



LEGAL AND POLICY FRAMEWORK

Cyprus ratified the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in July 1985, and its Optional Protocol in April 2002. In June 2015, Cyprus signed the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention) and ratified it in November 2017 with a series of reservations (on article 30, paragraph 2, on article 44 paragraphs 1, 3 and 4 and on article 59). Cyprus withdrew its reservations on articles 44 and 59 but upheld its right not to apply the provisions of article 30, paragraph 2.

Cyprus is one of the six EU members which has legally defined gender-based violence (GBV). Cypriot legislation covers the four forms of domestic violence specified in Article 3 of the Istanbul Convention: physical violence, sexual violence, psychological violence and economic violence. It has also legally defined femicide as a gender-based crime.¹

Following the ratification of the Istanbul convention, Cyprus passed Law 115(I)/2021 "On the Prevention and Combating of Violence against Women and Domestic Violence" (VAW Law 2021). This law criminalizes different forms of violence against women, and amends the definition of rape with a view to aligning it more closely to the Convention. This law works in conjunction with the Criminal Code, Law 60(I)/2014 "Prevention, Fighting against Trafficking in and Exploitation of Human Beings and Protection of Victims", Law 209(I)/2020 on "Combating Sexism and Sexist Behaviour" and Law 114 (I)/2021 "Protection from Harassment and Stalking."² Law 115(I)/2021 was recently amended by Law 117(I)/2022 to introduce femicide as a distinct criminal offence.

Law 115(I)/2021 departs clearly from the provisions of Law 119 (I)/2000 "The Violence in the Family (Prevention and Protection of Victims), amended by Laws 212 (I)/2004, 172(1)/2015, 78(I)/2017 and 95(1)/2019. While the 2000 Law adopted a gender-neutral definition of domestic violence that encompasses victims and perpetrators of both sexes, and all members of the household, treating cases of domestic violence as a public crime, the 2021

Law adjusted the definition of GBV and the types of punishable behaviours in line with the Istanbul Convention. VAW Law 2021 also eliminated the requirement for previous or current cohabitation, ensuring the application of the law to intimate partners that do not have a history of cohabitation.³ VAW Law 2021 foresees the establishment of a national coordinating agency for the prevention and combating of violence against women, which was set up in March 2022. The National Coordinating Agency developed the first National Strategy and Action Plan on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence 2023-2028, which was adopted on 15 February 2023.

Prior to this, there had been two National Action Plans for the Prevention of Violence in the Family: (i) between 2010-2013, and (ii) between 2017-2019.

In addition, the National Action Plan for Equality between Men and Women 2019-2023 includes "Combating Gender-Based Violence / Full compliance with the provisions of the Istanbul Convention" as a key priority.⁴

At the operational level, prejudices and patriarchal attitudes have led to inaction of the police and subsequent failure to record incidents of violence against women which has caused significant underreporting of GBV cases due to lack of trust. The lack of care in collecting and providing evidence and guidance consequently led to several unsuccessful cases when proceeding through the justice system. It has become evident that the legal framework in line with the Istanbul Convention lacks effectiveness when judges and prosecutors exhibit sexist and misogynist attitudes and that a shift can only be achieved through awareness raising and mandatory in-service training of professionals in all institutions to avoid revictimization and to guarantee the full implementation of the law.⁵

FACTS

In Cyprus 36% of women report having experienced some form of sexual harassment since the age of 15 and 1 in 5 women in Cyprus have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by a partner or non-partner.⁶ 28% have experienced some form of domestic abuse including economic, psychological, physical and sexual.⁷ Between 2019 and 2022, there were 20 femicides in Cyprus, the majority in the context of intimate partner violence.

In the second quarter of 2019 Cyprus was reported by Eurostat to be the country with the highest number of registered first-time asylum applicants in Europe relative to population. Since 2014 the number of first-time asylum applicants in Cyprus has grown continuously. From 1.480 applications in 2014 to 7.713 in 2018, reaching 6.554 applications already in the first six months of 2019. In 2018 men were with 68,2% the majority of asylum seekers, 31,8% were women and 14% children. Integration policies in Cyprus are gender blind impacting significantly its capacity to respond to needs and vulnerabilities related to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). Asylum-seekers and especially women are at a substantial risk of trafficking and sexual exploitation.

A vulnerability assessment in 2019 displayed that from the 592 (186 women, 405 men) people assessed 113 cases (19%) had experienced SGBV. 49% of all women and 5.1% of all men assessed were identified as victims of SGBV. The most frequent form of SGBV identified was sexual violence (59.3%) followed by physical violence (40.7%), trafficking (40%), humiliation (37%), sexual exploitation (27%), forced marriage (18.6%), and confinement/detention (19.5%) and lower rates of FGM and sexual harassment, which may be due to the fact that four out of nine asylum-seekers that experienced sexual harassment have also experienced sexual violence/rape.⁸

WOMEN'S CSOs LANDSCAPE - Challenges and Needs

In Cyprus, the capacity of civil society to mobilize and advocate effectively for policy change on gender equality issues and GBV remains weak and uncoordinated. Social and political actions in Cyprus have always focused on the division of the island, and together with the economic crises, the migration crises and a stagnant status quo of the ethnic division there is very little state funding for the CSO sector to prevent and combat GBV and violence against women and girls (VAWG).

More recently, however, civil society is growing and more human rights CSOs are taking an active part in public debates and advocating for a range of human rights issues, including on women's rights and VAWG. However, there is a lack of meaningful consultation with women's CSOs by state authorities on policy formulation and implementation on VAWG, and funding is restricted to only a limited number of CSOs that provide direct services.

The COVID 19 pandemic put a particular pressure on direct victim support services and their capacities to provide for the increasing victims of GBV. Access to services was particularly challenging for migrant women, including domestic workers, asylum-seeking and refugee women, that suffer multiple discrimination and are more vulnerable to violence and exploitation at every level.



¹ [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2022/738126/IPOL_STU\(2022\)738126_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2022/738126/IPOL_STU(2022)738126_EN.pdf) Retrieved March 31, 2023.

² The Table (Section 5) in the text of Law 115/1(2021) specifies every legal instrument aimed at each specific crime related to GBV. Retrieved March 30, 2023 from <http://www.familyviolence.gov.cy/upload/20220303/1646318711-01559.pdf>

³ GREVIO Shadow report by the Mediterranean Institute of Gender Studies (MIGS) September 2021. Retrieved March 25, 2023 from <https://rm.coe.int/migs-submission-to-grevio-final-02-12-21/1680a4d34f>

⁴ *ibid*

⁵ GREVIO Baseline Evaluation report Cyprus, 2022. Retrieved March 25, 2023 from <https://www.coe.int/en/web/istanbul-convention/-/grevio-publishes-its-report-on-cyprus>

⁶ FRA (2014) Violence against women: an EU-wide survey. Retrieved March 25, 2023 from https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra-2014-vaw-survey-at-a-glance-apr14_en.pdf

⁷ Συμβ. Επιτ. Βίας στην Οικογ (2012)

⁸ The Mediterranean Institute of Gender Studies (MIGS). Sexual and Gender-based Violence among Asylum-Seekers in Cyprus (Dec 2021). Retrieved March 25, 2023 from <https://www.unhcr.org/cy/wp-content/uploads/sites/41/2021/12/Sexual-and-Gender-based-Violence-Report.pdf>

⁹ <https://domviolence.org.cy/en/>

Exhaustion, staff burnout and turnover became a constant reality as CSOs were often the only contact point for victims of GBV with the healthcare system falling apart and social welfare services and other authorities with minimum services.

Direct Victim Support Activities

Shelters for victims/survivors of GBV are available in each main city, co-financed by the State covering up to 50-60% of their annual budget, their management outsourced to a mayor NGO (SPAVO⁹), who must supplement the remaining costs with donations. SPAVO runs a 24-hour helpline and provides women, victims/survivors of GBV with a place in the shelter or alternative housing as well as psychological and medical support. They also run a perpetrator program and other social support services. However, there is a huge **need for provision of legal advice** to victims of GBV which is not fully covered. More generally, in Cyprus, specialized services for GBV victims are lacking.

Cyprus has a lot of refugees and asylum seekers constantly pouring into the country as well as foreign domestic workers often having already experienced some form of GBV or being at the risk of it. The demand for legal advice is huge and there are many professional women lawyers who are not formally organized but would like to associate and offer **legal GBV specialized services to women** in need.

In December 2020, the Government announced the opening of the Women's House, a multi-agency and multi-professional crisis centre, offering victims of GBV support services, including migrant women and refugees regardless of status.

Another priority is to provide services to attend **new forms of GBV formerly not common in the country** like Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and forced child marriage. There is a need to form expertise to be able to attend women that are at risk of these forms of GBV or have already experienced it. Awareness raising and capacity training about these new forms of violence to health professionals, welfare services, the police etc. as well as offering them supervision and support is also a priority.

Indirect Victim Support Activities

Despite a well-established legal framework sufficient budget is lacking for its implementation and women's CSOs have identified the pressing **need to monitor and advocate for the implementation of adopted laws on the prevention of GBV in Cyprus**. The country lacks a systematic educational program on gender

equality and GBV for efficient professional training on these matters as stereotypical behaviours prevail. It is up to the women CSOs to fill the vacuum.

In 2022 a new law was passed which now is comprehensive and covers all forms of violence against women and girls as well as a law on domestic violence that also covers other members of the family, and the law on preventing and combating sexism, etc.

There is a 5 Year Action Plan with no budget dedicated to its implementation, hence calling for a lot of **monitoring and advocacy work to be done** that these laws, which are in line with the Istanbul Convention, are fully implemented.

For the monitoring and lobbying processes there is an urgent need to have data on GBV and VAWG as well as research to inform policy makers and demand actions. Regarding data, what is available on GBV is scarce, inconsistently collected and incapable of providing an overall picture on the prevalence of violence against women in Cyprus, or to properly evaluate the response of the relevant institutions and the support and protection provided to victims.



Community Building and Outreach Activities

Community building, coalitions between stakeholders, partnerships and strategic cooperation has been identified as a priority in Cyprus. There is a lot of competition among CSOs as all are aspiring for the same funds, so strategic cooperation is key with learning initiatives and raising consciousness about the need to work together, how to do this, have common goals, and how to put it into in practice.

Another priority is **community-based mobilization** with the direct involvement of target groups to clearly define needs and best practices.

Specifically, the more informal grassroots organizations and groups of women from migrant communities, who do not have access to any funds, would immensely benefit from this. Small women's CSOs and/or informally organized groups do not have significant budgets or are working, very systematically, but they really know how to raise awareness and communicate what is needed to prevent and combat GBV through community mobilization thematic local campaigns as well as using social media. With more financial support they could mobilize a lot of GBV awareness raising activities.

Gender-sensitive education and training for professionals is done through women's CSOs in Cyprus, however, it needs to be implemented more strategically as an inhouse service in all institutions to guarantee its sustainability. At the moment these are on/off courses offered by women's CSOs but initiatives are needed to institutionalize gender responsive professional training and education for health professionals, welfare services, the police, etc.

CSO Competency Building

To access funds is key for all women's CSOs, however, for the more informal groups it will be difficult, due to their informal status to manage funds and adhere to project management requirements. Hence, the main priority for women's CSOs in Cyprus is **building capacities for CSO sustainability** and to have a minimum structure, which then offers organizational growth.

Parallel to this getting technical support is a key priority, particularly on the area of **monitoring and evaluation as well as reporting processes**. Getting skilled on how to conduct an impact assessment is a key feature as this is rarely measured.

Another priority is to improve **knowledge on key concept**, so that people really know what it is they are addressing when talking about women's rights or gender equality. In this specifically legal expertise is needed to be able to analyse a new law or the approval of a law.

CSO staff also needs training on a systematic approach to advocacy methods, policy monitoring and lobbying to know how to respond on time to Government consultations and how to focus their goals and interests.

Furthermore, CSO staff need to build professional expertise for improved direct victim attendance with a specific focus on new forms of GBV.

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ABOUT THE STUDY

This study analyses the women's CSO landscape in Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Cyprus, France, Greece, Italy, Kosovo, Montenegro, Serbia and Spain. It identifies the challenges women's CSOs face and their needs to prevent and combat GBV. The study was carried out by INDERA SL at the request of **Calala Women's Fund** jointly with the **Mediterranean Women's Fund (MedWF)** and **Ecumenical Women's Initiative (EWI)**.

Methodology:

Based on a review of the current initiatives at grassroots level in the 11 countries and the project portfolio of EU supported initiatives, a model of activities was created comprising the following four areas: 1) Direct Victim Support Activities: services and activities which are provided directly to the victims of GBV; 2) Indirect Victim Support Activities: monitoring, advocacy, and watch dog activities regarding the adoption and implementation of laws and policies to combat and prevent GBV as well as research, awareness raising and preventative activities. 3) Community and Outreach: activities to strengthen stakeholders' collaboration, networking and community building; 4) CSO Competency Building: activities to strengthen women's CSOs structural, technical, financial and operational capacities.

Stakeholder interviews with women's CSOs and experts from the 11 countries, together with desk research provided information and data about legal and policy frameworks, actors, tools and methods in the area of GBV and VAWG to identify needs to support actions with potential in prevention, protection, prosecution, service provisions, partnership building and prevalence.

The data provided in this study was collected in March 2023. More information at: www.calala.org

