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## Violence against women: the first French national survey

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Is it possible to put figures on acts of violence, defined as the fact of inflicting physical and psychological abuse on a person? For many people, violence is a daily experience — the result of a relationship based on power or domination, most of the time in the context of the person's private or personal life. Often, the facts are concealed or denied by the victims themselves.

Yet, in order to establish the incidence of such abuse, these violent acts must be told, and in order to be told, they must be first given a name: such a task requires an appropriate methodology.

The national survey on violence against women in France (ENVEFF, see box) is the first statistical survey ever carried out on this topic in this country. In order to understand the phenomenon in all its various aspects, the survey takes into account all forms of violence perpetrated against women, regardless of the offender's identity. The women were interviewed about verbal, psychological, physical and sexual abuse experienced in the last twelve months in public areas, at work, in their relationships with their partner or with family and friends. Violence was never directly named, but identified through the description of acts, events, doings, words.

A single instance of physical and sexual aggression is enough to identify it as an act of violence. As regards other types of abuse, such as insults, denigration, contempt, control and other forms of psychological pressure, however, the situation of domination is created through the accumulation of events which, if taken separately, might seem quite trivial. For this reason, in order to establish a scale of these forms of abuse, the in-

dicators must combine both the frequency and the nature of the events. Thus, at home or at work, the maximum degree of psychological abuse, or "moral harassment", corresponds to a situation where insidious acts and humiliating words are constantly repeated.

### ◆ The sexist atmosphere of large cities

In the street, in public transport or public areas, the most frequent type of aggressive behaviour is verbal abuse or insults (see table 1). Thirteen percent of the respondents said that they had been verbally abused during the past year; for half of these, this was a frequent occurrence. In 25% of the cases, the women were personally acquainted with the offender. This is explained by the fact that public space provides opportunities for both chance encounters with strangers as well as habitual encounters with known persons. Whether or not they are known to the victim, three quarters of the offenders are men. Verbal abuse is more frequent in large cities and especially in the Paris area; this is probably because city dwellers more often use public transport and amenities.

Physical aggression — muggings, beatings and murder attempts — (2%) is more often reported by young women living in precarious or isolated social conditions (unemployed, women living alone). The offenders are mostly men (over 80%).

Being followed (5%), a sexually significant situation, or being harassed by an exhibitionist (3%) happens mostly to young women, regardless of their social position, and more frequently in larger cities.

Sexual abuse in public areas, reported by 2% of the women, consists usually of sexual advances and petting. Sexual assaults, rape attempts and rapes are much less frequent. The global "sexual harassment"

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indicator covers all types of "sexual abuse" (1). This indicator reveals the sexist atmosphere prevailing in many public places, especially in the Paris area (15%); this type of harassment is denounced by 8% of the respondents (see figure 1), mostly by young women (22% of the women aged 20 to 24).

### ◆ At work: from job competition to abusive customers

In the work sphere, two distinct phenomena prevail: the first concerns all salaried employees and is probably linked to certain forms of personnel management in a competitive environment; the second is clearly linked to

sexual factors.

Insults and verbal threats, reported by 8% of the women, usually come from service users and clients, most of the time men. These insults are not the only type of humiliation identified in the working environment. An indicator of psychological pressure was elaborated, grouping positive answers to at least one of the three following situations: "being given working hours, tasks, assignments no one else wants"; "being frequently and unfairly criticized"; "being snubbed". Seventeen per cent of the women declared having experienced psychological pressure at work, at least once during the year; like insults, this pressure is more often exerted on women at either end of the age and educa-

tional spectrum: young women who do not have the baccalaureate (high school diploma) (29%) and, to a lesser extent, women over 45 with higher education (20%). Given the recent emphasis laid on psychological harassment, a second indicator takes into account the frequency of occurrences and their intensity, so as to distinguish occasional criticism from habitual criticism (4%).

Physical violence as such occurs rarely in the working world (0.6%), and when it does, the offenders are always men. On the other hand, another rather frequent form of abuse is the destruction of work or of work instruments (2%) which can be perpetrated by colleagues of either sex.

Last, as concerns sexual assault, since 1992, penal and labour laws have included provisions pertaining to sexual harassment: "Taking advantage of one's position of authority conferred by a function in order to obtain sexual favours, by means of orders, threats or other constraints, is punished by the law". However, following the general approach regarding sexual harassment, its definition has been extended to include the "act of forcing a person to look at pornographic pictures" and the list of possible offenders now includes superiors, colleagues, subordinates, clients and service users, and other persons not necessarily in positions of authority.

(1) In comparison with the large number, in the French language, of expressions designating verbal abuse, the relative scarcity of words describing sexual abuse reveals the extent to which society denies this phenomenon.

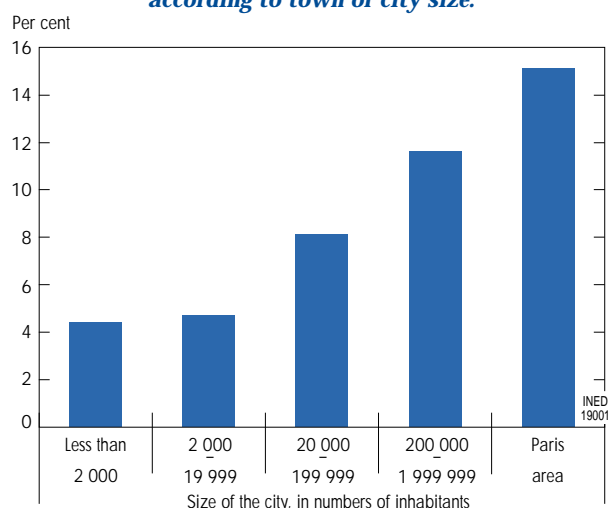
**Table 1 – Proportion of women reporting abuse over the last 12 months, according to age (in %)**

Type of violence	20–24 years	25–34 years	35–44 years	45–59 years	Total
<b>In public areas*</b>	<b>(n=717)</b>	<b>(n=1 934)</b>	<b>(n=2 122)</b>	<b>(n=2 197)</b>	<b>(n=6 970)</b>
Verbal insults and threats	24.9	15.2	11.7	8.6	13.2
Physical aggression	2.8	1.6	1.2	1.7	1.7
Being followed	12.4	5.8	4.0	2.8	5.2
Exhibitionism	8.9	3.3	1.7	1.2	2.9
Sexual advances and assault	6.5	2.6	0.9	0.5	1.9
Global indicator of sexual harassment (1)	21.9	9.9	5.9	3.9	8.3
<b>At work**</b>	<b>(n=335)</b>	<b>(n=1 409)</b>	<b>(n=1 596)</b>	<b>(n=1 408)</b>	<b>(n=4 748)</b>
Verbal insults and threats	11.7	10.1	8.8	6.2	8.5
Psychological pressure	20.2	18.6	15.2	15.7	16.7
of which psychological harassment (2)	5.2	4.7	3.6	3.1	3.9
Destruction of work done, of work tools	3.6	2.8	2.3	1.3	2.2
Physical aggression	0.6	0.6	0.6	0.5	0.6
Sexual harassment	4.3	2.8	1.9	0.7	1.9
<b>Domestic violence***</b>	<b>(n=464)</b>	<b>(n=1 707)</b>	<b>(n=1 872)</b>	<b>(n=1 865)</b>	<b>(n=5 908)</b>
Verbal insults and threats	6.1	4.1	4.3	3.9	4.3
Emotional blackmail	2.7	1.4	2.3	1.6	1.8
Psychological pressure	51.2	40.1	35.4	32.6	37.0
of which psychological harassment (3)	12.1	8.3	7.5	6.5	7.7
Physical aggression	3.9	2.5	2.5	2.2	2.5
Rape and other forced sexual acts	1.2	0.9	1.0	0.6	0.9
Global indicator of domestic violence (4)	15.3	11.0	10.0	8.0	10.0

(1) Having been followed or been in the presence of an exhibitionist or suffered sexual advances or sexual assault, at least once. (2) Among the three components of this indicator (persecution, criticism or denigration, exclusion), at least one is a frequent occurrence. (3) Having experienced more than three types of psychological pressure, of which one on a frequent basis. (4) To have been psychologically harassed or repeatedly insulted, or sustained emotional blackmail, or physical or sexual abuse. Field: \* all women aged 20 to 59; \*\* women 20 to 59 who have had a professional occupation during the 12 months preceding the survey; \*\*\* women 20 to 59 who were in a relationship with a partner during the 12 months preceding the survey.

Source: ENVEFF survey, 2000.

**Figure 1 – Global indicator of sexual harassment of women in public areas, according to town or city size.**



Source: ENVEFF survey, 2000

Most reported cases of sexual harassment mention sexual advances and petting, while rape attempts and rapes, over a one-year period, are relatively rare. During the year preceding the survey, about 2% of the women had suffered sexual advances and abuse at work, and in 1/5 of the cases, the offender was a senior colleague. The phenomenon is thus not limited to relationships of authority as defined by the law.

### ◆ Intimate partner relationships, the context in which most violence occurs

Violence of all kinds is most often perpetrated in the privacy of the home. Verbal abuse includes insults, threats, emotional blackmail (yelling at the children, threatening to commit suicide). Psychological pressure includes attempts to control the other person's doings (insisting on knowing where she has been and with whom, preventing her from meeting or talking to friends or family members), imposing authority (regarding the choice of clothing or hairstyle, or behaviour in public), attitudes of denigration, contempt; the "psychological harassment" indicator corresponds to situations where more than three such occurrences were declared frequent. Last, physical aggressions, other than murder attempts, beatings and other brutal acts, also include locking up a person or turning her out of the house. The definition of sexual aggression is limited to forced sexual acts and rape.

The findings on intimate violence pertain to women who have had a relationship though not necessarily cohabited with a partner during the past year. Psychological pressure plays a prominent role, but the frequency of sexual abuse was apparent in the respondents' answers (1%). For two-thirds of the women who had been forced by their partner to perform unwanted sexual acts or intercourse, the survey was the first opportunity they had had to mention the event. Women

who were no longer living with their partner at the time of the survey, in particular divorced women with or without children, were three to four times more likely to report domestic violence than the others, in particular as concerns psychological harassment (respectively 27% and 7%) (see table 2).

The incidence of insults, emotional blackmail or threats varies according to social position: women from poorer backgrounds tend to report a higher incidence of insults, whereas threats and emotional blackmail occur at all levels of society.

Regarding all forms of domestic violence, younger women (aged 20-24) report many more instances of abuse than their elders; to a lesser extent, unemployed women also seem more likely to experience abuse than working women. Physical violence is perpetrated at all social levels, but among women over 25, there is a higher incidence of physical abuse among higher-level employees, regardless of frequency: 4% of higher level employees report at least one instance, compared to only 2% of lower or intermediary level employees. Occasional psychological pressure is more often mentioned by students and highly qualified women.

The global indicator for domestic violence is based on the observation, made by social workers who aid the victims, that repeated psychological and verbal abuse is just as destructive as physical abuse. One out of ten women living with a partner was in this situation, and one out of three of those who recently separated from their partner, had experienced it. Overall, domestic violence is just as prevalent (about 9%) whether the

**Table 2 – Proportion of women reporting domestic violence during the last 12 months, according to partnership situation at the time of the survey (%)**

Type of violence	With partner (n=5 793)	No longer with partner (n=115)	Total (n=5 908)
Verbal insults and threats	4.0	14.8	4.3
among which repeated	1.6	8.1	1.8
Emotional blackmail	1.7	8.2	1.8
Psychological pressure	36.5	59.4	37.0
among which repeated	23.5	52.4	24.2
among which psychological harassment (1)	7.3	27.3	7.7
Physical aggression	2.3	10.2	2.5
among which repeated	1.3	6.9	1.4
Rape and other forced sexual acts	0.8	1.8	0.9
Global indicator of domestic violence (2)	9.5	30.7	10.0

(1) To have experienced more than three forms of psychological pressure, one of which repeatedly.

(2) To have experienced psychological harassment or repeated insults, or emotional blackmail or physical or sexual abuse.

Field: women aged 20 to 59 who were in a relationship with a partner during the 12 months preceding the survey.

Source: ENVEFF survey, 2000.

*Excerpt from the questionnaire:*  
**Psychological pressure in the person's relationship with her partner**

*During the last 12 months, did your spouse or partner:*  
 /never/rarely/sometimes/often/regularly

1. prevent you from meeting or talking to friends or family members?
2. prevent you from talking to other men?
3. criticize, ridicule what you were doing?
4. make unpleasant remarks concerning your physical appearance?
5. impose certain clothes, hairstyles, or public behaviour?
6. did not take your opinion into account, expressed contempt or tried to tell you what to think a/ at home b/ in public?
7. insisted on knowing where and with whom you had been?
8. refused to speak to you, refused point-blank to discuss anything?
9. refused access to household funds for daily expenses?

woman has an occupation outside the home or not. Conversely, unemployed women and students — who are younger and often living in rather unstable or economically precarious conditions — more often report abuse in their relationships with their partners (14% and 12%, respectively).

◆ **About 50,000 women aged 20-59 were raped during the year before the survey**

A global indicator of sexual attacks was elaborated, taking into account the occurrences of sexual abuse suffered by the respondents over the last 12 months, regardless of circumstances. This indicator assesses the proportion of women who report having been sexually assaulted, suffered a rape attempt or been raped; 1.2% of the respondents were concerned by this indicator, and 0.3% had actually been raped.

If we apply the proportion of rapes to the 15.9 million women aged 20 to 59 living in metropolitan France (according to the 1999 census), the resulting figure is 48,000 women of that age who were raped that year (2). The comparison between this assessment and official police figures — 7,828 rapes in 1998, among which 3,350 were over 18 — seems to show that only 5% of rapes of women over 18 are actually reported.

The initial findings of the ENVEFF survey show that psychological, physical and sexual abuse is most often suffered by women in their private lives. Beatings and other physically violent acts are most often perpetrated by their partners; however, the frequently-used term “battered women” does not accurately describe the phenomenon, since psychological harassment is one of the most prominent forms of domestic violence.

(2) The assessment ranges from 32,000 to 64,000 (with a 95% confidence interval).

**The national survey on violence against women in France (ENVEFF)**

The ENVEFF survey, commissioned by the Service des Droits des Femmes (Office of Women's Rights) and the French State Secretariat for Women's Rights\* follows the recommendations made to governments in 1995 at the World Conference on Women in Beijing, namely to “produce detailed statistics concerning violence against women”. The survey was coordinated by the Institute of Demography of the University of Paris I (IDUP) and conducted by a multidisciplinary team of researchers from the CNRS, INED, INSERM, and the universities.

The survey was conducted by telephone between March and July 2000 with a representative sample of 6,970 women aged 20 to 59, living in metropolitan France but not in an institution. In order to earn the respondents' trust, questions concerning violence only came after a first part, or module, devoted to contextual (economic, social, family, housing situation, etc.), biographical and health information. The questionnaire was designed so as to bring up the subject of violence very gradually and encourage the person to remember events that may have happened long ago. Violence was never named as such, since each module collected information concerning facts that were not qualified as violent and that had occurred in the past twelve months. The survey also investigated violent events experienced in the respondent's more distant past.

The answers showed different degrees of awareness, depending on generation and social background, especially as concerns psychological abuse. Thus, a qualitative study conducted with the interviewers revealed that most respondents had a tendency to minimize events; however, the younger and more educated women found it easier to talk about violent events.

Among the women not covered by this survey, one group is most certainly strongly affected by all problems related to violence: these are women living in hostels and emergency shelters, or homeless women; their number in metropolitan France is evaluated at about 14 to 15,000 at the most.

\* In partnership with the ANRS (National Agency for AIDS Research), the CNAF (Family Allowance Office), the FAS (Social Action Fund), the IHESI (Institute of Higher Studies on Internal Security), the OFDT (French Observatory on Drugs and Drug Addicts) the Regional Council of Ile de France, the Regional Council of Provence-Côte d'Azur and the research mission on “Law and Justice”.

One of the most significant findings of the ENVEFF survey is the extent to which victimized women conceal the facts. Indeed, the survey helped bring to light many situations of sexual abuse which would have otherwise remained unknown. The women were questioned in a neutral context and on an anonymous basis, which made it easier for them to speak of sexual abuse; for many, the survey was the first time they had ever admitted the problem. The facts remain all the more secret as the situation is an intimate one. This is probably due to the feeling of guilt, or even shame, often harboured by the victims. It also reveals, to some extent, a lack of care on the part of both institutions and the victims' personal environment, family or friends. ◆◆◆