



WIDE+ and EWL International Conference
“Movements, Borders, Rights? Feminist perspectives on global issues in Europe“
24-25 October, 2016, Brussels, Belgium

Final Conference Statement

Feminism has to be political in the present multiple crises. This is the key message from the international conference „Movements, Borders, Rights? Feminist Perspectives on Global Issues in Europe“ which offered a space for joint critical analysis, feminist responses and discussions on future strategies vis-à-vis the present challenges for governance, human rights and freedom of movement. Corner stones of the current European situation are 1) the political backlash with a rise of authoritarianism, right-wing populism and racism that is often combined with a strong antifeminism, 2) the financial crisis with Grexit and Brexit as reference points highlighting the uncertain economic prospects of the EU, and 3) the movement of refugees and migrants resulting in a humanitarian crisis due to inadequate political responses. The current polarisation in many societies and the new regional and global power constellations exert mounting pressure on democratic and civil society spaces as well as on social justice, citizens’ and women’s rights and the life of refugees.

If feminist perspectives want to be relevant they have to be repoliticised. Gender rights activists, professionals and scholars from different generations and 31 countries deepened their understanding of the current situation in an international exchange between partners from the West and East Europe and the Global South. The voices of migrant and refugee women were prominent in the debates.

We analysed the ways in which social justice, gender equality and women’s rights are affected, sacrificed or squeezed due to austerity policies, marketization and financialisation of everything. This analysis was done exploring the interrelatedness of European policies and its external trade and development policies such as SDGs, and the interdependencies of the different crisis to get a more complex and holistic picture of compartmentalised problems and incoherent policies.

The conference stressed that nowhere women are a homogeneous group and that without respect for the multitude of feminisms we can’t build agency. We have to take into account women’s multiple identities and the intersection of different regimes of power and oppression. As a base for solidarities and alliances the conference discussed and proposed the following perspectives and strategies.

Political Backlash

The time to counteract against right wing populism and anti-feminism is **now**. We need to challenge immediately its disinformation strategies and hate speech. And we need to politicise and scandalise their racist, anti-democratic and masculinist rhetoric and claims to control, e.g. regarding sexual and reproductive rights. There is no ‘one-fits-all’ recipe. Counterstrategies have to be grounded in a contextual analysis of the interdependencies of nationalistic, identitarian, misogynist and militaristic forces and mindsets. They should range between confrontations and dialogue in particular with groups inbetween the polarised positions, should reach from translocal to transregional and must be proactive and not only reactive. We must make use of key moments for intervention in public discourses, identify strategic entry points to bring our own narratives and stories into the media and create our own public.



These strategies should counter at the same time the ongoing shrinking of spaces for critical civil society, including feminist activism, the weakening of social movements that we see taking place across trade unions to women's movements and the appalling attacks on rights activists. We have to contest dominant funding policies that reduce the space for agency; they privilege big institutional projects, private consultant firms and audits over small NGOs, social movements and women's rights activism. Analysis on financial flows are an important entry points for feminist action. In order to protect spaces of public dissent and protest we should resort to civil disobedience and to inside-outside-strategies We must recognise and build on our own strength and learn from e.g. the massive women's mobilisation in Poland.

We can't stop holding governments accountable for the implementation of right-based conventions and regulations. States and policies that encourage an authoritarian neoliberalism, fierce border regimes, exclusion of 'others', securisation and militarisation have to be named and shamed. We will hold our politicians feet to the fire because they are responsible for creating the conflicts and wars through trade in arms as well as trade and investment policies from which migrants and refugees escape. They don't adhere to the comprehensive architecture of human rights, gender equality and social justice that was forged by civil society and women's organisations and that is collapsing in the crisis context.


We must defend this rights and justice paradigm as well as feminist perspectives on conflicts and violence which highlight the interlinkages between peace, development, human rights and gender equality in opposition to a focus on social control and military responses.

Migration

Discourses on migrants and refugees should be governed by the human rights paradigm instead of being framed by a rhetoric of threat, security and prevention. At the EU level, migration and asylum laws have to ensure in a systematic and coordinated way that asylum seekers get fast registration and recognition without bureaucratic hurdles and harassment. They have to be considered as rights holders, need a right to choose freely their residence in the hosting country as well as rights to work and earn money. Funds should be invested in programs for basic social infrastructure for their daily live instead of 'managing' and controlling them and sending them back to their home countries or the country of registration in the EU according to the Dublin regulation.

There is an appalling intersection of European migration politics and development cooperation: border regimes are externalised from Europe by constructing detention camps in Northern Africa or by giving aid to insecure countries under the condition that they repatriate migrants from Europe. The shift of EU's development money along with the lack of solidarity in Europe with refugees and the human rights violations in camps and at borders create double standards with regard to human rights. Development aid must be invested to combat the root causes of migration instead of being subsumed into the migration management agenda or being used for securisation. To tackle root causes of war and conflict, we demand that arm trade is being banned, political solutions be promoted, and to recognise the role of women in all peace processes and facilitate implementation of UNSCR1325 and national action plans

We call for the ratification of the Istanbul convention by the EU and all European Governments without reservations, and for the implementation of its gender specific provisions and asylum procedures that are sensitive towards violence against women regardless of her legal status. Codes of conducts have to be introduced to prevent any form of violence against refugee and migrant women.



Detention as well as militarisation and commercialisation of security in camps are unacceptable. At the same time human rights violations, profiting from wars and commercial exploitation of the vulnerable situation of migrants have to be widely scandalised.

In our analysis one of the root causes of growing racism, conspiratorial thinking and scape goating around migration is European austerity and financialisation policies and the disengagement of European states from welfare that increases the burden on individuals and privatises social responsibility.

We call for respect voices of migrant women who don't want to be victimised and pitied all the time and their subjectivities not to be reduced only to problems. Instead social infrastructure and safe spaces should be provided so that they can regain dignity through autonomous agency and (self-)organising. We cannot separate our struggle against racism from that against sexism because often race is expressed in gendered terms and sexism is expressed in racialised terms. Liberation of one group of society should never be based on the oppression of another group.

Development and Trade

Given that the 2030 Agenda, the global policy framework for development, does not fundamentally challenge the ways inequalities in income, wealth, and power are produced and reproduced through trade and economic policies, we need to set enforceable feminist standards which go beyond the SDGs.

Some of the participants from the South and migrants argued that the era of development aid should be over because it was always based on a eurocentric hierarchical mentality of helping, and ultimately benefitting and privileging the Global North, big business and the financial market. Without being patronised they want to be respected and treated as equal partners in the development arena as well as with regard to migration issues.

The sustainable development agenda harbours goals that work against the protection of human rights and sustainable development. While talking about universality measures still focus on the Global South. We need to hold our governments and the private sector accountable to make sure that one goal is not being fulfilled at the detriment of another. We can refer to international law and alternative standards such as those laid out in CEDAW, by the Committee for Racial Discrimination (CERD) or the Beijing Platform for Action. Some national or regional policy frameworks are stronger than the SDGs, with indicators for women's participation in peace negotiations and protecting women's organisations and women's human rights defenders.

The present EU trade policy is a major obstacle in achieving sustainable development. It deepens inequalities and confines the democratic and policy space of individual states due to lack of transparency of negotiations and to the mechanisms of dispute settlement as well as an agenda going far beyond mere trade issues, including investment, public procurement, services and privatization and liberalization. The free trade agreements result in a decrease of the states' revenues and their capacity to invest in social infrastructure. Privileging investors' rights over the rights of small economic actors and the local communities results in the erosion of livelihoods and local economies as well as in the precarisation of labour and living conditions. Furthermore it is not only gender-blind but it confines itself to a neo-liberal productivist model of growth that relies silently on the huge amounts of unpaid and underpaid care work that mostly women carry out. Thus it contributes to further gender discrimination and devaluation of women's work. It also harms sustainable development since the agreements undercut climate change commitments.



Therefore we call for a transformation of the current EU trade and investment regime: we need an alternative. Multilateral and bilateral trade agreements should include binding and enforceable chapters on labour standards, human rights and environmental protection. Trade policies should be reformed in order to ensure food sovereignty, not only food security. EU trade policy threatens small-scale agriculture that is for most women and men in the Global South the main source of livelihood. CEDAW and the ILO conventions, including Convention No. 189 on Domestic Workers and No. 156 on Workers with Family Responsibilities, need to be part of any human rights dispute settlement and monitoring. (Transnational) Companies should be regulated through binding treaties that will sanction them when they do not respect the rights of workers, communities and consumers.

We contest the signing and implementation of the Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) because they threaten the development of African states, undermine regional African integration, undercut the implementation of the SDGs and are as damaging as the TTIP (Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership), the TPPA (Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement) and the NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement).

As the neoliberal growth paradigm and not rights- and redistribution based norms determine also EU internal budget policies as well as tax and financial policies in the European countries we want to take up these policies as a feminist issue. Since austerity policies slowed down progress towards reducing economic gender discrimination and confine basic services, public goods and welfare provisions we call for more government investment in the care economy and for the EU as a social union based on solidarity and a logic of caring and sharing for each other.

New Solidarities and Alliances

In order to manoeuvre in the new topography of power and in the increasingly polarized societies we need to reconstruct solidarity on a translocal and transregional level, across borders and boundaries and between generations. We need to find a new basis for solidarity through politicizing feminisms and an approach that challenges neoliberal global restructuring, which is not just the insertion of women and gender into the current system but gears towards transformation. Discourses should be shifted back to human, citizens' and women's rights paradigm and thereby challenge the increasing marketization and financialisation. We must caution not to reproduce North-South-relations of dominance, and stereotypes of othering and patronising. This holds true for the level of neoliberal globalization as well as between feminists.

We need to make connections between issues, policies, spaces and actors. Our strategies and demands should intersect with the multiple and different problems women face, being women in western and Eastern Europe, the Global South, migrants, of color, LGBTQ, etc. We must really listen to what each of us is saying instead of hearing 'what 'we' think they are saying'. Solidarity is not just about a helping hand but about understanding and working together for common political objectives. Solidarity – not charity - is a way of building communities of mutual support and resistance and act together.

Additionally, we must build trans-sectoral alliances with different groups and social movements, integrate feminist demands in their agenda while addressing the power structures in these movements. As feminists we need to be more proactive, set feminist standards, develop economic alternatives, which are participatory and inclusive, with care and caring as key element, and create a vision of a world that enforces equal rights.