

Transnational Feminism and Its Foes

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While feminist movements are transnational by nature and examples of positively changing societal attitudes abound, efforts to build more inclusive societies are increasingly in the crosshairs of well-funded anti-rights networks. Achieving a truly feminist Europe requires resources, support for activists, and alliances at all levels.

Dreaming of a feminist future for Europe could conjure up a place in which no one is left behind. One in which no one is discriminated against for reasons of gender, race, sexual orientation, physical abilities, place of birth, or nationality. A place in which those with families can be parents and have fulfilling work, where those who want a family have the means to do so, and those who don't do not have to justify why. Above all, a feminist Europe would be a place in which no violence is accepted as a means of dealing with inter-human and inter-species relationships.

Feminism is a way of understanding the world and of acting. It rejects existing forms of social organisation that subjugate women and racialised people and that exploit people, animals, and Earth's resources. It is a positioning that tries to understand, conceive of, and challenge domination. It is a way of situating oneself to be able to understand how various forms of domination and discrimination intersect. Feminism reflects on and from the position of women and women's rights, not to establish (some) women as the new dominators, but, on the contrary, to forge paths towards a world where domination is not the rule. Feminist thinkers, intellectuals, writers, artists, and activists generate the fertile ground for imagining and constructing alternative models. Feminist movements are the beehives that nurture new ways to push for alternatives.

As part of these movements, I work on building transnational linkages between feminists with initiatives such as Room to Bloom, which networks and supports feminist artists, and FIERCE, which analyses feminist and anti-gender movements in various countries. While dreaming may be necessary, feminist movements are, above all, about doing: courageously and relentlessly paving the way for change; refusing established forms of domination; and building new practices.

Threats to women's rights

Unfortunately, the dream of a peaceful future based on the principles of respect, social justice, and freedom is slipping further away every day. Growing social and economic polarisation – the impact of global capitalism – combined with rising nationalism and a return to the political mainstream of previously established xenophobia and extreme-right movements are key threats to women's rights and the feminist movement.

Until recently, feminism as a social movement was seen as a thing of the past, a movement that – with the supposed triumph of equality – had lost its reason to exist.

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The deflagration of the #MeToo movement in 2017 (also thanks to the flames bravely ignited and nurtured by feminists in previous years) managed to reinstate feminism as an acceptable frame for action in the public space. By unveiling the profound reach of patriarchy in our societies, it exposed the sexist and sexual violence women and children face throughout their lives, and the illusion of equality between women and men.

MeToo has not reinvented feminism, but it has gone some way towards changing societal attitudes towards the movement. It has blown fresh wind in the sails of feminist work throughout the world and shown it to be just and justified. It has generated hope when the reasons to despair and feel paralysed are many.

But #MeToo also happened at a time when anti-gender movements were slowly and surely gaining ground, often attacking women's rights under the pretence of defending them against what they saw as the aberrations of radical feminism.

Nationalist and extreme right movements – such as the Rassemblement National (RN) in France under Marine Le Pen and Fratelli d'Italia under Giorgia Meloni – have excelled in hijacking and reappropriating parts of feminist legacy. These have been reinvented and reinterpreted into what American author Susan Faludi has called “femonationalism”,¹ to target progressive feminism, reproductive rights, and migrants.

This was strikingly encapsulated by Giorgia Meloni as she addressed a crowd of supporters of Spanish far-right party Vox in 2022: “Yes to the natural family, no to the LGBT lobby! Yes to sexual identity, no to gender ideology! Yes to the culture of life, no to the abyss of death! Yes to the universal values of the Cross, no to Islamist violence! Yes to secure borders, no to mass immigration!”

Just over a year after Meloni took office as Italy's first female prime minister in October 2022, the climate has already changed for LGBTQI+ Italian residents. In July 2023, a state prosecutor demanded that the birth certificates of 33 children born from medically assisted reproduction to lesbian couples be amended to erase the name of the second mother. This is a modus operandi that consists of instrumentalising anti-gender discourses to counter the idea of equality between humans, and it therefore undermines the very foundations of our democracies.

Reproductive rights are seen as a domain in which it is possible to “demonstrate” and instrumentalise what conservatives want to portray as an essential difference between humans. These ideas have a strong foundation in the Vatican's conceptualisation of the difference between men and women. As researchers Sara Garbagnoli and Massimo Prearo highlight, a new essentialist representation of women as equal to men as humans but essentially different has been promoted by the Vatican since the 1990s.² In 1995, in a letter to bishops entitled *Evangelium Vitae*, Pope John Paul II even encouraged women to promote a “new feminism” that “affirms the true genius of women” (i.e. supporting life).

The Vatican has been instrumental in creating the myth of a “gender theory” that needs to be confronted to protect life. One of the powerful coordinating networks pushing this idea is Agenda Europe, created in 2013, “which forms the normative framework for the fight against sexual and reproductive health and rights”. Agenda Europe brings together more than 100 associations from more than 30 European countries.

International anti-gender networks

The embedding of anti-feminist and anti-gender activism into a wider conservative movement across the world became evident during the Trump presidency. It is exemplified in Europe notably by the Budapest Demographic Summit, a network of nationalist, nativist, and natalist groups launched in 2015 that brings together politicians, church leaders, and so-called experts twice a year. The summit was the occasion for Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán to stress “the importance of ‘family-friendly, conservative powers’” in Europe, and to present Hungary as “an incubator for conservative policies, a place where the conservative policies of the future, workable solutions, and forward- looking initiatives are being developed”.

These transnational networks are powerful and efficient. Part of the extreme right, they are not only European but global. As a European Parliament report states, “The European Center for Law and Justice (ECLJ), led by Grégor Puppink, has been active in anti-gender advocacy at national and European levels, as well as around the Council of Europe and United Nations bodies in Geneva, including in the homophobic protests of La Manif Pour Tous (LMPT) in France in 2013, serving as a legal focal point for the anti-abortion ECI ‘One of Us’ and playing a leading role in Agenda Europe summits.”

The ECLJ claims to act chiefly for the defence of human life from conception, against euthanasia, for traditional marriage, and for the right to conscientious objection and freedom of belief, as well as the defence of Christians in Europe and worldwide. The report also highlights Russia’s leadership in the international anti-gender movement, with financial links between Russian and Western anti-gender actors, ranging from civil society organisations to parliamentarians and ministers. The St. Andrew the First-Called Foundation, for example, founded by Russian oligarch Vladimir Yakunin, has sponsored European politicians such as former French MEP Aymeric Chauprade and former Greek parliament vice-speaker Maria Kollia-Tsaroucha.

A wider attack

Looking beyond attacks on reproductive rights, there is a wider anti-rights campaign being conducted across Europe. A 2023 report by the Jean-Jaures Foundation and NGO Equipop sums up the political agenda of the anti-rights movement as an attempt to change the legal and societal status quo in a way that is contrary to fundamental European rights. “Antirights movements seek to expand and further impose their reactionary vision in order to reverse sexual and reproductive rights. They also target LGBTQIA+ rights, and, in the same vein, the Istanbul Convention, the strongest legal instrument for women’s rights in terms of sexual and gender-based violence and in particular domestic and intrafamilial violence,” explains the report.

The report also argues that anti-rights movements all over the world closely imitate the strategies of feminist organisations, “such as deciding on a course of action in response to feminist discourse, obtaining financing through foundations and governments, signing joint statements and declarations”.

The strength of these conservative networks and strategies opposing feminist movements – notably those advocating for an inclusive and open understanding of feminism, supportive of transgender rights and an intersectional approach – affects individuals pushing for women’s rights. Whether through masculinist movements that coordinate cyberattacks, micromovements that infiltrate feminist demonstrations to discredit them (such as Collectif Némésis in France), or more political and juridical forms of silencing women’s voices such as the low rate of rape prosecutions,³ this backlash is taking its toll on the feminist movement.

Despite the often adverse political and societal contexts, hope continues to spring.

The term “backlash” is controversial, but I believe that it conveys the violence and strength of movements opposing progress towards gender equality as well as the impact this has on feminist movements. Burnout is a widespread issue in the activism world, to which feminists appear particularly vulnerable, especially because women’s movements are acutely underfunded. Most are fully reliant on volunteer work, and individual activists often face violent attacks and threats, online and offline.

Reasons for hope

Despite the often adverse political and societal contexts, hope continues to spring. Heart-warming success stories show that societal views of women’s rights do not necessarily follow the routes set by the most conservative political forces in Europe.

One of the main triumphs of the past decades was Ireland’s referendum on abortion in 2018, in which almost 70 per cent voted in favour of legalisation – achieved in a deeply Catholic country that previously banned all forms of abortion. Indeed, the result reveals a generational divide: according to an Ipsos MRBI survey, 87 per cent of 18 to 24-year-olds and 83 per cent of 25 to 34-year-olds voted to legalise abortion, while 60 per cent of over 65s voted against. This may be a sign of a wider societal evolution regarding gender roles and reproductive rights.

The strength of feminist mobilisation against the ban on abortion in Poland is another striking example. In 2016, more than 100,000 women came out onto the streets in the “Black Protests”. The movement grew into the Women’s Strike in 2020, when the government proposed to push forward the most restrictive legislation on abortion in Europe. The impact of the protests later reached parliament, with the conservative Law and Justice (PiS) party losing its majority in October 2023. In its post-election press release, the Women’s Strike describes this as “the largest scale protests since the fall of communism in Poland – 100 days in over 600 cities. This time it was the young generation that took to the streets, as every one in three persons aged 18 to 29 took to the protests”. As the press release highlights, the fact that women and young people went to vote was decisive: the turnout for women reached a record high of 73.2 per cent (12 per cent higher than the previous election) and turnout for young people was at 68.8 per cent (over 22 per cent higher than the previous election).

Progress in one country stimulates feminist movements across borders.

Positive change has also come from within governments. In the European political landscape today, it is Spain that raises the bar when it comes to women’s rights. Since 2017 it has invested in fighting against gender-based violence. Equality Minister Irene Montero has passed legislation including the introduction of menstrual leave for women, free period products and mandatory sexuality education in schools, changes around consent with the “only yes means yes” law in 2022 (which states that consent has to be expressed and that any non-consensual sexual activity is rape), and legislation expanding abortion and transgender rights for teenagers in 2023.

The mobilisation of the Spanish women’s football team (and of society at large) in the wake of one of the

players being forcibly kissed on the mouth during the celebration of their World Cup win in the summer shows that these laws have changed the terms of the debate, even though the attempts to ignore these changes have proved strong.

Progress in one country – particularly when that country is perceived as Catholic and conservative such as Ireland or Spain – stimulates feminist movements across borders. Feminist movements are transnational by nature and empower one another. International solidarity has powered protests throughout the world such as the Polish Black Protests from 2016 onwards, Iranian women’s movements, and Argentina’s movement against gender-based violence Ni Una Menos, which started in 2015 and has since spread to countries including Spain and Italy.

Feminist movements have appropriated tools to denounce injustice and raise their voices across borders: from the national versions of #MeToo and the worldwide spread of the Chilean song *Un violador en tu camino* (“A rapist in your path”, also known as “The rapist is you”) to the feminist collages denouncing femicides appearing in cities around the world.

In Europe, the spaces for networking and connecting are numerous. Between 2007 to 2012, eight different feminist networks operated the European Feminist Forum (EFF), a web-based space for dialogue. Today, there are many opportunities for encounter and common work, from feminist festivals such as City of Women in Slovenia, Femi Festival in Denmark, Fem Fest in the Netherlands, and WeToo in France, to more political organisation such as the feminist forums of progressive EU Parliament groups and plans for an in-person European Feminist Forum by the WIDE+ network.

As feminist movements often operate on volunteers’ time and with limited funding, mobilising the resources to build strong, lasting transnational networks remains a challenge – especially when local and national work already pushes activists and organisations to their limits.

Those who are working to build a feminist Europe, effect societal change, and forge new paths should not be left alone to face the efficient and well-funded nationalist and extreme right movements. Feminist movements are a space of support and creation and often of joy and freedom. To effect serious social change, they will need funding but also strong support and alliances from within political parties and at local, national, and European levels.

A small step towards a feminist Europe would be to hold those elected at the upcoming EU Parliament elections to any promises of being allies of feminism. A transnational feminist movement should be able to develop, promote, and defend a feminist stance in all the EU’s priority areas: from the European Green Deal to the European Pillar of Social Rights; from energy and housing policy to innovation and science; supporting those most at risk of poverty and discrimination. The organisation of a European Feminist Forum, providing a space for transnational organising and for analysis and proposals on EU policy areas, could be a first step.

The 2022 French documentary *We Are Coming* follows a group of young women on their journey to becoming feminists and acting upon their convictions. It showcases some of the strengths feminist movements can build on at a time when interest in feminism has been revived: personal and collective journeys rooted in research; discussions on practical day-to-day issues; sharing frustration and despair but also joy, fun, and support; exchanges with others in a safe environment; and working with other movements. In the dream of a feminist Europe, one would build on such energies and give them space to transform our societies towards more openness, experimentation, respect, and freedom in order to better confront the anti-liberal forces attacking the foundation of our rights and democracies.



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