

## **ZI Council of Europe Committee Frequently Asked Questions The Council of Europe and Zonta's role**

Updated March 2021

### **1. Q: What is the Council of Europe (CoE)?**

**A:** The Council of Europe is Europe's leading human rights organization, an intergovernmental organization. It was founded after World War II in 1949 to promote democracy and to protect human rights and the rule of law in Europe. It comprises 47 member states, including the 27 members of the European Union and six observer countries Canada, the Holy See, Japan, Israel, Mexico and the United States of America. It represents 820 million people. Its seat is in Strasbourg, France.

*Member States: Albania, Andorra, Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, "the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia", Malta, Republic of Moldova, Monaco, Montenegro, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russian Federation, San Marino, Serbia, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, Ukraine, United Kingdom.*

### **2. Q: What is the difference between the Council of Europe, the European Union (EU) and the European Council?**

**A:** The CoE and the EU are separate institutions; they have different roles but share many of the same values and symbols such as the European flag and the European Anthem (Beethoven's Ode to Joy).

The EU was created in the aftermath of World War II and is a unique political and economic union between 27 European countries; all have delegated some of their sovereignty to EU institutions so that decisions on specific issues of joint interest can be made democratically.

The European Council is the decision-making body of the EU consisting of the governments of the member states and the president of the European Commission.

No country has ever joined the EU without first belonging to the Council of Europe.

### **3. Q: What is the CoE doing?**

**A:** The CoE advocates democracy, human rights and the rule of law. It advocates freedom of expression and of assembly, gender equality and the protection of minorities. It helps member states fight corruption. It launches campaigns to advocate for or against a cause and promotes human rights through international conventions/treaties, such as the Istanbul Convention.

An important part plays the monitoring process. Through it, the CoE monitors the implementation of measures required from member states which have ratified the conventions and makes recommendations through independent expert monitoring bodies. As of February 2021, the CoE has initiated over 220 treaties promoting human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

**4. Q: What is the structure of the CoE and where is Zonta represented?**

**A:** The structure of the CoE is based on four pillars: The Committee of Ministers as the decision making body; the Parliamentary Assembly as the deliberative body; the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities; and the Conference of International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs) as the consultative bodies. The secretary general leads and represents the CoE. Zonta International is part of the Conference of INGOs, the chief body representing International Non-Governmental Organizations holding participatory status with the CoE (currently over 320 organizations). Zonta International is represented by the ZI CoE Committee and is officially invited to speak up at the INGO sessions. The Conference of INGOs meets twice per year in Strasbourg. The Conference adopts an Action Plan for three years prioritizing major themes of concern.

**5. Q: What is the meaning of the participatory status of Zonta?**

**A:** The participatory status enables INGOs to increase active participation in the policies and work program of the CoE. They decide on policy lines, contribute directly to debates, resolutions or recommendations, contribute to the work of intergovernmental committees and assert the political role of civil society within the CoE and its member states. Through the participatory status, the CoE includes INGOs in intergovernmental activities and encourages dialogue of members of parliament with associations on challenges facing society. They provide, thus, to the decision-making process of the CoE. One of the main challenges currently is to strengthen NGOs and the civil society and to develop the participatory democracy on a pan-European basis.

**6. Q: Why is the CoE so important for Zonta's mission?**

**A:** Gender equality is central to the protection of human rights, the functioning of democracy and respect of the rule of law. The CoE's work in the fields of human rights and gender equality has resulted in comprehensive legal standards and policy guidance aimed at achieving the advancement and empowerment of women. These treaties, conventions, protocols and recommendations provide concrete advocacy tools for Zonta clubs and members to take advocacy into action and to advocate for women's rights with an impact (see the Istanbul Convention and the Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings).

**7. Q: How exactly can Zonta's representatives at the CoE address policy makers/parliamentarians to make a difference for women and girls and to share concerns?**

**A:** Zonta's representatives in the Conference of INGOs should participate actively in the debates on the status of women and girls and on gender issues, demanding gender mainstreaming of these issues in all decision-making and initiating them when needed. They can directly approach the representatives to the Parliamentary Assembly and draw their attention to important issues concerning women and girls.

**8. Q: What exactly can Zonta clubs do to actively advocate for women's rights nationally?**

**A: 1.** Zontians can follow the CoE monitoring process in their own countries. The monitoring process is an important part to the conventions and has been set up to supervise the implementation of the obligations contained in the conventions.

For instance, for the Istanbul Convention, they can follow the monitoring reports of their government and of the independent Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO) to see if their government meets the requirements of the Istanbul Convention. The group may receive information from NGOs as a complement to the info provided by the state/government itself.

Zonta districts and clubs should seek contact with the national organization responsible for preparing the report to the GREVIO and suggest that representatives of Zonta and other women's organizations be invited to national hearings in the preparatory phase of the report. If needed, women's organizations can also prepare their own "shadow report" to the GREVIO.

Zonta clubs should follow the recommendations and suggestions of the “GREVIO” found on the CoE Website: <http://www.coe.int/en/web/istanbul-convention/newsroom>. They can also ask for an open hearing and disseminations of these recommendations in their respective countries.

The same process can be followed for the CoE Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings, <http://www.coe.int/en/web/anti-human-trafficking/news>, with the *Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking (GRETA)*.

2. Zonta Clubs can launch on a national basis a petition to urge their government to ratify a respective convention and/or make the necessary amendments to legislation and/or to make the necessary implementations requested by the convention.

## 9. Q: What is the European Court of Human Rights doing?

**A:** As part of the CoE, the European Court of Human Rights oversees the implementation of the European Convention on Human Rights in the member states, a treaty to protect human rights, democracy and the rule of law. A precondition for the membership in the CoE is the signing of the Convention by the acceding states. The ratifying state becomes, thus, also a party of the European Court of Human Rights.

The crucial point of the European Court of Human Rights is that every individual can file a complaint against a member state if the state has infringed his/her human rights, covered by the Convention, once all domestic remedies, i.e. possibilities of appeal have been exhausted. This is unique in the world and sets the European Court of Human Rights apart from other Human Rights Institutions.

## 10. Q: Is the CoE somehow linked with the UN and other (human rights) organizations?

**A:** Since 1989, the CoE has been granted observer status to the UN General Assembly. The cooperation is well established. Since 2004, the UN General Assembly adopts every second year a resolution on cooperation between the UN and the CoE, e.g. in the fields of protecting human rights, fight against racism, discrimination, trafficking in human beings etc. The CoE also cooperates with the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), UNICEF, *United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)* and *International Monetary Fund (IMF)* to name a few.

## 11. Q: What are “CoE standards”?

**A:** The CoE’s work in the fields of human rights and gender equality has resulted in comprehensive legal standards (conventions, charters) and policy guidance (recommendations) aimed at promoting human rights, democracy and the rule of law and achieving the advancement and empowerment of women and the effective realization of gender equality in CoE member states and beyond.

- *Conventions/charters are legally binding, once the CoE member state has signed and ratified the convention. States Parties to the conventions, charters are obliged to transfer convention requirements into national law and provisions.*
- *Recommendations are not legally binding instruments, however they provide a policy framework and proposals that member states can imply on the national law.*

**CoE’s conventions and charters:** The European Convention on Human Rights (1950), The Revised European Social Charter (1991) and its Additional Protocol\* (1995), The Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (2005), The Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (Lanzarote Convention 2007), The Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention 2011).

\*NB: The Additional Protocol to the Revised European Social Charter provides for NGOs a possibility to file a collective complaint directly to the European Committee of Social Rights concerning possible non-implementation of the Charter in the countries that have accepted the complaints procedure.

**For further information or questions:**

Anita Schnetzer-Spranger, Chairman, D 28  
Zonta Club of Mainz, Germany  
[schnetzer-spranger@gmx.de](mailto:schnetzer-spranger@gmx.de)

Irma Ertman, Vice-Chairman, D 20  
Zonta Club of Helsinki II, Finland  
[ertman.irma@gmail.com](mailto:ertman.irma@gmail.com)

Tuija Heikkilä, Member, D 20  
Zonta Club of Tampere I, Finland  
[tuija.heikkila@kolumbus.fi](mailto:tuija.heikkila@kolumbus.fi)

Karin Nordmeyer, D 30, Legal Adviser  
Zonta Club of Freiburg-Schauinsland, Germany  
[knordmeyer@gmx.de](mailto:knordmeyer@gmx.de)