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Fighting gender inequality and violence with the Istanbul Convention

The #metoo campaign on sexual harassment has shed light on how gender inequality manifests itself in diverse forms of violence. The Istanbul Convention takes gender-based violence at its roots, by providing the tools to combat violence at all levels.

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The Istanbul Convention requires all states to apply comprehensive measures to combat violence against women. (Illustration: iStockphoto)

“Violence is harmful. It does damage, and it causes injury.”

These are the words of Purna Sen, a leading voice in the struggle to combat violence against women.

In her role as Executive Coordinator and Spokesperson on Addressing Sexual Harassment and Other Forms of Discrimination in UN Women, Purna Sen has a special responsibility to follow up on sexual harassment in the aftermath of the #metoo campaign. In June, she will join politicians and a wide range of stakeholders at the conference “Towards a Europe free from violence

against women and girls - the Istanbul Convention creating a new horizon and a paradigm change for all stakeholders!" (see fact box).

Sen explains how violence can be manifested.

"Physical, sexual and emotional violence can span the whole range of behaviours: from slapping and pulling hair, to beating and raping."

The impact of violence is also manifold, but according to Sen, all types of violence serve the same purpose.

"It takes away people's control of their body and their power to decide over their own lives. That is intrinsically harmful, because damaging a person in this way is a violation of their human rights and of their dignity."

Violence against women impacts the society as a whole

UN Women is an entity within the UN whose mandate is to promote gender equality and women's empowerment. They support diverse efforts to achieve these objectives, including women's movements who promote rights of women, states and parliamentarians that produce laws and policies, and the private sector businesses that strives for equal pay and care provision. The agency also supports actors who protect women in conflict situations and make women's voices heard in peace processes.

Violence against women is among the top priorities of the organisation, because it is a structural element of inequality between men and women that causes enormous damage.

"The impact of violence, particularly against women and girls, is that it limits and constrains their abilities to engage in the world around them," explains Purna Sen.

In Europe, one third of all women are expected to experience violence in their lives. Sen points to the fact that all women know they can be subjected to violence, and that girls are raised with a constant fear of violence.

"They learn that if you go out on your own you'll be in danger, if you go out at night you'll be in danger, if you're the only girl in the room: Watch out for those boys."

The constraint of women's activities has consequences, as they make up half the world's population.

"If you don't have women in politics, you get policies and laws made from the experiences and from the minds of men who don't understand what's happened in women's lives," Sen says.



Purna Sen from UN Women will be speaking at the high-level conference in Bucharest in June.

“If you have only men in the businesses you're not going to have a variety of ideas to help shape what you do or what goods you produce or how you sell them and to whom,” she adds.

Towards zero tolerance for violence against women

UN Women also works to ensure gender mainstreaming in the UN system, and advocates for women's rights to be placed at the centre of all UN agencies and their work. What Sen has learned from a long career working against discrimination and violence against women, is that experiences of violence are found everywhere.

“When you have patterns of violence, harassment and abuse, they become normalised and part of what you expect to happen rather than what you want to end,” she says.

“However, violence against women is not to be tolerated even though it is ubiquitous.”

“Why is a legal framework important to combat violence against women?”

“When we have a legal framework, we are spelling out who is responsible for what and which sanctions will operate when those standards are violated. Also, a law can dictate how we can set out compensation and ensure safety for those whose rights are violated,” says Sen.

A legal framework also sends a message.

“The states have to communicate through their legal system what is tolerated and what is not acceptable.”

Elisabeth Walaas is the Permanent Representative of Norway to the Council of Europe, and 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. She supports Sen’s analysis, from a European perspective.



Elisabeth Walaas, chair of the Bureau of the Committtee of the Parties to the Istanbul Convention, is one of the speakers at the high-level conference in Bucharest in June

“Violence against women is a societal problem in all European countries,” she says.

“It must be solved, and this can only be done by developing comprehensive politics. This must involve zero tolerance for violence and prosecution of aggressors,” says Walaas.

The Istanbul Convention was developed in accordance with research showing that 25–30 per cent of all women experience domestic violence or intimate partner violence.

“Due to history and culture, domestic violence has been defined as a private matter, as something that happens within the realm of domestic life, and not something of concern to society. However, violence against women does damage in the long run – therefore it is clearly a public issue,” says Walaas.

She emphasises that domestic violence is not just a women’s issue.

“We know that children, but also young boys and men suffer from violence. This is important, even though the majority of victims are women. That is why it is important to apply a holistic perspective.”

The Istanbul convention – designed to tackle the violence pandemic

In her role as chair of the bureau, Walaas works to promote the Istanbul Convention in Europe. The Convention has been celebrated as the best tool to combat violence against women. Walaas points to its comprehensive design to explain why.

“It is built along three axes. The first is prevention. This entails working with stagnated stereotypes and attitudes that could lead to violence. Second, several actions must be criminalised and prosecuted. Herein lies zero tolerance for violence. Thirdly, protection is key. Not just that victims should have access to a shelter the first days, we have to follow them up long-term.”

Walaas describes the convention as innovative in its design, but also radical.

“It is a radical and broad measure, as it requires the states to ensure a comprehensive cooperation with all stakeholders. This goes all the way to the localities where people live, and involves kindergartens, the justice system, civil society, the voluntary sector and families.”

Grevio – A unique monitoring mechanism

The goal of the Istanbul Convention is for states to move beyond words, and act on the violence pandemic. Grevio, a monitoring mechanism that oversees the implementation of the convention, constitutes the most radical measure, according to Walaas.

“The Istanbul Convention is the most comprehensive and binding convention there is globally, partly due to Grevio.”

Grevio is a board consisting of independent experts on violence against women. They are appointed by the Committee of the Parties, based on requirements such as experience and geographical belonging. Because they are working with all the different legal systems in Europe, the group has expertise in legal issues, prosecution, victim protection and human rights, and covers all of Europe.

“It is important for the legitimacy of the Convention and the European Council that the evaluation is based on sheer expertise,” says Walaas.

“The end sum of a convention that poses clear demands, combined with a thorough surveillance and monitoring mechanism, makes it more than just words on a paper.”

Istanbul Convention in its early stages

The Istanbul Convention entered into force on 1 August 2014. Walaas has been following the implementation process and sees this moment as crucial for the further development in Europe.

“We are in an early phase, as the convention has been enforced only in a few countries thus far, and only for five years. Grevio is developing its scheme and setting its standards as we speak.”

Eight countries have undergone evaluations by Grevio. Grevio has made reports with clear recommendations on how to better adapt to the demands of the Istanbul Convention.

“All eight countries state that they would not be where they are today without the Istanbul Convention. However, some countries have so much undone that they have a hard row to hoe,” says Walaas.

Purna Sen of UN Women sees the Istanbul Convention as an important step towards a Europe free from violence against women.

“When the UN sets global standards, they can be reflected in regional standards that we then expect to see at a national level. They're all linked up. They're not discrete or separate pieces of work or initiatives. The Istanbul Convention takes what has been set out internationally and makes it relevant at a regional level and strengthens the opportunities to implement those international standards at a national level.”

But the legal system cannot be the only arena to combat violence.

“The law doesn't necessarily change attitudes. It has to be supplemented by non-legal policies, by civil approaches, by workplace initiatives and many other things that may contribute to bring about cultural and normative change.”

This is why the Istanbul Convention is the right tool, as it requires work on protection, prosecution and prevention. According to Sen, there is a huge job ahead.

“150 countries still have laws that discriminate against women. There is still a lot of work to be done,” she says.

#metoo putting the issue on the agenda

In 2017 and 2018, the #metoo campaign resulted in a global movement that put sexual harassment and gender inequality on the agenda. Sen links sexual harassment to the work done by the Istanbul Convention.

“Sexual harassment is a by-product of gender inequality because power is distributed unequally between men and women. It tends to be more in the hands of men than women, and that power can often be exercised through sexual expressions that tend to be gendered,” says Sen.

“How has #metoo influenced the struggle to combat violence against women?”

“#metoo has brought everybody's attention to sexual harassment, and to the calls that women have made for many decades to end sexual abuse. I think we will talk about a time before #metoo and a time after #metoo. It links this issue to the broader experience of violence against women and girls across the world."

Sen urges leaders to listen to the calls from the #metoo movement.

"Women have put this issue on the agenda. They have opened the door and said we want the world to be different. Now the question remains: are we going to help shape that world or are we

going to ignore our responsibility and miss this moment?”

Walaas also believes the #metoo movement has had a huge impact on the struggle against violence against women.

“#metoo has been an eye opener to a gendered power asymmetry that still exists. Abuse of power takes on many shapes, from the most primitive violence to the more refined methods of harassment. #metoo underlines the importance of the Istanbul Convention, and also demonstrates that every generation has to go through their own struggles. Things can take on new shapes now than they had thirty or forty years ago,” she says.

High-level conference in Bucharest: Rising to challenge

At the conference in Bucharest, Walaas will address political leaders and stakeholders.

“It is important that political leaders talk about this issue, that they construe it as a societal problem. Then it can spread to the police, health services, schools, sports, and everyone in touch with families. We need to raise awareness and sharpen the gaze at this issue. In order to do that, the Convention must be alive, not just a document.”

She applauds the Convention for being radical.

“Not in the sense that it speaks up for a new definition of gender or any of the other myths that surround it, but because it acknowledges that this is a real problem in society, and therefore it is society’s task to solve it.”

Purna Sen of UN Women has no doubts; the states have a huge responsibility.

“Beyond laws, politicians are in a position to change national debates. They can steer these debates in directions that will give credence to the voices that have for too long been dismissed as malicious and not worth believing.”

Sen is looking forward to the conference in Bucharest.

“The fact that this meeting is taking place shows willingness and enthusiasm. And perhaps more than that a commitment to make the changes that are needed at this time. It's an honour to be part of that effort and I hope that we will bring the best of what UN Women has to offer into that conversation.”

“This is a moment where we can rise to the challenge that women have given us or we can miss the opportunity to make significant change.”

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