
Women in Europe and in the world: The state of the Union 2016

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Building on the definition of oppression developed by the philosopher Iris Young, the article argues that women in Europe are an oppressed group. Relying on recent statistics, it points out that a high percentage of women are still subject to gender violence; economically exploited and marginalized; powerless with regard to governance and participation in the public sphere, as well as victims of androcentrism—a pattern of cultural evaluation which seriously undermines women’s potential for development. The article then shows how this state of affairs has worsened over the last years, under the effects of the financial and economic crisis, and the austerity policies with which the European states have responded. Finally, it singles out two possible future scenarios. If the current neo-liberal trends persist, we can expect a move towards societies more polarized in terms of class and ethnicity; low fertility rates; and an increasing poverty of those most in need of care and in charge of care provision. The crisis could instead be perceived as an opportunity to diverge from this prevailing neo-liberal model, calling for a new, inclusive, societal model of development—a new humanism which puts the person, in her whole complexity and in her very real care dependent nature, at the very core of the political and economic project.

I. Introduction

Dear guests, colleagues, honored officials and friends, your Excellencies, the Mothers, including those who are not present but still to be thanked for all of us who are here, including the fathers, who have done those things that usually mothers do, including my own mother who is with us in this room, this morning, next to my children Simon and Lucas. It is a deep honor for me to be here, in the “Salone dei Cinquecento,” the Hall of Five Hundred, once the meeting room for the Grand Council of the Florentine Republic, all 500 of them men! It is an honor to be among the many male and female

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voices that today will speak on the state of women in Europe and in the rest of the world.

Ladies and gentlemen, Europe is struggling, and is indeed engaged in a deeper and more profound struggle than at any time since the foundation of the European Union over six decades ago as a human project of economic, political, and social dimensions. Europe is experiencing a protracted economic crisis with severe social implications. Europe is confronting an increased threat of terrorism as well as the rise of populism, xenophobic nationalism, and religious fundamentalism of different creeds. The Grexit has not entirely receded while, in the UK referendum, the Brexit supporters have won, epitomizing the increasing disillusionment of many with the European project. Thousands of refugees are drowning in our seas, while thousands more—over a million—are calling at our doors and being denied the humane and dignified response which we know they deserve, in fact, as a matter of right. And we know this, because too many of our predecessors knocked at similar doors when they too were confronted with the horrors of persecution, war, and other life-threatening forces, or because not too long ago and for far too many, we ourselves were part of the threatening forces. Some of you may be asking yourselves: in this context, what is the use of a State of the Union devoted to Women?

Well, let me then ask you: is it ever the right time to ask the Woman question? If we go back in history to approximately one century ago when the struggle for women's right to vote was taking place in different countries in Europe, we will find plenty of examples of how women were being asked to hold back, with the generosity and self-sacrifice that is so often expected of them, for the sake of other so-called “more important” or “urgent” causes, all of them fought in the name of freedom and equality: the socialist class struggle, nationalist movements, war efforts, or struggles to limit the powers of the Church and the monarchy as vestiges of the Old Regime.¹ But what we acknowledge now—something that was denied back then—is that including women in European “democracies-in-the-making” was also an urgent matter of equality and freedom. So too, I will claim today, Europe's democratic credentials and its commitment to social justice are at stake at this crucial juncture, and a central part of what will determine its success or failure is precisely how Europe responds to the woman question.

But what exactly, you may be asking yourselves, is the woman question in Europe today, now that women are entitled to the same rights and freedoms as men, now that we have finally erased from our legal systems the disgraceful and explicit traces of patriarchy that for years rendered women the equivalent to legal minors? Well, the unfortunate reality is that today, in spite of formal equal legal status, women in Europe, who make up more than half the population, remain an oppressed group. How can this be understood? Philosopher Iris Young, before her untimely death, explained in her writings that oppression consists of any system that reduces the potential for people to be fully human, either because they are treated in a de-humanized manner or because

¹ See *THE STRUGGLE FOR FEMALE SUFFRAGE IN EUROPE: VOTING TO BECOME CITIZENS* (Blanca Rodríguez Ruíz & Ruth Rubio Marín eds., 2012).

they are denied the opportunities that might allow them reach their full human potential, in both mind and body.² Remember that oppression does not only happen in cases of a cruel tyrant with bad intentions. Indeed, a well-intentioned liberal society can place system-wide constraints on groups and limit their freedom, relying not only on overt rules but also on unquestioned norms, habits, and symbols. Oppression has, according to Young, five faces, namely: violence, exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, and cultural imperialism³.

Ladies and gentlemen, we must (somewhat paradoxically) congratulate ourselves because we finally have the empirical evidence which demonstrates that women in Europe, some clearly more than others, confront these five faces of oppression as part of our ordinary existence. This data was gathered through rigorous studies using tools that have been developed in recent years, including the first EU-wide survey on violence against women by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights in 2014, a report based on interviews with 42,000 women across the twenty-eight member states of the EU. We also have the excellent report on Equality between Men and Women of the same year released by the European Commission and the Gender Equality Index reports by the European Institute for Gender Equality, which have been rigorously measuring gender equality in the European Union and its evolution between 2005 and 2012 by tracking gender gaps in several areas relevant to EU policy framework, including work, money, knowledge, time, power, health, violence, and intersecting inequalities.⁴

Drawing from these, I will now explain why and how women in Europe continue to be oppressed, and lay out possible scenarios for the future. I will confront the implications of these possible scenarios for Europe's self-understanding as a geopolitical space committed to democratic values and to ideas of equal justice: This commitment, I argue, should be part of the European Union's very *raison d'être*.

Let me then start by addressing what the data tells us. In what mirrors can we find the five faces of European women's oppression?

2. Faces of women's oppression

2.1. Violence

First, and worst, *violence*. Much recent public attention has been devoted to the violence perpetrated on migrant women, the Western gaze orientaling "the other women," including women who are victims of trafficking, often for sexual exploitation purposes, and girls who are subject to female genital mutilation. But the Fundamental Rights Agency's report rightly chose to talk about us, and not them. And what we know about us is that, in the EU today, one in three women has experienced physical and/or sexual violence at least once since the age of fifteen, which makes for 59.4

² IRIS MARION YOUNG, JUSTICE AND THE POLITICS OF DIFFERENCE 41 (2011).

³ *Id.* at 40.

⁴ The data comes from the website of the European Institute for Gender Equality, <http://eige.europa.eu/gender-statistics/gender-equality-index/about>.

million victims, with a similar ratio applying to girls under that age. What we also know is that one in twenty, or a group of about 9 million women, has been raped at least once since the age of fifteen, an experience which leaves survivors with fear, anger, shame, anxiety, and loss of self-confidence. What we know is that between 45 and 55 (!) percent of women in Europe have experienced sexual harassment, and that 18 percent of women have experienced some form of stalking, with cyberstalking becoming a new trend especially among the young.⁵ And yet I doubt that these figures include the forms of violence that have a disparate impact on particularly vulnerable women, including migrant women (whose migration status often places them in a situation of extreme dependence on either their husband or their employer, or both), asylum seekers and refugees (who, as we speak, are victims of trafficking and are being sexually abused by officials, smugglers and other refugees in transit zones and reception centers), or differently abled women (who, by definition, often live in the periphery of society and the legal order).

What is particularly painful, ladies and gentlemen, is the fact that, for one in five women, the experience of physical and/or sexual violence occurs at the hand of either a current or a previous partner. At the same time, scary, very scary, is the knowledge that only 14 percent of women reported their most serious incident of intimate partner violence to the police.⁶

Now, ladies and gentlemen, call it what you will, but to me, this means that millions of European women live in a state of terror and oppression often within their very homes, their schools, neighborhoods and workplaces.

2.2. Exploitation and marginalization

A word now on *exploitation* and *marginalization*, the second and third faces of oppression. Currently, the percentage of women in employment is still 63.5 percent; and for every euro men make, women, even in the same occupation and with the same educational level, get only 84 cents.⁷ The gender pay gap is perpetuated by the generalized practice of lack of transparency around payment by almost every employer. Even more worrisome is that the pension gap between men and women is 38 percent and the fact that one-third of women receive no pension at all, something which exposes elderly women, along with single mothers, to the highest risk of poverty and marginalization.⁸

Occupational segregation concentrates women in less lucrative sectors. Employed women are still four times more likely to be working part-time than employed men are, mostly to combine unpaid domestic work and paid employment.⁹ In total, the discrepancy in earnings that results from being paid less per hour, working fewer hours in paid jobs, and being under-represented in highly paid jobs reaches 37 percent.¹⁰

⁵ *Violence Against Women: An EU-wide survey. Results at a Glance*, in SURVEY BY THE EUROPEAN UNION AGENCY FOR FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS, FRA, 9–10 (2014).

⁶ *Id.* at 3.

⁷ *Report on Equality Between Women and Men*, REPORT BY THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION 7 (2014).

⁸ *Id.* at 16.

⁹ *Id.* at 7.

¹⁰ *Id.* at 15.

And yet any data pales against the likely reality when it comes to the real gender gap in economic resources, since, interestingly, gender-segregated data on resources from other financial assets, such as bonds or real estate, are simply missing.

In the meantime, ladies and gentlemen, working men devote only nine hours a week to unpaid care and household work, as compared with twenty-six hours a week for working women who therefore bear almost three times the load. In the meantime, ladies and gentlemen, many women immigrants find low-wage jobs as “off-the-books” nannies, housekeepers, or companions for the elderly. This enables high-wage women to increase their hours of market work without public subsidy: a market-based solution to care provision which may be cost-effective in the short run, but is simply not sustainable in the long run. It deprives the low-income countries, where the immigrants come from, of their ability to get any revenue in return for raising and educating these people, beyond voluntary (and often temporary) individual remittances, as well as draining sending countries’ own care resources.¹¹

This, to me, exemplifies what Young calls exploitation, that is, using people’s labor to produce profit while not offering them fair compensation;¹² and also what she identifies as marginalization:¹³ the act of relegating a group of people to a lower social standing or outer edge of society where single mothers, your Excellencies, the Mothers, increasingly find themselves both in Europe and elsewhere.

2.3. Powerlessness

Powerlessness is the fourth face of oppression. Women still account for less than a quarter of company board members of the largest publicly listed companies in the member states, despite representing almost a half of the employed workforce. As of November 2014, they comprise still only 28 percent on average of elected members of national parliaments and national governments.

There has been some progress at the level of EU institutions, although we are far from parity yet. The proportion of women in the European Parliament is now at an all-time high at 37 percent, but still 13 points off parity. The new Commission consists of nineteen men and only nine women; only 21 percent of judges in the Court of Justice are female; and the governing council of the European Central Bank is still comprised of twenty-two men and just two women.

Needless to say, the number of women who have broken through the glass ceiling and inhabit the male domain of power, authority, and decision-making would be much lower if we were looking at low income or migrant women.

2.4. Cultural Imperialism

Finally, *cultural imperialism*. At the root of gender injustice lies androcentrism, which political theorist Nancy Fraser¹⁴ defines as an institutionalized pattern of cultural

¹¹ Nancy Folbre, *Who Cares: A Feminist Critique of the Care Economy*, ROSA LUXEMBURG STIFTUNG 19 (2014).

¹² Young, *supra* note 2, at 48.

¹³ *Id.* at 53.

¹⁴ See Nancy Fraser, *Feminist Politics in the Age of Recognition*, in FORTUNES OF FEMINISM: FROM STATE-MANAGED CAPITALISM TO NEOLIBERAL CRISIS 162 (Nancy Fraser ed., 2013).

value that privileges traits associated with masculinity, while devaluing everything coded as feminine. Androcentric value patterns are expressly codified in many areas of the law and government policy, but also in popular culture, the use of language, and in everyday interaction, including in the market. Or is it by chance that, stereotypically, women's jobs (aside from being paid the least) are more likely to be relational and concerned with caring and provisioning, jobs that are also highly labor-intensive and with limited potential for productivity increases? The fact is, ladies and gentlemen, that the social value of care work, absolutely essential to sustain the economy and market society, your Excellencies, the Mothers, is simply not duly acknowledged. There is a longstanding hierarchical dualism between productive and reproductive work; and, as Nobel Laureate Joseph Stiglitz has recognized, a total lack of any relationship between private rewards and social returns.¹⁵ Social norms, and not any clear notion of marginal productivity, determine wages. Think of the example of an executive from a failed UK bank who was retained to advise on its restructuring at a monthly salary equivalent to three and a half times the annual salary of a childcare worker with twenty years of experience.¹⁶

Yet, androcentrism is not the only form of cultural imperialism that women in Europe are subject to. Heteronormativity and religious and ethnic forms of imperialism also shape women's lives in Europe: ask a lesbian woman seeking full expression of her emotions and family wishes; ask a Roma woman seeking respect for her sexual and reproductive autonomy; ask a transgender woman seeking legal recognition; or an adult Muslim woman wishing to wear a headscarf when attending university, and they will tell you.

3. Options for the future: Europe at a crucial juncture

So what has Europe done and what is the European Union doing about this? Europe, ladies and gentlemen, is at a crucial juncture. Let me explain why.

Since its inception, the EU has consistently advocated economic growth and social cohesion, and this concern with socio-economic inequalities and the ultimate goal of improving people's lives has evolved from the Treaty of Rome, through the Lisbon Strategy with its economic, social, and environmental pillars, to the current Europe 2020 agenda for smart, sustainable, and inclusive growth.

The pursuit of gender equality, beginning with equal pay in the Treaty of Rome and followed by numerous directives and policy innovations, has featured strongly in this advancement and was seen as key to the successful implementation of the economic agenda and growth. The goal throughout has been to provide women with equal opportunities in the domains of employment and services while, at the same time protecting them from discriminatory practices as mothers, such as to preserve Europe's traditional commitment, since the inception of the welfare state, to the protection of the family and motherhood.

¹⁵ Cited in Diane Perrons and Ania Plomien, *Gender, Inequality and the Crisis*, in *WOMEN AND AUSTERITY: THE ECONOMIC CRISIS AND THE FUTURE FOR GENDER EQUALITY* 300 (Maria Karamessini & Jill Rubery eds., 2014).

¹⁶ The example is cited in *id.* at 300.

In particular, from the mid-1990s onwards under the EU's European Employment Strategy, formulated in a context where it was assumed there would be no overall limit on employment opportunities, the promotion of women's employment and gender equality gained a new legitimacy, which pushed all EU member states to improve their parenthood systems and increase childcare services to assist in meeting the goal of higher maternal employment rates. Moreover, beyond economic considerations, both the European Union and the Council of Europe started to endorse the more ambitious goal of women's empowerment as a fundamental criterion of democracy echoing a concern expressed at the global level at Beijing's Conference and Platform for Action. The goal in several countries became that of parity democracy, a concept coined in Europe.

But sadly, analyses of recent EU policy documents with respect to goals and instruments, and the policy-making environment, suggest that attention to gender issues has become much less prominent and less adequate than in the preceding decades. This decreasing sense of urgency in European policies is clearly linked to the outbreak of the financial and economic crisis and the austerity measures that have followed them. Unfortunately, the perception of the economic crisis as primarily a crisis for men has meant that gender-equality considerations have been absent from policy making during the crisis. Most countries have witnessed a diminution in gender equality commitments with the machinery of gender equality policy being either stopped or severely cut back. The implied message seems to be that such policies are at best a distraction in the current crisis. This does not mean zero accomplishments over the last few years.¹⁷ There have indeed been some important milestones especially in the fight against violence, such as the adoption of the Istanbul Convention to prevent and combat violence against women and domestic violence, in 2011. We must also celebrate the adoption, at the EU level, of the Directive on Preventing and Combating trafficking in human beings (2011) and the Victims Directive (2012). But with the exception of the Framework Agreement on parental leave extending the period of parental leave from three to four months, all other legislative initiatives to advance further in the direction of empowering women and subverting gender roles have failed to pass, including the proposed reforms of the Maternity Leave and Working Time Directive, but also the Gender Balance on Corporate Board Directive.

So, crisis, crisis, austerity, and more crisis! But how have women and gender equality actually fared in the crisis and under austerity? And what do these facts tell us about future prospects for women in Europe? Well, drawing on Karamessini and Rubery's work, we have basically learned three things:¹⁸

1. First, regardless of the significant fall in both male and female employment at the outbreak of the crisis, women's labor market participation has in fact increased during these years, under the so-called added-worker effect. Far from quitting the labor market, women who lost jobs continued to look for work, more became sole

¹⁷ See Maria Karamessini & Jill Rubery, *Economic Crisis and Austerity: Challenges to Gender Equality*, in *WOMEN AND AUSTERITY*, *supra* note 15, 314, at 333–334.

¹⁸ *Id.* at 346.

breadwinners, and some entered the labor market for the first time. A return to a male breadwinner family model simply seems unlikely in advanced economies. It would require the reestablishment of traditional family structures, founded on strong family ties, secure male employment, and sufficient family wage jobs, none of which seems to be in the cards. In fact, given the ageing population, there is a general interest in keeping both men and women on the employment market for longer.

2. Second, gender inequalities in employment have somewhat diminished. This is, however, mostly due to the greater job loss and the spread of part-time and flexible forms of employment among men, and the pay freeze, pay cuts, and the overall deterioration of working conditions which have affected all. So, in other words, there has been a process of leveling down that has somewhat closed the gender gap.
3. Finally, under austerity and fiscal consolidation policies, there has been a contraction of the public sector, a major employer for women—in part because it enables them to be workers and mothers—as well as an overall retreat of the state from social reproduction which has manifested itself in retrenchment of support for working parents, and for the long-term care of the elderly and the disabled. As feminist economist Nancy Folbre suggests, this evolution means that gender inequality per se is now becoming less critical than trends that have been labeled “the pauperization of motherhood” and the “motherization of poverty,” which, needless to say, have a clear disparate impact on women.¹⁹

So here we are. In moving forward, these trends seem to point at two possible scenarios. I would claim that only one is compatible with Europe’s original self-understanding as committed to gender equality, democracy and social justice.

In the first scenario, current trends towards intensification of neo-liberalism, and the assumptions that the economy and economic policies are wealth creating and productive while social policies are unproductive, constitute a cost and stunt growth, will persist. In the view of many, under this scenario we can anticipate a move towards more polarized societies according to class and ethnicity. That is, we can expect an equalization of financial and employment conditions between the lower educated/lower skilled and migrant women and men, and the widening of gender gaps in the situation and prospects among the higher educated/higher skilled, already the reality in the USA today.²⁰ This situation will lead to increasing inequality between the two groups and the overall leveling down of men’s and women’s employment position and prospects. At the same time, failure to develop state support for care or reductions in existing provisions may lead to different reactions according to class and gender. Lower-educated women may increase time spent on unpaid work or increase their involvement in part-time jobs; higher-educated women may rely more on paid domestic care or on more equal sharing of unpaid care with their partner.²¹ In this scenario,

¹⁹ Folbre, *supra* note 11, at 17.

²⁰ Karamessini & Rubery, *supra* note 17, at 347–348.

²¹ *Id.*

then, those most in need of care, women from lower social classes, migrant women, young women, and single parents, would be the most likely losers. Fertility rates would remain low, and family and gender conservative ideology might still spread in part as a reaction, especially but not exclusively in some of the newer member states, which could perhaps cause a further rifts within the EU.

In a different scenario, the contemporary global economic crisis would be perceived, as many have advocated it should, as an opportunity to diverge from the prevailing neo-liberal model of capitalism. A call could be articulated for a more inclusive model of development, which, unlike the traditional position of the left, now integrates a gender perspective, and considers the value of activities outside the market, including care.²² This new emancipatory framework would need to continue to challenge gender stereotypes and predetermined gender roles and integrate economic, environmental and social reproduction concerns.²³ The equal representation of women in every site of decision making, that is parity democracy, would be part of the picture but beyond equal presence of women, this agenda would require the implementation of innovative gender equality policy approaches and tools, such as gender mainstreaming of macro-economic policy and gender budgeting. Work/life balance policies would be sought as intrinsically good for everyone, and not just women. This would require affordable quality childcare, after school care and care for other dependents (including the elderly and the differently abled persons). This would require equal and non-transferable paid leave for women and men. It would require flexible working arrangements, such as job-sharing, working from home, flexitime and innovative measures to promote equal sharing of work and care (including through tax incentives).

5. Conclusion

To conclude, only in this second scenario can we aspire to close the gender gaps that today still configure the five faces of European women's oppression, and to overcome the rigidities of a gender ideology that has hurt so many women and so many men too, in so many ways, and for such a long time. Only in this second scenario can we also hope to prevent the overall deterioration of the conditions of the middle and lower classes, and the fear, insecurity, and sense of dispossession, that results from it, hitting the young (ladies and gentlemen, an entire lost generation!?) particularly hard. For this fear, insecurity and dispossession can only fuel religious fundamentalisms, of the kind that often defines itself precisely around issues of control of women's bodies and sexuality. It can only generate racism, xenophobia and populism and, with it, a hellish existence for the migrants amidst us, migrants needed to pay our pensions, to keep up population growth and to take care of our children and elderly; and a hellish existence for asylum seekers, drowning in our waters. Neither will this fear, insecurity and dispossession encourage European men, including the young, to give up entirely what

²² Plomien & Perrons, *supra* note 15, at 295.

²³ Nancy Fraser, *Can Society be Commodities all the Way Down? Post-Polanyian Reflections on Capitalist Crisis*, 43 *ECONOMY & SOC'Y* 541 (2014).

Rousseau would have called the “illusion of the master over the slave,” that is, male dominance, as men may perceive gender-based hierarchy to be their last bastion of comfort and sense of self in a context of emasculation. This means misery for women who will continue to live terrorized in their very homes. And if these forces prevail, ladies and gentlemen, your Excellencies, the Mothers, Europe will indeed have lost, not only its commitment to equality and justice, but its democratic credentials altogether.

So now, more than ever before, is precisely the time for the Woman question to be raised, and for all those other issues that are strongly connected to it to be addressed. And this, the Salone dei Cinquecento, is precisely the place to do so, for this Salone was built in 1494 after one of the expulsions of the Medici family from Florence—Florence, the cradle of Renaissance and its humanism, a movement which sought the defeat of multiple forms of medieval dogmatism. Much the same in the present, if we are truly to confront and address the Woman question, it may require the displacement of dogmatisms around unregulated global financial markets, austere neoliberal states and the self-sufficiency of human beings. It may require the rescue, just as the Renaissance did, of the individual man, and indeed the individual woman too, from different forms of tyrannies and their modern iterations. Thank you very much for your attention.