

## News on the Council of Europe

### **Human Rights Commissioner releases latest country reports.**

The Commissioner today presented his latest report on the human rights situation in Armenia, Ireland and San Marino, to the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers. Based on information gathered during official visits in the countries between the end of 2007 and the beginning of 2008, the reports also contains recommendations on specific issues.

**Report Armenia:** in this report amongst other women's rights and domestic violence were discussed. The government has adopted a national action plan on improving the status of women and enhancing their role in society for the period 2004-2010. This plan covers specifically: equal rights and opportunities, improving social and economic conditions, education, health, eliminating violence against women, the role of mass media and institutional reforms. The Commissioner was told that women constituted 50 % of all public servants. and receive equal pay. In some areas, like health and education, they are in the majority. Some ministries, like the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, have specialised units on gender issues. There is one woman in office as a minister in the government - the Minister of Culture. The number of women parliamentarians has increased, though remains low. At the same time, ninety percent of the NGOs are reportedly led by women. The delegation noticed a certain embarrassment when the issue of violence against women, including domestic violence, was raised. Some officials declared that this wide-spread European problem was nonexistent in the country because of strong family traditions in Armenian society. The NGO "Women's Rights Centre" administers a 24/7 hotline free of charge for victims of domestic violence and says that the number of daily calls is considerable, which illustrates the existence of a serious problem. The Commissioner was pleased by the information about Armenia joining the Council of Europe campaign to combat violence against women, "Stop Violence Against Women!". According to the authorities an action plan for the campaign was developed and persons responsible for its implementation were appointed. The Action plan includes the organisation of joint round tables with civil society, international organisations and the media, awareness raising through posters, bookmarks, booklets, translation of necessary documentation and leaflets as well as the elaboration of

a needs assessment questionnaire. A study of the scale of domestic violence is underway and several training programmes for social workers were organised in cooperation with UNDP. An ad hoc working group, which includes representatives of government agencies and independent experts, has been established to draft a law on domestic violence. It is important to have established a working group to that effect. The Commissioner hopes that the new law will be adopted quickly and be applied in the near future.

**Report Ireland:** gender discrimination and women's rights were discussed in the report. Also domestic violence was discussed. The report states: "As of November 2007, only 18.4 % of the total seats in the Irish Parliament were filled by women, even though it should be acknowledged that women have long played an important role in Irish politics, frequently as ministers and twice as heads of state. As a positive development, the gender pay gap has narrowed from 13 % in 2004 to 9 % in 2006, which is below the EU average of 15 %. In April 2007, the Irish Government published a National Women's Strategy 2007-2016 with over 200 actions to address needs for the economic and social inclusion of women and with a budget of € 58 million for the period up to 2013."

The Commissioner is concerned that despite the already existing case law allowing for abortion under limited circumstances, no legislation is in place to ensure this happening in practice. This leads to serious consequences in each individual case but especially in such cases in which vulnerable women such as minors and migrants are concerned.

Transgender persons in Ireland informed the Commissioner that they experienced discrimination on account of their gender identity. Ireland, unlike nearly all Council of Europe member states, does not have a procedure for birth certificate recognition for transgender persons. The European Court has found several countries including the UK, France and Lithuania in breach of the ECHR for such a lacuna.

Violence against women including domestic violence remains a persisting problem in all Council of Europe member states. Ireland is no exception. The authorities have taken several measures to combat violence against women including the adoption of Domestic Violence Acts, the establishment of a central *Garda Síochána* (Police) Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Investigation Unit which provides assistance to police divisions countrywide and the introduction of the *Garda* Policy on Domestic Violence. The National Office for the Prevention of Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based Violence (Cosc) was set

up in June 2007 with the responsibility of ensuring a well-coordinated response to domestic, sexual and gender-based violence against women and men, including older people. Regarding violence against women, the Irish authorities informed the Commissioner that Cosc aims at supporting state and non-governmental structures already working in this area and to collaborate closely with service providers who support victims and treat perpetrators.

**Report San Marino:** Women under the law enjoy the same rights as men. There are no complaints of economic discrimination in pay or working conditions. San Marino is currently running a campaign called "Basta!" to prevent and put an end to violence against women. A taskforce has been set up, bringing together members of the police force as well as social workers to assemble data. The Republic of San Marino has however failed until now to introduce specific provisions relating to violence against women and spousal rape. Women in San Marino are faced with a problem with regard to one aspect of reproductive rights. Under articles 153 and 154 of the Criminal Code, abortion is criminalised except if performed to save the life of the pregnant woman.