

CHANGE

the influence of religion on the
human rights of women within the EU

A research made by
Ewa Larsson
Green women in Sweden

Conclusion

41 years have passed since the United Nations declared family planning as a human right. Today, there are political parties within the European Union that aim to restrict women's right to their own bodies as part of their political programs. We are all implicated in existing patriarchal structures. Thus, we all have a responsibility to make visible and act upon already made decisions in this field. The Council of Europe needs to follow the issue of women's rights closely, and the European Women's Lobby must take active steps to raise these questions on the EU's agenda. A problem in this regard is the democratic deficit in the forums where decisions are made, in the broader debate and in the relations of power in society. The demand for equality between men and women must pervade everything.

The principle of equal rights between men and women is enshrined in the United Nations Charter. The Charter also confirms that the UN strives to promote respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, without regard to race, sex or religion. The Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, organized by the UN under the theme Equality, Development and Peace, was the largest such event to date on the global level, with 17,000 participants from 189 countries, including 4,000 NGOs and a number of representatives of UN specialized agencies and other international organizations. At the end of the conference, the governments present unanimously adopted a Platform for Action, although some 20 reservations and a number of interpretative statements were submitted.

The most difficult issue in the negotiations over the Platform concerned women's health and reproductive rights. The discussions clearly showed how religious ideas are sometimes allowed to influence politics. Marked differences of opinion could be noticed between a number of Islamic countries, the Holy See and certain Catholic countries on the one hand, and the EU and the majority of the world's poorer countries (brought together within the framework of the so-called Group of 77) on the other. The three most sensitive issues concerned women's sexual rights, equal right to inheritance between men and women, and the question of sexual orientation. All these questions are linked to cultural and religious influences on the system of government, and positions on these matters often contradict the opening paragraph in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights."

In the preparations for the follow-up to the Platform for Action at the 49th session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women in 2005, EU negotiators had agreed upon a strategy of "not reopening the

document." The reason for this course of action was that the situation concerning women's sexual and reproductive rights had deteriorated during the last decade, partly because certain big countries, not least the United States, had come to endorse anti-abortion policies. Iran, the United States, the Holy See and other like-minded countries co-operated openly in the negotiations concerning sexual and reproductive health. Up until the last minute, representatives of these countries tried to weaken the wording in the paragraphs about abortion and contraceptives. In the discussions they had some success, making clear statements as to what their preferred line of action would be. Consequently, many countries in the Group of 77 realized that they would risk being denied aid in the future if they refused to agree to a ban on condoms. This, of course, increased the number of unwanted pregnancies, a rise in the number of women who die as a result of complications from abortions, an increased danger of accelerating the spread of HIV/AIDS.

The female body was thus detached from questions of human rights.

Since these issues are among the most difficult to tackle in international politics, and since they have become so closely associated with particular regimes and political parties, we consider it important to try to understand what is currently happening in this field in order to better prepare for the future. We also want to bring to attention our own history, and in particular the legacy of Martin Luther and the Christian notion of woman as a vessel.

In the absence of dialogue, the discrepancy between political commitments already agreed to and actual realities cannot be made visible. Open discussions, encompassing the entire range of existing viewpoints, are a prerequisite for peaceful change in the interest of equality.

Explanation of basic concepts

WHAT ARE HUMAN RIGHTS?

In December 1948, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Its first article reads:

“All human beings are born free, equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of unity.”

The second article states:

“Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. Furthermore, no distinction shall be made on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs, whether it be independent, trust, non-self-governing or under any other limitation of sovereignty.”

Today, the United Nations has 192 member states.

WHAT IS CEDAW?

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)¹ is the United Nations' most powerful instrument in its effort to strengthen women's position and rights. The Convention was adopted in 1979 and offers a framework for ensuring equal rights for men and women. CEDAW emphasizes that governments have an obligation to eradicate the most widespread forms of gender-based discrimination of women, both in legal terms and in practice. The countries who have ratified CEDAW are required to submit regular reports on what measures they have taken in order to implement the articles of the Convention. In addition to these official accounts, CEDAW networks consisting of NGOs² in the countries concerned produce shadow reports. In 2008, 185 countries had ratified the CEDAW, making the Convention the second largest, which has been ratified, surpassed only by the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

WHAT IS RELIGION?

Some dictionaries describe religion as the fear and worship of a God in accordance with a certain set of beliefs. Religion can be defined as a system of thought aiming to produce knowledge of things that we cannot grasp through our senses and our rational thinking. Over time, religion has developed in different ways – its original function was probably to deal with issues of life and death. Religion tries to account for events that cannot easily be explained and thus are difficult to understand. Religion interprets developments and problems relating to social life and works to promote co-operation and control within groups and by groups. Just like political systems, religions can be totalitarian, demanding strict obedience from their adherents. Totalitarian regimes are built on the same mechanisms that in contemporary public debates and within the UN are known as patriarchal structures.

In secular countries, spirituality, belief and religion are considered private matters, separated from the sphere of government and politics. The word secular is variously defined as worldly, dechristianized, lay, desecrated, profane, not belonging to the Church.

1. CEDAW, convention against all discrimination of women.
2. NGO, non government organisation

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BACKGROUND

All around the world, religious beliefs are mixed up with systems of government. Patriarchal notions of appropriate female behavior are put forward by (predominantly male) religious spokespersons. Women's right to their own bodies is made subject to interpretations by priests and prophets who seek to influence politics. Some political parties have made it one of their principal objectives to curb women's rights. Violence in the name of honor and prohibitions of abortion are undeniable facts, and in the international struggle for gender, the question of women's sexual and reproductive health is still high on the agenda

During its annual session in 2008, the Swedish Women's Lobby approved a proposal from the Swedish Women's Organization Green women to prepare a study on the development of sexual and reproductive health within the EU. In 2006, the European Women's Lobby adopted a policy paper on this matter, which has served as a basis for the questions used in the survey presented below.

In the spring 2008, Gröna kvinnor took part in a European feminist seminar in Rome. The participants expressed great concern over the entanglement of religion with systems of government, a connection that negatively affects women's right to their bodies. Although improvements were reported from a few countries (e.g. Portugal), many delegates told of a deteriorating situation. In this context, Green women found reason to raise the question of how co-operating countries within the EU interpret the human rights of women

METHOD

The method in the present survey was to design a questionnaire comprising four questions relating to sexual and reproductive health. The questions could be answered "yes," "no" or "partly". Those answering "partly" were asked to make an explanation. The questionnaire was sent to the governments of the 27 member states of the EU, as well as to the different women's associations co-operating within the framework of the European Women's Lobby. Among the governments, Belgium, Cyprus, Italy and Slovenia did not respond. The NGOs that participated are enumerated on page 15.

The questionnaire contained the following introductory text:

UN member countries have committed to implement the Action Plan Beijing Platform for Action from the Fourth UN Women's Conference in 1995, which is one of the crucial areas of women's sexual and reproductive health and rights. It is also one of the areas in which several countries have reservations about the Women's Convention.

Council of Europe resolution 1464 (adopted 2005) calls on Member States of the Council of Europe to take a stand and to protect women from violations of their rights which takes place in the name of religion.

European Women's Lobby (EWL) position's paper on women and religion, calls on EU Member States to ensure, maintain and promote sexual and reproductive rights for all women regardless of religious or cultural differences, to inform about the risk of sexually transmitted diseases such as AIDS and to give information about the rights of women to decide about their own body.

The four questions read as follows:

- 1** Do women have *sexual and reproductive rights?*
- 2** Are contraceptive methods *available to everyone?*
- 3** a) Do women have *the right to obtain an abortion?*
b) Describe the current rules on abortion and when they were introduced.
- 4** Do cultural and religious attitudes affect *the Government's work with the sexual and reproductive health of girls and women?*

Sexual and reproductive rights of women

The overwhelming majority of the governments responding, 22 out of 23 (Bulgaria, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Greece, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxemburg, France, Netherlands, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, United Kingdom, Sweden, Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary and Austria), confirm that women are endowed with sexual and reproductive rights. None of the governments denies that women have such rights. However, one government (Spain) and several NGOs only partly agree that women possess sexual and reproductive rights. In the four cases where governments have not responded, the answers made by the NGOs are presented – in all other cases the positions of governments have served as a basis for interpreting the results. Answers submitted by NGOs are in these cases presented only when they deviate from the government's position or are followed by a comment. The figure below shows the cases where both governments and NGOs have responded (nine countries, in total). As can be seen, NGOs are more prone to "partly" agree with the proposition that women have sexual and reproductive rights. Respondents answering "partly" to the first question can be divided into three groups: those arguing that women do not have a right to abortion; those referring

to inadequate implementation of conventions regarding women's rights; and those pointing to a lack of information and knowledge among citizens concerning women's rights.

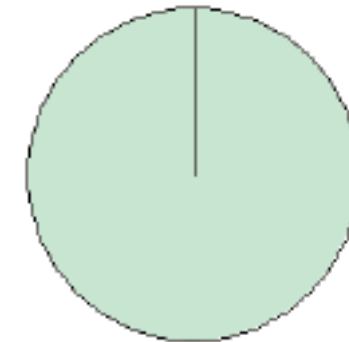
NO RIGHT TO ABORTION

The Spanish government argues that it is only partly correct to claim that women have sexual and reproductive rights, since they cannot "freely decide to get an abortion". The government of Malta confirms that women have sexual and reproductive rights, but adds that abortion is illegal. The Irish government also concedes that women have such rights, "assuming that this question relates to the freedom of couples and individuals to decide on numbers, spacing and timing of children and to have access to family planning services."

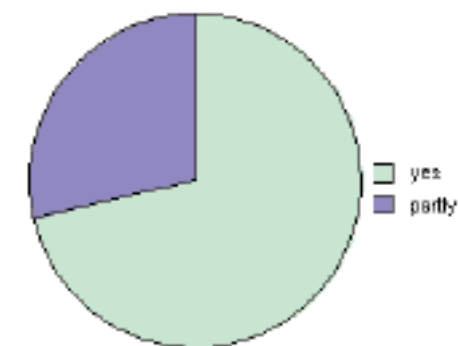
INADEQUATE IMPLEMENTATION OF CONVENTIONS

The NGO from Cyprus explains that despite the fact that their government has signed all the relevant conventions regarding women's sexual and reproductive rights, there are still shortcomings in the legislative framework, since it is not "adequately addressing these rights" and since implementation is deficient. In the same vein, the NGO from Slovenia stresses that even though women are free to choose whether or not to have children, and even though the government has ratified the conventions under discussion, women's sexual and reproductive rights are not fully protected in reality. Gender-based violence and discrimination is still part of everyday life for Slovenian women. A NGO from Czech Republic argues that women's sexual and reproductive rights are only partial, since "women cannot choose health care provider, particularly a midwife." "Czech doctors have a very conservative approach towards midwives." Another Czech NGO further points to a limited freedom of choice when it comes to childbirth and alternative medical treatments.

ANSWERS FROM GOUVERNEMENTS



ANSWERS FROM NGOs



Sexual and reproductiv rights of women





LACK OF KNOWLEDGE AND INFORMATION

The NGO from Lithuania argues that women’s sexual and reproductive rights are only partial, since young women often lack knowledge of these rights. In addition, not all women have access to necessary information and health service.

COMMENTS

No country denies that women have sexual and reproductive rights, a fact that arguably reveals a flawed self-image on the part of the countries themselves. After all, the data shows that neither information nor health service always reach all women. This raises the question of whether governments lack knowledge of the situation in their own countries. On the other hand, perhaps governments find it sufficient to confirm their support for women’s rights in principle and in international forums, without feeling obliged to translate this formal support into actual policies.

Spain is the only government that clearly links the right to abortion to sexual and reproductive health. It emphasizes that in Spain there is only a partial right to abortion, since women are not completely free to decide whether to have an abortion or not.

The NGO from **Slovenia** paints a bleak picture of women’s situation in the country. Even though the government has ratified CEDAW, and even though women in principle have a right to sexual and reproductive health, sexual violence and discrimination is still prevalent in women’s day-to-day life. Violence against the female body seems to be normalized to a certain extent, something that must be regarded as extremely serious.

The NGO from **Cyprus** explains that there is a discrepancy between theory and reality, since the national legislation has not been brought in line with CEDAW. The legal enforcement of rights is impossible in a context of discrimination. Thus, women’s rights become ineffective, and women lose their protection under the law.

The NGO from **Czech Republic** emphasizes the dominant position held by doctors, who seem to stand above both midwives and female patients, diminishing the latter’s possibility to influence decisions. Even so, the Czech government considers women to be endowed with sexual and reproductive rights.

The government of **Ireland** responds in the affirmative to the first question, an answer that as such requires interpretation. Irish media has reported extensively about a legal case in which a woman who got pregnant after a rape subsequently was denied abortion. The reason for the answer given by the Irish government might be that the authorities define this issue solely from the viewpoint of a family context, and thus exclude abortion as a relevant criterion.

The fact that **Malta** considers women to possess sexual and reproductive rights can be interpreted as a complete social normalization of the conditions that women are currently subjected to.

One could easily suspect that the governments answering in the affirmative to the first question (i.e., all governments except Spain) are criticized by NGOs who have a different approach. In the countries specifically mentioned above, there is a great difference between governments’ view of women’s situation and the actual reality when it comes to women’s possibilities to assert their sexual and reproductive rights.

Availability of contraceptive methods

18 out of 23 governments (Bulgaria, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Greece, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxemburg, France, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Spain, United Kingdom, Sweden, Germany and Hungary) state that contraceptive methods are available to all citizens in their respective countries. No government or NGO has responded to the second question in the negative, although some of them have answered “partly.” In this respect, there is a difference between governments and NGOs. The table below shows the distribution of the respondents answering “partly” to the second question.

| Number | Country | Government | NGO |
|--------|-----------|------------|--------|
| 3 | Cyprus | | Partly |
| 10 | Italy | | Partly |
| 12 | Lithuania | Yes | Partly |
| 13 | Luxemburg | Yes | Partly |
| 19 | Slovakia | Partly | |
| 20 | Slovenia | | Partly |
| 27 | Austria | Partly | Yes |

What can be noticed in the explanatory comments, are first the diverging notions of what “availability of contraceptive methods” should be taken to mean. Two different problems are mentioned: limited accessibility and economic constraints.

LIMITED ACCESSIBILITY

The NGO from Cyprus points out that contraceptives are available only at private institutions but not at public hospitals, which is to say that contraceptives are only partly accessible. The Czech government answered both “yes” and “partly,” since “certain pharmaceuticals are available on prescription only.” The NGO from Belgium describes the situation in similar terms: contraceptives are available, but must be prescribed by a doctor. In Ireland, condoms are available in shops, but there is an age limit of 17 years. Morning after pills require prescription. The NGO from Italy argues that contraceptives are only partly available for citizens, since there are no condoms for women. The Romanian government highlights the difficulty of making contraceptives accessible to vulnerable groups, especially on the countryside.

ECONOMIC CONSTRAINTS

The NGO from Lithuania argues that contraceptives are only partly available, since “voluntary sterilization” is illegal. Young women and women on the countryside predominate among those who cannot afford contraceptives. The government of Slovakia maintains that contraceptives, although available, are only partly accessible due to economic constraints. Hormonal contraceptives and intrauterine devices are particularly difficult to afford for weak groups. The Slovenian NGO similarly states that the freedom of choice is limited, since condoms are expensive, while other contraceptives require prescription. The government of Austria explains that since contraceptives are not covered by the publically funded health insurance system, they can only be said to be partly accessible. This perspective is shared by the NGO from Luxemburg. In Germany, access to contraceptives is generally considered adequate, even though a prescription is sometimes required. The costs for contraceptives prescribed by a doctor are covered by health insurance for all persons below the age of 21.

COMMENTS

The position taken by Czech Republic and Belgium, who consider contraceptives to be partly available despite the fact that they must be prescribed by a doctor, is somewhat dishonest, and stands in stark contradiction to the view expressed by Austria and Luxemburg, according to whom contraceptives are only partly available since they are not handed out for free. Contraceptives that require prescription or are subject to an age limit (as in the case of Ireland) cannot be regarded as available to everyone. The NGOs from Lithuania and Slovenia also emphasize the contrast between words and reality, explaining that while contraceptives may be available, they are often expensive. For people on the countryside, accessibility is limited. According to the Lithuanian point of view, the fact that especially women find contraceptives expensive is a reflection of the income gap between men and women.

Generally speaking, contraceptives are both expensive and difficult to access in the EU countries, and this is a problem that governments must address. Economic constraints should not be allowed to affect women’s right to their own bodies. The fact that information about sexual rights and contraceptives does not even reach certain groups in society is a further cause for alarm.



Abortion

Answers to the third question, relating to abortion, have been divided into four groups, reflecting different views on the conditions under which women are granted the right to have an abortion. The question was split in two parts: a first part where respondents were asked to state whether women had the right to abortion. The second part where they were asked to describe existing legislation on this issue. When categorizing the countries, the answers to both questions have been used. The interpretation of the answers has also drawn on explanations given by national NGOs as well as data from the United Nations website.

Green: abortion allowed during the early phase of pregnancy, if the woman so requests (free choice).

Yellow: consideration is given to the woman's physical and mental health; doctors take into account the social situation of the patient or might decide on mandatory consultations as a precondition for allowing abortion.

Orange: consideration is given to the woman's physical and mental health, medical reasons, foetal abnormality or rape.

Red: abortion is allowed only in order to save the life of the woman; the life of the fetus is regarded as equally valuable as the life of the woman.

■ Malta is the only country in Europe where abortion is completely illegal.

■ In Cyprus, abortion is partially legal. According to the NGO, abortions are allowed in order to save the life and the mental and physical health of the woman and in cases of rape, but social circumstances are also considered. On the UN website, it is explained that social reasons are not taken into account in Cyprus and that "certification by two physicians is required for all grounds except rape. In the case of rape, certification by a police authority is necessary, confirmed by medical certification, whenever possible." The NGO adds that the only grounds for abortion accepted in public hospitals are rape and medical reasons. Women seeking abortion on other grounds have to turn to private clinics. Thus, even if abortion is legal in certain specified cases, economic constraints make this option impossible for the majority of the population.

■ The Luxembourgian NGO states that women in the country have a right to abortion, while the government considers this right only partially. Abortions are allowed in cases of rape and when the life and health of the woman are at risk.

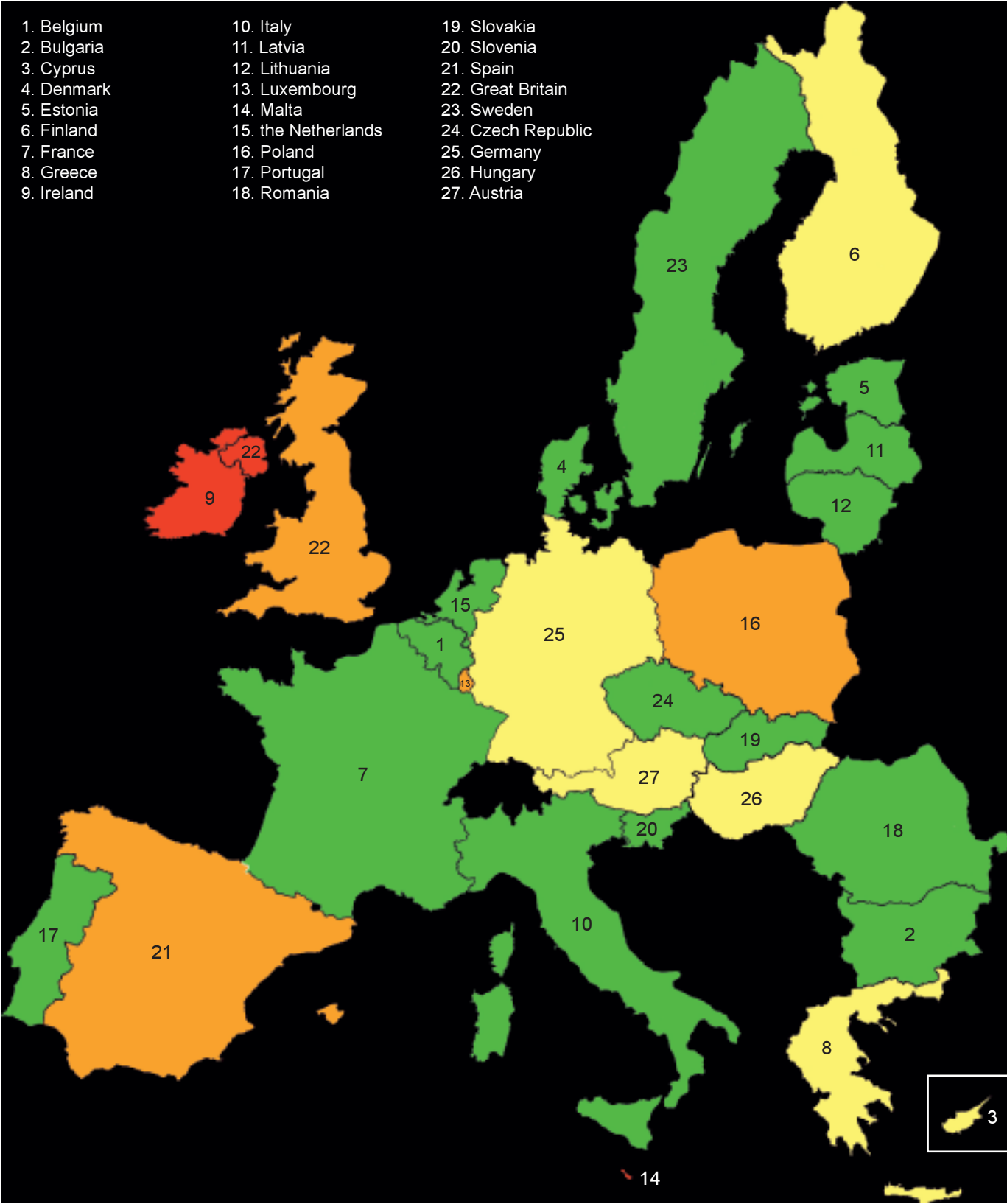
■ In the case of the United Kingdom, both the NGO and the government answer that women have a right to abortion. In the NGO's description of the grounds for legal abortion, no reference is made to the request by the woman or to social circumstances. The decision to make an abortion must be approved by two doctors. According to the UN, social reasons are to be given consideration, but this only refers to the family context, not to the individual situation of the woman, which is consequently not taken into account.

■ The Austrian government and NGO have both answered that women have a right to abortion. However, the NGO adds that the law requires mandatory counselling, which is why Austria is marked with yellow on the map, despite the UN's claim that abortion is allowed at the request of the woman.

■ The Belgian NGO declares that women have the right to obtain an abortion and that information and counselling is provided. Belgian law approves of abortion in situations where the woman has given her written consent and made clear her reasons. The doctor needs to be convinced that the decision is the right one and that the woman is in a "state of distress." The UN further specifies that Belgian law "requires a woman seeking abortion to state that she is in a state of distress as a result of her situation; the decision to have an abortion, however, is entirely the decision of the woman." In our interpretation, this nonetheless means that someone else, other than the woman herself, has to give an assessment of her situation, which is why Belgium has been marked with yellow on the map.

■ In the case of Finland, there is a discrepancy between the government's answer and the answer given by the NGO. While the government states that women have the right to abortion, the NGO only partly agrees. In the explanation provided by the NGO, it is made clear that "the woman's will alone to terminate the pregnancy is not enough." The UN confirms that abortion is not allowed simply because the woman so desires. According to the Finnish government, valid grounds for abortion are related to physical and mental health, and usually a statement about the patient written by a doctor is required. Social circumstances may also be taken into account, if "childbirth would cause a significant strain on the woman's life."

The woman's right to abortion



In countries where counseling is a requirement for allowing abortion, there is a risk that too much time elapses during pregnancy so that the option of legal abortion in reality becomes void.

■ In the case of Greece, the answers given by the government and the NGO differ: while the NGO states that women have a right to abortion, the government only partly agrees, since abortion is allowed only under certain conditions. Valid grounds have to be given and approved, which means that women are not completely free to decide whether to have an abortion or not completely free to decide whether to have an abortion or not.

■ The Lithuanian NGO explains that the national Parliament is presently considering a draft law that would limit women's possibility of obtaining an abortion. If the proposed law would come into force, this would mean that abortion would no longer be allowed at the request of the woman; instead, only reasons such as rape and health factors would be decisive. Consequently, Lithuania would move from the green to the orange group.

■ Another country experiencing change is Spain. Here, however, developments are moving in the opposite direction. According to the Spanish government, women have a partial right to abortion, namely in cases of rape and when the life and health of the women are at stake. A new law is being drafted, under which the decision to have an abortion would be in the hands of the woman.

■ Portugal has gone through a significant transformation from a previous situation, when only medical reasons were considered valid grounds for abortion. Since a new law entered into force in 2007, after a referendum in which a majority voted in favour of free abortion, women have the possibility of obtaining an abortion at their own request, and also free of charge.

■ After the reunification of Germany, women's right to their bodies became a contentious issue, and a compromise was forged between the diverging positions. Today, abortion is in general considered a crime, but may be obtained if the woman explains her reasons in mandatory counselling with an abortion consultant. If the woman lacks resources, the government may cover the costs.

COMMENTS

It is difficult to understand the assumptions behind the different answers given, especially since all countries except Spain agree that women have sexual and reproductive rights. This, however, does not mean that women are completely free to decide. Women are subjected to an authority, even when this is not explicitly admitted but rather stated in benign terms, e.g. by making reference to the health of the woman or the foetus (in Malta, the wish of the woman is actually less of a priority than the interests of the foetus). When these realities are not formulated in terms of a "human rights" perspective, based on the notion that all human beings are born free, governments can easily flee from their responsibility under CEDAW. Furthermore, the length of the period during which abortion is allowed at the request of the woman is of significance in EU countries where abortion is legal. Although we have decided not to elaborate on this subject here, we know that lively discussions are taking place in a number of Christian political parties.

The Swedish Christian Democratic party is internally divided over the present legislation, which allows abortion at the request of the woman during the first 18 weeks of pregnancy. Some voices within the party want to adjust the period to the norm within the EU, where the average period is 12 weeks. In Lithuania, the political majority is preparing a new law that would make abortions illegal. In Poland (now in the orange group), a proposal has been put forward to enforce an even stricter implementation of the existing rules.

In countries where counselling is a requirement for allowing abortion, there is a risk that too much time elapses during pregnancy so that the option of legal abortion in reality becomes void. This creates a very difficult situation for the woman and can easily give rise to feelings of guilt.

Cultural and religious influence

■ In order to describe the influence of culture and religion on governments' work in the field of sexual and reproductive health for women and girls, the answers given to the fourth question have been divided into four groups. Answers given by governments have served as a basis for the analysis, while comments made by NGOs and our own reflections have also been integrated into the text.

Green: cultural and religious attitudes do not affect the government's work in this field.

Yellow: cultural attitudes partly affect the government's work.

Orange: religious attitudes partly affect the government's work.

Red: cultural and religious attitudes affect the government's work.

■ The Polish government clearly states that cultural and religious attitudes affect their work, and notes that "because of the power of the Catholic church, abortion on demand will never be introduced in social life."

■ The Italian NGO answers "yes" to the fourth question, explaining that the Vatican and the Bishops' Conference "lobby permanently all political parties in order to cancel the law on abortion."

■ The government of Ireland declares that the government's work to promote the sexual and reproductive rights of women is not influenced by cultural or religious attitudes.

■ The NGO from Cyprus explains that even as socio-economic changes are taking place in the country, conservative attitudes still prevail when it comes to sexual and reproductive rights. The government is also partly affected by the position of the Church, which has a firm stance on these matters.

■ The Finnish government notes: "We don't have a strong public debate on this issue. It seems as if pre-productive rights are taken for granted, although the legislation is clearly stricter than in other Scandinavian countries." According to the Finnish government, the Christian Democrats is the only political party in the country that is actively engaged in these questions.

■ In the case of Bulgaria, there is a difference between the view of the NGO, which answers "no" to

the fourth question, and the position taken by the government, which concedes that it is partly affected by religious and cultural attitudes in its work.

■ The government of Lithuania states that religious and cultural attitudes do not influence its view on the sexual and reproductive rights of women. The Lithuanian NGO, in contrast, argues that the "religious influence is very strong both in the parliament and in the government". As has already been explained, opinions about abortion are currently changing in the country; in such a way, that possibilities of obtaining an abortion are drastically diminishing.

■ The government of Luxemburg does not consider itself affected by any religious or cultural influences; the NGO, argues however that, "Cultural and religious attitudes affect every political subject." As in the case of Lithuania, there is a clear contrast between government and NGO.

■ According to the government of Malta, there is no demand for a legalization of abortions in the country; on the contrary, "the current cultural approach is the one that is locally favored and found acceptable by the general public." Although the government has not responded to the question in a clear manner, its statement can still be interpreted as an affirmative answer.

■ The Dutch government states that it is partly influenced by religious groups and political parties with a religious orientation. "As a result," it explains, "the focus is laid on prevention, since abortion is something we have to avoid." The government further adds that the basic right to abortion will not be changed. An issue that is presently being addressed in the country, however, is the question of attitudes to sexual health within immigrant groups.

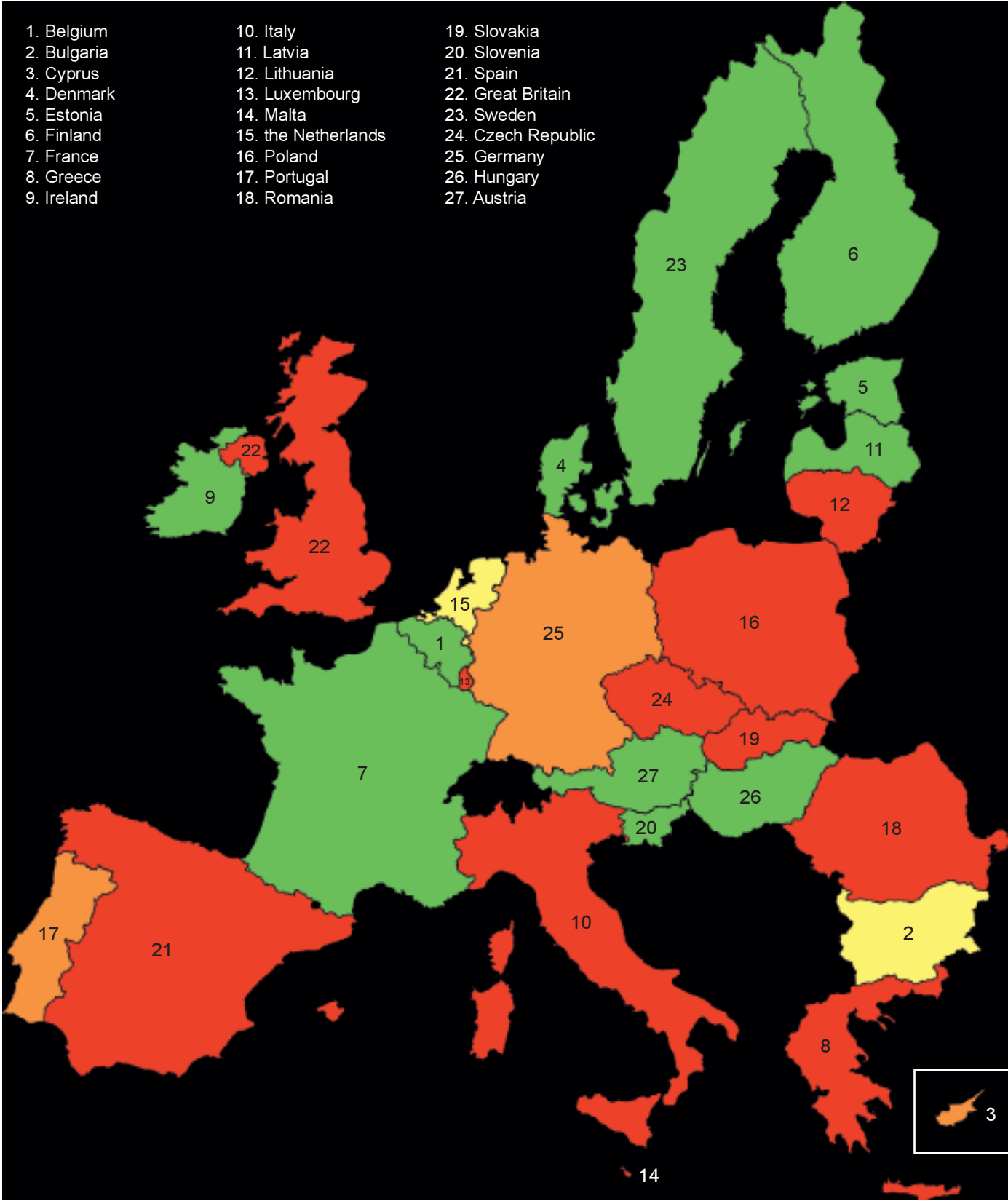
■ The government of Portugal similarly asserts that certain immigrant groups (notably from Guinea-Bissau) are bearers of cultural and religious attitudes about these issues, but that the government is working together with NGOs and civil society through specific programs in the field of equality and health.

■ The government of Romania stresses that some social groups are difficult to reach, e.g. women on the countryside where access to information is limited, the Roma community where different attitudes to these matters prevail, and immigrant Muslim women.

■ The Belgian NGO emphasizes that there are ongoing campaigns and activities in the country aiming to inform women about sexual and reproductive health issues.



Cultural and religious influence on governmental work with sexual and reproductive health.



Over time, influences change, and the ruling powers have always had the possibility to shape attitudes in society. In periods of economic distress, people are more prone to be affected and tempted by different credos and messages.

COMMENTS

That religion affects culture, that culture in turn affects religion, and that both affect politics is an obvious fact that nobody would contest. This also works in the opposite direction, since politics influences culture and religion.

It is astonishing that the government of Ireland, a country whose abortion laws are among the most restrictive in Europe, does not consider itself to be influenced by any cultural or religious attitudes. The fact that the present government of Lithuania allows religion to shape legislation is regrettable, as is the government's claim that this has nothing to do with such attitudes. The government of Malta adopts a short-term perspective, speaking of current rules being locally supported and uncontested by the public – as if we all lived in a vacuum unaffected by external influences. However, anyone who has passed through the airport of Malta knows what pride the country takes in its contribution to the Crusades during the Middle Ages. The fact that the island also hosts a number of archaeological excavations of one of the oldest preserved goddess temples in the world is much less trumpeted.

Over time, influences change, and the ruling powers have always had the possibility to shape attitudes in society. In periods of economic distress, people are more prone to be affected and tempted by different credos and messages. Especially for those who find it difficult to fit in and be accepted by society, the old adage “you ‘ll get the pie in the sky when you die” may translate into fundamentalism, extremism and terrorism.

A number of NGOs and governments have raised the issue of how host country values concerning women's rights should be extended to immigrant groups. From Portugal, there are reports of public campaigns seeking to raise awareness of equality and sexual health issues. In Romania, there are problems with a process of urbanization that leaves the countryside behind and with a Roma population that has a hard time being accepted by society. Similar problems are probably experienced by several of the new EU member countries. Romania is the only country that raises the sensitive cultural issue concerning immigrant Muslim women that do not share the norms upheld by the society as a whole. The real dilemma, however, is that a large number of countries do not discuss the problem of tensions between different groups. In some of these countries, new fundamentalist rules are

invented that have an immediate effect on women's right to their own life and their own bodies. Sweden is no exception in this regard.

Today, the religious map of Europe looks as follows:



RELIGIONS IN EUROPE:
Catholiques
Protestants
Orthodoxes
Musulmans

In international politics, an alliance is currently being formed between the Holy See, Islamist fundamentalist regimes and Christian right-wing governments (including the former Bush administration), who work together in order to influence UN texts on women's rights. In the light of these developments, the EU has an important task in defending what has already been achieved on the international level, but EU countries must also take responsibility for implementing the conventions on the human rights of women within their own borders.



The female body is still a battlefield

As mentioned, the impulse to control the female body and its use goes a long way back in history. Today, we read media articles where surprised journalists express astonishment at how women are abused, raped and murdered in ongoing wars. Nevertheless in cultures where women are primarily regarded as child bearers and as property of their husbands, it is considered to be an efficient weapon against a warring or occupied enemy to abuse and rape “his” women.

The French revolution at the end of the eighteenth century had a major impact on Europe as a whole and marked the beginning of an era during which religion and politics were to be kept apart. The witch-hunts and the persecution of nonconformist and independent women that had been going on for hundreds of years were a scourge that nobody wanted back. Early in the sixteenth century, Martin Luther proclaimed that the function of women was to give birth to children; in his view, women were nothing but “vessels.” The last time witches were burned at the stake in Sweden was in 1675, when 68 women and 3 men were put to death in the province of Ångermanland. Swedish women were not allowed to vote until 1921, and only in 1923 were married women accorded the status of adults with full rights. In Church, the prevailing view was that women should “keep silent in the congregation,” an attitude that most likely had a strong impact on peoples’ ways of thinking. While slavery was abolished in Europe already in the thirteenth century, trafficking in human beings is still taking place, a trade in which women and girls are the primary victims. The fact that such activities can go on has to do with dominant attitudes in society (on this note one might wonder why trafficking in human beings is less severely punished than, for example, the trade in drugs). No one would deny that culture and religion are mutually affecting each other, and that the both have an influence on politics. As mentioned earlier, this also works in the opposite direction, as politics is having an effect on religion and culture. Today, the debate about these issues seems to have come to a halt, regardless of the undisputable fact that we all are subject to such influences, whether we like it or not.

When we speak about patriarchal structures, we are having in mind not only the practicing of religion or religions, but rather the extent to which society is governed by totalitarian structures. People may express their beliefs, religion or spiritual convictions in non-patriarchal ways, individually or collectively. In a secular country with a democratic form of government, religion and politics are considered as separate. However, regimes sometimes prohibit expressions of religion or culture, as was the case in the old communist states, while maintaining a completely patriarchal

and totalitarian system of government. Individual countries often influence one another, but there are also political entities (e.g. the Holy See) that claim to have a global reach. When the pope visits Poland, he is not primarily a representative of Rome, but rather someone who claims to speak on behalf of a global community. Islamic fundamentalists, for their part, consider themselves as proponents of the only future possible.

CHANGE

Many different developments are currently taking place within the EU, and they often seem to go completely against the international commitments that countries have agreed to. The human rights of women appear ignored, and the female body has become a commodity. For certain political parties, women are stakes in electoral campaigns. While the government of Portugal has arranged a referendum on the right to abortion, women in Poland are protesting outside the national parliament against proposals for an even more rigorous interpretation of the existing rules. In Western media, women are often portrayed as problems or objects, not as independent individuals or subjects with equal economic rights and obligations, endowed with the right to freely decide over their own bodies.

Even today, the very cornerstone of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the notion that all human beings are born free and equal, does not extend to women. Despite the fact that 185 countries have ratified CEDAW, the female body is still subjected to political and religious powers through mechanisms of subordination and control. In order for us to be able to mobilize the strength to achieve change, these realities must be recognized.

Voices of women within the EU

In his electoral campaign, the Prime Minister of Italy Silvio Berlusconi vowed to introduce a complete ban on abortions, a message that was warmly welcomed by the pope, who increased his contributions to the Berlusconi camp accordingly. This episode was recounted by Anita Giuriato at the conference “Feminists for a Secular Europe” held in Rome during the spring of 2008. According to Giuriato, gender relations in Italy are going through a phase of general deterioration. Women from several other EU countries had similar stories to tell.

Lilian Halls from France explained that the three dominant religions in the country, Christianity, Judaism and Islam, were acting in a similar way and were given more space than previously in the public arena. As a result, Halls noted, stereotypes are strengthened and patriarchal structures are allowed to prevail. The general subordination of women to men is thereby accepted through a kind of silent agreement.

In Poland, Alicja Tysiac said, the Church was separated from the state in 1905. Today, however, conservative religious sentiments are pushing the country thou-

sands of years back in history. The Catholic media is targeting young people by portraying women as objects whose bodies belong to the family, in which the father should make all decisions. Abortions are currently being carried out at private clinics, at a cost equivalent to three monthly wages for the average employee. There are ten million fertile women in Poland, and many of them are forced to risk their lives and health by seeking abortion “outside” the ordinary health care system.

In Lithuania, the government in 2008 defined the “family” as a unit consisting of father, mother and child. Thus, by definition, single mothers do no longer have a family, and homosexual couples are rendered virtually non-existent.

In Spain, a new law on abortion is under preparation. The government wishes to open up the possibility of abortion, but the media, (which to some extent is owned by the Church) insists that abortion is in contradiction with human rights. During the spring, the government is expected to introduce a new bill with the proposed changes.

The human rights of women appear shut off, and the female body has become a commodity.

THE FOLLOWING NGOS PARTICIPATED IN THE SURVEY:

| Lnr | LAND | NGO |
|-----|----------------|--|
| 1 | Belgium | Nederlandstalige Vrouwenraad |
| 2 | Bulgaria | Bulgaian Gender Research Foundation |
| 3 | Cyprus | Cyprus Family Planning Association |
| 4 | Denmark | Kvinderådet |
| 6 | Finland | The Coalition of Finnish Women's Associations |
| 8 | Greece | Coordination of Greek Women's NGOs for the EWL |
| 10 | Italy | EWL Italy |
| 12 | Lithuania | Women's Issues Information Center and Family Planning and Sexual Health Assosiation. |
| 13 | Luxemburg | CNFL |
| 20 | Slovenia | Woman's Lobby Of Slovenia |
| 22 | United Kingdom | Engender (GB) |
| 23 | Sweden | Sveriges Kvinnolobby |
| 24 | Czech Republic | Union of Midwives (UNIPA) and Gender Studies (two respondents) |
| 27 | Austria | Österreichisher Frauenring |



What is the Green women?

www.gronakvinnor.se

Green women is a unique Swedish, politically independent and nonreligious feminist women's organization focusing on equality and environmental issues.

What is the Swedish Women Lobby (SWL)?

www.sverigeskvinnolobby.se

SWL is a politically independent umbrella organisation for women's movement in Sweden. It aims to bring together a diverse range of women's organisations and to promote women's democratic rights and equal opportunities.

SWL has 36 member organisations.

What is the European Women's Lobby (EWL)?

www.womenlobby.org

EWL is the largest umbrella organisation of women's associations in the European Union (EU).

It aims at promoting women's rights and equality between women and men in the EU. EWL acts as a link between political decision-makers and women's associations. There are approximately 2000 member organisations directly represented by EWL.

The questions were prepared by

Ewa Larsson, Chair of Green Women,

and Eva Fager, Chair of Swedish Women's Lobby.

Moa Larsson Sundgren communicated the questions and processed the answers.

Ann-Sofi Matthiesen presented the statistics, and Oskar Söderlind, translation.

Anita Sand made the graphic design.

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