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**GENDER EQUALITY COMMISSION
(GEC)**

DRAFT GENDER EQUALITY STRATEGY 2014-2017

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Introduction

Gender equality means an equal visibility, empowerment, responsibility and participation of both women and men in all spheres of public and private life. Although the legal status of women in Europe has undoubtedly improved during the last decades, and women have made significant inroads into political representation, labour market participation and education, effective equality in all these domains is still far from being a reality. Even if progress is visible, gender gaps persist in many areas and constrain women's opportunities to assert their fundamental rights and affirm their agency. Women continue to be marginalised in political and public life, face discrimination in employment or difficulties in reconciling private, family and professional life, are paid less than men for work of equal value and find themselves overrepresented in poverty and unemployment rates. Women's economic inactivity rates are two times higher than men's. Moreover, discrimination on the grounds of sex is exacerbated when women are subjected to discrimination on other grounds.

The worst expression of the uneven balance of power between women and men is violence against women, a human rights violation and a major obstacle to gender equality.

Women's empowerment is key to overcoming these barriers and achieving better outcomes for entire societies, including men, and for the next generation. Women are powerful agents of change. As extensive research has shown in a multitude of contexts, when women have equal chances with men to be socially and politically active, economies and societies thrive.¹ Greater female representation, including through women's organizations, has increased the prominence of issues more relevant to women's lives, including child mortality, maternity leave, child care, and violence against women.² Overall, women's more balanced participation in decision making contributes to transformative outcomes for societies, such as changes in laws, policies, services, institutions, and social norms.

Women's essential contribution to their communities, societies and economies, as well as the high costs of gender inequality need to be fully recognized, especially in the current context of economic crisis. Inequalities at all levels of society are on the rise and worsen those already faced by women in their daily lives. The crisis and the consequent austerity measures have hit women harder through job losses, pay cuts, reductions in public services and shrinking resources for vital support services to women who suffered violence. More worrisome, the crisis has often been presented as an excuse to undermine women's rights and limit initiatives towards greater gender equality.

Achieving gender equality is central to the protection of human rights, the functioning of democracy and to respect for the rule of law.

¹ [World Development Report 2012: Gender Equality and Development](#). The World Bank, Washington DC, September 2011. Last accessed 2nd April 2013.

² See, for example, findings reported in: Mala Htun and S. Laurel Weldon. 2010. "When Do Governments Promote Women's Rights? A Framework for the Comparative Analysis of Sex Equality Policy." *Perspectives on Politics* 8 (1): 207-16; Mala Htun and S. Laurel Weldon. 2012. "The Civic Origins of Progressive Policy Change: Combating Violence against Women in Global Perspective, 1975-2005." *American Political Science Review* 106 (3): 548-569.

The Council of Europe's pioneering work in the fields of human rights and gender equality has resulted in a solid legal and policy framework which, if implemented, would considerably advance women's rights and bring member States closer to "de facto" gender equality.

The Council of Europe transversal Programme on Gender Equality launched in 2012 aims at increasing the impact and visibility of gender equality standards, supporting their implementation in member States through a variety of measures, including gender mainstreaming and action in a number of priority areas. To achieve its aim, the Programme needs the continuous political and financial support which is essential to mobilise all Council of Europe decision making, advisory and monitoring bodies, involving them in the development, implementation and evaluation of the gender equality agenda. The Gender Equality Commission is at the centre of this effort.

This Strategy builds upon the results of the 7th Council of Europe Conference of Ministers responsible for equality between women and men (Baku, May 2010) and links them to both the current economic context and the political leverage within the Council of Europe. It outlines the goals and priorities of the Council of Europe Programme on Gender Equality for the years 2014-2017, identifies the working methods and the main partners as well as the measures to increase the visibility of the results. A table indicating current, future and proposed activities will be attached to this Strategy to show the immediate link between the strategic objectives and the specific measures and means used to achieve them.

I. Goal and strategic objectives

The overall goal of the Strategy is to promote the effective realisation of gender equality in Council of Europe members States by supporting the implementation of existing standards.

This will be achieved through 5 strategic objectives which will also integrate the issue of multiple discrimination and the specific rights and needs of children.

Strategic objective 1: Promoting balanced participation of women and men in political and public decision making

Pluralist democracy requires balanced participation of women and men in political and public decision-making. Council of Europe standards provide clear guidance on how to achieve this. Action will seek to:

- Monitor progress of women participation in decision making, provide visibility to data and good practices in member States. This will be done in particular through the collection and dissemination of information on the implementation of the Committee of Ministers' Recommendation on balanced participation of women and men in political and public life, including decision making (Rec (2003)3);
- develop measures aiming at empowering women and facilitating their participation in elections at the national, regional and local levels, as voters and candidates, including with regard to the electoral systems, parity thresholds, public funding of political parties and working conditions of elected representatives;
- achieve balanced participation in Council of Europe bodies, institutions, decision making processes as well as in middle and senior management functions within the Secretariat.

Strategic objective 2: Preventing and combating violence against women

Violence against women remains widespread in all member States of the Council of Europe, with devastating consequences on women, societies and economies. Opened for signature in May 2011, the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (the Istanbul Convention) is the most far-reaching international treaty to tackle this serious violation of human rights. Action in this area will seek to:

- support member States to sign and ratify the Istanbul Convention through the provision of technical and legal expertise;
- enhance the implementation of the Istanbul Convention by involving all relevant bodies and entities of the Council of Europe;
- collect and disseminate information on legal and other measures taken at national level to prevent and combat violence against women, providing visibility to good practices.
- promote the Istanbul Convention beyond the European Continent, making available expertise and sharing of good practice in the context of co-operation with non-member States and other regional and international organisations.

Strategic objective 3: Combating gender stereotypes and sexism

Gender stereotyping presents a serious obstacle to achieving real gender equality and feeds into gender discrimination. Gender stereotypes are both the result and the cause of deeply engrained attitudes, values, norms and prejudice against women. They contribute to justifying and maintaining the historical relations of power of men over women as well as sexist attitudes that mainly seek to undermine women. Council of Europe action will focus on:

- promoting education free from gender stereotypes and the implementation of the measures proposed in the Committee of Ministers' Recommendation on gender mainstreaming in education (CM/Rec (2007)13);
- combating sexism as a form of hate speech and integrating this dimension into Council of Europe action aiming at combating hate speech, combating discrimination and promoting respect and tolerance;
- identifying practical measures to promote a non-stereotyped image of women in the media and promoting balanced participation of women and men in decision-making positions in the media, in particular in management, programming and regulatory bodies.

Strategic objective 4: Promoting Equal Access of Women to Justice

The concept of access to justice, which was originally linked with ensuring rights through courts, tribunals and other institutions of administering justice, has evolved into the broader concept of justice and equal access to justice. A study into women's access to the European Court of Human Rights drew attention to the low number of applications filed by women, pointing out that these difficulties possibly reflected obstacles experienced by women at national level. Council of Europe action in this area will seek to:

- analyse the national and international frameworks with a view to identifying the obstacles women encounter in gaining access to the courts;
- identify, collect and disseminate any existing remedies and good practices in this field;
- make recommendations to improve the situation.

Strategic objective 5: Gender Mainstreaming in all policies and measures

The Gender Equality “machineries” set up in most countries are relatively isolated and have very limited resources and capacity to stimulate the necessary progress and to influence key policy areas. This can be partly compensated through effective gender mainstreaming.

“Gender mainstreaming is the (re)organisation, improvement, development and evaluation of policy processes, so that a gender equality perspective is incorporated in all policies at all levels and at all stages, by the actors normally involved in policy-making.”³

The Council of Europe will strive to achieve gender mainstreaming in:

- its various policy areas, in particular the areas of justice, local government, media, education, minorities, migration, Roma people, children’s rights, youth and sports;
- the development and implementation of co-operation programmes, projects and activities;
- the policy processes and functioning of the various bodies and institutions, in particular through the mobilisation and contribution of:
 - the Committee of Ministers, the Parliamentary Assembly, the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, the European Court of Human Rights and the Commissioner of Human Rights;
 - the steering committees and other intergovernmental bodies;
 - the monitoring mechanisms;
 - Partial Agreements.
- Council of Europe staff policies.

II. Institutional setting and working methods

The transversal nature of the Gender Equality Programme presupposes that all Council of Europe decision-making, advisory and monitoring bodies should support and actively contribute to the achievement of the goal and the strategic objectives of the Gender Equality Strategy. They will be invited to take initiatives within their respective mandate’s remit and taking due account of their status and resources. To stimulate and facilitate this process, the following elements complete the Council of Europe institutional setting:

- The **Gender Equality Commission**: an open-ended intergovernmental group of experts composed of 16 elected representatives. Under the aegis of the Steering Committee for Human Rights (CDDH), its mission is to steer the Gender Equality transversal Programme, advise and involve its various components, as well as liaise with existing intergovernmental bodies, providing expertise and a forum for exchange on good practices and issues of concern.
- The Committee of Ministers’ **Thematic Co-ordinator** on Gender Equality and Trafficking in Human Beings facilitates discussions in the Committee of Ministers on issues related, inter alia, to the Gender Equality transversal programme;
- The **National Focal Points** appointed at national level provide the link between the Council of Europe and the actors and mechanisms that are responsible for gender equality at national level, that is, from government, parliament, local and regional authorities, civil society and the private sector. They are also expected to promote international standards at national level with a view

³ Council of Europe Group of Specialists in Gender Mainstreaming, 1998

to bridging the gap between legal and real equality in a given country. The network of Focal Points is also a platform for thematic discussions and exchange of good practices.

- The **Gender Equality Rapporteurs** appointed within intergovernmental bodies and other Council of Europe structures strive to identify opportunities to integrate the gender perspective in the functioning, programmes and activities of these structures. In co-operation with the Gender Equality Commission, they are in a position to flag the opportunity of developing measures or new activities to promote gender equality.
- The **Gender Mainstreaming Team** is a group of Council of Europe staff members serving in the various sectors and bodies of the organisation. Its task is to share information and expertise, provide visibility to results, identify opportunities for joint action and make proposals to facilitate the implementation of the Gender Equality Programme.

In order to assess progress in the implementation of the strategy, the **Gender Equality Commission** will regularly take stock of results achieved and will prepare an annual report (to be brought to the attention of the Committee of Ministers).

III. Partnerships

All the main international partners of the Council of Europe have adopted Gender Equality Strategies or Action Plans. This creates an obvious basis for partnerships and, in some cases, an institutionalised co-operation allowing to identify opportunities for joint action, complementarity and synergies.

The European Union, UN-Women and the OSCE have been involved in the development of this Strategy. They are therefore invited to contribute to its implementation as appropriate, in particular by holding regular consultations with the Council of Europe, participating in meetings and events and programming and implementing joint initiatives. The Council of Europe will seek to reinforce its co-operation with other UN agencies and bodies (in particular OHCHR and CEDAW) and other international organisations (such as the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie).

The Gender Equality Programme will also seek to involve civil society organisations in the development, implementation and assessment of policies, programmes and activities.

Other natural partners in the implementation of the Gender Equality Strategy include:

- Parliaments
- Local authorities and their associations
- Gender Equality bodies
- Human Rights institutions
- Professional networks (in particular in the judiciary and in the journalism, education, health and social services fields)
- Trade unions and employers associations
- The Media
- The Private Sector

IV. Communication

A communication plan will be developed with the aim of:

- increasing the visibility of Council of Europe standards, studies, guidelines, events and their results;
- raising awareness on specific issues with a view to changing attitudes, mentalities and behaviours;

- facilitating the exchange of information between the various components of the programme and with partners;
- giving visibility to good practices and data collected at national, regional and local level.

This communication plan will be accompanied by a training plan targeting the Gender Equality Rapporteurs, Council of Europe staff and experts involved in the Organisation's work.