



Why do we need the Istanbul Convention?

Common myths and misconceptions

The following factsheet outlines some of the common myths and misconceptions which have circulated around the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention). This should be used by CSOs when developing their communications/advocacy campaign to promote the values, aims and main provisions of the convention. This list is not exhaustive and CSOs are encouraged to think of other myths that they have encountered regarding the Istanbul Convention and think about how to address these. In order to further emphasise the true aims of the convention, each fact debunking a myth should be adapted to the national context, and suggestions are included in *italics*. These facts can accompany the main messages which are meant to be shared on the different channels of communication or can be used as an internal script by CSOs when talking to decision-makers, to highlight the aims and importance of the Istanbul Convention.

MYTH

The Istanbul Convention is a foreign document imposed by Europe.

FACT

The Istanbul Convention was agreed by the Foreign Ministers from the 47 Council of Europe member states (now 46) following long discussions: every country was involved.

To add (if applicable):

Highlight that your country was one of the authors of the Istanbul Convention and signed/ratified it without any external pressure. State when your country joined the Council of Europe to show that it was fully involved.

MYTH

The Istanbul Convention introduces the concept of 'gender' in national legislation.

FACT

The Istanbul Convention helps us understand that there are many factors at play when men use violence against women. These have to do with how men and women are expected to act - what is considered acceptable for men, and what is acceptable for women. These attitudes determine our response to violence and impact the way we consider violence against women and girls. The term 'gender' defines these notions, and that's why it is used in the Istanbul Convention. It doesn't mean that national legislation and policies need to define it, but they must be designed with gender in mind.

To add (if applicable):

Outline national laws that address discrimination and equal rights between men and women.

MYTH

The Istanbul Convention aims to regulate family life or family structure and leads to the destruction of the traditional family.

FACT

The Istanbul Convention aims to keep families safe by keeping women and children safe from domestic violence, just as it aims to keep women and girls safe when they are not within their families. What a family looks like is irrelevant to the convention. What matters under the convention is that domestic violence and other forms of violence are prevented, that women and their children are protected and supported and that perpetrators are held accountable, by involving everyone in the process, so that in the end everyone is safe. The Istanbul Convention aims to end all forms of discrimination against women. It promotes equality between women and men, giving women agency over their own lives and power to make their own choices and decisions. It does this by relying on a comprehensive framework that (1) covers policies and measures to protect and assist all victims, (2) promotes international co-operation and (3) supports co-operation between law enforcement and organisations involved in ending violence to women.

To add (if applicable):

Point out that the Istanbul Convention is not aimed at destroying the traditional family in your country but rather seeks to break the silence about violence within families, which has caused suffering for victims, including children. Emphasise that the real threat to families is the violence itself, not measures that intend to protect and support its victims.

MYTH

The convention seeks to "eliminate differences" between women and men and denies their differences.

FACT

The Istanbul Convention does not seek to eliminate differences between women and men and does not imply that women and men are or should be the same. It does say that women and men have equal rights. It is a tool specifically designed to uphold women's rights to safety.

To add (if applicable):

Outline national legislation which is already in place to tackle gender inequality and address sexism in your country. Point out that this is in line with the aims of the Istanbul Convention.

MYTH

The convention contradicts national religious traditions and religion.

FACT

The convention does not deal with religion or beliefs. It does say that culture, customs, religion, tradition or so-called "honour" should not be used to justify any act of violence, for example, female genital mutilation or forced marriage. The Istanbul Convention has been ratified by a number of countries with strong religious traditions including Serbia, Greece, Cyprus, Montenegro, Georgia, Spain, San Marino, and Italy.

To add (if applicable):

Highlight that according to your country's constitution the church and religious organisations are separate from the state.

Stress that everyone in society has a right to freedom of thought and religion, just like everyone in society has a right to safety and protection.

MYTH

The convention introduces same-sex marriage into national law, as well as the concepts of "sexual orientation" and "gender identity".

FACT

The Istanbul Convention makes sure that, where it is implemented, this is done without any discrimination based on the gender identity of a person, or on the person's sexual orientation. To be offered protection from violence, it should not matter whom you love. Many states which do not recognise same-sex marriage have already ratified the convention, such as Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Poland, Romania, and Serbia.

To add (if applicable):

Emphasise that the terms "sexual orientation" and "gender identity" are already included in national legislation and provide specific articles in the law which address discrimination and equal rights.

MYTH

The convention protects only women and gives them privileges.

FACT

The Istanbul Convention is focused on women and girls, as it covers forms of violence from which only women suffer (forced abortion, female genital mutilation) or which women face much more often than men (sexual violence and rape, stalking, sexual harassment, domestic violence, forced marriage, forced sterilisation). However, the convention encourages the application of its provisions to benefit all victims of domestic violence, including men and children.

To add (if applicable):

Use national statistics to show that the majority of victims of domestic violence and/or rape are women and highlight the prevalence of women in your country who experience some form of violence during their lifetime.

If available, highlight how recorded domestic violence and/or sexual violence complaints have increased compared to previous years, as well as the percentage of complaints coming from women (due to COVID 19).

MYTH

The convention encourages states to intervene in the educational process.

FACT

The Istanbul Convention considers education an important aspect of the prevention of violence against women and domestic violence, because attitudes, convictions and behavioral patterns are shaped very early on in life. Teaching that boys and girls are equal and that they should have equal opportunities could contribute to eradicating future behavioral patterns leading to violence. However, it leaves it up to states to decide when and how to address issues of women's equality with men, mutual respect and non-violence, and when and how to bring up in formal or non-formal education settings the different forms of violence against women. Equipping children to call out violence and coercion of women and girls when they see it - as peers, as by-standers, and as family members - is the first step in building a generation free from violence.

To add (if applicable):

If possible, reference any qualitative or quantitative studies showing how the education children receive influences significantly how they think about themselves and their peers, and what they consider to be acceptable behaviour. Use examples of the many countries which take preventive measures such as teaching about bullying online.

MYTH

There is already national legislation to prevent violence against women and domestic violence, so the Istanbul Convention is not needed.

FACT

A country that adopts the Istanbul Convention proves its commitment to stopping violence by joining a system governed by international law. It goes much further than changing laws – it means joining efforts to raise awareness; gathering data and research; providing funding for victims' services; closing gaps in support services; ensuring access to justice; training professionals; and other important elements to stop violence. The convention helps governments to get the response right in relation to all forms of violence – and for all women and girls, no matter who they are and where they are from. It is a comprehensive checklist of measures tried and tested in other countries. It makes it clear that violence against women and domestic violence can no longer be considered a private matter, and that states must take a stand and adopt measures to prevent violence, protect victims and punish perpetrators.

To add (if applicable):

Examples of changes which have been made to national legislation in your country to protect women from violence. Follow this up by explaining that although this is a good start, the presence of national legislation is not in itself an argument against an international convention that sets out rules agreed upon and implemented by many countries internationally. For example, the convention covers areas in national legislation and practice that need improvement, ensures countries regularly exchange practices and approaches for better implementation, and provides external experts to give guidance and recommendations on better prevention of violence, protection of victims and prosecution of perpetrators.

Most importantly, emphasise that by ratifying the Istanbul Convention, your country will send a strong signal to the international community about its engagement to ending all forms of violence against women. It also saves lives.

This factsheet has been adapted from a draft text for the 16-days of activism against gender-based violence and domestic violence. For more information, please see *The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention): Questions and Answers* at <https://rm.coe.int/istanbul-convention-questions-and-answers/16808f0b80>

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