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The reciprocal influences of gender-based violence surveys and public policy: from survey design to dissemination of results. An example from a survey in the French overseas regions

Since the international call for the collection of statistical data on violence against women (VAW) emerged from the Fourth international Women's Conference in 1995, there has been a continuous effort in Europe and other parts of the world to collect data at national or regional levels. National policies and international agreements aiming to eradicate VAW rely on statistical knowledge about the causes and consequences of violence (Garcia-Moreno and Amin, 2019).

In France, the reciprocal influences of VAW statistical data-gathering exercises, grassroots mobilization and public policy have been the subject of studies in social demography (Fougeyrollas, Jaspard, 2003) and political science (Delage, 2017; Dauphin, 2023). Since the 1990s, there has been a succession of national awareness campaigns, legal and policy changes and France is one of the rare states that has produced two national surveys conducted in mainland France (*Enveff*, 2000 and *Virage*, 2015) followed by local surveys in some of the overseas regions (notably Reunion Island in 2002, Martinique in 2008).

The case study here is the social and political context that led to the conducting of questionnaire survey on gender-based violence in France three overseas island territories – Reunion Island, Guadeloupe and Martinique (*Virage Outre-mer*, 2018). This survey, piloted by the French Demographic Studies Institute (INED), was a replication of the most recent questionnaire survey on gender-based violence in France, *Virage* (2015). To conduct this, we use a multimethod approach combining: the *Virage Outre-mer* survey data; qualitative data on issues surrounding survey and questionnaire design; the search for funding; public presentations; documents relating to national and local policy; and semi-structured interviews with local policy decision-makers and practitioners.

In several overseas French territories, local elected representatives had called for specific surveys for their islands with the expectation that the data would show the extent of the phenomenon and provide justification for the allocation of human and financial resources towards combating violence against women. This close link between scientific and political expectations raises methodological and ethical questions relating to survey design and how are the results presented and used. It is thus important to consider the social processes linking grassroots mobilization, political discourses surrounding issues related to VAW and the availability of research resources to set up statistical surveys.

Quantitative research on gender inequalities and statistical surveys.

Following a period of antipathy within feminist research towards the use of quantitative methodologies, the dissemination of results of surveys investigating gender inequalities has played a significant role in increasing the recognition of such methodologies as being relevant to understanding women's oppression (Westmarland, 2001). Quantitative approaches nonetheless remain marginal in sections of the gender studies/feminist sociology literature and are often seen as producing over-generalizations of social mechanisms or relying on uncritical use of population categories. Disciplinary divides and national academic contexts contribute to such standpoints (Cohen et al., 2011). In the field of population studies in the UK, there is a lively debate on what feminist quantitative research implies for data collection and how it can contribute to a more reflexive and critical demography (Sigle, 2021).

Meanwhile, feminist perspectives within demographic scholarship have placed the analysis of gender-based violence (GBV) firmly within the discipline. Demographic studies of GBV, focusing on age-related or generational experience of violence, locating it within a specific interpersonal relationship, during a

given period and in both its social and biographical context, offer the possibility of examining how different characteristics and life course events interact to place certain individuals more or less at risk of experiencing GBV (Walby et al, 2017).

However, statistical measurement and interpretation of survey data relating to gender violence is highly complex and the exercise necessitates detailed contextualization (Myhill, 2017). This is particularly the case for IPV as Cavalin has shown in her comparative analysis of French surveys and the survey conducted by Michael Johnson and colleagues in the U.S. (Cavalin, 2013).

Social and political contexts of surveys on gender-based violence in France and the overseas regions.

In France, the production of GBV surveys and public action are closely linked. International pressure was determining in the development of a policy to eradicate VAW and the Fourth world women's conference marked a turning point. In France, funding was provided by the Secretary of State for Women's rights to launch the first national survey. Strong political expectations surrounded the survey, for the production of a reliable data by means of a representative population-based survey and thus counter or confirm the 'hidden figure' of two million 'battered women' that circulated amongst activists and practitioners. In January 2001, the publication of the first results (Jaspard et al., 2001) and what was to become the emblematic figure of 'One in ten women' victims of intimate partner violence (IPV)¹ shook the political establishment and media circles. It became the reference figure legitimating successive public action plans over the next decade and a half and was cited in the explanatory memorandum of laws on domestic violence in 2006 and 2010 (Dauphin, 2023). However, the symbolic importance of the figure did not fully reflect the feminist perspective behind the survey. The main component of the IPV indicator is psychological violence and not physical, but the former had not yet gained legal recognition. Furthermore, political action focused on IPV even though the survey results clearly revealed the continuum of violence against women (Kelly, 1989).

By the time the second survey was launched, fifteen years later, the context was very different. An observatory on violence against women was set up in 2012, its mission being to gather data from different sources. It was no longer a question of legitimating public action but of producing an instrument to enable policy evaluation by way of new data on IPV. Nor was the emphasis still solely on IPV but priorities reflected various issues, such as providing data on violence experienced by men in order to better understand the gender dimension of interpersonal violence and also more detailed data on violence in the workplace and in public space. Another dimension that had not been fully explored by the Enveff survey, and a particular concern for public policy, was the impact of IPV on children of victims. The Virage surveys included a separate module gathering data on violence during childhood and teenage within the family, noncohabiting relatives and other persons close to the family.

Given that the prevalence rates are two to three times higher in the overseas regions surveyed than for the average in mainland France, IPV continues to be the principal focus for local institutions and policy. However, over the last ten years following dramatic events capturing the news headlines, for example in Martinique in 2014, incest and more generally violence in childhood and adolescence have been a prime focus for political attention. The Virage Outre-mer survey² was able to provide data for the first time on these issues (Condon et al, 2021). Thus, for example, depending on the region, the survey revealed that before the age of 18 between 10% and 13% of women had been victims of sexual violence (within or outside the family) and between 3% and 4% had been victims of incest.

¹ In France, the term '*violences conjugales*' used, rather than 'domestic violence' to refer to violence within the couple, whether cohabiting or not. The issue of terminology and national contexts will be discussed.

² Final survey sample of approximately 3 000 respondents aged 20-69 years in each region.

The case study: context, preparation of the survey and public presentation of findings

After hearing the announcement of the new survey in mainland France, local elected representatives, echoing the mobilization of local NGOs, called for specific surveys for their islands. Much argumentation was based on social representations of the causes of violence against women they saw as specific to these regions (Condon, 2014). The scientific interest for this survey aimed to create an opportunity to introduce an intersectional perspective to analyzing violence in these regions, former plantation economy colonies of France. The role of the research team aimed to produce scientific knowledge to counter stigmatization of the local populations (Thiara et al., 2011). A particularly sensitive aspect of conducting these surveys was the obligation to produce data for institutional stakeholders - many of whom are also survey funders – that they use as ‘evidence’ in developing and communicating on their policies, without losing the focus of the initial research project (cf. Malbon et al., 2018). The gendered context of policy problems must be considered during the entire process.

A considerable level of funding was necessary to conduct the survey and sources beyond those generally funding large-scale surveys had to be sought. Local elected representatives pressured Parliament enabling the 5th Plan on violence against women to include funding for specific action in the overseas regions, including a statistical survey. Local health authorities also contributed financially and subsequently, to funding data analysis on health implications of VAW. An important feature of the survey was the setting up of local pilot committees in each of the regions. These were composed of local institutions, the regional delegate for gender equality, practitioners and NGOs. The committees were consulted during the preparation of the questionnaire and assisted in the pre-pilot test.

Press conferences to present the preliminary findings were organized in each region in collaboration with the regional delegate for gender equality, on the symbolic dates of 8th March (International Women’s Day) in Reunion Island then around the 25th November (International Day for Elimination of Violence against Women) in Martinique and Guadeloupe. The local Observatories on VAW had launched public awareness campaigns: on street harassment in Reunion Island; and on IPV among young couples in Martinique. The press conferences were introduced by local elected representatives and the regional prefect (central state representative). Members of the local pilot committees took an active part in the debate following the presentations. Tensions between the central state and local representatives were particularly perceptible, as were tensions between NGOs and the state.

Since the initial phase of dissemination, the research team has invested considerable time and effort to produce data briefs and research syntheses particularly on the issue of violence during childhood. On the one hand, to inform local debates on the impact of IPV on victims’ children. On the other, such work was vital in the context of increasing national awareness of incest as a hidden problem needing public action (publication of autobiographical accounts, #MeTooIncest). We have been auditioned by parliamentary delegations at regular intervals, by the National commission on incest and in December 2022 by the working group on commission on children’s rights in the overseas territories. In March 2023, a specific report on violence against children in the overseas regions was published. All this combined political focus, supported by survey data, led to the appointment last June of a coordinator on violence in the overseas regions.

In the paper, based on the French context and findings from this survey case study, we will discuss in more detail the intertwining dimensions of the policy – survey research nexus and their implications for research on gender inequalities. The issues we will be examining here are the reciprocal influences of academic and political objectives in the setting up of quantitative surveys to collect sociodemographically contextualized data on gender-based violence (GBV). We will discuss the challenges involved at the moment of presenting results to policy-makers, NGOs, practitioners, health

professionals and so on. Not only is there the challenge of framing results in a way that ensures a clear message on prevalence rates and risk factors, but also that of taking into account the various priorities (for example, a single figure for national policy communication) or backgrounds of actors (e.g., understandings of interpersonal violence based on psychological theory). And whilst such considerations are relevant for most fields of social policy, we will assess what makes this particular field of research and policy decision-making particularly sensitive.

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