

# EUROSOCIAL TOOLS

Nº 91

**SOCIAL COHESION** learnings

## Shelters for Victims of Gender-based violence in Europe: Best practices and challenges

ROSA LOGAR



Funded by  
European Union





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**Published by:**

EUROSOCIAL Programme  
C/ Beatriz de Bobadilla, 18  
28040 Madrid (España)  
Tel.: +34 91 591 46 00  
www.eurosocial.eu

**With the coordination of:**



Expertise France, Área de Políticas de Igualdad de Género

**Cover image:** © Matías Jacobi

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Non-commercial edition.

**ISBN:** 978-84-09-38901-8

**Graphic production:**

Cyan, Proyectos Editoriales, S.A.

Madrid, Februar 2022



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## Index

Foreword .....	5
Abbreviations.....	7
Introduction and methodology .....	9
Methodology of the report .....	10
History of women's shelters in Europe .....	11
Historical background in a nutshell .....	11
The development of women's shelter movements in Europe .....	12
The European Network WAVE .....	13
Situation of women's shelters .....	15
EU policies and legislation on gender equality and violence against women.....	17
Gender equality policies in the European Union .....	17
Measures to address violence against women in the EU .....	18
EU Victims' Rights Directive .....	19
European Protection Orders .....	20
The Council of Europe Istanbul Convention and its provisions regarding women's shelters .....	23
History of the Convention .....	23
Ratification and monitoring .....	24
Short overview of the Istanbul Convention - Content and fundamental principles .....	26
Core principles of the Istanbul Convention .....	27
Provision on support services for women victims of violence in the Istanbul Convention ..	29
General support services .....	29
Specialist women's support services .....	30
Standards for women's shelters .....	31
First results in implementing the Istanbul Convention .....	35
Progress and challenges in implementing the Istanbul Convention .....	35
Overview of principles and standards for women's shelters .....	41
Access to women's shelters without discrimination.....	41
Basic principles .....	42
Services offered in women's shelters .....	44

Living together in the women’s shelter . . . . .	45
Facilities and staff . . . . .	47
Quality assurance and accountability . . . . .	47
Empowerment and social-economic rights . . . . .	49
Summary of core minimum standards for women’s shelters . . . . .	50
<b>Best practices and challenges on shelters of GBV victims in Europe . . . . .</b>	<b>51</b>
Women’s shelters – general characteristics, definitions, types of shelters and funding . . .	51
Definitions and types of women’s shelters . . . . .	52
Number of women’s shelters in Europe . . . . .	53
Short case studies from European countries . . . . .	55
<b>Conclusions. . . . .</b>	<b>63</b>
<b>References . . . . .</b>	<b>65</b>
<b>Glossary . . . . .</b>	<b>67</b>
<b>Shot CV Author . . . . .</b>	<b>69</b>

## Foreword

The prevention and eradication of violence against women has been a core commitment of the European Union since its foundation. The **Treaty on European Union** (TEU; Maastricht Treaty, effective since 1993) and the **Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union** (TFEU; Treaty of Rome, effective since 1958), central treaties of the EU, recognise the promotion of equality between women and men as one of the Union's tasks and establish the elimination of inequalities in all its policies. In 2007, the amendments established by the Lisbon Treaty confirmed the importance of gender equality in the European Union.

Additionally, along with other regional and national legislation on this matter, several European countries have signed the **Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence**, better known as the Istanbul Convention, which recognises violence against women as a violation of human rights and a form of discrimination.

The first shelter for women victims of gender-based violence in Europe was founded in the early '70s. In Latin America they were established in the following decade. Since then, they have proved to be vital services for women and their children not only as an emergency response but also as a support for reconstructing violence-free lives. Safe accommodation and long-term sponsorship like legal advice, psychological counselling, and free training help women rebuild trust in themselves, society and institutions.

Despite the long history of shelters in the region, to date, we don't have a database that allows us to know their quantity, their sources of funding, the scope of their coverage, their accommodation capacity and their admission criteria.

"Best practices and challenges on shelters of GBV victims in Europe" aspires to answer some of these questions.

Firstly, the reader will find the history of European shelters with an overview of their deployment along the continent and the role played by the feminist networks in this development.

Secondly, the author analyses the regional policies on gender equality and the existing standards for shelters, highlighting the regional and national commitments.

Thirdly, a deeper study on five countries is presented with intention of comparing the standards applications in different territories.

The document concludes proposing inspiring European practices.

It should be mentioned that the following document was carried out all along 2021, during the COVID-19 pandemic. The restrictions introduced to stop the spread of the virus posed unprecedented challenges to providing and accessing support services, especially for victims of domestic violence. Shelters and national women's helplines, the two most vital specialised support services for women and their children, were over-demanded. It became urgent to have regional assessments of these safe places and to identify guidelines for their improvement.

This document was conceived within a more extensive project which aimed to propose quality standards to enhance the protection of victims of gender violence in Latin America. This project, submitted by the Follow-Up Mechanism of the Belém do Pará Convention (OEA – MESECVI) and supported by the Gender Equality Policies Area of the European Program EUROsociAL+, included a bi-regional investigation. The exchange of experiences and methodologies regarding the protection of victims of gender-based violence was accompanied by a diagnosis of Latin American shelters for victims of gender violence, soon to be published.

Holistic responses to prevent and eradicate gender-based violence need to consider policies on shelters for women and their children. As expressed by the Beijing Declaration and Platform for action, States should “provide well-funded shelters and relief support for girls and women subjected to violence, as well as medical, psychological and other counselling services and free low-cost legal aid, where it is needed, as well as appropriate assistance to enable them to find a means of subsistence”.<sup>1</sup>

From the Gender Equality Policies Area of the EU EUROsociAL+ Program, we hope that this document will serve as support for governments and institutions engaged with the protection of victims of gender-based violence. We thank all the Latin American and European institutions that helped consolidate this document, especially GREVIO, the independent expert body responsible for monitoring the implementation of the Istanbul Convention. Finally, we also want to recognise the great engagement of Rosa Logar and Susana Chiarotti, the Eurosocial+ experts who led the European and Latin American investigations.

**Sofia Gonzalez Chiraux**

*Project Manager from the European Union EUROsociAL+ Programme*

**Ana Pérez Camporeale**

*Coordinator Gender Equality Policy Area EUROsociAL+ Programme*

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1. United Nations, Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action, adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women, 27 October 1995, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3dde04324.html> [accessed 21 February 2022]

## Abbreviations

<b>COE</b>	Council of Europe
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>DV</b>	Domestic violence
<b>EBO</b>	Emergency Barring Order
<b>GBV</b>	Gender-based violence
<b>EIGE</b>	European Institute for Gender Equality
<b>FRA</b>	European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights
<b>IC</b>	Istanbul Convention: Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence
<b>OSCE</b>	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
<b>SWSS</b>	Specialist women's support services such as women's shelters, centres and helplines
<b>VAW</b>	Violence against women
<b>D.i.Re Italy</b>	Network of Anti-Violence Centers in Italy. Many of them also run women's shelters.



## Introduction and methodology

Violence against women (VAW) is a severe and widespread problem. Some call it a pandemic since it involves a global problem. There is no country on this planet where women and girls can live free from violence.

VAW is gender-based because it is violence “directed against a woman because she is a woman” and it “affects women disproportionately” (Council of Europe 2012, Article 4 d.). It is a specific form of violence, similar to racism or antisemitism. The term women in this report also includes girls since females of all ages are exposed to gender-based violence. There is no age at which women can be safe and no place, either: women encounter gender-based violence in the domestic sphere as well as in public, at the workplace and in institutions, including parliaments, in the media, in art and culture, in sports, in short - everywhere.<sup>2</sup>

Women experience several forms of violence, often simultaneously: physical, psychological, including severe forms such as threats, coercion, deprivation of liberty, and slavery, sexual(ized)<sup>3</sup> violence, and economic violence. VAW is committed by men, partners and ex-partners, bosses, co-workers, and colleagues. It can also be structural violence in the form of discrimination or exclusion.

As pointed out, VAW is not a specific culture problem but a global patriarchal regime that is still very firmly rooted in all political systems, even in democracies. In order to address its underlying causes, it has to be recognized that it refers to a “manifestation of historically unequal power relations between women and men, which have led to domination over, and discrimination against, women by men and to the prevention of the full advancement of women” (UN, Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing 1995, par. 118). VAW “is one of the crucial social mechanisms by which women are forced into a subordinate position compared with men” (Ibid, par. 117).

Surveys in Europe show that, on average, every third woman experienced violence since the age of 15 (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014). In some countries, two-thirds of women suffered from violence (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, 2019). Given the magnitude and prevalence of VAW, safe spaces must be created for women and girls in our societies, spaces in which women and girls are not exposed to violence and are empowered to live self-determined lives. All over the world, women’s shelters were created from the 1970s onwards as such safe

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2. We recommend on this subject the reading of the “Regional protocol for the investigation of crimes of gender violence of the AIAMP”, a protocol proposed to strengthen the capacities of Public Ministries to have standards, general guidelines, lines of action, theoretical bases and practical tools to guarantee the rights of direct and indirect victims of crimes of gender violence. Programa de la Union Europea EUROsocial+, Protocolo regional para la investigación con perspectiva de género de los delitos de violencia de género de la AIAMP, Madrid, 2020. Available at: [https://eurosocial.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/26370-practica\\_78Protocolo-regional-Genero-AIAMP.pdf](https://eurosocial.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/26370-practica_78Protocolo-regional-Genero-AIAMP.pdf)

3. Sexual violence is usually understood as including rape or sexual assault. The term sexualized violence is a broader concept describing any violence, physical or psychological, carried out through sexual means or by targeting sexuality

spaces, and they have become internationally recognized as essential services for women survivors of violence and their children (United Nations/UN Women 2015).

## Methodology of the report

The present report aims at providing an overview of the situation of women's shelters in Europe. It gives an insight into good practices and challenges in providing shelter to women survivors of violence and their children. It is based on theoretical and practical research reports and the author's own experience. Rosa Logar was the founder of the first women's shelter in Austria (1978) and co-founder of WAVE, the European network of women's NGOs working to end VAW. She also participated in the creation and monitoring of standards on the national and international level, for instance, as a member of the Council of Europe Istanbul Convention and the GREVIO Committee<sup>4</sup> monitoring it.

The following document gives a short outline of the history of women's shelters in Europe and their current situation. It informs about European Union policies regarding violence against women and addresses standards set by the 47 member states of the Council of Europe in the legally-binding Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, known as the Istanbul Convention. It also draws on findings from the first evaluation reports of the GREVIO Committee regarding women's shelters which describes progress and challenges.

Furthermore, this report provides information on gender-sensitive and feminist principles of women's shelters, as well as examples of good practices for supporting women survivors of violence and their children. This approach aims to consider shelters inside a more comprehensive network of women's support services needed to adequately support survivors of violence and their children.

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4. GREVIO is a group of independent experts monitoring the compliance of state parties with the Istanbul Convention. Visit their website: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/istanbul-convention/grevio>

## History of women's shelters in Europe

### Historical background in a nutshell

Europe is a continent comprising 50 countries, not including the Vatican.<sup>5</sup> The two big supranational organisations in Europe are the European Union (EU, 27 member states) and the Council of Europe (COE, 47 member states). The Council of Europe was founded in 1949, shortly after two devastating wars and the defeat of the fascist regime responsible for the mass murder of millions of Jewish people and other groups perceived as “enemies” of the regime.

Like the European Union, the Council of Europe also focuses on establishing peaceful relations, democracy, fundamental human rights, and the rule of law in Europe. Following World War II, the “Iron Curtain” divided Europe into two parts, with the Soviet Union forming the so-called Eastern Bloc. Between 1989 and 1991, under Mikhail Gorbachev, the Soviet Union dissolved. The change was primarily peaceful, except for the region of former Yugoslavia, where war and numerous armed conflicts marked the way to independence of the 8 Balkan countries. Some of these conflicts still prevail today. In 1990, the German Democratic Republic (also called East Germany) became a member of the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany) in the so-called German reunification. In the following years, eleven former Soviet Union member countries became members of the EU.<sup>6</sup>

From this short description, it can be seen that war, conflicts, and division, rather than peace and unity, have characterised European history in the 20th century. The situation of women has certainly been influenced and shaped by these developments. Economic problems in Eastern Europe during and after the transition to a market/capitalist economy hit women hard, causing manifold problems, forcing many into prostitution, and making them victims of trafficking. Moreover, many women were forced to migrate to Western European countries to work, often leaving their children behind with ageing grandparents.

The past two decades have seen growing nationalist tendencies in many European countries and a new rise of right-wing, populist parties and political groups. The UK government planned to soften the bond with “continental Europe” and hold a referendum in 2016. The nationalist right-wing forces seized this opportunity, and a narrow majority voted to leave the European Union. In February 2020, the UK withdrew from the European Union. The EU has secluded itself increasingly from the accession of new members. Turkey has sought to become a member since the 1990s and is still an accession country, but negotiations came to a standstill in 2018.

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5. The Vatican has managed to be officially recognised as the Vatican City State and has become a member of the United Nations. This small entity, with only about 800 mostly male inhabitants, is an influential player in restricting women's human rights, especially in the area of sexual and reproductive rights.

6. Poland, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Rumania, Bulgarian and Croatia.

While the Iron Curtain that once sealed off the East is gone, a new border has been shaped around Europe. Borders briefly opened in 2015, when hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing the brutal war in Syria came to Europe. Through increasingly strict immigration laws, legal immigration has become extremely restricted. Some former Soviet Union countries and new EU members, such as Hungary, ultimately rejected refugees and built fences at their borders. Hungary formed bonds with other countries where nationalist and ultra-conservative parties had come into power, such as Poland. Despite vast and long-lasting protests from women human rights activists, the Polish government just recently introduced one of the most restrictive abortion laws in Europe, practically banning abortion.<sup>7</sup>

People fleeing poverty, conflict areas, and climate crises desperately try to get to the EU, risking their lives. Trafficking of people has once again become a profitable “business”. Inside the EU, racism and xenophobia have increased, despite declining numbers of immigrants and refugees.

Despite all the problems described above, there has also been much progress and enormously essential developments for women’s human rights in Europe, such as the introduction of EU legislation on gender equality, the EU Directive on victim’s rights and the adoption of the Istanbul Convention. Women’s and human rights activists continue to organise everywhere in Europe and will not give up, even under challenging circumstances. One encouraging example is the Belarus people fighting for democracy and freedom against a brutal dictatorial regime.<sup>8</sup>

## The development of women’s shelter movements in Europe

The second women’s movement in Europe emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The first women’s shelter was founded in 1972 in London, almost by accident, as the story goes: a woman who came to the Chiswick Women’s Centre did not want to go back home one day for fear of her husband’s violence. In 1974, women formed the autonomous and feminist women’s organisation Women’s Aid, and within a few years, over a hundred women’s shelters were founded in England, Scotland and Wales (Elman, 2003).

VAW had become one of the central claims of the women’s movement in different countries. With its feminist approach, the women’s movement was the driving force behind bringing this subject onto the agenda. The first strategy to respond to the problem of VAW in intimate relationships was the establishment of safe places with proper support for women survivors of violence and their children.

The international character of the women’s movement against violence is evidenced by the spreading of the idea of women’s shelters in a short time. In 1976, the first women’s shelter was opened in Berlin, followed by one in Austria in 1978 and another in 1979 in Sweden. In Italy, the first women’s shelter was founded quite later, in 1989, mainly because the Italian women’s movement focused firstly on the political struggle against patriarchy rather than on running women’s shelters.

In the former Soviet Union countries, the problem of VAW was officially denied, and no women’s shelters were provided. It was in the former Yugoslavia, where the political regime left some space and freedom to its citizens, that women founded the first support services. In Croatia, the women’s helpline was established in the late 1980s, and the first autonomous women’s shelter in ex-Yugoslavia opened in 1990 in Zagreb.

7. BBC News on abortion ban in Poland <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-55838210>

8. BBC News on peaceful and creative activism against brutal state violence: <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-europe-55475917>

Women started to organise also in other post-soviet countries, and VAW became one of the newly emerging feminist groups claims (Krizsan/Roggeband 2018). They didn't start from scratch since their "sisters from the West" had already had 20 years of experience. Still, the situation was very different in the "countries of transition", so the advice was not always helpful and sometimes it could be experienced as patronising.

Women in the former Soviet Union countries faced many difficulties – they gained political freedom but lost social infrastructure and opportunities, such as women's employment, free childcare and health care, which had been common standards in Communist countries. The emancipation of women was seen as a "communist invention", and the newly gained freedom was allowing women to "be real women" again by letting them stay at home to take care of the family. Therefore, feminist ideas and initiatives were not popular.

Another difficulty they faced was the lack of civil society and social movements' tradition. The new states, although seemingly democratic, were often not supportive of independent NGOs. This attitude, in addition to the economic problems, led to the situation that women's shelters and other initiatives against violence had great difficulties being recognised and receiving state funding. They were often dependent on foreign donors. The situation improved when countries entered the EU. During the accession process, gender equality standards had to be met, and governments were eager to comply. But after they became members, women's shelters faced hardship again since the EU had no legally binding policy on violence against women and domestic violence. **The situation improved after the adoption of the EU Victims Directive in 2012 and the ratification of the Istanbul Convention in 34 countries. Still, there is a vast disparity in the availability of women's shelters and other women's support services in countries in Western Europe compared to the East (see chapter 3).**

## The European Network WAVE

In 1993, women's NGOs from all over the world gathered at the United Nations World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna to campaign for women's human rights (Bunch/Reilly, Niamh 1994). Activists from Europe realized at this conference that women's organizations in other parts of the world, especially in Latin America, were better coordinated in transnational networks than European women's organizations. This observation gave the impetus for setting up the European network Women against Violence Europe (WAVE) in 1994.

The Austrian women's shelter network took the initiative. They started creating the regional network, which was launched at the Fourth UN World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. The first European conference took place in 1997 in Belgrade. Since then, WAVE has held annual conferences and has carried out numerous projects and activities.

WAVE was established as an open network in 1994 and became a legal entity in 2014. The network comprises women's organizations combating violence against women and children in Europe and includes over 150 members in 46 European countries. The network has its office in Vienna and carries out projects with international organizations and donors, with funding from the European Commission as an operating grant. **WAVE has created a database of women's support services, and one of its core activities is to collect data and publish a regular report on the availability of women's shelters, centres and helplines in Europe.**<sup>9</sup>

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9. To downloads of WAVE information and publications, visit: <https://www.wave-network.org/wave-network/>



## Situation of women's shelters

As stated, women's shelters are essential services providing safe accommodation to women victims of violence and their children. Together with non-residential services and women's helplines (phone and online services), they belong to the core specialized services needed to provide a network of support to women victims and their children. The principles and standards for women's shelters and specialized services are described below (see chapters 5 and 7). This chapter aims at providing an overview of existing women's shelters in Europe.

As pointed out in the previous chapter, women's shelters vary widely across Europe due to historical and political reasons. While the women's movement in Western Europe started to set up women's tops in the 1970s, the first women's shelters in former Soviet Union countries opened about 20 years later. Despite progress made, most women's shelters are still situated in the western and northern parts of Europe, and the disparity between European countries in this respect is enormous.

Before presenting some basic data on women's shelters in Europe, **it is necessary to mention that Europe-wide data collection is still a challenge.** The WAVE network is practically the only organization regularly collecting data on women's shelters, centres and helplines on the European level (first annually and, for the last four years, biannually) (WAVE Network 2019). There has been some research in this field (EIGE 2012, Council of Europe 2014), although systematic and comparable data on specialist women's support services are still lacking. Therefore, the WAVE report is a precious source of data, even if the information is often limited to primary quantitative data due to a lack of collection on the country level. Information on the implementation of standards for women's support services is difficult to obtain.

Also, the seemingly simple question regarding **the number of women's shelters in Europe is difficult to answer because its definition varies.** Some countries consider all kinds of shelters as women's shelters when counting, even homeless shelters taking in women victims of violence. Others only include specific services for women victims of violence. The WAVE data collection aims at identifying women's shelters, centres and helplines that operate based on the analysis that violence against women is gender-based violence and apply a gender-specific and human rights-based approach, as required by the Istanbul Convention (see chapter 5).

The Istanbul Convention recommends that, as a minimum standard, 1 place in a women's shelter should be provided per 10.000 of the population. The WAVE data collection aims at taking stock and finding out how far countries have come in realizing this minimum requirement. Some results from the WAVE report 2019:

**Table 1: Women's shelters in Europe, 2019 (46)<sup>10</sup>**

Women's shelters in Europe	Number of women's shelters	Number of existing places (approx.)	Number of places missing according to the minimum standards of 1 place/10,000 population (approx.)	% minimum standard fulfilled
<b>Europe (46)</b>	<b>2 350</b>	<b>32 000</b>	<b>52 000</b>	<b>38%</b>
Non-EU countries (18)	436	7 000	26 000	21%
EU countries (28)	1 914	25 000	26 000	49%

As the table shows, the minimum standard for capacities in women's shelters has not yet been met in Europe.

According to the WAVE statistic, there are approximately 2.350 women's shelters in Europe. They provide about 31.000 places to women survivors of violence and their children. According to the minimum standard recommendation of the IC, around 84.000 places would be needed in women's shelters in Europe.

Thus, **about 52 000 places are missing, and the minimum standard is only met in 38% of the shelters.**

The table also shows the regions' disparities and that the minimum standard is not met in EU countries. **On average, the 28 EU countries by 2019 reached it in 49% of the cases, while the 18 non-EU countries only provide 21% of the places needed.**

There are also significant differences among the EU member states:

**Table 2: Women's shelters in the EU (28)<sup>11</sup>**

Women's Shelters in the EU (approx. 512 million population)	Number of women's shelters	Number of existing places (approx.)	Number of places missing according to the minimum standards of 1 place/10 000 population (approx.)	% minimum standard fulfilled
EU (28)	1 914	25 000	26 000	49%
"Old" EU countries (17)	1 670	22 000	19 000	44%
"New" EU countries 12 (11)	244	2 500	8 000	22%

**While in EU countries, the minimum standard on average is at a rate of 49%, the rate in "New" EU countries is only 22%.** This means that not even a quarter of the necessary minimum standard is met, and many women and children fleeing from violence cannot find safe accommodation and adequate support.

Swift ratification and implementation of the Istanbul Convention and effective gender equality policies in the European Union are needed to improve the quantity and quality of specialist women's support services. They are essential services and cornerstones of preventing gender-based violence against women. The following chapter describes the EU policies on gender equality and violence against women.

10. WAVE Network 2019. The UK was still member of the European Union.

11. WAVE Network 2019.

12. Eleven countries joining the EU after 2004 (former Soviet Union countries): Poland, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Rumania, Bulgarian and Croatia.

## EU policies and legislation on gender equality and violence against women

*"We should not be shy about being proud of where we are or ambitions about where we want to go."*

Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, in the Gender Equality Strategy paper 2020-2025 of the European Commission.

### Gender equality policies in the European Union

The European Union has a long history of legislation and policies on gender equality and the eradication of VAW. Equality between women and men is a core value of the European Union (EU) that is enshrined in the Lisbon Treaty. The Treaty on the European Union defines the promotion of gender equality as one of the Union's tasks (Article 3). The EU aims to eliminate inequalities and to promote equality between women and men in all its policies (Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, Article 8).

The EU has adopted significant legislation in the field of gender equality, and its member states are obliged to implement these directives. Additionally, policies on gender equality were developed and implemented. In March 2020, under the new and first-ever woman president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, the gender equality policy was strengthened after being downgraded in the preceding years. The new Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025 was published between other EU initiatives and strategies concerning equality and diversity.

The Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025 states that "gender equality is a core value of the EU, a fundamental right<sup>13</sup> and key principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights.<sup>14</sup> It is a reflection of who we are. It is also essential for an innovative, competitive, and thriving European economy. In business, politics and society as a whole, we can only reach our full potential if we use all of our talent and diversity. Gender equality brings more jobs and higher productivity.<sup>15</sup> This potential needs to be realised as we embrace the green and digital transitions and face up to our demographic challenges" (European Commission, 2020, p1).

The Gender Equality Strategy comprises six themes:

13. See Articles 2 and 3(3) TEU, Articles 8, 10, 19 and 157 TFEU and Articles 21 and 23 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights.

14. [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/social-summit-european-pillar-social-rights-booklet\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/social-summit-european-pillar-social-rights-booklet_en.pdf)

15. By 2050, improving gender equality would lead to an increase in the EU's GDP per capita by 6.1% to 9.6%, which amounts to €1.95 to €3.15 trillion: <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-mainstreaming/policy-areas/economic-and-financial-affairs/economic-benefits-gender-equality>

1. Being free from violence and stereotypes.
2. Thriving in a gender-equal economy.
3. Leading equally throughout society.
4. Gender mainstreaming and an intersectional perspective in EU policies.
5. Funding actions to make progress in gender equality in the EU.
6. Addressing gender equality and women's empowerment across the world.

The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) was set up in 2010 in Vilnius, Lithuania, to support the EU work on gender equality. EIGE "is an autonomous body of the European Union, established to contribute to and strengthen the promotion of gender equality, including gender mainstreaming in all EU policies and the resulting national policies, and the fight against discrimination based on sex, as well as to raise EU citizens' awareness of gender equality."<sup>16</sup>

One of the core tools of EIGE is the Gender Equality Index, regularly published to show the progress in achieving gender equality. The Gender Equality Index examines the situation in eight domains: work, money, knowledge, time, power, health, violence and intersecting inequalities (EIGE 2020).

However, the Gender Equality Strategy reveals that "no Member State has achieved full gender equality and progress is slow. The average score of the State Members is 67.4 out of 100 in the EU Gender Equality Index 2019,<sup>17</sup> a score which has improved by just 5.4 points since 2005." (European Commission, 2020, p 2).

## Measures to address violence against women in the EU

The EU, especially the EU Commission, the governing body of the EU, and the European Parliament have always been very active in preventing VAW. The European Parliament issued numerous resolutions, and the gender equality strategies always contained measures on the subject. Moreover, campaigns on ending VAW were carried out, and the DAPHNE program, an important project to fund actions to protect women, children and young people, was initiated. The DAPHNE Program gave experts the possibility to carry out cross-country projects, to learn from each other, to develop common standards and innovative approaches.<sup>18</sup>

Surveys on opinions regarding violence were carried out to EU citizens, such as the special Eurobarometer 344 on Domestic Violence against Women.<sup>19</sup> Another important initiative is the EU-wide survey on VAW. This survey was carried out by the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights FRA (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2014). It is the most extensive cross-country representative investigation on the subject carried out, based on 42 000 face-to-face interviews conducted with women aged 15-74 by specifically trained women interviewers across the then 28 EU Member States.

The interviews focused on women's personal experiences of physical, sexual, psychological and economic violence (partner and non-partner aggressors), stalking and sexual harassment, including cyber violence. They were asked about their experiences since the age of 15 and in the 12 months preceding the survey. The survey also provides evidence of the consequences of violence, the needs of victims for protection and support, fear of re-victimisation, reporting, attitudes towards VAW, and

16. EIGE – the European Institute for Gender Equality. Visit their website: <https://eige.europa.eu/about>

17. EIGE, Gender Equality Index 2019, available at: <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2019>.

18. Find further information on the DAPHNE program on the European Commission website: [https://ec.europa.eu/justice/grants/results/daphne-toolkit/daphne-toolkit-%E2%80%93-active-resource-daphne-programme\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/justice/grants/results/daphne-toolkit/daphne-toolkit-%E2%80%93-active-resource-daphne-programme_en)

19. Find further information on the Special Eurobarometer on Domestic Violence against women on the European Commission website: [https://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/archives/ebs/ebs\\_344\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/archives/ebs/ebs_344_en.pdf)

awareness of legal measures and support services, among other issues. It contains a wealth of information and data on gender equality. Therefore, the survey provides an excellent knowledge base for parliamentarians, policymakers, ministries, women's (and other) NGOs and institutions, professionals from various fields and other stakeholders.<sup>20</sup>

Despite these activities on VAW, all attempts by the EU Commission and the EU Parliament to initiate and introduce comprehensive EU legislation on VAW in the form of an EU Directive failed. It was blocked in the Council of the EU, decision-maker composed by representatives of the EU Member States. Some of them insisted that VAW was not in the competence of the Union, that it was a “domestic affair” for which the principle of solidarity applies.

Despite this backlash, activities to prevent gender-based violence continued at EU level. Some representatives actively engaged in the Council of Europe Ad Hoc Committee on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (CAHVIO), Committee in charge of drafting the Istanbul Convention.<sup>21</sup> In 2017, the EU signed the Istanbul Convention and started the process of ratification. Unfortunately, this process was suspended. Different groups questioning the Istanbul Convention gained power and blocked the ratification on the national level and in the EU (see chapter 5). Against this, the new president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, confirmed in her opening statement in the European Parliament that the EU should join the Istanbul Convention and proposed to add VAW to the list of EU crimes defined in the Treaty.<sup>22</sup>

## EU Victims' Rights Directive

Another important piece of EU legislation addressing VAW is the EU Victims' Rights Directive adopted in 2012, although it only considers the criminal justice dimension. It is legally binding and includes several provisions relevant for women victims of violence and for women's support services.

The Directive sets common standards in the European Union concerning victims' rights in criminal proceedings and their support. It contains a range of provisions aimed at guaranteeing the fundamental rights of victims and their protection and support:

- **Recognition of VAW as gender-based violence:** “Violence that is directed against a person because of that person's gender, gender identity or gender expression or that affects persons of a particular gender disproportionately, is understood as gender-based violence. It may result in physical, sexual, emotional or psychological harm, or economic loss, to the victim. Gender-based violence is understood to be a form of discrimination and a violation of the fundamental freedoms of the victim and includes violence in close relationships, sexual violence (including rape, sexual assault and harassment), trafficking in human beings, slavery, and different forms of harmful practices, such as forced marriages, female genital mutilation and so-called ‘honour crimes’.” (Council of the European Union, 2021, Paragraph 17)
- **Acknowledgement of the gravity of partner violence, which affects women disproportionately:** Paragraph 18 recognises the serious effects of partner violence: “Violence in close relationships is a serious and often hidden social problem which could cause systematic psychological and physical trauma with severe consequences because the offender is a person whom the victim should be able to trust. Victims of violence in close relationships may therefore be in need

20. European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. 2022. Violence against women: Survey information. Available at: <https://fra.europa.eu/en/content/violence-against-women-survey-information>

21. To read on the CAHVIO Committee, visit: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/istanbul-convention/cahvio>

22. European Commission, Press corner - opening Statement in the European Parliament Plenary Session by Ursula von der Leyen, Candidate for President of the European Commission, available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/it/speech\\_19\\_4230](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/it/speech_19_4230)

of special protection measures. Women are affected disproportionately by this type of violence and the situation can be worse if the woman is dependent on the offender economically, socially or as regards her right to residence.” (Council of the European Union, 2021, Paragraph 18)

- **The need of special support for women victims of gender-based violence:** the Directive states that «Women victims of gender-based violence and their children often require special support and protection because of the high risk of secondary and repeat victimisation, of intimidation and of retaliation connected with such violence.» (Council of the European Union, 2021, Paragraph 17)
- **Avoid re-victimisation:** Paragraph 40 stresses that repeat referrals should be avoided to stop re-victimisation.

The Victims' Rights Directive sets additional principles and standards for the provision of support to victims of gender-based violence:

- **Non-discrimination:** The Directive requires EU Member States to observe the principle of non-discrimination, covering all possible grounds such as gender, age, sexual orientation, disability, nationality, residence status, ethnicity or any other ground; the principle also applies to residence status.
- **Child-sensitive approach:** As per Article 1, §2, Member States are required to develop a child-sensitive strategy in the criminal justice system, taking into consideration the child's best interests on an individual basis, as well as the child's age, maturity, views, needs, and concerns.
- **Victim-sensitive approach:** Article 1, §2 further stipulates that victims of crime have the right to be treated in a respectful, sensitive and professional manner, taking the individual needs of victims into account.
- **Protection from secondary and repeat victimisation, intimidation and retaliation:** the Directive states that victims of crime should be protected from secondary and repeat victimisation, intimidation, and retaliation (Council of the European Union, 2021, Paragraph 52). Measures should be taken to protect the safety and dignity of victims and their family members, including protection or restraining orders.

The legislation recognises that victims of violence should be supported after they have been victimised and that the authorities are responsible for protecting them from further harm. In this regard, **two more important pieces of EU legislation were introduced to give victims the right to be protected in their country and any other EU country they would move to. These are the mutual recognition of protection orders or the “European protection orders”, as they are called.**

## European Protection Orders

In 2010, two committed and courageous Spanish Members of the European Parliament, Carmen Romero López and Teresa Jiménez-Becerril Barrio, started a groundbreaking initiative to protect women from gender-based violence in the EU, the European Protection Order. The idea was to establish an EU law regulating the mutual recognition of national protection orders in all EU Member States, and guaranteeing protection to victims when moving from one country to another. Despite fierce conflicts with the then EU Commission over the legal competence of the European Parliament for such an initiative, the two European Parliamentarians did not give up. The discussion was settled with **the establishment of two types of European Protection Orders.**

**The new mechanism consists of two instruments: the *Regulation on mutual recognition of protection measures in civil matters*<sup>23</sup> and the Directive on the European Protection Order.<sup>24</sup>** These mechanisms reflect the differences in the Member States' national protection measures (civil, criminal or administrative). Together, the two instruments aim to ensure that all victims of violence can get their protection orders recognised in any other EU Member State. Both mechanisms entered into application on January 11th 2015, with the participation of all EU Member States, except for Denmark.

The European protection orders are complex measures. However, they are important steps to guarantee the protection of women victims of gender-based violence, by recognising their right to free movement in the European Union. Women victims of violence must be provided with accurate information on these rights as well as professional and empowering support by specific services. Women's shelters and other specialist support services have a crucial role in supporting victims in obtaining cross-border protection.

Besides the EU measures and the EU Victims Directive, the Council of Europe Istanbul Convention is a comprehensive, legally binding human rights treaty establishing common standards in Europe.

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23. Regulation (EU) No 606/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 12 June 2013 on mutual recognition of protection measures in civil matters, visit: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:32013R0606>

24. Directive 2011/99/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 December 2011 on the European protection order, visit: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32011L0099>



# The Council of Europe Istanbul Convention and its provisions regarding women's shelters

## History of the Convention

The Istanbul Convention is a legally binding document adopted by the 47 Council of Europe member states in **May 2011 in Istanbul**. The Convention did not come “out of the blue”. Instead, it reflected the urgent need to strengthen the measures to prevent VAW and protect victims more effectively. The Convention was built on the Council of Europe’s decades-long work on the promotion of gender equality and the eradication of VAW<sup>25</sup> and was inspired by the much earlier Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment, and Eradication of Violence against Women (known as the Convention of Belém do Pará, adopted in 1994).<sup>26</sup>

The Convention was drafted by the Ad Hoc Committee CAHVIO in over two years, from 2008 to 2010. All 47 Council of Europe member states participated in the drafting process, including NGOs and observer states.<sup>27</sup> During the drafting process for the Convention, it was not always easy to find compromises since the situation in the 47 Council of Europe member states is quite diverse.

Controversies came up around the question of the scope. Some members favoured to focus on all forms of VAW as gender-based violence, while others wanted to restrict it to domestic violence or apply a more gender-neutral approach. The comprehensive anti-discrimination grounds, especially the inclusion of prohibition of discrimination based on gender identity and sexual orientation, were rejected by some member states.<sup>28</sup>

But the strong willingness by the vast majority of members to create a new, comprehensive and effective legally binding instrument to eliminate VAW and domestic violence prevailed. The compromise was to include in the scope all forms of violence against women, including domestic violence and to leave

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25. See for instance: adoption of the Council of Europe Recommendation Rec (2002)5 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on the protection of women against violence; running a Europe-wide campaign, from 2006 to 2008, to combat violence against women, including domestic violence; setting up a Task Force of experts who published the Council of Europe Task Force to Combat Violence against Women Report 2008, which recommended to the member states to adopt a legally binding convention to step up the efforts to eradicate violence against women.

26. Find more information on Inter-American Convention on the Organisation of the American states website: <https://www.oas.org/en/mesecvi/convention.asp>

27. Apart from its 47 member States in Europe, the Council of Europe has close links with numerous non-member states, five of which have observer status with the organization: the Holy See (1970), the United States of America, Canada and Japan (1996) and Mexico (1999).

28. In the past years in some countries a strong resistance against the Istanbul Convention slowed down the process of ratification and implementation. One of the misconceptions used in the campaigns against the Convention was that it would “promote homosexuality” and an “uncertainty of the biological sex” caused by two anti-discrimination grounds mentioned in the Convention, namely gender identity and sexual orientation. Radical right wing groups systematically launched campaigns to “restore the natural order”. See for instance: European Parliamentary Forum on Population & Development (2018): Restoring the Natural Order. The religious extremists’ vision to mobilize European societies against human rights on sexuality and reproduction, Brussels.

it to the parties to include other forms of domestic violence (Council of Europe 2012 Article 2). The drafters also agreed that the Convention “shall apply in times of peace and in situations of armed conflict”.

It is worth noting that Turkey played a crucial role in realizing the Convention. It was adopted in Istanbul in 2011, under the Turkish chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe. However, we face a different reality today. Despite the Turkish women’s movement, Turkey has become the first country to withdraw from the Istanbul Convention, a sign of the backlash.

## Ratification and monitoring

### State of signatures and ratifications

Despite the recent backlashes, the Convention has become a widely respected and supported standard in Europe and internationally.

To date, 34 countries have signed and ratified the Convention. Ten more countries have signed it but not ratified it yet, including the European Union.

#### Istanbul Convention - State of signature and ratification as of 31 December 2021

##### Ratified by 34 countries

Albania, Andorra, Austria, Belgium, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Croatia, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Germany, Greece, Finland, France, Georgia, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Macedonia, Malta, Monaco, Montenegro, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, San Marino, Serbia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland.

##### Signed by ten countries and the EU

Armenia, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Slovakia, Ukraine, UK. In July 2017, the EU signed the Istanbul Convention.

### Monitoring of the Convention

Two bodies monitor the Convention:

- GREVIO, a group of 15 independent experts nominated and elected by the representatives of the parties to the Convention. GREVIO monitors the implementation of the Convention by the parties and publishes country reports, including conclusions and recommendations to the Parties.
- Committee of the Parties (COP), the political body composed of the parties’ representatives. Based on the report and conclusions of GREVIO, the COP may adopt recommendations to the Parties.

The Istanbul Convention also gives an active role to parliaments in monitoring the Convention. It expects that national parliaments participate in monitoring the measures of the Convention and that Parties shall submit the GREVIO reports to the national parliaments. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe shall be invited to regularly take stock of the implementation of the Convention (Council of Europe 2012, Article 70).

## Monitoring by GREVIO<sup>29</sup>

The core work of GREVIO's experts is to monitor the Convention's compliance and publish evaluation reports. GREVIO started in June 2015 with ten independent experts. After the 25th ratification, five additional experts were elected and since September 2018, the committee has consisted of 15 members.

For the first round of evaluations, parties received an extensive questionnaire for their reporting.<sup>30</sup> When drafting it, GREVIO experts were aware that for many questions, the parties would not be able to provide the required data yet. But they kept them to stimulate and promote the improvement of data protection in the future.

So far, seventeen European countries (all parties to the Convention) have been evaluated. In addition to the country evaluation report, GREVIO has also published the first General Report on GREVIO's Activities, covering June 2015 to May 2019 (Council of Europe 2020).

### GREVIO Reports published

Austria (September 2017), Monaco (September 2017), Albania (November 2017), Denmark (November 2017), Montenegro (September 2018), Turkey (September 2018), Portugal (January 2019), Sweden (January 2019), Finland (September 2019), France (December 2019), Italy (January 2020), Netherlands (January 2020), Serbia (January 2020), Belgium (September 2020), Spain (November 2020), Malta (November 2020), Andorra (November 2020).

All GREVIO reports, state reports, NGO shadow reports, government comments on the GREVIO reports and recommendations of the Committee of the Parties can be accessed on the GREVIO website page under Country monitoring work:

<https://www.coe.int/en/web/istanbul-convention/country-monitoring-work>

### Special inquiry procedure

In case GREVIO receives reliable information about severe violations of the Convention, it may request the submission of a special report and conduct an immediate inquiry, including a visit to the country concerned, with the party's consent. So far, no such inquiry procedure has been carried out.

### General recommendations

According to the Istanbul Convention, GREVIO may also adopt general recommendations on the implementation of this Convention (Article 69). In 2020, the group of experts started working on general recommendations of GREVIO on the theme of cyber violence.

29. GREVIO website : <https://www.coe.int/en/web/istanbul-convention/home>

30. GREVIO, Questionnaire on legislative and other measures giving effect to the provisions of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention), 2019, available at: <https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?documentId=09000016805c95b0>

## Short overview of the Istanbul Convention - Content and fundamental principles

The Istanbul Convention is a comprehensive document. It consists of more than twelve chapters, over eighty articles and an extensive explanatory report (Council of Europe 2012). Contrary to other legally binding instruments, it contains very detailed provisions, such as the obligation of parties to provide effective protection to victims of domestic violence in a situation of immediate danger through an emergency barring order. This instrument guarantees victims the right to stay in their home and bars the perpetrator from entering the house for a certain period of time (Article 52 Emergency barring orders). Another example of the specific provisions in the Convention is the obligation to set up at least one state-wide round-the-clock (24/7) telephone helpline free of charge to provide confidential advice to victims of all forms of violence (Article 24 to Telephone helplines).

The Convention not only focuses on legal measures and criminalisation of violence against women, but it also consists of four pillars (4 Ps) aimed at addressing the root causes of violence and providing a comprehensive approach in eradicating violence against women and domestic violence.

The four pillars are:

- **P**revention.
- **P**rovision of support to victims.
- **P**rosecution and.
- Comprehensive, coordinated **P**olicies, including gender-segregated data collection.

The following section will address some of the essential elements and general principles of the Convention relevant to women's shelters. It will also reveal how measures are embedded in the human-rights-based and gender-sensitive framework of the Convention.

### State-wide, comprehensive and coordinated policies offering a holistic approach

The Convention requires parties to “adopt and implement state-wide effective, comprehensive and coordinated policies encompassing all relevant measures to prevent and combat all forms of violence” covered by the Convention and to “offer a holistic response to violence against women.” (Council of Europe 2012, Article 4).

#### What is meant by a holistic approach?

The principle of a comprehensive and holistic approach implies, for instance, that women victims of violence and their children are guaranteed the right to seek refuge in a women's shelter when fleeing from violence and that women's shelters exist in all regions. But it also implies that victims and their children have the right to stay safe at home and that the perpetrator is obliged to leave (see information on the Emergency barring order mentioned above). Victims of violence should not be forced to use one or the other provision but should have the right to choose the best option for them in a given situation. Victims might, for instance, not want to stay in the home where they were abused because of the trauma or because the perpetrator's family live close by and so they do not feel safe.

A holistic approach also means that victims staying in a women's shelter should not be obliged to stay there longer than necessary because of lack of housing. The state must ensure that victims access services facilitating their recovery from violence, such as housing (Council of Europe 2012, Article 20-General support services). The right to live free from violence includes the right to separate from a violent husband without risking the loss of one's livelihood.

Coordinated policies can have the form of National Action Plans. But it is a well-known fact that having a plan is not enough. Financial means and effective implementation procedures are required for implementation and monitoring. The Convention requires establishing one or more official bodies to coordinate, implement, monitor, and evaluate policies and measures (Council of Europe 2012, Article 10). Such bodies should include women's NGOs and civil society organisations working to end violence against women. Separate and independent agencies should carry out monitoring and evaluation.

### **Appropriate funding and effective co-operation with NGOs**

Parties to the Convention are required to “allocate appropriate financial and human resources for the adequate implementation of integrated policies, measures and programmes”, including for measures carried out by NGOs and civil society (Council of Europe 2012, Article 8).

The Convention emphasises the vital role of NGOs active in combating VAW and calls upon parties to “recognise, encourage and support” their work at all levels and “establish effective co-operation with these organisations.” (Council of Europe 2012, Article 9).

### **Data collection – The “BIG 5”**

The comprehensive and coordinated policies need to be supported by rigorous data collection.

All agencies (police, prosecution services, criminal court, civil courts, probation services and prisons, doctors, accident and emergency services, hospitals, general social services and specialized victim services such as women's shelters, centres and helplines, and other relevant organisations and bodies, such as the statistical offices) are required to systematically and annually collect data on all forms of VAW.

As a minimum, data on acts of violence need to be disaggregated by:

1. Sex of victim and perpetrator.
2. Age of victim and perpetrator.
3. Relationship of the perpetrator to the victim.
4. Type of violence and.
5. Geographical location of the crime.

## **Core principles of the Istanbul Convention**

### **Human-rights-based approach**

The Istanbul Convention is part of the international human rights instruments and thus based on the human rights principles. The Convention also explicitly mentions the essential role of the human rights of victims and requires parties to ensure that all policies “place the rights of the victim at the centre of all measures” (Council of Europe 2012, Article 7.2). In the chapter on protection and support, the Convention demands that Parties shall ensure that measures taken pursuant to this chapter shall be based on a gendered understanding of violence against women and domestic violence and shall focus on the human rights and safety of the victim (Council of Europe 2012, Article 18.3). A human-rights based approach also includes the principle of participation. This means that victims need to exercise the right to participate in all processes concerning them, be involved and asked for consent. Their rights need to be represented by independent women's support services they trust.

Women's shelters must also apply this principle. For instance, it takes effect when it comes to the victims' right to self-determination, which implies that the shelter does not decide without the victims' consent.

### Principle of non-discrimination

Non-discrimination is another core human rights principle: human rights must be guaranteed without discrimination of any kind. This includes purposeful discrimination and protection from policies and practices that may have a discriminatory effect. For instance, when certain groups of women, such as minority ethnic women or indigenous women, are not admitted to shelters, or if there are different age limits for boys and girls in shelters.

The Istanbul Convention prohibits any form of discrimination in the implementation of the measures of the Convention. It explicitly requires that the implementation of the provisions of the Convention "shall be secured without discrimination on any ground such as sex, gender, race, colour, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, association with a national minority, property, birth, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, state of health, disability, marital status, migrant or refugee status, or other status" (Council of Europe 2012, Article 4.3).<sup>31</sup>

However, this provision does not mean that a state cannot set up specific measures and programs for women, such as women's shelters. On the contrary, such measures are necessary to address the discrimination women and girls encounter in societies. The Convention clarifies that "special measures that are necessary to prevent and protect women from gender-based violence shall not be considered discrimination" (Council of Europe 2012, Article 4.4).

### Gender-sensitive approach

The Istanbul Convention recognises that gender inequality and discrimination of women and girls are root causes of gender-based violence and that the "realisation of de jure and de facto equality between women and men is a key element in the prevention of violence against women" (Council of Europe 2012, Preamble). **Consequently, the Convention obliges parties not only to eliminate all forms of VAW, but also to embody "in their national constitution or other appropriate legislation the principle of equality between women and men and [ensure] the practical realisation of this principle", to prohibit "discrimination against women" and to "[abolish] laws and practices which discriminate against women." (Council of Europe 2012, Article 4.2)**

A separate article on gender-sensitive policies in the Convention requires Parties "to include a gender perspective in the implementation and evaluation of the impact of the provisions of this Convention and to promote and effectively implement policies of equality between women and men and the empowerment of women" (Council of Europe 2012, Article 6).

In the area of service provision and women's shelters, a "gender-neutral" approach is not enough to address the problem of VAW effectively, also women's shelters and other support services must apply a gender-sensitive approach. The implications of this provision will be addressed below in this report (see chapter 6).

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31. Remark: all these anti-discrimination principles would also apply if they were not explicitly mentioned in the Convention. But the fact that anti-discrimination grounds such as sexual orientation and gender identity are explicitly mentioned is unprecedented in an international document because conservative, religious and right-wing groups had always impeded such a wording. The explicit mentioning of these grounds has prompted right-wing groups to campaign against the Istanbul Convention, falsely claiming that the Convention is "promoting homosexuality".

## Provision on support services for women victims of violence in the Istanbul Convention

Chapter IV of the Istanbul Convention addresses one of the 4 Ps – the provision of services to protect and support victims/survivors of gender-based violence.

### General principles of service provision

The introductory article sets out basic standards for the protection and support of victims:

- to “protect all victims from any further acts of violence” (Article 18.1),
- to “ensure that there are appropriate mechanisms to provide for effective co-operation between all relevant state agencies<sup>32</sup>(...) in protecting and supporting victims and witnesses of all forms of violence (...) including by referring to general and specialist support services” (Article 18.2),
- to “ensure that measures of protection and support are based on a gendered understanding of violence against women and domestic violence and shall focus on the human rights and safety of the victim”,
- and “bases on an integrated approach which takes into account the relationship between victims, perpetrators, children and their wider social environment” recognising the negative impact violence has on the family and society,
- “aim at avoiding secondary victimisation”, recognising the negative effect insensitive measures and mechanisms such as victim-blaming have on the well-being of victims,
- “aim at the empowerment and economic independence of women victims of violence”, recognising the importance of guaranteeing economic rights to victims so that they can live a life free from violence,
- “allow, where appropriate, for a range of protection and support services to be located on the same premises”, recognising that women victims of violence are often additionally burdened and endangered by bureaucratic procedures and by having to visit many different agencies to realise their rights and needs, and the importance for women’s shelters to offer many different services in one place, and to
- “address the specific needs of vulnerable persons, including child victims”, recognising that some victims are especially vulnerable and need specific attention and services (Article 18.3).

Finally, the Convention clearly states that help and support for victims “shall not depend on the victim’s willingness to press charges or testify against any perpetrator” (Article 18.4). This is another essential principle of support since victims should never be forced to take legal steps against the perpetrator to get help. Victims should only take legal or other kind of actions on their own free will.

### General support services

The Istanbul Convention clearly states that general services have an essential role in supporting victims and that specialized services need to be provided for women victims of violence and their children. Thus, it sets a dual track: the provision of general services and, in parallel, of specific women’s support services, to meet the rights and needs of survivors.

General services play an important role in guaranteeing social and economic rights to victims so that they can recover from violence and lead an independent life free from violence. **Measures should include “services such as legal and psychological counselling, financial assistance, housing,**

32. Including the judiciary, public prosecutors, law enforcement agencies, local and regional authorities as well as non-governmental organizations and other relevant organizations and entities.

**education, training and assistance in finding employment”** (Council of Europe 2012, Article 20.1 General support services). Financial assistance and the provision of affordable housing are vital socio-economic rights women must have in order to leave their violent partner. As mentioned above, women’s shelters are essential services, but women and children should not be forced to go back to the violent husband or partner after their stay in the shelter because of a lack of affordable housing. They should also not be obliged to stay longer in women’s shelters than they need to because they have nowhere else to go. Violence should not make women victims of violence and their children homeless on top of all the hardship they suffer (see also chapter 7).

**Social services and health care are often the first services women victims of violence turn to. It is important that victims of violence have access to health care and social services, the Convention states, and that these services “are adequately resourced and professionals are trained to assist victims and refer them to the appropriate services”** (Council of Europe 2012, Article 20.2).

Thus, health and social services have an important role in providing information and first support. Still, women victims of gender-based violence and their children should be referred to specialized support services as a next step.

## Specialist women’s support services

The Istanbul Convention stipulates that a range of specialized support services is needed to provide protection and support to women victims of gender-based violence and their children. Parties need to “provide or arrange for specialist women’s support services to all women victims of violence and their children.” (Council of Europe 2012, Article 22.2).

Such specialist support services include three main types of services:

- **Women’s shelters** as residential services which provide safe accommodation and support to women victims of violence and their children (for more information see the next section)
- **Women’s centres, including rape and sexual assault centres**, offering non-residential support, such as crises intervention and counselling, advocacy support in accessing rights, including social and economic rights, court accompaniment, pro-active support,<sup>33</sup> outreach, and other services.
- **Women’s helplines** providing telephone counselling and increasingly also online support via e-mail and through help-chats.

## Protection and support for child witnesses

Children are always affected by violence against their mothers or by domestic violence. Violent husbands and partners are often violent towards the children, who suffer from physical, psychological and sexual violence by the father or stepfather. **The Convention recognizes that also witnessing violence is a violation of the right of every child to live free from violence.** It obliges parties “to ensure that in the provision of protection and support services to victims, due account is taken of the rights and needs of child witnesses.” **This means that all specialist support services also need to offer support to the children, provide age-appropriate counselling, and give “due regard to the best interest of the child”** (Council of Europe 2012, Article 26).

33. In several European countries, a so-called pro-active support for victims has been developed. In Austria for example, the police notifies the NGO-run regional specialist women’s support centre about interventions in cases of violence against women and domestic violence and the centre contacts the victim and provide pro-active support. See Council of Europe 2017.

## Standards for women's shelters

The Istanbul Convention is quite explicit about what services are needed and how many services are necessary to ensure that women victims of violence receive adequate help from specialized women's support services. Concrete numbers concerning women's shelters and other specialist services are recommended, based on the findings of the final activity report of the Council of Europe Task Force to Combat Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Council of Europe 2008).

Recommended number of specialist services needed:

### Women's shelters

- According to the Istanbul Convention, a sufficient number of women's shelters need to be provided in every region.
- As a minimum standard, 1 family place per 10 000 head of population is recommended. The number of shelter places should depend on the actual need (Council of Europe 2012, Explanatory report, paragraph 135).
- A family place can be defined as a place for one woman and her child/children based on the average number of children per family in a country (Council of Europe 2012, Explanatory paragraph 135).

### Women's centres, including rape crises centres

- One women's centre / rape crises or sexual assault centre should be available per every 200 000 inhabitants (Council of Europe 2012, Explanatory Report, paragraph 142).
- Similarly, women's centres for all women victims of violence are required in all regions, 1 centre per 50 000 women inhabitants is recommended (Council of Europe 2008).

### Women's helplines

- At least one national women's helpline addressing all forms of violence against women, operating 24/7 and free of charge, is required.

Besides the quantitative standards, the following operations standards are paramount:

#### Basic operating principles and standards for specialist women's support services

Women's shelters and other specialist women's support services need to meet the following standards:

- Adequate geographical distribution.
- Immediate, preferably around-the-clock (24/7) access to safe accommodation for victims.
- Easy access, so that victims can self-refer to women's shelters and are not dependent on other agencies or bureaucratic procedures.
- Short as well as long-term support: It is not enough to provide only short-term support to victims in acute crises situations. Long-term support is necessary as well in order to empower victims and provide the possibility to live an independent life. Thus, victims should have the right to stay in women's shelters as long as they need to.
- Reach out pro-actively to victims, including hard-to-reach groups, such as women from minority ethnic groups or migrant or refugee communities, undocumented migrant women, women with disabilities, lesbian and transgender women, and women with mental health problems and other groups facing multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination.
- Provide accommodation and support to ALL victims, including the children, without discrimination on any ground.
- Give support to women victims of ALL forms of violence who need a safe place; staff of women's shelters need to address different types of violence against women and their children.
- Provide safe accommodation, risk assessment and safety planning to all victims.
- Victims with disabilities should benefit fully from their rights, on an equal basis with others. (Council of Europe 2012, Article 22 and 23; European Union 2012 Paragraph 21).

The aim of women's shelters and other specialist women's support services is to empower victims through "optimal support and assistance catered to their specific needs" (Council of Europe 2012, Explanatory Report Paragraph 132). Women's organizations are core agencies to provide such support. They apply a gender-sensitive approach and advocate gender equality. Temporary housing or general shelters, such as those for the homeless, are not sufficient to accommodate women victims of violence and their children, as they do not provide for the rights and needs of the victims.<sup>34</sup>

The types of support offered by women's shelters should include, among other things:

- Immediate admission to the shelter and safe accommodation.
- Immediate medical support.
- The collection of forensic medical evidence in cases of physical violence, rape and sexual assault.
- Short and long-term counselling.
- Trauma care.
- Legal advice.
- Advocacy and support in accessing rights.
- Advocacy and outreach services.
- Co-operation with other agencies.
- Support for the children in the shelter.

34. Concerning the use of the term "victim" and the term "survivor" see glossary.

## SHELTERS FOR VICTIMS OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN EUROPE: BEST PRACTICES AND CHALLENGES

Women's shelters also play an essential role in awareness-raising in communities, in multi-agency work and training of professionals.

The described principles of support of women's shelters need to be integrated in practice. Over the past decades, standards and guidelines have been developed for setting up and running women's shelters (see chapter 7).



## First results in implementing the Istanbul Convention

The first general report of GREVIO, published in 2020, contains the results of the first monitoring round from June 2015 to May 2019 (Council of Europe 2020).<sup>35</sup> The following section draws from this report, which addressed the first evaluation round in thirteen countries: Albania, Austria, Denmark, Monaco, Montenegro, Portugal, Sweden, Turkey, Finland, France, Italy, the Netherlands and Serbia.

The author of this document and EUROsocial+ expert, Rosa Logar, took part in this first monitoring round as a member of GREVIO and as rapporteur for the monitoring process in 4 countries (Denmark, Turkey, Finland and the Netherlands). The following analysis is based on the evaluation report as well as on the author's own experience and expert opinion.

## Progress and challenges in implementing the Istanbul Convention

Undoubtedly, the Istanbul Convention has a positive and inspiring influence in many European countries and, hopefully, beyond. It has brought up public debates, such as discussions around the legal concepts of rape. It has increased awareness of the magnitude of the problem and the urgent need to step up efforts to prevent VAW and improve protection measures for victims. As well, as a result, new legislation was introduced and several countries reformed against forms of violence that had not been mentioned before in their criminal code, such as stalking, forced marriage or female genital mutilation.

**The first evaluation round also clearly showed that, despite many changes and progress made in the past decade, severe problems and gaps remain in effectively addressing and eradicating violence against women and domestic violence.** While there are positive examples in all areas, significant challenges remain in the following fields:

**Insufficient resources** are allocated to implement the provisions and measures of the Convention. The lack of financial and human resources for the implementation of comprehensive and co-ordinated policies and actions is a serious shortcoming, making it difficult or practically impossible to tackle the problem successfully. Underfunding affects particularly women's NGOs providing services. Often authorities in countries do not even know how many financial resources are available and how much would be needed to implement the Convention effectively.

**Importance of proper budgeting and costing of implementation measures:** Underfunding is a severe and profound challenge that must be addressed and overcome to implement the Convention

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35. Council of Europe 2020, p 24-39

effectively. Proper government budgeting based on the prevalence of gender-based violence, calculating the costs for the support of victims, long-term prevention programs and other measures are needed. This includes gender budgeting and proper costing methods and procedures.

None of the thirteen countries evaluated in the first round of GREVIO monitoring has yet developed a proper costing and funding model, but several countries started discussing it. GREVIO rapporteurs invited experts from the Ministry of Finance to the country visits to facilitate such discussions.

Good practice examples in funding include sustainable models that provide advance funding for at least a year, or for a sufficient annual lump sum including all shelter costs, independent of the number of service users (Council of Europe 2020 p 34).

**Experience and good practice are still missing in costing measures to prevent violence.** While there is a growing body of knowledge on calculating the costs of gender-based violence (European Parliament 2013, World Health Organization 2004), few works deal with the questions of costing the measures to prevent VAW and domestic violence. The author found only one study on the cost of response services for women and girls subjected to violence by the regional office for Asia and Pacific of UN Women (2013).<sup>36</sup>

The problem of costing also affects women's shelters and other support services. The evaluation showed insufficient funding in most countries to meet the minimum quantitative standard regarding available shelter places (see below).

**There is a lack of comprehensive and co-ordinated measures and policies.** While several countries have introduced national action plans over the past few years, they are often limited and have little impact. They fail to apply a sustainable, comprehensive and holistic approach. Due to the mentioned lack of financial and personal resources to implement measures and policies, action plans often remain promises. Another problem is that national action plans do not always address all forms of VAW.

**Effective co-ordinated and monitoring bodies are neglected.** Besides the lack of financial and human resources, adequate structures and mechanisms to implement policies are often still missing. Co-ordinating bodies often do not have a solid structural base and lack clear and strong mandates, decision-making powers, competencies and financial and personal resources. Evaluation and monitoring should be carried out by a separate and independent body, a provision that is also often missing. Another shortcoming is that most NGOs working in the area of VAW and domestic violence are not systematically involved in the co-ordination, implementation and evaluation of policies.

**Severe gaps in data collection have been noticed.** Another challenge is the inadequate collection of data. Practically all countries have difficulties providing the minimum requirements of administrative data collection (that is, data disaggregated by sex and age of victim and perpetrators, the relationship between the perpetrator and the victim, the type of violence and the geographical location of the violent act). Parties started to disaggregate data for some categories, but not all. Another challenge is that data collection systems are not harmonised and vary between agencies; thus, comparable data are lacking.

Data on the prosecution rates and conviction rates of VAW and domestic violence crimes are missing in many countries. Therefore, it is complicated to know if and how laws are applied. There is also a

36. UN Women/Regional office for Asia and Pacific, Manual for Costing a multidisciplinary package of response services for women and girls subjected to violence, Thailand, 2013. Available at: <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2013/1/manual-for-costing-a-multidisciplinary-package>

concerning lack of judicial data on custody and visitation rights in cases of domestic violence, which makes it impossible to evaluate the fulfilment of the obligation “to ensure that the exercise of any visitation or custody rights does not jeopardise the rights and safety of the victim or children” as required in article 31 of the Convention.

According to the first general report of GREVIO (Council of Europe 202), data on the granting of refugee status based on gender-related persecution are not collected by asylum authorities in any country.

Disaggregating data is necessary to evaluate whether measures and policies are implemented, the level of this implementation, and the measures’ effectiveness. Therefore the improvement of data collection is crucial. Likewise, there is a lack of data in women’s shelters, especially when it comes to comparable data on the national level. It is more likely to have data in countries where networks of women’s shelters exist and receive funding,

In several countries, **gender-sensitive policies and measures are missing**. The tendency to apply a gender-neutral approach fails to tackle the root of gender-based violence since it doesn’t consider the specificity of the experience of women and girls victims of gender-based violence.

Another challenge is the **backlash against women’s rights**, and human rights in general, observed in Europe. Many countries have been observing concerted actions and campaigns by right-wing groups and parties spreading misconceptions and lies about the Istanbul Convention, as a recent research report published by the human rights organisation The Advocates for Human Rights shows. The report shows how organised opposition has negatively influenced the debate over ratification and undermined women’s human rights.<sup>37</sup>

### Successes and challenges in the area of women’s shelters and specialist women’s support services

The first evaluation report of GREVIO shows that several countries have increased the number of women’s shelters and other support services in the past years (Council of Europe, 2020 p. 33), especially in remote areas or regions that did not have such services before. However, many countries have not reached the recommended minimum standard of 1 family place per 10 000 inhabitants despite the improvement. Measures to achieve minimum standards in providing women’s shelter places and other specialist services must be urgently accelerated.

The first GREVIO evaluation report compares services for victims of sexual violence with services for victims of domestic violence. It concluded that “counselling services and shelters for victims of domestic violence are better serviced” and that “specialist support services that address different forms of sexual violence are often insufficient” (Council of Europe 2020, paragraph 50). It is essential to prevent setting off one type of service against the other. This understanding can lead to parties investing more in one area and neglecting the other, which would be problematic and discriminatory.

Another concern is that it is misleading and problematic to set “domestic violence” against “sexual violence”. It creates a false dichotomy. Domestic violence, also called domestic abuse, refers to a behaviour that is used to gain or maintain power and control over an intimate partner. This violence may include physical, psychological, economic and sexual violence, and other forms. Given the complexity, holistic approaches are vital, as stipulated in the Convention. Women’s support services staff should be trained to support women victims of all forms of violence, including sexual violence.

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37. The Advocates for Human Rights, A Rollback for Human Rights: The Istanbul Convention Under Attack, 2021. Available at: The Advocates for Human Rights.

**Services need to be comprehensive, catered to victims' needs, and ideally offered in one place.** Women victims of gender-based violence should not be obliged to visit multiple services. This is necessary to avoid burdening the victim by consulting several agencies and telling the story of violence repeatedly, leading to secondary traumatization (Council of Europe 2012, Article 18). Repeat referrals need to be avoided.

Another challenge regarding women's shelters is to ensure that **all groups of women and their children are admitted without discrimination.** This is not always the case: women from minority groups, immigrants, asylum-seeking and refugee women, and women from rural areas and other groups frequently face specific barriers in accessing shelters. The situation is specifically challenging for undocumented women and their children, who are often excluded from shelter services.

Some countries have opened women's shelters for specific groups facing intersectional discrimination, such as immigrant and refugee women, to better serve their needs. It is also of great importance that women and children with disabilities be admitted to women's shelters and their rights and needs are taken care of.<sup>38</sup>

### Data collection on women's shelters

As it was said, data collection on women's shelters is insufficient in many countries. For the country evaluation, the GREVIO questionnaire is asking parties to provide the following information on women's shelters and other specialist support services:

GREVIO Questionnaire – Section D:

*"Please provide a description of the measures taken in relation to Articles 22, 23 and 25 to provide or arrange for specialist women's support services<sup>39</sup> for all women victims and their children.*

*For each category of service (women's shelter, rape crisis and sexual assault centre, women's counselling centre, etc.), please provide information broken down by individual women's shelter/rape crisis centre/counselling centre/other service on:*

- 1. their number and geographical distribution (with an indication of the number of places in women's shelters);<sup>40</sup>*
- 2. the number of paid staff per service;*
- 3. their accessibility (for example 24/7 or other);*
- 4. the criteria defining a service as a specialist women's service as well as the standards of intervention, protocols, and any guidelines which are applied in order to ensure a gendered understanding of violence against women and a focus on the safety of the victims;*
- 5. the different groups of victims they are available for (for example women only, children, migrant women, women with disabilities, other);*

38. See WAVE 2017 Thematic Paper Improving Access to Services for Women with Disabilities By Ann Sofie Milling Høegh download Thematic-Paper-WWD-2017.pdf (wave-network.org).

39. Specialist support services refer to dedicated services for victims of the different forms of violence against women with "specialized and experienced staff with in-depth knowledge of gender-based violence", including counselling centres, shelters, rape crisis centres and sexual violence referral centres, among others.

40. The Final Activity Report of the Council of Europe Task Force to Combat Violence against Women, including Domestic Violence (EG-TFV (2008)6) recommends safe accommodation in specialized women's shelters to be made available in every region, at a rate of one family place per 10 000 head of population.

## SHELTERS FOR VICTIMS OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN EUROPE: BEST PRACTICES AND CHALLENGES

6. *the annual number of women seeking help from these services. Please provide specific information on the annual number of women who requested and those who received, together with their children, accommodation in women's shelters.*
7. *their funding (source, funding periods and legal basis);*
8. *who they are run by (for example women's NGOs, other NGOs, faith-based organisation, local government);*
9. *whether they are free of charge for all women (that is, irrespective of their income);*
10. *co-ordination between specialist support services and with general support services."*

The evaluation process showed that state parties were, in general, not able to answer these questions yet, because a systematical collection of data on women's shelters and other support services was still missing. GREVIO might get better information in the next round of monitoring, after parties hopefully have started to use the GREVIO questionnaire to improve their data collection.



## Overview of principles and standards for women's shelters

The chapter on measures and provisions on women's support services enshrined in the Istanbul Convention includes basic principles and guidelines for these services. Practitioners have developed these standards over the past decades by setting up and running women's shelters and other support services and providing training for staff (WAVE 2004 and 2008, WAVE 2017). They have been further developed, adapted and researched to become general quality standards on the national and international level (see Council of Europe 2008a, EIGE 2012, United Nations/UN Women 2015, EU Victims Directive and others).

The following compilation of standards for women's shelters and women's support services are based on this knowledge and experience, and of course, the standards outlined in the Istanbul Convention.

**Standards and guidelines must be comprehensible and carefully implemented to ensure that they not only exist on paper but that they positively affect women and children seeking help in a shelter. Respect, dignity, diversity and a sense of justice and belonging should be part of the atmosphere created in a women's shelter.** Shelters can quickly turn into institutions, ruling over people. The effective implementation of the following principles make the difference between the empowering and warm place a women's shelter can be and an institution "administering" a problem. A leading question should always be: What kind of shelters would we want as citizens if we needed help? What ideal environment would we wish for our mothers, daughters, and sisters if they suffered violence? What quality of service is needed to heal gender-based violence wounds and overcome the impact?

### Access to women's shelters without discrimination

#### Immediate access 24/7 and self-referral

Women survivors of violence and their children<sup>41</sup> in situations of acute violence need to be guaranteed instant access to women's shelters. Thus, shelters must be open 24/7 and ensure immediate access. If there is more than one shelter in a town, at least one should accommodate a woman and her children at any time. Admission should be within the discretion of the shelter. Bureaucratic admission procedures are to be avoided as they can jeopardize the safety of women and their children.

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41. Children is defined as under 18 years.

### **Open access without discrimination**

All women survivors of violence and their children have the right to be admitted to women's shelters, regardless of their nationality, ethnicity, religion, disability, residence status or any other status.

### **Access for undocumented women and their children**

Particularly for undocumented women and their children, women's shelters are of fundamental importance to their safety because they are often afraid to turn to the police or the judiciary.

### **Accessibility also needs to be guaranteed for women and children with disabilities.**

This requires sufficient funding for women's shelters to ensure barrier-free access.

### **Avoiding other barriers**

Women's shelters need to accommodate lesbian and transgender women. Victims of violence should also have the right to seek help in other towns and provinces. Likewise, funding and administrative restrictions discouraging help-seeking need to be removed.

### **Women's shelters are children's shelters, too**

VAW always affects children, directly and indirectly.

Witnessing violence against the mother is a traumatic experience and constitutes violence and a violation of the child's best interest. Women's shelters need to admit children and adolescents of up to 18 years without any age and gender restriction, providing adequate resources so that boys of all ages can stay with their mothers and siblings in separate units. Age restrictions for boys need to be removed.

All children in women's shelters need to exercise their human right to education. Thus children should be admitted to kindergarten and schools in the vicinity. Similarly, the education cost for the children needs to be covered by the state.

### **Specific shelters for women affected by specific forms of violence**

Women's shelters need to be open to all women who have become victims of physical, psychological, emotional, sexual and economic violence committed by a partner, former partner or member of the family. It is advisable that women's shelters also accommodate women survivors of other forms of gender-based violence and their children, for instance, victims of stalking. However, for women survivors of trafficking or women and girl victims of forced marriage, specific shelters with high safety precautions are needed. In some countries, shelters for black, migrant and minority ethnic women have been established as an important strategy to avoid intersecting discrimination.

## **Basic principles**

### **Human rights-based and victim-centered approach**

Women's shelters need to provide empowering and professional support to all women and children, based on their human rights and safety. The rights and needs of victims must be at the centre of the aims and tasks of women's shelters. Acting against violence means adopting a clear stance and condemning all forms of violence against women.

### **The right to be believed and the right to advocacy**

Women who come to a shelter should not have to offer proof of the violence they have undergone. Survivors need advocates who stand beside them and support them throughout the entire process.

### **Gender-sensitive approach and empowerment of women**

Women survivors of gender-based violence suffer significantly from being exploited and abused by men. Therefore, it is important for victims to receive support and help from a woman advocate. Sometimes people suggest that men should work in women's shelters so they experience that there are also "good men". However, this is not usually the problem women face – they do not believe that all men are violent, they experience low self-esteem as women. They have been told that they are worth little or nothing, so they lack self-confidence and self-respect. Women's shelters serve as a model for women, to experience their own ability to lead an active and self-determined life. They are also a model for girls and boys to see that women manage their lives in all aspects and deserve respect. Therefore, a gender-sensitive approach needs to be reflected in the structure of women's shelters by ensuring that women are employed and hold leadership positions.

### **Confidentiality and anonymity**

Women must decide which information about their life is shared. It is a way to protect a woman's human rights and her integrity. No information should be passed on without consent. Exceptions are only to be made if the life and health of a woman or her children is at stake (i.e. suicide attempts, acute danger posed by the violent partner). Such exceptions must be carefully explained and documented in the women's shelter files to ensure transparency to the victim.

Women victims of violence need to be informed upon their arrival at the women's shelter about the confidentiality regulations and their limitations. Upon their request, women should also have the right to receive counselling and support without having to reveal their identity.

### **Respect for the dignity and right to self-determination of each survivor**

A human-rights-based and survivor-centered approach means that every woman's will and decision are respected. Her dignity and right to self-determination are at the core of her stay in the women's shelter. It is a personal decision and a human right to either stay with the violent partner or to separate from him. Support offered is voluntary and survivors should never be obliged by authorities to go to a shelter or take legal steps to get help.

### **Understanding of intersectional discrimination, respect for diversity**

Some victims of violence experience multiple intersecting forms of discrimination, making them especially vulnerable to violence. Women's shelters need to recognize this in their policies and services and ensure that women are not discriminated against in the shelter and can freely exercise their rights. Staff needs to be able to provide culturally sensitive services to survivors.

### **Accountability of perpetrators**

Women's shelters need to take a clear stand regarding violence against women: there is no excuse for male violence against women and domestic violence; no form of violence is justifiable or tolerable. Perpetrators are accountable for their deeds and must bear the consequences and face sanctions.

## Services offered in women's shelters

### Services offered in women's shelters need to include:

- Crisis support, free transport to the women's shelter.
- Safe accommodation to women and their children in situations of acute danger.
- Comprehensive, gender-sensitive psycho-social support by an advocate of one's choice.
- Individual and group counselling to deal with and overcome the trauma of violence, including sexual violence; support to build resilience.
- Health care and recovery from violence.
- Documentation of injuries and collection of evidence.
- Legal information, advice and support to access justice and claim rights.
- Assistance at the police station, at court and in dealing with other agencies.
- Support regarding the children and protection in visitation and custody procedures.
- Support obtaining an independent residence permit.
- Assistance in becoming financially independent: support to receive financial aid, and to get employment training and to find employment.
- Education and training in the shelter, including for the children in the shelter.
- Mid- and long-term support.
- Outreach support after leaving the shelter.
- Encouragement and support to get involved in shelter life and in community activities to end violence against women and domestic violence.

### Support for the children

Children are always affected by the violence against their mother, especially in domestic violence cases, and they are often victims of abuse. Therefore, women's shelters need to provide age-appropriate and child-sensitive services to all children and youngsters in women's shelters, including boys of all ages, and ensure that children can take up and continue their education. Children also need to have the opportunity to learn about peaceful relations and violence-free communication.

### Services free of charge

Women's shelters need to be free of charge, at least for women with little or no income, to ensure that women and their children can access shelters independently of their financial status.

### The right to stay as long as necessary

Time limits on the stay in women's shelters are problematic, especially if they are short. If women victims of violence and their children are only allowed to stay a few days or a few weeks, they will experience high levels of stress and worry about where to go with their children. Thus, the possibility to stay in a women's shelter as long as needed is imperative. Women's shelters should offer the chance of leaving and coming back as many times as they need to.

### The right to an advocate<sup>42</sup> of one's choice

Every woman and every child living in a women's shelters needs to have the right to be supported by a counsellor/advocate of their choice. The advocate supports women in all matters, evaluates her own needs and those of her children, and develops a plan of steps to take. If the victim wishes, this plan will be written down and serve the victim to reflect on her situation, become aware of her needs and rights, and realize them.

42. The term advocate is used in this report for staff in women's shelters supporting survivors.

### **Safety and security**

Safety and security are paramount in women's shelters and the core services. Often perpetrators track women, and even if women's shelters try to keep their address secret, it can be discovered, especially with the new technology. Technical security precautions in and around the area are necessary. Governments must make the required investments to guarantee safety since security precautions and systems can save lives in dangerous situations. The core goal of safety also implies measures at several different levels:

- **Technical safety precautions**  
Technical safety precautions such as a confidential address, safe entrances, guards, technical monitoring systems and alarm systems.
- **Safety of the individual victim and her children - Risk assessment and safety planning**  
Risk assessment and safety planning with every victim and her children need to be a standard service in every women's shelter, at least upon entering and leaving the shelter and in any situation of change or risk. In the past years, experts in Europe have developed core principles, methods and tools for gender-sensitive and victim-oriented risk assessment and safety planning (WAVE 2012,<sup>43</sup> Council of Europe 2015).
- **Prevention of femicide and escalation of violence**  
Assessment of elevated and lethal risk using, for instance, Jacquelyn Campbell's Danger Assessment Tool.<sup>44</sup>
- **Systematic safety planning**  
Systematic and repeated safety planning with every woman and child is a strategy of empowering victims.
- **Safety plan for the women's shelter**  
Development and implementation of a written emergency safety plan on protecting residents and staff should be produced, as well as guidelines on how to protect and support staff members attacked by perpetrators. Safety plans with the police and regular training of all residents and staff on safety measures is vital.
- **Safety as core task of multi-agency work**  
Safety and security of victims must be at the centre of multi-agency work. The rights and needs of the individual victim must be represented in the multi-agency network by an advocate the victim trusts.

## **Living together in the women's shelter**

### **Participation and democratic structures**

As pointed out at the beginning of the chapter, it is crucial to avoid women's shelters turning into institutions where the residents' freedom is restricted and feel controlled. Democratic structures and the opportunity for participation in the various aspects of shelter life are important principles of a human-rights-based and gender-sensitive approach in women's shelters.

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43. The WAVE Protect Manual is also available in Spanish.

44. Danger Assessment Tool, see <https://www.dangerassessment.org/>

The institution's power should not replace the power of the violent (ex-)partner. All members and staff of the women's shelter need to be trained in participatory methods and how to act with respect and handle power carefully.

Regulations are necessary, but they should be designed and implemented to guide without putting too many limits on residents' freedom.

Participatory structures ensure that all residents of a women's shelter can live together in an atmosphere of tolerance, solidarity and equality.

### **Information about rights and duties**

Protocol (house rules) for the women's shelter should include information on:

- the range of services available to women and children, principles of service provision and information about the staff;
- the rights of service users at the women's shelter;
- the rules and limits of confidentiality;
- the procedures for entering and leaving the women's shelter.

### **Residents' participation and democratic decision-making structures**

Women and children staying at women's shelters need to have the right. They should be encouraged to participate in joint activities at the shelter and be involved in decision-making regarding the community life at the shelter.

### **Right to use a mobile phone**

Smartphones have become irreplaceable for most people. They give us access to information and enable us to mobilize help in a situation of acute danger. Oppositely, perpetrators can also use mobile phones to track victims of violence. Although it is understandable that some shelters prohibit mobile phones for this reason, it is also problematic because it restricts women's freedoms. An alternative might be to train victims in using their mobile phones in a way that does not jeopardize their own safety or the safety of other residents in the shelter.<sup>45</sup>

### **Fair procedures**

Sanctions for a breach of rules should not automatically include expulsion from the shelter. Such a severe sanction should only be imposed in cases of serious violations. Every resident has to be heard and supported in such a procedure.

### **Complaint procedures**

Residents of women's shelters need to have the right to issue a complaint in case they are not satisfied with the services or aspects of it. Complaints need to be directed to an agency independent from the shelter.

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45. See for instance: The Safety Net Project – it develops resources and toolkits on the use of technology for shelters and victims of gender-based violence. <https://www.techsafety.org/resources/>

## Facilities and staff

Women's shelters need to be able to provide the best possible help to victims and their children so they can be safe and overcome the traumatic experience of violence. Minimum standards need to ensure that **women's shelters are more than "a roof over the head"**. The following checklist is based on standards developed by experts from the WAVE network:

- Minimum standard of 1 room/unit per woman and child.
- One additional room for women with two or more children.
- A bathroom and a kitchenette for each family, especially if there are older children/boys in the family.
- One shared bathroom for no more than two single women.
- One large kitchen and living room area.
- Sufficient laundry areas as well as storage rooms for all women and their children.
- Rooms for counselling (individual and group sessions) and staff offering care to children during sessions.
- Space for age-appropriate activities for children.
- Room for studies, courses and homework, with computer equipment.
- Recreation space for women (living room), and if possible, a garden and wellness area.
- Play rooms for children.
- Office room and night-shift room for staff.
- One large assembly room for large meetings, seminars and festivities.
- If possible: one room for meditation, contemplation or praying.

(based on: WAVE 2004, p 29).

### Staff hour requirements at a women's shelter

The WAVE handbook includes a calculation of staff hours for a medium-sized women's shelter for 10–15 family units (a total of 25–35 places) operating a 24-hour shelter helpline and providing counselling services.

The minimum staff requirements for a shelter of this type are:

- 5 full-time staff for the 24/7 shelter services.
- 2 full-time staff for counseling and support for 10-15 women.
- 1 ½ full-time staff for support for the children at the shelter.
- 1 staff member for administration.
- 1 staff member for management, networking and PR.

(WAVE 2004, p 57)

## Quality assurance and accountability

### Effective governance and accountability

Women's shelters need to be effectively managed, ensuring that service users receive a quality service from appropriately skilled and supporting staff. Provisions must be made for ongoing training and supervision. Many shelters are dependent on support by volunteers, and it is crucial that volunteers are specifically trained as well.

Resources need to be managed economically and efficiently; quality standards should be checked through regular quality controls.

#### **Data collection and victim-centered evaluation**

An ongoing compilation of statistical data is necessary to evaluate women's shelters. Data in women's shelters should be disaggregated by sex, age, type of violence as well as the relationship of the perpetrator to the victim and geographical location, according to the minimum standards of data collection recommended by the Istanbul Convention (see section on the Istanbul Convention).

In order to be able to provide data on the national level, women's shelters should receive funding to set up a nationwide network of women's shelters (see below).

Women's shelters need to be evaluated regularly by the services users, i.e. the women and children seeking shelter help.

### **Structure, funding and role of women's shelters in social change**

#### **Women's shelters' role in social change**

Next to providing essential services, women's shelters also play an essential role in social change. They engage in awareness-raising and campaigning, they are involved in the training of professionals and in coordinated community responses and multi-agency work.

#### **Importance of national networks of women's shelters**

Networking and contributing to the development and implementation of policies and measures of federal, regional and local governments are other essential functions of women's shelters. National networks of women's shelters are essential and play an important role in this regard, as well as in data collection and evaluation of services. Such networks are also important to develop, implement, evaluate and constantly improve the services provided by women's shelters.

#### **Independent structure of women's shelters and funding requirements**

Women's shelters are human-rights-based services for victims of gender-based violence and should be run by independent non-governmental women's associations. States need to work in close partnerships with women's shelters and provide appropriate funding to enable shelters to fulfill their role of supporting women survivors of violence and their children, as well as their functions in awareness-raising, training and coordinated community work.

Funding of women's shelters should not be dependent on donors or income-generating programs. Such programs can empower women survivors of violence. Still, first and foremost, a women's shelter should concentrate on the support and recovery of women and children victims of violence rather than raising money for its own existence.

#### **The state must provide adequate funding for women's shelters**

Funding should be sufficient, sustainable and inclusive, allowing all groups of women to have access to shelter services.

Further criteria for good practice in funding are:

- A clear legal basis for funding women's shelters.
- Long-term (at least three years) and secure funding.
- Core funding instead of project-based or per capita funding.
- Safety as the core principle of funding women's shelters.

It is necessary to apply a systematic and gender-responsive approach to costing and budgeting to prevent violence against women, e.g. by establishing a gender-budgeting group dedicated to tackling violence against women and domestic violence (WAVE 2017, p 28).

## Empowerment and social-economic rights

Social and economic rights need to be guaranteed to all women victims of gender-based violence. This aspect is crucial for preventing gender-based violence since women dependent on a partner or family are at higher risks of victimization. Social and economic rights are also essential in providing victims with a way out of violent relationships. Women are often the primary caretakers of the children and supporters of a whole family also should be taken into account. Consequently, the following social and economic rights should be guaranteed to all women, and in particular to women experiencing violence:

- Right to affordable housing: women survivors of violence should not be compelled to live with a violent partner, especially after separation, only because they lack affordable housing. Similarly, survivors of violence and their children should not have to remain in women's shelters for the same reason.
- Right to education and training, including free interpretation and language courses for immigrant and refugee or asylum-seeking women.
- Right to support in accessing the labour market.
- Right to adequate financial aid (at a level that ensures subsistence) for all women who do not have access to sufficient income.
- Access to free health care for all women survivors of violence and their children.
- Right to exercise sexual and reproductive rights.
- Right to free or affordable childcare and priority in schools.
- Economic support for survivors of violence through measures, such as: tax reductions, an advantage getting a job in the public sector, promotion of business run by survivors and bargain loans.

## Summary of core minimum standards for women's shelters

Summary of minimum good practice standards regarding women's shelters needed:

- A national network of specialized women's shelters accommodating all women and their children.
- Database and coordination between women's shelters to facilitate survivors in finding a shelter's place online.<sup>46</sup>
- At least one shelter place per 10 000 inhabitants.
- Women's shelters free of charge in all regions.
- Provision of 24/7 and immediate support at women's shelters.
- Free transport to the nearest women's shelter.
- Qualitative minimum standard of one unit, including small kitchen and bathroom, per family.
- A sufficient number of women's shelters addressing the specific needs of migrant and minority ethnic women, as well as refugee and asylum-seeking women.
- Support for women and children with disabilities in all women's shelters.
- Admission of lesbian and transgender women.
- Admission of children of all ages, no age limits for boys; age-appropriate support for children.
- Outreach services of women's shelters in rural areas.
- Democratic structures and participation in women's shelters.
- Holistic approach.
- Short and long-term support, including psychosocial, legal and financial support in order to recover and overcome the traumatic experiences of violence.
- Training in and access to information technology (IT); support for women to share resources and, at the same time, to learn methods to use IT safely.

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46. Women's Shelter Coordination Germany (Frauenhauskoordinierung): On this page you can search for women's shelters and Counselling Centres throughout Germany. Women's Shelters and Counselling Centres - Frauenhauskoordinierung.

## Best practices and challenges on shelters of GBV victims in Europe

### Women's shelters – general characteristics, definitions, types of shelters and funding

As outlined, women's shelters are core services providing accommodation and support to women victims of violence and their children. The obligation to provide adequate support to survivors of violence is enshrined in international and national human rights instruments, recommendations of treaty bodies and resolutions.

The Beijing Platform for Action requires governments to "Provide well-funded shelters and relief support for girls and women subjected to violence, as well as medical, psychological and other counselling services and free or low-cost legal aid, where it is needed, as well as appropriate assistance to enable them to find a means of subsistence" (United Nations 1996, para 125.a).

The CEDAW Committee in its updated General Recommendation No 35 on violence against women stipulates that "States should provide specialist women's support services such as free of charge 24-hour helplines, and sufficient numbers of safe and adequately equipped crisis, support and referral centres, as well as adequate shelters for women, their children, and other family members as required." (United Nations Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women 2017, para 31a).

The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence and explanatory report requires parties to "take the necessary legislative or other measures to provide for the setting-up of appropriate, easily accessible shelters in sufficient numbers to provide safe accommodation for and to reach out pro-actively to survivors, especially women and their children (Council of Europe 2012, Article 23; see also chapter five).

The following section aims at exploring different types of women's shelters that women survivors of violence are offered when seeking help, differentiating women's shelters as specialist women's support services from other kinds of centres and accommodation. It also aims at identifying different forms of running and funding shelters.

## Definitions and types of women's shelters

### Definition

In its glossary, the WAVE Country Report<sup>47</sup> defines women's shelters as women-only shelters which are specialist support services for women survivors of violence and their children and ensure immediate access to safe accommodation. They provide empowering support based on a gender-specific approach to violence and focus on victims' human rights and safety. Therefore functions of women's shelters go beyond providing a safe place to stay. They also offer long-term support to give women and their children the opportunity and resources necessary to rebuild their lives free from violence. Some examples of services provided by women's only shelters include: counselling, legal advice and assistance throughout legal proceedings, support to enter/re-enter the labour market, move-on support to find long-term accommodation after staying in the women's shelter.

### Women's shelters as safe places with 24/7 access

As the WAVE definition lays out, women's shelters not only provide "a roof over the head", they are not merely accommodation places. Women's shelters offer safe accommodation and specialist support to women victims of violence and their children, aiming at supporting, healing and empowering survivors of male violence. They provide 24/7 emergency, medium- and longer-term accommodation; the length of stay should be established by the needs of victims, not by bureaucratic rules.

Women's shelters also offer gender-sensitive and comprehensive support to women victims of violence and their children. Professional principles and support methods have been developed over the past decades by women's organisations running women's shelters, and they have become standards for policy-making and international standards. Support must be based on the victim's rights, it must be provided immediately and 24/7, and it must be unconditional (not depending on the victim pressing charges, for example) and free of charge for women without income (see chapter seven on practical and detailed standards for women's shelters).

### Other types of accommodation

#### General shelters

General shelters, such as homeless shelters, do not constitute adequate support for women victims of violence and their children for several reasons. First, they often do not provide the safety standards needed. Second, often they are not women-only services, and women are confronted with male violence in the shelter, and third, general shelters do not specialise in violence against women and domestic violence and therefore cannot provide adequate support to survivors. They do not specialise in trauma and the recovery from trauma and might even inflict harm and cause secondary traumatisation.

Therefore, in its report, the WAVE network does not count general shelters as adequate services.

#### Mother and Child Homes

In some countries and regions, mother and child homes were set up in the 1960s and 1970s as services providing accommodation and support to young, often single mothers who were seen as not yet able to care for themselves and their children on their own. These homes often do not have a gender-specific approach and are not experts in providing support to

47. WAVE Country Report 2019, Glossary.

## Number of women's shelters in Europe

The following data gives an overview of the number of women's shelters in Europe and their capacity to support women and children seeking help. The data was collected by the WAVE network and published in the WAVE Country report 2019.<sup>48</sup>

The term women shelters in the WAVE Country Report 2019 refers to shelters offering specialist support services only for women survivors of violence and their children and providing safe accommodation and empowering support, based on a gender-specific approach towards understanding violence and focusing on the human rights and safety of survivors. The research for the WAVE Country report cannot assess qualitative standards. Therefore it is not possible to say to what degree the listed women's shelters fulfil the criteria for women's only shelters.

Additional information on quality criteria can be found in the next section of case studies from different countries.

The first table shows data on women's shelters in Non-EU countries, and the second in EU member states. It includes data on the number of women's shelters and the number of places, usually equitable with the number of beds.

**Table 1**

Women's Shelters Europe (Non-EU)	Population (approx.) Million	Number of women's shelters	Number of shelter places existing	Number of places needed	Number of places missing	% places existing	% places missing
Albania	2,8	20	270	287	17	94%	6%
Armenia	2,97	2	9	297	288	3%	97%
Azerbaijan	9,89	3	95	990	895	10%	90%
Belarus	9,49	5	72	949	877	8%	92%
Bosnia&Herz.	3,5	8	178	350	172	51%	49%
Georgia	3,72	7	100	373	273	87%	73%
Iceland	0,35	1	22	35	13	63%	37%
Kosovo	1,8	1	140	180	40	78%	22%
Liechtenstein	0,038	1	10	4	0	100%	9%
Nord Macedonia	2,1	8	35	208	173	17%	83%
Modova	3,5	8	174	355	181	49%	51%
Montenegro	0,62	3	45	62	17	72%	28%
Norway	5,3	47	1 146	530	0	100%	0%
Russian Federation	143,7	95	434	14 367	13 933	3%	97%
Serbia	7	12	257	700	443	37%	63%
Switzerland	8,5	38	400	848	448	47%	53%
Turkey	80,8	144	3 454	8 081	4 627	43%	57%
Ukraine	42,4	33	140	4 239	4 099	3%	97%
Total	328,5	436	6 981	32 854	25 873	21%	79%

48. WAVE Country Report 2019 WAVE Country Report 2019 - WAVE Network WAVE Network (wave-network.org).

Table 2

EU	Population (approx.) Million	Number of women's shelters	Number of shelter places existing	Number of places needed	Number of places missing	% places existing	% places missing
Austria	8,8	30	766	882	116	87%	13%
Belgium	11,4	25	597	1 140	543	52%	48%
Bulgaria	7	11	120	705	585	17%	83%
Croatia	4,1	18	296	411	115	72%	28%
Cyprus	0,86	3	36	86	50	42%	58%
Czech Republic	10,6	4	96	1 061	965	9%	91%
Denmark	5,8	48	451	578	127	78%	22%
Estonia	1,3	16	75	132	57	57%	43%
Finland	5,5	28	202	551	349	37%	63%
France	66,9	52	2 797	6 693	3 896	42%	58%
Germany	82,8	360	6 408	8 279	1 871	77%	23%
Greece	10,7	25	470	1 074	604	44%	56%
Hungary	9,8	25	167	978	811	17%	83%
Ireland	4,8	22	145	483	338	30%	70%
Italy	60,5	232	789	6 048	5 259	13%	87%
Latvia	1,9	11	140	193	53	72%	28%
Lithuania	2,8	0	0	281	281	0%	100%
Luxembourg	0,6	10	216	60	0	100%	0%
Malta	0,48	6	111	48	0	100%	0%
Netherlands	17,2	nD	800	1 718	918	47%	53%
Poland	38	35	20	3 798	3 778	1%	99%
Portugal	10,3	39	679	1 029	350	66%	34%
Romania	19,5	84	920	1 953	1 033	47%	53%
Slovakia	5,4	9	232	544	312	43%	57%
Slovenia	2	31	445	207	0	100%	0%
Spain	46,7	265	2 726	4 666	1 940	58%	42%
Sweden	10,1	161	354	1 012	658	35%	65%
UK49	66,2	364	4 904	6 627	1 723	74%	26%
Total	512,4	1 914	24 962	51 238	26 276	49%	51%

These charts indicate that few countries meet the standards recommended in the Istanbul Convention to provide one place for 10 000 inhabitants: Norway, Luxembourg, Malta and Slovenia. Some countries come close to the standard and others are far from it. This shows that even in countries in Europe that can look back to forty years and more of supporting survivors, gaps in service provision still exist. It needs a long-term commitment and much more significant financial investments to

49. The statistic is from 2019 when the UK was still a member of the European Union. The UK left at the end of January 2020.

effectively address the problem and eradicate VAW and domestic violence, which is deeply rooted in our societies (see also chapter 6 on the first results of the monitoring of the Istanbul Convention).

## Short case studies from European countries

The following sections provide more in-depth information on women's shelters services in Europe and give an insight in the history, the normative and policy frameworks, the types of services, gaps in service provision and recommendations by NGOs and GREVIO. The countries were chosen according to geographical criteria (one from the north, south and middle of Europe). The aim was also to include at least one country which is not part of the European Union.

### Finland

**Brief overview of the country:** Finland has a population of approximately 5 525 300 people.<sup>50</sup>

The Nordic country is a member of the Council of Europe and the European Union. The country has signed the Istanbul Convention and ratified it in 2015. The first GREVIO Report was published in 2019.<sup>51</sup> The country is geographically widespread and contains very sparsely populated regions in the north, home of the indigenous Sámi people. The Sámi population is approximately 10 500 strong; their representative body is the autonomous Sámi parliament in Inari, Finland. Their main task is to prevent their endangered language and culture.

Finland has a fairly comprehensive system of measures to address violence against women and domestic violence, including a network of specialist women's support services. The Finnish national women's helpline operates 24/7, is free of charge and provides multilingual support.

**History of women's shelters:** Historically, women's shelters in Finland were started by civil society organisations. The Federation of Mother runs most shelters and Child Homes and Shelters, initially set up to work with families and children in difficult circumstances<sup>52</sup> It promotes a child-welfare perspective, and in that respect, it differs from shelter movements in other European countries, which are more associated with the feminist women's movement. Some municipalities also run domestic violence shelters. According to the WAVE Countries Report (2019), in 2018 there were 28 women's shelters in Finland, of which 19 were run by the Federation of Mother and Child Homes and Shelters. There is also one shelter (Mona-shelter) that specifically accommodates and supports migrant women.

**Normative framework:** The ratification of the Istanbul Convention has prompted the government to step up its efforts to prevent violence against women and to protect and support victims. The funding of the women's shelters, which had not been sufficient and secure, was improved by the

Shelter Act 1354/2014, which entered into force in 2015. Its purpose is to guarantee national high-quality and comprehensive shelter services. The Act established that the National Institute for Health and Welfare is responsible for setting the standards in women's shelters and national coordination. While the improvements have been generally very welcomed by women's NGOs, the centralised management and control of shelters by the government has also been viewed critically.<sup>53</sup>

50. Eurostat News release 111/2020-10 July 2020.

51. GREVIO Country-monitoring work (coe.int).

52. GREVIO Report 2019.

53. Finland NGO Parallel Report on the implementation of the Istanbul Convention in Finland 2018 Country-monitoring work (coe.int).

**Shelter functioning:** Women's shelters in Finland offer help during crisis; survivors usually stay as long as they are in danger of experiencing violence. The introduction of a legal basis for funding through the Shelter Act is a substantial improvement, as core funding is made available in advance to the shelters for twelve months, irrespective of the number of women and children staying in the shelter. The funding rules also allow women's shelters to accommodate women and their children anonymously, which is especially important for high-risk victims and undocumented migrant women. The staff in women's shelters is authorised to decide the length of each stay (before it was a municipality role). This decision is based on the specific needs of the woman and her children.

**Capacity of shelters and access:** Women's shelters in Finland are mainly available in major cities. Access to shelters is limited in rural areas and for women and children with disabilities, as the GREVIO report indicates.<sup>54</sup> Difficulties also exist for Roma women. GREVIO report also expresses concern regarding the fact that specialised women-only shelters do not exist in Finland. Shelters seem to apply a gender-neutral approach and some are accommodating male victims and even perpetrators.<sup>55</sup> This raises questions of safety and empowerment of women victims of violence and the GREVIO report strongly encourages Finland to provide women-only shelters. The GREVIO report further strongly encourages the Finnish government to provide an adequate number of places in women's shelters to fulfil the standards recommended in the Istanbul convention, namely to provide one family place per 10 000 head of population. The WAVE report 2019 reveals that Finland only provides 202 places in shelters, and 349 places (63% of the capacity needed) are still missing.<sup>56</sup> Since the GREVIO report was published, the Finnish government has aimed at further increasing the capacities of shelter places.

## Italy

**Brief overview of the country:** Italy has a population of approximately 60 224 000 people.<sup>57</sup>

The Mediterranean country is a member of the Council of Europe and the European Union. They have signed the Istanbul Convention and ratified it in 2013. The first GREVIO Report on Italy was published in 2020<sup>58</sup>. Italy is a geographically widespread country, reaching from the autonomous province South Tyrol in the Alps to the island of Sicily in the Mediterranean Sea; it is divided in twenty regions and over a hundred provinces.

**History of women's shelters:** In Italy, as in many European countries, services for women survivors of violence and their children were first founded by feminist women's groups. The feminist experts started by setting up Anti-Violence Centres in the 1980s. These Centres aimed to support women victims of domestic and sexual violence. In the beginning, the Anti-Violence Centres had little means and were not able to set up women's shelters. Still, later on, many of the centres were also providing accommodation (see the section on Capacity of shelters). The Anti-Violence Centres worked together in the network D.i.Re since the beginning and formally established the network in 2008.

**Normative framework:** The situation of services varies from region to region, with some providing more funding for services and better coordination than others due to differing regional laws and regulations. With the purpose of addressing this uneven level of support, a federal law was enacted (Law No. 119) determining the responsibility of the state to finance women's shelters. In 2014, an

54. GREVIO Report 2019, p 33.

55. Ibid. p 34, para 117.

56. WAVE 2019 Report, p 79.

57. Eurostat Newsrelease 111/2020-10 July 2020.

58. GREVIO, GREVIO's (Baseline) Evaluation Report on legislative and other measures giving effect to the provisions of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention) ITALY, 2020. Available at: Final report on Italy (coe.int).

agreement between the state and the regions was adopted. The regulation provides that public authorities and non-governmental organisations are allowed to set up women's shelters. These shelters must enshrine in their statutes that the sole or primary goal is the support of women victims of gender-based violence. The service staff must be exclusively female, and the shelters must work in line with the objectives of the Istanbul Convention.<sup>59</sup>

While this normative framework is an essential progress in laying down common standards for service provision, implementation of these regulations has not been satisfactory at all. In their shadow report to GREVIO, women's NGOs are raising grave concerns that processes have been problematic in many regions, leading, for instance, to the result that long-term and experienced Anti-violence Centres were not awarded. At the same time, services that did not apply a gender-specific approach were granted funding.

Another worrying development is that in regions in northern Italy, during the worst COVID pandemic, women's shelters were required to reveal to authorities the identities of the women and children residing in the shelter. Many shelters refused to provide the personal data of victims and had to face a significant reduction in funding in a time when their services were most needed.<sup>60</sup>

**Shelter functioning:** Anti-violence Centres support women survivors of domestic and sexual violence with short and long-term counselling, trauma care, legal counselling, empowerment and support to realise economic rights, specific help for children as victims and witnesses, and other services.

Anti-violence Centres also run women's shelters providing immediate and around-the-clock accommodation for women and their children.

**Capacity of shelters and access:** The exact number of women's shelters in Italy is not statistically verified. The Department of Equal Opportunities (DEO) speaks of 285 Anti-violence Centres, including 228 shelters. Women's NGOs, however, state that there are only 160 Anti-violence centres, of which 117 run one or more shelters.<sup>61</sup> The WAVE Report (2019) estimates a shortfall of over 6 000 beds in women's shelters in Italy, as measured by the standard of one family place per 10 000 head of population.

In its report GREVIO urges the Italian authorities to, among other things, expand the coverage and capacity of specialist services throughout the country, to ensure the financial sustainability and the continuity of service provision and to set more stringent criteria to qualify as an anti-violence centre and/or shelter.

## Serbia

**Brief overview of the country:** Serbia has a population of approximately 8 682 000 people.<sup>62</sup>

The Balkan country has been a member of the Council of Europe since 2003. They have signed the Istanbul Convention and ratified it in 2013. The first GREVIO Report was published in 2020.<sup>63</sup>

59. Ibid, para 145.

60. Post, T. Italian centers for abused women lose state funding as lockdown fuels demand. [online] The Jakarta Post, 2022. Available at: <<https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/05/28/italian-centers-for-abused-women-lose-state-funding-as-lockdown-fuels-demand.html>

61. GREVIO, GREVIO's (Baseline) Evaluation Report on legislative and other measures giving effect to the provisions of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention) ITALY, 2020. Available at: Final report on Italy (coe.int).

62. World Population Review, 2022 World Population by Country. Available at: <https://worldpopulationreview.com>

63. GREVIO, Grevio Baseline Evaluation Report Serbia, 2020. Available at: Country-monitoring work (coe.int).

The people of Serbia and several other post-Yugoslavian countries are still suffering from the Balkan Wars in the 1990s and have severe economic and political problems. According to the estimate of international sources, Serbia's Roma population is estimated at 300 000 - 460 000, which would make them the largest minority ethnic group in Serbia.<sup>64</sup> When the EU member states blocked the "Balkan route" for refugees, many were stranded in Balkan countries, including Serbia.

**History of women's shelters:** Specialised women's support services in Serbia started in 1993, when the *Autonomni ženski centar* (Autonomous Women's Center) was established by feminists. The Centre is a women's human rights organisation. It assists women survivors of violence and advocates for the prevention of gender-based violence in Serbia. Initially, it was set up to support women survivors of rape in war-torn former Yugoslavia. The Centre has been advocating for effective national legislative and policy frameworks to end gender-based violence in the past decades. Due to a lack of resources and a legislative framework, women's shelters could not be permanently set up by women's NGOs.

**Normative framework:** In Serbia, there is no legal framework or policies and standards for establishing women's shelters. The Law on Social Protection, which regulates social services, does not mention specialised services for women victims of violence. Therefore it is difficult for women's organisations to set them up and to obtain sufficient funding. They often depend on foreign donors since the financial contributions of municipalities are very small or non-existent.

**Shelter functioning:** Women survivors and their children fleeing violence are mainly accommodated in general shelters. The GREVIO Report on Serbia<sup>65</sup> and the NGO shadow report<sup>66</sup> count 15 shelters in Serbia. The municipalities run most shelters and only about half of the shelters (9 out of 15) specialise in the support of women and children victims of violence. Only two women's shelters are run by NGOs. Survivors do not have immediate access to shelters but must be admitted through a referral procedure by social services. There can be referral problems for victims not from the municipality that funds the shelter. Specific groups of women, such as Roma women, or women with disabilities, also face barriers in accessing shelters.

**Capacity of shelters and access:** According to the standard of one family place per 10 000 of population, Serbia would need to provide over 800 places in women's shelters. The WAVE report stated that only about 250 places were available, not even one-third of the places needed.[1] The GREVIO report strongly encourages the authorities to expand domestic violence shelters' capacities and ensure practical access to all women, particularly those with disabilities, Roma women, and migrants/asylum seekers.

Despite the difficulties that women's NGOs, municipalities and state institutions face in Serbia in providing adequate support to survivors, they continue to work together and set important initiatives. One example is an analysis on "Social Housing Policies - Possibilities for women who have survived violence, and how they can realize their rights" published by the Autonomous Women's Centre presented in October 2021 in Belgrade at a meeting attended by representatives of women's associations, the Common Action for "The Roof Over Our Heads" from Novi Sad, The Standing Conference of Towns and Municipalities, and the Coordination Body for Gender Equality.<sup>67</sup>

64. Minority Rights Group. 2022. Roma - Minority Rights Group. Available at: <https://minorityrights.org/minorities/roma-16>.

65. GREVIO, Grevio Baseline Evaluation Report Serbia, 2020, Para 126. Available at: [Country-monitoring work \(coe.int\)](https://www.coe.int).

66. Improved Legislation Failed Protection, Independent report on the implementation of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic Violence Belgrade, 2018.

67. Autonomous Women's Center: Social Housing Policies – Possibilities for women who have survived violence, and how they can realize their rights - Autonomous Women's Center ([womenngo.org.rs](https://womenngo.org.rs)).

## Germany

**Brief overview of the country:** Germany has a population of approximately 83 166 000 people.<sup>68</sup>

It is a member of the Council of Europe and the European Union. The country has signed and the Istanbul Convention and ratified it in 2017. The first evaluation procedure of the German compliance with the Istanbul Convention is under way, the state report was submitted in August 2020 to the GREVIO Committee monitoring the Istanbul Convention. Several NGOs submitted shadow reports.<sup>69</sup> Germany has 16 regions (Bundesländer) with their own regional governments and parliaments. Until 1990, German was divided into East-Germany – the German Democratic Republic which was part of the Soviet Union, and West Germany, the Federal Republic of Germany. Since 1990 Germany is united again, but it took some years to build a joined society.

**History of women's shelters:** In former West-Germany the first women's shelter was established in 1976, four years after the first shelter for women and children in Europe had been set up in London in 1972. In former East Germany the first women's shelter was opened in 1990 in Berlin. In the past 45 years, women's organisations in Germany, together with the federal and the regional governments, have established a quite comprehensive network of women's shelters, women's centres, including centres to support victims of sexual violence, as well as national and regional helplines in all 16 regions. The network of specialised support for women survivors of violence is impressive, and still it is not sufficient yet – as women's NGOs point out in their shadow reports.

**Normative and policy framework:** Responsibility for help and support facilities, such as women's shelters, lies with the region (Länder) and the local authorities. There is no federal law or regulation. Women's shelters in Germany are principally open to all women, regardless of their nationality, residence status, or other status. In 2012, the Federal Government presented a comprehensive nationwide inventory of all specialist women's support services (Report of the Federal Government on the situation of women's shelters, women's specialised counselling centres and other support institutions for women affected by violence and their children).

Funding for women's shelters usually comes from several sources and is heterogeneously structured Germany-wide. The funding structure is largely determined by the regulations and policies of the respective Länder. Funding guidelines also contain the quality standards and the profile of the services provided under the support programmes.

**Shelter functioning:** Women's shelters in Germany are safe places of protection that cannot be found in any address register. All women – with or without children – who experience physical, sexual or psychological violence are be provided safety and support irrespective of their nationality, residential or other status. In emergency cases, women's shelters can also be accessed at night.

All women's shelters offer free counselling and supporting services that can help cope with the experienced violence and develop new perspectives on life. There are also services for children in women's shelters. Services in women's shelters are provided by qualified and mostly female staff. In these places, women find themselves and their children in a safe space to build up new strength. They are part of a community of women and children with similar experiences. Women's shelters are unusually equipped with rooms where women can retreat and be on their own. There are also

68. Eurostat Newsrelease 111/2020-10 July 2020.

69. GREVIO Shadow Report on the Implementation of the Istanbul Convention in Germany by Umbrella Association of Migrant Women\* Organisations DaMigra (Dachverband der Migrantinnen\*organisationen e.V.); Alternative Report on the Implementation of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence German Istanbul Convention Alliance February 2021, Germany (coe.int).

collective spaces (big kitchen, living room, playrooms for children, etc.). Every woman looks independently after herself and her children. Many women's shelters also offer childcare services.

As a rule, women and children can stay as long as necessary. The stay in a women's shelter is always voluntary. Every woman can decide for herself how long she wants to stay.

Women's shelters in Germany have a website to find the closest women's shelter and how to access it.<sup>70</sup>

**Capacity of shelters and access:** According to the state report of Germany to GREVIO, a broad network of at least 336 women's shelters exists in Germany. Additionally, there are 72 so-called safe houses and some 288 specialised women's counselling centres and over 261 intervention centres providing pro-active and coordinated support to victims of domestic violence after the police issued an emergency barring order against the aggressor.<sup>71</sup>

Regarding the capacities of women's shelters the NGO shadow report argues that finding protection in women's shelters is not secured nationwide for women seeking protection and support.<sup>72</sup> In many cities and districts women's shelters are still missing or there are too few spaces. In comparison to the recommendations of the Istanbul Convention, there is a shortage of around 15,000 places for women and children in women's shelters. Migrant women organisations criticise that a fundamental structural problem lies within the fact that refugee women have limited access to shelters owing to residence restrictions.<sup>73</sup>

The above-mentioned state report also identified gaps in accessing shelters concerning specific target groups, such as women with physical or mental disabilities, as well as capacity constraints at the regional level. The state report indicates that the authorities have made ongoing efforts to address the weaknesses in the support system but that much remains to be done, nonetheless.

## Spain

**Brief overview of the country:** Spain has a population of about 47 330 million inhabitants.<sup>74</sup>

The Mediterranean country is a member of the Council of Europe and the European Union. They adopted the Istanbul Convention early in 2011 and ratified it in 2014. The country has a high degree of regional autonomy and consists of 17 autonomous regions (Comunidades Autónomas), two autonomous cities (Ceuta and Melilla) and 50 provinces (Provincias). Regional governments lead the autonomous regions.

Spain has a national women's helpline operating 24/7 and free of charge. The country has also developed and implemented a comprehensive law and system of protection and support to survivors (see sections normative framework).

**Normative framework:** In 2004 Spain adopted a ground-breaking new law addressing violence against women, the Organic Law 1/2004 on Integrated Protection Measures against Gender

70. Frauenhauskoordinierung: Finding Women's Shelters - Frauenhauskoordinierung.

71. Germany State Report to GREVIO 2020, p. 35.

72. Alternative Report on the Implementation of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence German Istanbul Convention Alliance February 2021, Germany (coe.int), p. 79.

73. Association of Migrant Women\* Organisations DaMigra (Dachverband der Migrantinnen\*organisationen e.V.), p. 37.

74. Eurostat Newsrelease 111/2020-10 July 2020.

Violence (Ley Orgánica 1/2004, de 28 de diciembre, de Medidas de Protección Integral contra la Violencia de Género).<sup>75</sup>

With this law, focussing solely on violence against women, Spain became a forerunner in Europe regarding the right of women to live free from violence. The legal framework recognises that violence against women is gender-based violence and thus a specific form of violence that needs particular responses. The law consists of a range of measures to support and protect victims. It includes specific interventions by the police, specialised courts on VAW, health services and entities providing counselling to women, and measures guaranteeing economic empowerment and labour rights.

The Organic Law is undoubtedly a significant milestone in preventing VAW, for Spain and Europe. However, there are still challenges regarding implementation in several areas. Regarding service provision, there are considerable regional differences in the quality and availability of services, and GREVIO highlights the need for national guidelines of standards. They should be developed in co-operation with women's NGOs experiences in the provision of services to survivors of violence.<sup>76</sup>

**Shelter functioning:** The provision of shelters for women survivors of violence and their children in Spain lies in the competence of regional governments. Two types of shelter services are available: crises centres that accommodate women and their children fleeing violence for up to 15 days and shelter houses that offer medium and long-term accommodation for up to one year. The government has developed guidelines requiring that women's shelters adapt their services to the needs of women seeking help, including older women, women with disabilities, and girls under the age of 18. There is also a referral protocol ensuring that victims can be accommodated in shelters in other regions in emergency cases and when shelters places are not available in a region.<sup>77</sup>

Regarding the funding of specialist women's support services, the GREVIO baseline report notes with concern an increase in public tendering procedures which tend to favour the lowest bidder. Sometimes funding goes to private companies not even specialised in support services for victims of violence, and women's NGOs face precarious working and funding conditions.

The GREVIO report recalls that optimal support and assistance for the victims need to be provided by experienced staff with in-depth knowledge of gender-based violence. It strongly encourages Spain to "develop funding systems and ensure funding levels that enable specialist women's NGOs to play an active role in the provision of support services for women victims of all forms of violence and across all regions of Spain".<sup>78</sup>

**Capacity of shelters and access:** According to the WAVE Country report, Spain has a total of 265 women's shelters with an overall capacity of 2 726 beds<sup>79</sup>. This number contains the beds in all shelter facilities, including emergency shelters. Interestingly, the state report to GREVIO indicates only a total of 1 689 places available in shelter houses.<sup>80</sup> In any case the numbers are not sufficient to meet the standard of one place per 10 000 head of population, which would amount to at least 4 700. GREVIO also remarks that the number of places per capita differs strongly between regions.<sup>81</sup>

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75. BOE.es - BOE-A-2004-21760 Ley Orgánica 1/2004, de 28 de diciembre, de Medidas de Protección Integral contra la Violencia de Género.

76. GREVIO baseline report Spain 2020, Executive summary.

77. GREVIO baseline report Spain 2020.

78. Ibdn. para 47.

79. WAVE Country report 2019, p 132f.

80. Spanish state report to GREVIO, Annex 4, page 102.

81. An overview of support services offered by the different Autonomous Communities is available in Spanish at: Información descriptiva sobre recursos autonómicos - Delegación del Gobierno contra la Violencia de Género (igualdad.gob.es).

Women's shelters are available in most cities in Spain. Services are available free of charge, and theoretical all shelters provide 24/7 access. But in practice, access depends on the availability of services and on regional regulations.

According to information in the GREVIO baseline report, women are only referred to shelters when they report the violence to the police in some regions.<sup>82</sup> This can limit survivors' access to multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, such as women with disabilities, older women, migrant and refugee women. GREVIO therefore strongly encourages the Spanish authorities to "improve the access to shelters for women with disabilities, women in rural areas, women over the age of 65, girls, women substance abusers, women in prostitution, and migrant women"<sup>83</sup> and to ensure adequate numbers of places in women's shelters in all regions.

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82. GREVIO baseline report Spain 2020, para 162

83. GREVIO baseline report Spain 2020, para 164

## Conclusions

This report aims to show the developments, successes, and challenges in preventing violence against women and supporting survivors in Europe, focusing on the essential role of women's shelters.

Progress has been made, and societies have become more knowledgeable about VAW and more skilled in providing measures and tools for prevention and empowerment. Feminist movements have contributed enormously to this development and have been advocating improvements fiercely and steadily for almost fifty years. This report contains core elements for good practice that have been set up and implemented during the past years (see chapter 7).

Women's shelters are not only "a roof over the head". They need to be safe places for women and children experiencing domestic violence, where they can recover from the trauma of violence and become empowered and aware of their strength. They should be a place where they are free and can learn about their rights and opportunities. Women's shelters have to be democratic places, not hierarchical institutions, to represent an alternative to the control women and children experienced at home.

Women's shelters need to apply a comprehensive and holistic approach. This implies, for instance, that ALL women victims of violence and their children are guaranteed the right to seek refuge in a women's shelter and that they have immediate and 24/7 access to shelters in all regions.

A holistic approach further implies that victims and their children have the right to stay safe at home. Victims of violence should not be forced to use one or the other provision but should have the right to choose the option best for them in a given situation. Victims might, for instance, not want to stay at the house where they were abused because of the traumatic memories or because the perpetrator's family live close by.

Women and their children should not be obliged to stay in shelters longer than necessary because of a lack of housing. It is the obligation of the state to provide affordable housing to women and children survivors of violence. The right to live free from violence includes the right to separate from a violent husband without risking the loss of one's livelihood.

The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating violence against women and Domestic Violence adopted in 2011 in Istanbul is a milestone for Europe and the Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment, and Eradication of Violence against Women (Convention of Belém do Pará) was the model for it. The Istanbul Convention sets common standards for the elimination of VAW in all the areas of the 5Ps (prevention, provision of services, protection, prosecution and coordinated and comprehensive policies). It clearly states that specialist women's support services, including women's shelters, are core services to support and empower survivors. The report

is based on the principles and measures of the Istanbul Convention. The studies on Finland, Serbia, Germany, Austria and Spain show that the Convention is a driving force in improving the situations for victims and protecting violence. Finland, for instance, has increased the budget for women's shelters considerably. In Spain, where the most comprehensive system on the prevention of violence against women was adopted in 2004, the Istanbul Convention contributed to further improvement through, for example, the establishment of guidelines and standards for women's shelters.

The prevalence of VAW is still high in all European countries. The COVID-19 crisis has worsened the situation for many women and children victims of violence. We still see severe underfunding of women's support services in many countries. Why is that so? This is a burning question. The answer is not that "there is no money", which women NGOs often hear when applying for funding for women's shelters and other services. As the enormous resources mobilised during the economic crises in 2008 and the resources to address the COVID crises have shown, money can be "found" if there is a political will to do so.

Thus the next question is: Why is there not enough political will to effectively tackle violence against women? Answering this question would go beyond the scope of this report. However, a hypothesis might be that violence against women is, unfortunately, still accepted in our societies as a means to "secure the gender order" and to ensure that women remain subordinate. Equality between women and men has not been achieved yet. VAW is a primary cause and consequence of gender inequality.

Several studies show that VAW is not only harmful to individuals and our societies but also has an enormous economic price. According to the European Added Value Assessment, the annual cost to the EU of violence against women in 2011 was about EUR 228 billion (1.8% of EU GDP). This amounts to about EUR 450 per European citizen each year (European Parliament 2013).<sup>84</sup>

Could countries afford to invest more in eliminating VAW? A look at the costs of military spending shows the potential: in 2013, the world's military expenditure was estimated at 1 747 trillion USD. What could be funded with this money instead? Over 650 years of the UN's budget and over 6300 years of UN Women's budget (Women's International League for Peace and Freedom 2014). The world is over-armed, and peace is underfunded, as former Secretary-General of the United Nations Ban Ki-moon said.<sup>85</sup> This needs to be changed.

Coordinated policies can have the form of National Action Plans. But it is a well-known fact that having a plan is not enough. Financial means and effective implementation procedures are required for implementation and monitoring. The Convention requires that one or more official bodies establish the coordination, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of policies and measures (Council of Europe 2012, Article 10). Such bodies should include women's NGOs and civil society organisations working to end violence against women. Separate and independent agencies should carry out monitoring and evaluation.

The encouragement and support of an active civil society, national and regional networks of women's support services and multi-agency initiatives are good practice elements for adequate support and protection of victims. Such alliances are also essential to counter the backlash we face in many countries in Europe and worldwide.

We hope this document serves usefully to public entities, international organisations, institutions and individuals engaged in eradicating gender-based violence and building empowering safe places.

84. More information: European Institute for Gender Equality, The costs of gender-based violence in the European Union, Luxembourg 2021 view in: <https://eige.europa.eu/publications/costs-gender-based-violence-european-union>

85. Ban Ki-moon 2012 <https://www.neweurope.eu/article/world-over-armed-and-peace-under-funded-0/>

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## Glossary

### **Domestic Violence**

This report addresses male violence against women and their children and in particular its occurrence within the domestic sphere. Whilst other victim experiences are recognized, women remain disproportionately affected by gender-based violence, and in particular by domestic violence. The violence also impacts children either directly or indirectly. Domestic violence in this context refers to “all acts of physical, sexual, psychological and economic violence that occur within the family or domestic unit or between former or current spouses or partners, whether or not the perpetrator shares or has shared the same residence with the victim” (Article 3, Istanbul Convention).

### **Gender**

Gender refers to “the socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for women and men” (Article 3.c, Istanbul Convention).

### **Gender-based violence**

Gender-based violence against women refers to “violence that is directed against a woman because she is a woman or that affects women disproportionately” (Article 3.d, Istanbul Convention).

### **Gender-specific approach**

According to the Istanbul Convention, a gender-specific approach implies recognizing that violence against women and domestic violence are rooted in historically unequal power relations between women and men, and that in order to effectively address the problem, all measures taken should be aimed at achieving *de jure* and *de facto* equality between women and men.

### **Victim**

In this report, the term “victim” is used in order to recognize that women and children experiencing violence have been subjected to acts of violence and have a right to justice, protection, support and compensation. Using the term “victim” does not mean that victims are seen as passively “enduring” violence; it is important to acknowledge that victims try in many ways to prevent, resist and cope with the violence they experience. Victims are active in the process of prevention and intervention, not just objects of a process; they are “experts by experience” who need to be respected and empowered to be agents of change in their lives.



## Shot CV Author

**LOGAR Rosa:** Executive Director of the Domestic Violence Intervention Centre Vienna; and co-founder of the first women's shelter in Vienna (1978) and the European Network WAVE (Women Against Violence Europe, 1994); selection of further international activities: member of the UN Expert Group Meeting *Good practices in legislation on violence against women* (2008); from 2008-2010 member of the Council of Europe *Ad Hoc Committee on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence* which drafted the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention, 2011); from June 2015 to May 2019 member of the independent expert committee GREVIO monitoring the Istanbul Convention in the Council of Europe. Co-founder and manager of the victim-safety oriented Anti-Violence Programme for perpetrators in Vienna run in co-operation with the Men's Counselling Service. Lecturer at the University of Applied Science FH Campus Vienna, Department of Social Work.

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