

**VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN ACROSS THE EU: ABUSE AT HOME, WORK, IN PUBLIC AND ONLINE**

**COUNCIL OF THE EU**

**5 MARCH, BRUSSELS**

Morten Kjærum

Director of the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights

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Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to welcome you all to the presentation of our report from our violence against women survey here at the Council of the EU. I would particularly like to thank the Greek Presidency and the Council Secretariat for co-hosting the conference. It is also a great pleasure to welcome ministers and representatives from the European Parliament, Council of Europe, and many other organisations who will take part in the discussion and have done so for a long time, not to mention the many representatives of national governments and parliaments. Last but not least, a warm welcome to the civil society organisations here today who have campaigned so tirelessly on this issue for years. This report underpins your work and will help you take it forward.

It was the Council, as well as the European Parliament, who asked the Fundamental Rights Agency to collect data on the prevalence of gender-based violence. For many years now, the United Nations, the Council of Europe and NGOs working to combat violence against women have been calling for comparable and robust reliable data in this field. Because in many EU Member States, there is a data gap that has long been hampering efforts to develop and implement informed, targeted policies.

To fill this gap, we carried out what became the world's largest survey of its kind, interviewing 42,000 women across all the 28 Member States to give us comparative figures for the entire EU. **And we can see: it's time to act.** Too many women throughout Europe are suffering violence in one or more forms, in the overwhelming majority of cases the perpetrator is a man. **What does this say about equality in our societies? What does it say about us?**

Ladies and gentlemen,

- **1 in 3 women** in the EU has suffered sexual or physical violence some time in their life since the age of 15. That is over 62 million women.
- **5%** have been raped, which corresponds to some 9 million women. This is more than the population of Austria.
- **55%** have been sexually harassed since the age of 15, while **32%** of these victims said that the perpetrator was their boss, their colleague or a customer.
- **18%** of women have been stalked. Stalking instills fear in the women that are targeted. In effect, they become afraid of their own shadow.
- **11%** have experienced cyberharassment.

**This is no minor issue. We are talking about mothers, sisters, and daughters across the EU who have been abused physically, sexually and psychologically.**

People who work in this area will already have been aware of the general dimensions we are dealing with and will not be at all surprised by FRA's findings. It mirrors their everyday experiences. These professionals have offered support, provided shelter and actively campaigned to raise awareness of this issue. For this reason, too, it is important that the European

Commission's next *Strategy for equality between women and men* makes the impact of violence against women on all women a priority.

Our results show there is widespread under-reporting of violence against women. So official figures from law enforcement do not even come close to revealing the true extent of victimisation. It is a task for European police forces to reach out to vulnerable groups. An issue, I may add, we have also found in many other surveys on ethnic minorities and LGBT people.

Now,

those of you who have already had the opportunity to study the results in a little more detail will have seen there are considerable discrepancies between different countries. There are many reasons for these differences, a number of which we have tried to list in the report. We have to dig into the figures.

It is the beauty of a survey of 28 Member States. It is part of a learning process. We urgently need to learn from and build upon good practices developed by some Member States, such as setting up victims' shelters, encouraging police initiatives, or establishing awareness-raising campaigns. Because the one unavoidable conclusion from the survey is that levels of violence against women are high throughout the EU. Far too high. Even in countries with the lowest prevalence of physical or sexual violence, we still see that one in five women is suffering from abuse. That is 20%. **This is simply not acceptable.**

So what can be done?

Much is already being done in many EU Member States to raise awareness and reach out to victims. Austria, which currently holds the chair of the Council of Europe, chose to make violence against women one of the priorities of its

chairmanship. Portugal is establishing rape crisis centres for the first time as part of its new national action plan on gender-based violence. Then of course there are organisations like WAVE, a network of NGOs across Europe all working on combating violence against women and children.

And then we have the Council of Europe's *Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence*, the so-called Istanbul Convention. With more countries shortly due to join the eight that have so far ratified it, we should soon pass over the threshold necessary for the Convention to come into effect. So far, only 3 EU Member States have ratified it. Let's move forward. I am convinced that the Istanbul Convention can help to ensure that women throughout the EU are finally treated not as objects to be 'dealt with', but as subjects with rights. **We are talking about half of the population here! Half of the population that has the right not to be afraid of violence at the hands of family, colleagues or total strangers.**

The Istanbul Convention has a number of very practical stipulations that would help ensure **this document can help to change the reality**. For example, it obliges countries:

- to develop victim-centred policies for combating violence against women that include cooperation between all relevant actors, from government agencies, through national, regional and local authorities, to national human rights institutions and civil society organisations
- to provide and strengthen training for professionals who work with both victims and perpetrators of violence against women
- to set up easily accessible shelters for victims and establish round-the-clock phone helplines for victims or witnesses of any form of violence against women

However, whenever the Istanbul Convention enters into force, it is nonetheless clear that a wide variety of groups need to take action to combat violence against women. **There is no single answer. There are no simple answers. We need a multi-agency approach** that brings in employers, the police, health professionals and internet service providers, to work with the support groups that for years have helped abused women.

In the EU, the Victims' Directive recently came into effect. While this is a solid piece of legislation, the proof of the pudding as always will be in the implementation. For the Directive to work in practice, support services have to be set up that are

- specialised
- adequately resourced and
- tailored to the individual needs of each victim of violence

And as I mentioned earlier, our survey shows that many women are not coming forward to inform either the police or victim support services about their experiences. **Encouraging women to report abuse is therefore of the utmost importance.**

Ladies and gentlemen,

As well as discussing the findings of the survey on violence against women, FRA's report also contains a number of proposals to improve the situation, and to support policy makers to introduce and implement comprehensive measures to prevent and respond to violence against women. For example:

- All EU Member States must regard intimate partner violence as a public and not a private issue, and treat rape within marriage the same way as other incidents of rape.
- They must ensure that police, healthcare professionals, employers and specialist victim support services are trained, properly resourced and given the necessary powers to tackle violence against women.
- Internet and social media platforms should proactively assist victims of cyberharassment to report abuse and be encouraged to limit unwanted behaviour.

On a personal note I was shocked to see how slow social media has been to address this issue. They are much quicker when it comes to racism except for maybe the case last summer in the UK.

Of course, it is not enough to wait until women have become victims of violence. We have to work harder to prevent women from becoming victims in the first place. And for this, campaigns against and responses to violence against women must be directed at men as well as women. We need a public discussion on the topic that takes place at all levels of society and engages women as well as men. **We need to counter the normalisation of violence and harassment in our culture.**

For FRA's survey demonstrates clearly that violence against women is a problem in all walks of life: our findings show that three-quarters of women in a professional capacity or in top management jobs have experienced sexual harassment. I repeat this is  $\frac{3}{4}$  of professional women. And as the title of this conference indicates, the abuse takes place across the board. **Women are not**

**safe on the street; they are not safe at work; and when they get home, they may be even less safe.** That has to change.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We have the data we need. In line with this year's International Women's Day theme of 'Inspiring Change', I would also like to say: **Now we need change.** Change to ensure existing legislation is implemented, that there is specialist support available for victims, and that we tackle violence against women before it happens. And for this we need political leadership, resources and a concerted effort from us all. The EU's achievements in fostering equality between women and men have helped to change the lives of many citizens for the better, but we are not there yet.

I would like to end my remarks by quoting a victim of domestic violence we spoke to, a brave woman whom you will see in the video we will be showing you a little later. "Young men need to realise that hitting a woman isn't acceptable under any circumstances. The idea that it's macho and that women like it is just one big misunderstanding."

It is for this and all the other victims that we have to bring an end to the kind of violence we are here today to discuss. And I am optimistic we can.

Thank you.