

## **We have the tools to overcome the mounting threat of violence against women and girls, including online violence**

*Joint statement by Elena Bonetti, Italian Minister for equal opportunities and family and Council of Europe Secretary General Marija Pejčinović Burić*

We mark in 2021 the anniversary of the Istanbul Convention. It has been 10 years since the Council of Europe [Istanbul Convention](#) – the Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence – was opened for signature. And yet, the road to combat violence against women is still long.

Some 736 million women worldwide — almost one in three — have been subjected to intimate partner violence, non-partner sexual violence, or both at least once in their life, according to statistics from the United Nations. And this figure does not include sexual harassment and forms of violence such as stalking, forced marriage or female genital mutilation.

The Italian Presidency of the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers focuses on empowering women, which includes defending and promoting their rights. We cannot stand idle as online threats of gender-based violence are increasing, especially because online violence easily spills over to the “physical” world.

The Istanbul Convention is clear in its aims: it prevents violence against women, protects those who become victims and ensures prosecution of perpetrators.

It not only encourages integrated policy-making, but also criminalises specific offences, such as stalking, forced marriage and female genital mutilation. Where it has been implemented, it has worked – and with positive changes to national laws.

The Istanbul Convention is the most advanced international instrument European States have and its full implementation is the most effective way to stand up for women’s rights. We encourage additional signatures and ratifications.

During lockdowns, cases of domestic violence and gender-based violence against women have risen dramatically. Women's participation in the labour market, family support services and the promotion of leadership roles for women in the economy and society must be priority themes in recovery programmes. Women’s empowerment is fundamental for the prevention of violence against women, including “economic violence”. It is also essential to continue to work on reconciling professional and private life to ensure that women are not obliged to choose between family and work.

One day before the [UN International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women](#) (on 24 November 2021), the Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence ([GREVIO](#)) has published its first general recommendation on “the digital dimension of violence against women”.

The recommendation covers online acts of violence against women – such as sharing humiliating images, insults and threats of death and rape – and also crimes perpetrated through the tracking technology reported on by cyber security companies. The recommendation calls on action to prevent perpetrators from controlling a woman’s ability without her consent to acquire, use and maintain economic resources by controlling bank accounts and financial activities through internet banking. It promotes digital literacy and online safety in formal curricula and at all levels of education, and training on digital expressions of violence against women for relevant actors: from law-enforcement and criminal justice professionals, to members of the judiciary and health-care staff.

Among its many measures, the GREVIO recommendation promotes inclusion of digital literacy and online safety at all levels of education; it encourages Internet intermediaries to share responsibility and take action to put an end to impunity for digital acts of gender-based violence and calls for equipping law enforcement with the necessary instruments and knowledge to effectively investigate and prosecute perpetrators. Furthermore, the new General Recommendation builds on a chapter – devoted to online sexist abuse – in the [2019 Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers to all member States on preventing and combating sexism](#).

It draws an essential link to the Istanbul Convention in the context of the digital dimension of violence against women and provides potential opportunities for synergies between the Istanbul treaty and the Council of Europe’s Cybercrime Convention, also known as the [Budapest Convention](#), a landmark treaty regarded as the most comprehensive and coherent international agreement on cybercrime and electronic evidence to date, marking 20 years this month.

Violence against women is a serious threat to women’s freedom and rights, including online violence and gender-based cybercrime. We have the tools at our disposal both to recognise and to tackle violence. As we celebrate anniversaries this year for two essential Council of Europe treaties, and in light of the UN Day, we call on all State Parties to follow the indications of the Istanbul Convention and the guidelines set forth in the new GREVIO recommendation.