

A long way to go

International women's day provides an opportunity to put the need for a more equal society high on the agenda, writes **Cécile Gréboval**



International women's day has been celebrated for more than a century. What were girls aspiring to in the 1910s? Which of their wishes came true? In the 21st century, despite a lot of progress on women's rights, there is still a long way to go for gender equality to become a reality. In its everyday work, the European Women's Lobby (EWL) wants to propose solutions and convey the message that any change we achieve today is a concrete step for a more equal and fair future. Any change for the women and girls of today is a strong milestone for the girls of tomorrow.

EWL member organisations working with girls tell us that the girls of today long for equality between women and men: "For me, a fair society is an equal society where all human beings, no matter what gender, have the same opportunities to participate. Striving for gender equality is a way to fight inequalities based on patriarchal power structures and on ways of thinking and acting that prohibit a large group in society to reach their fullest potential," said Imse Nilsson of the world association of girl guides and girl scouts (WAGGGS), Sweden. "Gender equality gives me security to think, to say and to act as full citizen of democratic society," said Agnija Jansone of WAGGGS Latvia.

What kind of message are we sending for today's girls, when they hear on the radio on international women's day that the gender pay gap is still as high as 17.5 per cent? That women make up only 24 per cent of members of national parliaments? That seven women die every day from male domestic violence in the EU?

The girls (and boys) of today will be the women (and men) of tomorrow; by chang-

ing policies and mentalities now, we can write a new story for her. And we can ensure that the girls of tomorrow will live in a society where women's rights are fully respected and promoted. In order to achieve this, we need societal and political change, now.

Women's organisations can nowadays count on many girls engaging with feminism and celebrating annually the international women's day. In addition to passing forward feminist values, connections between generations of women also give a new impetus to feminist actions and build solidarity towards a real change. For example, the short film 'What is your dream?' produced by the EWL Belgian member organisation NVR, highlights the reality of women from different ages and origins and brings to life their hopes to escape poverty and social exclusion. This is the key in making women's voices heard.

We cannot accept that, for example, one in three girls (aged 13–17) in the UK has experienced sexual abuse from a partner, and that all girls in Europe do not have access to affordable contraception. EWL members take action on many topics: in Lithuania, they organised the country's first 'take back the night' event in October 2011 to raise awareness on violence against women and girls.

With the support of the EWL, the European network of migrant women will release a documentary to break stereotypes on migrant women and girls in the EU. While celebrating the European year on active ageing and intergenerational solidarity, the EU has the responsibility to support such initiatives and to create the conditions for the girls of today to live in a more equal society than the girls of yesterday. ★

A woman takes part in a march in October 2009 to recognise the 100th anniversary of the women's suffrage movement in the UK

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