



# Cross-sectoral training to reduce violence against women: A new feminist opportunity?

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## Abstract

Since the 2000s, the French State, following the lead of violence against women (VAW) at the international level, has promoted a cross-sectoral approach to VAW policy, which consists of including not only feminist organizations, but also other actors (police, justice, health sector, etc.). In this context, in-service training programs, which aim to spread knowledge about VAW and create a “common culture” between the numerous new actors, have become a central tool of this policy. The comparison between two regions—Île-de-France and Provence Alpes Côte d’Azur—shows that even though feminist organizations remain the main actors in charge of the implementation of the training strategy, some discrete evolutions in the framing of VAW are nonetheless taking place; although training sessions are not gender neutral and use feminist knowledge, their primary aim is to change professional habits without tackling gender inequalities.

**Keywords** Violence against women · Training programs · Feminist organizations · France · Policy implementation · Gender

In France, like in many other countries across the world, domestic violence policies have been put on the agenda by women’s movements, become a matter of public concern thanks to femocrats and the women’s policy agencies for which they work, and mainly framed as gender equality policies at the national level (Herman 2016; Delage 2017). Following policy cues from the European Union, the United Nations and other international instances, this policy has taken a more cross-sectoral approach since the mid-2000s, with French authorities demanding that actors from

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diverse policy sectors (police, justice, health, education) participate more actively in violence against women (VAW)<sup>1</sup> policy. This approach goes beyond the usual core of feminist policy actors in government and society to include all of the actors involved with VAW enforcement and prevention. The goal of this article is to analyze this transition through a focus on in-service training on domestic violence intervention required of state employees and their partners who are involved with this area of policy in the nonprofit sector.

As policy scholars have shown in general, moving from a complex policy idea, like a cross-sectoral approach to VAW policy, to practice, in this case to designing and delivering actual training programs that follow that approach, is complex with policy content varying significantly when implemented (e.g., Padioleau 1982; Hassenteufel 2011; Hill and Hupe 2002). The diffusion and appropriation of gender equality objectives outside the gender equality sector, i.e., by actors who are not specialized in gender equality, are limited by various factors (Jacquot 2014), such as the limited knowledge of actors on gender inequalities (Perrier 2015), or professional and institutional constraints (Perrier 2011). Also, the institutional context influences how, and the extent to which, actors in charge of the promotion of women's rights promote a feminist perspective (Delage 2015). Therefore, the meaning ascribed to the concept of gender changes, a process which may entail its depoliticization since gender progressively refers to an individual characteristic whose conception is disconnected from inequalities and power. Within international organizations like the United Nations, for instance, while gender is conceived in a critical perspective, it has been used in a "formal" and "vague" way, without any clear connection to systemic inequalities and power relations (Cirstocea 2010). In development agencies and transnational women's and feminist networks, gender has been domesticated (Cornwall 2007): Although it is widely used, its meaning is often reduced to "women" (Verschuur and Doubogan 2019). Krizsan and Poppa (2015) show that the meaning of VAW policies can change in similar ways in implementation:

for a variety of reasons states are cooperative in adopting policies, but reluctant and consequently differences emerge in the meanings the adopted policies take when implemented and the extent to which these meanings are inclusive of gender inequality (6).

Other feminist policy research shows that partnerships between state actors and women's groups (Krizsan 2015) and local actor reframing (Delage et al. 2020) are key elements for understanding how the original meaning of a gender equality policy can change in the implementation phase (Engeli and Mazur 2018).

This article examines the emergence and implementation of the cross-sectoral approach in VAW in-service training programs from the mid-2000s, as specific tools to implement more general policy, in two regions through process tracing (George

<sup>1</sup> In this article, the term "violence against women" refers to the policy category which encompasses a diversity of gender-based violence and "domestic violence" is one type of violence against women and one policy category which is often the main target of public policies.



and Bennett 2005).<sup>2</sup> The development of a cross-sectoral approach to in-service training—for all of the actors involved with VAW enforcement and administration and not just feminist groups and women’s policy offices—is based on the assumption that local actors are not well equipped to deal with the issues of domestic violence or the survivors of that violence and that they need to be educated through training programs. In this perspective, training is a necessary condition for all actors to be able to effectively fight VAW. Studying the development of in-service training programs provides an interesting lens to capture the changes in VAW policies more broadly speaking, at cognitive (through training content), financial (through training subsidization) and institutional levels (through the various actors who promote, support and implement the training).

This article discusses to what extent the promotion and implementation of the new cross-sectoral approach show changes in the VAW sector and in the domestic violence sector in particular: Which outputs and outcomes can be identified by tracing the promotion and implementation of this policy tool? After mapping out the process and feminist-only actors involved with VAW training programs in the first section, we describe the context in which the national government started to promote these tools and the consequent reactions of feminist organizations. In the next section, we go on to show that, even though training is a strong symbolic tool, its implementation remains weak. In “[An ambivalent opportunity for feminist organizations](#)” section, we illustrate how limited national government commitment in the promotion and dissemination of training programs generates financial and organizational constraints for feminist organizations that in turn affect the content of training courses and the possible outcomes of this policy tool, which is discussed in the last section in terms of the GEPP concepts of “policy empowerment” and “gender transformation” (Engeli and Mazur 2018).

## Getting political attention: training as a feminist tool prior to 2000

Before the development of government policies on VAW in the 2000s (Herman 2016; Delage 2017), feminist organizations had already been using training as a means, on the one hand, to convert new workers to the feminist perspective on domestic violence and, on the other hand, to make local-level actors, law enforcement and social workers especially aware of the importance and impacts of domestic violence and to encourage them to fight against stereotypes regarding VAW (Herman 2016; Delage 2017). By organizing training sessions, feminist actors could therefore develop local networks against VAW.

Since the 1980s, feminist organizations have been the main actors in dealing with the survivors of domestic violence, and a significant part of their work has consisted in framing the problem differently: claiming that domestic violence is not only an interpersonal issue, but a social problem, a cause and consequence of

<sup>2</sup> We conducted our research between 2016 and 2019. For a detailed presentation of the methodology for the two regional case studies, see the “[Appendix](#)” at the end of this article.



male dominance (Delage 2017); thus, domestic violence is seen as VAW. Feminist activists showed, on the one hand, that VAW reproduced male dominance insofar as it fueled women's fear and limited their social and geographic mobility and on the other hand, that VAW was produced thanks to other inequalities (especially economic inequalities) that tended to put women in situations where they had less power than men. They used academic knowledge about gender violence and rejected the common interpretation of VAW which was based on victim blaming, while also reinforcing it.

In the National federation of women's shelters and support services (Fédération nationale solidarité femmes, FNSF), which today includes 67 feminist domestic violence nonprofits, in-service training programs are part of the "historical activities" of the organizations, according to the current training coordinator. Feminist organizations developed training programs for their workers in order to build common grounds and implement a feminist practice within their organizations. Training sessions were therefore carried out at a local level, by members of feminist organizations themselves. This in-house training became institutionalized as of the 1990s, with the creation of a commission dedicated to the harmonization of practices within the FNSF in the late 1990s and the setting up of a specific training service in the year 2008. The National information's center on women's and families' rights (Centre national d'information sur les droits des femmes et des familles, CNIDFF), which brings together 111 local organizations (called CIDFF), has also organized training about VAW for its members and (in a more limited way) for local actors, since the 1990s.

Since both of these organizations hire workers from various professional backgrounds (Herman 2016), training sessions aim to create a common framing of VAW and to convey feminist principles and ideas to newer members of the staff and volunteers.<sup>3</sup> In 2016, thirty-eight trainees, among the 45 people trained by the FNSF that year, were new workers or volunteers of the FNSF; and in 2017, the CNIDFF organized 6 training sessions for its local teams.

Since the 1980s, VAW policies have developed in a variety of sectors. At first, when feminist organizations were still the main policy actors, training in other professional sectors remained marginal. The first training sessions aimed at encouraging female police officers to "provide assistance to women survivors of violence" were carried out in 1981 by SOS femmes alternative (SOS alternative for women) and the group named Jeunes Femmes (Young women) (Herman 2016, 80). These sessions were funded by the National department in charge of gender equality promotion (Service des droits des femmes et de l'égalité, SDFE); they have since been presented as "the most important action of the Department in the field of the fight against VAW" (Herman 2016, 81). In Marseille, the first training sessions were set up in the early 1980s and were also aimed at law enforcement. Since the first working premises of SAVE—a local FNSF organization founded in Marseille in 1976—were located in the same building as a police agency, training started off as informal discussions between SAVE workers and police officers regarding domestic violence

<sup>3</sup> See for instance FNSF, *Rapport d'activité*, 2016.



cases and gradually became formalized and institutionalized within the organization. Training sessions were aimed at improving actors' practices in order to avoid victim blaming, to help them detect domestic violence and give them tools to act appropriately, as well as to enhance local networks and promote cooperation between feminist organizations and law enforcement.

During the 1980s, local training programs developed, but no strategy existed yet for designing specific curricula about VAW or domestic violence. Although this lack of national government commitment and reactivity highlights the weak institutionalization of domestic violence training, it has also made it possible for feminist organizations to maintain the ownership of domestic violence trainings and for a feminist framing of domestic violence to remain hegemonic in the field of in-service training. This weak institutionalization therefore led to a relative stability at the cognitive level.

### **Adopting a cross-sectoral approach to in-service training: a national decision with ambivalent consequences at the regional level**

Since the 2000s, the French VAW policy has strengthened. In-service training programs have become an institutional tool, promoted by the national government in order to enroll new actors in VAW policy. This broadening of VAW policy is an ambivalent opportunity for feminist organizations.

#### **The institutionalization of training sessions at multiple levels**

The promotion of training as a policy tool occurred in a context characterized by an increasing visibility of VAW policies both at the international and at the national levels. During the 2000s, different countries, like France, created or reinforced VAW policies. First of all, VAW policy gained more legitimacy thanks to, among other factors, the international context and, more specifically, international conferences which encouraged governments to develop policies, such as the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women, as well as international reports and texts, like the 2011 Istanbul Convention (Allwood 2017, 10) which insisted on the necessary commitment of actors from different sectors in the fight against VAW. The issue of VAW also gained importance at the European level in the late 1990s (Jacquot 2014). Secondly, feminist organizations continued to lobby the government and politicians: They called for legal changes to improve the protection of survivors, but also for the development of in-service training programs.<sup>4</sup> In this context, the French government not only funded feminist organizations which help survivors, but also developed VAW policy

<sup>4</sup> See for instance "Rapport d'information n° 553 (2009–2010) de Mme Françoise LABORDE, fait au nom de la délégation aux droits des femmes, déposé le 10 juin 2010" for which organizations such as CNIDFF, CNDFF (Collectif national pour les droits des femmes), Choisir la cause des femmes or the Mouvement pour le planing familial were heard see also : <https://www.ladocumentationfrancaise.fr/rapports-publics/134000125/index.shtml>.



in two other ways: by strengthening the penalization of VAW and by expanding the policy framework and launching a “global” or “interdepartmental” strategy which aimed at including VAW policy in various sectors (police, justice, health, education, social sector, etc.). The cross-sectoralization of this public policy (Halpern and Jacquot 2015) was understood as a means to better identify the survivors who would not be detected by a diversity of actors to whom they would come to, like police officers, doctors or social workers. To enroll these policy actors in the fight against VAW, the national government had to design a training strategy to encourage and help them identify survivors.

The training strategy was promoted and made official through different means. Agreements were signed between feminist organizations and ministries.<sup>5</sup> Above all, this strategy was promoted in the interdepartmental plans that were launched in 2005 and were carried out by the successive governments, regardless of their political orientations. In-service training programs gained importance along with the development of the plans. An increasing diversity of workers became the target of the national government’s training strategy: The official documents not only mentioned police officers and lawyers, but also doctors and midwives, teachers and social workers. In addition to these plans, a variety of laws<sup>6</sup> instituted training as a key component of governmental action against VAW. The 2010 law<sup>7</sup> on domestic violence recommended that a report on various actors’ training courses should be handed into the government, but this legal prescription went unheeded.

### **An ambivalent opportunity for feminist organizations**

Among the FNSF organizations, two different attitudes developed regarding the institutionalization of in-service training: Some organizations felt compelled to develop training programs, while others saw it more as an opportunity to develop this activity.

According to the director of a shelter located in Paris, they had no other choice but to develop training programs in order to reach out to various actors and make domestic violence policies efficient: The lack of financial means made it necessary for the feminist shelter workers to spread their knowledge about VAW, so that other actors (in the police sector or in the social work sector for instance) could provide appropriate support to survivors. In SAVE, where training had been a significant part of the organization’s activity before the creation of national plans, the institutional impulse was but one means for highlighting the visibility and legitimacy of

<sup>5</sup> In 2005, the CNIDFF, FNSF and the Ministry of the Interior signed a protocol which highlighted law enforcement trainings. In 2015, a similar text was signed between the CNIDFF and the Ministry of education.

<sup>6</sup> See for instance article 21 of the 2010 law (loi n° 2010–769) on violence against women, domestic violence and their consequences on children) and article 51 of the 2014 law, about “Real gender equality” (loi n° 2014–873). Politicians involved in the parliamentary debates surrounding the 2006 law already claimed that the promotion of training in various sectors should be included in the law, but they were initially unsuccessful.

<sup>7</sup> Article 21 of the 2010 law (loi n° 2010–769 du 9 juillet 2010).



its work. Besides FNSF organizations, other nonprofits, such as the network Politicians against VAW (Elu-es contre les violences faites aux femmes—ECVF), which was created in 2003, also started to design training programs, as they were becoming prescribed policies. The idea that feminist organizations took this institutionalization as an opportunity echoes one member of the Centre Hubertine Auclert<sup>8</sup> who thought that “feminist organizations strove to develop trainings.” Surprisingly, a femocrat, working for a Department of Women’s Rights, was of the opinion that feminist organizations, especially those of the FNSF, resisted the development of training programs, as they feared losing control over a part of the process.

### **The relative monopoly of feminist organizations on national and local levels**

Thus, training, as a policy tool, gained growing relevance and attention in the 2000s. Yet, its management and monitoring remain unclear. In such a context, this institutional shift enabled feminist organizations to retain quite a dominant position in the VAW field and led to a relative cognitive stability in the framing of the VAW problem.

Neither the law nor the interdepartmental plans explained who should be in charge of implementing the training strategy, or how it should be done. However, the situation changed with the adoption of the January 3rd decree of 2013 and the creation of the Interdepartmental mission for women’s protection against violence and human trafficking (Mission Interministérielle pour la Protection des Femmes Contre les Violences et la Lutte contre la Traite des Etres Humains, MIPROF). Since 2013, one of its main goals has consisted in producing training materials for various professionals. For several years and until 2017, this institution was headed by Ernestine Ronai, who founded the Observatory of violence against women in Seine-Saint-Denis in the early 2000s—a role that provided the MIPROF with great legitimacy in the VAW field. Part of the mission of the MIPROF was to develop “pedagogic tools” (such as films,<sup>9</sup> information sheets, etc.) dedicated to the different sectors involved in VAW policy. To implement this goal, the MIPROF organized conferences for all sectors (police, justice, health, etc.), where attendees were taught to become instructors for their own colleagues. In other words, they were to become ambassadors of the VAW fight in their specific sectors and workplaces.

This goal was both ambitious and limited. On the one hand, one may call it a “dissemination strategy,” as the potential recipients were numerous. On the other hand, the MIPROF had few concrete means to lead a global “training policy,” even though it was the main government agency which organized training sessions. Within specific sectors, such as the police, some national in-house training departments carried out their own VAW programs, but local workers and national institutions often relied on the MIPROF programs or local VAW-specific organizations for training. Yet, this institution suffered from a lack of resources, like many other institutions dedicated

<sup>8</sup> This center is a regional institution situated in Île-de-France and dedicated to the promotion of women’s rights and gender equality.

<sup>9</sup> To see these films: <https://www.stop-violences-femmes.gouv.fr/4-outils-pour-l-animation-sur-les.html>.





to state feminism or to “institutional feminism” (Mazur and McBride 1995; Dauphin 2010; Revillard 2016; Perrier forthcoming). In the MIPROF, only one person was in charge of in-service training programs and the creation of training materials often relied on volunteer work. For instance, Marion,<sup>10</sup> a midwife, participated in all of the 10 working commissions and in the creation of the film “Elisa” for free.

Although a government institution, the MIPROF was identified as a feminist agency because of its relationship to femocrats and feminist nonprofit organizations. Moreover, VAW actors—organizations which are often identified as feminist—remained dominant in Île-de-France and PACA—as well as in other French regions.<sup>11</sup> Organizations like the CIDFF, the GAMS,<sup>12</sup> the national network Ruptures,<sup>13</sup> or others which belonged to the FNSF, such as Le Relais de Sénart, Flora Tristan center, L’Escale, Paroles de femmes, Tremplin 94-SOS femmes in Île-de-France, and SAVE in PACA were in charge of most of the training sessions.<sup>14</sup> Among the organizations that were based in the field of women’s rights, many of them are historical actors of VAW policy, such as the organizations that were members of the FNSF or of the CIDFF network.<sup>15</sup>

Besides these feminist identified actors, new organizations emerged such as equality services created by local communities (municipal councils, departmental councils or regional councils), in a context of institutionalization of equality policies at the local level (Perrier forthcoming). For instance, the Paris Observatory of VAW, created in 2014, organized several training sessions every year for its social workers and its front-office civil servants; the Centre Hubertine Auclert sometimes organized training sessions for some of the local politicians of Île-de-France; and some local authorities, like the Department of Essonne, set up trainings for their staff. Moreover, new feminist organizations, which were created in the 2000s, also offered training programs on VAW.

Other actors carry out training programs, such as the CIMADE (which supports migrants and promotes their rights), victims’ rights organizations (like the INAVEM,<sup>16</sup> or Paris helps victims), public health institutions (like the IREPS<sup>17</sup>), the

<sup>10</sup> In this article, the first names of interviewees have been changed.

<sup>11</sup> Ministère des droits des femmes, *Lutte contre les violences faites aux femmes. Catalogue des formations locales et nationales à destination des professionnels* (2012).

<sup>12</sup> Groupe pour l’abolition des mutilations sexuelles, Group for the Abolition of Female Genital Mutilation.

<sup>13</sup> Ruptures (Break) is a feminist national women-only organization, created in 1984.

<sup>14</sup> See Ministère des droits des femmes, *Lutte contre les violences faites aux femmes. Catalogue des formations locales et nationales à destination des professionnels* (2012); the person in charge of the policy in the Cere Hubertine Auclert confirmed it in an interview we conducted.

<sup>15</sup> CIDFF organizations receive funding from the Ministry of gender equality; they are spread out across each “département” and are specialized in gender equality law, three dimensions which legitimize their involvement in training sessions. A “département” is a territorial entity and community in France.

<sup>16</sup> Institut national d’aide aux victimes et de médiation, National Institute for Victim Assistance and Mediation.

<sup>17</sup> Instance régionale d’éducation et de promotion de la santé, Regional body for education and health promotion.





FACE<sup>18</sup> foundation (fighting against exclusion), or mental health structures (like La durance in Marseille). Some programs were part of a larger institution, such as the Bureau d'Aide aux Victimes<sup>19</sup> of Marseille which trained police officers to tackle family violence. The programs designed by these actors often focused on one specific aspect of VAW or a category of victims in particular: For instance, La Durance specialized in consequences of violence and abuse on children and on trauma, the CIMADE focused on foreign survivors, etc. According to a civil servant working in the Regional office of the department for women's rights (DRDFE) in Île-de-France, such organizations considered themselves legitimate experts on VAW because of the support services they provided to survivors. These organizations had therefore created niches in the market of training programs.

Thus, even though feminist organizations and non-specialist organizations competed with each other, the competition mostly remained confined to certain niches. Although the number of actors who could provide training on domestic violence practices increased, feminist organizations remained dominant in this field both at the national and at the regional levels, and most new actors also specialized in gender equality issues. The persistence of a feminist-dominated field was related to the growing institutionalization of women's rights' issues (Blanchard et al. 2018). Femocrats who worked in gender equality institutions often approved the feminist perspective on violence and contributed to promoting feminist actors in this field.

Thus, training appeared as a symbolic policy tool: It aimed at changing local actors' practices by changing their perception of domestic violence and survivors. As the main government's agency lacked resources to carry out this training strategy, feminist organizations remained the main actors who were in charge of its implementation. The VAW field therefore remained somewhat unchanged.

## **Cross-sectoral training in practice since the mid-2000s: a strong symbolic tool implemented by weak institutions**

Despite the importance of in-service training as a policy tool on a symbolic level, we identified two main problems regarding the implementation of VAW training programs.

### **Limited national government commitment**

Above all, the limited national government commitment implied that this tool remained symbolic, with no coercive or constraining dimension, which in turn impacted the latitude of organizations when implementing training sessions. Even though training programs became a significant aspect of VAW policy in France,

<sup>18</sup> Fondation agir contre le chômage et l'exclusion, Foundation to act against unemployment and exclusion.

<sup>19</sup> Services dedicated to helping victims file complaints and assisting them throughout the judicial process.



government authorities remained weak in conducting this policy area. As noted already, the MIPROF did not have any compelling power or hierarchical, legal or financial leverage to impose training programs. In such a context, the MIPROF had no overview of the various, local actions undertaken by a wide range of organizations.<sup>20</sup> National plans, therefore, were used instead as vague guidelines that helped to assert the legitimacy of feminist organizations rather than as a strong impulse that could shape the format, content and audience of training programs. Besides, stricter national guidelines could sometimes be distorted at a local level and appropriated by feminist organizations. For instance, the MIPROF was in charge of training health professionals in Paris to create domestic violence “referents”—points of contact—within health institutions. Since this requirement was not implemented in Bouches-du-Rhône—because, among other reasons, health professionals would not go to Paris to get training—the Regional Health Agency (Agence Régionale de Santé, ARS) created a 3-year plan in order to train health professionals within the département and mandated SAVE to implement it.

Moreover, once trainees became trainers, the MIPROF had no overview of the content of training activities that were developed at a local level. The MIPROF staff did not know about the characteristics of trainers, about their area of expertise or the types of materials they used.

Women’s policy agencies at the national level and their regional and departmental antennae had no general guidelines for implementing training with clear recommendations on the types of programs they should promote,<sup>21</sup> let alone for funding them. In Bouches-du-Rhône, the Déléguée départementale aux droits des femmes<sup>22</sup> explained how unclear her mission was, in general, and for that matter specifically; she insisted on the discrepancy between the promotion of training programs and the few means they had at their disposal. As national-level offices did not fund training activities, it was quite difficult for her to follow what happened in this field. In the Regional office of the department for women’s rights in Île-de-France, a civil servant explained:

We have a partial vision of what happens regarding the training sessions on VAW. Thus, when we had to assess the job that had been done, we couldn’t identify what had happened. We don’t organize an annual listing of training sessions; we have many difficulties in doing it.

The weak resources of such institutions made it difficult for them to gather all the pieces of information on current initiatives. An actor of the Centre Hubertine Auclert, working with nonprofit organizations in the fight against VAW, underlined

<sup>20</sup> Conversely, local nonprofit organizations do not necessarily know about the initiatives of the MIPROF when the institution organizes a conference for doctors, or policemen in a département.

<sup>21</sup> This situation can be compared to the implementation of gender mainstreaming: This strategy has been promoted by the European union, without defining the content of the gender equality goal. See Perrier 2015.

<sup>22</sup> Person in charge of the territorial office of the department for women’s rights in a French département.



that even though some organizations made their training activity visible, others did not:

Organizations like Flora Tristan [a historical feminist organization against VAW] have great booklets describing training sessions, and they have a training service, but we also know that other organizations conduct training sessions, and we can't exactly know what they do.

In that respect, identifying these structures became one of the objectives of the Centre Hubertine Auclert.

### **Stability... and unexpected competition among feminist organizations**

With the institutionalization of VAW policies, some actors, such as police officers, were compelled to receive some basic training on domestic violence, but training mostly remained on a voluntary basis as local policy actors may or may not have reached out to feminist organizations for training. In a context where public funds given to VAW training programs were limited, the development of in-service training seemed to be a strategic issue for feminist organizations.

First of all, carrying out training programs was usually, if not increasingly, a source of funding. Even if the national government has promoted training on VAW as a goal of its policy for about 15 years, it did not have designed or granted a specific budget for this activity. Training was a prescriptive tool, without any funding. As there was no financial plan that framed training programs, actors were encouraged to develop their programs step by step by commercializing their activity and using funds allocated for one specific project—such as a 3-year project dedicated to training health workers in Bouches-du-Rhône. This lack of resources revealed greater changes that stood in sharp contrast with the history of the sector, as some years ago an increase in the activity would have implied an increase in funding. Thus, the VAW training field became a market where organizations defended their financial interests. Although the idea of spreading knowledge about VAW was crucial, feminist organizations could not ignore this financial dimension. Many feminist organizations specialized in VAW encountered “structural” financial difficulties, to quote an institutional actor who was in charge of the follow-up of nonprofit organizations specialized in VAW in the Île-de-France region. One of the eight CIDFF in Île-de-France even had to close because it went bankrupt. These organizations were thus compelled to diversify their financial sources. In the CNIDFF, training courses were no longer free of charge for its own members in the early 2000s. This financial dimension also explains why the CNIDFF organized training sessions for actors who were not members of the CIDFF network:

As public funding is limited, [training] is a way for the government to point out how to increase our budget without any financial input from government itself” (head of the training service in the CNIDFF).

In SAVE, the instructor was happy to say: “Today, most training sessions are paid. (...) Some years ago, we realized that we would not receive funding for ever.” The



financial dimension was of great concern for institutions too. For instance, the Centre Hubertine Auclert, which was threatened in 2015 by a 30% budget cut, launched its own training sessions as a mean to develop its own resources; it organized training sessions on cybersexism, a topic which was not taken up by local organizations.

Thus, even though the number of non-feminist organizations involved in training sessions was limited, competition did exist: It also (and above all) came from the feminist sector itself. In a context of institutionalization of gender policies, more and more actors and services were devoted to gender equality and some of them carry out training sessions. In the département of Essonne, the training market was divided between the main actors: The CIDFF and a nonprofit organization specialized in helping victims (Mediavip 91) organized training sessions that addressed legal aspects of VAW, whereas Paroles de femmes and Femmes solidaires 91, two feminist nonprofit organizations, specifically provided training on the cycle of violence. Feminist actors were often aware of the issue of competition and tried to limit its impacts. In Bouches-du-Rhône, the division of the training market between two major historical organizations overlapped with a territorial divide, as the CIDFF in Arles was in charge of all training sessions in the North of the département, and SAVE operated in the South.

## **Training outcomes: changing the perception and treatment of domestic violence**

Despite significant professional constraints that shaped training programs, most people we interviewed perceived significant cognitive and practical changes resulting from the training of all workers involved in the domestic violence field as well as a broader context of visibility of the issue.

## **Empowering workers to better deal with survivors: creating a “common culture” and networks**

Although there was no clear information available about the gender of trainees, they were mostly thought to be women by the people we interviewed. In SAVE, the instructor explained: “The other day, I had one social worker, who was a man, who attended the session. It is rare enough to be pointed out.” The VAW field was dominated by women, as it remained rooted in the sector of social work and because the issue was perceived as related to care work (Bessin 2009). Even if the issue had penetrated other working sectors, such as the police, the justice system, or health institutions (Henrion 2001; Cavalin 2016), which are sometimes male-dominated, tackling domestic violence in police stations, in courts or in hospitals often behooved women workers anyway, probably because they were supposed to have specific skills to support survivors and this task remained disparaged. However, the prevalence of women among trainees did not necessarily imply that training programs were a means of women’s empowerment: They were not conceived as such, and female trainees were trained in a professional setting and for professional



reasons. To the contrary, research shows that working in feminist organizations may lead individuals to actually embracing feminist approaches to violence: Some of the newly recruited workers become feminists thanks to in-service trainings about VAW as well as collective meetings and daily conversations with feminist workers where they become aware of how gender impacts the lives of survivors as well as theirs (Herman 2016; Delage 2017). Yet, training programs were most of the time neither primarily conceived as a channel for politicizing other workers and policy actors, nor promoted as a means to raise consciousness about gender relationships and their impacts on women's lives. They were often presented by instructors we interviewed as practice-oriented and focused on VAW. When sexism was explained, it aimed at better understanding the mechanisms of violence.

To affect as many people as possible, training programs should appeal to a variety of actors who have different professional concerns and interests (i.e., a police officer, a nurse and a social worker) and whose perspective on domestic violence and on survivors changes accordingly (i.e., a police officer who collects reports, a nurse who identifies and care for a survivor, and a social worker who supports survivors, finds a shelter and provides counseling for them and their children). Although training programs were delivered by feminist organizations, their implementation was shaped by a variety of constraints which were related to professional and organizational factors as well as a lack of state governance. Like other gender equality training programs (Perrier 2013; Verschuur and Doubogan 2019), they often involved workers who volunteered to attend and were “one shot training program,” without any follow-ups. Besides, their content and format were often conceived and thought to be practice-oriented to give social actors concrete tools.

First of all, even the shortest versions of training programs aimed not only at conveying knowledge about domestic violence but also at “embodying practices, such as listening” or “adapting one's professional postures” (training instructor in SAVE). The training that was given aimed first of all to detect situations of domestic violence; for instance, a training program provided by the Feminist collective against rape (Collectif féministe contre le viol, CFCV) was entitled: “Bringing out the story of female survivors of sexual violence.” Training programs also aimed at supporting survivors according to their needs and to act with empathy. A worker of a CIDFF in Île-de-France explained how she responded to a social worker who was angry at survivors because of their “curious reactions.” In such a case, she gave information about the many constraints that survivors of violence face and convinced the social worker to keep in touch with the victims. Training programs also set out the practical steps to help a survivor who had never reached out to some institutions, such as the justice system, law enforcement agencies, etc.<sup>23</sup> The training programs of the CIDFF always presented the legal framework regarding VAW and domestic violence.

Then, training catalogs often differentiated types of training courses according to their length and content. For instance, a “sensibilisation” was a 3-h overview of

<sup>23</sup> See for instance Centre Hubertine Auclert, Fiche réflexe, “Vous êtes en contact avec une femme victime de violences ? Conseils pour aider et orienter les femmes victimes de violences,” s.d.



what domestic violence was, how survivors felt and responded to it, and the basic resources available. They may be qualified as “McDo” programs, as they were “short and quickly consumed,” and they were supposed to reach as many people as possible (Verschuur and Doubogan 2019). In SAVE, the catalog also included a 2-day “basic training,” to which may be added “complementary units” about “domestic violence and the law,” “the consequences of domestic violence on children,” “perpetrators of domestic violence” and “gender and social work.” Specialized organizations like the CFCV, or the CNIDFF, also offer such “long-lasting” (2 days, or more) training sessions to their own members or to feminist sister organizations, in which the content of the programs specializes in different types of violence, or in legal aspects.

Even though time restrictions were part of training programs, long-term cooperation was also understood as an expected goal. The purpose of training programs was not only to convey information and a perspective on domestic violence; they were also a means for creating long-lasting networks of actors to better support survivors. In Île-de-France, the Relais de Sénart offered a three-step program. It started with half a day dedicated to basic knowledge about domestic violence, then, 1 or 2 days aimed at providing more in-depth knowledge regarding one specific aspect of domestic violence, and it ended with half a day entitled “retour sur expérience” where local actors met up to create long-lasting networks. In the département of Bouches-du-Rhône, training sessions were organized for all local actors, especially social workers and law enforcement, in a diversity of communities where six formal networks had been created. The SAVE worker in charge of training programs was also in charge of organizing and facilitating these networks meetings which he described as follow-ups, a means to keep on conveying information about domestic violence or providing legal updates. As laws and plans about domestic violence have multiplied since the 2000s, one key issue for instructors was to keep track of all those reforms, to understand them and to set up moments for explaining them to actors in the social field. The first part of the meeting of September 2018 was about the 2018 law about sexual and sexist abuse; the second part was dedicated to discussing concrete cases of domestic violence that local actors had recently dealt with. Conveying knowledge about domestic violence and creating long-lasting networks were two intertwined purposes that were at the core of training programs.

Since VAW policies have become cross-sectoral, one of the main purposes of training programs was to create a “common culture” between diverse workers. Trainers often used this expression to describe their job and purpose when carrying out trainings. The instructor in SAVE argued: “The purpose is to know the mechanisms that prevent women from leaving as soon as possible, [understanding] why it is so difficult for them to file a complaint, why it is so difficult to understand her, why she can’t express what she wants. (...) It’s to explain the answers to the questions that are asked by the average person: why doesn’t she leave? If she stays, she probably likes it, etc.”

Some of the common ideas and notions that were conveyed were based on feminist knowledge regarding violence. All the programs developed by the MIPROF and domestic violence organizations highlighted the diverse forms of abuse (economic violence, administrative violence, psychological and sexual violence), the difference between conflict and violence, a conception of trauma and control (*emprise*)



that avoided victim blaming, and data which asserted gender asymmetry. All these analyses were carried out by feminist researchers and feminist organizations. Therefore, a gender perspective on domestic violence had not faded and training programs were part of a broader agenda that aimed at conveying concrete answers to domestic violence.

Although the programs were infused with gender, they were not conceived as a channel for gender empowerment. As the social worker-cum-instructor of SAVE put it, training sessions had to be “useful for workers, and finally for survivors.” When asked if he explained the relationship between sexism and domestic violence, the social worker–trainer of SAVE said: “Of course. How could I do it otherwise?” Moreover, to the question “what about male survivors?” he answered that men who were victimized by women did exist but that the mechanisms were different from domestic violence against women because this latter issue was the result, and climax, of a sexist society. The Déléguée départementale aux droits des femmes who attended all training programs of the département also described their framing as “feminist.” But the main focus was laid on practice. In other words, training sessions targeted domestic violence, as a problem to be dealt with, rather than the structural causes of the issue.

Systemic gender inequalities were mostly absent from training contents, and feminist ideas were used to better explain the effects and mechanisms of violence and to provide with a women-centered perspective. For instance, while programs explained how domestic violence affected mostly women and was a gendered issue, gender was reduced to the quantitative asymmetry that characterized the phenomenon of domestic violence and VAW. Moreover, the problem was rarely discussed in relation to other types of violence, such as sexual violence other than marital rape, to show how the control of women’s bodies operated in society; women were mostly perceived as women or mothers who need protection. The mechanisms of domestic violence and VAW were explained in psychological terms (especially thanks to the notions of trauma and *emprise*), but they were completely disconnected from other gender inequalities, such as economic inequalities or the gendered division of labor, and from their impacts on various aspects of life. While training programs, as policy tools, were not gender neutral, gender, as a concept for capturing social relations and hierarchies, was neutralized in the training programs; it was limited in scope and only applied to domestic violence. The relationship to feminism that was described by trainers also reflected how gender was neutralized. The social worker and instructor of SAVE explained that, when he took over the training service in 2012, he steered programs toward practice and toward improving each sector’s work practices, rather than toward a feminist perspective on domestic violence. He also chose to develop “sessions devoted to work practices,” instead of “trying to convince actors of the validity of feminism.” As training programs became institutionalized beyond and within these structures, the organization of work changed and purpose of in-service training was also rethought. While conveying feminist ideas about violence and gender, training programs often rested on a consensual feminist perspective, one which focused on work practices and on violence as a specific and isolated phenomenon and one which did not question general inequalities.





## **Transformation in the long run: developing training, increasing the visibility of domestic violence, transforming gender relations?**

By being mostly practice-oriented and focused on domestic violence, training sessions probably failed to transform gender norms, but they changed practices of trainees regarding domestic violence. They were therefore instruments that generated “gender accommodation” (Engeli and Mazur 2018).

Assessing the direct impact of VAW training was very tricky. First of all, assessing the evolution of VAW was nearly impossible as we lacked the quantitative data that would have been collected over time. In that respect, the only available data were produced by the Ministry of justice, but were based on criminal complaints and therefore only captured a small fraction of the reality of VAW. Moreover, an increase in the number of complaints filed with the police does not equal an increase in violence. Secondly, when studying violence, it is difficult to distinguish the impact of training tools from other global evolutions of the French VAW policy which have gained increasing attention since the early 2000s. Moreover, not only did public policy change, but the media treatment of VAW also did and the issue had become more visible in different spheres: For instance, the increasing institutionalization of gender studies at the university had contributed to its growing visibility, as VAW was talked about in courses on gender. Thirdly, insofar as instructors had few feedbacks about training sessions, the impact of training was difficult to assess. When trainees filled in course evaluations, they did so right after the session, without reflecting on changes in work practices, and focused on their level of satisfaction. Such assessments could not measure the extent to which the content of training sessions was adequate and had an impact on their practices. However, some quantitative evaluations were available, but they were incomplete and limited in scope. For instance, the Paris Observatory of violence against women did a yearly assessment of its activities. Although part of this document was dedicated to the assessment of training courses, it only referred to the number of social workers and front-office civil servants who took part in them.

Although quantitative assessment was limited, domestic violence policy actors often mentioned transformations in the attitudes toward domestic violence during interviews. In an interview we conducted, the instructor of SAVE highlighted two types of intended outcomes: a practical one and a more general one.

One of the main perceived and expected changes was related to professional practices. To explain the extent to which the attitudes toward domestic violence had changed since SAVE developed training programs and network building, the training instructor of SAVE gave the example of a network’s meeting where a social worker explained how she had managed to handle a domestic violence situation all through the social and judicial process, with the help of local actors she had met during those meetings. When telling the situation, she thanked the instructor of SAVE, saying she would not have been able to do so if she had not attended the program. He concluded this story by insisting on the fact that this was what they aimed for: “Becoming practically dispensable.” Yet, organizational constraints, such as staff turnover in police stations or in courts, and the fact that domestic violence policies often relied



on one or two committed workers (according to policy actors), tended to hinder their efficiency.

A general statement about perceived changes related to the increasing visibility of VAW, and domestic violence in particular, in society, is also understood as one of the direct results of the spread of training sessions. As the trainer in SAVE explained: “The authorities have changed a lot. 15 years ago I can see myself trying to reach out to local authorities to talk about the issue of domestic violence, they would answer ‘No thanks, not here.’ Today, people are coming to us. (...) No one can say that they do not know DV exists.” The growing visibility of the issue goes along with the growing—and intended—visibility of their structure and actions against domestic violence.

## Conclusion

Since the 2000s, VAW policy has followed a cross-sectoral trend in France: While feminist organizations, who put the issue on the political agenda and dealt with it on a daily basis, were the main policy actors during the 1980s and 1990s, the national government aimed at reaching out to various sectors in order to develop its VAW policy. VAW training programs, which were first carried out by feminist organizations to train their own members and then law enforcement officers, became a major policy tool to implement this strategy. To what extent can this strategy improve VAW policy in France? What were the consequences of the promotion of this policy tool on the VAW sector? The comparison between two regional cases shows that there was no clear-cut answer to this question. On the one hand, in a context where state feminism approved of feminist organizations and lacked financial means to steer this policy, feminists remained the main actors in charge of the implementation of the training strategy. In both regions we studied, the VAW policy actors were stable. Yet, because of various constraints (such as the short format of training courses, the necessity to adapt the training content to a variety of professional expectations, concurrence in the market of training programs), this relative stability was accompanied by some discrete evolutions in the framing of VAW. Even though training sessions were not gender neutral and used feminist knowledge, they aimed, first and foremost, to change professional habits without tackling gender inequalities. Our analyses of training programs and interviews show that although these training programs were not gender neutral, they tended to neutralize gender: Although the training content was anchored in a feminist perspective, the issue of gender-based violence tended to be disconnected from gender inequalities. Training sessions enlarged the number of policy actors who were aware of VAW and contributed to spreading knowledge about VAW, but the degree of empowerment and of gender transformation was only limited, because of the practical constraints that shaped these programs.

To better capture the impact of training programs, we will have to conduct an ethnographic research in order to tackle two other questions: the appropriation of (feminist) ideas (Jacquemart and Albenga 2015) in different sectors (police, justice, health sector) and the articulation between ideas and practice. To what extent is feminist knowledge about VAW understood and assimilated? Does it change



professional practices? Besides, the content analysis of some training programs suggested that they may have contributed to an increasing global knowledge on VAW, or at least to an increasing awareness of the problem. Most training programs referred to general information about VAW: its frequency and existence in all social groups, the different types of violence, etc. Although training programs have professional outcomes, they may have an impact that goes beyond the professional sphere.

## Appendix: Methodology

The empirical elements used for this article come from two types of sources, gathered between 2016 and 2019: grey literature, produced by different types of actors, and interviews with key players.

Regarding documents produced by the French state's institutions, we analyzed:

- The 5 interdepartmental and 3-year plans to fight against VAW and policy plan assessment reports of two of these,
- A national catalog produced by the national department in charge of gender equality promotion (Service des droits des femmes et de l'égalité, SDFE) (2012), identifying existing training courses all over the country,
- Documents designed by the interdepartmental mission for women's protection against violence and human trafficking (Mission interministérielle pour la protection des femmes contre les violences et la lutte contre la traite des êtres humains, MIPROF).

Regarding local actors, we analyzed training catalogs: those from Metanoya, the National information's center on women's and families' rights (Centre national d'information sur les droits des femmes et des familles : CNIDFF), Paroles de femmes 91, SAVE (the name was changed), CIDFF Arles (Centre d'information sur les droits des femmes et des familles), CIDFF 13), and training programs (of some CIDFF, La Durance and SAVE), of the feminist group against rape (Collectif féministe contre le viol, CFCV), of the Paris Observatory of violence against women (Observatoire parisien des violences faites aux femmes, OPVF), of Metanoya, of the network Politicians against VAW (Elu-es contre les violences faites aux femmes, ECVF).

We did interviews ( $n = 19$ ) with two main types of actors:

- (Nonprofit) organizations carrying out training sessions; some of them are historical feminist organizations (the National federation of women's shelters and support services—Fédération nationale solidarité femmes, FNSF), while other organizations are not specialized in VAW or in the promotion of gender equality, but have carried out training programs on this topic.
- Femocrats in charge of the promotion of gender equality and/or the fight against VAW ( $n = 7$ ), at the national level (MIPROF), but above all at the local level.



We also analyzed press articles about actors or organizations committed to the promotion of training programs.

This research is based on a multi-level approach of the VAW training tool.

The first step of this research consisted in analyzing the national context in which this tool was promoted: When and how did training programs appear in the national VAW policy? Who are the actors who promoted this instrument? What are the governmental recommendations regarding the implementation of training programs?

On a regional level, we mapped out actors and institutions who played a significant role in developing training programs.

We chose to focus on two regions, Île-de-France (IdF) and Provence Alpes Côte d'Azur (PACA) which have several points in common. First of all, they are both characterized by a strong feminist influence, with a (relatively) well-established network of feminist organizations. In the national catalog which lists training sessions,<sup>24</sup> Île-de-France appears as the region where the training activity is the highest in the country, whereas PACA appears as an average case study. Yet, the relationship to the French central power (and its institutions) is very different in Île-de-France, characterized by its geographic and symbolic proximity, whereas PACA remains distant from central government. Thus, focusing on these two areas provides an interesting insight for analyzing the variability of policy implementation and evaluation.

Comparison is used as an analytical tool to explore the implementation of the VAW policy, to analyze the role of feminist organizations in the context of State promotion of training programs, the extent to which the framing of VAW was questioned, and the effects of the implementation of training programs in the VAW sector.

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