

IAW International Meeting at Bulgaria, 6 September 2024

Key-note speech by Iliana Balabanova, President of the European Women's Lobby (EWL)

Dear ladies, esteemed guests, feminists and advocates for women's human rights, dear friends,

It is an honor to stand before you today on this momentous occasion, the Conference of one of the first International Women's organisations. Very welcome in Bulgaria! Founded in the 7th century, my country is one of the oldest states in the European continent. Bulgaria is not only oldest but also very beautiful, and I hope you will find a time to explore Bulgarian nature, food, and hospitality.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak on behalf of the European Women's Lobby. I am Iliana Balabanova and I am the President of the European Women's Lobby, the largest European umbrella network of women's associations representing a total of more than 2000 organisations in 26 EU Member States, four Candidate Countries, one former EU Member State and one European Free Trade Association country, as well as 17 European-wide organisations representing the diversity of women and girls in Europe. The European Women's Lobby (EWL) brings together the women's movement in Europe to influence the general public and European Institutions in support of women's human rights and equality between women and men.

We have a vision of a Feminist Europe, in which all women and girls enjoy equal rights and participation in power and decision-making structures across all levels of society. Liberated from all forms of oppression and exploitation, women and girls have true freedom of choice, and live lives free from sexism and all forms of violence. Women's contribution to all aspects of social, political and cultural life is recognised, rewarded and celebrated.

As I personally believe that women are those who bring hope and accelerate progress, I would like to use the fact that you are in my home country and to briefly introduce Bulgarian women. The women who started the Bulgarian women's movement in 1857 by founding the first women's society in Bulgaria aims **to educate women**. At the end of **the 19th century, women in Bulgaria got the right to study at an university**, after an **active movement was created that fought for this right**. Until, Sofia University did not admit women as students, and it was only thanks to this women's action that attention was paid to this great injustice. However, years after, till 1945, female lawyers and medical doctors were still not allowed to practice their profession, just because according to the understanding of Bulgarian society, these professions are not feminine.

Bulgarian women got the right to vote in 1937, but only if they were/are mothers and had/have a legal marriage, and only in local elections. In 1938, "married, divorced or widowed" women over 21 received the right to vote in parliamentary elections. This does not apply to unmarried women. Women in Bulgaria gained equal voting rights in 1944. With the change of political regime in 1944 a rapid historical turning point occurred. During state socialism (1944-1989), the women's movement was centralized into a unit within the Female Department of the Bulgarian Communistic Party. **The "Comrade Courts" were given the task of intervening in family issues and deciding how to proceed in cases of alcoholism, domestic violence, and adultery. Within the Party apparatus, the women's question was initially silenced.**

The fall of state socialism in 1989 came and the subsequent economic transformation affected both citizens and institutions and led to the total dissolution of the former women's organizations. Research done in Eastern Europe and Bulgaria specifically shows that the transition to liberal democracy and market capitalism after 1989 had ambiguous effects on women in the former socialist world. Conservative trends harmed the reproductive rights of women and questioned the legitimacy of their work outside the home, and the economic crisis, a wholesale reorganisation of former social policy dispositions, with a minimal state, resulted in scaling down of universal and social insurance benefits. This led to an increase in **poverty among children and women, and worsening of the position of women in the labor market. However, in the new system after 1990 civil and political rights have been strengthened. This is a gain for civil society in general. These rights allow the assertion of group interests; hence they effectively serve the interests of women.**

Presently situation is changed. Today Bulgaria is part of the EU and NATO. However, Bulgaria refused to ratify the Istanbul Convention, and the Bulgarian Constitutional Court declared the Convention unconstitutional. The Istanbul Convention is still object of a debate of epic proportions which divided Bulgarian civil society. The right-wing organisations and political formations as well as more conservative members of society are spreading misconceptions and fallacies around the Convention: i.e., the inclusion of the notion of a 'third sex' – people who do not identify as male or female, or the legalisation of same sex marriage, etc. **Bulgaria's refusal to ratify the Istanbul Convention is a national manifestation of a transnationally circulating global anti-women movement.**

These gross misrepresentations demonize organizations working to prevent and respond to violence against women, and anyone who seeks their help. It silences discussion of such violence and, more broadly, of discrimination against women. And it reinforces the idea that family violence is a private matter, and even acceptable. This brutal sexism from the highest political tribune spreads daily, thus becoming the norm and the model of talking and behaving. E.g. Bulgaria does not have gender quota or any other affirmative measures that apply to the electoral system. At the beginning of August 2024 Bulgaria's Parliament adopted a law which prohibits "propaganda" for "non-traditional sexual orientation" in schools, without explaining what propaganda means, without specification what "ideas and views" would be considered unlawful, but with a restriction on even talking about the sexual orientation. This legislation is sparking outrage and protests. A petition against the legislation has been started, asking the Bulgarian President to veto the Bill.

In the absence of adequate policies and actions to achieve equality between women and men, Bulgarian women are facing a patriarchal model that is being revived thanks to a far-right movement that reframes and misrepresents the meaning of 'feminism'. Unfortunately, this is happening not only in Bulgaria, but more broadly tendency is not also in Europe and all over the world!

Despite progress, women's and girls' rights in Europe face setbacks and numerous challenges, including violence, discrimination, hate speech. So, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the goal of achieving equality between women and men continues to remain elusive.

Continuing imbalances in equal opportunities affect the prospects for social and economic development in the long term and, in this sense, have a negative effect on future generations as well.

- In the EU today, still:
 - 1 in 3 women have suffered physical and/or sexual violence
 - 1 in 2 women have experienced sexual harassment since the age of 15
 - More than 6 women are killed by their partner or ex-partner every day
 - women earn on average 0.87€ for every 1€ earned by men
 - women's pensions are 40% lower than those of men, which means that for every 100€ men get, women get 60€
 - Women now make up 38.5% of the European Parliament; this share is 2.1 percentage points lower than in the previous term (40.6%), the first significant drop since direct elections started in 1979.
 - There is one more alarming fact. After the European elections in June 2024, the number of MEPs from far-right parties who openly preach policies directed against women's rights increased to 187 out of a total of 720 seats.

Independent experts predict three possible scenarios regarding gender equality:

- Advances in the labor market (especially in entrepreneurship) and some moderate support for violence against women and girls (although action to make rape a European crime is unlikely), or
- Stagnation in gender equality policies, if not
- A regression, that is always possible, as illustrated by Simone de Beauvoir's quote: "It only takes a political, economic or religious crisis to call into question the rights of women. Therefore, you must remain vigilant throughout your life." Proof of this is the abolition of the right to abortion in Poland and the trends in Italy and Hungary, or the regression from/to the Istanbul Convention by governments that have signed the Convention, but whose parliaments have not ratified it. The strength of MEPs working against women's rights will be measured by the advancement of harmful stereotypical beliefs, the use of the term "gender ideology", xenophobic, racist, homophobic rhetoric and the rise of violence against women.

The situation all over the world is indeed concerning.

- Gender pay gaps persist globally, and the pace of change remains slow. Efforts to close the pay gap should include policies promoting equal pay, transparency, and addressing unconscious biases.
- Child marriage: The 15.5 million girls at risk of child marriage within the next 16 years face immense challenges. Early marriage often leads to limited education, health risks, and perpetuates gender inequality. Advocacy, legal reforms, and community awareness are crucial to combat child marriage.
- Access to Education: It's hard to imagine that there are still girls today that have never seen the inside of a classroom. Never sat at a desk anticipating the day's lessons. But, according to UNESCO, 129 million girls are out of school with 50 million girls in sub-Saharan Africa. Education is a fundamental right. Investment in infrastructure, teacher

training, and removing barriers (such as distance and cultural norms) can improve access to education.

Dear friends, we cannot stand here today and pretend the world is in a good place, because it isn't! We are deeply troubled by the suffering of our sisters in every part of the world where there is conflict, tensions and war. War is an extreme expression of patriarchy. Women are agents of change and must be given the space to be in the driving seat for world peace and human security.

We must collectively work toward a more equitable world, where every individual has equal opportunities regardless of gender. We are facing new challenges. Now that the world is currently being shaped by rapid technological advancement, the intersection of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and violence against women and girls has emerged as a critical concern.

This year, 2024, is an important year for elections, with elections in more than 50 countries. So, this year can become a turning point in many regards, especially when it comes to global peace and security. The world is waiting for the results of the USA elections in November. But It's wonderful to see the feminist society already celebrating the possibility of having the first woman president of the United States. Kamala Harris, the current Vice President of the United States, has been a vocal advocate of women's rights.

I would like to conclude by stressing the crucial importance of the relationship between gender equality and the health of democracies. When women are denied equal rights, it undermines the very foundations of democratic societies. Women's participation in political processes, access to education, and economic empowerment are all essential for a thriving democracy. Let's continue advocating for equal rights and opportunities and for women's rights across the globe.

Thank you, and may these days in Bulgaria, days of solidarity and networking inspire us all to be relentless champions for women's rights.