

Austerity promotes gender hierarchies ^[1]

Author: Michalitsch, Gabriele

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EXCERPTS:

Neoliberal restructuring and the economic crisis have led to increasing inequality, social polarisation and societal disintegration. That austerity politics fosters these developments is widely acknowledged. Its gender effects, however, are mostly neglected, though, in contrast to the public rhetoric of equal opportunities and gender mainstreaming, gender inequality is rising. This contribution, therefore, focuses on the impact of austerity on gender relations.

1. Privatisation

During the last decade, neoliberal policies led to a transfer of state activities to the private sectors of markets and households. Processes of privatisation hence are not limited to a change of property from public to privately owned enterprises, but refer to a wide range of policies substituting public by private responsibility - austerity is one of them. Postulating equal opportunities and self-reliance, state activities are increasingly restricted to "key issues", while societal contradictions are reinterpreted as "individual" issues beyond the public realm. Privatisation thus means a redefinition of the public and the private, characterised by narrowing the political sphere as the realm of democratic negotiation and control: The political is privatised.

In the context of crisis and tight budgets, gender hierarchies are increasingly redefined as individual arrangements, structural discriminations as individualised disadvantages and feminism and emancipatory gender policies as 'luxuries'. As a result, not only do many women's anti-sexism projects face partial or total cuts to their subsidies, a wide range of austerity measures foster gender hierarchies.

2. Welfare benefits

Austerity politics implies prolonging last decades' welfare cut-backs. Since men receive about two thirds of labour income and control more than 95 % of private wealth (and wealth-based incomes) in the European Union, women are economically much weaker and rely much more on welfare benefits than men. So welfare cut-backs are generally more to the disadvantage of women than men.

In particular, deregulation of the labour market led to increasingly precarious - mostly female - employment, which partially lacks integration in social insurance systems and, as such, raises first of all women's social risks. Additionally, most European welfare systems are primarily based on labour market participation. Duration of employment and the amount of income decide entitlement to and amount of transfers, like pensions or unemployment benefits. Gender inequalities in the labour market (income differences, 'atypical' jobs) are thereby reinforced by the welfare system, especially owing to measures of reform like extension of years of employment for pension entitlement, reductions of pensions in case of early retirement and increase of the retirement age. Consequently, a female pensioners' yearly mean income in Germany and Austria amount to little more than 50 percent of male pensions.

Furthermore, the reorganization of retirement based on a "three-column-model", which combines public, private and firm provisions, leads to further inequalities and polarization among the elderly, since access to costly private provision is limited by women's generally low income levels, whereas firms' pension provisions are mostly restricted to predominantly male full-time employees. As a consequence, gender disparities and the feminisation of poverty increase.

3. Public services

Austerity politics also implies cut-backs - or at least lack of extension despite growing demand - of public services like child care or care for the elderly. Due to high costs and partly limited availability (e. g. care for children below the age of three) in most EU member states, market supply plays only a marginal role in this context. Consequently, care-work is either transferred to the informal sector of the economy, which implies an increase of mostly female low wage labour without social security, or, mostly, to the private household, thus increasing primarily women's unpaid work. Together with prevailing gender stereotypes in society and gender-specific income differentials in the labour market, this leads to a renewal of the female ascription of family work and thereby to the re-traditionalisation of gender relations.

Austerity hence preserves private care activities and increase pressure on the unpaid care economy, thereby reducing women's opportunities to participate in the labour force, herewith reinforcing gender segmentation of the labour market and increasing economic gender inequalities. Lack of economic independence of women, feminisation of poverty and polarisation between men and women as well as between women from different social classes are the results of these developments.

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