

Violence survivors need accessible support services

"This event is important for the victims of violence, so that they do not feel alone and know there is a way out," said the Norwegian ambassador Susan Eckey at the conference in Bratislava.

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Mother and her child in a room

More than 130 participants attended the conference to discuss the needs of support services for victims of violence in Bratislava in December 2023. (Illustration photo: iStockphoto)

The aim of the conference was to discuss the needs of support and specialised services and how to sustain those needs. This was highlighted by the Slovakian President, Zuzana Čaputová, when she opened the conference (see fact box).

More than 130 participants from 18 different countries attended the conference with the aim of discussing a wide range of issues concerning support, counselling, and specialised and health services for the victims of domestic, sexual and intimate partner violence in various European countries.

The crucial role of NGOs and victim-centred approaches

Marta Becerra, head of the Gender Equality Cooperation Unit in the Council of Europe, highlighted trends in support services in Europe, particularly for victims of sexual violence. This was based on the experience gained from the organisation's cooperation activities with its member states and the monitoring of the Istanbul Convention by the Council of Europe Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence.

The Norwegian ambassador Susan Eckey in the middle together with (from left) Jenna Shearer Demir, Council of Europe; Jana Dacková, Head of the Programmes Operation Unit EEA and Norway Grants; Nora Mehlsen, Policy expert at EFTA and Hana Tasler Goldschmitova, Royal Norwegian Embassy in Vienna. (Photo: Vibeke Hoem)

Becerra believes that, despite notable advancements that address victims of violence against women, most countries still focus mainly on domestic violence, and not necessarily other forms of violence against women. She also highlights the efforts that a number of countries are making to develop multiagency cooperation mechanisms, the crucial role of NGOs, women's organisations and victim-centred approaches that place the empowerment of women at the fore.

Other factors that impede effective access to support include victims experiencing secondary victimisation and the lack of one-stop shops. Family justice centres could serve as centralised entry points, but need to avoid focusing solely on the needs of children at the expense of adult victims (mostly women). In order to ensure access for all victims of all forms of violence against women, it is important to look at the full diversity of women, including Roma women, women with disabilities, ethnic minority and language minority women, LGBTIQ+ women and so on.

Becerra alluded to the need for both short and long-term support for victims of sexual violence, with Denmark currently being the only country in Europe with the recommended number of sexual violence shelters per capita.

See [Becerra's and all the other presentations from day one](#)

Exploring various forms of violence

Various aspects of domestic and gender-based violence, sexual violence, and emerging forms of violence were explored during the conference.

Barbora Burajová, the director at the Coordinating Methodical Centre for Gender-based and Domestic Violence (CMC) presented an overview of domestic and gender-based violence, emphasising the need for legal protection.

She highlighted how the prevalence of gender-based violence (GBV) in intimate partner relationships disproportionately affected women and girls. Burajová discussed various forms of violence, including forced marriage and trafficking, and

stressed the importance of education to combat misconceptions about violence, victim blaming, and the need for international cooperation.

Read more about the Coordinating Methodical Centre for Gender-based and Domestic Violence in the article: [New research on shelters in Norway and Slovakia](#)

Melanie Hyde from the [World Health Organization](#) is concerned about sexual violence as a public health problem, focusing on intimate partner violence (IPV).

Hyde presented statistics on the prevalence of IPV, non-partner sexual violence, and child sexual abuse in the European region. She highlighted the importance of past evidence-based prevention strategies and the WHO guidelines on violence against women. In addition, she addressed the need for a health system approach, aligning frameworks with best international practices, and supporting communities of practice.

Cyberstalking – often perpetrated by current or former partners

Daša Malíková from the ALEJ Counselling Centre, an NGO that is an expert on cyberstalking, addressed the topic as a new form of violence against women and girls.

Malíková explains that this form of violence is often perpetrated by current or former partners, or individuals rejected in a relationship. She emphasised the cumulative effects of cyberstalking, including psychological damage, reputational damage to women and girls, and crimes committed on social networks. We need increased awareness, education, and legal measures to address cyberstalking, she said.

A panel discussion also stressed the importance of good practices for addressing the digital dimension of violence against women. Germany and Slovenia were mentioned as potential examples, with Germany focusing on complex procedures and new challenges, while Slovenia had a project called “click off”, which addresses digital violence in schools.

The key points discussed in this session included the complexity of addressing different forms of violence, the need for education, international collaboration, and legal measures to protect women and girls.

The status of support services in Slovakia and Norway

Representatives from the Slovakian ministries spoke about critical intervention and support services for victims of domestic and sexual/intimate partner violence, focusing on the current status in Slovakia.

Daniela Kosecka, from the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the SR (MoLSAF) in Slovakia, informed, that the Coordinating Methodical Centre for Gender-based and Domestic Violence (CMC) had, in cooperation with MoLSAF, proposed legislation that defined domestic violence as a crime. The proposed legislation was not passed.

“ It takes courage to ‘blow the whistle’ on these actions, while at the same time respecting the autonomy and empowerment of women to make their own decisions.

She also advocates for a greater number of support centres, as well as increased legal, psychological, and professional help for victims. She emphasised the need for contraceptive coverage in healthcare and accelerated health programmes for victims.

Mária Machajdíková, Director of the Department of Social Services, acknowledged inadequacies in the ministry's approach and noted that shelter capacity for women was only 50 per cent of the safe recommended amount.

The Norwegian expert Freja Ulvestad Kärki, from the Norwegian Health Directorate in Norway, shared insights about the crisis centres, sexual assault centres, trauma-sensitive health services, and the development of intersectoral expertise in Norway.

From left: Solveig Bergman, NKVTS; Lene Nilsen, the Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public security; Renate Alstrup Furre, Agder Police District; Rachel Eapen Paul, Susan Eckey, The Norwegian ambassador to Slovakia; Wanja Jeanette Sæther, the crisis centre in Salten; Freja Ulvestad Kärki, the Health Directorate and Nora Starheim Ruud, NKVTS. (Photo: Vibeke Hoem)

The director of the Crisis Centre in Salten, Wanja J. Sæther, presented the shelter movement in Norway. She explained that there are currently 43 crisis centres in Norway.

While there have been shelters in Norway for 40 years, the first shelter in Slovakia was established in 2016. There are currently 28 centres in Slovakia, including some for rape-victims and only eight that offer overnight accommodation.

A number of the proposals and key points made during the participant discussion were demand-driven calls for funding, dependent on organisations applying. The participants discussed the importance of continuous funding and the impact of Norwegian funding on interventions by the Ministry of justice.

"Shedding light on the dark corners where violence against women thrives"

As part of the conference, there was a social initiative against domestic and gender-based violence: Blow the whistle. In front of whistleblowing, different representatives gave a speech on the importance of combating domestic and gender-based violence.

"It is good to be together in Bratislava today, during 16 days of activism, to continue our focus on the troubling prevalence of violence against women," said Jenna Shearer Demir from the Council of Europe, who was one of the speakers:

Shearer Demir emphasised the pivotal role that whistle-blowers play in shedding light on the dark corners where violence against women thrives in her speech at the whistleblowing initiative outside the conference venue in Bratislava.

"The alarming statistics surrounding violence against women highlight the critical need for action. One in three women in Europe has experienced violence, a stark reality that demands our collective attention."

Shearer Demir acknowledges the steps taken by governmental and nongovernmental entities to prevent violence, protect victims, prosecute perpetrators and coordinate policies to end the violence.

"Speaking out against all forms of violence against women is crucial for justice and accountability. It takes courage to 'blow the whistle' on these actions, while at the same time respecting the autonomy and empowerment of women to make their own decisions."

Shearer Demir highlighted four important reasons for reporting violence against women:

"Firstly, it provides victims a pathway to justice, holding perpetrators accountable for their actions.

Secondly, reporting incidents of violence helps create a comprehensive understanding of the prevalence and patterns of violence, enabling authorities to develop more effective prevention and intervention strategies.

Thirdly, reporting empowers victims to seek out crucial support services, counselling, and legal assistance, fostering their recovery."

Finally, Shearer Demir believes that "reporting violence against women challenges social norms and attitudes, promoting a culture of zero tolerance for violence against women and fostering collective efforts to create safer communities for everyone."

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