

The Permanent Mission of Denmark to the UN, the Permanent Mission of Latvia to the UN, and the Nordic Council of Ministers organized the following side event

## **PROTECT DEMOCRACY, DEFEND GENDER EQUALITY**

11 Mar, 01:15 PM - 02:30 PM

Gender equality is a cornerstone in a democratic society. Any democracy must defend gender equality and human rights to ensure democratic resilience and social cohesion.

Karen Ellemann, Secretary General to the Nordic Council of Ministers, chaired the event, which featured a number of high-level speakers:

Sanni Grahn-Laasonen, Minister for Social Security, Finland

Alain Berset, Secretary General, Council of Europe

Lauma Paegļkalna, Vice-Minister of Justice of Latvia

Neil Datta, Executive Director and founder, European Parliamentary Forum on Sexual and Reproductive Rights

Marta Royo, Executive Director, Profamilia Colombia

Iluta Lāce, Director and Founder, MARTA Centre, Latvia,

all of whom with great expertise, left no doubt about the reality of the threat of coordinated counter-movements using disinformation to polarize societies and undermine democratic institutions and international commitments to gender equality and women's rights. Many countries report that backlash against gender equality has undermined implementation nationally - slowing progress that could unlock equality, rights, and protection for all women and girls.

However, the event also highlighted how regional and international cooperation can strengthen democratic resilience, counter disinformation, and uphold gender equality and human rights.

This is a summary of some of the most impressive interventions, which Karen Ellemann moderated in an expert way introducing this highly complex theme as follows:

Needless to say, but important to say that gender equality is a cornerstone in a democratic society. Any democracy must defend gender equality and human rights to ensure democratic resilience, social cohesion, trust in institutions, and equal participation. However, what we are seeing globally is a coordinated counter movement that use disinformation about issues related to gender equality to actually polarize our societies and undermine our democratic institutions and our international commitments to gender equality and women's rights. We've heard it a lot, we've seen it a lot, that many countries are reporting that backlash against gender equality has undermined development nationally and actually slowing the progress that could unlock equality, that could unlock the rights and the protection of all women and girls. We are here today and hopefully all of you here today present to discuss this and also to discuss how regional and international cooperation can strengthen democratic resilience, can counter disinformation, and uphold gender equality and human rights.

**Finnish Minister for Social Security Sanni Grahn-Laasonen** emphasizes the critical importance of protecting democracy and gender equality, both of which are increasingly under pressure worldwide. These values are often attacked from within through manipulated public debate, misinformation, and false narratives. Such messages are frequently disguised as "traditional values," "common sense," or even as efforts to protect women and children, while actually aiming to divide societies and weaken trust in democratic institutions.

Coordinated anti-gender movements spread misleading claims, particularly targeting gender equality. Common examples include false assertions that abortion is more dangerous than childbirth or causes cancer, that gender equality harms families and lowers birth rates, or that sexuality education is harmful to children. Other narratives claim women are biologically unfit for leadership. None of these claims are true, yet their constant repetition increases their influence.

This spread of misinformation threatens progress on women's rights and undermines social cohesion. Repetition plays a powerful role: when falsehoods are repeated often enough, they begin to shape

public opinion and even policy decisions. The greatest danger is not always visible threats, but those that go unchallenged.

Grahn-Laasonen stresses that women's rights are human rights and that gender equality is fundamental, not optional. When basic rights become negotiable, democracy itself is at risk. She calls for active efforts to confront misinformation, defend facts, and consistently stand up for the rights of women and girls.

**Latvia's Vice Minister of Justice, Lauma Paegļkalna**, stresses that protecting democracy and defending gender equality are inseparable goals. Gender equality is not merely a women's issue or a policy choice—it is a core democratic principle essential for resilient, inclusive societies. However, coordinated efforts increasingly use disinformation, including “gender disinformation,” to polarize societies and undermine trust in institutions and international commitments.

Gender equality is often the first target, serving as a testing ground for broader attacks on democracy, the rule of law, and fundamental rights. Latvia has faced such challenges directly, with disinformation aimed at weakening trust and questioning commitments to human rights, particularly women's rights and protection from violence. Despite this, Latvia has remained resilient, maintaining strong democratic and media freedom rankings through robust institutions and an active civil society.

This resilience is grounded in trust in the rule of law. Latvia relies on its constitutional court, checks and balances, and international expertise to counter disinformation with legal facts and independent analysis. For example, attempts to challenge international commitments were carefully reviewed with input from courts and external bodies.

Citizen empowerment is another key defense. Digital platforms enable public participation, as seen when over 67,000 people quickly mobilized to defend women's rights. Latvia also protects open dialogue, valuing peaceful protests and democratic debate while resisting efforts to silence or divide society.

Paegļkalna concludes that strong democracy—supported by independent courts, free media, and active citizens—is the best safeguard for human rights, gender equality, and long-term security.

**Alain Berset, Secretary-General of the Council of Europe**, highlights the importance of collaboration in defending democracy and gender equality. He thanks Latvia for its strong support in protecting the Istanbul Convention, noting the rare and powerful public demonstrations in favor of the government's موقف—evidence of broad societal backing for women's rights. However, he emphasizes that the pressure against such commitments is ongoing and requires continued cooperation.

Berset shifts focus to security, describing it as the defining language of today's global order. Yet, he raises a critical question: who shapes this security? Women remain significantly underrepresented—only one leads a defense ministry in the G7, about one in five work in cybersecurity, and just one in three parliamentarians are women. In peace processes, women are almost entirely absent. This exclusion, he argues, is both dangerous and short-sighted.

He introduces the concept of “democratic security,” which goes beyond military strength to include strong institutions, protection of rights and freedoms, and resilience against threats such as cyberattacks, terrorism, disinformation, and climate risks. Gender equality, he stresses, is essential to this framework. Far from being a “soft” issue, it is fundamental to stable, legitimate, and secure societies.

Finally, Berset warns that progress is too slow. At the current pace, achieving full gender equality will take generations. A girl born today may never see true equality in her lifetime. In a time of global instability, delaying action is not only unjust but a strategic mistake.

**Neil Datta, Executive Director and founder, European Parliamentary Forum on Sexual and Reproductive Rights.** A key finding is the dramatic rise in funding for anti-gender movements in Europe. In the Council of Europe region, funding grew from about \$20 million in 2009 to \$80 million in 2018, and reached \$270 million by 2022—a twelvefold increase in just over a decade. This indicates that these movements are no longer small-scale actors but highly coordinated and well-resourced networks.

Datta also highlights that, after facing legislative defeats in countries like Spain and Poland, these groups have shifted strategies. Rather than relying solely on democratic processes, they are increasingly targeting the foundations of liberal democracy itself. One approach is influencing courts

and judicial systems to secure favorable rulings, as major setbacks to abortion rights have often come through courts rather than legislation.

A second strategy involves using gender-related issues for geopolitical purposes. For example, debates around the Istanbul Convention are sometimes less about policy and more about weakening ties with European human rights frameworks, potentially pulling countries toward illiberal spheres of influence. Third, these movements are actively opposing social media regulation, such as the EU's Digital Services Act. By doing so, they can amplify disinformation, polarize societies, and target groups like women politicians, while also aligning with interests that profit from data and online engagement. In conclusion, while public debate on these issues is legitimate, Datta warns that coordinated anti-gender movements are increasingly working to undermine democratic institutions and values across Europe.

**Marta Royo from Profamilia in Colombia** highlights the real-life impact of global debates on gender equality and rights. While discussions may seem abstract, they directly affect vulnerable individuals—such as an indigenous girl in Colombia's Chocó region. She describes a “strategic erosion of rights,” where protections are weakened not through major legal changes, but through subtle mechanisms like budget cuts, regulatory delays, strategic litigation, and targeted pressure on service providers. Royo emphasizes that coordinated disinformation campaigns play a central role. Well-organized international networks reframe gender equality and sexual and reproductive rights as “gender ideology,” aiming to polarize societies and undermine trust in democratic institutions. These movements operate globally, sharing strategies, messaging, and funding, while targeting both policies and the people who implement them, including healthcare providers and civil society organizations. She warns that democratic backsliding often becomes visible first in attacks on gender equality. When rights become bargaining tools in political negotiations, it signals deeper institutional weakness. In Colombia, this is evident as gender equality and reproductive rights have become major sources of political polarization ahead of upcoming elections—despite the country facing severe issues such as widespread violence against women and mass displacement. Royo also stresses the need to renew how gender equality is communicated. Advocacy must evolve to resonate with new generations and highlight that these issues are not niche concerns but fundamental to inclusive and resilient democracies.

**Iluta Lāce, Director and Founder, MARTA Centre, Latvia,** highlights that democratic backsliding rarely begins with dramatic legal changes but instead shows through gradual warning signs. Drawing on over 25 years of experience supporting women affected by violence, discrimination, trafficking, and exploitation, she identifies three key signals. First, the politicization of gender equality, including issues like violence against women and reproductive rights. Second, shrinking civic space, such as reduced funding for women's organizations and restricted access to services like safe abortion. Third, the erosion of trust in victims, where survivors' experiences are minimized or dismissed. She illustrates these trends through Latvia's recent debate over withdrawing from the Istanbul Convention. Despite significant progress—such as criminalizing emotional violence, improving legal protections, and expanding crisis services—this proposal marked a serious setback. Civil society responded quickly, countering disinformation with clear communication and mobilizing citizens to engage with policymakers.

Public support grew rapidly, with protests expanding from a few hundred to thousands. Businesses and organizations joined in solidarity, helping sustain large demonstrations. Ultimately, the president intervened, halting the withdrawal process. The movement showed strong public commitment to democratic values and alignment with Europe.

Iluta notes similar patterns across the region, including attacks on media freedom and restrictive laws targeting civil society in countries like Lithuania, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan. In more repressive contexts, organizations are forced to operate underground.

She concludes that these developments demonstrate how fragile women's rights can be. Continued vigilance, active civil society engagement, and sustained advocacy are essential to protect and strengthen gender equality and democratic values.

In the ensuing discussion Karen Ellemann highlighted once more the most important points the speakers had mentioned and put them in relation with each other. Thus some of the issues could be

elaborated on and there was a general consensus on the interdependence of true information – gender equality – human rights – democratic security and democracy.

cf. <https://www.norden.org/en/csw70> >> protect democracy, defend equality.

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