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Understanding and Addressing **Violence** Against Women

Insights from Lithuania, Latvia, and Poland

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1. Introduction

On a daily basis, girls and women, being members of various socio-economic and cultural backgrounds persistently experience sexual and gender-based violence including sexual harassment, rape, domestic violence, economic and cyber violence, psychological and physical abuse. The traumatic and complex experiences substantially restrain the capacity of women and girls to engage in public life, create careers, and receive education, as well as directly affects their rights and overall well-being.

Despite the normative progress of recent decades regards eliminating violence against women and girls, not enough frequently the efforts have led to concrete, tangible and sustainable outcomes. Addressing violence requires collaborative measures from communities, institutions, and individuals committed to creating a society that ensures safety and equality, for all of its members.

This handbook is a joint creation by the organisations AY Institute (Lithuania), Latvian Association for Youth Activists (Latvia), and Diversity Hub (Poland), developed as one of the outcomes of the project “Sisterhood Pathways” that was realized with the support from the Council of the Baltic Sea States. It is a tool that broadens the understanding of violence and abuse, covering and describing the realities and statistics in Lithuania, Latvia and Poland. The handbook and research that was conducted by the project’s partners offer a platform for specialists to contribute their expertise and for those impacted by violence to share their experience in finding support systems and recovery.

The partner organizations, driven by a common commitment, seek to highlight the complex aspects of violence against women, exploring its causes, forms, and widespread impacts on individuals and societies. It dispels the misconception that violence is solely physical, acknowledging various interconnected forms and diverse contexts, each equally harmful.

Through fostering a solid understanding of the complicated dynamics behind violence against women and gender-based violence in general, the handbook aims to become a step for positive change, ending the normalization of abuse, victim-blaming, and stigmatization of the topic in our society and the Baltic Sea Region.

2. Violence against women

Violence against women (VAW) is a significant societal issue that affects people regardless of where they live or their cultural background.

It involves violating human rights and is a clear sign of unequal treatment between genders. Shocking statistics reveal that approximately 1 in 3 women in the European Union, equating to 61 million out of 185 million, have encountered physical or sexual violence, or both, since turning 15 (EIGE, 2016).

Before delving into country-level observations, this section explores the multifaceted nature of violence against women, aiming to understand its underlying causes, various forms, and societal implications.



2.1. Underlying Causes

Violence against women is a complex issue with roots in various social, cultural, economic, and political factors. Central to this problem are deeply ingrained gender inequalities, sustained by societal norms and attitudes favoring male dominance. These norms dictate expectations of gender roles, promoting the belief that men have the right to control women, often through violence. Such entrenched attitudes not only normalize violence but also lead to victim-blaming and stigmatization of survivors, which perpetuates cycles of abuse.

Economic disparities also significantly contribute to worsening violence against women. Many women find themselves financially dependent on their abusers, with limited access to economic resources and unequal job opportunities, which keeps them trapped in abusive relationships out of fear of financial instability. Even if they manage to leave, they often face financial difficulties and a lack of support, making it challenging to rebuild their lives. Weak legal systems and ineffective enforcement allow perpetrators to act with impunity, while survivors face numerous obstacles in seeking justice. Cultural and institutional barriers, such as societal attitudes that downplay or ignore violence against women and a lack of awareness about available support services, further discourage reporting and perpetuate the cycle of violence.

2.2. Forms of Violence

Domestic violence often takes center stage in discussions surrounding violence against women, with statistics indicating a significant proportion of perpetrators being men and women and children being primary victims. However, it is imperative to recognize that violence against women transcends intimate partner relationships and can occur in various settings. Violence perpetrated by parents, siblings, children, relatives, employers, colleagues, and acquaintances illustrates the multidimensional nature of this issue. Workplace harassment, sexual assault on college campuses, human trafficking, and femicide are just a few examples. In addition, when discussing violence, society often emphasizes its physical manifestations. However, violence against women encompasses a multitude of forms, each equally damaging and unacceptable. These forms are often interlinked, magnifying the harm inflicted.

Physical Violence

Physical violence involves the use of force to inflict bodily harm or injury upon women. It includes acts such as hitting, punching, choking, or any form of physical aggression intended to intimidate, dominate, or subjugate the victim.

Psychological Violence

Psychological violence targets a woman's mental and emotional well-being, aiming to undermine her self-esteem, autonomy, and sense of security. It encompasses verbal abuse, threats, manipulation, gaslighting, and other tactics designed to exert psychological control and coercion.

Economic Violence

Economic violence entails controlling a woman's financial resources, employment opportunities, or access to basic necessities, thereby perpetuating dependence and vulnerability. It may involve financial exploitation, withholding of financial resources, sabotage of employment opportunities, or economic coercion.

Sexual Violence

Sexual violence encompasses any non-consensual sexual act or behavior that violates a woman's bodily integrity and autonomy. It includes rape, sexual assault, coercion, harassment, trafficking, and any form of unwanted sexual contact or exploitation.

Cyber Violence

Cyber violence, facilitated by digital technologies and online platforms, targets women through harassment, cyberstalking, non-consensual sharing of intimate images, online grooming, and other forms of digital abuse. It amplifies existing patterns of violence and poses unique challenges in terms of prevention, detection, and response.

2.3. Cycle of Violence

Especially prevalent within family settings, violence often follows a cyclical pattern known as the cycle of violence, characterized by three distinct phases: tension building, explosion, and reconciliation. Over time, the initial phases of tension building lengthen, intensifying their impact, while the “honeymoon” phase shortens.

This repetitive cycle of abusive behavior persists until the woman experiencing violence decides to end the violent relationship.

STAGE 1: TENSION BUILDING

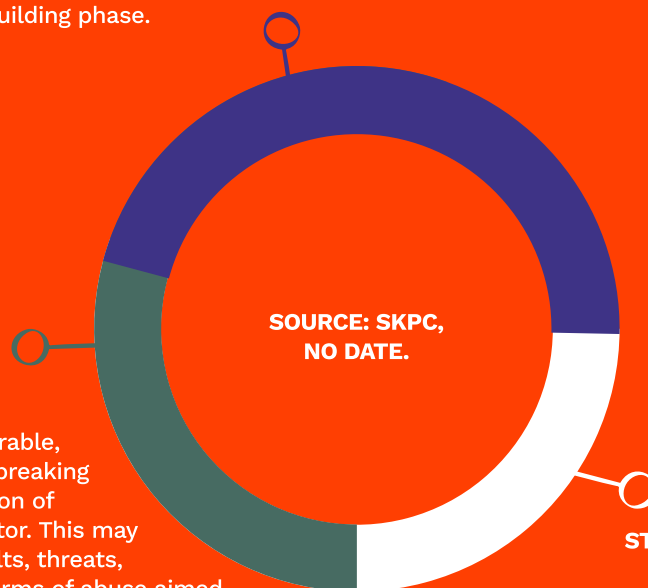
In the initial stage, tensions gradually rise within the relationship, often disguised by seemingly innocent gestures or expressions of concern from the perpetrator. The partner may start displaying signs of jealousy and exerting control, such as monitoring the woman’s interactions with others, critiquing their appearance or abilities, and demanding more attention. In an effort to avoid conflict, the women may suppress their emotions and thoughts, choosing to comply with the perpetrator’s demands in hopes of appeasing them and preventing further escalation. This marks the beginning of the tension-building phase.

STAGE 2: EXPLOSION

As tension becomes unbearable, the relationship reaches a breaking point, leading to an explosion of violence from the perpetrator. This may manifest as physical assaults, threats, sexual coercion, or other forms of abuse aimed at asserting dominance and punishing the woman for perceived transgressions. The women may attempt to justify the perpetrator’s behavior, citing excuses such as “They’re just overly concerned” or “It’s stress from work”. Despite recognizing the escalating conflicts, women often cling to hope, believing that compliance will prevent further violence.

STAGE 3: RECONCILIATION

Following the eruption of violence, the perpetrator enters a phase of reconciliation, also known as the “honeymoon” period. They may express remorse, shower the woman with affection, and promise to change their behavior, manipulating the woman’s emotions and fostering a sense of hope for a better future. The women, yearning for love and validation, may embrace these gestures of reconciliation, momentarily alleviating the pain and fear. However, the cycle inevitably repeats as tension begins to build once again, leading to further cycles of abuse.



2.4. Impacts and Consequences

The consequences of violence against women are profound and far-reaching, affecting not only individual women but also families, communities, and societies as a whole. Women may experience physical injuries, psychological trauma, chronic health problems, economic hardship, social isolation, and diminished opportunities for education and employment. Moreover, the intergenerational transmission of violence perpetuates cycles of abuse, reinforcing societal norms that condone and perpetuate violence against women. This perpetuation of violence contributes to wider issues of gender inequality, as it reinforces power imbalances and systemic discrimination against women, hindering their full participation in social, economic, and political spheres.

3. Methods

Aiming to delve deeper into the issue in Lithuania, Latvia, and Poland, the imminent stage of implementing this project involved conducting research, based on qualitative research methods, which included: reviewing data related to the national context and conducting a series of individual in-depth interviews (IDI) among specialists working with women, who have experienced violence and among the women themselves, affected by violence. The choice of the methodology used was directly dictated by the research goal, which was to better understand the problem of violence against women and to attempt to identify areas requiring improvement.

The review of data related to the national context involved analyzing existing data in the form of available reports, studies, articles, or legal acts. The data were mostly obtained from websites and online databases. The aim of these activities was to outline the situation in each of the three partner countries (Lithuania, Latvia, and Poland), regarding the system of combating violence against women and the situation of women experiencing violence. The scale of the phenomenon was reflected by presenting statistical data. Both, legal solutions operating in individual countries and the organization of institutional support for women experiencing violence were subject to analysis. The gathered data were evaluated for their accuracy and usefulness, then combined into larger, semantically consistent segments and subjected to interpretation. Regarding the hermeneutic process, which involved explaining and interpreting the gathered data to achieve understanding, inductive reasoning (from detail to general) was applied.

In the course of this project, a total of 33 individual in-depth interviews were conveyed.

The interviews were conducted among 2 groups of research participants:

1. Specialists working with women, who have experienced violence
2. Women, who have experienced violence

In Lithuania, 11 interviews were conducted (9 with specialists and 2 with women), in Latvia 8 (5 with specialists and 3 with women), and in Poland 14 (7 with specialists, 7 with women). The interviews were conveyed, based on semi-structured research questionnaires (separate for specialists and separate for women), consisting of open-ended questions. The interviews were conducted through in-person meetings, telephone calls, or online, using Zoom, MS Teams, and Google Meet platforms. The duration of the interviews varied from 20 minutes to 87 minutes. The selection of interview participants was purposive.

The specialists interviewed, served as psychologists, psychotherapists, educators, lawyers, and social workers. They were employed in crisis centers, courts, psychotherapeutic offices, or non-profit organizations operating in this area. These individuals had significant experience in working with women exposed to violence. In Lithuania, their experience ranged from 3 to over 25 years, in Latvia from 2 to 25 years, and in Poland from 3 to 30 years. These individuals had higher education (bachelor's, master's, doctorate). Regarding professional experience, care was taken to deliberately include specialists working in both larger urban centers and smaller towns.

Women, who had experienced violence, were mostly recruited to participate in interviews through specialists working with them. Participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous. For legal and ethical reasons, in Poland, there was no requirement to obtain consent for the processing of personal data of interview participants, ensuring full anonymity. The interviews were mostly recorded using a dictaphone, and the recording itself was not and will not be publicly disclosed, serving only for the transcription of the interview. The interviews were conducted until the point where no new significant data emerged that would help to better understand the situation of women experiencing violence (from both perspectives mentioned above).

Taking into account the voices and observations of both specialists and women experiencing violence, this study allowed for a better understanding of the problem of violence against women and the identification of areas requiring improvement.



4. Examining National Data on Violence Against Women

4.1. Lithuania

Domestic violence, primarily affecting women, presents a significant challenge in Lithuania. In 2019 (LRT), it ranked as the second most common crime in Lithuania, indicating its pervasive nature and the urgent need for intervention. These incidents not only cause harm to individuals but also have profound implications for women's rights and gender equality in the country.

There have been some improvements made in recent years, with registered cases of domestic violence decreasing yearly. For instance, in 2020, registered cases decreased by 7.8% compared to 2018 (OSP, 2021). However, significant work remains to be done in Lithuania. According to experts (Lygybe, 2016), while the Law on Protection against Domestic Violence has been in effect for over 10 years, it has not been implemented effectively and does not ensure comprehensive assistance for women experiencing violence, as evidenced by the statistics below.

Finally, Lithuania's failure to ratify the Istanbul Convention, a powerful legal instrument against violence against women and girls, is another notable concern. This convention defines violence against women as a human rights violation and a form of discrimination. The reasons for Lithuania's non-ratification are influenced by resistance from conservative groups, which advocate traditional gender roles. Also, there are concerns over sovereignty, fearing potential interference in domestic affairs.



Statistical Insights

Lithuania lacks consistent and comparable data with EU members, highlighting insufficient attention to the issue of violence against women. However, some statistics provide insights into the situation:

- **31%** of Lithuanian women in relationships have experienced violence by an intimate partner
- Approximately **1 in 5** women who have worked in Lithuania have experienced sexual harassment at work
- **92.4%** of perpetrators of domestic violence are men
- **42%** of respondents believe that women often fabricate or exaggerate reports of violence or rape, while **45%** believe that the woman provokes the violence

Sources: EIGE 2023¹, Lygybe 2016.

Challenges in Recognizing and Addressing Different Forms of Violence

Physical violence is the most commonly reported type of violence in Lithuania, accounting for **65%** of cases (SKPC, 2019). However, it cannot be claimed that physical violence is the most common type of violence. Other forms such as economic, psychological, sexual, or cyber violence are also greatly prevalent, however, they pose distinct challenges as they are often harder to recognize and prove.

Also, according to a 2019 survey (SKPC), **60%** of women experiencing domestic violence in Lithuania did not seek help due to fear of judgment, mistrust of institutions, and lack of information about support services. Here, it is important to mention that disabled individuals are particularly vulnerable, experiencing violence at **nearly twice** the rate of non-disabled individuals. Moreover, they are less likely to seek help due to isolation from information and potential communication barriers with law enforcement and support services.

Challenges in Recognizing Sexual Violence

In Lithuania, the issue of sexual violence remains largely unrecognized, with significantly fewer women seeking assistance from institutions than those actually affected by such violence.

Sexual violence between spouses is not widely acknowledged as a form of violence. A recent survey revealed that **41%** of respondents partially agree that having sex with one's spouse is a wife's obligation (cited in Ribologija, no date). Additionally, alarming attitudes persist among students, with **20%** of girls and **39%** of boys endorsing the notion that girls may provoke harassment through their appearance or behavior. Moreover, **3%** of girls and **10%** of boys hold the concerning belief that a girl's refusal of sexual relations could be interpreted as "maybe" or "yes". In other words, 1 out of 10 boys would not stop upon hearing "no" from a girl (Ibid.)

4.2. Latvia

Statistical Analysis: Comparison with Regional/National Averages

Central Statistical Bureau on violence in Latvia reports the results of a 2021 survey that indicates that every fourth woman (**25.1%**) between the ages of 18 and 74 has experienced physical or sexual violence (*Published on the Official Statistics Portal of Latvia by mid-2022*). The same survey concludes that domestic violence is more prevalent - one in three women (**30.1%**) in relationships has experienced psychological, physical, or sexual violence. The most common form is psychological abuse (**28.8%**), followed by physical (**15.4%**) and sexual violence (**4.4%**).

Consequences include physical injuries (**10%**), psychological problems (**9%**), and feeling life-threatening situations (**8.3%**). Repeated violence is more common among women (**14.1%**) than men (**2.6%**). The same survey concludes that in cases of VAW, the perpetrator has more often been male (**88.8%**), with a female perpetrator in **18.1%** of instances.

By 2023, Latvia is still one of the European Union member states where VAW and domestic violence, in particular, is widespread, with **30%** of women in relationships experiencing intimate partner violence. Additionally, around one in nine women has faced workplace sexual harassment, as indicated by data collected by the European Institute for Gender Equality (*EIGE, 2023²*).

As of the topicalities posted on the official site of the European Commission on 24 November 2023: one in three women both in the EU and globally have experienced physical or sexual violence at least once in their lifetime. Latvia marks slightly lower with one in four. However, as this paper reveals, these calculations may not be taken at face value and country specifics do apply to each statistic.



Impact and Consequences of Tumultuous Historical Period

The pandemic brought about an increase of particularly domestic VAW in various cultures around the world (*UN Women, 2020, Fraser, 2020*). Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on violence against women and girls (*Report No. 284*), a 2022 European parliament survey on COVID-19 consequences concludes that **77%** of EU women believe physical and emotional VAW has increased in their country as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. A 2022 country study of Latvia “Covid-19 and gender” carried out by I. Kažoka, D. Pelse, and S.Tarasova-Dubkeviča reveals that **56%** of Latvian women see a rise in physical and emotional violence during the pandemic, lower than the EU average of **77%**. **14%** of Latvian women know someone personally affected by violence at home, aligning with the EU average. Street harassment is less common in Latvia, but online VAW exceeds EU averages. This country study shows 30 reported cases of women being killed in 2020, decreasing to 26 in 2021, reflecting an overall decline.

Incidents of intentional bodily harm and assaults against women were also reduced. Nevertheless, the recorded instances of rape and sexual VAW declined in 2020 but saw a significant rise in 2021. According to Ministry of Welfare (LM) data, Following the pandemic, in 2022, the number of various forms of violence cases has increased. The predominant type of violence remains emotional abuse. In 2022, **726** adults received social rehabilitation services, with **690** being women and **36** men. The data reveals that in **87%** of cases, the perpetrator of violence was male. Violence mostly occurs among spouses or partners, as well as other relatives and individuals with whom the woman shares a common household, making domestic violence the most common form of VAW following the pandemic.

Reporting Underreporting and Support Mechanisms

As the Central Statistical Bureau on Violence survey of 2021 demonstrates, the majority of individuals who have experienced violence in Latvia are more likely to discuss it with close acquaintances than seek support from institutions. About **76.5%** of women and **38.4%** of men aged 18-74 have reported their experience to someone or an organization. Most commonly around **68.9%** of women disclose cases of physical or sexual violence to someone close. Approximately a quarter of women (**26.4%**) have reported partner violence to police.

Factors influencing underreporting include societal norms and stigmas around reporting violence, and, as mentioned above, even institutional steps towards diminishing VAW can result in underreporting, making it challenging to fully assess the extent of VAW. Global underreporting is a pervasive problem, particularly pronounced in cases of widespread domestic violence due to its challenging nature and sensitivity. A 2019 report “Strengthening families, communities and relationships: An anthropological approach to the study of violence” reveals that from 2010 to 2016, there has been little shift in perspectives on VAW. A mere **64%** of the Latvian population believes that domestic VAW is unacceptable and should always be punishable. This figure is notably lower than the EU average of **84%**, indicating a higher tolerance for violence in Latvian attitudes. According to the Ministry of Welfare 2023, **25%** of the public in Latvia believe that domestic violence is a private matter and should not be punished. There is a positive indication with a **9%** change between the outcomes from 2010-2016 and the current results.

Support Services and Recent Institutional Response in Latvia

Since 2000, the MARTA Centre has been the only women's rights organization in Latvia. However, since 2008 the association "Latvian Women's NGO Cooperation Network", a member of the European Women's Lobby, in Latvia has grown to include 42 organizations, collectively comprising 110 organizations and over 7000 members.

Among several campaigns and activities launched by Latvia's NGO's and MARTA center, on Thursday, November 23, 2023, the Ministry of Welfare launched a social campaign titled "Violence Likes Silence. Speak Out!" to address the persistence of VAW in Latvia (*based on EIGE, 2023*²). This is an initiative directed particularly at reducing societal tolerance of VAW and domestic violence, which marks a local recognition of the widespread underreporting issue and urges fellow citizens not to be indifferent in the event of violence and to report it to the police.

Within the educational sector, a new online course titled "Violence against Women and Domestic Violence for Law Enforcement" was launched in Riga on November 8, 2023. The event saw the participation of 30 individuals, which included Latvian police officers and State Police College staff. This initiative aims to provide specialized training for law enforcement professionals, enhancing their understanding and response to such incidents, leading to more effective prevention and intervention measures.

A Way Forward

Despite the alarming challenges discussed, there is a positive shift in attitudes towards domestic violence, with a notable decrease in those considering it a private matter. Moreover, among the extensive improvements outlined in the Istanbul Convention, which all member states must adhere to, is the provision of comprehensive support and protection for women experiencing violence. This includes establishing crisis centers, operating a 24/7 hotline, offering specialized support for survivors of sexual violence, and providing care for children who witness violence.

Latvia's recent ratification of the convention marks a significant step toward reducing violence against women and establishing a robust support system.

4.3. Poland

The issue of violence against women in Poland has been increasingly explored in recent years, with research findings contributing to preventive actions, awareness building, and interventions in cases of potential violence against women.

Statistical Data

Violence against women is not confined to family settings alone. It extends to workplaces, schools, among peers, and acquaintances. Statistics confirm that out of **227,826** individuals affected by violence in Poland in 2019, a staggering **124,382 (54.59%)** were women (the statistic does not include children). Among the apprehended perpetrators, a significant majority were men (**16,647**), while only **606** were women. The scale of violence experienced by women, particularly those in close relationships, underscores gender-related structural inequalities. This is manifested by the clear gender divide, with men predominantly being the perpetrators and women the victims of violence (*Starzewski, 2021*).

A report from the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights reveals that in Poland, **15%** of respondents experienced physical violence at home, **16%** in someone else's home, **18%** at school, **6%** at work, **22%** in a store or restaurant, and **12%** on the street or in public places (*EU Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014*). Interestingly, research for this report indicates that Poland ranks among the EU countries with the lowest incidence of violence against women. Only one in five women admit experiencing physical and/or sexual violence (**19%**), compared to **33%** in the EU.

Polish women also less frequently reported experiencing psychological violence (**37%** compared to **43%** in the EU), stalking (**9%** compared to **18%** in the EU), or sexual harassment after the age of 15 (**33%** compared to **55%** in the EU). They also reported experiencing childhood violence almost twice as rarely (**18%** compared to **33%** in the EU) and expressed lower fear of physical and/or sexual violence in public places (**32%** compared to **46%** in the EU). The percentage of women who occasionally avoided certain situations or places due to fear of physical and/or sexual violence was **24%** in Poland and **35%** in the EU (*Duda, 2015*). It is crucial to note that this study is a decade old, and circumstances may have changed since its publication.



According to data presented by the Center for Women's Rights (*Centrum Praw Kobiet*), around **800,000** women in Poland experience violence annually. Nineteen percent of Polish women experience violence from a current or former partner, with children often being co-victims. Over **400** women die annually in Poland as a result of violence, either at the hands of their perpetrators or by suicide. Domestic violence is among the most frequently committed crimes in Poland, following theft and murder. About one-third of homicides in Poland are linked to violence against women. One-third of women in Poland have experienced violence in their lives, with intimate partners accounting for every sixth case and other men (relatives, acquaintances, or strangers) for every fourth case. Police are notified of partner violence only in every third case (*Center for Women's Rights, 2024*). In Warsaw, a high percentage of women experiencing family violence has been consistently reported for many years - in 2021, it reached **46%** of all notifications (*Warsaw City Portal, 2022*).

Legislative Solutions

Article 33 of the Constitution of the Republic of Poland (1997), introduced the principle of equality between women and men in family, political, social, and economic life. Preventing domestic violence is within the state's duties related to combating gender-based discrimination. Poland ratified the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, known as the Istanbul Convention, on May 11, 2011.

However, due to ideological disputes, the Istanbul Convention was frozen within the EU for many years, and its provisions only came into effect on October 1, 2023. Significant changes in laws concerning the prevention of domestic violence came into effect on June 22, 2023, through the Act of March 9, 2023, on preventing family violence and certain other laws. These changes replaced the term "family violence" with "domestic violence" ensuring a proper focus on the individual experiencing violence rather than the family as a whole. The amendment also expanded the scope of domestic violence to include economic and cyber violence. The range of individuals covered by these provisions was extended to include, among others, former spouses, partners, or individuals currently or previously in a lasting emotional or physical relationship, regardless of cohabitation (*Michałowski, 2023*).

In October 2011, the institution of the so-called "Blue Card" was introduced into legislation. In 2023, these provisions were amended (*Regulation of the Council of Ministers of September 6, 2023, on the "Blue Card" procedure and "Blue Card" form templates, Official Journal of Laws 2023, item 1870*). The Blue Card procedure is a special tool aimed at combating family violence. Special protection for the victim or those threatened with violence begins when the form is filled out by a police officer, representative of social services, education, health care, or a municipal commission for solving alcohol-related problems. The Blue Card procedure is activated when there are suspicions of family violence. The idea behind the procedure is cooperation between services working to counter family violence, actions against perpetrators of violence, and protection for the victims.

Institutional Assistance for Women Experiencing Violence

In Poland, institutional assistance for victims of violence against women is provided by the police, public prosecutor's office, courts, social welfare centers at the municipal level, municipal commissions for solving alcohol-related problems, healthcare facilities, educational system institutions, crisis intervention centers, specialized support centers for victims of family violence, counseling points for victims of violence, local family support centers, shelters for mothers with minor children and pregnant women (*Filipek, 2017*).

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) functioning in the field of human rights, especially those specializing in aiding victims of violence against women, play a crucial role in providing assistance. They offer various forms of support. Here are a few selected examples of organizations operating at the national level:

- Center for Women's Rights (Centrum Praw Kobiet)
- Feminoteka Foundation (Fundacja Feminoteka)
- National Emergency Line for Victims of Family Violence "Blue Line" (Ogólnopolskie Pogotowie dla Ofiar Przemocy w Rodzinie "Niebieska Linia")
- Together Against Violence Association (Stowarzyszenie Razem Przeciw Przemocy)

Many NGOs provide professional assistance at the local level. A map of support organizations for victims of violence is available on [the website](#).



5. Insights from Interviews

5.1. Lithuania

The Perspective of Specialists in the Field of Violence Against Women

Main Challenges

Return to Abuser

Despite consultations and warnings about potential dangers, women sometimes return to their abusers due to emotional attachment, financial dependency, and fear for their safety. The cyclical nature of abuse, especially during the “honeymoon phase” after apologies and promises of change, poses a significant challenge. However, specialists emphasize that once violence occurs, it is likely to happen again.

Non-sustainable Change

Achieving lasting change proves difficult, particularly when circumstances become unfavorable. Some women may revert to abusive relationships even after deciding to leave, while others struggle to maintain changed behavior when faced with financial hardships.

Communication Barriers and Incomplete Information

Women may not fully acknowledge or disclose all types of violence due to stigma, shame, and privacy concerns. Women are especially reluctant to talk about sexual violence, although it is often highly correlated with physical violence. Specialists suggest that it usually takes numerous discussions to obtain complete information, without which specialists cannot offer effective assistance and support.

Normalized Violence

Over time, some women normalize violence, considering it a normal part of family life or marriage. Psychological and sexual violence, in particular, may be downplayed or dismissed as common marital conflicts.

Story: A specialist once had a client who endured severe physical violence resulting in broken ribs, among other serious injuries. Even so, the woman downplayed the issue, considering it normal and something that happens in every family.

Additionally, she did not even call the police; instead, an outsider did. Even after consultations, she refused assistance and perceived such situations as ordinary occurrences.

Legal Complexity

Legal recognition of psychological abuse remains limited, complicating legal interventions. Courts may struggle to identify non-physical abuse, and abusers often contest legal proceedings, hindering the protection of women experiencing violence.

Lack of Trust

Women may distrust specialists and support services, viewing them as intrusive or unhelpful. This lack of trust poses a significant challenge, especially when families are referred to specialized centers against their will.

Reporting Challenges

Fear and lack of opportunity deter women from reporting abuse promptly. Financial dependency and societal norms further inhibit reporting, particularly in small villages. Women who suffer violence are often manipulated not to leave, especially when finances are controlled by the abuser, exacerbating fears of homelessness and lack of financial support, particularly if children are involved.

Story: A woman who experienced various types of violence was separated from the perpetrator and taken to the shelter center. One day, the perpetrator attempted to enter the center. Despite the presence of a fence, the woman, fearing for her safety, locked herself in a room and refused to let anyone in for hours. Center staff sat behind the door for hours, attempting to calm her down and open the door, ensuring that the man was not allowed access. This illustrates the magnitude of fear.

Systematic Issues

It is emphasized that systemic issues within the country can hinder the effectiveness of specialists' work. Specialists stress the conflicting nature of some laws and perspectives among different institutions.

Lithuania recently enacted a new law

allowing for the temporary removal of an adult posing a risk of violent behavior from their residence. However, complications arise when the residence is in the abuser's name, as no action is taken to enforce the abuser's removal.

Men's Behavior Change Programs

have been introduced in some cities, requiring perpetrators to undergo behavior change programs after committing violence. Specialists note that while the law is beneficial, its implementation falls short. These programs may be inactive in smaller towns, and even when active, abusers may adapt to avoid repercussions, resorting to psychological tactics instead of more obvious physical violence.

Also, a representative from the Institutional Violence Prevention and Indication Center (who agreed and wished to disclose the center's name) highlighted further systemic issues:

- Women often seek understanding rather than immediate assistance from organizations. However, organizations are sometimes obligated to report potential violence, particularly if it involves children, which may not align with the women's initial intentions.
- Available free assistance includes primary consultation, but subsequent legal processes that require hiring a lawyer are not further covered, which can be financially challenging. This is especially applicable to women not in high-risk groups, as they do not fall under the eligible rules for further free assistance.
- There is a shortage of lawyers in Lithuania specializing in domestic violence and divorce, further complicating the situation.

Specialists at Work

Despite the challenges they face, specialists emphasize the importance of motivation and maintaining a healthy work-life balance. They unanimously agree that the most rewarding aspect of their work is witnessing successful outcomes when they can assist women and families in need. Some specialists also draw motivation from personal experiences, such as overcoming violence themselves or navigating difficult relationships.

To ensure their well-being, specialists implement various practices, including:

- Engaging in physical activities.
- Participating in informal gatherings with colleagues.
- Creating a supportive work environment.
- Engaging in intervisions with colleagues to share best practices and seek advice.
- Utilizing emotional support services at work for themselves.

Effective Strategies and Good Practices

While there is no one-size-fits-all approach to assisting women after violence, specialists employ a multifaceted approach to address the challenges:

Trust Building and Safe Space

Specialists highlight that they cannot force or push women to take action; rather, the decision must be made by the women themselves. Therefore, a major part of their work involves building trust, creating a safe space for women to talk and seek guidance, and helping them understand and navigate their situations. This includes explaining the potential outcomes of certain decisions so that women can make informed choices. Building trust is essential for effective assistance, especially considering that women often lack trust in institutions that may become involved in divorce proceedings or other matters.

Engagement in Various Activities

These are recommended as a helpful means of assisting women in difficult situations. While the specific activities may vary depending on individual cases, it is suggested that therapeutic and self-help groups, community events, hobbies, and work-related activities greatly contribute to the well-being of women.

Collaboration with Stakeholders

Effective support efforts require regular communication and collaboration with police and child rights protection services, among other relevant institutions.

Complete Physical Separation

Separating from the abuser allows women to reflect and evaluate their situations independently, increasing the likelihood of positive change.

Comprehensive Support

Specialists provide holistic support, including legal and psychological assistance, while emphasizing empowerment and self-esteem building.

Tools and Resources

Specialists acknowledge having good access to **training opportunities**, particularly with the availability of numerous online courses. They also emphasize the significance of **practical experience, networking, and sharing best practices** among colleagues to enhance their effectiveness.

However, interviews revealed resource gaps in certain areas. In larger cities, specialists stress the need for **improved collaboration** with relevant institutions, particularly child protection services. Conversely, in smaller towns, the primary barriers are **insufficient funding** and **human resources**. Consequently, specialists express their inability to deliver quality and sustainable individual support in such circumstances.

The Perspective of Women Who Suffered Violence

Support Services

For the women interviewed, the decision to seek help was not immediate and often influenced by other people. Financial barriers, fear of the abuser's reaction, concerns about changing their situation, and worries about losing custody of their children were common reasons for delays.

However, once the decision was made to seek help, they found the support services to be fast and effective, offering holistic assistance. Psychological support played a crucial role in helping them calm down, gain self-awareness, analyze their situation, and make informed choices with clarity, safety, and confidence.

Story: A woman shares her experience of enduring violence throughout her 20-year marriage, encompassing various forms such as physical, sexual, psychological, and economic abuse. The action was only taken when a child called the police during another incident of violence. Reflecting on her journey after receiving support and going through the divorce process, the woman acknowledges that financial barriers and societal reactions are significant obstacles. Initially, she wanted to wait until her child turned 18 to ease institutional processes. However, it was the child who took the courageous step to seek help, prompting the woman to realize the importance of timely support. Now, reflecting back, the woman expresses gratitude to her child for taking this step. Upon further reflection, she now also realizes that it was not helpful for her or her child to stay in an abusive environment and suggests that she would have left and sought help sooner if she knew the support would be so quick and operational.

Well-being

Women emphasize the importance of having their own pursuits, such as hobbies and jobs, during challenging times like experiencing violence at home. Engaging in activities like education, long walks, reading, and spending time with close family or friends helps them cope with stress. However, they also recount moments when, despite these activities, they felt unable to escape the abusive environment and withdrew from the outside world. On the contrary, they note that their closest family members and true friends have become more supportive since seeking help, leading to an improvement in their social lives.

Areas for Improvement

Despite eventually receiving effective assistance, women also identify challenges they encountered:

- Societal reactions: Remarks such as “But your husband looks like such a good man” are often heard. Women find it challenging to disclose the truth, especially if the abuser has a good reputation in society, as people may not believe them.
- Police cannot always intervene effectively, particularly in cases of psychological or economic violence that are difficult to prove.
- Women highlight ongoing struggles in further processes like divorce, especially concerning the division of shared assets, proving violence, and finding professional, affordable lawyers.

Recommendations

Awareness-Raising

Educate women about what is normal in relationships to help them recognize early signs of abuse. This includes self-exploration, setting boundaries, and understanding that feeling safe at home and having their feelings respected are essential. This education should begin at a young age and be directed towards both men and women.

Dissemination of Successful Examples

Highlight successful stories of women who have received effective help, left abusive environments, successfully divorced, retained custody of their children, and rebuilt their lives. Positive examples should be made more public to inspire and empower women to overcome their fears and take the first steps towards seeking help.

Education on Various Forms of Violence Across Different Settings

Provide education to the broader society about different types of violence, including psychological and economic abuse. This education should be disseminated in various settings, such as workplaces, and should focus on increasing awareness about the different forms of abuse, not just recognizing them but also understanding the legal challenges in proving them.

Promoting Safe and Effective Responses to Violence

Educating individuals on how to respond when signs of violence are observed is crucial. People are encouraged not to hesitate and to initiate dialogue sensitively, creating a safe space for women to speak. However, it is essential to refrain from providing personal advice and instead emphasize recommending professional assistance or facilitating connections with support services. This approach ensures individuals receive effective, tailored support while mitigating the risk of unintended harm or misinformation.

Enhanced Cooperation between Organizations

Foster greater collaboration between organizations working in the field of domestic violence. Address any competitive dynamics between organizations to ensure a more cohesive and effective response to supporting women.

Story: *Reflecting on my own experience, I am grateful for the help and support I received and for my decision to leave the abusive environment. However, I am saddened by the prevalence of such relationships. More dialogue about successful cases is crucial so that women can see that escaping is possible, understand that they are not alone in facing fears, and feel empowered to seek help.*

5.2. Latvia

The Perspective of Specialists in the Field of Violence Against Women

Overcoming of Challenges

The specialists highlighted common challenges, including a sense of helplessness when law enforcement authorities are irresponsible to violence cases, preventing women's rehabilitation and reducing the motivation for change. The daily exposure to numerous stories of women facing violence poses additional difficulties.

Unfortunately, many people commonly tolerate violence in the society of Latvia. This discourages women from seeking help, adding fear of institutions mandated for women's safety, which may not act promptly. Co-dependence, originating from prolonged exposure to violence, further hinders women from seeking assistance.

The challenges faced by workers, as reported in the interviews, are often overcome by learning, following statistical data, supervision, an empathetic approach, and receiving support from colleagues and supervisors.

Personal Experience

Despite their professional training, some of the interviewed workers find that certain cases have a lasting emotional impact. This is particularly true in situations where a victimized woman returns to a violent and destructive relationship. There was also a reported instance of an abuser seeking revenge by attempting to influence the employees of the crisis center.

The interviewed specialists emphasize that having knowledge in the field significantly reduces the emotional tension experienced when working with abused women. When it comes to a woman returning to a destructive environment, statistics reveal that, on average, a woman requires 6-7 attempts to successfully leave a violent relationship. Awareness of this fact helps specialists navigate and overcome the emotional tension associated with such cases.

Access to Resources

The majority of the interviewed specialists mentioned that they attend seminars and training programs to find resources, share best practices, and stay updated on effective methods for rehabilitating women. A psychologist highlighted the need for more training, guidelines, and professional development, but emphasized that the demanding nature of psychology work requires substantial resources. In Latvia, limited training opportunities are available, focusing on specific and expensive psychotherapy methods. Specializing in a narrow field is challenging due to insufficient resources, and psychologists must have diverse knowledge and invest continuously in their growth, which may not always be financially viable. Additionally, the lack of inter-institutional cooperation poses a challenge, as organizations and specialists often navigate bureaucracy and formal procedures in their work.

Prevention

All interview specialists shared the same opinion - to prevent violence against women in our society, we must change the way people think about and stigmatize the issue. It is crucial to provide clear and informative explanations about the consequences of violence and openly acknowledge the problem's national significance. Public education programs should be established to teach young people about healthy and dysfunctional relationships and recognise signs of violence and different personality types. Law enforcement agencies should be better educated about violent relationships and how they function. Gender stereotypes that are also contributing to violence should be made more understandable through collective efforts, and campaigns and instead of justifying violence with explanations like bad childhood experiences, our society needs to adopt zero tolerance.

Legislation is needed to ensure immediate consequences for abusers who violate court-issued restraining orders. It's important to closely monitor the work of law enforcement agencies and provide motivation through fair remuneration for their employees. There should be frequent and ongoing campaigns that reduce public tolerance of violence and create a more informed and responsive society.

Best Practices and Recommendations

The support necessary for victims of violence mentioned by the interviewed specialists:

- Availability of long-term psychological counselling or psychotherapy;
- Support groups and support person/trustee;
- Moral and emotional support from fellow citizens and civil workers;
- Access to specialists and information;
- Emergency shelter;
- Financial support for the transitional stage;
- Professional support groups;

The psychological and general well-being, recovery and social stability of a woman who has experienced violence are deliberately and systematically monitored. For women who are living in crisis apartments, a support person oversees the achievement of set goals, while for others, a case manager-social worker is responsible. A specialist suggests that crisis centres would be more effective if women experiencing violence could remain completely anonymous for their safety, and the service availability of the crisis centre should be extended, according to each case individually.

The Perspective of Women Who Suffered Violence

All the interviewed women experiencing violence expressed that other's reactions to the seriousness of the incidents challenged the normalisation of their experiences. For one of the women, seeking help was delayed because she felt shame about what had happened. She was reluctant to tell about it and believed that no one would be interested and nobody would want to help. This caused her to deny being a victim, deny the violence she experienced and even defend the abuser. The experience reinforced the inferiority complex and the narrative that "I am nothing".

Ways how a woman who did not seek the help of a specialist was coping with the traumatic experience:

- It felt as if the body forgot about the experience, the mind erased the faces and even if she wanted to, she could not remember the details of what had happened, although she was completely aware of the act had happened
 - The woman, even years after the experience, feels as if the body and mind are blocking the memories of the incidents
 - Shortly after, she experienced disassociation and lost touch with reality which later in life led to depression and self-isolation
 - Before the traumatic event, she was already suffering from low self-esteem and inferiority complexes, especially concerning men, and after the incident, they became even stronger
- Ever since childhood, she felt secondary as a woman, because she was taught that a man is always right and must be obeyed. It took a long time for these views to change.

All of the women who joined the interview noticed the anxiety and anger about the incident in those around them. Nobody could understand the calm manner in which the women were talking about their experiences. As commented by one of the specialists, It was most probably caused by disassociating after experiencing the traumatic events. The closest people categorically claimed that what the women had experienced was not normal and encouraged them to seek help.

Some of the interviewed women have faced abuse from a young age, leading to similar incidents into adulthood, where denial and defence mechanisms further complicate their struggle. Most of the coping mechanisms that were mentioned in the interviews were memory suppression and dissociation, which became tools for survival, but the impact on identity and self-perception was profound and lasted long after the traumatic incidents.

It is necessary to work with the public's attitude, people must be informed on how to act when they witness violence. As suggested, those who choose to help should maintain a calm and supportive attitude, and not blame the woman for what happened. The fact that many women do not acknowledge themselves as victims of violence should be emphasized. The general attitude of society must be changed through educating and bringing awareness. Women should be motivated to seek help by publishing informative videos, guidelines, life stories of other women, and recovery stories.

Story: One of the women shared that after the incident, she did not seek the help of a psychologist, but found support in her closest friends. She was in disbelief that the experience was serious enough to talk about it with a specialist, even though the case involved police and a restraining order for the abuser. The woman was abroad when the final incident happened, but she wasn't offered social assistance, psychologist consultation or given contacts to organizations that work with the recovery of victims. The woman isolated herself, but at the same time couldn't be alone because of the constant fear she was feeling. She was seeking support from her friends, but at the same time felt lost not knowing where to seek professional help in recovery. All the emotions caused her to develop destructive habits and use alcohol. In her opinion, only people who have experienced violence can fully relate to and understand the complexity of it.

Story: One of the interviewed survivors, was a woman who decided to seek help on her own, understanding it would improve the situation. She visited a psychologist who brought her to the realization that the abuse made her realize she couldn't change others but could control herself. This awareness allowed her to better understand people and avoid potential abusers in her future life. Experience also increased empathy toward other victims. She learned not to let the abuser's words affect her, maintaining objectivity. Post-experience, she became more patient, remaining calm even when faced with verbal aggression. This quality persisted, and she wasn't afraid to calmly stand up against those raising their voice. Noting societal norms, she highlighted the importance of treating women as equals, allowing them to choose professions and act according to their will, as gender-based oppression was the case she was facing in the past.

To conclude the interviews and answers given by women who are victims of various types of violence we are drawing these conclusions:

- The public should be more widely informed about the possibilities of social rehabilitation for victims of violence.
- Men should treat women as equals, not engage in discriminatory or unequal behaviour.
- Reactions from others can challenge the normalization of violence which the victims are experiencing and help them see the reality of the situation.
- Shame, reluctance, and the belief that no one would be interested can delay seeking professional help for victims of violence.
- Denial and defence mechanisms can strongly reinforce an inferiority complex in victims of violence.
- Coping mechanisms can include memory suppression and dissociation, impacting the identity and self-perception of the woman.
- Childhood experiences of feeling secondary as a woman can persist into adulthood.
- Disassociation after trauma caused anxiety and anger in those around the victims.
- Some women face abuse from a young age, perpetuating similar incidents into adulthood.
- Educating the public on responding to violence and changing societal attitudes is crucial.
- Women experiencing violence should be motivated to seek help through widely available informative content and awareness campaigns.
- Visiting a psychologist after experiencing a traumatic event can help to gain awareness, empathy, and understanding.

5.3. Poland

The Perspective of Specialists in the Field of Violence Against Women

Motivation for Working with Women Experiencing Violence

The main motivators for working in this field include:

- The opportunity to witness real change in women experiencing violence and the awareness of having a positive impact on human lives.
- Fighting social injustice, lack of equal opportunities, abuses, and social class issues.
- A desire to help others.
- A sense of being needed.

“Accompanying someone through change is satisfying, showing the strengths of these women, their resources, and observing how they become more empowered and independent.”

Challenges Faced by Specialists

Among the significant challenges mentioned in interviews, participants listed dealing with:

- Emotional problems of women experiencing violence.
- Systemic solutions (long procedures, lack of specialists, inflexibility of the system).
- Legal issues, including interpreting regulations (“feeling caught between the good of the victim and regulations that do not always serve a purpose”).
- The feeling of helplessness of women experiencing violence.
- Working with the families of these women, especially if they are minors, also with their parents.
- Lack of willingness to cooperate from women experiencing violence, lack of faith and motivation for change.

Story: *At the initial stage, the challenge is naming what is happening as violence. It must be very balanced not to scare the patients. At a more conscious stage, it's a difficult moment because the woman already feels empowered but struggles to leave the situation, like a revolving door effect (breaking contact and returning). Accompanying them in this is difficult to endure.*

Ways of Coping with Challenges

To address the challenges faced by specialists working with women experiencing violence and emotional aspects of their work, they mentioned ensuring work-life balance, maintaining safety and hygiene in their lives, personal therapy, teamwork, peer supervision, and frequently mentioned, supervision.

Story: *Supervision is a form of mental hygiene. Feedback on your work and support from experienced individuals are important. Sometimes what I consider inadequate is correct.*

System and the Ability to Effectively Support Women Experiencing Violence

The interviewed referred to numerous cases where violence against women occurred, and the system was an adversary rather than an ally. Examples included prolonged court cases for child custody, which kept the victim in constant dependence on the perpetrator.

There were problems with the “Blue Card” procedure, which did not protect women from potential harm by the perpetrator. Issues like “secondary victimization” during the interrogating women experiencing violence by male police officers were mentioned, retraumatizing the victim. It was also noted that in larger cities, comprehensive help in difficult situations (interdisciplinary support teams) is more accessible than in small villages where help institutions are scarce.

The challenge of monitoring the recovery of women who experienced violence, once therapy is concluded, was also highlighted. After therapy, contact often ceases, and while this might indicate successful support, sometimes the same person returns to specialists after some time, and the problem remains unresolved. The law allows the monitoring of a person who experienced violence with a “monitem” after violence has ceased (even 6–9 months after the end of violence), but this only happens when the woman receives comprehensive help, e.g., through the Blue Card procedure.

Specialists are bound by medical and legal confidentiality, so not all information about a patient is accessible. Attempts to establish contact independently are often ineffective and considered unethical in the professional environment.

Challenges Faced by Women Experiencing Violence from the Perspective of Specialists

- material and economic dependence on the perpetrator
- emotional issues
- childhood traumas
- secondary victimization
- self-blame for the situation caused by the perpetrator
- long-term involvement in difficult situations
- feeling of shame
- social isolation caused by the perpetrator
- the feeling of powerlessness, helplessness, and the inability to care for one's own needs
- stepping out of the comfort zone
- stereotypes
- normalization of violence in the past (what was commonly accepted in previous generations is now recognized as violence)
- for refugees: coping with an entirely new situation caused by the need to escape mandatory military service (e.g., Eritrea, Somalia, Ethiopia), persecution, sexual violence at the Sudan border by smugglers, and torture by a father who does not accept his daughter's LGBT orientation (Cameroon) were highlighted.

Story: *In my work, I realized that violence is very democratic: it is not reserved for one social class, affecting people of different social status, gender, age; it can happen to anyone.*

Access to Developmental Tools

Specialists working with women experiencing violence enhance their competencies through formal education (e.g., additional psychotherapeutic studies) and informal means (self-education, courses, training, webinars, participation in conferences). Among the tools improving their skills, supervision and peer supervision were also mentioned.

The interviewed mentioned weaknesses of the system of support that should be addressed, what would help them in their professional role. Among them are: few strong social campaigns on violence against women, lack of support programs for men, ineffective prevention, limited knowledge of legal procedures, systemic lack of authorized persons in roles of “guardians” for women experiencing violence.

Preventing Violence Against Women

The most crucial element of prevention is considered to be psychoeducation (conducted for children and young people, parents, as well as for individuals aged 40+, who often lack awareness and knowledge of what violence is). Emphasis was placed on building good interpersonal relationships and communication in everyday life. While awareness of violence has increased significantly in recent years (thanks to social campaigns, media information, publications), there is still much to be done in this field. Working with perpetrators of violence was also considered very important to prevent escalation and eliminate the risk before the perpetrator commits violence.

Proven Methods and Recommendations

Specialists were asked to share their perspective and assess the most beneficial and desirable types of support to achieve long-term goals in helping women experiencing violence. It was emphasized that this is a very individual matter, depending on the stage at which a person finds themselves. At the beginning, specific assistance is usually needed, such as separating the woman from the perpetrator, ensuring safety, legal assistance, and financial support. In later stages, a comprehensive approach to psychotherapy, individual work with victims, and therapeutic groups proved to be the most effective. Significant importance was also attached to community work (e.g., with family members of these women experiencing violence).

Elements that could increase the effectiveness of helping women experiencing violence, from the perspective of specialists, include:

- Creating the role of an assistant for women experiencing violence, who would help with handling all formalities and guide the woman through legal procedures.
- The possibility of handling more matters remotely, digitization of support institutions.
- Providing psychotherapists with access to free legal knowledge.
- Reducing the number of charges remaining under court supervision by one probation officer.
- Closer cooperation within support teams (with individuals and institutions providing assistance to a specific person), better information flow, interdisciplinary cooperation.
- Integration of the environment in supporting women affected by violence and the flow of knowledge between specialists.
- Psychological support for foreigners (a database of translators and psychologists speaking a particular language).



The Perspective of Women Who Suffered Violence

Seeking Support and Emotional Barriers

Making the decision to seek help after experiencing violence is very difficult, and each case should be considered individually. This decision is always influenced by the challenging situation in which women experiencing violence find themselves. Some of them seek support impulsively, without considering the potential consequences. Others seek help but first seek opinions from others to ensure whether it is indeed violence.

However, many women who have experienced violence seek help due to persuasion from people in their surroundings, reports from the police (e.g., after a domestic dispute), schools (e.g., when a child also experiences violence), hospitals (e.g., after an examination of injuries inflicted by the perpetrator). The decision to seek help is often influenced by the encouragement of someone close, such as a family member who has witnessed the situation for a long time. Women experiencing violence sometimes say, “I feel like I’m exaggerating, being hysterical,” and often these are not their own words but those of their husband, who addresses them in this way. Women enter into cognitive distortion and rationalize that such situations probably occur not only in their homes but in the majority of households. Lack of courage, powerlessness, exhaustion from the situation of violence, or a desire for a radical change in their lives are cited as factors influencing the decision to seek support.

Among the barriers that prevent women experiencing violence from deciding to seek help, the following have been identified:

- Lack of knowledge about where to seek appropriate help.
- Social ostracism – fear of being stigmatized, pointed at by those who find out.
- Fear of losing one’s dignity.
- Fear of negative consequences of such a decision for oneself, children, and close ones.
- Threats from the perpetrator, referring to perpetrator’s connections.
- Shifting responsibility for the situation from the perpetrator to the woman experiencing violence.
- Fear of naming the perpetrator’s behavior as violence.
- Confusion and lack of independence.
- Uncertainty about the future (what will happen after reporting violence?), fear of change, leaving the comfort zone.
- Initiating long-lasting and complicated legal procedures.
- Received support services.

Support Services

Women who have experienced violence most often reported that the support they received helped them understand the situation they were in, make a decision, and then take appropriate steps to bring about a change in their lives. Tangible effects of help also included receiving financial support. However, not all cases are equally positive. It happens that women affected by violence change their minds during the assistance process, drop out of psychotherapy, and return to the perpetrator. In such situations, the problem is often “frozen” and reappears with doubled force after some time, leading these women back to specialists. Often, in the first meeting with a psychotherapist, for example, women inquire about professional secrecy because they fear what will happen to the information about violence that they shared with the specialist. This question reveals initial distrust towards the psychotherapist, which needs to be overcome through education. This fundamentally affects the further situation of the victim.

Support is much easier to obtain in large cities, where various support institutions are located, than in small villages lacking access to such institutions. According to women, although the support system seems to be more efficient from year to year, it still does not work as it should.

Complaints were raised about the enforcement of regulations requiring the isolation of the perpetrator from the woman experiencing violence. Prolonged court cases, protracted procedures, the need to personally appear before representatives of support institutions were also pointed out. There are also few free support groups, a shortage of psychologists specializing in narrow fields of violence against women, a lack of specialists offering comprehensive legal assistance in cases of violence, and trust helplines that practically do not operate 24/7. In one case, a woman who experienced violence (rape) stated that the district officer and probation officer appeared at her home, not at the place of residence of the perpetrator, which means that her family is monitored by the system, not the perpetrator. As she described it, “it was stigmatizing and humiliating”. However, one woman admitted that the help she needed was received almost instantly (she was already enrolled in a support program within about 2 weeks).

Story: *Generally speaking, from the courts, Municipal Social Welfare Center, police, Blue Card procedures, family assistants, social workers, and district officers, I did not receive help.*

Story: *Please forgive me for the strong words; maybe this procedure (Blue Card) helped someone, but as for my experiences, absolutely not.*

Among the most accurate and helpful aspects of support, the interviewed mentioned an increase in awareness of what constitutes violence and what does not, labeling the perpetrator’s behavior as violence, the effectiveness of the family assistant’s role, EMDR therapy (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing), using other examples of violence, rationalizing fear and concerns.

Story: *The most accurate help, in my opinion, is that I can be listened to, not just report this situation to the police.*

The Impact of Received Support on Well-being and Coping Mechanisms with Stress

In most cases, seeking support had a positive impact on the mental, emotional, and physical well-being of women who had experienced violence. Interview participants mentioned that they began to sleep better, sorted out certain issues in their heads, felt more confident and better, felt power and independence in decision-making, focused on themselves and their problems, gained faith in themselves, and restrained PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder).

Story: *Psychological support allowed me to finally look at myself and realize that I am important. It allowed me to pay attention to what is essential for me at the moment, not for someone else.*

However, one woman admitted that seeking support worsened her situation. She went to a trauma treatment day unit last year, where she was told that she was primarily a victim of institutional violence and that her condition worsened due to the lack of appropriate actions by support institutions. Another woman expressed a similar opinion, saying, “Only support from the therapist somewhat improved my mental state. However, all other institutions make my mental state worse”.

Social Environment and the Situation of a Woman Affected by Violence

Reactions of close family members or friends to situations of women experiencing violence can vary greatly. Most often, those closest relatives initially do not want to get involved in such situations and prefer to stay away. A common excuse is that it is not their business (this reaction is not only from neighbors or acquaintances but often from family members).

Staying in a situation where violence is experienced also causes social isolation, a decrease in activity, a sense of loneliness and social exclusion (although not always), and even self-exclusion. Respondents mentioned that they did not want to “impose their worries and problems on others”, limiting their activity only to work and staying at home with the perpetrator, causing other friends to distance themselves. Some women stated that their social activity “almost dropped to zero”. Mention was also made several times about falling into the mechanism of questioning reality, known as gaslighting.

Effective support dramatically changes these destructive behaviors and thoughts, leading to a gradual opening up to the surrounding world.

Story: *I only started going out to people now. When I was in that relationship, I practically didn't go anywhere. I just stayed at home and spent time with the cats. Because I also had a guilty conscience that I couldn't go out if he didn't go out.*

Importantly, after making the decision and receiving support, several women declared that they gained approval from people in their surroundings (“*you did well, you finally revived!*”).

Recommendations for Improvements in the Assistance to Women Experiencing Violence

Women who have experienced violence suggested the following changes in the way support is provided:

- Raising awareness of emotional violence and manipulation (*“physical violence is reported more often, but there is no talk about manipulation, pressure, or the infamous punishment by silence, which I experienced. There was practically no week when I did not experience the punishment by silence, which was one of the most painful punishments for me.”*)
- Greater availability of information on what violence is and how to behave in situations of experiencing it (media, social media, information campaigns)
- Hiring competent individuals in support institutions and tightening cooperation between various institutions in specific cases (ensuring efficient information flow)
- The need to intervene with the perpetrator, not just the woman or children
- The need for changes in society’s way of thinking, stopping blaming women experiencing violence for the situation they are in, more empathy, and stopping the depreciation of harm
- Better post-separation assistance
- Awareness of the existence of so-called institutional violence.

6. Comparison of Findings

6.1. General Conclusions about Violence Against Women

Lithuania

Domestic violence against women is a significant challenge in Lithuania, ranking as the second most common crime in 2019. Despite some improvements, challenges persist due to ineffective implementation of protective laws and societal resistance to international conventions. Limited data complicates understanding the full extent of violence, but available statistics indicate a substantial percentage of women affected, especially by intimate partners. Barriers to seeking help include fear of judgment, mistrust of institutions, and lack of information about support services, with added challenges for disabled individuals.

Latvia

Latvia experiences a high incidence of violence against women, with one in three women in relationships facing intimate partner violence. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated domestic violence, although rates vary compared to the EU average, and underreporting persists. There is a positive shift in attitudes toward domestic violence, with decreasing numbers considering it a private matter. Various NGOs, campaigns, and educational initiatives, including recent measures for law enforcement training, aim to address violence against women.

Poland

In Poland, violence against women extends beyond family settings, highlighting structural gender-related inequalities. Research findings contribute to preventive actions. Statistical data indicates a significant number of women experiencing violence, with men predominantly being perpetrators. Legislative changes, including the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, aim to address domestic violence, focusing on supporting individuals experiencing violence. Institutional assistance is provided by various entities, including the police, public prosecutor's office, courts, and NGOs specializing in aiding victims of violence against women.

6.2. Comparison of Interview Findings with Specialists

Challenges

The most common challenges faced by specialists in all countries, as found in interviews, include difficulties in recognizing and naming different forms of violence, a high frequency of victims returning to their abusers, and significant hurdles in seeking assistance, particularly when emotional or financial co-dependence exists.

Additionally, societal normalization of the issue, coupled with stigma and shame preventing victims from disclosing full information to specialists, exacerbates the problem. Legal complexities in recognizing less obvious forms of violence like psychological abuse, along with instances of helpless law enforcement and a pervasive lack of trust in support services and authorities, further compound the challenges in effectively addressing VAW.

Coping Strategies and Well-being

Specialists stress the importance of prioritizing well-being, emphasizing motivation and maintaining a healthy work-life balance. They recommend coping mechanisms like engaging in physical activities, fostering a supportive work environment, and accessing emotional support services. Additionally, specialists advocate for effective strategies such as trust-building, establishing safe spaces, and promoting collaboration with stakeholders to address challenges related to violence against women.

Tools and Resources

It is commonly acknowledged that access to training, including online courses and practical experience, is important. Additionally, specialists identify resource gaps in certain areas, such as insufficient funding and human resources in smaller towns.

Prevention and Recognition of Violence

- **Prevention:** Emphasis on changing societal attitudes, public education programs, and addressing gender stereotypes.
- **Recognition:** Observation, interviews, and environmental interviews are common methods to recognize signs of violence.

Recommendations and Best Practices

- **Necessary Support:** Long-term psychological counseling, support groups, moral and emotional support, access to specialists, emergency shelter, financial support, and professional support groups.
- **Psychoeducation:** Considered crucial for prevention, focusing on healthy relationships and communication.
- **Proven Methods:** Comprehensive psychotherapy, individual work with victims, therapeutic groups, and community work.

Systemic Issues

In **Lithuania**, recently enacted laws allow for temporary removal, but complications persist. Behavior change programs face challenges with ineffective implementation and adaptability of abusers in some cities. In **Latvia**, women face a help-seeking dilemma, as they seek understanding but may encounter mandatory reporting by organizations. In **Poland**, challenges arise with the “Blue Card” procedure, as it does not effectively protect women, highlighting issues with its implementation.

Recommendations for Improving Effectiveness

- Roles of Assistants: Creation of an assistant role for women experiencing violence.
- Digitization: Handling more matters remotely, digitization of support institutions.
- Interdisciplinary Cooperation: Closer cooperation within support teams and interdisciplinary collaboration.

6.3. Comparison of Interview Findings with Women Experiencing Violence

Seeking Support and Emotional Barriers

Across all three countries, the decision to seek help for women experiencing violence is challenging and influenced by various factors. Fear of the abuser’s reaction, financial barriers, and concerns about changing their situation are common reasons for delays in seeking assistance. In all three countries, women emphasize the crucial role of support services once they decide to seek help. Psychological support is highlighted as essential for calming down, gaining self-awareness, and making informed choices.

Challenges and Barriers

Societal reactions, including disbelief due to the abuser’s good reputation, are a common challenge in Lithuania and Latvia. In Lithuania, difficulty in proving psychological or economic violence, struggles in divorce proceedings, and challenges with legal representation are highlighted. In Poland, barriers include fear of social ostracism, threats from the perpetrator, and uncertainty about the future after reporting violence.

Distinct Perspectives

Lithuania

- Interviewed women in Lithuania stress the importance of individual pursuits like hobbies and jobs during challenging times.
- Despite effective assistance, challenges include societal reactions, police intervention, and struggles in divorce processes.

Latvia

- Latvian women who were interviewed for this handbook often use coping mechanisms such as memory suppression and dissociation, impacting identity and self-perception.
- Recommendations include changing societal attitudes, motivating victims through informative content, and promoting a calm and supportive response from those who choose to help.

Poland

- Decision-making is influenced by the challenging situation, with some women seeking support impulsively.
- Support services are reported to help women understand their situation, make decisions, and bring about positive changes.
- Challenges include the lack of knowledge about where to seek help, social ostracism, and prolonged legal procedures.

Recommendations for Improvement:

All three countries emphasize the need for awareness campaigns and education on various forms of violence. They advocate for promoting safe and effective responses to violence, enhancing cooperation between organizations, and raising awareness about successful examples in addressing violence against women.

In terms of specific recommendations, **Lithuania** calls for educating women about normal relationships, disseminating successful examples, and providing education on various forms of violence. **Latvia** emphasizes the importance of changing societal attitudes, motivating victims through informative content, and promoting a calm and supportive response from individuals who offer help. **Poland** suggests raising awareness of emotional violence, improving information availability, intervening with perpetrators, and fostering changes in societal thinking regarding violence against women.

7. Practical Tips

7.1. Recognizing Signs of Violence

Women who have experienced violence often find it difficult to speak about it due to feelings of fear and shame. It is important to understand that there isn't a one-size-fits-all stereotype for women experiencing violence; they come from various social backgrounds. This includes women with higher education, such as teachers and doctors, as well as those working abroad, as notes one of the interviewed Latvian specialists. Additionally, women experiencing violence can be found in families dealing with substance abuse issues, but it's crucial to recognize that victimized women aren't confined to a specific group.

Supporting a woman in a violent relationship is very important, as such relationships may persist due to factors like having nowhere else to go, especially if children are involved. It's essential to communicate with the woman that there is life beyond abusive relationships and that legal measures for temporary protection exist. However, it's crucial to acknowledge the difficulty of leaving, with around 90% of women experiencing violence returning to the relationship at least once, according to the information gathered during interviews with specialists.

It's important not to place blame by questioning why she stays in the relationship, as this exacerbates her feelings of guilt. Instead, offering help and asking what she wants to do can empower the woman to make her own decisions. Only the woman, realizing that the reality she is in is not normal and can be changed for the better, chooses to change her life. A very low self-esteem has been noted in many women who are victims of violence. This reinforces the belief that without a man, they are unlovable, useless, and insufficient for anyone.

Very often the abusers further perpetuate this by asserting that no one else will love the woman, undermining her sense of self-worth. It is crucial to develop zero tolerance for any kind of violence. It is our task as individuals, to educate ourselves and promote awareness about the destructive and horrendous impact of violence on individuals, families, generations and communities.

Here are common signs that might indicate the woman is a victim of violence:

- If a previously sociable woman suddenly withdraws from society, lives in seclusion, isolates herself and avoids discussing her family life, it could be a sign of potential violence.

- Lack of Independence and inability to make independent decisions, such as always consulting with her partner before agreeing to plans with friends.
- Excessive Apologizing: Constant apologies for trivial matters, fear of expressing opinions, and an overwhelming sense of guilt may indicate emotional manipulation and control by a partner.
- A sudden shift to financial dependence on the partner, with limited access to personal funds or control over finances, might indicate controlling behaviour from the partner.
- Physical signs of abuse and unexplained injuries, such as bruises, marks, or injuries inconsistent with the person's explanation, very often point to physical abuse.
- Partners overly excessive control over the woman's daily activities, monitoring her whereabouts, or restricting her interactions with others.
- Downplaying or minimizing instances of mistreatment and abuse when asked about the relationship, as well as refusing to share information about the relationship, daily life and reality.

7.2. Identifying Characteristics of an Abuser

Men with violent characteristics often manipulate their partners by comparing them to previous relationships, suggesting that the current partner is better and can provide a reason for the man to change his behaviour (substance abuse, alcoholism, addictions, violence, etc). Abusive traits tend to reveal themselves over time, with individuals rarely entering a relationship aware of the potential for abuse from the outset.

Signs of potential violence in a relationship that a woman can look for in her partner's behaviour:

- What a man tells about his past relationships and relationships in general. It is advisable to consider the possibility of his violent nature if he acts as though he is superior to his past partners, and criticises or insults his former partner.
- The woman is being overgifted at the beginning phase of the relationship. According to the comments of one of the interviewed specialists, men who are conscientious and hard-working don't tend to throw money around, but men who may be unstable often try to buy a woman by gifting material things. Women who have not experienced such an attitude before are falling into the trap because the man appears different from other men she has dated before.
- The woman is being isolated from his close circle of people. The man is reluctant to meet the woman's family, reluctant to introduce his family and friends. It is important to meet family and close friends to understand how important the relationship might be. If a woman is isolated, it means that something is wrong from the very beginning.
- The woman experiences consistent, frequent, or rare emotional manipulation, such as guilt-tripping, gaslighting, or playing mind games, which is a concerning behaviour that can escalate to abuse.

- The man is displaying difficulty managing anger, explosive outbursts, or a tendency to resort to aggression in response to disagreements could be early indicators of violent tendencies.
- Partners who exhibit excessive control over the woman's daily activities, monitor her whereabouts, or dictate whom she can interact with may be displaying controlling tendencies that often escalate to violent behaviours.

7.3. Reporting Violence

Even though reporting violence might feel stressful, especially if done for the first time. It is very important to be involved, as such a step has the potential to change someone's life for the better.

Here's a general guide on how to report violence, as it can vary by the country you are located in:

- Don't hesitate and call emergency services if there is an immediate threat to someone's safety or life, dial emergency services to get immediate assistance. 112 is the European emergency number you can dial free of charge from fixed and mobile phones everywhere in the EU. It will get you straight through to the emergency services – police, ambulance, fire brigade. National emergency numbers are still in use too, alongside 112.
- Contact local law enforcement by visiting the nearest police station to report the incident. Provide as much detail as possible, including the date, time, location, and description of the events.
- Use hotlines and helplines for reporting violence. Look for national or local helplines that specialize in domestic violence, sexual assault, and other relevant issues. These hotlines often provide confidential support and guidance.
- Contact local victim services and organizations or advocacy organizations. They can offer support, resources, and guidance on reporting violence, as well as help in navigating the legal and support systems.
- If violence involves a child, contact the local Child Protective Services or equivalent agency. They specialize in addressing situations where children are at risk.
- Use online reporting tools or mobile applications where you can submit information about incidents. The availability of such tools might vary depending on the country you are located in.
- If the violence occurs within an educational institution or workplace, report the incident to relevant authorities, such as school administrators, human resources, or supervisors. They can provide support and take appropriate action.
- Consult with legal professionals or victim advocates to understand your rights and options. They can guide you through the legal process, help with obtaining protective orders, and provide information on available legal remedies.
- Keep a detailed record of the incidents, including dates, times, locations, and descriptions. Document injuries with photographs if possible. This information will be useful when reporting to law enforcement or seeking legal assistance.
- If you witness violence or know someone who is a victim, encourage them to report the incident. Offer support and provide information about available resources.

Remember that reporting violence is an important step, but it's equally crucial to prioritize safety. If you or someone you know is in immediate danger, seek help immediately through emergency services.

8. Conclusions

This research aimed to delve deeper into the issue of violence against women (VAW) in Lithuania, Latvia, and Poland, with a specific emphasis on identifying areas requiring improvement. Through qualitative research methods, including data review and in-depth individual interviews, the study sought to gather insights from both specialists working with survivors and women directly affected by violence.

The findings of this research are intended to assist practitioners in the field in improving their effectiveness. Moreover, the paper is designed to reach the general public, providing them with a comprehensive understanding of the issue, signs to identify potential violence, and guidance on how to act when such signs are noticed.

In conclusion, despite progress, VAW remains a widespread issue, and much work remains to be done. This paper, by prioritizing the voices and experiences of survivors and practitioners, lays the groundwork for meaningful change. It underscores the importance of collaborative efforts to eradicate VAW and support survivors on their journey toward healing and justice.

Ultimately, this paper represents a small yet significant contribution to the ongoing fight against this issue.



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