

# Filming with Responsibility: Ethical Filmmaking on Domestic Violence

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## 1. Foreword

A warm welcome to this Manual about Ethical Filmmaking on Domestic Violence!

Who is behind this manual?

This manual was created by a team of scientists and practitioners in the field of domestic violence who came together for the EU project *IMPROVE*<sup>1</sup>. Within this project, various studies on domestic violence were conducted between November 2022 and September 2023, to feed the already existing data with personal experiences both from survivors and professionals.

Following this process of information gathering, we developed a training website on domestic violence<sup>2</sup> for training those who work with individuals affected by domestic violence in their everyday day work in the police, healthcare, social and justice sectors, and we created *AinoAid*<sup>TM3</sup>, a digital contact and information point for people experiencing domestic violence.

Additionally, we were faced with the question of how to better educate the general public about domestic violence – and that's where films come in!

For this manual, we interviewed five experts from the filmmaking industry and incorporated their experiences and insights into our work.

A huge thanks for this inspiring exchange!

*Natalie Köpsel, Sandra González Cabezas, and the entire IMPROVE consortium*

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<sup>1</sup> [www.improve-horizon.eu](http://www.improve-horizon.eu)

<sup>2</sup> <https://training.improdoxa.eu/en/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://ainoaid.fi>

## 2. Audio-visual Depiction of Domestic Violence

### 2.1 Why is it important to depict domestic violence?

Domestic and gender-based violence remains a widespread and persistent global social issue, affecting millions of individuals around the world. According to UN Women, an estimated 736 million women—nearly one in three globally—have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner, non-partner, or both at least once in their lifetime. Most violence against women is committed by current or former husbands or intimate partners, with more than 640 million women having been subjected specifically to intimate partner violence (UN Women, 2024).

While these figures underscore the alarming scale of the problem, our findings suggest that knowledge about national helping systems, the various forms of violence, and the legal consequences and opportunities for seeking help remains limited. As one interviewee noted,

*“Society in general is unaware of the scale of this problem and, therefore, does not tend to take an interest in these topics.”*

E1

This lack of awareness is particularly significant when considering how domestic violence is represented in cultural media. In the film industry, its depiction shows that cinema acts as a narrator of the society from which it arose (Sarwari & Mohammadi, 2023). It evokes emotions, shocks, draws attention, and is intertwined with the personal stories of main characters—either as survivors or as saviours for those in need of rescue.

Moreover, film serves as a mirror of cultural attitudes, raises awareness about systemic issues, and can inspire empathy, reflection, and social change among audiences.

As one interviewee remarked,

*“If we want to inform people about domestic violence in a way that goes beyond simply providing factual information, fiction film can be an important channel to engage audiences around issues related to domestic violence”*

E4

At the same time, not all portrayals are constructive. As one scholar notes, “Repeated exposure of not only unrealistic portrayals of intimacy and romance, but also of harmful depictions of the romanticization of hypermasculinity, hyper aggression, intimate partner aggression, stalking, and negligence of consent can shape and ultimately desensitize viewers’ beliefs on what an appropriate relationship looks like within society” (Krans, 2023).

### 2.2 Why is it important to change the depiction of violence?

You have probably heard of the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975) Male heroes are worldwide in the centre of storytelling. The audience’s emotions are bound to this male hero, who might save a helpless and desperate woman from a violent relationship – a knight in shining armour.

But which picture is drawn of this woman? Through camera perspective, sound, lighting and focus, she is often represented as weak, helpless, unable to save herself and possibly traumatised by interactions with the police.

*“A common shortcoming in films about violence is that they fail to show how dangerous it truly is. Or when a victim is kicked in the stomach, films rarely convey how much pain it actually causes.”*

E3

To truly empower people in real life, whether they are experiencing violence in their relationships, are friends or family who want to support, or are professionals confronted with domestic or gender-based violence, different stories need to be told.

Survivors should be portrayed as resilient individuals with agency rather than being defined only by their abuse. Narratives should highlight: stories of social networks, professional collaboration, empowerment and the full range of human emotions.

Watching films can impact people's perspective and behaviour, educating audiences on how to behave, where to seek help, and what not to accept anymore.

Changing the depiction of violence in films is not just about showing real cases, it's about shaping understanding, empathy, and action. By presenting survivors as active agents and showing the complexity of their experiences, cinema can become a tool for social awareness, prevention, and empowerment.

Anyways it needs to be considered, which type of movie you would like to create. The following recommendations are not always applicable to fictional AND documentary films. Please use those aspects that suit your project.

*“It is important to keep in mind that cinema is part of the entertainment industry, and therefore, in very few cases does it address such specialized and complex issues. Only the documentary genre deals with them in more depth.”*

E2

### 3. Changes in the Depiction of Domestic Violence

#### 3.1 What can be done to create and amplify change?

##### 3.1.1 Needs for the portrayal of the multifaceted reality:

- **A more diverse and relatable representation of**
  - **...the dynamics of domestic violence.** Challenge simplistic narratives of victimhood and villainy. Acknowledge the repetitive cycle of abuse:

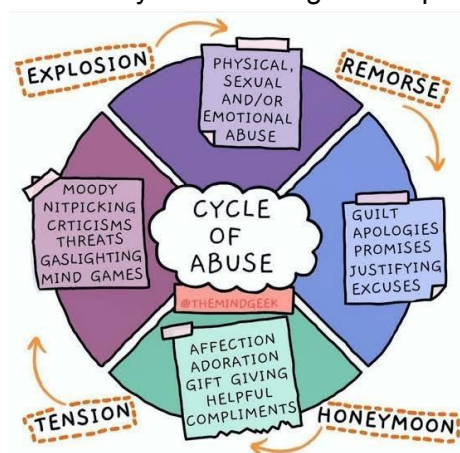


Figure 1 The Cycle of Abuse, [Stopping Violence Resources — Kapiti Living Without Violence](#)

- **...the different faces of domestic violence**, such as stalking, psychological, economical, physical violence as well as the effects of witnessing violence (especially important when children witness domestic violence).
- **...the people who experience domestic violence**: It is not bound to education, income, (dis)abilities, age, sex, gender or other factors.
- **...those who act violently**. There is never an excuse for violent behaviour, yet everyone has their own story and experiences that influence the ability to act or not act violently.
- **...the families and social network involved and/or affected**.
- **...the way out of violent relationships**. It is not an easy path and most people are successful thanks to a strong social network that empowers and encourages them.
- **Addressing the structural background in which violence is embedded.**  
Such as gender inequality, discrimination, lack of protective laws or social norms that tolerate or even fuel aggression.
- **Focus on solutions and support**  
While depicting the realities of abuse is crucial, it is also important to highlight resources available for victims, pathways to safety, and opportunities for healing and recovery. Show positive examples of a well-functioning social network and successful support from professionals.

- **Challenge viewing habits:**

*“The audience is intelligent, but also comfortable; if you give them what they expect, it will remain just a simple anecdote.”*

*“You don’t always need to show everything—sound is a powerful tool.”*

*“The important thing is not to see a scene full of violence, but the before and the after.”*

E1

*“I’d like to challenge the viewing habits: We need to change the way of storytelling where there is only one hero or heroine, who faces all the challenges and prevails. Rather, focusing on the collective that supports a person affected by domestic violence would bring a new perspective e.”*

E4

*“I believe that I would rather explore the profound emotions that transform the way we perceive and accept the world than to confront the audience with pictures of violence.”*

E5

These insights show that depicting domestic violence in films is not only about showing violence; it is also about the emotional and social impact, the broader context in which the violence occurs, and the experiences of all those involved.

### 3.1.2 Facilitators for changes of the filmmaking process ethically

- **Trainings for the production team**, including mandatory courses on sexual harassment, workplace harassment, and discrimination. Training should be tailored for different roles (producers, directors, crew members, and other staff) and use models specifically designed for the film industry. Production companies should ensure funding and access for all relevant personnel, making participation mandatory rather than optional.
- Including authentic voices: Use **survivor or professional expertise as a matter of quality** (and not limit it to the label of “social justice” or “women’s issue”, as said by E4)
- **Ensuring psychological wellbeing of everyone involved.**

Trauma- and domestic-violence-sensitive filmmaking is not limited to the needs of the audience. Contrarily: It includes the needs of everyone involved in the process. Every member of the filmmaking team may have experienced violence in an intimate relationship before and may be affected by the story you want to tell.

Effective de-escalation strategies, including staying calm, maintaining non-threatening body language, and practicing active listening, together with clearly communicated contact points, are essential. It is therefore highly recommended to provide training on these techniques and appropriate communication protocols, at minimum for directors and preferably for the entire production team.

*“A further challenge is the effect that working with violence has on the director. While the director can take measures to protect actors from being retraumatised, it is also crucial to consider their own coping strategies. In fiction, the work ends with the film; in documentary, the reality continues, and directors often remain connected to the protagonists. Addressing violence can even lead to threats or harassment against the filmmaker.”*

E3

Especially, when you decide to include domestic-violence-survivors,

*“it has to be a key priority that the process respects their needs and follows their own rhythm - not the often hectic rhythm of the filmmaking process. If they are featured in a documentary, it is important that they are given the possibility to withdraw their consent for their material to be included, even late in the process. Empowerment and ensuring that they are not deprived of control of their own story is key.”*

E4

### 3.2 Further recommendations of the interviewees

The interviewees offered **practical suggestions for improving the depiction of domestic violence** in films, emphasizing the importance of training, knowledge, and gender-sensitive storytelling:

#### 1. Training Beyond Representation:

*“The assumption that having women in the writing team will automatically lead to more sensitive storytelling, is not enough. Rather, all writers, irrespective of their gender, need to bring awareness, sensitivity and knowledge. Similarly, the knowledge and understanding is important for all people involved in the process of filmmaking.”*

E4

#### 2. Gender Perspective in Scripts:

*“I highly value the training of the teams involved in the film, I greatly appreciate that the script is written with a gender perspective, that it does not reinforce the discrimination of women, and that it takes their demands into account.”*

E2

#### 3. Complex Storytelling (while acknowledging the challenges that may arise)

##### a. Context of the violent behaviour:

*“When I depict fictional violence, I also think carefully about the perpetrator’s character. What drives them to commit violence? The crucial distinction is that violence does not stem from the victim.”*

*“When I presented the idea to a TV producer, the challenge was that the producer wanted the ex-husband’s perspective included in the film. This would have created a security risk and, at the same time, taken the voice away from her.”*

*“You cannot give the impression that nagging, infidelity, or losing one’s home could legitimize violence.”*

all E3

##### b. Emphasize with the situation of the person that experiences violence:

*“Another way I raised awareness of her suffering was by highlighting her love for her children—something any viewer can relate to. Every mother loves her children, regardless of culture.”*

*“If it is too grim, or if the victim has no positive moments at all, the audience may turn away. Showing the victim’s empowerment is crucial.”*

*“If I create a character, I might base them on someone I know. That makes the story recognizable and authentic, so the audience can see parallels in their own lives. It’s important to create that sense of identification—because that’s when it resonates.”*

all E3

#### 4. General comments on depicting domestic violence in movies

*“Another thing to avoid is social pornography—films that dwell solely on suffering, where the protagonist’s life is depicted as nothing but misery. It is essential to also include moments of joy.”*

*“People are multi-faceted, sometimes even contradictory, and this complexity makes both them—and cinematic storytelling—engaging”*

E3

**5. Comprehensive Knowledge for Screenwriters:**

*“As a screenwriter, you must have all the information to be able to talk about it without gaps in reality.”*

E1

These insights highlight that diverse teams alone are insufficient; professionals involved in filmmaking need awareness, education, and access to accurate information to depict violence responsibly.

## 4. Helpful Reflections for the Process of Filmmaking:

- **What is the aim of your movie? -> Entertainment, Documentary, Infotainment**
- ***What are compromises that you are willing to make for the sake of your main aim?***
- **Whose story do you want to tell?**
- **Whose feelings do you want to show?**
- **Whose perspective do you want to present?**
- **What do you aim to evoke in the audience?**
- **What is your knowledge/expertise on DV?**

In your professional education, you will have learnt techniques on storytelling, attention keeping, sound, light and editing. But now we talk about a very sensitive topic- so who can be an expert to support you in delivering high qualitative work?

There are various possibilities in the area of domestic or gender-based violence:

- a) Victim-survivors and their official representatives
  - b) Researchers and/or practitioners
  - c) Other filmmakers (*ask to interviewees, if realistic and necessary*)
  - d) Agencies that offer consulting specifically for filmmakers and the filmmaking process, but: not all of them have expertise in the complex-structure of gender-based violence, as mentioned by E4. It is therefore important to check their background.
  - e) Maybe you already have some knowledge from your own experience or people close to you. Please ensure your own psychological wellbeing when you reflect on biographical experiences.
- **Which information, such as contact details, do you want to provide to the part of your audience that may be affected by domestic violence?** Some directors include a final segment in their films to inform viewers where they can seek help in such situations. *Examples of information to include are the local Helpline for Violence against Women or other relevant local support services.*

### 4.1 Further Reading

For various reflections specially designed for the filmmaking process of a fictional movie, check out the white paper from WIFT (*Women in Film and Television Germany*), the MaLisa Foundation and BFFS (*Bundesverband Schauspiel, Germany*):

[https://wiftg.de/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/white-paper\\_gender-based-violence\\_film\\_finalfeb2024.pdf](https://wiftg.de/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/white-paper_gender-based-violence_film_finalfeb2024.pdf)

And the factsheet for scriptwriters, directors and producers from the IMPRODOVA-Project:

<https://improdova.eu/pdf/Displaying-Domestic-Abuse-Fact-sheet.pdf?m=1629955205>

More on myths about domestic violence:

<https://safeandequal.org.au/understanding-family-violence/myths/>

The project's recommendations for frontline responders (such as police officers, doctors, social workers, midwives,...) on communication in cases of DV can be found in our training platform: [Police](#), [Health Sector](#), [Social Sector](#) or [Legal Sector](#).

## 5. Conclusion

And now it's your turn!

Whether you are a filmmaker yourself, decide on film fundings, do casting, editing, post-production or scriptwriting, you can help to show the dynamics of domestic violence, depict support systems or promote utopias.

We appreciate you taking the time to read this manual.

We hope to enrich your work and, together with you, share valuable knowledge with those affected by domestic violence.

*And to conclude this manual, we would again open the stage for the statement of one of our interviewees: "Whether it's fiction or documentary, credibility is crucial. What makes it credible are the elements people can relate to."*

E3

The Experts quoted in this manual:

E1: Expert 1 is a Spanish filmmaker, journalist, and gender equality advocate from Valencia, known for documentaries and for founding a festival promoting social justice and women's visibility in film.

E2: Expert 2 is a Spanish filmmaker, producer and screenwriter from Valencia, who founded Inquietafilms and is known for award-winning short films, with her work often selected for national and international festivals.

E3: Expert 3, namely Kaisa Restimo, is a Finnish film director, writer and producer known for socially engaged cinema that spans both fiction and documentary. She has directed several notable films, such as *Heinähattu ja Vilttitossu* (2002) and *Myrsky* (2008). After a long break from filmmaking – in part due to frustration with prevailing misogyny in the film industry – *Nasrin's Voice* (2024) marks her return. The film explores themes of human trafficking, forced marriage, survival, and the cost of claiming freedom.

E4: Expert 4 is an expert on prevention of gender based violence, with a focus on communication, including the role of the media. For the past decade, she has worked directly with practitioners and institutions in the (German) audio-visual media industry to introduce evidence based approaches to improve gender representation, reduce gender stereotypes and improve representation of gender based violence in both fictional and journalistic storytelling.

E5: Expert 5, namely Stéphane Avril, is a well-known amateur filmmaker on Réunion Island who has filmed the different communities, their festivals and traditions, and the beauty of the island's diverse nature. He has a large social media following and has supported the dissemination of the chatbot AinoAid.

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