



IETM REPORT

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# LET'S ACT NOW: ON GENDER AS A POLITICAL ISSUE

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# *Let's act now: on gender as a political issue*

This session developed the conversation on gender started during the IETM Plenary Meeting in Valencia (November 2016), and it was designed to discuss gender equality and sexual identities and to define some concrete steps that IETM members and the network as a whole can take.

After an introduction by **Lian Bell (Ireland)** and **Israel Aloni (Sweden)**, the speakers presented their own experiences and provided hints for the discussion.

**Harpreet Kaur (UK)** reminded how culture, politics and power are intertwined. Identity is based on beliefs, class, values and nationhood and can be a political tool; however, if it is not freely formed, but rather imposed on us, there's no freedom of representation and identity becomes a tool for populism. That's why we need diversity.

Gender and culture are interdependent: our understanding of gender and world politics is a result of the interactions we have with popular culture, as consumers and producers. Therefore, if we want to change the dominant patriarchal models in society and fight for equality, we have to do it with and through culture. We need an intersectional approach, tackling sexism, racism, homophobia, xenophobia, and classism.



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## **Moderators:**

Lian Bell - Independent, Ireland

Israel Aloni - [ILDance](#), Sweden

## **Speakers:**

Mish Grigor - [Post Presents Post](#), Australia

Maribel Bayona - [Coordinadora Salas Alternativas](#), Spain

Paul Dunca - Freelance performer, Romania

Mihaela Michailov - Freelance playwright, Romania

Harpreet Kaur - Independent, United Kingdom

Statistics confirm what we know anecdotally: there's a clear gender gap in power positions in the arts. Potential solutions need to be long-term strategies (there is no quick fix), and include:

- Letting the work speak for itself - through its quality;
- Taking advantage of digital technologies, that can bring anonymity;
- Engaging with audiences and ensuring that work by/about minorities is not just for a niche audience;
- Ensuring freedom of expression and the opportunity for all to make their voices heard.

**Maribel Bayona (Spain)** presented some figures about the situation of gender (in) equality in Spain, that confirm the general trends already mentioned by Harpreet: there are way fewer women in the arts (with differences across jobs, e.g. more women costume designers, fewer directors etc.), and women mostly work in the independent scene, which implies lower wages and more precarious situations.

Maribel mentioned an example of positive discrimination in Spain: in a playwriting grants, 10 additional points were automatically given to any woman applying. It was quite a controversial initiative and it's not sure whether that was the right solution to improve the situation. The real question is: what kind of measures can we apply in cultural policies? And are there any examples of effective practices?

Since the beginning of her career **Mish Grigor (Australia)** was very vocal when coming across clear situations of lack of gender equality and of women stories in festivals, competitions etc. However, senior female artists advised her to be careful and not to sacrifice her career for gender, knowing that if people in power position thought of her as the troublemaker, her career would suffer. This self-censoring attitude is shocking but understandable, and explains why it's hard to change the situation.

Excuses to exclude women from festivals and programmes (and possibly including them in specific sections or focuses) are different but often use "quality" or a vague "lack of interest" as excuses. Strategies for change exist, but sometimes are problematic. This included, for Mish, being paired with a male artistic co-director but not being allowed to have a say in the programme, allegedly because of her young age/early career stage.

**Mihaela Mihailov (Romania)** tried to explain why only a few artists work on gender issues in Romania. This was the last country in EU to abrogate art. 200 of the Constitution, punishing sexual relations between people of the same sex with 1-5 years of jail; it happened in 2001, 12 years after democracy was instituted in the country. The historical trauma is still very present, people suffered from physical and mental abuses and are still afraid to talk; this is one of the main reasons why there are still not many performances and engaged approaches in this field in Romania. This became very clear when Mihaela and her team looked for persons to interview in preparation for a performance documenting Romanian gay history and how people succeeded to survive in dictatorship, finding spaces of freedom and openness. It was hard to find people eager to talk/being interviewed, and those who accepted were extremely careful about what could be shared and mentioned, even anonymously. We need to understand history and the general political context to really understand the issue.

In 2005 conservative groups asked to reframe the definition of "family" in the Romanian constitution as the union between a man and a woman. Protests erupted and the change wasn't made. A few years ago an actress was sexually harassed by the director she was working with in Cluj, and the theatre manager understated the event said it was "not so uncommon" that such things happen in theatre; her colleagues protested and made the incident visible. So, while there are important artists in Romania doing work on this issue, and gender inequalities are being acknowledged, equal rights still have to be conquered everyday.



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**Paul Dunca (Romania)** is a performer who works on gender and change, transformation. What is sometimes called "gender dysphoria", Paul suggests, should rather be called gender gift or gender fluid. A particular interest in working on hormones, their effect on the body, the balance and transformation of testosterone and estrogen, etc. led Paul to work with the transgender community in Romania. Initially the work was made in English, but then transgender young audiences asked him to translate it into Romanian so they could show it to their parents. In line with Paul B. Preciado, who said that "we're not interested in transforming men into women and women into men, but we want to make the human species go even further", Paul suggests it's time to "embrace the estrogen", the life energy, and start a matriarchal era.

Following the presentations, the session continued in the format of an open space discussion, with sub-groups discussing some topics proposed by the participants. The main points raised are summarized below.

- Gender is often used as a synonym of feminism, but it's actually a much **broader conversation**. Indeed discussions starting about gender easily end up tackling intersectionality, change, expressing - on stage - who you are. So we need a change in society, starting from the language we use in the everyday.

- Small acts can be powerful: as an individual, just bring up the topic at home, in the work place and with friends (although it can be exhausting). As artists: **small acts, small groups and small audiences - creating intimate spaces can have a big impact**.

- Anything we do about gender is going to be **political** - the work itself, the way we make our work, the way we communicate: that's where the political lies.

- We can't make one strategy that fits everybody. **Context** is key, so the challenge is to exchange strategies, learn from each other and to build one that fits a specific situation.

- **Institutions** have a role to play in bringing a change and should be required for **community accountability**, but often maintain the status quo. Effective strategies to change conservative institutions include joining their Boards of directors/advisors, to try and make a change from within, and talking with institutions, not against them. All this can bring change in the long term. A positive example is the Irish national theatre, that devised its own guidelines for gender equality: for instance, now "gender" is part of any Board meeting discussion, exactly like budget etc., so it's **mainstreamed**, not a separate conversation.

- On another hand, artists should not necessarily chase the institutions to be granted "success" - it is important to see where one's work sits best, knowing that artists have the right to be specific - the idea of a work not being for everyone is not inherently bad. Artists need the freedom to make

the work that they want, and institutions need to look at who they are missing.

- Artists are part of the community that they represent, so if they feel threatened when voicing an opposition, institutions, for example national theatres, which are more visible than independent artists/companies can support them (e.g. sending support letters,).

If we want to change the current **power structures** and not to fit in the existing gender discourse that supports them, we need to fight with a common, non-binary approach, and to do things in circles instead of opposites and binaries (man-woman, artist-audience). We also need to have conversations in a different way, devise new strategies of PR, use the strategies of dominant powers. For example, in Sweden the government allocated 4.5 Million to focus on strategies/statistics for gender equality, and 10 years later the situation has not improved dramatically. In the same country, women are ruling contemporary dance world as Artistic Directors, but male choreographers are the ones who are exported. How to break the binary? Women's organization often use a normative gaze that doesn't fundamentally shifts power structures. Is it more useful to present work by women or is it more useful to present work about gender.

- Change takes time: it takes years just to bring interested audiences in and make your audiences interested in certain types of work. We need long-term strategies.

- Authenticity can get lost to marketing. We also need to have conversations in a different way, devise new strategies of PR, use the strategies of dominant powers.

- Know what you're saying and hold your position. Look after yourself and care about other people. Establish contacts with others. In the US things like The Count, letters from regional alliances / identity affinity groups who have banded together, seem to be working effectively.

- It is crucial to **speak up**. However, how to overcome the fear of speaking in public? And how to fight patriarchal structures in

the work place? **IETM is a safe space to practice speaking in public about these issues**. It's a space where we can practice and gain confidence, so we feel more at ease speaking in public. All those who want to have some practice are invited to come forward (as speakers, moderators, participants).

- Many people, particularly men in position of power, were not in the room: **this conversation on gender has to be part of other conversations in IETM**, so it becomes a topic included "naturally" in other discussions.

- We usually name gender, for example when we submit a proposal and we want to work on this issue. But then, if we don't name it, we can make it fluid, and just live it... We should be careful in defining it and putting people in boxes; we just "are". This helps to get softer also in our theatre work, so everybody can be there just as they are. At the same time, if you are a performer, onstage you are seen as female (or male), it is hard to be neutral, so leaving it all to the work alone can be tricky.

As a concluding remark, Israel Aloni noted how smart phones have changed our lives in 10 years, while 100 years of feminism have not changed the way we talk about gender. However, the sense of insecurity around the topic that surfaced during the session is quite rewarding - we feel part of a community of people who share an interest on this topic and is open to engage in conversations about it.

Everybody is invited to continue the conversation on IETM's [digital forum](#), so other voices can join!