

CONFERENCE REPORT

Toward effective perpetrator programmes in line with European standards



Bridging policy, practice, and co-operation
for impactful programmes for perpetrators
of domestic violence

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**Bridging policy, practice, and co-operation
for impactful programmes for
perpetrators of domestic violence**

Prepared by Cristina Oddone,
Researcher, Centre Max Weber, France,
Council of Europe consultant

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Introduction

The Council of Europe conference “Toward Effective Perpetrator Programmes in line with European Standards: Bridging Policy, Practice and Co-operation for Impactful Programmes for Perpetrators of Domestic Violence” took place at the European Youth Centre in Budapest on 2-3 June 2026. Organised in co-operation with the European Network for the Work with Perpetrators of Domestic Violence (WWP EN), the event gathered around 100 participants:

- ▶ Representatives of the Council of Europe’s Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO) as well as the Gender Equality Division (GED);
- ▶ Representatives and experts from international networks, including European Network for the Work with Perpetrators of Domestic Violence (WWP EN) and Women Against Violence Network (WAVE);
- ▶ Participants from countries where the Council of Europe provides technical co-operation support (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Greece, Kosovo*, Latvia, Republic of Moldova, Slovenia, Türkiye, and Ukraine), including national policy makers, governmental representatives and authorities, legal professionals, law-enforcement personnel, programme providers, as well as representatives of specialist women’s support services and civil society organisations.

The main objective of the conference was to strengthen the implementation of Article 16 of the Istanbul Convention, “Preventive intervention and treatment programmes”, by providing support for the development of safe, effective and accountable programmes for perpetrators of domestic violence. Specific objectives were to:

1. Strengthen policy and practice;
2. Support the design of effective and safe perpetrator programmes;
3. Enhance co-operation with specialist victim support services;
4. Reinforce evaluation, monitoring and accountability;
5. Facilitate peer learning and national action planning.

The conference focused exclusively on male perpetrators of domestic violence against women without discussing other less common situations (domestic violence in same-sex couples, female perpetrators of domestic violence, programmes for sex offenders). This post-conference report integrates contributions drafted by WWP EN, co-organisier of the event, and WAVE, who was in charge of facilitating one workshop.

Key discussions and outcomes

Throughout the analysis of panel presentations, interactive workshops and World Café table discussions, five main topics emerged during the conference: 1) Article 16, its relevance and practical implementation; 2) Gender-informed practice as a core element of perpetrator programmes; 3) Quality standards and evaluation of perpetrator programmes; 4) Victims’ perspectives and victims’ safety within perpetrator work; 5) Co-ordinated policies and multi-sectoral approaches.

1. Article 16, its relevance and its practical implementation

The conference offered an opportunity to illustrate the content of Article 16 and its relevance within the chapter on “Prevention” of the Istanbul Convention. It also affirmed the need for an official recognition of perpetrator programmes by national authorities (Elena Jovanovska-Brezoska, GED). The analysis of GREVIO’s monitoring work, throughout the baseline and first thematic evaluation cycles, provided concrete examples of the Committee’s evaluation of States Parties’ practical implementation of Article 16 (Helmut Tichy, GREVIO

* All references to Kosovo, whether to the territory, institutions, or population, in this text shall be understood in full compliance with United National Security Council Resolution 1244 and without prejudice to the status of Kosovo.

member; Cristina Oddone, researcher). The understanding of Article 16 was enhanced by several presentations focusing on specific national experiences: two communications on countries that are Parties to the Convention and one on progress achieved in a country benefiting from the Council of Europe's technical co-operation support. Presenters shared their experience in facilitating programmes within the national probation system (Raul Robles Marin, Spanish Ministry of Interior) and in a local NGO (Uroš Gradišar, Slovenian Association for Nonviolent Communication), or explained the process of adapting legislation and piloting an experimental programme (Artë Ademi Bajrami, Office of the National Coordinator for Protection from Domestic Violence in Kosovo*).

2. Gender-informed practice as a core element of perpetrator programmes

The opening keynote speaker invited the audience to “consider men’s violence against women as a men’s issue” (Alessandra Pauncz, WWP EN). Throughout the conference, violence against women was presented as both the cause and the consequence of unequal power relations and domestic violence was framed within the broader context of gender inequalities and normative gender roles. Experts underlined that perpetrator programmes need to address the structural dimension of violence in order to achieve meaningful change. The lack of a gender-sensitive approach increases the risks of facilitators colluding with perpetrators, reinforcing perpetrators’ blaming attitudes towards victims and contributing to their self-justifications. On the contrary, incorporating a gender-responsive analysis in the work with perpetrators can strengthen motivation for change and show the connections between violence and men’s conditioning, attitudes and beliefs about masculinity, relationships, authority, and the expectations placed on women. During one of the workshops, delegations discussed these topics through the use of participatory tools (“the iceberg”), which allowed for self-awareness and the identification of feelings, attitudes and values which underlie visible behaviours. The facilitator underscored that helping men to critically reflect on such feelings and attitudes can maintain a clear focus on their responsibility for violence. It also creates opportunities for accountability and long-term change in their attitudes and conducts (workshop 4, facilitated by Rory Macrae, WWP EN).

3. Quality standards and evaluation of perpetrator programmes

Experts have warned that “perpetrator programmes can be powerful tools with a potential to harm”, if key principles are not respected. Safe and effective programmes should ensure victim safety, perpetrator accountability, inter-agency co-operation, gender-informed practice, risk assessment, and quality assurance (Sandra Jovanović Belotić, WWP EN). To avoid counterproductive effects, national initiatives have to be aligned with the WWP EN *European standards* and with the Council of Europe *Guidance for Safe and Effective Perpetrator Programmes*. In particular, experts emphasised the importance of relying on evidence-based research. Evaluation of programmes implemented must be carried out systematically, at set times and on the basis of complex data. In particular, perpetrators’ self-assessment cannot be considered sufficient. In order to demonstrate that programmes are effective, evaluations have to examine multiple sources of information (including from current and former partners), to combine both quantitative and qualitative data, and to make a clear distinction between programme activity (outputs) and programme impact (outcomes and long-term impact). Data needs to allow for a comparison between the perpetrator’s and the (ex)partner’s perspectives at different stages of participation in the programme. Experts introduced the “Impact toolkit” to the audience: a standardised evaluation conducted in co-operation with women’s support services. Results show a reduction of the gap between men’s and women’s perceptions of violence over time, and a gradual alignment of their perspectives (Marianne Hester, WWP EN, presentation and workshop 3). During one of the group exercises, participants had to deal with information provided by perpetrators, facilitators, victims (including children), police officers, or other agencies. Analysing practical case studies from different perspectives enabled participants to apply evaluation principles to realistic situations. This activity fostered a reflection on the value of co-facilitation and on the need to consider several views to provide for a more accurate assessment of programmes’ effectiveness. The focus on the victim’s safety and the need for a victim-centred evaluation approach were presented as pivotal since they allow to go beyond the simple indicator of recidivism.

4. Victims’ perspectives and victims’ safety within perpetrator work

Experts recalled that perpetrators can be “highly manipulative” and, while performing very well in a programme, are still capable of continuing to be violent towards their (ex)partner, including through coercive control and psychological violence (Sarah Kirkpatrick, WAVE). To counter this risk, emphasis was placed on the essential role played by women’s specialist services in supporting all victims affected by a single perpetrator and in ensuring that perpetrator work does not overlook their needs and perspectives. Prospective programme facilitators were also invited to ensure partner-contact services, to avoid victim-blaming language and to

convey realistic expectations of change in perpetrators' attitudes and behaviour. An interactive workshop on these topics allowed country delegations to explore effective models of co-operation with women's support services, that can ensure victim safety, robust risk assessment and management, and perpetrator accountability (workshop 1, facilitated by Sara Kirkpatrick and Stephanie Futter-Orel, WAVE). Participants were also invited to identify barriers to collaboration as well as possible strategies to overcome them. The collective exercise of using wooden dolls to represent an imaginary perpetrator (his features, background, needs and route to the programme) helped participants identify people at risk of abuse around him (former, current and potential future partners, dependents such as children or older relatives, colleagues, etc.). The group discussion underlined the importance of widely framed interventions that not only take into consideration the perpetrator's views, but also those of multiple people impacted by the perpetrator's violence. Structured and trust-based co-operation with women's specialist services from the outset were thus presented as essential conditions for any intervention aiming to protect victims and prevent further violence. However, this issue emerged as particularly sensitive, since co-operation is generally absent across all participating countries.

5. Co-ordinated policies and multi-sectoral approaches

Experts expressed concern about a fragmented reactive system to domestic violence and invited country delegations to integrate perpetrator programmes into a structured, proactive and co-ordinated preventive system (Alessandra Pauncz, WWP EN; workshop 2 facilitated by Heinrich Geldschläger, WWP EN). To comply with one of the four pillars of the Istanbul Convention, "Co-ordinated policies", perpetrator programmes must be considered as part of the interinstitutional response to domestic violence. Furthermore, a holistic accountability approach requires each institution involved to duly fulfil its obligations under the Istanbul Convention to prevent men's violence, protect the victims, and prosecute the offenders. During one of the workshops, participants explored possible avenues for co-operation between perpetrator programmes and the judiciary (law enforcement agencies, family and criminal courts) but also with the health sector, child protection, social services and specialised support services for women. Referral at an early stage was considered of paramount importance. Interactive groupwork activities explored the multiple referral pathways into perpetrator programmes (criminal justice, civil justice, and voluntary referral routes), while showing that co-operation must go beyond agreements on referral strategies. It also implies shared practices such as risk assessment, joint case reviews, proactive contact with victims and co-ordination with support services. Examples of co-ordinated community response included [MARAC](#) and [MATAC/Perpetrator Panels](#)¹.

The [ENGAGE toolkit](#) was also presented as an effective training package for all kinds of frontline professionals involved. One of the key messages emerging from the workshop was that perpetrator programmes are most effective when embedded within co-ordinated community responses and supported by sustainable policy frameworks.

Main conclusions and key messages

The main conclusions presented in this section will focus on both the structure and the content of the conference.

On structure

The overall structure of the conference ensured a good balance among different elements. Following the registration and the opening remarks, the programme of the first day (full-day) included a plenary session in the morning (an introductory keynote presentation followed by two panel sessions) and, in the afternoon, two rounds of parallel workshops on crucial topics for perpetrator work. The second day (half-day), included an interactive group exercise, "Critical Insights into Country Practices", followed by a World Café on eight different topics. This mixed-methods conference methodology, combining short lectures and horizontal interactive activities, proved to be effective. On one hand, it allowed to lay the foundations of perpetrator work (Article 16, GREVIO's monitoring work, European Standards) while, on the other hand, it enhanced the exchange of views and sharing of experiences. It also made the overall programme very dynamic, with timely breaks also providing space to recharge and exchange with other participants. The work of the visual facilitator, who drew *vignettes* on the basis of each intervention or workshop, also favoured a relaxed atmosphere and brought some humour despite the seriousness of the topic. At the same time, the presence and active involvement of WWP EN experts, who circulated among the groups and provided guidance, feedback, and

1. The Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences (MARAC) are meetings where information is shared on the highest risk domestic abuse cases, with a focus on the victim's safety, while the Multi-Agency Tasking and Coordination (MATAC) are inter-institutional regular meetings aimed at identifying high-risk domestic abuse perpetrators and referring them to a programme.

practical recommendations, ensured that conference discussions remained grounded in victim safety, perpetrator accountability, gender-informed practice, evidence-based interventions, and co-ordinated community response. The participation of WAVE representatives was significant as it supported the emphasis on including the victim's perspective and prioritising the victim's safety in all kinds of interventions targeting perpetrators. Parallel interactive workshops were designed in particular for delegations from countries where perpetrator programmes are still not well established and where specialised support services for women may be limited. They also facilitated peer learning and national action planning. The work in small country-based groups represented an opportunity for participants to reflect on the specific realities, challenges and opportunities related to perpetrator programme implementation in their own national contexts. Participants could analyse their national frameworks, including legislation, referral pathways, co-operation with victim support services, quality assurance mechanisms, monitoring systems, and the integration of perpetrator programmes within broader responses to domestic violence. They could therefore examine how their existing systems aligned (or not) with the principles of the Istanbul Convention and with the Council of Europe *Guidance for Safe and Effective Perpetrator Programmes*.

On content

Besides the main themes outlined in the first section of this report, discussions on the second day revealed significant differences in the development of perpetrator programmes across participating countries. While some groups focused on strengthening existing systems and improving programme quality, others explored how to establish basic referral pathways, inter-agency co-operation mechanisms and national standards. Participants raised numerous practical questions related to implementation, including co-operation with victim support services, risk assessment and management, partner-contact services, funding models, quality assurance procedures, training requirements, and the application of gender-informed approaches. The shared concerns identified during the WWP-EN and WAVE joint roundtable "Child Custody in cases of Violence Against Women", held in Vienna in April 2026, were also presented and discussed during the conference. As confirmed by GREVIO's reports, across Europe the following challenges are identified as potentially jeopardizing women's safety and protection from violence:

- ▶ Legal frameworks exist but are applied inconsistently, with domestic violence routinely minimised or reframed in the transition from criminal to family court;
- ▶ "Parental alienation" is increasingly weaponised against survivor-mothers, in some cases contributing to loss of custody;
- ▶ Supervised visitation is treated as a procedural step rather than a safety measure, with transitions to unsupervised contact occurring without meaningful assessment of risk or behavioural change;
- ▶ In several countries, perpetrator programmes have been funded at the expense of women's specialist services. Participants stressed that funding for perpetrator programmes must be additional to – and not come at the expense of – funding for specialist support services for women;
- ▶ Mandatory, gender-sensitive, evidence-based training for judges, lawyers, social workers and psychologists is largely absent and urgently needed.

In addition, several specific challenges related to the countries represented emerged throughout the conference:

- ▶ The persistence of stereotypical views on perpetrators. The perpetration of violence is not always framed as the result of structural unequal power relationships between women and men, but is often linked to specific individual conditions (socio-economic deprivation, addictions, mental-health issues, etc.);
- ▶ Limited understanding of the core principles and conditions for perpetrator work and of the risks deriving from programmes that do not comply with European standards;
- ▶ Limited understanding of the work and need for specialised services for women victims of domestic violence;
- ▶ Limited understanding of the victim's perspective and experience of violence;
- ▶ Difficulties in identifying different forms of violence beyond physical violence, such as sexual violence, psychological violence, coercive control;
- ▶ Limited understanding of the importance of motivation when perpetrators enrol in a programme;
- ▶ Overconfidence in the judicial approach and in mandatory referral to perpetrator programmes.

Recommendations

Two sets of recommendations conclude this report: a first list for the development of perpetrator programmes in a country; a second one with indications for the set-up of future co-operation activities in this field.

Developing perpetrator programmes in a country

1. Ensure that any initiative targeting perpetrators of domestic violence is aligned with the requirements of the Istanbul Convention (Art 16). To this end, programmes must be based on the WWP EN *European standards* and the Council of Europe *Guidance for Safe and Effective Perpetrator Programmes*;
2. Guarantee strong local ownership by national authorities;
3. Make sure that the development of perpetrator programmes comes with (or follows) the establishment of specialised services for women victims of domestic violence in the country;
4. Ensure multiple referral pathways into perpetrator programmes (criminal justice, civil justice, and voluntary referral routes) and embed perpetrator programmes in both the probation and the penitentiary systems;
5. Ensure inter-institutional co-operation to share relevant information, conduct risk-assessments, measure the programme's outputs, outcomes and impact;
6. Ensure sustainability beyond the support of international organisations;
7. Make sure that funding is secured and balanced for both perpetrator programmes and for specialised support services for victims.

Setting up co-operation activities

1. Take into account the country-specific characteristics and consider the different stages of understanding of perpetrator work and development in each national context;
2. Ensure that professionals and practitioners from different sectors are equally represented in future outreach activities or trainings. The work with perpetrators is not just a criminal justice issue: if possible, avoid having a majority of legal professionals with a low representation of professionals from the health sector, social services and specialised support services;
3. Foster the exchange of practices between countries that apply national minimum requirements, based on the Istanbul Convention and on the WWP EN *European standards*. The organisation of study visits can be one of the strategies to develop a deeper understanding of the purpose of perpetrator programmes, in line with European standards, and their role in the inter-institutional co-operation to tackle domestic violence.

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