

**Shadow report
to the 1st thematic evaluation round report of Estonia to the Group of
Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence**



Submitted by the Estonian Women's Shelters Union and the Estonian Women's Associations Roundtable

We are hereby presenting our observations regarding the implementation of certain articles of the Istanbul Convention in Estonia.

Article 7 – Comprehensive and co-ordinated policies

According to our assessment, existing national development plans and policies have largely neglected primary prevention, such as programs to enhance communication and relationship skills, focusing instead on responding to the consequences.

Article 8 – Financial resources

In recent years, the Estonian government has reduced budget allocations across various sectors, including support for victims of violence, with funding for women's support centres failing to keep pace with the rising cost of living. In 2019, the annual allocation to women's support centres amounted to EUR 1 million; in 2023 it was raised by 7% to EUR 1.07 million. However, meanwhile the cost of living in Estonia increased by nearly 50%. There is also concern about the possibility of additional reductions. Previously, various parliamentary groups provided supplementary funding to women's support centres for the provision of psychological and legal assistance; however, this support ended in 2024. As a result, support centres are no longer able to provide services to the same extent as before.

As concerns total funding for measures aimed at preventing and combating violence, budgetary cuts affect all sectors making it very difficult to maintain the current level of public services. As a result, imposing additional obligations under international agreements would inevitably undermine both the accessibility and quality of existing services.

Article 11 – Data collection and research

The Estonian state report submitted to GREVIO refers to several surveys that were conducted over the recent years. In this context, we would like to note that the government has unfortunately failed to allocate resources to undertake a more in-depth analysis of the valuable material collected through a comprehensive survey carried out by Statistics Estonia in 2021-2022.

Article 14 – Education

In the field of violence prevention, significant gaps remain in ensuring that teachers and students have access to educational materials on creating and maintaining safe intimate relationships. Current school materials focus mainly on promoting gender equality, recognizing signs of violence, condemning violence, and teaching response skills, while skills for building and sustaining positive intimate relationships remain unaddressed.

It is also regrettable that the state report does not mention the critically important relationship skills programme "*Relationship Smarts Plus*", which has been adapted for use in Estonia since 2022. More than 50 teachers have already been trained to deliver it. The programme is intended for young people aged 13–19 and is fully in line with the current national human studies curriculum.

Article 16 – Preventive intervention and treatment programmes

The *Supporting Non-Violence programme* run by the Social Insurance Board has proven to be highly effective. Unfortunately, due to the insufficient number of counsellors, it is not accessible to all people in need of help across Estonia.

In recent years, the state has also discontinued support for several previously popular prevention programmes run by NGOs. For example, the programme *Within My Reach* has received very positive feedback. Since 2024, the City of Tallinn has offered the programme to parents navigating high-conflict or abusive relationships. Participation in the programme is voluntary.

Article 20 – General support services

In recent years, the Estonian government has on several occasions raised taxes and cut down the number of public services. According to the [analysis](#) commissioned by the Gender Equality and Equal Treatment Commissioner, this has had a particularly negative impact on the quality of life of vulnerable groups. One of the vulnerable groups consists of women in abusive relationships, especially in rural areas, who increasingly experience difficulties accessing government-funded services.

With public transport in rural areas often insufficient or unavailable, and car travel increasingly costly, many women find it impossible to reach the services they need. Online and remote phone services cannot replace in-person meetings, particularly in regions where reliable internet access is limited or non-existent. In addition, employment opportunities in rural areas have significantly decreased in recent years. Longer waiting times for services and a shortage of experienced professionals affect all regions. All this has made it considerably harder for women to leave abusive relationships or to rebuild their lives afterwards.

Article 31 – Custody, visitation rights and safety

Even though according to Estonian law, in custody and visitation disputes the best interests of the child must be of top priority, and courts are required to take into account, among other things, whether one parent has been violent towards the other parent or the child, this principle is not always followed in practice. The primary obstacles include the challenges of substantiating acts of violence and the introduction of the so-called equal parenting principle in Estonia. The problem became particularly acute after the 2021 amendments to the Family Law Act, which changed the basis for calculating child maintenance. It is increasingly presumed that children will spend equal time with both parents, with no obligation for either parent to pay maintenance. While this amendment aimed to ease the burden on the courts, its adverse effects on children and survivors of violence were insufficiently addressed.

Article 48 – Prohibition of mandatory alternative dispute resolution processes or sentencing

Estonian legislation does not provide for mandatory mediation, neither in criminal nor in civil proceedings, and the consent of the parties is always required. As far as we are aware, there

have been no cases where victims of violence were coerced into mediation in criminal proceedings.

Regarding family mediation in civil cases, several victims of violence have reported to women's support centres that, although they had agreed to participate in mediation, they experienced pressure to do so, particularly from child protection workers. Problems have also arisen in situations where an abusive man has taken the case to court and the court has referred the couple to family mediation, while the woman has not disclosed the violence she has experienced to the Social Insurance Board officials and has agreed to mediation. Such women have reported feeling re-victimised.

Women's support centres have been in regular contact with the Social Insurance Board, which organises the family mediation service, and we have agreed on ways of addressing such cases. Nevertheless, we see a clear need to establish, alongside the existing family mediation service, a safe special procedure that takes into account the specific nature of domestic abuse. This would ensure that victims and perpetrators are not required to meet face-to-face, while still allowing for out-of-court agreements on child custody and visitation, thereby safeguarding the safety of both victims and children. A few years ago, we cooperated with the Social Insurance Board in this regard, but unfortunately these initiatives have since then been put on hold.

We hope that our input will contribute to a better understanding of the situation in Estonia. We remain ready to provide further information or clarifications, either in writing or in person.

Eha Reitelmann
Secretary-General, Estonian Women's Associations Roundtable

Merle Albrant
Board Member, Estonian Women's Shelters Union