



WOMEN AGAINST VIOLENCE EUROPE

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WAVE Thematic Paper with Policy Recommendations

How Gender Neutral Policy and Practice Is Dismantling Women's Specialist Support Services and Ways to Counteract It

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I. Introduction

This policy paper is based on the WAVE 2020 Handbook by the Gender Neutrality Working Group called “How Gender Neutral Policy and Practice Is Dismantling Women’s Specialist Support Services and Ways to Counteract It”.¹ The handbook as well as this policy paper deals with the protection of women’s support services² from gender neutral policy and practice.

This policy paper argues that gender neutral policy endangers women’s support services and denies access to safe women-only spaces for women suffering from violence. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, violence against women has significantly increased and women’s support services are suffering from these side-effects.

Therefore, this policy paper claims that gender neutrality should not be applied to women’s support services as well as policies addressing the elimination of violence against women and girls. This can be solved through the application of intersectionality³, funding, commissioning, state policies, ratification and implementation of international treaties as well as effective communication and campaigning. Moreover, this paper states that it is also essential to support anti-violence workers emotionally and psychologically by providing them with access to self-care and a safe, flexible work environment.

The hope is that this policy paper and the related handbook will inform European and national stakeholders to revise gender neutral policies and consider implementing the recommended policies to ensure women’s specialist services are supported.

II. Gender neutrality

Gender neutrality can be defined as ‘a set of policies established by the state and governments to provide services to both men and women that have been funded through public money’⁴. It targets women-only organisations to provide equal services to both men and women

¹ WAVE Handbook 2020: How Gender Neutral Policy and Practice Is Dismantling Women’s Specialist Support Services and Ways to Counteract It. 2020. WAVE.

² Women's specialist support services support women experiencing gender-based violence and their specific needs, such as sexual violence crisis centres and women-only shelters.

³ Intersectionality is a theoretical framework for understanding how aspects of a person's social and political identities combine to create different modes of discrimination and privilege. (Crenshaw, Kimberlé W., "On Intersectionality: Essential Writings" (2017). *Books*. 255. <https://scholarship.law.columbia.edu/books/255>)

⁴ WAVE Handbook 2020: How Gender Neutral Policy and Practice Is Dismantling Women’s Specialist Support Services and Ways to Counteract It. 2020. WAVE.

without considering unequal power relations between men and women nor the prevalence of male violence against women which thereby ignores the roots of gender inequality. Gender neutrality denies access to safe women-only spaces. It is important to name diverse groups of women which suffer from the side-effects of gender neutrality the most:

- Black and minoritised women
- Disabled women
- Lesbian, bisexual, and transgender women
- Women trafficked into different countries
- Women with insecure immigration statuses
- Migrant women
- Women experiencing caste oppression
- Women with mental health needs
- Women in and exiting prostitution
- Women in and exiting the prison system
- Women in the care system
- Women from Roma and traveller communities
- Women with problematic substance abuse issues
- Young women and girls groomed and/or subjected to any form of online abuse where they may not have met the perpetrator or have had any physical contact with him
- Women subjected to sexual harassment affecting their safety in public spaces
- Women subjected to sexual harassment in the workplace, education, and other spaces they access to maximise their life chances and choices
- Women at risk or subjected to violence from gang association and/or involvement
- Women subjected to so-called 'harmful practices'
- Among other groups and categories of women subjected to gender-based violence at home and in the community, across sectors and industries and from the state.

This can be demonstrated through a number of cases which show how gender neutrality has destructive effects on women survivors and their children. For example, in some states, state-run social services apply a gender neutral approach by representing the interests of the dominant group, i.e. men, each time that they do not respond to violence against women, do not take it seriously, or hold the victims co-responsible for the violence. This is problematic

for survivors of violence and makes it more difficult for women's support services to advocate successfully for survivors' rights. For instance, in Slovenia, state-run services practice gender neutrality by holding women responsible for the violence they experience and believing men who claim victimhood when they are denied their male privilege. Through gender neutral policies, these services minimise male violence against women and fail to take into account structural inequalities. Additionally, laws surrounding partner violence are gender neutral which has severe effects on the distribution of resources aimed at eliminating violence. This is also the case in Ukraine, where due to gender neutral language in laws, male perpetrators take advantage of the system and falsely file complaints against their partner. As a result, the police usually fail to protect women, who are the real victims.

Where gender neutral policies exist, women's specialist support services are profoundly impacted in several ways. Firstly, they are underfunded as criteria in funding applications fail to recognise specialist provision to specific groups of women. In addition, the back office and infrastructure of women's specialist support services are under-resourced. Thirdly, their capacity is reduced to undertaking short-term strategic planning which eventually prevents planning for the long-term. Lastly, they struggle to generate reserve income and often experience cash flow problems which can generate further issues in emergency times as during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The following section provides an overview of policy recommendations which WAVE believes are necessary to ensure women's specialist support services receive adequate support and funding in light of gender neutral policies. These recommendations are divided into five key areas where state-level policymaking is needed, namely:

- Gender inclusion through intersectionality
- Funding
- Commissioning
- State responsibility
- Effective communication

In addition to these five key areas, we also provide recommendations and strategies specifically for women's specialist services to support anti-violence workers.

III. Policy Recommendations

1. Gender inclusion through intersectionality

Gender neutral policies and practices overshadow the specific inequalities faced by diverse groups of women with intersecting identities including black and minoritized women, migrant women, and disabled women, among others. Intersectionality should be viewed as a vital concept that considers the ways in which diverse groups of women are subjected to interlocking oppression that impacts their equal participation in the economic, social and political system. Therefore, government agencies should consider the following policy recommendations to ensure intersectional policymaking:

- Address the impact of gender neutrality by **ensuring resources are allocated to women's specialist support services**, including services addressing the needs of Black and minoritised women and other discriminated groups of women through an intersectional framework of support.
- **Create a responsive social policy framework** that addresses historically rooted and structurally identified intersectional oppression to which women from diverse locations and backgrounds are subjected.
- Develop a **post-COVID-19 social justice approach** to social policy grounded in intersectionality which centres voices of diverse groups of women subjected to marginal locations through systemic and institutional discrimination within society.
- **Resist the tendency to centre a corporate mainstream or conservative feminism**⁵ approach as this tends to be tied to the neoliberal marketplace and marginalises women with interlocking identities. This arises through a process of internationalisation within feminism which produces exclusive opportunities from which few women benefit because they are individualising, corporate driven and corporatist. There is thus an absence of intersectionality as ideas about equality become experiments in diversity.

⁵ Corporate mainstream feminism refers to a branch of feminism where women's achievement is measured through the neoliberal model of economic growth which emphasises 'breaking the class ceiling within corporate capitalism'. Related to this, conservative feminism draws on classical feminist notions which narrowly define women's rights for only the most privileged women and rests on conservative gender values.

- Recognise **how gender-neutral policies and practices perpetuate race erasure** which excludes many women from participating in society and exacerbates intersecting oppression.
- **Resist the temptation to categorise sexism and misogyny as a universal experience for all women to avoid reproducing inequalities** for some groups of women. Along with this, it is important **to acknowledge the differential impact of inequality on marginalised women** to ensure that such harms can be addressed through an intersectional lens.
- With regards to the COVID-19 pandemic, emphasis should be placed on intensive **woman-centred trauma-informed support** as the severity and frequency of violence against women with multiple, complex, and intersecting needs has increased. While this pervasive situation requires immediate action, a long-term policy plan also needs to be put in place as the curve on infection rates and exposure to COVID-19 flattens.

2. Funding

With gender neutral policies, women’s organisations remain under-funded and under-resourced as such organisations are disproportionately impacted through specific funding structures. As the WAVE Gender Neutrality Working Group found in their report on protecting women’s specialist services from gender neutral policy⁶, 47% of organisations lost funding in the last 5 years, 72% lost funding due to increased competition, and 66% said that gender neutral organisations were the main competitors for government funding.⁷ The following points are essential policy recommendations which national and international stakeholders can implement to enable women’s organisations to receive funding and support:

- **Reconsider short-termism in funding structures** as these prevent long-term planning for women’s organisations leaving them with reduced capacity to undertake strategic planning.
- Especially with regards to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to **increase the capacity to support emergency needs** which women’s organisations

⁶ WAVE approached 140 members, the questionnaire reached a response of one third of the membership (53 respondents).

⁷ WAVE Handbook 2020: How Gender Neutral Policy and Practice Is Dismantling Women’s Specialist Support Services and Ways to Counteract It

disproportionately face. As such organisations struggle to generate reserve income, emergency funding opportunities can help alleviate cash flow problems.

- Consider **restructuring centralised funding approaches** as these give preference to larger organisations and leave women’s specialist support services out of grant allocations. One way of doing this could be to **increase the capacity of smaller grants which women’s organisations more easily have access to**. This is necessary in order to ensure that smaller organisations which have more expertise on dealing with violence against women and girls have access to funding and also alleviates the pressure on women’s organisations to have to form partnerships to bid for funding.
- Ensure that **Black and minoritised women’s organisations receive adequate funding and resources** as such organisations are disproportionately impacted through exclusion criteria in funding applications that fail to recognise specialist provision to women with intersecting identities.
- **The need for specialist women services and women-only spaces** should be taken into consideration **in grant proposals and funding opportunities**. This is especially pertinent for state funding which should strive to allocate a specific amount of resources and funding to women-only organisations.
- **Review the rules and conditions connected to the use and administration of state and public funds** to check that these are clear and cannot be changed retroactively. This ensures that women’s organisations will not be at risk of being requested to return the funds granted to them and will not be burdened with having to provide an undue amount of evidence.
- It is important that **state and public funds are not only provided for specialist support services but are also available for other activities** such as campaigning, training and advocacy which is crucial for the longevity of women’s organisations.
- Consider **reducing the amount of paperwork needed from women’s organisations** as many feel overburdened and spend a disproportionate amount of time on paperwork.
- **The provision of a comprehensive framework of funding at the system level** is necessary for women’s organisations as it alleviates the strain of project-based funding which such organisations heavily rely on. Additionally, system level funding is important as project-based funding often does not cover staff and other organisation-related costs, which women’s specialist services require.

- Verify that state and public funds to women's organisations take into account **increases in operational costs** as well as inflation when determining fund allocations over multiple years.

3. Commissioning

Gender neutrality is expanded through austerity measures introduced by governments to control public expenditure and reduce the social economy. Across Europe, austerity policies have undermined women's empowerment. With commissioning, fundamental changes are introduced to the women's social economy through the way services are commissioned during times of austerity. Ultimately, commissioning leads to reshaping the women's social sector and proliferation of gender neutral policies and practices by governments that are supported by the broad alliance led by the conservative right. To counteract these measures, the following policy recommendations could be implemented at the state and national level:

- **Gender responsive budgeting for specialist women's organisations** to address the harms of gender neutrality, race erasure and other exclusions and discriminations that are embedded in the current system. This should include a **transformative approach to budget-setting** that recognises social value and community asset and considers long-term preventative violence against women outcomes over short-term gains.
- Reconsider using standardised templates to define the supply market, undertake market research, and assess performance and contract value. Instead, it is important to **acknowledge the various needs of women's organisations such as equal treatment, sustainability, efficiency and improvement which complex procurement processes may overlook and disregard.**
- **Develop an alternative to public procurement policy through grant funding by central government** and guidance to local authorities covering national violence against women priorities. Important to this is the ring fencing⁸ of a women's fund delivered by and for women's organisations inclusive of Black and minoritised women's organisations.

⁸ Ring-fencing refers to the process of ensuring a sum of money or assets are protected and only used for a particular purpose, in this case funding reserved for women's support services.

- **Implement long term structural change** to the fund management systems⁹ in order to address the systemic nature of inequality that is embedded in these systems that manifest as gender neutrality.
- In the short-term, **full eradication of gender neutrality policies and practices** is needed on the following basis: acceptance of specialist women’s services and Black and minoritised women’s services within fund management structures, ring-fenced funding, permanent fund allocation in recognition of the social problem of violence against women, inclusive funding structures for all groups of women and long-term funding sustainability for these organisations.
- **Competitive tendering should exclude specialist women’s organisations working on violence against women** as it does not fit within the social sector and undermines the social value of organisations addressing societal problems that cannot be assessed through competition.
- Develop **long term sustainability planning backed by long-term funding** and resourcing strategies **by the state and government** where these bodies take responsibility for addressing violence against women through appropriate action.
- **Consider the removal of an over-emphasis on financial efficiency and move towards a needs-led approach** that centres women’s experiences, creating safe reporting pathways that women identify for themselves and ensure early intervention, prevention and forms of intervention that reflect the lived experience of women.

4. The responsibility of states

States play a crucial part when it comes to gender neutrality policies. It is essential to ratify international treaties such as the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention)¹⁰ and create space for cooperation between states in the international community. In order to protect women and women’s support services working on the elimination of violence against women, the following should be considered:

⁹ Fund management describes people and institutions that manage investments on behalf of investors.

¹⁰ <https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/rms/090000168008482e>

- **Redefine the UN Sustainable Development Goals¹¹ on gender equality with regards to COVID-19.** WAVE's recent Policy Statement on COVID-19 and Violence Against Women and Girls¹² highlights the widespread effect of COVID-19 on women and girls experiencing violence as well as women's access to specialist services. These goals are even more crucial now as a result of the COVID-19 situation. Therefore, it is important to adapt the aforementioned goals to the current challenges posed by COVID-19 pandemic.
- **Ratify and implement the Istanbul Convention** as it is the only international legal instrument that advances state obligation to ensure the availability of women's specialist support services with trained professionals equipped to properly support women survivors of violence.
- **Adopt the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).**¹³ Although CEDAW does not contain a specific provision on violence against women and domestic violence, it eliminates violence indirectly by tackling gender stereotypes, practices and laws that perpetuate gender inequality. It obliges state parties to modify and abolish social attitudes, cultural patterns and practices which are based on the stereotyped gender roles for men and women.

5. Effective communication

Effective communication is another very important part of fighting gender neutral policies. Although not all these examples are directly connected to eliminating gender neutral policies, they can be very useful for women's specialist services to be more successful in suppressing gender neutral policies:

- **Increase visibility in media** (social and/or classical) as much as possible by sharing the success of organisations working in the field, provide updates on your organisation's successful initiatives and lobby by using media.
- **Contact policymakers and government officials** regularly and begin **intensifying lobbying before a political event** such as an election, targeting all parties running during the election and propose a solution to the current situation.

¹¹ <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/>

¹² http://wave-network.org/wp-content/uploads/WAVE_Covid19statement.pdf

¹³ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cedaw.aspx>

- **Cooperate with other women's organisations**, form a coalition specifically for the cause and agree on a common goal such as renaming a ministry or ratifying the Istanbul Convention. These alliances can often be beneficial to both parties.
- **Ask for support from the outside**. Find support from other campaigns, **international or regional organisations** that are relevant to your cause and engage with them.
- Make sure that your **communication is consistent** and that your message is heard by both policymakers and the public.

6. Recommendations and strategies for women's specialist services

Anti-violence workers need to be supported too. It is essential to ensure there are healthy, safe, and flexible work environments which give adequate attention to their well-being.

To protect the health, both mental and physical, of anti-violence workers it is important to:

- Create **spaces for healing as well as sharing** one's feelings, get **regular consultation and counselling**, and create space for workers who are also dealing with their own problems through one-to-one support.
- **Organise work in a flexible way**, with quiet time to complete tasks, manage the daily workload so that it is not too much.
- **Fund self-care**, write the costs of implementing a collective care culture into the organisational budget, and verify it.
- **Set limits** with clients and colleagues and arrange a comfortable workspace. **Implement a complaints and whistle-blowing policy**, which is vital to enable colleagues to report any colleague, director or other regarding behaviour that may be inappropriate and not conducive to a healthy organisation.

IV. Concluding remarks

This policy paper has outlined how gender neutral policies and practices harm women's specialist support services and women-only spaces by requiring services to address violence

against women and men. Without a gendered response addressing structural inequality and erasure of the full scale of discrimination against all women (race, disability, sexuality, migrant status, among other disadvantages), violence against women will continue to disproportionately exacerbate inequalities, such as during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. A reversal on gender neutral policies and practices by governments supported by sustainable resourcing will help address violence against women and protect women's support services. The hope is that this policy paper and the related handbook will inform European and national stakeholders to revise gender neutral policies and consider implementing the recommended policies to ensure women's specialist services are supported.

Sources

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