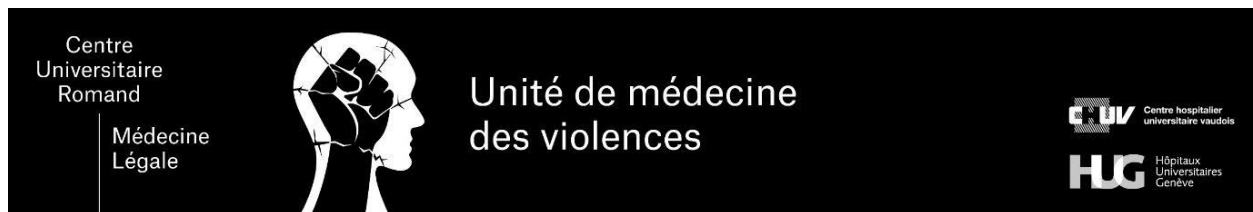


The full report and the summaries in the three national languages may be found at: [www.curml.ch/unite-de-medecine-des-violences-umv-0](http://www.curml.ch/unite-de-medecine-des-violences-umv-0)



## How intimate partner violence-victimised mothers perceive the adequacy of professional and institutional responses to their needs

The University Centre of Legal Medicine at Lausanne University Hospital has supported this study, which was carried out by its Violence Medical Unit.

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- Office for Equality between Women and Men (BEFH), Department of Infrastructure and Human Resources (DIRH)
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# 1 Summary

## Objectives of the study and methodology used

This study examines how intimate partner violence-victimised mothers perceive the adequacy of professional and institutional responses to their needs. Its objectives are to provide some answers to the following questions: How did victimised mothers experience their contacts with the institutions and professionals? What has the experience of their children been? To what extent have these contacts responded to their needs as mothers, as well as to the needs of their children? This qualitative research is based on 20 semi-directive individual interviews conducted in 2020 with mothers who were victims of intimate partner violence and who consulted the Violence Medical Unit between 2011 and 2014. The interviews were subjected to inductive thematic content analysis.

## Key descriptive results

*The mothers' experiences* – In addition to fear of reprisals, there are multiple factors that prevent victimised mothers from seeking help and/or leaving their violent partner – and at the same time father of their child(ren)<sup>3</sup>: worrying about the consequences for the children; having feelings for the perpetrator/father and hoping that the situation will improve; minimising the violence suffered; the perpetrator/father's "hold" over the victim, together with emotional exhaustion; a lack of resources; and/or an unwillingness to appear as a victim. Once the violence has been exposed, victimised mothers mention different types of support they have received throughout their journey, such as protective measures; statements in their support by various professionals; financial and/or administrative support; psychological support; or being referred to the network of help and support for victims. However, a lack of support was also experienced sometimes. Some mothers say they were taken seriously as victims by different types of professionals. Nevertheless, nearly two-thirds of the participants say they were not listened to or believed by various professionals. They attribute this to several factors: the impact of the perpetrator/father's lies and manipulation; not conforming to the expected image of a victim of intimate partner violence; racist and/or sexist prejudice; and/or the professionals minimising the violence suffered. In the majority of the experiences related, there is in victimised mothers a feeling of fear which persists once the violence has been exposed. The fear concerns the victimised mothers' own safety, that of their children, and/or the possibility of being separated from their children. This feeling is elicited by the aggressive behaviour of the perpetrator/father, a feeling of a lack of protection from the institutions, not being recognised as a victim, and/or the fact that the child may be left in the care of the perpetrator/father. The harmful behaviour of the perpetrator/father persists after the couple's separation in many cases. It continues in the form of physical and/or psychological violence and threats, particularly at the moment of handing over the children; lying to professionals and institutions; absence from appointments required by the courts; failure to respect a restraining order or an eviction from the home; failure to respect the rules on visiting rights; non-payment of support; and/or instrumentalisation of children. In parallel, victimised mothers express a sense of injustice regarding the impunity that perpetrators/fathers appear to enjoy. It is felt when – instead of the perpetrator/father –the mother has to leave the home; in the face of a qualification deemed too weak of the violence by the justice system; when there is a failure to condemn violence, or a sentencing considered too lenient compared with the harm suffered; but also when there is

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<sup>3</sup> Hereafter referred to as the "perpetrator/father".

a failure to follow up on the sentences or decisions of the courts and/or to take violence into account during divorce proceedings. Furthermore, some victimised mothers felt frustrated, angry or distressed when professionals issued criticisms, injunctions or decisions about the children's welfare with which they were not in agreement. Depending on the individual case, this involved informing childcare professionals of the occurrence of intimate partner violence; the obligation to leave the perpetrator/father in order to protect the child; having to decide on the fate of the children's father; the perpetrator/father's visiting or custody rights; and/or having the children taken into care. In addition, the majority of victimised mothers found the cumbersome nature of procedures difficult to cope with, ranging from the multitude of appointments to attend – some of which they regarded as useless or inappropriate – to the difficulty of having to tell their story over and over again, the visibility of certain interventions, and/or the length of the measures and procedures, which for some were still ongoing at the time of the interview.

*The children's experiences* – The children's exposure to violence against their mother was significant and lasting in the great majority of cases. Moreover, the children of almost half the victims also suffered violence at the hands of their father, before and/or after the separation, whether in the form of physical, psychological or verbal violence, death threats or suspected sexual abuse. Several children were able to tell professionals about what was happening in their family. Children who talked about their situation at school, or showed signs of distress at daycare, raised concerns in the minds of their teachers and carers, who went on to support their mothers in different ways. On the other hand, when some children expressed a wish to live with their mother they were not always listened to, and in one case this was taken to result from manipulation by the mother. Several types of professional intervened with the children in the wake of the violence suffered by the mother. The majority of the children involved were given at least one course of individual counselling. Mothers sometimes think that the counselling had a positive effect on their children, but other times, that it did not help or even had a negative impact. Victimised mothers whose children participated in family therapy sessions report harmful experiences. The negative evaluations of these two types of therapy relate to poor comprehension or handling of the situation on the part of the professionals, as well as the children's exposure to the manipulative discourse of the perpetrator/father, or the sadness induced by rehashing the story. Several children had the experience of living in a shelter, either because they accompanied their mother to a women's refuge or because they were taken into care. With regard to refuges, victimised mothers mainly report a sense of safety, well-being and/or being well cared for. Little information was gathered regarding the experiences of children taken into care. Finally, there is little mention of pediatricians by victimised mothers, but when they do so, they talk about the support they received from them, or alternatively they express surprise at the absence of contact when the pediatricians had been informed of the situation by other professionals.

*The consequences for mothers and children* – Experiencing violence and its aftermath had numerous consequences for victimised mothers and their children. First of all, there were multiple repercussions on health for both mothers (physical and psychological injury, trauma, exhaustion, depression and somatic disorders) and children (anxiety, deep concern about their mother's safety and their own, phobias, stress and agitation, sleepwalking, attention problems, sadness, depression, suicidal thoughts, encopresis). There were also financial consequences. Several victimised mothers and their children found themselves in very precarious circumstances following the separation from the perpetrator/father. They attribute these problems to the non-payment of support by the perpetrator/father and to having to repay debts that he built up, as well as to their own precarious employment situation and the cost of legal representation and court. On the administrative level, some victimised mothers also mention the following

consequences: problems finding accommodation; having a criminal record; and/or problems relating to residence permits. The financial and administrative consequences naturally also affected the children. Lastly, consequences for the children's schooling are noted. At the time of the interview, some children and victimised mothers are still traumatised by their experience and are continuing to live under very difficult conditions. The violence suffered and the post-separation experiences also had an impact on the mother-child relationship. Indeed, both victimised mothers and children felt the need to protect each other in multiple ways. Furthermore, some participants reported that the relationship with their children had deteriorated for various reasons, such as the perpetrator/father's manipulation, a son reproducing the violent behaviour towards his mother, and/or decisions to place the children in care.

*Messages from the participants and summary of the needs of the victimised mothers* – Some victimised mothers had messages for their peers and/or for the institutions (see list in section 4.5). The needs mentioned by the victimised mothers are listed in a table (Table 2, section 4.6). Pre-separation, these needs relate to help with gaining financial independence, recognising the violence, obtaining information and being encouraged to leave. During the separation process, the needs relate to being recognised as a victim, protection, being referred to the support network, receiving assistance, and faster procedures. Afterwards there is a continuing need for protection, particularly through following up on the decisions of the court. It is also important to ensure that support payments are made and that victims are able to access high-quality counselling, if desired.

#### *Analysis of the relationship between the needs expressed and the responses received*

At the time of separating or seeking help, the victimised mothers had often spent several years living in a climate of violence, fear and coercive control by the perpetrator/father (e.g. being forbidden to work, being isolated from friends and family, denigration). In addition, several explained that at that time they were under the perpetrator/father's hold and had feelings of guilt. Beyond a fear of reprisals, these vulnerabilities arising from the abusive situation may lead to reluctance to leave the perpetrator/father because of the difficulty to imagine a new life in which it will be necessary to be independent and provide for the needs of her children. This lack of resources and, for some victimised mothers, the worry of losing their residence permit due to a separation also made them fear losing custody of their children. At the time of their first contact with professionals, some victimised mothers are therefore physically and emotionally exhausted, have no financial or social resources, and are suffering from low self-esteem. This means they may not be in the best state to embark on the legal battle that awaits them, and may not present the best image of themselves to the professionals. Indeed, not being able to express themselves well in the presence of the police, being terrorised to the point of no longer appearing credible, and retracting their statements through fear or feelings of guilt, did them no favours when they came forward as victims. However, a more combative attitude may also count against them because it does not correspond to the expected image of a victim. Finally, a number of victimised mothers suffered racist and sexist prejudice from some professionals. These different factors, added to the lies and manipulation of the perpetrators/fathers in the presence of professionals, can have a negative impact on the recognition of victims as victims. Yet, this first contact with the institutions is a key moment in a victim's care, which may lead them either to resign themselves, at least temporarily, to no longer seeking help, or may by contrast mark the beginning of salutary support. Given the many difficulties experienced in the aftermath of the abusive relationship in which the victimised mothers found themselves or continue to find themselves, it may be noted that the help available – medical, medico-legal, psychological, administrative,

legal, social and financial – corresponds to the mothers' needs. However, not all types of help were offered, seized or implemented optimally. Afterwards, the fact that in many cases the harmful behaviour of the perpetrators/fathers continues post-separation, and that the latter appear to benefit from a degree of impunity which enables such behaviour to persist, has serious consequences for victimised mothers and their children. In many situations, the main problem is the absence of physical and psychological protection. Also, in addition to having to live in fear, victimised mothers and their children then find themselves in precarious financial circumstances and sometimes see their own relationship deteriorate. Furthermore, some children have been taken into care and thus separated from their mother because perpetrators/fathers have failed to comply with the court's decisions. Mothers and children may be placed in danger by the system itself, particularly by legal processes regarded by victimised mothers as inappropriate to their situation. These concern matters such as their safety, how penal law treats violence, the failure to take violence into account when decisions are made relating to divorce and visiting rights, the obligation to attend family therapy and the risk of expulsion faced by victimised mothers with a precarious residence status. Finally, the cumbersome nature of the steps and procedures, which was mentioned in almost all the statements gathered, delays any return to normal with the result that entire childhoods may be spent in a climate of violence and fear. In addition to the length of the procedures and the multiple appointments that have to be attended, being held responsible for the children's safety when they are not the authors of the violence weighed heavily on the victimised mothers' shoulders. In short, the professional and institutional care given to victimised mothers may have positive as well as negative impacts on the well-being of mothers and children. Positive impacts may arise from good information, recognition of the victims as victims, proactive and joined-up referral to the support network, multifaceted support, and proper follow-up of the court's decisions. By contrast, an impartial attitude to parental rights and an unequal view of the parental duties of perpetrators/fathers and victimised mothers may have harmful consequences, in both the short and the long term, on the well-being of victimised mothers and their children (health, work, school, finances, accommodation, residence permit) by putting them in danger, dragging out the procedures and provoking negative feelings.

## Discussion and conclusion

The present study shows that important needs of victimised mothers, at different stages of their journey, have not been met. This is mainly to do with the problem of recognising victims as victims, the degree of impunity enjoyed by perpetrators, and an imbalance between the rights and duties of perpetrators/fathers and victimised mothers. These results raise questions about the way in which the problem of intimate partner violence is tackled, and about the way specific needs of victimised mothers and their children are taken into account by the institutions and within professional practices. In order to ensure better care for victimised mothers and their children, it is essential that all the different types of professionals involved with them have a good knowledge of the issues surrounding intimate partner violence. Such knowledge covers several particularly important aspects: taking account of the vulnerabilities resulting from the abusive relationship, particularly the coercive control exercised by perpetrators/fathers; combatting racist and sexist prejudice; and the need to differentiate between violence and conflict within the couple. Together with a re-examination of certain procedures in the case of violence – as opposed to conflict – within the couple, this could help improve the protection of victimised mothers and their children, from their recognition as victims through decisions relating to divorce and to visiting and custody rights, thereby ensuring that the impact of violence on their well-being is not made worse. Furthermore, particular attention should be paid to the fate of victimised mothers whose residence permits depend on their

marital status. Finally, both in practice and in research, it is important to consider how the children involved view their experiences, needs and resources, so as to provide them with the best support possible and try to reduce the impact of the violence on their future lives. Recommendations appear at the end of the report (section 6).