Priorities and outline of a new EU policy framework to fight violence against women

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The European Parliament adopted a resolution on priorities and outline of a new EU policy framework to fight violence against women.

Parliament recalls that studies on gender-based violence estimate that 20 to 25% of all women in Europe have experienced physical acts of violence at least once during their adult lives, and more than 10% have suffered sexual violence involving the use of force. The annual cost of violence against women is estimated to be in the region of EUR 33 billion.

The resolution stresses that violence against women encompasses a wide range of human rights violations, including: sexual abuse, rape, domestic violence, sexual assault and harassment, prostitution, trafficking of women and girls, violation of women?s sexual and reproductive rights, violence against women at work, violence against women in conflict situations, violence against women in prison or care institutions, and several harmful traditional practices.

It proposes a new comprehensive policy approach against gender-based violence including:

- a criminal-law instrument in the form of a directive against gender-based violence;
- measures to address the ?six-P? framework on violence against women (policy, prevention, protection, prosecution, provision, and partnership);
- Member States to ensure that perpetrators are punished in accordance with the gravity of the crime;
- Member States to ensure training for officials likely to come into contact with cases of violence against women;
- plans to develop specific investigative routines for police and health sector professionals in order to secure evidence of gender-based violence;
- the creation of partnerships with higher education institutions with a view to providing training courses on gender-based violence for professionals in the relevant fields, especially judges, police officials, health and education professionals and victim support staff;
- policy proposals to help victims rebuild their lives, addressing the specific needs of different groups of victims such as minority women, in addition to ensuring their safety and re-establishing their physical and psychological health;
- the integration of specific identification and diagnosis mechanisms within hospital emergency services;
- Member States to provide shelters for victims of gender-based violence in cooperation with relevant NGOs;
- minimum requirements as to the number of victim support structures per 10 000 inhabitants for victims of gender-based violence in the form of centres with specific expertise to help victims;
- the establishment of a European charter setting out a minimum level of assistance services for victims of violence against women, including: the right to legal aid; the creation of shelters to meet victims' needs for protection and temporary accommodation; urgent psychological aid services to be provided free of charge by specialists on a decentralised and accessible basis; and financial aid arrangements aimed at promoting victims' independence and facilitating their return to normal life and the world of work;
- mechanisms to facilitate access to legal aid enabling victims to assert their rights throughout the Union (the committee had proposed for this aid to be free, a proposal which was not accepted in plenary);
- plans to develop methodological guidelines and undertake new data collection to obtain comparable statistical data on gender-based violence, including female genital mutilation, in order to identify the extent of the problem;
- the establishment, in the next five years, of a European Year Against Violence Against Women with the aim of raising awareness among European citizens;
- the Commission and Member States to take appropriate measures on prevention, including awareness-raising campaigns, where relevant in cooperation with NGOs;
- the implementation of measures in wage agreements and greater coordination between employers, trade unions and enterprises;
- an increased number of courts specifically handling gender-based violence; more resources and training materials on gender-based violence for judges, public prosecutors and lawyers.

Parliament also proposes a series of other measures, which may be summarised as follows:

Greater recognition of the phenomenon of violence against women: Parliament urges Member States to recognise rape and sexual violence against women, particularly within marriage and intimate informal relationships and/or where committed by male relatives, as a crime in cases where the victim did not give consent. It states that violence against women is one of the most serious forms of gender-based violations of human rights. Exposure to physical, sexual or psychological violence and abuse between parents, Members call for age-appropriate psychosocial counselling that is specifically tailored to children to cope with their traumatic experiences. It notes that stalking, of which 87% of all victims are female, causes psychological trauma and severe emotional stress and should therefore be considered as a form of violence against women and be subject to a legal framework in all Members States.

Improve training for professionals: Parliament stresses the importance of suitable training for all those working with women who are victims of gender-based violence, especially of the police, judges, social workers and healthcare workers. It calls for improved research and ask the Commission to consider establishing an observatory on violence against women based on the reporting of court cases involving violence against women.

Fight against genital mutilation: Parliament note that traditional harmful practices such as Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and so-called ?honour killings? are highly contextualised forms of violence against women and therefore it urges the Commission to give specific attention to traditional harmful practices in its strategy to combat violence against women. It rejects any reference to cultural, traditional or religious practices as a mitigating factor in cases of violence against women, including so-called ?crimes of honour? and female genital mutilation.

Fight against Trafficking in human beings: the resolution draws attention to the worrying increase in human trafficking into and within the EU ? a trade which targets women and children in particular ? and urges Member States to take firm action to combat this illegal practice. It asks Member States to acknowledge the serious problem of surrogacy which constitutes an exploitation of the female body and her reproductive organs. Parliament also notes that domestic violence has been identified as a major cause of miscarriage or stillbirth and of maternal deaths

during childbirth, and it asks the Commission to focus more closely on violence against pregnant women. The EU and its Member States are called upon to establish a legal framework that gives immigrant women the right to hold their own passport and residence permit and makes it possible to hold a person criminally responsible for taking these documents away.

Working with civil society: Parliament points out that civil society, particularly NGOs, women?s associations and other public and private voluntary organisations, offers a service of great value, and should be given support by the Member States. It reiterates the need to work with both victims and aggressors, with a view to enhancing awareness in the latter and helping to change stereotypes and socially determined beliefs which help perpetuate the conditions that generate this type of violence. Member States are also asked to provide shelters for women in order to help women and children live a self-determined life and ensure these offer specialised services.

Provide appropriate means: the resolution emphasises that Member States should devote appropriate resources to preventing and combating violence against women, including through recourse to the Structural Funds and also through instruments such as the ESF or the Progress Programme to enable a return to working life.

Lastly, Parliament calls on the Commission and Member States to address violence against women and the gender-related dimension of human rights violations internationally, in particular in the context of bilateral association and international trade agreements in force and those under negotiation.