

**The Global Forum entitled “Getting Back on Track - United for Gender Equality”
was held by the United 4 Istanbul Convention Campaign**

United 4 Istanbul Convention Campaign organized a global forum entitled “Getting back on track-United for Gender Equality” on the 7th of December, 2021 about the strategies to tackle anti-gender, anti-rights attacks through intersectional and transnational solidarity with participants from the Global North and South.



Kaldığımız Yerden Devam
Toplumsal Cinsiyet Eşitliği
İçin Birlikte
Tarih / Date:
7 Aralık, 16:00 – 19:00 İstanbul
December 7, 14:00 – 17:00 pm CET
Açılış Konuşması / Opening Speech:
Andrea Petö,
Toplumsal Cinsiyet Çalışmaları Bölümü, Orta Avrupa
Universitesi / Department of Gender Studies at Central
European University
Etkinliğe katılmak için formu doldurmayı unutmayınız. / Please fill the registration form.

Getting Back on Track
United for Gender
Equality

UNITED for
İSTANBUL
CONVENTION

The Forum, was moderated and opened up by Şehnaz Kıymaz Bahceci who gave the welcoming speech. After Şehnaz, Biljana Ginova shared their opening remarks and described the aim, activities and perspective of the Campaign. In their brief remarks, Biljana mentioned that the United for Istanbul Convention has been kicked off by more than 20 organizations working in Turkey, Europe and at the global scale who gathered first to condemn and advocate for the reversal of Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention but also more importantly, to highlight the importance of the Istanbul Convention as well as its importance for the prevention of gender-based violence. Biljana pointed out that the inclusive and participatory discussions led by feminists and LGBTQI+ activists within the Campaign group made it clear that there is a global threat to gender equality and the withdrawal of Turkey from the Convention may have effects both in Europe but also in a global context. Lastly, Biljana briefly summarized the events held by the United for the Istanbul Convention Campaign so far, and gave a special attention to the online global march in which approximately 2,000 individuals and organizations joined with their own personal messages from all over the world. Biljana concluded by emphasizing that the campaign consists of 23 organizations now, but she hopes that this will grow not only in numbers but also in solidarity.

After Biljana, Andrea Petö, the first keynote speaker of the Forum, started her speech by emphasizing that the attacks towards the Istanbul Convention is transnational, thus the response should be transnational as well. Professor Petö's keynote was as follows:

“The Istanbul Convention (IC) has a serious transformative potential. There are lots of academic discussions about the text. The discussion about the Convention is around six points: how the IC was drafted, what are the concepts used, is criminal law is a

response, what is the relationship of the national criminal law to international criminal law, is it protecting the victims or not (it is also connected to the issues of migration and connection to asylum seekers), the connection of the national level and the transnational level and the ratification.

There are previous explanatory frameworks for discussing the kind of attack that we are facing. Is it a backlash? Can we go back to good old times? This is a problematic point because there have never been good old times. Is it authoritarianism we are facing? This concept is very much used with the inter war years. Is it a mafia state? Is it illiberal constitutionalism? With my colleague Weronica Grezebalska we use the concept of the “polypore state”. The reason why we came up with this biologizing metaphor is that it helps us how the states are operating. If you understand how the state operates, then it is easier to fight against it and to create strategies. These illiberal polypore states are working with parallel institutions, security narratives and familism. They are creating parallel institutions, parallel research institutes, parallel universities, parallel NGOs and parallel human rights declarations and documents. There are several government level discussions among the illiberal states to replace the existing intergovernmental human rights documents to create another one. It is working with security narratives, so everything is becoming a threat: the threat of migrants, the threat of gender studies scholars, the threat of LGBTQI+ activists... The other point about the polypore state is about familism, this is a very new form of politics related to the concept of family and this is a new framework instead of focusing on individuals, focusing on collectivity, an imagined collectivity.

The last years also showed what I already defined as reactive reaction. Human rights defenders and NGOs are reacting to what is happening, instead of being proactive. Reaction to the reaction is extremely tiring and time consuming. And that's why if you talk to colleagues, everybody says they are exhausted and totally tired. This kind of constant reaction is sucking the energy from the activists. Also, so far we failed the track transnational policy transfers to control the humanities/social sciences and the other aspects of knowledge production and that's why let me welcome this fantastic meeting. It's a way of exchanging ideas. Because you know that in Brazil one of the anti-gender forces are putting up on Facebook a certain picture you can be sure that it will show up in Estonia, in Portugal in less than a week. Let's think about this polypore. That is my main message for today: our fight which is actually major for the liberal rights for the liberal world order, for the future and not for the past, requires new strategies, moving beyond the national framework, moving beyond the kind of donor dependency of the different NGOs which is very much a curse than a blessing and creating a new language which is talking to a majority of the constituencies.”

Following Andrea Petö’s keynote speech, the Forum kept on with the second keynote speech delivered by Iris Luarasi, the president of the GREVIO Committee. What Iris Luarasi emphasized in her video message may be summarized as follows:

The Istanbul Convention is widely recognized, the most far-reaching legal instrument setting out binding obligations to prevent violence against women and domestic violence. 34 of 47 of the Council of Europe member states have already signed the Convention. Last month the Parliament of Moldova passed the bill of ratification of the Convention. Kazakhstan and Tunisia have been invited by the Committee of Ministers. And many countries are working toward ratification.

At the moment we are speaking there is a conversation about the Istanbul Convention, and this is not happening just because some societies are more conservative. This might be a contributing factor but that's not the reason why it is happening. Certain groups of transnational actors who are working against women's rights, the ones who have fueled the problems with the Convention and the series of lies and misinformation through a series of tools and actors. We have learned from different researches done by international institutions that strategies have been deployed in the form of legal briefs, social media campaigns are being used, fake news organizations have being created. Now after several publications and researches we have a clear picture on the context. Transnational actors and strategies of increased anti-gender activism across Europe that created the backlash of the Istanbul Convention. We are now informed of the huge amount of money that is working to defeat the Convention. There is a change of vocabulary in several countries by developing new narratives. This regrettable step serves as a strong reminder that we need to double up efforts to share the knowledge about the added value of this important treaty and to ensure that women live a life free from violence.

After the keynote speeches, the Forum continued with interventions of activists from different international organizations to share their activism and experience. The first intervention was from Anissa Daboussi from AWID. Anissa started with a brief introduction about the work the AWID does and the global context. Anissa recalled that rights related to gender and sexuality are profoundly threatened by consolidation of nationalism of diverse evolving forms of fundamentalism and gender and sexuality are a central preoccupation for anti-gender ideologies and patriarchy. Then, Anissa presented their latest report "Rights at Risk" on anti-rights trends, actors and strategies, which they prepared in collaboration with the Observatory of Universality of Rights. As to the report, Anissa said, anti-rights actors include not only individuals but also institutions which are affiliated with fundamentalism, nationalism and transnationalism, white supremacy, and ultraconservative and other ultra-oppressive movements. These are transnational web of alliances and organizing campaigns to delegitimize multilateralism and UN institutions. They are engaging within the multilateral human rights system to undermine them through various tactics like the form of trainings or infiltration of UN NGO committees. One of the discourses that is very prominent and that is used cross regions, cross countries at the national, regional and international levels is gender theory. Another one is cultural imperialism which says human rights are an ideological colonization and cultural imperialism. And third one is the protection of familism and instrumentalization of family in an opposition to protect the institution of the family versus protection of the family members. Daboussi

concluded by saying that what we are calling for the stages are feminist alliance and solidarity to face and to fight back.



The second intervention was from İrem Tuncer Ebetürk and Jelena Cupac, who shared their research on how anti-gender actors do interfere with the UN's processes. Jelena and İrem mentioned that they tried to theorize what kind of mechanism underlines the process of socialization of anti-gender groups and they came up with the concept of “competitive mimicry”, mimicking everything that feminist NGOs had done successfully within the UN so far. Jelena and İrem also mentioned that what they observed is polarized politics, which basically means aligning differences and discourse like “us versus them” which the opponents perceive each other as existential threats. Another approach Jelena and İrem observed is strong moralizing discourse. It's not about policies anymore but it really feels like this battle is between good and evil and both feminists and anti-feminist actors are conceptualizing others as illegitimate and evil forces. Jelena and İrem concluded by asking how to react to polarized politics and they warned that once feminists reciprocate these kinds of politics, they are not making the rules of the game, but the anti-feminist actors are setting up the rules of the game and then feminists are just involved in their game.

The third intervention was from Irena Cvetkovic from Coalition Margins from North Macedonia. Irena noted the importance of bringing topics of politics such as poverty, power relations, corruption, pollution or climate change, closer as much as possible to gender and sexuality. As to Irena, not only individuals or certain NGOs but rather our worldviews, our ideologies and our political agendas are under attack. Irena also emphasized that anti-gender movements benefit from moral panic, social polarization and division through fake news they created and suggested activists to create positive and supportive arguments on gender equality, sexual freedom and reproductive health rights to tackle social polarization.

The next intervention was from Hubert Sobeski, from the Love Doesn't Exclude Association in Poland. Hubert stated that Poland's right-wing coalition adopts a copy-paste strategy from Orbán's anti-gender policies. Hubert noted that anti-gender groups try to create an illusion, like they are ordinary people and their policies were all made for ordinary people. However, Hubert added, when we look at the way they work and the way they take action, it's possible to express them as social engineering which acted in very similar ways not only at the national level but also at the international level.

After Hubert, Ceren Akkaya from Mor Çatı Women's Shelter Foundation took the floor. Ceren talked about what has happened since the Turkish President has withdrawn from the Istanbul Convention. Ceren mentioned that in June, Mor Çatı was invited to the parliamentary committee which was newly established to investigate the reasons of violence against women. She noted that their contribution at the meeting was interrupted by AKP's parliaments when they underlined that the Government does not need to investigate the reasons of violence against women but instead, does need to implement the Istanbul Convention which is the main roadmap on preventing gender-based violence. In her speech, Ceren also mentioned about the latest action plan on violence against women which Turkey announced on 1st July, the date which Turkey officially was withdrawn from the Istanbul Convention. She pointed out that the action plan does not use the concept of gender equality, unlike the previous action plan in which the concept of gender equality was used 30 times. She concluded with sharing her belief on strong feminist movement and feminist solidarity in Turkey to keep fighting to protect women's rights.

The next intervention was from Andrea Rivas from AFDA, the Asociacion Familias Diversas de Argentina. Andrea shared the positive achievements that took place in Argentina during the pandemic such as the enactment of social inclusion laws in employment with trans and nonbinary quotas and the establishment of the ministry of women, gender and diversity as well as the importance of economic autonomy against a possible far-right government. Andrea also emphasized having an intersectional agenda on anti-corruption and LGBTQI+ rights, creating new alliances, and economic empowerment of the movement in terms of feminist funding are the other crucial issues they try to deal with in Argentina.

After Andrea, Umut Güven from KAOS GL, began to speak. Umut said that the most challenging issue for the LGBTQI+ movement in Turkey was the official statement made by the Presidency of Turkey alleging the Istanbul Convention was "misused" by LGBTQI+ people. Umut shared their regrets by saying that NGOs working in the field of human rights did not show a proper reaction to this statement. In their speech, Umut also noted that the concept of "well-being" is essential for right defenders especially for these days when the civic space is shrinking day by day. Umut emphasized that the well-being of right defenders is often ignored however it is crucial in fact, not only for creating the power to tackle with threats to our daily lives but also our political movement, in order to make it sustainable.



The next intervention was from Arzu Kepez and İlknur Akbaba from the Katre Women's Organization, a local women's rights organisation in Erzincan, Turkey. In their speeches, Arzu and İlknur shared their experiences on how their lives have been affected since the discussions on the Istanbul Convention have arisen. Arzu and İlknur said that local public institutions do not use the terms "gender" and "gender equality" in any of their official works including their in-house trainings. As to Arzu and İlknur, women in Erzincan believe that learning the laws or their rights does not mean much to them because they think that the state does not protect women especially after the withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention. Arzu and İlknur also said that to oppress women and LGBTQI+s was the main motivation of the government behind the withdrawal decision, because implementation of the Istanbul Convention and empowerment of women were posing a real threat to AKP's oppressive politics, especially in small cities.

The last intervention was from Damjan Denkovski from Center for Feminist Foreign Policy. Damjan shared the research they made on how the anti-gender movement functions. Damjan noted that we can better mobilize our power as long as we focus on local dynamics and develop appropriate responses for these varying dynamics as much as possible. Damjan emphasized that the need to stop working just within small circles and stressed the importance of working alongside alliances and building grand coalitions to counter anti-gender narratives, because anti-gender movement uses the fragmentations among right-based movements.

In the second part of the event, participants shared more tactics to resist the authoritarian regimes and the anti-gender groups they are in collaboration with. While one participant shared their experience on a local campaign they organized for Afghan women, the other emphasized the importance of investing money and feminist core fundings for the sustainability of the struggle. Some participants stressed that it is not enough to give people rational sources to refuse anti-gender discourses, fake news and disinformation, but instead, people's emotions

should be addressed through other communication ways such as story-telling or presenting cases from real life. As agreed by the rest of the participants, one participant emphasized that the governments and politicians come and go, but the people stay, thus we should never lose hope to fight against oppressive governments.

The main points and suggestions pointed out during the Forum can be summarized as follows:

- It is not a “backlash” which assumes that we had been in good old times that we faced. It is instead a new state, which can be called “polypore state” which is working with parallel institutions, security narratives and familism. They are creating parallel institutions and NGOs to replace the existing intergovernmental human rights documents to create another one, working with security narratives which approaches migrants, gender scholars and LGBTQI+s as a threat, and is focusing family and collectivity instead of focusing individuals. In order to fight against the anti-gender strategies that we faced today globally, first, we have to understand how these states operates.
- As human rights defenders and NGOs, we have to be proactive, instead of being reactive to what is happening, because it is extremely tiring and time consuming for us.
- We have to be careful to track transnational policy transfers to control the aspects of knowledge production used by anti-gender groups, because they are mimicking each other like a polypore.
- Our struggle is for the future and not for the past, thus, it requires new strategies, moving beyond the national framework, moving beyond the kind of donor dependency.
- We have to keep in mind that Istanbul Convention is objected in some countries because they are more conservative than others. It is a systematic effort made by certain groups of transnational actors which have huge amount of money.
- Anti-rights actors include not only individuals but also institutions which are affiliated with fundamentalism, nationalism, white supremacy, and ultraconservative and other ultra-oppressive movements.
- We have to avoid to reciprocate polarized politics and discourses that anti-gender groups use, because once we reciprocate polarization we lose our play-maker position and the anti-gender actors set up the rules of the game.
- An intersectional perspective which brings topics of politics such as poverty, power relations, corruption, pollution or climate change, closer as much as possible to gender and sexuality is significant, because our worldviews, ideologies, and political agendas are under attack as a whole.
- Anti-gender groups try to be deemed like ordinary people and their policies were all made for ordinary people, however, they are nothing more than a social engineering.
- Having an intersectional agenda on anti-corruption and LGBTQI+ rights, creating new alliances, and economic empowerment of the movement in terms of feminist funding are crucial. Also, we should not ignore well-being of right defenders to make our struggle sustainable.

- We need to stop working within small circles and alliances; instead, we need to build grand coalitions to counter anti-gender narratives, because anti-gender movement uses the fragmentations among right-based movements. Also, it is always significantly valuable to look and learn from the local struggles.
- It might be a good strategy to address the people's emotions through for example storytelling or presenting cases from real life.
- Last but definitely not least, the governments and politicians come and go, but the people stay, thus we should never lose hope to fight against oppressive governments.

The organizers of the Forum concluded by noting that they hope the Forum and next activities of the United 4 Istanbul Convention campaign will foster a global dialogue on anti-gender and anti-rights attacks among feminists, LGBTQI+ activists and human rights defenders all around the world, and they called activists across movements to unite their efforts to struggle against all inequalities.