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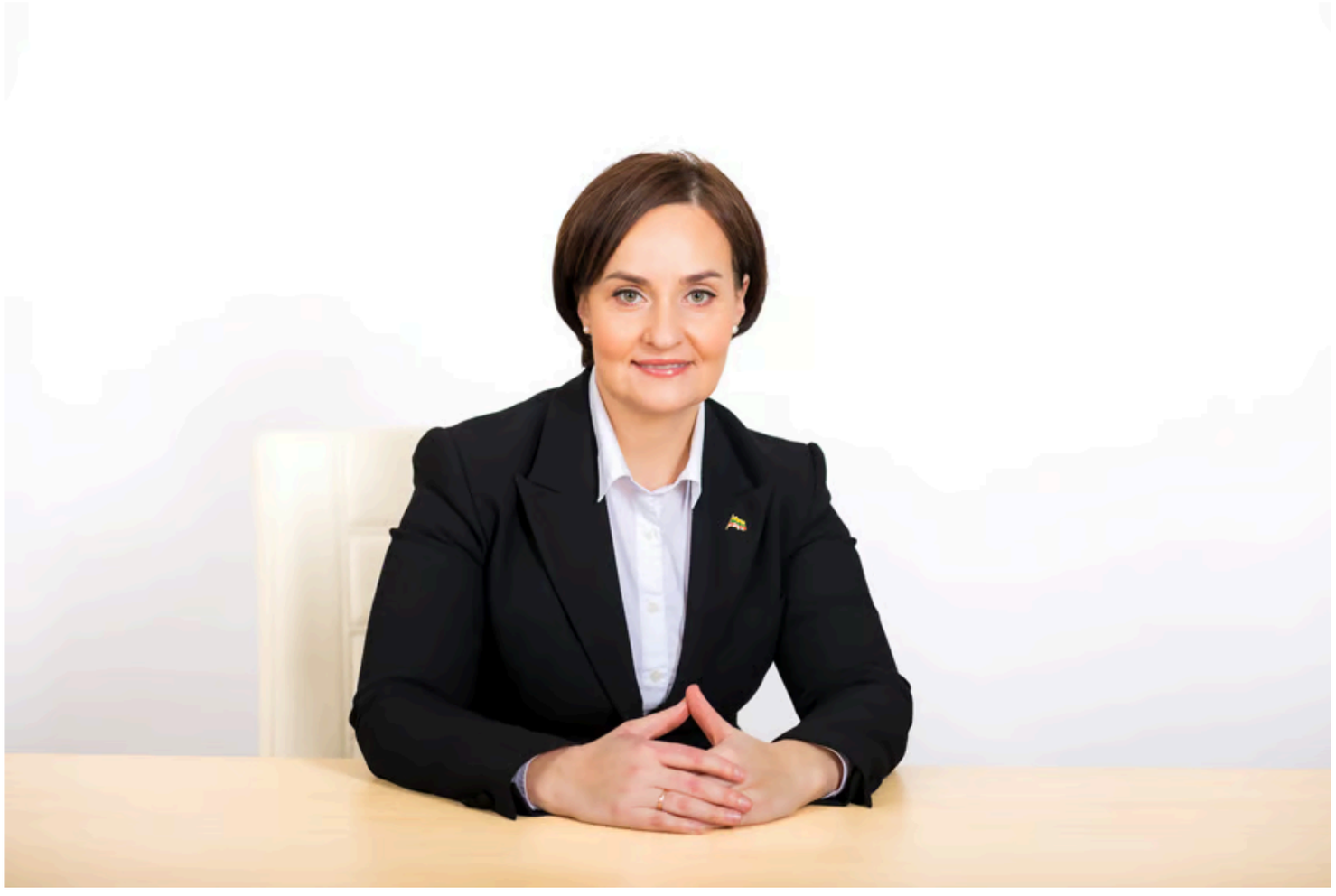
2025 SYNERGY conference charts the future of gender-based violence prevention in Europe

“In the current geopolitical context, our work is more crucial than ever”, said Rita Grigalienė, Lithuania’s Vice-Minister of Social Security and Labour.

BY SIMON GRAMVIK, SIG@FORSKNINGSRADET.NO PUBLISHED 12 FEB 2025



Rita Grigalienė, Lithuania’s Vice-Minister of Social Security and Labour. (Photo: Social Security and Labour)

“The international SYNERGY-conference was not just a celebration of the end of a program, but the beginning of a new chapter in our collective journey towards a safer, more equitable society”, Grigalienė emphasized.

As one of the 16 participating countries in the SYNERGY Network, Lithuania played a central role in organizing the event.

Key issues on the agenda included cyber violence, crime prevention, Roma inclusion, and sexual harassment.

The conference on January 20-21, titled “Working Together for a Europe Free from Violence”, marked the closing of the EEA and Norway Grants 2014–2021 programs addressing domestic and gender-based violence. The event brought together high-level political representatives from Norway, Poland, and Lithuania, who reaffirmed their commitment to tackling gender-based violence across Europe.

Read also: Combatting gender-based violence in Europe-together

Urgent need for protective measures

Discussions centered on coordinated policies, emerging challenges like cyber violence, and the need for stronger institutional responses.

“In the current geopolitical context, our work is more crucial than ever”, Grigalienė stressed, pointing to Russia's aggression in Ukraine as an exacerbating factor.

She highlighted the heightened risks of exploitation, abuse, and trafficking faced by displaced women and girls, emphasizing the urgency of comprehensive support systems and protective measures in times of conflict.

Watch the EEA and Norway Grants video from the SYNERGY conference in Brussels

Increase in cyber violence

A key theme at the conference was the increasing threat of cyber violence, which, experts say, is evolving at an alarming rate.



Anna Mazurczak, Director of the Department for Equal Treatment under the Chancellery of the Polish Prime Minister. (Photo: Department for Equal Treatment, Poland)

“Addressing cyber violence is a key obligation under the EU directive and the Istanbul Convention,” said Anna Mazurczak, Director of the Department for Equal Treatment under the Chancellery of the Polish Prime Minister.

She noted that while Polish legislation has formally expanded the definition of domestic violence to include cyber violence, the country still lacks infrastructure and professional training to effectively combat these threats.

Read: Calls for a holistic approach to combating digital violence

Sexual harassment is on the rise

Despite progress in legislation, cases of sexual harassment continue to rise, Mazurczak emphasized.

“While civil society organizations have successfully raised awareness among women about what constitutes harassment, many employers remain unaware or unresponsive," said Mazurczak.

She pointed to a growing number of high-profile cases in media, cultural institutions, healthcare, and the military. Yet, many employers, labor inspectors, and law enforcement officials fail to recognize or take action against such violations.

Looking ahead, Mazurczak called for stronger institutional accountability and more robust responses:

“We must ensure that those responsible for responding to sexual harassment—employers, labor inspectors, and law enforcement—are adequately trained and held accountable. Criminalizing sexual harassment should also be considered as a next step," Mazurczak concludes.

We need gender-responsive policing

The conference provided a platform to discuss good practices and for policymakers, law enforcement officials, civil society representatives, and researchers to exchange experiences on tackling gender-based violence.



Eygló Harðardóttir, Lead on Crime Prevention at the Office of the National Commissioner of Icelandic Police. (Photo: Ásta Kristjáns)

“No country has yet eliminated gender-based violence,” said Eygló Harðardóttir, Lead on Crime Prevention at the Office of the National Commissioner of Icelandic Police. Delivering a keynote on crime prevention and investigation, she emphasized the importance of cross-sector cooperation and the need for continuous exchange of best practices.

Harðardóttir described measures introduced in Iceland to enhance police responses to domestic and sexual violence, such as:

- A victim-centered approach ensuring early intervention and support.
- Immediate on-site investigations of domestic violence cases rather than delayed follow-ups.
- Multi-agency cooperation, where police, social services, and other stakeholders conduct coordinated risk assessments to prevent reoffending.

“Our work in gender-based violence prevention must emphasize gender-responsive policing to be truly effective,” Harðardóttir stresses afterwards in an e-mail.

We need coordinated health response

Another topic was the role of the health sector in preventing and responding to sexual violence.



Melanie Hyde, WHO European Office for Investment for Health and Development. (Photo: Jasmin Sleeman)

“The health sector plays a critical role in combatting sexual violence”, said Melanie Hyde, WHO European Office for Investment for Health and Development.

She emphasized that effective prevention and response require a well-coordinated, multisectoral effort across health, justice, and social services.

Read: Strengthening health sector response to violence against women

Roma women must be included

Senada Sali, Legal Director at the European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC), underscored the urgent need to address gender-based violence against Roma women.



Senada Sali, Legal Director at the European Roma Rights Centre. (Photo: Layla Aerts)

“Gender-based violence is not a ‘Roma problem’—it is a societal issue,” Sali said. “Yet, Roma women face additional barriers when seeking safety, justice, and support, from police brutality to discrimination in shelters.”

She highlighted alarming cases, including forced sterilization, police violence, and the exclusion of Roma women from support services. True progress, she argued, requires that Roma women are not only protected but also included as decision-makers in policies and programs designed to support them.

“Roma women must not be seen only as beneficiaries of programs but as co-creators of solutions,” Sali emphasized. “Only by including them in every phase of programming—design, planning, implementation, and decision-making—can we achieve sustainable outcomes.”

Read: A new handbook to include Roma women: “Nothing about us, without us”

"The network has been a success"

“The momentum we have built through SYNERGY is striking”, writes Jenna Shearer Demir, Programme Advisor at the Council of Europe’s Gender Equality Division, in a statement following

the conference.



Jenna Shearer Demir, Programme Advisor at the Council of Europe's Gender Equality Division. (Photo: Private)

"Since 2018, we have created a platform where we can share honestly about what works and what doesn't in tackling gender-based violence against women", she adds.

In her closing remarks at the conference, Hilde Knotten, Lead Analyst at the Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security, reflected on the impact of the SYNERGY network.

"I think it is fair to say that the SYNERGY network has been a success", she said.



Hilde Knotten, Lead Analyst at the Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security. (Photo: Private)

As a donor program partner under the EEA and Norway Grants, the Norwegian Ministry of Justice has been responsible for coordinating the network. Knotten attributed the success of the initiative primarily to the dedication and commitment of both EEA beneficiary countries and donor countries' program and project partners.

Looking ahead, she stated that Norway remains committed to further developing the network, with a focus on:

- Expanding inter-ministerial cooperation and policy development.
- Strengthening civil society and governance collaboration.
- Enhancing interdisciplinary efforts to provide integrated, user-friendly services for victims and promote non-violent behaviors.

Other priorities include closing gaps in national policy implementation, improving research and data collection, and establishing independent mechanisms for monitoring progress.

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