

Unequal Equality

By Ana Tajder

At the first sight, Austria is a country of alpha-women, women who *live* equality. The Foreign Minister is a woman (Ursula Plassnik); the Majority Leader of the Parliament is a woman (Barbara Prammer).

Everywhere young women are swarming, hungry for careers and success, enthusiastically starting a professional path into big corporations. Women are buying their first apartments, traveling around the world and (if they can fit it in) searching for the perfect men. When they find them, they continue their journey as Amazon warriors and, in spite of the responsibilities of family, develop careers and balance everything just perfectly.

Magazines adore these women: Every week, the Austrian magazine *Woman* is devoting a large part to them; in March, *Brigitte* published a big study called „Women Taking Off“; in April, *Spiegel* had a special edition devoted to women called „The Strong Sex“. Austrian women got what they fought for.

At the first sight. What about the second?

In their book *White Book Women, Black Book Men*, Sybille Hamann and Eve Linsinger want the Austrian public to take a second look. Women in Austria are equal, but only to a certain level. Once they reached it, they bump their heads and – and either stand there feeling dizzy, or take a few steps back. Wherein lies the paradox?

It used to be believed that education of girls symbolized entrance into a modern society, a key for the equality of the sexes, better family planning, more health and wellbeing. The moment girls received education equal to that of boys, the argument went, equality would happen on its own.

In the mean time, male pupils continued to lag behind females: there are more girls among high-school graduates (56% of *Matura* diplomas end up in female hands), girls get better grades; more girls than boys enter university, they need less time to receive a degree, they do better exams and spend more terms abroad.

Apart from that, one cannot say that Austria did not do its share of the administrative homework: There are women's parking places, women's professorships, stock funds especially designed for women, organizations for promotion of women into technical professions. Still, the EU study revealed a disappointing situation for women in Austria: Contrary to the European trend, the salary gap is growing. For the same job, women in Austria earn on average 20% less than men. At the same time, the percentage of women in higher level positions is decreasing and currently lies at 28%

How is that possible? Were women in Austria betrayed? Were they promised too much? Or is equality not reachable by knowledge and hard work?

The story always starts with the same old question:

“What will you be when you grow up?“ Boys dream of becoming a captain on a space ship, girls nurses or teachers. Later, those dreams are reflected in the choice of profession: boys study to become technicians, electricians, engineers. Girls study to be hairdressers, pharmacists, secretaries. The trick is that the male-dominated professions are always the better paid. But unfortunately, the solution does not seem to lie simply in joining those professions: The profession of secretary or teachers used to be more respected and better paid jobs. As women entered them over in the early years of the 20th century and gradually took them over, their prestige fell. And so did the salary.

“How is it possible,“ the authors wonder, “that servicing cars is a more important and better paid nursing and teaching children?“

At home, nothing changed. In spite of working, housekeeping and children stayed a female domain. The difference among the sexes is drastic: in total, women work 45,2 hours per week, men 35,1. And a full two thirds (66%) of women's time goes to unpaid work, such as housekeeping and child care, with men it is only 20%. Research even showed regression:

In 1991, 55% of young men had their meals cooked for them by women; in 2001 this number had risen back to 72%. One European study showed that women spend the same amount of time with their young children whether they work full-time or not. What this means is that women would rather sacrifice sleep or hobbies than time less spent with their kids.

In past few years, having a full-time job in Austria turned into the loss of a private life. It became an unwritten rule of professional advancement that office hours grew: In fact, every sixth employee in Austria spends more than 45 hours a week on the job. On average, men weekly spend four hours more in the office than required.

Unfortunately, nothing has been done to support women balancing long hours at work with family life. Child care centers are too few and too expensive, and schools let out as early as 13:00 – leaving women no choice but to work part time.

Which is what 40% of employed women do. Unfortunately, the part-time jobs – often in supermarkets or call-centers – rarely offer no security or possibilities for advancement, such jobs. This means that for highly qualified women, they offer no alternative and these women are often forced to decide between career and family.

But those women who do manage to balance a family with 45 (or more hours) weekly spent at the office, still have to fight the “glass ceiling.” In Austria, only 6% of top management jobs are occupied by women, and these women earn 27% less than their male colleagues. The prospects are so poor that some studies show that the higher women climb the corporate ladder, the less they wish to continue climbing. Only 24% of women on high managerial positions want to develop further; a full 57% decide against further development.

Michael Mayer, professor on Vienna's University of Economics created a study in which he combined 50 twin couples among the university graduates – women and men of same age, same background, same education, same ambition and same communication and leadership skills. At the beginning of their careers, everything ran parallel. But after four or five years, the gap started to develop: Men received more training and more advancement; they got their own departments and were given more subordinates.

After 10 years, women earned €70.000 less than their male twins. The only difference was their sex.

The reason of women's problems with professional advancement lies in the vicious circle of existing structures, occupied by men and run in their own interests: The boss is a man, colleagues are men, clients and partners are men. And they all possess a certain homophilia – a love of male company – anchored as deeply as ever. Bosses prefer those who are similar to them, who wear similar suits, have same hobbies, go to the same golf club. They believe that this person, whom they can easily identify with, will be more loyal. This mechanics of men supporting men is empowered by the fact that only 40% of positions are announced - the rest, and mostly the best ones, are staffed in informal ways.

In Austria, say the authors, a quest for a career pays off less for women. Men do what they always did, while women do what they always did – plus what men do. Furthermore, they have to work and fight harder, while accepting that they will earn less. So gradually, women in Austria give up – not because they are less capable or less ambitious, but because they are pragmatic and rational. When they see they cannot win, they choose not to fight.

Society suffers the biggest loss.

“It is visible from the demographics that the potential of highly educated women is the biggest, and most under-utilized potential for innovation, and thus should be better developed and employed,” wrote the European Commission in a 1994 report. Nothing has changed. Old attitudes, old values and male-dominated power mean Austria is giving up on this potential, say authors Hamann and Linsinger.

Because, face it, this men's world doesn't work all that well.