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SUMMARY OF PUBLIC POLICY PROPOSAL FOR SUPPORTING VICTIMS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN CROATIA

Women's Room
Prepared by: Maja Mamula, Ph.D.
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Women's Room is a civil society organization that has been providing support to survivors of sexual violence for more than twenty years. Through direct work with victims, specialized education, advocacy for changes in legislation, and the development of public policy and prevention programs, we continuously work to improve the system of protection and support for victims of sexual violence.

The issue of the victim support system is one of our key areas of activity. Therefore, as part of a project supported by the **Croatian Women's Fund - SOLIDARNA Foundation, a Public Policy Proposal for the Support of Victims of Sexual Violence in Croatia** was developed in July 2025. The proposal is based on an integrated model of support that connects specialized crisis centers with hospital-based referral centers for victims of sexual violence.



Context and social framework

In Croatia, sexual violence remains a serious social issue affecting a large number of women, girls, and children. Although Croatia **ratified the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence** (Istanbul Convention) in 2018, and despite the introduction of important legislative changes in recent years, practice continues to reveal significant systemic shortcomings in the protection, support, and realization of rights for survivors of sexual violence. Survivors frequently encounter institutional barriers, a lack of adequately trained and sensitized professionals, and insufficiently developed support mechanisms. The need for a comprehensive and coordinated public policy response to address these gaps is clear.

In September 2023, Croatia received the GREVIO evaluation report from the Council of Europe's independent expert body responsible for monitoring the implementation of the Istanbul Convention. The report contains approximately twenty measures directly related to sexual violence. GREVIO highlights significant shortcomings in support for victims of sexual violence, particularly the lack of crisis centers and the need to establish hospital-based referral centers equipped with rape kits, forensic evidence collection and storage systems, and access to psychological support without requiring survivors to report the violence to the police. The report also emphasizes the importance of training professionals, ensuring their familiarity with relevant guidelines and the Protocol on Conduct in Cases of Sexual Violence, and securing the financial sustainability of women's organizations that operate specialized support services for victims of sexual violence. In December 2023, the Committee of the Parties to the Istanbul Convention identified 17 recommendations requiring urgent implementation. Two of these recommendations (No. 11 and 12) directly build on provisions 164 and 165 of the GREVIO evaluation report, highlighting the need to establish referral centers for victims of sexual violence, strengthen the capacities of specialized organizations providing long-term support to victims, and ensure that access to all such services is not contingent upon a victim's willingness to report the violence.

2.

Problem Analysis



Despite existing legislation and international obligations, practice shows that the support system for victims of sexual violence in Croatia is neither comprehensive nor accessible. Significant disparities exist in the availability of services across regions, and responsibility for providing support is dispersed among different institutions without clear coordination. Health care professionals are often not adequately trained to work with victims of sexual violence in accordance with the recommendations of the Istanbul Convention. Judicial proceedings can be lengthy and retraumatizing for victims, while the social welfare system is not sufficiently responsive to the specific needs of victims of sexual violence. Within the existing system, a significant portion of support and counseling services for survivors of sexual violence is provided by nongovernmental organizations whose funding depends largely on project-based grants, raising concerns about the continuity and accessibility of services. As a result, the fragmented nature of the system and its insufficient institutional capacity contribute to victims' distrust of institutions and the low reporting rates of sexual violence.

3.

Mapping of existing services



Croatia currently lacks a comprehensive and coordinated support system for victims of sexual violence. Services are fragmented and available in only a limited number of cities, largely due to the work of specialized civil society organizations. There are no referral centers for victims of sexual violence, and forensic examinations are not available without reporting the violence to the police. Most health care and social service institutions do not have standardized protocols or adequately trained staff to work with victims. The lack of financial stability and institutional support further undermines the continuity and accessibility of existing services. These gaps highlight the need to develop an integrated model of support.

4.

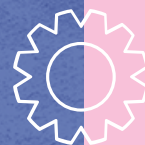


Assistance and support for survivors of sexual violence

Support for survivors of sexual violence is based on two key models: crisis centers and referral centers, which together provide comprehensive, survivor-centered care. Crisis centers, or specialized victim support services, are often operated by feminist organizations and provide both immediate crisis intervention and long-term psychological, legal, and emotional support. The role of referral centers, which in many European countries are most commonly located within hospitals, is to provide emergency medical care, forensic examinations, and the collection of evidence without requiring survivors to report the violence. While these models serve different functions, they are complementary. Survivors can receive immediate medical care and forensic services and then continue their recovery through specialized psychological support. Examples of good practice, such as those in Iceland and Ireland, demonstrate the value of an integrated model of support approach that ensures accessible, confidential, and continuous support for survivors of sexual violence.

5.

Public policy recommendations



Drawing on many years of experience in supporting survivors of sexual violence, the commitments undertaken by Croatia through the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, and the recommendations of GREVIO and the Committee of the Parties to the Istanbul Convention, the Women's Room has developed a public policy proposal for strengthening support for victims of sexual violence.

The proposal is based on the development of an integrated model of support that connects specialized crisis centers with referral centers for victims of sexual violence at hospitals. It includes 4 specific objectives and 25 concrete measures.

Strategic priority:

Provide comprehensive, accessible and sustainable support to survivors of sexual violence in accordance with international standards and identified needs.

The aim is to increase the number of specialized, geographically widespread, easily accessible and free **support services for survivors of sexual violence** through an integrated model of support. This model is based on a close cooperation between existing **crisis centers/specialized victim support organizations** and **referral centers for victims of sexual violence**, which have yet to be established in Croatia.

The objectives include:

1. Strengthening and further developing the capacities of crisis centers/ specialized organizations that provide support to victims of sexual violence.
2. Implementing the necessary legal changes to enable the establishment of referral centers for victims of sexual violence in Croatia, in accordance with the Istanbul Convention.
3. Establishing referral centers for victims of sexual violence within hospitals across Croatia.
4. Developing an integrated model of support for victims of sexual violence in Croatia.

The implementation of these objectives would ensure the availability of geographically widespread, specialized support services for survivors of sexual violence. It would also strengthen intersectoral coordination and institutional commitment for the implementation of standards, enhance the capacities of professionals across all relevant sectors, and secure financial sustainability and strategic development of the support system.

Key measures include:

- Establishing crisis centers/specialized victim support organizations, as well as a sufficient number of hospital-based referral centers for victims of sexual violence, while ensuring geographical accessibility across Croatia.
- Ensuring access to medical care, forensic examinations, and the collection and preservation of evidence, regardless of whether the sexual violence has been reported.
- Strengthening the long-term capacities of crisis centers/specialized victim support organizations through stable and sustainable financing.
- Developing national standards and specialized training programs for professionals in the health, social welfare, and justice sectors.
- Establishing a digital database of available services and an effective referral system for victims of sexual violence.

6.

Financing and sustainability



The successful implementation of the proposed measures requires stable, multi-year financing from the state budget, alongside the strategic use of available European funds. The long-standing reliance on project-based funding for specialized civil society organizations has contributed to insecurity and uneven access to support services for victims of sexual violence. It is therefore necessary to establish financing mechanisms that recognize the specific role and expertise of crisis centers/specialized organizations for providing support to victims of sexual violence. This includes providing direct and sustainable budgetary co-financing for specialized services, encouraging local communities to develop their own support networks, and strengthening partnerships between public institutions and civil society organizations. Without stable and strategic investments, the support system will remain fragmented, vulnerable, and dependent on short-term project cycles.

7.

Conclusion

This public policy proposal is based on the identified needs of survivors and the professional practice of specialized victim support organizations. The proposed measures are aligned with international recommendations and provide a sustainable framework for the further development of support services for survivors of sexual violence in Croatia. It is time to acknowledge the expertise of professionals and the institutional responsibility for supporting survivors of sexual violence, with the aim of creating a society in which they have the right to safety, support and dignity. Decision-makers are invited to incorporate the recommendations set out in this document into strategic plans and budgets, ensuring that support for victims becomes systematic, sustainable and effective.