

TIME FOR WOMEN'S RIGHTS, TIME FOR A UNITED FEMINIST EUROPE

The state of women's rights in Central Eastern Europe, the Balkans
and the Baltic States: Under Attack and Under Resourced

A report by the Central Eastern Europe, the Balkan and the Baltic States Taskforce of the European Women's Lobby

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



EUROPEAN WOMEN'S
LOBBY
EUROPEEN DES FEMMES

1. INTRODUCTION

The European Women's Lobby (EWL) is the largest umbrella organisation of women's associations in the EU, working to promote women's rights and equality between women and men. EWL membership extends to all 28 EU member states and the 3 candidate countries, as well as 19 European-wide bodies, representing more than 2,000 organisations. In Central Eastern Europe, the Balkan and the Baltic States (CEEBS), the EWL established itself at the end of the 1990s as a strong contact point in between national networks of women's organisations and EU institutions and forums.

In the past decade, progress on women's rights has been neither linear nor uniform across EU member states. EWL is taking stock on women's rights and gender equality efforts in the region and sees this moment as an opportunity to amplify the voice of women's organisations from the region by sharing their analysis at EU level. While there is a wide variety of experience across the different countries in the region, both in terms of history and present, there are trends that are important to draw out, as well as lessons learned and recommendations coming from women's organisations across the region.

The EWL has serious concerns about gender equality and women's rights within the CEEBS region and the extent to which EU architecture for equality incorporates regional challenges as well as the voices of women from the region. We are also engaged in the visible resistance to the rise of populism which is coming from a bold and widespread women's movement in different countries. Across the region and throughout the region, women's organisations are mobilising

to defend and advance women's rights. We are taking to the streets to raise awareness about the denial of women's human rights, about the continuing economic and social inequality women face, about the marginalisation and silencing of women's voices, and we are mobilising to mark our outrage about the continuing intolerable levels of violence against women. We organise as women in all our diversity across class, ethnicity, migration, ability and age status.

2. WHAT IS THE CENTRAL EASTERN EUROPE, THE BALKAN AND THE BALTIC STATES (CEEBS) TASKFORCE?

The CEEBS Taskforce (hereafter 'The Taskforce') was created after the 2014 General Assembly of EWL to share information, identify common challenges and strategies for action in the CEEBS region to promote gender equality and a context sensitive women's rights agenda. Successive European Gender Equality Indexes (EIGE) demonstrate that progress towards gender equality in the region has stalled. The Taskforce consequently urges immediate action by domestic and European decision-makers as well as a new political commitment in the region.

The CEEBS Taskforce has identified eight key areas of priorities for women's rights in the region:

- 1 Strengthening, supporting and resourcing a strong women's rights movement in the region.**
- 2 Reclaiming feminism and equality between women and men as European values.¹**
- 3 Ensuring women's economic independence, reducing economic disparities between women and men and urgently tackling poverty-based on gender and other intersecting forms of discrimination.**

"It's a crucial moment for global feminism. (...) We women sometimes play a role in the continuity of patriarchy, because patriarchy is not a black and white system in which men oppress women. It's much more complicated. I think we need to go back to the basics. Remember the solidarity. The sisterhood. And expand it."

Elif Shafak, writer and women's rights activist, Turkey

- 4 **Increasing women’s participation and representation in politics and increasing the number of feminist politicians in power.**
- 5 **Strengthening accountable and well-resourced gender equality machineries whose mandates will take into account the principle of diversity and will be responsive to the needs of all women and girls.**
- 6 **Ending violence against women and ensuring sexual and reproductive health and rights for all.**
- 7 **Ending intersectional discrimination of women from minority groups, including of Roma women and migrant and refugee women.**
- 8 **Maintaining a peaceful Europe by ensuring participation and representation of women in all stages of peace-making processes.**

3. REGIONAL BACKGROUND FOR PROMOTING WOMEN’S RIGHTS AND GENDER EQUALITY

Equality between women and men used to be one of the perceived advances of the Eastern Bloc in Cold War times. In 1929, constitutional provisions recognised equality between women and men in the Soviet Union. After the Second World War, socialist regimes in Eastern Europe formalised equality between women and men as a constitutional right and granted women equal rights of participation in the public sphere and in family law. Most countries in the Eastern bloc legalised abortion before Western countries and provided free access to health and education. There was a strong rhetoric of equality between the sexes, though mostly in terms of female employment. Women’s integration in the labour market was in reality limited by their significant responsibilities for child rearing

and housework while the gender pay gap was similar to levels found in OECD countries. Women’s political participation was also part of the socialist regimes measures of equality and many introduced a quota system. Nonetheless, women’s position in politics was rather toothless compared to those of men. Paradoxically, the strong rhetoric of authoritarian regimes on equality has in places led to a rejection of feminism, gender equality and women’s rights issues during the transition period, often portrayed as signs of a defunct political order.

The 1990s had an enormous impact on people living in post-transitional countries. Women’s participation in politics dropped dramatically in many of the first elected parliaments (RO from 30% to 3.3, HU from 33% to 7%) as quotas disappeared. Women paid a higher cost for transition. They often felt pressure to leave the workplace behind in economies unable to provide sufficient jobs. Transition rhetoric often emphasised women’s return to the home as a restoration of “proper, traditional gender relations” that had been “artificially altered” by the previous regimes. In several countries, this included restrictions to abortion, and cuts to childcare facilities. Women were impacted by market liberalisation, state reforms and severe cuts in the welfare system, losing their jobs as well as of special measures and social benefits. Within the neoliberal paradigm, pre-existing networks of solidarity based on class, professional and gender fell apart in many places, leaving space for other kinds of alliances based on business interests, political affiliation or religious affinity.

The 90s also saw the establishment or re-establishment of many women’s rights organisations working on promoting culture, lobbying and advocacy for women’s reproductive rights or violence. Public campaigning and organising happened, especially around the Beijing World Conference for Women in 1995 and the EU accession in the 2000s. With limited funding and organising experience, many of the battles became reactive. In some cases these organisations also began fulfilling functions formerly managed by the state. The twin track of service provision and advocacy work is still one of the features of women’s organisations in the region.

Women’s rights NGO had relied on international funding, as nationally there were no or limited funds available. With EU accession, the

1. Equality between women and men is one of the European Union’s founding values: <http://ec.europa.eu/justice/gender-equality/>

international donor agenda changed such that EU funding was the only option. EU funding was often inaccessible due to problems with providing matching funding and the organisational infrastructure required. This said, EEA Grants had a positive impact on the promotion of equality in the region leading to a revival among women's rights NGOs by providing an accessible system of funding that was friendlier to women's rights NGOs than formal EU funding channels.

After EU accession, fine-tuning gender equality 'machinery' and monitoring institutional efforts were crucial for women's rights NGOs. However, as austerity economics hit both old and new EU, the agenda was undermined across the entire EU. National mechanisms were severely affected by cuts, as were public services that women relied on. What is more, women's rights advocates lost influence and leverage through the marginalisation of women's rights and gender equality as a European priority and through the rise of conservative populist politics and neoliberal economics. As a response to this situation, women's rights organisations see the strengthening of women's movement in the region as key. The following priorities will form the basis for joint campaigning and advocacy ahead in the coming years.

4. TASKFORCE PRIORITIES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1 Strengthening, supporting and resourcing a strong women's rights movement in the region

Women's organisations in the region have actively contributed to the development of their societies and of women's rights.

Nonetheless, women's NGOs have been unable to respect, these organisations pioneered and even invented new forms of support in the field of social services. Still, women's NGOs were not able to capitalise on their contributions and often became increasingly marginalised in society. In addition, funding for women's rights NGOs is rapidly decreasing or altogether disappearing. This situation needs to change and the Taskforce is committed to work towards building a strong women's movement in the region.

Recommendations for European and national decision-makers:

- Allocate funding to women's rights NGOs through schemes that cover service provision and advocacy work as well as funding small women's rights NGOs themselves;
- Support the strategic development of women's rights NGOs to ensure the continued existence of a women's movement and long-term resilience of NGOs;
- Recognise women's rights NGOs knowledge and expertise and actively seek and integrate their inputs into different policy areas.

2 Reclaiming feminism and equality between women and men as European values

The Taskforce has observed conservative forces increasingly attacking women's rights by denouncing "gender" as a criminal ideology. The anti-choice international lobby gathers popular support and co-opts politicians in public denunciations of gender equality as "an ideology threatening family values". Attackers of the "gender ideology" target in particular women's access to sexual and reproductive health, young people's access to sexuality education as well as the rights of LGBTQI people.

Recommendations for European and national decision-makers:

- Promote equality and the long traditions of feminism that have made possible the recognition of women as full members of society. An EU political strategy for equality should be developed and implemented;
- Hold EU countries accountable for the full implementation of EU standards and laws on gender equality, through annual monitoring on the implementation of EU standards and laws on gender equality by the European Commission;
- Establish a regional or European campaign to highlight the contribution of women's rights activist and feminists to European History modelled on Women's History Month;
- Take measures to recognise sexism as an aggravated form of discrimination;
- Allocate funding to women's rights NGOs ensuring that grassroots women's rights NGOs have access to funding;
- Full implementation by the EU and Member states of the Council of Europe Istanbul Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence.

3 Ensuring women's economic independence, reducing economic disparities between women and men and urgently tackling poverty based on gender and other intersecting forms of discrimination

The recent economic crisis and ensuing fiscal reforms in member states have had a strong gendered impact. Women's employment rates have dropped and the pace of labour market reintegration is very slow. Women's earnings have significantly fallen. Austerity packages brought new legislation to cut labour costs. Cuts in social protection schemes, pension provisions and public services have impacted women's lives and increased the risk of poverty. The CEEBBS region has the largest European population at risk of poverty with 4 member states where more than a third of the population is on the threshold of poverty (Bulgaria 48%, Romania 40.4%, Latvia 35.1% and Hungary 33.5%). Women's safety continues to be put at risk with the defunding of shelters, counselling centres and hotlines.

Recommendations for European and national decision-makers:

- Ensure gendered targets for poverty reduction in the context of the post Europe2020 Strategy;
- Strengthen measures for tackling the pay gap and increasing women's employment;
- Protect women from cuts and make more affordable and accessible services;
- Strengthen women's role and participation in collective bargaining;
- Individualise rights to social protection and taxation to support women's economic independence;
- Provide significant financial incentives for women entrepreneurs;
- Ensure that the country reports produced by the European Commission contain information on women's socio-economic status;
- Ensure that women's organisations are engaged in meaningful consultation on National Reform Programmes and other country specific tools submitted to the European Commission.

4 Increasing women's participation and representation in politics and increasing the number of feminist politicians in power

The EIGE Gender Equality Index shows that most countries of the region scored below the

EU average on women's political representation. Women make up between 9,5% (HU) and 28% (PL) of elected delegates in national parliaments. In Hungary, no single woman holds a ministerial portfolio. Few countries in the region have introduced compulsory special measures to promote women in politics. Women's access to politics is constrained by gender stereotypes and sexism within politics, as well as capacity gaps. Yet special measures such as compulsory quotas work. In the Republic of North Macedonia, a quota meant that women's representation jumped from under 10% in parliament to 30% in one election cycle. The Taskforce calls for more women politicians, and more feminist politicians, to ensure the representation of women's rights in laws and policies.

Recommendations for European and national decision-makers:

- Adopt compulsory temporary special measures such as quotas at all levels;
- Support funding for women's causes in elected bodies;
- Where appropriate, change legislation on the establishment of political parties and political party funding so that women's parties and feminist political forces can participate;
- Reform educational programmes so that non-stereotypical gender roles are promoted among the young;
- Sanction sexism during election campaigns as an aggravated form of gender-based discrimination.

5 Strengthening accountable and well-resourced gender equality machineries whose mandates will take into account the principle of diversity and will be responsive to the needs of all women and girls

Since the Beijing Platform of Action in 1995 and the incorporation of the *acquis communautaire* in the CEEBBS region, institutional mechanisms on women's rights have been a key demand from women's NGOs. National mechanisms are increasingly important and visible, but under serious financial threat with the onset of austerity. Equality between women and men, gender mainstreaming and gender budgeting still remain confused or not yet fully understood by decision-makers. Women's NGOs participation varies across the region but is generally reported as insubstantial.

Recommendations for European and national decision-makers:

- Urgently re-establish national gender equality machineries, where specific institutions to promote gender equality do not exist, without creating competitiveness with women's rights organisations; provide adequate funding while ensuring this funding does not impact on resources for women's organisations; and provide adequate human resources to make institutions functional and effective;
- Promote EU co-operation between different national machineries and best practice exchanges; promote cooperation with EU level structures such as the European Commission's Department-General for Justice and the EU Commissioner for Gender Equality;
- Introduce clear means of engagement in between national gender equality machineries and women's NGOs, acknowledging that the role of women's rights CSOs is to be critical and demanding.

6 Ending Violence against Women and Ensuring Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights for All

The current situation of violence against women is incompatible with human rights commitments and with democratic standards. One in three women in the EU has been a victim of physical violence and more than 6% have suffered from sexual assault. While some criminalisation of domestic violence exists across the region, many countries are reluctant to design laws for the protection and safety of women from a women's rights perspective. The urgency of the situation of violence against women and girls is not fully recognised. In addition, sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) have been under serious attacks almost in every single country in the past five years.

Recommendations for European and national decision-makers:

- All member states must sign, ratify and implement the Council of Europe Istanbul Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, without reservations, the EU should also ratify it;
- Ensure systematic consultation of and sustainable funding for women's organisations;

- Issue an EU Strategy and new Directive on Violence recognising all forms of male violence against women;
- Violence against women should be broadened at EU level to encompass prostitution;
- Appoint an EU coordinator to end violence against women and girls, within the umbrella of the European Commission's work on equality, with a mandate to coordinate the implementation of the Istanbul Convention at EU level;
- The EU is at the forefront of promoting SRHR in international environments but must do so in its national contexts. Women in the EU have a right to legal abortion and abortion belongs in the EU equality agenda;
- The European Commission should follow its mandate on anti-discrimination and recognise that health packages limiting women's access to sexual and reproductive health and services are discriminatory and should end;
- Government policies should not promote sexist attitudes, incite to hatred, or be expressed in antigypsyist, anti-migrant or homophobic language and it should not promote gender stereotypes.

7 Ending intersectional discrimination of women from minority groups, including of Roma women and migrant and refugee women

The CEEBBS region hosts the largest Roma population in the European Union. Romani women are often exposed to intersectional discrimination, including on the grounds of gender and ethnic origin and have limited access to employment, education, health, social services and decision-making. The Roma population face several social issues due to ongoing social exclusion and multigenerational poverty. Romani women in particular, run a higher risk than non-Romani women of all forms of violence against women, notably domestic violence, trafficking and exploitation while facing additional obstacles in accessing protection. Migration occurs both from outside and within European borders to and from the CEEBBS region. While women and girls have reported being targeted in hate crimes in the CEEBBS region due to their migrant background or perceived ethnicity, women migrants from the CEEBBS region also face discrimination and anti-immigrant sentiment within other

EU member states. Against all of this, migrant women, Roma women, and in fact all women, have a wealth of knowledge, expertise and experience that they are willing to share. We call on the Member states to see women migrants and Roma women as a resource, and remind the EU of its human rights obligations towards them.

Recommendations for European and national decision-makers:

- Meet the promises of National Strategies for Roma inclusion;
- Ensure that the fundamental rights of Romani women, men and children are respected and end policies such as forced evictions that would further marginalise them;
- Ensure that Romani and Traveller women and girls are informed about their rights under existing national legislation on gender equality and anti-discrimination and fully benefit from them;
- Implement equality in civic rights and in access to health services, education, employment and accommodation that respect human rights, non-discrimination and compatible with nomadism in relevant cases;
- Social inclusion priorities must be linked with anti-discrimination measures and zero-tolerance to antigypsyism;
- Ensure access to services and assistance to all Romani, migrant and refugee women and girls as required, in line with human rights;
- Sign the UN Convention on the Protection of the Rights of all Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families;
- Ensure that social inclusion programmes for refugee and migrant people have a gender component; design accessible social services.

8 Maintaining a peaceful Europe by ensuring participation and representation of women in all stages of peace-making processes

The more the conflict escalates, the more a militarist patriotic rhetoric explodes in the neighbouring countries. Populists capitalise on the situation in order to revive patriarchal stereotypes associating men with warriors and defenders and women with motherhood. Such politics is dangerous for peace and stability. The Taskforce calls for a responsible politics leading towards a de-escalation of conflict and meaningful participation of women in all stages of peace-making processes.

Recommendations for European and national decision-makers:

- Diplomatic talks should include women negotiators and women peacekeepers according to the UN resolution on women and peace and security (UNSCR1325);
- EU foreign policy must value peace and regional cooperation and act more decisively towards ending conflicts;
- Grant refugee status and other forms of protection to people fleeing in the face of conflict;
- Direct European aid to conflict zones in the Middle East and Ukraine, especially to refugee camps;
- Recognise violence against women, especially sexual violence, as a risk to women in conflict zones; recognise sexual violence in conflict and post-conflict situations as a crime of war and provide legal remedy to victims.

CREDITS

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ABOUT

THE EUROPEAN WOMEN'S LOBBY

Founded in 1990, the European Women's Lobby (EWL) is the largest alliance of over 2,000 women's non-governmental associations in the EU coming together to campaign for their common vision of a Feminist Europe.

ABOUT EWL'S CENTRAL EASTERN EUROPE, THE BALKAN AND THE BALTIC STATES (CEEBS) TASKFORCE

The EWL CEEBS Taskforce brings together women's rights advocates from Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Republic of North Macedonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Turkey as well as representatives of 2 network organisations, the European Network of Migrant Women and the European Centre of the International Council of Women (ECICW). Together they work to promote inclusive democratic and peaceful societies free of gender stereotypes and discrimination.

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