

A Gender Agenda: Asia-Europe Dialogue (Phase 2) Transformational Approaches to the Roles of Women and Men

Tampere, Finland, 15-18 September 2002

Globalization and good governance are shaping the political and scientific debates around the world. Within this context the role of gender and the opportunities for European and Asian cooperation in developing "Transformational Approaches to the Roles of Women and Men" were discussed in the second Asia-Europe Dialogue. The conference was organized within the wider framework of the fourth Asia Europe Meeting (ASEM), and took place in Tampere, Finland from September 15-18. It was funded by the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF), the Japan Center for International Exchange (JCIE) and the host of the conference, the Coalition of Finnish Women's Associations for Joint Action (NYTKIS).

Two study groups had prepared reports beforehand in order to streamline the discussions of the conference. Wilma Van Henderikse from the Netherlands and Azalina Othman, from Malaysia, presented the results on economics and political decision-making. Van Hendrikse stressed the ongoing gender divide. She saw the need for changing the consumption attitudes and understanding of women as a valuable workforce in order to create a win-win-situation for all members of society. In terms of legislation, Van Hendrikse admitted a satisfactory international standard, but underlined the need to adjust national legislation with gender-mainstreaming being taken much more into consideration. She also recommended changes in workplace characteristics which should better suit the needs of women and families.

The commentator from the Philippines, Ciel Habito, pointed to the structural influences on women due to the effects of globalization. He specifically referred to labor migration, the increase of MNCs and ICT. Habito especially stressed the increase of working chances for women. ICT, for instance, provides new jobs which match modern familial requirements and a new understanding and use of time. Still, obstacles have to be overcome. In Asia, for example, the teaching systems still teach to be employees rather than employers.

By the end of the session on "Women and Men as Agents of Change in Economic Life" it was generally acknowledged that it is necessary to fundamentally change the educational systems as the basis for desired attitudinal change; recognize the need for specific training of women, especially in financial aspects; to adapt the workplace characteristics to nowadays familial requirements; and, accordingly, to create and adjust a new concept of time in working life.

This conclusion of the session on economics was strongly supported by the presentation of Azalinah Othman on behalf of the study group on "Women and Men as Agents of Change in Political Decision-Making". Othman discussed the ambivalence of quotas and the need for compliance systems. There is the need to encourage younger women to take an interest in politics. A major reason for the lack of interest in politics so far has been the traditional attitudes which imply that politics is a dirty business and only for men.

Erna Witoelar's comment concentrated on the problem of the definition and understanding of the principle of "gender-mainstreaming". Since good governance needed

international cooperation to enforce gender mainstreaming in all spheres, international organizations, MNCs and NGOs should consider gender mainstreaming thoroughly. Women should understand the strong linkage of private and public life, quota could and should therefore only be used as a start. Thus, Witoelar pleaded for an entire transformational approach within a concrete timeframe.

The second part of the conference involved the division of the 60 participants into three Working Groups which were to tackle the issue on "Women and Men as Agents of Change in Economic Life" in greater detail. The issue of "Women and Men as Agents of Change in Political Decision-Making" was discussed in three different groups the next day. Each group had a moderator and a rapporteur who were to present the results of the working groups in front of the plenum at the end of the conference.

Ines Alberdi (Spain) and Yoriko Meguro (Japan) led throughout the final discussions and presentation of the working groups. The results were complex but stimulating. It was widely accepted that it is necessary to strengthen specific support systems such as women's leaders networks, the promotion of female role models and the establishment of monitoring and budgeting systems. It was also noted as necessary to raise women's interest in politics and change attitudes towards politics in general. This can be achieved by setting up institutional tools such as the establishment of national councils on sustainable development, specific training and leadership education, and the increased utilization of research materials exchange and intergenerational communication as well as the introduction of early money-systems, the promotion of voters education and the awareness-raising of legal means.

As for concrete steps the members proposed common Euro-Asian initiatives at the meetings of the UN Commission for the Status of Women (CSW), setting up a Euro-Asian homepage following the Tampere-conference, exchanging research materials and interlinking statistical websites. An additional interesting recommendation came from Finland. They proposed setting up gender neutral youth councils wherein girls were able to develop political skills because of their earlier maturity compared to boys. For adults the necessity of strengthening the establishment of transparent public funds for the political campaigns (not only) of women and the need for creating a girls-network for supporting interpersonal exchange was emphasized. The importance of learning by role models and intergenerational discussion as well as the sensitization of the media on the depiction of women, girls and boys was heavily underlined in this context.

The last proposition, to increase the awareness for gender aspects among European observers during election campaigns in Asia, once again illustrated the importance of this conference: the necessity and fruitfulness of discourse and information exchange for a better cooperation between Asia and Europe.

Martina Timmermann