**Stop gender-based violence! Use the Istanbul Convention!**

**Victimisation is part of the hegemonic order: it is not only ineffective, but it also perpetuates the prejudice that women suffer**

I fear we have grown accustomed to hearing emotive, angry outbursts about women being subjected to violence on account of their gender. Today, I want to talk about solutions. About pragmatism. About taking action, and getting rid of exclusive, ineffective labels. This may sound obvious, but in order to tackle a problem you first have to give it a name and put it in the spotlight. One name. Not 20 different ones. The universally accepted name is [gender-based violence](https://elpais.com/tag/violencia_genero/a). So let’s stop making up new variations. To address this problem, we need to act resolutely in looking for and identifying its causes. And in order to solve it we need to draw up an action plan, setting out actions, dates, specific resources and defined objectives, and with indicators to check whether those objectives are being met along the way.

We have spent too long focusing solely on the victims. The victims do need to be protected, of course, but I think we would all agree that the aim must be to get rid of the crimes that create the victims in the first place. There is a long list of crimes in the grim catalogue of gender-based violence. And the words for those who commit those crimes are equally as descriptive and numerous: murderers, mutilators, abusers, kidnappers, rapists, harassers, traffickers, pimps, and so on. All are classed as violent crimes. How can it be that we are still using complex arrangements and round-the-clock protection for those who are threatened, rather than insisting that the courts and the police use their powers to report, prosecute and convict offenders?

We can never thank the Council of Europe enough for getting the [Istanbul Convention](https://elpais.com/sociedad/2011/05/11/actualidad/1305064808_850215.html) off the ground, and for managing to turn it into the first legally binding instrument to comprehensively address gender-based and domestic violence. It is the first instrument that, rather than sticking to the prevention of violence and the protection of victims, brings the prosecution and punishment of offenders into full focus. To me, its entry into force on 1 August 2014 heralded an extraordinary sea-change. For the first time, violence against women and domestic violence were considered to be serious human rights violations and a form of discrimination for which States are liable if they fail to take appropriate action. It was established clearly and unequivocally that no form of violence against women is acceptable. Not one. And that those who commit such violence should be brought to justice.

In ratifying the Convention – which Spain did in 2014 – governments undertake to change their legislation, introduce effective measures and allocate resources to prevent and combat gender-based violence in an effective manner. It is a historic milestone along the path towards eradicating violence against women, because each State that ratifies it undertakes to identify, prevent and eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls. This year, the [Fundamental Rights Agency](https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra-2014-vaw-survey-at-a-glance-oct14_es.pdf) published its report on violence against women in the 28 EU Member States, revealing that a third of European women said that that they had experienced physical or sexual violence in the past 15 years. At home and at work. In public and in private. In real life and online.

It was clear to me at the time that this was a battle that absolutely had to be fought from the European Parliament – to which I had recently been elected – and specifically from the Committee on Women’s Rights and Gender Equality, of which I was already a member. Three years on, we have taken a major step forward: the EU, as an institution, has ratified the Istanbul Convention. All that remains is a final formal decision by the Council. This is extremely significant, as it establishes a common framework for Europe that requires States to take action in response not only to violence against women, but also to all forms of domestic violence. It will be especially important in countries with less rigorous legislation in the areas concerned.

Another important aspect of the Convention is that it opposes the damaging notion of cultural relativism. It condemns all practices carried out against women, and does not accept any kind of tradition as a mitigating circumstance. We should not forget that genital mutilation is being carried out right here in Europe, and it has not always been condemned roundly enough in certain political circles, which have continued to see it as a cultural specificity. The activist and academic [Ayaan Hirsi Ali](https://elpais.com/tag/ayaan_hirsi_ali/a), herself a victim of genital mutilation, is keen to point out this imbalance, which she puts down to the fact that the left wing in the West is obsessed with identity.

Transposition into law is absolutely essential, but legal frameworks are not enough on their own if, as I pointed out before, they are not accompanied by resources that will make it possible for effective measures to be taken on the basis of action plans. I welcome the fact that Spain’s Prime Minister has said that, over the next five years, he will be allocating EUR 200 million per year from Spain’s budget to the [State Pact to combat gender-based violence](https://politica.elpais.com/politica/2017/09/28/actualidad/1506588859_420508.html). But the question is, what exactly will that money be spent on? Has a strategic five-year plan been drawn up, with maximum government involvement, and quantifiable, measurable, feasible objectives to which that sum of EUR 1 billion will be allocated? Or will it be split up into small amounts to be spent at regional and local level, providing piecemeal funding to various well-meaning organisations (or directly channelled towards a specific ideological or party political goal), thereby simply perpetuating the cycle of breast-beating and choruses from certain quarters about ‘what a disgrace this is’? If that happens, the pact won’t be worth the paper it’s written on.

And what about social attitudes? The [latest Eurobarometer survey](https://elpais.com/economia/2017/11/20/actualidad/1511174011_891496.html) brought to light worrying attitudes that are not hard to link to gender-based violence. Some 44% of Europeans (both women and men) take the view that the most important issue for women is housework. There are marked differences between countries: the figures in eastern Europe are shocking. Spain fares better, but the figure still stands at 29%. Changing people’s attitudes is a very difficult thing to do, but I believe that continued efforts must be made in the field of education in order to completely reject trivialisation and indifference throughout society.

A specific appeal ought to be made to the media, including social media, on which we are all able to create and distribute content, opinions and attitudes. An unfortunate consequence of the [‘Manada’ gang-rape trial](https://politica.elpais.com/politica/2017/11/23/actualidad/1511427184_053171.html) in Spain has been the extremely flippant tone of the discussions as to whether the victim could have given her consent. This shows just how ingrained these prejudices still are: prejudices according to which it is women’s own fault that they are subjected to violence. Victimisation is part of the hegemonic order: it is not only ineffective, but it also, inevitably, serves to perpetuate prejudice. That’s why it’s time for things to change.