



A PARLIAMENTARY RESPONSE TO VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

*Conference for Chairpersons and Members of Parliamentary Bodies
Dealing with Gender Equality
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Concluding observations by the Rapporteur, Ms. Thalia Dragona, Member of the Special Permanent Committee on Equality and Human Rights, Hellenic Parliament

We have come together these past two and a half days to discuss and exchange experiences on parliament's role in addressing violence against women (VAW). Our objective has been to identify key priority areas for action and parliamentary initiatives and strategies to put an end to this violence.

Our discussions began by recognizing that violence against women is today an issue that is on all agendas, whether at the international or the national level. Violence against women is actually a relatively new "political issue", despite the fact that it has always existed. It is now accepted and recognized as a challenge to development and a violation of women's human rights. It is also a challenge to the well-being of all of our societies. A world that is free of violence against women is not an ideal but indeed a necessity. It should be the norm.

Addressing violence against women is a complex issue which requires profound changes. It means looking at power relations; confronting patriarchy, which permeates all aspects of our societies; changing mentality and challenging social roles and stereotypes which we hold within us. Women have internalized low self-esteem and poor self-image and this will take a long time to change, but change it should.

Global political awareness offers unprecedented opportunities which we should take advantage of to step up progress and make effective change in the lives of women in our respective countries.

The figures for violence against women depict a situation which is alarming, to say the least. The challenges faced in developing responses to VAW are numerous. We mentioned some of them, such as mentalities, education, limited national capacity, lack of data collection and systems, lack of coordination between partners, limited resources, lack of effective monitoring and accountability mechanisms etc. Making progress in this field may seem impossible, but change can be achieved and our contribution as parliamentarians can make a difference.

There is no one solution for addressing these challenges and reaching the objective of putting an end to violence against women. Rather, there are a variety of approaches, reflecting the diversity of situations and country experiences. The following is by no means an exhaustive summary of the range of experiences and detailed practices that were examined during the conference. Rather, it aims to highlight the main strategies and elements that can contribute to achieving progress.

Priority 1: Ending violence against women requires a comprehensive and all-inclusive approach

- **First**, violence against women stems from gender-based discrimination and gender inequality. We cannot hope to address VAW without taking into account the wider context in which women evolve and the need to secure respect for women's fundamental rights in general. All policies, laws, budget decision, etc. impact in one way or another on women and have the potential to increase their vulnerability to violence.
- **Second**, the response to violence against women should be holistic. We have to prevent and protect. We have to assist the victims and make sure that they are protected in the future. We have to criminalize violence against women, identify the perpetrators and bring them to justice. We need to fight impunity.
- **Third**, putting an end to VAW is not the responsibility of one person, actor or group. Sustainable change will require a collective response, in which we all have our role to play. Actions therefore need to involve all stakeholders, men and women, developing and developed countries,

representatives from government, parliaments, the judiciary, law enforcement agents, civil society, the private sector and international organizations.

Priority 2: Building a strong and effective legal framework

To address VAW, we must begin by building a legal framework. This is a basic foundation for which we - as parliamentarians - have responsibility.

- **First**, many of our countries have already passed legislation on VAW. Some have one omnibus law whereas others have violence addressed in a variety of laws. In this last case, we need to ensure that there is harmonization between the different laws.
- **Second**, legislation on VAW needs to include several key elements. It must acknowledge violence against women as a form of **gender-based discrimination**, and that violence may affect different groups of women differently. It should also be **comprehensive**, including provisions regarding prevention of violence against women, protection and support for the complainant/survivor, and prosecution and punishment of the perpetrator. We all insisted on the importance of ensuring that prevention is covered by law.
- **Third**, legislation should be **evidence-based**. It must also address national realities and serve the interests of all constituents, including rural women and marginalized women. Special attention should also be placed on women in vulnerable and crisis situations (in situations of conflict, migrant women, trafficked women, victims of the sex trade, etc.).
- **Fourth**, legislation should also provide for **implementation mechanisms** such as budgetary support, the creation of specific institutional mechanism aimed at monitoring implementation and collection of statistical data.
- **Fifth**, legislation should be regularly monitored and we should not hesitate to **amend** it in order to respond to new realities, address gaps or correct inadequacies.
- **Sixth**, national legislation must meet the **international standards** and benchmarks to which our countries have committed. Particular attention should be placed on international human rights instruments, such as CEDAW, Concluding comments of the UN Committee on discrimination against women, Security Council resolutions 1325 and 1820 as well regional legal instruments on VAW.

Priority 3: Securing effective implementation of legislation

While legislation is necessary, it is not sufficient, as there is often a gap between de jure and de facto equality, i.e. there is a gap between legislation and its effective **implementation**. Responsibility for bridging this gap lies also with parliamentarians, as they can oversee the implementation of policies and programmes to ensure that they meet the standards and goals we have set.

- **First**, we must ensure, through our budgetary powers, that sufficient resources are allocated to match the priorities set in legislation and national policies on violence against women. The development of gender-sensitive budgeting can help us in that regard. Cost assessments of legislation could also be carried out to identify needs for effective implementation.
- **Second**, we must have access to comprehensive, sex-disaggregated data and make use of indicators and targets in order to assess the impact of laws. We need to build our national statistical capacities and should not hesitate to make use of tools and instruments developed by the international community in this field.
- **Third**, we should make use of existing parliamentary mechanisms (such as parliamentary committees) or set up new parliamentary bodies specifically mandated to oversee the implementation of VAW legislation. These bodies should benefit from sufficient resources and support, and also have the power to impact on the work of parliament.
- **Fourth**, the creation of specific inter-institutional mechanisms should also be promoted. Members of parliament should be included in such bodies with a view to enhancing political follow-up.
- **Fifth**, we must not hesitate to use all of our powers to monitor the situation. We must ask the difficult questions and hold governments to account regularly on the implementation. We can also engage with independent bodies such as the audit office or the office of the ombudsman.
- **Sixth**, we must encourage and support civil society actors to play an active role in putting an end to VAW.

Priority 4: Education, sensitization and heightening the visibility of VAW

Effective progress will require a change in mentality and social patterns, a growing awareness of women's rights issues and violence against women. As opinion leaders and policymakers, we, as parliamentarians, must take the lead.

- **First**, change starts at birth. From a very early age, children - girls and boys - should be educated on human rights and gender equality. Teaching and learning materials that are used in schools must also be reviewed to address stereotypes. Families should be targeted in terms of raising awareness about women's rights and challenging social stereotypes. Parental education on women's rights should also be developed.
- **Second**, for laws to be effective and make an impact, they must be known about and understood. Legislative reform must therefore be accompanied by campaigns to raise awareness and educate women about their rights. Boys and men should also be targeted. We should therefore not hesitate to speak up, explain the laws, and challenge the media, civil society associations, the private sector and others to join in public education programmes. Laws must also be easily accessible and translated into local languages.
- **Third**, training and education programmes should be designed to target judges and law enforcement agents such as the police. For that, we should ensure that specific programmes are designed to that end and receive sufficient funding.
- **Fourth**, sensitization campaigns should be launched to make VAW visible and raise awareness. We should not hesitate to support national campaigns on VAW or even lead some. We should also not hesitate to make use of existing campaigns, such as the White Ribbon campaign or the United Nations Secretary-General's Campaign to End Violence against Women.

Priority 5: Work in partnership

Progress will only result from the combined efforts of all stakeholders aimed at achieving equality and putting an end to VAW. We need to build a united front. It is important to maintain open channels of communication and forge **alliances** between the various actors, from the local to the international levels.

- **First**, partnership between men and women is at the core of progress. Specific programmes and initiatives aimed at engaging men in the fight against VAW should be developed and adequately supported. Men should also be encouraged to champion efforts to put an end to VAW, reach out to other men and contribute to transforming mentalities and societal roles. The participation of men should be valued and made visible. Discussions on masculinity and the role of men in society should be carried out.
- **Second**, as parliamentarians, we must help forge national consensus on the need to address violence against women as a priority. This should begin within our own parliaments. We must build cross-party alliances to support VAW action. We must also cooperate with other stakeholders, especially civil society and grass-root organizations.

Priority 6: Political will

Violence against Women is a political issue and needs strong political will to be addressed as a matter of priority.

- **First**, to garner political will, we need to have access to give visibility to the question, have accurate data, to know about the situation, inform others and engage them. Exercises of costing violence against women can serve as strong instruments of mobilization. We should therefore not hesitate to request and support such exercises.
- **Second**, we need to continuously put pressure on our government to follow up on its commitment or to commit to ending VAW. We should not hesitate to question government and call ministers to give account of their commitments, hold briefings and hearings in parliament to convince and engage MPs and political leaders.

Priority 7: Strong institutional framework

Effective change requires a strong institutional framework and national bodies that have the power and the capacity to take action.

- **First**, we must build our parliament's capacities to take action to put an end to VAW. We should look at what parliamentary mechanisms can be developed to support work on VAW. The establishment of a specific parliamentary committee on VAW could be an option.
- **Second**, we should build the capacities of members of parliament to address VAW. Exchange of experiences between parliaments from a same region or even at the global level should be encouraged. We should also not hesitate to seek support from international or national organizations that could facilitate training or provision of expertise.

- **Third**, it is crucial that more women be represented in decision-making bodies. We need to develop strategies to promote their access to parliament, government, national courts, etc.
- **Fourth**, national strategies to mainstream gender should be developed and supported so as to ensure that a coordinated approach and response to VAW is secured.
- **Fifth**, all efforts to address VAW should be taken into account and implemented at all levels of government: national, subnational and local. Specific attention should be placed on building the capacity of rural bodies which often lack support despite the important needs of rural populations.

In summary, we need to coordinate efforts and work together - women and men parliamentarians - civil society, central and local government, international and national organizations, and ordinary citizens. "Together" is the key word.