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# TACTICS

Regional Report on existing Domestic  
Violence Response System between police  
and professionals

Belgium

Mouvement pour l'Égalité entre les Femmes et les Hommes

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## The TACTICS project

In cases of domestic violence, the first responders are often the police officers. Consequently, police officers are, in many instances, expected to act as the "coordinators" of the broader network of service providers, particularly those offering assistance to victims and perpetrators. However, in numerous European jurisdictions, various individual, organisational, and systemic obstacles hinder them from making necessary referrals.

TACTICS builds upon significant prior fieldwork with the aim of enhancing the responses of both the police and the community to domestic violence within the local jurisdictions in seven project implementation countries. Ultimately, it seeks to strengthen the capacity to support multi-agency cooperation among the police, victim support services, and perpetrator intervention services to improve the response to cases of domestic violence. This includes enhancing police awareness and attitudes towards domestic violence victims, especially those belonging to specific vulnerable groups such as the elderly, individuals with substance abuse issues, refugees, etc. To achieve this goal, focus groups and interviews involving victims, perpetrators, police officers, and other frontline professionals were conducted, addressing the issue of intimate partner violence and its police handling.

## Action Plan and Progress of interviews and focus groups

### A - Summary of the Discussions with the Victims

#### Organization and Recruitment

The organisation and recruitment of participants for the discussion groups with victims were conducted through several means. Our team distributed flyers calling for participants on social media and at relevant locations, particularly across about fifteen Facebook groups and through family planning centres in Belgium. We also contacted numerous associations and NGOs advocating for women's rights, estimated to be at least twenty, as well as several victim support centres, provincial coordination units, and university researchers. We attempted to find ingenious ways to assemble victim discussion groups, but due to difficulties in setting up willing women, we conducted 1 focus group of victims; 1 focus group with a prevention centre in regular contact with various victims, and 3 individual interviews. These different exchanges allow access to richer results and viewpoints from different perspectives.

## Conducted Interviews

Regarding the 3 individual interviews, each was conducted online, with a woman who had been a victim of violence from a former partner and was subject to one or more addictions. The complete transcripts of these interviews, as well as the details of the analysis and results, can be consulted in the annexes (see summary).

We were unable to conduct discussion groups.

Due to the difficulty in finding female victims of violence willing to discuss and reflect collectively on their experiences and to be recorded, we conducted 2 focus groups:

- 1 with professionals working with victims (Focus group Charleroi Espace Libre)
- 1 with professionals working with victims (Focus group Violence Prevention Center).

## Summary of Analysed Results

The three conducted interviews and the 2 focus groups reveal relatively similar observations and some differences. The time lapse between the current moment and the period of experienced violence can, however, explain the different perceptions. For the first victim, the incidents of violence and police intervention date back about fifteen years, whereas the violence reported by the second victim occurred approximately five years ago. The focus groups highlight significant limitations regarding the police. Please find the specific summaries of each focus group and interviews alongside.

### **Focus group Charleroi Espace Libre (victims)**

The participants in this discussion are professionals in assisting victims of domestic violence, including social workers. They share their experiences and thoughts on how the police handle victims of domestic violence. Here are some key points that emerge from this discussion:

1. **Repetition and Institutionalization of Violence:** Participants highlight that many victims of domestic violence are forced to contact the police multiple times due to the recurrence of violence. They also note that domestic violence is often institutionalised in relationships, making it difficult for victims to escape.
2. **Lack of Resources:** Participants recognize that the police lack the means to effectively deal with domestic violence. They suggest that more resources, training, and awareness are necessary to improve the care of victims.
3. **Problems with Reception and Confidentiality:** Participants criticise the lack of confidentiality and proper reception in police stations. They mention situations where

victims are met with a cold reception or a refusal to record their complaint, which can be discouraging.

4. **Ageism:** Older victims are sometimes mistreated or ignored due to their age. They are expected to tolerate violence because of the long duration of the relationship.
5. **Addictions and Stigmatization:** Participants mention that victims of domestic violence can develop addictions to alcohol or drugs as coping mechanisms. However, these addictions are often used against them to discredit their testimony.
6. **Lack of Information:** Participants indicate that victims are not always properly informed by the police about their rights and the available support services.
7. **Need for a More Specialised Approach:** Participants suggest that each police area should have a specialised unit for domestic violence, with adequate training for officers. They also emphasise the need for more resources at the victim support network level.
8. **Changes in the Justice System:** Participants call for changes in the justice system to ensure that complaints of domestic violence lead to action and that victims receive the necessary protection.
9. **Need for Resources:** Participants stress the need for financial resources to improve the care of victims of domestic violence, particularly in terms of housing, administrative support, and specialised personnel.

Overall, this discussion sheds light on the challenges and shortcomings of the police's system for handling domestic violence, while emphasising the need for a more sensitive, specialised, and better-funded approach to help victims escape from violent situations.

### Individual Interview with Victim No. 01

The online interview with a female victim of domestic violence (DV) who struggles with multiple addictions (alcohol, hard drugs) highlights several conclusive elements in the context of this research:

- The reports of domestic violence to the police never came from the victim but from neighbours.
- The victim felt shame, fear, a sense of danger and insecurity, misunderstanding, and dissatisfaction towards the police, which prevented her from contacting them,

whether it was to call them at the time of the violence, report the violence at the time of the intervention, or file a complaint.

The feelings of the victim of domestic violence were profoundly exacerbated by several determining factors. Firstly, the presumed collusion between the police and her violent ex-partner amplified her feelings of helplessness and despair. Feeling abandoned by the authorities meant to protect her reinforced her isolation and vulnerability. Moreover, the victim was overwhelmed by a sense of illegitimacy stemming from the police's awareness of her addictions. Being listed for drug use fueled her fears about the credibility of her testimony and the reception of her call for help. She perceived a form of prejudice from law enforcement, who seemed to either completely ignore domestic violence or consider it acceptable due to her dependencies. The victim's addictions and the police's reaction to them contributed directly and indirectly to worsening her situation of domestic violence. On one hand, they influenced her perception of the police and her own legitimacy as a victim. On the other hand, the police's perception of her as someone suffering from addictions reinforced those same dependencies, creating a vicious cycle that was difficult to break.

Additionally, the police's reluctance to openly address the possibility of filing a complaint for domestic violence left the victim in the dark, without access to crucial information for her safety. The lack of clear communication and adequate support from the authorities amplified her feelings of abandonment and despair. Fortunately, the psychiatric hospital was a vital resource for the victim. By offering a safe refuge, attentive listening, and detoxification programs, the facility played a crucial role in her recovery and protection from domestic violence. However, despite these sources of support, the victim desperately lacked three essential elements: accessible shelter, assistance with her administrative and medical procedures, and preventative separation from her violent partner. The absence of preventative measures hindered her ability to seek help and rebuild safely.

In conclusion, while a change in the reception and care of victims of domestic violence by the police is conceivable, the reality experienced by this victim at the time did not meet her expectations. The gaps in the protection system left this person in a state of distress and despair, thus highlighting the urgency of improving practices and policies in combating domestic violence.

### **Individual Interview with Victim No. 02**

The online interview with a woman who is a victim of intimate partner violence and struggles with multiple addictions (alcohol, drugs) brings to light various significant conclusions for this study:

This victim remained in a contentious relationship for three long years, but she managed to find the courage to act when she felt it was necessary. More recently, faced with the ignorance and indifference of her son's father, she turned to the police, even though she initially left her home before realising that it was her right to be there, and then returned to alert the authorities. She describes this action

by acknowledging that "it may have been a bit excessive, but anger drove me." She acknowledges having been a person with low self-confidence and vulnerability. However, over time, she seems to have developed a keen awareness of the need to react to abnormal situations, especially by calling the police. Today, she no longer pays attention to her ex-partner's former threats, who told her he would have problems with the police if she reported him, because she believes he has no right to be above the law. This attitude reveals that she no longer allows herself to be imprisoned by guilt, a feeling often exacerbated in victims still under the influence of their abuser. She seems to have developed good reflexes in reporting gender-based violence to the police. In the interview, she describes herself as a "fighter." Indeed, she demonstrates through her repeated calls to the police that she refuses to be a victim. Even when a rape that occurred when she was 14 years old resurfaced in her memory years later, she recounts having immediately contacted the police, scheduled an appointment, and filed a complaint without hesitation. She positively describes her overall exchanges with the police, involving three phone calls followed by an in-person meeting. However, she identifies three major gaps in police assistance:

- A lack of support during the crisis of decompensation.
- A lack of information about procedures and filing a complaint.
- A lack of proactive action by the police to connect the victim with associations and resources that could offer more comprehensive support and a progressive resolution of the problem.

These points underscore the need for police services to not only respond to victims' distress calls but also to proactively support them throughout the process, providing them with necessary information and connecting them with appropriate support structures.

### Individual Interview with Victim No. 03

Victim No. 3 highlights several negative points: 1) the lack of empathy from the police due to their lax response; 2) delayed intervention following her calls; 3) lack of information and support, especially regarding available options for reporting violence; 4) stigmatization and judgment felt from the police; 5) absence of follow-up from the police and judiciary; 6) issues related to social prejudices and stereotypes; 7) she suggests that social stereotypes influence how the police handle cases of domestic violence; 8) and she also notes negligence towards child abuse.

### Focus Group from the Brussels Center for the Prevention of Domestic and Family Violence

Police interventions vary in efficiency from the initial responses to the care of victims and the management of violent perpetrators. Examples show rapid and well-coordinated police reactions, contrasting with delays and difficulties in understanding the situation. The police sometimes appear aware of signs of violence but may be limited in their actions due to procedures or hesitations.

There are solutions available for victims of Domestic Violence (DV). Services such as shelters, violence prevention centres, and social emergency services have been beneficial for victims, providing vital support to escape dangerous situations.

The behaviour of violent partners includes various forms of violence and control over victims. There are attempts to manipulate the judicial system against victims.

Positive aspects of victims' interactions with the police include empathy, care, and referral to appropriate services. The police have sometimes been perceived as a reassuring and supportive source for victims.

Victims encounter numerous difficulties, including lack of communication and follow-up from the police and judiciary, as well as obstacles related to judicial procedures and discriminatory attitudes. Overall, the analysis highlights both the successes and challenges faced by victims of domestic violence when interacting with law enforcement.

The complex experiences of victims of domestic violence (DV) towards the police and the judicial system are discussed throughout the exchanges. Emotions and thoughts shared by the Brussels Center for the Prevention of Domestic and Family Violence (CPDFV) highlight the challenges faced by female victims when seeking help and protection: intense fear, particularly related to insufficient communication with the police, as well as uncertainty about the future actions of their violent partner. This fear often prevents them from seeking help from the police or filing a complaint.

Guilt is another significant aspect, fueled by the victim's past, the manipulations of their partner, and the fear of not being supported by the police. Victims also feel misunderstood regarding police and judicial procedures, as well as their own experiences of violence. They often feel isolated, silenced, and not taken seriously, reinforcing their sense of powerlessness. Despite these difficulties, victims call the police hoping to protect their children, themselves, and to have the violence they are experiencing recognized.

The discussions also emphasise the importance of receiving adequate support from the police, including reassurance and being directed to appropriate resources. Victims' suggestions for improvement include:

- A better understanding and reception of their situation by the police,
- Concrete measures such as training for police officers and revisions of investigative procedures,
- Better involvement of the social circle, which is also crucial, although sometimes ambivalent, as it can both support and hinder the victim's efforts to seek help.

In summary, victims of DV face numerous complexities related to the judicial, police, social services, family, psychology, etc. Hence, the importance of a sensitive and appropriate response from the authorities and social circle.



## Conclusion

### Exchanges with Victims

Victims of domestic violence report differences in police interventions depending on when they occurred, with a noticeable improvement over time. During police interventions, victims can experience feelings of relief but also fear.

The negative feelings of victims are often linked to the relationship between the police and the perpetrator, as well as to the preconceived notions that the police may have about the victim. Additionally, the link between addictions, domestic violence, and case management by the police is highlighted, with a significant lack of consideration for addictions during the reception and care by the police.

Regarding the solutions offered by the police, victims mention the possibility of filing a complaint and talk about centres or shelters for battered women.

The paths to solutions and improvements suggested by the victims include the need for an accessible place of refuge, of which they would be aware, as well as more direct contact with associations specialising in domestic violence and professional services related to these issues. They also express the need to have someone to accompany them between different services, such as the police, shelters, and psychiatric hospitals, and to follow up. However, they also raise the dilemma of a preventative distancing from their partner, which could hinder the victim's ability to speak about domestic violence. Finally, victims ask for more explanations about the long-term legal care process, such as what happens after filing a complaint.

## B - Summary of Discussions with Perpetrators

### Organization and Recruitment

The organisation and recruitment of participants for the discussion groups with perpetrators are mainly done through four distinct channels.

- The first is the publication of flyers calling for participants on social media, specifically on the Facebook page of MEFH.
- The second is Praxis, the association for managing perpetrators of domestic violence in Belgium. We are currently in contact with the management of Praxis to organise one or more focus groups in collaboration with them.
- The third consists of a set of prison directors and chaplains, through whom we seek to organise one or more interviews with men convicted by the court for violence against (ex-)partners.
- Finally, the fourth is made up of services that provide assistance to those subject to legal action.

## Interviews Conducted with Perpetrator Assistance

It has been very complicated to get in touch with perpetrators of domestic violence, and even more so to conduct individual interviews or to set up discussion groups.

To address this impossibility, we held exchanges with a perpetrator support structure at the Espace Libre de Charleroi (6 people) on Monday, October 23, to have a discussion with an association that assists perpetrators.

## Summary of Analysed Results

### Focus Group from the Charleroi Espace Libre Group (Perpetrators)

The discussion covers various aspects of domestic violence (DV) and highlights the challenges related to the care of DV perpetrators in Belgium, as well as the relationships between the police, support associations, and the justice system. Here are the key points that emerged from the discussion:

#### Awareness and Stereotypes:

Participants emphasise the importance of raising awareness among police officers and the public about DV issues. They note that the stigmatisation of perpetrators can complicate their care and encourage them not to report incidents.

#### Care of Perpetrators:

Participants identify a need for improvement in the care of DV perpetrators. They believe that budgets are often disproportionately allocated in favour of victims and that efforts should be made to assist perpetrators.

#### Police Training:

Participants suggest that police officers should receive ongoing training on DV. They believe that training should be specialised to better manage these cases.

#### Role of Alcohol and Drugs:

Participants note that alcohol and drugs are often linked to DV cases, and that their consumption can exacerbate the behaviour of perpetrators. Alcohol is sometimes used as an excuse or justification by perpetrators for their violent behaviour.

#### Need for Information and Support for Perpetrators:

Participants emphasise the need to inform perpetrators about available support services. They suggest setting up information campaigns so that perpetrators know where to get help.

#### Complexity of DV:

Participants note the complexity of DV and the fact that cases can be difficult to handle due to power and control dynamics.

### Support for Victims:

Participants also highlight the importance of continuing to support DV victims and strengthening their protection.

In summary, the discussion highlights the need to improve the care of DV perpetrators, while continuing to raise awareness among the public and police officers about DV dynamics. A more balanced approach, taking into account both perpetrators and victims, is recommended for a better understanding and combating of this phenomenon.

### Conclusion

#### The observations of the Author Support Service

The author support services emphasise the importance of raising awareness among both police and the public about the issues of domestic violence, as the stigmatisation of the perpetrators complicates their support. They note that alcohol and drugs are often factors related to cases of domestic violence, and that their consumption can worsen the behaviour of the perpetrators. Their suggestions for improving the situation include better informing the perpetrators about the available support services, through targeted information campaigns.

They also recommend investing more in the support of domestic violence perpetrators, pointing out that budgets are often allocated more to victims, while the perpetrators also need help. Furthermore, they call for an enhancement of training for police officers, to better prepare them to handle these complex situations.

## C - Summary of discussions with the Police

### Organisation and recruitment

The organisation and recruitment of police officers for discussion groups occur at two levels:

- The first is the Federal Police in Belgium, at the national level, which has so far not allowed organising interviews.
- The second occurs at the local level, either by personally knowing a police officer in the area or by making a request to the mayor of the city or the aldermen. Some areas have responded more favourably than others. Currently, it mainly involves areas located in the Province of Liège, Brussels, and Namur. Thus, we have conducted a total of 6 police focus groups between September 2023 and January 2024.

## Interviews conducted with the police

The interviews conducted during these 4 months have gathered converging opinions on certain issues and problems such as the lack of economic resources or the limits in recruitment. However, other issues appear very variable depending on the geographical areas where the Police Zone is located. To this end, please find the specific summaries of each focus group below.

## Summary of the analysed results

### Summary of the Brussels focus group

An in-depth analysis of domestic violence in Brussels was presented during the discussions, highlighting several aspects. The main finding is that elderly people are potential victims, although research and understanding of the extent of domestic violence targeting them are lacking. Domestic violence towards the elderly is often under-reported or less visible, despite their recognized vulnerability.

Statistics reveal a predominance of domestic violence cases involving women as victims and men as perpetrators.

The challenges related to the care of individuals under the influence of addictive substances are also emphasised, highlighting the need for adapted approaches for these specific cases. Prejudices and stereotypes, particularly towards victims with addictions, often hinder an adequate response. Gaps in police training and procedures are identified, underlining the need for ongoing and uniform training for all officers. Logistic obstacles, lack of resources, and legal constraints also complicate the police response to domestic violence.

Moreover, the emotional challenges faced by police officers involved in managing these cases are also recognized, underscoring the need for support and additional resources for these professionals. In terms of solutions, improvements are proposed, including more effective coordination between services, ongoing training, and increased awareness, as well as integrating domestic violence education into school programs. In summary, the discussions highlight complex challenges faced by efforts to combat domestic violence within the Brussels Police Zone.

### SAV Police Herve focus group (2 people) on Tuesday, September 26

The "Pays de Herve" police zone covers a semi-rural region characterised by a combination of urban areas and vast agricultural expenses. With an area of 308.3 km<sup>2</sup>, it encompasses eight municipal entities, some of which have dynamic urban centres, such as Herve. Agricultural lands make up the majority of the territory, followed by wooded areas and built-up zones. Each municipality has a police station, in accordance with Belgian legislation.

In reality, the police zone faces geographical challenges, including response times of 30 to 45 minutes, which can affect emergency interventions. The national road N-68 is the main axis of the police zone.

It also faces linguistic challenges due to the diversity of the communities present and differences in legal procedures between neighbouring countries. The zone has 6,700 inhabitants for 140 police staff members, including members of the Police Assistance Service to Victims (SAPV), who play a crucial role in supporting victims of crimes. The SAPV, composed of 2 to 3 people, offers practical and emotional support to victims throughout the judicial process, helping them make informed decisions regarding filing complaints and guiding them in their procedures.

Domestic violence is a major concern for the SAPV, although other issues such as offenses related to social networks and computing are also on the rise. Despite efforts to encourage victims to file complaints, many obstacles persist, including fear of retaliation and concerns about the reaction of the judicial authorities.

Collaboration among different actors, including police officers, magistrates, and social services, is essential to ensure effective support for victims. However, challenges remain, including a lack of resources and a mismatch between victims' expectations and the constraints of the judicial system. The SAPV offers comprehensive support to victims, including social assistance, legal aid, and psychological support. Victims are accompanied at every step of the process, from initial care to referral to other specialised services, with the goal of promoting their recovery and autonomy.

### Summary of the Ottignies-LLN focus group

The focus group for the Ottignie police zone brought together a man who works at the reception and a woman who works in intervention. Several points are highlighted in these two-hour exchanges. Regarding police interventions related to domestic violence (DV), emphasis was placed on elderly victims and/or those subject to one or more addictions, who do not always manage to denounce domestic violence because they are often individuals who have grown up and accepted the condition of violence. Statistics show that about 20 to 25 cases are reported each year, but these numbers could be higher. Police interventions are also often faced with perpetrators or victims suffering from addictions, mainly related to alcohol, which exacerbates the violence.

Regarding the training of police officers, it primarily focuses on report writing rather than managing interventions, although progress has been observed over time according to the two interviewees. However, assessment tools, like the risk assessment grid, help standardise procedures and protect police officers from potential fallout from cases.

Services like CPVS and SAPV are set up to assist victims of domestic violence, but redirection to these services often depends on the individual initiative of the police officers. Encountered obstacles include confidentiality issues, time constraints, and difficulties in establishing a trust relationship with the victims during interventions. And police officers often feel a significant individual responsibility in managing these cases.

Possible improvements include better selection of police officers for sensitive cases, more continuous follow-up of files, and post-intervention communication to ensure appropriate follow-up.

### Summary of the La Louvière focus group

During the Focus Group organised on Thursday, November 10, 2023, from 10 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. within the La Louvière police zone, the connection was orchestrated by Ms. Sandra Di Tullio, Counselor and clinical psychologist, head of the Police Assistance Service to Victims (SAPV) within the local police of La Louvière. Unfortunately, Marlène, who was initially scheduled, was absent during this meeting.

Three participants were present. Upon our arrival at the station, we noticed a poster related to Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) on the entrance wall, as well as another in the waiting room, focusing on the “help” sign and the possibility of filing a complaint online. The Focus Group took place in the morning and lasted about two and a half hours. The interview, which was held in person, was located in the La Louvière police zone, at the following address: Place de Haine-Saint-Paul - 7100 La Louvière, between two Project Managers of the Movement for Equality between Women and Men (MEWH) and three members of the zone.

The interview report was divided into several categories to organise the content and the statements made. These categories include information on the La Louvière Police Zone, information on people contacting the Police Zone for IPV, tools or aids used by the police, the intervention strategy, information on perpetrators, information concerning the police (training, obstacles, etc.), as well as the specific opinions of the interviewee.

The La Louvière police zone, resulting from the merger between the gendarmerie and the municipal police, comprises 242 members and ensures the security of 80,000 inhabitants over 64.2 km<sup>2</sup>. Despite its size, it has only 3 places in the emergency service. The staff distribution is predominantly male in the operational framework and female in the administrative framework. The zone is decentralised, promoting cross-cutting relations and better efficiency of the service rendered to society.

La Louvière records a high number of reports for domestic violence (DV), with a significant proportion of elderly victims. However, data on addictions are not collected. Victims of DV are diverse, and care is tailored to their needs, although homeless women and those with non-compliant papers encounter difficulties accessing help services.

The zone uses various tools to handle online complaints, prioritise emergencies, and coordinate interventions. The ONO app allows victims to report an emergency, ensuring a quick response from the police. Training on DV is recommended but not mandatory, and the initial training of police officers does not sufficiently prepare them for the reality of DV on the field.

The intervention strategy conforms to national obligations, with standardised procedures for witness statements. However, there are few specific approaches to empower perpetrators, although rehabilitation efforts are undertaken if they wish.

The interviewees highlight the effectiveness of temporary residence bans and recognize a link between addiction and domestic violence. They also note progress in police practices but regret the responses deemed insufficient by justice, particularly regarding sanctions and alternatives to incarceration.

### Summary of the Herve focus group

The increase in the number of reports is attributed to various factors, including increased public awareness and better media coverage, although gaps remain in collecting precise quantitative data. The analysis also highlights the role of addictions, particularly alcohol, in perpetrating domestic violence, underscoring the need for appropriate care for perpetrators suffering from dependencies.

Regarding police procedures and tools, continuous efforts are made to improve training and adapt procedures to new circumstances, with particular attention paid to the use of body cameras and considering children during interventions. However, persistent challenges include the recurrence of cases, fatigue of agents, and difficulties related to administrative documentation.

Collaboration with the Police Assistance Services to Victims (SAPV) is considered beneficial, although improvements are needed to ensure smooth communication and optimal use of available resources. Furthermore, challenges are noted regarding the training of officers and coordination with magistrates, highlighting the need for a better mutual understanding and harmonisation of procedures. However, positive observations have been made regarding the evolution of training approaches and the change in attitude within the police forces, testifying to a growing awareness of the importance of adequate preparation of officers and their support. Nonetheless, improvements are necessary to ensure a more effective and consistent response to cases of domestic violence, especially in terms of interinstitutional coordination and optimal use of available resources.

### Summary of the Ans focus group

#### Facts, intervention procedure

In the field of Domestic Violence (DV), Conjugal Violence (CV) is predominant, with at least one case reported per service and up to three incidents reported per day. To intervene effectively, police officers use a specific tool, an evaluation grid that appears in Appendix 1 of the circular COL 15/2020 of the College of Prosecutors General: this prosecution form, which includes essential criteria presented in the form of "small bombs". A distinction is made in the treatment of CV cases: cases without physical violence are recorded on an information sheet, while those involving physical violence are documented through an Official Report (OR). In this process, police officers have a significant dependence on magistrates, who expect suggestions and guidance from law enforcement. During hearings, the approach differs: victims are put in contact with the Police Assistance Service to Victims (SAPV), while the questioning of suspects is steered in a specific direction. A notable concept mentioned is that of the 'umbrella', a strategic approach aiming to intervene in a specific manner to protect oneself, cover up, and avoid any fallout for inaction. Moreover, a practice of home revisits is established, involving collaboration between the neighbourhood officer and SAPV to ensure appropriate follow-up of situations. These initiatives demonstrate the commitment of law enforcement to combat Conjugal Violence and ensure the safety of victims within their homes.

### Addictions

In situations of Conjugal Violence (CV), alcohol is often identified as a predominant and frequently problematic factor, a conclusion often drawn from hearings conducted. A distinction is made between different profiles, notably alcoholic individuals and "true victims," each characterising distinct situations and behaviours requiring a specific and adapted approach.

### Police officer's feelings

The reaction of police officers to Conjugal Violence (CV) varies according to their individual sensitivity. Some choose to observe, delve deeper by engaging in thorough discussions with the involved parties, and redirect victims to the Police Assistance Service to Victims (SAPV). In contrast, others may not notice anything at all. Due to the inherent complexity of CV, a willingness to delve deeper is generally necessary to fully understand the dynamics at play. However, a lack of willingness to understand on the part of some police officers is noted, attributed to a form of weariness and frustration. This attitude is particularly evident in recurrent calls and can sometimes lead to cases where Official Reports (ORs) are not written.

### Complicated relationship between the police and other services

Police officers express a sense of helplessness in the face of the complexity of the situations they encounter. They feel powerless, sometimes unable to know which relay to turn to or faced with unsatisfactory returns. They often find themselves overwhelmed, lacking flexibility and availability. Moreover, some mention a lack of partnerships with key associations such as family planning centres, Youth Aid Services (YAS), women's shelters, School Health Promotion Services (SHPS), and psychologists.

This evolution is perceived as negative, underscoring a blatant absence of a multisectoral approach in the management of Conjugal Violence (CV). Although the Police Assistance Service to Victims (SAPV) is recognized as a significant asset, it is deemed insufficient to adequately address the complex and varied needs of victims. These findings highlight the persistent challenges faced by police officers in their fight against CV and underline the need for increased coordination and collaboration among the various actors involved.

### The perpetrator

It is observed that no measures are currently in place to take care of the perpetrator of Conjugal Violence and their underlying problem. The ongoing procedures are often long and repetitive, involving warnings, summons, and alternative measures such as sending to Praxis or issuing warrants, which often come very late in the process. Moreover, it is regrettable to note a blatant lack of feedback regarding these procedures. This situation largely stems from a lack of material and human resources, leading to a shortage of available places and means necessary for adequate care. As a result, perpetrators of Conjugal Violence often escape appropriate sanctions. It is also noted that the Police Assistance Service to Victims (SAPV) focuses exclusively on following up with victims, without taking



care of the perpetrators, who are even less likely to be confronted with addiction problems. This gap in the care of perpetrators underscores an urgent need to develop specific programs and services aimed at addressing underlying issues and preventing the recurrence of violent behaviour.

### Suggestions for Improvement

It's crucial to implement additional measures to improve the management of Domestic Violence (DV) and ensure proper follow-up for both victims and perpetrators. Firstly, creating a Victim Assistance Service (VAS) specifically dedicated to perpetrators would allow for a better understanding of the deep causes of violent behaviours and offer appropriate support to help them overcome their problems. Moreover, it's necessary to develop additional relay services to ensure long-term follow-up after an emergency situation. This would include rehabilitation and anger management programs for perpetrators, which could be offered as an alternative to criminal penalties. Establishing institutions such as centres dedicated to violent men, offering withdrawal from home, reassessment, and follow-up with psychologists and social workers, would also be beneficial. This would allow the police to redirect individuals to these centres, thus improving the overall care for victims and perpetrators. Specialised training for the police, focused on managing domestic violence and collaborating with assistance services, is also needed. Furthermore, strengthening police resources and manpower, as well as increasing the police's decision-making power, are essential to ensure an effective and rapid intervention. Finally, combating leniency towards perpetrators of domestic violence by strengthening sanctions and implementing deterrent measures to counter the trivialization of violence and preserve the integrity of police work is imperative.

### Existing Solutions

It's proposed to specifically designate addresses where significant and confirmed cases of Domestic Violence (DV) have been reported as special addresses. This designation would be communicated via a notification to the communication centre, thus prioritising police interventions in case of a call from the victim from this address. Revisits, or updates on the victim's situation, would also be essential. They allow maintaining a continuous link with the victim and monitoring the evolution of the situation, especially regarding the dynamics within the couple. To ensure proper follow-up of alternative measures taken towards perpetrators, such as training at Praxis, justice assistants could serve as a link between the victim, the prosecutor's office, and the concerned services. These justice assistants would be responsible for monitoring the alternative measures, such as the training, through summons and ensuring that the perpetrators comply with these commitments, while also ensuring regular follow-up of the victim's situation.

## Conclusion

### What is already in place and working

#### What is already in place and working (to be strengthened):

The Police Assistance Service to Victims (SAPV) is the basis for a multisectoral approach. Revisits are carried out by the district officer and/or the SAPV, who recontact the victim to assess the situation following the initial contact with the police. The temporary prohibition of residence (TPR) is underused by the prosecutor/magistrate. Moreover, there is the possibility of recontacting the concerned individuals after the intervention (post-crisis moment).

#### To some extent:

It is possible to refer cases to sensitive police officers who are willing to work on these matters, rather than imposing them. There is long-term follow-up by the same officer, for example, by taking the time to know the story and building a trust relationship.

#### In some police zones:

There is the possibility of scheduling an appointment for filing a complaint online and prioritising by order. Frontline officers have access to CANVA, standard PVs, and a domestic violence case management protocol specific to the zone. There are district DV platforms with a referent per zone, aimed at exchanging good practices. The ONO emergency app allows making a call and triggering an alarm within the police during emergency situations, thus reassuring the victim.

### What is suggested (to be created)

Several measures can be implemented to strengthen the effectiveness of already existing and operational services in handling victims of domestic violence. Firstly, it is paramount to develop Police Assistance Services to Victims (SAPV) that cater to perpetrators. It is also necessary to develop structures such as centres for violent men, offering the possibility to temporarily remove perpetrators from the home, reassess and follow them with the help of psychologists and social workers, which could alleviate the work of police officers by allowing them to redirect cases to these centres. Specific training should be offered to perpetrators to address underlying issues or raise awareness about existing solutions, such as those offered by the organisation Praxis. It is also important to promote the use of alternative sentences to incarceration.

Regarding post-intervention follow-up, it is necessary to set up additional relay services, in addition to those already available in emergencies. This could include strengthening training for the police, expanded decision-making power, and more time to allow officers to continuously follow certain cases, thus avoiding referrals from one officer to another. It is also crucial to adopt more robust responses from the judiciary to counter the feeling of failure among police officers and ensure appropriate penalties for perpetrators, which would help prevent the trivialization of domestic violence and strengthen the credibility of law enforcement work. It is also important to provide more resources to the police: staff, time.

In addition, it is essential to reinforce the systems already in place but which are not fully functioning in their current state. For example, the creation of hotspots or a "red list" would make it possible to designate addresses or telephone numbers where major cases of domestic violence are known to occur, enabling interventions to be prioritised according to the recurrence and/or seriousness of the incidents, the background of the people involved, and the information centralised at zonal level. Justice assistants could also play a crucial role as relays for victims with the public prosecutor's office, monitoring alternative measures taken against perpetrators, such as training at Praxis, through regular convocations.

Finally, we need to create more places in emergency services for police areas, while encouraging the inclusion of addiction issues in the understanding and management of cases of domestic violence.

### Intervention

In Domestic Violence (DV) cases, instances of spousal abuse are predominant, usually occurring at least once a day in certain areas, with a noticed average. To enhance the handling of these situations, the COL 15 tool is mandatory, systematically used across all areas. This form, sent by the public prosecutor's office in the form of a circular, contains crucial information for assessing the situation and taking the necessary measures. A recurring concept discussed in exchanges with the police is the "umbrella," which refers to a specific approach to intervene in a way that protects, covers, and prevents any negative fallout due to inaction. Some areas have implemented their own dispatching system, ensuring that each call from a victim is recorded to provide effective follow-up. In some areas, a list of interpreters is available for foreign victims or perpetrators, as well as for deaf-mute individuals, thus guaranteeing better access to services. It's important to note that the responsibility for disseminating and informing about these mechanisms is specific to each area, thereby underlining the need for an approach adapted to each local context.

### Procedure for welcoming and supporting a victim of DV

There are two main ways a victim of spousal abuse can be received:

- First, if they file a complaint at the reception, the Police Support Service for Victims (SAPV) is immediately informed to take care of the victim in a non-legal manner. The SAPV provides essential support by reassuring the victim, offering advice, and establishing a trust relationship, while answering their questions.
- Second, the victim may first make an appointment with the SAPV, who will guide them and possibly redirect them to the police reception for filing a complaint, explaining the importance of this step. This approach is becoming increasingly common.

If the victim does not wish to file a complaint, two options are available to the officer:

- First, they can write an informative report, also called an information report or info sheet, which constitutes a written record in the police database without having legal consequences, designated as "family dispute without blows".

- Second, if signs of blows or struggle are visible, the officer must automatically write a report on Domestic Violence (DV). This report is then forwarded to the magistrate/public prosecutor, who decides whether to initiate prosecution. In this case, the victim's complaint is no longer necessary.

Witnesses can also make statements through a form provided for this purpose. Some police areas have implemented the possibility of making appointments online to file a complaint. Additionally, some of these services have provided front-line officers with a CANVA, a standard report (PV), and a protocol for managing cases of spousal abuse. Moreover, some police areas participate in platforms dedicated to domestic violence at the district level. Each area designates a referent with the goal of exchanging best practices, learning from previous cases, and improving overall strategies for victim support.

### Police Training

The training sessions currently offered on domestic violence are on a voluntary basis. They usually consist of general theoretical courses that cover the subject, but specific learning on managing domestic violence situations in the field is limited. Indeed, while these trainings provide a platform to discuss the subject, they do not necessarily provide the practical tools to effectively handle these situations on the ground. In practice, skill acquisition in this area often occurs through direct field experience, both individually and from other responders.

### **Police Perception**

A police officer's sensitivity plays a crucial role in the reception and support of victims of domestic violence. Their ability to notice certain details, to deepen investigations, to direct the victim to appropriate resources, or to ensure nothing is overlooked can have a significant impact. It is recognized that the complexity of domestic violence situations generally requires a willingness to delve deeper, even though this may sometimes lead to reluctance due to fear of criticism in case of inaction.

Furthermore, the reception and support of victims are also influenced by the weariness and frustration felt by police officers. This can be the result of recurrent calls, which sometimes end in non-written reports, or court decisions that may be perceived as disappointing. The size of the police zone and the network of colleagues can also influence the actions that can be taken in each situation.

It is important to highlight the significant individual and moral responsibility of police officers in these contexts. They are often called upon to make delicate decisions, to deepen investigations, and to request follow-up on their interventions. A positive evolution is observed in the resources made available to police officers to perform their work adequately. For example, the introduction of optional training on Domestic Violence or the recommendation addressed to the aggressor to leave the home rather than the victim reflects progress in handling these sensitive situations.

### **Police-Justice/Prosecutor/Magistrate Relationship**

There is a notable gap between the expectations of victims of domestic violence, the investment of police officers in their care, and the decisions made by the prosecution. This gap can create tensions,

especially when the police officer, as a link between citizens and justice, is perceived as responsible for the decisions made by the judicial system.

The profession of policing, as well as the functioning of the police and judicial machinery, faces great complexity. This includes the need to document facts accurately, the complexity of the legal process, human factors such as the mood of the magistrate, and constraints related to human resources such as limited time and the high volume of cases to handle.

Additionally, there is a gap between existing laws and their practical application, as illustrated by the example of the temporary prohibition of residence, which can sometimes pose challenges in its concrete implementation on the ground. This complexity adds an additional layer of difficulty to the management of domestic violence cases for police officers and justice actors.

### **Police-Other Services Link**

Police officers often find themselves in a situation where they are unsure which referral service to turn to for necessary assistance, or they encounter difficulties with existing referral services. These problems can be related to a lack of availability, flexibility, or suitable associations. Potential partners mentioned include family planning centres, Youth Aid Services (SAJ), women's shelters, school mental health services (PMS), and psychologists.

This situation underscores a dire need for a more effective multi sectoral approach. Although the Police Support Service for Victims (SAPV) provides a solid foundation, it is often considered insufficient and requires strengthening. Furthermore, there is a specific support mechanism for children in cases of separation and domestic violence, which is another commendable initiative. However, for a more comprehensive and tailored response to the needs of victims, closer and better-coordinated collaboration among different actors and services remains essential.

### **Perpetrators**

The underlying problem of perpetrators of domestic violence remains largely without an adequate solution. The procedures to handle these cases are often lengthy and involve repeated warnings, summons, and other alternative measures such as referrals to specialised organisations like Praxis, or even mandates. However, there is often a lack of feedback and follow-up from the police regarding these actions.

The lack of available places and adequate resources sometimes leads to an absence of punishment or effective measures against perpetrators. Generally, the police note that assistance to perpetrators is offered on a voluntary basis on their part, which may be insufficient to effectively address the problem. The assessment of a perpetrator's dangerousness is based on several criteria, including the police's known history, the context of the violence (such as the presence of children), and possibly substance use. However, despite these assessments, it remains difficult to ensure an adequate response to the potential threat posed by perpetrators of domestic violence.

### Addictions and Other Vulnerability Factors

Alcohol is often a major issue in cases of domestic violence, identified particularly through interviews, and is considered a risk factor for the perpetrator's dangerousness by some police zones. A distinction is sometimes made between what are called "true victims" and others.

Addictions, although often not systematically catalogued by police zones, are taken into account when writing reports. Instead of being specifically categorised, they are often included in the broader category of "vulnerable people," encompassing disabled, elderly, pregnant, or homeless individuals.

However, the complexity of dealing with homeless women, with whom it can sometimes be difficult to maintain contact, poses additional challenges. Moreover, it is noted that victims cannot benefit from shelters for battered women if they do not have proper documentation, which excludes those in irregular situations, thus preventing police officers from connecting them with these support services. In the reception and handling of domestic violence cases by the police, addictions are often not taken into account or are limited to a mere context for explaining the violence. As indicated by some officers, their responsibility is limited to stopping the offence and filing the report, without formally addressing the issue of addictions.

## Appendices

**Appendix A - Questionnaires (Victims - Perpetrators - Police)**

**Appendix B - Methodology of the Victim - Police - Perpetrator Triptych**

**Appendix C - Focus Group SAV Police Herve (Muriel Hermanns, Catherine Flas) on Tuesday, September 26th**

**Appendix D - Focus group victims - Charleroi Espace Libre (6 people) Monday, October 23**

**Appendix E - perpetrator focus group - Charleroi Espace Libre (6 people) Monday, October 23**

**Appendix F - Focus group police - Louvière (6 people) Friday, November 10**

**Appendix G - Focus group police - Ottignies (Inspecteur David Vandermeersch et Inspecteur Audry Hasoppe) du Lundi 06 novembre**

**Appendix H - Victim Interview - Auvelais**

**Appendix I - Analysis of interview with victim n°1 Tuesday 26 September**

**Appendix J - Transcript of interview with victim n°2 Friday, September 29**

**Appendix K- Focus group of Monday, December 18, 2023- Center for the Prevention of Domestic Violence (Brussels)**

**Appendix L- Focus group (police) of January 15, 2024 - Police Politie Brussels**

**Appendix M- Focus group (police) of Thursday, January 18, 2024 - Politie de Herve**

**Appendix N - Focus group police de Ans (Aude, Flo, Laurie, Fabienne) Wednesday, October 18**