PRESS RELEASE

WAVE echoes warnings: pushback against women's rights and shrinking civic space threaten democracy in Europe

Vienna, 25 November 2026 – As the largest European network of women's specialist services, representing over 1,800 women's organisations in 46 countries, the Women Against Violence Europe (WAVE) Network stresses that the pushback against women's rights, including the right to a life free from violence, threatens democracy in Europe. On the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, WAVE calls on institutions to protect feminist civil society and to involve and fund women's specialist services as part of Europe's democratic infrastructure. These feminist services provide specialised support to women and their children experiencing gender-based violence and are central to preventing it.

Across Europe, anti-gender and anti-feminist movements are eroding hard-won women's rights faster than they were secured. Women's rights organisations lose funding and their place in policymaking, restrictive laws such as "foreign agent" laws limit their work, and women's human rights defenders face intimidation [1]. As public funding shifts towards generic, gender-neutral services, women and children affected by violence lose access to the specialised support they urgently need, and Europe risks losing the expertise and practice of women's specialist services in preventing this violence [2]. Technology accelerates both this backlash and violence against women and girls itself [3].

Stephanie Futter-Orel, WAVE Executive Director, highlights the role of women's specialist services: *"Despite funding cuts, political pushback and repression, women's specialist services across Europe persist. They are essential to democracy: they save lives, help women and their children build a future free from violence, and bring survivors' voices into political decision-making."*

To safeguard this role, WAVE calls for the protection of civic space, which requires the full inclusion of feminist civil society to uphold democratic values and principles. WAVE's demand goes further: every woman and girl must be free from violence and free to claim and live her human rights in full. That freedom depends on institutions that fund women's specialist services sustainably, including in the EU's next Multiannual Financial Framework for 2028–2034; on policymaking that actively involves feminist civil society; and on a society that dismantles the gender stereotypes and unequal power relations that keep violence against women and girls in place [4].

There is no democracy without women's rights, and no women's rights without a feminist movement free to organise, speak and mobilise. Preventing and ending violence against women and girls is a defence of democracy itself.

The full statement is available on the WAVE website: https://wave-network.org/no-democracy-without-womens-rights-and-a-life-free-from-violence/

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