

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

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



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

June 2022

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 26 EU member states, 3 candidate countries, Iceland and the United Kingdom, as well as 17 European-wide bodies, representing more than 2,000 organisations across Europe. In Central and Eastern Europe, the Balkan and the Baltic States (CEEBS), the EWL established itself at the end of the 1990s as a strong liaison between national networks of women's organisations and EU institutions and forums.

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

The EWL is seriously concerned about gender equality and women's rights in the CEEBS countries and the extent to which EU architecture for equality incorporates regional challenges and women's voices. These challenges were amplified following the beginning of Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. As in all wars and conflicts, women and girls are collateral damage, and violence and rape are systematically used as a weapon of

war. As we gradually emerge from a public health crisis, in which women took their lion's share to keep the society functioning, this war again generates poverty and heightens violence, sexual exploitation, and prostitution, all of which impact different groups of women.

The EWL 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 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, the continuing economic and social inequality, marginalisation and silencing of women's voices, and the continuing intolerable levels of violence against women. We organise as women in all our diversity across class, ethnicity, migration status, ability and age.

"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

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

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

The 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.**
- 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.**

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 Romani 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 the 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 that 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 special measures and social benefits. Within the neoliberal paradigm,

pre-existing networks of solidarity based on class, profession 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 reestablishment of many women's rights organisations working on promoting culture, lobbying and advocacy for women's reproductive rights and combating violence. Public campaigning and organising happened, especially around the Beijing World Conference for Women in 1995 and the EU enlargement 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 NGOs had relied on international funding, as nationally there were no or limited funds available. With EU accession, the international donor agenda changed, making EU funding 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 joining the EU, fine-tuning gender equality 'machinery' and monitoring institutional efforts were crucial for women's rights NGOs in the region. However, as austerity economics hit both the old and new EU, the agenda was undermined across the entire Union. National mechanisms were severely

affected by cuts, as were public services that women relied on. Women's rights advocates lost influence and leverage as women's rights and gender equality were marginalised 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. This strengthening is even more essential after the devastating effects of the COVID-19 crisis on women and in the light of the dramatic consequences of the invasion of Ukraine for women from Ukraine and in the region. 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 gain respect, although they 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 became increasingly marginalised in society. In addition, funding for women's rights NGOs is rapidly decreasing or altogether disappearing. The Covid-19 pandemic and its aftermath forced women's organisations to work under huge resource constraints, battling active political movements against the rights of women and girls. 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. The EU Gender Equality Strategy should be fully implemented;
- Hold EU countries accountable 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;
- Fully ratify and implement the Council of Europe Istanbul Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence;
- Adopt the European' Commission's Directive on 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 as well as the devastating COVID-19 crisis 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 exacerbated by the Covid-19 crisis brought new legislation to cut labour costs. Cuts in social protection schemes, pension provisions and public services have affected women's lives and increased the risk of poverty. The CEEBBS region has a large European population at risk of poverty. In 2020, 35.8% of people in Romania and 33.6% in Bulgaria were at risk of poverty and social exclusion. Following the major health, security and energy crises in the past two years, these

numbers are expected to only get worse. 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 13% (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;
- Foster parity and adopt concrete measures to ensure candidate lists have an equal number of male and female candidates, such as the use of alternation or zipped lists;
- Support funding for women's causes in elected bodies;
- Support Women's rights organisations with adequate resources and funding, in particular considering the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic;
- 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;
- Establish gender mainstreaming in all the activities of the European Union and national governments;
- Make gender equality a horizontal principle of the European and national elections and a minimal democratic standard;
- 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 cooperation 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 Equality;

- Introduce clear means of engagement 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. In the European Union, one in three women have been victim of physical and/or sexual violence at least once since the age of 15 and one in two women experienced sexual harassment. Moreover, every week, around fifty women die from domestic violence. 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. The Covid-19 pandemic and the invasion of Ukraine yet again proved how quickly women's right to a free, safe, legal and destigmatised access to reproductive services can be denied.

Recommendations for European and national decision-makers:

- All member states must sign, fully 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;
- Adopt the new Directive on Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence and improve it so that it recognises all forms of male violence against women, including sexual exploitation;
- Violence against women should be broadened at EU level to encompass sexual exploitation and 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. This has been reminded by the French President, Emmanuel Macron, in January 2022 in the framework of the French EU Presidency of the Council, when he requested the recognition of abortion rights in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights;
- 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 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 Romani 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, Romani 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 Romani 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, integration programmes, training, decent 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;
- Make a top priority to promote a society of peace and safety by preventing and combating all forms of male violence against women and girls including sexual exploitation; protecting and supporting victims; prosecuting perpetrators; and addressing all the structural issues that fuel this violence;
- Apply gender mainstreaming across all migration and asylum policies and initiatives, including during the design, objective-setting, implementation and monitoring phases and using gender impact assessments and collecting sex-disaggregated data;

- Strengthen collaboration between EU institutions, national governments and key stakeholders, including open dialogue and consultation with women's specialist organisations to maximise the voices of women's diverse experiences.

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 militarist patriotic rhetoric explodes in the neighbouring countries. The war in Ukraine is a sad reminder of this reality. 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 responsible politics leading towards a deescalation of conflict and meaningful participation of women in all stages of peace-making processes.

Recommendations for European and national decision-makers:

- Guarantee women's equitable participation in EU foreign policy negotiations, diplomatic talks, the various stages of the conflict cycle, and peace and security processes as well as include women negotiators and women peacekeepers according to the UN resolution on women and peace and security (UNSCR1325);
- Gender mainstreaming should be systematically integrated into the EU's foreign and security policy;
- 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;
- Give high priority to gender equality and SRHR in the EU and Member States humanitarian aid response, particularly among vulnerable groups such as refugees and migrants, women and girls, who are particularly exposed to sexual violence, sexually transmitted diseases, sexual exploitation, rape as a weapon of war and unwanted pregnancies;
- 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

The European Women's Lobby (EWL) would like to give special thanks to the many knowledgeable women from across Europe who made valuable contributions to this report. We thank all the **members of EWL's Central and Eastern Europe, the Balkan and the Baltic States (CEEBS) Taskforce** who participated in the preparation, drafting and review of the report, including Selma Acuner, Laura Albu, Daniela Antonovska, Iliana Balabanova Stoycheva, Teresa Buczkowska, Julia Gierczak, Borbala Juhasz, Edite Kalnina, Audroné Kisieliené, Inga Koralewska, Riina Kütt, Vanja Macanovic, Aleksandra Nestorov, Violeta Neubauer, Nela Pamukovic, Metka Roksandic, Jana Smiggels Kavková, Nijole Steponkute, Małgorzata Tarasiewicz, Anna Zobnina, Aslihan Tekin, Selma Acuner, Nicole Farnsworth from the Kosovo Women's Network, as well as all staff at the EWL Secretariat, who contributed to this report. A special thank you to Irina Costache, who carried out research and wrote a first version of this report in 2015, to Laura Sullivan for her precious editing and writing, and to Jelena Jovanovic at ERGO for her valuable input.

EWL PRESIDENT

Réka Sáfrány

EWL SECRETARY GENERAL

Konstantina Vardamatou

EDITORIAL AND PUBLICATION COORDINATION

Joanna Maycock, Stephanie Yates and Mirta Baselovic

RESEARCH & WRITING

Irina Costache

EDITING

Laura Sullivan

GRAPHIC DESIGN

Mirta Baselovic

© European Women's Lobby



Funded by
the European Union

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.

www.womenlobby.org