

Directorate General of Human Rights Equality Division



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Equality between women and men

Introduction

Gender equality means an equal visibility, empowerment and participation of both sexes in all spheres of public and private life. Gender equality is the opposite of gender inequality, not of gender difference.

It means accepting and valuing equally the complementarity of women and men and the diverse roles they play in society.

The legal status of women has undoubtedly improved over the last thirty years, but effective equality is still far from being reality. In the general perspective of protecting and promoting human rights, the Council of Europe seeks to combat any interference with women's liberty and dignity, eliminate discrimination based on sex, promote a balanced participation of

women and men in political and public life and encourage the integration of a gender perspective into all programmes and policies.

Equality must be promoted by supporting specific policies for women, who are more likely to be exposed to practices which qualify as torture or inhuman or degrading treatment (physical violence, rape, genital and sexual mutilation, trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation). These violations of women's human rights are still

common and have dramatically increased in some areas of Europe.

Furthermore, women are still marginalised in political and public life, paid less for work of equal value and find themselves victims of poverty and unemployment more often than men.

Gender equality can only be achieved by women and men working together. The involvement of men in promoting gender equality has progressively developed over the past years.

Gender equality: an integral part of human rights and a criterion of democracy

In 1988, the Committee of Ministers affirmed (Declaration on Equality of Women and Men) that equality between women and men is an integral part of human rights and that sex-related discrimination is an impediment to the recognition, enjoyment and exercise of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

During the Organisation's 2nd Summit, the Heads of State and Government of Council of Europe member States (Strasbourg, October 1997) stressed "the importance of a more balanced representation of men and women in all sectors of society, including political life," and called for "continued progress with a view to achieving effective equality of opportunities between women and men".

During the 4th European Ministerial Conference on Equality

between Women and Men (Istanbul, 1997), the European Ministers adopted a Declaration on gender equality as a fundamental criterion of democracy.

During the 3rd Summit of the Council of Europe (Warsaw, May 2005) the Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe member States stressed that equal participation of both women and men is a crucial element of democracy and they confirmed their commitment to achieving real equality between women and men in all spheres of society.

On the occasion of the 6th European Ministerial Conference on Equality between Women Men (Stockholm, 8-9 June 2006), the Ministers emphasised that the lack of gender equality implies personal, social and economic costs higher

than the cost of those incurred in implementing gender equality and that there are social and economic benefits to be gained from its implementation.

Article 14 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) established, already in 1950, a prohibition of discrimination based on sex in relation to the rights of the Convention.

Protocol No. 12 of the ECHR, which entered into force in April 2005, represents an important step forward for building equality between women and men by securing a general prohibition on discrimination by any public authority on *inter alia* the grounds of sex, regarding the enjoyment of any right set forth by law and not only rights and freedoms of the ECHR.



Activities

The Council of Europe set up its first committee to promote equality between women and men in 1979. Today the gender equality activities are organised under the main responsibility of the *Steering Committee for Equality between Women and Men (CDEG)*. Each member state of the Council of Europe is entitled to appoint one representative and non-member states holding observer status with the Council of Europe are entitled to appoint an observer. Non-governmental organisations are also represented on the CDEG.

Gender Equality Standards and Mechanisms

In 2004, a *Stocktaking study on the effective functioning of national gender equality mechanisms in Council of Europe member States* was published. In line with the Organisation's pioneering role of standard setting, a recommendation containing the European standards on equality between women and men, including national equality mechanisms is currently being prepared.

Gender mainstreaming

Gender mainstreaming is the main strategy used to achieve gender equality. It implies incorporating a gender perspective into all policy processes in order to take into account the needs and interests of both women and men. A report on *Gender budgeting* containing guidelines to assist member states on the introduction of a gender perspective in the budgetary process was recently published and a recommendation on gender mainstreaming in education is being prepared. An *Informal Network on Gender Mainstreaming* meets once a year to exchange information and to discuss ways of integrating this strategy in a specific field. The CDEG also works together with other Council of Europe bodies and steering committees to introduce this strategy in their activities.

Legal texts

- *European Convention on Human Rights*, Article 14 - Prohibition of discrimination
- *Protocol No. 7*, Article 5 - Equality between spouses
- *Protocol No. 12*, Article 1 - General Prohibition of discrimination
- The *European Social Charter (Revised)* of 1996 guarantees without discrimination on the grounds of sex the enjoyment of the rights set forth in the Charter (Part V, Article E).

Preventing and combating violence against women

Protecting and promoting women's human rights means taking measures to fight against interferences with their liberty and dignity. In 2002, the Committee of Ministers adopted Rec(2002)5 containing guidelines to assist member states in the preparation and/or modification of legislation and policies to combat violence against women. Progress in the implementation of the recommendation was evaluated in the recent publication *Combating Violence against women - Stocktaking study on the measures and actions taken in Council of Europe member states*.

In 2006, as a follow up to the 3rd Summit, a *Task Force to combat violence against women, including domestic violence* was set up to evaluate progress at national level and establish instruments for quantifying developments at pan-European level. A pan-European Campaign to combat violence against women, including domestic violence was launched. Other activities include a seminar on *The Place and the role of men in relation to violence within the family* and a study on *Forced marriages in Council of Europe member states - A comparative study of legislation and political initiatives*.

Action against trafficking in human beings

Since the late 1980s, the Council of Europe has adopted a variety of initiatives aimed at combating trafficking in human beings. A new impetus was given to this action through the opening for signature of the *Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings* during the 3rd Summit of Heads of State and Government (Warsaw, May 2005). A *Council of Europe Campaign to Combat Trafficking in Human Beings* was launched in 2006.

Committee of Ministers recommendations

- *Recommendation No. R(98)14* on gender mainstreaming (7/10/1998)
- *Recommendation No. R(2000)11* on action against trafficking in Human Beings for the purpose of sexual exploitation (19/05/2000)
- *Recommendation Rec(2002)5* on the protection of women against violence (30/04/2002)

Balanced participation of women and men

The balanced participation of women and men in political and public decision-making is at the heart of the functioning of pluralist democracy. In 2003, the Committee of Ministers adopted Rec(2003)3 containing guidelines to assist member states in promoting an increased participation of women in decision-making. Progress on implementation of this Recommendation is monitored. Recent activities include examining the role and position of women in the diplomatic service. In 2005, a study on *Parental Leave in Council of Europe member States* was published.

Role of women and men in conflict prevention and resolution and in peace building

The 5th European Ministerial Conference (Skopje, January 2003) was devoted to the roles of women and men in conflict prevention, peace-building and post-conflict democratic processes. As a follow up to this Conference, a recommendation containing guidelines for the development and implementation of strategies and mechanisms for increasing women's participation and strengthening their roles in these fields is being prepared.

Co-operation & assistance activities

Co-operation and assistance activities in the field of equality include information and awareness-raising seminars and legislative expertise. In preparation for these activities the main Council of Europe documents in the field of gender equality are translated into the different languages of the member states.

- *Recommendation Rec(2003)3* on balanced participation of women and men in political and public decision making (12/03/2003)
- *Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings* opened for signature on 16 May 2005.

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