

Institute on  
Gender Equality and  
Women's History



## **Comments on 'The prevalence of domestic violence and child abuse in the Netherlands' (2019)**

**Shadow report of Atria for GREVIO Commission  
Monitoring mission to the Netherlands  
March 11-15, 2019**

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## Introduction

The Council of Europe (COE) GREVIO Committee will visit the Netherlands (March 11-15, 2019) to monitor the implementation of the COE Istanbul Convention (IC) in the Netherlands. *Atria, National Institute on Gender Equality and Women's History* hereby wishes to submit an additional report to the Committee. *Atria* is also part of the Dutch CEDAW Network of NGOs and, in that capacity, contributed to the general *Shadow Report* to GREVIO in October 2018.<sup>1</sup>

The reason for this additional submission is the recent publication (February 6, 2019) of a prevalence study in the Netherlands on domestic violence and child abuse. The study was commissioned by the Dutch Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport and the Ministry of Justice and Security. The coordination and overall analysis (“synthesis report”) of the study has been conducted by the Research and Documentation Centre at the Ministry of Justice and Security (hereafter: WODC-study).<sup>2</sup> The study is *inter alia* intended to provide empirical data for Dutch national policy makers.

Since the IC contains specific obligations for States to conduct research<sup>3</sup> and more generally to realize gender sensitivity in its policies and measures,<sup>4</sup> the publication of this study is timely and merits careful attention in the context of the GREVIO monitoring mission.

From that perspective, *Atria*—as an independent national knowledge institute on gender equality, and with specific expertise in gender research—wishes to provide a brief analysis of the study and its results to GREVIO. While the study is to be welcomed for a more explicit acknowledgement of the need for gender specific research, limitations in the design, data collection and data analysis merit attention. This first analysis is limited to the part of the study regarding domestic violence between adults and is not intended to be exhaustive.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Dutch CEDAW Network, *Joining forces to break the circle of violence against women*. October 2018. <https://rm.coe.int/dutch-ngo-shadow-report-istanbul-convention-30oct2018-def/16808eb417>

<sup>2</sup> Boom, A. ten, K. Wittebrood (2019), *De prevalentie van huiselijk geweld en kindermishandeling in Nederland*. (‘The prevalence of domestic violence and child abuse in the Netherlands’). Den Haag: Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek en Documentatie Centrum (WODC). Cahier 2019-1 [file:///S:/Cluster%20Onderzoek%20&%20Advies/THEMAS/Veiligheid/WODC%20huiselijk%20geweld/Cahier%202019-1\\_2668i%20Volledige%20tekst\\_tcm28-374137\\_syntheserapport.pdf](file:///S:/Cluster%20Onderzoek%20&%20Advies/THEMAS/Veiligheid/WODC%20huiselijk%20geweld/Cahier%202019-1_2668i%20Volledige%20tekst_tcm28-374137_syntheserapport.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> See Art. 11 of the IC, para 1a and notably para 2. “1. For the purpose of the implementation of this Convention, Parties shall undertake to: a. collect disaggregated relevant statistical data at regular intervals on cases of all forms of violence covered by the scope of this Convention.” (...) 2 “Parties shall endeavour to conduct population-based surveys at regular intervals to assess the prevalence of and trends in all forms of violence covered by the scope of this Convention.”

<sup>4</sup> See Art. 6 of the IC.

<sup>5</sup> For an English summary: [https://www.wodc.nl/binaries/Cahier%202019-1\\_2668i%20\\_Summary\\_tcm28-374134.pdf](https://www.wodc.nl/binaries/Cahier%202019-1_2668i%20_Summary_tcm28-374134.pdf) The— “synthesis study” - builds on a large scale self-report prevalence survey among a representative sample, a capture/recapture analysis of police registrations of domestic violence, and two survey studies on negative experiences as a child, including experiences with physical and/or sexual abuse.

In the aforementioned *Shadow Report*, para 14 contains critical observations regarding the “Lack of systematic data collection on all forms of violence against women”. Atria wishes to reiterate the importance of recommendations already included in the Shadow Report that also impact improvement of data collection, notably the need to establish a *National Rapporteur on VAW and DV*, and the need for *disaggregated statistics* on intersectional characteristics of victims of DV applying for various kinds of support (like: gender, social class, migrant background, sexual orientation).

Before turning to the substantive comments, it is fitting to provide some background information on prevalence studies in the Netherlands in order to properly contextualize the 2019 study.

#### *Brief history of Dutch prevalence research on domestic violence*

The first two national prevalence studies on forms of violence against women were conducted in the 1980s (national surveys among representative samples, face-to-face interviews by specially trained interviewers). The focus was respectively on sexual child abuse and on intimate partner violence against women.<sup>6</sup> The Netherlands was in the vanguard in Europe with these prevalence studies.

During the 1990s and the first decade of the new millennium, government-based research funding for violence against women and domestic violence decreased, with one study conducted in the late 1990s.<sup>7</sup> On several occasions in its country reports on the Netherlands the CEDAW-committee has observed the “Lack of systematic data collection on violence against women disaggregated across all forms of violence and group”.<sup>8</sup>

After 2005 efforts were renewed (by the joint Ministries of Social Affairs, Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sports and the Ministry of Justice) to update prevalence research on domestic violence. This resulted in a large-scale self report survey in 2010, spearheaded by the coordinating Ministry of Justice and conducted by the WODC research department at the Ministry. In the study the violence concept was broadened like in the study conducted in 1997 : it focused on prevalence of domestic violence against *both* women and men, and the group of perpetrators were *extended* to include all household members (including non-partners, members sharing the household or regular ‘house friends’). The study applied new methods (written questionnaires, new operationalizations, on-line sampling). In the results much attention was paid to what was presented as an increasing level of male victimization of domestic violence by women (findings suggested that 40% of the victims of domestic violence (hereafter: DV) were male and 60% female). Due to different methodologies findings were hard to compare with results from earlier surveys (in the Netherlands and international surveys).

This study met with profound critiques by academic gender researchers on what was referred to as ‘lack of gender sensitivity’ and ‘methodological flaws’. The critique, communicated to the Minister of

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<sup>6</sup> Draijer, N (1988) Seksueel misbruik van meisjes door verwanten. Den Haag: Ministerie van Sociale Zaken. Römken, R (1989), *Onder ons gezegd en gezwezen* (1989). Rijswijk: Ministerie van Welzijn, Volksgezondheid en Cultuur. Römken, R (1997), Prevalence of wife abuse in the Netherlands. Combining quantitative and qualitative methods. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*. 12, 1, 99-125.

<sup>7</sup> In 1997 a survey was conducted on ‘domestic violence’ using a broadened concept of “violence by any member of the household”, Results were difficult to compare to data from earlier research. See; Dijk, T. van, Flight, S., Oppenhuis E., & Duesmann, B. (1997). *Huiselijk geweld, Aard, omvang en hulpverlening*. Den Haag: Intomart, Sociaal Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek.

<sup>8</sup> See e.g.: UN CEDAW, Concluding Observations on the Sixth Periodic Report of the Netherlands [https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/1654601/files/CEDAW\\_C\\_NLD\\_CO\\_6\\_Add-1-EN.pdf](https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/1654601/files/CEDAW_C_NLD_CO_6_Add-1-EN.pdf)

Security of Justice, regarded: 1. Limitations in reliability due to research method (bias due to internet sampling), 2. Limitations in validity: lack of gender sensitivity in operationalization and analysis, 3. International isolationism (lack of comparability of results with international research data), and 4. Non-compliance with international obligations according to CEDAW.<sup>9</sup>

The ratification of the IC in the Netherlands took place on November 18, 2015. In order to effectively address the critiques mentioned above, several advisory research reports have been commissioned by WODC as preparation for the 2019 study, *inter alia* on how to improve the quality of data collection on gender differences and how to develop a more gender sensitive methodology when researching DV. The advisory report on how to improve gender sensitivity in research focused on intimate partner violence (it is referred to as ‘gender advice’ in the 2019 prevalence report). It is important to note that when the advisory report was commissioned, the starting point was that results of any new study had to be comparable with the 2010 study in order to establish ‘trends’. Options to advise on methodological changes were therefor limited.

In the synthesis report the researchers carefully elaborate on the issue of gender sensitivity and indicate that substantive improvements have been made in the 2019 study to address gender issues. However, researchers are also explicit about how adjustment of some parts of the data collection, process while maintaining the initial overall methodological design, created data sets that are not easy comparable (*inter alia*: adding a small study on relational dynamics while maintaining operationalizations used in the survey questionnaire. As a consequence some data reveal internal inconsistencies that are hard to interpret. It deserves appreciation that the underlying sub-reports are transparent in their reporting of the pros and cons of the methodology used.

Against this background, we address the following questions:

- To which extent has the 2019 study succeeded in improving the quality (reliability and validity) of data on domestic violence between (ex-)partners.
- To which extent does the study generally meet the requirements of the IC regarding gender sensitivity.

### Main comments on ‘The prevalence of domestic violence and child abuse in the Netherlands’ (2019)

The 2019- survey report represents an important step forward by recognizing that gender sensitivity in research into domestic violence deserves more attention. The 2019 report contains a chapter dedicated to a theoretical and research-based reflection on the relationship between gender and violence. Attempts have been made to go beyond the basic reporting of differences between women and men, underlining the importance of addressing the relational dynamics, sexual aspects of violence, motivational aspects and consequences for the victims. However, the preliminary ‘gender advice’ to profoundly address qualitative gender aspects in the empirical study has been only partially realized.

In its conclusions the report emphasizes gender differences in prevalence, notably the substantially greater risk that women run to become victims of (ex-)partner –violence than men. Upon close

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<sup>9</sup> Letter to mr. Opstelten, Minister of Justice and Security of March 28, 2011 (prof. dr. Mieke Verloo, prof. dr. Toine Lagro-Janssen).

examination however, both the reliability and validity of the prevalence study and the reported gender related differences demonstrate profound limitations, some of which are acknowledged by the researchers in their report. We list the main concerns below.

**1. Validity and operationalization of domestic violence:**

- The concept of domestic violence is broad and focuses in the survey on behavioral acts (not motivations) by all members in the household and ‘house friends’. In the presentation of *overall* prevalence data, figures for men and women are presented as if they refer to similar violence over the past five years (“*one in 20 adults (5.5%) have experienced some incident involving physical and/or sexual violence in the home setting*”). In follow-up analyses, profound gender differences are revealed. *Inter alia*: almost 44% of all DV cases is perpetrated by household members/ friends. Household members perpetrating DV turn out to be predominantly male family members targeting each other. Women are mostly victimized by (ex-)partners. The initial use of a neutral and generalized overall figure of DV masks profound qualitative differences in violence that centre around gender (differences in prevalence, nature, power differentials, relational dynamics of control, consequences). It raises the basic question about validity: do we measure what we say we measure when we end up with results referring to very different kinds of ‘domestic violence’? From that perspective it is crucial that gender differences are presented upfront.
- In additional research (n=85), efforts have been made to investigate relational aspects of power and control related to DV. In the reporting these results are shown as a relative separate part of the data. Notably respondents who reported to be single were excluded from this study, therefore data of women who were victimized by an ex-partner have not been analyzed, whereas they belong to the group that is known to report significantly more violence than women who are still in the relationship. The in-depth study into gender dynamics has not been integrated. In this respect the synthesis report is hampered when addressing the complexities of the research. This is also reflected in the gap between the theoretical considerations (reflecting gender sensitivity) and the subsequent free- standing presentation of empirical results.

2. **Reliability self report prevalence study:** The design of the **self report** prevalence study among an on-line panel ( criticized in 2010 for its implied selectiveness in sampling, now randomly selected ) was used again in the interest of comparability and in the hope of establishing trends in the data (sample size: 5,876). In order to investigate the potential selectiveness, a second population-based sample-survey was added on (conducted by the CBS - Central Bureau of Statistics; sample size: 6,835). In short: the 2019 study had to meet two different comparative goals. First, to compare prevalence results *between* the studies of 2010 and 2019 (based on data from similar on-line samples). The goal is to answer one of the recurring question of policy makers : has prevalence of DV increased or decreased over time?

And what can be said about the impact of policies on changes in reported violence? The second goal was more methodological, to compare *within* the 2019 study whether the use of different

sampling techniques yielded different prevalence data. However, the synthesis report ultimately focuses on the data of the latter survey. The argument was that the data from the on-line panel survey were considered less reliable. This raises several interrelated questions and concerns about the reliability of data and the limitations to compare results and establish trends:

- *Comparability*: The 2019 prevalence data are based on the population-based survey that is new in its methodology compared to the 2010 study. The recent results are lower than those in the 2010 study. But it is virtually impossible to make a reliable comparison of data given the differences in sampling. Within the 2019 study, the prevalence of reported DV in the on-line panel survey are slightly higher than the prevalence data in the population-based sample. This raises profound questions on reliability (and validity) of each of the methods used. The report does not provide an in-depth analysis in this respect. The net result is that despite costly efforts to find out whether selectivity in sampling did affect the data, no comparison can be made.
- *Trends*: The report is initially upfront in its conclusion that trends cannot be established for the reasons just mentioned. The data are essentially too limited to offer a reliable indication for any trend. It is an unfortunate outcome, given the efforts made, certainly in light of the goal of comparability. *"The prevalence of domestic violence among adults measured in 2017 was lower than the prevalence measured in 2008<sup>10</sup> (...). Since the measurements are not entirely comparable with regard to the sampling, it is impossible to say with certainty what the degree is to which the observed decline does indeed reflect a real drop in domestic violence."* Despite the limitations in data, findings are framed as 'an observed decline' that is not 'certain' and leaves an opening for an interpretation that there might be a real decline. However, data on help-seeking behaviour of victims of DV in the Netherlands (police, GP, shelters, one-stop advisory service 'Veilig Thuis' – 'Safe home') are consistently high. Although help-seeking statistics of any kind are never a reliable indicator of prevalence of the problem in the population, the fact that it remains high across various professional services is certainly an indication that does not support a decline of the underlying problem; quite the contrary.
- *Under-reporting*: Focusing on victims of (ex-)partner violence, the five-year prevalence figures are 4% for women and 2% for men. This victimization rate is relatively low from an international perspective, certainly when looking at the results from the VAW-survey of FRA.<sup>11</sup> The Dutch general prevalence data (all forms of domestic violence, including live-in relatives, household members or 'house friends') for a five- year period are relatively low. This is also the case for reported violence from (ex-)partners (4% for women and 2% for men) (6.2% for women and 4.7% for men "When limited to physical violence no significant differences were found between reported victimization by women and men over the past five years (5,4% women and 4,5% men)."<sup>11</sup> Researchers acknowledge the fact that the design has prevented inclusion of more severe cases.

<sup>10</sup> Researchers refer to the years of *data collection*.

<sup>11</sup> Römken, R., H. Harthoorn, T. de Jong (2014), *Violence against women. European research data in a Dutch context*. Amsterdam: Atria (Analysis of the 2014 Fundamental Rights Agency – European survey data on violence against women for the Netherlands). See: [www.atria.nl](http://www.atria.nl)

The extremely low prevalence data on reported sexual violence (1.8% of women, 0.3% of men) indicate obvious under-reporting in light of the available prevalence data on sexual violence in the Netherlands.<sup>12</sup> One of the questions used was “Have you been raped?” (as it was in 2010). It is known from research that this loaded framing of the question evokes under-reporting, even in the context of less loaded questions.<sup>13</sup>

3. **Reliability of capture –recapture study to measure prevalence:** In 2010 critique was voiced that the capture –recapture method was essentially unfit to apply to the issue of DV, since one of the pre-conditions is not met (underlying police registrations have to be applied consistently yet in practice are too often inconsistent due to individual and/or systemic variation in registration). In the interest of comparability, and the wish to triangulate data collection and use multiple methods to estimate the prevalence of DV, the method was replicated in the 2019 study. According to the researchers the assumption was that the consistency of police registrations had improved over time. This assumption turned out to be groundless. The number of registrations of DV had actually declined substantially despite the remaining high level of interventions by the police, and the fact that regional inconsistencies in registrations had increased. The police data were flawed to the extent that the researchers considered them useless for the capture/recapture-method. The researchers have recommended that further research be conducted into the reasons for inconsistent registration of cases and the remedies for improving Dutch police registration of DV cases. *“Unfortunately, the second and independent method of estimating domestic violence (capture-recapture method (...)) yielded results which raise too many questions, so these prevalence estimates were not used. As a result it is not possible to create a timeline based on a non-survey method in order to confirm or refute the decline in domestic violence found in the self report study.”*<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Graaf, H. de, C. Wijzen (2017), Seksuele gezondheid in Nederland. (‘Sexual health in the Netherlands’). In 2017 experiences of sexual force were reported by 11% of young women and 2% of young men (between the age of 12 and 25). [https://www.rutgers.nl/sites/rutgersnl/files/PDF-Onderzoek/Seksuele\\_Gezondheid\\_in\\_NL\\_2017\\_23012018.pdf](https://www.rutgers.nl/sites/rutgersnl/files/PDF-Onderzoek/Seksuele_Gezondheid_in_NL_2017_23012018.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> Three other questions on sexual force were included in the questionnaire ( here in English translation): ‘Efforts were made to force sex upon you’, ‘You have been forced to perform sexual acts by your current or ex-partner’ and ‘An other form of sexual violence has been committed against you’. The low prevalence figures indicate that the added questions did not prevent underreporting.

<sup>14</sup> P. 107 Summary report

## Conclusions

The analysis of the results of the recently published Dutch study (February 2019) of WODC, commissioned by the Ministry of Justice and Security and the Ministry of Welfare, Health and Sport on (*inter alia*) prevalence of domestic violence, yields mixed results and gives reason to be cautious. With respect to the quality of research data and their gender sensitivity the 2019 study leaves substantial room for improvement in order to meet the requirements of the Istanbul Convention.

An important step forward is that the need for gender sensitive research is addressed more explicitly than in an earlier study (2010) commissioned by Dutch Ministries. Efforts have been made to improve the gender sensitivity of the study. The study unfortunately fails in fully realizing its intentions. Although some limitations (like under-reporting) are addressed, in the end they are also implicitly minimized because the prevalence figures are presented as factual results. To a certain extent the researchers have been transparent about the limitations. In the report the need for improvement is acknowledged. These can be made in terms of the quality of design, data collection and data analysis.

Concerning the design, the study design seems to have been held hostage to methodological choices made in the past. While critiques have been acknowledged, the basic method and design have been maintained. Researchers chose to replicate some methods and add on others. This has resulted in a costly and inconsistent form of triangulation. The core research goal has not been achieved: producing reliable prevalence data that allow for comparison over time. Efforts to include a balanced methodology in order to address gender issues have delivered limited results or results that were too unreliable to report and/or analyse. In the past Atria has recommended that international comparability is an important consideration when choosing survey designs.<sup>15</sup> The Fundamental Rights Agency survey on violence against women provides an excellent example of high quality design and gender sensitive operationalizations, yielding a higher level of reported violence. In order to achieve improvements, it is important to allow for new approaches.

Some of the limitations mentioned relate to the limited gender sensitivity in the implementation of the study (data collection, data analysis). There is a need for research that is focused on gender related differences between male and female victimization as well as perpetratorship, while acknowledging and understanding how ethnic and cultural differences intersect with gender related risks. Findings of gender differences merit more in-depth and integrated analysis.

Domestic violence is a violation of fundamental rights that affects women disproportionately. The toll is too high, both for individuals and society. The Istanbul Convention is groundbreaking in its call upon States to conduct gender sensitive research into all forms of violence against women. Enhancing the quality of research data is crucial to develop effective policies that are empowering for women and foster social justice for all.

March 15, 2019

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<sup>15</sup> Supra note 9.