

A Renewed Call for Ratification of the Council of Europe Istanbul Convention

(The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence)

As the number of COVID-19 infections has continued to rise around the world over the last six months, reports of gender-based violence, in all its forms, have also increased exponentially. While governments continue to take steps to respond to the immediate impacts of COVID-19, we cannot ignore the increased risks for women and girls across the globe.

These unique and challenging circumstances call for a coordinated and holistic response to preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. Therefore, Zonta International is renewing the call for ratification and implementation of the [Istanbul Convention](#), the first legally binding instrument in the world creating a comprehensive framework to prevent violence, to protect victims, to prosecute perpetrators and to implement state-wide “integrated policies” that are effective in preventing and combating all forms of violence against women. The framework provided by the Istanbul Convention can be applied under any circumstances but takes on greater significance within the ongoing COVID-19 crisis.

Governments bound by the Convention have to take several actions, including:

- Addressing gender stereotypes and promoting changes in mentality and attitudes about the role of women and girls in society.
- Training professionals to work with survivors or women at risk of violence and working closely with specialized NGOs.
- Providing support services for women and girls, including services for physical and psychological support, shelters, sexual violence referral centers and free 24/7 telephone helplines.
- Guaranteeing the effective investigation of any allegation of violence against women and domestic violence by responding to calls for help, collecting evidence and assessing the risk of further violence to adequately protect victims.
- Ensuring that violence against women is criminalized and appropriately punished and that excuses on the grounds of culture, tradition, religion or so-called “honor” are not regarded as a justification for any form of violence against women.
- Allowing women and girls who suffer from gender-based violence in developing countries to seek protection in another state when their own fails to offer adequate protection.

While the actions outlined in the Istanbul Convention serve as an essential framework for combating violence against women and girls, we are unfortunately starting to witness some countries who had previously ratified the convention taking steps to withdraw from the treaty, while others are expressing an unwillingness to sign and/or ratify the convention. One reason for these decisions is a misinterpretation of the use of the word “gender” in the convention. The Council of Europe, however, clearly explains that for the purposes of the convention, the term “gender” is the “socially constructed roles, behaviors, activities and attributes that a given

society considers appropriate for women and men” and that can contribute to violence against women or the perpetuation of harmful practices.

These misinterpretations do not take away from the fact that the Istanbul Convention is a groundbreaking and immensely beneficial resource for combating violence against women and fighting for gender equality, one that is accessible to any country in the world. Citizens of countries outside Europe can also use the Istanbul Convention as an advocacy resource and can urge their government to accede to the convention.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated many violations of women’s rights, including child, early and forced marriage, trafficking and female genital mutilation. In light of the increasing rates of these harmful practices and all forms of gender-based violence, and the ongoing needs of women and girls that are certain to remain after the pandemic, Zonta International calls on all Zonta clubs and individual members in Europe and beyond to use the Istanbul Convention as a concrete tool in their advocacy to end violence against women and girls around the world. As Zonta clubs plan for their [Zonta Says NO to Violence Against Women campaign](#) activities and the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence, they are encouraged to explore the many resources on the Istanbul Convention that are available to members on the [Zonta International website](#) and to reach out to the Zonta International Council of Europe Committee for further guidance and assistance.

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