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**Beijing+20 Regional Review Meeting Co-hosted by ECE and UN Women
Geneva, 6–7 November 2014**

**“Gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls
for sustainable development in the ECE region”**

Panel 7: Preventing and eliminating violence against women and girls

I would like to thank the UNECE, UN Women and UNFPA for convening and organising this important meeting, and inviting the Council of Europe to participate actively in this Panel.

I am going to focus my presentation on three issues, highlighting: 1) some of the **new information** published this year about the extent of VaW in Europe and the measures to fight it; 2) **key features of the Istanbul Convention**; 3) and some **examples of actions taken by member states** to prevent and combat VaW.

1) New data on VaW in 2014:

This year, the EU and the CoE have published new and updated data on the prevalence of violence against women and the measures taken to combatting it. And we know that the picture is not rosy:

- **FRA survey on violence against women**

In March, the FRA published the results of this survey, which found that:

- one in three women had experienced physical and/or sexual violence since age 15.
- appr. 3.7 million women experienced sexual violence in the year before the interviews
- 5% of women have been raped since the age of 15.

The FRA survey also showed that only 14% of the most serious incidents of partner violence had been reported to the police. About one quarter of victims explained that feeling ashamed or embarrassed was the reason for non-reporting.

- **Results of the 4th round of monitoring the implementation of CoE Recommendation Rec(2002)5 on the protection of women against violence:**

This Recommendation was the precursor to the Istanbul Convention. It comprises a catalogue of measures to combat the different forms of VaW: from rape and sexual violence, to violence within the family or domestic unit, sexual harassment, female genital mutilation, and killings in the name of honour, among others.

Since 2005, the Council of Europe has monitored the implementation of the Recommendation by member states, and has identified certain trends. Having received

information from all 47 of our member states, our latest report, published in March, gives a comprehensive picture of where member states are in combating violence against women.

Some **positive trends** since monitoring of this Recommendation began in 2005:

- criminalisation of more forms of VaW (such as forced marriage and stalking)
- increased comprehensiveness of national policies to prevent and combat VaW
- more countries are setting up national co-ordinating bodies against VaW
- increased efforts to train professionals working with women victims of violence
- increased recognition of the role of education in preventing violence against women

BUT:

- Only one of the forms of VaW (physical violence) is criminalised in all 47 MS.
- Only four member states have national policies that address all nine forms of VaW covered in the Recommendation
- The vast majority of member states cannot provide figures regarding the allocation of financial resources to address VaW.
- In a third of member states, the number of shelter beds for women and children victims of domestic violence is very low compared to the recommended standards.
- Provision of specialised services for women victims of sexual violence is still lagging well behind those provided to victims of domestic violence.

2) The response to VaW: Apply the Istanbul Convention

The Council of Europe Gender Equality Strategy for 2014-2017 acknowledges that VaW “remains widespread in all member States of the CoE, with devastating consequences for women, societies and economies”. Preventing and combating violence against women is one of the five strategic objectives for the CoE’s work on gender equality, as such violence is both a human rights violation and a major obstacle to gender equality. Vaw is a pronounced expression of the uneven balance of power between women and men.

The Istanbul Convention entered into force in August 2014 and there are currently **15 States Parties to the Convention** (eight of which are members of the EU). **Further 21** member States of the Council of Europe have signed the Convention and are taking steps towards ratification. The Convention is also open to ratification by countries outside the Council of Europe. At a recent conference in Rome to mark the entry into force of the Convention, Parties adopted a Joint Declaration urging other States and the EU to join the Convention.

The Istanbul Convention is increasingly recognised as the most comprehensive international instrument on violence against women. Last month, here in Geneva, the World Future Council, the Inter-Parliamentary Union and UN Women awarded the Istanbul Convention the **Vision Award**, which honours the ground-breaking nature of the Istanbul Convention and the vision it carries for women in Europe and beyond to lead a life free of violence.

Why the Istanbul Convention is a ground-breaking treaty:

- It recognises **violence against women as a violation of human rights and a form of discrimination against women.**
- It **sets legal obligations** for Parties, recognising that acts of VaW are part of a social mechanism which allows or tolerates discrimination against women.
- It recognises the **unequal power relations between men and women** as the root cause of VaW, which cannot be eradicated without investing in greater gender equality. This is part of the **obligation for Parties to prevent** VaW and DV.
- It breaks taboos and makes it clear that **VaW is not a private matter** but a responsibility of the State to protect women and girls suffering from violence.
- It is the “prime example” of a **comprehensive legal and policy framework** that provides a blueprint for national authorities to draw up and implement comprehensive and co-ordinated policies involving government agencies, NGOs as well as national, regional and local parliaments and authorities
- It places the **survivors’ rights and needs at the core** of all State response: Women and girls’ right to safety is prioritised over culture, religion, and so-called honour.

The Istanbul Convention establishes the setting up of an **independent monitoring mechanism**, the **Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO)**, whose task will be to monitor the implementation of the Convention by the Parties. Monitoring the implementation of the Istanbul Convention is expected to generate much-needed debate around violence against women and increase visibility of its obligations at national and international level. It is hoped that civil society and national parliaments will play an active part in the monitoring process and contribute to its results and their dissemination.

3) Working with countries to prevent and combat VaW

With the entry into force of the Istanbul Convention, the Council of Europe’s action in this area seeks to:

- **support member States to sign and ratify the Istanbul Convention**, and enhance the implementation of the Convention;

- **collect and disseminate information** on legal and other measures taken at the national level to prevent and combat violence against women, **providing visibility to good practices**;
- **promote the Istanbul Convention in Europe and beyond**, making available expertise and sharing of good practice in the context of co-operation with non-member States and other regional and international organisations.

The Convention is already generating high acceptance of common standards, as well as changes in legislation, policies and improvement of support services in our member states, linked to the ongoing process of ratification.

- **Trend towards criminalising more forms of violence against women:**
 - Croatia, France and the UK introduced legislation on **forced marriage**;
 - Poland, the UK and Finland introduced the offences of **stalking**;
 - France has criminalised the incitement to **female genital mutilation**
 - FYROM adopted a **law against DV** and Slovakia is planning to introduce a **new law covering VaW and DV**.
- The definition of sexual violence has been extended to include **all forms of non-consensual sexual acts** (Belgium, Croatia, Ireland and the UK).
- Increase in **enabling prosecutors to initiate and continue proceedings**, both in cases of violence within the family and in cases of sexual violence. (In Poland and Italy: *ex officio* prosecution of crimes of gender based violence).
- More countries are setting up **national governmental co-ordinating bodies** for implementing policies to prevent and combat VaW and DV (Finland, Slovakia).

The CoE has published **three papers on prevention of violence against women**, as tools for the implementation of the Convention. Each of the papers is designed as an easy to use, 'how to' guide each dedicated to a specific article of the Convention. They include a detailed description of the nature of the obligations contained in the respective article, good practice examples, and information on state-of-the-art research and resources for the implementation of the provisions. I invite you to consult these papers on our website.

The Istanbul Convention cannot accomplish change on its own. It is a call for action: for countries to ratify the convention, for governments to design and implement the necessary policies, for parliaments and parliamentarians to review legislation and monitor the effectiveness of the measures taken, and for local authorities and civil society to actively participate in the response to VaW. The Istanbul Convention has been hailed as a "vision". Let's now hope that it turns into reality.