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4 Human rights

4.2 Gender Equality Commission (GEC) –

Gender Equality Strategy 2014-2017

INTRODUCTION

Gender equality means equal visibility, empowerment, responsibility and participation for both women and men in all spheres of public and private life. It also means an equal access to and distribution of resources between women and men. Although the legal status of women in Europe has undoubtedly improved during recent decades, effective equality is far from being a reality. Even if progress is visible (educational attainment, labour market participation, political representation), gender gaps persist in many areas, maintaining men in their traditional roles and constraining women's opportunities to affirm their fundamental rights and assert their agency.¹

The most pronounced expression of the uneven balance of power between women and men is violence against women, which is both a human rights violation and a major obstacle to gender equality.

A change in gender relations, women's empowerment and abolishing negative traditional gender stereotypes are key to achieving gender equality and benefits entire societies, including men, and for the next generation. As extensive research has shown in a multitude of contexts, when women have equal chances with men to be socially and politically active, economies and societies thrive.² Overall, women's more balanced participation in decision-making contributes to positive transformative processes for societies, such as changes in laws, policies, services, institutions, and social norms.

The essential contribution of women to communities, societies and economies, as well as the high costs of gender inequality need to be fully recognised, especially in the current context of economic crisis. Inequalities at all levels of society are on the rise. The crisis and the consequent austerity measures have hit women hard in many countries through job losses, pay cuts, reductions in public services and shrinking resources for vital support services to women who have suffered violence.

¹ Agency is understood as the ability to make choices and take actions related to oneself, one's situation in the household, and one's situation in the public sphere (World Development Report 2012: Gender Equality and Development).

² *World Development Report 2012: Gender Equality and Development*. The World Bank, Washington DC, September 2011.

Discrimination against women has a structural and horizontal character that pervades all cultures and communities, as well as all sectors, levels and areas, throughout life. Gender inequalities tend to add up during the course of life, so that certain disadvantages experienced in earlier stages of life cause subsequent disadvantages in later stages by limiting options for choice. Women are often subjected to discrimination on several grounds such as those referred to in Article 14 of the European Convention for Human Rights and Article 4.3 of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention).

For all these reasons, it is important to address discrimination against women in a systematic and comprehensive way, in order to achieve full and substantive gender equality. This calls for a dual-track approach to gender equality work which includes:

- specific policies and actions, including positive action when appropriate, in critical areas for the advancement of women and for gender equality and
- the promotion, monitoring, co-ordination and evaluation of the process of gender mainstreaming in all policies and programmes.³

Achieving gender equality is central to the protection of human rights, the functioning of democracy, respect for the rule of law and economic growth and competitiveness.

The Council of Europe's pioneering work in the fields of human rights and gender equality has resulted in a solid legal and policy framework which, if implemented, would considerably advance women's rights and bring member States closer to *de facto* gender equality.

The Council of Europe Transversal Programme on Gender Equality launched in 2012 aims to increase the impact and visibility of gender equality standards, supporting their implementation in member States through a variety of measures, including gender mainstreaming and action in a number of priority areas. To achieve its aim, the Programme needs the continuous political and financial support which is essential to mobilise all Council of Europe decision-making and advisory and monitoring bodies, involving them in the development, implementation and evaluation of the gender equality agenda. The Council of Europe Gender Equality Commission is at the centre of this effort.

This Strategy builds upon the vast legal and policy *acquis* of the Council of Europe as regards gender equality as well as upon the results of the last Council of Europe Conference of Ministers responsible for equality between women and men held in 2010⁴ and links them to both the current economic context and the political leverage within the Council of Europe. It outlines the goals and priorities of the Council of Europe Programme on Gender Equality for the years 2014-2017, identifies the working methods and the main partners as well as the measures required to increase the visibility of the results. A table indicating current, future and proposed activities will be attached to this Strategy to show the immediate link between the strategic objectives and the specific measures and means used to achieve them.

I. GOAL AND STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

The overall goal of the Strategy is to achieve the advancement and empowering of women and hence the effective realisation of gender equality in Council of Europe member States by supporting the implementation of existing standards.

³ Recommendation CM/Rec(2007)17 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on gender equality standards and mechanisms.

⁴ The 7th Council of Europe Conference of Ministers responsible for Equality between women and men was held on 24-25 May 2010 in Baku, Azerbaijan. Under the theme "Gender equality: bridging the gap between *de jure* and *de facto* equality" and the results, the Conference adopted a Resolution and an Action plan.

This will be accomplished through the realisation of five strategic objectives which will also integrate the issue of multiple discrimination while taking into account the specific rights and needs of women and men throughout the life cycle.

Strategic objective 1: Combating gender stereotypes and sexism

Gender stereotyping presents a serious obstacle to the achievement of real gender equality and feeds into gender discrimination. Gender stereotypes are preconceived ideas whereby males and females are arbitrarily assigned characteristics and roles determined and limited by their sex. Sex stereotyping can limit the development of the natural talents and abilities of boys and girls, women and men, their educational and professional experiences as well as life opportunities in general. Stereotypes about women both result from and are the cause of deeply engrained attitudes, values, norms and prejudices against women. They are used to justify and maintain the historical relations of power of men over women as well as sexist attitudes which are holding back the advancement of women. Council of Europe action will focus on:

- Promoting Gender Equality Awareness, in particular through the development of training and communication initiatives targeting a broad range of professionals (including civil servants), with special attention to the prevention of all forms of violence against women;
- promoting and disseminating education syllabuses and teaching practices which are free from explicit and implicit gender stereotypes as well as the implementation of the other measures proposed in the Committee of Ministers' Recommendation on gender mainstreaming in education;⁵
- combating sexism as a form of hate speech and integrating this dimension into Council of Europe action aiming at combating hate speech and discrimination while actively promoting respect for both women and men;
- identifying practical measures to:
 - promote a positive and non-stereotyped image of women and men in the media,
 - abolish women's image of inferiority and submission as well as stereotypes about men's masculinity,
 - further balanced participation of women and men in decision-making positions in the media, in particular in management, programming and regulatory bodies;
- promoting the role of men in achieving gender equality.

Strategic objective 2: Preventing and combating violence against women

Violence against women remains widespread in all member States of the Council of Europe, with devastating consequences for women, societies and economies. Opened for signature in May 2011, the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (the Istanbul Convention) is the most far-reaching international treaty to tackle this serious violation of human rights. Action in this area will seek to:

- support member States to sign and ratify the Istanbul Convention through the provision of technical and legal expertise;
- enhance the implementation of the Istanbul Convention by involving all relevant bodies and entities of the Council of Europe;
- collect and disseminate information on legal and other measures taken at national level to prevent and combat violence against women, providing visibility to good practices;
- promote the Istanbul Convention beyond the European Continent, making available expertise and sharing of good practice in the context of co-operation with non-member States and other regional and international organisations.

⁵ CM/Rec(2007)13.

Strategic objective 3: Guaranteeing Equal Access of Women to Justice

Persisting inequalities between women and men, gender bias and stereotypes also result in unequal access of women and men to justice. A study into women's access to the European Court of Human Rights drew attention to the low number of applications filed by women, pointing out that this possibly reflected obstacles experienced by women at national level. Reasons advanced include lack of awareness, confidence and resources, gender bias and cultural, social and economic barriers. These barriers are particularly important in the case of women victims of violence or in situations of vulnerability, such as women victims of various forms of discrimination.

Council of Europe action in this area will seek to:

- analyse national and international frameworks with a view to gathering data and identifying the obstacles women encounter in gaining access to the national courts and to international justice;
- identify, collect and disseminate any existing remedies and good practices aiming at facilitating access of women to justice, including out-of-court and quasi-legal stages of protection of women's rights (*inter alia* through Ombudspersons and other human rights institutions);
- make recommendations to improve the situation.

Strategic objective 4: Achieving balanced participation of women and men in political and public decision-making

Pluralist democracy requires balanced participation of women and men in political and public decision-making. Council of Europe standards⁶ provide clear guidance on how to achieve this.⁷

Action will seek to:

- achieve balanced participation of women and men in political or public life in any decision-making body (the representation of either women or men should not fall below 40%);
- monitor progress on women's participation in decision-making, ensure the visibility of data and good practices in member States. This will be done in particular through the collection and dissemination of information on the implementation of the Committee of Ministers' Recommendation on balanced participation of women and men in political and public life, including decision-making;
- identify measures aiming to empower candidate and elected women, to facilitate and encourage their participation in elections at the national, regional and local levels. This would include measures which relate to electoral systems, parity thresholds, public funding of political parties and working conditions of elected representatives, while also encouraging women to participate in the electoral process by voting;
- achieve balanced participation in Council of Europe bodies, institutions and decision-making processes as well as in senior and middle management functions within the Secretariat.

Strategic objective 5: Achieving Gender Mainstreaming in all policies and measures

Gender mainstreaming is the (re)organisation, improvement, development and evaluation of policy processes, so that a gender equality perspective is incorporated in all policies at all levels and at all stages, by the actors normally involved in policy-making.⁸

⁶ Recommendation Rec(2003)3 to member States on balanced participation of women and men in political and public decision-making.

⁷ See also Recommendation 1899 (2010)1 of the Parliamentary Assembly "Increasing women's representation in politics through the electoral system"; Recommendation 1413 (1999)1 of the Parliamentary Assembly "Equal representation in political life"; The Congress Recommendation 288 (2010) "Achieving sustainable gender equality in local and regional political life".

⁸ Council of Europe Group of Specialists in Gender Mainstreaming, 1998.

In its Recommendation to member States on gender equality standards and mechanisms,⁹ the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers recalls the importance of adopting methodologies for the implementation of the gender mainstreaming strategy, including gender budgeting, gender-based analysis and gender impact assessment. Experience shows, however, that even the most committed member States are finding it difficult to achieve gender mainstreaming.

The Council of Europe will strive to achieve gender mainstreaming in:

- its various policy areas, in particular the areas of justice, law enforcement, local government, media, culture, education, minorities, migration, Roma people, children's rights, bioethics, social cohesion, youth and sports, fight against corruption, trafficking in human beings and drug abuse;
- the development and implementation of co-operation programmes, projects and activities;
- the policy processes and functioning of the various bodies and institutions, in particular through the mobilisation and contribution of:
 - the Committee of Ministers, the Parliamentary Assembly, the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe, the European Court of Human Rights and the Commissioner of Human Rights;
 - the steering committees and other intergovernmental bodies;
 - the monitoring mechanisms;
 - Partial Agreements.
- the Council of Europe staff policies.

The Council of Europe will also continue to actively promote gender mainstreaming by gathering information on and disseminating good practices in its member States.

II. INSTITUTIONAL SETTING, RESOURCES AND WORKING METHODS

The transversal nature of the Gender Equality Programme presupposes that all Council of Europe decision-making, advisory and monitoring bodies should support and actively contribute to the achievement of the goal and the strategic objectives of the Gender Equality Strategy. They will be invited to take initiatives within their respective mandate's remit and taking due account of their status and resources. To stimulate and facilitate this process, the following elements complete the Council of Europe institutional setting:

- The **Gender Equality Commission**: an intergovernmental group of experts open to all Council of Europe member States where participation of 16 elected representatives is covered from the Council of Europe budget. Under the aegis of the European Committee for Human Dignity, Equality and Social Cohesion (CDDECS)¹⁰, its mission is to steer the Gender Equality Transversal Programme, advise and involve its various components, as well as liaise with relevant intergovernmental bodies, providing expertise and a forum for exchange on good practices and issues of concern.
- The Committee of Ministers' **Thematic Co-ordinator** on Gender Equality and Trafficking in Human Beings facilitates discussions in the Committee of Ministers on issues related, inter alia, to the Gender Equality Transversal Programme.
- The **National Focal Points** appointed at national level provide an important link between the Council of Europe and the actors and mechanisms that are responsible for gender equality at national level, that is, from government, parliament, local and regional authorities, civil society and the private sector. They are also expected to promote international standards at national level with a view to bridging the gap between legal and real equality in a given country. The network of Focal Points is also a platform for thematic discussions and exchange of good practices.

⁹ Recommendation Rec(2007)17 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on gender equality standards and mechanisms.

¹⁰ Draft terms of reference still to be adopted by the Committee of Ministers.

- The **Gender Equality Rapporteurs** appointed within intergovernmental bodies and other Council of Europe structures shall identify ways to integrate the gender perspective in the functioning, programmes and activities of these structures. In co-operation with the Gender Equality Commission, they shall identify opportunities of developing measures or new activities to promote gender equality.
- The **Gender Mainstreaming Team** is a group of Council of Europe staff members serving in the various sectors and bodies of the Organisation. Its task is to share information and expertise, provide visibility to results, identify opportunities for joint action and make proposals to facilitate the implementation of the Gender Equality Programme.

In order to assess progress in the implementation of the strategy, the **Gender Equality Commission** will regularly take stock of results achieved and will prepare an annual report (to be brought to the attention of the Committee of Ministers through the relevant steering committee).

III. PARTNERSHIPS

All the main international partners of the Council of Europe have adopted Gender Equality Strategies or Action Plans. This has created a sound basis for partnerships and, in some cases, an institutionalised co-operation, enabling the identification of opportunities for joint action, complementarity and synergy.

The European Union, UN-Women and the OSCE have been involved in the development of this Strategy. They are therefore invited to contribute to its implementation as appropriate, in particular by holding regular consultations with the Council of Europe, participating in meetings and events and programming and implementing joint initiatives. The Council of Europe will seek to reinforce its co-operation with other UN agencies and bodies (in particular OHCHR, CEDAW, UNICEF and UNESCO) and other international organisations (such as the OECD, the World Bank, *Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie*).

The Gender Equality Programme will also seek to involve, engage and use the experience and expertise of civil society organisations in the development, implementation and assessment of policies, programmes and activities. Other natural partners in the implementation of the Gender Equality Strategy include:

- Parliaments;
- National Governments;
- Local authorities and their associations;
- Gender Equality bodies;
- Human Rights institutions;
- Professional networks (in particular in the judiciary and in the journalism, education, health and social services fields);
- Trade unions and employers associations;
- The Media;
- The Private Sector.

IV. COMMUNICATION

A communication plan will be developed with the aim of:

- increasing the visibility of Council of Europe standards, studies, guidelines, events and their results;
- raising awareness on specific issues with a view to changing attitudes, mentalities and behaviours;
- facilitating the exchange of information between the various components of the programme and with partners;
- giving visibility to good practices and data collected at national, regional and local level.

This communication plan will be accompanied by a training plan targeting the Gender Equality Rapporteurs, Council of Europe staff and other experts involved in the Organisation's work.