

Advancing Feminist Leadership and Securing Peace

„Enabling Feminist Leadership in uncertain Times“

- 1. On feminist leadership: Should we as progressives frame our leadership not only “progressive” but also “feminist”? What sets feminist political leadership apart as an approach and process in solving societal problems we confront today i.e., growing inequality, backlash on women’s rights, war and conflicts, democratic backsliding**

Eva-Maria Holzleitner, Minister of Women, Science and Research and Head of the Socialdemocratic Women in Austria

We’re witnessing a resurgence of authoritarianism, misogyny, and anti-rights movements. In this context, feminist leadership isn’t just idealistic – it’s *strategically necessary*. Feminist leaders and movements have historically been on the frontlines of resisting oppression, building community resilience, and peacemovement. By claiming the label “feminist,” progressive leaders align themselves with this legacy – and make a clear stand against the forces of patriarchy and authoritarianism.

Feminist leadership is a clear commitment to gender justice and intersectionality – a framework that recognises inequality as multi-dimensional, encompassing factors such as race, class, disability, sexuality, colonialism, etc.).

Feminist leadership doesn’t just seek representation – it questions who holds power, how it’s exercised, and working to redistribute it. This is particularly important in times of **democratic backsliding/decline**, where autocratic leaders often reinforce patriarchal norms.

While progressive leaders support social justice, equity and democratic values, “feminist” leaders advocate for systemic change.

Feminist leadership emphasizes collaboration, requires collective intelligence and solidarity.

Feminist leadership or Feminist movements have always been peacemaking movements. In times of multiple crises this emphasis is particularly important.

A feminist approach often incorporates a global and anti-colonial perspective – which is essential for building peace and resisting militarization, especially in times of **wars and conflict** when women, children, and marginalized groups are disproportionately affected.

As a Minister I see the **desperate need for a feminist leadership** – we are all – world wide confronted with a **backlash against women’s rights**.

- 2. On regional or country experiences: What lessons from your government and/or party leadership show the impact of the rise of authoritarian or populist forces on gender equality goals? Conversely, are there programs or policies on gender equality that are making headway against under-representation and/or backsliding on women’s rights in the face of authoritarian or misogynist tendencies?**

As a member of a government comprising five progressive social democrats feminists I am proud to say that programmes on gender equality and women’s rights are at the top of our governance’s „table issues“.

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You have to understand that to change society for the better you need rules, laws, and commitments. You can't just hope for change, as a feminist politician you have to change the law.

In response to the worldwide backlash, the Austrian government has a plan -and not just a plan.

- Fight against gender-based Violence - National Action Plan
- Fight for Only Yes means Yes - **Consent is required, Silence is not consent**,
- Currently, only a dozen EU countries have laws that define rape as sex without consent.
- Things must change - to honour the incredible courage of Gisèle Pelicot and to protect other women in the future! The 'Only Yes means Yes' approach must become the new norm throughout the whole EU.
- Fight for Pay Transparency Directive - Women in the EU still earn, on average, about **13% less** than men for doing the same or equivalent work. The directive aims to **expose hidden pay gaps** and ensure that **“equal pay for equal work”** is actually practiced, not just promised.
- Dick Pic Paragraph - it is forbidden to send penis-pictures
- Fight against poverty in old age - especially for women
- Gender Medicine
- Abortion and reproductive Rights

All of this happens on a national level - but we also see the backlash all over the world. Therefore, we must fight against the far right, the backlash and misogyny. Therefore we need international frameworks, pressure and sanctions against those, who want to take us back to dark times, those, who want to block and/or **oppose laws** aimed at promoting gender equality, such as gender quotas or protections against workplace discrimination, those who cut funding for women's services such as shelters, reproductive health care or programs on gender based violence.

We need sanctions on countries which violate laws and rights - including gender and LGBTQ+ rights - because they are human rights.

We need international conventions like the CEDAW - (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women) and other UN mechanisms, which support local feminist groups.

Authoritarian and populist forces often see gender equality as both a **symbol** and a **substance** of liberal democratic values - making it a prime target. However, this also means that *resisting gender backlash is fundamental to resisting authoritarianism itself*.

The countries and movements that are making headway show a few key strategies:

- Embed gender equality in law and institutions.
- Build broad coalitions, including youth, labor, and civil society.
- Invest in feminist leadership at all levels - especially in local governance.
- Use data, storytelling, and visibility to shift public narratives.

Feminist leadership is not only a policy choice - it's a democratic imperative.

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3. On strategic partnerships: What partnership are most effective in sustaining feminist leadership and protecting women in public life? How do we make these alliances durable beyond electoral cycles and crises?

This is not just a call for collaboration – it's a demand for systemic commitment. Feminist leadership is not optional; it's essential to the survival of democracy, human rights, and social justice. In a world where authoritarianism relies on silencing and sidelining and marginalising women, particularly those who speak truth to power, we must understand it is about systematically and holistically implementing policies that contribute to gender equality and the full enjoyment of human rights of all women and girls.

The goal is to strengthen women and girls through three 'R's: rights, representation and resources, guided by a fourth R, their realities. We do this by integrating a gender perspective into all the work.

Gender equality should not be seen as a thematic issue but as an overarching guiding principle. Policies and interventions should be guided by knowledge and employ gender analyses to ensure that entire populations are considered in all decisions and operations. This needs to be supported by gender and age disaggregated data as well as consultations with relevant actors, including civil society.

Quelle: <https://feps-europe.eu/feminist-foreign-policy-rights-representation-resources/>

As a minister of Science and Research too, I demand the freedom of science and research – because we need scientists and researchers to provide good and sustainable data.

We need free speech and independent media as lifelong partners. And of course free elections!

Feminist leadership thrives when it's collective, not isolated. And it thrives when alliances are built for the long term, not just for survival – but for transformation.

4. On closing statement: One sentence on what you learned from your co-panellists or from the delegates today, and one sentence on what you want us to remember about feminist leadership in uncertain times.

Once again, I have learned how powerful women all over the world are – how important feminist leadership is in making this place a better place.

I want to remember that only a feminist future is a future based on human rights! If you destroy women's rights, you destroy human rights, democracy and the rule of law!