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Ensuring the rights of women who are victims of intimate partner violence in Lithuania: A literature review

Zapewnienie praw kobietom doświadczającym przemocy ze strony partnerów na Litwie: przegląd literatury

Abstract: In 2019, the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), an independent centre of excellence for promoting and protecting human rights, conducted research to take a closer look at the experiences of female victims of partner violence as they encountered the criminal justice system. The fieldwork covered seven EU countries, excluding Lithuania. The objective of this paper is to examine the findings of the FRA research on the state of knowledge in Lithuania. A narrative literature review methodology focussing on qualitative synthesis was utilised. Following a database search, 15 research studies that met the inclusion/exclusion criteria were selected for analysis. The findings in the case of Lithuania fully support the conclusion reached by the FRA, that the most problematic areas in ensuring the rights of women as victims of partner violence are the lack of effective protection against repeat victimisation and insufficient support services. Additionally, the paper not only verifies whether similar problems are present in other studies, but also expands on the findings of the FRA study by exploring urgent issues in the national system of protecting IPV victims' rights.

Keywords: crime victims' rights, intimate partner violence (IPV), women as victims of IPV, victim support services, criminal justice system

Abstrakt: W 2019 r. Agencja Praw Podstawowych Unii Europejskiej (FRA), niezależne centrum doskonałości zajmujące się promowaniem i ochroną praw człowieka, przeprowadziła badania mające na celu dokładniejsze przyjrzenie się doświadczeniom kobiet będących ofiarami przemocy ze strony partnerów w kontaktach z wymiarem sprawiedliwości w sprawach karnych. Badania terenowe objęły siedem krajów UE, z wyjątkiem Litwy. Celem niniejszego artykułu

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jest analiza wyników badań FRA dotyczących stanu wiedzy na Litwie. Zastosowano metodologię narracyjnego przeglądu literatury, koncentrującą się na syntezie jakościowej. Po przeszukaniu bazy danych do analizy wybrano 15 badań naukowych, które spełniały kryteria włączenia/wyłączenia. Wyniki badań dotyczących Litwy w pełni potwierdzają wniosek FRA, że najbardziej problematycznymi obszarami w zakresie zapewnienia praw kobiet będących ofiarami przemocy ze strony partnera są brak skutecznej ochrony przed ponowną wiktymizacją oraz niewystarczające usługi wsparcia. Ponadto w artykule nie tylko sprawdzono, czy podobne problemy występują w innych badaniach, ale także rozszerzono wyniki badania FRA, analizując pilne kwestie dotyczące krajowego systemu ochrony praw ofiar przemocy ze strony partnera.

Słowa kluczowe: prawa ofiar przestępstw, przemoc w związku partnerskim, kobiety ofiary przemocy, usługi wsparcia dla ofiar przemocy ze strony partnera, wymiar sprawiedliwości w sprawach karnych

Introduction

Intimate partner violence (IPV) against women is a widespread phenomenon, observed in Europe and beyond. Victims of IPV need protection against repetitive violent acts. Unfortunately, most female victims of domestic violence are disillusioned and do not dare to ask for help or inform the authorities about the abuse they suffer. Therefore, they need special protection and assistance.

In its report on women as victims of partner violence (FRA 2019), the FRA emphasised the experiences of one particular group of victims as women who endure partner violence. According to the findings of the FRA (FRA 2019), since the early 1990s the issues of violence against women in general and of domestic partner violence in particular have received increasing attention from policymakers and legislators. Within a few years, from 1992 to 1995, a widespread consensus emerged that partner violence should be recognised as “gender-based violence” – that is, as a form of violence that has deep social and cultural roots and one of many manifestations of large-scale discrimination encountered by women.

Female victims of violence have a right to protection under the Istanbul Convention and EU Directive 2012/29/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 25 October 2012 establishing minimum standards on the rights, support and protection of victims of crime, and replacing Council Framework Decision 2001/220/JHA (Victims’ Rights Directive) (OJ of 14.11.2012, L 315, pp. 57–73). In line with Article 18 of the Victims’ Rights Directive, Member States shall ensure that measures are available to protect victims and their family members from secondary and repeat victimisation, intimidation and retaliation – including the risk of emotional or psychological harm – and to protect the dignity of victims during questioning and when testifying. When necessary, such measures shall also include procedures established under national law for the physical protection of victims and their family members. Due to the developments in justice (child-friendly, victim-centred justice) and technology, as well as new challenges (such as health

crises), the Europe Commission has revised the minimum standards and has proposed amendments for the Directive so that victims fully benefit from their rights.

The Victims' Rights Directive was adopted to better protect the rights of all victims of crime. It only establishes minimum standards and provides minimum thresholds, as an instrument of minimum harmonisation. The Directive does not go as far as the Istanbul Convention does regarding the protection of victims; it arguably lacks a cross-border approach and leaves very wide discretion for the Member States. It has a better prognosis for implementation, however, partly due to the minimum-intervention strategy and partly due to its legal form (Pilinkaitė-Sotirovič, Vaigė 2017). When it comes to the victims of domestic violence, however, the Directive employs an exclusive perspective on protecting rights (Arts 9, 22, etc.), i.e. it acknowledges their specific vulnerability, uses dedicated terms (such as "particular attention" and "due consideration") and calls for targeted and integrated services (such as appropriate measures of protection and specialist support). But again, it directs only the degree of performance, leaving the national authorities the discretion to choose specific instruments. However, these problems are addressed in the proposal for amending the Directive, which would establish more specific obligations for states (e.g. implementing a help line for victims, making timely assessments of the most vulnerable victims' individual needs, providing psychological help free of charge, etc.). A higher-level standard is formulated in the jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) as well: given the specific nature of the violence and the victims' vulnerability, cases of domestic violence must be handled with special diligence and the utmost expediency (*Talpis v. Italy* 2017); national authorities must act with a greater degree of vigilance (*Hajduova v. Slovakia* 2010); the reaction must be active, prompt and more robust (*T. M. and C. M. v. Moldova* 2014); and measures of protection should be effective and in some circumstances, without delay (*Bevacqua and S. v. Bulgaria* 2008).

Despite pro-victim legal reforms, women who suffered intimate partner violence continue to report their dissatisfaction with the criminal justice system. They still face victim-blaming and expectations to be an "ideal victim" (Meyer 2016). They still encounter ignorance about the specifics of their experience, as their needs are not limited to the immediate violent event. They also seek to maintain long-term safety and exert their rights to protection and freedom from abuse in the recovery phase (Shearson 2021). A better understanding of victims' needs is crucial because an incorrect needs assessment renders the service ineffective (Roeg, Hilterman, van Nieuwenhuizen 2022). Because ensuring rights is closely connected with the discretion of the authorities, it is inconsistently applied – even in the same jurisdiction (Anderson 2015) – and getting help depends on "being lucky" with the officials one encounters (Saxton et al. 2021). To respond to victims' needs and optimise the use of criminal proceedings, researchers and legislators are searching for new solutions. Some are testing the potential of innovative technologies (Grommon, Rydberg, Carter 2017; Al-Alosi 2020; Signorelli et al. 2022). Others turn to policy, e.g. basing policy and procedures on an enhanced victim empowerment approach

(Birdsall, Kirby, McManus 2017), victim-focussed, community-coordinated outreach intervention (DePrince et al. 2012) or community-based second responders (Rubenstein et al. 2021). Others still are monitoring new legal instruments, e.g. individual legal representation (Iliadis, Fitz-Gibbon, Walklate 2021), Independent Domestic Violence Advisors (Ross, Sebire, Strang 2022) or new offences (Walklate, Fitz-Gibbon, McCulloch 2018). Comprehensive academic analyses are still needed in the areas of enforcing rights, intersectional challenges, the potential for restorative justice and emerging issues (pandemics, the migration crisis and technology-facilitated abuse).

Before turning to victims' rights, we should clarify the notion of a victim in Lithuania's criminal law. The explicit term "victim" is not defined in national criminal legal acts; instead, the Lithuanian word "*nukentėjusysis*," meaning "the one who suffered," is used (OJ of 9.04.2002, No. 37-1341: Art. 28). The substantive scope of the Lithuanian concept was synchronised with Art. 2.1(a) of the Victims' Rights Directive to cover family members as well as the direct victims. However, the status of a victim depends on the procedural aspect, i.e. the decision of the pre-trial investigating officer, prosecutor or court. This means that a victim is entitled to procedural rights only if and when a competent authority decides to grant them the status of a victim. This mechanism does not fully comply with the Directive's approach that a person who falls under the definition is a victim notwithstanding their role in the national criminal justice system. Following the minimum standard established in the Directive, the status of a victim in Lithuania is related to the criterion of harm and its direct causal link to the crime.

However, the preamble of the Istanbul Convention recognises that children are victims of domestic violence, including as witnesses of violence in the family. Similarly, the Lithuanian Law on Protection against Domestic Violence (LPADV) declares that a child living in an abusive environment is acknowledged as having experienced domestic violence (Art. 2.4). However, children who have witnessed domestic violence usually are not granted the status of a victim during criminal proceedings. Moreover, the concept of a family member in Lithuania's criminal law is rather limited. The Directive confers the discretion to the national legislature to determine and prioritise the list of beneficiaries. However, research suggests that – given the nature of domestic violence – the provisions of international legal acts, the jurisprudence of the ECtHR and the register of family members in Lithuania's criminal justice system should be wider in scope (Jakštienė 2019). The Directive's concept of a family member has been fully transposed into the LPADV, and it establishes the less stigmatising notion of a survivor (Arts 2.4 and 2.7).

To transpose the requirements of the Victims' Rights Directive into national law, the Criminal Procedure Code of Lithuania was amended and new secondary legislation was introduced. These adjustments resulted in the redefinition of the concept of a victim and a family member (Arts 28 and 38), the establishment of a new institution in criminal proceedings (i.e. a person accompanying the victim [Art. 56-1]) and of a new concept of special protection needs and the procedure to

assess them (Arts 36-2 and 186-1; TAR, 1.03. 2016, No. 4051) and the expansion of the list of victims' rights (the right to be informed, the right to be interviewed by an officer of the same sex, special measures for children victims, etc.). However, according to the Lithuanian Department of Statistics, reported cases of domestic violence have been on the rise recently (from 41,531 reports registered by police in 2018 to 55,815 reports in 2021). At the same time, the number of crimes related to domestic violence has been decreasing: for example, in 2021, 5,802 offences were registered as domestic violence, or 60.9% less than in 2018 (9,530) (Lithuanian Department of Statistics n.d.). Accordingly, there is a huge gap between reports of violence and the number of pre-trial investigations initiated by the police. These figures raise serious concerns about the response from law enforcement satisfying the minimum standard of victims' rights, let alone a higher one. Although institutions that assist victims of violence have noted the inability of law enforcement officers to identify individual types of violence, the reasons for the gap between the numbers of reports and of pre-trial investigations may be more complex. Therefore, Lithuanian researchers ask what relevant institutions can do in response to domestic violence in order to change this situation (Michailovič et al. 2022b).

Before the Victims' Rights Directive was implemented, law researchers in Lithuania tackled a range of issues regarding the rights of victims, from identifying the most problematic points (Uscila 2004; Michailovič 2009) to defining legal concepts such as a victim and their legal status (Ancelis 2003), the interests in criminal proceedings (Matuizienė 2012), ensuring specific rights, such as the right to access justice (Ažubalytė 2010), compensation for damages (Gavrilovienė 2006), support services (Uscila 2007), restorative justice (Uscila 2001), realising the rights at particular stages of criminal proceedings (Ažubalytė 2005) and the rights of vulnerable victims, e.g. children (Tamutienė 2005; Grigutytė, Valiukevičiūtė 2006).

After the national law was harmonised with the Victims' Rights Directive, the legal academic discourse in this field was expanded by some conceptual victimological insights (Michailovič 2019), general overviews of victim rights (Blažytė, Vaigė 2014) and precise terms: problematic aspects in cases of certain categories of criminal offences (e.g. property crimes (Bučiūnas, Jasevičienė 2022), the implementation of specific rights (e.g. restorative justice (Michailovič et al. 2014; Michailovič, Giedrytė-Mačiulienė 2016), the right to private prosecution (Matuizienė 2013), compensation for damages (Drakšas 2017; Levon 2017), support services and protection (Chomentauskas, Dereškevičiūtė, Murauskienė 2015), the rights of vulnerable groups such as children (Kavoliūnaitė-Ragauskienė 2016; Murauskienė 2017) or people with disabilities (Uscila 2020) and assessments of vulnerability (Ažubalytė, Zajančkauskienė 2014; Jakštienė 2017b). Undoubtedly, the Victims' Rights Directive promoted the academic debate on the rights of domestic violence victims at the heart of this research. At the same time, researchers point out the challenges of the as yet unratified Istanbul Convention in ensuring victims' rights (Michailovič et al. 2021) or criminalising stalking and providing effective responsibility for sexual harassment and other forms of sexual abuse (Laurinaitytė, Michailovič, Jarutienė 2022).

It is worth mentioning that to ensure adequate protection for victims of violence, proper data collection is crucial. The FRA collects and analyses data, advises and supports the safeguarding of the rights, values and freedoms enshrined in the EU's Charter of Fundamental Rights. Building on its previous efforts regarding victims of crime (FRA 2014; FRA 2017), the FRA conducted research to examine the experiences of women as victims of partner violence as they encountered the criminal justice system. The methodology was interviewing victims and professionals, and the fieldwork covered seven EU countries, excluding Lithuania. The different jurisdictions diverged in scale and proficiency of their protection systems: from minimal to enhanced, from elementary to experienced. Despite the diversity, a lack of effective protection was the key universal verdict. The findings indicate a need for active, systemic changes to close the gap between legislation and practice. The report calls for fundamental change in perceptions and attitudes by shifting to a more victim-centred approach. These suggestions encourage an examination of the implications of recent FRA research (FRA 2019) in the context of Lithuania and a systemic review to determine the obstacles preventing effective protection of the rights of female victims of IPV. The implementation of EU victim protection standards at the national level is still an under-researched topic in Lithuania.

1. Methodology

The purpose of a literature review is to present an objective summary of the existing knowledge on a given topic, drawing from previously published research. It offers readers a thorough overview of the subject and helps contextualise the information within the broader field (Green, Johnson, Adams 2006; Van Roeyen et al. 2016; Rajan 2025). In the study, we used the databases of Web of Science, Scopus, Google Scholar and ResearchGate as a source of eligible research. Since we predicted that the number of studies related to Lithuania's legal system would be small, we opted for a broad network of data to capture as such material as possible. The references of the selected articles were also reviewed to identify additional studies that meet the inclusion criteria. We referred to the PRISMA guidelines (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-analyses). Studies were eligible for inclusion if they met the following criteria.

- Partner violence – Because we did not identify any studies focussing specifically on the rights of women as victims of “intimate partner” violence, we broadened our search to encompass studies on the rights of victims of “domestic violence.”
- Relevance of studies – Since one of the main criteria for data collection was relevance to the topic, we only selected studies that deal with the relevant legal regulation in Lithuania during the first ten years following the LPADV's entry into force, i.e. 2011–2021.

- Study design – Qualitative empirical studies were included in the research. We then filtered the preliminary results according to the methodology, i.e. by selecting studies that used the same methodology for data collection as the FRA: interviewing victims, law enforcement officers (police and probation officers and prosecutors), judges and agencies providing support for victims of domestic violence.

For the purposes of the study, the following search terms were used: *rights** AND *women** AND *victim** AND *domestic violence** OR *intimate partner**. During the search, 15 published, peer-reviewed studies were selected as material for this research. We made a list encrypted the studies for more convenient reference. The details of the specific articles included in the review are presented in Table 1. The data were processed as a case study of Lithuania, utilising a narrative literature review methodology focussed on qualitative synthesis.

In this paper, we determine whether the findings from the FRA are also evident in Lithuania. Therefore, we examined the key findings of the FRA:

1. Women who are victims of partner violence lack effective protection mainly due to:
 - inadequate responsiveness of the police;
 - shortcomings in the referral of victims to support services and an incomplete network of support organisations;
 - insufficient implementation of court protection orders.
2. Everyone involved in the institutional response to partner violence should improve their contributions and cooperate better.
3. Legislation and organisation need to improve.

Although the analysis included studies that employed similar methodologies to the FRA and examined comparable problem areas, another aim of our study was to expand on the FRA findings and verify whether analogous issues were revealed in other research. This is an added value of the article, as it brings a new context to the FRA survey.

2. Results

The records for this study cover the period 2014–2021. Only one of the items was an operational audit; all the others were research. Most of them focussed on the situation in Lithuania, and only two of them were part of an EU-scale survey (FRA 2014; FRA 2021). However, several national studies assessed Lithuania's legal system in the context of international law to measure its compliance with European standards (HRMI 2014; Jakštienė 2019). The academic narrative ranges from law to sociology/psychology, the latter being slightly more numerous. Some studies took a multidisciplinary approach (e.g. Jakštienė 2019). Most of the legal texts were dedicated to criminal proceedings specifically. While some of

them assessed a wider range of criminal instruments (e.g. criminalisation, the adequacy of the Penal Code, due diligence and positive state’s duties, assessment of special protection needs, measures of protection, evidencing, etc. in Jakštienė 2019), some of them tackled a particular issue (e.g. interinstitutional cooperation and multi-agency approach in Michailovič et al. 2019; 2021). The rights of domestic violence victims as the sole subject matter were observed in just one paper (HRMI 2014). Again, only one thesis explicitly adhered to a gender-sensitive paradigm and addressed the protection of women (Jakštienė 2019), although the remainder also implied the gender-based nature of domestic violence in terms of its causes, prevalence and effects. Beyond the diversity of academic fields and foci, the findings of the various studies did not significantly differ, as they all evidenced significant shortcomings in victim protection. While the international studies offered a comparative perspective on the prevalence of victimisation and victims’ experiences, national investigations approached the local context with an in-depth and nuanced analysis.

The main findings of the FRA survey were also identified in different Lithuanian studies (see the results in Table 1). Moreover, in some studies we observed all or almost all the conclusions reached by the FRA (HRMI 2014; Jakštienė 2019). Accordingly, the extent and nature of the problem in Lithuania corresponds to the situation in other EU countries. These outcomes are reinforced in other Lithuanian research that is beyond the direct scope of our research, but still relevant to the topic. Therefore, we shall also refer to them to validate our conclusions.

Table 1. FRA findings and research in Lithuania

FRA findings	Research in Lithuania			
	Authors (references are provided in the article)	Title	Method	Results
Women who are victims of partner violence lack effective protection, mainly for the following reasons:				
Inadequate responsiveness of the police	Vasiliauskaitė, Geffner 2020	Reasons that keep women from disclosing intimate partner violence	Online questionnaire of 127 female survivors of IPV were recruited through social media. The Composite Abuse Scale (CAS) and the Scale of Economic Abuse (SEA) were used, together with a list of 12 possible reasons for non-disclosure.	The odds of not disclosing abuse due to past negative experiences with the police were 48% higher (less in the case of sexual violence). This suggests that a previous negative experience plays a significant role in help-seeking.

FRA findings	Research in Lithuania			
	Authors (references are provided in the article)	Title	Method	Results
	Vasiliauskaitė 2015	Help-seeking and perceived helpfulness of formal help sources for victims of domestic violence: An exploratory study	Semi-structured interview of five women who sought help from a specialised support centre for domestic violence	The most helpful formal support they found was from specialised support centres. In carrying out the state-delegated function, they provided the best assistance and therefore rekindled trust in the legal system as well as the state itself. All women had experienced institutional violence and/or institutional betrayal.
	National Audit Office of Lithuania 2015	Organization of protection against domestic violence: Report of the National Audit Office	Mixed methods including interviews with specialists, judges, prosecutors and police officers	Although the average police response time to reports of domestic violence is getting shorter and the number of people who are provided protection up to 48 hours after a violent incident is increasing, there are still cases where the response to reports exceeds the set 20-minute arrival time at the scene.
	Human Rights Monitoring Institute HRMI 2014	Victims' Rights Directive: A new approach to victims of domestic violence	15 semi-structured interviews with professionals from law enforcement, social services and non-governmental organisations	Inadequate responsiveness of the police, as victims complain of an overall insensitive, unprofessional attitude and indifference, prejudice, incompetence and incoherent procedures. Officers are also sometimes unprofessional when arriving at the scene and registering cases of violence. Some respondents noted that police officers try to persuade victims not to initiate criminal proceedings. There is no effective mechanism for responding to violations of court-ordered preventive and/or protective measures in cases where the suspect or accused returns to the victim's home without warning, tries to seek contact or exerts influence on the victim through third parties, e.g. children.

FRA findings	Research in Lithuania			
	Authors (references are provided in the article)	Title	Method	Results
Shortcomings in referring victims to support services	FRA 2021	Crime, Safety and Victims' Rights	Mixed methods survey (34,948 respondents in total EU-wide) In Lithuania, face-to-face questionnaire interview with 1,008 randomly selected respondents over 16 years of age	In Lithuania, 0% of victims contacted victim support organisations after experiencing physical violence.
	Purva-neckienė, Venslovaite, Stonkuvienė, Žiliukaitė 2019	Domestic violence – Prevention, protection, assistance, cooperation: Qualitative research report	Semi-structured interviews with (1) persons who have experienced domestic violence and (2) experts working in the prevention of domestic violence and assistance to victims of violence and (3) two focus group discussions with experts working in institutions providing assistance to survivors of domestic violence	There is little or no information about specialised support centres, although they perform public functions. Disabled people suffering from domestic violence are even more isolated from services and organisations that provide information and assistance.
	National Audit Office of Lithuania 2015	Organization of protection against domestic violence: Report of the National Audit Office	See above: National Audit Office of Lithuania 2015	Reports from police officers to specialised complex assistance centres do not always meet the requirements set by the Commissioner General of the Lithuanian Police, and do not provide all the necessary data about victims, which makes it difficult for the centres to contact them.
	Human Rights Monitoring Institute HRMI 2014	See above: HRMI 2014	See above: HRMI 2014	The specialised support centres lack information about specific cases; they are not always provided with the victim's contact information.
	FRA 2014	Violence against women: An EU-wide survey	Survey and interviews with a nationally representative sample of 1,500 women per country (42,000 women aged 18–74 years old in total across the EU)	In Lithuania, 0% of victims contacted victim support organisations after experiencing physical or sexual violence by a partner.

FRA findings	Research in Lithuania			
	Authors (references are provided in the article)	Title	Method	Results
Incomplete network of support organisations	Michailovič, Justickaja, Vaičiūnienė, Kalpokas, Visockas 2019	Towards effective cooperation between the police and other stakeholders: A model for the recognition, assistance and prevention of domestic violence	45 semi-structured interviews and three focus group discussions with experts working with domestic violence cases in Lithuania	The limited number of specialised support centres and limited funding make timely provision of assistance difficult.
	Vasiliauskaitė Geffner 2020	Reasons that keep women from disclosing intimate partner violence	See above: Vasiliauskaitė, Geffner 2020	The state should provide sufficient and continuous funding so the organisations can be staffed well enough to provide the necessary help. They also need funding to raise awareness of the services available to help women and the importance of seeking help.
	Purvanekienė, Venslovaitė, Stonkuvienė and Žiliukaitė 2019	Domestic violence – Prevention, protection, assistance, cooperation: Qualitative research report	See above: Purvanekienė et al. 2019	The availability of services varies geographically: in smaller towns assistance is received much less than in large cities. The network of NGOs providing assistance is insufficient, and the continuity of their activities is hampered by unstable funding.
	Human Rights Monitoring Institute HRMI 2014	Victims' Rights Directive: A new approach to victims of domestic violence	See above: HRMI 2014	Some critical remarks were made regarding the restriction of accommodation services for those with children. The study revealed that the lack of legal aid and legal representation during the process is a particularly relevant problem and leads to insufficient protection of the interests of the victim.

FRA findings	Research in Lithuania			
	Authors (references are provided in the article)	Title	Method	Results
Insufficient implementation of court protection orders	Jakštienė 2019	Domestic violence against women: Protection by criminal law	Mixed methods including face-to-face, in-depth interviews (free-form questions) with 28 respondents (judges, prosecutors, police officers, probation officers and specialists from specialised support centres)	Enforcement of protective measures remains one of the weakest elements in the protection structure for victims of violence. The legal consequences of a suspect (accused) violating preventive measures are usually associated with repeat violations
	Purvanekienė, Venslovaitė, Stonkuvienė, Žiliukaitė 2019	Domestic violence – Prevention, protection, assistance, cooperation: Qualitative research report	See above: Purvanekienė et al. 2019	One of the main problems related to restraining orders is the lack of information about this measure at both the institutional level and among victims of domestic violence (their beginning, end and content).
	Human Rights Monitoring Institute HRMI 2014	Victims' Rights Directive: A new approach to victims of domestic violence	See above: HTMI 2014	The response mechanism to violations of court-ordered protective measures is not effective enough, especially in cases when the person who used violence returns to the survivor's residence, tries to seek contact or influence her through children or other third parties.
The police, support organisations, health care institutions and courts should improve their contributions. Everyone involved in the institutional response to partner violence should cooperate better.	Michailovič, Justickaja, Vaičiūnienė, Viršilas 2021	Changes in violent behavior of intimate partner: Perspectives for the development of work with perpetrators of violence in Lithuania	Qualitative data from 50 semi-structured interviews and three focus group discussions with the facilitators, attendees and various stakeholders of batterers' intervention programmes (BIPs)	The consistency and integrity of the entire implementation of BIPs should be prioritised, and institutional cooperation in Lithuania needs to be improved to achieve a successful, coordinated response to IPV. BIPs in Lithuania should be systematised by incorporating existing instruments, such as motivational interviewing, risk-based assessment, differential treatment and evidence-based programmes focussed on different theoretical approaches and forms of implementation.

FRA findings	Research in Lithuania			
	Authors (references are provided in the article)	Title	Method	Results
	FRA 2021	See above	See above	States should consider introducing specific measures to ensure targeted support for victims of domestic violence who struggle to break the cycle of violence and receive justice. This can include training and specific guidelines for professionals who are in contact with victims (such as health care professionals or teachers) on how to detect crime that occurs at home and how to deal with it appropriately. In recording crimes and reporting on the situation in the country, EU Member States could make use of third-party reporting mechanisms to capture more incidents.
	Michailovič, Justickaja, Vaičiūnienė, Kalpokas, Visockas 2019	Towards effective cooperation between the police and other stakeholders: A model for the recognition, assistance and prevention of domestic violence	See above: Michailovič et al. 2019	There are contradictions between the perception of and solution to the problem of domestic violence, as well as the vision of family support between specialised support centre employees and specialists from child protection services. Specialised support centres have no feedback on the final decision in cases. It is necessary not only to strengthen specialised assistance, but also to increase the availability of social services for domestic violence survivors.
	Jakštienė 2019	See above: Jakštienė 2019	See above: Jakštienė 2019	The lack of inter-institutional cooperation complicates the implementation of BIPs.

FRA findings	Research in Lithuania			
	Authors (references are provided in the article)	Title	Method	Results
	Purvanekienė, Venslovaitė, Stonkuvienė, Žiliukaitė 2019	Domestic violence – Prevention, protection, assistance, cooperation: Qualitative research report	See above: Purvanekienė et al. 2019	Most of the professionals who participated in the study, especially police officers, stated that the training on domestic violence is sufficient, and they recommended focussing on its quality, not quantity. The participants pointed out the following problems with the training: duplication of topics, a lack of systematic organisation and continuity and inconsistency between theory and practice. However, there is a need to train police officers, especially newly hired ones, about the specifics of assisting disabled people experiencing domestic violence. Considering that they may be the only source of information for disabled people as victims of violence, there should be a package of information on where else to turn. One of the alternatives is to oblige police officers to inform municipal support centres about disabled people experiencing domestic violence (to the extent permitted by the Law on Legal Protection of Personal Data of the Republic of Lithuania). Raising awareness and improving professional competences are one of the main conditions for successful prevention of domestic violence.
	Jakštienė 2019	See above Jakštienė 2019	See above Jakštienė 2019	Criminal legislation and case law do not fully comply with the requirements

FRA findings	Research in Lithuania			
	Authors (references are provided in the article)	Title	Method	Results
				of the Victims Rights' Directive and relevant jurisprudence of the ECtHR. State officers/professionals lack awareness and training on the nature of gender-based violence and IPV.
	Michailovič, Bikelis, Čepas, Dobrynina, Simaitis, Šneideris, Ūselė, Venckevičienė 2014	Restorative justice perspectives in Lithuania	Mixed methods including 18 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with law enforcement officers and experts in gender-based violence	Decisions on restorative justice measures in domestic violence cases should be made on an individual basis, after careful consideration of the circumstances.
	Pilinkaitė-Sotirovič, Vaige 2017	Challenges for preventing violence against women in Lithuania	Mixed methods including 10 in-depth interviews with female victims of domestic violence	The impact of gender-neutral policies on attempts to solve the problem of violence against women should be critically assessed.
	Michailovič 2020	The importance of changing violent behavior in preventing domestic violence	Mixed methods including four in-depth interviews with experts working with domestic violence cases	An effective strategy to prevent domestic violence must be comprehensive, involving work with perpetrators and a primary focus on the needs and interests of victims.
	Michailovič, Giedrytė-Mačiulienė 2016	Policy and practice dealing with domestic violence cases in Lithuania	In depth, semi-structured interviews with 15 police officers, prosecutors and judges who work with domestic violence cases	The problem of domestic violence cannot be effectively addressed solely through penal measures. A comprehensive and coordinated approach – encompassing legislative reforms, educational initiatives, social support systems and psychological assistance – is essential. Only through integrating these measures can society create an environment conducive to preventing domestic violence and supporting its victims

FRA findings	Research in Lithuania			
	Authors (references are provided in the article)	Title	Method	Results
	Human Rights Monitoring Institute HRMI 2014	Victims’ Rights Directive: A new approach to victims of domestic violence	See above: HRMI 2014	Transposing the EU Victims’ Rights Directive into national law is not appropriate. For example, criminal laws do not clearly regulate victims’ rights to protection, nor do they cover protection measures or how they are to be put in place. Victims do not receive all the information required by the Directive during their first contact. Female survivors received some of the information later – not from police officers, but from specialised assistance centres, legal representatives or the internet.

3. Discussion

3.1. The case of Lithuania

The analysis suggests that victim’s rights protection in Lithuania is shaped by the efforts to attune international trends and national cultural as well as legal frameworks. New legislation is introduced slowly. Lithuania remains one of the few EU countries that have not ratified the Istanbul Convention. Although this is being disguised with legal arguments, the main obstacle is essentially a lack of political will regarding the human rights agenda. The Constitutional Court of Lithuania found that the disputed provisions of the convention (i.e. the concept of gender and ensuring gender equality) are not incompatible with the Constitution of Lithuania (Constitutional Court of the Republic of Lithuania 2024). Political decisions are supported by stereotypes, misconceptions about intimate partner violence and attitudes regarding gender roles that are still widespread among the society. Though population surveys indicate some positive changes, victim-blaming and tolerance of IPV is still prevalent (RAIT n.d.). Moreover, the lack of a trauma-informed, victim-sensitive approach has impacted the criminal justice system accordingly.

Unfortunately, the gendered nature of IPV is not appropriately reflected in the legal system. For example, no definition for “gender-based violence” is established in either the criminal or domestic violence laws. Other relevant terms (e.g. “victim” or “family member”) are subject to limitations. Insufficient and defective legislation reinforced by lagging implementation and procedural obstacles hinder the benefits of victim protection. This allegation is supported by NGOs, research and state institutions working in the field of human rights (Parliamentary Ombudspersons of Lithuania 2021).

3.2. Ensuring rights of women as victims of IPV in Lithuania

3.2.1. Inadequate responsiveness of the police

The police force is at the forefront of the system protecting against domestic violence. Therefore, its operations are very much observed, and victims have many expectations for its effective involvement. However, inadequate responsiveness of the police is one of the most common findings of Lithuanian researchers. Victims complain of an overall insensitive, unprofessional attitude and indifference, prejudice, incompetence and incoherent procedures (HRMI 2014). On the other hand, deficiencies during specific procedures are also indicated: e.g. actions at the scene, poor record-keeping, delayed response, etc. (HRMI 2014; National Audit Office of Lithuania 2015; Jakštienė 2019; Purvaneckienė et al. 2019). Previous negative experience with law enforcement plays a significant role in the underreporting of domestic violence and discourages help-seeking (Vasiliauskaitė 2015; Vasiliauskaitė, Geffner 2020).

To address these problematic issues, new procedures were introduced: instructions to make records, video recording of the scene of incidents, targeted preventive measures for perpetrators in case of repeat victimisation and secondary verification of the circumstances if domestic violence was not detected after the first report (TAR, 3.07.2018, No. 11084). Pressing victims to not initiate criminal prosecution or to drop the charges was frequent previously, but this has changed since private prosecution of particular crimes was replaced with prosecution *ex officio*: e.g. crimes against health, liberty or private life or sexual crimes (OJ of 25.10.2000, No. 89-2741: Arts 140, 145, 148-1, 149, 150, 151, 165). However, this provision does not cover all offences. Thus, the level of state protection is not uniform, without a reasonable justification.

3.2.2. Shortcomings in referring victims to support services

In line with the right of victims to have access to victim support services and the obligation of EU Member States to facilitate the referral of victims (Art. 8(2) of the Victims’ Rights Directive), the police should be empowered and obliged to inform a specialised support organisation and allow the organisation to follow up

on the police intervention in cases of IPV by contacting the victim and offering support (FRA 2019).

However, according to interviews with victims in the FRA study (2019), in about one in three cases it was the police who established the first contact between the victim and the support organisation. The police referred fewer than half of the victims to a support organisation. As this referral is a crucially important link between the police intervention and ensuing court proceedings, the police should step up efforts to ensure effective referral of the victim to an appropriate support organisation.

Member States shall ensure that victims, in accordance with their needs, have access to confidential victim support services, free of charge, acting in the interests of the victims before, during and for an appropriate time after criminal proceedings (Art. 8 of the Victims' Rights Directive). The research conducted by the Human Rights Monitoring Institute (HRMI) in 2014 shows that victims did not receive all information required by the EU Directive during the first contact. The female victims of domestic violence received some of the information later, not from officials but from Specialised Complex Assistance Centres (hereinafter SCACs) or legal representatives – or found it themselves online.

In Lithuania, police officers are instructed to report all victims of violence to SCACs immediately (LPADV, Art. 13.2), but no specific deadline is set. Therefore, this does not guarantee that the SCACs receive such information from the police in a timely fashion (National Audit Office of Lithuania 2015; TAR, 3.07.2018, No. 11084 [changes made on 10 June 2021]).

According to the Office of Equal Opportunities Ombudsperson, from 2016 to 2018 the number of persons who experienced domestic violence and received specialised complex assistance increased: from 11,079 in 2016 to 11,635 in 2017 and to 12,758 in 2018. These figures are slightly higher than those registered by the police, as some people who experience domestic violence contact the SCACs directly (Purvaneckienė et al. 2019). In 2020–2021, SCACs registered 16,672 (16,343) individuals who experienced domestic violence, of whom 5,236 (5,184) were minors who experienced violence, witnessed it or were living in a violent environment. In 2021, 11% of the victims registered by SCACs applied for help in person. Meanwhile, 89% of the registered reports of domestic violence were forwarded to SCACs by the police (LNAWR 2021; LNAWR 2022).

3.2.3. An incomplete network of support organisations

According to FRA findings obtained by interviewing victims and practitioners, there is a lack of appropriate and sufficiently funded specialised support organisations. An appropriate support organisation must not only grant the victim effective access to criminal proceedings, but also protect her from repeat victimisation. Victim support services must be comprehensive enough to include social,

emotional, psychological and financial support as well as practical and legal advice (FRA 2019). However, insufficient support in terms of referral and accessibility (e.g. geographical coverage), as well as a lack of coordination and funding, was reported EU-wide (Commission Staff Working Document 2022).

As Zuzana Vasiliauskaitė and Robert Geffner reported, the women who experienced emotional abuse did not disclose the abuse largely because of shame (59.1%) and fear of losing their children (12.6%). However, both of these reasons can be a consequence of the poor institutional response to IPV. Child Rights Protection Units (CRPUs) too often do not differentiate between the abusive and non-abusive parent. This negative practice puts the women and children at even greater danger, as they should focus on protecting the child and the non-abusive parent (Vasiliauskaitė, Geffner 2020).

3.2.4. Insufficient implementation of court protection orders

EU national victim support organisations consider that protection orders are not sufficiently effective (Commission Staff Working Document 2022). The Lithuanian legislature offers a range of protection measures to prevent domestic violence and protect against repeat victimisation: legal responsibility, court-ordered temporary protection measures, coercive measures, special protection measures, punitive measures, etc. (OJ of 25.10.2000, No. 89-2741: Arts 72-1, 72-2; OJ of 9.04.2002, No. 37-1341: Arts 132-1, 186-1; OJ of 14.06.2011, No. 72-3475: Art. 5.1). The problem is that they are mostly related to criminal prosecution, since analogous civil protection measures (prior to recent amendments of the LPADV) were available only in limited cases, i.e. during divorce proceedings (OJ of 6.09.2000, No. 74-2262: Art. 3.65.2). However, even under such circumstances, the ECtHR ruled that the Lithuanian law is sufficient to provide victim protection, but that inappropriate implementation of criminal-law mechanisms may be severe enough to be grounds for violating the Convention (Valiulienė v. Lithuania 2013).

Ensuring court protection orders is a procedure to which such a description particularly applies. Victims are not informed of the dates when this instrument comes into force and expires, nor of its content (what specifically the abuser is or is not restrained from doing). Accordingly, in most cases the legal regime of shared custody of children presents a way for an abuser to violate the court order without facing any consequences (Purvaneckienė et al. 2019). However, the most problematic aspect is that response mechanism to violations of court-ordered protective measures is not effective enough, especially in cases when the perpetrator returns to the victim's residence, tries to seek contact, or affect the victim through third parties, e.g. their children (HRMI 2014). The execution of court orders and the legal consequences in case of a breach are not monitored well enough to have a deterrent effect (Jakštienė 2019). Recent amendments to the LPADV (came into force on 1 July 2023) are very promising in this regard, as they establish a civil

protection order. Its scope and application make it a “true” protection order that is timely, relevant and related to victims’ needs instead of criminal proceedings. Although the police are reporting increasing numbers of civil protection orders, for the moment it is too early to assess whether this will properly address the previously identified deficiencies.

3.2.5. Limited institutional response to IPV

When replicating the findings of FRA research in the Lithuanian context, it is important to highlight the role of institutional response to intimate partner violence against women. As the FRA stated, the police, support organisations, health care institutions and courts should improve their contributions. Everyone involved in the institutional response to partner violence should cooperate better (FRA 2019). The LPADV defines the management system for protecting domestic violence victims, assigning roles and obligations to relevant institutions. The LPADV governs the interaction between the institutions in charge of enforcing the law, their coordinated operation and the processes that combine victim protection and assistance (Art. 4). For example, the SCACs should receive information from the police about an incident of domestic violence and should proactively contact the victims, providing them with various supportive services (Art. 13.2). Similarly, when a child is involved in an episode of violence, the territorial child protection unit should be informed about the incident, which then assesses the situation and responds appropriately (Art. 13.4). It should be noted that until the recent amendments of the LPADV, the three primary subjects in charge of enforcing the law were the police, the SCACs (usually NGOs providing assistance to victims) and the CRPUs (if a child was involved). However, according to the above-mentioned amendments to the LPADV, other institutions such as the Lithuanian Probation Service (in charge of batterer intervention programmes [BIPs]), social services and support centres are formally part of the network. Therefore, we can notice a positive change in Lithuania, by which other responsible institutions – primarily probation services – are recognised as part of the multi-agency network of cooperation. This is crucial in Eastern Europe, which was influenced by the Soviet Union for nearly half a century and where many countries have not systematically implemented intervention for domestic violence perpetrators (Michailovič et al. 2022b).

According to recent research (Michailovič et al. 2019), interinstitutional cooperation in protecting and assisting victims of domestic violence is currently fragmented and often chaotic. Although cooperation is established as one of the principles to protect against domestic violence (Art. 3(1) of the LPADV), it is often impaired by the lack of a cohesive systemic approach, common goal and shared vision. Since the entities involved in multi-agency cooperation have a limited understanding of how others in the network operate, they are not fully aware of how the entire system works as a whole. The findings suggest that the level

of institutional cooperation is basic, limited to contacting and informing other institutions, and that due to a lack of feedback and a common approach, there is no effective teamwork or coordinated response.

Other research (Michailovič et al. 2021) has revealed that the greatest need for collaboration is between institutions that assist victims and those working on batterer intervention programmes. The activities of these two entities must be integrated, consistent and transparent to both victims and perpetrators. Respondents in this study also emphasised that a multilevel coordinated response may better ensure institutional cooperation and hold each institution accountable for their role in preventing domestic violence. It may also improve the efficacy of BIPs. Overall, the research revealed that there is a need for a stronger, more regulated and coordinated multi-agency response to domestic violence.

Based on the research, it can be stated that institutions working with cases of domestic violence assess violence-related issues narrowly, i.e. within the limits of their competence. Specialists have a narrow understanding of domestic violence and the needs of people affected by it. The different understanding of violence and the lack of a uniform perception of the problem complicate the organisation of a comprehensive, high-quality response. Due to the different approaches to the issue, the multi-agency cooperation is not smooth and leads to a lack of information and feedback (Michailovič et al. 2019).

In addition to cooperation among the relevant institutions, their individual substantive contributions must be enhanced. For example, high schools and the health care sector have specific legal duties in the protection against domestic violence, particularly to report it (including but not limited to Arts 3 and 4 of the LPADV). However, they are still reluctant to be involved (Vaigė 2016a; Jakštienė 2017a). Therefore, the activities within the relevant organisations and the collaboration among them are strongly related. It is a two-way road, as close networking has the potential to make internal procedures more effective and vice versa. This becomes possible thanks to delineating the competencies and responsibility, setting common standards and monitoring the operations.

3.2.6. Deficiency of legislation and need for comprehensive training programmes

In line with the FRA's findings, Lithuanian academics also see the need to improve legislation as a means of enhancing the protection of IPV victims' rights. Some of the academic recommendations and those initiated by NGOs have become real changes in law, such as the long-debated criminalisation of stalking by a special norm in the Penal Code (OJ of 25.10.2000, No. 89-2741: Art. 148-1). Despite the encouragement from Article 34 of the Istanbul Convention to criminalise stalking, the Lithuanian parliament did not introduce a specific criminal offence for it until 14 October 2021.

One of the reasons for ignoring this issue was a belief that the generic criminal provisions were sufficient and provided adequate protection against stalking behaviour (Michailovič et al. 2022a). In reality, law enforcement is very often unable to ensure the safety of victims, and stalkers do not experience any legal consequences for their behaviour. A recent study found that victims of stalking were unsure whether the police would treat the intrusive and intimidating behaviour seriously; consequently, they may be worried that the reaction from the police would not be sufficient to stop it (Laurinaitytė, Michailovič, Jarutienė 2022). The criminalisation of stalking in Lithuania was a complex undertaking. The draft was edited several times during the legislative process. The reaction to the final version of the provision is controversial: on the one hand, it is a positive legal development, but on the other hand it is a step back because it establishes more lenient legal consequences for the perpetrator than previously and it distorts the established case law (Sinkevičius 2021).

The list of aggravating circumstances was supplemented with a new one that establishes a more severe punishment for some forms of sexual violence against a family member, close relative or cohabitant (OJ of 25.10.2000, No. 89-2741: Art. 60.1(14)). Yet, this provision does not cover all the criminal offences. Sentencing has become unreasonably diverse, as judgments are more favourable for the perpetrator in cases where an intimate relationship is neither a qualifying nor an aggravating element of a crime. With this argument in mind and due to the lack of reasoning, we do not support eliminating a family member or close relative from the list of qualifying elements of a homicide (Švedas et al. 2022).

Considering the concerns by professionals, the Law on Mediation (OJ of 31.07.2008, No. 87-3462) was amended to establish possible instead of mandatory mediation in cases of domestic violence. However, contrary to the advice, the law does not determine the procedure in detail, does not provide for safeguards and does not introduce non-eligible cases (Vaigė 2016b; Vasiliauskienė, Dirmotaitė, Vasiliauskaitė 2016).

Another urgent insight is related to the concept of one's social environment in the criminal law system: academics argue in favour of a wide scope for a family member as a qualifying element of some crimes in order to cover more forms of close relationships, e.g. ex-partners, ex-spouses, people having a child together, etc. (Jakštienė 2019). Recent amendments to the Criminal Code have addressed this issue, though the list of family members was mostly supplemented with non-formalised relationships and remains exhaustive (Art. 141.2).

Some other suggestions from academics, mostly related to criminal justice, have not been taken up by the legislature. To enhance the criminal-law response to psychological IPV and to offer adequate protection against it, researchers recommend criminalising coercive control with a special provision in the Penal Code (Jakštienė 2019). The CEDAW committee's recommendations to explicitly criminalise the rape of an intimate partner with a special norm in the Penal Code were also supported by Lithuanian academia (Vaigė 2016b).

As Lithuanian scholars noticed, Lithuania adopted a special law on domestic violence (LPADV 2011) which introduces a gender-neutral concept of domestic violence and undermines any attempt to identify the problem as being gendered in nature or to relate it to structural gender inequality. Nevertheless, a gender-neutral framing of violence against women does not translate into gender-neutral implementation (Pilinkaitė-Sotirovič, Vaigė 2017). Unfortunately, this approach persists in the new law as well (LPADV 2011 amended in 2022). The Istanbul Convention calls for its signatories to introduce in their national law a set of articles that consider the specifics of violent behaviour against women. Signing the Convention would address the urgency of the problem and fulfil the desire to strengthen the international prestige of the country. On the other hand, there is a reluctance to decisively change the existing practice of reserved, asymmetric responses to violence against women (Michailovič et al. 2022a). We therefore join the advocacy to ratify the Convention (Vaigė 2016b; Vasiliauskienė, Dirmotaitė, Vasiliauskaitė 2016; Purvaneckienė et al. 2019).

Here again we must agree with the conclusion of the ECtHR that the legal framework for protecting against domestic violence is not defective per se, but that the approach and the manner of its implementation are inappropriate. Therefore, the objective of the research-based recommendations that were mentioned above is to change the existing inadequate practice.

Respondents of the national survey declared that the institutions providing social and psychological assistance, municipalities, and NGOs must improve their contribution to the issue of domestic violence. On the contrary, the interviewed judges noted that law enforcement only deals with the consequences of violence against women, but not the causes (Michailovič, Giedrytė-Mačiulienė 2016). For example, most of the professionals who participated in the study conducted by Giedrė Purvaneckienė et al. (2019), especially police officers, stated that the training on the topic of domestic violence is sufficient; they recommended focussing on the quality of the training, not the quantity. The interviewees singled out the following problems of training: duplication of topics, a lack of systematic organisation and continuity of training and inconsistency between theory and practice. Therefore, as FRA research suggests (FRA 2019), in everything they do, the police, other authorities and support organisations must be trained to intervene in cases of partner violence in a manner that unambiguously conveys certain messages to offenders and victims.

3.2.7. Other problematic aspects

As one can guess, this is not an exhaustive list of problematic aspects. The academic insights of Lithuanian researchers focus on the national context and elaborate on the findings of the FRA study by identifying specific details that contribute to making the system of protecting IPV victims' rights defective. The procedure for

assessing special protection needs is criticised for its formal and recommendatory format, the excessive discretion given to officers and for ignoring the specific nature of domestic violence and the vulnerability of the victims (Jakštienė 2017b). To the authors' knowledge, this procedure is still quite varied in practice. However, this was found to be a common problem in other EU states (Commission Staff Working Document 2022). The widespread practice in Lithuania of so-called turbo processes (i.e. criminal proceedings in 48 hours) and reconciliation as a basis for exemption from criminal liability raise doubts due to their inappropriateness in cases of systemic, complex IPV (Jakštienė 2019). At the same time, however, the research shows that decisions about the use of restorative justice measures in domestic violence cases could be made on an individual basis, after careful consideration of the circumstances (Michailovič et al. 2014). In addition, the newest studies show the need to change violent behaviour by implementing BIPs and social services as part of the multi-agency network of cooperation to achieve a successful coordinated response to intimate partner violence (Michailovič et al. 2022b). Furthermore, the scale of the problematic aspects is even more significant in the case of especially vulnerable victims, e.g. people with disabilities. This field is under-researched, but the data shows that this group experience domestic violence significantly more often than other people. The availability of support services is even more limited, since people with disabilities are often abused by their guardians – who are family members (Purvaneckienė et al. 2019). Therefore, these findings demonstrate the need for further research at the national level.

3.2.8. Beyond the core findings: divergence and overlooked topics

The analysis implies that sample research offers different spotlights but does not generate significant contradictions. While earlier papers (pre-2015) tackle transitional moments (the shift from civil to criminal law, from national to EU-wide standards for victims' rights) and find substantive non-compliance with the Victims' Rights Directive, the most recent ones (2019–2022) focus on specific aspects (interagency coordination, perpetrator programmes or emerging issues) and acknowledge points of improvement. Qualitative victim-centred studies (Vasiliauskaitė 2015; Purvaneckienė et al. 2019) prioritise authentic experience and emotional/psychological barriers, whereas institutional/policy studies (National Audit Office of Lithuania 2015) work on the legal system, resources, procedures, administrative and governance shortcomings. Thus, their explanation of institutional effectiveness varies from structural (slow procedures, limited availability of shelters or bureaucracy) to individualised (psychological or relational). Accordingly, they relate the progress in victims' rights protection to operational developments (National Audit Office of Lithuania 2015) or cultural changes (e.g. Laurinaitytė, Michailovič, Jarutienė 2022 [on stalking]).

Some academic studies utilised a limited scope (e.g. HRMI 2014 [legal compliance]), but most of them took a holistic approach, incorporating social

support networks, psychosocial interventions (Vasiliauskaitė 2015; Purvaneckienė et al. 2019), a coordinated community response and perpetrator programmes (Michailovič et al. 2019; 2021; 2022b) and a gender-sensitive, trauma-informed legal response (Jakštienė 2019). Almost all the studies took a rather critical perspective towards the police response and pointed out a range of serious shortcomings (e.g. a dismissive attitude and secondary victimisation); only some of them perceived gradual improvement (Michailovič et al. 2019). A more pronounced difference in positions can be observed when assessing the anti-violence programmes for perpetrators: while Ramunė Jakštienė (2019) points out their questionable effectiveness and potential adverse impact on victims' safety, Ilona Michailovič et al. (2019) argue for increased utilisation. However, the preferred form of the interventions – individualised (Michailovič et al. 2021) or systemically uniform (Michailovič et al. 2022b) – is still debated.

These findings suggest that some dimensions are still under-researched at the national level. A comprehensive longitudinal qualitative study is needed to assess the effect of the Victims' Rights Directive in cases of IPV. It should measure the real-life relation between interagency coordination, anti-violence programmes and victims' safety. Intersectional vulnerabilities are an extremely relevant research topic. The experience of children exposed to IPV has only been covered indirectly (Jakštienė 2017a). Though a significant research gap has already been acknowledged (Jakštienė 2019; Laurinaitytė, Michailovič, Jarutienė 2022), cyber-violence, coercive control, stalking and economic abuse are still tackled fragmentarily. While academic attention is focussed on the response by law enforcement, the definition of full algorithms demands an in-depth study on the involvement of other frontline professionals (social workers and healthcare providers). Though their relevance has been identified (Pilinkaite-Sotirovič, Vaigė 2017), prevention measures (stereotypical attitudes, media discourse, masculinity norms and tolerance of violence) remain largely unaddressed.

Conclusions

In Lithuania, Directive 2012/29/EU promoted legislative activities and academic debate on the rights of domestic violence victims. It resulted in amendments to and/or new special and secondary legislation. However, the concept of a victim in Lithuania's criminal law does not comply fully with the approach in the Victims' Rights Directive that a person defined as a victim is a victim, notwithstanding their role in the national criminal justice system.

To some extent the policymaking in Lithuania is affected by a gender-based, victim-sensitive, domestic violence-specific approach. However, as our research shows, there is a reluctance to decisively change the existing practice of reserved,

asymmetric responses to violence against women: the delays in criminalising stalking and establishing civil protection orders, the reliance on generic legal provisions, the inadequate funding or the lack of political will to ratify the Istanbul Convention and shift away from a gender-neutral concept of domestic abuse. Furthermore, national legislative developments mostly address the formal transposition of minimum standards established in the Victims' Rights Directive and fails to adopt its spirit and attitude or to introduce extra safeguards. The legal framework is reactive instead of proactive. As a consequence, adequate monitoring to assess the implementation of legal novelties is not ensured. It seems that the activities of state authorities lack consistency and a common position. In consequence, the protection of victims' rights hardly reaches the basic level operationally, except for children's rights, which are better organised both in strategy and in practice. However, international standards (Directive 2012/29/EU, the Istanbul Convention, the jurisprudence of the ECtHR, etc.) require victims of partner violence to be approached in a special way.

We support the views from the literature on the subject that the national legal system of protecting women against partner violence is not defective *per se*; the standpoint and the manner of its implementation do not respond appropriately to victims' experiences and needs. Therefore, the objective of research-based recommendations is to change the existing inadequate practice.

The most problematic areas of ensuring the rights of women as victims of IPV cover protection and support services, both in Lithuania and across the EU. The inadequate response from the police, the non-deterrence of restraining orders and victims' limited access to assistance all contribute to an ineffective protection system. This does not mean that the implementation of other rights is sufficient. These are merely related to victims' basic needs to prevent repeat and secondary victimisation. On the other hand, they are the most widely surveyed. It is highly problematic that this is a universal concern despite pro-victim legal reforms and different national systems that differ regarding the level of protection and expertise, i.e. the extent of criminalisation, the financial resources dedicated to providing support services, awareness among society, history of legislation, etc. The FRA's instructions (FRA 2019) only echo regulations that already are part of the state's positive obligation to act with due diligence to protect people from crime. Therefore, the future efforts of researchers and practitioners should be directed at finding common causes that yield the same unsatisfactory result in diverse circumstances, as well as new solutions that evolve into true changes. Likewise, the proposals for amending the Directive seem very promising in this regard, as they are based on EU-wide monitoring and aim at better harmonisation and specification of states' obligations – including in cases of domestic violence (Commission Staff Working Document 2022).

In the case of Lithuania, the potential to encourage victims to report IPV and to seek formal help is still untapped. Improved quality of services and access to them (i.e. reaction from law enforcement, support for victims from SCACs

and BIPs) are the prerequisites to achieve this. Expanded networking and closer institutional cooperation may provide some fuel for this procedure. Although the Victims' Rights Directive promotes scientific research to adopt a victimological perspective in policymaking, the protection of the rights of vulnerable victims (e.g. people with disabilities, migrants, the elderly, poor women, persons of ethnic minorities or children) is still under-researched in Lithuania. Therefore, it is another direction for future research.

There are several limitations to this review. Firstly, the limited number of relevant studies might reduce the representative significance of the analysis. Future research may be considered, including the most recent papers, both published and unpublished. This review covered studies available in English and Lithuanian, which may have introduced another limitation as a perspective free of language bias could offer new insights.

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