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“Structural inequality as the root of violence against women”

Annual conference of the WAVE network
(Women Against Violence Europe)

Welcome Address by Dunja Mijatović
Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights

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Dear organisers, dear participants,

Thank you for giving me this opportunity to talk about these issues which are so high on my agenda.

1. I would like to reflect first on some **recent attempts to undermine women's rights**.

Before, during and after the lockdown prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic, we witnessed renewed attacks on women's rights, often endorsed by ultra-conservative movements.

Once again, some of these attacks targeted the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, the well-known **Istanbul Convention**.

Over the summer, in Poland and Turkey, prominent politicians called for a withdrawal from the Convention, repeating misrepresentations of the Convention, such as claiming that it undermines family values and traditions. Several member states such as Bulgaria and Slovakia have also appeared to express doubts about ratifying the Istanbul Convention, often questioning the way that the word “gender” is used in the Convention.

The growing attempts to sow confusion and spread false narratives about the Convention are rendered all the more disturbing by the fact that they come in the context of increased cases of domestic violence during lockdown. Of course, it is violence that destroys families, not the word gender. We need to actively refute these false narratives and emphasise how useful the concept of gender is when combating violence against women.

The Convention's aim is to tackle gender-based violence, meaning violence affecting women because they are women, and affecting them disproportionately. The Convention makes the link between these forms of violence and the historically unequal power relations between women and men. It says that domestic violence and violence against women are by their very nature gender-based as their roots lie in deeply entrenched inequalities and stereotypes concerning the roles of women and men in society.

The term “gender” therefore is used in the Convention to make the point that gender stereotypes concerning women and men must be addressed because they perpetuate violence against women.

This is why the Convention also insists on the importance of combating discrimination against women and achieving gender equality in law and in fact, as a prerequisite to preventing and curbing violence against women.

Moreover, the Convention also sends out a powerful signal to society that domestic violence is not acceptable and that it can never be considered a private or a family matter. It is a human rights violation, which should be criminalised and of concern for society as a whole.

You can count on my full support in favour of the ratification and implementation of the Istanbul Convention. I will keep raising the issue with member states and I hope that we will manage to overcome the resistance and unfounded criticism vis-à-vis this landmark document.

In addition to attacks on the Istanbul Convention, the focus has also been again on women's **sexual and reproductive health and rights**. I recently expressed my concerns about draft laws intended to curtail women's access to safe and legal abortion in Slovakia and Poland, and cautioned against any measure that could lead to regression in this respect.

Another area where there is increasing objection is **sexuality education**. In Romania, for instance, a law was adopted last June to repeal the inclusion of mandatory sexuality education in school curricula.

In July, I published a Human Rights Comment in which I stressed the crucial importance of comprehensive sexuality education to prevent gender-based violence and discrimination against women. As advocated by the Istanbul Convention, sexuality education should convey strong messages in favour of equality between women and men, promote non-stereotyped gender roles and teach pupils about mutual respect, consent to sexual relations, non-violent conflict resolution and respect for personal integrity. Sexuality education is also a good setting in which to raise awareness about the sexual and reproductive health and rights of women, including access to modern contraception and safe abortion.

This increasingly hostile environment has a negative impact on the **work of women's rights activists**. During my visit to Bulgaria at the end of 2019 for example, I learnt that women's rights defenders, including NGOs working with victims of violence against women, those that had the term "gender" in their names, and academics working in the field of gender studies, had become a target of smear campaigns and hate speech in the media. These campaigns appeared to be driven by members of the same groups which opposed the ratification of the Istanbul Convention. As a result, some NGOs had decided to change their name while others had had to deal with attempts to close them down or to cut their funding. Everywhere in Europe, women defenders are also exposed to sexism, harassment and violence.

It is also crucial to ensure that women can demonstrate peacefully everywhere in Europe to uphold their rights and that they are not at risk of reprisals for doing so.

2. I would also like to talk to you about some of the **concerns for women's rights that have emerged in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic**.

I have been especially interested in the **impact of measures taken during lockdown on the sexual and reproductive health and rights of women**.

Although some countries have taken specific measures to guarantee **women access to abortion and to reproductive health care**, in many other places, access has been restricted by the pandemic in practice.

Access to abortion became particularly difficult for women who live in the few European states where abortion is illegal or severely restricted, such as Malta, as they could not travel abroad to seek assistance and care. But even in states where abortion is legal, pre-existing obstacles were likely to have worsened access to services in due course. These include mandatory waiting periods and counselling, widespread refusal to provide care on grounds of conscience and limits on the use of medical abortion pills. There are also signs that access to contraception became more difficult in some countries.

A growing number of reports indicate that **accessing quality maternal care** has also become problematic and harmful practices have been imposed on women in childbirth. These have included C-sections and induced labour, sometimes without consent, medically unjustified separations of mothers and new-born babies, and in many countries, refusal to allow a birth companion to be present.

Moreover, measures taken during lockdown have had a disproportionate impact on **women from certain vulnerable population groups**, such as migrant women, women from some minority groups and women living in poverty.

The consequences of the pandemic for women's rights may be felt for years.

I plan to pay special attention to this issue in my work. In addition to sexual and reproductive health and rights, other issues of particular concern to me include:

- the reported upsurge in domestic violence and violence against women and restricted access to support and protection;
- the impact of the crisis on funding for women's rights NGOs and activists;
- other economic consequences of the pandemic for women, particularly in view of the disproportionately large number of women employed in the informal economy and, more generally, the probable impact on gender equality of the economic turndown brought about by the crisis;
- occupational segregation and the gender pay gap, which have become even more noticeable during the health crisis as women form the majority of staff in both health care and long-term care institutions, and in the shops which provided basic necessities during lockdown. This crisis has shed a stark light on the disconnect between the low social esteem and low pay associated with these jobs and their vital importance for society.

My goal is to highlight the most threatening consequences of the crisis for women's rights but also to raise awareness about the need for gender-sensitive responses.

3. I would like to finish on a more positive note by highlighting the **crucial role played by civil society in defending women's rights**, including during the COVID-19 pandemic.

To give but one example, I was particularly impressed by the large numbers of Turkish women who took to the streets last summer to defend the Istanbul Convention. This protest was accompanied by campaigns to raise public awareness about the content of the Convention and its importance for Turkish women, and to counteract the dissemination of false ideas about it.

More recently, civil society organisations have launched public campaigns to protect the right to safe and legal abortion in Slovakia. Such examples of civil society activism are heartening.

European NGOs and activists defending women's rights need to be supported and protected in the current context, in which powerful ultra-conservative forces are actively trying to undermine their work. They need both more material resources and public support for their work to counteract campaigns to roll back protection of women's rights. Supporting human rights defenders and organisations defending women's rights will remain a priority for me. I praise them for their courage – in fact I praise *you* for your courage and I stand firmly by you in your work to promote women's rights and gender equality.

As to **Council of Europe member states**, I will continue to welcome gender equality action plans and strategies but I would also stress that simply drawing up action plans and opening a few shelters for women victims of violence is far from sufficient to remedy the widespread problem of gender-based violence in European societies. Preventing violence against women takes time and unremitting effort, including at financial level. It is very much about eliminating structural gender inequality in our societies. This means that I will consistently call on states to promote gender equality and combat sexism in all spheres of life – and to create an enabling environment for all women human rights defenders by removing all obstacles to their work.

To conclude, there is a need for far more comprehensive, resolute and long-term state action so that the many policies and action plans in favour of women's rights translate into real gender equality. I promise you that I will do my utmost to contribute to this long-term goal and to keep calling on states to support the important work each of you are doing to achieve it!

Thank you