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**Ending violence against women and girls in the  
Economic Commission for Europe region**

## **Breaking the cycle: Ending violence against women and girls in the Economic Commission for Europe region**

**Note by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the  
Empowerment of Women (UN Women)**

### *Summary*

This note reviews the progress of the 56 member States of the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) in addressing violence against women and girls (VAWG). It focuses on critical areas outlined in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BfPA), presenting the current situation, progress, challenges, and proposed actions for continued improvement. While progress has been made in normative frameworks to address VAWG, it remains widespread in various forms due to persistent gender power imbalances, patriarchal norms and structural inequalities. VAWG occurs in domestic settings, often perpetrated by current or former partners, but also happens in public spaces, workplaces, digital environments and political arenas. The impact on women's physical, emotional and social well-being is profound, discouraging them from seeking power, speaking out and participating in decision-making. Countries in the ECE region have prioritized eliminating VAWG, with efforts including legal and policy reforms, capacity building for VAWG response, improved support services and prevention activities. These efforts align with the Istanbul Convention, even among non-signatory countries. However, interventions often focus narrowly on domestic violence, overlooking other forms of VAWG. Additionally, legislation has not kept pace with rising technology-facilitated violence, and gender-neutral legal provisions fail to address the gendered nature of VAWG. Since Beijing+25, multiple crises—including the COVID-19 pandemic, conflicts in the region and natural disasters—have undermined progress. Policy priorities have shifted, authoritarian and populist tendencies have risen, and gender backlash has strengthened. Support for civil society, especially women's and feminist organizations, has weakened, hindering their ability to support victims effectively. Overall, despite some progress, no significant breakthrough has been made in eliminating VAWG since Beijing+25.



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## I. Introduction

1. This note provides a review of progress made by the 56 member States of the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) in preventing and eliminating violence against women and girls (EVAWG) in line with Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the Sustainable Development Goals, in particular SDG 5 and SDG16 and Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention). The report is prepared by the UN Women Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia based on the survey and national reports submitted by member States for the Beijing +30 anniversary, civil society consultations and available data and literature. It is a background note on the issue for the regional meeting to review 30 years of progress in implementing the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in the ECE region.

## II. Main trends in the ECE region

2. Despite being an area of attention for many countries in the ECE region, violence against women and girls (VAWG) continues to undermine the human rights and wellbeing of women and girls. Grounded in structural gender inequalities, unbalanced gender power relations and patriarchal and stereotypical cultural norms, violence against women and girls takes a diversity of forms.

### A. Prevalence of violence in diversity of forms

3. Monitoring the prevalence of VAWG across the region is sub-optimal due to the lack of regionwide standardized methodologies and inconsistencies in data collection and publication timelines. Surveys on the prevalence of VAWG are crucial, as they provide more reliable estimates of the scale and forms of violence than administrative data, as many women do not report violence to the system for response. Since 2021, a comprehensive EU survey on gender-based violence against women (EU-GBV) has been introduced in EU member states and among EU candidate countries. The survey covers psychological, physical and sexual violence by intimate partners; physical and sexual violence by non-partners; sexual harassment at work; violence experienced in childhood; and stalking by any perpetrator. However, the implementation of this survey is fragmented. In the EU, 18 member states implement this survey, while Italy has agreed to share data based on its national VAW survey. For the remaining eight member states, the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) and the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) conduct separate data collection following the Eurostat methodological manual. The first wave of data collection was undertaken in 2021 and data have been published for 18 EU member states, 2 EU candidate countries and Kosovo<sup>1</sup>. Iceland conducts its own national survey. Surveys in Türkiye, Eastern Europe and Central Asia are implemented using different national methodologies and are not available in all countries.

4. According to the most recent data for countries implementing the EU-GBV survey, the proportion of women aged 18-74 who have experienced gender-based violence by any perpetrator since the age of 15, ranges from 10.3 per cent in Kosovo to 57.1 per cent in Finland.<sup>2</sup> Differences in prevalence depend at least partly on the extent to which violence is tolerated in the wider community and women's awareness of the importance to disclose such experiences in order to provide evidence for policies addressing VAW. Therefore, survey data are only proxy to real prevalence and should be taken with reference to the context.

5. The prevalence of physical violence perpetrated by non-partners ranges from 5.7 per cent in Montenegro to 12.4 per cent in Italy. The prevalence of sexual violence ranges from 2.4

<sup>1</sup> References to Kosovo shall be understood to be in the context of UN Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999).

<sup>2</sup> European Commission, "[Women who have experienced violence by any perpetrator, by age group](#)", Eurostat.

per cent in Bulgaria to 34.2 per cent in Finland, while the prevalence of rape ranges from 0.6 per cent in Poland to 9.8 per cent in Finland.<sup>3</sup>

6. Intimate partner violence is more prevalent than non-partner violence. The proportion of women who disclosed that they were exposed to intimate partner violence (whether physical, psychological or sexual) is the lowest in Bulgaria (20.5 per cent) and highest in Finland (52.6 per cent). The most common is psychological violence.<sup>4</sup>

7. Technology-facilitated violence (referred to as ‘cyberviolence’ in the EU<sup>5</sup>) is on the rise with the advancement of digital technologies alongside persistent gender inequalities. It includes all acts that are ‘committed, assisted, aggravated or amplified by use of ICTs or other digital tools, that result in or is likely to result in physical, sexual, psychological, social, political or economic harm, or other infringements of rights and freedoms’.<sup>6</sup> ‘Offline’ and technology-facilitated violence are not separate forms, but rather could be understood as a continuum in which some forms occur only offline, some occur only through the use of digital technologies, and many include both offline and technology-facilitated components. In the Western Balkans, Türkiye, Eastern Europe and Central Asia, more than half of women who use digital technologies and are present online had experience of some form of technology-facilitated violence. The highest prevalence was found in Ukraine (76.8 per cent) and the lowest in Tajikistan (30.7 per cent); prevalence rates are also linked to internet penetration in the country and awareness of the importance to disclose experience of violence during surveys.<sup>7</sup> Violence most frequently takes the form of sexual harassment (unwanted or offensive content or messages, inappropriate sexual advances on social networks) and hacking women’s accounts. Women most often experience violence on Facebook and Instagram, and in half of cases, perpetrators are unknown persons or persons known only on the Internet, but in one-third of cases, perpetrators are partners, friends, acquaintances, colleagues or other persons in women’s ‘offline’ social proximity.

8. Data on economic violence are scarce. According to the 2022 VAWG survey in Georgia, 7.2 per cent of women ages 15-69 experienced economic violence during their lifetime, manifesting as acts of control, monitoring of women’s use of money or deprivation from access to economic resources.<sup>8</sup>

9. Childhood violence (before the age of 15) is one of the strongest predictors of experiencing violence as an adult.<sup>9</sup> In Western Balkan countries, Moldova and Ukraine, on average, 21 per cent of women have experienced some form of violence during childhood.<sup>10</sup> In Georgia, 8.5 per cent of women were exposed to childhood violence.<sup>11</sup>

10. Stalking is a form of violence that manifests as control, harassment and threatening behaviour that is repeatedly perpetrated both offline and through digital technologies. It can result in serious harm and even femicide. Across the Western Balkans, Moldova and Ukraine, 10 per cent of women have experienced stalking during their lifetime.<sup>12</sup> In Georgia, 8.5 per cent of women experienced such violence.<sup>13</sup> Perpetrators are most often men unknown to women, but in the Western Balkans, Moldova and Ukraine, more than a quarter were previous or current partners, while in Georgia one in ten was a partner.

11. Sexual harassment is one of the most pervasive forms of VAW, taking diverse forms and occurring in various settings. According to the EU-GBV survey, the percentage of women who have experienced sexual harassment at work ranges from 11.0 per cent in Latvia to 53.7

<sup>3</sup> European Commission, “Women who have experienced violence by a non-partner, by type of violence”, Eurostat.

<sup>4</sup> European Commission, “Ever-partnered women who have experienced violence by an intimate partner, by type of violence”, Eurostat.

<sup>5</sup> EIGE, *Combating Cyber Violence against Women and Girls* (2022).

<sup>6</sup> UN Women, *The dark side of digitalization: Technology-facilitated violence against women in Eastern Europe and Central Asia* (2023), p. 9.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>8</sup> UN Women, *National Study on Violence against Women in Georgia* (2022).

<sup>9</sup> OSCE, *Well-being and safety of women. Main report* (2019), p. 64.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> UN Women, *National Study on Violence against Women in Georgia* (2022), p. 132.

<sup>12</sup> OSCE, *Well-being and safety of women. Main report* (2019), p. 67.

<sup>13</sup> UN Women, *National Study on Violence against Women in Georgia* (2022), p. 144.

per cent in Finland.<sup>14</sup> In Georgia, 24.5 per cent of women experienced at least one form of sexual harassment in their lifetimes. The most frequent form is staring or leering in a way that makes women feel uncomfortable or humiliated, followed by asking intrusive questions about sexual, intimate or private life that makes them uncomfortable, embarrassed or offended.<sup>15</sup> In Kazakhstan, one in ten women faced sexual offers or demands at work.<sup>16</sup> According to the *End Violence Against Women (EVAW)* survey on experiences of sexual harassment in public spaces among British women 85 per cent of women aged 18-24 had experiences unwanted sexual attention, and 45 per cent unwanted sexual touching in public spaces.<sup>17</sup>

12. Child, early and forced marriage (CEFM) is still practiced in certain countries or among certain groups of populations. These include unions, official or not, in which at least one partner is under the age of 18. It is driven by a lack of value placed on girls' education and future role in society beyond domestic work and family care, intersecting with poverty, social exclusion, 'tradition' and other factors. It has devastating consequences for girls, preventing them from achieving full development of their potential and freedom of choice.<sup>18</sup> According to the global initiative 'Girls not Brides', in Armenia and Belarus, 5 per cent of girls are married before their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. This proportion is 8 per cent in North Macedonia, 9 per cent in Ukraine, 11 per cent in Azerbaijan, 12 per cent in Albania and Moldova, 14 per cent in Georgia and 15 per cent in Türkiye.<sup>19</sup>

13. Femicide is the most extreme form of violence against women. It is estimated that 48,800 women were killed by their intimate partners or other family members globally in 2022.<sup>20</sup> This means that, on average, more than 133 women or girls are killed every day by someone in their own family. Long-term trends (2010-2022) indicate a 21 per cent decline in femicide in Europe but with sub-regional differences.<sup>21</sup> Slight decrease has been also recorded in Eastern Europe from over 1 woman per 100,000 female population in 2015 to 0.6 in 2020 in Belarus or from 0.6 to 0.4 in Romania, and in Russia from 1.7 in 2017 to 1.5 in 2021.<sup>22</sup> Legal frameworks often do not recognize femicide as a specific crime. For example, research on femicide in three Western Balkan countries (Albania, Montenegro and Serbia) noted that this crime is not classified as a separate criminal offence.<sup>23</sup>

14. Human trafficking of women and girls in the ECE region declined during the COVID-19 pandemic, but due to lack of recent data, it is unclear if this reduction has been sustained. The number of detected female victims per 100,000 in the region dropped 24 per cent in 2020 compared to 2019.<sup>24</sup> However, women and girls still make up the majority of victims and are mainly trafficked for the purpose of sexual exploitation. They are exposed to physical and psychological violence (including threats) by traffickers in much higher proportion than male victims of trafficking.

15. Conflict-related sexual violence is of particular concern globally as well as in the ECE region, due to the newly emerging or ongoing conflicts. The Secretary-General's report on conflict-related sexual violence highlights "an unprecedented level of lethal violence used to silence survivors in the wake of sexual assault." According to the report, the number of UN-verified cases jumped 50 per cent in 2023, indicating extremely harmful conditions for women and girls in conflict-affected areas.<sup>25</sup> The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on

<sup>14</sup> European Commission, "Ever-working women who have experienced sexual harassment at work, by age group", Eurostat.

<sup>15</sup> UN Women, *National Study on Violence against Women in Georgia* (2022), p. 135.

<sup>16</sup> UN Women, *Studying the level and main causes of violence and sexual harassment at workplace in the Republic of Kazakhstan* (2023), p. 14.

<sup>17</sup> European Parliament, *Bullying and sexual harassment at the workplace, in public spaces, and in political life in the EU* (2018), p. 33.

<sup>18</sup> UNFPA, *Child marriage in Eastern Europe and Central Asia: regional overview* (2013).

<sup>19</sup> Girls not Brides. Available at <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-atlas/atlas/georgia> (accessed on 3 July 2024).

<sup>20</sup> UNODC, UN Women, *Gender-related killings of women and girls (femicide/feminicide). Global estimates of female intimate partner/family-homicides in 2022* (2023), p. 3.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p. 11

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p. 11, 22.

<sup>23</sup> Beker, Kosana, *Stop Femicide: Regional Report. Social and institutional responses to femicide in Albania, Montenegro and Serbia* (2023).

<sup>24</sup> UNODC, *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons* (2022).

<sup>25</sup> Security Council, *S/2024/292-Conflict-related sexual violence. Report of the Secretary General* (2024).

Ukraine found documented cases of sexual violence and rape against women and girls as well as against men.<sup>26</sup>

16. The consequences of violence are profound at the individual and collective level. Violence impacts women's physical and psychological health and well-being. Surveys show that women experiencing violence more often suffer from diverse health issues that prevent them from leading healthy and productive lives. Fear of violence can lead to self-censorship and withdrawal from participating in social circles and in different spheres of society. When technology-facilitated violence is at play, women may limit their use of the Internet and digital technologies, which are crucial for many aspects of social inclusion and participation, including in education, employment, politics and social life. A Belgian study on deepnudes<sup>27</sup> (hyper-realistic but fake nude images or videos created using artificial intelligence) found that the impact and long-term consequences of deepnude victimization are comparable to other forms of sexual image abuse online. The study showed that men in significantly higher proportion view, create, receive and possess deepnudes while women are more affected by these practices. VAW has also its economic price. The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) has estimated that the cost of gender-based violence across the EU amounts 366 billion Euros a year, with VAW making up 79 per cent of this cost (289 billion of Euro).<sup>28</sup> According to a study in Azerbaijan, the aggregate economic cost of violence against women amounts to 1.8 per cent of GDP, and 90 per cent of costs are borne by victims themselves.<sup>29</sup>

17. Gender stereotypes are persistent across the region and contribute to the perpetuation of VAW. According to 2023 Gender Social Norms Index available for 19 countries in ECE region, there are huge differences in percentage of population with at least one bias related to physical integrity (which is proxy for VAW) ranging from 8.23 per cent in UK to 90.18 per cent in Kyrgyzstan.<sup>30</sup> Most women and men participating in the UN Women and UNFPA survey on gender stereotypes in East Europe and Central Asia countries<sup>31</sup> believe that it is better for preschool children if their mothers do not work (e.g. 66 per cent of women and 75 per cent of men in Armenia, 46 per cent of women and 58 per cent of men in Belarus. Half of respondents in Armenia and 54 per cent in Azerbaijan believe that career advancement is more important for men than for women. However, among younger generations (18-29 years) such patriarchal views are less present.<sup>32</sup>

18. Tolerance to violence and hesitance to report violence remain high in a number of countries. More than half of men participating in the survey in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Moldova feel that conflict between a husband and wife, even if it involves violence, should remain private. The majority of female respondents in Armenia and Azerbaijan and almost half in Georgia and Moldova share this view. Overall, the reported awareness of laws on GBV and rape is low across Eastern Europe and Central Asia.<sup>33</sup>

## B. Intersectionality of Violence Against Women

19. Women in public roles and positions of power are increasingly exposed to violence, particularly in a context marked by increasing gender backlash and populist and right-wing movements. Women politicians, journalists and feminist activists are particularly exposed to the fierce violence that is often a combination of gender-based, political and cultural/symbolic violence. Unlike domestic violence, which tends to remain hidden, violence against women in public positions tends to be public and visible, as it aims to discredit and demean women in front of broad groups of audiences (voters, readers, citizens) and to discourage not only

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p. 23.

<sup>27</sup> Institute for the Equality of Women and Men, *Deepnudes among Young people in Belgium: the Numbers, the Market, the Impact* (2023).

<sup>28</sup> EIGE, "Gender-based violence costs the EU €366 billion a year", 7 July 2021

<sup>29</sup> UNFPA, *The Economic Cost of Violence against Women in Azerbaijan* (2020), p. 6

<sup>30</sup> UNDP, *Breaking Down Gender Biases: Shifting social norms towards gender equality* (2023), pp. 26-27.

<sup>31</sup> UN Women, UNFPA, *Baseline Study on Gender Norms and Stereotypes in the Countries of the Eastern Partnership* (2022), p. 19.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, pp. 25-26.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, p. 26.

particular women but women in general from aspiring to higher positions of power and raising their voices to shape policies or influence public opinion.

(a) According to the research of the Inter-Parliamentary Union conducted on a sample of women members of parliament (MPs) and parliamentary staff in 45 European countries, 85.2 per cent had suffered psychological violence in the course of their term of office; 46.9 per cent received death threats or threats of rape or assault; 58.2 per cent were targeted by online sexist attacks on social networks; 67.9 per cent were targeted by comments about their physical appearance or based on gender stereotypes; 24.7 per cent suffered sexual violence and 14.8 per cent suffered physical violence.<sup>34</sup>

(b) Qualitative research in Türkiye revealed complex mechanisms for discouraging women political candidates that include pressure from family members and discouraging and reminding women of their traditional role, often under the guise of protecting them, from close relatives and friends, colleagues from the same political party and political opponents from other political parties.<sup>35</sup>

20. Women in humanitarian situations, refugees and displaced women are exposed to increased risks of violence. Data on the Armenia refugee crises indicate higher risks of GBV and exploitation among women displaced in October 2023, particularly women with disabilities who make up a high proportion of those displaced.<sup>36</sup> Multiple forms of GBV – including intimate partner violence, sexual exploitation and abuse, sexual harassment, conflict-related sexual violence and economic abuse – have been reported since Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Women and girls on the move, at border crossing points and transit/collective centres, and in bomb shelters face a particularly high risk of violence.<sup>37</sup>

21. Women affected by natural disasters, such as the devastating earthquakes in Türkiye in 2023, are at heightened risk of gender-based violence due to unsafe and uncertain living conditions. They had to be accommodated in tents or containers or stayed in damaged buildings. They were exposed to higher risks of violence due to deprivation, frustration, economic pressures and harmful coping mechanisms, and they faced barriers in reporting violence, interacting with law enforcement or seeking legal, medical and psychosocial support.<sup>38</sup>

22. Age impacts women’s likelihood of being exposed to violence. Younger women are at higher risk of certain forms of violence, such as technology-facilitated violence,<sup>39</sup> sexual harassment or physical and sexual violence perpetrated by non-partners.<sup>40</sup> Older women are at higher risk of economic violence and neglect.<sup>41</sup>

### III. Progress

23. Preventing and combating VAWG has been one of the most common priorities for countries over the past five years and a key priority for future efforts to advance gender equality and empower women and girls, as demonstrated by 90 per cent of countries participating in the Beijing+30 survey and submitting national review reports. Where other sources are not referenced, below examples of country initiatives are taken from national review reports.

<sup>34</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union, *Sexism, harassment and violence against women in parliaments in Europe* (2018).

<sup>35</sup> UN Women, Terra Development Cooperative, *Violence against women in politics in Türkiye. A qualitative study* (2023).

<sup>36</sup> UN Women, *Disability inclusion and gender dynamics of the Armenia Refugee Crisis* (2024).

<sup>37</sup> UN Women, *Securing gender equality in Ukraine amidst the war* (2022).

<sup>38</sup> UN Women, *Her aftermath. The impact of the earthquakes in Türkiye: Focus on prevention and response to violence against women and girls* (2023).

<sup>39</sup> UN Women, *The dark side of digitalization: Technology-facilitated violence against women in Eastern Europe and Central Asia* (2023), p. 12.

<sup>40</sup> OSCE, *Well-being and safety of women. Main report* (2019), p. 122.

<sup>41</sup> Red Cross of Serbia, *Exploring violence against older women in the Western Balkans, Moldova and Ukraine* (2022).

## A. Improving laws and policies

24. The Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, known as the Istanbul Convention, is the main framework for addressing VAWG in the region. Presently, 39 countries across the ECE region have ratified the Istanbul Convention, six countries have signed but not ratified and one country (Türkiye) withdrew from the Convention in 2021.<sup>42</sup> According to the mid-term horizontal review of GREVIO baseline evaluation reports,<sup>43</sup> stronger legislative and policy standards have been introduced at the national level in a number of countries, demonstrating the transformative momentum created by the Convention and the increased engagement of parties.<sup>44</sup>

25. A significant step forward in improving legal frameworks was achieved in the EU by adopting the EU Directive on Violence against Women (EU Directive 2024/1385).<sup>45</sup> The Directive marks a crucial step towards ensuring the safety and protection of women and girls in all spheres of life, including online. Other ECE countries have been improving national legal frameworks in various ways.

(a) Some advancements have been related to more comprehensively addressing the diversity of forms of VAW beyond domestic violence, which is often the main or sole focus of EAW legislation.<sup>46</sup> For example, Belgium adopted a comprehensive law with concrete instruments to fight femicide and gender-based killings (2023), and Cyprus included femicide as a separate criminal offence in the Law on prevention and combating VAW and DV (2021). In Cyprus, a separate law (2021) protects against harassment and stalking. Many countries improved legislation related to sexual harassment in the workplace following the ratification of International Labour Organisation (ILO) Convention No. 190 on Violence and Harassment in the World of Work. Greece banned ‘sex-normalizing’ procedures on intersex infants and children below age 15 and allowed it after age 15 only with the informed consent of the individuals. Sweden introduced an offence in the Criminal Code related to honour-based oppression and CEFM which can lead to a sentence of imprisonment up to 4 years for those who induce or allow a child to enter a marriage or a marriagelike relationship.

(b) In other cases, countries revised definitions of certain forms of violence. In Belarus, the term ‘family violence’ was replaced by ‘domestic violence’ to expand the definition to include violence not only perpetrated by family members but also by former spouses, persons with whom women share a child and persons living in the same household. In Finland, the legal definition of rape was revised in 2023 to be defined by lack of consent.

26. Legal and policy initiatives have been undertaken to prevent technology-facilitated violence and provide more adequate protection for victims. Some examples include:

(a) The EU Digital Services Act (DSA) entered into force in 2022 with the aim to create a safer digital space in which the fundamental rights of all users of digital services are protected.<sup>47</sup> The DSA is a step towards ensuring that women and girls have safer and more equal experiences online. In particular, the inclusion of GBV as a systemic risk within the DSA aligns with the EU’s aim to criminalize certain forms of technology-facilitated GBV;

(b) Belgium has introduced legal provisions that prohibit the dissemination of nude or sexual images without the authorization of the person depicted. The law clearly defines what this behaviour covers, ranging from taking images without consent to sharing them on online platforms, social networks or through messaging;

(c) Cyprus has enhanced its legal framework to address online harassment and abuse. The country has laws that criminalize various forms of online abuse, including cyberstalking, non-consensual sharing of intimate images and online threats;

<sup>42</sup> Council of Europe, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/istanbul-convention/turkey>.

<sup>43</sup> Council of Europe, *Mid-term Horizontal Review of GREVIO baseline evaluation report* (2022).

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, p. 17.

<sup>45</sup> European Parliament, “Parliament approves first ever EU rules on combating violence against women”, 24 April 2024.

<sup>46</sup> Council of Europe, *Mid-term Horizontal Review of GREVIO baseline evaluation report* (2022), p. 18

<sup>47</sup> European Commission, “The Digital Services Act Package”, 25 July 2024.



(d) Iceland has adopted the Act on Sexual Privacy in 2021 to address increased digital sexual violence. The Act covers digital communication behaviours related to creating, distributing or publishing sexual images of others without permission. Iceland also amended its General Penal Code to include stalking.

27. To approach the issue of EVAW in a comprehensive and structured way, countries have adopted and implemented policies, such as national and local strategies, action plans and programmes, that either specifically focus on EVAW or include EVAW as a strategic objective within broader gender equality strategies. Additionally, some countries have adopted strategies that focus on preventing and combating specific forms of VAWG or within specific population groups. For example:

(a) Armenia and Azerbaijan have adopted national programmes for combating human trafficking and exploitation;

(b) In Finland, honour-related violence, female genital mutilation and forced marriage have been covered to a greater extent in national policies and programmes;

(c) Belgium has begun addressing the issue of gynaecological and obstetrical violence, which has only recently been recognized as specific form of VAWG. In early 2024, the Senate adopted an information report concerning the right to bodily self-determination and combating obstetric violence with 93 recommendations to promote a culture of gynaecological and obstetrical kindness in Belgium;

(d) Iceland adopted a Parliamentary Resolution on Action Plan in LGBTI Issues for 2022-2025, which is the first programme to deal exclusively with LGBTQ issues, including domestic violence;

(e) In 2023, in Moldova, around 60 representatives of electoral management bodies, local authorities, non-governmental organizations, anti-discrimination stakeholders, media and potential voters gathered to build a common platform to discuss preventing and combating hate speech, sexism and other forms of gender-based violence ahead of the election campaign for the general local elections in November 2023. A methodology for monitoring sexism during the electoral campaign was developed;

(f) In the Netherlands, to ensure the safety of women and girls in public spaces, the number of municipalities that participate in the programme ‘Safe Cities’ has expanded to 20 cities across the country. The programme focuses on strengthening women’s and girls’ safety in public spaces.

28. GREVIO has noted a number of promising practices implemented by countries regarding administrative data collection. For example:

(a) In Portugal, data from law enforcement bodies and the judiciary must now be collated to reconstruct the entire criminal proceedings chain, from filing of the complaint to the delivery of judgment;<sup>48</sup>

(b) In Spain, the Ministry of Interior compiles and publishes monthly data on the number of cases of intimate partner violence against women entered by law enforcement agencies and other relevant institutions into the Integrated Monitoring System for cases of gender-based violence (VioGen);<sup>49</sup>

(c) In Türkiye, robust data are collected on emergency, restraining and protection orders.<sup>50</sup>

## B. Improving support to survivors

29. Increasing the capacities of institutional mechanisms for the prevention and elimination of VAW, including to respond to technology-facilitated violence, was prioritized in many countries across the region. For example:

<sup>48</sup> Council of Europe, *Mid-term Horizontal Review of GREVIO baseline evaluation report* (2022), p. 40.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, p. 41.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, p. 41.

- (a) Albania has reported on extensive police officer training to work in line with legal changes and standard operating procedures as well as to improve investigative skills related to sexual crimes, domestic violence and misuse of firearms;
- (b) Azerbaijan, along with many other countries, organized a series of law enforcement training in the area of domestic violence;
- (c) Belgium has taken a series of steps to improve prevention and response in cases of female genital mutilation, including conducting its fourth prevalence study, introducing a reporting code with protocols for health care providers and launching awareness-raising campaigns;
- (d) In Sweden, police capacities to investigate cybercrimes such as gender-based crimes, including unlawful threats against public persons, has significantly increased. In addition to a cybercrime centre at the national level, regional cybercrime centres have been established. Access to evidence has been enhanced, and cooperation with major technology companies has increased in volume and intensity.

30. There is a trend across the region, albeit modest, to establish or strengthen multisectoral coordination in response to violence. Some countries have established multisectoral coordination mechanisms and structures that can ensure effective referral and provide comprehensive response to individual cases. However, in most cases, such mechanisms are limited to domestic violence.<sup>51</sup>

- (a) In the Walloon region of Belgium, the multisectoral system for combating domestic violence was launched in 2023 (DIVICo). It includes multidisciplinary consultations between professionals to prevent critical situations of domestic violence which can lead to femicide, infanticide or forced suicide;
- (b) In Azerbaijan, recent amendments to the Law on Preventing Domestic Violence include establishment of monitoring and coordination groups, consisting of state officials, NGO representatives and independent experts among others;
- (c) In Cyprus, the Woman's House was set up as a multi-agency and multi-professional crisis centre for victims of VAW and their children. It operates as a 'one-stop-shop', within which all services involved and coordinated under the same roof, with the aim of effectively managing cases. The provision of services is not conditional on the victim having to press charges against the perpetrator. The multi-professional network of services includes those provided by social workers, psychologists, healthcare, legal professionals and the police.

31. Many countries reported improving services to support survivors including provision of shelters/safe housing, helplines, counselling, employment, health care, legal aid and access to gender-responsive police and justice services (e.g., specialist courts, protection orders, reparations.) and serving diverse forms of violence such as technology-facilitated violence. Some examples are:

- (a) Armenia introduced three new services to victims of domestic violence: support centres providing different forms of support (psychological, social, legal), shelter services and one-time monetary compensation;
- (b) In Azerbaijan, recent amendments to the Law on Preventing Domestic violence envisages legal aid at the expense of state funds among other free services (medical, psychological, etc.);
- (c) In Belgium, the Institute for the Equality of Women and Men developed a tool for detecting coercive control by partners as a specific form of psychological violence. The tool is intended for front-line professionals, victims and clinical psychologists and raises attention to coercive control and identifies situations of post-separation violence to ensure better support for victims;

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, p. 71.

- (d) In Bosnia and Herzegovina, an initiative has been launched to establish the first three Crisis Centres for Rape Victims attached to health care institutions in three cities;
- (e) In 2023, Finland established a nationwide network of 25 Seri Support Centres for victims of sexual violence. These centres provide forensic examination, support for trauma, psychological help and therapy if needed;
- (f) In Italy, 37 per cent more anti-violence centres and shelters were in operation compared to 2017. From 2020-2022, these services supported over 60,000 survivors;
- (g) In Latvia and Moldova, new electronic monitoring mechanisms were established in cases of domestic violence to improve the safety of victims;
- (h) In Romania, 10 regional intervention centres for victims of sexual violence were established in accordance with the provisions of the Istanbul Convention.

32. Many countries have invested efforts to improve support services to survivors of violence from vulnerable social groups. For example:

- (a) Armenia increased the capacities of care workers providing support to the older population within the 24-hour elderly care centres to recognize, understand and address violence against their beneficiaries. It also improved the capacities of support centres to accommodate and provide support to women displaced from Karabakh;
- (b) In some countries, such as Azerbaijan, shelters with support services specialized for victims of human trafficking have been established;
- (c) Greece has provided rapid response for the inflow of refugees from Ukraine, among which the majority are women and children. It incorporated into the ERAW structures (national mechanisms and services) cultural mediators and information and services (SOS line) available in Ukrainian and Russian languages. Greece also introduced Ethical and Professional Behaviour guidelines for employees in institutions responsible for response to VAW related to women and girls with disabilities;
- (d) In Italy, an Integrated Communication Plan was prepared in 2023 to disseminate through communication campaigns information on legal provisions and support services for women victims of gender-based violence. Particular attention was paid to migrant/asylum-seeking women for whom the information was multilingual and culturally sensitive;
- (e) In 2021, Latvia amended the Law on Social Services and Social Assistance to enable of victims of violence access to social services and support even if they do not have a declared place of residence, granting access to support services to persons with temporary residence permits as well as to third country nationals or stateless persons;
- (f) In Sweden, the government commissioned the Sami Parliament to analyse Sami society from a gender equality perspective, including gender-based violence against women. Based on the study, measures have been proposed, including to establish a support structure for Sami women and girls who are victims of violence and to identify gaps in their protection and support.

33. While not a consistent trend across the region, and while in some sub-regions or countries, support to women's organizations and CSOs providing support services to women victims of violence is in decline,<sup>52</sup> some countries recognize the value of these organizations and allocated funds from state budgets to support their service provision and support. For example:

- (a) Armenia has annually allocated around AMD 125 million (just over 302,000 EUR) to women's organizations dedicated to preventing and combating gender-based violence;<sup>53</sup>

<sup>52</sup> UN Women, *Overcoming Crises. Remaining essential services for women survivors of violence in the Western Balkans after the COVID-19 pandemic* (2023).

<sup>53</sup> Armenia's Beijing +30 National Review, p. 53.

(b) In Bosnia and Herzegovina, eight safe houses are currently operated by CSOs and receive support from the state budget at different administrative levels;

(c) The Government of Cyprus provides grants to women's organizations through national funding mechanisms. This financial support helps organizations to offer critical services such as shelters, hotlines, legal aid and counselling. Women's organizations in Cyprus also benefit from government-supported awareness-raising campaigns and training programmes;

(d) In Finland, women's organizations were awarded 500,000 EUR for their contribution to the implementation of the Action Plan for Combating Violence against Women 2020-2023;

(e) Iceland has supported a number of civil society organizations (CSOs) providing services to survivors of VAW;

(f) In Romania, CSOs were supported to contribute to the capacity building of state service providers in local communities.

34. Some countries develop cooperation with the private sector to provide support to women survivors. In Italy, the Freedom Microcredit project is one such example. Ministry for Equal Opportunities and Family partnered with banks and their associations, and Caritas to support women victims of violence who seek to leave violent relationships and live independently through access to business microcredit or social microcredit contributing their economic empowerment.

### **C. Improving Prevention**

35. Prevention activities include diverse national and local awareness-raising campaigns that often take place within the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-based Violence (25 November–10 December annually), as well as on International Women's Day (8 March). Numerous examples are provided in the national review reports.

36. Some countries organized campaigns for raising awareness on specific forms of violence or provided online courses, trainings and seminars for different audiences in order to increase awareness on different forms of violence. For example:

(a) Azerbaijan conducted a campaign to raise awareness among younger generations of the consequences of early marriage and marriage between close relatives;

(b) Finland launched an online course on digital violence aiming to increase knowledge among professionals and students in the social, health, education and security sectors. The course raises awareness on digital violence, stalking and coercive control in close relationships;

(c) In 2021, the Swedish Crime Victim Authority conducted an awareness raising campaign on online hate speech and democratic participation that reached around three million people at the request of the Swedish Government;

(d) Efforts to prevent child, early and forced marriage are being carried out collaboratively with all relevant stakeholders, including public institutions and organizations, universities, and civil society organizations in Türkiye.

37. Few countries work with men and boys to remove gender stereotypes and promote equitable masculinities. In Albania, activities have been implemented through 'Be a man club' in 11 municipalities and high schools in the city of Tirana. Through these clubs, around 1,700 boys and girls, women and men participated in activities aiming at engaging boys and men.

38. Some countries involve religious leaders in prevention activities. For example, Albania launched such initiatives in several local communities. In Tajikistan, the state-authorized body for religious affairs, together with international and public organizations, organized a number of seminars to engage religious leaders in the implementation of government programmes to prevent domestic violence.

39. Many countries developed specialized mobile applications where citizens can get information about available services and to increase awareness on different forms of violence.

Examples include the ‘Safe YOU’ application in Armenia and ‘BrightSky application’ in Albania. In Türkiye, Ministry of Interior developed the Women's Support Application (KADES) to ensure rapid and effective access of victims of violence to law enforcement.

## IV. Challenges

40. EVAW efforts often focus narrowly on domestic violence and more on physical and sexual forms than psychological and economic. Despite progress, many countries still fail to address the prevention and elimination of VAW fully in line with the Istanbul Convention, as many forms of VAW remain unaddressed by national laws and policies. This also results in networks of services that are adequate for victims of domestic violence but inadequate for victims of other forms of violence (e.g., sexual violence, forced marriage, forced abortion, sexual harassment). Also, in judiciary practices, domestic violence offences are rarely pursued for psychological violence.<sup>54</sup>

41. De-gendering discourse on domestic violence is a growing and worrying trend. Eight out of seventeen countries reviewed by GREVIO in mid-term evaluation reports have gender neutral approaches in most legal provisions and policy documents that address VAW. Such an approach fails to take into account that gender is the primary motive of gender-based violence against women and that gender-neutral policies will not effectively respond to the specific position and needs of women and girls.<sup>55</sup>

42. In many countries, despite the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, legal provisions are not yet fully adjusted to the definitions of different forms of violence in the Convention. For example, in some countries, the legal definition of rape is still based on the use of force or threat by the perpetrator rather than lack of consent, and the burden of proof falls on the victim.<sup>56</sup>

43. Culture, rather than gender, is seen as the cause of some forms of violence. In some countries ‘honour-related violence’ and child, early and forced marriage is treated rather as cultural than gender-based, preventing a holistic response and perpetuating stereotypes about ethnic minorities that provide grounds for their discrimination.<sup>57</sup>

44. Reporting cases of violence and seeking assistance is still low across the region. For example, the proportion of women who reported sexual violence to police during the last five years is much lower than the proportion of women who reported in the EU-GBV survey having experienced sexual violence during the same period. Of the six countries where both figures are available, the number of offences reported to the police accounts for less than 5 per cent of the total number of women reported in the survey as having experienced any sexual act of violence.<sup>58</sup> The reasons for low reporting, as revealed by the OSCE-led survey in South-East and Eastern Europe, are the lack of trust in institutions in system for response, low availability of services and strong norms that violence is private matter and should be kept in the family.<sup>59</sup>

45. In many countries, the network of specialized services is insufficient, whether because some types of services are missing or because of uneven geographical distribution. Services are often not tailored to the specific needs of victims from vulnerable and marginalized groups and do not take a culturally sensitive approach.

(a) Shelters are rarely well distributed geographically throughout a country, so women in need often have to travel long distances to access shelters. Some shelters do not accept women with male children or women with special needs, such as women with mental disorders;

(b) In many countries, there are no nation-wide, 24/7 available hotlines. Hotlines are not always free of charge, not always available in minority languages and almost never equipped with skills and protocols to provide advice or referral in cases of technology-facilitated violence;

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, p. 103.

<sup>55</sup> Council of Europe, *Mid-term Horizontal Review of GREVIO baseline evaluation report* (2022), p. 19.

<sup>56</sup> Albania Beijing +30 National Review, p. 9.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, p. 32.

<sup>58</sup> Eurostat, *EU survey on gender-based violence against women and other forms of inter-personal violence (EU-GBV) – first results*, 2022 edition, (2022), p. 4.

<sup>59</sup> OSCE, *Well-being and safety of women. Main report* (2019).

(c) Specialized services for victims of sexual violence and rape are very rare, although health care and forensic services are available despite the lack of specialized centres for sexual violence (which also include psychological counselling). In some countries, victims of sexual violence face barriers to access certain types of support services, such as termination of unwanted pregnancies in countries where abortion is penalized;

(d) Women often do not have access to legal aid.<sup>60</sup>

46. Delays or failures in opening investigations occur in many countries included in the GREVIO mid-term evaluation. Delayed or insufficient police responses have been attributed to lack of VAW training for law enforcement officers, among other reasons.<sup>61</sup> In addition, low prosecution and conviction rates remain a main shortfall across the region, contributing to a lack of trust among victims.<sup>62</sup> Mediation is still used in procedures for determining custody and visitation rights during divorce. For example, in Azerbaijan, preliminary mediation session is mandatory. This practice can leave women victims of violence particularly vulnerable due to the power imbalance, reduces their ability to negotiate agreements that ensure the safety of both mother and children.<sup>63</sup>

47. Access of victims to compensation is restricted and conditional in many countries, where compensation is introduced as part of criminal and/or civil proceedings.<sup>64</sup>

48. Countries are not yet ready to adequately respond to rapid increases in technology-facilitated violence (TF VAW). Countries in southeast and eastern Europe and Central Asia do not have adequate legal and policy frameworks to address TF VAW.<sup>65</sup> Only in a few cases do key laws address TF VAW directly, at least to some extent. Legal provisions relevant for TF VAW are usually gender neutral, while provisions related to specific forms of VAW do not address perpetration using digital technologies. A particular challenge is that victims and perpetrators may reside in different countries, requiring different protocols and modes of coordination and cooperation. Online platforms on which violence most often occurs are insufficiently responsive and accountable, failing to protect women and girls. Similarly, while several EU directives and regulations are directly or indirectly applicable to cyberviolence against women, a harmonized definition or legal instrument does not yet exist. At member state level, general offences applicable in the ‘offline’ sphere are extended to the digital sphere, with references to ICT. However, these are rarely considered as aggravating circumstances, and provisions tend to be gender neutral.<sup>66</sup>

49. Programmes for perpetrators of VAWG are rarely available and often low quality. In many cases, programme attendance is low regardless of whether participation is voluntary or court-ordered.<sup>67</sup>

50. The insufficient allocation of financial and human resources for the implementation of policies and measures to prevent and combat VAW is consistent across the ECE region, as noted by GREVIO. The lack of precise data on budget allocations to ERAW policies and programmes is often a consequence of the absence of gender responsive budgeting.<sup>68</sup>

51. Cooperation with CSOs has weakened. Many countries lack stable institutional frameworks that enable CSOs to be regularly involved in the design and implementation of normative and policy frameworks. Moreover, the funding of CSOs who possess valuable know-how and decades of experience working with survivors has been in decline in most countries, endangering their sustainability, making them more dependent on donor funds and preventing them from providing accessible and quality specialized services to survivors. This decline in cooperation with and funding for women’s CSOs is evidenced by GREVIO across the signatory

<sup>60</sup> Council of Europe, *Mid-term Horizontal Review of GREVIO baseline evaluation report* (2022).

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 128.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 130.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>64</sup> Council of Europe, *Mid-term Horizontal Review of GREVIO baseline evaluation report* (2022), p. 96.

<sup>65</sup> UN Women, *The dark side of digitalization: Technology-facilitated violence against women in Eastern Europe and Central Asia* (2023).

<sup>66</sup> EIGE, *Combating Cyber Violence against Women and Girls* (2022), p.8.

<sup>67</sup> Council of Europe, *Mid-term Horizontal Review of GREVIO baseline evaluation report* (2022), p. 63.

<sup>68</sup> Council of Europe, *Mid-term Horizontal Review of GREVIO baseline evaluation report* (2022).

countries as well as in specialized reports assessing the impact of multiple crises on prevention and response services.<sup>69</sup>

52. Incomplete, incomparable and non-standardized administrative data prevents adequate monitoring of VAWG. This challenge persists at both the country level (across different institutions) and regional level (between countries). Not all countries collect sex-disaggregated data on victims and perpetrators or on their relationship, in cases of violence against women in the criminal justice sector,<sup>70</sup> making it difficult to assess individual cases, identify larger patterns and explore whether/how cases pass through the system for response. In addition, data are usually limited to domestic violence; administrative records on other forms of VAWG are even more absent or of a lower quality. Data on child witnesses and victims are also missing.

53. Regarding prevention activities, awareness-raising campaigns are often short-term and with insufficient geographical reach, limiting their impact on broader population groups.<sup>71</sup> Cooperation with media actors should be enhanced for these purposes, as should cooperation with education systems in order to incorporate prevention content in school curricula at different levels of education. Enhanced cooperation is also needed with religious communities, with opportunities to leverage the influence of religious leaders to promote zero tolerance toward VAWG, raise awareness and provide information on legal protection and available support.

## V. Priority actions

54. Continue to promote integrated approaches to ensure that all women and girls live free from all forms of violence by strengthening the development, monitoring and reporting of global norms and standards on EVAW. Additionally, develop and enhance existing linkages with other sectors – such as economic empowerment, environment, infrastructure and others – to address VAWG and women’s safety.

55. Enhance partnerships in ending VAW between international agencies and entities, national governments and state and non-state actors, especially women’s rights and feminist organizations and networks, to scale up evidence-based prevention strategies and to pool and effectively allocate resources.

56. National legislation, policies, prevention and support services and legal responses should be further aligned with the Istanbul Convention to improve national systems for preventing and combating VAW. Participation in reporting mechanisms to GREVIO and the effective implementation of GREVIO recommendations offer the best guidance for countries in their EVAW efforts.

57. There is a need to re-gender the approach to addressing VAW across the region, as well as to expand the legislative, institutional, policy and programmatic focus to encompass the diverse forms of VAW, in line with the Istanbul Convention.

58. More efforts should be invested in multisectoral coordination and response to VAW. The entry points into the system for protection are multiple, including police, health care, social protection, education and humanitarian aid. As such, the system for referrals and specialized support must be better coordinated among different sectors and services. Outreach to women victims of violence should be more proactive and geographically comprehensive, taking into account access to information, transport and services. Service design and delivery must centre on feminist principles and the needs of victims, avoiding secondary victimization and empowering women.

59. A stronger focus on intersectionality is needed, as women from different vulnerable groups face different risks of violence, experience different consequences and have different needs for support and empowerment.

60. More concerted efforts are needed to build mechanisms to effectively respond to technology-facilitated VAW. These efforts should include gender mainstreaming legislative frameworks and establishing new forms of coordination, such as including cybercrime police

<sup>69</sup> Council of Europe, *Mid-term Horizontal Review of GREVIO baseline evaluation report* (2022), p. 19.

<sup>70</sup> Council of Europe, *Mid-term Horizontal Review of GREVIO baseline evaluation report* (2022), p. 41.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

in multisectoral mechanisms and improving cross-border cooperation for cases in which the victim and perpetrator reside in different countries. The capacities of professionals and CSOs specialized in support services to victims should be built to enable them to provide more adequate and effective support in cases of technology-facilitated violence.

61. Awareness-raising campaigns should be more systematic, long term and have a broad geographic reach. They should also be tailored to the needs of particularly vulnerable groups of women, such as women living in rural areas, older, migrant women, women with disabilities, ethnic and religious minorities, women in prostitution, LGBTQI women, women living with HIV and others. Campaigns should also raise awareness on the adverse impact of violence against women on children.

62. Advocacy should place pressure on governments to ratify ILO Convention 190 and join initiatives such as Call to Action on Protection from Gender-Based Violence in Emergencies.<sup>72</sup>

63. Countries should consider opportunities to introduce or improve the implementation of gender responsive budgeting in order to precisely monitor the allocation of funding to preventing and combating VAW.

64. Increased support to women's rights and feminist CSOs that work with victims is essential, in terms of both effective use of resources as well as ensuring that services are women-centred and empowering.

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<sup>72</sup> <https://www.calltoactiongbv.com/>.