

**Socioeconomic Empowerment of Women Survivors
of Intimate Partner Violence:
The Role of the EU Policies and Funds**

Policy paper

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The employment status has a considerable impact on the recovery process of women survivors of intimate partner violence as well as on their socioeconomic empowerment pathway. The **quality of both employment** and **working conditions** are **key factors** to guarantee the economic autonomy of women recovering from violence.
- Job-seeking and retention policies and programmes do not meet the **specific and intersectional needs** of women survivors of violence and do not take into account the **many obstacles** they face to enter the labour market (e.g., care burdens, geographic labour mobility, etc.).
- **The lack of well-managed public services** (e.g., care services) and the **gender-blindness** of job centres, agencies, civil servants, labour programmes, and companies as to the IPV survivors' needs are key issues that job-seeking and retention policies need to address.
- **Child and elderly care services** play a key role in job re/integration and retention of IPV survivors. However, the shortage of places in public facilities, the bureaucratic obstacles, the high costs of privates' services, and the lack of flexible working hours make it impossible for women recovering from violence to access the available child and elderly care services.
- Because of the **lack of awareness** among job and training agencies' staff, women are often offered **training and work opportunities strongly influenced by gender stereotypes** and that do not consider their level of education and the demand of the local labour market.

INTRODUCTION

Socio-economic independence plays a crucial role in women's journey towards freedom from violence. It offers women the material conditions to consciously exercise control over their life and make decisions for themselves and dependent children (if any) to meet their own needs¹. Being financially secure affects women's decision to leave the perpetrator, if they co-habit, and to move out of shelters. It contributes to create the conditions for women to walk away from violence and prevents a potential relapse. However, in order to succeed in their socio-economic empowerment pathway, survivors need additional essential services: shelters, social, psychological, legal, financial, employment and housing support. A **safe and affordable place where to live** is the main need women leaving violence express. Housing support is therefore essential to start the journey towards recovering from violence. However, the access to a low-priced housing solution can be guaranteed by a continuous and secure income, which IPV survivors often do not have. Due to the violence suffered, women could be unable to access their own financial resources because the perpetrator controls them. Likewise, many survivors are economically insecure because they may be unable to work due to their care duties or health issues caused by violence. Moreover, they could be unemployed or have no job experience. In these cases, prompt and effective financial, housing, and employment support is vital for women to successfully go through the journey to emancipation.

It is important to acknowledge that **this kind of support is secured by many international² and European frameworks³** as well as national constitutions. Having full access to decent work, housing, education, health and broadly to sufficient economic resources for an adequate standard of living are just some of the socio-economic fundamental human rights that States must guarantee to everyone. Unfortunately, in several Member States, many fundamental rights are still not fully guaranteed to citizens and even less to women who have suffered intimate partner violence. Indeed, even though economic and social rights have long been a key part of the legislative framework, there is still a huge gap between what the law says and reality, as highlighted by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) data⁴. Indeed, women in the labour market endure persistent disadvantages in employment and earnings. Issues such as their disproportionate exposure to the risk of poverty and gender gaps on pay and pensions are still holding women back financially and economically⁵.

Hence, it is necessary **to turn legislation into policies and services that meet IPV survivors' specific needs** and foster their abilities, autonomy, and power to make strategic decisions at personal, social, political, and economic levels to have control over their lives. The aim of this policy paper is to present some solutions to overcome the major barriers women IPV survivors face in accessing the labour

¹ UN, Beijing Declaration, 1995, para 26; UN Commission on the Status of Women, Agreed Conclusions on eradicating poverty, including through the empowerment of women throughout their life cycle, in a globalising world, E/2002/27 E/CN.6/2002/13, p. 1.

² According to the Istanbul Convention (Council of Europe, Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, 2011, art. 20), States must guarantee to women who suffer violence 'assistance, housing, education, training, and assistance in finding employment. The same obligations arise from other and international frameworks, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) the International convention on the elimination of all forms of racial discrimination (1965), the International convention of economic, social and cultural rights (1966), the Convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women (1979), the International convention on the protection of the rights of all migrant workers and members of their families (1990), the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development (2015).

³ The European Convention on Human Rights (1950) and its first Protocol, the European Social Charter (1996), the Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities (2006), the European charter of fundamental rights (2000) the European strategy for gender equality 2020-2025, and the Action plan of the European pillar of social rights (2021).

⁴ EIGE, *Gender Equality Index 2022: The COVID-19 pandemic and care*, 2022.

⁵ *Ibidem*.

market. The barriers were identified during the We Go 3! policy labs⁶ held in Bulgaria, France, Greece, and Italy.

1. SOCIOECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT FOR WOMEN IPV SURVIVORS: THE CRITICAL ROLE OF LABOUR

Work is key to economically empower women, and the same applies to IPV survivors. The employment status has a considerable impact on women's recovery process as well as on their socio-economic empowerment pathway. As a matter of fact, employment provides women with secure and adequate economic resources to leave the perpetrator's house or the shelter, makes them more autonomous and contributes to boosting their self-esteem, consequently speeding up the empowerment process. For this reason, active labour market policies⁷ are often used to increase economic independence of women, especially for those on low incomes⁸.

However, **employment is not only about seeking and finding a job, but it is also about retaining it.** Working can make it difficult to start or continue the recovery process, especially for women who have precarious jobs or lack access to children and elderly care services.

Moreover, current EU and national policies and programmes neither meet the survivors' needs nor include any leave provisions for the time necessary to recover from violence. In fact, they are designed to promote women's economic independence but fail to address their specific and intersectional needs and challenges to access the labour market. The latter include limited work experience, poor education, welfare restrictions, immigration status, lack of housing, living in a shelter, unaffordable care services, stereotypical employment training, and the companies' unwillingness to invest on socio-professional reintegration programmes due to their negative stereotypes on IPV survivors. Likewise, job seeking and retention programmes – which are inadequately funded – as well as the social services do not fully meet the needs of women with experience of violence.

2. WEGO!3: THE CHALLENGE TAKEN BY THE PROJECT

The third edition of the Women Economic Independence & Growth Opportunity (WeGo)⁹ project investigated the issue of the labour market access and job retention for IPV survivors. Through an inclusive, participatory, and feminist methodology, women, anti-violence centres, national and local

⁶ A feminist, inclusive, and participatory open methodology aimed to co-design policy proposals and practices to support the economic empowerment of women recovering from violence.

⁷ Namely all the programmes implemented by national and local authorities to promote employment and labour market participation (e.g., training and professional advice, employment support, training promotion), see *Ministero del lavoro e delle politiche sociali*.

⁸ A.E. Adams, R.M. Tolman, D. Bybee, C.M. Sullivan, A.C. Kennedy, "The Impact of Intimate Partner Violence on Low-Income Women's Economic Well-Being: The Mediating Role of Job Stability", in *Violence Against Women*, Vol. 8, no. 12, 2012, pp. 1345-1367.

⁹ Since 2016, WeGO! projects have specifically addressed the socioeconomic independence of intimate partner violence (IPV) survivors as a key factor for their empowerment. Funded by the Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme, WeGo! allowed actors from seven EU countries (Bulgaria, Cyprus, France, Greece, Italy, Spain, Sweden, United Kingdom) to exchange know-how and practices on how to support the social and economic empowerment of IPV survivors. The third edition of the project² – [WE GO3 - From individual IPV empowerment to community activation](#) – aims to increase the local multi-agency networks' capacity to foster the IPV survivors' socio-economic independence through the co-design and adoption of gender-responsive labour policies.

authorities, trade unions, and companies from Bulgaria, France, Greece, and Italy analysed the barriers faced by IPV survivors in accessing the labour market and tried to identify possible solutions to overcome them. Two themes cut across all countries:

- The **inadequacy and unaffordability of children and elderly care services** hinder women's access to the labour market and job retention for those already employed.
- The **lack of awareness** as to domestic violence on the part of employment centres and agencies' staff, trade unions, and companies results in stereotypical job placement and training programmes that neither meet the specific needs of women IPV survivors nor ensure them a decent job.

3. AFFORDABLE CARE SERVICES: A COMMON NEED

The presence of children in their life, especially those in pre-school age, has a relevant impact on women's participation in the labour market, as does the presence of elderly-related care needs. EIGE data confirm it: inadequate care services have a disproportionate impact on women as supplementary or informal care responsibilities still fall predominantly on them, affecting their work-life balance and their options to take a well-paid job¹⁰. This happens to most women because of the widespread gender inequality at home or as a result of the inadequacy and unaffordability of the care systems in the EU Member States. Such state-of-the-art can negatively impact not only on the IPV survivors' participation in the labour market and on their socio-economic empowerment but also on their prospects to be free from violence. For example, in cases of domestic violence, women with children can no longer rely on their partners to manage any caregiving burdens and very often cannot count on a friend or family network either. Therefore, **public services are the only viable solution for them**, but their too often long waiting lists, expensive rates, and eligibility requirements (e.g., low-income, national citizenship, residence permit, etc.) hinder their accessibility. Except for France, where they are most available¹¹, public care services are insufficient and unaffordable in Bulgaria, Greece, and Italy¹².

Job seeking and retention for IPV survivors can be successful only if good quality care services for children and the elderly are widely available. At the EU level, the Directive 2019/1158¹³ was adopted to enhance the work-life balance for parents and carers. In 2022, the European Commission presented the European Care Strategy¹⁴ to ensure quality, affordable and accessible care services across the Member States and improve the situation for both care receivers and care givers. Yet, both documents do not take into account the specific needs of people who are in a temporary vulnerable condition. This is the case of women survivors of violence with care burdens who **need priority pathways to apply for state support** so to recover from violence and achieve their socio-economic empowerment process. All relevant stakeholders, including EU, national and local authorities, trade unions, companies, should play their part in ensuring full access to care services for IPV survivors. In this regard, it would be crucial:

¹⁰ EIGE, *Gender inequalities in care and consequences for the labour market*, 2021.

¹¹ Ibidem.

¹² Evidence resulted by policy labs implementing in WeGo3 project.

¹³ [Directive \(EU\) 2019/1158](#) of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019 on work-life balance for parents and carers and repealing Council Directive 2010/18/EU.

¹⁴ European Commission, [COM\(2022\) 440 final](#), Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the European Care Strategy.

- To guarantee a seat in public kindergartens, nurseries, or long-term care facilities for family members of women survivors of domestic violence, also by introducing **priority criteria** for their access.
- To sign **agreements with private facilities** in areas where public services are not available. Fees reduction and cash benefits should be provided to allow women to cover the expensive fees of the private facilities.
- To ensure **hour flexibility** in private and public care services as well as in places of work. Care services should consider the needs of women performing evening and night shift work and provide an appropriate response. Employers, in turn, should offer flexible working arrangements to survivors, where necessary, and adopt internal policies to promote responsive public services.

Furthermore, all stakeholders should be aware of the challenges women IPV survivors face in accessing labour market and be informed how to tackle them. **Awareness-raising and training activities should be carried out** targeting all levels of staff of employment centres, employment agencies, and companies, including managers and Human Resources offices.

All these proposals fall under the competence of the Member States. However, the European Union plays a key role in ensuring that all women escaping violence are guaranteed the **same support and opportunities, regardless of where they reside**, by emending directives, updating the EU Care Strategy, and submitting new directives' proposals. At the same time, the EU should encourage all Member States to adopt a **shared set of indicators** to collect comparable data on relevant policies on, *inter alia*, labour, welfare, protection and assistance to inform future policies and funding programmes.

4. JOB PLACEMENT AND TRAINING PROGRAMMES' INEFFECTIVENESS

Economic distress is a key barrier to women leaving abusive relationships, especially if women are unemployed and, therefore, cannot be financially independent. However, it is not only about losing the job, but it is also about finding a decent one. Both the **quantity and the quality of available work** are essential elements to guarantee the economic independence of women recovering from violence. Low quality work (e.g., low wages, precarious jobs, forced part-time, and so on), limited retention and career opportunities result into low and/or unreliable income and negatively affect the socioeconomic empowerment of women. Thus, it is necessary to provide them with well-paid and sustainable work, flexible working patterns, and a safe working environment that is free from harassment and violence. Consequently, job placement and training programmes must offer decent and affordable job opportunities so to **meet IPV survivors' needs and the labour market's demand**.

Instead, women are often offered training and work opportunities strongly influenced by gender stereotypes that re/produce inequalities in terms of access to the labour market, career progression, salary, employee benefits, retirement, and so on, fuelling the horizontal and vertical segregation that confines women to a narrower range of occupations than men and to lower levels of responsibility, regardless of their level of education and the local production system demand. However, stereotypical

job opportunities are often offered because the staff of the employment and training agencies is not aware of gender-based violence-related issues.

Against this background, **Member States should:**

- Fund **regular awareness raising activities**, including training, targeting personnel of employment and training agencies to ensure women IPV survivors a safe work environment, a decent job, wider employment opportunities, and caregiving measures.
- Invest in **diversifying jobs and trainings offer** (e.g., bursaries for a wider range of professions, richer and well-developed regional training offers) taking into account competences and wishes of IPV survivors but also the characteristics of the different economies, namely needs of private sector companies, cooperatives as well as the public administration. Indeed, the mismatch between women's skills and what the labour market requires is often an obstacle for women in accessing the labour market.
- Offer **trainings for free or make them more affordable**, providing (if necessary) an income support to allow survivors to attend courses regularly and free from economic or financial worries. Indeed, to cope with the lack of qualifications that affect some women, training programmes are crucial, but long waitlists, high costs and specific eligibility requirements (e.g., immigration status, income level, education level) often hind them to attend.
- Foster **public transport networks and policies**. The shakiness of the public transport network has a considerable impact on women's lives and even more on women recovering from violence. Attending a class-based training course, going to work, or accepting a job at 10 km from home can sometimes be an insurmountable obstacle, especially in rural areas. Being able to travel is both a logistic and an economic issue. Therefore, transport policies should help women recovering from violence and their children as well as provide alternative solutions where the public transport network is not adequate (e.g., subsidised private transport, easy access to credit to buy a vehicle).

European funding programmes can play a significant role in supporting Members States to ensure job and training programmes more affordable and respondent to the IPV survivors' specific and intersectional needs. Most of all, all relevant stakeholders must adopt a holistic policy approach to make sure women survivors of violence can fully and stably access the labour market. Passive and active labour market policies should then include *ad hoc* provisions for women recovering from violence and be interwoven with social, housing, anti-poverty, and transport policies, amongst others. Delegating solely to anti-violence centres or specialized associations the duty of identifying the best way to support women towards their economic and social independence (e.g., job seeking and internship advice, tutoring) as advanced, for instance, in the EU Proposal for a directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence¹⁵ cannot be a viable option. For this reason, **all relevant legislation should be amended to include mandatory inter-agency coordination** among all stakeholders working on anti-violence, labour, social, and housing policies at European, national, and local levels.

¹⁵ European Commission, COM(2022) 105 final 2022/0066(COD), [Proposal for a directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on combating violence against women and domestic violence](#).

CONCLUSIONS

Over the last decade, the European institutions have significantly contributed to prevent and combat male violence against women. However, a lot of work still needs to be done, especially to promote the socioeconomic empowerment of IPV survivors. Indeed, socioeconomic independence is crucial for women who faced violence. The proposal for a directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on combating violence against women and domestic violence may represent an opportunity to improve the socio-economic support provided by Member States to IPV survivors. This is also the view of the European Economic and Social Committee, as stated in its opinion on the proposal, especially regarding the need to promote the job retention and the integration of unemployed women survivors of violence¹⁶. However, much more needs to be done. Indeed, **the economic independence of IPV survivors cannot be achieved through disjointed policies**, implemented almost exclusively by institutional offices dealing only with GBV policies. In order to promote IPV survivors' socio-economic empowerment, it is more effective to **modify existing policies by supplementing them with actions and criteria that respond to their intersectional and specific needs** so to ensure their easy access to essential services. Regulations and directives to increase employment of women and encourage States to strengthen their public care systems as well as financial programmes should include the specific needs of IPV survivors. For example, this is the case of the European Care Strategy¹⁷, the Proposal for a Council recommendation on the revision of the Barcelona targets on early childhood education and care¹⁸, the regulations on the European regional development fund and on the cohesion fund¹⁹, etc.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the evidence gathered during the national participatory processes, the We Go 3 project partners strongly believe that it is urgent to provide all IPV survivors, regardless of where they reside, with adequate tools to achieve their socio-economic empowerment. Most of all, it is urgent a **paradigm shift: all policies and tools governing the socioeconomic life of the EU Member States should include measures to support women IPV survivors**. The international and national anti-violence frameworks violence and the gender equality strategies in place can no longer be the sole machineries to effectively support the socio-economic empowerment of women recovering from violence.

Against this background, the We Go 3 project partners call upon the European Commission, the Council, and the European Parliament to:

- Strengthen the existing legal framework by adopting **binding measures for Member States to ensure full access for women IPV survivors to services** supporting their socio-economic empowerment. In this view, EU institutions should:

¹⁶ European Economic and Social Committee, SOC/726 -EESC-2022-01395-00-00-AC-TRA(EN)5/10, [Opinion on the proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on combating violence against women and domestic violence](#), art. 3.9.

¹⁷ [Cfr.](#)

¹⁸ European Commission, COM(2022) 442 final, [Proposal for a Council recommendation on the revision of the Barcelona targets on early childhood education and care](#).

¹⁹ [Regulation \(EU\) 2021/1058](#) of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 June 2021 on the European Regional Development Fund and on the Cohesion Fund.

- **Amend Chapter IV of the Proposal for a directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence** to include an article listing the services and measures Member States must provide to IPV survivors to enable their socio-economic empowerment (e.g., easy access to the labour market and to the national welfare system);
 - **Inform all EU policies and tools to promote women’s participation in the labour market** by taking into account the specific and intersectional needs of IPV survivors (e.g., amending the EU Work-Life Balance directive or the EU Care Strategy).
- Require Member States to **use funding from, *inter alia*, the European Structural Funds (ESF) and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF)**, to specifically invest in:
- **Care services**
 - **Job and training programmes,**
- that must be affordable and fully responsive to women IPV survivors’ intersectional needs.
- Fund – through the Plan Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme – projects aimed at:
- Fostering the socioeconomic empowerment of women IPV survivors.
 - **Raising awareness** of companies, job and training agencies on gender-based violence related issues.
 - Mapping IPV survivors’ needs and challenges in their access to the labour market, on one hand, to remove the detected obstacles and, on the other, to **design policies and services to successfully meet women’s needs.**
- Require Member States to **adopt common indicators**, in line with gender budgeting guidelines, to collect comparable on relevant policies on, *inter alia*, labour, welfare, protection and assistance to inform future policies and funding programmes.
- **Include ad hoc indicators in the monitoring and evaluation systems of the structural funds** (e.g., European Social Fund) to detect the number of women IPV survivors identified by the funded projects and the needs addressed, in order to inform future financial programmes and policies at the EU and national level. All personal data shall be collected in full respect of women’s privacy and anonymity in conformity with the EU General data protection regulation (GDPR)²⁰.

²⁰ Regulation (EU) 2016/679 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 April 2016 on the protection of natural persons with regard to the processing of personal data and on the free movement of such data, and repealing Directive 95/46/EC (General Data Protection Regulation).