



EUROPEAN WOMEN'S
LOBBY
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Joint contribution from European Women's Lobby (EWL) and Women against violence Europe (WAVE)

UN Special rapporteur on violence against women -

Call for submissions on COVID-19 and the increase of domestic violence against women

This contribution is built on the basis of a joint [EWL-WAVE presentation to the Mutual learning programme of the European Commission](#) and [EWL policy brief on Women must not pay the price for COVID-19](#).

1. Overview of the situation

Male violence against women is a long-term systemic issue across Europe. There is an emergency situation threatening the security of women's lives that precedes the COVID-19 pandemic crises, which has indeed resulted in an increase of risk of harm for different forms of violence against women and girls.

Lockdown and isolation measures creates an enabling environment for abusers' coercive control of victims and lead to more incidents of physical, psychological and sexual violence.

Women and girls who are victims of intimate partner violence and sexual violence are confined at home, or in institutional settings, with their abusers, with less possibilities of seeking help without further endangering their lives. Despite the increased danger, women and girls risk having bigger obstacles to seek help and also limited access to critical support services and safe shelters during this crisis.

Preliminary data just on intimate partner violence shows an increase in prevalence and reporting in many countries. In France, the Ministry of Interior indicated an increase of reports between 32% and 36% in the Paris region alone. In Germany's capital Berlin, the police reported an increase of 10% of cases. A member in Ireland reported a five-fold increase in domestic violence orders sought and a huge increase in contacts from women living in rural communities. In Lithuania, femicide cases have already doubled in 2020 compared to the previous year.

For some countries, reporting figures have remained similar or have decreased, like in Italy at the beginning of the crises, Netherlands, Portugal, Estonia and others. Different reactions do not mean





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that in underreporting countries violence has decreased but that in these countries there might be bigger obstacles for women to seek help. Data from 2014 already pointed out that only less than 15% of the worst cases of intimate partner violence are reported (Fundamental Rights Agency Report on VAWG, survey 2014).

A higher risk of female genital mutilation (FGM) has been acknowledged as it can go undetected with children off school. Those at risk of incest and/or so-called 'honour-based' violence may be in lockdown with family members who are a threat to them. The fact that in some countries schools are not reopening until September means enough time to heal wounds and let the violation pass undetected¹. In some other countries, there are cases of missing children who are not responding to messages from schools since the lockdown, which have mainly migrant backgrounds. Those children might be exposed to violations, which would also pass undetected and not reported. On the other hand, a main factor of decreased risk, specifically for the European context, is the temporary travel ban, which definitely lowers the chances of FGM being carried out abroad during the holiday season. However, this does not mean that other ways cannot be found to perform the practice.

As the delivery of essential services is being limited by the current pandemic, women victims of male violence have had less access to help and protection, including psychological support. Furthermore, self-isolation and social distancing can have a negative impact on women who have previously experienced abuse, triggering flashbacks and increasing anxiety. Suspension or delay of court proceedings have caused significant distress to victims as the abusers are not held accountable.

This pandemic crisis has deepened existing inequalities. Women and girls are already shouldering disproportionately the impacts of this crisis in terms of risk of poverty and threats to their economic independence, especially those who face multiple forms of discrimination and who are made vulnerable by our system: women with disabilities, older women, refugee and/or undocumented migrant women, Roma women, homeless women, etc. The deepest impact of the crisis is hitting those women and girls who face multiple forms of discrimination on the basis of sex compounded with other factors including race or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age, sexual orientation, class, and/or migration status.

The current COVID-19 has shown to what extent inequalities between women and men are deeply rooted in our society and how rapidly we can go backwards on hard won progress. The spike of violence against women needs to be analysed in that context. Women have represented the overwhelming majority of frontline workers in the current crisis, allowing society to continue

¹ End FGM <https://www.endfgm.eu/news-en-events/news/covid-19-and-fgm-an-end-fgm-eu-survey-on-the-pandemic-impact-on-women-girls-and-organisations/>





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functioning. They have been exposed to the virus in their frontline work as nurses, cashiers, cleaning ladies, baby-sitters, elderly carers, etc. This crisis has come to deepen existing gender stereotypes and inequalities. We are hearing testimonies of women balancing employment with bearing most of household chores and child care, letting go of their job because “it pays less” than their partner’s; at home with a violent partner; Because, indeed, with inequalities comes a paradox: women are actually carrying the burden of most of the now so-called “essential services” which are also the most undervalued and underpaid by our society. In sum, **this crisis reveals how far we actually are from equality in all spheres of life and how crucial it is to keep fighting for full realisation of women’s rights in the EU.**

2. Responses to address violence against women in the current pandemic crises

In many countries, women specialized services (WSS) have been leading the response to this crisis, doing a remarkable effort to respond to the situation, continue operating and trying to find new ways to outreach to victims. To keep working, WSS have had to re-arrange work and pay for additional expenses that were not in their budgets, such as laptops, internet access, mobile phones, etc. for employees working remotely. They have done an immense effort to meet increased demand within pandemic conditions without an increase of resources. This is greatly complicated by the fact that in almost all cases, CSOs cannot generate any reserves due to lack and restrictions of funding.

At the same time, we have witnessed that several countries have drastically decreased funding of WSS due to budgetary concerns caused by the pandemic. In most places, funding was limited even before the pandemic started. In some cases, funding has decreased to zero, putting CSOs serving survivors of VAW into a very difficult situation. This development is short-sighted, leaving vulnerable groups without help that is mandated by the Istanbul Convention. Furthermore, not addressing the issue of VAW will negatively affect the state's social, health, and other support services in the long term. For example, some of the women who do not receive needed help will develop serious health issues. And the trauma on their children will continue many years into the future.

We should also be ready to deal with the increased demand for recovery services such as emergency-intervention, counseling and therapy that will most likely occur in the months after the COVID crisis passes.

Several EU Governments have also reacted swiftly, putting in place contingency measures and allocating extra resources. However, in the longer term, we must use this moment to recognise that





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our current political responses have been insufficient in recognising the inequality, harassment and violence so many women face on a daily basis. To ensure Governments never again leave women and girls in such situations of risk and vulnerability, we must work together between political partners, frontline services, advocacy groups and crucially those affected, to ensure adequate realisation of the provisions in the Istanbul Convention,² and go even further to bring an end to systematic male violence against women and girls.

Long term recommendations based on the assessment of women's organizations:

- **Services to protect victims** should be **declared essential** in this pandemic and always.
- Need to address the **full continuum of violence against women and girls**.
- Need to step up efforts in **ratification and implementation of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, the Istanbul Convention (IC)**. There are many valid legal arguments that can justify the non-ratification of this Convention as demonstrated by the Venice Commission.
- The comprehensive provisions of the Istanbul Convention should be applied at all times. We highlight the [declaration recently issued by the Committee of Parties to the Istanbul Convention](#). The Convention should be implemented adopting a gender-sensitive perspective, victim-centered and human rights-based response to the crisis; and in close co-operation with **specialized women's organizations: their expertise should be recognized and their work should be fully funded in a sustainable way**.
- Ensure that **women's organizations participate in decision-making processes** around long-term recovery so that the needs and concerns of women and girls experiencing violence are included in the prevention of and responses to violence against women and girls.
- **Equality between women and men should be at the heart of the response to the COVID-19 crisis**. It is imperative that the responses to and long-term recovery measures are **gender mainstreamed in order to protect women from paying the price of this crisis**. Emergency responses must be grounded in women's rights and incorporate a **gender perspective in the design and implementation of services that draw on accurate and streamlined sex-disaggregated data**.

² [Online petition "Rise up against violence!"](#)





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3. Demands at EU level

The current crisis has only made clearer the **necessity of coordinated EU action on women's rights to address the persistent inequalities**. Concretely, the EU needs to establish **long-lasting structures to end the continuum of all forms of violence against women and girls**.

EWL and WAVE **call for coordinated action at EU Level and urge the EU and all its member states to:**

- **Show leadership and commitment to implement the Gender Equality Strategy (2020-2025)** launched early March by the European Commission, which has to combat violence against women as a top priority.
- **Accelerate the conclusion of the EU's accession to the Istanbul Convention** in order to facilitate the full implementation of its provisions across the EU.
- **Develop a comprehensive EU Strategy to prevent and combat all forms of violence against women and girls**, and to address all the structural issues that fuel this violence
- **Add violence against women to the list of Eurocrimes** and recognized the need for tackling this phenomenon jointly.
- The new Victims' Rights Strategy should adequately address the specific needs of women victims of gender-based violence by assessing the current gaps in EU legislation with regards to international standards on violence against women, especially the Istanbul Convention and the ILO Convention, with a view of enhancing the legislation on victims' rights, protection and compensation of victims.
- **Common standards for data collection** must be made mandatory and standardized across all EU Member States.
- **All EU MS should participate in the Eurostat survey on the prevalence of violence against women and girls.**
- Ensure adequate EU funding for women's civil society organisations combating against violence against women and supporting its victims.

4. Demands at Member State level

EWL and WAVE **demand of concrete measures to be taken to deal with the current crisis, future waves of this pandemic, and any other future emergency crisis:**

1. **Reinforcement of systems and services to protect women and girls against violence:**





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- Women specialised services should be considered as **an essential service**, by all member states and supported to continue to operate under conditions of lockdown and restrictions in movement.
- **Urgent funding** should also be provided to frontline support service providers, given the tremendous increase in the risk of harm they face. There should also be a recognition that services will need to support the cumulative effect of need by victims.
- A long-term commitment to **securing and increasing funding** for WSS should be taken by governments, to ensure continuity of the service during and after the pandemic.

2. Prevention and protection:

- **Awareness-raising campaigns** should be developed and targeted to women victims of different forms of violence to ensure that they have information about the services that they can access for emergency protection and support.
- These campaigns should run **in partnership with women's NGOs** as they have the required expertise.
- Campaigns should reiterate that prosecution and protection measures are still being applied by law enforcement units despite the exceptional circumstances.

3. Measures to ensure that all victims can seek help and report crimes:

- States must ensure that victims can seek help and report crimes that were committed against them. Alternatives to digital channels should be ensured in order to reach out to vulnerable groups without access to technology (women with disabilities, marginalised groups, out-of-reach, elderly, rural women, etc.).

4. Protection:

- Shelters for women and girls who are victims of violence, including for homeless and asylum-seeking women, must be kept open with appropriate measures taken to protect women and workers in these shelters from the spread of COVID-19. To enable the physical distance this requires, additional shelter space must be made available.
- States should ensure that all groups of women and girls get equal access to shelter spaces, support services and social benefits.
- Child custody and visitation rights in cases of intimate partner violence are always a huge concern that has become even more critical during the pandemic. As per the provisions of the





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Istanbul Convention, necessary legislative and other measures should be taken in the determination of custody and visitation rights to ensure that violence against women is taken into consideration. The safety and well-being of women and children must always be considered in all circumstances.

5. Protection and prosecution:

- **Law enforcement** units should make it clear that they are **still operating** and are especially attentive to the early identification of women victims.
- Protection measures such as **emergency barring, restraining and protection orders** against perpetrators **should still be issued**.
- **Court proceedings for such cases should always be granted to ensure access to justice and avoid the risk of re-victimization**. Suspension or delay of court proceedings is causing significant distress to victims as the abusers are not held accountable. In some cases, a delay may be fatal for women victims of violence.

About the organisations

The European Women's Lobby (EWL)

Founded in 1990, [the European Women's Lobby \(EWL\)](#) is the largest European umbrella network of women's associations representing a total of more than 2,000 organisations in the EU coming together to campaign for their common vision of a Feminist Europe. The EWL has members in 26 EU Member States, three Candidate Countries (North Macedonia, Serbia, Turkey), the United Kingdom and Iceland, as well as 17 European-wide organisations representing the diversity of women and girls in Europe. Together with our members, we aim to influence the general public and European Institutions in support of women's human rights and equality between women and men.

The European Women's Lobby has worked with its members throughout Europe and with the EU institutions for more than 20 years to demand that Violence against women is taken seriously and addressed as a priority in building the society we want. There can be no peace and security while women fear for their safety in their homes, in workplaces and in public places in Europe. The European Women's Lobby Observatory on violence against women, with more than 23 years of experience, is a unique structure in Europe which brings together a dynamic group of women from 32 countries in Europe (professionals, women's rights defenders, front-line NGOs activists, etc.) and eight of our





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European wide members, with outstanding experience and expertise in different forms of male violence against women. The EWL Observatory plays a key role in identifying burning issues and monitoring progress towards a Europe free from male violence against women. The EWL Observatory raises visibility of the phenomenon of male violence against women and monitors the commitments at local, regional, national and European level regarding violence against women, highlighting advances and set-backs, as well as providing relevant data.

Women against violence Europe (WAVE)

The WAVE Network was established in 1994 as a network of women's NGOs and specialist women's support services (women's shelters, women's centers, intervention centers, helplines and other services). The main objective of WAVE is to work towards elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against women and their children and to promote the right of women and girls to live free from violence in both the public and the private sphere and to promote the human rights of women and girls.

The WAVE Network has 159 members (May 2020), located throughout 49 European countries. Through these Members, together with the extensive WAVE online database, the network reaches out to more than 4,000 women's organizations across Europe. The members of WAVE include women's organizations, individuals and networks working to end violence against women and their children. WAVE Members are responsible for dissemination and collection of information on violence against women in their country. The WAVE Office continually provides Members with relevant information (for instance, exchange of national and international news) and vice versa, good practice examples, international recommendations, policy papers, and legal and policy changes regarding violence against women. While at the same time, Members report on current developments in their respective countries. Members are also primary contacts for inquiries by women affected by violence and regarding research inquiries.

