

Synergy for Change

**Civil society raising awareness on violence against women
in a context of global challenges**

11-12 July 2024

European Youth Centre, Budapest

Call for Action



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To inspire future action and priorities in the years ahead, the participants of the Conference “Synergy for Change” call for civil society organisations and the Council of Europe and its member states to:



Build and support international, regional and national feminist coalitions.

Support and monitor the progress of women’s organisations’ participation in monitoring systems

Expand and develop national and multi-country co-operation projects between women’s organisations.

Establish one platform for civil society organisations to share information and good practices.



Design and deliver a European awareness-raising campaign and improve data collection on the digital dimension of violence against women and domestic violence.

Prioritise training and awareness-raising for legal professionals alongside the awareness campaign.

Develop resources for the education community to prevent sexism and stereotypes, with a focus on young people.





Address the impacts of pornography on the perpetuation of sexism and gender stereotypes, in particular online.

Address technological aspects and issues related to Artificial Intelligence (AI).

Develop long-lasting solutions through education, within the justice system, as well as institutional mechanisms and partnerships, to maximise women's access to justice.



Work with media, to build their knowledge and capacity to report sensitively on violence against women.

Create spaces for networking and reflection on how intersectionality is shaped by regional, national and local contexts.



Encourage networks and organisations to use more accessible language.

Explanatory report

Introduction

The conference [Synergy for Change: Civil society raising awareness on violence against women in a context of global challenges](#) held in Budapest on 11 and 12 July 2024 within the framework of the Council of Europe [Ending violence against women: multi-country programme](#) brought together 91 representatives of civil society and international organisations active in combating violence against women and promoting gender equality from 26 countries.

Violence against women and domestic violence is the most common violation of women's human rights in Europe, and a form of discrimination against women. It is a cause and consequence of gender and intersecting inequalities, and of the unequal power relations between women and men.

The work of civil society organisations (CSOs), especially organisations led by and for women and the communities they serve, is vital if we are to achieve a world in which we can live free from violence, in families and relationships that are safe and respectful, and where people have what they need to thrive. The work of CSOs provides the foundation for promoting, delivering and monitoring the [Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence](#) (Istanbul Convention), in order to transform the world in which we live.

The conference enabled participants to share practices, challenges, needs and experiences, in relation to raising awareness of the Istanbul Convention. The four workshops of the first day of the conference had a particular focus on the digital dimensions of violence against women, sexism and gender stereotypes, women's access to justice, and addressing the gender backlash.

Participants selected the following burning issues in the workshops to discuss at the World Café session on the second day:

- Building alliances to strengthen resilience of grass roots CSOs in combatting violence against women.
- Countering the shrinking spaces to mobilise communities for long-term prevention of violence against women while sustaining progress already made.
- Mainstreaming the digital dimension of violence against women in prevention and response work by CSOs.
- Advocacy for strengthening the legal response to the digital dimension of violence against women (perpetrators and platforms).
- Integrating work to address sexism and gender stereotypes in the education system.
- How technology perpetuates sexism through polarisation and pornography?
- Uniting for gender equality without making women invisible or diminishing other groups.
- Framing the narrative: using language to challenge the gender backlash.
- Making justice systems accountable by reflecting the research and evidence from CSOs.
- Combatting gender bias and stereotypes in the justice chain (including women experiencing intersectional discrimination).

The findings of discussions are reflected in the final document of the conference - ***Call for Action*** for inspiration of future actions and priorities identified by participants, for CSOs and the Council of Europe and its member states to deliver, over the years ahead.

Raising awareness of the Istanbul Convention by women's organisations

Informed by an expert panel to set the scene for the conference, participants examined the benefits of ratifying and raising awareness of the Istanbul Convention, which is a comprehensive framework of legal and policy measures for preventing violence, supporting victims and punishing perpetrators. They explored how women's CSOs raise awareness and advocate on its provisions (with a focus on Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Latvia, Poland, Hungary and Lithuania) and how this work fits alongside their work to support and protect women and children.

The work of the Council of Europe on combatting gender stereotypes and sexism, on implementation of the new [Council of Europe Gender Equality Strategy 2024-2029](#) was shared, given its relevance to preventing violence against women and domestic violence.

It was felt to be important to support organisations to use the [Council of Europe / WAVE Network / UN Women\) methodology and advocacy resources and tools](#) to increase understanding of the Istanbul Convention, promote ratification and its implementation. Examples were given of how women's organisations participate in national monitoring mechanisms, depending on their capacity.

The burning issues identified by participants included countering the shrinking spaces to mobilise communities for long-term prevention of violence against women, while sustaining progress already made, and building alliances to strengthen resilience of grassroots CSOs in combatting violence against women and domestic violence.

It was recommended to:

- **build and support international, regional and national feminist coalitions.**
This would include, for example:
 - Supporting existing networks to collaborate with similar coalitions advocating to achieve gender equality.

- **support and monitor the progress of women's organisations' participation in monitoring systems.**
This would include, for example:
 - Working with existing networks to build the capacity of women's organisations to participate in systems such as monitoring of the Istanbul Convention, by the [Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence](#) (GREVIO).
 - Communications and engagement with local, regional and national authorities.

- **expand and develop national and multi-country co-operation projects between women's organisations.**
This would include, for example:
 - Co-designing and delivering co-operation projects with relevant organisations.

- **establish one platform for civil society organisations to share information and good practices.**
This would include, for example:
 - Systems to monitor that funding is available equitably to women's organisations.
 - Creating an integrated learning exchange platform, supported by the Council of Europe, for civil society organisations to share information, data, experiences and contacts.

The digital dimension of violence against women and domestic violence

Participants discussed how the digital dimension of violence against women and domestic violence is a serious concern that has consequences for both individuals and society and impacts detrimentally on the prevention of violence against women and domestic violence, gender equality, democracy and the freedom of speech. Practices and challenges were shared, and solutions for women's organisations and for states were explored.

Normalisation of pornography in different spaces online was discussed, alongside unregulated social media (e.g. Tik Tok) and participants noted it was difficult to find safe online spaces for people to discuss violence. There is a significant gap in legislation on the digital dimension of violence against women, and many organisations are not aware of the risks of these forms of violence against women and domestic violence, or of services available in response.

Participants also shared that technology-facilitated domestic violence includes setting up monitoring cameras in the home, publishing sex videos online, and using tracking devices, amongst others. There are good initiatives to check and disable tracking apps installed on devices but not many victims are familiar with these. It was noted that the lack of national data and indicators to measure cyber violence is a gap that could be addressed, to inform the Istanbul Convention implementation.

The burning issues identified by participants included mainstreaming the digital dimension of violence against women and domestic violence in prevention and response work by CSOs, and advocacy for strengthening the legal response to the digital dimension of violence against women and domestic violence (with a focus on perpetrators and digital platforms).

It was recommended that:

- **a European awareness-raising campaign be designed and delivered, and data collection improved, on the digital dimension of violence against women and domestic violence.**
This would include, for example:
 - A focus on all aspects of digital dimensions of violence against women and domestic violence.
 - Enhancing the capacity of CSOs on the digital dimension of VAW by building a common understanding and confidence to campaign on the topic and adapting to the relevant local context.
 - Collecting national level data on the digital dimension before designing and delivering the campaign.
 - A conference to precede the campaign.
 - Improving the collection of data and evidence on the digital dimension of violence against women and domestic violence, including investment into national studies that evidence the prevalence and impact of the phenomenon, the needs and the responses required.
 - A network between CSOs on exchange of practices and data.

- **training and awareness-raising for legal professionals be prioritised alongside the awareness campaign.**
This would include, for example:
 - Training programmes for judicial and other justice system agencies and law enforcement on the digital dimension of violence against women and domestic violence.
 - Production of guidance and tools to implement GREVIO's First General Recommendation on the digital dimension of violence against women.

Addressing sexism and gender stereotypes

Several participants gave examples of educational measures to counteract sexism and gender stereotypes, in particular targeting young people. There was a discussion about the prominence of some very stereotyped models (“trophy wife”, “trad wife”) on social media, which are difficult to counteract, and sometimes hijack feminist discourse. The promotion of diversity (for example the “body positive” trend) is not enough, as this does not address the root causes of sexism, for example the way in which women’s bodies are perceived.

It was noted that a lot of children and young people are exposed at a very young age to pornography and are informed about sexuality only through pornography, especially in jurisdictions where sexuality education is illegal or contested. Participants stressed the power of the sex industry, the fact that pornography is too easily accessible, including for children, that much of its content is violent, and that it perpetuates stereotypes about both women and men.

There were also discussions about the polarising impact of social media and Artificial Intelligence (AI), whereby users receive information that corresponds mostly to previous online views/activity. The result of “filter bubbles” is an amplification of biases, a decrease in tolerance for opposing views, and greater vulnerability to fake news. This is particularly true among young people. This is a barrier to the promotion of alternative narratives and contributes to the perpetuation of sexism and gender stereotypes.

Participants also made the connection between pornography and prostitution, the harms perpetuated by the sex industry, and the benefits of the Equality Model in addressing sexism and gender stereotypes (which prioritises the rights of those who have been exploited while holding buyers and exploiters accountable for the harm they cause). Participants urged that prostitution and pornography be recognised as forms of violence against women and girls and stressed the need for these issues to be addressed in the standard-setting documents.

The burning issues identified by participants included how technology perpetuates sexism through polarisation and pornography and integrating work to address sexism and gender stereotypes in education systems.

It was recommended to:

- **develop resources for the education community to prevent sexism and combat stereotypes, with a focus on young people.**

This would include, for example:

- Working with men and boys on sexism (including to dismantle objectifications of women and girls), stereotypes and masculinities, which requires resources and expertise (a methodology).
- Including, within formal and non-formal education, sexuality education, preventing sexism and combating gender stereotypes.
- Organising summer camps for girls on gender equality-related topics, including self-esteem, consent, and sexuality.
- Training media (social and traditional media) to minimise promotion of gender stereotypes and sexism.
- Integrating feminist topics in sport events and work with athletes.

- **address the impacts of pornography on the perpetuation of sexism and gender stereotypes, in particular online.**

This would include, for example:

- Developing and running communication campaigns - on the harms of pornography - targeting young people.
 - Creating alternative online platforms on sexuality education for children and young people of different ages to offer alternatives to pornography and inform young people.
 - Educating parents, carers and teachers about pornography and supporting them in addressing its harmful effects.
 - Gathering good practices and advocating for better regulation of access to online pornography for children (identification methods).
 - Recognising that the harms caused by pornography are connected with the prostitution industry and the benefits of the Equality Model, adopted in several countries.
- **address technological aspects and issues related to Artificial Intelligence (AI).**
This would include, for example:
- Advocating and promoting research to ensure the equal participation of girls and women in the tech sector and in AI, both at the level of education (formal, non-formal) and in the labour market.
 - Promoting the capacity and expertise of women and women's CSOs in social media and in AI, for them to counter and mitigate polarisation and use tech themselves for the promotion of gender equality.
 - Advocating for more transparent algorithms and more agency for users in relation to the information received on social media.
 - Promoting digital literacy for all, particularly for young people, including learning about the workings, power and resources of platforms and of the tech sector.
 - Advocating to ensure the responsibility of platforms in relation to harmful and sexist content: filtering, reporting, multiple platform tracing etc.
 - Encouraging all relevant authorities at national and European level to work with and consult women's organisations and to integrate a gender equality perspective in their work (for example, the implementation of the EU Digital Services Act).
 - Better, human rights-based regulation of AI ensured by European and international organisations, including the Council of Europe.

Women's access to justice

There was consensus among participants that women face persistent barriers to accessing justice, in cases of violence against women, domestic violence and for other violations of their rights. These barriers range from high fees and the cost of legal representation (that many women cannot afford) to the gender-insensitive practices of professionals within justice systems. Participants identified an overarching need for devising ways that CSOs can hold justice systems accountable, for gender bias, promoting stereotypes and for breakdowns in the justice chain.

While CSOs are using a variety of tools (for example, provision of free legal aid, trial monitoring and strategic litigation), a persistent issue is that the justice institutions often do not react or do not take CSOs seriously when they bring forward evidence of breakdowns in the system. Additionally, holding the justice system accountable requires constant and long-term work of monitoring, making recommendations and advocacy.

The burning issues identified by participants centred around holding justice systems accountable for addressing barriers and gaps that reflect the research and evidence gathered by CSOs and combatting gender bias and stereotypes in the justice chain (including for women experiencing intersectional discrimination). CSOs stressed the importance of a partnership approach, in which justice sector professionals and women's organisations work jointly to remove barriers to women accessing justice.

It was recommended to:

- **develop long-lasting solutions through education, within the justice system, as well as institutional mechanisms and partnerships, to maximise women's access to justice.**

This would include, for example:

- Providing training for a diverse group of legal professionals (police, prosecutors and judges but also young professionals and law students) as part of a training framework that is focussed on practice, monitored and improves professional accountability.
- Creating internal justice system guidelines, protocols and regulations for victim-centred and trauma-responsive justice for all women.
- Developing and promoting 'one stop' services for women, who would only have to contact one agency, for their support needs to be met by multiple agencies.
- Establishing systems for reporting on judicial bias when it occurs, in collaboration with women's CSOs.
- Forming coalitions for co-operation between CSOs on the monitoring function to hold justice system agencies to account and for women's organisations to also share information to diversify the tools for monitoring and advocacy in this area.
- Encourage legal professionals who have received training to work as partners and allies with women's CSOs to identify evidence of systemic failures and build on good practices.

- **work with media, to build their knowledge and capacity to report sensitively on violence against women.**

This would include, for example:

- Mandatory training for media professionals accompanied by guidance and a 'charter' for journalists.
- Strategically exposing selected failures of the justice system.
- Building capacity of media to ensure more effective reporting, and not to reproduce or reinforce gender stereotypes.
- Ensuring access to support for women and children alongside reporting on violence against women and domestic violence.

Addressing the gender backlash

As a reaction to the advancements in gender equality across Europe, the gender backlash is characterised by resistance and attacks from different groups to advances on gender equality and women's rights more generally. This is often manifested in discriminatory attitudes, behaviours and practices that reinforce traditional gender roles and societal expectations and that hinder progress achieved by activists and service systems in promoting gender equality.

Participants discussed the examples of the gender backlash and the challenges faced by CSOs in advocating against cultural and social norms that perpetuate harmful stereotypes and limit opportunities. They also discussed challenging policy resistance by institutions and governments that hinder the introduction of effective measures to promote gender equality and prevent violence against women and domestic violence.

Consideration was given to how to empower marginalized groups while maintaining women's visibility and their need for sex-specific services, along with possible policy and education reforms that could mitigate the gender backlash. CSOs also noted the importance of resources for women's services to support those impacted by violence against women and domestic violence. These impacts are compounded by the gender backlash.

The burning issues identified by participants included framing the narrative and using language to challenge the gender backlash and uniting for gender equality without making women invisible or diminishing other groups.

It was recommended to:

- **create spaces for networking and reflection on how intersectionality is shaped by regional, national and local contexts.**

This would include, for example:

- Create opportunities for learning, engagement and reflection to enhance understanding of how multiple barriers and oppressive conditions are created for women and how this impacts the work to end VAW.
- Increase awareness among national and European institutions on making women more visible in policy, systems and services and the specific needs and challenges faced by diverse groups.

- **encourage networks and organisations to use more accessible language.**

This would include, for example:

- Clarifying the terms used in this work and using language appropriately, depending on the different target audiences.
- Messaging and communication guides to challenge the gender backlash.

Way forward

Concluding remarks, which turned to the next steps and future priorities, encouraged participants to bear in mind that the approach is as important as what will be delivered. A silo approach to preventing violence against women and domestic violence needs to be avoided, and how awareness-raising happens needs to align with service provision and placing accountability for violence with perpetrators. How we effectively change social and cultural norms founded on sexism must also intersect with focus on how sexism overlaps with other oppressions like colonisation, racism, disablism, ageism, homophobia, bi- and transphobia. Work to shift attitudes can also be strengthened by policy and systems change that place the responsibility for prevention in law and policy firmly with institutions. It is also important that gender equality and prevention work happens simultaneously with meeting the needs of those furthest away from service systems, because of discrimination they face for being women, people of colour, from migrant and refugee communities, LGBTIQ communities, for being disabled, older or young people. Services and initiatives should also be informed by the experience of people impacted by multiple disadvantages including problematic substance use, homelessness, or involvement in the justice system.