

Speaking Remarks by the President of GREVIO
Professor Feride Acar on the occasion of the award of the
Council of Europe Pro Merito Medal
Strasbourg, 23 of May 2019

Madame Director General,

Madam Ambassador,

Excellencies,

Dear Friends and Colleagues,

This is indeed a momentous occasion for me, and I honestly do not know how to express my gratitude in the right way.

I am overwhelmed with feelings of pride and appreciation, but also admittedly with sheer joy!

I would like to say at the outset that I am receiving this most prestigious award, the *Pro Merito* medal, not as an individual expert but as President of GREVIO. So, the glory belongs to all of us, members of the Committee and its Secretariat. In my heart and soul, I am elated to share this celebration of our collective work with you all.

On a personal level, being so honoured by the Council of Europe for work that I have done almost all my professional life, i.e., working for promoting women's human rights, gender equality and elimination of gender-based violence against women, at this particular juncture in my life, is not only unexpected but also most gratifying.

While, for some time, my career as an academic had mostly developed in the field of gender and women's studies in Turkey, it is really my work in the international arena that has given me the greatest satisfaction and pride. Not many academics get the chance to do something with a tangible impact on the everyday lives of real people, while they pursue their academic passion. I am very happy to have had that chance and to be in positions that I believe have touched the lives of many women.

While my CEDAW duties have provided my early exposure to international women's human rights discourse, it is in the Council of Europe and the Istanbul Convention that I have truly experienced the sense of stepping over a threshold, and really being part of something that will have a substantive impact on lives of women in a large geography. Perhaps, because I have been personally involved in the making of the Istanbul Convention from day one or because of the cutting-edge nature of this standard-setting instrument itself, the Istanbul Convention has really become the 'apple of my eye'.

Having the honour of serving as the first President of its monitoring body GREVIO was, therefore, a unique privilege and honour. I am thankful to all my colleagues in GREVIO for giving me that opportunity. I will always cherish it.

I hope that in my role as President during the initial and forming years of GREVIO, I was able to contribute to setting the course in the right direction for institutionalisation of GREVIO as a strong, consistent entity that achieves its mandate fully as depicted in the Convention.

In that sense, let me say that I have always thought of GREVIO as not only the robust monitoring mechanism of the most advanced legal instrument in the world to combat violence against women, but also as a full-fledged women's human rights entity that can take a leading role in the global push for gender equality.

In the last four years, I have had the rather unusual chance of being a member of both UN CEDAW and GREVIO simultaneously. This experience has convinced me, once again, that collaboration and cooperation with fellow rights defenders, be they in civil society or in other international organisations, having close relationships among the different entities working for the same basic goal in various regions is the only viable strategy for success.

I know that at the present time, we are all going through difficult times when it comes to defending human rights and gender equality. However, history has shown time and again that liberalism with such ideals as equality, inclusiveness, diversity, tolerance, and promotion and protection of human rights has always outlived very strong illiberal regimes that have tried to repress and erase these values, including women's human rights. Of late, reactionary, populist movements and governments in so many countries around the world are, once again, openly challenging the values and ideals of civil liberties and gender equality as part and parcel of their retrogressive world views.

While I feel justifiably disturbed by these threats levelled against the very ideals enshrined in the Istanbul Convention, I am in no way discouraged or disheartened. With the passion, dedication and unrelenting work of its supporters, I am sure the Istanbul Convention will play a critical role in countering retrogressive movements and will have a growing eminence towards eliminating violence against women and ensuring gender equality.

I am confident that Council of Europe will always be a key player in pushing the agenda forward and setting the bar highest in these areas.

Now to my 'thank you's...

I am cognizant of and most grateful for the trust that has been placed in me over the years by several governments in my own country, who have nominated or appointed me to different international positions. To have the confidence of women's NGO's in Turkey and abroad has always been a most-valued motivation for me. I am also very thankful to the members of the international community who have enabled me to serve in my area of passion by electing me to various posts all these years.

I would like to express my special gratitude to all the entities and individuals involved in maintaining the exemplary collaborative working environment here at the Council of Europe.

I thank the Council of Europe Secretary General Jagland for his leadership and valuable support, and of course Director General of Democracy Samardžić-Marković who has been most encouraging and empowering the work of GREVIO and myself as its President from the beginning. I see this particular honour bestowed on me today as yet another example of such support. Thank you indeed.

Thank you to also Ambassador Walaas, as President of the Committee of the Parties to the Istanbul Convention, the sister monitoring entity with whom GREVIO has had an exemplary cooperation to ensure that the IC is effectively implemented.

I believe with the impressive talent, passion and wilful work of its members, GREVIO will continue to play an increasingly salient role in protecting women from violence of all kinds, and helping democratic and liberal forces in our societies to resist retrogressive forces. I thank all my colleagues and friends in GREVIO for their ground breaking contributions during the last four years.

From its onset, GREVIO has been blessed with an exceptional Secretariat composed of very experienced and skilled Executive Secretaries; highly competent Administrators who are themselves world-class experts on the Istanbul Convention, and a most dedicated staff for all of whom the work of GREVIO is a true 'labour of love'. My gratitude to all of them needs no further expression. I know that I am receiving this medal today on behalf of all of you.

Thank you to all again.