

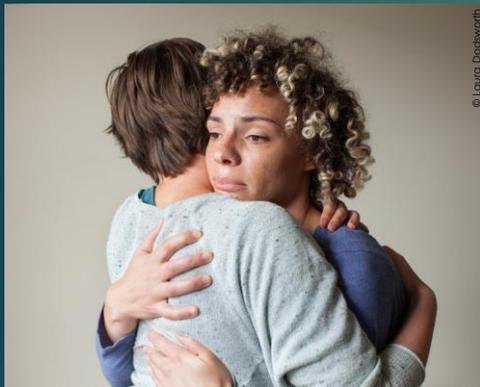
Displaying Domestic Abuse

FACTSHEET FOR SCRIPTWRITERS, DIRECTORS, & PRODUCERS

1

Domestic abuse means “... all acts of physical, sexual, psychological or economic violence that occur within the family or domestic unit or between former or current spouses or partners, whether or not the perpetrator shares or has shared the same residence with the victim ...”.¹

Domestic abuse is not a typical quarrel between romantic partners, but about one partner dominating and controlling the other one.²



Domestic abuse is a hidden epidemic.

- Every day, 8 women or more are killed by their (ex-)partner or family in Europe.³
- One in three women has experienced psychologically abusive behaviour by an intimate (ex-)partner.⁴
- 82% of domestic abuse victims are women.⁴
- Even during pregnancy domestic abuse often does not stop.⁵

Domestic abuse is toxic.

- Women and men exposed to domestic abuse have a higher risk to suffer from mental disorders (e.g., depression, PTSD).⁶
- Domestic abuse has a negative impact on bystanding children (risk for e.g., depression, anxiety and behavioural problems, increases).⁷
- Domestic abuse has an effect on unborn life: During pregnancy it is associated with preterm birth and the baby's low birth weight.⁸

Survivors rarely speak about DOMESTIC ABUSE because of...

- shame
- little energy
- hope that the perpetrator will change
- losing their home
- losing their children
- reprisal
- not being believed

not recognising the abuse

lack of confidence in police

And also the perpetrator tries to keep the survivor from telling or separating by...

- isolating the survivor from friends and family
- controlling and frightening her/him so that the survivor feels trapped in the relationship and unable to leave

The media has the potential to address these topics and to emphasise its importance within society by communicating about domestic abuse in a sensitive way.⁹

Producing

2

“The emotional impact of violence can be felt and shared by most human beings including physical traumata. People whose own feelings have been hurt do understand violent victimization.” Expert A



“I believe, a documentary on domestic abuse could create immense interest in a public film funding body because it is so rarely tackled.” Expert A

- Many problematic and false assumptions about domestic abuse existing in society are echoed and multiplied by popular news coverage^{10, 11, 12}.
- Film productions have the chance to re-tell the narrative in an educating and entertaining way^{13, 14}.
- Production of responsible works in cinema and TV shows needs to equally present male and female points of view by increasing the number of female scriptwriters, producers and directors.⁹

“Domestic violence in film and media scripts has the problem that audiences as well as producers view such violence as a ‘**downer**’, a topic that likely turns viewers away, that depresses them, confronts them with aspects of the human factor they don’t want to know or be informed about. **Producers and financing bodies want happy ends.** To include such depressing aspects of human life and relationships in films as an art form one needs a high amount of consciousness in relation to society - and producers, directors, authors, and filmmakers who possess an extraordinary level of **informed awareness**. The film-making enterprise consists of various personalities; some are aware in that sense, or willing to broaden their perspectives, others have the minds of salesmen for vacuum cleaners. To realize a film project, one needs to find an intersecting set among those making the decisions or fighting them through.” Expert B



In the media, domestic abuse is often depicted as jealousy or family drama.¹⁵ In many ways, domestic abuse is legitimised by cinema and television.⁹



„Start such projects with questions, and not with a-priori value judgments that would blur your creative view and block your access to new insights.“ Expert B



An artistic representation is hardly likely to do proper justice to the complex realities of a problem that belongs to the public and private spheres at the same time.⁹



“Complicated topics like domestic violence, violence of mothers against their children, or violence between children ask for a naïve perspective. Forget what you know beforehand, and rather take a fresh view on reality. To my mind, predetermined intellectual structures create stencilled approaches to human behaviour, or a heavy load of stereotype-laden interpretations of the causes for violence.“ Expert B



Sexual violence presented by a male point of view is in some cases presented as perpetuating inequality and victim-blaming.⁹



“Camera perspective determines the effect on the audience! Take the example of filmed rape scenes: Films that deal with sexual assault routinely show the victim lying under the perpetrator of the violent act. Although such films are supposedly against violence against females, the camera perspective allows the viewer to watch the rape through a ‘peephole’, instead of showing the act through the victim’s eyes: an ugly, distorted face, panting, groaning, cursing abusive expletives above that of the frightened victim’s face.“ Expert B

Scriptwriting I

“My view of myself, and that of my characters, is one of females who in spite of their experiences with female victimization are **not prepared** to conceive of themselves as a victim. This is the principal attitude that delineates my way of story-telling.” Expert B



“Why is it so difficult, and so utterly depressing? Because audiences sense that **the depiction of violence** in these cases **is not heroic**, but rather pitiful or wretched. But the heroism is on the victim's part! A woman takes care of the children, manages the household, the budget, and many other chores, and the bloke comes home and smacks her in the face in front of the frightened kids. With film's traditional hero scheme,

the story ought to be turned the other way around: **She is the tale's true hero**. Everyday wisdom, however, has it that women are either too psychologically dependent or too stupid to let this happen to them, instead of stepping out of the abusive environment. Of course, there are such cases of a couple sharing binge-drinking followed by mutual aggression and assault. But there may be a much larger number of women who get into such situations because of accidental circumstance, **bad luck, and still try to make the best of it**. For them, there is no alternative, they are forced to live through the abuses, and still try to get things in order.” Expert A

“The **helplessness** we feel when confronted with domestic violence, does **not connect us with the victim**. Also, the public attributes complicity to victims which, of course, is pure layman's psychology, and they connect it exclusively to the underclass or minority populations.

An alleged 'complicity' may be a suitable focus for a TV drama series using various circumstances. 'Why don't I leave my tormentor?' However, **such films will need to have a happy ending**, something like **narrow escape at the very last moment**, and more or less 'by accident', so it becomes very clear that it's not at all easy. **It will need a very smart victim who can save herself successfully.**” Expert A



Scriptwriting II

5



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“There is a real problem with the images of male ‘heroes’ serving as dangerous multipliers of toxic masculinity. In case such a male hero is seen as very attractive, he serves in a role model function! We –filmmakers and social scientists– are challenged to diffuse other, alternative images to society. But that **will work only if productions still figure as entertainment**. They need to be accomplishments that define true art. As always, good intentions do not always translate into good work or high-quality examples of entertainment.” Expert B

“To bash someone close to you is ... not a sign of strength, rather an evidence of the loss of self-control I believe the women who are bashed receive a serious violation of their humanity when they are regarded as too stupid or too weak to leave the situation. I can rather detect some heroism in their staying in such situations. They may stay because they see it as their job, their responsibility to keep going, to keep this family going, and that is often heroic, ... not just a result of being depressive, or a sign of weakness. There I would see a momentum to turn around the ‘downer’ effect in media narratives about domestic violence. A woman proves herself being strong, she is taking care of the family reputation, her husband’s reputation. She feels the shame about the abuse in a much more pronounced way than the abuser. Shame is a clue to understand domestic abuse. To imagine such a woman as hero is much more difficult than to attribute heroism and ‘real masculinity’ to the man who intervenes on her behalf by beating the living hell out of her abuser. In taking the woman’s struggle seriously which although she loses every time, and not to disavow her humanity by saying she’s dumb to let herself being abused by him, the narrative can be changed.” Expert A



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“Punishment of the abuser is more of the same. [...] Generally, there is a huge amount of aggression, not only on the abuser’s part, but also in wider society. And that finds an expression, an outlet, in this desire for revenge and retribution directed against the abuser. Of course, the rule of law must be kept up, and must not be diminished, ... but **justice is not dependent on strict sentencing guidelines**, on the measurement of harm afflicted to a man who has abused his partner. The judgment of the harm done and how it may be alleviated does rest with the communities. The cost of domestic violence is not counter-weighted by prison sentences, particularly not when it comes to the children in such families.” Expert A

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Further reading

- <https://training.improдова.eu/en/> → IMPRODOVA training website providing training material about domestic abuse
- <https://improдова.eu/news-events/news/pdf/Republica Portuguesa Guide to good media practice in preventing and combating VAW and DV.pdf?m=1570616025&> → Guide to good media practice in preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence
- <https://www.zerotolerance.org.uk/work-journalists/> → Advice for journalists – media guideline on violence against women

The quotations come from interviews IMPRODOVA conducted with two film experts:

- **Expert A** is a documentary director, with about 10 documentary productions, among them a film about victims of fatal violence, which attempts to initiate a process of reconciliation between the survivors and the persons who perpetrated the deadly acts. He received five major awards for his work.
- **Expert B** is active as a director and producer of feature and TV-films, and also as a documentary director. Among the films she has previously directed are about five feature films dealing with violence in the family, childhood, and adolescence. For her work as a filmmaker she has received 17 national and 4 international prizes/awards. She teaches as an Honorary Professor at the film academy.

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