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Ending impunity for violence against women and ensuring gender equality: the Council of Europe Istanbul Convention

- Your Royal Highness the Crown Princess of Denmark, Excellences, dear members of the Gender Equality Commission, dear participants,
- I am extremely honoured by the invitation to address this conference which has the noble purpose of launching the new Council of Europe Gender Equality Strategy. This document will serve as a roadmap for what we need to achieve to make gender equality a reality in Europe. There might be obstacles and setbacks along the way, but with a roadmap we at least know where we are going, and that's key.
- One of the obstacles I know we are going to have to overcome is that of violence against women. After all these years of advocating for women's rights and gender equality, we still live in a world where many women and girls are prevented from, living, loving, dressing, playing, working, writing and achieving what they want – and how to do it- on account of the violence they are exposed to simply because they are women.
- Distinguished Audience,
- For years now, surveys the world over have shown that there is not a single aspect of life where women and girls are not at risk of physical, sexual or psychological violence. As if this wasn't enough, the recent wave of individual testimonies of sexual harassment and sexual violence that have reached the shores of our social media accounts as part of the various #Me Too campaigns, the Every Day Sexism hash tags and similar initiatives have certainly driven home the message.
- Women who work are suffering from sexual harassment in all industries. Women who express their opinions as journalists, bloggers and authors live with the constant fear of rape threats and other misogynist violence. Women in politics trigger similar reactions simply by doing their job. Women in ordinary, everyday (?) relationships are dominated and controlled by their male partners. Women in sports are sexually harassed by their coaches - and paid a fraction of their male counterparts, by the way....
- Violence against women is structural and must be recognised for what it is: a social mechanism by which women are forced into a subordinate position compared with men. It is a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between women and men which prevent the full advancement of women. It is both a cause for and a consequence of the inequality of women and this vicious circle must end.
- The Istanbul Convention is the first international treaty to fully recognise this structural connection. The Istanbul Convention is firmly rooted in the premise that without full equality between women and men there will be no end to gender-based violence. It requires a comprehensive framework of measures which aim to change attitudes, mindsets and gender stereotypes that perpetuate the notion of women as the weaker sex, as inferior, as submissive, as dependent. Whether these are notions held by the general public, by the police, by the judiciary, by husbands, fathers and brothers, or by teachers, the message of the Istanbul Convention is clear: women have a right to full equality with men and it is each woman's right to decide fully over her body, her mind, her sexuality and her reproductive functions. And a right to be protected by the state when these rights are being violated, including by members of their own families.

- Lately, it seems that these notions are very threatening to some. The rising anti-gender discourse which we are witnessing with concern is spreading misogynist and homophobic fears. This discourse deliberately misstates the aims of the Convention and makes only feeble attempts at masking its real concern: upholding the status quo in terms of heterosexual male power – in society and within the family unit.
- Misogyny and homophobia are not only present in Europe, and we must all guard against it. We must also ensure there is no room for unholy alliances that seek to undermine the work of international treaty bodies and mandates on violence against women and gender equality. We must stand together in the face of such open backlash to substantive equality between women and men.
- And when I say ‘we’ here, I mean both women and men as well as global, regional and national human rights bodies in Europe and elsewhere in the world. We need to have a unified and loud voice that will be heard everywhere ... we need to work together in order to make the world a better place for both men and women.

This is why I am personally (committed to creating synergies with other international bodies working in the area of violence against women: the Special Rapporteur of Violence against Women, the CEDAW Committee and the monitoring mechanism of the Inter-American convention on violence against women: Belem do Para. Our intention is to develop more institutionalised co-operation and exchanges.

To that end the Council of Europe will host a meeting of regional and international monitoring mechanisms next year. We are taking the initiative to ensure that we are all singing from the same hymn sheet when standing up for women’s human right to be free from violence.

Thank you.