



Emotional, physical and sexual abuse The experiences of women and men

Commissioner: Institute for the equality of women and men

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Summary of the research report

The Institute for the Equality of Women and Men in 2008 commissioned the University of Liege and Ghent University, in collaboration with a sociologist specialising in the prevention of domestic violence, to conduct a survey of the Belgian population on abuse in different life spheres, with particular reference to partner abuse and the gender dimension. This survey was conducted in the spring of 2009 among a sample of 2,000 people aged 18 to 75, representing the population of the country's three regions. It was supplemented with information from professionals in the management of such abuse, within both the legal and the psycho-medico-social sectors, in order to formulate recommendations in terms of prevention and of support for victims of abuse, based on their interpretation of the study's results and their professional experiences.

The results of this survey are divided according to the spheres of life (couple, family, public area) and time references: on the one hand the experiences of the past 12 months for these three spheres, including witnessing abuse, and on the other, a broader view on the abuse experienced throughout adult life and on sexual abuse experienced before the age of 18. The abusive incidents themselves were primarily investigated by breaking them down into verbal, emotional, physical and sexual abuse.

Partner abuse experienced over the last 12 months

The survey also examined abuse experienced at the hands of the victim's current partner, whether or not they were living together, as well as that suffered at the hands of a former partner, with whom the victim might still be in touch. In this brief presentation, we will consider all such abuse.

Overall figures

Overall, and irrespective of the type, severity or frequency, 12.5% of the respondents reported having experienced at least one act of abuse by their (partner or former partner during the past 12 months (14.9% of women and 10.5% of men).

These incidents can be broken down by type as follows:

	Women	Men	Total
No abuse	85.3%	89.5%	87.5%
Emotional or verbal abuse	11.9%	9.7%	10.7%
Physical abuse (with or without emotional abuse)	1.9%	.8%	1.3%
Sexual abuse (with or without emotional or physical abuse)	.9%	.0%	.4%

Drawing inspiration from the classification developed by French researchers¹, we classified the abuse experienced as «moderate», «serious» and «very serious», taking into account both the intrinsic gravity of the acts, their frequency and possible accumulation. Beyond the typical physical abuse that corresponds to the «battered woman» concept, emotional abuse can have equally important consequences. However, analysis shows that «battered women» represent only one side of partner abuse whereas psychological pressures are more predominant: emotional or verbal abuse affects nearly 11% of all respondents, while physical assaults were reported by 1.3% of the respondents.

These figures are hardly comparable to those of other countries as they are sensitive to minute variations in the wording of questions or the method of investigation. The available French figures for female victims (2000) are slightly higher (2.7% physical abuse and 1.1% sexual abuse), while Italy (2006) showed rates that are almost identical to those in our survey. However, these variations fall short of what can be considered the precision of the survey given the methodological differences.

The percentage of victims of «serious» and «very serious» abuse among women is higher. The difference between men and women lies in the severity (combining frequency and type of abuse) of abuse experienced rather than in the percentage of victims.

	Women	Men	Total
No abuse	85.3%	89.5%	87.5%
Moderate abuse	4.7%	5.3%	5.0%
Serious abuse	5.0%	3.4%	4.2%
Very serious abuse	5.0%	1.7%	3.3%

When trying to characterise the victims, age does not appear to be an explanatory factor for women or men. Only younger women, between 18 and 25 years, reported more abuse (22.1%) than the other categories. When taking into account abuse by former partners, we see that women who lived with a partner over the last 12 months are less affected by abuse (12.3%) than separated women (18.2%) or women who have kept in touch with their former partner (24.6%). As for the duration of the situations of abuse, in 90.2% of the situations, the abuse lasts less than one year.

In terms of risk factors, the relatively small population of victims in the sample highlights statistically that the combination of a certain social isolation (dissatisfaction with regard to one's social network), of a partner with a history of violence outside the home and «deficient couple adjustment» (low score for the DAS² indicator which measures consensus, cohesion, satisfaction and affective expression within the relationship) maximises the risks of partner abuse. These analyses therefore give more weight to relational dynamics than to gender-specific effects.

Responses and the use of resources

An indirect indication of the underestimation of partner abuse is evident from the percentage of victims who, in the survey, discussed acts of abuse which they had not talked about with people close to them or with professionals at the time of the abuse. We note that women confide much more than men (64.8% against 39.2%). Partner abuse is the most concealed (compared with abuse suffered at the hands of a former partner); the figures are virtually the same, whether the victim is married or not. Younger victims (18-24 years) stand out sharply from the other age categories; a percentage of 82.9% discussed this abuse with someone while the average is around 57%.

¹ Jaspard M., E. Brown, S. Condon et D. Fougeyrollas (2003). *Les violences envers les femmes en France, une enquête nationale*, Paris: La documentation française.

² Antoine P., V. Christophe et J.-L. Nandrino (2008). « Echelle d'ajustement dyadique : Intérêts cliniques d'une révision et validation d'une version abrégée », *L'Encéphale* 34 (1), pp 38-46.

Overall, victims confide more in Flanders than in Wallonia. This difference stems mainly from a higher mobilization of the informal sphere (family, friend(s), ...) in Flanders. The informal sphere is by far the most used by both women (64.3%) and men (42.4%). The psycho-medico-social sphere, meanwhile, is mainly used by women. Whereas 23.6% of women confide in a doctor or a psychologist, only 6.8% of men do so.

As to the degree of satisfaction of respondents vis-à-vis the assistance received, there is a significant difference between men and women for three categories of professionals: doctors, psychologists and the police. For all three categories, men always attribute a lower satisfaction score than women. This can be explained by the inexperience and ignorance of some professionals with regards to the dynamics of partner abuse.

Consequences

The consequences of partner abuse on health are significant. Women who experience abuse suffer from physical injuries more frequently than men: 15.7% of the female victims reported being injured while this is the case for only 1.1% of men, illustrating the difference in gravity, when physical abuse is committed.

Women also admit to more psychological consequences as a result of the violence suffered. Thus 40.7% feel less confident, 25.7% said they were ashamed, or 23.9% became more aggressive; for men the figures are respectively 16.1%, 7% and 9.2%.

Finally, even if such violence is rare (and exclusively limited to women, at least according to the survey), it is worth noting that the score for the consequences of sexual abuse is much higher than the score for the other two types of abuse.

Abuse with witnesses

In more than 40% of cases of partner abuse, at least one child has witnessed acts of abuse committed against a parent. This percentage is respectively 23.3% for acts which have been witnessed by relatives, and 15.3% for other witnesses. 48.8% of the cases of serious partner abuse are heard or seen by a child, and 43% of very serious situations. The probability that children may witness scenes of partner abuse is strongly linked to the victim's marital status: more than one in two abusive incidents is seen or heard by children when it comes to abuse by a former partner. This figure decreases to 38.4% for situations between partners who are still living together.

Family abuse experienced over the last 12 months

The abuse experienced within a family or at the hands of a victim's relatives (i.e. other than a partner) over the last 12 months was allocated its own dedicated module in the survey. This type of abuse is sufficiently rare (13.1% verbal abuse, 1.3% emotional abuse) that we could not elaborate on it much further.

It consists mostly of verbal abuse, and women are somewhat more frequently the victims. Such abuse is very rarely reported to the police.

We were unable to study the specific phenomenon of neglect of the elderly probably because we did not extend the age limit (75 years) to a point where we might possibly have encountered a significant incidence of such abuse.

Violence experienced in the public space during the past 12 months

Violence experienced in the public space was also considered. One should however bear in mind that, in contrast to partner and family violence, there is rarely an emotional or family connection meaning that the victim is not exposed to durable or even constant abuse from the perpetrator, and that leaving does not entail a comparable emotional or practical cost. Whereas acts of partner abuse can be considered as turning into a «violent situation» the duration of which implies a risk of major physical

and psychological consequences, violence in public places is usually a “once-off event” and is not comparable.

Men and women are victims of verbal abuse in public places in comparable proportions (12.9% women, 12.4% men), but these events are mostly isolated. Men are twice as vulnerable to physical assault (2.5%) as women (1.2%). Women on the other hand are more likely to be followed in the street (4% compared with 2.1%) or exposed to sexual abuse, although this is still exceptional (0.5% of women are victims of exhibitionism or unwanted touching).

Young people are most exposed to abuse in public places, especially when younger than 25 years, when the victim rate is double that of other age groups.

In half the cases, the most serious acts are committed by someone the victim knows, and the perpetrator is a man in nine cases out of ten. This type of abuse is the subject of a much higher proportion of confidences (8 times out of 10) as well as complaints to the police (almost 2 in 10). The proportions of complaints filed rises to 62% in the case of violent theft.

All abuse experienced after the age of 18

Overall figures

Apart from partner abuse, which was the main concern of this study, other forms of violence were also discussed, this time using the victim’s adult life as a reference, that is to say, abuse experienced after the age of 18.

Overall, 55.1% of women and 49.3% of men reported having experienced no abuse since the age of 18, regardless of the context and the perpetrator. If verbal abuse is excluded then these rates increase respectively to 71.1% and 67%. Verbal abuse is by far the most frequent (41.5%), followed by intimidation (22%) and physical assault (15%). Sexual abuse mainly affects women (5.6% against 0.8%), and women are more frequently locked up or locked out of their homes (5.9% against 2.7%).

It is worth noting that the oldest respondents state that they have experienced less abuse over the course of their lives. This observation can be interpreted more as an effect of memory, an aspect which should not be ignored in the overall findings on lifetime prevalence. Similarly, a higher prevalence of violence among the most highly educated people, especially males, can be read as an effect of the difference in interpretation by the victim of what is or is not violence. The sensitivity to psychological damage as a result is more developed. Verbal abuse and intimidation in particular increase with the level of education. By contrast feeling close to a religion is associated, among women in particular, with a lesser exposure to physical violence.

Consequences

Victims of abuse have worse health profiles than the rest of the respondents when it comes to sleep problems, anxiety, stress, medication or drugs. Suicide attempts are twice as common among victims of violence, especially among women who suffer physical abuse (3.4% against 0.9% among non-victims). Alcohol consumption, by contrast, is not affected. Victims also tend to resort to a psychological follow-up more frequently.

The most serious or most important incidents: according to type of perpetrator

Given the range of potential incidents that respondents might have experienced in the course of their lives, only those incidents that were considered most serious and most important have been investigated in detail (frequency, feedback, type of perpetrator). This last dimension helps us establish the sphere (marital, family, professional, public) in which the abuse takes place.

When we take a closer look at the most serious or important incidents, verbal abuse still represents 46.1% of all abuse thus categorised, even sometimes when it is combined with other acts. However, among women, it is most often partner abuse (30.8%) which is categorised as the most serious and important, whereas for men it is usually violence inflicted by persons who are unknown to them

(40.4%) which is so described. This is confirmed if one examines the findings for physical abuse more closely. But the incidents that men consider to be the most serious are usually isolated events, while women experience more situations of repeated abuse, and more often perpetrated by people close to them, their relatives or their partner, than by strangers.

Responses and the use of resources

Men tend to confide in others much less than women (68.7% against 81.7%) about what happens to them; this is even more marked when it comes to partner abuse. This type of abuse might thus be even more underestimated in men. Very few victims file a complaint: 13.9% of women and 9.8% of men, regardless of the perpetrator. However, people are least likely to file a complaint against their relatives (6.2%), whereas in the case of their partner, 17.9% of "most serious incidents" have been reported, a little less than complaints against unknown persons (21.1%).

Sexual abuse experienced before the age of 18

A special chapter was dedicated to sexual abuse suffered before the age of 18. This needed to be considered separately, given that it is more frequent than the sexual abuse that people experience in adulthood, and that the consequences are much more serious.

8.9% of women and 3.2% of men experienced unwanted touching or forced sex before the age of 18. The vast majority of sexual abuse before the age of 18 is committed by family members or by people close to the victim, especially among women. Sexual abuse is rarely perpetrated by one's partner. In half the cases, these are isolated incidents; this is especially the case when the perpetrator is not a family member.

Whereas in other parts of the study the estimation of subjective severity does not always coincide with the external perception of these incidents, 80% of victims believe that these incidents are «quite serious» or «very serious».

Reactions and consequences

This abuse is very often concealed from the victim's close circle and again men tend to be far less open about this than women. Only 60% of men, compared with 77% of women had discussed these incidents with anyone.

The health consequences of sexual abuse before the age of 18 are even more important than for abuse in adulthood, in terms of depression (three times more frequent than in non-victims), insomnia and in particular attempted suicide (12.4% of the victims tried to commit suicide at least once, compared with 2.1% for the rest of the sample. 13.9% of the victims resort to psychological treatment, three times more than others.

Recommendations

In addition to statistical and epidemiological findings from the survey, the study also involved a consultation with panels of experts, who are professionals involved in the care of victims of abuse. The two panels, which were French-speaking and Dutch-speaking respectively, included psychologists, GPs, magistrates, policemen and others who are responsible for sheltering or counselling victims. Their recommendations were based in part on the results of the study, and in part on their daily practice and on the difficulties they encounter. The main points that emerged are:

- Professionals emphasize the numerical importance and severity of psychological abuse, which can have serious consequences if it persists. This type of abuse is difficult to identify at the stage of early diagnosis, and often only appears in connection with other related problems. One should therefore focus on tools for identifying and objectifying controlling behaviour. Prevention campaigns, which draw attention to the violent nature of manipulation and harassment, are also desirable, especially among young people who are not necessarily aware of it.

- Men very rarely request assistance and professionals should be made aware of this.
- Among the categories of women who cannot easily mobilise the resources to deal with abuse, they specifically referred to women without residence permits, who are in need of specific protection, since they are at risk of deportation if they denounce the perpetrators, and women with a low income who are not entitled to a pro bono lawyer.
- Awareness campaigns aimed at establishing an early diagnosis should be implemented, especially among frontline workers, GPs, paramedics, lawyers, etc., since these professionals often only start working with the victims when the situation is already beyond the warning stage.
- Particular attention should be paid to children affected by the separation of their parents, especially when there are signs of abuse between the parents. In such cases, the risk to the child is multiplied, as it is a potential instrument of continued abuse between separated parents. In these cases, joint custody is counter-productive.
- Everyone agreed that a networked approach is required. These networks already exist partially, but they only link up professionals in the same profession (psycho-medical on one side, judicial on the other, doctors on the outside). They requested a greater integration of the different intervention components, and wider sharing of good practices that have been developed locally or abroad.
- Shortages of accommodation are often caused by the fact that it is difficult to find a more permanent solution once the emergency has passed. As a result emergency places are not freed fast enough to help others. The point is not to create new emergency shelters but to implement better solutions for the next stage of housing assistance.

Practical information

The research report can be downloaded on the website of the Institute for the equality for women and men: <http://igvm-iefh.belgium.be> > Publications / Publicaties > Violence / Geweld. (The English version will be available from December 1st onwards.)

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The mission of the Institute for the equality of women and men, which was created in December 2002, is to guarantee and promote the equality of women and men and to fight against any form of discrimination and inequality based on gender through the development and implementation of an adequate legal framework, appropriate structures, strategies, instruments and actions. The Institute aims at anchoring this equality of women and men in society so that it becomes an obvious fact in mentalities and in practices.