

SOCIETY

Gender-based violence in the time of Covid-19: calls to the 1522 helpline

CALLS TO 1522 UP BY 73% FROM 1 MARCH TO 16 APRIL

During the lockdown there were 5,031 valid calls to 1522, +73% over the same period in 2019. A total of 2,013 victims asked for help (+59%). The increase in calls is not necessarily attributable to more violence; it could be the effect of awareness campaigns that made women feel less alone

30.7% SEEKED HELP FOR VIOLENCE AND STALKING

1,543 calls were requests for help for violence suffered, but many women also called to get information on the 1522 service (28.3%) or to reveal problem situations other than violence (17.1%).

REPORTS OF ABUSE DECREASED BETWEEN 1 AND 22 MARCH

Reports of family abuse decreased by 43.6% and female homicides went down by 33.5%, and among these reports of women killed by their partner dropped by 83.3%. A sufficient reading of this phenomenon will require a longer reference period.

6 OUT OF 10 CALLS WERE MADE BETWEEN 9:00 AND 17:00

In 60.6% of cases, calls came in between 9:00 and 17:00; calls at night and in the early morning, usually a smaller number, reached 17.5% during the lockdown.

INCREASED REQUESTS, ESPECIALLY IN LAZIO AND TOSCANA

In Lazio, the incidence rate grew from 6.8 in 2019 to 12.4 in the same period of 2020; in Toscana, the rate went from 4.8 to 8.5 per 100,000 residents. Compared to the same period in 2019, more victims also called from Sardegna and Umbria.

ONE OUT OF 2 VICTIMS WERE AFRAID FOR HER SAFETY, AND 2 OUT OF 3 WERE CASES OF WITNESSED VIOLENCE

45.3% of victims feared for their safety or their lives, 72.8% did not report the crime suffered. In 93.4% of cases, violence occurred in the home, and 64.1% reported also witnessed violence.

Calls to the toll-free helpline against violence on the increase

With the social distancing measures and the instructions to stay at home provided in the Prime Ministerial Decree no. 18 of 8 March 2020, the risk of intimate partner violence might have risen, as shown by all international sources that have contributed on this issue¹. In Italy, there was a sharp increase in the number of telephone calls to 1522, the toll-free number provided by the Department for equal opportunities of the Presidency of the Council² to support and help victims of gender-based violence and stalking (in line with the definitions of the Istanbul Convention).

Compared with the period 1 March - 16 April of the previous year, requests for help registered a marked increase, although it is not possible to determine whether this actually corresponded to a rise in violence against women. This upsurge has certainly been influenced by the intensification of information campaigns on the subject, in that they raised women's awareness of the need to get free from pressing and cogent violence, and strengthened their ability to use tools for seeking help.

Reports of abuse and homicides dropped

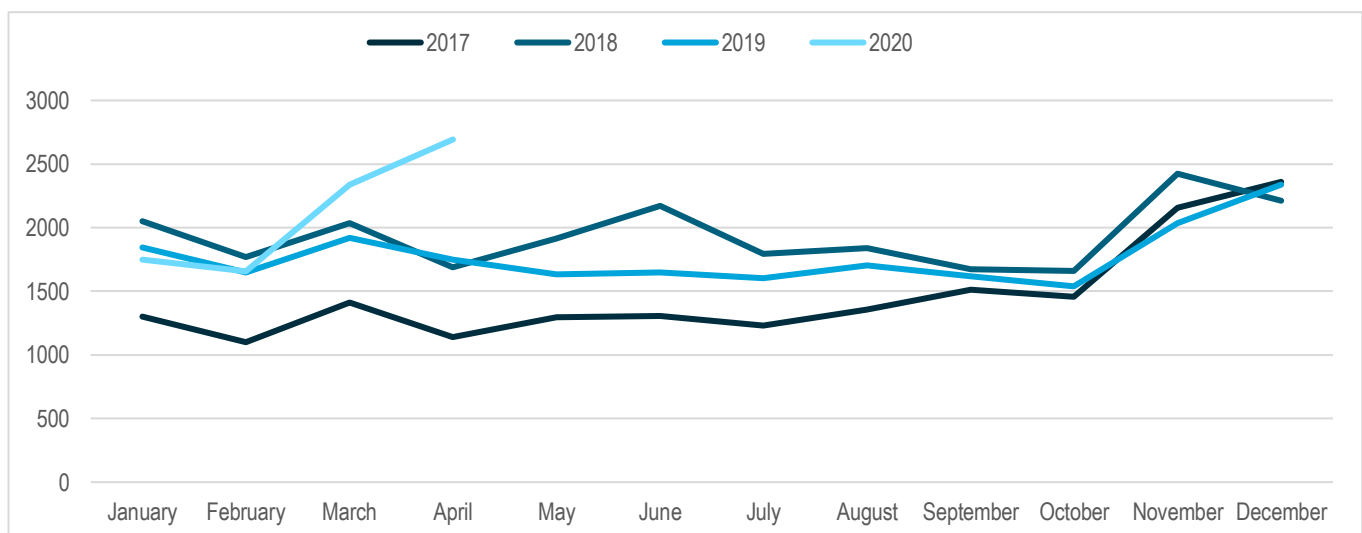
Reports received by the Police forces between 1 and 22 March 2020 for maltreatments, injuries and battery dropped compared to the same period in 2019. Specifically, reports of domestic maltreatments decreased by 43.6% and female homicides went down by 33.5%, meaning an 83.3% drop in reports of women killed by their partner. The reference period is too short to be able to make an overall assessment of the reasons behind the drop in reports and female homicides.

A phone call, especially a message, to ask for help

The trend of calls over the years, although strongly influenced by the effectiveness of awareness campaigns, contains significant numbers. When subtracting calls made by mistake, as a joke or to cause annoyance (referred to as 'nuisance calls') from the total number, the total of 'valid' calls (see Glossary) per year changed from 17,616 in 2017 to 21,290 in 2019. The growth in November and December should be interpreted in the light of increased awareness due to the International Day for the elimination of violence against women celebrated on 25 November.

The toll-free 1522 number seems to have been a very helpful support for survivors of violence in the lockdown period. The growth in valid calls was not comparable to the trend recorded in the previous years, including due to an increase in TV campaigns, launched on the web and relaunched by social media, often with the help of show business testimonials (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1. TREND IN VALID CALLS. 2017 - 16 April 2020 Period. Absolute values



Source: 1522 dataset, Equal opportunities department (President of the Council of Ministers)

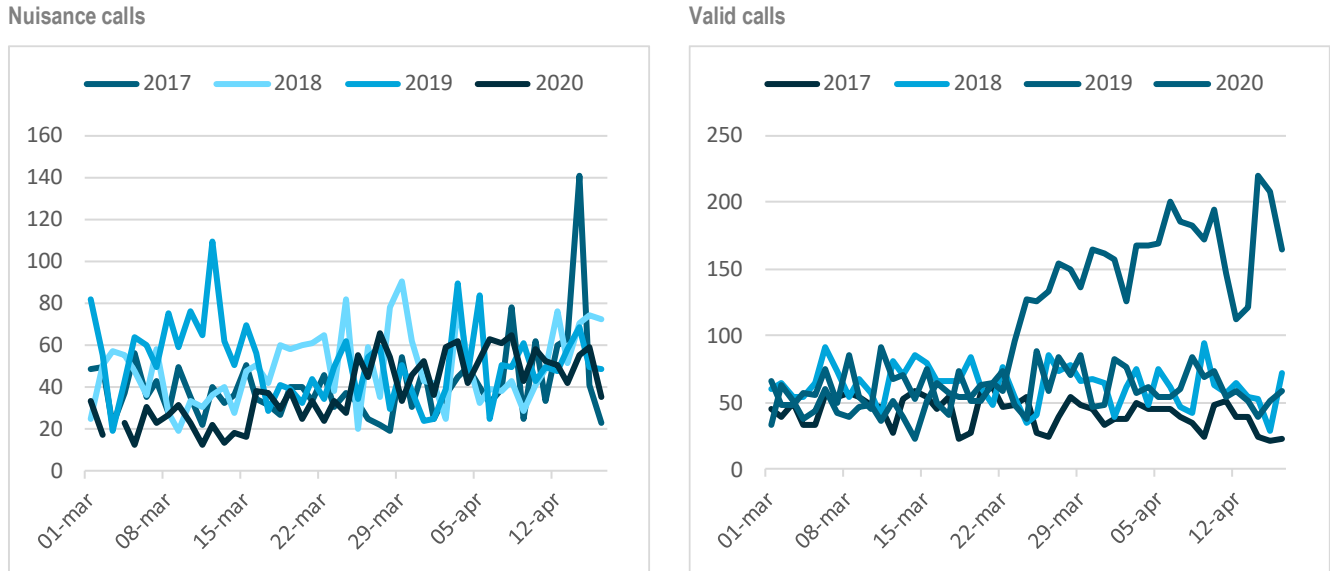
¹WHO - World Health Organization, COVID-19 and violence against women, 25 March 2020. UN WOMEN, COVID-19 and Ending Violence Against Women and Girls, <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/issue-brief-Covid-19-and-ending-violence-against-women-and-girls-en.pdf?la=en&vs=5006>

² As part of the Istat Agreement of 21 March 2017 aimed at creating an integrated collection and processing system for data on gender-based violence included in the National plan on sexual and gender-based violence, the Equal opportunities department provides Istat with the 1522 data to be processed and released.

As of 22 March, the increase in calls to 1522 was exponential, except for the structural decline in phone calls over the week-end. Requests for help soared, but calls made to harass or disparage the operators' activities or calls by mistake remained stable (a total of 1,788 from 1 March to 16 April 2020, versus 2,478 in the same period of 2019).

FIGURE 2. TREND IN PHONE CALLS DURING THE 1 MARCH-16 APRIL 2020 PERIOD.

Reference period 2017-2020. Absolute values.



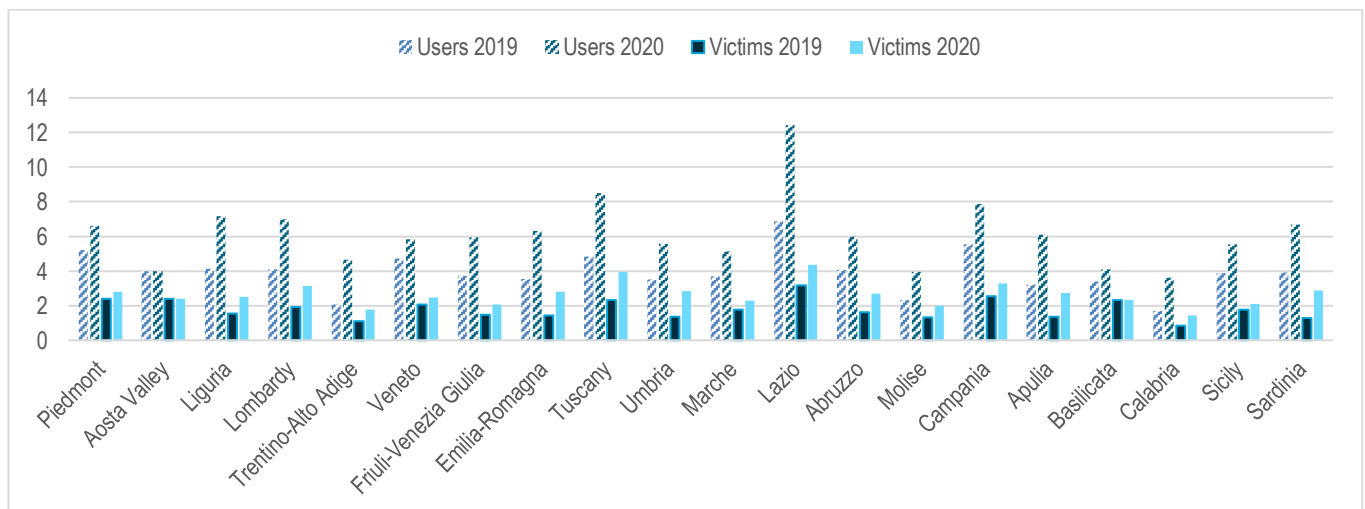
Source: 1522 dataset, Equal opportunities department (President of the Council of Ministers)

Calls to 1522 went up especially in Lazio and Toscana

Still considering the 1 March-16 April 2020 period, the incidence of calls to 1522 on the resident population showed an increase in valid calls in Lazio and Toscana from 6.8 per 100,000 residents in 2019 to 12.4 and from 4.8 to 8.5 per 100,000 residents, respectively. They were followed by Piemonte (from 5.2 to 6.6 per 100,000 residents), Liguria (from 4.1 to 7.2) and Lombardia (from 4.1 to 6.9).

In the Southern regions as well, the regional rate grew significantly: with reference to its users, in Puglia it went from 3.2 to 6.0, and in Sardegna from 3.9 to 6.6; with reference to the number of victims, the highest increases in calls were in Sardegna, Toscana, Umbria, Emilia Romagna, Lombardia and Lazio.

FIGURE 3. DISTRIBUTION OF USERS AND VICTIMS BY REGION. Reference period 1 March-16 April 2019-2020 (Rates of usage per 100,000 residents). Absolute values.



Source: 1522 dataset, Equal opportunities department (President of the Council of Ministers)

Regarding the channels used by victims to contact 1522, the best known are the internet and television, the remainder being friends, relatives and public offices. Nevertheless, web searches, which had registered a strongly growing trend starting from 2013, were overtaken by television during the period analysed. Data show that 45% of users learned about the helpline from TV (up from 25.3% in 2019), while 38.6% found it on the web (down from 45.9% in 2019). This was due to the significant campaign run on television.

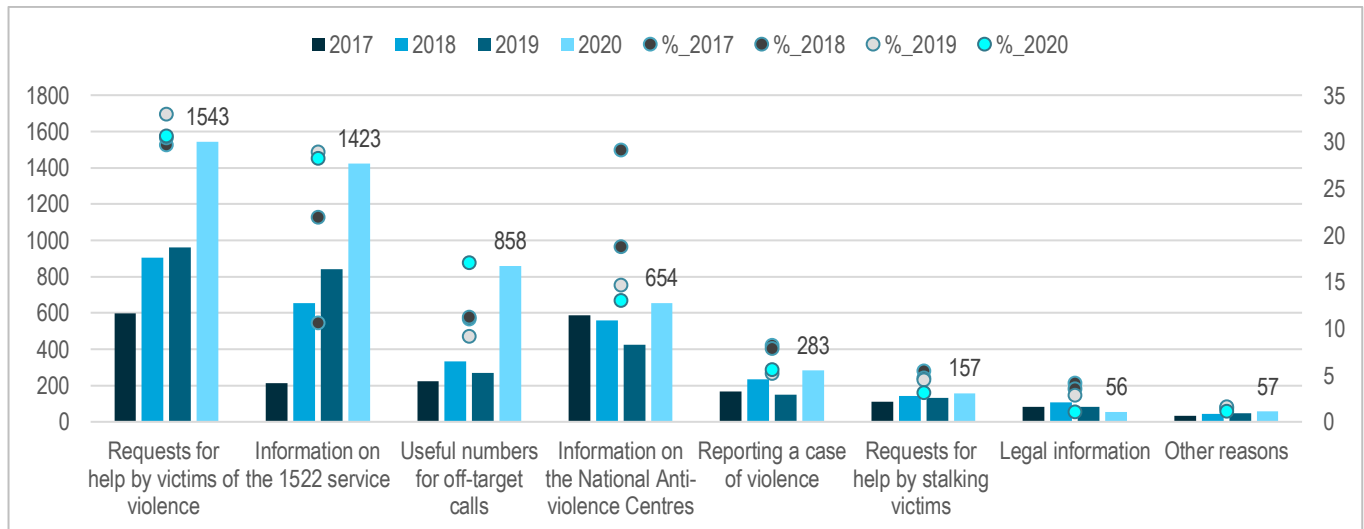
Calls to 1522: in 4 out of 10 cases, calls reported violence and stalking

People called 1522 to ask for help in cases of violence and/or stalking, to report cases of violence and emergencies (2,013 calls, or 40% of valid calls from 1 March to 16 April 2020), to ask for information about the service (1,423, or 28.3%) and to get information on anti-violence centres (654, or 13%). Many people (17.1%) also used the service to request for social or psychological assistance (858 cases).

The anti-violence helpline was also called by people who did not find a suitable response to the various requests for support. This type of call grew proportionally more in the period 1 March-16 April 2020 than in previous years (+7.8 percentage points), probably as a result of the same TV campaign.

In 60.6% of cases, calls to 1522 came in between 9:00 and 17:00; those received at night or early in the morning, usually a much lower number, increased during the lockdown period compared to the same period of the previous year (calls between 21:00 and 5:00 increased by 7.4% over the same period in 2019).

FIGURE 4. PRIMARY REASONS FOR CALLING 1522. Reference period 1 March - 16 April 2013-2020. Absolute values and percentages



Source: 1522 dataset, Equal opportunities department (President of the Council of Ministers)

Many requests for help for the caller or others in trouble, but no reports

Over time, the toll-free helpline proved to be helpful for both victims and other users, like operators and services, who called for advice and information, or networks of relatives and friends who used this channel to support victims.

From 1 March to 16 April 2020, anti-violence centres (25 cases against 7 in the previous period) and the Law Enforcement (34 calls against 30 in the previous period) used the 1522 helpline more than in the same period of 2019. Victims, 40% of callers, were women in 97% of cases (a constant figure over time) of different age groups and mostly married, a sign that calls for help arose from some kind of intimate partner violence.

Based on what victims told the 1522 operators, it emerged that most of them did not report to the Police the violence they suffered because it mostly occurred within the family. The rate of survivors making reports dropped from 74.8% (947 cases) in the 1 March-16 April period of 2019 to 72.8% (1,466) in the same period this year.

The reasons for not filing a report included the negative consequences that could arise within the family (21.6%), general fear (13.4%), fear of the offender's reaction (10.9%), uncertainty about the future (6.0%), lack of trust in the police forces or these latter advising against reporting (3.3%). Among the survivors, 2.8% withdrew the report and more than one in three (40.4%) returned to the abuser.

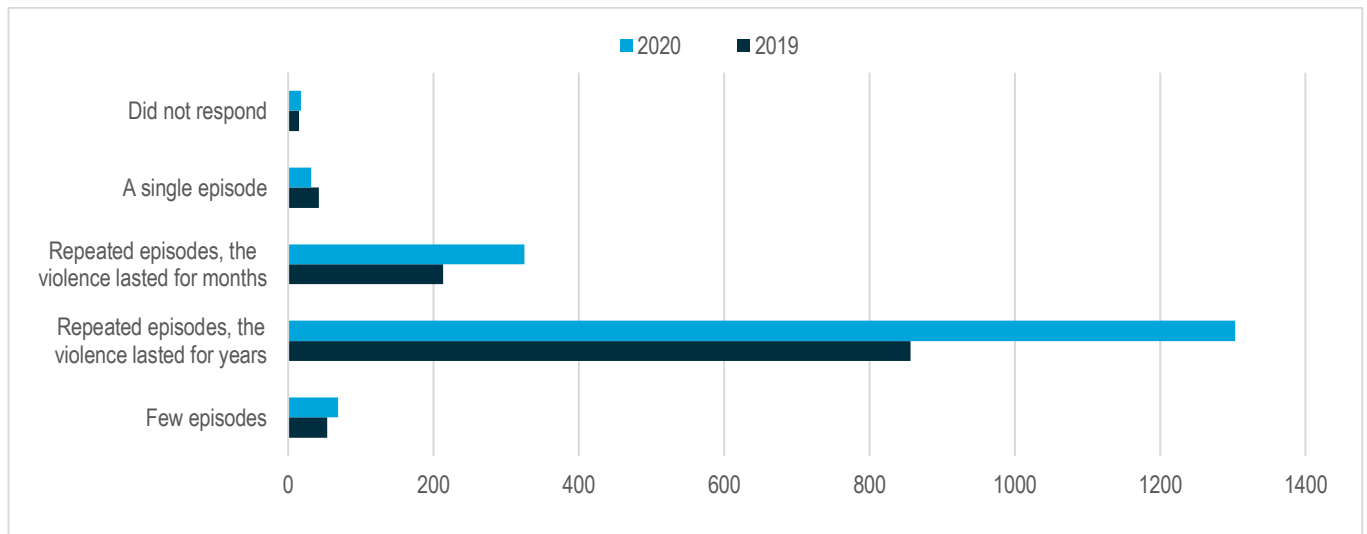
Violence mostly occurs in the home and often minors witness it

Descriptions by people calling the 1522 highlighted the danger of domestic violence, as it emerged that the home is one of the places where violence occurs most often: 93.4% of cases in 2020. In most cases, violence appeared to be not a sporadic episode, but rather a repeated behaviour: 74.6% admitted that violence had lasted for years (72.6% during the same period in 2019), and 18.6% that it had lasted for months.

Those who made it to the end of the phone calls confessed to living in a state of anxiety: 45.3% say they were afraid of dying or feared for their safety. In the period 1 March-16 April 2020, the percentage of people experiencing this state of mind increased by 5.4 percentage points over the same period of 2019 (39.9%).

56% of the requests for help came from victims with children, and 33.7% from victims with minor children. 64.1% of the victims with children (722 people) reported cases of violence witnessed by minors and/or cases of violence suffered by minors.

FIGURE 5. DURATION AND FREQUENCY OF VIOLENCE SUFFERED BY VICTIMS. Reference period 1 March - 16 April 2019-2020



Source: 1522 dataset, Equal opportunities department (President of the Council of Ministers)

Violence reported to the helpline was mostly of a physical and psychological nature, a constant feature over the years. During the reference period, reports of physical violence rose by about 10 percentage points, from 43.4% to 52.7%; psychological violence rose by about 5 points, from 37.9% to 43.2%.

Glossary

1522: toll-free helpline for gender-based violence and stalking. All helpline operators are women. They can be contacted by phone calls or by using the 1522 mobile app for messages and chat.

Anti-violence centres: provide immediate, short and long-term specialist support services for women survivors of violence. All services are free of charge. Immediate, round-the-clock access to safe accommodation for women and their children is also ensured by anti-violence centres, a number of which therefore further qualify as shelters. The 2014 State-Regions Agreement defines the minimum requirements for accessing state funding. Under the terms of this agreement, public local entities and non-governmental organisations may set up anti-violence centres and shelters.

Nuisance calls: the total calls to 1522 made with the intention of causing problems, such as jokes, annoyance, harass, disparagement and wrong numbers.

Valid calls: the total calls made by users and/or victims for reasons appropriate to the service provided by 1522. 'Reasons appropriate to the service' means: (a) Information on National Anti-Violence Centres, (b) Information on the 1522 service, (c) Violence victim request for help; (d) Reporting a case of violence, (e) Numbers needed for making non-target phone calls (f) Emergency; (g) Legal information, (h) Stalking victim request for help, (i) International call after hours, (l) Request for help with discrimination; (m) Information for professionals on the procedures to follow with cases of violence; (n) Reporting a problem with public/private services, (o) Legal liability of the operators of public services; (p) Reports in the Media

Victims: people who called 1522 to ask for help for themselves and suffered violence in one of its various forms

Users: people who called 1522 to ask for help for themselves or others.

Violence witnessed: violence witnessed by a minor

Methodological note

1522 is the toll-free number made available by the Equal opportunities department - President of the Council of Ministers, to support and help victims of gender-based violence and stalking, in line with the definitions in the Istanbul Convention³. It is free, it guarantees anonymity and covers different forms of violence 24 hours a day and in 4 languages aside from Italian (English, French, Arabic and Spanish). This helpline provides first-responder information in case of emergency or helpful advice on services and anti-violence centres active in the area that victims of violence or other users may contact. The database of services that can be used is updated constantly by the Regional Administrations and by Associations operating in the area: at the time that a new centre, service or counter begins operations, it is provided complete instructions about addresses and ways to perform services that allow the 1522 operators to provide prompt and timely updates.

The information provided during the phone calls are recorded in a computerised platform. There is a form to be filled in by 1522 operators while the caller is speaking. The data is available starting in January 2013. The analysis of the phenomenon of violence and stalking arising from examination of the 1522 data, therefore, provides a cross-section useful in understanding the dynamics and characteristics, which correspond surprisingly well with the profile already revealed by the sample surveys conducted by Istat on the same subject.

From 2013 to 16 April 2020⁴, the toll-free number provided support to 72,722 victims and provided consulting and information to social/healthcare operators, law enforcement, family members and friends of the victims (165,424 users). Nevertheless, a high rate of inappropriate calls should not be forgotten, such as jokes, calls from harassers and wrong numbers, which constitute 45.4% of the total (a percentage that remains constant over the years). Jokes and nuisances (for a total of 114,898 calls) are indicative of a lack of sensitivity to the subject, providing a measurement of the intolerance towards the subject of gender-based violence.

To fully understand the data reported, the standardisation process used on the database should be made clear. The data have been made comparable among the various years, as varying and inconsistent response methods have been used in different years. This normalisation work was done above all to make the data collected usable and they are available in the warehouse of statistics, which can be accessed at I.Stat 'violence against women'. <http://dati-violenzadonne.istat.it>

³The telephone support service for victims of violence is included in the Istanbul Convention, which, in article 24 states that governments 'take the necessary legislative or other measures to set up state-wide round-the-clock (24/7) telephone helplines free of charge to provide advice to callers, or with due regard for their anonymity, in relation to all forms of violence covered by the scope of this Convention'.

⁴ The toll-free number has been in operation since 2006, and data for processing is available back to 2013.

The complete set of information on the subject of gender-based violence is available on the web site <https://www.istat.it/en/violence-against-women>

Special attention should be paid to the numbers of cases: it is possible for the same person to call the toll-free number various times, either for themselves or for others. To date, for privacy and other reasons, the system does not check this information except by asking the person calling whether it is the first time that user has made use of the toll-free number.

Another consideration must be made in order to guide people in properly reading the information provided, which is closely related to this last point: the fact that the dataset consists of telephone calls involves a rather high and variable number of missing values. The phone calls are often interrupted before the end of the conversation, and in many cases those missing values cannot be ascribed to either a desire not to answer or an interruption of the call. This was taken into consideration in the data processing procedure, which does not include the missing values due to interrupted calls in the percentage calculations.