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Input thematic evaluation Netherlands: Building trust by delivering support, protection and justice	VA24-023

To the members of GREVIO,

On behalf of the National Network of Women's Shelters, Valente, association for safe shelter, would like to take the opportunity to give our input for the thematic evaluation of the implementation of the *Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combatting Violence Against Women Domestic Violence*. Although Valente sees progress being made in the implementation of the Istanbul Convention, several pressing concerns remain. Despite efforts of many actors, the numbers of (fatal) victims in the Netherlands do not decrease, which should be reason enough for great concern. We still see major gaps in provisions that hinder the building of trust from victims of violence and their close ones and would like to highlight three of them.

Lack of comprehensive and coordinated policies and a coordinating body (art. 7):

We welcome the recent development of a [national plan on the prevention of femicide](#). This plan brings together both an approach that is gender-specific on risk-factors for femicide (acknowledging the gender-based nature of coercive control and links between various forms of violence against women and domestic violence) and programs already started in the broader approach of domestic violence. This plan could be a first step towards a long-term strategy and plan to prevent and combat violence against women and domestic violence in all its forms. However, the plan – like previous programs, such as Violence Belongs Nowhere - still lacks any longer-term perspective towards structural funding. Despite its ambitions, there is no financial translation whatsoever beyond the (limited) current 2024 budget of the Ministries involved.

- ❖ *We suggest the GREVIO Committee asks the Dutch government to ensure that the responsible Ministries (Health, Welfare and Sport, Justice and Security and Education, Culture and Science provide budget for the implementation of this plan.*

The new plan on the prevention of femicide still has to be aligned with the program started in 2021, the "Future Scenario Child and Family Protection" which focuses on families and has been based on a gender-neutral analysis of violence, which is hard to 'repair' along the way in the development of subsequent policies and tools. Primary focus of this program was child abuse, with the risk that the safety, rights and needs of women (including those without children and older women and men) are treated as separate - and even secondary - to that of their children.

Anno 2024, policies and funding still are fragmented. The coordinating Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport has no authority over other relevant partners at the national or local level in the Dutch decentralized system. Municipalities can - and do - make their own policies, which results in major differences between regions in expertise, support, number of beds in shelters and (specialized) services.

The women's shelter organizations are confronted daily with the limits of the current decentralized system, which is characterized by this fragmentation and partitions between funding streams that stand in the way of an integrated, system-oriented and thus more effective approach to violence against women and domestic violence.

Another major drawback of the current system is the fact that our specialist knowledge, that of other actors and outcomes of previous projects are not effectively used. Thus, fundamental expertise gets lost along the way instead of being widely shared and used to the advantage of all stakeholders for the benefit of survivors of domestic violence and their families.

- ❖ *A strong coordinating body with national powers and responsibilities that could also play a role in building and securing a national knowledge infrastructure on violence against women and domestic violence is much needed.*

#### The Netherlands does not meet IC standards for the provision of women's shelters and safe accommodation

The National Network of Women's Shelters recently published our vision on capacity of women's shelters, concluding that there is a structural capacity shortage of shelters within the Netherlands. This shortage - particularly during recurring peak moments in demand for safe accommodation – results in safety risks for women and their children.

The women's shelters have been advocating for both more non-residential services from women's specialized services and more possibilities of independent assisted living in order to provide the best possible care under safe conditions for clients without completely disrupting their living situations (as is often the case when coming to the women's shelters). Since 2020, the government has made €14 million per year structurally available to municipalities to organise sufficient shelter places. However, there has been no monitoring of how this money has been spent in the different regions and whether these funds have been effectively used to create more safe shelter space. Overall, the number of safe shelters has not increased, despite this financial impulse. Only in some regions (such as the metropole of Amsterdam) the women's shelter has successfully advocated for an increase in beds. Expansion of specialized ambulatory services is also needed, but we do not expect that to lead to a significant reduction in inflow into the shelters. Hence, we have recently resumed our talks with both the Ministry of Health and the Association of Municipalities (VNG) based on our current vision on capacity.

- ❖ *Expansion of the number of safe shelter places as well as non-residential specialist services is needed. We ask GREVIO to point out the need to respect the standards of the Istanbul Convention to Dutch authorities.*

### Custody, visitation rights and safety

Our third pressing concern relates to the implementation of the articles on custody, visitation rights and safety of women. Generally, in the women's shelters and their ambulatory services, we hear that trust of victims of domestic violence in state agencies is low. This is partly due to the low number of successful criminal prosecutions but more so because women fear that when they turn to any agency as victim of intimate partner violence, this will result in their children being taken away from them on grounds of poor parenting, i.e. failure to protect their children from harmful experiences. In their experience, general services such as the community teams as well as the Safe Home (Veilig Thuis) agencies focus first on how violence affects children. The way this has been organized does not guarantee that intimate partner violence against women and the gender-based nature of this violence is systematically acknowledged and taken seriously.

The same applies to court cases dealing with custody and visitation rights. In Dutch family law practice, continued contact between both parents and children after divorce is central. Joint custody is usually continued after divorce even in cases of coercive control and violence, as it is considered to be in the child's best interest. Many victims of violence and family lawyers experience that domestic violence is routinely ignored in court proceedings on custody and visitation rights. The Child Protection Board does not commonly address intimate partner violence against the mother in their advice to the court, on the grounds that they are ill-equipped to assess the truth of parents' accounts of violence.

Our concern whether judges and other legal professionals have sufficient specific in-depth knowledge about the gender-based nature of violence against women and patterns of intimate partner violence such as coercive control are unfortunately all but resolved by the recent [report of the Dutch authorities](#), stating that “there are no measures taken by the government to ensure judges, court-appointed experts and other legal professionals have sufficient knowledge nor can they be taken for they are independent” (p. 48, report 12 June 2024). In family court proceedings, there still seems to be the tacit presumption that when a relationship ends, partner violence ends as well. As a result, in the majority of custody/visitation cases, no assessment of the safety of parents and children is made.

- ❖ *We demand the government therefore to introduce a compulsory screening of all custody/visitation court cases for domestic violence, to actively engage with the court system to encourage training for family judges and other legal professionals to recognize and understand patterns of domestic violence and to create protocols for the Child Protection Board to ensure clear and factual reporting on patterns of domestic violence.*

### Emerging trends

Finally, we would like to draw your attention to the fact that [recent research](#) concludes that addressing the digital dimension of violence against women is still in its infancy in the Netherlands and is also very fragmented. Valente specifically sees that the intersection between online and offline forms of violence still receives very little attention from both authorities and NGO's. Our member organizations see an increase in the abuse of technology

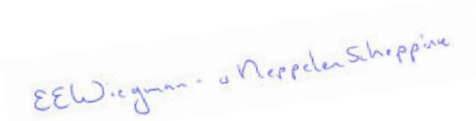
within the context of other forms of violence. Initiatives taken by women's shelters organizations such as [SafetyNed](#) lack structural funding, with the risk that here – again – fundamental expertise that we are just beginning to build up is lost over time due to lack of continuity and support.

- ❖ *We suggest that GREVIO asks the government which steps they are taking to ensure that fundamental expertise on the intersection between on- and offline forms of domestic violence and violence against women and girls is secured and more widely shared.*

#### Visit to women's shelter organization

On behalf of Valente's National Network of Women's Shelters, we are looking forward to participating in the NGO Round table during the visit of GREVIO later this year. We would also like to invite the GREVIO-members to visit one of the women's shelters. This visit could be organized in partnership with other stakeholders, like Vereniging Vrouw en Recht (Association for Women and Legal Justice), the Federation of Relatives of Victims of Violence or others such as police or Safe Home. Such a visit would offer the opportunity to meet with victims and professionals and to discuss our above-mentioned concerns as well as other topics.

On behalf of the National Network of Women's Shelters,  
with kind regards,



Esmé Wiegman-van Meppelen Scheppink (director of Valente)