

Sexual and Gender-Based Violence

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Summary: Preventing, mitigating, and responding to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) remains an issue of critical concern in Cyprus. Gaps in legal protection, institutional weaknesses, and insufficiently resourced strategies and operational measures hold back progress in eliminating SGBV. Additionally, Cyprus ranked 21st in the EU's Gender Equality Index for 2023, and women's political participation in particular lags far behind EU averages. Cypriot laws, policies, and information management systems fail to consider women who may experience multiple forms of discrimination, including women subjected to labor exploitation and trafficking, refugee and migrant women, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (LGBTQ) women.

Legal gaps and poor implementation prevent comprehensive, intersectional protection for victims of SGBV.

- While Cyprus passed the welcome 2021 Prevention and Combatting of Violence against Women and Domestic Violence Law (2021 Law) to implement the Istanbul Convention, the 2021 Law set definitions that conflate biological sex, gender, and gender identity, which may obscure the gendered nature of violence against women and girls and allow Cyprus to overlook intersectional discrimination against trans women in data collection.
- The 2021 Law is not aligned with the Violence in the Family Laws, weakening protection from domestic violence.
- The coordinating body for the 2021 Law is insufficiently resourced and not empowered to ensure the law's monitoring and implementation.
- The National Strategy for Preventing and Combatting of Violence against Women and Domestic Violence has no dedicated budget. Lack of services and untrained officials contribute to under-reporting of domestic violence.
- Trafficking victims often go unidentified or are retraumatized instead of protected. While the Refugee Law entitles victims of trafficking to an expedited asylum process, government agencies and refugee services do not always identify victims of trafficking due to a lack of a standardized process. Insufficient training of police officers on gender, culture, and interviewing involved in processing results in re-traumatization of victims.
- Many domestic violence victims are denied protection due to excessive criteria for protective orders. Courts arbitrarily deny domestic violence victims the right to legal aid. Insufficiently trained prosecutors and judges allow cases involving violence against women to be converted into charges with lighter penalties.
- There are no rape crisis centers or sexual violence referral centers in Cyprus. There are just four women's shelters, and overall, there is one bed per 18,894 people. This is far from the standard of one per 10,000 people.

- Data collection is under-resourced, inconsistent, and not intersectional. This prevents analysis of the causes of SGBV and evaluation of strategy implementation, policy effectiveness, and institutional response to SGBV.

Women face inequality in politics, economics, and the peace process.

- Women in Cyprus remain largely excluded from decision-making and leadership positions, especially in public and political life, and Cyprus is one of the most gender-segregated countries in the EU regarding employment.
- Sexism and gender stereotypes keep women out of the peace process. Intersectional discrimination makes participation more challenging for Turkish Cypriot, migrant, and LGBTQ women and women with disabilities.
- There is no information available on the implementation of the National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security for 2021-2025, excluding civil society from contributing their expertise or implementing the plan.

Policies and services for asylum-seekers and migrants fall short on SGBV needs.

- Reception services do not meet the needs of LGBTQ individuals or SGBV survivors, despite half of women arriving in Cyprus seeking protection reporting that they experienced SGBV.
- There are insufficient specialized support services for asylum-seeking and migrant women, and accessing them requires a referral from welfare services or the police, leaving many women unprotected.

Recommendations

- Establish specialized, mandatory training for governmental officials, including authorities in first-arrival reception centers; law enforcement; judiciary; health professionals; educators; and other stakeholders on trafficking, SGBV, and victim-centered investigation and prosecution.
- Provide legal assistance and ensure availability of native-language psychological support to victims of trafficking, ensuring they have an advocate or legal representative without restrictions from immigration law.
- Establish and strengthen systematic data collection on, and a mechanism for, early identification of trafficking victims and a rapid referral system to specialized services for survivors of SGBV.
- Resource the proposed structure of the National Coordinating Body for it to carry out its mandate effectively.
- Harmonize definitions of domestic violence in Violence of the Family Laws of 2000 and 2004 with the 2021 Prevention and Combatting of Violence against Women and Domestic Violence Law.
- Provide sufficient funding to enact the National Strategy for Preventing and Combatting of Violence against Women and Domestic Violence.
- Establish and fund databases to collect and publish comprehensive disaggregated data on all forms of SGBV and SGBV-related legal cases, including type and number of reports received by the police, the investigations opened, indictments made, convictions, and number and type of protective orders.
- Increase shelter capacity to meet the international standard of one family place per 10,000 people.
- Remove logistical barriers, such as referral requirements, to access Women's House, shelters, and other social welfare programs in order to support all women and girls, particularly women who are in situations of disadvantage and facing multiple forms of discrimination, including migrant women.