

Ladies and gentlemen

My name is Liesbet Stevens, I am the deputy director of the *Belgian Institute for equality of women and men*, and it is an honour to welcome you here for this two-day symposium on the prevalence of female genital mutilation in Europe.

The Institute is the Belgian equality body with regard to discrimination on the ground of sex or gender. Our missions are threefold:

- As all equality bodies, we assist victims of discrimination – and in our case that means not only assisting victims with legal advice, but we can also take cases to court, together with the victim.
- We carry out, or coordinate, independent research relating to gender discrimination.
- And we, finally, make recommendations to policy makers and other stakeholders in the fight against gender discrimination.

We have a long tradition in the fight against gender based violence. I suppose that comes as no surprise to you all: the conviction that gender based violence is a form of discrimination is wide spread amongst experts. In 1992 already the CEDAW Committee (which is the committee that sees to the implementation of the Convention on the Elimination on all forms of Discrimination Against Women) adopted a *General Recommendation on Violence Against Women* in which it stated exactly that. Twenty years later, in 2012, the Convention of Istanbul reiterated that statement in its definition of violence against women as a form of discrimination.

So we consider our work on gender based violence as central to our mission to fight against gender discrimination and to fight for gender equality. And we are recognised as such: we have been the coordinating body on the Belgian National Action Plan against gender based violence for many years now – and I'm sure that many amongst you will understand that coordinating the different state levels, and within those levels, the different policy makers that are involved? is not always an easy matter and is even in the best scenario's a time and energy consuming mission – but we get results. And, last year, the Institute was nominated as the official coordinating body for the implementation and monitoring of the Istanbul Convention.

As you all know, female genital mutilation also occurs in Europe. According to one of our studies there are an estimated 48.000 women and girls living in Belgium coming from a country where female genital mutilation is practiced. Approximately 13.000 women and girls are probably already mutilated and approximately 4.000 are at great risk of being mutilated.

As people from different corners of the globe have settled in Europe, they have brought with them their languages, customs, beliefs, traditions and rituals. In most cases these have become part of the fabric of everyday life in the Member States of the Union, being shared among people with different origins who now call Europe 'home' and have a common dream for the future.

All people – whether born in one of the Member States or not – have an equal right to protection from practices that prejudice their health, freedom, equality or human rights.

Sadly, within some communities some practices continue that are harmful to those who fall victim to them. Female genital mutilation is such a harmful practice against women and girls, and thus a form of gender based violence, and discrimination.

Since 2010 the battle against female genital mutilation has been an integral part of the Belgian national action plan to fight gender based violence. However, we are well aware that there is still a lot of work to be done.

From our work on female genital mutilation it has become clear for us that collaboration between grass root organisations, academics and policy makers is essential for success. We need to work together – professionals, researchers, politicians – and the communities themselves to eradicate female genital mutilation. And to be able to work, you need resources. A simple observation, that is true for each stakeholder involved in this battle.

With the limited resources the Institute has, we focus on developing tools for professionals to prevent female genital mutilation and protect women and girls who are at risk. We made toolkit for prevention and a toolkit with good practices relating to female genital mutilation. Only last week, we participated in launching an e-learning module for hospital personnel on female genital mutilation and later this year, we will organise a conference for members of the Belgian police and justice department with regard to the new circular about the judicial policy relating to honor based violence.

I hope I no longer need to explain why we were immediately convinced that it was a good idea to host this conference. I hope it is obvious by now. The Belgian *Institute for the equality of women and men* strives to be a catalyst for new developments in the fight against all forms of gender based violence, included the fight against female genital mutilation. And that is why we are especially glad to welcome you here today.

Because all of us involved in this battle, need clear and correct methods to measure the prevalence of female genital mutilation. And this is especially true in a time of “alternative facts” and so many negative opinions on migration. Prevalence studies can help us to better understand and sensitize the Belgian and European population about the magnitude and gravity of the practice. Comparable data and regular studies are necessary to monitor the evolution of the phenomenon and to help us adapt our policies, if necessary. One thing that we, at the Institute, are convinced of, is that we will need to include men in the fight against female genital mutilation. Not only women, also men need to speak out against this harmful practice to help protect their wives, daughters and all women and girls at risk in our societies.

So I thank you all very much for your presence here, and for your recommendations, and your continued work and efforts for a most important issue: the eradication of female genital mutilation.