



Annual Colloquium on Fundamental Rights 2017
"Women's Rights in Turbulent Times"
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Concept paper by the European Commission and the European Institute for Gender Equality

Plenary A: Women's rights under attack

Aim of the session

After a period of progress on gender equality and fulfilment of women's rights, currently many areas remain stagnant. This session will explore the rise of anti-gender movements on the one hand and the surge in criticism of sexism and misogyny through popular movements on the other hand.

The session takes the form of a roundtable discussion. To enable as many discussants to take the floor as possible, please keep your interventions to 2 minutes.

Issues for discussion

- What is, from your perspective, the most urgent issue to address, and if there was one action you could take to improve the situation, what would it be?
- How can we shift the discourse and narrative back from backsliding on women's rights to the discussion of how to fulfil women's empowerment in all spheres of life?
- How can we combat the discourse that has resulted in political parties seeking to be seen as protecting the 'heritage' of a nation, resulting in a backlash against rights seen as contrary to this?
- What measures can we envision to tackle persistent gender stereotypes?

Background

This paper considers the realities on the ground for women in today's European Union and whether women's rights are under attack.

Efforts to undermine women's rights include explicit and openly misogynist and anti-women movements, the rise of populism and the resurgence and imposition in some European countries of traditional roles and ideologies. These efforts seek to reassign women to the procreative role in the domestic sphere, to undermine women's voices including through violence and intimidation, and to prevent women from participating fully in society.

Advancing gender equality is critical to all areas of a healthy society, from reducing poverty to promoting the health, education, protection and the well-being of girls and boys. At an international level, Goal 5 of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. Increased efforts to achieve SDG5 in the European Union is more important than ever in these times of growing threats to women's rights, equality and autonomy.

Intersectionality is an important frame for understanding how different grounds of discrimination intersect and impact women differently and how multiple discrimination can lead to additional burdens for some women (ENAR, 2017). The situation of women at the intersection of several types of inequality (e.g. race, immigration status and disability) should be a sounding board for the kind of society we want to live in. Threats to the most vulnerable women in Europe are threats to all, and experiences of racism, homophobia, ableism, ageism, and discrimination based on economic and social background should be understood and combatted by the wider movement for women's rights (ENAR, 2017).

Backlash against women's rights

Academic research has highlighted that in the last decade we have witnessed a rise of nationalist movements calling for regressive policies and retrogressive solutions as part of an organised opposition to democratic values and the global human rights agenda (Zacharenko, 2016). Several parts of Europe are currently facing new waves of resistance to a so-called 'gender ideology' or 'gender theory' (Paternotte and Kuhar, 2017). Opposition to progressive gender equality is manifested in challenges to equal economic independence, equal pay, equality in decision-making; ending gender-based violence; gender mainstreaming; sex education; and the persistence of gender stereotyping.

Reproductive health care often becomes a key area of dispute. Restricting access to contraceptive care can be a form of oppression, in which women are forced through pregnancies in order to ensure that they remain under the coercive control of others. Those pushing for these restrictions on women's lives often claim that the protection of a country's culture is their main aim.

Sexism and misogyny rising to the surface

The #MeToo campaign is showing the world that a vast majority of women, at some point in their lives, has been affected by sexism and misogyny. Figures published by the Fundamental Rights Agency confirm that the situation in this area is deeply worrying: 55% of women in the EU have experienced sexual harassment (FRA, March 2014).

Over the last century, two contradictory developments have come to the surface at the same time. While the women's rights movement has played a key role in establishing the success and independence of women, it has not been able to limit the new form of aggressive misogyny that has been evolving.

This backlash has led to a counter strategy, which is reflected in women's social movements, aimed at combatting a sexist and misogynist culture.

The persistence of gender stereotypes

Gender stereotypes are preconceived notions about how people should act, think and look based solely on their gender. They are a result of deeply ingrained societal values and norms, which tend to be acquired from a very young age and passed on thereafter (EIGE, 2017). Gender stereotypes are pervasive in all aspects of life, from education to work, from sport to art, from family to political life and in the media. They influence behaviours at work and in social life, being inextricably linked to gender inequalities in all spheres of life. Gender stereotyping can harm the lives of girls, boys, men and women by limiting the development of their natural abilities in terms of education and professional advancement and affecting their choices for the future (OHCHR, 2017). As just one example, results from the forthcoming Eurobarometer show that a majority of Europeans believe that women are more likely than men to make decisions based on their emotions (European Commission, forthcoming). Most gender stereotypes still perpetuate typically patriarchal values in our modern society, which have a negative impact on the lives of children, particularly girls, putting them at higher risk for instance of sexual abuse and domestic violence (Blum, Mmari and Moreau, 2017).

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