Parliamentary Assembly
Assemblée parlementaire
https://pace.coe.int

COUNCIL OF EUROPE
CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Doc. 14361
28 June 2017

Putting an end to sexual violence and harassment of women in public space

Committee Opinion[1]
Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media
Rapporteur: Mr Stefan SCHENNACH, Austria, Socialist Group

A. Conclusions of the committee

1. The Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media welcomes the report by Ms Françoise Hetto-Gaasch (Luxembourg, EPP/CD) on behalf of the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination. It shares the main thrust of the report and considers that violence against women, together with violence against children, is a plague that our societies must unreservedly condemn and fight with all their strength and commitment. Unfortunately it seems that the efforts already made have not been sufficient to reduce the extent of the problem and eradicate its causes. This deserves continuous and serious consideration by all social actors and we must take concrete and determined action to achieve results.

2. The committee values, in general, the draft resolution submitted by the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination. Based on the suggestion by its rapporteur for opinion, the committee proposes the following amendments, which are aimed at strengthening the text on specific issues within its remit.

B. Proposed amendments

Amendment A (to the draft resolution)

Replace paragraph 7.5 with the following paragraph:

> *"include awareness raising about respect for human dignity and non-violent conflict resolution, and more specifically about gender equality, gender stereotypes and the role of women in our societies, in general education curricula, so as to address this issue from different angles; and to develop targeted learning modules on, for example, the impact of sexual violence and harassment on victims, or on how to behave when confronted directly or indirectly with attacks against women; special emphasis must be put on programmes aimed at educating or re-educating parents and enhancing their approach or understanding of what violence against women is and why it must be eradicated;"*

Amendment B (to the draft resolution)

After paragraph 7.5, insert the following paragraph:

> *"develop teaching methods and school activities that help address the causes of violence, also avoiding reproducing imbalanced power relationships and gender-based stereotypes, and provide opportunities for pupils to control their physical or psychological tensions in a non-violent manner;"*

---

1. Reference to committee: Bureau decision. Reference 4183 of 29 January 2016. Reporting committee: Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination. See Doc. 14337. Opinion approved by the committee on 27 June 2017.

Amendment C (to the draft resolution)

After paragraph 7.5, insert the following paragraph:

> *"provide school teachers and staff with mandatory training, so that they can: a) learn to detect the potential victims of violence (children subjected to abuse, witnesses of parental quarrels); b) better understand the different forms of violence (physical, psychological, verbal and behavioural); and c) learn how to oppose them;"*

Amendment D (to the draft resolution)

After paragraph 7.5, insert the following paragraph:

> *"ensure the regular presence in schools of specialised counsellors, mediators and/or psychologists, who should be available for pupils, their parents and teachers, and should be trained to help those who have experienced violence, including victims, perpetrators and bystanders;"*

Amendment E (to the draft resolution)

After paragraph 7.7, insert the following paragraph:

> *"launch a dialogue with the providers of new media services or products, such as internet access or service providers, providers of mobile telecommunications media and sellers of videos and video games, to foster their commitment in the fight against gender stereotypes and gender-based violence, through adequate self-regulatory measures as well as control and complaints mechanisms; encourage closer co-operation of new media providers with national governments in combating and prohibiting the dissemination of media outlets with gender-based violence content, including timely and prompt exchange of information and reaction when sexually disturbing media content is put on the internet;"*

C. Explanatory memorandum by Mr Stefan Schennach, rapporteur for opinion

1. Introduction

1. I would like, from the outset, to warmly thank Ms Françoise Hetto-Gaasch and the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination for the report on "Putting an end to sexual violence and harassment of women in public space" and the analysis and concrete proposals therein.

2. Violence against women, together with violence against children, is a plague that our societies must unreservedly condemn and fight with all their strength and commitment. This cannot be done by words and declarations alone; we need concrete and determined action to achieve results. Unfortunately the feeling is that efforts already made have not been adequate to reduce the extent of the problem and attack its causes. Today, sadly, no country could honestly consider itself as safe from this plague and this deserves serious consideration.

3. Besides the clamour and commotion that can be provoked by the most dramatic attacks against women – and there are indeed too many of them in our countries –, I am, and I believe we should be, deeply shocked by the fact that violence against women in public space seems to be a kind of routine phenomenon. A shocking video of a Roma man in Albania publicly beating up his wife for no reason went viral last summer, and recorded lectures of controversial imams from the Middle East countries encouraging and listing situations when husbands must beat up their wives have become almost daily news, particularly on the social media.

4. According to statistics that Ms Hetto-Gaasch mentioned in her report, not only have most women, and particularly young women, direct experience of it, but most of them, because of a pervasive sense of insecurity, tend, or even feel forced, to adapt their behaviour seeking to reduce the probability they could be confronted (again) with unpleasant, offensive, if not physically aggressive, behaviour by men. Moreover, women victims of sexual harassment often end up with the bitter feeling of being denied access to justice, precisely because of the power relationship already established and the fact that it almost inherently favours the men, not the women. As Ms Hetto-Gaasch's report correctly and concisely states, this is simply unacceptable.

5. I share the main thrust of the report, which is also captured by the first lines of the draft recommendation: violence against women is a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between women and men, which to date we have not been able to correct; and we cannot bring to an end violence against women unless we achieve fundamental changes of our mindsets.

6. If we, as politicians and decision makers, are not able to act more incisively to counter violence against women, maybe we are not much better than those people who, when confronted with such frequent forms of psychological and physical violence against women, don't dare intervene and leave them alone to face their attackers. Violence against women is not only a phenomenon in so-called socially fragile environments. Women holding strong and influential political positions have also been targeted by inflammatory and discriminating language or actions or campaigns. Have we, as fellow politicians, done enough, if anything, to come to their defence? It is not enough to react when there is a public outcry; we must consistently assume our responsibilities through a coherent, holistic strategy and sustainable long-term initiatives intended to foster the required change of mindsets.

7. Ms Hetto-Gaasch's report deals with different aspects of the problem and the role of different actors. I would like to contribute to this analysis by adding a few considerations, in the following two sections, on two questions evoked by the report which are within the sphere of competence of the Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media. These are the role of the education system and the role of the media in combating violence against women. When dealing with these issues, I will also bear in mind previous relevant work of our committee.

2. Fighting sexist violence in schools and through education

8. It seems obvious that schools and the education system in general should have a prominent role in fighting sexist violence. Indeed, school is the place where we should not only learn but also start practising fundamental concepts such as human dignity, mutual respect and equality between women and men. School is the place where critical thinking must be nourished, and stereotypes and "cultural biases" – including negative gender, sexist and sexual stereotypes – eliminated.

9. As the report by the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination indicates, the Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (CETS No. 210, Istanbul Convention) takes account of the role of education in its Article 14, which states: "Parties shall take, where appropriate, the necessary steps to include teaching material on issues such as equality between women and men, non-stereotyped gender roles, mutual respect, non-violent conflict resolution in interpersonal relationships, gender-based violence against women and the right to personal integrity, adapted to the evolving capacity of learners, in formal curricula and at all levels of education. …"

10. I would add that the Council of Europe has for many years stressed the fundamental role of education in the promotion of gender equality (including by shaping positive gender representations, attitudes and behaviours).[2] Fulfilment of this role is a prerequisite for the achievement of *de facto* equality between women and men in all spheres of life in society.

11. Education against violence is certainly the key; we know, however, that schools are public spaces where violence takes place, including sexual and gender-based violence, which could take psychological, physical and/or sexual forms. Such violence reproduces and contributes to enforcing and reinforcing power imbalances between the sexes, as well as gender inequalities, stereotypes and socially imposed roles.

12. Just as an example, in the United Kingdom, the Women and Equalities Select Committee of the House of Commons made an inquiry into sexual harassment and sexual violence in schools. The results are very worrying: a picture emerged of girls being harassed, kissed, groped, slapped and sexually assaulted at schools across the country. Large-scale survey data showed that 5 500 alleged sexual offences (including 600 rapes) had been reported to the police as having occurred in schools over three years, and that almost one in three 16- to 18-year-old girls had experienced "unwanted sexual touching" at school.[3]

---

2. See, for example, Recommendation CM/Rec(2007)13 of the Committee of Ministers on gender mainstreaming in education (adopted on 10 October 2007 at the 1006th meeting of the Ministers' Deputies). In 2015, the Council of Europe published a compilation of good practices intended to provide examples of meaningful activities implemented in Council of Europe member States to promote an education free from gender stereotypes and identify new ways to implement the measures comprised in the Committee of Ministers Recommendation on Gender Mainstreaming in Education.

3. The results of the inquiry are published online: Sexual harassment and sexual violence in schools.

13. Although I am not proposing to add a recommendation to this end, I would like to stress that the initiative of the House of Commons is to be praised and that our own parliaments should take inspiration from it and launch similar enquiries. Indeed, it is important to be aware of the real extent of the problem; this is not to scare ourselves, but we cannot just bury our heads in the sand and pretend that everything is fine!

14. Of course, although we are focusing here on sexual and gender-based violence, we must fight all forms of violence at school and many young boys are also victims of violence. We certainly do not need additional reasons to assert that fighting against violence against children at school is clearly our responsibility; but I would note that, as the report by the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination explains, the perpetrators are often individuals who have suffered sexual or physical abuse in their childhood. Thus, if violence at school produces negative knock-on effects, eliminating violence at school and ensuring that schools are a safe place for all our children will certainly help to reduce violence in our societies and violence against women in particular.

15. Eradicating violence at school implies efforts in different directions, including with the aim of involving families in the fight against sexual and gender-based violence through education of their children and targeted school projects and initiatives. The report by our committee on "Education against violence at school"[4] and the ensuing Resolution 1803 (2011) provide detailed guidelines in this respect and it is a pity that such texts have not had a greater impact on work in our parliaments. While it is not appropriate to recall all our recommendations in the framework of the present report, I believe that it could be useful to resume and adapt a few of them to expand the proposal which is enshrined in paragraph 7.5 of the draft resolution, which reads as follows:

> *"7.5. to implement specific preventive measures, especially by developing school sex- and relationship-education programmes and by providing support for education staff responsible for delivering them, with the aim of informing children about gender equality, gender stereotypes, the impact of sexual violence on victims and the notion of consent"*

16. Rather than suggesting sex- and relationship-education programmes, I would uphold the idea that awareness raising about respect for human dignity and non-violent conflict resolution in interpersonal relationships, and more specifically about gender equality, gender stereotypes and women's role in our societies, should form part of general education curricula and should be addressed from different angles in classes on, for example, history, literature, arts, music, sports, philosophy and religion or ethics. This approach could possibly be supplemented by targeted learning modules intended to enhance understanding on, for example, the impact of sexual violence on victims, or on how to behave when witnessing attacks against women.

17. The issue is not only to inform, but to ensure that students understand and learn. To achieve this result, and building also on what our Assembly stressed in Resolution 1803 (2011), teaching methods and activities should:

– help address the causes of violence, also avoiding that individual pupils find themselves in a situation of isolation or exclusion;

– encourage active involvement of pupils and teamwork, taking care to guide pupils towards sound collaborative moods and avoiding reproducing imbalanced power relationships and gender-based stereotypes;

– provide opportunities for pupils to control their physical or psychological tensions in a non-violent manner, for example through sports or artistic activities.

18. This also brings to the issue of providing support for education staff. In this respect, I would propose being more explicit and recommend that school teachers and staff should have mandatory training to better understand the different forms of violence (physical, psychological, verbal and behavioural violence) and learn how to oppose them.

19. Last, but not least, again building on Resolution 1803 (2011), school staff should include specialised counsellors, mediators and/or psychologists, who should be available for pupils, their parents and teachers, and should be trained to help those who have experienced violence including victims, perpetrators and bystanders.

20. Based on these considerations, I am proposing five amendments to the draft resolution.

---

4. Doc. 12513 (rapporteur: Mr Gvozden Srećko Flego, Croatia, SOC); see also Resolution 1803 (2011) and Recommendation 1965 (2011).

3. The role of the media in fighting sexist violence

21. The media are a powerful tool to shape society's perceptions, ideas, attitudes and behaviour, thus our mindsets. This is why it is so important that they are vehicles to uphold gender equality. It is worth recalling that the Council of Europe – and of course our Assembly – has been working on this issue for many years.

22. In July 2013, the Committee of Ministers adopted Recommendation CM/Rec(2013)1 on gender equality and media. Although the focus was more general, the guidelines appended to this recommendation also refer to the issue of gender-based violence.

23. In particular, guideline No. 1 states that "… member States should adopt an appropriate legal framework intended to ensure that there is respect for the principle of human dignity and the prohibition of all discrimination on grounds of sex, as well as of incitement to hatred and to any form of gender-based violence within the media".

24. Guideline No. 4 adds that "Media organisations should be encouraged to adopt self-regulatory measures, internal codes of conduct/ethics and internal supervision, and develop standards in media coverage that promotes gender equality, in order to promote a consistent internal policy and working conditions aimed at … a non-stereotyped image, role and visibility of women and men, avoidance of sexist advertising, language and content which could lead to discrimination on grounds of sex, incitement to hatred and gender-based violence".

25. The WACC/IFJ Media Gender-Ethical Journalism Resource Kit (2012)[5] underlines the critical role of media in ending gender-based violence and says: "Media reporting on violence against women carries an extra responsibility … anything short of breaking through the silence that often surrounds the criminal acts of rape, assault and feminicide supports a status quo that minimises and excuses the impact of violence, and endangers women everywhere". Observers, however, denounce a "sexist slant" in media representation of women, including the fact that the coverage of sexual violence is often dismissive or titillating.[6]

26. In this respect, paragraph 7.7 of the draft resolution seems appropriate; it recommends "to launch a dialogue with the media on their responsibility for providing objective information on sexual violence and harassment in public space and encourage them to give prominence to awareness campaigns and to associations working to combat violence against women".

27. However, similarly to what I noted concerning schools, while the contribution of media in fighting sexist violence would be fundamental, media, and in particular social media, are tools through which many continue to nourish gender stereotypes and which are misused to exert psychological violence and gender-based cyberbullying. The report of our committee on "Violence in and through the media"[7] explored to a certain extent this problem and stressed that violence in the media can take different forms, ranging from implied or verbal to depiction of psychological or physical violence, including sexual violence.

28. The report by the Women and Equalities Select Committee of the House of Commons, which I quoted above, stressed that: "Widespread access to pornography appears to be having a negative impact on children and young people's perceptions of sex, relationships and consent. There is evidence of a correlation between children's regular viewing of pornography and harmful behaviours. The type of pornography many children are exposed to is often more extreme than adults realise" (paragraph 204).

29. In the same spirit, our report on "Violence in and through the media" referred to qualified opinions according to which possession of child abuse images leads to an increased probability that the person involved in viewing this material will then go on to commit sexual offences against children. The same report also analysed the impact of violent video games and indicated that there are two specific ways in which they have been found to fuel aggressive behaviour. The first one is dehumanisation and refers to the denial of human traits to another person, which leads to moral disengagement. A second mechanism is desensitisation.

---

5. The Gender-Ethical Journalism Resource Kit is the result of collaboration between the World Association of Christian Communication (WACC) and the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) to redress gender disparities in news media content.

6. This is for example the opinion of Laura Bates, the founder of the *Everyday Sexism project*. She stated recently that previous male leaders have not been treated in the same way as Theresa May, Hillary Clinton and Angela Merkel. See the article in *The Independent* on "Sexist slant in media representation of women 'needs to change'", www.independent.co.uk/news/media/sexism-latest-theresa-may-meghan-markle-hillary-clinton-angela-merkel-everyday-sexism-laura-bates-a7501491.html.

7. Doc. 13509 (rapporteur: Sir Roger Gale, United Kingdom, EC); see also Resolution 2001 (2014) and Recommendation 2048 (2014).

When we see an act of violence we respond emotionally and physiologically, but these reactions can be desensitised: children who play violent video games have less empathy than children who do not play these violent games. This has important real life consequences, as research has shown that it can also make us less willing to help people when they are in need.

30. Resolution 2001 (2014) on violence in and through the media includes various recommendations to counter violence in the media, which take account of the role of the providers of new media services or products, such as internet access or service providers, providers of mobile telecommunications media as well as sellers of videos and video games. With a view to putting an end to sexual violence and harassment of women, I suggest including in the draft resolution a specific recommendation asking member States to encourage these partners to commit further to the fight against gender-based violence. This is the rational of the proposed amendment E.

31. To conclude, I hope that these proposals will be considered constructive and backed by Ms Hetto-Gaasch and by the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination.