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Launch Event

Combating violence against women in a digital age utilising the Istanbul Convention: GREVIO General Recommendation No.1 on the Digital Dimension of Violence against Women

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Dear GREVIO members,
Distinguished speakers,
Colleagues and friends,

Let me begin by congratulating GREVIO on the adoption of General Recommendation No.1 on the digital dimension of violence against women. I wish to extend my congratulations to all the experts and actors who worked on this document. It is with great pleasure that I take part in this launch event.

Today, in a context where the Istanbul Convention is under attack and where restrictions to contain the COVID-19 pandemic have increased levels of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence against women and girls, your work is all the more essential.

Combating violence against women and girls, including domestic violence, has been among the top priorities on my agenda since the beginning of my mandate. Addressing the digital dimension of violence against women is challenging but also very timely. And that is why I welcome the fact that GREVIO's first General Recommendation focuses on that topic.

The long-standing problem of cyberviolence in Europe has acquired a new dimension in recent years with the rising popularity of social media platforms. Today, online threats of murder, sexual assault or rape are worryingly part of women's daily life. The COVID-19 pandemic has further exposed women and girls to online gender-based violence, particularly sexual violence. It is in this same period that, last year, I published a [statement](#) calling on member states to stop cyberviolence against women and girls. Throughout my work, I have noted how cyber-attacks against women and girls are often not taken seriously, not only by law-enforcement officials, but also by women's families and relations and by society as a whole. Women and girls might not be believed, they are sometimes discredited and stigmatised. They are often told that nothing will change if they speak up. Cyberviolence continues, therefore, to go underreported and underestimated. Huge challenges still lie along the path towards obtaining justice for the women victims who do actually find the courage to speak out.

This needs to change. It is important that manifestations of violence against women and girls in the digital sphere are understood as a form of violence against women that, like any other, hampers the full realisation of gender equality and violates their human rights.

Freedom of expression is a fundamental right which must be protected, but it is not an absolute right. There are limits which apply, in particular with regard to hate speech against women and girls. Cyberviolence against women can and should be prosecuted and sanctioned as such and women should be protected and able to obtain redress.

However, we also need to be aware that, in some cases, content shared online targeting women and girls, which may not reach the threshold to fall under the scope of criminal law, can nevertheless be harmful. Disparaging comments and images can also be destructive, considering the amplitude that this may take due to the multitude of people involved and the wide and quick spread of such content through the Internet and social platforms. Here, awareness-raising is among the preventive measures that can be taken.

I also believe that freedom of expression should serve as a vital tool to counter hate speech and make the digital world a place where women and girls feel safe, free from violence, empowered and more visible. This is why, in 2019, ahead of the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, I [called on](#) member states, and on all of us in fact, to speak up against sexist hate speech in full line with the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers [Recommendation](#) CM/Rec(2019)1 on preventing and combating sexism.

States must address cyberviolence, using all the tools at their disposal. And these tools exist.

Today we have this General Recommendation, dedicated to the application of the Istanbul Convention in relation to the digital dimension of violence against women. This General Recommendation confirms that the Istanbul Convention is the most comprehensive and far-reaching international treaty to address gender-based violence against women. This treaty needs to be valued and adequately implemented to protect women and girls, also in the ever-evolving digital space.

This should be done in connection with other treaties and instruments we have at our disposal, such as the [Lanzarote Convention](#), dealing with sexual abuse and exploitation against children, and the [Budapest Convention](#) on Cybercrime, to which a [second additional protocol](#) on enhanced co-operation and disclosure of electronic evidence was adopted last week.

Considering the disproportionate and very harmful impact that cyberviolence has on women, it is essential to find ways of preventing perpetrators from hiding their identity in the digital sphere. Digital environments cannot be realms of impunity. GREVIO's General Recommendation is full of measures that can be taken in this respect. In particular, the role of all relevant actors, including ICT companies and internet intermediaries, must be enhanced.

The digital dimension of violence against women not only causes women and girls psychological harm and suffering – resulting, in some cases, in physical violence - but it also deters them from digital participation in political, social and cultural life. As women in society experience varying and intersecting forms of discrimination, having an aggravating negative impact in their daily lives, we must be aware that sexist hate speech and cyberviolence may affect women to different degrees and in different ways.

Some women – in fact - are particularly exposed, such as public figures, politicians, journalists and women's rights defenders. Today, I would like to address in particular the situation of human rights defenders and female journalists.

Most defenders of women's rights are women themselves. It is their voices that are often silenced by attacks and threats made by thousands of invisible faces. As a woman, and Commissioner for Human Rights, I am familiar with such attacks online.

I have also noted how the online harassment of women journalists has a significant impact on women's participation in the field of journalism, their personal lives and the ability of society to access information. I have often reiterated that states have the duty to adopt protective measures for female journalists and to encourage the private sector and the media to fight gender-based violence online. Human rights standards to ensure the safety of journalists and combat gender-based violence exist. Implementation is, however, lacking.

In particular, in light of the work carried out by my Office in the past years, I have seen that women's rights defenders and journalists who challenge traditional gender stereotypes or work on issues such as sexual and reproductive health and rights are often specifically targeted in a number of European states. Women defending and reporting on the rights of the LGBTI community are also under constant attack. Those who advocate for the rights of women victims of domestic violence and provide them with assistance have reported continuous harassment and threats online by perpetrators of violence.

Recently, I was informed that women's human rights defenders have also been subjected to cyberviolence for highlighting in some states the importance of ratifying and implementing the Istanbul Convention.

This type of violence in the digital sphere may cause women's defenders and female journalists to withdraw from participating online and from expressing their views on online platforms, silencing their voices and rendering them further invisible in the public debate. This has tremendous consequences. Undermining women's human rights defenders and female journalists' rights and work, in a digital or non-digital environment, means undermining democracy itself. In the context of the current backlash against women's rights which endangers the progress already achieved towards gender equality, this is very dangerous.

Women's defenders and journalists, in their role as public watchdogs in democratic societies, stand at the core of that constant vigilance and mobilisation that incessantly fights against stagnation and retrogression in women's rights.

We, in turn, need to highlight their courage and determination by creating and promoting the use of existing tools and assisting them in this fight. That is also one of the objectives of the adoption of this very first General Recommendation. And that is why, in my dialogue with states, you can be sure that I will continue to call on them to ratify and implement the Istanbul Convention with this guidance in mind, and to have perpetrators duly prosecuted and sanctioned for their acts of violence online.

I will reiterate as it is done in this General Recommendation the need to guarantee easily accessible, safe and specialised mechanisms enabling women to report abuse and obtain both protection and the removal of harmful materials. And to train law enforcement agencies to be able to investigate and prosecute cyberviolence more efficiently. I also believe that initiating societal debates raising awareness about this multifaceted problem and how to tackle it is very important. And, lastly, we should not forget that the internet can also be a good place for awareness-raising campaigns alerting society to the risks of cyberviolence and offering counselling and support services to women's human rights defenders and female journalists. An excellent example is the OSCE Representative on Freedom of Media's [SOFJO](#) project focusing on the online safety of female journalists.

This alone cannot overcome the many barriers women, including women's human rights defenders and female journalists, continue to face in the digital space. Improving their protection also requires that political leaders, opinion makers and influencers refrain from hostile speech and actions against them, and raise public awareness of their work and the importance of protecting their rights. All state authorities need to step up, acknowledge the injustice and suffering created by the digital dimension of violence against women, recognise the costs to society, and work to transform the situation, including by combating the root causes of gender inequality and violence.

I wish you a fruitful conference. I trust that this General Recommendation will contribute to a renewed understanding and commitment to the implementation of the Istanbul Convention, and other Council of Europe instruments.

Thank you.