

Which Violence Matters?

Perceptions of intimate partner violence among people in The Netherlands.

English summary

ABOUT THE STUDY

The first Dutch women's shelter (*blijf-van-m'n-lijf-huis*) was founded in Amsterdam in 1974. It marked the beginning of a decreasing tolerance of violence against women in intimate partner relationships. Since then, the Dutch women's movement generated a growing awareness as well as increasing professional support facilities for victims, research and government policy, aimed at preventing and contesting intimate partner violence. Almost half a century later, the NGOs Atria, Institute on gender equality and women's history, and Blijf Groep (IPV shelters) conducted a comprehensive and representative study on prevailing attitudes and beliefs in The Netherlands regarding partner violence against women *and* men. It is the first study that focuses on attitudes and beliefs regarding partner violence in the Dutch context. Internationally, attitudinal research on partner violence has been carried out, but only on a small scale. The research presented here provides initial key insights as to how people in The Netherlands perceive and interpret violence that occurs between (ex) partners.

A representative sample of Dutch respondents (N = 3100) participated by completing an online questionnaire. The quantitative dataset that developed from the survey was supplemented with a qualitative, in-depth study, through four focus group interviews (among women and men of respectively Dutch/Western and non-Western backgrounds). In the study, a distinction has been made between three types of intimate partner violence: physical (such as hitting and kicking), psychological (persistent forms of control, intimidation and scolding) and sexual violence (inter alia forced sexual acts and rape).

The following core questions addressed in this study are:

How do people in The Netherlands perceive the extent and nature of intimate partner violence? Do they believe this violence consists of physical, psychic and/or sexual violence? How comprehensive and how frequent do people think intimate partner violence occurs? Do people know someone personally who has experienced intimate partner violence? Do women and men differ in perceptions of prevalence of intimate partner violence?

How do people in The Netherlands perceive the social distribution of intimate partner violence among different groups in Dutch society (ethnic, religious)? Do people believe intimate partner violence occurs more or less among certain social groups? Which social and demographic characteristics are most relevant in perceptions of how intimate partner violence is distributed?

How do people in The Netherlands think about moral aspects that pertain to intimate partner violence? Do they believe intimate partner violence is unacceptable under all circumstances? What are their attitudes towards matters of responsibility, of both victims and perpetrators?

RESULTS

Meaning of the concept intimate partner violence

The Dutch associate intimate partner violence primarily with physical violence (83 percent), sometimes in combination with psychic violence (44 percent). This combined association is more prevalent among women than men. More often than women, men associate intimate partner violence exclusively with the violation of bodily integrity. In the context of a relationship, sexual violence rarely comes to mind among our respondents (2 percent). It appears that the dominant cultural representations of sexual violence are largely determined by a belief that sexual violence is mainly committed by 'the unknown man hiding in the bushes'.

Estimates of prevalence of intimate partner violence

Over the past four decades, scientific research repeatedly indicated that at least one out of three individuals, predominantly women, ever experience intimate partner violence. Beliefs of the Dutch respondents regarding prevalence of intimate partner violence reflect this earlier finding. Depending on the type of violence (physical, psychic or sexual) and whether it concerns violence against women or men, estimates of how many people experience intimate partner violence fluctuate between 15 and 39 percent. Both women and men believe that intimate partner violence is mostly directed against women. More than partner violence against women, intimate partner violence against men is associated with psychic violence. Women give a higher estimate of the prevalence of intimate partner violence compared to men. The study reveals one remarkably contradictory finding: respondents give relatively high estimates of the extent of intimate partner violence against men, but at the same time they are unable to identify a similar proportion of male victims in their direct surroundings. Regarding estimates of female victimization, these do converge with the level of actually knowing female victims. Finally, women know more female and male victims of intimate partner violence personally, compared to men. For the majority of people, then, intimate partner violence is far from abstract. More than half of our respondents report to know one or more persons that have experienced violence in the context of an intimate partner relationship.

Estimates of the social distribution of intimate partner violence

More than 1 out of 3 respondents (35 percent) believe that physical violence in intimate partner relationships is unrelated to migration and that it occurs equally frequent among people with a Dutch/Western and a non-Western background. Almost half of our respondents believe that physical violence in intimate partner relationships is related to ethnic background and estimate that it occurs more often among citizens with a non-Western background. This belief is particularly dominant among native Dutch (%) and more specifically among men (49%, compared to 33% of respondents with a non-Western background). Among Dutch female respondents, 42 percent believe that physical intimate partner violence correlates with a non-Western background. A small group of 3 percent believes the opposite is true: and that it occurs more often among native Dutch.

Almost half (40 to 46 percent) of Dutch respondents presume that intimate partner violence occurs equally regardless of level education. However, 40 percent believe that physical violence in particular happens more often among the lower educated. Of our lower educated respondents, 25 percent think that physical violence is more prevalent within their own group compared to the higher educated.

Young people below the age of 25 believe that intimate partner violence is more common (than average) within their own age category. This goes for physical violence (37 percent against 25

percent of respondents older than 25) and even more so, for sexual violence (46 percent of our respondents below 25 think sexual violence occurs more often in their age category, compared to a third of the respondents over 25).

Which type of violence is unacceptable?

In general, respondents agree (90 percent) that violence in the context of an intimate relationship is unacceptable. However, when presented with concrete situations, boundaries start to shift. Almost a third (29 percent) deem the use of violence against a partner acceptable under specific circumstances. For all circumstances this goes more for men than for women. On average 1,5 to 2 times as often than women, men find physical, psychic and sexual violence acceptable. In addition, higher educated respondents have more permissive attitudes towards mutual violence, compared to medium and low educated respondents. There are no significant differences between people with a Dutch/Western background and a non-Western background in their acceptance of intimate partner violence. Only when one partner beats the other (18 percent versus 14 percent) or in the case of divorce causing emotions to run high (7 percent against 4 percent) slightly more people with a non-Western background find intimate partner violence more acceptable than native Dutch or respondents with a western background.

Young people and intimate partner violence

Striking in the Dutch study is the relatively high level of tolerance among young people (below the age of 25), especially regarding sexual violence in an intimate partner relationship. 1 out of 20 young people in the Netherlands find rape (sexual intercourse through exercising physical force) of a female partner acceptable (in turn, only 2 percent of the totality of respondents share this view). In addition, young people more often have victim-blaming attitudes and state that physical violence happens because it is 'provoked' (8 percent of people below 25 against 2 percent of people over the age of 55). Moreover, they more often express the opinion that others should not interfere in intimate partner violence, since it is considered to be a private matter (9 percent, against 4 percent of people over 55).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite higher levels of awareness and increased provisions for victims of high professional level compared to 50 years ago, this study shows that intimate partner violence remains a major problem. At least half of the Dutch respondents personally know a victim of this type of violence. Considering that this study indicates that men have more permissive beliefs and attitudes towards intimate partner violence, the development of gender-specific expertise on the problem is crucial, especially with a view to effective prevention. Investments in help services, refuge facilities, as well as in long-term programs that target prevention, are essential to realize effective recovery of victims.

The authors recommend measures that focus on advancing professional expertise, education and research. The finding that young people are relatively permissive towards multiple forms of partner violence raises the question whether we will face an increase in intimate partner violence in the near future. Interventions pointed at young people are urgent for stopping intimate partner violence to continue or increase, in future generations. Further research is important to assess to what extent envisioned changes are achieved and to analyze how intervention strategies can be improved for better effects.

LINKS AND REFERENCES

Renée Römken, Aleid van den Brink & Tim de Jong (2018) *Welk geweld telt? Opvattingen van Nederlanders over partnergeweld*. Amsterdam: Atria en Blijf Groep.

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