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# THE FIERCE AND THE FURIOUS

FEMINIST INSIGHTS INTO THE ANTI GENDER  
NARRATIVES AND MOVEMENT



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**The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation** strengthens and promotes women's organisations in several regions around the world. We support women human rights defenders who live and work in conflict affected countries, so that they can continue fighting for women's rights.

**EuroMed Rights** seeks to develop and strengthen partnerships between NGOs in the Euro-Mediterranean region, advocate for human rights values and develop capacities in this regard.



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## FOREWORD

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Throughout the globe, we witness a backlash against gender equality.

The main forces behind it are conservative, fundamentalist and nationalist movements. At first glance, they are diverse. But their rejection of feminism and gender is strong enough to create a common ground. The anti-gender movement has seen unlikely alliances between the Vatican and Iran, between Russia and the USA.

But what if this is not only a backlash? What if an entire new paradigm is in the making where well-organised and well-funded anti-gender actors with catchy storytellers are constructing new narratives in society? A reality where feminist and human rights notions are hijacked – “freedom” means suppression, “life” means anti-abortion and “mother’s rights” substitute women’s rights.

What if the womens' movement is one step behind? EuroMed Rights and The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation decided to join forces and together with our partners and member organisations counter this development. #WeSay together we are strong. #WeSay together we raise our voices for equal rights and choices. #WeSay the time to stand united and act has come.

*Petra Tötterman Andorff, secretary-general of The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation & Wadih Al-Asmar, president of EuroMed Rights*

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## INTRODUCTION: REJECTING THE CONCEPT OF GENDER

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In early 2019, a bomb was found at the entrance of the gender studies' department at the University of Gothenburg in Sweden.<sup>1,2</sup> Later in that same year, the German political party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), which is openly racist, sexist and xenophobic, achieved historical election results in two German states. In Brazil, the newly elected president Jair Bolsonaro proclaimed in his inauguration speech: "We are going to unite the people, rescue the family, respect religions and our Judeo-Christian tradition, combat gender ideology, conserving our values." In Lebanon, a band called Mashrou Leila, whose singer is openly gay, had to cancel concerts in Beirut as they received death threats from Christian-extremist groups.<sup>3</sup> In April 2019, a network called the "Turkish Family Assembly" was created which appeals for the annulment of the Istanbul Convention combatting violence against women and an end to "the global war on the family".<sup>4</sup>

The common denominator in these events is a **strong rejection of the concept of gender and feminism**. During the past few years, we have witnessed a backlash against gender equality and against women's and LGBTQI+ persons' rights across the world.<sup>5</sup> The forces behind this backlash are mostly conservative, fundamentalist, and nationalist groups and movements, and the general perception in the global women's movement is that we are lagging behind. Discourse on anti-genderism, gender ideology or gender theory is a phenomenon which appeared in the late 1990s and that has since grown and developed across the world. David Paternotte and Roman Kuhar have defined it as a **transnational and increasingly global phenomenon** that shares practices and a common resistance towards the enhancement of women's and LGBTQI+ persons' rights. Gender theory, stemming from academic gender studies as well as from activist movements, is considered to be a threat to society, traditional values, the nuclear family and democracy.

Operating in various ways, **anti-gender movements share a surprisingly similar narrative across the world**. First, they introduce a binary world: Themselves, the traditionalists and nationalists who claim that they are protecting the children, the family values, order and in some cases religion, against Us, the progressives and liberals who are destroying traditional values, coercing countries into depravity and harming children. The term gender ideology has become a symbolic glue for the fight against this evil.<sup>6</sup> It has even been called a "cultural war", a war of ideas and ideologies.<sup>7</sup> The five most common issues that anti-gender movements attack are: LGBTQI+ rights, gender studies, sexual and reproductive health and rights (not least abortion) and sexual and equality education. Gender ideology creates unlikely "un-holy alliances" between Orthodox communities, Catholics, Islamists, right-wing secularists, nationalists and conservatives.

According to scholars such as David Paternotte and Eszter Kováts, **these movements originate from two high-level UN conferences: Cairo on Population and Development in 1994, and the Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995**. In Cairo, notions of sexual and reproductive rights for women were introduced and in Beijing the word "gender" replaced "sex" in a UN context. These two conferences represented a huge ideological defeat for the Vatican and various other like-minded movements.<sup>8</sup> Since then, the backlash has taken the shape of various civil society organisations and political trends which all target gender and feminism as a threat to our societies.






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## #WESAY

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This report has been developed by EuroMed Rights and Kvinna till Kvinna, organisations that support and engage with numerous civil society organisations actively addressing gender equality. In this report, the anti-gender movements' actors and their narratives in the Euro-Mediterranean region have been investigated.<sup>11</sup>

The report does not claim to be exhaustive but is rather a snapshot of the Euro-Mediterranean region based on interviews, reviews of contemporary research and a survey. We have reached out to activists working for gender equality in the region in order to understand the current situation. We have reviewed literature on the topic and interviewed eight academics and activists targeted by the anti-gender movements.<sup>9</sup> We have carried out a survey responded by 50 activists to identify the trends and understand the factors behind the backlash, so as to assess the impact it has on the women's and LGBTQI+ movement and find strategies to counter-act it.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, a workshop to consolidate messages has been organised by EuroMed's Women's Rights and Gender Justice working group.

Because the actors of the backlash are hijacking feminist concepts for racist and nationalist purposes, and because gender is a foundation of every political movement, tackling gender equality must include promoting migrant and refugee rights, countering social and economic injustices as well as addressing the climate crisis. More than ever, solidarity is needed.

In the making of this report, we have seen how anti-feminist and anti-gender discourses are on the rise all over the Euro-Mediterranean region and beyond. The anti-gender movements use rhetoric and strategies characterised as anti-gender or war on gender, defining the demands for gender equality as gender ideology, and women's and LGBTQI+ rights work as aiming to destroy the nation, traditional values, and families. This very strategic, sometimes loosely connected, movement is behind the backlash on gender equality. It has resulted in a **harsher and more severe – sometimes even dangerous – working environment for human rights activists** by spreading propaganda and fear, limiting women's rights and LGBTQI+ rights activists' chances for obtaining funding, and in some cases using violence to silence



Photo: Ester Perez Berenguer

their voices both on- and offline. The response from the women's and LGBTQI+ movement needs to be further strategising, mobilising and alliance building in an increasingly hostile terrain.

The overall aim of this report, and the campaign accompanying it, is to encourage movement building and strategising among activists fighting for gender equality in the region. The report reflects on how we can move forward **to build counter arguments to strengthen a global call for a more inclusive and equal society**. The limited scope of the survey does not allow us to generalise the results. However, the survey and interviews are supported by existing literature and research on the topic. It is important to note that while gender ideology or anti-genderism has been extensively studied in Europe in the past years, anti-genderism has not yet been studied in the Middle East and North African region.

In society, discourses matter because they tell stories which end up being believed and embodied through repetition. This is why, faced with these well organised and well-funded populist storytellers (sometimes prone to use fake facts) who spearhead the anti-gender movements, **the women's and**

**LGBTQI+ movement must be ready to tell their stories**, and to construct a paradigm and a project for society that is based on the notion of all human beings' equal rights. This is even more pressing as the movements against gender equality might not constitute only a backlash per se. What if, as scholars such as Andrea Peto point out, they are **the sign of a new paradigm?** A form of resistance from "il-liberal democracies" to what they perceive as "globalised neoliberal democracy". As Jair Bolsonaro stated when visiting another propagator of gender ideology rhetoric, the American president Donald Trump, at a joint press conference: "In conclusion, may I say that Brazil and the United States stand side-by-side in their efforts to ensure liberties and respect the traditional family lifestyles and respect to God, our creator, against the gender ideology and the politically correct attitudes and against fake news".<sup>12</sup>

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## KEY CONCEPTS OF ANTI-GENDERISM IN EUROPE

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In Europe, the first anti-gender campaigns began in Spain in 2005-2006, spread quickly to Italy, and flourished in France with “la Manif pour Tous” campaigning against same-sex marriage in 2012. We saw similar occurrences in Slovenia in 2009-12 and in 2014-15 in Croatia, Hungary, Poland, Germany, Sweden, etc. Interestingly, the causes and triggers differ, but the way of mobilising as well as the arguments are similar.

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**These [anti-gender] movements not only share a common enemy, they display similar discourses and strategies as well as a distinctive style of action. We label them transnational anti-gender campaigns to emphasise their global scope and underline their particular profile in the wider landscape of opposition to feminism and LGBTQI rights.”<sup>13</sup>**

The rejection of feminism and gender is strong enough to create a common ground; the anti-gender movement has, for example, seen collaborations between Catholic and Orthodox campaigners in Bulgaria.<sup>14</sup> International anti-gender organisations in Europe include for instance Mum, Dad and Kids, Citizen Go (which is present in more than 50 countries in the world), European Dignity Watch, and the European Center for Law and Justice. The biggest of all is the World Congress of Families. Networks include the Political Network for Values, Agenda Europe, ADF International, One of Us, and Tradition Family Property. Funding comes from the USA's Christian right lobby, non-governmental organisations, billionaires, Russian oligarchs and their foundations, public funding, EU sources and crowdfunding.<sup>15</sup> Roman Kuhar has classified anti-gender organisations into three groups: the new, the old, and the allies. Under new groups, he includes “concerned citizens”, institutes, parliamentary boards and political parties. The older group consists of religious actors, anti-abortion lobbies, family groups and the radical right. Finally, the allies are academics, politicians, corporations and media channels.

For Roman Kuhar, the main strategy of the anti-gender movements is the **politics of fear**. It combines partial facts, fictitious constructions, and the constant repetition of common-sense claims until the discourse becomes a new truth. Another strategy used is **moral panic**, which often draws upon threats to the wellbeing of children and claims to be the voice of reason in a world where it has all “gone too far”. The **discourse of the silenced majority against the elite** is also common. Other action-based strategies are drafting petitions, lobbying towards institutions, targeting politicians and producing alternative sources of knowledge.



The discourse often hijacks feminist and human rights notions for the interests of the anti-gender movements. Words such as “freedom”, “life” and “family” are often used. For instance, the term women’s rights is replaced with mother’s rights and gender mainstreaming is replaced by family mainstreaming. The main strategy towards the public is to rebrand old and often religious discourses into colourful, young and dynamic ones.<sup>16</sup>

Often the arguments follow a logic comprising four elements: First, gender poses an anthropological threat, as it endangers reproduction. Second, it carries a project for society which is against God’s design and against nature; gender is not a social construct, it is natural. Third, gender endangers children. Fourth, gender and feminism are perceived as a democratic threat, promoting a totalitarian regime and ideology. It is the language of a perverted elite carrying forward a neo-colonial project.<sup>17</sup>

The triple “crisis” of finance, security, and refugees (better described as a humanitarian crisis) has strengthened populist and nationalist movements in Europe which spread the idea that gender ideology would go hand in hand with what triggered the crisis. In this way, **gender is assimilated with migration, minority rights, globalisation, individualism and even growing precarity**. The women’s movement has started to respond to this by joining forces with the anti-racist and environmental movements, but these collaborations are still scarce and in the early stages of their development.

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## KEY CONCEPTS OF GENDER POLITICS IN THE MENA REGION

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The parts of the Middle East and North African region that experienced the spring revolutions in and around 2011, have seen mixed outcomes on gender equality.

Some countries have had a backlash against women's rights.<sup>18</sup> Wars and conflicts are not known to be contexts in which gender equality flourishes.<sup>19</sup> Rather, in uncertain situations, traditional gender relations and roles tend to be reasserted.<sup>20</sup>

A long time has passed since Edward Said coined the term Orientalism, which constructs the Middle East as a mirror to Western empires.<sup>21</sup> This concept is important to bear in mind when discussing anti-gender in the MENA region. The notion prevails that:

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**[the West] to this day  
[has] attacked Islam  
especially for its  
treatment of women,  
which has encouraged  
many middle easterners  
to defend this treatment  
as part of its reaction  
against imperialism”.**<sup>22</sup>

Two patriarchal visions are opposed, where white men “want to save brown women from brown men” (to use the iconic quote from the Indian scholar and feminist Gayatri Spivak) and the other way around, each side claiming to be the one treating their women better.<sup>23</sup> In situations of internal conflict within countries, for instance in the case of Cyprus between the Greek and Turkish populations, this dichotomisation around gender is prevalent.<sup>24 25</sup>

Anti-Westernism is a key concept to understand the rejection of gender equality in some parts of the MENA region.<sup>26</sup> The rise of Islamism in countries in the post-2011 era was closely connected to a return to what is believed to be a “genealogical purity” and, by analogy, to “restore woman to her proper place”. This “return” can be seen as a sign of a counter-ideology or a counter-paradigm to capitalist Western societies. In the case of Algerian neo-fundamentalism, the link between post-colonialism and the dissolution of sexual and moral values is strongly established. Gender politics is at the core of the anti-imperialist, anti-Western project. Neo-Islamism believes that the re-imposition of a “sexual order” is the one solution to end imperialist oppression and influence: “attributing all the evils of Algerian society to the debauchery of women whom they saw as the prostitutes of the modern post-colonial situation”.<sup>27</sup>

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## SURVEY RESULTS

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Approximately 95 per cent of the respondents of the survey carried out as part of this report state that they use Facebook as their main social media platform, followed by Twitter and Instagram.

One out of three respondents has received written or verbal harassment both online and offline. Slightly fewer have never experienced any written or verbal attacks. Four out of ten respondents have been subjected to physical and/or sexual harassments or attacks. The nature of these attacks varies, but 40 per cent of the respondents have been exposed to slander and 24 per cent have received threats of violence towards themselves, their families or their friends. Five respondents out of a total of 50 have experienced death threats. These horrifying survey numbers, which in reality indicate that if you engage in the fight for gender equality there is a ten per cent chance that you will be threatened in some way, cannot be linked directly to the anti-gender movements. However, interviews and literature suggest such a connection and, in any case, assaults of this kind (whether verbal or physical) is a consequence of a patriarchal structure that the anti-gender movements are trying to preserve and even strengthen.

When survey respondents were asked who were behind the attacks, the top four propositions chosen were random people, extreme-right movements, nationalists and fundamentalists. The fact that “random people”, i.e. with no known affiliation to organisations, was the most chosen alternative could be a sign of how profoundly the anti-gender discourse has been entrenched in societies, and in fact reached the “concerned citizens” that the anti-gender movement addresses. In countries where the anti-gender narrative is part of government rhetoric, the public opinion is usually not in favour of women’s rights and gender equality. There are exceptions; in Poland we have seen a development where the 2018 Black Protests against the draft anti-abortion legislation actually raised awareness among a general public and strengthened the feminist movement.

The other most chosen alternatives are less surprising. With the growth of extreme-right, nationalist and fundamentalist movements, the notions that gender equality is harmful for the society is a given part of the narrative.

**73 per cent of all respondents expressed that the discourse against gender equality and women’s and LGBTQI+ rights has become more vocal in the last two to three years.** The reasons behind this increased anti-gender discourse varies, but most survey participants agree that the discourse today is less hidden and claims more space in the public debate. Some have experienced that their governments and/or political parties speak more openly in homophobic, gender discriminatory ways and are openly against, for example, sex education.

The anti-gender movements are perceived to be more organised today as conservatives have new funding and methods to develop anti-feminist and anti-LGBTQI+ rhetoric. A few respondents have witnessed that the anti-gender movement is creating its own non-governmental networks to spread their ideas.

When asked what the political, economic and/or social reasons behind the emerging anti-gender movement are, three out of four respondents replied that women and LGBTQI+ persons are threatening patriarchal societies and the privileges they bring to some. Approximately 40 per cent of the respondents believe that societies are more conservative, and some express that governments are becoming more religiously bound. Almost half of the respondents stated that increasing nationalism in society plays a vital role in fuelling the hostility towards, what is perceived to be, “Western ideas”. Some respondents stated that they believe authorities are using their power to influence and manipulate individuals to redirect their discontent towards, for example, globalisation, refugees, women in general, LGBTQI+ persons and feminists.





Photo: Oliver Cole

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## ANTI-GENDER ARGUMENTS IN THE EUROMED REGION

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Historically, gender norms transform over time and space. Today, we can see several types of arguments being used by the anti-gender movement, and to fully understand them we have to remember contemporary and sometimes even historical events and symbols. In this section we will illustrate how anti-gender arguments are used in a few specific contexts in the EuroMed region. In the survey, 58 per cent of the respondents stated that they encounter the terms gender, gender ideology, women's rights and/or LGBTQI+ used in an aggressive or negative sense several times a week. According to the survey, the five most common arguments used against gender equality are: that it destroys family and traditional values; it is a Western influence; it is unnecessary because women and men are already equal; that gender equality has gone too far; and that it introduces a third sex. This is mirrored by the findings of the desk review and interviews. Based on what the findings of this report and literature studied, the five most important arguments can be summarised as follows:

1. **The “imported from the West” argument** – gender is a Western or Marxist concept that is either imposed in a post-colonial way or simply does not fit into the society in question. For instance, in Turkey, Islamist elites and members of the government believe that secular “Western feminism” is contradictory to the Islamic roots of Turkey, and that “Western” influences have degenerated Turkish women, destroyed the true Turkish family, and brought immorality to Turkish society.
2. **The nature and God argument** – men and women are, by nature, different and therefore unequal. Men and women are to be regarded as complementary and gender and feminism are against the design of God and religion. Sometimes these arguments are not linked to religion but to a certain scientific anti-feminist discourse that is prevalent in more secular societies. For instance, Polish member of European Parliament Janusz Korwin-Mikke used this narrative when claiming women did not deserve equal pay as they are naturally smaller and weaker.

3. **The ideological argument** – generally tries to undermine the concepts and aims of feminism. It is spread as the truth and builds its ideology on a critique of gender and feminism, for instance, the notion that gender studies is not a science, and that gender is a totalitarian concept. It proclaims that a small elite is trying to impose ideas on “ordinary citizens” and that they promote homosexuality with the aim of destroying family values. It is considered to be a part of neoliberal policies which destroy and deregulate our world. In Hungary, gender studies have been banned and the government is proudly and openly homophobic, blaming problems and crises on the neoliberal and global world. In North Macedonia, the first gay pride took place in 2019, which awoke the anti-gender movement and caused it to become increasingly active on social media with a central claim that they are the ones caring for the people in need, as opposed to “the elite” feminists.
4. **The politics of fear** – promotes ideas that gender will harm our children and create an “asexual” society (boys will be girls, girls will be boys). It paints the organised fight for gender equality as part of an LGBTQI+ conspiracy. Ultimately, gender and feminism will lead to the end of our civilisation (anthropological crisis). In Poland, it is common among politicians to blame gender for the financial and economic problems of the country, used as a strategy for populists to stay in power. In the Czech Republic, the Catholic priest and former minister of education, Petr Piřha, mentioned during a sermon that one of the consequences of the Istanbul Convention on combatting violence against women will be the creation of “concentration camps for parents, who raised their children traditionally - to raise the girls as the girls and boys as the boys”.<sup>28</sup>
5. **The “it has gone too far” argument** – the classic anti-feminist argument that has, by now, been used for centuries. It has simply gone too far, and men are in crisis because of gender equality: some feel they are oppressed and that gender equality is a discriminatory ideology towards men; some perceive that women and men are already equal so what is the fuss all for. In the Czech Republic, again, when the churches managed to sway the public opinion against the Istanbul Convention on violence against women, the Prime Minister backed away from his promise of implementing it, saying that it was not necessary since women's rights were already protected. One survey respondent pointed out that some anti-gender arguments imply that their organisation “wants more than what is needed for women” and that “they should not interfere with questions that are not women's issues”. The same kind of statements have been shared to us by several activists and academics in interviews and discussions.

# Case Studies

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## ANTI-GENDERISM IN TURKEY

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Although the terms anti-gender and gender ideology did not exist in the vocabulary of Turkish gender politics until very recently, anti-gender politics date back to 2011 when the ruling, authoritarian Islamic-nationalist party, AKP (the Justice and Development Party), started to bypass gender equality laws in favour of pro-natalist policies promoting motherhood.<sup>29</sup>

In Turkey, the principal actor against gender equality is the ruling party, but it acts with support from popular movements.<sup>30</sup> The anti-gender narrative comes from radical Islamist writers, conservative journalists, academics and non-governmental organisations. Other important actors are the government-controlled women's rights organisation, KADEM (the AKP's attempt to hijack the independent and powerful feminist movement in Turkey), and the Council of Higher Education.<sup>31</sup>

The Turkish state has repeatedly attacked gender studies and excluded queer and feminist researchers from universities and other institutions. There is no ban on gender studies, as such, but the repression makes it difficult for researchers to work. Several women's organisations have been shut down, and LGBTQI+ activism is severely repressed as an "offense against public morality". Kurdish feminists especially have been subject to violence. Policy-wise, as in Hungary where anything related to gender or women has been replaced by "family",<sup>32</sup> the Turkish government set up a ministry for family labour and social services, responding to the Directorate of Religious Affairs. The narratives used by Turkish politicians borrow a great deal from those of European anti-gender movements. Islamist elites

and the government believe that secular "Western feminism" is contradictory to the Islamic roots of Turkey. These "Western" influences were described as having "degenerated Turkish women, destroyed the true Turkish family and brought immorality to Turkish society".<sup>33</sup> It is quite apparent how the Turkish state is aiming to create a new paradigm, an alternative to globalised and decadent Europe.<sup>34</sup>

On the 8th of March 2019, anti-gender politics took a leap forward in Turkey.<sup>35</sup> A new network, the "Turkish Family Assembly", released an announcement on social media calling on people to "stop the global war on the family". This is the exact same slogan which is used by anti-gender movements in Europe and elsewhere. According to this movement, "the terrorism of gender equality and homosexuality is a crime against humanity".<sup>36</sup> They want to restore the importance of the family status and lift the ban on underage marriages.



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## THE PROBLEMATIC CONCEPT OF GENDER IN TUNISIA

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The anti-gender movements in Tunisia can be traced back to the moment of the 1994 Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, argues Khadija Chérif, Tunisian sociologist and feminist activist. She continues:

– At this time, conservatives, Islamists, the Vatican and even Iran tried together to prevent the enhancement of women's rights. The worst enemies are always ready to team up against women's rights. The term gender itself is triggering tremendous hostility in the country. It is debated at length in the Parliament each time it is mentioned. For instance, during the debates on the Integral Law against violence against women, the use of the term gender was negotiated for weeks.

Gender for many, means to recognise homosexuality. This is not specific to Tunisia, the term gender is complicated in many parts of the world and has roughly ten different translations in the Arab-speaking world. Gender, or anything related to women's rights, is often considered to be against religious and moral values. Anti-gender movements claim that there is a need for preserving the unity of the family and not giving in to decadence. Discourses against the term gender can be spread at the Mosque during the sermon.

– The term gender creates outrage, says Amel Grami, director of the Gender Studies program in La Manouba. Before, anti-feminist attacks were mostly directed towards activists, now they target gender studies professors. Gender studies are seen as something that normalises and promotes homosexuality.

For Khadija Chérif, the main argument used against women's rights and gender equality is to invoke religion. The backlash that feminists in Tunisia face is framed around the women's rights movement being influenced by the West and introducing concepts which are alien to the Tunisian society, and go against its identity, nation and culture. The Islamist movements are powerful and pay hackers to harass and troll feminist researchers online. They are very organised and constantly connected on social media which gives them channels to directly attack activists and professors via emails, raids, cyber-attacks, and so on.

Amel Grami was herself harassed on social media and a raid was launched against her after she spoke in the media on the topic of homosexuality and religion.

– I think this has to be seen in the context of fear of what the future will look like, the economic crisis, and of terrorism. It is seen as a “natural” thing to go back to traditional values such as family. Gender is seen as a threat towards these “secure” values. It is an invasion of the “other” which, in an uncertain context, can feel alien and dangerous. But it is also a classic attempt from conservative forces to preserve patriarchy and privileges, she says.

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## NATIONALISM AND RELIGION: A TOXIC COCKTAIL IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

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The arguments used against gender equality bear similar traits across Western Balkans; hate speech towards LGBTQI+ people, blaming “the West” for trying to influence society, and the need to protect traditional and familial values.

The discourses around gender equality in the Balkan region are intertwined in religious, nationalistic and political conflicts. In order to understand the situation nowadays, it is necessary to go back to the former entity which united most of the present Western Balkan countries: Yugoslavia.

Interestingly, during this era gender equality was assured by the law. Civil and political rights were enshrined in legislation, and abortion was permitted. On paper, at least, equality was there. However, society in general was more traditional and Yugoslavia was culturally and structurally a patriarchal society. The 1990s saw growing nationalism and populism fuel a terrible war grounded in ethnicity and religion. In a highly volatile political and social context, discourse focussing on “one enemy” is likely to be prevalent to unify the nation as one strong and legitimate entity against the external enemy. This rhetoric was transformed to become today's discourse where women (re)produce the nation, the identity and the culture, and are the “real mothers of the nation”. This concept is rallied against the feminists, who are regarded as being the ones harming and destroying the nation.

In the 2000s, EU enlargement processes provided a powerful incentive for many national governments in the Western Balkans to adopt legislations ensuring gender equality, as this is a condition for entering the European Union. This has contributed to changes in legislation, and has attracted substantial foreign investments into the region, which plays a part in the gender politics. One symbolic example is that the Serbian law for gender equality is currently being kept out of adoption for “budget reasons”, and because it would not be “in favour of the business community and foreign investments”.<sup>37</sup>

Today, the actors of the anti-gender movements in the Western Balkans are a mix of civil society organisations (often with religious affiliations), political parties, intellectuals and the church. They have close links with each other and cooperate. Some ferociously anti-gender American intellectuals are influential in the Balkans. Jordan Peterson, a Canadian intellectual famous for his anti-feminist, anti-left and transphobic positions, has had his work translated into Serbian. Generally, the triggering issue for the anti-gender movements in the Balkans is the question of LGBTQI+ rights. According to Maja Stajcic, from the Belgrade office of The Kvinna till Kvinna, Peterson's rhetoric is very popular, and feeds the anti-gender movements discourses:

– Anti-gender movements are powerful enough to be able to destabilise political processes. This happened when a law related to equality in education and school curriculum that had been debated for ten years, made it to the Serbian parliament. Representatives of anti-gender movements reacted the same day in the media, arguing that the new law would be violating children's rights and were of a Western influence. The backlash was so well organised that it actually succeeded to get the law withdrawn from parliament.

The populist and anti-gender discourses manage to catalyse fear for the future and reorient economic and social concerns to direct them towards one enemy; gender. The power of anti-gender movements lies in their ability to navigate the media. They are present in all types of social media platforms with messages which are short, impactful, and often perfectly tailored to new media.

In North Macedonia, the anti-gender movement has arisen in a way which could qualify as a backlash for gender equality. During the past ten years, a very traditionalist and religious government was in power. During its mandate, this government promoted traditional and religious values, campaigned against abortion, and generally emphasised the traditional role of women and thereby denying their human rights. As the anti-gender rhetoric was coming from the state itself, there were few movements as such fighting against women's and LGBTQI+ rights.

Then a large-scale governmental scandal, which uncovered practices of wiretapping of citizens, gave rise to turmoil in the country and forced the government to step down.

Another, more liberal party was elected and improved women's rights in many ways. Notably, the abortion law was changed, and an anti-discrimination law including sexual orientation as a criterion of discrimination was introduced. In May 2019, the first gay pride took place in Skopje. Confronted with these waves of societal liberalisation, anti-gender movements started to emerge in the public debate. Voskre Naumoska Ilieva, working for The Kvinna till Kvinna in North Macedonia, reflects:

– The anti-gender movements are often linked to the religious communities, they are civil society organisations made of “concerned citizens”. They are active on social media, building a good reputation as the ones caring for the people. They are active in the political sphere and are able to create unlikely alliances, such as the one created in reaction to the abortion law by gathering all major heads of religious strands in North Macedonia; the Orthodox, the Muslim and the Catholic.



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## THE POWER OF THE CHURCH AND ANTI-GENDER DISCOURSES IN POLAND

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Anti-gender movements appeared in Poland in 2012, when the Istanbul Convention on preventing gender based violence was discussed in the parliament.

The discussions focussed on the term gender used in the Convention. A few years later, the discussions erupted again when the new government planned to withdraw from the Convention. They later changed their mind and argued that they would not have to formally withdraw but could simply not follow the Convention. The Istanbul Convention is currently a “dead law” in Poland, according to Liliana Religa, communications coordinator of the Polish Planned Parenthood organisation. In 2016, a new attack against feminism and gender was launched, triggered by *in vitro fertilisation*.<sup>38</sup> Politicians of the Law and Justice party attacked activists through aggressive propaganda in the media. Liliana Religa describes how gender came in handy for conservative politicians:

– They tend to blame progressive forces for all the things which go wrong in the country. Gender is seen as a threat to the nation and its culture. Another principal argument against gender equality policies is that it would be an import from the West. The politicians are anti-gender to gain votes on critical issues such as gender and refugees.

Among the reasons for anti-genderism, Liliana Religa mentions the fact that gender is used to create fear amongst citizens as an efficient political strategy for certain populists to maintain their power. In a globalised context, where fear over the future reigns, it is convenient to blame financial and economic distress and the new neoliberal paradigm on an issue such as gender. Liliana Religa continues:

– The Catholic church in Poland is unbelievably powerful, and very conservative. The current Pope is considered too liberal on many issues and the actors of the anti-gender movement are strategic. They form fake non-governmental organisations, such as the “Institute of Lawyers”. Their goal is to restore the “national order” and they are strongly anti-abortion, but hide their agenda under a neutral, law-based name.

The “Institute of Lawyers” works on anything related to sex education and abortion rights, and opposes the notions of gender-based violence and domestic violence. They specialise in delivering reports and opinions. For instance, the draft law which was stopped by the Black Protests in 2018 because it would have drastically reduced abortion rights for women, was proposed by the “Institute of Lawyers”. Actually, this specific draft law has turned out to work in the favour of the women’s movement in Poland. The Black Protests gathered over 150 000 signatures and dramatically raised public support for sexual and reproductive rights in the country. Liliana Religa explains:

– The mass demonstrations have helped to alert the population on the gravity of such laws, and have raised the interest of what is happening in Poland among the international community and media.

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## ANTI-GENDER IN THE SECULAR CZECH REPUBLIC

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In 2015, Amnesty International in the Czech Republic issued a petition supporting the country's signature of the Istanbul Convention on combatting violence against women.

Back then, the process went smoothly, and not much campaigning was necessary for the Convention to be adopted. The government, at this point, had promised ratification in 2018.

– This is when the anti-gender movement woke up and organised a big campaign against the ratification of the Istanbul Convention. The Church got involved, and an important bishop gave a speech which succeeded in making people scared, says Diana Gregorová from the Czech Women's Lobby.

Churches started sharing petitions and brochures against the Istanbul Convention. A lot of misinformation was spread, which forced the Czech Women's lobby to file legal complaints. When politicians witnessed that opinions around gender equality and the Istanbul Convention changed, their stance shifted dramatically as well. Diana Gregorová continues:

– The current prime minister went from being openly in favour, to claiming that the Czech Republic did not necessarily need the Istanbul Convention, since he said that Czech laws already protect women against violence.

Anti-gender movements and Catholic groups cited arguments focussing on children. The gender ideology would make kids gender-neutral, they would no longer be girls or boys, but rather a third "sex". Even the claim that the Istanbul Convention would make Catholic holidays disappear was used. Diana Gregorová explains:

– In this storm of fake truths and fear-mongering campaigns, the Czech feminists tried to react as they could, but were taken back by the sudden backlash. We focussed on the political aspect, we wrote open letters, met with politicians. But the anti-gender movement continued to get immense support, and they were not afraid of telling lies.

The Czech Women's Lobby has decided to avoid using the term Istanbul Convention, which on top of being subject of intense controversies, could be linked to anti-migrant narratives because of its name. Further, they decided to avoid using the word gender, due to the term being so controversial. The actors creating the backlash on gender equality are grassroots movements with links to both the political and the religious worlds. Case in point, one association, the "Central European Inspiration", is directed by a former member of parliament. Generally, the support for such activities is huge and the resources of the anti-gender movement are substantial.

– This is very much linked to the shrinking space for feminist organisations, as some actors directly try to limit our funding. In 2018 it was decided that state funding intended for NGOs to work on gender equality will be cut almost in half. The campaign against so-called "political NGOs" has started with the migrant crisis. They consider gender, pro-migrant and ecological activists to be all the same, sharing the same agenda. The anti-gender movement is not big, but they are vocal, visible and it looks like they are financially well-off, says Diana Gregorová.

The anti-gender movements are directly attacking feminist and LGBTQI+ activists. The so-called trolls often target the Czech Women's Lobby's Facebook page with raids of hateful comments while others send offensive emails and inundate the office with phone calls.<sup>38</sup>

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## THE EGYPTIAN AUTHORITARIAN STATE “FEMINISM”

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**Historically, feminists in the region have on many occasions aligned themselves with authoritarian and undemocratic regimes (Egypt under Mubarak, Tunisia under Ben Ali and Iraq under Saddam Hussein being amongst the many examples). They worked with regimes which, either as part of their modernising projects or as ways to clamp down on Islamist opposition, promoted aspects of greater gender equality and women’s rights. This led to achievements in women’s education, labour force participation and legal rights. However, we also know that it contributed to an increase in social conservatism and a backlash against women’s rights in the context of the revolutionary protests and developments that ousted many of the secular authoritarian regimes in the region.”**<sup>40</sup>

This quote from Nadjé Al-Ali sums up the situation in Egypt quite well and highlights the relation between “state feminism”, authoritarianism, and the revolutionary backlash against women’s rights. As a country with a long history of feminist movements, Egypt is a very good context to observe how gender issues have been central to the political competition for power.

One of the most important, and perhaps most symbolic, actors in Egypt is the Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>41</sup> Founded in 1928, this movement aims at re-Islamising Egypt. To do so, women must adopt a certain behaviour in public and be educated a certain way. To assist them, they have the Muslim Sisters group who are very active at the grassroots level on welfare provision and religious education. They are also active at the international level and mobilise through international advocacy. Resisting feminism and women’s rights equates resisting any real or perceived Western influence.

Mubarak’s regime lasted thirty years. During his time, the actors of the gender agenda were the National Council for Women, non-governmental organisations, and the Islamist movements. Egypt’s system at this time was a form of government-imposed gender equality, which involved “top-down enforcement of women’s rights in a way that is underpinned by oppressive governance practice.”<sup>42</sup> Most of the reforms came from one important actor, the First Lady, Suzanne Mubarak. She presided over two national entities on women, including the National Council on Women which was created in 2000. The fact that Mubarak’s era improved women’s rights, at least legally, in an undemocratic way saw gender equality policies being further demonised once the revolution came. The post-revolution discourse criticised “Suzanne laws” and her personality itself for interfering in the running of the country for too long. These laws were revoked. During the short period in which Morsi was in power, the Muslim Brotherhood limited women’s rights in the

constitution. They opposed all mentions of bodily integrity in the constitution, as well as removing any mention of violence against women, and removed the minimum age for marriage. Even quotas for political representation were removed. The Muslims Sisters were very active in parliament, challenging the CEDAW Convention on eliminating discrimination against women, and promoting men's superiority at the UN level.<sup>43</sup> They made alliances at the international level with conservative right-wing Christian groups.

El Sisi took power in 2013 after a coup against the Muslim Brotherhood. The new constitution that was adopted enhanced women's rights; for the first time, the state committed to protecting women from all forms of violence, and all reforms made in Mubarak's time were restored. After attention in the international media related to sexual violence towards activists and female demonstrators, El Sisi presented himself as the "protector" against the "Islamists". As a symbolic gesture, he visited one of the survivors of an attack at the hospital, giving her a bouquet of flowers.<sup>44</sup> Again, such pro-women policies were nothing but political strategies, and had little to do with women's rights.

Today, women's rights organisations in Egypt are jeopardised and subject to everyday pressure. Egyptian social and economic rights defenders, trade union activists, journalists and whistle-blowers, as well as feminist and LGBTQI+ organisations have not been spared in recent waves of state crackdowns on civil society.<sup>45</sup> The non-governmental organisation Al Nadeem Centre for the Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence has been stormed by security forces under orders from the Health Ministry. Several feminist activists are under travel ban. The media describe feminist groups as "traitors to the nation". The authoritarian regime is in favour of women's rights when it favours their interests, and represses, bans and surveils women's rights organisations at the same time.

As women's rights activist Mozn Hassan explained in a Middle East Eye article:

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**[it] is possible to mainstream feminism in Egypt when you have a public space, not while you are stigmatised as a spy”.**<sup>46</sup>

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## JORDANIAN SOCIETY: BETWEEN TRADITIONALISM AND LIBERALISM

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As all societies in the world are, Jordan is a patriarchy. The paradigm of the Jordanian family structure is strong and anchored in long-lasting traditions. Roles and identities are strictly determined: men are perceived as the primary breadwinners for their families, and women's main role is to uphold the family and to work as mothers.<sup>47</sup> On the other hand, at the international level, Jordan is seeking to develop itself with the help of foreign aid, Western values of development, and the maintenance of a stable relationship with the USA.

This dual identity shapes its discourse on women's rights and gender equality. The actors of gender politics in Jordan are also divided, but key players include the Royal family, the parliament, women's organisations, international organisations and Islamic parties and organisations.

Islamic organisations are very vocal and organised in preventing gender equality policies from being adopted. For instance, following the ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in Jordan, complaints arose from Islamists. Three main controversial areas can be identified: Support for CEDAW; laws relating to the status of women and men (especially personal status law and honour killings); and the use of quotas to promote female political representation.<sup>48</sup> In the words of Amani Al Serhan, professor at the Center for Women's Studies at the University of Jordan:

– First of all, Jordan has a similar experience as Europe when it comes to women's studies. The term gender is not used; gender studies are "women's studies". We are often attacked for spreading discourses from "the West". Courses on women and equality are viewed as an attempt of "cultural colonialism". Women's studies and gender equality is seen as a Western project, we are there to corrupt the people. Women in Jordan are seen by the Islamists as already free.

As an academic, Amani Al Serhan needs to be extremely careful about the topics she tackles in class. Regarding anti-genderism in Jordan, she points out that it is not as relevant as anti-feminism and anti-Westernism concepts:

– The word gender does not create much outrage. Gender is understood as a women question. The Jordanian society is dual; in-between "modernity", which promotes a Western vision of gender equality, and "traditionality", which engages with the "women's issue" from a religious and tribal understanding where complementarity rules over gender relations.



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## CONCLUSIONS AND REFLECTIONS: MOVING FORWARD

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The backlash against women's rights and LGBTQI+ rights takes many forms in the EuroMed region.

Concerning the concept of anti-genderism, it does not seem to apply to all countries. Anti-feminism seems, in Jordan for instance, to be a more relevant term. If the political use of pro/anti-gender equality arguments comes from different historical backgrounds, the arguments per se are very alike across the countries analysed in this report. Women are already equal, and gender equality policies would be the result of the influence of "the West", the EU, or any entity that a given narrative chooses as a scapegoat. Gender studies are considered as unscientific, or at best as strongly ideological frameworks.

The movements targeting women's and LGBTQI+ rights differ from country to country; fake non-governmental organisations, political parties, religious groups, churches, governments, and so on. They use the topic of gender equality as a symbolic glue, a perfect culprit used to gain and preserve power. The intertwining of anti-feminism and anti-Westernism in some areas of the Middle East calls for a more

subtle understanding of the political and post-colonial aspect of the rejection of gender equality. Deconstructing anti-Western discourses and the rhetoric that equality is an alien concept for a specific nation, could help us to shape our strategies ahead.

Some scholars claim that feminism has lost touch with the destructive aspects of capitalism and neoliberalism which forms the basis for the popular support for anti-gender discourses. For Nancy Fraser, reclaiming "feminism's lost socialist or anti-capitalist dimension" could help feminist and queer movements to fight the reasons for their dismissal.<sup>49</sup> For Andrea Peto, "resistance alone is not enough", and new progressive politics are needed to enhance feminist politics.<sup>50</sup> Similarly, other authors call for a transnational and intersectional feminism, which is able to navigate outside of Orientalist and racist discourses, and challenge the growing anti-feminist, transnational movements.<sup>51</sup>



**do you  
want  
a future  
of  
decency  
equality  
and real  
social justice**

Photo: Jon Tyson

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## COUNTER ACTING ANTIFEMINIST NARRATIVES

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### So, how do we move forward?

Women's rights and LGBTQI+ rights organisations have globally been forced to develop counter strategies to tackle the attacks from the anti-gender movement. According to our survey, half of the respondents have strategies against the aggressions. Most of the respondents suggest: To not stay silent; to stay focussed on the common goal; and to dare to stand up for women's and LGBTQI+ rights.

On a more concrete note, suggested strategies from the respondents of the survey include: To prioritise investigative journalism to be able to rectify fake news; to generate and spread accurate scientific information; and to create press releases to call out to politicians to combat discriminatory speeches.

Other strategies suggested are to target specific audiences, for example to target the younger generation and to reach out to people "outside our bubble" and challenge social polarisation. Providing support on legal measures is yet another strategy, so that people empower themselves to be able to react to abuses, or to reach out to media offering to support them to counteract racist and anti-feminist narratives. Most of the respondents highlight **the importance of coalitions and alliances and to not react to the attacks but rather to reclaim the discourse**. One respondent highlights how unity of the movement is important to avoid becoming too focussed on "my issue" and forgetting the realities and problems of other groups. It is also suggested that as the political situation changes, especially in light of technological development, we need to think of new practices, new approaches, and new strategies.

Even if most participants shared concrete strategies, a small proportion stated that they prefer to ignore aggressive comments or situations. Because of the attacks, they avoid talking about sensitive topics on social media and are careful with what they say.

WE  
PROPOSE  
JOINING  
US IN THE  
**#WESAY**  
MOVEMENT

# #WESAY

## When feminists unite, things change!

A strong women's movement is the single most important factor for more gender-equal societies: It is more important than progressive governments or increasing the number women in politics. A country with a strong feminist movement is a country with stronger legislation on gender-based violence.<sup>52</sup>

# #WESAY

## Equality is a beautiful tradition

In ancient Greek, in around 400 BC, when Lysistrata (according to the play by Aristophanes) grew weary of the ongoing war between Greek cities, she persuaded the women from the warring cities to deny their husbands any kind of sexual intercourse. The strategy showcased the patriarchal stereotypes of the society, and in the end the women's aim was met and peace restored. (The strategy was later employed by the Liberian women's movement during the civil war at the early 2000s.)

Born in 1879, Huda Sha'arawi, was an Egyptian feminist leader, founder of the Egyptian Feminist Union. Along with other women, she led protests during the Egyptian Revolution of 1919 for Egyptian independence from Britain and the release of male nationalist leaders. Amongst many other things, she opened schools for girls, organised lectures for women and raised money to help disadvantaged women. Tahar Haddad (1899-1935) was a Tunisian revolutionary feminist male thinker. Journalist and politician, he called for a revisited interpretation of sacred texts, that give women the right to education and sanctions abuses using the Quran, the Hadith, and stories about women in the early period of Muslim history as sources.<sup>53</sup>

The list could be longer, but those examples are enough to challenge the idea that feminism would be a modern and Western concept. Everywhere and at all times, women and men stood up for gender equality.

## "Gender equality has gone too far!"

# #WESAY

## Really?

It comes as no surprise that women are still to a large extent excluded from decision making powers in many parts of the world. Not only in reference to the most basic argument that women happen to constitute a little over half of the world's population and should therefore be fairly politically represented, key research shows that for as long as women are excluded from policy making, decisions will lack a gender perspective, peace will be less sustainable, and inequality will persist.

Women continue to be largely excluded from negotiating peace. Between 1992 and 2018, women constituted 13 per cent of negotiators, three per cent of mediators and only four per cent of signatories in major peace processes.<sup>54</sup> When it comes to women in parliaments, only 24.3 per cent of all national parliamentarians were women in February 2019. As of June 2019, 11 women worldwide are serving as Head of State and 12 are serving as Head of Government.<sup>55</sup>

# #WESAY

## **Both men and women benefit from gender equality**

*Equal rights for others does not mean less rights for you. It's not a pie.*

The idea that gender equality only benefits women is both a harmful and partial narrative. It is no news that gender inequalities impact overwhelmingly women, and privileges men on the political, social, economic and cultural level. However, the overall patriarchal system does not only define who gets what on the basis of their gender, but also sets rigid norms which harm non-normative parts of the society. It not only sanctions women, but femininity in general, as well as non-heterosexuality. Other systems of power, such as race, class or ability, also harm what is considered as outside the norm. When gender equality aims at breaking the norms which lead to inequalities, injustices and violence, it means more freedom and justice for everyone. When gender equality aims at breaking stereotypical masculinity, it allows men to be able to connect on an emotional level with their children. When gender equality aims at challenging gender norms, it allows trans persons to exist. When gender equality aims at redefining strength and power, it allows other men to seek for help without shame. For the good of all, gender equality means freedom and justice.

**"Feminism is only for the elite!"**

# #WESAY

## **Then why is it so loud in our streets?**

Feminism is often being criticized for being an ideology from and for the elite. Therefore, it would not apply to "us". By framing feminists as elitists, one subtly inserts the idea that equal rights would only apply to a few. Women's rights are not rights reserved to an elite, women's rights are human rights. Furthermore, by claiming that feminism is elitist, one forgets and makes the feminists working every day for societal change invisible. What about the feminists receiving calls from women on helplines? The ones supporting and empowering refugee women? The ones advocating for better working conditions for women in the agriculture sector? Undoubtedly, we also need the so-called "elite" feminists: the ones using their privileges to be vocal in the media, the ones using their high-education to promote women's rights in politics, the ones shaking patriarchy from the top. Finally, the feminists are also those we see in the streets, chanting, yelling and demonstrating their anger and demands. We are strong and we reinforce each other.

# #WESAY

## **Gender equality gives us the freedom to define who we want to be**

Most of us agree that Saudi Arabian women should be able to leave their houses without being accompanied by a man, or have the freedom to drive a car. But gender equality is about much more than this. It means encouraging and accepting that young boys play with dolls, if they want to. Or that men can fall in love with other men. Or understanding that adult women may choose to not have children, without blaming them for being selfish or “unwomanly”. Gender equality is synonymous of choice.

# #WESAY

## **Everyone is a victim of toxic masculinity**

"By far the worst thing we do to males — by making them feel they have to be hard — is that we leave them with very fragile egos."

*(Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, award-winning author)*

One out of three women globally has experienced physical and/or sexual violence (not including sexual harassment) at the hands of a man. But violence is not limited to women, men also suffer violence committed by other men. The term “toxic masculinity” is defined as a set of traditional masculine behaviours which entails dominance, competition, violence, self-reliance and emotional repression. Those behaviours are enshrined in a profound rejection of any traits related to femininity. It leads to sexist, homophobic beliefs and actions, going as far as motivating acts of violence and assault.

This type of masculinity is harmful to our society in general. In itself, toxic masculinity considerably limits men’s freedom and it harms others. Let us redefine and change our expectations on masculinity.

# #WESAY

## **Gender equality is justice for all**

Unequal power relations and exclusion from decision-making processes are amongst the structural causes of social and political instability that generates poverty. More than ever, the reduction of gender inequalities has a strong contribution to make to social justice and sustainable development.<sup>57</sup> Tackling gender inequality must mean tackling economic and social injustices.

# #WESAY

## **We are not afraid. We are not silent. We do not obey!**

Enough is enough. We need to come together in solidarity and construct an efficient and clear narrative promoting gender justice and gender equality as the only way forward for a better world.



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