



Making laws work to end violence against women and girls

Bucharest (Romania), 12-14 June 2017

Regional Conference for Central and Eastern Europe jointly organized by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), the Romanian Chamber of Deputies, Global Rights for Women and Vital Voices, with the support of the Senate of Romania

OUTCOME DOCUMENT

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We, members of parliament, non-governmental organization representatives and government officials from Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Georgia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Republic of Moldova, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia, Tajikistan, Turkey and Ukraine, as well as members of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation, and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, have gathered in Bucharest, Romania, from 12 to 14 June 2017 for the Regional Conference on *Making laws work to end violence against women and girls*. The conference was jointly organized by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), the Romanian Chamber of Deputies, Global Rights for Women, and Vital Voices, with the support of the Senate of Romania.

We come from different countries, from different backgrounds, and work in different sectors, but we all share the common objective of enabling women to live free from violence. We recognize the critical role of parliaments, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) advocating for legal reform and providing support to survivors, and legal government officials - including law enforcement officials, prosecutors and judges - in the eradication of violence against women and girls (VAWG) and greatly welcome this regional conference that has brought us together for the first time.

A key methodology of the conference was for participants to work in delegations composed of parliamentarians, representatives of NGOs and government officials from their countries. Each delegation formulated action plans to apply the knowledge gained at the conference when they return to their respective countries. In this way, we hope that the conference will have a concrete, lasting impact.

Violence against women is a serious human rights violation. It occurs in the broader context of gender-based discrimination and unequal power relations between men and women in both the public and private spheres. Violence against women and girls not only deprives them of their dignity and integrity, but it also prevents them from realizing their full potential for themselves and for society. Thirty-five per cent of women worldwide have experienced physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence. No country is free from this violence.

We believe that Goal 5 of the Sustainable Development Agenda - *Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls* – which includes the elimination of violence against women as a target, should be addressed not only as a goal in itself, but also as a key enabler for achieving all the SDGs. We are fully committed to ensure effective implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals in our respective countries.

Furthermore, international and regional human rights instruments exist that recognize governments' obligation to protect the human rights and fundamental freedoms of all women and girls so as to ensure that they are free from violence. We applauded the fact that all countries in our region have ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and that most have signed and ratified the Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. We urged those that have not yet done so to deposit their instruments of ratification. We encouraged parliaments and civil society organizations to actively engage in monitoring the implementation of these conventions in their respective countries.

We recognized and commended the very important achievements made in the region towards legal and policy reforms. Valuable efforts have been made to bring national legislation in line with international human rights instruments; however, passing laws and developing policies is not enough. Their implementation remains the key challenge. Without it, these laws and policies will not fulfil their intended objective of preventing violence, protecting and support victims, and holding perpetrators accountable.

The regional conference afforded an opportunity to discuss ways to overcome gaps and challenges in our work, to inspire and empower each other and move towards common policies to improve the systems' response to VAWG in our countries.

Each one of us is an essential component of the drive to improve the implementation of laws and policies aimed at eradicating VAWG. However, real progress in achieving the goals of ensuring survivors' safety, strengthening offenders' accountability and kindling in the minds of all members of the community intolerance for violence against women and girls can only result from our combined efforts. This regional conference has provided a valuable springboard for increasing this inter-sectoral collaboration, dialogue and partnership among us.

Our debates focused on: 1) The fundamentals of domestic violence and sexual violence; 2) International and regional frameworks on ending violence against women and girls; 3) Coordination of essential services for victims and accountability for offenders. The conference also included two multi-session learning tracks where we had an opportunity for in-depth sharing of good practices in the civil and criminal justice system, as well as in multi-sectoral collaboration in implementing laws on violence against women and girls.

There is no one solution to putting an end to violence against women. It is within the reach of parliaments, NGOs and government officials to develop key strategies and responses. The following is by no means an exhaustive summary of the range of experiences and detailed practices that were examined during the regional conference. Rather, it aims to highlight the main strategies and elements that can contribute to achieving progress.

1. The lack of efficient cooperation between actors, the tendency to blame victims for violence and the insufficient understanding of the constant danger and oppression they face when trying to escape their abusers were some of the issues that we addressed. We need to develop multi-sectoral coordination, collaboration and partnership for a strong community coordinated response (CCR), through country and community-tailored intervention programmes, including those based on the Duluth Model, in which various agencies meet regularly and are guided by victims' stories and input, policies and protocols are agreed upon that will enhance victim safety and offender accountability.
2. We highlighted the importance of having a common theory of violence that is shared among agencies, a prerequisite to achieving effective coordination. A common understanding in a CCR that most domestic violence and sexual violence are an exercise of power and control over victims will enable effective responses of police, prosecutors, judges and other actors. We also shared the need for a victim-centred response to the violence.
3. Only a small number of cases of violence against women are ever reported and an even smaller number are ever prosecuted. Even when cases are prosecuted, convictions are difficult to obtain. We need to better understand and meet the needs of the victims by providing easy and gender-sensitive accessible services so as to ensure that more women feel that it is safe to report violence and seek justice. This means that we need to listen to the survivors and include their

voices, as well as those of the specialized organizations that support them, in our efforts in the areas of law, policy development, implementation and monitoring. Legal professionals must be trained to understand the dynamics of domestic and sexual violence to be able to apply the law appropriately.

4. We identified the need to provide victims with a comprehensive array of services to enable them to meet their needs. These included victims' access to civil and criminal protection orders, psychosocial services, housing and economic sustainability, and the opportunity to pursue criminal charges against perpetrators. It is particularly important to make these options readily accessible and to remove barriers that inhibit access to these remedies. Indeed, a number of requirements, including that victims must press criminal charges, obtain medical reports, or produce witnesses in order to be granted protective measures, are burdensome and could be counterproductive.
5. We discussed the severe problem of victim intimidation and suggested the use of danger assessments and safety plans as tools that can help address this widespread concern. Victims may be unwilling or unable to pursue criminal charges or avail themselves of other mechanisms within the justice system. In such situations, it is imperative to treat victims with respect and offer them services that reduce their reliance on their abuser. The legal system should allow for pursuing criminal charges even without the participation of victims.
6. Investment in a justice system based on the protection of women survivors and their rights is vital. Participants unanimously agreed that the burden of holding abusers accountable is on the criminal justice system. Furthermore, requiring victims to engage in mediation with the abuser is not only dangerous, but also in violation of the Istanbul Convention.
7. For policies to be successful, sustained and effective awareness-raising campaigns are vital. All citizens, whether men or women, boys or girls, must understand that there is nothing private about VAWG and that it cannot be truly eliminated without an understanding that its tolerance in any form is unacceptable.
8. Change starts at birth. Education is a powerful equalizer; it is the key to transforming mentalities, addressing stereotypes and discrimination and building a culture of equality. Educating boys and girls on human rights and gender equality from an early age will help to instil respect and non-violence in relations between the sexes.
9. Effective implementation will be possible only when we mobilize and engage men in this movement of change. We have to count on men and boys to embody a new social construct of non-violent men and relationships built on respect.

In order to inspire action on violence against girls and women, we will bring this outcome document to the attention of our colleagues through all possible channels. We undertake to bring the document to the attention of other relevant stakeholders. We also urge the IPU to bring our conclusions and recommendations to the attention of the global parliamentary community and ensure follow-up through its programmes and assemblies.