

Why domestic violence is more common than we think

By Catharina Vogt, March 2021

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The first time I came into direct contact with victims of domestic violence was in Chicago in 2011: I was in the city during a conference and was approached on the street in the afternoon by a mother and her two sons, asking if I could buy them a bus ticket. The father of the family had violently attacked the woman, and the two sons had tried to intervene. In the end, they had to flee anyway. With bruises and various wounds, including the eye of one of the sons.

A little later and back in Germany, a friend told me that her husband had left her and her two children without notice. Her bank account had been emptied, and there was only a 50-euro bill on the kitchen table. Shortly after, he came back and threatened her with a pistol to prevent her from reporting him.

These incidents seemed like sad exceptions to me at the time. But why, actually?

If one looks at the figures of the police crime statistics (PKS in Germany) or victim surveys, however, domestic violence is widespread. According to the PKS¹, almost half (48%) of completed homicides in 2019 took place in the partnership or family environment (a total of 263 deaths). In 2014, the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights surveyed 42,000 women in Europe about their experiences of violence. The analysis showed²: "Of women who are or have been in a relationship with a man, 22% have experienced physical and/or sexual violence" (p. 10). So this affects more than one in five women. Statistically, in Germany as in many other countries worldwide, the home or the partnership is the most dangerous place for women.

Yet, as I can argue from my own perception and also from the feedback of various people in my environment, we are not aware of the tragedies that often happen in our immediate neighborhood. There are many reasons for this. For one, we need to understand that domestic violence or abuse is about more than a marital spat and also more than a battering counterpart. Domestic violence includes psychological violence, financial violence, sexual violence, and stalking in addition to physical violence. The thing that causes the most psychological damage on the part of the victim in domestic violence is the permanent coercive control by the perpetrator. Typical signs of this are, for example, checking the partner's cell phone, determining how the partner dresses, what he/she may spend money on or with whom he/she may meet. Non-compliance is sanctioned, e.g. by withdrawal of love or threats.³ Victims often only become aware of the problem at a late stage. They hope for improvement, which usually occurs but also quickly turns into abuse again (so-called cycle of violence). They are ashamed that such an injustice happens to them as modern people and due to the psychological impairments resulting from the abuse (e.g. fear, depression), it costs them a lot of strength to disclose the grievances and to seek help. They are afraid of losing a lot in the process: Their home, their familiar environment, their job, their children, their reputation.

Abusers do everything they can to maintain control over the victim and prevent disclosure of the abuse or separation. For example, they accompany the victim to doctor's appointments so that the victim cannot confide in medical personnel even if the pattern of injury is clear. They isolate the victim from friends and family who would otherwise intervene, and blame the victim for everything that goes wrong in the relationship. At the same time, it is difficult for us to recognize domestic violence as such, because we often still have the romantic image of "Beauty and the Beast" in our

minds, which makes us believe that it is okay for men to misbehave, or that women can patiently endure everything and save it with their love.

As part of the EU-funded IMPRODOVA project, we have implemented the theme of this article in a video (see end of text). The video also describes how victims can be helped. Fortunately, there are many contact points and hotlines (overview of European hotlines can be found here: <https://ec.europa.eu/justice/saynostopvaw/helpline.html>). Incidentally, many police have a motto: "If you hit, you leave." Victims do not necessarily have to flee to a women's shelter - for example, if the perpetrator is not allowed to enter his or her own home due to a removal order or contact ban.

Domestic violence or abuse often takes place behind closed doors and is thus often invisible. On the other hand, we ourselves know of cases as victims or friends of victims. The stronger our awareness of the problem, the sooner we can recognize domestic violence and the sooner we can help. Typical warning signals are conspicuous changes in behavior, such as when the person concerned no longer arranges to meet acquaintances, wears long-sleeved clothing even on very hot days, or consult their partner about the smallest decisions. Then outsiders can carefully inquire and signal a willingness to support.

My friend has moved and apparently changed her cell phone number. I have not been in contact with her for years. In Chicago, the nearest kiosk that had tickets was two blocks away. The family was going to a church to get help. On the way, I asked the older son what he wanted to be when he grew up. He looked up at the skyscrapers and said, "Architect for those nice big houses." He had not lost everything that day and he possessed more than his backpack: hope for a better future.

Why do too many mistakenly think that domestic violence is not a serious problem in our society? This **video** gives an overview of typical reasons and also explains how you can help a victim: <https://youtu.be/b-JtosP6yu0>

Further languages: [Bulgarian](#), [Finnish](#), [French](#), [German](#), [Hungarian](#), [Italian](#), [Portuguese](#)

¹ Bundeskriminalamt (Hrsg., 2020). *Polizeiliche Kriminalstatistik. Bundesrepublik Deutschland. Jahrbuch 2019. Band 2. Opfer.*

https://www.bka.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/DE/Publikationen/PolizeilicheKriminalstatistik/2019/Jahrbuch/pks2019Jahrbuch2Opfer.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=3

² European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2014). Violence against women: An EU-wide survey. https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra-2014-vaw-survey-at-a-glance-oct14_en.pdf

³ In a non-violent partnership, mild forms of these behaviors can also occur (e.g., discussing how the family budget is spent); the difference is that *both partners have the same right* to express their wishes and are listened to *in the same way* by the other person. Here, the guiding motive is not control, but the well-being of the other person.

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