

# PSYCHOLOGICAL VIOLENCE

Eleven women break the silence



AMNESTY  
INTERNATIONAL



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## INTRODUCTION AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL - THE NETHERLANDS

**Trigger warning:** this publication contains stories about psychological violence, domestic violence and sexual violence.

Constantly controlling a partner, forbidding them from seeing family and friends or wearing certain clothes, harassing, belittling and threatening to harm the other person or oneself. These are examples of psychological violence. Physical violence or even femicide (murder) is often preceded by psychological violence.

Statistics Netherlands (CBS) together with the Research and Data Centre (WODC) conducted research on domestic violence in 2024. Over 870,000 people reported having been a victim of one or more forms of psychological violence in their homes over the past 12 months. This is six percent of all people in the Netherlands who are 16-years or older.

Every human being has the right to health, the right to physical and mental integrity, and the right to live free from violence. Perpetrators of psychological violence deprive their victims of these rights. Psychological violence is a serious human rights violation. In the Istanbul Convention, which aims to eliminate violence against women and domestic violence, there is a provision dealing specifically with psychological violence. Article 33 of the Istanbul Convention defines psychological violence as: *the intentional conduct of seriously impairing a person's psychological integrity through coercion or threats.*

Psychological violence is not (yet) explicitly criminalized in the Netherlands. After conducting a human rights analysis, Amnesty International concludes that this must change soon.<sup>1</sup> Amnesty International emphasizes that amending criminal law is only one piece of the puzzle. New legislation alone is not enough to address the underlying causes and factors that lead to psychological violence. The government must invest in prevention and strengthening support and assistance to victims. Listening to victims and the advice they have is essential in doing so.

Between June 2024 and February 2025, Amnesty International spoke with women about their experience as a victim of psychological violence.

Eleven women break the silence in this publication. They describe their experiences with psychological violence, in their own words, and what it does to them to this day. The women provide recommendations for legislators, policy makers, social services and the police. They also emphasize how important it is as a society to recognize and acknowledge psychological violence. This publication does not contain their real names, but a pseudonym.

Amnesty International is convinced that a lot of power emanates from the message of these women. They know better than anyone else the barriers you face as a victim of psychological violence and how the law currently offers insufficient protection.

Amnesty International did not analyze their files. These are their own texts, not those of Amnesty International. This is their story.

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<sup>1</sup> Amnesty International the Netherlands (2024), Statement: criminalize psychological violence in the Netherlands. Location: <https://www.amnesty.nl/content/uploads/2024/03/DEF-Statement-Amnesty-International-Psychisch-geweld-Maart-2024-PDF.pdf?x55122>. The publication was first published in Dutch. This is a non-official translation.



## 1. LAILA

Psychological violence is an invisible prison. It means losing your identity. It is control, manipulation, humiliation and isolation. It is living in constant fear, with no bruises needed to feel the pain. Someone is completely taking over your autonomy, making you feel like you are worth nothing and you have nowhere to go.

In my case, it started with: jealousy, controlling who I talked to, questioning my contacts. Then it got worse: he controlled my phone without my permission, unlocked it with my finger while I slept and had my WhatsApp installed on his own phone. He determined where I went, who I talked to and even what I thought. He sometimes locked me in the car for hours and drove to remote places so I couldn't escape.

When I burst into tears out of fear and helplessness, he would come and comfort me and express his concern for me and the need for me to see a psychologist.

### **Psychological violence turned into physical violence**

Psychological violence broke me completely. I lived in constant fear. I lost ten pounds in a month and suffered from palpitations. Even when I was pregnant, he kept me up all night until morning and I was not allowed to go to work. When I tried to detach myself, the physical violence got worse and worse: he threw a phone at my chest but claimed he had not hit me. He hit me so hard that I got a hole in my eardrum, and during an argument after my delivery, he kicked me so hard that I was in pain for a month and a half. He bugged me by hiding recording devices in our home when he wasn't home himself, which also made me feel unsafe in my home in his absence.

### **Forced by agencies to 'cooperate'**

The worst part was that he used my child to keep control over me. Even when I finally knew I had to escape, I was forced by agencies to "cooperate" with an abusive man. My child was handed over to him even though my ex had proven in every way possible that he was dangerous.

I was not safe anywhere. Not in my own home, not with the police, not with youth protection agencies. No one took my fears seriously, because "psychological violence" was elusive.

### **This never stops unless I leave**

I knew I was unhappy, but it wasn't until I sought help from the Stay Group (Blijf Groep) and heard from experts by experience about "coercive control" that I understood what was happening. Until then, I thought I was exaggerating. That he just had a 'difficult' character. But I was no longer in control of my own life.



He had previously been in detention for a crime when I had just given birth. During that time, he sent his mother to our house to check on me. I didn't call him but he called me several times a day while he was in detention. When he was in detention for weeks after I filed a report, I was in the shelter and even then, he had a cell phone he could use to call me. He indicated afterwards that he could use his cell phone in detention.

I knew then, this will never stop unless I leave.

### **Criminalization of psychological violence would have helped**

If psychological violence had been recognized as a crime, I would have gotten protection sooner. Then the police would not have intervened only when there was physical violence. Then youth protection would not have forced me to cooperate with him. Then I wouldn't have had to live in fear for years.

### **Concrete legislation and policy changes needed**

If I were a policymaker, I would ensure that victims are finally truly heard. That the stories we share are not just used as emotional testimonies, but that they lead to concrete legislation and policy changes.

Psychological violence is an invisible hell. Bruises from physical violence disappear, but you carry the damage and consequences of psychological violence with you forever.

### **A parent who inflicts violence on the mother also poses a risk to the child**

After spending years in a women's shelter with no future prospects, including being locked up for six months because there was a high risk of femicide, me and my infant son did not receive the help we needed. I had to travel to my old hometown with an AWARE button (a mobile alarm system) for my little son to meet his father every weekend, with the costs being shifted entirely onto me. Because of this, I finally decided after years to leave the shelter anyway, against the advice of the Stay Group.

If a mother is unsafe with the child's father, the child can never be truly safe with him. A parent who exerts violence and control over the mother also poses a risk to the child's well-being and emotional safety because violence never stops with just one person in the family. Therefore, the child's safety can never be separated from the mother's safety; a safe environment for the mother is an essential condition for the child's safety and well-being.

Finally, I want to describe some of the barriers I have experienced to getting help and I also have advice to improve things right away.

### **Barriers to getting help:**

- **Police:** My reports were not taken seriously. Only after I was physically abused, they did something. Psychological violence was not recognized as a crime.
- **Youth Protection:** Despite multiple police reports and reports to Safe at Home (Veilig Thuis), I was forced to collaborate with the perpetrator. My concerns about his dangerous behavior were ignored.

- **Safe at Home:** Asked me if it wasn't a better idea to get an abortion, instead of helping me.
- **Government:** I felt completely abandoned and had to protect myself, while the system was actually reaching out to the perpetrator.
- **Stay Group - Altra/Ihub:** They were the only ones who took my case very seriously.

**What I needed:**

- Direct recognition of psychological violence and coercive control.
- No mandatory cooperation with an abuser.
- A safe way out, without having to advocate to be taken seriously.
- Recognition for the expertise of the Stay Group.
- A comprehensive approach where agencies work together and take responsibility.

**What needs immediate improvement in addressing psychological violence is:**

- **Criminalization** of psychological violence and coercive control.
- **No mandatory cooperation with** an abusive ex.
- **More knowledge** among agencies about psychological violence.
- **Faster and better protection** for victims.
- **Recognize** that abuse does not stop after the relationship ends.

## 2. ANNE

Psychological violence cannot be briefly described. For me, it was oppression and suffocation. I didn't literally have a hand around my throat taking my breath away but still felt I was suffocating.

There was loneliness. Because no one knew. Because I was ashamed. But above all, because he managed to suffocate me without touching me. Choking me by isolating me. At one point I had almost no contacts left. Because he preferred that I didn't leave. And when I did go because he let me, he was always there. Not physically, but by texting me asking where I stayed, if I wanted to send pictures, so I could show that I was indeed there, where I had said I would be.

**To suffocate** me by telling me how to behave. He said I put on that one skirt to get attention from men and then made such a big deal about it that I stopped wearing the skirt. By telling me how to chew my chips. It wasn't allowed to crack, that was vulgar. By giving him the remote control, always having to watch sports and being interested in them. If I didn't, I was uninterested; if I did, it was fake.

**To suffocate** me by being dismissive of everything I loved. If I went for a walk alone, he kept calling. If I sat upstairs alone for a while, he kept coming in because he wanted to check what I was doing.

**To suffocate** me by controlling me. My phone, my email. By listening in when I called my father, judging that. And then afterwards parroting and imitating my father.

**To suffocate** me by managing my salary. All my income had to go to the general account from which I had no bank card. He paid for everything. If I needed money for tampons I had to ask and got a sigh because oh, how expensive.

### **Losing myself**

By treating me this way, I lost myself. I was literally empty. I was no longer in touch with my feelings. I wasn't allowed to be there. I didn't want to occupy space or exist. I was a shell, an empty package. I had no idea who I was. Really was.

I believed what he said: I was bad, impatient and there must be something wrong with me.

He had already managed to get me to see a psychologist. Because he had also convinced me that I had a disorder. I had borderline or I was autistic. Living with me was basically impossible. And yes, I did recognize it. I was not comfortable in my own skin. I was tired, short-tempered and I also acted difficult. I didn't realize that this was because I was in survival mode, walking on eggshells.

The psychologist indicated that there was nothing wrong with me and suggested that things were not going well within the relationship. The psychologist suggested that we had a meeting with him together. This suggestion was immediately rejected and I was forbidden to go back to the



psychologist. According to him, it was obvious that I was not mentally well. He saw that, his parents saw that too. That he was still with me was a miracle. Barely doable.

So for years I heard that. And I kept trying extra hard to get it right. And the harder I tried, the worse it got.

### **Tiptoeing all day**

There was nothing left of me. Except for being scared and anxious and always on my guard. Tiptoeing all day and surviving. If I do this, or react this way, it might not be so bad. If I just stay home, I know what he is doing, what his mood is. If I act nice, listen and cooperate, maybe he won't get angry.

He controlled me, determined everything.

I was a puppet and he was pulling the strings. I had to do what he said. I had to understand what he required of me. And when you thought you got it, he changed the unwritten rules again. Everything I stood for disappeared. All day long I was busy trying to please him. So that it didn't escalate.

An escalation was very nasty. Swearing. Then he stood before me, ranting. Called me names for everything.

Silence. Totally ignoring me, sometimes for days. Then he wanted me to apologize and if I said sorry, he told me I didn't mean it and if I didn't say sorry, he told me I didn't care for him. Or I didn't know what he was angry about, and he wanted me to guess. If I was wrong, he stayed silent.

Forcing me to sleep on the couch. For nights on end. I didn't deserve a place next to him in bed. Waking me up when I finally slept. Because I deserved to lie awake. Throwing the food, I had made into the trash bin in front of me. It was inedible, he would say.

Just like that. Because I looked wrong. Because I wasn't enthusiastic enough when he came home. Imitating me, parroting me. Imitate how I walked. And then laughing really hard about it.

### **Realizing it was psychological violence**

It took me a while to realize that it was psychological violence. It was pointed out to me by others, but I trivialized it for a long time. It wasn't until I was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) that it dawned on me. And as I started reading more and more about psychological violence, I recognized myself as a victim.

I no longer consider violence against others to be worse than violence against myself.

By speaking about it, I acknowledged it. When I was in the relationship, I thought we just had a bad relationship and that I was the cause of that. That he just had a bit of a temper. He did swear sometimes, but well.... not every day. He had a hard time too, and if only I tried harder.

### **Voice in my head**

I completely lost myself. I found that out while I ended the relationship. I was nothing without him. At least that's what I thought. I had to rediscover myself. Get to know myself. Who am I?

Beyond that, I was traumatized. His voice was in my head. Everything he told me about me, I had come to believe. That I was a nasty woman. Selfish. Cold.

The psychological violence got worse and worse. The escalations became more intense and more frequent. I was desperate and I felt the need to make it stop. But how? Where was I supposed to go? By now I was no longer seeing the social worker because she had indicated that she should actually report our situation to Safe at Home (Veilig Thuis).

### **Able to leave because of my support system**

The particular day I fled I had called my sister again after a long time. She knew things were going very bad. She stressed that I could come to her if I ever needed support. That night my daughter begged me to leave. He had left angry and that's when I decided to leave. Seeing my child so scared again made me go. However, I did that more often. Now I stayed away. Because there was a support system. Of people who, even though I kept disappearing, continued to support me. From a distance. That line was there. They never judged. Stood around me for protection after my escape. As a result, I stayed away. Without them, I might have gone back.

After I fled with the children and things calmed down, the mental problems came.

When I had just left him, he started manipulating me remotely. Through emails and apps. It took weeks before I dared to block him. He went on and on. Sweet as pie, then cursing and shouting, threatening with suicide. He pulled out all the tricks to get me to come back. I heard him in my head all day long. Because he had treated me like that for years. You can't do anything. You are nothing. You're a bad mother. You're lazy. You're stupid. You're bad. You bring out the worst in me.

### **Mental problems**

I was scared during the day, anxious. I was frightened by everything, overstimulated and depressed. I had to take care of the children. By now I had a refurbished house. What remained were mental symptoms. Nightmares, inability to sleep, relapses. It was terrible. I sought help and was diagnosed with PTSD.

The psychological abuse damaged my trust in people and in myself. Even now, years later I am still working on that with a coach.

At a court hearing or an investigation, my PTSD symptoms are there again. It starts with dreaming, lying awake, I become more alert again during the day and I get overexcited more quickly. The little voice (meaning his voice) is still there sometimes. Sometimes it overwhelms me. Then my new life seems too good to be true.

### **What is not helpful**

Safe at Home (Veilig Thuis) has been a big barrier. Because it created even more insecurity.

If a report is made to Safe at Home, a letter is sent afterwards. To our home address, that is. He then knew that a notification had been made. That only made the situation worse. He then thought the report came from me, but it came from the police officer who had a bad feeling. Then he started watching me even more.

What also didn't help was that after my flight I had to have a meeting with him and staff from Safe at Home. I went there. Terrified. And yes, there were social workers there, but it was crazy. There was psychological violence. I was afraid of him. And they let me sit so close to the perpetrator and expected proper communication. They think two adults should be able to do that together. For the sake of the children. I was once told that if I continued to do nothing, there was a chance I would be held responsible too. I was not standing up for the safety of the children. When I did, by fleeing, I had to have a conversation with him to try to communicate like adults. For the sake of the children, they said. It was horrible. He was acting very nasty. And I just sat there. We had to go outside at the same time afterwards.

### **Never received recognition**

I never received recognition for what happened over the past 20 years. Not at Safe at Home, there it's all about 'how are we going to move forward?' What are you going to do differently for the sake of the children? As if you fled for your own fun. Everything is about communication improvement while this is about domestic violence. I never got recognition from Safe at Home or the Child Protective Services. Never.

In all the reports, the goal is described as communication improvement between parents. My ex often sent dozens of emails. I had not yet realized that this was stalking. For example, I would send him a monthly update on how the kids were doing. Then I got many e-mails back. With abusive language, insults and criticism. Result: stress. Because I had to read it and explain a lot again, resulting in even more emails. He didn't stop, even when called on it. And yet the reports hammered on communication improvement. With a man who continued to psychologically harass me. Only when he started harassing the children as well did they see that it was not helpful and that he could not possibly communicate decently.

I once said the following to a Council investigator: "You don't send someone who has PTSD after fighting in a war (a soldier) back into the war zone. You do send me back".

It is so difficult to accept for yourself that it is psychological violence when the authorities don't give it that label. You quickly think you are exaggerating. You want to tell the truth, and they call it 'slinging mud'. Even though it really happened to you.

It is a barrier to ask for help or to leave if psychological violence is not recognized.



**Call it psychological violence!**

We must stop calling psychological violence a “complex divorce” or “divorce battle”. We also need to recognize that leaving a partner does not mean the violence stops. With me, it continued. It continued for years after we fled. The emails, sometimes dozens a day. The text messages to the kids. Until we blocked him and he could no longer send messages or call, only then did it stop and when the police had a conversation with him (a stop call).

**Know the signs**

I think there should be more awareness about the signs of psychological violence. At Safe at Home, with judges, lawyers. If it's not recognized ... the right action is not taken. Take victims' signs and fears seriously. Offer safety. Don't say Safe at Home will provide for your safety if you are expected by that organization to sit down and communicate with your ex, who is a perpetrator.

**Criminalization would have helped**

With me, it certainly would have helped if psychological violence had been criminalized because then I would have reported it. Now it just didn't make sense. The damage of psychological violence is enormous. I don't think I will ever completely overcome that, and I will have to learn to deal with that. Fortunately, I have a very positive attitude, and I am fortunate to have the resources and the right people around me. If I had been able to report it, it might have stopped sooner. And I might have left sooner, too.

### 3. LIESBETH

Before I tell my personal story, let me explain what psychological violence is.

#### **A hostage situation in your home**

If psychological violence is understood as coercive control, I would describe it as: a hostage situation in your own home. A pattern of behaviour that causes the perpetrator to completely control you and control your life. A victim is always concerned with maintaining harmony and preventing outbreaks of violence. These outbursts of violence can be physical, sexual, as well as psychological and/or emotional.

#### **Language matters**

I believe that we can only talk about the severity of psychological violence if we use the right language. That is why I will never speak of something like a “toxic relationship”. A relationship is based on love, trust and reciprocity, as well as consent. When there is a situation of coercive control, all these components do not exist. The relationship is not based on consent, and it is not voluntary because a victim is absolutely not allowed to leave, and the violence worsens when the victim makes an attempt to get away. There is no reciprocity: the victim gives, the perpetrator takes and determines. There is no love or trust. The perpetrator does not love the victim and will drop them as soon as they no longer need the victim. Moreover, the perpetrator has isolated the victim and the victim thinks he/she trusts the perpetrator. Moreover, it is his/her only real relationship. Since the victim is controlled and there are threats of violence if the victim would leave, I think the word **hostage** is appropriate.

A victim does not immediately end up in a situation of coercive control. A foundation must be built that allows the abuse/maltreatment to take place later. A relationship of trust is built. The perpetrator is likely to convince the victim that this relationship is unique, creating an “us versus them” mentality: we understand each other, we are the same, we are different from others, etc. The perpetrator will speak ill of other people, both in his/her life and in the victim’s life. The perpetrator will assign the victim a special role: you understand me, you are the most important person in my life, etc. There will be an element of threat, think: if you leave me I will commit suicide; you will leave me one day because everyone leaves me; if you leave me I will not be able to take care of myself, etc.

Another relevant word is **gaslighting**. This is a form of manipulation in which the victim’s reality is denied or questioned. You can also speak of **brainwashing**. A person who is gaslighted, is brainwashed. A victim is stripped of his or her own experience and programmed, as it were, with the experience of the perpetrator. An important example: it is instilled in the victim that he/she him/herself is bad, the perpetrator is not.

### **Psychological incidents of violence**

In my “relationship” there was coercive control, and I was always afraid of incidents of violence. These were not physical or sexual. These incidents of violence were purely psychological and emotional. My partner changed from the normal, gentle, loving person who treated me equally, to someone who without emotion or compassion verbally razed me to the ground, and only stopped doing so when he felt like it. Begging, crying, whatever I did, it changed nothing. These humiliations and intimidations could last for hours - since they took place in my own studio apartment, I had nowhere to go, not even to another room.

### **No escape**

I think every victim of coercive control fears for his/her life. My perpetrator threatened not to kill me, but to kill himself. He would harm himself if I left him - but if I did not obey him, I made his life “so unbearable” that he threatened to harm himself as well. In this way I could not do anything. All the people close to me were manipulated by him. If the victim is being abused at home, and people close to the perpetrator do not disapprove, but even agree that the victim is wrong, there is no escape.

### **Body could no longer cope with the humiliation**

The coercive control and violence lasted “only” eight months. Before this violence began, I was a happy, healthy woman who worked, got an education, had many hobbies and interests - in short, was full of life. I loved my partner, lived with him, loved our shared home very much and felt very safe with him. This was the longest relationship in my life, and I had gone through fire for my partner.

When I found out my partner was cheating, I wanted to leave him, and the control and violence started. Eight months later, it left me unmoved when it looked like my partner was going to kill himself when I left our house and didn’t respond to his calls. I couldn’t take it anymore and had to leave; my body couldn’t take it anymore. I had lost so much weight that I was close to being underweight and was constantly sick. I slept poorly, thought about suicide during the last months and was completely removed from who I had been. The only thing I still went out for was to run errands, walk the dog or go to work. Everything else was gone. I barely saw and talked to my friends and could no longer go to my education. I no longer had interests, curiosity or happiness: a body that has been in survival mode for so long is not concerned with that.

### **Brainwashed**

Once I was in safety (that is, had blocked my ex and his family everywhere and had new housing), I gained back my interests, curiosity, happiness and my personality, but I did have post traumatic stress syndrome (PTSD). Moreover, I was really brainwashed. It took months and intensive therapy until I began to understand what I had been through. Until I could believe and feel that my version of the story was really true.



I think I'm pretty far along in my recovery now. I no longer suffer much from the PTSD, courtesy of about 10 EMDR sessions, lots of other therapy and rest. I also no longer suffer from the brainwashing. It takes a very long time to stop doubting your own story and to really understand the magnitude of what was done to you.

I have seen a very dark side of humanity. I have been used and abused. Someone tried - very successfully but thank God not completely - to dim the light in my eyes. Many women cannot recount this because they have been killed. Then there are a lot of men and women who cannot recount this because they cannot escape. Not because they are "weak," but because their partner's grip is too strong; because they do not have enough help and support. Then there are many people who left their (ex) partner but will never completely escape the grip of their abuser, because their children are used against them in a divorce. I consider myself really lucky that 1. I am still here, 2. I did not allow myself to be alienated from my friends and family, 3. I found the right information in time to realize what was going on, and 4. my partner was hospitalized at the time of my escape.

### **Step by step**

Realizing that it was psychological violence came to me step by step. I had to study partner violence for my degree. As a result, I read mostly sources from the United Kingdom where psychological violence is criminalized, so I could not deny that it was happening in my home. Despite this, I have long thought that my partner did not do this on purpose and that it was because of his mental health. One of my best friends is a family doctor. She helped me realize that perhaps all perpetrators are mentally ill.

### **Seeking help in secret**

I secretly sought help, and through some wandering ended up at a support group. I found the testimonies of other women inconceivable - I thought this was my unique problem, but everything was happening exactly the same to the other women. That definitely opened my eyes.

### **Strange information**

I started at Safe at Home. All they could offer was to refer me to a social worker. The social worker sent me on to Victim Support Netherlands. Victim Support Netherlands couldn't offer me anything. Then, by googling, I ended up at FIOM. They offered me a support group for victims in the city. They may offer an individual support program afterwards: unfortunately, I no longer lived in the same city at that time. In my then hometown, no other help was available. FIOM's support group was good because I was in contact with other victims. Nevertheless, the social workers offered strange information that, especially after I read a lot of scientific research myself in retrospect, just wasn't true. They mainly made us believe that we ourselves sought out wrong men, which would have to do with our own 'bad childhood'.

### **No help from the police**

I reported a threat to the police. I already knew that psychological violence is not punishable in the

Netherlands but had decided (in consultation with a family member who has worked for the police for a long time) to make a report in order to build up a file. The police processed the report but did not give me any further help or suggestions.

### **The Listening Line and The Lost Self Foundation**

The only agencies I got direct help from were the Listening Line (once when I called in high distress, they offered adequate help - they listened very well, allowing me to get back on my feet for a while) and The Lost Self Foundation (Het Verdwenen Zelf). The Lost Self Foundation offers very targeted and, as far as I am concerned, indispensable help to recover from psychological violence. Without their information I would never have been able to understand what I really went through.

### **“Every couple has an argument from time to time.”**

It is worth mentioning that my partner was getting mental health treatment our entire relationship. He was in therapy, and I went with him regularly. As soon as the psychological violence began, I insisted that he be admitted. After all, I was very frightened by his behaviour. I had always feared that he would commit suicide and/or collapse if I left him, and indeed now he seemed completely beyond reason. I was involved in both the preliminary process and the admission itself.

As soon as the violence began at our home, I always communicated this to the social workers. I would read my notes to his psychiatrist describing what was going on at my home. I have pictures of these notes, so I can still read that I explained very clearly how afraid I was of my partner. The psychiatrist did not recognize the signs and let us go with the credo: every couple has arguments from time to time.

### **Zero communication**

My ex was admitted to a clinic for personality problems. Within the first few weeks it became clear that he was causing insecurity in the group and that he had narcissistic traits, and/or an actual narcissistic personality disorder. Despite this, there was 0.0000 communication with me as a partner - despite the fact that it was clear that we were living together and he was released every weekend. On the weekend before admission, I emailed the psychiatrist that things were really not going well with my partner, and asking if we could schedule a phone call, as I was very concerned. The psychiatrist replied that she could not call or speak to me because of privacy rules.

Only after I had already left my partner did I have an appointment with a so-called ‘family coach’ at this mental health facility. I could only make this appointment because my ex and I had seen a flyer about it at the location. This coach had seen my ex’s file and was able to explain to me a little more about what it’s like being a next of kin. He also saw that I was already broken, and thus he came into the picture too late.

In an ideal world, the psychiatrist would have taken me aside after my cry for help and given me a helpline. That would have made a world of difference.

### **Little knowledge in the Netherlands**

It would have helped a lot if I had known that psychological violence existed. My image of partner violence was: husband beats wife. That was it. I had no idea. I am highly educated and googled and read as much as I could. Except for The Lost Self Foundation, there were really only English sources. There is already a lot of research on coercive control and psychological violence, so there is so much knowledge, but not in the Netherlands yet. I published a book about my experiences, and the reaction from readers is: I finally have words for what happened to me, I finally understand it now. We victims now have to do everything on our own.

I have a very good psychotherapist who has helped me very much in recovery. Nevertheless, I had to hand her the information; she has no additional knowledge about psychological violence from her training. In an ideal world, social workers would be able to tell you what is going on, instead of the other way around. In an ideal world, victims would be treated like cult dropouts. They would get help with deprogramming everything you have been led to believe, to bring you back to your own perspective.

### **Hostage situations**

In an ideal world, the police act as they do in hostage situations. As soon as a situation of coercive control becomes apparent, the alleged perpetrator should be taken away. It seems pretty clear to me that that is the only solution to prevent femicide, for example. An offender will never give up, provided he/she gets fed up with the victim and moves on to someone else. Now, as a victim, you can do everything the right way (leave, call the police, secure your home) and still be murdered. Or be stalked and abused for years to come.

### **What needs to change NOW**

There needs to be help for women who want to escape. That there is no help now costs lives. I find it inconceivable that this is not taken more seriously. There should be a helpline, or the police should be trained to the point where you get at least some advice on how to get away safely.

There needs to be recognition that psychological violence exists and recognition of the severity of this type of violence. It is agonizing and infantilizing that in the Netherlands, so few people understand what psychological violence is, what its impact is, and that there is such a widely held assumption that partner violence only happens to weak women with bad childhoods.

### **If he had stolen my watch, I could have done something**

I personally benefited a lot (and still do) from the fact that coercive control has been criminalized in the UK since 2015. That really made me realize that what was going on in my home was not normal. I experience agony that my ex could have stolen a watch from me, and I could have done something. Now he destroyed my life and was able to just walk away. It makes me feel that my life has been worth very little. It has deeply affected my sense of justice. And, of course, not only how it has been with me. This applies to ALL the people who have gone through something similar with whom I am now in contact. And for the people who have not been able to recount it.

**Additional advice for policy makers**

I would very much like us not to be dismissed as weak hysterical women who must have brought it upon themselves. This view costs lives. It is harmful and unsubstantiated nonsense.

I would like to see partner violence become AT LEAST a 'high impact crime'. Then it will be treated like any other predictable murder. I would want recognition of the failure to protect women whose lives it has cost. I would also like recognition that femicide is just the tip of the iceberg. That there are people who have committed suicide out of misery; murdered their partners out of desperation and are serving their sentences for it; are no longer allowed to see their children (parental repudiation); and/or otherwise lose their lives, freedom and dignity to coercive control.







## 4. ELIN

Psychological violence is violence by which women (but also men when they are victims, in this paper I speak of 'women') are put under social-emotional pressure and restrictions are imposed on their freedom. Often with the aim of stroking the ego of the aggressor or positioning themselves as better than or ruling over the other. This can involve both verbal and physical (threatening) violence. It involves forms of belittling the woman, humiliating her, making threats, putting her under pressure and (emotionally) neglecting her.

### **'Get away from him anyway'**

Psychological abuse caused me to remain in an unhealthy situation longer than was desirable for both my own well-being and that of the children. Eventually, all the events made me so dejected that at one point I asked myself if it wouldn't be better if I weren't there anymore. It gives an enormous feeling of loneliness, the more so because those around me often do not understand: 'get away from him'/'because you stay, you keep it going yourself'. Social services are also often not decisive enough to offer sufficient safety and conditions to be able and willing to leave the unhealthy situation.

### **Now I realize how unhealthy the relationship was**

I realized pretty quickly, after a few months, that the situation was unhealthy. But how unhealthy it actually was I only realize now, almost eight years later. Now that he is confined and I have more distance from him and there is supervision of him.

The prison system is of no use to you in terms of counselling as a partner and victim. Violent behaviour is even facilitated in prison from within. For example, there is a pilot in prison to allow inmates to make unlimited phone calls on cell. That may be nice. But not in the case of a perpetrator of psychological violence who takes this opportunity to make nearly a hundred calls a day. This is not considered at all. People look away when you report it. Saving their own butts by covering up abuses is more important to staff and management than ensuring the safety for the families outside.

### **Reporting a strangulation would not do much according to police**

The help I was offered was not effective in my situation. After I was physically assaulted, with an attempted strangulation, I was asked if I wanted to report it. Since no injuries were seen (I was able to tear myself away in time so the spots didn't turn blue until a day later), it was indicated by the police that a report wouldn't actually accomplish much because of the lack of visible injuries. It was my word against his. Within a day he would probably be outside again.

### **He was the problem, not me**

An alternative was a restraining order, as if I had any illusions that he would comply. Finally, a shelter was offered. Not an option for me either because that would mean sitting somewhere far away in anonymity, not being able to do my job anymore and therefore missing income to support the family. When I asked if my partner could not be forcibly helped, since he is the problem, I got the answer that nothing was possible.

Then my partner committed a serious crime and was released pending his appeal. Even though all the information was known, they saw no need for an ankle bracelet to monitor him. At my request, Safe at Home became involved, so he knew there was some control. Arrangements were also made with Safety Home (Veiligheidshuis) when I would ask for help. After a hearing it was decided to put him back in detention. At that point, my partner became life threatening. It had previously been agreed in the established Safety Plan that I would call the emergency line 112 if the situation became unsafe.

### **112 stopped the call twice**

When I felt compelled to call 112, the police ended the phone call twice. There is a recording of the second call which is also in Amnesty's possession. Then the police called with apologies after my neighbours also raised the alarm about the dire situation that had arisen. There was a lot of miscommunications and it took a long time to get a search warrant. It is a miracle that nothing bad happened.

### **Take the aggressor away**

What I would have needed were agencies that take you seriously and have resources to take away the aggressor, instead of trying to put the victim away. In addition, you should expect the justice system to detain someone who is dangerous to his surroundings. And the lady and gentleman from 112 who ended my phone calls for help should have been fired for leaving someone in a helpless state who was raising a cry for help in accordance with agreements with Safety Home.

### **Different approach needed**

Knowledgeable people should be given the opportunity to deal with the aggressor. The approach must be reversed. Not the victim should be put away but the perpetrator. Signs of psychological violence must be picked up sooner and seen as a harbinger of more serious violence. In such a case there must be a case manager who connects all the organizations with each other and who keeps an overview so that no one is working alongside or against each other.

In addition, it is important that victims are not made responsible for the offender's treatment process. For example, I was pressured to call the offender so that his supervisors could see if he was progressing or not. Why should victims have to cooperate with that and experience that pressure?

### **Criminalization would help**

I think criminalization of psychological violence would help. If psychological violence becomes punishable, you have more options in the law to deal with the perpetrator and thus better protect the victim.

For me, this would have helped so that he did not slip further down the spiral of criminal behaviour. The crime he is being detained for has nothing to do with me. If he had been arrested earlier for what he did to me, a lot of people would have been spared serious suffering.

I think the aspect of psychological violence as a precursor to more antisocial behaviour is also still very much underestimated.

In the end, his crime made me a victim of threats and violence again, albeit by the people he got involved with.

It is often said to leave the offender, but the question is whether a woman always wants that. Often, she wants the violence to stop and the partner to be helped. Also, because there are still things that links them together, for example, their children.

### **Politicians engage with victims**

I would recommend that policymakers engage with victims and hear from them how they experienced things. I believe the stories of these women can contribute to insights into how counselling can be designed more effectively. In addition, the entire criminal justice chain needs to be better designed to protect women from psychological violence. As I reported, there is still too little attention within the justice system for the safety of the partner of the detainee.

## 5. EVELINE

Psychological violence is verbally belittling, humiliating, threatening and frightening another person. Sometimes it doesn't even involve words, but body language or compelling looks. The perpetrator manipulates and gaslights in such a way that the victim constantly doubts themselves, loses all self-worth or feels out of control of their own thoughts. As a victim, you fear that the perpetrator will do something physical to you or your loved ones. You fear the outbursts when you don't live up to expectations.

### **What psychological abuse does to you**

I lost my self-esteem and constantly doubted myself; my personality, my thoughts, my appearance, my values, my feelings, my femininity and my skills as a mother.

On every level, I became insecure until I no longer had an opinion of my own, kept my mouth shut and didn't answer back. Because of the threats made by my partner, I feared for myself and my family. I was afraid something would happen to us if I did not do what I was asked. I was afraid that no one would then know that he had done it. In addition, I was afraid to raise my concerns with others, because I did not know what the consequences would be if he found out. Shame also played a big role. My fear was so strong that eventually he didn't have to say anything. His body language or look was enough for me to completely shut down and look at the ground. "As long as I don't make eye contact, nod yes and don't say anything, it will blow over" I thought. It is a long and intensive process to recover from this. Talks with the psychologist, EMDR therapy, sessions with an Intimate Terror expert, Trauma Sensitive Yoga, etc. It was hard to find myself again...and it still is. Who am I really? What are my thoughts? I had to learn to feel again and had to find my values again.

### **A camera in the house**

I realized it wasn't right when fights kept breaking out before I left and when I was away he would call incredibly often for the stupidest things. Every 15 to 20 min he would call me or send me messages. At first he did this mostly when I went to parties or work activities but for me it only became visible when family gatherings, birthdays and holidays became an issue for him and I was addressed by those closest to me. It only really became apparent when my mother was diagnosed with cancer and I couldn't be there for her during her chemo treatment...but I let that pass me by as well. I think the last straw was when we had a camera in the house and, when he was away, he would check on me through the camera, no longer let me leave the house alone (even to take the kids to school and/or run errands) and I no longer dared to go to work, knowing that a verbal or physical attack awaited me when I got home.

### **What I needed from the various agencies**

Because the psychological violence turned into a domestic violence case, the children and I ended up being taken care of by agencies and the women's shelter.

### **Police:**

- A year before I was actually removed from the situation, I had tried to file a police report. I was with family then, without my ex-partner (then partner) and finally had the opportunity and courage to file a report. The police sent me home with an appointment, which was to take place two days after. A lot can happen in two days; how could I slip away again? I started thinking about what the consequences could be, I lost the courage I had gathered to take this step, I started doubting if this was the right step. I had already been brainwashed to the point that by a sweet gesture on his part, I regained hope that everything would change.

**I needed this:** You should have taken my report seriously and acted immediately, because it took an awful lot of courage to take this step.

- The police could have intervened earlier, as my sisters had been in contact with the police and Safe at Home the night before the arrest. My sisters had told them that they were in contact with me at that time and asked for help, but the police indicated that they couldn't do anything unless I called them myself. Something impossible in such a situation, since the offender is constantly listening in. They only intervened the next day, after a relative of my ex-partner drove to the police station to file a report. At first the family member was also sent away, but there was an officer who called her back and wanted to hear her out. Eventually they took her seriously and my ex-partner was arrested.

**I needed this:** You should have taken my sisters' notification seriously, I could not call myself. I waited until he was asleep and did not dare to sleep myself, not knowing if I would wake up then.

### **Safe at Home:**

- After the first report made to Safe at Home, we received a home visit. We were both present, so I didn't get a chance to speak freely. They thought we would work it out together. The file was closed and returned to us.

**I needed this:** You should have made two separate appointments, with the parents separate from each other, on location or in a neutral setting, so that both parents could speak freely.

- Safe at Home was barely accessible when the children and I ended up in care.

**I needed this:** I was full of questions and would have liked to have them answered in this stressful situation. I felt like I was on my own... and I was.

- A visiting arrangement between the father and our children had been initiated. When we moved, there was ambiguity among the agencies as to how the visiting arrangement would continue.

**This is what I needed:** That Safe at Home had not simply passed our case on to Youth Protection without doing proper research.

### **Youth Protection:**

- The Salvation Army Youth Protection Agency's only job was to make sure that the father and children had a proper visiting arrangement. After about six months, they only started a conversation with me and delved into the case. They did not listen to what we had to say, did not have a conversation with the children, but stuck to the protocol instead of thinking out of the box.

**This is what I needed:** Someone who didn't see us as a number, but had actually studied the case. Someone who had listened to me as well as to the father and the children. Someone who had been easily accessible.

### **Prosecutor's Office (OM):**

- The District Attorney met with me, asked how I would like to see the outcome in court, and met with me again a week before we had to go to court to see if I was still expecting the same thing. The verdict of the judge was: mandatory psychological and financial help, help with housing, no-contact order unless it concerns the children, a location order at the home address with a probationary period. If violated, he must go to jail.

**I needed this:** n/a

### **Social Welfare:**

- The shelter took us in for an emergency bed. It looked and felt like an old prison. The strange thing was that I was not assigned a social worker. During the intake, I was asked how I envisioned my future place to live, to which I replied that eventually I wanted to go back to the city I came from. They immediately indicated that this was not possible. I had to register in that municipality where the emergency bed was and we would then most likely be assigned housing there, so there was a good chance that we would have to stay there. We had nothing in that municipality; no network, no ties, nothing at all ... while having a social network is very important to recover.

**This is what I needed:** A social worker, the feeling of safety, being heard and understood. Any questions I had were answered by another resident and not a social worker.

### **Protected Shelter:**

- The shelter in another city did a lot to offer practical support. This included: appointing a social worker, arranging benefits (because your whole life comes to a halt on every level at once), making sure the financial situation was clear, alerting me to an application for referral for a psychologist, alerting me to look for a school for the children, etc. In addition, they offered help for the children in the form of play therapy and talks, initiating contact between father and children, being in contact with father to keep communication open about the children, etc.

**I needed this:** n/a

### **Stay Group:**

- The Stay Group took care of us by offering an emergency bed and checking on us two or three times a day to see how we were doing and what they could do for us. They also worked on transferring us to a safe place. They arranged for me to take training on intimate terror and talk to an expert about it. I was able to take Trauma Sensitive Yoga. There was care and support for the children so I could have conversations and take training. I was assigned a social and legal worker who could support me and the offered in-house youth services for the children. The Stay Group says that they involve the (former) partner to make the situation safe again. However, this was not offered to me.

**This is what I needed:** What I did need was for my ex-partner to be involved in the process. Then the process would have been more successful and the restoration of contact between father and children would have been easier. As a result, the dynamics between the father and me could have changed for the better.

**Tools needed to support my children.** I would have liked to have received tools to be able to guide/care for my children in dealing with their father. Perhaps his personality disorder will be suppressed through medication, but his narcissism will not. I need to teach my children how to deal with this so that they know it is not their fault and they do not end up in the same pattern as their father. He grew up in a home where domestic and psychological violence played a major role. Although he disapproves of this, he has taken this with him as baggage and the past repeats itself, only now in his own relationship.

### **Probation:**

**This was what I needed:** I had hoped that my ex-partner had not been placed close to us in an assisted living program. I expected that my ex-partner would have been assigned a social worker to guide him, so that there would actually be change for the children in the future with their father (and that someone would watch over, that he would keep his appointments). I would have expected that there would be monitoring, that he would get psychological help, because the judge imposed it. I expected that there would be consequences if the imposed measures were not fulfilled.

### **Recommendations**

- Make psychological violence a criminal offense. The recovery process of physical (not permanent) injury is relatively short compared to the recovery process of psychological injury.
- Make psychological violence visible. Not only in the media but start doing this already in schools. Especially when children are still young, because one can encounter psychological violence at an early age. Teach young people to spot red flags early on. It doesn't happen overnight; it sneaks in and occurs in every layer of society.

- If someone has gathered the courage/ found the space to file a report, act immediately and don't let them wait. It may be too late by then and he/she has done something to himself/ herself or has been harmed.
- Take reports from loved ones seriously. Especially if it is indicated that they are in contact with the victim and the person asks for help but cannot call themselves. In most situations, it is not possible to call or go to a police station yourself because the perpetrator is almost always there.
- Safe at Home: Speak to both parties separately. Make a separate appointment on site, in a neutral setting, so that both parties can speak freely.

### **Legal consequences**

I think when psychological violence is punishable, people think twice to commit this form of violence. It is a form of exercising power, and one does it consciously, so it has been thought about. Currently, they get away with it easily because it has no legal consequences.

For me, criminalization would certainly help, because the psychological violence is still going on. Even though there has been a ruling on the domestic violence, there is no punishment for the psychological violence. I think when psychological violence becomes punishable, he will think twice before sending a nasty message, calling me to insult me, making a nasty comment or terrorizing me by standing by my balcony screaming. I'd most likely really have my life back then. Although I am now physically out of the situation, the mental violence continues.

So, I think criminalization of psychological violence can help address it. No one is eager for prison, community service or imposed psychological help. In fact, the latter, in addition to the punishment imposed, should always be imposed when it comes to psychological violence, domestic violence and femicide cases. You often see and hear that the perpetrator has trauma or had a difficult childhood. With such a background, an offender has developed into the controlling predator he is today. He probably never received the proper help to deal with it.

### **Additional recommendations for policymakers**

Don't cut back on education and care. We have a severe shortage of teachers, whilst they should be the foundation for the new generation. They are, unfortunately, partly the stable factor for children, as both parents often work and the average child today spends more time in school and day care, than with their own parents. They largely ensure that our children learn to function in society.

We have a shortage of good healthcare personnel, whilst they should be providing us with help in situations where we need it. For me, this shortage was evident in the assistance I received. My social worker had a burnout 3 times in 1.5 years, so I had to make do with a substitute who did not know my case. Youth Protection, Safe at Home and Probation are not easily accessible and/or are always replaced by a new contact person, for the same reason. Because of this, the help we receive is not consistent. Something that is unacceptable, given that you are talking about someone's life and therefore, as a social worker, you also have partial control over someone's life.



If I were a policy maker, I would request an investigation to find out how and where things can go so wrong in the provision of assistance. Request reports from the agencies involved and find out why the help that should be offered is not being offered. I would offer training to the agencies on what psychological violence means and what the consequences are so that they know better what they are dealing with.

## 6. TANJA

Psychological abuse is the worst and most devastating of all the abuse I have had to endure. It is literally *a death by a thousand cuts*. It is humiliation, isolation, making you feel that you have gone mad, that you are the culprit for everything. Prolonged psychological abuse literally causes brain damage, and this has an extreme effect on your functioning as a human being. Your quality of life deteriorates severely, even years after the violence has stopped. So, it is actually physical abuse, because it gives long-term physical injury. The perpetrator gains ultimate control over the victim, through isolation, gaslighting (this is where someone twists the truth to make another person doubt themselves) and financial control, for example. Your identity, health and functioning are severely damaged, and it takes years to recover. If it can recover at all, because I will never fully heal after what I went through.

### **It does not stop when you flee**

I broke down brick by brick as a person until there was nothing left of me. I went from a powerful woman with self-confidence and zest for life, to a heap of misery, having panic attacks several times a week, thinking I had gone crazy and no longer wanted to live. Because the violence had a slow pace and was almost hidden but systematic in nature, I didn't realize it until it was already too late, and I couldn't go anywhere. It started with him telling me: "Just lie down you are tired, here you have a cup of tea" and it slowly changed over the years into "you can't leave the house at all, you are a wreck, you need to stay at home." The psychological abuse left me with a complex post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). I no longer know who I am, what I like and don't like, I no longer trust anyone, and the despair I feel is often unbearable. I will never be the same person I once was; something is forever broken. It affects everything, even now that I've been away from him for a few years. It affects my self-confidence, my identity, my role as a mother, my health, my social and professional life. It affects every area of my existence. And even when you run away, it continues. There is no escape, and there is no one to help you stop it. All you can do is endure it and try to keep standing for your child.

### **Intimate terror**

I only realized it was domestic violence when I had been in the relationship for five to six years. Because I confided in someone and that person told me it wasn't normal. When I left after a relationship of more than ten years, my lawyer made me do a timeline. She told me that I was dealing with intimate terror. That was the first time I heard that terminology. After requesting my file, it turned out that the Stay Group had determined the intimate terror a year before, but they did not communicate that to anyone.

### **No one really did anything**

I didn't understand myself that I was in a relationship of intimate terror. Because of the web of manipulation my ex had spun, I thought I was the culprit because I was sick. Because of this, it was long misjudged as situational violence. Only when the violence turned to our daughter did I start raising the alarm, but this fell on deaf ears. No one really did anything. After more than fifteen reports from me, my family, the family doctor, the police and various social workers, Safe at Home still did nothing, no investigation at all. My ex only had to say he was in treatment and nobody did anything. Even when my ex was diagnosed with the combination of narcissistic and compulsive personality disorder, no one did anything. To this day all I hear is "you can't change him, you just have to learn to stand up to it and change yourself." No one is stopping this! No one really wants to identify the patterns.

### **The pattern is not seen**

People are looking at isolated incidents, not patterns. And that is the biggest problem. In addition, people think that as long as a perpetrator is getting treatment, that it is not serious. But my ex managed to tell treatment providers over and over again what they wanted to hear. With lies, he made them believe he was a victim. The agencies (unintentionally) became a pawn in his psychological violence. I was never taken seriously. My daughter was never heard. Several punishable physical and psychological violence incidents occurred during his treatment. The treatment providers were aware of these incidents but never reported them to Safe at Home.

### **Treatment providers part of psychological abuse**

Even though I kept pointing out to his therapist that nothing was changing at home, they kept telling other caregivers that father was working so hard and that he was showing so much improvement. This not only perpetuated the violence for years, but they also made it worse because he started using their words to *gaslight* me even further and make me feel like I was crazy. And still to this day, they are part of the psychological abuse. Because of this, my trauma was caused not only by my ex's psychological abuse but also by his treatment providers.

### **Map patterns and believe victims**

The patterns of perpetrators must be identified, and the truth must be established by comparing the perpetrator's files and statements to various authorities. Examine audio recordings of victims and believe victims when they finally dare to come forward.

### **Psychological violence also harmful to children**

Children need more protection! Psychological violence is also incredibly harmful to them and should be factored into risk assessments. One must let go of stereotypes. Not all victims are just scared. Some do talk but are not believed. Manipulative behaviour on the part of the perpetrator ensures that they use the system and the support services to continue the abuse and maintain their coercion and control. The red flags are easy to recognize.

### **The system as a weapon**

Criminalization of psychological abuse is essential. Social workers, police, justice, youth protectors, etc. now say to me “We see something, but we can’t and shouldn’t do anything with it because it’s not punishable.” Children and victims of intimate terror are not protected in the Netherlands from psychological abuse. The system keeps the abuse going partly because psychological violence is not punishable and perpetrators have free rein to continue and use the system as a weapon. By the system I mean all organizations and agencies involved around domestic violence (from Safe at Home, parent and child team, police, prosecutor, youth care, the Stay Group).

### **Criminalization essential**

If psychological violence had been criminalized, my case would have looked very different. The pattern would have become visible and not just the incidents I had evidence of. Criminalization can improve the safety of me and my daughter even now, because without it, it doesn’t stop. The social services continue to allow violence because they don’t understand or see it. What I mean is that often social services do not see that the perpetrator continues the abuse under their eyes. And if you bring this up as a victim you are gagged with phrases like “you have to stop talking negatively about your partner/ex” or with “we don’t see it” or with “we can see that something is going on but are not allowed or able to do anything”. The lack of knowledge about all forms of psychological abuse is enormous! With psychological abuse, people think black and white, they think that it is swearing and threatening. Often it is much more subtle than that.

An example: your partner has given you a lecture at home, that you don’t keep the house clean enough, that you are a bad mother, that you don’t look well. Then you go to a birthday, and in front of you your partner says to the birthday person, “How good your house looks, and what a beautiful dress you and your daughters have on, what a great mother you are! Many people should take an example from that” while you get a look. At that point, the perpetrator has given the victim a sneer while no one notices, then when the victim gets sad or angry, her partner will point right away and say “you see what I have to deal with? She’s really not okay” causing the bystanders to think there is something wrong with the victim. This happens again and again under the eyes of social workers, who do not understand what is happening and indeed begin to think that the victim is the problem. They thereby perpetuate the violence, unintentionally becoming an extension of the perpetrator. I have experienced this in virtually every part of the system, right up to and including the prosecutor, who threw my ex’s lies in my face and said, “I’ve heard stories about you too” So yes! Right now, the agencies perpetuate the system of violence and often even participate in it.

### **Micro-war zone**

Victims are not protected now while they are entitled to it as human beings. I live in a micro war zone almost every day, even now that I am away from him. Criminalization could stop this.

**Advice to policymakers**

I would talk to victims. They can talk about the despair of not being able to escape psychological violence, of not being able to heal. Because as long as the abuse continues you can't get successful trauma therapy because that doesn't work in an active situation. Human and children's rights are being violated every day. I feel I have no right to freedom, to happiness, to rest in the Netherlands. You can save lives by recognizing the seriousness of psychological violence and stopping it by criminalization. This stops the systematic abuse that victims of intimate terror endure daily.

Patterns need to be identified, not just isolated incidents. And there needs to be much more knowledge about recognizing and documenting these patterns.

## 7. JESS

When you experience psychological violence, you are trapped in a pattern of control and coercion. You are constantly belittled, subtly or directly threatened, manipulated, intimidated and confused. And the nasty thing is, you can't see that your cage is getting smaller and smaller. You slowly become totally isolated from the people around you, become completely subservient to the person who abuses you.

### **Beginning of the relationship**

It began beautifully, like in a movie. I was twenty and wanted to date. I met him on an app. We had discussions about art house movies and politics, such as whether Iran or Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman was the greatest danger to the Middle East. He was sweet, just stopping by my work, whispering sweet words in my ear, doing everything to make me feel like I was the most important person in his life. He said I was so good to him. I tried to stay cool and say this was all platonic. There was so much to talk about and so much to share. I wanted to understand him, and he said he really saw me. And slowly I fell in love. Maybe he could be a blanket I could hide under.

But then, without warning, he changed. One wrong word or an innocent misunderstanding, and that same man who had just put me on a pedestal looked at me with eyes full of coldness. His voice, which less than an hour before had been full of softness, became sharp. He blamed me for things I didn't even know were wrong. "Why are you acting like this? You destroy everything. Why do you listen to me so badly?" And then silence followed. And I became hysterically afraid, and I was disgusted with myself. I had done wrong; I was a bad person.

### **Attraction and repulsion**

I was in a vortex of attraction and repulsion. The moments when he loved me felt like a reward I had earned after hours or days of doubt and uncertainty. I wondered what I had done to release that anger in him. Why was it all suddenly different? What had I said, what had I done? And every time, when he looked at me again as he had in the beginning, it felt as if everything would be all right again.

But the pattern repeated itself. Every time I thought we were back on the right track, he pushed me away again. One mistake, one moment of uncertainty on my part, and he slammed the door shut again. For a moment, he seemed unreachable. I ran after him, again and again, determined to open that door again. I begged to have those moments of tenderness back, as if it was my job to make him happy.

That cycle was destroying me. I felt torn between those loving moments and the cold rejections, caught in a game I could never win. The peace was always short-lived, and I knew I could never

fully relax. I slept poorly. At every beep, I checked my phone. In time, I stopped meeting up with friends because I always had to be there for him. Because if I didn't answer in time, I would know it too. And meanwhile, I was still living with my parents: but they didn't see how I was trapped.

This was the poison of the psychological violence: the constant alternation between attraction and repulsion that kept me emotionally confused and dependent. I was so desperate for his love that I didn't realize how entangled I had become in his web.

### **Psychological violence leaves traces**

Psychological violence deeply affected my life in ways I did not fully understand at the time. What began as a seemingly perfect relationship turned into a situation where I was constantly walking on eggshells, being controlled and increasingly losing my self-confidence. For years I felt guilty and ashamed because I felt I had let it happen. How could I, as a strong and independent woman, end up in such a destructive situation?

It took me a long time to realize what was really happening: I was being psychologically abused. Manipulation, humiliation, gaslighting, and isolation left their mark. Occasionally it still creeps into my dreams, and the feeling of danger makes me sick to my stomach. The dependence I felt was so strong that I no longer trusted my own thoughts and decisions. Sometimes I really can't look at that image of myself crying and calling him over and over and begging: that I would do well. That it was all up to me. That he's right and I don't value love. That makes me so sad. That I couldn't see how he was playing me. That he just used all the things I told him in confidence against me.

### **Signals disguised as love**

I wish I could say that I had already left at that first red flag, but unfortunately, I did not. The signals were there, dark and threatening, but they disguised themselves as love. Every time I travelled by train, I had to call him. So I did, always.

That first red flag I remember so well. I stepped off the train and felt the fresh air of the station caress my face. My heart was pounding with excitement because I was going to see one of my best friends again in a long time. All along the journey I had been talking on the phone with him. Even as I walked toward the station exit. "I've arrived at the station," I said with a smile. "I can see her waving already!" My voice was cheerful, but that was not what he wanted to hear. Suddenly he turned cold. "You can't hang up until you say you love me, Jess. Do you hear me?" His words were like an iron grip around my throat, and the mirth evaporated like fog in the sun. I began to laugh, not because I found it funny, but because I found it absurd. We had only been dating for a month, and I didn't want to show that I was actually already in love with him. "Oh, you have to laugh," he said. In his voice I heard sarcasm and menace. "If you don't say it now, I'll block you and you'll never be able to reach me again."

Fear squeezed my stomach. I looked at my friend, who was still waving at me from the distance. "I really need to hang up," I said hastily, feeling the pressure on my chest increase. Before I had given it much thought, I quickly whispered, "I love you." That lie rolled right out of my mouth, forced by his manipulation.

"Good," he said, and it was as if the air pulled out of the room as he hung up. I felt the emptiness around me as I arrived at my friend. She looked at me with surprise and confusion. "Jess, what on earth are you doing?" she asked, the concern in her voice was like a scream in the silence of my thoughts. I believe your deepest girlfriends possess an invisible antenna, a delicate compass that whispers to them when someone they love is slowly fading into the fog.

That was the moment I felt, through that concern of my best friend, that I was doing something that was not right. But every time I thought about it, I had hope that it would get better. And I thought I would leave if things really went wrong.

### **A thousand little knives**

About a month later, the time had come. That night we lay together on his bed watching a movie. Still, we were not romantically together.

I laughed at a scene in the movie and again the storm of words came. He looked at me with a look as sharp as a knife. "You're disgusting and fat," he sneered, his voice full of contempt. The words cut through me, like thousands of tiny knives destroying my self-confidence. Not again, I thought. "No one loves you, Jess," he said. He started to push me away, in a weird playful way. I remember thinking then: what the fuck am I doing? What kind of weird stupid idiot is this? With one last glimmer of pride, I rebelled. I pushed him away, an impulsive action that I immediately regretted. That was when the situation escalated. He started kicking me with his foot, I felt pain in my legs.

Like a shock wave, I woke up. And then came a kind of anger. Also, at myself. Was I so blind? Why am I only waking up now? But also at him: how could you do this to me and enjoy it too. I suddenly saw it all. My heart was pounding in my chest, and I could feel the adrenaline coursing through my veins. This couldn't go on like this. I had to get out of here. I stood up and yelled at him, "You're insane. What's wrong with you? How can you act like this? I can't take this anymore." After that last sentence, I couldn't see him because tears were rolling down my cheeks and blurring my vision.

He seemed to soften. Gestured for me to sit on his lap. Crying, I lay against his chest. He removed the hair from my face and brought his mouth to my ear, "You deserved this," he said. People say that anger is the greatest stimulator, and I couldn't agree more: a kind of primal force came out that I haven't felt before. Within two seconds I was at the door. I looked at him and said, "I never want to see you again." And then left. I never responded to him again, and



believe me, he threatened me often enough. “I know where you live” or “You know I have a gun in this house.” I was terrified but the thought of being with him again really made me a hundred times more scared. I never wanted to be a shadow of myself again. And somewhere I thought he knows this game is finished. I was nothing but a pawn. Now it’s not exciting anymore. After two weeks I heard nothing from him anymore.

### **Lack of awareness**

When I look back on my experience, it is mainly the lack of awareness that affects me. I would have liked so much to have known that what I experienced was psychological violence. That I wasn’t the only one and that many young people who are dating experience these things. It would have helped me tremendously to understand that this was not because of me, but because of the manipulative dynamics of the relationship. That knowledge might have given me the strength to escape sooner.

Because I didn’t realize I was dealing with psychological abuse, I didn’t go to agencies. I had no idea what had happened to me. Only years later when I was researching psychological violence for an article - I am a journalist - did I realize that I had experienced it myself. And I found out that no one wanted to talk about it openly. It’s not taken seriously until you’ve been hit. No one sees that you are already completely shattered inside. I looked for recognition and support, but often I felt I had to prove that my pain was legitimate. Instead, I often met barriers, such as a lack of knowledge about psychological violence among social workers and an overly narrow view of what constitutes violence.

### **Needed a safe space without judgment**

I needed a safe space where I could share my story without judgment, a place where I could learn that what I had experienced was real and not just a naïve childish love with a wrong person. Otherwise, young people can repeatedly end up in relationships where they are mentally destroyed.

### **Legal system not on my side**

Above all, what I miss is a legal system that is on my side. The idea that you can get recognition. Psychological violence is not yet explicitly criminalized in the Netherlands, and that made it so difficult to recognize it and get recognition. The idea that you can knock on the door of the authorities and they will take you seriously, that they will help you make your voice heard, that would have made a difference.

### **Psychological violence in the context of dating**

As far as I am concerned, more attention urgently needs to be paid to the multifaceted nature of psychological violence, especially in the context of dating and early relationships. It is crucial to recognize that psychological violence does not only occur in marriages or long-term relationships, as is often suggested in the media. Many young people experience these forms of violence in

the early stages of their romantic lives. It happens during the time when we discover ourselves, when we learn what love is and how we relate to others.

### **Paralysing effects**

The consequences of these experiences are profound and paralysing. When you encounter psychological abuse while dating, it sets the tone for all your future relationships. You begin to doubt yourself, your worth and what you deserve in a relationship. It not only erodes your self-confidence, but it also affects important choices in your life. If you see yourself as inferior, you're not going to be ambitious. You may even hesitate to pursue your dreams because you think you are not worthy of them.

### **Education and awareness**

What really needs to be improved is the way we talk about and deal with psychological violence. This starts with education and awareness, not only for victims, but also for the entire society. We need to create a culture where psychological violence is recognized, discussed and taken seriously, regardless of the stage of the relationship. This can help educate young people about the signs of manipulation and control so that they can resist unhealthy dynamics sooner.

In addition, agencies, such as social workers and the judiciary, should be better trained to recognize psychological violence in all stages of relationships, including dating. There needs to be an integrated approach where victims receive not only recognition, but also appropriate support. This can be done by creating safe spaces where people can share their experiences, where they can be heard without judgment, and where they can learn that they are not alone.

We also need a clear strategy for prevention and counselling that goes beyond traditional views of relationships. We need to show young people that psychological violence is a serious problem that can happen to anyone, regardless of their situation. By giving them the tools and knowledge to recognize it, we can break the vicious cycle and ensure that future generations are better armed against these forms of violence.

### **Criminalizing psychological violence can help**

I certainly believe that explicit criminalization of psychological violence can help address this problem. It would send a clear message that psychological violence is taken seriously and that there are consequences for those who commit it. For me personally, this would have provided a sense of validation. It would show me that not only are my experiences legitimate, but also that there is a system in place to protect me.

If there were explicit legislation, it would not only give victims the courage to report, but it would also better enable social workers and police to take these cases seriously. It would give them the legal basis to take action even when there is no physical harm. This could lead to greater recognition of psychological violence in society and could ensure that victims get the support they need more quickly.

In addition, it could also help create awareness and education around psychological violence. If the legislation is in place, it could be used in campaigns to educate victims about their rights and make the broader community aware of the impact of psychological violence. All of this would contribute to a culture where psychological violence is not tolerated.

**Advice to Members in Parliament**

To Members in Parliament, my main message is that change is needed, and it cannot wait any longer. It is essential to not only recognize psychological violence as a problem, but to treat it as a priority. This is an opportunity to improve the lives of countless people, especially young victims whose development is affected and whose love lives are greatly affected.



## 8. MEREL

I have experienced psychological violence as part of the more familiar concept: intimate terror/coercive control.

Psychological violence involves bonding with someone through lying and cheating. It is not a loving connection based on equality. But a bond, which is consciously created as a precursor to carry out the psychological violence. This usually happens in a very short period of time. It is a manipulation technique. It is also called love bombing, in order to be able to exert power on the other person afterwards (abuse of power). If this power is acquired, then through words and actions someone's health and being is broken down.

It starts in your brain, through words that demean, words that are threatening and create fear, swearing, manipulation, frequent criticism.

But it goes further in actions like, praising, giving gifts, helping a lot. You are then made an ally, mostly in financial matters. Which in turn creates a bond.

Then isolating the other person, economically abusing them, not allowing them to rest, beating them, not fatally strangling them, pushing them, pulling them, controlling them, stalking them.

The positive and negative in word and deed alternate so that you maintain hope for improvement in the relationship.

### **Mental prison**

Because words and actions do not match, you become confused. You start to doubt and become anxious. You don't understand what is happening. As a result, your normal thinking capacity actually deteriorates. So, you get burn out symptoms, such as poor concentration, forgetfulness, depression, sometimes suicidal, poor sleep. These symptoms then in turn create ammunition for the perpetrator of violence to humiliate you more deeply and make you think you are crazy-dumb and unworthy. You come to believe it because you also no longer function as you did before. As a victim, you find yourself in a mental prison. It is an overall assault on your brain, and it is an assault on your body, mainly on your immune system.

### **The impact**

Psychological violence has a big impact. For example, I became paranoid, had distrust in people, low self-esteem and little self-confidence. I lost my job after more than ten years of steady service, and I was robbed of five years of participation in society. I also lost friendships.

I do now reflect on my own life and the choices I have made. Because of everything, I do express my boundaries more strongly now and am more assertive than before.

I only realized that there was psychological abuse in the last months of my relationship when I read information about narcissism and through everything that happened after the divorce. I had also purchased a book from the ***The Lost Self Foundation*** which made me familiar with the terms.

### **Supervisor with knowledge of the case needed**

I had needed a personal counsellor who was knowledgeable in providing safety and peace of mind for us as victims (mother and children). Someone who understood and helped me with everything that was coming at me. I was still in shock from all the events. And I was still “under his spell.” I was still in a bad movie. The authorities did nothing with stories from the past. They did not want to get facts clear.

### **No cutting and pasting**

Guidance plans from Youth Services, the municipality and the Child Protection Council should have clear and measurable goals. This is not the case now. Goals are not made concrete, parties do not have to sign and nothing is binding. There are no measuring points and no consequences if plans are deviated from. They are now often endless cut-and-paste documents that no one reads. Now the content is lost and mistake upon mistake is made. This causes re-victimization on a large scale. The Youth Care Agency writes something, the Child Protection Council cuts and pastes it again, then the judges cut and paste it again.

### **The criminal justice system is failing tremendously**

I advocate for mandatory registration of the perpetrator of violence with the probation department for supervision. Possibly with an ankle bracelet for the offender instead of giving women an AWARE box (an electronic alarm system). So, there is a much more direct line to the criminal justice system. So real control of the perpetrator and mandatory care! There should be mandatory trainings for the people working in the criminal justice system to understand the patterns/trauma of the perpetrators.

### **Still under his regime**

Youth Services can't really do anything now either. Certainly not with custodial parents. The offender's custody should be revoked for a year at a fairly early stage so that the wife and children retain their rights. Now you are out of the relationship but still under his regime. You are not FREE. You have to ask permission for a new ID card for your child, for vacations, participation in hobbies, etc. Now almost by default child custody is abused by the perpetrator, to continue violence, control and psychological abuse.

### **What needs to improve**

I advocate that the perpetrator be admitted to a shelter with counselling instead of placing women and children in a shelter. Put more emphasis on the fact that psychological violence is committed precisely by mentally ill / severely traumatized people. They often have personality problems, such as narcissism, or are psychopathic, anti-social etc....These perpetrators are themselves sick and should be approached and treated as such. The unpredictability of these sick people that thus creates insecurity should become a priority in the approach.

Social workers need to work trauma sensitively with victims, which means, among other things, acknowledging, understanding how and why victims behave in a certain way, why victims say and do things and that there is often still tremendous fear. It is important that young people already receive information about these relationship dynamics within school (for example, in social studies).

And mandatory communication between parents should be abolished. No room should be given to the perpetrator to continue the abuse of power and often economic abuse. Caregivers themselves should also report when victims dare not. Especially when there is knowledge of child abuse.

### **Specialists at the police and specialized lawyers needed**

There should be a special unit within the police with men and women with experience with domestic violence to properly follow up on reports and to take appropriate steps to provide safety. There must be proper aftercare. When reports are made, they must be properly questioned. For example, about non-fatal strangulation! Specialized lawyers for victims are also needed. Counselling for victims needs to be improved. The safety plans that are made are not binding and bring nothing. It is now costing a lot of money.

### **I am outlawed**

If psychological violence had been punishable, it could all have been included in the report. Now nothing was done with it despite me telling my whole story to the police. Then my ex would have been seen for what he is: a perpetrator and recidivist of violence against women and a child molester. Then our child would not have had to experience new abuses. No child custody or Child Protective Services Council. I hope that criminalization will include mandatory mental health treatment for the perpetrator so that safe access to the child may be possible in the future. There is now absolutely no insight into my ex and what he might do to us. I am outlawed.

### **What I want to say to policy makers**

I have worked within forensic care for over a decade, as a personal counsellor to participants and as a coach to my colleagues.

The care I provided here is in great contrast to what I received as a victim in terms of help within the social domain. Specifically, I am referring to the poor cooperation of agencies within the social domain. There is more talking ABOUT the families than WITH the victims and perpetrators of the families. A special holistic approach should be implemented, where experts by experience should also have a permanent place. When policy is made, this should be addressed bottom up. I would mandate that experts by experience work in all layers of the social domain. Social workers should want to know how it feels and how it is perceived on the 'other side' of the table.

The problem at hand lies at the interface of Care & Compulsion and needs a totally different approach than is currently the case. A much more integrated approach is needed. Now people hide behind the privacy legislation of the AVG. But there is often a threatening approach, mainly to the mother who is usually the main care giver.

The judiciary also needs to change their role by having criminal and family judges review cases together with the social domain. In addition, the courts have long waiting times and this also creates insecurity.

There is now far too little dialogue and evaluation to improve. If you ask about this as a victim, people become hostile.

### **Treated worse than a detainee**

I experienced treatment that was even worse than that received by people in prison. I was treated like a convicted criminal, who constantly had to defend herself and her child. I had to protect myself and my child from the perpetrator and from the aid agencies. I went from one terror situation to a whole new kind of terror. The agencies instilled fear in me around my parenting. When it comes down to it, the social services take little to no responsibility for safety and the parent has to make their own decisions.

Policy makers should also regularly check whether policies are actually being implemented and carried out, because everyone is just doing something. Don't wait for complaints and abuses.

Generational patterns must be broken. This is important for a healthy society and for the future of the Netherlands.



## 9. MANON

Psychological violence is hidden and tactical. The latter is really important to understand and accept! This form of violence is not a mistake, not an incident. Not an out-of-control *argument* where “both parties can learn/grow/adjust in communication or in parenting skills”. The possible improvement for perpetrators of psychological violence is not to be found in (child) trauma processing, emotion regulation, therapy or learning to “take timeouts” as a parent or partner. As an expert by experience, I cannot stress this strongly enough.

### Entitlement

To understand psychological violence you must know why psychological violence is committed. My ex was convinced that he had the right to control me and the children. This belief is called *entitlement*: the root cause of psychological violence, according to the (international) experts. He felt justified in inflicting (psychological) violence on us and felt himself a victim if we dared to go against it.

### Web of control

Psychological violence breaks down your identity and deprives you of your autonomy. You are mentally trapped in a web of control.

In fact, during my years of experience with psychological violence, I eventually saw clear discharge and satisfaction in the abuser in response to the psychological violence. I am happy to share a personal experience of this with you, as an example for clarification:

After several years of marriage, with by now a considerable increase in (various forms of) violence, I had an “argument” with the abuser one morning. I do not remember what it was about, but our “quarrels” in these last months of our marriage actually had one core theme: STOP committing (psychological) violence towards me and the children!!!

“Then hit me! Then hit me! I know you want it!” he screamed in succession in my face, ranting, while towering over me as a tall man, “Then hit me!”

\* PATS!\* I slapped him. A huge flurry of fear took over me. Not that I had never been angry before, or not dared to yell at him, for example; I was not a fearful female who does not dare to stand up for herself. On the contrary. But toward the end of our relationship, he pulled out all the stops to elicit a reaction from me. I increasingly lost myself, my identity, and did not recognize myself again. \*Pats\*. He saw the shock on my face ... smiled and heaved a sigh of relief. “See you’re the abuser” he said glumly. I had beaten him. He had never hit me before. That was now a fact. So the violence was mutual; so he convinced me, and our network. Our network thought it was just an argument that got out of hand, but no real violence: of course he is not like that! He is a decent, white, Christian, intelligent and a nice man. Whereas I... I had now hit him.

Sometimes it really seemed as if he had a psychosis; pitch-black eyes, completely unreasonable and out of control. But at the same time, he could then be fully “present”; thoughtful in his words, realizing what he was doing and saying, aware of what he was destroying. He was not overcome by emotions but used emotions tactically in order to dominate and overpower.

### **Psychological violence and sexual violence**

The belief “I have a right to the other” leads to sexual violence as well.

As a woman, I have always cared deeply about intimacy. I saw sexuality as a glue and celebration of the connection between partners. So, during the courtship and engagement period, there were no notable (re)identifiable ‘red flags’. But from the start of our marriage, this soon began to change. ‘*You are mine,*’ he said in succession on the wedding night, which I still perceived then as a romantic ‘*you belong to me.*’ But even the honeymoon was filled with suddenly being completely ignored, interspersed with “rough intimacy”. ‘*He still has to get used to it,*’ is what you give yourself as a logical explanation.

Consequently, the start of the subtle and tactical game was mainly in the bedroom. There the first seeds of conditioning and brainwashing took place; to give up your body and mind without “nagging”. Clinging to glimpses of hope of ever being able to make a human connection again in intimacy. After several years of marriage, there was nothing left of me, and my ideas and feelings about intimacy. Begging, crying, begging and fighting to be treated as a human being in the bedroom, rather than, as I described myself on several occasions: *sperm container* and *blow-up doll*. How dare I make a point of this. Denying him intimacy now or expecting **anything** at all from him in this regard. It led to increasingly violent tantrums and/or crying fits: I was doing something terrible to him by not ‘feeling’ treated as a human being by him.

Towards the end of our marriage I built more and more solid mental walls for myself, including in the bedroom. I impressed upon myself: *only with true consent, and otherwise it is not happening!* Not long after making this decision, my then husband, the abuser, raped me. I violently kicked him off me, after which he began to throw doors, pots and pans, furiously, screaming. The next day he offered a very sincere-seeming apology. He even read a letter in couples therapy in which he admitted, in detail, fully what he had done. Beautiful words of insight and empathy, promises of reversal, a beautiful piece of jewellery as a gift. The relationship therapist loved it. Despite all that had since become known about the violence toward me and the children during the therapy. Sometime after my decision to divorce, the abuser again completely denied the rapes and violence. My report for the marital rape was then directly put aside because he now denied, despite, among other things, the multiple clear confessions of the abuser.

### **Dehumanizing effect**

Psychological violence is harmful one-sided deliberate violence for limitless “personal gain” for the perpetrator. It acts as pure poison on your psyche, your development, your (mental) well-being and

your health. Not living but surviving.

It is subtle, hidden, and takes place over a long period of time. You cannot make someone “resilient” to psychological violence, say that they should “just care less about it”. In practice, this means leaving victims to their own devices and giving perpetrators free rein.

Psychological violence is not punishable. An offender is allowed to do all this in the Netherlands. I can tell you from my own experience that you hardly feel human anymore, but the fact that this devastating form of violence is not even punishable increases the dehumanizing effect.

### **Mental key**

Everything I experienced with my ex-husband, all the times I had to witness, listen to or endure the bizarre and pathological behaviour, led me to delve into psychopathy. The considerable depth in this allowed me to understand and accept that this is how mental abusers operate, think, act and live. This was the **mental key** to my choice to divorce; face the brutally honest reality and accept that this is it. No more being a prisoner of false hope.

What finally made the decisive difference in actually daring to make the choice to leave was that I began to see how serious the psychological violence was toward the children. Not long after my decision to divorce, my child said: *“I have asked you many times why you stayed, but you didn’t understand it then.”* Because of the focus on the abuser and living in survival mode, I hardly had an eye or ear for this anymore. Not long after some of those involved also began to warn me more sharply about the danger and damage to the children, I was ready: I pulled the plug on our marriage, apologized for my negligence as a mother to the children, and fought to get safety, peace and stability in our home as soon as possible. Seeing the great positive changes in the children kept me strong and focused in physically breaking down the learned and ingrained; the self-gaslighting, addictive trauma bond and fear of the possible reaction and consequences.

### **Need for psychological violence to be criminalized**

Psychological violence destroys the lives of its victims. Certainly, also the lives of children!

But because psychological violence is hardly recognized, minimized and waved away by social workers, children who have fled with their safe parent are simply sent back to the perpetrator. Children in such a situation really do not find protection, let alone justice. On the contrary. A distorted picture, based on a great lack of knowledge about psychopathy and underestimating the seriousness of such a situation, especially for the children, is presented to a family judge in these kinds of cases. And this is how counselling and our family court system contributes to the devastation. Therefore, it is not only necessary that psychological violence becomes punishable as soon as possible and is taken into account in family court cases. It is also crucial to look at how social workers, police and judges learn to recognize and deal with psychological violence, instead of facilitating it.

An important factor here is to address the rooted bias against women in our aid and justice system. Distrust and suspicion meet mothers and women in virtually every conversation. In the “investigations” or court hearings in which mothers beg for safety and peace of mind. Sighs and eye-rolling, disbelief and pity for the perpetrators, are primarily the reactions from people in high positions of power and influence. It is retraumatizing to be dragged through that if, after years of living in a hell of psychological violence, you want to be proud and happy to have broken free.

### **Changed forever**

The psychological violence has changed me forever; my worldview, thoughts and beliefs about our country and society. I see so sharply now the embarrassing level in terms of lack of knowledge among our “professionals”. Or the enormous injustice to victims, and the limitless minimization of violence towards women and children in our Dutch aid and legal system. I constantly see in various cases the abusers find protection; a hand over their heads, while victims are re-traumatized by the continuous and increasing injustice. Victims do not have the ‘luxury position’ **to be able** to deny that such malice exists behind closed doors, as aid workers, police and judges do extensively.

### **Aid workers look away**

Alarm bells should have gone off years ago when the therapists decided to conduct a psychodiagnostic examination of my abuser and it revealed a high score in Anti-Social Personality Disorder and Narcissistic Personality Disorder. If (from) then on we were properly checked for **safety** behind closed doors after concluding these serious diagnoses, it would most likely have saved us a lot of suffering. Instead, the mental health care decided to ignore the entire antisocial personality disorder diagnosis, because ‘we can’t do anything with that as social workers’, and never to look at the safety behind closed doors. Especially not concerning the children: there was absolutely no eye or ear for this, while it was getting more and more out of hand for them as well.

The next big misstep was starting relationship therapy for us; an absolute no-go in such situations. In detail, the violence was discussed in couples therapy, yet, full of (false) hope and built on (empty) promises, we continued. Further gaslighted and manipulated in couples therapy that our marriage and family could still be saved. The relationship therapist should have **long since** made a Safe at Home report and call in organizations to get me and the children to safety.

### **There are only ‘perspectives’**

We have created a system in which **no one** wants to find out what is really going on. No one is interested in the **truth** because suddenly only ‘different perspectives’ exist. As if, for example, the forcible rape and subsequent rage was ‘*a difference in perception between us*’.

This way of working is labelled ‘neutral,’ while it serves only one party: the abuser. ‘*It was a communication problem*’, ‘*you have been abusive too, but you just don’t take responsibility for it*’, ‘*you keep hysterically pointing at the other and at the past, let it go!*’ Exactly the seeds that a psychological abuser plants are further nurtured by the false belief that this is how we work in these situations ‘correctly and neutrally’. And this while experts continue to point out that there is no neutrality at all, or multiple bias possible, in these types of situations: **there is no such thing**.

But an enormous wall of ego and arrogance from our social workers, despite precisely the immense lack of knowledge and (insight) into the situation, comes at you when you bring this up. This I can tell you from accumulating experience. Stuck in frameworks and protocols that protect the position of the aid worker **at the expense of** the victims. Above all, the children.

### **The system damages victims more deeply than all the years of psychological violence**

I don't think I can ever get over the shock that our Dutch system treats victims this way. Victims' rights don't matter! The Istanbul Convention doesn't matter. The fact that, for example, marital rape is punishable does not matter. And neither does the child's right to grow up safely. The enormous injustice, the threat and pressure hanging over your head, especially in terms of child safety, damages victims **more deeply** than the years living with psychological violence. This is because you cannot break free. You have no influence, no power, no control, no voice and, in practice, apparently even no right(s) as a human being and a victim. The web of control and dehumanization, but through the system. No escape. Because *'you just have to act normal, shut up and cooperate'*.

### **Recommendations:**

- **Increase the knowledge about psychopathy;** the knowledge should really be increased considerably mainly among social workers, therapists, Youth Care, youth organizations, etcetera. When the seriousness of the situation with regard to the perpetrators is no longer so persistently underestimated, the manipulative tactics become visible for social workers, for the public prosecutor's office and the judge, because there is knowledge in our system, only then you can actually act on it. People without (more than) sufficient knowledge should absolutely not have access to these situations because of the risk for victims. No more ego or arrogance, while beliefs are grounded in misinformation.
- **Once again, the government should look closely at the burden of proof in our criminal justice system:** Doing justice to the victim for the violence done to them is an incredibly important point for recovery and healing. But this step is also crucial for the perpetrator! It is incredibly important to the mental abuser's process that there are consequences for committing violence. As long as violence pays, a mental abuser sees no reason to stop. And in the absence of appropriate consequences, an abuser processes and registers this as an **approval**, or at least a **complete license**, to commit violence. An abuser can hear so many times that what he is doing is wrong, to someone on the spectrum of psychopathy, that message is not getting across. I have heard and seen several abusers, including my own, brag about how incredibly simple it is to manipulate those around them, above all; the therapists and treatment providers. How easily people fall for the tricks; for a sad story, a show of contrition, or the 'angry father for whom there is understanding'. These tricks are so obvious to the victims, while the victims themselves are not believed, let alone taken seriously (enough). This is incredibly painful.

I would therefore urge you to read the book 'Why Does He Do That' by expert Lundy Bancroft, or delve into the material of David Mendel, who makes clear what psychological violence means. Knowledge and information about violence behind closed doors aimed at women and

children is completely lacking to a deeply embarrassing level at, for example, the mental health services (GGZ), the public prosecutor's office, Safe at Home, Youth Services, etc. In my opinion, therefore, it is the first crucial step; to wake up people in a position of influence and power.

***"Mercy for the guilty, is cruelty to the innocent."* – Adam Smith**

- **Criminalization would help.**

Criminalization of psychological violence would help, as long as the Netherlands really adheres to the Istanbul Convention and victims do not face re-traumatization, victim blaming and more injustice if they invoke the rights of this Convention. A conviction is important for the perpetrator, but especially for the victims of psychological violence because of the confusion created by the abuser. By convicting you make it a fact, which is the antidote to self-gaslighting; something left after psychological violence. Possibly it also makes a difference to the environment, which of course is also manipulated. It sends a message to our society: 'this behaviour **is not** accepted.' And in addition, criminalization can make a difference in keeping the children of abusers safe, provided a case is viewed in combination from both criminal and family law perspectives.

- **Understand psychological violence.**

It is especially important to clearly understand, really grasp, that psychological violence is hidden and tactical. Where for social workers, police and judges (besides of course the social network) the perpetrator paints a pretty picture, tells a believable story minimizing the seriousness of the situation, the most damaging form of violence plays out in the unseen; Intimate Terror. It is devastating to the lives, futures, psychological well-being, health and above all, safety of the victims. And in doing so, let us also not be unclear about who the victims are in the vast majority of cases. Let us not look away from how our patriarchal society contributes to a culture of normalizing and downplaying violence against women and children.

- **Stop hyperfocus on contact with both parents.**

There is a focus among authorities on the child's 'right to contact with both parents'. The system of involved authorities not only facilitates psychological violence, but even participates by denying, ignoring and minimizing the complaints of victims, and telling victims that they are the problem ("you must have an unresolved trauma, project your own fears, be unstable, hysterical") and puts the solution in 'becoming resilient against the violence'. This burden is also placed on children. They are given the message to 'learn to cope with your (psychologically) violent parent', because it is still your parent. The Child Care and Protection Board mentions that 'parents love their children'. This message damages a child who has been psychologically destroyed, to then read from the Child Protection Council that 'that parent loves them and has the child's best interests at heart'. That this is the norm, the way to act and work, is really not acceptable anymore if we really want to be concerned with the safety and best interests of children.

- **Don't look away.**

As long as we, as a whole Dutch society, do not face the fact that psychological violence is **deliberately** perpetrated for **horrible purposes**, even by our 'professionals' and people in

positions of power and influence, ***we will never understand what psychological violence is.***

This is so hidden and bizarre; the real intent, the motive, the 'method', the tactics and the drive for control, revenge, destruction, it is precisely because of this that victims (women and children) stay with the perpetrator. Because what reasonable man with a heart and mind WANTS to hurt his wife and/or children? The natural defence reaction to this is the ultimate form of *gaslighting* of society. People must therefore begin to see how big and serious the problem of psychological violence is, instead of looking away from it out of discomfort and disbelief, at the expense of the victims.

## 10. ANNA

You don't recognize psychological violence until it is actually too late, all the constructs of your life have been compromised. The shame runs so deep, the confusion is immense.

Psychological violence is something you only dare to recognize and acknowledge if you dare to look at all events in an integrated way. And that hurts a lot. You were told on a daily basis that you are the perpetrator. As a victim, you have to experience that kind of violence for a very long time first. Can you imagine how difficult it is for an outsider/social worker to make an assessment of your situation in a short time and conclude that it is life-threatening.

As a victim, you over-reflect. You continually second-guess yourself because someone who claims to love you is trying to point out all the things you are doing wrong 'for your own good'. Someone positions themselves as your saviour. Only years later do you find out that this person turns out to be your downfall.

### **It starts in a subtle way**

It is so subtle that you do not notice that you are being mentally abused. After his excessively violent behaviour, my perpetrator did the following: deny, attack/discredit me, made himself a victim and characterize me as a perpetrator. The perpetrator also said things like, "If you talk about this, I will destroy you" and "Everyone knows you are crazy, no one believes you."

### **Defamation and slander**

He spread the most damaging slander after the relationship. He went to the police every week to make false reports. Agencies and social workers did not believe me. He isolated me from agencies that were supposed to give me proper help. This was what he did (I list the worst, most drastic things):

- He filed charges of libel and slander.
- He reported stalking.
- He had lawyers send letters accusing me of theft, false reporting and stalking.
- He went to the social worker and discredited me. He linked the result of that conversation to me. He said they examined him and there was nothing wrong with him. I on the other hand had all kinds of mental problems. Several experts spoke about that, according to him.
- He sent apps to my friends and tried to isolate me from them.
- He told people that I was cheating continuously. And that this was also the reason for the breakup.
- He secretly photographed me and delivered the photos to police and lawyers with the frame 'she is stalking me'.



- If I tell my story anonymously through media/agencies, he calls the creators to discredit me and position himself as a victim.
- I reported abuse months after the relationship, after much thought. The perpetrator heard that and it encouraged him to do everything he could to position himself as a victim.
- When I told the police that he kept stalking us, the police officer in our neighbourhood advised me not to file a report. He decided to have a 'stop talk' with the perpetrator. After the stop talk, according to the police, everything would calm down; but it actually continued in a more sophisticated and indirect way. A stop talk can be perceived by the perpetrator as humiliating. And then the danger to the victim actually increases.

### **Closed door**

In the relationship, he often literally shut me off from my social network. For example, my garden door was always open during the day. For kids in our neighbourhood, girlfriends, my parents, etc. At one point I had to lock the door from him all the time. I WAS that open garden door. That door was something I stood for, it was my open heart, my love for people. He wanted me to close that door so I could be there for him completely. For him, family relationships were cold, and at an early age his family fell apart. My family, with all the craziness, nice and also not so nice things, but always open and focused on connecting, infuriated him. Things had to go his way. His right was right and his wrong was wrong.

If I had a glass of wine, he would start calling me an alcoholic and saying that my drinking was causing all the problems. One time he took me out at night in my underwear and put two bottles of wine next to me on the chair. He again scolded me for being an alcoholic. He then locked the door. I sat outside for hours.

### **Justifying rape and assaults**

When we were not living together, he also behaved inappropriately via messages. If we had a discussion, out of the blue he would send a dick pic or humiliating images to make it clear: shut up. It didn't stop at these messages. He raped me and assaulted me. I was confused about the emotions the messages, assaults and rapes evoked in me. Only in retrospect did I dare to label my experiences as sexual assault and rape and also report them. If I indicated, "I don't want this," or "I don't like this," he made it seem as if I was inexperienced or he called me an 'ice bunny'.

### **Controlling and setting the agenda**

My ex controlled who I was seeing. Who the kids were seeing. Where we were. When we were away without him, he sent continuous messages. He emotionally manipulated us if the answer didn't come quickly. He sometimes sent me a lot of messages at work. If I wasn't home at a certain time, I was neglecting the family/him. I had to consult with him for every step I took. If I didn't do that in enough detail, he ignited in anger.

### **Punishment and harassment**

My ex hit me when I indicated I disagreed with him: “Should I beat you up again, or will you shut up?” He took away my car keys if I had been too “rude” to him. If I told him to rather not walk upstairs with his shoes on, he would walk up the stairs with his shoes on stomping. I was not the only one he harassed and punished: he also did this to my children (his stepchildren) and his own children. You come to believe that you are the problem, and you are deeply ashamed of who you are. This interferes with your overall functioning. As a result, you sometimes react in an unnatural way or skittishly to others, who then see your behaviour as arrogant or aloof. Shame increases your distance to other people.

### **Extreme controle**

Everything had to be planned in advance. People were always allowed to come only within a certain time. He checked my phone. He yelled as soon as he got home: everyone had to come downstairs and jump into position. He determined who I could and could not see. He controlled the bills and groceries and was extremely jealous. The common thread was: if someone said, “I don’t like that,” he often did that very thing. To provoke. At one point I said to my ex-partner, really exhausted and mentally broken, “There is a blue cup in front of you, but you are able to make everyone in this room believe it is red.”

The woman who warned me about his behaviour, an ex-girlfriend of his, was portrayed by him as a stalking lunatic whom he had long suffered. She was said to be jealous and unable to let go of him. Again, that pattern: discredit the victim - very convincingly.

I was in a totally rotten, lonely world, at times feeling no longer a part of normal society. Everything at one point sounded hollow, distorted.

### **Family court judge did not take the abuse into account**

I came out of the relationship penniless. To the family judge, my ex twisted the story so that I would have taken money from the account and left him penniless and with an empty house. It was so convincing, I thought for days that I was indeed wrong. I even saw my own lawyer hesitate for a moment.

Try to tell the judge that you have been manipulated for years. The family judge did not want to hear about my story of physical and psychological abuse for years. I was advised by my lawyer not to say anything about it. “That only creates irritation,” she said. You can’t talk about the foundation of why you are there, you are scared and confused. Facing a family judge with your very calculating abuser is hell in every way. I could barely utter a word, sitting there surviving and unable to say anything about the criminal dynamics.

### **You can’t talk about it**

The fact that my children and I were the only ones who saw what devil he was in the fullness of time, but we couldn’t find the words, was really debilitating, confusing and ultimately unsafe because, for example, the police didn’t believe us. And when we found the words, we couldn’t speak because we were already discredited with some people. So, you can’t talk about it because you’re not credible

anymore and the outside world sees him as this wonderful, quiet man, the victim of a mother with her terrible children.

### **Generational violence**

Both my offender's father and grandfather committed this kind of violence. They always managed to keep social workers out of their way. I was the first to talk to social workers about the violence and report it. My ex-partner pressured me to keep my mouth shut. The family also continues to support the perpetrator and is part of a pretty complicated system of violence.

### **What psychological violence did to me:**

- It affected my decision-making ability. Sometimes I still hear his voice giving me advice. And then I doubt my own moral compass again.
- I am no longer part of the rule of law. I do not feel free and safe, and agencies that are supposed to protect me are systematically set up against me. The police act as the long arm of the perpetrator.
- For a long time, it made me lack credibility with aid agencies, which consequently made the wrong decisions or, on the contrary, showed lack of action.
- It made me depressed, anxious and observant. I have been in therapy for months for this. When my ex-partner does things that affect me again, I often have relapses of several weeks.
- It made me physically ill. I developed severe abdominal pain and lost weight.
- I was unable to work for months.
- I have been financially wiped out. And spent thousands of euros in attorney fees. No one sees the financial terror because there are no agencies to look into it.
- I was put down as the perpetrator and did not get the help a victim needs. The helplessness has put a serious strain on my mental health and still causes me a lot of stress on a regular basis. I am at the mercy of the perpetrator's behaviour and have nowhere to turn to for protection. The police respectively see me as the perpetrator/part of the overall problem. As a result, my safety and that of my children is (has been) at stake. When I called the police, I was not taken seriously. As a result, you no longer dare to make reports. The pattern is not seen. But meanwhile the police say: you must report everything and don't hesitate to do so, because then we will see the patterns and can do something with it. The practice is, that due to ignorance about the patterns/bias/personnel shortage, they cannot live up to that at all.
- I am more suspicious and check that I am safe.
- I have made myself virtually invisible. I have a secret address, and I changed my mail address.
- I find it difficult when people I don't know approach me spontaneously.

- I always feel less than everyone else.
- My family will never be the same.
- I am still afraid he will kill me.

### **If I had stayed, he would have killed me**

Only after the relationship ended, I was able to see that I had been horribly and life-threateningly abused in every possible way. If I had stayed, he would have killed me because I was just too bad a person and deserved it.

I still doubt sometimes if I haven't seen and felt it all wrong. Then I think: maybe I really am crazy.

During the last few months of the relationship, I started googling: "When conversations with your partner confuse you." Then I came across websites that described psychopathy, gaslighting and narcissistic personality disorders. Then I thought: gosh, I'm not the problem at all, his behaviour is. But then I still did think: if I better behave myself and if we seek help, maybe things will get better. While from day to day the violence became worse and also more dangerous. In the relationship I could watch campaigns about domestic violence and tell myself that I was not in it. That it was "different" with us.

### **Barriers to seeking help, safety and justice:**

- You are afraid of losing your children.
- You are totally unfamiliar with the steps involved and who comes to you for what reason, when you decide to call for help. I called 112 and that turned out to be the beginning of a totally unfamiliar and frightening journey in the pitch black.
- When you have asked for help, it takes over your life. A superhuman assertiveness is expected of you while you are lying on the floor in a hundred thousand shreds. Also, like a cat in a strange warehouse, you have to go through all the juxtaposed systems, all the while moving from address to address. I sometimes, in addition to my job, had conversations with 3-4 people a week. Conversations where sometimes I thought, I'm sitting here doing all the work, explaining myself, what do you do for me?
- The police indicated to me: report everything. But they were not mindful of the effect of my report/reports on the perpetrator and did not see through the context and pattern of the counter-reports. In fact, because of the perpetrator's reports and lack of knowledge about the patterns, the police turned on me. My last report they refused to deal with. I was no longer allowed to visit. "We had to leave each other alone now." The officer who said that had not read my file.
- All the attention was on me, the pressure was on me, as if I had failed as a mother and needed to be screened. The abusive partner could do his godly thing, wallowing in the role of victim, all the while assaulting me.

- I received advice from the police to keep quiet in order not to trigger my ex-partner to harass me. This lowered my confidence in the police and raised the threshold for making reports. They said being more invisible would help. So, the police told me to curtail my freedom and make my world smaller to keep a violent person calm. Whereas the psychologists said: talk about it, dare to go outside again and move freely, that is important for your recovery.

### **Not getting help**

In the mental health field, a common reflex when treating victims is: we don't do truth-telling. This is ridiculous. It is not complicated to get a clearer picture of the truth/situation and to share your suspicions with other disciplines. I noticed that people were also afraid to take on the case.

Help for my family was fragmented at different mental health institutions. The police, mental health services, Safe at Home and Victim Support worked separately from each other. No one had an integral view of the situation I was in with my children. The perpetrator took advantage of the lack of direction in a devastating way. He played me off against agencies, made me unbelievable. If there had been a directed approach, the patterns would have been visible; at every agency the perpetrator showed the same behaviour.

Meanwhile, my ex harassed me through lawyers, friends/acquaintances and stalked me directly. I was too broken mentally to properly defend myself. As a severely depressed and traumatized victim, I had to navigate all the agencies that were independently concerned with care and safety in their own way. And had to explain my situation a hundred times. And still there was and is no integral picture.

### **Police gave my case the qualification 'minor assault'**

The police did not have time, and the officers involved were not experts on the subject. I dealt with more than 10 officers in total. And additionally with a contact at the Public Prosecution Office. My report was divided into a report for vice and a report about the violence. My report for the (years of) violence, was rated "minor assault". I had to have a separate interview with a police officer for the vice report. As a result, I had a different contact person for the two reports. The person who recorded the report for the assault was overworked a week after the recording.

### **What I would have needed:**

- Direction. A multidisciplinary approach where care and safety experts sit at the table with each other and look at similar partner violence situations in their areas of work in an integrated way and address them properly. There were so many misjudgements in my situation, so many things not addressed, I was exposed to a lot of danger and mental pressure.
- Protection.
- Acknowledgement.
- Sensitive approach: People in the police who are able to ask good questions that result in a high-quality report. In this kind of situation, as an officer you really have to be very good at asking

inquisitive, open and sensitive questions. The way the reports were recorded was pathetic. I would say the officers need a mandatory course with investigative journalists! Words matter. The report said, “The woman left the house with the children after an argument with her partner”. At a certain point you no longer have the energy to single-handedly track down and correct all that insensitivity and misrepresentation of situations. While those words are all-important in the approach taken.

- Helping to review returns and statements. Me and my children were unable to check our own declarations due to our mental state. We were sent our declaration texts by email (unsecured) with the request to check it ourselves. This meant going through all the events again. I couldn't do it, it evoked huge emotions, and I therefore agreed without proofreading.
- The police did not conduct a sash screening (a tool used to estimate the risks). While the patterns of violence including strangulation attempts - death threats and stalking showed the picture of high risk. Such screening should be mandatory.
- There should be designated people within police regions who are always responsible for domestic violence reports. So that they become super specialists on this subject and their sensitivity to unsaid things, facial expressions and body postures improves. I spoke to a female ex-police officer who could sense things when she walked into a home. She said, “You can feel it from the vibrations in the room when you walk in, and when you look at the people in the room, your feeling is confirmed.”
- The night before I left, I was seriously assaulted and called 112. I had injuries. My right arm was sore/ bruised. I was not examined for injuries by a doctor and the police left the children and me alone with the abuser after talking to them. I was scared to death. When I later filed a report, I happened to run into one of the officers involved at the police station. He said, “We didn't know any better than that it was a one-time altercation.”
- Behaviour of a victim is apathetic, anxious, dismissive. You want peace, you feel shame, you want harmony. This is often translated as: it's not so bad/it's a one-time dispute between two people. I had needed someone to take the lead for me, who had seen that there was more behind my apathy.
- Every county/region should have a prosecutor appointed to have domestic violence/intimate terror/coercive control in their portfolio.
- Even family judges should not look away from the patterns. The family judge indicated that she did not care about my story of severe violence. Explaining, “I don't do truth-telling.” But the disruption that caused me to subpoena the ex-partner and the terrible things he said there in court to discredit me were all part of that same violence.

- Police, prosecutors and all parts of the judiciary need to increase their knowledge of the patterns of psychological violence and the often-underlying behavioural problems. In doing so, they must collaborate with trusted experts by experience and behavioural experts.
- It should be possible to enforce behavioural investigations on perpetrators at an earlier stage and (neighbourhood) investigations after a report. To illustrate, I was told that if I had been murdered or more seriously injured, a neighbourhood investigation would have been done and there would have been more opportunities to force behavioural investigations as well.
- Often you can't leave overnight because you will suffer great financial loss. It would be nice if that were better regulated in the law. That currently still assumes that both partners want to end things properly. That law does not work if one of the two partners is violently/coercively controlling. A settlement sometimes takes years; that is also what the coercively controlling partner is after. And: the 'mentally healthy' partner often has to subpoena the coercive ex and therefore bears all the costs. Divorcing a coercive controlling ex without being financially destroyed is currently impossible.
- Provide a person with the right to know if her new partner has a history of violence. For example, whether there have been any reports or charges made against the partner. I should have had that right.

### **Criminalization is hopeful**

Criminalization of psychological violence may at least encourage victims to report it. A separate law allowing explicit criminalization sounds hopeful to me at least. However, it is essential to complete the puzzle together, to increase knowledge, to use the same words for the problems and to cooperate between the care and security domains.

Such a law would have helped me. Because then the audio recordings, in which it is clear that I am being humiliated and that verbal abuse is being used against me, would at least have led to an investigation. And then my report, in which I consistently state about the control, humiliation and violence, would also have been looked at much more seriously. Now my report was taken off the table pretty quickly. And it was given too "light" a qualification, which made it seem like a one-time assault.

Non-prosecution was the fuel for my attacker to open a full attack on me and wallow himself in the role of the victim of the vindictive ex-wife. That, added to the choices of the police officers involved and the lack of direction, has been devastating for me. Looking back, in the current situation, I might never have filed charges.

### **Advice for policymakers**

Have officials engage with experts by experience when writing the law.

Ask experts in the United Kingdom how the law came about there.

Make the law a symbol for more openness about violence in the intimate sphere. And describe what

duties you have as a bystander in reporting violence that you see, or an uncomfortable feeling that you have. Now bystanders still do far too little with what they see. Also, because the legislation and measures surrounding it don't really provide a basis for those reports to be effective. If you ask citizens to take a big responsibility, you have to support them to do so. The Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport's campaign in which they called on bystanders to pay attention to signals from victims and report was a typical example of symbol politics. In fact, a good policy/approach is totally lacking.



## 11. ELISA

Many times, I asked myself if I wasn't crazy, if it wasn't all up to me. I sought confirmation about how I felt or thought. Even from organizations that were later involved. I was suspicious. I scanned persons, even during conversations. And even if I thought I had a positive image of someone, there was still a little voice that told me; "Watch out now, you will be disappointed or not believed again anyway".

The psychological violence caused me to lose myself completely. I no longer dared to trust myself, my feelings. I closed myself off, my world was small. I was tired. Afterwards it turned out that I was already suffering from dissociations at that time. When I dissociate, I am sort of detached from my environment. It is a survival mechanism in which I temporarily switch off my thoughts, emotions perceptions/feelings and memories. This can be anything from a few minutes to hours. It takes an enormous amount of energy, so I was often exhausted afterwards.

I didn't know how to behave anymore and once I even drove to a clinic in the night. I stood there for a long time at the door and thought 'I'll get myself admitted'. I thought I had severe psychological problems that prevented me from thinking normally. I didn't know how to behave anymore. But when I got to the clinic, I didn't know what to say either, so I spent a long time standing in front of the door. It felt very lonely, and I struggled through the following days. I felt very unstable.

### **Realization that it wasn't me**

It wasn't until I got out of the relationship and had therapy that I slowly came to realize that it wasn't me. I was dealing with someone with a narcissistic personality. I had been dealing with psychological abuse and coercive control.

At first, I naturally toned it down because I was still very much in doubt about myself, but slowly it became more and more clear to me what I had been exposed to all this time.

### **"Where there are problems, two are to blame"**

You get the feeling that everything is your fault. I went to the family doctor at one point to tell my story. Later I was called by the GP who said, "where two fight, two are to blame". The GP said she had spoken to my partner before she called me and so came to her conclusion. The trust was gone for me. From then on, I have had no contact with my GP.

I also tried to understand why my ex behaved in a certain way, looked for an excuse for it. Often, he would name the reasons for his behaviour himself. This in turn made me feel guilty. I constantly doubted myself, became very insecure. I was uncertain whether my thoughts, experiences or memories were correct.

### **Not taken seriously by agencies**

I did not feel that the institutions took me seriously or understood me. After much doubt, I contacted a shelter. The woman I spoke to on the phone told me that I had to realize what I was getting into. The children were used to a life of luxury and at the shelter we would all have to share a room. Maybe we would even have to share a room with other women and children and would not have our own shower and toilet. It would be quite traumatic for my children if I took that step. That caused me to feel guilty and not take the step. Also, years later, I contacted another agency. I explained my situation, and what agencies I had been dealing with or had been dealing with in the meantime. The man on the phone told me that his agency could not help me.

I was also told that I could manage because I could articulate my situation just fine. I came across as a very intelligent woman. I came from an affluent background, was well educated. But that should have nothing to do with your request for help. After all, psychological violence is not only found in a certain stratum of the population!

### **Not seen and not heard**

I was being stalked by my ex. This looked like, among other things: chasing, trapping, hanging out in front of our door, getting into our phones and computer because there was a program installed on them, calling, sending text messages, emailing, having letters, packages and flowers delivered, hanging letters or bags of stuff on my car, spraying graffiti on the roads we had to travel every day, harassing people in our neighbourhood (even our lawyer), showing up at our work, posting lies on social media and texts that had a threatening tone.

At the moment when the stalking was at its peak and the children and I were really in an unsafe situation; I had to fall back on the municipality. There I was treated as if they were dealing with a suspect. I had to make a timeline of my situation in front of a staff member. I had to do this in the public hall, on papers 1.5 meters long. That felt very unsafe. Having to be forced to recall all the situations was very difficult and emotional. In addition, I was on edge because I did not know or trust the municipal employee because of the way I was treated. I did not feel seen and heard.

Because I was put in the public hallway, my stalker could walk in at any time. Even people who knew me and him and could inform him that I was there could walk right in. So, he could also wait for me outside. Also, I was put with my back to the entrance which made it feel even more threatening.

### **Victim blaming by agencies**

At the police but also with other aid agencies, I had to deal with victim blaming. I was told comments such as: You chose to leave and come back, didn't you? Aren't you looking for something too much yourself? Aren't you provoking it yourself? It's a fighting divorce, both of you are doing something in this. Isn't it a back-and-forth issue?

### **Passivity police**

Police often showed procrastination. They cited several reasons for this, including:

- “There is not enough evidence yet, you need to keep a log.”
- “He’s not doing anything wrong at the moment, so there’s nothing we can do for you.”
- “We’re going to have one more stop call with him first,” the police officer said. ...Turns out that’s not even allowed multiple times. In a stop talk, the police engage in conversation with the offender. They tell the offender that the behaviour is punishable and that it must stop now.

### **Dedicated contact person needed**

I think it would be good if at every emergency response organization, including the police, there is a dedicated contact person who guides you throughout the process. For example, you don’t want a new contact person at the police all the time, but actually you don’t want that at any organization. You are vulnerable and need to open up to tell your story.

### **Other recommendations are:**

- Ensure short lines of communication between the organizations.
- Appoint a process manager within the organizations who monitors the process during the case and has control over the case so that there is an improvement in communication between the organizations but also with the victim and the perpetrator.
- The information exchange must be in order, and creating a good file is important.
- Involve an expert by experience during the entire process (i.e. from the moment the case is running, whether it is at Safe at Home, the police or another care agency), because this person understands what the process is about and what you are going through. The use of an experienced expert has a positive influence on the cooperation between victims/perpetrators.

### **Cases of violence must be prioritized**

Each organization collects evidence for itself and there is no proper mutual consultation or sharing of information. This slows down the process while quick and appropriate action must be taken to prevent further consequences (death). So, at the first small signs, action must be taken. When does a red flag actually mean high risk? If a whole process has already taken place, the public prosecutor eventually comes in. This should ensure proper treatment of the victim.

### **Action needed**

The mistake regularly made by counselling organizations is to think that a case of psychological violence is not that serious. But those assumptions are wrong. Any case involving violence (domestic violence, intimate terror/psychological violence, stalking threats of death) should be prioritized by the police and emergency services. The police should not let themselves be played by the perpetrator with excuses/manipulations but proceed to arrest. It leads to enormous despair among victims when the police only warn an offender and take no further action.

As a result, victims lose confidence in the police. The police must take reports of psychological violence seriously. Failure to make an immediate arrest can have serious consequences. It is very important that all organizations involved maintain the trust of the victim.

It is hopeful that there is going to be a law criminalizing psychological. Although I think a lot of knowledge still needs to be gathered among agencies so they can make a good assessment about someone's situation. The fact that a case is classified as "Low Risk" does not necessarily mean that it does not have a major impact on the victim's life. Psychological violence can drag on for years. It can suddenly escalate to 'High Risk'.

### **Details are important**

A good case file details the defendant's actions and the concrete impact on the victim's life. Details are important. Facts often speak for themselves, but they must be written down properly. Place a summary above the criminal case file that clearly describes the impact of the violence. This makes the reader alert and provides guidance when reading the file.

A case officer (the prosecutor in charge of the case) needs to know the risk factors for victim safety and the threat of escalation or further escalation so that this information is properly and completely shared with the judge.

An investigative psychologist should be involved in every stalking case. This person can take an additional look at the case and determine proper approaches for stalkers. Also to prevent femicide!

### **Recommendation to policy makers**

If I were a Member of Parliament I would want to make sure that every organization that deals with perpetrators and victims of psychological violence has to undergo mandatory training so that they have a better understanding and knowledge of what intimate terror, psychological violence, coercive control, stalking, etc. entails. And that there is a national law that every region is required to follow and not that every region has its own rules, because that doesn't work! There should be a law that every region is obliged to follow on how to act in certain situations of stalking, intimate terror etc. and not that every region can have its own interpretation of it. For victims, it doesn't work when the victim goes to live in another region where different rules and protocols apply and the victim's safety can be jeopardized again as a result. But also, that you have to tell your whole story all over again and so actually have to start from the beginning again. Just like everything in the world changes, you have to renew these things nationwide every so often!



