

A comprehensive approach to combating violence against women

The Istanbul convention requires states to coordinate their response to violence against women. At a high-level conference in Bucharest in June 2019, solutions and good practices were shared and discussed.

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The Istanbul convention requires a holistic approach to combating violence against women. Violence against women and domestic violence is a larger problem than many might think, and have serious consequences for victims and their families. (Illustration: iStockphoto)

On June 4th 2019, high-level representatives from European governments, stakeholders from different political levels, NGO representatives and practitioners working with victims of violence were gathered in Bucharest, Romania. Under the headline *Towards a Europe free from violence against women and girls – the Istanbul convention creating a new horizon and paradigm change for all stakeholders!*, the aim of the conference was to share experiences and discuss the potential for ratifying and successfully implementing the Istanbul convention – The Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence.

Violence against women is a massive problem in Europe

EIGE – European Institute for Gender Equality has gathered data on violence against women throughout the European states. Their findings show that gender-based violence is more common than many might think.

“One in three women has experienced physical or sexual violence, one in twenty has been raped,” said Theresa Murphy, Head of operations at EIGE.

Murphy explained that social norms affect both the extent and acknowledgement of gender-based violence. Furthermore, they affect police reporting. Murphy concluded that gender equality is key to ending violence against women.

There was no doubt among the participants at the conference that violence against women is a massive problem in Europe. Biljana Brankovic, member of GREVIO, the evaluation agency that has been established as part of the Istanbul convention, put it this way:

“Violence against women and femicide represent a greater threat to human security than global terrorism.”

Combating violence through comprehensive measures

“Whenever and wherever women suffer violence, it is our shared responsibility. This is one of the most important tasks in our time as a European society,” said Chair of the Bureau of the Committee of the Parties to the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, Elisabeth Walaas at the conference.

She was one of the many speakers who emphasised the usefulness of the Istanbul convention.

“We have no excuse not to act according to this responsibility, as we have the best tool available: The Istanbul convention. It requires a holistic response to deal with violence against women,” she explained.

The holistic and comprehensive response is spelled out in terms of four main areas, all starting with a P: Prevention, Protection, Prosecution and Policies. The fourth area, integrated policies, was in focus at the conference in Bucharest. As many admitted, it is a daunting and challenging task to coordinate all policies and services to meet the needs of survivors, to prosecute perpetrators and to prevent more violence.

Lene Nilsen, senior adviser at the Ministry of Justice and Public Security in Norway, broke the policy requirements down to seven C’s, to underline that the convention requires policies to be:

(1)Centred around victim rights, (2)Comprehensive and (3)Coordinated. They also require (4) that Capital must be allocated, (5) that Civil society must be involved, (6) a Coordinating body and (7) Collection of data and research.

Lone Alice Johansen of the Shelter movement in Norway offered her perspective from the civil society working on survivor support:

“All the Cs are connected. The victim-centred approach is dependent on the other six Cs,” she said.

Including civil society is key

The convention requires states to include the civil society in their measures to combat violence against women. According to the speakers at the conference, there are several reasons why this is a good move. Marai Larasi was until recently the executive director of Imkaan, a United Kingdom-based black and minority ethnic women's organisation working to prevent and respond to violence against marginalised European girls and women. From her perspective, including civil society is key to success.

Marai Larasi was until recently the executive director of Imkaan, a UK-based black and minority ethnic women's organisation. She spoke on the importance of applying the intersectional perspective in combating violence against women.

“You need NGO leadership. Survivor-led NGOs are the organisations that have the expertise. They have acquired their expertise through experience, in terms of their own survival,” says Larasi.

“We need to make sure that the survivors’ voices and the voices of NGOs supporting these survivors are always at the centre of the conversations,” she continues.

Larasi points to the fact that the Istanbul convention is the result of hard work and cooperation between civil society and European states.

“We are here because of feminist activism. So, we are already evidence that listening to feminist activists could be an initiative to do something about this issue. What we cannot do is marginalise and side-line these NGOs.”

Intersectional approach to meet the needs of all women

Marai Larasi was invited to present an important perspective on the issue of violence against women: *intersectionality*. She believes it is important to understand and apply this perspective.

“Intersectionality allows us to consider and respond to the realities of groups who are differently positioned,” she says.

“A discourse purely about gender does not deal with the fact that whole groups of women are subject to oppression not just on the basis of their gender.”

The intersectional perspective takes different forms of identity and discrimination into account.

“If you are a lesbian, for example, you will be subjected to oppression both on the basis of your gender and on your sexual orientation. And these types of oppression don't happen in parallel. They are likely to intersect,” she explains.

“Let us say I experience an assault in the streets, where I am called a *dyke*. In such a case, I would be attacked as a woman, but also as a lesbian. Are you going to ask me to choose one explanation? I don't think I can do that. So, intersectionality allows us to think about this, and creates a space for us to develop our strategies, our thinking and our approach in a way that is much more responsive to survivors' lives, girls and women's lives.”

Highlights power differences

Many find the intersectionality perspective and the term itself difficult to understand. Larasi points to the power dimension of discrimination to explain this.

“Violence and discrimination are fundamentally about power. And if you're a power holder, very often you don't want to give up power. Moreover, you often don't feel powerful,” she says.

“So, if you are a heterosexual middle-class white woman, you might not consider yourself powerful or privileged because you're subject to gender oppression. And therefore, when somebody like me says that you hold power and that you need to take that power into account, it might not be so easy for you to realise why that would be important.”

Marai Larasi thinks this is crucial.

“I don't find it challenging to understand at all because this is my reality. And I think that that in itself highlights the power differences.”

“Survivor support has to be at the centre”

Taking intersectionality into account will help those providing support to victims to be more sensitive to their needs. Larasi thinks the requirement to involve civil society, and the requirement to centre efforts around the survivor, are intertwined.

“To better integrate intersectionality, I think you have to involve the right NGOs. There are NGOs that are reactionary and really problematic; rather, you should listen to NGOs rooted in feminist thinking and consciousness, which focus on survivors.”

Larasi believes survivor support must be at the centre. She warns against being too focused on the criminal justice system.

“Violence against women is a crime. So why be cautious about that? I think the criminal justice system has a role to play. However, for the survivor, what is needed for her safety might not be a criminal justice response. Her safety might depend on the support from a shelter, or rape crisis counselling. Most survivors won’t report the violence to the police, they will go to an NGO first. Therefore, whatever the survivor needs must be at the centre of the measures taken.”

Police and health providers first in line

Putting survivors’ needs first, and keeping the intersectional perspective in mind, is especially important to those practitioners providing the first necessary help to victims.

“We have to remember that the first responders are often police or medical staff, therefore it is crucial that they are sensitive to the victims’ rights,” said Alina Munteanu, who attended the conference as representative of OSCE’s Transnational Threats Department”.

“They can forget that they have a vulnerable person in front of them. It is crucial to invest in soft skills training for police,” she said.

In Iceland, the police has made considerable progress in this regard.

“Many things have been done in Iceland in the recent years,” says Sigríður Björk Guðjónsdóttir. She is head of the Police department in Reykjavik, Iceland.

“Most important are the change of approach regarding domestic violence, establishment of a family justice centre and a refocus on investigations of sexual violence.”

Integrated policies bottom-up

Sigríður Björk Guðjónsdóttir explains that when the police changed their approach, and started acting as a service organisation rather than a power organisation, they began to see real progress.

Sigríður Björk Guðjónsdóttir is head of the Police department in Reykjavik, Iceland. She sees the main role of the police in the fight against violence against women as using every tool available to investigate and assist the victims of domestic abuse, and advice perpetrators on how to get help.

“In order to make such a change, you have to understand your clients and see what obstacles they face when they are in need of the police service. Before we changed our approach, very few cases reached the courtroom, and domestic violence was not very high on the agenda in practical terms.”

After identifying obstacles and changing their approach, the reports of domestic violence have tripled, according to Björk Guðjónsdóttir.

“We have identified three things that needed to change: First and foremost, the cases need to be investigated on scene, not days later. Secondly, the victim is in dire need of assistance from the social services. Now, a social worker comes to the scene along with the police, supports the victim to seek medical attention and gives the necessary victim support. In this way, the police can then do their job better. Finally, the responsibility of pressing charges and requesting restraining order, is lifted from the victim when necessary and the police can proceed without the cooperation of the victim with the aid of a risk assessment. This is possible because the evidence has already been secured.”

She is pleased to say that all the police forces in Iceland use this method now, and according to her, the effect is potentially of major importance.

“The main role of the police in the fight against violence against women is to use every tool available to investigate and assist the victims of domestic abuse, and advice perpetrators on how to get help. By really prioritising these cases, not just in reports, there is a possibility to increase trust and thereby increase the number of cases that are actually reported.”

“The Istanbul convention requires integrated policies – how does this work in Iceland? What role does the police play in this work?”

“The integrated policies are already in place, but the approach was partly developed bottom-up, by the police and social workers who work with these cases. Now it has a societal approach, and the Istanbul convention is the backbone of all our policies.”

Important not to lose ground

Sigríður Björk Guðjónsdóttir urged all the participants at the high-level conference to go ahead and “just do it”, and not wait for implementation of policies top-down. She appreciates the collaboration through events such as the conference in Bucharest.

“European collaboration affects our work on the ground by enabling research and cooperation on various important things, for example conventions and meetings, where experts and policy makers can join forces and strengthen the effort in this important fight.”

Reflecting upon the event, Marai Larasi is pleased to see the European representatives coming together.

“It was amazing that this event even happened, and that this space was created. That different approaches, different thoughts and different disciplines come together. This has to do with the aim of actually understanding how we address violence against women and girls and how we can make sure that we don't lose ground around the Istanbul Convention,” Larasi says.

“So, just the very existence of the event is in and of itself an achievement.”

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