
Making Laws Work to End Violence Against Women and Girls

Bucharest Romania June 12 – 14, 2017

Post-Conference Report

Introduction

Making Laws Work to End Violence Against Women and Girls, held in Bucharest Romania June 12 – 14, 2017, provided a platform for approximately 160 parliamentarians, NGO representatives, and government officials from 22 countries¹ in Eastern and Central Europe to share best practices in implementing violence against women laws. The organizers of the conference were Global Rights for Women, Vital Voices, the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and the Romanian Parliament. The Romanian NGO, Anais, was our local partner in carrying out the conference. The conference produced an Outcome Document that summarized the main strategies for achieving progress, emphasizing the need for collaboration and a victim-centered response.²

The conference goal emphasized the human rights principle of victim safety and offender accountability in addressing violence against women and girls (VAWG) and the necessity of multi-sectoral cooperation:

The goal of the conference is to empower national actors - parliaments, governments, and civil society organizations - to work together to adopt and effectively implement violence against women laws, prioritizing victim safety and offender accountability. The conference goal builds on the acknowledgement that multi-sectoral cooperation is a prerequisite to ensure that women are protected and offenders are held accountable.³

Throughout the conference, the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (*Istanbul Convention*) was at the center of

¹ Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Georgia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Republic of Moldova, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia, Tajikistan, Turkey and Ukraine, as well as members of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation, and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

² See Appendix.

³ Making laws work to end violence against women and girls, General Information document.

discussions on best practices for addressing VAWG. It offers concrete guidelines for combatting VAWG and includes the requirement of a multi-sectoral approach. Many of the countries that participated in the regional conference have signed or ratified the Convention, and others are working toward ratification.⁴ Other international instruments, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and in particular the Committee's General Recommendation no. 19, and Goal 5 of the Sustainable Development Agenda were also addressed throughout the conference.

The structure of the conference was unique, consisting of plenary sessions and two learning tracks. Country delegations composed of parliamentarians, NGO representatives, and government officials, also a unique feature, were predominant at the conference. The learning tracks and delegations were especially innovative, providing in-depth, action-based learning experiences for participants.

- **Delegations** –conference participants were organized into groups of participants from the same country, providing them with the opportunity to consult throughout the conference and plan how they would continue to work together to apply the lessons learned when they returned home.
- **Plenary Sessions** – consisted of expert panelists and speeches by renowned international experts, along with interactive discussion.
- **Learning tracks** - offered participants an in-depth opportunity to explore and expand their knowledge and skills of implementing laws to end VAWG through the justice system or through multi-sectoral collaboration.

Plenary Sessions

Keynote Speaker Rosa Logar, First Vice President of the Istanbul Convention's Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO) and coordinator of Women Against Violence Europe (WAVE), addressed the central principle of victim safety and offender accountability. Ms. Logar noted the importance of changing the behavior of perpetrators through education. Simply removing a perpetrator from a situation does not ameliorate the real issue since they will surely find someone new to victimize.

As Ms. Logar stressed, it is imperative that in constructing our laws and measures against domestic and sexual violence, we must place victims at the center of our considerations. It is

⁴ Signed and Ratified: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia, Turkey. Signed: Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Republic of Moldova, Ukraine. Not signed: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus (not a member of Council of Europe), Tajikistan (not a member of Council of Europe).

only then that we can effectively address the issue of violence and protect victims. By putting victims first, we ensure they are empowered with the rights and services to which they are entitled. Specifically, Ms. Logar noted the necessity of helplines, shelters, and support centers for victims of domestic and sexual violence and their children. Ms. Logar's speech illustrated the strategic balance between victim safety and offender accountability that this movement requires to be most effective.

Ms. Logar also noted the VAWG movement's contribution to general democracy building in the region. She stressed the strong leadership of women's rights NGOs in building and effective civil society voice, working with policy makers to push for changes in law, demanding transparency in government activities and attention to individual rights.

According to Lily Greenan, an independent consultant and researcher from the United Kingdom, it is imperative to discuss the roots of VAWG in male gender norms and socialization lest we resort to engaging in "the invisible man syndrome." The phrase is meant to encompass the misguided perception that men are absent from the equation of domestic and sexual violence, i.e., women are not only the victims, but also the cause of their own suffering. Thus, the responsibility for ending violence is placed on the victims, rather than where it belongs, on the perpetrators. This dangerous idea does not exist only in Greenan's home of Scotland, but the world over, whether or not other nations have labeled the phenomenon this way. This is one of the many mythologies that obscure the truth about VAWG.

Violence against women and girls is complex and difficult to understand, according to Valeria-Diana Schelean-Somfelean, a member of the Parliament of Romania, because "the statistical data do not represent the reality of things." Yet when we do consider the data, it paints a grim picture of the problem. Simona Voicescu, of the Romanian NGO Necuvinte, reported that in Romania in 2011 only five percent of acts of domestic and sexual violence were prosecuted, and only two percent of perpetrators were sentenced. Mihaela Sasarman of NGO Asociatia Transcena in Romania reiterated the dire situation of low punishment rates for domestic and sexual violence. Without thorough, standardized, consistent sentencing of perpetrators of VAWG, efforts to protect women and girls are significantly undermined.

Beatrice Fresko-Rolfo, a member of parliament in Monaco and of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, and Vibeke Brask Thomsen of NGO Gender Hopes, Monaco discussed the status of the VAWG issue in Monaco. Monaco and Austria, were the first two countries evaluated by GREVIO. Ms. Fresko-Rolfo and Ms. Brask Thomson demonstrated the collaborative relationship between NGOs and government bodies in the treaty body reporting process. Although Monaco is unique both in its small size and its comparatively abundant resources, it

shares many of the challenges of other countries. Highlighting the need for increased measures for victim safety, Ms. Fresko-Rolfo emphasized the lack of shelters for victims and the lack of available helplines, reiterating a point underscored by Ms. Logar. However, she emphasized that the availability of resources is only one aspect of ensuring victim safety. Women and girls must have the requisite information if and when it becomes necessary to access these resources.

Another speaker highlighted the reality that in the fight against VAWG, men are indispensable allies. Not only is it necessary to engage the whole of society to tackle a problem so immense, but men -- as husbands, fathers, brothers, and sons -- want to see the women and girls in their lives (and even those who aren't) flourish, thrive, and live free from violence. Natko Gereš of Promundo, an organization dedicated to “[promoting] gender equality and [preventing] violence by engaging men and boys in partnership with women and girls,” addressed VAWG via the “traditional hegemonic masculinity” norms in which men are embedded. Mr. Gereš presented a motif that pervaded the conference in its entirety: VAWG touches each and every aspect of our society.

Learning Tracks

The *Making laws work to end violence against women and girls* conference provided the opportunity for in-depth learning on best practices through two learning tracks moderated by expert trainers. The subject of the first learning track was the justice system response to VAWG. The second learning track focused on building a multi-sectoral response to VAWG. Each of the participants selected one of the tracks and met for a total of six hours to engage in interactive skill sharing on that topic.

Best Practices in Civil and Criminal Justice System Response to VAWG

This learning track focused on enhancing the knowledge and skills of civil and criminal justice professionals and other participants by identifying justice system strategies for holding abusers accountable while securing the safety and dignity of victims. Participants were urged to use a victim-centered approach to address domestic and sexual violence cases in their countries, and to consider the impact of each decision made during the justice system processes on the victim's safety and well-being at all times. The importance of being aware of the unique nature of domestic violence cases was emphasized throughout the learning track.

During this learning track, three main goals of investigating and prosecuting domestic violence cases were identified: 1) keep the victim safe; 2) prevent recurrent of violence; and 3) penalize

the abuser. Participants gained a thorough understanding of the specific characteristics of domestic violence cases:

- The nature of the intimate relationship between the victim and the perpetrator
- Financial, emotional and other types of dependency of the victim on the perpetrator
- The phenomenon of victim-blaming and the various societal pressures on the victim to avoid prosecution
- Victims' concern about the safety of children over their own well-being

These characteristics make domestic violence cases much more difficult to prosecute than other criminal cases. Presenters of this learning track - including Cindy Dyer, Vice President for Human Rights at Vital Voices - also encouraged participants to consider the importance of educating victims about their rights and the tactics of coercion and intimidation.

Group exercises helped delegations understand and carefully assess risk factors such as threats of homicide or suicide, increase in frequency and/or severity of violence, strangulation, or unemployment of the perpetrator. These factors indicate that the victim is in danger of being killed or further harmed by her abusive partner. Participants learned about various risk assessment instruments to assist them in effectively implementing domestic and sexual violence laws.

Participants were urged to always consider the impact of each decision made during the criminal justice process on the victim's safety and well-being, and to always listen to the victim. This learning track focused on the common situation in which the victim does not want to actively participate in the investigation or prosecution. Participants were asked to consider why victims may refuse to participate, and discussed approaches for persuading victims to work with law enforcement and prosecutors without threatening them. However, it was also emphasized that it is the victim's choice to cooperate with the justice system and that lack of victim cooperation does not relieve the system of its responsibility for investigating and prosecuting cases of domestic and sexual violence. Many practitioners in this learning track expressed their willingness to pursue these cases, even without the cooperation of the victim.

Best Practices in Multi-sectoral Collaboration in Implementing Laws on VAWG

This learning track focused on enhancing participants' knowledge and skills in coordinating the implementation of violence against women laws. Through lectures, group exercises, and case examples, participants were exposed to various perspectives on domestic and sexual violence and how to respond effectively by using a coordinated approach.

Key aspects of this learning track were identification of the types of domestic violence – battering, resistive violence and non-battering - and the power and control wheel which was developed through the Duluth Model, a coordinated community response model that has been adapted throughout the world. Several participants commented on their previous lack of knowledge of the Duluth Model and its concepts, and found it a useful tool for addressing domestic violence cases in their countries. One participant stated that their country’s definition of domestic violence does not include the idea of an *ongoing* pattern of abuse and that medical reports do not include this information either. They expressed the usefulness of knowing the types of domestic violence in order to better identify cases of abuse.

Police officer Marcus Bruning discussed types of abuse not commonly addressed through legislation. He stated that emotional abuse, for example, is “not illegal” and “not understood by actors such as police officers,” therefore, “no action can be taken” in cases of emotional or psychological abuse. He said that in order to change the police response to such abuse, we must change policies to include identifying non-physical violence, and monitor how this policy change is applied. It is imperative for practitioners to have an understanding of emotional and psychological abuse and the patterns of abuse that are often observed in cases of domestic violence.

Conclusions, and Outcomes

On the final day of the conference participants worked in their country delegations to create action plans to apply their new-found knowledge when they returned home. Conference organizers will check in with the delegations to provide support and encouragement in implementing the action plans.

Participants left the conference inspired by the words of Eleonora Pokola, a Romanian author and survivor of domestic violence, who powerfully described her own experiences. She stated that “laws must be changed to condemn psychological and emotional violence,” and that society should “expose and condemn perpetrators.” Ms. Pokola’s moving testimony reinforced the importance of participants’ continuing to work on implementing effective laws to combat violence against women and girls throughout the world.

Similarly, in her closing speech, Margaret Mensah-Williams, chairperson of the National Council of Namibia and president of the IPU Bureau of Women Parliamentarians, stressed the importance of “continuing to share experiences and cooperating” to achieve effective solutions on the issue of violence against women and girls. The regional conference on making laws work

to end violence against women and girls showcased the benefits of such discussions among various actors working on this issue from different sectors of society. The experiences and new connections made among parliamentarians, NGO representatives, and government officials in the region will foster innovative alliances to eradicate violence against women and girls.

The unique structure of the regional conference earned congratulatory comments from IPU secretary general, Mr. Martin Chungong. He stated that the positive feedback received from participants “bears testimony to the fact that the debate was **insightful, action-oriented, and opportune.**” For the first time, regional delegations composed of relevant actors working to eradicate gender-based violence in their countries were given an opportunity to work together to develop concrete action plans. This innovative approach to ending violence against women and girls resulted in feasible action plans crafted by the delegations, and a sense of togetherness that will continue to inspire practitioners working on this important issue. *Making laws work to end violence against women and girls* requires cooperation between actors, dedication to end violence against women and girls, and political will to implement laws for a better world.

Follow-Up

The organizers are taking concrete steps to ensure that the conference has long term benefits for the countries that were represented.

- Vital Voices has offered four grants of up to \$10,000 to participant NGOs to carry out work on VAWG.
- The organizers are following up with participants to offer support in implementing their action plans.
- Participants are being asked to report back on their progress in implementing their action plans and results will be published.
- Organizers will continue to offer assistance and opportunities for networking as participants pursue implementation of laws to end VAWG.