

Area D — Violence against women: response and eradication

Introduction

Violence against women (VAW) is rooted in the unequal balance of power between women and men and is both a cause and a consequence of gender inequality. It takes many forms and remains widespread within the EU. One in three women aged 15 and over has experienced physical and/or sexual violence. Nearly one in four women (22 %) has experienced physical and/or sexual violence at the hands of a partner since the age of 15, and nearly half (43 %) have experienced psychological violence by an intimate partner. Women and girls account for more than two thirds of victims of trafficking in human beings, overwhelmingly for the purposes of sexual exploitation. They can also face other forms of violence, including sexual harassment, cyberviolence, female genital mutilation and forced marriage. Different forms of violence often overlap, amplifying their effects and making them difficult to address and eliminate.

All EU Member States have criminalised some forms of VAW and, together with the EU institutions, have worked to strength-

en legal frameworks and better determine the scale of the phenomenon. At EU level, gender-based violence is a policy priority, as reflected in the strategy for equality between women and men (2010-2015) and in the follow-up strategic engagement for gender equality (2016-2019). There have been several important developments in this area since 2013: the EU has taken steps towards ratifying the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (the Istanbul Convention); the EU Anti-trafficking Directive has been complemented by the EU strategy towards the eradication of trafficking in human beings 2012-2016 and the 2017 communication stepping up EU actions in this area; and the implementation of the Victims' Rights Directive and the European Protection Order Directive has progressed in Member States. Nevertheless, there remains significant room to further strengthen and harmonise legal frameworks across the EU Member States and to produce more reliable, comparable and high-quality EU data on VAW.



The Istanbul Convention needs to be ratified by the EU

The Istanbul Convention is the most comprehensive and ambitious international treaty to address VAW in all its forms. It aims to prevent, prosecute and eliminate VAW in all its forms, and to protect and assist all victims of such violence. It therefore has the potential to strengthen the legal frameworks of the EU Member States and to enhance their due diligence.

Although the convention has been signed by all EU Member States, the process of its entry into force (ratification) has not been always smooth. Notably, the convention has not yet been ratified at national level by several Member States: Bulgaria, Czechia, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Slovakia and the United Kingdom. In some countries, this has been linked to the rise of 'anti-gender' movements, which contested the role and the significance of the convention and hindered its ratification. Such movements have also gained support in countries that have already ratified the Convention. They often contest the concept of 'gender' included in the convention and argue that the Convention goes against their countries' traditional family structures and cultures. Stopping the ratification of the Istanbul Convention is a serious backlash against gender equality and women's rights.

Member States' obligations of due diligence are not always uniformly applied. For example, there is still no clear over-

view of available support and treatment services for victims of violence in the EU, with the exception of several particular services covered by data from Women Against Violence Europe. These data show that the overall number of women's shelters and bed spaces has decreased in the EU since 2013; it is estimated that they cover only about a half of the current need in the EU. Most Member States do not fulfil the minimum levels of support outlined in the convention (e.g. offering free, 24/7 national hotlines and minimum numbers of specialist support services).

Member States face many challenges in implementing national legislation on VAW. Such obstacles include, to varying degrees in different Member States, the following:

- challenges faced by victims in accessing justice due to gender stereotypes, inconsistent application of legislation, high costs of legal proceedings and gender biases in the judiciary;
- ineffective protection of women victims of gender-based violence and inadequate responsiveness of the police;
- under-reporting of incidents of violence, as well as low prosecution and conviction rates.

Improved data collection is essential to combat VAW

Investing in high-quality comparable data on all forms of VAW is essential to determine the extent of the problem and identify the factors that influence levels of violence over time. Good data help governments to adopt evidence-based measures to prevent and respond to different forms of VAW.

Member States face widespread difficulties in collecting data on VAW. Key among these is under-reporting of specific forms of violence. Only 33 % of women who are physically or sexually abused by their partners contact the authorities and only 20 % of women indicate that the most serious incident

of violence by a partner was brought to the attention of the police. The lack of systematic recording of complaints, or lack of similar categorisation and recording of incidents, also limits the robustness and comparability of data collected. These challenges, and the lack of legal definitions of some forms of violence in certain Member States, lead to underestimation of the scale of the phenomenon.

Eurostat and other EU agencies (mainly the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) and the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE)) have carried out important work in this area, supporting Member States to improve their data collection approaches and advocating a uniform EU-wide system for mapping data on VAW. The first EU-wide

survey on VAW was carried out by FRA and published in 2014. Eurostat is further developing this work in an EU-wide survey on gender-based violence, simultaneously collecting crime data from the police and justice systems. EIGE has led research to improve administrative data collection and estimation of the prevalence of different forms of violence, including intimate partner violence, trafficking and female genital mutilation. It has also undertaken some initial work to understand the emerging phenomenon of cyberviolence against women and girls, its consequences and possible ways of addressing the problem. This work is crucial to pave the way for more reliable and comparable statistics on the extent of all forms of VAW.

Recommendations for action

It is important for governments, politicians and civil society representatives in the EU to stand up to the backlash against gender equality, women's rights and the Istanbul Convention. For example, the EU itself could take action to overcome the misinformation and misconceptions that have informed that backlash. From the perspective of VAW, it is particularly important to ratify the Istanbul Convention and encourage Member States to do so without reservations.

To support women's organisations and networks providing services to victims of VAW, Member States and the EU are recommended to ensure that these organisations have access to adequate, sustainable public funding. Removing any other restrictions that may impede sustainable operation of these organisations is also important to ensure adequate levels and quality of support services for victims of violence, and to support broader efforts to eliminate VAW and the gender

stereotypes that underpin it. For example, it is important to improve the availability of beds in women's shelters, which currently supply only over about half of the estimated need in the EU.

Providing gender-sensitive training for law enforcement personnel and judges within Member States would contribute to better implementation of legal instruments addressing VAW, and help overcome high rates of impunity for certain crimes against women. Victims of violence would also benefit from stronger Member State efforts to assist them in accessing remedies through courts or other bodies.

Finally, it is advisable that Member States take steps to harmonise administrative data collection on VAW by the police, the judiciary system and other organisations, with a view to generating comparable high-quality EU-wide statistics on violence in its many forms.

Further information

Beyond the developments presented here, the Beijing + 25 review has revealed a wide range of other challenges in relation to VAW (Area D). For example, a range of new forms of gender-based violence are emerging, linked to the rise of digitisation in society. These are often referred to as cyber-violence, and take many forms including online trafficking in women and girls, cyberbullying, online hate speech and revenge porn. There are also grave risks for women on the move (such as asylum seekers), who may be subjected to

gender-based violence in all stages of their journey, including within the EU.

Further information on EU policy developments and trends in the area of VAW can be found in EIGE's Beijing + 25 report and the section dedicated to gender-based violence on EIGE's website. Additional factsheets are available for other areas of the Beijing Platform for Action, some of which present challenges related to VAW (such as Area C, Health of women).

EIGE regularly produces reports reviewing different areas of the Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA) or other EU policy priorities, as requested by the presidencies of the Council of the European Union. This factsheet is based on the report *Beijing + 25: The fifth review of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action in the EU Member States*, prepared at the request of Finland's Presidency of the Council of the EU.

Other publications include:

- [Tackling the Gender Pay Gap: Not without a better work-life balance](#) (2019)
- [Gender Equality and Youth: Opportunities and risks of digitalisation](#) (2019)
- [Women and Men in ICT: A chance for better work-life balance](#) (2018)
- [Study and Work in the EU: Set apart by gender](#) (2018)

You can explore all of EIGE's previous BPfA reports and publications at <https://eige.europa.eu/beijing-platform-for-action>

EIGE also has a range of publications focusing specifically on gender based violence. These include:

- [A guide to risk assessment and risk management of intimate partner violence against women for police](#)
- [Risk assessment and management of intimate partner violence in the EU](#)
- [Understanding intimate partner violence in the EU: the role of data](#)
- [Terminology and indicators for data collection: Rape, femicide and intimate partner violence – Report](#)

You can explore more of EIGE's work on gender based violence at <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-based-violence>.

European Institute for Gender Equality

The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) is the EU knowledge centre on gender equality. EIGE supports policymakers and all relevant institutions in their efforts to make equality between women and men a reality for all Europeans by providing them with specific expertise and comparable and reliable data on gender equality in Europe.
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European Institute for Gender Equality
Gedimino pr. 16
LT-01103 Vilnius
Lithuania

Contact details

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<https://www.linkedin.com/company/eige> 
eige.sec@eige.europa.eu 
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