



COUNTRY REPORT 2023



ADVANCING WOMEN'S SPECIALIST SERVICES IN EUROPE: ASSESSING SERVICE PROVISION AND IMPACT

Women Against Violence Europe (WAVE) Network is the largest European network of women's specialist services representing more than 1,600 women's organisations through over 170 members based in 46 European countries. WAVE is the only network dedicated solely to preventing and combatting violence against women.

*1 in 3 women have experienced physical and/or sexual violence since the age of 15 –
that's a total of 62 million women in Europe.*

Women's Specialist Services in Europe





Women's specialist services (WSS) play a pivotal role in providing comprehensive and holistic feminist support to women and their children facing gender-based violence (GBV), actively contributing to the prevention and combatting of violence against women and girls. 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.

Drawing on the 2023 WAVE Country Report, this factsheet offers a concise overview of the accessibility of WSS and the adherence to Istanbul Convention (IC) minimum standards throughout Europe. With insights gathered from 46 countries, it serves as a roadmap for tracking progress and pinpointing areas requiring improvement, ultimately directing efforts towards enhancing services for women survivors of GBV.



Importance of Women's Specialist Services

WSS offer tailored, survivor-centred support, that recognises the complex and specific needs of women and their children impacted by violence against women and girls (VAWG) and domestic violence (DV). Embedded within WSS are key features that distinguish them as invaluable resources for survivors:

-  **WSS are staffed by experts who have a deepened understanding of the needs of women and girls who have experienced violence.** They are also trained in trauma-informed care and can provide a safe and supportive environment for women to heal.
-  **WSS are often the first point of contact for women and girls who have experienced violence.** They can provide immediate support and crisis intervention, as well as longer-term support such as counselling, advocacy, and support groups.
-  **WSS are women-centred and women-led. This means that they are designed and run by women, for women.** This is important because it can create a sense of trust and safety for women who are seeking support.
-  **WSS are independent of the state and other institutions.** This means that they can provide confidential and impartial support to women, without fear of judgment or reprisal.

These inherent characteristics underscore the unique value WSS bring to addressing the multifaceted challenges of gender-based violence against women.

According to EU legislation, victims of all crimes have a right to comprehensive support. However, for specific groups of victims, such as those affected by VAWG and DV, the nature and impact of the crime requires specialised protection and support.

Recognising the Unique Contributions of Women's Specialist Services in Comprehensive Victim Support for VAWG

Survivors of VAWG and DV often face severe and long-lasting negative consequences on their physical and mental health, as well as their social and economic well-being. This underscores the critical necessity for tailored specialised support, which women's specialist services are uniquely equipped to provide.

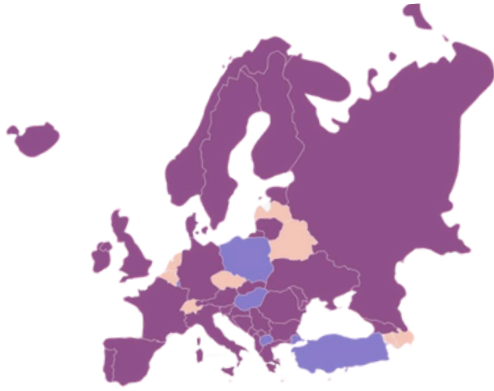
WAVE advocates for the recognition of VAWG & DV survivors' right to specialist support, emphasising the need for a clear differentiation between women's specialist services and general services within European legislative frameworks, strategies, and policies. This distinction is essential for safeguarding the rights and specific needs of survivors of VAWG and DV. While general services cater to a wide range of victims, they lack the specialised expertise required to effectively address the complexities of GBV against women and girls.




Just as a general practitioner cannot replace a specialised medical professional, general victim support services cannot substitute women's specialist services. Both services are indispensable yet, have markedly different competencies and thus should collaborate under a multi-agency approach, as proposed by the Istanbul Convention articles 20 and 22.

Relying solely on non-specialist providers poses a significant risk to VAWG & DV victims, potentially exposing them to re-victimisation and leading to their withdrawal from support services entirely. Therefore, it is imperative to ensure that women victims of VAWG and DV have direct and immediate access to WSS. **This goes beyond practicality; it represents a fundamental ethical obligation to uphold the rights of survivors of GBV against women.**

National Women's Helplines

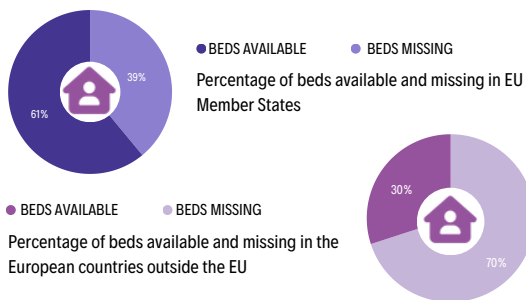
are dedicated phone lines that provide immediate, confidential assistance to women experiencing VAW and DV, including sexualised violence. As a safe and accessible first point of contact, they offer crisis intervention, information, referrals, and empower survivors towards recovery.



-  national helpline meeting IC standards
-  national helpline not meeting IC standards
-  no national helpline

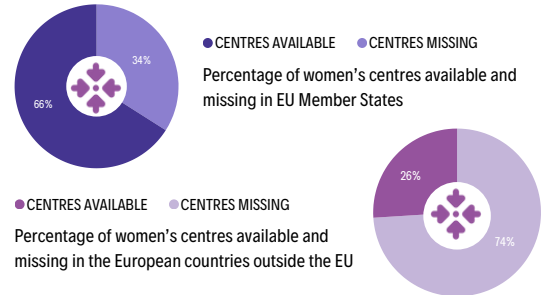
Women's Shelters

are indispensable safe spaces offering housing and support for survivors of VAW and their children. These shelters provide a secure, respectful environment that supports both immediate crisis response and long-term recovery. The Istanbul Convention highlights the need for widespread, accessible shelters which meet the needs of survivors through multiagency collaboration.



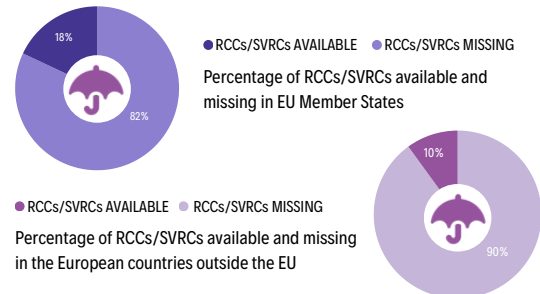
Women's Centres

Serving as essential support hubs, women's centres offer specialised services to female survivors of VAWG. They prioritise survivors' rights, needs, and empowerment through gender-specific approaches. These centres are instrumental in fostering recovery, promoting community awareness, and preventing violence, enabling survivors to reclaim their autonomy and control.




Specialist services for survivors of sexualised violence

are essential. They include rape crisis centres and sexual violence referral centres. The demand for these services far exceeds the current availability, highlighting the urgent need for increased support and resources.



Primary Prevention

 Preventing VAWG involves a comprehensive approach targeting the issue before it occurs.

It includes primary prevention to alter deep-seated behaviours and attitudes, secondary prevention for early intervention, and tertiary prevention for crisis support and recovery. Investing in primary prevention can significantly reduce violence rates, making it a cost-effective strategy for protecting women's human rights.

FEMICIDE

the gender-based killing of a woman because she is a woman, demands urgent action in Europe. The lack of a standardised definition and consistent data collection hampers efforts to combat this extreme form of violence.

In 2022, at least 2,558 women were killed in Europe.



Recommendations

Sustainable funding

States must guarantee adequate and long-term funding for WSS, to ensure the continuity of their work and sufficient capacities to provide services free of charge to all survivors.

Enhanced data collection

State-wide data collection systems regarding the provision of WSS should be established in each country. Data should identify the providers of such services, which services are provided, where they are located, to whom services are provided and how many clients are served. This data should be made widely accessible and available to service providers, advocates, policymakers and the general public, including those in need of assistance. Accurate and comparable data across countries is a crucial foundation for making evidence-based decisions to improve service provision, and it cannot rely solely on the limited resources of civil society organisations.

Ensure universal access/increase accessibility

Accessibility to WSS shall be guaranteed to all survivors. Particular attention shall be given to the provision of specialist support to survivors of specific forms of violence and for survivors from vulnerable groups.

Training (both for WSS staff and professionals in key sectors)

Staff of WSS must be adequately trained and have a gender-specific approach in dealing with violence against women and must put the survivor and her needs at the centre of all interventions. Additionally, WSS staff should receive ongoing support, including mental health support, to ensure that they can provide the best care to survivors and manage the emotional toll of their work. A systematic programme of initial and continuous training and professional development should also be established for key sectors (including police, judiciary, health services and education) and specialised training modules for different professionals should be developed.

Unified definitions for all services

A shared understanding and common definitions of the different types of WSS should be developed across Europe. Comparable definitions would improve clarity and consistency in the collection and recording of relevant data and would facilitate a more accurate representation of WSS.

Feminist methodologies

WSS need to be based on working models which apply feminist principles and methodologies. At the core, this implies applying a gender-specific and survivor-centred methodology which acknowledges the diverse, gendered nature of violence experienced by women, with approximately 90% of perpetrators being men.

Services coverage (per km and inhabitants)

Comprehensive geographical coverage of WSS is necessary to ensure all services are accessible to women and children who need them. This entails that specialist services be made available even in rural or remote areas and that there is an even distribution of such services across the country, not only in the most populated areas. States should aim to meet the minimum required Istanbul Convention standards in terms of geographical coverage which are outlined for each service per kilometre and number of inhabitants.

Policy-related

Measures to end VAW must be implemented by way of effective cooperation among all relevant agencies, institutions and organisations, and it is imperative that legislative frameworks, strategies, programmes and policy decisions explicitly recognise the indispensable role of WSS in addressing the gendered nature of violence and ensuring the rights and safety of survivors.

The recommendations outlined in this factsheet serve as a compass, guiding towards meaningful change. They benchmark progress, shedding light on areas where improvement is imperative. But more than that, they represent a call to action—a call to integrate these standards into legislative proposals and accountability reports, thereby cementing our commitment to upholding the Istanbul Convention.

We invite decision-makers and policymakers alike to stand with us in this crucial endeavour. Let us transform rhetoric into reality, advocacy into action, and promises into palpable change. Together, let's build a future where Women's Specialist Services serve as pillars of support, and where the rights of women are not just protected, but fiercely championed. Join us. Together, we can make a difference.