



# Istanbul Convention: combatting violence against women

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Gender-based violence is a brutal form of discrimination and a violation of fundamental rights. It is both a cause and a consequence of inequalities between women and men.

It happens everywhere, be it at home or in public, in every society and EU country, regardless of social background.

- One in three women in the EU has been a victim of physical and/or sexual violence since the age of 15;
- One in 20 women have been raped;
- Over half (55%) of women have experienced sexual harassment;
- One in three women has experienced psychological abusive behaviour by a partner;
- One in three women has experienced physical or sexual violence by an adult during childhood.

## Serious underreporting

The large majority of incidents of violence against women do not come to the attention of the police. Only around 30% of victims of violence report the most serious incidents to the police.

One in four women who do not report sexual violence to the police chooses not to do so because of shame; one in five does not want anyone to know, one in ten believes the police could or would not do anything. Of those who do report to the police, only about half are satisfied with the assistance received.

**Tolerance and acceptance of gender-based violence persist**, and often victims can be blamed when they suffer violence<sup>(1)</sup>.

## Urgent action is needed

Violence against women is a human rights violation. It can also hamper women's access to employment, thereby negatively affecting their financial independence and the economy in general.

**From an economic point of view, gender-based violence against women costs approximately EUR 226 billion** per year across the EU. If we reduced violence by only 10%, approximately EUR 7 billion would be saved each year.

(1) [http://ec.europa.eu/justice/gender-equality/files/documents/151125\\_attitudes\\_enege\\_report\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/justice/gender-equality/files/documents/151125_attitudes_enege_report_en.pdf)

The Council of Europe's Istanbul Convention addresses all forms of violence against women, including domestic violence, through measures aimed at **preventing** violence, **protecting** victims, and **prosecuting** the perpetrators. Immediate action is needed to reinforce the action of the EU and its Member States to protect victims of violence.

## Protection

- > **Clear and concise information** – Victims must be supported with access to clear and concise information, in a language they understand;

Sara is being forced by her family to marry somebody against her will. Under the Istanbul Convention, professionals must give her all information regarding the services available to her in simple language that she understands.

- > **Accessible shelters** – Member States have to ensure that shelters are accessible in sufficient numbers and adequately distributed across the country;

Mara is a trafficked woman. She wants to escape, but has nowhere to go. She will have access to a shelter close to where she is.

- > **Telephone helplines** – Member States are obliged to ensure state-wide 24/7 telephone helplines available free of charge. Helplines are essential in offering immediate expert advice and pointing victims towards safety;

Anne lives in a violent household and fears for her life. She can have access to a state-wide 24/7 telephone helpline free of charge. The helpline will offer immediate expert advice and will guide her towards the steps that will ensure safety.

- > **Specialised help centres** – Member States are obliged to ensure easily accessible rape crisis or sexual violence referral centres to provide immediate medical counselling, care and forensic services.

Susanna has been sexually assaulted and raped. She can get access to rape crisis or sexual violence referral centres where she will be taken care of by trained doctors and forensic services will be at her disposal.

## Prosecution

- > **Power to the police** – to remove a perpetrator of domestic violence from his or her home;

Sophie's husband beats her and abuses her. Thanks to the Istanbul Convention, the police have the power to remove him from their home, even if he owns the house. He also will not be able return to the household and will be barred from contacting her.

- > **Ensuring violence against women is a crime**, including psychological and physical violence, sexual violence and rape, stalking, female genital mutilation (FGM), forced marriage, forced abortion and forced sterilisation. This includes the so-called "honour" is not a justification for the above listed crimes.

Linda for several years has been subject of continued threats and intrusions from her former boyfriend. Her boyfriend's behaviour had caused her extreme stress and anxiety. However, she lives in a country where stalking was not criminalised and when she went to the police, she was not taken seriously. Following the ratification of the Convention by her country, stalking is now a crime. Police and public authorities better understand what is at stake, as they have been trained and know how to respond adequately to such situations. Linda now lives a life free from fear.

- > **Ensure effective and timely investigation** of any allegation of violence against women and domestic violence and ensure immediate protection for victims.

Adriana is assaulted and complains to the police. The police start the investigation immediately, saving Adriana a lot of undue suffering from lengthy proceedings.

### > Protecting female migrants and asylum seekers

Female migrants and asylum seekers are particularly vulnerable to gender-based violence.

### > Delivering women their own residence permit

Member States can grant migrant women their own residence permit if they fall victim to domestic violence.

Amina is an immigrant. She is a victim of domestic violence, but she is afraid to leave her household as her residence status depends on that of her husband. She is afraid that if she leaves him, she will lose her residence status. Under the Convention, Amina will be able to have her own residence permit if the relationship ends, because she is a victim of domestic violence. This way she does not have to endure violence to keep her right to reside in her host country.

### > Protecting and supporting child witnesses

Exposure to physical, sexual or psychological violence and abuse has a severe impact on children. Member States would be obliged to pay special attention to the rights and needs of children who have witnessed violence.

Mark witnesses his mother being repeatedly beaten by his father. He will get special attention as a child from the dedicated services to understand and overcome from his traumatic experience.

## Prevention

> **Promoting awareness through awareness-raising campaigns and education at all levels** to ensure that the general public are fully informed of the various forms of violence that women experience on a regular basis as well as of the different manifestations of domestic violence.

### Awareness-raising campaigns

Under the Convention, Member States are obliged to promote and conduct awareness-raising campaigns, together with civil society, and in particular together with women's organisations. They are obliged to disseminate information to make the general public more aware of ways to prevent acts of violence.

**Example:** France ratified the Convention in July 2014. The French government launched a campaign on sexual harassment in public transport<sup>(2)</sup> in November 2015. The aim is to raise awareness of the issue and of the penalties, as well as to encourage reporting and bystander intervention.

### Education

Under the Convention, Member States must take the necessary steps to ensure that equality between women and men, non-violent conflict resolution in relationships, and the right to personal integrity are included in school curricula at all levels.

**Example:** Italy ratified the Convention in September 2013. In 2014-15, the Italian government developed a web series on violence against women, focusing on the role of men and how they could choose non-violent behaviour towards women. This was then used to educate young people in schools.

### Training of specialists and professionals who provide assistance to victims of violence

Member States must ensure or strengthen training for professionals dealing with victims of violence, who could help prevent or detect acts of such violence, or prevent secondary victimisation.

**Example:** Spain ratified the Convention in April 2014. It has specialised bodies in the police corps and judiciary dealing with violence against women, with appropriate training for staff.

(2) <http://www.famille-enfance-droitsdesfemmes.gouv.fr/lancement-de-la-campagne-contre-le-harcèlement-sexiste-et-les-violences-sexuelles-dans-les-transports/>

## Advantages of ratifying the Istanbul Convention at EU-level

- **Better data-collection:** Currently, there is not enough data to show the extent and nature of violence against women. **An EU accession to the Convention would oblige Member States to collect and send accurate and comparable data to Eurostat**, the statistical office of the EU. This data will be **essential for developing effective policies** and awareness-raising campaigns. Better knowledge of this phenomenon will help solve it more efficiently.
- **More accountability:** The EU will have an active role in monitoring the proper and effective application of the Convention. As a member of the Committee of the parties (representatives of those who have ratified), the EU would participate in electing the Group of experts and adopting recommendations concerning the implementation of the Convention. This would strengthen the EU's international role in the fight against violence against women.

### Background

#### What are the key aspects of the Istanbul Convention?

- The Convention is a Council of Europe Convention from 2011 aiming at **combatting violence against women and domestic violence**. Acceding to the Convention would be a **major step forward in making Europe a safer place**.
- It addresses violence against women through measures aimed at **preventing** violence, **protecting** victims, and **prosecuting** the perpetrators.
- It recognises violence against women as a **human rights violation**.
- It aims to **bring societal change** by challenging acceptance or denial of such violence and gender stereotyping. It **calls on men and boys as key actors** in such a process.

#### What are the objectives?

- Protect victims from violence.
- Step up education and awareness-raising to increase understanding of the issue of violence against women and its consequences.
- Improve skills of professionals working in the field, allowing better support and advice for women experiencing violence.
- Support the role of NGOs, civil society and the media.
- Give victims of violence a stronger role and better rights in criminal proceedings.
- Improve the reporting of incidents.

> **For more information:** <http://www.coe.int/en/web/istanbul-convention/home>