

Episode 7

"Rethinking Support for Domestic Violence Victims: Research-Driven Insights" Transcript

Featuring this episode:

- The **narrator** (voice of Dylan Power).
- The **protagonist** Anna (voice of Aine Hanrahan).
- The **protagonist** Anna (voice of Greta Hirschberg).
- **Ramune Jakštienė**, professor from Mykolas Rameris University in Lithuania, an expert on gender and victim support systems.
- **Nicole van Gelder**, a practice-oriented researcher, from Victim Support Netherlands, whose work focuses on victims of intimate partner violence in the Netherlands.

Transcript Episode 7

(Music)

Protagonist (Aine) 00:00:02

Does the train only pass once?

Narrator (Dylan) 00:00:08 – 00:00:55

Welcome to the Together for Victims podcast, a journey by train around Europe through the complexities of coordinating and harmonising support services for victims of gender-based violence.

This journey, shaped by Victim Support Europe, the leading European organisation advocating for the rights and services of all crime victims,

explores how 11 partner organizations in the Together for Victims project are working together with one goal, improving services for victims of gender-based and domestic violence.

Our Together for Victims podcast takes listeners on a rail journey through seven countries.

Belgium, Croatia, Cyprus, France, Lithuania, the Netherlands and Portugal.

And the journey doesn't end there.

It will cross even more borders.

Protagonist (Greta) 00:01:00 - 00:01:42

Welcome to our Together for Victims podcast.

I am your host, Anna, and in today's episode, we're coming to you from Lisbon, Portugal.

I recently spent three days at the welcoming offices of Victims Support Portugal, APAV, where I had the chance to witness a study visit first-hand.

In this episode, we're rethinking how we support victims of domestic violence and exploring why a gender-sensitive, research-driven approach is essential for meaningful change.

Today, we're joined by two guests.

Ramune, a professor from Mykolas Rameres University in Lithuania, an expert on gender and victim support systems.

Hi, Ramune!

Ramune 00:01:43 - 00:01:44

Hello!

Protagonist (Greta) 00:01:44 - 00:01:53

And Nicole from Victim Support Netherlands, a practice-oriented researcher whose work focuses on victims of intimate partner violence in the Netherlands.

Nicole 00:01:53

Hello!

Protagonist (Greta) 00:01:55 - 00:01:58

Let's get started.

To begin, Ramune, we often talk about support for victims, but not always about how that support is delivered.

Could you start by explaining what gender-sensitive support means in the context of domestic violence services?

Ramune 00:02:12 - 00:03:46

Yes.

Relevant legislation and professionals often refer to a gender-sensitive approach in the context of gender-based violence.

For example, Istanbul Convention defines it as a gender perspective to promote and effectively implement equality between women and men.

However, this concept usually defines gendered support just in terms of approach and framework.

Therefore, its practical implementation largely depends on the discretion of support organizations.

They use this term intuitively, as it is self-explanatory, but when it comes to providing a simple definition, it's a challenge.

Therefore, the key task of our research was to establish a definition of gendered support and define its elements.

For the purpose of our research, a gender-sensitive approach means acknowledgment of diverse gendered needs and experience of women, men, and non-binary people, ensuring its integration across policy programs and operations.

A gender-sensitive approach creates equal opportunities to tailored support for all genders, including especially vulnerable people.

This perspective understands and addresses the experience of power imbalances, structural divides, and disparities experienced by victims of domestic violence.

Protagonist (Greta) 00:03:46

Why do you think it's so important that victim support be gender sensitive rather than gender neutral?

Ramune 00:03:52 - 00:05:24

Gender neutral approach in legal system and society might result in seeing no differences in men and women as domestic violence victim needs.

Prejudice, disbelief, cultural norms, and pressure determine victimization and special needs of all domestic violence victims.

However, sex or gender of a victim is related to different experiences that are driven by distinct motivation and dynamics of men and women violence.

When gender is ignored, the nature of gender-based violence is overlooked and each victim is approached like an isolated individual case.

Due to this, their real needs are not recognized nor customized, and they might be subjected to secondary victimization.

On the contrary, a gendered approach to domestic violence victim support acknowledges that this type of violence is systemic and structural, impacted by power imbalances and gender inequalities in society.

It also recognizes that depending on their gender, identity, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, age, immigration status, and other variables,

Different groups of individuals may experience distinct obstacles and challenges when trying to obtain and receive support.

Protagonist (Greta) 00:05:24

You've also worked a lot on understanding different groups' needs.

Ramune 00:05:28 - 00:08:24

What are some gender-specific needs that women, men, LGBTQ+ individuals, and persons with disabilities might have when seeking support?

It is important to understand that specific needs of domestic violence victims are not only a result of victims' characteristics, but also the situation or circumstances they are in.

This is different nature of gender-based violence and domestic violence to which women, men, and LGBTQ plus community are exposed, as well as gender inequality and stereotypes.

The key differences in needs regarding support provision are closely related and even stem from different levels of ignorance and misunderstanding, discrimination and marginalization to which different victims groups are exposed in society.

Therefore, it is important to tailor services to their unique experiences.

Gender stereotypes and inequalities influence the type of support requested, consequently impacting the availability and development of support structures.

While women need prompt, children-friendly services that grant safety, security, and protection, men usually need targeted services and practical daily life support.

LGBTQ+ community needs non-discriminatory, low-threshold services that grant safety.

While women prioritize emotional support, men emphasize the need for practical services.

Acknowledgement and awareness, suitable approach and support, as well as specialized services were identified as common needs during our research.

However, they must be responded in a gendered way.

Domestic abuse against people with disabilities is a specific form of abuse due to dependency on caretakers.

The intersection of gender and the range of vulnerabilities is evident.

And again, women are disproportionately affected.

For example, women with disabilities are often neglected due to societal norms valuing body ableness.

Latency of domestic abuse against them is significantly higher, but access to justice is aggravated.

The need for specialized support and adequate accommodation was one of the most reported ones by the experts during our research.

However, while tailoring gender-sensitive services, we must avoid gender stereotyping, and take into consideration broader relational and contextual factors.

Protagonist (Greta) 00:08:24 - 00:08:37

And when it comes to designing or evaluating services, what are the indicators of truly gender-sensitive support?

How can we tell whether a service is actually meeting these diverse needs in practice?

Ramune 00:08:37 - 00:09:59

Yes, we've been working to find the answer to this question, and this is what we suggest.

Foundation of gender-sensitive support should be grounded on patterns and dynamics of domestic violence, and take a holistic approach.

Its methodology arises from feminist theory and practice.

The services are based on human rights framework and gender sensitivity in easily accessible, inclusive, trauma-informed, victim-centered, children-friendly, and culturally sensitive way.

We identified both quantitative and qualitative elements during our research to define victim support in a gendered way.

They cover different levels and stages of support procedure.

This is vision, policy, execution, and evaluation.

The list of specific indicators you will find in our research report as soon as it is published.

But the main action points are acknowledging gender differences, gathering gender desegregated data, and multi-agency cooperation in a coordinated, integrated approach to prevent and combat gender inequality and gender-based violence against women.

Protagonist (Greta) 00:09:59 - 00:10:20

Thank you, Ramune.

Those are incredible insights.

Nicole, now turning to you.

Ramune has given us a strong sense of what gender-sensitive support looks like and why it matters.

Your work focuses on the research side of the issue.

Why is research so important for organizing sufficient and effective support for victims?

Nicole 00:10:20 - 00:11:18

Well, Anna, while research is often perceived as a very theoretical exercise with little connection to the real world, it can actually provide essential contributions to practice, policy and law.

If you want to develop an effective intervention for supporting victims, then you need to know many things the research can help you with.

For example, you need to know which people are affected by the crime, what their experiences and needs are, how the support system currently operates, and what type of support interventions already exist, and how effective they are.

So prior to actually developing a victim support intervention, there's already so much that you need to know to investigate and research, and it can bring you the insights that you need and identify what is still unknown or unclear.

And when you've developed an intervention, you probably want to know if it's effective and if it works the way that you intended it.

So research comes in again.

Thus, research can be very practice-orientated and it's crucial in developing evidence-based support for victims.

Protagonist (Greta) 00:11:18

Could you share what kinds of research are currently being done in the Netherlands to better understand victims' needs and improve services?

Nicole 00:11:26 - 00:12:36

Yes, we conduct a lot of research in the Netherlands when it comes to support and interventions for victims.

For example, there's currently a pilot with a victim device, which is basically a small device.

It looks like a keychain, and it's meant to protect the victim.

So if a perpetrator was convicted for abusing their partner, for example, and they were

The victim device is connected to the perpetrator's ankle bracelet.

And in this way, the perpetrator and the victim are both tracked via GPS.

And when they come too close to each other, the control room receives a signal and then warns the victim and the perpetrator is being asked to distance themselves.

And if necessary, there's also an emergency button that the victim can use for direct contact with the police.

So this pilot ran and the evaluation was positive.

So now it's being used in more regions in the country.

And another example is studies into the criminalization of psychological abuse.

One on the current situation and what could or should be improved, and one on how other countries have criminalized this type of violence.

And these studies will be used to shape the law on this in the Netherlands.

Protagonist (Greta) 00:12:36

And do you have some concrete examples of how this research is already shaping support for victims of intimate partner violence in the Netherlands?

Nicole 00:12:45 - 00:14:47

So I've mentioned the victim device and the criminalization of psychological abuse already, but there are more interesting examples.

Unfortunately, support for victims of intimate partner violence is very fragmented in the Netherlands, which is not beneficial for the victim nor for the professional.

And Rotterdam was the first city to establish Philomena, a specialized center for domestic violence and child abuse cases, including intimate partner violence.

It focuses on victims of very severe violence and with complex problems, and it has an inter-agency and multidisciplinary way of working with professionals from various sectors working together at the same premises.

It's very low threshold for victims and Philomena provides long-term and high involvement support with a case manager that remains the same person throughout the support trajectory.

And the process evaluation stated that while there are improvements to be made, both victims and professionals generally are positive.

And now you see Philomena centers or plans for them at least, popping up all over the Netherlands, for example in Groningen, Tilburg and Amsterdam.

And another example is that research uncovered various dynamics, patterns, context and types of intimate partner violence and the impact on multiple levels, which leads to new insights for better shaping policy and practice.

So for example, we now see that there's a lot more intention for intimate terrorism, coercive control and psychological abuse.

And this is important because intimate terrorism and situational couple violence need very different interventions in order to be effective and safe.

Also, intersectionality in research, policy and practice is very important.

For example, research has shown that people in the LGBTIQ+ community face relatively higher levels of victimization by a current partner or an ex-partner.

And if you want to address the root causes of it and tailor support for victims, then you need to adopt an intersectional lens to achieve that.

Also in the research that's being conducted.

And without reliable knowledge and insights from research, it's actually very difficult to truly effectively support victims.

Protagonist (Greta) 00:14:54

Building on that, could you highlight some promising or good practices in the Netherlands when it comes to gender-sensitive support for victims of intimate partner violence?

Nicole 00:15:03 - 00:18:11

Yes, when it comes to gender-sensitive support specifically, the Netherlands still has a lot to learn, to be honest.

Because the earlier policy approach was a gender-neutral one, and various studies have stressed the importance of taking gender aspects into account.

Unfortunately, this has now changed, and the importance of a gender-sensitive approach for both policy and practice is better acknowledged now.

So I do think that more acknowledgement in the Netherlands for the fact that gender does matter in intimate partner violence is somewhat of a good practice, although policy and practice sometimes struggle to actually translate this into something concrete.

So the Netherlands is still in the process of implementing a gender sensitive approach.

An example of gender sensitivity and support for victims of intimate partner violence is that there are shelters, peer support groups and therapy groups for women and for men.

And most training for supporting victims of intimate partner violence tends to be based on women as victims.

But now there's more acknowledgement and research to back it up as well, that men can be and are victims of this.

So you notice that now there's also training available for working with male victims specifically, as their context and needs can be different.

And there's also more awareness on pronouns and how important it is to be addressed correctly.

For example, if a transgender woman is still officially registered as a man and she informs the support organization that it needs to be changed, it's important that it will actually be changed and that she's being addressed as a woman.

Also, there's a specific online platform for women experiencing intimate partner violence.

It's called SafeWomen.nl, where they can find information on intimate partner violence and options for support.

And there's also a website for men who experience this type of violence, mannenmishandling.nl.

Furthermore, there are checklists and guidelines that have been developed to help shape gender sensitivity in policy and practice.

Gender factors are being mentioned in fact sheets about various types of domestic violence, for example, explaining how gender stereotypes can influence a victim's experience and help-seeking process.

Research on the impact of gender stereotypes and inequality on intimate partner violence and on experiences and needs of victims with various backgrounds is being conducted and

knowledge about this is being spread amongst professionals, policy makers, victims and society and is being used to inform policy and practice.

So for example, professionals are trained in using gender sensitivity in a system-oriented approach.

And they, for example, get the following questions that they could use in their work.

Who perpetrates the violence against who, when, how, and with which consequences?

Are there differences in power, equality, and dependency between the people involved?

Do beliefs on how men and women should behave complicate acknowledging being a victim or perpetrator of violence for the people directly involved?

And do these beliefs make the people directly involved vulnerable to violence?

Protagonist (Greta) 00:18:11

And how are these initiatives addressing the specific needs of different groups, such as women, men, LGBTQ plus individuals, and people with disabilities?

Nicole 00:18:22 - 00:19:35

I believe it depends on the specific initiative and how it's being used that determines how they address specific needs from various groups.

Of course, we focused on gender sensitivity just now, but your question addresses something bigger.

It's about intersectionality, in which gender, of course, plays a role as well.

And in the Netherlands, we are looking at this more and more, for example, in providing support to victims with diverse cultural backgrounds or a refugee background, or to people with gender diversity, diverse sexual orientations, people with disabilities, et cetera.

However, when it comes to addressing specific needs, it's all about understanding, acknowledging, and respecting someone's context, and acts accordingly.

This helps victims in feeling seen, heard, and understood, and taken seriously by the professionals providing support.

For example, if you have a physical disability, and a shelter is tailored to accommodate this, you probably feel more welcome and understood and safer than when it wasn't the case.

Or when you're transgender, intersex, or non-binary, you probably feel more included, acknowledged, and taken seriously if the professional uses the correct pronouns.

If you don't know or don't understand the context of a victim or why they express certain needs, it will be harder to effectively support them.

Protagonist (Greta) 00:19:35

And what lessons or practices can other countries or organizations take from the Dutch experience?

Nicole 00:19:35 - 00:20:42

Well, while we can learn a lot from other countries, I think other countries can also learn something from the Netherlands.

For example, in providing policy makers and professionals with the knowledge and tools to make them aware of gender sensitivity and intersectionality and how you can implement this, to provide them with guidelines and trainings, make it explicit in both policy and practice.

Sometimes people think it will kind of just happen, but a Dutch study said some municipalities do not explicitly include gender in their policy, but expect that gender is automatically taken into account in the execution.

However, this expectation is not supported by monitoring.

And I would also encourage other countries to gather data and conduct research on this as well, to conduct research into experiences, context, and needs of people with a greater variety of backgrounds in their country, because it does matter, and all victims of intimate partner violence deserve to receive the best support possible, tailored to their needs.

And trust me, the gender-neutral approach definitely doesn't work.

Protagonist (Greta) 00:20:42 - 00:21:02

Thank you so much for all your incredible insights, Nicole. That was truly fascinating.

Now, we've heard from both of you on the importance of linking research with practice.

How can researchers and practitioners collaborate more effectively to ensure that research insights actually influence real-world support systems?

Nicole 00:21:02 - 00:22:13

Well, in my opinion, researchers sometimes don't pay much attention to practical implications of their findings, or how to communicate these to, for example, professionals and policymakers.

So teaching researchers how to translate research outcomes into information that is easier for policymakers and professionals to grasp and to use is important.

For example, if you have a scientific article or report on the one hand, but oftentimes policymakers and professionals won't really have time to read all of that, the language is not very accessible and they have to search for the information that they can use.

So besides the often in English scientific article, I like to make more accessible documents in Dutch, like a fact sheet or an infographic or a short summary.

I also try to spread these in my network, which also includes, for example, professionals, policymakers and politicians, so they don't have to go searching for it.

And sometimes I give a lecture or a workshop about it as well.

I think we can come a long way if policymakers and professionals are open to scientific insights and spend some time to explore them and if researchers proactively make these scientific insights accessible to them and not only to the other researchers.

Ramuné 00:22:13 - 00:22:45

Yes, I fully agree.

And another thing that I experienced as a researcher is that practitioners sometimes indicate the need for academic study in a specific field to rely on research-based tools, methodologies, etc.

For example, during our research, experts pointed out the need for qualitative studies regarding the victims groups which are under research.

For example, women with disabilities, elderly women, migrant women, et cetera.

Protagonist (Greta) 00:22:45

And what are some of the current barriers that make it difficult to translate research findings into everyday practice for service providers?

Nicole 00:22:53

I think mainly the fact that they don't necessarily have the time to go look for scientific insights themselves, especially not when you then also need to translate them into concrete actions for support yourself.

Oftentimes, it's simply not that accessible, and research isn't always aimed at providing answers to that question.

What can I take from this for my everyday practice?

And it's important that researchers, professionals, and policymakers connect and discuss what they all need answers to and how it can be connected to each other.

If a researcher aims that the outcomes of their research will be used in policy or practice, there needs to be a connection there.

Protagonist (Greta) 00:23:29 - 00:23:59

So if I were to imagine a fully research-informed and gender-sensitive victim support system, what would that look like in the near future?

Nicole 00:23:37 - 00:23:59

Well, if it's intersectional as well, then it sounds like a perfect victim support system.

Jokes aside, it will mean that if it's intersectional as well, most or even all victims would receive the support that they need, provided that the capacity and finances needed, etc., are present and sufficient, and it would mean actual tailored support to an individual's needs and situation.

It would mean knowing if the support we provide actually works the way it should work and adapt it if it does not.

Ramuné 00:24:06 - 00:24:31

The experts in our research identified several major trends in advancing support services in a gendered way.

First is ensuring substantive gender-sensitive system.

Second, holistic and comprehensive response.

The next one is development of post-intervention services and utilization of technologies.

Protagonist (Greta) 00:24:31

Before we close, I'd love to hear from both of you.

If policymakers, practitioners, or researchers could take away just one message from our conversation today, what should it be?

Nicole 00:24:41 - 00:25:28

Well, for effectively supporting victims of intimate partner violence, it's essential to do this in a gender-sensitive manner and to adopt an intersectional lens.

However, I want to stress that it's important to be aware of the influence of gender aspects on, for example, support needs, but that we always need to look at an individual's context and avoid stereotyping.

So you don't want women are always victims and men are always perpetrators, but in case you find that women tend to have a greater need for psychological support and men for practical support, you also want to avoid

This victim is a woman, so I will focus on psychological support.

Or, this victim is a man, so he will want practical support, and it's no use for me to offer psychological support first.

Don't make assumptions.

Check with the victim what they need and take their personal context into account.

Ramune 00:25:33 - 00:25:55

I have a message for policymakers.

Improvement of gender-sensitive services for victims of domestic violence is closely related to developments in legislation and policy.

Activities must cover not only response to abuse, but also proactive prevention of gender-based violence.

Protagonist (Greta) 00:25:55 - 00:26:28

Today's discussion has shown how change happens when research meets practice, and when we dare to question gender-neutral approaches that overlook real differences in victims' lives.

By embracing gender-sensitive, evidence-based, and intersectional support systems, we can move closer to a future where no victim feels unseen or unsupported.

It's a shared responsibility for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers to make that vision a reality.

(Music)

Thank you so much, Ramuné and Nicole, for sharing your perspectives and experiences.

Ramuné 00:26:28

Thank you, too.

Nicole 00:26:29

Thanks for having us.

Protagonist (Greta) 00:26:33 - 00:26:46

I am Anna, and this has been Together for Victims.

Thank you for listening, and join us next time as we continue exploring how Europe is rethinking support for people affected by gender-based violence.

Protagonist (Aine) 00:26:46

Does the train only pass once?

Narrator (Dylan) 00:26:50 - 00:27:22

You're listening to the Together for Victims podcast, focusing on gender-based violence services.

This podcast was produced by the Together for Victims Project, led by Victim Support Europe in collaboration with 10 partner organisations and funded by the SERVE programme of the European Commission, co-funded by the European Union.

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Thank you very much for listening.