

Time for action

Ending violence against women is not a luxury for times of growth, but a question of fundamental rights, argues **Cécile Gréboval**



Violence against women is the most widespread human rights abuse within the EU. Domestic violence alone is a reality for one in five women and sexual violence affects one in ten. In times of economic recession, the situation becomes even more desperate, as cases of violence against women

increase and resources dedicated to prevention, protection and prosecution dwindle. Ending violence against women is not a luxury for times of growth, but a question of fundamental rights. The time for the EU to act is now.

In 2010, the European women's lobby (EWL) and Oxfam international studied the first effects of the crisis on women, showing that economic recession creates conditions that exacerbate inequalities and leave women more vulnerable to the effects of violence. Periods of economic hardship also lead to increased trafficking in women and a rise in prostitution and attacks on prostitutes. As homelessness rises due to job scarcity and the inability of authorities to provide housing, so does prostitution. A recent 'hidden homelessness' report by the UK's Sheffield Hallam university found that nearly one in five homeless women has resorted to prostitution.

Recession also creates conditions where women have fewer resources to be safe, to flee, and to protect themselves and their children from male violence. The results of a further UK

study launched earlier this year entitled 'Unravelling equality? A human rights and equality impact assessment of the public spending cuts on women in Coventry' reveal the widespread negative impact of public spending cuts on women experiencing violence, and how previous advances can be reversed.

The study found that budget cuts faced by the police and judiciary reduce the services available to victims of violence. Cuts to legal aid and the number of specialist domestic abuse officers also limit the ability of women suffering violence to get the legal help and support they need. Public health services addressing the physical and psychological needs of victims are restricted or cut altogether. This analysis is also echoed in the Fawcett Society's recent report, 'A life raft for women's equality'.

Furthermore, widespread cuts and other changes to welfare benefits across Europe leave women financially dependent on men, increasing their vulnerability as it becomes harder for them to leave violent relationships. Cuts to housing benefits make it harder for women to physically escape their attacker.

With governments increasingly unable to meet the needs of victims of violence, the work of women's NGOs is vital in providing shelters for women fleeing abuse, counselling services, as well as legal and other advice. However, these services are also under threat as funding is cut. Many grass-roots service providers have already closed while the future of many others – and the women they support – is

"As the crisis continues and desperation over the situation for women victims of violence increases, the need for concrete action in the form of binding EU legislation takes on new urgency"



