ZONTA INTERNATIONAL

BUILD A BETTER WORLD FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS

2024 – 2026 ZI Council of Europe Committee

November 2025

The Anti-Gender Movement : Going backwards in women's rights.

-What Zontians should know-

Introduction

Equality policy, women's rights, and democratic culture are coming under increasing pressure—worldwide. For decades, feminist scholars and advocates around the world have articulated important concepts related to "gender" to understand and challenge oppression and discrimination against women and girls. Those concepts have now become the target of anti-rights actors who claim that oppressive patriarchal gender roles are "common sense".

Anti-feminist movements, right-wing extremist parties, and authoritarian forces are defaming equality initiatives, rejecting gender studies, and spreading reactionary role models. Anti-feminism, sexism, and other misanthropic ideologies are no longer a marginal phenomenon, but part of public debate. They threaten social cohesion and are directed in particular against the rights of women and marginalized groups.

As women's rights advocates we in Zonta have to understand the motives and objectives of the anti-gender movement and their actors involved to counteract conspiracy narratives and threatening scenarios, that endanger the hard-won rights for women.

Anti-feminism is encountered in our everyday life, at the kitchen table, in schools, at the workplace, in social media. This manual aims to provide support for those who are committed to equality and want to be prepared in responding to situations that we experience every day.

The first chapter outlines the history and development of women's rights, the second chapter comes up with basic information and implications of the anti-gender movement, the third chapter will provide concrete support how to counteract five anti-feministic statements repeatedly brought forward by people of the anti-gender environment. In the fourth chapter the ZI Council of Europe Committee would like to encourage Zontians to get familiar with the anti-gender movement by considering activities how to best oppose it.

Part 1: Feminism – A longtime Human Rights Movement

Historically, feminists constantly advocated for women's rights as a human right. The path of feminism started in the mid-19th century with single voices and is today a global movement. This period is usually distinguished by 4 waves:

- The **First Wave (mid-19th century to 1920)** focused on legal issues and inequalities. The most popular movement was the "Suffrage Movement", fighting for women's right to vote in elections. In Europe, it took 4 centuries till the voting rights for women were admitted and in place. In the early 20th century, women were first allowed to go to university, and an increasing number of women began to work in factories and offices.
- The **Second Wave (1960s to early 1980s)** addressed issues of equality and discrimination, including workplace rights, reproductive rights, and sexuality (e.g. violence in the family). This movement played an important role in the drafting of international documents. One of the most important achievement in this feminism period was in
  1979 The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women – CEDAW.
- The **Third Wave (mid-1990s to 2010s)** emphasized individualism and diversity, challenging the definitions of femininity and advocating for a broader range of women's experiences. Activities were a reaction to the backlashes, promoted by conservative media and politicians, announcing the end of feminism. This wave is characterized by an increased awareness of overlapping categories, such as race, class, gender, sexual orientation (intersectionality). Numerous non-governmental organizations (NGO's) were established, focusing on specific feminists issues. Two important documents were formulated:
  1995 The UN Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action at the forth global Conference on Women.
  2005 The Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings.
- The **Fourth Wave (2010s to present)** is characterized by the use of digital technology and social media. On the one side, they are utilized to spread harassment, hate speeches and other forms of sexism. On the other side however, feminists are applying digital tools for combating sexism and inequality, often associated with movements like #MeToo.
  In 2011 The Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, known as the "Istanbul Convention", was put in place.

Each wave had focus topics, engaging more and more women to achieve gender equality. Legally, wives are in some countries independent from husband, have the right to vote and have access to education. Still, no country has achieved de facto gender equality yet. In contrary, there is an accelerating wave of backlashes on women's rights undermining the successes of the four previous waves - the Anti-Gender Movement.

Part 2: Basic information and implications of the Anti-Gender Movement

In the past 10 years, the anti-gender movement has strengthened and widened its activities. It is now a global phenomenon opposing 'gender ideology', although the ultimate goal is 'all of us' (at least women's rights and their defenders), gender equality, gender studies, LGBTQI+ rights etc. This movement is well organized and very well financed, not a loose conglomeration here and there. In 2019-2023 the total financing was at least 700M dollars. It has its strongholds in many different sources, both extreme right and left ideologies and also in fundamentalist religious values and groupings. Racism and misogyny cannot be overlooked in this context as possible sources.

A serious implication of the movement has been that international conventions on girls' and women's rights, like the Istanbul Convention, have lost some former Parties and it seems that such conventions would not be possible to be concluded today. Also the progress of the Beijing Declaration has been slow and its target has not come true even after 30 years. Instead, 'traditional family values' and patriarchal opinions are referred to, which may antagonize the roles of men and women in the society in an unhoped way. Thus, anti-feminism can be a result of the anti-gender movement and toxic masculinity attitudes. This is already seen in hate speech and targeted online harassment, in the debates, actions and opposition concerning girls' and women's rights to education and for example to reproductive rights and sexual education.

Many countries have not invested enough institutional resources for gender equality although gender mainstreaming may be embedded in their policies and programs.

In the long run, this will limit or prevent women's participation in politics and society and thus, will have a negative or lopsided effect in societal structures. This will have a serious impact on the freedom of speech and democracy. In some countries there have been closings of the networks which is never in line with human rights. Examples are also the SLAPP cases (Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation) - lawsuits to silence critics, often women, journalists and activists. One of the countermeasures has been made by the Council of Europe which adopted 2024 the recommendation to cover criminal and administrative matters and contains a set of indicators to help identifying a SLAPP.

Part 3: A clear stance for gender equality – practical arguments against anti-feminist narratives

“Gender ideology” narratives are increasingly present in public discourse and policy-making spaces, posing a significant threat to human rights. Everywhere these narratives rely on provoking uncertainty and fear and are often combined with misinformation and sensationalism, their goal is to undermine the advancement of women’s rights and gender equality.

Active feminists in defending gender equality are often confronted with situations like those and are then under pressure to react spontaneously.

The following five examples of anti-feminist narratives and sexism, we are confronted with time and again, require a response. This small training session should help Zonta members how to counter negative narratives on gender equality, to oppose sexism and anti-feminism with valid and concrete arguments, to not become “speechless” by defending women’s rights.

FIVE ANTI-FEMINIST NARRATIVES AND WHAT WE CAN DO ABOUT THEM

1. “FEMINSM DESTROYS THE FAMILY!”
2. “SINCE I HAVE RETURNED TO MY CONSERVATIVE ROLE AS A MOTHER AND HOUSEWIFE, I FEEL BETTER” (TradWife)
3. “ANY WOMAN CAN DO ANYTHING IF SHE WANTS TO." (SO WOMEN JUST DON'T WANT TO?)
4. “WOMEN ALREADY HAVE EQUAL RIGHTS, NOW THEY JUST WANT MORE!"
5. “FEMINISM IS MISANDROUS”!

Ad 1: “FEMINSM DESTROYS THE FAMILY!”

The central message: Feminism threatens traditional values, softens gender roles, and undermines the traditionally perceived family of father, mother, and child(ren).

Positive counterarguments: Feminism strengthens families by creating fair conditions, such as a better work-life balance, economic independence for women (especially in the event of separation or divorce), and a fair distribution of care work. It also enables children in diverse family models to grow up with equal rights.

What kind of narrative is this, and where does it come from? The idea that women should be professionally independent, men should be actively involved in the family, and diverse family structures should be recognized as equal is portrayed as an attack on the “natural order.”

Possible conversation starters: When someone says, “Feminism is destroying the family,” questions that encourage reflection can help: “What exactly do you mean—what does family mean to you?” "Do you really think women have a natural talent for housework and children? And would it be fair to automatically leave all the housework and caregiving to them because of that?“ ”What if families are strongest when they function on an equal footing?"

Ad 2: “SINCE I HAVE RETURNED TO MY CONSERVATIVE ROLE AS A MOTHER AND HOUSEWIFE, I FEEL BETTER”

The central message: The TradWife narrative (short for traditional wife) romanticizes a traditional role model and ignores the structural constraints that often push women into this position. It is a widespread myth in which freedom of choice is confused with conformity to conservative norms.

Positive counterargument: Equality policy and feminism demand freedom of choice for all women and disadvantaged persons. Many women suffer from the social and economic pressure

of having to juggle care work and career without sufficient structures such as daycare places or all-day schools. A more equitable distribution of care work and political measures such as flexible working hours or better part-time jobs relieve the burden on everyone involved, including men.

What kind of narrative is this, and where does it come from? The TradWife narrative is romanticized primarily on social media. Women present themselves as “happy housewives” who focus entirely on housework, marriage, and children, supposedly of their own free will. This narrative conveys the image that traditional gender roles are the key to a happier life and is aimed primarily at young women. Originally from the US, but now also used in European countries, e.g., in ultra-conservative circles, social media bubbles, or misogynistic online forums.

Possible conversation starters: „Do you feel free in your decision, or what factors led you to conform?” ”What would your everyday life look like if childcare, work, and partnership were divided more fairly?"

Ad 3: “ANY WOMAN CAN DO ANYTHING IF SHE WANTS TO." (SO WOMEN JUST DON'T WANT TO?)

The central message: Commitment, self-confidence, and courage are important resources, women can achieve their goals through hard work.

Positive counterargument: Economic equality does not depend on individual decisions, but on systemic changes, such as fair wages, better working conditions, and combating discrimination. Commitment, self-confidence, and courage are important resources, but they are not enough when women have to fight against structural discrimination.

What kind of narrative is this, and where does it come from? At first glance, this narrative sounds motivating, as it suggests that all women can achieve their goals through hard work, courage, or the right attitude. But that is precisely the problem: it shifts the responsibility for inequality solely onto women and completely ignores structural barriers.

Possible conversation starters: “If it's just a matter of will, why are women so often paid less even though they are better qualified?”

Ad 4: “WOMEN ALREADY HAVE EQUAL RIGHTS, NOW THEY JUST WANT MORE!"

Central message: “Women already have equal rights” is a classic example of the formal equality discourse that confuses equality on paper with actual equality in everyday life. This narrative ignores structural disadvantages and confuses equality with privilege.

Positive counterargument: Equality policy does not demand “extra rights,” but rather promotes equal opportunities and equal participation. Equality is not a zero-sum game—everyone wins! Laws are important, but they do not work automatically. Structural discrimination (in the workplace, in the family, in the pension system) is still a reality. The only thing that helps here is an active equality policy. What would help in concrete terms? E.g. Expand the law on pay

transparency and make it mandatory. Upgrade professional care occupations. Expand full-day childcare paternity leave. Parity laws for parliaments and political bodies. Support programs for women in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) and leadership positions. Feminism does not mean "more rights for women," but rather equal opportunities for all.

What kind of narrative is this, and where does it come from? It emerged particularly strongly in the 1980s and 1990s, when legal equality was advancing while social power relations remained unchanged. Today, it is often used to portray feminist demands as excessive or unnecessary. The aim is often to delegitimize feminist movements and defend the status quo. It plays on the fear that men might lose something if women gain more. At the same time, it has a depoliticizing effect: if equality has supposedly long been achieved, there is no longer any need for gender politics.

Possible conversation starters: One idea is to address what concrete changes could result from greater equality: "Where would you like to see more financial independence?" "Do you experience a more equitable and just division of family and paid work?" "What would better retirement provisions look like?" "Where could there be more visibility and participation in politics and society?" "Would you also like to see less burden from unpaid care work?" We live in a democracy in which the participation of all is central. Equality policy aims for equal access to resources, power, and time—not special rights.

Ad. 5: "FEMINISM IS MISANDROUS"!

The central message: The narrative that "feminism is hostile to men" is based on the misconception that equality automatically means discrimination against men. This is zero-sum thinking, which assumes that if women gain more, men lose something.

Positive counterargument: Feminism is not directed against men, but against unfair structures that also burden men, e.g., exaggerated norms of masculinity or the expectation of being the sole breadwinner. Feminism offers all genders more freedom and calls for a partnership-based coexistence that breaks down role stereotypes. For men, feminism means: more freedom to show emotions, less pressure to perform and fewer role constraints, healthier relationships, more time for family and self-care, the opportunity to actively reshape roles.

What kind of narrative is this, and where does it come from? This narrative originated in part as a reaction to the second women's movement of the 1970s, but was particularly reinforced by social media and anti-feminist movements in the 2000s. So-called men's rights movements and populist actors also use this framing deliberately to discredit feminist demands and defend the status quo. The statement deliberately distorts the fact that anti-feminist positions in particular work with enemy stereotypes: anyone who does not fit into a patriarchal worldview is declared an opponent and a threat**.** The aim of the narrative is to cast feminism in a bad light, create polarization, and prevent constructive dialogue**.**

Possible conversation starters: What expectations are placed on "real men"? "Is caring also masculine?" "In your opinion, what do men lose through equality?" "How can men be part of the

solution?" Feminism is directed against structural inequalities—not against individuals or genders. It is not about fighting men, but about questioning a system that confines all people to rigid gender roles.

Part 4: What can Zontians do?

Women's and girls' rights are important cornerstones of the Zonta International. The Council of Europe Committee has intensely followed the positive development of these issues, but also the backlashes that have been targeted to them during the past decade. Therefore we feel it necessary to pay attention to these phenomena and suggest possible activities to Clubs. We Zontians should be aware of these negative developments and ready to counteract them with positive narratives and actions.

So what can we do? Here are some suggestions:

- To be informed of the most important documents and laws on women's rights in force in your own country and areas, as well as on how they are practiced.
- To participate in the debate on these issues and keep up women's issues, and cooperate with other women's organizations.
- To inform and mentor girls and boys on gender equality and to explain why the extreme fundamentalist role models are not the best solution (like Sugar Daddy and Tradwives phenomena).
- To meet local decision-makers and politicians and keep up issues of equality and its enforcement even on local level.
- To explore how the AI will impact the equality and women's possibilities to participate in societal discourse and politics (inform yourselves on what are for ex. deepfake and nudity apps). Be aware of the digital human rights, the moderation of the social media and the SLAPP cases in your countries.
- To realize what limiting free speech and academic freedom to study and explore in universities etc, and militarized speech change our societies.

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