Replies to the SG questionnaire sent to the Chair of the Gender Equality Commission

Strategic priorities

1) What should be the key priorities for the Organisation in order to best respond to the challenges faced by European societies?

Ongoing challenges include: growing inequality, the backlash against gender equality and, more generally, women's rights (which is undermining past achievements); populism and populist governments; the ever present culture of violence and intolerance and the increase in online violence and harm; and in a context of long and not fully known multiplication of negative effects that the COVID-19 pandemic will have in our societies.

In order to best face those challenges, the CoE priorities in the coming years should include:

- a stronger and more visible presence in the public arena;
- raise key issues and facilitate discussions to find the best solutions;
- lead the way towards non-violent and inclusive public discourse;
- set appropriate standards and follow up on their implementation;
- forge alliances with all gender equality mechanisms to respond to challenges through joint actions and innovative approaches.

2) What is the role and added value of the CoE in addressing these challenges?

The CoE should ensure that actions to tackle these challenges are embedded throughout its activities.

The role and added value of the CoE lies in pulling together the experience, knowledge and diversity of its members, bringing high quality and innovation to the issues that need to be addressed. The CoE is a leader and influencer in the field of gender equality, through its standards developed over the years and which member states strive to achieve and use at the national level. The CoE is therefore, in these areas, a reference partner, a high-quality body for international cooperation, and an agent of change.

As an intergovernmental Organisation, the CoE can ensure follow-up action on the issues it tackles, both at the national and European levels.

Governance and working methods

In view of the strategic priorities you have identified:

3) What role could be played by intergovernmental committees? What possible changes could be envisaged to fulfil this role?

4) Is the virtuous circle of standard-setting/monitoring/co-operation still relevant? If yes, can the link and co-ordination with the monitoring and co-operation sectors be improved, and how?

Intergovernmental committees have expertise, political awareness and a commitment to improvement and action. However, they need to ensure that they have experts on gender equality amongst them so that a gender equality approach is mainstreamed in all the Organisation´s work. The role of gender equality rapporteurs and of the Secretariat is therefore

key. Secretariats need to consult widely within the CoE as part of their work (as many do) so that all work is coherent, transversally relevant and avoids unnecessary duplications.

The virtuous circle is absolutely relevant in the area of gender equality, with important instruments and activities already operating on all the three elements of the circle (standards, monitoring bodies and cooperation activities), and even more due to the increasing challenges that the organisation and our societies are facing in this particular area. The GEC regularly exchanges views with relevant monitoring bodies (GREVIO, Social Charter, ECRI etc.) and draws from them inspiration for possible further action. Through exchanges of information on ongoing cooperation activities and the experience of peers, member states are encouraged to develop targeted cooperation activities for the implementation of relevant standards and monitoring findings. These are "permanent" items on the GEC agenda, sometimes with the participation of experts from the capitals and project managers based in the field. But it may be important to find appropriate mechanisms to avoid the development of excessive expectations from member states on the availability of resources for cooperation projects – which are limited and largely depending on external donors.

The new COVID-19 reality has pushed us towards more online work and this situation will be with us for a while. Virtual meetings have been a just about satisfactory replacement for actual/presential meetings, but they are not as effective, since they are less conducive to dialogue and networking. At the same time, it appears that the reduced cost of on-line meetings may facilitate the more frequent organisation of such meetings, formal and/or informal, thus bringing the CoE agenda forward and to responding faster to the challenges that lie ahead.

5) How does your intergovernmental body develop synergies and co-ordination with other bodies and entities of the Council of Europe, and externally?

The GEC enjoys a regular and high level of participation in its meetings and activities from other CoE bodies, international governmental and non-governmental organisations working towards gender equality, and non-member states. Exchanges of views and information are regularly held with such partners. In turn, the GEC secretariat and experts regularly attend meetings of other bodies and entities (internally and externally) working on issues of relevance for its mandate. Joint initiatives have already been carried out with other intergovernmental bodies, such as in the areas of sport and of media, including with a view to the follow-up of relevant standards. Particularly close interaction is, obviously, ensured with the secretariat of the Istanbul Convention and with bodies in charge of its monitoring (GREVIO and the Committee of the Parties).

6) Does the structure of the Secretariat favour synergies with other activities undertaken in the same area by other sectors of the Organisation? Can it be improved, and how?

The GEC Secretariat is very active in liaising with other sectors of the Organisation. The Gender Mainstreaming Team, part of the CoE´s Transversal Programme on Gender Equality, holds meetings twice a year - organised by the Gender Equality Division – to discuss gender mainstreaming efforts throughout the Organisation and update colleagues on the work and activities of the GEC and related co-operation activities to implement the CoE Gender Equality Strategy 2018-2023. Increased awareness raising on the relevance of this work for – basically – all areas of action of the Organisation could be facilitated by more systematic thematic training on gender mainstreaming. Increased opportunities for mobility (including perhaps some form of obligatory "rotation" of staff) could also facilitate synergies. Finally, it may be useful that when defining priorities and terms of reference for all committees some form of coordination be

ensured already within the secretariat to verify the coherence, relevance and absence of overlap between the mandates of the various bodies.

7) How could digital developments facilitate your work?

The GEC has increasingly used IT developments due to the COVID-19 crisis, but these technologies could also be used more widely, or maybe also as a facilitating option available to members who are not able to participate in person. However, it is important to highlight, at the same time, that the role and aim of committee meetings is also to facilitate networking, exchanging ideas and sharing practices, which to a large extent take place only in presence, and often in the margins of meetings, and which are invaluable and irreplaceable by electronic means. The same applies to the research of compromises and consensus, which physical presence facilitates greatly. Further technical improvements may be necessary for specific aspects of committee work, such as for the sharing and drafting of documents in large committees, and the possibility of "seeing" more participants at the same time

Lessons learnt from the sanitary crisis

8) How has the current crisis impacted the policies and priorities of governments across Europe in your area of responsibility? Have new needs for standards emerged as a result?

Some policy actions have been postponed while priorities changed due to the need to focus on the immediate response to the health crisis. Member states' response to the current crisis has varied as regards the attention given to gender equality policies and measures. This situation may well "backfire" in the near future, as we are already facing some direct consequences with regard to increased gender-based violence against women and girls, and with the potentially different impact on the economic aspects of the crisis on women and girls' employment and empowerment. Some of the issues on which the GEC planned to launch new work and prepare new standards before the COVID-19 pandemic remain as relevant as ever, if not more, in the current context. This is the case regarding the preparation of a draft CM recommendation on migrant women which the GEC has entrusted to a drafting committee for the biennium 2020-2021. Women and girls' right to a life free of violence, including online violence, remains a top priority too. These and other questions, such as the economic inequalities, the role of men and boys in promoting gender equality, the impact of new technologies and the Internet etc., remain high on the agenda of the GEC, with a view to the possible elaboration of new standards or other instruments (guide of good practices, declarations etc.), subject to a more thorough reflection and needs assessment.

9) How has the current crisis impacted the functioning of your intergovernmental body?

The GEC has provided governments with ideas and solutions for tackling inequalities that have arisen from the health crisis. GEC members and the secretariat have led the way in providing information and ideas, sharing research findings, etc. A dedicated webpage was prepared showcasing the different measures taken by member states, in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic, and aimed at reducing the impact of the health crisis on existing gender inequalities. The GEC and its Bureau have adjusted their working methods, like other CoE committees, to holding online meetings. At the same time, it has been a learning experience for many GEC members as regard to the use of new technologies both in their national posts and in the CoE context, which can contribute positively to their jobs – while being aware of the limitations of online communication only.

10) What kind of risks or opportunities have you experienced/have you seen emerge during the current crisis? How should the continuing work of your body be shaped in view of these risks and opportunities?

The risk of greater inequalities with regard to the most vulnerable groups is a real one, as is the risk of a greater gender gap particularly in the field of employment. The increase of violence against women and girls has also been a reality in many places, coupled with cuts in gender equality funding in some national contexts, due to the redistribution of budgetary funds operated in some member states to strengthen the economy in a context of severe crisis.

Opportunities have also arisen to positively influence society with regard to the traditional gender roles assigned to women and men, through making more visible the role that women and girls have played, and continue playing, during the crisis and in the current recovery period – as agents of change. This can be used to facilitate a transformative change which is much needed in the society if we are to finally reach *de facto* equality between women and men in Europe and beyond.

An active contribution of the GEC to this end is the ongoing support to the implementation of CM Recommendation CM/Rec(2019)1 on preventing and combating sexism, which lies at the heart of much gender-based discrimination and violence in our societies. The current mandate of the GEC for 2020-2021 includes plans for following up progress on the implementation of this CM Recommendation.

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