



# A life free from violence

Primary prevention as the key to eliminating violence against women and girls



## Imprint

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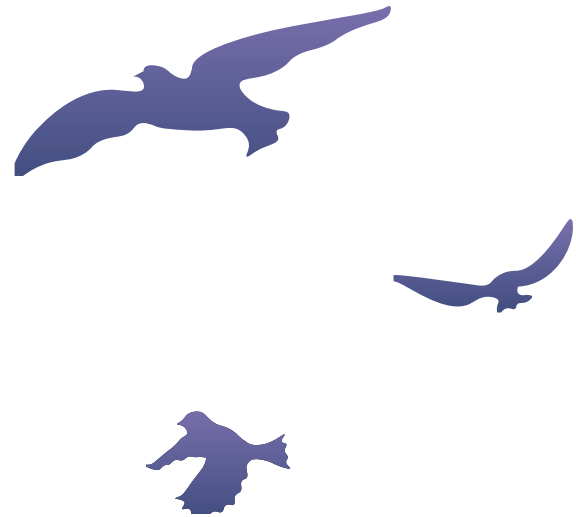


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## List of abbreviations

<b>CAP</b>	Child Assault Prevention
<b>EIGE</b>	European Institute for Gender Equality
<b>FSD</b>	Feminist Self-Defence
<b>GBV</b>	Gender-Based Violence
<b>GREVIO</b>	Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence
<b>IC</b>	Istanbul Convention
<b>LGBTQIA+</b>	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/questioning, Intersex, Asexual, and more
<b>NAP</b>	National Action Plan
<b>NGO</b>	Non-Governmental Organisation
<b>PP</b>	Primary Prevention
<b>ToT</b>	Training of Trainers
<b>VAW</b>	Violence Against Women
<b>VAWG</b>	Violence Against Women and Girls
<b>WAVE</b>	Women Against Violence Europe
<b>WG</b>	Thematic Working Group
<b>WHO</b>	World Health Organisation
<b>WSS</b>	Women's Specialist Services

# Preface

As a European network focusing on the elimination of all forms of violence against women and girls (VAWG), it is only natural that WAVE considers the importance of primary prevention within this field. Up until now, the work of the WAVE Network has predominantly focused on the provision of specialist support for survivors once violence has already occurred, such as the establishment of national women's helplines, shelters accessible to women survivors of domestic violence, and other services offering survivor-centred and short as well as long-term support to enable women and girls to come to terms with their experience and break free from violence. These services are part of secondary and tertiary prevention activities, which are distinct from primary prevention activities.

In 2022, a new WAVE Thematic Working Group (WG) on primary prevention was established. This Working Group marks the beginning of WAVE's work on primary prevention as a strategic priority within the context of VAWG and considerations on how we can advocate for the inclusion of primary prevention activities without overshadowing the importance of women's specialist support services.

The Working Group consists of WAVE members who either are themselves directly working on primary prevention or those interested in integrating primary prevention in their organisations' work. As of October 2023, there were 15 active WG members from 12 countries including Armenia, Belgium, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Poland, Romania, Russia, Scotland, Sweden and Türkiye. The WG met online on a monthly basis to discuss common struggles and promising practices on primary prevention work in members' organisations. Furthermore, a workshop was organised by some WG members at the WAVE Conference 2022 in Prague, and a follow-up article was written for the Fempower Magazine 2022.<sup>1</sup>

At the beginning of 2023, the WG decided to develop a publication highlighting the importance of primary prevention in the context of VAWG and showcasing the work that is already being done around this topic in the network. The WG is sympathetic to the fact that many women's rights organisations may not have the capacity to implement primary prevention activities into their ongoing work, and that we are all working under patriarchal oppression which focuses our attention on the immediate needs of survivors and reduces our ability to conceive the possibility to prevent violence from happening in the first place. However, the goal of this publication is to shed 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. This publication was written by WAVE members and originally intended for other members in the network, but has been adapted to serve the interest of all women's organisations working in the field of VAWG. The hope is that it will pave the way towards strengthening our work on prevention in general and on primary prevention in particular.

The Primary Prevention Working Group believes that in order to properly and effectively fight for a world without violence against women, we need to be able to imagine that preventing violence before it occurs is possible.

This publication begins with an *Introduction*, which outlines the importance of primary prevention in the context of upholding the fundamental human rights of women and girls, and preventing VAWG instead of only responding to it. We categorise primary prevention activities based on their levels of impact (e.g., individuals, groups/communities, societal structures) and the role or position of the audience (e.g., those exposed to violence, potential perpetrators, bystanders, activists). We also list various types of primary prevention activities, such as school-based workshops and feminist self-defence programmes.

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1 Accessible here (pages 15-16): [https://wave-network.org/wp-content/uploads/WAVE\\_fempower2212\\_web.pdf](https://wave-network.org/wp-content/uploads/WAVE_fempower2212_web.pdf)

*The Feminist Rationale for Primary Prevention* section examines how social norms and upbringing prevent women and girls from exercising basic human rights and how the threat of violence may impact their choices related to education, careers, self-presentation, relationships and caregiving. It further highlights the importance of primary prevention for feminist movements and explains why primary prevention has the potential for broader social change, compared to change achieved through secondary and tertiary prevention. We then focus on empowerment as an integral part of primary prevention and, finally, explore the need for feminist self-awareness.

The section on *The Situation of Primary Prevention in Europe* provides a brief overview of key international legal instruments addressing the primary prevention of VAWG and highlights its limited visibility. Then, it delves into the impact of the European legal framework on WAVE's activities, specifically examining the Istanbul Convention. Finally, we assess primary prevention efforts in Europe, based on data collected from WAVE member countries for the WAVE Country Report 2023.

In the following section, *Promising Practices from the WAVE Network*, we outline nine characteristics associated with effective prevention programs. Based on these criteria of success, the section introduces promising primary prevention practices carried out by WAVE members, hoping that they will serve as an inspiration to other women's rights organisations and offer some concrete instances of primary prevention activities.

The final section, *Advocating for Primary Prevention*, introduces the case study of Garance's advocacy efforts in French-speaking Belgium. It outlines the journey and strategies employed by Garance to establish primary prevention of VAWG as a priority. The advocacy efforts include different approaches, starting with influencing feminist movements and then moving to local and national advocacy, which finally led to international impact. This section also examines three key messaging strategies that Garance used in its advocacy efforts.

One important note: WAVE uses the term violence against women (VAW) or violence against women and girls (VAWG) in the majority of its work, and this is also why this term is used throughout this preface. This term alludes to the gendered nature of such violence, which is predominantly enacted by men against women\* and girls<sup>2</sup>, a fact that can become blurred or be forgotten when using the term gender-based violence. This term is not meant to diminish the fact that there are many other survivors of different forms of violence who are not women, including non-binary and gender non-conforming people. The Primary Prevention WG however acknowledges that WAVE members use different terms in their work and organisations, and therefore, the authors of each chapter of this paper use specific terms to describe the same/similar forms of violence (i.e., gender-based violence against women and girls and male violence against women and girls).

The WAVE Office would like to thank all authors who contributed to this publication. Their collaborative efforts, expertise, and valuable insights were crucial in shaping this work. We are also appreciative of the commitment and support of the WG members for enriching the content of this publication with their diverse perspectives and thoughtful contributions.

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2 The asterisk indicates the inclusion of a wide spectrum of individuals including persons socialised as girls, identifying as girls/women or having the experience of life as a girl/woman, and all identities having to do with some form of girlhood/womanhood. It is important to note that this term is used by the authors of this publication, and does not necessarily reflect WAVE's official terminology.

# Introduction

Author: Tere Iglesias Lopez

## What is “primary prevention”?

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, prevention is “the act of preventing or hindering”. Preventing is itself defined as “to keep from happening or existing”. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), prevention is defined as follows: “all measures aimed at avoiding or reducing the number and severity of diseases, accidents and disabilities”. It also refers to three aspects of prevention: primary, secondary and tertiary. Primary prevention (PP) intervenes before the disease occurs, secondary prevention while it occurs and tertiary prevention once it has occurred (Vigourt-Oudart et al., 2016).

Therefore, translated to the prevention of VAWG, prevention aims to act so that VAWG is kept from happening or existing at all. In its *World Report on Violence and Health*, the WHO translates the concept of primary/secondary/tertiary prevention to the prevention of violence. Primary prevention refers to all approaches that aim to prevent violence before it occurs and acts on risk and protective factors. It can be applied to the general population, for example by transforming the existing norms underlying violence, or to particularly vulnerable populations. Secondary prevention encompasses approaches that focus on the detection of violence and more immediate responses, and aims to identify and support survivors at an early stage and to interrupt the violence. Finally, tertiary prevention focuses on long-term care in the wake of violence and seeks to support the survivors and alleviate their trauma, to prevent the violence from reoccurring and can also include programmes designed to make perpetrators accountable (Krug et al., 2002). This more precise distinction between the three different preventive approaches seems important to us at the outset of this publication, as we note that the term prevention is most often used for initiatives that do not “prevent” violence in the dictionary sense of the word. All too often, speaking of prevention without specifying which aspect of prevention is talked about, makes it invisible that policies and programmes focus on secondary and tertiary prevention only, neglecting the transformative potential of primary prevention.

At the moment of writing this publication, there does not yet exist a single internationally harmonised definition of primary prevention in relation to VAWG. It is important to point out that the WHO concept of primary prevention, although translated to violence prevention, originates from public health. Indeed, thinking about and working on primary prevention of VAWG from a public health perspective instead of a human rights and justice perspective could impact our understanding of VAWG. This publication aims to provide an overview on the current role of primary prevention among action-oriented efforts existing within the WAVE network to eradicate VAWG. It seeks to answer questions such as “what is the current position of primary prevention within Europe?”, “what are the existing practices in the field of primary prevention undertaken by WAVE members?”, “what is lacking and where is improvement needed?” and “how can we advocate for primary prevention?”

## Why is primary prevention important?

Primary prevention means to act before violence occurs so that it does not happen or does not exist. As such, it is the most strategic approach to not only managing, but effectively ending VAWG. UN Women (2010) has listed some of the most obvious reasons:

- » Primary prevention upholds the fundamental human right of women\* and girls\* (and we will add: of sexual and gender minorities) to live free from violence and helps to avoid the serious problems VAWG causes for social justice, security and public health;

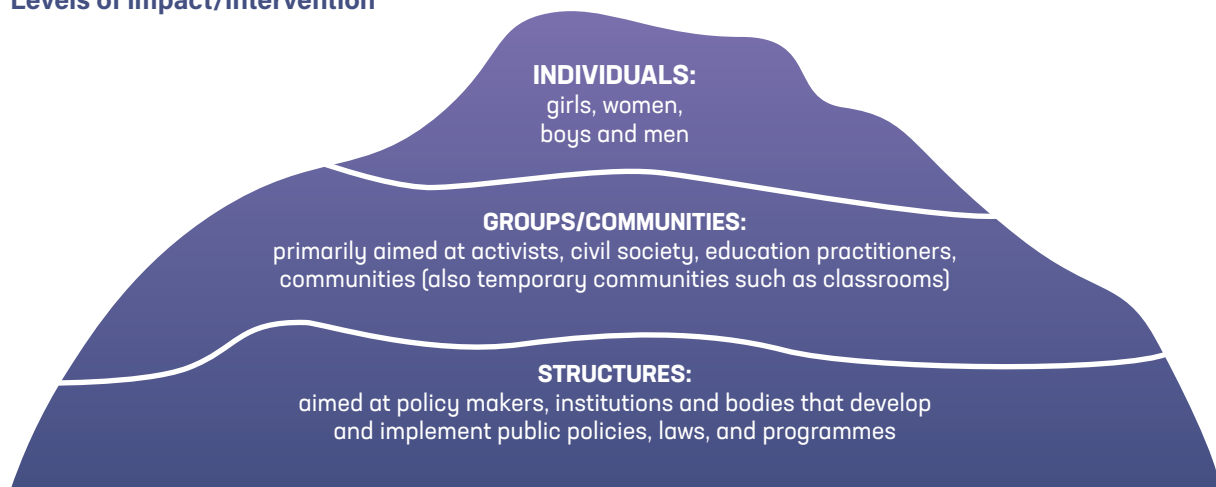
- » It is always preferable to prevent problems rather than to respond to them after the fact and to deal with their consequences and devastating costs (in terms of health and wellbeing, but also economically);
- » In the long-run, successful primary prevention efforts could improve the social, economic, and health status of women\* and girls\* and thus contribute to the broader societal wellbeing and equality around the world.

### Which primary prevention activities exist?<sup>3</sup>

Activities in the field of primary prevention can be distinguished using different prisms: based on the demographics they are addressing, based on their level of impact, or else based on the different types of activities. The form of activities depends on the societal levels that we aim to influence or impact (Sekutowicz, 2023). For example, to achieve legislative changes, primary prevention advocacy needs to be addressed to decision-makers.

We can therefore look at primary prevention efforts through different perspectives:

#### Levels of impact/intervention



#### Role or position of the audience of PP efforts

- » Those exposed to violence and discrimination on the grounds of their gender;
- » Those who may commit VAWG;
- » Those who are bystanders of VAWG;
- » Those who act against VAWG, such as activists, educators, social workers, etc.;
- » Those who sustain VAWG and patriarchal oppression.

#### Types of activities

- » School-based workshops for children;
- » Feminist self-defence for women\* and girls\*;
- » Peer education programmes;
- » Workshops for professionals.

These lists are not exhaustive, and evidently interventions are needed at every level and using different prisms for systemic change to take place.

<sup>3</sup> Primary prevention activities presented in this section represent actions undertaken by several civil society organisations which authors of this paper were involved in. This list does not encompass all potential actions but focuses on those carried out within these specific organisations.



Summarising the findings of several reports commissioned by international organisations (Arango et al., 2014; Kelly & Sharp-Jeffs, 2016; WHO, 2010) that highlight the strong evidence for the effectiveness of primary prevention strategies against VAWG, best practices in primary prevention can be identified.

According to available research, primary prevention strategies that are effective or promising, i.e. with emerging evidence of effectiveness, in terms of preventing VAWG, are the following: school-based programmes to prevent violence in dating contexts among youth, school-based training for children to recognise and avoid sexual violence, home visitation programmes and health worker outreach during pregnancy, programmes and interventions for children and adolescents subjected to child maltreatment and/or exposed to intimate partner violence, empowerment and participatory approaches for addressing structural gender inequality, feminist self-defence for women\* and girls\*, social and cognitive skills development in teens through girls clubs, changing social and cultural gender norms through the use of social norms theory and through working with men and boys (Arango et al., 2014; Kelly & Sharp-Jeffs, 2016; WHO, 2010).

In relation to these best practices, it also seems important to highlight some of the prevention strategies and programmes which were deemed to be ineffective or even harmful in terms of preventing VAWG. That is for example the case of awareness-raising campaigns which were assessed to be ineffective (Arango et al., 2014) or rape-awareness and knowledge programmes for school and college populations, as well as confrontational rape prevention programmes with youth that had a detrimental impact on rape myths and sexual violence perpetration (WHO, 2010).

However, despite these good practices and the benefits of primary prevention that have proven their potential to reduce and end violence, primary prevention is still underfunded and remains an afterthought in the fight against VAWG.

## **Primary prevention: the poor parent**

In the fight against VAWG, primary prevention has been (and still is) the poor parent. Even within feminist spaces, primary prevention has often not been a political priority and there has been relatively little sustainable investment in it. In fact, historically, it is secondary and tertiary prevention services, such as intervention programmes, shelters, rape crisis centres, helplines, work with perpetrators, and responsive criminal justice-based responses, that have been prioritised in the Global North (Storer Heather et al., 2016). These secondary and tertiary prevention services are of course a necessity, but they have the disadvantage that they only can be useful once violence has already occurred, with the full human and economic costs it engenders.

The marginalisation of primary prevention means that its potential to prevent violence from occurring and to transform the social relations that produce and legitimise it remains neglected. Too often, feminist associations, faced with the urgent needs of survivors of violence, try to react to violence after the fact, without ever having - or creating - the space and resources needed for the profound social change required to put an end to VAWG.

# The Feminist Rationale for Primary Prevention

Authors: Silvia Menecali, Agata Teutsch & Irene Zeilinger

## Primary prevention and goals of the feminist efforts against VAWG

VAWG holds back women\* and girls\* in all their endeavours, be they work-, family- or community-related. From early childhood, girls are educated and socialised to feel vulnerable and incapable of autonomy due to the possibility of experiencing violence. This limits their choices about their education and career, self-presentation, relationships and distribution of care work.

If we look at the issue from a human-rights perspective, which is central for the feminist movement, women\* and girls\* have the right to a life free from violence. The violence we face every day (at the interpersonal, collective and systemic level) prevents us from exercising our basic human rights and enjoying our opportunities and possibilities. VAWG affects us, in the way we have historically been erased as victims of the most horrifying persecutions (Kramer & Sprenger, 1486), and how we still experience the fear of navigating public space. Even if in theory everyone is born equal and in dignity, violence and the threat of violence deprive us of the opportunity to exercise our rights.

How some feminist thinkers put it in the 70s; why would women accept being paid less for work of equal value, being stuck with a disproportionate part of unpaid care work and being surrounded by cultural productions humiliating, infantilising or demonising them, if not for the risk of being attacked if they rebel against the status quo (Hanmer, 1978)? Would heterosexual monogamy and its institutionalisation in the form of marriage have such a dominant role if it was not for women feeling the need to put themselves under the protection of one man against all other men (Brownmiller, 1977)?

Violence is not inevitable, violence is preventable. Violence is not necessary, and we do not have to accept it. We can also effect change through language that makes this perspective visible and creates a new reality (women\* and girls\* being able to live truly free from violence and the fear of it). If we focus on primary prevention, we will not only talk about the number of women who have experienced violence. We can speak about the number of women\* and girls\* who may not experience violence. We can talk about their energy and resources that have not been lost due to violence, but which can be used to make our world a better/safer/fairer place for everyone. Our important task is to influence the way categories such as safety and security are understood.

## The importance of primary prevention for feminist activism

Primary prevention strives for a society without VAWG; it imagines what is needed to get there and what living without violence would look like. This provides primary prevention practitioners with a particular perspective on VAWG, not as a fatality, but a contingency that ultimately can be eradicated.

Secondary and tertiary prevention touch only indirectly on the social foundations of VAWG. Their potential for profound social change and liberation is limited. On the contrary, primary prevention, to have a measurable impact, needs to tackle the root causes of VAWG, e.g., the many factors of vulnerability of the oppressed group and the entitlement and protection of the dominant group. This makes primary prevention particularly relevant for feminists and feminist organisations.

Let's think about how, due to various factors out of our control (such as the way inadequate public funds are distributed), the activities of specialised feminist services are focused on secondary and tertiary prevention, ignoring that primary prevention contributes to the goal of eliminating gender-based violence (GBV) much more.

Although VAWG is violence that affects us as women, *de facto* caring only about what we can do once the violence has occurred excludes us from that path of self-awareness that lies at the heart of the feminist struggle. In primary prevention, this struggle does not only happen where there is violence, but everywhere, all at once. This allows to broaden the struggle to people who do not feel directly affected by violence so that they can get involved.

Because when it comes down to it, everyone is affected by VAWG, no matter whether they have experienced it in person or not. This includes people, groups and structures that commit violence or support it. Many primary prevention activities are aimed at men and boys, as well as people who may be bystanders. A very important function of primary prevention is to change attitudes towards VAWG: in public opinion, in the education system, among decision-makers in politics, programming and the justice system, among others.

We need to recognise that secondary and tertiary prevention do not reduce the high rates of violence against women\* and girls\*: this statement is relevant to rekindle the rationale we need, as feminists, to focus on primary prevention.

Activities undertaken in the area of primary prevention with a feminist approach and addressed to people exposed to oppression and violence are focused on emancipation and empowerment. Empowerment is an approach that has been used since the 1960s in emancipatory activities, in counteracting discrimination, as well as in social work, psychiatry, business, health care and management (Teutsch, 2017). From the beginning, it has been associated with feminism and emancipatory pedagogy. Empowerment, beyond the individual, reveals the cultural and systemic/structural nature of discrimination, oppression and violence. Empowerment is a process in which people from oppressed groups regain individual and collective control over their own lives, interests, spaces, rights, and the language used to describe reality, including themselves. The process of empowerment includes both the issue of obtaining and regaining rights, control, power, and reaching and making existing (but blurred, invisible, forgotten, unused) resources and competences visible.

Thanks to empowerment, people belonging to an oppressed group are able to define their interests and obstacles to exercising their rights and ability to act, and can develop a sense of agency and tools to affect change. The goal of empowerment activities is change at both the individual and structural/systemic levels. Empowerment is at the same time a strategy, a method, a process and a state towards which we strive. As a process, it is a spiral rather than a cycle, which means that once started, it cannot be stopped, even if it undergoes temporary setbacks. Empowerment is a strategic, long-term process of social change.

Empowerment is a different strategy than the "aid/support strategy". In the case of support, most often someone's power, strength, resources, authority is lent to, or used for, others. This does not change the disproportionality of the power held nor the power relationship. Again, disempowered individuals and groups who have had their power taken away from them, who have been disempowered – are not getting their power back. Although the perspective of support is tempting (and important), it still involves an unbalanced relationship, and the result is often deepening the inability (lack of power), helplessness, and dependence of the person being the object of support activities. Support assumes that the person we help is weaker or "can't cope" and needs someone from outside. Ultimately, support often contributes more to improving the situation of the person helping than the person or group to whom the support is provided. Institutionalised support often and quickly takes on the nature of window dressing, is often ineffective and does not lead to long-term and transformative change, because at the end of the day, it is a tool for maintaining the status quo.

An important feature of empowerment is revealing and deconstructing those power relations that accompany the relationship between a woman\* survivor of violence and women providing support (who is structurally in a better position than the survivor, as they have resources, influence, and can help them seek justice). Often the difference/gap between these two people is apparent, but has significant negative consequences for the effectiveness of actions aimed at freeing women from violence. People performing a support function/role, despite their own knowledge and life experience, may become involved in reproducing a system that tries to maintain the status quo and block any changes, including those related to stopping GBV. This is a terrible position from a psychological, personal and political point of view. Empowerment helps change this. In the approach based on empowerment, women are not a "group with special, specific needs and problems" that needs support or assistance. It is not women who have to adapt to existing conditions, but it is the conditions, rules, norms, laws and relationships that have to be changed to stop male violence against women\* and girls\*.

It is very important that we do not blame ourselves for not yet doing something. We simply operate in certain conditions, we are brought up in a patriarchal society, and sometimes we need time to notice that something should be done differently, or some changes are needed to let us see that a better lever may be somewhere else.

We also may need to consider feminist sensationalism (Ahmed, 2017), which is understood as our faculty of perceiving things (feeling sensations), which can be used to boost our way of reacting and existing in the world. All of us, as feminist activists, are familiar with the feeling of being exposed to injustice as women, but because of the very system that wants us to be insensitive to this feeling, and that in every way intends to take this sensitivity away from us (e.g., by denying us spaces, funding, putting us on the same level as gender-neutral organisations and generic services, creating stress and conflicts), we often find ourselves reacting to violence once it has happened. Furthermore, women\* and girls\* are taught to ignore the signals that every human being - as an animal - has when they are in danger. We are punished for our reactions, we are told that we are "oversensitive", and we are reprimanded for attempting to satisfy the animal instinct of defence and survival.

Focusing on ourselves is crucial in the context of sensationalism. Sometimes we feel uncomfortable focusing on ourselves because, as feminist activists, we are exhausted by the daily struggle against social injustice and we consider paying attention to ourselves as a form of selfishness. The urgency of providing immediate responses, the lack of funding, and the widespread job insecurity in our organisations force us to focus our efforts on emergency intervention rather than on primary prevention, starting from ourselves.

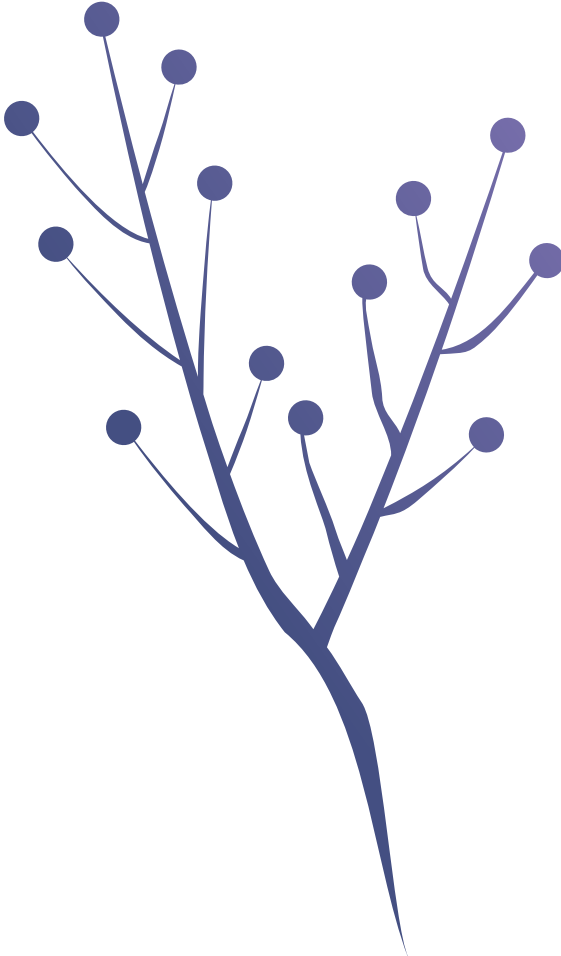
Therefore, we need to slow down and restore practices of self-awareness which, involuntarily, we left at the margins of our activism. Recovering is a fundamental and necessary element in the fight against patriarchy, and an indispensable form of primary prevention. Prioritising spaces where we can share experiences, discuss conflicts, and retrace our history is the best way to create the connection that is needed to fuel solid and definitive primary prevention. Self-awareness: this is the key word that we must put back at the core of all our actions, to nourish the collective feminist consciousness that is the driving force behind all VAWG prevention actions, including secondary and tertiary. Indeed, to be able to effectively intervene at the secondary and tertiary levels and outside the patriarchal system, we need to start from ourselves, from our refusal to handover our autonomy (personal and/or sexual) to a misogynist society that, through family, political and institutional structures, carries out daily oppressive acts that we cannot risk reproducing.

Research on feminist self-defence has demonstrated that self-efficacy, the conviction that one is able to successfully defend oneself, decreases fear of crime and the avoidance strategies that hamper women's\* freedom of movement and their participation in all fields of society. In addition, it translates into general self-efficacy (Hollander, 2014; Ozer & Bandura, 1990; Weitlauf et al., 2000; Weitlauf et al., 2001): because a woman\* is able to trust in her ability to take care of her own safety, she also feels more capable in other, unrelated fields. This is an important aspect of liberation.

Feminist self-defence is a set of physical, psychological and verbal techniques that help us defend our rights and existence, by increasing self-awareness and self-confidence. Exploring the different forms of everyday discrimination, aggression and injustice allows us to get in touch with our feelings of anger, fear and worry, and empowers our existence. Being able to explore and share self-care and self-defence is the first step towards being able to imagine

a world without VAWG, because it is the tool through which we take power and control away from patriarchy. The daily and widespread engagement in primary prevention is the most effective form of burnout and bullying prevention among activists.

A less palatable factor to some, but an important one for underfunded and overstretched women's specialist services (WSS), is the cost effectiveness of primary prevention. In sum, it is much cheaper – in economic terms, but also in terms of human suffering – to prevent rape, domestic violence or sexist harassment than to support survivors in reconstructing their lives after violence (Sarnquist et al., 2014). A French study estimated that every euro invested in violence prevention leads to 87 euros of saved costs, of which 30 euros in direct expenses (Nectoux et al., 2010). It should be an alarming sign that governments prefer to (insufficiently) fund secondary and tertiary prevention to keep us busy with mopping up patriarchy's worst manifestations rather than investing in constructing the world we want – and deserve!



# The Situation of Primary Prevention in Europe

Authors: Tere Iglesias Lopez & Agata Teutsch

In this section, we seek to outline the position of primary prevention in Europe. We will first present some of the most important international conventions and declarations regarding the fight against VAWG. We will then focus on the European framework, as this is the framework which also determines the scope of WAVE's operation, and more specifically on the Istanbul Convention, as it represents a landmark European legal instrument to end violence against women. Finally, we will seek to assess the state of primary prevention within Europe, and especially within WAVE member countries.

## International and European legal framework

In international law (mainly in conventions and declarations), primary prevention of violence against women\* and girls\* has been rarely or not at all mentioned; indeed, none of the documents use the public health definition of primary, secondary and tertiary prevention. The term prevention is used indiscriminately, and it is left to the reader to interpret from context or personal preferences which type of prevention is meant.

The 1993 UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, the first international instrument explicitly addressing violence against women, and which provides a reference point for all subsequent international action, merely talks of the need to develop preventive approaches that promote the protection of women against any form of violence (DEVAW, 1993). The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, which identifies specific actions for governments to prevent and respond to VAWG, points to the training of police and civil servants involved in prevention, but without identifying specific prevention actions (UN Women, 2014).

Even the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Council of Europe, 2014), also known as the Istanbul Convention (IC), the first legally binding international instrument on VAWG, does not mention primary prevention as such, and no specific measures are included. Despite the third chapter of the Convention being called "Prevention", only Article 12 - General Obligations and, to a lesser extent, Article 14 - Education, which aim at promoting a change in social and cultural behaviour can be read in that sense, but again, the interpretation is in the eye of the beholder (Garance, 2019). Although there is a Council of Europe publication on the implementation of Article 12 (Hester & Lilley, 2016), which broadly explains how to build a prevention policy and calls for primary prevention to be placed at its centre, it does not mention any specific measures for doing so. Moreover, in that same document, the words "primary", "feminism" or "self-defence" are not used at any time. In addition, the prevention model that is described in detail in that publication does not include actions aimed at strengthening the agency and the ability of women\* and girls\* to defend themselves against violence. With regard to Article 14,<sup>4</sup> there are no informal guidelines from the Council of Europe for its implementation.

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4 We have noticed that the Polish translation of article 14 differs from the English version allowing for a different meaning. While the English version calls for adapting teaching materials and activities to include certain topics such as equality, GBV, etc. the Polish version calls for the introduction of educational activities "in justified cases" without further specification of who decides according to which criteria if cases are justified.

In addition to the shortcomings of the official French and English versions of the Istanbul Convention (Art. 12 of the Statutes of the Council of Europe), countries might base their understanding of the Convention on the translation in their national languages, which can also lead to different interpretations (see footnote 4).

This means that the interpretation of Articles 12 and 14 and their implementation depend on the political will of national governments, which we know to be little invested in primary prevention (although it is the role of Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO) to come in to correct erroneous interpretations). And yet, we also know the importance of influencing the way of understanding, defining and describing primary prevention if we want to achieve real change and put an end to GBV.

On 8 March 2022, the European Commission proposed a new Directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence. The proposal aimed to ensure a minimum standard across the EU against such violence.<sup>5</sup> The Directive (EU) 2024/1385 on combating violence against women and domestic violence was adopted on May 14, 2024, and entered into force on June 14, 2024, whereby Member States have 3 years for its transposition. The adopted Directive spans seven chapters covering general provisions, criminalised offenses, protection and access to justice, victim support, prevention and early intervention, coordination and cooperation, and final provisions. Despite strong advocacy by feminist organisations like WAVE for a comprehensive approach to VAW and DV that prioritises prevention, the final text remains heavily focused on criminalisation. This outcome is due to a lack of political will and the absence of a strong legal basis, as GBV is not classified as a Eurocrime. As a result, comprehensive prevention, including primary prevention is treated as an add-on rather than being central to the Directive. This approach contradicts primary prevention perspectives, which view law enforcement as a last resort for survivors rather than the predominant, almost one-size-fits-all solution that the Directive portrays it to be.

Moreover, the measures included in the prevention chapter, which should strongly emphasise primary prevention, do not align with our understanding of prevention. The proposed measures focus heavily on awareness-raising campaigns, which have been proven ineffective, and do not aim to develop citizens' prevention skills or address structural inequalities, apart from sexual education and consent education (mentioned in the Recitals and Article 35). Specifically, Article 35 on the prevention of rape and the central role of consent in sexual relationships refers to power dynamics, gender stereotypes, and sexual education. It addresses the need to work at a structural level via a "culture of consent," although it does not mention feminist self-defence training as an effective prevention tool.

Regarding training, the Directive emphasises training judges, healthcare professionals, social services, educational staff, and workplace supervisors to detect and understand the needs of victims and potential victims rather than preventing violence against women in educational, professional, health-related, and social spaces, as well as society at large. However, small steps are taken concerning media training to combat stereotypical portrayals of gender roles and research and education programmes to increase public understanding of the different manifestations and root causes of all forms of VAW and DV.

The Directive lacks a requirement for prevention programs to be evidence-based and does not provide for sufficient funding for WSS to train primary prevention workers and collect and analyse evidence to continuously improve their programs. Article 36 mentions that training activities "may be provided by relevant civil society organisations, non-governmental organisations working with victims, the social partners, and other stakeholders," but this falls short of the demands made by women's rights organisations. These shortcomings may be due to a lack of a clear definition of prevention and the fact that the differentiation between primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention is only included in Recital 73. This distinction is not carried through in the Articles, limiting the possibility of mainstreaming prevention

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5 More on the EU measures to end violence against women: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eu-measures-end-violence-against-women/#directive>; the full text of the Directive (EU) 2024/1385: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32024L1385>.

and emphasising the key role of primary prevention.<sup>6</sup> It is important to highlight that this Recital was included due to WAVE's advocacy efforts and the amendments WAVE presented during the legal procedure.<sup>7</sup>

## The situation of primary prevention in Europe: data from WAVE members

For the first time, WAVE started to collect data on primary prevention from WAVE delegates<sup>8</sup> in 2023 for the biennial WAVE Country Report. This being the first report to collect such data, it is not yet possible to draw accurate conclusions on the current position of primary prevention in Europe. It can, however, give us some insight into the primary prevention activities that are carried out by WSS and, over the next few years, it will help us identify trends and improvements.

Among the primary prevention activities that are being carried out in WAVE member countries, the most common one is awareness-raising campaigns or programmes. Over 80% of WAVE countries have such campaigns or programmes. As mentioned earlier, awareness-raising campaigns were actually assessed to be ineffective for primary prevention (Arango et al., 2014). They may, however, play an important role in secondary prevention.

School-based primary prevention programmes are being implemented in over 60% of WAVE member countries, even if it should be pointed out that these are not an integral part of the curriculum and are provided by non-school actors, most of the time by WSS. The school-based programmes are followed by training for primary prevention practitioners, which are carried out by half of WAVE member countries. It remains to be explored in more depth if these school-based programmes are actually full primary prevention programmes or are limited to awareness raising.

In less than a third of WAVE member countries (30%), feminist self-defence training is available. Yet, a number of university studies have demonstrated the benefits of feminist self-defence and therefore the importance of this primary prevention activity to prevent VAWG (see next chapter). Finally, other primary prevention activities being implemented in WAVE member countries include bystander intervention trainings (32%), self-care activities (28%), and others (15%), such as activities on anti-discrimination/equality education, activities targeting potential perpetrators or specific groups (i.e. minoritised women), and sector specific initiatives targeting the entertainment industry, for example.

More data at hand regarding available primary prevention activities in WAVE member countries concern the beneficiaries. According to information provided by delegates, the main beneficiaries of primary prevention activities are the general public (81%), followed by women (68%), girls under the age of 18 (66%), boys under the age of 18 (59%), LGBT+ people (57%) and finally, men (51%).

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6 Recital 73 states: "Actions to prevent violence against women and domestic violence should be based on a comprehensive approach composed of primary, secondary and tertiary preventive measures. Primary preventive measures should aim to prevent violence from occurring and could include actions such as awareness-raising campaigns and targeted education programmes to increase understanding among the general public of the different manifestations of all forms of violence and their consequences and to increase knowledge about consent in interpersonal relationships at an early age. Secondary preventive measures should aim to detect violence early and prevent its progression or escalation at an early stage. Tertiary prevention should be focused on preventing reoffending and revictimisation and on properly managing the consequences of the violence and could include the promotion of bystander intervention, early intervention centres and intervention programmes."

7 You can read WAVE's full statement on the adoption of the Directive here: <https://wave-network.org/vaw-directive-032024/>.

8 The WAVE Advisory Board consists of one Delegate and one Co-delegate from member organisations in each country. Delegates and Co-delegates are appointed by mutual agreement of the member organisations of the respective country. The responsibility of delegates is to provide national data for WAVE Country Reports.



# Promising Practices from the WAVE Network

Author: Tere Iglesias Lopez

Compared to research on VAWG, there is little academic literature on primary prevention programmes and in particular on what makes prevention programs *effective*. A review-of-reviews (Nation et al., 2003) identified nine characteristics that were consistently associated with effective prevention programmes for young people: the programmes were comprehensive and had a global approach, included varied teaching methods, provided sufficient dosage, were based on theory and empirical data, fostered positive relationships, intervened at the right time, were socioculturally relevant, included impact evaluations, and involved well-trained staff.

Based on these criteria of success, several primary prevention promising practices implemented by WAVE member organisations were identified. In this section, we will introduce some of those promising practices that are carried out by members. This will, on one hand, provide readers with an overview of what is already being done within the WAVE network, and, on the other hand, inspire and give women's rights organisations access to concrete examples of primary prevention activities. These examples are not exhaustive, but they offer a good starting point on which to reflect about primary prevention activities that are worthwhile to promote and share within the WAVE Network and beyond.

## Feminist self-defence and assertiveness for women\* and girls\*

Three WAVE members, [Autonomia](#) and [Juniper Foundation](#) from Poland and [Garance](#) from Belgium, offer feminist self-defence (FSD) workshops for women\* and girls\*, including those with LBTQIA+ identities, with and without disabilities, with migrant experiences, different ages, etc. Related activities include the training of trainers (ToT), developing standards of ToT, FSD advocacy, networking and alliance (coalition) building, evaluation and research, and publications.

Feminist self-defence workshops are a primary prevention and mitigation method, a feminist answer and active resistance to GBV against women\* and girls\*, based on an empowerment approach. At FSD workshops, participants have the opportunity to 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. Women\* and girls\* learn how to recognise and respond to boundary transgressions and violence. They strengthen their sense of self-confidence, self-esteem and agency.

Various studies demonstrate that feminist self-defence reduces the risk of aggression and/or violence to which women\* and girls\* may be subjected. Studies conducted in the Netherlands (van Baarsen & van der Plicht, 1995), Canada (Senn et al., 2015), the USA (Hollander, 2014), Kenya (Sarnquist et al., 2014) and Malawi (Decker et al., 2018) show that after attending an FSD workshop, women\* and girls\* feel less vulnerable and more in control when threatened, are less likely to be sexually assaulted<sup>9</sup> and, in the event of sexual assault, are more confident in their

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9 Van Baarsen and van der Plicht also found a preventative impact of FSD participation on physical violence victimisation. However, the other quoted surveys only took sexual violence into account.

ability to resist and therefore more often able to defend themselves effectively. Annual rates of rape and sexual assault were lower for women\* and girls\* trained in self-defence than for untrained women\* and girls\*. In addition, participants that were unable to thwart an attack reported a lower impact on their mental health.

According to an evaluation on the impact of participation in FSD workshops conducted in Poland in 2008, among the 113 adult participants, 94% stated that feminist self-defence influenced their personal/professional life (Sekutowicz, 2023). For as many as 90% of the participants, their skills in recognising and responding to violence increased. 86% stated that the knowledge and skills acquired from feminist self-defence training were useful for them. More than 90% of participants declared that FSD is an efficient violence prevention method and think that every girl should have the possibility to participate in FSD training. All participants would advise other women\* and girls\* to take part in a feminist self-defence workshop.

A similar evaluation of 71 questionnaires from girls\* aged 13-16 in Poland who took part in a 12-hour FSD workshops in 2009, showed that 69% of participants had experienced violence previously. After the workshops, all the girls\* felt safer, almost 95% experienced an increase in self-confidence and skills related to assertive communication, and for all participants, the ability to recognise and respond to violence increased. All participants recommended that other women\* and girls\* take part in the feminist self-defence workshops.



Illustration 1. Photo from a workshop for teenagers carried out by Agata Teutsch. Author of the photo: Magdalena Stoch.

**School-based prevention programmes**

CAP (Child Assault Prevention) is a programme developed in 1978 in the US by FSD practitioners. Belgian WAVE member Garance was trained by Canadian CAP trainers in 2015 and has since then implemented the programme *Enfants CAPables* (CAPable children) in Belgian French-speaking primary schools. Its objective is the primary prevention of bullying and sexual violence. It is based on a three-pronged educational approach, including workshops for parents, school staff, and children. In this way, consistent prevention messages are disseminated to all three groups and can reinforce each other. The programme aims to inform and raise awareness, but above all to empower children and adults alike and to increase their self-confidence and personal and collective resources for action.

**In the workshops, adults receive information on child abuse and its legal framework. They also learn how to:**

- » communicate with children about safety;
- » recognise the physical, emotional, psychological and social signs of a child who might be a victim of violence;
- » welcome a child who wants to confide in an adult.

**The workshop for children aims to enable them to:**

- » identify dangerous situations, such as bullying between children or sexual violence by strangers or adults close to them, without increasing their fear;
- » learn strategies for dealing with such situations: setting limits, staying safe, seeking help, communicating with a trusted adult, as well as a few notions of self-defence;
- » show solidarity with other children who may be victims of aggression;
- » recognise and emphasise what children are already doing in their everyday lives to stay safe.

During the school year 2022-2023, the children's satisfaction rate following the workshop was 78%. The children were also given the opportunity to explain their choice and illustrate it with a drawing. Many of the children expressed how pleased they were to have learned strategies for feeling safer when they went home alone, or simply how pleased they were to have seen the scenarios and have learned new things (including a few self-defence moves and the "power yell"). Others explained that it was a novelty for them to know that they had three fundamental rights: to be strong, safe and free, and sometimes accompanied their words with drawings of themselves representing these rights. For some, it was the first time they had been told that they were capable of defending themselves.

Another WAVE member, [D.i.Re](#) from Italy, also carries out workshops in schools, for children aged 4-7 years and for their teachers and educators. For this, D.i.Re has designed and constructed pedagogical tools, and specifically four animated videos on the topic of power. They provide training to school staff and activists, volunteers and operators of anti-violence centres to use these animated videos. In the schools involved, they organise awareness-raising meetings on the issue of GBV addressed to all staff, as well as trainings for teachers and educators on the phenomenon of GBV, including its cultural roots and prevention strategies in school.



*Illustration 2. Photo from a D.i.Re workshop for children on the topic of power.*

## Camps for young women and girls

Rebel Girls Day Camp is a five-day-long educational and community programme for girls aged 13-18 organised by NANE, a Hungarian WAVE member. The camp offers the girls a deep insight into a number of subjects that are central to their lives, yet are under-discussed or considered taboo, such as gender roles, beauty standards, safe and equal relationships and sex, forms and warning signs of violence in intimate relationships, the effects of pornography, and digital violence.

The programme of the camp is built on a series of workshops using playful and creative learning methods as well as leisure and community-building activities including feminist self-defence, yoga, skateboarding, and art workshops. The camps aim to strengthen the participants' self-esteem, sense of belonging, and resilience in face of harmful gender-based societal expectations, to develop their ability to define and express needs and boundaries, as well as critical thinking on violence and discrimination affecting women and girls.



*Illustration 3. Photo from one of NANE's Rebel Girls camps organised.*

Since 2021, 175 girls have attended the Rebel Girls camps organised in Budapest, as well as in the regional centres Pécs and Szeged. Unfortunately, restrictive laws hinder a sufficient dosage, and the programme is a one-time intervention without the necessary follow-up action. Moreover, while direct outcomes and short-term impact are better evaluated, long-term impact is very difficult to measure without the necessary funding.

In Poland, WAVE member Autonomia has managed to put in place a comprehensive empowerment programme for girls\*, implemented throughout the year in the form of a Girls\* Empowerment Centre. This is a space which offers many activities and workshops aiming to empower girls\* and prevent GBV: "Girls\* have power" workshops, The Theater of the Power, feminist self-defence workshops, consent workshops, Girls\* Climate days, Bivouac<sup>10</sup> of Power, The Summer of Girls\* Power, and repair cafes, among other activities. Through those activities, every girl\* can safely and freely discover her abilities and strength, grow her courage, resilience and resistance. The space allows them to get rid of the sense of shame and helplessness, appreciate their voice and body, learn how to make decisions and overcome challenges, how to organise and cooperate, and sometimes even how to safely make mistakes.

The Girls\* Empowerment Centre was operating in Cracow since 2019 on an everyday basis for more than a year but because of lack of funding, it now only operates incidentally. In 2022, five more centres have been established in other cities in Poland: Efk, Warszawa, Łódź, Głogów and Niepołomice.

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10 Temporary encampment under little or no shelter.



*Illustration 4. Author: Florence Moncenis. Photo from a workshop carried out as part of the international project "Empowerment education of girls\* and young women\* by educating youth educators and creating centres for girls\*".*

## Social work with a feminist perspective

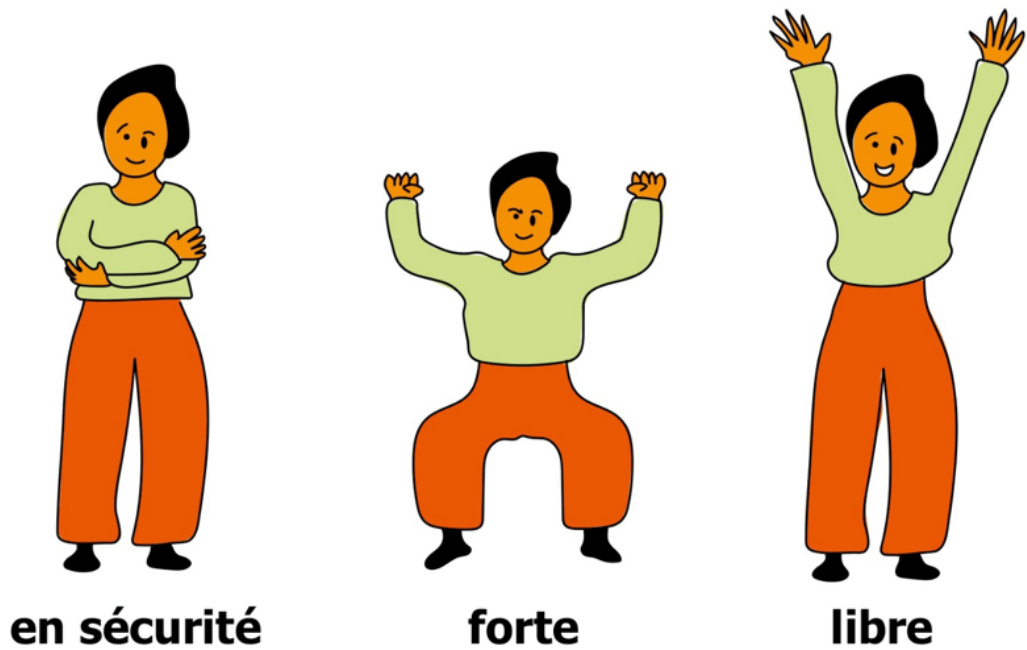
Within their solidarity centre and shelter for women who are subjected, or under the risk of being subjected to male violence, Turkish WAVE member [Mor Çatı Women's Shelter Foundation \(Mor Çatı Kadın Sığınağı Vakfı\)](#) engages in social work with a feminist perspective. This preventive dimension is a cornerstone of their work, manifested through various elements within the Solidarity Centre. Their approach encompasses meaningful conversations and crisis intervention, going beyond mere helpline operations. These interactions involve providing preventive information through risk assessments, and developing plans to address potential future violence or rights infringements, as well as preventing institutional violence. Mor Çatı recognises the importance of comprehensive support, including strategies to prevent violence and empower women. Thus, in their feminist social work, there is a primary prevention component on top of the secondary and tertiary prevention work of the helpline operations.

In the shelter, their work extends beyond crisis intervention, encompassing ongoing assistance to address social, economic, and psychological aspects. Their approach is rooted in understanding the intricate dynamics of male violence, power relations, the cycle of violence, red flags and safe relationships. This means they are not only addressing present risks and challenges but also anticipating potential crises that they can define with a holistic support approach. This approach considers a range of factors, ensuring that women receive the necessary tools and resources to regain control over their lives and pursue empowerment.

In short, they are not only supporting women with their current risks or challenges but also tackling possible risks, crises and/or ups and downs through social, economic and psychological support. In addition to that, they emphasise the cultivation of safe relationships and boundary setting, which is particularly vital for women at risk of entering another violent relationship.

## Peer education programmes

Belgian WAVE member Garance has been training peer educators to lead safety workshops on violence prevention since 2008. Peer education is based on the fact that a peer facilitator shares certain characteristics of the group (gender, age, origins, life experiences, etc.) and experiences similar issues and discrimination. The fact that they share the same realities enables the group to develop strategies together that meet their needs so that they can better defend their rights and feel more confident at home, on the street, or at work. The peer education programme on safety is also a gateway into feminist self-defence.



*Illustration 5. Safe, strong and free is the slogan of all the peer education work carried out at Garance.*

At the moment, the three audiences for Garance's peer education programmes are older women\*, migrant women\*/ women\* of colour and women\* with learning disabilities. After their training, the peer educators are able to facilitate five safety workshops on prevention strategies; personal boundaries and boundary setting; safety in public spaces; safety in the private sphere (including residential institutions for women with disabilities); and discrimination. Each module allows participants to critically reflect on the societal contexts, to share their experiences and resources and to develop satisfying solutions together. This collective emancipatory work also strengthens social bonds and solidarity. Garance provides continuous support and further training through regular peer educator meetings and/or a yearly outdoor seminar to share their facilitation practices and experiences.

In evaluations through questionnaires and focus groups, peer educators and participants alike consistently report an increase in self-confidence and a reduction of fear and avoidance strategies, positive changes that remain stable over time. They also underline the importance of working in a peers-only group context where they can focus on their specific needs and interests. What is more, they feel better able to put into practice the prevention strategies that their groups developed (increased self-efficacy), and mid-term evaluations show that many of them successfully use them.

# Advocating for Primary Prevention

Irene Zeilinger

This chapter is a case study of Garance's close to 20 years of advocacy in French-speaking Belgium. When Garance started out advocating for the primary prevention of VAWG, it was without a long-term strategy in mind. They did what they had to do to open the space and find the resources for what they were convinced was necessary to do, and the strategy emerged over time from their engagement with different actors. However, its past experiences may provide pointers for other organisations wanting to plan their advocacy from the outset. The socio-political context in French-speaking Belgium is certainly less hostile than in many other European localities, but the Garance story may be able to incite hope to advocate for primary prevention elsewhere. Hope because when Garance started its advocacy, it was literally the only organisation in all of Belgium talking about primary prevention, and for years, if they were not physically in the room to put the topic on the political agenda, primary prevention would remain left out. Today, primary prevention has become one of the priorities of the Belgian feminist movement to end VAWG. In addition, the current national and other action plans on VAWG and gender equality include primary prevention and create new opportunities to end VAWG. So how did Garance get from A to B?

Some general remarks first: primary prevention advocacy is about transforming the conversation about VAWG. This takes time and, as the saying goes, little strokes fell great oaks: even if you have the impression that nobody is listening or that you are going nowhere, your efforts add up and, in time, you'll have reached critical mass. Also, be prepared to be "everywhere all at once"; to be knowledgeable and reliable and to have to do it all yourselves. Chances are that nobody will do it in your place. Use any platform that is slightly related to VAWG to broadcast your message and don't be afraid of repeating yourself and wearing people out with sheer single-mindedness. That's what has worked in Garance's case.

From its foundation, Garance made the primary prevention of VAWG its principal mission, and as a consequence held an insider-outsider position in the feminist movement. It was an insider because it developed a feminist perspective on (resistance against) VAWG which resonated well with other feminist non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and gave ample opportunity for collaboration and solidarity. And an outsider because all other feminist NGOs working on VAWG were focused on survivor support and, in the best-case scenario, had some small prevention activities on the side. So primary prevention was not a priority to them and in some cases was seen as in competition with survivor support for the scarce resources made available. Therefore, as a first step, Garance advocated for primary prevention within the feminist movement to end VAWG, to raise awareness that existing activities and demands did not cover all the bases and that these blind spots limited the efficacy of the whole movement. The response to this messaging was reluctant at first because some NGOs feared that highlighting flaws in the feminist responses to VAWG could backfire. Framing this lack of response as a logical consequence of inadequate government policy and programming rather than a shortcoming of the civil society response helped to overcome this reluctance.

As soon as Garance had some support from the larger and more established and recognised feminist NGOs, Garance used its insider position as a stepping stone for advocacy with national and local decision-makers. Whenever a feminist platform, roundtable or other action group on VAWG was invited to a meeting with a decision-maker, Garance was able to participate and repeat its message about primary prevention. Increased visibility in these spaces opened doors for individual advocacy outside of collective meetings. A very important practice was and still remains the "ministerial tour": each time a new government or municipal council is elected, something that happens with relatively high frequency in Belgium due to its institutional complexity, Garance contacts the relevant politicians and asks for a meeting to discuss the new administration's policy projects on VAWG. These meetings

are opportunities to make the new ministers aware of the possibility to prevent VAWG and how this could fit in with their existing policy projects. The advocacy approach was rather pedagogic than vindictive. At the same moment, Garance called on politicians to make a difference and leave their mark on VAWG policymaking, by highlighting how their policy initiatives risked to fall short without including primary prevention. Over time, there was a noticeable improvement of awareness of primary prevention and willingness to invest resources in it.

In parallel to local and national advocacy, Garance went international early on. As Belgium was one of the founding members of WHO's global campaign on violence prevention in 2002, Garance was able to participate in several international events, became a member of WHO's Violence Prevention Alliance, and relayed the campaign and its tools among Belgian decision-makers. This conferred more visibility and credibility to Garance's messaging and enriched its network with academic researchers, non-feminist NGO allies, and feminist advocates around the world. International advocacy tools, best practices, evaluation studies and policy examples were useful to improve advocacy within Belgium. While Garance did not have the capacity to maintain a constant presence in the international community, it was able to capitalise on some opportunities such as the 2017 European Parliament resolution on the Istanbul Convention, where a couple of emails and follow-up contacts were sufficient to introduce self-defence for women\* and girls\* in the final document, a first in official EU documents since the 1980s.

This three-pronged advocacy approach became unified in the run-up to Belgium's first GREVIO evaluation. Garance participated actively in the creation of the shadow report on the (lack of) implementation of the IC by Belgian governments and coordinated the chapter on prevention (Coalition "Ensemble contre les violences faites aux femmes", 2019). This made it possible to distinguish clearly between primary, secondary and tertiary prevention and point out gaps in policy and programming, beyond what the GREVIO questionnaire would have achieved. The collaborative process with other NGOs also continued to broaden the feminist basis of support for primary prevention, which became one out of 10 priority demands. GREVIO picked up this demand, and its report arrived just in time for the newly elected, relatively progressive government to influence their coalition agreements and pave the way for the explicit inclusion of primary prevention and feminist self-defence in different action plans.

Advocacy is first and foremost about messaging. In the following, we would like to examine three aspects of Garance's messaging strategies that may prove helpful and transposable to other contexts.

## 1 FRAMING

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Framing is about the perception, understanding and communication about reality, and it is key to successful advocacy. The words we use to talk about a policy topic reflect how we perceive and understand the underlying problem and guide subsequent policy and programming (NCIPC, 2010). Because framing is so important, the feminist movement has been grappling for a long time with the best terms to reflect feminist thought and practice, see the different political positions expressed by choice of vocabulary like victim vs. survivor; domestic violence vs. intimate partner violence vs. family violence; sex work vs. prostitution, to name a few examples.

In the case of Belgium, feminist NGOs and decision-makers were using the term prevention widely and with no distinction, for any measure combating VAWG. As a consequence, the fact that the large majority of attention, efforts and resources went to secondary and tertiary prevention and that little was done to actually prevent VAWG from happening in the first place remained invisible. Therefore, educating potential feminist allies and policymakers about the concept of primary, secondary and tertiary prevention, the differences between the three, and their complementary character, was an important first step for raising awareness of necessary changes to Belgian policy making and programming. As mentioned above, it took a lot of repetitions and several years to get everyone to adopt this three-pronged perspective on combating VAWG.

In a second step, Garance further distinguished between primary prevention and awareness raising, two concepts that were often used as synonyms, as if the only way to prevent violence from happening was to inform about and attract attention to the topic. Indeed, if government policy included a commitment to prevent VAWG, it was by way



of awareness raising campaigns. However, as international research has shown (WHO, 2010), awareness raising campaigns on VAWG have failed to demonstrate a preventative effect in terms of reducing levels of violence. Therefore, awareness raising campaigns, while necessary for other goals, are insufficient in terms of primary prevention. The challenge was to point out that awareness raising, while necessary, falls short of the expected effect of reducing violence, and that other means of action needed to be funded to prevent VAWG. A first success was the National Action Plan (NAP) of 2010-2014<sup>11</sup> that separated awareness raising and prevention into two different chapters and therefore included for the first time explicit primary prevention initiatives such as school-based programmes for the prevention of violence in dating contexts with young people or aligning sex education programmes with a gendered analysis of violence. However, this gain was lost with the following NAP (2015-2019)<sup>12</sup> that followed the structure of the Istanbul Convention and therefore, primary prevention was again invisible and mixed up with awareness raising. This highlights the limited usefulness of the IC for primary prevention purposes and the prudent care needed to assure that its implementation does not harm existing or jeopardise future efforts to that end.

On a more general level, framing can position primary prevention as the most logical approach to combat VAWG, due to three major arguments that can hardly be disputed without reputational loss for adversaries:

→ **Basic premise:**

Everyone wants less violence. Violence isn't good for anyone and harms many, so of course we all want to prevent it before it even happens. This argument is about overcoming a lack of imagination that it is actually possible to prevent violence, and to get to an elementary agreement on the necessity to reduce violence. It is self-explanatory and no empirical proof is needed to support the argument.

→ **Moral/human rights-based premise:**

Focusing on survivor support, perpetrator work and repression means that violence has to happen first for something to be done about it. That further signifies that, as a society, we accept VAWG and tolerate exposing women\* and girls\* to its harm. A useful metaphorical parallel is car accidents: the current approach to combating VAWG is comparable to a government that knows that on a certain stretch of road there are a lot of accidents causing injury, death and economic loss. Instead of lowering speed limits, imposing belt-wearing, generalising safe-driving education and reducing drunk driving, the government installs cameras and a helpline to identify accidents early on and builds a hospital on the roadside to shorten the way ambulances have to drive to save lives. It invests money in training and equipment for the hospital to improve medical outcomes of accidents and it funds a re-education programme for guilty drivers to prevent further accidents. This and other parallels highlight that the conventional approach to combat VAWG based on secondary and tertiary prevention only, while improving the situation for individuals once violence has been committed, is not the best solution overall.

→ **Economic premise:**

VAWG is extremely expensive; an EIGE study (2021) estimates that the yearly cost of VAWG amounts to 290 billion euros. Letting violence happen first to then clean up after the fact is much more expensive – in terms of individual suffering, government expenditure, and costs to the national economy through decrease of productivity – than preventing it from happening in the first place. A French study (Nectoux et al., 2010)

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11 The full text of the NAP 2010-14 can be accessed online (in French) here: <https://igvm-iefh.belgium.be/sites/default/files/downloads/101123-PAN%20FR.pdf>

12 The full text of the NAP 2015-19 can be accessed online here: [https://igvm-iefh.belgium.be/sites/default/files/comprehensive\\_press\\_file\\_0.pdf](https://igvm-iefh.belgium.be/sites/default/files/comprehensive_press_file_0.pdf)

estimates that one euro invested in prevention saves 87 euros in costs of VAWG, of which 30 euros in direct public expenditure. And in a Kenyan feminist self-defence programme, the prevention of one sexual assault on a teenage girl costs 1.75 US dollars (Sarnquist, 2014).

## 2 CREDIBILITY

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Garance started out as a small, volunteer-based feminist NGO that nobody had heard about and with a new message that called for a transformation of the conversation about VAWG. This weak starting position made it necessary to build up Garance's credibility step by step. Again, a couple of strategies emerge from its experience:

→ ***Quote scientific research at them until you are blue in the face.***

The good news is that we have science on our side to advocate for primary prevention. The bad news is that very few people within the movement and in positions of power know about it. Key publications are often in English and/or inaccessible behind paywalls. Useful local research published in national languages remains under the radar of macro-level surveys on what works in violence prevention. Therefore, alliances with feminist researchers who can provide access, help upgrade NGO-led research to scientific standards, or even conduct research themselves, are very important. If there are no such allies, you can publish summaries of international primary prevention research into national languages. It is also useful to translate research undertaken in your country to English to broaden the international knowledge base and garner more visibility and credibility for your organisation.

→ ***Do it yourself!***

If no evaluative research exists about your activity and/or your context, evaluate your activity yourself. One of the reasons for Garance's good reputation in Belgium is their evaluation practice and transparency. While there has been, as of yet, no Belgian scientific evaluation of feminist self-defence, it has become a universally acknowledged truth that the practice is an effective means of preventing VAWG.

→ ***Wear your badge proudly!***

Join broader initiatives that are related to the topic of the primary prevention of VAWG. It does not have to be something as specific as WHO's Violence Prevention Alliance. A more institutional forum on safety and security, family policy or education might also fit the bill. Volunteer for advisory boards and other types of committees that can confer a stamp of official approval to your organisation and your voice.

→ ***Use any platform!***

As long as you are not yet invited to speak at a conference, you can ask critical questions from the public. The art is to do it diplomatically so as not to embarrass the organisers (too much) and to get invited as a speaker the next time around. For example, if there is a conference on domestic violence and only secondary and tertiary prevention perspectives are presented, you could, during Q&A, shortly present what primary prevention is about (framing), ask the speakers what they think about primary prevention, and if there will be a future event to complete the picture with more information on the issue. Follow it up during a coffee break so that you put yourself on the organisers' map as a knowledgeable person who is able to add an interesting perspective to the conversation.

→ **Make it a lived experience!**

Many people cannot imagine that it is possible to prevent violence. Deeds, not words, was the British suffragists' slogan, and you can use it to overcome this obstacle. Invite participant testimonies to highlight the positive impact of your activity. Ask people you want to convince to participate in an activity for free so that they can experience the potential for change for themselves. If the advocacy target is a man and you organise activities for women only, that should not be an insurmountable obstacle either. Garance did a couple of public presentations at press conferences and other events where they invited a male minister, mayor or other decision-maker to help them demonstrate self-defence techniques. If the politicians said no, they framed it as proof that the techniques were so efficient that men got afraid to even try, and if the politicians said yes, they very quickly testified to the effectiveness of the techniques...

### 3 TAILORED MESSAGING

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To increase the success of your advocacy, repetition is key, but so is tailoring the (repeated) message to your audience. If you are talking to an audience of medical professionals, remind them of the suffering they see every day in their practice or hospital and about their feeling of helplessness when they have to send women\* and girls\* back into abusive situations. If you are talking to people from the justice system, highlight how expensive it is to prosecute perpetrators and how much more jails they would need to build if they had to prosecute all perpetrators of VAWG. If you are talking to faith-based groups, make it about our moral obligation to preserve life and the family that gets destroyed through violence. When talking to government representatives, identify which costs of VAWG their department has to cover. And when talking to feminists, agree with them on the ultimate goal of ending VAWG as a major aspect of women's social subordination; also ask them if overstretched services and activist burnout could be prevented by decreasing violence. Remember: everyone wants less violence, and everyone has something to gain if we can stop VAWG. You can find the argument that links this to your audience's belief system, their needs, their reputation or whatever else is important to them.

At the same time, this approach increases emotional adhesion to the message of primary prevention. Another strategy for this is participative storytelling. Ask audiences how their everyday life would be different if there was no possibility at all of violence occurring, ever. How would they spend their time, interact with other people, make everyday choices? Most people have never thought about it, which is proof of how much work is needed so that we don't forget about primary prevention and make it an inherent part of combating VAWG. If you have the opportunity to collect answers, you can use them to underline gender differences (men's everyday lives probably won't change all that much, compared to women's) or to point out how much the possibility of violence limits our freedom and creates a constant mental load to carry with us.

In all of this, use the hopeful perspective that primary prevention provides to your advantage. It is more difficult to use humour when talking about the consequences of VAWG or victim support, but the primary prevention message is one full of joy, fun and freedom, and that's what your advocacy can and should reflect so that people actually want to join up and thrive together with us.

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