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New EU Women Enliven Debate

Frankfurt based foundation wants to bring together Western and Eastern European Women

At its inaugural event the Frankfurt based foundation "Stiftung Frauen in Europa" (Foundation Women in Europe) has demonstrated the pertinence of its concern: strengthening the participation of women in the process of EU unification and encouraging the exchange between Western and Eastern European women.

Frankfurt/Main. The participants of the symposium "Frauen im erweiterten Europa" (Women in Enlarged Europe) were poised between optimism and pessimism this weekend. The old European countries are pervaded by the worry that new member states may cause regression in equality between men and women, reported Margaret Krannich from the co-organising Heinrich Böll Foundation Hesse. On the other hand, women from Western Europe might be able to profit from the close interconnection between women's studies and the women's movement in the transition states, where women's projects do not "bumble about, lacking in theory and strategy, as has been the case here with us".

Polish native Bozena Choluj, Professor at the Europa-University Viadrina, provided proof for the organizers' analysis that political participation of women is decreasing in the new EU states. The ratio of women in the Polish parliament Sejm is down from 23 to 19 percent. Moreover, under the social democratic government neither legislation regarding abortion has been liberalised nor has an equal rights act been introduced. Choluj interprets the lack of women's support for the only woman among presidential candidates as a disastrous "sign of acquiescence to the status quo of gender relations".

Due to its weak representation in parliament the women's movement faces the danger of becoming polarized in the course of catholicisation of one fraction. Therefore Polish women must "rely on the international network". External pressure might be of help. The EU ought to study closely the impending report on equality, and also take seriously the accompanying "shadow report" provided by non-governmental organisations.

Mechthild Veil, who has established the foundation, expects input for German issues from the transnational perspective. For too long labour participation and day care statistics have served as sole indicators for emancipation levels. Experiences from the transition countries provoke new considerations. Particularly since the outdated belief in a close connection between the economic and the political participation of women can hardly bear up to reality in the new EU states.

According to the viewpoint of the symposium organisers, the increasing renunciation of party politics practised by Central and Eastern European women goes hand in hand with increased efforts to establish oneself on the job market and in civil society. Quite a few questions, to which the new foundation is seeking to find answers by means of symposia and a networked approach.

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