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Gender deniers, feminist foreign policy and the myth of strongmen

Friends of Europe's Shada Islam on the need to fight back against the erosion of women's rights in Europe and beyond

How they like to swagger and strut, the so-called 'strongmen' who hold the reins of power in too many countries across the world.

The list is long: from Russia's bare-chested Vladimir Putin to Israel's scandal-ridden Benjamin Netanyahu, or even Hungary's conspiracy theorist Viktor Orbán. Not to mention US President Donald Trump, who is in a league of his own. There are many others, in Europe, Asia, Africa, the Middle East and America. Their outreach is impressive, their egos big and their characters flawed.

But now, finally, powerful women from across the world are saying enough is enough. Enough macho policies, enough pushbacks against women's rights, enough 'gender deniers'. In an open letter released last week, more than 30 female world leaders, including current and former heads of state, have called for a fightback against the erosion of women's rights, including what some have labelled 'a macho-type strongman'.

Women such as Helen Clark, the former Prime Minister of New Zealand, Irina Bokova, the Bulgarian politician and former UNESCO director and Susana Malcorra, former Argentinian Foreign Minister, all warn of a pushback on gender equality and gender empowerment by populist leaders across the world.

'We have to be prepared to raise our concerns...we need to be very prepared to fight back,' say the signatories. The rise of populism and decline of multilateralism mean that hard-won gains in women's rights are being eroded.

They are right. And their warning is well-timed, coming as it does just before elections to the European Parliament and as governments get ready to select members of the new European Commission and a new

head of the European Council.

If they really mean what they say – and if Europe is to maintain a modicum of leadership on the issue – European politicians must put forward more women on the electoral lists and send more women as European Commissioners and members other EU institutions. It's time for a woman to lead at least one of the top EU institutions.

The EU must put women's rights at the centre of its foreign and security policy, development aid, neighbourhood policy, trade, climate and connectivity.

It's also time that the focus was on ALL women, irrespective of their race, colour, religion or sexual orientation. Instead of making vague promises about putting women centre stage, politicians should be obliged to commit themselves to specific, quantifiable targets and benchmarks.

It also means steering clear of nebulous concepts like 'feminist foreign policy'. Certainly, women need to have a stronger voice in international relations and should put their stamp on all kinds of global conversations. But the label is misleading. Feminist foreign policy is in fact what the EU – in theory – stands for: cooperation, multilateralism, building networks and partnerships.

It's about ethics and respect. Talking to dictators and despots if needed but not, as appears to have been the case at the EU's Sharm el Sheikh summit with the League of Arab States, speaking so softly on human rights that no one actually hears the EU comments.

Instead of getting stuck on labels, let's focus on the content. Jacinda Ardern, New Zealand's Prime Minister, with her emphasis on the well-being economy is proof that not all people want macho men to lead.

Let's shine the light on the brave women and men who are fighting for gender equality and female empowerment

There is no room for complacency, however. 'Gender deniers' no longer lurk in the corners, they are in the spotlight. The push-back against women is serious. Take your foot off the pedal – even for a minute – and there's a danger of slippage, of the return to old mindsets and of suffocatingly restrictive traditions.

So, on International Women's Day on 8 March, let's shine the light on the brave women and men who are fighting for gender equality and female empowerment. Their combat is about changes in laws, traditions

and mindsets which still stand in the way of women's right to education, health, jobs, political representation, economic empowerment and more. Thanks to their struggle, women's rights are on the agenda of even the most conservative societies.

And as they arrest, confine and detain the protesters who call for equality and freedom, the so-called 'strongmen' are, in fact, running very scared.

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