



# WAVE POLICY STATEMENT

## COVID-19 and Violence against Women and Girls

WAVE shares the concern expressed by UN Secretary-General's on the impact of the recent global pandemic of COVID-19 on women, particularly in relation to emerging evidence on increased reporting of [violence against women and girls](#) (VAWG). Through the ongoing input from our WAVE members including women's specialized services (WSS) from across Europe, WAVE is very well placed to testify of the widespread effect of the COVID-19 crisis on women and girls experiencing VAWG.

In light of the current COVID-19 pandemic, women's specialist services find themselves in new territory. In response, WAVE organised a [series of webinars](#) to support its members and all women's specialist support services going through this challenging time.

## Impact of COVID-19 and VAWG

WAVE members report that since the outbreak of COVID-19, reports of violence against women, and particularly domestic violence, have increased dramatically in several countries. Women are in increased danger not only due to the widespread confinement measures in place, but also due to the pressures imposed on state institutions – including the police, social services and the courts – challenging their ability to effectively respond to violence against women. While in some countries, reports of domestic violence have been increasing, other countries have reported a drop in requests for help. This also reflects the gender digital divide, where women and girls may not have access to technology in order to access services, or may not be able to use mobile or other devices due to close monitoring by the perpetrator or other family members. The increase in online communication has also exacerbated the risks of online violence against women including stalking, bullying, sexual harassment, and sex trolling.

WAVE members also highlight the disproportionate impact of the crisis on women that are particularly vulnerable to the negative social and economic impact of the crisis, including women of colour, migrant and refugee women, Roma women, and LGBTQ+ persons, and women of poor and working class background. Pandemics of this nature exacerbate and exploit existing inequalities. They do not alleviate them. The disproportionate impact COVID-19 on specific communities due to existing health inequalities such as the lack of access to quality health services and lack of attention to the needs of diverse communities results in high prevalence of pre-existing conditions and make com-

munities more vulnerable to the disease. Further, the lack of data disaggregation means that the disproportionate impact on diverse communities is not fully acknowledged by government. Where there is a failure in recognition, equalities will not be centred in policy making during the crisis, or in decisions about funding diverse communities. This creates the tendency to respond to VAWG during the crisis through simplified measures, which fail to account for the need for nuanced responses or particular need for trauma-informed wrap-around support to diverse groups of women.

Women's specialist services have also been affected due to the current health crisis due to increased demand for services and the need to administer essential services differently in order to comply with restrictions in movement and social distancing. Increased demand for emergency shelter has also brought to the fore the already precarious situation of women's refuges and shelter, with number of beds across Europe, falling woefully short of Istanbul Convention requirements.<sup>1</sup> Lack of capacity and space to accommodate survivors and their children compounded by the challenge of providing adequate measures for isolation or quarantine, points to the critical need for increased financial support to specialist support services. Also critical, is the need for authorities to continue to offer victims access to emergency barring, restraining and protection orders to avoid stretching women's emergency shelters past capacity.

<sup>1</sup> WAVE country report 2019 [https://www.wave-network.org/wp-content/uploads/WAVE\\_CR\\_200123\\_web.pdf](https://www.wave-network.org/wp-content/uploads/WAVE_CR_200123_web.pdf)

# Long-term consequences of COVID-19 and implications for VAWG

With many EU governments announcing plans to gradually lift restrictions, it is vital to take into account and prepare for the long-term consequences of the crisis and its implications for VAWG. The economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic will very likely result in a recession in the EU. With women more likely to be in part-time, temporary and precarious employment, the financial instability that often prevents domestic violence victims from leaving abusers is likely to be exacerbated and place the most vulnerable groups of women at an even higher risk of violence. The financial burden to public finances in the aftermath of the

pandemic is also likely to threaten the already reduced economic support to women's specialist services and the capacity of women's organisations to advocate for policy reforms on VAWG. The likelihood of austerity measures will also have a disproportionate impact on women and the VAWG sector, as witnessed during the 2008 financial crisis.

It is crucial that EU Member states and EU institutions step up to ensure a comprehensive response to the impact of COVID-19 on VAWG.

## WAVE recommendations

- The **Council of Europe Convention on the Preventing and Combating of Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention)** must play a key role in adopting a **gender sensitive, victim-centred and human rights based response to the crisis**. To this end, we highlight the declaration recently issued by the Committee of Parties to the Istanbul Convention. The declaration offers practical recommendations and guidance for governmental action during the exceptional circumstances presented by the outbreak of the current pandemic its aftermath.
  - WAVE urges the EU and its member states also to **accelerate the conclusion of the EU's accession to the Convention** in order to facilitate the full implementation of its provisions across the EU.
  - It is imperative that the European Commission revisit the **EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025**, drafted before the current health crisis, in order **to ensure that it adequately responds to the new and emerging needs presented by the COVID-19 and its impact on women and girls, particularly women already experiencing multiple discrimination**. We also stress the importance of **honouring the commitment made to integrate a gender perspective in all EU policies** and major initiatives.
  - The **collection of sex-disaggregated data is imperative in order to fully understand the disproportionate impact of the crisis on VAWG** and inform support policies and funding decisions in the aftermath of the crisis. Such data collection efforts should not put women and girls at greater risk of violence and distress.
  - **Emergency laws introduced by governments to address the crisis have largely been restrictive in terms of rights-based approaches and protections**. The consequent increase policing and surveillance in communities have been applied disproportionately and without accountability and transparency. WAVE calls for assurances that restrictive laws and measures are short-term and do not extend beyond the crisis period.
  - The backlash against women's rights and gender equality continues to be a reality across Europe as well as the hostile environment against migrant women. We must ensure that the current health crisis is not used to reinforce and accelerate this backward trend. **Restrictive measures that existed before the crisis must be lifted and all women should be granted safe access to public services** without the fear of detention and deportation.
  - Specialist women's organisations must be resourced to meet need through **a clear government recognition of women's specialist services backed by long term funding commitment**. As with this pandemic, we know that there is fluctuating need for service during the initial lockdown period, which is called the 'suppression of need'. Once the curve is flattened, service will need to support the 'cumulative effect of need'. Women's organisations must be fully resourced to meet this need.
  - It is vital to **ensure that women's organisations participate in decision-making processes around long-term recovery** so that needs and concerns of women and girls experiencing violence are included in prevention of and responses to violence against women and girls.
  - **Gender equality and VAWG must be mainstreamed in the Multiannual Financial Framework 2021–2027 and the proposed Digital Europe programme** in order to ensure sufficient resources to prevent and combat VAWG.
  - **EU liquidity measures provided by European Investment Fund and other measures to help hard-hit small and medium businesses must also include the non-profit sector providing services to citizens**, such as women's specialist services, shelters and helplines.
- Creating a world free from violence against women and girls has been the mission of the WAVE Network for the past 25 years. The above policy recommendations are imperative for independent women's NGOs to continue the crucial work of protecting women and girls and for an inclusive and sustainable post-COVID-19 recovery.