

Women in modern Societies: from peripheries to center, Θεσσαλονίκη (στα αγγλικά)

UNESCO CENTER FOR WOMEN AND PEACE IN
THE BALKAN COUNTRIES *Program "Social
Development" "The role of the women in the
beginning of 21th century"* WOMEN IN
MODERN SOCIETIES FROM PERIPHERIES TO
CENTER RIGHTS, RESPONSIBILITIES,
PARTICIPATION, EMPOWERMENT

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In the beginning of the 21st century, women are faced with a number of challenges. There is an apparent need to explore new ways of settling differences, create a more humane society, protect the environment and make an effort for a fairer distribution of power and resources, that is, to identify a new political culture. It is becoming obvious that no problems of our times can ever be adequately solved without the contribution, the ideas and the political participation of women.

The socioeconomic conditions having prevailed over the centuries and the different spheres that the two sexes have found themselves – men in the public sphere and women in the private one – resulted in the development of two separate worlds with different value-systems. There are, therefore, two different cultures based upon different value-systems. Women, as a whole, are historically associated with non-violence; their value-system is associated with dialogue, compromise, reconciliation and settling-up of

differences by peaceful means. This value-system can hopefully provide an alternative to the current culture of violence, whilst at the same time it can help the development of a new political culture, that of peace, co-operation and respect for differences. It is estimated that if the politics adopted women's values, there would be more social solidarity amongst people and nations, there would be no bloodshed wars and conflicts due to religious fanaticism and extreme nationalism; additionally, there would be more awareness about social issues related to quality of life such as protection of the environment, social policy and welfare, health care, education, and combating of drug-use.

Examining women's role in the 21st century, we have to consider the new environment created by the rapid technological change, the widening application of information and communication technologies. Women's role can be profound in this context. Concerns regarding the impact of ITCs are twofold: the first has to do with employment, that is whether these technologies actually destroy more jobs than they create; the second has to do with democracy and equality, that is whether the complexity of these technologies will widen the gap between developed and less developed areas, between the rich and the poor, men and women and between the young and the old. To meet these concerns we need public policies which can help us reap the benefits of technological progress and achieve a fair distribution of the potential for prosperity. Information Society should be *about* people and should be used *for* people and by people to unlock the power of information, not to create inequalities between the information rich and the information poor. Considering women's sensitivity and awareness to social issues, most possibly in their hands, Information Society can become a tool for the creation of an inclusive society.

One of the most important consequences of the new technological progress is, undoubtedly, the phenomenon of globalization and by extension the trade liberalization. Available evidence indicates that the ongoing process of trade liberalization combined with the overall impact of the processes of globalisation are increasing economic inequalities between countries as well as between different economic groups within countries, between men and women and among women as they form part of the differently privileged economic groups.

The gender dimension of trade liberalisation shows both positive and negative affects. It is a fact that trade liberalisation has opened up new opportunities especially for educated and younger women with professional skills in developed countries and has led to access to new, better paying employment and opportunities previously unavailable to women. The impact of trade expansion on women's economic activity has wider human and developmental benefits. It gives women greater control of income, although not always absolute individual control. Women's tend to have more family oriented expenditures patterns than men, so that an improvement in women's income-earning capability has lead to greater investment in the human capital of children, in their education possibilities and their livelihoods.

But all that glitters is not gold. The processes of structural change to the global economy also carry with them new risks.

a. One of the main factors that threaten the progress of women is **poverty**. A prominent characteristic of women in poverty is social and economic inequality leading to greater vulnerability to the risk of being marginalised and further impoverished in times of economic upheaval.

The Beijing Platform for action refers to the phenomenon of "feminisation of poverty" declaring that

- – Women's poverty-income is more severe than men's poverty-income.
- – Over time, the incidence of income poverty among women is increasing compared to that among men.

The international community has already agreed that poverty is a problem in North and South and that its eradication requires democratic participation and changes in economic structures in order to ensure more equitable distribution of wealth. In addition women often do not have the same access as men to education, training, credit, technology and information, which are necessary to take advantage of new economic opportunities arising from trade liberalisation. In order to favor women's full integration in the global economy is necessary 1. To promote legislative and administrative reforms to give women equal rights with men to economic resources, including access to ownership control over land, other forms of ownership, access to the information and communications technologies, access to savings and credit mechanisms and institutions; 2. To adopt and maintain macro-economic policies and development strategies that addresses the needs of women in poverty.

b. Women are particularly affected by unemployment and under employment together with many forms of discriminations in the labour market. Trade might increase women's access to labour market, but women in most developing countries are staying locked in at relatively low levels of pay and skills. Women are over-represented in the work places where conditions are poor and wages are low and under represented in managing and decision – making positions. For other women liberalised trade can

mean loss of labour rights: such as social benefits and the right to organise; given that women tend to be concentrated in low-wage industries their relative power also tends to be low. For women it is difficult to separate their rights as workers from their rights as equal citizens. Very little will be achieved by ending discrimination at work if women are denied the right to education; or by bringing about equal pay if women do not have the right to control their earnings.

- – In the EU as a whole, women doing the same work as a man are paid only 76% of the gross hourly wage men earn
- – The employment rate for women is 51,2%, compared to 70,8% for men
- – 83% of part-time workers in the EU are women. (Eurostat, 1998/99)

The EU's mandate is to mainstream gender equality in employment policies however, this requires effective tools to implement this principle, such as the use of specific indicators, increased use of benchmarking and improved gender diseggregated statistic. Social development must also be a crucial cornerstone of trade policy. The EU, the international organisations and the governments to act to eliminate pay discriminations, and reinforce legislation on this field.

In addition, Commissioner for Employment and Social Affairs Anna Diamantopoulou, speaking before informal Council of Ministers meeting, in the beginning of 2001, challenged Member States to enforce rules on equal pay and conditions for men and women in Europe or to risk equality rules becoming a dead letter. She appealed to Member States to "gender-comb" their tax and social security systems in order to break down disincentives to full participation of women in the jobs market.. She added "Gender equality in tax and social security systems is also

essential for the sustainability of the systems in the future. To adapt what J.F. Kennedy said, don't ask what social protection systems can do for women. Imagine what women can do for social protection systems if they participate fully in the labour market".