

By Caoimhe Clements

Brexit has undermined efforts to protect women from gender-based violence, weakening the EU's safeguarding mechanisms and creating significant gaps in funding, collaboration and data sharing.

Speaking to Stella Mavropoulou, the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Co-ordinator at Goldsmiths, University of London. "Brexit has also impacted victim support." She explains: "The UK has lost access to EU funding mechanisms such as the Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme, which supported initiatives to combat gender-based violence and provide assistance to survivors. This is a massive loss for the UK."

"One major consequence is the UK's loss of automatic access to major EU systems such as the Schengen Information System (SIS), Europol and Eurojust. These platforms were essential for sharing real-time data about criminal activities, including sexual violence," Stella adds.

Another consequence of the UK leaving the European Union is the loss of the European Arrest Warrant (EAW), a tool that facilitated arrests across all EU member states. This warrant no longer applies to the UK.

Having grown up in Northern Ireland, I am aware that it has been recognised as one of the most dangerous regions for women and girls in Western Europe. Research carried out by Ulster University shows that 98% of women in Northern Ireland have experienced at least one form of violence or abuse in their lifetime, with 50% subjected to it before the age of 11.

Femicide is a global crisis, with no country entirely free from its occurrence.

Since 2017, 42 women in Northern Ireland have tragically lost their lives to violent acts, with a male suspect or perpetrator in all but one case. This stark statistic highlights the serious issue of misogyny in society.

Phrases like "take precautions", "be careful," or "text me when you get home" are commonly directed at women. While these expressions show concern for safety, they also point to a deeper cultural problem in Northern Ireland. Their frequent use reflects an underlying awareness of the dangers faced by women and young girls, showing the troubling reality embedded in societal norms.

The United Nations has highlighted a sobering reality: globally, the most dangerous place for a woman is their own home, where the majority of women are killed by men.

In 2024, it was reported that a significant percentage of women are killed in their homes each year, with most perpetrators being partners or family members. In 2023 alone, 85,000 women and girls worldwide were intentionally killed and 60% of these cases were at the hands of partners or family members.

Approximately, every 10 minutes, a woman or girl loses her life to violence inflicted by someone within her household.

Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) figures show that women represent 78% of sexual crime victims and 68% of domestic violence victims.

In 2023, London saw an alarming rate of reported rapes, with Metropolitan Police data indicating 8,852 cases over the year – averaging roughly 24 incidents daily. This statistic highlights the serious issue of sexual violence in the city, reflecting concerns about women's safety.

Stella, originally from Greece, shared her perspective on the issue of sexual violence in her home country:

“As a Greek woman living in the UK, I have observed firsthand the significant challenges and barriers that women encounter when attempting to report incidents of sexual violence. These barriers are not unique to Greece but are common across the EU and the UK.”

“In Greece, underreporting is a significant issue, partly because the country lacks sufficient rape crisis centres and specialised support services. This is especially concerning because GREVIO, the group monitoring violence against women, has highlighted that many cases in Greece are either dropped before reaching court or fail to result in convictions.”

“What I find particularly striking is how reporting rates differ across Europe. For example, looking at the 2022 data on reported sexual violence cases, Greece ranks the lowest. However, it's important to understand that these numbers don't reflect the actual prevalence of sexual violence.”

A shared issue between the EU countries and the UK is the normalisation of victim-blaming culture.

“One of the most pervasive obstacles is the fear of not being taken seriously or, worse, being blamed for the assault. This victim-blaming culture often shifts the focus onto irrelevant details, such as what the victim was wearing at the time or whether she was behaving in a socially ‘acceptable’ way.”

“Not all women are treated equally when reporting sexual violence. Women from marginalised groups, such as ethnic minorities, migrants, LGBTQ+ individuals, or those with disabilities, often face additional layers of prejudice and discrimination. For instance, migrant women may fear deportation if they come forward, while women from minority communities may distrust authorities due to systemic racism or past negative experiences.”

“I believe that, for many women, the idea of going to the police or involving legal systems might feel intimidating, invasive, or just too much to handle,” Stella Concludes.

The European Union (EU) has implemented various measures to protect women, focusing on legislation, strategic initiatives and international agreements. One of the EU's main priorities is combating gender-based violence, both online and offline. The EU criminalises certain

forms of violence against women, ensuring that perpetrators are held accountable. It has also strengthened the rights of victims of domestic abuse and violence against women and girls (VAWG), guaranteeing access to critical support services, shelters and medical care. Additionally, the EU Protection Order offers further protection by enabling women who have experienced domestic violence to move to another EU country, where they are shielded from their abusers.

The EU has developed a gender equality strategy for 2020–2025, which focuses on areas such as data collection, raising awareness, strengthening legal frameworks, providing support services and holding perpetrators accountable. This comprehensive strategy aims to improve gender equality and increase protection for women across EU member states.

In October 2023, the EU became a party to the Istanbul Convention, a key international agreement from the Council of Europe. This convention outlines measures to prevent violence, protect victims and prosecute perpetrators, reinforcing the EU's commitment to fighting gender-based violence.

Furthermore, the EU has established a network to combat gender-based and domestic violence, facilitating co-operation among member states to share best practices and improve responses to these issues. The European Commission has also taken steps to promote women's representation in senior leadership positions within the EU, striving for gender equality at the highest levels of decision-making.

These initiatives demonstrate the EU's dedication to protecting women, advancing gender equality and fostering a safer environment for women across Europe. Through legislation, international collaboration and strategic action, the EU is working to create lasting change in the fight against gender-based violence.

To combat Gender Based Violence (GBV), YEM UK launched their campaign, "Break the Silence to End the Violence" and are engaging with over 200 organisations. They are calling on the government to make misogyny a hate crime to improve prevention efforts.

In the New Year, YEM UK will officially launch their campaign at Europe House with Frances Fitzgerald MEP, working to push this issue higher on the political agenda.

In conclusion, Brexit has negatively impacted efforts to combat sexual violence against women and girls, weakening vital support systems and legal tools. The loss of EU funding, data-sharing platforms and the European Arrest Warrant has left the UK with significant gaps in resources to protect victims. Additionally, the normalisation of victim-blaming and underreporting of sexual violence continue to worsen the issue. Despite these challenges, campaigns like YEM UK's "Break the Silence to End the Violence" are working to raise awareness and push for policy changes, aiming to bring greater political attention to this urgent issue.