



EUROPEAN WOMEN'S
LOBBY
EUROPEEN DES FEMMES



EWL - WAVE Presentation

EU Mutual Learning Programme in Gender Equality: Good practices for tackling domestic violence in the context of COVID-19

Webinar, 19th of May 2020

1. Overview of the situation and long term recommendations:

Male violence against women is a long-term systemic issue across Europe. There is an emergency situation threatening the security of women's lives that precedes this pandemic crisis.

The situation has worsened - hand in hand with the severity of the measures taken- with an increase of risk of harm for different forms of violence against women. This Webinar focuses on intimate partner violence, but our members have also raised their concerns about other forms of male violence, from street harassment and online abuse to sexual exploitation, risk of female genital mutilation, incest, so-called honor-based violence, etc.

- Lockdown and isolation measures have created an enabling environment for abusers' coercive control of victims and lead to more incidents of physical, psychological and sexual violence.
- There are bigger obstacles for women to seek help.
- This crisis has deepened existing inequalities and women are already shouldering disproportionately the impacts of this crisis; in terms of risk of poverty and threats to their economic independence, especially those who face multiple forms of discrimination and who are made vulnerable by our system: women with disabilities, older women, refugee and/or undocumented migrant women, Roma women, homeless women, etc.

Preliminary data just on intimate partner violence shows:

- An increase in prevalence and reporting. In France, the Ministry of Interior indicated an increase of reports between 32% and 36% in the Paris region alone. In Germany's capital Berlin, the police reported an increase of 10% of cases. A member in Ireland reported a five-fold increase in domestic violence orders sought and a huge increase in contacts from women living in rural communities. In Lithuania, femicide cases have already doubled in 2020 compared to the previous year.
- In other countries, reporting figures remain similar or have decreased, like in Italy at the beginning of the crises, Netherlands, Portugal, Estonia and others.





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Different reactions do not mean that in underreporting countries violence has decreased but that in these countries there might be bigger obstacles for women to seek help. Let's not forget that data from 2014 already pointed out that only less than 15% of the worst cases of intimate partner violence are reported (FRA survey 2014).

Responses to address violence against women in the current pandemic crises

In many countries, women specialized services (WSS) are leading the response to this crisis, doing a remarkable effort to respond to the situation, continue operating and trying to find new ways to outreach to victims. On many occasions they have little support or none, which is not acceptable.

Many EU Governments have also reacted swiftly, putting in place contingency measures and innovative solutions.

We highly welcome these efforts as they come to recognize that protection measures have been insufficient even during “normal” times.

These renewed commitments need to be transformed into long term actions.

Long term recommendations based on the assessment of women's organizations:

- **Services to protect victims** should be **declared essential** in this pandemic and always.
- Need to address the **full continuum of violence against women and girls**.
- Need to step up efforts in **ratification and implementation of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, the Istanbul Convention (IC)**. There are no valid legal arguments that can justify the non-ratification of this Convention as demonstrated by the COE Venice Commission opinion¹.
- The comprehensive provisions of the Istanbul Convention should be applied at all times. We highlight the [declaration recently issued by the Committee of Parties to the Istanbul Convention](#). The Convention should be implemented adopting a gender-sensitive perspective, victim-centred and human rights-based response to the crisis; and in close co-operation with **specialized women's organizations: their expertise should be recognized and their work should be fully funded in a sustainable way**.
- Ensure that **women's organizations participate in decision-making processes** around long-term recovery so that the needs and concerns of women and girls experiencing violence are included in the prevention of and responses to violence against women and girls.

¹ CDL-AD(2019)018-e Armenia - Opinion on the constitutional implications of the ratification of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention) adopted by the Venice Commission at its 120th Plenary Session (Venice, 11-12 October 2019), available at [https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-AD\(2019\)018-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-AD(2019)018-e)





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- **Equality between women and men should be at the heart of the response to the COVID-19 crisis.** It is imperative that the responses to and long-term recovery measures are **gender mainstreamed** in order to protect women from paying the price of this crisis. Emergency responses must be grounded in women's rights and incorporate a **gender perspective in the design and implementation of services that draw on accurate and streamlined sex-disaggregated data.**

The current crisis has only made clearer the **necessity of coordinated EU action on women's rights to address the persistent inequalities.** Concretely, the EU needs to establish **long-lasting structures to end the continuum of all forms of violence against women and girls:**

EWL and WAVE call for coordinated action at EU Level and urge the EU and all its member states to:

- **Show** leadership and commitment to implement the **Gender Equality Strategy** (2020-2025) launched early March by the European Commission, which has to combat violence against women as a top priority.
- **Accelerate the conclusion of the EU's accession to the Istanbul Convention** in order to facilitate the full implementation of its provisions across the EU.
- **Add violence against women to the list of Eurocrimes** and recognized the need for tackling this phenomenon jointly.

Building on the strong commitments already in the Gender Equality Strategy, the European Commission should urgently propose a **Directive on preventing and combating all forms of violence against women and girls** to align with existing relevant EU legislation and strengthen measures to disrupt the full continuum of violence, aligned with the Istanbul Convention and including sexual exploitation, tackling both online and offline violence.

Common standards for data collection must be made mandatory and standardized across all EU Member States.

All EU MS should participate in the Eurostat survey on the prevalence of violence against women and girls.





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2. Demands at Member State level

In most member states, women's specialized services (WSS) are carried out by independent NGOs that have had to work hard to meet increased demand within pandemic conditions without an increase of resources. To keep working, WSS had to re-arrange work and pay for additional expenses that were not in their budgets, such as laptops, internet access, mobile phones, etc. for employees working remotely. This is greatly complicated by the fact that in almost all cases, CSOs cannot generate any reserves due to lack and restrictions of funding.

At the same time, we have witnessed that several countries have drastically decreased funding of WSS due to budgetary concerns caused by the pandemic. In most places, funding was limited even before the pandemic started. In some cases, funding has decreased to zero, putting CSOs serving survivors of VAW into a very difficult situation.

This development is short-sighted, leaving vulnerable groups without help that is mandated by the Istanbul Convention. Furthermore, not addressing the issue of VAW will negatively affect the state's social, health, and other support services in the long term. For example, some of the women who do not receive needed help will develop serious health issues. And the trauma on their children will continue many years into the future.

We should also be ready to deal with the increased demand for recovery services such as emergency-intervention, counselling and therapy that will most likely occur in the months after the COVID crisis passes.

Despite the difficulties faced by WSS organizations due to Covid-19, there are good practices that have been implemented to deal with the problem. It is our hope that these can be inspirational to others in Europe. However, it is important to remember that the circumstances surrounding each measure is unique and their success depends in part on local conditions. Thus, our suggestion is to keep this in mind when considering implementing them, as they may need to be adapted to the specific circumstances.





EWL and WAVE demands of concrete measures to be taken on:

1. Reinforcement of systems and services to protect women and girls against violence:

- Women specialized services should be considered as **an essential service**, by all member states and supported to continue to operate under conditions of lockdown and restrictions in movement.
- **Urgent funding** should also be provided to frontline support service providers, given the tremendous increase in the risk of harm they face. There should also be a recognition that services will need to support the cumulative effect of need by victims.
- A long-term commitment to **securing and increasing funding** for WSS should be taken by governments, to ensure continuity of the service during and after the pandemic.

2. Prevention and protection:

- **Awareness-raising campaigns** should be developed and targeted to women victims of different forms of violence to ensure that they have information about the services that they can access for emergency protection and support.
- These campaigns should run **in partnership with women's NGOs** as they have the required expertise.
- Campaigns should reiterate that prosecution and protection measures are still being applied by law enforcement units despite the exceptional circumstances.

3. Measures to ensure that all victims can seek help and report crimes:

- States must ensure that victims can seek help and report crimes that were committed against them. Alternatives to digital channels should be ensured in order to reach out to vulnerable groups without access to technology (women with disabilities, marginalised groups, out-of-reach, elderly, rural women, etc.).

4. Protection:

- Shelters for women and girls who are victims of violence, including for homeless and asylum-seeking women, must be kept open with appropriate measures taken to protect



women and workers in these shelters from the spread of COVID-19. To enable the physical distance this requires, additional shelter space must be made available.

- States should ensure that all groups of women and girls get equal access to shelter spaces, support services and social benefits.
- Child custody and visiting rights in cases of intimate partner violence are always a huge concern that has become even more critical during the pandemic. As per the provisions of the Istanbul Convention, necessary legislative and other measures should be taken in the determination of custody and visitation rights to ensure that violence against women is taken into consideration. The safety and well-being of women and children must always be considered at all circumstances.

5. Protection and prosecution:

- **Law enforcement** units should make it clear that they are **still operating** and are especially attentive to the early identification of women victims.
- Protection measures such as **emergency barring, restraining and protection orders** against perpetrators **should still be issued**.
- **Court proceedings for such cases should always be granted to ensure access to justice and avoid the risk of re-victimization**. Suspension or delay of court proceedings is causing significant distress to victims as the abusers are not held accountable. In some cases, a delay may be fatal for women victims of violence.