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Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development

Minutes

Exchange of views on “Addressing sexual violence against children: stepping up action and co-operation in Europe”, held in Strasbourg, on Wednesday, 26 June 2019, from 2 to 3.30 pm

The Committee held an exchange of views, first **Mr Leite Ramos, First Vice-Chairperson**, and then **Ms Ohlsson, Second Vice-Chairperson**, in the Chair, with the participation of:

- ✓ Ms Gioia Scappucci, Executive Secretary of the Lanzarote Committee (Committee of the Parties to the Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse)
- ✓ Ms Tineke Sonck, Co-founder of the Belgian Voices in Sport Foundation

The Chairperson welcomed and introduced the guest speakers before giving the floor to Baroness Massey for her introduction. Unfortunately, Ms Maud de Boer-Buquicchio, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography, who had been invited to take part in this exchange of views, had had to cancel her participation due to the changes in the agenda of the session.

Baroness Massey presented her revised introductory memorandum. Prevention was key for addressing sexual violence against children. Survivors needed to receive appropriate compensation. They had to go through enormous stress, which led in some cases to suicide. When relations between adults and children were involved, that implied imbalance of power. Sexual violence often occurred within the circle of trust. Progress has been made, in particular with the development of international conventions and national strategies on this issue. In the framework of the Council of Europe, the Lanzarote Convention had been adopted, and the Children's Rights Programme was running a broad range of activities. As part of the preparation of the present report a fact-finding visit had been hosted by Germany and it had proved most useful. The information on this visit was included in the appendix to the introductory memorandum. The Council of Europe organised the “One in Five” Campaign to stop sexual violence against children (in which the Assembly had actively participated for six years), and a “Start to talk” Campaign was currently under way. The Assembly had held a meeting in Tbilisi in October 2018, where “Ten key steps to better protect children against sexual violence in sport” had been proposed. A draft report on “Addressing sexual violence against children: stepping up action and co-operation in Europe” would be prepared for discussion during the October part-session.

Ms Scappucci congratulated the Committee on its work, and the active participation of its representatives in the work of the Lanzarote Committee. She highlighted that during the first monitoring round dedicated to the “Protection of children against sexual abuse in the circle of trust”, the Lanzarote Committee had underlined the crucial importance of: preventing re-victimisation and ensuring multi-agency cooperation when providing assistance to victims. The Lanzarote Committee's monitoring reports included recommendations to the member States on steps to be taken in the circle of trust, including in sport, and was available online. Parliamentarians could support relevant actions taken to ensure the recommendations of the Lanzarote Committee were followed up. The second monitoring round was devoted to “The protection of children against sexual exploitation and sexual abuse facilitated by information and communication technologies (ICTs)”. One important challenge was “sexting”. Children took images of themselves and such images could be considered as child abuse material / “child pornography”. In June, the Lanzarote Committee had adopted an “Opinion on child sexually suggestive or explicit images and/or videos generated, shared and received by children”, which specified in which cases

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criminal prosecution was not required and outlined necessary child support measures. It also indicated when criminal prosecution should be used as a last resort. The number of sexually explicit images was growing, and increasingly younger children were involved. According to the Internet Watch Foundation, 1 out of 4 images was self-produced by a child. This often led to harmful consequences. It was important to give priority to the best interest of the child. When children did this in the context of private relationships such images should not be considered “child pornography” and the children involved should not be criminally prosecuted. Criminal prosecution should only be used if such images were spread further, and only as the last resort. Alternative measures should be promoted. Awareness of risks should be raised from a very early age. When children knowingly disseminated images as revenge (which was a widespread practice), such behaviour should be treated with alternative measures first. The Lanzarote Committee Opinion was based on the policy and practice in place in the member States. It provided recommendations on what needed to be done to bring legislation into conformity with the Lanzarote Convention.

Ms Sonck provided a testimony on sexual violence against children in the context of sports, sharing her own experience. The European VOICE project, in which she had taken part was the first time, at least in Belgium, that attention had been given to survivors’ stories. Never before, the stories of survivors of sexual violence in sport had been collected or analysed. Survivors felt that making use of such experiences would help protect other children. They had called on the Flemish sport actors to address sexual violence in sport. When the project came to an end last year, it was decided to continue the work that had been started. Because even though VOICE had achieved good results - in Flanders different political measures were taken after the public testimonials of several victims - a lot still could be done to prevent abuse. It was the public testimonials that aroused the public debate and put the topic high on the political agenda. The insights provided by survivors helped to raise awareness among politicians, sport administrators, coaches and parents. The survivors were willing to invest in training, education and policy advice. That was why the foundation “Voices in Sport” had been set up. It advised policy makers and organisations on what sexual abuse in sports looked like, what they could do in terms of prevention, or how to lower the threshold to report abuse, not only by victims, but also by bystanders. Society, politicians and decision makers at all levels had a role to play. The survivors were ready to assist them, in order to ensure that children could practise sports in a safe environment.

The Chairperson stressed that it was important for parliamentarians to be confronted with such testimonies. Children’s lives could be destroyed by suffering in silence.

Baroness Massey found that it was striking that children often thought that what was happening was acceptable, because it was often a priest, a coach or a parent who committed the abuse. This made it particularly hard for the child to disclose the abuse. It was a brave and essential thing to do. Baroness Massey enquired, whether from the perspective of the Lanzarote Committee, enough was being done to tackle peer-to-peer abuse and bullying.

Lord Touhig underlined that sexual violence against children happened across societies. Social media could be used more actively to get across the message that such violence was not acceptable. There was a big debate in the United Kingdom about lack of action to protect young people. **Ms Hetto-Gasch** pointed out, with respect to Ms Scappucci’s remark that children should not be incriminated, and that it was important to bear in mind that in some cases sharing sexually explicit images led to suicides. She felt that children of over 10 years old must have known what they were doing. **Ms Ohlsson** enquired what could be done by parliamentarians. Research and testimonies from young children showed that the norms were different and violent sex was more broadly accepted than before. Children did not know what they could say “no” to. **Mr Amraoui** pointed out that no-one was immune from such violence. As in many cases a close person or a parent were involved, this should not remain a taboo and awareness raising was essential.

Ms Scappucci responded that indeed much more could be done to address peer-to-peer sexual violence. Awareness raising was needed, including speaking in schools, at home and in society at large, with focus on children’s rights. One of the conclusions of the Lanzarote Committee’s first monitoring round was that it was important to ensure that children knew what was not acceptable, from an early age. In none of the countries that had taken part in this monitoring round had there been public campaigns on sexual abuse in families. All stakeholders should be involved, including those in the private sector. Social media should be used more actively. Law enforcement agencies needed to be allowed to take down child abuse images. With respect to “sexting” the starting point was that children exchanged pictures among themselves. The Lanzarote Committee had involved children in its monitoring work on this occasion, to better understand why this was done. The preliminary response was that this was how children expressed themselves. It was therefore important to alert them about the risks involved in such behaviour. **Ms Scappucci** intervened in schools on this topic, and no one thought that such images could be considered “child pornography” or that sharing them could be a criminal offence. It was not known how easy it was to hack images either. Children were not sufficiently aware of the possible consequences of their actions and would be more careful if they had more information. The Lanzarote Committee was collecting

examples of how these challenges were tackled successfully in the States Parties, and would make this information available, once its monitoring report was adopted.

Ms Sonck pointed out that when there was a relationship of trust and power, there was a margin for abuse. A child might not have the vocabulary to talk about sexual violence. Furthermore, abuse often happened in front of other adults. It was important to encourage bystanders to act, whether openly or anonymously. This was what drove her organisation. Social media had to be used. Children were connected 24 hours a day 7 days a week. Bullying never stopped, and this was a new element. Sport clubs had to introduce new rules, such as forbidding the use of mobile phones in locker rooms.

Ms Hetto-Gaasch clarified that her remark referred to cases when children intentionally caused damage to other children.

Ms Scappucci responded that criminal prosecution was only to be used as a last resort, in cases where the child did not respond positively to alternative measures. In the Netherlands progress had been achieved through the "Halt" Programme. Information about this programme was available online in English. The programme included measures to be taken before prosecution. It involved, for example, bringing together the victim and the offender.

Ms Scappucci also recalled that the Council of Europe promoted the 18 November as the European Day on the protection of children against sexual exploitation and sexual abuse. Last year the focus of the European Day had been on the protection of children against sexual violence in sports, and many useful tools had been made available online. In 2016 on the occasion of the European Day a Forum of survivors of child sexual exploitation and abuse had been held for the first time, in cooperation with ECPAT International - a global network dedicated to ending child sexual exploitation. It had brought together adults who had been abused as children, and it had been a powerful event. The Lanzarote Committee encouraged the contribution of survivors in policy development in this area, as they knew best what needed to be done. Financial support was required to support such contributions in an adequate way. The example of the VOICE project in Belgium was good in this respect, but this was a rare example.

Baroness Massey stressed that she was a big supporter of child participation, and children had to be involved in relevant discussions, even if it was a very difficult thing to do. Regrettably, the women's soccer championship had not been used as an opportunity to raise awareness of this issue. Role models needed to be used in this debate.

Ms Sonck mentioned that her organisation was trying to get UEFA and FIFA involved. There would be more opportunities to do that in future. Her organisation did not involve children, as special training was needed for that.

Ms Scappucci pointed out that the Lanzarote Committee involved children in general in its monitoring work (not victims of sexual abuse). The Lanzarote Committee had no special funds for this work. With the help of NGOs, 300 children had been consulted. They knew best why they took sexually explicit images, and what needed to be done to address that. If the Committee had more resources, more could be done. She highlighted that similarly it was also important to involve victims of abuse. Financial support to do so was however needed.

Ms Ohlsson mentioned that in Sweden there had been a big discussion about a case of sexual abuse revealed by a famous high jumper. This case opened the doors and allowed other survivors of sexual abuse to come forward. Ms Ohlsson was a chairperson in a football club, and when young people reported to the leadership that one of the trainers behaved in an unacceptable way, the person concerned was fired. The teenagers were more willing to come forward, because these issues had been previously discussed.

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