The EU Mutual Learning Programme in Gender Equality

Women and the Media
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Comments Paper – Czech Republic

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Non-profits fighting against sexism in the media: The Czech case

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1. Country context related to women and the media

1.1. Historic background related to gender equality

Gender equality represented a strong issue in the policy of the first modern independent state, the Czechoslovak Republic, established in 1918. Women were officially granted the right to vote in the constitution of 1920 and the women’s movement was perceived as an integral part of the emancipatory efforts of the whole nation.

Nevertheless, after the 1948 coup d’état in which the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia assumed undisputed control over the government of Czechoslovakia (backed by the Soviet Union), gender issues became an ideological instrument subordinated to the interests of the party ruling the country for the next 40 years. Women were officially considered equal to men in all aspects including the right (or the obligation) to work but the problems of the double burden, gender pay-gap or insufficient representation of women in leading positions have never been solved in any satisfactory way.¹

Moreover, as a result of the indoctrination of the Czechoslovak citizens by the communist government, the women’s movement and feminist ideas were rejected by the majority as unnecessary in the situation in which women allegedly reached full equality.² Hence, the feminist movement lost continuity during the socialist era and since the Velvet revolution in 1989, the gender agenda has been promoted mainly through civil society institutions’ projects, often labelled as inappropriately ideological by both the majority and the political representation and rejected as such.

Today, research identifies the Czech Republic among the most sexist countries in Europe³, the fact reflected also in the political representation’s stance towards gender equality issues. As concerns our focus, the Special Eurobarometer also reveals that Czech citizens are among those most satisfied with the media representations of women – 61% of them think that there is no problem with the way women are presented in media and advertising in the Czech Republic and another 17% think that this problem does not need to be addressed.⁴

⁴ Ibid.
1.2. Policies related to the provision of equal opportunities within the media sector

Gender issues tend to be represented as a dangerous ideology by many actors of the Czech public sphere/s and the quotas or other means leading to gender equality are approached rather sceptically. That is why the country lacks any systematic policy related to the provision of equal opportunities of women and men within the media sector and also any systematic analysis of the state of gender relations in and aspects of the field. As concerns the sparse numbers available, the online server Data journalism\(^5\), which provided basic data related to gender composition of the management of the main newsrooms in the Czech Republic, points out one of the most problematic aspects of Czech journalism – the lack of women in the management positions. The report states that only 24.6% of the management positions are held by women and that the editors-in-chief are strictly men. Women are present in very low numbers even in the public service media management which, according to the declared role of these institutions in the media system, is alarming. The European Institute for Gender Equality confirms in its 2013 report that there are no women at the most senior strategic positions in media organisations in the Czech Republic and even no women in senior decision-making posts. The percentage of women as board members is also among the lowest in the EU.\(^6\)

Data reflecting representation of women in the media content show that the Czech Republic is lagging behind the world average with only 21% of women constituting subjects of print and internet news and 13% of women as expert sources\(^7\).

The media system of the Czech Republic is a dual system in which public service broadcasting (the Czech Television and the Czech Radio) are supposed to fulfil specific roles anchored in the legislation. No specific requirement related to equal opportunities within these media institutions is stated in the respective laws of the Czech TV and/or Czech Radio and balanced representation of women and men is mentioned in only one paragraph in each of the documents (see below).

Gender balance in the media sector and in the content it produces is addressed in a governmental document called “The government strategy for equality of women and men in the Czech Republic for years 2014-2020” published by the Office of the Government of the Czech Republic in 2014. This strategy is the only promising political activity related to equal opportunities within the media sector. In the section called “Everyday life and lifestyle”, the strategy states as its main goal to achieve “balanced participation of men and women in the decision-making […] and gender mainstreaming in the media….” Together with a few further goals related to fighting gender stereotypes as mentioned below, these goals represent the governmental measures aimed at achieving gender equality in the media institutions. Nevertheless, due to changes in political representation of the Czech Republic since the announcement of the Strategy, the implementation of such strategies is heavily

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dependent on the approach of current government towards gender issues. As pointed out in the contextual part of this paper, gender issues represent a very sensitive political topic in the Czech Republic which does not promise gaining political points or votes.

1.3. Initiatives related to fighting gender stereotypes: Civil society as the main initiator of gender equality in the media sector content

As described above, there are only a few regulations related to gender equality in the media sector and its production. The laws regulating the activities of Czech public service broadcasters, the Czech TV and Czech Radio, only require that the media “offer a balanced mix of programmes for all societal groups with a specific focus on their religious freedoms and beliefs, their culture, ethnic or national origin, nationality, social origin, age or gender, so that these programmes reflect the diversity of opinion and political, religious, philosophical and artistic approaches, with the aim to strengthen mutual understanding and tolerance and support coherence of a pluralistic society”\(^8\). A more general law regulating the activities of all broadcasters states that the regulatory body will not prolong the validity of the licence in case the broadcaster has been repeatedly charged for having included programmes which had instigated hatred based on the factors of gender, race, skin colour, language, belief and religion, political opinion etc.\(^9\) Finally, the Press Act declares in its paragraph 4 that the publisher is responsible for the content of the periodical press.\(^10\)

The governmental equality strategy, mentioned above, states some problems identified in relation to the media production in the section of “Everyday life and lifestyle”. According to the strategy, one of the main problems is a “low awareness of the gender issues, reproduction of gender stereotypes in the media content and the advertisement” and insufficient institutional pressure on the fulfilment of non-discriminatory approach. The strategy further declares its decision to “systematically monitor the media content including advertisement” and to “foster cooperation between public service broadcasters and the private media, mainly through advisory boards and sharing of good practice”. It further states its goal to “set a system of media monitoring including advertisement” and to “implement gender mainstreaming in the media”. The efficiency of these measures and the fulfilment of the goals stated in the strategy are nevertheless subject to various political pressures.

Thus, pushing of the “gender agenda” remains traditionally the concern of a few non-profit and non-governmental organisations in the Czech Republic whose position is often challenged by many influential political (mainly populist, but also traditionally conservative) actors. One of the most important NGOs which continuously targets issues related to gender sensitivity in media content, Nesehnuti, focuses on the fulfilment of the goals of the above mentioned governmental strategy in the field of advertisement. In their project called “The fulfilment of the governmental strategy for the equality of women and men in the field of discriminatory advertisement” Nesehnuti identified many obstacles to the possibility of penalising illegal discriminatory advertisement – mainly the lack of considered cases and the lack of information and cooperation among regulatory

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\(^10\) Press Act no. 46/2000 Coll.
institutions. Their project announced in January 2018 aims at filling the information gaps in this field and helping the regulatory bodies by providing them with expert knowledge, analyses and assessment of key cases. Nesehnutí are also well known for their anti-prize for sexist advertisement called “The Sexist Piggie” which regularly triggers emotions in the Czech public sphere. Together with two other non-profit organisations, the Gender Information Centre NORA and The Frog in the Well, it organised a mentoring and educational project in 2015-2016 called “And how about women in the media?” which aimed at supporting women in the media, their presence in decision-making in the media and at improving the media representations of both women and men. Besides the mentoring programme for female journalists it pointed at stereotypical gender representations and statements in the media. In 2015, a non-profit network of institutions and individuals from NGOs, the academia, public and private sectors called The Women’s Congress dedicated their second event of the same name to the topic of “Women and the Media”. The position of women in the media, media representations of women and men, sexist advertisement and gender aspects of social network sites were discussed during this event.

2. Transferability of the policies of the host country to the Czech Republic

As concerns the transferability potential of the French policies to the Czech Republic, the main challenge for the country would be a necessary significant change in the approach of the political representation of the Czech Republic to the issues related to gender equality and gender sensitivity in general. Whereas there is a lot of space for improvement in the approach of the media as well, it is, on the other hand, mainly some journalists (both female and male) together with representatives of civil society (mainly NGOs) who put stress on the issue of gender sensitive media representations and gender equality in general. The political representation remains rather passive or even actively against a wider public debate concerning gender equality issues. Hence, the generally conservative and anti-liberal (gender) culture prevalent in the Czech society (which strongly affects not only the approach of politicians towards the topic but also any enforceability of gender sensitive approach) represents the main challenge in any efforts concerning gender equality issues. Hence, the generally conservative and anti-liberal (gender) culture prevalent in the Czech society (which strongly affects not only the approach of politicians towards the topic but also any enforceability of gender sensitive approach) represents the main challenge in any efforts concerning gender equality in the media. Unfortunately, the gender agenda is mainly pushed by a minority of civil society actors and a few ministerial activities perceived as marginal, unimportant or even as unnecessary measures imposed from outside the country, specifically the EU.

Despite this, a much stronger pressure of the EU on significant changes in the gender policies of its Member States can contribute to an improvement in this field. Significant changes in the education system are necessary as well, which, again, will probably not happen without a strong pressure of international actors. Without attempting to appear too pessimistic, I believe that without significant changes in the gender culture of the Czech public which have to be pushed politically and through the education system, the situation in the media will change only very slowly, if at all.
3. Conclusions and recommendations

To open space for a significant development of the Czech approach to gender issues, key changes in both the education system and the policies are necessary. Gender has to become an issue perceived as politically important and crucial, not politically dangerous or “sensitive”. In relation to the media sector, a systematic, internationally comparable data collection related to the representation of women in the newsrooms/the media (including the decision-making positions) is necessary in the first place as individual efforts remain rather unsuccessful or incomplete. Second, the political representation of the Czech Republic should be forced by the EU to start considering the gender equality issues crucial in their agenda. The media performance in this sphere should primarily become a political responsibility and not fall on the shoulders of a few non-profit organisations whose efforts are opposed and ridiculed by the majority of the Czech society (including political representation). I believe that trying to identify possible specific measures which could improve the gender equality in the less “gender sensitive” European countries and cultivate their media sector in this sense is an important task which cannot be solved individually.