

European Parliament discusses the impact of religion on Women's Rights

Lea Perekrests for HRWF (03.03.2016) - On 17 February 2016, co-chairs of the European Parliament Platform for Secularism in Politics, MEPs Ms. Virginie Roziere and Ms. Sophie in't Veld, of the Group of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE), hosted a meeting titled "Feminism and Faith: Impact of religion on women's rights". Ms. Virginie Roziere, emphasized the importance of this meeting in the Parliament, stating that "After decades of progress, women's rights face a rising threat." The meeting provided a rich and diverse panel, comprised of:

- Ms. Daniela Bankier, head of Gender Equality, European Commission
- Dr. Niels Spierings, assistant professor in Sociology, Radboud University.
- Ms. Kristina Lunz, activist and founder of StopBildSexism, author #ausnahmslos
- Ms. Lorena Sosa, assistant professor, Netherlands Institute of Human Rights

Ms. Sophie in't Veld initiated the discussion by posing the provocative question, "Is religion always detrimental to women's rights?" The meeting touched on an array of ways in which religion and women's rights intersect within and outside of Europe. Some of the main topics discussed by the participants addressed the compatibility of feminism and Islam, feminism and the European court rooms and the objectivisation of women in European media.

This discussion comes at an important time, with the theme of women's rights and religion being covered extensively by the media after the Cologne, Germany, attacks on New Year's Eve, when more than one-hundred women were sexually abused, assaulted and raped. Responding to these attacks, many media platforms and individuals concluded that the attacks were conducted and inspired by Muslim immigrants. This argument has contributed to a theory that claims Islam is dangerous to women.

Dr. Spierings of Radboud University discussed the obstacles that challenge feminism and Islam in the Middle East and Europe, emphasizing that debates on this topic have been damaged by the assumption that only two mind-sets are present in regards to feminism and Islam: those who are secular and feminist and those who are Muslim and anti-feminist. While Spierings explained that the Middle East tends to resist equality of the sexes, he nonetheless remained hopeful that these ideals will only expand in future.

Kristina Lunz was a part of a group of feminists who, in reaction to the Cologne attacks and the anti-Muslim backlash after the event, created a campaign to show how sexual assault/harassment has always been a problem in Germany regardless of changing religious demographics in the country. Ms. Lunz's narrative contributed to the discussion that the protection of women's rights and safety is not a religious-based issue that arises only within Islam but is a societal problem that is, and has been, prevalent and thriving within the EU. Lunz attributes this marginalization of and violence towards women in Europe to their representation in media platforms.

Ms. Lorena Sosa carried this argument, raising awareness about how European courts hinder women's rights in regards to their religious freedom. Ms. Sosa presented three case studies in which women were deprived of their freedom of religious expression ultimately leading to them being denied the right to education and labour. Ms. Lorena Sosa stressed the importance to reflect on the EU practices in addition to religious practices, "Religion might not be good for women... [but] law is also not very good for women [either]."

In conclusion, the meeting fostered a diversity of voices and experiences, all of which unanimously called for the deconstruction of stigma around the idea that religion and

feminism are mutually exclusive. The meeting stressed that this is not just a phenomenon or issue in the Middle East, but also in the European public eye and institutions.