

Ministerie van Volksgezondheid,
Welzijn en Sport

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Executive Secretary Monitoring mechanism of the Council of
Europe convention on preventing and combating violence against
women and domestic violence;

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Enclosure(s)

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Date

Subject Response by the Netherlands to the GREVIO report

*Please address any
correspondence exclusively to
the return address, stating the
date and reference of this
letter.*

Dear sir/madam,

On 21 November 2019, the Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO) submitted its evaluation report to the Dutch government regarding the implementation of the Council of Europe's convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (hereinafter referred to as "the Convention"). I am hereby informing you – on behalf of the Minister for Legal Protection and the Minister for Education, Culture and Science – about the manner in which the government is implementing the recommendations made in the report.

Summary of the recommendations

GREVIO is generally positive about the efforts that the Dutch government has made in both policy and legislation to prevent and combat violence against women and domestic violence. GREVIO appreciates the importance of the 'Violence does not belong anywhere' programme, as well as the organised campaigns in recent years to bring domestic violence into the public eye and create perspectives for action.

Additionally, GREVIO's evaluation report gives 57 recommendations to the Dutch government for improving the approach to eliminate violence against women and domestic violence. GREVIO has prioritised 15 of those recommendations. Together with the other responsible ministers, I have chosen to focus primarily on these prioritised recommendations. Wherever possible, related recommendations are simultaneously addressed, in order to keep the recommendations executable for the municipalities, the organisations that implement the policies and the central government itself.

Structure of the letter and appendix

The appendix attached gives a detailed response to how the government is implementing the fifteen prioritised recommendations. In this letter, a summary of the response is given for each theme.

Response to the recommendations

I am grateful to the GREVIO committee for the insightful report with its recommendations about Dutch policy. Violence against women and domestic violence are human rights violations and they must be prevented at all times. The recommendations enable us to take a critical look at our efforts in this area and demonstrate where it is possible to make improvements.

An explanation of the response to the recommendations for each theme has been added below.

The Caribbean part of the Kingdom

Aruba, Curacao and Sint-Maarten recognise the importance of the Convention and are taking further steps to put it into effect.

To bring the situation on Bonaire, St. Eustatius and Saba more in line with the Istanbul Convention, the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport signed an 'Administrative agreement on the approach to domestic violence and child abuse in 2017-2020' with the public entities. Based on that administrative agreement, the public entities and the ministry are working together on prevention, promoting expertise, strengthening the ability to provide assistance and setting up an easily accessible notification structure for reporting domestic violence and child abuse. To continue along this path and to develop the approach further and strengthen it, the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport is working with the public entities on a successor to the current administrative agreement from 2021 onwards.

Gender sensitivity

A recurring theme in GREVIO's evaluation report is the observation that the approach taken in the Netherlands to violence against women and domestic violence is predominantly gender-neutral and that too little attention is paid to gender as an underlying cause of violence.

I recognise this observation to a certain extent. The Dutch approach to tackling violence against women and domestic violence focuses primarily on shelter and assistance for victims and preventing revictimisation. When doing so, we examine the system as a whole and see what needs to be done to stop violence permanently. In the Netherlands, the attention paid to underlying, gender-related causes is mainly addressed by emancipation policy. Unequal power relationships between men and women and stereotypical views of masculinity and femininity are viewed as a potential cause for the emergence and continuation of gender-based violence. At the same time, assistance for victims of all types of violence takes unequal power relationships into account. That does not take away the fact that improvements can be made, which is why we seek to explore how these improvements can be made in the context of gender sensitivity.

I organised an online meeting in June this year for the local government, executive organisations and NGOs involved with violence against women, domestic violence, women's rights and LGBTI rights. The aim of the meeting was to explore how these organisations view the various recommendations regarding the gender sensitivity of the policy. Those present stated that awareness of gender as a cause of violence is important, but they also said that further specification of the recommendations is needed in order to integrate this into their daily practice.

The responsible ministries have outsourced a request for advice about the recommendations aimed at gender sensitivity, among other things to obtain a better understanding of the considerations that need to be weighed up if gender as a cause of violence is to be taken into account better, as well as the possibilities for practical implementation of the recommendations. We will consult the stakeholders in this process. The advice is expected by the end of 2020.

Shelters

GREVIO compared the number of shelters in the Netherlands for female victims of domestic violence to the norm based on the Istanbul Convention of one family shelter place per 10,000 inhabitants. In 2016, The Netherlands had 500 shelter beds for female victims of violence. According to the norm based on the Istanbul Convention, this figure should be 1700.

I believe it is important that enough sheltered places are available to allow women (and their children) to leave unsafe situations at home and recover. I am committed to this, along with the municipalities and organisations providing shelter. The Association of Dutch Municipalities, Valente (the umbrella organisation for organisations providing shelter) and myself do not consider a predefined standard to be the leading criterion in this regard. In the appendix it is explained why we see it this way.

Vulnerable victims

In line with GREVIO's recommendation to strengthen the approach for highly vulnerable victims, we spoke with various experts and NGOs about how the approach to protecting these victims could be improved. In our current policy, we already aim to protect vulnerable victims, such as female migrants and refugee women. On 18 February 2020, the Minister for Health, Welfare and Sport and the Minister for Legal Protection presented the action plan against harmful practices to the Lower House of Parliament. The aim of GREVIO strongly encourages the Netherlands to finance its approach to violence against women and domestic violence through a separate budget and funding stream. However, the Netherlands has decentralised systems for, among other things, the approach to ending violence against women and domestic violence. Dutch municipalities are free to decide how to implement their responsibilities for these issues and they are therefore free to determine the allocation of resources within this approach. This makes it possible to develop an approach that is aligned to the local needs and options. It is therefore my belief that the manner in which the approach is funded by the national government is sufficiently stable and long-lasting, in line with Article 8 of the Istanbul Convention.

Evaluation and research

GREVIO emphasises the need to evaluate various aspects of victim assistance. Ongoing research is being carried out through the programme 'Violence does not belong anywhere' into the help provided to victims. Several studies are currently underway. It was not possible to join in with these ongoing studies in the short term. I would therefore like to see how we can address the points of concern raised by the GREVIO report in future research.

In addition, the need for evaluation and research as mentioned by GREVIO will also be part of the external advice mentioned before. After considering the result of the external advice, we can decide on possible additional studies and evaluations.

Concluding remarks

The government remains committed to obtaining an earlier and better picture of violence against women, including domestic violence, and to resolving and stopping it permanently. In the coming period, the Minister for Education, Culture and Science, the Minister for Legal Protection and myself will be working on GREVIO's prioritised recommendations in the context of the Istanbul Convention. I will report on the progress once again in two years' time.

Yours sincerely,

the State Secretary of Health,
Welfare and Sport,

Paul Blokhuis