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EU researchers tackle pushback against gender equality in politics and society

EU-funded researchers are investigating recent push-back against gender equality measures, seeking to understand its motives and impact, to provide practical solutions.

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For Zoe Lefkofridi, a professor of politics and gender at the University of Salzburg in Austria, there cannot be real democracy without gender equality. But past progress cannot be taken for granted. Despite significant steps in Europe towards gender equality, opposition seems to be on the rise.

“The EU has been a pioneer in promoting women’s rights, especially concerning employment,” said Lefkofridi. “However, we’re observing worrisome developments in certain EU countries, as well as the US.”

Lefkofridi is leading an EU-funded research initiative called PushBackLash, which looks into various aspects of gender equality problems and seeks practical solutions.

It was set up in 2023 to try to understand the motivations, strategies and tactics used by those campaigning against gender equality initiatives. The researchers are also trying to get a better understanding of where the public stands on these issues.

Dr Vera Beloshitzkaya, an expert on gender and politics on the team, said the most obvious example of backlash against gender equality can be seen in changing political rhetoric, with anti-feminist narratives becoming more mainstream.

“Backlash can also occur at the policy level, where more inclusive policies face resistance, or in people's attitudes. However, the key question is always: what is the starting point? To really say there’s a backlash, we need to understand where we were, where we are today, and where we’re heading.”

Pushing back for equality

The researchers aim to assess the impact of these campaigns against gender equality and how they can best be countered. The team includes scientists from Austria, Germany, Hungary, the Netherlands, Spain and the United Kingdom, as well as researchers from non-governmental organisations from Belgium and Poland.

Beloshitzkaya's dedication to this work is rooted in her background. She grew up in Belarus – a country whose regime has become increasingly authoritarian since the 1990s – and developed her critical thinking through grassroots movements and the creation of debate clubs in schools.

When it comes to protecting democracy, Beloshitzkaya emphasises the importance of separating legitimate policy debates, which are key to the democratic process, from the promotion of views that go against the principles of pluralism and equality.

"We should be very careful to distinguish when it's a policy perspective versus an opinion that dehumanises fellow citizens," she said.

She singled out claims from some politicians "that women need to go back home".

"This is probably an example of backlash because most women are in the labour market."

Inequality persists

The fact is, though, that women continue to be under-represented in positions of power in the EU. The European Institute for Gender Equality reports that in 2023 women held 33% of seats in the European Parliament, and only 34% of government ministers were women.

The PushBackLash researchers are looking at the ways multiple forms of inequality or disadvantage sometimes compound each other and create obstacles that are not always immediately obvious.

For instance, early findings reveal that while attitudes towards women in leadership roles are improving, many people remain uncomfortable with LGBTQI+ individuals in high positions of power.

They also show that the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated traditional gender roles in countries like Austria. Women disproportionately shouldered additional childcare responsibilities due to school closures, and this has affected their attitudes to gender roles.

Taking action

Lefkofridi's convictions about the importance of democracy are deeply personal. Her parents, who were part of the resistance during Greece's military dictatorship from 1967 to 1974, endured imprisonment and torture for standing up for democracy.

"Democracy is, for me, one of the highest values, it is something to die for," she said.

Her team goes beyond surface-level discourse and focuses on extensive data collection to develop a deeper understanding of the impact of anti-equality rhetoric and behaviour on public attitudes and policies. They also seek to drive real change by collaborating with policymakers and activists.

"It's not enough just to observe and understand the problem, we must also act to change it," said Lefkofridi.

The researchers have identified several good practices from various EU organisations and national governments to counter the backlash against gender equality. These include, for example, supporting female entrepreneurship, increasing investment in girls' education and providing more funding for women's organisations.

Additionally, they are exploring various creative approaches aimed at increasing awareness of the issues around gender equality.

Among these are a series of comic strips illustrating key aspects of the gender equality discourse, as well as the use of theatrical roleplay in universities to engage young people in pushing back against views that may undermine progress in gender equality.

Through a blend of rigorous research and practical solutions, the PushBackLash researchers are aiming to reinforce policies that promote gender equality and ensure that activism is also grounded in solid evidence.

“The reason these issues often remain in echo chambers is because there is an idea, but there’s no evidence behind it,” said Lefkofridi. “So it’s very important for us, as social scientists and as feminists, to build and assess the evidence.”

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