

Feminist Movements in Europe: A Democratic Force Against the Backlash

Based on the FIERCE Research (2010-2023)



Introduction

Between 2010 and 2023, Europe saw **an intensification of feminist mobilisations** while at the same time social inequalities continued to rise. The feminist movements, far from being homogeneous, share a common desire to **reaffirm equality as a democratic foundation**, by articulating intersectional demands, innovative practices and a systemic critique of power structures. The **FIERCE** (Feminist Movements Revitalizing Democracy in Europe) project has carried out in-depth research in eight European countries (see Figure 1) to understand how feminist movements are organised, what strategies they deploy and how they influence democracy.

Methodology

As part of this research, we used an **interdisciplinary and comparative approach**, combining interviews, campaign analysis and discourse mapping. This methodology enabled us to analyse the **transnational dynamics** as well as the **local specificities** of feminist mobilisations. A total of 240 interviews were conducted (163 with feminist activists and 69 with politicians who support feminist initiatives).

Feminist mobilisation in Europe: Interconnected struggles against structural domination

Across the eight countries, feminist movements are converging on the structural nature of gender-based oppression. From gender-based violence (GBV) to reproductive justice, from LGBTQIA+ rights to economic inequality, these movements are defending rights, autonomy and dignity - not as isolated but as intertwined issues, in a broader struggle against patriarchy, neoliberalism and authoritarian drift. The main issues dealt with are:

Combating gender-based violence

Sexual and domestic violence has remained at the heart of feminist mobilisations in recent years. In Spain, Italy, Slovenia, France, Turkey, and Poland, activists explicitly present gender-based violence as a symptom of patriarchal structures, deeply



Figure 1

rooted in law, culture and institutions. Feminist movements have contributed to major legal reforms (such as the ratification of the Istanbul Convention or the adoption of consent-based laws to redefine rape and sexual violence) but the gaps between symbolic recognition and concrete protection persist.

Promoting reproductive justice and bodily autonomy

Sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR) are a recurring concern, in particular the right to abortion. Even when abortion is legal, there are many **informal obstacles**, including **conscientious objection**, **limited access**, **medical violence** and so on. In Poland, Slovenia, Turkey, Italy and Spain, feminist organisations have mobilised to fight attempts to restrict the right to abortion.

Defending the rights of LGBTQIA+ people

In almost all the cases studied, alliances between feminist and LGBTQIA+ collectives (when they are not linked within the same organisation) are aimed at equality and access to new rights by law (legal recognition of same sex couples and queer parenthood, rights to have a family) Some victories have been achieved. In Slovenia, for example, same-sex marriage was legalised in 2022, and in France access to all women to Medically assisted procreation was attained in 2021. Throughout the

case studies, alliances have also often focused on the legalisation and recognition of gender identity.

Combating economic inequality

Contemporary feminist movements are paying renewed attention to the **material conditions of existence**, arguing for **equal pay, recognition of care work**, the right to housing and economic security. In Turkey, activists target policies that reproduce poverty, while in Spain, precarious work conditions of migrant domestic workers have been a main focus. **Care work** was also at the centre of feminist strikes in France, Italy and Spain.

The intersectional approach, a new central framework and an area of conflict

Intersectionality is a fundamental framework for analysis, particularly in Spain, France, Turkey, Greece, Italy and Slovenia. Conceptualised by Kimberlé Crenshaw, this paradigm makes it possible to think about overlapping oppressions –sexism, racism, ableism, transphobia and classism. In Greece, activists are documenting the specific violence suffered by refugee and migrant women. But in some countries, this concept is the subject of strong antagonism. In France, the intersectional perspective has led to tensions between a new generation of activists and those loyal to traditional universalist approaches. In Denmark, the approach has earlier been marginal in mainstream feminist discourse but is increasingly becoming more prominent through cross-cutting alliances in civil society and innovative campaigns.

Organisational forms and adaptation dynamics

Structural diversity: between autonomy and institutionalisation

Feminist movements in Europe are characterised by great structural and organisational diversity. Movements fluctuate between **professionalisation (NGOs)** and the **maintenance of horizontal, autonomous and intersectional forms**. In Italy, Spain and Greece, feminist organisations generally maintain **grassroots, non-hierarchical structure** in order to preserve their autonomy from official political institutions. In other contexts, such as Denmark or France, feminist action has a more institutional dimension, with NGOs and CSOs wor-

king within established political frameworks, often engaging in advocacy, service provision or policy monitoring. Many organisations adopt a hybrid posture, combining autonomous activist practices and institutional dialogue.

Strategic adaptability to changing environments

Feminist movements in Europe have demonstrated a strong capacity to adapt, in response to uneven and changing political contexts. In countries where SRHR rights are legally recognised - such as France and Slovenia - they fight for their effective application. Conversely, in more repressive contexts - such as Poland or Turkey - they adopt more discreet strategies: informal networks, mutual aid, or protective practices.

This adaptability is not just defensive. It is based on a subtle link between urgency and prefiguration: responding rapidly to attacks (on abortion rights, LGBTQ+ rights, etc.) while building sustainable forms of organisation, such as training facilities, solidarity networks and legal resources.

Feminists also know how to mobilise on a transnational scale. Slogans such as Ni Una Menos and #MeToo are reappropriated locally (in Italy, Spain, Denmark and Slovenia), not as models, but as mobilisation resources adapted to national contexts. This circulation of ideas and practices enables them to think locally and globally, to build alliances across borders and to respond collectively to anti-gender offensives. Strong transnational solidarity is also demonstrated by the 2024 campaign My Voice, My Choice, initiated by a Slovenian feminist collective, which gathered over 1 million signatures in support of safeguarding abortion rights across Europe.

Feminist adaptability is anything but a retreat: it is a situated, inventive and collective political practice that enables these movements to endure, to act and to open futures.

Practices and repertoires of action: Between resistance and political invention

Feminist movements deploy a broad, rich and evolving repertoire of action, combining resistance to existing systems of domination with the invention of alternative political and social practices. They do not simply resist but propose transformative



FIERCE
Feminist movements revitalizing Democracy in Europe.

forms of narrative and repertoire of action. Street demonstrations remain a mainstay - whether against sexist violence in France, the restriction of SRHR in Poland. But they are only one mode of action. Movements are also investing in autonomous **training**: workshops, feminist schools, intersectional pedagogies. These spaces transmit knowledge, histories and tools of resistance outside institutional frameworks.

Other tools, although already in use, are central to feminist action, according to FIERCE research.

Artistic expression - performances, choreographies, theatrical actions - plays a central role in the construction of a feminist presence in the public space. The innovative use of performance was highlighted in many of the cases studied in Italy, Greece and Slovenia. These actions are not merely symbolic; they channel emotions, memory and collective identity into the public space, creating new forms of visibility and commitment.

Feminist activists are deploying a combined strategic use of digital and traditional media to raise awareness and extend the reach of action. Feminist activists are using social networks not only to raise awareness, but also to create alternative spaces for deliberation, solidarity and collective action across borders (in France, Slovenia, Turkey, Greece and Spain). In several cases, digital campaigns serve as a springboard for offline organising, enabling feminists to bypass the filters of traditional media and reach marginalised groups. At the same time, activists report an increase in online attacks, disinformation and surveillance, prompting them to develop new forms of digital security, content moderation strategies and collective defence mechanisms.

A striking dynamic runs through all the fields studied: the building of inter-struggle alliances. The feminist organisations studied show **real coherence and ideological consistency** in their fight for equality, social justice and democracy, and are building **cross-cutting alliances** with the anti-racist, trade-union, homosexual and migrant movements. In France, alliances have been forged between feminist, anti-racist, gay and trade union organisations, notably around opposition to austerity or discriminatory policies. In Poland, the defence of reproductive rights was closely linked to broader campaigns in favour of the rule of law and democratic freedoms. These coalitions, though sometimes fragile, reflect a shared political vision: feminist struggles are at the heart of contemporary democratic resistance. They do not add to other struggles - they link them.

Feminist movements also mobilise **affect, emotion and live experience as central resources for political action.** In the face of neutralising



conservative rhetoric or technocratic narratives, feminists are asserting that emotion is political - that it enables injustice to be named, institutional silences to be denounced and more humane and deep-rooted forms of resistance to be nurtured. Anger, frustration and fear are used by feminist actors to signal the urgency of threats - particularly in response to anti-gender narratives or institutional inaction. At the same time, emotions such as **caring, empathy and solidarity** are deployed to foster inclusive communities, support traumatised people and build lasting trust between organisation. In Greece, public mourning performances and tributes to the victims of femicide and the murder of LGBTQIA+ persons are becoming acts of resistance. Elsewhere, talking circles, support rituals and psychological care spaces are being created to sustain mobilisation over the long term. These “affective infrastructures” are fundamental to building resilient, intergenerational communities rooted in reciprocity.

Tensions with the institutions: Between symbolic openness and political lock-in

Despite the growing visibility of feminist demands in the public arena, the activists interviewed expressed a widely shared frustration at the difficulty of translating this recognition into lasting structural change. While the contexts vary, a common observation emerges: institutions oscillate between rhetorical openness and political lock-in.

Variable openness of political systems: between recognition and inaction

In most countries, feminist concerns such as gender-based violence, SRHR, or gender equality are officially recognised in political discourse. In countries with consolidated democratic mechanisms, feminist actors have participated in legislative processes, political consultations and public scrutiny. These commitments have contributed to concrete results, such as comprehensive laws on violence against women or greater recognition of LGBTQIA+ rights. However, the gap between rhetoric and action remains wide: the mechanism to implement the laws adopted are often underfunded, poorly implemented or fragile in the face of political upheaval. In France and Denmark, activists note that government actors often invoke “women's rights” as general principles, while avoiding engaging in structural criticism or intersectional perspectives. This form of symbolic politics generates fatigue and mistrust.

In more restricted civic spaces such as Turkey or Poland, the space for action is drastically reduced: **surveillance, criminalisation and public defamation** become tools of dissuasion. Access to institutions is limited, and feminist organisations are often forced into a defensive posture, limiting their ability to pursue proactive strategies and rights expansion. Still, activists in Turkey capitalize on the fragmented nature of governance between the central and the local and collaborate with municipalities run by opposition parties.

In many countries, interviewees pointed to the instrumentalisation of feminist discourse by anti-gender and far-right movements for strategic purposes - selectively invoking gender equality to signal progressivism while promoting anti-feminist positions or aiming to exclude other marginalised groups (e.g. racialised or transgender communities).

In the face of authoritarian regression, feminism as an essential democratic force

Feminist struggles go well beyond the sectoral or identity-based framework. In the eight countries studied, they have emerged as **a bulwark against de-democratisation**, linking the fight against violence, economic injustice, racism, homophobia and authoritarian excesses.

Through their actions, feminist movements are not content simply to resist. They **propose a different vision of politics**, based on solidarity, recognition of interdependence and radical democracy. They reach out to the margins, forge alliances and experiment with forms of collective action that are rooted in lived experience and open to the political imagination.

In a Europe faced with the rise of anti-gender rhetoric and the weakening of democratic institutions, **feminists play a central role**: as watchdogs, innovators and catalysts for democratic renewal. Their full recognition is **a necessary condition** for any policy of progress and justice.



FIERCE
Feminist movements revitalizing Democracy in Europe.

Our Recommendations

Political recommendations were elaborated by feminist collectives from throughout Europe in a collaborative research-action framework happening within the transnational feminist labs and network:

Monitoring and countering anti-gender movements

- Identify and map European funding that directly or indirectly benefits anti-gender actors. Put an end to this funding by ensuring that it complies with EU values.

- Publicly sanction hate speech and attacks on the rights of women, LGBTQIA+ people and human rights defenders.

- Strengthening digital safety: reporting procedures, rapid removal of sexist, homophobia, transphobic etc. content, media codes of conduct.

Strengthening feminist movements in Europe

- Ensure sustainable and structural core funding for feminist organisations, beyond one-off projects.

- Actively support transnational feminist networks: networking, alliances, political visibility in European institutions.

- Accurately monitor financial flows: introduce transparent monitoring of the actual funding allocated to women's and gender minorities' rights.

Protecting democracy in the face of digital attacks

- Regulate digital platforms to counter sexist and anti-feminist misinformation.

- Promoting algorithmic justice: auditing gender bias in technologies and guaranteeing the transparency of moderation criteria.