



“The role of foreign policy in advancing gender equality: Addressing the challenges, pushbacks and obstacles faced by women”

Takeaways

**Conference organised by the
Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Cyprus
in partnership with the Council of Europe
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**REPUBLIC OF CYPRUS
MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS**

COUNCIL OF EUROPE



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Introduction

The conference co-organised by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Cyprus and the Council of Europe, brought together representatives of the country's highest institutions, the Council of Europe's Deputy Secretary General, as well as national and international experts and academics. It provided rich insights into the success, the setbacks and the current challenges countries face in advancing women's rights and gender equality and the instrumental role that foreign policy can play at different levels.

I. States' leaders lead the way

Based on the principle of respect and promotion of women rights as fundamental rights, feminist foreign policy requires a *collective determination*, as well as political will to act both inside a country and in concert with other states. Gender equality is best promoted when practiced by all the highest state institutions (parliament, president, ministries, etc.) and is most effective when it leads by example. When gender equality is seen by a country's leadership as an overarching issue, it:

- ✓ brings that country a more assertive voice in multilateral fora as well as in bilateral matters;
- ✓ brings new voices to the diplomatic table which are informed by the reality of women's situations and needs and with their full participation;
- ✓ brings new topics onto the discussions including, inter alia, women's empowerment, violence against women, trafficking of human beings for the purpose of sexual exploitation or migrant women;
- ✓ helps focus on other foreign policy issues through new lenses and to enhance gender equality around the world notably through projects and specific official development assistance and to ensure a more holistic and therefore more impactful approach to foreign policy;
- ✓ helps changing the internal structures of the ministries of foreign affairs in promoting more gender-balanced mechanisms.

II. International organisations and initiatives provide the arena

Multilateral organisations, country groupings and other initiatives are excellent vehicles to advance gender equality but are also the places where states' views and practices most diverge. This requires states' foreign policy to be firmly based on human rights, including women's rights and to be fully cognizant of the multiple challenges coming from groups and movements that undermine human rights and democracy by attacking women rights.

Furthermore, Covid-19 has shed renewed light on persistent and entrenched gender inequalities that can only be tackled by a collective effort. A more impactful policy for gender equality in multilateral fora should:

- ✓ adapt the format to more effectively “pushback the pushbacks”;
- ✓ tackle the “terminology challenge” that undermines women rights;
- ✓ accelerate the pace of change by continuing with the “double approach” that includes targeted measures for the advancement of women and girls and gender mainstreaming;
- ✓ include young women and men as political actors.

III. The role of civil society

Gender equality is substantially supported and promoted by civil society actors, in particular women’s organisations. Their role is instrumental as it makes foreign policies more inclusive of different points of view and of societal positions, including groups of women in more vulnerable situations, such as migrant women. In order for civil society to fully play its role:

- ✓ countries should ensure that NGOs have the legal and material frameworks to operate;
- ✓ spaces should be open for all voices including the ones that disagree;
- ✓ countries should ensure systematic and open dialogue aiming to promote women’s organisations voices and experience in the international fora;
- ✓ sustainable funding for women NGOs and activists should remain available.

IV. It all starts with education and knowledge building

Significant gaps remain in relation to having a full picture of gender inequalities in all areas. For example, in the area of migration, there is a serious lack of data regarding women and girls’ situation on the ground. Feminist foreign policies require building the capacity of relevant stakeholders, to allow for a full integration of the gender equality perspective. Such knowledge building requires:

- ✓ supporting the collection of gender-disaggregated data in all areas, as well as research, monitoring, and evaluation of policies from a gender equality perspective;
- ✓ creating and sharing tools to enhance the capacity of the diplomatic sector to become more gender sensitive;
- ✓ supporting full access to education at all levels for women and girls around the world through foreign policy, targeted projects, and funding.