

## EU member states must adopt a zero tolerance approach to sexual harassment and violence

Written by Anna Maria Corazza Bildt on 10 April 2018 in Opinion  
Opinion

It's time for member states to step up to their responsibilities and ensure women and girls in Europe are free from sexual harassment and violence, writes Anna Maria Corazza Bildt.



Anna Maria Corazza Bildt | Photo credit: European Parliament audiovisual

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The #MeToo movement has shown how widespread sexual harassment and violence against women and girls remains. It happens everywhere: at home, in public places, at work and increasingly, online. #MeToo became a way for women to be encouraged and feel heard. I am committed to ensuring that the movement's positive momentum continues in the real world and that we support women and girls in speaking up. I want to say loud and clear: "You are not alone."

The European Parliament adopted a strong resolution for zero tolerance against sexual harassment

last October. The silence has been broken, but much more needs to be done to eradicate gender-based violence.

We need to ensure proper sentencing of the perpetrators and effective protection for victims. We must ensure the painful process of denouncing these crimes is worth it. It's about putting an end to victim blaming and shifting guilt to the perpetrators. It's also about recognising that sexual harassment is a serious crime, motivated by sexism and a culture of discrimination against women.

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To prevent sexual harassment and other forms of violence against women and girls, we need a strong legal framework with strict sanctions, ensuring that offenders are brought to justice. Member states need to ensure effective protection for women, with greater resources for police, more shelters and support for those civil society organisations helping victims to recover.

We also need to join forces to build a culture of respect for women and girls. Education on equality and training for police, judges, and other officials dealing with women that are victims of violence will be key to prevention. The media also plays an important role in promoting equality and changing mentalities.

#MeToo had a multiplying effect because it spread on social media, raising awareness and building networks among millions of women and girls. It is appalling that many of them were insulted and humiliated on social platforms when sharing their experience of sexual harassment.

In my work in the European Parliament, I have called on the member states to take appropriate measures to combat hate speech against women and girls and other forms of online crimes, including revenge pornography or sex extortion, which are affecting an entire generation of women.

We are also working together with the internet industry and social media, pressing them to take shared responsibility, removing denigrating and illegal content online against women and girls and respecting their privacy.

In the European Parliament, I lead the work on the EU accession to the Istanbul convention, which is the best tool we have to strengthen our action to prevent violence, combat impunity and protect victims. It clearly criminalises both violence against women and domestic violence, including sexual harassment. It provides strict sanctions and important measures to prevent violence and protect victims.

In June last year, I was proud to represent Parliament at the signing of the EU accession. Since then, Estonia, Cyprus and Germany have ratified the convention. I regret, however, that 11 member states are still missing from the list.

During the plenary session in March, I launched an appeal to break the deadlock and move forward.

There has been much misrepresentation of the Istanbul convention in some countries, such as Bulgaria, Croatia, Poland, Slovakia and also in Ukraine.

In his recent speech to the plenary, the Council of Europe Commissioner for human rights clarified that there was no hidden agenda behind the Istanbul convention. He said the term 'gender' means the "socially constructed roles and behaviours that a society considers appropriate for women and men."

It means that the role of women in our society goes beyond the difference of sex. It is about combating stereotypes and promoting equality. The convention is not against traditional families. It is violence that "endangers families", not the convention, which actually protects families.

In our call for action, we ask the Bulgarian EU Council presidency to put the Istanbul convention on the European Council meetings agenda for as long as it takes. We call for a constructive dialogue with member states opposing the convention, to address their concerns and clarify the misleading interpretation of 'gender'. I have written to the Bulgarian President and Prime Minister calling on them to re-open the ratification process in Bulgaria.

The public debate must be based on facts, engaging with civil society and religious groups. We are also supporting women's organisations in making their voice heard. The shrinking space of civil society in some countries is part of the problem. I am pleased that gender equality Commissioner Vera Jourová has announced that she will travel to those countries to support the ratification of the convention.

Let's continue to join forces and pressure member states to do more, faster and better to enforce the convention. It is time for them to take their responsibility and move from words to action, to zero tolerance for violence against women and girls.

It is about empowering women and girls and standing up for women's rights. As co-rapporteur on the Istanbul convention, I can assure you that we will never give up, not until women and girls in Europe are free from violence.

## About the author

Anna Maria Corazza Bildt (EPP, SE) is Parliament's co-rapporteur on the CoE convention on combating violence against women

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