Gender equality in Switzerland today
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Brigitte Liebig, President of the Steering Committee NRP 60 at the Swiss National Science Foundation outlines the results of the NRP 60 program and how it hopes to create knowledge regarding gender equality in Switzerland...

Since the 1980s, a variety of political programs, strategies and measures have pursued the aim of achieving equal opportunities for men and women in Switzerland. A recent national research program offered the opportunity to review the various gender equality activities in...
Switzerland of the last few decades and highlighted not only progress but also persisting inequalities. The 21 research projects of the NRP 60 'gender equality' covered a wide range of issues and have been completed recently.

**Education, labour market, family, and social security**

In education, the gap in qualifications achieved by young women and men at secondary-school and university level has narrowed, which constitutes an important step towards gender equality in Switzerland. Despite this success, there has been little change in educational aspirations: young women are overrepresented in general knowledge subjects while young men dominate in technical and scientific subjects. Young men, in particular, may encounter derision from their peers if they want to pursue a “typically female” education or career. What’s more, young women who wish to have children continue to train for professions which allow for part-time work and career interruptions, whereas men’s choice of career is still largely informed by the notion of “bread winner” and life-long working. Parents, heads of schools, teachers and career advisors still fail to question sufficiently the gender connotations of education and career choices.

The situation is similarly complex in the job market: during the last 2 decades, the labour force participation of women in Switzerland, particularly of mothers, has risen significantly, and is one of the highest in Europe today. However, NRP 60 shows that labour
market opportunities of men and women remain far from equal despite this great achievement. It is rare to find men or women in “gender-atypical” jobs and positions or with atypical work-time percentages. In addition, the large pay gap and different wage developments of men and women persist. Even for first jobs there is an inexplicable 7% gender wage gap that is often accentuated as careers progress. It was also noted that women with few qualifications and women in the second half of their working life are often overlooked in gender equality politics. In working environments, women over 50 are often not considered for courses and measures related to age management.

The compatibility of family, education and work has also enjoyed political priority in recent years. Child care services have been expanded throughout Switzerland and families with children now pay less tax. But also in this case challenges persist: paid and unpaid work continues to be distributed unequally. Mostly women provide unpaid care work for the young and the old that is of crucial importance to society. In addition, there are large discrepancies between cantons with regard to child care services, and the overall costs of child care in Switzerland are very high. Further, researchers note low wages in care jobs: The increasing numbers of women from third countries who provide care work in private households are barely protected against precarious and under-regulated working conditions. In addition, analyses conducted by NRP
60 showed that there is a continued lack of family-friendliness in companies. In practice, measures for improving the compatibility of family and career are too often directed at women and rarely include men.

With respect to social security, numerous political reforms have aimed to improve gender equality in old age. However, a number of shortcomings have been identified in this area too: NRP 60 shows that the inequalities of traditionally “female” education and careers are accentuated over the course of a lifetime. To this day, women’s biographies typically include limited education, few professional qualifications, unpaid work in care or family businesses (e.g. in farming), interrupted careers and low wages; this reduces their capability of providing for their old age and ensuring social security: Provisions for loss of earnings due to unemployment, illness or age are closely associated with an uninterrupted, full-time working life. For this reason, women in Switzerland are often in a worse financial position as they reach retirement age or if they experience a crisis, and they have to depend on supplementary benefits or on support from social services to make ends meet.

**Much remains to be done**

The NRP 60 highlights complex mechanisms – including social measures and norms – that prevent gender equality policies from being more successful than is presently the case. The results also suggest that the chances of equality are determined at crucial moments in life, influenced by
the expectations and functional logic of different fields of life. To address the complexity of causes and effects, gender equality measures need to be comprehensive in their design by taking account of the biographical moment and the functioning and requirements of different parts of society. Gender equality policy needs to address stereotypical concepts of masculinity and femininity, the self-evident structures of professional and private lives, if it is to achieve greater freedom for “atypical” choices and life courses of women and men.

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