



Beyond honour

Tackling diversity of domestic violence in the Nordic countries



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Preface

Nordic gender equality policy touches on several different sectors, subject areas, organisations and groups. A shared history of peace, prosperity, a strong welfare state and democratic institutions form the cornerstones of how Nordic gender equality policy is expressed in theory, policy and practice. At the same time, there are stated, and sometimes more unstated, expectations about how women's and men's living conditions should be understood and changed that are not common. This applies not least to the area of men's violence against women, within which the Nordic countries naturally have several points of contact, but also differ in essential parts in legislation, policy and practice. Of particular interest in this context is the way in which honour-based violence is explained and expressed in politics and policy. It is an area of interest that cuts across the priorities of gender equality policy, but is also influenced by how migration, organised crime, freedom of expression and religion, and a number of other issues are perceived in the present day.

This anthology offers a unique insight into how the Nordic countries' politics and policies have evolved, resulting in partly divergent concepts, understandings, and strategies regarding honour-based violence. Against the backdrop of the Istanbul Convention's framework for addressing men's violence against women, researchers critically examine how each country's policies measure up to requirements such as the need for a holistic understanding of this violence. Through research-based analyses of strategies, policies, specific legal cases, and media representations, a picture emerges that highlights both clear differences between the Nordic countries and the consequences that different approaches have for how honour-based violence is framed as a problem. An important lesson from the anthology is that, over time, honour-based violence has come to be constructed as something distinct, clearly separated from other forms of men's violence against women. This shapes legislation, politics, policy, and other discourses, within which specific concepts emerge to describe and explain the violence (such as "honour motive" and "negative social control").

The risk of cementing assumptions about who commits honour-based violence, which groups are covered by the concept itself, is significant and prevents a nuanced and critical discussion about the forms of violence, its consequences and how prevention can be developed. Ultimately, it can also have negative consequences for those who are exposed to violence, since an unfounded perception of the forms and expressions of violence risks leading to both ineffective and harmful priorities and interventions in practice.

Fredrik Löfström Bondestam

Director

Swedish Secretariat for Gender Research, University of Gothenburg

The anthology concludes the Secretariat's work on analysing honour-based violence in Sweden and the Nordic countries. More publications on the same theme can be found on our website:

<https://www.gu.se/nsfg/publikationer>

Preamble

The Swedish Secretariat for Gender Research at the University of Gothenburg commissioned this anthology on current discourses and policies concerning honour-based violence and related issues in the Nordic countries. We are grateful to Fredrik Löfström Bondestam, Director at the Secretariat, for this collaboration.

The anthology was written by Rúna í Baianstovu, Örebro University, Sweden, Anika Liversage, VIVE – the Danish Center for Social Science Research, Denmark, Satu Lidman, University of Turku, Finland, and Anja Bredal, Oslo Metropolitan University, Norway. In four essays, one from each country, we draw on our previous and ongoing research, as well as our broader insights into public debate and policy developments in our respective countries. We have shared and discussed our ideas in joint workshops, but responsibility for each chapter rests with its respective author. Anja Bredal wrote the introductory and synthesis chapters.

Oslo, April 2026

Anja Bredal

Project leader



1. Introduction

1. Introduction

Honour-based violence has received increasing attention across the Nordic countries since the early 2000s. In this collection of essays, four researchers examine the emergence of this issue in public debate and policy in their respective countries. We describe and discuss key discursive and institutional patterns in the way honour-based violence is tackled, including how the “phenomenon” is constructed and delineated, as part of or separated from domestic violence and violence against women more broadly. Our interest is therefore not limited to honour-based violence alone. We believe that the increasing focus on honour reflects a growing recognition that Nordic populations are diverse, and that patterns of violence are correspondingly varied. We are therefore interested in whether and how discourses and policies on honour-based violence relate to diversity in domestic violence and violence against women more generally.

Previous research

A common point of reference has been Bredal’s previous analysis of public policies on honour-based violence in the Scandinavian countries.¹ The study was based on policy documents, news articles, and other sources from Denmark, Norway, and Sweden from the first decade of the 21st century.

Bredal’s findings point toward two central features. First, in public discourse, honour-based violence tended to be framed through a contrast between a free and gender-equal majority population and immigrant groups – especially Muslims – characterised as culturally backward and gender oppressive. In what is typically called culturalist explanations, violence in minority families is depicted as culturally prescribed, while violence in majority families is seen as a matter of individual deviance. Second, in public policy, while domestic abuse was acknowledged as an issue affecting the entire population, a divide emerged in how policy agendas were structured. Where there was previously a single policy agenda on domestic violence and violence against women, a new and separate agenda on honour-based violence and related issues gradually developed alongside the existing one. In other words, the way diversity was tackled was by establishing a parallel track, with separate national action plans etc. At the time of Bredal’s study, she identified tendencies toward a more integrated agenda in Norway and Sweden, while Denmark continued to rely on separation. The present collection of essays can thus be seen as an update of Bredal’s study from more than a decade ago, as well as

¹ Bredal 2014.

an extension through the inclusion of Finland: How have policies and discourses developed over the last ten years?

A central point in Bredal's argument is that problematic constructions of domestic violence in minority groups – and specifically honour-based violence – cannot be fully understood without also examining how violence in majority populations is framed. She argues that “mainstream” policies against domestic violence and violence against women were modelled on knowledge about individual partner violence in majority families, while violence in an extended household and violence against women as daughters and sisters were not represented. When the mainstream is constructed in ways that exclude specific aspects of violence in minority groups, these exclusions may themselves contribute to the creation of a separate policy agenda targeting such aspects.

Transcending polarisation

Honour-based violence has attracted considerable attention in Europe and the global North, with debates at times marked by polarisation, not least because the issue intersects with broader discussions on immigration and integration. Typically, the debate has revolved around whether this violence, which is associated with certain immigrant minority groups, should be understood as essentially similar to or different from violence in majority families. As documented in several studies², the discussion often alternates between gender-based perspectives, which emphasise universal patriarchal power structures, and cultural perspectives that foreground ethnicity and difference. Critics of traditional violence against women perspectives argue that honour-based violence can also be perpetrated by women and victimise men, and that individual partner-violence frameworks fail to capture the honour logic, in which violence is collectively perpetrated and socially supported. Proponents of gender perspectives, on the other hand, contend that an excessive focus on culture obscures commonalities in violence against women across groups and portrays violence in minority families as more different than it is.

Furthermore, the two “sides” also tend to differ in their assessments of whether authorities adequately address honour-based violence. While some argue that public authorities and services lack both the knowledge and the courage to adequately address honour-based issues, others claim that the strong focus on honour-based violence in minority families has led to violence in majority families being largely overshadowed.

² Bredal, Eggebø & Eriksen 2020; Carbin 2010; Elaies & Rabe 2025; Gill, Strange & Roberts 2014; Idriss 2017; Lebedeva & Rosquist 2026.

The authors of the present report agree that polarisation is unproductive and must be transcended for us to move forward. To provide a more constructive framework for the analysis, we have placed our project within a human rights framework by using the Istanbul Convention as a starting point. This treaty, also known as “The Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence”, has been ratified by all the Nordic countries and thus serves as a mutually agreed standard to which they are held accountable.³

Specifically, we refer to the Convention's definition of honour-based violence as domestic violence and violence against women, and to Article 7, which requires states to ensure comprehensive and coordinated policies:

Parties shall take the necessary legislative and other measures to adopt and implement State-wide effective, comprehensive and co-ordinated policies encompassing all relevant measures to prevent and combat all forms of violence covered by the scope of this Convention and offer a holistic response to violence against women.⁴

As we understand Article 7, policies, laws and other measures should encompass all kinds of violence, being sensitive to diversity among different parts of the population. All victims of violence should receive help, regardless of their socio-economic, ethnic, religious, etc. background. This implies that support measures must be adapted to the individual person and group, in line with the principle of equality/equity in public services. A holistic response requires an integrated and inclusive framework across all parts of the population. To what extent have the Nordic states succeeded in this? In line with Bredal's argument outlined above, we find that this question cannot be answered solely by looking at how honour-based violence has been addressed.

³ The Istanbul Convention is a human rights treaty that was opened for signature on 11 May 2011 in Istanbul, Turkey. It is a binding international agreement that requires states to address violence against women and domestic violence. The Convention covers four areas of action, often called the four pillars, or the four Ps: *preventing* violence, *protecting* victims, *prosecuting* perpetrators, and integrated/co-ordinated *policies*. States' compliance with obligations is monitored by GREVIO, the independent expert body responsible for monitoring the implementation of the Convention. Dates of ratification: Denmark, 23 April 2014; Sweden, 1 July 2014; Finland, 17 April 2015; Norway, 5 July 2017.

⁴ [CETS 210 - Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence](#)

Our common ground

The authors of this report have conducted extensive research on gender and generational relations in families with immigrant backgrounds, including domestic violence, as well as on welfare services and legal systems. Our present contributions are written as scholarly essays, drawing on the authors' own and other research, as well as on our broader knowledge of public debate, policy, and service provision in our respective countries.

We agree that the term *honour-based* captures certain distinctive features that domestic violence and violence against women may take, and that these features are linked to the cultural contexts in which those involved live. At the same time, we maintain that additional factors and contexts at both individual and group levels must be considered to understand the violence and to support both those exposed to violence and those who perpetrate it. We view the concept of *honour-based* as one of several concepts needed to describe the variation that characterises domestic violence and violence against women in our increasingly diverse societies. At the same time, we share a concern that discourses on honour-based violence may work and be mobilised in problematic ways, as pointed out by Baianstovu and Strid:

It is widely accepted that honour-based violence is a lived reality and a serious problem. However, honour-based violence is also a contested academic and political field, characterized by a polarized debate about whether or not the violence comprises stereotyping images of immigrants.⁵

Our aim is to contribute to ongoing discussions on how to understand and address the diverse “landscapes of violence” in our societies, in ways that neither exaggerate nor downplay difference in the discourse on honour-based violence.

Our main research question then is this:

How is honour-based violence addressed in the Nordic countries, and to what extent do different approaches comply with the obligation to adopt a holistic framework for domestic violence and violence against women under Article 7 of the Istanbul Convention?

In writing the essays, we have been guided by a set of shared themes: public debate, critical events, the organisation and content of public policy, and legislation. At the same time, we wanted to adapt each chapter to its national context, and they therefore differ in structure. Importantly, we have not aimed to produce a complete mapping, but rather to

⁵ Baianstovu & Strid 2024, p. 552.

discuss some key patterns and illustrate these with examples.⁶ A central objective has been to challenge the common assumption that the words and terminology we use – for instance, how different “forms” of violence are labelled and defined – are of purely academic concern. Rather, we suggest that discursive choices can have practical implications for how violence is responded to, including with consequences for victims of violence.

In accordance with the Istanbul Convention, we use “violence against women and domestic violence” as our overall term and we consider honour-based violence as a subcategory of domestic violence and violence against women, also in keeping with the convention. In the country chapters, we use literal translations of the concepts that are used in different national contexts. All translations from the Nordic languages have been made by the authors, partly with the help of AI.

⁶ For a comprehensive presentation of policies, laws, and measures against honour-based violence in the Nordic region, see the recent mapping by Lebedeva & Rosquist 2026.

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2. Denmark – a “dual tracks” approach



2. Denmark – a “dual tracks” approach

Anika Liversage

Introduction

Denmark is generally considered a “woman-friendly welfare state” with a high level of gender equality.⁷ While these claims to gender equality are undeniable in a global context, they fade somewhat in comparison to Denmark’s Nordic neighbours. Denmark has been substantially weaker than Sweden and Norway when it comes to institutionalising gender equality policies⁸ and was the last Nordic country to implement earmarked parental leave for fathers, in 2022⁹. Similarly, in a comparison to its Norwegian neighbour, Danes show more “gender fatigue”. Thus, larger shares of the Danish population agree with the statement that, for example, there is too much talk about gender equality in the public debate.¹⁰

Regardless of such comparisons, Danes generally consider themselves very equal when it comes to gender. In Danish political discourse, this construction of the “gender-equal Danish society” often occurs in marked contrast to an immigrant (and particularly Muslim) “other”. According to this discourse, Denmark’s major gender equality problem is to be found among Muslim migrants, commonly represented as epitomising backward culture that threatens central values in Denmark.¹¹ In 2022, this understanding led the government to establish the Commission for the Forgotten Women’s Struggle.¹² The Commission was established to provide input to aid girls and women where “...culture and religion limit opportunities in life – solely on the basis of gender. This is especially true for girls and women from minority ethnic backgrounds. They therefore experience being let down by the [majority Danish] community”.¹³ The Commission had a rather troubled existence. After a major delay, it gave its recommendations in January 2025. The political impact of these seemed limited, however, in part due to the Minister of

⁷ Hernes 1987.

⁸ Borchorst & Siim 2008.

⁹ Kjaer, Seggaard and Shamshiri-Petersen 2025.

¹⁰ Kjaer et al. 2025.

¹¹ Blaagaard & Andreassen 2012.

¹² Brodersen & Øland 2023; see Kommissionen for den glemte kvindekamp: [Forside | Den glemte kvindekamp](#) (accessed 28 May 2026).

¹³ The original Danish reads: “Hvor kultur og religion begrænser muligheder i livet – kun på grund af køn. Det gælder særligt for piger og kvinder med minoritetsetnisk baggrund. De oplever derfor at blive svigtet af fællesskabet.” Here, and elsewhere in the chapter, quotations from Danish are by the author.

Integration Kaare Dybvad Bek announcing 22 new initiatives in the field just one-and-a-half weeks before the Commission was to announce its recommendations.¹⁴

While ethnic minority girls and women are thus perceived as vulnerable victims, in mainstream society, ethnic minority men are commonly perceived as aggressive and even dangerous.¹⁵ This perception filters into everyday life. Thus, compared with men from the Danish majority, ethnic minority men are, for example, more often arrested and/or charged with crimes of which they are subsequently found to be innocent.¹⁶ Similarly, young men with an immigrant background have less socially accepted scope for expressing anger than other groups in society.¹⁷ The Finnish sociologist Suvi Keskinen argues that attributing violence to “the (Muslim) Other” contributes to Nordic nation-building.¹⁸ In Denmark, this polarised understanding has played a central role in the past three decades and been used to underpin ever-greater restrictions in Danish immigration legislation.

This chapter investigates how this political climate affects Danish policies on combating violence against women. Denmark is obliged to provide such support to all groups in society. This flows from Denmark’s 2014 accession to the Istanbul Convention – the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. The Istanbul Convention’s Article 7 requires states to implement “... [s]tate-wide effective, comprehensive and co-ordinated policies encompassing all relevant measures to prevent and combat all forms of violence covered by the scope of this Convention and offer a holistic response to violence against women”.¹⁹ This chapter explores how Danish policies and measures targeting violence against women are structured, and whether the chosen response can be considered a “holistic” one. In the next sections, I draw on national action plans, other documents, and research literature to sketch the Danish approach to violence against women, and what role ethnicity plays herein.

To provide an overview, Figure 1 lists the titles of eight central Danish action plans, covering the period 2002–2025.

¹⁴ [Udlændingeminister står for skud: 'Han er fuldstændig bedøvende ligeglad' | Politik | DR](#) (accessed 28 May 2026).

¹⁵ Jensen et al. 2018.

¹⁶ Søndergaard & Hussein 2022.

¹⁷ Özkaya 2025.

¹⁸ Keskinen 2009.

¹⁹ Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Chapter 2, Article 7, accessed 28 May 2026).

“Ordinary” plans under the Minister of Equality	“Other” plans under the Minister of Integration
2002 The Government’s Action Plan to Combat Violence against Women	2003 Action Plan for the Government's Efforts in the Period 2003–2005 against Forced Marriages, Forced-Like Marriages and Arranged Marriages
2010 National Strategy for Combating Violence in Close Relations	2012 National Strategy against Honour-Related Conflicts
2014 Efforts Against Violence in the Family and in Close Relations – National Action Plan	2016 Prevention of Honour-Related Conflicts and Negative Social Control – National Action Plan
2023 Action Plan against Partner Violence and Partner Homicide 2023–2026	2025 A Free Life in Denmark – the Government’s Increased Effort against Negative Social Control and Parallel Societies

Figure 1 – Danish governmental action plans from “two tracks”, in the 2002–2025 period

As for definitions of violence in close relations, the Danish Authority of Social Services and Housing has a subpage entitled “violence in close relations”.²⁰ The page lists and explains different types of violence with headlines such as “physical violence”, “sexual violence”, “economic violence”, and “stalking”. One of the listed types is “honour-related violence”, whose subpage contains a link to a Ministry of Integration²¹ website for further clarification. Forced marriage or female genital mutilation is not mentioned on the “violence in close relations” webpage. This absence provides a first indication of the “dual track” approach in Danish policy.

²⁰ [Vold i nære relationer | Social- og Boligstyrelsen](#) (accessed 28 May 2026).

²¹ Established in 2001 as the Ministry for Refugees, Immigrants and Integration, the ministry has since changed its name several times. Today, it is called the Ministry of Immigration and Integration. For ease of reading, I use the term “Ministry of Integration” throughout the chapter.

The development of public policies to prevent violence against women

I start by sketching the Danish approach to what Anja Bredal has termed “ordinary” violence – i.e. violence against women from the majority, contrasted to the “other” violence, seen as levelled against ethnic minority women.²² In Denmark, as in many other countries, the women’s movement grew strong in the 1970s. With the motto that “the personal is political”, a central issue became how to combat the violence some women were experiencing at home. In the early 1970s, a shelter movement evolved, emerging first in the United Kingdom²³ and reaching Denmark in the late 1970s. Thus, in 1978, the first Danish shelter for battered women was inaugurated.²⁴

While Danish women’s shelters were initially run by activists and grassroots organisations, the need to support battered women gradually evolved into a public concern and on 8 March 2002 Denmark introduced its first state-sponsored action plan to combat violence against women.²⁵ Unsurprisingly, this development came relatively late in comparison with Denmark’s Scandinavian peers. In conjunction with this action plan, a basic support structure developed. The focus was on establishing a nationwide shelter capacity and giving access to hotline support. In 2004, Danish legislation was changed, so that women experiencing abuse in close relations gained a right to a temporary stay in a shelter. In the following years, policy developments have included a growing focus on preventive efforts and better collaboration across, for example, social and health professionals. Some of this work has occurred within the context of different national action plans. The next four action plans came out in 2005, 2010, 2014 and 2019.

One notable change over time has been a shift from a focus on violence against women, towards a gender-neutral framing where men, too, are included as victims of abuse in intimate relations.²⁶ Thus, in contrast to the action plans of 2002 and 2005 focusing on violence against women, the 2010 action plan was entitled *National Strategy for Combating Violence in Close Relations*.²⁷ The first sentence states that “...[n]o women, men or children are to live with violence in their everyday lives” (p. 1), illustrating an expansion to who is to be considered a victim. The plan does not include any definition of what is to be considered as “violence”, but a specific minority-related topic such as forced marriage is,

²² Bredal 2014.

²³ Dobash & Dobash 1979.

²⁴ Dokkedahl et al. 2021.

²⁵ The Government 2002.

²⁶ Sørensen & Bertelsen 2023.

²⁷ The Government 2010.

for example, not included. In this plan, the term “honour-related conflicts” appears in the explanation of one of the 30 issues/activities included in the plan. It concerns the initiative to survey existing experiences with aftercare services for women leaving after a shelter stay. According to the 2010 action plan, this survey will include ... “both women with a Danish background and ethnic minority women, and the survey will also include both intimate partner violence and honour-related conflicts”, thus making a particular distinction between two separate types of negative experiences.

The gender-neutral approach of the 2010 action plan (and hence, the move away from a focus on violence against women) remains to date. The most recent national action plan (from 2023) is one against “... partner violence and partner homicide”, focusing only on adults.²⁸ At this point in time, violence against children has earned a separate action plan entitled “Safe Childhood”.²⁹ Like the situation in 2010, “honour-related conflicts” are also briefly mentioned in the 2023 action plan on violence. Again, the mention is in conjunction with a specific initiative – this time an initiative to screen all pregnant women and recent mothers for exposure to violence in close relations. In such a health care initiative, frontline personnel are likely to encounter pregnant women with diverse backgrounds, which (similar to the 2010 mention in conjunction with an aftercare initiative) may be why the minority-related concept of an “other” type of violence is included in this “ordinary” plan.

The changes towards gender neutrality in the action plans can also be observed in Danish social legislation. While shelter legislation used to address women’s issues, since 2024 men (and other genders) also have a legal right to a temporary stay in a shelter on the same terms as women. The shift in views on abuse in intimate relations (from a gendered issue to a gender-neutral one) has implications for the understanding of the phenomenon. Hence, while a gendered understanding of such violence points to the existence of structural inequalities between women and men – inequalities which should be addressed – the gender-neutral understanding rather calls for individual explanations (e.g. psychological ones), and hence for individual solutions rather than structural ones.³⁰

Besides the consecutive action plans, other important changes relevant to combating violence against women³¹ in Denmark merit mentioning. These include changes in the criminal justice system. One such revision occurred in 2009. That year, the option for getting a so-called “wife discount” was abolished. Until then, individuals who killed their

²⁸ The Government 2023.

²⁹ The Government 2025b.

³⁰ Sørensen 2019.

³¹ Given my interest in Denmark’s implementation of the Istanbul Convention, I focus on violence against women.

partner (overwhelmingly men killing women) often had their prison sentences reduced by two years, due to the understanding that the homicide had occurred in a state of affect. Treating this kind of “emotional strain” as a mitigating circumstance was brought to an end by a High Court decision in 2009.³²

Other relevant alterations have taken place in the criminal justice system. Important examples are the criminalisation of psychological violence (2019) and stalking (2022), and a consent-based rape law (2021). These recent legislative changes have gained applause from GREVIO, the body of independent experts which monitors the implementation of the Istanbul Convention. When it comes to the gender-neutral conceptualisation of the field, however, Denmark has attracted criticism. Hence, in a Danish baseline report from 2017, GREVIO expresses concern over the ways, “...insufficient attention is being paid in policy design and legislation to the experiences of women who are exposed to violence because they are women”.³³ With this section, I have outlined the main features concerning “ordinary” Danish policies addressing violence against women. So far, I have not interrogated the role played by ethnicity. I do so in the next section.

The role of ethnic minorities in “ordinary” policies to combat violence against women

Migration to Denmark must be understood in its historical context. A common starting point is the call for labour migrants in the late 1960s. Until the migration stop in 1973 (when the “oil crisis” hit), Denmark drew in several, predominantly male, labour migrants. Main countries of origin were Turkey, Pakistan and the former Yugoslavia. These groups have subsequently grown substantially, in large part due to marriage migration.³⁴ From the late 1970s onwards, various groups of refugees have entered Denmark, shaped by the waxing and waning of wars and unrest across the globe. In recent decades, EU labour migrants and individuals entering on a variety of work- and study-related visas add further nuances to the picture.

The share of ethnic minorities in Denmark’s population varies, depending on inclusion criteria. Politically, the focus during the past four or five decades has been on “non-western” immigrants (from the Global South). Over time, the focus has increasingly turned towards immigration from predominantly Muslim countries.³⁵ As part of this change, since 2020 much of the debate concerns migration from what is delineated as

³² Rasmussen 2014.

³³ GREVIO 2017, p. 59.

³⁴ Liversage 2024.

³⁵ Brodersen & Øland 2023.

MENAPT countries – i.e. countries in the Middle East and North Africa (including Somalia) as well as Pakistan and Turkey.³⁶

Regarding violence against women, statistics show that ethnic minority women turn to women's shelters more often than women from the Danish majority and make up around half of all female shelter users. According to a study, based on register data on shelter use in the 2017–2023 period, ethnic minority women (both immigrants and their offspring) are three times more likely to stay in a shelter, compared to women with a majority Danish background.³⁷ It is important to note, however, that immigrants and their offspring may originate from a wide range of countries, including European ones, and that a substantial share of non-Danish female shelter users (with, for example, a Thai or Russian background) have left abusive men from the Danish majority.³⁸

The clear over-representation of non-Danish women in shelters is, however, not reflected in the content of the “ordinary” Danish action plans. In early “ordinary” Danish action plans (from 2002 and 2005), ethnic minorities were indeed mentioned in the text, where they were singled out as a particularly vulnerable group. The plans also stated that such women both made up a large share of shelter users and returned to their abusers more often than Danish users did. Hence it “...must be ensured that the Government's initiatives cover the particular needs of this group of women”.³⁹

This (albeit somewhat peripheral) inclusion of such women as a particularly vulnerable group remains in the “ordinary” action plans for about a decade. Thus, in the 2014 action plan, ethnic minority women are also mentioned as a vulnerable group, due to some women living in isolation, lacking knowledge of their rights and of where to seek support.⁴⁰ It is first in the 2014 plan, however, that the “ordinary” action plan had a funded initiative, specifically targeting the needs of ethnic minority women. Entitled “a strengthened preventive and informative effort towards women with ethnic minority backgrounds, including women who have been in shelters”,⁴¹ the initiative aimed to increase the awareness among such isolated women of their rights and of available support services. The 1.3 million DKK allocated to this particular effort, however, had to be carried out under the auspice of the Ministry of Integration, and was ultimately never

³⁶ [Tessfaye: Ny statistik skal give et mere præcist billede af integrationsudfordringerne](#) (accessed 28 May 2026).

³⁷ Statistics Denmark 2025, p. 1.

³⁸ Nielsen & Gitz-Johansen 2006.

³⁹ The Government 2002, p. 8.

⁴⁰ The Government 2014, p. 14.

⁴¹ The Government 2014, pp. 14–15.

used.⁴² Despite their overrepresentation among shelter users, there is almost no mention of ethnic minority women in the two latest “ordinary” action plans (from 2019 and 2023).

A final point I wish to make about the action plans against “ordinary” violence (targeting Danish majority women) concerns the various ministries involved in their creation and implementation. The action plans against violence against women, and the subsequent plans on “violence in close relations”, have generally fallen under the Ministry of Equality and have therefore been headed by the Minister of Equality. Given the rather peripheral importance attributed to (gender) equality in Denmark, the post of Minister of Equality has seemingly become an add-on to more significant posts. Especially in the latter part of the investigated period, the Ministry of Equality has led a somewhat nomadic existence. At the time of the first action plans (in 2002 and 2005), issues concerning equality were thus placed in the Ministry of Social Affairs. At the time of the third action plan (in 2014), the issue was even reflected in the name of the ministry, which was labelled the Ministry for Children, Equality, Integration and Social Affairs. In Denmark, “integration” designates issues concerning immigrants and refugees who are expected to integrate into Danish society. The (albeit short-lived) coexistence of issues related to equality, integration and social affairs within the same ministry may thus explain the somewhat larger focus on the particular needs of ethnic minority women in the “ordinary” action plan from 2014.

In 2019, however, equality had been moved to another ministry, and the action plan was signed by the Minister for Fisheries and Equality. In 2023, the action plan was signed by the Minister for Digitalisation and Equality. Further moves have taken place in recent years, placing equality, for example, in the ministries for transport, food, and foreign affairs. In May 2026, responsibility for equality issues now lies with the Ministry of the Environment. The ease with which this particular policy area is relocated time and again can in itself be read as an illustration of the limited traction that gender equality issues have in Danish politics today.

To sum up, while ethnic minority women were (albeit very peripherally) included in the early “ordinary” action plans, this is no longer the case. Since 2019, ethnic minority women have been entirely absent from the “ordinary” Danish action plans on violence against women. This absence must be understood in a political context where issues associated with ethnic minorities are allocated a specific realm, distinct from more ordinary “Danish” issues. Consequently, Denmark has had a string of parallel action plans addressing issues (including violence) in close relations in ethnic minority families.

⁴² Oxford Research 2019, p. 8.

To understand how this split has come about, we must rewind to events occurring around the turn of the millennium.

A new ministry and a set of “other” action plans

While the Danish immigration legislation in the 1980s and 1990s was very liberal,⁴³ concerns over immigration and issues such as forced marriages in immigrant families gradually grew in the 1990s. A national election in the autumn of 2001 – occurring in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attack in the USA – ousted the Social Democrat-led government. Instead, a centre-right government came to power with the support of the right-wing Danish People’s Party. Danish People’s Party had gained considerable traction through a political agenda, which was very critical of immigration, particularly from Muslim-majority countries.

One of the new government’s first acts was to create a new ministry – the Ministry for Refugees, Immigrants and Integration. As a central policy change, the new government passed major restrictions on family migration, making it much more difficult for marriage migrants to enter Denmark.⁴⁴ Part of this new legislation was the “24-year rule”, requiring that both partners be at least 24 years old for one of them to be granted entry as a spouse. An already-existing “attachment requirement” (since 2000) was tightened to require that couples have a “greater attachment” to Denmark than to another country, if one partner was to gain a spousal visa. Since then, the Danish rules have undergone various changes, but generally in an increasingly restrictive direction, prompting researchers in 2017 to comment that these rules “...together constitute the toughest family-migration rule package in force among Western democracies today”.⁴⁵ Current Danish legislation also makes it very hard to gain a permanent residency permit, which can make it difficult for women to leave an abusive marriage for fear of being evicted from Denmark.⁴⁶ As elsewhere in Europe, the numerous changes particularly affect lower-skilled individuals.⁴⁷

An early initiative from the new Ministry of Integration, established at the end of 2001, was to launch an action plan. The headline stated that the action plan was to combat “... forced marriages, forced-like marriages and arranged marriages”.⁴⁸ As can be gleaned from the title of the action plan, forced and arranged marriages were seen as a

⁴³ Gammeltoft-Hansen 2017.

⁴⁴ Bech, Borevi & Mouritzen 2017; Bissenbakker 2019; Schmidt 2014.

⁴⁵ Bech et al. 2017, p. 6.

⁴⁶ Liversage 2025; Slot et al. 2023.

⁴⁷ Kofman 2018.

⁴⁸ The Government 2003.

continuum, and were both considered illegitimate in a Danish context. This contrasts with the common understanding, where arranged marriages are considered legitimate.⁴⁹ According to this understanding, arranged marriages are different from forced marriages, with the latter being marriages that (while also arranged by parents or other family members) take place independently of, or in direct opposition to, the wishes and expectations of one or both of the spouses-to-be.⁵⁰

In the preamble, the Danish action plan from 2003 states that a “...democratic society is built on personal freedom. This means that all young people, regardless of their ethnic affiliation, must have the opportunity to choose their own spouse” (ibid, p. 1). Hence, this action plan did not focus on violence (from men against women), but rather on restrictions on personal choice (from parents against children).

The action plan seemingly addressed a particular problem. Rather than solving pre-existing problems, however, the political scientist Carol Bacchi argues that policies create “problematisation”, which we need to critically interrogate. She has indeed developed a “what is the problem represented to be?” approach.⁵¹ In the 2003 action plan on forced marriages etc., the problem is thus “represented to be” that ethnic minority youth lack individual freedom and are restrained when it comes to making important decisions regarding their own intimate lives. One argument in the preamble, used to support this view, is that half of the non-Danish women who seek help from women’s shelters are marriage migrants. Hence, the government assesses that “...[w]e need to put the issue of forced and arranged marriages on the agenda. We need to get better at helping young people who do not want to marry a distant relative or someone from their parents' country of origin against their will”.⁵² The overrepresentation of ethnic minority women in shelters thus becomes an argument for the controversial restrictions regarding marriage migration.⁵³ It should be noted that many young ethnic minorities opposed the restrictions on marriage migration, stating that the Danish state was discriminating against them and forcing them to act in particular ways.⁵⁴

With the action plan’s stated approach to supporting youth in resisting family pressure regarding marriage, initiatives in the action plan included information campaigns and educational activities for frontline workers. Other initiatives included the establishment of shelter facilities for “...young ethnic girls/women who have either entered a forced

⁴⁹ Berta 2023.

⁵⁰ Gullestad 2002, p. 33; Schmidt & Jakobsen 2000, p. 137.

⁵¹ Bacchi 2009, 2010.

⁵² The Government 2003, p. 1.

⁵³ Liversage & Rytter 2014.

⁵⁴ Schmidt 2014.

marriage or are at risk of being subjected to a forced/arranged marriage. The girls/women in the target group may also have been subjected to violence or threats of violence if they break out of a marriage”.⁵⁵

The “ordinary” 2002 action plan aimed to “...combat violence against [majority Danish] women”. As the focus was on reducing violence in the private sphere, regardless of what types of relationships the women were involved in, it has no mention of, for example, “marriage”. In contrast, the 2003 “other” action plan had a primary focus on combating “arranged” and “forced” marriages among young ethnic minority women. The problem was largely represented as one of unwanted marriage migration, with the benevolent Danish state stepping in as a protector of ethnic minority girls and women. A particular focus was placed on protecting such individuals living in Denmark from being pressured into marriages with spouses from abroad. Stating that this approach would address the overrepresentation of ethnic minority women in shelters, the action plan made no reference to the way in which, for example, the dependency on a spouse for a visa can make women vulnerable to abuse.⁵⁶ With the new government, such visa-related vulnerability did indeed increase considerably. One part of the many restrictive legislative changes in 2002 was the extension of the probationary period – the residency period necessary to gain an independent leave to remain – from three to seven years.⁵⁷ This legal change made marriage migrants dependent on their spouses for a considerably longer time than before and likely increased some women’s exposure to partner violence.

With the 2003 action plan against forced and arranged marriages, the Danish government inaugurated an “other” track of “ethnic minority” action plans, running in parallel with the “ordinary” Danish action plans on violence against women. In the next section, I discuss subsequent developments in these “other” action plans as well as concomitant changes in Danish legislation and policy.

⁵⁵ The Government 2003, p. 12.

⁵⁶ Del Real 2019; Innes et al. 2024; Liversage 2022a.

⁵⁷ Amnesty 2006.

Further action plans related to ethnic minority issues

To date, a further three action plans have been developed, specifically targeting abuse-related issues among ethnic minorities in Denmark. As listed at the beginning of this chapter, these three action plans are the following:

- 2012: National Strategy Against Honour-Related Conflicts
- 2016: Prevention of Honour-Related Conflicts and Negative Social Control: National Action Plan
- 2025: A Free Life in Denmark: The Government's Increased Effort Against Negative Social Control and Parallel Societies

The titles of the “other” action plans bring out the shifting conceptual landscape in Denmark. Where the 2003 plan had a rather narrow focus on marriage practices, the plans from 2012 onwards take a broader approach. According to the preambles, the main focus has remained the same: All citizens in Denmark should be able to enjoy the same basic rights, including “...the right to choose one's spouse, the right to equality between women and men, and the right to choose to live the life one wants”. That is not believed to be the case in Denmark today, as some “... youngsters are exposed to social control and are subjected to family demands of living according to a particular code of honour”.⁵⁸

The introduction of the concept of “honour-related conflicts” (since 2012) signals a broadening of the targeted problems. While forced and arranged marriages remain relevant issues, they are only one part of a broader field of problematic issues, which includes restrictions concerning friendships and young people's social lives, and youth being sent abroad on what can literally be translated as “re-educational journeys” (“genopdragelsesrejser”). Such stays are generally understood as periods spent abroad, initiated by parents who feel that their children have become “excessively Danish”⁵⁹ and have also attracted political attention in other Scandinavian countries.⁶⁰

While the issues which these “other” action plans seek to address have broadened since 2003, the main problematisation⁶¹ remains the same. The central problem is considered to be the perceived lack of individual freedom for ethnic minority youth. Flowing from

⁵⁸ The Government 2012, p. 4.

⁵⁹ Ankestyrelsen 2018; Liversage 2026.

⁶⁰ Bredal & Ekspertgruppe 2020; Jämställdhetsmyndigheten 2022; Lidén et al. 2024.

⁶¹ Bacchi 2009.

this, the action plans include several initiatives aimed at supporting such youth, be it through creating educational materials or providing frontline workers with courses on

“honour-related conflicts”. Another string of action plan initiatives has links to what is today known as RED-Center.⁶² RED is short for Rehabilitation of Ethnic women in Denmark. The organisation harks back to the 2002 founding of an organisation named “Ethnic Youth” (“Etnisk Ung”), which addressed the issue of forced marriages. In 2004, the first RED Safehouse was established near Copenhagen as a shelter for “... young women with an ethnic minority background, on the run from their families, due to honour-related conflicts”.⁶³ Users could be up to 30 years old and could not bring children with them. Since then, RED-Center has expanded, in part due to financing allocated through various of the “other” action plans. In 2016, a shelter in Jutland was thus inaugurated⁶⁴ and in 2022 an LGBT+ shelter for ethnic minorities opened. In these shelters, there is a strong focus on safety, with users being assigned new names upon entry. RED-Center also runs a counselling service and provides support for individuals leaving a RED-Center shelter stay. This institutional infrastructure thus explicitly targets ethnic minorities, but has an upper age limit of 30, underscoring the focus on the needs of young people. Hence, the main focus is on intergenerational relations (including parental control and abuse) rather than gendered relations (including men’s violence against women).

A change from the “other” action plan in 2003 to the one in 2012 is the inclusion of young men as a target group. Part of the 2012 action plan is thus the creation of safe shelter spaces for such men. The inclusion of young men mirrors the shift towards gender neutrality, which can be observed in the “ordinary” action plans, which shifted from addressing “violence against women” (in 2002) to addressing “violence in close relations” (in 2010).

The age focus (on young individuals) raises the question about ethnic minority women who are not “young”. As mentioned above, ethnic minority women take up about half of the general shelter space but are hardly mentioned in the “ordinary” action plans from 2019 and 2023. Such “adult women” are indeed included in a short section of the “other” (ethnic minority) action plan from 2012. The section, entitled “adult women”, concerns a new initiative making it mandatory for municipalities to offer help to citizens over the age of 18 when they “... are at risk of a serious honour related conflict, as e.g. forced marriage, honour related violence or threats” (today §12a of the Social Service Act⁶⁵).

⁶² [Forside - RED Center](#) (accessed 28 May 2026).

⁶³ <https://red-center.dk/om-red-center/> (accessed 28 May 2026).

⁶⁴ Liversage & Jepsen 2019.

⁶⁵ [Servicebogen](#) (accessed 28 May 2026).

While all individuals should be able to access free counselling in the municipality, individuals affected by honour-related conflicts have broader rights, including being

offered a risk assessment of their situation. With the specification of forced marriage, this particular section of the 2012 action plan retains the focus on generational, rather than on gendered, problems. The “other” 2012 action plan also aims to strengthen the work carried out by women’s shelters. Regarding this issue, the action plan states that “the ordinary women’s shelters also encounter women who have been exposed to honour-related violence from their husband or family”.⁶⁶ The reference to shelters in this action plan is thus not to violence per se, but on a particular kind of violence, motivated by concerns regarding “honour”. This construction clearly creates an a priori distinction between the abuse suffered by women in Denmark. Ethnic minority women suffer a particular kind of “other” (e.g. honour-related) violence, which is set apart from the “ordinary” violence suffered by women from the Danish majority.

The preoccupation with “honour” suffuses Danish policies when it comes to ethnic minorities. Furthermore (as can be seen in the title of the 2012 action plan from the Ministry of Integration), the concern is not about (honour-related) violence but the more nebulous issue of “(honour-related) conflicts”. Today, the concept of “honour-related conflicts” is integrated into Danish legislation, which states that an...

...honour-related conflict means a conflict that is related to the perception of one or more family members that another family member has violated the family's honour. This can, for example, arise in cases where the person in question has a girlfriend, has a sexual relationship outside of marriage, has chosen a spouse against the family's wishes, is homosexual, wants a divorce, etc. Both men and women can be exposed to honour-related conflicts.⁶⁷

The legislation is thus concerned with motive rather than substance. Elsewhere, it states that “honour-related” deeds can include e.g. physical, psychological, sexual, and economic violence, as well as threats, stalking, forced marriage, female genital mutilation, involuntary stays abroad and even homicides.⁶⁸ The 2012 action plan also mentions problems of “social control” where families impose extensive restrictions on the lives of ethnic minority youth, stating that “...far-reaching social control can ultimately lead to

⁶⁶ The Government 2012, p. 48.

⁶⁷ From *Guidance on the purpose of the Service Act and general provisions of the Act (Guidance no. 1 to the Service Act)*, issued by the Ministry of Children and Social Affairs. (accessed 28 May 2026).

⁶⁸ SIRI 2018. SIRI stands for the Danish Agency for International Recruitment and Integration (*Styrelsen for International Rekruttering og Integration*). The agency operates under the Ministry of Integration.

honour-related conflicts”.⁶⁹ Rather than the relatively clear focus on violence (of different kinds) in the “ordinary” action plans, this parallel track of “other” action plans thus addresses a broader domain, targeting the inner workings of ethnic minority families.

The next section discusses a further development – the relatively recent introduction of a focus on “negative social control”.

The next conceptual move – negative social control

The first plan from 2003 had a relatively concrete focus on “forced, forced-like and arranged marriages”. In 2012, this had evolved into a focus on “honour-related conflicts”. In 2016, the action plan from the Ministry of Integration introduces yet another concept – the concept of “negative social control”.⁷⁰ The concept designates...

... actions that a community uses to regulate and/ or sanction the behavior of the individual according to the norms of the community. Negative social control can be expressed, among other things, as limitations on the individual's ability to make age-appropriate choices for his or her own life, including social life, leisure interests, sexuality, body, education and job, retention in undesirable relationships and through isolation and surveillance.⁷¹

The concept underscores the policy problematisation of ethnic minority youth’s perceived lack of individual freedom. Hence, such youth are considered unable to enjoy the activities of their majority Danish peers. On the one hand, it is an undeniable reality that some ethnic minority youth face substantial restrictions in their private lives⁷² – restrictions that can be detrimental to individual well-being.⁷³ On the other hand, the preoccupation with “liberating” ethnic minority youth from their “repressive” families also feeds into a polarised political climate where being “tough” on immigrants has become a mainstay of almost all political parties from the far right to the Social Democrats and beyond. To use the words of Baianstovu and Strid, honour-based issues (in their focus: violence) consists simultaneously of lived reality and stereotypes.⁷⁴ The authors argue that the stereotypes surrounding the issue may indeed retain individuals in

⁶⁹ The Government 2012, p. 7.

⁷⁰ The Government 2016.

⁷¹ SIRI 2022, p. 13.

⁷² Følner et al. 2018; UIM 2024.

⁷³ Baianstovu et al. 2019; Bengtsson et al. 2022.

⁷⁴ Baianstovu & Strid 2024.

violent relations and become obstacles to support services by social workers, impeding their access to much-needed support.

In a related vein, Sara Farris – in her book “In the name of women’s rights: the rise of femonationalism” – examines how calls to “liberate” immigrant (and particularly Muslim) women can be seen as a move to both justify exclusionary policies and to funnel such women into a segregated caregiving labour market. All this occurs while claiming to promote the emancipation of such women.⁷⁵

In the Danish context, the American researcher Reva Jaffe-Walter argues that frontline workers’ attempts to support particularly female ethnic minority youth can be experienced as what she terms “coercive concern”.⁷⁶ Jaffe-Walter coins the term based on fieldwork in Danish schools where she observed how Danish teachers counselled female students to embrace Danish norms on sexuality to foster their positive integration and freedom. This approach is very much in line with the problematisations of the various “other” action plans. When girls showed resistance to doing so, due to their profound embedding in their cultures, families, and ethnic minority networks, this could reduce such pupils’ much-needed access to teacher support for their academic achievement. Furthermore, it would position them – as is commonly the case for ethnic minorities – as outsiders to Danish society.⁷⁷

To return to the concept of “negative social control”, a central criticism concerns its nebulous character. While the exact demarcation of a concept such as “violence” can be up for debate, it certainly seems clear and well-defined in comparison. The starting point for “negative social control” is the broader concept of “social control”. Such control is a central concern in all societies and has been discussed by classical scholars such as Émile Durkheim, George Herbert Mead and Talcott Parsons.⁷⁸ The addition of the term “negative” positions some control as problematic and unwanted. Hence, it becomes a normative concept, casting particularly ethnic minority parents as culprits, from whom children need protection and support.

In an article about the concept, Jesper Petersen unpacks how Danish policy documents position “negative social control” as something other than “honour-related conflicts”. Nevertheless, when exemplified, the two concepts seem almost synonymous.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Farris 2017.

⁷⁶ Jaffe-Walter 2016.

⁷⁷ Jenkins 2011.

⁷⁸ Jacobsen 2024.

⁷⁹ Petersen 2024.

Furthermore, from referring to something occurring in close relations between, for example, family members, the use of “negative social control” has expanded and is now also used in an educational context. The educational authorities in 2018 and 2019 thus commissioned investigations into “negative social control” in the educational system,⁸⁰ referencing practices such as gossip and bullying between ethnic minority pupils and students. “Negative social control” is thus both a broad and unclear term, covering practices that may or may not be illegal and that may or may not take place in close relations.

The term also appears in Danish legislation criminalising psychological violence (§243, since 2019), which is punishable by up to three years in prison. Psychological violence, as a general concept, is understood as occurring where a present or former household member “...repeatedly, over a period of time, exposes the other person to grossly degrading, abusive or insulting behaviour that is capable of improperly controlling the other person”⁸¹. In an article, Jesper Petersen documents how “negative social control” only appeared once in The Ministry of Justice's legislative work on the psychological violence section. It did so as part of a list of different examples of abusive behaviour that ended with the words “... or subjecting the victim to other negative social control...” The term was therefore not defined beyond being an “etcetera” appended to more specific types of abuse.⁸²

However, in the legislative preparations for the 2021 revision, the Ministry of Integration notes “that a reference to negative social control should be inserted in Section 243 of the Criminal Code as an example of psychological violence in order to signal that negative social control constitutes the core area of the provision.”⁸³ Petersen pointedly comments that it “...is remarkable that the core area of the psychological violence paragraph, according to the Ministry of Immigration and Integration, was not defined in 2019”.⁸⁴

While not defined as such in the 2021 revision, this revision contains numerous examples of what can be considered “negative social control”. Examples include keeping a person in a marriage with “...reference to notions of decency or the general status of the family” or “put pressure on victims to make certain life decisions, such as choosing a spouse”.⁸⁵

⁸⁰ Als Research 2018; Rambøll 2019.

⁸¹ [Straffeloven § 243](#) (accessed 26 May 2026).

⁸² Petersen 2024, p. 35.

⁸³ Forslag til lov om ændring af straffeloven, lov om pas til danske statsborgere m.v. og Udlændingeloven:
https://www.ft.dk/ripdf/samling/20201/lovforslag/l126/20201_l126_som_fremsat.pdf (p. 36, accessed 28 May 2026).

⁸⁴ Petersen 2024, p. 35.

⁸⁵ [20201_l126_som_fremsat.pdf](#) (accessed 28 May 2026).

Besides alluding to forced marriages, the context for this wording is a political concern for Muslim women's access to divorce, in part due to social pressure from families and ethnic minority communities.⁸⁶ Hence, the wording of the legal text illustrates how the concept of "negative social control" is clearly associated with family practices in immigrant-origin (and predominantly Muslim) families.

The focus on youth, liberty and the rather hazy concept of negative social control take centre stage in the latest action plan from the Ministry of Integration. This plan is entitled: *A Free Life in Denmark: The Government's Increased Effort Against Negative Social Control and Parallel Societies*.⁸⁷ While this plan's focus is on ethnic minority youth, there are more provisions for adult ethnic minority women experiencing abuse in gendered relations. Thus, one initiative involves expanding RED-Center to include shelter space "...for families with children, fleeing from honour-related conflicts".⁸⁸ Furthermore, some initiatives target particular problems related to adult ethnic minority women. Thus, one initiative concerns how to counsel women "...against giving up parental custody due to negative social control", while another should "look into the possibilities for making illegal religious polygamous marriages" (p.14). The targeted practices are all very particular to ethnic minorities. This division both fortifies the split between the "ordinary" and "other" violence and broadens the issues to be addressed in ethnic minority families beyond violence and abuse. There is no broader engagement with what arguably constitutes a significant part of the hardships that ethnic minority women experience – partner abuse, which is not necessarily driven by "honour-related issues".

The fact is that, as documented in a Norwegian study,⁸⁹ the abuse experiences of ethnic minority women cover a very broad terrain. The experiences of some women (primarily from first-generation immigrants) indeed commonly deviate from the average Norwegian experience of gender-based violence by being more collective in character, by often being more physical (rather than psychological) and by the perception that leaving the abuser is shameful. The abuse experiences of other ethnic minority women are, however, much more aligned with the experiences of the Norwegian majority. Such variations and overlaps show the problematic nature of creating a sharp dichotomy between "their" and "our" violence experiences in Danish society.

⁸⁶ Liversage & Jensen 2011; Liversage & Petersen 2020.

⁸⁷ The Government 2025a.

⁸⁸ The Government 2025a, p. 19.

⁸⁹ Bredal 2020.

Consequences of the dual approach to violence against women in Denmark

As this chapter has unpacked, the “ordinary” Danish action plans on violence against women have largely excluded ethnic minority women, as these are considered to be the domain of the Ministry of Integration. The parallel series of action plans from the Ministry of Integration has not targeted violence against women as much as problematised the perceived lack of freedom for ethnic minority youth. This leaves the target group of adult ethnic minority women (who form a disproportionately large share of shelter users in Denmark) out of focus. This state of affairs can be exemplified by an interview with an ethnic minority shelter user, stemming from an evaluation of Danish women’s shelters. The interviewed woman states that...

...[o]ne of the worst challenges is getting help! The help is there, but I can’t get it because I’m a foreigner (...). [At the shelter, we...] ... have a contact person and a lawyer who knows the law. But I can’t get any public benefits. Because if I get public benefits, I can’t get a permanent residence permit.⁹⁰

This woman points to the difficulties of obtaining help, due to her lack of a permanent residence permit. This vulnerability indeed creates major problems for ethnic minority women and may lead some women to remain in abusive relations. Like many other countries, Denmark does have a clause making it possible for women who leave their partners due to abuse, to retain their residency permit⁹¹. This clause may, however, be difficult to use in practice.⁹²

Underpinning the observation that a dependent visa status makes women more vulnerable to abuse, is a recent quantitative study. The study shows that when women on a marriage migrant visa transition to an independent residence permit, it decreases their exposure to partner abuse, regardless of whether women remain married to their husbands or not.⁹³ Today, the requirements that must be fulfilled to gain such an independent residency permit are, however, very steep. In addition to eight years of residency, the requirements also include stipulations regarding full-time employment and (as stated in the quote above) not receiving any public benefits for a set period. Consequently, some women are never able to gain an independent residency permit.

⁹⁰ Rambøll 2015, p. 81.

⁹¹ Lev uden vold, [Opholdsgrundlag](#) (accessed 28 June 2026).

⁹² Slot et al. 2023.

⁹³ Hasager 2024.

Hence, they will never gain the level of security that can be a central prerequisite for leaving an abusive relation.⁹⁴

In this discussion, it is also important to note that the “other” action plans and their focus on providing support for particular types of ethnic minority challenges have resulted in some ethnic minorities gaining access to particular kinds of resources not available to women from the majority. One concrete example is that young ethnic minorities, contacting RED Center counselling about problems at home, can gain free sessions with a psychologist. Such provisions are not available for majority Danish youth with a troubled relationship to their parents. Another resource for ethnic minorities is the so-called “security consultants” (“sikkerhedskonsulenter”). This type of regional frontline worker was established as part of the 2016 action plan and began functioning in 2018. Starting with six security consultants, there are today 17 such consultants across Denmark. Security consultants, just as the various RED Safehouses, conduct risk assessments and help coordinate in honour-related cases. For some ethnic minority women, when experiencing abuse, access to this type of customised help can be very useful. These consultants are now part of a Danish infrastructure, where there is a considerable understanding of the complexities of abuse in ethnic minority families, including cases involving multiple perpetrators⁹⁵ and transnational dynamics.⁹⁶ As such, the support infrastructure addresses the “lived reality” of honour-based violence.⁹⁷ However, the split into two parallel tracks of help provisions comes at a cost. This cost is evident from an interview with a security consultant that I conducted in 2022. The consultant mentioned that he...

... two days before was called by a municipality. They had a case where there were some elements of stalking. It was about a very massive family conflict. But there were no honour-elements [in the Danish majority family case]. I thought I could have done a really good job at advising them. But I could not – so I send them on to the local police, and that was about it.

With two separate tracks – one for majority Danish women, and one for ethnic minority women – the security consultant had to turn away a case where he could have provided relevant help. This exemplifies well how the Danish dual-track approach cannot be seen as offering “...a holistic response to violence against women”, as stipulated in the Istanbul Convention.

⁹⁴ Liversage 2022a.

⁹⁵ Baianstovu & Strid 2024; Bates 2021.

⁹⁶ Bredal 2023; Liversage 2022b.

⁹⁷ Baianstovu & Strid 2024.

While the dual-track approach is clear when looking at government action plans, there are moves to greater integration elsewhere in Danish institutions. A central example can be found in police work. Since 2022, Danish police have created specialised units (in Danish: “SVÆV-teams”). These teams are intended to improve the quality of police work in relation to stalking, violence in close relations, honour-related violence and rape.⁹⁸ In 2025, I interviewed a police officer working in a specialised unit. She found that working with violence in close relations across different groups and dealing with both “ordinary” and “other” violence had positive effects. As she explained:

We have gotten better at focusing on safety first – before we necessarily need to start a criminal case and an associated investigation. We also do a lot of crime prevention work. We're particularly good at it in honour-related crime. [In such cases] we are somehow quicker to say: “Okay, this could get serious if we don't start with making a security plan. Then the investigation has to come afterwards”. [We tend to have...] less identification with these [ethnic minority] cases, and therefore a greater tendency to think “this is dangerous, we have to do something about it”, than we have with our ethnic Danish partner violence cases. Where we sometimes tend to think: “if it was really that serious, then why hasn't she left?”

This police officer thus found that working in an integrated manner had been beneficial to women from the Danish majority as such women could also benefit from a “safety-first” approach – the approach often applied in ethnic minority cases. In this way, a more integrated approach had contributed to improving the general quality of police support.

Conclusion

It is a fact that women in Denmark are exposed to violence, regardless of their ethnicity. It is also a fact that ethnic minority women make up a disproportionately large share of shelter users, pointing to particular vulnerabilities in this group. These two facts, however, are not reflected in the Danish policy approach to addressing violence against women which instead reveals a deep and persistent bifurcation. On one side of this policy structure is a string of general action plans targeting the “ordinary” violence against women from the Danish majority. Regarding gender, early versions of these plans had a focus on men's violence against women. Over time, however, gender became neutralised, shifting the focus from structural towards more individualised understandings of violence. Regarding ethnicity, ethnic minority women earned only peripheral mention in early plans of this “ordinary” track. In later action plans, ethnic minority women have

⁹⁸ [Politiet er blevet dygtigere til at håndtere partnervold - Danner](#) (accessed 28 May 2026).

been totally omitted. On another side of the Danish policy structure, parallel “ethnic minority” plans take a rather different approach, including towards the “other” violence of ethnic minorities. Through culturalised lenses of honour, control, and a perceived lack of freedom, the policy focus is on generational, rather than on gendered, issues. Furthermore, the focus is not on violence per se, but on more nebulous phenomena such as “honour-related conflicts” and “negative social control”.

While both strands of policy plans have produced valuable institutional infrastructure, including shelters, legal reforms, and specialised counselling, this bifurcation simultaneously reinforces a categorical distinction between “Danish” and “non-Danish” women and violence. This architecture of action plans thus contributes to the production of an imagined national self that is egalitarian, liberal, and modern (except for some individualised violence). This imagined national self is contrasted with a cultural “other”, where the real problems reside and where the young generation needs to be rescued. The dual-track structure leaves adult ethnic minority women, arguably a group particularly vulnerable to gendered violence, insufficiently covered by either policy domain.

In conclusion, the Danish policy architecture cannot be considered holistic, as required by the Istanbul Convention. Furthermore, the Danish approach obscures the ways in which a plethora of national policies make the lives of ethnic minorities increasingly precarious. Ever-increasing restrictions on access to independent residence permits, and growing welfare chauvinism and economic precarity, both contribute to adult ethnic minority women’s vulnerabilities to abuse. These policies may also increase stress and hardship in ethnic minority families and contribute to increasing levels of abuse in both gendered and generational relations.

As a final point, not all Danish institutions ascribe to the dual-track approach. A notable exception is the specialised police units which – since 2022 – address both “ordinary” and “other” forms of relational violence. It is likely that the fact that the police are placed under the Ministry of Justice (and hence not part of either the “ordinary”, nor the “other” action plan track) has contributed to creating this more integrated approach to combating violence against women.

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3. Making sense, making visible. Perceptions of gender, honour and violence in Finland



3. Making sense, making visible. Perceptions of gender, honour and violence in Finland

Satu Lidman

In October 2025, the deputy chancellor of justice, Mikko Puumalainen, announced his decision concerning investigations into intimate-partner assaults. In most of the cases in which the plaintiff had not demanded penalty, the police had stopped the investigation, even though the Criminal Code obliges them to investigate since 2011. Puumalainen stated that the problem can be assumed to be long-term and widespread. As a result, dozens of investigations were reopened across the country.⁹⁹ The episode is just one of many incidents, that force one to reflect on Finland's carefully guarded reputation as an exemplary model of the rule of law and gender equality.

Of course, many positive developments have taken place over the decades as well. Yet the fact that Finland has been ranked number one in the *World happiness report* for many years in a row, offers only a limited insight into the full picture. By this measure, other Nordic countries are also among the happiest nations, but creating a safer society still requires much work in all of them.¹⁰⁰ More specifically, the so-called Nordic paradox refers to the disconcerting fact that gender-based violence shows high prevalence in gender-equal countries like Sweden and Finland.¹⁰¹

The femicide rates reported by the *World Population Review*, gathered during the last five years, marked Finland with the darkest number among the Nordic countries. As an initiative, the Finnish women's magazine *Eeva* has started to maintain a website providing updated short news on all homicides with female victims in the country. Further, especially after the large European study on violence against women in 2014, and again in its follow-up results in 2024, the victimisation figures raised serious questions concerning Finland's good reputation.¹⁰² These kind of shocking findings have fuelled repeated media reports debating whether violent behaviour, and the habit of overlooking its seriousness, is rooted in Finnish culture.

For decades the prevalence and harm of violence against women and domestic violence remained understated, and the means to combat it were utterly insufficient. Since the

⁹⁹ [Chancellor of Justice 14.10.2025](#) (accessed 5. December 2025).

¹⁰⁰ [World Happiness Report](#) (accessed 11 August 2025).

¹⁰¹ Wemrell et al. 2021.

¹⁰² [World Population Report](#) (accessed 11 August 2025); [Eeva.fi](#) (26 May 2026); [FRA 2014](#) (accessed 25 May 2026); [FRA, EIGE, Eurostat 2024](#) (accessed 25 May 2026).

1990s, and more intensively during the past ten to fifteen years, awareness and knowledge of the subject have grown and the issue has gained public attention.¹⁰³ In many ways this has been due to international pressure, especially the development that culminated in the ratification of the Istanbul Convention in 2015. In parallel with this, the slow uptake of research findings, together with the persistent work of NGOs and other experts, has had an effect.

The improving understanding of various phenomena of violence, as well as the diversity of groups at risk, has gradually started to show in the media, public services, training of professionals and decision-making.¹⁰⁴ Both economic and health-related consequences of violence are better known than before, and there are efforts to build more sustainable structures for prevention and support.¹⁰⁵ At the same time, certain contexts of violence seem to be politicised, fuelling anti-migration views and polarisation. In this chapter, I focus on the topic primarily within the framework of domestic violence, paying particular attention to its diversity.

Despite the changes in Finnish society over the decades, domestic violence continues to be an issue. The failure to combat it forces one to question the fulfilment of the political responsibility. Recently, the economic recession has led to decisions on funding cuts of support services, which are soon likely to cause unpredictable costs. Together with the current societal tensions, questions surrounding violence evoke strong emotions, especially when it comes to possible intersections with gender, culture, and minorities. By analysing the key sub-concepts and central debates, as well as describing the legislative and policy framework, I aim to help the reader understand how domestic violence in particular is being understood and tackled in Finland.

¹⁰³ Kotanen 2013; Lidman 2015 & 2024; Piippo 2022; Statistics Finland 2023.

¹⁰⁴ Keskinen 2009; Hansen et al. 2016; THL 2019.

¹⁰⁵ Prime Minister's Office 2022; THL 2024b.

Navigating through gender-neutral concepts of domestic violence

When engaging in international debates, established definitions of violence and its relation to gender are useful and recommendable.¹⁰⁶ Yet the concepts may not easily translate into national languages. For example, instead of the direct translation of domestic violence into Finnish (*kotiväkivalta*), the term *family violence* (*perheväkivalta*) is more commonplace, and thus it is also used in the translation of the Istanbul Convention. This choice puts the emphasis on the relations between the spouses and children rather than on the physicality of the private sphere.

In addition to internationally known wordings, there will probably always exist another conceptual layer, which builds on the history and discourses of violence as well as the social and political reality of each country. A key example of the impact of discursive choices in Finland is the term *violence in close relationships* (*lähisuhdeväkivalta*). It is widely adopted as an alternative to domestic violence, as it appears to be the most used term in policy documents and services, as well as in political and media discussions concerning violence that targets family members or other close relations. It is not based on the Criminal Code but arises mainly from research. At the level of policy and practice the understanding of its content is not uniform.

There may be an illusion of a shared view, but the use of the term *lähisuhdeväkivalta* is also criticised. It tends to cause confusion as different actors perceive it differently. The discourse on what is meant by this term – or not – seems to go in circles, following a similar pattern for decades. The gender neutrality of the term logically aligns with legislation, meaning all genders can become victims or perpetrators of violence in their close relationships. Problematically, the term is often mistakenly used as a synonym to *intimate-partner violence*, but this is an unfortunate mix-up. There is a specific expression for violence in spousal relationships (*parisuhdeväkivalta*), be it through marriage or cohabiting, and one should not shy away from using it when necessary. Such nuances are important because the choice of terms strongly shapes our understanding of the phenomena and what they encompass.

There remains an ongoing need in Finland to emphasise that, as important as it is to combat intimate-partner violence, we should also keep learning about the mechanisms and risks of violence in parent-child and sibling relationships, as well as other relations beyond the nuclear family. Furthermore, it should not be forgotten that many forms of

¹⁰⁶ See for example [World Health Organization](#) (accessed 4 December 2025).

violence women typically face take place outside close relations.¹⁰⁷ For the sake of clarity in this chapter, I use the concept of domestic violence to describe incidents between family members. However, I would like to emphasise that even though domestic violence is a gender-neutral expression, there are gendered aspects to be aware of.

The ratification of the Istanbul Convention, including its definition of violence against women, gave the concept more weight in many discourses and in a legal sense. In the Istanbul Convention “gender-based violence against women” means “violence that is directed against a woman because she is a woman or that affects women disproportionately” (Art. 3d). This has been helpful for the attempts to raise awareness on issues related to violence and gender in Finland. Despite this, there exists a variety of perceptions on how domestic violence, intimate-partner violence, sexual violence and violence against women overlap and differ (as concepts and in practice).

The persistent urge to promote gender neutrality, thinking that this leads to equality, has been repeatedly identified as a weak point by many Finnish women’s organisations, human rights NGOs, researchers and other actors. A similar kind of critique was included in the second *Action Plan for the Istanbul Convention (2022–2025)*¹⁰⁸. The deficiency of a gender-neutral approach is the risk of not being able to distinguish different contexts of violence, even though precisely this would be central to prevention and support, as well as for working with perpetrators. Thus, it may complicate the efforts to combat gender-based violence.

On the one hand, compared to past decades, there seems to be a better general awareness of violence against women as a phenomenon that deserves attention for its own sake. However, policy makers, practitioners and media often still use gender-neutral expressions, presumably in the name of impartiality, or out of habit. On the other hand, difficulties or unwillingness to see why and how gender matters also exist and they are typically politicised. This is evident, for example, in some of the answers Amnesty International in Finland got from the parliamentary parties in connection with campaigning before the regional and municipal elections held in 2025.

The candidates were requested to react to different statements, and one of these specifically concerned combating violence against women. According to the Finns Party (Perussuomalaiset/Sannfinnländarna), however, it would be more equal to rather promote a gender-neutral approach to violence in close relationships.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ Lidman 2015; THL 2019.

¹⁰⁸ Ministry of Social Affairs and Health 2022.

¹⁰⁹ [Amnesty International in Finland 2025](#) (accessed 25 May 2026).

The party is known, among other things, for its right-wing oriented, nationalist and populist views on migration. During the administrative term of 2023–2027 it was the second largest party in the parliament and government (the largest being the National Coalition Party), holding the offices of the Minister of Justice and of the Interior and of Social Affairs and Health, among others. The wording of its response is therefore not merely a detail but relevant as an observation, since the representatives to be elected play a significant role in local decision-making concerning social services, welfare and safety for which they are by law responsible.

To understand – and change – our social, political and cultural reality, we need sufficient vocabulary. Multi-professional and interdisciplinary collaboration goes hand in hand with the development of terminology, which is a central tool in combating violence. The articulation of domestic violence in all its diversity is extremely important, but we also need to foster an open dialogue on what can be achieved and what may be at risk when using the chosen terms. A classic example is the term *victim*, which suits pragmatic legal contexts, but support services may rather speak about *survivors* to create an atmosphere of hope and trust. Supporting the agency of those who have been exposed to domestic violence and emphasising that victimisation does not define the whole person is essential on the level of discourse, policy and practice.

Developing terminology on honour and violence

In terms of domestic violence in minority contexts, Finnish discourses on terminology have long been, and to an extent still are, accompanied by the fear of accusations of racism.¹¹⁰ In particular, this is evident through the hesitation over whether and how to use the term honour. The difficulty is typically grounded in the attempted avoidance of discriminating against minorities. In today's turbulent societal atmosphere, however, linking honour and violence has become politicised in a new way. This is an unfortunate turn in relation to long-term efforts made to improve the more nuanced understanding of domestic violence, aiming at a safer society for all its members.

Sometimes the motives behind the acts of domestic violence can be linked with gendered perceptions of honour which are commonplace within several minority groups. It is therefore functional to describe this type of violence with a separate term.¹¹¹ However, the reality of this phenomenon is complex. It does set specific requirements for prevention and intervention, but also for a better understanding of varied meanings of honour, shame and social norms in different contexts. Furthermore, it is central to pay

¹¹⁰ Hong 2020; Keskinen 2009.

¹¹¹ Hansen et al. 2016; THL 2021a; Statistics Finland 2023.

attention to the ways in which minority positions of both victims and perpetrators may weaken their trust in authorities, hamper communication, or add to their vulnerability in different ways.

The first concept used to describe violence in relation to perceptions of honour in Finland, was simply *honour violence* (*kunniaväkivalta*). As knowledge of the phenomena has accumulated, it has predominantly been replaced with the more accurate term *kunniaan liittyvä väkivalta*. This translates directly to *honour-related violence*, which equals *hedersrelaterat våld* in Swedish, and ‘honour-based violence’ in many international discourses.¹¹² Occasionally, there have been attempts to launch the term *shame violence* in various opinion pieces. This is typically put forward by lay people, who do not work in the field, but want to emphasise that “violence is never honourable”. In their replies, experts have then explained that the word honour refers to motives and context, not the nature of the crime.

The sharpening of the terminology is to be considered a positive development. It includes the vocabulary of specific deeds that can be categorised under the concept of honour-based violence, such as forced marriage and female genital mutilation (FGM). Finland, along with other Nordic countries, has taken steps towards recognising and combating these forms of violence.¹¹³ Nevertheless, it is crucial to bear in mind that the ethnic or cultural background of the victim and/or the perpetrator never automatically defines what kind of domestic violence may take place. Therefore, a deeper and up-dated knowledge on related characteristics and risks is central for training of professionals and developing support services, as well as for reforming and implementing laws.

The Istanbul Convention, however, is not using the term honour-based violence, nor any other similar term, for that matter. Instead, it mentions “the so-called ‘honour’”, emphasising that it cannot be considered as a justification for violence by using culture, custom, religion or tradition (Art. 12). For its part, the possibility of domestic violence is viewed as not depending on the parties’ connection to any majority or minority population group. It is simply defined as acts of physical, sexual, psychological or economic violence occurring “within the family or domestic unit or between former or current spouses or partners, whether the perpetrator shares or has shared the same residence with the victim” (Art. 3b).

¹¹² Terminology was discussed in multi-sectoral workshops (2021–2023); for results see [\[Sopu-work\]](#) (accessed 29 August 2025).

¹¹³ See also NIKK 2026.

The Istanbul Convention's definition allows us to perceive domestic violence as a broader concept including honour-based violence, but it does not necessarily lead to this line of thinking. In Finland, parallel with the implementation of the Istanbul Convention, the awareness of the variety of controlling behaviours that may be linked to perceptions of honour has grown. Additionally, the wording *negative social control* (*kielteinen/negatiivinen sosiaalinen kontrolli*) has been briefly mentioned in the latest national *Action plan on combating violence against women* (2020–2023).¹¹⁴ The term has, however, not really been adopted in Finland, but has rather encountered criticism.

In the action plan, negative social control is explained as a mechanism for upholding honour in the eyes of the community and seen as part of honour-based violence, which is then placed under the umbrella of domestic violence. It is noted that especially the most severe forms of honour-based violence are usually linked with migrant communities, whereas negative social control also exists among other minorities having “strict perceptions on morality”. The passage could be read as if social control among the majority population would be neutral in nature, or even positive, but this is not the message. The wording rather mirrors the unfinished process of developing a shared understanding on the contents and characteristics of honour-based violence.

In recent years, the discussions on honour-based violence have increasingly been extended to include the Finnish Roma minority. This development offers opportunities for a better understanding of the diversity of domestic violence, but it may also lead to misunderstandings jeopardising the ability to identify risks. Certainly, honour and shame are visible cultural elements that regulate many actions among the Roma, yet the way they are interpreted may vary from other groups, such as certain groups from the MENAPT-countries. Be it Roma or another minority context, in Finland honour-based violence is not only understood to take place between members of the same kin, but also as a form of intimate-partner violence between spouses or ex-partners.

Instead of generalising negative phenomena as being part of somebody's culture and othering minorities, violence prevention requires respectful dialogical processes within and between minority and majority groups. Besides, in some contexts, honour may not be such a decisive category. The difficulty of being able to comprehend the mechanisms of violence against women and domestic violence in different cultural settings therefore needs another kind of solution. It is perhaps even more important to educate relevant

¹¹⁴ Ministry of Justice 2020. For a discussion on the use of the term *negative social control* in Denmark, Norway and Sweden, see Nordic Council of Ministers 2020 and other chapters in this report.

actors in society on the impact of collectiveness in minority communities, be they Christian, Muslim, or of any religion.

I argue that the term *collective violence* (*yhteisöllinen väkivalta*) offers a helpful perspective, since it enables looking beyond honour.¹¹⁵ In its essence, honour-based violence is collective, but not all collective violence is honour-based. Collective violence does not necessarily, if at all, refer to multiple perpetrators. Rather, it draws attention to contexts in which individual agency is seen as subordinate to the community and its norms. This is a recent topic and is being increasingly discussed in various forums of the Finnish anti-violence work.

Another sign of the accumulating knowledge on the various contexts of domestic violence is the concept *coercive control* (*pakottava kontrolli*). Coercive control is understood as relevant in describing many non-physical aspects of violence, which are especially poignant in the context of violence against women and domestic violence.¹¹⁶ Both coercive control and collective violence demonstrate how gendered power systems, and in some cases the wish to protect familiar practices, may work in favour of upholding cultures of violence. Importantly, they reflect the processual nature of control and psychological abuse in close relationships.

Hierarchies of victimhood and perpetration

It has been encouraging to experience an improvement in the identification of honour-based violence within the last ten years or so. The general and professional awareness has grown, and political interest towards the subject among several parties has increased.¹¹⁷ There are signs of taking the phenomenon more seriously, yet it would be naive to ignore other possible outcomes of the increasing visibility of the topic. The more knowledge there is on the existence and harm of a particular type of violence, the easier it gets to use this information for diverse purposes – regardless of the intentions of those who participate in research and debates around the subject.

The long history of wars and global crises, including related economic recessions and political turbulence on the national level, demonstrate that discriminatory hierarchies tend to strengthen when societies are facing such challenges. It is therefore relevant to ask who are seen as potential victims deserving help – or potential perpetrators threatening societal stability – and how this affects the ways in which interventions are carried out.

¹¹⁵ Lidman & Hong 2018. See also THL 2021a; Statistics Finland 2023.

¹¹⁶ Viini 2025; Ministry of Justice 2023b.

¹¹⁷ Grans 2018; Hong 2020; Swedish Secretariat for Gender Research 2025. See also Hansen et al. 2016; Lidman & Hong 2018 (survey conducted among professionals in 2016).

For decades the immigrant population of Finland was relatively small, but in 2015 the number of asylum seekers grew higher than ever before, reaching just over 32,000.

In the following years this sparked debates mainly based on crime reports, because statistically, men born outside Finland were – and still are – over-represented in the figures of sexual violence perpetration and convictions.¹¹⁸ News on such deeds caused tensions and certain groups were easily labelled as criminals per se. Particularly young men from Syria and Iraq, but also Somalia and some other non-European countries, were often generalised as sexual predators and thus dangerous to (white) Finnish women.

By that time, there were frequent writings on Soldiers of Odin, a group that called itself “a patriotic street patrol organisation”.¹¹⁹ Yet the activities of these men failed to increase women’s sense of security and safety. Rather, they led to the opposite.¹²⁰ However, the debates concerning these episodes reveal differences in the perceptions of who were thought to run the risk of being victimised and by whom. The attempts to talk, or keep silent, about the possible connections of culture, gender and violence raised multiple heated reactions, and the arguments were often driven by emotions rather than facts.

In the late 2010s, domestic violence against migrant women was increasingly perceived as honour-based, and that possibility was gradually also taken into account within the justice system. Nevertheless, voices presenting violence among the majority population as a Finnish problem became louder too.¹²¹ A dual perception of violence, either being “ordinary” or “other”, grew stronger.¹²² When engaging in public debates, experts and practitioners were carefully balancing between distributing neutral information and the risk of stigmatising minorities. In the existing political atmosphere, this dualism of violence has, again, become more visible.

In the previously mentioned campaign by Amnesty International in Finland, one of the statements for election candidates read: “My party actively promotes human rights-based policies in municipalities and welfare areas”. This formulation can be considered generic

and broad, and as such it deliberately offered various opportunities for comments. The answers generally emphasised taking the needs of different population groups into account when developing services and promoting safety, as well as promoting

¹¹⁸ [Migri 2016](#) (accessed 15 August 2025); Prime Minister’s Office 2021.

¹¹⁹ Their website also states: “We are against uncontrolled immigration, islamisation, EU and globalization. We work to improve security situation locally, in communities where we operate”. [Soldiers of Odin](#) (accessed 15 August 2025).

¹²⁰ [Yle News, 5 January 2016](#) (accessed 15 August 2025).

¹²¹ [Yle News, 14 July 2017](#) (accessed 15 August 2025).

¹²² Bredal 2014; Hong 2020.

non-discrimination and gender equality. The Finns Party, however, linked the statement to honour-related violence claiming that it is an obstacle for effective implementation of human rights.

In its answer to Amnesty, the party also communicated that the minister of justice has consulted different organisations and authorities on the matter. The Ministry will commission a study on the prevention of honour-based violence and the reasons why cases are currently not progressing properly in courts. The commissioning of this study, which would help modify the guidelines for municipalities and welfare areas, was among the government's measures to combat racism and promote equality.¹²³ The study is currently being conducted by the Finnish League for Human Rights, an NGO with long experience in this field (forthcoming, 2026).

All in all, during the past decades the overall awareness of violence against women and domestic violence in Finnish society has risen. Yet the categories of so-called ideal victims, who are more likely to be seen in the position of receiving justice, and those who are not that easily recognised as having faced violence, as well as those who are more easily blamed than others, continue to exist. For example, people who work in prostitution and/or suffer from drug addiction, are in a weaker position as victims of crime than many other individuals. The same goes for those not mastering any of the native languages well, or who belong to ethnic or other minorities.

When it comes to violence against women and domestic violence, including sexual violence and digital violence, underreporting is a common phenomenon in all population groups. There are several reasons for this, including the fact that criminal processes are known to often become very long. Furthermore, as evidence may prove insufficient for a conviction, charges can be dismissed.¹²⁴ For the victim, explaining details concerning violence is likely to be stressful, and emotionally, it is particularly hard to report a family member. Feelings of shame and fear, as well as worries concerning children and property, possibly also the permit to stay in the country, can be mixed with the hopes for a safer future and getting justice.

¹²³ Government Action Plan to Combat Racism and Promote Equality 2024.

¹²⁴ Prime Minister's Office 2023a; Ministry of Justice 2024a.

Recognising the seriousness of all domestic violence

Currently, and more than ever before, honour-based violence is now recognised as a relevant issue in Finland. Yet there is no individual crime in Finland known as “the high-profile case” like, for example, the murder of Fadime Şahindal (1975–2002) in Sweden. Nevertheless, several serious offences and their attempts have been linked to harmful practices and honour perceptions by the police and prosecutors, and in the media. Many NGOs and professionals in public support services have long been aware of the reality behind such cases. It is important to understand that the non-existence of a high-profile narrative does not result from the absence of honour-based violence or killings in Finland. It simply marks the way the story is told.

The exact prevalence data on honour-based violence, including FGM, in Finland is still scarce and scattered.¹²⁵ Forced marriage is, however, estimated to be the second most common form of human trafficking covering one third of its victims.¹²⁶ In practice, professionals are experiencing an increase in the requests related to honour-based violence, but long-term comparable figures emerge at a slow pace. Due to the lack of national statistics covering the reasons why clients come to services, the picture remains blurry. However, the non-white woman with an immigrant background, and especially when suspected to be Muslim, has become the image of a potential victim of honour-based violence. As important as it is to identify the risks and to develop structures for prevention and protection, assumptions based on inadequate information should always be avoided.

The homicide rates have been declining during the past decades, but this concerns mainly male victims and killings outside the family. Women are typically killed in their own home, and the perpetrator is most likely their partner or ex-partner. In research and among professionals it is well known that these deeds are usually preceded by continuous episodes of control and violence, often over years.¹²⁷ Previous incidents of domestic violence and post-separation stalking constitute a critical point of escalation, be they psychological or digital violence, or actual physical assaults.

The remark that violence against minority women is taken less seriously, or even ignored, and that this occurs not only in the society in general but also among (white) feminists, comes up every now and then.¹²⁸ Such claims should be taken seriously, but they have remained at the level of individual media stories and have not led to broader discussion.

¹²⁵ Statistics Finland 2023, p. 100–105; THL 2023; Ministry of Social Affairs and Health 2021.

¹²⁶ [Ihmiskauppa.fi](https://ihmiskauppa.fi) (accessed 25.8.2025).

¹²⁷ Törölä & Raeste 2025; Prime Minister’s Office 2023c.

¹²⁸ [Yle News 10.12.2024](https://yle.fi/uutiset/3-10122024) (accessed 18.8.2025).

Gender- and culture-informed support services for survivors with a minority background, as well as research on the topic have existed for decades, but they remain insufficient in number. On a positive note, the diversity of professionals in different positions of anti-violence work has increased gradually.

Further, a more recent change can be detected in the way media reports cases of violence against women and domestic violence. They are no longer so much presented as a force of nature that “just happens”, but as a societal issue requiring the full attention of the state.¹²⁹ It is positive that the custom of listing the number of the 24/7 national helpline (*Nollalinja*) and relevant organisations under such media reports has by now become normalised.

Today, Finns are better informed on the dynamics of violence against women and domestic violence, and the support services available. The typical cycles of intimate-partner violence and the related difficulties of leaving the abusive spouse are more commonly known. Yet there seems to be a repeating pattern: despite the clear signs of concern, even convictions, violence keeps taking place in close relationships. If domestic violence involves migrant groups, such as people of Kurdish, Somali and Iraqi origin, or the Finnish Roma, it is likely to be seen as “other” rather than “ordinary”. The Sámi people are, however, rarely included in any discussions on violence. Both in incidents involving majority or minority populations, the inability of authorities to prevent serious assaults and killings, sometimes also involving children, remains highly topical.

On the one hand, public discourses on violence tend to demonstrate the difficulty of drawing a line between different types of violence. On the other hand, they show emerging understanding of how control, honour perceptions, collectiveness and gender play out. Yet violence perpetrated by and among marginalised groups is often being reported differently from incidents involving the majority; motives and explanatory factors are more easily connected to “culture”, as if cultural aspects existed only among minorities. In reality, children of all population groups are brought up to internalise several kinds of social norms, and some of them can be harmful. It is crucial to avoid demonising any group as violent and to invest in research to deepen the knowledge on the risks and mechanisms of violence in different settings.

¹²⁹ [Yle News 12 November 2024](#) (accessed 18 August 2025).

Amending the legal framework

Historically, domestic violence was understated, even perceived as a fact of life, rather than seen as something that obliged the authorities to intervene. The insufficient regulation reflected the common understanding of certain kinds of violence as a “private matter”. Gradually, the focus was put on state responsibility and victims’ status rather than on perpetrators.¹³⁰ Developments that shaped the legal framework governing domestic violence into its existing form, were preceded by much research, heated political debates and campaigning of the civil society over several decades. The latest layer of this development is the changing legal positioning of some forms of honour-based violence. It is, however, too early to say how much and in what ways this will help protect people at risk or assure that they receive justice.

For years the argumentation of “already having the necessary legislation” hindered the development in the field of combating honour-based violence. It was often noted, for example, that the paragraph of aggravated assault would be applicable in cases of female genital mutilation, FGM. For its part, forced marriage could be sentenced as human trafficking or handled through divorce proceedings.¹³¹ This reluctance to reform the legislation had some similarities with the earlier views on domestic violence, for example the criminalisation of marital rape, which was still partly considered irrelevant in the 1970s.

When it comes to children’s safety and wellbeing in the family and other contexts of care, Finland was one of the global forerunners by banning physical punishments of children in the early 1980s. Among the Nordic countries, Sweden was the first in 1979, and Iceland the last when joining in 2003.¹³² However, only from the early 1990s onwards, along with the international discourses on gender and human rights, a broader societal and legal change concerning violence against women and domestic violence started to emerge in Finland. After 2015, the ratification of the Istanbul Convention has pushed Finland to reassess its legal framework.

In 2019, the objective of a comprehensive reform concerning sexual offences, and fundamentally the consent-based definition of rape, was included in the *Government Action Plan*, which then resulted in several amendments. Further, as part of the measures enhancing safety, especially in respect of combating hate crime and digital violence,

¹³⁰ Kotanen 2013. For the long history of gendered violence and related legislation, see Lidman 2015, 2018.

¹³¹ Ministry of Justice 2017; Ministry of Justice 2024c.

¹³² [Endcorporalpunishment.org](https://endcorporalpunishment.org) (accessed 26 February 2026).

gender became an aggravating circumstance.¹³³ Several measures clearly reflected the spirit of the Istanbul Convention. Of course, in its wording, Finnish legislation itself has long been gender neutral, to be implemented regardless of gender. The exception to this was infanticide, of which only women could be accused, but the article was repealed in 2024.

Under the administrative term of 2023–2027, led by the National Coalition Party, conciliation of violence in close relationships was largely abandoned by amending the Act on Conciliation.¹³⁴ The need for this had been advocated for years by women's and human rights organisations, as the issue was considered central due to unequal power relations of intimate-partner violence and the vulnerability of the victim. Yet the National Police Board claimed that the amendment may require modification and suggested reconsidering the possibility of conciliation.¹³⁵ Tensions around the subject have clearly not vanished.

In 2025 all forms of FGM and their attempts, as well as preparing FGM or forcing someone to travel for the purpose to undergo FGM, were included in the Criminal Code. The limitation period for prosecution of FGM is 20 years after the victim has turned 18 years of age. This enables the investigation, prosecution and trial of such offences for a sufficient time, as instructed in the EU directive on violence against women and domestic violence (Art. 13). When it comes to forced marriage, the legislative position is different, because it is not criminalised as a separate crime but under the provision on human trafficking. In other words, the paragraph was modified to be more clearly applicable to cases of forced marriage, but the conviction will still be given for human trafficking. Importantly, the law now recognises forced marriage to be punishable as such, based on its objectives and the lack of consent.

The current legislation takes some features of honour-based violence better into account than its predecessors. Yet creating an article to cover honour-based violence as an offence of its own has not really been discussed. The number of detected and reported cases of FGM and forced marriage is relatively small, and time will tell whether the respected amendments will have preventive effects or show an increase in convictions. During the period of the latest *Action Plan to Combating Violence Against Women* (2020–

¹³³ Government Action Plan 2019.

¹³⁴ Government Action Plan 2023.

¹³⁵ [The National Council of Women of Finland](#), 8 June 2026 (accessed 26 May 2026); [The Non-Discrimination Ombudsman](#), 7 February 2024 (accessed 26 May 2026); [Finnish League for Human Rights](#), 9 August 2024 (accessed 26 May 2026).

2023)¹³⁶ many professionals of the legal sector, including the police, prosecutors and judges, were educated to implement these changes.

Overall, there remains a constant need for training key professionals on mechanisms of all kinds of violence against women and domestic violence, and the impact of gender, be they minority or majority contexts. It also continues to be important to ensure the implementation of existing jurisdiction. The motivation – and obligation – to promote such actions arises from the will to enhance non-discrimination and defend women's rights, and more specifically from the obligations of the Istanbul Convention.¹³⁷ In order to take the diversity of domestic violence into account, the understanding of how collectiveness impacts the safety of the victim and other family members also has to be completed.

Additionally, citizens must be repeatedly informed about their right to support and how to identify harmful behaviour. For example, even though a vast majority of the population knows that disciplinary violence is a crime, the number of those who are unaware of this has grown. Psychological violence towards children has increased, and almost one third of the parents admit having used forceful grabbing or rough handling for disciplinary purposes.¹³⁸ As important as it is to provide and develop a solid legislative basis on which a just society can be built, it is even more important to enhance education and attitudinal change to prevent violence and abuse.

In the box below I have listed some of the most significant amendments, roughly from the past half- century, to illustrate the emerging awareness of domestic violence in Finland. This includes the will to protect children and a gradual recognition of the processual dynamics of intimate partner violence, in other words perceiving it as a chain of acts rather than separate individual deeds. Further, they demonstrate a progressing understanding of violence against women and sexual violence, including their gendered mechanisms, as well as their relation to harmful practices and perceptions of honour.

¹³⁶ Ministry of Justice 2023a; Ministry of Justice 2024b.

¹³⁷ THL 2025a.

¹³⁸ Holmi & Kuokkanen (eds.) 2025.

- 1984 corporal punishment (disciplinary violence) of children criminalised
- 1994 rape within marriage criminalised
- 1995 public prosecution of assaults and aggravated assaults in the “private sphere”
- 2004 abolition of the victim’s right to demand dropping of charges for assaults in close relationships
- 2011 public prosecution of also minor assaults in close relationships
- 2014 stalking and (physical) sexual harassment criminalised
- 2015 law on shelters obliging the state to organise shelter services
- 2019 abolition of the possibility to apply for special permit to marry under the age of 18
- 2023 reform of legislation on sexual offences including consent-based definition of rape; aggravating circumstances include gender-based motive; possibility for annulment of forced marriage
- 2025 restrictions on conciliation of domestic violence; FGM and forced marriage criminalised

The current *Government Action Plan for Gender Equality* (2024–2027) instructs the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health to assess the need for new legislation, which would strengthen the structures for violence prevention and support services in municipalities and welfare areas.¹³⁹ This is an important initiative, which has long been discussed in various professional circles and forums of civil society. The state of the current legislation is complex and fragmented, and as such it does not offer an adequate framework for action in the field. Enacting such a law would contribute to the multi-sectoral efforts to combat different types of violence against women and domestic violence.¹⁴⁰

Currently, several NGOs, decision-makers, researchers, and other actors are investigating and advocating the criminalisation of coercive control and breach of the child peace, meaning domestic violence witnessed by children. A majority of Parliament is in favour

¹³⁹ Ministry of Social Affairs and Health 2024.

¹⁴⁰ THL 2025a.

of a similar provision which Sweden has had since 2021 (barnfridsbrott).¹⁴¹ Reforming the Child Welfare Act to better ensure the child's right to safety is also currently under consideration. These topics are all relevant for combating domestic violence, including honour-based violence. By emphasising the early warning signs in fragile situations, they help prevent the escalation of violence.

Designing policy to combat violence

By the turn of the millennium, Finland had a state project on preventing violence against women and prostitution (1998–2002), but the *Action Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women* (2010–2015) was the first document of its kind.¹⁴² The multi-sectoral action plan was developed by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health in cooperation with other actors. The process was preceded by international critique, especially from the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). The action plan also anticipated the forthcoming ratification of the Istanbul Convention in 2015.

The main responsibility for the second action plan, the *Action Plan on Combating Violence Against Women* (2020–2023), was given to the Ministry of Justice. Its title reflected a more ambitious attitude as it did not promise to *reduce*, but to combat and eradicate violence against women.¹⁴³ During the administrative term of 2019–2023, under the leadership of the Social Democratic Party, the attempts to eradicate violence against women and domestic violence, including honour-based violence, became more visible than before. The ethos of the period can be described as one that promoted an intersectional feminist approach, and in its title the government action plan for gender equality aimed to “make Finland a global leader” in that field. Paradoxically, already at the beginning of 2020, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic raised concerns of what would happen when couples and families became isolated inside the four walls of their homes. Studies soon showed increasing rates of domestic violence in some contexts.¹⁴⁴

When it comes to combating the diverse forms of domestic violence, the Finnish policy approach can better be described as integrated rather than split, or following two tracks, like in Denmark. There are, however, separate action plans for FGM, developed by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health in 2012 (then referred to as *circumcision*) and in

¹⁴¹ [Helsingin Sanomat](#), 5 November 2024 (accessed 26 May 2026).

¹⁴² Ministry of Social Affairs and Health 2010.

¹⁴³ Ministry of Justice 2020. See also [European Crime Prevention Network](#) (accessed 21 August 2025). More on Finnish action plans and institutions see NIKK 2026.

¹⁴⁴ Ministry of Social Affairs and Health 2020. On impact of the pandemic see THL 2021b; Prime Minister's Office 2023b; [Yle News](#), 21 October 2021 (accessed 18 August 2025).

2021.¹⁴⁵ Further, the action plans to combat violence against women have had special emphases on “vulnerable groups”, including immigrant minority women (2010–2015) as well as honour-based violence (2020–2023).¹⁴⁶ Nevertheless, honour-based violence is perceived as a subcategory of domestic violence, even though it is understood to require specific knowledge and measures.

Appointed by the government in 2016, the Committee for Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (NAPE) operates in conjunction with the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, and has the objective of coordinating, monitoring, and evaluating the implementation of the Istanbul Convention. In 2022, the Non-Discrimination Ombudsman was appointed as the independent National Rapporteur, which includes monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of the measures taken to combat violence against women and domestic violence (Art. 10). NAPE and the rapporteur work independently but in close cooperation.

NAPE’s tasks include preparing action plans for the national enforcement of the Istanbul Convention. The first two were designed for shorter periods (2018–2021 & 2022–2025), but the third one covers eight years (2026–2033). It was developed through close cooperation with different actors, including several NGOs and authorities. In addition to its measures, it presents three “cross-cutting objectives”, which are: “strengthening the consideration of gender and interconnecting vulnerabilities, reinforcing the structures, coordination, and multiprofessional cooperation, and enhancing the knowledge base for the prevention and combating of violence”.¹⁴⁷

GREVIO has seen improvement in the efforts made in aligning the national legislation with the requirements of the Istanbul Convention and commends Finland for recognising the importance of gender perspective in the action plan to combat violence against women. Finland is yet encouraged to improve awareness of all forms of violence against women, and explicitly “prioritise targeted preventive measures for women at risk of intersectional discrimination”, such as Sámi women and other minorities. Tailored and culturally sensitive services are to be offered to vulnerable groups.¹⁴⁸

These recommendations are taken into account in the latest plan for implementation of the Istanbul Convention in Finland. It calls for more research on related topics, including mapping the prevalence of FGM, as well as ensuring access to shelters in all parts of the

¹⁴⁵ Ministry of Social Affairs and Health 2012; Ministry of Social Affairs and Health 2021.

¹⁴⁶ Ministry of Social Affairs and Health 2010; Ministry of Justice 2020.

¹⁴⁷ Ministry of Social Affairs and Health 2017, 2022b, 2025a.

¹⁴⁸ GREVIO 2024; GREVIO 2025, §§ 4, 8 & 9. See also GREVIO 2019, §§ 47 & 104.

country, including the Sámi areas.¹⁴⁹ As a permanent body, NAPE's existence does not depend on changes in the political sphere, which allows for longer-term planning. Yet there is no specific funding structure for the implementation of the Istanbul Convention.

An important aspect of recent policymaking is the recognition of domestic violence not only in the context of gender but also as a transgenerational issue impacting children and families. The *Action Plan for the Prevention of Violence Against Children* (2020–2025) developed by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, and called Non-Violent Childhoods, already included measures on honour-based violence, FGM and forced marriage. The second action plan covers a longer period (2026–2033) in the same way as NAPE's latest action plan, and these documents reflect a similarly integrated agenda.¹⁵⁰ In contrast to the latest action plan to combat violence against women, which was short-term, they provide more time to enhance sustainable changes.

The *Government Action Plan for Gender Equality* (2024–2027) also names several measures, such as increasing the number of shelters, ensuring the work of the national helpline and raising awareness of honour-based violence.¹⁵¹ Yet resources allocated to this kind of work are insufficient. In addition to public services, many NGOs play a central role in the actual anti-violence work and victim support, and they are heavily dependent on the state-aid authority, the Funding Centre for Social Welfare and Health Organisations (STEA). Currently, the worsening financial conditions under which NGOs operate, as well as various challenges hampering the development of the services in welfare areas, send worrying signals of the Finnish welfare system being in decline.

Structures of knowledge and cooperation

On the operational side, the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare (THL) has many responsibilities. As an independent but state-owned expert and research institute, working under the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, it comes closest to being a national resource centre on violence. THL hosts several long-term research programmes and there is a specific section for violence research and coordination of the support system for victims of domestic violence, including honour-based violence. In the School Health Promotion Study,¹⁵² organised every two years by THL, children and youth reply to a survey on their wellbeing, which includes a set of questions regarding experiences of violence. The results are widely cited and discussed in media and research.

¹⁴⁹ Ministry of Social Affairs and Health 2025a, pp. 25, 29, 45, 48.

¹⁵⁰ Ministry of Social Affairs and Health 2019a; Ministry of Social Affairs and Health 2025b.

¹⁵¹ Ministry of Social Affairs and Health 2024.

¹⁵² [School Health Promotion Study](#) (accessed 11 December 2025).

In a way, the year 2024 marked an end of an era as the Centre for Gender Equality in Finland at THL was shut down. For years it played a central role in providing gender equality data for decision-makers, researchers, media and citizens. This turn was largely met with disappointment by women's organisations, as it seemed to fail the progress that had been achieved. Nevertheless, THL still produces information on gender equality and aims at including gender perspectives in its statistics and data collections.¹⁵³ It maintains an open-access digital platform providing online training for professionals, as well as guides on the identification of violence and on support services for regional authorities and citizens.

Importantly, THL has the task of coordinating the shelter network. Shelters are by law (2015) primarily meant for "people who are facing violence in their close relationships", and thus gender neutral. However, in 2025 some women-only shelter sections were opened in the cities of Tampere and Oulu. All shelters cooperate closely with social welfare authorities, the police and other actors both before, during and after sheltering victims of violence. There is no specialised national housing scheme for victims of honour-based violence, but shelter Mona provides services in 15 languages exclusively to women and their children. It is also the only safe house at a protected address.¹⁵⁴

In the absence of a formal centre for advice on honour-based violence, specialised support services and other expertise are mainly in the hands of a few NGOs.¹⁵⁵ They are consulted nationwide and often work in close cooperation, including the use of the MARAC method (Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference) for domestic violence, coordinated by THL. Introduced in 2010, there are now around 40 working groups across the country.¹⁵⁶ The experiences with MARAC have been largely positive. Yet there are still elements that require consideration. For example, in cases of small immigrant communities, the need to use interpreters may become an issue of confidentiality.¹⁵⁷

Evidently, a well-functioning cooperation and exchange of relevant information between authorities and other actors are crucial for interventions for domestic violence, including honour-based violence.¹⁵⁸ For example, cases in which children and young people are allegedly sent abroad on "re-educational journeys" or to be forced into marriage, raise

¹⁵³ [The National Council of Women of Finland](#), 15 May 2026 (accessed 29 August 2025); THL: [thl.fi](#) (accessed 24 May 2026).

¹⁵⁴ THL 2025b.

¹⁵⁵ Especially the Finnish League for Human Rights, MONIKA – Multicultural Women's Association, Loisto Setlementti's Sopu-work, and Tampere Setlementti's Didar. See also Nordic Council of Ministers 2020, pp. 3, 57.

¹⁵⁶ THL 2024a; [Crimeprevention.fi](#) (accessed 2 September 2025).

¹⁵⁷ Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment 2020.

¹⁵⁸ Ministry of Justice 2022; Ministry of Social Affairs and Health 2019b.

concerns among professionals in educational institutions, NGOs, child welfare services and the police.¹⁵⁹ However, there is no functional structure or appointed expert group to coordinate the work and manage the response to such cases.

A promising example of the multi-sectoral cooperation was the contribution of the Helsinki police department. For years, there was a team of constables who worked closely with the social and health sector and NGOs to lower victims' threshold for reporting violence and access to services. A risk assessment questionnaire was developed together with the Loisto Settlementti's Sopu-work. Further, a keyword flagging system to help distinguish suspected honour-based violence cases from other types of domestic violence was launched in 2019.¹⁶⁰ Unfortunately, after the reorganisation of the Helsinki police department in 2024, the so-called preventive functions, such as the grassroots-level communication with communities and individuals at risk of honour-based violence, could not continue in their previous manner. The decision complicated the cooperation, also causing turbulence within the police, and the episode became national news.

In addition to well-functioning multi-professional cooperation to combat violence against women and domestic violence, it is important for Finland to strengthen the status of professional education. This objective is included in the GREVIO's recommendations and the action plan for the implementation of the Istanbul Convention (2026–2033).¹⁶¹ Comprehensive basic education in all relevant fields, including a consistent transfer of knowledge and frequent mandatory in-service training, is the undeniable cornerstone of combating violence. This would also contribute to solving the problem of individualised expertise in critical positions, as for now important knowledge tends to get lost due to retirement or changing jobs.

In 2026 news spread that, due to a decrease in resources, the Statistics Finland might have to abolish several long-term statistics including those relating to crime. This would seriously hamper research on violence against women and domestic violence. All in all, essential questions for the future are: What is considered sufficient knowledge of different types of violence? Which professions are seen as the most important to educate, and how can the use of this knowledge be supported in working life? Particularly in hierarchical environments, professionals may encounter difficulties in their attempts to combat violence regardless of the education and knowledge they have received.

¹⁵⁹ [MOT documentary on re-educational journeys 2024](#) (accessed 18 August 2025).

¹⁶⁰ For a handbook on intervening in domestic violence, see National Police Board of Finland 2022.

¹⁶¹ GREVIO 2024; THL 2025a.

Conclusions

Finland has a long history of downplaying the seriousness of domestic violence and a shorter history of combating it. The common mentality of not interfering to other people's – or communities' – lives and ignoring the impact of gender, has affected attitudes, legislation and service structures. Changing this narrative to a gender-informed understanding of combating violence as everybody's business has taken place only gradually, and the process is still ongoing. However, at some levels, signs of change can be detected. For instance, during the finalisation of this chapter, news spread on the first two police investigations based on the criminalisation of FGM.

In the midst of the current national and global crises it remains topical to perceive all development as fragile, as we cannot be certain what direction it will take. Promising prospects and setbacks may exist simultaneously, and regulations cannot guarantee non-violent behaviour. Therefore, it is important to identify early signs of attitudinal change, such as hardening language on gender and minorities, and the lowering of the threshold for justification of violent behaviour. These are, unfortunately, among the relevant trends that Finland should pay attention to.

In the scope of this chapter a concern arises as to whether the concept of honour, or related terms, is used to create a safer society for all, or whether it is politicised for the purpose of discriminating against minorities. There are tendencies of looking at honour-based violence merely as an issue of "others", which may also result in a reluctance to consider other types of domestic violence in minority contexts. However, I remain hopeful that the recent legislative changes increase justice rather than boost stigmatisation.

On the policy level, the diversity of violence against women and domestic violence is taken into account, and there seems to be no split agenda based on differences between population groups. In practice, many vulnerable groups are in a weaker position, as services are primarily designed to meet the needs of the majority population. Simultaneously, accessing them has become increasingly difficult for everyone. Many expert NGOs have been forced to limit their functions, even though they often provide services regional authorities cannot offer. Further, the length of processing cases of domestic violence must be shortened.

Despite various efforts made, there is a constant need for critical evaluation of the concrete results. Among the most severe deficiencies is the lack of low-threshold services which would offer support in the early phases of crises. Investing in them would save resources and prevent suffering, if all parties involved in violent situations would receive help before escalation. Further, professionals' skills to assess the risks of domestic

violence – and act accordingly – are still incomplete. It cannot be emphasised enough that taking a history of threats, stalking and assaults seriously would save lives.

To ensure the implementation of the Istanbul Convention, Finland now has a long-term action plan which covers several aspects of violence against women and domestic violence in their diversity, including honour-based violence. However, its success is largely dependent on the political will to allocate sufficient resources over the coming period of eight years. The price for today's short-sighted decisions must be paid in the future, but investing in prevention of violence against women and domestic violence essentially contributes to building a stronger and safer society. Tomorrow's history is written today.

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4. Tracks and cracks in Norwegian policies against domestic violence



4. Tracks and cracks in Norwegian policies against domestic violence

Anja Bredal

In Norway, the year 2024 has been referred to as “the year of murders” (“drapsåret 2024”).¹⁶² Beginning on 2 January, the first three months of the year alone saw seven cases of intimate partner homicide and murder-suicide within close relationships, all involving male perpetrators. Unsurprisingly, these murders generated significant media attention and triggered a renewed public debate on violence against women. Notably, female survivors of male partner violence came forward with strong criticism of the police and welfare services for failing to provide protection and support. We also witnessed a revitalisation of victim-led NGOs.

During the same period, the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation (NRK) released a TV documentary series with the title “Honour” (Ære). NRK introduces the series with the following terms on its streaming platform:

*Young Norwegian girls live in fear that their parents will find them and kill them. The documentary (...) reveals how powerless we in Norway are in the face of honour culture.*¹⁶³

The documentary series follows police investigations and court cases concerning alleged forced marriage and honour-based violence. It also includes an interview with a man of Syrian descent who is serving the maximum prison sentence for killing his ex-wife and her new partner. The court found that it was an honour killing.

The series was followed by public debate. For instance, the 30 January 2024 edition of NRK’s weekly programme “The Debate” (Debatten) was entitled “Men who beat, rape, and marry off women” with the subtitle “What is Norwegian society doing about brutal honour-related violence?”. During the programme, host Nina Owing referred to the issue as “the Muslim debate”. Christopher Fardan, a researcher on extremism, commented on this in an op-ed article in which he criticised NRK for linking honour-based violence to Muslims.¹⁶⁴ Fardan argued that, although it is explicitly stated in the documentary that honour-based violence is not connected to Islam, other references throughout the series indicate otherwise, such as images of the Qur’an, recordings of the call to prayer,

¹⁶² [Drapsåret 2024 - Omfanget har sjokkert Norge.](#)

¹⁶³ [Brennpunkt: Ære - NRK TV.](#)

¹⁶⁴ Fardan 2024.

Arabic-sounding music, and a “dramatic introductory sequence [that] ends with a woman veiling herself”. He concludes: “Unfortunately, what could have been an important discussion about violence in close relations has been reduced to yet another debate about Islam. This comes across as racist toward Muslim minorities.” His preferred alternative is to talk about violence in close relations as a gendered social and psychosocial problem:

So let us call a spade a spade and refer to so-called ‘honour-related’ crime for what it is – violence in close relations. Regardless of who is affected, we must work preventively to address such social problems. A more productive starting point is to direct attention toward hegemonic masculinity, poverty, marginalisation, and psychosocial challenges.

Among Fardan’s critics was Sylo Taraku, a Norwegian author, commentator, and political adviser working on issues related to immigration, integration, democracy, and Islam. He accused Fardan of categorically denying honour-based violence as a distinct phenomenon and of dismissing cultural factors as irrelevant: “Not only does he exclude Islam from the picture; he also seeks to remove the cultural dimension altogether.”¹⁶⁵ Responding to Fardan’s call to name honour-related crime “for what it is – violence in close relations,” Taraku countered: “Honour-related crime cannot be “reduced to” violence in close relations.” These two statements, one insisting that honour-based violence is simply a form of domestic violence, and the other insisting that honour-based violence cannot “be reduced to” domestic violence, illustrate a principal area of tension in the honour-based violence debate.¹⁶⁶ Fardan adopts a position that emphasises *similarity*, thereby downplaying culture and religion and instead highlighting socio-economic factors and individual psychology. Taraku, on the other hand, argues that culture and religion must be part of the picture, and thus emphasises *difference*. In other words, they represent the recurring binary between *sameness* and *difference*, a tension that lies at the heart of discourses on “honour” and to which I will return.

The main point so far has been to show how two public debates about violence and homicide in close relations unfolded in parallel during the same period, without anyone making any connection between them. They proceeded on *two separate tracks*. As we shall see, this two-track structure of the debate mirrors the discursive and institutional structure in public policy and is a key feature of Norway’s way of dealing with diversity in domestic violence and violence against women.

¹⁶⁵ Taraku 2024.

¹⁶⁶ See e.g. Idriss 2017.

Policy development on two tracks

From men's violence against women to "in close relations"

In Norway, violence against women was placed on the public agenda in the 1970s, driven by the women's movement and activists within the public sector; a process which has been called "state feminism in action".¹⁶⁷ The first women's shelter was established in 1978, and the first governmental national action plan came in 1983. Inspired by the Swedish Women's Peace Reform (Kvinnofridsreformen) in 1998 and following considerable pressure from activists within NGOs, the Gender Equality Council and political parties, a public committee was appointed in 2001, the Violence Against Women Committee. Their remit was to review how the situation of abused women could be strengthened, including by means of legislative change. In their report,¹⁶⁸ the committee used the term *men's violence against women in close relations*. The government, however, adopted the gender-neutral term *violence in close relations* (vold i nære relasjoner) in its follow-up.

Violence in close relations has since been the main term.¹⁶⁹ Officially, it functions as an umbrella term for violence across all categories of close relations, as does domestic violence in the Istanbul Convention. This broad definition underpins, among other things, the penal provision on domestic violence (§219, now §§ 282 and 283), the Crisis Centre Act, and the national guidelines for municipal action plans. Violence in close relations is, however, still sometimes used in a narrower sense, referring to intimate partner violence.

One of the Violence Against Women Committee's main recommendations was a new penal provision, based on the following argument:

"the current penalty rules do not capture the complexity of violence against women and children in close relations. (...) It is the totality of violent offences – that she lives under the constant threat of violence - that characterizes violence against women in close relations.

¹⁶⁷ Skjorten, 2004; see also Jonassen 2013; Bredal 2013; Skjorten et al. 2019; Smette, Bredal & Stefansen 2019.

¹⁶⁸ NOU 2003: 31.

¹⁶⁹ The subsequent national action plans also included short sections on "violence against the elderly", referring to adult children abusing their elderly parents, often associated with drugs. We will not go into this topic.

In the Committee's view, it is important that the legal justice system does not see the violence and threats as single actions but captures the totality of the abuse".¹⁷⁰

The argument and proposed new section were similar to the Swedish offence of Gross Violation of a Woman's Integrity (grov kvinnofridskränkning), which was introduced as part of the already mentioned Women's Peace Reform. While the proposal was accepted by the government, they adjusted it into a gender-neutral provision, section 219, which came into force in 2005.¹⁷¹ The provision, now section 282, addresses the totality of regime-like severe family violence, specifying actions such as "threats," "coercion," "restricting freedom," "violence" or "other violations."

Public policies on violence in close relations have been located within the Ministry of Justice since the early 2000s and remain so today. This institutional placement is often presented as an indication of political priority.

Immigrant women and state-induced vulnerability

Until the mid-1990s, there was little public attention to domestic violence in immigrant groups, with one exception – the issue of immigration law and the three-year rule. This rule meant that immigrant women's residence permits during their first three years in Norway depended on the marriage remaining intact. Women exposed to violence therefore risked losing their residence status if they left an abusive relationship. In this way, Norwegian legislation contributed to making these women particularly vulnerable to violence. The fight against this rule was high on the agenda of immigrant women's organisations such as Foreign Women's Group.¹⁷²

This state-induced vulnerability to violence was also the main topic raised by the Violence Against Women Committee concerning immigrant women, as part of a group called "especially vulnerable". Whether specific cultural norms within some immigrant communities made women at particular risk of abuse was not addressed, with one interesting exception: the committee's discussion of the immigration regulations' exception to the three-year rule. This exception allowed women to obtain an independent residence permit before the three years had passed if the woman concerned could document that she was subjected to violence by her husband and/or if, as a result of leaving the marriage, she would face "unreasonable difficulties in her home country due to social and cultural conditions there".¹⁷³ The committee reinforces this cultural

¹⁷⁰ NOU 2003: 31, s. 144.

¹⁷¹ Aas 2019.

¹⁷² Now the MiRA Centre.

¹⁷³ NOU 2003:31, p. 161.

reasoning when they write: “In some countries, divorced women face severe difficulties; they are treated as dishonourable, they are unwanted, and in some cases may even be subjected to violence from their families”.¹⁷⁴ It is striking that the same cultural norms are not considered risk factors for the same women in a Norwegian context.

Notably, the committee explicitly limited their scope to intimate partner violence, excluding forced marriage and female genital mutilation (FGM) that had started to appear on the public agenda. Moreover, they were clearly reluctant to address cultural differences directly. The committee refers to concerns that “ethnicising” violence might make it harder to see similarities across social, cultural, and religious groups. They emphasise that domestic violence occurs in all societies, that all forms of violence are unacceptable, and that there is no evidence of *more* violence in minority families than in ethnic Norwegian families. Whether certain *forms* or *relations* of violence, or whether certain *motives* are more prevalent in some groups than others, is not discussed. Thus, the committee can be understood as positioning itself within a gender perspective that emphasises similarities across different population groups.

Emergence of an “honour track”

Following media coverage of individual cases, attention to violence in close relations in immigrant families increased throughout the 1990s and 2000s, with an emphasis on young women exposed to abuse as daughters and sisters, in particular forced marriage.¹⁷⁵ The government’s 1998 National Action Plan against Forced Marriage was the first of its kind in Europe, coordinated by the Ministry of Children and Family Affairs. The plan focused on knowledge-building and on funding for NGO-based support services. Public attention accelerated significantly after the murder of Fadime Şahindal in 2002, which received extensive media and political attention. Although the main focus was still on forced marriages, honour-based violence was gradually introduced to Norwegian discourse.

In brief, the development of what I will call “the honour track” in public policy in the 1990s and early 2000s unfolded as follows: Forced marriage served as the main framing for several years and the debate was partly influenced by proposals to use immigration-regulating measures to combat forced marriage, notably a minimum age of 21 for family immigration on the basis of marriage¹⁷⁶ inspired by the Danish 24-year rule.¹⁷⁷ Later, the attention turned more toward strengthening the competency of public

¹⁷⁴ NOU 2003:31, p. 161.

¹⁷⁵ Bredal, 2006; 2013; 2014.

¹⁷⁶ NOU 2004:20.

¹⁷⁷ Bredal 2011. An age limit of 24 was introduced in 2017.

support services, such as the child protection services, and to establish special measures that would safeguard the need for competence and knowledge. The national action plan against forced marriages for 2008–2011 stands out as the first plan to be accompanied by “fresh money”, which was mainly used to establish three institutional mechanisms that still exist; *minority advisors* (recently renamed *diversity advisors*) in upper secondary schools, *integration attachés* at selected embassies abroad¹⁷⁸ and a *national competency team* to counsel frontline services (child protection and social services, the police, etc). From 2010 onwards the honour-track belongs to the policy field of integration and was administratively located within the ministry responsible for integration policy at any given time.¹⁷⁹

As knowledge and experience from support work increased, it became clear that forced marriage was too narrow a framework and the conceptual agenda gradually expanded. “Extreme control” was one of several attempts to conceptualise the severe restrictions on young people’s autonomy that they could be subjected to in families from certain strictly patriarchal countries, particularly those related to women’s sexual chastity. In the 2013–2016 National Action Plan, the chosen formulation was “serious restrictions on young people’s freedom”.¹⁸⁰ In 2017, the government introduced the term *negative social control* in the action plan *The Right to Decide about One’s Own Life. An Action Plan to Combat Negative Social Control, Forced Marriage and Female Genital Mutilation (2017–2020)*, and it became a central concept in the subsequent plan which also had honour-related violence in its title for the first time: *Freedom from Negative Social Control and Honour-Related Violence (2021–2024)*. Both Norwegian activists¹⁸¹ and politicians drew inspiration from Denmark, where the term *social control* had been introduced a few years earlier.¹⁸² Norway chose to place “negative” in front of it, which was later adopted by the Danes. The concept has gained significant traction in public discourse. A search in the Atekst¹⁸³ database shows no hits for “negative social control” in Norwegian media before 2017, but nearly 3,000 media hits from 2017 through 2024.¹⁸⁴ Young people being left abroad against their will gained increasing attention in the years 2017–2019. It was included in the national action plan and was the topic of a government-appointed expert group between 2019 and 2020.¹⁸⁵ I shall return to the concept of negative social control below.

¹⁷⁸ Currently: Amman, Ankara, Islamabad & Nairobi.

¹⁷⁹ See table 1 below.

¹⁸⁰ Ministry of Children, Equality and Social Inclusion 2013.

¹⁸¹ Bile et al. 2017.

¹⁸² The Government 2016.

¹⁸³ Atekst is a Norwegian digital media archive.

¹⁸⁴ Smette et al. 2026.

¹⁸⁵ The group was headed by the author. See Bredal & Expert Group 2020.

Violence-in-close-relations track

Let us now leave the honour-track and return to the other policy track, the *violence-in-close-relations track*. As mentioned, violence in close relations was early on officially defined as an umbrella term that also includes forced marriage, female genital mutilation (FGM), and honour-related violence.¹⁸⁶

How, then, was diversity tackled in the violence in close relations track? I have already mentioned the early designation of immigrant women as part of “especially vulnerable groups” linked to their immigration status. Moving on into the 2010s, let us use the first White Paper in this policy field, entitled *Prevention and Combating of Violence in Close Relations*¹⁸⁷, as an example. Here it is repeated that forced marriage and FGM are forms of violence in close relations. A short separate section on these two forms (section 1.2.4) reads as follows:

Violence in families with an immigrant background is generally similar to the violence described above as intimate partner violence, violence against the elderly, and children living with violence in the family. In some immigrant communities, patriarchal attitudes that contribute to maintaining the power imbalance between women and men are expressed to a greater extent, making women more vulnerable to violence. In addition, positioning within a collectivist versus an individualist frame of understanding may result in more members of the (extended) family participating in the perpetration of the violence. The term “honour-related violence” is often used in such contexts. Forced marriage and female genital mutilation are forms of domestic violence that occur within a limited part of the population with an immigrant background. (p. 14)

As is evident from the above, domestic violence in immigrant families is described as largely similar to that in majority families, with one exception: families with stronger patriarchal attitudes are seen as placing women at greater risk. This suggests a quantitative difference, an increased vulnerability to similar forms of violence. The document also notes a qualitative difference: in collectivist families more and other perpetrators beyond the intimate partner may be involved. This collective aspect of perpetration is then linked to the term honour-related violence. In other words, the violence among immigrants is either similar or different, and if it is different, it is honour-related abuse. There is no conception of how violence may be diverse in other respects.

¹⁸⁶ Violence against children tends to be regarded both as part of violence in close relations, and as a separate policy field, named “violence and abuse against children”.

¹⁸⁷ Ministry of Justice and Public Security 2013.

Following the above quotation, the text then goes on to explain why the government has chosen to address FGM, forced marriage, and “strict control and restrictions on young people’s freedom” through separate national action plans: “The reason for this is, among other things, that knowledge within public services is particularly lacking in this field.” In other words, the justification for developing a separate plan for these culturally specific forms of violence is the perceived need for an additional *boost*. Knowledge and interventions are described as lagging behind, and separate action plans are therefore necessary. This line of reasoning – *the boost argument* – is repeated in subsequent action plans issued by the Ministry of Justice as the rationale for excluding honour-related violence from the violence-in-close-relations-track. Thus, in the violence-in-close-relations track, separate action plans on honour-related violence and eventually negative social control are justified on strategic grounds: substantially, all types of violence fall under *violence in close relations*, but the most effective way to ensure that these particular types of violence in close relations receive sufficient attention is through separate, dedicated action plans.

In the field of integration policy, however, the justification for a separate honour-track is more substantial, though equally taken for granted. It is simply defined as an integration issue, presumably because it concerns immigrants and their descendants. As stated in the latest White Paper on integration,¹⁸⁸ the *‘work to combat negative social control and honour-related violence (...) has been an important part of integration policy since the late 1990s, and it has been highlighted through action plans with targeted measures’*.¹⁸⁹ The White Paper has separate sections on “violence in close relations” and “negative social control and honour-related violence”, where the first term does not function as an umbrella category under which the second term falls, but rather as a parallel category.

The central place of negative social control in integration policy is also reflected in the Government’s Integration Strategy (2019–2022) where one of the four “priority areas” is titled “the right to live a free life” and concerns negative social control. Although the strategy emphasises that efforts to combat negative social control are “closely interconnected” with the broader efforts to prevent violence and abuse, it mainly focuses on existing special measures, such as strengthening the minority advisor scheme, and on introducing new ones. The strategy here refers to an expert team (*fagteam*)¹⁹⁰ that will support staff competence development in schools that do not have minority advisors, and in adult education centres and refugee services. Why there is a need for this expert team in the Directorate for Integration and Diversity (IMDi) in addition to a national

¹⁸⁸ Ministry of Labour and Social Inclusion 2024.

¹⁸⁹ Ministry of Labour and Social Inclusion 2024.

¹⁹⁰ Fagteamet for forebygging av negativ sosial kontroll og æresmotivert vold.

competence team that is coordinated by the Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs (Bufdir) is not commented on.

Priority or fragmentation

Table 1 outlines the two tracks, their associated national action plans, and the responsible ministries over the past 20 years or more.

Figure 2: The two tracks, their associated national action plans, and responsible ministries

Violence-in-close relations track	Honour-track	Integrated
Ministry of Social Affairs: Action Programme against Violence against Women (1994–1997) [Sosialdepartementet: Handlingsprogram mot vold mot kvinner 1994–1997]	Ministry of Children and Family Affairs (1998): Action Plan against Forced Marriage [Barne- og familiedepartementet: Handlingsplan mot tvangsekteskap (1998)]	
Ministry of Children and Family Affairs (2000) The Government's Action Plan against Violence against Women (2000–2003) [Barne- og familiedepartementet: Regjeringens handlingsplan «Vold mot kvinner» Handlingsplan (2000–2003)]		
The Ministry of Justice and Police: Action Plan Against Violence in Close Relations (2004–2007) [Justis- og politidepartementet: Handlingsplan. Vold i nære relasjoner (2004–2007)]		

Ministry of Justice and Police: Action Plan Against Violence in Close Relations 2008–2011 Turning point. [Justis- og politidepartementet Handlingsplan mot vold i nære relasjoner 2008–2011 Vendepunkt]¹⁹¹	Ministry of Children and Equality: Action Plan Against Forced Marriage (2008–2011) [Barne- og likestillingsdepartementet: Handlingsplan mot tvangsekteskap (2008–2011)]¹⁹²	
Ministry of Justice and Public Security: Action Plan against Violence in Close Relationships (2012) [Justis- og beredskapsdepartementet: Handlingsplan mot vold i nære relasjoner (2012)]	Ministry of Children, Equality and Social Inclusion: Action Plan Against Forced Marriage and Genital Mutilation (2012) [Barne-, familie- og inkluderingsdepartementet: Handlingsplaner mot tvangsekteskap og kjønnslemlestelse (2012)]	
Ministry of Justice and Public Security: White Paper No. 15 (2012–2013) Prevention and Combatting of Violence in Close Relations 8 March 2013¹⁹³ [Justis- og beredskapsdepartementet: Meld. St. 15 (2012–2013) Forebygging og bekjempelse av vold i nære relasjoner 8. mars 2013]	Ministry of Children, Families and Inclusion: Action Plan against Forced Marriage, Female Genital Mutilation, and Severe Restrictions on Young People's Freedom (2013– 2016)¹⁹⁴ [Barne-, familie- og inkluderingsdepartementet: Handlingsplan mot tvangsekteskap, kjønnslemlestelse og alvorlige begrensninger av unges frihet]	

¹⁹¹ [handlingsplan-mot-vold-i-naere-relasjoner-2008-2011.-vendepunkt.pdf](#).

¹⁹² This ministry was abolished in 2010. Its responsibilities were then transferred to the Ministry of Children, Equality and Social Inclusion.

¹⁹³ <https://www.regjeringen.no/contentassets/1cea841363e2436b8eb91aa6b3b2d48e/no/pdfs/stm201220130015000dddpdfs.pdf>.

¹⁹⁴ https://www.regjeringen.no/globalassets/upload/bld/handlingsplaner/handlingsplan_2013_veb_enkelsider.pdf.

Ministry of Justice and Public Security: A Life Without Violence: Action Plan against Violence in Close Relations (2014–2017) [Justis- og beredskapsdepartementet: Et liv uten vold: Handlingsplan mot vold i nære relasjoner (2014–2017)]¹⁹⁵	Ministry of Justice and Public Security:¹⁹⁶ The Right to Decide over One's Own Life: Action Plan against Negative Social Control, Forced Marriage and Female Genital Mutilation (2017–2020)¹⁹⁷ [Justis- og beredskapsdepartementet: Retten til å bestemme over eget liv. Handlingsplan mot negativ sosial kontroll, tvangsekteskap og kjønnslemlestelse (2017–2020)]	
	The Government's Integration Strategy (2019–2022)¹⁹⁸ [Regjeringens integrasjonsstrategi 2019–2022]	
Ministry of Justice and Public Security: Freedom from Violence: The Government's Action Plan to Prevent and Combat Violence in Close Relationships (2021–2024)¹⁹⁹ [Justis- og beredskapsdepartementet: Frihet fra vold. Regjeringens	Ministry of Education and Research (2021): Action Plan. Freedom from Negative Social Control and Honour-Related Violence (2021–2024) (16 June 2021)²⁰⁰ [Kunnskapsdepartementet (2021) Handlingsplan. Frihet fra negativ sosial kontroll og	Proposition No. 36 S (2023–2024) to the Storting (proposed parliamentary resolution) Escalation Plan against Violence and Abuse of Children and Violence. Safety for all.²⁰¹

¹⁹⁵ <https://www.regjeringen.no/contentassets/97cdeb59ffd44a9f820d5992d0fab9d5/hplan-2014-2017-et-liv-uten-vold.pdf>.

¹⁹⁶ At the time this ministry included integration policy, and the action plan was placed under the remit of the integration and immigration minister.

¹⁹⁷ https://www.regjeringen.no/contentassets/e570201f283d48529d6211db392e4297/handlingsplan_rettet-til-a-bestemme-over-eget-liv.pdf.

¹⁹⁸ At the time this ministry included integration policy.

¹⁹⁹ <https://www.regjeringen.no/contentassets/9c4fb648c66c4c1eb2e58f645eb870b8/209755-jd-frihetfravold-web.pdf>.

²⁰⁰ <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumenter/frihet-fra-negativ-sosial-kontroll-og-aresrelatert-vold/id2861094/>.

²⁰¹ <https://www.regjeringen.no/contentassets/9f13c290967946d9b9ccf721bcfa58b8/no/pdfs/prp-202320240036000dddpdfs.pdf>.

handlingsplan for å forebygge og bekjempe vold i nære relasjoner 2021–2024]	æresrelatert vold (2021–2024) 16 June 2021]	[Prop. 36 S (2023–2024) Proposisjon til Stortinget (forslag til stortingsvedtak) Opptappingsplan mot vold og overgrep mot barn og vold i nære relasjoner (2024–2028) Trygghet for alle]
	Ministry of Labour and Inclusion: Action Plan. In Charge of your Own Life: Strengthened Efforts against Negative Social Control and Honour-Related Violence (2025–2028) ²⁰² [Arbeids- og inkluderingsdepartementet. Handlingsplan. Sjef i eget liv– styrket innsats mot negativ sosial kontroll og æresmotivert vold 2025–2028]	

This structure was described and discussed in the process evaluation of the national action plan against forced marriage, female genital mutilation, and severe restrictions on young people's freedom (2013–2016).²⁰³ Bredal and Lidén point out that each track was coordinated by an interministerial group responsible for the respective action plan. They showed that this structure results, on the one hand, in the same civil servants from ministries and directorates participating in separate meetings for each action plan, where similar measures involving the same services and agencies are discussed, and, on the other hand, in different actors attending parallel meetings addressing overlapping issues. Bredal and Lidén argue that this structure is inefficient and leads to fragmentation, and they recommended merging the two tracks into a comprehensive and more diversity-sensitive action plan.²⁰⁴

²⁰² <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumenter/handlingsplan-mot-negativ-sosial-kontroll-og-aeresmotivert-vold-sjef-i-eget-liv-styrket-innsats-mot-negativ-sosial-kontroll-og-aeresmotivert-vold-2025-2028/id3100799/>.

²⁰³ Bredal & Lidén 2015.

²⁰⁴ Bredal & Lidén 2015.

Similar observations have more recently been made by two monitoring bodies. First, Norway's supreme audit institution, The Office of the Auditor General (Riksrevisjonen) commented as follows in the report from their investigation into the authorities' efforts to combat domestic violence:

*Different ministries are responsible for the action plans in this field, and the plans partially overlap. Several respondents in the survey point to this as challenging, because the work appears unclear and difficult to navigate (...).*²⁰⁵

Secondly, the Istanbul Convention's monitoring body, GREVIO, expressed similar concerns in their baseline report on Norway from November 2022.²⁰⁶ They noted that dividing the work across several action plans and ministries contributes to fragmentation and undermines the comprehensive and holistic approach that states are obliged to pursue under the Article 7 of the Convention: "the co-existence of different national action plans may lead to the compartmentalising of policies which can stand in the way of coherence and continuity in the efforts to prevent and combat violence against women". GREVIO encouraged the Norwegian government to strengthen coordination across national action plans, "with the aim of integrating them under an overarching framework that would ensure a holistic response to all forms of violence against women covered by the Istanbul Convention." (pp. 18–19) As a further criticism, GREVIO also expressed concern with the tendency to regard honour-based violence and negative social control as a cultural issue instead of a gendered one. They referred to indications from experts that the national action plan on these forms of violence "tends to construct violence in migrant families as different from violence in the general population and treats it primarily as an integration issue." (p. 18).

Apparently, at some level this criticism was considered by the government, as this marked the first attempt to establish a more comprehensive and integrated approach.

A short-lived attempt at integration

At request of Parliament to increase efforts to combat violence in close relations and violence against children, the government drafted a White Paper called *Escalation Plan against Violence and Abuse against Children and Violence in Close Relations (2024–2028)*,²⁰⁷ coordinated by the Ministry of Justice and Public Security.²⁰⁸ Here, the two policy tracks – violence in close relations and honour – were brought together in the same policy paper

²⁰⁵ The Office of the Auditor General 2022.

²⁰⁶ GREVIO 2022.

²⁰⁷ Prop. 36 S (2023–2024).

²⁰⁸ Prop. 36 S (2023–2024).

for the first time.²⁰⁹ The need for better coordination is mentioned explicitly in the escalation plan, with reference to the above-mentioned criticism from the Office of the Auditor General:

*The Escalation plan includes several forms of violence that have previously been addressed in separate action plans and strategies. In this plan, the various forms of violence and abuse are viewed in context, and a comprehensive presentation of the challenges in the field is provided. This is intended to contribute to more holistic prevention and combatting of violence and abuse against children and violence in close relations.*²¹⁰

There is, however, no change in the two-track system on an institutional level. The split structure remains in place, with the same reasons given:

*However, the responsibility for coordinating the various forms of violence will continue to fall under different ministries (...). Complex challenges and extensive support needs among individuals exposed to negative social control and honour-related violence require continued targeted efforts.*²¹¹

Again, the argument for a separate action plan is tied to the special status of honour-related violence, as complex and in need of extensive and specific efforts. To maintain momentum the existing action plan will continue, and a new plan is announced “to strengthen efforts further”. Thus, the justification for maintaining a separate action plan on honour-related violence and negative social control is pragmatic, but the argument is not substantiated by any form of evaluation. Rather, the arguments seem to be repeated automatically: There is still a need for a separate plan for reasons of priority and visibility. The situation is not yet mature enough to incorporate these violent practices into the broader domestic violence policy framework. Again, there is no justification or explanation for the integration policy framework that GREVIO criticised. It seems as if this is taken for granted.

Furthermore, it is stated that existing separate ministerial groups will continue to coordinate the two national action plans.²¹² However, an institutional invention is introduced. The *Directorate Group for Work against Violence in Close Relations and Violence and Abuse against Children* was established in 2023 as a coordination mechanism across both

²⁰⁹ Also, for the first time, the escalation plan has a dedicated chapter on violence in close relations and violence against children in the Sámi population.

²¹⁰ Prop. 36 S (2023–2024) p. 10.

²¹¹ Prop. 36 S (2023–2024) p. 33.

²¹² Prop. 36 S (2023–2024) p. 33)

tracks and action plans, consisting of ten directorates and led by the Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs (Bufdir).

The Escalation Plan could have marked the beginning of a more comprehensive and inclusive policy agenda in the violence-in-close-relations track but turned out to be an exception. Subsequent policy development has continued along the same two separate tracks, and there is no indication that the Ministry of Integration will relinquish ownership of honour-related violence and negative social control. The creation of a joint escalation plan has not altered the two-track-structure, which is instead reproduced and reinforced through new separate action plans and new institution building (the new advisory teams (fagteam) in IMDi).

Consequences of a two-track structure

As outlined above, the dual-track structure was explained by the need to strengthen and prioritise efforts specifically targeting honour-related violence. At the same time, it has been challenged on the grounds that it may contribute to fragmentation, overlap, and reduced effectiveness. However, there are also other, more substantive concerns associated with the entrenched two-track structure. In the following, I will examine some examples of problematic consequences of the two-track system and how it contributes to rendering both differences and similarities in patterns of violence invisible.

Abuse between the cracks

The first example is from the violence-in-close-relations track. In 2018, the government (Ministry of Justice and Public Security) appointed an *Intimate Partner Homicide Committee* (Partnerdrapsutvalget) with a mandate to review intimate partner homicide cases. Its task was to examine whether and how public support services had failed in the prevention of these homicides and how prevention could be improved. The Committee reviewed criminal case documents in 19 cases.²¹³ Despite considerable public attention to the issue of honour killings, honour was not mentioned in the committee's mandate, nor was it considered in its case review. A search in the report for the word "honour" yields two results, both referring to a section on risk assessment tools, where the tool PATRIARK is mentioned only briefly without further comment.²¹⁴ There were no results for "honour killing."²¹⁵ Searches for words like "collective," "extended family," "in-laws," and similar terms yielded no results. In a later review of homicides, the National Criminal

²¹³ NOU 2020: 17.

²¹⁴ PATRIARK is a risk assessment tool for honour-based violence cases.

²¹⁵ Obviously, limiting the mandate to partner homicide excluded honour killings against daughters, sisters etc.

Investigation Service (Kripas) found that two of the homicides reviewed by the Intimate Partner Homicide Committee could be called honour killings.²¹⁶ However, Kripas, for its part, did not offer the comprehensive review of partner homicide cases that would be necessary to substantiate the comparative analysis allegedly required to distinguish honour killings from non-honour killings.²¹⁷

The second example is from the honour track. In recent years, concerns have increasingly been raised about the situation of both children and adults belonging to or leaving so-called closed Christian communities, such as Jehovah's Witnesses and the Brunstad Christian Church (BCC). Save the Children, the Ombudsman for Children and the NGO Hjelpeskilden have all contributed to placing these issues on the public agenda.²¹⁸ Hjelpeskilden has framed its advocacy using the terminology of negative social control and honour-related violence and pushed for this group to be included in policies. As a result, the first national action plan to include "negative social control" in the title (for 2017–2020) briefly mentioned that "young people who grow up in closed, religious communities may also experience negative social control" (pp. 11 and 14). During the drafting of the next action plan on negative social control (for 2021–2024), some directorates and ministries proposed including issues related to closed, religious communities with a majority-population background. However, the Integration Ministry objected, arguing that the action plan fell under integration policy and that the topic therefore lay outside its mandate.²¹⁹ Eventually, after some negotiation, the issue was included, but only briefly, with a small number of measures relating to competence-building and research. In the subsequent national action plan, the topic continues to be mentioned, but with diminishing emphasis.

A third example is also from the honour-track. In 2021, the government (Integration Ministry) appointed a legislative committee to examine "the overall legal issues in cases concerning negative social control, honour-related violence, forced marriage, female genital mutilation, and psychological violence."²²⁰ Thus, the mandate was limited to forms of abuse associated with the honour track, with the important exception of psychological violence. The responsibility for appointing and follow-up is delegated to

²¹⁶ Kripas 2024.

²¹⁷ Rather, they relied on data from the Intimate Partner Homicide Committee that were only partially comparable.

²¹⁸ For an outline of this development, see Smette, Bredal & Rinde, 2026.

²¹⁹ This account is based on the author's communication with involved parties.

²²⁰ NOU 2024: 13 *Law and Freedom: Negative Social Control, Honour-Motivated Violence, Forced Marriage, Female Genital Mutilation, Psychological Violence, and Involuntary Stays Abroad – Legal Issues and Proposals for Regulatory Changes*. [Combating Negative Social Control and Honour Based Violence in Norway - regjeringen.no](https://www.regjeringen.no). The report proposes several regulatory changes in the areas of criminal law, child protection law, immigration law, and other areas of law.

integration authorities, rather than to justice authorities, which are responsible for violence in close relations, including psychological violence. Expertise on violence in close relations was scarce among the members, and there is clear bias in the report's knowledge base. For example, in the review of research, there are hardly any references to studies on domestic violence more broadly, except for a few studies on prevalence.

This bias becomes ever more evident in the Committee's discussion of the range of people covered by Section 282 of the Penal Code, "Abuse in Close Relations". Under the current provision, the category of "close relations" includes current or former cohabiting intimate partners, as well as other close relatives in a descending or ascending line of kinship, provided they live together. Shared residence is therefore a key criterion for establishing a "close relation."

To make the provision more inclusive and sensitive to the diversity of violence in close relations, the Committee proposes expanding its scope to include in-laws who do not necessarily belong to the same household, thereby capturing the more collectivist dimensions of honour-related violence. In this context, the Committee's arguments are based on relevant research, including studies on violence against women perpetrated by in-laws.²²¹ However, when addressing the question of whether intimate partners who do not cohabit should fall within the scope of the provision, the Committee does not engage with the substantial body of literature documenting clear parallels between violence in cohabiting and non-cohabiting relationships.²²² Moreover, the Committee's discussion is only cursory, and the question is consequently rejected without a thorough assessment.

Furthermore, one of the most problematic consequences of the Committee's biased knowledge base is that "honour-motivated violence" is – both implicitly and explicitly – framed in contrast to non-honour-motivated violence, without reference to research on domestic violence and violence against women in the majority population. This imbalance leads the Committee to overstate the distinctiveness of honour-based violence. This is particularly problematic given that the same Committee suggests that an "honour motive" should be an aggravating circumstance.

²²¹ For instance, Bredal 2020.

²²² For instance, Överlien, 2020; see also Ørum 2024.

A different “form” of violence defined by its (aggravating) motive

The Law Commission introduced the term *honour-motivated violence*, which has since been adopted as the main policy term, e.g. in the present national action plan (2025–2028). The Commission’s reasoning “is that it is honour as the motive for the criminal act or wrongful behaviour that is central”²²³ and they define this term as follows:

*Honour-motivated crime, or honour-motivated violence and violations, refers to physical violence, psychological, sexual and economic violations against a person with the aim of preventing loss of honour or restoring honour within families, extended families or communities where social reputation is regarded as a collective matter. It is **an umbrella concept** covering many different actions, **ranging** from subtle restrictions on an individual’s freedom and milder forms of **negative social control** to serious criminal acts such as **domestic violence**, forced marriage, female genital mutilation and honour killing. (emphases added)*²²⁴

As illustrated by this quote, motive is not merely one element of harm and violence but the constitutive – defining – element that groups a wide range of abusive practices together. Within this conceptual logic, a murder is placed in the same definitional category as parental bans on dating during adolescence, provided it is honour-motivated. Put bluntly, a murder motivated by honour is treated as having more in common with prohibitions on having boyfriends or girlfriends than with murders that are not honour-motivated. At the same time, other motives are neither conceptually specified nor substantively explained but are instead loosely referred to as jealousy and the like (see the quote below). In this way, the centrality of motive establishes a fundamental divide, operating as a discursive mechanism that produces binary difference.

This point is further illustrated by the law commission’s proposal to add an honour motive to the list of aggravating circumstances in Section 77 of the Penal Code. In support of this proposal, the Commission cites several factors that are said to qualify an honour motive as aggravating. As the Commission itself acknowledges, many of these factors are already covered by the general aggravating circumstances listed in Section 77, such as premeditation and the involvement of multiple perpetrators (i.e., collective action). Nevertheless, the Commission maintains that an honour motive is distinct from other motives, such as “pride, a need for control, or jealousy”.²²⁵ The quotation below illustrates the commission’s reasoning, which oscillates between acknowledging that the

²²³ NOU 2024: 13, p. 23.

²²⁴ NOU 2024: 13, pp. 63–64.

²²⁵ NOU 2024: 13, p. 171.

same factors may be present in non-honour-motivated violence and insisting that these factors are nonetheless specific to honour-motivated violence.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, there are fundamental differences between honour-motivated violence and other types of violence, which indicate a need to highlight honour-related motives as an aggravating factor in criminal legislation. For the victim, the consequences of honour-motivated violence and other types of violence may indeed be relatively similar. For example, jealousy-driven violence may also result in the victim living in fear of the perpetrator for many years afterwards and losing the opportunity to live a free and independent life. However, the committee emphasizes that the collective aspect of honour-motivated crime makes such acts particularly serious and has the potential to affect the victim in ways different from other types of violence. Among other things, the victim may be ostracised from their entire social network. In addition, the committee has emphasised the inherent threat not only to the victim but also to other family members or others within the victim's social circle.²²⁶

The overall impression is that the committee's argument is constructed as a “package” of factors presumed to be present when honour is the motive for violence. However, these factors are not necessarily present in a case of honour-motivated violence, and several of them may also occur in cases where violence is not honour-motivated. For example, the victim's family members may also be threatened and subjected to violence by perpetrators of intimate partner violence, and if so, this should be seen as aggravating. In any case, leaving aside those factors that are already included in Section 77, it remains unclear what it is about an honour motive *as such* that should be considered aggravating, compared with other motives for domestic violence.

The problem with negative social control

As mentioned, negative social control was introduced in the honour track in the national action plan from 2017, where it was defined as “pressure, supervision, threats or coercion exercised to ensure that individuals live in accordance with the norms of the family or group”.²²⁷ Since then, negative social control has been defined in various ways and continues to be used with differing meanings. In a recently published research commentary, Smette and colleagues (including the author of this essay) argue that the

²²⁶ NOU 2024: 13, p. 171.

²²⁷ Ministry of Justice and Public Security 2017, p. 12. At this time the ministry had two ministers, the Minister of Justice and the Minister of Immigration and Integration. The action plan on negative social control etc. was the responsibility of the latter.

concept is problematic in three related ways: it is unclear, it is expansive, and it is used selectively.²²⁸ Their claims are substantiated as follows:

Unclear: The concept of negative social control is used in varied and sometimes contradictory ways. It is defined both as an umbrella term, in which violence is a subcategory, and as a subcategory of violence in close relations. Some perceive it as synonymous with honour-related violence and control, while others view it as either distinct from or part of honour-related violence. An example is found in the above quotation from the law committee, where negative social control is a subcategory of honour related violence. Some associate it primarily with parental and family control of older children and young adults (particularly girls and young unmarried women), while the term is also used to describe control as part of a partner-violence regime.²²⁹

Expansive: While negative social control was initially used to describe control within the family, it has also been applied to controlling behaviours in youth environments and in schools in recent years.²³⁰ Smette et al. note that negative social control has acquired an increasingly broad meaning, becoming a general term for “practices that prevent the fulfilment of an overarching ideal of self-determination”.²³¹ They cite a text by the Directorate of Integration and Diversity as an example:

*Negative social control does not occur only between adults and young people; it also occurs among young people themselves – and it takes place at school. Students control each other on the basis of sexual orientation, gender expression and religious practice, especially fasting during Ramadan. The control is exercised, among other ways, between partners and ex-partners, and in the form of peer pressure, which may concern, for example, pressure related to clothing and the use of intoxicants.*²³²

The lack of clarity and the continued expansion of its usage lead Smette et al. to conclude that negative social control has become an *empty signifier*, in line with Petersen’s analysis of the term in a Danish context.²³³ He argues that the concept can mean different things and encompass varying phenomena depending on the user’s needs and on the context.

Selective use: Smette et al.’s third point is that negative social control is used only in relation to certain (immigrant) groups, in a way that contributes to the impression that the

²²⁸ Smette et al. 2026; see also Aarset et al. 2025.

²²⁹ For examples, see Smette et al. 2026.

²³⁰ IMDi 2024; Proba 2024.

²³¹ See also Proba 2021.

²³² IMDi 2024, p. 120.

²³³ Petersen 2024.

named practices in question belong to a different category from those associated with the majority population. One example is when slut-shaming and sexual rumours are called negative social control in the context of minority youth, but as sexual harassment and bullying in majority groups. Another example, as already mentioned, is when what we would otherwise call violence in the majority population is called negative social control because the victim belongs to a minority. This selective use of negative social control establishes a separate way of talking about abuse and rights violations in certain immigrant minority groups, which echoes the two-track discourse described above. The consequence, as Petersen²³⁴ also notes, is that negative social control is constructed as a distinct field of knowledge, separate from existing fields, such as violence in close relations, sexual harassment, and bullying. As a result, professionals may fail to recognise phenomena in which they already have substantial expertise in. Smette et al. argue that this development of the concept has resulted in the authorities establishing a discriminatory classification system.

Furthermore, they warn that the varying and expansive use of the term results in trivialisation and belittlement: “Rewriting violence as negative social control represents, in reality, a step backward in the conceptual development within the field of violence,” they argue. At the same time, they stress that using the same basic vocabulary – for instance, talking about slut-shaming as sexual harassment – does not prevent us from addressing diversity, such as the different implications that slut-shaming may have in different cultural contexts. While being called a “whore” is a stigmatising label for most girls, being labelled a “whore” and accused of having sex outside marriage may have far more serious consequences for girls living under chastity norms and an absolute prohibition on premarital sex than for girls living within more liberal sexual norms.

To sum up, the meaning of the term negative social control remains highly ambiguous, and its usefulness for identifying a distinct phenomenon is open to question. Most importantly in this context, the term both mirrors and sustains a split in domestic violence work between “us” and “them.”

²³⁴ Petersen 2024.

Concluding discussion: violence in close relations is not a spade

To conclude, I shall return to the discussion between Christopher Fardan and Sylo Taraku that opened this essay. As noted earlier, Fardan argued for calling a spade a spade: honour-related violence (a spade) is violence in close relationships (a spade).

In Norwegian public policy, “violence in close relations” is officially defined as a higher-order category – an umbrella term – intended to encompass a range of violent practices and “forms”, including honour-related violence, forced marriage, and female genital mutilation (FGM). An umbrella term denotes a broad category that covers several related concepts and may include multiple subcategories. Within this understanding, and to continue the spade metaphor, “violence in close relations” is not a spade but rather a garden shed, in which the spade is but one of several garden tools.

However, as I have shown, this conceptualisation of domestic violence and violence against women is not carried through into actual policy. Policies in the “violence in close relations track” are mainly directed at individual partner violence, which, according to official definitions should instead be a subcategory in the conceptual hierarchy. In the “honour track”, by contrast, honour-related violence and negative social control are constructed as umbrella terms in their own right. In practice, policies thus work to undermine the status of violence in close relations as an umbrella term. Instead, they reinforce the split between two different “forms” of violence that correspond to two different parts of the population – the majority and some minorities.

Within this framework, Taraku’s claim that Fardan trivialises the specificity of honour-based violence has some force. However, understanding “honour-related violence” as a *subcategory* of “violence in close relations” does not necessarily entail disregarding its particularities. On the contrary, such a framework would make it possible to render visible *both* the shared features that justify placing these practices within a higher-order category *and* the differences that warrant distinguishing honour-related violence as a specific subcategory. Thus, for the conversation on diversity within domestic violence to move forward, “violence in close relations” should be understood and employed as a higher-order category – not as a spade, but as a garden shed.

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5. Recognition and Othering in tension: Swedish policy responses to domestic violence



5. Recognition and othering in tension: Swedish policy responses to domestic violence

Rúna í Baianstovu

Introduction

In recent years, Swedish public debate has undergone a marked shift in how issues of domestic violence in immigration contexts are discussed. Questions that were once treated as coherent social and legal challenges are increasingly folded into broader narratives about extremism, cultural threat, and undermining of societal cohesion. How did we get here?

In Sweden, domestic violence has been institutionally linked to gender equality policy for several decades. Since 1991, Sweden has set itself the goal of eliminating all domestic violence as part of society's striving for gender equality, and several steps have been taken in that direction, one of them the ratification of the Istanbul Convention in 2014, through which Sweden committed itself to pursuing a holistic and coherent orientation in all work against men's violence against women. A thematic follow-up by the Council of Europe's monitoring expert group (GREVIO) in 2024, however, raised concerns that Sweden, despite that, practises a differentiating policy. GREVIO argued that honour-based violence in Swedish policy is "being linked to specific migrant communities considered as patriarchal and misogynistic", while "other forms of violence against women appear to be increasingly addressed in a gender-neutral manner, notably as gender-based violence affecting both men and women".²³⁵

The initial formulation of the gender equality policy area took shape under the government of Olof Palme (Social Democrat), alongside the appointment in 1973 of the country's first Minister for Gender Equality (and Minister for Immigration), Anna-Greta Leijon (Social Democrat).²³⁶ The Palme government's approach to gender equality was premised on strengthening women's access to, and capacity to exercise, choice and autonomy across societal and private domains. This was operationalised through measures aimed at securing access to employment, schooling and education, childcare

²³⁵ GREVIO 2024, p. 13.

²³⁶ Time in government: 1969–1976.

provision, political representation, adequate housing, and the promotion of egalitarian norms and values.

In a speech, Palme underscored that gender equality is contingent upon a *holistic* perspective that includes equal rights for all members of society and that it is intrinsically connected to broader social equality, which is *coherent* in the sense that it includes everyone.²³⁷ Thus, this *holistic and coherent* policy framing rested on the assumption that equality between women and men presupposes wider socio-economic equality and equal rights for all in both the household and public life.

However, diversity was not explicitly articulated in the gender equality politics of the Palme era. During this time, policy was oriented towards a liberal, multicultural welfare state striving for everyone's right and ability to shape their own living conditions and the factors that confer power to influence the future of the society they live in. The policy was guided by the principles of equality, freedom of choice, and cooperation, echoing the slogans of the French Revolution. It articulated a vision of a synergy between an inclusive welfare system, a universalist conception of citizenship centred on social rights, and a multicultural understanding of the Swedish nation, through which the state took a stand against previous policies of forced assimilation.²³⁸

This holistic and coherent rights-oriented policy was, however, beset by paradoxes in practice. Although it professed to reconcile universalism and particularism, it was recast into a form of stereotypical cultural categorisation, resulting in a polarised stratification of civic conditions. One paradox of particular relevance to gender equality policy was the positioning of the white, middle-class woman as the normative subject of gender equality work, with the consequence that society risked overlooking how gender, class, and ethnicity shape variations in women's challenges and needs, thus becoming colour-blind.²³⁹ An illumination of a holistic and yet diversified – and, in a sense, segregated – approach to gender and domestic violence policy can be found in a 1991 government bill. This government bill emphasised the importance of ensuring that “immigrant parents” also “receive information about the possibilities for fathers to take parental leave”.²⁴⁰ In the area of domestic violence, financial allocation increased to “the women shelters national organisation and to immigrant organisations that support abused women”.²⁴¹ Hence, in the early gender equality policy, recognition and othering operated in tandem.

²³⁷ Palme 1972.

²³⁸ Ålund & Schierup 1991, 2022.

²³⁹ Carby 1982; Ålund & Schierup 1991, 2022.

²⁴⁰ Government Bill 1990/91:113, p. 34. Government of Ingvar Carlsson (Social Democratic); Margot Wallström (Social Democrat), Deputy Minister for Civil Affairs.

²⁴¹ Government Bill 1990/91:113, p. 55.

In the book *Paradoxes of Multiculturalism*, scholars Ålund and Schierup likewise highlighted how a homogenising view of the “immigrant woman” as a passive and restrained bearer of tradition contributed to the emergence of a racialising and culturalising understanding of migrant women’s needs. The paradox is captured by Kimberlé Crenshaw’s well-known dilemma²⁴²: how do we make visible violence within and against marginalised minority groups without simultaneously stigmatising those very same groups?²⁴³

In 1998, the Persson government (Social Democrat) abandoned the previous policy of multiculturalism in favour of a policy of individual diversity. It was affirmed that everyone has the right to their own identity and that no one should be subjected to coercive assimilation.²⁴⁴ However, the equal rights of men and women were emphasised as a non-negotiable norm, alongside society’s obligation to prevent and combat discrimination, xenophobia and racism.²⁴⁵ This occurred during a transformation of the national economy from social liberalism to neoliberalism, inspired by British New Labour. The consequence of this change was that the individual obligations and rights became disconnected from the obligations of the state. Again, recognition and othering operated in tension.

Against this backdrop, the aim of this chapter is to understand how domestic violence is conceptualised and addressed in Swedish policy, with particular attention to honour-based violence. The focus on honour-based violence entails a number of delimitations that limit the possibility of illuminating the broader field of violence in a comprehensive manner. The research question concerns what roles holistic, coherent, and diversity perspectives have played in policy over time, and the consequences of these approaches in the tension between recognition and othering.

The following text opens with the first Swedish case of honour killing to be tried as such in court and continues with the paradigmatically significant honour killing of Fadime Şahindal. This is followed by a critical reflection on a number of particularly relevant policy documents and the institutionalisation of work against domestic violence. The chapter then turns to the legislative framework, with a focus on the Penal Code provision introducing an honour motive as an aggravating circumstance, which entered into force on 1 July 2020. The discussion then examines three femicide cases prosecuted as honour killings following the introduction of the legislation. The text concludes with a discussion of the overarching policy approach and a reflection on the agendas that shape it.

²⁴² Crenshaw 1989.

²⁴³ Cf. Walby et al. 2012.

²⁴⁴ Government Bill 1997/98:16, p. 22.

²⁴⁵ Government Bill 1997/98:16, p. 1.

Public awareness of honour-based violence is evoked

Many Western countries that have experienced extensive migration since the 1980s – including Canada, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, the UK, and Sweden – have also developed public narratives around honour killings involving the murders of girls and women by male relatives.²⁴⁶ The core meaning of the term honour-based violence, including honour killing, as it is defined in anthropology and sociology, is violence carried out in family honour contexts by agnatic kin (male blood relatives on the father's side) in response to perceived violations of an honour code by which perceived shame is brought upon the family. Such violence may include murder.²⁴⁷ Women bear the burden for shame associated with violations of men's sexual 'honour' and can be killed even if they have been victims of incest or rape and have become pregnant as a result. The mere suspicion of an offence against the honour code may be considered enough to justify such violence in the name of honour. Honour-based violence is characterised by collective sanctioning within a family and its wider community. The collective nature of honour-based violence underscores the role of community norms and indicates that the violence is not a private issue but a socially sanctioned practice.²⁴⁸

The first case to be tried as an honour killing in Swedish court occurred in the early 1990s. The case concerned Albert, a Christian man of Arab origin who killed his daughter Hanan in the hallway of their apartment in a refugee camp in Sweden. Albert had learned that his daughter was cohabiting with a young Muslim man, an act perceived as a violation of honour with both sexual and religious connotations. After Hanan rejoined the family in Sweden, Albert reportedly told friends that he had intended to kill her but reconsidered when the possibility arose of marrying her to a man to his liking. However, Hanan broke off the engagement, and shortly thereafter, Albert beat her to death. Albert told the court that he was "happy and proud" of his actions because "the shame was gone." The court concluded that "Arab customs" had pressured him to kill his daughter and that he had attempted to avoid doing so until the act became "pressingly necessary." This was treated as a mitigating circumstance, and Albert was convicted of manslaughter, not murder.²⁴⁹ Whether this verdict encouraged other fathers in similar contexts cannot be known, but several honour killings followed over the next decade.

²⁴⁶ Baianstovu et al. 2025, pp. 101–118.

²⁴⁷ Cooney 2014; Delaney 1987; Hasan 2002; Peristiany 1965.

²⁴⁸ Sev'er & Yurdakul 2001; Faqir 2001.

²⁴⁹ Eldén 2003, p. 89 ff.

Between 1996 and 2002, the murders by male agnatic kin of three young, unmarried women of Kurdish background – Sara in 1996, Pela in 1999, and Fadime in 2002 – marked a turning point in Swedish gender equality policy in which honour-based violence became an important strand. These cases also helped shape Sweden’s specific legislation on honour-related crime. For reasons of space, the focus in this text is on the case of Fadime Şahindal, which is also the best known.

On 20 January 2002, 25-year-old Fadime Şahindal was shot and killed by her father in her mother’s apartment building after “years of harassment, violence and threats”.²⁵⁰ According to Fadime’s own descriptions, the killing occurred within a social context characterised by family-based honour practices.²⁵¹ Two months before her death, on 20 November 2001, Fadime addressed the Swedish Parliament. She described the speech as her “last resort” and “most efficient protection”, after seeking help from the police, who offered her an alarm and a protected identity – measures she found insufficient. As Eldén and Westerstrand note in one of the first research articles on honour-based violence in Sweden, “as so many women living under threat, Fadime was forced to find her own ways of protecting her life.”²⁵²

Fadime’s father confessed to the murder before the District Court. Echoing Albert’s confession, he stated that the killing had removed the shame Fadime had brought upon the family and restored its honour. Male relatives explicitly supported his actions. The District Court sentenced him to life imprisonment for murder, a verdict upheld by the Svea Court of Appeal.²⁵³

A central problem with these verdicts was that although the collective nature of the violence was acknowledged in research and public discourse, it remained unaddressed by the courts.²⁵⁴ No one other than the individual who carried out the killing was held legally accountable, although the legal framework provided mechanisms for holding others accountable, such as conspiracy to commit an offence, aiding and abetting, or harbouring an offender.

²⁵⁰ Eldén & Westerstrand 2003.

²⁵¹ Şahindal 2001.

²⁵² Şahindal 2001.

²⁵³ Eldén 2003.

²⁵⁴ Eldén 2003.

Debates in the aftermath of the honour killing of Fadime Şahindal

In the aftermath of the honour killing of Fadime, public debate in Sweden centred on whether honour killings should be understood as extreme manifestations of universal gendered and patriarchal power – which had been the overarching framework for understanding domestic violence in Swedish policy since the early 1990s – or as manifestations of particular cultural beliefs perceived as previously unknown in the Swedish context and as having been brought to Sweden by immigrants. Hereafter, these are referred to as the gender-power perspective and the cultural perspective, respectively.

The universal perspective – represented in the Swedish context by the concept of *men's violence against women* – had been developed to make visible both the concrete manifestations of violence and their roots in a gendered power order in which men, as a category, hold structural power over women.²⁵⁵ Men's violence against women is understood as a continuous spectrum of patriarchally legitimised violence, encompassing all forms of physical, psychological, social, sexual, economic, and material violence, as well as control and surveillance, all of which may manifest in multiple ways in time and space. The concept of men's violence against women frames violence as both an expression of, and a mechanism that sustains, the gender power order, and links violence to broader patterns of discrimination and violations of women's rights in society. The term is based on a perspective that foregrounds the significance of gendered power relations for women's rights in both public and domestic settings, as well as the continuity between these spheres.²⁵⁶

In the public debate that followed, three perspectives became particularly salient and also came to permeate subsequent policy developments: *men's violence against women*, promoting a universal approach to all forms of violence; *a cultural perspective*, emphasising the particular dangers associated with immigrant patriarchy; and *intersectionality*, which introduced a focus on complex power relations, including the ambiguous roles of ethnicity and racism.²⁵⁷

The cultural perspective foregrounds immigrants' traditions and cultures as explanatory factors for honour-based violence. It criticises the gender-power perspective for being oblivious to the suffering of girls and women in immigrant contexts and accuses the intersectional perspective of cultural relativism. The cultural perspective was initially

²⁵⁵ Eldén 2003; SOU 2025:28.

²⁵⁶ Eldén 2003; SOU 2025:28.

²⁵⁷ Cf. Carbin 2009, 2010.

championed by legal sociologist Astrid Schlytter, who, in her book *The right to make one's own choices*, pinpointed Swedish society's failure to protect "immigrant girls", which she attributed to the cultural relativism associated with failed multiculturalism. In her book, the patriarchal culture of immigrant girls' families (and ethnic groups) was contrasted with Swedish gender equality policy and legislation.²⁵⁸ Another proponent was the Norwegian anthropologist Unni Wikan,²⁵⁹ who has written several texts on the honour and shame nexus in the Middle East, placing Fadime Şahindal at the centre of her analysis. The cultural perspective has remained pervasive in the media, public debate, and in the development of policy and legislation.

The gender-power perspective foregrounds patriarchal power as explanatory factor to honour-based violence and warns that the cultural perspective may contribute to culturally based discrimination and racism – a process of culturalisation. The first text promoting the *gender-power perspective* was sociologist Eldén's dissertation on honour-based violence, in which she argued for a coherent and universal perspective on men's violence against women. Without a cohesive understanding, she warned, violence risks being fragmented into categories of "not so bad" and "really bad" violence along lines of ethnic belonging.²⁶⁰ In these early discussions, Eldén²⁶¹ warned against attributing honour-based violence to "other cultures", as doing so risks culturalising violence when the perpetrator is "non-Swedish", de-culturalising violence when the perpetrator is "Swedish", and fragmenting the understanding of men's violence against women into separate categories. In a later public inquiry,²⁶² Eldén argued that resources should instead be directed towards developing knowledge of the broader social and cultural contexts in which women are subjected to men's violence, rather than towards categorisations that risk obscuring shared structural conditions. In a similar vein, other commentators, including the journalist and novelist Stieg Larsson,²⁶³ warned against the racist backlash embedded in culturalist interpretations, arguing that the cultural perspective served to entrench a discourse on honour, killing and oppression as something fundamentally alien to Swedish culture.

The intersectional approach includes both gender power relations and culture, whilst understanding culture as dynamic, socially produced, and always intertwined with other power relations at the micro, meso and macro levels. The approach entails a critique of the gender-power perspective, which is seen as risking obscuring how women's

²⁵⁸ Schlytter 2004.

²⁵⁹ Wikan 2004 2008.

²⁶⁰ Eldén & Westerstrand 2003.

²⁶¹ Eldén 2003.

²⁶² SOU 2004:121.

²⁶³ Larsson 2004.

vulnerability to violence varies across axes of gender, class, ethnicity, and migration. It also criticises the cultural perspective for being essentialist and potentially discriminatory. Initially, the intersectional perspective was advanced by Paulina de los Reyes in the report *Patriarchal Enclaves or Ungoverned Spaces*,²⁶⁴ in which she problematised the institutional no-man's-land experienced by girls and young women with an immigrant background who are subjected to family control. This no-man's-land is created by Swedish society's culturalising explanations for the violence to which they are exposed. The aim of the report was to contribute to preventive work that could help mitigate generational conflicts in families undergoing transition as a result of migration. The intersectional perspective has remained influential in research in various ways.²⁶⁵

Concluding remark

After Fadime's honour killing, the debate became polarised between particularism (a cultural perspective) and universalism (a gender-power perspective), despite the more cohesive understanding potentially offered by the intersectional approach. The intersectional perspective's potential to provide a coherent approach lies in its ability to incorporate *both* culture *and* gender within the broader context of the societal forces that shape how they are expressed and how they interact. In this sense, the intersectional approach has the capacity to bridge the inherent tensions between universalism and particularism by contextualising violence through an acknowledgement of the specific constellation of factors present in each situation and how these factors operate within a given context.

²⁶⁴ De los Reyes 2002.

²⁶⁵ E.g. Alinia 2020a; Baianstovu 2012, 2017, 2021; Baianstovu et al. 2019; Baianstovu & Strid 2024; Baianstovu & Särnstedt Gramnaes 2022; Björktomta 2019; Cinthio 2023; Sedem 2014; Strid et al. 2021.

The institutionalisation of “honour-based violence and oppression” in Swedish policy on domestic violence

Between 2005 and 2026, policy has taken a winding course through initiatives that have at times sought to integrate gender equality and violence policy, and at other times, to separate them. In the text that follows, documents that are particularly relevant to the aim and research question of this chapter will be highlighted.

In the 2006 public investigation *Power to shape society and one's own life*,²⁶⁶ produced under the Persson Government and under the leadership of Minister for Gender Equality Mona Sahlin, issues of gender equality and violence were addressed in a cohesive manner. Drawing on the work of intersectional scholar de los Reyes and Mulinari, the report underscored the importance of recognising that inequality shapes women's vulnerability and how welfare policy influences that vulnerability. The report argued that not all women live under the same conditions, and that an exclusive focus on gender inequality risks obscuring other forms of oppression. It also emphasised that phenomena affecting women cannot be explained solely through a gender-power lens, because gender intersects with other axes of power such as class, sexuality, nationality, and ethnicity.

The investigation set out four holistic and coherent gender equality sub-goals – covering power and influence, the economy, household and care work, and violence. The subsequent government bill²⁶⁷ added two further sub-goals, on education and health. These six goals are presented below as they appeared in subsequent policy texts until autumn 2024:

1. **An equal distribution of power and influence.** Women and men shall have the same rights and opportunities to be active citizens and to shape the conditions for decision-making.
2. **Economic gender equality.** Women and men shall have the same opportunities and conditions in terms of education and paid work that provide lifelong economic independence.
3. **Gender-equal education.** Girls and boys should have the same opportunities, rights, and obligations in education.

²⁶⁶ SOU 2005/06:155.

²⁶⁷ Government Bill 2005/06:155.

4. **An equal distribution of unpaid household and care work.** Women and men shall share responsibility for domestic work and have equal opportunities to give and receive care.
5. **Gender-equal health.** Women and men should have the same conditions for achieving good health and receiving care on equal terms.
6. **Men's violence against women shall cease.** Women and men, girls and boys, shall have equal rights to, and opportunities to enjoy, bodily integrity.

During this period, under the same government and minister, an extensive government inquiry, *The Investigation on Ethnic Discrimination*²⁶⁸ was presented in 2005–2006. The inquiry consisted of thirteen volumes written by leading scholars from various social science disciplines. It examined a range of structural difficulties experienced by immigrants from non-European countries, highlighting how immigrant backgrounds intersect with segregation, including limited access to employment, schooling and education, childcare, political representation, and adequate housing. In this respect, the inquiry resembles the Palme government's holistic and cohesive approach. One of the volumes, *The Blue-and-Yellow Glass House*,²⁶⁹ advocates a holistic and coherent understanding of honour-based violence, in contrast to the prevailing public and media discourse, which, as the authors note, “gives the impression that immigrant men's violence against women is due to a woman-oppressing culture, whereas Swedish men's violence against women is explained at an individual, psychological level. These explanations stigmatise immigrants as a collective while simultaneously concealing the gender-power order in the (majority) society”.²⁷⁰ According to the inquiry, such explanations stigmatise immigrants as a collective while obscuring the gender-power order within the majority society. The inquiry was criticised by proponents of more culturally oriented explanations, and its perspectives were notably absent from subsequent policy.

²⁶⁸ JU 2004:04.

²⁶⁹ SOU 2005:56.

²⁷⁰ SOU 2005:56, p. 446.

Policy measures to recognise honour-based violence “and oppression”

The first policy document targeting honour-based violence was the Action Plan to Combat Men’s Violence Against Women, Honour-Related Violence and Oppression in the Name of Honour and Violence in Same-Sex Relationships, launched in 2007.²⁷¹ The plan was produced under the conservative Reinfeldt government (2006–2010), led by the Moderate party, with Nyamko Sabuni of the Liberal Party serving as Minister for Integration and Gender Equality, at the Department of Integration and Gender Equality.

The plan expressed an ambition to create a coherent policy, unique in the Nordic context, and stated that all three dimensions of domestic violence – mentioned in the title – are equally unacceptable. The action plan explicitly placed honour-based violence within the overarching concept of men’s violence against women, although it was emphasised that “honour-related violence and oppression” differs from other forms of men’s violence against women because of its collective nature, which typically involves multiple perpetrators of different genders and ages, and a broader range of victims. The action plan is particularly significant in Swedish social policy, as it provided Sweden’s first official policy definition of honour-based violence, a definition that has continued to underpin both social policy and legislation. The definition reads as follows:

Honour-related violence and oppression, like men's violence against women in general, is rooted in gender, power, sexuality, and cultural beliefs about these. [...] There are many similarities in the structure and mechanisms of the violence, for example, that violence and oppression often occur within close relationships and that the victim is in various ways dependent on and strongly emotionally attached to the perpetrator or perpetrators. The view of women's and men's sexuality is central to understanding the structure and mechanisms of the violence, both regarding men's violence against women in general and honour-related violence and oppression.

Honour-based violence was positioned as a dimension of men’s violence against women, while simultaneously being distinguished by its family-centred collective nature and the involvement of multiple perpetrators:

When it comes to honour-related violence and oppression, the control of girls' and women's sexuality is central and closely tied to the collective. In honour-based thinking, notions of virginity and chastity are in focus, and the family's reputation and standing are seen as dependent on girls' and women's actual or alleged behaviour. This relationship can be more

²⁷¹ Government Communication 2007/08:39.

or less explicit, and the control can range from everyday forms of restrictions in girls' and women's lives, such as clothing choices, social interactions, and freedom of movement, to life decisions like education, work, marriage, and divorce. In its most extreme form, honour-based thinking results in threats of violence and actual violence, including deadly violence. The collective nature of honour-related violence means that there can be multiple perpetrators of both genders and that the victims can be women and men, as well as girls and boys.

The definition aligns with UN reports on men's violence against women and with international research on family honour, noting that honour-related beliefs are not tied to any specific culture or religion and may also appear in non-religious contexts.²⁷² In retrospect, it is also consistent with the Istanbul Convention, which Sweden ratified in 2014, in its emphasis on the principle that violence and oppression that harm women can never be justified with reference to religion, custom, or tradition. At the same time, however, the formulation “can also mean” frames honour-based violence as being only *potentially* sanctioned by the family or social circle—an interpretation that diverges from the core definition of family-centred honour-based violence in international literature.²⁷³ It is here that the origin of a distinctly Swedish policy approach to honour-based violence becomes visible.

Despite the explicit comparison to the gender-power connotations in the definition of “honour-related violence and oppression”, the action plan makes no explicit references to a holistic and cohesive policy that connects honour-based violence to men's violence against women and the rights that the first five gender equality sub-goals seek to advance. In this policy text, violence and equality are not addressed within a broader framework of societal responsibility and prevention. Furthermore, responsibility for implementing important parts of the policy was assigned to a separate, parallel track. The addition of “and oppression” to *honour-related violence* seems to have institutionalised this parallel track.

A discourse of othering is established through “and oppression”

The recognition of honour-based violence as an aggravating circumstance for individuals exposed to domestic violence, provided a necessary counter-statement to the colour-blind premises of early Swedish gender equality policy. At the same time, however, the explicit addition of *oppression* intensified the perceived distinction between “ordinary” violence and the “other”. The explicit use of the term *oppression* diverged from international research, international conventions, and earlier Swedish gender equality policy, since

²⁷² Government Communication 2007/08:39.

²⁷³ Baianstovu et al. 2025.

oppression is inherent in all forms of gender-based violence.²⁷⁴ So, where and when did the term “oppression” first appear as a specific honour-related term?

I searched for the term “oppression” in Fadime Şahindal’s 2001 speech, and found that it does occur there, but as a universal condition rather than something unique to immigrants. She said that “oppression of women does not affect only girls from the Middle East; it is also found in many other families from different parts of the world.”

In this sentence, Fadime performs the art of constituting honour-based violence as an important but neglected aspect of universal patriarchal oppression of women – by *recognising* their particular needs without othering them.

I also reviewed policy documents from 1991 to 2006 for references to honour and oppression,²⁷⁵ but the only policy text that explicitly used the term *oppression* prior to *Government Communication 2007/08:39* was the public report *Patriarchal Violence: An Attack on Human Security*, published in 2005.²⁷⁶ The text largely adopts universal perspectives on patriarchal violence, and refers to the phenomena “honour-related violence”, “violence against LGBT persons”, and “male violence in the home”, which allegedly has inspired the formulation of the term “honour-based violence and oppression”.²⁷⁷

Parallel tracks are institutionalised by the first action plan

The overarching message of the first national plan²⁷⁸ emphasises that women’s vulnerability should be addressed through preventive measures that involve “both counteracting the perpetration of violence and interrupting ongoing violence”, while also ensuring that women’s vulnerability is considered “in urban planning and construction” in order to reduce the risk of “being subjected to crime in outdoor environments”.²⁷⁹ Men’s violence against women and honour-related violence are presented cohesively within the same sentences and proposals. At the same time, funding for these two areas was partly allocated to different public bodies, an approach that, in retrospect, deepened the divide between how society addresses men’s violence against women and violence in close relationships on the one hand, and “honour-related violence and oppression”, on the other.

²⁷⁴ 2005/06:155.

²⁷⁵ E.g., SOU 1995:60; SOU 2002:71; SOU 2004:121; SOU 2005/06:155; Government 2005.

²⁷⁶ Government 2005.

²⁷⁷ Government Communication 2007/08:39.

²⁷⁸ Government Communication 2007/08:39.

²⁷⁹ Government Communication 2007/08:39, p. 7.

Examples of a cohesive policy approach include the mandate given to the National Centre for Knowledge on Men's Violence Against Women (NCK) Uppsala University, which had held an overarching national mandate for men's violence against women since the mid-1990s. NCK was tasked with providing information and disseminating knowledge on "men's violence against women", honour-based violence, and "violence in same-sex relationships".²⁸⁰ The assignment resulted in a comprehensive review of Swedish research on honour-based violence²⁸¹ and the development of university-level education and professional training. Other assignments of similar cohesive character were given to ensure that experiences of violence were incorporated into health-care assessments;²⁸² a task assigned to the Prison and Probation Service's to introduce "recidivism-prevention support measures for men convicted of sexual offences and domestic violence", and restrictions on their "right to possess personal property"²⁸³ The document also highlights targeted training for coordinators and development staff within youth services, social services, and schools on "men's violence against girls and young women, as well as "honour-related violence and oppression".²⁸⁴

Assignments of an ostensibly universal character were also issued. In these, neither men's violence against women nor "honour-related violence and oppression" was explicitly mentioned, yet their conceptual framing nonetheless aligned with honour-based violence. These assignments included the mandate given to the Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society (MUCF) to "map the prevalence in Sweden of arranged marriages against a person's will".²⁸⁵

A distinct assignment on honour-based violence was given to the county administrative boards, whose "initiatives on sheltered housing, knowledge development, and preventive work" should continue "to ensure long-term sustainable efforts". The work against "honour-related violence and oppression" should also, as far as possible, be coordinated "with the general efforts to combat men's violence against women".²⁸⁶

Overall, although the first action plan signalled an explicit ambition to advance a relatively holistic approach, the funding was only partly distributed in a cohesive manner and partly in a way that reinforced distinctions between the different dimensions of

²⁸⁰ In 2024, NCK was also tasked with operating the helpline *Right to Choose* for young people at risk of honour-based violence. Together with the Gender Equality Agency in Sweden, NCK now conducts regular national mapping of the prevalence of honour-based violence.

²⁸¹ See Carbin 2010.

²⁸² Government Communication 2007/08:39, p. 24.

²⁸³ Government Communication 2007/08:39, p. 33.

²⁸⁴ Government Communication 2007/08:39, p. 37.

²⁸⁵ Government Communication 2007/08:39, p. 36.

²⁸⁶ Government Communication 2007/08:39, p. 20.

violence. However, despite the overarching heading and the formal placement of honour-based violence within the broader category of men's violence against women, the government commissioned the county administrative boards to provide consultative support, particularly to social services, in their work on "honour-based violence and oppression".²⁸⁷ Moreover, the County Administrative Board of Östergötland was also commissioned to provide support at the national level for initiatives aimed at preventing "honour-related violence and oppression". Although presented as part of a coherent strategy, this move created a separate institutional track, supported by dedicated funding and a mandate to develop national expertise.

Subsequent policy documents – including the 2014 Action Plan *Violence in Close Relationships - a Public Health Issue* (led by the Government's National Coordinator against domestic violence) and later the *National Strategy against Men's Violence against Women and Honour-Based Violence and Oppression* (led by the director of the County Administrative Board of Östergötland) – further reinforced the dominance of cultural explanations in public policy and practice.²⁸⁸

Between 2016 and 2020, the County Administrative Board of Östergötland consolidated its position through the establishment of a national competence team on "honour-related violence and oppression" and through the establishment of regional resource centres. However, intersectionally oriented practice and research increasingly challenged the purely cultural framing of honour-based violence, as exemplified by the cities of Gothenburg, Malmö, and Stockholm,²⁸⁹ which initiated and financed what remains the largest study on honour-based violence in Sweden.²⁹⁰ In retrospect, this contributed to the transformation of the Competence Team into the National Centre against Honour-Related Violence and Oppression (NCH) in 2022, accompanied by a more pluralistic knowledge base spanning gender-power, cultural, and intersectional perspectives.

Thus, although honour-based violence was formally placed within the overarching framework of men's violence against women in *Government Communication 2007/08:39*, the governance of these areas has evolved through a pattern of institutional differentiation, which has produced parallel structures that shape how violence is understood, categorised, and addressed. At the same time, this institutional differentiation has

²⁸⁷ Government Communication 2007/08:39.

²⁸⁸ Cf. Carbin 2010.

²⁸⁹ Metropolitan Cities 2017.

²⁹⁰ Baianstovu 2017; Baianstovu et al. 2019; see also, e.g., Alinia 2020a, 2020b.

reinforced divisions between the explanatory perspectives of culture, gender-power and intersectionality.

Dissolution and reintegration

In 2022, the dominance of the cultural perspective at the County Administrative Board of Östergötland and the National Competence Team gave way to a more pragmatic and integrated approach under the National Centre Against Honour-based Violence and Oppression (NCH).²⁹¹ In December 2024, however, the government announced that NCH would be dissolved following an internal investigation, with its responsibilities transferred to the Swedish Gender Equality Agency, which was established in 2018 by the Löfven government (Social Democrat), with Åsa Regnér (Social Democrat) serving as Minister for Gender Equality. The role of the Swedish Gender Equality Agency is to conduct monitoring and analysis, and to provide coordination, knowledge, and support to help Sweden achieve its gender equality policy goals. Its work is intended to contribute to the strategic, coherent, and sustainable governance of gender equality policy. It may be important to add that the agency's work is divided into different areas.

This shift was publicly framed as part of a broader effort to streamline governance and strengthen long-term coordination between efforts to address men's violence against women and honour-based violence. From 2026, national coordination will be carried out by the Swedish Gender Equality Agency's new National Coordination against Honour-Related Violence and Oppression (NSHRV). This reintegration has the potential to restore conceptual coherence across the work against men's violence against women, violence in close relationships, and honour-based violence. Yet the direction taken by the Swedish Gender Equality Agency will become evident through the practical projects and studies it chooses to fund. Equally important will be the extent to which it provides public access to knowledge produced from a range of theoretical approaches and perspectives.

A ten-year gender equality policy strategy is introduced

In 2017, the Löfven government (Social Democrat) and the Minister for Gender Equality, Åsa Regnér (Social Democrat), introduced a ten-year gender equality policy strategy beginning with *Power, Goals and Authority: A Feminist Policy for a Gender-Equal Future*.

The document set out the direction for gender equality policy over the following ten years. It included the gender equality sub-goals; a ten-year national strategy for preventing

²⁹¹ See Nilsson Folke & Granath 2025 for an example of the more pragmatic perspective.

and combating men's violence against women; and the government's governance model for gender mainstreaming. The plan adopted a holistic and coherent approach to gender equality policy. It emphasised the importance of a cohesive and integrated society and noted that segregation contributes to poorer living conditions for both men and women. For example, it underlines that young girls in socio-economically disadvantaged areas are "the most restricted group" in relation to sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), and that these problems can be linked to "honour norms and honour-related oppression". It also expressed the intention to integrate work on gender equality and domestic violence by transferring the main responsibility for "honour-related violence and oppression" from the County Administrative Boards to the forthcoming Swedish Gender Equality Agency.

Several publications within the ten-year strategy followed, including the National violence prevention programme in 2022, under Magdalena Andersson's government (Social Democrat), with Eva Nordmark (Social Democrat) serving as Minister for Employment and Gender Equality. This programme adopted a universal, holistic, and cohesive perspective on gender equality and violence by identifying actors at various levels as important participants in preventive work.²⁹² Organised sports movements, registered religious communities, leisure activities, schools, civil society at large, asylum seekers, and newly arrived immigrants are mentioned. Furthermore, measures addressing different forms of violence are pursued simultaneously. One example is the establishment of a new state grant for preventive work against men's violence against women, violence in close relationships, sexual violence, honour-based violence and oppression, and prostitution and human trafficking for sexual purposes.²⁹³ In this context, the preventive work aims at a universal and coherent approach to prevention: "The first objective of the strategy is to a greater extent to prevent violence from arising at all, and to persuade men and boys who use violence to stop doing so."²⁹⁴ Another example is that the work on gender-mainstreaming efforts in school settings should be directed at boys more broadly, and that knowledge on gender, power, and violence needs to form part of the competence of teachers and other school staff. Thus, not only a holistic but also a coherent strategy is consistently maintained throughout the text.²⁹⁵

The last publication within the ten-year strategy was the action programme for 2024 – 2026, *Free and Safe Without Violence and Oppression: To Prevent and Combat Men's Violence Against Women, Violence in Close Relationships, Honour-Based Violence and Oppression, and Prostitution and Human Trafficking for Sexual Purposes*. The

²⁹² Government 2022.

²⁹³ Government Communication 2016/17:10.

²⁹⁴ Government Communication 2016/17:10, p. 120.

²⁹⁵ Government Communication 2016/17:10.

programme was developed by the conservative Tidö Government²⁹⁶ under the leadership of Ulf Kristersson (Moderate), with Paulina Brandberg (Liberal), serving as Minister for Gender Equality and Deputy Minister for Employment. The action plan lists 132 assignments, with a strong emphasis on "honour-based violence and oppression". In contrast to the previous ten-year strategy and its holistic approach, this document is heavily focused on honour-based violence as a matter of crime. More broadly, the programme focuses primarily on violence that has already occurred.

The document places a pronounced and recurring emphasis on prevention, with preventive terminology appearing 92 times throughout the text. The preventive approach is primarily situated at the *indicated prevention* level, focusing on interventions aimed at reducing recidivism among individuals identified as being at risk of further offending. This orientation is intended to enhance the protection of victims of violence by targeting those who have previously engaged in criminal behaviour. At the *selective* level, the proposed measures consist largely of targeted information initiatives directed at specific groups. These include clarified guidance on sexuality, consent, and interpersonal relationships, as well as strengthened content on "honour-related violence and oppression" within all components of the national curriculum. Early interventions by public authorities are also identified as important elements within the preventive framework. However, the policy proposals lack universal preventive strategies targeting the population at large. The preventive agenda is therefore confined to individual-level interventions – primarily information dissemination and similar measures – without any corresponding structural, societal, or community-level initiatives. As a result, the approach remains fragmented and does not reflect a holistic or cohesive preventive strategy.

The seventh gender equality sub-goal: the institutionalisation of difference

The holistic and coherent gender equality policy goals adopted by the Riksdag in 2005–2006 were altered under the Tidö government, with Paulina Brandberg (Liberal) serving as Minister for Gender Equality, through the introduction of a seventh gender equality sub-goal. This followed a government inquiry that had recommended retaining the existing six goals. The inquiry's main argument was that a single, cohesive goal on violence was necessary for the policy to remain holistic and coherent, and to comply with the Istanbul Convention.

²⁹⁶ The coalition consisted of the Moderate Party, the Christian Democrats, and the Liberals, with parliamentary support from the Sweden Democrats.

The government had tasked the investigator with the following: (i) propose a specific sub-goal on honour-related violence and oppression and a revised formulation of the sub-goal on ending men's violence against women; (ii) develop proposals for one or two strategies; (iii) propose indicators for monitoring; and (iv) review governance in the field.

In March 2024, the investigator submitted the interim report *An Inclusive Gender Equality Policy Sub-Goal Against Violence* to Paulina Brandberg, Minister for Gender Equality. The investigators emphasised that the work had been conducted in close collaboration with an expert group, whose members had largely supported the inquiry's considerations and proposals. The investigators also drew on interviews with a substantial number of researchers active in the field in Sweden, most of whom stressed the importance of respecting Article 7 of the Istanbul Convention:²⁹⁷

The integrated understanding and the requirements for a coordinated policy in the Istanbul Convention are, in our assessment, strong arguments for not separating honour-related violence and oppression into a specific sub-goal. A separate sub-goal would affect the integrated understanding of the violence and could also risk making the Government's policy less effective and less coordinated.

The investigator also proposed a formulation of the sixth goal that explicitly includes "honour-related violence and oppression":

Men's violence against women, domestic violence, honour-based violence and oppression and exploitation in prostitution and human trafficking must end. Everyone, regardless of gender, should have the same right and opportunity to physical and mental integrity throughout their lives.

"Despite this, the investigator was required to formulate a separate seventh sub-goal on honour-based violence, irrespective of the inquiry's own position and its proposed reformulation of the sixth goal. Although the investigator recommended a cohesive sixth goal, the Government adopted the same wording but omitted any reference to honour-related violence and oppression".

Men's violence against women, domestic violence, and exploitation in prostitution and human trafficking must end. Everyone, regardless of gender, should have the same right and opportunity to physical and mental integrity throughout their lives.

²⁹⁷ SOU 2024:21, p. 135.

The seventh sub-goal was formulated as follows:

Honour-related violence and oppression shall end. Everyone, regardless of gender, should throughout their life have the same right and opportunity to live their life without being restricted by collectively based honour norms.

Accordingly, Swedish gender equality policy now contains two separate goals relating to domestic violence. This means that Sweden's compliance with the Istanbul Convention may be called into question.

Legislative measures

Swedish penal law has undergone a series of targeted reforms to strengthen protection against various forms of violence associated with honour.

Before delving into particular legal measures on honour-based violence, it is useful to draw attention to some universal provisions that govern the protection of women and children from abuse, exploitation, and violence, as these provisions form part of the overarching regulatory framework within which domestic violence policy operates.

Social services carry comprehensive responsibility for the welfare of children.²⁹⁸ The social services shall investigate children's needs for protection and support. Support should be given voluntarily and with the consent of those concerned,²⁹⁹ and when this is not possible, through coercive action.³⁰⁰ From its introduction in 1982, the Social Service Act was culturally and religiously neutral, but in 2002, preparatory work for a revision signalled a shift towards cultural interpretations by introducing "families with strong patriarchal values", thereby indicating a new category of social problems that threatened the well-being of "girls in particular".³⁰¹ Moreover, in the 2025 version of the Act, violence or oppression motivated by honour was pinpointed as a particular responsibility of the social services.³⁰² Furthermore, Sweden ratified the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* in 1990 and in 2020, the convention became part of Swedish legislation. In 2021,

²⁹⁸ Social Services Act 2025:400, first adopted in 1983; Care of Young Persons Act (1990:52) (LVU).

²⁹⁹ Social Services Act 2025:400.

³⁰⁰ Care of Young Persons Act (1990:52) (LVU); The Swedish Children and Parents Code (1949:381) Chapter 6, Section 1.

³⁰¹ SFS 2025:400, Chapter 13, Section 1.

³⁰² Government Bill 2002/03:53, p. 82.

the new offence of *barnafridsbrott*³⁰³ was introduced, making it an offence to cause children to witness domestic violence.³⁰⁴

The Law on Gross Violation of a Woman's Integrity (Kvinnofrid), adopted in 1998 regulates a man's repeated violations against a woman with whom he has or has had an intimate relationship.³⁰⁵ Both the range of offences covered, and the applicable penalties, have been expanded over time. The crimes are various forms of violence, violations of personal freedom and peace, sexual offences, vandalism, breaching of restraining orders, defamation, and unlawful violations of privacy, such as the unlawful distribution of images and intrusive photography. The penalty is imprisonment for a minimum of one year and a maximum of six years. However, the crime has had low conviction rates.³⁰⁶ This law has played a particularly important role in arguments for and against specific legal provisions addressing honour-based violence. Moreover, children are protected by the *Law on Gross Violation of a Person's Integrity* which is an age and gender-inclusive equivalent of the *Law on Gross Violation of a Woman's Integrity*.³⁰⁷

Honour in the Penal Code

In 2014, the legislature introduced the specific offence of *forced marriage* through amendments to Chapter 4 of the Swedish Penal Code, thereby criminalising the act of coercing an individual into marriage as a distinct form of wrongdoing. Furthermore, the provisions on human trafficking in Chapter 4, Section 1a, were expanded to encompass trafficking for the purpose of compelling a person to enter into marriage. The general offence of unlawful coercion in Chapter 4, Section 4, was also clarified, ensuring that coercive conduct in the context of marriage formation was explicitly captured within the scope of the law. Further prohibitions are being prepared, including an expanded travel ban, a ban on virginity checks, and a prohibition of marriage between cousins and other close relatives.³⁰⁸ Overall, these penal measures have universal traits as they target specific acts and are therefore applicable to every individual in the Swedish jurisdiction. In 2020, however, this principle was departed from with an introduction of an honour-motive as an aggravating circumstance, to which I now turn.

³⁰³ Chapter 4, Section 3, Penal Code.

³⁰⁴ Offences regulated in Chapters 3, 4, 6 and 12 of the Penal Code; Government Bill 1997/98:55.

³⁰⁵ See also SOU 1995:60.

³⁰⁶ BRÅ 2019.

³⁰⁷ Penal Code, chapter 4, § 4a.

³⁰⁸ Ds 2024:20; Action Programme 2024–2026.

Honour motive as an aggravating circumstance: Chapter 29, 2 § 10 of the Penal Code

Under this provision, the law allows the court to consider an honour-motive as an aggravating circumstance for any offence. The concept of motive had previously been used only once in Swedish legislation, in relation to hate crime.³⁰⁹

The referral bodies that support the provision highlighted the vulnerability of children and young women living within honour systems, and the inadequacy of current law to protect them.³¹⁰ The opposing referral bodies' principal lines of reasoning centred on risks of stigmatisation and discrimination, concerns about regulatory duplication and a lack of systematic coherence, uncertainties arising from unclear statutory criteria and broader issues of legal certainty, practical and evidential difficulties, as well as doubts regarding the measure's likely effectiveness.³¹¹ In addition, Roks (the National Organisation for Women's Shelters and Young Women's Shelters in Sweden) urged the legislature to respect the Istanbul Convention as the foundation for all work addressing domestic violence.

The different positions reveal the deeply entrenched divergence concerning the conceptualisation of honour-based violence as either a distinct phenomenon, qualitatively different from other forms of domestic violence, warranting separate legislative treatment, or as a manifestation of domestic violence already encompassed within the existing legal framework. Whereas the supporting bodies emphasised the symbolic value and clarificatory function of a separate offence, the opposing bodies highlighted the attendant risks of stigmatisation and the evidential difficulties such an offence would entail in the administration of justice by the judiciary.

Honour in murder cases, 2024–2025

The verdicts in three murder cases from 2024 and 2025 illustrate the growing complexity of discourse, policy, and judicial discretion surrounding femicide and the application of honour motives.

³⁰⁹ Brax 2016a, 2016b.

³¹⁰ [Remiss av SOU 2018:69 Ökat skydd mot hedersrelaterad brottslighet](#) (Accessed 8 February 2026).

³¹¹ [Remiss av SOU 2018:69 Ökat skydd mot hedersrelaterad brottslighet](#) (Accessed 8 February 2026).

SHAHIDA AZIZ

The first case concerns the murder of 22-year-old Shahida Aziz, a young woman of Afghan background who had secretly left Sweden to marry a compatriot in another European country. After her father persuaded her to return home “to talk,” she was found a week later, having been strangled and left in the woods with burn marks on her body. The court noted that the “body bears no marks of burning indicative of an attempt to eliminate evidence. Instead, it is clear that the intent was the desecration of the deceased.”³¹²

The District Court³¹³ and the Court of Appeal³¹⁴ sentenced her father to life imprisonment for murder and corpse desecration, with an honour motive treated as an aggravating circumstance. Shahida’s brother, who carried out the strangulation, received 16 years’ imprisonment on the grounds that he acted under duress from his father. The mother, who was present during the killing, was acquitted in both courts.

Shahida’s marriage – entered into independently, outside the family bloodline, and without family consent – was framed by the court as a violation of family honour that her male relatives perceived as requiring purification. Media reporting reinforced this narrative, by emphasising the family’s Muslim religious affiliation with statements such as “she was killed with the shawl she didn’t want to wear”.³¹⁵

ABIER ALHAMAD

The second case concerns the killing of 27-year-old mother-of-two Abier Alhamad, who, after years of abuse, was strangled in September 2024 by her husband, Mohammed Osman, after informing him of her intention to divorce. The District Court³¹⁶ sentenced Osman to life imprisonment for murder, with an honour motive treated as an aggravating circumstance. His mother was also sentenced to life imprisonment for incitement to murder, and several relatives and acquaintances were convicted of aiding and abetting murder or harbouring a criminal.

The Court of Appeal³¹⁷ upheld Osman’s life sentence but acquitted Osman’s mother, finding that the District Court had relied on mistranslated digital messages. Osman’s brother, initially convicted of aiding and abetting murder and harbouring a criminal, was

³¹² Växjö District Court B 1868-25.

³¹³ Växjö District Court B 1868-25.

³¹⁴ Göta Court of Appeal.

³¹⁵ Hjertén 2025.

³¹⁶ Eskilstuna District Court B 3959-24, 26 August 2025.

³¹⁷ Svea Court of Appeal B 12443-25, 9 December 2025.

acquitted of the former but convicted of the latter. The remaining defendants were acquitted due to factual circumstances that undermined the District Court's assessment.

The Court of Appeal also rejected the honour motive, concluding that the killing had not been planned and instead stemmed from Osman's jealousy. The Court stated: "Overall, the Court of Appeal, unlike the District Court, considers that the prosecutor has not been able to show that the crime, even partially, was committed with an honour motive."³¹⁸ It should be noted that life imprisonment for intimate partner homicide is common in Swedish verdicts.³¹⁹

SAGA FORSGREN ELNEBORG

The third case concerns the murder of 20-year-old Saga Forsgren Elneborg, who was seven months pregnant, and her unborn child. Saga died after being strangled in her apartment in April 2023. Two days later, her 21-year-old boyfriend, Mohammedamin Abdirisak Ibrahim who was born in Somalia, was arrested at his family home.

The prosecutor charged Mohammedamin with murder under Chapter 3, Section 1 of the Penal Code, and invoked Chapter 29, Section 2(10) arguing that an honour motive constituted an aggravating circumstance. The charge rested on the claim that he acted "wholly or at least partially to preserve and/or restore his own and/or his family's honour."³²⁰

In the District Court, an expert witness for the prosecution cited several factors as evidence of an honour motive: the family's Muslim faith, the accused's domestic responsibilities, his insistence that Saga terminate the pregnancy, and statements allegedly made to Saga that his mother forbade him from dating "white girls."³²¹ Two expert witnesses for the defence – of whom I was one – and one for the prosecution testified that, although honour is significant in Somali communities, family honour is not enforced through sanctioned killings by blood relatives. The experts further noted that the murder had not been committed by the victim's blood relatives and that none of the factors described by the prosecutor's witness refers to honour norms exclusively.

The District Court accepted the prosecution's argument and sentenced Mohammedamin to life imprisonment for murder, with an honour motive as an aggravating circumstance, though the life sentence also rested on other aggravating circumstances. The Court of Appeal upheld the life sentence but rejected the honour motive, finding it unproven

³¹⁸ Svea Court of Appeal B 12443-25, 9 December 2025.

³¹⁹ E.g., Johansson 2026.

³²⁰ Örebro district court B 2686-23.

³²¹ Örebro district court B 2686-23.

beyond reasonable doubt.³²² The prosecutor appealed, but the Supreme Court declined to review the case.

THE CASES TAKEN TOGETHER

Taken together, these three brutal murder cases reveal the increasing complexity of applying the statutory provision on honour motives in Swedish courts. They also expose the interpretive tensions produced by the policy-driven separation of violence categories. Courts must navigate between cultural, gender-power, and intersectional understandings of honour-related violence, while simultaneously assessing evidentiary thresholds, motive, and the risk of cultural essentialism. The result is a legal landscape marked by inconsistency, ambiguity, and competing imaginaries of what “honour” means in judicial practice. However, as criminal-law measures intensify, practitioners across sectors stress the need for social policy that builds trust rather than fear.³²³

The radicalisation of lawmakers’ rhetoric and its implications for lawmaking

As stated in the introductory paragraph, Swedish public debate has in recent years undergone a marked shift in how issues of honour-based violence, migration, and national security are discussed. Questions that were once treated as distinct social and legal challenges are increasingly folded into broader narratives of extremism, cultural threat, and societal cohesion. This reframing has influenced both political rhetoric and policy proposals, shaping how problems are defined and which solutions are considered legitimate.

A debate has emerged in which senior government representatives and politicians fold honour-based violence into a sweeping narrative of Islamism and terrorism. A *Dagens Nyheter* op-ed by leading Christian Democrat representatives exemplifies this shift, portraying “imported Islamism” as a system-threatening force allegedly enabled by decades of Swedish trust-based governance.³²⁴ The piece constructs a values-based conflict in which the Muslim Brotherhood is positioned as an existential enemy requiring EU sanctions and terrorist designation. Islamism is presented as a catch-all explanation for antisemitism, honour-based oppression, and social withdrawal, while women’s rights are depicted as being relativised and honour norms excused as “culture”. The authors further claim that criticism of Islamism is routinely silenced through accusations of racism or Islamophobia, framing public debate as distorted by Swedish self-censorship.

³²² Göta Court of Appeal B 2587-24, 9 October 2024.

³²³ Nilsson Folke & Granath 2025.

³²⁴ Busch et al. 2026.

This rhetorical strategy collapses distinct phenomena into a single threat narrative, amplifies culturalised explanations, and narrows the space for more nuanced policy discussions.

The *Vandel inquiry*³²⁵ is a Swedish government inquiry launched in 2023 that proposes the introduction of rules that make asylum seekers' eligibility for residence permit conditional on standards of conduct by reintroducing the obsolete moral concept of *vandel* into the Swedish Aliens Act. "Vandel" refers to a person's honourability (*hedersamhet*) in terms of moral conduct, reputation, and lifestyle beyond mere adherence to the law. The inquiry states that "an alien" who does not "conform to [...] Swedish mores and attitudes"³²⁶ is not an "honourable person" according to the prevailing moral order. The inquiry is part of the Tidö governments punitive turn and is regarded as one result of the governments collaboration with the Sweden Democrats.³²⁷ Representatives of the Sweden Democrats have also pushed for *vandel* to serve as grounds for the revocation of permanent residence permits.³²⁸ Several major referral bodies, including Amnesty International, the Swedish Institute for Human Rights and the Equality Ombudsman, warn that the proposal undermines legality, legal certainty and human rights, and that it fails to meet fundamental democratic requirements such as proportionality analysis and a clear definition of what *vandel* means more precisely.³²⁹

The *vandel* inquiry places women and children in precarious migration situations at acute risks. These groups are already highly vulnerable to domestic violence and often unwilling to testify against family members. Linking residence security to moral judgement is therefore likely to deepen silence, heighten exposure to harm, and create state-generated vulnerability. Research shows that political and media discourses shape victims' willingness to seek help, while marginalisation itself reinforces honour norms, thus rendering the government's rhetoric counterproductive.³³⁰

³²⁵ Ju 2023:25.

³²⁶ SOU 2025:33 s. 33.

³²⁷ SOU 2025:733.

³²⁸ SOU 2025:33.

³²⁹ [Remiss av betänkandet *Skärpta och tydligare krav på vandel för uppehållstillstånd* \(SOU 2025:33\).](#) (accessed 3 February 2026).

³³⁰ Cf. Baianstovu et al. 2019; Baianstovu & Strid 2024; Baianstovu & Särnstedt Gramnaes 2022; Strid et al. 2021.

Concluding reflections: The problem of difference-making and the potential for an inclusive, holistic, and coherent policy on domestic violence

A coherent policy aimed at eliminating all forms of violence against women and girls – across family life and beyond – has been widely endorsed across political and ideological lines. Yet the trajectory of Swedish policy over the past two decades reveals a persistent and deepening differentiation. The concept of oppression has carried this distinction from the political birth of “honour problems” in the early 2000s to today’s seventh gender equality sub-goal and other measures.

The concept of oppression suspends the universality of law for women and girls associated with these groups and replaces it with increasingly detailed, exceptional legal provisions. The result is a parallel system of governance that treats some women as fully rights-bearing citizens and others as subjects to the external jurisdiction of an allegedly static “honour culture”.³³¹ The women described – many of whom are citizens – are in fact subject to the same laws and entitled to the same rights and protections as any other resident. The contradiction is evident: while the state claims to “rescue” these women, it simultaneously constructs them as belonging to a separate, alien jurisdiction, thereby risking their exclusion from full citizenship, understood as recognition of both their universal and particular rights.

This aligns with a “clash of civilisations” discourse,³³² which – within certain strands of public reasoning informed by the cultural perspective – rests on a worldview that divides societies into two types: “the honour culture”, based on kinship and blood ties, and “the citizen culture”, based on shared political goals and bonds.³³³ When ideal types such as these are treated as if they carry implicit empirical evidence, they collapse complexity into stale categorisation. Consequently, the sharp separation between “honour-related violence and oppression” and other forms of violence can only be sustained through such simplified concepts or ideal types.

The reason why ideal types of this kind are inadequate as representations of lived experience is that when theory is mistaken for reality, the potentially powerful analytical ideal type becomes a pamphlet for ideological struggle. As Durkheim warned in *The Rules*

³³¹ Cf. SOU 2024:21.

³³² Huntington 1996.

³³³ E.g., County Administrative Board of Norrbotten et al. 2023.

of Sociological Method,³³⁴ reified abstractions distort the very phenomena they are meant to illuminate, as real lives unfold between ideal-typical poles, not within them.

Overall, gender-based violence has been increasingly framed in gender-neutral terms in mainstream policy, even as femicide rates seem to remain constant and fewer women receive protection despite more severe violence.³³⁵ As cultural differentiation intensifies, practitioners report growing difficulties in reaching women and children in need, especially in minority contexts, and victims increasingly report mistrust in service provision.³³⁶

There is also a risk that the application of an honour-motive as an aggravating circumstance in cases involving “foreigners”, becomes the new normal, while violence by “Swedish” or “Western” men is implicitly detached from patriarchal power and possibly other power relations that the law recognises as aggravating factors. This raises the question of whether differentiation ultimately worsens conditions for all women, regardless of what the violence they experience is attributed to. A coherent policy and legal framework must ultimately recognise that women and children require protection irrespective of whether the violence they experience is attributed to aggressive masculinity, individual pathology, or drug abuse, or if it is legitimised through collective explanatory frameworks such as religion, honour, or other cultural constructs – or, as is often the case, involves a combination of several such factors. This is important because research on collective violence, including Satu Lidman’s contribution to this anthology and elsewhere,³³⁷ shows that violence is more prevalent in groups marked by strong internal cohesion, chauvinism, and limited openness towards the outside world.³³⁸ That is because collectives can form around nationality, ethnicity, religion, political ideology, local community, sport, or military identity.

The future policy challenge is to design measures that are sufficiently universal to address the needs of everyone at risk of (or) being exposed to, , violence, while remaining sufficiently targeted to address the specific vulnerabilities faced by particular groups. Particular vulnerabilities must be taken seriously, but without being transformed into culturalised categories that stigmatise entire communities or obscure the structural conditions that shape exposure to violence.

³³⁴ Durkheim 1974.

³³⁵ Unizon 2026.

³³⁶ Baianstovu et al. 2019; Baianstovu & Enelo 2023.

³³⁷ Lidman & Hong 2018.

³³⁸ Baianstovu 2017; Baianstovu et al. 2019; Strid et al. 2021.

The task, then, is to develop policy that is both universal and attentive to diversity: *universal* in the sense that it applies equally to all women and children, irrespective of origin, *and attentive* in the sense that it incorporates knowledge about how violence is distributed across social, economic, and migratory contexts. A holistic and coherent approach would extend across social, health, school, education, labour-market, migration, development, and foreign policy. It would aim to strengthen universal rights, which remain the most reliable foundation for gender equality and for the safety of children. In such a framework, specific forms of vulnerability are addressed not through cultural exceptionalism but through a commitment to ensure that no group is rendered more exposed – or more suspect – by the very policies intended to protect them.

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[Remiss av SOU 2018:69 Ökat skydd mot hedersrelaterad brottslighet - Regeringen.se](#)
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Violation of a child’s integrity (barnfridsbrott), regulated in the Swedish Penal Code, Chapter 4, Section 3.



6. Beyond honour – some final reflections



6. Beyond honour – some final reflections

Anja Bredal

Domestic violence and violence against women, including honour-based violence, are firmly on the agenda across the Nordic countries, but what kind of agendas are they? Do these countries fulfil their obligations under the Istanbul Convention to ensure a coherent and holistic policy to prevent and combat violence in all its forms? Are policies and laws sufficiently sensitive to diversity across populations? What are the current challenges and concerns? This final chapter offers reflections based on the national essays, highlighting common challenges, tensions, and points of divergence across the Nordic region.

Coherent or split

A key issue in policy development is the question of cohesion versus fragmentation. Should policies follow separate tracks or a single cohesive track? How can policy move from a domestic violence track modelled on majority experiences of violence to one that is sensitive to diversity?

In Norway, the policy agenda on violence in close relations is officially defined as holistic, as the term *violence in close relations* includes all forms of violence, including honour-related violence. For all other practical purposes, however, it is a two-track agenda. Policies and measures are laid out in two national action plans, each coordinated by a different ministry, thereby constructing domestic violence and honour-based violence as two kinds of policy matters: justice and integration. Denmark has an apparently similar structure, with two national action plans and two ministries, and with honour-based violence considered as integration policy issue. However, the countries seem to differ somewhat in that Norway firmly states that honour-related violence is a “form” of violence in close relations, while the Danish concept of honour-related conflicts is further removed from the mainstream policy agenda on domestic violence. More generally, the domestic violence agenda is weaker in Denmark than in Norway. In Finland and Sweden, responsibility for honour-based violence lies with the ministry responsible for gender equality, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health in Finland and the Ministry of Employment³³⁹ in Sweden. In both countries, honour-based violence is included in the same national action plan as domestic violence and violence against women.

³³⁹ The Ministry of Employment has a separate minister responsible for gender equality.

Finland defines honour-based violence as a subcategory of domestic violence that requires specific knowledge and measures, while in Sweden, honour-based violence appears to function as a parallel category rather than as a subcategory.

It is essential that legislation and measures addressing violence and control encompass and are adapted to the full range of violent practices in the population to ensure equality before the law and equitable access to services. Targeted initiatives may be needed to increase competence, address gaps in knowledge and attention, and to adapt support to specific needs. This is the official argument for having two separate tracks in Norway, as articulated by the Ministry of Justice. A separate national action plan on honour-related violence is justified by a perceived need to catch up with the historically stronger violence-in-close-relations track. This would seem to indicate that the honour track may eventually be merged with the violence-in-close-relations track, resulting in a genuinely comprehensive agenda on domestic violence and violence against women that is sensitive to diversity. However, other dynamics suggest a different trajectory. First, when honour-related violence and negative social control are treated as matters of integration policy, there is little incentive to merge the two tracks. Second, when honour-related violence and negative social control are viewed as qualitatively different from domestic violence, the rationale for merging the tracks weakens. Third, path dependence and issues of organisational and political ownership work against consolidation.

In the legal context as well, there is a tendency to introduce an increasing number of special provisions throughout the Nordics. Instead of revising existing provisions to make them inclusive, generally applicable, and sensitive to diversity, thereby ensuring equality before the law, separate provisions are introduced that single out specific groups at the risk of discrimination.

Falling through the cracks

Within the framework of these national action plans, a number of initiatives and measures have been implemented. Significant capacity-building has taken place, both within existing services and through the establishment of separate institutions. Separate action plans may have made it easier to introduce targeted initiatives and measures addressing honour-based violence, thereby improving services and responses.

On the other hand, these measures are designed and defined according to an understanding that systematically distinguishes honour-based violence from abuse that is *not* considered honour-based, thereby leaving some victims outside the scope of these

measures. For instance, Liversage³⁴⁰ shows how a safety consultant was unable to assist a woman at risk of abuse because her situation was not defined as an “honour conflict” and therefore fell outside his remit. She also notes that free psychological therapy is available only when the abuse is categorised as honour-related. Bredal, for her part, argues that features of diversity that fall outside the honour category may receive insufficient attention in the two-track system in Norway. The split structure thus creates a risk that some victims will fall through the cracks.

To sum up, the ways in which violent practices are labelled, and policies and responses are organised, can have problematic consequences for the provision of support services, as terminology shapes who is included or excluded. At the same time, it is important to emphasise that not all support services are structured according to this divided framework. A clear example is crisis shelters, which provide services to all individuals exposed to domestic violence. Shelters thus represent a comprehensive, inclusive approach in practice. This is consistent with findings from a trend analysis by the Swedish National Centre against Honour-Related Violence and Oppression,³⁴¹ which shows that while policy frameworks tend to be fragmented, practitioners often work in more holistic ways.

From culture talk to cultural sensitivity

As noted in the introductory chapter, discourses on honour-based violence have long been shaped by a polarised binary between gender and culture. Where some have foregrounded culture as an explanatory framework, others have sought to sideline cultural explanations. Broadly speaking, this resistance arose for two main reasons: First, the women’s movement wanted to keep the focus on gender and perceived talk about culture as a way of rendering gender invisible. It was considered important to maintain a unified agenda on violence against women, rather than splitting it or diverting attention from what was shared – namely gender. The strong and dramatic focus on violence in immigrant families was perceived as trivialising violence in majority families. Second, a focus on culture was seen as problematic in itself, partly because it placed excessive emphasis on difference at the expense of commonalities, and because it led to overgeneralisations, stereotyping, and stigmatisation. Explanations for violence in minority families tended to be culturalist, while violence in the majority population was explained in terms of individual factors, most often substance abuse and mental health issues, or both. Those who emphasised cultural differences were often the same actors who promoted immigration-regulating measures. Because cultural explanations tended to

³⁴⁰ Chapter 2 in this anthology.

³⁴¹ National Centre against Honour-Related Violence and Oppression (NCH) 2025.

be problematic and discriminatory, if not racist, the solution has often been to avoid culture talk altogether and instead focus on other dimensions of diversity, such as social class, racism, and immigration status.

This strategy of avoidance has not only been defensive but has also proved unsuccessful, insofar as questions about culture have largely been left to “the other side” of the debate. What is needed, then, is a more productive and nuanced account of how violent practices and patterns vary and are shaped by both cultural logics and other intersecting forms of diversity. Most importantly, a culturally sensitive and intersectional analysis of domestic violence and violence against women should include violence in all groups of society. Are cultural explanations of motive as a defining element of domestic violence or homicide, for instance, only relevant for honour-based violence and murder? Consider, for example, that, until quite recently (2009), affective and emotional reactions to divorce was considered a mitigating circumstance in Danish sentencing for murder.³⁴² More broadly, the ways in which causes and motives are labelled and classified are themselves culturally conditioned – for instance, whether violence is framed as an expression of “jealousy” rather than possessiveness, control, or domination.

Inflation and expansion

Another concern emerging from the preceding discussions relates to the expanding use of the concept of honour beyond the field of domestic violence. We observe tendencies in which the legitimate struggle against violence is drawn upon, and at times, exploited to frame entire population groups as fundamentally different from the majority, and, in some cases, as posing a destabilising threat to the social order. This perceived threat is explicitly linked to honour norms or culture. Such problematic appropriation is facilitated when honour-related violence is positioned as an integration issue outside the anti-violence policy field – a precarious framing that renders the concept particularly vulnerable to misuse.

As Liversage concludes in her chapter on Denmark, the preoccupation with honour has become a major feature of both public debate and policy in our countries. In Denmark, in particular, this concern is less about domestic violence as such than about a broader focus on “the inner workings of ethnic minority families”.³⁴³ Likewise, the term *negative social control* appears to have expanded into a catch-all label for problematic practices associated with certain groups, both within and beyond the family. A similar dynamic may be observed in the Swedish concept of *honour-related violence and oppression*, where

³⁴² See Liversage, chapter 2 in this anthology.

³⁴³ See Liversage, chapter 3 in this anthology.

“oppression” can be used in an analogous way. Furthermore, the Danish use of *honour-related conflicts* may indicate a broader application of the concept, a tendency that may be paralleled in Norway by the introduction of *honour-motivated crime*, with its connotations of criminal gangs. Baianstovu, for her part, observes that notions of honour culture are invoked and linked to narratives of societal destabilisation.

A self-reinforcing discursive eddy

Bringing honour-based violence into view has been vitally important for making Nordic discourse and policies on domestic violence and violence against women more sensitive to diversity. There are strong reasons to take honour seriously as a meaningful dimension of violent practices. At the same time, the way honour-based violence is conceptualised has brought with it two problematic discursive tendencies.

First, honour-based violence was constructed early on in opposition to what is commonly referred to as “ordinary” violence – typically understood as individual intimate partner violence in majority contexts. Honour-based violence is often described as collective rather than individual, planned rather than spontaneous, affecting multiple victims, and socially recognised or even rewarded. Ordinary violence, by contrast, is implicitly framed as individual, unplanned, limited to a single victim, and uniformly condemned. This sharp binary contrast is built into the definition of honour-based violence and, indirectly, into the understanding of so-called ordinary violence. Yet these assumptions are often poorly grounded in research. Individual intimate partner violence may be planned, may profoundly affect or involve family members, and may be tacitly or overtly supported by the perpetrator’s social network. Clearly, this does not preclude honour from being a distinctive factor.

Second, honour-based violence was framed early on as a distinct *form* of violence and one that differed fundamentally from ordinary violence, i.e., individual intimate partner violence in majority families. Together, these two moves have produced strong discursive constraints. Honour-based violence comes to be understood primarily through a constructed binary with ordinary violence, while ordinary violence is simultaneously constructed as essentially different from honour-based violence.

This way of thinking has concrete policy implications, including in the legal field. When honour-based violence, as a “form” of violence, is treated as a fixed package of interconnected characteristics, legislation risks being based on assumptions rather than assessments. This is evident, for example, in the arguments of the Norwegian law commission recommending that an “honour motive” should be treated as an aggravating factor in criminal law, as is already the case in Sweden. Such “packaging” amounts to

analytical short-circuiting: instead of examining whether specific features, such as planning, involvement of others, social support, or harm to multiple victims, are present in a given case, these features are presumed once violence is labelled honour-related. The label itself replaces analysis. This weakens case-by-case assessment, limits meaningful comparison across forms of violence, and risks hard-coding generalised assumptions into law and policy.

The fact that domestic violence may be caused or motivated by norms of honour is a reality. However, constructing this motive as so exceptional that it sets certain violent practices apart as unique is problematic. It is more useful to understand diversity as variation along multiple dimensions, described in a matrix rather than through binary oppositions. For example, a case of domestic violence may be shaped both by the perpetrator's mental health issues and by the cultural norms in which they live. Intimate partner homicides may be, and often are, planned, even if the motive is "jealousy", which is itself a culturally conditioned way of describing a motive. A matrix-based approach would provide greater analytical precision by requiring that different characteristics of violent practices be assessed separately in each case, taking into account multiple factors and their interactions – such as motive, relational dynamics, the number of perpetrators, individual biography, psychological traits, cultural norms, and relevant structural conditions.

Instead, the debate all too often takes a polarised form, reproducing familiar binaries: culture versus gender, difference versus similarity, "us" versus "them". Taking honour-based violence seriously becomes equated with insisting on its categorical distinctiveness, while pointing to overlaps or shared dynamics is interpreted as trivialising the phenomenon. In this way, the debate is caught in a self-reinforcing discursive eddy, repeatedly circling the same positions and leaving little room for analytical development or new insights.

Promising change on the ground

Fortunately, work on the ground has not come to a standstill. While it has not been our ambition to provide a comprehensive account of the work carried out by welfare services, the police, and NGOs to combat domestic violence and violence against women, including honour-based violence, we recognise that significant progress has been made in recent years, particularly in terms of support for victims and, in some cases, for perpetrators as well.³⁴⁴ We also know that many professionals and volunteers working directly with affected individuals have a far more nuanced understanding of violence than is reflected in the polarised and “packaged” versions of violence we critique here.

To gain a fuller understanding of what is actually happening in efforts to combat domestic violence and violence against women, it is necessary to examine developments at multiple levels. Productive developments in services and support measures at the level of practice may coexist with problematic developments at the policy level. Conversely, policy achievements may not be matched by sufficient resources or funding at the service level.

For this reason, while we consider it vital to challenge the dominant ways of talking about violence and organising policy responses, we also emphasise that important changes are taking place in practice. These are profound processes which deserve greater recognition and may, we hope, contribute to more nuanced public discourse and policy development.

³⁴⁴ See, for example, Nordic Council of Ministers 2020.

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