

Opening Speech

Women Empowerment Conference

Protecting Girls: Reinforcing the Euro-Mediterranean cooperation to protect girls against gender-based violence

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is my pleasure to welcome you all here in Lisbon at the premises of the European Commission's Representation in Portugal whom I take the opportunity to thank for its support and for hosting us.

I would like to welcome the wide variety of our participants present here today, the distinguished members of the diplomatic corps, representatives of the Portuguese Ministries of Foreign Affairs and of the Interior, the Portuguese NGO Platform, representatives of the civil society from Egypt, Lebanon and Morocco, as well as the academia.

I would also like to warmly welcome our many online participants. We have 150 online participants joining us from across the entire Euro-Mediterranean region.

I am delighted to address you at this opening session of the Women Empowerment Conference on "Protecting Girls". This is a vitally important topic when it comes to defending human rights, promoting the rule of law, and supporting democratic reforms. These are the basic values that guide the work of the North-South Centre of the Council of Europe in its mission to promote an active global citizenship and dialogue between the North and the South by fostering solidarity and raising awareness of global interdependence.

Since its creation, 32 years ago, the North-South Centre has been playing a dual political role of representing "the voice of the South" within the Council of Europe,

as well as promoting and transmitting the Council of Europe values through the promotion of key conventions and other legal standards.

With its office in Lisbon, a bridge between Europe and the South, the North-South Centre is an instrument of multilateral co-operation and of the Council of Europe's policy towards neighboring regions.

It holds the conviction that dialogue and cooperation are crucial for a genuine universality of human rights and in this respect, recognizes the unique roles played by civil society organisations. Civil society organisations are the ones closest to the day-to-day realities and challenges on the ground while also being those who can support the effective application at the local level of national laws and international standards.

This is particularly true when we take into consideration the on-going health, economic and humanitarian crises and their dire consequences on our populations – and more particularly on certain groups, such as women and children, the majority of whom see their situation of vulnerability to violence worsening. We know that girls face much greater risk of abuse, sexual exploitation, violence and forced marriage during conflicts and natural disasters or in situations like the recent pandemic. In that context, supporting civil society actors, who have a frontline role in ensuring the protection and support of victims, is essential.

This is precisely the objective of the North-South Centre's project, and of this Conference, which brings representatives of the Euro-Mediterranean region together to address the important issue of the protection of girls against violence.

This event is organised in the framework of a joint programme between the European Union and the Council of Europe ["Regional Support to Reinforce Human rights, Rule of Law and Democracy in the Southern Mediterranean" \(South Programme IV\)](#). It aims to support the on-the-ground enforcement of key practices focusing on the protection of women and girls victims of gender-based violence in the Euro-Mediterranean region.

Distinguished speakers, and participants,

The willingness to protect girls from all forms of violence, everywhere and throughout the world; The willingness to provide them with a bright future, ensuring that they stay safe at home, at school, in the community, as well as online:

This is what brings us together today!

Our determination to pool our efforts, to support each other in achieving our common goals by sharing insights and practices, is what we aim to achieve during this conference.

Today we have much information, tools, legal instruments and citizen engagement to fight against the scourge of gender-based violence against girls. However, the efforts and the way to go remain a considerable challenge.

We must then act together, North and South, Civil society and decisions makers, in close partnership.

Solidarity is a concept dear to the work of the North-South Centre. But it must not only be considered in emergency situations. Solidarity should be our constant concern if we want to achieve global social justice, equality of rights and equal opportunities for all. And on behalf of the North-South Centre, it's an honor to work with you in achieving those goals.

This Conference is the last component of the North-South Centre's project on combating violence against women and girls. This is also a highly significant and symbolic event in the context of the 10th anniversary of the Women Empowerment programme.

The conference will mark the beginning of renewed cooperation thanks to the conclusions that will be produced today.

In closing, I wish you all a very successful conference. It is with appreciation and with great expectation that I look forward to today's reflections.

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