

Your excellences,  
Dear professors,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

First of all I want to thank the organisation for the invitation and for the opportunity given to me to address you at this academic meeting. Please accept my apologies for not having been able to attend the whole meeting.

As you all know - better than me - ICHR is one of the largest academic units of its kind in Europe and it is stating the obvious to say that the centre enjoys a high-level profile, both regionally and internationally. ICRH has not been idle in the past 20 years, as is proven by the impressive list of hundreds of high-level scientific publications. The strategy for the future, that has been presented here today, indicates that the next 20 years may even be more productive.

Hence, I would like to **congratulate the university and all the collaborators of ICRH** for all the achievements of the last two decades. Allow me to mention in particular doctor Marleen Temmerman, the founding mother and driving force of this centre.

**Science** should not be something practised in an isolated, distant world. It should be rooted in reality, driven by the problems and challenges of our time and aimed at contributing to solving these problems. ICRH is the example of a research institute that works in such a way. During its 20 years of existence, it has improved the lives of numerous people all over the world, as besides being an academic unit, ICRH implements projects worldwide (Europe, Latin America, Africa and Asia) with a focus on developing training programs and actions to defend sexual and reproductive rights.

ICRH has more specifically contributed to finding new ways of preventing infectious diseases (f.e. HIV-Aids and HPV - cervical cancer). But it has also worked to better understand complex problems, as gender-based violence, and to improve maternal and child health, providing extensive technical assistance to national and international departments of health in the fields of family planning or harmful traditional practices.

Two characteristics of ICRH are rather exceptional in the world of science and the basics of this success:

In the first place, ICRH adopts a **global approach**, meaning that a great deal of the research is taking place in the developing countries and/or involves specific vulnerable groups in society, such as people living in poverty, migrants, refugees, adolescents, sex workers, men having sex with men, etcetera. **By targeting the weakest and most vulnerable groups, ICRH adds an extra societal value to its work.**

Secondly, ICRH's research approach is typically **multidisciplinary**. The close collaboration within ICRH between medical doctors, social scientist, law specialists etc. is

undoubtedly challenging, but it is **also indispensable in our complex and multifaceted world**.

As gender related issues belong to the working field of ICRH, in particular genital mutilation and gender-based violence, I would like to enlighten you two aspects of my policy as Secretary of state not only responsible for science policy but also for equality and equal chances.

Although female genital mutilation looks like something happening far away from here for a lot of people, thousands of girls and women in Belgium are at risk of genital mutilation. Therefore, I will pay particular attention to Female Genital Mutilation in a National Action Plan. Given the expertise of the various actors in the field, I want to consult you all, after which I will elaborate a protocol for the prevention and protection of women and girls who are at risk of genital mutilation, forced marriages and honour-related violence.

Another issue that will be one of my political priorities is the **fight against gender-based violence**. The Office of the European Union Fundamental Rights survey on violence against women shows the extent of the violence suffered by women at home, at work, on the street and online. 36% of the surveyed Belgian women older than 15 years have been the victims of physical and/or sexual violence. 6% of women have been last year victim of serious violence within a relationship.

I therefore wish to intensify the fight against gender-based violence. An important element in this context is the Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. It is the first legally binding instrument that provides a set of measures in the field of preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. Given the importance of this Convention, Belgium must ratify the Convention as soon as possible!

Ladies and gentlemen,

The ICRH has combined a scientific approach with a global and multidisciplinary approach. In that way it has undoubtedly done a great service to mankind, both on the medical and on the social level. As such ICRH and its partner organisations can be considered as an inspiring example for other scientific institutes.

Therefore, I wish you all the very best for each and every one of your future endeavours. Thank you.