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PC.DEL/395/20
4 May 2020

ENGLISH only

Distributed at the request of the United Kingdom

1265th Meeting of the Permanent Council
30 April 2020

Joint Statement

Domestic and Sexual Violence Risks under Covid-19

in the OSCE Region

Mr Chair

On behalf of Albania, Andorra, Armenia, Austria, Belarus, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Canada, Croatia, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Moldova, Monaco, Mongolia, Montenegro, Netherlands, North Macedonia, Norway, Romania, San Marino, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, Ukraine, United Kingdom, and members of three gender networks: Women in the First Dimension, Men Engage, and the Women Ambassadors, I wanted to bring the attention of the Permanent Council to a potentially hidden security risk related to COVID-19 in the OSCE area.

Alongside unprecedented health risks for individuals, economic security risks, risks for human rights and democratic institutions and enhanced risks in the OSCE's conflict areas, there is a greater risk of domestic and sexual violence during the COVID-19 crisis.

Domestic violence often increases during times of heightened stress. This is particularly the case when it is linked to economic instability and fears of job losses. The last weeks are no exception. Women and girls are the overwhelming majority of victims of gender-based violence; however, it is also important to recognise that anyone can be affected, regardless of gender.

The OSCE Ministerial Council Decision on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women, adopted in 2018, recognises the persistence of gender-based violence experienced by women and girls, and the many forms it can take.

At this challenging time, the social isolation of lockdowns means women and girls, as well as other victims, may be trapped in their homes with their abusers, isolated from the people and the resources that could help them. They may also have fewer opportunities to contact domestic abuse support services. It is incumbent on all of us to ensure that these risks do not remain hidden. We need to address them and ensure that victims are able to access the support they need.

On 5th April, the UN SG shone a spotlight on the 'horrifying global surge in domestic violence' and urged 'all governments to make the prevention and redress of violence against women a key part of their national response plans for COVID-19.' We also greatly appreciate that this issue was raised by the OSCE's SG, the Parliamentary Assembly and ODIHR in their press release of 2nd April.

We should also be concerned about the possible increased occurrence of sexual exploitation and abuse. We stress the need to remain alert to this risk, and we underline the need for effective preventative and safeguarding measures in responding to the crisis.

In addition, we should be alert to the repercussions of school closures. Girls are least likely to return to school following a crisis, facing increased risks of child marriage, teenage pregnancy, gender-based violence and sexual exploitation, including on-line sexual exploitation, and the loss of vital sexual and reproductive health services as resources are diverted elsewhere.

We call on all OSCE participating States to do their utmost at this time to mitigate against these risks. This includes through appropriate scaling up of response services, adapting prevention activities and recognising that a public health response to screen for domestic violence could be life-saving.

We want to ensure that this major security risk does not remain hidden in the OSCE area.

We are committed to retaining a focus on this topic. We would like attention to be drawn in a subsequent week on broader gender implications of COVID-19.