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"Women's Rights in Turbulent Times"
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Concept paper by the European Commission and the European Institute for Gender Equality

Plenary C: Confronting a culture of violence

Aim of the session

The aim of this session is to link the growing range and scale of gender-based violence in the EU to culture, attitudes and questions about the very fabric of our society. The session will look at how attitudes need to change and the measures that can be taken to tackle the culture of violence.

The session takes the form of a roundtable discussion. To enable as many discussants to take the floor as possible, please keep your interventions to 2 minutes.

Issues for discussion

- What is, from your perspective, the most urgent issue to address, and if there was one action you could take to improve the situation, what would it be?
- What can be done to change attitudes on violence against women and gender stereotypes and sexism more generally? Is there a 'generation gap' in attitudes on violence against women in our current social media and technological reality – are the norms of what is considered "violence" changing?
- How can social media movements such as #MeToo contribute to dismantling a culture of violence and promoting support for victims? How can we – as fellow citizens and sometimes bystanders – reject and confront violent behaviour and help to empower victims? What role do different stakeholders (e.g. education, health and social services, grass roots organisations, police and justice systems) play in the work to prevent violence and support victims?
- How do we prevent violence and support victims in contexts in which reporting and accessing services may be particularly challenging, such as for migrant women and in the case of cyber violence? For example, what measures can be taken to address linguistic and legal barriers to enable migrant women to access justice and support services? How can public and private sectors work to counter the proliferation of online violence?

Background

This paper considers the link between the pervasiveness of gender-based violence in the European Union and culture, attitudes and questions about the very fabric of our society.

As the #MeToo movement and the EU FRA (2014) data show, violence and harassment against women is very widespread, and vastly underreported to the authorities. For instance, while one in five women has experienced physical and/or sexual violence from either a current or previous partner, only 14 % of women reported their most serious incident of intimate partner violence to the police (EU FRA, 2014).

Gender-based violence harms women, families and communities as well as society as a whole. It constitutes a grave violation of human rights and remains one of the most pervasive forms of gender-based inequality. It cannot be understood outside of the social structures, gender norms and roles that perpetuate it.

One in five respondents in the 2016 Eurobarometer survey hold victim-blaming views, agreeing that women make up or exaggerate claims and that violence against women is often provoked by the victim (European Commission, 2016). In order to overcome violence, we must challenge these

beliefs and address the culture that it is rooted in/ based on. The European Commission and the Council of Europe have consistently emphasised the role of social and cultural norms and attitudes in reproducing rights abuses. Underlying attitudes and stereotypes surrounding violence against women in the European Union and the way these perceptions contribute to a continued culture of violence must be reflected on.

Culture attitudes and perceptions of violence

Attitudes, norms and stereotypes around gender in general and violence against women in particular have an important role in the victimization of women and girls and can be considered indirect violence. Indirect violence operates within a larger societal context, by imposing codes of femininity and masculinity on women and men respectively that predicate stereotypical gendered views which, in turn, foster gender-based violence (EIGE, 2013). Examining these attitudes can provide insight into the way in which these indirect forms of violence are created and sustained, and even more importantly, how they contribute to and facilitate direct forms of violence against women. Despite concerted efforts of national and international actors in the realm of prevention, cultural complacency - even tolerance to violence against women - is still apparent throughout the European Union (European Commission, 2016a, p.106).

Tolerance of violence against women is clear evidence of low awareness and maturity of societies, which must be addressed throughout all levels of society. Survey data shows that this form of violence is still accepted and even justified in some countries across Europe. For example, data from the Special Eurobarometer show that more than one in ten respondents across the EU (12%) believe that although intimate partner violence against women is unacceptable, it should not be punishable by law. This opinion is bolstered by the fact that domestic violence is still considered to be a private matter to be handled within the family (15% of Europeans overall) with results largely varying across Member States. In addition, 24% of respondents admitted knowing someone in their circle of friends and family or immediate area or neighbourhood, where they work or study who had been a victim of domestic violence, 18% knew a victim in their immediate area or neighbourhood and 10% where they work or study. However, 28% of the respondents across EU who knew a victim of domestic violence did not talk to anyone about it, with the largest proportion (in this case 26%) citing the reason for lack of disclosure as it being none of their business.

Misconceptions surrounding who can constitute either a victim or a perpetrator of gender-based violence prevail. Research points to the persistence of xenophobic attitudes regarding perceived perpetrators of violence against women (ENAR, 2015) and the belief that the majority of perpetrators are unknown to the victim – which is not the case (FRA, 2014). Socio-economic or socio-cultural factors are also often used to explain both victimisation and perpetration of violence.

Gender-based violence in a changing society

It is important to not only acknowledge underlying perceptions and attitudes of gender-based violence in the European Union, but to consider the ways in which such attitudes may shape or compound challenges related to its rapidly shifting geopolitical, sociocultural and digital landscape.

The continued conflation of conflict, human rights violations and the effects of climate change in many countries has led to the displacement of millions of people who seek refuge in Europe, with Mediterranean countries such as Italy and Greece constituting the main points of first reception (International Rescue Committee, 2015). As of January 2016, women and children account for more than 55% of those travelling on migration routes, compared to only 27% in June 2015 (UNFPA and Women's Refugee Committee, 2016). During the process of displacement, women and girls, children and adolescents travelling alone, female-headed households, pregnant and breastfeeding women and those with disabilities tend to face disproportionate gender-based

violence, including sexual or intimate partner violence, trafficking, forced prostitution and early or forced marriage (European Women's Lobby, 2015).

Ongoing conflicts and mass-migration have also facilitated the emergence of hybrid criminal networks which deal increasingly in trafficking in human beings, often for the purposes of sexual exploitation. In 2016, the UN adopted resolution UNSCR 2332 to 'address the nexus between trafficking, sexual violence, terrorism and transnational organised crime' and recognise conflict related sexual violence as a form of terrorism (UN, 2017). The landmark resolution is a step toward not only addressing the gendered impacts of conflicts, but recognising the links more generally between violent crime and violence exerted upon women and girls.

Another phenomenon of recent concern is that of increased cyber violence against women and girls, from cyber stalking, bullying and harassment to growing hate speech, in which misogyny may intersect with racial, religious or xenophobic discrimination. Cyber violence against women and girls is a growing global problem with potentially significant economic and societal consequences (EIGE, 2017b). Digitalization provides not only a vehicle for new forms of violence such as non-consensual pornography or 'recruitment', but a platform in which existent forms can manifest and be further facilitated (EIGE, 2017b). Despite increasing severity, to date, cyber violence against women and girls has not been fully conceptualised and many questions remain as to its current scope and impact, or indeed that of the future (EIGE, 2017b).

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