

Women's Specialist Services Stand Together Against Gender-Based Violence

WAVE Network Statement on International Women's Day 2023

On International Women's Day, the Women Against Violence Europe (WAVE) Network reaffirms its **daily commitment to women and girls, especially to survivors of gender-based violence (GBV)**, demanding an active response from governments and society to the defence of women's rights and an end to violence against women (VAW) and domestic violence (DV). **Until the day no woman or girl will have to face gender-based violence, Women's Specialist Services (WSS) will remain on the frontline providing specialised women-centred and trauma-informed support.**

Despite years of work, gender equity in Europe is still an unfulfilled promise for human rights. Violence against women and domestic violence remain widespread forms of gender inequality across the European Union, Europe, and beyond, deeply entrenched in our social norms and stereotypes. For instance, **during COVID-19 lockdowns, domestic violence and abuse reports spiked¹ due to women and children being confined at home with their abusers, leading to a consequent increase in the number of contacts to women's specialist helplines².** Likewise, the pervasiveness of gender-based violence in Europe, which disproportionately affects women and girls, was estimated by FRA in its 2014 survey at 33%, meaning that one in three women has experienced physical and/or sexual violence since the age of 15³.

Next to domestic violence, EU young and adult female citizens also face harmful stereotypes, hate speech, cyber violence, online and street harassment, sexual harassment, and discrimination at the workplace, and can also fall victim to human trafficking. According to EIGE, **the estimated cost of these various forms of gender-based violence across the EU is EUR 366 billion per year, with the costs of violence against women and girls amounting to EUR 289 billion (79%), and costs for domestic and intimate partner violence (of which 87% is carried out against women) at EUR 175 billion⁴.** In addition, the overall costs of **cyber harassment and cyber stalking against women and girls are between EUR 49 and 89.3 billion⁵.**

To defend the right of every woman and girl to live a life free from all forms of violence, **action must be taken to prevent gender-based violence from happening in the first place, and to**

¹ European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), The Covid-19 pandemic and intimate partner violence against women in the EU, 2021. Available at <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/6af1ff62-82e8-11eb-9ac9-01aa75ed71a1/language-en/format-PDF/source-197868801>.

² Women Against Violence Europe (WAVE) 2021 Country Report: Women's Specialist Support Services in Europe and the impact of COVID-19 on their provision. Available at <https://wave-network.org/wave-country-report-2021/>

³ Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA), Violence Against Women: an EU-wide survey, 2014. Available at: https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2014-vaw-survey-main-results-apr14_en.pdf.

⁴ EIGE, The costs of gender-based violence in the European Union, 2021. Available at <https://eige.europa.eu/publications/costs-gender-based-violenceeuropean-union>.

⁵ European Parliament Research Service (EPRS) Combating gender-based violence: Cyberviolence, European added value assessment, 2021, p. 8. Available at [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/662621/EPRS_STU\(2021\)662621_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/662621/EPRS_STU(2021)662621_EN.pdf).

ensure that victims and survivors have access to the specialised services they need. The proposed European Directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence is a step forward in this direction by introducing EU sectorial legislation for the protection of women and girls victims of GBV.

WAVE calls on Member States and the European Parliament to adopt this legal instrument, include the amendments put forward by our network of Women's Specialist Services, and continue working towards the full accession of the European Union to the Istanbul Convention.

To successfully prevent and combat violence against women and girls, dedicated legal instruments and frameworks of specialist support provided by feminist civil society organisations must be in place. **Only by acknowledging the sectorial competencies that women-led and feminist civil society organisations have in tackling gender-based violence will women survivors be ensured that they will receive the specialised services they need to support and empower them in breaking free from violence.** Women's Specialist Services⁶ are best placed to provide this holistic response to the needs of victims of VAWG and DV because they provide services based on gendered, specialised methodologies of intervention and decades of expertise.

The path to justice and recovery for women and girls victims of VAW and DV will only be complete when an institutional gendered approach is adopted and women's prevention services besides women's specialist services are fully integrated as an irrefutable step in service provision in response to gender-based violence. Therefore, we call on EU institutions and Member States to stop pushing for gender-neutral services which continue to reinforce the institutional violence women and girls currently face, when they gather the courage to denounce an abuser and demand their rights.

The WAVE Network will continue carrying out its advocacy and campaigning work for stronger regional, national, and international legislation to protect and uplift women's rights, collecting crucial country-specific data on the access to, and demand of, Women Specialist Services in Europe and making it available through our WAVE Country Report. Furthermore, we will continue to recognise youth engagement and leadership as an intrinsic part of violence prevention efforts and continuously amplify youth voices and inclusion through the WAVE Youth Ambassadors initiative, and carry on providing our members with tools and financial resources so that they can maintain their support to women and girls, especially in the face of emergent crises that disproportionately impact women, such as the war in Ukraine and the earthquake in Türkiye and Syria.

As a network of women, representing more than 1,200 organisations under the umbrella of 164 members in 46 European countries, we stand in power and solidarity with women and girls in all their diversity. Support our work!

The WAVE Network

⁶ In the form of primary prevention services, women's support centres, women's shelters, helplines, rape crisis or sexual violence referral centres.