

**Conference on Sexual Violence against Women
and Children in Sports
Helsinki, 29-30 April 2019**

Speech by Liri Kopacı-Di Michele, Head of Violence against Women Division and Executive Secretary of the monitoring mechanisms of the Council of Europe Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence

- I would like to thank organisers and the host authorities for the invitation. The conference addresses some very pertinent issues that affect the **integrity, physical and wellbeing sportswomen and girls, men and boys.**
- We all agree that sport provides a **powerful tool to empower women** and bring our societies a step closer to equality between women and men and **to challenge gender stereotypes** and the devaluation of women and girls. **Sport provides girls and boys with key values such as fair play, respect for others and respect for rules, team spirit, tolerance and responsibility**

which form the basis of responsible citizens, and prerequisites for life in a democratic society.

- It is exactly these values that we promote through our work and standards at the Council of Europe. Values and principles enshrined in legally binding texts that set the standards for the functioning of democratic societies and ensure that **violence against women and children is not and should not be "part of the game"**.
- But there is also the other side of the coin: sport sadly can also be the **site of violence and abuse**. Practicing sport may lead to greater exposure to particular forms of **gender-based violence or sexual exploitation and abuse by peers, coaches or fans**.
- Furthermore, **overtly sexualised images of women athletes may incite sexual harassment, lead to poor body image, anxiety, low self-esteem and violence against women by trivialising it and making it acceptable.**

- **[Almost 5 years ago, in June 2014,** George and I were here in Helsinki contributing to a parallel session by the Council of Europe at the 6th International Working Group (IWG) World Conference on Women and Sport entitled “Sport without fear –our concern, our response”]. We spoke about prevalence of violence in sport, action needed, standards in place, the need for awareness raising and breaking taboos, good promising practices and a lot of other issues. Since then, while there has been progress, we are far from guaranteeing a safe environment for women and girls to safely practice sport.
- **Research** carried out by the International Working Group on Women and Sport and published last year, indicates **that violence, sexual harassment, sexual abuse and discrimination remain widespread and underreporting persists**. Most of the time, athletes don’t report abuse because of shame, fear of backlash and negative impact on their career. The same research by the [International Working Group on Women and Sport](#) (IWG – 2018),

found out that more than a third of organisations asked (158 in total) had not taken action since they were last surveyed in 2013.

- Time is now – not in sometime in the future BUT NOW, for **sport clubs and associations to establish efficient ways to deal with instances of gender-based violence, sexual exploitation and abuse in sport programmes and sporting activities.** [*The ultimate aim is to protect women athletes, enable them to practice sport safely – not to protect the brands and their image.*]
- It is equally important **to challenge sporting cultures which accept and tolerate a culture of fear through control, condone negative behaviour such as bullying, emotional humiliation, sexual harassment and sexual abuse at the hands of coaches, peers and other adults.** [*Larry Nassar was sentenced for sexual abuse of 160 female athletes – it's not possible no one was aware of what was going on! This culture of cover up and tolerance towards predatory criminal behavior should stop*]

- Establishing **codes of conduct**, developing and running **education and training programs** for coaches to raise awareness about the scale of abuse, harassment and violence against women in sport and its consequences; establishing **reporting mechanisms** for both athletes and coaches, build strategic alliances with the **media and the private sector** sponsors and work closely with **parents and associations of athletes and coaches** to develop a **safety network and promote an atmosphere of trust**.
- The **Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, also known as the Istanbul Convention**, marks an important step forward in international efforts to prevent and combat violence against women in all areas of life, including in sports. This powerful legal treaty - **the first legally-binding instrument dedicated to putting an end to violence against women in Europe and beyond** – will soon mark five years since its entry into force. Ratified by 34-member states, signed by 11 including the European Union, the convention is **generating the much-needed change both**

regarding policies, legislation but also **changing mentalities, breaking taboos and making sure women and men speak up against violence, stand up for women's safety and ensure they enjoy their basic human right – the right to a life free from violence.**

- The convention makes it clear that violence against women and domestic violence can no longer be considered as a private matter but that **states have an obligation to prevent violence, protect victims and punish the perpetrators.** The Convention presents states with a comprehensive catalogue of measures and asks all relevant actors in particular governments to:
 - **Recognise** the problem and promote measures to **change attitudes** – starting young, with children in schools.
 - **Change the law** so that it includes specific criminal offences for psychological violence, stalking, physical violence, sexual violence including rape, and that it prohibits sexual harassment.

- Make sure the **police is responsive** enough and knows how to deal with violence against women in all its many forms including sexual harassment and sexual abuse;
- Give women a way out by setting up a **safety network** of support services;
- Make sure **the courts serve the victims** and not the perpetrators.
- Encourage the **private sector**, the information and communication technology (ICT) sector and the media to set guidelines and self-regulatory standards to enhance respect for the dignity of women and thus contribute to preventing violence against them.
- The Istanbul Convention also introduces **specific measures for the field of sports**, or that have **particular relevance for sports**.
- Most important among such measures, the Convention creates a better understanding of **sexual harassment**, by introducing a definition that extends beyond the area of work and therefore

recognises that sexual harassment happens in schools and **sports** among others.

- As a measure to prevent violence against women, the Istanbul Convention asks that the **principles of equality between women and men, non-stereotyped gender roles, mutual respect, and the right to personal integrity are promoted in sports** (Article 14).
- The Convention also asks for the **involvement of men and boys in preventing violence against women and girls**. Sport can also be a powerful vehicle for engaging men and boys. In many countries, male athletes from boxers to football players (Turkey) to and rugby players have stepped up and acted as role models by publicly opposing violence against women.
- Last but not least, Article 17 of the convention, asks governments to provide **incentives and work closely with the private sector and media to prevent violence against women**. Media has an

important role to play in this regard. Unfortunately, far too often it perpetuates negative images of sports women and girls.

- We should not underestimate the impact of sexism, sexual harassment, online sexual abuse and sexualization of women in the public eye, including sporting figures. **It has negative consequences on young women's ability to enjoy and participate in sport.** It **undermines their right to feel safe** when they practice sport. It **threatens their personal integrity and dignity.**
- Preventing and combating violence against women **is a state responsibility but we all have a part to play.** The Istanbul Convention is a tool to change the way society, the justice system, and all institutions respond to violence against women, but also the way we think about it and react to it. It calls for a global effort **to break the silence, break taboos, raise awareness, prevent violence and protect women.**

- The **Istanbul Convention and most recent movements such as the #MeToo continue to lift the silence** surrounding violence against women in Europe, including in sport. The convention can therefore be a powerful tool to achieve irreversible change toward a sporting environment without fear and without violence.