

Gender justice in business – some feminist reflections

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Which forces can develop economic processes and how social structures can be changed and/or destroyed: is it via a feminist motivation or via social criticism. 100 years ago women, struggling for peace demanded an immediate cessation of arms traffic and war materials. It was clear that war as part of a disastrous economic and political development, which destroys societies. This is true even today, but the profit-maximizing and profit-making economy has gained the upper hand systematically in times of globalization and digitalization. Where are the networks of solidarity, where are the women, who do the most care and housework, more and more often unpaid, invisible, unspectacular? What does "peace" mean when the distribution of work and time is so unfair, the options for participation of women and men so unequal? 100 years later, women commit themselves and work together for a gender-equitable and sustainable peace!

On June 14th 2019, Switzerland saw the biggest strike for years: it was the second women's strike. The traditional forces were present, although less on the street than in new news – among them manager (women) of companies, economically successful employers and conservative politicians calling for "equal wage for equal work" and more women in economic and political leadership positions. However, there were the strong voices of feminists, which underlined some other unacceptable inequalities: The volume of unpaid work, the lion's share of which is provided by women and its value for the national economy of Switzerland, officially calculated and published! Due to the broad acceptance, that care economy is adding value to the GDP, the implications of the gendered division of labour and the related inequalities became an issue of interest. Of course, the question of how to address the issue was controversially discussed – along political lines and economic positions. Still, the majority would agree that unequal wage is unacceptable and that the discrimination of women in pension schemes as to be stopped.

In Switzerland, as in many other European countries, gender equality is enshrined constitutionally. However, in real life, it is different. Gender is still used as a category of non-justified discrimination, reflected in Statistics, which shows that per year women earn 100 billion Swiss franc less than men do. The monetary value of unpaid work is 408 billion per year. Women provide more than 60% of the unpaid care work. Like Switzerland, many of the rich countries suffer from the same discrepancies and show similar numbers. The numbers are not random though, but a product of economic dynamics and political power relations at the interfaces of the different stakeholders. These are the private sector (market), the government (public sector), the civil society and the households. Now, for us it is key to analyse these interrelations in order to plan actions for a change towards gender justice. Do we know what happens to profit, values and wealth generated and accumulated through our economic performance? How balanced is the share when comparing time we invest in work and what we are paid for it? Do we understand how government handles its budget? Do we understand the logical frame of financial politics, the resulting public spending and its impact on the wellbeing of the people? Feminist women's rights defenders have to understand the gendered dimension of economic and financial processes reflecting the interaction of the state, private sector, civil society and of persons in their different roles as members of households, citizens, women's activists, children, farmers, entrepreneurs, consumers etc.

These are the key questions; too many to tackle in this short input, but having these questions in mind in our continuous work may give us some guidance.

Let me quickly come back to the women's strike in Switzerland, an important symbolic moment to reinforce women's rights. At the strike, the quality of daily living conditions at micro level was an issue as much as the underlying structures of discrimination. Feminist organisations and activists criticized the endless desire for profit maximization of the private sector, but also reflected the role of the state and the tension between business and state. As said before, the positions differed a lot, indicating the controversy between neoliberal and critical "feminists": On one side is the narrative of self-responsibility such as "If you really want to become a successful business woman you can do it". On the other side, the critical feminist approach addresses the economic situation of women and men from a quite different angle, focusing on the underlying power relations and its gendered dynamics. Looking at individual stories and economic carriers of women or men, we only see the surface and not the conditions under which individuals perform. These are mainly the underlying mechanisms of gender specific discrimination and exploitation of labour force constituted and reproduced in the patriarchal hierarchies. Focusing on the gender specific dimension of digitalization, unemployment and the wage trends in the formal labour market. They pointed out the limited accessibility of social security system and care infrastructure to women and their relevance for women's wellbeing. Feminist activists' quintessence of these insights and discussions is probably that business both causes and replicates the underlying patriarchal structure because it corresponds with the logic of the profit-oriented market and finally benefit from economic advantages - regardless of the number of women as business leaders.

First, I will glance behind the scenes of the market. Then I will look at the performance of the state in its role as duty bearer in relation to the human and women's rights. Finally, I question the visibility and value of care work as the key activity for people's wellbeing.

1. Business and the question of benefits

The organization of the private sector is based on its productivity and the maximization of profit. There are different ways to increase productivity: Rationalization of production, investment in new technology, or simply by influencing the costs of the labour force such as staff redundancy, flexibilisation of contracts, informalisation of certain jobs etc. The costs for the staff should remain low, is even decreasing while the annual profit is increasing. Otherwise, the business would collapse; unfortunately, all companies are organized according to this logic. Of course, many companies have a strong human rights based performance; they do guarantee decent jobs, social security, ILO-confirm standards. Still, when it comes to the annual reporting and a company is faced with a decline in growth, it will have to respond, and the easiest way to respond is to reduce staff costs. If the legal protection of employees is weak and the logic of the tax system is rather strengthening the private sector with its financial privileges than the individual employee investing labour force. However, not all type of work is equally exposed to such changes. It also depends, as we all know, on the options that digitalization offers a company. It depends on the sectors of work and on the education and learning opportunities of the employees. We know the market is volatile, and the small enterprises with little resources for risk management are especially affected by this volatility. Their flexibility and adaptability is on average much lower compared to big national and multinational companies. Why do I underline this difference? When we talk about women's economic empowerment, in general we do not mean the high-level business leadership, but rather small entrepreneurship as a possibility for women to improve their standard of living. Women receive capacity building and small credits and as prudent savers, women repay their micro credits after investing them profitably. Women are therefore also a welcome target group for micro-credit programmes and finance institutes.

However, if we look closer at this picture, we will see that their options for investment remain very limited. First, their profits are low, often the costs are higher than the income, and only few women have control of the means of production. Without the possibilities to accumulate capital, their empowerment is in danger and instead of growing; their enterprise may shrink and disappear. Furthermore, the sectors where women perform their market-oriented activities, or where the promoting programmes of the Women Economic Empowerment-Strategy are anchored, are often subjected to crisis and economic downturns. The marge de manoeuvre is shrinking, the risk of self-exploitation increasing, which of course threatens the wellbeing of businesswomen and their families.

For those reasons, the integration of women into the market does not automatically lead to empowerment and enhanced opportunities to act in all fields of public and private fields as a rights holder. New forms of dependencies and discrimination emerge, often not visible at the first glance. Social networks break apart. The lack of time and increasing duties to fulfil push women into precarious situations. For small entrepreneurs, high pressure of the market, competitiveness and the pressure to accelerate the production for more profit, increasing quality requirements and hygiene standards, conformed by state laws, may lead to unprofitable business and high depth burden.

The dynamics at the interface of time use, labour and household budgets are very complex and dynamic, but they are decisive for gender relations. They influence and form the gender specific conditions of daily life including care work. Unfortunately, in research and politics, this remains a black box, kept under the carpet or make the gender differences invisible.

Considering the enormous power, the owners of business and market forces can display, it is for us, as feminists, an imperative to observe critically the impacts on human rights and gender justices. We have to analyse the origins and games of power and the decision-making procedures to detect popping up of new discrimination and its reproduction. We have to understand the frames of reference for politics. Are women more likely to be on the loser side than men are, when neoliberal economies dominate political decisions? How gender biased is the impact of the accelerated market system on social politics? These questions lead me to the next point.

Women's rights, human rights and the duty of the state

The direct impact of structural changes on companies, the loss of economic force of certain small enterprises in some specific branches such as the clothing industry, of which the big majority of owners are female, may hit men and women similarly, of course in relation to the differences between sectors where mainly women or men respectively work. It depends on the revalidation of their labour force, of their productivity, and on the fact that in many sectors, women's jobs are time consuming, slow and often even not suitable for rationalization. Yet, there is a second dimension, and here we switch now to my second point, the question of human and women's rights. I would dare to say, that as an indirect influence of such structural changes the living conditions of women will worsen more than men's, women will have less benefits looking at the work load they are carrying in addition to the paid job.

Business women working in small enterprises will hardly ever be protected with good social security schemes. Balancing the benefits women have from being economically active on the market and the standard of living as a whole and at long term, including the reproductive or care costs, the results

are rather disappointing. Women entrepreneurs invest a lot of time and money. They need support at home to care for their children, elderly relatives, or sick members in the family. They have to plan for the time after, etc. If the state is not able to support them adequately, if there is no general pension or social security system, no social infrastructure such as nursery, public hospitals or retirement homes, the huge share of this care work will fall back on women again. The essentialised role society gives women, as carers by nature will compel them to organize, deliver and guaranty the provision the fundamental services – to prevent society from a collapse.

The value added for regional and local development may decrease, may be stumbled by conflict and war, but care work is still the key for the survival, it is the basic economic activity because it produces labour force and it is the motor of social development. Therefore, the question is not about the relevance of care work, but of how it is organized and who is responsible to insure the basic care service according to human rights and women's rights and how the states can play their key role as duty barer and warrantor of a caring society.

Currently we observe the weakening of many states, and shrinking space for persons acting as members of the civil society. We also miss a systematic reporting on the human rights. At the same time, we are all somehow challenged by the withdrawal of public services, cut offs in the social sector, shrinking accessibility of the public care services. Of course, it is the state, which carries the main responsibility and we are the citizens. Still, it is more complex than that, because it is the interaction of public and private sector, the civil society and the households as said before.

The state uses powerful instruments such as budgets, tax system, and important to underline here, the legal frames of the public finance system, including social security as well as tax schemes. National economy allows certain insights into the economic validation of care work by the government: How much of public money is invested in schools, health service, in elderly pension schemes or day care for children and sick people compared to other so-called profitable sectors. What are the narratives justifying the cutbacks in social security and services. We all know the stories about the important role of the mother, of the wife and the capabilities caring for others – even if it is invisible, unpaid and unprotected. The protagonists of such narratives are the family and social security politics that are generating and reproducing these narratives. Still, the politics are not storytellers, but a mirror of the national economy trends. However, do we know who from civil society is supporting this politics and why, what are the interests behind it?

Care is costly, we know, and it doesn't generate immediate profit. Only the long-term perspective may allow calculating its economic value. However, we expect from a functioning state to ensure a public care service is inclusive and accessible without discrimination! It is also a duty of a government to assure, that the aspects of the fiscal policy are adapted, among others the tax law.

What is the message for feminists? We reclaim a political system that provides the support of care providers, based on the added value in terms of time and labour. We advocate for a changing investment strategy of the government to increase the corporate- and profits taxes of companies in order to raise the capital for social care infrastructure and therefore of course we advocate for a legal system which favours this qualitative change of direction, a state have to go.

Here I would like to quote one of the most brilliant feminist researcher Sarah Razavi (2010): "The need to address care through public policy is now more urgent than ever. Women's massive entry into the paid workforce—a near-global trend—has squeezed the time hitherto allocated to the care

of family and friends on an unpaid basis. At the same time, population ageing in some countries, and major health crises (especially HIV and AIDS) in others, have intensified the need for care services.” Here I would add also the costs of long lasting conflicts, war and militarization! Shahra Razavi points out that in many countries public health systems have been severely weakened during the decades of market-oriented reform, and we know that the same is true in the OSCE participating States, that much of the care burden has fallen back on women and girls.

Shahra Razavi concludes by underlying the specific role of the state: it is qualitatively different from that of the private sector, civil society of the households as main actors in the provision of basic care. It is not just a provider of public care services, but also a significant decision maker when it comes to the rights and responsibilities of other institutions. Whether and how the state makes use of its role is fundamental for defining who has access to quality care and who bears the costs of its provision. The effective creation, regulation and funding of care services can increase the access, affordability and quality of care and reduce time burdens placed on unpaid care-givers. Parental leaves, family allowances and other transfers can be financed through taxes or social insurance programmes, thereby socializing some of the costs assumed by unpaid caregivers. From a feminist perspective, the focus lies on the relation between the market value of labour in relation to the time used for it on one side and the resulting productivity-gap between paid and unpaid care work on the other side. The findings show it clearly: there is a strong gender bias, where women turn out to be the losers, especially those providing hours of care work unpaid and invisible. Their productivity is not valorised as such. In addition, the government also misses to compensate for it, be it in form of a fundamental rights based public services or through subsidies for non-profit organizations and services deliverers of care services.

Conclusion

New trends in business and markets are alarming and many feminists are worried about the possible new forms of discrimination. There are many reasons to worry: The rationalization and digitalization of modes of production, the dismissals in certain sectors, the increasing expenditure for the army and high tech security technology, the destabilizing impact of austerity programs in the social sector: All these developments and trends have a strong gender dimension. Gender is an immanent category of the logic and the structures behind. This has a high prize, which becomes clear when we look at the quality of life. Who are the losers, who the winners, and how gendered is this gap! Women will not be affected the same way as men are, and their chances will not increase in the same way as men’s will – especially also as economic actors. Individual stories give insights into these discrepancies. However, to understand them, we should not reach for explanations such as individual responsibility, incapacities or even laziness, but analyse the social economic causes of discrimination – in the context we work in, we deal with, we know and may be able to influence. Women’s rights are the key. Women have the same rights to care as men do, independently of the benefit they add to the private sector. It is not a question of the rate of return but of a fundamental right. Care work is an economic activity adding value to the gross domestic product of a state. It is this value, which has to be reconsidered and taken as a benchmark, and not as the rate of return. There is no justification for not including it in the GDP, not even the female capability of being loving mothers. Taken into account that we are invited to the Kharkiv international Legal forum I apply to lawyers, legal experts, human rights defenders, politicians: in order to achieve gender justice, to defend the rights of individuals is key, but we definitely also need changes in our legal system, in the way public money is generated and spent. Thank you for your attention!