Time for action

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

INTERNATIONAL DAY FOR THE ELIMINATION OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

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iolence 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 homeless-

ness' 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



highly uncertain.

Ruhama, for example, an Irish NGO working to support women affected by prostitution, has experienced budgetary cuts of up to 30 per cent from statutory funders in the last three years, with additional cuts expected in 2012. This has already meant the shrinking of their services, and further cuts will mean the further reduction of their capacity to assist highly vulnerable women.

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. The members

of the European parliament have long recognised this need and spoken out for EU action to protect women's basic rights. Two years ago, the parliament called for a directive and an action plan on violence against women. Last year, the council backed this call. More recently, during a roundtable organised by the EWL together with NGO partners, MEPs called for strong partnerships with women's associations to combat

"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" violence against women and expressed particular concern for the future of funding for women's rights in the current context of the economic crisis. So far, however, the European commission has failed to deliver the strategy requested by the parliament, member states and NGOs, and funding for women's rights at EU-level is more vulnerable than ever.

The EU declares equality between women and men a fundamental value, and promotion of this equality an objective and mission of the Union. Yet violence against women is a daily occurrence for millions of women and the EU continues to effectively turn a blind eye to this abuse, even as the situation

rapidly deteriorates. The EU must change this by prioritising actions to end violence against women in the framework of a European year dedicated to this theme, delivering a comprehensive strategy including legal measures, and securing EU budget lines for the realisation of gender equality. In some areas at least, the measures necessary to effectively combat the crisis are clear. \star

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