

From Words to Action

A report on women's rights in Europe 20 years after Beijing



Pictograms from the report, made by Aurore de Boncourt

European Women's Lobby

Dieser Artikel enthält Kurzfassungen des kürzlich veröffentlichten Berichts „From Word to Action“ der European Woman's Lobby (EWL). Er gibt einen Überblick über die Situation von Frauen und Mädchen in Europa auf der Grundlage der kollektiven Einschätzung der 2.000 Mitgliedsorganisationen der EWL's. Der Bericht bietet nicht nur die Möglichkeit, aus 20 Jahren Aktivismus und politischer Arbeit zu lernen, sondern auch zu erkennen, dass Investitionen in Frauenrechte und dessen Verstärkung der Kern sind, um eine nachhaltige, demokratische und integrative Welt zu schaffen. Die Analysen und Forderungen des Berichts präsentieren die Basis für ein feministisches Europa

This article contains abstracts of the European Women's Lobby (EWL) recent report 'From Words to Action'. The report provides a picture of the situation of women and girls in Europe, based on the collective assessment of EWL's 2.000 member organizations. It gives the opportunity to learn from 20 years of activism and policy work, but also, and above all, to realize that investing in women's rights and empowerment is the core commitment for a sustainable, democratic and inclusive world to blossom. The analysis and demands of the report are the basis for a feminist Europe. 2015 is a very exciting time for gender equality and women's rights, and for the women's movement globally and in Europe. The international community celebrates the 20th anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action. At the same time, the European Union (EU)

will adopt its new Strategy on Equality between women and men, which should be the framework of the EU action on gender equality and women's empowerment for the coming five years. At international level, a new global framework for development will be adopted, with new Sustainable Development Goals, amongst which women's rights and gender equality will be the subject of a standalone goal. The celebration of Beijing+20 therefore comes at a strategic time for the women's movement and the EU policies on gender equality. By assessing the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action in Europe we can take stock of progress, look at remaining challenges, and highlight opportunities for the EU to lead the way towards women's empowerment and equality. Despite the fact that equality between women and men is a core value of the EU, it is still not a reality.

The heritage of Beijing

Adopted two years after the Vienna World Conference on Human Rights, the Beijing Platform for Action aimed to bring to light the structural inequalities and human rights violations faced by all women and girls on the planet, and setting the ground for concrete action to realize de jure and de facto equality between women and men. 20 years later, much has been achieved, and much remains to be done. Women and girls in Europe are now present in all spheres of society, from education to employment, reaching political and business decision-making, expressing their views as artists, journalists, researchers, or community leaders. They are more able than ever to bring their voice to the political debates and raise their concerns. A new generation of young feminists is mobilizing widely,

making the most of new communication technologies, and dynamically tackling new and old forms of violations of their rights. There is international outrage and massive waves of solidarity in response to violations of women's rights as witnessed by the reactions to the appalling cases of rape in India. Some men are taking a public stance or engaging in the feminist movement, to support women's organizations' demands. Feminist economists are challenging the current system we live in, by proposing new ways of measuring wellbeing and protecting our planet and the next generations.

However, despite this optimistic picture of a renewed feminism in Europe, women's rights are facing a stronger backlash than ever. On the one hand, ultra-conservative and religious groups are systematically calling gender equality into question, by attacking women's sexual and reproductive rights, sexuality education, women's access to employment and decision-making. Some men's groups are getting media attention to their reactionary demands for patriarchal structures. Financial cuts are threatening the very existence of women's organizations. With the 2014 European elections, we are seeing more populist and misogynist parliamentarians sitting in the European Parliament, directly threatening EU policies to promote gender equality and women's rights. On the other hand, the neoliberal system and the consumer society are impacting detrimentally on women's and girls' empowerment, by commodifying their body and sexuality and perpetuating gender stereotypes throughout all spheres of society. We are worried to see that the cult of individualism has become so widespread

that structural violations of women's rights are not taken seriously.

The EU can be a driving force for legislation on gender equality, and of inspiration for the Member States. Equality between women and men is a core value of the EU. However, such commitment does not translate into practice in the majority of the spheres of society and life. While over the years, the European Parliament has taken a bigger role in raising the alarm over human rights violations, calling for gender equality and women's empowerment, the Member States have prevented the adoption of ambitious goals and legislation on women's human rights. It is according to this logic that, for example, no strategy on ending violence against women has been adopted until now. The recent nomination of an EU Commissioner for Gender Equality can be a milestone towards more ambitious EU action.

Have we met the goals?

Gender mainstreaming has been adopted as a central strategy for all EU policies, but the reality shows that it is not implemented in many areas, and not considered as a priority. The myth of "equality being already there" in Europe is still strong and prevents gender equality from becoming a standalone goal for the EU. The recent climate of austerity reinforces the idea, for many decision-makers and individuals, that women's rights are "the icing on the cake". From EWL's report it becomes clear that some actions have been taken in one or the other area, but the lack of a comprehensive strategy shows that gender equality is not taken seriously enough. In this context, in the majority of the EU policies, women's and girls' needs are not integrated at all.

Another clear learning from EWL's assessment lies in the persisting gender stereotypes in all spheres of society. Stereotypes that shape toys for boys and girls, that influence girls' choices in education, that prevent women from accessing some jobs, that impact on women's and girls' health, that legitimize violence and everyday sexism, that convey messages about women's role in society. The Beijing Platform for Action did not only want to see legal frameworks to guarantee women's rights, it also aimed to raise awareness on the radical change needed in mentalities to achieve equality between women and men. Today, this shift of mentalities remains the highest challenge for the women's movement. While legislation is key, it is not enough and should be accompanied by powerful political will and grassroots action to make a real change at all levels of personal life, community and society.

New challenges

In parallel, new challenges are coming up and will require all our attention and vigilance. Women are not a homogenous group and have multiple identities. But living in systems where racism, sexism and classism are still prevalent, women with multiple identities are rendered more vulnerable to discrimination, violence and violation of their rights. The situation of migrant or undocumented women, women from ethnic minorities, indigenous women, Roma women, women with disabilities, rural women, girls, older women, lesbians and bisexual women, transgender women, has long been made invisible. It is urgent to make sure that all policies are designed to not leave a single girl or woman behind.

It is time to understand that peace, justice and sustainable development cannot be achieved if half of the population is not fully enjoying their human rights. We need a new paradigm for human rights: human rights are about a collective vision and solidarity, they are not tools to promote individualism. The current economic, political and social system has proven to be unsustainable, dangerous for the Earth, and unable to include and protect the most vulnerable, starting with women and girls. Feminist economists are an inspiration for a radical new vision of people and planet, including of the care economy, and the women's movement is allying with other social movements to propose alternatives based on rights, solidarity and equality. The development of a global citizens' movement demanding a new paradigm for the future can be an opportunity for the women's movement to demonstrate that investing in women's rights is the most urgent and clever action to protect the planet and see future generations equal, empowered, living in peace and dignity.

Reference: From words to action (2014): www.womenlobby.org/get-involved/ewl-campaigns-actions/beijing-20/ewl-beijing-20-report/?lang=en

On the author: The European Women's Lobby (EWL) is the largest umbrella organization of women's associations in the European Union (EU), working to promote women's rights and equality between women and men. EWL membership extends to organizations in all 28 EU member states and the three candidate countries as well as to 20 European-wide bodies, representing a total of more than 2.000 organizations. Elvira Buijink compiled the information from EWL's report for this article. She is Communications and Media Officer for the European Women's Lobby.