

The refusal to legislate on violence against women is symptomatic of a wider backlash against women's rights in Europe

Written by Christine Revault d'Allonnes- Bonnefoy on 10 April 2018 in Opinion
Opinion

As some member states refuse to ratify the Istanbul convention, the EU must take action to protect those women whose governments are failing them, writes Christine Revault d'Allonnes-Bonnefoy.



Christine Revault d'Allonnes-Bonnefoy | Photo credit: European Parliament audiovisual

Last year was a pivotal year. Through #metoo, #moiaussi and #balancetonporc, millions of women around the world spoke out on the harassment they had been subjected to. The allegations against US film producer Harvey Weinstein unleashed an unprecedented chain reaction among women of all ages, professions and social backgrounds. What this scandal revealed - and what some of us already knew and had denounced - was the extent of gender-based violence.

According to articles 34 and 40 of the Council of Europe convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence - the Istanbul convention - harassment and sexual harassment are forms of violence.

This legally-binding, international treaty has been signed by all EU member states and provides prevention measures and support for victims and demands that gender-based violence is criminalised must be punished as such.

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For those doubting the gravity of the situation, here are some striking figures. According to a report published by the EU fundamental rights agency in March 2014, one third of women have been victims of physical or sexual violence during their adult life; one in 20 women has been raped. It is a social evil.

We have reached a turning point, as society realises that gender-based violence isn't simply a private issue, but rather something that concerns us all and must be dealt with both politically and legally.

During the public debate, I was particularly saddened by the 'right to pester' letter which was signed by many French celebrities, who confusing violence and seduction. When denouncing violence requires courage, discounting the victims and displacing the blame onto women does not help. Their words were imprinted with the patriarchy and male domination that we have all integrated but must free ourselves from.

This violence is the product of the unequal distribution of power between men and women, sexism and gender stereotypes that have led to the domination of and discrimination against women by men. Eradicating violence against women is a constant battle, one that ultimately requires a profound change in mentality to use the legal and political instruments available.

The Istanbul convention is an international treaty that member states have signed, but why have they not all ratified and truly implemented its provisions? Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Slovakia, the Czech Republic and the UK have yet to do so, to the detriment of their citizens.

What is worse is that some member states are publicly opposed to the convention and have been using misleading and deceptive arguments against it. Women make up half their population, but clearly not the half that matters.

No, the ratification of the Istanbul convention will not lead to legalisation of same-sex marriage. No, the term 'gender' doesn't conceal a hidden ideology - it allows us to describe violence based on gender, which disproportionately affects women.

What can we say to all of this? To start, we can support the EU's full ratification to the Istanbul convention. The Union has signed, but not ratified, it because of the reticence of those member states

stalling the negotiations.

For the Slovak and Bulgarian women that are victims of violence and whose governments prefer to look the other way, EU ratification of the convention would constitute additional protection. The European Parliament has said this several times.

All of this is only a first step, and it will take months - maybe years - for the Istanbul convention to be properly applied in Europe. However, we must be ready to fight against further regression. This refusal to legislate on violence against women is symptomatic of a wider backlash against women's rights in Europe, affecting areas like sexual and contraceptive health and the right to safe, legal abortion.

About the author

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