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## Article

title

### **Critical transitions: the production of gender (in-)equality in the life course**

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#### **Article Type: Guest editorial From: Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal, Volume 34, Issue 2**

This special issue of *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal* is dedicated to new findings on the (re)production of (in-)equality in the life courses of men and women in contemporary western societies in the case of Switzerland. It refers to the National Research Program 60 on “Gender Equality” (2010-2014) launched by the Swiss National Science Foundation that aimed at generating knowledge on the complex conditions for gender equality in the Swiss context. Despite extensive efforts in the last decades at all levels of governance in many countries and in numerous organizations, real equality between women and men has not yet been achieved. The causes of persisting gender inequality can be situated in both institutional and inter-individual conditions, and an important part of their social reproduction takes place cumulatively as the individual progresses in his/her life course. As van Genep (1908/1960) has stated already 100 years ago, transitions are characterized by passages from one structural position to another. Such transitions are structured by social norms, especially concerning their timing, their sequential order, and partly also the co-occurrence of significant life events. Some of the social norms attached to life courses have even legal status (such as legal majority, or official retirement age). This makes it more difficult, often even stressing and harmful to individuals to follow non-normative paths, whether they choose them or are forced into them. Moreover, life courses and transitions are not only institutionalized by way of social norms, but also by all sorts of social institutions, their rationalities, and demands (cf schools, family, labour organizations), which makes it also structurally difficult to practice alternatives (Liebig *et al.*, 2014). They can impose typical tensions that people can escape only depending on the availability of specific resources, among which especially purchasing power or – more generally – more or less privileged social positions.

Here, we may distinguish two sorts of transitions in life courses, positional changes and those related to social participation. Positional changes are gradual since they do not imply entry into or exit from specific social fields, but they include changes of one or more positions an individual holds within particular social fields (such as upward or downward professional mobility). Changes in participation are of more radical character: they concern changes of participation (such as job entry or exit, marriage or divorce) and, for that matter, changes of the whole profile of the social participations an individual holds. Transitions of the second sort are therefore likely to engender more fundamental processes of transformation and adaptation, as they bring with them entries into new social roles or exits from heretofore occupied roles as well as entry to or exit from fields of participation, with their related networks of social relations, relevant social norms, available resources, accessible opportunities,

etc. By hypothesis, then, participatory changes may have stronger effects on life course-passengers' identities and life perspectives than positional ones (Levy, 1991/1998, 2013).

In this perspective, life course transitions appear as particularly critical moments for the establishment of gender (in-)equality. Gender inequalities are often reproduced at transition points in the life course, such as choosing a career, pregnancy, marriage, the birth of a first child, divorce, or retirement. These passages typically entail "a loss or gain of privilege, influence or power, and a changed identity and sense of self, as well as changed behaviour" (Glaser and Strauss, 1971/2010, p. 2). Biographical decisions of men and women quite often follow deeply-rooted ideas and cultural notions of gender which are confirmed and perpetuated by institutional norms and pathways. Some decisions may have gendered consequences in the long run that were not necessarily anticipated. For instance, women's choice of a sex-typed vocational training (such as for instance in health-care or nursing) creates at first sight only "horizontally" social difference to men. However, at a later point in time this choice will condition entry into sex-typed jobs that are vertically segregated, i.e., only later in life it turns into an experience of social inequality. Also the decision to have children quite often proves to be significant for men and women, though it is only rarely taken in full anticipation of its re-traditionalizing effects with respect to the division of paid and unpaid labor in a specific social environment.

The contributions to this issue direct attention to such critical moments of transition from different perspectives among which decision making over the life course and its institutional and social framing are of particular interest. Biographical decision making is a complex process, involving different actors in different – quite often asymmetrical – roles, and referring to structural, cultural, economic, legal, social, and political conditions. Few is known about how social and institutional gender constructions – such as company policies on work hours, gender-typical income structures, hiring rules, or tax and pension legislation (re)shape gender relations or about how gender-related values interact with basic prevailing structural conditions, and how these translate into individual decisions and action. As to the more direct institutional and social framing of life courses, basic questions concern how the educational system, employment conditions, and factors in the reconciliation of work and care influence and shape life courses today. To what extent do psychological, social, and economic factors or political and company incentive systems influence couples' decisions about children, family-work sharing, or employment? What institutional arrangements make gender-unequal forms of the division of labour seem "rational" and acceptable to men and women? Further, what is the relationship between current developments in the global/national labour market and gender relations, such as the consequences of discontinuous work histories and atypical and insecure workforce participation on typical and atypical decisions about the life course?

#### **About the texts**

The five contributions to the present volume cover a considerable array of the above-sketched issues within the context of federalist Switzerland, which is particularly diverse with respect to sociopolitical differences on its subnational level of cantons. The article of Makarova and Herzog highlights the importance of the educational system for persisting gender (in)equalities by focussing on traditional stereotypes on gender and science, as most important underlying factors of gender-typical education and career choices of young men and women. In applying Osgoods' rating technique of the "semantic differential" the authors analyse gendered attitudes towards mathematics, physics, and chemistry based on a large Swiss sample of adolescent

school students' as well as their male and female science teachers. While negative associations between female stereotypes and maths as well as physics seem to persist, it is interesting to note that chemistry is characterized by a rather diffuse gender profile, and accordingly also more strongly favored by young women. More freedom for future educational choices of women is also promised by the fact, that science teachers seem more open to gender-neutral conceptions with respect to both, chemistry and physics. However, also in this case strongly "masculine" representations of mathematics among teachers obviously will contribute to discourage changes in female educational and occupational career paths.

Kanji and Brunner focus their interest on women's and men's preference for children as an important biographical crossroad for career aspirations and occupational paths. Also in this case, so it is stressed by the authors, individual decisions coincide with an evaluation and anticipation of structural preconditions. Starting from a detailed theoretical reflection Kanji and Brunner reconstruct the association between women's desire for having children at age 16 and their occupational wishes and situation at age 23. Empirically based on panel data from the Swiss "Transition from Education to Employment (TREE) Survey" their findings imply that young women with "*Kinderwunsch*" envisage and end up in occupations with a higher concentration of women, though further variables such as familiar background or regional (labour-market) contexts develop moderating effects. "Choosing what is possible" seems core aspect of these women's choices, even if the "family friendliness" of female occupations is far from being proved. Information and advice for young women, as well as policy measures enforcing gender equality in organizations are necessary in order to surmount these effects.

Epple, Gasser, Kersten, Nollert and Schief analyse data from the Swiss Labor Force Survey with respect to cantonal differences of women's employment and confirm that "the gendered effect of parenthood on employment is a principal driving force for gender inequality". Their results illustrate the importance of cantonal social policies, especially in the sense that "childcare facilities buffer the gendered impact of parenthood", their presence contributing strongly to a more balanced division of both paid and family work between men and women. Differences between language regions remain net of such policy or structural as well as other cultural factors, French- or Italian-speaking regions being more favorable to employed mothers' working longer hours. Overall, their analysis confirms that in the socio-political context of Switzerland, the task of reconciling engagement in paid work and family life is largely left to mothers instead of being shared by both parents. The emerging picture of contextual influence factors is quite complex, in part even puzzling, and calls for further studies.

Riaño, Limacher, Aschwanden, Hirsig, and Wastl-Walter present an illustrative case study of a nationally mixed couple of professionals, the wife having immigrated from Norway to Switzerland to join her Swiss husband. The authors highlight the critical importance of spatialized social structures of opportunities as well as related cultures, and of critical transitions and actors' related decisions concerning the timing of parenthood, the change of residence, and their consequences for the valuation and devaluation of individual resources. According to their analysis, gender, ethnicity (i.e. in this case, more exactly national origin), and age intersect to create a hierarchically organized family structure which result in the female protagonists' disadvantage. And it points out also the importance of the relationship between the context of emigration and the context of immigration for individual outcomes. The study demonstrates the great importance of (present or absent) structural awareness in biographical decision

making; the couple under study was little aware of structural contingencies and explicitly states that in hindsight, it would prefer other decisions and strategies. Le Feuvre, Kuehni, Rosende, and Schoeni study is dedicated to gendered experiences of aging at work in order to – as they formulate themselves – “illustrate the mechanisms through which men and women accumulate dis-/advantage across the life course, and the influence that critical events in different life domains have on the conditions under which they prepare the transition to retirement”. Their comprehensive fieldwork in four large Swiss companies of different branches include guided interviews with more than sixty male and female employees in different positions, all of them in the final phase of their working life. The authors develop a telling fourfold typology of aging at work, which documents different levels of life satisfaction and of personal control. According to the results, gendered scripts of aging are equally prominent today in Switzerland as increasingly individualized ways to retirement. Due to fundamental changes in the labour market and the private sphere the authors sketch a critical picture for future transition to retirement.

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