

Violence against women in the EU

State of play

SUMMARY

Violence against women is a violation of human rights and a form of gender-based discrimination. Rooted in inequalities between men and women, it takes many forms. Estimates of the scale of the problem are alarming. Such violence has a major impact on victims and imposes a significant cost burden on society.

The instruments put in place by the United Nations and Council of Europe, including the latter's 'Istanbul Convention', to which the EU plans to accede, are benchmarks in efforts to combat violence against women.

The EU is tackling the problem in various ways, but has no binding instrument designed specifically to protect women from violence.

Although there are similarities between national policies to combat violence against women, the Member States have adopted different approaches to the problem.

Parliament's efforts have focused on strengthening EU policy in the area. Parliament has repeatedly called for a European Union strategy to counter violence against women, including a legally binding instrument.

Stakeholders have expressed a range of concerns, also regarding the impact of the coronavirus pandemic and the related need to expand and adapt support for victims, and have highlighted the need for a comprehensive EU political framework on eliminating violence against women. They have also launched new initiatives of their own.

This is a further update of an [earlier briefing](#) by Anna Dimitrova-Stull, of February 2014. The [most recent previous edition](#) was from November 2019.



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Glossary

Violence against women: 'all acts of gender-based violence that result in, or are likely to result in, physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life'.

Gender-based violence against women: 'violence that is directed against a woman because she is a woman or that affects women disproportionately'.

Domestic violence: 'all acts of physical, sexual, psychological or 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'.

Source: [Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence](#), Council of Europe, 2011.

The problem

Violence against women violates human rights and is a form of gender-based discrimination. It constitutes a major obstacle to gender equality. Despite increased attention, the problem still affects all levels of society and all Member States.

Causes and forms

Violence against women and girls is rooted in social inequalities between men and women. Traditional and religious values are sometimes invoked to justify it. [Factors](#) including a lack of economic independence increase women's vulnerability.¹

Violence takes many forms, including psychological violence, harassment, physical and sexual violence, female genital mutilation (FGM), forced marriage, forced abortion and sterilisation, sexual harassment, and 'honour' crimes. Some specific groups, such as [migrant](#) women, women with [disabilities](#), [LGBTI women](#), or women living in [institutions](#), are more likely to experience violence and [intersecting](#) forms of violence.²

Scale of the problem not fully known

The most comprehensive [survey](#) on violence against women at EU level – based on interviews with 42 000 women in all 28 EU Member States on their experiences of physical and sexual violence, sexual harassment and stalking over the past year and since the age of 15 – was published by the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) in 2014³. The results paint a stark picture of the nature and extent of violence against women across the EU. The survey data show that one woman in three has experienced some form of physical and/or sexual violence since the age of 15. One in 10 women has experienced some form of sexual violence since the age of 15, and one in 20 has been raped. Just over one in five women has experienced physical and/or sexual violence from either a current or previous partner, whilst 43 % of women have experienced some form of psychologically abusive and/or controlling behaviour when in a relationship.

At the most extreme end of the spectrum, Eurostat [data](#) on the number of reported incidents of intentional homicide, rape and sexual assault show that in many Member States⁴ over half of all female murder victims are killed by an intimate partner, relative or family member. According to a scientific study, there are approximately 3 500 domestic violence-related deaths in the EU every year. In other words, there are more than nine victims, as many as seven of them women, every day.⁵

However, reliable and comparable data on violence against women are still [lacking](#) at national and European level. Although the data obtained through the FRA survey give a first comparative overview of women's experiences of violence in the EU, due to the limitations of the sample, it cannot give an insight into the experiences of women who have experienced rarer forms of violence, and forms that specific groups in the population may fall victim to, such as [FGM](#)⁶ and ['honour'](#)

[crimes](#). These can only be captured by highly developed crime survey research, which to date exists in only a few Member States, such as the United Kingdom and Italy.⁷ The lack of a common definition of violence against women at European level, and differences in the way data are collected at national level, are another obstacle to collecting comparable data.⁸

Crucially, one of the key FRA survey findings, for all types of violence, is that the majority of women do not report their experiences to the authorities. Victims had reported their most serious incidents of partner violence to the police in only 14 % of cases, and the most serious incidents of non-partner violence in only 13 % of cases. Together with fear and shame, or lack of

confidence in the authorities, [public attitudes](#) towards violence against women, including [victim-blaming](#), may deter women from reporting. A 2016 [Eurostat](#) survey showed that more than one in five respondents (22 %) believe that women often make up or exaggerate claims of abuse or rape, and 27 % think that there are situations where sexual intercourse without consent is justified. This means that the full scale of violence against women is not reflected in official data.

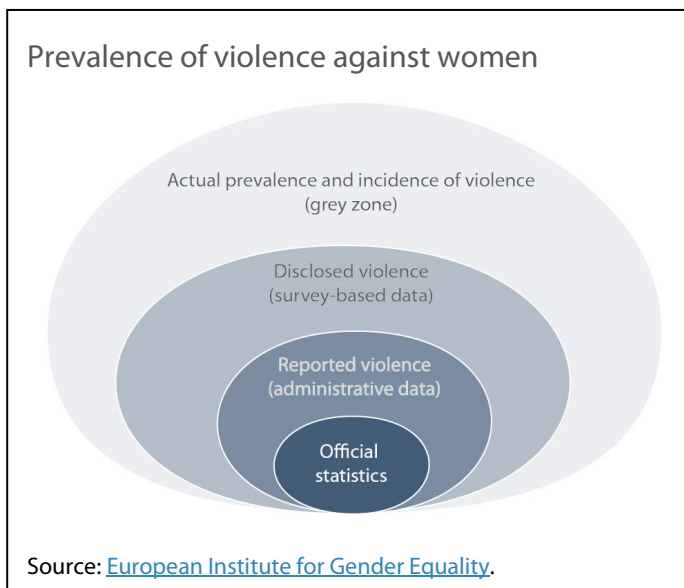
Consequences

Violence has serious immediate and long-term consequences for the physical and mental health of the women who are victims, and can have consequences for children who witness it. The EU FRA survey revealed that the victims' emotional responses to victimisation had been fear, anger and shame. They suffered from a loss of self-confidence and were left feeling vulnerable and anxious. About half of the victims suffered injuries, some of them multiple. For example, 17 % of victims of sexual violence by a partner suffered two to three different types of physical injuries as a result of the most serious incident.

Besides the human suffering it causes and its impact on health, violence against women imposes a significant economic burden on society as a whole, in the form of healthcare costs, policing and legal costs, lost productivity and social costs. According to an EPRS study, the total annual cost of violence against women in the EU amounted to more than €228 billion in 2011.⁹ In 2018, a further EPRS evaluation [quantified](#) the impacts on individuals, societies and lost GDP.¹⁰

Issues in the spotlight: Covid-19 and domestic violence

Past crises and epidemics, including the outbreaks of SARS and swine flu, were [associated](#) with increased levels of violence against both women and children. There are [many reasons](#) why quarantines in particular can increase the risks of domestic violence and abuse. In March 2020, as governments across the world began to impose mandatory lockdowns on their populations to curb the spread of the COVID-19 virus, the United Nations [warned](#) that the pandemic could lead to an increase in levels of domestic violence and a decrease in the ability of service providers to respond to cases and support victims. In Europe, the alarm was raised by many actors including the [European Women's Lobby](#), the Council of Europe's [Secretary General](#) and [Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence](#), the European Union's [Commissioner for Equality](#), the [European Institute for Gender Equality](#) (EIGE) and the European Parliament's [Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality](#).



By early April 2020, the UN Secretary General, António Guterres, was [signalling](#) that lockdowns were indeed linked to a 'horrifying global surge in domestic violence' directed towards women and girls.

Comprehensive EU data is not available but figures have been reported by organisations offering victim support, police forces and some governments. In **Italy**, the first European country to impose a national lockdown on 9 March 2020, the first month of the restrictions [saw](#) a sharp fall in the number of calls to helplines and official reports of domestic violence. The largest domestic violence helpline, [Telefono Rosa](#), reported that calls fell by 55 % to 496 in the first two weeks of March, compared with 1 104 in the same period in 2019. A [report](#) from a parliamentary committee on violence against women also found that reports of domestic violence to the police dropped to 652 in the first 22 days of March, compared with 1 157 during the same period in 2019. However, the committee cautioned that, far from reflecting a decline in domestic violence, this was a signal of added difficulties in reporting and seeking help. The European Women's Lobby [reports](#) a similar picture in some other countries, including the **Netherlands**, **Portugal** and **Estonia**, where figures remained similar or decreased. In other countries, the available data shows an increase in the numbers of women reporting incidents and seeking help. In **Spain**, data [reported](#) by the National Institute for Women show that calls to the 016 helpline increased by 31 % from 14 March (when the state of emergency was declared and the lockdown started) to 15 April 2020 compared with the same period in 2019, while online consultations increased still more substantially (by 443.5 %) in the same period. Spain's Interior Ministry [reported](#) that the police and civil guard carried out 83 341 interventions to protect victims and prevent violence in the first 31 days of the lockdown (from 14 March to 14 April), an increase of 25.27 % compared with the same period in 2019. In **France**, the Minister of the Interior [announced](#) that, nationwide, reports of domestic violence had risen by 30 % in the first 11 days of the country's lockdown and by 36 % in Paris. In **Ireland**, organisations working on domestic violence [reported](#) an increase in the number of calls to their helplines and the [Gardaí](#) reported a 25 % increase in domestic violence calls in April and May 2020 compared with April and May 2019. In **Belgium**, the number of calls to the French-language helpline, [Écoute Violences Conjugales](#), tripled from mid-March when the lockdown began and the Flemish helpline [reported](#) an increase in reports to the police. In **Romania**, statistics released by the police [showed](#) a 2.3 % increase in cases of domestic violence in March 2020 compared with March 2019. In **Cyprus**, [calls to helplines](#) rose by 30 %. In **Germany**, an [online survey](#) of 3 800 women aged between 18 and 65, which did not compare with previous figures, found that during the strict lockdown period between 22 April and 8 May 2020, 3.6 % had been subjected to rape and around 3 % to physical violence by a partner. Where women were quarantining at home, or households were experiencing financial insecurity and loss of employment, the figures were significantly higher. Around 2 % of respondents could not leave their home without permission and in 4.6 % of all cases, partners controlled the women's contacts with others, including digital communication. Only a very small percentage of the women concerned made use of support services. There have also been [reports](#) of femicides after lockdowns were imposed. In the **UK**, the Home Affairs Select Committee heard [evidence](#) that the number of suspected domestic abuse killings doubled in the first three weeks of the lockdown compared with the same period over the past 10 years. Simultaneously, the pandemic has created challenges for organisations supporting survivors of domestic violence. Reports received by the [Council of Europe](#) show that domestic violence shelters in some areas stopped all admissions because they were unsure how to manage the risk of infection, while others privileged online or telephone support, leaving women at risk from their abusers. The European Women's Lobby (EWL) and its member organisations [flagged](#) that the delivery of essential services was being limited by the pandemic.

Against the backdrop of a [resurgence in Covid-19 cases](#) in many EU countries and the prospect of further localised or broader lockdowns, what lessons can be learned from what happened earlier in the year? [Many](#) EU countries responded proactively to protect women, maintain existing support services and introduce innovative ways of providing support for victims. For example, in **Spain**, the government adopted a [contingency plan](#) with urgent measures to address the needs of victims of domestic violence, sexual violence, trafficking, sexual exploitation and prostitution. These included

[legislation](#) classifying support services and shelters as essential services, enabling them to continue to provide in-person information, social assistance and legal counselling and implement protection orders. The plan also included a series of additional measures, such as transforming holiday accommodation into temporary shelters, upgrading the existing AlertCops application with an [SOS Button](#) enabling victims and health workers to ask for immediate assistance from the police; and launching an [information campaign](#). **France** also introduced [comprehensive measures](#), including additional public funding to expand the national domestic violence telephone hotline and online service and the creation of temporary assistance points in supermarkets and pharmacies. There is some evidence that measures have been effective. In the **UK**, Refuge, the country's largest domestic abuse charity, which had already [reported](#) a significant rise in calls to its helpline and hits on its website, found that the day after launching an awareness campaign, calls to the helpline [rose](#) by 120 % and visits to the website by 700 % in a single day. A separate helpline for perpetrators of domestic abuse seeking help to change their behaviour also received 25 % more calls.

Looking to the long term, the EIGE is [investigating](#) how the EU and the Member States can do more to protect women from intimate partner violence and other forms of gender-based violence during crises such as pandemics, natural disasters and economic recessions¹¹. Given the social and economic impacts of the current pandemic, it will be especially important to avoid the kind of negative impacts that followed the 2008 economic crisis. Austerity policies [led to](#) cuts in services designed to end violence against women and support the victims of violence, meaning that many were unable to meet demand and [remained](#) insufficient when the pandemic struck. Women's organisations are [warning](#) that some countries have already drastically decreased funding for specialist support services owing to budgetary concerns generated by the pandemic. This is particularly worrying in view of the likelihood of increased demand for emergency intervention, counselling and therapy in the months after the crisis passes.

International context

United Nations

The [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women](#) (1979)¹² and the [Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women](#) (1993) are benchmark documents in the field. Although not binding, the declaration was the first international text to deal exclusively with violence against women.

Violence against women was one of the critical areas of concern identified in the [Beijing Platform for Action \(BPfA\)](#) adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995. The platform lists the measures that states, and international and non-governmental organisations, should take to prevent and tackle this form of violence. The [Commission on the Status of Women](#) monitors and reviews progress on the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. In [2016](#), the commission strongly condemned all forms of violence against women and girls, and called for a number of [measures](#), including improvements to legislation and better implementation. At its 64th session in 2020, the commission committed to full, effective and accelerated implementation of the BPfA, including eliminating and preventing all forms of violence and exploitation, off and online and ensuring provision of support services for all women victims of violence.¹³

In 2017, the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women [assessed](#) the adequacy of the current international legal framework, concluding that the main challenge in addressing violence against women is the failure to fully incorporate and apply international norms. [General Recommendation No 35](#) on gender-based violence against women, adopted in July 2017, is intended to accelerate their implementation. This and the previous [General Recommendation No 19](#), which it updates, are landmark documents because they frame violence against women as a human rights issue and form of gender-based discrimination (No 19) and recognise the prohibition of gender-based violence as a norm, expanding the definition of violence to include violations of sexual and reproductive health rights (No 35). The Special Rapporteur's [2018 report](#) analysed online violence against women from

a human rights perspective, whilst the [2019 report](#) looks at the issue of obstetric violence. The [2020 report](#) examines violence against women journalists.

The UN [Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs) include a gender-equality goal, which incorporates targets aimed at ending violence and discrimination against women and girls, including a target on eliminating female genital mutilation (FGM) and child, early and forced marriage (CEFM).

International Labour Organization

In June 2019, the International Labour Organization adopted the [Violence and Harassment Convention](#), which applies to violence and harassment in the world of work, and obliges the signatory states to adopt an inclusive, integrated and gender-responsive approach to prevent and eliminate violence and harassment in this context.

Council of Europe

In 2002, the Committee of Ministers adopted a [Recommendation on the protection of women against violence](#) in which it called on the member states to draw up action plans to prevent violence and protect victims.

The [Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence](#) ('[Istanbul Convention](#)') was opened for signature in May 2011 and entered into force in August 2014. Europe's first legally binding convention in the field, it creates a comprehensive framework for preventing violence, protecting victims and prosecuting perpetrators. As of November 2020, all EU Member States have [signed](#) the convention, and 21 (AT, BE, DE, CY, DK, EE, EL, ES, FI, FR, HR, IE, IT, LU, MT, NL, PL, PT, RO, SE, SI) have ratified it. However, in July 2020, the Polish government announced its intention to withdraw from the Convention.

What is the EU doing?

The [Treaty on European Union](#) (TEU) affirms the principle of gender equality and non-discrimination (Article 2). The [Charter of Fundamental Rights](#) guarantees people's right to dignity (Title I) and equality (Title III). It also includes specific provisions on people's right to physical and mental integrity, and bans any form of discrimination on the grounds of sex. Although it has no legal force, Declaration 19 on Article 8 of the [Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union](#) (TFEU) affirms the political commitment of Member States to combat all forms of domestic violence.

Political commitments

Combating gender-based violence is one of the key priorities of the EU's 2020-2025 [gender equality strategy](#), a [continuation](#) from the EU's [strategic engagement for gender equality](#) for 2016-2019.

One of the key areas for action is improving the availability, quality and reliability of data on gender-based violence through cooperation with Eurostat, the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) and the Fundamental Rights Agency. EIGE is engaged in a [project](#) to improve the collection and harmonisation of the data on violence against women collected by national police forces, justice systems, and health and social services across the EU. Since 2017, it has been able to [include](#) violence against women within its [gender equality index](#), which measures progress across the EU. Furthermore, an EU-wide survey coordinated by Eurostat will provide new data on violence against women and other forms of interpersonal violence. The results are due to come out in 2023.

Another priority is [EU accession](#) to the Council of Europe's Istanbul Convention, which could help to provide more equal protection for women across Europe against all forms of violence. In October 2015, the Commission issued a [roadmap](#) for EU accession, followed in March 2016 by two proposals for Council decisions, one on the [signature](#) and the other on the [conclusion](#) (ratification) of the Convention on behalf of the EU. The Convention was [signed](#) by the EU on 13 June 2017. The

next step is the EU's formal accession to the Convention, for which the European Parliament will have to give consent.

In case the EU's accession to the Convention remains blocked, the new gender equality strategy has announced the Commission's intention to propose, in 2021, measures to achieve the same objectives as the Istanbul Convention (within the limits of EU competence). In particular, the Commission intends to extend the areas of crime where harmonisation is possible to specific forms of gender-based violence, and propose additional measures to prevent specific forms of gender-based violence, including sexual harassment, abuse of women and female genital mutilation. In addition, a victims' rights strategy to address the specific needs of victims of gender-based violence was [presented](#) in June 2020.

In the field of EU external action, the [EU guidelines on violence against women](#) adopted in 2008 affirm the EU's commitment to promote and protect the rights of women in third countries. The Union addresses the problem of violence against women in its specific dialogues on human rights and supports projects to combat violence against women by means of the [European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights](#). In 2015, the European Commission and EEAS adopted a [gender action plan](#) for external relations for 2016-2020, which prioritises violence against women and girls. Building on the achievements of this plan, another version is to be launched in 2020, with a comprehensive approach and integration of all its relevant elements into the EU's external action. In 2017, the European Union and the United Nations launched the [Spotlight Initiative](#), with an initial investment of around €500 million, to support measures to eliminate violence against women and girls, in line with the [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#).

In line with its increased focus on prevention, the Commission will also launch an EU network on the prevention of gender-based violence and domestic violence, where Member States and stakeholders can exchange good practice. It will provide funding for training, capacity-building and support services. The [Daphne Programme](#) which funds [projects](#) aimed at preventing and combating violence and protecting victims, will continue under the new [Rights and Values programme](#) for 2021 to 2027.

To address the pervasive problem of online violence against women and girls, the Commission is planning to propose a Digital Services Act to clarify online platforms' responsibilities with regard to user-disseminated content and to facilitate the development of a new framework of cooperation between internet platforms (due to be presented in [December 2020](#)). It will also address human trafficking by presenting a new strategy on the eradication of trafficking in human beings, and it will address child sexual abuse by presenting a strategy on that as well. The strategy on preventing child sexual abuse was [presented](#) in July 2020.

Legislative measures

The EU does not currently have a specific binding instrument designed to protect women from violence.¹⁴ However, legal instruments have been established in different areas in which women can be victims of violence, and in those areas where there is violence that has a cross-border element, because this is where the EU has the strongest competence for crime-related action. This means that unfortunately, the EU 'has not addressed comprehensively the wider manifestation of violence as women experience it'.¹⁵

These instruments concern, among other things, equal treatment and non-discrimination, which includes a ban on sexual harassment ([Directive 2006/54/EC](#), a recast of [Directive 2002/73/EC](#), concerning equal treatment as regards access to employment and working conditions, [Directive 2010/41/EU](#) on the application of the principle of equal treatment between men and women engaged in an activity in a self-employed capacity, and [Directive 2004/113/EC](#) on equal treatment in the access to and supply of goods and services¹⁶); trafficking in human beings ([Directive 2011/36/EU](#) on combating trafficking and [Directive 2004/81/EC](#) on the residence permit issued to third-country nationals who are victims of trafficking); and protecting victims by strengthening the

rights of victims whatever their nationality and wherever in the EU the crime takes place, including if the victims travel or move within the EU ([Directive 2012/29/EU](#) on the rights and protection of victims of crime, [Directive 2011/99/EU](#) on the European protection order in criminal matters, and [Regulation \(EU\) No 606/2013](#) on mutual recognition of protection measures in civil matters¹⁷).

Member States

Although there are similarities between national policies to combat violence against women, the Member States have adopted different approaches to the problem.

As far as legislation is concerned, domestic physical violence and sexual violence are the main types of violence punishable by law. Domestic psychological violence, forced marriage, sexual harassment and FGM are punishable in different ways depending on the country.¹⁸ In some cases, victims must submit a formal complaint before legal proceedings can begin.¹⁹ The low prosecution and conviction rates for crimes of domestic violence and rape appear to be a problem common to a number of Member States. In order to address this problem, Spain and the United Kingdom have established [specialised courts](#) to deal with cases of violence against women.

In addition to legislative provisions, in recent years Member States have adopted policy strategies to combat violence against women, either in the form of national action plans (NAPs) targeting all or specific forms of violence, or by means of measures built into other action plans aimed for example at promoting gender equality and social inclusion.²⁰ NGO [data](#) from 2017 show that 24 EU Member States had NAPs on combating gender based violence in place in 2016 or after. Domestic violence and people trafficking are the most common areas addressed by the NAPs, although there is an increase in concern for sexual violence, especially sexual harassment and FGM. More and more emphasis is being placed in these plans on prevention measures (e.g. awareness campaigns, training for professionals working with victims, treatment programmes for perpetrators) and on support (shelters for women victims, telephone helplines). Meanwhile, reinsertion programmes focused on the needs of women who have been victims of violence (access to affordable housing, employment, training and income support) are less common.²¹ In 2020, the Council of Europe [concluded](#) that many countries could do more to ensure that their NAPs cover all forms of violence and that measures are monitored and fully resourced.

European Parliament

The European Parliament first sounded the alarm about the problem of violence against women in a [resolution](#) of 11 June 1986. Since then, it has played a particularly important role in the field, not least through the work of its [Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality](#) (FEMM). In 2015, the Committee launched a [Working Group on Violence against Women](#) to create a forum for exchange of views and formulation of strategy on the issue.

Parliament has previously asked the Commission to monitor the implementation of existing EU gender equality legislation more effectively and has carried out its own assessments of the [Victims' Rights Directive](#), and the [European Protection Order](#) (EPO). These [found](#) that the directive had not been fully implemented across the EU, in particular when it comes to access to support services, and that differences between judicial systems (for example, stalking is not a criminal offence in all EU countries) are obstructing the use of EPOs. In 2020, Parliament's Committees on Civil Liberties and Women's Rights and Gender Equality are [assessing](#) the implementation of the trafficking directive.

Since [2009](#), Parliament has also been urging the Commission to draw up a comprehensive proposal for a directive on preventing and combating all forms of violence against women to ensure that all women in the EU have the same level of protection from male violence. In its [resolution](#) of 25 February 2014, it also called on the Council to [add violence against women](#) to the [areas of particularly serious crime](#) listed in Article 83(1) [TFEU](#), and asked the Commission to launch the procedure for EU accession to the Council of Europe's Istanbul Convention, as a complement to a future EU directive. It has continued to push for progress on these recommendations.²²

With respect to the Istanbul Convention, before receiving a formal request for its consent, Parliament has been [considering](#) the matter of EU accession. In its [interim resolution](#) of 12 September 2017, it welcomed the signing of the Convention by the EU and urged the Council to speed up EU ratification. However, it also regretted that EU accession had been restricted to two areas (judicial cooperation in criminal matters and asylum and *non-refoulement*). In Parliament's view, this raises legal uncertainties about the scope of the EU's accession and concerns about its implementation. In its [resolution](#) of 4 April 2019, Parliament decided to ask the European Court of Justice for an [opinion](#) to resolve the legal uncertainty regarding the compatibility of the accession proposals and procedure with the Treaties, with a specific focus on the legal basis for the decisions and the split into two decisions. Parliament has also asked the Commission to be proactive in dispelling [misconceptions](#) about the Convention, in particular around the use of the terms 'gender' and 'gender-based violence', which are [blocking](#) some EU Member States from ratifying it. A [European added value assessment](#) conducted for Parliament found that an EU directive would have far greater impact on national legal orders than EU accession to the Istanbul Convention, but taken together, the two instruments would 'guarantee a true European Area of Freedom, Security and Justice where violence against women becomes not only rhetorically but also legally outlawed'. Parliament would be involved in the adoption of the [legislative proposal](#) on preventing and combating certain forms of gender-based violence included in the European Commission's work programme for 2021.

Beyond legislation, Parliament has [repeatedly called](#) for the establishment of a coherent system for collecting statistics on gender-based violence in Member States, the establishment of a European Observatory on Violence against Women and Girls, and the adoption of an EU-wide strategy and action plan to combat violence against women. Parliament has also put the spotlight on [emerging forms of gender-based violence](#) such as cyberstalking and online harassment and drawn attention to the need to combat specific forms of violence including [sexual harassment](#), [trafficking](#), [forced prostitution of women](#), and [FGM](#),²³ and to the vulnerability of and issues facing particular groups such as [undocumented women migrants](#), [women asylum-seekers and refugees](#), [women and girls with disabilities](#) and [LBTI women and Roma women](#). As of November 2020, parliamentary committees are working on reports on [intimate partner violence and custody rights](#), [combating cyber-violence](#), and the impacts of the pandemic. Parliament has also flagged that a [backlash against women's rights and gender equality](#) is eroding the machinery and resources for combating violence against women at national level, and called for renewed commitment at national, EU and [global](#) level. It would like to see more funding for the [Rights and Values programme](#) for 2021-2027, which will cover the Daphne programme for preventing and combating violence against women.

Stakeholders' views

A number of specific issues relating to violence against women have been the focus of attention and advocacy by civil society organisations and other stakeholders.

Most recently, the emerging data showing the negative impact that the Covid-19 pandemic is having on women's safety and security has been noted by several organisations, including the European umbrella organisation, the [European Women's Lobby](#) (EWL), which has been warning from the start that women and girls are at [higher risk](#) of domestic violence while obliged to shelter at home, owing to increased tensions in the household. The EWL is [calling on](#) national authorities to work with women's organisations to get a clearer picture of what is happening on the ground and to provide them with the immediate and long-term support they need to assist survivors. It also recommends specific measures for ensuring continued access to helplines and legal services. The [Women against Violence Europe](#) (WAVE) network had already highlighted gaps in support through its mapping of support services such as helplines, women's centres and shelters available to women survivors in Europe. Their most recent [report](#), issued in December 2019, found that 21 EU countries have at least one helpline for survivors, but only 16 meet the Istanbul Convention minimum

standards of being free and available round the clock, and only five Member States meet the minimum standards for bed spaces in women's shelters.

Another issue dominating recent debates has been the amount of money dedicated to combatting violence against women in the EU's funding programmes for 2021 to 2027. In September 2020, 14 members of the European Coalition to end violence against women and girls wrote an [open letter](#) to EU decision makers regarding the 2021-2027 MFF and the EU's Next Generation EU recovery plans, in which they urge the EU to ensure adequate EU funds to promote gender equality and the fight to end violence against women and girls. The Coalition advocates for the amount dedicated to the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values programme to be tripled to €1.83 billion. They also ask for an increase in funding for the EIGE. The EWL made similar calls for robust funding in an [open letter](#) to the ECOFIN Council on 3 November 2020.

Accession to the Istanbul Convention is an issue that has been on the agenda for longer, but it is still current and very important, not least because it provides the foundation for a systematic and EU-wide approach to combatting gender-based violence. This is recognised by numerous organisations, many of which have advocated for the Member States to ratify the Convention over the years, such as the [EWL](#), the [European Economic and Social Committee](#) and the European Coalition to End Violence against Women and Girls, a strategic alliance of more than 25 cross-European human rights and social justice civil society organisations, which expressed [regret](#) at insufficient progress in the ratification progress in June 2018, on the occasion of the first anniversary of the signature of the Istanbul Convention by the EU.

Regarding the EU's legislative framework for tackling gender-based violence, the EWL [has been calling](#) for a comprehensive EU strategy to end all forms of violence against women in Europe. In September 2019, at a [conference](#) organised by the Finnish presidency of the European Council, the EWL reiterated its call for a comprehensive EU-wide action plan to prevent and combat violence against women, including a directive covering all forms of violence. The EWL also urged the EU to adopt legislation to [end prostitution](#) and [sex trafficking](#) by criminalising the purchase of sex, by 2020. It is now 20 years since the EWL passed [a motion](#) affirming that 'prostitution and trafficking in women constitutes a fundamental violation of women's human rights'.

A further focus for stakeholders is monitoring. The EWL's [Observatory](#) on violence against women, with members from 32 European countries and seven international and European women's organisations, identifies issues and continuously monitors progress towards eliminating violence against women. A recent area of interest and action has been the adoption of international standards to end violence against women in the [world of work](#). Another key focus, for the EWL and other organisations, has been to raise awareness of the reality and impacts of online violence. The EWL [mapped](#) the situation in 2017 and launched an initiative to support [politically engaged women](#). WAVE has published research on cyber violence against women and girls, as part of the CYBERSAFE project. Their [2020 report](#) presents a literature overview on the topic and the situation in several EU Member States.

Stakeholders are also highlighting the importance of addressing the specific situations and needs of diverse groups of women and advocating for particular populations. An important area of action for the WAVE network has been raising awareness of the importance of [specialist support services for women](#) and working to protect these services from gender-neutral policy and practice. In August 2020, WAVE published a [handbook](#) on how to counteract this phenomenon, which foregrounds the need for these services to take account of the fact that different women survivors of violence encounter various forms of discrimination. The network has also published a [position paper](#) on intersectionality and an inclusive approach to dealing with gender-based violence and specific recommendations for [improving support and protection for older women](#) and [women with disabilities](#). A number of organisations are working to raise awareness of and prevent harmful practices such as [FGM](#). The [European Network of Migrant Women](#) (ENOMW) has [drawn attention](#) to an increase in the number of women victims of trafficking arriving in the European Union and called

for comprehensive support and rehabilitation programmes, together with better training for reception centre staff and measures to tackle demand. More recently, the network has [asked](#) the European Commission to extend the mandate of the EU Anti-Trafficking Coordinator and has also drawn attention to the perilous situation of migrant women during the [pandemic](#), to whom safety measures can often not be applied.

FURTHER READING

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ENDNOTES

¹ G. Malgesini, L. Cesarini Sforza, M. Babović, [Gender-based Violence and Poverty in Europe](#), Briefing, EAPN Gender and Poverty Working Group, 2019; A. Peterman, S. Roy, M. Ranganathan, [How is economic security linked to gender-based violence? New insights from the Sexual Violence Research Initiative Forum 2019](#), International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), 2 December 2019; F. Bettio, E. Ticci, [Violence against women and economic independence](#), European Commission, 2017.

² See also [Violence against women and the role of gender equality, social inclusion and health strategies: synthesis report](#), European Commission, 2010, Section 1.13, pp. 81-85.

³ The EU statistics agency, Eurostat is [collecting data](#) for a follow-up survey between 2020 and 2022.

⁴ For this category, though, the data are not available for all Member States. As of 2018, comparable data on women victims of intimate partner femicide were available for 14 Member States. See: the EIGE [gender statistics database](#) and analysis of the data in [The EU is inching towards comparable data on intimate partner violence](#), EIGE, 2020. The [European Observatory on Femicide](#) also published [findings on femicide in Europe](#) in 2018.

⁵ Figures for 2006. See: Estimated mortality related to domestic violence in Europe, summary of scientific report, Psytel, June 2010, p. 5. The scientific report and summary are available at: <http://www.psytel.eu/en/>.

⁶ EIGE is working on a methodology for assessing the number of girls at risk of FGM in the EU, and published its [third report](#) in November 2018, covering Belgium, Greece, France, Italy, Cyprus and Malta.

- ⁷ J. Goodey, [Violence against women: placing evidence from a European Union-wide survey in a policy context](#), *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 2017, Vol. 32(12): 1760-1791.
- ⁸ For an overview of national indicators and definitions, see: EIGE, [Data Collection on Violence Against Women](#).
- ⁹ M. Nogaj, [Combating violence against women: European Added Value Assessment](#), EPRS, European Parliament, 2013, p. 24.
- ¹⁰ W. von Ballegoij, [Equality and the Fight Against Racism and Xenophobia: Cost of Non-Europe Report](#), EPRS, European Parliament, 2018, pp. 25-27. See also earlier scientific analysis: *Estimated cost of domestic violence in Europe, summary of scientific report*, Psytel, June 2009. The report found that domestic violence alone costs the EU a total of €16 billion a year, while the cost of preventing this violence in Europe amounts to tens of millions of euros every year. It also shows that increasing the budget for prevention policies by €1 would generate overall savings of €87, including €30 in direct costs, pp. 3-4. The report and summary are available at: <http://www.psytel.eu/en/>.
- ¹¹ For initial findings see: [Covid-19 wave of violence against women shows EU countries still lack proper safeguards](#), EIGE 18 November 2020. The study will be published in early 2021.
- ¹² The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, in [General Recommendation No 19 \(1992\)](#), contributed to having violence against women recognised as a form of discrimination within the Convention's meaning.
- ¹³ In 2020, the EIGE issued a [review of the BPfA](#) with specific findings and recommendations for the EU and the Member States.
- ¹⁴ Under the Daphne Programme the Commission financed a feasibility [study](#) to assess the possibilities and needs to standardise national legislation on violence against women, violence against children and sexual-orientation violence. It concluded that it would be difficult to find a suitable legal basis in EU law for a number of the proposed minimum standards, and that the EU should use the open method of coordination (OMC) to encourage greater convergence between Member States. See: pp. 188-190.
- ¹⁵ See J. Goodey, p. 1762 and [The Legal Protection of Women From Violence Normative Gaps in International Law](#), Rashida Manjoo, Jackie Jones, eds., Routledge, 2019: Chapter 5.
- ¹⁶ These directives prohibit both harassment on grounds of gender and sexual harassment, and consider them to be a form of gender-based discrimination.
- ¹⁷ The regulation, which has applied from 11 January 2015, is of importance for women [victims of domestic violence](#) who wish to make use of their right to free movement within the EU.
- ¹⁸ For information on divergences, see the results of monitoring by the Council of Europe in [2010](#), [2014](#) and [2020](#) and the [legal definitions](#) and [EU and country factsheets on combating violence against women](#) published by EIGE in 2016.
- ¹⁹ [Protecting women against violence: analytical study of the results of the third round of monitoring the implementation of Recommendation Rec \(2002\) 5 on the protection of women against violence](#), Council of Europe, 2010, pp. 14-15.
- ²⁰ [Violence against women - victim support: review of the Implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action in the EU Member States](#), European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), 2012, pp. 21-22; [Strategic Engagement for Gender Equality 2016-2019](#), pp. 40-46.
- ²¹ See the Council of Europe's monitoring results, cited above.
- ²² For example in its resolutions of [9 June 2015](#), [24 November 2016](#), [14 March 2017](#), [12 September 2017](#), [11 September 2018](#), [28 November 2019](#) and [13 February 2020](#).
- ²³ In its resolutions of [2009](#), [2012](#), [2014](#) and [2020](#), Parliament stated that hundreds of thousands of women in Europe are affected by FGM and called on the Commission and the Member States to take measures to eliminate the practice. The Commission organised a [public consultation](#) on the topic in May 2013. This consultation, as well as a [report](#) of the European Institute for Gender Equality, were used by the Commission in drawing up a series of actions, see: [Towards the elimination of female genital mutilation](#), COM(2013) 833 final of 25 November 2013.

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