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Women's rights at the crossroads: strengthening international co-operation to close the gap between legal frameworks and their implementation

Conference organised by the Council of Europe in co-operation with the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, its causes and consequences and with the French Presidency of the Committee of Ministers

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International co-operation was at the heart of developing the concept of gender-based violence against women as a violation of their human rights. The 1993 UN Declaration on the elimination of violence against women and the 1995 Beijing World Conference on Women were milestones in this regard. It does not come as a surprise that the Inter-American Convention on the prevention, punishment, and eradication of violence against women – the Belém do Pará Convention – came into force at the same time in 1995. Another important regional step was the adoption of the Maputo Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights in 2003.

Now we have a strong international and regional legal and monitoring framework for addressing violence against women. The progress in standard setting is aptly summarised in the CEDAW General Recommendation on gender-based violence against women published in 2017. In Europe, the Istanbul Convention was quickly signed by most Council of Europe member states following its adoption in 2011 and it has now been ratified by 34 countries. The associated monitoring body, GREVIO, is already working at full capacity. I would like to salute its founding President, Feride Acar, who will address you in a moment.

Frankly, I am not sure whether the response to the Istanbul Convention would be equally enthusiastic if it had been adopted today. Translating international standards into a domestic reality is always a big challenge. However, now we can no longer take willingness to make progress in gender equality for granted. We are witnessing stagnation and backward steps in gender equality. Several member states also appear to express doubts about ratifying the Istanbul Convention.

I am aware of growing efforts to sow confusion and spread false narratives about the Convention. The protagonists often focus on criticising the concept of gender and claim that the use of the term would lead to the “destruction of the family” or the “end of traditional values”. Of course, it is violence that destroys families and not the word gender. We need to actively refute these false narratives and uphold the usefulness of the concept of gender in combating violence against women.

The term is used in the Convention to make the point that gender stereotypes about women and men must be addressed because they perpetuate violence against women. The expression gender-based violence is applied to describe forms of violence that are directed against women because they are

women and which affect women disproportionately. This forms the basis for the human rights-based approach against violence.

In reality, attacks against the concept of gender often aim to reject gender equality itself and tend to reinforce harmful stereotypes. They ignore the diversity of life situations and attempt to legitimate pervasive discrimination and even condone violence against women.

We will naturally need to continue our dialogue with member states to persuade all of them to ratify the Istanbul Convention. However, as most of Europe has already ratified it, it is time to put increasing emphasis on its effective implementation, including monitoring. This is also an important means of convincing the public about the Convention's usefulness.

During my country visits, I have often put a special focus on combating violence against women. I also visit shelters for women victims of violence and discuss the situation with residents and staff. In Armenia and Hungary, I urged the authorities to ratify the Istanbul Convention to ensure a comprehensive response to violence against women. In Estonia, Romania and Poland, I was already able to assess the efforts to implement the Convention.

Major issues to be addressed include:

- limited coverage and funding of support services,
- uneven implementation of legislation on domestic violence, and
- low levels of reporting and problems in accessing justice.

More efforts are clearly needed to remove perpetrators from the family setting so that repeat victimisation can be prevented. Investigations and prosecution of violence should be made more effective. Continuous training among the police, prosecutors and judges is essential.

The steadily growing number of reports by GREVIO is in the process of establishing the baseline for the Convention's implementation. The reports give a great deal of detail on the challenges and needs for assistance faced by member states. The implementation gaps must be resolved to fulfil the promise of a comprehensive response to violence against women.

Defenders of women's rights and NGOs working to promote gender equality are key partners in our combat against gender-based violence. They were the pioneers in providing support services to women victims of violence. They have also been instrumental in promoting the establishment of domestic and international standards in this area.

Unfortunately, the backlash on gender equality has also affected their work. The space for civil society has narrowed down in many countries. Women's rights defenders face obstacles in obtaining adequate funding and they are not always consulted by the authorities on questions related to gender equality. Women defenders are also exposed to sexism, harassment, and violence themselves.

It is crucial that we continue to support civil society in the field of gender quality and highlight the problems they encounter. Without active NGOs our efforts to monitor measures against gender-based violence will be far more difficult.

We should not forget men either. While it is true that most perpetrators of gender-based violence against women are men, men can also become agents of change against violence. They can be effective communicators in raising awareness of gender-based violence among men, and women too. Ultimately, we must aim to modify men's violent behaviour and the gender stereotypes they are rooted in.

The prevention of violence against women takes time and continuous effort. It is very much about eliminating structural gender inequality in our societies. I am impressed by the close cooperation towards this end by the Platform of independent international and regional women's rights mechanisms.

The UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women, Dubravka Šimonović, has given leadership to this initiative and it is essential for me to work together with her and the Platform. Imparting coordinated and consistent messages is all the more important as we are facing new obstacles in our work. We need to be robust and determined in defending gender equality and combating violence against women. The independent and impartial monitoring of the implementation of agreed standards will be key to ending violence against women.