

Plenary Panel: act, advance, achieve women's rights – Where we stand in the UN ECE Region,
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Main Challenges and Key Emerging Issues in the Implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action in Central Eastern Europe and Central Asia

SHORTER VERSION FOR THE PANEL PRESENTATION

Karat is a feminist network of women's organizations from 25 countries from the region of Central Eastern Europe and Central Asia. It was conceived at the Beijing conference. Since then, the region has been undergoing constant significant political and economic changes. Today, except Central Asia, a half of the countries are part of EU (so called EU 13) and the second half of the Region aspire to be a member of the European Union.

Twenty years after the Beijing Conference, I would like to highlight what we as NGO network see as three main concerns facing women's rights in the region:

1. the serious attack of ultraconservative circles and some Churches on the principle of gender equality
2. the simultaneous weakening of institutional mechanisms for women's rights and gender equality
3. the continued presence and reemergence of militarism, nationalism and armed conflict in our region with serious repercussions on women's human rights.

20 years after Beijing Conference, awareness about gender equality and women's discrimination has clearly increased and issues like e.g. violence against women are no longer taboo. However, greater public attention for gender also has caused resistance: we are currently facing a serious intensive attack of ultra conservative circles and some Churches on

the principle of gender equality, LGBT rights, which are presented as so-called “gender ideology” and a major threat to family values. The protagonists of antifeminism instead demand a reinforcing of traditional social roles of women and men and oppose all kinds of gender equality policies, including combating violence against women.

Unfortunately we are not witnessing a strong reaction of national authorities to counteract the “anti-gender” campaign. Institutional mechanisms for women’s rights and gender equality – although in place in most countries around the region – are too weak to effectively act.

Moreover, the equal treatment approach – that is, a trend (obligation in the context of EU membership and candidacy) to adopt overall antidiscrimination legislation, often has the effect of diminishing attentions to gender equality. When all grounds of discrimination are merged – and gender is subsumed as one of the grounds - into the tasks of one independent body, de facto it means that attention to gender equality is diminished, including financial and human resources specifically for gender equality and women’s empowerment.

At the same time, women’s rights organizations see big challenges in their activities of lobbying and advocacy for effective policy on women’s rights or their watchdog function towards national machineries and governments. Cuts in financial support for NGO watchdog activities meant that many organizations did not survive in EU-13 in the last 10 years. In some Eastern European and Central Asian countries, NGOs, including women’s rights organizations, are threatened by existing or proposed laws against NGOs that received foreign funding, obligating them to register as “foreign agents” and comply with severe requirements difficult to fulfill. The prevailing condition of European feminist/women’s organizations had an impact on building a feminist power. A strong feminist movement is crucial for engaging for social and political changes within Europe and for increasing the influence on policies and institutional mechanisms for gender equality and women’s empowerment.

20 years after Beijing, unfortunately, armed conflict, militarism and violent nationalism continue to be areas of concern in our region. Today, our region is experiencing escalating political tension in response to popular struggles for democratic change in Ukraine. We are

concerned about the impacts of the Ukrainian crisis on Europe, the prospects of democracy, human rights and gender equality. Unfortunately, the voices of women on this crisis are often marginalized from public discussions and reporting.

As a reminder: In 1999, in the response to the armed conflict in the Balkans, Karat Coalition initiated a Central Eastern European solidarity gathering with women from all countries and minorities from the Balkans entitled “Women and Peace Building: Recommendations of women of CEE for Beijing+5 review process”. In the face of the Ukraine crisis, Karat has initiated a regional women’s “conversation” on the current Ukrainian crisis in the form of a questionnaire that we sent out to our members and other women’s rights activists. We received responses from Ukraine and from other numerous other countries of the Region I would like to summarize some key highlights here:

Traditional values and nationalism – the threat to human rights and gender equality

Respondents fear that women’s rights and gender equality are being pushed aside as “less important” than other topics (such as military conflict, economic chaos, national interests). They also fear that gender equality is threatened by the rise of nationalism and so called ‘traditional values’.

A very recent – extreme - example of serious deterioration of the human rights and gender justice in Ukraine is the Christian Tradition Protection Law in the unrecognized Lugansk Region: It outlaws homosexuality, which can be penalized by long prison sentences. In case of rape, death penalty could be applicable.

Violence/ sexual violence against women

All of the responses in one way or another, see women at great risk of violence, including sexual violence. Violence can be very diverse, our respondents argue, for example not only being perpetuated by the ‘enemies’ but also by male family members returning from war. There is no public debate of the impact of the military conflict on women’s human rights. Respondents are concerned that the issues of violence against women in Ukraine during the current conflict may never be addressed, or with a very long delay, as this was the case in other countries.

Women in peace building

Most of the respondents believe that while women's role in peace building is crucial, but it is not discussed adequately in the context of Ukraine at the moment, nor are women adequately included in negotiations at the moment – several of our Karat members feel reminded of the situation after the Balkans wars in the 1990s.

Solidarity of women

One extremely strong message came across from the responses: the wish of women from different parts of the region (due to their specific understanding of the situation) to demonstrate active solidarity with Ukrainian women, and the belief that this solidarity has to also involve women from other parts of the world (particularly the rest of Europe and U.S). Our respondents believe that the efforts of women's organizations can, in the long term, help achieving gender equality, and in the short-term help saving lives. Our respondents also see solidarity as a tool to help women from other countries to understand what really is taking place in Ukraine. Based on their experiences of cooperation with women from other countries of the region, our respondents came up with very concrete suggestions for joint action and exchange.

Azerbaijan: (...) we would like to implement a (...) (women's regional) project, which would cover all the conflicted regions: Russia, Ukraine, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova. The project should create a coalition of NGOs and Networks, to carry out training in conflict resolution and citizen diplomacy".