Gender-based violence (GBV) is an act of violence ‘directed against a person because of his or her gender and expectations of his or her role in a society or culture’. It is a violation of human rights and – since women and girls are disproportionately affected – one of the key problems to address in order to achieve genuine gender equality. GBV encompasses physical, sexual and psychological violence and can take various forms, such as domestic and intimate partner violence, harassment, stalking, rape, female genital mutilation and femicide. As the world moves online, many forms of GBV are following suit. Both offline and online, they cause substantial harm to victims and society. The surge in GBV during the COVID-19 pandemic and the increased risk of trafficking and sexual violence linked with the war in Ukraine further highlight the need for comprehensive action. While the EU does not have a specific legal instrument to address gender-based physical or cyber violence, it has now acceded to the Istanbul Convention, and in 2022 the European Commission put forward a long-awaited proposal for a directive on violence against women and domestic violence. The European Parliament has called repeatedly for a legally binding EU instrument in this area.

Combating violence against women and domestic violence
Briefing by Ionel Zamfir, September 2023

On 8 March 2022, the European Commission adopted a legislative proposal on combating violence against women and domestic violence, to enshrine minimum standards in EU law criminalising certain forms of gender-based violence, improve access to justice, protection and support for victims, ensure coordination between relevant services, and prevent these types of crime. In July 2023 the Parliament decided to enter into interinstitutional negotiations. It will need to find agreement with the Council, in particular on the extent of EU competences to criminalise at EU level certain forms of violence against women. The position adopted by the Council weakens the proposal significantly by removing rape and other crimes, because the Council considers that there is no legal basis in the Treaties to define them at EU level.

Understanding EU action against human trafficking
Briefing by Martina Prpic, June 2023

Gender plays an important part in human trafficking, as women and men are not trafficked in the same way or for the same purpose. Women and girls represent a disproportionately high number of victims, both globally and at EU level, especially in terms of sexual exploitation. This form of exploitation is still dominant in the EU, even though other forms are on the rise, such as exploitation for forced labour and for criminal activities. The pandemic brought new challenges for victims, as well as amplifying the vulnerabilities of those most at risk.

Preventing and combating trafficking in human beings
Briefing by Martina Prpic, June 2023

In December 2022, the European Commission presented a proposal to review Directive 2011/36/EU to strengthen the rules on combating trafficking in human beings and to improve victim protection. Despite progress made on fighting human trafficking, the Commission reports that, on average, 7 000 people a year are victims of human trafficking in the EU and that this figure is most likely only the tip of the iceberg. This briefing looks into the Commission’s proposal.
Victims’ rights in the EU: Revision of Directive 2012/29/EU
Briefing by Hannah Nafize Ahamad Madatali, June 2023
Directive 2012/29/EU (the Victims’ Rights Directive) establishes minimum standards on the rights, support and protection of victims of crime and seeks to ensure that people who have fallen victim to crime are recognised and treated with respect. It also aims to ensure that victims receive proper protection, support and access to justice. The Victims’ Rights Directive has had a positive effect where implemented. However, the European Commission 2020 evaluation of the directive recognises that there are shortcomings when it comes to its practical implementation by Member States. This briefing is one in a series of implementation appraisals produced by EPRS on the operation of EU legislation in practice.

EU accession to the Istanbul Convention
‘At a glance’ note by Ionel Zamfir, May 2023
After delays in ratification of the Council of Europe’s Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, the Council has requested Parliament’s consent for EU ratification. Parliament’s Committees on Women’s Rights and Gender Equality (FEMM) and Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE) adopted a favourable recommendation on 25 April 2023. In May 2023, MEPs voted in favour of the EU’s accession.

Women’s rights in Afghanistan: An ongoing battle
Briefing by Gabija Leclerc and Rosamund Shreeves, April 2023
Since the Taliban regime took over the country in mid-August 2021, Afghanistan’s record on women’s rights has been manifestly one of the worst in the world. Despite promises to ‘uphold women’s rights in line with Sharia law’, from the very first weeks of its rule, the Taliban began suppressing the rights of their citizens, with women the main target of restrictions. This briefing analyses the current situation of women’s rights in Afghanistan, taking a long view.

Violence against women in the EU – State of play
Briefing by Rosamund Shreeves, November 2022
The EU is tackling the problem of violence against women in various ways, but has no binding instrument designed specifically to protect women from violence. This briefing explains the scale of the problem, including the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the war on Ukraine and the lessons to be learned for future crises. It provides an overview of the international context, EU legislation and political commitments, the activities of the European Parliament, the various approaches of the Member States, and stakeholders’ views.

Violence against women and domestic violence – The new Commission proposal in light of European Parliament requests
Study by Izabela Cristina Bacian and Nora Hahnkamper-Vandenbulck, June 2022
On 8 March 2022, the European Commission presented a proposal for a directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence. This EPRS study, commissioned by the Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality (FEMM), analyses Parliament’s main requests for a legislative framework since 2009 – when Parliament first called for a directive on preventing and combating all forms of violence against women. The study then compares these requests with the provisions of the Commission proposal.
Combating violence against women and domestic violence
Briefing by Laura Zandersone, June 2022
This briefing provides an initial analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the European Commission’s impact assessment (IA) accompanying the above-mentioned proposal, submitted on 8 March 2022. According to the Commission, the proposal sets out targeted rules for the protection of victims of violence against women (VAW) and domestic violence in order to strengthen the actions taken by the Member States. The proposal aims to ensure minimum rules on the level of protection across the EU against such violence, regardless of whether it takes place online or offline.

Zero tolerance for female genital mutilation
'At a glance' note by Rosamund Shreeves, February 2022
The EU is committed to working collectively to eradicate female genital mutilation (FGM), as part of broader efforts to combat all forms of violence against women and girls, and to supporting the efforts of its Member States in this field. The European Commission has undertaken to assess EU efforts to combat FGM every year, on or around 6 February – the International Day of Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation. This publication is a further update of an 'at a glance' note originally published in January 2015.

Combating gender-based cyber-violence
'At a glance' note by Rosamund Shreeves, December 2021
As the world moves online, forms of violence that already affect women and girls disproportionately are following suit, and digital technologies are enabling them to take on new guises. The EU does not have a legislative framework to address this gender-based violence, despite its harmful impacts on individuals, society and democracy. A legislative-initiative report calling for EU legislation to fight gender-based cyber-violence, and provide its victims across the Union with equal protection was adopted during Parliament’s December 2021 plenary session.

Adding gender-based violence to the list of serious crimes in Article 83(1) TFEU
'At a glance' note by Rosamund Shreeves, September 2021
Despite the extent of gender-based violence and the harm it causes, the EU does not currently have a specific legal instrument to address it. An own-initiative legislative report setting out proposals for strengthening the EU's response by identifying gender-based violence at EU level as an area of serious crime was adopted during the plenary session in September 2021.

What if deepfakes made us doubt everything we see and hear?
'At a glance' note by Philip Boucher, September 2021
Deepfakes are hyper-realistic media products created through artificial intelligence techniques that manipulate how people look and the things that they appear to say or do. The accessibility and outputs of deepfake generation tools are improving rapidly, and their use is increasing exponentially. A wide range of malicious uses have been identified, including fraud, extortion and political disinformation. However, the most widespread use so far has been the production of non-consensual pornographic videos, with negative impacts that overwhelmingly affect women. While the technology itself is legal, some malicious uses are not, and a combination of legal and technical measures can be mobilised to limit their production and dissemination.
Gender-based violence as a new area of crime listed in Article 83(1) TFEU – European added value assessment
Study by Cecilia Navarra, Meenakshi Fernandes and Niombo Lomba, with María García Muñoz, June 2021
This European added value assessment supports the European Parliament’s legislative-initiative report on a 'Proposal for a Council decision to identify gender-based violence as a new area of crime listed in Article 83(1) TFEU', 2021/2035(INL). The assessment presents evidence supporting the classification of gender-based violence as a particularly serious crime with a cross-border dimension, estimates the significant benefits that could be generated through EU action, and identifies complementary EU action that could enhance the European added value of this policy option.

Combating gender-based violence – Cyber violence, European added value assessment
Study by Niombo Lomba, Cecilia Navarra and Meenakshi Fernandes, March 2021
With the rise of new technology and social media, gender-based cyber violence is a constantly growing threat with impacts at individual, social and economic levels, on women and girls and on society generally. Action taken so far has been inadequate, and the cross-border nature of gender-based cyber violence has yet to be properly addressed. This European added value assessment (EAVA), which complements the European Parliament’s own initiative legislative report on combating gender-based violence: Cyber violence (2020/2035(INL)) finds that the cost to individuals and society is substantial and that a combination of legal and non-legal policy options would generate the greatest European added value.

War on Ukraine

Russia’s war on Ukraine: The risk of trafficking of human beings
‘At a glance’ note by Maria-Margarita Mentzelopoulou, May 2022
Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has forced millions of people to flee the country or move to safety within Ukraine’s borders, resulting in one of the largest European humanitarian crises of recent times. The chaos caused by the conflict has raised heightened the risk of human trafficking and exploitation, especially for the most vulnerable.

Russia’s war on Ukraine: The situation of LGBTI people
‘At a glance’ note by David de Groot and Micaela del Monte, May 2022
With each passing day, the chaos engendered by the war exacerbates the risk of violence and exploitation, in particular for the most vulnerable, including women, children, Roma people, and members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) community.

Russia’s war on Ukraine: A gender-sensitive humanitarian response
‘At a glance’ note by Rosamund Shreeves, March 2022
Even – or especially – in complex emergency situations, a gender perspective is vital in order to take into account the specific needs of women and men and the different risks to which they are exposed. Humanitarian actors are calling for a gender-sensitive response to the Ukraine crisis, to help tackle barriers to accessing vital services, address increased risks of gender-based violence and facilitate the reception and integration of refugees.

Further reading

Selected online reading on violence against women
EPRS library guide, April 2023
Combating gender-based violence at EU level
An EPRS assessment found that a combination of policy options would generate the greatest European added value, promote victims’ fundamental rights, address the impact on individuals, society and the economy, and support law enforcement and people working with victims.

The deepfake menace: A gendered issue
Deepfakes can be used for a wide variety of purposes, both good and nefarious. Deepfake technologies are currently predominantly used to swap the faces of women with those of actresses in pornographic videos. Victims are at increased risk of defamation, intimidation and extortion.