

Council of Europe Gender Equality Strategy 2014-2017: Taking stock

Progress and Challenges

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Speaking Points

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Background

- The Council of Europe has a long-standing commitment to gender equality. For the Continent's leading human rights organisation, achieving gender equality is central **to the protection of human rights, the functioning of democracy, respect for the rule of law and economic growth and competitiveness**. This is at the heart of all the work and activities of the Council of Europe in the area of gender equality. It is **the backbone of the Gender Equality Strategy 2014-2017**.
- In 2012, the Council of Europe launched the new **Transversal Programme on Gender Equality**. It presented opportunities and challenges;
- A new departure with clear focus on the implementation of existing standards;

- It set up **comprehensive** structures aiming at **sustainability and mainstreaming** gender equality across all policies and activities: Gender Equality Commission (**GEC**), National Focal Points (**NFPs**), Gender Equality Rapporteurs (**GERs**) and the Gender Mainstreaming Team (**GMT**);
- **Challenge**: pulling together (limited) resources (financial and human), expertise, knowledge and experience, interconnecting the different structures, adopting a cohesive approach to ensure work and activities at CoE level responded to needs, the work and activities to achieve gender equality in the member states.
- **The first major project** of the Transversal Programme: drafting the first ever **Council of Europe Gender Equality Strategy**. What came out of intense work and consultations was the Gender Equality Strategy 2014-2017: **a balanced, flexible and focused document** that builds upon the **strengths, specificities and the added value of the Council of Europe**. A document that has been guiding both the Organisation and the Transversal Programme to achieve the effective realisation of gender equality in the CoE member states through activities around **five strategic objectives**:

1. Combatting **gender stereotypes and sexism**;
2. Preventing and **combating violence against women**;
3. Guaranteeing **equal access of women to justice**;
4. Achieving **balanced participation** of women and men in political and public decision making;
5. Achieving **gender mainstreaming** in all policies and measures;

Mid-Term through the implementation of the Strategy

- The Strategy has allowed the Organisation **to focus its response to the challenges and opportunities faced in the implementation of key gender equality standards** both within the Council of Europe and in its member States.
- It has **energised and accelerated work on narrowing the gap between de jure and de facto gender equality**, as well as brought together resources for greater impact across the organisation, through its gender mainstreaming pillar.
- The Transversal Programme on Gender Equality has gained **visibility, influence and authority** in promoting and implementing gender equality standards.
- The Council of Europe is increasingly recognised as **a lead organisation and reference point** in the field of women's rights and gender equality, both in Europe and beyond.
- Member States continue to **engage in a proactive and meaningful way in activities related to all five objectives of the Strategy** and

national efforts have benefited from the initiatives and tools developed under the guidance of the GEC.

- Co-operation with the member states has been vital and has enabled the Strategy to harness the Council of Europe standards with initiatives, innovative ideas and experience at national level.
- Gender mainstreaming has gained further impetus within the Council of Europe. Work carried out by GERs in the intergovernmental, monitoring and institutional bodies has led to coordinated and sustained efforts to introduce a gender equality perspective in all policies and at all levels.
- Member States are also actively addressing the need for gender mainstreaming, including by setting up inter-sectoral working groups, adopting specific plans and strategies, providing training and support, evaluating and monitoring impact and progress.
- Targeted co-operation projects have provided national authorities not only with relevant standards but also with the tools and the expertise necessary to comply with them.
- The Council of Europe has further developed and strengthened strategic partnerships with other regional and international organisations and civil society. This is crucial to ensure synergies and strengthen impact of actions aimed at narrowing the gap between standards and their implementation and towards the overall protection and promotion of gender equality and women's rights.

Some objective-related achievements include:

1. CoE work on gender stereotypes and sexism has paved the way towards the **preparation of a Committee of Ministers Recommendation on sexism**. It will address **standard gaps** in this area as identified by work on media and image of women, gender stereotypes or the recent activities on addressing sexist hate speech where the CoE has taken a strong lead.
2. The highlight of work on strategic objective 2 is the **entry into force of the Istanbul Convention**. Following numerous successful promotional events (over 105 events in 35 countries), and cooperation with key external partners, the **Istanbul Convention entered in force on the 1 August 2014**. It has become a **global reference instrument** used by other major regional and international organisations in their policy making or standard setting. Without any doubt the reference to it as **“the gold standard” or “primus inter pares”** (thank you Ms Puri!) is the highest possible recognition. The EU is working towards ratification of the Convention - this further consolidates the position of the Istanbul Convention as the most comprehensive international treaty on combatting violence against women and domestic violence and reaffirms once more the European Union's solid commitment to fight gender-based violence and promote gender equality. The Convention is also recognised by other regional or international organisations such as the OSCE or the OECD. It has been a privilege to work with so many partners from across the globe to promote the Convention, cooperation we hope will continue for its implementation.

1. Whether it is making available information, studies, data, research and benchmarks. Or working with the European Court of Human Rights, putting together compilations of good practice, supporting member states to develop training on women's rights and gender equality for legal professionals, or developing a framework for Measuring Access to Justice in cooperation with our colleagues at UN Women, **CoE has contributed to narrow the data gap, make available information and build knowledge to identify barriers that hamper women's access to justice and put forward recommendations to overcome them.**
2. On **balanced participation of women and men in political and public decision-making, monitoring implementation** is used as a tool to support member States in their efforts to comply with Council of Europe standards. The GEC's work in this area focused on the preparation of the questionnaire for monitoring the implementation of the Committee of Ministers on this issue. Likewise previous rounds of monitoring of the same or other CM recommendations in the area of gender equality, we expect the replies from the member states will bring useful information about progress or lack thereof, gaps in policies, legislation and implementation, but also good practice examples that may benefit member states.
3. Contrary to all doubts and low expectations, CoE work in the area of **gender mainstreaming has witnessed growing interest and significant progress has been achieved.** Combining formal structures (GERs and GMT) with more visibility for the work of the different sectors in this area (exchange of views with GEC, presentations to the GMT or other occasions) **have led to a "buy-in"** from the other sectors which are increasingly understanding

the importance of gender mainstreaming into their work and activities. **A total of 42 GERs are currently operational in their respective Committees, monitoring bodies or partial agreements** leading efforts to integrate a gender dimension into their work and activities. Education, media, sport, cinema, health, culture, corruption, terrorism, democracy, local government, legal and judiciary, constitutional matters, youth, electoral assistance, social policies, rights of Roma, or cooperation programmes: the list is long and very diverse. In addition, gender equality issues are increasingly visible in the work and activities of institutional bodies including the Committee of Ministers, ECtHR, PACE, the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities or the Office of the Commissioner of Human Rights.

- **Practical tools and publications, visibility and promotion materials on the Council of Europe standards and their implementation** have been prepared and widely disseminated. Such publications are in high demand by member States, internal and external partners, and are considered to be very **useful tools to monitor progress and compliance with benchmarks and standards in the area of gender equality**. Examples cover all five objectives of the Strategy, cross cutting or transversal themes and come in a wide variety of formats (factsheets, information cards, studies, analytical reports, compilations, handbooks etc. etc. Examples include: (power point photos):

What impact on the ground?

- Many activities towards member states efforts to achieve gender equality **are inspired by and linked to the Council of**

Europe standards and tools. This is a process that goes both ways: CoE standards – both legally binding and what we call soft standards – as well as gender equality related work and activities **are the result of in-depth analysis of problems and innovative solutions and approaches tested in the member states.** They are good practices brought up to the level of a legally binding instruments or recommendation. In turn, such standards **provide benchmarks and inspire work at national level to bring their policy and legal framework in compliance with international agreed standards.** Examples include:

1. legislative and policy measures to sign, ratify and implement the Istanbul Convention (Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, Greece, Ireland, Malta, Republic of Moldova, Poland, Serbia, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Turkey);
2. national strategic plans on gender equality with thematic priorities in common with the Council of Europe Strategy (Cyprus, Greece, Slovak Republic);
3. activities to combat gender stereotypes and sexism (Croatia, Denmark, France, Republic of Moldova);
4. activities to improve women's access to justice (see compilation of good practices on this topic, with contributions from 23 member States);
5. measures to increase women's participation in political decision-making based on the Council of Europe standard requiring a minimum representation of each sex above 40% (about 30 CoE countries have either legal or voluntary political parties' quotas);
6. training on gender equality issues (ex. the work of the Council of Europe and its Gender Equality Commission, addressed to civil society and prepared by the GEC member

from Portugal; 2 successful GM training for GERs from the different intergovernmental committees at the Council of Europe GM training for Estonian representatives)

7. Last but not least keeping gender equality high in the political agenda both at CoE and national level: Gender Equality and related work or activities has been a priority for several Presidencies of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe - the host country of the Conference Estonia being an example.

➤ **Targeted co-operation projects on gender equality issues** provide member states with policy and legal expertise to ensure compliance with Council of Europe and other international standards. Some examples include:

1. a two-year regional project funded by the EU Programmatic Co-operation Framework to improve women's access to justice in five countries of the Eastern Partnership;
2. co-operation with UN Women on the preparation of a multi-country study on the availability and accessibility of services in response to violence against women and girls;
3. co-operation with the South-Mediterranean countries to combat gender based violence and promote gender equality;
4. co-operation under the EEA/Norway Grants in the area of violence against women and domestic violence.

Challenges

In brief:

1. The gap between standards and their implementation, *Beijing +20 existence of a wide gap between legislation and its implementation in all areas of the Beijing Platform for Action*;
2. Growing threats to women's human rights (rise of authoritarianism, radicalisation, illiberalism and populism); or in the words of the regional review carried out by the United Nations 20 years after the Beijing Conference *"rising conservatism and a pushback on gender equality and women's rights and empowerment"*
3. Reduced resources and weakening of national gender equality mechanisms;
4. Restrictions and reduction of support for women's rights civil society organisations;
5. Challenges related to intersectionality: some groups of women experience specific problems (migrant, refugee, Roma, or LBT and therefore more significant inequalities.

Context

- The Council of Europe action for gender equality operates in a **global and regional context which has shown positive but limited results**. At the global level, **no country in the world has yet fully achieved equality and empowerment of women and girls**. In March 2015, the UN CSW reviewed the progress made in the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, 20 years after its adoption. The conclusion was that progress has

been “**slow and uneven**”, that “**major gaps remain**”, and that “**obstacles persist, including structural barriers**”.

- Europe’s regional review also referred to the “**existence of a wide gap between legislation and its implementation in all areas of the Beijing Platform for Action**”
- The challenges that Council of Europe member States face in the implementation of the Strategy are obviously related to the wider context mentioned above. These challenges call for enhanced synergies and partnerships, stronger implementation, accountability and monitoring of standards, as well as stronger standards, co-operation and communication.

The Future

- Looking forward to the discussions and contributions of this Conference as well as its proposals and recommendations for future work.