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## After eight years, why are we still waiting for a legal commitment to eradicate violence against women in the UK?

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*The Istanbul Convention focusses exclusively on eliminating all forms of violence against women (VAW), creating a holistic and comprehensive legal framework to prevent VAW, protect survivors of violence and end impunity for perpetrators, yet after eight years the UK is not yet legally bound to the treaty. [Lisa Gormley](#) and [Christine Chinkin](#) detail the Convention, the UK's approach, and why it is needed now more than ever as domestic violence levels increase.*

Today, 8 June 2020, marks the eighth anniversary since then Prime Minister David Cameron signed the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic

violence, known as the [Istanbul Convention](#). We are still waiting for it to be ratified and thus for the UK to become legally bound as a party to the treaty.

This anniversary is about far more than just technical language in a dry legal agreement. The insightful guidance gained from the process of working with the Istanbul Convention was recently described as “a game-changer” by Nina Nordström, the Finnish diplomat who is the chairperson of the Committee of the Parties – representatives of states who have already ratified the Istanbul Convention – which currently stands at 34 out of the 47 states in the Council of Europe. Given that [the number of killings of women in domestic violence cases has more than doubled since the COVID-19 crisis began](#), we need this transformative change now in the UK.

### **COVID-19 and the Istanbul Convention**

The webinar in which Nina Nordström was speaking was on Violence against Women: “[the shadow pandemic](#)”. She was joined by experts on violence against women, including the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women, Dubravka Šimonović, with moderation from

Marceline Naudi of the Group of Experts on Action on Violence against Women and Domestic Violence ([the GREVIO Committee](#)) which monitors the implementation of the Istanbul Convention.

The panel discussed how gathering data on the prevalence of violence against women across Europe has been challenging during the COVID-19 pandemic, but that it is clear that lockdown is exacerbating the structural issues that allow violence against women to persist: the privacy of the home shielding violence from view, abusers controlling women’s movements and ability to contact friends and family. Lockdown also makes it harder for women to seek help from police and other authorities, or to seek the support services they need to make a change in their situation and ultimately, to make a recovery from the effects of violence.

Adrienne Van Der Wilk, an expert on online and technology-facilitated violence against women, explained how the move to much greater online communication and wider use of technologies has also led to greater use of technologies to isolate, monitor and control victims, as well as increasing non-consensual communication of intimate images and other forms of online violence.

It is clear that under the COVID-19 situation, the practical solutions and legal obligations provided by the Istanbul Convention are needed more than ever.

### **Ratifying the Istanbul Convention**

Ratifying the Istanbul Convention will be valuable for improving the UK's response to violence against women in three ways.

- Its 81 provisions set out a holistic cross-government approach to eradicating violence against women, using an integrated approach across criminal and civil justice, health care, social service provision, education of children and public information, backed up by solid data collection and research, coordinated and monitored for effectiveness across all forms of violence against women;
- After ratification, states parties prepare a report on progress, based on a comprehensive questionnaire designed by GREVIO to highlight gaps and room for improvement. This report becomes the basis of a constructive dialogue between state representatives and members of the GREVIO Committee, leading to advice on how laws, policies and service provision can be improved to prevent and eradicate violence against women faster and more effectively, tailored for the specific national context. This external perspective and thorough check against the standards of the Istanbul Convention by GREVIO can offer a whole new perspective on national responses to eradicate violence against women.
- The Committee of the Parties is also a venue where member states can exchange ideas and solutions. Nina Nordström has emphasised that this

involves “soft persuasion” a method of working that most governments find acceptable.

The Istanbul Convention entered into force in 2014, and the GREVIO Committee has been operating now for over four years, so the practical benefits for states parties have been demonstrated. So why are we still waiting for the UK to take the final step and become a member of this valuable forum, with so much at stake?

The UK government has [responded to demands for ratification](#) stated that it is important to ensure compliance between UK legislation (including the legislation of devolved regions) and the Istanbul Convention before ratification can take place.

Under international law, this is not necessary – it is common for states parties to human rights conventions to have a great deal to change, in terms of domestic law and practice, and this is not a barrier to ratifying these treaties. However, ratification of the treaties brings benefits to states, who can then participate in the periodic review process, taking stock of progress and gathering insights into improvements in law and practice that need to be made.

The COVID-19 pandemic is making [more acute women’s experience of inequality](#) across all their human rights in the UK not least acts of physical, psychological, sexual and economic violence from which there is no easy escape or relief. The insights and dynamic change that the Istanbul Convention will bring are needed now more than ever.

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*The views, thoughts and opinions expressed in this blog post are those of the author(s) only, and do not necessarily reflect LSE’s or those of the LSE Centre for Women, Peace and Security.*

*Image credit: [Alan Denney \(CC BY-NC-SA 4.0\)](#). Wall of Dolls, the art installation is a symbol of childhood innocence, alongside the names of*

*murdered women raising awareness of violence against.*

## About the author



**Christine Chinkin**

Christine Chinkin is a leading expert on international law and human rights law, especially the international human rights of women. In 2000, her co-authored, ground-breaking book with Hilary Charlesworth, 'The Boundaries of International Law: a feminist analysis' examined the status of women in human rights and international law'. In 2005, in recognition of this and other contributions, Chinkin and Charlesworth were awarded the American Society of International Law, Goler T. Butcher Medal 'for outstanding contributions to the development or effective realization of international human rights law'.



**Lisa Gormley**

Lisa Gormley is a Policy Fellow in the Centre for Women, Peace and Security. She is an international lawyer specialising in equality for women and girls, and the obligation of States to eradicate violence against women and girls. Currently, Lisa is developing the Centre's Tackling Violence against Women website, adding further detailed analysis of the international jurisprudence relating to violence against women, with support from the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust.