

UN ECE and UN Women Beijing +25 Meeting
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Good afternoon everyone. Thank you for inviting me to reflect on the role of private sector and business in fighting against gender-based violence in this meeting.

Despite all the efforts of states and intergovernmental organizations, gender-based violence remains to be one of the most severe human rights violations around the World. Most of this violence against women is perpetuated by a current or x-intimate partner. We frequently refer to “vulnerable” women when we talk about intimate partner violence, but intimate partner violence is not a phenomenon that is happening to some women, somewhere else. It is widespread in all segments of the society and all women are exposed regardless of their level of education or income. I am sure many women in this room have experienced intimate partner violence at least once in their lives and perhaps some of the men sitting here, knowingly or unknowingly, have been perpetrators of some type of violence.

The results of a survey conducted by the European Commission Fundamental Rights Agency revealed that the highest rate of physical and/or sexual partner violence after is among women working as supervisors compared with women who have never been employed. Furthermore, a survey conducted in Turkey shows that women who earn more than their partners are more likely to experience intimate partner violence. In these circumstances gender equality at work is an illusion.

Intimate partner violence harms businesses in many ways. It prevents businesses to enjoy the benefits of diversity, it affects workplace safety, employee morale, efficiency and productivity and it incurs costs. The business case is well established, but employers also have a moral obligation to protect their employees from the effects of intimate partner violence and support those women who are struggling with. It is therefore paramount that the businesses are mobilized to contribute to the efforts for eliminating violence against women.

To demonstrate how business can support women in their fights against intimate partner violence, I would like to present you the case of a Business Against Domestic Violence which was kicked off in Istanbul, the city where Istanbul convention was signed. The Project was conceptualized base on the outcome of a survey conducted in 2016 by Sabanci University Corporate Governance Forum which revealed that 75% of the white-collar working women have experienced intimate partner violence at least once during the past 5 years. The results were shocking since most of the respondents were university graduates with above average incomes and most of them had managerial or supervisory responsibilities. Two organizations reacted immediately when we published the results of the survey; UNFPA and a business association of large businesses in Turkey-TUSIAD.

The outcome was a project run in partnership with these organizations. The Project started with developing a Guidebook with companies to help businesses develop workplace policies to support their female employees exposed to domestic violence. After the publication of

the Guidebook, 17 companies have agreed to pilot the Guidebook and developed policies. The project was then rolled to other cities in Turkey like Bursa, Antalya and Izmir in partnership with business associations in those cities. At the end of the 4th year, more than 60 companies with more than 120000 employees were included in the project. The implementation involved training the management and in-house trainers together with UNFPA. Through these training the project expanded its mission from focusing on domestic violence to targeting gender equality at the workplace. Most companies included outreach activities to promote the idea of gender equality in the society and fight against social norms and values that feed into intimate partner violence. Project leaders and managers sit in 5 days of training to learn how to recognize women who are exposed to violence at home and how to approach them. In turn they trained all employees, men and women.

The Project is an example of using the organizational capabilities and resources of private sector in achieving a social goal.

Social norms and values are difficult to change. State organizations are not free from the prevailing values and norms. Many states are caught in between respecting the human rights of the individual and preserving so called “family values”. And for that reason, in many countries, women don’t trust the state in protecting them. Employers, business organizations can play a significant role to compensate this lack of trust especially in countries where trade unions are ineffective. Lastly, I must draw your attention to the new ILO convention adopted in 2019 that refers to the role of private sector in fighting against gender based violence, including domestic violence.

Elimination of domestic violence serves business interest both from efficiency and productivity perspective and from legitimacy and stakeholder management perspective. The employees of companies that participated in the Business Against Domestic Violence Project developed more positive attitudes towards their employers and found their work more meaningful. The Project furthermore promoted a sense of social purpose and compassion within the companies. For example, participating companies collectively fund a domestic violence hot-line. Most recently they agreed to establish a platform which would help other companies to develop workplace policies for achieving gender equality and fighting domestic violence.

The Project continues to evolve and serve as an instrument not only for supporting working women in their struggle against intimate partner violence, but also for changing attitudes and organizational norms towards a rooted appreciation of gender equality and respect for human rights in the business environment. The scope and content of policies developed by companies as well as the outreach campaigns they initiated during the Project are manifestations of the role business can play.

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