

IPV-PRO&POL

Intimate Partner Violence: impact, processes, evolution and related public policies in Belgium

DURATION

1/01/2017 - 15/04/2020

1/01/2018 - 15/04/2021

BUDGET

612.223 €

417.777 €

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Context

Presently, Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) has truly emerged as a major societal challenge. The mass media increasingly cover dramatic cases of IPV, awareness campaigns for the general public are launched, and after centuries of silence in criminal law and policy, recent decades have been marked by increasing recourse to legal action and a rise in penalization of intimate partner violence, hitherto commonly considered as belonging only to the private sphere. Furthermore, although it took a long historical process for IPV to appear on the political agenda, since 2001 in Belgium, IPV has been the subject of a public policy defined in a National concerted Action Plan (NAP) between the Federal State, the Communities and the Regions, involving multiple areas and actors: police, justice, health, welfare, education, or development cooperation.

General objectives and underlying research questions

The objective of the project is to study IPV from a dual approach: discussing the impact of the phenomenon and the complex processes from which it results and also considering it from the angle of the public policies developed in this matter. The aim is to link these two approaches in order to propose a better articulation between the media discourse, the scientific knowledge on IPV, and public policies.

An analysis of the impact first implies questioning the definition of the phenomenon, pointed out as problematical in the scientific literature. Is there evidence to define IPV in terms of gender domination relations, as feminist interpretations suggest? How can we derive meaning from this interpretation, especially in the light of research in psychology which has endeavoured to go beyond an analysis of profiles focusing on psychopathology towards one that looks into interactional dynamics decoded on the basis of notions of power, control and insecurity? And what about so-called situational factors? To what extent are non-traditional relations (such as same sex relations) adequately captured in definitions and policies on IPV? How can we understand IPV and critically assess policies from a perspective that considers the intersections between gender, class, ethnicity, citizenship, age and/or other relevant dimensions of inequality and exclusion? What are the issues at stake in these different interpretations in terms of defining a public policy and drafting a criminal policy? How do these visions correspond to the reality of situations referred to justice? And lastly, is there evidence that IPV is on the rise, or rather is it more a matter of changes in the way these behaviours and the insecurity they generate are perceived?

The multi-level governance approach suggested in the NAP constitutes a real challenge. But to date, there is little knowledge about the effectiveness of the proposed transversal practices and about their efficiency in terms of curbing IPV or giving adequate responses to the affected citizens. Data show that while the criminal justice system has increasingly been asked to deal with intimate partner violence, at the same time a quite relative success in criminal intervention has been observed in this area. Research points out that the zero tolerance policy promoted during the last decades seeks to deter and to send a symbolic message, but is not usually very effective in instrumental terms. How have public policies evolved in this matter? How have the roles of, and the interactions between “police”, “justice” and “welfare” been changed? Does the increasing recourse to legal action reflect a decline of welfare resources or rather a decreasing use of available services, and, in such case, what are the reasons? What forms of coordination can be observed and how to think about the specific function of each institution? What about public opinion and social representations in this area and how do they shape the practices of the various actors?



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Methodology and interdisciplinarity

In order to answer these questions, the research project will combine different approaches, which is made possible by the multidisciplinary network's composition including historians, (socio)criminologists, psychologists, demographers, gender studies and socio-political experts. Various methodologies will be developed: analysis of criminal files and files of associations, analysis of statistical data (police, justice, health, associations, etc.), analysis of public discourse, analysis of grey literature (shelters, associations, etc.), interviews with relevant stakeholders, interviews with victims and offenders. Some approaches appear a priori as more adequate in meeting the defined objectives: Life course studies ("pathway perspective"), actor-network analysis method and social network Delphi study.

Expected impact of the research on science, society and/or on decision-making and deliverables

The research aims (1) to improve the knowledge about the phenomenon of intimate partner violence and the role of public policies; (2) to produce an analysis of the consistency and inconsistencies between knowledge and public policies; (3) to promote the involvement of the decisions-makers (who will participate in the follow-up committee) and finally (4) to have an impact towards an efficient multi-level governance in this matter. In line with the objectives, we will produce several deliverables targeting the various actors: academic world, public (police, magistrates ...) and private (associations, social workers ...) stakeholders, medical sector (training for doctors ...) as well as the general public.

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