RED FLAG

Prevenire la violenza di genere
How to prevent gender violence

FAR:S
ENTREPRENEURSHIP TECHNOLOGY EDUCATION

PEDRA

PORTA APERTA
SOCIETA' COOPERATIVA SOCIALE

YSPDB

Co-funded by
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GUIDEBOOK

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Introduction

Recognizing the early signs of toxic relationships and gender-based violence is crucial for protecting individuals, especially young women, from serious emotional, psychological, and physical harm. The Red Flag Project was designed to provide a proactive solution by equipping young people, educators, and social workers with the tools to identify and respond to these "red flags" before they escalate into more dangerous situations. By raising awareness and offering practical methods for intervention, this project empowers those at risk and the adults who support them to take early action and prevent long-term damage.

Harmful behaviours can often be overlooked or misunderstood, making it difficult to address toxic dynamics in relationships. This guide offers valuable insights and practical advice, designed specifically for individuals aged 12 to 20 and the adults working with them. It provides the necessary knowledge to recognize toxic actions and attitudes early on and equips educators and social workers with the skills to guide and support young people in making healthier, safer decisions.

At the core of this guide is the belief that early intervention is key. Whether it is identifying controlling behaviour, understanding the impact of emotional abuse, or knowing how and where to seek help, this resource gives clear steps to prevent the harmful effects of toxic relationships. Through increased awareness and support, the goal is to foster more respectful, healthier connections and give young people the confidence to protect themselves from harm.

1. Defining violence: conflict, domestic abuse, and beyond

According to the United Nations (1993), violence against women is defined as "any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life."

Acts inflicting physical, sexual, psychological, or financial distress, including threats, are considered violence against women and constitute a violation of their human rights. Regardless of whether the offender currently resides with the victim or has previously shared a residence, all acts of physical, sexual, psychological, or financial violence that take place within a family, household, or between current or former spouses or partners are considered domestic violence [Istanbul Convention 2011].

There are various types of violence:

Psychological – involves a range of intimidating, threatening, and derogatory attitudes by the aggressor. Tactics are employed to isolate the victim from social reality, leading to repercussions on their identity and inducing a state of trance and confusion. The victim's perceptions and sensations are altered. Some examples include:

- Humiliations and harassments: "You're ugly," "You're stupid," "You don't understand anything";
- Devaluation related to social roles: "You're worthless as a wife/partner/mother/worker";

o Devaluation of achievements in education and career;

o Public ridicule/mocking;

o Forms of control: monitoring movements, relationships, social media channels, emails, phone usage, passwords, expenditures, and clothing choices;

o Accusations and blame attributions: "It's your fault I act this way"

o Isolating the victim from friends and family

o Adopting a victim-like attitude by the abuser to shift responsibility onto the woman regarding their own reactions, to imply that she has fabricated being his victim, or to suggest that she has deliberately exaggerated her accounts to accuse him of abuse.

o Gaslighting: psychological manipulation of the victim to make her doubt herself and her mental stability.

Online

o Non-consensual distribution of intimate images;

o Sexual threats – coercing or pressuring someone to engage in sexual behaviour or to share sexual material online;

o Sexual harassment – receiving unwanted comments or requests;

o Cyberstalking – using apps to geolocate someone;

o Sextortion – a form of online blackmail using photos and/or videos shared with the victim;

o Victim blaming – secondary victimization;

o Trolling – sending provocative, irritating, false, or off-topic messages to strangers (this differs from cyberbullying, which targets victims known to the perpetrator) with the aim of disturbing and provoking strong reactions in others. The primary victims of trolling are women, especially those engaged in activism or who are publicly known.

Domestic – Involves a series of acts of physical, sexual, psychological, or economic violence perpetrated by a partner within the family unit. This behaviour pattern is characterized by chronicity and continuity over time that leads to health problems for the victim.

Stalking – A series of stalking behaviors, threats, or harassment that cause intense anxiety or fear for one's safety. It manifests through:
   o Relentless phone calls
   o Message bombardment
   o Stalking and monitoring the victim
   o Tracking the victim's location
   o Lurking in places frequented by the victim

Economic – Any behavior aimed at undermining and obstructing the victim's financial independence. This includes:
   o Denying access to family income or bank accounts
   o Preventing the victim from working or maintaining a job

The goal is to create a state of economic dependence (Reale, 2011).

Sexual – involves actions that lead to coercion, through violence or threats, to endure or perform sexual acts. This can also occur within a couple, in cases where one partner does not give consent or changes their mind because they do not agree with how the act is being carried out.

Verbal – this type of violence manifests through slurs, insults, and threats. Derogatory language is used; the woman is demeaned and humiliated both privately and publicly.

Physical – It includes any action that directly or indirectly harms fundamental legal rights, such as life and personal safety. It manifests through:

- o Beatings and physical abuse
- o Mistreatment, slapping, twisting of limbs
- o Burns, crushing injuries
- o Deprivation of food or sleep

Relational equality is a component of conflict, and disagreements are resolved through negotiation. Confrontations can range in intensity.

Relationship imbalances between parties, a lack of communication, unequal resource availability, and the aggressor's dominance over the victim are all components of violence.

Equality in relationships means that conflicts are resolved through dialogue and negotiation. However, violence arises when there is a power imbalance between

the parties, a lack of communication, unequal access to resources, and the perpetrator's dominance over the victim.

Different age groups are exposed to various forms of violence:

- o Children and adolescents: more vulnerable to bullying, sexual abuse, and peer violence.
- o Young and middle-aged adults: more likely to experience domestic, economic, and workplace violence.
- o Elderly individuals: at higher risk of neglect and financial abuse.

(Data from World Health Organization - WHO reports)

2. What are "Red Flags"?

"Red flags" refer to warning signs or indicators that suggest potential problems or issues within a relationship. These signs can signal behaviours, attitudes, or situations that may be harmful, unhealthy, or indicative of deeper underlying issues. In the context of relationships, recognizing these **red flags** is crucial for identifying and addressing concerns before they escalate into more serious problems.

Here are some common red flags that might indicate a toxic relationship:

- Disrespectful behaviour towards you or others, including dismissiveness, condescension, or belittling comments.
- Excessive jealousy, possessiveness, or attempts to control your actions, decisions, or relationships with others.

- Difficulty in expressing feelings, constant misunderstandings, or unwillingness to discuss important issues openly and honestly.
- Using guilt, threats, or other manipulative tactics to influence your decisions or behavior.
- Making you responsible for their emotional state.
- Encouraging you to distance yourself from friends, family, or support networks (claiming they are harmful or unhealthy for you), making you entirely dependent on the relationship for emotional support.
- Constant suspicion without valid reasons, checking your phone or social media with or without your consent, or accusing you of dishonesty.
- Ignoring your personal boundaries, whether physical, emotional, or financial.
- Refusal to address or work on recurring problems, leading to a cycle of unresolved conflicts.
- Physical or Verbal Abuse: Any form of physical violence, threats, or verbal abuse should never be tolerated.
- Tracking movements and monitoring who you go out with
- Calling or messaging repeatedly
- Dictating what clothes to wear and what not to wear
- Trying to change personal grooming habits (e.g., "You look better without makeup," "Black hair suits you more," etc.)
- Using the silent treatment as punishment (ignoring or disappearing for hours or days after an argument)

Recognizing these signs early on is essential. It's important to trust your instincts and not ignore persistent feelings of discomfort or unhappiness within the relationship. Healthy relationships are built on mutual respect, trust, open communication, and support. If you notice several red flags or feel consistently unhappy, it may be time to seek support from friends, family, or a professional counsellor to evaluate the relationship's health and discuss potential steps forward.

It is worth mentioning that the understanding of the concept and the overall meaning of "red flag" develops with age. Younger teenagers and children are not able to recognize them. Younger individuals are easier to manipulate. That is why education on this topic is so important.

3. Introduction to toxic relationships

Navigating relationships can be one of life's most rewarding experiences, but sometimes, relationships can take a darker turn. Toxic relationships are those characterized by harmful behaviours, attitudes, and dynamics that can cause emotional, psychological, or even physical distress to those involved.

In this introduction, we'll explore what constitutes a toxic relationship, common signs to watch out for, and the impact they can have on individuals. Understanding toxic relationships is vital for maintaining healthy connections and recognizing when it's necessary to seek help or make changes.

3.1 - What is a toxic relationship?

A toxic relationship is one that is emotionally or psychologically damaging to one or both parties involved. It's marked by behaviours that undermine the well-being, self-esteem, and happiness of those within the relationship. Toxic relationships can manifest in various forms, from romantic partnerships to friendships, family relationships, or professional interactions.

3.2 - Signs of a toxic relationship

Recognizing the signs of a toxic relationship is crucial for intervention and self-preservation. Some common signs include:

- Constant criticism and regularly receiving negative feedback or being belittled.
- Lack of trust, suspicion, jealousy, or controlling behaviour without valid reasons.

- Poor communication, difficulty expressing feelings or frequent misunderstandings.

- Manipulation, using guilt, threats, or coercion to influence actions.

- Isolation and encouraging separation from supportive relationships or activities.

- Unresolved conflict, repeatedly facing the same issues or arguments.

- Emotional volatility, frequent mood swings or explosive outbursts.

- Disregard for boundaries, ignoring personal space or crossing emotional, physical, or financial boundaries.

- Feeling trapped, without the possibility to leave, even though the relationship hurts.

3.3 - Impact of toxic relationships

Toxic relationships can have profound negative effects on individuals, including:

- Emotional distress presenting itself as anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, or feelings of worthlessness.

- Physical health issues like increased stress levels, sleep disturbances, or physical symptoms related to chronic stress.

- Isolation from friends, family, or support networks.

- Diminished confidence, self-worth and self-belief.

- Normalizing unhealthy behaviours and patterns.

3.4 - Impact on adult life

Young people who have experienced abuse in a romantic relationship may develop trust issues - both in themselves and in others - making it difficult to establish a healthy and fulfilling relationship in adulthood.

3.5 - Witnessed violence

Children and adolescents who grow up exposed to violent family dynamics tend to replicate these patterns in their future relationships. In many cases, they identify with the parent (or caregiver) of the same gender and mimic the relational behaviors they observed.

Understanding these dynamics is essential to breaking free from toxic relationships and fostering healthier connections. Recognizing the warning signs early and taking proactive steps toward positive change allows individuals to prioritize their well-being and build relationships that positively contribute to their lives.

4. Toxic behaviours: common patterns

Recognizing these toxic behaviours is essential for individuals to protect themselves and cultivate healthier relationships built on respect, trust, and genuine care for each other's well-being. Addressing toxic behaviours often requires setting clear boundaries, seeking support from trusted individuals or professionals, and sometimes making difficult decisions to prioritize personal safety and emotional health.

Despite extensive efforts over the past three decades, domestic violence and the resulting witnessed violence remain largely hidden phenomena. A primary contributing factor to this concealment is the socio-cultural context, which often leads to denial or downplaying of its severity (e.g., dismissing incidents as "just a slap" or attributing it to temporary emotions), thereby impeding early identification and support for victims. Early intervention is crucial to mitigate the severe impact on the well-being of women and their children.

Instances of minimizing and normalizing violence are still prevalent, frequently mistaken for ordinary couple conflicts by private circles, family, friends, and institutions. Consequently, when women seek help, they may not receive adequate or timely support necessary for their liberation from abusive situations. Culturally, there is a prevalent tendency to blame and judge women who have experienced violence. Victim blaming, a form of secondary victimization, shifts focus away from the perpetrator and places undue responsibility on the victims. This often leads women to fear disbelief, experience guilt and shame, and choose not to disclose their experiences.

Violence is fundamentally an expression of domination and coercion, devoid of relational equality or reciprocity. Perpetrators seek control, dominance, and the subjugation of others. It is imperative to emphasize that responsibility for violent behaviour lies solely with the perpetrator, not the victim. This distinction is critical to understanding that violence is not a mutual dynamic but an act of abuse perpetrated by one party against another and must be addressed as such.

Below you can find some specific examples of toxic behaviours that can occur within various types of relationships:

4.1 Manipulation

Manipulative behaviour involves using tactics to control or influence another person's thoughts, feelings, or actions for personal gain. Examples include:

- Guilt-tripping – making someone feel guilty for not complying with their wishes.

- Gaslighting – denying or distorting facts to make the other person doubt their own perceptions or sanity.

- Using emotional blackmail to get what they want.

4.2 - Constant criticism

Continuously finding fault with or criticizing the other person's behaviour, appearance, or choices. Examples include:

- Regularly pointing out flaws or mistakes in a demeaning manner.

- Making hurtful remarks about the other person's abilities or character.

4.3 - Control and possessiveness

Seeking to dominate or control the other person's actions, decisions, or relationships. Examples include:

- Monitoring their partner's activities, such as checking their phone or social media without permission.

- Dictating who the other person can spend time with or where they can go.

4.4 - Lack of empathy

Disregarding or minimizing the other person's feelings, emotions, or needs. Examples include:

- Ignoring or dismissing the other person's concerns or emotions.

- Showing little interest in understanding the other person's perspective.

4.5 - Jealousy and insecurity

Exhibiting excessive jealousy or insecurity, leading to controlling or accusatory behaviour. Examples include:

- Accusing the other person of infidelity without evidence.

- Becoming overly possessive or suspicious of the other person's interactions with others.

4.6 - Stonewalling and avoidance

Withholding communication or emotional engagement as a form of punishment or control. Examples include:

- Refusing to engage in conversations or provide emotional support during times of need.

- Giving the silent treatment as a way to manipulate or exert power over the other person.

4.7 - Physical or emotional abuse

Engaging in any form of physical violence, threats, intimidation, or verbal abuse. Examples include:

- Physical aggression, such as hitting, pushing, or grabbing.

- Verbal attacks, name-calling, or insults intended to hurt or degrade.

4.8 - Boundary violations

Disregarding personal boundaries, whether physical, emotional, or psychological. Examples include:

- Invading personal space without consent.

- Ignoring requests for privacy or autonomy.

4.9 - Blame-shifting

Refusing to take responsibility for one's actions and instead blaming others for problems or mistakes. Examples include:

- Always shifting the blame onto the other person in conflicts or disputes.

- Avoiding accountability by making excuses or justifying harmful behaviour.

4.10 - Unresolved conflict and recurring patterns:

Engaging in repetitive cycles of conflict without seeking resolution or positive change. Examples include:

- Repeating the same arguments or issues without addressing underlying problems.

- Failing to learn from past mistakes or behaviours, leading to a pattern of dysfunction.

5. Consequences of Toxic Relationships

The consequences of a toxic relationship can be severe, affecting nearly every aspect of a person's well-being – mentally, emotionally, and physically. These harmful dynamics often leave long-lasting scars that can be difficult to overcome. Understanding the effects is the first step toward recognizing when a relationship is toxic and taking the necessary steps to protect oneself. Below are some of the most common and damaging impacts that toxic relationships can have:

- **Emotional strain** is a hallmark of toxic relationships, leading to persistent feelings of anxiety, sadness, and tension. Over time, these negative experiences wear down self-worth, leaving individuals feeling unloved and inadequate.

- **The constant criticism**, manipulation, or emotional abuse typical of these relationships can cause deep damage to self-esteem. Individuals may start to doubt themselves, internalizing the negativity, which leads to feelings of worthlessness.

- Toxic partners often **isolate individuals** from friends and family, cutting them off from their support network. This isolation deepens feelings of loneliness and creates dependence on the toxic partner for validation and emotional support.

- The stress and emotional turmoil caused by toxic relationships can take a toll on **physical health**. It may result in sleep disturbances, headaches, digestive issues, and other stress-related ailments as prolonged emotional distress weakens the body's defences.

- In toxic relationships, individuals may lose sight of their own values, interests, and goals, as they focus on appeasing their partner. This can lead to a **loss of personal identity**, creating a sense of **emptiness** or **confusion** about who they are outside the relationship.

- These relationships often follow a c**ycle of conflict and temporary resolutions**, with promises of change that never materialize. This cycle keeps individuals trapped in dysfunction, leaving them feeling frustrated and hopeless.

- The **emotional scars** from a toxic relationship can linger long after it ends, making it difficult to trust others and form healthy connections in the future. Past trauma can interfere with the ability to build new, positive relationships.

- The ongoing emotional strain of a toxic relationship can contribute to serious **mental health issues**, such as **anxiety**, **depression**, or **post-traumatic stress disorder** (PTSD), often leaving individuals feeling emotionally exhausted and overwhelmed.

- In some cases, toxic partners may exert control over finances, leaving individuals **financially dependent or exploiting** their resources. This can create lasting financial difficulties and further entrapment in the relationship.

- In the most extreme cases, toxic relationships may escalate to **physical violence** or serious threats, endangering the individual's safety. Immediate intervention is crucial in these situations to prevent further harm.

Recognizing these consequences is essential for individuals to prioritize their well-being and take steps toward recovery. Seeking support from friends, family, or professionals like therapists or counsellors can be instrumental in breaking free from toxic dynamics and rebuilding a life grounded in self-respect, care, and healthy relationships.

6. Promotion of healthy and assertive communication

6.1 - Assertive Communication

Assertiveness is about expressing your thoughts, needs, and opinions in a direct and clear manner while maintaining respect for others. Developing assertive communication can help you:

- Reduce conflicts

- Manage anger effectively

- Ensure your needs are acknowledged

- Build stronger and more positive relationships

Many people struggle to apply assertiveness in daily life, often because they confuse it with other communication styles. To clarify, let's explore what assertiveness is not.

6.2 - Aggressive Communication vs. Assertive Communication

Assertiveness is sometimes mistaken for aggression because both involve standing up for oneself. However, they are fundamentally different:

Example: Imagine you are in line at the bank, and someone cuts in front of you.

An aggressive response might be grabbing their shoulder and loudly saying, "Hey! What makes you so special that you don't have to wait like the rest of us?" This could lead to an argument, leaving you frustrated and escalating the situation.

An assertive response would be calmly tapping their shoulder and saying, "Excuse me, there's actually a line here. It would be fair if you waited your turn like the rest

of us." This approach increases the chance of a positive response while maintaining mutual respect.

While assertiveness does not guarantee that others will respond kindly, it ensures that you handle the situation in a way that reinforces your confidence and self-respect.

Aggression	Assertiveness
Forces personal needs or opinions on others	Expresses needs clearly but respectfully
Often involves intimidation or pushing others around	Treats others with respect
Focuses solely on personal needs	Considers the needs of both parties
Refuses to compromise	Seeks a fair compromise
Damages relationships	Strengthens relationships
May escalate into shouting or physical aggression	Uses clear and composed language
Lowers self-esteem	Builds self-esteem

6.3 - Passive Communication vs. Assertive Communication

Assertiveness is also distinct from passive communication, which involves failing to express one's thoughts or needs out of fear, a desire to avoid conflict, or a tendency to prioritize others.

Characteristics of passive communication:

- Avoiding speaking up, believing one's views don't matter

- Always prioritizing others' needs over one's own

- Allowing oneself to be ignored or mistreated

- Using hesitant body language (e.g., looking down, shrugging)

Undermining one's opinions with phrases like "Only if you don't mind" or "It's not that important" A passive communication style can harm self-esteem and relationships. When others repeatedly overlook your needs, frustration and resentment can build.

6.4 - Finding the Balance: Practicing Assertiveness

Assertiveness sits in the middle ground between passive and aggressive communication, allowing you to express yourself confidently while respecting others.

Here are some practical ways to strengthen your assertiveness skills:

- Be clear and direct: Express your needs or opinions without hesitation. Use "I" statements: Instead of blaming, express how a situation affects you. ("When you leave dishes on the table, I feel frustrated because I don't want to clean up after you." instead of "You're so messy!")

- Watch your tone and volume: Speak in a steady, firm voice—not too loud, not too soft.

- Align body language with words: Maintain eye contact, stand upright, and keep a relaxed posture. Mixed signals (e.g., speaking confidently while looking down) can weaken your message.

- Avoid exaggerations: Replace phrases like "You're always late!" with factual statements like "You were 20 minutes late today, and this has happened three times this week."

- Focus on facts, not judgments: Say "This report is missing key details" instead of "You did a bad job again."

- Practice regularly: Like any skill, assertiveness improves with practice. Start with small interactions and build up more challenging conversations.

By developing assertive communication, you can navigate difficult conversations more effectively, maintain stronger relationships, and build greater self-confidence.

7. Action plan: how to proceed when you identify "Red Flags"

Developing a plan of action upon identifying warning signs in a relationship is essential for your well-being and empowerment to make informed choices. It's important to recognize and acknowledge the red flags you've identified, even if they seem subtle or infrequent. Take the signs seriously and assess how they are affecting your emotional, mental, and physical health. Reflect on your own needs, values, and boundaries within the relationship to determine if these red flags are violating your boundaries or compromising your well-being.

Seeking an external perspective from trusted friends, family members, or a therapist can provide clarity and validation regarding the red flags you've identified. If you feel safe and comfortable, communicate your concerns assertively using "I" statements to express how certain behaviours are impacting you. Clearly establish your boundaries and communicate them to the other person, explaining the consequences if the red flags persist or if your boundaries are violated.

Monitor the other person's progress and behaviour changes to see if they acknowledge the red flags and show willingness to change. Evaluate your options and potential outcomes if the red flags persist or escalate, considering whether

the relationship is salvageable through mutual effort or if it may be healthier to disengage.

Throughout this process, prioritize self-care by focusing on activities that bring you joy, relaxation, and comfort to manage stress and uncertainty. If dealing with serious red flags like abuse or manipulation, seek professional help from a counsellor, therapist, or support organization. Prepare yourself mentally and emotionally for making decisions based on addressing the red flags, trusting yourself to prioritize your own health and happiness.

Finally, take appropriate action based on your assessment and reflection, whether it involves working on improving the relationship with clear boundaries or distancing yourself if necessary for your well-being. Remember that addressing red flags requires courage, self-awareness, and a commitment to your own happiness and safety. Trust yourself to make choices that align with your values and contribute positively to your life journey.

Despite how hopeless and inescapable the situation might seem, it is possible to break free from violence with the right support, and every individual can contribute significantly. Whether it involves professional counselling or confiding within a friend or family circle, it is crucial to provide an environment of welcome, respect, and trust.

7.1 How should we act when a woman discloses a domestic violence situation?

It is essential to listen without judgment, reassuring her that you believe what she is confiding, emphasizing that violence is never justified, and it is never the fault

of the victim, but solely that of the perpetrator. Validate her feelings "I'm sorry you're going through this, no one deserves to be treated like this'

Acknowledge and respect the difficulties the women may express. Avoid questions like "Why didn't you leave sooner?", "Why don't you leave him?" or "Why haven't you reported it?". These can make her feel judged and misunderstood in the painful situation she is experiencing. Remember that both separation and reporting are very delicate steps that should ideally be taken with the support of specialized services and legal assistance. In these instances, it is crucial to avoid downplaying the situation or suggesting that she might have done something to provoke the violent behaviour. Recognize and respect the fears they may express, their fear, and confusion about what to do next, avoiding a judgmental or overpowering attitude, instead, reinforcing their strength and confidence, always ensuring your support. Maintain confidentiality! Do not share any details with other friends etc

Make sure that the person has a safe place to stay, without aggressive partner. Inform her that she can rely on the support and assistance of Anti-Violence Centres, specialized local facilities aimed specifically at supporting women and, if present, their children, guiding them through every phase of their liberation from violence.

Take care of yourself while helping! Being involved in such a difficult situation may affect you emotions and mental wellbeing. People who help others should have proper resources.

7.2 - Should you report if you recognize domestic violence?

Prioritizing the victim's safety and consent is essential. If they are not in immediate danger, talk to them first and ask what they want to do. Many survivors fear retaliation or losing control over their situation. Respect their decision, as forcing them to report may do more harm than good. Offer support by letting them know they are not alone and that you can help them find resources or create a safety plan.

If there is an immediate danger, calling the police may be necessary. This applies in situations where:

- The perpetrator threatens the life of the victim or others.

- You witness physical violence happening in real time.

- A child is in danger.

- The victim is unconscious, injured, or unable to seek help on their own.

In some countries, domestic violence is a mandatory reportable offense, so it is important to check local laws or consult a professional for precise guidance.

Before reporting without the victim's consent, consider the risks. They may feel betrayed and stop trusting you or others who want to help. If they are not ready to leave, a police report could escalate the abuse. In some cases, law enforcement intervention might not guarantee safety, particularly in countries where legal protections are weak.

If your friend is not ready to go to the police, there are alternative ways to support them. Encourage them to seek professional help, such as calling a domestic violence hotline, a therapist, or an advocacy group. Help them create a safety plan by discussing safe places to go, emergency contacts, and what to do if the

violence escalates. Provide emotional support by reassuring them that they are not alone and that you will be there for them no matter what.

If they are in immediate danger, calling the police is the right course of action. If they are not in immediate danger, supporting them in making their own choice is crucial. The best approach is to empower your friend, provide resources, and ensure they know you are there for them when they are ready to take action.

8. Understanding violence against women: national contexts

Violence against women is a global issue, but its forms, causes, and impact can vary significantly across different countries and cultures. Each nation's history, social structures, legal frameworks, and cultural attitudes shape how gender-based violence is experienced and addressed. Understanding these national contexts is crucial to developing effective strategies for prevention and support.

In this section, we explore the unique challenges and responses to violence against women in various countries. By examining national research, we gain insight into the societal, legal, and cultural factors that influence both the prevalence of violence and the measures taken to combat it. These perspectives not only highlight the differences between countries but also underscore the shared global responsibility to address violence against women.

Through this analysis, we aim to deepen our understanding of the complexities surrounding gender-based violence, while also identifying best practices and areas for improvement. By learning from diverse national experiences, we can move toward more inclusive and effective solutions to protect and empower women everywhere.

8.1 - Italy

Violence against women is on the rise in Italy, but this increase might also be linked to a greater willingness to report these incidents. This shift comes thanks to awareness campaigns run by both public and private organizations working to combat violence, as well as stronger and more detailed laws. These laws focus on punishing gender-based crimes, which are covered by the Italian Penal Code and Law No. 69 of July 19, 2019, known as the "Red Code." This law introduced important changes to criminal and procedural regulations around domestic and gender-based violence, providing stronger protection for victims of stalking, domestic abuse, and sexual violence.

Italy's legal framework for tackling gender-based violence is based on the Istanbul Convention, which the country signed on September 27, 2012. When Italy signed the Convention, it also submitted a note to the Council of Europe, stating that it would implement the Convention in line with its own constitutional principles. The Italian Parliament later ratified the Convention through Law No. 77 in 2013.

8.1.1 - Organizations

Several organizations in Italy are actively engaged in combating gender-based violence. These entities provide essential services, ranging from psychological support to legal assistance, and work closely with both government and non-government organizations.

Government agencies

- **Rete Nazionale Antiviolenza (National Anti-Violence Network)** is managed by the Ministry of the Interior, this network operates the 1522

helpline, which offers free psychological and legal support to victims of violence 24/7.

- **Rete Dafne Italia** provides public and free services to victims of crime, including women who have suffered from violence. It collaborates with local authorities and healthcare services to provide assistance.

Non-Profit Organizations

- **D.i.Re (Donne in Rete contro la violenza)** is a national network of 87 organizations managing over 100 anti-violence centers and shelters. D.i.Re supports migrant women and refugees in partnership with the UNHCR and raises awareness about gender violence.

- **Differenza Donna** manages the 1522 helpline, focuses on transforming cultural perceptions of women and offering direct support to victims of violence through legal aid and counseling.

- **Associazione Nazionale Relive** provides support programs for perpetrators of violence, aimed at prevention and accountability, in line with Article 16 of the Istanbul Convention.

8.1.2 - Legal framework

Italy has developed a comprehensive legal framework to combat gender-based violence, focused on protecting victims, prosecuting offenders, and preventing further violence. Over the past decade, Italy has introduced several key laws that have significantly strengthened the fight against violence against women. These laws have not only increased penalties for perpetrators but also provided quicker

and more efficient legal processes, as well as specific protections tailored to the needs of victims.

- **Law No. 77/2013: Ratification of the Istanbul Convention**

    This law ratified the Istanbul Convention, a landmark international treaty focused on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. It requires Italy to take specific measures to protect victims, prosecute offenders, and prevent violence through policies, services, and public awareness campaigns.

- **Law No. 69/2019: The 'Red Code'**

    The Red Code law introduced several major changes to the Italian Penal Code to speed up investigations of gender-based violence and strengthen victim protections:

    - **Revenge porn (Art. 612-ter)** – sharing sexually explicit images or videos without consent is now a crime, punishable by 1 to 6 years in prison and fines ranging from €5,000 to €15,000.

    - **Facial disfigurement (Art. 583-quinquies)** – causing permanent facial injuries, also known as "facial disfigurement," is punishable by 8 to 14 years in prison. If the victim dies as a result of the injuries, the perpetrator faces life imprisonment.

    - **Forced marriage (Art. 558-bis)** – forcing someone into marriage, whether in Italy or abroad, is punishable by 1 to 5 years in prison. If the victim is a minor, penalties increase. This applies even if the crime occurs outside of Italy, as long as the victim or perpetrator is an Italian citizen or resident.

- o **Violation of restraining orders (Art. 387-bis)** – breaking a restraining order or removal order from the family home is now punishable by 6 months to 3 years in prison.

In addition to these new offenses, **Law No. 69/2019** also increased penalties for existing crimes related to violence:

- o **Domestic abuse** – penalties increased from 2-6 years to 3-7 years in prison.
- o **Stalking** – increased penalties, from 6 months to 5 years, to a minimum of 1 year and a maximum of 6 years and 6 months.
- o **Sexual violence** – the punishment range was increased from 5-10 years to 6-12 years in prison.
- o **Group sexual violence** – the minimum penalty was raised from 6 years to 8 years, with a maximum of 14 years.

The **Red Code law** also mandates that law enforcement receive specialized training on how to handle cases of gender-based violence. Additionally, it speeds up the response time for victim complaints and introduces a system known as the Questor's Warning, which allows police to issue immediate protection measures for victims at risk.

- **Law No. 34/2021: The 'Cartabia Law'**

  The Cartabia Law, named after Italy's Minister of Justice, was designed to reduce the length of criminal trials, which can often be prolonged in Italy. For cases involving gender-based violence, the law also emphasizes the need for timely investigations and trials, to prevent victims from facing delays in justice. It includes provisions to protect victims throughout the

legal process, ensuring they are supported and that their rights are upheld during criminal proceedings.

- **Law No. 168/2023: National guidelines**

  These guidelines were introduced to further strengthen Italy's approach to preventing and addressing violence against women. They focus on:

  o Raising awareness about the different forms of violence, including domestic violence, and their root causes.

  o Improving the identification of early warning signs in relationships that could escalate into violence.

  o Educating the public and professionals on the legal tools available to protect victims, particularly based on the Istanbul Convention.

  o Promoting best practices in preventing and responding to violence against women.

8.1.3 - National initiatives

Italy has implemented several national initiatives aimed at preventing and responding to violence against women:

- **"National Strategic Plan on Male Violence Against Women 2021-2023"**, in continuity with the previous 2017-2020 Plan, it is structured into 4 Axes (Prevention, Protection and Support, Prosecution and Punishment, Assistance and Promotion), in alignment with the Istanbul Convention, each of which corresponds to specific priorities. The Plan aims to drive government action to respond to the various aspects of violence: prevention, protection of victims,

punishment of men who commit violence, training and education of workers and the population, information and awareness-raising, actions directed at abusive men, protection of migrant women and those subjected to multiple forms of discrimination, work, economic, and housing autonomy, and the creation of spaces dedicated to women.

- **Experimental Plan "Educating on Relationships"**, developed in November 2023 by the Ministries of Education, Culture, and Family and Equal Opportunities: It allows secondary schools to optionally include 30 hours per year in their curricula for "discussion groups" among students to talk about emotional and relational issues. These discussions will be moderated by a teacher and may include professionals (psychologists, educators, etc.) or associations in the sector. The training of the teachers involved will be carried out by Indire (National Institute for Educational Documentation, Innovation, and Research) in collaboration with qualified professionals.

- The **"ViVa - Monitoring, Evaluation, and Analysis of Interventions for the Prevention and Combat of Violence Against Women"** project is carried out as part of a collaboration agreement between IRPPS-CNR (Institute for Research on Population and Social Policies - National Research Council) and the Department for Equal Opportunities of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers. The project has two main levels of action:
  - The first supports policies for the prevention and fight against violence against women through a series of action-research activities aimed at assisting the Department for Equal Opportunities in implementing the National Strategic Plan on Male Violence Against Women 2017–2020.

o The second focuses on an evaluative analysis of both the quantitative and qualitative dimensions of violence against women in Italy. It includes an ex post evaluation of the implementation processes, achievements, and results of the Extraordinary Plan (2015-17), as well as further evaluative analyses (ex-ante and ongoing) of the achievements of the 2017–2020 Plan.

8.1.4 - Comparison of violence trends

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the changing dynamics of violence against women in Italy, it's essential to analyze how different forms of gender-based violence have evolved over the past few years. The period from 2019 to 2023 saw significant changes, influenced by a combination of legislative reforms, awareness campaigns, and external factors like the COVID-19 pandemic. These trends not only highlight the effectiveness of certain measures but also point to areas where more work is needed.

- **Domestic abuse**

Domestic abuse remains one of the most pervasive forms of violence against women in Italy. Between 2019 and 2022, reported cases of domestic abuse increased by 13%, rising from 20,850 cases in 2019 to 24,570 cases in 2022. This increase can be attributed to several factors:

o Increased reporting, as awareness campaigns and stronger protections for victims, especially following the introduction of the Red Code law, have encouraged more women to come forward and report abuse. The

law's fast-track mechanisms for domestic violence cases helped improve the response time of law enforcement and judicial bodies.

- o The COVID-19 pandemic contributed to a rise in domestic abuse cases globally, and Italy was no exception. Lockdowns, economic stress, and the confinement of families within homes exacerbated tensions, leading to an increase in violence. At the same time, victims found it harder to access support services during the lockdown periods, leading to an underreporting of cases, which surged as restrictions eased.

Despite the increase in reported cases, experts believe that domestic abuse remains underreported, particularly in rural areas where social stigma and limited access to services may discourage victims from seeking help.

- **Stalking**

The trend in stalking cases shows a steady rise, peaking in 2021 during the pandemic before slightly declining in 2022. From 2019 to 2022, stalking cases increased by 7%, with 16,085 cases in 2019, 18,724 in 2021, and 18,671 in 2022. Several factors explain this pattern:

- o During the pandemic, social restrictions led to an increase in online stalking and harassment, as perpetrators shifted to digital means of control and intimidation. The surge in digital communication, paired with isolation measures, created more opportunities for stalking behavior.

o The Red Code law strengthened penalties for stalking, increasing the minimum penalty from 6 months to 1 year and the maximum penalty to 6 years and 6 months. This legal change, along with greater public awareness, likely contributed to more cases being reported, especially in urban areas where victims have greater access to support services.

The slight decline in 2022 may suggest that the heightened reporting during the pandemic has begun to stabilize, but stalking remains a serious concern, especially for younger women.

- **Sexual Violence**

Cases of sexual violence, including rape, rose significantly during this period. Reports increased from 4,884 in 2019 to 5,991 in 2022, representing a 35% increase. Although Italy has made progress in increasing the penalties for sexual violence and raising awareness about the issue, underreporting remains a concern. Many victims, particularly from marginalized communities, still hesitate to come forward due to stigma, fear of not being believed, or distrust in the legal system.

Several key factors drive this trend:

o Legislative reforms like the Red Code law, which raised the minimum sentence for sexual violence from 5 to 6 years, have likely encouraged more victims to come forward. The publicized criminalization of new offenses, such as revenge porn, has also raised awareness about the legal consequences of sexual violence, leading to higher reporting rates.

- o Italy has seen an influx of migrants and refugees in recent years, particularly women from conflict zones. These women are especially vulnerable to sexual violence and exploitation. Many face barriers to reporting crimes due to language, legal status, or fear of retaliation.
- o Like other forms of violence, the pandemic created conditions that contributed to an increase in sexual violence. The economic strain and confinement experienced during lockdowns intensified intimate partner violence, while the isolation of victims made it harder for them to access help or escape abusive situations.

- **Femicide**

In 2022, 125 women were killed, a number that slightly decreased to 120 in 2023. The majority of femicides are committed by intimate partners or ex-partners. The relative stability in femicide rates, with minor fluctuations, suggests that while awareness has increased, systemic issues related to domestic violence and control in intimate relationships persist.

Key factors contributing to femicide include:

- o The majority of femicides occur in the context of intimate relationships. Even with increased legal protections, some women are unable to escape abusive relationships due to economic dependence, social pressure, or fear.

- o Deeply ingrained gender norms and patriarchal values, particularly in rural areas, continue to play a role in how men perceive control and power over women, leading to violent outcomes.

- **Cyberviolence**

Cyberviolence, particularly among younger populations, has become a growing issue in Italy. By 2021, Italy had become the second most affected country in Europe for cyberstalking, with 11% of Italians reporting experiences of digital stalking. This trend can be explained by several factors:

- With the rise of social media and digital platforms, perpetrators have more opportunities to harass, intimidate, and stalk women online. The shift to remote work and communication during the pandemic further accelerated this trend.

- While Italy has laws to address cyberstalking, enforcement remains challenging. The rapid evolution of technology often outpaces the legal system's ability to regulate and control online behaviour, leaving many victims vulnerable.

8.1.5 - Conclusion

Italy has made significant strides in combating violence against women through legislative reforms, increased penalties, and improved support services. The Red Code law and the Istanbul Convention have provided a robust legal framework, ensuring faster responses and stronger protections for victims. The creation of specific offenses, such as revenge porn and forced marriage, along with harsher penalties for domestic abuse, stalking, and sexual violence, reflect Italy's commitment to addressing the complexities of gender-based violence.

However, while legal measures have advanced, enforcement challenges remain, especially in under-resourced areas such as rural regions. Victims in these areas may face significant barriers in accessing shelters, legal aid, or psychological support, despite the existence of a national helpline and anti-violence networks.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted the need for adaptable support systems. Domestic violence and sexual violence surged during lockdowns, exacerbating existing social and economic pressures on women. Although awareness campaigns have increased reporting, underreporting remains a major issue, particularly in cases of intimate partner violence and cyberviolence.

Another critical challenge is addressing cultural norms and societal attitudes that perpetuate gender inequality. While the Italian legal framework is among the strongest in Europe, social change is slower, with traditional gender roles and patriarchal values still influencing how violence is perceived and reported. This is especially true in rural and conservative communities, where stigma continues to deter victims from seeking help.

The data trends between 2019 and 2023 show clear progress in terms of increased reporting and prosecution, but the persistence of issues like femicide and the rapid rise in cyberviolence reflect the need for ongoing efforts. The steady rates of femicide, despite heightened legal protections, underscore the deep-rooted cultural issues that Italy must continue to tackle.

Looking ahead, Italy must build on the progress made by:

- Ensuring better access to services in rural areas,

- Further educating and training law enforcement to recognize and prevent gender-based violence,

- Strengthening digital protections against cyberviolence, and

- Continuing public awareness campaigns to challenge societal attitudes and encourage reporting.

By maintaining momentum in these areas, Italy can continue to improve its response to gender-based violence, ensuring that all women, regardless of their circumstances, have access to justice, protection, and support.

8.2 - Poland

Violence against women in Poland is a significant and complex issue. To fully understand it, one must consider the country's history, culture, society, and legal framework. Poland's past, marked by wars and political upheaval, has influenced societal attitudes toward gender roles and violence. The fight for independence often overshadowed social issues, including violence against women.

The Catholic Church holds a powerful influence in Poland. Its traditional values frequently support patriarchal family structures, contributing to gender inequality and making it more challenging for victims of violence to seek help. The Church's positions on divorce, contraception, and abortion can further limit women's options and ability to escape abusive relationships.

Poland has laws addressing domestic violence, such as the Act on Counteracting Domestic Violence (Ustawa o Przeciwdziałaniu Przemocy w Rodzinie) from 2005. However, these laws are sometimes criticized for not being fully enforced or comprehensive enough. In 2015, Poland signed the Istanbul Convention to

combat violence against women, but there has been ongoing political debate about withdrawing from the treaty, with some arguing it conflicts with traditional family values.

There are both government and non-government organizations that assist victims of domestic violence, though resources are often limited, particularly in rural areas. Poland ranks low on gender equality within Europe. In the 2020 Gender Equality Index, Poland was placed at the bottom among EU countries, reflecting economic disparities, limited political representation for women, and societal attitudes that perpetuate discrimination.

Economic dependence on men can make it especially difficult for women to leave abusive relationships. Unemployment, poverty, and a lack of affordable housing further complicate this issue.

Despite these challenges, awareness and activism around gender-based violence are growing. Movements such as the Black Protests (Czarny Protest), which opposed strict abortion laws, have shone a light on broader women's rights issues. The previous government, led by the Law and Justice Party (PiS), adopted conservative positions on many social issues, tightening abortion laws and downplaying the seriousness of domestic violence. While a new government has recently taken office, and there is hope for positive change, it remains too early to assess its impact.

8.2.1 - Organizations

In Poland, various groups are working to combat gender-based violence. These include government agencies, non-profit organizations, and community initiatives, each playing a crucial role in supporting victims and raising awareness.

Government agencies

- **Ministry of Family and Social Policy**:
  This ministry develops programs to support victims of domestic violence and has been instrumental in creating laws to address stalking and sexual harassment.

- **Commissioner for Human Rights (Rzecznik Praw Obywatelskich)**:
  The RPO provides legal assistance to victims of gender-based violence and advocates for stronger laws and policies to protect women's rights.

Non-Profit Organizations

- **Women's Rights Center (Centrum Praw Kobiet)**:
  This organization provides legal, psychological, and social support for women facing violence and conducts public awareness campaigns and educational programs.

- **La Strada Foundation**:
  Focused on combatting human trafficking, La Strada supports victims, especially women, and works on prevention through education and advocacy.

- **Amnesty International Poland**:
  The organization campaigns against gender-based violence and conducts research to highlight issues such as domestic violence and the rights of sexual minorities.

Community groups and initiatives

- **Feminoteka Foundation**:

    Feminoteka operates a helpline for domestic violence victims and organizes workshops promoting gender equality and preventing violence.

- **Anti-Violence Network**:

    A network of local groups that provide direct assistance to violence victims while advocating for stronger protections and support systems.

8.2.2 - Legal framework

Poland has implemented several legal mechanisms to protect victims of domestic violence, though enforcement and resource allocation often remain inconsistent. While shelters, hotlines, and counselling services are available, they are underfunded and less accessible in rural areas.

- **Act on Counteracting Domestic Violence** enacted in 2005, this law provides mechanisms such as restraining orders and police intervention to protect victims and remove perpetrators from their homes.

- **Criminal Code** that includes penalties for various forms of violence against women, including physical assault, sexual violence, and harassment.

- **Ministry of Family and Social Policy** which implements programs to extend legal protections to victims of stalking and sexual harassment.

- **Commissioner for Human Rights** who provides legal support to victims and pushes for stronger protections through policy advocacy.

Poland signed the Istanbul Convention in 2015, leading to stricter penalties for abusers and improved victim support procedures. However, political opposition to the convention, particularly from conservative and right-wing groups, argues that it conflicts with traditional family values. This has led to ongoing debates about Poland's potential withdrawal from the treaty, despite widespread protests and advocacy from women's rights groups.

8.2.3 - National initiatives

- **National action plan for combating violence against women:**
  A comprehensive plan outlining measures to prevent and respond to violence against women, focusing on improving legislation, enhancing victim support services, and increasing public awareness.

- **Blue line (Niebieska linia)**:
  A national hotline offering immediate assistance to domestic violence victims, including legal advice, psychological support, and intervention services.

- **Emergency health system response**:
  In response to the rise in gender-based violence, particularly among Ukrainian refugees, the World Health Organization (WHO) and national partners have launched initiatives to strengthen the capacity of the Polish health system to support victims of violence during emergencies.

- **Support for refugees and displaced persons**:

Poland has made significant efforts to support Ukrainian refugees, primarily women and children, by addressing their health and safety needs and providing temporary protection.

- **UN Women and EU-UN spotlight initiative**:

This initiative aims to end violence against women and girls through comprehensive programs that include legal reforms, support services, and prevention strategies. It also provides increased funding for local women's organizations and grassroots movements, ensuring they have the resources necessary to continue their work.

8.2.4 - Comparison of violence trends

To gain a deeper understanding of the dynamics of violence against women in Poland, it is crucial to examine how different forms of violence have changed over time. The following section presents both a comparison chart and a detailed breakdown of trends in reported cases of domestic abuse, stalking, sexual violence, femicide, and cyberviolence between 2018 and 2022.

- **Domestic abuse**

Domestic violence remains a serious issue in Poland, with the COVID-19 pandemic worsening the situation. In 2018, police reported around 92,000 domestic violence interventions, increasing to 94,000 in 2019. Although there was a slight decrease in 2020, cases remained high. Women made up over 75% of victims in reported cases.

The pandemic saw a rise in domestic violence, reflecting global patterns of increased tension due to lockdowns. Legal reforms aimed to better protect victims, offering restraining orders and stricter penalties for offenders.

Victims face difficulties in accessing shelters, particularly in rural areas, where support services are limited. Healthcare professionals often lack adequate training to identify domestic violence, leading to underreporting.

Both government and non-profits have expanded services, including hotlines and counselling, although coverage remains uneven. Public awareness campaigns have increased efforts to encourage reporting and reduce stigma.

- **Stalking**

Stalking incidents increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, rising from 5,300 cases in 2018 to over 6,000 during lockdowns. By 2022, cases decreased slightly to 5,800. The "Red Code" initiative, introduced to improve police response times and prioritize urgent stalking cases, has enhanced victim protection and streamlined the process for obtaining restraining orders.

Women, especially those aged 18-35, report the highest instances of stalking. Both urban and rural areas report cases, though rural areas face greater challenges due to fewer resources.

- **Sexual violence**

In 2019, Poland saw around 2,500 cases of reported rape, which increased to 2,700 in 2021. Sexual harassment and violence surged during the pandemic, leading to higher demand for support services.

Young women, aged 15-49, are disproportionately affected. The influx of Ukrainian refugees since 2022 has also increased vulnerability among displaced women and girls. Reporting remains a major issue, with many victims reluctant to come forward due to stigma. Efforts are underway to improve reporting through better healthcare training and support services.

- **Femicides**

Femicides in Poland have risen, with approximately 400 women killed in 2019, often due to domestic violence. Intimate partners or family members are typically the perpetrators.

Urban areas tend to report higher femicide rates due to better reporting mechanisms, though rural areas may experience underreporting due to social stigma and limited resources.

- **Cyberviolence**

Cyberbullying among teens has risen significantly, with nearly half of all teens in Poland experiencing it by 2022. This trend is largely attributed to increased online activity during the pandemic.

Most incidents occur on social media platforms like YouTube, TikTok, and Snapchat. Common forms of cyberbullying include name-calling, spreading false rumours, and receiving explicit images.

Victims suffer from anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem. Efforts to combat cyberbullying include blocking offenders and reporting incidents, but the involvement of schools and parents remains crucial.

Impact of the pandemic

The pandemic exacerbated domestic violence, with lockdowns leading to increased household tension and reduced access to support. While reporting initially dropped, as restrictions eased, reports of abuse surged.

The pandemic highlighted the need for stronger, adaptable support systems that can function during emergencies. These experiences will likely influence future policies and practices for addressing domestic violence.

8.2.5 - Conclusion

Poland has made significant progress in combating violence against women, driven by improvements in reporting systems, legal reforms, and enhanced support services. The urgency for these changes became even more evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, which not only amplified existing issues but also spurred much-needed innovations in how the country addresses gender-based violence.

A key development has been in how victims report abuse. Authorities have worked hard to encourage more victims to come forward, creating more accessible systems and training police officers to handle domestic violence cases with greater care. These efforts, supported by organizations such as UN Women, have led to more effective and empathetic responses from law enforcement.

At the same time, legal reforms have strengthened protections for those at risk. Poland's expanded definition of domestic violence now includes stalking and sexual harassment, alongside stricter penalties for offenders. Victims also have better access to protection orders, reflecting a broader commitment to their safety and well-being. These legal changes have been crucial in addressing the

complexity of gender-based violence and ensuring that victims receive the justice they deserve.

Support services have also evolved to meet the growing needs of victims, especially during the pandemic when traditional forms of assistance were harder to access. Organizations like the Women's Rights Center and La Strada Foundation have played a vital role, offering essential legal aid, counseling, and social support. During lockdowns, many of these services transitioned online, ensuring that help remained within reach for those in need. The quick adaptation to digital support systems highlighted the resilience and dedication of these organizations in times of crisis.

The pandemic, while exposing the fragility of existing support systems, also brought about heightened awareness and a more robust response to domestic violence. Initially, reporting decreased as victims found themselves isolated with their abusers. However, as restrictions were lifted and public awareness campaigns intensified, reporting surged once again. Helplines and online resources became essential tools, offering victims a way to seek help discreetly and safely.

Public engagement and increased media attention have further shifted attitudes toward gender-based violence. Civil society organizations have led the charge in advocating for change, working closely with law enforcement and government agencies to drive policy reforms and foster greater trust within communities. These collaborations have not only improved responses to domestic violence but have also sparked broader conversations about gender equality.

Looking ahead, Poland is committed to building on this progress. Continued efforts to address the remaining gaps will focus on ensuring that all victims,

regardless of their circumstances, have access to the support and justice they need. This includes ongoing police training, further legal reforms, and sustained support for non-profit organizations and community groups. By maintaining momentum and expanding these efforts, Poland is working toward a future where safety and equality are guaranteed for all.

8.3 - Bulgaria

Bulgaria has no official statistics on victims of domestic violence and gender-based violence. The data is extracted on a different basis, with different methods and criteria, from the organizations involved in the problem, the emergency phone 112 signals and from the statistics of cases opened and closed. However, many cases remain hidden because people do not report the problems or do so sporadically. For this reason, much of the data for this study was gathered from media publications, interviews and statements of representatives of various governmental and non-governmental organizations. The main objective is to frame the problem and the solutions that are implemented.

The phenomenon of "domestic violence" is complex, multifaceted and affects every aspect of our lives - economic, psychological, social, relational, legal, etc. Eradicating it requires coordinated change at every level.

According to the survey "Violence in Bulgaria", every second Bulgarian citizen defines the problem of domestic violence as very significant - 54% rate its seriousness between 8 and 10 on a ten-point scale. This opinion is shared

almost equally across different socio-demographic groups, including men and women. Gender-based violence is also defined as a serious public problem – 45% of respondents give it importance between 8 and 10 on a ten-point scale.

The cause of protecting women from violence is relatively new and globally. The UN began its campaign dedicated to this problem by declaring November 25 as the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women only in 2000.

To date, the topic is particularly sensitive for society. Unfortunately, this also came at the cost of the victims, whose stories received media attention. According to data in a nationally representative study on the topic "Violence in Bulgaria" from 2019, three quarters of all cases of violence that happened to people in the last one year were precisely domestic violence, and for 56.6% the most serious situation of violence they ever experienced was also in their home. For many years, the topic was replaced by opposition to the Istanbul Convention and the fear of gender ideology. To a large extent, this blocked the posing of the real problem, namely "How to stop the violence?". The answer to this question illuminates many tasks that require the combined efforts of the whole society such as: a prevention system, raising awareness, a fast and coordinated victim protection system, services to work with abusers, increasing trust in institutions, reporting both from the victims and their relatives and many others.

The term "domestic violence" is well-known in our country (in 2005 the Law on Protection from Domestic Violence was issued), but the term "gender-based violence" is still poorly used, its content is unclear to the public and overlaps with violence against women. Some NGOs conduct campaigns to clarify the scope and

content of the phenomenon and conduct educational and advocacy campaigns to limit it.

8.3.1 - Organizations

Several Bulgarian organizations, both governmental and non-governmental, work to combat gender-based violence and support victims through legal assistance, crisis intervention, and awareness campaigns.

Government agencies

- **Ministry of Justice** has undertaken key efforts to revise Bulgaria's laws on domestic violence, expanding the scope of protections and working towards faster response mechanisms for victims.

- **Social Assistance Agency**, operating in coordination with municipalities to provide shelter, counselling, and other forms of social support to domestic violence survivors.

Non-Profit Organizations

- **P.U.L.S. Foundation**, which provides vital support services, including counseling and emergency aid to victims, as well as education campaigns to raise awareness about domestic violence.

- **Animus Association Foundation**, as one of the leading NGOs in Bulgaria, Animus provides psychological support, legal aid, and operates a crisis center for women and children.

- **Bulgarian Women's Fund**, which focuses on advocacy, research, and funding support to various smaller organizations working to combat gender violence throughout Bulgaria.

8.3.2 - Legal framework

The analysis of the legal framework requires us to consider a longer period, during which many changes have occurred in Bulgarian socio-political life.

It is important to note that the introduction of the term "domestic violence" is not simply a refinement of the legal framework. It reflects deep processes of change in public attitudes, economic changes, values, understandings, relationships. The characterization of a given behavior as an act of domestic violence follows the path of understandings such as:

- they are family and we cannot interfere with them;

- if he is not jealous of you, then he doesn't love you;

- the woman must be silent and obedient;

- she asked for it, she is guilty;

- if he acted like that, there must have been a reason;

- the man brings the money into the house and deserves respect;

- this is in the nature of every man and many others.

to realizations as:

- this should not happen;

- you have no right to do this;

- you have the right to protection;

- you don't have to put up with this;

- love shouldn't hurt;

- you are not weak, etc.

This long path of change is reflected in the state legal framework. As a member of the EU, Bulgaria synchronizes its legislation with European norms.

Until 2005 "domestic violence" as a term does not appear in the country's laws. This does not reflect the absence of the phenomenon in the lives of Bulgarians, as well as the lack of prosecution of the culprits, the cases that were filed had other categorizations - bodily injury, murder, coercion, rape, etc.

In March 2005 a watershed moment in domestic violence protection comes with the promulgation of the **Domestic Violence Protection Act**. The law aims to give quick and effective protection and to provide help and support to persons who have suffered from or at risk of domestic violence, and to exercise a preventive and deterrent action on the perpetrator of the violence. It gives a legal definition of the concept and specifies who and in which cases can seek protection from the court, and in the presence of immediate danger to life or health - from the police. Protection from gender-based violence is not yet subject to independent legal regulation in a normative act with the rank of law, beyond that provided by the norms of the Criminal Code. Until 2023, the Law on protection from domestic violence will undergo numerous amendments and additions, expanding the concept of "domestic violence", adding persons who can seek protection, extending the period of validity of the measures, etc.

Other legal acts related to the protection of victims of domestic violence:

- **Rules for implementing the law on protection from domestic violence,** - adopted in 2010, it regulates:
    - 1. the implementation of measures for protection from domestic violence;
    - 2. the interaction of state authorities and legal entities that work for protection from domestic violence;

- o 3. the financing of projects of non-profit legal entities for the development and implementation of programs and trainings.

- **Family Code** - The Family Code governs relationships based on marriage, consanguinity and adoption, as well as guardianship and guardianship.

- **Law on Equality of Women and Men**; equal treatment of women and men and no gender-based discrimination and violence.

- T**he law on assistance and financial compensation to victims of crimes** - regulates the conditions and procedure for assistance and financial compensation by the state to victims of crimes Bulgarian citizens or citizens of member states of the European Union. This includes domestic violence.

- **Criminal procedural code** - domestic violence interrogations.

- **The Law on Social Services** - regulates the provision, use, planning, financing, quality, control and monitoring of social services in the Republic of Bulgaria, including for victims of domestic violence**.**

- **Regulations for the organization, organization and activities of the National Council for the Prevention and Protection of Domestic Violence,**

- **Strategy "Combating violence and protecting and supporting victims".**

- **National program to prevent and counter human trafficking and protect victims for 2023.**

Under the influence of public pressure ("The Deborah Case") and the data from the survey by the Ministry of Justice, in 2023. significant reform of legislation

protecting against domestic violence and gender-based violence is taking place. Due to the complexity of cases of domestic violence between partners who live without marriage and do not share a common household, the legislator defined an "intimate relationship", which caused much controversy among lawyers and the public.

8.3.3 - The (non)acceptance of the Istanbul Convention

The Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, also called the Istanbul Convention, is a document that sets a gold standard for the work of institutions. It was proposed for signature on May 11, 2011 in Istanbul, Turkey, and entered into force on August 1, 2014. Bulgaria, represented by then Minister of Justice Ekaterina Zaharieva, signed the Convention on April 21, 2016.

In July 2017, the "Alliance for the Protection of Gender-Based Violence", uniting 11 organizations from all over the country, and the "Bulgarian Center for Gender Studies" foundation made a public request for the immediate ratification of the convention.

On November 28, 2017, the Deputy Minister of Justice Desislava Ahladova announced during a round table organized by the Bulgarian Women's Fund that the Istanbul Convention will be ratified by the end of 2017. A group of governmental and non-governmental organizations was formed to prepare a Strategy for the introduction of the principles and requirements of the Istanbul Convention into Bulgarian legislation.

In 2018, the Bulgarian Constitutional Court accepted that she advocated legal concepts related to the concept of "gender" that were incompatible with basic principles of the Constitution.

"Article 216, paragraph 2 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union states that agreements concluded by the Union are binding on its institutions and member states," the Commission pointed out.

Many protests, signatures and debates are held against the Convention. The arguments are entirely about the definitions of the concepts "social gender" and "gender identity", and opponents of the Convention suspect the danger of promoting gender ideology in Bulgaria. Their interpretation is that it will legalize "gender of choice" and same-sex marriage, destroy the traditional Christian family. In a short time, all the opposition parties stood against the ratification of the Convention. On January 22, 2018, the Holy Synod of the BOC published an address to Orthodox Christians, citizens and representatives of state power in the country, calling on the National Assembly not to ratify the convention. At the same time, more than 140 non-governmental organizations issued a call to the National Assembly to ratify the Convention. They present data according to which for thousands of Bulgarian women, violence is a daily occurrence. According to statistics from 2016, 90% of the 311 clients of the PULS Foundation suffered from gender-based violence, as did their children. They primarily suffer from domestic violence against women and mothers in the family, they systematically witness or are subjected to various types of violence, including sexual. In the same year (2018), 107 university professors signed a letter of ratification.

Bulgaria is one of the six countries that refused to ratify the convention, which delays its adoption at the EU level. In May 2023 The European Parliament voted a decision, with which it agreed to the Council of the EU to complete the process of ratification of the Istanbul Convention. The recommendation was approved by two separate votes with an overwhelming majority - over 450 votes from around 600 participating MEPs. As of October 1, the Istanbul Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence entered into force throughout the European Union (EU). In Bulgaria, this happened only partially. As a member of the EU, Bulgaria is obliged to apply the law of the union in the areas where EU law also applies. In most of its provisions, it will be a valid law for the Republic of Bulgaria, but not in its entirety.

8.3.4 - National initiatives

Bulgaria has a range of impactful national initiatives aimed at tackling gender violence, with support from both government bodies and NGOs, such as:

1. **"You Are Not Alone" Campaign**, which brings attention to violence against women by featuring public figures who raise awareness and help foster a collective response.

2. **Emergency Fund for Domestic Violence Survivors**, which was launched by the Bulgarian Women's Fund with BCause Foundation and the Bulgarian Donor Forum, this fund emerged during COVID-19 to provide urgent support to victims and the organizations that serve them, such as crisis centers and legal support services.

3. **Bulgarian Helsinki Committee's Media Monitoring**, which in response to increasing femicide, this group collects data on intentional homicides of

women by monitoring news sources, creating a transparent record of cases.

4. **National Statistical Institute's Gender-Based Violence Study**, which is supported by the European Commission and provides crucial data on the prevalence of gender-based violence in Bulgaria.

5. **Animus Foundation's Police Training**, conducting specialized training for police officers, aimed at equipping them with skills to support victims of domestic violence.

6. **Association Naya's Elderly Women's Protection Program**, funded by the EU's CERV Program, improves inter-institutional responses to violence against elderly women.

7. **Amalipe Center's PATTERN Project**, focusing on Roma communities works to prevent domestic violence by educating women on their rights and offering support resources. Their film "Turn the Page" amplifies this message.

8. **Educational Film by NAYA Association** ("Sevda – Fate or Longing") uses storytelling to raise awareness of the impacts of gender violence, drawing attention to the experiences of survivors.

9. **PULS Foundation** aims to improve the support systems available to domestic violence survivors, ensuring they have timely access to help and resources.

8.3.5 - Comparison of violence trends

In recent years, Bulgaria has faced growing concerns over domestic and gender-based violence. The COVID-19 pandemic heightened this crisis, trapping many

victims in unsafe environments with limited options for help. While issues like domestic abuse, stalking, and cyberviolence are gaining attention, deep-rooted stigma and limited resources continue to make reporting and support difficult. However, increased public awareness and legal advancements reflect a society starting to confront these challenges, pushing for a safer future amidst complex and evolving threats.

- **Domestic abuse**

Domestic violence remains a deeply rooted issue in Bulgaria, impacting a large proportion of the population and exhibiting various forms – emotional, physical, sexual, and economic abuse. According to a 2021 survey by the National Statistical Institute (NSI), 28% of women aged 18-74 reported experiencing domestic abuse at some point in their lives, with emotional and psychological abuse being the most common. Economic violence, which restricts women's access to financial resources and decision-making, also remains a significant issue, affecting their independence and safety.

In 2022, 736 cases of domestic violence were recorded in the first half of the year, involving 188 women, 6 men, 542 children, and 10 people with disabilities. By 2023, reported incidents had climbed significantly, with 4,590 cases, of which 2,828 resulted in protection orders. While protective measures have increased, access to resources like shelters remains limited, especially in rural areas where victims often face significant logistical and financial barriers to escaping abuse.

A survey by the Trend Research Center in early 2024 highlighted complex societal attitudes toward domestic violence, with 82% recognizing it as a serious issue, yet 48% believing family issues should be dealt with privately. Other findings reveal

that 20% see jealousy as a sign of love, 15% find it acceptable to check a partner's personal messages, and 13% do not view slapping as violence. Additionally, 55% of respondents lack faith in the ability of Bulgaria's justice system to address domestic violence cases, underscoring public distrust and the need for reform. At the same time, 67% support stricter laws and penalties, reflecting a desire for greater accountability and protection.

- **Stalking**

Stalking, which became a punishable offense in 2018 under Bulgarian law when related to domestic violence, has increasingly drawn attention as a form of abuse that requires more robust protections. Legislation now permits sentences of up to five years for stalking and mental abuse. Findings from a pan-European survey show that 18% of Bulgarian women have been stalked since age 15, and 5% experienced harassment within a year prior to the survey. Despite the prevalence, 74% of stalking victims do not report the incidents to the police, due to perceived barriers and lack of support. Furthermore, 21% of stalking victims endured the abuse for over two years, highlighting the need for both prevention efforts and improved accessibility to restraining orders and emergency assistance.

- **Sexual violence**

Sexual violence impacts a wide demographic of women in Bulgaria, but young women and those in intimate partner relationships are disproportionately affected. NSI data from 2021 reveals that 11.9% of women aged 18-74 reported experiencing physical or sexual violence at some point, with 20.5% of women

facing intimate partner violence. Young women between 18 and 29 are particularly vulnerable, with 36.3% reporting having been raped by a current or former partner. Additionally, workplace harassment remains a significant concern, affecting 12.2% of women in professional settings, while 28% of women report abuse during childhood, often by one of their parents.

Cultural stigma continues to suppress reporting rates, as many victims hesitate to come forward. To counteract this, healthcare providers are receiving specialized training to identify signs of abuse, support victims, and guide them to appropriate resources. The hope is that improved training and awareness among professionals will increase reporting rates and enhance the quality of support available to survivors.

- **Femicides**

Femicides, a particularly grave manifestation of domestic violence, are alarmingly common in Bulgaria, with intimate partners or family members frequently identified as perpetrators. Official data shows 33 cases of premeditated murders related to domestic violence in 2021, with femicides more often reported in urban areas where victims have easier access to support services. However, this urban-rural divide creates a challenge, as limited resources in smaller towns mean that femicides often go unaddressed or unreported. Data from media monitoring by the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee indicates at least 26 femicides in 2022, 21 in 2023, and 5 so far in 2024, though the true numbers may be higher due to underreporting in isolated communities.

- **Cyberviolence**

Cyberviolence has emerged as a serious concern in Bulgaria, particularly affecting younger individuals as internet access and social media use grow. In 2023, a study revealed that one in seven children reported being victims of online bullying or stalking. Meanwhile, 37% of children who experienced online abuse reported feeling unable to share their experience with others, underlining the isolation often associated with cyberviolence. As a result, the National Center for a Safer Internet recorded 32,000+ reports of harmful online content in just the first nine months of 2023, a 79% increase from the previous year. Over 90% of these reports involved child sexual exploitation, highlighting the pressing need for preventive measures and interventions.

To combat cyberviolence, Bulgaria has established several support hotlines, such as the National Child Protection Line and the Cybercrime Department, offering support to children and families. Despite these resources, the prevalence of cyberviolence underscores the need for increased digital literacy, stronger safety regulations, and education programs to help youth navigate online risks.

Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic brought a new wave of challenges, with stay-at-home orders intensifying instances of domestic violence. Early in the pandemic, NGOs reported a 30% increase in hotline calls from victims, with many callers being children who witnessed or experienced violence at home. In the first few months alone, nine women lost their lives to domestic violence, while police handled 3,500 family violence incidents and issued 600 protective orders in Sofia alone.

With limited movement options and many victims confined to homes shared with their abusers, the situation exposed a "silent pandemic" of violence.

In response, organizations like the Bulgarian Women's Fund and BCause Foundation launched emergency initiatives like "The Invisible First Line" fund, designed to support front-line organizations providing legal, psychological, and social services to domestic violence victims. By 2021, domestic violence cases had increased by 10% compared to 2020, and the rate of protection order violations grew as well. The pandemic laid bare the gaps in Bulgaria's support infrastructure and emphasized the need for resilient, adaptable solutions capable of supporting victims even during national crises.

8.3.6 - Conclusion

Bulgaria faces complex challenges in addressing domestic and gender-based violence, an issue exacerbated by cultural stigma, underreporting, and resource limitations. Despite the lack of a centralized data system, extensive evidence from government, media, and NGOs underscores the severity of domestic violence, stalking, sexual violence, femicides, and cyberviolence across the country. The country's legal framework has evolved significantly, with the 2005 Domestic Violence Protection Act marking a pivotal moment. Yet, societal attitudes and gaps in legal clarity, especially surrounding terms like "gender-based violence," continue to hinder progress.

Efforts by governmental bodies, such as the Ministry of Justice and Social Assistance Agency, and by key NGOs, including P.U.L.S. Foundation and Animus Association, are making strides in victim support, awareness campaigns, and reform advocacy. Recent initiatives—such as specialized police training and the

establishment of emergency funds during the COVID-19 pandemic—highlight the importance of responsive, adaptable support systems. Additionally, debates around Bulgaria's partial adoption of the Istanbul Convention illustrate both the obstacles and the urgency for legislative alignment with EU standards on gender violence.

While public awareness and policy advancements indicate a growing societal acknowledgment of these issues, Bulgaria's path to meaningful change will require sustained efforts at every level. Moving forward, comprehensive prevention systems, increased victim support services, education to dismantle harmful stereotypes, and greater trust in institutional responses are critical. As the nation navigates this complex journey, the combined efforts of governmental agencies, NGOs, and the public will be essential to ensuring a safer and more equitable future.

8.4 - Cyprus

Domestic violence and violence against women are pervasive issues that affect societies globally, without knowing cultural, economic and geographical boundaries. In Cyprus, these forms of violence unfortunately still remain critical social problems affecting individuals, families and the society as a whole. A lot has been done in recent years with many legislative improvements, and awareness has been raised through various actions, but domestic violence and violence against women still exist, which requires continuous and concerted efforts to address their effects.

Cyprus is a small society and demonstrates a unique socio-political behaviour with a distinct context for the examination of domestic violence and violence

against women. Following the 1974 Turkish invasion, the Republic of Cyprus was divided into two and as a result, experienced significant political and social disruption. All this has affected social dynamics and society's attitudes towards gender-based violence.

In recent years, and especially in the free part of the Republic of Cyprus, several steps forward have been taken in recognising and addressing domestic and gender-based violence through various legislative improvements, public awareness campaigns and victim support services.

Domestic violence in Cyprus is not limited to any one demographic group and affects all socio-economic classes, ages and nationalities. The complex interplay of traditional gender roles, economic dependencies and social norms often exacerbate the problem, making it difficult for victims to seek help. Many victims of domestic violence in Cyprus face significant barriers, including stigma, fear of retaliation and lack of awareness of available resources.

These barriers are often more acute in rural areas, where access to support services may be limited. Many victims of domestic violence in Cyprus face significant barriers such as stigma, fear of retaliation and lack of information about available support resources. These barriers are often more acute in rural areas, where access to support services may be limited.

In Cyprus, violence against women is a critical issue in the broader spectrum of domestic violence. It encompasses a wide range of abuses from physical and sexual violence to psychological and economic coercion. Statistically, as in the rest of the world, women in Cyprus are disproportionately affected by intimate partner violence. Cypriot society has a traditional patriarchal structure which, combined with the cultural attitudes of a small society that tolerates gender-

based violence, contributes to the occurrence and persistence of violence against women. Legislation that has improved in this area in recent years and helps to protect women's rights and ensure justice, unfortunately, its enforcement remains inconsistent and victims often face obstacles in the legal system.

Cyprus has taken steps to align with European Union standards on gender equality and violence against women. The ratification of the Istanbul Convention in 2017 was a very important milestone, committing Cyprus to take comprehensive measures to prevent violence, protect victims and prosecute perpetrators.

Furthermore, establishing the Advisory Committee for the Prevention and Combating of Violence in the Family and adopting the National Action Plan for Gender Equality (2019-2023) reflects Cyprus' commitment to addressing these issues. However, implementing these policies requires continuous monitoring, adequate funding and sustained political will.

The Ministry of Justice and Public Order, along with the police and social services, are also key institutions in addressing violence against women.

8.4.1 - Organizations

Multiple organizations and agencies in Cyprus actively work to combat violence against women, offering services like legal support, emergency shelter, and public education:

Government Agencies

- **Ministry of Justice and Public Order** that is responsible for policy formation and overseeing law enforcement related to domestic violence;

- **Ministry of Labour and Social Insurance** that provides welfare services, including shelters and counselling;

- **Ministry of Health** that manages healthcare services for victims, including medical and psychological support;

- **Cyprus Police** that investigates domestic violence cases and provides victim protection;

- **Office of the Commissioner for Administration and the Protection of Human Rights (Ombudsman)** that addresses complaints related to human rights violations, including gender-based violence;

- **Cyprus Women's Lobby** which is a network of nine organizations promoting gender equality and advocating against violence toward women;

- **Association for the Prevention and Handling of Violence in the Family (SPAVO)** that operates shelters and offers counselling and legal support for victims;

- **Cyprus Family Planning Association** that provides sexual and reproductive health services, focusing on issues of gender-based violence;

- **Mediterranean Institute of Gender Studies** that conducts research and provides training for professionals addressing gender-based violence.

8.4.2 - Legal Framework

Cyprus has strengthened its legal framework significantly, with several laws designed to prevent, prosecute, and address violence against women:

- **The Prevention and Combating of Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence Law (2021)** that defines domestic violence broadly to include physical, sexual, psychological, and economic violence, aligning with the Istanbul Convention.

- **Protection Orders and Restraining Orders** which is Under the Prevention of Violence in the Family and Protection of Victims Law (2000), victims can apply for protection orders to restrict offender access.

- **Penal Code Amendments** that strengthens penalties for domestic violence and criminalizes stalking, cyber harassment, and the non-consensual sharing of intimate images.

8.4.3 - National Initiatives

Cyprus has implemented several national initiatives to prevent and respond to violence against women:

- **National Action Plan for Gender Equality (2019-2023)**, which aims to address gender-based violence through prevention, protection, and support services.

- **National Action Plan for the Implementation of UNSC Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace & Security (2021-2025)**, which focuses on women's participation, empowerment, and protection.

- **"Break the Silence" Campaign**, which is an awareness initiative encouraging the reporting of domestic violence, with broad media outreach through social media, television, and radio.

8.4.4 - Comparison of violence trends

An analysis of violence against women in Cyprus from 2017 to 2023 reveals both notable progress and persistent challenges across various forms of gender-based violence. Legislative reforms, awareness campaigns, and external factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic have all influenced these trends, highlighting areas for continued focus and improvement.

- **Domestic abuse**

Domestic abuse is one of the most pervasive forms of violence against women in Cyprus. A 2014 survey by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights reported that 22% of Cypriot women had experienced physical and/or sexual violence since the age of 15. Between 2017 and 2023, reported cases showed an upward trend, especially during the pandemic, when calls to national helplines increased by 30% in the 2020 lockdown. Key factors contributing to this trend include:

- o Awareness campaigns and strengthened victim protections have led to greater willingness to report abuse. Fast-track measures introduced for domestic violence cases have also improved law enforcement response times.

- o The COVID-19 pandemic worsened the situation, as economic strain, confinement, and limited access to support services heightened tensions within households, leading to an increase in violence. While cases surged post-lockdown, experts believe that

domestic abuse remains significantly underreported, especially in rural areas where cultural stigma and limited service access persist.

- **Stalking**

Stalking has seen a steady increase in awareness and reporting in Cyprus. The number of reported cases rose from around 120 in 2019 to approximately 150 in 2020. This increase reflects several developments:

- o The 2020 amendment strengthened legal provisions against stalking, enabling more restraining orders and elevating penalties. These changes, along with greater public awareness, have likely contributed to increased reporting.

- o Public initiatives emphasizing stalking as a serious offense have encouraged victims to come forward, especially in urban areas where support resources are more accessible. However, stalking remains challenging to report consistently, as many cases go unreported due to fear or stigma.

A significant majority of stalking cases involve perpetrators known to the victim, with former intimate partners comprising approximately 40% of reported cases.

- **Sexual violence**

Reports of sexual violence, including rape, have risen significantly during this period, with sexual assault cases increasing from 120 in 2020 to 145 in 2022. Although awareness and legislative reforms have encouraged more victims to report, challenges remain:

o Legislative changes, including increased penalties and clearer definitions of sexual offenses, have led to a higher reporting rate. Cyprus has also criminalized offenses like sexual harassment and non-consensual sharing of intimate images, raising public awareness and confidence in the system.

o Despite legal improvements, stigma around reporting sexual violence persists, especially among marginalized communities. Many victims hesitate to come forward due to fear of social judgment, distrust in the legal system, or potential retaliation.

While reporting has increased, the prosecution rate remains at around 60%, with a conviction rate of approximately 30%, indicating gaps in legal follow-through.

- **Femicides**

Femicides in Cyprus, though relatively stable, remain a deeply concerning issue. On average, 5-6 femicides are reported annually, with intimate partners involved in about 70% of these cases. Key factors contributing to femicide rates include:

o Most femicides are committed by current or former partners, reflecting issues of control, possessiveness, and power dynamics that often escalate to lethal outcomes.

o Cyprus's patriarchal society, particularly in rural areas, reinforces traditional gender roles and dependencies that can make it difficult for victims to leave abusive relationships.

Femicides occur in both urban and rural areas, with major cities like Nicosia and Limassol recording higher case concentrations. The age range of victims generally

falls between 25 and 45, with women in more vulnerable economic or social situations disproportionately affected.

- **Cyberviolence**

Cyberviolence, especially among younger populations, has become a rapidly growing issue in Cyprus. Between 2019 and 2023, reported cyberviolence cases, including cyberstalking, online harassment, and non-consensual sharing of intimate images, increased by 10-15% annually. Major trends driving this rise include:

o Increased social media use, particularly among younger people, has expanded opportunities for harassment and exploitation. Digital platforms have become the primary environments for cyberviolence, especially as remote interactions grew during the pandemic.

o New legal measures against cyberstalking and harassment have encouraged reporting, with victims more likely to come forward due to enhanced protections.

Victims of cyberviolence are predominantly women aged 18-35, reflecting the vulnerability of younger populations active on digital platforms. In approximately 60% of cases, the perpetrators are known to the victim, underscoring the need for digital literacy and protective measures.

8.4.5 - Conclusion

Cyprus has made notable progress in addressing violence against women through legislative reforms, awareness campaigns, and improved victim support services. The ratification of the Istanbul Convention in 2017 was a significant step toward

strengthening the legal framework, and subsequent laws have introduced crucial protections, such as restraining orders and penalties for newer forms of violence, including cyber harassment. The COVID-19 pandemic, however, exposed vulnerabilities in existing support systems, with lockdowns leading to a 30% surge in helpline calls and heightened difficulties for victims seeking assistance.

Despite advancements, challenges remain. Enforcement inconsistencies, especially in rural areas, create barriers to accessing resources like shelters, legal aid, and psychological support. Social stigma and traditional gender norms further complicate reporting and support access, especially in conservative communities. Additionally, while increased awareness has led to higher reporting rates, underreporting persists, particularly for cases involving intimate partner violence and cyberviolence.

Looking ahead, Cyprus can build on its progress by:

- Expanding services and support networks in rural areas,
- Increasing law enforcement training to better recognize and address gender-based violence,
- Strengthening digital protections and resources against cyberviolence, and
- Sustaining public awareness campaigns to shift societal attitudes and encourage reporting.

By maintaining momentum in these areas, Cyprus can continue to improve its response to gender-based violence, ensuring all women have equitable access to justice, protection, and support.

9. Country comparison

Italy, Poland, Bulgaria, and Cyprus share common challenges rooted in traditional gender roles and conservative societal structures. However, each country's unique historical context has shaped the cultural attitudes toward gender-based violence in specific ways. For instance, Poland's deep-rooted Catholic influence reinforces patriarchal values that can hinder women's access to resources, while Bulgaria's complex socio-political past has led to significant cultural stigma around reporting domestic violence. In Cyprus, the trauma of the 1974 division still reverberates, affecting the country's approach to social issues, including gender-based violence. Italy's traditionally conservative societal views also persist, though increased public awareness and proactive measures in recent years indicate a cultural shift toward recognizing the severity of these issues.

Italy and Cyprus have ratified the Istanbul Convention, embedding it into their legislative frameworks, while Poland and Bulgaria exhibit a more complex relationship with the Convention. Italy's "Red Code" and recent updates like the "Cartabia Law" demonstrate Italy's commitment to tightening legal protections for victims, introducing strict penalties for crimes like stalking, revenge porn, and forced marriage. Similarly, Cyprus's 2021 Prevention and Combating of Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence Law aligns closely with the Convention, expanding protections for women.

In contrast, Bulgaria has partially adopted the Convention due to internal resistance and political debate, largely over fears surrounding "gender ideology." Poland also faces ongoing debates about withdrawing from the Convention, driven by concerns that its provisions conflict with traditional family values.

Despite this, both countries have enacted domestic violence laws and mechanisms like protection orders, though enforcement remains inconsistent.

9.1 - Support services and public awareness

Italy and Cyprus have extensive support networks for victims, including emergency helplines, shelters, and legal support services. Italy's National Anti-Violence Network (1522 helpline) and Cyprus's Association for the Prevention and Handling of Violence in the Family (SPAVO) exemplify structured systems that offer accessible support to victims. Both countries also actively involve NGOs in victim support, a partnership that enhances service availability.

Poland and Bulgaria have more limited support systems, particularly in rural areas where resource scarcity and social stigma create additional barriers. Bulgaria, for instance, lacks centralized statistics on domestic violence, with many cases underreported or undocumented. However, public awareness in all four countries is growing, spurred by media coverage of femicides, advocacy campaigns, and civil society movements like Poland's "Black Protests." Bulgaria's "You Are Not Alone" campaign and Cyprus's "Break the Silence" initiative are additional examples that demonstrate efforts to reduce stigma and encourage victims to report violence.

9.2 - Types and trends of gender-based violence

All four countries report high levels of domestic abuse, sexual violence, stalking, and femicides, though the degree and visibility of each type of violence vary. Italy and Cyprus have particularly robust data collection mechanisms and clear legal definitions for these crimes, which support increased reporting and response.

Italy has shown an increase in cases of stalking and revenge porn due to legislative reforms and heightened awareness, while Cyprus's inclusion of cyberviolence in its legal framework reflects the country's responsiveness to emerging threats. Poland and Bulgaria face significant challenges with underreporting, particularly regarding sexual violence and stalking. In Poland, femicide rates are notably high, and in Bulgaria, intimate partner femicides reveal an urgent need for stronger prevention and intervention measures. Both countries have seen rising cases of cyberviolence, especially among younger populations, highlighting the need for digital protections and educational initiatives to address online harassment.

9.3 - Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

The pandemic intensified domestic violence in all four countries, leading to increased hotline calls and reports of abuse. Italy and Cyprus quickly adapted their support systems by expanding digital resources and enhancing emergency services. Italy's swift adaptation to digital support systems ensured that victims could access help remotely, while Cyprus reported a 30% rise in helpline calls during lockdown, prompting additional government support for crisis centres.

In Poland and Bulgaria, the pandemic exposed critical gaps in the accessibility and adaptability of support services. Both countries saw initial drops in reporting due to victims' confinement with abusers, followed by surges as restrictions eased. The pandemic highlighted the need for flexible, crisis-responsive support systems that can withstand future emergencies.

9.4 - Social and institutional attitudes

Each country demonstrates varying degrees of public and institutional support for gender equality and protections against violence. Italy and Cyprus benefit from

broader public support for victims, with increasing awareness of gender-based violence and its consequences. Conversely, Bulgaria and Poland struggle with conservative attitudes and distrust in legal institutions. In Bulgaria, a 2024 survey revealed that over half of respondents doubt the justice system's ability to address domestic violence effectively. Similar scepticism exists in Poland, where societal norms often encourage resolving family issues privately, inhibiting open discussions about violence.

9.5 - Final comparison conclusion

Italy, Poland, Bulgaria, and Cyprus have made strides in addressing violence against women, though each faces unique challenges based on cultural attitudes, resource limitations, and legislative constraints. Italy and Cyprus illustrate strong adherence to EU standards, with comprehensive legal frameworks and accessible support services. Poland and Bulgaria, while making progress, exhibit reluctance towards the Istanbul Convention and face structural barriers that hinder comprehensive support for victims.

To foster a more effective, unified response to gender-based violence across these countries, several recommendations are pertinent:

- Bulgaria and Poland, in particular, should prioritize resource allocation to rural areas, ensuring shelters, counselling, and legal aid are accessible to all victims, regardless of location.
- Continued public campaigns and school-based programs are essential to challenge harmful stereotypes and societal norms, especially in Poland and Bulgaria, where conservative values often prevent victims from seeking help.

- Given the rise of cyberviolence, particularly in Italy and Cyprus, all countries should invest in digital literacy programs and robust cyberviolence laws to protect victims.
- The pandemic underscored the need for adaptable support systems. Ensuring digital access to services and remote legal support can help each country prepare for future crises, minimizing disruptions in victim assistance.
- All four countries could benefit from enhanced police training to improve their understanding of gender-based violence, promote empathetic victim support, and ensure consistent enforcement of legal protections.

10. Final thoughts and takeaways

This guide has explored the far-reaching impact of violence against women, from emotional and psychological harm to physical and social consequences. We've underscored the importance of recognizing early signs of abuse, understanding the dynamics of toxic relationships, and the critical role that education plays in prevention.

We also examined how cultural and national contexts influence the prevalence and response to gender-based violence, revealing the importance of strong legal protections, accessible support systems, and effective enforcement. Throughout, the need for awareness and collaboration between individuals, communities, and governments emerged as key to creating meaningful change.

Ultimately, the guide emphasizes that addressing violence against women requires both systemic reforms and personal responsibility. By fostering understanding, dismantling harmful stereotypes, and ensuring support for victims, we can move toward a society where violence is no longer tolerated, and everyone has the right to live free from fear.

Key takeaways

10.1 Awareness is the first step

Recognizing the signs of toxic relationships and gender-based violence is critical. Education and awareness empower individuals to spot early warning signs and take action to prevent abuse from escalating. Communities and institutions must continue to promote awareness so that more people understand the complexities of these issues.

10.2 Support systems are lifelines

A strong network of support, whether it's friends, family, or professional services, can be life-saving for those experiencing violence. Formal services, such as hotlines, shelters, and counselling, must be accessible and widely available, especially in rural and underserved areas. Informal support networks, like trusted friends or colleagues, also play a crucial role in offering victims a safe space to speak up and seek help.

11 Legal protections need to be strengthened and enforced

While legal reforms have made progress in protecting victims, gaps still exist in enforcement and resource allocation. Stricter laws alone are not enough, there must be ongoing training for law enforcement, healthcare professionals, and legal practitioners to ensure they understand the dynamics of domestic violence and respond appropriately. Continued legal reforms, like including stalking and harassment as forms of abuse, are essential, but they need to be paired with strong, consistent enforcement.

12 Breaking cultural barriers

Gender stereotypes and cultural norms often perpetuate violence and silence victims. To truly address violence against women, we must challenge these harmful societal norms. Educational programs that promote gender equality from an early age, as well as media campaigns that deconstruct stereotypes, are vital tools in reshaping societal attitudes.

13 Healing and recovery take time and support

Leaving a toxic or violent relationship is often just the beginning. The emotional and psychological damage caused by abuse can take time to heal. Counselling and mental health support are crucial for helping

survivors rebuild their lives, regain their confidence, and move toward healthier, more fulfilling relationships.

14 The role of communities and governments

Governments, civil society, and communities must work together to create environments where violence is not tolerated. Public policies, community programs, and grassroots initiatives all play a part in addressing the root causes of violence and ensuring that victims are supported. Governments must prioritize funding for shelters, legal aid, and educational campaigns, while communities can foster a culture of safety and accountability.

15 Education is the foundation for long-term change

Violence prevention starts with education. Schools, workplaces, and community groups need to focus on teaching about healthy relationships, mutual respect, and the impact of gender-based violence. By educating the next generation, we can lay the groundwork for long-term societal change and help break the cycle of violence.

16 Everyone has a role

Combating violence against women is not solely the responsibility of governments or organizations. Every individual has the power to make a difference, whether it's through raising awareness, supporting someone in need, or standing up against abusive behaviour when they see it. Collective action can drive meaningful change, creating a society where violence is not tolerated.

17 Escaping violence is possible

No matter how trapped someone may feel, there is always hope. With the right resources and support systems in place, escaping from a toxic or

violent relationship is achievable. Victims should know they are not alone, and help is available. Whether through formal channels or personal networks, support is key to breaking free and beginning the journey toward healing and empowerment.

18 The road to equality and safety is ongoing

Ending violence against women is a continuous process that requires commitment and action from all levels of society. While progress has been made, there's much more work to be done. By keeping gender equality and non-violence at the forefront of our collective efforts, we can build a future where everyone has the right to live free from fear and harm.