

## Violence against women: an EU-wide survey

*Article 1 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union states that human dignity is inviolable; it must be respected and protected. Article 2 guarantees the right to life, and Article 4 the prohibition of torture and inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. Article 21 recognises the right to be free from discrimination, including on the ground of sex, and Article 47 secures the right to access justice.*

### Context

Violence against women encompasses crimes that disproportionately impact on women, such as sexual assault, rape and 'domestic violence'. It is a violation of women's fundamental rights with respect to dignity and equality. The impact of violence against women stretches beyond those women who are themselves victims, since it affects families, friends and society as a whole. It calls for a critical look at how society and the state respond to this abuse. Measures to fight and prevent violence against women are therefore required at both European Union (EU) and national levels.

Measures at European level that can serve to address violence against women include the EU Victims' Directive (2012/29/EU) and the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention). The EU Victims' Directive, adopted in 2012, establishes minimum standards on the rights, protection and support of victims of crime in the EU, and makes specific reference to victims of gender-based violence, victims of sexual violence and victims of violence in a close relationship. The Istanbul Convention, which the Council of Europe adopted in 2011, is the first legally binding regional instrument in Europe that comprehensively addresses different forms of violence against women, such as psychological violence, stalking, physical violence, sexual violence and sexual harassment. The convention is due to come into force after 10 ratifications.

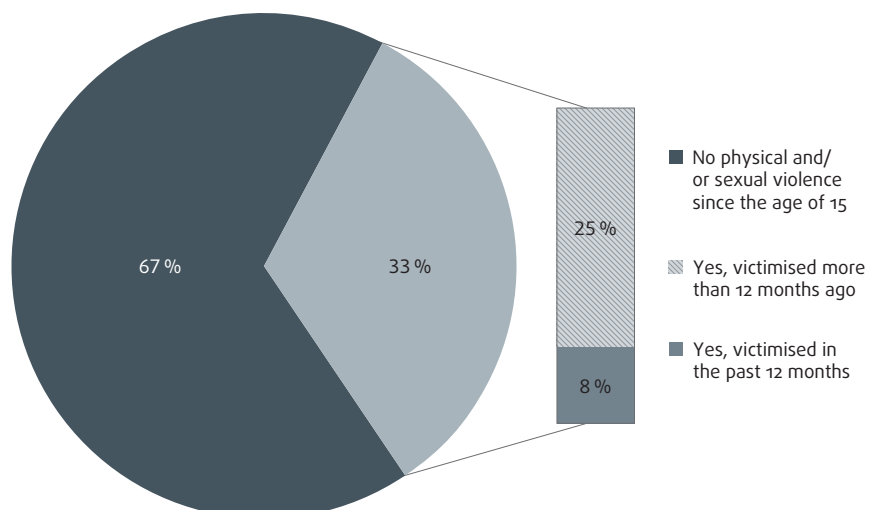
Alongside these encouraging legal developments, evidence from FRA's EU-wide survey on violence against women indicates that the majority of women who are victims of violence do not report their experiences to either the police or any victim support organisation. As a result, most women who are victims of violence do not come into contact with the justice system and other

services. It is therefore clear that the needs and the rights of many women in the EU are currently not being met in practice.

Given the significant impact of violence against women, it is unfortunate that policy makers and practitioners in many EU Member States still have to grapple with a lack of comprehensive data on the scale and nature of this problem. As most women do not report violence and do not feel encouraged to do so by systems that are often seen as unsupportive, official criminal justice data only record those few cases that are reported. As a result, policy and practical responses to address violence against women are not always informed by comprehensive evidence. While some EU Member States and research institutions have undertaken surveys and other research on violence against women, a lack of comprehensive and comparable data remains in this field across the EU, compared with other areas, such as employment, where a number of Member States collect data in relation to gender.

The FRA EU-wide survey responds to a request for data on violence against women from the European Parliament, which the Council of the EU reiterated in its Conclusions on the eradication of violence against women in the EU. The results from the survey interviews can be looked at alongside existing data and gaps in knowledge on violence against women at EU and Member State level, and is ready to be used in the development of policies and action on the ground to combat this human rights violation.

**Figure 1: Women experiencing physical and/or sexual violence since the age of 15 and in the 12 months before the interview, EU-28 (%)**



Note: Based on all respondents (N = 42,002).

Source: FRA gender-based violence against women survey data set, 2012

## Data collection and coverage

The results of FRA's survey on violence against women are based on face-to-face interviews with 42,000 women in all 28 EU Member States, with on average 1,500 interviews per Member State. The respondents were selected based on random sampling. The results are representative of the experiences and opinions of women who are 18 to 74 years old and live in the EU. The standardised survey interviews comprised questions about physical, sexual and psychological violence, childhood victimisation, sexual harassment and stalking, including new mediums for abuse such as the internet. Women were asked to provide information about their personal experience of various forms of violence, how often they have experienced certain types of violence, and what consequences violence has had on their lives. The survey also collected information about reporting and non-reporting to the police, and about women's use of other services that can provide assistance to victims.

## Selected findings and ways forward in response to violence against women

The FRA survey results aim to support policy makers and other stakeholders in tackling violence against women across the EU. Based on the survey results, FRA has developed a series of detailed opinions that are presented in the survey's main results and summary reports (see 'Further information' box).

This factsheet presents some examples of survey findings, which are placed alongside general considerations as possible 'ways forward' for responding to violence against women.

### Differences in results between and within countries

Differences between and within countries in rates of violence against women are also reported in other surveys, such as the World Health Organization's (WHO's) 10-country study on women's health and domestic violence, and the United States' (US) national intimate partner violence and sexual violence survey covering all 50 US states.

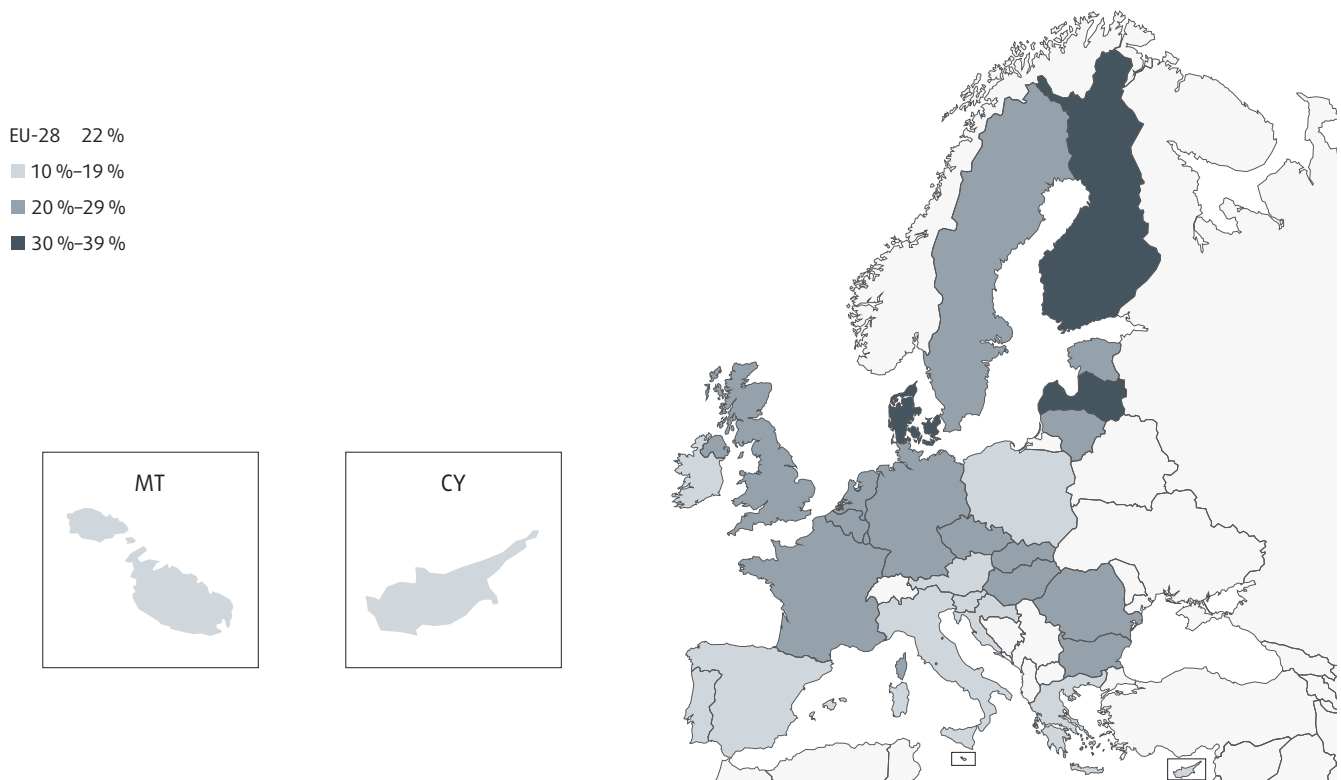
Differences between countries can reflect a number of factors as well as actual differences in victimisation rates, such as: whether it is culturally acceptable to talk with other people about experiences of violence against women, including survey interviewers; and the possibility that enhanced gender equality in a country could lead to higher levels of disclosure about violence against women since incidents are more likely to be openly addressed and challenged in societies with enhanced equality.

The survey's main results report and 'At a glance' summary report address some of the possible reasons for observed differences. For a detailed breakdown of results at the level of individual EU Member States, see the online data explorer that accompanies the survey: <http://fra.europa.eu/en/vaw-survey-results>.

### Physical violence

An estimated 13 million women in the EU have experienced physical violence in the course of the 12 months before the survey interviews. This corresponds to 7 % of women aged 18–74 years in the EU.<sup>1</sup>

Figure 2: Women experiencing physical and/or sexual partner violence since the age of 15, EU-28 (%)



Source: FRA gender-based violence against women survey data set, 2012

<sup>1</sup> According to the Eurostat online database, 186,590,848 women aged 18 to 74 years lived in the EU-28 on 1 January 2013, see: [http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/statistics/search\\_database](http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/statistics/search_database) (data code demo\_pjan, data extracted on 16 August 2013).

## Sexual violence

An estimated 3.7 million women in the EU have experienced sexual violence in the course of the 12 months before the survey interviews. This corresponds to 2 % of women aged 18–74 years in the EU.

**Ways forward:** Future EU strategies on equality between women and men could build on the survey findings to address key areas of concern with respect to women’s experiences of violence. Examples could include new or newly recognised forms of violence against women, such as stalking or abuse through the medium of new technologies, as well as aspects of violence that are under-reported by women to the police and victim support organisations.

**Ways forward:** Given the scale of violence against women reported in the survey, the EU’s post-Stockholm Programme landscape in the field of justice and home affairs should ensure that violence against women is acknowledged and addressed as a fundamental rights abuse within the framework of the EU’s responses to crime and criminal victimisation.

One in 20 women (5 %) has been raped since the age of 15. This figure is based on responses to the survey question “Since you were 15 years old until now, how often has someone forced you into sexual intercourse by holding you down or hurting you in some way?”

In a number of EU jurisdictions, the legal definition of rape extends beyond the requirement that the perpetrator uses physical force. In this regard, the extent of rape in the EU could be in excess of 5 %.

**Ways forward:** The EU Victims’ Directive applies to all crime victims and makes reference specifically to victims of gender-based violence

alongside other vulnerable victims. It provides a solid base on which to build targeted responses, at the Member State level, to meet the needs of women as victims of violence with respect to victim support and criminal justice interventions. As part of the review of the implementation of the directive undertaken by the European Commission, a component could assess whether the directive meets – in practice – the needs and rights of women who are victims of violence.

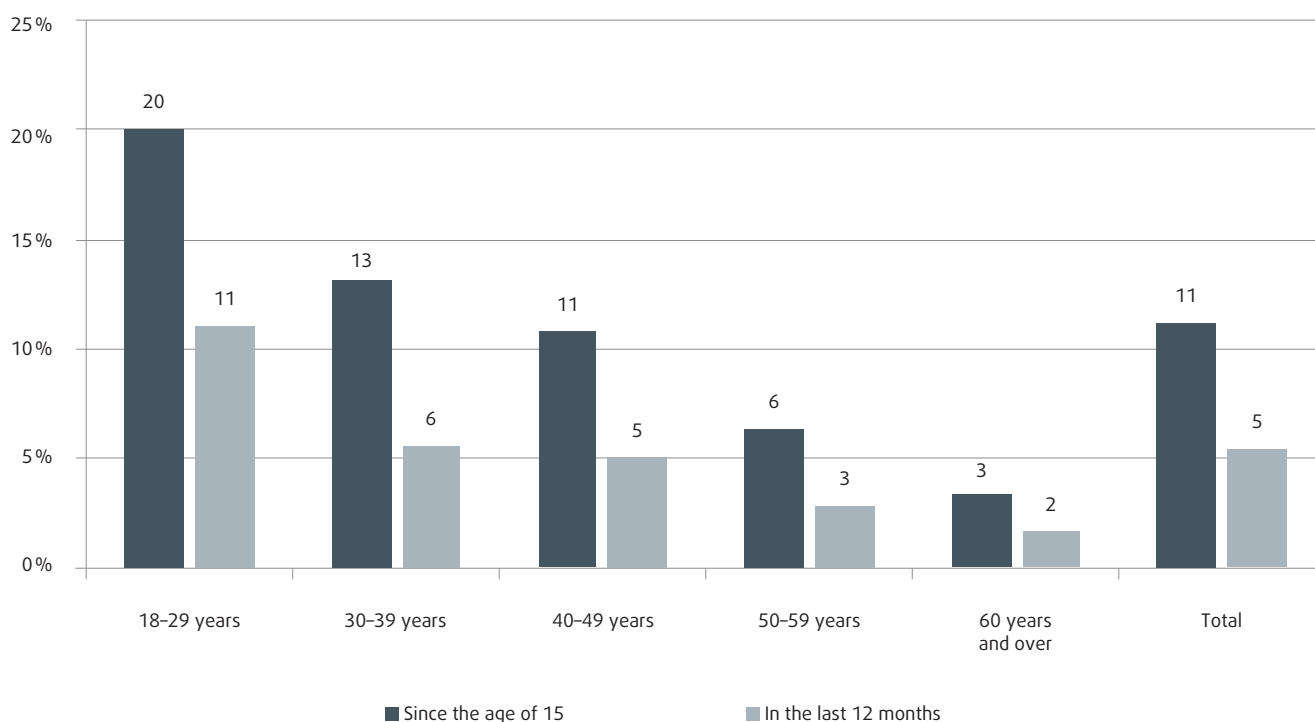
**Ways forward:** The EU should explore the possibility of accession to the Council of Europe’s Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention). At present, it is the most comprehensive regional instrument addressing violence against women. The FRA survey results can also support EU Member States in ratifying the convention.

In the EU-28, 18 % of women have experienced stalking since the age of 15, and 5 % of women have experienced stalking in the 12 months preceding the survey. This corresponds to about 9 million women in the EU-28 experiencing stalking within a period of 12 months.

To obtain this finding, women were asked in the survey interview whether they had been in a situation where the same person had been repeatedly offensive or threatening towards them with respect to a list of different actions; for example, whether the same person has repeatedly ‘Loitered or waited for you outside your home, workplace or school without a legitimate reason?’; or ‘Made offensive, threatening or silent phone calls to you?’.

**Ways forward:** EU Member States are encouraged to develop specific national action plans on violence against women, which should use the results of the survey in the absence of data at the national level. Civil society actors working with women who are victims of violence can usefully be involved in the development of action plans

Figure 3: Forms of sexual cyberharassment since the age of 15 and in the 12 months before the survey, including unwanted sexually explicit emails or SMS messages that were offensive, by age group, EU-28 (%)



Notes: Out of all women excluding cases where the answer to the questions on cyberharassment was not applicable (n = 35,820). 6,084 respondents answered ‘not applicable’ on both items; information on age was missing in 98 cases.

Source: FRA gender-based violence against women survey data set, 2012

to help ensure that these can deliver practical results for victims and are sustainable.

**Ways forward:** EU policy in the fields of employment, education, health, and information and communication technology should address the impact of violence against women in their respective fields. This should be reflected at the Member State level in specific policy interventions and national action plans that address these different fields.

Some 12 % of women indicate that they have experienced some form of sexual abuse or incident by an adult before the age of 15, which corresponds to about 21 million women in the EU.

The results show that 30 % of women who have experienced sexual victimisation by a former or current partner also experienced sexual violence in childhood. Of those women who have not experienced sexual victimisation in their current or former relationship, 10 % indicate experiences of sexual violence in their childhood.

**Ways forward:** The EU should ensure that funding mechanisms that continue the work of DAPHNE and other programmes, which variously contribute to the protection of children, young people and women against all forms of violence, can be used to further support research and work by civil society organisations addressing violence against women. In particular, funding is needed for the work of targeted victim support services in the field of violence against women.

**Ways forward:** A victim-centred and rights-centred approach to women as victims of violence needs to be reinforced at the EU and

Member State level. Positive examples have emerged in recent years in a number of Member States that recognise 'domestic' or 'intimate partner' violence as a matter for state intervention rather than a private matter.

**Ways forward:** The EU and Member States could signify their commitment to the collection of data, on a regular basis, on different forms of violence against women. This can provide evidence for the development of policy responses and action on the ground. This process could be supported by Eurostat and its relevant expert groups, and could be used to feed data to the specific monitoring bodies of the United Nations (UN) and the Council of Europe, as well as the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE).

Half of all women in the EU (53 %) avoid certain situations or places, at least sometimes, for fear of being physically or sexually assaulted. In comparison, existing surveys on crime victimisation and fear of crime show that far fewer men restrict their movement.

**Ways forward:** EU and Member State policies and national action plans to combat violence against women must be developed on the basis of evidence that draws directly from women's experiences of violence. Data on women's experiences of violence should be collected in addition to administrative and criminal justice data, which do not capture the majority of unreported victimisation. The EU and Member States should promote and fund surveys in a concerted effort to uncover information on the extent and nature of violence experienced by women. These surveys can be repeated every few years to measure developments over time.

## Further information:

The FRA summary report on the survey findings – **Violence against women: an EU-wide survey. Results at a glance** – provides an overview of selected survey results and includes the main opinions stemming from the findings: <http://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2014/vaw-survey-results-at-a-glance>.

The main survey results report – **Violence against women: an EU-wide survey. Main results** – presents a comprehensive account of the findings from the survey data, as well as a number of detailed opinions specifically in response to results on various types of violence against women, such as physical and sexual violence, sexual harassment and stalking, all of which are addressed chapter by chapter in the report: <http://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2014/vaw-survey-main-results>.

For the **online data explorer** of the survey results, see: <http://fra.europa.eu/en/vaw-survey-results>.

For details on the survey methodology – **Violence against women: An EU-wide survey. Technical report** – see: <http://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2014/vaw-survey-technical-report>.