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GRECO CONFERENCE ON “GENDER DIMENSIONS ON CORRUPTION”

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Protection against corruption and gender equality – two concepts that are **essential ingredients for an advanced democratic society** – were at the centre of discussions during this intense and very fruitful conference that brought together, in the beautiful town of Prague, 70 participants from across GRECO member States, as well as key international organisations, civil society and independent experts.

The **protection against corruption**, with its multiple facets, is one of the core areas of interest for the **Council of Europe**, whose mission is to uphold democracy, human rights and the rule of law. GRECO, its anti-corruption monitoring body, has taken the lead in the development and promotion of the world’s most advanced anti-corruption standards and the implementation of targeted anti-corruption measures in 49 member States.

As a parameter that is central to safeguarding human rights, the functioning of democracy, respect for the rule of law and economic growth and competitiveness, **gender equality** has also been an issue of prime concern for the Organisation. With its **treaties on combating human trafficking and domestic violence**, the Council of Europe has opened a deeper reflection on gender equality standards and has been exploring whether incorporating a gender perspective might bring an added value to its activities in other sectors, including notably the prevention and fight against corruption. This approach has been re-confirmed by the newly adopted **Gender Equality Strategy 2014-2017** which promotes **gender mainstreaming** in all Council of Europe policies and measures.

The **interrelationship between corruption and protection against it and gender may not be obvious at first glance**. Nevertheless, a steadily growing number of studies from around the globe have looked at this nexus, drawing insightful, albeit at times controversial, conclusions. Information and findings presented during this one-day event enabled a genuinely lively debate.



among the perspectives analysed were for example:

- ♦ plausible differences in male and female behaviour regarding corruption in various contexts, including, for example, explanations for corrupt behaviour by reference to features related to masculinity or femininity;
- ♦ the relationship between levels of corruption and increasing participation/representation of women (e.g. depending on the proportion of men and women in the workplace; the presence of women in top managerial posts; women's representation in government; women's participation in social life; the level of democracy in a country);
- ♦ the possible influence of gender on the typology of corrupt acts and the existence of specifically gendered forms of corruption, such as sexual extortion;
- ♦ the different impact/consequences of corruption on men and women as victims in general and in some specific sectors (i.e. trafficking in human beings, healthcare, education, access to justice);
- ♦ possible differences in the level of perception and tolerance of corruption among men and women;
- ♦ the unhealthy triangle linking poverty, gender inequality and corruption.

A wealth of **ideas, research conclusions and hypotheses have been presented**, some of which may constitute a viable basis for anti-corruption policy development.

1. The participants acknowledged the **statistical fact** that the **percentage of female perpetrators** in corruption cases was **lower than the percentage of male perpetrators** (*this is also the case for general crime rates*). However, no consensus emerged on how this fact is to be interpreted or whether there is **a direct relationship between gender and corruption** as it does not seem feasible that the problem of corruption could be solved simply by bringing more women to positions of power. **There is not a simple causal link**. However, based on the existing research, several panellists have argued that more **established democracies**, with a greater number of women participating in public and social life, with advanced gender equality and good governance, are more likely to have a better institutional capacity to prevent and fight corruption. In that context, the gender dimension is one of several ingredients of a **"fairer system"** where the expectation is that the incidence of corruption is reduced.

2. Some speakers have supported the hypothesis that **women** behave no differently to men in no-risk situations, but they **exhibit a significantly lower willingness to accept bribes in risky situations**. Such a conclusion may serve to encourage the development of anti-corruption policies that include more stringent audits and controls in those areas where men are present in significantly higher numbers and where they may be inclined to take risks and pursue corrupt practices.

An **Austrian study** has explored the relationship between the levels of women's engagement in the work place, the operation of **"gender mixed" groups** – as opposed to only male or female or predominantly male or female groups – and the risk of their involvement in corrupt schemes. The results suggest that **groups where a gender balance is achieved** may be **less prone to corruption**, which makes them a potentially **effective** and **cost-free preventive tool** for institutions or units with higher corruption risks.

3. The economic situation that prompted the collapse of banks in **Iceland** in 2008 gave rise to multidisciplinary research and investigations. A study was presented which explored the causes of events by looking at the features of the actors involved using **concepts of masculinity and femininity**. It explained how socially and **culturally ingrained ideas and stereotypes related to gender** had played an important role in precipitating the country's economic downturn. In particular, one possible explanation can be drawn from a culture that was based on the **"emphasised masculinity"** of company leaders and political decision makers, meaning **risk-seeking**, higher levels of competitiveness as well as mutual support among men and communication through informal networks rather than institutional (and transparent) communication and decision-making processes.

4. Gender **differences** are identified also by research into the way in which **men and women experience corruption**. The limited access of women to senior posts and the type of activities they perform in the public and private sectors may determine the corrupt acts they commit. In the **higher education system of Ukraine**, for example, men dominate the senior academic levels and hence have greater opportunities to engage in the types of corruption often attributed to senior-level officials. The simple fact that women are likely to occupy lower level posts also means that they are less likely to engage in corrupt activity from a position of power and are relegated to the role of intermediary or facilitator in a corrupt transaction. The use of **sexual services as corrupt payment** is real but remains "taboo" and is poorly understood. Studying how this form of corruption operates in practice would encourage greater openness, better understanding and increased recognition among policy makers and the public at large. This would ultimately translate into higher levels of prosecution and sanctioning of this criminal act, which is explicitly covered by the Council of Europe Criminal Law Convention on Corruption (ETS 173).

5. One of the most important aspects of the nexus between gender and corruption is the direct and **negative impact of corruption on vulnerable groups** such as victims of trafficking in human beings, patients, the poor, children and the mentally ill – women forming a significant part of these groups. Corruption can be a disastrous hindrance to efforts to **combat human trafficking**. Vulnerabilities to corruption can be found at the level of law enforcement, justice and local authorities that each play a role in protecting the victims or in detecting, investigating or sanctioning the traffickers. Therefore the overall implementation of national anti-trafficking policies needs to strengthen its focus on corruption issues, especially in the domain of investigation and prosecution.

6. **Perception of corruption** might also be analysed in relation to gender, as well as education levels and age. For instance, university educated middle-aged women responding to a survey in Ukraine demonstrate the most advanced understanding of corruption and therefore have the most powerful anti-corruption potential. On the contrary, young and middle-aged men with vocational qualifications have the most tolerant attitude to corruption. Female respondents feel more **negative emotions towards corruption** engagement than men. That element gives a useful indication to policy makers on the categories of persons that may more easily engage in anti-corruption efforts. On the other hand, women are more **reluctant to report corruption** out of fear of repercussions.

The participants concluded that **corruption touches citizens of both sexes** and, as a consequence, the **prevention and fight against corruption should benefit everyone, regardless of gender**. Nonetheless, **corruption**, in its many forms, is a **social phenomenon** — or, more accurately, multiple social phenomena — that occurs in the context of **embedded gender relations**. Whether it is a case of bribery, extortion, misuse of personal connections, other illicit practices, or, as is often the case, a combination of one or more of those, interactions are shaped by **gendered norms and expectations**. Moreover, the **current economic climate in Europe**, clouded by the austerity measures that burden citizens, further diminishes tolerance of unfair and invariably criminal practices, such as corruption. Given that the **public interest in corruption** has dramatically increased in the last few years, a greater emphasis is no longer being placed on efforts to **fight corruption with punitive measures** but rather on **preventing corruptive networks** from being formed. Also, bearing in mind that **gender equality standards and the empowerment of women** are essential elements of **effective democracy building** and measures against poverty, they can only be achieved through seriously tackling corruption. Therefore, **anti-corruption policies and policies aimed at the advancement of women** should go hand in hand, in order to produce positive, long-lasting results.

Taking stock of the information exchanged during this **first pan-European conference** on “Gender dimensions of corruption”, the participants supported the need to pursue a **human rights-based approach** to protection against corruption and gender equality, as it naturally stems from the Council of Europe’s mandate. They encouraged **GRECO and its Gender Equality Rapporteur, Ms Helena LIŠUCHOVÁ**, to continue exploring the gender dimensions of corruption and promoting further research and tailored initiatives and responses at national and sub-national levels. They agreed that the many facets of corruption will be more accurately defined and the anti-corruption policies and strategies **better tailored if gender is deliberately considered when examining the typology and impact of corruption** in the different contexts within the GRECO member States. Such an approach does not necessitate the revision of the Council of Europe’s anti-corruption legal instruments but can be **integrated directly into GRECO’s on-going monitoring activities**, representing a **shift from gender neutrality to gender mainstreaming**. It would also be appropriate for GRECO to support further research and foster the regular collection and in-depth analysis of **gender-disaggregated data** at the national level. Last, but not least, it would be desirable for GRECO to engage and co-operate closely with other relevant partners, such as parliamentarians, regional and local authorities, civil society, including specifically women’s organisations, as well as other international organisations, in raising awareness of gender implications of corruption.

