

## **Domino Effect?: From Fiscal Crisis to Feminist Attack in the EU**

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*“What is now called the ‘economic and financial crisis’ is also a crisis of democracy and gender equality.”*

– Committee on Women’s Rights and Gender Equality report to the European Parliament, “Report on the Impact of the Economic Crisis on Gender Equality and Women’s Rights” (2012)

When, in 1996, the EU formally introduced gender mainstreaming, it seemingly connoted a major turning point in terms of its recognition – and its proposed redress to – the pervasiveness of gender inequality. However, in the nearly two decades since gender mainstreaming’s launch in the EU, feminist scholars and activists have generated a substantial literature that attempts to make sense of the still unmet promise of transforming the status quo. The alarm over gender mainstreaming’s shortfall has arguably intensified in the wake of the economic and financial crisis set off in 2008, with gender mainstreaming supposedly ‘sidestepped’ in policy responses to the crisis. This perceived sidestepping has provoked warnings of a new “crisis of gender equality” borne out of this bypass. Although we concur that the economic and financial crisis and its policy responses have heightened inequalities, we are not convinced that EU responses to the crisis reflect a major break from how gender has been mainstreamed in EU policy prior to 2008. We contend that policy (dis)engagement with gender mainstreaming represents a long-standing challenge, marking its course from the outset. In this paper, we *historicize* the path of mainstreaming gender that seemingly culminates in 2008 and since – with the onset and progression of the crisis – in a reversal of its gains. In our re-reading of the empirical evidence *en bloc*, the widely-shared supposition that past ‘gains’ were progressively accruing becomes dislodged. We argue that many of these changes have been localized and unsustainable. Furthermore, the emphasis on (and desire for) positive change has deflected attention away from stasis (or negative, undesired changes) as progress offsetting. We conclude that the crisis was, in fact, a missed opportunity for the EU to re-envision its economic governance towards realizing gender equality but its non-occurrence does not reflect a “critical juncture” or emergent “crisis” – that is, a departure from its earlier course – brought on by the economic and financial crisis and/or its policy responses.

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