

- Council of Europe, UN WOMEN and OSCE-ODIHR

COUNTERING BACKLASH AND SAFEGUARDING WOMEN'S RIGHTS

12 Mar, 10:00 AM - 11:15 AM

Conference Room 6 (max. capacity: 123), General Assembly Building

CSW70 side-event, organised by the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly (PACE) Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination and its Network Women Free from Violence.

Mr Alain Berset, Secretary General of the Council of Europe

Ms Petra Bayr, President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe

Ms Milana Rikanovic, Head of the UN Women Office in Serbia

PANELISTS

Baroness Lyn Brown (United Kingdom, SOC), member of PACE

Ms Sevilay Çelenk (Türkiye, UEL), third Vice-Chairperson of the PACE Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination

Mr Saša Gavrić, Adviser on Gender Issues, OSCE-ODIHR

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Ms Despina Chatzivassiliou, Secretary General of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE)

MODERATOR

Ms Zita Gurmai (Hungary, SOC), member of PACE

This side-event examined how backlash and anti-rights narratives undermine women's participation in public life, drawing on the work on anti-gender movements of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, the Istanbul Convention, and violence against women in politics. Participants exchanged experiences and strategies on recognising backlash sources, developing counter-narratives, implementing policy measures to counter online hate speech, and building democratic resilience so that women's voices are heard, respected and protected in public and political life. This was a high-level event bringing together parliamentarians and representative from international organisations including OSCE-ODIHR and UN WOMEN.

The participants made a statement reflecting the challenges of the backlash in equality in their respective countries and organizations, elaborating on the most important issues in the subsequent panel discussion moderated with great expertise by Zita Gurmai.

Summary of the speech of Alain Berset, Secretary General of the Council of Europe :

The backlash against women's rights is not accidental. It is organised, political, and spreading.

Women in public life are increasingly targeted with intimidation, abuse, and threats. Many are leaving politics, journalism, and public roles because the personal cost has become too high. What these stories share is not ideology, but hatred of women. It rarely begins with physical violence—it starts with words, fear, and lies. Women leaders face disinformation, insults, and threats against themselves and their families. Others who speak out, especially on violence against women, are met with waves of abuse, including extreme threats.

These are not isolated incidents. Studies show that 80–85% of women parliamentarians experience psychological violence during their mandate, while 70% of women activists, journalists, and human rights defenders report online abuse.

The pattern is clear: dehumanise, divide, destroy. This must be broken—especially online, where outrage is amplified for profit and the most extreme voices are rewarded.

We cannot stand still. The Council of Europe has adopted a recommendation on accountability for technology-facilitated violence against women and girls. Its message is clear: online violence is real violence. Justice must apply in the digital world, with proper evidence, cross-border cooperation, and greater responsibility from tech companies to ensure safety and transparency.

This backlash is coordinated. Across Europe, gender equality is increasingly misrepresented as “gender ideology,” often targeting the Istanbul Convention. False claims suggest it threatens families or sovereignty. In reality, it exists to prevent violence against women—still affecting one in three women in Europe.

These narratives have delayed or reversed progress. Rights once gained can be fragile.

But change is still possible. Women’s rights must never be treated as secondary. Equality remains the ultimate test of democracy—and it is something we can still achieve.

This CSW is taking place in one of the most challenging periods of geopolitical instability since the Second World War.

Yet it has shown us that inequality is not inevitable.

It is made. And it can be unmade.

03/31/2026
Isabel Bolli