

Two years on, the Istanbul Convention needs more ratifications

03/06/2013 - New Europe / International

A petition in the UK claims that as many as two women are killed by a current or former partner every week. The petition was launched by a citizens' campaign called Refuge, and the family of Maria Stubbings, who was murdered by her former partner despite making repeated calls for help to the police. It calls upon the government to open a public inquiry to investigate why victims of domestic violence are still not getting the protection they deserve from the police and other state agencies. .

Headlines sadly remind us that millions of women across the world suffer from violence and are obliged to live in fear – just because they are women.

On 21 May 2013, Portuguese President Aníbal Cavaco Silva honoured two women with the Council of Europe's North-South prize, which recognises "exceptional commitment" to promoting human rights, intercultural exchange and North-South solidarity.

During the award ceremony in Lisbon, Gabriella Battaini-Dragoni, Deputy Secretary General of the Council of Europe said that Monika Hauser, founder of Medica Mondiale – an NGO which assists women in war and crisis zones – and Asma Jilani Jahangir, Pakistani lawyer and human rights activist, "risked their lives to improve the condition of women, irrespective of ethnic or religious origin."

The Deputy Secretary General called upon states around the world to sign and ratify the Council of Europe's convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence.

The same day that the North-South prizes were awarded, a police commissioner in Essex (UK) told the BBC that in Essex alone, "over 80 domestic abuse incidents are reported to police every single day."

May 2013 marks two years since the Council of Europe convention was opened for signature in Istanbul. To date, only five states – Albania, Montenegro, Portugal, Turkey and, most recently, Italy – have ratified. At first glance this may seem thin, because 10 ratifications are required for the convention to go into effect. But many governments need to pass legislation introduce other measures in their countries before they can ratify.

For example, the convention requires a free national telephone hotline for victims of domestic violence. In an interview this month, French Prime Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault told the French press that – starting next year – such a nation-wide telephone hotline would be made available. France is among the 25 states which have signed, but not yet ratified the convention.

The Council of Europe is hopeful there will be further ratifications this year.

For far too long, communities have seen domestic violence as a private matter, and police were trained to respond accordingly. The community (and the criminal justice system) expected police to be involved in only the most extreme cases as euphemisms for violence reflected such detachment: "family trouble," "domestic dispute," "husband-wife spat." Police tended to either defuse the situation or attempt to mediate the "dispute," reinforcing a perception of the victim and assailant as equal parties with equal power over each other's behaviour.

For the first time in history, the Istanbul Convention makes it clear that violence against women and domestic violence can no longer be considered a private matter, but that states have an obligation to prevent violence, protect victims and punish the perpetrators.

It also obliges states to ban any attempts that justify criminal behaviour on the basis of culture, custom, religion, tradition or so called honour – because “honour crimes” sadly hit the headlines as well. Recently, a Swedish court upheld the guilty verdict of a 17-year-old boy who had stabbed his sister more than 100 times after she fled a forced marriage in Iraq, in what the court referred to as an “honour killing “.

North-South Prize winners Asma Jahangir and Monika Hauser were recognised for providing a voice to the women of the world whose ordeals have gone unnoticed and to those who have suffered in silence. They set an example for courage and for action.

The Council of Europe’s convention alone cannot end such violence, but its ratification would result in governments across Europe – and possibly also beyond – taking important action to reduce violence, from training professionals working with victims and setting up specialised support services that provide medical assistance, to ensuring that law enforcement agencies respond immediately to calls for assistance and manage dangerous situations adequately.

Just as important, the convention would set up a specific monitoring mechanism to ensure that its provisions are put into practice.

The Council of Europe’s message is Safe from fear, Safe from violence. Perhaps someday countries such as Saudi Arabia, which has just launched its first major campaign against domestic violence, will be able to ratify the Council of Europe convention. The first step is to see the convention enter into force with 10 ratifications, and then to promote it worldwide.