



Berlin one day special lower price ticket to highlight women's low pay

The persistence of women's inequality in the EU

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Equality between men and women was enshrined in the founding treaties of the European Union. Gender equality was the subject of over 15 directives and sometimes a stated objective for EU funding. Yet, for all this, discrimination against women stubbornly persists.

Across the member states, on 2018 figures, women's gross hourly earnings are 16.2% below those of men on average. This has changed very little over the past 10 years.

Women's life-long earnings in the member states paint a worse picture. They are on average almost 40% lower than men's, and their pensions likewise.¹

The EU Gender Equality Index 2005–2017 shows that women are still second-class citizens and that occupational segregation in the labour market results in women's work being undervalued and underpaid.² Women's support services are under threat in many

countries due to severe funding cuts.

The same index reports that one in three women in the EU (some 62 million women) have experienced physical and/or sexual violence since the age of 15.³ Most European countries still do not recognise in law that sex without consent is rape. In April 2018, protests broke out in Pamplona in Spain after five men accused of the gang rape of a woman were found guilty of a lesser charge of sexual abuse, despite the court finding that the woman had not consented to sex.⁴ Injustices around sex crimes have been met with an outpouring of #metoo protests in France, Italy, Ireland, Sweden and Spain. In the European Parliament itself, employees, faced with no mechanisms for swiftly dealing with sexual harassment cases, have been forced to set up their own #metoo website.

In some EU countries, abortion rights are under attack or still being denied. In Italy, seven out of 10

physicians have conscientious objections to performing abortions, making abortion inaccessible for many women. In Poland, anti-abortionists have been on the offensive; women's rights organisations have had their offices raided by the government, who have attempted to smear pro-choice women as 'dangerous to families'.

Ireland, having won the right to abortion last year, bucks the trend. But we should remember that membership of the EU played no part in this gain. The EU lived happily with the special 'protocol' to the Maastricht Treaty which allowed Ireland to keep abortion illegal for nearly 30 years. Similarly, Croatia, Slovenia or Poland today are not harried by the EU to change their harsh abortion laws.

In a further disturbing development within the core countries of the EU, there is a far-right backlash against women's rights. Its agenda, like Trump's in the US, combines opposition to marriage equality and abortion rights with racism and Islamophobia.

In Spain, the far-right party Vox has demanded an end to public funding of abortions and the scrapping of laws protecting women from gender violence and has railed against 'feminazis'. Vox proposes no longer taking in Syrian refugees. It won 12 seats in regional elections in Andalusia last year and, in the recent general election, won 10% of the vote nationally and 24 seats in the parliament. In Italy, the ruling far-right party, the League (formerly the Lega Nord), declares that women should return to their 'natural' role as mothers and, in a rehashed refrain from Mussolini, that Italian women should produce more children for the nation. In Germany in February last year, the far-right Alternative für Deutschland party organised a march 'to protect women against Muslim men'.

Gender equality may be one of the European Union's founding values, but inequality and discrimination have continued. Amid the interminable Brexit debate, in which most Irish mainstream politicians seem to take for granted the EU's benevolence, the EU's record on gender has been lost. Yet the EU is responsible for women's rights losing ground.

'Labour activation'

The EU has not erased gender discrimination because the former follows the principles of capitalist competition, not those of social equality. Official EU economic policy,

copper-fastened in the Lisbon Treaty and rigorously implemented since, is to keep government spending down, reduce the size of the state, cut sovereign debt to revive profitability and cut the costs of taxation and welfare. This has allowed gender discrimination to persist.

The goal of EU employment policy has been economic 'efficiency', including reducing 'labour force inactivity' (unemployment) by any means possible. Part of this objective is to draw women into the labour market, while at the same time disallowing extra state spending for the social services needed for women to take on paid work. The Lisbon Process at the beginning of the 2000s set 60% as the target of women's paid employment (and men's at 70%) by 2010. 'Labour activation' notched up increases in employment, with the EU employment rate for women rising in 2016 to 64.3% (compared to 75.9% for men).⁵ But the increase occurred mainly through more part-time and flexible contracts. The rise in women's employment in an increasingly deregulated labour market – and with no compensatory state supports – meets the political and economic needs of states and corporations, not those of the millions of women who work in it.

EU-led policy in Ireland follows the same logic. A recent document from the EU on women's equality in Ireland, while noting the extent of female discrimination and under representation, has as its overarching aim the increase of female 'labour-market participation'. The headlong drive to meet labour and skill shortages is what 'labour activation' means, regardless of whether insecure contracts, lower pay and more precarity are the outcomes. Increased state spending on supports for childcare and other social services is out of the question.⁶

Indebted to the EU?

The same Brussels document grandly cites 'strong equality legislation from the EU' as conferring the right to Irish married women in public sector jobs to continue to work. The 1973 legislation, which lifted the marriage bar, is often seen as a watershed moment for Irish women, a progressive EU intervention which broke with the legacy of Catholic conservatism. This is misleading. The move was a significant gain for women in civil service jobs, but it followed the lifting of the

marriage bar for women primary teachers, which had occurred in 1958. Meanwhile, Article 42.1 of the Irish Constitution, which stated that Irish women should not be 'obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home', remained in the Constitution, where it is still today. Also, it is not true that, prior to the legislation, the culture of married Irish women was not to be in paid work. Many emigrants to the UK and further abroad, married or not, had always worked. Furthermore, the employment rate for women grew only slowly after the 1973 legislation. It did rise from a very low base (20%), but the substantial change occurred much later during the Celtic Tiger boom. In 2006, it reached 59.1%, a figure above the EU average, around which, even with the intervening deep recession, it has stabilised today.⁷ The 1973 legislation was one element in the uneven growth of Irish female employment, which was shaped by many factors, within as well as outside of Ireland.

Austerity impact

The interests of capital always trump those of the mass of people in the EU because its rules set caps on deficits, debt and state aid. The austerity regime imposed by the ECB-EC-IMF Troika during the Great Recession was a tragic playing out of the EU's unwavering commitment to this dogma. Cut-backs in public spending always disproportionately affect women. Women are more likely to be public sector workers (they are 69% of the sector across the EU);⁸ women are more dependent on public services; women are the main recipients of benefits, due to their parenting responsibilities and lower earnings.

Ursula Barry has shown the extent of the impact of austerity on gender equality in Eurozone countries: public sector cuts and staffing freezes (applied in nine EU countries), reductions and restrictions in caregiver supports and increased charges for publicly subsidised services (applied in eight countries), reduction of housing or family benefits (applied in six countries) and restrictions on eligibility for unemployment and assistance benefits (applied in five countries).⁹ The harmful effect on women of the slashing of public services, so systematically applied, made nonsense of the proclaimed EU policy of 'gender-mainstreaming' (a term which has now been dropped from employment



German mini jobs push women into permanent precarity

strategy documents).¹⁰ The imposition of what may come to be known as austerity cutbacks proves how society expects women to pick up the social shocks of a crisis.

In Ireland, as we know, austerity wrought havoc on women's lives. The qualifying pension age rose to 66 years, pay cuts were introduced for teachers and nurses, and there was a rise in low and zero-hours contracts in retail, hospitality and care. Ireland came to share with the US the highest percentage of low-paying jobs among OECD countries.¹¹ There were cuts to benefits, including child benefit, while women in paid work still had to put up with a childcare system that was the most expensive in Europe. Irish women had Europe's highest female homeless rate, with women accounting for a shocking 47% of the homeless in Dublin. Funding of Rape Crisis Centres and domestic violence services was cut by over 30% from 2008, even though the number of women accessing their support services increased. The measures introduced to marginally raise the minimum wage and reduce tax for the low paid did little to alter the dramatic increase in Irish poverty levels, with stay-at-home mothers and low-income earners faring the worst.¹²

Ironically, the spending cuts imposed by the EU were implemented from 2011–16 by Labour Minister Joan

Burton, who saw no contradiction between her declared support for women's rights (and for every neoliberal treaty from the EU) and her implementation of austerity cuts which hit women hardest.¹³

Childcare: Anything goes

EU reports sometimes blur the real social causes of the gender pay gap. One report claims that it is 'due to differences in the average characteristics of male and female employees'.¹⁴ Yet the figures show that childcare and domestic responsibilities are the main obstacles to women's employment prospects and earnings. Women up to the age of 25 are as likely to be in employment as men and more likely to be in education, but in the 25–34 age range, all this changes. Young mothers experience a much lower employment probability than young fathers.¹⁵

Yet EU childcare policy is opportunistic and amounts to anything goes. The 2002 Barcelona Objectives on childcare called for EU member states to provide childcare to at least 33% of children ages 0–2 by 2010. The EU average of provision still has not met that target (Ireland is at 20% of what it should be).¹⁶ But the problem goes deeper.

The Barcelona objectives rely on both 'formal' (by which are included public and private childcare 'centre-based' services) and 'informal' (care provided by family members, neighbours or non-certified child-minders) childcare provision. EU reports recognise that high childcare costs can be a disincentive to start or return to work for what is surprisingly termed a 'second earner' in a dual earning couple. Ireland, whose childcare costs represent more than 23% of family income, is singled out for mention.¹⁷ But the EU offers no overall social policy to redress this.¹⁸ For all the EU's proclaimed targets, childcare across the union should take full account of national patterns of provision' and 'different childcare traditions'.¹⁹ Acceptance of existing, often inadequate social policies of member states fits conveniently into a deregulated market framework.

EU policy certainly lauds 'affordable childcare' and a 'sustainable work-life balance'. But bound by rules which set limits on public spending, the EU does not advocate universal access to childcare (or care for the elderly) via full state provision. This leaves individuals, usually women, to either pay private agencies for this

work or share care work 'informally' among family members. Free-market orthodoxy converts childcare—which should be free and a social right – into either an expensive commodity out of the reach of many or an 'informal' arrangement that society disowns.

Reliance on the market for care services has further knock-on discriminatory effects. Paid domestic work does not fit into the official definition of care, and paid domestic workers are not recognised as equal workers. Elin Peterson points out in relation to Spain that many care workers, very often migrant workers, are forced to occupy a twilight zone as regards their rights and social citizenship. She makes the point that this restriction gives a lot more consideration to individual women who have the means to solve their own work/care dilemmas than it does to the female care workers who provide the service.²⁰

Germany: No model for working women

What happens in Germany, the powerhouse of the EU, shows the prevailing attitude to women workers. At the time of the creation of the Eurozone, Germany was liberalising its labour laws, and this became the model for other member states. This set women back and contributed to the falling living standards of the working class.

In the 1950s, the gender pay gap in Germany was between 40 and 50%. Today, it has fallen significantly but is still 21%, five points greater than the EU average. Gender inequality and discrimination, Oliver Nachtwey argues, has become an integral part of the contemporary German labour market.²¹ In March this year, Berlin's Transport system, the BVG, formally recognised this by offering for one day a 'Frauenticket' (women's ticket) which cost 21 percent less – the amount of the women's pay gap.

The traditional sexual division of labour in the home, based on the model of the male breadwinner, has only quite recently been replaced by the dual-income model in Germany. The driving force behind more women working has been economic necessity. The extra wage was needed because one breadwinner per household was no longer enough to meet needs. This pressure has forced young, migrant and women workers to accept what is benignly known as 'atypical employment'—working less than 21 hours per week, usually at lower rates of pay. This type of work was enabled by the

2002–5 Hartz programme of reforms. Women and migrant workers were now stuck in insecure, low-paid temporary jobs.

The effects of the increase in atypical employment can be seen in the statistics for work in Germany. Unemployment may have fallen and the reserve army of mainly female labour shrunk, but the total volume of work has not risen. It has actually fallen slightly on a per-capita basis.²² Between 2001 and 2016, indefinite part-time employment, mainly occupied by women, rose by 4 million while the number of full-time jobs fell by one million.²³ More women are working but for fewer hours and less money, so that, across the bottom segments of the labour market, total household income is falling.

Wages today are not enough to cover basic living expenses. More than 1.3 million Germans were working in so-called ‘top-ups’ in 2012, in ‘mini jobs’ or under conditions in which they needed welfare benefits. Since 2004, the working poor in Germany have nearly doubled. In 2014, 9.6% of all employees suffered from poverty, or living on less than 60% of the average adjusted net income. In Europe’s richest industrial country, the number of the working poor has risen more sharply than in any other EU state.²⁴

Germany is no different to other economies in late capitalism. In the US, more women have also entered the work force and, since 1999, median household incomes have fallen. Like Germany, the pay gap in the US hovers around 20%. Some women have done very well, but women make less than men over their working years and their earnings have not made up for the decline in men’s incomes for the population as a whole.²⁵ In the two major western capitalist economies, therefore, women’s pay is not compensating enough to prevent a fall in household incomes.

Karl Marx, in the mid-19th century, highlighted a similar phenomenon in the working class in industrial capitalism. He angrily noted how ‘now four times as many workers’ lives were used up as there were previously, in order to obtain the livelihood of one working family’. As he put it, ‘the more productive capital grows, the more does competition extend among the workers, [and] the more do their wages shrink together’.²⁶ Today, more and more women are working, pushed into work to meet everyday living costs, but the dual-wage household is not proportionately better off

because living costs have risen and wages fallen behind. In Germany, as elsewhere, the wage ratio, or the part of the national income allocated to wages, has shrunk over the last 30 years.²⁷

Marx also identified one section of the reserve army of labour as those people with ‘extremely irregular employment’, whose ‘conditions of life’ were below the average normal level of the working class. This provided an opportunity for ‘special branches of capitalist exploitation’.²⁸ Drawing the reserve army of women into work, and their disproportionate occupation of ‘atypical employment’, allows the implementation of a specific



Deregulation of labour; protestors demonstrate against Macron's labour law in France

form of what Nachtwey calls ‘secondary exploitation’ in which the structural discrimination against women is used in capitalism to raise levels of exploitation overall. Low pay for women workers is established through an unholy alliance of state and capital: the one by withholding provision of care services and the other by taking advantage of this situation to pay women workers less. The inter-relationship between women’s subordination and capitalism could not be clearer.

Class and gender

The debate over discrimination against women often focuses on the question of equal opportunity. As significant, though given far less attention, is social inequality between women. Not all women face

equal discrimination. More women in employment has brought greater independence and, for some in professional jobs, self-fulfilment at work. The EU makes much of equality at work, more women in management and more women on boards of directors, and the winners of equality policies are women from the upper classes. A woman manager has a much higher chance of being treated equally than does an immigrant cleaning woman or care worker. While women are indeed more equal in terms of formal rights, material inequality among women has never been as great.²⁹

For many women who work in low-paid jobs, given that few males do their jobs, equality at work is somewhat meaningless. Of all women in full-time employment, one in three earns the minimum wage. Women workers are concentrated in the service sector: in call centres, unskilled work in the food industry, cleaning and care work, as well as the retail trade. Women clustered together in these low-paid, low-skilled jobs face a collective discrimination with few chances of secure employment, never mind career progression.

While class, gender and ethnicity fuse into systemic discrimination, this is not mentioned in the mountain of official reports and documents from Brussels. This reflects the fact that those running the EU are extraordinarily unrepresentative of the people living in Europe. EU institutions are very male – only five female judges in the court of Justice out of 28 and only nine out of 28 Commissioners – but also very white. Although something like 50 million people living in the EU are of a racial and ethnic minority, only three of the 751 MEPs are black. All 28 European Commissioners are white.³⁰ Brussels' blindness to diversity is said to reflect the fact that its bureaucracy is derived from the French model, which states as illegal the collection of data on race. But it is part of the institutional racism of the EU, which has built up over many decades. It is shameful that there are no specific EU measures to advance diversity on the grounds of race, ethnicity and religion. Despite the mass of references in official EU documents to gender equality, ethnic minorities are hardly mentioned. For example, the annual Women in Parliament report has no indicators for women of colour.³¹

Workers' rights are women's rights

Gender discrimination alongside greater numbers

of women working has led to a new political climate in workplaces. Outrage at women being humiliated, treated unfairly or sexually harassed has come to the fore in recent struggles and has seen working women across the EU taking things into their own hands. Most notably, the *#metoo* campaigns have had a huge impact.

Grievances are both sex- and work-specific. Women workers in cleaning companies have highlighted not only their low pay but also how they feel that their work is ignored and undervalued by their clients and the public. Germany's first nationwide strike in the cleaning sector in 2009 was described as a 'revolt of the invisible'.³² Women workers, often precarious and in many cases immigrants, who in the past had rarely appeared in the forefront of industrial struggles, seemed no longer afraid to come forward.

In the strike against temporary contracts at Amazon's two 'fulfilment centres' in Bad Hersfeld, Germany in 2013, one of the main grievances was that people wanted to be treated with greater respect. Similarly, in the industrial conflicts in the health sector, workers have increasingly struggled for recognition of their social and economic rights and dignity. In this year's nurses strike in Ireland, for example, respect for the work that nurses do and for parity with other health professionals were the demands that united nurses – both women and migrants – in their militancy.

Gender inequality and sexism have ignited struggles in the tech sector. The 'does-no-evil' Google corporation allows men to make up 69% of its employees worldwide, and more in technology jobs.³³ In November of last year, there was a huge internationally coordinated walk-out protest against gender inequality and sexual harassment cases. The Walkout for Real Change protest came after Google had given a \$90 million severance package to a top executive and concealed details of a sexual misconduct allegation made against him. Workers at Google's European headquarters in Dublin streamed out to gather beside Google docks; Berlin Google workers gathered around the Brandenburg gate. Employees left the same flyer at their desks explaining their case and posted a list of five demands, including an end to pay and opportunity inequality as well as greater transparency about sexual harassment. In 50 cities, within and outside Europe, Google employees came out at the same time across different time zones; 24% of Google's world-wide

workforce took part. For one day, it gave a glimpse of the power of tech workers and how highly coordinated, with no union representation, their joint action could be. Women and men came out together.

Where strikes over pay have seen a decline, there has been a surge in spontaneous strikes, involving direct action, over women's rights in Poland and in Ireland during the Repeal campaign. One of the strongest was the *Huelga feminista* (feminist strike) on 8 March 2019. It was organised outside the formal labour relations framework by a coalition of more than a hundred different organisations. Workplace committees known as Workers' Commissions took part, and it was these that pressurised Spain's two largest unions – the CCOO and UGT – into calling a two-hour work stoppage. Over five million people took part nationwide, huge demonstrations took place in the major towns, and demands included inclusive sex education in schools, an end to sexist violence, an end to gender discrimination at work and support for migrant women.

These struggles share with those in the health sector and Google the adoption of new organisational forms, new demands around sexual politics and women workers leading them.

EU rules need to be broken

The National Women's Council of Ireland has produced a Feminist Manifesto for Europe which demands of candidates in the EU elections that they share a vision for a feminist EU.³⁴ As one of their demands, they rightly advocate for a budgeting framework for gender equality and investment in high-quality public services. But it avoids mentioning the EU's neoliberal policies, which have been a block to women's equality, and gives the impression that the EU is on the right path. Likewise, the NWCT's laudable appeal for funds to support women and girls who are migrants and asylum seekers fails to mention the existing institutionalised racism of the EU. Policing migrants on its borders, imprisoning migrants in refugee camps, ignoring the deaths of men, women and children in the Mediterranean: this is official EU policy. If women's equality and lives are to be taken seriously, the EU must be called out for the policies that threaten both.

The real story of women's rights in the EU needs to be told. The EU has a greater commitment to

defence spending, set to rise under the agreed PESCO arrangements, than it does to services for women. The denial of women's rights as workers across Europe, even as more women are in paid work, is proof that their social rights are being trampled under the privatising juggernaut of the EU. Furthermore, the anti-woman far-right political bloc has been able to grow partly because of the poverty and social divide created by the capitalist priorities of the EU.

Winning childcare as a social right will require in each member state a dismantling of privatised childcare systems and their replacement with fully state-funded ones. Only then, with these vital social building blocks in place, can the gender pay gap begin to close and the relegation of women workers to low-paid, precarious jobs begin to change. This will require breaking the capitalist rules of the EU and more new movements from below to deliver full public funding for the social services that women so badly need.

Notes

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