

## **Policing Domestic Violence in Greece: The Cooperation of the Police with Women-Victims of Domestic Violence as a Key Factor in the Prevention and Treatment**

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### **Abstract**

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Addressing a complex social problem, such as intimate violence, is neither simple nor easy. Since the period of the recognition of domestic violence as an independent criminal act in the international Conventions and the law of states, police performing was one of the main factors at the center of studies. In spite of interventions in the field of Police action, several studies have so far revealed the low level of domestic violence reporting to Police Authorities and the well-held perception in the consciousness of women victims that the Police cannot provide them with meaningful help, which is complicated by the very effect of abuse on their lives and their decisions. This article presents the findings of two surveys conducted in Greece during the implementation of a European project. The findings of these studies highlight once more the reasons for under-reporting domestic violence crimes to the Police, as well as the attitudes and perceptions of police officers on the phenomenon, the assessment of the operational preparedness and the obstacles in managing relevant incidents.

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**Keywords:** intimate violence, police force, referrals on domestic violence, policing.

### **1. Introduction**

Domestic violence against women by their spouse/ partner is a form of gender-based violence which undermines the physical and mental health of victims, their social and economic well-being, and keeps modern societies accountable for the inability to protect the human rights of this specific population group.

For several decades, field research has been developed and intervention programs have been designed to protect victims of domestic violence (DV). The interventions of feminist movements have been decisive not only in interpreting and understanding the phenomenon of intimate violence (IV), but also in criminalizing domestic violence and integrating it into the political agenda of states and international organizations. The latest developments in the recognition of crimes of IV and the implementation of measures to combat it in the Member States of the European Union are reflected in the Directive 2012/29/EU (the Victim's Rights Directive) and the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, also known as the Istanbul Convention<sup>2</sup>.

Yet, the rate of violence against women is still extremely high across the world. A WHO report (2013) estimates that 35% of women worldwide have experienced either physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence (In UNCRI, 2014: 7).

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<sup>2</sup> The Istanbul Convention is the first legally binding instrument concerning the prevention of violence against women and domestic violence in Europe. The main objectives of the Istanbul Convention are to establish a legal and policy framework to tackle violence against women, focusing on prevention, protection of victims, the prosecution of perpetrators and integrated policies. The convention was adopted by the Council of Europe in 2011 (Council of Europe, 2011b) and entered into force in 2014. As of December 2018, it has been signed by all 28 Member States and ratified by 20. On 4 March 2016, the European Commission adopted two proposals for a Council decision on the signing of the Istanbul Convention on behalf of the European Union, with the EU going on to sign the convention on 13 June 2017 (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2019). <https://eige.europa.eu/publications/police-and-justice-sector-data-intimate-partner-violence-against-women-european-union>

In Europe, according to the EU-wide survey on Violence Against Women, commissioned by EU Fundamental Rights Agency, an estimated 13 million women had experienced physical violence in the course of the 12 months before the survey interviews (7% of women aged 18–74 years in the EU), while 3.7 million women experienced sexual violence in the same period (2% of women aged 18–74 years in the EU). Two out of five women (43 %) have experienced some form of psychological violence by either a current or previous partner (European Union Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA), 2014).

All of the above considerations call for a critical look at how society and the state respond to the recording of IV cases, the criminal treatment of the perpetrators, the assistance to victims and their children, as well as the raising of awareness among citizens in order to prevent DV. For several decades, since the phenomenon has begun to stimulate the interest of researchers and concern practitioners working in the field of assistance to crime victims, a number of agencies and services have been developed to provide more effective support for victims and to attribute responsibility for violence to perpetrators.

By its nature, the phenomenon calls for the co-operation of a multitude of Services of different character and diversity, not only among themselves, but also internally. Thus, when a case of IV is revealed or denounced, a number of Agencies and Services are activated (or should be activated) such as Police and prosecuting Authorities, medical and forensic Services, legal Services, counseling centers, even shelters for hosting the victims and their children. In this chain of intervention and activation of agencies, the Police have a key role, as it represent the official state institution which comes in direct contact with victims and perpetrators, collect evidence of the offense, and also activates the criminal mechanism in cooperation with prosecuting Authorities. At the same time, the Police should interconnect the victim with community or other social networks and Services that undertake to support the victims and their children at a practical level (medical care, housing, legal support, etc.) but also emotionally (empowerment, crisis management, coping with mental trauma, etc.).

While the role of the Police recorded as particularly important, however, research studies show a low degree of mobilization, as well as low level of cooperation of IV victims with the Police. It is a fact that women who are being abused by their husband/spouse do not usually resort to the Police, nor as a matter of priority. As it was rightly pointed out by Birdsey and Snowball (2013: 1) the failure to report the abuse to the Police hides dangers and raises concerns because a) DV is not recorded on the actual dimensions and the perpetrators are not identified and remain unpunished, b) the high “dark number” of DV cases can lead to erroneous assessments of the extent and severity of the phenomenon, and thus to remove the social and scientific interest of its study, its degradation in the political agenda and deprivation of resources to address it, and c) the non-cooperation of victims of DV with the Police may deprive their spiritual and physical support and the benefits that could have arise from it.

## **2. Research findings on the role of the Police in addressing the phenomenon of intimate violence**

Early studies following the criminalization of domestic violence and female abuse in Europe and the United States have highlighted the failed attempt of police interventions for a holistic approach (Medie, 2015). Police tactics usually include delaying engagement or avoiding active action on DV, due to unwillingness to interfere with matters relating to the "private sphere" of the relationship between two adults, while there are few times where compromise is sought between perpetrator and victim of abuse. Indeed, earlier surveys show that documented reports about the number of perpetrators of abuse is incomplete (Fleury-Steiner, Bybee, Sullivan, Belknap and Melton, 2006) and the rates of arrest ranging only between 7% and 15% of the cases (Schwartz, 2012). This recording had already been done in the past by Dobash and Dobash (1979), who pointed out that arrests against perpetrators of violent crimes are more likely than against spouse abusers.

Dawson and Holton (In Medie, 2015) point out that Police usually mediate only when serious physical attacks and death threats against women are committed. Police officers may also be indifferent to the victims or criticize them, demonstrating negative behavior that is humiliating for battered women and may lead to re-victimization. Accordingly, such behaviors often inhibit the willingness of victims to exercise their legal rights, and their trust in the Authorities (Muftić & Cruze, 2014). It appears that the Police have not been embedded in the perception of domestic violence victims as a provider of assistance. On the contrary, in many cases, victims of IV feel that their co-operation with police Authorities can put them at greater risk of escalating violence against them when the perpetrator's actions are revealed and the arrest process initiated. Recent studies show that while the overall percentage of women experience systematic violence is around 20% -30%, officially, only half of them are in contact with the Police (Rose, 2015).

The probability of a failed police intervention in cases of domestic violence increases if one considers the working culture of the “security forces”, which wish to participate in the prosecution of criminals and not to standard procedures that lack action (Artinopoulou and Maganas, 1996). The multidimensional role of the Police also acts as a pretext for many officers, creating room for self-action and devaluation of events that are inconsistent with their “tasks”. An interesting study of Papakonstantis et al. (2007) points out that the factors influencing the behavior of police officers towards domestic violence are summarized as follows: (a) official rules and ethics; (b) professional culture (ideology-personal experiences-mentality of the Police force) (c) education, (d) the social perceptions of police officers on the phenomenon of domestic violence, (e) the stereotypes and prejudices that exist before entering the force (Papakonstantis, Antoniadis, Manolidaki and Panagiotidou, 2007:295-304).

Other factors that affect police decisions to deal with an incident of DV include the circumstances of the incident, the organizational status of the officers and the police station as a distinct unit, the community-area, the race /nationality of perpetrators and victims (Lee, Zhang, and Hoover, 2013).

In Greece, due to the absence of official data, there is no clear picture of how the police Authorities respond to incidents of DV. More generally, there seems to be a difficulty in Police cooperation with other agencies, health professionals and victim support structures (Chatzifotiou, Fotou, and Moisides, 2016). The need for a comprehensive record of perpetrators by the Police Authorities is also highlighted. The only nationwide effort to gather statistical data shows that in 2011 in 19 of the 53 Police Head Departments of the country, 409 incidents of DV were reported with 422 offenders, of whom 94% were men (Petropoulos, Fotou, Ranjan, Chatzifotiou, and Dimadi, 2016).

In December 2017, a two-year European project was launched in Greece, co-funded by the European Union's "Rights, Equality and Citizenship 2014-2020" program<sup>3</sup>. The project was titled "ARIADNE: Developing and supporting multi-sectoral police reporting procedures to prevent and respond to domestic violence against women" and included, among others, the reporting of DV against women to the Police, managing cases in the light of the victim-centered approach, as well as police cooperation with agencies, professionals and victim support services.<sup>4</sup> The main findings of the surveys conducted in the project are presented below.

### 3. Research results of ARIADNE project

Within the framework of “ARIADNE” project has been several research actions aimed at recording the perceptions of women victims of IV, as well as the perceptions of police officers, about the role that the Police can play in the management of relevant incidents in addition with the evaluation of the cooperation between the two parties.

#### 3.1. The views of women victims of intimate violence

One of the studies carried out in the framework of the project concerned interviews with eighteen (18) women who were victims of IV and during the research period were staying in shelters for abused women, in Athens. The purpose of the interviews was to investigate the use of police assistance from the women victims in the process of reporting incidents of violence to police Authorities. The main findings of the survey show that compared to the past, the level of cooperation between the abused women and the Greek Police has improved according to the findings of previous studies (Papakonstantis, Antoniadou, Manolidakis and Panagiotidou, 2007); Gatsas, 2008), although Police remain an agency to which women not easily addressed.

In particular, the respondents said they did not seek help from official agencies, since the beginning of the violence, as they hoped that abuse would not continue. One important reason not to disclose their abuse is the fear of the offender's reaction, but above all the feeling of "helplessness", especially when they have nowhere to go / stay with their children. It seems that revealing their abuse and seeking help comes when violence becomes more serious or more dangerous for themselves and their children, when they feel their life is threatened. However, even when most of the women in the sample decided to ask for help, they approached friends and relatives, while 28% turned to a counseling center or a welfare structure and only 5, 5% approached the Police.

<sup>3</sup> Reference number: JUST/2015/RDAP/AG/MULT/9858

<sup>4</sup> The ARIADNE project was implemented by a consortium of Greek partners with coordinating partner the Center for Safety Studies (KEMEA). The author was the head of the research team and a member of the scientific team representing the Equality Research Center. (KETHI). For more information <https://ariadnenetwork.eu/>

The reluctance of victims to contact the Police appears to be largely related to their attempt to protect the image of the family (offender and children), their desire not to harm the perpetrator, or the consideration of the reporting process as a stressful event. It is worth mentioning that 17% of respondents consider that the Police / Public Prosecutor cannot help them. These findings corresponding to other studies, where it appears that victims of DV are less likely than victims of other forms of violence to contact the Police, mainly because of the fear of retaliation by the perpetrator or their attempt to protect him (Birdsey and Snowball, 2013; Felson, Messner, Hoskin and Deane, 2002). If someone does not know the characteristics of an abusive relationship, he/she will surely wondering with the victim's attitude, which is reluctant to denounce the offender and try to protect him. As Hoyle and Sanders (2000) have pointed out, arrest policies that emphasize victims' preferences are naive if they ignore the conditions that shape the victim's preferences.

The cooperation of the victims of abuse with the Police usually starts after having contact with a counseling center or entering a shelter. Victims of the sample who have come in contact with the Police (83%) report that they are usually informed that domestic violence is a criminal offense and that the crime is prosecuted ex officio. In more than half of the cases (57%) the police Authority initiated the criminal proceedings with most common actions, the automatic procedure and the referral of the victim to a forensic assessment. There remain a 43% of cases in which no criminal proceedings initiated by the Police. It is noteworthy that as reported by women in 36% of cases, the police officers encouraged victims to reconcile with the perpetrator, and very often (64%) there is no referral to victim support agencies by the Police.

The sample population is positively assessing the behavior of the police officers with whom they collaborated. Typically, women said that they were polite, reassuring, showing interest and tried to help them. The general assessment of the victims for the role that the Police can play in DV cases includes, proposals on the upgraded role that Police should have in providing victim and child safety, better information, more direct response / intervention , specialized knowledge / skills to manage these incidents and support victims, both psychologically and practically, through referral to specialized professionals / Services.

### **3.2. The views of the police officers**

In "ARIANDE" project, in addition to the survey of women - victims of IV, interviews with sixteen police officers (12 men and 4 women) and a focus group discussion involving eight (8) police officers (5 men and 3 women) were contacted. The purpose of the interviews and the focus group discussion was to record the attitudes and perceptions of police officers on domestic violence against women, as well as recording through self-report and evaluation the operational readiness, and the obstacles they face in managing relevant incidents. The main findings of the interviews include the fact that the large majority (88%) of the respondents believe that domestic violence should be treated as a social problem, while 56% believe that the extent of the IV in Greece has increased, on the one hand due to information and other legal provisions favorable to the victim (ex officio offense, non-payment fee, etc.) on the other, because of the economic crisis from which the country is suffering the last ten years. They pointed out that there are still an undefined "dark" number of non-reported cases. Police officers, based on their professional experience, state that the majority of abused women resort to the police department primarily to get advice and psychological support and not to sue the perpetrator. They consider that inhibiting factors for not reporting abuse are the economic and emotional dependence of the victim on the perpetrator and the existence of children.

A remarkable finding that reflects the attitudes of police officers on domestic violence is the fact that respondents in their vast majority (81%) believe that in cases of small-scale domestic violence (verbal violence or aggressive behavior), namely "light" violence, the couple should find a way to resolve its differences in order to preserve the family/ relationship. If there is a repeat of the incidents, then the couple should refer to specialists and if there is physical violence to be reported directly to the Authorities. Therefore, respondents consider that only the serious incidents of physical and sexual violence must be immediately reported to the Authorities in order to prevent further abuse. In line with this view, the majority (75%) of the questioned police officers reported that they have attempted to change the opinion of a woman in order to reconcile with the perpetrator, but only in cases of verbal / psychological violence and only when the episodes were not repetitive. Instead, their mobilization is immediate in cases of physical violence, with visible signs of physical harm, where the ex officio procedure is followed in reporting the crime.

An interesting finding of the study demonstrating the low level of cross-sectoral police cooperation with institutions and services for the assistance of victims of DV, as well as the weak role the Police perform in relation to the referral of victims to other agencies, is that 50% of police respondents did not know to which agencies (counseling centers, shelters, etc.) to refer victims of abuse or state that should not have had to do so. Regarding, the assessment of the operational preparedness of the Police in dealing with cases of DV, the overwhelming majority of respondents (93%) state that they need further training on domestic violence issues. In particular, the need for training is focused on the management of incidents of abuse in a practical way (case studies and on the job training by specialized scientists and police officers), the management of the offender and the victim, the approach and communication with the victim, the way of filing and collecting data to refer the cases to the Prosecutor's Office.

Finally, for the respondents, the most critical points for the Police in dealing with DV cases are (a) the shortcomings of the legal framework (for example: a case may take between 2 and 2.5 years until it is judged and by that time the offender is free, there is a serious problem for the protection of the victim after the prosecution, etc.), b) the interconnection of the Police with specialized Services and professionals as well as with public hospitals and educational institutions, c) shortages in the shelters that can host the victims of DV and their children; and (d) coordinating the actors involved in domestic violence.

#### **4. Limitations of the Current Studies**

Some limitations of the ARIANDE project's studies that are presented are worth noting. Initially, although the surveys were qualitative and were based on interviews, the representativeness of the participants with respect to the ranked populations and their characteristics (abused women and police officers) should be examined with caution. Specifically, the sample of women victims of intimate violence was living during the period of the study in shelters for victims of gender-based violence. It may have been a sample of convenience, but it should not be overlooked that the interviewed women are victims who have already been mobilized and received support to cope with the crisis they are experiencing. Also, they might have contact Police as their entry into shelters means that they have experienced serious physical and / or sexual violence and their life is in danger. In that case, the level of cooperation is probably different because of their reality. Future research is suggested to reach also abused women who are experiencing other forms of violence (psychological, social and economic) and have less involvement in the system of aid agencies. Also, the police population should not be considered representative of the police force in Greece, as the sample had limitations on its characteristics (age, educational level, marital status) in addition to the small number of participants. Future research will be useful to examine the attitudes and perceptions of police officers about domestic violence based on gender and other socio-demographic characteristics.

#### **5. Conclusions**

The role of the Police Authorities in modern states worldwide, concerns the control and enforcement of public order, which make imperative that law and police officers operate seamlessly, equally and without discrimination towards every citizen. Particularly in the cases of DV it is necessary the Police to operate as an institution properly, in order to respond more effectively to the phenomenon (Chatzifotiou et al., 2016). However, the action of the police towards the arrest of domestic violence perpetrator is not a panacea, nor sufficient in itself. According to Xie and Lynch (2016) the risk for the escalation of violence against the victim of domestic violence does not only depend on the arrest of the offender, but mainly from services provided to victims on the basis of their needs and the assessment of their situation. Despite the efforts that have been made in the past with regard to the role that the Police can play in preventing and managing cases of DV against women, it appears that the goals have not yet been achieved. Victims find it difficult to report the perpetrators to the Police for reasons relating to both the relationship, and the perception that they still have on the effectiveness of the Police to support and help them. On the other hand, while there is a legal obligation on the part of the Police to assist the victims of any crime and to prosecute the perpetrators, in practice there is a reluctance and weakness of the police officers to deal with the particular crime of domestic violence.

The failure of the Police to respond to its role appears not only in the low rates of victims' reporting and the small number of perpetrators' arrests, but also in the incomplete recording of statistics relating to domestic violence. It is a fact that the Police play a very important role in collecting data from the early stages of the criminal proceedings. Even in cases that do not result in criminal prosecution, the collection of information and accurate recording spousal violence incidents as reported to the police, can give a more complete picture of the extent of the phenomenon and the characteristics of the involved parties.

Usually, judicial statistics include more information about the perpetrator of crime, and there is a shortage of information about the victim, which can be covered through information and data collection from the Police side. Police data reveals how many recorded crimes do not reach court and the effectiveness of policies meant to protect victims of violence (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2018a).

In Greece there is currently no legal or policy framework in place to regulate data collection on intimate partner violence or violence against women. According to the text of Recommendations from the European Institute for Gender Equality (2018b:2): *«Developing such frameworks would be useful to support the move towards a comprehensive harmonisation of data collection across the police and justice sectors. It would also provide a catalyst for the implementation of policies which aim at improving the quality of the data collected on intimate partner violence and would strengthen the collaboration between institutions responsible for collecting data on intimate partner violence at the national level».*

On the other hand, the reluctance of the Police to deal with DV cases looks more like perplexity and is closely linked to the operational action and preparedness of the Police in dealing with DV cases, the culture of the "force", but also the stereotypical perceptions of the Police regarding the privacy of relationships, the social stereotypes for both genders and the real causes of the phenomenon.

It is a common assumption and also a finding of the surveys conducted in "ARIANDE" project that, police officers seeking to improve cross-sectoral cooperation with other agencies and specialized training on the treatment of the DV victims.

Particularly in the field of cross-sectoral cooperation must be included that the police Authorities are called upon to resolve cases of DV, to protect the victim, and other family members, in an environment where not only the victim of the abusive relationship acts, but many other groups of actors, formal and informal, which affect the life and the decisions of the victim. Informal actors include groups more or less familiar to the victim, such as the family-friendly environment, friends, colleagues, etc. Typical (formal) actors include those organizations that are active in providing relief and support to the victim of domestic violence, counseling centers and shelters, even religious and therapeutic groups. Many factors interact with the decisions taken by an abused woman, but also with the perception that shapes her, the others and the abusive context where she lived in. The cooperation of police Authorities with other actors and professionals who play an important role in the life of the victim during the disclosure of abuse and search for assistance should be considered as a prerequisite for effective intervention.

For that reason, the Police need to be encouraged, but also seek to participate in groups of professionals from various sectors (such as social workers, doctors, nurses, psychologists, lawyers, etc.) who represents agencies and Services that assist victims of domestic violence. A co-ordinate cross-sectoral group can effectively deal with various issues arising in the management of domestic violence, such as (Domestic Violence Police Guidelines, 2013: 5):

- Defining roles and responsibilities for actors involved in providing services to the victim
- Providing assistance to the victim and her children even when no criminal prosecution is involved or the case never reached the court
- Establish criteria for case assessment, process control and quality assurance in service provision
- Coordination of intervention in the case of cross-sectoral cooperation
- Ensuring the privacy and protection of personal data of parties involved in the exchange of information between agencies
- Risk assessment and planning of a safety plan for the victim and her children
- Develop a local strategy to prevent repeat victimization, including monitoring the progress of victims of DV
- Development of early intervention and prevention programs addressing DV.

Regarding the training of police officers on issues related to the analysis and interpretation of the phenomenon of DV in general, and the spouse abuse in particular, it should be noted that it remains a constant demand and a challenge. We must confess that professionals who come into contact with victims of DV can understand that the reality experienced by the victims is harsh and causes intense emotional pain, regardless the presence of physical pain. Victims of domestic violence, as recorded in the literature, live in a constant crisis, experience intense feelings of fear, despair, shame, distress, emotions that express when they are in front of a professional from whom they expect to be lead to a safe path for themselves and their children.

Emotional charge is transferred to the professional and intensifies especially when the woman brings with her, her children, directly or indirectly victims of abuse. In the case of professionals who have been trained, techniques are developed to decongest the professional from emotional tension. But what about the police officers who have to handle such situations? As noted in the “Handbook for Police Responding to Domestic Violence”, published by the Centre for Children and Families in the Justice System (2004:2) “...domestic violence intervention is one of the most difficult aspects of policing. Any training efforts have to begin with an appreciation of the perspectives of police officers...”

According to Horwitz et al. (2011) although the criminalization of DV has brought police officers to the front line to tackle it, little is known about the way they perceive this serious social problem and even less about the way they are experiencing their role in it. The authors, through a focus group discussion with 22 police officers, attempted to record, inter alia, their emotional response to calls to manage cases of DV. The participants reported their disappointment about the repeat nature of DV and the lack of accountability of other systems involved in dealing with cases, following police actions, such as the courts, public prosecutors and the community. Additionally, police officers said that they need more professional training and expertise, guidance from other professionals, especially regarding the treatment of the DV victim, better and more detailed information on the cases they have dealt with, including feedback and follow-up and better co-operation between other professionals (Horwitz, Mitchell, LaRussa-Trott, Santiago, Pearson, Skiff and Cerulli, 2011).

Therefore, training programs aimed at police officers to improve their knowledge and to develop their skills for better management of DV cases should be designed based on real needs, as experienced by the professionals themselves. At the same time, training programs for the Police should not omit issues such as:

- Analysis and interpretation of domestic violence as a form of gender- based violence
- Analysis of the offending relationship and its physical, psychological and social effects on victims
- Presentation of the risks faced by victims of abuse and how these risks affect their decisions
- Cultivation of empathy and the “art of collaboration”.

Each training intervention should be accompanied by practical tools for police officers to perform their duties, advisory support from other more experienced police officers, as well as experts, control and accountability. Of course, it should not be forgotten that the success of police action in safeguarding the safety of the victim, preventing crime, investigating and detecting crimes and prosecuting offenders can only take place in steady and continuous steps, commitment to the goal by the political leaderships of the relevant Ministries and the leadership of the Police. The involved actors “... must act decisively to make this an operational reality. It must become everyone’s business ... rather than someone else’s problem” (HM Inspectorate of Constabulary, 2014:18).

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