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23 June 2020

Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination

Parliamentary Webinar

Gender dimension of foreign policy in the response to COVID-19

Information document prepared by the Secretariat

1. On 11 June 2020, the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe organised a webinar on the “Gender dimension of foreign policy in the response to COVID-19”.
2. Interventions focused on raising awareness of the importance of a gender dimension of foreign policy, including in the responses to the COVID-19 crisis, as well as sharing good practices and recommendations on the way forward. The event echoed and contributed to the updating of the report on “[The gender dimension of foreign policy](#)” currently on the Parliamentary Assembly agenda.
3. The event took note of the fact that 2020 was supposed to be the year of activism and celebration for gender equality, with the 25th birthday of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action as well as the 20th anniversary of the UN Security Council Resolution 1325, the normative framework for the women, peace and security agenda. The crisis has delayed these events, and in particular the “Generation Equality Forum”, a global gathering scheduled to take place in Paris in July (and in May, in Mexico). The postponement of these international events to 2021 will provide an opportunity to draw lessons of the crisis and see what innovative mechanisms can be put into place.
4. The event highlighted the increased backlash against women’s rights since the outbreak of the pandemic. Lockdown and confinement measures have led to an upsurge in violence against women, especially domestic violence, and more difficulties for women to access sexual and reproductive health and rights. The COVID-19 crisis acts as a magnifying glass for existing inequalities in our society as certain groups have been disproportionately affected, including women with disabilities, women of different social and economic backgrounds, elderly women and persons belonging to minorities.
5. Speakers pointed out that decision and policy-making panels are mainly composed of men: women are either underrepresented or altogether absent from such processes. The response to the pandemic of COVID-19 was described as “gender blind” and attention was drawn to the fact that measures put in place cannot be “one size fits all”. They need to take into account the interests and hear the voices and concerns of all different groups of people. Parliaments can contribute towards raising awareness of these issues through parliamentary and public debates on the gender dimension of the pandemic and on the need to introduce gender mainstreaming in all recovery policies and measures. In their interventions, panellists also touched upon issues related to the types of leadership in times of crisis: from what one speaker described as “machismo politics” to “inclusive leadership” giving clear direction and showing empathy to communities in distress.
6. Some progress has been made in women’s representation in the field of foreign and security policy in recent years but changing mindsets is a lengthy process. There was a general agreement that normative ideas of masculinity and manhood had shaped policy and institutions for decades, and that this needed to change. It is important to ensure that not only are more women represented in diplomacy, especially at the higher echelons, but also that a gender approach to foreign policy changes the content of policies: so-called ‘women’s issues’ are often the cornerstones of foreign and security policies, and both women and men have to work together on issues of common interest and benefit.
7. Countries like Sweden, France or Canada have shown leadership in promoting and adopting progressive gender equality policies at national and international level. One panellist highlighted the importance of following the example of Sweden by institutionalising gender mainstreaming at all levels of government and ensuring the cooperation and collaboration of all government structures in order to maximise impact.
8. The implication of women is no longer seen as an issue concerning women only but a question of sustainable security and peace. Policies directly affecting women should not be decided without them, or as one of the speakers said, citing the words of former Swedish Deputy Prime Minister Margot Wallström: “nothing about us, without us.”
9. Positive and progressive change is possible, but it takes time and commitment. The key challenge is to reach out and convince those who do not agree. One way to do this is for leading countries to bring the gender dimension to the forefront whenever they chair multilateral bodies. A gender dimension in foreign policies should not only be implemented at a national level. International and European institutions should also work to ensure a gender inclusive and intersectional response to the crisis. In the European Parliament, the current representation of women is just over 40%, although it is only around 35% in committees dealing with external affairs. The Parliament was urgently pressing EU institutions to include gender analyses in their proposals, introduce gender mainstreaming across the board, and step up gender-based budgeting. The Parliament is also encouraging all member States to ratify the Istanbul Convention.

10. Participants drew attention to the necessity of having an intersectional gender dimension in foreign policy as “one woman does not represent all women”. Women are different and face different challenges. Intersectionality is very important to ensure in the words of several speakers, we “leave no one behind”.

11. In their concluding remarks, panellists highlighted some proposals and recommendations to guide efforts and actions in promoting a gender dimension in external policies and ensuring women’s access to leadership positions in this field:

- Put on gender lenses to analyse all policies and measures designed to tackle the pandemic crisis;
- Ensure the gender dimension is duly integrated into all recovery measures and plans;
- Collect and disseminate disaggregated data and statistics;
- Ensure balanced participation of women and men in all decision-making bodies, including in external actions;
- Identify and disseminate good practices on gender equality policies at national and international level;
- Pay attention to specific groups of women such as women with disabilities, migrant and refugee women or women in rural areas;
- Promote the institutionalisation of gender mainstreaming at the level of member States and, as required, provide support to achieve this including through the compilation and dissemination of good practices in this regard;
- Encourage political leaders to embrace a feminist, intersectional and inclusive approach to foreign policies;
- Guarantee the participation and representation of women in all crisis response planning and decision making;
- Undertake gender impact assessments and ensure gender budgeting for all recovery measures and financial packages;
- Hold public debates on the gender dimension of the COVID-19 pandemic and promote an intersectional approach to recovery plans;
- Ensure intersectionality through the participation of women from diverse backgrounds in the institutions;
- Promote the ratification of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention) by all member States and use its standards to tackle violence against women, including in times of crisis.

Appendix 1

Useful links

A. Council of Europe resources

Access to the webinar:

- Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/NetworkWomenFreefromViolence/videos/189574152372847/>
- You Tube: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCwDH2OWHMWX1ARsxxg-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

Gender dimension of foreign policy in the response to Covid-19

11 June 2020, from 15.30 to 16.30 (CEST)

Welcome Remarks:

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

Panelists:

- Petra Stienen, Rapporteur on the Gender Dimension of Foreign Policy, Parliamentary Assembly, Council of Europe
- Bert Koenders, Professor of Peace, Justice and Security at Leiden University (Kooijmans Chair), Special Envoy of the World Bank for Fragile States, Member of the Board of Trustees of the International Crisis Group and Commissioner of the International Commission on Missing Persons
- Ann Bernes, Swedish Ambassador for Gender Equality and Coordinator of Feminist Foreign Policy
- Samira Rafaela, Member of the European Parliament
- Delphine O, Secretary General of the Generation Equality Forum 2020-2021, Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, France
- Jennifer Cassidy (PhD), Lecturer at University of Oxford, Editor of the book 'Gender and Diplomacy', Former diplomat

Moderator:

- Marja Ruotanen, Director of Committees, Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe