



## BEIJING +25, A BITTER ANNIVERSARY FOR WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND GENDER EQUALITY

*On the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Beijing Declaration, EuroMed Rights calls on the UN to address the growing backlashes to gender equality in the Euro-Mediterranean region*

2020 marks an important anniversary on the long path for the achievement of gender equality. Twenty-five years ago, in Beijing, the representatives of 189 governments and almost 50,000 participants and civil society actors met in the framework of the Fourth World Conference on Women. Two weeks and an enormous joint effort later, **the Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action** - the most comprehensive and transformative global agenda for the achievement of gender equality and women's rights to date - saw the light of day. The UN General Assembly is tomorrow celebrating this milestone with the High-Level Meeting "Accelerating the realization of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls", with the twofold aim of demonstrating the political will to address change and showing concrete actions and plans to achieve gender equality by 2030.

But while the year of this anniversary should be pivotal in the achievement of this objective, **2020 has seen contestations of gender equality rising exponentially and from a multitude of actors on both shores of the Mediterranean.** The COVID-19 pandemic and the varied governmental measures enacted in response to it have in certain countries perhaps represented the worse pushback of all. The crisis effectively worsened women's life conditions, affecting their livelihoods and safety. As schools closed and lockdowns were decreed in many countries, women saw their preexisting unpaid care burdens growing, the social and economic consequences of which will be long-lasting. Additionally, a worrisome, yet expected, increase in online and offline violence has been observed.

On top of these impacts pertaining to the management of the sanitary crisis, **illiberal and autocratic governments have deliberately seized the occasion of the COVID-19 pandemic to pursue their attacks against women's and LGBTIQ+ rights.** In Turkey, the ruling party recently announced its intention to withdraw from the Istanbul Convention – a bitter irony - as has Poland, while in the Spring, Hungary voted on a bill rendering legal gender recognition practically inaccessible for trans people. In Egypt, several women human rights defenders have been arrested over the past months, and a campaign targeting female social media influencers, especially TikTokers, similarly led to several arrests on vague, sexist charges such as violating "public morals" and "undermining family values". While ongoing conflicts continue to lead to a reassertion of traditional gender roles, in other parts of the Euro-Mediterranean Region, women's rights are increasingly being used to further advance and justify xenophobic and racist policies.

Behind these different episodes lies a common thread: **gender equality is being contested less for its content and more for what it represents.** Gender has become a symbolic glue unifying different sorts of movements and parties who, each in their own way, contest the "global order", claim cultural specificity, and defend "traditional and religious" values against the imposition of "Western values".

In this context, Heads of State and Government and other stakeholders present at the High-Level Meeting must not only show the political will and leadership to "accelerate the realization of gender equality", but must also develop concrete actions to **address the growing backlashes to gender equality** by considering and exploring the underlying, profound reasons behind the current broader contestations of international human rights law and the universality of human rights. Moreover, they should consider **the current backlashes to gender equality**

**as a symptom of a larger democratic crisis**, which entails, non-exhaustively, the general population's mistrust of institutions and growing, unaddressed inequalities feeding populist, nationalist movements and narratives. It is only by confronting these larger-scale issues that it will be possible to respect, advance and sustain the human rights of all women, everywhere.

In 25 years' time, we hope 2020 will not be remembered as the year of regression for women's rights but rather as the year that paved the way for a new and radical impetus.