



Local & Regional  
Europe

# A unified and multi-level approach to the EU Directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence

CEMR position paper  
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## Key messages

1. *There are significant overlaps in competences and responsibilities across the various levels of governance for the policy areas targeted by the Directive proposal. A more comprehensive recognition of the role of subnational authorities and the reinforcement of a collaborative multi-level approach will be necessary for the effective implementation of the Directive. Particularly in the areas of: prevention, working with boys and men, the workplace, service provision and victim support (housing, healthcare, access to justice).*
2. *In addition to preventing and prosecuting violence against women, this proposal for new legislation presents an opportunity to simultaneously safeguard civic and democratic life by tackling violence against women in politics through specific provisions and penalties.*
3. *To facilitate comparability and to precisely measure the efficacy of policy interventions and programmes, common data collection protocols should be introduced and harmonised across and within MS—including at local and regional levels.*

## Introduction

Violence against women and domestic violence are a manifestation of historic structural inequalities between women and men, matters of criminal law, and violations of the fundamental rights enshrined in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union.

In light of the proposal for a [Directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence](#) published by the European Commission, the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR) and its members are mobilised to ensure that an eventual Directive reflects and supports an integrated approach to this complex and pressing issue facing society and to avoid adding to the “patchwork” approach that has so far characterised efforts in Europe to tackle violence against women and girls.

CEMR welcomes that a number of our inputs and concerns have been taken into consideration in the proposal. Indeed, the proposal for a Directive mentions: obligations for Member States (MS) to establish appropriate mechanisms to ensure effective coordination and cooperation between all levels of government; violence faced by women in public offices and political functions; safeguards for child victims, victims with specific needs and groups at increased risk; sexual harassment at work; the importance of training professionals as a form of prevention of violence; the need to prevent the cultivation of harmful gender stereotypes that perpetuate sexism and perceptions of women’s inferiority by addressing them in early-childhood education and care.

However, there remain opportunities to strengthen the text in the following areas to ensure that it is effectively implemented by all relevant stakeholders once adopted.

## Coordination and cooperation

The main challenges in preventing violence against women and girls (VAWG) include a lack of coordination between all actors and levels of government, leading to an overlapping and/or a mismatch of competences. In many European countries health, social services, education and in some cases even municipal police, are total or partial competences of local and regional governments (LRGs).

Taking this into account, CEMR regrets that the proposal for a Directive was formally addressed to the governing bodies of the EU, as well the European Economic and Social Committee, but **not to the Committee of the Regions**. The Committee should issue an own-initiative opinion on the proposal for a Directive in any case.

To **reduce fragmentation in policies and approaches**, national governments need to consult and liaise with LRGs specifically in these fields, and make sure that specialised professionals and financial resources are adequately distributed across their territory. The Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention) already calls for the involvement of, among others, “regional and local parliaments and authorities.”

- ⇒ Therefore, more emphasis should be put on the key role they play in preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. Indeed, **LRGs are at the frontline to help victims of violence**, providing information and entry points to services, as well as in coordinating support for individuals across networks of service providers and NGOs. They are central in ensuring protection, assistance and specialist support to victims, before, during and after judicial proceedings, and in facilitating access to justice for victim/survivors. Article 39 of the proposal which requires MS to set up an official body to coordinate and oversee policies and **effective multi-level response should oblige them to consult LRGs**.
- ⇒ In practical terms, CEMR wishes to see specific calls targeting local authorities to support prevention, awareness-raising, capacity-building and investments in public services and social infrastructure for victims, as well as in the workplace via EU programmes such as: Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV), Cohesion Fund, European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), and European Social Fund +.
- ⇒ To complement CEMR’s recommendations and suggestions to strengthen the proposal for a Directive, the voice, experience and expertise of local governments and their national representative associations must be included and a place at the table guaranteed for them in the soon-to-be-launched EU network for exchanging good practices for preventing violence against women.

## Violence against elected women

In addition to domestic violence, another unacceptable reality is that women in politics are often subject to harassment and violence in carrying out their public service and responsibilities. **Threats and violence against elected representatives undermine the foundations of democracy and its institutions**. Protecting women’s rights to participate in politics on equal terms is fundamental, yet there has not been adequate action at any level of government to effectively prevent it and set out penalties to date. In a context where women are already significantly under-represented in decision-making, we cannot afford to see women drop out of politics after one term or decide against running as candidates due to their fear of harassment and violence.

## Spotlight on women in politics

- *In the EU, women account for approximately **34% of local councillors**, **16% of mayors** and **31% of parliamentarians** at national level. (Source: “Women in politics: Local and European Trends”, CEMR (2019); “Women in politics in the EU - State of play”, EPRS (2021))*
- *According to a survey of 996 local elected women conducted in 2021 by the associations Elues Locales, **74% of respondents indicated that they had faced sexist remarks or behaviours** (7% of these were online attacks, 5% harassment, 3% death/rape/beating threats, 1% physical violence); additionally, **28% reported to have considered abandoning politics due to the harassment and sexism they faced** and 23% know a woman who left politics for this reason.*

It is therefore necessary for the EU and Member States to seriously address the harassment of women politicians, both through legislation to [extend the list of EU crimes to hate speech and hate crime](#) and the current proposal for a Directive. CEMR regrets that the current proposal does not go far enough to address the continuum of violence that is targeted to women in the public eye. It fails to specifically address harassment and violence against elected women politicians – including online - and does not foresee specific consequences for it.

- ⇒ To remedy this, CEMR proposes to add a specific clause under Article 13 “Aggravating circumstances” concerning elected women and women holding public office at all levels.

## Data

Collecting **data disaggregated by sex and age** is essential to better understand the prevalence and impacts of gender-based violence and to be more effective in tackling it. According to the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), there is a [need for better collection of comparable data on gender-based violence](#). Chapter 6 Article 44 on “Data collection and research” calls Member States to put in place systems for the collection, development, production and dissemination of disaggregated data and of statistics on violence against women and domestic violence. In particular, point (5) states the necessity of establishing common standards on counting units. The Agreed Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for data management mustn’t neglect local and regional governments in the collection system.

- ⇒ In this regard, CEMR proposes to add a clause and to highlight the necessity of **collecting disaggregated data at least at regional level (NUTS 2 and NUTS 3) and also at local level** in order to draw comparisons within countries and consequently to develop tailored policies and programmes. LRGs are well-positioned to contribute to the process by regularly collecting consistent information locally (via police, justice, or health and social services) and forwarding it to relevant national statistics bodies.

## Public service provision and victim support

It is necessary to **streamline and improve reporting systems** to **provide clear and multiple pathways** for victims to report violence and make sure all information on where to access support is available in a timely manner and in a variety of languages. The proposal suggests the creation of “one-stop” online access to respond to the multiple needs of victims in the same place.

CEMR supports this idea and thinks it could be developed further since access to the internet and Information Communications Technology (ICT) is subject to gender disparities. In addition to “one-stop” online access, physical support centres must be accessible to all, including women and girls with disabilities, and those living in urban centres or rural communities.

- ⇒ The proposal should **specify minimum requirements** for the geographical distribution of support and reporting centres for victims, taking into account important factors like population density. With some investment and capacity-building, existing infrastructures (for instance, maternity centres) could also serve as nodes in a comprehensive victim support network.

To ensure that victims are properly cared for, Member States should make sure that local trained professionals in diverse sectors are numerous, equipped to identify gender-based violence and respond appropriately, and can be accessed from several entry points. Local and regional governments, public servants and service providers would benefit from awareness-raising measures and exchange of experience on how to support and work with women and girls at risk of gender-based violence and domestic violence.

Finally, CEMR has some comments on certain terms used in the proposal in the chapter concerning targeted support for victims with specific needs and groups at risk:

- ⇒ The term “women sex workers” should be removed from the Directive and instead be replaced with the term “**women in prostitution**”. “Women sex workers” stands in direct conflict with the Nordic Model, CEDAW (the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women) and the UN Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and of the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others. The term implies that prostitution is equal to labour without any regard to the fact that sexual consent cannot be bought.
- ⇒ The **definition of prostitution should be added** to Chapter 2 of the Directive, in order to highlight the fact that offences concerning sexual exploitation of women includes prostitution.

## Prevention

Gender transformative work to **reorient societal norms** that can restrict and negatively impact both sexes should begin at an early age when young people are forming their view of the world. Tackling the underlying sociological phenomena, culture and attitudes with an aim to increase gender-equitable attitudes and behaviours among boys and men has a positive influence on and contributes to reducing intimate partner violence and sexual violence. Notable efforts have already been made in Europe’s LRGs to tackle the underlying attitudes that can lead to gender based violence and should be continued and expanded with support from EU programmes.

In the area of work, social partners, trade unions and local governments as employers support the objective of combating sexual harassment and violence in the workplace. Studies have suggested that women working in high-risk sectors with most contact with the public such as healthcare, social work,

and education are more often subjected to violence by third parties than men.<sup>1</sup> However art. 30 and 37 of the proposal do not give an adequate overview of the **important role that workplaces can play in preventing, identifying and combating violence** against women and domestic violence. Work can also potentially represent a preventive and protective factor in the lives of victims, by providing a break from the violence and abuse and offering a safe place. Moreover, workplaces can be key in identifying violence, raising awareness on the issue, and supporting victims.

- ⇒ Thus, CEMR would like to see the issue of third party violence and the link between domestic violence and workplace further emphasised in the proposal. For example, through the introduction of a specific article in Chapter 6 on cooperation with social partners and LRGs.

## Useful links

- [CEMR analysis: “Proposal for an EU Directive on Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence: What implications for local and regional governments?”](#)
- [CEMR study “Women in politics: Local and European Trends”](#)
- [Multi-sectoral guidelines to tackle third-party violence and harassment related to work \(2010\)](#)
- [Multi-sectoral project on “the role of social partners in preventing third-party violence and harassment at work”](#)
- [European Charter for Equality of Women and Men in Local Life \(Article 22 on gender-based violence\)](#)

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### About CEMR

The Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR) is the broadest organisation of local and regional governments in Europe. Its members are over 60 national associations of municipalities and regions from 40 European countries. Together these associations represent some 100 000 local and regional governments.

CEMR's objectives are twofold: to influence European legislation on behalf of local and regional authorities and to provide a platform for exchange between its member associations and their elected officials and experts.

Moreover, CEMR is the European section of United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), the worldwide organisation of local government.