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**Policy Recommendations for
Strengthening Victims' Rights in the
EU**



VOICES OF THE WORLD

TECHNICAL INFORMATION

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INTRODUCTION

Unsilenced is a European co-funded project inspired by the **#MeToo** movement of United States.

Through this project we aim to **amplify the voices and experiences of victims of sexual harassment and sexual violence across Europe** and to offer a platform to share experiences. While advocating for a safer environment for women and girls of all ages.

Understanding women's perspectives and giving them a voice and a platform still remains challenging across many European countries. In such situations, compassion can be scarce, and women are frequently exposed to shaming and blaming.

Unlike the #MeToo movements that have been taken place mostly by celebrities, **with Unsilenced, we aim to reach the rest of the population and give them voices.**

Reports indicate that more than **one in four (1/4) Europeans have experienced harassment**, with significant numbers of physical attacks and psychological impacts reported. The FRA emphasizes the need for better support and reporting mechanisms for victims.

The economic cost of gender-based violence:

In 2021, gender-based violence across the European Union was estimated to cost around EUR 366 billion a year. Violence against women makes up 79% of this cost, amounting to EUR 289 billion

Victim blaming attitudes:

They are societal attitudes that suggest victims provoked the attack by their behaviour, clothing, or actions. Such attitudes are prevalent across different cultures and significantly impede justice by discouraging victims from reporting incidents and influencing the public perception of sexual violence.

The below is a report on victim-blaming attitudes in Europe

The Urgent Need for Action

The stories shared in the **Unsilenced** project reveal the pervasive and deeply ingrained nature of **sexual harassment** and assault across Europe. These narratives – ranging from workplace harassment to street harassment, from coercion in personal relationships to public spaces – underscore a critical failure in the protection, support, and empowerment of victims. The recurring themes of self-blame, fear of reporting, and institutional inaction highlight the urgent need for comprehensive policy reforms at the EU level.

Many victims, as shared in the testimonies found in our **Unsilenced Podcast**, never reported their experiences because they feared that no action would be taken. Others were met with victim-blaming responses from authorities, friends, or even mental health professionals. These gaps in justice and support must be addressed through robust legislative and institutional reforms. The following recommendations provide a roadmap to ensuring that victims across the EU are given the protection, justice, and dignity they deserve.

These recommendations are grounded in the real experiences shared in the **Unsilenced** project and seek to create a legal and societal framework where victims of sexual harassment and assault are believed, supported, and empowered. The EU must act decisively to ensure that no survivor feels alone, and no perpetrator acts with impunity.

1. Strengthening Legal Protections for Victims of Sexual Harassment and Assault

- Amend the **Victims' Rights Directive (2012/29/EU)** to explicitly cover sexual harassment and assault, ensuring uniform recognition and protections across all member states. Many testimonies from **Unsilenced** demonstrate that victims did not pursue justice due to a lack of legal clarity or fear of repercussions (e.g. the case of the woman working at a Greek hotel who was assaulted by the owner's partner but felt reporting would be futile).

- Require all member states to criminalize all forms of sexual harassment, including coercion, verbal harassment, and online harassment, aligning with Directive 2006/54/EC **on Equal Treatment in Employment**. Victims from various testimonies – such as the woman sexually harassed in an elevator by an acquaintance – expressed regret at not reporting due to societal dismissal of their experiences.
- Enforce stronger workplace protections against sexual harassment, ensuring employers comply with **Directive 2019/1158/EU on Work-Life Balance** to provide necessary accommodations for victims of harassment, including leave for legal proceedings or recovery.

2. Improving Access to Justice and Reporting Mechanisms

- Implement a standardized, victim-centered approach to reporting and prosecution of sexual harassment and assault across the EU. Several survivors in **Unsilenced** (e.g. the teenager harassed at an aquapark who froze and later felt she should have reported it) did not know how to file complaints or feared they would not be taken seriously.
- Require police and judicial authorities to provide multilingual support, as mandated by Directive **2010/64/EU on the Right to Interpretation and Translation in Criminal Proceedings**, ensuring that victims who are non-native speakers (such as the woman harassed in a restaurant who did not speak French) can report their experiences without language barriers.
- Develop anonymous online reporting platforms that allow victims to document incidents, receive legal guidance, and connect with support services. Many survivors, like the woman harassed at a Lebanese restaurant in Belgium, were afraid to take legal action because they did not know where to begin.

3. Enhancing Compensation and Support Services

- Expand **Directive 2004/80/EC on Compensation to Crime Victims** to ensure that victims of sexual harassment and gender-based violence can access financial compensation for psychological and economic damages. Testimonies from **Unsilenced** reveal the financial toll of harassment, with some victims

losing jobs after rejecting advances (e.g. the young woman fired from her bar job in Hungary after escaping her boss's assault attempt).

- Allocate EU funding to provide free legal aid for victims, ensuring alignment with **Directive 2016/1919/EU on Legal Aid**. Victims, like the woman in Belgium who was harassed on her way home from the gym, often do not pursue legal action due to financial constraints.
- Strengthen psychological support services, requiring that all victims have access to specialized trauma-informed counseling. Multiple survivors in **Unsilenced** described long-term trauma, depression, and even psychiatric intervention due to their experiences, indicating a dire need for more comprehensive support.

4. Promoting Victim Participation in the Judicial Process

- Ensure victims have a guaranteed right to be heard in legal proceedings, enhancing protections under the **Victims' Rights Directive**. Many victims, like the woman in Greece who was sexually assaulted at a party but never spoke out due to fear of societal backlash, would have benefited from a more transparent and supportive legal system.
- Provide mandatory training for law enforcement, prosecutors, and judges on handling sexual harassment cases with a trauma-informed approach. Some survivors in **Unsilenced** who did seek help (e.g. the woman physically assaulted at her apartment entrance in Greece) found that police responses were inadequate or dismissive.

5. Raising Awareness and Training for Law Enforcement and Employers

- Introduce EU-wide awareness campaigns on victims' rights, addressing victim-blaming attitudes that were evident in multiple testimonies from **Unsilenced** (e.g. the woman blamed by her friend for being "too friendly" when she was attacked in an elevator).
- Establish compulsory training for law enforcement and judiciary personnel on gender-sensitive interviewing techniques to prevent further traumatization of victims.

- Mandate that workplaces provide training on sexual harassment prevention, ensuring compliance with **Directive 2006/54/EC on gender equality in employment**.

6. Strengthening Cross-Border Cooperation and Data Collection

- Improve cooperation between member states to support victims of cross-border crimes through the **European Protection Order (Directive 2011/99/EU)**. Several testimonies in **Unsilenced** highlighted the need for international protection, particularly for victims who move between countries for work or study.
- Develop a centralized EU database to track reports of sexual harassment and assault while ensuring compliance with **General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (Regulation 2016/679)**. This will help address the underreporting of cases, as seen in multiple **Unsilenced** testimonies.

7. Monitoring and Reporting Mechanisms

- Require annual reporting from member states on the effectiveness of sexual harassment laws and victim support services.
- Establish an independent EU body responsible for monitoring and assessing the implementation of victims' rights laws, using standardized indicators set by **Eurostat and the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE)**.
- Ensure that all reported cases receive follow-ups from law enforcement authorities, addressing the lack of action experienced by survivors such as the woman in Greece who went to the police after a violent attack but never received any further updates on her case.



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