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Gender Equality in Social Assistance? Transforming Norms and Practices at a Client, Frontline, Organizational and Policy Level in Different Regions of Switzerland – in an intersectional perspective

Vulnerability and poverty are closely intervened with gender: this does become very concrete when looking at social assistance. In Switzerland, for example, every fifth single-parent household, from which around 90% are female, are dependent on social assistance (FSO 2022b). Historically, women have been over-represented in social assistance schemes in all industrialized countries. This is partly due to prevailing norms about men as breadwinners and women as mothers and wives that have been embedded in social policy schemes. These norms, however, have been challenged in recent decades by the new ‘activation paradigm’, which promotes work integration of all adults.

This project aims to contribute the understanding of how transforming gender equality norms and practice in social assistance are implemented differently by comparing various levels and regions. The topic is highly relevant, as these changing norms are shaping client’s lives, trajectories and opportunities to leave assistance.

The research focuses on two Swiss cantons, Vaud and Bern, which differ in their implementation of social assistance and gender culture. In each canton, an urban and a rural social service will be examined with the methodical approach of data triangulation at three levels: 1) analysis of social assistants’ practices and the experience of client’s through observations and interviews (Micro level) 2) analysis of social services norms and practices, across statistical and discourse analysis of organizational documents, focus group, and observations (Meso level). 3): to identify changes and differences between the case studies we will do focus groups, as well as analyzing documents and legal texts since the beginning of the 21st century at the municipal, cantonal and supra-cantonal levels (Macro level). For each of these levels, we will analyze the norms and practices of social assistance around four dimensions: access and intake, material support, personal support and sanctions.

We aim to identify mechanisms, factors and practices at all levels that promote gender equality from an intersectional perspective, as well as those that hinder it. The findings will be reflected upon with the various stakeholders, including clients, to develop target-group specific recommendations, summarized in fact sheets for SKOS and SODK, cantons and communes, social services and frontline-workers, schools of social work, etc. The results will help to broaden the gender and intersectionality perspective within social work, welfare state and street-level bureaucrat research in Switzerland and beyond.

As this SNSF-funded project is only starting in 2024, the presentation will be based on the current state of the art and the discussion of the planned project.