

Women Empowerment Conference

Protecting Girls: Reinforcing the Euro-Mediterranean cooperation to protect

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Dear representatives of the European Union, of the Portuguese Government, dear Afonso, dear colleagues, dear participants,

I am delighted to be taking part in this regional seminar as Coordinator of the Council of Europe's policy towards neighbouring regions. The theme that we are discussing today is of crucial importance: the Euro-Mediterranean cooperation to protect girls against gender-based violence and has regrettably become even more topical during the covid pandemic. According to several national and international reports, sexual abuse on children increased very significantly as a side consequence of the pandemic. For ex, a report published by Interpol in September 2020, stated that “we are seeing just the tip of a growing iceberg in terms of online child exploitation material”.

Girls are especially vulnerable as regards. And we know very well that vulnerabilities can be multiple. This is why this seminar will also discuss specific issues relating to migrant and refugee girls.

Preventing, combating and prosecuting violence against girls is a global challenge, to which Europe is confronted, like the Southern Mediterranean region. Hence, the protection of girls has been at crossroad between several of the main areas of action of the Council of Europe in the cooperation with the Southern Mediterranean region.

In this common fight, several Council of Europe's conventions are relevant: Istanbul, Lanzarote, Budapest, or even organ trafficking. And let us not forget that crime against children can also be part of organised crime, and that the Council of Europe has developed many tools on that. And, I usually say that Council of Europe standards, although made in

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Europe, are much broader in their reach and use. And this is especially the case for the topic which gathers us together for this Conference.

This activity is organised as part of the South Programme IV, a joint initiative between the European Union and the Council of Europe co-funded between the European Union and the Council of Europe's and implemented by the Council of Europe. The implementation of this programme, which has recently celebrated a decade in a Conference held at Alicante in Spain, has been faced with a decade marked by very important challenges in the Southern Mediterranean region, political instability, economic problems, sub-regional conflicts, and even war.

Despite this challenging context, many results have been achieved over the past decade for a better protection of human rights in the region. Let me mention a few of them, which are especially relevant for us today:

- 1) **Enlarged common legal space:** based on the universal values promoted by the Council of Europe and reflected in its flagship conventions, including in particular those of Istanbul, Lanzarote, or Budapest on cybercrime. This has been reflected in the accession of some countries of the region to several to Council of Europe conventions, such as Tunisia's accession to Lanzarote to protect children against sexual abuse in 2019. Morocco is CP to cybercrime. We hope that other countries like Morocco will also soon join Lanzarote.
- 2) This has also been reflected in the **harmonisation of national legislation and instruments with European standards**. As way of example, the programme has accompanied the revision of legislation in areas which are relevant to our work today, like the law on combating VAW in Tunisia. The programme has also contributed to the launch of the first online reporting platforms to combat cyberviolence of children in the southern Mediterranean region launched and promoted in Tunisia and Morocco to combat cyberviolence of children in collaboration with Internet Watch Foundation. These platforms are instrumental for the protection of children as they allow citizens to securely and anonymously report images and videos of sexual abuse against children posted on the Internet.
- 3) **Capacity-building:** the programme contributed towards strengthened protection of children, including in the digital environment, through the promotion of the online portals and by building capacities through training activities targeting parents and

educators. Fighting violence against women is another essential feature of the training component for the benefit of legal professionals, civil society, including through the European Programme for Human Rights Education for Legal Professionals and its thematic courses, both on the online platform and through tutored courses.

- 4) **Support to multilateral and multisectoral cooperation:** this led, in particular to the launch of the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) for identifying and referring potential victims of human trafficking in Tunisia, in December 2021. It is the first referral mechanism established in the Southern Mediterranean region and represents an important step forward in fostering cooperation between countries in the fight against human trafficking in the region and beyond. The setting-up of a referral mechanism is one of the key recommendations of the Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (GRETA) for an effective implementation of the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings. A similar approach has been followed for the ongoing development of a national referral system to protect women victims of violence. This process will involve capacity building of stakeholders in the areas of detection, referral, care, and social reintegration of women victim of violence.

- 5) Last but not least, the programme supports the **functioning and creation of networks in the region** through Unidem Med which aims at supporting the modernisation of public administration; the actions implemented by the Schools of Political Studies in the region to build capacities and exchanges of experiences between young leaders of the region; or events of the North-South Centre like the Lisbon Forum in the past, or the event which is gathering us today.

The Council of Europe's work in the region will continue, notably in the framework of the South V Programme, which will be launched from September 2022 until 2025.

The current challenges are numerous and complex, but I am convinced that we have the means to face them, in particular by forging links and exchanging at the level of the Mediterranean region.

Thank you for your attention and I wish you fruitful exchanges during the Conference today.