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**Keynote Address by Thomas Hammarberg,
Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights
At the
Launching Conference on the Council of Europe Campaign to Combat Violence
against Women, including Domestic Violence**

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It has to be said at the outset that violence against women is a manifestation of unequal status between men and women in society. Therefore, **violence against women must be addressed in the context of seeking to end all forms of discrimination, to advance gender equality and to empower women.**

Women are still grossly underrepresented in almost all political assemblies and decision making bodies at all levels in Europe – also within the Council of Europe. This in turn is reflected in the priorities selected and, very importantly, on budgets and decisions on funding.

In spite of the numerous women's rights conferences, agreed norms against discrimination and political pledges about gender equity, the gap between rhetoric and the daily reality remains. This is the main message in the UN Study on Violence Against Women which was published just a few days ago.

The UN Study points out that though strong laws have been adopted in many countries, most national-level responses have been inadequate and have not eradicated the impunity perpetrators too often enjoy.

The Study confirms previous reports indicating that the level of violence against women, including domestic violence, remains very high. Though precise data are lacking, we know that such abuses are widespread and a serious problem also across Europe – affecting the lives of a large number of women, as well as their children.

We also know that where combating violence against women indeed has been made a priority by the government, we have seen tangible improvements in a relatively short time. The host country of this conference has been one of those that have taken the issue very seriously and progress is being made. This is largely thanks to the efforts of the women's movement and the good co-operation between the government and the women's groups.

This Conference should clearly send the message across Europe that combating violence against women is a very high priority and something to be taken seriously. The support demonstrated here in statements must be turned into serious action at the national and local levels, where it really matters.

The video testimonies of survivors that we saw his morning underlined the importance of a *victim centered approach* when combating violence against women. Another important principle is the need to empower the victim. Victims of violence must be able to regain and take control of their lives and they should not be revictimized by unprofessional or insensitive approaches by social, health care, judicial and other authorities.

One of the consequences of the recognition of violence against women as a human rights issue is that not only the individual perpetrators but also the authorities carry responsibility. **The authorities must do everything they possibly can to prevent the violence, to protect victims, to award compensation and to prosecute and punish the perpetrators.**

However, when it comes to measures to protect and support the victim, they can not do it alone. The involvement of women's groups and networks is crucial.

There is a vast amount of knowledge and experience accumulated over the years to guide the work of the authorities on how to protect and support victims of violence against women. They are listed in an important Recommendation adopted 2002 by the Committee of Ministers within the Council of Europe but also in a number of UN documents, including the reports by the Special Rapporteur Yakin Erturk. These are some of the messages:

- The *legal framework* is important and must provide for a wide definition of violence against women, including psychological forms. It must cover preventive and educational measures, as well as protection and assistance for victims and measures against perpetrators.
- A good law is the result of a broad *consultative process* involving women's groups and experts, including victims, and taking into account the opinions of the civil society.
- The laws must be effectively *enforced*. Detailed guidelines or protocols to establish clear standards, for example for the police to follow when dealing with violence against women, are necessary.
- Education of police, social workers, health workers, teachers and the judiciary must include *training* on how to recognize and deal with violence against women. It is crucial that the response to such abuses is professional and gender sensitive. The rights of the victims to privacy, dignity and full autonomy should be met at all stages and by all authorities.

We should give special attention to those most at risk. A sensitive analysis would, for instance, detect the particular vulnerability of *migrant women*. A migrant woman who is subjected to domestic violence is unlikely to report to the police for fear of losing her residence status, if it is dependant on her husband's status. Some countries have addressed this concern by allowing victims of domestic violence to apply for permanent residence status irrespective of their spouses support for the application. This is a responsible approach.

Sensitivity to the needs of the victims also calls for *comprehensive and accessible services*. The victim must be able to overcome all the various difficulties and consequences that violence has caused. Support services must take into account and respond to both immediate and long term needs of the victim.

- Health clinics are often first among services to come into the contact with the victims of violence. It is important that *health personnel* are well trained, gender sensitive and have clear referral systems in place to link to other support sectors. Health care providers must be

able to refer the victim to counselling or temporary safe housing, and if needed, to the police.

- Essential services also include the provision of *information about the rights* of victims and access to legal aid.
- *Hotlines* and telephone help services must be set up to provide information free of charge.
- Ensuring that women have access to *shelters* to protect them from further violence is important. Good shelters also provide a range of other services. Often the shelters are run by NGOs, but authorities do have a responsibility and assist and co-operate with these organizations. Shelters should be seen as an emergency, short term solution and of course not justify that the victim is the one who has to move.

Providing services are essential but they cannot eliminate the need to establish *an ethical consensus* that violence against women is an absolute taboo. The threshold must be made as high as ever possible. This is why it is **particularly important that leading politicians, male and female, do demonstrate that this is a priority issue.**

- They should listen to the women's movement.
- They should do their share of educating the public.
- They should explain the paramount importance of **zero tolerance towards domestic violence.**