

Fighting violence against women must become a top priority

Posted By [commdh](#) On July 29, 2014 @ 9:30 am In [Uncategorized](#) | [Comments Disabled](#)

213 ^[1]

49 ^[2]



^[3]

On August 1, the [Istanbul Convention](#) ^[4], a landmark treaty of the Council of Europe dedicated to preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, will enter into force. It could not come at a better time. Violence against women remains one of the most widespread human rights violations which takes place every day in Europe; intimate partner violence is still among the major causes of non-accidental death, injury and disability for women. This tragic situation stems from a variety of social, economic and cultural reasons, but a common background condition is glaring inequality between men and women. The Convention has the potential to become a powerful driver in making progress on this pressing human rights issue.

If we look at available data, we can better grasp the urgency of the situation. It is estimated that at least 12 women are killed by gender-related violence in Europe every day. In 2013, available statistics showed that domestic violence claimed the lives of 121 women in France, 134 in Italy, 37 in Portugal, 54 in Spain and 143 in the United Kingdom. In Azerbaijan 83 women were killed and 98 committed suicide following cases of domestic violence, while [data](#) ^[5] collected by the media in Turkey reported that at least 214 women were killed by men last year, mainly because of domestic violence and often despite these women having asked the authorities for protection. Available data covering the first six months of 2014 in many European countries continue to show such alarming figures.

A recent UN [study](#) ^[6] indicates that lethal domestic violence accounts for almost 28% of all intentional homicides in Europe. Women are more likely than men to be killed by people close to them: while intimate partner or family-related violence is responsible for 18% of all male homicides, the number rises to 55% when it comes to women. These [rates](#) ^[7] vary from country to country, but the phenomenon is present across Europe, with 89% of women killed being murdered by a partner or family member in Albania, 80% in Sweden and 74% in Finland. If we look at non-lethal domestic violence, the picture is equally grim: in [Ukraine](#) ^[8], for example, 160,000 cases of domestic violence were registered in 2013 and a survey showed that 68% of women suffered abuse in the family. In Ireland, in 2012 almost 15,000 cases of domestic violence were registered.

Violence against women is not limited to inter-partner and family relationships, a fact largely recognised by the Istanbul Convention, which also addresses forms of gender-based violence such as stalking, sexual harassment, sexual violence and rape. As shown by a representative [survey](#) ^[9] published last March by the EU Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA), one in five women (22%) has experienced physical violence by someone other than their partner since the age of 15. As concerns stalking, which nowadays includes cyber-stalking, in the EU-28, 18% of women have experienced stalking since the age of 15, and 5% of women have experienced it in the 12 months before the survey interview. This corresponds to about 9 million women in the EU-28 experiencing stalking within a period of 12 months. 45% of women in the EU have experienced sexual harassment at least once during their lifetime.

The entry into force of the Istanbul Convention is to be welcomed also because it will contribute to ending forced marriage, female genital mutilation, and forced abortion and sterilisation. Europe is not immune to these forms of violence: in its 2012 [Resolution](#) ^[10], the European Parliament estimates that around 500,000 women and girls live with female genital mutilation in the European Union while 180,000 others are at risk of being subjected to the practice every year.

However huge, these are only conservative numbers as women tend to underreport cases of violence, mainly because of little trust in law enforcement bodies. This is understandable as all too often state institutions have been unresponsive to those women who find the courage to report. As the [case-law](#) ^[11] of the European Court of Human Rights shows, states not only often fail to protect them, but they also fall short of their obligations to duly investigate cases of gender-based violence, to offer effective remedies and to adopt adequate measures to prevent further violence. An illustration of this failure is a recent [case](#) ^[12] where the French state was ordered by a national court to pay compensation to the family of a young woman killed by her ex-partner because the "wrongful and repeated failure of the gendarmerie (constituted) gross negligence directly and unquestionably linked with the murder".

This lack of sensitivity to victims among the police is illustrative of states' neglect of women victims of violence. A recent analytical [study](#) ^[13] carried out by the Council of Europe shows that, although initial vocational training on violence against women is provided to the police in 44 of its 47 member states, only 29 of them offer further specific training to their police officers. This lack of training may well be one of the reasons for the poor record of the police in many countries in dealing with victims of domestic violence. Reports show that in some cases police officers tried to persuade women not to file a complaint. In other cases, their behaviour showed both contempt for human dignity and their own sense of impunity. A telling example is what happened in the United Kingdom, where two police officers offended in a vulgar manner a 19-year old woman who intended to lodge a complaint for domestic violence. The case prompted public outrage and political condemnation and the officers are currently under [investigation](#) ^[14]. But the damage remains and an unfortunate signal has been sent to women by the police. Moreover, a [report](#) ^[15] shows that the lack of police responsiveness to victims of domestic violence in the UK is far from being confined to this individual case.

This lack of responsiveness is further compounded by inadequate victim support. Places in women's shelters are largely insufficient and the austerity measures adopted in many countries have further reduced them, thus increasing women's vulnerability. In Sweden, statistics show that 60% of abused women are denied a place in shelters. In the UK, too, [funding cuts](#) ^[16] risk exposing thousands of victims to new or repeated cases of violence.

Reduced resources also translate into more threats to the health of women who are victims of violence. As the World Health Organisation (WHO) warned, "violence has a range of adverse physical, including sexual and reproductive health, and mental health outcomes for women and girls". This evidence-based assessment led the WHO member states to adopt a [resolution](#) ^[17] aimed at strengthening the response of health systems to violence against women last May.

All this evidence points to the need for more resolute state action in combating violence against women and domestic violence from a victim's perspective. Responding to this need, the Istanbul Convention offers a holistic set of measures to take action where it is needed, and in this sense, it is truly unique. Specifically dedicated to several forms of violence against women, it is victim-centred and contains a comprehensive array of practical tools to help improve the response of all relevant actors. It clearly states that Parties have an obligation to prevent violence, protect victims and punish the perpetrators, and measures in these regards need to form part of a set of integrated policies. This is crucial, because we can hope to end violence against women only if gender stereotypes and roles are deconstructed, attitudes are changed, laws are amended, women are empowered and justice is within reach. Crucially, the Convention also establishes a specific monitoring mechanism in order to ensure the effective implementation of its provisions by the Parties.

To date, 13 Council of Europe member states have [ratified](#) ^[18] the Istanbul Convention [\[1\]](#) ^[19]. In addition 23 indicated their political will by signing

it, leaving 11 member states with no action on this at all [2] [20]. It is my hope that this important Convention will not only be ratified by all Council of Europe member states, but by many other countries around the world and by the EU.

This will not increase women's safety overnight, but it would definitely mark a turn in the right direction, giving a strong signal of commitment to millions of women.

Nils Muižnieks

[1] [21] Albania, Andorra, Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Denmark, France, Italy, Montenegro, Portugal, Serbia, Spain, Sweden and Turkey.

[2] [22] Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Ireland, Latvia, Liechtenstein, the Republic of Moldova and the Russian Federation.

Article printed from Human Rights Comment: <http://humanrightscoment.org>

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- [4] Istanbul Convention: http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/standardsetting/convention-violence/default_en.asp
- [5] data: <http://www.bianet.org/english/women/152706-men-kill-214-women-in-2013>
- [6] study: <http://www.unodc.org/gsh/en/index.html>
- [7] rates: http://www.unodc.org/documents/gsh/data/GSH2013_IPFM.xlsx
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- [12] case: <http://prdchroniques.blog.lemonde.fr/2014/05/09/letat-condamne-pour-faute-lourde-apres-le-meurtre-dune-femme-victime-de-violences-conjugales/>
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- [17] resolution: http://apps.who.int/gb/ebwha/pdf_files/WHA67/A67_ACONF1Rev1-en.pdf?ua=1&ua=1
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