

## Episode 1

### "Understanding 2gether4victims project"

#### Transcript

#### Featuring this episode:

- The narrator (voice of Dylan Power)
- The **Protagonist** Anna (voice of Aine Hanrahan)
- **Aleksandra Ivankovic**, a widely respected human rights lawyer and dedicated custodian of victims' rights, Deputy Director of Victim Support Europe
- **Melanie Maria**, a Dutch performance artist, director/choreographer, graduated from Bachelor Fine Art (BEAR) at ArtEZ University of the Arts Arnhem in The Netherlands, and a survivor of domestic abuse.

#### Transcript Episode 1

(Music)

#### Protagonist

Does the Train Only Pass Once?

(Music)

#### Narrator

Welcome to the 2gether4victims podcast

[Soundscapes: train, stations, announcements]

#### Protagonist

A journey through abundance, plunge and shadow to new understandings, heights and depths, unexpected discoveries or recoveries.

#### Narrator

A journey by train around Europe through the complexities of coordinating and harmonizing support services for victims of *gender-based violence*.

This podcast is focused on the latest developments in the field of gender-based violence services in the European Union.

This journey, shaped by Victim Support Europe, the leading European organization advocating for the rights and services of all crime victims, explores how eleven partner organizations in the

2gether4victims project are working together with one goal: improving services for victims of gender-based and domestic violence.

Along the way, we'll examine their current efforts and how these actions are paving the way for harmonized, gendered support services for victims across Europe.

Our *2gether4victims* podcast takes listeners on a rail journey through seven countries: Belgium, Croatia, Cyprus, France, Lithuania, the Netherlands, and Portugal. And the journey doesn't end there—it will cross even more borders...

### Protagonist

If you work with victims of crime, have been a victim yourself, or know someone who has, please, find your seat. You'll learn about the latest advancements in victims' rights across Europe.

### Narrator

Our podcast train is funded by the CERV program of the European Commission.

Co-funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Commission. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

(Music: exit)

Welcome to Episode One, where we'll be exploring the “**2gether4victims**” project. In this episode, we'll dive into what this project is all about and how it aims to enhance support services for victims of gender-based and domestic violence. We'll discuss its mission, the key partnerships involved, and why gendered support services are so important for providing a victim-focused response.

We'll also tackle some foundational issues, such as why addressing gender-based and domestic violence is crucial today, what we can do to address gender inequality, and whether gender inequality leads to violence. Plus, we'll explore how we can create meaningful change.

Our main character is Anna, an independent podcaster, sound artist, and a survivor of domestic abuse.

Anna is a European citizen, with Irish, Polish, and Italian roots, and she sees herself as a world citizen, embracing diverse cultures and experiences, though without forgetting where she comes from.

[Soundscape: train]

Through sound, she explores social structures, personal histories, and the unconscious imagination of individuals. Traveling by train across Europe, her goal? To investigate best practices and initiatives that support vulnerable populations, all with the aim of making the world a better place.

(Music: introspective)

### **Protagonist**

As my train glides along the ‘Brussels-Luxembourg - Brussels-North’ line at around 80 kilometers an hour, we pass through the city’s architectural landscape which is both quirky and wonderful. The EU capital’s architecture is a potpourri of styles, from the grandeur of neoclassical buildings to the whimsy of art nouveau, the elegance of art deco, and the sleek lines of modernism.

[Soundscape: noise, voices, shouts]

My psychologist once suggested that I start a daily journal to support my self-exploration beyond our therapy sessions. After enduring the ups and downs of an abusive relationship that lasted several years, she thought it might help me stay grounded.

And she was right.

Recording my nocturnal visions and daily experiences in an audio diary helped me regain balance and find joy in life.

[Soundscape: noise, voices]

3, 2, 1... started.

You know, I sometimes wonder if Federico Fellini ever got similar advice about keeping track of his dreams. This legendary Italian filmmaker was known for his vivid imagination, which he meticulously captured in *The Book of Dreams*, a collection of his dreams and nightmares that inspired many of his films.

In my case, this boundless territory of imagination led me to explore the world of sound! And that’s how, about ten years ago, I became an independent podcaster and sound artist.

[Soundscape: the train stops + city soundscape]

### Protagonist

Today, Anna is taking you to Place Schuman, right in the heart of the European Quarter in Brussels. She'll be meeting for an interview with **Aleksandra Ivankovic**, a widely respected human rights lawyer and dedicated custodian of victims' rights. They will explore the 2gether4victims project.

This initiative is all about making a real difference for at least 75 million victims of gender-based violence across the EU. That staggering number comes from a study by the Fundamental Rights Agency, specifically a survey on violence against women commissioned by the EU back in 2014. We'll see why this project matters, what it aims to achieve, and how it's planning to make a difference.

[Soundscape: office]

### Aleksandra Ivankovic

00:06:16

Anna! Anna! I'm right here!

### Protagonist

Oh, Aleksandra, hello! It's great to finally meet you!

### Aleksandra Ivankovic

00:06:25

Yeah, same here. You know, it's always different to meet people in person. But anyway, thank you for always coming to our online events. It really makes a difference when survivor-ambassadors like you come and join the events and it makes a difference also in the policy making world, you know.

### Protagonist

Thank you so much Aleksandra! I learned an awful lot and I really enjoy being part of your events! It's fantastic that Victim Support Europe always offers hybrid options, so we can join in from anywhere in the world. Your conferences and training have really helped me get a better grasp of what's actually happening in the victim support world.

### Aleksandra Ivankovic

00:07:00

Oh I'm so glad that you say that because that is exactly why we do that. But anyway why don't we just find a place to sit - I've already ordered coffees and breakfast for us. So I'll check to see

if it's ready.

**Protagonist**

Thank you!

[Soundscape: coffee shop]

**Protagonist**

With gender-based violence cases on the rise, Aleksandra Ivankovic's work has never been more critical. As Deputy Director of Victim Support Europe, the leading Europe-wide umbrella organisation for victims of crime, she tackles a wide range of crimes, from domestic abuse to human trafficking.

But what does it truly mean to lead an organization that stands up for victims of crime?

[Soundscape: "Ding"]

**Aleksandra Ivankovic**

00:07:38

Here we are. You know, one of the most important parts of my work is really listening to victims and making sure their voices are heard. It's a tough journey to change our criminal and civil justice systems to better support victims. It takes a lot of hard work, and honestly, it can be even more challenging during these uncertain times.

[Soundscape: Page flipping]

**Protagonist**

You know, I heard about this very-promising European project called "2gether4vicitms" that I think you launched last year in July 2023.

**Aleksandra Ivankovic**

00:08:13

Ah yes, I see you've been following our social media and looking at our websitwhich is a very good thing to hear.

**Protagonist**

Yeah. This project I know many people feel it will make a difference for victims of gender-based violence, in particular, domestic violence, that this time it can actually change things in the provision of support for this type of victims?

**Aleksandra Ivankovic**

00:08:37

So, let me try to break it down.

Gender-based violence isn't just one type of violence or just one type of abuse—it actually covers a lot of harmful behaviors like domestic violence, sexual assault, trafficking, stalking and many many more.

It's not just a personal issue, it's not something that happens behind closed doors; it's a form of discrimination and it's a form of violation of our basic human rights.

Gender-based violence is also not just about physical violence; it also includes things like psychological abuse, financial abuse, many harmful practices like forced marriages, female genital mutilation. So, yeah, that's a huge huge problem.

**Protagonist**

Yes

**Aleksandra Ivankovic**

00:09:24

But basically it all comes down to deeply ingrained gender roles and inequality in our society. And the numbers are really eye-opening. So the data that we get, and we don't get a lot of that, but what we do get we know that in the EU, about one in three women has experienced physical or sexual abuse since the age of 15. More than half have faced sexual harassment, and a significant number have suffered from psychological and physical abuse.

**Protagonist**

And where do these numbers come from?

**Aleksandra Ivankovic**

00:09:57

This staggering numbers comes from a study that the EU Fundamental Rights Agency, or as we call it FRA, conducted in a survey on violence against women back in 2014. So the data is quite old but we know that things haven't improved significantly. It also tells us that this is a really serious issue that requires our close attention.

**Protagonist**

Oh wow, those numbers are really staggering. What is the current situation now?

**Aleksandra Ivankovic**

00:10:28

Well, there's been some really important movements. So, in 2011, the Council of Europe adopted what is known as the Istanbul Convention, which aims to set rules and grounds for how to fight gender-based violence across all of the European countries, like geographical European countries.

And then just earlier this year in May 2024, the EU adopted the directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence, so there's been quite a lot of movement in terms of legislation, but then you can't just change behaviors by imposing laws. So we need to introduce some measures and some steps to bring us closer. And one of the big, important steps was the adoption of the use gender equality strategy that aims for a future without gender-based violence. But still, there's a long way to go.

### Protagonist

Oh, so that's where the project comes in.

### Aleksandra Ivankovic

00:11:23

Yeah, exactly. So the 2Gether4Victims project is here to try to find out and help us how to respond to the needs of victims of gender-based violence. We've learned a lot over the years. And then when the COVID-19 pandemic started, that was a big eye opener. One of the first thoughts that I had when lockdown was declared was "Oh my god, what about these poor victims of domestic violence who are stuck at home with their abusers?"

And we do know we see the data that the amount, the frequency, the intensity of gender-based violence, domestic violence increased during these months. When people were stuck at home. With their, with their abusers. And that's what inspired us to embark on this project, to understand what the needs are of victims of gender-based violence and how we can respond to those.

### Protagonist

OK. OK.

### Aleksandra Ivankovic

00:12:31

So the current support system for victims of gender-based violence is a mix of all crime services. So services that are available for all victims of all crimes and then specially support services that are only providing support to victims of gender-based violence.

And while all crime services are trying to address broader needs of victims, these specialized services are also very important for handling some specific aspects and some specific needs of victims of gender-based violence.

So, for example, in Finland, victims support Finland, Rico is an all crime service and they are aiming to provide support to all victims of all crimes, but what happens in reality is that a huge majority of their users of people who come to seek support from them are actually women victims of domestic violence.

In Portugal, for example, are member above the Portuguese Victim Support, they provide all crime services to all victims of all crimes, but they also have very specialized services like shelters for victims of domestic violence. So there is a range of services that's being provided by our members. That is being provided by different organizations. Then our research highlights that many support systems are outdated and they also need to adapt to the reality of the needs of victims in the field in real life. Victims, especially women, victims of domestic violence, often use support services, but then we don't really know what are the standards of quality for these services.

We don't know if the services that that these victims receive are actually of good quality, of satisfactory quality, and that they really respond to the needs of victims, and then we also don't know what is the difference between needs of victims of different genders as well. We sometimes assume that all victims of domestic violence will need shelter, which is not true. And then we also sometimes assume that all victims of a certain gender want to be supported by the person of the same gender, but that again, cannot stand true for all the victims. So, this is what our project is trying to find out. How do we understand the needs of victims of different genders? And then how do we respond to those needs?

### **Protagonist**

Oh okay, I think I understand because I've heard Victim Support Europe talk about that victim centered support before.

With this project, should we feel hopeful?

### **Aleksandra Ivankovic**

00:14:59

Well, yes, but also with a dose of realism. So, what we're doing here is just planting the seeds of change and it will still take time. It will take coordination. It will take sustained effort to see the full impact. The 2Gether4Victims project is certainly a big step forward. But we also need an ongoing commitment of everyone to truly help victims of gender-based violence.

### **Protagonist**

The project sounds really promising if we do get the commitment to, to, complete it.

And, what can we do to address gender inequality? Does gender inequality lead to violence? How do we make this change?

**Aleksandra Ivankovic**

00:15:45

Yeah. I mean, gender inequality does not necessarily lead to violence. But then the trouble is that it sets a stereotyping. And to change the society, because what the project is trying to do is trying to operate within the society, as imperfect as it is, but then also to drive the change. But then we need to imagine that change. We need to imagine the result before we start working towards it.

And not only must we stand at the foot of the mountain. But we also need to be ready to climb it and not just support those who fall off its sides and that's the challenge that we are embarking upon.

(Music: Ominous, thought provoking)

So even in the 21st century, gender stereotypes are still strong. Differences in the treatment of men and women in the society are institutionalized. Women's femininity and men's masculinity are predefined, and then expectations are set at birth. And generally, we need to accept that European Society, despite all the changes and some big steps towards gender equality, European Society is still patriarchal and its mainly male driven. Men are given oversight of the society and of their female counterparts.

Unfortunately, this has led or this still leads to machismo becoming prevalent across society and that can expose women and those expressing feminine traits to gender bias, inequality, discrimination, and it also leads to male dominance and in some instances that can lead to violence as well.

So just as an example, a few years ago I had two of my children, a boy and a girl, in the same school, and my daughter has already been in the school for two years. When my son started on his very first day of his very first year in secondary school, he was a boy of 12 at a time. He was getting into the school like he used to before with his sister, who was, as I say already there for two years, and he had a small earring in his ear and he was told that he couldn't get in the school with that one small earring in his ear and his sister had five earrings in both her ears and she just went through the door.

And that was really a surprise for me and I was thinking "what do I do about this?" It took me a while to actually convince my son to start talking to people at school about this, to question this difference in behavior. And so eventually I went to talk to the school principal, and I was told that the problem wasn't the school having different rules for boys and girls. The problem was my lack of understanding of Belgian culture. And I had to question it. I had to take a case to the

Belgian Gender Equality Institute, and you wouldn't believe it. But I actually told me that it was OK. They didn't find any problem with this difference in treatment between boys and girls. And so at that point, I didn't want to create more fast because my both children were going to that school. And so I said, OK, fine. I'm choosing my battles. He's not going to wear his earring to school, and he hasn't been wearing his earring for two years. Every time he would have his earring, he would take it off before getting into school.

And then fast forward two years later, he's starting his third grade in this very same school, and he, in the meantime, hit puberty big time and decided to sport hair style, which included having a male bun. You know, like this one, kind of a funny tail at the top of his head. And he went to school on the first day of third grade and he's coming back from school and he's telling me, mom, you need to sit down because I have a story to tell you. And I was really concerned because, like, he looked like something happened. So I was like "oh my God, what happened?" And then he actually told me "well, when I entered school or when I tried to enter the school today, they told me to untie my hair" And I was really surprised. And I was like, why? And then they told he told me that they told him "well, because boys are not allowed to wear tails in school"

And it was really like, you know, like, it was harmful. It was hurtful. It was frustrating. It was 2021 or something in Belgium and there you go. You have a boy and a girl in school and there's different rules and different expectations. And it was really something that I had to do something about again. So this time around I went and filed a complaint to the Belgian Commission for Rights of the Child, and they were really surprised to hear when I told them that this was happening in a school in the center of Brussels just a few minutes' walk away from the European Parliament and the European Commission. And they also told me that, you know the problem wasn't me. The problem wasn't my lack of understanding of Belgian culture. It was actually the problem with the culture at this specific school.

And so they started working with the school, started working on changing the school culture. But at that point our decision was to actually change schools. And I had to take both of my children from that school because I didn't want them to be exposed to to gender inequality on a daily basis.

## Protagonist

How did the school react?

## Aleksandra Ivankovic

00:21:32

Well, they were, I guess, relieved to see me going because that was the first solution that was offered to me, was to say "well, Madam, there's many other schools. So you're welcome to choose a school with better culture for you and your children" And as I say, eventually I did give

up. I left the The Children's Rights Commission deal with those issues. We change schools where the the culture and the the environment was much healthier. But also like when I was talking to the school principal on several occasions on on these issues He he asked me like, why is it such a problem? Why are you like almost making your children's lives more difficult by causing fuss? And then I told him, look, it really pains me as a feminist, as someone who's grown up trying to or and and sometimes successfully, and sometimes less successfully, overcoming obstacles that my gender put in front of me when I was born. It really pains me to actually raise the issues of discrimination against boys because usually discrimination is affecting girls and women, but it was also really, really important for me to send the message to my children that there is no room for inequality in 21st century, in Europe or anywhere else. And it was really important for me to lead by example and to teach a lesson to my children that they should expect equal treatment from everyone. So that was what drove me.

### Protagonist

Hmm.

### Aleksandra Ivankovic

00:23:06

My vision, and I believe that it should be a vision of society, is to ensure that there is no discrimination and that we achieve equality. But then, we need to ask questions, raise our concerns, approach institutions that can provide solutions. We need to accept that the change will not happen overnight and all at once. It will take place gradually by asking questions by confronting issues and situations and make decisions that will bring bring us closer to the vision of the future that we want for ourselves and that we want for our children.

### Protagonist

Yeah, I agree with you. Gender equality should should be for all people and and it's ensuring the rights for the future people.

How prevalent is violence against women in the EU?

### Aleksandra Ivankovic

00:24:09

Well, that's a very good question and one that's very difficult to answer. Well, in brief, we don't know precisely, so the trouble is that Member States rarely collect data in a way that can be easily interpreted and that can be easily compared. And then these data collection methodologies are not same across Member States and also not all Member States bother with collecting data. What we know is some some studies have shown for example that for each

victim of domestic violence, who comes to the police to report an incident of domestic violence that has been preceded by other six incidents. So we know that there is a lot of unreported crime and we don't know how much. And I sometimes feel that for the authorities, that's a preferred way of action so that they don't know the size of the problem because it's much easier to ignore the problem when you don't know how big it is, or as I like to say in brief: no data, no problem.

So some efforts have been done, some commendable efforts have been done and I think I already mentioned this study that the fundamental agency ran in 2014. So it was 10 years ago. And that study tells us that one in three women had been a victim of physical or sexual abuse since the age of 15, which is really concerning. And then the study also told us that more than 40% of women had experienced some form of psychological violence, and at that point in time, around 18 per cent women who were victims of cyber stalking. And I believe that this number is much higher now, especially from what we learned what happened during COVID-19 pandemic. And then this is also very similar to some global results of some UN studies. So you know I I basically do not know woman, and I would assume that you don't know a single woman who's never been a victim of some form of gender-based violence.

Gender-based violence, domestic violence,63245 is certainly the major cause of physical or psychological injury to women. Statistically speaking, the most dangerous place for a woman is not the street, it's her own home. And you know, it's it's really concerning that women share their homes with their abusers. It's really concerning that, for example, we know that the most dangerous period in a woman's life is when she's pregnant. And that's not because of potential complications of pregnancies, but because of an increased risk to her life by her partner. So women are living in this in this environment of trauma. They're living stuck at their home with their abusers. And that's really, really complicated. And we are trying to understand this trauma. We're trying to explain how how that happens and what are the consequences for women when they go through the trauma of domestic violence.

And there is this amazing book that I've been reading recently, it's by a Harvard psychiatrist, Judith Herman. The book name is Trauma and Recovery. And in this book, she actually compares the trauma that women victims of domestic violence experience to the trauma that is experienced by war veterans. And this tells a lot to say that there is the same or similar levels of trauma for women victims of domestic violence and for those who fight in combat. And it kind of tells me that women actually live through a war at their own homes. And that's really, really difficult.

So maybe you know, I have this book here, and I underlined one really, really good passage that I would like to read to you.0So see here, Judith Herman, she writes:

"Combat and rape the public and private forms of organized social violence are primarily experiences of adolescence and early adult life. the United States Army enlists young men at 17. The average age of the Vietnam Combat Soldier was 19. In many other countries, boys are

conscripted for military service while barely in their teens. Similarly, the period of highest risk for rape is in late adolescence. Half of all victims are aged 20 or younger at the time they're raped, 3/4 are between the ages of 13 and 26. The period of greater psychological vulnerability is also in reality the period of greatest traumatic exposure for both young men and young women. Rape and combat might thus be considered complementary social rights of initiation into the coercive violence at the foundation of adult society. They are the paradigmatic forms of trauma for women and men."

### Protagonist

That's really concerning. Thank you very much for sharing that quote. It really makes you think. Education for me is definitely a long-term solution. But what can we actually do right now to tackle this issue?

It feels like there's so much urgency around it and we need to find ways to help victims in the short term as well as combating it long term.

### Aleksandra Ivankovic

00:29:43

Well, we need to support the victims, and we need to enforce the laws. A vast majority of crime in general and then of gender-based violence in particular, is never reported, as I already told you. And then when a victim dares to report, they're not believed. And then if they're not believed, that's, you know, a problem. But then, even if they're believed, cases are still rarely prosecuted because of some procedural concerns. Because you know, this happened behind closed doors and it's your words against his. And then there's this lack of evidence, there's shortcomings, shortcomings of legal definition. And then you know, you kind of have to overcome this problem of reporting, the problem of having it properly investigated, the problem of starting a prosecution. And then if a case is prosecuted, the conviction rates are really, shamefully low. And then even when there is a conviction, sanctions are often inadequate and on the occasion, you know, it's really defeating to see these sanctions. I was just earlier this week I was talking to a criminal judge, and she was telling me about the case in which she convicted the offender to the maximum sentence and then the offender appealed to the second instance court. And then the court reduced his sentence because of the mitigating circumstance that he was a family man who had children. And she was absolutely devastated. She was really demoralized by the fact that the higher instance went to give a shamefully low sentence to an offender, a repeated offender of domestic violence because he had family, that he was violent against. So these are the sort of things that we have to face. These are the sort of things that discourage women from reporting that discourage prosecutors from prosecuting and then discourage judges from actually imposing harsh sentence.

And then, you know, even when victims go and succeed, conditionally succeed, in their case, and then they go to to seek compensation, then you know, these compensations are again very low. And then you know, to get compensation, you have to ask it from your offender. And then you have to face your offender again to seek payment so you know it's really complicated, it's really hard.

We see cases where, if there is a lack of evidence against the perpetrator, victims of rape are actually prosecuted for false reporting, and so they go and they they get victimized again by by the system. This time around, we see that even in cases in which there is DNA evidence or video evidence for sexual violence or other forms of gender-based violence, it's just not enough because there is a narrative around "well, she must have asked for it. Look at how she's, you know, behaving. She was drinking. She was wearing a short skirt and you know, like, well, the rapist is a married, vulnerable man. So he would have never done that." And then this is where you end up, really.

### **Protagonist**

So, what does that mean for women in this situation? How do they come back from from this continued victimization?

### **Aleksandra Ivankovic**

00:33:10

Well, it's really really complicated because, you know, in, in this reality, women are damned if they do but then they're also damned if they don't report. And it's really not about, you know, weakening of the rights of the defense.

I'm, I'm a human rights lawyer. I believe in human rights of everyone. I believe that everyone should have a fair trial and procedural rights, but then we really need to make sure that the system is balanced.

We need to make sure that the myths and biases are minimized or ideally removed from from any environment, and especially from a courtroom. And then, that no matter what the outcome, a victim shouldn't come out of the process even more traumatized and swearing to never go through it again. You know, we we talked to victims who tell us that the experience of reporting the rape to the police was more traumatizing than the rape itself, and we really have to stop that.

So you know the the first time, we, we become a victim when the crime happens and then of course our primary duty is to prevent the crime forever ever taking place. But then we also have to understand that we're humans. We live in a society where we will probably always have crime and we will never be able to fully prevent any instance of crime. And so once we fail in preventing the crime, we need to be able to empower and support victims and make sure that they feel heard and believed. And this does not mean that each time crime needs to end in

placing the offender behind the bars, but each victim must receive the respect and recognition that she reserves, and she needs to receive the support that she actually needs. So no matter what the outcome of a criminal proceeding is, we can certainly make an effort to reach out to the victim and offer them psychological and other types of support and help them recover and rebuild their lives.

And to achieve this we need a fundamental shift. We need a shift that will help us come to a point where we measure success of our justice systems, not by how many years of imprisonment we pronounce to the offenders, but by how much victims felt the sense of justice, having left the courtroom. And this is something that doesn't happen, and we don't think about it in that way. And you know the the focus is really not on just finding people guilty or innocent and being efficient.

We have to think about how victims feel when they go through the criminal justice system and whether they feel that justice is safe for them, whether they feel that if they go into the system, they will not be harmed even more and they will not suffer even more just because they decided to go down that path.

And you know, we need to make sure that we're minimizing harm, that we are preventing secondary victimization, and that we give an equal importance to the fair trial rights of the offender to having a system that provides safe justice to victims of crime, and we have to start measuring how we do that.

So we need to avoid failing victims again and again. And you know, like we, we need to understand already being a victim once is once too many. And it's already too much.

So to to achieve that we see that we need to build Victim Support frameworks, a national framework. In which support is provided to all victims by everyone that they come across in their on their path to recovery. And we need to also make sure that we can help countries develop these national Victim Support frameworks. And that these frameworks also need to be able to to recognize and acknowledge each victim. They need to be able to define and determine what needs of these victims are, and then they need to be able to respond to the needs of these victims. And this is also why we do this project because we do understand that there are differences between the needs of victims of different genders. But we still haven't pinned down how do we make sure that then services that these victims support are what we call gendered. And the entire point of the 2gether4victims project is to help us find the answer to this.

So you know, many all crime services Victim Support organizations that provide support to all victims of all crimes they can help victims of gender based violence, but there are also specialized organizations that provide support to victims of gender based violence, and we need to make sure that all of them are able to reach out to the victims and to respond to their needs.

And what I like to mention as an example for victims to go to a specialized organization, an organization that may have in their name or in their description and somewhere very visible on their website saying that they provide support to victims of gender based violence of domestic violence, you need to understand that you are a victim of that. And that's the problem that many victims of domestic violence it takes a while to understand what is going on. It's like, you know, this boiled frog syndrome, like, these things rarely start from, you know, like a partner beating you up to pulp it, they start from like small instances of aggression of violence, of control. We talk a lot about coercive control, which is nonviolent way of being of, of, of not non physically violent way of actually perpetrating domestic violence. So it really takes for many victims, it takes a while to understand that they're the victims. And then it takes potentially even longer for them to accept that they need to do something about it, because there's a lot of investment in trying to repair the relationship, especially when they have children, etc. And So what we see in practice is that it takes a while for women to go to specialized organizations because it needs a lot of recognition and work and many issues before. But then they're probably more likely to go to an all crime service earlier because of of some different things maybe, maybe not some things that are related to their domestic situation.

So an example that I often mention is if you, for example, are an all crime service and you get a call from a woman who is calling about online fraud to to say that, you know, she noticed that €500 were missing from her bank account and to ask for support on how to reclaim this money. And then you talk to her and through talking to her, you understand that her problem, her primary problem, is not so much about having lost €500. But about how am I going to go back home and tell my husband about having been defrauded by €500, and then you start revealing that there is a situation of violence at home that she's not ready to deal with at the moment. So, at the moment, she just wants to make sure that her husband doesn't know that she's lost money to a fraud.

So this is a victim that will call an all crime service. This is not a victim that will call a specialized organization. This is not a victim who's ready to deal with her domestic situation yet. And so it's really, really important to have a variety of services that are able to capture all these victims and also a variety of services that work together to respond to the full needs of the victim because we can't do it in isolation, we have to work with each other.

So, there are successes. There are still some challenges and the only thing I can say is that the struggle for victims' rights will probably never end, because obviously we will always have crime. So, we will keep doing what we can to support victims understanding this reality and it's not really a task for just one organization, and it's not just a task for one single project. Our schools, our educational systems, our administrations, our judicial systems, our medical professionals and everyone else in the society should also be involved to understand what victimization is and to make their small contribution towards at least not victimizing victims anymore.

And you know, one one victim whose testimony really touched me. Her name is **Melanie Maria**. She is a victim of domestic abuse. And, and she made this very powerful statement when she said the secret is the support. And yeah, that's all that I can say.

### Protagonist

That's really moving for me. You know something I've heard frequently when I talk to my peers or or other victims is abuse doesn't start on the first date. I think that really comes across in what you were saying. I also really believe in in this quote that you shared by **Melanie Maria** where the secret is in the support because that's where I get an awful lot of my strength. UM, could you tell me more about her? What's her story?

### Aleksandra Ivankovic

00:43:12

Well, she's she's really this amazing and very resilient woman. And yeah, maybe actually because she spoke at our conference and we have some audio recording of her intervention. So maybe I can just play it to you and then you and then you can hear it from her own words. So let me just look it up please.

[Soundscape: Typing]

### Protagonist

Melanie Maria is a Dutch performance artist, director, and choreographer. Recently graduated from a Bachelor of Fine Art at Art Easy, University of the Arts Arnhem in the Netherlands. She is a survivor of domestic abuse.

On November 20th, 2019, Melanie Maria spoke at Victim Support Europe's autumn conference in Brussels. She shared her own experiences and highlighted the importance of educating young people about healthy relationships.

### Melanie Maria

00:44:03

The secret is support.

I was lucky, but I know that a lot of people have to wait quite a long time before they get support. I think it is very important to have a personal meeting with victims or workers as soon as possible after a victim reaches out the services.

The first weeks are crucial for a victim to be taken care of by Victim Support workers and specialists. I am now almost a year and a half out of my abusive relationship.

In this past year and a half, I experienced a lot of support by talking freely and being open with doctors, with social workers, with various experts and specialists. Moreover, even just when talking to friends, family and strangers.

First I started with one-on-one help through Moviera Victim Support domestic violence or eight months straight, a social worker from Moviera came every other week to my home to talk about what I had experienced and what to change for the future.

After seven months, I started with Group workshop therapy sessions through Moviera with a group of 10 women. We got educated about different facets of domestic violence, about what happens during and after. Both 101 health and group therapy were focused on having the same core value " toekomst zonder geweld" "Future without violence"

When it comes to who or what was most helpful to me after experiencing domestic violence, I would say that the one-on-one support made the biggest difference. It started right after the break up with the abuser and the support worker, the woman of Moviera, was always very patient to listen, react and also teach me about domestic violence. For instance, the circle of violence.

Detailed, unhurried conversation about what had happened to me helped me to figure out that it was real and awful. I believe I asked her almost every session if it was right for me to get Victim Support, If I was a victim of domestic violence and that it wasn't me who was the narcissist in the relationship.

### **Protagonist**

That's a really powerful testimony.

And I was reading somewhere that recently some countries have argued they can't implement the laws, such as the Victims Rights Directive, because of their current economic issues. Is that the case?

### **Aleksandra Ivankovic**

00:46:32

Yeah, well, that's the usual excuse that countries make in order to not comply.

According to the EU, EU Commissioner for Equality, Gender based violence against women costs the EU approximately €226 billion a year. And evidence shows that if you get this right, if you put support systems in place, then basically it's much cheaper and you save money by supporting victims because you avoid long term consequences. Not just for the victim, but also for the society and for the entire criminal justice system.

So you know the the way we see it, the way we argue is that Victim Support is not a cost but an investment. So you know, like we've done some research and some preliminary evidence indicates that for every single euro that's spent on supporting victims, at least €5 are saved elsewhere. And of course you have to invest. You have to increase grants for support services.

You have to make sure that victims shelters are able to operate. You have to be able to provide sufficient psychological and legal support. You need also to invest in police training. You need to invest in increasing awareness of judges and prosecutors. You need to develop tools. You need to build up services. So it's not just something that happens overnight. But then as a result you will have lower healthcare costs, you will have employers who will benefit from fewer absences of their employees from work and then you will have a justice system that is more efficient and gives you better and more just results for everyone involved.

You know, like just looking into the justice system and how investing into Victim Support can have better outcomes, victims who are supported will, for example, give better testimony and will be better supported than than their their evidence is going to be of better quality to provide judges grounds for better decisions. And at the end you you have overall better results, so you know there is really no excuse to fully implement victims' rights legislation. At least to the minimum standard that is expected.

So because this way you do not only reduce the cost in the short term, but you also do it in the medium and long term. And then there's multiple ways in which states can find funding to implement rights and services to reduce the impact on their budgets.

So, for example, you know we, we looked into how can you find funding for Victim Support services and that's also an excuse that that governments often use to say, well, you know, we can't afford that in the present budget. So we have been actually looking into ways how to build specific income sources for Victim Support services. How to not rely on just what you have at the moment, but actually to create something that will provide a specific income source for Victim Support services, so that's possible there is as, as, you know, the proverb says, when there's a will there's a way. So we just need to work towards convincing governments that this is the way to go and then eventually we'll find a way to make it work.

## Protagonist

So it seems like there's many economic values to investing in Victim Support.

How exactly will the 2gether4victims project make support services better for victims of gender-based violence and domestic? What are its key goals?

## Aleksandra Ivankovic

00:50:49

At Victim Support Europe, we also start from understanding that all victims of all crimes have 5 basic needs: so this is respect and recognition support, including information access to justice protection, and compensation and restoration. But we also understand that not all victims have the same needs in the same way.

So between understanding the needs of all victims and identifying individual needs of every victim, we also have to accept that certain groups of victims will have some specific needs and

characteristic of that specific group. And so when we talk about victims of gender based violence, domestic violence, the project is trying to identify what are the specificities of gender needs of victims so we can understand and, through through understanding differences of genders and also understanding gender as a spectrum, because at this time and age we have to understand and and we accept that there is not just the men and the women, there is also everything in between and then we need to be able to capture the needs of people of different genders and then respond to those needs in a way that's required by that individual victim. And when we talk about women victims of domestic violence, there is often this presumption that only a woman can support a woman, and that may stand true in many cases. But then in some other cases it might be irrelevant, or it might even be harmful because giving a prescription and the one-size-fits-all solution is very unhelpful and so this is what the project is trying to figure out is how can we respond to these gender needs of victims of different genders in a way that is appropriate to their individual needs? And how can we make Victim Support services be ready to respond to these needs in an appropriate way?

So, what we're trying to do through the project is one part is doing research to help us identify indicators and pin down elements of what makes a service gendered. Is that the ability to have different reception areas for victims of different genders? Is that being able to provide support to the person with an expert, with the professional supporter of a gender that the victim prefers her support received from? Or is that having, I don't know, pink walls for the girls and blue walls for the boys, which is probably not the solution.

But what we're trying to do is do research, identify what are these elements and then build those elements into the way how services operate. So we are developing 2 sets of tools, one set of tools is focused on organizations on service provision, and we call those tools the organizational self-assessment tools. Where we will support organizations in going through their own structures and their own practices and see how they can make those structures and practices gender gendered and gender sensitive so that they can respond to the needs of victims of domestic violence.

And then the other set of tool is individual needs assessment tools which will help us go towards the victim and then identify the gendered needs of these victims. So not all needs but needs that are gendered. So, going back to these pink and blue walls, if that's the need of the victim, how can we respond to that? So, this is basically what the project is trying to to figure out, you know, like what do we have? What are we missing? And how can we improve the current support systems and make it work for victims of gender-based violence.

So, we are, at the moment, we are in the stage where we're developing these tools. Once the tools are developed then we will actually pilot them. So, we have a great project partnership that will pilot these tools and then based on that pilot, we'll try to learn from our partners on how that works and then we'll offer these tools to as many organizations that are willing to implement them. So that's basically what what we're trying to do. And, and, I can't emphasize

enough that even though. we do know that women are disproportionately affected by gender-based violence, they're not the only victims of gender-based violence. So, we're trying to make these tools inclusive. We are trying to make them make sure that they're focused not just on the biggest proportion of victims of gender based violence, which is women, but also to address the needs of often forgotten or disregarded or marginalized, more marginalized victims, like members of LGBTIQ community or men victims of gender based violence. Because we really want all victims, no matter what their background is, no matter who they are and what, no matter where they come from, to get the support they need.

So, yeah, in short, the 2gether4victims project is all about making support better and more personal for victims of gender-based violence and domestic violence. And we are really trying to make sure that everyone gets the support that they need.

### **Protagonist**

Thank you very much for all the information. It's really valuable to to learn and hear from you what the current state of play is and I'm really hopeful for this project to make a difference for all victims of gender based violence.

[Soundscape: Ringtone]

### **Aleksandra Ivankovic**

00:57:20

Ah sorry, I need to take this. This is a lawyer calling. Sorry.

Yes, yes. Uh-huh. Yeah, I see. I see. Alright. Yeah, yeah, yeah. I'll be on my way. OK. Thanks.

Yeah. See you in a bit. Bye.

Oh, I'm so sorry about this. So yeah, obviously this is a call from a lawyer, so they need me to be in their office quite quickly because there's something urgent that we need to sort out with the strategic litigation case that we're working on. So sorry, but I'll just have to cut this short.

### **Protagonist**

No problem. Thank you so much for for everything so far. We're almost done anyway. So really it's not an issue. And how are you getting there?

### **Aleksandra Ivankovic**

00:58:02

Yeah, I'm just going to hop on the train.

[Soundscape: ambiance sounds, faint voices of people talking]

**Protagonist**

Oh, I'm taking the train as well. Maybe we could continue the conversation there.

**Aleksandra Ivankovic**

00:58:09

Oh yeah, that really sounds good. So I can have company. While I'm getting there. Yeah, yeah, sure. Let's just head to the train and then we can continue our discussion on the train.

**Narrator**

As our two characters embark on a train journey toward Antwerpen, Alexandra prepares for an important appointment with Anna, accompanying her to continue their conversation.

After dropping Alexandra off, Anna will continue her journey to Utrecht in the Netherlands, where she is set to meet with Victim Support Netherlands.

But we'll delve into that in the next episode.

**Protagonist**

So, you've mentioned APAV, the Victim Support Portugal. Can you tell us about the other partners in the 2gether4victims project and what their roles are?

**Aleksandra Ivankovic**

00:58:56

Yeah, so we really try to strike a balanced partnership between organizations that work with all victims of all crimes and then organizations that really focus on working with victims of gender-based violence.

So we have 11 partners in the project, obviously Victim Support Europe is coordinating the project and we're based in Belgium, in Portugal we have APAV as you rightly mentioned, that's full member of Victim Support Europe and the Portuguese national Victim Support organizations that provide support to all victim's world crimes, and then as I said before, they also have shelters and provide specialized support to victims of domestic violence. But then we also have a feminist organization, Feministas em Movimento, FEM, who focus only on working with victims of gender-based violence.

We have similar partnership composition also in Croatia where we have an all-crime service, the Victim and Witness Support Service Croatia, but we also have Women's Room, Ženska Soba, who are the Croatian national reference organization for victims of sexual violence. We have a similar partnership also in Lithuania, where we have this all crime and a feminist organization, so we have VILIAS as an all-crime organization, and then we also have KSPSC, which is a specialized organization working with victims of gender based.

And then we also have in France we have an all crime service only on the V 58, France Victimes. We have in Cyprus a feminist organization only, SPAVO, who provide support to victims of domestic violence. And then we also have partners that support the effort with, with their skills in research. So, in the Netherlands we have Victim Support, Netherlands, that is the national Victim Support organization that also like works with all victims of all crimes, but also have a good background in research and a very strong research component. And then last but not least, we have Mykolo Romerio University from Lithuania and their researchers who specialize in domestic violence, who are actually providing us with significant leadership on research. So, that's partnership in a nutshell.

### Protagonist

Uh-hum, okey.

That that's a really wide range of of partners. You know, it's it's really important when when looking at this topic that we lean on solid evidence when we're trying to come up with new solutions and approaches by getting the real scoop on what actually works and what doesn't. We can really improve Victim Support and make a difference that lasts to survivors.

So, what evidence based methods is the project using and how are you going to check out the support services?

### Aleksandra Ivankovic

01:02:03

What what we were really trying to design into the project methodology was to collect evidence before making any sort of conclusion or proposing any sort of solutions. So, this is a three-year project and we are dedicating almost the entire first half of the project, so the first 18 months of the project, to research because we understand that this is the crucial phase. And the idea behind the research is to answer one key question how can Victim Support services be provided in a way that properly addresses gender differences?

So, as I said before, we asked experts from Mykolo Romerio University in Lithuania, And in particular, Dr. Ramunė Jakštienė from this university, who is an expert in domestic violence, to lead this effort. To really help us define the right types of questions and aim to find the answers to these questions that will help us, guide us, towards solutions of the development of the tools that I already mentioned - the the organizational self-assessment and the individual needs assessment.

[Soundscape: train loading sounds]

So, you know, we we asked Ramunė to develop research methodology, which she did quite competently. And then based on the research methodology and the questions that she helped

us formulate, we asked our national partners to conduct National Research through obviously desk research, but also through looking into best practices, talking to experts, talking to victims, trying to understand what their needs are. In that gendered cluster of needs so that we could be able to develop better services for victims.

So, you know, like we, we had a lot of activity in research. We also asked partners to validate their findings and to present their research to broad network of stakeholders. And then, in addition to that, at Victim Support Europe, we conducted this international research trying to find international good practices, trying to find comparative practices outside of project countries so that we could inform our next steps as good as possible. And through that research, the goal was to provide clear evidence-based answers to some questions like: What roles do different types of organizations play in supporting victims of gender-based violence? So how do all crime services support victims and how do specialist services support victims? And then also like, how can we design these services so that they can provide support to victims in the best way possible.

And yeah, I mean this research will explore the needs of victims and how they might differ based on different types of violence that they experience in their environment and also like you know, what are the differences of different genders and what are the different if there is any differences in needs between different genders, and then if there is what those differences are and how do we address these differences in our daily work?

So yeah, I mean we we really try to to make a best effort to make informed decisions so that we can be assured as much as possible that our solutions will be responding to the needs of victims.

### **Protagonist**

So just one final question before you have to leave.

[Soundscape: train announcement, arrival at station]

From what you've told me, the 2gether4victims project aims to explore what it means to have gender, to support services for victims of domestic violence, and what makes a service, and its approach gendered.

Have your researchers provided any preliminary answers on the topic?

### **Aleksandra Ivankovic**

01:06:14

Yes indeed, this is what we are just looking into as we speak. So the colleagues are looking into the preliminary findings and what we are understanding is that to to be able to respond to the needs of victims of domestic violence, we need to develop services that are gender sensitive

and victim centric. Which in brief means that we just need to look into every individual victim, understand what their personal situation is and how to best respond to their personal environment and their personal needs. So, this is what we're hoping to achieve through the tools that we'll be developing the project.

**Protagonist**

Brilliant. Thank you so much.

**Aleksandra Ivankovic**

01:06:52

Oh, we're almost there. Sorry, but I better run. So thanks a lot for the conversation. It was really great talking to you, Anna.

**Protagonist**

Yeah, it was wonderful to meet you. Thank you so much for everything, Alexandra. Have a good meeting.

**Aleksandra Ivankovic**

01:07:06

Thank you. Thank you and well have good luck with your journey. Bye.

**Protagonist**

Bye bye.

(Music)

Alexandra left, and I can't help but feel a mix of hope and urgency this 2gether4victims project is so much more than just a program. It's a real shot at making a difference for those who have been through the wringer of gender-based violence. As we talked about the complexities of gender inequality, it hit me just how deeply rooted these issues are in our everyday lives. Alexandra's story about her son getting denied entry to school for wearing an earring really struck a chord. It shows how societal norms and expectations can create obstacles, not just for women, but for everyone. It's a clearer reminder that the fight for equality is ongoing and complicated.

This conversation has really driven home by belief that we need to keep pushing for change, not just in policies, but in how society views and treat survivors.

I'm so inspired by the Alexandra's determination. She speaks so clearly about the need to rethink how we approach justice for victims. It's not just about punishing offenders. We also need to prioritize the well-being of those who've been hurt.

I find myself wondering how I can help and bring about this change. What can I do to amplify these conversations and support the victims?

As I continue my journey across Europe, this discussion has fired me up to dig deeper into the thoughts on the best practices of the together for victims partners. Reflecting on my chat with Alexandra about the together for victims project, I can't shake the powerful testimony of Melanie Maria, a survivor of domestic violence. Her words really resonate. The secret is support. Melanie's journey shows just how crucial, timely and personalized assistance can be for victims trying to reclaim their lives after abuse. She really highlighted how important immediate one-on-one support is in the weeks after leaving an abusive relationship, helping her face the reality of her situation.

It's shocking to learn that gender-based violence costs the EU around 226 billion every year. But Alexandra pointed out that investing in Victim Support not only tackles this issue but makes economic sense too. For every year spent on supporting victims, at least €5 can be saved across sectors like healthcare and justice. This really drives home that supporting victims isn't just a moral duty, it's a smart investment.

The goals of the together for victim's project are truly inspiring. I love their focus on tailoring support services to fit the unique needs of each. Making sure they're not only gender sensitive, but also inclusive of diverse groups.

The introduction of the organizational self-assessment and individual needs assessment tools really stands out to me as a crucial step towards improving the quality of support across Europe. These tools allow organizations to evaluate and upgrade their services, making it easier to meet the specific needs of victims. Especially those from marginalized communities hearing about the collaboration among various organizations across Europe gives me hope that there are dedicated efforts to improve Victim Support.

[Soundscape: "Ding"]

As I continue my trip to Utrecht to meet the victim, support Netherlands, I feel a renewed sense of purpose. I'm excited to learn more about the innovative approaches being developed to support victims of gender based and domestic violence. This conversation has really deepened my understanding of the challenges victims face and the vital importance of making sure they get the support they need to heal and thrive.

## Protagonist

01:11:21

Anna has found herself transformed, brimming with inspiration, she is now crafting a plan to expand her journey across Europe, eager to discover new countries and immerse herself in a wealth of fresh experiences.

Thank you so much for tuning in. We hope you'll join us again next time as we continue our journey with the 2gether4victims podcast.

The next stop is understanding domestic violence myths versus reality, where we'll tackle common misconceptions about gender-based violence.

Stigma often tells the truth, and many myths continue to circulate.

(Music)

[Soundscape: train]

Does the Train Only Pass Once?

### **Narrator**

You're listening to the 2gether4victims podcast, focusing on gender-based violence services.

This podcast was produced by the *2gether4victims* project, led by Victim Support Europe in collaboration with ten partner organizations and funded by the CERV program of the European Commission.

Thank you very much for listening.

(Music: exit)

### **Protagonist**

Thank you very much for listening.

### **Disclaimer**

This podcast is co-funded by the European Union.

Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Commission.

Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.