**2.6. Violence Against Women & Girls**

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| **Living a life free of violence is a fundamental human right, but…** **“*Millions of women and girls around the world are assaulted, beaten, raped, mutilated or even murdered in what constitutes appalling violations of their human rights…” (former UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-Moon).*** |

**Introduction:**

Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) and Gender-Based Violence (GBV) are phenomena rooted in the inequality, discrimination and power imbalances between men and women which become manifested as physical, psychological, economic and other forms of abuse. VAWG affects women and girls across the life course from pre-birth sex selection to child and forced marriage, rape, sexual assault, domestic violence, harassment in the workplace and also elder and widow abuse. Children who experience domestic violence often suffer in silence. Deeply ingrained patriarchal structures reinforce harmful gender stereotypes and relegate women to their roles as mothers, wives and objects of male pleasure. These effects are often compounded by institutional violence based on race, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, health, immigration or IDP status, age, homelessness, imprisonment, marital status, disability and socio-economic class, making an intersectional approach essential. The media plays a pivotal role in the objectification of women, and rapid advancements in new technologies have facilitated and increased cyber VAWG, including online harassment, child pornography, non-consensual dissemination of intimate images and human trafficking. Gun violence, particularly in North America, is an important form of VAWG.

Most VAWG cases go unreported, and many women are unaware of the support available to them. Family and community pressures, lack of financial resources, language barriers, immigration status and lack of trust in local institutions, including the police and the judicial system, may prevent women reporting of VAWG. On average, only 13% of cases of VAWG across Europe are ever reported, and only a fraction result in conviction (EIGE, 2019). Moreover, accusations of domestic violence are often ignored under civil law in child custody decisions, allowing abusers to retain parental rights.

Gender stereotypes remain a challenge with VAWG often being perceived as a “women’s problem.” Toxic masculinities and sexist attitudes further exacerbate this problem. It is often seen as a private family matter rather than a public or political one, making it difficult for authorities to intervene. Some members of this group have also suggested investigating the Every Woman Treaty. Despite these many dimensions of VAWG, women’s agency and resilience remain strong, and civil society voices must be heard.

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| **VAWG is an obstacle to the achievement of the SDGs.** ***UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, stated in 2018 that whilst women’s empowerment was central to the success of the Sustainable Development Agenda, this could not be achieved without eliminating violence against women and girls (VAWG). Most countries in the UNECE region make the link between the BPFA and the SDGS, especially Goal 5, but the alignment between the two frameworks is not often clearly stated.*** |

**Answers to questions regarding the UNECE region:**

**(**Based on 43 national country report reviews, 55 CSO questionnaires and group discussions)

1. **Main structural barriers:** Insufficient access to justice; lack of training of judiciary, police, health and social workers about the care and dignity of survivors of VAWG; lack of specialized courts; lack of education, awareness and data on VAWG, including feminist analysis; lack of women in leadership; lack of implementation, knowledge and enforcement of laws; austerity measures, lack of funding for specialised services for VAWG survivors, e.g. shelters, legal aid, job training, sexual and reproductive health services (including abortion and birth control), socio-economic and cultural barriers, harmful gender stereotypes (e.g. machismo, media portrayal of women), ageism, lack of respect for minority groups such as LGBTQIA+, indigenous, Roma, migrant and refugee women, and women and girls with disabilities.
2. **Most prevalent and concerning forms of VAWG:** Domestic violence, sexual violence, human trafficking, sexual harassment, child marriage, FGM, femicide, cyber violence.
3. **De jure and de facto progress:** Most governments have advanced the 12 critical areas of the BPFA both de jure and de facto, albeit to different extents, e.g. little progress in Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan, a backlash against the #MeToo movement in Canada, Denmark and other countries.
4. **Examples of positive practices include:**
* Free legal aid for VAWG survivors regardless of background and financial income.
* Supporting women’s independence, free childcare for work/study, tax credit for single mothers.
* #MeToo movement which empowered women to speak up about their experiences of violence.

**Recommendations regarding VAWG in the UNECE region:**

1. **Improve access to justice.**

**Priority 1**: Remove barriers to reporting VAWG and stop impunity of perpetrators (especially for victims of sexual violence). Faster investigations, prosecutions and redress, better coordination, immediate interventions (e.g. emergency restraining orders, crisis ambulance services). Monitor and collect data in national database with guaranteed confidentiality. Use multisectoral teams of well-trained police, judges, health and social workers. Rehabilitate perpetrators and engage men and boys in campaigns, e.g. White Ribbon Campaign and Man Up.

**Priority 2:** Strengthen legal protection against VAWG, including cyber VAWG and unlawful violations of internet privacy. Ratify and implement the Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (the Istanbul Convention) and ILO Convention 190 on the Elimination of Violence and Harassment in the World of Work. Improve enforcement of laws and ensure equality and non-discrimination under the law in accordance with international human rights standards.

1. **Establish comprehensive National Action Plans on VAWG based on gender equality, gender mainstreaming and budgeting.**

**Priority 1**: Provide adequate and sustainable funding, community driven resources for survivors’ services (e.g. women’s shelters, free legal aid, psychological support, childcare and healthcare for survivors).

**Priority 2:** Ascertain the need for VAWG services by collecting integrated, reliable, disaggregated data on all forms of violence, including emerging forms. Improve structures to assess VAWG and establish reliable monitoring and independent evaluation mechanisms to oversee EVAWG efforts, expenditures and results.

1. **Focus on prevention of VAWG through education and awareness.**

**Priority 1**: Educate pre-kindergarten children through to secondary school students on internet safety, human rights, mutual respect and tolerance; teach adolescents about consent, sexuality and healthy relationships.

**Priority 2**: Address gender stereotypes, especially the glorification of masculine violence and objectification of women, in schools, in homes and through the training and involvement of the media.

**Priority 3:** Work with CSOs, feminist associations and movements to mobilise women and girls at the grassroots level. Engage local governments, County Councils and employers to prevent domestic violence, including using mobile units and smartphone apps under the guarantee of confidentiality.