

Lunch Debate 17 October 2013

Bi-Regional Dialogue EU-CELAC¹ on Gender Issues: The Role of the European Union in the Eradication of Femicide²

In the EU-CELAC Summit held on 26-27 January 2013 in Santiago de Chile the heads of states and governments of Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean adopted a policy statement and an action plan EU-CELAC (2013-2014). As an outcome of the ongoing work of the civil society in the different countries, this action plan created a bi-regional dialogue on gender issues that includes, as one of its three focal points, the elimination of all forms of violence against women.

In order to achieve their goal, the action plan proposes different actions. One of those will be the creation of a bi-regional seminar to exchange experiences about gender-related violence and to share the best practices and most effective measures. It is mentioned that there is a necessity to identify and exchange practices and lessons learned about the integration of the gender perspective in all the public policies, the standardisation of investigation protocols in order to prosecute and punish the perpetrators. It is also planned to create a bi-regional intergovernmental work group to define shared objectives about the three gender-related focal points.

What is and should be the role of civil society organisations in these processes? What changes do the public policies need to combat the violence against women and what would be their key issues? What will be the role of the European Union and its Member States?

What proposals does Argentina put forward, having been one of the most active promoters of the creation of this gender-related dialogue?

Retrospect and progress of the work

¹ European Union and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States.

² Invited speakers were: **Susanna Daag**, Executive Secretary, CIFCA **Oswaldo Marsico**, Head of Argentina Mission to the European Union, **Raül Romeva i Rueda**, Member of the European Parliament, the European Greens/ALE, **María Loredana Idomir**, Office Coordinator, Academic Council on the United Nations System (ACUNS) Vienna.

Without denying that femicide continues to be a very challenging issue, it is possible to observe some progress in the lobbying work of the past years. Several networks of civil society organisations in cooperation with the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung European Union in Brussels and the European Parliament are working together for many years on this topic.

One of the main objectives was to obtain visibility of the phenomenon and put it on the political agenda. In the beginning, that implied a tireless confrontation of many politicians working in that field. Since it is a difficult and uncomfortable topic concerning many of the cultural, social, economical and mental roots in society, it was complicated to achieve the required recognition.

The occurrence of femicide questions our organisation of life and our daily practices, which, as a consequence of the current economic system dominating the society, are evidently unfair. Scrutinising this fact does discomfort many people. Today the visibility of femicide has been reached thanks to the work of the civil society organisations. Today the majority of the involved politicians claim that the need to act is obvious. This obviousness, which has not always been that obvious, can count as one of the big victories of this work.

The resolution of the European Parliament about femicide³ in 2007 was a determining key moment, because it was the first official document mentioning the problem by using the term femicide: It is described as a social phenomenon and the European Union and Latin America are requested to take necessary steps to remedy. The adoption of the EU guidelines on violence against women⁴ in 2008 can be seen as a further big step forward. In cooperation with several NGOs a guide was developed on how to implement these guidelines in the Latin American countries.

Naming milestones in the work, it is necessary to mention the sentence of the Inter-American court of Human Rights in the 'Cotton Field' case, in which the court condemned the Mexican state for violation of human rights regarding the severe cases of femicides in Ciudad Juárez. This sentence supported the claims of women's rights organisation and favoured the definition of femicide as a criminal offence in order to specifically punish gender-based murders of women. Since then in nine countries of Latin America femicide has been classified in this way.

Even Catherine Ashton, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy issued a declaration, which acknowledged the problem and the severity of femicide. The next steps were the two EU – Latin America and Caribbean Summits: In May

³ European Parliament resolution of 11 October 2007 on the murder of women (femicide) in Mexico and Central America and the role of the European Union in fighting the phenomenon ([2007/2025\(INI\)](#)).

⁴ EU guidelines on violence against women and girls and combating all forms of discrimination against them.

2010, the declaration of the Madrid Summit mentioned for the first time the importance of fighting against gender based violence and in January 2013, the Chilean Summit added a chapter to the EU-CELAC Action Plan regarding the creation of a bi-regional dialogue about gender, that would integrate the violence against women and the killing of women based on gender reasons as one of his three focuses.

Reviewing the titles of the events on femicide of the past years, one can observe a shift of focuses. In the beginning in 2009 the debate about the fight against femicide was shaped in a much more general way. There were titles, such as “It is time to act” and “It is time to unite forces”. Today we are having an event with the title “Bi-Regional Dialogue EU-CELAC on Gender Issues”. Just by comparing those titles you see the progress of the work. Furthermore, the organisation of the first official meeting in Argentina, called the “Workshop about Violence against Women, Femicide within the framework of the Gender Dialogue EU-CELAC” that will take place in November 2013, shows that the topic finally entered the official political debate. It is important to point out that Argentina is playing an outstanding role inside the relations EU-CELAC regarding the gender debate in general and violence against women in particular. The role of the European Union will be to support and strengthen the corporate work on a political level including the exchange of experts, which should benefit from the different experiences and include them in the elaboration and implementation of policies on the two continents.

Current situation

In spite of some progress on the political level, the magnitude of femicide continues to be a severe problem. Most of the time the problem of femicide is still regarded as a Latin American issue, but this is not the case. Femicides occur everywhere, in every country of the world. They take different forms and they may not be recognised as femicides, but that is what they are: the killing of women and girls because of their gender. However, the conclusion that the problem concerns only the Latin American countries is due to the fact that the figures are very high in those countries. For instance, in 2012 658 women were murdered in Guatemala. Nonetheless, femicides also occur in Europe. It is another context, but equally severe and worrying, taking into consideration that the problem’s origin is the same in any region: the socio-economic model generates structures of social inequality, discrimination and vulnerability of women.

In many countries these murders are tolerated, accepted and even justified, often based on arguments related to traditions or culture. However, this argumentation is unacceptable. In order to pursue this development, the work of the NGOs continues to be indispensable.

Next steps

In order to establish the bi-regional dialogue EU-CELAC on gender, two members of the Parliamentary Assembly EuroLat initiated a resolution on femicide and violence against women in Europe and Latin America. A group of civil society organisations and the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung European Union are launching a campaign, which aims to collect suggestions and recommendations from organisations committed to the protection of women's rights in order to amend the mentioned resolution and create a crucial tool to provoke concrete changes at national level, which favour the prevention, sanction and eradication of femicide. Although this resolution will not be binding for the states, it is an opportunity to generate a space for discussion and debate between the civil society and the states that will hopefully have an impact on the political will and the awareness of those who are involved in the decision about public policies. In particular, it is important to have an impact on the representatives of the Parliamentary assembly EuroLat and the governments.

Since the origin of the resolution is based on the elaboration of the dialogue EU-CELAC about gender, it opens the possibility to approach the representatives of governments in order to discuss the modalities of implementation and the participation of the civil society in this dialogue.

To strengthen the campaign, civil society organisations produced a video presenting femicide in Europe and Latin America. The video was launched on 16 October 2013 and quickly gained popularity, measured by the distribution and acceptance in the social networks. The video will be used as a tool to visualise and exemplify the campaign.

Civil society organisations consider that the impunity, which in some cases reaches up to 98%, is the biggest obstacle in the fight against femicide and should therefore be the main objective of a combined work of civil society and states. To end the impunity it is necessary to improve the juridical systems in order to guaranty the needed diligence to prevent, investigate and punish crimes. It is also essential to assure the physic, economic and structural access of women to justice and implement measures of prevention and protection, promote official information and accessible statistics on all the forms of violence against women. In order to meet these challenges, the interaction between civil society and the governments is indispensable, since in the end it is the governments, who adopt and implement policies.

Another pending issue is the ratification of the “Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence”, also called the Istanbul Convention⁵ by the European States. This will only be a binding instrument, if it gets 10 ratifications.

Regarding the participation of the civil society in future events in the EU-CELAC framework, such as the workshop on violence against women in Argentina, an observer status is suggested, which is already the case in the United Nations. The civil society should be able to present recommendations and declarations in the beginning of the debate, instead of in the end when an exchange is not possible anymore. It is recommended that in future events the civil society will be able to organise parallel acts and have stands to present their material and activities. Another idea is to establish informal hearings before the official events in order to provide a platform for the civil society.

It is vital to assure the active and effective participation of the civil society in this bi-regional dialogue between the EU and CELAC. This should address in particular the organisations committed to the protection of women’s rights in both regions.

⁵ Further information on the Convention is available at http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/standardsetting/convention-violence/about_en.asp.