LEA

LEADERSHIP | ENGAGEMENT | ADVOCACY

PREVENTING GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE DURING SEPARATION

A European evidence review on coercive control, stalking, harassment and technology-facilitated abuse during relationship breakdown

RESEARCH FOCUS

Separation should be treated as a distinct prevention window - not merely as the endpoint of a relationship.

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Executive summary

For many women, the end of an intimate relationship does not necessarily mean the end of control or abuse. Separation can become a period in which coercive control, persistent unwanted contact, stalking, threats, harassment and technology-facilitated abuse emerge, continue or escalate. Prevention systems, however, often become fully visible only once violence has already become established.

31.6%	1 in 3	114,023
Women and girls globally estimated to have experienced physical/sexual IPV or non-partner sexual violence in their lifetime (WHO 2023 estimates).	Headline EU finding: women reporting violence at home, at work or in public in the EU-GBV survey.	Women interviewed across the EU-27 for the 2024 EU gender-based violence key-results publication.

Core finding. Relationship breakdown should be recognised as a specific prevention and risk-management phase. This does not mean assuming that separation is dangerous. It means equipping institutions to identify patterns of coercion, escalation and unwanted contact early enough to act.

This publication is an institutional **desk-research synthesis**. It does not present original LEA prevalence data. It draws on WHO, Eurostat, FRA, EIGE and the EU legal framework, while explicitly identifying where harmonised evidence does not isolate the period immediately before, during and after separation.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

1. Separation as a distinct prevention window

WHO defines intimate partner violence as behaviour by a current or former intimate partner that causes physical, sexual or psychological harm, including controlling behaviours. The reference to former partners is crucial: formal relationship status does not determine whether coercive or abusive behaviour has ended.

A separation-sensitive approach distinguishes ordinary relationship conflict from patterned abuse. Professionals should consider repetition, context, fear, escalation, boundary violations and the function of the behaviour.

Forms of abuse that may continue or emerge

- **Coercive control:** attempts to retain power over movement, finances, social relations, parenting or everyday decisions.
- **Persistent unwanted contact:** repeated calls, messages, appearances, gifts or third-party contact after boundaries have been set.
- **Stalking:** repeated following, monitoring or contact that causes fear, alarm or distress.
- **Technology-facilitated abuse:** account access, location tracking, impersonation, digital surveillance, image-based abuse or platform harassment.
- **Economic abuse:** withholding resources, sabotaging employment, creating debt or exploiting shared financial dependencies.
- **Threats and intimidation:** threats involving the woman, children, relatives, pets, property, reputation or livelihood.

GLOBAL AND EUROPEAN EVIDENCE

2. The scale of violence against women

WHO's updated global estimates indicate that 31.6% of women and girls worldwide have experienced physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence in their lifetime. Among ever-partnered women aged 15 years and older, WHO estimates that 24.7% have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by a current or former husband or male intimate partner at least once.

840m	24.7%	0.2%
Approximate number of women and girls globally affected by physical/sexual IPV or non-partner sexual violence.	Ever-partnered women aged 15+ estimated to have experienced physical/sexual IPV.	Average annual decline in IPV over the previous two decades reported by WHO.

The 2024 joint Eurostat-FRA-EIGE EU gender-based violence survey provides the most comprehensive harmonised EU picture to date. The key-results publication covers 114,023 women across all 27 EU Member States. The institutions summarised the headline finding as approximately one in three women having experienced violence at home, at work or in public.

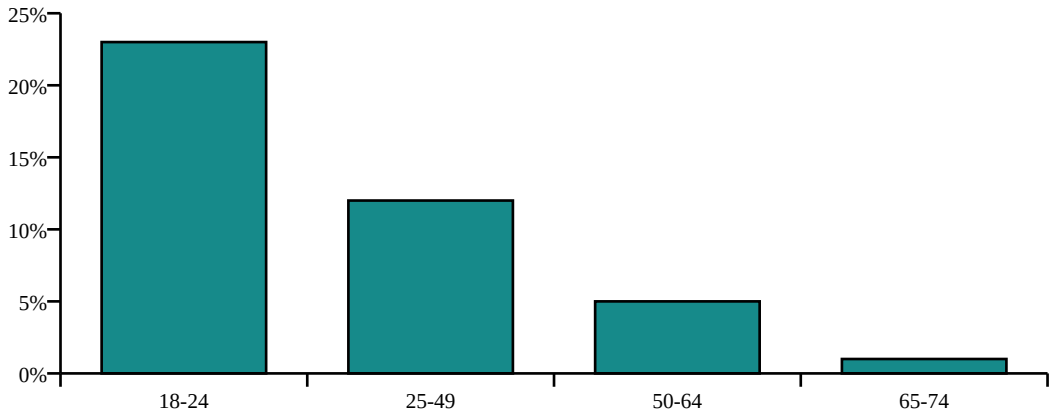
Important limitation: these are not separation-specific prevalence estimates. They demonstrate the scale of the wider population exposed to violence and abuse. The absence of consistent separation-timing variables across datasets is itself a major research and prevention gap.

THE ONLINE-OFFLINE CONTINUUM

3. Technology-facilitated abuse and cyber stalking

Digital technologies can allow abusive conduct to persist after physical separation. EIGE describes cyber stalking as repeated abusive online acts by the same person that cause fear, alarm or distress, including unwanted messages or calls, remote monitoring or tracking, and offensive or humiliating public comments.

In the extended FRA-EIGE data collection covering eight Member States, lifetime cyber-stalking prevalence ranged from 7.4% of women in Romania to 18% in Sweden. The age gradient was substantial:



Lifetime cyber stalking by age group in the extended FRA-EIGE dataset: 23% among women aged 18-24, 12% among 25-49, 5% among 50-64 and 1% among 65-74.

EIGE also reports overlap between cyber stalking and intimate-partner violence. Women with a history of physical or psychological IPV reported cyber stalking more frequently than women without such histories. This supports treating digital abuse as part of a wider continuum rather than as a separate online phenomenon.

PREVENTION GAPS

4. Why systems may intervene too late

- **Incident-led responses:** individual acts can be recorded separately even when they form an escalating pattern.
- **Fragmentation:** police, justice, health, social services, schools, NGOs and digital platforms may each see only part of the behaviour.
- **Shared obligations:** housing, finances, children and legal procedures can create necessary contact that may also be exploited for coercion.
- **Digital evidence burden:** victims may need to secure accounts and preserve evidence while simultaneously managing immediate safety.
- **Data limitations:** offence categories do not always capture former-partner status, separation timing, repetition or online-offline escalation.

A separation-sensitive assessment should ask

Has separation been discussed or initiated? Has unwanted contact increased? Is there monitoring or tracking? Are threats becoming more specific? Are children, money, housing or digital access being used to compel contact? Is behaviour moving across platforms or from online to offline spaces?

5. EU legal and policy context

Directive (EU) 2024/1385 on combating violence against women and domestic violence strengthens the EU framework on prevention, victim support and forms of cyber violence. The framework is relevant to non-consensual sharing of intimate or manipulated material, cyber stalking, cyber harassment and cyber incitement to hatred or violence.

For separation-sensitive prevention, the policy direction is clear: digital conduct must be treated as substantive harm where legal thresholds are met; data systems must become better able to capture cyber violence; and legal responses need to connect with accessible victim support and prevention services.

Implementation differs across Member States and operates alongside national criminal, civil, family-law and victim-support frameworks. This report therefore does not provide jurisdiction-specific legal advice.

6. The LEA Separation-Sensitive Prevention Framework

01 IDENTIFY	Make separation and relationship breakdown visible as a routine screening variable where appropriate.
02 MAP	Document controlling behaviour, unwanted contact, threats, stalking, surveillance, economic pressure and cross-platform conduct.
03 ASSESS CHANGE	Look for escalation, new behaviours, boundary violations and changes associated with separation.
04 SECURE	Support safe communications, account security, privacy review, evidence preservation and physical safety planning.
05 COORDINATE	Connect specialist GBV services, health, police, justice, housing, child/family services and digital support.
06 FOLLOW THROUGH	Maintain appropriate support after the immediate separation event; abuse and harassment may persist.

7. Institutional recommendations

Health and social services

Include relationship-status change and unwanted post-separation contact in GBV screening where safe and appropriate; establish confidential referral routes.

Police and justice

Record former-partner status, repetition, cross-channel behaviour and escalation so that patterns are not lost across separate incidents.

Family and child services

Differentiate ordinary co-parenting conflict from coercive patterns and minimise procedures that unnecessarily expose victims to unsafe direct contact.

Digital platforms

Strengthen reporting and evidence pathways for repeated harassment, impersonation, account compromise and tracking.

Employers and education providers

Create discreet protocols when stalking or harassment reaches the workplace or campus; protect schedules, contact data and location information.

NGOs and community organisations

Offer low-threshold access before abuse reaches crisis level and connect safety planning with psychosocial, legal, housing, economic and digital support.

MEASURE THE SEPARATION PHASE

8. A minimum European data set

Variable	Prevention relevance
Relationship status	Current partner / former partner / separation in progress.
Timing	Before separation; during the process; 0-3 months; 4-12 months; longer term.
Behaviour	Physical, sexual, psychological, coercive control, stalking, threats, economic or cyber abuse.
Channel	In person, phone/SMS, messaging, social platform, email, account/device access, third party.
Repetition	Single event versus repeated pattern.
Escalation	Changes in frequency, severity, specificity or proximity.
Children/dependants	Whether parenting, care or contact arrangements are implicated.
Service contact	Police, health, social, legal, NGO/shelter, platform, employer/education.
Outcome	Safety measures, referral, protection, repeat incident and ongoing support.

Data collection must apply strong confidentiality, data-minimisation, security and survivor-centred safeguards. Information systems should never create new exposure to monitoring or retaliation.

ILLUSTRATIVE INDICATORS

9. Monitoring a prevention programme

Dimension	Illustrative indicator
Reach	People receiving separation-sensitive prevention information or screening.
Early identification	Referrals occurring before a severe physical incident is recorded.
Digital safety	Relevant supported cases receiving digital-security assessment.
Coordination	High-concern cases with documented multi-service referral or coordination.
Continuity	Cases receiving appropriate follow-up after initial separation-related contact.
Capability	Professionals trained on coercive control, stalking and technology-facilitated abuse.
Quality	Survivor-reported accessibility, safety, respect, clarity and usefulness of support.
Data quality	Completeness of former-partner status, timing, behaviour and repetition variables.

A fall in reports should not be used alone as evidence of success. Increased awareness and trust can initially increase reporting. Evaluation should combine repeat victimisation, escalation, access, safety outcomes and survivor experience.

WHAT EUROPE STILL NEEDS TO KNOW

10. Research priorities

- **Separation-specific prevalence:** harmonised estimates immediately before, during and after relationship breakdown.
- **Longitudinal evidence:** research following trajectories over time rather than relying only on lifetime prevalence.
- **Coercive-control measurement:** stronger tools for cumulative patterns and restrictions on autonomy.
- **Technology pathways:** evidence on tracking, account compromise, impersonation, image-based abuse and cross-platform persistence.
- **Service-system interaction:** which combinations of legal, psychosocial, housing, economic and digital support reduce repeat harm.
- **Intersectional barriers:** evidence on disability, migration, poverty, rurality, age and other factors affecting access to support.
- **Children and post-separation contact:** careful evidence on how coercive behaviour may interact with parenting and family procedures.

LEA recommends that future European research and prevention programmes explicitly include **relationship breakdown and post-separation abuse** as a defined analytical category. Without this, prevention risks remaining structurally late.

LEA INSTITUTIONAL POSITION

11. Conclusion

Separation is not inherently violent and should never be treated as evidence of abuse in itself. Yet where coercion, violence or intimidation already exists, relationship breakdown can create a distinct prevention challenge. The objective is precision: identify patterns and escalation without pathologising separation.

The evidence supports four priorities: recognise abuse by former partners and the persistence of coercive control; integrate cyber stalking and technology-facilitated abuse into mainstream GBV prevention; move from incident-only responses toward pattern-based coordination; and improve European data on the timing of abuse around separation.

LEA POLICY MESSAGE

The end of a relationship should never mark the end of prevention.

A mature prevention system remains visible before, during and after separation - early enough to identify coercion, connected enough to see patterns across services, and capable enough to respond when abuse moves between physical and digital spaces.

Prepared by **LEA - Leadership Engagement Advocacy**
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SELECTED AUTHORITATIVE SOURCES

References and methodological note

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6. EIGE (2026). Protecting Women in the Digital Age: Strengthening EU action against cyber violence.
7. EIGE Gender Statistics Database. Cyber violence indicators, including cyber stalking.
8. Directive (EU) 2024/1385 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 on combating violence against women and domestic violence.

Methodological note. This is an institutional desk-research brief based on publicly available authoritative evidence. It does not claim that general IPV or cyber-stalking prevalence figures are specific to separation. Where the evidence does not isolate the separation period, this is identified as a research gap.

Scope. The report focuses on women because the principal evidence reviewed concerns violence against women and because gender-based violence disproportionately affects women. People of any gender can experience intimate-partner abuse, stalking and technology-facilitated abuse.

Use: policy, prevention, programme design and advocacy. This report is not legal advice, a clinical assessment tool or a substitute for specialist risk assessment.