



Dear friends, sisters and comrades,

It is an enormous honour to be standing here, among you, so many strong friends, some of whom I deeply admire. Thank you so much for inviting me in this beautiful part of the world and in this beautiful country that is so near to my heart.

I must have been 6 years old, I had just started primary school, when I told my grandmother very firmly: I am going to be a teacher when I grow up! Mind you, it wasn't just the new teacher that I liked, I was fond of my grandfather and he was the head teacher of the school. My grandmother laughed and told me that she had been a teacher before her marriage and that it was the best profession and that she had loved it. I asked her; 'so why did you stop being a teacher?' She then explained that she had to, women were not allowed to work in those professions after they got married. I don't think I was very shocked at the age of 6 and when I was around 12 it still didn't anger me. My grandmother was old, that period was far behind us, like in the dark ages or so. But it wasn't the dark ages. I was born in 1956, and up until that year married women were not allowed to work, and had to ask their husband permission to buy household appliances or even clothes. They couldn't get money from the bank, according to the law they were not competent to do all this without their husband's consent and autograph. So that situation is not that long ago, at least I consider myself not that old..... Needless to say that when I did realise, it infuriated me, women were considered incompetent and therefore second class citizens.

Of course, thankfully, a lot has changed in 60 years, but are we there where we want to be yet? What is the current state of the women's empowerment movement?

Around the world, women now have more decision-making power and influence than ever before and progress is being made even in the most



conservative societies. But unfortunately, progress is uneven, both across and within regions and countries, and resistance and backlash are common. We see that progressive parties and movements, in Europe, in the United States, in Asia, eg the Philipines, have to face conservative and extremist forces, that not only bring along an anti-feminist rhetoric and misogynist behaviour in daily politics, but foremost ban women's issues on the back burner and undermine their rights.

To stand united against this new powershift, women and men all over the globe take to the streets, build new networks and create allies. But we witness that this growing mobilisation is not yet translated into political engagement and the Social Democratic and progressive parties need to ask themselves what role we are going to play in this phenomenon.

So what are the key challenges and opportunities?

We have to fight the conservative backlash: On both sides of the Atlantic and here in Asia we are witnessing a severe shift to the right, which unfortunately has an impact on our future, and in particular on women's rights. Not just in the US also in all recent elections in Europe, we have witnessed a shift to the right and the rise of populism and conservatism; be it in the Netherlands (my own country), France, Germany, Austria etc.

It is scientifically proven that with the decline of democracy, we automatically will have less gender equality and women's rights. This academic observation, is also one that we have witnessed when exchanging views while visiting women's organisations across Europe and the world. Politics, media and debates may it in the private or in public spheres are becoming much more inward looking, exclusive and are dominated by nationalistic, white middle-aged men. That means that we not only see a growing anti-



democratic atmosphere, but also a political reality that is marked by a racist, misogynic and hatred-filled narrative that brings a certain behaviour and language to the table that discriminates, creates fear and in particular targets women. Not only in the workplace, at home or on the streets, but also on the internet and in social media. We often see that especially women who are in the public eye, like journalists, athletes, actresses and politicians are exposed to a wide range of hate speech and attacks due to their religion, their ethnic origin, sexual orientation, disability or gender.

While social democratic parties have been a stronghold, front runner and natural ally for women throughout its history, we do see a decline and even a total change in women voters behaviour. I was appalled when I saw the data of the elections in my own country; for the first time ever, less women than men had voted for our party. And after research we learned that this is the case in many countries. Progressive parties in crisis tend to push gender equality to the back of their agenda, and conservative parties push 'so called' feminist women, with a nationalist agenda, to the front.

That is why we, the progressives, have to find a new strategy and narrative that will make people believe in our parties, our values and that will reach out to those who need us, those people who have nothing to gain from conservative and right wing parties. In a way, let's say, go back to our roots, but with the narrative of today. This is not to say that the Left's emphasis on LGBTI rights, gender equality, ethnic minority rights, in my opinion, basic human rights, is off-putting to its traditional working-class voters, but rather that the Left has of late paid insufficient attention to the most important concern of many voters: their job and their livelihood, which includes social justice and equality.

Another big challenge for the left is to be more inclusive: It is highly important to include the young generation in our decision-making, they are shaping the future of our societies and that is why we need to listen to their concerns and



believes; and most of the times, we can actually learn from them. But after listening, we have to work together, hand in hand with and for them, we have to take them seriously, their views on social justice, and on rights, their family concepts, their aspirations etc.

We also need to reach out more to people in rural and underdeveloped areas and therefore seize the opportunities of modern technology without neglecting their negative side effects. And of course it is very important to include men in the movement because gender equality affects both genders, it is about questioning gender roles and power structures and not *them* versus *us*. To treat it only as a women's issue is like one hand clapping.

I strongly believe there are strategies and we should develop new ones at the global and regional level that push the women's empowerment agenda forward. I will mention here a few that we should discuss more in the future;

1. We need cooperation with Civil Society Organisations/ and NGO's to rebuild and strengthen the movements and demands
2. Gender budgeting with enough financial means is essential
3. Political will is absolutely necessary, we need our parties to act
4. We have to fight for vertical and horizontal quotas on political party lists
5. Education on gender equality is needed on all levels
6. We need gender legislation: a) Like the Istanbul Convention, in Europe which focusses on violence against women and has been adopted by a lot of European countries. b) Abortion must be decriminalised, c) transparency laws on equal pay and criminalisation of unequal pay (example Iceland)

So how should progressives address the challenges of gender inequality in the 21st century?



To counteract the right-wing rhetoric, that is no longer just a side-event but has become mainstream sexism, we need to translate gender mainstreaming into concrete actions instead of keeping it a technocratic terminology. We need to unpick arguments, eg. conservatives and nationalists who are anti-immigration claim that refugees and immigrants are a danger to women. And so they try to get women on their side. Instead of being just reactive to these false claims, we need to be proactive, because anti-feminist rhetoric is on the rise.

We should rebuild and strengthen the women's movement: In many parts of the world there is a strong civil society and there are strong women's movements and we must look for opportunities of solidarity to support one another and to work together. The call for dialogue is urgently needed in order to try to mediate between groups, and between polarized positions. For instance, on the surface, many of the arguments coming from the right wing can be very seductive, tapping into fear. However, when we engage in discussion with right wing populist movements, we are able to show that they are often very limited in terms of policies. We can offer workable alternatives!

That is why it is so positive to witness that women and men are mobilising, taking to the streets and are speaking out –even shouting out- against inequalities, such as around the #MeToo movement. The whole #metoo discussion has been very helpful in identifying and debating the roots of evil and how power structures function, and are embedded in our societies. But this is not a new issue nor an issue that will disappear soon, unless we act upon it. While it is important to hold perpetrators accountable, it is even more crucial to look at the real issue behind such behaviour and acts. The movement cannot stop by being outraged about rapists, we need to move it forward into a much more far-reaching campaign for gender equality and fight the way the world is structurally engineered against women. We need to build an equitable system in which women have the power to lead full lives. Because after all, gender based violence, sexism and sexual misbehaving are



a consequence of an unequal society and power structure, unless we change this, we will be shouting out #metoo for a long time.

We need good examples and role models when it comes to gender equality. And we politicians and political parties should be these examples. We therefore must have gender balanced boards, gender balanced party congresses, gender balanced panels etc. (By the way, that is exactly why I am pretty proud of what happened at the Progressive Alliance conference in Costa Rica. When we had the working group on gender we adopted an internal charter, which among other things makes sure we will always have gender balanced panels and we ensured that at every conference the topic of this conference should always be looked upon from the gender aspect as well. The working group on women was the first workshop of the conference, straight after the key note speeches. And for the rest of the conference all participation of the public was gender balanced. Panel leaders made sure of this.)

Furthermore, it becomes more and more important to shape and improve global standards on gender equality and the empowerment of women, because we are all facing similar problems when it comes to women's representation. The 2030 Agenda and Sustainable Development Goals are good tools for that matter, but we have to invest more and work hard to achieve these common goals.

Social democratic parties should act on women's rights and on gender equality and have to be inclusive to all women in our society and should reflect that in its representation and policy proposals. Eg. When we talk about economical, or educational, or pension reforms, our parties should be able to understand and demonstrate how these will affect and have an impact on women. Like ;how will single mothers be able to combine long working hours or multiple jobs with low salaries, while trying to provide basic education for their children, when childcare or education under right wing governments



seem to be scarce or non-affordable? Hence campaigns such as the PES Women campaign on Equal Pay, one that will be carried by all parties across the whole of the EU. Be intersectional, link women's issues to big political, economic and social questions, don't treat women's right as a separate and marginal topic.

In order to have an influence on the legislation that benefits girls and women, social democratic parties are needed, and have to find a way to convince people that we –with our values- are the only ones that will really work on an equal society.

Civil society movements and bottom-up approach through e.g. trade unions are essential, but enabling women to increase their potential for political mobilization is the key to create sustainable gender equality. That is why we have to establish a more robust global sisterhood that can not only tackle the challenges to our democracy, but that will empower women to be heard, to be listened to, and will give them a fair share in decision making. It will make societies more vibrant and its institutions more responsive. Support bottom-up approach from global feminist movements a la #metoo or #shedecides

Exploit the possibilities of Social Media in a positive way; it will raise awareness and put pressure faster and easier than some years ago, and above all across country borders. The #metoo hashtag is a perfect example of this, it triggered a debate on sexual harassment and gave people a platform to speak about their experiences, to break taboos and to show that women do not stand alone. That's why eg in Europe PES Women is urging all Member States to ratify and implement the Council of Europe Convention aiming at combatting violence against women and domestic violence, named the Istanbul Convention.

We Social Democrats and especially we feminists (women and men) we have to reflect on what we can improve and how we can be the front runner –again-



in demanding measures and in giving ALL women a voice in this battle; combining activism and our political engagement. I firmly believe that we can do it because there is no equal society when there is no gender equality!

Thank you all.