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## **GENDER EQUALITY COMMISSION (GEC)**

**Conference organised by the Council of Europe  
in partnership with the German Presidency of the Committee of Ministers**

**Berlin, 11-12 May 2021**

**DRAFT Concept Paper**

While, historically, progress has been achieved in the fight for gender equality and the right of every woman and girl to a life free from violence, we are witnessing attempts to question such progress. The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention), which celebrates 10 years from its adoption, has been a primary target of such attacks, in spite of its positive impact. In the words of Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuk, Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director of UN Women, “there is a need to recapture and fast forward from the gains made thus far, which are now under threat. Rather than incremental steps, big bold steps need to be taken”. With this conference, the Council of Europe, under the aegis of the German Presidency of the Committee of Ministers, aims at drawing attention to the progress made and to the challenges ahead, and at taking a bold step towards securing and surpassing the gains reached thus far.

**First day: 10th anniversary of the [Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence](#) (Istanbul Convention)**

May 2021 marks the 10th anniversary of the opening for signature of the Istanbul Convention. The international recognition that the Istanbul Convention has obtained and the concrete impact that it has had on national legislation and practices, as well as - what is most important - on victims, are all causes for celebration. Drawing on international and European standards and case law, as well as best practices and lessons learned at national level, the Istanbul Convention is widely recognised as the most far-reaching legal instrument to prevent and combat violence against women. The evaluations carried out thus far by GREVIO (the monitoring mechanism set up by the Istanbul Convention) clearly show that the convention has inspired and brought changes to legislation and practices in states parties. The treaty is thus delivering tangible results that are trickling down to victims of violence against women.

Yet, against the backdrop of a general “backlash” in the area of gender equality and women’s rights in the world, the Istanbul Convention is increasingly under attack by different groups. Using discourse based on false narratives and incorrect assumptions about the implications of the convention, these voices gained some support and detracted attention from the phenomenon of violence against women and the tools provided by the convention to tackle it. In some cases, this has resulted in a delay or rejection of the ratification of the convention. Council of Europe bodies, GREVIO experts and representatives of the Committee of the Parties to the convention have addressed the objections raised and dispelled the misconceptions around the convention with very clear, evidence-based messages that draw from GREVIO evaluations and states parties’ experience. Demonstrating the unfoundedness of these objections and the convention’s positive impact on states parties, they have underscored the need for an international instrument in addition to solid national legal and policy frameworks. The strength and importance of the convention has therefore been emphasised and action towards further progress should continue.

The number of parties to the Istanbul Convention has thus increased steadily since its entry into force, including in the last years. Non-member states of the Council of Europe such as Kazakhstan and Tunisia have also expressed an interest in adhering to the standards of the convention, setting in motion their national procedures leading to its possible signature. The Assembly of Kosovo\* adopted in September 2020 an amendment to the Constitution that gives direct effect to the convention. The European Union signed the convention already in 2017. More, however, must be done to showcase the benefits of the Istanbul Convention and dispel any concerns over its scope and impact, the aim being ultimately that all member states of the Council of Europe, and beyond, ratify the convention and, in so doing, offer women and girls safety and protection from violence. This day of celebration also serves this purpose.

*The objective of the first day of the conference is three-fold:*

- ✓ Celebrate the 10th anniversary of the opening for signature of the Istanbul Convention;
- ✓ Take stock of the Istanbul Convention's achievements as well as the challenges faced;
- ✓ Encourage member states of the Council of Europe who have not already done so, as well as non-member states, to sign and ratify.

The conference will pay tribute to the important role of the Istanbul Convention in filling a gap in the protection of women from gender-based violence in Europe and beyond. Particular emphasis will be placed on the added value of the convention, the link between achieving gender equality and combating violence against women, as well as recognising violence against women as a human rights violation. In an engaging and interactive manner, the conference will address the current challenges that the Istanbul Convention is facing, placing it into the wider context of the general regression in the area of gender equality and women's rights in the world, including by giving voice to representatives of Council of Europe member states who have not yet ratified the Istanbul Convention, or who have successfully overcome difficulties in the ratification process. The conference will then provide a platform for the exchange of promising practices in implementing the Istanbul Convention, with the participation of state representatives and civil society. This will be achieved through a panel, and also through a dynamic "World Café" event in which, in a more informal setting, participants will discuss how the Istanbul Convention has enabled NGOs and other actors working in the area of violence against women to ensure better prevention, protection, prosecution and integrated policies. The first day of the conference will culminate with a call to member States of the Council of Europe who have not done so already and other participating states, to sign and ratify the convention. The conference is expected to reaffirm the political will of states parties to fully implement the convention, and to generate genuine interest in the convention among key stakeholders, media and NGO representatives in states who are not yet parties.

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\* All reference to Kosovo, whether to the territory, institutions or population, in this text shall be understood in full compliance with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 and without prejudice to the status of Kosovo.

**Second day: *On the road to gender equality: implementing the [Gender Equality Strategy 2018-2023](#)***

Building on the discussions of the first day, achieving gender equality is central to the protection of human rights, the functioning of democracy, and respect for the rule of law, economic growth and sustainability. The Council of Europe, through its [Gender Equality Strategy 2018-2023](#), aims to increase the impact and visibility of gender equality standards by supporting their implementation in member states. The overall goal of the strategy is to achieve the advancement and empowering of women and the effective realisation of gender equality in the Council of Europe member states through activities around six strategic objectives, three of which will be at the core of the second day of the conference:<sup>†</sup>

- *Prevent and combat gender stereotypes and sexism;*
- *Achieve balanced participation of women and men in political and public decision-making;*
- *Protect the rights of migrant, refugee and asylum-seeking women and girls.*

In the process of implementing its Gender Equality Strategy 2018-2023, the Council of Europe engages in the promotion, monitoring and evaluation of standards, in order to identify gaps and obstacles to their implementation. The conference will provide a good platform to do so, with a view to the development of activities, tools and co-operation programmes to address gaps and needs in applying the relevant instruments. Building and strengthening strategic partnerships with national stakeholders, other regional and international organisations, as well as with civil society, is also a priority in order to ensure the necessary synergies, strengthen impact and increase effectiveness, outreach and visibility - in these times of increased pressure on limited resources, not least because of the numerous impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

An assessment of the situation and progress in the member States as regards the implementation of key gender equality standards under the Gender Equality Strategy for 2018-2023 will therefore enable mutual learning, exchanges of experiences and new partnerships, providing a much needed focus to achieve effective equality between women and men at all levels and in all areas - for the benefit of society as a whole, as well as future generations. It will also provide the necessary impetus to accelerate action in priority themes.

*The second day of the conference aims to:*

- ✓ Take stock of progress, experiences and challenges in the implementation of the Gender Equality Strategy 2018-2023 and highlight the most critical issues to be addressed in the next two and a half years;
- ✓ Share information and experience on strategies and tools used to implement the 2019 Council of Europe Recommendation on preventing and combating sexism;
- ✓ Examine the persistent obstacles to achieving a balanced participation of women and men in political and public decision-making, and explore the role of political parties and relevant institutions in making further progress;

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<sup>†</sup> The other three strategic objectives are: "Prevent and combat violence against women and domestic violence" (the focus of day 1 of the conference); "Ensure the equal access of women to justice"; and "Achieve gender mainstreaming in all polities and measures".

- ✓ Highlight promising practices and relevant research on migration, asylum and integration policies from a gender equality perspective.

Sexism is widespread and prevalent in all sectors and societies. Combating gender stereotypes and sexism has been a priority of the Council of Europe since 2013 and various activities have been carried out, in particular in the [media and education sectors](#). The landmark [2019 Council of Europe Recommendation on preventing and combating sexism](#) calls on member states to monitor the implementation of policies to combat sexism at the national level, including through legislative and policy measures. The first panel of Day 2 will discuss the implementation of the recommendation and the related campaign “[Sexism : See it. Name it. Stop it!](#)”, highlighting relevant initiatives of decision-makers and civil society at the national and regional level.

The second panel will address the current situation, trends and tools to reach [a balanced participation of women and men in decision making](#), including parliaments, which is a condition for justice and democracy. This objective requires the implementation of existing standards, but also supporting policies to achieve parity democracy. Co-ordinated action among different stakeholders is necessary - and remains critical - to achieve a balanced participation of women and men in political and public decision-making. Further it is important that female politicians build up networks in order to accelerate their political advancement.

The third and final panel will take stock of the latest research and policies on protecting the rights of migrant, refugee and asylum-seeking women and girls, as well as progress in the [preparation of a new Council of Europe recommendation](#) on this topic. The situation and needs of migrant women have significantly changed in the last decades, with a growing proportion of women migrating alone, and higher levels of labour market participation. Policies and legislation in this field have also progressed over time, including the development of strategies and concepts like gender-sensitive asylum policies; the need to prevent and combat gender-based violence; gender mainstreaming; multiple discrimination and intersectionality.

### **Targeted participants:**

High-level decision makers and policy makers from Council of Europe member states, observers and non-member states; members of the Gender Equality Commission; members of the Committee of the Parties to the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention); members of the Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO); representatives of relevant Council of Europe institutions and bodies; independent international expert groups and treaty bodies; representatives of other regional and international organisations; parliaments; national human rights institutions and equality bodies; NGOs and civil society representatives, including women’s rights organisations; academics; media representatives.

### **Venue and dates of the conference**

The conference will be held in Berlin (Germany) on 11-12 May 2021.