

Austria: Frame conditions and women's rights 20th Century War and Peace in Europe

Europe's geopolitical structure was completely reconfigured: two World Wars, foundation of republics, fascist and dictatorial regimes and the split in two parts according to ideology. 'Cold War' dominated the political scene until 1989.

Everything is still very vivid, because we experienced it ourselves or it was passed on by contemporary witnesses.

Socio-political Frame Conditions

Looking back 100 years we have to acknowledge with appreciation that eventually big changes took place for us women: starting with the right to vote (1918) political participation from basis up to parliament became possible. This facilitated continuous influence on the legislation regulating access to education, freedom to choose a career and pursue it, which in turn led to more personal freedom in social and private matters.

First half of the 20th Century

Women are especially affected in times of war and the aftermath, since they traditionally have to care for the daily needs of the family. They have to replace the men missing in factories, they are supposed to encourage their husbands, brothers and fathers to persevere in the defence of their home countries. This also happened during the two World Wars 1914-1918 and 1938-1945.

Already during the first feminist movement in the beginning of the century, the call for 'Peace', 'Disarmament' and 'War – never again' was part of their campaigns. However, this desire was only fulfilled in a united Europe in the 2nd half of the century.

Rich and poor were affected by the world economic crisis during the interwar period. The one lost their properties, the others lost their jobs. In times of crisis it is easier for fascist regimes to attain power. For women it meant that rights they had obtained in arduous struggle were withdrawn again in favour of the potentates' ideology. Racial laws forced some of them and their families to leave the country, they were deported to concentration camps and murdered. In illegality men and women tried to fight against the dictatorial regime.

The second half of the 20th century

To move freely in public was not an issue any more in the second half of the 20th century. The 'Salons' were replaced by autonomous feminist movements, and there were spaces reserved for women. The feminist movement, which now formed itself under great participation - 'the private is political' – generated enormous pressure, so that politics had to respond.

In the 70ties women's requests turned into women's politics.

Some essential achievements, which make social participation easier for us and grant us many liberties today: self-determined reproduction due to anti-baby pill and abortion legislation, changes in marriage law to partnership with equal rights, access to and free choice of all educational institutions and professions, equal pay for equal work in collective contracts (reality still lags behind).

A century of fundamental change in Europe – politically, but also in respect to women's rights and position in society.

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