

Athens, 14 May 2025

PRESS RELEASE

by Marangopoulos Foundation for Human Rights

Key points of the Focus Section of the 6th General Activity Report of GREVIO: Shrinking Space for Women's Rights Defenders

The 6th General Activity Report of GREVIO dedicates its focus section to the increasingly alarming phenomenon of the shrinking space for women's rights defenders, with a particular emphasis on women's rights organisations. These organisations—first and foremost among the key actors—along with individual defenders such as lawyers, journalists, academics, and grassroots activists, are instrumental in advancing the values and the implementation of the Istanbul Convention.

Women's rights organisations have historically been at the heart of service provision, advocacy, and policy development in the field of gender-based violence. They play a crucial role in providing specialist support services, raising awareness, monitoring state actions, and contributing to evidence-based policymaking. Article 9 of the Istanbul Convention recognises their critical importance and obliges states to support and cooperate with them. Despite this, GREVIO's thematic evaluation reports in 2024 highlight a disturbing reality: across many states, these organisations are increasingly marginalised, underfunded, and targeted by restrictive administrative and political measures.

President Maria-Andriani Kostopoulou, in her foreword to the General Activity Report, underscores this regression: "The shrinking space for civil society organisations has a negative impact on all organisations, but it hits women's organisations particularly hard." GREVIO documents the multiple challenges these organisations face. Among the most pressing is financial instability: funding is often short-term, delayed, or dependent on competitive bidding processes where expertise in women's rights is not prioritised. In some countries, women's rights NGOs remain reliant on international donors, which puts their long-term sustainability in question.

Moreover, GREVIO has identified that women's rights organisations are often excluded from policymaking processes or relegated to merely advisory roles, despite the Convention's requirement for inclusive and coordinated policies. GREVIO has noted the lack of institutionalised channels for these organisations to contribute meaningfully to national strategies. In some cases, these organisations operate in climate of fear, mistrust, and smear campaigns, leading to a chilling effect on their work.

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The Report also draws attention to troubling legal and bureaucratic obstacles. In several countries, NGOs face onerous licensing requirements that limit their ability to receive funding or provide services. These systems often exclude newer or smaller organisations, particularly those representing women facing intersectional discrimination such as Roma women, migrant women or women with disabilities.

Another alarming trend is the competition from non-specialist, generalist, or for-profit entities, which increasingly receive public tenders for services traditionally provided by women's rights NGOs. This undermines the gendered and victim-centred approach championed by the Convention and threatens the viability of specialist services and the quality of such services.

President Kostopoulou notes: "The women's movement has long been at the forefront of service provision for victims and their expertise and decades of experience must be recognised according to the convention." She adds that "their voices must be heard" and warns against "tendering procedures that do not prioritise quality, expertise and recognition for violence against women as a gendered phenomenon."

In light of these findings, the GREVIO General Activity Report sends a strong message: a safe, enabling environment for women's rights organisations and defenders is indispensable for the full and effective implementation of the Istanbul Convention. As the report emphasises, "The presence of a strong and autonomous feminist movement and freedom of human rights defenders to exercise their activities are critical factors to drive implementation... and to promote change in the area of violence against women."

This focus section is both a tribute and a call to action—to uphold the commitments made under the Istanbul Convention and to ensure that the frontline defenders of women's rights are protected, supported, and empowered.

The Marangopoulos Foundation for Human Rights (MFHR) echoes GREVIO's findings and urges the authorities to acknowledge, promote, and support—at all levels—the efforts of non-governmental organisations and civil society actors working to combat violence against women, by providing them with adequate funding and eliminating barriers that limit their effectiveness. Furthermore, the MFHR emphasises the need for effective cooperation between the authorities and these organisations in order to ensure the implementation of meaningful measures, on the basis of the Istanbul Convention.