



“The role of foreign policy in advancing gender equality: Addressing the challenges, pushbacks and obstacles faced by women”

**Conference organised by the
Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Republic of Cyprus
in partnership with the Council of Europe**

CONCEPT NOTE

**26 October 2021
Hilton Hotel
Nicosia, Cyprus**

Hybrid conference



**REPUBLIC OF CYPRUS
MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS**

COUNCIL OF EUROPE



CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

To celebrate 60 years since Cyprus joined the Council of Europe, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Cyprus, in collaboration with the Council of Europe, is organising a high-level conference on **“The role of foreign policy in advancing gender equality: Addressing the challenges, pushbacks and obstacles faced by women”**.

Although progress has been made both nationally and internationally on women’s human rights, full and substantive gender equality has not been achieved to date. In 2021, women and girls all over the world continue to face restrictions on their freedom, as well as various forms of violence. They are still deprived of equal opportunities and equal access to education, health, work, as well as to political, economic, cultural and social life. This situation has been aggravated world-wide by the COVID-19 pandemic.

At the same time, international relations are no longer shaped exclusively within traditional policy domains such as security, defence and States’ other international obligations. We live in an era where climate diplomacy, economic diplomacy, cultural and digital diplomacy, migration and the human rights agenda are all at the centre of foreign policies. In this context, women’s rights and gender equality should be mainstreamed as a horizontal priority in all foreign policy. Policy discussions and implementation must take into account the different needs of women, and for this to happen, women must be included.

International policies therefore need to take into account the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic affects women and men differently and that women have been and are being more adversely impacted in many respects. From the rise in violence against women, including domestic violence, and limited access to family planning services to disproportionate economic impact, measures to control the pandemic affect women, and their basic rights considerably more than they affect men. More specifically, women in migration have been badly hit by lockdowns and border closures, with perpetrators of gender-based violence, including sexual violence, often using COVID-19 as a means of coercive control, isolating women more than ever before. Access to services has been reduced or has even ceased, resulting in migrant women being unable to get help, report violence or gain access to justice and shelters.

Questions related to the gender equality and women’s rights situation worldwide, including the gender-related aspects of international migration and humanitarian policies need to be a major focus of international relations, in order to promote the full implementation of international standards in all of the world’s regions.

These issues must be fully addressed on an international level and more specifically within the context of diplomacy and international relations. As with many disciplines, diplomacy and international politics have historically valued characteristics associated with “manliness” and have been dominated by men. The traditionally male domain and power structures within the diplomatic sphere did not in fact permit women to have access to diplomatic careers equally in different parts of the world. For example, based on a [Council of Europe study on “Balanced Participation of Women and Men in Decision-Making](#), the number of member States where the various functions of the diplomatic service reached the 40% minimum target for both women and men was very low in 2016, especially for the highest positions. The number of minister councillors (lowest rank examined) had on average the highest number of women diplomats (just under 33%). On the contrary, out of 45 countries providing data on the number of women ambassadors extraordinary and plenipotentiary (the highest positions in the diplomatic service), only three States reached the 40% minimum target (7% of countries). It is also important to note that some countries had no women diplomats in some of these positions. This data clearly demonstrates the existence of a glass ceiling in the diplomatic sector.

Consequently, while a number of European countries have developed “feminist foreign policies” in the last years, the meaningful and effective participation of women and girls in international relations, from preparatory processes and decision-making to implementation of decisions, as well as the integration of a gender equality perspective in all aspects of foreign policy continue to be a major challenge in member States of the Council of Europe.

The conference will focus on the role of foreign policy in the promotion of women’s rights and achieving gender equality, including within the migration context, assess current affairs on women’s rights and women’s participation on the multilateral level and discuss the way forward.

Practical aspects

Format: one-day event, 26 October 2021, online, with some physical participation (hybrid).

Target audience: Politicians (including MPs), Public Servants, Ambassadors, Diplomats, Academia, Civil Society, Youth, Migrants, Journalists