Civic space of women's rights organisations in Europe

The research

For the MOTERIS report, national researchers covered 15 EU countries: Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, France, Hungary, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Spain and Sweden. They combined desk research, questionnaire, interviews with movement leaders and three regional focus groups, and produced country reports in March-April 2026. The analysis follows four areas, aligned with FRA and CIVICUS: the legal and institutional environment, funding, participation in decision-making, and safety, all anchored in the women's human rights framework including CEDAW and EU primary law. The evidence is qualitative and reflects the experience of participating respondents, who represent women's rights organisations or are part of the women's movement across Europe.

Key findings across different countries

01 **Civic space is open on paper, constrained in practice.** There are no legal restrictions for WROs civic participation. Yet organisations are often not encouraged to take part, and rights such as abortion can exist in law while being hard to access (Romania, Austria). Worrying debates around the Istanbul Convention, on withdrawing from it or not ratifying it, have surfaced in Hungary, Czechia, Poland and Latvia.

02 **Funding insecurity is the most consistent problem, in every country.** Funding is short-term and project-based, with little to no core support. In France WROs lost about 45% of needed resources in 2025, with 44% of victim-support organisations holding three months or less of reserves. Swedish state funding has been unchanged since 2005, while in Portugal funding for WROs is no longer anchored in the state budget. EU funds are a crucial lifeline for many WROs where state funding is insufficient (Cyprus, Croatia), but hard for small grassroots groups to access due to complex and administratively heavy requirements. Countries like Czechia, Hungary and Lithuania rely on external funding and are thus more vulnerable to geopolitical shifts (such as the withdrawal of US funding).

03 **Consultation without influence and conditions for state funding.** Austria, Cyprus, Portugal and Romania describe procedures that are correct yet symbolic, without WROs having actual influence. Funding comes with conditions that shape what organisations can say. Respondents in several countries report that funding depends on alignment with government priorities and official positions. In Hungary, Poland and Croatia these are traditional and conservative values, favouring the organisations that are aligned. In Belgium, Portugal and Austria the priorities are more so-called "inclusive" or "gender-neutral", and organisations report being expected to provide mixed-sex services, or losing funding for providing or advocating for single-sex services and spaces. Spain reports misuse of funds allocated to combatting sex-based VAWG.

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La Coordination Française pour le Lobby Européen des Femmes
Co-funded by the European Union

04 **Harassment of WROs and WHRDs is universal and increasingly normalised in the digital era.** A majority of respondents in Croatia, Latvia and Portugal report attacks or harassment linked to their work, much of it online. Organised "manosphere" and masculinist networks are named as a main threat in France and Sweden, while abusers' use of online forums to coordinate legal tactics are reported in Ireland. In the Czech Republic and Poland, podcasts and other social media enables the spread of anti-women's-rights narratives. In Spain, the so-called "Gag Law" restricts freedom of expression and assembly, and activists report physical attacks. The use of the justice system for intimidation, and strategic lawsuits used to silence organisations (SLAPPs), are reported in both Spain and Portugal. Organisations focused on protection of women from sex-based discrimination, eliminating sexual and reproductive exploitation are often framed as “exclusionary” and “anti-rights”.

05 **Women as a policy category, and sex-based protections, are being diluted.** Equality bodies and laws are merging into broader “diversity” or “gender-neutral” frameworks (Portugal, Lithuania, Belgium, Austria, Ireland, Spain), weakening women-only services and sex-disaggregated data. The conflict between sex as a legal category in law and gender identity based frameworks results in weakening of women-focused service provision and frameworks on VAWG while creating a divide in the women’s movement (Austria, Latvia, Ireland, Belgium, Spain), leading to self-censorship and exclusion from the movement.

06 **Marginalised women are the most vulnerable.** Migrant, Roma, rural, poor, prostituted, and other marginalised women, and the organisations working for their rights, are the most affected across all surveyed countries.

Conclusions

Backlash against women’s rights and shrinking civic space for women reinforce each other. The question is no longer only whether civic space for women’s rights organisations is shrinking, but how long it can be sustained under these conditions. Women’s rights organisations deliver services when the state fails to do so, monitor implementation of EU commitments for equality between women and men, and act as democratic watchdogs. Weakening women’s rights organisations undermines the EU’s own equality and rule-of-law agenda. A sustainable women’s movement relies on sustainable funding, anchored in the reality of WROs operations, and ear-marked specifically for the advancement of women’s rights.

About the project

MOTERIS – Protecting the civic space of women and girls is a two-year project funded by the CERV programme. It is run by the Swedish, Hungarian, Lithuanian and French Women’s Lobbies and the European Network of Migrant Women, all members of the European Women’s Lobby. It examines the civic space for women’s rights organisations (WROs) and women human rights defenders (WHRDs) in Europe, and it is building a monitoring framework to track this over time.

For more information about the project and the activities.
sverigeskvinnoorganisationer.se/project/moteris-protecting-the-civic-space-of-women-and-girls/

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