**Equality cannot wait 200 years**

The year is 2234, and the world has finally achieved gender equality. It may sound like a joke, but that’s the date the World Economic Forum has put forward after warning that the progress made in closing the gender gap over recent decades has begun to stall. And that’s not all: in the past year there has actually been a decline in the political representation of women.

The reactionary surge that seems to have inundated Western democracies has consequences. National populists yearn for a mythical traditional society with clear – and unfair – gender roles: power for men, servitude for women.

It is a truism that ‘a week is a long time on politics’. As political representatives – within democratic systems, at least – we are subject to regular elections in which we are held to account before being re-elected, if that is our intention. One of the less trivial criticisms levelled against democracies is that it is hard for them to see past the next elections. And yes, it is hard to do that, but sometimes democracies get their act together and come up with binding, relevant agreements. For that to work, consensus is absolutely vital.

However, even if a country manages to marshal its resources and draw up long-term strategies, a goal that is over 200 years away is not a political goal. And if anyone were tempted to say, ‘OK, progress is slow, but we are actually making progress’, or ‘That’s 200 years after thousands of years of inequality’, I would tell them they are missing the point. We can’t say to the little girls of today, ‘Never mind, your great-great granddaughters will enjoy genuine equality’. Politics has an obligation to tell those little girls that they – they, at least – will be able to enjoy equality.

Of all the information in the World Economic Forum’s report, perhaps the most disheartening concerns access to education. If girls do not study, they are condemned not only to economic insignificance, but also to political insignificance: they will never have the tools they need to get organised, to call for what they want, to fight for their rights. They will be easy prey for the powerful.

If we want to look on the bright side, we could cite the examples of Rwanda and Nicaragua, where equality policies in the world of politics have led to social reforms being placed on the public agenda that are particularly beneficial to women. And many of those reforms involve education. This has been a constant throughout history: if you want to stop discrimination against a certain group, give that group genuine political power.

It is clear that the situation of women is worse outside the developed world, but we should be aware and alarmed about something that has happened here in the developed world recently. In the wake of a Hollywood scandal involving the harassment and abuse of numerous actresses by the producer Harvey Weinstein, a wave of outcry has swept across the world, bringing to light just how widespread this form of oppression is.

And it appears that no area is unaffected, including, I’m sorry to say, the European Parliament. According to data gathered by the Commission, some 55% of European women say they have been subjected to sexual harassment. Where female executives are concerned, that figure rises to 75%. So this is a hidden, incredibly widespread evil that goes far beyond violence: it shows unacceptable tolerance, and a position of superiority that allows offenders to prey on their victims’ fear and hide behind a wall of silence.

The current legislation on sexual harassment has failed. That failure has not only led to unacceptable suffering for the victims: it has also placed yet another obstacle in women’s professional career paths. Women who aspire to positions of responsibility know that they are likely to experience stressful, humiliating situations that men do not have to go through. The worst thing about this is that it is still not taken into account in the analysis of equality in the workplace.

Are we going to tell the victims of sexual harassment and abuse that things will have changed in 2234? Are we going to tell the girls of today in a country such as India, for example, that their great-great-granddaughters will be able to go to university? Are we going to tell women that their desire for equality is not on the political agenda, but would be a suitable subject for a sci-fi film? I know that progress in politics tends to come gradually, but setting a goal two centuries hence is not a political goal; it is scandalous. And we have to rise up against that scandal.