



Thematic Paper:

The Importance of Women's Specialist Support Services in Europe



 **Federal Chancellery**

Federal Minister for Women,
Families and Youth



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**OPEN SOCIETY
FOUNDATIONS**



This publication was produced with the financial support of the European Union. Its contents are the sole responsibility of WAVE and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union.

GLOSSARY

DEVAW – UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women

DV – Domestic violence

EUR – Euro

GBV – Gender-based violence

GDP – Gross domestic product

IPV – Intimate partner violence

IC – Istanbul Convention

NGO – Non-governmental organisation

VAW – Violence against women

WSS – Women's specialist support services



Defining violence against women (VAW)

VAW is a complex phenomenon encountered everywhere across the world. For the purpose of this thematic paper, the definition provided by the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (also referred to as Istanbul Convention, hereafter IC) will be considered. Article 3 of the IC states that ‘violence against women is to be understood as a violation of human rights and a form of discrimination against women and shall mean all acts of gender-based violence (GBV) that result in, or are likely to result in, physical, sexual, psychological, or economic harm or suffering to women.’¹ Domestic violence (DV) is further defined by the IC as ‘all acts of physical, sexual, psychological or economic violence that occur within the family or domestic unit, or between current or former spouses or partners, whether the perpetrator shares or has shared the same residence with the victim.’²

Prevalence of VAW

According to the World Health Organisation one in three women worldwide have experienced either physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence in their lifetime.³ A study published by the World Bank estimating the health consequences of GBV showed that rape and DV is a more serious risk factor for disability and death among women between the ages of 15 and 44 than cancer, motor vehicle accidents, war and malaria.⁴ When it comes to lethal victimization among women, data published by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime indicates that in 2017 out of approximately 87,000 female victims of homicide, more than 30,000 women were killed by an intimate partner and a further 20,000 were killed by other family members worldwide.⁵

A survey measuring the prevalence of VAW conducted by the European Union Fundamental Rights Agency in 2014 states that 1 in 3 women in the EU has suffered sexual or physical violence at some point in their lives since the age of 15. Moreover, violence surveys in general indicate life-time prevalence of intimate partner violence (IPV) against women to be between 25 to 30 per cent, and annual prevalence between approximately 2 to 12 per cent.⁶

¹ Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence Article 3.

² Ibid.

³ WHO, *Violence against Women: Key facts*, available at: <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women>

⁴ Heise L.L., Pitanguy J. and Germain A. (2005) *Violence against Women: The Hidden Health Burden*, World Bank Discussion Paper, p. 17.

⁵ UN Office on Drugs and Crime (2018) *Global Study on Homicide: Gender-related killing of women and girls*, p. 10.

⁶ Wathen, N.C. and MacMillan, H. L. (2003), „Interventions for violence against women“, *JAMA*, vol. 289 (3), pp. 589-600, 2003.



The need for women's specialist support services

Currently there is wide recognition of the need to create specialist support services which enable women to realise their right to live a life free from violence and have access to support, justice, redress and rehabilitation. The Council of Europe developed a set of minimum standards for support services⁷ following the principles and recommendations contained in the UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (DEVAW).⁸ The IC is based on a set of recommendations issued by the Council of Europe in 2002⁹, urging States to introduce, develop and improve national policies to tackle VAW, empower victims by avoiding secondary victimization, ensure special training for professionals working in the field of eliminating VAW and undertake regular research and data collection on VAW.

In 1993 when the DEVAW was adopted, States were called upon to ensure to 'the maximum extent feasible in the light of their available resources and, where needed, within the framework of international cooperation, that women subjected to violence and, where appropriate, their children, have specialized assistance.'¹⁰ The women's movement had long called for the adoption of such a declaration, and yet another outcome of this achievement was the establishment of the mechanism of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women.¹¹ Since the endorsement of the DEVAW, there has been increasing global recognition for VAW as a form of discrimination violating women's human rights. In this context, support for victims¹² has historically been provided by women's NGOs, often referred to as the specialist VAW sector.¹³ These organisations have played a fundamental part in driving the policy-making process towards specialized service provision and effective criminalization of VAW, while struggling with significant financial barriers to sustain their work.¹⁴

The minimum standards for service provision enshrined in the IC require state parties to ensure that women survivors of violence and their children have access to short- and long-term specialist support services.¹⁵ These specialist support services include shelters, helplines, and services for women and girls who have experienced sexual violence such as rape crisis or sexual violence referral centres.¹⁶ The approach taken by the IC to tackle VAW is based on the concept of comprehensive and co-ordinated policies encompassing all relevant measures to prevent and combat violence against women and domestic violence, placing the rights of the

⁷ Council of Europe (2008), *Combating violence against women: Minimum standards for support services*, Council of Europe: Strasbourg.

⁸ A/RES/48/104, Declaration on the elimination of violence against women (1993)

⁹ Council of Europe (2002)5: Recommendation Rec(2002)5 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on the protection of women against violence.

¹⁰ GA Res. 48/104, 1993 (DEVAW), Article 4 (g).

¹¹ For further information about the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women see:

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/issues/women/srwomen/pages/srwomenindex.aspx>

¹² Relevant policy and legal guidelines use the term 'survivor' and 'victim' interchangeably; however, the latter is meant to reflect the legal status of victims of crime.

¹³ Council of Europe (2008), *Combating violence against women: Minimum standards for support services*, p. 8.

¹⁴ Merry S. E. (2006), *Human rights and gender violence: Translating international law into local justice*, University of Chicago Press: Chicago.

¹⁵ Article 22, *Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence*.

¹⁶ Articles 23, 24, 25 *Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence*.



victim at the centre of all measures. Measures need to be implemented by way of effective co-operation among all relevant agencies, institutions and organisations (Article 2 of the IC). All measures providing support for victims must be based on a gendered understanding of violence against women and domestic violence and focus on the human rights and safety of the victim. Services must further aim at securing the empowerment and economic independence of women victims of violence. These principles, enshrined in the IC, are also important principles which have been implemented by the WAVE network over the past years (see WAVE reports on the availability of specialist support services in Europe).¹⁷

Cost of violence against women

VAW is a problem that affects all societies, its implications are profound and complex, having an impact not just on individuals but also on the economy as a whole. This is because of the lost economic output, since persons affected by violence cannot develop their full potential and are often left outside the labour market because of the harm and trauma they had suffered. Furthermore, VAW also puts an economic burden on the state because of the costs associated with the justice system, detention facilities, temporary accommodation, but primarily the strain on the health care system and social services. Previous studies have shown that the prevalence of VAW across all regions is extremely high. For example, the total cost of violence against women in one year alone amounts to EUR 2,5 billion EUR in France¹⁸, EUR 70 million in Denmark.¹⁹ An estimate on the total cost of violence against women in the UK indicates that the economic impact is around £40 billion each year.²⁰ Therefore, investing in prevention is one of the most effective ways of reducing the prevalence of VAW and averting its manifestations in the first place.

Prevention of VAW can take many forms, depending on the intended target group for specific measures or interventions, and desired outcomes. The following represent a couple of examples of prevention measures, in line with existing requirements from the IC and recommendations issued by the Council of Europe.

Examples of prevention measures

- **Legislation and policy reforms** that ensure systemic change which eliminates VAW. For example, a comprehensive legal approach from a gender perspective tackling VAW is the Spanish Integrated Protection Measure against Gender Violence Act, which incorporates several protection measures across the public and private sector.²¹

¹⁷ WAVE Country Reports are available at: <https://www.wave-network.org/category/reports/page/3/>

¹⁸ Nectoux et. al. (2010).

¹⁹ Helweg-Larsen et.al. (2010).

²⁰ *Hard knock life: New Philanthropy Capital* (2008), p. 11.

²¹ Hester, M. and Lilley, S.A. (2014), *Preventing violence against women: Article 12 of the Istanbul Convention*, Council of Europe, pp. 16-18.



- **Public awareness-raising campaigns** represent another tool for preventing VAW, as they can challenge stereotypes and patriarchal social norms that perpetuate VAW.²² Therefore, such campaigns need to convey a clear message to the audience, emphasizing that violence against women is a human rights and public health issue that concerns society at large. Furthermore, such campaigns are also advised to target men and boys, in order to challenge their views as to what constitutes acceptable violence, abuse and controlling behaviour in relationships.²³ An example of a campaign raising awareness on violence against women and mobilizing efforts in society to protect the rights of women and children to live a life free from violence is the WAVE Step Up! Campaign.²⁴
- **Working with the education sector** is one of the key target areas for the prevention of VAW. This is also defined as an obligation for ratifying States under Article 14 of the IC. Gender roles and acceptable patterns of behaviour are something that individuals learn in the early stages of life. Hence, it is important to ensure that rigid concepts of masculinity and stereotyped gender roles are challenged through education provided in schools.²⁵ Education curricula should ensure that boys and girls have access to comprehensive programmes informing them about notions of gender equality, promoting positive images of roles in society associated with women and men that challenge negative stereotypes. Youth4Youth represents an example of an intervention aimed at preventing VAW through peer education.²⁶ Activities undertaken under this initiative sought to understand how young people think and behave with regard to their identity, which represented the foundation for further efforts tackling VAW.
- **Addressing vulnerable groups** is important in ensuring that women who are facing multiple, intersecting forms of discrimination are as equally protected as less vulnerable population groups. Targeted and tailored strategies, based on the individual needs of survivors, are needed, as well as an in-depth understanding of all forms of violence against women and their impact. Specialist women's support services for black, migrant and minority ethnic women are crucial for the empowerment of these groups of women and to ensure effective capacity building of different institutions focusing on particular forms of VAW; these may include forced marriage, female genital mutilation and honour-based violence, to avoid discriminatory interventions which can cause secondary traumatisation of survivors. The chain approach (Ketenaanpak) is an example of a prevention programme implemented in the Netherlands seeking to tackle the problem of female genital mutilation.²⁷ The programme adopted a chain approach using existing structures to stop female genital mutilation by ensuring that key actors

²² Ibid. p. 19.

²³ Ibid. p. 19.

²⁴ Further information about the aims and activities undertaken within the frame of the Step Up! Campaign can be found at: <http://wave-stepup.org/>.

²⁵ Hester, M. and Lilley, S.A. (2014), *Preventing violence against women: Article 12 of the Istanbul Convention*, Council of Europe, p. 24.

²⁶ Further information available at: <https://youth4youth.org/>.

²⁷ Hester, M. and Lilley, S.A. (2014), *Preventing violence against women: Article 12 of the Istanbul Convention*, Council of Europe, p. 29.



such as health care professionals, police, schools, midwives, child protection services and migration organisations work together in an integrated and coordinated way. The chain approach is based on the development and implementation of protocols, training of professionals and key persons who are anchored within the risk communities. The aim is to ensure effective, multi-agency working with joint responsibility across all agencies involved.

- **Empowering women** is one of the most important ways to ensure gender equality and the promotion of policies and legislation tackling social norms and attitudes that perpetuate VAW. Article 12 of the IC calls upon state parties to implement programmes and make efforts towards the empowerment of women. Efforts and measures undertaken in this respect should ensure their empowerment in all aspects of life, including the political and economic sphere.²⁸ Measures promoting women's empowerment may include the development of policies that address socioeconomic inequalities and improve the status of women in society. Welfare policies that promote the (re)integration of women into the labour market and policies that ensure access to welfare benefits for socially disadvantaged women represent a few relevant examples in this respect²⁹. Moreover, employers from the private and public sector should adopt policies acknowledging that DV can be an obstacle to women's employment, and furthermore implement mechanisms that can support women to overcome this barrier.³⁰

Existing studies on the cost of VAW and their limitations

Several studies exploring the cost of VAW have been carried out; however, it is important to bear in mind that research like this may be using different methodologies, indicators (such as types of violence analysed) and data samples, therefore it is difficult to compare results across countries directly.

Nevertheless, one common feature of all existing studies is that the numbers they present are in fact underestimates, because they exclude cases of violence that go unreported and furthermore, it is extremely difficult to consider all costs associated with the phenomenon of VAW and DV. The latter also involves long-term effects on children, not only women. It is estimated that the annual cost of VAW in all 28 Member States of the European Union amounted to EUR 228 billion in 2011, representing 1.8% of the entire GDP³¹ of the EU. This amounts to approximately EUR 450 per European citizen every year.³² Given the high economic costs associated with the impact of VAW in society, preventing such violence in the first place may be the most cost-effective option for policy makers. Moreover, by preventing violence a great deal of harm inflicted on women and children could be avoided, enabling them to reach their full potential.

²⁸ Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence: Explanatory Report, p. 68.

²⁹ Hester, M. and Lilley, S.A. (2014), *Preventing violence against women: Article 12 of the Istanbul Convention*, Council of Europe, p. 39.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ European Added Value Assessment: Combatting Violence against Women (2013): Council of Europe, p. 24

³² Austrian Shadow Report to GREVIO (2016), p. 15.



The IC also requires State parties to undertake prevention measures. NGO Shadow Reports submitted to GREVIO³³ also emphasize the need for prevention. The NGO Shadow Report from Austria recommended that at least 5% of the costs associated with VAW (EUR 450) should go into the budget of the Ministry for Women for violence prevention, amounting to approximately EUR 25 per citizen.³⁴ This would amount to EUR 210 million, while the budget of the Ministry was around EUR 10 million in 2016. This is an example of serious underfunding of measures to eradicate violence against women and domestic violence, which exists in all European countries.

The precise measurement of the costs of violence against women is less important than the fact that it adds another important factor to the list of ethical, legal and sociological arguments for the prevention and eradication of violence against women.³⁵ Putting aside ethical considerations that render investment in prevention a necessary undertaking, such an investment brings substantial economic benefits, as it helps reduce the enormous costs generated by the impact of VAW on society and people.

An economic lens shows that violence against women has a negative impact on the economy as it leads to social exclusion and reduces economic output. Actions to prevent VAW and scale down its prevalence in society are beneficial to the economy by increasing output and productivity, and by reducing the costs associated with VAW. The following available figures referring to the cost of VAW in several European countries (based on different methodologies).

Available figures:

- VAW has a negative impact as a consequence of victims/survivors taking time off from work because of their injuries, be it physical or psychological.³⁶
- According to a study published by the European Institute for Gender Equality, the cost of lost economic output of VAW in the UK for the year 2012 was approximately EUR 3,6 billion. The cost of lost economic output of intimate partner violence against women for the same period of time was approximately EUR 1,5 billion.³⁷
- According to the European Added Value Assessment, 'the annual cost to the EU of VAW is estimated at EUR 228 billion in 2011 (1.8% of EU GDP), of which EUR 45 billion per year relate to expenditures involving public and state services and EUR 24 billion per year to lost economic output.'³⁸
- A study carried out in France states that the total cost of intimate partner violence in France is estimated at EUR 2,5 billion a year.³⁹ This number includes healthcare costs,

³³ GREVIO, short for Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, is the independent expert body responsible for monitoring the implementation of the IC in ratifying States.

³⁴ Austrian Shadow Report to GREVIO (2016), p. 15.

³⁵ European Added Value Assessment: Combatting Violence against Women (2013): Council of Europe, p. 25.

³⁶ Walby & Olive 2014.

³⁷ Walby & Olive 2014, p. 129.

³⁸ European Parliament. (2014). European Parliament resolution of 25 February 2014 with recommendations to the Commission on combating Violence against Women (2013/2004(INL)). Para R.

³⁹ M. Nectoux et. al. (2010).



social and justice services, production losses as a result of death, imprisonments, and absenteeism among other.

- A study carried out in Denmark indicates that VAW costs the Danish society approximately EUR 70 million every year.⁴⁰
- E. Villagómez conducted a study in 2010 exploring the costs of DV against women by partners and ex-partners in Andalucía. Results point out that the annual costs are at EUR 2,356 million.⁴¹

The Value of women's specialist support services

Within the discourse around the enormous cost of VAW to society and the need for prevention, it is essential to highlight the outstanding value provided by WSS. Most women-run WSS are rooted in feminist principles, with their values and political approaches, which put the woman and her personal history, specific resources and desires at the centre of the professional and empathic support. The support provided is respecting her agency and values and empowering her autonomy and self-determination. Moreover, this kind of approach helps her find her way as a woman and as mother to protect herself and her children and to live a life free from violence. With their decades of professional experience, the women providing WSS have developed the capacity to actively implement these values not only within their working practise, but also in society as a whole. This is done through supporting individual women and by developing efficient cooperation with other relevant actors (for example social and health services, police, judiciary), by networking and delivering training programs for relevant professionals, strengthening the perspective on VAW and GBV according to the definition recently introduced by the IC in article 3.

Through this comprehensive approach WSS prevent repeat victimization and ensure that women and children are able to rebuild their lives after experiencing violence and abuse, including re-entering the labour market and continuing their education. Existing research shows that WSS by ensuring increased economic independence for women survivors of violence, also reduce state benefit spending.⁴² Moreover, WSS work with some of the most vulnerable and marginalised women within society, which often experience multiple forms of violence and discrimination. Hence, WSS have acquired specialist expertise in providing programmes that are truly tailored to women's specific needs.⁴³

Overall WSS not only mitigate the emotional, psychological and physical impact of VAW on women by increasing their self-confidence, autonomy and independence, but they also create substantial added value for society as a whole. This is evidenced through the following:

- WSS reduce the need for repeat interventions: Tailored interventions by WSS ensure women and children reach empowerment, long lasting autonomy, and safety faster and with less barriers than through generic support services. The psychological and

⁴⁰ Helweg-Larsen et.al. (2010).

⁴¹ E. Villagómez (2010).

⁴² *Hidden value: Demonstrating the extraordinary impact of women's voluntary and community organisations* (2011), p. 8.

⁴³ *Hidden value: Demonstrating the extraordinary impact of women's voluntary and community organisations* (2011), p. 10.



physical health of women and children is improved and protected; the quality of their lives is significantly increased.

- WSS create substantial social value for a society: ‘For every £1 a funder invests into a WSS, they create between £6-8 of social value for overall society.’⁴⁴
- A study carried out in the UK indicates that WSS create significant savings to the: criminal justice system, civil legal services, healthcare, social services, housing and refuges, more than £1.9 billion for the economy (based on time off from work because of injuries), and just over £9.9 billion in ‘human and emotional’ costs, for example, the cost of domestic murders and attempted murders, threatening behaviour and the subsequent pain, suffering and fear caused.⁴⁵

Apart from the financial savings WSS create in societies in which they exist, it is important to acknowledge that they also serve a vital purpose beyond their favourable financial impact—WSS provide women with the essential support they need in order to rebuild their lives. Particularly when it comes to groups of women who experience greater marginalization and isolation in society, women-only services are the last resort for many women who would otherwise not engage with services.⁴⁶ Previous research also shows that many women prefer to access women-only services because these provide an environment that promotes empowerment and recognizes the different and specific needs women have.⁴⁷ When women access women-only services, they realize that their experiences of sexism, racism, or violence are not isolated, enabling them to find mutual support and self-determination.

One of the most important drivers behind the policy-making process in the field of VAW is reliable, accurate and comparable data across countries. Data collection is therefore an essential component for demonstrating the positive impact of WSS on society and the economy. Article 11 of the IC is centred around the importance of data collection for preventing and combating VAW and DV. The set of obligations imposed by the IC require State parties to collect disaggregated statistical data targeting victims and perpetrators of violence, to assess whether existing policies meet the needs of those affected by violence. Relevant statistical data include administrative data, public health data, criminal justice data and also data collected by NGOs.⁴⁸ Apart from recording data on the number of victims and perpetrators of crimes associated with VAW, it is also important to collect data on victim’s experiences of violence, reasons for not reporting and the services received.⁴⁹ WSS are thus in a favourable position to collect data on the services provided and the users who access these.

⁴⁴ Solace Women’s Aid and Ascent (2015), *Ascent Advice and Counselling: For women and girls affected by domestic and sexual violence*; *Hidden value: Demonstrating the extraordinary impact of women’s voluntary and community organisations* (2011).

⁴⁵ UK Women’s Budget Group 2017.

⁴⁶ Women-only services: Making the case, A guide for women’s organizations (2011), Women’s Resource Centre, p. 17.

⁴⁷ Women-only services: Making the case, A guide for women’s organizations (2011), Women’s Resource Centre, p. 18.

⁴⁸ Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence: Explanatory Report, p. 63.

⁴⁹ Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence: Explanatory Report, p. 65.



WAVE has been regularly collecting data on the number of WSS in Europe since 2011 and sought to identify gaps and challenges in the field of specialist service provision. The latest WAVE Country Report 2017 provides an overview of the number of women's helplines and women's shelters, including bed spaces, available in all 46 EU and non-EU countries surveyed; information on the number and type of women's centres available in all countries included in the research sample, and national action plans or strategies addressing VAW is also presented.⁵⁰ Another important aspect related to the work and sustainability of WSS in Europe is available funding, and the sources from where this is secured. Latest research carried out by WAVE shows that state funding for women's specialist services has been significantly reduced over the past 5-7 years and many WSS are increasingly struggling to survive and are trying to identify alternative funding sources.⁵¹

Concluding remarks

Ensuring specialist service provision for women and children affected by violence is one of the key requirements from the IC. A considerable number of existing studies reveal the high impact VAW has on society, firstly in terms of the amount of suffering caused by violence, and secondly in terms of lost economic output, costs incurred on the criminal justice and health care system. VAW and DV not only affect women, but these also have a long-term impact on children. In 70-90% of domestic violence incidents children are in the same or next room, leaving many with short or long term psychological impacts⁵².

WSS are essential in providing women with a safe haven from violence, offering legal advice and counselling as well as practical advice (i.e. on safe re-housing, risk management, social benefits etc) helping women regain their self-esteem and empowering them to leave a violent relationship. By supporting and financing the work of organisations providing this type of specialist support, governments and decision makers can significantly reduce human and economic costs associated with the impact of VAW. Not only can women's and children's lives be saved this way, their abilities to re-integrate with the wider society, (re-)enter the labour market, continue education and ultimately rebuild their lives will thus be ensured.

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⁵⁰ WAVE Country Report (2017), p. 13.

⁵¹ WAVE Country Report (2017), p. 6

⁵² https://www.naccc.org.uk/downloads/NewsItems/APPG_Inquiry_report_Domestic_Abuse_Child_Contact_and_the_Family_Court.pdf



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