

**Seminar**  
***Combating Sexist Hate Speech***  
Strasbourg, European Youth Centre  
9 a.m.  
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Opening speech

*Director General of Democracy, Snežana Samardžić-Marković*

*[Welcome]*

I would like to start by giving a warm welcome to all the participants: young activists, representatives of women's organisations, gender equality and women's rights experts. Thank you all for coming to the Council of Europe – to our European Youth Centre in Strasbourg – for this important seminar.

During these next three days we will have the privilege of hearing from experts on sexist hate speech. We will have opportunities to discuss and debate the key issues and also to look at progress in challenging gender stereotypes and bias and to share good practices.

*[Problem of Sexist Hate Speech]*

Sexist hate speech is rife, both offline – in the street and daily interactions – and online: via emails, websites or social media.

It has increased along with the increasing use and availability of the Internet and social platforms, which have provided the possibility of publishing offensive material anonymously and with apparent impunity.

*[Women most affected]*

Who is most affected? Well, as you know, the victims are almost exclusively female.

Female politicians, journalists, bloggers, human rights defenders, actresses, well-known feminists or personalities are particular targets.

To give you a couple of examples, British MP Stella Creasy was threatened with rape by a man opposed to her campaign to keep a woman's face on just one British banknote. Laura Boldrini, spokesperson of the Italian Parliament, faced a violent harassment campaign, notably on social media and through emails threatening rape, torture and murder.

But, you don't have to be famous. Sexist hate speech targets any woman, just for being a woman.

I - like most women - have witnessed or suffered sexist hate speech, often disguised as a joke or even as a compliment, and most of it with a sexual connotation.

*[Connection to Violence against Women and Girls]*

Sexist hate speech is closely linked to violence against women and girls.

Women receive online threats and insults of a sexual nature, sometimes on a daily basis. These can include rape or death threats or threats to publish personal photos and information.

Let me give you some statistics. 26% of women aged 18-24 have been stalked online and 25% have faced online sexual harassment. They also fall victim to 'revenge porn' and 'cyber rape', whereby sexually-explicit material content about them is uploaded by former partners seeking revenge.

The aims are to humiliate and objectify women, to destroy their reputations and to make them vulnerable, ashamed and fearful.

There are – unfortunately – too many examples where women – including young women and girls – have their lives destroyed by this relentless intimidation, harassment and humiliation. They may have to take drastic action, changing jobs, moving home or even changing their name. In extreme cases, they commit suicide.

*[The problem is not taken seriously]*

Despite the seriousness of the offences and despite the seriousness of the consequences, somehow, sexist hate speech is just not taken seriously. It is often considered less severe than other forms of hate speech.

Perpetrators of sexist hate speech play down the seriousness of their actions. One will tell you he is joking. Another will say you have no sense of humour. Others will accuse you of taking yourself too seriously, or tell you that you are arrogant or no fun.

*[Sexist hate speech is a human rights violation]*

But let's be clear from the outset: sexist hate speech is a human rights violation. It is a form of violence against women and girls that feeds into gender-based discrimination. Sexist hate speech presents a serious obstacle to the achievement of real gender equality.

*[Freedom of expression]*

Sometimes sexist hate speech is excused in the name of freedom of expression. But there is no competition between fundamental rights. Gender equality and freedom of expression are mutually reinforcing. Free speech and free expression are not 'free' if they are hijacked to intimidate, demean and – ultimately – to try to silence women subjecting them to hate speech.

*[Action by the Council of Europe]*

There is no acceptable excuse for sexist hate speech, and action is necessary to counter its rise. So, what is the Council of Europe doing?

*[No Hate Speech Movement]*

Our youth campaign – the No Hate Speech Movement – aims to reclaim the Internet and social networks as a safe space for women, as well as men.

An online survey carried out by the Youth Department of the Council of Europe in 2015 found 83% of respondents reported that they had encountered hate speech online and that women were one of the top targets of online hate speech.

On International Women's Day this year – 8 March – the No Hate Speech Movement is organising a European Action Day against Sexist Hate Speech. There will be a programme of activities prepared by online activists – trained through the campaign – in co-operation with international youth organisations and the coordinators of campaigns at national level.

*[General information on the NHSM]*

The No Hate Speech Movement, which started in 2013, will be running until 2017. It aims to protect and promote human rights online and encourage youth participation and 'netcitizenship'. Ultimately, the goal is to mobilise young people to help create a culture of human rights and democracy.

In particular, the campaign works through human rights education. Our human rights education manual 'Bookmarks' provides lesson plans for secondary-level teachers and educators on the subject of hate speech and has been produced in many languages.

The campaign has developed many other tools to counter hate speech; notably "Hate Speech Watch", which allows registered users to tag and comment on any hate speech content from the Internet.

The campaign is focused online, but includes offline events, conferences, youth camps and festivals. National campaigns have been running across Europe and beyond.

Overall, the campaign is the work of young people and youth organisations. The idea for it came from youth leaders who are part of the Council of Europe's unique 'co-management' structure, within which young people and government representatives decide together on the Organisation's youth programmes, policies and priorities.

*[Gender Equality Strategy]*

Let me turn now to our work on gender equality.

The Council of Europe Gender Equality Strategy (2014-2017) has made combating sexism as a form of hate speech part of its *first objective*. This objective aims to fight gender stereotypes and sexism, the root causes of gender inequality in our societies.

Through the work and activities developed around the implementation of the Strategy, the Council of Europe is already tackling sexism as a form of hate speech.

Let me remind you that back in 1997 when the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers Recommendation on hate speech was agreed, it did not include sexism in its definition. We have made important advances since then.

I would like to highlight the recent General Policy Recommendation on combating hate speech, which was adopted in December by ECRI, the Council of Europe monitoring body that deals with racism and intolerance. This expands the definition of hate speech to include hate speech on the basis of sex, gender, gender identity and sexual orientation.

I can also tell you that Article 12 of our 2011 'Istanbul Convention' – on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence – requires States which have ratified the Convention to: "take the necessary measures to promote changes in the social and cultural patterns of behaviour of women and men with a view to eradicating prejudices, customs, traditions and all other practices which are based on the idea of *the inferiority of women or on stereotyped roles for women and men*". This idea of 'inferiority' and these 'stereotyped roles' are at the core of sexism and sexist hate speech.

And, the Istanbul Convention includes types of violence against women that can also represent forms of sexist hate speech: notably sexual harassment and stalking.

*[Call for action by participants]*

I hope that gives you an idea of some of the key work being done within the Council of Europe to counter sexist hate speech.

Let me say here that we count on your support, dynamism, motivation and energy to make progress in tackling sexism and sexist hate speech. And we will be counting, in particular, on all the young activists who are part of the No Hate Speech Movement. Together we can help build the necessary momentum for change among young activists and members of civil society.

*[Conclusion]*

Now, to conclude:

This seminar is not about setting one group against another. It is about working together: youth leaders working with government representatives, young people with old – or older – people, men working with women, women working with social media and the Internet...

It's about joining our forces to achieve real gender equality. This is not an impossible goal. We can do it.

Thank you