

## **Notes from session: In times of nationalism, fundamentalism and shrinking space- Who will stand up for women's rights?**

The session held by the Kvinna to Kvinna foundation provided a special focus on the gendered aspect of shrinking civic space and the additional threats that women human rights defenders are exposed to due to a suppressing shrinking space environment. Increasing conservatism, nationalism and focus on traditional values, narrows the space for women and women human rights defenders. If civil society is closed, women human rights defenders have few arenas if any to fight for political influence and for women's human rights.

The gendered aspects of shrinking space is a global phenomenon, and we can see that the space for women's human rights within the EU and bordering countries is also closing. How can the voice of the EU be for defending civic space when it allows the problem to grow even within the EU?

In interactive working groups we build on and draw learnings from the experiences shared by invited guests and from participants, and give concrete recommendations on how the EU and the international community can step up its work to support and strengthen women's organisations in repressive environments.

### Panelists:

Veronika Móra – head of Hungarian Environmental Partnership Foundation, Hungary

Blazhen Maleski – researcher, Reactor, Macedonia

Woman Human Rights Defender, Azerbaijan

Lena Ag – secretary general Kvinna till Kvinna, Sweden

Anna Jakenberg Brinck – head of Democracy and Development cooperation unit at Swedish MFA

Moderator: Helena Bjuremalm, Senior Policy Specialist on Civil Society, Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida)

Organizer: The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation

### *Introduction by Lena Ag, Kvinna till Kvinna*

We all work in or with civil society, so we have all experienced the latest years shrinking or closing civic space. It has affected our work. It took us some years to notice the full extent of what was happening. We have done a lot of talking and discussing on the subject. Now we need urgently to act. And in that action, we as Kvinna till Kvinna wants to make sure that no one ignores the gendered aspects of shrinking space – how it affects women human rights defenders – perhaps not always more – but in different ways. It is necessary to take this into account in order to respond. It is also necessary that we see and acknowledge that this is not only something happening in far-away countries, but very close to us, in Europe and the USA.

We need to state what might be obvious but is often forgotten: In many countries, the civil society arena is almost the only arena for women who wants to influence their societies and make change. Formal decision-making arenas are often hard for women

to access due to patriarchal structures and traditions. The civil society arena has also proven to be important starting point for women aiming at entering politics.

Research looking at 70 countries from 1975 to 2005, show that strong women's movement is the single most important factor leading to strong legislation and implementation on violence against women. More important than having many women in parliament, or having a liberal/socialist government, etc. So, closing civic space means closing the women's movement's possibility to fight for political influence and women's human rights. And if the women's movement can't work – who then will fight for women's rights?

After the introduction, each panelist representing a different country and context, provided a short update on the effects of gendered aspects of shrinking civic space. Then three questions were posed to the audience which were then discussed in groups. The audience were also asked to write down some recommendations relating to the posed questions to be collected at the end of the session.

#### Questions to the audience:

- 1) Do you have examples of the gendered aspects of Shrinking space?
- 2) How can we make visible the gendered aspects of shrinking civic space, in order to increase international and national response?
- 3) How should the EU/Sweden act in order to better counteract the development within its own borders and in accession countries?

#### Result from group discussions:

- There is a need of a better international framework that could create a more hardcore approach in connecting the gender issues to democracy in international conventions, since gender issues could be difficult to sell to certain conservative male actors.
- The fact that women rights organisations are prevented from fighting for women rights and raising awareness about the crimes committed against women should be the most important factor to emphasize and to focus on the long-term effects of this in a much higher degree. The long-term effects are that gender equality stagnates or even goes backwards which then result in a lack of democracy. In that sense, it is thus crucial to really emphasize and make the long-term effects of the attacks more visible and there should be early warning systems in place that shows these attacks on an earlier stage. Important to create alliances with other groups in emphasizing and making these issues more visible.
- One group were telling a story about a feminist in Uganda, a lecturer at a university who had been confronting the power by holding the government accountable on social media for promises that were later abolished. She was arrested and brought to trial under cyberlaw. Social media spaces are thus not allowed to be used and are shrinking. The group also connected this issue to

the Swedish media spaces where women are often attacked and harassed on social media.

- CSOs should urge donors, governments, and media to emphasize the gendered aspects. Furthermore, the feminist movement should be aware that goal 5 (achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls) cannot be issued without goal 16 (Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels) and finally they shall also raise more awareness on the gendered aspects among donors since many are genderblind.
- One of the groups highlighted that it is important not to see women as a coherent group and that patriarchal references are being used also by women. Rural women are not always accepted as actors that can speak up for themselves and religion is used as reasons for differential treatment.
- Donors play an important role and have responsibility to ensure that civil society organizations and especially women's organisations are invited to talks and are consulted with. Some experience that women are not represented in talks about gender policies or invited to donor meetings and sometimes even met with the argument that women have their "own" groups to discuss such issues. It is important that Sweden talk about these issues as political issues and not only linking it to development aid and something that only Sida can deal with and thus not included in foreign policy.
- The discussions ended with the statement that organisations working with human rights are not performing good gender analysis. Finally, concerns were raised about working with international response to shrinking space, some organizations might be afraid of working with international response since it could entail danger.

Provided recommendations in written (post-its) connection to three posed questions:

1) Do you have examples of the gendered aspects of Shrinking space?

- Shifting power could lead to GBV
- Conservative CSOs: s discriminative against women – issues within civil society
- Double layers - GBV, challenging patriarchal norm
- Male dominated societies leading to attacks
- Women leaders harassed in many ways
- Women empowerment instead of gender equality
- Cyber space is a place of violence against many women activists - a global problem

2) How can we make visible the gendered aspects of shrinking civic space, in order to increase international and national response?

- Must involve local leaders such as religious leaders and private sector
- Find allies in women in government and create cooperation
- Creative local crowd funding when foreign funding is criminalized
- National level must be transferred to grass root level

- In data collection on monitoring by human rights organisations, the gender aspects must be included
  - National and international solidarity needed - WHRDs often feel alone
  - Media must take this up and make the link, awareness raising on shrinking space among feminist movement
  - CSO community must make link clear to governments and donors on goal 5 and 16
  - Ensure implementation- not just legislation. Access to justice.
  - Create allies so that more org and actors support women's rights organisations
  - Early warning signs - make visible the patterns leading to shrinking space on an early stage.
  - Research provides credible data to prevent international community
  - Keep your ears on the ground - continued contextual analysis and monitoring of the current situations
  - Media can play an important role- but a prerequisite is that there is equal access for all to do that
- 3) How should the EU/Sweden act in order to better counteract the development within its own borders and in accession countries?
- To put these issues on political level – not only a development issue
  - Recognize that not all women are the same. Avoid elitism and think intersectionality.
  - To always ask to meet with women when traveling- ask where are the women?
  - To make sure to condition funds/aid, so it will go to both men and women
  - To pro-actively invite /include civil society to important meetings
  - More support to women's rights organisations
  - Challenge NGO-legislation