



POLICY BRIEF

March 2026



Estonia

This policy brief summarises the challenges that have emerged in aligning Estonian law with international norms tackling gender-based violence as well as in implementing the law. The policy brief is primarily based on a report by M.-L. Sepper titled 'Gender-based violence. International standards, Estonian law and challenges in implementation' (2026).

KEY MESSAGES

- Gender-based violence continues to represent a major challenge in Estonian society. 41% of Estonia women have experienced violence in an intimate partner relationship during their lifetime.
- Estonia's accession to the Istanbul Convention has strengthened its domestic standards for combating gender-based violence. Work to align national legislation with the Istanbul Convention is still ongoing.
- The primary challenges in effectively combatting gender-based violence have, to date, been related to the attitudes and awareness of law enforcement officials, judges, and other specialists.
- National legislation has failed to provide an effective response to victims of certain types of violence, such as sexual violence.
- There are a number of national development plans in place in Estonia that address intimate partner violence and, less frequently, violence against women. However, it is evident that policy documents rarely acknowledge the gender dimension of certain types of violence.

BACKGROUND

Estonia has been a party to international treaties aimed at combating gender-based violence for decades. Estonia acceded to the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1991 and to the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (the Istanbul Convention) in 2017. In addition to the obligations set out in international human rights treaties, EU legislation requires Estonia to combat gender-based violence. Nevertheless, gender-based violence remains widespread in Estonia. Statistics Estonia's survey '[Safe Relationships in the](#)

[Family, at Work and Outside](#) reveals that 41% of Estonia women have experienced violence in an intimate partner relationship during their lifetime. Since 2017, the number of reports of intimate partner violence in Estonia has increased by one third. In 2024, a total of 3373 domestic violence crimes were recorded, of which 65% occurred between partners in a relationship. The perpetrator was typically a man.

LAW IN FORCE

[The Penal Code](#) (KarS), Section 121 is the only provision in the code that contains a reference to intimate partner violence. It provides for more severe penalties for physical abuse committed against a person who is economically dependent on the offender, as well as against a former or current family member of the offender, a person living with the offender or a person who is otherwise dependent on the offender in the family (KarS § 58(4)).

The code criminalises trafficking in human beings (§§ 133, 133¹ and 175), rape and other sexual offences (§ 141-147). Furthermore, the facilitation of prostitution and pimping are criminalised under §§ 133² and 133³, and are categorised as trafficking-related offences in criminal statistics.

In the wake of accession to the Istanbul

Convention, the mutilation of female genital organs was criminalised in Estonia (KarS § 118¹), forced marriage was added to trafficking in human beings and sexual harassment was made a misdemeanour (KarS § 153¹). Thanks to the Istanbul Convention, harassment by stalking has also been criminalised in the Penal Code (§ 157).

[The Estonian Law of Obligations Act](#) (VÕS) allows victims of violence, including domestic violence, to apply for a protection order against the perpetrator in cases of bodily harm, damage to health, violation of privacy or other violation of personal rights (§ 1055). A court may issue a temporary protection order against a person suspected or accused of having committed a criminal offence and a longer-term protection order in cases where the perpetrator has been convicted.

MAIN CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTATION

GREVIO has carried out an initial assessment for Estonia under Article 68 of the Istanbul Convention. Its conclusions were set out in its [2022 assessment report and recommendations to Estonia](#). The 2022 baseline report contains both praise for and criticism of Estonia. GREVIO found that the Estonian authorities have made significant progress in aligning the national legal framework with the Istanbul Convention, e.g. the Penal Code was amended in 2017 to criminalise stalking, female genital mutilation and forced marriage.

Praise is also given to the strategic document (the Agreement to Prevent Violence 2021 - 2025), which prioritises the combating of domestic and sexual violence and certain

forms of violence against women in cyberspace.

The 2022 baseline report criticises the fact that while the government has made efforts to combat domestic violence, measures against other forms of violence against women are not as comprehensive. GREVIO also notes that Estonia's policy to combat violence does not turn attention to cross-cutting inequalities (intersectionality).

The implementation of the Istanbul Convention in Estonia has also been studied through a [survey of specialists](#) (145 respondents). According to the specialists surveyed, there are problems in Estonia with ensuring the rights of victims of domestic violence: 50% said that there are some problems, while 39% said that there are major problems. 37% of the

respondents felt that Estonia has done quite a good job of implementing the Istanbul Convention, while 26% felt it has done quite a poor job and 3% that it has done a very poor job. 34% were unable to say. None of the respondents rated the country as having done a very good job.

[An analysis of pre-trial criminal investigation of sexual violence in Estonia in 2024](#) revealed that while the country's pre-trial practices and attitudes of specialists have become more victim-friendly, there are still a number of barriers to pre-trial proceedings. These barriers can re-victimise the victim of sexual violence, instil mistrust in the justice system and more broadly stand in the way of bringing perpetrators to justice.

[A 2020 study 'Intimate partner violence in Estonia: practising lawyers' assessments of the justice system'](#) looked at intimate partner violence through the eyes of prosecutors, judges, lawyers and other law enforcement specialists. The results showed that these

specialists consider intimate partner violence to be a serious problem.

While violence is widely regarded as a significant problem, there is a prevalence of victim-blaming attitudes among legal professionals: 26-50% of respondents viewed the victim as the cause of the violence, suggesting that they had brought the violence upon themselves through thoughtless or provocative behaviour.

Similarly [a 2023 study on 'Knowledge of and attitudes towards intimate partner violence among rescue workers and police officers'](#) found that these officials consider intimate partner violence to be a serious and widespread problem. However, the rescue workers and police officers interviewed do not generally consider the gender dimension to be an intrinsic part of intimate partner violence. Violence is perceived as a relational or communicative issue, with contributions from both parties. Nor were the interviewees convinced that men are more violent than women.

CONCLUSIONS

The international frameworks on gender-based violence, particularly the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), have had little impact on Estonian law with regard to combatting gender-based violence.

Estonia's accession to the Istanbul Convention has strengthened its domestic standards for combating and punishing gender-based violence. It has also significantly impacted the content of national strategy documents; for example, the [Action Plan to Prevent Intimate Partner Violence \(2024–2027\)](#). Work to align national legislation with the Istanbul Convention is still ongoing.

EU law continues to influence Estonian law on gender-based violence. This includes the transposition of the directive on violence against women and domestic violence, the revised anti-trafficking directive and the revised directive on the rights of victims of crime (which is planned for transposition in Estonia in 2028). As of 23 March 2026, no draft legislation had been finalised for the transposing of these directives.

The main challenges in effectively combatting

gender-based violence have, to date, been related to the attitudes and awareness of law enforcement officials, judges, and other specialists, as well as a general lack of awareness of rights and legal recourse among the population. National legislation has also failed to provide an effective response to, or protection for, victims of certain types of violence, such as sexual violence.

Over the past two decades, Estonia has witnessed a significant shift in the visibility of gender-based violence in public discourse. For instance, the Police and Rescue Board has prioritised tackling domestic violence for many years, and the issue is generally not questioned in political debate. Representatives of the Ministry of Justice and Digital Affairs have publicly stated that preventing human trafficking is one of the ministry's priorities. There are a number of national development plans in place in Estonia that address intimate partner violence and, less frequently, violence against women. However, policy documents rarely acknowledge the gender dimension of certain types of violence. Furthermore, there are only a few references to violence against women in law.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The following policy recommendations are intended for the attention of the government sector.

1 Gender dimension of violence

Recognise the role of gender and gender stereotypes in violence that is gender-related or predominantly experienced by one gender group. National strategic documents, including action and development plans, should explicitly reference phenomena such as gender-based violence and violence against women. They should also outline the specific interventions planned to combat these types of violence.

2 Systematic training

Specialists and legal professionals in charge of proceedings who come into contact with victims of gender-based violence must undergo systematic training. This training should provide an overview of the harmful effects of gender stereotypes and their role in gender-based violence. Recommendations to provide such training are a recurring theme in many studies and country-specific recommendations made by human rights institutions.

3 Intersectional approach

Take action to prevent and combat violence affecting people from marginalised groups and those experiencing intersectional inequalities, including women with disabilities, older people, women from ethnic minorities and LGBTQI+ people.

4 Resources and accountability

Ensure that the necessary resources are allocated for the implementation of a national policy to combat gender-based violence. This should include a budget, key performance indicators, and a list of the authorities responsible for implementing the measures and activities outlined in the strategies. This will ensure the policy is implemented effectively.

5 Study court practices

Study the judicial practice and procedure in relation to the prosecution of cases of gender-based violence, in particular sexual violence, including how the impact of trauma is recognised and taken into account in court.

6 Victim-centred approach

Examine how victims of gender-based violence experienced the handling of their case, how they were treated, and whether their needs were considered. In Estonia, only a few studies have analysed victims' experiences of violence and related procedures. There are still gaps in our knowledge, particularly with regard to the experiences of marginalised groups such as LGBTQI+ people, ethnic minorities and disabled people.

7 Awareness raising

Continue to change public attitudes and raise awareness of consent-based sexual behaviour, sexual violence, and the legal redress available in cases of sexual violence. As a preventative measure, it is essential to incorporate teaching on consent-based sexual behaviour into education at all levels, while also highlighting the impact of harmful gender stereotypes. Teacher training should include the impact of gender stereotypes and their role in gender-based violence.

Reports of BalHar:

Sepper, M.-L. (2026), Gender-based violence. International standards, Estonian law and challenges in implementation. Report. Feministeerium.



This policy brief was compiled as part of the 'Baltic Harmony: Building a Gender-Sensitive Violence-Free Educational Environment' project.