

# Understanding Psychological Violence against Women

The need for harmonised definitions and data in the EU

## What is psychological violence?

Psychological violence is a common form of gender-based violence that includes **any intentional course of conduct that seriously impairs another person's psychological integrity through coercion or threats** <sup>(1)</sup>.

Psychological violence often **co-occurs with or precedes other forms of violence**, such as physical, sexual and economic violence <sup>(2)</sup>.

Examples of psychological violence include, but are not limited to, **emotional abuse, coercive and controlling behaviours, stalking, and harassment**. These behaviours are found below, in Figure 1.

It is important to note that **digital technologies** can facilitate and amplify psychological violence <sup>(3)</sup>.

Figure 1. Examples of psychological violence

### Emotional abuse



Behaviours aimed at generating emotional harm or threat of harm, such as belittling, humiliating, threatening or intimidating the victim <sup>(4)</sup>.

#### Examples of emotional abuse

- Verbally abusing, bullying, insulting and demeaning a victim.
- Gaslighting a victim.
- Threatening harm, self-harm or to threaten to take the victim's children away when a relationship ends.

### Stalking



Repeated, unwanted contact or attention from a perpetrator which causes fear or intimidation <sup>(1)</sup>.

#### Examples of stalking

- Repeatedly sending unwanted texts, emails, letters, gifts or online messages to a victim.
- Regularly following a victim in public or repeatedly showing up at their residence uninvited.
- Tampering with someone's personal property to let them know they are being observed.

### Coercive and controlling behaviours



Oppressive conduct aimed at controlling, isolating, degrading, and intimidating victims <sup>(5)</sup>.

#### Examples of coercive and controlling behaviours

- Restricting a victim's mobility outside of the home.
- Limiting a victim's contact with other people, such as friends, family members and co-workers.
- Demanding access to a victim's computer or phone, or monitoring their social media activity.

### Harassment



Unwanted conduct that violates a victim's dignity and creates an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment <sup>(6)</sup>.

#### Examples of harassment

- Defaming a victim by intentionally spreading misinformation about them.
- Repeatedly posting unwanted pictures of a victim, their family, or their workplace online.
- Breaching a restraining order which prohibits a perpetrator from contacting a victim.

<sup>(1)</sup> Council of Europe (2011), *Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence* (Istanbul Convention).

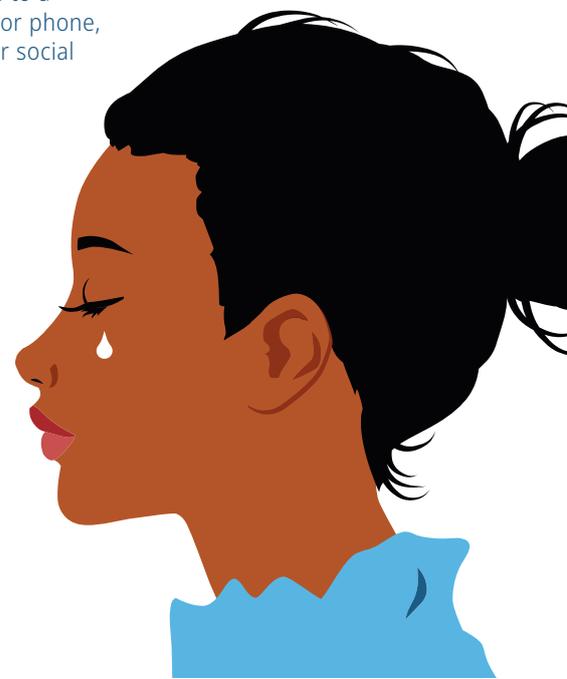
<sup>(2)</sup> European Institute for Gender Equality (2022), *Combating coercive control and psychological violence against women in the EU Member States*

<sup>(3)</sup> Group of Experts on Action Against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO) (2021), *Recommendation No. 1 on the digital dimension of violence against women*.

<sup>(4)</sup> Martín-Fernández, M., Gracia, E. and Lila, M. (2019), 'Psychological intimate partner violence against women in the European Union: A cross-national invariance study', *BMC Public Health*, Vol. 19, No 1739, pp. 1–11.

<sup>(5)</sup> Stark, E. (2013), 'The dangers of dangerousness assessment', *Family and Intimate Partner Violence Quarterly*.

<sup>(6)</sup> European Institute for Gender Equality (2022), *Glossary and thesaurus: harassment*.



## Who is most at risk of experiencing psychological violence?

Women in intimate relationships are disproportionately affected by psychological violence <sup>(7)</sup>. Findings from an EU-wide survey on violence against women reveal, an average of 43 % of women in the EU have experienced psychological violence by a partner since the age of 15 <sup>(7)</sup>.

Younger women (under 30), women with disabilities, refugee and asylum-seeking women and non-heterosexual women are most at risk of facing psychological violence <sup>(2)</sup>. Women with dependent

children also experience unique risks, as perpetrators may make threats relating to children.

Recognising the gendered and intersectional nature of psychological violence and the heightened vulnerability of victims based on factors of race, ethnicity, age, socio-economic status, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability and immigration status is necessary to effectively tackle the phenomenon.

## How does psychological violence impact victims?

Psychological violence is associated with various short-term and long-term consequences to victims' overall well-being. However, these consequences may not be immediately apparent. Compared to other forms, psychological violence is more difficult to identify; consequently, it is less criminalised and prosecuted, and therefore less reported.

The detrimental effects of this form of violence are heightened for victims experiencing multiple forms of violence simultaneously. The adverse consequences of psychological violence are described in Figure 2.

**Figure 2.** Impacts of psychological violence on victims

### Increased risk of suicide



The most serious effect of psychological violence on women victims is increased risk of suicide. In 2017, at least 1 136 women in the EU took their lives due to repeated psychological partner violence <sup>(8)</sup>.

### Psychological and emotional wellbeing



Psychological violence creates a sense of fear and diminished self-esteem in victims. Victims of this form of violence can suffer from anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder <sup>(2)</sup>.

### Physical health



Psychological violence can hinder the capacity of victims to seek out and afford general and specialised healthcare services, leading to a deterioration of their physical health. Victims have reported higher incidences of alcohol and drug abuse, chronic pain, permanent fatigue and sleep disorders <sup>(9)</sup> <sup>(10)</sup>.

### Lack of social networks and support



Victims of coercion and controlling behaviours are often isolated from their social networks, friends, families and systems of support, and remain heavily reliant on perpetrators.

<sup>(7)</sup> Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) (2014), *Violence against Women: An EU-wide survey – Main results report*.

<sup>(8)</sup> European Project on Forced Suicides (2021), Internal report submitted to the European Commission (unpublished).

<sup>(9)</sup> Domenech Del Rio, I. and Sirvent Garcia Del Valle, E. (2017), 'The consequences of intimate partner violence on health: A further disaggregation of psychological violence - Evidence from Spain', *Violence against Women*, Vol. 23, No 14, pp. 1771–1789.

<sup>(10)</sup> Coker, A. L. (2000), 'Physical health consequences of physical and psychological intimate partner violence', *Archives of Family Medicine*, Vol. 9, No 5, pp. 451–457.

<sup>(11)</sup> European Union (2012), *Directive 2012/29/EU establishing minimum standards on the rights, support and protection of victims of crime*.

<sup>(12)</sup> European Institute for Gender Equality (2017), *Glossary of definitions of rape, femicide and intimate partner violence*.

## How is psychological violence criminalised?

Member States that have ratified the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (**Istanbul Convention**), are obliged to adopt laws to prevent and combat psychological violence <sup>(1)</sup>. At the national level, **all Member States criminalise psychological violence and coercive control, to some extent**. However, legislation may not explicitly refer to the term ‘psychological violence’ and may fail to cover relevant offences which might occur within an intimate partnership relationship <sup>(2)</sup>. Overt forms of violence (i.e. threats of harm) are more likely to be prosecuted under criminal law, whereas covert forms of abuse (i.e. gaslighting) are less likely to be considered as a criminal offense. Moreover, in several Member States, laws combating psychological violence do not refer to actions perpetrated online <sup>(2)</sup>.

There is considerable variation in legal provisions against psychological violence across EU Member States. In 2021, only five Member States had criminal offences specific to psychological violence or coercive control. Most countries have psychological violence under wider offences relating to domestic violence or intimate partner violence or use other criminal offences to prosecute psychological violence that are not specific to the domestic violence/intimate partner violence context <sup>(2)</sup>.

**Denmark** has a specific criminal offence for psychological violence.

**Ireland** specifically uses the term ‘coercive control’ in its Domestic Violence Act.

**France’s** criminal code specifies that violent criminal offences can be psychological in nature.

**Hungary’s** criminal code has an article listing acts of psychological violence.

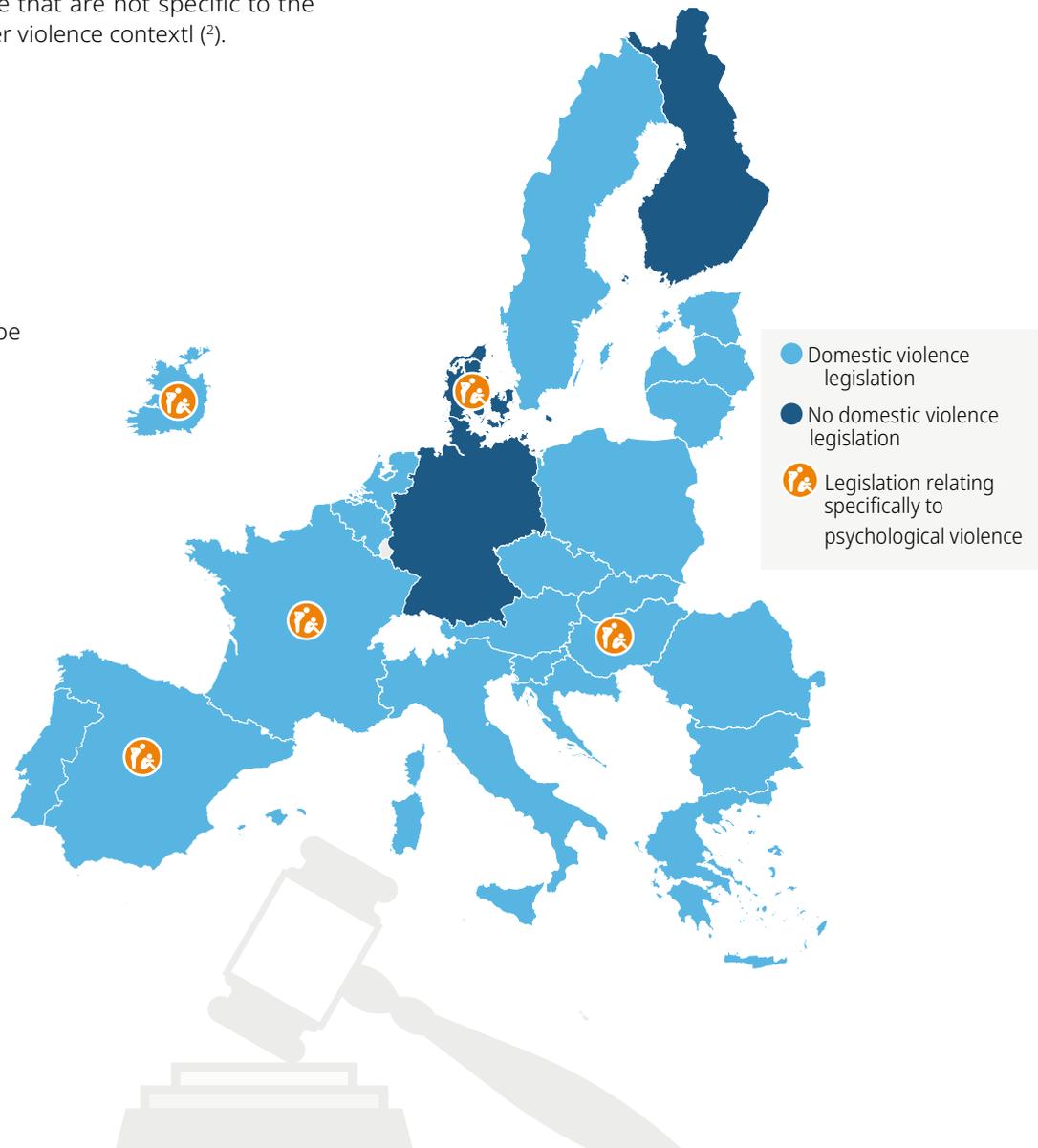
**Spain** has three criminal offences specific to psychological violence against women.

At the EU level, the **Victims’ Rights Directive (2012/29/EU)** recognises that violence can manifest in different forms, including psychological. The directive establishes minimum standards on the rights, support and protection of victims of crime <sup>(1)</sup>.

Under these measures, Member States are to ensure that victims receive proper protection, support, access to justice and free specialist support services, counselling and shelters in emergency scenarios.

In 2022, the European Commission adopted **the proposal for a directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence (COM/2022/105)** which recognises psychological violence as a form of violence against women and lays down comprehensive measures to combat it.

**Figure 3. Criminalisation of psychological violence across the EU**



## EIGE's data collection on psychological violence in the EU

EIGE's definition of psychological violence for statistical purposes is 'any act which causes psychological harm to an individual. Psychological violence can take the form of, for example, coercion, defamation, verbal insult or harassment' <sup>(12)</sup>.

EIGE has developed 13 indicators to measure intimate partner violence (IPV) in the EU. EIGE's measurement framework includes an indicator that specifically measures the number of women victims of psychological violence <sup>(13)</sup>.

Between 2018 and 2020, EIGE used the 13 indicators to try to collect comparable EU-wide data on IPV <sup>(14)</sup>. Findings from the data collection exercise show that **only four countries (Czechia, Germany, Latvia and Finland) had 'comparable' data** on the number of women victims of psychological violence, aligned with EIGE's data requirements <sup>(15)</sup>.

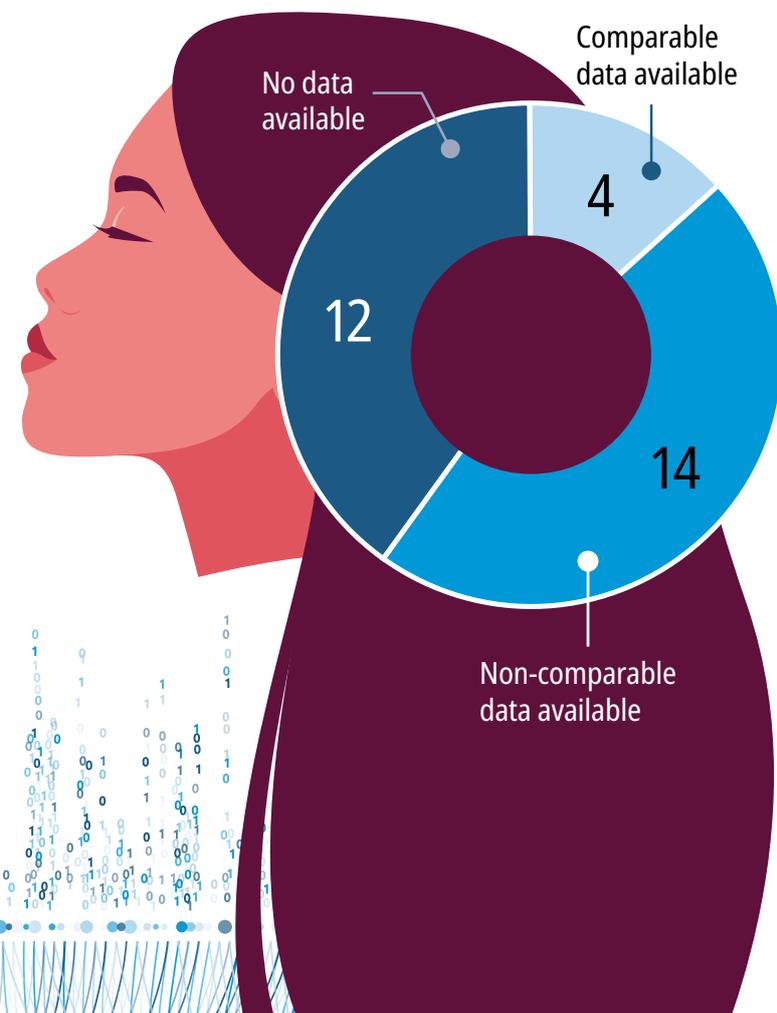
In 14 countries, available data on psychological violence was deemed 'non-comparable' because it didn't meet the requirements set by EIGE's indicator. In these countries, data was available on the number of victims of psychological violence, but data on the sex of the victim and perpetrator and/or the victim-perpetrator relationship was not collected.

Findings from EIGE's data collection exercise highlight the following two main **challenges with collecting comparable administrative data** on psychological violence in the EU.

 The **data collection practices** of Member States are diverse. Many countries do not collect sufficient data on the characteristics of victims and perpetrators or their relationship.

 There is a **lack of common definitions** for psychological violence in the EU. Many Member States do not recognise forms of psychological violence that affect women in intimate partner relationships.

**Figure 4. Number of countries with data available to measure EIGE's indicator on psychological violence (EU-27 + United Kingdom's three jurisdictions)**



## What hampers the collection of data on psychological violence?

There are several socio-cultural and institutional barriers preventing administrative data collection on psychological violence in the EU.

For victims, fear of retaliation from perpetrators and a lack of awareness on the phenomenon can lead to under-reporting, which affects the data collected. For institutions, failure to recognise common forms of psychological violence against women limits data collection on covert acts and behaviours.

EIGE's consultations with national data providers suggest that there is a **general lack of awareness and understanding of what constitutes psychological violence** and the gendered nature of the phenomenon in the EU.

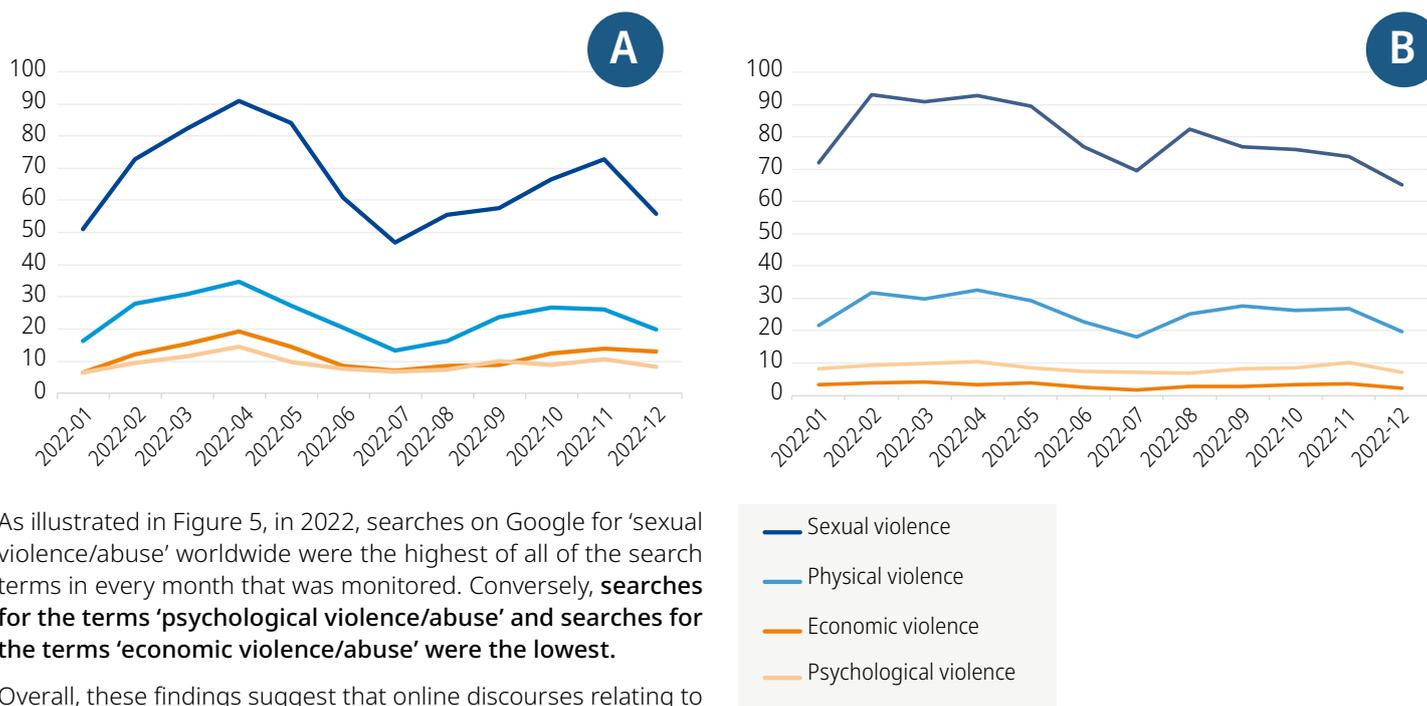
Analysing search engine data can provide insights into the extent to which online users are aware of and discuss the phenomenon of psychological violence. Ultimately, the types of searches being performed online can be a proxy for public interests, concerns or intentions.

<sup>(13)</sup> In EIGE's 2018–2020 data collection exercise, Indicator 5 measured the 'Annual number of women victims of psychological intimate partner violence (aged 18 and over) committed by men (aged 18 and over) as recorded by police'.  
<sup>(14)</sup> A new data collection exercise, covering 2014–2022, will be conducted in 2023.  
<sup>(15)</sup> EIGE's data requirements involve components such as, type of offences included, counting units, disaggregation by sex of the victim and/or perpetrator as well as by the nature of the victim-perpetrator relationship. See: European Institute for Gender Equality (2021), *EIGE's indicators on intimate partner violence, rape and femicide: EU state of play*.

Google Trends data suggests that online discourses relating to more covert forms of violence (i.e. psychological and economic violence), are less prevalent than discourses relating to more overt forms of violence (i.e. physical and sexual violence.)

Figure 5 highlights the relative popularity of search terms relating to various forms of violence and abuse between January 1 and December 31, 2022.

**Figure 5. Worldwide Google searches of forms of violence (A) and abuse (B) in 2022**



As illustrated in Figure 5, in 2022, searches on Google for ‘sexual violence/abuse’ worldwide were the highest of all of the search terms in every month that was monitored. Conversely, **searches for the terms ‘psychological violence/abuse’ and searches for the terms ‘economic violence/abuse’ were the lowest.**

Overall, these findings suggest that online discourses relating to psychological violence are less prevalent than discussions relating to more overt forms of violence.

Findings from EIGE’s data collection exercise on IPV and Google Trends data illustrate the need to raise awareness on the prevalence and gendered nature of psychological violence.

Ensuring that there is adequate awareness of violence against women is essential for effective policy planning, implementation and evaluation.

### Understanding Google Trends data

The results from Google Trends describe the relative popularity of a search term over time, in (almost) real time. The figures on the graph do not represent absolute search volume numbers. Instead, the figures represent how many searches have been made for a term relative to the total number of searches conducted on Google in the selected geographic region and timeframe. All numbers are normalised using a 1-100 scale. A value of 100 is the peak popularity for the term within the timeframe, a value of 50 means that the term is half as popular, and a score of 0 indicates that there was not enough data for the term.

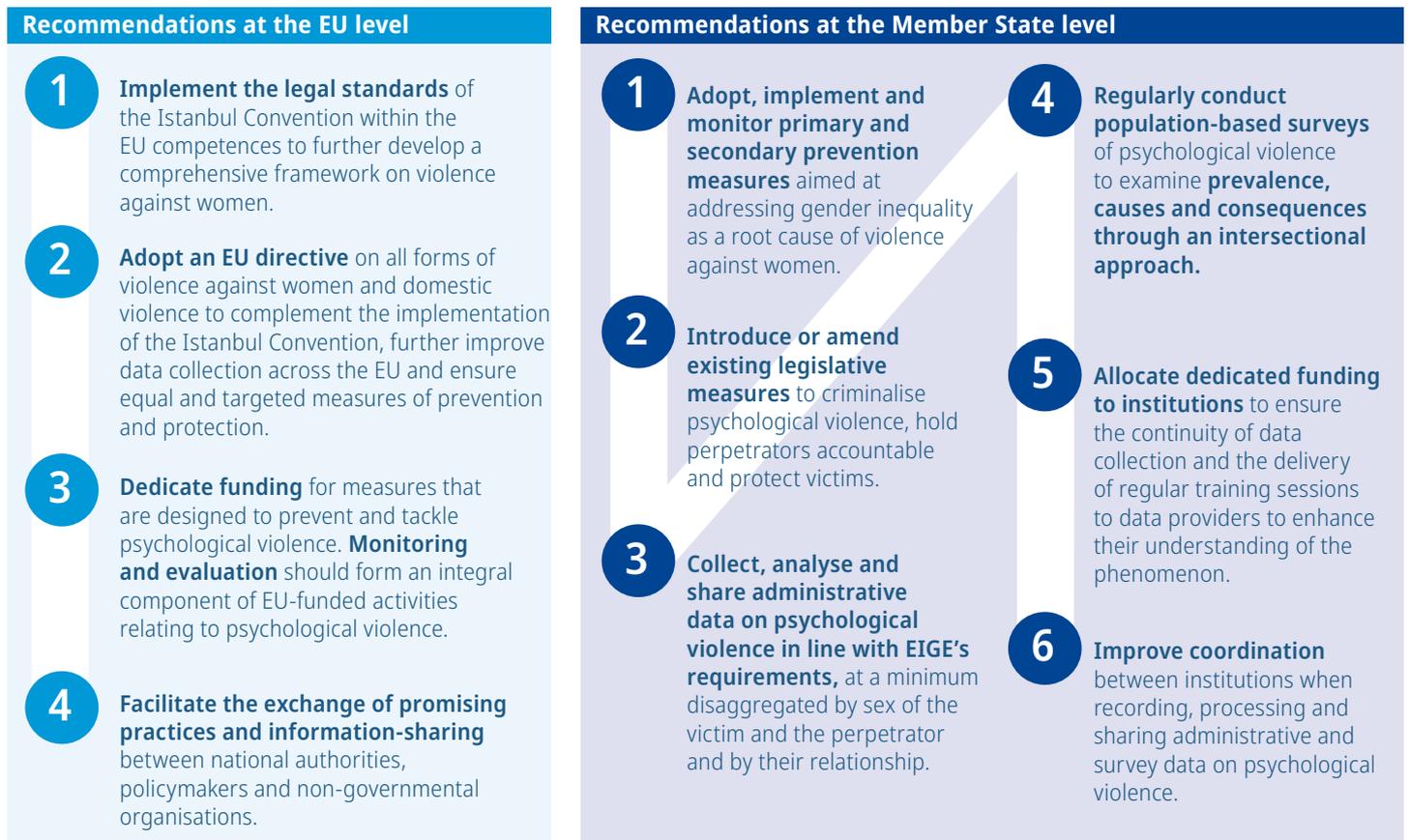


## How can the EU and Member States combat psychological violence?

Proactive and harmonised measures must be adopted at the EU and Member State levels to effectively combat psychological violence and monitor its prevalence in the EU.

The following recommendations can be adopted at the EU and Member State levels to improve data collection and tackle psychological violence against women more broadly.

**Figure 6.** EIGE's recommendations to combat and prevent psychological violence in the EU



All data is published in EIGE's **Gender Statistics Database**, which provides a one-stop source for all gender statistics at the Member State and European Union levels.

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