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“Still not sufficient services for women victims of violence”

Keynote speech by

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A week ago I visited a refuge in Cork, Ireland, for women who needed shelter against violence at home. Here women had been received since the mid-seventies for a couple of days or up to several weeks, in most cases together with their children. This refuge had chosen not to operate under secret address but there was always a police car outside. There had been incidents of brutal attacks against the premises.

This refuge was now faced with new challenges as a consequence of the immigration to Ireland. The pressure had increased during recent years; language and cultural barriers had made the work more complex. However, the commitment of the staff and volunteers in this centre made it still work.

I talked with an immigrant from Hungary who had come here with her little daughter when the crisis had struck the family and the husband had become violent. The time in the refuge had given her perspective and self-confidence, she had been helped to establish her rights and in her case the marriage could be healed. She was now on a visit to thank the staff and reconnect to those who had become her friends for life.

I have similar experiences from several countries I have visited. The shelters are extremely important as a refuge; they are often run by voluntary organisations and often with economic support from local authorities. Another typical pattern nowadays is that a number of the guests are from other countries.

This was also the case with the shelter I visited in Graz in late May. They had a confidential address and other security arrangements to prevent any risk of gate-crashing. Again, this was a well-run institution in a home-like atmosphere. The problem they raised was that bureaucratic rules for the grants did not allow them to retain a guest more than a set period of time. Typically, the staff now considered to pay themselves for the continued stay of a women whose time was up but the crisis still unresolved.

However, not all cities in Europe have such shelters. I have talked with politicians in power who have argued that “in our country there is no need”. In fact, I have had some clearly negative experiences in talks with leading government representatives in recent times. Not only have they been dismissive about the problem as such; they have volunteered chauvinistic jokes which should belong to the past. This has to change – and it will.

Putting an end to domestic violence is of course very much a question of *political will*. What should be done in every country is really no secret. There should be a precise and strict legislation; there should be bye-laws or guidelines to enforce the law; there should be a thought-out strategy and an action plan covering both national and local levels; there should be a system for the support services which are aimed at prevention, protection, prosecution but also rehabilitation and rebuilding lives.

Much has been done to implement these obligations, but much remains to be done. Most governments have now picked up the principles, but some are far behind in implementation. These are some of the points which need to be stressed again:

- 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.
- The governments should support the civil society groups, but they must themselves take responsibility as well for informing the public about this plague. Creating genuine *awareness* in this field is essential.

Special attention should be given 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 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.

- Intervention centres which combine *comprehensive* police, judicial, social and health support should be developed in order to avoid the burden on the victims to go from one institution to the next. This is being tried in Austria with positive results.
- The service centres are crucial in the efforts to assemble information and data, which are important as a basis for political action to prevent and respond to abuses in future. The services are therefore also tools for planning policy and evaluation.
- Services must be provided without prejudices. We know that some women in need avoid to seek assistance because they fear being stigmatized or blamed. Poor and marginalized individuals have the same rights as others.
- 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. It is important that those who are at the other end of the line have training in coping with difficult circumstances.
- Ensuring that women have access to *shelters* to protect them from further violence is important. Good shelters also provide a range of other services. Even when the shelters are run by NGOs, the authorities have a responsibility and assist and co-operate. 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.
- Decisions to restrain the perpetrator can be decisive. There should be legal possibilities for intrusive barring or non-contact orders.

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 and that there has to be *zero tolerance* towards domestic violence.