

CommDH/Speech(2020)14

**“Violence against Women and Girls in France”**  
Conference held by the French National Consultative Commission  
on Human Rights

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3 December 2020

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for inviting me to open this webinar on a topic which has been very high on my agenda since the beginning of my mandate in 2018.

Violence against women and domestic violence are human rights violations. They must be combated vigorously. Figures speak for themselves: in France for example, homicides within the home increased by 16% in 2019, and 80% of the 173 victims were women.

In this address, I would like to focus on the means at our disposal to tackle this scourge, and in particular on the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, the well-known Istanbul Convention.

This Convention is the most comprehensive and far-reaching international treaty to address gender-based violence against women, which means violence affecting women because they are women or affecting them disproportionately. The Convention makes the link between these forms of violence and the historically unequal power relations between women and men. It says that domestic violence and violence against women are by their very nature gender-based as their roots lie in deeply entrenched inequalities and stereotypes concerning the roles of women and men in society.

The Convention sets out obligations on states to prevent violence, protect victims and prosecute perpetrators. It also broke new ground in requiring states to criminalise a broad range of violence against women, including physical, sexual and psychological violence, stalking, sexual harassment, female genital mutilation and forced marriage.

Unfortunately, in recent months we have witnessed renewed offensives on the Istanbul Convention and on women's rights, often endorsed by ultra-conservative movements. Many of the controversies focus on the use of the concept of “gender” in the Convention. Those opposing the use of this term claim it can lead to the “destruction of the family” or the “end of traditional values”.

Over the summer, in Poland and Turkey, prominent politicians called for a withdrawal from the Convention, evoking such misrepresentations of the Convention. Several other member states such as Bulgaria and Slovakia have also expressed doubts about ratifying the Istanbul Convention, questioning the way that the word “gender” is used in the Convention.

These growing attempts to sow confusion and spread false narratives about the Convention are rendered all the more disturbing by the fact that they come in the context of increased cases of domestic violence during lockdown. Of course, it is violence that destroys families, not the word gender.

In truth, these attacks seek to reject gender equality itself and are aimed at reinforcing harmful stereotypes about women's and men's lives. They ignore the diversity of people's real-life situations and attempt to legitimate pervasive discrimination and justify or condone violence against women.

We need to actively refute these false narratives and emphasise how useful the concept of gender is when combating violence against women. In the Istanbul Convention, the concept is used to make the point that gender stereotypes concerning women and men must be addressed because they perpetuate violence against women. The Convention insists on the importance of combating discrimination against women and achieving gender equality in law and in fact as this is a prerequisite to preventing and curbing violence against women.

The Convention also sends out a powerful signal to society that domestic violence is not acceptable and that it can never be considered a private or a family matter. It is a human rights violation, which should be criminalised, and is of concern for society as a whole.

It is encouraging that 34 of the 47 Council of Europe member states have already ratified the Istanbul Convention. However, we should aim for ratification by all 47 member states, so as to scale up our response to violence against women across the continent.

Everyone has a role to play in this: civil society organisations and human rights defenders are key partners in the effort to advocate for ratification and full implementation of the Convention. Large demonstrations in favour of the Convention and of women's rights have been held recently in some countries. The media can also help dispel myths and misunderstandings about the Convention and raise awareness in society about violence against women.

States parties to the Convention such as France also have a role to play: they can share their experience with countries that have not yet ratified it, and encourage them to accede. It would be useful for example for them to know how obstacles and resistance in the process of ratification were overcome. It is also crucial to spell out the positive effects of being a party to the Istanbul Convention, such as those regarding improvements to the legislative framework to combat violence against women, protect victims and punish perpetrators. Practical outcomes should also be highlighted, such as more reporting of cases of domestic violence, the improved response of the police and the judiciary, increased training for professionals and more shelters for victims. For instance, the report by the committee which monitors the implementation of the Convention, the GREVIO, has highlighted progress in France where it comes to promoting true gender equality, achieved through measures fostering an integrated approach to equality issues.

More generally, it is key to share information on measures designed to increase awareness in society of the magnitude of the problem of violence against women and of the disastrous impact it has, both on victims and on society as a whole.

I will keep promoting the ratification and full implementation of the Istanbul Convention in the member states and I hope that all together, we will manage to overcome the resistance and unfounded criticism vis-à-vis this landmark document. This is crucial to our efforts to combat violence against women and domestic violence more effectively.

Before concluding, I would also like to stress that attacks on women's rights have also targeted women's sexual and reproductive health and rights. For instance, I was recently prompted to express my concerns about draft laws intended to curtail women's access to safe and legal abortion in Slovakia and Poland, and I cautioned against any measure that could lead to regression in this respect. I call on you to take this dimension into account when discussing violence against women as there are many links between the two issues. The protection of women's sexual and reproductive rights should be an integral part of the efforts to prevent and combat violence against women.

I wish you a fruitful conference. I trust it will contribute to renewed commitment to the Beijing Declaration, which is as relevant and necessary today as it was back in 1995.