

## Workshop on Regional Arrangements for the promotion and protection of human rights

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### Panel 3: Cooperation in relation to promoting women's rights

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One of the most fundamental women's rights is the right of women to be safe, to be free from violence, from any forms of violence. Unfortunately, violence against women remains a scourge all over the world. Europe is no exception.

The most recent Council of Europe's response to address this phenomenon is the Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence. It is now known as the Istanbul Convention after it was opened for signature in Istanbul in 2011.

Whilst in Strasbourg in November last year, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and its consequences, Ms Dubravka Šimonović, said that the **CEDAW Convention and the Council of Europe's Istanbul Convention** mirror each other in the area of violence against women. She knows well that the text of the CEDAW Convention and relevant general recommendations developed by the CEDAW Committee over the years served as major sources of inspiration for the drafters of the Istanbul Convention. Taking its roots in the CEDAW Convention and other regional instruments, the Istanbul Convention is now the most comprehensive international treaty on violence against women. It combines detailed legally binding obligations in the implementation of co-ordinated policies, the prevention of violence, the protection and support for women victims and the prosecution of perpetrators of various forms of violence. At the same time, I have no doubt that the Istanbul Convention is now in the minds of the drafters of an updated version of the General Recommendation No. 19 of the CEDAW Committee on gender-based violence against women.

The Group of Experts against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (**GREVIO**) is the Council of Europe's watchdog on violence against women and has recently been set up to monitor the practical implementation of the Istanbul Convention in the countries that <sup>have</sup> ratified it, that is 22 states at present.

GREVIO ~~has~~ launched its first evaluation procedure earlier this year, in March. When selecting countries to be evaluated, it decided to take into account whether these countries were under review by the CEDAW Committee. By doing so, GREVIO tried not to overburden governments and civil society organisations with additional reporting duties. It intended to avoid overlaps and inconsistencies in monitoring and wished to create more synergies with the CEDAW Committee.

The recent emergence of GREVIO as a new monitoring body on violence against women creates new opportunities for interaction. It also requires increased co-ordination and more frequent exchange of information in the context of GREVIO's two types of monitoring in particular: <sup>review</sup> country-by-country evaluations and special inquiries.

During its first country-by-country evaluation procedure, GREVIO reviews state reports, which are in principle made public, together with state representatives. When considering these reports, GREVIO takes into account all available information, including **information from United Nations treaty and other bodies**. This is more than a good practice. It is the subject of a specific provision in the Istanbul Convention.

As the CEDAW Committee and UN Special Rapporteurs do, GREVIO relies much on **information received from civil society organisations**, in particular women's organisations. Civil society organisations are considered by GREVIO as major partners in monitoring. They are strongly encouraged to give their input. Civil society organisations can draw on the longstanding practice of shadow reporting to the CEDAW Committee. In this connection, the recent shadow report received by GREVIO from a coalition of 30 NGOs on the situation in Austria, one of the first countries currently under evaluation, is a very good example of what GREVIO needs for its monitoring.

The establishment of national coalitions of non-governmental organisations for shadow reporting is indeed of great assistance to GREVIO, as is the case for many monitoring bodies. In order to help civil society organisations to help GREVIO, GREVIO followed the practice of many Council of Europe monitoring mechanisms and created a webpage dedicated to civil society organisations. GREVIO also relies on international non-governmental organisations and women's networks which have international experience to provide guidance to national or local civil society organisations in their reporting.

I should mention that, during its first evaluation procedure, GREVIO also envisages ~~to carry out~~ <sup>it</sup> **visits** to all countries under monitoring. Such visits are expected to be the only viable way of gaining sufficient information for a thorough assessment of the situation on the ground. In addition, these visits will provide a unique opportunity to forge direct contacts with groundwork organisations which do not have the opportunity to be otherwise heard by GREVIO. At the same time, the organisation of visits requires co-ordination with United Nations and other Council of Europe bodies also entitled to conduct country visits. For this purpose, GREVIO will certainly announce its plans for visits, as it has done already for the first countries under evaluation.

GREVIO is also entitled to conduct **inquiries** in specific circumstances, as is the case of the CEDAW Committee under the Optional Protocol to the CEDAW Convention. GREVIO – which is still a newly-born body – has not yet been confronted with such cases. However, one may reflect on how these two bodies should work when facing situations calling for an inquiry in a country where they ~~are~~ <sup>have</sup> both in a capacity to act.

Unlike the CEDAW Committee or Special Rapporteurs, GREVIO is not entitled to deal with **individual complaints**. In the Council of Europe, individual human rights complaints are ~~taken care of by~~ <sup>in the remit</sup> the European Court of Human Rights. That being said, the content of individual communications may be of help to GREVIO to identify systemic problems.

A number of women victims have already shared their stories with GREVIO. GREVIO may direct women making complaints to UN and other complaints bodies should they request intervention in their individual cases. Similarly, the information contained in individual complaints sent to the CEDAW Committee and other United Nations relevant bodies could also be of help to GREVIO in its monitoring. A mechanism could be put in place to ensure that these complaints, in particular when they are communicated to governments, and their outcome, are made available to GREVIO. There is clearly a reference to this in the Istanbul Convention.

To conclude, the best way to achieve results in protecting <sup>the right of</sup> ~~women's right~~ to be free from violence is to establish **effective co-operation** among all relevant actors at international, national and local levels and recognise and encourage the work of civil society organisations, including women's organisations. We do have the framework to work together, to meet our common goal of ending one of the most serious human rights violations and forms of discrimination against women, violence against women, in all areas of life, in times of peace and in conflict situations. Let's now move from framework to teamwork.