

Hard of Hearing Women and Girls in Europe



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About EFHOH

The European Federation of Hard of Hearing People (EFHOH), established in 1993 and registered in the Netherlands, is a non-profit organization representing hard of hearing and late-deafened individuals across Europe. EFHOH advocates for awareness and practical actions to eliminate barriers to access affordable hearing care and rehabilitation and create an accessible society through public services and assistive technologies. Its main objective is to protect and promote the rights of individuals with hearing loss in Europe, facilitating legislative and social protections through collaboration with members and stakeholders.

Foreword

EFHOH women have been visible at EDF Women Committee, thanks to dedication of our nominated representatives for many years and contributed to the shared knowledge of the group. However, data relevant to Hard of Hearing women is hard to find. EFHOH Board is pleased to see this report as a much needed first step, towards making Hard of Hearing women issues visible. We hope the report will help improve understanding the challenges Hard of Hearing women face and provide much needed guidance for improvements. We are grateful to the EU Commission for the financial assistance to make this report a reality and our volunteers and staff for working on this initiative.

Executive Summary

EFHOH conducted an online survey between March and April 2024, targeting hard of hearing women and girls across Europe to assess their experiences and the barriers they face. To be clear, hard of hearing individuals have mild to severe hearing loss but often use spoken language to communicate and rely on assistive devices like hearing aids or cochlear implants. They can also benefit from visual cues, such as lipreading and speech-to-text tools, to facilitate communication.

This initiative is part of the Citizens, Equality, Rights, and Values Programme (CERV), co-funded by the European Union. The survey consisted of 28 questions, including multiple-choice, closed, and open-ended formats. This methodology allowed for the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data, providing a comprehensive view of the issues and obstacles encountered by hard of hearing women and girls.

The survey findings highlighted several significant challenges faced by hard of hearing women in Europe. Many respondents reported limited access to healthcare, employment discrimination, educational barriers, and increased exposure to violence. Key issues identified included communication barriers, lack of accessible support systems, and insufficient data on the specific needs of hard of hearing women. These factors were particularly problematic in emergency situations, where seeking help or reporting violence proved to be difficult. Additionally, some respondents expressed uncertainty about whether they had experienced violence, revealing a lack of awareness and recognition of abuse, especially within the context of disability.

The survey revealed also low visibility of hard of hearing women and girls in social and political life, with many respondents highlighting a lack of representation. Additionally, barriers such as insufficient support, accessibility, and awareness hinder their participation in civic engagement and political movements. The findings emphasize the need for accessible environments that empower hard of hearing women to fully exercise their rights and engage in society. Without these accessible systems and support, they are unable to seek justice, report violence, or fully participate in social and legal processes.

This report emphasizes the need for raising awareness, improving accessibility, and enacting inclusive policies that address both gender and disability. Collaboration among governments, healthcare providers, employers and communities is crucial in ensuring that hard of hearing women have the necessary support, resources, and equal opportunities in every life aspect.

Introduction

Why do we need to discuss Hard of Hearing women?

Women and girls with disabilities make up 25.9% of the total female population in the European Union (EU), representing 60% of the overall 100 million persons with disabilities in Europe. Yet, their voices often go unheard¹. According to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities², women with disabilities are not a homogeneous group. They include Indigenous women; refugee, migrant, asylum-seeking, and internally displaced women; women in detention (hospitals, residential institutions, juvenile or correctional facilities, and prisons); women living in poverty; women from diverse ethnic, religious, and racial backgrounds; women with multiple disabilities or high support needs; women with albinism; lesbian, bisexual, and transgender women, as well as intersex persons. The diversity of women with disabilities also encompasses all forms of disabilities, including hearing loss.

Many women with disabilities face discrimination, not only because of their gender but also because of their disability. However, do we consistently consider the challenges faced by women with hearing loss in our organizations? Do we address the double or intersectional discrimination they face when developing projects for hard of hearing people? Do we consider the specific impact our projects may have on hard of hearing women? These are critical questions that need answers.

Discrimination and Violence Against Women with Disabilities

This diverse group of women continues to experience multiple and intersectional discrimination in various aspects of life. Women and girls with disabilities are particularly vulnerable to violence, abuse, and harmful practices. As the European Disability Forum states in its position paper, *“These can occur in different environments (such as institutions and segregated schools) and take numerous forms, including harassment, sexual violence, bullying, and psychological or physical violence. Specific abuses also include forced abortion, sterilization, incest, and coercive contraception. Disability-specific violence, such as restraint, sexual abuse during daily hygiene routines, removal or control of communication aids, violence*

¹ European Commission: Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion & Grammenos, S. (2021). [European comparative data on Europe 2020 and persons with disabilities : labour market, education, poverty and health analysis and trends](#), Publications Office of the European Union, page 19.

² CRPD Committee, (2016). [General Comment no 3 on Article 6 - Women and girls with disabilities](#), paragraph 5.

during treatment, overmedication, or withholding medication, is also a concern. Perpetrators often exploit the unique barriers faced by women and girls with intellectual or psychosocial disabilities, deafblind individuals, and those with high support needs”³.

Available data highlights that women and girls with disabilities in the EU are at a higher risk of violence compared to their peers without disabilities:

- Women with disabilities are 2 to 5 times more likely to experience violence than other women⁴.
- 34% of women with a health condition or disability have experienced physical or sexual violence from a partner in their lifetime, compared to 19% of women without disabilities⁵.
- 61% of women with a health problem or disability have experienced sexual harassment since the age of 15, compared to 54% of women without disabilities.

These statistics reveal the widespread nature of violence against women with disabilities, an issue that remains under-discussed. Similarly, violence against hard of hearing women is insufficiently researched, making this topic an urgent area for more investigation, awareness, and action.

Why This Report?

Women with disabilities should not only be seen as victims of crises but as leaders and changemakers. They must be empowered to advocate for their rights and address societal needs⁶. Gathering data on women with disabilities is a crucial first step toward this goal. Such data can be instrumental for raising awareness and shaping policy advocacy.

The specific challenges faced by hard of hearing women have yet to be fully explored. To fill this gap, EFHOH, as part of the European Disability Forum Women’s Committee, sought to better understand and highlight the barriers experienced by hard of hearing women in Europe.

This report is based on the findings of a survey created after the European Disability Forum’s 2023 survey for women with disabilities. It marks EFHOH's initial effort to:

³ European Disability Forum, (2021). [Violence against women and girls with disabilities in the European Union](#).

⁴ European Parliament, (2018). [Resolution of 29 November 2018 on the situation of women with disabilities \(2018/2685\(RSP\)\)](#).

⁵ See note 3.

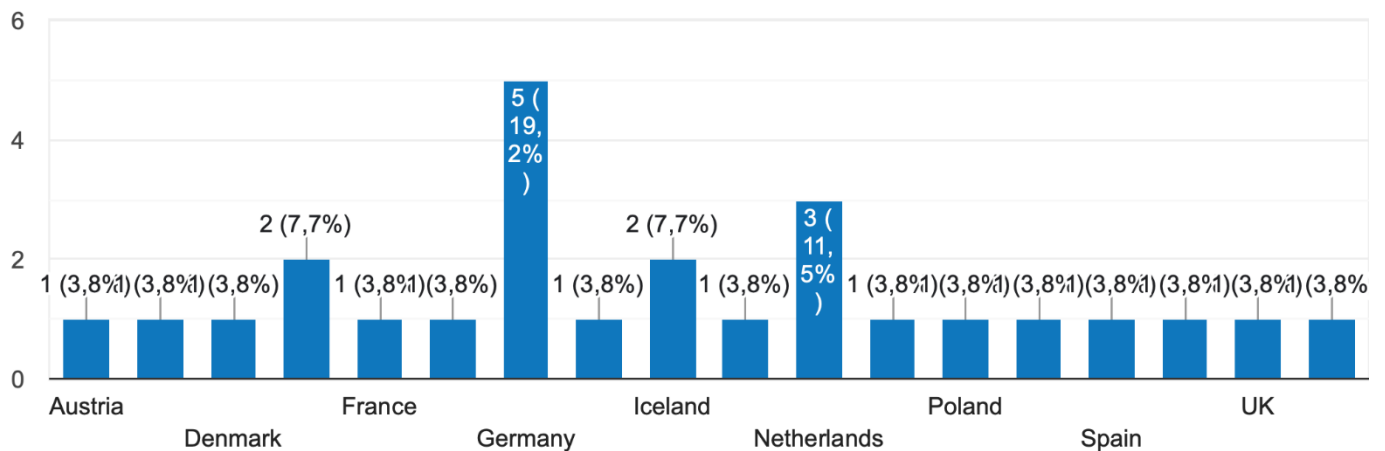
⁶ European Disability Forum (2024). [Manifesto on the Rights of Women with Disabilities](#).

- Understand the current challenges faced by women with hearing loss in Europe.
- Inform EFHOH’s membership projects and programs, ensuring they support hard of hearing women effectively.
- Make the specific barriers faced by hard of hearing women more visible.
- Explore violence against hard of hearing women.

Although we received only 26 responses from women across Europe, these responses provided a few valuable insights into the barriers hard of hearing women face. This report represents the first step in a long journey. EFHOH hopes that its members will continue to explore these barriers and the issue of violence, enabling women with hearing loss to advocate for themselves using evidence-based data and effective advocacy tools.

Overview of the respondents

The survey included 26 participants, all of whom are hard of hearing women, with ages ranging from 25 to nearly 70. Each respondent uses hearing aids or cochlear implants to assist with their hearing. The participants come from various countries across Europe, offering a diverse perspective on the challenges experienced by hard of hearing women. They represent a wide range of life stages and professional situations, with some currently employed, others studying, retired and actively looking for work. This provides valuable insights into the key issues faced by hard of hearing women across different cultural, socio-economic, and professional contexts.



Key Issues

- **Sweden:** *“Hearing loss is seen as an issue only affecting old people; outdated modes of communication (only phone calls) which can affect perceptions on the ability to work even if accommodations exist; hearing loss, in general, is often perceived as correlated with intelligence about our own body, energy levels, disability and abilities to live our lives how we want it to be. Also, less access to good knowledge will result in not knowing what we need from our governments to succeed, to stay healthy, to get the help needed, the aids needed.”*

Survey Question: *What do you think are the key issues for women and girls who are hard of hearing in Europe?*

Based on the responses, six key issues have been identified to highlight the main concerns and inequalities faced by hard of hearing women and girls in Europe throughout their lives.

Healthcare and Accessibility

- **Access to Facilities and Care:** The need for good facilities and free hearing care, including hearing aids, is paramount.
- **Long Waiting Times:** Participants report waiting a long time for audiological appointments, indicating a critical need for more timely services.

Employment and Economic Independence

- **Discrimination in Employment:** Limited job opportunities, career advancement barriers, and a significant gender pay gap, with women earning less than men for the same work.
- **Impact of Motherhood:** Pregnant women or mothers face job insecurity and are often not promoted.
- **Workplace Accessibility:** Inadequate support systems and outdated communication methods limit employment opportunities.

Education

- **Educational Barriers:** Participants highlight insufficient accessibility in the educational system, limited resources for learning languages, and lack of disability awareness.

- **Need for Inclusive Policies:** Participants urge for policies that ensure barrier-free access and support for hard of hearing students.

Violence and Abuse

- **Domestic Violence:** Communication barriers make it difficult to seek help in situations of domestic abuse.
- **Lack of Support Systems:** There is a need for better awareness and support systems to address abuse among hard of hearing women and girls.

Social and Political Participation

- **Low Visibility:** Hard of hearing women and girls often lack representation in political and social life.
- **Civic Engagement Barriers:** Many do not engage in civic or political movements due to a lack of support and awareness.

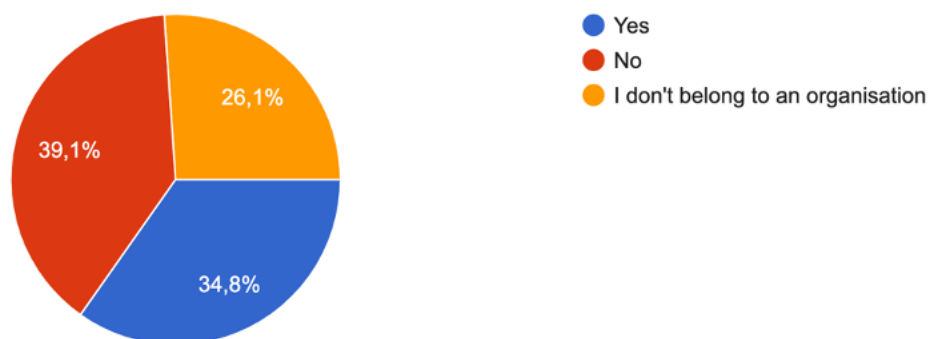
Mental Health and Support Systems

- **Mental Health Support:** Participants emphasized the need for psychological support and understanding of the mental health issues faced by hard of hearing women and girls.
- **Intersectional Oppression:** Institutions often overlook the interplay of gender and disability discrimination, leading to further disadvantages.

Civic and Political Participation

- **Germany:** *“Ensure representation of women with hearing loss in political and cultural life of the society.”*

Survey Question: Does your organization work on the issues of hard of hearing women and girls?



The graph highlights a concerning trend: limited engagement in such movements. This lack of involvement is largely attributed to insufficient support systems and a lack of awareness about opportunities for participation. Despite these barriers, some respondents are affiliated with organizations such as UH, Deaf Women in Czech, IFHOHYP, Chime, and SINOSZ, demonstrating the potential for active involvement when proper support is available. Others are advocating for the hard of hearing women’s community through public speaking, social media platforms, and participation in governmental meetings.

The data reveals a strong willingness among most respondents to contribute to EFHOH’s efforts on issues affecting hard of hearing women and girls. This indicates a significant potential for advocacy and activism within this community, emphasizing the need for EFHOH and similar organizations to develop inclusive strategies to support and mobilize these individuals.

Accessibility to Public and Healthcare Services

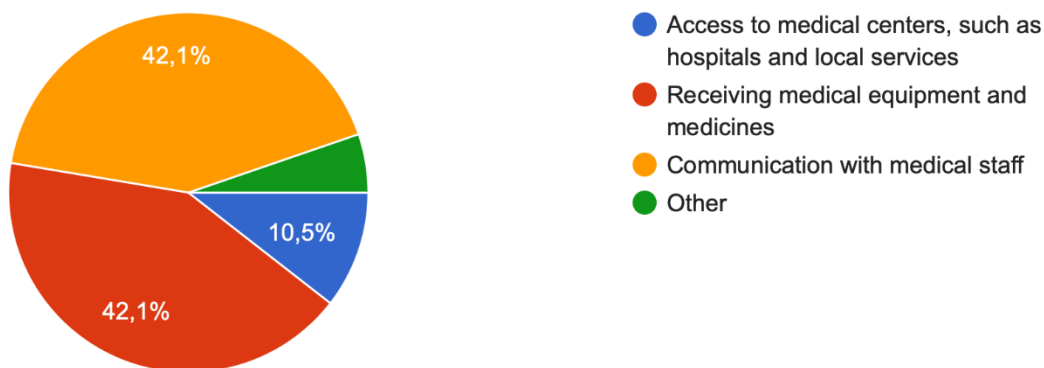
Significant challenges are faced by hard of hearing women when accessing medical services. Most respondents report needing regular healthcare due to hearing loss, yet barriers persist across multiple areas. A common concern is the **long waiting times** for audiological services. Extended waiting periods disproportionately affect hard of hearing women, who often face additional caregiving responsibilities, especially as many are mothers or primary caregivers. The delay in receiving necessary treatments exacerbates existing gender inequalities, as women may experience stress from the lack of timely care, which hinders their ability to manage both personal and professional responsibilities. This situation emphasizes the urgent need for **systemic reforms** to enhance the **efficiency** and **availability** of audiological services.

Denmark: *"In general, there are no loops available, and even if there were, staff would not know how to use the system. At the same time, STT is not known. We are expected to HEAR as soon as we get audiological treatment."*

Additionally, the **lack of assistive technology** in healthcare settings further exacerbates these challenges. Many respondents noted the absence of essential tools such as **induction loops** and **real-time captioning systems** in medical facilities. The absence of these technologies not only highlights a **lack of infrastructure** but also a **gendered gap in accessibility**. Hard of hearing women often face unique challenges, such as navigating the healthcare system while balancing family and professional responsibilities, making it even more critical for healthcare settings to be fully accessible.

Furthermore, the **inadequate training of staff** in using assistive devices significantly worsens the situation. Even when assistive devices like induction loops are available, staff often lack the training to operate them effectively, leading to missed opportunities for better communication and care.

Survey Question: *If you regularly use healthcare services because of your hearing loss, do you have concerns related to the following option?*

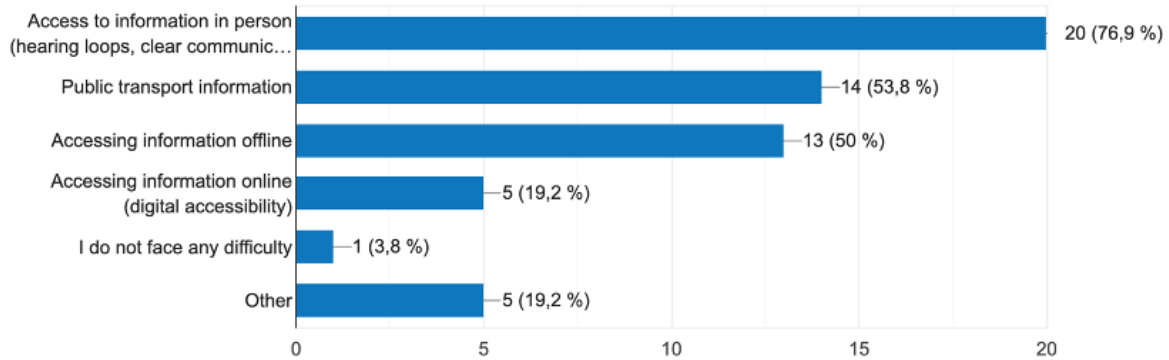


Beyond healthcare facilities, respondents face barriers in everyday communication.

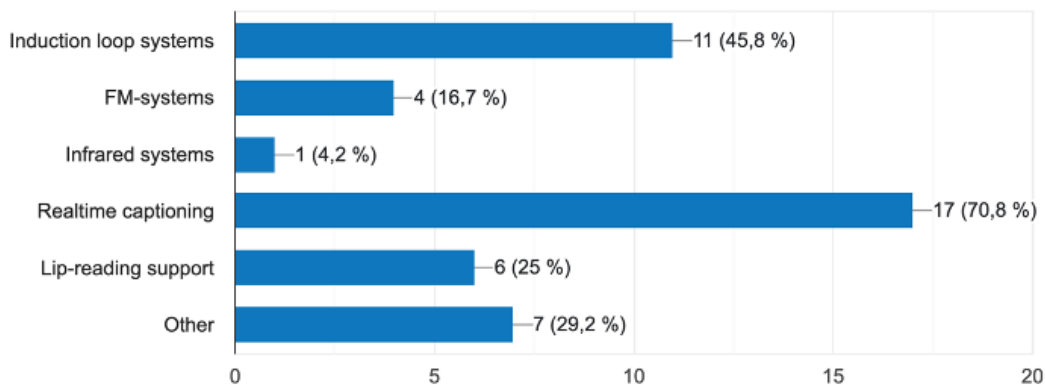
Hungary: *"In personal conversations, meetings, lectures, if I don't hear something, the information is lost. If there are too many things to pay attention to, I can't read lips as well."*

This is highlighted by the responses to two survey questions focusing on **communication challenges** in public and professional settings.

Survey Question: *Regarding accessibility, do you face difficulties in any of the below options?*



Survey Question: *In public services, what accessibility support do you lack most of all?*



The graphs and responses collectively identify several major issues:

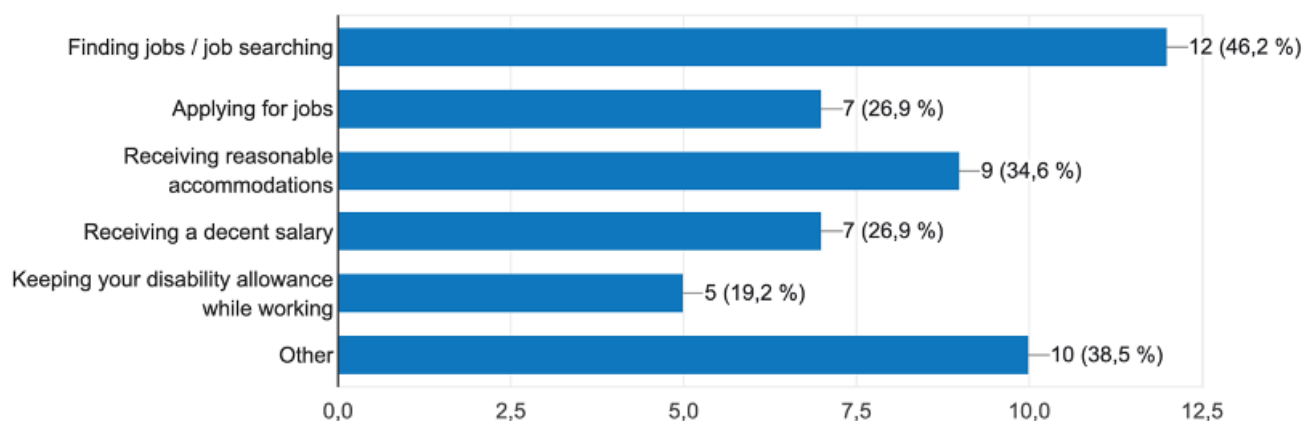
- **High Costs:** The expense of hearing aids and related services remains a significant financial burden.
- **Lack of Awareness:** Many staff and service providers lack understanding of how to effectively communicate with hard of hearing individuals.
- **Inadequate Support Systems:** The absence of induction loops, real-time captioning, and consistent audiological care is a widespread concern.
- **Noise Pollution:** Ambient noise in public spaces and workplaces further hinders effective communication.

Employment

Employment challenges for hard of hearing women are shaped not only by their disability but also by the intersection of gender-based inequalities. Nearly half of respondents reported difficulties in finding jobs or

navigating the job search process, which may be exacerbated by employer biases against both women and people with disabilities. Women with hearing loss often face double discrimination, as traditional gender roles and stereotypes can intersect with ableist attitudes regarding the impact of hearing loss on communication barriers, limiting their employment opportunities.

Survey Question: *Based on your experience in employment, did you find any of the options below challenging?*



The fact that 34.6% of respondents struggled to receive reasonable accommodations underlines how workplaces often fail to prioritize accessibility for women with disabilities. This is particularly problematic in sectors where women are already underrepresented or in positions where they face additional stigma about disability. Similarly, 26.9% of respondents reported challenges in applying for jobs and receiving a decent salary, resulting in wage disparities that not only affect women generally but are intensified for those with disabilities. The struggle of 19.2% to retain disability allowances while working also disproportionately impacts women, who are more likely to take on caregiving responsibilities alongside financial insecurity. These findings highlight the need for an intersectional approach to employment policies, addressing both gender and disability discrimination while fostering inclusive practices to ensure that hard of hearing women can fully participate in and benefit from the labor market. The survey results show a lack of improvement since the publication of the [Deafened People experience in Europe in 2018](#), which also covered questions on employment.

Hungary: *“Support the employment of women. Whether it rewards businesses for employing hearing impaired people; and the salary should be set, not less than others.”*

Denmark: *“I was bullied at work by colleague, who was to maintain the technical equipment including the loop system and he did not want to do it. Obviously it was his protest against head of department, but the result was, he took it out on me and I was not able to follow staff meetings, although all other colleagues used the microphones available. It was really not a help to me to be a professional myself, being female and knowing about use of assistive listening systems. [...]It is like they provide us a service and we should just be thankful for that and at the same time [they] also claim we should be participating.”*

Violence

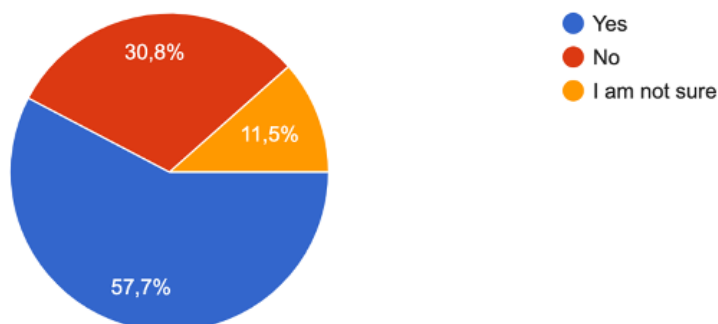
More than half of the respondents reported experiencing violence as hard of hearing women, with psychological violence, bullying, and physical violence being the most common forms.

Sweden: *“I would ask to analyse the data gap on the mental health of hard of hearing women and the violence or discrimination they face. Using the data I’d postulate for building a support system in the emergency situations.”*

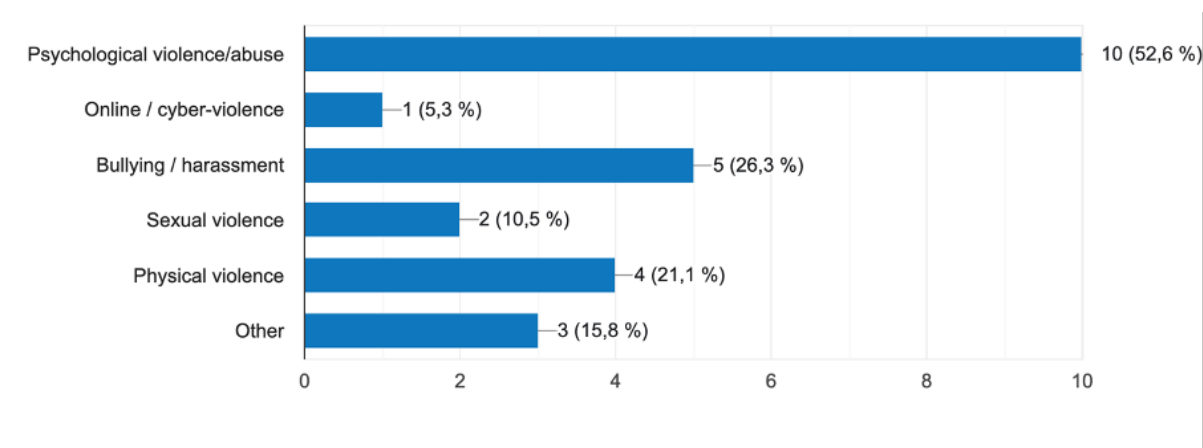
Poland: *“[There is] increased vulnerability to domestic violence, as communication barriers may make it difficult to seek help + lack of awareness and support systems for addressing abuse among hard of hearing women and girls.”*

A small portion of respondents was unsure if they had experienced violence, reflecting a lack of awareness, particularly regarding disability and hearing loss. Subtle forms of abuse, like psychological violence or discrimination, can be difficult to recognize, especially when featured by societal attitudes that undermine the experiences of women with hearing loss. This uncertainty highlights the need for raising more awareness and support to help identify and address such violence.

Survey Question: *Have you ever faced violence?*

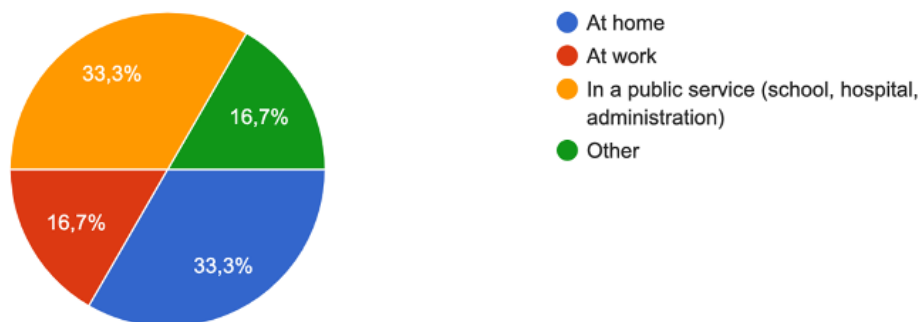


Survey Question: *If yes, what type of violence?*



These acts of violence often occur in environments such as the home, public services and workplace. The intersection of gender-based violence and disability discrimination is particularly evident in these spaces, where women with hearing loss are even at more risk due to communication barriers, lack of accessibility, and insufficient support systems.

Survey Question: *If yes, where did the violence take place?*



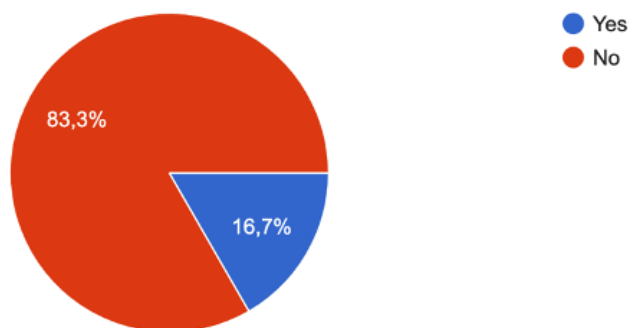
From a gender perspective, this intersection reveals the violence faced by hard of hearing women, who are not only marginalized due to their disability but also subjected to abuse due to gender-based power imbalances. Communication barriers often exacerbate abuse, making it difficult for women to seek help in emergency situations, especially to report violence or connect with services promptly. The lack of accessible support systems, as well as limited awareness among service providers, worsens the issue. In family contexts, stigma about disability or caregiving roles can lead to controlling behaviors or neglect, while public services often fail to accommodate the needs of hard of hearing women. The mental health impact

of this violence is significant, contributing to long-term trauma, emotional distress, and a low sense of safety.

Access to Legal System

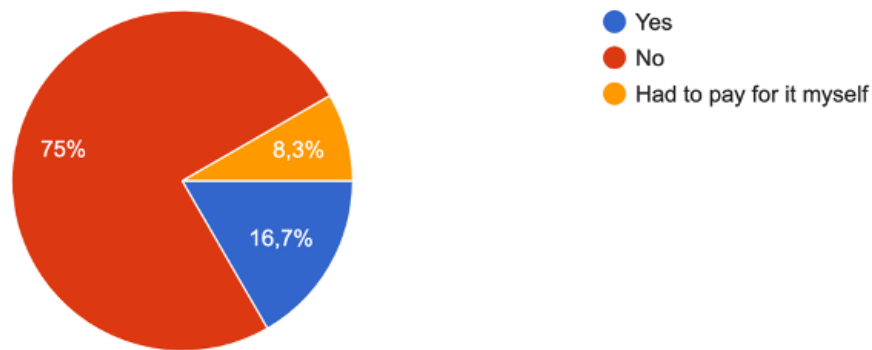
Almost all respondents who needed to attend judicial hearings reported that the hearings were not accessible to them, with no reasonable accommodations provided. This lack of access restricts their ability to defend their rights effectively.

Survey Question: *If you needed to attend judicial hearing (divorce, child services, court hearing as a victim), was the hearing accessible to you?*



The issue lies in an inaccessible judicial system, where hard of hearing women are excluded from meaningful participation, whether through the absence of accessible support services such as real-time speech-to-text options, or the inability to communicate effectively with legal professionals. Creating space for women with hearing loss is not enough, as such spaces must be genuinely accessible, allowing women to fully engage in legal processes, make informed decisions, and participate in important aspects of their lives. Without an accessible environment, hard of hearing women are not empowered to exercise their rights.

Survey Question: *Were you provided reasonable accommodation?*



While it is disappointing that 75% of respondents were not provided with reasonable accommodations based on their need for effective access to communication and information, it is encouraging that some were actually provided with support.

When the judicial system fails hard of hearing women and girls to provide them with effective access to justice proceedings, it also fails its obligations under UNCRPD Article 13, which clearly states:

“States Parties shall ensure effective access to justice for persons with disabilities on an equal basis with others, including through the provision of procedural and age-appropriate accommodations, in order to facilitate their effective role as direct and indirect participants, including as witnesses, in all legal proceedings, including at investigative and other preliminary stages”.

We call for a review of current policies in Member States, with regard to identifying potential gaps in policies related to reasonable accommodations for hard of hearing women such as speech-to-text professionals and assistive listening systems in courts.

Desired Change and Improvement in the Rights of Hard of Hearing Women and Girls

We asked the respondents to share with us their views on what needs to change for Hard of Hearing women and girls to feel valued and included in society. Their responses have demonstrated intersections of access to hearing care, communication support, changing attitudes, employment and social protection as demonstrated below.

Survey question: *If you could change the laws and policies, what would be the biggest change you would ask to improve the rights of women and girls with hearing loss?*

Free Hearing Care and Devices

- **Government-Funded Hearing Aids:** Full state subsidy for hearing aids to ensure equal access to quality hearing solutions.

Inclusive Education and Workplace Policies

- **Anti-Discrimination Laws:** Strengthen laws to explicitly protect persons with disabilities and ensure reasonable accommodation at work.
- **Inclusive Education Policies:** Ensure educational accessibility and support for hard of hearing students.

Public Awareness and Training

- **Awareness Campaigns:** Develop campaigns to reduce stigma and raise awareness about the rights and needs of hard of hearing women and girls.
- **Professional Training:** Implement training programs for healthcare providers, educators, and employers.

Intersectional Approaches

- **Intersectional Policies:** Integrate policies that recognize the effects of gender and disability in resource allocation and support systems.

Improving Access

- **Reduce Waiting Times:** Easing appointment processes to ensure timely access to audiological care.

- **Comprehensive Hearing Aid Support:** Ensure health insurance companies cover suitable hearing aids without financial burdens on individuals.

Employment Support

- **Equal Pay Policies:** Ensure equal pay for women with disabilities and implement preferential employment policies to support their entry into the labor market.

Anonymous comment: *“Women with disabilities are among the most discriminated groups. It is important to support them both to ensure equity and inclusion for them (through policies and campaigns) and for their well-being (personal, psychological support) as well as the tolerance and acceptance of others (information and awareness raising for not affected people). If the latter ones are missing, these women will not be able to adequately use the benefits of structural improvements (for example, it doesn’t help to get perfect accessibility services at work if you face bullying from colleagues because of them)”.*

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, examining the connection between the challenges faced by women and girls who are hard of hearing in Europe and the broader societal responsibilities they hold is crucial. These individuals encounter significant obstacles, including limited healthcare access, employment discrimination, educational barriers, vulnerability to violence, and low visibility in social and political life. Particularly noteworthy is the role of mothers, who often bear the primary responsibility for their children's education and healthcare. Many mothers, who typically stay home to care for their children, face significant difficulties due to insufficient support and accommodations. For hard of hearing mothers, these challenges are exacerbated as they encounter additional barriers, making it even more demanding to effectively support their children and fulfill their dual roles as caregivers and providers.

As found out in the survey outcomes, hard of hearing women face also significant challenges due to communication barriers, a lack of accessible support systems, and insufficient data on their specific needs, particularly when it comes to reporting violence and responding to emergencies. Without an accessible environment, women with hearing loss are unable to fully exercise their rights and participate in society. To address these critical issues, it is essential to raise public awareness, implement comprehensive and inclusive policy changes, and adopt intersectional approaches. Coordinated efforts from governments,

healthcare providers, employers, and the broader community are essential to establishing an environment where hard of hearing women are supported, valued, and given equal opportunities.

Recommendations

- Ensure government subsidies for hearing aids and audiological care prioritize the unique needs of hard of hearing women, addressing their economic and caregiving responsibilities.
- Reduce waiting times for audiological services, as delays disproportionately affect women, particularly mothers, who face additional caregiving burdens.
- Strengthen anti-discrimination laws to eliminate the gender pay gap and ensure hard of hearing women have equal opportunities for career advancement.
- Employers should provide tailored workplace accommodations, considering the challenges faced by pregnant women and mothers with hearing loss.
- Promote inclusive education policies that support hard of hearing girls, ensuring equal access to resources and fostering their future career prospects.
- Raise awareness about hard of hearing from a gender perspective, and ensure accessible reporting mechanisms and support services.
- Create accessible shelters and legal assistance for hard of hearing women who experience domestic abuse, addressing both gender and hearing-related barriers, such as text-based communication and provision of speech-to-text and other forms of communication as required and provided by authorities.
- Encourage political engagement by providing platforms and resources addressing the needs of hard of hearing women, who often face dual discrimination.

- Promote the adoption of intersectional policies that address the compounded effects of gender and disability discrimination, ensuring that hard of hearing women receive targeted support.
- Encourage governments and NGOs to collect data on the experiences of hard of hearing women and girls, particularly on violence, employment, and healthcare, to inform policy decisions and resource allocation.