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Combating violence against women and girls in Estonia – where is it now?

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Abstract

As Estonia is a small country of only 1,3 million people, then in theory, it should have been relatively easy to fully implement the Istanbul Convention (IC). However, in practice, this has not been the case. As stated in IC article 4, it is a fundamental right of women to live free from violence in both the public and private sphere. Although some progress has been made, there is still a long way to go to fully achieve requirements of the convention in Estonia. Currently, only 2 out of the 4 P's (prevention, protection, prosecution and policies) are mostly implemented. For the other two there is still a lot of work to be done before they can be considered being in line with the requirements of the IC. The protection of victims/survivors of violence is well-implemented and changing and implementing of policies are moving in the right direction. However, there are legislative and procedural changes that still must be made to ensure that victims support is efficient in all contacts with the state or service providers (police, social workers, etc.). On the positive side, governmental officials and political decision makers have expressed a commitment to working with stakeholders to develop these processes to ensure full implementation of the IC in Estonia.

1. Estonia – Relevant country context

1.1 Strategy and Legislation

Estonia signed the Istanbul Convention in 2014 and ratified it in 2017. Since then, the state's commitment to developing legislation and procedures to provide better protection to victims and survivors of violence against women (VAW) has been stable and slowly improving.

This includes the violence prevention agreement that covers prevention and combating various forms of interpersonal violence¹. The current agreement is set for the period 2021-2025.

To fulfil the IC, amendments have been made to the Penal Code, to cover physical sexual harassment, female genital mutilation (FGM), and crimes committed in a

¹ [The Violence Prevention Agreement | Justiitsministeerium](#)

subordinate relationship. Also, there is a new Victim Support Act² that came into force in April 2023, which has improved on previously vague legislation to more clearly indicate how services for victims of abuse should be provided.

The newest legislative change became active in June 2022, when the age of consent³ was increased from 14 to 16. This change also included the “Romeo and Juliet law” that legalised consensual relationships between minors. Currently there is debate about changing articles on sexual violence and rape. As current legislation leaves almost all rape cases without any conviction of the perpetrator (it is estimated that 0.5% of cases get to punishment), the need to speed up the change is clear. There is political will of newly elected politicians to continue working on the change, so we are hopeful that it could be implemented within a few years.

There are two other large unresolved issues that need to be tackled as soon as possible: coercive control in (post-) relationships (IC art.33) and long-term post-relationship abuse via manipulation of the custody and visitation rights of children (IC art.31).

1.2 Services

The country has also established a victim support department⁴ (VSU) within the Estonian Social Insurance Board (SIB). The new department is responsible for organizing the work of women’s support service (WSS) contractors, developing quality guidelines, and carrying on quality control of the work of WSS. Also, other services that are connected to articles of IC, for example running 24/7 crisis helpline in 3 languages, organising coordinated cooperation of stakeholders in regions, initiating local multi-agency risk assessment conference (MARAC) and working with perpetrators.

All women’s support service centres are non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that obtained contracts via competitive bidding that are described by SIB VSU. There are 17 WSS-s (one for each county plus 3 in the capital) and 4 sexual crisis centres (in each regional hospital: North, South, East, West central).

There is not always good understanding on how to make supporting of victims/survivors more efficient. Closer cooperation between regional stakeholders is developed by SIB VSU, but currently solid agreements and top-down guidelines on how to do cooperated community response (CCR) are missing. Therefore, the support depends on personal connections and common view of particular people working on local level. This is not a sustainable approach, as people are moving or changing jobs and the gap has to be filled again.

An important gap is that first contact points to victims and survivors (police, legal professions, social counsellors, children support services, medical professionals etc.)

² [Victim Support Act–Riigi Teataja](#)

³ [Estonia approves law raising age of sexual consent to 16 | News | ERR](#)

⁴ [Support for victims | Sotsiaalkindlustusamet](#)

are not educated on the topic during their studies which means that they are not prepared when starting to work. In some university curricula there are courses, but that typically are not mandatory and thus are usually only taken by students that are already interested in the topic.

1.3 Data collection

Statistical data about domestic violence (DV) and related crimes is collected by different organisations and reported by the Ministry of Justice semi-annually. Since 2018, until 2021 reporting of DV cases have increased by 20-35% compared to previous years. Currently, reporting numbers for 2022 are in decreasing trend. This could be explained by (not enough) public awareness campaigns and lower focus on the topic by decision makers and leaders of institutional services. Further analysis on what is behind the decrease remains to be done.

In 2022, there were 3244 registered DV crimes (2021: 3760). That was 46% of all violent crimes. 86% of DV crimes were committed by men and 79% of victims were women. 66% of abusers were the current or previous partner and 19% were a parent.

Victim Support Services counselled 3477 victims of DV, that is about 75% of all who turned for help. Annually, WSS-s help between 1900 and 2200 women and their children.

There is no data analysis about femicide. General statistics, done by Ministry of Justice, is giving information about inter-family murders, but there is no further analysis done on whether there was previous DV/IPV registered.

1.4 Public discussion, prevention

Although society is more aware about the problem of violence against women, myths and problematic attitudes, victim-blaming is still prevalent. Countering this requires regular public awareness raising and education activities.

Prevention activities are described in various strategies, but unfortunately it is not performed systematically. This is one area that must be further developed and funded regularly by the State. Until now, campaigns are usually done randomly by NGOs with the support of for-profit companies. As noted above, legislative changes have been made to comply with the IC and ensure the protection of victims/survivors of VAW, but there are still gaps that must be addressed.

2. Conclusion

As described above, Estonia has benefitted from the ratification of the IC. The IC has been used to develop guidelines for holistically tackling the phenomenon of violence against women and building an efficient working support system for victims/survivors of the violence. Although important progress has been made, there is still a long way to go to ensure the best support possible for victims and fair prosecution of perpetrators.

For countries that are going to ratify and implement the IC, the recommendation is to have solid political agreement to commit to full implementation of the convention. At the same time with that, a step-by-step implementation plan has to be created. The plan should involve all stakeholders who have to work together in the future implementing changes and serving victims, to ensure that all obstacles that may occur are going to be solved and avoided in the future. WSS NGOs as important stakeholders need to be involved from the very beginning of the process. Work with perpetrators must be long term and feedback about their progress given within several years. Only then it is possible to ensure that abuse won't continue in the future and there won't be previous or new victims of the same perpetrator(s). The experience of Estonia, as well as other countries have demonstrated that cooperation between state and civil society organizations guarantees the best outcome for the groups that are served. When implementation of IC is executed poorly, it is more difficult to make changes.

3. Transferability of the knowledge and information

When looking at the progress Estonia and Romania have made during past years in efforts to implement requirements of IC, it can be seen as a good way going forward.

For Estonia, dialogue between state and CSO-s has been constant and that is helping to improve current legislation and finding ways of supporting victims no matter in which area of the state they live. The New Victims Support Act was created in cooperation with experts from CSO-s, who are grassroot responders and advocates for victim's rights. WSS-s should be carried on by expert CSO-s, who can focus solely to supporting victims/survivors, both – in work to leave abuse as well as advocacy to improve services. Training of first contact specialists (police, social workers, children support services etc.) is constant and ongoing (as they enter the workforce) and that should be the way for Romania as well.

Romania is a step ahead on clearing the work to implement IC on a legal level. The law no.217/2003, for the prevention and combating domestic violence is the tool that can be useful also in Estonia. Currently, Estonia does not have special legislation, therefore protection and prosecution won't be as efficient as it could and re-victimization is common. Cyber violence as a new form of abuse has also been added to the law. Estonia does not have a similar amendment, therefore it is impossible to protect victims of cyber violence, neither is it possible to prosecute.

Both countries would benefit when they get legal professions on board and those agree to learn and be trained as well as take into consideration all forms of abuse during legal process. National plans and strategies must be visible in both state's annual budgets to ensure coordinated development on the field covered by IC.