



Empowering Women: WAVE's Call to Action for the 2024- 2029 European Institutional Cycle

Vienna, June 25, 2024

A Critical Time for Gender Equality

Following the European Parliament elections held on Sunday, 9th June 2024, we find ourselves at a critical crossroads in our pursuit of gender equality and the eradication of gender-based violence against women and girls. In the face of escalating challenges, including the resurgence of far-right extremism, economic instability, and ongoing conflicts, we must uphold the principles of gender equality and human rights.

The Challenge of Far-Right Influence

The EP election results show a significant shift towards far-right parties across Europe, reflecting a challenging political landscape for promoting feminist values. Far-right parties like France's National Rally (RN), Germany's Alternative for Germany (AfD), Austria's Libertarian Party (FPÖ), Belgium's Vlaams Belang ("Flemish Interest") and Italy's Fratelli d'Italia, among others, have gained substantial support, posing significant threats to gender equality, women's rights, and the human rights of the EU's most vulnerable populations. These populist, nationalist parties have a strong anti-EU stance. They have historically undermined gender equality and feminist policies, supported hardline anti-immigration measures, and promoted rhetoric that fosters xenophobia and discrimination, particularly against refugees, migrants, Muslims, ethnic minorities like the Roma community, people with disabilities, and LGBTQ+ individuals. They seek to adopt restrictive laws that limit the rights and freedoms of these populations and defund CSOs defending their rights. Due to their electoral successes, this trend is likely to increase across Europe. Consequently, their growing influence in the EU Parliament necessitates heightened vigilance, activism, and advocacy from feminist and human rights organisations and all CSOs dedicated to defending democracy, European values, and the rule of law.

The Significance of the WAVE Manifesto

Against this backdrop, as a members-led network of women's specialist services (WSS), the WAVE Network's election manifesto, presented ahead of the EP elections, now holds even greater significance. Our manifesto is a proactive call to the newly (re)elected members of the European Parliament and soon-to-be appointed heads of the European Parliament, European Commission, and European Council to maintain a strong focus on achieving gender equality and ending violence against women through EU policies and strategies.

The Importance of Sustaining Gender Equality Efforts

The past five years are a testament to what can be achieved when there is political will to work towards gender equality via strategies, policies and programs, the relevance of having a dedicated commissioner who champions this portfolio at the EU level, and the crucial importance of having active cooperation in the form of partnerships with feminist CSOs in Europe to ensure human rights are defended. However, we are acutely aware that hard-won achievements in gender equality can be quickly undone by policy and personnel changes, as the reversal of *Roe v. Wade* in the US has shown. This is why WAVE calls for the effective implementation of all gender equality strategies, programs, and policies adopted in the previous term, along with adequate funding to achieve their goals. We call for the next EU Gender Equality Strategy 2025-2029 to be an instrument that centres violence prevention, beyond raising awareness campaigns and victim support, strengthens its focus on the



needs of young women and girls, envisions sustainable budgets and furthers Member State's commitments to effectively end violence against women and girls. Moreover, it is crucial to recognize that gender inequality in all its forms is a deeply entrenched systemic issue. Therefore, achieving gender equality requires constant commitment and resources to realise the human rights of all women and girls in Europe. The path has not ended, and we are still far from achieving actual gender equality and effectively preventing gender-based violence against women and girls (VAWG.) Thus, WAVE proposes a fundamental change in how women's and human rights issues, particularly violence against women and domestic violence, are addressed at the EU level. We believe a fundamental paradigm shift is necessary to envision a new reality, where it is possible to prevent all forms of violence, including gender-based violence against women and girls before it occurs.

A Call for a Stronger Prevention Approach

According to the WHO, prevention strategies are classified into three categories: primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention. Primary prevention aims to stop violence before it occurs, secondary prevention focuses on early detection and immediate response to violence, and tertiary prevention involves long-term care to support survivors, alleviate trauma, and prevent recurrence, including holding perpetrators accountable. To effectively combat violence against women and girls, we need a holistic approach where action and investment are equal at all three tiers of prevention through policies and strategies that are proactive rather than reactive, allowing for deeper social change. Efforts in primary prevention, particularly those addressing the intersectional needs of marginalised women are even more underfunded and overlooked than other specialised support services, despite their proven benefits in reducing and ending violence. A holistic prevention approach is essential for a comprehensive fight against VAWG in the EU.

Upholding Human Rights

In a volatile political context, where the possibility of an extended war within Europe is being discussed, WAVE is profoundly concerned about the emerging discourse that Europe must be willing to compromise some of its values to achieve security. This discourse is ill-informed and disregards historical lessons on the importance of upholding human rights and democratic values, especially in the face of conflict, populism, and authoritarianism which are also a hotbed for more gender-based violence. WAVE members support a preventative approach not only towards gender-based violence against women and girls but also more broadly in the current political context. Thus, we call on European Institutions not to fall into this trap, which will only lead to potentially irreparable harm to European citizens and weaken our democracies. Defending human rights and human dignity is at the core of European values, and defence-only focused policies threaten to undermine these values, disproportionately affecting women, children, and other vulnerable populations. WAVE stands firmly against the destruction caused by war, recognising that women and children often suffer the most during armed conflict. We emphasise the need for the new European Parliament to commit to feminist peacebuilding efforts, focusing on dialogue, diplomacy, and conflict prevention. At the same time, we acknowledge the right of nations to defend themselves against aggression and occupation, ensuring that our stance supports victims while promoting lasting peace and justice.

The Need for Sustainable Resources

Feminist civil society needs sustainable resources to achieve its full potential. Funding cuts and restricted access to funding are major challenges feminist organisations face in Europe. This is due to a "gender backlash"—resistance or negative reaction against advances in gender equality. This backlash manifests as efforts to roll back or undermine progress in women's rights and gender equity



policies. As a result, feminist organisations face reduced access to funding and, at worst, open persecution of human and women's rights defenders. Both protection and sustainable funding are essential for feminist organisations to continue their vital work. This funding should come from the resources European institutions receive through taxes, including those paid by women, who make up more than 50% of the population in Europe.

WAVE's Call to Action

Hence, we urge all European Institutions to prioritise the following:

- **Primary Prevention Efforts:** Allocate sustainable resources and support initiatives focused on the primary prevention of gender-based violence, including promoting autonomy for women and girls, ensuring access to reproductive rights and health services, fostering healthy relationships and non-violence masculinities, and advancing intersectional¹ equality.
- **Sustainable Funding:** Increase financial resources for all feminist grassroots organisations, particularly women's specialist services and primary prevention services who address gender-based violence against women and girls.
- **Support for Migrant and Undocumented Women:** Reject hypocritical policies toward migrant, undocumented, asylum-seeking, and refugee women, which violate their human rights. Exercise caution with the EU Migration and Asylum Pact to ensure its provisions do not exacerbate the plight of migrant, asylum-seeking, stateless, undocumented, and refugee women and girls or make them more vulnerable to violence.
- **Ensure the Continuation of the Equality Commissioner and the FEMM Committee:** Advocate for women's equal representation in leadership positions and decision-making bodies, and support the ongoing presence of a commissioner dedicated to advancing gender equality and preventing gender-based violence against women.
- **Collect Comprehensive and Good Quality Data:** Sustain efforts to collect comprehensive and good quality data on violence against women and domestic violence, including their prevention.
- **Facilitate Transposition Workshops:** Organise workshops, facilitated by feminist CSOs, to aid in the transposition of Directive (EU) 2024/1385 on combating violence against women and domestic violence into national legislation. The European Commission should leverage the expertise of feminist CSOs and include them in drafting the transposition guidelines that national governments will receive.
- **Strengthen the EU Network on Prevention:** Enhance the EU network on the prevention of gender-based violence, giving feminist civil society organisations a more prominent role in shaping prevention strategies.
- **Close Gender Gaps and Implement the EU Care Strategy:** Continue efforts to close gender gaps in society, including salaries, care responsibilities, and access to opportunities in the

¹ Intersectionality acknowledges the diversity of backgrounds, experiences and histories that form women's identities. Intersectionality understands that these identifies exist at multiple levels simultaneously creating layers of inequality for women (by the way such identities interaction or intersect). Ultimately, the goal of intersectionality is to connect women by disrupting predominant and prevailing patterns of power and privilege that operate in wider society and in feminist spaces. By looking at space through an intersectional lens, individual women are aware, recognise, and accept the realities of all women as lived experience and give space to the expression of multi-layered experiences.



labour market. Ensure effective implementation of the EU Care Strategy, particularly in childcare, long-term care, and childhood education.

- **Combat Harmful Practices and Secure Abortion Rights:** Expedite the finalisation of recommendations to combat harmful practices such as female genital mutilation (FGM), forced marriage, forced sterilisation, and honour-based violence, and take concerted action to ensure legal access to abortion at the EU level.

Our Unwavering Commitment

WAVE remains steadfast in our commitment to advocating for the visibility and recognition of women and girls, and particularly their human right to live free from violence. We reject gender-neutral policies that obscure the distinct needs and experiences of women under the guise of equality. Despite progress, the reality is that women and men are not yet equal, and we refuse to allow women to be sidelined or made invisible.

By placing women at the forefront of our advocacy efforts, we strive to create a world where all women and girls are empowered to thrive and flourish. Our commitment to gender equality is unwavering, and we will not rest until every woman and girl is afforded the respect, dignity, and opportunities they deserve.