



NEWSLETTER #2

HELPLINES IN EUROPEAN AND INTERNATIONAL LEGAL AND POLICY FRAMEWORKS

Specialized women's helplines are an essential component of the European response to gender-based violence, providing free, confidential, and accessible support to women and girls experiencing violence. Their establishment is a legal obligation under Article 24 of the Istanbul Convention and is further reinforced by the new EU Directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence, which requires Member States to ensure 24/7 support services for victims. Helplines play a critical role in protecting victims, facilitating access to specialized services, and ensuring that survivors receive timely information, counselling, and assistance regardless of where they live. Our project is strongly anchored in several key European and international instruments that explicitly recognize the importance of specialized helplines:

1.

Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention)

Article 24 requires states to establish **nationwide, 24/7, free-of-charge telephone helplines** for all forms of violence covered by the Convention. The article specifically states that victims must be able to receive confidential advice and support at any time.

2.

EU Directive on Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence

The new EU Directive requires Member States to ensure access to specialized support services, including **24/7 helplines that are free of charge and accessible throughout the year**. The project specifically supports implementation of these provisions.

3.

Victims' Rights Directive

The Directive promotes access to information, support, protection, and specialized victim services. Helplines are recognized as an important mechanism for ensuring victims receive information and support necessary to exercise their rights.

4.

EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child

The strategy supports actions that help children grow up free from violence, including strengthening victim support services that can assist both women and children affected by domestic violence.

5.

European Harmonized Helpline Number 116 016

The EU has introduced the harmonized number 116 016 for victims of violence against women. This number connects callers to national support services and enables women to access help across EU countries through a common European entry point.

From the Wave Country report for 2025, we can learn that by 2024, 39 European countries (85% of all European countries) had at least one national women's helpline, while seven countries (15%) still had none.

Where helplines exist, quality is high: all 39 operate free of charge, and 37 are available 24/7, meaning 37 countries (80%) meet the full standard. Across the 32 countries able to provide figures, national helplines received almost 1 million calls in 2024, underlining the scale of demand. Multilingual support, however, is available in only 63% of countries.

The same report reminds us why are national women's helplines important and unique:

- Accessibility and anonymity - calling a helpline is the very first step in seeking help, and provide conditions for a victim to see if they are believed and explore their options
 - Breaking isolation Violence against women often isolates survivors, cutting them off from family, friends, and community
 - Inclusion of all women
 - Referral and coordination within the broader network of available women's specialist support services
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WAVE analysis found that:

Helplines run by women's NGOs differ fundamentally from generic services: they are survivor-centered, rights-based, and aware of the gendered structures underlying violence. This expertise cannot be replicated by services that treat violence as gender-neutral or that fail to understand its structural causes.

From our non-EU partner country, Bosnia and Hercegovina, we received good news about the adoption of Rulebook on the Operation of the SOS Telephone Line for Assistance and Support to Victims of Violence, in the Federation of BiH entity, setting out, in detail, the organization of work, service delivery standards, operator procedures, user privacy protection, recording and reporting methods, as well as cooperation with all institutions involved in the protection system.

This year is also the first year that the budget was provided for the 1265 SOS line, from the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina budget.

We continue to work to establish common standards for quality services, share experiences and training curriculums, and analyze good practices. Stay tuned for more results in the next Newsletter!



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