

Aim of the discussion

This session offers the possibility to look at movements for women's rights through the lens of the actors. It will provide an opportunity to hear success stories and ponder about the lessons learnt, discussing the present and looking towards the future together with civil society organisations across the continent and coming from all horizons.

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?
- This is the moment to hear from you. What are you proud of, what was your success in your area of work? What was the lesson learnt?
- What role does protest and activism, for example the Women's Marches and the #MeToo campaign, play in the process of promoting women's rights?
- Who are the potential allies in the future? Who are you seeking to mobilise in support of women's rights? Are there other movements, societal groups, or some country-specific developments to build on? How do you intend to involve men to deliver change?

Background

This paper considers how to best promote women's rights through inclusive and sustainable civil society. It looks at the challenges facing the women's movement in an ever-changing world.

Civil society in turbulent times

Civil society has been instrumental in the progress made on women's rights as a dynamic source of ideas and policy perspectives, partnerships and support. It plays a vital role in advancing the shared strategic objective of promoting gender equality, and women's rights and empowerment. Women's movements are active in the practice and frontline; bring the voices and experiences of women to the attention of policy makers and act as catalysts and connectors between movements, countries, sectors and actors. They are the imperative component of 21st century governance.

Promoting gender equality and combating gender-based discrimination is a long-standing policy commitment of the European Union, through its Strategic Engagement for Equality between Women and Men (European Commission, 2015), and strongly reaffirmed by the European Pillar of Social Rights. Women's movements, from their beginnings, fought for very concrete aims – such as voting rights, reproductive rights, non-discrimination at work, ending gender-based violence. Story-telling and women's personal and collective narratives have been a central part of women's movements: amplifying real women's voices and life experiences in different European contexts, and bringing these into the European decision-making arenas.

Civil society has a crucial role to play in maintaining the political pressure on decision-makers, especially at a time when there are increasing risks of populism and resistance to increased

women's rights. The social movements that have emerged recently as a response to new wave of misogyny are increasingly using social media, crowdsourcing and crowdfunding as a means to build their movement. Another example is the use by grassroots organisations of online platforms to find and connect with young people in order to identify physical and emotional violence in relationships and the family.

Inclusive society and its supporters

One area for further reflection is how the women's movement can better reflect the interests of women of colour and religious minorities. It is extremely important to ensure that diverse women's voices are heard in all parts of civil society and in public life. For the women's movement it is a priority to ensure that the full range of diverse women are visible and included, especially women with disabilities, migrant women, women of colour, young women, older women and LGBTI people.

The issue of how to build solidarity amongst groups promoting and representing different social groups is crucial - the Irish Yes Equality campaign is a good example of how to develop gender equality networks across the EU.

A further issue is how existing women's movements can reach out beyond their natural audience and bring together an alliance of different supporters on issues like increased gender equality in companies and political decision-making. For change to be decisive, men will need to embrace it. It is therefore necessary to address the best approach to bring men into the reform process.

Sustainability

Recent research published on the impact of austerity in the UK and France has shown that austerity measures hit hardest the organisations developed to support women of colour and migrant women (e.g. Bassel and Emejulu, 2017). These organisations are generally the least likely to receive state support, and when they do this support is often the first casualty of austerity measures. The sustainability of funding and resources is a constant challenge for civil society, including for those advocating women's rights. Women's organisations are engaging in an ever more strategic approach to power analysis and alliance building to ensure that we do not miss opportunities to engage with other networks to shape debates on the Future of Europe.

Joining the dots

New citizens' movements are reacting by opening up new political space and engaging in local action. Opportunities are presenting themselves to build new alliances within civil society.

Women's progress in education, greater access to the labour market, and changes in gender norms all affect men and women's aspirations and opportunities in life. Women's rising levels of educational attainment – and the associated narrowing of the gender gap in education – are key drivers of change towards an inclusive and sustainable society.

References

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