



Women  
Against  
Violence  
Europe

**Agents  
of Change:**

**Women's Specialist  
Services and Their  
Feminist, Multi-Level  
Approach to Tackling  
Violence Against  
Women and Girls**

## IMPRINT

---

<b>Publisher:</b>	WAVE – Women Against Violence Europe
<b>Research Coordinator:</b>	Léa Dudouet
<b>WAVE Team authors:</b>	Léa Dudouet, Elena Floriani, Marta Konrad
<b>External researcher and co-author:</b>	Claudia Pividori
<b>Acknowledgements:</b>	Baljit Banga, Valentina Cecchi, Anca Ciupa, Stephanie Futter-Orel, Carlotta Geremia, Eliana Jimeno, Alexandra Legentil, Beverly Mtui, Morgane Thomas, and WAVE Board Members and Advisory Board Members who provided invaluable input and insights during the initial planning phase as well as all WAVE Members who agreed to be interviewed and responded to the survey.
<b>Graphic Design:</b>	Lena Lojić
<b>Place and year of publication:</b>	Vienna, May 2026
<b>Please cite this report as:</b>	WAVE Network. (2026) Agents of Change: Women’s Specialist Services and Their Feminist, Multi-Level Approach to Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls. Vienna: Women Against Violence Europe.


<b>WAVE Information Centre:</b>	Monday–Thursday: 9:00 to 17:00
<b>Phone:</b>	+43 1 548 27 20
<b>E-mail:</b>	office@wave-network.org
<b>Website:</b>	www.wave-network.org
<b>ZVR:</b>	601608559

The contents of this publication are the sole responsibility of the WAVE Network and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of WAVE’s funders.



**Funded by  
the European Union**



 Federal Chancellery  
Republic of Austria

 Federal Ministry  
Women, Science  
and Research  
Republic of Austria

 Federal Ministry  
Labour, Social Affairs, Health,  
Care and Consumer Protection  
Republic of Austria

# Table of contents

<b>LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>FOREWORD</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>METHODOLOGY</b>	<b>11</b>
Research Design	11
Data collection	14
Data Analysis	18
Limitations	19
<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>20</b>
Historical Account of the Role of Women’s Specialist Services in Shaping the Discourse on Violence Against Women and Modelling Support Services	20
Current Challenges	22
Normative Framework for the Recognition of the Role of Women’s Specialist Services	26
Showcasing the Value of Women’s Specialist Services	27
<b>● WOMEN’S SPECIALIST SERVICES AT THE INDIVIDUAL LEVEL</b>	<b>33</b>
Feminist and Gender-Specific Approach	33
Survivor-Centred Approach	36
Empowerment, Solidarity, and Organisational Care	40
<b>● WOMEN’S SPECIALIST SERVICES AT THE COMMUNITY LEVEL</b>	<b>47</b>
Effective Multi-agency Cooperation with Government and Key Institutions	47
Promising Partnerships and Other Forms of Collaboration	52
Tackling Violence through Primary Prevention	56
<b>● WOMEN’S SPECIALIST SERVICES AT THE SOCIETAL LEVEL</b>	<b>63</b>
Shifting Societal Narratives and Raising Awareness	63
Influencing Policy and Institutional Frameworks	67
Women’s Specialist Services in the Face of Backlash	70
<b>CONCLUSION</b>	<b>75</b>
<b>GLOSSARY</b>	<b>77</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>	<b>81</b>

# List of Abbreviations

DV	Domestic Violence
EU	European Union
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
GREVIO	Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence
LGBTQI+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex and other identities
MARAC	Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences
NAP	National Action Plan
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
UN	United Nations
UN	Women United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women
VAWG	Violence Against Women and Girls
WAVE	Women Against Violence Europe
WHO	World Health Organisation
WSS	Women's Specialist Services

# Foreword

Rooted in feminist movements and decades of collective struggle, women's specialist services (WSS) not only support women and their children before and throughout the cycle of violence but also actively challenge the structural inequalities and patriarchal power relations that allow violence against women and girls (VAWG) to persist. In doing so, *WSS function as agents of social, cultural, and political transformation, continuously developing survivor-centred and gender-specific practices, identifying gaps in policy and legislation, and advancing more effective intersectional and human rights-based responses to VAWG.*

WAVE uses the term *women's specialist services* to refer to feminist services that support women and their children experiencing (or at risk of experiencing) violence. These include, but are not limited to, women's support centres, women's shelters, helplines, rape crisis and sexual violence referral centres, as well as specialist primary prevention services. WSS are grounded in a gendered understanding of violence and in the recognition that VAWG is both a cause and a consequence of women's structural inequality. As such, they are vital partners to governments, policymakers, and all actors committed to ending VAWG.

For the purposes of this study, WAVE distinguishes between women's specialist services, general services, and generic services to differentiate gender-specific, survivor-centred services described in Article 22 of the Istanbul Convention from other support services falling under Article 20. General services refer to broader support services offered by public authorities, including social services, health services, and employment services, that are accessible to survivors of violence but are not necessarily gender-specific. These services play an important complementary role but are not

designed to replace WSS. Generic services, as used in this study, refer to victim support providers that are neither WSS nor explicitly gender-specific. This category includes broad-mandate non-governmental organisations, institutional actors, or general victim support services that offer assistance to victims of all crimes without a specific focus on VAWG or a feminist, gender-specific analytical framework. This distinction is not intended to devalue the role of general or generic services, but to highlight that they cannot substitute WSS.

This study was made possible thanks to the ongoing support, input, and advice from WAVE Members and reflects a collective effort within the WAVE Network to amplify the voices of WSS across Europe. While WAVE has produced research underscoring the essential role of WSS in addressing VAWG over the last three decades, the current political and funding climate calls for a renewed and unequivocal emphasis on WSS as paramount and indispensable. Across Europe, backlash against women's rights, coupled with the increasing generalisation and gender-neutralisation of support services, has undermined the work of WSS. These developments obscure the gendered nature of violence, divert public resources away from specialist services to generic services, and weaken WSS's capacity to prevent further violence.

The study explores the value of WSS across multiple levels based on the socioecological model of violence, examining the work and impact of WSS on three interconnected levels of intervention. At the ● **INDIVIDUAL LEVEL**, this study examines how feminist and gender-sensitive approaches underpin WSS's work and the provision of tailored support, ensuring women and girls' intersecting needs are at the centre of all interventions. At the ● **COMMUNITY LEVEL**, the study explores how WSS engage in multi-agency cooperation, develop local partnerships and specialised training for professionals, and promote primary prevention activities, while also reflecting on the challenges and successes of collaboration with other actors. Finally, at the ● **SOCIETAL LEVEL**, this study examines the political and advocacy role of WSS, their impact on policy and legislative developments, and current challenges such as anti-gender backlash, funding restrictions, and recent developments shaping the future of WSS.


The purpose of this study is to serve as an advocacy tool for WSS and their allies. It aims to inform policymakers, funders, and decision-makers at local, national, and European levels about the irreplaceable role of feminist, gender-specific services in addressing VAWG. Grounded in the experiences of WSS and feminist women's rights organisations operating in diverse European contexts, the study does not claim to speak on behalf of all WSS globally. Rather, it offers a European perspective shaped by the realities faced by WAVE members and provides a robust basis for why WSS are essential, not only for women survivors of violence, but for society as a whole.

# Methodology

## Research Design

The idea for this study emerged during an internal strategic meeting in early 2024. It was subsequently discussed with the WAVE Board and Advisory Board at the Spring Advisory Board Meeting in Vienna in May 2024. There was unanimous agreement on the need for a study that showcases the added value of women's specialist services (WSS) in preventing and responding to violence against women and girls (VAWG), particularly in a context of shrinking space for feminist civil society and shifting policy priorities across Europe. Following consultations with key WAVE bodies, a concept note was developed outlining the rationale for the study and research questions.

A call for an external researcher was sent out to all WAVE Members in July 2024. The main tasks of the external researcher included selecting the appropriate research methodology, validating the research framework, providing input on the expert interview questionnaire, and providing relevant materials and other research advice as needed. It was later agreed that the external researcher would also be responsible for drafting the introductory chapter, reviewing all other chapters, and overseeing literature referencing throughout the study, including its quality and credibility. A key consideration for the external researcher was that they should not only provide feedback based on past research experience but also from frontline experience directly supporting survivors of VAWG. This ensured that the study's research framework and methodology appropriately reflected the situation and context of WSS. Starting in August 2024, the WAVE Office project team met with the external researcher on a regular basis to refine the research aims and questions.

The  **SOCIOECOLOGICAL MODEL** (also referred to as the ecological model) of violence was chosen as the basis for the research design because it offers a comprehensive, multi-layered framework for understanding the interconnected principles underpinning WSS's work and their role in empowering women and girls. The socioecological model was initially developed to explain how different environmental systems indirectly shape individual and community experiences.<sup>1</sup> The model was later adapted to violence against women, theorising that VAWG occurs due to interlocking multi-level factors, including on a personal or individual level, situational or community-based level, and socio-cultural or societal level.<sup>2</sup>

Importantly, the socioecological model also highlights how interactions across these levels influence behaviours and risks over the life course, providing critical insights into when and where interventions should be introduced to disrupt the cycle of violence or prevent violence from occurring in the first place. The socioecological model has been utilised by the World Health Organisation (WHO) as a framework for violence prevention, with the aim of reducing risk factors and strengthening protective factors across different manifestations of VAWG.<sup>3</sup> By illustrating these interconnections, the model promotes the development of cross-sectoral prevention policies and programmes that embed effective strategies into broader responses to VAWG.

- 1 Bronfenbrenner, U., 1977. Toward an experimental ecology of human development. *American Psychologist*, 32(7), pp. 513–531.
- 2 Heise, L., 1998. Violence against women: An integrated, ecological framework. *Violence Against Women*, 4(3), pp. 262–290.
- 3 World Health Organization, 2010. Preventing intimate partner and sexual violence against women: taking action and generating evidence. Geneva: World Health Organization. Available at: <https://www.who.int/publications/item/9789241564007>.

Although the initial model does not explicitly address patriarchal power and gendered dynamics within environmental systems, this study applies the socioecological model to WSS’s work through a feminist lens. This approach illustrates how WSS operate across multiple levels to address and prevent VAWG, reflecting the holistic approach that is central to the work

of feminist, gender-specific organisations. Using this model as a basis for the study ensured that the full scope of WSS’s impact was captured, from personal empowerment and survivor support to broader social change and advocacy. The figure below illustrates the socioecological model adapted to the work of WSS:

● SOCIETAL LEVEL

- Political & advocacy work
- Policy & legislative influence
- Awareness raising
- Transformative impact

● COMMUNITY LEVEL

- Multiagency cooperation
- Partnerships & (in)formal networks
- Primary prevention activities

● INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

- Survivor-centred approach
- Feminist & gender-sensitive support
- Intersectionality
- Empowerment & solidarity

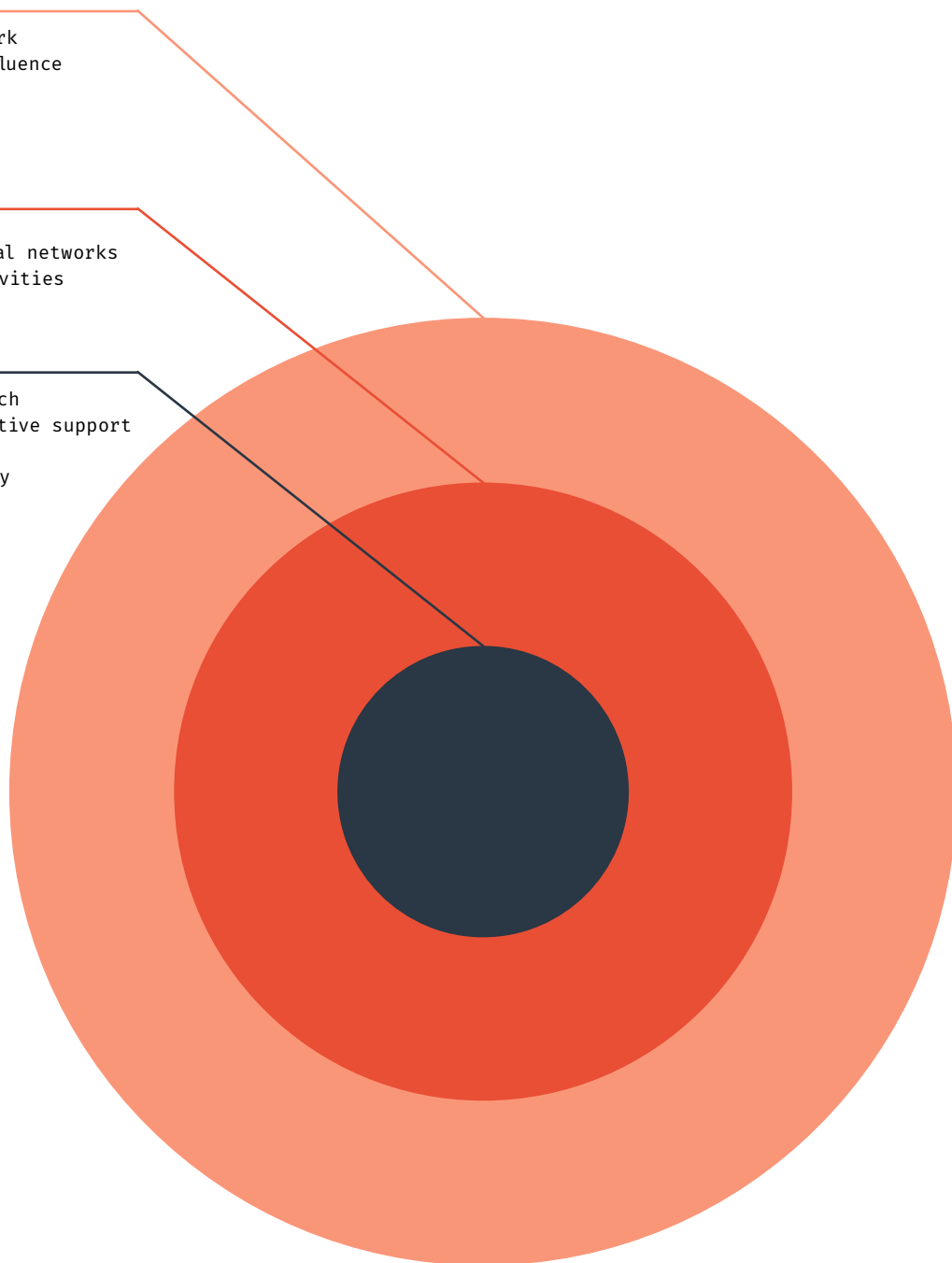


Figure 1: Visualisation of the socioecological model of WSS

At the individual level, WSS provide direct, survivor-centred support that is grounded in feminist and gender-sensitive approaches. At the community level, WSS play a central role in advancing coordinated, multi-agency responses to VAWG. And at the societal level, WSS engage in sustained advocacy and policy work to influence laws, policies, and public discourse on VAWG. Based on this framework, the following research questions were identified, addressing each of the three levels:

● **INDIVIDUAL LEVEL:**

---

How do women's specialist services address the specific needs of survivors through a feminist, intersectional, survivor-centred, and human rights-based approach?

● **COMMUNITY LEVEL:**

---

How do women's specialist services cooperate with other actors involved in tackling VAWG? How do women's specialist services impact the community response/perception to VAWG?

● **SOCIETAL LEVEL:**

---

What broader societal impacts result from women's specialist services' efforts/mission to improve women's rights and eradicate VAWG?

Part of the preparatory work also included a literature review of relevant existing research highlighting the importance of WSS developed by scholars, WAVE, as well as other international institutions and allies. Zotero was used as reference management software to collect all literature, and a unified system for highlighting relevant passages and adding tags to the literature was developed. The study is structured according to the three levels of the socioecological model, *highlighting the value of WSS at the individual, community and societal levels*. An introductory chapter precedes these chapters and provides an overview of the existing literature (including both academic research and grey literature such as NGO, policy, and institutional reports) as well as legal standards on WSS at the centre of the fight against VAWG.

## Data collection

In relation to the research methods, the project team and the external researcher decided that the study would focus on capturing the approaches and experiences of organisations across the WAVE Network as a basis for the principles underpinning the work of WSS across Europe more widely. As WAVE is the only European network focusing solely on the elimination of VAWG and represents over 1,600 WSS in 46 countries, the project team believes WAVE is well-positioned to represent the needs and interests of WSS beyond the network. A mixed-methods approach was selected, which included structured, in-depth qualitative interviews with 12 WAVE Members as well as a survey which was sent to all WAVE Members and incorporated open-ended as well as multiple-choice questions.

### Qualitative Interviews

Careful consideration was given in selecting interview participants to capture regional representation as well as the variety of services offered by WSS. A pre-selection of potential WAVE Members to interview was developed by the project team together with the external researcher. Following the spring WAVE Advisory Board Meeting in 2023, a regional division for the WAVE Network was established to enable the development of new regional meetings and foster exchange among WAVE Members facing similar challenges and contexts. This includes the following six regions: East-Central Europe, West-Central Europe, South-East Europe, South Europe, North Europe and Eurasia.

It was initially planned to interview two WAVE Members from each region. However, during the sampling process, this approach was adapted to better reflect the experiences of WSS across Europe. South Europe encompasses a wide range of political, legal, and institutional contexts affecting WSS, including varying levels of state support, cooperation with authorities, and experiences of backlash against women's rights. To capture this diversity, three WAVE Members from South Europe were therefore included. Eurasia, as the smallest region in the network, presents more shared structural challenges among women's organisations; therefore, only one WAVE Member was interviewed from this region. An additional consideration was the inclusion of WAVE Members providing specialised support to minoritised women and groups (e.g., women with disabilities, BME women, women with uncertain residence permits, LGBTQI+ individuals), as this is a key aspect of the intersectional work of many WSS and caters to the individual needs of survivors.

**Table 1:** Qualitative interviews: basic characteristics

N°	COUNTRY	REGION	TYPE OF SUPPORT SERVICE	SPECIALIST SUPPORT
1	Iceland	North Europe	Sexualised violence service	-
2	Georgia	Eurasia	Women's centre	-
3	Serbia	South-East Europe	Women's centre	Women with disabilities
4	United Kingdom	West-Central Europe	Women's shelter & centre	Black & minoritised women
5	France	South Europe	Helpline & network organisation	-
6	Ukraine	East-Central Europe	Helpline & research organisation	-
7	Sweden	North Europe	Network organisation	-
8	Türkiye	South Europe	Women's shelter & centre	-
9	Slovakia	East-Central Europe	Women's centre	-
10	Bosnia & Herzegovina	South-East Europe	Sexualised violence service, helpline & shelter	-
11	Spain	South Europe	Women's centre	Migrant & refugee women
12	Germany	West-Central Europe	Network organisation	-

It is important to note that while the WAVE Network also has individual members (such as individual experts working in the field of VAWG and academic researchers), these were excluded from the interview selection. The reason for this was that, since the study aims to capture the essential role of WSS in tackling and combatting VAWG, it was more appropriate to focus on organisations and networks rather than individual members.

All interviews were conducted between December 2024 and April 2025. Interviewed WAVE Members were contacted via email, and once they confirmed their participation, they were sent the interview guide to prepare their answers in advance. Interviews were conducted in English, either via Zoom or Teams, and lasted between 1 hour 12 minutes and 2 hours 49 minutes (the average length was 1 hour 51 minutes). All interview participants were offered financial compensation for their participation to acknowledge the member organisation's time and efforts invested.

The interview guide was structured around the three levels identified in the socioecological model and outlined in the previous section. Questions covered key areas of the member organisation's work, including principles, standards, and approaches to feminist and gender-sensitive support. In addition, members were asked about their collaboration with other state institutions and about broader ongoing developments in relation to VAWG in their country. Key topics included:

● **INDIVIDUAL LEVEL:**

Services offered, the importance of feminist/gender-sensitive support, and tailored support for survivors with specific needs.

● **COMMUNITY LEVEL:**

Multi-agency cooperation, collaborations and other informal partnerships, prevention activities, and challenges or successes in collaboration.

● **SOCIETAL LEVEL:**

Engagement in policy work through advocacy efforts, national allies, challenges such as anti-gender backlash, and recent developments affecting WSS.

Following the first six interviews, the interview guide was refined and shortened, removing questions identified as redundant or repetitive during the first round. Some follow-up questions not directly part of the interview guide were also asked to gain additional information or insights where needed.

The interviews were guided by feminist research principles and a strong commitment to the safety, dignity, and rights of all participants, particularly WSS working in increasingly hostile environments and facing numerous financial and political challenges. Special care was taken to create a safe and respectful environment during interviews, recognising that English is not the working language of most member organisations, and to ensure participants could take a break or stop the interview at any time if needed. Members were asked for explicit

consent to be named in the study, and only those who consented are named in the following chapters.

## Survey

A survey was also sent to all WAVE Members via email in February 2025 to ensure more WAVE Members' voices across Europe were included and brought to the fore in the study. The survey aimed to gather further qualitative insights from WAVE Members to better understand the relevance, impact and practices of feminist and gender-specific approaches in supporting women and children affected by violence as well as in promoting societal change. This included concrete case studies and country-level examples, as well as detailed explanations of successful interventions, best practices, and impactful strategies that place survivors at the centre of interventions. Additionally, members were asked to share how challenges such as anti-gender backlash, funding restrictions, bureaucratic challenges, and other barriers have impacted WSS across Europe.

The survey included 21 questions in total and was divided into four sections: general contact information, the importance of a feminist and gender-specific approach, multi-agency cooperation and advocacy work, and backlash and funding restrictions. The questions were largely based on the qualitative interview guide and adapted for the survey. The majority of questions were open-ended to allow WAVE Members to provide as much qualitative information as needed. Five multiple-choice questions were also included to capture quantitative data that could be analysed separately from the interview materials.

**Table 2:** Survey responses: basic characteristics (n=25)

	N° OF RESPONSES (PER CENT)	
<b>REGION</b>		
East-Central Europe	1	(4%)
Eurasia	4	(16%)
North Europe	3	(12%)
South-East Europe	5	(20%)
South Europe	7	(28%)
West-Central Europe	5	(20%)
<b>COUNTRY</b>		
Albania	4	(16%)
Armenia	2	(8%)
Azerbaijan	1	(4%)
Belgium	1	(4%)
Croatia	1	(4%)
Cyprus	2	(8%)
Denmark	2	(8%)
Georgia	1	(4%)
Germany	1	(4%)
Greece	1	(4%)
Ireland	1	(4%)
Italy	1	(4%)
Lithuania	1	(4%)
Poland	1	(4%)
Portugal	1	(4%)
United Kingdom	1	(4%)
Spain	2	(8%)
Switzerland	1	(4%)
<b>TYPE OF ORGANISATION</b>		
Network organisation	4	(16%)
(Primary) prevention organisation	2	(8%)
Research and advocacy organisation	1	(4%)
Women's centre	8	(32%)
Women's helpline	1	(4%)
Women's shelter	3	(12%)
All of the above	2	(8%)
Other	4	(16%)

WAVE Members were given one month to respond to the survey, and the survey received 25 responses in total. Given that there were 166 WAVE member organisations (excluding 16 individual members) at the time of the survey, this equates to a 15% response rate. Although this may appear low, based on previous experience, the average

response rate for WAVE surveys is around 10-20%. The project team therefore concluded that the survey achieved a satisfactory response rate, consistent with past engagement levels and the capacity constraints commonly faced by frontline organisations, particularly WSS.

## Data Analysis

The data collected through the qualitative interviews and online survey were analysed thematically to identify patterns, key themes, and relationships across the individual, community, and societal levels. While the survey data was more limited in scope, it provided additional contextual support and was used to complement and triangulate the interview findings, highlighting additional perspectives from WAVE member organisations.

### Qualitative data analysis

All 12 interviews were recorded and transcribed using the qualitative data analysis software Atlas.ti. As English was not the first language for most participants, some non-English words or phrases were used. Where identifiable, these were translated and included alongside the original transcript. Where translation was not possible, the phrase was left in its original form.

The interviews were analysed using thematic analysis, in which an initial coding framework was developed in Atlas.ti, grounded in the three research questions and corresponding levels of the socioecological model (individual, community, and societal). These codes were further informed by WAVE's previous work as well as feminist and intersectional principles of WSS. Pre-developed codes were applied to relevant passages, while new codes were identified inductively during the coding process.

Using Atlas.ti's network function, visual maps were created to explore how individual codes were related, for example, whether a code was associated with another, contradicted it, or was part of another code. This network mapping enabled a deeper interpretation of relationships across themes and informed the identification of key patterns. These final themes, organised according to the three research questions, form the basis of the following chapters and are supported by direct quotations from interview participants.

### Survey data analysis

Responses to closed-ended questions were summarised using descriptive statistics, such as frequencies and percentages, to provide an overview of participant demographics, organisational profiles, and service characteristics. Some of this data is presented alongside relevant qualitative data throughout the study.

For open-ended survey responses, a thematic coding process was used following the same codes developed during the interview analysis. This allowed for alignment and comparison of themes across both data sources. Responses were generally shorter than the interview transcripts, but they offered valuable insights and helped validate and expand on key findings from the interviews.

The survey responses also served to triangulate findings, highlight recurring issues across the WAVE Network, and include additional perspectives from a broader set of WSS representatives. The integration of survey data in this study provides a more comprehensive picture of the challenges and contributions of WSS across Europe.

## Limitations

It should be noted that this study reflects the experiences and perspectives of WSS specifically. As such, the findings are not intended to represent a systematic or academically rigorous assessment of service provision for survivors of VAWG, and WAVE recognises that there are other actors providing services to women and girls who have experienced violence. Rather, this study draws on the voices and lived experiences of WAVE Members to highlight key trends, urgent challenges, and the critical role of WSS across Europe. While WAVE acknowledges the limitations and potential biases in this approach, the intention is to contribute to ongoing efforts to safeguard and strengthen feminist, gender-specific, and survivor-centred responses to VAWG.

One limitation of the study was that it was fully self-funded. WAVE had been in discussions with a potential funder in 2024; however, following international funding cutbacks in early 2025, the grant proposal was placed on hold. The study was therefore primarily funded through other core costs and donations. While this has meant that it was independently developed solely for and by the WAVE Network, it has also led to considerable delays in data collection, writing, and dissemination.

Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that the sample size for both the qualitative interviews and the survey does not fully capture the diversity of experiences across all WSS in Europe. While the project team believes the data presented highlight the situation of many WSS and the current challenges faced by feminist organisations working in the field of VAWG, the generalisability of the findings is limited. Additionally, language barriers and differing national contexts may have influenced the depth and comparability of responses. Notably, not all members of the WAVE Network have the same systems in place to support survivors. While specific service provision models are successfully implemented in some countries, they may not work in other contexts, making comparisons across countries difficult. The research team has tried to capture the realities of diverse WSS across different regions of Europe and explicitly outline when different terminology is used.

# Introduction

## Setting the Scene – Women’s Specialist Services at the Centre in the Fight Against Violence Against Women and Girls

### Historical Account of the Role of Women’s Specialist Services in Shaping the Discourse on Violence Against Women and Modelling Support Services

Since the late 1960s, there has been an increasing awareness across Europe on the issue of violence against women and girls (VAWG) and domestic violence (DV).<sup>4</sup> In every country, albeit with different starting points in time, it was women’s movements that were the first to articulate the issue of VAWG, pressing for its recognition as a public problem and raising claims about the subordinate position of women in society.<sup>5</sup>

In Europe and beyond, women’s organisations are recognised as being the single most important factor driving policy development to prevent and respond to VAWG.<sup>6</sup> In few other areas of European state policy, the presence of grassroots movements is as strong as on the issue of VAWG and DV. Government responses to VAWG stem from the interaction between women’s movements and political institutions.<sup>7</sup> In this regard, at the international level, there is an explicit recognition of the depth of knowledge built over decades within women’s organisations, which has come to inform the policies and responses adopted by state agencies.<sup>8</sup>

Due to the lack of state response to VAWG, the emergence of specialist support services in the 1970s was a response by feminist activists to the immediate and essential needs of women survivors of DV and their children. Prior to this, primary prevention initiatives such as feminist self-defence trainings sought to envision a new reality where preventing violence before it occurs is possible by addressing the root causes of VAWG.<sup>9</sup> Women’s consciousness-raising groups developed as part of a political movement, creating women-only spaces for political and cultural activism and solidarity. Not only did these groups support survivors, but they also created a space where women were able to speak openly about their experiences of violence. This resulted in radical changes in the perception and understanding of violence in women’s lives.<sup>10</sup>

- 4 Hague, G., 2021. History and memories of the domestic violence movement: we’ve come further than you think. Bristol: Bristol University Press.; Corradi, C. and Stöckl, H., 2016. The lessons of history: the role of the nation-states and the EU in fighting violence against women in 10 European countries. *Current Sociology*, 64(4), pp. 671–688.; Htun, M. and Weldon, S.L., 2012. The civic origins of progressive policy change: combating violence against women in global perspective, 1975–2005. *American Political Science Review*, 106(3), pp. 548–569.
- 5 Corradi, C. and Stöckl, H. 2016, “The lessons of history”, op. cit, p. 677.
- 6 Htun, M. and Weldon, S.L. 2012, “The Civic Origins”, op. cit.; OSCE, Bringing Security Home: Combating Violence Against Women in the OSCE Region. A Compilation of Good Practices, 2009, <https://cdn.osce.org/sites/default/files/f/documents/d/b/37438.pdf>; Merry S. E. (2006), *Human rights and gender violence: Translating international law into local justice*, University of Chicago Press: Chicago.
- 7 Corradi, C. and Stöckl, H. 2016, “The lessons of history”, op. cit, p. 673; Htun, M. and Weldon, S.L. (2012), “The Civic Origins”, op. cit.; Weldon, S.L. 2002, *Protest, Policy, and the Problem of Violence against Women: A Cross-National Comparison*, Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press; Hague, G. (2021), *History and Memories*, op.cit.
- 8 Kelly, L. and Dubois, L. 2008, *Combating violence against women: minimum standards for support services*, EG-VAW-CONF, 2007, Study rev. September 2008, Strasbourg, Council of Europe, p. 10.
- 9 WAVE, 2002, *WAVE Report - More than a roof over your head. A survey of quality standards in European women’s refuges*, p. 6; WAVE, 2004, *WAVE Report - Away from Violence: Guidelines for Setting Up and Running a Women’s Refuge*; Htun, M. and Weldon, S.L. 2012, “The Civic Origins”, op. cit.; OSCE, *Bringing Security Home*, op. cit.
- 10 WAVE, 2015, *Wave Report 2015 on the Role of Specialist Women’s Support Services in Europe*, p. 38; Nichols A. J. 2013, “Survivor-defined practices to mitigate revictimization of battered women”, *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, vol. 28, pp. 1403-1423.

Innovative and never-before-seen forms of support services were established, with a certain degree of differentiation across countries: among others, shelters, women's centres, helplines, services for survivors of sexualised violence, and women's centres serving different groups of survivors, such as Black and minoritised women.<sup>11</sup> In response to the growing demands of the women's movement for a gender-specific analysis of the problem and a human rights-based approach to VAWG, specialist services have developed depending on a variety of social, economic and political factors specific to each country.<sup>12</sup> Different traditions of social support, for example, particularly for women as mothers and their children, have resulted in different provision structures, and the meaning of the same service may be interpreted differently across countries. For example, there is no common, shared definition of what constitutes a women's centre; similarly, rape crisis or sexual violence referral centres can be quite diverse and be located within other institutions and structures.<sup>13</sup>

Organisations wishing to improve support for survivors of VAWG have pragmatically adapted to these differing conditions, filling gaps in provision and influencing or supplementing existing structures. Women's NGOs have grown within, outside, and between such structures to develop gender-specific, empowering, human-rights-based support for women.<sup>14</sup> Services run by women's organisations upheld women-centred principles, consciously trying to break down power differences between the women using the services and those providing them, who were sometimes the same women. Initially dependent on unpaid and voluntary work, they took services for survivors of violence forward in new, feminist-inspired ways. After 40 years, many still operate this way.<sup>15</sup>

Of course, the women's movement no longer exists in the same form as it originally did. Feminist movements themselves have had to cope with hostility, backlash, and diverse approaches to women's liberation. In the last 15 years, a number of challenges have emerged.

11 See WAVE Country Reports; Kelly, L. (2018). Mapping support services for victims of violence against women in line with the Istanbul Convention standards. Methodology and tools. Council of Europe.

12 WAVE, 2006, Bridging Gaps – Models of Coordination between women's NGO's and state authorities, p. 11; Hague, G. 2021, History and Memories, op. cit., p. 144; Demurtas, P. and Misiti, M. (2021), *Violenza contro le donne in Italia. Ricerche, orientamenti e buone pratiche*, Guerini Scientifica, pp. 106-107.

13 WAVE, 2006, Bridging Gaps, op. cit., p. 11. Developing a common understanding of definitions of women's specialist services is a long-term goal of the WAVE Network.

14 Ibidem.

15 Hague, G. 2021, History and Memories, op.cit., p. 97.

## Current Challenges

### Backlash against women's rights, shrinking spaces and waning funds for women's organisations

It is well documented that several countries in Europe are confronted with an ever-intensifying backlash against women's rights, which leads to increasing discrimination and oppression of women, as well as to the shrinking of public space for feminist civil society.<sup>16</sup> Movements opposing gender equality have distorted public discourse and debates by using disinformation, promoting negative narratives related to gender and sexual equality, and advocating for patriarchal values.<sup>17</sup> One of the consequences, among others, has been the slowed progress of individual rights and empowerment of women and girls and sexual/gender minorities.<sup>18</sup>

In many countries, policy priorities have shifted, as authoritarian and populist tendencies continue to gain ground.<sup>19</sup> The context for women's rights, the empowerment of women, and the protection of women from violence have become less favourable than before. Shifting policy priorities during times of crisis, rising political instability, and conflicts also foster more aggressive public discourse and stronger voices from conservative forces.<sup>20</sup> This context is marked by the rise of right-wing and anti-feminist movements and an increasing anti-gender

backlash.<sup>21</sup> Anti-gender movements, according to which gender is seen as a tool of "an international feminist strategy" aimed at destroying the traditional family and family values, are targeting women's rights – particularly reproductive rights, LGBTIQ+ rights, sexuality and gender-sensitive education in schools, and the very notion of gender.<sup>22</sup>

As a consequence of this broader context, in some countries, spaces for civil society engagement on women's rights issues have diminished.<sup>23</sup> Support for civil society, especially women's and feminist organisations, has weakened, hindering their ability to effectively support women survivors of violence.<sup>24</sup> This has been followed by shrinking public funds for women's organisations, which possess valuable expertise and decades of experience working with survivors, and a growing gap between the state and civil society, which narrows the space for support to NGOs.<sup>25</sup> This endangers their sustainability, making them more dependent on donor funds and preventing them from providing accessible, high-quality specialised services to survivors.<sup>26</sup>

16 WAVE, 2023, Country Report 2023, p. 7; United Nations, Economic Commission for Europe (2024), Beijing+30 Regional Review Meeting, Regional review of progress: regional synthesis 2024, ECE/AC.28/2024/, [https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2024-09/concept-note\\_beijing30\\_rrm.pdf](https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2024-09/concept-note_beijing30_rrm.pdf).

17 UN Women, 2023, Overcoming Crises. Remaining essential services for women survivors of violence in the Western Balkans after the COVID-19 pandemic, p. 42, [https://bosniaherzegovina.un.org/sites/default/files/2024-03/report\\_follow-up-assessment-overcoming-crises\\_2023-online.pdf](https://bosniaherzegovina.un.org/sites/default/files/2024-03/report_follow-up-assessment-overcoming-crises_2023-online.pdf); Verloo, M (ed) (2018), Varieties of Opposition to Gender Equality in Europe, Routledge.

18 United Nations, Economic Commission for Europe (2024), Beijing+30, op. cit., p. 13.

19 United Nations, Economic Commission for Europe (2024). Breaking the cycle: Ending violence against women and girls in the Economic Commission for Europe region, ECE/AC.28/2024/6, [https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2024-09/ECE\\_AC.28\\_2024\\_6e.pdf](https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2024-09/ECE_AC.28_2024_6e.pdf).

20 United Nations, Economic Commission for Europe (2024). Breaking the cycle, op. cit.

21 OHCHR 2024, Gender equality and gender backlash - Guidance document of the Working Group on discrimination against women and girls, A/HRC/WG.11/41/2; Verloo, M (ed) (2018), Varieties of Opposition, op. cit.

22 OHCHR 2024, Gender equality and gender backlash, op. cit, paras 20-21.

23 United Nations, Economic Commission for Europe (2024), Beijing+30, op. cit., para. 18 [https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2024-09/concept-note\\_beijing30\\_rrm.pdf](https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2024-09/concept-note_beijing30_rrm.pdf).

24 United Nations, Economic Commission for Europe (2024). Breaking the cycle, op. cit.

25 UN Women, 2023, Overcoming Crises, op. cit.

26 GREVIO, 2022, Mid-term Horizontal Review of GREVIO Baseline Evaluation Report, p. 19; United Nations, Economic Commission for Europe (2024). Breaking the cycle, op. cit., para 51.

### Gender neutrality and Proliferation of generic support services

In Europe, there is a growing and worrying trend towards de-gendering the discourse on VAWG and DV.<sup>27</sup> Gender neutrality refers to policies and regulations that require state-funded services to serve both men and women equally, without differentiation based on sex or gender. This approach largely stems from the economic model of neoliberalism and is nurtured by a misinterpretation of equality.<sup>28</sup>

Gender neutrality hides or diminishes the root causes of gender inequality and VAWG.<sup>29</sup> It does not sufficiently link the prevalence of violence to the unequal position of women in society and the power imbalances between men and women. Gender-neutral policies fail to understand that VAWG is distinctly gendered and a social mechanism that helps keep women in a subordinate position to men.<sup>30</sup> They also fail to address all forms of interlocking oppression to which women are subjected, as they do not frame women's oppression as intersectional.<sup>31</sup>

The dangers of gender neutral-policy and practice are multiple,<sup>32</sup> as gender-neutral policies do not effectively respond to the specific position and needs of women and girls.<sup>33</sup> This results in women's experiences being masked and runs contrary to the obligation of paying particular attention to women victims of gender-based violence (GBV) under Article 2, paragraph 2 of the Istanbul Convention.<sup>34</sup> Gender-neutral approaches put at risk both the safety and the empowerment of women victims of violence.<sup>35</sup>

Where gender-neutral policies exist, women's specialist services (WSS) and women-only services are impacted in numerous ways.<sup>36</sup> Gender-neutral policies dismantle the ethos of women-only organisations that challenge patriarchy as a root cause of women's inequality and VAWG.<sup>37</sup> By diverting resources away from feminist, gender-specific services, gender-neutral policies diminish the capacity of women's organisations to campaign for women's rights and especially for the recognition of DV as a form of GBV.<sup>38</sup>

- 
- 27 WAVE, 2020, WAVE Handbook. How Gender Neutral Policy and Practice Is Dismantling Women's Specialist Support Services and Ways to Counteract It; United Nations, Economic Commission for Europe (2024). *Breaking the cycle*, op. cit., para. 41.
- 28 WAVE, 2020, WAVE Handbook. How Gender Neutral Policy, op. cit., p. 6; GREVIO Baseline Evaluation Report on Finland, p. 10: In this context, GREVIO draws attention to the fact that special measures, such as the setting-up of women-only support services that are necessary to prevent and protect women from gender-based violence, shall not be considered discrimination under the convention (Article 4, paragraph 4); Hague, G. (2021), *History and Memories*, op. cit.: What happened was that the local Council decided to fund general, non-specialist services in the supposed interest of equality for all, and tried to take away funding from specialist BME services. It ended up being about the meaning of equality itself, according to Pragna Patel, and the need to counteract disadvantage with specialist, focussed input, before you can start thinking about getting to an even 'generic' playing field.
- 29 WAVE, 2020, WAVE Handbook. How Gender Neutral Policy, op. cit., p. 6; United Nations, Economic Commission for Europe 2024, *Breaking the cycle*, op. cit., para 41.
- 30 De Vido, S. and Frulli, M. (eds.) (2023), *Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence. A Commentary on the Istanbul Convention*, Cheltenham UK & Northampton, MA, Edward Elgar, p. 149; GREVIO, Baseline Evaluation Report on the Netherland, para. 28; Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), General Comment No. 28; CEDAW, *Concluding Observations on Denmark*.
- 31 WAVE 2020, WAVE Handbook. How Gender Neutral Policy, op. cit., p. 6; WAVE (2023), Paper - Developing Intersectional Practice at WAVE: Stage 1 Paper on Intersectional Theory and Key Literature.
- 32 WAVE 2020, WAVE Handbook. How Gender Neutral Policy, op. cit., p. 6.
- 33 GREVIO 2022, Mid-term Horizontal Review, op. cit., p. 19.
- 34 GREVIO Baseline Evaluation Report Netherland, para. 30.
- 35 GREVIO, Baseline Evaluation Report on Finland, para. 116: Shelter provision in Finland seems to apply a gender-neutral approach, accommodating both male victims and perpetrators. This raises questions of the safety as well as the empowerment of women victims of violence. In order to ensure recognition of the gendered nature of violence against women, women-only shelters should be provided.
- 36 WAVE 2020, WAVE Handbook. How Gender Neutral Policy, op. cit., p. 6.
- 37 WAVE 2020, WAVE Handbook. How Gender Neutral Policy, op. cit.
- 38 GREVIO, Baseline Evaluation Report on Denmark, para. 25

In this connection, gender neutrality not only has the potential to deny women's access to safe women-only spaces, but it also favours a tendency where public authorities entrust women-only services to generic organisations (both non-profit and for-profit)<sup>39</sup> at the expense of specialist organisations, particularly women's organisations.<sup>40</sup> Generic organisations are often structured around and focused on providing general victim support across multiple service areas such as wellbeing, public health and family. With a less women-centred approach and less experience in this field, these organisations adopt standardised, one-size-fits-all approaches in which survivors are offered a set of options for assistance based primarily on the availability of services or the organisation's mission, rather than on the survivor's unique circumstances and hopes for the future.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, generic organisations do not necessarily play a role in understanding and challenging the root causes of VAWG.<sup>42</sup>

In recent years, the WAVE Network has expressed growing concern about the increasing adoption of gender-neutral policies and practices in responses to VAWG, and a Gender Neutrality working group was established in 2016. Its conclusions were reported in the WAVE Handbook *How Gender Neutral Policy and Practice Is Dismantling Women's Specialist Support Services and Ways to Counteract It (2020)*,<sup>43</sup> along with practical proposals for counteracting gender neutrality in diverse political and

economic contexts. This has been followed by years of tireless advocacy, especially in the context of the legislative process that brought in the adoption of the EU Directive on Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, as well as the revision of the Victims' Rights Directive. WAVE has consistently called on the European Commission and the EU Parliament to reaffirm the importance of WSS as the primary providers of support to survivors, ensuring their long-term sustainability and preventing the replacement of their expertise with general or generic services, as well as to reject gender-neutral policies that obscure the reality of VAWG and redirect resources away from gender-specific interventions.

### The institutionalisation process: minimum standards and the risk of depoliticisation

Increased state commitment and accountability to prevent and combat VAWG, long advocated for by the women's movement itself, has initiated a multifaceted process of institutionalisation marked by expanded bureaucratisation and professionalisation.

This process has invested in women's rights organisations to different levels and degrees, and, according to some, it risks eroding the feminist orientation of women's organisations, thereby depoliticising their work.<sup>44</sup> A longstanding tension exists around how much a women's organisation can simultaneously function as a political campaigning body against violence while also providing

39 Lauri, M., Lauri, J. and Linande, I. (2023), "Women's shelters and private shelters discursive struggle: separatism, security and social change", *Nordic Social Work Research*.

40 GREVIO Baseline Evaluation Report on Montenegro, Sweden, Portugal, North Macedonia para. 54, Croatia, para. 30.

41 Goodman, L.A and others, 2014, "Survivor-Defined Practice in Domestic Violence Work: Measure Development and Preliminary Evidence of Link to Empowerment", *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 31(1), pp. 163-185.

42 WAVE-CSSP, 2021, Report - Promising practices of establishing and providing specialist support services for women experiencing sexual violence; McDonald, J. (2005), "Neo-Liberalism and the Pathologising of Public Issues: The Displacement of Feminist Service Models in Domestic Violence Support Services", *Australian Social Work*, 58 (3), pp. 275-284.

43 WAVE, 2020, WAVE Handbook. *How Gender Neutral Policy*, op. cit.

44 Goodman, L. A., & Epstein, D. 2008, "The advocacy response" in L. A. Goodman and D. Epstein, *Listening to battered women: A survivor-centered approach to advocacy, mental health, and justice*, pp. 29-47; Koyama E. 2006, "Disloyal to feminism: Abuse of survivors within the domestic violence shelter system" in INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence (eds.), *Color of violence: The INCITE! Anthology*, p. 209; Lehrner, A., and Allen, N. E. 2009, "Still a Movement After All These Years? Current Tensions in the Domestic Violence Movement", *Violence Against Women*, 15(6), pp. 656-677.

services to survivors of violence.<sup>45</sup> Funding from the state for WSS has, at times, led to those organisations being absorbed or co-opted by state structures.<sup>46</sup> In certain cases, receiving funds from the state and the need to comply with a multitude of bureaucratic requirements have led to a transition away from the early grassroots organising efforts that sought complete independence from governmental institutions. Due to the increased professionalisation of the sector, staff requirements imposed on WSS may favour formal educational degrees over long-term work experience or knowledge of the gendered dimension of violence.<sup>47</sup> Similarly, women's organisations may be confronted with a generational shift in approaches to unpaid work, especially where the boundary between service provision and activism is perceived as particularly blurred.

One of the most relevant debates connected to the institutionalisation process is the one around minimum quality standards for service provision. Developed in different international legal fora,<sup>48</sup> the Council of Europe being the most prolific one, minimum quality standards responded to the need to find basic agreements across states about the extent and range of services that should be provided to women survivors of violence. The WAVE Network also made its contribution to this important topic by extensively

elaborating on standards and principles that support services should follow in order to meet the needs of women survivors of violence and their children.<sup>49</sup>

Minimum standards for specialist services at a national level have revealed both opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, minimum standards can help ensure the quality of specialised services for survivors. On the other hand, women's organisations have repeatedly stressed the dangers of imposing them. The perceived risk is that imposing minimum standards in an already inadequately resourced sector could reduce WSS's capacity and lead to a loss of services for survivors of VAWG.<sup>50</sup>

The introduction of licensing systems for service providers, which in certain countries have been seen as a way to operationalise minimum standards, was identified by GREVIO as a concerning trend that might hamper the high-quality provision of services.<sup>51</sup> Related to this, researchers have documented numerous ways in which systemic requirements can impact the survivor-centredness of interventions and support services.<sup>52</sup> In addition, licensing systems may set criteria (e.g., staff numbers, premises size, etc.) that women's organisations, especially small and community-based ones, may find difficult to meet. This element, coupled with the fact that licensing systems may not relate to

45 Hague, G. 2021, *History and Memories*, op.cit., p. 73

46 WAVE 2015, *Supporting the Sustainability and Autonomy of Women's Organizations Providing Services in Eastern Europe for Women and Children Survivors of Domestic Violence*, p. 174.

47 GREVIO Baseline Evaluation Report on North Macedonia, para. 55.

48 Kelly, L. e Dubois, L. 2008, *Combating violence against women: minimum standards*, op. cit.; OSCE (2009), *Bringing Security Home*, op. cit; UN-WOMEN (2012), "Standards and regulations".

49 WAVE ,2015, *Supporting the Sustainability*, op. cit.; WAVE (2012), *More than a roof*, op. cit.; WAVE (2004), *Away from Violence*, op. cit.

50 Kelly, L. and Dubois, L. , 2008. *Combating violence against women*, op. cit., p. 21: NGOs repeatedly stressed the dangers of imposing standards on an already inadequately resourced sector; that this might serve to reduce capacity, and could even result in loss of services.

51 GREVIO Baseline Evaluation Report on Montenegro, Executive Summary.

52 Cattaneo, L. B. and others , 2020., "Survivor-Centered Practice and Survivor Empowerment: Evidence From A Research-Practitioner Partnership", *Violence Against Women*, 27(9), pp. 1252-1272; Wood L., Cook Heffron L., Voyles M., Kulkarni S. 2020., "Playing by the rules: Agency policy and procedure in service experience of IPV survivors", *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 35(21-22), pp. 4640-4665; Kulkarni S. J., Herman-Smith R., Ross T. C. (2015), "Measuring intimate partner violence (IPV) service providers' attitudes: The development of the Survivor-Defined Advocacy Scale (SDAS)", *Journal of Family Violence*, 30(7), pp. 911-921; Messing J. T., Ward-Lasher A., Thaller J., Bagwell-Gray M. E. 2015, "The state of intimate partner violence intervention: Progress and continuing challenges", *Social Work*, 60(4), pp. 305-313; Fisher E. M., Stylianou A. M. (2016), "To stay or to leave: Factors influencing victims' decisions to stay or leave a domestic violence emergency shelter", *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 34(4), pp. 785-811.

## Normative Framework for the Recognition of the Role of Women's Specialist Services

feminist principles on which services should be based, such as a gendered understanding of violence, empowerment of survivors, avoiding secondary victimisation, and respecting confidentiality, raises serious concerns. As a result, generic organisations with little experience in the field, or those applying a family-oriented approach, can be selected as service providers, thereby further negatively impacting the overall quality of available services.<sup>53</sup>

### States' duty to set up specialist services for women survivors of violence based on a gendered understanding of violence and a human rights-based approach

Several international provisions recognise states' obligation to establish a wide range of specialised support services for survivors of VAWG and DV.<sup>54</sup> Stemming from the unique dynamics of GBV, it is recognised that these services must cater to the distinct and specific needs of women survivors.

Numerous international standards and guidelines therefore underscore the necessity of basing specialist support services on a gendered understanding of VAWG and a human rights-based approach.<sup>55</sup> States must acknowledge the intrinsic link between the patterns of VAWG, the consequent needs of survivors, and how support services should be

structured to effectively meet those needs.<sup>56</sup>

Articles 18(3) and 22 of the Istanbul Convention, in particular, outline several aims and principles that specialist support services should uphold. Such provisions shape the standard of due diligence in adopting protective measures that adequately protect survivors.<sup>57</sup> These services must adopt an integrated approach that considers the broader environment in which victims live, aligning with the "three P's" approach of prevention, protection, and prosecution. This implies that women's needs should not be addressed in isolation, but through a holistic approach grounded in the interplay between personal, situational, and sociocultural factors.<sup>58</sup>

### States' duty to recognise the role and value of women's rights organisations

NGOs, especially those focused on women's rights, play an indispensable role in preventing and combating VAWG. This recognition is grounded not only in the fact that, within states, the overwhelming majority of specialist services are operated by these organisations, but also in the recognition that their engagement, anchored in their long-standing expertise, is crucial to ensure that services truly reflect survivors' needs and uphold their human rights.<sup>59</sup> Beyond the extensive survivor-centred expertise of

53 GREVIO Baseline Evaluation Report on Montenegro, para. 6, 124; Serbia, para. 131; North Macedonia, para. 48; Croatia, p. 138; Romania, p. 187.

54 CEDAW General recommendation 35, Protection, para. 31 (a) (iii); United Nations General Assembly (2014), Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences; GREVIO Activity Report 2021; Directive 2012/29/EU, Article 8(3) and Article 9(3); Directive 2014/1385/EU; Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence Against Women, art. 8 (d).

55 Kelly, L. e Dubois, L. (2008), Combating violence against women: minimum standards, op. cit.; OSCE (2009), Bringing Security Home, op. cit.; UN-WOMEN, 2012, "Standards and regulations", op. cit.;

56 WAVE, 2015, Supporting the Sustainability, op. cit.; WAVE (2012), More than a roof, op. cit.; WAVE (2004), Away from Violence, op. cit.

57 De Vido, S. and Frulli, M. eds., 2023, Preventing and Combating Violence, op. cit., p. 291.

58 Ivi, p. 293; Council of Europe (CoE) (2011), Explanatory Report to the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, para. 116; GREVIO Baseline Report on Denmark para. 103, Finland, para 109; Bradbury-Jones, C. and others (2025), "The Scope, Range and Use of Voluntary Sector Specialist Sexual Violence Services in England: Findings and Recommendations From a National Study", Health and Social Care in the Community.

59 Article 9, Istanbul Convention; De Vido, S. and Frulli, M. (eds.) (2023), Preventing and Combating Violence, op. cit., pp. 176 and 182; GREVIO Baseline Evaluation Report on Austria, Denmark, Turkey, Serbia, Malta, Spain, Portugal, Belgium, Switzerland, p. 46, North Macedonia, para. 55; Council of Europe (CoE) (2011), Explanatory Report, op. cit, paras. 68-69.

women's organisations, "the social and economic value of their activities" should also be recognised.<sup>60</sup>

States are therefore called to create an environment conducive to the work of NGOs, particularly those addressing intersectional forms of discrimination and community-based organisations.<sup>61</sup> This includes respecting the working methods and the authenticity of women's organisations' missions, and recognising their contribution to promoting policies and providing support services tailored to the specific needs of all survivors of violence, while upholding their human rights in a gender-sensitive manner.<sup>62</sup>

States have the duty to cooperate with and support these organisations, allowing them to play their crucial role effectively and confidently.<sup>63</sup> This may also include establishing dedicated funding procedures that guarantee the valorisation of experience and survivor-centred expertise, moving away from practices driven by the "price over quality" logic that favours generic service providers over WSS.<sup>64</sup>

The following study is structured according to the three levels of the socioecological model: individual, community and societal level, showcasing the comprehensive and multifaceted role played by WSS. Through

feminist and gender-specific approaches at all levels, these specialist services not only support individual survivors of violence but also operate at the community and societal level to challenge the norms, beliefs and social as well as economic systems that create the conditions for VAWG to occur.

### The value of women's specialist services at the individual level

International knowledge, research and practice converge in recognising that services provided by WSS are consistently the most responsive and effective for women who have experienced violence.<sup>65</sup> There is a strong consensus that specialist services should be provided by women for women and that women-only services should be guaranteed.<sup>66</sup>

The foundational principles grounding the work of women's organisations have implications for both how VAWG is understood and how services are delivered. Women's individual experiences, indeed, are shaped by the organisational contexts in which they take place.<sup>67</sup>

Embracing a survivor-centred, feminist philosophy that emphasises women's choices, partnerships, and tailoring support to each survivor's unique needs, contexts, and coping strategies is a key contributor

## Showcasing the Value of Women's Specialist Services

60 GREVIO Baseline Evaluation Report on France, para. 52, Switzerland, para. 46; North Macedonia, para. 35; CEDAW General recommendation 35, Protection, para. 4.

61 De Vido, S. and Frulli, M. eds. 2023. Preventing and Combating Violence, op. cit., p. 179; CEDAW General recommendation 35, Protection, para. 34; GREVIO Baseline Evaluation Report on Turkey.

62 De Vido, S. and Frulli, M. eds., 2023, Preventing and Combating Violence, op. cit., p. 183.

63 Ibid., p. 184; WAVE, 2017, Prevention and Support Standards for Women Survivors of Violence. A Handbook for the Implementation of the Istanbul Convention, p. 32.

64 GREVIO, 2021, Activity Report 2021; GREVIO Baseline Evaluation Report on Italy, France, Spain; De Vido, S. and Frulli, M. eds. 2023, Preventing and Combating Violence, op. cit., p. 180.

65 GREVIO Baseline Evaluation Report on Albania, p. 38; GREVIO Activity Report 2021, p. 28; GREVIO, (2022), Mid-term Horizontal Review, op. cit.; UN-Women 2012, Handbook for National Action Plans on Violence against Women; Kelly, L. and Dubois, L. 2008, Combating violence against women, op. cit., p. 10; Bradbury-Jones, C. and others 2025, "The Scope, Range and Use of Voluntary Sector, op. cit.

66 GREVIO Baseline Evaluation Report on Finland 116; Council of Europe (2021), Quality Guidelines for Shelters for Victims of Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, pp. 19-20; Women's Resource Centre (2017), Why Women Only? The value and benefits of by women for women services, p. 73.

67 Nichols, A.J, 2011., "Gendered Organizations: Challenges for Domestic Violence Victim Advocates", Feminist Criminology.

to empowerment and other positive outcomes.<sup>68</sup> Respecting confidentiality, ensuring safety, and providing a safe space for women to speak freely, be believed, and decide their next steps are also recognised as preconditions for effective support.<sup>69</sup> With the support of specialist, gender-sensitive, comprehensive, and empowering services, survivors of VAWG and DV are more likely to report violence and obtain protective measures, and less likely to agree to mediation.<sup>70</sup>

WSS work under an intersectional framework where all forms of VAWG are recognised, and oppression is viewed as interlocking. Within WSS, there are also specific and nuanced specialisms such as organisations working with Black and minoritised women and girls, women with disabilities and the many other categories of women with protected characteristics.<sup>71</sup>

It is only by taking into consideration the intersectional oppression to which women from diverse locations and backgrounds are subjected, as well as the unequal relationship between survivors and perpetrators,

that women's safety can be ensured.<sup>72</sup> On the contrary, gender-neutral and assistance-based approaches lead to disempowering and revictimising interventions, as well as to repeat referrals.<sup>73</sup> Erasing the structural inequality between women and men, such approaches legitimise violence and produce negative outcomes for women survivors.<sup>74</sup>

### The value of women's specialist services at the community level

With their decades of professional experience, WSS have developed the capacity to actively implement their foundational values, not only by supporting individual women but also by working at the community level across multiple contexts, including schools, workplaces, neighbourhoods, social institutions, faith communities, and governance structures.<sup>75</sup>

Aimed at ensuring an effective holistic support for women and their children,<sup>76</sup> the engagement of WSS impacts the community level in numerous ways. It ensures the perspectives of women are heard by statutory

- 68 WAVE ,2019., Thematic Paper - The Importance of Women's Specialist Support Services in Europe; WAVE (2015), Supporting the Sustainability, op. cit.; WAVE , 2012, More than a roof, op. cit.; WAVE (2004), Away from Violence, op. cit.; Goodman, L.A and others (2014), "Survivor-Defined Practice", op. cit.; Nichols, A. J. (2013), "Survivor-defined practices", op. cit.; Cattaneo, L. B. and others (2020), "Survivor-Centered Practice", op. cit.; Kulkarni S. J., Bell H., Rhodes D. M. , 2012. "Back to basics essential qualities of services for survivors of intimate partner violence", *Violence Against Women*, 18, pp. 85-101; Goodman L. A. and Epstein D. (2008), Listening to battered women: A survivor-centered approach to advocacy, mental health, and justice, Washington, DC; Bergstrom-Lynch C.A 2018, "Empowerment in a Bureaucracy? Survivors' Perceptions of Domestic Violence Shelter Policies and Practices", *Affilia: Journal of Women and Social Work*, pp. 112-125; Nichols, A. J. (2011), *Gendered Organizations*, op. cit.; Zweig J. M., Burt M. R. 2007, "Predicting women's perceptions of domestic violence and sexual assault agency helpfulness: What matters to program clients?", *Violence Against Women*, 13(11), pp. 1149-1178; Hester, M. and Lilley, S.J. 2017, "More than support to court: Rape victims and specialist sexual violence services", *International Review of Victimology*, 24(3).
- 69 De Vido, S. and Frulli, M.eds. , 2023. Preventing and Combating Violence, op. cit., p. 327. Grevio Baseline Report Albania, p. 39: "The foundational principles which should underlie specialist support services include inter alia a gendered understanding of violence against women, respect for confidentiality, ensuring women's safety, avoiding secondary victimisation and working to empower victims. To this end, specialist support services should aim at providing spaces in which women feel free to tell, where they are believed and respected and have the possibility to explore options."
- 70 GREVIO Baseline Report Netherland, p. 295.
- 71 WAVE Country Report 2023, p. 211.
- 72 WAVE ,2020. WAVE Handbook. How Gender Neutral Policy, op. cit; GREVIO Activity Report 2021, p. 33: governmental specialist support services' structures are often based on a family mediation approach. This approach places a great emphasis on keeping families together and mediation in the resolution of conflicts, which may fail to take account of the unequal relationship between victims and perpetrators and may run counter to protecting victims and prioritising women's needs and safety.
- 73 GREVIO Baseline Report Netherland, p. 295.
- 74 WAVE (2020), WAVE Handbook. How Gender Neutral Policy, op. cit.
- 75 WAVE (2015), Supporting the Sustainability, op. cit., p. 39.
- 76 WAVE (2023), Country Report 2023, p. 7.

services, thereby preventing repeat victimisation,<sup>77</sup> and contributes to the creation of stronger referral pathways.<sup>78</sup> Research and practice have shown that WSS play a central role in multi-agency work, by developing efficient cooperation with other relevant actors (for example, social and health services, law enforcement, and judiciary) at different levels of governance, by networking and delivering training programmes for relevant professionals, as well as joining efforts with other voluntary and statutory agencies.

Women's organisations also have a long tradition of carrying out primary prevention activities at the local, regional or national level. Such activities include, among others, school-based programmes, training for primary prevention practitioners, bystander intervention programmes, feminist self-defence training and self-care activities.<sup>79</sup> Primary prevention strives for a society without VAWG. It imagines what is needed to get there and what living without violence would look like. Tackling the root causes of violence, primary prevention has potential for profound social change and liberation.<sup>80</sup>

### The value of women's specialist services at the societal level

The profound social and political impact that WSS had in contributing to the recognition of VAWG as a human rights violation and to the adoption of laws and policies to address it is widely recognised.<sup>81</sup> In the frame of the Istanbul Convention, the recognition of the social value of women's organisations' activities is considered a decisive criterion for assessing the alignment of public policies with the requirements of Article 9.<sup>82</sup>

The reason for such an acknowledgment is that, in addition to providing vital services for survivors of VAWG, women's organisations have played and continue to play a crucial and unique role in challenging the root causes of VAWG.<sup>83</sup> The link between individual experiences of violence and gendered social structures inextricably connects with one of the most essential and unique traits of women's organisations: their role as political activists with a collective voice and agenda, advocating for social change through, as well as beyond, individual support to survivors of violence.<sup>84</sup> In addition to strengthening the gendered understanding of VAWG, WSS encourage and empower other actors to construct a shared language, practices and methodologies.<sup>85</sup>

Activities such as promoting and advocating for policy and legislative changes, monitoring the implementation of international human rights obligations as well as the implementation of national legislation and policies, and collecting data, contribute to driving broader social transformation to address the structural inequalities and power imbalances that enable VAWG to persist.

77 WAVE (2019), Thematic Paper - The Importance of Women's Specialist Support Services in Europe, p. 9.

78 Women's Resource Centre (2017), *Why Women Only?*, op. cit.

79 WAVE (2023), Country Report 2023, p. 18; WAVE (2023), *A life free from violence. Primary prevention as the key to eliminating violence against women and girls*; GREVIO (2022), *Mid-term Horizontal Review*, op. cit., p. 49

80 WAVE (2023), *A life free from violence*, op. cit., pp. 9-10.

81 Ref. to "Historical Account..." Section; CEDAW, General Recommendation, 35.

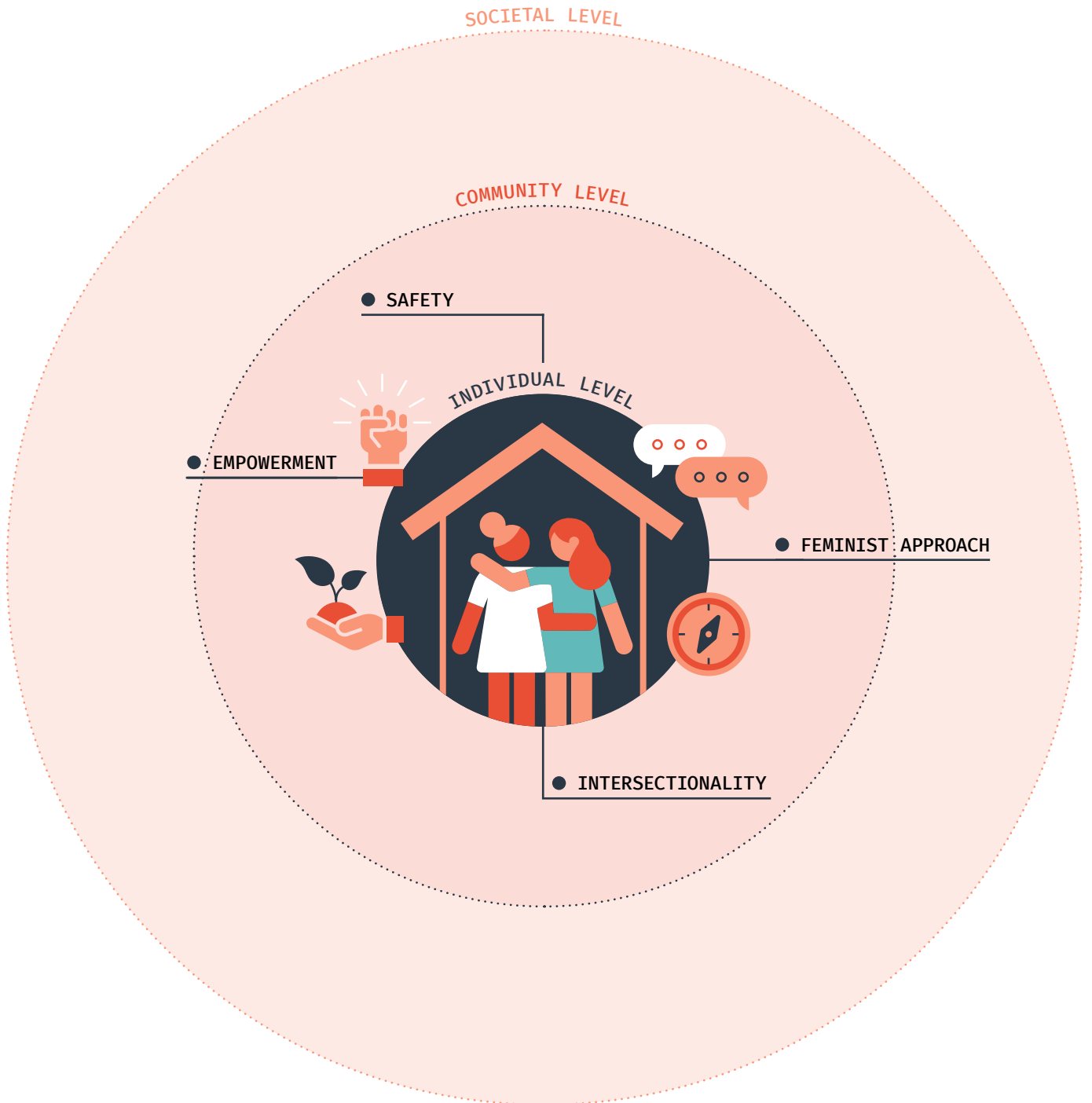
82 GREVIO Baseline Evaluation Report France, para. 52; Switzerland, para. 46; North Macedonia, para. 35.

83 WAVE (2015), *Supporting the Sustainability*, op. cit., p. 3; WAVE (2017), *Prevention and Support Standards*, op. cit., p. 31.

84 WAVE (2023), Country Report 2023; Lauri, M., & Lauri, J. (2024), "In the business of gendered violence: the private shelter discourse in Sweden", *Critical and Radical Social Work*, 12(3), pp. 398-413.

85 WAVE (2019), Thematic Paper - The Importance of Women's Specialist Support Services in Europe, p. 9.

# **Women's Specialist Services at the Individual Level**



# Women's Specialist Services at the Individual Level

## *Feminist, Survivor-Centred and Empowering Support*

The first level this study focuses on is individual support practices within women's specialist services (WSS). It examines how WSS understand and organise their work with survivors and how feminist and gender-specific principles are translated into concrete interactions, decisions, and relationships. In doing so, this chapter highlights the specific value and effectiveness of WSS at the individual level, particularly in contexts where generic responses fail to meet survivors' needs. WAVE defines violence against women, following Article 3(a) of the Istanbul Convention, as a human rights violation and a form of discrimination encompassing all acts of gender-based violence (GBV) that result in or are likely to result in physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm, including threats, coercion or the arbitrary deprivation of liberty. This conceptual understanding emphasises how WSS analyse violence and structure their support. The analysis does not treat individual support as a technical domain, but as a political level where feminist understandings of violence against women and girls (VAWG) are enacted and contested. Overall, the chapter highlights how individual-level support in WSS is embedded in broader feminist approaches to addressing violence, which are further explored at the community and institutional levels in the following sections.

### **Defining a feminist and gender-specific approach**

Across the interviews, WSS describe a feminist and gender-specific approach as the core principle shaping all aspects of their work at an individual level. Rather than treating violence as a series of isolated incidents between 'private' individuals, WSS frame VAWG as rooted in systemic gender inequality and patriarchal power structures.

As a feminist research and advocacy organisation based in Cyprus explained in the survey, their approach "*recognises that VAWG is rooted in systemic gender inequalities and power imbalances, which are reinforced by patriarchal norms and structures,*" and uses feminist methodologies "*to analyse, challenge, and dismantle these structures.*"

WSS highlight that gender-neutral or 'individualised' framings of violence obscure the fact that it is a gendered phenomenon predominantly enacted by men against women and can inadvertently reproduce the power imbalances that sustain violence. By contrast, a feminist approach centres the experiences, needs, and voices of women and girls in all interventions, ensuring that survivors' rights and agency are prioritised and that responses are not only effective but also transformative. Several WSS explicitly link this approach to resisting gender-neutral policies. The aforementioned WAVE Member from Cyprus emphasised that maintaining a gender-specific lens is crucial for challenging policies "*that fail to acknowledge the specific ways in which violence affects women and girls*", particularly in areas such as legislation, law enforcement, education and healthcare. Similarly, they describe a feminist and gender-specific approach as "*recognising and addressing the unique experiences and challenges faced by women and marginalised genders,*" insisting on an intersectional lens to combat injustice and prevent violence against diverse groups, including LGBTQI+ individuals.

This emphasis on intersectionality demonstrates that feminist analysis extends beyond gender to include how it interacts with migration status, disability, ethnicity, age, and other forms of marginalisation. Many WSS stress that this intersectional lens is not only a general principle but

## **Feminist and Gender-Specific Approach**

something they actively apply in practice, because a ‘one-size-fits-all’ response can obscure how structural barriers shape women’s exposure to violence and their access to safety and support. Several organisations also emphasise that intersectionality is not about ‘difference’ in itself, but about how institutions and systems can use factors such as language, migration status, or disability to deny women equal protection, credibility, or access to rights. In this sense, intersectionality helps shift attention away from individual characteristics and towards the structural conditions that shape risk, choice, and safety. Many WSS explicitly apply this intersectional lens in their approach and practice, shaping assessments, interventions and advocacy.

For a WAVE Member operating as a women’s centre in Croatia, applying a feminist framework means explicitly connecting everyday case work with broader structural change. They understand GBV as “a direct result of systemic gender inequality and patriarchal structures” and situate their support within an agenda to “empower women, challenge power imbalances, and advocate for social change.” Importantly, this framework is not only rhetorical; it also guides concrete decisions about how support is organised, which services are prioritised, and how survivors are involved in their own processes. The member highlights that all interventions are designed to be “holistic and empowering,” combining immediate assistance (such as legal aid, counselling, and safe accommodation) with advocacy that addresses the root causes of violence.

In sum, these accounts show that a feminist and gender-specific approach at the individual level is not an “add-on” to standard service provision. WSS read survivors’ experiences through a gendered analysis of power, design interventions that centre survivors’ voices, and seek to transform the structural conditions that enable violence.

This provides the foundation for survivor-centred and trauma-informed practices, which are discussed later in this chapter.

Interviewed WAVE Members strongly reject the idea that professionals supporting survivors should be ‘neutral’. Instead, they insist on explicitly taking women’s side as an ethical and political commitment. The **National Federation of Women Solidarity - FNSF** (*Fédération Nationale Solidarité Femmes*), a French WAVE member operating as the network of WSS and running the national women’s helpline, stressed in the interview that “domestic violence is analysed using a feminist and systemic approach [...] the professionals, they are not neutral [...] they take the woman’s side [...] placing it in a systemic context of patriarchy, masculine domination and gender imbalance.” Here, “taking the woman’s side” signals a deliberate move away from institutional practices that treat both parties as equally responsible and frame violence as a ‘relationship conflict’. It also reflects an effort to make visible the widespread nature of men’s violence against women, which, while experienced by individual women, is part of a broader structural problem rooted in gendered power inequalities.

This stance is grounded in existing data and research.<sup>86</sup> **Stígamót**, a counselling and information centre supporting survivors of sexualised violence in Iceland, underlined during the interview that without a gendered approach “we get nowhere,” noting that “ninety-five percent of those who are perpetrators are men, and ninety percent of those who are victims [...] are women.” Recognising such patterns is part of feminist knowledge production: it involves systematically naming who is harmed and who holds power, rather than treating each case as an isolated anomaly. It also means that, in individual counselling, practitioners validate women’s experiences of fear, coercive control and blame, and actively counter narratives

86 FRA, EIGE, Eurostat, 2024. EU gender-based violence survey – Key results. Experiences of women in the EU-27, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg. [https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra\\_uploads/pr-2024-eu-gender-based-violence-survey\\_en.pdf](https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/pr-2024-eu-gender-based-violence-survey_en.pdf)

that minimise or mutualise responsibility. This standpoint then shapes how they interpret survivors' stories, how they document cases, and how they engage with other institutions (for example, when challenging problematic decisions in child custody or immigration cases).

The aforementioned Croatian WAVE member described in the survey how this standpoint translates into everyday practice. They report that all employees working directly with survivors are educated in feminist principles and trauma-informed care, and that *“all decisions regarding her case are made together with her, respecting her wishes and needs.”* This approach is grounded in a survivor-centred perspective that recognises that responsibility for violence lies solely with the perpetrator, while ensuring that survivors' autonomy and informed consent guide all interventions. Here, taking women's side is not about speaking for survivors, but about creating conditions in which women can safely speak for themselves and have their choices respected.

### From grassroots movements to “by-and-for” services

The feminist and gender-specific approach at the individual level is also rooted in the historical development of many WSS as grassroots feminist organisations. Many women's organisations were founded by women directly affected by violence, by activists within the women's movements, or by communities facing specific forms of marginalisation. This history matters because it informs their organisational culture, staffing decisions and understandings of expertise. For example, the Serbian WAVE Member **IZ KRUGA – VOJVODINA**, a women's centre providing specialised support to women with disabilities, emphasises that their services are *“provided also by women with disabilities”* and that *“the upper management and the governance are led by women*

*with disabilities.”* Whenever possible, *“the service provider belongs to the same group as the beneficiary,”* and the organisation works to open different channels of communication and ensure accessible premises.

This “by-and-for” model is itself a feminist practice: in specialist services led by and for Black and minoritised women, disabled women or migrant women, the lived experience of those most affected is treated as a form of expertise and placed at the centre of organisational decision-making. This approach is also closely linked to intersectional practice because it reduces the burden on survivors to ‘explain’ the social and institutional pressures shaping their situation and can strengthen trust, accessibility, and safety in support relationships, especially for women facing multiple forms of marginalisation. Research on Black and minoritised VAWG organisations in the United Kingdom shows that services led by and for Black and minoritised women are an essential part of addressing violence, of movement building and women's community organising.<sup>87</sup>

A similar logic can be seen in organisations working primarily with migrant and refugee women, where intercultural staff teams are described as a core strength. **Asociación Por Ti Mujer** in Spain, a women's centre providing specialist support to migrant and refugee women, highlighted in the interview that they are an intercultural team with workers from various Latin American and North African countries, reflecting the communities they serve. Staff bring not only professional qualifications but also lived and community-based knowledge that helps build trust, navigate language and cultural barriers, and challenge racist institutional practices.

<sup>87</sup> Imkaan. 2018. *From Survival to Sustainability: Critical issues for the Black and ‘minority ethnic’ ending violence against women and girls sector in the UK.* London: Imkaan.

## Survivor-Centred Approach

These examples illustrate how feminist and gender-specific approaches are embedded in WSS's organisational structures and staff composition. Expertise is not only defined by professional experiences, but also by activist experience, shared identities and long-term engagement in feminist movements. At the individual level, this means that survivors often encounter support workers who understand their experiences from within, who share aspects of their social position, and who are committed to collective struggle against VAWG. This history and staffing model distinguish WSS from many general or generic services and underpin their ability to deliver specialised services that centre individual survivors' intersecting needs.

### Defining survivor-centred practice in WSS

Across all interviews and survey responses, WAVE Members emphasise that being *survivor-centred* is one of the most fundamental principles guiding individual support of WSS. While this approach is grounded in feminist understandings of VAWG, it operates at the level of every interaction, shaping how practitioners listen, validate, inform, and act. WSS define a survivor-centred approach as one where the woman's autonomy, choices, pace, and voice guide the support process, ensuring that the survivor is "at the centre of intervention and decision-making process", as put by a feminist human rights organisation working on women's empowerment, gender equality and violence against women and girls in Armenia. Furthermore, a women's centre in Slovakia explicitly links this to a feminist understanding of violence against women "as a violation of women's human rights", emphasising that their three core principles of service provision are "safety, empowerment, and social change", all operationalised in practice.

Survivor-centredness is thus part of the ethos as well as the everyday practices of WSS. In *Stigamót*, one of "the main work[s] we do [...] is to tell survivors it's not your fault. It's in the structure of the society [...] in the gender power structure". Positioning violence as a product of unequal gendered structures rather than individual failure is experienced as "very liberating" for survivors and is seen as essential "for the struggle against gender-based violence", because it counters internalised blame and shame.

Several WAVE Members who were interviewed explicitly contrast this approach with more directive, bureaucratic, or paternalistic practices in generic services. The Slovakian WAVE member stresses that empowerment means "we are not taking control from the women," but instead "support them to make a decision and provide them with all information they need so decisions can be made". Similarly, *Asociación Por Ti Mujer* in Spain describes a "victim-centred approach, which prioritises the autonomy, dignity and safety of each woman," and where "all support plans and interventions are developed in collaboration with the survivor". Survivor-centred practice is therefore not simply an ethical principle but a standpoint: as outlined in the introduction, it assumes that women themselves are the primary knowers of their situation, risk and needs, and that any intervention which sidelines their knowledge risks reproducing the control and coercion of the abusive relationship.<sup>88</sup>

### Survivors as agents with decision-making power

A central feature of WSS's survivor-centred work is the deliberate redistribution of power within the support relationship. Practitioners repeatedly describe support as a process of restoring autonomy after prolonged experiences of control. This is done through informed choice, transparency, and shared decision-making rather than professional prescription.

<sup>88</sup> For reference, the two following sections from the introduction address survivor-centred practice: "Gender neutrality and proliferation of generic support services" as well as "The value of women specialist services: supporting women survivors of violence".

In practice, this involves clearly explaining available options, outlining risks, and ensuring that women know their rights, without pressuring them towards any particular course of action. A WAVE member in Slovakia emphasises that empowerment means *“we try to support them to make a decision [...] so they have all information to take free decisions about their life”* and that staff *“try to support them to take any steps they decide to take”*. The same logic is present in the description of a women-centred needs assessment by WAVE Member **Mor Çatı Women’s Shelter Foundation** (*Mor Çatı Kadın Sığınağı Vakfı*), a Turkish women’s shelter and centre: *“we don’t have a standard way, a to do list [...] each work is specified for that woman”* because *“each woman is different in terms of their resources, the way she experienced violence, the different coping mechanisms and different choices in life”*.

Helplines and crisis services similarly operationalise informed choice. The French national network and women’s helpline **FNSF** stresses that professionals are “not neutral” about domestic violence (DV) – they *“take the woman’s side”* – but this does not translate into imposing decisions. Instead, they *“give the orientation [...] and then it’s the caller who has to take the next step,”* because *“women’s agency and autonomy are really at the heart of the principles”*. Staff *“will never tell a woman, you have to press charges, you have to go to the police [...] you have to divorce”*; the role is to accompany, not to decide.

Across interviews, WSS emphasise that women themselves decide whether and when to report to the police, initiate legal processes, leave or return to the perpetrator, or move more quickly or more slowly through the different stages of support. Practitioners are clear that these choices may appear contradictory from the outside (for instance, when women return to an abuser or pause legal proceedings), but are meaningful and rational within the complex risk landscape survivors navigate.

Survivor-centred work therefore assumes that women continuously assess danger, resources, and obligations, and that safety planning must be built on their own judgement.

Consequently, shared decision-making is both psychologically and strategically crucial. It counters institutional patterns in which survivors are told what they “should do” or judged for “waiting too long,” and instead constructs women as agents who have survived and now co-decide the direction of support. Trust emerges in the interviews as the precondition for any meaningful intervention. Practitioners repeatedly insist that survivor-centred work is fundamentally relational: it relies on sustained, non-judgemental, confidential relationships through which women can gradually re-establish a sense of safety and self-trust. As one counsellor from **Stígamót** put it, *“it’s a question of trust”*.

Many women reach WSS having already encountered disbelief, minimisation or bureaucratic coldness in state systems. Survivor-centred services consciously create an alternative space in which women are believed, their experiences are named accurately, and the pace and depth of disclosure remain theirs. A Slovakian WAVE member stresses that the counselling centre has no time limits and that services are provided *“for as long as women need,”* including weekly sessions, *“sometimes, for several years”*. If women return to a partner, *“it’s ok for us [...] the door to the counselling centre stay[s] open,”* signalling that support is not conditional on making “the right” choices.

### Recentring women’s experiences: trusting and believing survivors

Trauma-informed principles are closely intertwined with this relational work. Spanish WAVE Member **Asociación Por Ti Mujer** describes how their staff are trained *“to recognise the impact of trauma and provide compassionate and nonjudgmental support,”* developing *“personalised action plans tailored to the specific needs of each*

survivor” and focusing not only on crisis response but “*the long-term recovery,*” since “*the real job begins after the report*”. Similarly, a by-and-for organisation supporting Black and minoritised women in the United Kingdom, speaks of delivering counselling “*in a transcultural way,*” refusing to use translators because this would “*compromise the women’s narratives*” and the cultural and religious meanings of their experiences; instead, the goal is to “*enable them to open up and talk about their vulnerabilities*” and to centre “*her [...] not our prescriptive documents*”.

These accounts show how trauma-informed practice is not reduced to specific techniques but is embedded in everyday interactions: slowing down, repeating information, maintaining predictable structures, and validating ambivalent feelings. Staff at the aforementioned organisation in the United Kingdom, for example, underline that risk assessment is “*a dynamic process*”, attentive to how loneliness or memories of “*good times*” might lead women to reconsider returning to an abusive partner. Rather than ignoring these feelings, practitioners insist that “*we’ve got to enable the women to be honest with us and with themselves and say it’s OK to feel like that. Let’s talk about it [...] let’s talk about the risks of that*”. Survivor-centred practice therefore reconstructs safety not only as physical protection but also as emotional safety - the ability to speak, doubt, remember and decide without fear of judgement or abandonment.

A recurring theme across interviews is that WSS often receive survivors after they have been failed by other institutions: police who minimise risk, courts that prioritise formal procedure over safety, welfare offices that pressure women to reconcile, or disability services that claim to treat everyone the same. Survivor-centred practice thus frequently functions as a counter-institutional model, designed not only to protect women from perpetrators but also from secondary victimisation.

Several organisations describe how generic services misrecognise or erase key aspects of women’s experience. WAVE Member **IZ KRUGA – VOJVODINA** noted in the interview that when they work with disability organisations in smaller municipalities in Serbia, staff often insist that “*we are providing services [to] everyone the same way,*” which “*is exactly the problem,*” because it denies the specific gendered violence women with disabilities face and renders sexual and reproductive rights or VAWG “*not seen*”. **Sapari**, a women’s centre in Georgia, similarly contrasts their “*permanent communication*” with survivors, through regular calls from lawyers or social workers if a woman has not been in touch, with state services that are “*not that communicative*” and “*don’t know their beneficiaries that well*”.

Survivor-centred WSS respond to these gaps by re-centring women’s experiences and by taking an explicitly critical stance towards institutional practices. The interviewed WAVE member in **Slovakia** highlights the tension between state funding requirements and quality of support: because “*the state gives us money, we have to report to the state,*” often in terms of numbers of interventions. This can “*reduce the quality of the service,*” so the organisation prioritises maintaining a basic standard of support “*even if we don’t or cannot do any other activities,*” ensuring that women’s needs remain central in decisions about whether to join new projects or advocacy campaigns.

In other contexts, survivor-centred practice also extends into legal and policy advocacy. **La Strada-Ukraine**, a national women’s helpline and research organisation, describes their involvement in drafting legislation on conflict-related sexual violence, emphasising that survivor participation in the working group was crucial “*because with survivors we can provide quite strong legislation*” and that they hope this will serve as a precedent for “*voices of survivors [...] being heard*” not only in the media but also “*in our legislation and decision-making process*”.

In sum, these examples show that survivor-centred WSS do not simply adapt to institutional frameworks but aim to transform them. By validating women's accounts, documenting institutional harms, and accompanying survivors through retraumatizing procedures, they create an alternative practice space organised around safety, recognition and women's own assessments of risk and justice.

### Survivor-centred practice through intersectionality

Lastly, survivor-centred practice is described as necessarily intersectional and tailored. To place "survivors at the centre" means recognising how structural inequalities shape both exposure to violence and access to support. Many WSS highlight the specific vulnerabilities of women marginalised along several levels. **Stígamót** notes that "women on the edge of society are more vulnerable for violence," including women with substance abuse issues or those with intellectual and/or cognitive disabilities, and that accessible premises, interpreters and staff experience with diverse groups are therefore essential elements of their counselling work. In Serbia, **IZ KRUGA – VOJVODINA** describes how they organise separate group support for young and adult women with different disabilities, including embodied practices such as "laugh yoga" as both support and prevention, and stresses the importance of peer-to-peer spaces within a broader mental health network.

Services working with migrant women emphasise how legal status and racism shape the conditions of choice. **Asociación Por Ti Mujer** in Spain notes that "for many of them, the administrative status becomes the major obstacle to seeking help or reporting the abuse because of their fear of being deported," and that in many cases "the abuser is the only support system" in the host country. That's why their holistic intervention

combines legal advice on rights and protections, psychological support that "show[s] them the impact of migration on their decisions," and employment services aimed at breaking economic dependence and building autonomy.

Other WSS use intersectional frameworks to reframe victims not only as survivors but also as agents who have resisted violence within difficult conditions. **Unizon**, a Swedish umbrella organisation of women's shelters, draws on response-based practice<sup>89</sup> to "highlight [women's and children's] resistance to violence," stressing that they "did everything they could in order to resist and they never accepted it," which directly counters societal narratives asking, "why did she wait so long?". This approach reveals another dimension of survivor-centredness: the willingness of organisations to treat each survivor's situation as the starting point for institutional learning and adaptation, rather than expecting women to fit into existing service templates.

In sum, survivor-centred practice in WSS is a concrete set of relational, organisational and political commitments. It entails trusting women as experts on their lives, redistributing power through informed choice and shared decision-making, building trauma-informed relationships of safety and trust, countering institutional harms, and continuously adapting support to the intersecting structures that shape women's experiences of violence and survival.

<sup>89</sup> For more information on the methodology of response-based practice, see publications from the Centre for Response-Based Practice: <https://www.responsebasedpractice.com/publications/>.

## Empowerment, Solidarity, and Organisational Care

### Solidarity as a feminist relational practice

Across the interviews, WSS describe solidarity as foundational to their work with survivors. Rather than approaching women from a position of expertise or hierarchy, many organisations emphasise relational, emotional and political forms of accompaniment. **Mor Çatı Women's Shelter Foundation** explain that in their counselling centre, support is not a hierarchical relationship, but a shared emotional process. They highlight how relationships with survivors often continue long after formal support ends: *"sometimes years later they come back [...] showing how their life has changed and how their children changed their lives."* These long-term connections reflect a feminist ethic of non-abandonment. They also demonstrate that solidarity extends beyond crisis intervention, creating a sense of belonging and continuity. One survivor explained how she learned to ask for change on a minibus – something she had previously felt unable to do: *"when I paid and they didn't give me the return, I would never voice up. But now I ask for my money back."* This example illustrates how empowerment is experienced in everyday interactions: the ability to speak up in public, assert one's rights, and challenge small injustices signals a broader shift in self-confidence and self-perception. As practitioners note, such *"small things that changed"* are significant markers of recovery and agency as they show how feminist solidarity translates into lasting changes in women's daily lives.

Solidarity is not only interpersonal but also organisational. A national network of women's shelters and counselling centres in Germany describes establishing support funds that redistribute resources across their network, enabling a collective response to women's needs: *"[We] direct donations to where they are needed in the form of various support funds."* Survivors also maintain contact with former counselors, with one woman continuing to write years later to share her milestones – an

illustration of solidarity radiating outward into survivors' everyday lives.

Solidarity further extends into feminist organising and movement-building. **Stígamót** situates their work within Iceland's broader feminist infrastructure, noting that *"we have so many people working within the system who are feminist [...] it's a luxury."* They describe collaboration with labour unions and more than 40 organisations in preparation for nationwide feminist actions, such as the Women's Day Off strike. This locates WSS within a larger ecosystem of feminist struggle, where solidarity becomes a political tool that shapes advocacy, public discourse and collective resistance. More on how WSS go beyond survivor-centred, trauma-informed support as political actors, and on their transformative role in challenging the structural roots of VAWG, can be found in the societal level chapter.

### Solidarity as organisational resistance and continuity of feminist struggle

Solidarity also appears as a protective force within WSS themselves. **Medica Zenica**, a women's centre supporting women and children survivors of DV and conflict-related sexual violence in Bosnia and Herzegovina, describes how they resist state attempts to absorb or replace WSS with general welfare structures. They emphasise that institutions which prioritise keeping families together *"do not understand what it means for survivors [...] to receive a sensitive approach following their needs,"* and affirm: *"We will continue fighting for safe houses and specialised services, which need to be led by women's organisations."*

By defending their feminist mandate, organisations practice solidarity not only with survivors but also with the wider movement. **Stígamót** similarly links their present work to historic feminist struggles, including Iceland's 1975 women's strike, explaining that these histories *"spiralled into being this huge world event."* Such narratives reinforce that solidarity is both a present action and a continuity of feminist resistance across time.

### Empowerment as a relational and transformative process

Empowerment appears throughout the interviews as both a process and an outcome of feminist solidarity. WSS consistently describe empowerment not as a professional objective imposed on survivors, but as something that emerges through trust, validation and survivor-led decision-making.

**Mor Çatı Women's Shelter Foundation** in Türkiye highlights that witnessing women move away from violence is *“very valuable for us and empowering for us as well.”* Empowerment is thus mutual: as women reclaim voice and agency, staff also feel strengthened in their work. For many women's organisations, empowerment involves helping women recognise abuse and break cycles of violence. Spanish WAVE Member **Asociación Por Ti Mujer** explains that psychosocial support aims to *“help women to identify situations of abuse [...] break free from the cycle of violence and work towards healing and recovery.”* Access to information and ongoing communication reinforce agency; as **Stígamót** notes, survivors *“can write to our online services [...] ask any information or any help”*, ensuring they are never alone in navigating difficult decisions.

Empowerment is also described as inter-generational. A WAVE member organisation in the United Kingdom explains that workers *“try not to be rescuers”* but instead equip mothers with tools to support their children after violence, strengthening both parental agency and family resilience. **Mor Çatı Women's Shelter Foundation** similarly emphasises that supporting women and children helps *“break cycles of violence, inequality and pave the way for future generations.”*

### Children as survivors in their own right

WSS consistently emphasise that children affected by violence against women are not only witnesses or dependents, but also survivors in their own right, with specific

needs, rights and forms of harm that require dedicated attention. This understanding aligns with WAVE's broader work on safeguarding and empowering children, including the *Safeguarding and Empowering Children* project launched in 2022, which highlights children's rights and their participation in VAWG responses.<sup>90</sup>

Several organisations describe a shift away from earlier assumptions that protecting the mother automatically ensures the child's safety. **Unizon**, for example, explains that they have actively worked to change this approach at both practice and policy levels in Sweden, advocating for children to be recognised as *“separate independent actors that need a separate intervention and support,”* rather than being treated as secondary to their mothers' cases. This shift has also informed legal and institutional change, including greater recognition of children's right to live a life free from violence, even when this conflicts with dominant norms around shared custody.

At the individual level, WSS operationalise this understanding through specialised services, adapted outreach, and child-sensitive practices. **Stígamót** describes creating an anonymous online chat for young people aged 13 to 21, precisely to lower barriers to disclosure and ensure that teenagers can seek help without fear of immediate institutional consequences: *“the reason why it's anonymous [...] is that we don't have the obligation to call child protection services, and they can ask anything”*. Others emphasise early intervention and prevention, particularly among adolescents, stressing that normalising abuse in teenage relationships risks reproducing violence across generations. As one **Stígamót** representative notes, if abuse among young people is not condemned, it sends the message that *“you can abuse women”* and that *“it has no consequences,”* reinforcing patterns of VAWG later in life.

<sup>90</sup> All resources can be found here: <https://wave-network.org/wave-child-safeguarding-movement-building-project/>

Several organisations also highlight the importance of everyday, relational support for children living in shelters or refuges. The interviewed WAVE Member from the United Kingdom describes how child-focused work includes creating safe spaces for play, leisure and celebration, recognising that “*play and leisure is such a therapeutic [...] medium for children*” and an important way to help them process trauma and restore a sense of normality. **Medica Zenica** similarly notes the need to organise “*special corners*” and activities for children accommodated in safe houses with their mothers, emphasising that children’s recovery requires intentional, child-sensitive environments. Taken together, these practices reflect a shared understanding among WSS that addressing VAWG necessarily involves recognising children as survivors with their own voices, experiences and rights and integrating child-focused support into feminist, survivor-centred approaches at the individual level.

### Organisational care

Alongside solidarity and empowerment, organisational care emerges as a critical dimension of WSS practice. Working with survivors while simultaneously engaging in advocacy places a significant emotional and political burden on staff. WAVE member **Medica Zenica** from Bosnia & Herzegovina describes this dual pressure: “*from one side, we work with survivors. From the other side, we try to lobby and make some concrete changes,*” all within “*a very hard political situation and economic situation.*” They stress that without collective attention to wellbeing, “*burnout is very near if we do not think about ourselves.*” This focus on organisational care is also reflected in WAVE’s own work. *The WAVE Toolkit on Feminist Self-Care for Young Activists and Young Professionals*<sup>91</sup> highlights the importance of collective responsibility and supportive

organisational cultures in preventing burn-out and sustaining feminist work against violence. Organisational care involves both internal support systems and personal strategies. **Medica Zenica** emphasises that staff must consider “*organisational care [...] but also my self-care in my private life*”, and that they integrate these reflections into collective strategy-making to ensure sustainability.

Values also serve as organisational grounding. A women’s centre in Slovakia reflects that feminist values such as “*life free of violence*”, “*respect*”, and fundamental commitments to survivors enable them to endure difficult times. As explained in the interview: “*That is the very important thing that helps you get through difficult times [...] to understand why you do it and why it’s important you continue even though there is no light in the end.*”

Finally, organisational care also includes recognition of the movement’s diverse expertise. Serbian WAVE Member **IZ KRUGA – VOJVODINA** points to collaborative networks with organisations working with Roma, migrant, and displaced women, illustrating how shared responsibility and knowledge exchange function as care for the movement and its workers. Across the interviews, empowerment, solidarity, and organisational care appear to be deeply interconnected processes. Solidarity provides the relational foundation through which survivors experience validation and regain agency. Empowerment strengthens survivors’ voices and reveals the transformative potential of shared feminist practice. Organisational care ensures that staff remain supported and emotionally sustained as they engage in demanding work.

These dimensions form a holistic approach to individual-level support that reflects the distinct value of WSS. They reflect a feminist understanding that healing and resistance emerge not only through the

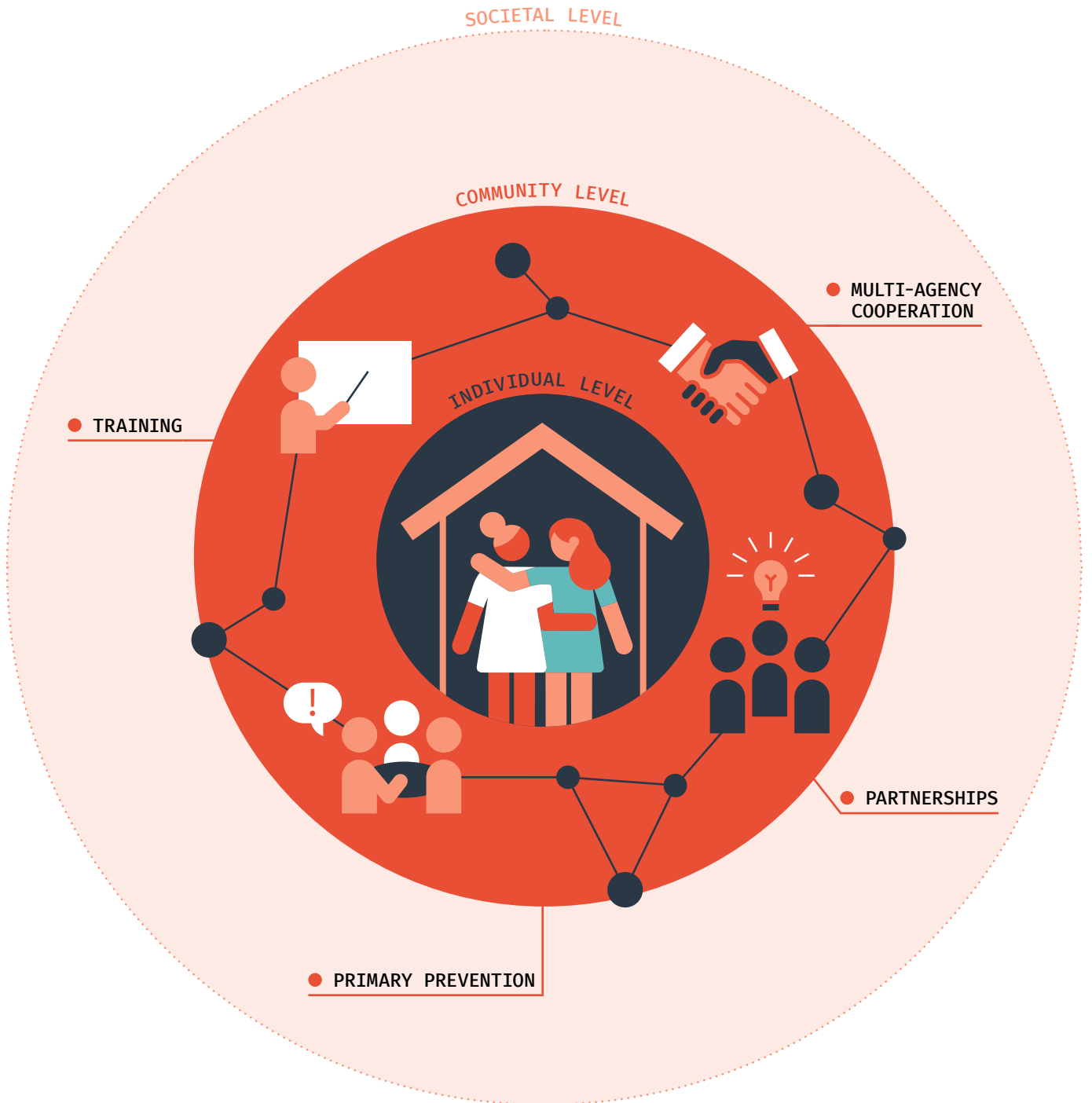
91 The toolkit can be accessed here: <https://wave-network.org/wave-toolkit-on-feminist-self-care-for-young-activists-and-young-professionals/>

services delivered, but also through the relationships, organisational cultures, and political commitments that make such support possible.

**As this chapter has shown, individual-level support offered by WSS does far more than providing direct interventions to women.** A feminist and gender-specific approach shapes how violence is interpreted and documented; survivor-centred practice reorganises the support relationship around women's autonomy, knowledge and safety; and empowerment, solidarity and organisational care sustain both survivors and practitioners over time. Together, these elements contribute to forms of support that survivors experience as more responsive, trustworthy, and effective, particularly when non-specialist systems fall short.

Individual-level work, therefore, operates as a key site of feminist knowledge production, where institutional harms are identified, survivors' resistance is made visible, and women and children's voices are heard. These dynamics cannot be fully understood in isolation. The principles and tensions identified here around gender-specific analysis, intersectionality, counter-institutional practice and the sustainability of feminist work can be found at the community and institutional levels. The next section, therefore, turns to community-level practices, examining how WSS translate these individual-level commitments into broader forms of public engagement, coalition-building, and collective action, and how, in turn, community-level organising feeds back into individual support to break the cycle of violence.

# Women's Specialist Services at the Community Level



# Women's Specialist Services at the Community Level

## *Multi-agency Collaboration, Effective Partnerships and Coalition Building to Tackle the Root Causes of VAWG*

At the community level, this study examines how women's specialist services (WSS) collaborate with other actors tackling violence against women and girls (VAWG) and how their work shapes the broader community response and perception of VAWG. **As this chapter illustrates, WSS extend their work beyond individual support to active engagement within the community**, collaborating with schools, healthcare professionals, neighbourhood initiatives, and institutions to strengthen local responses to VAWG. Through multi-agency cooperation, community-level collaboration and partnerships, training, and awareness-raising, WSS promote a shared, gendered understanding of violence, improve referral pathways, ensure survivors' voices are heard by statutory actors, and drive the development of effective primary prevention practices.

### **Cooperation with various institutions**

To effectively tackle and prevent VAWG, coordinated interventions are needed among the different bodies involved in supporting survivors. Many forms of multi-agency cooperation have been developed across Europe since the 1990s, in which WSS have played, and continue to play, a key role. In fact, it was the women's movement that lobbied for stronger commitments and accountability from state authorities, most notably in countries such as the United Kingdom, Germany, and Austria.<sup>92</sup> Actors involved in multi-agency work include, but are not limited to, government agencies and

local municipalities, health services, youth welfare authorities and other agencies for children, the police, the criminal justice system, civil courts, social services, housing and employment programmes, perpetrator programmes and, of course, support services such as WSS.

Multi-agency cooperation is also a key principle outlined in Article 18 of the Istanbul Convention, which requires establishing appropriate mechanisms to ensure effective cooperation among relevant state agencies and other entities in protecting victims of all forms of violence covered by the Convention. The term "mechanism" refers to any formal or informal structure, such as agreed protocols, roundtables, or other mechanisms, that enables professionals to cooperate in a standardised manner.<sup>93</sup> It is common practice for such collaborations to work at a structural level through exchanges of experience, joint actions, training and other activities to improve cooperation and ultimately ensure that the survivor is at the centre of the intervention.

Furthermore, the EU Directive on Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, adopted on 14 May 2024, outlines the importance of multi-agency cooperation in responding to and tackling VAWG in Articles 40 and 41, which specify that Member States should hold regular consultations with civil society organisations and NGOs working directly with survivors.<sup>94</sup>

## Effective Multi-agency Cooperation with Government and Key Institutions

<sup>92</sup> WAVE, 2006. Bridging Gaps – Models of Coordination between women's NGO's and state authorities, p. 12

<sup>93</sup> Council of Europe (CoE), 2011. Explanatory Report to the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, para. 113.

<sup>94</sup> Directive (EU) 2024/1385 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 on combating violence against women and domestic violence: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dir/2024/1385/oj/eng>.

One key benefit of established multi-agency cooperation to support women survivors of violence is the use of Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences (MARACs), first developed by WSS in the United Kingdom in the early 2000s. MARACs bring together representatives from different statutory and agency bodies to assess and coordinate responses to high-risk cases of domestic violence (DV), typically based on standardised risk assessment tools.<sup>95</sup> While these tools support information sharing, referrals, and accountability through coordinated action plans for survivors and their children across agencies, WSS have also raised concerns that risk-based approaches can fail to identify coercive control and may be harmful if applied without a gender-sensitive understanding of VAWG.<sup>96</sup>

Importantly, WSS play a key role in identifying high-risk cases and cooperating with other relevant institutions and, in many contexts, have also been instrumental in developing risk assessment tools. Effective cooperation with the police is central to this work. A WAVE Member from Germany, representing a national network of women's shelters and counselling centres, explained that while some federal states have established roundtables bringing together relevant actors to manage particularly high-risk cases, such structures are not in place nationwide. This lack of consistent coordination often leads to gaps in information sharing between practitioners and the police. Where these mechanisms do exist, however, they are highly effective for tackling high-risk DV cases: *"Where it's really established, I think it works very well. And it's especially good for the high-risk cases. But it could, of*

*course, be improved, and it would be really better if you had it in Germany in every region because that's not the case at the moment."* Although the establishment of such multi-agency risk assessment models varies between countries, WSS are often key to developing such approaches because they have a clear insight into the risks posed to survivors and into when DV has or is likely to escalate.

Health services, including general practitioners and other healthcare professionals, also play a central role in multi-agency cooperation, as they are often the first point of contact for women experiencing violence and a vital link to WSS. Across Europe, referral pathways between healthcare providers and women's organisations have enabled timely access to specialist support, while WSS have also added significant value by filling gaps in public service provision and enhancing legal and social outcomes for survivors. For example, UN Women's 2022 report, developed by WAVE, *Cooperation between women's NGOs and healthcare providers – A comparative study in the Western Balkans and Turkey*, revealed that when public mental health services were disrupted during the COVID-19 pandemic, women's NGOs provided or sourced psychological care and clinic specialists to provide individual therapy, facilitated access to life-saving medical treatment, and supported forensic documentation that strengthened criminal prosecutions. This demonstrates how collaboration with WSS can directly improve health, legal, and safety outcomes for survivors.<sup>97</sup>

95 EIGE, 2019. A guide to risk assessment and risk management of intimate partner violence against women for police, p. 60; <https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/publications/guide-risk-assessment-and-risk-management-intimate-partner-violence-against-women-police>; Richards L., Letchford S. and Stratton S. (2013), Policing domestic violence, OXFORD University Press, p. 301; <https://safelives.org.uk/about-domestic-abuse/domestic-abuse-response-in-the-uk/what-is-a-marac/>

96 Women's Aid, 2024. Funding safer futures: A government pathway for the quantity and quality of funding required to help women and children experiencing domestic abuse, <https://womensaid.org.uk/funding-safer-futures/>.

97 UN Women, 2022. Cooperation between women's NGOs and healthcare providers – A comparative study in the Western Balkans and Turkey; <https://eca.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2022/07/cooperation-between-womens-ngos-and-healthcare-providers-a-comparative-study-in-the-western-balkans-and-turkey>.

These coordinated efforts extend beyond the healthcare sector to include a wide range of local actors. A by-and-for WAVE Member organisation supporting Black and minoritised women in the United Kingdom described how multi-agency structures bring together local authorities, commissioners, health and social services, police, and specialist organisations to jointly assess domestic abuse cases, identify service gaps, and coordinate responses at the local level. As the interviewee explained:

*“Everybody’s got their little bit of specialism that they provide. For example, we have a domestic abuse strategic group that consists of local authority members [...] we’re all sitting around the table looking at domestic abuse in our area, looking at the numbers, looking at who’s coming forward, who’s not coming forward, what services are available [...] To create a picture of what is going on locally [...] and for everybody to work together to provide holistic support [...] They all play a part in helping domestic abuse survivors.”*

While effective multi-agency collaboration between WSS and various institutions has been established over the years, ongoing efforts are needed to ensure this work continues to develop and receive appropriate financing. As many WAVE Members have reported, too many multi-agency initiatives rely on short-term commitments that can be dismantled quickly by government changes and political shifts.

### Establishment of minimum quality standards (and other protocols)

Across Europe, different services are available to survivors of VAWG, depending on available resources, national contexts, and state requirements. The introduction to this study outlined how the Istanbul Convention and other international legal instruments

do, however, provide a number of aims and principles that specialist support services should pursue and be based on.<sup>98</sup> Where established minimum quality standards are lacking, individual WSS have developed their internal working process and procedures over time in a more or less uniform manner.

Such standards are well established in countries like England, where women’s networks have developed quality standards that demonstrate the enormous impact that WSS have in delivering life-saving services for women survivors. The Women’s Aid National Quality Standards (NQS) were developed in 2015 in response to the needs expressed by services across the Women’s Aid Federation and form a set of accredited criteria through which WSS can evidence their quality. In fact, the Women’s Aid NQS are the only accreditation in England that recognises and represents the work of specialist women-led domestic abuse services and the unique value and high-level impact of these services, which centre the long-term safety and recovery of survivors and the prevention of further harm.<sup>99</sup> The NQS are even referenced in the government’s statutory guidance (Domestic Abuse Act 2021) as best practice.

All but one of the interviewed WAVE Members confirmed that their country has minimum quality standards for support services, whether formal or informal, although the breadth of these standards and the forms of violence covered vary. Even when services are aligned with state standards on paper, in practice, there can be gaps in service quality across countries and within a country, as **Mor Çatı Women’s Shelter Foundation** (*Mor Çatı Kadın Sığınağı Vakfı*), a Turkish women’s shelter and centre, noted in the interview. This is also a pitfall of setting minimum standards

<sup>98</sup> For reference, the two following sections from the introduction address minimum quality standards: “The institutionalisation process: minimum standards and the risk of depoliticisation” as well as “States’ duty to set up speciality services for women survivors of violence based on gendered understanding of violence and human rights-based approach”.

<sup>99</sup> Women’s Aid Federation of England, National Quality Standards: <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/what-we-do/national-quality-standards/> (accessed 14 November 2025).

for an entire country, especially when services are provided at the federal or regional level, where local authorities have developed their own standards. The aforementioned national network of women's shelters and counselling centres in Germany explained that, with the introduction of a new Violence Assistance Act (*Gewalthilfegesetz*), the state is attempting to develop unified standards:

*“if you try to find a consensus of quality standards, then on the federal level, there is always a risk that there is, you know, a race to the bottom. Like, what is the minimal thing we can all agree on? We are working on this and watching this closely so that when the new quality standards are developed, which will start now, and new women's shelters will be built, they will at least have the standards we already have. And [we] actually published quality standards ourselves, which were developed by practitioners from our members.”*

This example highlights the importance of WSS developing their own standards. In many instances, states rely on standards already established by WSS, as these exceed the minimum set out in national or international legal instruments. Conversely, when minimum standards fall short of what specialist services should provide to adequately support women survivors,<sup>100</sup> WSS have advocated for the adoption of higher standards, as ...**IZ KRUGA – VOJVODINA**, a women's centre providing specialised support to women with disabilities in Serbia, reported doing with their local government. In other instances, donor agencies impose their own standards that exceed state-mandated minimum standards. For example, one WAVE Member operating as a women's centre in Slovakia described how funding from a Norwegian foundation enabled the establishment of a coordination methodological centre on VAWG. Working in cooperation with women's NGOs, the centre developed minimum standards for service provision, monitored services, and collected data.

In Slovakia, new family counselling centres for survivors of violence have opened up, which are not run by WSS with a feminist and gender-specific approach. These centres focus on child custody and claim to provide psychological and legal counselling in family matters. Some centres run by children's rights organisations even promote family mediation, which is not advisable in VAWG cases.<sup>101</sup> In such instances, the introduction of clear standards can help ensure that survivors receive appropriate support regardless of the provider, ideally with WSS involved in their development. Standardisation can therefore play an important role in safeguarding the quality-of-service provision when different types of services for survivors exist.

While the establishment of minimum quality standards can ensure women survivors of violence receive adequate support, it can also hinder the work developed by WSS over the decades. In Sweden, a change in legislation introduced a licensing system for shelters, including women's shelters, in 2024. The responsible licensing authority is the Health and Social Care Inspectorate (*IVO – Inspektionen för vård och omsorg*), and this system outlines specific criteria that shelters must meet to offer services. WSS and feminist networks have been preparing for these changes by, for example, providing quality assurance training to women's shelters to enhance their capacity and quality of work and meet licensing requirements. However, with the increased standardisation of shelter services, the existence of some shelters run by WSS is placed in limbo. On the other hand, regulations can also help improve service provision by ensuring that profit is not a motivating factor for establishing a shelter. This dichotomy is explained by **Unizon**, a Swedish umbrella organisation of women's shelters:

<sup>100</sup> E.g., by following the CoE minimum standards for support services developed in 2008, which are seen by WSS as outdated.

<sup>101</sup> As outlined in Article 48 of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention).

*“this licensing is not easy because for women’s shelters that have been there for over forty years, accumulating this massive expertise, to have them apply for the same licenses as private actors who started yesterday, it doesn’t feel right. And also, it’s an expensive thing and we know that private actors, since they are profit driven, they can afford to pay a lot of money when applying for the license which has now doubled the price. So, for our shelters it is a very difficult process with negative consequences that can even cost a shelter their existence. On the other hand, if you think about how it was before that, an actor who was not really serious but wanted to get good money could do that because there was no regulation, so it is good to have a certain standard.”*

Therefore, standardisation of services through the establishment of minimum quality standards and other formal or informal protocols must include and consult WSS, who understand the importance of specialist support provision. As the Swedish example illustrates, increased regulation can improve services for women survivors of VAWG, but it can also have damaging consequences for WSS if developed without consulting the services themselves. More on how WSS advocate for and have lobbied governmental representatives and other stakeholders for improved legislation and legal standards is described in the next chapter.

In terms of increased bureaucratisation and regulation of services, almost half of WAVE Members who responded to the survey reported that their organisation had experienced increased regulation (by the state, local authorities, or funders) in relation to service provision. These include heightened bureaucratic and administrative burdens, often without corresponding funding, that divert resources from WSS’s frontline support. This has been the case in Belgium and Spain. In some countries, new regulations threaten core principles of WSS, such as confidentiality and gender-informed methodologies, particularly through requirements that undermine survivor safety or exclude migrant women. For example, in Italy, some regional regulations require the disclosure of private data (e.g., tax codes) and the regular submission of documentation by migrant women. Others recognised the potential benefits of standardisation, as one Irish member noted in the survey: *“This may not be a bad thing, provided the sector itself is fully part of the process, and it is not ‘imposed’ in a way that is not domestic-violence- and gender-informed.”*

## Promising Partnerships and Other Forms of Collaboration

### Community-level collaboration practices and (in)formal networks

Beyond established multi-agency cooperation models, WSS have also developed partnerships and other more informal forms of collaboration with regional institutions and other civil society organisations. Although there are differences across Europe in the capacity to collaborate extensively and in the availability of partners and allies, WSS rarely work in isolation, and partnerships are an essential part of their work. Interviewed members mentioned various formal or informal networks they belong to, such as national or regional women's networks or coalitions, national women's councils, national observatories on VAWG, and other informal collectives on VAWG. These partnerships play an important role in providing peer-learning opportunities and inter-organisational support among WSS. For example, **Mor Çatı Women's Shelter Foundation** (Mor Çatı Kadın Sığınağı Vakfı) described the importance of having feminist organisations as allies, particularly in a context where women's issues are framed as anti-government, as is the case in Türkiye:

*"I think there are a lot of allies, but we prefer to always act together with different feminist organisations because we prefer not to be side by side with any other [type of] organisation. It's obviously a political choice for us because we do have allies from different parts of society. In the government, the opposition parties and many organisations around them, they usually perceive us as allies [...] but the way they react to our statements and position is different because they either do not see us or discredit us, that's the strategy of the anti-gender movement."*

At a local level, WSS work closely with municipalities to co-design and deliver services and to jointly develop initiatives that address survivors' needs in the community. **Unizon** described how they are promoting long-term cooperation between the municipality and

local women's shelters or women's crisis centres across Sweden through so-called "*public-private partnerships*" that rely on sustained funding for women's services. These partnerships have enhanced women's rights and safety in the municipality and have even led to the development of a women's rights barometer to evaluate municipalities' work on women's rights and safety.

Housing is another area of collaboration, as shortages of safe, affordable accommodation can create significant barriers for survivors leaving shelters, making municipal partnerships essential to secure sustainable housing solutions and support their long-term recovery. **Unizon** mentioned that they have begun partnering with companies to provide survivors with long-term housing contracts, which give women more agency and security than sublets, which do not guarantee permanent housing. Secure and safe housing notably emerged as a critical issue during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the *WAVE Country Report 2021*, some countries, including Iceland, Denmark, Portugal, Finland, and Belgium, developed public and private initiatives to provide extra emergency beds, and in Ireland, two thousand additional hotel bed nights were made available to WSS as in-kind support from a company for short and long-term homestays.<sup>102</sup>

Local partnerships and collaboration are vital to ensure coherent and effective housing solutions for women who have separated from abusive partners. In London, WSS have established collaborations with the housing sector to ensure improved housing options for survivors with intersecting identities, including Black and minoritised women. An interviewed WAVE Member described how this work aligns with a mayoral funding programme that enables housing departments to partner with WSS to co-develop new or refurbished housing tailored to survivors' needs: "*it provides an opportunity for us to design these new buildings together*

102 WAVE Country Report 2021: Women's Specialist Support Services in Europe and the impact of COVID-19 on their provision, p. 117, [https://wave-network.org/wp-content/uploads/WAVE\\_Country-Report.pdf](https://wave-network.org/wp-content/uploads/WAVE_Country-Report.pdf).

and to accommodate women [...] with disabilities, possibly having children with disabilities.” This example illustrates how municipal collaboration can not only address immediate housing needs but also shows the key role WSS play in co-developing long-term, inclusive housing solutions for survivors.

Such joint initiatives demonstrate the value of locally grounded partnerships in tackling complex barriers to safety and independence, which is particularly important when working in rural communities where resources and services may be more limited. **Medica Zenica**, a women’s centre supporting women and children survivors of DV and conflict-related sexual violence in Bosnia and Herzegovina, has established an informal network of women across 80 rural villages, encouraging them to organise their own activities in the local community, alongside safe houses (which operate as women’s shelters). In the 12 years since the informal network was established, women’s participation in these villages has increased, as has their involvement in local-level lobbying. Similarly, the **National Federation of Women’s Solidarity – FNSF** (*Fédération Nationale Solidarité Femmes*) serves as the umbrella network of WSS across France and has a rural women’s commission that has established a partnership with the national association of rural mayors. The project aims to develop rural contact points for women and, as the member explained, tries to create bridges for women in rural areas who may have difficulty accessing specialist services if they have experienced violence:

*“Out of our 82 associations, one third of them are based in rural areas, but more than half of them intervene in rural areas because some of them they [...] have vans, like trucks, and they go to the rural areas to try to reach women who are isolated, so this is really something that was important for the network. And we started this working group with a few associations who wanted to develop [...]*

*a programme of mobilising citizens that can be “point repères” [checkpoints] to orient women towards local associations.”*

Following the success of this initiative within their network, the member organised a national event on violence against women in rural areas and is looking to share promising practices from the work of the rural women’s commission with other WSS to ensure that rural communities are not left out of service provision and that women in remote areas have pathways to safety and support.<sup>103</sup>

While strong partnerships can significantly enhance the support survivors of VAWG receive at the local and community levels, WSS have also pointed to the challenges of building and sustaining these relationships, particularly when they depend heavily on individuals or personal contacts. In smaller countries, such as Slovakia, close-knit networks can make it easier to connect with decision-makers, yet the pool of potential allies is limited, and influence may rest with a small number of supportive political figures with limited mandates. In Georgia, the women’s centre **Sapari** noted that personal relationships, such as knowing a prosecutor involved in a case, have at times been critical to ensuring a case of VAWG is dealt with promptly, but this reliance on individual connections is not sustainable, underscoring the importance of developing more formalised and nationwide forms of collaboration.

103 Resources from FNSF on supporting rural women: <https://solidaritefemmes.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/livret-plaidoyer-ruralite-1.pdf>.

### Training and capacity building for key professionals

WSS also play a crucial role in strengthening the wider institutional response to violence against women through training and capacity building.<sup>104</sup> Across Europe, WSS are actively involved in designing gender-sensitive training manuals and guidelines and in delivering training programmes for public authorities and other relevant stakeholders, ensuring that responses are rooted in a feminist understanding of VAWG and survivors' lived experiences. They have developed specialised training for key institutions such as the police, social workers, health-care providers, and legal professionals, and frequently serve as the primary trainer for these groups. As one Scottish WAVE Member noted in the survey: "We are the primary trainer to most public sector partners. People understand it is their job to help reduce or stop domestic abuse in Scotland - even if they aren't sure how to do this appropriately yet." By offering regular training opportunities and practical guidance, WSS help professionals understand how to interact appropriately and safely with survivors and their children, to avoid re-traumatisation and help break the cycle of violence.

One key institution for which WSS provide specialised training is the police, as they are usually the first professionals survivors interact with when reporting an incident of VAWG and play a crucial role in ensuring a safe and informed initial response. When the police are not properly trained to respond to and interact with survivors, further harm can result, including survivors feeling shame for reporting the violence and returning to the perpetrator (in cases of intimate partner violence). **Sapari** highlighted in the interview that several decades ago, women in Georgia would rarely

go to the police if they experienced DV, as violence was normalised and survivors were shamed by family members or relatives, or not believed if they reported the violence. This has improved over the years, in part through the introduction of DV legislation in 2006 and training for professionals offered by civil society organisations and international organisations:

*"Compared to what I remember from my childhood, it has really improved. And the police are better now. When victims of gender-based violence call them, they don't mock [survivors] anymore [...] And we help them and also offer training for police officers, for prosecutors and investigators, to teach them how to talk to women and women victims especially. And it is an important approach for us because it means that if you can use it in your practice, then it leads to less domestic violence in your environment. Because I don't know any other case now as I knew in my childhood [where survivors had to hide the violence]."*

This example demonstrates how sustained training and engagement with different law enforcement agencies can shift attitudes and behaviours over time, safeguarding a survivor-centred, respectful response. By ensuring that the police, judges, prosecutors and courts receive appropriate, gender-sensitive training, WSS also contribute to an improvement in the frontline response to VAWG, thereby reducing tolerance for violence and the shame survivors may feel. In some countries, specialised VAWG police units have been developed, staffed by trained expert police officers who can intervene in cases of DV and other forms of VAWG.

<sup>104</sup> Training and sensitisation of professionals are recognised as effective means of preventing and combating violence against women, mitigating the risk of secondary victimisation and re-traumatisation and significantly improving the nature and quality of the support provided to victims. See Art. 15 Istanbul Convention and Explanatory Report, para. 98; see also CEDAW General Recommendation n. 35, para. 30 (e). In its 6th General Report on GREVIO's Activities, para 99, GREVIO stresses the importance to tap into the accrued experience of the many long-standing women's rights organisations and specialist support services when designing and implementing training programmes for professionals.

In Ukraine, WSS provided training for specialised VAWG police units and developed tailored courses for the national school of judges on handling DV cases. As reported by **La Strada-Ukraine**, a national women's helpline and research organisation, the start of the full-scale invasion saw trained police officers sent to occupied territories who were better equipped to communicate more effectively and sensitively with civilians affected by the war, underscoring the importance of such training beyond VAWG response. Additionally, **...IZ KRUGA – VOJ-VODINA** was told at a conference organised by the Serbian provincial ombudsman that only one police station had provided disaggregated data on survivors with disabilities, namely the one our member had trained.

However, effective training and multi-agency cooperation depend heavily on sustained state commitment and long-term financing. As highlighted by **Unizon** during the interview, a former police-led initiative in Stockholm (“DAWN”) led to a close cooperation between specialised trained police and women's organisations, particularly through targeted police training on men's violence against women. Despite its success, the initiative was discontinued: *“unfortunately, instead of spreading it as a good practice to the whole country, they just ended it. But still, [the trained police force], they're there [...] So even when some functions are transformed, people still make this cooperation as effective as possible under the circumstances.”* While trained officers continue to apply this knowledge informally, the absence of sustained political will and funding can undermine effective practices, even where good cooperation has been established.

The role of WSS in providing training and capacity building for professionals extends far beyond law enforcement. As already mentioned in this chapter, healthcare professionals are a vital and life-saving frontline responders for survivors. One Albanian member explained in the survey that through ongoing collaboration with local

referral mechanisms, including social services and healthcare staff, they have seen a clear shift towards a more survivor-centred approach and improved reporting rates: *“In some municipalities, after our training sessions and joint case reviews, frontline responders began prioritising risk assessment and safety planning, which wasn't standard practice before. Also, we have thoroughly trained the healthcare staff in some municipalities in Tirana on VAWG and a victim-centred approach. Before our training, the data showed that 0 cases of violence were identified and referred by healthcare staff. This number has significantly increased after our training.”*

Training efforts also extend to other sectors that play a key role in the VAWG response. For example, many WSS engage with the media and organise training for journalists on how to report on VAWG cases in a sensitive, survivor-centred manner, rather than relying on sensationalist coverage. As **Medica Zenica** highlighted, this is especially evident in femicide cases in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and much can be gained from working with local journalists and media outlets.

However, when gender-sensitive approaches are not fully integrated into state or local institutional responses to VAWG, challenges arise. In particular, inadequate training among judges and other justice system actors often results in DV cases being mishandled or minimised, leading to unjust outcomes for survivors. Without proper understanding and sensitivity, professionals also risk causing secondary victimisation or re-traumatisation in their interactions with women and their children. Moreover, where positive change depends on individual staff members who have received specialised training, progress can be quickly undone when these individuals leave their positions, highlighting the need for institutionalised and sustainable training programmes across all relevant sectors.

## Tackling Violence through Primary Prevention

### Community awareness-raising and education

Tackling the root causes of VAWG requires more than responding to violence after it occurs; it demands proactive efforts to prevent it from happening in the first place. WSS have and continue to play a vital role in this work, using their feminist expertise to engage in community-based, transformative primary prevention initiatives. Primary prevention aims to build a society free from VAWG by addressing the underlying social norms, power imbalances, and gender inequalities that enable violence to persist. Unlike secondary or tertiary prevention, which focus on intervention and recovery, primary prevention seeks lasting social change by challenging stereotypes, promoting equality, and fostering respectful relationships. Across Europe, WSS lead activities such as school-based and peer education programmes, feminist self-defence for women and girls, empowerment activities, and workshops for professionals working with young people to prevent violence.

WAVE's 2023 publication *A life free from violence: Primary prevention as the key to eliminating violence against women and girls* sheds light on how women's rights organisations working in the field of VAWG can advocate for primary prevention while continuing to support survivors who have experienced violence.<sup>105</sup> As highlighted in the publication, primary prevention in feminist practice focuses on emancipation and empowerment. It centres not only on individual experiences, but also on the cultural and structural forces that produce discrimination and violence. It enables people from oppressed groups to reclaim control over their lives, rights, spaces, and self-definition, making visible the resources and capacities that have been overlooked or suppressed. This is central to the work of

WSS, which not only support those who have experienced violence but, in many cases, also invest time and effort in empowering women and girls to envision a world without violence. **Medica Zenica** expanded on this during the interview when describing their primary prevention work in Bosnia and Herzegovina:

*“One of our prevention programs is economic and psychosocial empowerment, which proves to be very important when it comes to empowering women to get to know their rights, to build their self-esteem, but also to become economically independent, which, in the end, reduces the risks of being exposed to violence. So, what we are trying to do is to have a comprehensive prevention program that [...] also [addresses] stakeholders who are in different positions, starting from direct assistance up to decision-making positions where they influence policies or legislation.”*

At the heart of diverse primary prevention efforts lies a shared feminist principle that ending VAWG requires transforming both societal structures and individual experiences of power and control. One powerful manifestation of this principle is feminist self-defence, a vital element of primary prevention which equips women and girls with the physical, verbal and psychological tools to recognise, resist and challenge violence and everyday boundary violations. Research shows that participation in feminist self-defence reduces fear, vulnerability and the likelihood of assault, and promotes broader empowerment essential for liberation from patriarchal control.<sup>106</sup>

<sup>105</sup> WAVE (2023). *A life free from violence*, op. it.

<sup>106</sup> Hollander JA, 2014. Does self-defense training prevent sexual violence against women? *Violence against women*, 20(3), 252-269.

Thompson ME, 2014. Empowering self-defense training. *Violence Against Women*, 20(3):351-9. doi: 10.1177/1077801214526051. Epub 2014 Mar 30. PMID: 24686126.

WAVE members such as **Autonomia** and **Juniper Foundation** in Poland, as well as **Garance** in Belgium, offer feminist self-defence workshops for women, girls, and LGBTQIA+ individuals as a feminist, empowerment-based response to VAWG, strengthening their sense of self-confidence, self-esteem, and agency. These workshops help participants overcome the feeling of helplessness and defencelessness against verbal and physical attacks they encounter in public places, at school, at work, and/or at home, and teach them to recognise and respond to boundary transgressions and violence.

Another core part of the primary prevention efforts mentioned by the interviewed WAVE Members was initiatives targeting schools and youth, as this work is crucial in shaping future social norms and building the foundations of a violence-free society. This could take the form of art workshops, as described by **Sapari**, or violence-prevention workshops or sessions in schools that discuss healthy relationships and the importance of consent. Furthermore, **Stígamót**, a counselling and information centre supporting survivors of sexualised violence in Iceland, has developed a public awareness and prevention campaign called *Sjúkást* (Crazy Love), focusing on healthy relationships and violence prevention for young people.<sup>107</sup> Developed materials include a discussion game that examines healthy and unhealthy behaviour in relationships, an interactive online exercise highlighting factors that can influence power dynamics in relationships, and an anonymous online chat for teenagers, *Sjúktspjall* (Sick Chat). Through this campaign, **Stígamót** estimates that they have reached all young people in Iceland, either directly or indirectly, most notably through school counsellors, whom students must see once a year.

Other WSS-led primary prevention work has expanded to the broader community level, aiming to shift collective norms and promote active bystander engagement. One such example is the StoP Project (*Stadtteile ohne Partnergewalt*), a community-based primary prevention model originally developed in Germany in 2010 and later expanded to Austria. StoP has been successfully implemented in 12 districts in Germany, and as of 2025, there are 46 StoP locations throughout Austria, 12 of them in Vienna. The project has been implemented by the **Association of Austrian Autonomous Women's Shelters** (*Autonome Österreichische Frauenhäuser – AÖF*) and local partners. StoP has become one of Austria's most recognised primary prevention initiatives and is run by local WSS. The project is developed through eight structured steps to prevent DV in neighbourhoods. Its activities range from establishing a committed local institution and conducting socio-spatial and network analyses, to forming resident-led action groups, building broad neighbourhood networks, offering individual support, fostering sustained organising, and ultimately forging political alliances to enact systemic change. The model has shown real impact internationally, reflecting deepening social change in neighbourhoods and a reduction in DV.<sup>108</sup>

---

107 More info on the campaign available here: <https://sjukast.is/>.

108 See StoP Toolbox, Achievements of StoP (2023)

### Building coalitions and a collective voice

A core dimension of WSS's work lies in their ability to build coalitions and mobilise a strong collective voice to challenge the root causes of VAWG. By forging both formal alliances, such as networks, platforms or policy-focused partnerships, and informal, community-based coalitions, they have advocated for structural change, shaping policy directions and promoting long-term, transformative prevention strategies.

For example, despite gaps in international legislation specifically addressing primary prevention, WSS across Europe have increasingly mobilised to advocate for the integration of primary prevention into national policies and national action plans (NAPs). While an increasing number of countries have introduced NAPs to address VAWG, most focus on responding to violence once it has occurred, rather than developing a holistic, coordinated prevention approach.<sup>109</sup> A positive example comes from Belgium, where the National Action Plan to Combat Gender-Based Violence 2021-2025 includes specific provisions on primary prevention (in Axis III), focusing on awareness-raising, information, and primary prevention initiatives, as well as a definition of primary prevention in line with the definition used by the World Health Organisation (WHO). This development is in part due to the feminist NGO **Garance's** advocacy efforts over the last two decades in French-speaking Belgium. As the WAVE Member explains:

*“After more than 15 years of advocacy, we have achieved that primary prevention is a strategic priority of all feminist NGOs across Belgium, which is a feat in a linguistically divided country where the policy focus is on after the violence has occurred. Also, we were able to shift public policy more towards primary prevention which is at least mentioned alongside secondary and tertiary prevention and is starting to receive basic funding.”*

Importantly, **Garance** actively participated in the creation of the shadow report on the (lack of) implementation of the Istanbul Convention by Belgian governments and coordinated the prevention chapter in the run-up to Belgium's first GREVIO evaluation. **Garance's** advocacy directly contributed to changes in the 2010–2014 action plan, which, for the first time, separated awareness-raising and prevention into distinct chapters and explicitly introduced primary prevention measures such as school-based dating-violence prevention and the integration of gender analysis into sex education. Although this progress was partly lost in the 2015–2019 action plan, **Garance** demonstrated how consistent, feminist-informed engagement can shift national policy landscapes, embed prevention more firmly in official frameworks, and build long-term understanding of what truly prevents VAWG before it occurs.<sup>110</sup> The wider contribution of WSS to the development and implementation of NAPs is elaborated further in the next chapter.

<sup>109</sup> The Equality Institute and UN Women (2023). Together for Prevention: Handbook on Multisectoral National Action Plans to Prevent Violence against Women and Girls. New York: UN Women, <https://knowledge.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2023/10/together-for-prevention-handbook-on-multisectoral-national-action-plans-to-prevent-violence-against-women-and-girls>, p.22

<sup>110</sup> More on Garance's experience advocating for primary prevention can be found in WAVE's Publication "A Life Free from Violence: Primary Prevention as the Key to Eliminating Violence Against Women and Girls".

Another example comes from Sweden, where **Unizon** has developed a partnership with the organisation **MÄN**, which focuses on advancing gender equality, combating men's violence, and redefining masculinity. As they explained: *“[The collaboration with MÄN] is seen as an important strategic partnership by decision-makers. For example, especially when we talk about certain questions related to primary prevention, it weighs much more when we do it together through shared messaging [with MÄN] than if we would do it ourselves”*. Together, they have developed a number of materials, including a methodology and toolkit called *Machofabriken* (Macho Factory) for working with youth, specifically young boys, on how to talk about masculinity norms, as well as violent behaviour and how to prevent it. They have also trained professionals in schools as chosen mentors for children and active bystanders, which was specifically mentioned in Sweden's National Strategy on Combating and Preventing Men's Violence Against Women and is recognised on a national level as a good primary prevention practice.<sup>111</sup> Of course, WSS's advocacy work is not limited to primary prevention but is part of the multifaceted efforts of feminist women's organisations to tackle VAWG. The next chapter of this publication focuses on the societal impact of WSS and delves further into the advocacy and lobbying work of WSS.

As this chapter has shown, at the community level, WSS have been instrumental in tackling and preventing VAWG. Through multi-agency cooperation, local partnerships, grassroots mobilisation, training and capacity-building for key professionals, community-building, and primary prevention efforts, WSS go beyond simply providing direct services to women survivors of violence. This level showcases how service provision alone can only go so far and is limited in achieving the transformative, lasting change needed to ultimately eradicate VAWG. ***When WSS are embedded in a wider community network, and multisectoral collaboration is present, their impact expands beyond individual interventions, laying the groundwork for broader societal change,*** which the following chapter examines.

---

<sup>111</sup> On January 28, 2026, the Swedish Prime Minister presented the government's decision to establish a Council for Protection of Women's Safety (Rådet för kvinnofrid) aimed at preventing and combating men's violence against women through a zero-tolerance vision. This development is seen as a positive step by Unizon and other Swedish WSS, who have been promoting this approach for years.

# Women's Specialist Services at the Societal Level



# Women's Specialist Services at the Societal Level

## Agents of Change and Social Transformation

At the societal level, this study highlights the broader societal impact that results from the efforts of women's specialist services (WSS). Driven by a mission to improve women's rights and eradicate violence against women and girls (VAWG), WSS achieve this through a multifaceted approach. On one hand, as presented in the previous chapters, they focus on preventing violence and supporting survivors. On the other hand, **WSS are active agents of change, working to shift societal perspectives, raise awareness to reduce gender stereotypes, discrimination, and violence, and actively engage in improving policy, legislative, and institutional frameworks.** WSS operate in an increasingly hostile political environment, which is slowing progress and causing setbacks in advancing women's rights. This chapter presents their role in driving positive societal change and highlights the economic benefits of WSS's work.

Over the past six decades, feminist activism and WSS have profoundly reshaped how VAWG is understood in public discourse. Once relegated to the private sphere and treated as a private matter, VAWG is now increasingly recognised as a structural injustice rooted in patriarchal norms, systemic inequality and gender stereotypes. This shift is the result of sustained advocacy, language reframing, and challenges to the narratives that normalise violence and gendered power dynamics. While this has been made possible by the efforts of feminist movements across Europe and beyond, WSS have been focal points of these endeavours, combining frontline experience in supporting survivors with political action and a strong resolve not to accept VAWG as inevitable, but to confront it as a structural issue that must be dismantled.

### How to talk and write about violence

Language serves as a powerful tool of education and societal influence, as highlighted by the **National Federation of Women Solidarity - FNSF** (*Fédération Nationale Solidarité Femmes*), a French WAVE member operating as a national network of WSS: *"We no longer talk about battered women, but we talk about women victims of violence, because we know that domestic violence is not just physical violence"*.

Similarly, language can be an instrument for empowering women: using the term "survivor" instead of "victim" recognises that the woman has survived the violence and is not defined by it. Using the right language can also improve the tailoring of survivor support by recognising their needs and placing them at the centre of interventions. This also applies to children, who should not be considered only as witnesses of domestic violence (DV) but as victims in their own right who also need attention and specialised support, as highlighted in the individual level chapter.

The influence of language is closely linked to the impact of media and the narrative surrounding VAWG. Responsible reporting by journalists plays a crucial role in raising awareness about the impact of abuse on survivors, the availability of support services, how to recognise the signs of domestic abuse, how to intervene as a bystander, and in challenging the stigma and misconceptions that put the blame on the survivor. Informed reporting can highlight the multifaceted nature of VAWG, treating cases not as isolated crimes but as part of a structural issue. Additionally, responsible reporting can give survivors a platform to make their voices heard and the confidence to report violence, knowing that their lived experiences are

## Shifting Societal Narratives and Raising Awareness

acknowledged and taken seriously. While there is increased attention and visibility on VAWG, such attention does not always contribute to exposing the root causes of VAWG and can reinforce stereotypes and misconceptions. As mentioned by an Italian national network of WSS in the survey:

*“Social perceptions and all media communication about violence against women have increased greatly in the last decade, creating a great deal of awareness and attention. The same is true in the political world. On the one hand, this is a very positive result; on the other hand, it is more difficult for us to have a say in the issue, as many so-called “experts” have emerged, as more money and attention have come in. Politicians use the issue “demagogically” and manipulate it for other interests (e.g., against migrants, stereotyping the “typical perpetrator and victim”, etc.); the media report with an eye to what arouses the interest of the readers (concentrating on women’s lives with prejudices) rather than approaching it professionally.”*

Therefore, increased media attention needs to go hand in hand with gender-sensitive reporting, informed by the expertise of feminist and women’s rights activists working in the field of violence prevention and specialist support. Positive initiatives have been developed throughout Europe to improve media reporting on VAWG; one is run by **Women’s Aid Federation Northern Ireland**, which has developed media guidelines for the sensitive and effective reporting of domestic abuse and VAWG.<sup>112</sup> Such guidelines are implemented through workshops for journalists to change the narrative about VAWG, shape public attitudes, raise awareness, and promote accountability. The guidelines cover topics such as understanding VAWG and domestic abuse and their intersectional impact, analysing common issues in reporting domestic abuse, the importance of imagery, and how to engage with survivors.

### A layered approach to bring about change

The reframing of the issue of VAWG has been reinforced by advocacy and awareness-raising efforts that operate across multiple levels of society, as **Medica Zenica**, a women’s centre supporting women and children survivors of DV and conflict-related sexual violence in Bosnia and Herzegovina, explains:

*“Our focus is the survivor, but we know that we need to work with different circles at the same time - with families, with governments, with society, to raise awareness and then to influence policies, laws, strategies”.*

This layered engagement positions WSS as both a service provider and a cultural actor, capable not only of supporting survivors and their immediate circles but also of influencing societal attitudes. All interviewees highlighted the relevance of a feminist perspective in addressing VAWG, emphasising the importance of understanding gendered power dynamics and societal structures that perpetuate such violence. With these guiding principles, in terms of awareness-raising, WSS played and still play a pivotal role in changing public perspectives on VAWG and DV. Historically, in many European countries, women’s NGOs stepped in where the states were not providing adequate support to survivors, and managed to shift the narrative on DV from a private matter to a societal issue that requires collective responsibilities, as highlighted in one of the interviews with a WAVE member from Slovakia operating as a women’s centre:

*“What we can see in the long term is: if something has changed in the last 25 years, it is the understanding and awareness of the public to violence against women, and I think it is also shown in how many people call our helpline that are not women but relatives, employers, colleagues, neighbours, whoever. We can see the ratio there, and you know, I think it’s fair to say it hasn’t been*

<sup>112</sup> The guidelines „Responsible Reporting Matters” are available on the website of Women’s Aid Federation Northern Ireland: <https://www.womensaidni.org/resources/responsiblereportingmatters/>

*only as a result of our work, but also other women's NGOs, because this is something that the state doesn't do."*

A landmark example of the role of WSS in leading systemic change was the Icelandic Women's Strike of 1975, as highlighted by **Stígamót**, a counselling and information centre supporting survivors of sexualised violence in Iceland. On October 24, 1975, over 90% of Icelandic women stopped paid and unpaid labour to highlight their indispensable yet undervalued contributions. Organised by a coalition of grassroots feminist collectives, unions, and national women's groups, the strike showcased the power of solidarity and collective action in challenging entrenched gender inequalities. Following the strike, these organisations continued to influence policy and public attitudes, and by combining grassroots support, advocacy, and public education, they demonstrated how feminist activism can simultaneously support individuals and drive systemic change. In 2025, Icelandic women's organisations marked the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the strike by renewing calls for government action on gender-based violence, including adequate support for survivors.<sup>113</sup>

Women's organisations have also proven essential during and after conflicts. As explained in WAVE's 2022 toolkit, *Preventing and responding to gender-based violence during the war and in post-war settings*, when conflicts occur, governmental bodies and public institutions hold formal responsibility for protecting women and girls from violence.<sup>114</sup> However, experience from countries like Bosnia and Herzegovina demonstrates that these official systems frequently prove inadequate, and that women who report gender-based violence during wartime face tremendous obstacles. One of the recommendations resulting from the abovementioned toolkit is the importance of challenging social norms related to the toleration of VAWG in

post-conflict situations, and to address the stigma faced by survivors of conflict-related sexual violence.

WSS's engagement in these endeavours is key, both in peacetime and even more so during and after conflicts and emergencies. An example of such work is the aforementioned WAVE member from Bosnia and Herzegovina, **Medica Zenica**, which was founded in 1993 to support refugee women survivors of sexualised violence during the war and to encourage them to speak out, as crimes such as rape and incest were considered taboo. In the interview, they shared a recent case of two women they supported in applying for the status of civil war victims. During the war, as young girls, they were raped by men from the same ethnic group. When they applied for this status, they received a negative response, stating that if the perpetrator was from the same ethnic group, their application was not valid. Thanks to the work of Medica Zenica, in 2025, their rights as survivors were finally recognised. Such victories pave the way for other women to see their rights and their lived experiences recognised.

<sup>113</sup> More information on the movement and its demands is available here: <https://kvennaar.is/english/>

<sup>114</sup> WAVE, (2022). *Preventing and responding to gender-based violence during the war and in post-war settings*. Available at: <https://wave-network.org/toolkit-prevention-response-gbv-war/>.

### Intergenerational feminist activism

Feminist activists have been and continue to work tirelessly to dismantle the patriarchal society that enables VAWG and to protect the achievements of those who came before. It's essential to recognise the legacies of previous feminists and to support the work of younger generations of activists, who are invigorated to carry on these efforts as part of the same ecosystem aimed at addressing VAWG. Young people are not simply “the future” but active agents of feminist resistance, challenging systemic violence and envisioning new strategies rooted in intersectionality, inclusivity, and creativity. Therefore, their experiences and voices need to be acknowledged, and cross-generational feminist activism that values and incorporates diverse perspectives should be fostered.

The *WAVE Youth Ambassadors* initiative, launched in 2018, is a powerful example of this in practice: it unites young activists across Europe to confront VAWG and discrimination, keeping feminist struggle alive and evolving. *WAVE Youth Ambassadors* engage in *WAVE's* work to combat VAWG by creating content and resources for youth audiences and fostering collaboration among young activists both online and offline. They are a youth-led movement that raises awareness from local communities to international institutions, while providing a support system for young people who demand change and promote gender equality.<sup>115</sup> They also contribute directly to shaping *WAVE's* work by providing input, perspectives, and feedback that ensure youth voices are meaningfully integrated into strategies, advocacy, and policy recommendations, strengthening *WAVE's* efforts to remain responsive, inclusive, and grounded in the lived realities of young people.

Complementing this initiative, *WAVE's Campaigning and advocacy toolkit for young activists* further builds on *WSS's* legacy as a driver of social and political change. The toolkit addresses both the inner and outer layers of cultivating stronger activism for effective advocacy and campaigning, while emphasising solidarity, sustainability, and self-care as integral components of feminist activism.<sup>116</sup> Furthermore, the *WAVE Toolkit on Feminist Self-Care for Young Activists and Young Professionals* aims at supporting young changemakers in sustaining their mental and physical well-being while engaging in transformative work for gender equality.<sup>117</sup>

115 More information on the *WAVE Youth Ambassadors* generations can be found here: <https://wave-network.org/wave-youth-ambassadors/>

116 *WAVE*. (2022). *WAVE campaigning and advocacy toolkit for young activists*. Available at: <https://wave-network.org/wave-campaigning-and-advocacy-toolkit-for-young-activists/>.

117 *WAVE*. (2024). *WAVE Toolkit on Feminist Self-Care for Young Activists and Young Professionals*. Available at: [https://wave-network.org/wp-content/uploads/wave\\_toolkit\\_on\\_feminist\\_self\\_care-layout-final-digital.pdf](https://wave-network.org/wp-content/uploads/wave_toolkit_on_feminist_self_care-layout-final-digital.pdf)

## Influencing Policy and Institutional Frameworks

In addition to influencing societal narratives and perceptions of VAWG, WSS play a key role in shaping policy and legislative change. They do so by advocating for better laws, contributing to and monitoring their implementation, collecting data, conducting research, and engaging in sustained, collective advocacy. These actions contribute to broader, long-term societal transformation to address the structural inequalities and power imbalances that underpin VAWG.

All interviewees in this study reported advocating for systemic and policy changes, although at different levels depending on their internal capacity. They do so by participating in discussions with government officials, providing expert recommendations, influencing legislative measures, and much more. Several WAVE Members have played crucial roles in shaping important legislation, such as laws concerning DV, trafficking, and women's rights more broadly. They describe successes and setbacks in their advocacy efforts, often emphasising the need for ongoing pressure and collaboration among civil society organisations to maintain progress. As mentioned in the community-level chapter, partnerships are essential to WSS's work and are often organised within women's lobby groups, women's networks, national women's councils, and informal collectives. Such partnerships are essential to amplify advocacy efforts as well. For instance, **Mor Çatı Women's Shelter Foundation** (*Mor Çatı Kadın Sığınağı Vakfı*), a women's centre and shelter in Türkiye, explained that the work of the coalition of women's organisations was essential in implementing laws to improve women's rights in the country, from the first law against VAWG to the inclusion of marital rape in the Criminal Code.

### Implementing and monitoring legislative tools

WSS exert significant influence on the development and implementation of National Action Plans (NAPs) against VAWG. This work often involves navigating complex political challenges and inconsistent implementation,

largely due to insufficient political commitment and dedicated funding. For example, **La Strada-Ukraine**, a national women's helpline and research organisation, reported that civil society organisations are recognised as political actors and formally included in the creation of NAPs, such as the National Action Plan for the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on 'Women, Peace, Security' for 2026-2030. In Cyprus, a feminist research and advocacy organisation was commissioned by the Ministry of Justice to develop the entire National Strategy on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence 2023-2028. Nevertheless, as noted, implementation gaps remain a persistent challenge in Europe, and the adoption of a NAP often does not translate into effective implementation: while structures exist on paper, they often do not function effectively in practice.

WSS have also been instrumental across multiple countries in advancing the ratification and implementation of the Istanbul Convention, the Council of Europe's key treaty to prevent and combat VAWG and DV. In Ukraine, civil society organisations have advocated extensively for the Convention's adoption since 2016, despite considerable obstacles and the challenges posed by the war. The Istanbul Convention was ratified in 2022, and civil society's efforts have also contributed to broader policy changes, including laws on conflict-related sexual violence, as explained by **La Strada-Ukraine** in the interview:

*"We, as civil society, have been advocating on the Istanbul Convention for a very long time, starting actively in 2016, [and for] changes of legislation on conflict-related sexual violence. [...] After the full-scale invasion, our point was to include not only survivors from 2022, but also survivors from 2014 and this time we were successful. In this legislation, the survivors from 2014, when Russia occupied Crimea, [...] were included as well, so not only those who suffered conflict-related sexual violence in 2022, when the full-scale invasion began."*

In Cyprus, WSS played a pivotal role in the country's ratification of the Istanbul Convention by conducting research and drafting the legal provisions required to align national laws with the Convention's standards. Similarly, Lithuanian organisations ran the *YES to the Istanbul Convention* project in 2023, which successfully brought the question of ratification back to Parliament's attention, culminating in a Constitutional Court decision in March 2024 confirming the Convention's compatibility with the national Constitution.

Beyond advocating for the ratification of the Istanbul Convention and other legislative instruments, WSS engage in shadow reporting to monitoring bodies such as the Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO). This serves as a powerful tool for ongoing lobbying and advocacy, as noted by the interviewee from **Medica Zenica** in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Through shadow reporting, organisations can highlight implementation gaps, document the lived experiences of survivors that may not appear in official statistics, and hold governments accountable for their international commitments, creating an essential check on state reporting and a mechanism for advocating evidence-based improvements to policy and practice. Such reporting provides alternative narratives and evidence to international monitoring bodies, complementing and often challenging official state reports. An Italian national network of WSS explained in the survey how they are actively involved in such processes: they coordinate with other third-sector organisations, organise collective reporting initiatives, participate in consultations with the Parliament, and contribute to the development of protocols designed to improve multi-agency responses to VAWG, though they note that these are “*unfortunately, in practice, often ignored by other actors who are not sufficiently trained on VAWG.*”

### Evidence-based research and advocacy

WSS engage in extensive data collection and research as both a monitoring tool and a deliberate strategy to make women's experiences visible and to drive policy change. Organisations gather demographic information on service users, track service utilisation including referrals and shelter stays, document the nature of violence, and conduct qualitative research on survivors' experiences. As **Mor Çatı Women's Shelter Foundation** from Türkiye explains, this work serves a deeper purpose:

*“We always do it as a political tool because we believe that our main duty is that, as we learn from women's experiences, we should find ways to make their experiences visible. It's also actually a feminist question about how to perceive knowledge, because women's experiences are usually undermined [by saying that] they are not scientific enough or they are not reliable or too unique [...] So to overcome these arguments, we take their statements at the centre of our work, and then we support it with data, monitoring and research, to share with the public and the decision-makers what's really happening to women and how they are experiencing violence and what happens to them when they want to get away from violence and how the state fails to protect them from violence.”*

As presented in the individual-level chapter, many women's organisations follow the by-and-for model, meaning that service providers belong to the same group of beneficiaries (e.g., women with disabilities or migrant women), and their lived experience is treated as a form of expertise placed at the centre of their work. This approach is also reflected in the research conducted by such organisations, which have unique expertise and can give voice to the perspectives and needs of marginalised groups. For instance, the WAVE Member **Asociación Por Ti Mujer** in Spain, a women's centre providing specialised support to migrant women, conducts research on specific areas such as sexualised violence experienced by women working in care and

cleaning services. As they explained:

*“We often do research to fill the gaps in the national data, especially focusing on migrant women, who are at higher risk, and this data includes the prevalence and rates of gender-based violence among migrant women specifically, which are usually overrepresented in the numbers, and institutional violence that the migrant women suffer in different processes [...] Our research aims to provide a better understanding of the complexities and multiple factors that impact gender-based violence and to inform the evidence-based policy recommendations. So the research is not a state requirement but is crucial for us to advocate for systematic changes and to show that there is a reality that [is] not in official data and to ensure that national data better reflects the experience of all survivors and particularly of those who face multiple layers of discrimination”.*

### **At the forefront of advocacy for women’s rights**

Such efforts in data collection, research, and shadow reporting are instrumental in supporting evidence-based advocacy at the local, national, and international levels. Women’s organisations use their knowledge to formulate policy demands, run campaigns, participate in parliamentary hearings, present recommendations, and build new alliances. This committed advocacy has achieved numerous legislative goals across Europe. For instance, in Germany, decades of advocacy by women’s organisations led to the implementation of the Violence Assistance Act (*Gewalt-hilfegesetz*) in 2025, which, for the first time, establishes a nationwide legal right to protection and counselling for women affected by violence and their children, a historic step towards effectively combating VAWG and providing survivors with comprehensive access to support services.

Furthermore, in Albania, women’s organisations drafted and submitted the country’s first law addressing digital violence and played a key role in developing the National Registry for Sexual Offenders and the first

law against DV. In Armenia, advocacy efforts contributed to an updated bill on medical abortion, improving its accessibility, and a law addressing sexualised violence in the workplace. In Belgium, the concept of the continuum of sexist violence is increasingly present in NAPs and other policy documents to tackle VAWG, as a result of the advocacy work of women’s organisations working on primary prevention. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, women’s organisations influenced legislation that recognised survivors as a social category and granted them free health insurance, legal support, and financial assistance after leaving shelters. These efforts and the vast influence WSS can have in preventing violence were exemplified by **Medica Zenica** in the interviews:

*“Our work has also influenced many people in terms of their understanding, but also their commitment to combating and preventing violence. And we have positive examples of ministers in decision-making positions who show a commitment to listening to women’s NGOs [ . . . ] Those people are very important, but we need more of them to be like that and do their jobs. To understand that the prevention of violence is part of their job and agenda and not to be an effort pushed by NGOs in order to be promoted [...] So, yeah, we had to do a lot until we were able to change not only the mentality but the point of view of the general public when it comes to violence against women.”*

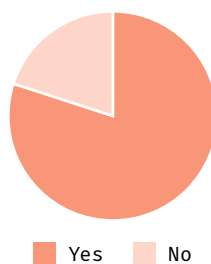
Countless victories and steps forward for women’s rights have been achieved through WSS’s advocacy. Nevertheless, the advocacy landscape is increasingly complicated by rising anti-gender movements, funding insecurities and authoritarian governance, which leads to a crackdown on civil society and a rollback of hard-won rights for women and LGBTQI+ individuals. Yet women’s organisations continue to demonstrate resilience through collaborative efforts, alliance-building, and strategic use of international frameworks and monitoring mechanisms to hold governments accountable and drive meaningful policy change.

## Women's Specialist Services in the Face of Backlash

As highlighted in the introduction to this study, the backlash against women's rights across Europe is intensifying, slowing progress in women's empowerment. Globally, UN Women has found that one in four countries reports a backlash against women's rights.<sup>118</sup> As outlined, the rise of populist and authoritarian political regimes has created an increasingly hostile environment for women's rights organisations, resulting in reduced public funding and shrinking feminist civic spaces.<sup>119</sup> This threatens the sustainability of WSS, forcing them to rely more heavily on donor funding and limiting their capacity to effectively support women survivors of violence.

In addition to this, the trend towards gender-neutral policies in addressing VAWG has obscured the gendered nature of such violence, which is rooted in structural inequality and gendered power imbalances. These policies have a direct and stark impact on the work of WSS, as they divert resources to generic service providers that lack a women-centred approach and expertise in supporting survivors.<sup>120</sup>

### HAS YOUR COUNTRY EXPERIENCED AN ANTI-GENDER BACKLASH AND/OR CHALLENGES RELATED TO GENDER-NEUTRAL APPROACHES?



The widespread impact of the backlash against women's rights and the trend towards gender neutrality is well-documented,

but this study further sheds light on how the VAWG sector has been affected across Europe. According to the survey responses from WAVE Members across 18 countries, 80% (20 respondents) had experienced an anti-gender backlash and/or challenges related to gender-neutral approaches. Of the five WAVE Members who indicated that their country had not experienced these challenges, one nevertheless noted that their local government does not provide financial support for WSS, while another organisation added that WSS still face significant barriers due to societal perceptions around gender-based violence and women's rights.

In terms of the impact this has had on the work of WSS, responses indicate that **economic developments are the most prevalent**, followed by political and societal developments, as well as developments directly affecting support services. This includes funding cuts and instability, increasing legal and administrative barriers (including "foreign agent" laws and anti-money laundering rules), and growing hostility towards feminist and women's NGOs, alongside smear campaigns and online harassment of staff. Gender-neutral policy shifts have led to the deinstitutionalisation of gender-specific frameworks (such as renaming "women's counselling centres" to "women and men's counselling centres" or "victim counselling centres"), increased reliance on generic services, and the diversion of resources away from specialist service provision for VAWG. At the same time, far-right and misogynistic public discourse is influencing social attitudes, contributing to a more hostile environment for survivors and those who support them.

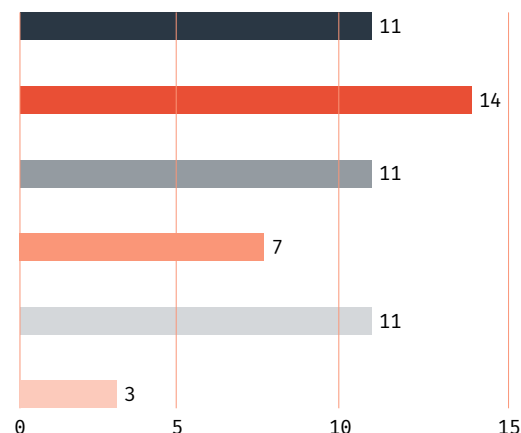
118 UN Women. (2025). Women's Rights in Review 30 Years After Beijing. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2025/03/womens-rights-in-review-30-years-after-beijing>.

119 United Nations, Economic Commission for Europe (2024). Breaking the cycle: Ending violence against women and girls in the Economic Commission for Europe region, ECE/AC.28/2024/6, [https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2024-09/ECE\\_AC.28\\_2024\\_6e.pdf](https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2024-09/ECE_AC.28_2024_6e.pdf); UNRISD, 2025, *Understanding backlash against gender equality: Evidence, trends and policy responses*: <https://knowledge.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2025/09/understanding-backlash-against-gender-equality-evidence-trends-and-policy-responses>.

120 WAVE (2020). *WAVE Handbook. How Gender Neutral Policy and Practice Is Dismantling Women's Specialist Support Services and Ways to Counteract It*.

## 15. WHAT IMPACT HAS THIS HAD ON THE WORK OF SPECIALIST SUPPORT SERVICES FOR WOMEN SURVIVORS OF VIOLENCE?

- Political developments (e.g., rise in far-right, political repression, etc.)
- Economic developments (e.g., funding cuts, competition for funding, etc.)
- Support service developments (e.g., increase in general support services, restrictions on women-only spaces, etc.)
- Legislative developments (e.g., changes in policies and laws, foreign agent laws, parental alienation laws, etc.)
- Societal developments (e.g., reinforced gendered stereotypes, changes in educational learning, denying gendered understanding of violence or gender-specific language, etc.)
- Other



### Economic developments: challenges

Gender-neutral approaches and connected neoliberal policies risk transmuting combating violence against women into a marketplace where WSS have to compete with generic services. These approaches are presented as cost-saving measures in times of austerity, allowing governments to consolidate services and reduce spending. In this context, WSS are increasingly treated as expendable and required to prove their added value in a competitive marketplace.<sup>121</sup>

WSS across Europe are under growing financial pressure due to global and European funding cuts. The reinstatement of the Global Gag Rule, USAID funding freeze, and US cuts to UN agencies have severely impacted women's rights organisations. According to a membership assessment survey sent to WAVE Members in 2024, around one-third (37%) of the membership had experienced funding cuts in the last five years and/or were concerned about cuts to come. With regard to the level of funding

cuts experienced, most respondents reported cuts of 33% to above 50%, creating prolonged deficit budgets with minimal scope for recovery. This challenging context is compounded by increased funding for anti-rights actors. Between 2019 and 2023, anti-gender organisations invested €339.6 million in lobbying to reverse progress on gender equality and women's rights, ultimately aiming to undermine EU values of fundamental rights, democratic principles, and the rule of law.<sup>122</sup>

UN Women's 2025 Report, *At Risk and Under-Funded: How Funding Cuts are Threatening Efforts to End Violence Against Women and Girls*<sup>123</sup> exposes how massive global aid cuts and shifting political priorities are devastating women's rights organisations and civil society organisations working to end VAWG. Many donors, including European governments, are redirecting funds from gender equality towards defence, economic recovery, and national security. In Europe and Central Asia, organisations face increased

121 WAVE, 2020. *WAVE Handbook. How Gender Neutral Policy*, op. cit.; Women's Aid (2018), *The Women's Aid National Quality Standards*.

122 Neil Datta, 2025. *The Next Wave: How Religious Extremism Is Regaining Power*. European Parliamentary Forum on Sexual and Reproductive Rights (EPF).

123 Un Women, 2025. *At Risk and Under-Funded: How Funding Cuts are Threatening Efforts to End Violence Against Women and Girls*, <https://knowledge.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2025/10/at-risk-and-underfunded-how-funding-cuts-are-threatening-efforts-to-end-violence-against-women-and-girls>.

legal restrictions on international funding and bureaucratic obstacles that prevent independent NGOs from accessing grants. In Ukraine specifically, over 60% of organisations addressing VAWG have had to reduce or suspend programmes. Globally, 34.5% of surveyed women’s rights organisations have suspended or ended programmes tackling VAWG, whereby activities most affected include empowerment (35%), training (33.8%), advocacy (32.9%), and psychosocial support (28.5%).

Further highlighting the current funding landscape WSS are facing, the Association for Women’s Rights in Development’s (AWID) latest report, *Where Is the Money for Feminist Organizing?*,<sup>124</sup> analyses 1,174 survey responses from feminist, women’s rights, LGBTQI+, and allied organisations from 128 countries, reflecting funding experiences from 2021–2023. Globally, most funding for feminist and women’s organisations is still short-term, project-tied and restrictive, with respondents in Western Europe and North America reporting a median annual budget of USD \$81,000 (€68,600). Financial precarity is also widespread, as 28% of surveyed organisations had no budget secured for 2025, and 46% had no budget secured beyond 2026. Most strikingly, the report found that the combined income of just three global anti-rights organisations (the *Christian Broadcasting Network*, *Focus on the Family*, and the *Alliance Defending Freedom*) was more than twice the total funding received by all feminist and women’s rights organisations that completed the survey, surpassing \$500 million (€423,6 million).

Responses from this study’s survey further reveal the severe and multifaceted impact of funding cuts on WSS across Europe. In Albania, a WAVE Member organisation faces the withdrawal of financial support from the US, Swiss, Swedish, and Norwegian governments, whilst simultaneously enduring a coordinated smear campaign. This campaign has targeted women’s human rights

defenders by name with false accusations claiming that women’s organisations have received funding from USAID and the Open Society Foundation to undermine Albanian family values. In Italy, more than a decade of anti-gender attacks within institutions, intensified under right-wing governments, has promoted a gender-neutral approach that diverts funding towards generic services deemed appropriate for addressing VAWG alongside other “social problems.” This systematic defunding forces WSS to rely heavily on volunteer advocacy and political work, limiting their capacity to expand or improve despite the ongoing need.

The funding crisis is further exacerbated by bureaucratic and legal barriers that impede organisations’ access to international support. In Cyprus, civil society organisations face mounting restrictions under anti-money laundering regulations, causing significant delays in transferring or receiving funds from EU institutions, UN agencies, and feminist funds. Banks have become increasingly hesitant to process transactions for organisations engaged in women’s rights advocacy, viewing them as politically sensitive, which has led to concrete operational failures. For example, a DV shelter struggled to pay rent after a bank imposed lengthy verification procedures on incoming donations, and a women’s research organisation has faced banking restrictions due to its “advocacy” nature, despite being a legally registered NGO. These funding obstacles threaten the sustainability of WSS, forcing them to reduce essential programmes in shelter provision, legal aid, psychosocial support, and advocacy work.

Such restrictions are increasingly prevalent in European countries, which have passed, or are in the process of passing, laws that specifically target NGOs and civil society organisations receiving foreign funds and require them to register as “foreign agents”. This was discussed in the interviews with WAVE Members from

124 AWID, 2025. *Where is the Money for Feminist Organising?*, <https://www.awid.org/witm>

Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, and Slovakia, where governments are imposing additional requirements on NGOs, directly affecting WSS. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, **Medica Zenica** described how donor-driven conditions can be disconnected from the realities on the ground. For example, one project proposal was rejected because it did not include collaboration with women's NGOs in the Republic of Srpska, even though legal frameworks on VAWG differ in this region, resulting in networks and partnerships that exist primarily to satisfy funding criteria. In Slovakia, a proposed law would require NGOs that receive more than €5,000 in financial support from abroad to publicly disclose it on their websites. In addition, NGOs engaging with politicians would be labelled "lobbyists", granting the Ministry of the Interior the power to shut down organisations without a court ruling if information on political engagement is not provided. Such measures risk severely restricting WSS's independence and undermining their advocacy role.

### Economic developments: added value of WSS

Some studies, mainly from the United Kingdom, have sought to address the challenges highlighted above. The **Women's Aid** 2023 Report *Investing to save: The economic case for funding specialist domestic abuse support* makes the economic case for increased investment in specialist domestic abuse services.<sup>125</sup> The report highlights significant cost savings for public services, such as the police and health services, when survivors can access timely specialist support. Other reports pinpoint the social value of women's services. The **Women's Resource**

**Centre**, for example, has calculated that the social value generated by women's services is five to 11 times greater than the amount of money invested in them.<sup>126</sup> An Italian study estimates a social return of €7,15 for every euro invested in specialised services.<sup>127</sup>

Albeit from another perspective, studies that estimate the cost/support deficit for survivors fleeing domestic abuse may also help demonstrate the value of WSS.<sup>128</sup> According to a 2024 report of **Women's Aid**, it could cost a survivor almost £50,000 (€57,900) to leave an abuser, based on the direct costs of fleeing and rebuilding a new life. In the best-case scenario, a survivor would still face a £10,000 (€11,600) shortfall after receiving her full state support. For survivors who have no recourse to public funds, such as women with undocumented status, the deficit would be much larger, namely around £20,000 (€23,200).

Women's NGOs across Europe are adopting creative strategies to secure sustainable funding amid gender neutrality and shifting government support. The Icelandic WAVE Member **Stígamót** reported compensating for the lack of increased state or municipal funding by successfully mobilising individual donors and project-based contributions, enabling them to continue their work despite limited public investment. Additionally, a Swedish umbrella organisation of women's shelters, **Unizon**, described how, despite receiving more long-term governmental funding than in previous years, they are proactively diversifying their funding base through new forms of collaboration with private companies, including partnerships with major brands, to both raise awareness and safeguard their financial independence in the event of future political or funding instability.

125 Women's Aid, 2023. *Investing to save: The economic case for funding specialist domestic abuse support*, Bristol; Women's Aid, 2024. *Nowhere To Turn, 2024: Findings from the eighth year of the No Woman Turned Away project*, Bristol.

126 Women's Budget Group and Women's Resource Centre, 2018, *Life-Changing and Life-Saving. Funding for the Women's Sector*, London; Women's Resource Centre, 2011, *Hidden value: Demonstrating the extraordinary impact of women's voluntary and community organisations*; WAVE, 2020, *WAVE Handbook. How Gender Neutral Policy*, op. cit.

127 WeWorld, 2017, *Violenza sulle Donne. Non c'è più tempo. Quanto vale investire in prevenzione e contrasto. Analisi SROI delle politiche d'intervento*.

128 Women's Aid, 2024, *The Price of Safety: The cost of leaving a perpetrator and rebuilding a safe, independent life*, Bristol.

**The economic added value of WSS should therefore not be underestimated.** By limiting the long-term social, health, and justice impacts of VAWG, WSS generate significant economic and social returns that far exceed their operating costs. Amid the growing backlash against women's rights and generalisation of support services for women survivors of violence, national governments and EU institutions must recognise the essential role of WSS in protecting women, children, and wider society from violence.

This chapter explored how WSS function as active agents of societal change through their multifaceted interventions. WSS work to transform societal narratives and raise awareness of VAWG, employing strategies such as training media professionals in responsible reporting practices. Simultaneously, they advocate for policy reform and strengthen institutional frameworks through sustained advocacy. While their overarching mission to end VAWG remains steadfast, women's rights defenders face an increasingly hostile political landscape. As discussed in both the introduction and the final section of this chapter, the rise of anti-gender movements and the adoption of gender-neutral approaches are undermining progress on women's rights across Europe. A consequence of this shift has been the gradual defunding of WSS, despite the demonstrated economic and social returns that investment in these services generates.

# Conclusion

As this study highlights, women's specialist services (WSS) not only empower and support women and girls but also have a transformative potential to shape community responses to violence against women and girls (VAWG) and act as agents of social change. **By examining WSS interventions across multiple, interconnected levels of the socioecological model, this study reveals the triple effect of feminist, gender-specific approaches** that simultaneously support survivors, strengthen community responses, and challenge the norms, beliefs and social systems that create the conditions for VAWG to occur.

At the **INDIVIDUAL LEVEL**, WSS provide survivor-centred support grounded in feminist understandings of VAWG as both a cause and a consequence of patriarchal structural inequality. Through gender-specific analysis and intersectional approaches, WSS create safe spaces where women and children are believed, their resistance is validated, and their autonomy is respected. This level of intervention does more than address immediate safety needs; it also functions as a critical site of feminist knowledge production where survivors' voices challenge dominant narratives that perpetuate violence. The principles underpinning this work, such as placing women's needs at the centre, recognising the gendered nature of violence, and addressing intersecting forms of discrimination, form the foundation upon which all other WSS interventions are built.

At the **COMMUNITY LEVEL**, WSS play a key role in multi-agency cooperation, the development of local partnerships, the training of key professionals, and primary prevention initiatives. By collaborating with various stakeholders such as healthcare providers, law enforcement, school professionals, and neighbourhood initiatives, WSS improve referral pathways and ensure that survivors' voices reach statutory actors, thereby reducing the risk of secondary victimisation. This community-level work transforms isolated individual interventions into

coordinated responses that hold stakeholders accountable and support survivors as they navigate complex judicial and bureaucratic systems. Grassroots mobilisation and community building further extend primary prevention efforts, addressing attitudes and behaviours in order to prevent violence before it occurs.

At the **SOCIETAL LEVEL**, the knowledge, advocacy, and organising of WSS drive policy reform, legislative development, and cultural transformation. Through strategic media engagement, public awareness campaigns, and sustained advocacy with policymakers, WSS challenge the structural inequalities and patriarchal power relations that enable VAWG to persist. They identify gaps in legislation, advocate for the implementation of international legal standards, and ensure that policy responses remain grounded in gender-specific approaches. As research has shown, investment in WSS generates significant social returns, not only through cost savings from prevented violence but also through the broader economic empowerment of women and the strengthening of institutions that support women and girls across the cycle of violence.

The added value of WSS extends across every level of intervention, and their impact on individual, community and societal spheres **cannot be replicated by general or generic services, gender-neutral approaches, or piecemeal interventions**. The power of WSS is perhaps best illustrated through the voices of those who witness it daily. As WAVE Members highlighted throughout the interviews, the impact of WSS's work manifests in a multitude of ways, both small and large. For example, a mother who lost the custody of her child transformed her grief into political action, starting an organisation that joined the fight to change the very laws that failed to protect her family. Additionally, a survivor who endured abuse for twenty years completed her education, secured employment, and publicly shared her story during a 16 Days of Activism

Against Gender-Based Violence campaign. As WAVE Members have observed, survivors “start looking different, their physical appearance changes. They look more rested, healthier [...] they return to themselves, to their original selves.” This return to self is not only personal restoration but also lays the foundation for broader change. Women who come to WSS as help-seekers become survivors, then activists, “bearing a very strong message of empowerment, resisting violence and sharing their knowledge and understanding of men’s violence with their contacts.” In this way, WSS are agents of social transformation – individual support creates ripples that extend far beyond the walls of women’s shelters, counselling centres and feminist, gender-specific services.

In short, **WSS are indispensable to any meaningful response to VAWG.** Yet at this critical moment, WSS across Europe face unprecedented threats. The backlash against women’s rights, an increasingly hostile political climate, the gender-neutralisation of specialist services, and the shrinking space for feminist civil society threaten to dismantle decades of hard-won progress. The consequences of allowing WSS to downsize or disappear extend far beyond individual survivors who will be left without support; they include the loss of community capacity to respond effectively to violence, the erosion of legal and policy protections, and the reversal of behavioural shifts that have made VAWG more visible and less acceptable.

For WSS themselves and their allies in the feminist movement, **this study affirms the transformative power of a feminist, intersectional, survivor-centred, human rights-based approach to VAWG.** Policymakers, funders, and decision-makers at all levels must recognise that providing direct and prompt access to WSS is not just practical – it is an ethical obligation fundamental to upholding women’s rights and protecting survivors’ safety.

*The path forward is clear: invest in, protect, and strengthen women’s specialist services to effectively tackle and address violence against women and girls.*

# Glossary

## By-and-For

By-and-for organisations are those that are led by women with intersecting identities and for women with intersecting identities. Their work is grounded in the lived experiences of women who hold multiple, intersecting identities and whose experiences of violence and abuse are shaped by these interlocking factors. Within this wider definition, there are multiple specialist forms of by-and-for provision, each rooted in the lived experiences and cultural knowledge of particular groups of women, such as Black and minoritised women, women with disabilities, and survivors with other protected characteristics.

## Domestic violence

Domestic violence means all acts of physical, sexual, coercive, psychological, or economic violence that occur within the family or domestic unit or between former or current spouses or partners, whether or not the perpetrator shares or has shared the same residence with the victim.<sup>129</sup>

## Gender backlash

Gender backlash can be understood as deliberate, organised attempts to roll back established commitments, rights and achievements in gender equality, women's rights and women's empowerment. It usually takes the form of orchestrated, often virulent political opposition to the rights of women, girls and people with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities and to the actors who champion them. Backlash tends to operate in cycles. In many instances, it responds to prior waves of feminist activism and/or advances. It can lead to policy backsliding that removes formal commitments or dismantles

policies to advance gender equality. It can also involve more gradual processes that undermine the implementation of commitments.<sup>130</sup> This backlash increasingly manifests through gender-neutral policy frameworks that have moved beyond fringe far-right politics into mainstream discourse, obscuring the gendered nature of violence and presenting gender equality measures as either unnecessary expenditure or potentially harmful to men and society.

## Gender-based violence

Gender-based violence against women means violence that is directed against a woman because she is a woman or that affects women disproportionately.<sup>131</sup> Gender-based violence is understood to be a form of discrimination and a violation of the fundamental freedoms of the victim and includes violence in close relationships, sexual violence (including rape, sexual assault and harassment), trafficking in human beings, slavery, and different forms of harmful practices, such as forced marriages, female genital mutilation and so-called 'honour crimes'. Women victims of gender-based violence and their children often require special support and protection.<sup>132</sup>

## Gender-specific approach

Article 18 §3 of the Istanbul Convention recognises violence against women as gender-based violence. As such, all measures to eliminate violence against women must be implemented using a gender-specific approach, meaning a gendered understanding of the violence experienced by women, its specific dynamics and consequences, and should focus on the survivors' empowerment.

<sup>129</sup> Article 3(b) of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention).

<sup>130</sup> UNRISD, 2025, *Understanding backlash against gender equality: Evidence, trends and policy responses*: <https://knowledge.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2025/09/understanding-backlash-against-gender-equality-evidence-trends-and-policy-responses>

<sup>131</sup> Article 3(d) of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention)

<sup>132</sup> Recital 17, Directive 2012/29/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 25 October 2012 establishing minimum standards on the rights, support and protection of victims of crime, and replacing Council Framework Decision 2001/220/JHA.

### General support services

General support services are offered by public authorities which provide long-term help and are not exclusively designed for the benefit of victims only but serve the public at large. General support services include public welfare services such as housing services, employment or unemployment services, public education and training services, public psychological and legal counselling services, but also financial support services to address, when necessary, the specific needs of victims of the forms of violence.<sup>133</sup>

### Generic support services

Generic support services (both non-profit and for-profit) refer to victim support organisations providing services to all victims of crime, without a specific focus on violence against women. They lack a gendered understanding of violence and are not explicitly gender-specific, adopting approaches aimed at the family unity.<sup>134</sup> They are often structured around and focused on the wider “market” of well-being, public health and family.

### Intersectionality

Intersectionality recognises multiple forms of inequality and oppression as overlapping and existing simultaneously. Central to intersectionality is the experience of racism by Black and minoritised women of colour. The focus on racism within intersectionality stems from a recognition that racism is a foundational system of oppression that interlocks with other forms of inequality, such as sexism, patriarchy, white supremacy, classism, ableism, transphobia, and others. To deepen the understanding of intersectionality, it is important to frame it appropriately as oppression rooted in structural inequality and how diverse identities can be used by institutions and structures to deny women equality. An intersectional

framework ensures that women’s diverse experiences are recognised, and their needs are met through more inclusive services and policies. It moves beyond single-issue approaches, addressing the interconnectedness of social inequalities and the specific challenges faced by those with intersecting identities.

### National women’s helpline

A national women’s helpline is a dedicated service for women that serves exclusively or predominantly women survivors of violence. It should operate 24/7, be free of charge, and support survivors of all forms of violence against women. To ensure accessibility, the helpline should offer assistance in multiple languages and be available to women across the entire country, with staff who are well-trained, skilled communicators, and knowledgeable about regional contexts and relevant services. Women’s helplines provide crisis counselling, practical support, and referrals to other services, such as women’s specialist services.

### Primary prevention

Primary prevention refers to all approaches that aim to prevent violence before it occurs by tackling root causes like gender inequality and stereotypes. Actions may include community organising for gender equality and against VAWG, school-based programmes on preventing child abuse or dating violence, feminist self-defence, and programmes challenging harmful masculine behaviour and attitudes.

### Rape crisis centres

Rape crisis centres are specialist services for survivors of rape, sexual assault, and all forms of sexualised violence. They provide immediate, medium-, and long-term support grounded in survivor-centred empowerment, offering counselling, advocacy, information,

<sup>133</sup> Council of Europe (CoE) (2011), Explanatory Report, op. cit., para. 125-126.

<sup>134</sup> GREVIO Baseline Evaluation Report on Montenegro, para. 6 and 124, Sweden, Portugal, North Macedonia para. 48 and 54; Croatia, para. 30 and 138; Serbia, para. 131; Romania, p. 187.

and accompaniment, including support at police stations, in court, and throughout legal proceedings. Many centres also run helplines that offer specialist counselling, explain survivors' rights, and connect them with other support services. In addition to direct care, rape crisis centres often work with communities and partner agencies to strengthen responses to sexualised violence and advance prevention.

### Sexual violence referral centres

A sexual violence referral centre specialises in immediate medical care, forensic practice, storage of evidence and crisis intervention, and can be placed in hospital settings to respond to survivors of recent sexualised violence. These centres can also carry out medical assistance and refer survivors to other specialist community-based centres.

### Support services for survivors of sexualised violence

Support services for survivors of sexualised violence include rape crisis centres, sexual violence referral centres, and other specialised services, such as crisis/medical services and specialised sexualised violence helplines. Many women's centres also offer a range of support services to survivors of sexualised violence within their holistic approach to ending violence against women and girls.

### Specialist support services

Specialist support services have specialised in providing support and assistance tailored to the – often immediate – needs of victims of specific forms of violence against women or domestic violence and are not open to the general public. While these may be services run or funded by government authorities, the large majority of specialist services are offered by NGOs.<sup>135</sup>

### Survivor/victim

This study uses the term “survivor” as a preferred term, to empower women by recognising that the woman has survived the violence and is not defined by it. The term victim is an international legal term, which means a natural person who has suffered harm (including physical, mental or emotional harm or economic loss) that was directly caused by a criminal offence.<sup>136</sup>

### Survivor-centred approach

A survivor-centred approach prioritises the rights, needs and wishes of survivors. It ensures that all actions promote their safety, confidentiality, respect and non-discrimination, and that they are empowered to make informed decisions about their lives.

### Violence against women and girls

Violence against women and girls is understood as a violation of human rights and a form of discrimination against women and shall mean all acts of gender-based violence that result in or are likely to result in, physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life.<sup>137</sup>

### Women's centres

Women's centres are non-residential specialist services that support women survivors of violence and their children. Grounded in feminist, gender-specific, and human rights-based practice, they provide empowering short- and long-term assistance while prioritising women's safety and autonomy. The term includes women's counselling and crisis centres, specialist services for Black and minoritised women, migrant women, or refugee women,

<sup>135</sup> Council of Europe (CoE) (2011), Explanatory Report, op. cit., para. 125.

<sup>136</sup> Directive 2012/29/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 25 October 2012 establishing minimum standards on the rights, support and protection of victims of crime, and replacing Council Framework Decision 2001/220/JHA.

<sup>137</sup> Article 3(a) of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention).

specialist services for women survivors of trafficking, and other outreach services. Typical support includes information, advice, advocacy, counselling, practical help, and accompaniment to courts, police, or social services, as well as proactive and outreach support, among other services.

### Women's specialist services

Women's specialist services are feminist services that support women and their children experiencing gender-based violence. These services include, but are not limited to, women's centres, women's shelters, helplines, rape crisis or sexual violence referral centres, as well as primary prevention services. Women's specialist services empower and support women and girls throughout the cycle of violence by putting their needs at the centre of all interventions, applying an intersectional approach, and working together with them, recognising their agency. Women's specialist services are typically run by non-governmental feminist organisations that aim to advance women's and girls' human rights to enjoy a life free from all forms of violence.

### Women's shelters

Women's shelters are specialised services that provide immediate, safe accommodation for women experiencing violence and their children. Rooted in feminist, gender-specific, and human rights-based practice, these shelters offer far more than emergency accommodation: they work to empower women, prioritise their safety, and offer long-term support. Services provided often include counselling, legal assistance, help accessing employment, and support in securing stable housing.

# Bibliography

Arango, D.J., Morton, M., Gennari, F., Kiplesund, S. and Ellsberg, M., 2014. *Interventions to prevent or reduce violence against women and girls: a systematic review of reviews*. Washington, DC: World Bank.

AWID, 2025. *Where is the money for feminist organising?* Available at: <https://www.awid.org/witm> [Accessed 18 December 2025].

Bergstrom-Lynch, C.A., 2018. Empowerment in a bureaucracy? Survivors' perceptions of domestic violence shelter policies and practices. *Affilia: Journal of Women and Social Work*, pp. 112–125.

Bradbury-Jones, C. et al., 2025. The scope, range and use of voluntary sector specialist sexual violence services in England: findings and recommendations from a national study. *Health and Social Care in the Community*.

Bronfenbrenner, U., 1977. Toward an experimental ecology of human development. *American Psychologist*, 32(7), pp. 513–531.

Cattaneo, L.B. et al., 2020. Survivor-centered practice and survivor empowerment: evidence from a research–practitioner partnership. *Violence Against Women*, 27(9), pp. 1252–1272.

CEDAW Committee, 2010. *General recommendation no. 28 on the core obligations of States parties under article 2 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women*. CEDAW/C/GC/28.

Corradi, C. and Stöckl, H., 2016. The lessons of history: the role of the nation-states and the EU in fighting violence against women in 10 European countries. *Current Sociology*, 64(4), pp. 671–688.

Council of Europe, 2011. *Explanatory Report to the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence*. Available at: <https://rm.coe.int/1680a48903> [Accessed 12 September 2025].

Council of Europe, 2021. *Quality Guidelines for Shelters for Victims of Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence*, Available at: <https://rm.coe.int/shelter-guideline-eng/1680a24ced>. [Accessed 4 October 2025].

Datta, N., 2025. *The next wave: how religious extremism is regaining power*. Brussels: European Parliamentary Forum on Sexual and Reproductive Rights.

De Vido, S. and Frulli, M. eds., 2023. *Preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence: a commentary on the Istanbul Convention*. Cheltenham, UK and Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar.

Demurtas, P. and Misiti, M., 2021. *Violenza contro le donne in Italia: ricerche, orientamenti e buone pratiche*. Milan: Guerini Scientifica.

EIGE, 2019. A guide to risk assessment and risk management of intimate partner violence against women for police. Available at: <https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/publications/guide-risk-assessment-and-risk-management-intimate-partner-violence-against-women-police> [Accessed 7 October 2026].

Fisher, E.M. and Stylianou, A.M., 2016. To stay or to leave: factors influencing victims' decisions to stay or leave a domestic violence emergency shelter. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 34(4), pp. 785–811.

FRA, EIGE and Eurostat, 2024. *EU gender-based violence survey – key results: experiences of women in the EU-27*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. Available at: [https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra\\_uploads/eu-gender\\_based\\_violence\\_survey\\_key\\_results.pdf](https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/eu-gender_based_violence_survey_key_results.pdf) [Accessed 4 December 2026].

Goodman, L.A. et al., 2014. Survivor-defined practice in domestic violence work: measure development and preliminary evidence of link to empowerment. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 31(1), pp. 163–185.

Goodman, L.A. and Epstein, D., 2008. *Listening to battered women: a survivor-centered approach to advocacy, mental health, and justice*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

GREVIO, 2018. *Baseline Evaluation Report on Montenegro*. Available at: <https://rm.coe.int/grevio-report-montenegro/16808e5614>. [Accessed 18 September 2025].

GREVIO, 2019a. *Baseline Evaluation Report on Finland*, Available at: <https://rm.coe.int/grevio-report-on-finland/168097129d>. [Accessed 11 October 2025].

GREVIO, 2019b. *Baseline Evaluation Report on Portugal*, Available at: <https://rm.coe.int/grevio-reprt-on-portugal/168091f16f>. [Accessed 11 October 2025].

GREVIO, 2019c. *Baseline Evaluation Report on Sweden*, Available at: [https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2002634/GREVIO-Inf-2018-15\\_eng\\_final.pdf.pdf](https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2002634/GREVIO-Inf-2018-15_eng_final.pdf.pdf). [Accessed 11 October 2025].

GREVIO, 2020. *Baseline Evaluation Report on the Netherland*, Available at: <https://rm.coe.int/grevio-report-on-netherlands/1680997253>. [Accessed 11 October 2025].

GREVIO, 2023a. *Baseline Evaluation Report on Croatia*, Available at: <https://rm.coe.int/baseline-evaluation-report-on-croatia/1680ac76c9>. [Accessed 11 October 2025].

GREVIO, 2023b. *Baseline Evaluation Report on North Macedonia*, Available at: <https://rm.coe.int/baseline-evaluation-report-on-north-macedonia/1680ac76ab>. [Accessed 11 October 2025].

Hague, G., 2021. *History and memories of the domestic violence movement: we've come further than you think*. Bristol: Bristol University Press.

Heise, L., 1998. Violence against women: an integrated, ecological framework. *Violence Against Women*, 4(3), pp. 262–290.

- Hester, M. and Lilley, S.J., 2017. More than support to court: rape victims and specialist sexual violence services. *International Review of Victimology*, 24(3), pp. 1–16.
- Hollander, J.A., 2014. Does self-defense training prevent sexual violence against women? *Violence Against Women*, 20(3), pp. 252–269.
- Htun, M. and Weldon, S.L., 2012. The civic origins of progressive policy change: combating violence against women in global perspective, 1975–2005. *American Political Science Review*, 106(3), pp. 548–569.
- Imkaan, 2018. From survival to sustainability: critical issues for the Black and ‘minority ethnic’ ending violence against women and girls sector in the UK. London: Imkaan.
- Kelly, L., 2008. *Combating violence against women: minimum standards for support services*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe. Available at: [https://www.coe.int/t/dg2/equality/domesticviolencecampaign/source/eg-vaw-conf\(2007\)study%20rev.en.pdf](https://www.coe.int/t/dg2/equality/domesticviolencecampaign/source/eg-vaw-conf(2007)study%20rev.en.pdf) [Accessed 18 October 2025].
- Kelly, L., 2018. *Mapping support services for victims of violence against women in line with the Istanbul Convention standards: methodology and tools*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe. Available at: <https://rm.coe.int/mapping-support-services-vaw/16808ec66b> [Accessed 11 October 2025].
- Koyama, E., 2006. Disloyal to feminism: abuse of survivors within the domestic violence shelter system. In: INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, eds. *Color of violence: the INCITE! anthology*. Cambridge, MA: South End Press.
- Kulkarni, S.J., Bell, H. and Rhodes, D.M., 2012. Back to basics: essential qualities of services for survivors of intimate partner violence. *Violence Against Women*, 18, pp. 85–101.
- Kulkarni, S.J., Herman-Smith, R. and Ross, T.C., 2015. Measuring intimate partner violence (IPV) service providers’ attitudes: the development of the survivor-defined advocacy scale (SDAS). *Journal of Family Violence*, 30(7), pp. 911–921.
- Lauri, M. and Lauri, J., 2024. In the business of gendered violence: the private shelter discourse in Sweden. *Critical and Radical Social Work*, 12(3), pp. 398–413.
- Lauri, M., Lauri, J. and Linande, I., 2023. Women’s shelters and private shelters’ discursive struggle: separatism, security and social change. *Nordic Social Work Research*, 15(3), pp. 438–450.
- Lehrner, A. and Allen, N.E., 2009. Still a movement after all these years? Current tensions in the domestic violence movement. *Violence Against Women*, 15(6), pp. 656–677.
- McDonald, J., 2005. Neo-liberalism and the pathologising of public issues: the displacement of feminist service models in domestic violence support services. *Australian Social Work*, 58(3), pp. 275–284.

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

Messing, J.T., Ward-Lasher, A., Thaller, J. and Bagwell-Gray, M.E., 2015. The state of intimate partner violence intervention: progress and continuing challenges. *Social Work*, 60(4), pp. 305–313.

Nichols, A.J., 2011. Gendered organizations: challenges for domestic violence victim advocates. *Feminist Criminology*, 6(2), pp. 111–131.

Nichols, A.J., 2013. Survivor-defined practices to mitigate revictimization of battered women. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 28, pp. 1403–1423.

OHCHR, 2024. *Gender equality and gender backlash: guidance document of the Working Group on Discrimination against Women and Girls*. A/HRC/WG.11/41/2. Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/tools-and-resources/ahrcwg11412-gender-equality-and-gender-backlash-guidance-document> [Accessed 11 October 2025].

OSCE, 2009. *Bringing security home: combating violence against women in the OSCE region. A compilation of good practices*. Available at: <https://www.ose.org/files/f/documents/d/b/37438.pdf> [Accessed 18 October 2025].

Richards, L., Letchford, S. and Stratton, S., 2013. *Policing domestic violence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

The Equality Institute and UN Women, 2023. *Together for prevention: handbook on multisectoral national action plans to prevent violence against women and girls*. New York: UN Women. Available at: <https://knowledge.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-10/handbook-on-multisectoral-national-action-plans-to-prevent-violence-against-women-and-girls-en.pdf> [Accessed 11 October 2025].

Thompson, M.E., 2014. Empowering self-defense training. *Violence Against Women*, 20(3), pp. 351–359.

UN Women, 2022. *Cooperation between women's NGOs and healthcare providers – A comparative study in the Western Balkans and Turkey*. Available at: <https://eca.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2022/07/cooperation-between-womens-ngos-and-healthcare-providers-a-comparative-study-in-the-western-balkans-and-turkey> [Accessed 21 November 2025].

UN Women, 2023. *Overcoming Crises. Remaining Essential Services for Women Survivors of Violence in the Western Balkans after the COVID-19 Pandemic*. Available at: [https://eca.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-12/report\\_follow-up-assessment-overcoming-crises\\_2023-online.pdf](https://eca.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-12/report_follow-up-assessment-overcoming-crises_2023-online.pdf) [Accessed 21 November 2025].

UN Women, 2025a. *At Risk and Under-Funded: How Funding Cuts are Threatening Efforts to End Violence Against Women and Girls*. Available at: <https://knowledge.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2025/10/at-risk-and-underfunded-how-funding-cuts-are-threatening-efforts-to-end-violence-against-women-and-girls> [Accessed 21 November 2025].

UN Women, 2025b. *Women's Rights in Review 30 Years After Beijing*. Available at: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2025/03/womens-rights-in-review-30-years-after-beijing> [Accessed 21 November 2025].

UN Economic Commission for Europe, 2024a. *Beijing+30 Regional Review Meeting, Regional review of progress: regional synthesis 2024*. ECE/AC.28/2024/. Available at: [https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2024-09/ECE\\_AC.28\\_2024\\_3e.pdf](https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2024-09/ECE_AC.28_2024_3e.pdf) [21 November 2025].

UN Economic Commission for Europe, 2024b. *Breaking the Cycle: Ending Violence against Women and Girls in the Economic Commission for Europe Region*, ECE/AC.28/2024/6. Available at: [https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2024-09/ECE\\_AC.28\\_2024\\_6e.pdf](https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2024-09/ECE_AC.28_2024_6e.pdf). [21 November 2025].

UN Research Institute for Social Development, 2025. *Understanding Backlash against Gender Equality: Evidence, Trends and Policy Responses*. Available at: <https://knowledge.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2025/09/understanding-backlash-against-gender-equality-evidence-trends-and-policy-responses> [21 November 2025].

Verloo, M., ed., 2018. *Varieties of Opposition to Gender Equality in Europe*. New York: Routledge.

WAVE, 2002. *More Than a Roof Over your Head. A Survey of Quality Standards in European Women's Refuges*. Vienna: Women Against Violence Europe. Available at: <https://wave-network.org/more-than-a-roof-over-your-head-2002/> [Accessed 4 February 2026].

WAVE, 2004. *Away from Violence: Guidelines for Setting up and Running a Women's Refuge*, Available at: [https://wave-network.org/wp-content/uploads/Away\\_from\\_Violence\\_2004\\_English.pdf](https://wave-network.org/wp-content/uploads/Away_from_Violence_2004_English.pdf) [Accessed 4 February 2026].

WAVE, 2006. *Bridging Gaps – Models of Coordination between Women's NGO's and State Authorities*.

WAVE, 2015a. *Supporting the Sustainability and Autonomy of Women's Organizations Providing Services in Eastern Europe for Women and Children Survivors of Domestic Violence*. Available at: <https://wave-network.org/supporting-the-sustainability-and-autonomy-of-womens-organizations-providing-services-in-eastern-europe-for-women-and-children-survivors-of-domestic-violence-2015/> [Accessed 4 February 2026].

WAVE, 2015b. *Wave Report 2015 on the Role of Specialist Women's Support Services in Europe*. Available at: [https://wave-network.org/wp-content/uploads/WAVE-Report-2015-final-version-June\\_16.pdf](https://wave-network.org/wp-content/uploads/WAVE-Report-2015-final-version-June_16.pdf) [Accessed 12 October 2025].

WAVE, 2019. *Thematic Paper - The Importance of Women's Specialist Support Services in Europe*. Available at: <https://wave-network.org/new-wave-publication-thematic-paper-on-the-importance-of-womens-specialist-support-services-in-europe/> [Accessed 16 October 2025].

WAVE, 2020. *WAVE Handbook. How Gender Neutral Policy and Practice Is Dismantling Women's Specialist Support Services and Ways to Counteract It*.

WAVE , 2021. *Country Report 2021: Women's Specialist Support Services in Europe and the Impact of COVID-19 on their Provision*, Available at: [https://wave-network.org/wp-content/uploads/WAVE\\_Country-Report.pdf](https://wave-network.org/wp-content/uploads/WAVE_Country-Report.pdf), [Accessed 15 October 2025].

WAVE , 2022. *WAVE campaigning and advocacy toolkit for young activists*, Available at: <https://wave-network.org/wave-campaigning-and-advocacy-toolkit-for-young-activists/>, [Accessed 16 November 2026].

WAVE, 2023. *Paper - Developing Intersectional Practice at WAVE: Stage 1 Paper on Intersectional Theory and Key Literature*.

WAVE, 2023. *Country Report 2023. The Status and Value of Women's Specialist Services in Preventing and Tackling Gender-based Violence against Women*, Available at: [https://wave-network.org/wp-content/uploads/WAVE\\_CountryReport2023.pdf](https://wave-network.org/wp-content/uploads/WAVE_CountryReport2023.pdf), [Accessed 21 October 2026].

WAVE, 2024. *Toolkit on Feminist Self-Care for Young Activists and Young Professionals*, Available at: <https://wave-network.org/wave-toolkit-on-feminist-self-care-for-young-activists-and-young-professionals/> [Accessed 13 November 2025].

WAVE-CSSP, 2021. *Promising Practices of Establishing and Providing Specialist Support Services for Women Experiencing Sexual Violence*, Available at: [https://wave-network.org/wp-content/uploads/WAVE\\_CSSP\\_ExecSummary210917\\_web.pdf](https://wave-network.org/wp-content/uploads/WAVE_CSSP_ExecSummary210917_web.pdf) [Accessed 5 November 2025].

Weldon, S.L. 2002. *Protest, Policy, and the Problem of Violence against Women: A Cross-National Comparison*, Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press.

WeWorld, 2017. *Violenza sulle Donne. Non c'è più tempo. Quanto vale investire in prevenzione e contrasto. Analisi SROI delle politiche d'intervento*, Available at : [https://back.weworld.it/uploads/2021/07/Analisi-Sroi\\_2017.pdf](https://back.weworld.it/uploads/2021/07/Analisi-Sroi_2017.pdf). [Accessed 5 February 2026].

Women's Aid, 2018. *The Women's Aid National Quality Standards*.

Women's Aid, 2023. *Investing to Save: The Economic Case for Funding Specialist Domestic Abuse Support*, Bristol, Available at: [https://www.womensaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Republica\\_web.pdf](https://www.womensaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Republica_web.pdf) [Accessed 12 December 2025].

Women's Aid, 2024. *Funding Safer Futures: A Government Pathway for the Quantity and Quality of Funding Required to Help Women and Children Experiencing Domestic Abuse*, Available at: <https://womensaid.org.uk/funding-safer-futures/> [Accessed 4 February 2026].

Women's Aid, 2024. *Nowhere To Turn, 2024: Findings from the eighth year of the No Woman Turned Away project*, Bristol, Available at: <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Nowhere-to-Turn-2024-Report-PDF.pdf> [Accessed 4 December 2025].

Women's Aid, 2024. *The Price of Safety: The cost of leaving a perpetrator and rebuilding a safe, independent life*, Bristol, Available at: <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Price-of-Safety-Report-2024-Final-Version.pdf> [Accessed 4 December 2025].

Women's Budget Group and Women's Resource Centre , 2018. *Life-Changing and Life-Saving. Funding for the Women's Sector*, London, Available at: <https://www.wrc.org.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=a7564bea-87f3-40c1-8028-93955767f3bc> [Accessed 4 December 2025].

Women's Resource Centre (2011). *Hidden Value: Demonstrating the Extraordinary Impact of Women's Voluntary and Community Organisations*, Available at: <https://www.wrc.org.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=4222e0eb-c528-48c8-a56c-d10db4fd3fb0> [Accessed 4 December 2025].

Women's Resource Centre , 2017. *Why Women Only? The Value and Benefits of by Women for Women Services*, Available at: <https://www.wrc.org.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=fcc6bbc0-e18d-4b66-ad35-3e679fc9b549> [Accessed 4 December 2025].

Wood L., Cook Heffron L., Voyles M., Kulkarni S. , 2020. "Playing by the Rules: Agency Policy and Procedure in Service Experience of IPV Survivors", *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 35(21-22), pp. 4640–4665 [Accessed 5 December 2025].

World Health Organisation , 2010. *Preventing Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence against Women: Taking Action and Generating Evidence*, [https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/44350/9789241564007\\_eng.pdf?sequence=1](https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/44350/9789241564007_eng.pdf?sequence=1) [Accessed 4 February 2026].

Zweig J. M., Burt M. R. ,2007. "Predicting Women's Perceptions of Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Agency Helpfulness: What Matters to Program Clients?", *Violence Against Women*, 13(11), pp. 1149–1178.

