



# Support for migrant women who are victims of intimate partner violence

European guide for frontline professionals



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Year of publication: June 2025

This document was drafted as part of the European program "Citizens, Equality, Rights, and Values" (CERV).

**Funding:**

This publication has been made possible thanks to the financial support of the European commission's Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Program for the project CERV-2022-DAPHNE/101097049.

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# Introduction



# Introduction



Violence committed by an intimate partner is a widespread phenomenon that cuts across all layers of our societies, regardless of cultural, economic, or social contexts.

However, not all women are equally exposed to this violence. Among the most at-risk groups are migrant women, whose vulnerability is heightened by a combination of factors: unstable administrative status, social isolation, language barriers, lack of knowledge about protection mechanisms, and obstacles to accessing fundamental rights. In fact, this violence occurs at the intersection of several relationships of domination: gender, origin, social class, and immigration status.

## The context

Available studies confirm this **overexposure**: women with a migrant background are more likely to be victims of domestic violence, often in more **diverse** forms and with more **complex** consequences. According to the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights ( FRA), nearly 33% of migrant women in the European Union have been victims of physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner, compared to around 22% of women born in the host country<sup>1</sup>. And in France, according to the DREES, women born abroad account for 25% of women killed by their partners, even though they represent only about 12% of the adult female population<sup>2</sup>.

Yet women and girls, long invisible in migration flows, accounted for 48% of international migration in 2017, according to UN Women<sup>3</sup>.

This guide, the result of a collaboration between the *Mouvement pour l'Égalité entre les Femmes et les Hommes* and the *Collectif des Femmes*, takes an intersectional approach. It aims to equip frontline professionals so that they can better identify, understand, refer, and support migrant women facing intimate partner violence.

All of this work was based on the **Istanbul Convention**, adopted by the Council of Europe in 2014, which played a key role in establishing pan-European legal standards for prevention, victim protection, and punishment of perpetrators. It also recognizes that **unequal power relations** between men and women are a key factor in violence against women.

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<sup>1</sup> Collective Against Domestic Violence and Exclusion (CVFE). (2014). One third of European women have been victims of physical or sexual violence ( R. Begon). Online: <https://www.cvfe.be/publications/analyses/226-le-tiers-des-femmes-europeennes-a-ete-victime-de-violence-physique-ou-sexuelle>

<sup>2</sup> DREES. (2005). The experience of intolerant or discriminatory attitudes by immigrants. Studies & Results, No. 424. Online: <https://drees.solidarites-sante.gouv.fr/sites/default/files/er424.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Schoenmaeckers, D., & Rousset, C. (2018). Gender and migration. The world according to women. Online: <https://www.mondefemmes.org/product/genre-et-migration/>

For educational purposes and for clarity, this guide uses the feminine form to refer to victims and the masculine form to refer to perpetrators. However, it should be noted that **domestic violence can affect people of all genders**, and that the recommendations made here are intended for all victims, without distinction.

## The objectives of the guide

The European IPV-Migrants<sup>4</sup> project aims to equip frontline professionals—lawyers, social workers, health professionals, and members of the judiciary—to better understand the specificities of these situations and improve the quality of support offered to migrant women who are victims of domestic violence.

The main objective is to provide theoretical and practical guidelines to better identify situations of violence, adapt listening, referral, and support services, and effectively refer those affected to the appropriate resources. This guide also aims to equip professionals with a **more nuanced understanding of the specific obstacles** faced by migrant women in their journey to escape violence.

In concrete terms, the guide consists of two main parts:

- The first part is analytical, exploring the applicable legal framework, the mechanisms of domestic violence, the specificities of migration contexts, and the forms of institutional violence encountered by migrant women.
- A second, operational section proposes concrete tools: warning signs, specific points to watch out for, decision-making diagrams, and advice on care and referral.

It is therefore a cross-cutting tool that is both educational and practical, enabling users to question norms, strengthen their capacity for action, and offer structured support to professionals in the performance of their duties. The guide can be downloaded from the link below:

<https://violenceagainstmigrantwomen.eu/storage/docs/IPV-Migrants-Europeanguide.pdf>

or via the following QR code:



<sup>4</sup> European IPV-Migrants Project, Migrants social norms in intimate partner violence (Influence of social norms on violence within couples in families with a migrant background) (2025).

This guide is part of a broader initiative developed within the European IPV-Migrants project (Project: 101097049 – CERV-2022-DAPHNE)<sup>5</sup>, funded by the European Commission for the period 2023-2025. It complements other freely available resources:

- The **MOOC**<sup>6</sup> entitled "Migrant women victims of intimate partner violence. Understanding and supporting them": a free online course, accessible 24/7, allowing everyone to progress at their own pace. It includes assessment questions and a glossary of resources. This key component of the project is available online:

<https://violenceagainstmigrantwomen.eu/en/accueil/27>

or via the following QR code:



- **The tool "What to do when a migrant woman is a victim of intimate partner violence"**, is intended for frontline professionals. The aim is to equip them when they encounter migrant women who are victims of intimate partner violence. The tool can be downloaded from the MOOC at the following address:

<https://violenceagainstmigrantwomen.eu/storage/docs/IPV-Migrants-tool.pdf>

or via the following QR code:



The teaching materials, which can be downloaded from the MOOC (link above), offer face-to-face training.

By closely integrating this guide with the MOOC curriculum, the aim is to provide a comprehensive resource that is accessible to all professionals working with migrants and involved in combating intimate partner violence.

Together, these resources have a common goal: to improve the understanding, detection, and response to violence in migration, placing human rights and the fight against inequality at the heart of the response.

<sup>5</sup> The English version of the acronym IPV (Violence by an Intimate Partner) is IPV (Intimate Partner Violence).

<sup>6</sup> A MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) is an online course open to a wide audience, accessible free of charge or at a reduced cost. It can combine videos, interactive exercises, and discussion forums.

# 1 - UNDERSTANDING



# 1.1 Legal framework



Intimate partner violence against migrant women is a complex and pervasive issue, sometimes rooted in the legal framework itself. In the theoretical section, this first chapter examines regional instruments and national legislation to highlight the protections available.

## 1.1.1 The Istanbul Convention

The Istanbul Convention<sup>7</sup>, adopted by the Council of Europe in 2011 and entered into force in 2014, marks a **major turning point** in the fight against domestic violence and gender-based violence in Europe. This convention establishes a **binding legal framework** to prevent violence against women, protect victims, and prosecute perpetrators. It explicitly recognizes that domestic violence is a form of gender-based violence, highlighting the need to treat these acts not only as criminal offenses but also as human rights violations. **It should be noted that Belgium ratified the Istanbul Convention in 2016.** Following the ratification of this instrument by the European Union in June 2023, the Convention has become an integral part of the legal order of the European Union.

This text emphasizes the need to raise awareness, sensitize, and train professionals who work with victims. It promotes the implementation of comprehensive policies and preventive measures, such as awareness-raising campaigns and gender equality education from an early age. The Convention also attaches great importance to transnational cooperation, emphasizing the exchange of best practices and the strengthening of cooperation mechanisms between member states in order to combat this violence effectively.

The Istanbul Convention is unique in **its integrated approach**, which encompasses the prevention of violence, the protection of victims, the prosecution of perpetrators, and integrated policies. It requires states to change their national legislation to adopt these principles and to create specialized support services for those affected. The Convention also emphasizes the importance of **collecting information** and conducting **studies** to better understand and combat gender-based violence.

In addition, a chapter is devoted to migrant women in the Istanbul Convention (Chapter VII – Migration and asylum). **This is the first time that an international text has addressed the situation of migrant women who are victims of violence or asylum seekers.**

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<sup>7</sup> Council of Europe Convention. (2011). Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. Istanbul, May 11, 2011. Article 3b and Article 59. Online: <https://rm.coe.int/168008482e>

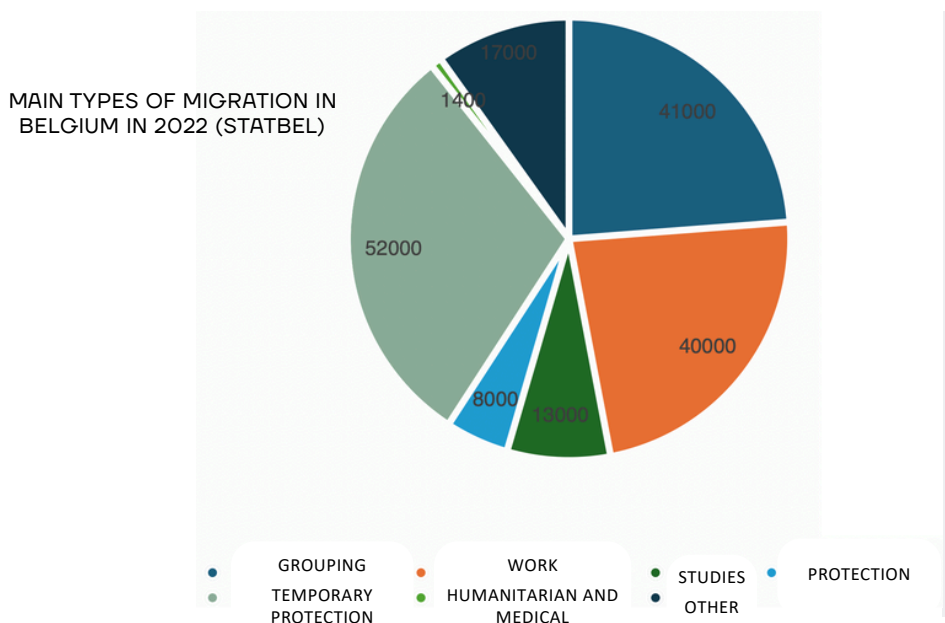
It provides that an independent residence permit must be granted to women victims of violence whose residence status depends on that of their spouse or partner in particularly difficult situations (Article 59), regardless of the duration of the marriage or relationship.

Furthermore, the Convention provides for the principle of non-refoulement for women victims of gender-based violence who seek international protection (Article 60). It also requires States to take into account the gender dimension in the reception and assessment of asylum applications from women victims of gender-based violence (Article 60). Finally, Article 4 .3 requires States Parties to respect the principle of non-discrimination, including on the basis of national origin, migrant or refugee status, or any other status.

In summary, the Istanbul Convention plays a crucial role in promoting a safer and more equal society where gender-based violence is no longer tolerated. Its implementation and concrete application in member states represent a commitment to protecting the rights of women and girls, as well as a major step forward in the fight against domestic violence in Europe.

### 1.1.2 National law

There are few legal channels for migration to the EU or Belgium in particular in the current context. Family reunification accounts for a significant proportion of migration to Belgium (see Myria report<sup>9</sup>). In addition to this category of people, there are migration opportunities for students pursuing higher education and for highly skilled workers. If people apply for asylum and are granted international protection, they will also have the right to stay in Belgium (refugee status, subsidiary protection and temporary protection)<sup>10</sup>.



<sup>8</sup> Carles, I., & Miguel-Sierra, M. (2020). The Istanbul Convention and gender-based violence against migrant women. La Voix des Femmes ASBL. Online: [https://lavoixdesfemmes.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/VdF\\_convention\\_A4\\_web\\_PUBLICATION.pdf](https://lavoixdesfemmes.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/VdF_convention_A4_web_PUBLICATION.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Myria. (2023). Right to live as a family. Online: [https://www.myria.be/files/Droit\\_de\\_vivre\\_en\\_famille-2023\\_Chiffres.pdf](https://www.myria.be/files/Droit_de_vivre_en_famille-2023_Chiffres.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> In addition to these categories, there are also people who have been regularized for humanitarian reasons (based on Article 9bis of the Law of December 15, 1980) or medical reasons (based on Article 9ter of the Law of December 15, 1980).

Because migrant women who arrive in Belgium through family reunification are **particularly dependent** on their husbands and because this situation **further exacerbates the unequal power relations** between the sexes that already exist in society, it is essential that this specific status be taken into account when supporting victims.

The right to family reunification is governed in Belgium by the law of December 15, 1980<sup>11</sup>, in particular Articles 10 to 12 bis and Articles 40 to 47. Applications for long-term residence must be submitted to the Belgian Embassy in the country of origin (with a few exceptions). Family reunification, while allowing families to be reunited, is subject to complex and demanding regulations.

The right to family reunification is subject to different rules depending **on the residence status of the sponsor<sup>12</sup> in Belgium** ( family member of a third-country national, a Belgian national, or a citizen of the European Union), which determine the conditions for access to family reunification. The law imposes multiple conditions on family reunification and continued residence once in the host country. The separation caused by this demanding and lengthy procedure can create tensions within the couple. For refugees, family reunification can be particularly complicated, as they have sometimes lost contact for years. In addition, once they arrive in Belgium, the conditions for family reunification must be met for five years before the reunited person<sup>13</sup> can obtain independent residence.

As Christine Flamand demonstrated in her legal study<sup>14</sup>, the specific environment in which migration takes place, and specifically its legal framework, are sources of tension<sup>15</sup>. In other words, violence against women by an intimate partner sometimes manifests itself precisely because of the legal framework and the administrative dependence of the reunited family member on the sponsor, created by the law<sup>16</sup>. Furthermore, attempts at the emancipation or integration of a woman are sometimes hindered upon her arrival in Belgium as a spouse/partner. Foreign women therefore suffer double violence, as women and as migrants<sup>17</sup>.

Let's take the example of the family reunification with a third-country national. Only the nuclear family is eligible to it: spouse, minor children (or adult children with disabilities).

<sup>11</sup> Law of December 15, 1980, on the entry, stay, settlement, and removal of foreigners, M.B., December 31, 1980.

<sup>12</sup> A sponsor is a person legally established in a country who brings members of their family to that country under the family reunification procedure.

<sup>13</sup> A reunited person is a family member joining a relative who is already legally established in a country under the family reunification procedure.

<sup>14</sup> Movement for Gender Equality & Women's Collective. (2023). Report on the analysis of the legal framework as a source of violence. Online: <https://m-egalitefemmeshommes.be/autres-projets/normes-sociale-et-culturelles-dans-la-violence-par-un-partenaire/rapport-juridique/>

<sup>15</sup> It should be noted that Article 42 quater §4, 2° and 3° provides for exceptions to the end of stay in the event of separation for family members who are third-country nationals of Belgian or EU citizens (Article 42 quater §4, 1°, 2° and 3°).

<sup>16</sup> See also, for a sociological study, Orsini, G. (2021). Beyond culture: domestic violence in the context of securing migration (family and romantic). In Merla, L., Sarolea, S., & Schoumaker, B. (eds.). Dealing with norms. Academia.

<sup>17</sup> The term "migrant" refers to any person who does not have Belgian nationality. A distinction is made between persons who do not have Belgian nationality, citizens of the European Union, and nationals of a non-EU country. In this article, the term "foreigner" refers to nationals of countries outside the European Union. The various situations provided for by the law of December 15, 1980, will be examined as part of the family reunification procedure.

The foreign sponsor must have sufficient, stable, and regular income. This income is assessed at 120% of the RIS (Revenu d'Intégration Sociale, or Social Integration Income), i.e., the rate for a family with dependents since February 1, 2025, which is set at €2,131.28 (net income).

In addition, the sponsor must demonstrate that they have sufficient housing for the size of the family, and this condition must be met at the time of application (which can easily take more than a year), as well as proof of health insurance. These strict conditions make family reunification difficult if the sponsor is not economically active. In addition, family ties must be proven, documents must be legalized, and fees must be paid. Added to this are the practical difficulties of accessing embassies to submit the family reunification application. Once in Belgium, the conditions for residence must be met for five years before a woman and her children can obtain autonomous residence.

This administrative dependency can create tension within the couple, as well as feelings of insecurity or anxiety, which are often already present in the country of origin due to the length of the family reunification process.

A woman and her children are in possession of an "A" card (limited stay of one year), issued as part of a family reunification with a third-country national. If the separation occurs before the end of the five-year period or if the sponsor loses their means of support (employment), this may result in the loss of the reunified family member's right of residence. The law makes an exception to the end of residence in cases of domestic violence, providing for a protection clause<sup>19</sup>. It refers to particularly difficult situations and cites domestic violence as an example. If the reunified person is a victim of violence and can prove it, they may, in the event of separation, apply to the Immigration Office for independent residence.

While these protective clauses are valuable in enabling victims to obtain residence permits, they are difficult to implement. Victims must dare to report the violence and be able to prove it, which is not easy for the women concerned. Furthermore, violence by an intimate partner takes various forms, such as physical violence, but above all psychological or economic violence. Other obstacles arise, such as shame or lack of information about the process, or even the victim's isolation and lack of knowledge of the language. Furthermore, victims fear that their residence permit will be withdrawn if they cannot provide sufficient proof of the violence, which is why it is essential that victims receive support in this area to help them with these procedures.

A circular dated June 15, 2023, in force since November 29, 2023, was issued to facilitate the practical implementation of these clauses and to harmonize the conditions to which they are subject<sup>20</sup>.

<sup>18</sup> It should be noted that refugees do not have to demonstrate such conditions if their family arrives within one year of their status being recognized, nor do the ascendants of unaccompanied minors (if the application is submitted within three months of their coming of age).

<sup>19</sup> Law of December 15, 1980, Article 11 §2, 4° and Article 40ter, § 2, paragraph 2, 1°.

<sup>20</sup> Belgium. (2023). Circular of June 15, 2023, on protection in relation to residence for victims of domestic violence. M.B., November 29, 2023.

This circular is based on the observation that:

« Practice shows that victims of domestic violence are still too often reluctant to disclose such facts during the period in which their right of residence is subject to conditions relating to family reunification. An important factor in this regard is the fear of losing the right of residence in Belgium. »

The circular provides guidance on "strengthening legal certainty and seeking to reduce obstacles to reporting domestic violence." It describes the procedure to be followed to avoid termination of residence, depending on whether or not the victim of violence has voluntarily approached the Immigration Office (pt. 3.2.1 or 3.2.2). It reiterates that the burden of proof lies with the victim and provides examples of evidence that may be useful in support of an application for independent residence<sup>22</sup>. This evidence mainly refers to the filing of a complaint but also mentions proof of accommodation in the case of presence in a shelter.

However, the circular continues to exclude certain categories of persons, such as spouses of foreigners with limited stay permits or victims awaiting a decision on their residence status on the basis of family reunification (in possession of a registration certificate, AI). The only option for these individuals is to apply for regularization on exceptional grounds, based on Article 9 bis of the Law of December 15, 1980. This application for residence is left entirely to the discretion of the Immigration Office. Victims have no right of residence or protection against removal while their application is being examined. The circular does not mention European spouses of EU citizens or women who are victims of violence and are residing illegally.

While this circular has the merit of clarifying the procedure to some extent, it still does not meet the requirements of the Istanbul Convention (Article 59)<sup>23</sup> or the report submitted by the GREVIO expert group on Belgium<sup>24</sup>. This report calls for more extensive protection for victims of domestic violence *rationae personae* and a thorough overhaul of immigration laws to bring them into line with the Convention's obligations. A reform of family reunification through a law of March 10, 2024, does not incorporate these changes<sup>25</sup>. This therefore constitutes a failure on the part of the legislature.

<sup>21</sup> Belgium. (2023). Circular of June 15, 2023, on protection in relation to the residence of victims of domestic violence. M.B., November 29, 2023, page 161.

<sup>22</sup> Examples taken from the circular, a judgment or a letter from the public prosecutor concerning proceedings brought against perpetrators of violence, in particular under Articles 398 to 400, 402, 403 or 405 of the Criminal Code; A copy of a police report relating to acts of domestic violence; A copy of a report relating to a complaint filed with the police concerning acts of domestic violence; Witness statements; A medical certificate attesting that the person concerned has suffered violence (physical or psychological); A detailed report from a shelter or Family Justice Center; Proof of accommodation and a detailed report from a shelter specializing in helping victims of domestic violence.

<sup>23</sup> Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, adopted by the Council of Europe on May 11, 2011, and entered into force on August 1, 2014. It has been part of the European asylum system since October 1, 2023. Article 59: Parties shall take legislative measures to ensure that victims whose residence status depends on that of their spouse or partner, in accordance with their domestic law, are granted, upon request, in the event of the dissolution of the marriage or relationship, in particularly difficult situations, an autonomous residence permit, regardless of the duration of the marriage or relationship.

<sup>24</sup> GREVIO. (2020). Report on Belgium: Violence against women must be more visible in national policies against violence.

<sup>25</sup> Bill adopted on March 10, 2024, amending the law of December 15, 1980, on access to the territory, residence, establishment, and removal of foreigners with regard to the right to family reunification, which entered into force on September 1, 2024.

Another difficulty is the lack of provisions concerning children, who also need this protection. Children are also affected by domestic violence. In this case, there is a legal vacuum. Youth workers are at a loss when faced with situations involving domestic violence and migration, without any clear guidelines to refer to. It is urgent that children also have a place in Belgian legislation, based on two essential principles: for all children, the principle of the best interests of the child must be upheld, with the possibility for them to express their views on matters affecting them. Furthermore, the status of the child must take precedence over their status as a foreigner.

A recent amendment to the law of 15 December 1980 by the law of 18 July 2025 modifies, in particular, the material conditions for family reunification. Thus, the amount of resources that the foreign sponsor must have in order to be authorised to bring his or her family must be equivalent to 110% of the RIS. For each additional dependent family member, this amount increases by 10%. However, the law is silent on the issue of the protection clause relating to domestic violence.

### **1.1.3 A perspective: the Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on combating violence against women and domestic violence, adopted on February 8, 2024, by the Council.**

On February 8, 2024, the Council of the European Union adopted a Directive on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (hereinafter referred to as the Directive).<sup>26</sup> This is a European framework for combating violence against women and domestic violence. It pays particular attention to children and their vulnerability, especially as witnesses or victims of domestic violence (Article 14), and the devastating effects of such situations on children (recitals 13 and 42). It refers to specific support measures for children (Articles 31 and 32). It also provides that specific training must be provided on domestic violence involving children (Article 36).

She also raises another thorny issue, that of accommodation in cases of violence. The 2020 Grevio report on Belgium criticized the lack of accommodation for women victims of violence (with or without children). Article 30 of the Directive refers to the need for a sufficient number of shelters and other appropriate temporary accommodation. These should be easily accessible and equipped to meet the specific needs of women, while guaranteeing the rights and needs of children, including child victims. This implies a positive obligation on States to create shelters. These must be open to victims "regardless of their nationality, citizenship, place of residence, and residence status."<sup>27</sup> With regard to children, the principle of the best interests of the child plays a decisive role in determining issues relating to temporary accommodation.<sup>28</sup>

The Directive only marginally addresses the situation of migrant women. Recital 35 recalls that Member States must ensure that victims who are third-country nationals, regardless of their residence status, are not deterred from reporting violence against women or domestic violence.

<sup>26</sup> Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council. (2024). Directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence. Adopted on February 8, 2024. The Directive refers to the areas of access to justice, in particular with regard to minimum rules on definitions and penalties for certain criminal offenses.

<sup>27</sup> Directive, Article 30, 3.

<sup>28</sup> Directive, Article 31.

Recital 71 emphasizes that victims who are subject to intersectional discrimination and who, as a result, are at increased risk of violence, should receive specific support and protection. However, these protections are not provided for in the body of the Directive and are therefore not guaranteed. In the absence of more specific provisions concerning migrant women, all women should be able to benefit from the measures to prevent and combat violence provided for in the Directive.

This Directive must be transposed into Belgian law. Its national implementation, expected by June 14, 2027, at the latest, raises the urgent need to adopt specific provisions for women and children who are victims of violence, particularly in terms of personalized support, appropriate accommodation, and training for the professionals involved.

Unlike the Istanbul Convention, this Directive must be transposed into Belgian law by June 14, 2027. It is urgent to provide specific provisions for children and women victims of violence, whether in terms of specific support, accommodation, or training.

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<sup>29</sup> Directive, recital 71: These could include women with disabilities, women whose residence status or residence permit depends on that of another person, undocumented migrant women, women seeking international protection, women fleeing armed conflict, homeless women, women belonging to a racial or ethnic minority, women living in rural areas, women in prostitution, women with low incomes, women in detention, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or intersex persons, older women or women suffering from alcohol and drug-related disorders.

# 1.2 Mechanisms of domestic violence

**Violence perpetrated by an intimate partner**, commonly referred to as domestic or intimate partner violence, varies and may include **physical, sexual, psychological, and economic** abuse. These forms of violence aim to **control and/or dominate the partner**, often creating a **power imbalance** in the relationship.

This second chapter presents the theory on violence in general. Violence within intimate relationships (VPI) is a universal phenomenon, often characterized by coercive control by men in a global patriarchal context. According to UN Women, one in three women has experienced violence, whether or not it comes from an intimate partner. Violence against women is intrinsically linked to patriarchy—a system of social and cultural norms that favors men's freedoms at the expense of women. The patriarchal system facilitates men's control over their partners, exacerbating the risk of violence within families. Rejecting all forms of violence is the non-negotiable foundation for a healthy relationship.

To recognize domestic violence, it is important to differentiate it from arguments or conflicts. During arguments or marital conflicts, **two** opposing **points of view** are expressed in a **relationship of equality**. In contrast, violence involves a **relationship of domination and power over the victim** by the abuser. Through their words and behavior, abusers seek to control and destroy their partners. This manifests itself through the use of fear and/or violence to dominate the female victim in all areas of her life. The violent partner exploits their relationship with the victim to place them in a position of inferiority, insecurity, powerlessness, and dependence, thereby limiting their ability to leave the relationship.

## 1.2.1 The different forms of domestic violence

Domestic violence can take many forms. The list below is not exhaustive:

Psychological and emotional violence	<p>It manifests itself in words or behaviour intended to humiliate, denigrate, intimidate, control or isolate a person. Invisible but destructive, it undermines self-esteem and mental health. Acts of psychological violence include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Threats of violence and harm against the victim or those around them, through words or actions (harassment, weapons).</li> <li>• Harassment and bullying at work.</li> <li>• Humiliating and insulting comments.</li> <li>• Isolating the woman and restricting her outside contacts.</li> <li>• The use of children by a violent partner to control or harm the woman. These acts constitute violence against both children and women.</li> <li>• Gaslighting (originally referring to the manipulation of a woman by her husband by casting doubt on her words and mental state<sup>30</sup>).</li> </ul>
Physical violence	<p>They include all acts intended to injure or mistreat a person's body, such as hitting, slapping, biting, burning, confinement, or assault with objects or weapons. They seriously undermine the victim's physical and psychological integrity. The most publicised forms of violence. The resulting injuries are often disguised as accidents<sup>31</sup>.</p>
Sexual violence	<p>They encompass any sexual act imposed without consent, including rape, sexual touching, sexual harassment, exploitation or incest. They constitute a serious violation of a person's physical and psychological integrity and dignity. They include<sup>32</sup> :</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rape or other forms of sexual assault</li> <li>• Unwanted sexual advances, sexual harassment</li> <li>• Trafficking for sexual exploitation</li> <li>• Forced exposure to pornography</li> <li>• Forced pregnancy, forced sterilisation, forced abortion</li> <li>• Forced marriage/child marriage</li> <li>• Female genital mutilation/virginity testing/incest</li> </ul>
Violence 2.0	<p>This refers to violence perpetrated through digital tools, such as online harassment, cyber control, image blackmail, or the non-consensual dissemination of intimate content. It can have devastating effects on victims' privacy, reputation and mental health. Examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tracking your partner via their mobile phone or GPS, placing a tracker.</li> <li>• Using revenge porn<sup>33</sup>.</li> <li>• Using deepfakes<sup>34</sup>.</li> </ul>
Administrative violence	<p>In the context of domestic violence, this manifests itself in the withdrawal or concealment of the victim's identity or residence documents, thereby depriving them of their independence and reinforcing their dependence on their partner (or their income), which complicates their ability to escape abuse<sup>35</sup>.</p>

<sup>30</sup> A form of psychological manipulation intended to make a person doubt their own perception, memory, or mental health. The abuser denies the facts, minimizes the victim's emotions, or makes them believe they are exaggerating, with the aim of controlling or destabilizing them. For more information, see: France Inter. (2023). What is gaslighting? [YouTube video]. Online: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EWK-K\\_yT5Gg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EWK-K_yT5Gg)

<sup>31</sup> Beghlin, A., & Laouar, N. (2020). Domestic violence. Risk assessment and removal from the home. Cahiers du GEPS.

<sup>32</sup> Institute for Gender Equality. (2021). Manual on the code for reporting domestic violence. Online: <https://igymiefh.belgium.be/sites/default/files/138-manuel-code-de-signalement-violences-conjugales.pdf>

<sup>33</sup> Revenge porn is the non-consensual dissemination of intimate images or videos with the intention of causing harm, often for the purpose of revenge or blackmail.

<sup>34</sup> Deepfakes are fake videos or images created using artificial intelligence to make it appear as though a person has said or done something they never did, often for the purpose of manipulation, harassment, or dissemination of falsified intimate content.

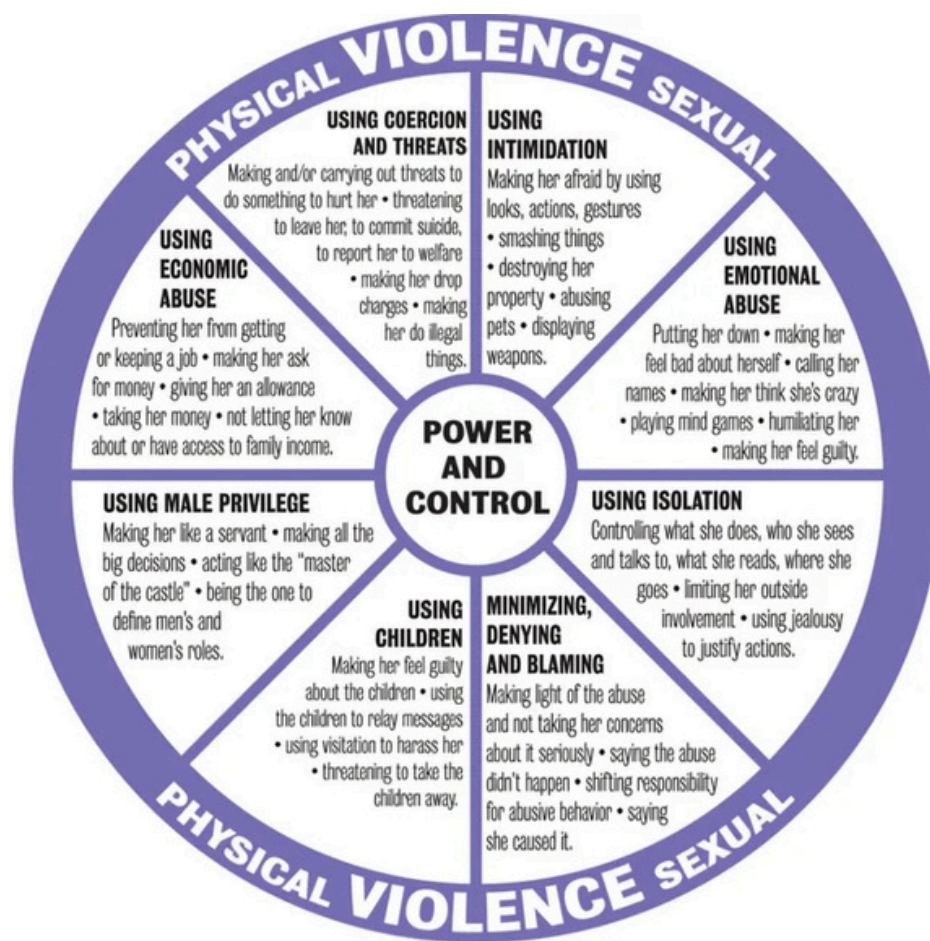
<sup>35</sup> Institute for Gender Equality. (2021). Manual on the code for reporting domestic violence. Online: <https://igymiefh.belgium.be/sites/default/files/138-manuel-code-de-signalement-violences-conjugales.pdf>

## 1.2.2 Coercive control and the process of domination in domestic violence

Domestic violence is a system set up by the abuser to gain power over the other person. The abuser will establish a whole mechanism of control and power over their victim. The mechanism consists of a series of acts aimed at subjugating someone or making them dependent by isolating them, confiscating their resources for personal gain, depriving them of the means necessary for their independence, and deciding how they should behave on a daily basis. This is known as **coercive control**.

The #StopFéminicide<sup>36</sup> law defines coercive control as a pattern of coercive or controlling behaviors, whether continuous or repeated, that cause psychological harm. In other words, it is a **pattern of behavior aimed at controlling a partner while depriving them of their resources and freedom**. This manifests itself in subtle and repeated strategies that may involve control and/or coercion<sup>37</sup>.

These coercive behaviors are illustrated by the Duluth model - **Wheel of Power and Control**<sup>38</sup>:



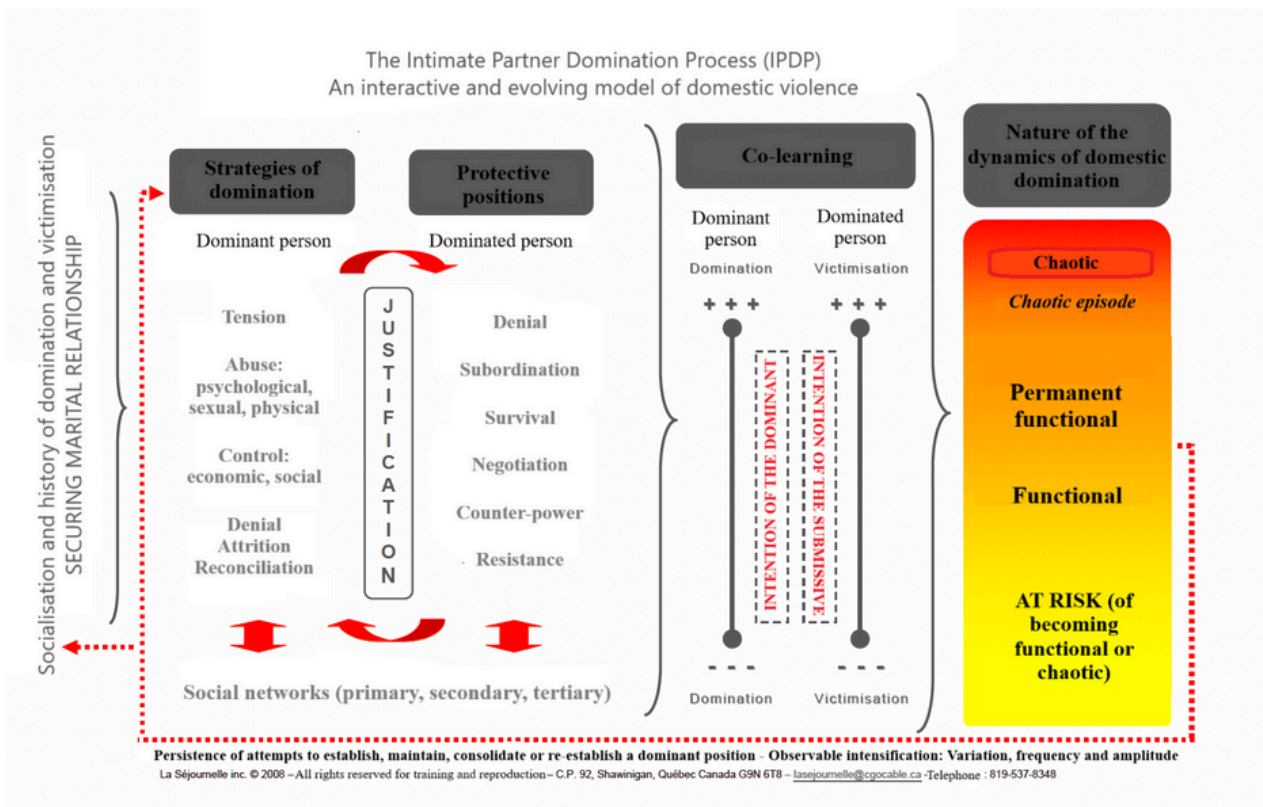
<sup>36</sup> Belgium. (2023). Law of July 13, 2023 on the prevention and combating of femicide, gender-based homicide, and violence. Online: [https://www.ejustice.just.fgov.be/cgi/article\\_body.pl?language=fr&caller=summary&pub\\_date=2023-08-1&numac=2023044133](https://www.ejustice.just.fgov.be/cgi/article_body.pl?language=fr&caller=summary&pub_date=2023-08-1&numac=2023044133)

<sup>37</sup> Institute for the Equality of Women and Men. (2023). What is coercive control? Online: <https://igvmiefh.belgium.be/fr/themes/violences/violences-entre-ex-partenaires/controle-coercitif>

<sup>38</sup> Domestic Abuse Intervention Programs. (2017). The Duluth Model. Online: [theduluthmodel.org](http://theduluthmodel.org)

The control mechanisms underlying domestic violence are analyzed in what is known as the "domestic violence cycle," a systemic analysis that highlights the mechanisms by which one spouse coercively controls the other. This systemic analysis helps us understand how this system is established, structured, and perpetuated by identifying the strategies used by the abuser and the responses of the victims. It is used to identify high-risk couple dynamics and to determine the level of victimization of the victims (learned helplessness, ability to mobilize resources, etc.).

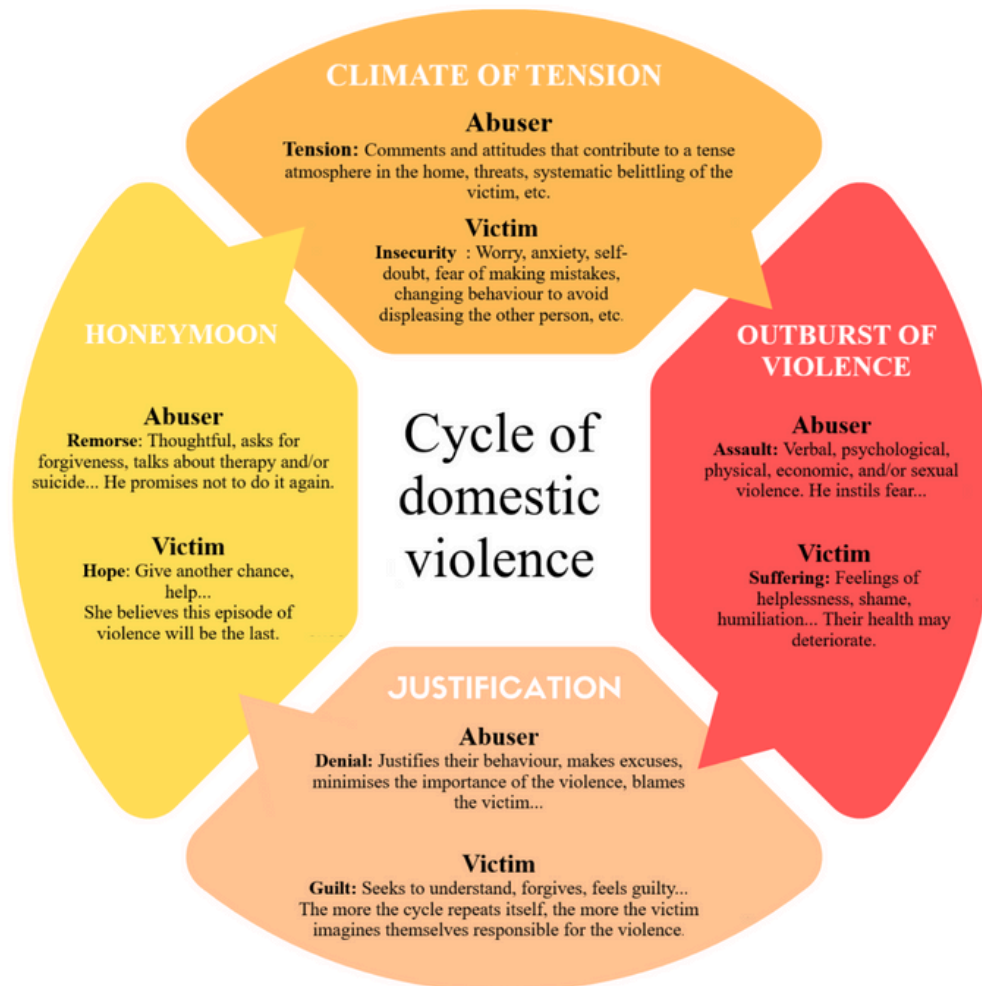
The author of this analysis is DENISE TREMBLAY, psychologist and director of La Séjournelle, a resource center for women who are victims of domestic violence in Shawinigan (Trois RIVIÈRES, QUÉBEC), who collaborated with the University of Quebec to validate the concepts and Accord Mauricie, a service specializing in psychosocial support for perpetrators of domestic violence.



### 1.2.3 The cycle of domestic violence

Violence perpetrated by an intimate partner often takes the form of a recurring cycle of violence and reconciliation. This cycle usually begins with a period of heightened tension, followed by an act of violence. After the act, the abuser may express remorse or make gestures of reconciliation, leading to a period of apparent calm. Without appropriate intervention, this cycle tends to repeat itself, with each iteration marked by increasing intensity of violence. It is therefore essential to understand this in order to avoid questioning the victim's word and simply wondering why the victim does not leave. In fact, it takes **an average of seven attempts before a victim is able to actually escape from** a situation of domination.

Image from the Solidarité Femmes website: The cycle of domestic violence. Online: <https://www.solidarite-femmes.be/violences-conjugales/cycle/>



### 1.2.4 The impacts of violence on the victim's in

- **Acquired incapacity or learned helplessness**

Acquired incapacity is similar to a state of resignation resulting from the loss of control over events that occur and affect them. Acquired incapacity is the result of repeated exposure to a lack of control over one's life and actions, which leads to a decline in performance when carrying out a task.

At the cognitive level, this manifests itself in three deficits:

- Cognitive or difficulty in establishing, for a given task, the link between one's own actions and their consequences.
- Motivational, consisting of a decrease in the effort put into the task.
- Emotional, resulting in an increase in depressive-type emotions.

- **Disorders related to victimization<sup>39</sup> when there is psychological trauma**
  - Acute stress disorder, distress with or without peritraumatic dissociation, brief psychotic disorders, up to one month after the trauma.
  - Post-traumatic stress disorder (less than one month), chronic (more than six months):
    - Flashbacks (traumatic memory)
    - Avoidance syndrome
    - Neurovegetative hyperactivity syndrome (state of alertness and control).
  - Symptoms of dissociation, altered state of consciousness, feeling of strangeness, memory and concentration problems, depersonalization, feeling like a spectator in one's own life.
- **Injuries:** bruises, cuts, burns, concussions, fractures, miscarriages, etc.
- **Chronic health problems:** sleep disorders, gastrointestinal problems, loss of appetite, headaches, back pain, etc.
- **Psychological disorders:** loss of self-esteem, depression, stress, anxiety, panic attacks, despair, suicide attempts.
- **Escape into alcohol, drugs, or medication.**
- **Socio-economic impacts:** frequent absenteeism from work, loss of concentration, reduced income, loss of employment.
- **Social isolation:** less and less contact with friends, family, coworkers, etc.
- **Barriers to leaving violence:** There are many deep-rooted barriers to breaking the cycle of violence. Victims of IPV are caught between the desire to exist as a whole person and/or to protect their child(ren) and:
  - the desire to maintain a family unit and an emotional relationship
  - fear of reprisals
  - loss of independence, loss of confidence, and fear of the unknown
  - stigmatization: fear of being judged by others
  - social isolation: lack of support from friends and family
  - financial dependence
  - love and hope that the situation will improve.

These obstacles may explain why they find it difficult to leave their abusive partner and make decisions to change their situation.

It is difficult to draw up an exhaustive list of the consequences of domestic violence, as they are many and varied depending on individual experiences. However, they may include complex psychological trauma, unexplained physical pain, gynecological disorders, chronic musculoskeletal disorders, and less recognized symptoms such as post-traumatic mutism.

<sup>39</sup> Victimization is the experience of being or considering oneself to be the victim of harm, injustice, or aggression.

### 1.2.5 The impact of violence on children

Children exposed to domestic violence are also victims in their own right, just like their mothers. Too often invisible, they suffer profound and lasting consequences.

Specialized literature generally distinguishes between two main forms of victimization among children. On the one hand, they may be direct victims when they witness scenes of violence. They witness aggressive behavior, shouting, reproaches, and even threats or insults. This direct exposure may also include situations where the child attempts to intervene to protect the victimized parent, not only putting their physical safety at risk, but also exposing themselves to lasting psychological consequences.

On the other hand, they are also indirect victims when exposed to a family environment marked by fear, tension, unspoken words, and suffering. Even without directly witnessing violent acts, they are sensitive to dysfunctional family dynamics, their parents' emotional states, and the destructive impact of violence on family life.

This exposure, whether direct or indirect, has multiple and often serious consequences for their overall development. Neurologically, neuroscience research has shown that chronic stress linked to a violent environment can alter brain development, particularly in areas involved in emotion management, memory, and behavior regulation.

On a psycho-emotional level, exposed children may develop attachment disorders, hypervigilance, generalized anxiety, or a permanent feeling of insecurity. Their self-esteem may be impaired, as well as their ability to trust adults.

Behaviorally, these children may show signs of social withdrawal, aggression, sleep disorders, academic difficulties, or risky behavior during adolescence. Some develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), with flashbacks, nightmares, or flight or freeze responses.

They may also develop psychological survival strategies to adapt to their environment, known as "coping mechanisms," such as denial, hyper-responsibility, or dissociation. Sometimes they take on specific roles in an attempt to maintain a fragile family balance: they become a "parentified" child, protector of the mother, mediator between parents, confidant of the abuser, "model child," or, conversely, a "symptom child" who expresses the family's suffering through their behavior.

Furthermore, it is important to highlight the risk of internalizing violent relationship patterns, which can lead to the reproduction of these dynamics in adulthood: either by becoming perpetrators of violence or by re-entering controlling relationships. This is not inevitable, but it is a vulnerability that must be identified and addressed from an early age.

Finally, supporting these children requires a caring, reassuring, and interdisciplinary approach. This involves institutional recognition of their status as victims, prevention work, psychological support, and a protective environment to enable them to rebuild their lives.

Ultimately, this text highlights the imperative to consider children exposed to domestic violence as victims in their own right, grappling with profound and lasting consequences for their development. While their care is crucial for their psychological and emotional well-being and for breaking the cycle of violence, the current system has flaws. The lack of a direct mandate for these children in support mechanisms, dependence on the interpretation of various authorities, and insufficient consideration of the dynamics of domestic domination and parental alienation hinder a coherent and sustainable response. Experience in the field shows that active intervention by youth support services, acting as intermediaries and providing support to protective parents, contributes to better coordination and more effective protection for these children.



# 1.3 Specific characteristics of violence against migrant women

In the first theoretical part, this third chapter presents the specific characteristics of violence against migrant women. The aim of this section is to explain the characteristics that may make migrant women more vulnerable to intimate partner violence compared to native European women. The section helps to strengthen the knowledge of practitioners in the field in supporting women who are victims of violence with their partners, taking into account the demographic, sociocultural, socioeconomic, and institutional specificities that make these (racialized) victims more vulnerable than other victims.

## 1.3.1 Some figures

As already mentioned at the beginning of this guide, domestic violence in Europe affects all social and cultural groups, but women with a migrant background are particularly vulnerable. Women and girls, long invisible but nevertheless very much present in migration flows, now account for one third of those seeking international protection in the European Union<sup>40</sup>. They are also highly represented in other procedures, such as applications for family reunification in Belgium, where women are in the majority<sup>41</sup>.

*«In Belgium, in 2022, (...) 65% of people who entered Belgium through family reunification were women.»<sup>42</sup>*

- According to the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights<sup>43</sup> ( FRA), nearly 33% of migrant women in the European Union have been victims of physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner, compared to around 22% of women born in the host country.

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<sup>40</sup> Cahiers de l'EDEM. (2024). Editorial – Towards stronger protection for migrant women victims of gender-based violence in Europe: progress has been made, but there is still a long way to go (Chr. Flamand). February 2024.

<sup>41</sup> CIRÉ asbl. (2025). Women and migration. Online: <https://positions.cire.be/par-thematique/femmes-migration/>

<sup>42</sup> CIRÉ asbl. (2025). Women and family reunification. Online: <https://www.cire.be/publication/les-femmes-et-le-regroupement-familial/>

<sup>43</sup> Collective Against Domestic Violence and Exclusion (CVFE). (2014). One third of European women have been victims of physical or sexual violence (R. Begon). Online: <https://www.cvfe.be/publications/analyses/226-le-tiers-des-femmes-europeennes-a-ete-victime-de-violence-physique-ousexuelle>

- Various reports from the Institute for the Equality of Women and Men reveal that women from immigrant backgrounds are less likely to report violence (on average 30% less than Belgian-born women), mainly due to fear of legal or social consequences.
- In France, a study by the DREES indicates that women born abroad account for 25% of women killed by their partners, even though they represent only around 12% of the adult female population.
- In Germany, according to data from the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, approximately 35% of women victims of domestic violence registered in women's shelters are of foreign origin. Other studies suggest that women with a migrant background are more often and more severely affected by domestic violence from their partners and find it more difficult to escape from an abusive relationship<sup>45</sup>.

Furthermore, a comparative analysis<sup>46</sup> of the prevalence of certain types of violence in some European countries shows the following:

- In Germany, 37% of Turkish women vs. 29% of German women experience physical violence.
- In France and Germany, psychological violence through control, jealousy, restrictions on going out, etc. is reported more frequently by migrant women.
- Death threats, including threats with weapons, are more common against young women from migrant backgrounds in France and Germany.
- With regard to access to legal services, women from migrant backgrounds are underrepresented in institutional remedies despite being over-represented in shelters

These statistics clearly show that women with a migrant background are more exposed to violence in their relationships, which is exacerbated by specific vulnerabilities. According to the World Health Organization, for example, although IPV is common across all social groups, migrant women and ethnic minorities are more vulnerable and therefore require special attention (Vives-Cases et al., 2014). This overrepresentation can be explained by a combination of structural, legal, economic, and sociocultural factors. A better understanding of these factors is essential to improve support for victims and tailor psychological, social, legal, and administrative responses to their specific realities.

<sup>44</sup> DREES. (2005). The experience of intolerant or discriminatory attitudes by immigrants. Studies & Results, No. 424. Online: <https://drees.solidarites-sante.gouv.fr/sites/default/files/er424.pdf>

<sup>45</sup> Das Gesundheitsprojekt. (2016). Protection against violence against women in Germany. Online: [https://www.mimi-gegen-gewalt.de/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/RatgeberGender\\_ENG.pdf](https://www.mimi-gegen-gewalt.de/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/RatgeberGender_ENG.pdf)

<sup>46</sup> Thiara, R.A., Condon, S.A., & Schröttle, M. (2011). Violence against Women and Ethnicity: Commonalities and Differences across Europe. Barbara Budrich Publishers.

There are, of course, texts and tools for protecting women against gender-based violence. However, international and national texts aimed at protecting women against violence still fail to take into account the experiences of women of color. The lack of intersectionality in studies on IPV, combined with the failure to consider the influence of social norms, limits the effectiveness of frontline actors and the implementation of European public policies capable of addressing both gender-based violence and transnational movements within national and international legal frameworks.

In Belgium, where the importance of combating gender-based violence against women has been recognized since the 1980s, migrant women have not always been taken into account in policies to protect women against domestic violence.

We must therefore seek to develop a way of considering the situation of migrant women by undertaking a simultaneous analysis of the responsibility of macrosocial factors and individual conditions linked to the emergence of intimate partner violence in Europe. Indeed, it has been established that IPV cannot be studied from an individual or situational perspective, as it is embedded in a social structure that initiates and even permits violent behavior. International commissions have long recognized the importance of attitudes, norms, and beliefs that justify violence and gender inequality.

### 1.3.2 The influence of social norms on intimate partner violence (IPV)

Every form of gender-based violence is supported by sex/gender norms (traditional views of male/female roles) that assume unequal power relations between men and women in all known societies, Western or otherwise. Social norms are understood here in the broadest sense, as shared beliefs about appropriate, typical, and valued behaviors within a given reference group. Social norms can be defined as behavioral rules that individuals within a group follow because they believe in them. They encompass sex/gender norms as a sociocultural reference system for couples, families, and nations.

- Sex/gender norms (traditional views of male/female roles) are a component of social norms, and the latter justify or legitimize violence in heterosexual relationships.
- Traditional social norms (patriarchy, male domination) have a measurable impact on the prevalence of IPV, especially in countries with low gender equality scores.
- In some countries, gender equality is used as a tool to stigmatize migrant cultures (e.g., debates on "honor crimes") without addressing the structural causes of violence.

<sup>47</sup> Alexander-Scott, M., Bell, E., & Holden, J. (2016). DFID Guidance Note on Addressing Violence Against Women and Girls. DFID.

Addressing VAW from the perspective of social norms leads to the following observations:

- There is no clear scientific consensus on methods for measuring social norms.
- Prevention tends to focus on identifying risk factors, which allows for targeted actions but does not challenge the underlying social structures.
- It is essential to adopt a nuanced approach towards migrants, avoiding cultural essentialism while taking into account the influence of transnational dynamics on their representations and practices related to gender relations.

It was with a view to overcoming these difficulties that the study<sup>48</sup> (theoretical and empirical) conducted by the Collectif des Femmes and the Mouvement pour l'Égalité entre les Femmes et les Hommes, as part of the IPVMigrants project adopted a critical perspective based on an intersectional approach that cross-analyzes multiple forms of vulnerability and their impact on intimate partner violence. This study shows that there are indeed links between macrosocial factors and individual factors involved in intimate partner violence. This is confirmed, among other things, by the report of the World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995), which states that age, disability, economic and social status, race, and ethnicity can create particular

*«All societies have patriarchal social norms that lead to domestic violence, regardless of whether the society in question is Western or non-Western.»*

Therefore, in order to effectively respond to the protection and support needs of migrant women in relation to violence without falling into essentialism, it is important that frontline service providers adopt an inclusive, intercultural, and human rights-based approach.

### 1.3.3 The characteristics of migrant women's vulnerability to domestic violence

This section describes the characteristics of migrant women that may make them more vulnerable to violence from their intimate partners.

#### 1.3.3.1 High material dependence on the sponsor resulting from family migration

The Family Reunification Act requires the sponsor from a third country to prove that they have sufficient income and spacious accommodation.

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<sup>48</sup> Movement for Gender Equality & Women's Collective. (2023). State of play. Deliverable D2.2. Online: <https://m-egalitefemmeshommes.be/autres-projets/normes-sociale-et-culturelles-dans-la-violence-par-un-partenaire/rapport-etatdeslieux/>

These conditions not only place the sponsor in a difficult position, as they are more restrictive than those of the average Belgian, but also place the sponsor in a position of dominance over the sponsored spouse. The latter should always bear in mind that "it is because her partner has proven that he has sufficient means that she has been able to come to Belgium."

In many situations, the sponsor uses this requirement to reinforce their position of dominance over the person being reunited.

### ***1.3.3.2 Precarious or dependent migration status***

Many immigrant women depend on their spouse's status for their legal residence. This administrative dependency increases their fear of reporting violence, for fear of being deported or losing their right of residence. Family reunification therefore also creates administrative dependence, reinforcing power imbalances. This situation places them in a position of psychological, social, and economic vulnerability, as they fear that separation will result in the loss of their right to stay and, in some cases, their deportation. This fear of legal instability reinforces their dependence on their partner and often prevents them from leaving an abusive relationship.

### ***1.3.3.3 Language barrier***

Poor command of the language of the host country limits access to information and support services and makes it difficult to understand their rights and legal procedures. When violence occurs and the victim calls the police, it is not uncommon for the perpetrator to act as the victim's interpreter, thereby distorting the facts to their advantage.

### ***1.3.3.4 Social isolation and precariousness***

Migration distances migrant women from their support networks (family, friends, community of origin). The resulting loss of bearings leads to or exacerbates difficulties in integration and precariousness, making them more dependent on their partners and more vulnerable to their control. The situation is further exacerbated when their families, who have remained in their country of origin, pressure them to stay in the marital home. This situation often deprives them of resources that are essential for their empowerment and well-being.

### ***1.3.3.5 Lack of awareness of rights and available resources***

Due to a lack of information or mistrust of institutions, some women are unaware of their rights or do not know where to turn for help. This lack of awareness can be reinforced by a poor knowledge of the language of the host country.

### ***1.3.3.6 Institutional racism and stereotypes***

The view of the husband as "head of the family" or the minimization of the seriousness of domestic violence in families with a migrant background remains significant. This racism can be particularly evident among police officers who are supposed to receive and listen to victims. A report from an international conference organized by the Collectif des Femmes in 2022 showed that some police officers do not hesitate to express prejudices about African women, claiming that they are accustomed to rape to "satisfy their numerous sexual appetites" and that they are used to submission, etc.

This racism on the part of officers who are supposed to protect people on behalf of the state discourages victims and leads them not to file complaints (anymore). As for shelters, one respondent stated, for example:

« I was called a whore in the shelter. I had to prostitute myself when I had nowhere else to go. »

As indicated by comparative research on IPV in the context of migration in 2011<sup>49</sup>, certain public policies in Europe tend to present violence within migrant communities as a cultural phenomenon. This approach denies structural responsibilities and also tends to render gender-based violence perpetrated by white populations invisible, as well as exoticizing violence perpetrated by racialized people.

### 1.3.3.7 Cultural and social norms

Certain patriarchal norms, deeply rooted in some communities, can legitimize male domination, tolerate domestic violence, or blame women who report it. From a sociological perspective, it has been shown that attachment to and approval of social norms are less strong in individualistic societies (such as Western society) than in collectivist societies, particularly African society. From this perspective, it can be suspected that women from non-EU migrant backgrounds may be predisposed to accept violence and/or less inclined to report it.

### 1.3.3.8 Community and religious pressures

Women may be pressured to “save the marriage” or avoid bringing “shame” on the family, which pushes them to remain in abusive relationships.

It is important that frontline actors in the primary prevention<sup>50</sup> of gender-based violence are aware of these specificities and take them into account in their support work.

<sup>49</sup> See Tiara, R.A., Condon, S.A., & Schröttle, M. (2011). *Violence against Women and Ethnicity: Commonalities and Differences across Europe*. Barbara Budrich Publishers.

<sup>50</sup> Primary prevention of violence against women aims to prevent such violence from occurring in the first place by taking early action, including through education on equality, raising awareness of gender stereotypes, and promoting mutual respect.

# 1.4 Institutional violence in the context of intimate partner violence against migrant women

This final theoretical chapter presents what institutional violence is and how it takes shape in the context of violence against migrant women. **Institutional violence** refers to **harm or oppression inflicted** on individuals not through direct interpersonal aggression, but through the **functioning, practices, omissions, or structures of state institutions and public systems**. In the context of genderbased violence (GBV) against migrant women, institutional violence occurs when laws, procedures, or state actors fail to protect women who are victims of violence or cause them harm, particularly when these failures are motivated by racism, xenophobia, sexism, or bureaucratic rigidity.

## 1.4.1 What does institutional violence look like for migrant women?

Institutional violence is not always visible or intentional. It can be understood as:

- Omissions: the failure of authorities to provide protection or support (e.g., police refusing to take a complaint, particularly due to prejudice against the victim).
- Discriminatory practices: when services are provided in a way that excludes, stigmatizes, or penalizes migrant women.
- Barriers to access: administrative, linguistic, legal, or cultural barriers that prevent women from exercising their rights.
- Criminalization: when women are punished or threatened with deportation for seeking help or reporting violence.

## 1.4.2 Examples from the European context

### 1. Migration status of the perpetrator<sup>51</sup>

In several EU countries, women entering the country under family reunification or marriage visas are dependent on their partners for their residence status. If the woman leaves the relationship due to violence, she risks losing her legal status and being detained or deported. This is institutional violence that forces women to remain in abusive relationships to avoid legal precariousness.

### 2. Inaction by the police and the judicial system

Cases in France, Belgium, and Germany show that the police often dismiss complaints from undocumented or racialized women, or fail to provide interpreters. Reports of domestic violence may be classified as “family disputes” or not followed up when the victim is undocumented. This refusal to treat complaints from migrant women with the same seriousness illustrates systemic neglect and discriminatory treatment.

### 3. Denied access to shelters or social services<sup>53</sup>

Shelters and protection services often require valid identification, an address, or health insurance. For undocumented or newly arrived women, this can mean being unable to access safe housing, therapy, or legal support. Institutional violence occurs when services designed to protect against violence are inaccessible to those who need them most.

### 4. Requirement to prove “sufficient violence”<sup>54</sup>

In countries such as Austria and the Netherlands, migrant women must provide detailed and precise evidence of physical violence in order to obtain an independent residence permit. Psychological violence, coercive control, or economic violence are often excluded. This narrow definition of violence perpetuates the invisibility of many forms of intimate partner violence and creates institutional barriers.

## 1.4.3 Why is this institutional violence ?

These examples are not isolated actions by individuals, but highlight systems and institutions that:

- Refuse protection or safety because of immigration status or lack of documents.
- Reinforce the power of perpetrators by failing to provide exit strategies for women.
- Apply laws in a discriminatory manner that does not take into account gender and immigration status.

<sup>51</sup> European Network of Migrant Women. (2021); Council of Europe, Observations on Article 59 of the Istanbul Convention.

<sup>52</sup> FRA – European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. (2014). Violence against women: an EU-wide survey.

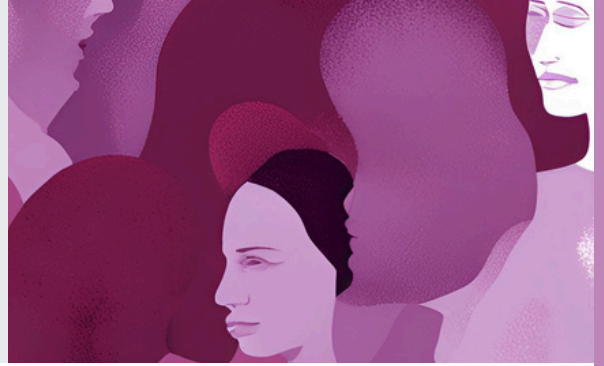
<sup>53</sup> PICUM - Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants. (2011). The Rights of Undocumented Women in Europe. Online report: <http://rajfire.free.fr/spip.php?article272>

<sup>54</sup> FRA – European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. (2021). Protecting migrant women from gender-based violence.

# 2 - SUPPORT



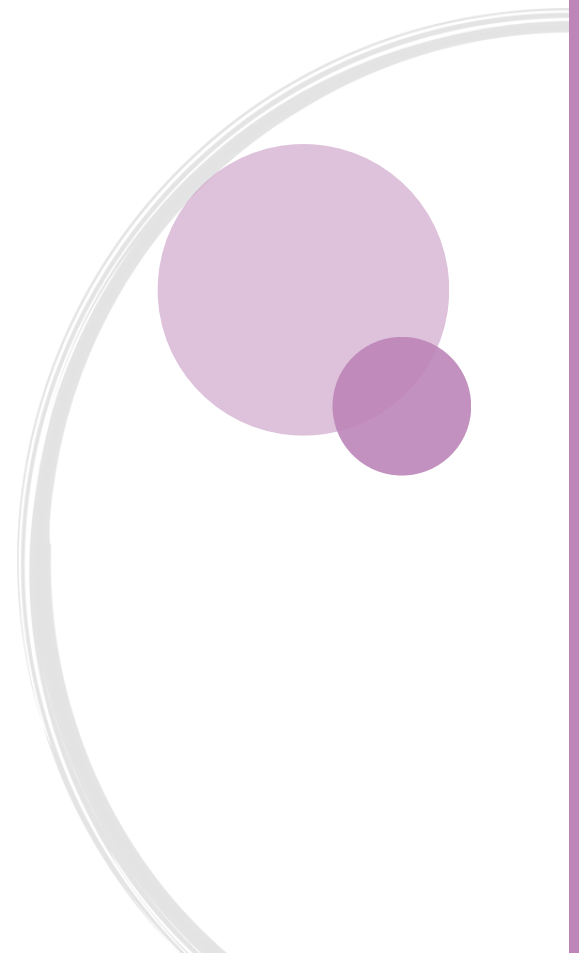
## 2.1 Introduction



As explained above, this guide is divided into two parts. The first part presented the theory on the legal framework, the mechanisms of domestic violence, the specificities of migrant women, and explanations of institutional violence against them.

The second part of the guide, which begins here, has a more practical focus, providing professionals with tools to identify victims, areas requiring vigilance, and guidelines for supporting migrant women who are victims of violence.

Based on the data studied in the first part, we have identified the key factors to be taken into account when providing practical support to migrant women who are victims of violence. The theoretical framework on violence presented in Chapter 1.2 contributes to the detection of victims explained in Chapter 2.2. The results of research on the specificities of migrant women's situations have made it possible to develop specific points of attention and basic guidelines for better support for victims.



## 2.2 Identifying victims of violence

To begin this more practical section, it is important to be able to identify victims using certain elements.

Most domestic violence goes unreported for years. Victims rarely speak out spontaneously, as they may minimize what they are going through, convince themselves that the situation is not that serious, or feel ashamed, mistakenly assuming that they are responsible. Many fear that they will not be listened to, that they will not be believed, that they will suffer reprisals, or they do not know that support is available.

In this context, detection is necessary as it creates a safe space for victims to speak out and identify signs (whether subtle or more obvious) of violence. Detection can also refer victims to appropriate resources. It is a crucial lever in preventing violence from occurring or escalating, and in ensuring that victims receive care. This care must be provided in a respectful manner and in accordance with the limits and needs of each victim. It is important to know how to identify elements of coercive control.

The #StopFéminicide law defines these elements as follows<sup>55</sup>:

**Coercive behavior** is "an act or series of acts of aggression, threats, humiliation, intimidation, or other abuse intended to hurt, punish, or frighten the victim."

**Controlling behavior** refers to "a pattern of behavior intended to make a person subordinate or dependent by isolating them from their sources of support, exploiting their resources and abilities for personal gain, depriving them of the means necessary for independence, resistance, or escape, or regulating their daily behavior."

Elements of coercive control can be identified using the screening grid below. This questionnaire<sup>56</sup>, developed by the Refuge for Women of the West Island in Canada, was designed specifically for professionals and who wish to assess and screen for coercive control in a relationship.

<sup>55</sup> Belgium (2023). Law of July 13, 2023, on the prevention and combating of femicide, gender-based homicide, and violence. Online: [https://www.ejustice.just.fgov.be/cgi/article\\_body.pl?language=fr&caller=summary&pub\\_date=2023-08-31&numac=2023044133](https://www.ejustice.just.fgov.be/cgi/article_body.pl?language=fr&caller=summary&pub_date=2023-08-31&numac=2023044133)

<sup>56</sup> Coercive control. Additional tools to accompany the guide. Refuge for women in the West Island. Domestic violence shelter in Kirkland, Canada.

## Screening grid – Indicators of coercive control

### In your relationship:

- Is he jealous?
- Does he yell?
- Do you receive insults from him?
- Does he threaten you (you, children, pets)?
- Does he threaten to call the authorities (child protection services, immigration, mental health services, etc.)?
- Does he damage your property?
- Are you afraid of making him angry?
- Do you feel like you're walking on eggshells because you don't know what will trigger his anger?
- When he's unhappy with your behavior, does he refuse to talk to you or ignore you for long periods of time?
- Does he blame you for only taking care of the children and never paying attention to him?
- Does he accuse you of having lovers?
- Does he drive dangerously when he's angry with you?
- Does he block access to doors during your arguments?
- Does he keep you awake at night when you argue?
- Does he ever scare you by standing close to you with his fists clenched?
- Does he threaten you with objects?
- Does he physically attack you and then ask you how you got hurt?
- Does he prevent you from getting medical treatment at a clinic or hospital?

### In your communications:

- If he texts or calls you and you don't respond, are you afraid of his reaction?
- Does he call you frequently at work?
- When you go out, does he constantly keep in touch with you and make you feel like you have to respond immediately?
- Does he monitor your social media?
- Do any new activities on your social media trigger an interrogation?
- Does he insist on having your social media passwords?
- Does he pretend to be you on social media?
- Does he log into your account and interact on social media on your behalf?

### In your respective roles:

- If household chores aren't done, are you afraid of how he will react?
- Are his expectations for housekeeping so high that you never have time to do anything else?
- Are his expectations regarding housekeeping so unrealistic that you have difficulty balancing everything with your work or childcare?
- Does he encourage you to quit your job or drop out of school?
- Does he do all the shopping so you don't have to go out?
- Have you lost your job or your school year because of him?

**In managing your income or important documents:**

- Does he demand that your income be deposited into his account or a joint account?
- Does he refuse to let you have your own account or demand access to your personal account?
- Does he request that child support be deposited into his account or into a joint account?
- Do you have to account for every penny you spend?
- Does he get angry if you exceed the budget?
- Do you have access to money if you want to spend it on the children?
- Do you have access to money if you want to spend it on yourself?
- Does he get angry when he is restricted in his own spending?
- Does he seem to keep your financial situation secret?
- Does he tell you that you don't have to worry about money, that he takes care of everything?
- Do you have to ask him for money every time you go shopping for the family?
- Have you had to borrow money from family members for your needs or those of your partner?
- Does he ask you to borrow money from the bank in your name?
- Does he steal money from you or sell your belongings?
- Do you keep your identity documents/important papers, as well as those of your children, in your possession?
- Do you have access to your identity documents or other important papers, as well as those of your children, at all times?
- Has he stolen or is he withholding your identity documents or other important documents, or those of your children?

**When you come and go:**

- Are you afraid of his reaction when you are late?
- Does he react strongly when you go out longer than he would like?
- Does he limit how long you go out for?
- Does he limit how often you go out?
- Does he restrict your freedom to go out?
- Does he make you feel guilty when you go out without him?
- Does he make you feel guilty when you go out without the children?
- Does he tell you he doesn't like you going out without him because he worries?
- Does he accompany you everywhere you go?
- Does he drive you to and from work, for example, to avoid your colleagues "getting ideas"?
- Does he make you take the children with you on all your outings?
- Does he often show up at your workplace to see if everything is okay?
- Does he ask you to turn on your GPS when you're not with him?
- Does he track you using geolocation apps?
- When you come back, does he ask you about everything that happened?

**In terms of your appearance:**

- Does he choose your clothes because he wants you to look perfect?

- Does he force you to change your clothes because he finds them too provocative?
- Does he force you to wear sexy clothes or clothes that make you feel uncomfortable?
- Does he demand unattainable aesthetic standards from you or compare you to other women?

**In your relationships with those around you:**

- Have you lost contact with loved ones because of your relationship with him?
- Does he make you feel guilty when you see loved ones without him?
- Does he speak to your loved ones on your behalf?
- Does he frequently call your loved ones, your bosses, or your colleagues to ask about you?
- Does he call your family to check that you're with them?
- Does he accuse you of being a lesbian when you spend time with your female friends?
- Does he accuse you of flirting with any man in your circle of friends?
- Does he ask the children to watch you?
- Does he try to seduce women in your circle?

**In your sexual relationship:**

- Does he insist on performing sexual acts that make you feel uncomfortable?
- Does he make sexual jokes that belittle you in front of children or other people?
- Does he insult or criticize you about your body or sexual acts?
- Does he insist that you send him photos or videos that make you feel uncomfortable?
- Does he share your intimate photos or videos without your consent?
- Does he make sexual comments about you on social media?
- If you refuse to act on his sexual desires, does he insult, threaten, or ignore you?
- Does he insist on performing sexual acts in front of other people?
- Does he force you to have sex with other people?

---

The list is exhaustive and may seem long. But remember, the abuser will use any strategy to gain control and power over the victim or to regain it. The reality of violence is the abuser's quest for control and power. And to achieve this, they will use various strategies and means, including those mentioned in the questions above.

Please note that it is important to be able to interview the victim alone. If the husband is with the victim, you must be able to see her alone. However, the fact that the victim cannot leave alone is an additional indication of control that should be taken into consideration.

## 2.3 Specific points to note

This chapter outlines how to respond effectively to each of the specific vulnerabilities (see section 1.3) faced by migrant women who are victims of intimate partner violence. Supporting migrant women who are victims of domestic violence has specific characteristics that must be taken into account in order to provide appropriate and effective care. These characteristics can be explained by several factors, including language barriers, lack of knowledge of their rights, administrative and economic dependence, and cultural issues.

The experiences of migrant women reveal multiple and interconnected layers of violence, which are often invisible or normalized. This should draw attention to:

- The importance of recognizing all forms of violence, not just physical violence.
- Training for professionals to avoid re-victimization.
- The promotion of their autonomy and dignity.

### 2.3.1. Increased vulnerability due to administrative status often dependent on spouse

Migrant women are highly dependent on their spouses due to their residence status. It is therefore essential to inform migrant women about their rights, particularly about the specific measures that exist to protect them. Among these measures, independent residence permits for victims of domestic violence are a key measure, enabling these women to separate from their abusers without risking losing their right to reside in the country. Specialized legal support is therefore essential to enable them to escape situations of violence while guaranteeing their safety and legal stability, as well as that of their children. See opposite:

<https://www.collectifdesfemmes.be/projet-europeen-liste-des-services-daide-juridique-pour-les-femmes-migrantes-victimes-de-violence/>

or via the following QR code:



### 2.3.2 Language barriers and lack of knowledge about support services

It is essential to adapt communication, use professional interpreters, and simplify administrative and legal information. Local support becomes very important for migrants, as it encourages interaction with the outside world and prevents cultural and gender discrimination. Be more specific and use simple words to ensure that the person understands the information.

### 2.3.3. Social and familial isolation

Isolation is a key factor in the perpetuation of domestic violence. Effective support must necessarily include work to rebuild social ties. This can involve setting up group activities and networking with other support structures to break isolation and strengthen external support. It is therefore essential to help victims escape this situation by working to rebuild ties, in particular through the organization of discussion groups, cultural mediators, local associations, and trusted intermediaries to create an environment conducive to reporting and support.

This lack of a support network is a determining factor in these women's social and professional integration. The fact that institutions mainly take in foreign women reinforces certain prejudices, particularly the idea that domestic violence mainly affects African or Arab populations. However, domestic violence knows no cultural or social boundaries. It affects people of all origins and social classes. It is therefore crucial to include clear information on rights and available remedies in the support provided, so that these women can break out of the cycle of violence and gradually regain control over their lives.

### 2.3.4 Cultural specificities and psychological barriers

In the context of psychosocial support, it is essential to question not only one's position as a professional, but also the institutional values and practices that underpin the intervention.

It appears that many African and Arab migrant women tend to somatize and encounter difficulties in adhering to traditional psychological counseling. Physical manifestations such as bodily pain and illness often feature prominently in their discourse. It is crucial to take this dimension into account. For example, when a woman presents symptoms such as headaches or body aches, these signs may reflect underlying psychological distress. It is therefore imperative that these women are able to externalize the violence they have experienced, not through their bodies, but through language. These words, which carry their experiences, must become a means of shedding light on who they are, what they feel, what they desire, and what they dream of, with the aim of promoting a therapeutic process that allows them to redefine themselves beyond the trauma.

In this context, an inclusive reception area based on the principles of empowerment seems particularly appropriate. The aim is to encourage interactions that allow people to "meet" rather than "reject," to "value" rather than "belittle," and to encourage "living" rather than "surviving." This process should make it possible to overcome the victimization dynamic that can, in some cases, lead to a situation of dependency, as illustrated by the example of a woman who interrupted her support because she rejected the role of "beggar" that she felt was imposed on her by her status as a victim.

In addition, interventions must be adapted to cultural diversity, without cultural relativism or stigmatization, taking into account the social norms within communities. A comprehensive assessment of the individual's life context must be carried out, including in the case history: residence status, level of education, financial dependence, isolation, family pressure, and situation before and after migration. It will be important to avoid reducing the situation to a "culture," but rather to explore the dynamics of power, isolation, and the effects of the administrative context.

It is also essential to emphasize that values related to marriage or family are not universal. Indeed, these concepts must be examined in light of the cultural and individual specificities of the women we support. This examination is necessary to ensure that our theoretical concepts and cultural values do not become instruments of domination, thereby reinforcing a power relationship that exploits women's bodies and resources.

Finally, it should be highlighted that administrative, institutional (social) and cultural violence often remain invisible among migrant women. This invisibility is exacerbated by a lack of awareness, as well as by the presence of a social system that remains structurally racist and sexist, as previously emphasized.

### 2.3.5 institutional violence

The concepts of victim and violence, as they are learned in our societies, can vary depending on the discipline or the people involved. For example, some migrant women report having been socialized to believe that it was normal to suffer physical violence or that so-called intimate matters should remain private ("what happens in a couple is the couple's business"). Furthermore, the concept of victim varies according to areas of expertise. In the justice system, it is based on defined criteria. For psychologists, it is legitimate insofar as it is based on experience. And for doctors, it is a measurable fact perceived through the body. These different approaches lead to different types of care, hence the importance of mediators.

The lack of awareness among professionals about cultural differences leads to institutional violence, marked by administrative negligence and multiple forms of discrimination. This leads to institutional mistrust on the part of beneficiaries, which can hinder their social and professional reintegration. Hence the need to question our institutional values and the motivations behind them. For example, we must remain cautious about the concept of empowerment, which is part of Western society. How does this concept resonate with someone from a collectivist society, whose identity is constructed through the group? And what is their relationship to their culture?

Some women have been prevented from accessing their own money or have had their spending controlled, reminiscent of aspects of economic violence they have experienced at the hands of their partners.

Offer language and vocational training and easier access to housing to strengthen women's social and economic independence. Immigrant women who are victims of violence need to be integrated into socio-professional integration programs and supported in their efforts to obtain residency, etc.

It is imperative to create a safe space for women who are victims of violence, while ensuring that our practices and institutions are constantly reviewed.

### 2.3.6 Summary of points to consider

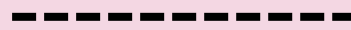
The specific points to consider are also summarized in our tool presented in the introduction, entitled "What to do when a migrant woman is a victim of intimate partner violence." This tool is intended for frontline professionals. The aim of this document is to help frontline professionals identify, listen to, refer, support, and/or care for migrant women who are victims of intimate partner violence. This leaflet can be downloaded from the MOOC at the following address:

<https://violenceagainstmigrantwomen.eu/storage/docs/IPV-Migrants-tool.pdf>

or via the following QR code:



## POINTS TO CONSIDER



Please note that this list is not exhaustive. However, the presence of any of these elements is often associated with an increased risk and requires referral to a specialized service.

### VICTIM

- **Threats to their life and that of their children.**
- **Dependencies:** residence permit, material and financial insecurity, control, addictions, etc.
- **Social isolation:** lack of resources (close friends, family, professionals) or unsupportive resources, prohibition from learning the language of the host country or a trade, attempts to sabotage oneself, etc.
- **Vulnerabilities:** suicidal thoughts, pregnancy, precariousness, level of education, language, etc.
- **Cultural and religious pressures:** forced marriages, family opposition, limiting beliefs.
- **Separation and post-separation:** risk of increased violence.

### ABUSER

- **Problem profile:** manipulative, failure to comply with legal measures, instability, suicidal threats.
- **Control/harassment:** jealousy, surveillance (physical or digital), isolation.
- **Previous violence:** physical (strangulation, weapons, objects, etc.), threats (death, children, loved ones, animals).
- **Triggers:** announcement of the partner's departure, court or police summons, court hearing.

### PROFESSIONAL

- **Key information to gather:** residence status, language, children, socioeconomic situation, mobility, vulnerabilities.
- **Appropriate communication:** simplification, verification of understanding, interpreter, and cultural adaptation.
- **Rights and procedures:** ensure that they are aware of them (protection, divorce, health, housing, special attention to residence permits, etc.).
- **Health monitoring:** quickly involve a mental health professional and identify any signs of somatization.
- **Safety:** assess physical and psychological risks, the possibility of reprisals, and the availability of reliable resources.
- **Confidentiality:** essential, particularly in cases of irregular situations or potential access to data by the perpetrator.
- **Migration history:** take into account personal history and its effects.
- **Complex trauma:** identify the cumulative effects of domestic violence, migration history, and other traumas.
- **Awareness of bias:** recognize your own cultural biases and limitations, seek training to avoid stereotypes and prejudices, and recognize the need for specific expertise.
- **Specific risk assessment:** assess the risks of reprisals (including cultural) and psychosocial impacts (employment, residence, family ties).

## 2.4 Basic benchmarks and decision-tree

In order to respond in a concrete and appropriate manner to the needs of migrant women who are victims of domestic violence, it is essential to have clear guidelines for effectively supporting them and directing them to the appropriate resources.

With this in mind, we present below some basic guidelines, as well as a tool developed as part of this project: a decision tree designed to facilitate assessment and referral in this type of situation.

### 2.4.1 Basic guidelines

First and foremost, it is important to ask yourself whether you feel **comfortable discussing the issue of violence** with the person concerned. As frontline professionals, each of us is responsible for providing the best possible support to victims, while taking into account our own skills, limitations, and resources.

If this is not the case, it is completely understandable. In this situation, the most important thing is to be able to **refer them to the right place**. This may involve providing a leaflet or useful information, or referring them to a qualified person they trust in this area. It is therefore recommended that migrant women be referred to the Écoute Violences conjugales helpline, an official service in Belgium for people affected by domestic violence: **0800/30.030**. This number is free and available every day.

It is also possible to provide them with the link to the online chat service dedicated to violence against migrant women:

[www.we-access.eu](http://www.we-access.eu)

This confidential service, available in several languages, facilitates communication and access to appropriate assistance. The decision tree includes a QR code providing direct access to this service, which is run by teams based in Spain, Belgium, and the United Kingdom, trained to talk to, inform, and guide those affected.

**If you feel able to address the issue of violence**, it is recommended that you create a warm and caring environment for discussion. This can be achieved through simple gestures such as offering a hot drink or listening carefully.

This type of welcome helps build trust. It is also essential to respect the person's beliefs and cultural references. This means listening actively, without interrupting, judging, or taking sides. Ensure **good communication**, in particular by providing an interpreter if necessary, using translation tools (such as Google Translate, chat, images, etc.) and/or adapting your language to make it simple and understandable. Audio aids can also be used for women who are illiterate or functionally illiterate. It is entirely possible to call on professional interpreters trained in gender-based violence issues, including for individual interviews, to avoid involving the violent partner, relatives, or family members. Similarly, to ensure linguistic accessibility, information documents (rights, procedures, useful numbers, legal information, etc.) can be translated in advance into the languages of the target audience.

In all cases, it is essential to ensure that victims are informed of their rights. To this end, it is recommended to collaborate with legal experts or specialized services to provide accurate information on residence rights and existing protection mechanisms, particularly in cases of violence (residence permits on humanitarian grounds, family reunification, etc.).

In this context, the decision tree includes two additional QR codes. The first link takes you to a list of legal aid services for migrant women who are victims of violence, available on the Collectif des Femmes website. The second provides access to the brochure "Guide des adresses utiles" (Guide to useful addresses), which brings together a wide range of resources on the rights of migrant women, including issues of access to healthcare, food, and housing.

It is also important to make all women, including those who do not report violence, aware that the right to protection takes precedence over immigration status. This information is important to enable them to take action without fear of deportation.

Tailoring support to individual needs is also important in order to develop flexible integration pathways that take into account each woman's migration experience, trauma, and pace. Providing childcare solutions helps prevent absenteeism from certain appointments. Finally, it is also necessary to critically analyze institutional practices to avoid any reproduction of domination or exclusion.

It is also essential **to refer the person to a legal aid service specializing in immigration law** or domestic violence. Appendix 3 contains an updated list of legal aid services available in Belgium for migrant women who are victims of violence. The aim is to facilitate referral to competent, accessible services that are aware of the specific realities faced by these women.

Keep in mind that it is always better to ask questions and verify the facts rather than ignore or minimize the situation.

Training is an essential asset. A **better understanding of the specific status** of migrant women helps to avoid mistakes in referral or advice. Specific attention should be paid to residence status in order to tailor your recommendations as effectively as possible

Addressing the issue of violence requires **sensitivity**. Use open-ended questions and maintain an active listening posture.

Also make sure that the person is **safe and has reliable resources around them** (trusted individuals, professionals, services, etc.). It is important to assess the quality of these resources. Family, for example, can be a source of support, but can also be an obstacle, particularly when religious or cultural norms conflict with certain social practices (such as divorce).

Finally, **confidentiality** is fundamental. Reassuring the victim is essential to establishing trust. It is important to remind them that their story will be treated with respect and without judgment, and that all exchanges will remain confidential. This assurance allows the person to feel safe and comfortable sharing their experiences without fear of consequences. Creating a safe environment is a key step in the helping relationship, and even more crucial if the person is undocumented or if the abuser still has access to some of their personal data (digital tracking is becoming increasingly common).

### 2.4.2 Decision tree

The tool "What to do when faced with violence against a migrant woman," intended for frontline professionals, can be downloaded from the MOOC at the following address:

<https://violenceagainstmigrantwomen.eu/storage/docs/IPV-Migrants-tool.pdf>

or via the following QR code:





## FACED WITH VIOLENCE AGAINST A MIGRANT WOMAN, WHAT TO DO?

Guidelines for approaching and providing the best possible support to a migrant woman

WHEN FACED WITH A MIGRANT WOMAN WHO IS A VICTIM OF VIOLENCE

AM I COMFORTABLE RAISING THE ISSUE OF VIOLENCE WITH THE PERSON?

NO

YES, IT IS OK

Provide a leaflet or information, or refer them to someone trustworthy who is qualified in this area.

**VIOLENCE HELPLINE**  
Belgium

0800 30 030

[www.ecouteviolencesconjugales.be](http://www.ecouteviolencesconjugales.be)

and the **chat** service for violence against migrant women:

[we-access.eu](http://we-access.eu)



If she finds herself in a situation of violence, make sure she knows her rights.

Always refer the person to a specific legal aid service specializing in immigration law.

**ASK AND CHECK  
= IMPORTANT AND ESSENTIAL!**

YES

Supportive environment

Ensure appropriate means of communication

Respect beliefs and customs

- Check understanding and, if necessary, arrange for a professional interpreter or an appropriate communication system.
- Have a better understanding of the specific status of migrant women.
- Ensure confidentiality, especially if she is in an irregular situation or if the perpetrator still has access to her data.
- Address violence with open questions. Adopt an active listening posture, without interrupting, judging, or taking sides.
- Pay particular attention to her residence permit. Make sure she is safe and has "reliable" people she can turn to.



TO FIND OUT MORE AND TAKE THE NEXT STEP, CHECK OUT OUR FREE ONLINE COURSE

REFER AND SUPPORT TOWARDS THE SPECIALISED NETWORK

Specialized legal resources



List of useful addresses



# Conclusion



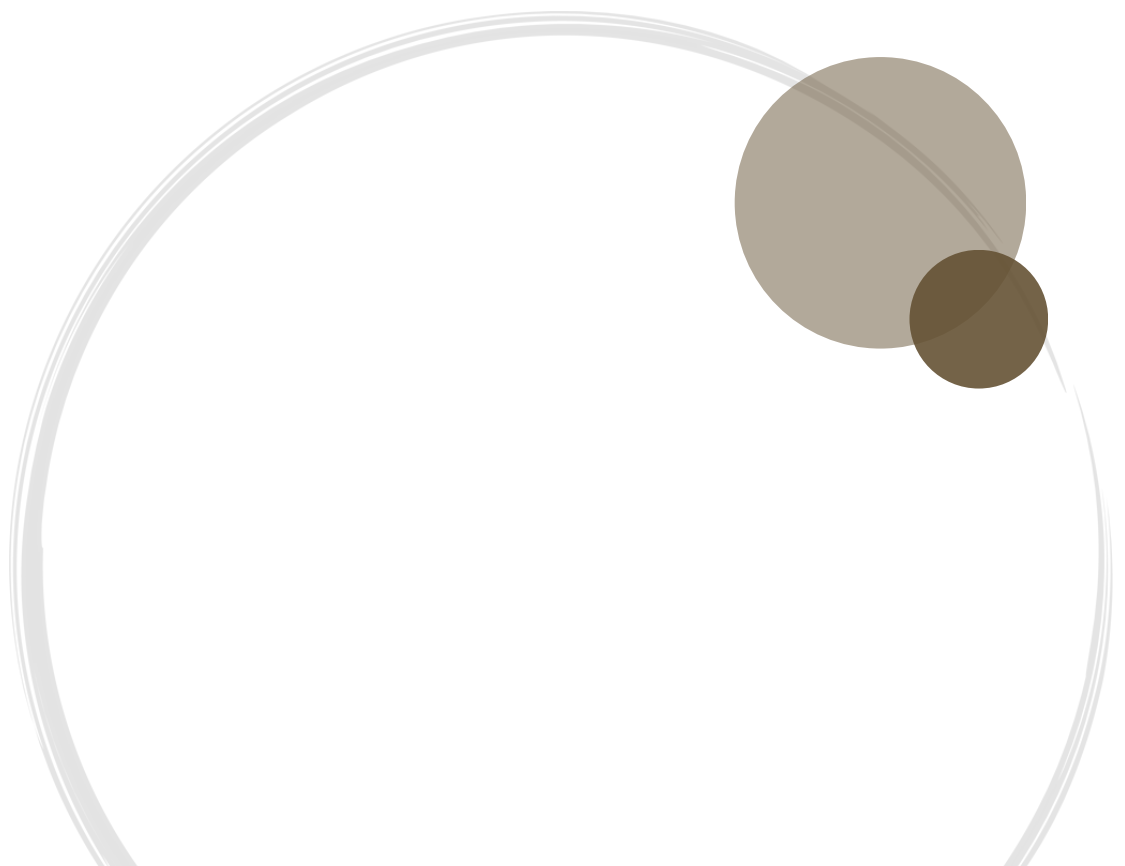
# Conclusion



In summary, domestic violence, particularly against migrant women, is a complex and multidimensional problem deeply rooted in unequal power dynamics and exacerbated by migration and patriarchal contexts. The various forms of violence—whether physical, psychological, economic, or institutional—fuel a cycle of domination that traps victims in oppressive relationships. Obstacles such as economic dependence, language and cultural barriers, and stigmatization make it difficult to report violence and access support resources.

There is specific legislation such as the Istanbul Convention at the European level, the legal framework in Belgium, and the new European Directive. However, the current system is not sufficient to provide concrete solutions to the difficulties faced by migrant women who are victims of intimate partner violence.

Even if change takes time, every gesture counts, and all frontline professionals are encouraged to be particularly attentive to these difficult situations faced by migrant women.



# APPENDICES



# Appendix 1: Diagram of the cycle of domestic violence

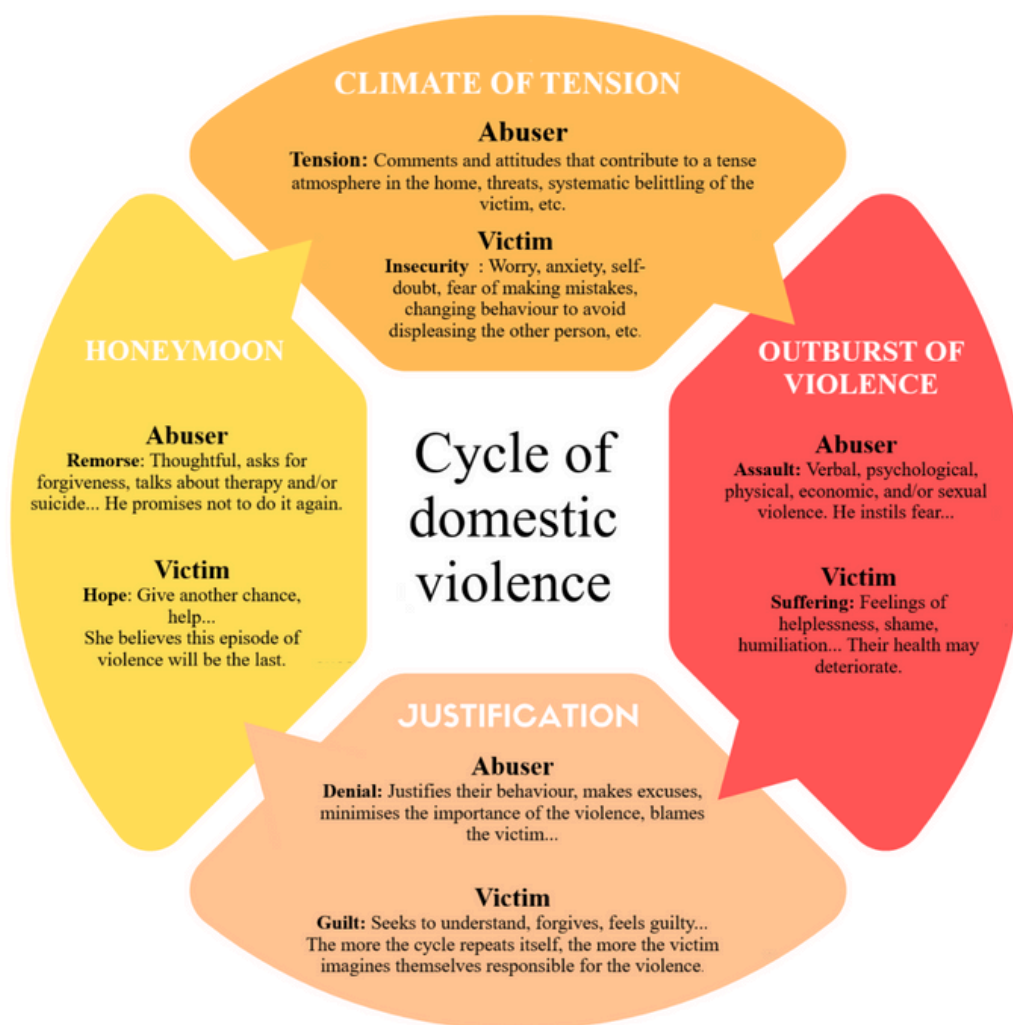
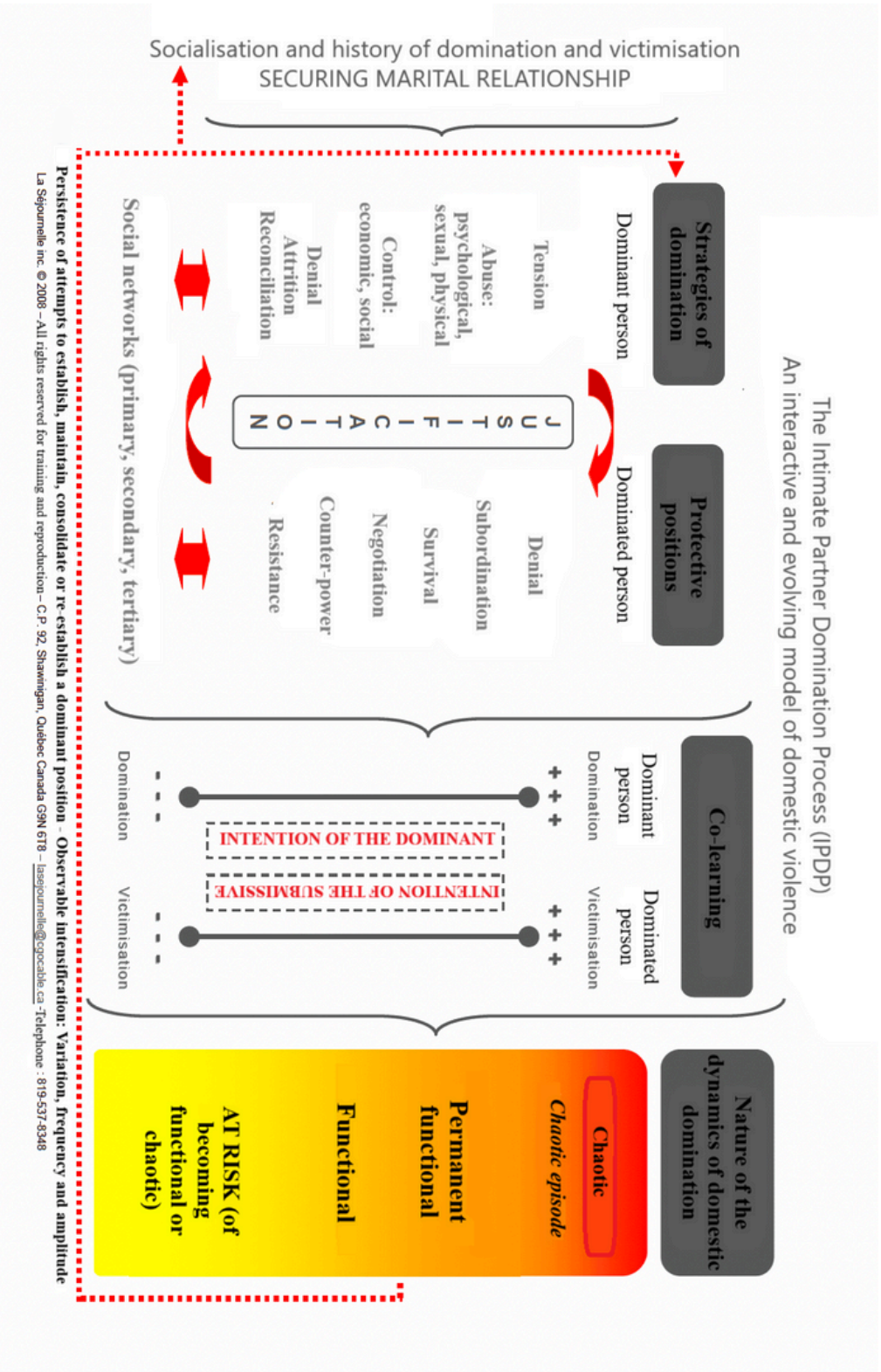


Image taken from the Solidarité Femmes website: The cycle of domestic violence  
<https://www.solidarite-femmes.be/violences-conjugales/cycle/>

# Appendix 2: Diagram of the process of domestic domination



# Appendix 3: List of specialized legal services for migrant women who are victims of violence

This document provides an updated list of **legal aid services** available in Belgium **that specialize in assisting migrant women who are victims of violence**. Its aim is to facilitate referral to competent, accessible structures that are aware of the specific realities faced by these women. By listing the main actors involved in legal support, this resource aims to strengthen the protection of rights and access to justice for all, regardless of their status or origin, and in a safe environment for each woman and her children.

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## Rights of foreigners

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### **SIREAS asbl ((International Education Research Service))**

**Description** : SIREAS legal service Information on rights and obligations in Belgium; assistance with various administrative and social procedures such as: work and residence permits, social security issues, housing, health, schooling, financial difficulties, procedures with the CPAS (public social welfare centers), etc.

**Address** : Rue du Boulet, 26 - 1000 Brussels

**Site** : <https://sireas.be/>

**Mail** : [sasb@sireas.be](mailto:sasb@sireas.be)

**Phone** : 02 649 99 58

**Information** : Come to the office every morning. Call every day from 2pm to 5pm except Mondays.

The service is open every day from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. and from 2 p.m. to 5:30 p.m.

### **Casa legal asbl**

**Description** : Association offering an alternative way of practicing law with an interdisciplinary, tailor-made approach that is better suited to the needs of a particularly vulnerable group.

**Address** : Rue des Tanneurs, 52 - 1000 Brussels (4th floor)

**Site** : [casalegal.be](http://casalegal.be)

**Mail** : [info@casalegal.be](mailto:info@casalegal.be)

**Phone** : +32 (0) 2 880 57 37

**Information** : The team members can assist you in French, Dutch, English, and Spanish and can call on an interpreting service if necessary.

Open Monday from 9:00 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. and from 1:30 p.m. to 5:00 p.m., and Tuesday through Friday from 9:00 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.

### Démocratie Plus

**Description** : Socio-legal assistance for people of foreign origin and promotion of community living. Management and follow-up of naturalization files and all other issues and procedures concerning refugees.

**Address** : Rue des Deux Églises, 111 - 1210 Saint-Josse-ten-Noode

**Site** : [democratie-plus.be](http://democratie-plus.be)

**Mail** : [democratie-plus@hotmail.com](mailto:democratie-plus@hotmail.com)

**Phone** : +32 (0)2 350.45.80

**Information** : Every day from 9:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. in the afternoon by appointment.

### Caritas International Belgium

**Description** : Caritas International helps victims of war, violence, disasters, and poverty, both in their own countries and as refugees, in collaboration with its local, national, and international networks.

**Address** : Rue de la Charité 43 - 1210 Saint-Josse-ten-Noode

**Site** : [caritasinternational.be](http://caritasinternational.be)

**Mail** : [info@caritas.eu](mailto:info@caritas.eu)

**Phone** : +32 2 229 36 11

**Information** : Monday to Friday from 8:30 a.m. to 4:45 p.m.

### NANSEN

**Description** : Legal expertise center on international protection that analyzes structural developments in international protection and access to procedures and bodies. Non-profit organization offering specialized legal assistance.

**Address** : Rue Émile Féron, 153 - 1060 Brussels

**Site** : [nansen-refugee.be](http://nansen-refugee.be)

**Mail** : [dossiers@nansenrefugee.be](mailto:dossiers@nansenrefugee.be)

**Phone** : Asylum and victims of torture: Marjan Claes - phone: 0485 26 84 47

**Phone** : Asylum and detention: Alice Sinon - phone: 0487 88 50 41

**Information** : No assistance for undocumented persons.

### Comité des travailleurs-ses Migrants.tes avec et sans papiers de la CSC Bruxelles (Confédération Syndicats Chrétiens)

**Description** : The CSC invests in the defense and organization of migrant workers with and without papers. The committee is a collective action group supporting access to legal work and residence.

**Address** : Rue Pléтинckx 19 – 1000 Brussels

**Site** :

<https://www.lacsc.be/csc-bruxelles/agissez-avec-nous/nos-champs-daction/migrants-csc-bruxelles>

**Mail** : [u05ejl@acv-csc.be](mailto:u05ejl@acv-csc.be)

**Phone** : 02 557 80 69

**Information** : Weekly legal advice service (every Monday from 9.30am to 11.30am).

### ADDE- Association pour le Droit des Étrangers

**Description** : Socio-legal support tailored to all foreigners. The AVEVI service is specifically intended for victims of intimate partner violence. Research center that studies issues related to migration and cultural diversity and promotes the rights of foreigners.

**Address** : Rue du Boulet, 22 –1000 Brussels

**Site** : [www.adde.be](http://www.adde.be)

**Mail** : [servicejuridique@adde.be](mailto:servicejuridique@adde.be)

**Phone** : 02 227 42 42

**Information** : Monday to Friday, 9:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. and 2:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m.

### Point d'appui

**Description** : Local initiative for the integration of foreign nationals or people of foreign origin (focus on specialized legal assistance in immigration law). The non-profit organization aims to help foreign nationals in precarious or illegal situations.

**Address** : Rue Maghin, 33 - 4000 Liège Belgique

**Site** : [pointdappui.be/](http://pointdappui.be/)

**Mail** : [info@pointdappui.be](mailto:info@pointdappui.be)

**Phone** : 04/227.69.51

**Information** : Monday to Friday, 9:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. and 1:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m.

### Espace 28

**Description** : Actions and services to support and assist migrants, particularly new arrivals, asylum seekers, refugees, and anyone in exile.

**Address** : Rue de la Colline 18 - 4800 Verviers

**Site** : [espace28.be](http://espace28.be)

**Mail** : [info@espace28.be](mailto:info@espace28.be)

**Phone** : 32 (0) 87 34 10 53

**Information** : Mondays from 9:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. and Tuesdays from 1:30 p.m. to 4:30 p.m.

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Domestic violence & Foreigners' rights

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### La Voix des femmes

**Description** : Reception, social and legal support, French as a foreign language classes, activities and training, project development.

**Address** : Rue de l'Alliance-Verbond, 20 - 1210 Saint-Josse-ten-Noode

**Site** : [lavoixdesfemmes.org](http://lavoixdesfemmes.org)

**Mail** : [lvdf@lavoixdesfemmes.org](mailto:lvdf@lavoixdesfemmes.org)

**Phone** : 02 218 77 87

**Information** : Monday to Friday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

### Collectif des femmes

**Description** : Supporting women and marginalized people on their journey toward independence, integration, and success.

**Site** : [collectifdesfemmes.be](http://collectifdesfemmes.be)

**Mail** : [accueil@collectifdesfemmes.be](mailto:accueil@collectifdesfemmes.be)

**Phone** : 010/47 47 69

**Information** :

- Rue du Grand Hospice 7 - 1000 Brussels: Monday and Tuesday from 9:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.
- Rue du Méridien 10 - 1210 Brussels (Maison Amazone): Thursday and Friday from 9:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.
- Rue des Sports, 19 - 1348 Ottignies-Louvain-la-Neuve: Monday to Friday from 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

### Les Tamaris Asbl

**Description** : Association against domestic violence and abuse, run by psychologists and family mediators from the Nivelles Bar Association. Support service for victims of domestic violence, offering legal and psychological assistance.

**Address** : Rue de Marbais, 61B – 1495 Villers-La-Ville

**Site** : [lestamaris.be](http://lestamaris.be)

**Mail** : [info@lestamaris.be](mailto:info@lestamaris.be)

**Phone** : 0460/24.50.71

**Information** : Drop-in sessions at CPAS offices, with or without legal stay. Between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. on weekdays.

# Appendix 4: Glossary

- **The Istanbul Convention**

The Istanbul Convention is based on a victim-centered approach. It promotes respect and equality for all women and girls who may be victims of violence, providing practical tools to ensure their safety and empowerment.

The Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence is a major human rights instrument establishing comprehensive legal standards guaranteeing women's right to freedom from violence. The result of the Council of Europe's ongoing efforts since the 1990s to prevent violence against women and domestic violence, this European legal instrument was negotiated by its 47 member states and adopted on April 7, 2011, by its Committee of Ministers. It is also known as the Istanbul Convention, named after the city where it was opened for signature on May 11, 2011. Three years later, on August 1, 2014, it entered into force after its 10th ratification. Since then, all governments that have ratified this treaty are bound by its obligations.

The Istanbul Convention recognizes violence against women as a violation of human rights and a form of discrimination against women. It covers various forms of gender-based violence against women, which refers to violence directed against women because they are women or violence that affects them disproportionately. Gender-based violence against women differs from other types of violence because, in this case, the fact that it is perpetrated against women is both the cause and the result of unequal power relations between women and men that relegate women to a subordinate status in the public and private spheres and contribute to making violence against them acceptable.

Under the convention, the term "gender" is used to recognize how harmful attitudes and perceptions of the roles and behaviors attributed to women in society play a role in perpetuating violence against women. This terminology does not replace the biological definition of "sex" or that of "women" and "men," but aims to emphasize that inequalities, stereotypes, and violence do not stem from biological differences, but from harmful preconceived ideas about how women should be or behave, which have the effect of limiting women's ability to act freely. Consequently, the convention places the elimination of violence against women and domestic violence in the broader context of promoting equality between women and men.

- **Domestic/intimate partner violence**

**Europe :**

"Domestic violence" refers to all acts of physical, sexual, psychological, or economic violence that occur within the family or household or between former or current spouses or partners, regardless of whether the perpetrator shares or has shared the same residence as the victim.

**Belgium:**

"Intimate partner violence is a pattern of behaviors, actions, or attitudes by one partner or former partner that aims to control and dominate the other. It includes verbal, physical, sexual, and economic aggression, threats, or coercion that is repeated or likely to be repeated, causing harm to the other person's integrity and even their social and professional integration. This violence affects not only the victim but also family members, particularly children. It constitutes a form of domestic violence. It appears that in the vast majority of cases, the perpetrators are men and the victims are women. Violence in intimate relationships is the manifestation, in the private sphere, of the unequal power relations between women and men that still exist in our society.<sup>58</sup>"

- **The cycle of violence**

A theory developed in 1988 by psychologist Leonor Walker. It helps to understand the cyclical nature of domestic violence. Leonor Walker identifies four phases in the cycle of violence, the duration of which can vary considerably depending on the situation. In some couples, these four phases can occur in a single day, while in others they can extend over several weeks or even months.

- **The honeymoon phase:**

This is the early stage of the relationship or the period following the justification phase, during which the abuser actively seeks reconciliation in order to be forgiven.

- **Tension :**

There is palpable tension in the relationship. The victim will try everything to reduce or alleviate it. Often, they are unable to explain this tension in words, nor can the children who feel it put a clear label on it.

- **The explosion or crisis:**

The abuser explodes and attacks (not only physically, but also through a huge outburst of anger). During this explosion, they exceed the limits of what is acceptable (consciously or unconsciously) in the relationship. For each couple, this may vary. The victim is afraid, sometimes stunned, and experiences this outburst in terror. They enter or may enter survival mode.

<sup>57</sup> Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, Istanbul, May 11, 2011, Article 3b. Online: <https://rm.coe.int/168008482e>

<sup>58</sup> Single definition adopted by Belgian federal, regional and community ministers in February 2006: Écoute Violence Conjugale (Domestic Violence Helpline): What is domestic violence?

On line : <https://www.ecouteviolencesconjugales.be/pourquoi-appeler/professionnel/definition>

- **Justification/guilt:**

The couple accepts explanations for the outburst. These explanations are obviously provided by the aggressor. They often blame and hold the victim responsible, which is why the term "blaming" is preferred to "justification." However, the victim will also seek to understand this outburst and will therefore also try to justify it, explain it to themselves, and thus be able to put alternatives in place should it happen again. If the justifications for the outburst are accepted by both partners, the situation calms down and we then enter the reconciliation phase, also known as the "honeymoon" phase.

In each of these phases, there are specific behaviors and feelings that vary depending on the protagonist.

- **Process of Marital Domination (PDC)**

The Process of Marital Domination (PDC) is a systemic analysis that highlights the mechanisms of coercive control of one spouse over the other. This systemic analysis helps to understand how this system is established, structured, and perpetuated by identifying the strategies of the aggressor and the responses of the victims. This makes it possible to identify couple dynamics where the risk is high. It also makes it possible to determine the level of victimization of victims (learned helplessness, level of ability to mobilize resources, etc.).

This theory focuses on the different people involved in and around the violent relationship and links them to one another. Specifically, PDC links the abuser (the dominant person) and the victim (the person who is the target of attempts at domination), as well as the social networks surrounding both. The term "social network" refers here to the primary network (family, friends, etc.) as well as the secondary network (support networks, police, justice system). In addition, this theory also focuses on the socialization of actors, i.e., their learning of social norms and codes throughout their lives. This theory offers a comprehensive and systemic view of domestic violence and seeks to interpret domestic violence as a dynamic and evolving process.

- **Migration**

Migration is the voluntary or forced movement of people from one place to another, usually from one country to another, for economic, social, political, or environmental reasons.

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<sup>59</sup> Intersectoral assessment of intimate partner violence using the Evivico tool. Online: <https://www.evivico.be/>

<sup>60</sup> Theory developed by Denise Tremblay, psychologist and director of La Séjournelle, a resource center for women who are victims of domestic violence in Shawinigan (Trois-Rivières, Quebec) and Accord Mauricie, Quebec. Accord Mauricie is an organization whose mission is to meet the needs of men by implementing various intervention strategies tailored to their specific needs. More specifically, the organization targets men who adopt controlling, domineering or violent attitudes and behaviours toward their partners, children or loved ones, as well as men in difficulty or vulnerable situations who exhibit risk factors that could lead them to adopt such behaviours.

- **Family honor**

Importance attached to family reputation, often used to justify control over women.

- **Assimilation**

Process by which migrants adopt the norms of the host society, which may alter or exacerbate power dynamics within the couple.

- **Culture shock**

Conflict between the norms of the country of origin and those of the host country, which can influence couple relationships.

- **Intersectionality**

Concept that examines how different types of oppression (gender, race, immigration status) combine to affect migrant women.

- **Normalized violence**

Conflict between the norms of the country of origin and those of the host country, which can influence couple relationships.

- **Hidden violence**

Invisible violence is a form of violence that is ignored, minimized, or not recognized by society, making its effects less visible or less taken into account, despite its real impact on victims.

- **Language barriers**

Barriers to accessing services and information, exacerbating the vulnerability of migrant women.

- **Economic dependence**

Increased vulnerability linked to financial dependence, exacerbated by migration status.

- **Culturality**

The set of cultural characteristics, values, and traditions that shape the identity and behavior of an individual or social group.

- **Family reunification**

Family reunification is a legal process that allows family members of an immigrant to join them in their host country, with the aim of maintaining family unity or building a new one.

- **Traditional gender roles**

Specific cultural expectations regarding the behavior and responsibilities of men and women within the couple and the family.

- **Community pressure**

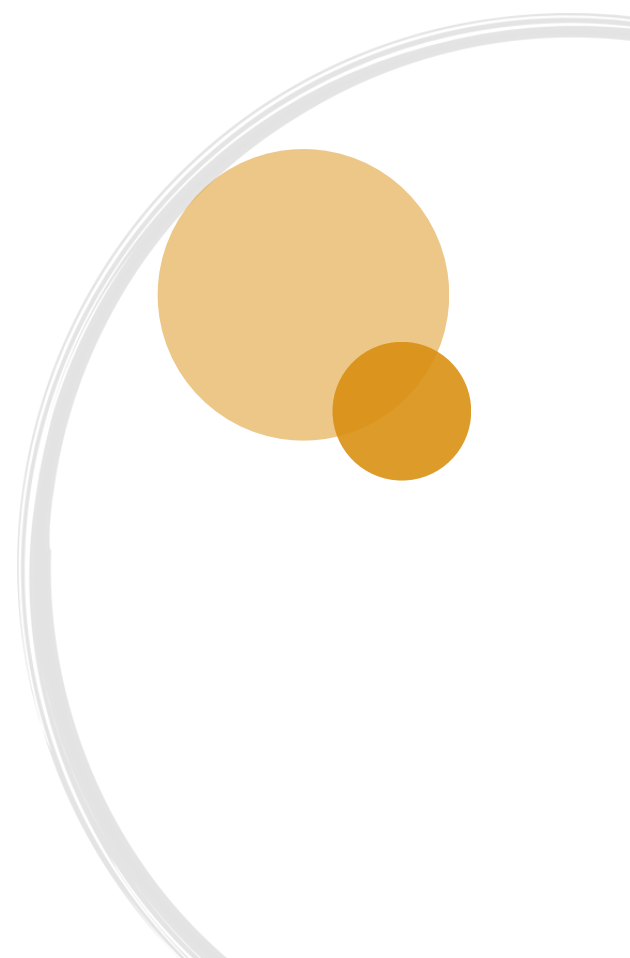
Influence exerted by the community of origin on individual behavior, often to maintain traditional norms.

- **Religious norms**

Rules and values derived from religion that can influence norms as well as family and couple dynamics.

- **Ethnic solidarity**

The tendency of members of the same community to protect each other, sometimes to the detriment of victims of violence.



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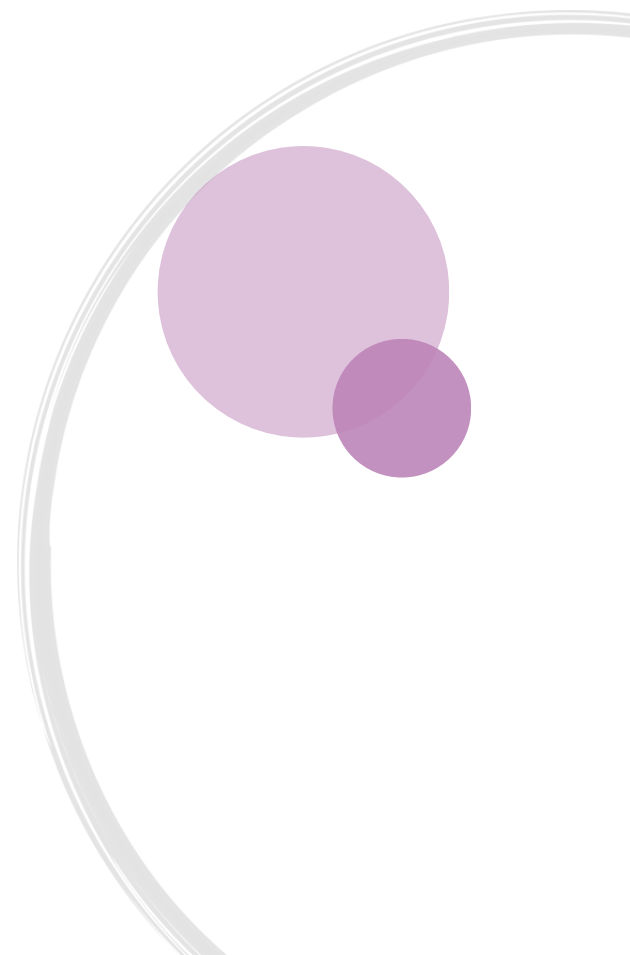
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