

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 about 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 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 Union 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, such as the impact of the economic crisis, and have highlighted the need for a comprehensive EU political framework on eliminating violence against women.

This is an update of an earlier briefing published in June 2013.



In this briefing:

- The problem
- International context
- What is the EU doing?
- Member States
- European Parliament
- Stakeholders' views
- Further information

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

Causes and forms

Violence against women 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 vulnerability¹.

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 or disabled women, or women living in institutions, are more likely to experience violence².

Scale of the problem not known

Reliable and comparable data is still lacking at national and European level. It is difficult to collect data because, for various reasons (including fear and shame), victims often fail to report acts of violence committed against them. According to the [Agency for Fundamental Rights](#) (FRA), four in five women did not turn to any service after suffering violence at the hands of persons other than their partner. The lack of a common definition of violence against women at European level is another obstacle to collecting comparable data³.

Current estimates are alarming. The Council of Europe [considers](#) that 20% to 25% of women in Europe experience physical violence at least once during their adult lives and that more than 10% have suffered sexual violence involving the use of force. As many as 45% of women have suffered some form of violence. According to estimates, 12% to 15% of women in Europe over the age of 16 are victims of domestic violence – the most common form of violence. 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 day⁴.

Consequences

Violence has serious immediate and long-term consequences for the physical and mental health of the women who are victims. It can also have harmful consequences for children who witness it.

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 health care costs, policing and legal costs, lost productivity and social costs. According to a scientific report, domestic violence alone costs the EU a total of €16 billion a year. The cost of preventing this violence in Europe amounts to tens of millions of euros every year⁵. According to a study by the European Parliamentary Research Service, the total annual cost of violence against women in the EU amounted to more than €228 billion in 2011⁶.

Impact of the economic crisis

Some studies have shown that violence against women tends to increase during times of crisis. Losing their job, for example, can cause some men to feel frustrated and act violently⁷. The European Parliament stated in its [resolution of 12 March 2013](#) that the economic crisis fuels harassment, abuse and violence of all kinds against women, and leads in particular to an increase in prostitution. It also states that, in times of crisis and budgetary austerity, women have fewer resources to protect themselves and their children from violence.

International context

United Nations

The [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women](#) (1979)⁸ and the [Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women](#) (1993) are benchmark documents in the field. Although not binding, the declaration is the first international text that deals exclusively with violence against women.

Violence against women is one of the critical areas of concern identified in the [Beijing Platform for Action](#), which was adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995. The platform lists the measures which States, international and non-governmental organisations should take to prevent and tackle this form of violence.

Eliminating and preventing violence against women was the priority theme of the [57th session of the Commission on the Status of Women](#) held in New York in March 2013.

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.

In May 2011, the [Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence](#) ('Istanbul Convention') was opened for signature. It is Europe's first

Daphne programme

Launched in 1997, the Daphne programme seeks to prevent and put an end to violence against women, young people and children. The EU uses the programme to finance measures taken by NGOs, local authorities and research centres, among others, to combat this kind of violence. The [Daphne III Programme](#) (2007-13) had a budget of €116.85 million. The Commission [proposed](#) incorporating the Daphne programme, as from 2014, into the Rights and Citizenship Programme 2014-20. This programme was adopted by the European Parliament and Council on 17 December 2013, and has a maximum budget of €439.5 million for the 2014-20 period. In its [resolution of 2 February 2012](#) the European Parliament stressed that funding for the programme must be at an appropriate level and that its profile should be enhanced.

legally binding convention in the field, and creates a [comprehensive framework](#) for preventing violence, protecting victims and prosecuting perpetrators. So far 20 EU Member States have [signed](#) the convention, and three, Portugal, Italy and Austria, have ratified it.

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

The [Stockholm Programme](#) (2010-2014) stresses that women who are victims of violence are a vulnerable group in need of greater protection, including legal protection, and strengthens the EU's commitment to tackle gender-based violence more effectively. The [Women's Charter](#) adopted by the European Commission in March 2010 declares that a comprehensive action plan will be established to tackle violence against women.

Tackling violence is one of the major areas covered in the [Strategy for equality between women and men](#) (2010-2015). One of its priority actions is to adopt an EU strategy to combat violence against women. In its conclusions of [8 March 2010](#) and [6 December 2012](#), the Council called on the Commission to devise such a strategy.

Legislative measures

The EU does not currently have a specific binding instrument designed to protect women from violence⁹. However, legal instruments have been established in different areas where women can be victims of violence.

These instruments concern, among other things, equal treatment and non-discrimination ([Directive 2002/73/EC](#) concerning equal treatment as regards access to employment and working conditions (recast of [Directive 2006/54/EC](#)) and [Directive 2004/113/EC](#) on equal treatment in the access to and supply of goods and services¹⁰); 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 ([Directive 2012/29/EU](#) on the rights and protection of victims of crime, and [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 matters¹¹).

In the field of Union [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](#).

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 country¹². In some cases, victims must submit a formal complaint before legal proceedings can begin¹³. 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.

Spain: in 2004, a far-reaching piece of [legislation](#) was adopted concerning comprehensive protection measures to tackle gender-based violence. This is the first law of its kind in Europe.

Sweden: prostitution is treated as an act of gender-based violence and is seen as an obstacle to gender equality. In 1999, [legislation](#) was introduced to criminalise the purchase of sexual services.

Besides legislative provisions, in recent years the Member States have adopted policy strategies to combat violence against women, either in the form of national action plans (NAP) on all kinds of violence, or by means of action plans targeting specific forms of violence, or have incorporated measures into other action plans aimed for example at promoting gender equality and social inclusion¹⁴.

Domestic violence and people trafficking are the most common areas addressed by the NAPs. 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 common¹⁵.

European Parliament

The European Parliament first sounded the alarm about the problem of violence against women in its [resolution of 11 June 1986](#). Since then, Parliament has played a particularly important role in the field, including through the work of its [Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality](#) (FEMM). Many texts have been adopted by MEPs in order to address trafficking and forced prostitution of women, FGM¹⁶, gender-based violence in general and, more broadly, issues relating to gender equality¹⁷.

In its [resolution of 26 November 2009](#) Parliament called on the Commission to draw up a comprehensive proposal for a directive on preventing and combating all forms of violence against women. It urged the Member States to recognise sexual violence and rape, including within marriage and intimate informal relationships and/or where committed by male relatives, as offences which result in automatic prosecution. The text also referred to the idea of having a European year for the elimination of violence against women.

Parliament reiterated its call for a European directive in its [resolution of 5 April 2011](#). It stated that not all women in the EU have the same level of protection from male violence. MEPs welcomed the Commission's commitment to draw up a strategy in the field and proposed adopting a comprehensive approach to combating gender-based violence.

More recently, in its [resolution of 6 February 2013](#), Parliament called once again on the Commission to devise an EU strategy for tackling violence against women, which would include the drafting of a directive laying down minimum standards. It also called on the EU and the Member States to sign and ratify the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women.

Finally, in January 2014, the FEMM Committee [adopted](#) a legislative initiative [report](#), with recommendations to the Commission on combating violence against women (rapporteur Antonyia Parvanova, ALDE, Bulgaria). This report, accompanied by a [European Added Value Assessment](#), calls on the Council to add violence against women to the areas of particularly serious crime listed in Article 83(1) [TFEU](#). Moreover, the report calls on the Commission to prepare, by the end of 2014, on the basis of Article 84 TFEU, a legislative proposal establishing measures to encourage and support Member States' actions in the field of preventing violence against women. The Commission is also invited to present a European strategy and an action plan, and to declare a European year for the ending of violence against women, within the next three years. The report should be considered in plenary before the end of the current legislature.

Stakeholders' views

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) [is concerned](#) that the economic crisis is seriously undermining social policies in many Member States and that shelters for women victims of violence are being shut down, prevention projects are being discontinued and national equality budgets are being slashed. The EESC stresses that the crisis and austerity are leading to greater inequality, which exacerbates the conditions which give rise to violence.

The [European Women's Lobby](#) (LEF) [is calling](#) on the EU to establish a comprehensive political framework on eliminating violence against women and to draw up a directive in the field, and supports the idea of a European year on the elimination of violence. It has also drafted an evaluation [report](#) of the NAPs designed to combat violence against women. It concludes, inter alia, that most NGOs working on women's issues are disappointed by the way in which they are consulted by national authorities when the latter draw up and implement action plans. The EWL considers prostitution to be a form of violence against women and is leading a [campaign](#) for its abolition.

The [Women against Violence Europe](#) (WAVE) network [stresses](#) that few EU Member States have created a free national helpline available 24/7. The number of spaces available in shelters for women who are victims of violence is not enough; at EU level only half of the places needed are available. The number of centres for victims of sexual violence is also insufficient.

More information

[Combating violence against women: European Added Value Assessment](#), Directorate-General for Parliamentary Research Services, European Parliament, 2013, 33 p.

[Sexual exploitation and prostitution and its impact on gender equality](#), Directorate-General for Internal Policies, Policy Department C Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs, European Parliament, 2014, 89 p.

[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, 2012, 142 p.

[The issue of violence against women](#), Directorate-General for Internal Policies, Policy Department C Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs, European Parliament, 2010, 38 p.

[Violence against women and the role of gender equality, social inclusion and health strategies: synthesis report](#), European Commission, 2010, 207 p.

[Feasibility study to assess the possibilities, opportunities and needs to standardise national legislation on violence against women, violence against children and sexual orientated violence](#), European Commission, 2010, 210 p.

Notes

- ¹ [Eliminating all forms of gender-based violence: background note](#), Conference on 'Equality between women and men', European Commission, DG Justice, September 2011, p. 6; [The issue of violence against women in the EU](#), Directorate-General for Internal Policies, European Parliament, March 2010, p. 11.
- ² [Violence against women and the role of gender equality, social inclusion and health strategies: synthesis report](#), European Commission, 2010, pp. 81-85.
- ³ For an overview of national definitions, see: [Violence against women and the role of gender equality, social inclusion and health strategies: synthesis report](#), *Ibid.*, p. 37.
- ⁴ 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/>.
For information concerning male victims of domestic violence, see: [Les hommes aussi sont victimes de violence conjugale](#), Le Figaro, August 2010.
- ⁵ Figures for 2006. See: *Estimated cost of domestic violence in Europe, summary of scientific report*, Psytel, June 2009. The report shows that increasing the budget for prevention policies by EUR 1 would generate overall savings of EUR 87, including EUR 30 in direct costs, pp. 3-4. The report and summary are available at: <http://www.psytel.eu/en/>. The issue of the cost of violence is also addressed in [Combating violence against women: stocktaking study on the measures and actions taken in Council of Europe member States](#), Council of Europe, 2006, pp. 8-12.
- ⁶ [Combating violence against women: European Added Value Assessment](#), Directorate-General for Parliamentary Research Services, European Parliament, 2013, p. 24.
- ⁷ [The impact of the global economic crisis on women's well-being and empowerment](#), SIDA, December 2010, pp. 40-41; [The world economic and financial crisis: what will it mean for gender equality?](#), UNIFEM, July 2009.
- ⁸ The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, in its [General Recommendation No. 19 \(1992\)](#), contributed to having violence against women recognised as a form of discrimination within the meaning of the Convention.
- ⁹ Under the Daphne Programme the Commission has 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 concludes 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.
- ¹⁰ These directives prohibit both harassment on grounds of gender and sexual harassment, and consider them to be a form of gender-based discrimination.
- ¹¹ The Regulation, which applies 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.
- ¹² [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. 40-41.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 14-15.
- ¹⁴ [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; [Violence against women and the role of gender equality, social inclusion and health strategies](#), *Op.cit.*, pp. 107-113.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 113-131; pp.138-164.
- ¹⁶ In its resolutions of [2009](#) and [2012](#), 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.
- ¹⁷ [The issue of violence against women in the EU](#), *Op. cit.*, p. 38.

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