

WHO IS AFRAID OF GENDER EQUALITY?

Common trends in Europe and Central Asia

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FOREWORD

WHY IS THIS REPORT NEEDED?

In more and more countries in Europe and Central Asia, gender equality policies are blocked by initiatives that fail to understand gender, blame equal rights activism for the destruction of traditional family and manage to mobilize growing numbers of public influencers against the agenda of gender equality, spreading false information and fear. When these new tendencies manifest themselves in countries where equal rights for women are a recent achievement, or in countries that lack a strong feminist tradition due to tens of years of dictatorship (such as countries in Eastern Europe) consequences can be severe: women and girls face new obstacles, their access to information and services backtracks and opportunities for women and girls to achieve their full potential diminish.

Before asking “Who is afraid of gender equality?” let us first explain what we mean by gender equality. According to the Council of Europe, gender equality means “equal visibility, empowerment, responsibility and participation of both sexes in all spheres of public and private life. It also means an equal access to, and distribution of resources between women and men. It means equally accepting and valuing the differences of women and men and the diverse roles they play in society.” Rest assured, following this definition, equal does not mean “the same”, but of equal value. Gender equality acknowledges that men and women are different, but it aims to ensure that “different” does not create categories such as “superior” and “inferior”.

Less than a century ago, women living in our region could not vote and run for public offices, as societies considered women’s role to be exclusively limited to the home; women could not

decide freely if, when and whom they would marry, and lived under the authority of a male relative (a father, a husband or a brother); young women had limited access to school education where boys were privileged; the same can be said for opportunities to work outside the house, women’s financial independence was frowned upon. These inequalities did not disappear magically. It took many generations of women to demand and fight, to protest and march and even to go on hunger strikes to obtain the rights that women enjoy today. Suffragettes, feminists and women’s rights activists eventually succeeded to place women’s rights as an indivisible aspect of human rights.

Equality between women and men still demands work. Only in 1993 did the UN officially declare violence against women as a violation of human rights. Every year, thousands of women still die at the hands of their partners or other family members, while governments still fail to adequately prevent and prosecute gender-based violence. Perpetrators still enjoy various levels of impunity.

One of the most important instruments adopted in recent years by European states to fight violence against women is The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating of Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (or the Istanbul Convention). This document was adopted in 2011 and ratified by 34 countries. The Convention shows that there are links between violence against women and gender inequalities and for this reason it was under attack. In 2018, 333 organizations in Europe, mostly religious conservative Christian groups, signed a petition against the document and argued that states should not comply with its provisions. In some countries, like Bulgaria, the Convention could not be ratified because of the strong lobby against it.

The attacks against the Convention block progress in the region on better laws for the prevention and protection against violence, as well as for the prosecution of perpetrators.

It is in this context that **A.L.E.G. in Romania** and **Women’s Resource Center in Armenia** decided to implement the project “*Who Is Afraid of Gender Equality?*” The project undertook a research among With and for Girls Award grantees - pioneers of girl leadership in the region - and other women’s rights organizations working with girls, to find out what challenges they were experiencing in relation to this hoax hunt and, most of all, what this means for girls?

Data for this report was collected via an online questionnaire was then analysed through quantitative and qualitative measures and related to the recent literature in the field. A number of 21 countries from Europe and Central Asia participated in this study. The report does not provide a comprehensive and in-depth assessment of the situation of women in the countries concerned, or of the legal and institutional framework of gender equality and women’s rights in these countries. This report seeks to introduce the basics of the framework, and to describe those areas that respondents identified to be the mostly affected by the backlash. In this context, the study also reflects on some missed opportunities where progress has not happened despite potential, and also reflects on new problems that have arisen in the last five years.



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Fear does not justify the means

CEDAW Convention - United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

Equal opportunities of women and men indicates the absence of barriers to economic, political and social participation on grounds of sex and gender and other characteristics. Such barriers are often indirect, difficult to discern, and are caused and maintained by structural phenomena and social representations (such as gender stereotypes) that have proved particularly resistant to change.

Gender backlash refers to perceived setbacks and deteriorations in the equality relations between men and women. It points to the fact that gender equality and human rights are on the decline all over the developed world and that there is a significant increase in attacks against rights that have recently been achieved.

Gender ideology refers to attitudes regarding the appropriate roles, rights and responsibilities of men and women in society. Traditional gender ideologies emphasize the value of distinctive roles for women and men, where men fulfil their family roles through breadwinning activities and women fulfil their roles through homemaker and parenting activities. Gender ideology also refers to societal beliefs that legitimate gender inequality.

Gender balance is commonly used in reference to human resources and equal participation of women and men in all areas of work, projects or programmes. In a scenario of gender equality, women and men are expected to participate proportionally to their shares in the population. In many areas, however, women participate less than what was expected based on the sex distribution in the population (underrepresentation of women), while men participate more than expected (overrepresentation of men).

Gender equality refers to the equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities of women and men, girls and boys. Equality does not mean that women and men will become the same but that women's and men's rights, responsibilities and opportunities will not depend on whether they are born male or female. Gender equality implies that the interests, needs and priorities of both women and men are taken into consideration, recognizing the diversity of different groups of women and men. Gender equality is not a women's issue but should concern and fully engage men as well as women. Equality between women and men is seen both as a human rights issue and as a precondition for, and indicator of sustainable people-centred development.

Gender inequality means unequal access to and control over the various material and non-material resources and assets of society. In all societies the woman's role is the inferior one in the relationship. There is still no country in the world where women have equal access to power and decision-making, and to decent and well-paid jobs.

Gender mainstreaming is the (re)organisation, improvement, development and evaluation of policy processes, so that a gender equality perspective is incorporated in all policies at all levels and all stages, by the actors normally involved in policy-making. Mainstreaming a gender perspective is the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programs, in all areas and at all levels. It is a way to make women's as well as men's concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programs in all political, economic and societal spheres so that women and men benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated. The ultimate goal is to achieve gender equality.

Gender stereotypes are preconceived ideas whereby males and females are arbitrarily assigned characteristics and roles determined and limited by their sex. Sex stereotyping can limit the development of the natural talents and abilities of boys and girls, women and men, their educational and professional experiences as well as life opportunities in general. Stereotypes about women are used to justify and maintain the historical relations of power of men over women as well as sexist attitudes which are holding back the advancement of women.

Human rights define that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood, according to Article 1 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Istanbul Convention - Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence.

NGO - Non-governmental organisation.

KEY FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

Many NGOs active in the field of gender equality in European Union (EU) and Central Asian countries report that it has become harder for them to achieve progress on girls rights, because of negative public attention in the media and of pressure exerted on policy makers to restrict rights, especially in the area of reproductive health. This negative context that hinders the work of equal rights NGOs are leaving their girl beneficiaries in a more vulnerable position.

While challenges exist in all EU and Central Asian states, their exact nature and extent vary across countries. How strongly the challenges are felt also varies depending on the type, size and age of the organization involved, and on the development of the social context. These include unfavourable changes in legislation or inadequate implementation of laws, hurdles to access funding that ensures sustainability for NGOs or attacks on and harassment of girls rights defenders, including public negative discourse with the aim of delegitimizing and stigmatising the people working directly on gender equality issues.



A.L.E.G. (Romania) and Women's Resource Center (Armenia) agreed to partner up to implement a collaborative project in which the two organizations involved their girl beneficiaries in studying the backlash on gender equality in the Europe and Central Asia region. This research identified the specific areas of impact on the lives of girls and women of anti-gender policies:

FINANCE AND FUNDING

funding cuts in general for NGOs, sometimes coming from the fact that the state replaces services that used to be commissioned to NGOs by state-run services (eg. women's helplines); funding cuts for those activities that clearly relate to gender equality; obstacles to obtaining long term funding; government is not financially supporting human and girls rights policies; ensuring co-financing for projects often constitutes a challenge, as do delays in payments of grants; cumbersome reporting procedures; negative media coverage against NGOs that receive foreign funding, including, in some cases, the demand for them to brand themselves as foreign-funded organizations on all their materials.

INTIMIDATION OF NGOS AND RIGHTS ACTIVISTS

that include acts of violence: physical attacks, harassment and threats. Girls rights and gender equality activists are subjected to verbal attacks, such as online hate speech, threats, negative public discourse and even personal attacks. These tendencies have become so widespread that activists regard them as part of the job.

NEGATIVE PUBLIC DISCOURSE AND SMEAR CAMPAIGNS

hostile public discourse, including by state officials and politicians, has negative consequences for NGOs. It undermines public trust, which makes citizens less likely to associate themselves with these NGOs, support them, volunteer, donate funds or treat them as credible sources of information.

THE RELATIONSHIP WITH THE GOVERNMENT

has changed in the last five years, adopting measures like cuts in funding or procedures of excessive reporting obligation regarding funding sources and distribution. Also, since the Istanbul Convention has become a target for the opponents of “gender ideology”, its ratification or implementation has been hindered.

NEGATIVE EFFECTS ON THE SAFETY OF WOMEN AND GIRLS

impunity which refers to gaps in legislation and/or poor implementation of existing laws failing to sanction and discourage acts of gender based violence, lack of services that prioritize the safety of women, such as shelters, integrated support centres in cases of sexual assault, counselling in cases of sexual harassment etc.

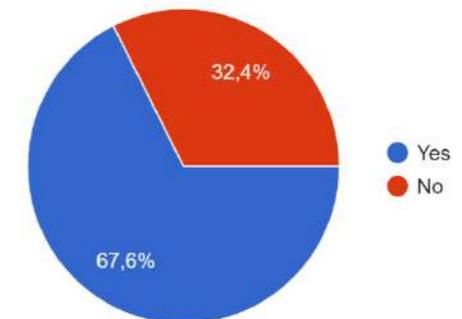
PUBLIC EDUCATION SYSTEMS

have been affected. In terms of gender equality education, the campaign against “gender ideology” has successfully blocked or prevented reforms or has led to the rolling back of achievements. Projects that involve the word gender were blocked, even if they promoted fundamental education about prevention of violence against women and girls or reproductive health.



More than 67% of the participants in this report face negative consequences for the fact that they are dealing with women and girls' rights. From the standard accusation that our societies already have equal rights between women and men, to the question *But what about men's rights?*, NGOs face challenges in their work. It happens often that their staff is exposed to threats, insults or hate speech. On the other side, in relation with educational projects, sometimes NGOs have to reconsider the way they write their applications, in a way that doesn't put at risk the implementation in schools. Many countries have reported that the Ministry of Education doesn't allow projects that include the word *gender* into their curricula.

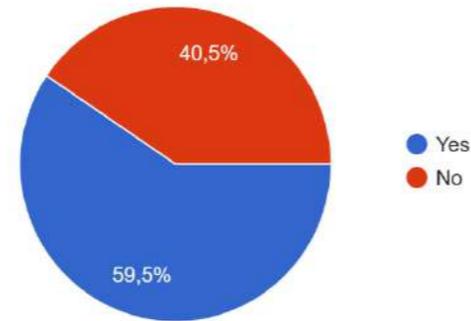
Does your organisation face any negative consequences or new challenges for dealing with women and girls' rights?



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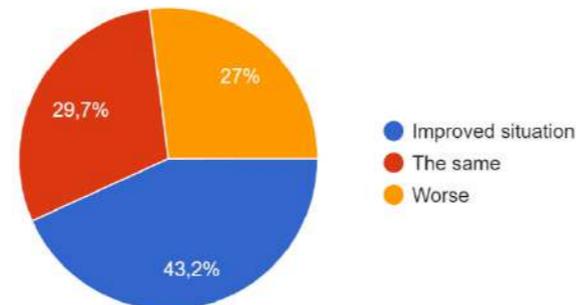
The public discourse regarding the appropriate roles, rights and responsibilities of each gender in society promoted by traditional family refers to social beliefs that legitimate gender inequality. For example, the traditional role of women is to have kids and to take care of the household, while men must work and be the head of the family. This specific characteristics of what men and women can and should do according to conservative views about society are harming both genders and preventing them from fulfilling their true potential. More than 59,5% of the NGOs in Europe and Central Asia consider that empowering girls and fighting for gender equality is a difficult issue from the standpoint of policy decisions. This has an effect on girls as it's becoming difficult to legislate in favour of better policies to combat gender-based violence or of policies that grant girls' the right to access sexuality education.

Did gender ideology discourse prevent decision-makers from taking policy decisions to improve girls' rights?



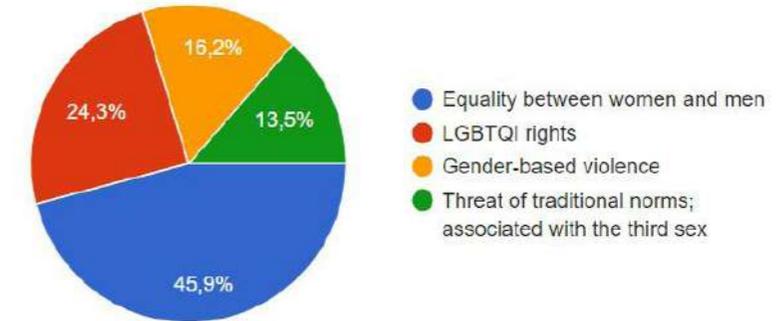
More than 43,2% of the respondents agree that there have been improvements in public policy and national legislation regarding our issue, over the last five years. Girls and women have become more aware of combating gender based violence, which means there is a growing number of active professional organizations that now work with vulnerable groups of women. Besides, there are new laws regarding family rights and parent allowance, but we still see a gender pay gap. This is one reason why mostly women take maternity leave and fathers rarely do so. Also, respondents in some countries say that new regulations are making it easier to access abortion pills.

How would you describe the most significant developments in the last 5 years in national legislation and public policy (including national strategies, action plans, etc) related to girls' rights and gender equality.



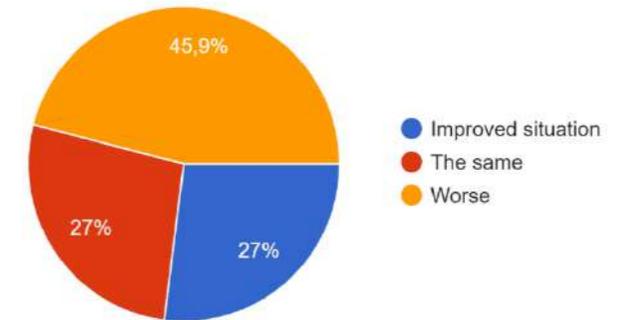
In many contexts, the association of NGOs with the word gender brings them negative public discourse, challenges in funding and actions of violence and intimidation for their staff members. More than half of the respondents of the survey (56,7%) agree that the media has a negative reaction when they hear about gender issues, mostly because they associate it with LBGTQI rights or the third sex, or with the fact that people could change their sex whenever they want. Also, it seems that the use of the word gender has become a threat to the traditional family norms.

Does the word "gender" trigger a positive or a negative attention in the media in your country?



National strategies and action plans related to girls' rights and gender equality, in areas like sexual and reproductive health rights, family and marriage or education, have changed in the last years. While in 27% of the countries the situation has improved by through better laws, in practical terms (on the field) few things have changed. Several countries in Europe signed the Istanbul Convention (such as Latvia, Albania or Croatia), but no real changes have happened in terms of protection of women and girls against of all forms of violence and in prevention and elimination of domestic violence. On the other side, there are countries that don't have a new National Policy for Gender Equality or laws promoting girls' rights or the empowerment of girls. Another issue we discovered refers to the poor relationship between governments and NGOs, as the former cut off opportunities for civic society to access funding and to invest in new partnerships or projects.

How would you describe the development in the last 5 years related to the legislation and the policies for your organisation and other NGOs working on women and girls' rights (funding regulations, reporting obligations, cooperation with state)?



WHO IS AFRAID OF GENDER EQUALITY? COMMON TRENDS IN EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA

EUROPE

For a better understanding of how anti-gender narratives work in a socio-political context, it was more strategic to look at what NGO partners expressed as changes and challenges in each region of Europe from where we received responses. We decided to divide our respondents in the following groupings and have allowed them to speak about their most pressing issues.

The groups are: **Eastern Europe, Western Europe, Northern and Southern Europe.**

Eastern Europe participants in this study are from **Bulgaria, The Republic of Moldova, Romania, Russia** and **Ukraine**. In Bulgaria, as in all the other countries mentioned above, the word gender mostly triggers a negative attention in the local media and is very often associated with LGBTQI rights. The term *gender*, is charged with extremely negative meaning, used in association with the term *ideology*, and is perceived like a threat to society. Gender ideology seems to be something that people fear and it has become the main threat to national traditional values. These misunderstandings and manipulations of language shifts away from the term of gender equality that is associated with girls' rights.

In some countries, the original meaning of gender equality is little known, and often confused even in academic circles. For example, decisionmakers in Russia support "traditional family value" discourse, a discourse in which the term "gender" is "non-traditional" and presented only in connection with the possibility of changing one's gender.

In **Ukraine**, the Orthodox Church and anti-gender movements have a huge influence on the works of decision-makers. They actively promote the "family values" and anti-abortion laws. The word "gender" is mostly associated with LGBT rights and

it is perceived as an "anti-family" and "anti-national" value. All these anti-gender movements have led Istanbul Convention nor being ratified in Ukraine: the reason behind the delays is the definition of "gender" used in the document. Nowadays, instead of the word "gender" they use the word "sex" on all official documents related to this topic.

National legislation and public policies related to girls' rights and gender equality in Ukraine has improved in the last five years. Ukraine has adopted a National plan, and a new law on domestic and sexual violence. As a positive result, we notice that the number of professional organizations that work with vulnerable groups of women has increased and women have become more aware of the issue of various forms of violence. Moreover, the number of women in parliament and in the army has increased.

In **Romania**, in 2018 the parenting education strategy for which the Ministry of Education commissioned UNICEF and other experienced NGOs was blocked and never approved due to a petition signed by many parents' and religious organizations who felt that gender equality was a bad message and that parents should not talk to their children about it. These organizations managed to convince the Ministry of Education to give up this draft strategy altogether simply because gender ideology is misunderstood. There is a strong fear that the term gender equality hides a secret attempt to introduce third gender and destroy the traditional family. This fear has led to the loss of an important policy instrument. Guidance for parents regarding their children's education is much needed in Romania and this strategy could have helped very much if implemented.

On the other hand, despite the fact that international conventions ratified (Istanbul Convention, CEDAW convention) require the

Romanian government to provide education against gender stereotypes in schools as a means to prevent gender-based violence, authorities are more and more opposed to the topic of gender education due to a very intense lobby against it coming from religious organizations and the Coalition for the traditional family. These organizations have recently signed a petition asking the Ministry of Education to ban all gender ideology in school programmes and manuals. Unfortunately, few people are aware that this attack is in fact an attack against the prevention of family violence. At the same time, while statistics show alarming figures when it comes to teenage pregnancies in Romania and while the recent Gender Barometer (2019) shows that most Romanians think that sexuality education is needed in schools, the same lobby groups have been blocking all educational attempts on this topic for years. Instead of an open dialog on finding best solutions and middle way settlements, there is a violent rejection of the entire issue of gender.

The situation in **Russia** has been getting worse year by year. In 2013 Russia adopted a federal law against *propaganda of nontraditional sexual relations*. Besides, in 2017 the president of Russia signed a law that decriminalizes domestic violence which does not seriously injure the person. The number of hate-speech and hate-crime cases against members of the LGBT community has increased. Girls do not get proper information about sexuality and reproductive health, there is no proper sexual education in schools. The influence of the Russian Orthodox Church has increased as well. Orthodox views can affect school curricula on reproductive health and sexuality.

In relation with legislation and policies for NGOs working on women's and girls' rights, the situation got worse, with the addoptation of The

Russian *foreign agent* law, officially called "The Law On Amendments to Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation regarding the Regulation of the Activities of Non-profit Organizations Performing the Functions of a Foreign Agent". Through this law non-profit organizations that receive foreign donations and engage in *political activity* are required to register and to declare themselves as foreign agents. This law has made the processes of getting grants from foreign funds even more difficult. The situation is more problematic especially if an NGO is working on domestic violence, gender-based violence issues, gender inequality and any women's issues (except supporting mothers): as such issues are not "traditional" in Russia.

In **Bulgaria** the government used media as a tool to spread propaganda against the Istanbul convention, as a result, within a couple of weeks, the whole country was convinced that if signed, the Convention will make their children think about changing their gender. Moreover, the Istanbul Convention was declared unconstitutional. No other adequate legislation is adopted as there is no government support for victims of gender-based violence. For example, the lack of legal support in creating services for the victims has lead to a rise in the number of femicide in the last years. On the other hand, the government takes credit for succesfully dealing with domestic violence issues, even if the work was actually done by NGOs. Also, NGOs face huge problems in the implementation of projects, especially in schools, as the Minister of Education declares publicly that gender will never become a priority in schools.

In the **Republic of Moldova** the situation is similar to that in the other countries when it comes to funding and general public discourse. Women's rights NGOs receive fewer funds due to restrictive

regulations, but they feel optimistic because since they've been facing these difficulties, they have seen higher motivation levels for volunteering for this cause.

The situation in **Western Europe** is described by the experience of Germany, a country where the term gender is associated with equality between women and men and where the gender ideology discourse did not prevent decision-makers to take policy decisions to improve girls rights. They also report that, working with gender equality issues, they are often asked *Why just women and girls? This time has passed, we already have equal rights and opportunities in Germany. We need to support boys...* Over the last five years parental allowance improved in terms of law, but very few fathers take the opportunity to stay home and care for their children. This mostly happens when they earn more money than their female partners. The glass ceiling faced by women is still in place and the income for women is 22% lower all in all. In German Parliament only 33% of representatives are women. The law has changed and now marriage is legal for LGBTIQ couples.

Northern Europe respondents of this research are from Ireland, Latvia and the United Kingdom (Wales). To a large extent women's rights are still a rather unpopular issue to work with in these countries, and NGOs are often faced with backlash arguing that the problems that they work with are all imaginary, because women have all the rights they need (and on paper it really does seem like the situation is great, even if legislation is not always used effectively in practice).

In **Latvia**, the concept "gender" is seen as a threat that made the ratification of the Istanbul Convention stalled. A huge backlash enforcing stereotypical gender roles has ensued and the

discussion is veered away from, actual gender-based violence for example. General public and uneducated population is afraid that with the advancement of gender discourse people will supposedly be able to change their gender anytime they want. Recently, a change in legislation regulating donations was made, which makes it less appealing for large businesses to donate to NGOs. The fact that Latvia is now often viewed as a "rich" Nordic state by international funding bodies has been a considerable issue when trying to secure funding for projects. Another issue when receiving support from the government (which is very little and consists in a state-funded programme for the rehabilitation of victims of violence) is the huge administrative burden and bureaucratic requirements that often-time become a strain for the NGOs.

The situation is a bit different in **England**, as the word gender is often associated with equality between men and women. In the context of legislation and policies, there is more awareness for decision-makers, but this doesn't necessarily mean real changes in the field. Nevertheless, there have been, some improvements in accessibility to abortion pill and some changes to the VAWDASV Act which have brought positive change and new strategies. Also, England has just launched a programme that will bring free menstrual products in all secondary schools. A big challenge to face is answering to what about the men question, which makes the subject of girls' rights area being underfunded. In Ireland there are improvements in terms of legislation for domestic violence which became more victim-friendly, and there is a new law on abortion and marriage equality. Similar to all the countries in the area, the funding possibilities are not enough.

Southern Europe is represented by **Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Serbia, Spain.**

Albania is one of the lucky countries where the general public associates the word gender with equality between men and women. There has been progress in enforcing human rights, especially at local level, and in strengthening the institutional mechanisms to defend the rights of children, tackle gender-based and domestic violence and protect vulnerable groups. Despite the progress, the country still faces obstacles regarding access to health and to sexual and reproductive health services by vulnerable groups. The National Health System Strategy 2016-2020 does not include women's health and well-being as separate items, making it difficult to develop appropriate interventions for women and girls. There is an evident lack of integrated services, addressing gender-based violence; providing mental health screening and screening for cancers of the reproductive system resulting in critical health gaps that limit the effectiveness of SRH programs, compromising human health. Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) programs do not extend to children or young people. Despite the achievements, NGOs report a low level of use of modern contraceptive methods, particularly among adolescents/youth and other vulnerable groups. Unofficial sources indicate a higher number of abortions than those published. Even though there is a law on prevention of pregnancy in Albania there is no full access to abortion care throughout the country. There is a need for partnership in the implementation of joint projects between NGOs and public health institutions in terms of information, awareness and delivery of quality services on women's health.

In **Bosnia and Herzegovina** the access of girls from rural areas to school programs and also the access of young women to higher education programs such as universities has grown, which automatically allows more women to be more independent financially and gives them opportunities to take part of the labour market. The Government cooperates with NGOs but without major improvements.

Despite gender ideology discourse, the Istanbul Convention was ratified, but implementation process is standing still in **Croatia**. The National Policy for Gender Equality has expired in 2015, as the law was available between 2011-2015. NGOs feel the need for new improved laws and procedures and they lack national funding, mainly depending on the EU. Moreover, activists promoting girls' rights face negative comments on social media, phone harassment and, with the new, probably more restrictive abortion law, they expect their work to become much more difficult.

In **Serbia**, gender equality policies are often embedded in general policies, thereby losing the significance of measures aimed at improving the position of women and girls. The Law on Gender Equality was adopted in 2005 and prescribes already under-represented legal forms. The new gender equality law has not yet been adopted, although the expert public and civil society have been considering it since 2015. Also, in the last 5 years, there has been a poor cooperation between institutions at both national and local levels with NGOs. International organizations increasingly cooperate directly with institutions without the involvement of civil society.

Even if the legislation at a national level that promotes better services for girls and women has

been considered long ago, in practice nothing has changed, in **Spain**. Gender ideology discourses are arising and organisations face hate speech attacks mainly when launching awareness raising campaigns and/or through social networks means. It is also very difficult to reach funding to support women suffering from gender based violence in terms of the budget necessary for a long-term and qualitative support. Funding regulations and reporting obligations have been more difficult over the last 2 years for medium and small NGOs is not feasible to reach funding in that frame. Many girls that have suffered sexual violence are not being protected by justice trials and perpetrators are released without punishment.

The situation in **Armenia, Georgia, Turkey** is not different from other geographical areas and other countries, as anti-gender movements are very similar in different places. NGOs face the same threats: limitation of their activities, laws regarding those limitations and control, etc. There are public accusations against freedom of speech and women's organizations are getting marginalized. Women and human rights defenders are attacked as well and, for example in Armenia, some criminal cases have already been opened because of that.

The first publicly evident waves of anti-gender attacks started in Armenia in the 2010s. LGBTQI, women's and gender issues, including also adolescent girls' sexual and reproductive health care are constantly under attack by anti-gender mobilizations. At the beginning, these attacks were mostly spread around through Facebook and social media. But currently there are direct attacks on the people in the streets. Gender has negative connotations and all other concepts related to it are also presented in a negative manner in media and in public debates. Some of the public figures, such as writers representing media, do not even know the differences between gay and transgender people.

The actual fact of being "one of them" is a reason for nationalist groups to promote hate among the public. Women's Resource Center is one of the NGOs working in the area of women's right. During the last years the NGO unfolded the project "Parents for Happy Kids" who's goal is to inform parents who have teenagers about the problems or difficulties their kids could face and to propose effective parenting methods. Workshops were done in schools and became a reason for attacks from the society to the NGO. Ultra-conservative groups started a campaign claiming that "Armenian teenagers don't need sexual education", and that "women's organizations are destroying national identities and values".

As for the legislation in **Armenia**, there are three important legal documents worth mentioning: the Law on Equal Rights and Equal Opportunities for Women and Men, the Law on Domestic violence which has, unfortunately been changed into one promoting solidarity in the family, instead of helping women not to die from femicide; and the Gender Strategy. A new Gender Strategy in Armenia has not been adopted since 2015. Nowadays, there are some discussions between stakeholders on the preparation and adoption of the new document.

In **Georgia** too, "gender" mostly triggers negative attention and is associated with equality between women and men. As a traditionalist country, the mentality of Georgian society is mainly patriarchal. Several issues - for example sexual education, reproductive health and rights, LGBTQI rights, etc. - have not been raised because of the fear of the reactions from the Church and other existing anti-gender groups and mobilizations.

When looking for development of the national legislation and public policy it is important to mention

that Georgia has ratified the Istanbul Convention and made a lot of amendments in 24 national laws in order to harmonize them with the document. Ratification of the Convention contributed to positive change in terms of awareness in the society about different issues of women's rights, violence, etc. Besides, the discourse on sexual and reproductive health and rights has been promoted by NGOs and, as a result, the negative effects regarding early marriage have been actively discussed. The relationship with authorities is mixed as, there are NGOs which have a good partnership with the Government, while several other NGOs have reported that the situation has worsened and the state has increased control over activities and tries to limit them in certain areas. Besides, obtaining funding and reaching out to new donors is becoming a challenge.

In **Turkey** the term gender triggers mostly negative reactions and is associated with gender-based violence. After 2014, the Government of Turkey has started to adopt and implement more conservative policies. It has also started a sort of a fight against the concept of "gender equality". On the one hand, the Government cancelled all the projects related to gender equality. On the other hand, it has started new projects and collaborations with religious and conservative NGOs which mostly promote gender stereotypes and traditional gender roles. In other words, the national legislation and public policy related to girls' rights and gender equality has worsened. For example, in 2010 and 2011, an organization called "Independent feminist" cooperated with the Government for writing Law no. 6284 on the "Protection of Family and Prevention of Violence against Women" but, after 2014, there were no positive changes or developments, and the Government stopped cooperating with independent

women's organizations.

We can certainly say, that all the NGOs working in the field of women's and girls' rights are affected by these widespread attacks. For example, a very well-known feminist NGO in Turkey, has regularly been attacked over the last 3 years (not physical attacks but verbal attacks mostly the in media) by conservative and religious groups. They accused the organization of "destroying family values", "crashing or ruining families", "being perverts", "being an enemy of the nation" etc. However, human rights defenders, and activists are hopeful for positive changes despite the new waves of anti-gender attacks.



WHO IS AFRAID OF GENDER EQUALITY?

COMMON TRENDS IN EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA

CENTRAL ASIA

In Central Asian countries (**Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan**) where most of the society has traditional and conservative approaches and cultural values, gender issues and the use of the term “gender”, in general, face a negative reaction. Decision-makers often overlook and do not focus on issues of gender equality, discrimination and gender-based violence. The Church has a strongly conservative and discriminatory attitude towards gender issues which influences public policies.

In these countries, gender issues are often raised by non-governmental organizations. Thus, it is important to be aware of the activities of the NGOs and the challenges they face working in the field of women’s rights.

Kazakhstan is one of the countries in Central Asia where the word “gender” mostly triggers negative attention in the media and is associated with gender-based violence. It is really difficult to organize educational programs, trainings, conferences in this field in Kazakhstan, because there is a lack of funding for projects promoting gender equality.

NGOs working in Kyrgyzstan say that there is a slow progress in promoting gender equality, because of the patriarchal mentality and of the fact that the Government does not allow people who try to represent women’s rights as decisional factors. During the last 5 years feminist NGOs have tried to support women in the election processes, at the same time working to activate their civic engagement. Moreover, NGOs also work in the field of women’s reproductive health, but there are several misunderstandings on reproductive health among the Government and the church. For religious people, it is prohibited to discuss reproductive health publicly.

Despite these challenges, NGOs working in **Kyrgyzstan** described significant changes in the last five years, in terms of mentality: women and girls want to become empowered and be aware about their rights. More women and girls have developed critical thinking and are willing to participate in local elections as candidates.

In **Uzbekistan**, the use of the term “gender” is very limited, because most part of the society does not know its meaning. In recent years, the government has been trying to take some steps towards supporting women who have been victims of domestic violence, but in reality nothing has really changed: hotlines do not work well, shelters do not work, there is no psychological, medical and legal assistance for women. Generally, there is no change in the field of women’s rights in Uzbekistan. Also, there are only few women’s rights NGOs.

To sum up, we can say that in Central Asian countries gender inequality is still a problem. For the NGOs working in the field of women’s rights or gender issues, most of the difficulties are related to the national and patriarchal mentality of the societies. Anti-gender movements are fuelled by religious groups and women’s rights NGOs’ workers are mostly labelled as “enemies of the nation”, “family values destructors”, “non-traditional”, etc. In any case, while talking about the future situation on gender equality, most of the respondents from these countries believe that the situation will improve someday, and governments will become more sensitive to gender issues.

RECOMMENDATIONS

(GOOD PRACTICES, INSIGHTS FROM NGO'S)

Improving safety for girls and professionals working on the issue of girl's rights and gender equality requires joint efforts across the region to report hate speech and other attacks and to request that authorities sanction and discourage such intimidating practices. International petitions or letters of support for activists in a given country who find themselves in critical situations can have a strong empowering effect for the entire women and girls movement.

Promoting gender equality in education and lifelong learning. Gender equality can be promoted more effectively by engaging teachers, as well as parents and students, in efforts to challenge myths about gender equality and to show the benefits for both women and men, girls and boys. We strongly recommend focusing on parents as a first step in overcoming fears about gender equality education. Promoting human rights-based education and lifelong learning can play a center role in breaking gender stereotypes that reinforce structural gender inequalities.

Strengthen cross-sector partnerships between NGOs in a local, national and international context and take actions following the same goals, overcoming framework differences. NGOs tend to create coalitions that are limited to a single field or ideology: gender equality, education, youth, human rights etc. Cross-sector partnerships that bring together organizations from different fields are very important to strengthen the voice and the long-term impact of NGO activism. It also promotes a better understanding of each other's challenges and helps overcome prejudice and blaming attitudes among activists. In relation to governments, it can also help secure more funding for the NGO sector and reliability on NGOs for service provision.

Increase focus on girl leadership and women's rights history. Girls need to be empowered and supported to achieve their dreams, and learning about women's rights and the history of the women's movement helps their empowerment. Especially in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, schools are blind to women's achievements in history and fail to provide strong female role models. School texts focus on male figures in most fields (literature, history, economics, etc). This needs to be compensated by NGO efforts to raise awareness among girls and boys about the role of women in history, and it should be a priority not only for equal rights activists, but also for youth, rural development and cultural organizations.

Working with boys is a crucial element in achieving of a more equal society. Involving men in equal rights initiatives, especially in education, is very important in order to provide boys with positive role models of men who treat women as their equals. This is also a key to prevent violence against women and girls.



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The report seeks to introduce the basics of the framework in gender equality and women's rights and to describe those areas, policy fields and issues that are revealed to have been mostly affected by the backlash. The questions addressed were suggested by the project team made up of nine Romanian and Armenian teenagers who underwent training on gender equality and on feminism history in the framework of the project. To collect data we used an online survey, that was available between February and March 2019. Interpreting data was an exercise for the adolescent girls under the supervision of a researcher from each organisation (A.L.E.G. and Women Resource Center). In the process of analysing data we took into account relevant work by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), WAVE network, UN, Council of Europe, European Institute for Gender Equality and European Parliament.

QUESTIONS ASKED

Does the word "gender" trigger a positive or a negative attention in the media in your country?

In the media, what is „gender" most often associated with in your country?

Did gender ideology discourse prevent decision-makers from taking policy decisions to improve girls rights? (If your answer to the previous question is YES, please explain).

How would you describe the most significant developments in the last 5 years in national legislation and public policy (including national strategies, action plans etc.) related to girls rights and gender equality? (please keep in mind associated areas like sexual and reproductive health and rights, family and marriage, education). Please bring examples to support your answer to the previous question.

How would you describe the developments in the last 5 years related to the legislation and policies for your organization and other NGOs working on women and girls rights? (eg. funding regulations, reporting obligations, cooperation with state)?. Please give examples to support your answer to the previous question.

Does your organization face any negative consequences or new challenges for dealing with women and girls rights? (If your answer to the previous question is YES, please explain)

How would you describe the situation regarding rights of girls in your country compared to 5 years ago? (Please give examples to support your answer to the previous question)

We have collected this data in accordance with GDPR regulations, so the names and contact details from respondents are not public. If you have any questions regarding this report, please contact the Association for Liberty and Equality of Gender (A.L.E.G.) at contact@aleg-romania.eu or our partner Women Resource Center Armenia at info@womenofarmenia.org

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