

A Review of Feminist Initiatives in Europe

This publication is the result of a review of feminist organizing in Europe initiated by the WIDE+ network. We organized this review as we experience fragmentation between feminist initiatives and groups. While some international spaces exist, there is no encompassing space for feminists to work together on strategies in Europe from a collective shared vision. Similarly, there is no network that connects all the diversity of feminist action and identities.

We present here conclusions from the in-depth interviews with feminists working in national and local contexts, as a source of inspiration and reflection for other feminists, without claiming that the observations from the interviews can be generalized.

Introduction

WIDE+ is a European network of feminist activists and associations that promotes 'a new global cake, instead of demanding a bigger piece of a rotten cake', to quote the Indian feminist Devaki Jain. Women's rights can only be achieved if we challenge the systemic causes of inequality that are rooted in cultures of patriarchy and our current (global) political-economic governance that enables big business to become bigger, while the rights of individuals and communities - to decent livelihoods, civic and political rights, rights to one's own body, etc.- continue to be traded out.

One of the threads running through this review is that there is currently a momentum and an openness to collaborate and exchange ideas among feminist groups and organizations in Europe, though due to the many challenges we face, it is not an easy task. This review briefly describes these challenges and provides suggestions as to how we can come together. We also focus on lines of work that could contribute to the strategy building of the feminist movement in this continent, based on the experiences of women we have talked with.

This briefing paper doesn't aim to present generalized conclusions about feminisms in Europe. We cannot talk about a single feminism; the movement's strength lies in recognizing the differences. We see a



rich, diverse, but at the same time delicate 'forest' of feminist actions, experiences, analysis, solidarity and connections.

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This review synthesizes the information provided by 16 feminist groups and three feminists interviewed in the following countries: Bulgaria, Croatia, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Macedonia, Portugal, Romania, Serbia, Greece, Hungary. One of the groups identifies itself as located in the Mediterranean region. The interviews were conducted between August and October 2019. For the methodology, we used a questionnaire and conducted a structured interview. We not only reviewed the work of the group, but also asked about the political context of the country and their understanding of feminism.

Description of the groups

There were topics of feminist action that more than one group is working on: gender-based violence, the rights of migrant and refugee women and girls, sexual and reproductive rights, gender equality, inter-sections between housing, health, mobility, and working conditions, LGBTQI+ rights, right to make use of public spaces and social constructions of gender identity. A majority of the groups define their feminism with anti-racism, anti-capitalism, and anti-patriarchy.

Most groups were NGOs, but there were also groups that identify themselves as social movements or collectives. The individuals that we interviewed show how feminism moves beyond feminist structures into other domains. One works at a funding institution; another is an academic researcher and the third is a journalist.

Main challenges

In most of the interviews, the rise of the far-right emerged as a common issue in the current political spectrum. The advancement of the far-right - both in terms of taking over governments, congresses and in spreading disinformation - was a recurring concern which raises many questions. Furthermore, the dissemination of ideas that attack the feminist movement, such as suggesting gender equality is part of a 'gender ideology', is obstructing communication between the feminist movement and the rest of society, according to our some of our interviewees. It is a strategy that also generates misinformation and feminist groups have endeavored to fight against this by finding ways of sharing their own narratives.

Sharing 'our own stories' (those from a feminist perspective), however, appears to be very difficult, as mainstream and traditional media – such as newspapers, TV and radio stations - are still in general very sexist. In some countries, media are controlled by the State; in others theoretically more open, but still controlled by patriarchal news organizations.

In places where social and political organization is violated, the interviews showed that international networks and strategies are playing an important role by shining a light on rights violations. Some feminist groups need to act anonymously, because they could be criminalized for working on some issues. This is the case, for example, with reproductive rights, abortion rights and sexuality in general. Or they face additional difficulties in their activism such as experienced by LGBTQI+ organisations. All in all, these groups have more problems in accessing funding, joining international networks and achieving visibility.

The expression of different forms of racism, LGBTQI phobia and other attempts to control activism also appear as intersectional challenges. The challenges different groups face daily in Europe differ a lot as a result of power asymmetries.

Access to finance is a major issue, common to most groups. How to address financial needs without losing autonomy was mentioned in some interviews as a current challenge. And how to create solidarity between financially stronger groups and those with more limited resources, as this solidarity can be lacking.

Finally, a common challenge mentioned by feminist activists was a heavy workload combining their activism with paid work and reproductive work in

terms of time and basic needs. As a consequence, many groups face burnout and increasing internal conflicts. Some groups described good internal communication, attention to care and a sense of collectiveness.

Suggestions on strategies or areas of work for transnational collaboration

More funding for all kinds of feminist initiatives

It is important that work done by feminists receives more funding and that such support can be easily accessed by grassroots groups. Thus, important questions are: 'how to reduce the bureaucracies for migrant women and other groups more affected by power asymmetries such as race, sexual orientation, gender identities, transnational inequalities and many other issues?', and 'how can funds facilitate spaces where allied European groups share privileges in terms of legal responsibilities with other marginalized groups?'. The various regional and national women's funds in Europe can play a special role and this financial capacity should be strengthened by public and private institutions.

Transnational coalition-building and diver-sity of feminisms

In terms of building transnational feminist coalitions to address current political crises, the following key questions seem to emerge for further reflection: How to build a feminist movement that can deal with different layers of action, respecting differences? How can we form a network to shine a light on and build a response to the growth of the far-right in so many countries? How to discuss the meaning of feminism, without accepting setbacks? How can we better understand processes of disinformation, from traditional media to social media?

Social-environmental Justice

There was a definite interest in working and prioritizing social-environmental justice, but it was difficult for groups to translate this into clear actions. There is certainly room for more European collaboration on this issue. Discussions on the concept of nature and its relationship with the feminist movement is considered important, but still not well developed in most of the groups that were interviewed.

Digitalization

Another issue that emerged was around digitalization, in terms of sustaining livelihoods (the digital platform economy) and communication in cyberspace, for example, how does digitalization affect feminist movements? The same power asymmetries that exist in the non-digital world are now embedded in the digital world. This means that women's movements are also targeted online and suffer new kinds of



Photo by Sacha Verheij on Unsplash, Women's March 2020, the Netherlands

violence. At the same time, some studies show that algorithms give more visibility to conservative discourses than progressive ones. It is very important to further reflect on the power relations and feminist organizing in the digital sphere.

Media strategies of building own narratives

There are different ways of using the information shared by the groups. Some groups interviewed shared their experiences of communication strategies. One is to build a media strategy that highlights different approaches to feminism, such as *sharing the mic* with groups that are not so often made visible. There are different ways of developing these through social media, podcasts, community radio, street protests and creative forms of occupation, developing documentaries and books to share our experiences. The common thread among these efforts is the goal of producing and disseminating content based on women and LGBTQI people narratives as a powerful tool to increase engagement, social awareness and debate in the public sphere.

Sharing knowledge

Among the groups there is interest in sharing knowledge and experiences around some topics. There are tools such as webinars, workshops and other formats which can help to build alliances and strategies. Many of the groups are developing practices that could be of interest to an international audience of feminists. There are also interesting and relevant practices being developed around care and internal communication, for example, how does a feminist group, network or association incorporate good care practices (self-care of activists and care of the group)?

Power asymmetries among feminists

The strategies, actions, strategies and perspectives of feminism among the groups were very diverse. Some of them organize street protests, mass actions and so on, others organize activities for political education and/or movement building. There are others more engaged with funding or advocacy. There are also power asymmetries among feminists, and we need to recognize these. One of the points that came up is the need to work at many different levels in order to find ways of collaborating.

Further reflection on intergenerational dialogues is important. Different generations of feminists are not always defined by differences in age. They can be about differences in eras of feminist activism, with recently joined feminists having different approaches or a different starting point compared to feminists who have been active for a long time. The differences are not clear-cut; it seems from our interviews that the young generation tends to take a more intersectional approach, in which feminism is broader than the promotion of women's rights. Still it is important not to frame this as a dichotomy between different feminism perspectives. There is also a large overlap between generations and by working across different generations, we can avoid reinventing the wheel.

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