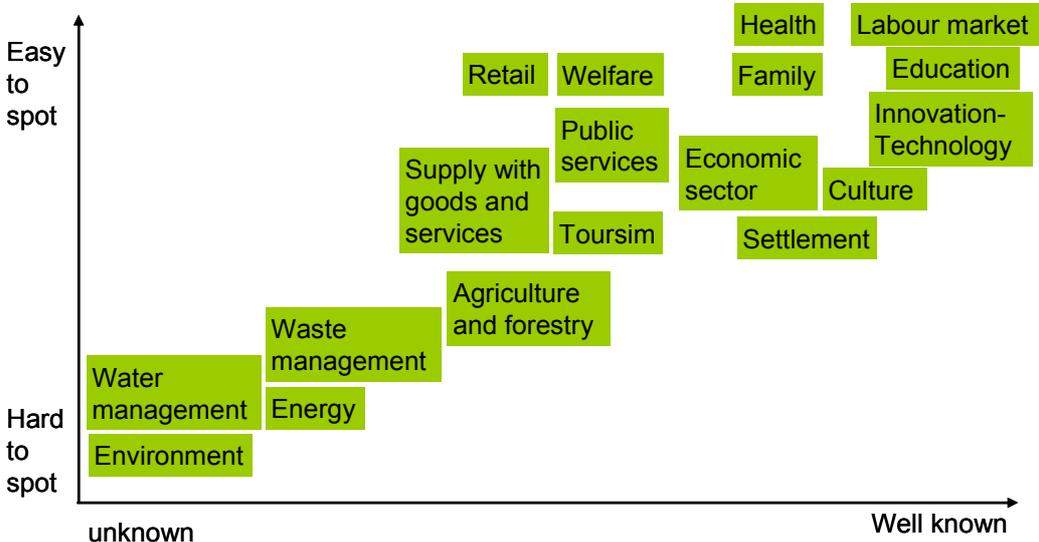
3. Implementation and fields of intervention of gender issues in region planning

Gender issues in planning intend to add a different perspective to the planning process. A perspective that reflects the different social roles of women and men. Gender planning asks:

- Who is concerned?
- What are the different needs of women and men?
- Which targets and measures ensure equal rights?

Basically gender issues in regional development are manifold and should be taken into account in all actions. Of course some fields of interventions are easy to spot and very well analyzed like the labour market, education or settlements. But also in the case of environment, water and waste management inequalities can occur.

Figure 1: Fields of intervention



The question is how to implement the cross-sectional matter of gender mainstreaming in regional development projects and decision making as gender mainstreaming is a strategy and there is no universal recipe for implementation. The principle of “mainstreaming”, which consists of taking systematic account of the differences between the conditions, situations and needs of women and men, needs to be applied in all policies and actions.

As a basic guideline a gender check needs to be done for all programmes, project proposals and concepts. To get a rough overview on how gender issues are integrated in the document check phrases (men, women, gender, equality, ...). The data in the analysis should normally include gender data – this could still be challenge, because especially on the local and regional level this data is still not available. Gender perspective should be included into and be an integrative part of the strategy and goals. To secure the implementation measurable indicators need to be set. The gender perspective in measures and actions should be visible and inherent part of the evaluation. Basically this should encounter no difficulties in implementation, but the challenges, barriers and needs in practice are various as experience showed. In Austria the following major problems occur by implementing the gender mainstreaming strategy in regional development especially in poorly developed regions:

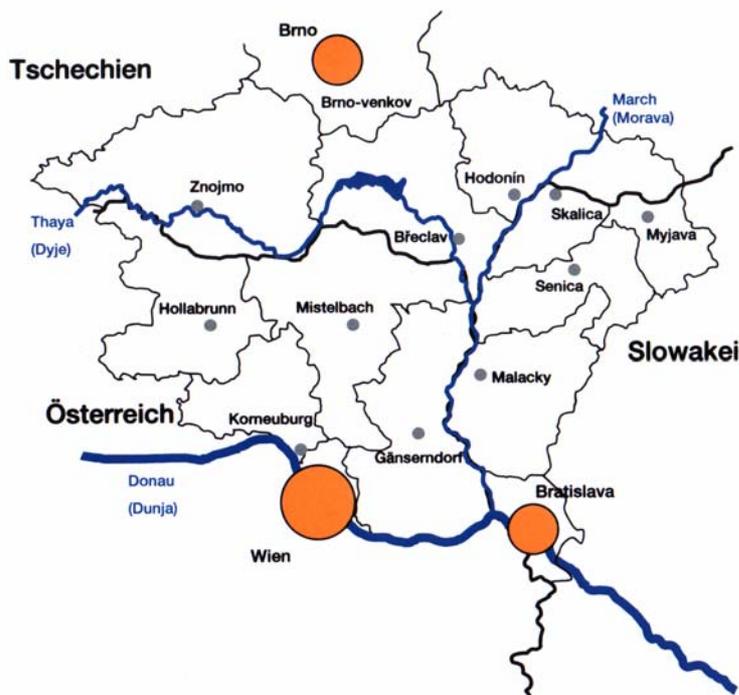
- How to sell the topic: The strategy of gender mainstreaming is difficult to communicate especially in poorly developed regions. The obstacles are various like f. e. there is no appropriate translation into German, it's still identified as a feminist topic, everybody heard about it without knowing the details. Dealing with this topic in poorly developed regions needs careful information strategies.
- Unused development potential “women”: Women's contribution to the regional development is significant, but they are a minority in decision-making and planning. As the global competition for regions becomes tighter the regions need all resources for a successful development. By using the knowledge, multi-skills and workforce of women for regional development the living conditions will be improved.
- Top down versus bottom up: Poorly developed regions in Austria strongly rely on the concept of endogenous regional development, which grounds on bottom up processes. To ensure sustainability the top down strategy gender mainstreaming must be anchored in regional bottom up processes.
- Decision makers and regional politics: Public life in poorly developed regions is traditionally dominated by men like the community politic or clubs, regular's tables, festivities and many more. So still it's much easier for men to protect their interests and to participate in the decision making process even if they spent less time in the region than women. The role of women in regional politics needs to be strengthened.
- Topics, topics, topics: Gender mainstreaming needs to be an important cross-sectional matter in every regional development project. Presently the knowledge about the surplus for projects is far off mainstream. By connecting with all topics in regional development gender mainstreaming can easily positioned.
- Finally it's all about money: Currently a lot of public money is spend on gender mainstreaming projects more on the federal than on the regional and local level. Special funds for projects supporting equal opportunities would contribute to sustainable regional development.

4. Good practice examples

Project GEKO – “gender sensible cross border cooperation”

To involve women in regional development is an effective investment in human resources of every region. During the last years gender mainstreaming became a popular issue in regional development. As a fact of that and to change the situation along the borders to the Czech Republic and Slovakia the Weinviertel-South Moravia-West Slovakia developed a project dealing with the “gender sensible cross-border cooperation - GEKO” funded by the provincial government of Lower Austria and co-financed by the INTERREG IIIA programme.

Figure 2: The EUREGIO Weinviertel-South Moravia-West Slovakia



Source: mecca environmental consulting

The primary aim of the GEKO project was to implement gender mainstreaming in the EUREGIO Weinviertel-South Moravia-West Slovakia. Following measures were taken:

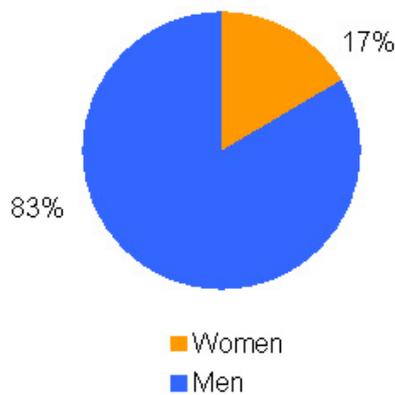
- To teach the regional stakeholders and population as well as politicians about gender mainstreaming and its goals by mentally preparing the people for gender equality and equity and strengthening the knowledge about inequalities. So an important impulse for sustainable development of the EUREGIO is set. In the long run the rural society shall change and women should be well visible in the public life.
- To develop a “gender sensible” organisation structure for the EUREGIO Weinviertel-South Moravia-West Slovakia: The aims are to formulate a gender mainstreaming goal for the organisation first and to change the, at the moment 100% male dominated, executive committee in the long run. The involvement of women into the decision-making of the EUREGIO Weinviertel-South Moravia-West Slovakia is an important milestone for the region to make women visible and use this resource in regional development.
- To evolve strategies for future development of the EUREGIO taking into account the cross section of gender mainstreaming: For the sustainability of the GEKO project a gender mainstreaming expert should be employed within the EUREGIO. Beside that some

impulses for the cross-border funding programs – on the federal as well as on the regional and local level – were composed.

- To develop Key-Projects like a cross border network for women active in local politics or a training course for consultants as examples for putting gender mainstreaming into practice in the region, because one basic obstacle of gender mainstreaming is that it seems to be very theoretical. Within the project a guideline for project initiators was developed. This guideline asks some basic questions to make the project initiators aware of the gender perspective in cross-border projects. Beside that there is an offer for a gender expertise free of charge.

To change the structures especially on the community level needs a lot of time and commitment. Especially in the Weinviertel women are not visible on the political arena. Only 2% of the mayors are female, in the whole EUREGIO the percentage raises to 17%. So there is just a little chance for the project GEKO to change the decision-making on the political level in the short term or even mid term.

Figure 3: Mayors in the EUREGIO Weinviertel-South Moravia-West Slovakia



Source: http://volby.statistics.sk/vs2002/en/tab/tab12_.jsp (26.07.2004), <http://www.volby.cz/pls/kv2002-win/kv12?xjazyk=EN&xId=0> (26.07.2004), Amt der Niederösterreichischen Landesregierung (28.06.2004)

Another possibility to strengthen gender mainstreaming in cross border cooperation is the introduction of gender mainstreaming experts on different levels, in correlation with the top down strategy of gender mainstreaming starting with the federal level, where they are already very well established, going down from the country level to the regional level in connection with the well established regional managements (as for example in the country upper Austria). The expert's impacts secure the assessment of gender mainstreaming on projects and regional development strategies on all levels. With the gender mainstreaming expertise not only the transnational co-operation will benefit, furthermore the experts can also set important impulses for the regional development. One result of GEKO is a project proposal to instruct people dealing with cross-border programs in the border region and furthermore to consult project initiators by giving the gender perspective to project proposals.

Project manager for equal opportunities in the Lungau

The Lungau is the smallest district in the south of Salzburg. Women earn about 40 percent less than men. Only 46 percent of the mothers are employed – child care is in short supply. Most of the well educated women leave the Lungau. Among the 15 mayors in the region is no

woman. This was the starting point to implement a project manager for equal opportunities in the regional development agency in 2002 based on a part time job. Partly financed by the provincial government of Salzburg, the European Union and the communities itself the goals to achieve were:

- Improvement of the child care facilities
- Equal opportunities promotion
- Education for women
- Cooperation and networking

The strategy to improve to situation was based on analysis and creation of awareness in the first step. Always keeping in mind the gender sensible perspective and involving the existing networks into the project work. Out of this strategy a lot of projects developed like training in politics, women' network, several child care offers like business kindergarten and seminars. The project manager has been working for four years rather successfully in regional development with well developed structures and contacts.

5. Conclusions and the way forward

Nevertheless there are already good practice examples there should be done more to fully recognise women's role in communities – legally, economically, technically and in statistics. Women's local knowledge and social interaction should be integrated in regional development strategies and teaching concepts. Their self-esteem as productive actors in rural development has to be recognised in extension. An essential goal for the empowerment of women is their equal share in all spheres of production and reproduction, resource control, knowledge and decision making. Gender sensible and specific further education remains a focal issue in poorly developed regions. All these changes need a lot of time as the traditional role models of women and men in the society need to be changed.

As experience showed a crucial factor for the implementation are the experts active in consulting regional projects. These information multipliers need to be trained and convinced that gender issues bring an added value to regional development.

Beside that, it's a must to strengthen the gender mainstreaming approach in the upcoming programs 2007-2013 by the European Union for territorial cohesion. The main goal is to develop a multi level strategy starting with the programs itself down to each single project. The main task is to raise the quality of regional development projects in general by improving the equal opportunities.

Concluding the integration of gender issues in regional development is no new approach in planning, but nevertheless it changed the perspective of regional development policies in Austria. To ensure a "more" endogenous regional development planners as well as decision-makers need to observe the different needs and expectations of people and to secure equality in all their concepts and policies.

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