

Comparative Analysis of Volunteer Organizations and EU Policy Campaigns in Addressing Gender-Based and Domestic Violence Against Women in Ukraine, Belgium, and Spain

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1. Executive Summary

This report presents a comprehensive comparative analysis of volunteer organisations and a national campaign working towards eradicating Gender-Based and Domestic Violence (DV) against women in Ukraine, Belgium, and Spain. The study delves into the operational dynamics, challenges, accomplishments, and strategies of these organisations and campaigns, with the goal of enhancing their efficacy and impact.

2. Introduction

Gender-based violence (GBV) remains an ever-evolving concern across various domains including workplaces, public spaces, and homes. GBV can take many forms such as 'harassment, physical and sexual violence, female genital mutilation (FGM), forced marriage, forced abortion and sterilisation, sexual harassment, and 'honour' crimes' (Shreeves, 2022). The intricate interplay of challenges, exacerbated by factors like the pandemic, necessitates a constant re-evaluation of the issue, not only within the legal framework but also from a training perspective within the context of volunteering. The emergence of Covid-19 not only brought unprecedented challenges to voluntary aid efforts but also starkly highlighted the need for diverse support mechanisms tailored to the vulnerabilities faced by women. The pandemic-induced regulations compelled a reduction in the capacity of voluntary shelters, propelling hotlines to the forefront of voluntary assistance (Meurens and D'souza, 2020).

Recent studies underscore the unfortunate reality of increased GBV and Domestic Violence (DV). However, it is crucial to acknowledge that the enduring presence of GBV remains a global scourge, impacting countless women worldwide (Mittal and Singh, 2020). The isolation and confinement stemming from quarantine measures exposed the inadequacies of existing legislatures and services meant to ensure the safety of women. In the aftermath of Covid-19, there exists an urgent imperative for organisations and administrative bodies to embark on strategies that bolster the mechanisms for combating GBV.

The European Union (EU), inclusive of Ukraine, Belgium, and Spain, grapples with alarming instances of gender-based violence. In response, an array of volunteering organisations have taken proactive steps to address this issue, offering support to victims and advocating for systemic reforms. This report aims to analyse these organisations' efforts within their unique societal and political contexts.

Despite commendable endeavours, gender-based violence remains an unsettling reality within the EU. The sobering statistic of one in three women having experienced physical and/or sexual violence since the age of 15 (Shreeves and Prpic, 2020; Yenilmez, 2020) underscores the urgency of the situation. World Health Organization (WHO) reports attributing a significant portion of such violence to intimate partners (WHO, 2023). A disconcerting aspect arises from the fact that one in five women faces violence from either a current or former partner, and yet a majority of these cases go unreported. This unsettling fact is further accentuated by the 2022 Briefing from the European Parliamentary Research Services (ERPS), revealing that only a mere 14% of victims report their gravest incidents involving intimate partners to the police (Shreeves, 2022). This starkly highlights the chasm between the number of women seeking assistance and the availability of resources, thereby perpetuating a scenario wherein organisations grapple with inadequate solutions and victims struggle to access help.

In relation to the case studies mentioned within this report, the biggest challenge all of them appear to have is in determining the ways in which they can bridge the gap between the development of resources accessible and the accurate number of women experiencing GBV. The overall challenge is to enable all the resources available to reach beyond borders to its victims.

3. Case Studies

Embedded within the context of this report's case studies are overarching challenges shared by all entities: the imperative to bridge the gap between the development of accessible resources and the actual prevalence of GBV among women. This crucial challenge resonates as a common thread in the narratives of Belgium, Ukraine, and Spain. In each of these regions, distinct challenges emerge, ranging from cultural and linguistic conflicts, internal conflicts that exacerbate the issue, and the presence of resources like rehabilitation workshops and legal aid that often remain underutilised due to lack of awareness and access among women. Each geographical area showcases instances of effective program implementation to support victims, as well as areas warranting further development, notably in terms of communication, training, and program preparedness.

Furthermore, it's imperative to consider the nuanced application of the criminalization of GBV, exemplified by European Parliament Amendments such as Amendment 5 pertaining to criminal conduct and Amendment 12 addressing violence against women on the basis of sex. Notably, the approach towards these amendments varies across the countries under examination (Fitzgerald and Incir, 2023). Consequently, a holistic assessment involves scrutinising how the listed organisations navigate practical challenges encompassing funding, access to resources, policy advocacy, and potential staff vulnerabilities (La Strada International, 2023a).

3.1 Ukraine

La Strada, also branched as *La Strada-Ukraine* is an independent organisation created in 1995 that expanded to *La Strada International* in 2019. Its core mission is to prevent the crime of trafficking human beings by measuring data to create research, liaising with other organisations, and providing aid via telephone or on-the-ground rehabilitation programmes to victims.

With the unique case of *La Strada* in Ukraine, the organization has faced the challenge of dealing with limited access to victims in Russian-occupied regions. Furthermore, this challenge is exacerbated by cases of GBV. However, recent publications by *La Strada* indicate that trafficking cases have been relatively low in number compared to other regional figures (La Strada International, 2023b). The organization's focus extends to trafficking, GBV, and discrimination, and its efforts have been essential in providing support services to victims. Nevertheless, the persistent conflict, resulting in internal displacement and societal disruption, poses challenges to *La Strada's* efforts, underscoring the dire need for peace and stability to enhance the fight against GBV. Suzanne Hoff, the International Coordinator of *La Strada International*, highlighted the barriers European organizations have encountered in tackling issues in Ukraine during the past 3 years, especially amidst the lockdown, during the 34th meeting of the Solidarity Platform (La Strada International, 2023b).

As the escalation of war in Ukraine continues, there is a heightened demand for urgent humanitarian assistance. The *La Strada* branch in Ukraine has utilized its longstanding hotline service to assist and counsel victims of gender-based violence and domestic violence in the region. The number of victims accessing this hotline during the Covid-19 lockdown increased by 20% (UEAM Ukraine, 2020).

Studies have shown that women dealing with GBV respond differently to the trauma of events, depending on the type of violence committed against them, such as sexual violence or physical violence (which is elevated during times of conflict). A public health study revealed that women who experience sexual violence are likely to delay seeking care by up to 4 days compared to survivors of other forms of gender-based violence in Ukraine (Capasso and Skipalska et al., 2021). This underscores the further complexities inherent in GBV and its implications for the numbers of women dealing with these forms of violence. Due to the trauma they experience, they are often less willing to come forward and seek help.

3.2 Belgium

Belgium, characterized by a multicultural and multilingual society, experiences various forms of GBV. According to statistics from the Belgian press, 70% of complaints made regarding domestic violence were dismissed without further action being taken (Baker McKenzie, 2023). The country has undertaken significant efforts to combat *Violence Against Women* through numerous campaigns by non-profit organisations, providing support to victims through counselling, legal aid, and other support services.

Belgium is divided into devolved parliaments in three main regions that are managed differently: the Flemish region, the Brussels-Capital region, and the Walloon region. Consequently, the country has two official languages, French and Dutch, and additional provinces within these regions that use German and English in their cultural and work environments. The robust cities and quality of life in Belgium attract many migrants, increasing the multicultural and ethnic presence within Europe. In this already fragmented country, there are significant obstacles due to divisions in language, national identity, and values. These challenges make it difficult for cohesive legislation and unified national programs to effectively address complex GBV cases.

The Brussels Government acknowledges these divisions and the influence they have on the increase of violence against women. The capital of Belgium has demonstrated a strong commitment to addressing this issue through its Regional Policy Plan 2019-2024. This plan aims to reduce violence against women, covering prevention and awareness-raising and includes 56 action plans to combat GBV (Walker, 2021). These plans also involve providing training courses for professionals in the field and the voluntary sector (Hamou, 2021). As the first comprehensive Brussels plan to combat GBV, the region has further developed its ambitions by establishing the Brussels Plan 2020-2024 strategic framework through Eurostat. By introducing this framework, the Brussels government aims to collect and analyse the most relevant data to develop effective strategies to address GBV within homes, education, and workplaces.

3.3 Spain

Spain grapples with deeply ingrained cultural and societal norms that perpetuate GBV. Over the past decade, women in Spain have organized protest movements such as the International Women's Walkout in 2017 to combat institutional incompetence and limited strategies to address new forms of gender violence against women within the legislature (Martinez, 2017). Spain has historically normalized domestic violence against women, which persists in contemporary society, causing numerous women who experience GBV to feel ashamed to speak out against their perpetrators and isolated. Women in Spain still struggle with the responses from their communities, police departments, and workplaces, where their experiences are often invalidated and deemed insufficient for legal action.

Recognizing these challenges, *Fundación Ana Bella* has established various programs, including survivor empowerment initiatives. Despite their significant strides, stigmatisation and societal biases against victims persist, hindering the organization's reach and effectiveness. To address issues of isolation and taboos, *Fundación Ana Bella* offers job opportunities and access to educational centres, providing survivors with a network, community, and essential resources and support (Fundación Ana Bella, 2023). This case serves as a prime example of a charity organization that empowers victims by providing them with professional training and labour integration. This approach not only helps survivors achieve financial stability but also enables them to assist future women in the organization, improving their quality of life (Perdomo and Gonzales et al., 2019).

Legal experts from *Fundación Ana Bella* emphasise that despite stringent laws against domestic violence in Spain, inadequate state-provided resources hinder enforcement (Lopez, 2023). This highlights the multifaceted nature of GBV as a pervasive social issue, particularly challenging to police within private homes.

4. Comparative Analysis

This section will compare the organisations' approaches to combating violence against women, detailing their specific operations and initiatives. These include providing help centres for women who are too afraid to go to the police to report a crime against them and reintegrate into society (such as finding a job) or getting psychological help for their experience of trauma.

Through the case study of these countries, each charity organisation and policy campaign within these countries have demonstrated their key contribution in the fight against GBV. Ukraine's source of aid through telecommunications, Belgium through legislative changes and updates in research, and Spain in organisational legal aid and reintegration programmes for women. Despite the distinct environments these organisations are from, they share a common goal: combating GBV. However, their strategies differ based on their regions' cultural, societal, and political landscapes. *La Strada-Ukraine*, for instance, must deal with the additional challenge of war.

While *Violence Against Women* campaigns in Belgium confront language and cultural diversity, it's taking more intersectional approaches by extending GBV to different forms of it, such as forced marriages, female genital mutilation, and cyber-violence. By extensively measuring data and attitudes towards violence and shaping laws according to more accurate data, organisations in Belgium and its institutions are able to address the intricacies of the language barriers and cultural differences established within its regions. This means that they are able to respond better to victims who are expats or women who are experiencing different stages of GBV according to age or race.

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Despite these great strides, there is still much development needed to create united initiatives within the Walloon and Flemish regions of Belgium, which can also alter the way charity organisations can take initiative from a local level on an individual case.

In Spain, *Fundación Ana Bella* grapples with ingrained societal views of GBV. Therefore, this organisation has adopted a multifaceted service to respond to the gap of institutional help provided for women in Spain, alongside establishing practical ground-level assistance to women's social isolation, such as helping them find work as they restart their lives.

Each organisation has displayed resilience and innovation, attuning its strategies to its context, and demonstrating the importance of contextualised, victim-centred interventions in combating GBV. In comparison to organisations in Belgium, Ukraine has many more complex layers to tackle when it comes to the socio-cultural response to GBV. Taboo issues within these cultures (especially Spain and Ukraine) will come in the lack of accountability within the criminal justice system when it comes to GBV and DV, the level of support victims actually get from family members when they reveal they are victims of GBV, or the perception of shame if you are someone who has dealt with GBV.

In terms of the practical obstacles these organisations will have to deal with, the limited resources they may have to make victims feel safe, such as the scenario of the hotline service used within *La Strada*, pose challenges. They face the potential disconnection in trust between the helper and victim, an accuracy in participation problem, and how conflict enlarges the prospects of GBV. All these components are provoking each other and are issues beyond the capacity of professional and volunteering peers. Institutional support and organisational support of its staff workers would be highly important. This can look like funding so that victims can attend a set of therapy sessions, an information pack on access to rehabilitation centres accessible to them, and financial aid towards legal advice if necessary.

However, in thinking about the necessary institutional steps countries have to take for organisational programmes to thrive, Belgium appears to have greater support from its devolved governments. With the Brussels-capital region government's objective to eliminate the presence of GBV in its country, organisations and campaigns have the likelihood of a stable amount of funding. Because of this support, it is becoming easier for Belgium, in its immersed multi-ethnic and cultural state, to provide the necessary tools for professionals and volunteers. For them to be trained in a broader context of GBV and different cultural values.

Perhaps a similar situation exists with organisations such as *Fundación Ana Bella* in Spain. In terms of settling what are the most prominent issues arising from GBV against women, as mentioned throughout this report, there is a large gap between the number of women who access their service and women dealing with GBV. With the laws against GBV not fully enforced/implemented by the state, organisations are filling in the gaps. In comparison to the situational context of both case studies, *Fundación Ana Bella* appears to adequately provide a multifaceted array of services for victims of GBV.

La Strada Ukraine has done its best to adapt to limited territorial access in Ukraine's most hostile region, such as the capital, Kyiv. Despite this, the organisation continues to publish comprehensive and up-to-date reports on the violence against women in the format of trafficking. By collaborating with other high-level organisations and the International European Institutions, they have been able to raise awareness regarding the travesties that are currently happening in Ukraine. To directly reach women who are victims of GBV, they have well-inclined hotline services that women across Ukraine, who have access to a phone, can use.

Violence Against Women in Belgium has established a greater campaign to address the realities of GBV within its country. Despite the language and cultural divisions, Belgium is managing the intersectional forms of violence through thorough research initiatives and updated policies to ensure that women can have better access to public services such as the police, at local levels. These changes at a regional level ensure women have more protection.

Although they all have completely different socio-political circumstances determining their operations, each organisation and campaign initiative has successfully approached different methods to help reintegrate victims of abuse into society. Overall, all the case studies serve different purposes, as seen in how they may determine their organisational criteria according to the most prominent issues in their respective regions.

5. Key Challenges and Obstacles

Each organisation faces unique challenges. For *La Strada-Ukraine*, the ongoing war presents significant barriers to their work. *Violence Against Women* in Belgium deals with the complexities of a multicultural and multilingual society, complicating communication and service delivery. *Fundación Ana Bella* in Spain faces societal norms that may discourage victims from seeking help. These challenges highlight the critical need for comprehensive and context-specific policies that account for the distinct realities within which these organisations operate.

Expanding on *La Strada*, the organisation's assistance is primarily facilitated through telecommunication. This means they lack direct access to women who are suffering in silence or misplaced families that may not have access to the assistance services they provide. Consequently, women in rural areas without access to phones are at a greater disadvantage when seeking help. Victim reporting rates are generally low, and victims often require close contact or familiarity with an organisation to openly discuss their experiences and needs. Therefore, organisations need to consider victims who lack support systems and explore the option of assigning specific members as confidants to help victims with openness and guide them to specialised support services, such as psychological support.

For the *Violence Against Women* campaigns in Belgium, the country's multicultural and multilingual nature complicates communication and service delivery. This necessitates investing additional time and resources into voluntary work within these communities, including finding helpers proficient in multiple relevant languages for the regions they serve. Training programmes that educate helpers about cultural norms are crucial to ensure effective support delivery and establish trust with victims. Consequently, financial aid and time are required to expertly train staff members to respond effectively to various scenarios. The central Belgian government must also consider measures for migrant workers, including seasonal, seconded/post workers, domestic workers, or diplomatic household employees. Thorough assessments are essential to ensure these workers have access to decent work, housing, social services, healthcare, and the freedom to change employers (Hogewoning, 2023).

Fundación Ana Bella in Spain grapples with societal norms that often deter victims from seeking assistance. Often, women feel isolated or discouraged from seeking further help. These challenges emphasise the need for comprehensive, context-specific policies that account for the unique realities within which these organisations operate. This dilemma creates what researchers have suggested as the 'grey zones' of data research gaps between the disclosed violence recorded and the incidence of violence that occurs. This visual diagram demonstrates the many processes a research facility or organisation has to tackle before attaining more reliable data on incidences of violence.

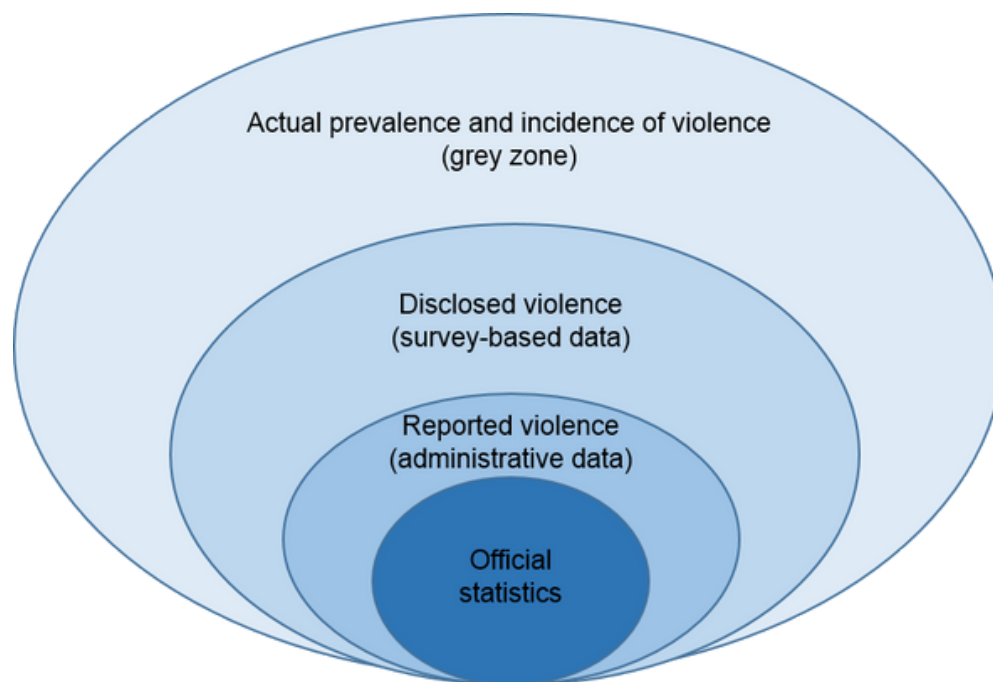


Figure 1: Grey and blue zones of data collection of GBV (EIGE, 2016)

Figure 1 illustrates the various methods employed to access accurate details of incidents against women. Despite research facilities' and charities' efforts to bridge this gap, a considerable lack of detailed information about victims persists (EIGE, 2021). This gap is evident in the case of Ukraine. Despite extensive research and data collection efforts to measure the severity of GBV in the conflicted state, the disparity between the actual prevalence (grey zone) and official statistics (blue zone) shared with EU Member States and charity organisations remains significant.

6. Beneficial Work and Contributions

However, despite these challenges, these charitable organisations and policy implementations have made significant contributions to their respective societies. Their impact extends beyond supporting victims, encompassing a crucial role in advocating for policy changes and raising societal awareness about GBV.

In the preceding sections of the report, we can observe how research and development programs at the regional level have compelled national and international governmental entities to address the complexities and intersectional aspects associated with GBV. This impact is evident in Belgium, where the result can be seen in the Regional Policy Plan aimed at reducing the prevalence of GBV against women. In Ukraine, thorough research conducted by the European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS) and organisations like La Strada International has led to the development of ways to better adapt services to address GBV in a country where direct contact with victims and accurate data on women experiencing GBV remain limited. Furthermore, organisations in Spain, such as *Fundación Ana Bella*, have filled gaps for vulnerable women in cases where the criminal justice system's services fall short.

Collectively, these programs have made a positive impact on a European scale, ultimately influencing the cultural perspective on GBV. This influence is evident in the implementation of policies that now incorporate terminology acknowledging the nuances of GBV at the European level. Notably, branches of the European Commission, like the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), play a pivotal role in providing up-to-date data on GBV against women. One of their recent data collections focused on intimate partner violence (IPV) and gender-related killings of women between 2019 and 2020. Efforts are underway to address the lack of detailed information across Member States concerning victims (including sex and age) and the dynamics of the victim-perpetrator relationship, particularly in the context of IPV (EIGI, 2021). Even at the regional level, the significant work being done at the EU level becomes increasingly evident.

7. What is the EU doing now?

An overview of the programs launched in the past 5 years highlights their significant impact in addressing issues related to GBV and IPV. Organizations such as UNFPA and UNICEF have collaboratively established a joint program aimed at eradicating the presence of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) in the EU since 2008, as part of a global initiative. The fourth phase of this program was launched in 2022 with the goal of eliminating the practice by 2030. In a bid to expedite this process, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) has allocated \$18 million towards the program (UNFPA, 2023).

The European leadership community has also taken substantial steps to combat this violation of human rights. In 2022, the Commission introduced a new proposal plan to address and prevent violence against women, including FGM in 2023. This plan has brought key aspects to light, such as the criminalization of rape, cyber violence, and FGM.

Similarly, the EU Gender Equality Strategy within their 2020-2025 Program is dedicated to implementing measures that foster gender balance. One notable initiative involves providing women with enhanced access to higher-level positions within the workplace (European Commission, 2020), enabling accomplished women to assume senior roles and contribute their expertise. A primary objective of this initiative is to ensure that women with commendable qualifications and experience can ascend to senior positions, where they can actively contribute their knowledge.

8. Recommendations

Based on the comparative analysis, there are evident gaps in policies that need addressing. Policies need to be tailored to fit the unique context of each country. In Ukraine, policy intervention should focus on the plight of internally displaced persons and research gaps. Policies in Belgium must address cultural and linguistic barriers to aid dissemination in regions outside of Brussels. Whilst Spain requires policies that address societal norms and stigmas associated with GBV, dismantling institutional frameworks that are preventing the safety of women.

9. Conclusion

This report underscores the indispensable role of volunteer organisations and policy initiatives in addressing GBV and domestic violence against women. It emphasises the need for support and policy interventions to amplify their effectiveness. The insights gleaned from the summarised case studies provide a roadmap for future strategies, advocating for context-specific approaches that consider diverse socio-cultural and political landscapes.

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