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Support and protection measures of victims of domestic and gender-based violence in Latvia

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Abstract

This paper highlights the prevalence of violence against women in Latvia, major measures implemented towards combating violence and a reflection of the situation in Latvia.

1. Relevant country context

Domestic violence and gender-based violence issues are compared to other EU members wide-spread across Latvia and remain as severe human rights violation, which is also confirmed by relevant data. For example:

- OECD data¹ about the prevalence of violence against women in the lifetime shows that every fourth women has been a victim of violence, where Latvia remains at the highest position within the European Union, whereas supporting attitudes towards violence (from women’s perspective) are showed to be one of the lowest.
- The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights’ survey in 2012² also shows high percentage (39%) of physical and/or sexual violence since the age of 15. Latvia’s position is above average and 7th highest in EU, same parameter data collected in 2021 by Central Statistical Bureau Republic of Latvia – 25,1%³. The latter also highlights that 37,4% have experienced physical or emotional violence in childhood.

Also, Latvia remains one of the six EU countries, which has not ratified the Istanbul Convention⁴, where some of leading political parties mistakenly interpret convention as threat to “traditional family values”.

¹ OECD (2023), [Violence against women](#) (indicator). doi: 10.1787/f1eb4876-en (Accessed on 08 April 2023)

² FRA (2012), FRA [gender-based violence against women](#) survey dataset

³ Central Statistical Bureau Republic of Latvia (2021), [Vardarbības izplatība Latvijā 2021](#) (Spread of violence in Latvia 2021). Publication is in Latvian with major headlines in English.

⁴ Violence against women: [MEPs demand the EU ratify the Istanbul Convention](#) (15/02/2023)

Nonetheless, there are positive dynamics in the societal attitude towards violence, whereas in 2016, 31% of the Latvian population agreed with the position that domestic violence is a “private thing, which does not need intervention”, the same survey in 2018 showed that only 19% agreed with this statement, also it showed increase (from 64% to 75%) in acceptance of the fact that perpetrators should be prosecuted⁵.

There are recent improvements in legislation towards support and protection measures to combat violence against women, for example:

- On 17th of February 2022 changes in the law “On Police”⁶ implemented changes, which allow for officials to apply temporary protection against violence without a written application of the victim. This allows to reach the needed protection in situations when the psychological well-being of the victim is severely affected by the perpetrator and therefore fear of continuous harm in case of an application is present.
- On 4th of April 2022, the 3 Cabinet of Ministers⁷ agreed to reserve the united number of services of social value 116016 for support of women, who are victims of violence. It is known that there is an on-going evaluation and intentions to implement this number.
- In Latvia, municipalities also have the right to implement social services, which are provided locally to the inhabitants of the municipality, for example, Riga City municipality⁸ on 22nd of March 2023 has implemented psychological support groups for women, who are or were victims of domestic violence as a regular social service in their municipality.

An important present issues within governmental and non-governmental providers of support is the scarcity of financial resources, for example, recent survey of organisations, which provide support for women and children who are victims of violence⁹, showed that the main problems are irregularity of funding and incapability to provide services in the expected quality. Other issues in field of women and children specialist services is lack of specialists in rural areas (74% of organisations agree), lack of funding for appropriate market-based salaries (43% agree) and work overload of specialists (80% agree). Also lack of availability of good practice within the country (47%) and beyond it (57%).

⁵ Council of Europe (2021), [Roadmap for establishing specialist support services for victims of violence against women and domestic violence in Latvia in line with the Council of Europe standards](#)

⁶ [Law “On Police”](#) (04.06.1991) Section 10, part 21.

⁷ Ministry of Transport Republic of Latvia (2023), [Atbalsta sniegšanai vardarbībā cietušām sievietēm rezervēs tālruna numuru 116016](#)

⁸ [The procedure for receiving and paying for social services provided by the municipality of the city of Riga](#), article 8.1.

⁹ Women’s NGOs Cooperation Network of Latvia, 2022, [Research of support network for women, who are victims of violence](#).

2. Policy debate

Policy debates are regularly on-going in Latvia concerning the situation of domestic and gender-based violence, but usually it takes a long time to implement developments after they are proposed.

In 2023 multiple reforms towards combatting domestic violence are planned to be implemented, for example, now in process are changes in Rules of Cabinet of Ministers Nr. 790, which are designed to settle order of the state-paid social rehabilitation service to people, who suffered from violence. The changes are proposing to raise available state paid consultations for victims from 23 to 120 consultations in case of “high violence” and implementing new service – crisis flat service¹⁰.

Also, as mentioned in the previous section, there are debates towards implementing a new support helpline for women, who are victims of violence. It is planned that it will work 24/7, but at the moment further information about the implementation terms is unavailable.

3. Good practice examples

3.1 Social rehabilitation service for adults, who are victims of violence (state implemented service)

3.1.1 Aims/goals

Provide consultation (social rehabilitation) for victims of violence, which includes up to 23 consultations with a psychologist, lawyer or social worker in order to achieve reintegration and needed protection for victims of violence.

3.1.2 Target groups

Adult victims of violence. The service is being implemented by social services or by non-governmental organisations by municipality delegation.

3.1.3 How does the project work in practice

Victim can apply for service in social service or non-governmental organisation which provides this service. The victim is not required to apply by place of living and freely can choose any municipality, where to apply, what is especially important for inhabitants of rural areas, where fear or risks of confidentiality may appear. Also, an important issue is that non-governmental organisations can accept a person to receive a programme without the victim applying in agencies, what is friendly for

¹⁰ [Amendments to the regulations](#) of the Cabinet of Ministers of December 23, 2014 no. 790

"Procedures for the provision of social rehabilitation services to victims of violence and adults who have committed violence".

victims, which upon personal beliefs or bad experience choose not to engage with state/municipal services. The first consultation is being provided by a social worker, which evaluates the needs of the victim and appoints to further consultations to any of three mentioned specialists.

3.2 Temporary protection against violence without victims' application and information of social service

3.2.1 Aims/goals

Provide legal protection of victims of domestic violence by separating the perpetrator from the place of residence and/or forbidding any contact with victim.

3.2.2 Development of legal protection

The originally implemented measure required an application from the victim in order to receive this form of protection, but since February 2022, the requirement of application has been cancelled and therefore officials can evaluate the situation and apply measures without approval of the victim. This measure was especially important due to several cases of victims being threatened and thus were refusing writing an application to police. Also in August 2020 a practice was established that if the temporary protection is being applied, then information is being provided to social service. This measure was important to avoid a situation, where domestic violence cases are known for the police, but are not in sight of social services to provide help.

3.2.3 How does the measure work in practice

There are two types of temporary protection against violence in place. One is being applied by the police, another by the court.

Temporary protection by the police is being applied when a call is received and is designed as a measure to protect the victim and "give space" to apply to long-term court protection. Police protection is being provided up to eight days and afterwards should be prolonged by court. The police, by evaluating the situation, can apply this measure.

Temporary protection by court is being applied by written submission of a victim to court and is being revised within one working day.

Temporary protection forbids the perpetrator to approach and contact the victim, but there are issues with complete control of compliance of this measure.

3.3 Victim Support Helpline 116006

3.3.1 Aims/goals

General goal of the victim support helpline 116006 in Latvia is to provide psychological first aid and information of available resources for crime victims. Nonetheless, half of the calls received are especially about issues of domestic violence.

3.3.2 How does the service work in practice

The helpline works every day 12 – 22 (including holidays, 365 days yearly), where specifically trained workers provide psychological first aid (crisis intervention), which is not limited in time and afterwards provide information about existing legal, health and social services available to the victim. In the context of domestic violence, the victim is being provided with guidance to apply for temporary protection against violence and existing social rehabilitation services. The helpline serves as “contact point” between victim and the available resources in Latvia. The helpline is toll-free.

3.4 Social rehabilitation (violent behaviour reducing programme) for perpetrators

3.4.1 Aims/goals

The violent behaviour intervention programme aims to provide individual and/or group intervention sessions for perpetrators to reduce violent behaviour.

3.4.2 Application to programme

A perpetrator can be assigned to the programme in cases of administrative and criminal violation, which is related to violence or threats to commit violence, or the police/social service or orphans court has information relating to the persons violent behaviour, or a person can apply voluntary in cases of self-reflected fear of possibility to commit violence or admitting that a violent act has been done. Therefore, a person can receive up to 16 individual consultations or 16 two hour group consultations, and extra three individual consultations afterwards.

4. Transferability aspects to Romania

The good practices presented in the discussion paper are relevant and implementable in Latvia. There are practical issues of crisis (shelter) centre's, where, unfortunately, due to public knowledge of the location of those places, situations are known, when a perpetrator tries to reach the victim. Due to this, the issue of specially designed crisis flat has been raised and is soon-to-be nationally implemented in Latvia. Unfortunately, any other detailed expertise is unavailable about the second good practice towards referral centre's for victims of sexual violence, due the fact that no special services for victims of sexual violence exist in Latvia¹¹. Such practice should be implemented in Latvia to meet the needs of victims of sexual violence appropriately and avoid referring victims of sexual violence to generic type of services.

¹¹ Council of Europe (2021), [Roadmap for establishing specialist support services for victims of violence against women and domestic violence in Latvia in line with the Council of Europe standards](#)

5. Conclusions and recommendations

Latvia establishes new protection measures and expands existing services to tackle violence against women, however, those are insufficient towards existing needs of women, who are victims of violence.

National recommendations:

- Ratification of Istanbul Convention – at present there is no united, harmonised definition and understanding of violence against women, the implemented understanding is based on a gender-neutral position, which does not include the needs of women, who are victims of violence.
- Implement women-specialised and violence type-based services to provide professional help in accordance with women victim's needs with sufficient funding and training.
- Develop a national victim support framework/system, which establishes cross-institutional cooperation among actors.