



## Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions — Stopping gender-based violence — cities and regions leading the way

(C/2024/1042)

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### POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS (CoR),

#### General context and main challenges

1. emphasises that gender-based violence is a brutal violation of human rights which is a pan-European problem;
2. specifies that gender-based violence (GBV) is physical and non-physical violence directed against a person because of that person's gender and gender expression or violence that affects persons of a particular gender disproportionately. Although anyone can fall victim to violence simply because of their sex or gender, women and girls are especially at risk. Highlights that defining GBV, including violence against women, is also challenging since it is strongly conditioned by cultural, historical, religious and institutional factors. However, according to the Istanbul Convention, the expression 'gender-based violence against women' designates any violence directed against women as such, or which disproportionately affects women<sup>(1)</sup>;
3. observes that the wording captures the structural dimension of GBV, which affects private, professional and social life, attributing a multifaceted connotation to the phenomenon. Such complexity can only be addressed and countered by recognising the cultural stereotypes in which violence lurks and develops against individuals of all genders. Thus, it is necessary to take action at all levels to challenge and debunk gender stereotypes in order to create a society with zero tolerance for GBV;
4. points out that it is essential to abandon the fractional perspective that GBV is the sum of individual criminal and/or pathological behaviours, step out of this context and recognise that the causes lie in a profound imbalance in gender relations and on harmful cultural and social norms that condone or trivialise violence against women;
5. recalls that while gender-based violence affects women disproportionately, there are women from specific communities who face a higher risk, e.g. racialised women, working class women, LGBTQIA+ women, women with disabilities, women living in institutional care, migrant and undocumented women, sex workers and young women and girls, among others. Therefore, an intersectional approach to understand and address gender based violence is necessary and groups at specific risk are in need of special protection;
6. is appalled by the fact that one third of all women in Europe have experienced physical or sexual acts of violence at least once during their adult lives, 20 % of young women have experienced online sexual harassment, one in five women have been stalked, one in twenty women raped and more than one in ten having suffered sexual violence involving lack of consent or the use of force<sup>(2)</sup>;
7. welcomes the specific and resolute reference made at the State of the European Union (SOTEU) address by President Ursula von der Leyen to the urgent need to combat GBV, with a clear emphasis on the fundamental principle that 'no means no'. This unwavering commitment by the president to address critical issues such as rape and consent not only demonstrates the timeliness of this present opinion but also reinforces the imperative for decisive action in the fight against GBV;

<sup>(1)</sup> Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (CETS No. 210), <https://rm.coe.int/168008482e>.

<sup>(2)</sup> <http://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2014/vaw-survey-main-results>

8. warns that with the COVID-19 pandemic, all types of violence against women and girls have intensified<sup>(3)</sup>;
9. acknowledges that GBV is not only taking place within households or in public spaces but also in the digital space where the lack of regulation and systematic approach has led to widespread gender-based violence and threats;
10. calls for special attention to be paid to the protection of migrant and refugee women and their children (also in the context of Russia's war on Ukraine), as they are significantly exposed to abuse, the violation of their rights and to multiple forms of violence. Calls on local and regional authorities (LRAs) to pay particular attention and give special care to women and girls that are in the EU territory based on the reunification with family principle. These women are particularly fragile to domestic violence, as their status is closely bound to staying in the same household with the potential perpetrator;
11. accentuates nonetheless that only about one third of women who are physically or sexually abused contact the authorities<sup>(4)</sup> — for the most part, due to the impunity, silence, stigma, fear and shame surrounding it;
12. warns all decision-makers that besides being devastating for survivors of violence and their families, GBV entails significant social and economic costs for our society and not eradicating it entails a significant cost for the future, as violence can be perpetuated;
13. acknowledges the importance of the European Commission Strategy 'A Union of Equality: Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025' as a step towards freeing European society of GVB;
14. is grateful to see that the Council finally approved the EU's accession to the Istanbul Convention. This obliges the EU to effectively create policies for the prevention of GBV, the protection of victims and prosecution of perpetrators and opens the door for LRAs to introduce concrete measures to prevent GBV in their communities;
15. calls on the remaining EU Member States (MS) to ratify the Istanbul Convention, as soon as possible;
16. welcomes the European Commission's proposal for a directive to combat violence against women and domestic violence (DV) at the EU level<sup>(5)</sup> and supports the ambitious position<sup>(6)</sup> of the European Parliament on the proposal, including the proposal for a new Article 5a;
17. reiterates however that GBV also affects people who do not identify as women, and highlights that, while the directive is titled 'violence against women', it should be considered to relate to other genders as well;
18. appreciates that the role of LRAs has been recognised by the European Parliament and the Council. Calls however to go beyond the mere coordination role attributed, as local and regional governments have many levers at their disposal to prevent GBV, caring for victims and educating and raising awareness about the negative impacts of GBV and ultimately, as actors that can contribute toward greater gender equality;
19. calls for more efficient actions and frameworks to be put in place at all levels of governance in order to ensure that perpetrators are prosecuted, and to focus on the prevention of violence and the assistance of victims; these frameworks should entail multi-faceted approaches and involve multiple stakeholders;
20. understands that, according to the internal CoR SEDEC Survey 'on GBV in EU Territories' distributed among the members of the Commission for Social Policy, Education, Employment, Research and Culture (SEDEC), there are three types of approach by LRAs with an implied geographical division within the EU:

<sup>(3)</sup> WHO warns of surge of domestic violence in Europe (<https://unric.org/en/who-warns-of-surge-of-domestic-violence-as-covid-19-cases-decrease-in-europe/>).

<sup>(4)</sup> Ending gender-based violence ([https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/genderequality/gender-based-violence/ending-gender-based-violence\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/genderequality/gender-based-violence/ending-gender-based-violence_en)).

<sup>(5)</sup> Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on combating violence against women and domestic violence (COM(2022) 105 final).

<sup>(6)</sup> Report on the proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on combating violence against women and domestic violence, European Parliament, A9-0234/2023 ([https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2023-0234\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2023-0234_EN.html)).

- i. LRAs where stopping GBV is very high on the political and policy agenda, resulting from strong national legislation (while also implementing international obligations) and even taken further at regional and local levels through campaigns and original and targeted initiatives;
- ii. LRAs that demonstrate a record of legal and practical measures in place and that believe they have the problem of GBV under control — resulting in GBV not having the highest position on the political and policy agenda;
- iii. LRAs demonstrating a lack of recognition and prioritisation of stopping GBV;

**Lack of data: What we do not know, we cannot measure and cannot fight**

21. looks forward to the publication of the forthcoming update of national data on GBV and other forms of interpersonal violence, expected in 2024<sup>(7)</sup>;

22. acknowledges that certain Member States, such as Italy, regularly collect national data on GBV, however, the collection of data is not homogeneous in all countries and often even within the same territory, making it difficult to have an overview of the situation on the ground;

23. calls therefore on all MS to collect comparable, reliable, high-quality, disaggregated data on GBV (including information on domestic violence against men and children) and suggests considering the European Institute for Gender Equality's (EIGE)<sup>(8)</sup> indicators on intimate partner violence, rape and femicide as guidance for comparability;

24. understands the bottlenecks in the collection of data at subnational level; is however deeply convinced of the importance of local and regional authorities in contributing to the national overview, as there are differences regarding the frequency but also the types and root causes of GBV not only between MS, but also within countries and regions;

25. calls therefore on LRAs and the civil society actors on the ground to better cooperate and coordinate to gather comparative administrative and survey-based data and calls for national actors to make these data available, whilst ensuring privacy considerations;

26. expresses concern as incidents of GBV are often considered a private issue and therefore tolerated and not reported to any authorities; believes also in the importance of utilising readily available methods, such as population-based surveys at regular intervals to assess the situation on the ground;

27. considers that tackling the root causes of gender-based violence is of the utmost importance, in order to prevent acts of violence. Achieving a European Union free of all forms of gender-based violence requires institutional and structural change;

**Prevention: measures for immediate change**

28. reiterates that cities and regions can design and put in place comprehensive frameworks, policies and gender-sensitive measures to combat GBV, in some cases in cooperation with third parties such as civil society organisations and in particular with women's organisations;

29. calls on LRAs to acknowledge the importance of urban design and transport planning as means to create safe spaces that can help lower the rate of gender-based attacks in our streets, in and around public transportation, schools, workplaces, public toilets, water and food distribution sites, parks and other public spaces;

30. welcomes in this respect UN Women's Safe Cities and Safe Public Spaces for Women and Girls global initiative and calls on more EU cities to benefit from this framework by adhering to it;

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<sup>(7)</sup> Gender-based violence: capturing accurate data — Products Eurostat News — Eurostat (<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/productseurostat-news/-/wdn-20211004-1>).

<sup>(8)</sup> [https://eige.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/mh0221655ena\\_002.pdf](https://eige.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/mh0221655ena_002.pdf)

31. calls on all those CoR members that have good practices, such as ensuring city festivals are safe, correct lighting in public spaces, access to public transport during night hours even outside of allocated stops, appropriate marking of exits from confined spaces on the transport network and many others to share them within the EU network on the prevention of GBV and calls on the CoR to establish an online platform on its website to collect and present these practices; calls on Member States and the EU decision-makers to familiarise themselves with best practices from the ground and take these into account when concluding on ambitious legislation;

#### **Education: measures for long-term societal change**

32. accentuates that lasting social change and gender equality can be fostered by awareness-raising and education campaigns that attack the root causes of GBV. Thus, the primary goal should be to address gender inequalities, roles and power dynamics as well as to educate about consent. Here, LRAs and other territorial actors (e.g. associations, educational and training institutions) play a fundamental role since culture and education are within their remits;

33. recalls that according to the EC public consultation (2021)<sup>(9)</sup>, most respondents believe that the gaps in protection against sexual harassment resulted from the perception that such harassment was not considered a real problem by the general public (66 %);

34. appreciates that the European Commission launched a campaign to challenge gender stereotypes, on 8 March 2023; is however concerned about the degree to which it reached European citizens in their villages, cities and regions. Calls in this regard on the Commission to involve the CoR in future similar initiatives and to launch a targeted campaign on stopping GBV;

35. is aware that despite a relatively high number of awareness-raising campaigns, they often do not reach target groups meaningfully, having limited emphasis on the right to be protected against violence<sup>(10)</sup> and calls therefore for campaigns to be adapted to the audience — to not only aim at informing, but helping change attitudes that normalise and tolerate GBV in the online as well as in the offline world, to help circumvent the digital divide and differences in digital literacy;

36. believes that such campaigns should not only aim to raise awareness among the general public, but also create political will to act and to find the resources to prevent and eliminate all forms of GBV. Some types of GBV are rooted in cultural and religious practices, such as female genital mutilation and honour crimes. Patriarchal attitudes, gender inequality and male dominance can be considered to be part of these practices, and changes need to happen in such cultural and/or religious beliefs and practices;

37. stresses that violence prevention is not just about intervening when violence is used, but about ensuring that violence does not occur in the first place. Knowledge about gender stereotypes, hegemonic masculinity, female perspectives and experiences, coercive control and GBV form an important basis for effective violence prevention work. It is important to highlight more clearly that violence prevention needs to target and include men, promote gender equality, and counter destructive standards of masculinity and stereotypes about gender and sexuality. Comprehensive violence prevention efforts are crucial for municipalities and regions;

38. believes that achieving a more balanced representation of men and women in all their diversities in politics would strongly contribute to building the political will to eradicate GBV effectively;

39. stresses that special attention should be paid to eradicating messages, content and discourses from the public sphere that promote gender stereotypes, or justify gender-based violence, provide rationalisation, excuses, or support for acts of gender-based violence or harm;

40. strongly believes in the importance of working with children and young people to change attitudes and question gender stereotypes through education. Calls in this respect on LRAs with relevant competences to consider introducing campaigns and relevant subjects in schools, as the example of the Brussels region demonstrates;

<sup>(9)</sup> See the European Commission open public consultation (2021) for the beforementioned Proposal (COM(2022) 105 final).

<sup>(10)</sup> Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on combating violence against women and domestic violence (COM(2022) 105 final — 2022/0066 (COD)).

41. calls on actors involved in education/awareness raising in GBV to use all available channels, including social media, to reach out to young people and potentially also identify public figures popular among young people to 'champion' the cause;

42. recommends that, in order to prevent violence, such campaigns should focus on stopping perpetrators of domestic violence. Campaigns should aim to change destructive standards of masculinity that lead to violence and abuse, and to encourage people to speak up if they see or hear violence or abuse. It is crucial to emphasise that GBV is not a private matter and to spread information for both those subjected to violence and potential perpetrators about their rights and resources available to help them;

43. is deeply concerned about what the pornography industry transmits to young persons in the form of destructive standards of masculinity, serious sexual abuse and humiliation of women and girls, and the easy access to pornographic content for minors. Guaranteeing pornography-free environments for children and preventing the dissemination of pornography are crucial to efforts to combat GBV;

44. invites raising awareness about GBV to be acknowledged as an effective tool to fight under or un-reporting, as recent findings (<sup>(11)</sup>) suggest that initiatives such as the #MeToo movement contribute to freeing voices;

45. welcomes awareness-raising campaigns such as #SafePlace4Women (<sup>(12)</sup>) that calls upon authorities to declare their cities and regions as safe spaces for women and calls on all CoR members to commit to the cause by joining this or similar initiatives;

#### **Immediate protection to victims: when prevention and education fail**

46. stresses that a victim-centred and rights-centred approach to victims of GBV needs to be reinforced at all levels of government; highlights the importance of comprehensive training for professionals who are likely to be the first point of contact for victims of GBV, such as police officers, doctors, or social workers to ensure that victims feel safe, respected, protected and to avoid retraumatisation and emphasises that LRAs are often the first instance to respond to the needs of victims, ensuring that they are cared for by the local social, medical and mental health services and protected by law enforcement;

47. calls members of the CoR, its European Network of Regional and Local Councillors and Young Elected Politicians to take a step further and join the 'European Charter for Equality of Women and Men in Local Life' (<sup>(13)</sup>) that has already gathered a diverse pool of more than 2 000 LRAs across Europe;

48. recalls that, according to the European Commission's public consultation (2021) on the directive to combat violence against women and domestic violence, 60 % of respondents believed it necessary to improve information to victims about their rights, the services they can turn to, and the follow-up given to their complaints; and that information was not provided quickly enough (43 %), was difficult to find (42 %), and was inconsistent and spread over different sources (42 %); and 41 % considered that victims may not receive information on support services in a timely manner and in a language they understand;

49. recalls that according to a European Parliament study (<sup>(14)</sup>), awareness of support services for victims of GBV/DV differs between Member States, with Eastern European citizens being least likely to have heard of related services;

50. calls for all regional authorities to put in place accessible, survivor-centred reporting systems, such as helplines and confidential advisors; and to establish multilingual information platforms and material (digital and physical) so that potential victims can easily and quickly access information on their rights and the protection and assistance available, and ensure that there is equal access and homogeneity of intervention throughout the territory. Great examples of such platforms exist for example in Bavaria and the Basque country;

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(<sup>11</sup>) The Silenced Women: What works in encouraging women to report cases of gender-based violence? (<https://blogs.worldbank.org/developmenttalk/silenced-women-what-works-encouraging-women-report-cases-gender-based-violence>).

(<sup>12</sup>) [https://pes.cor.europa.eu/sites/default/files/Resolution\\_Safe%20Place%20For%20Women%20EN.docx](https://pes.cor.europa.eu/sites/default/files/Resolution_Safe%20Place%20For%20Women%20EN.docx)

(<sup>13</sup>) The text of the Charter — Observatory of the European Charter (<https://charter-equality.eu/the-charter/observatoire-europeen.html>)

(<sup>14</sup>) Implementation of the Daphne programme and other funds aimed at fighting violence against women and girls, EP (2019).

51. invites LRAs to consider establishing a *path for victims of hate crimes* for women and children, as the example of Tuscany demonstrates. ‘Code Pink’ is a regional network providing gender-sensitive paths of reception, care and protection for victims, by connecting all the Tuscan health services with the Public Prosecutor’s Office, law enforcement agencies and associations. In this way, the victims are admitted to a path where they receive medical care, emergency shelter as well as advice and guidance for a real and feasible exit from violence;

52. notes that there is a need for intervention programs for perpetrators of crimes, and for those who fear they may commit them; in order to minimise the risk of recidivism for crimes of violence against women; highlights in this regard also the importance of available and accessible mental health resources to allow individuals to explore and treat underlying issues causing the potential for violence;

53. calls in this context on the Member States and the LRAs to invest in systematic early intervention, prevention and gender-sensitive training programmes for professionals who come into contact with victims, in particular police and medical staff, so that they understand violence from a gender perspective and do not underestimate what is reported, but can deal with the situation swiftly and appropriately;

54. believes that there is clear need to differentiate the training between the operators involved in the preventive phase, the care phase and the execution phase;

55. requests members of the CoR to lead by example and improve the gender equality awareness and gender-sensitive skills of their public administration;

56. warns however of the need to also ensure a gender balance in the attendance of these training courses, as some existing initiatives demonstrate that they are at present mainly attended by women;

57. invites MS and LRAs to consider the example of certain regions such as Catalonia and introduce specific police and specialised courts on GBV;

#### **Funding and dissemination of projects combatting GBV**

58. appreciates the funding provided with the Daphne Initiative under the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme to fight GBV and violence against children; understands however that the geographical distribution of Daphne funding to beneficiaries is uneven and the Central and Eastern European region in particular lacks initiatives to benefit from such EU funds (<sup>(15)</sup>);

59. calls on the European Commission to better inform CoR members on the Daphne programme, to help such funding reach LRAs and use them as a dissemination platform to also inform other actors on the ground;

60. calls on the Commission to swiftly launch the EU network on the prevention of GBV and DV, including LRAs and also allowing for an exchange of good practice on prevention, education and training initiatives, coupled with a guide on available EU funding instruments for the latter;

61. urges the Commission and the Member States to implement gender budgeting in the Multi-Annual Financial Framework and national budgets, as an instrument to improve gender equality via budget measures that can help close gender gaps; and to allocate sufficient, long-term, sustainable financial and human resources in order to adequately prevent and combat all forms of GBV.

Brussels, 29 November 2023.

The President  
of the European Committee of the Regions

Vasco ALVES CORDEIRO

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(<sup>15</sup>) Implementation of the Daphne programme and other funds aimed at fighting violence against women and girls, EP (2019).