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Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination

COVID-19 and violence against women: a holistic response based on the standards of the Council of Europe Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence

Information document prepared by the Secretariat

1. On 5 May 2020, the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe organised a webinar on “COVID-19 and violence against women: a holistic response based on the standards of the Istanbul Convention”.
2. Interventions focused on raising awareness of the standards of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women ([Istanbul Convention](#)) in tackling violence against women and ensuring access to services; the role of parliaments and parliamentarians in advocating for its implementation, including in times of crisis; identifying promising practices; and highlighting the importance of international cooperation and coordination.
3. The event took note of the fact that the lockdown and confinement measures designed to contain the spread of the coronavirus have led to an upsurge in violence against women. It noted that in “normal” times, throughout the world, 87 000 women are killed every year because of their gender and that during the pandemic, violence against women has increased in all different settings: in public spaces (harassment), private spheres (domestic violence) and online (cyber violence). The lockdown measures have turned homes from safe places into dangerous and isolated traps for women who are victims of domestic violence.
4. The situation is further aggravated by limited access to preventive and protective measures and services. Therefore, it is imperative that national authorities take adequate steps to prevent violence, protect victims and prosecute perpetrators, in line with the principles and standards of the Istanbul Convention. Due attention should be paid to tackling the root causes of violence against women: inequality and the imbalance of economic, social and cultural power between women and men. Integrating a gender dimension in all policies and measures to contain the pandemic and all recovery efforts is also essential.
5. Interventions highlighted the importance of parliamentary scrutiny of all government measures, actions, and legislation aimed at tackling violence against women to ensure a gendered approach, balanced allocation of resources and compliance with the standards of the Istanbul Convention.
6. Speakers expressed concerns that the COVID-19 crisis has sometimes been used to curtail overall human rights and especially women’s rights, including sexual and reproductive rights, and called for continuous vigilance to guarantee that women’s human rights are upheld.
7. Interventions from the panellists and online discussions also highlighted the importance of guaranteeing the availability of services to women at risk of becoming victims of violence. They stressed that essential services such as shelters or helplines were available before the crisis and that they should continue to be available and accessible during and after the crisis. There is a real need for comprehensive service planning and emergency preparedness and in this regard, the crisis should be considered as an opportunity to draw attention to issues surrounding violence against women and to create longer term commitment to ensuring the sustainability of services for victims of violence. Due attention should be paid to the availability of, and access to, services for specific groups of women such as elderly women, women with disabilities or women living in rural areas. Technological tools, which have been broadly used during the COVID-19 crisis, should continue to be used and developed and be made accessible to all women without discrimination. While the pandemic has had very negative impacts in our societies, it is important to recognise the attention it has brought to issues related to violence against women and the fact that it has pushed governments to act and come up with innovative solutions to the pandemic emergency. It is important to remain vigilant and hold governments accountable to pledges and promises made.
8. There is overall agreement that the Istanbul Convention, often referred to as a “gold standard”, provides member States with comprehensive standards and tools to prevent violence, protect victims and prosecute perpetrators. In the words of one of the speakers, the Convention is like a charter on women rights. Cooperation and coordination between all relevant actors, including civil society and women’s rights organisations, are essential to promote the ratification of the Istanbul Convention by all European states, and beyond, in order to realise its full potential as a global tool to end gender-based violence. The decision of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe to invite Kazakhstan and Tunisia as the first non-member states to accede to the Istanbul Convention, is a very welcome development.
9. Participants welcomed the [declaration by the Committee of the Parties to the Istanbul Convention](#) which states the relevance of the principles and requirements of the Istanbul Convention in the areas of prevention, protection, prosecution and integrated policies, and provides clear guidance for governmental action under the current exceptional circumstances. Solutions and practical measures exist in the provisions of the convention, including a response to specific problems brought to light by the COVID-19 crisis such as: the proper implementation of eviction mechanisms, which are very important to ensure the safety of women; alternative solutions to ensure there are enough shelters for women and children victims of violence; and raising

awareness of available services and their locations. Therefore, the focus should be on the effective implementation of the convention.

10. In this regard, the role of parliaments and parliamentarians is very important in holding the executive accountable for the implementation of commitments undertaken at national and international level. The [Handbook](#) for Parliamentarians on the Istanbul Convention is a unique tool for parliamentarians and national parliaments to mobilise action and resources to ensure the implementation of the convention.

11. The backlash against women's rights is real and it is important to keep women's rights and ending violence against women at the top of the political agenda at regional, national and international level. In the words of one of the speakers, it is important to mobilise: "The world is prepared to stop everything to save lives during a pandemic. Why is the world not mobilising to save the lives of women who are victims of gender-based violence?"

12. Participants also drew attention to the fact that 2020 was to be a very important year for women's rights, firstly, with major events scheduled to mark the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and, secondly, through the organisation of two major events of the Generation Equality Forum 2020 to mobilise and re-energise efforts to push for gender equality. The pandemic crisis has forced the international community to postpone such events, but it is important to ensure that, despite all the difficulties, work to uphold women's human rights continues.

13. In concluding, participants stressed that the following points should guide all efforts and action to tackle violence against women:

- ratify and implement the Istanbul Convention and ensure all action, measures and legislation to end violence against women and domestic violence comply with its provisions;
- continue working with the member States to ensure all member States ratify the Istanbul Convention;
- guarantee the availability of and access to: essential services such as shelters and helplines; sexual, reproductive and health rights for all women, both during the present crisis and after;
- include violence against women in the European catalogue of crimes to unify measures to fight gender-based violence;
- use "gender lenses" to analyse all policies and measures designed to tackle the pandemic crisis and ensure the gender dimension is duly integrated in all recovery measures and plans;
- identify and disseminate good practices on prevention, protection, prosecution and coordinated policies to end violence against women;
- strengthen cooperation to tackle the backlash against women's rights and violence against women;
- collect disaggregated data to inform measures and policies;
- pay attention to specific groups of women such as women with disabilities, migrant refugee women or women in rural areas;
- be aware of the issues raised using new information and communication technologies and guarantee access to all women without discrimination;
- ensure a balanced participation of women and men in all decision-making bodies.

Appendix 1

Useful links

A. Council of Europe resources

Access to the webinar:

- Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/NetworkWomenFreefromViolence/videos/524515881763066/>
- You Tube: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCwDH2OWHMX1ARsxdg-YTGgg/videos>

[Council of Europe's web page on women and COVID-19](#)

[Istanbul Convention](#)

["Questions and answers" on the Istanbul Convention](#)

[Handbook for parliamentarians on the Council of Europe Istanbul Convention](#)

[Resolution 2289 \(2019\) of the Assembly on The Istanbul Convention on violence against women: achievements and challenges](#)

[Resolution of the Assembly on Towards an ambitious Council of Europe agenda for gender equality](#)

Declaration of the Committee of Parties of the Istanbul Convention:

- [Summary and link to full text](#)
- [Direct link to full text](#)

[Resolution 2274 \(2019\) on Promoting parliaments free of sexism and sexual harassment](#)

B. UN resources

[The UN Women Policy Brief on COVID-19 and Ending Violence against Women and Girls](#)

C. European Union resources

[Resolution of the European Parliament \(28 November 2019\) on the EU's accession to the Istanbul Convention and other measures to combat gender-based violence \[P9_TA\(2019\)0080\]](#)

[European Commission Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025](#)

D. Other resources

[Human Rights Dimensions of Covid-19 Response, analysis by Human Rights Watch, 19/03/2020](#)

[Recommendations of the European Women's Lobby on the impact of COVID on women](#)

Appendix 2

Programme of the webinar

COVID-19 and violence against women: a holistic response based on the standards of the Istanbul Convention

5 May 2020, from 15.30 to 16.30 (CEST)

Welcome Remarks:

- Wojciech Sawicki, Secretary General of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe

Panellists:

- Zita Gurmai, PACE Rapporteur on the Istanbul Convention
- Nina Nordström, Ambassador, Permanent Representative of Finland to the Council of Europe, Chair of the Committee of Parties to the Istanbul Convention
- Julien Pellaux, Strategic Planning and Operations Adviser, UN Women
- Arba Kokalari, European Parliament Co-Rapporteur on the EU accession to the Istanbul Convention
- Sylwia Spurek, European Parliament Co-Rapporteur on the EU accession to the Istanbul Convention
- Nicholas Spetsidis, Project Coordinator, Union of Women Associations of Heraklion Prefecture, Greece
- Hillary Margolis, Senior Researcher, Women's Rights Division, Human Rights Watch

Moderator:

- Marja Ruotanen, Director of Committees, PACE