

Take a map of Europe... Violence, gender and (in)equality in the EU

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Eurocrisis in the
Press

By [Catherine Briddick](#)

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Take a map of Europe (go on, this is going to be fun). Look at it. Think about the recent (and continuing) financial crises and, depending on your position on the political spectrum and views of the prevailing neo-liberal order, note which countries are disproportionately suffering/affected/responsible. Colour them in if you so wish. Now think about those countries which are differently situated; whose books are (mostly) balanced, whose taxes are (mostly) paid. Feel free to colour them in in a different colour.



Now consider the psychological violence used against women by their current and former partners. Think about being belittled, humiliated, forced to watch pornography, threatened with having your children hurt or taken away from you. In which countries do you think women are experiencing the highest levels of psychological violence? In which countries do you think women are experiencing the highest levels of physical and sexual violence, sexual harassment or stalking? The answers may come as a surprise because if we look at that nicely coloured-in map it would appear that those countries which might be perceived as being the most financially secure, which might be congratulated on their levels of gender equality, are those which have the highest reported levels of violence against women.

The EU's Agency for Fundamental Rights has released the results of [a survey](#) conducted with 42,000 women across all 28 EU member states.^[1] The report makes for shocking reading, revealing levels of violence that many in the mainstream media found hard to believe or explain. So, 52% of women in Denmark report having experienced physical or sexual violence, 47% of women in Finland and 46% of women in Sweden, all countries which are perceived to have made significant advances towards gender equality.

The survey found that 5% of European women have experienced rape since the age of 15. However, as the report itself recognises, the 'real' figure is likely to be higher as the question women were asked focussed on physical violence rather than simply non-consent^[2], requiring 'more' than the legal definitions of rape in many European countries. In England and Wales consent is a positive act of agreement.^[3] When considering whether or not a person has consented the police or Court will consider what steps the suspect/defendant took to find out if the complainant was consenting. No reference to physical violence or other force. No requirement to resist or fight. If this and the fact that there remains a reluctance to disclose sexual violence is considered then it would appear that the prevalence of rape is likely to be higher than the report suggests. Even in the countries in which high levels of rape or other forms of sexual violence are identified. The picture becomes more troubling when sexual violence in the context of domestic violence is considered. 31% of women who reported being raped by their partner had experienced six or more incidents of violence.

So, how is this 'crisis' in the lives of so many European women being reported and discussed? [BBC Radio 4's today problem](#) set the bar despairing low in an interview in which presenter Evan Davis focused his attention on ensuring that the distressingly high levels of physical and sexual violence discussed did not, in fact, include psychological abuse (thereby 'inflating' the figures). Thankfully he could be reassured by Joanna Goodey, one of the report's authors.

The [Guardian](#) and [BBC's website](#) managed a slightly more nuanced assessment of the evidence, unpacking the report's key findings and focusing on Britain's place in the league tables of European women's misery. The Times' Kaya Burgess produced by far the most analytical piece discussing the links between [gender equality and violence](#) and asking why women who are working, socialising or engaging in the public sphere are more likely to experience forms of gender-based violence like sexual harassment or stalking.

What is particularly interesting about this media discourse is what is absent from it, the persons responsible for the violence that is [so nicely displayed in the info-graphics](#). Whilst the report considers the sex of perpetrators of violence and concludes, for example, that 97% of sexual violence is perpetrated [by men against women](#), reports of the study appear to have missed this point entirely. If violence against women is a perpetrator-less 'epidemic' (and such language is often used, no one is responsible for passing on a cold) then nothing can really be done about it.

And why does violence appear to be more prevalent in countries with greater levels of economic prosperity and gender-equality? The report identifies links between increased urbanisation and violence against women as well as highlighting the role of higher levels of alcohol consumption (both of which are more significant in the northern European countries identified). Women from different countries and therefore different cultural backgrounds might find disclosing experiences of violence more, or less, acceptable.

But there is another possible explanation. Women are being 'punished' for their achievements in the public sphere, for failing to conform to traditional gender roles and achieving success in traditionally male endeavours. In relation to sexual violence for example, a woman's risk of experiencing sexual violence from a stranger increases with her level of education (the same not being the case where the perpetrator is her partner).[4] Violence in this context is being used to 'police', to reinforce traditional gender identities and punish those who transgress them. You may be in the boardroom but you can still be hurt, be made to feel afraid, ashamed and humiliated.[5]

It's important that states ratify the [Istanbul Convention](#) but it is also important that we consider the impact of different gender constructions and how they, devastatingly, play out in European women's lives.

[1] *Violence Against Women: an EU wide survey*, European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, March 2024.

[2] Participants were asked: "Since you were 15 years old until now, how often has someone forced you into sexual intercourse by holding you down or hurting you in some way?"

[3] Section 74 of the Sexual Offences Act 2003 www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2003/42/contents.

[4] 19 % of women with primary education have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by a non-partner since the age of 15, whereas 22 % of women with secondary education and 27 % of women with tertiary education indicate that they have experienced this type of violence by a non-partner since the age of 15, *Violence Against Women: an EU wide survey*, European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, March 2024 page 36.

[5] "Considering women's experiences of non-partner physical or sexual violence since the age of 15 by their present occupational position reveals that physical and/or sexual non-partner violence is highest among women who are managers or directors, professionals (such as lawyers, doctors, accountants and architects) or supervisors. Depending on the category, 28 %–30 % of women in these positions have experienced violence by a non-partner since the age of 15. In comparison, 13 % of women who have never done paid work and 17 % of women engaged in skilled manual work have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by a non-partner since the age of 15." Ibid, page 37.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Euro Crisis in the Press blog, nor of the London School of Economics.