

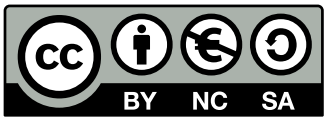
EUNWA
European Neighbourhood Watch Association

Beyond Closed Doors

The role of neighbours in preventing and addressing domestic violence

White Paper

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Beyond Closed Doors

The role of neighbours in preventing and addressing domestic violence

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Protecting every generation. The role of Neighbourhood Watch in safeguarding children, young people, adults and older persons

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Foreword

Community safety is deeply connected to the quality of the relationships that make a place liveable. In this respect, we refer to the neighbourhood both as a physical environment and as a social and psychological environment. Different disciplines place emphasis on different aspects: urban planning focuses on buildings and functional features, which provide the foundations for community life and harmonious coexistence; the ethno-sociological approach pays greater attention to social dynamics, to processes of competition and cooperation, conflict and collaboration, and to the ways in which groups of individuals create local communities. The psychological perspective concerns the ways in which people come to know their neighbourhood, represent it, experience it and relate to it. It also highlights how the neighbourhood affects people's wellbeing, their sense of belonging and their motivation to participate, beginning with the possibility of feeling recognised, being listened to and asking for help without fear of judgement. Bringing this perspective into a reflection on domestic violence means asking not only what happens within the neighbourhood, but also what happens inside individual homes, and considering the social conditions that can make suffering invisible or, conversely, help it to be recognised.

The document "Beyond Closed Doors: The Role of Neighbours in Preventing Domestic Violence" proposes broadening the focus of neighbourhood networks to include the protection of people, recognising the everyday presence of citizens as a resource for prevention and as a link to services. Community psychology can make an important contribution to this proposal by helping us understand how bonds of solidarity are built, how participation can be supported, and what conditions enable informal networks to take on a protective role.

From a community psychology perspective, wellbeing and distress take shape through the interaction between people and contexts across increasing levels of complexity, from the individual problem to the wider social macrosystem. Domestic violence likewise requires an understanding capable of holding several levels together: individual experiences, power relations, social networks, access to services, and cultural representations that may legitimise control or fuel the blaming of those subjected to it. While keeping firmly in view the responsibility of those who use violence, this perspective broadens our understanding of the phenomenon by making visible the collective conditions on which it is possible to intervene. Isolation is a central issue in gender-based violence. It can be deliberately produced through restrictions on contact and autonomy, but it can also become entrenched through indifference, fear of interfering, and the belief that what happens within a family belongs to a sphere outside social responsibility. Yet community psychology teaches us that no problem is exclusively individual: its origins, and often the conditions that allow it to become entrenched, are situated within a broader context. A community capable of offering respectful relationships and opportunities for support can help open up possibilities where there may appear to be only isolation and silence.

This capacity, however, has to be built. Physical proximity does not automatically generate trust, just as a large network does not guarantee solidarity. Community development also involves creating opportunities through which residents can get to

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know one another, recognise shared resources and experience forms of reciprocity. Meeting spaces, shared initiatives and small exchanges of everyday help can create a relational foundation on which it becomes easier to express a need. Prevention begins here too, before a situation is recognised as an emergency.

The research I have conducted with colleagues on participation and volunteering has helped to highlight the value of experiences through which people can feel part of a community, perceive that they matter to others and recognise that they can make a contribution. These processes also suggest a direction for neighbourhood work: creating contexts in which people living in vulnerable circumstances can continue to be recognised in their dignity, their capacities and their right to choose. Help has value when it supports autonomy and respects the person's own pace. Promoting cohesion means asking who is included, which voices are heard and who remains on the margins. A supportive network must also be able to reach those with fewer resources, those facing language or cultural barriers, and those who may distrust institutions.

A further contribution of community psychology concerns the building of links between citizens, associations and services. Studies of community organisations show how important it is to support their internal functioning, their collaboration with other actors and the recognition of their role within the local area. Neighbourhood networks, too, need accessible points of contact, clearly defined responsibilities and relationships of trust with professionals. Civic participation can facilitate access to support within a system in which institutions continue to retain full responsibility for protection.

In this process, training and ongoing support for volunteers are crucial. Recognising warning signs, listening without judgement and knowing what services are available all require preparation. They also require opportunities to reflect on one's own reactions: fear, anger, helplessness or the desire to resolve the situation immediately. Ongoing spaces for reflection and support can help volunteers process these emotions, respect the boundaries of their role and sustain their involvement over time. Caring for those who offer help contributes to the quality and continuity of the help itself.

Making a neighbourhood safer means increasing the real possibility that every person can find recognition, a listening ear and access to appropriate resources. It is within this everyday fabric of relationships and responsibilities that a neighbourhood can foster solidarity, and solidarity can become a resource for protection.

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Preface

For decades, the concept of neighbourhood safety has been inextricably linked to the protection of property. We built higher fences, installed brighter lights, and kept a watchful eye out for the stranger on the street. However, as the European Neighbourhood Watch Association (EUNWA), we have come to recognise a stark and uncomfortable reality: for many individuals, the most dangerous place is not a dark alleyway, but their own living room.

Domestic and gender-based violence remains one of the most pervasive, yet hidden, threats within our communities. It thrives in silence and relies on the isolation of the victim. This realisation demands a profound paradigm shift in how we define a safe neighbourhood. It is no longer enough to protect houses; we must commit to protecting the people living within them.

EUNWA acts as a bridge to facilitate mutual understanding and cooperation among national Neighbourhood Watch associations across Europe. We acknowledge that our volunteers are not social workers, psychologists, or law enforcement officers—and this White Paper does not ask them to be. Instead, it invites them to evolve from passive observers into active ‘social sensors’.

Our goal is to equip ordinary citizens with the awareness to recognise the subtle, non-physical signs of coercive control and abuse. We aim to provide them with the tools to act safely, respect professional boundaries, and effectively signpost vulnerable neighbours to specialised support services.

This document is the result of extensive collaboration, bridging academic research with grassroots civic engagement. It represents our shared belief that the true strength of a Neighbourhood Watch scheme lies not in surveillance, but in supportive presence. By breaking the wall of silence, we can transform our local networks into genuine safety nets.

A truly safe neighbourhood is a place where no one is forced to live in fear behind closed doors.

The EUNWA Team - October 2026

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Acknowledgements

This White Paper, *Beyond Closed Doors: The role of neighbours in preventing and addressing domestic violence*, represents a collaborative milestone for the European Neighbourhood Watch Association (EUNWA). Its development would not have been possible without the dedication, expertise, and shared vision of our broader network.

A special and profound thank you goes to **Elisabeth Zinschitz** for her invaluable contribution to the realisation of this document. Her meticulous review, strategic insights, and practical expertise have been fundamental. She played a vital role in ensuring that complex sociological concepts were translated into an accessible, safe, and actionable framework for the Neighbourhood Watch volunteers to safely connect residents to professional help.

Furthermore, our sincere appreciation extends to the national Neighbourhood Watch associations across Europe. As EUNWA acts as a bridge to facilitate mutual understanding and cooperation among these national organisations, their continuous commitment on the ground proves that community safety must evolve beyond traditional property protection. It relies on our collective willingness to break the wall of isolation and protect our most vulnerable residents.

Finally, a note of gratitude to the academic partners, legal experts, and victim support professionals who guided our methodology. By bridging the gap between civic engagement and specialised care, they have helped ensure that the active citizen's role remains safe, ethical, and profoundly impactful.

Together, we are proving that a truly safe neighbourhood is a place where no one is forced to live in fear within their own walls.

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Abstract

Neighbourhood Watch was traditionally established to protect property and deter petty crime. Yet, the concept of 'safety' in a modern community cannot exclude the protection of the physical and psychological integrity of its residents. Domestic and gender-based violence currently remains one of the most pervasive and silent threats within our communities.

While Neighbourhood Watch groups form only one part — often a small one — of the vast ecosystem of volunteering and civil society, they possess a unique strength: a widespread presence within residential areas, precisely where domestic violence occurs. It is within this space that on-the-ground presence can be transformed into a vital resource for the early detection of distress.

Nevertheless, while organisations such as the Neighbourhood Watch Network in the United Kingdom have already developed specific domestic abuse toolkits, much of continental Europe still lacks shared standards to translate Neighbourhood Watch volunteers' sensitivity into operational competence. This document aims to fill this gap by proposing a unique model adaptable to different national jurisdictions.

Within this context, EUNWA (European Neighbourhood Watch Association) aims to support national associations by supporting the evolution of the Neighbourhood Watch role from passive observers to 'social sensors'. By adapting validated European methodologies, the objective is to equip volunteers with practical tools to

- recognise signs of abuse (affecting children, adolescents, partners, and the elderly),
- report risk situations promptly to the appropriate helpers, and
- protect victims by breaking the wall of isolation.

Consequently, this White Paper proposes an operational framework and training pathway for national associations, helping volunteers transform their community presence into a competent source of prevention and safe signposting to specialised services.

This model does not ask Neighbourhood Watch volunteers to investigate domestic violence, mediate conflicts, confront alleged perpetrators, or manage victims' cases. Their role is to strengthen community awareness, reduce isolation, recognise objective signs of distress, and safely connect residents to professional help.

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Introduction

Beyond the closed door: a new paradigm for community safety

For decades, the concept of safety in our neighbourhoods has been synonymous with property protection: locked doors, alarms, and watching out for 'strangers' who might threaten our homes. Yet, criminological statistics reveal a harsh reality: for many residents, the most dangerous place is not a dark street, but their own living room. Domestic and gender-based violence currently remains one of the most pervasive yet silent threats within our communities. Although Neighbourhood Watch groups were originally established to prevent crimes such as burglary or vandalism, they possess a unique strength: widespread presence within the residential context, precisely where domestic violence occurs. It is within this space that a 'presence on the ground' can be transformed into a fundamental resource for the early detection of distress. This White Paper proposes an evolution of the role of Neighbourhood Watch: the transition from passive observers of property to 'social sensors'.

By breaking the wall of isolation and moving beyond traditional defence against external intruders, neighbourhood networks can become a competent resource for crime prevention, in particular in the context of domestic violence, and for the correct signposting of victims towards specialised services. Ultimately, the safety of a neighbourhood is not measured solely by the sturdiness of its locks, but by its capacity to protect its most vulnerable members. A truly safe neighbourhood is a place where no one is forced to live in fear within their own walls.

The European regulatory framework

This document aligns with the strategic objectives set by European legislation and international standards, which are discussed in detail in Chapter 1:

- **Directive 2012/29/EU (Victims' Rights Directive):** establishes minimum standards to ensure victims are treated with respect and can access support services.
- **The Istanbul Convention (2011) of the Council of Europe[1]:** the primary international legal instrument for preventing violence through active community involvement.
- **Directive (EU) 2024/1385 on combating violence against women and domestic violence:** focuses on the prevention of domestic violence and the implementation of specialised support measures.
- **EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025:** explicitly prioritises combating gender-based violence as a key objective.

[1] Formally acceded by the EU in June 2023.

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- **The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1990)**[2]

Bridging the gap

Despite the urgency dictated by these standards, a significant gap exists within the European landscape of participatory security. While the Neighbourhood Watch Network in the United Kingdom has already developed specific toolkits for domestic abuse, in much of continental Europe, Neighbourhood Watch groups still lack specific training on this issue.

This White Paper aims to bridge this gap. EUNWA intends to propose a common operational standard to national Neighbourhood Watch associations. We are not asking citizens to replace the police or social workers, but, instead, to activate that 'supportive vigilance' which is the very essence of good neighbourliness: to see the invisible, hear the silence, and offer a helping hand before it is too late.

In practical terms, this means building a culture of supportive presence rather than surveillance. Neighbourhood Watch groups should not investigate, mediate, or directly intervene in domestic abuse situations. Their added value lies in reducing isolation, recognising objective warning signs, and guiding residents towards qualified professionals, emergency services, and specialised support organisations.

[2] The EU stipulates the rights of the child mainly in Art. 24, Art. 32, Art. 14 and Art. 21.

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1. The legal foundations

Genesis, evolution, and obligations

To understand the potential role that Neighbourhood Watch, and broader civil society, today, we must examine the evolution of the European and international regulatory framework within which such initiatives are situated. While the European Union seeks to harmonise victim protection across a complex legislative landscape, national implementation often remains fragmented. Over the past fifteen years, Europe has shifted from a generic victim protection approach to targeted strategies against gender-based violence, *while also addressing violence against other vulnerable groups—such as the elderly and disabled—*, ultimately recognising community-based prevention as a vital tool. This chapter, therefore, outlines the key legal instruments that define victims' rights and Member States' preventive obligations.

1.1 Directive 2012/29/EU (The Victims' Rights Directive)

The genesis

At the beginning of the millennium, the European Union acknowledged an unacceptable level of fragmentation: the rights of a crime victim varied drastically depending on the country they were in. The Stockholm Programme (2010–2014) laid the foundations for a common judicial area, shifting the focus for the first time from 'punishing the perpetrator' to 'protecting the victim'[1]. As part of its implementation, the EU adopted Directive 2012/29/EU, which established minimum standards on the rights, support, and protection of victims of crime. (European Council, 2010; European Parliament and Council, 2012).

Description and content

This Directive, acknowledged as a milestone in European protection, sets minimum standards for all Member States to guarantee to any victim of any type of crime, from burglary to domestic violence. For Neighbourhood Watch the most relevant provisions are:

- **The right to information:** victims must be informed of available support services from their first contact with authorities (Art. 4).
- **The right to access to support services:** Member States must ensure access to confidential and free support services (Art. 8).

Relevance to civil society and Neighbourhood Watch

Where Neighbourhood Watch is in place, volunteers could facilitate the application of Article 4 as well as Article 8 by providing neighbours with the contact details of anti-violence centres, thereby helping to bridge the information gap that institutional services may leave uncovered. (European Parliament and Council, 2012, Arts. 4 and 8).

[1] The Stockholm Programme (2010–2014), the EU's multiannual strategic plan for **justice, freedom, and security,** established the political foundations for modern EU victim protection, shifting the focus from state security to individual protection and the protection of vulnerable groups (children, minorities, **victims of violence**). The Stockholm Programme laid important groundwork, but the **2024 Directive** and current strategies are now the primary references.

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1.2 The Istanbul Convention (2011)

The genesis

While the EU worked on general rights, the Council of Europe recognised that violence against women is not a 'neutral' crime, but a gender-based, structural issue. Following years of work by the CAHVIO committee[2], the Istanbul Convention was opened for signature in May 2011 and is now considered the global 'gold standard' for combating violence against women and domestic violence. (Council of Europe, 2011).

Description and content

The Convention defines violence against women as a violation of human rights. It is built upon the '4 Ps' framework:

- **Prevention:** changing cultural attitudes, awareness and social roles.
- **Protection:** ensuring the victim's safety (e.g. restraining orders) and providing them with support
- **Prosecution:** criminalising specific acts such as stalking, psychological and physical abuse, and others.
- **Integrated policies:** coordinating all stakeholders in society and promoting multi-institutional cooperation.

Relevance to civil society and Neighbourhood Watch[3]

Article 9 of the Convention encourages support for civil society organisations. Neighbourhood Watch groups, where active, can respond to this call by evolving from property-focused prevention to a greater sensitivity towards protecting vulnerable individuals. For the informed citizen, it is not about becoming an anti-violence professional but about knowing where to signpost those in need. (Council of Europe, 2011, Art. 9).

A recent GREVIO evaluation illustrates how the Istanbul Convention's emphasis on civil-society participation and integrated policies can translate into practice, even under exceptionally difficult conditions.

GREVIO's Assessment of Ukraine: lessons for community-based responses to domestic violence

GREVIO reports, in its first baseline evaluation of Ukraine's implementation of the Istanbul Convention, about the efforts this country has made, in spite of its difficult circumstances, to strengthen its legal and policy framework in the context of the protection of women and children against violence.

[2] CAHVIO (Ad Hoc Committee on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence) was the expert body responsible for drafting the Istanbul Convention (2011).

[3] Source: GREVIO (2026a), Baseline Evaluation Report: Ukraine, Council of Europe, published 4 September 2026.

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Particularly significant is the network of approx. 700 multidisciplinary teams providing social and psychological support to women experiencing domestic violence, including rural and hard to reach areas, and complementing shelters, crisis rooms, helplines, legal assistance and specialist police response units. While shortcomings still remain, a national training centre for gender-based violence has been established, and specialist training of police officers and prosecutors has undergone improvements. Certainly, contribution to safety and support for victims by their network, including neighbours, is to be promoted.

The role of communities

The report demonstrates that communities can help prevent isolation, improve awareness of available support and provide pathways towards professional assistance. Their contribution must, however, remain carefully defined. Community members should not investigate suspected abuse, assess the level of risk, mediate between the parties or confront an alleged perpetrator.

Effective community involvement requires clear referral procedures, appropriate training, strict confidentiality and close connections with specialist organisations and public authorities. Community awareness is therefore most valuable when embedded in a properly funded, victim-centred and professionally led multi-agency system.

Although developed in the exceptional context of wartime Ukraine, this experience illustrates a broader European principle: community involvement is most effective when connected to specialist, victim-centred and professionally coordinated services.

1.3 Directive (EU) 2024/1385 (Violence against Women and Domestic Violence)

The genesis

Following the EU's accession to the Istanbul Convention in June 2023, the need arose to transform its international obligations into binding community law. This resulted in the adoption of the landmark Directive in May 2024. (Council of Europe, 2011; European Parliament and Council, 2024).

Description and content

This is the first EU law specifically addressing gender-based violence. It mandates uniform criminalisation of modern offences (e.g. cyber-stalking) and requires targeted prevention through awareness-raising campaigns. Member States must transpose this Directive by 14 June 2027. (European Parliament and Council, 2024).

Relevance to civil society and Neighbourhood Watch

As states are obliged to implement widespread prevention, community networks, including Neighbourhood Watch where operational, position themselves as an ideal

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infrastructure to bring these campaigns into residential buildings, particularly regarding digital violence affecting young people.

1.4 EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025

The genesis

The EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025 was adopted by the European Commission as a five-year framework to advance gender equality, with the elimination of gender-based violence established as a core priority in response to persistent structural inequalities. (European Commission, 2020).

Description and content

The Strategy sets out comprehensive measures across key areas, including the prevention and elimination of gender-based violence, protection and support for victims, and the promotion of multi-stakeholder cooperation to achieve substantive gender equality. (European Commission, 2020).

Relevance to civil society and Neighbourhood Watch

The Strategy provides a policy foundation that legitimises and supports the role of civil society and community networks such as Neighbourhood Watch in domestic violence prevention, awareness-raising, and victim signposting to specialised services.

1.5 The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1990)

The genesis

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1989 and entering into force in 1990, is the most widely ratified international human rights treaty, establishing a comprehensive framework for the protection and promotion of children's rights. (United Nations General Assembly, 1989, especially Art. 19).

Description and content

The Convention defines a full spectrum of civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights for all children under 18, including the right to protection from all forms of violence, abuse, exploitation, and neglect, as well as rights to survival, development, and participation. (United Nations General Assembly, 1989).

Relevance to civil society and Neighbourhood Watch

The UNCRC provides a binding international legal framework that underpins community-based child protection initiatives, supporting Neighbourhood Watch's role in safeguarding children from domestic violence and ensuring their rights are upheld at the local level.

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1.6 Legal differences between international conventions and EU Directives

The mechanics of rights

To operate effectively in Europe, it is fundamental to understand the difference between the legal instruments that govern us and why their application varies from country to country.

1. The International Conventions (Council of Europe, UN)

These are international treaties. When a State ratifies them, it makes a solemn commitment to the world to combat violence. However, the Conventions often lack the 'legs' required to walk.

The problem: a judge or police officer cannot arrest someone 'in the name of the Convention'. They require a specific national law (e.g. an article in the Penal Code) that defines the specific offence and the penalty.

The reality: some countries ratify the Conventions but delay adjusting their internal laws, creating a significant gap in protection.

2. EU Directives: the obligation of result

Unlike the Convention, an EU Directive is a binding supra-national law that imposes an obligation of result on Member States within a precise deadline. (TFEU, Art. 288; European Parliament and Council, 2024).

The effect: if a Member State fails to transpose a Directive correctly or within the required deadline, the European Commission may initiate infringement proceedings. These proceedings may ultimately lead to financial penalties imposed by the Court of Justice of the European Union. The new Directive 2024/1385 is therefore significant because it creates a binding obligation for Member States to harmonise key aspects of prevention, protection, access to support services, and responses to gender-based and domestic violence.

1.7 Technical scope and additional provisions

While the primary focus of this White Paper is on community-based prevention and signposting, EUNWA acknowledges the comprehensive scope of Directive 2024/1385. To ensure a holistic institutional response, the Directive includes several technical and judicial provisions that form the necessary backbone for state intervention:

- **Individual assessment (Articles 16–17):** the requirement for a personalised assessment of a victim's specific protection and support needs. (European Parliament and Council, 2024).

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- **Removal of online material (Article 23):** new powers for national authorities to mandate the rapid removal of non-consensual intimate material or other cyber-violence content. (European Parliament and Council, 2024).
- **Safe reporting mechanisms (Article 14):** measures to ensure that reporting violence does not lead to negative repercussions for vulnerable groups, such as children or migrants. (European Parliament and Council, 2024).
- **Union-level cooperation (Article 43):** Member States are required to facilitate cooperation and exchange good practices, including consultation on particular cases through relevant EU judicial-cooperation channels where appropriate. (European Parliament and Council, 2024).

1.8 Comparative analysis and national alignment

The implementation of these norms varies significantly across Europe, influencing how Neighbourhood Watch volunteers operate in different jurisdictions:

- **The pioneers (e.g. Spain, Sweden, Belgium, Austria):** legislation already meets or exceeds the 2024 Directive. Here, community networks **would focus** on integration into mature systems like Spain's 'VioGén'.
- **Countries in transition (e.g. Italy, France, Germany):** robust laws exist but face application challenges. In these contexts, the Neighbourhood Watch model **could act** as a vital 'sentry' to help ensure reports are not ignored.
- **Critical areas (e.g. parts of Eastern Europe)**: in countries yet to ratify the Istanbul Convention, the role of civil society becomes vital. Where the state is less present, community support networks — which Neighbourhood Watch aims to represent — **would act** to ensure citizens know their rights and available resources.

1.9 EUNWA's strategic position

EUNWA promotes an evolution of the citizen's role from a passive observer to a 'social sensors'. By adopting validated methodologies, Neighbourhood Watch has the potential to transform its local presence into a competent resource for prevention and victim support. In the context of shifting regulations, such networks exercise 'civil subsidiarity', fostering a culture of prevention and protection aligned with European standards.

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2. Beyond property: a social paradigm shift

To understand why a transition in community safety is necessary, one must first confront the paradox of modern security. Historically, initiatives like Neighbourhood Watch emerged with a clear focus on protecting private property and preventing burglaries, vandalism, or street crime. This approach fostered a culture of outward surveillance, focused on the 'intruder' or the 'stranger'. Yet, criminological statistics reveal a disturbing reality: for many residents, the greatest danger lies not on a dark street, but within their own four walls. Domestic violence represents a radical challenge for the classic model of community safety because the 'enemy' is not an outsider, but someone who holds the keys to the home.

2.1 The three pillars of community safety

Definition of 'Civil Society'

In the context of urban security, Civil Society refers to the collective of organisations, formal and informal groups, and of citizens networks that act voluntarily for the common good, operating in a space distinct from both the State (Institutions, Police) and the Market (private companies).

Specifically, regarding urban safety, Civil Society represents the 'Third Pillar' of prevention, complementing the role of the two other pillars:

- **The State:** provides crime repression and law enforcement (Hard Power).
- **The Market:** delivers passive defence technologies such as alarms and reinforced doors (Target Hardening).
- **Civil Society** (where Neighbourhood Watch is situated): builds Social Capital, fostering cohesion, mutual trust, and informal control to prevent victim isolation. (Sampson, Raudenbush & Earls, 1997).

When we speak of civil society, we refer to organised, active citizenship. These are not 'vigilantes' seeking to replace the State, nor are they merely 'passive residents', but, instead, citizens who take responsibility for co-producing safety by nurturing neighbourhood relations.

2.2 Violence as a human rights violation

Domestic violence is not a simple family conflict or a 'private matter'. It is, by definition, a violation of human rights and a critical public health issue. For any civil society volunteer, recognising this is the first step: Reporting or signposting is not 'interfering', but upholding the inalienable right to safety that every individual possesses. This shift in perspective moves the focus from protecting objects to caring for people, thus breaking down the cultural and legal barriers of the 'private sphere'. (Council of Europe, 2011; World Health Organization, 2025).

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SPOTLIGHT

The three pillars of legitimacy (Stichting WABP)

As a practical example of how civil society organisations build their operating mandate, we look to the model developed by Stichting WABP in the Netherlands. Its legitimacy and national authority are grounded in three key dimensions:

- **Factual presence:** over eleven years of continuous activity, supporting more than 9,000 locally managed groups and reaching over 650,000 residents.
- **Institutional recognition:** established collaborations with the Dutch National Police, the Ministry of Justice and Security, and the Association of Dutch Municipalities (VNG).
- **Principled stance:** maintaining an independent, non-commercial, and platform neutral position, ensuring free participation for all residents.

Source: Stichting WABP Organisational Model (2025)

2.3 The domestic unit: protecting all generations

The scope of domestic violence includes physical, sexual, psychological, and economic abuse occurring within the family unit. This definition demands a broader perspective to include all potential victims[3]:

- **Children:** primary victims in cases of direct exposure, subject to secondary victimisation when witnessing violence (research suggests that children living in households affected by intimate partner violence are at increased risk of direct abuse, neglect, and long-term psychological harm). Children are also often the first to show signs or symptoms in case of domestic abuse, also when they are not the primary victim. Neighbours should be sensitive to this and should not ignore persistent crying or a child's prolonged absence from communal areas. (Vu et al., 2016).
- **Adolescents and young people:** often invisible victims of parental abuse or 'Teen Dating Violence' (TDV), a pattern of physical, sexual, or psychological abuse within intimate relationships between young people, frequently characterised by coercive control and digital monitoring. Notably, these dynamics often occur outside the private home, in parks or communal residential areas, where neighbourhood presence is critical for detecting signs of distress that might otherwise remain hidden (e.g. cutting themselves, depression, anorexia, etc.). (Rodríguez-deArriba et al., 2021).
- **Adults (Partners):** primarily women, victims of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV). (World Health Organization, 2025).

[3] All of these groups can include persons with disabilities. In their case, signals of abuse can be the same or also specific (please see Table 1).

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- **The Elderly:** vulnerable individuals exposed to neglect, isolation, and economic violence (often perpetrated by family members or carers). Community networks, where established, could act as early warning systems detecting signs of malnutrition or forced isolation. (World Health Organization, 2024a).

2.4 The sociology of isolation and the 'Black Box'

In Western societies, the home is regarded as a sanctuary of privacy, a 'black box' inaccessible to the public gaze. Yet, when distorted, this very concept becomes the abuser's most powerful ally. It is crucial to distinguish between privacy (a right to autonomy) and secrecy (a strategy imposed by the abuser to ensure impunity).

- **The breaking of silence:** violence thrives in isolation as the abuser actively works to sever the victim's social ties. Community networks can serve as an infrastructure of social capital fostering a culture of 'supportive presence' that helps break this isolation.
- **Social cohesion as protection:** research on social cohesion and community safety suggests that stronger neighbourhood ties may reduce isolation and improve the likelihood that victims are connected to support. This is not necessarily because neighbours intervene physically, but because a strong social network reduces the abuser's ability to isolate the victim. (Sampson, Raudenbush & Earls, 1997; Sylaska & Edwards, 2014).

2.5 The iceberg theory and coercive control

A common error for non-professionals is equating domestic violence solely with visible physical aggression. If community groups focus only on these signs, they will always arrive too late.

- **The visible tip:** physical violence (bruises, shouting, broken objects).
- **The submerged mass (coercive control):** this includes psychological manipulation (gaslighting), economic abuse (controlling finances), and the restriction of movement. This 'dark figure of crime' is often more visible to a neighbour than the violence itself. Recognising when a person disappears from social life or appears hyper-vigilant in their partner's presence is the essence of effective social observation. (Stark, 2007; European Parliament and Council, 2024).

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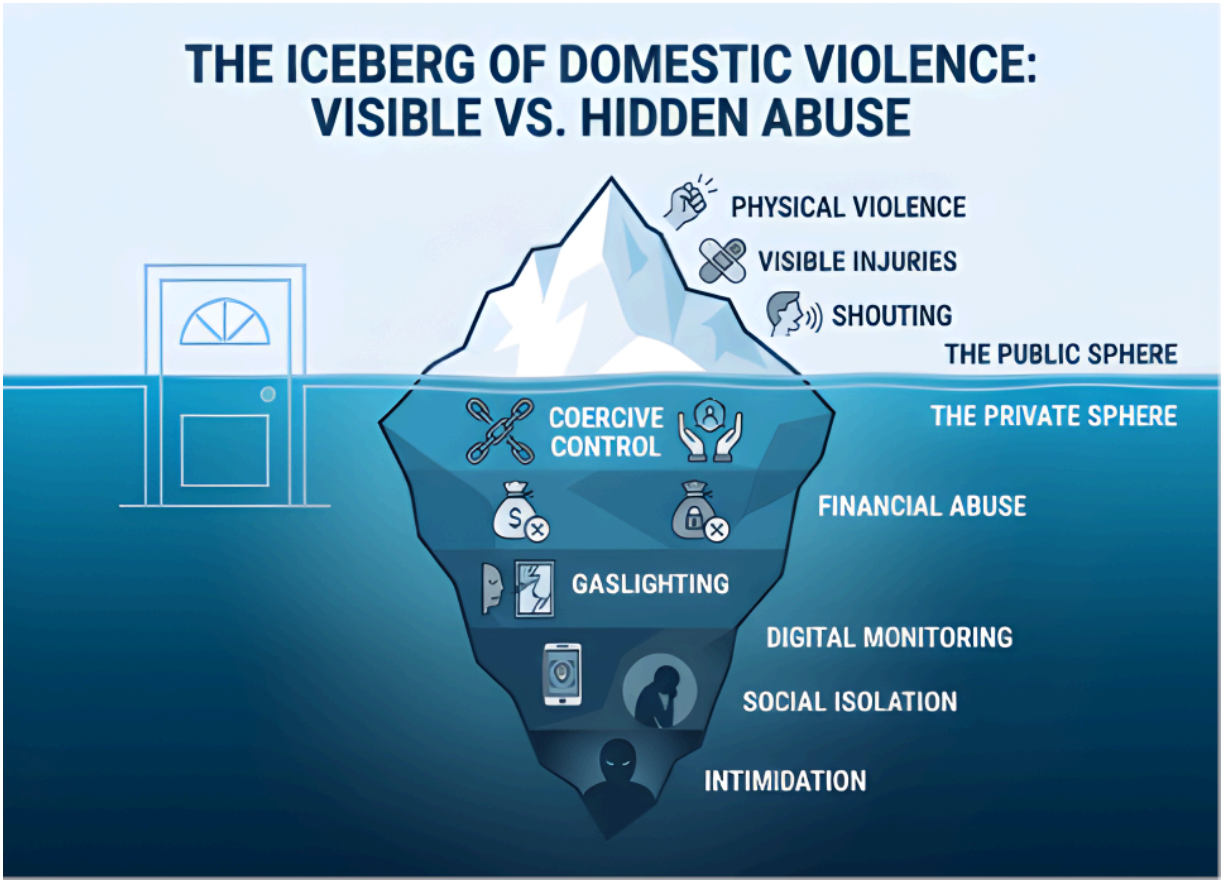


Figure 1. The submerged coercive control

2.6 The 'good neighbour' paradox and confirmation bias

Community groups may fall into the trap of confirmation bias, judging situations based on social appearances. Abusers are often skilled manipulators who cultivate an impeccable public image (the 'he always said hello' syndrome). Meanwhile, the victim, worn down by trauma, may appear unstable, unkempt, or even hostile to neighbours. A mature community programme must train participants to distrust superficial impressions and focus exclusively on observable facts and objective signs of distress.

2.7 Redefining the role: from 'vigilante' to 'social sensors'

This new paradigm proposes a transition from surveillance to care-taking. Lacking a formal mandate, EUNWA suggests that where national associations are active, they could refine the 'informal gaze' of residents:

- **What the volunteer is NOT:** they are not a rescuer, an investigator, or a family mediator. Amateur mediation can lead to a lethal escalation of risk.
- **Inclusivity and cultural bridges:** in multi-ethnic neighbourhoods, foreign victims may face additional invisible barriers, such as language difficulties or fear of authorities. For a truly holistic approach, effective civil society networks should build 'cultural bridges' and engage mediators within diverse

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communities to ensure universal access to safety and to manage post-emergency situations in an effective manner. (Home Office, 2023; WHO, HRP & UN Women, 2024).

- **Radical normality:** after a known episode of violence, the role of a 'good neighbour' is to practice radical normality, continuing to interact cordially with the victim to affirm that their social dignity remains intact.

2.8 The methodological challenge: preserving community trust

Expanding civil society's scope to include the domestic abuse prevention presents a significant methodological challenge, a concern actively debated by national associations across Europe. Neighbourhood networks fundamentally rely on trust-based, bottom-up community structures.

If sensitive social issues are introduced through overly institutional or top-down mechanisms, there is a substantial risk that the network's identity may fracture. As highlighted by the operational experience of Northern European associations, members and residents might begin to perceive the organisation as an intrusive 'monitoring structure' rather than a supportive community safety net.

To mitigate this risk, the transition must be managed organically:

- **Avoiding professional duplication:** the objective of civil society is never to duplicate or replace the duties of professional support organisations, social workers, or law enforcement.
- **Protecting the network's nature:** protocols must be designed to gradually strengthen awareness and local signposting without compromising the foundational trust that makes these community networks effective.

Guidelines such as the 'Operational Silence Protocol' serves exactly this dual purpose: protecting the victim from secondary victimisation while simultaneously ensuring the volunteer network does not devolve into a surveillance or gossip apparatus.

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3. Operational guidelines

The transition from a passive observer of property to an attentive 'social sensors' requires specific tools that help volunteers recognise objective signs of distress and respond safely through appropriate signposting. These guidelines do not aim to replace professionals; instead, they are designed to empower citizens to serve as a competent bridge to specialised support services.

The operational principle is therefore clear: observe objective signs, act safely, preserve confidentiality, and signpost to qualified services. Volunteers must not investigate, collect evidence beyond basic factual observations, mediate between partners or family members, confront alleged perpetrators, or attempt to manage the victim's situation.

Table 1. The integrated observation checklist

Category	Specific indicators to observe in the neighbourhood
Children	• Sudden social withdrawal: stopping play with other children. • Aggressive or regressive behaviour in communal areas, or also hypervigilance. • Visible terror at shouting or loud noises coming from homes. • Evident neglect (e.g., inappropriate clothing, being left alone). • Unexplained injuries (or frequent pain complaint without medical cause) • Age-inappropriate aggressive or sexualised language
Adolescents and young people	• Drastic personality changes: a cheerful youth becoming sullen or abandoning usual activities. • Relationship control: public obsessive jealousy or checking the partner's phone. • Physical signs: wearing heavy clothing out of season to hide marks, non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI), chronic pains. • Emotional signs: chronic anger, numbness, low self-esteem • Isolation: cutting ties with their peer group.
Adults (partners)	• Frequent bruises or 'domestic accidents'; use of sunglasses or scarves to cover marks. • Territorial control: the partner never leaves the victim alone or prevents them from speaking to neighbours. • Hyper-vigilance: the victim appearing frightened or submissive when the partner returns home.
Elderly people	• Sudden disappearance from public life in the neighbourhood. • Constant shouting of reproaches or insults directed at the elderly person. • The person appearing confused, frightened, or lacking basic necessities (e.g., food, medicine). • Unexplained injuries
Persons with disabilities	• Missing or repeatedly broken assistive/mobile devices. • Unexpected changes in alertness can be a sign of over-/under-medication or medication mismanagement. • Poor hygiene, weight loss, pressure sores, dehydration. • Repeated missing doctor's or therapy appointments.
Environmental indicators	• Shouting and noise: frequent one-sided arguments, the sound of breaking objects, or prolonged crying. • Physical isolation: shutters always closed, systematic refusal to engage in neighbourhood life.

Evidence base for Table 1: indicators are synthesised from the UK Domestic Abuse Act statutory guidance, WHO guidance on abuse of older people and violence against women with disabilities, and research on children's exposure to intimate partner violence and adolescent cyber dating violence (Home Office, 2023; World Health Organization, 2024a; WHO, HRP & UN Women, 2024; Vu et al., 2016; Rodríguez-deArriba et al., 2021).

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3.1 The integrated observation checklist

To observe effectively, associations should encourage volunteers to identify 'weak signals' of abuse that often precede physical violence. It is recommended to emphasise that a single indicator is not definitive proof, but that a combination of factors warrants closer attention.

3.2 Action protocol: the neighbour's 'traffic light' system

This framework could guide actions based on the perceived severity of the situation, prioritising the safety of all parties involved. The importance of informed community reporting is supported by European practice. In its evaluation of Estonia, GREVIO highlighted awareness-raising initiatives specifically designed to help witnesses of domestic violence understand how to seek support and use appropriate reporting procedures. Such initiatives illustrate an important distinction for community-based prevention: residents can be equipped to recognise concerning situations and respond safely without being expected to investigate, assess risk professionally, or intervene directly. (GREVIO, 2022).

🟢 Green code: monitoring and prevention

- **Situation:** Vague signals of sadness or mild isolation.
- **Suggested action:** Strengthen good neighbourly relations (e.g. organise a 'neighbourhood coffee') to reduce isolation. Distribute helpline numbers on communal noticeboards.

🟡 Amber code: founded suspicion

- **Situation:** Recurring signals of distress or coercive control.
- **Suggested action:** DO NOT intervene directly in the conflict. Where lawful and appropriate, volunteers may keep a brief private record of objective facts only — such as dates, times, and observable events — solely for the purpose of reporting to competent authorities or seeking advice from a recognised victim support service. They must not collect sensitive personal data, speculate about causes, or share these notes with other residents or chat groups. The volunteer may anonymously consult a victim support centre or community police officer for advice.

🔴 Red code: immediate danger

- **Situation:** violence in progress, calls for help, sounds of a struggle, or grave threats.

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- **Suggested action: IMMEDIATE CALL TO EMERGENCY SERVICES (112 or 999**[4]). Provide specific details (e.g., presence of minors, weapons, nature of the shouting). **DO NOT** expose yourself physically to avoid escalating the risk to the victim. Be available to act as a witness.

3.3 Bystander intervention: the 5 Ds

To act effectively without endangering oneself, volunteers are encouraged to adopt the international methodology of Bystander Intervention.[5] This model moves from heroism to strategy: (Right To Be, n.d.; Latané & Darley, 1968).

1. Distract (direct intervention):

Interrupt the dynamic with a mundane excuse (e.g. asking for a favour) to give the victim a moment of respite and let the abuser know they are being observed.

- *Example*: ring the doorbell with a trivial excuse such as *"Excuse me, I've lost my cat", "Do you happen to have any salt?", "There's a light on in your car."* This creates a 'disrupted scene', giving the victim a moment's respite and making the attacker aware there is an outside witness.

2. Delegate (mediated intervention):

If the situation is dangerous, alert emergency services or seek advice from a professional support centre.

- *Example*: call the police (112 or 999[6]) or contact a women's shelter for guidance on how to proceed.

3. Document (the testimony):

Record objective facts solely for the benefit of the authorities. **Never** share this on social media or in neighbourhood watch chats.

- *Action*: note the dates, times and nature of any screams or suspicious noises.
- *Warning*: never post anything on social media or in Neighbourhood Watch group chats (risk of defamation or endangering the victim). Documentation is for the relevant authorities only. Any documentation must remain strictly private, factual, proportionate, and intended only for emergency services, law enforcement, or recognised victim support professionals.

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[4] The emergency telephone number 112 is used in nearly all EU Member States while 999 is mostly valid outside of Europe except for the United Kingdom. In the Republic of Ireland, 112 and 999 are both fully operational emergency numbers, both numbers are answered by the same call centres. Emergency number 112 has also been adopted by other countries outside the EU. A 112 call in the United Kingdom will be forwarded to 999.

[5] The '5 Ds' methodology (Distract, Delegate, Document, Delay, Direct) is a globally recognised standard for bystander intervention, formalised by the international organisation Right To Be. This protocol is based on social psychology research regarding the 'Bystander Effect' (Latané & Darley, 1968).

[6] See footnote 7.

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4. Delay (postpone – retrospective support):

If it was not possible to act at the time, check in with the victim later in a calm, safe moment:

- *Example*: meet the victim when things are quiet (e.g., in the hall or in the park) and simply ask: *"Are you OK? I heard some noises yesterday and I was worried."* This does not force the victim to open up: their reaction may at first be negative led by fear and characterised by denial or defensiveness, even hostility. Do not expect immediate gratefulness. However, it opens the door and makes them feel less alone.

5. Direct (the explicit intervention):

Immediate verbal intervention is recommended **only** if there is no risk to the volunteer's physical safety.

- *Action*: intervene verbally during an assault in a public place, or physically separate the people involved (only if trained to do so or as part of a group). In a residential block context, this option is often discouraged in favour of the first four. Try and make sure, other persons present call for law enforcement support immediately.

3.4 Building the network: active prevention

Beyond reactive intervention, the strength of a community network lies in its ability to build a resilient social infrastructure. Associations may consider the following proactive strategies: (Sampson, Raudenbush & Earls, 1997).

- **Informal networks:** encouraging small reciprocal favours (e.g., Time Banks) to foster trust and establish secure communication channels.
- **Formal networks (Info-Points):** organising annual meetings with local police and anti-violence centres to provide specialised training for coordinators.
- **Awareness campaigns:** displaying posters and leaflets in communal areas to challenge stereotypes and provide essential helpline numbers.
- **Culture of respect:** utilising group chats not only for crime reporting but also to share information on victims' rights and to debunk harmful myths (e.g., victim-blaming).

3.5 Digital support and innovation

To scale support for thousands of local volunteers without overburdening human resources, national networks may consider automated solutions. For instance, implementing AI assistants can provide group coordinators with 24/7 technical and

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procedural guidance, ensuring consistent support across the entire network. Such tools allow the core team to focus on strategic development while maintaining a low-threshold support system for residents.

Any digital or AI-based support tool must be designed with strict safeguards. Volunteers must never enter names, addresses, personal details, descriptions of identifiable cases, or sensitive information into such systems. AI tools should provide only general procedural guidance, such as reminders of emergency numbers, ethical boundaries, and referral pathways. They must not provide legal advice, psychological assessment, or risk classification of real cases. The use of such tools should always be subject to GDPR compliance, national data protection rules, and prior review by the association's legal or data protection adviser.

3.6 Digital hygiene and chat management

A 'privacy by design' approach is fundamental to building trust within the community. In line with the EUNWA core philosophy, observation **should remain strictly limited** to what is visible from one's own private or shared residential spaces. (European Parliament and Council, 2016, Art. 25; European Data Protection Board, 2020).

Ideally, the national association **should** facilitate the registration and coordination of the network without holding the personal data of individual members within local messaging groups. This ensures that the association remains a facilitator of safety rather than a repository of sensitive personal information.

The use of messaging platforms (Signal, WhatsApp, Telegram) is standard practice for neighbourhood watch groups. However, when addressing domestic violence, the dynamics are radically different from reporting a suspicious car and require extreme caution.

- **The 'mole' principle (the abuser could be in the group):** unlike a burglar or a drug dealer, who usually comes from outside the community, the perpetrator of domestic violence is a resident and could, in theory, be a member of the same Neighbourhood Watch chat group. Posting in the public chat, "There's a furious row going on at the Browns'", amounts to alerting the abuser in real time. This can lead to two consequences:
    - The perpetrator temporarily ceases their actions to evade the arrival of law enforcement.
    - The perpetrator retaliates against the victim, accusing them of '*making a scene'*, which has exposed them to public judgement (e.g., *"Did you see? Now the whole building is talking about us because of you."*).
- **The gossip trap (re-victimisation):** a neighbourhood watch group chat must not devolve into a 'logbook' of other people's quarrels. Comments such as *"Have they started again?"* or "*Yes, I heard plates smashing"* trivialise the tragedy. This creates a hostile environment for the victim, who may feel judged and monitored, leading to further social isolation.

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- **Operational Silence Protocol:** for the following reasons, Neighbourhood Watch chat regulations should enforce a strict protocol:
  - **Absolute ban on reporting:** it is strictly forbidden to report domestic disputes or suspected abuse within public chats.
  - **No identifiable information:** no identifiable domestic incident, suspected abuse situation, family dispute, address, name, nickname, photograph, audio recording, video, or description allowing identification may be posted in any Neighbourhood Watch chat. This prohibition applies even when the intention is protective, because public discussion may expose the victim to retaliation, gossip, or secondary victimisation. (European Parliament and Council, 2016; European Data Protection Board, 2020).
  - **One-way channel:** coordinators may only use the chat to share general resources, such as national anti-violence helplines, emergency numbers, links to verified victim support services, or general information guides. They must never discuss specific cases, names, addresses, family disputes, or suspected abuse situations in the group chat.
  - **Private action:** anyone who hears or sees something must act privately (by calling emergency services or contacting the coordinator directly), never publicly.

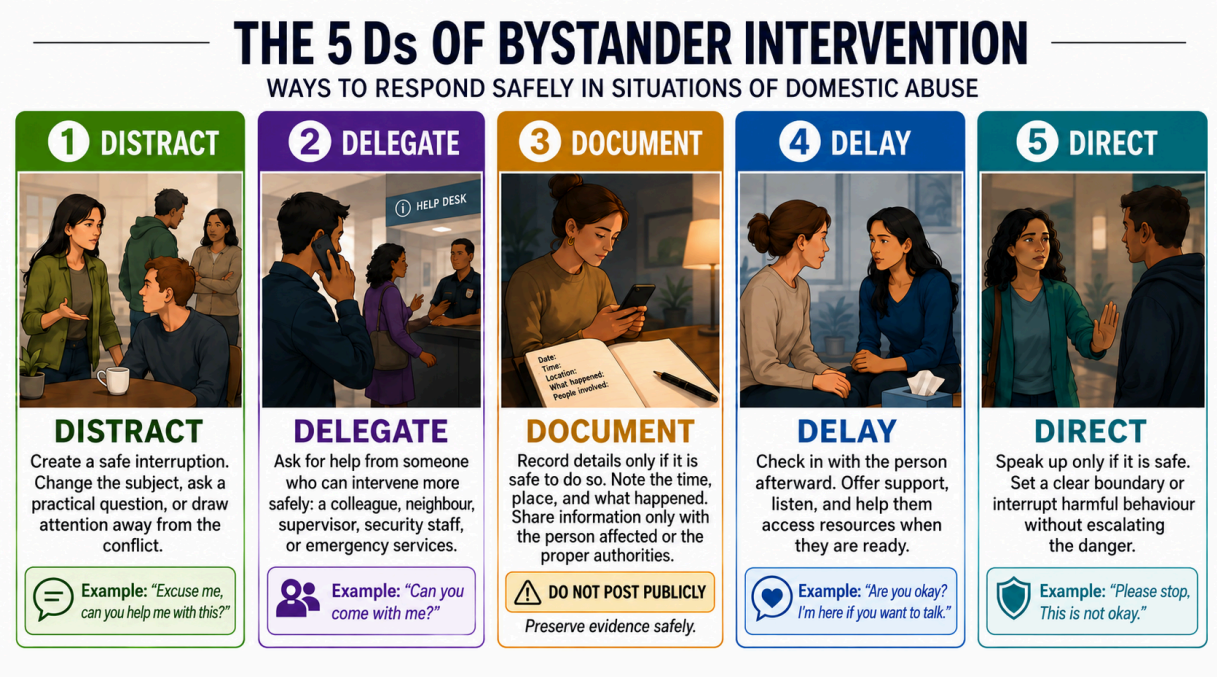


Figure 2. The 5 Ds of bystander intervention

3.7 Ethical guidelines and limits of action

To ensure the safety of both the volunteer and the victim, EUNWA recommends adhering to these fundamental ethical boundaries:

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- **Never mediate:** domestic violence is not a conflict between equals; it is an abuse of power. Informal mediation attempts are dangerous, inappropriate, and can escalate the risk to the victim. (Home Office, 2023; Neighbourhood Watch Network, n.d.).

- **Never judge:** it is essential to avoid victim-blaming comments. Understanding the 'cycle of violence' (Tension → Explosion → Honeymoon) helps explain why a victim may remain in an abusive situation and ensures a supportive, non-judgmental community environment.

- **Never investigate:** the volunteer's role is limited to observing what is public. Volunteers must not violate neighbours' privacy, conduct undercover investigations, or breach data protection rights.

- **Professional boundaries (signposting):** a neighbour is not a social worker, a psychologist, or a police officer. Their role is strictly that of a signposter. The objective is to facilitate a connection between the victim and professional services. Every Neighbourhood Watch group must maintain a 'Resource Sheet' containing the contact details of local anti-violence centres and the national helpline, to be shared discreetly should an opportunity for dialogue arise. (Sylaska & Edwards, 2014; Neighbourhood Watch Network, n.d.).

3.8 The training mandate

The implementation of these guidelines must not rely solely on goodwill. It is essential that any community group intending to address personal safety establishes formal partnerships with professional services and **recognised academic centres specialising in Community and Social Psychology.**

This requirement is consistent with the wider safeguarding principles identified by GREVIO. Effective responses to domestic violence depend on structured co-operation between relevant agencies and civil society rather than on isolated individual action. Community organisations can therefore contribute most safely when their awareness and referral role is connected to clearly identified professional pathways and specialist services. (GREVIO, 2022).

Only periodic training managed by external experts can transform the intention to help into effective assistance that meets professional standards. This reliance on certified expertise ensures that the volunteer network is formally recognised by police and municipal partners.

In this regard, the involvement of university departments is considered a gold standard for validating the social sustainability and ethical integrity of Neighbourhood Watch initiatives.

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3.9 The attentive neighbour's decision tree

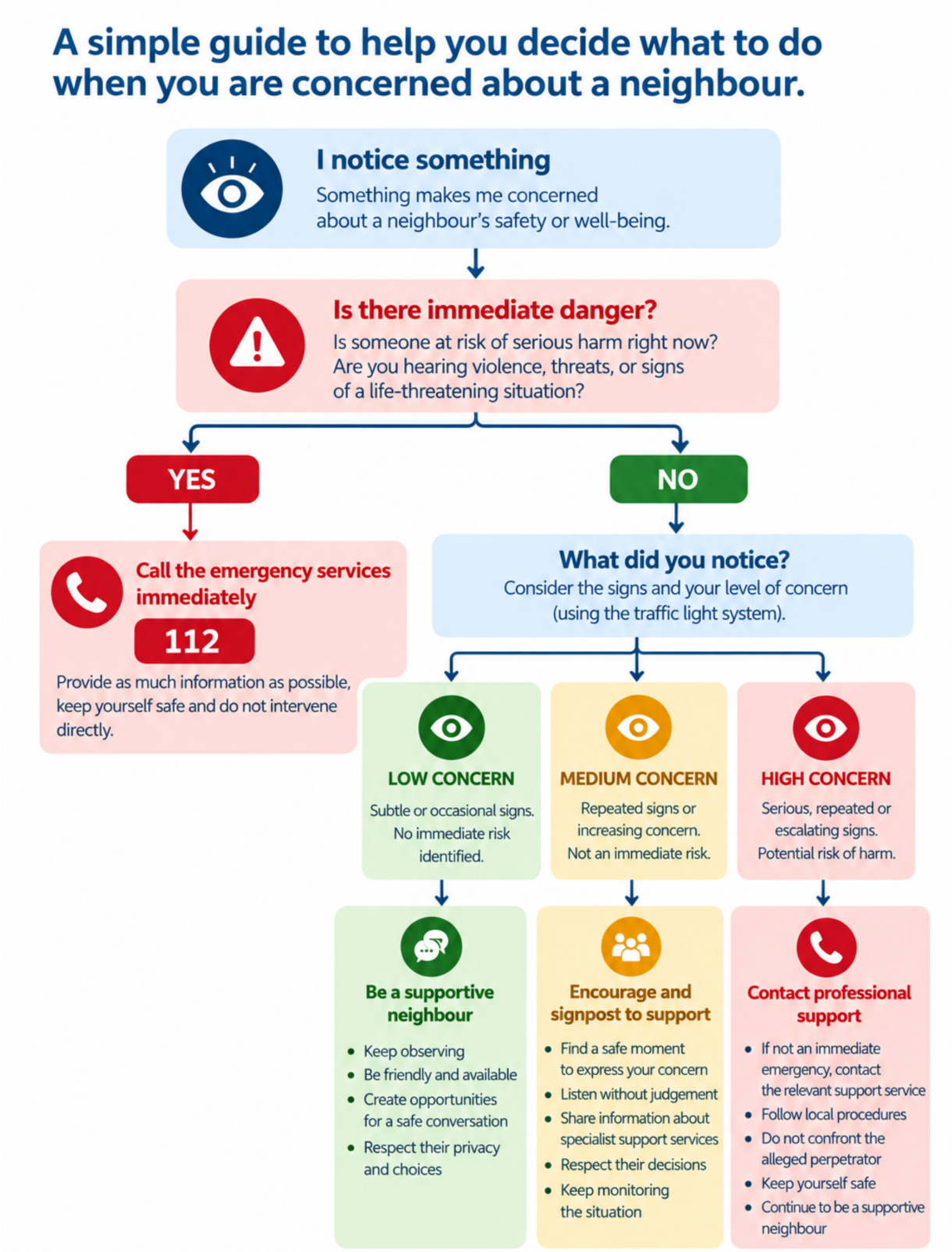


Figure 3. The attentive neighbour's decision tree

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4. The human factor and legal protection

While previous chapters focus on community protection, this section is dedicated to the volunteers themselves. Addressing domestic violence, unlike reporting a broken streetlamp, carries emotional and legal weight that must be managed with awareness to prevent group burnout and ensure the long-term credibility of any initiative.

As demonstrated by the Dutch national framework, Stichting WABP, it is essential to define a national association as a supportive infrastructure rather than a deployable workforce. The primary role of the organisation is to empower and coordinate residents who choose to engage in their own time, rather than mobilising resources centrally. This volunteer-based model is a defining characteristic that ensures the network remains credible and independent from commercial or political pressures.

4.1 Emotional sustainability: managing vicarious trauma[7]

Inviting citizens to act as 'social sensors' means exposing them to the distress of others. Witnessing the aftermath of abuse or hearing persistent conflict is not a neutral activity; it carries a psychological cost known as '**vicarious trauma**'. (McCann & Pearlman, 1990).

- **Recognising the signs:** a volunteer may develop anxiety, cynicism, or an excessive urge to 'rescue' the victim, which can lead to unsafe interventions.
- **The 'shared burden' strategy:** associations **should** establish a culture and a structure where volunteers do not carry this weight alone. Normalising the fact that feeling powerless or saddened is a healthy reaction, rather than a weakness, is crucial for the resilience of the group.

4.2 Acting in good faith: legal framework and protection

One of the primary deterrents to civil intervention is the fear of legal repercussions, such as being sued for defamation or false accusation. It is essential to clarify these boundaries to empower volunteers to act confidently within the law.

- **The distinction between error and malice:** European legal systems generally distinguish between an unfounded report made in **good faith** and malicious slander (calumny). Reporting a suspicion of violence based on observable distress is an act of civic duty, not a crime.

[7] **Vicarious trauma:** a concept first introduced by McCann and Pearlman (1990), referring to the profound psychological and cognitive transformation experienced by individuals who engage continuously and empathetically with trauma survivors. Unlike general burnout or compassion fatigue, vicarious trauma specifically alters the helper's core cognitive schemas—fundamentally disrupting their beliefs regarding safety, trust, control, and the predictability of the world. In the context of civil society networks, understanding this phenomenon highlights the absolute necessity of maintaining strict boundaries (signposting) to protect volunteers from the psychological toll of internalising a victim's trauma.

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- **‘Better a false alarm than a tragedy’:** law enforcement agencies often prefer to receive multiple reports of verbal disputes that turn out to be harmless rather than arrive too late at a scene of serious violence because *‘no one wanted to interfere’*.

- **Anonymity and confidentiality:** where possible under national law, volunteers should be reminded that they can request that their details remain confidential when alerting emergency services to ensure their own safety and peace of mind.

- **Jurisdictional safeguards:** because legal rules differ across jurisdictions, national associations should obtain local legal advice before issuing operational protocols. Volunteers should be trained to report objective facts, avoid accusations, and use official emergency or support channels rather than confronting alleged perpetrators directly.

4.3 Professional boundaries: the neighbour as a bridge

As already indicated above, a neighbour is not a social worker, a psychologist, or a police officer. Attempting to solve a violent dynamic or conduct amateur family mediation can lead to dangerous escalation (e.g., retaliation) for both the victim and the volunteer.

- **The mandate of signposting:** the volunteer’s role is strictly that of a ‘signpost’. The goal is to facilitate a connection between the victim and professional services, **never** to attempt a solo rescue mission. (Sylaska & Edwards, 2014; Neighbourhood Watch Network, n.d.).

- **Civil subsidiarity:** by understanding their limits, volunteers act as an essential ‘first tier’ of support, providing a bridge to the formal protection systems described in European directives.

The credibility of this model depends on maintaining clear boundaries: volunteers support access to help, but they do not replace police, social workers, psychologists, lawyers, or victim support professionals.

Ultimately, the success of this programme will not be measured solely by the crimes it prevents, but by the quality of the relationships it builds. A neighbourhood that learns to protect its most vulnerable residents within their own homes is a neighbourhood that has learnt to be, in the noblest sense of the word, a community.

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5. European mapping & case studies

5.1 How EU countries transpose the rules (comparative analysis)

A comparative analysis shows that whilst the system is well-established in countries such as Spain, in many parts of Central and Eastern Europe Directive 2024/1385 will represent a positive regulatory shock.

Legislative differences across the continent profoundly influence how citizens and civil society organisations can operate. The following clusters outline the diverse approaches required based on the national legal framework.

The pioneers (Austria, Spain, Sweden, Belgium, Portugal)

In these countries, national legislation often exceeds the requirements of the 2024 European Directive. Therefore, the primary objective for civil society is to fully and seamlessly integrate into these advanced systems.

- **The barring order and proactive transposition (Austria):** the right of the police to issue an eviction and barring order against a perpetrator was introduced in 1997 with the *Gewaltschutzgesetz* (GeSchG). Furthermore, Austria has already proactively begun implementing Directive (EU) 2024/1385 by amending its criminal code (StGB, § 218) via BGBl. I Nr. 45/2025. These changes address new digital offences such as cyber-flashing and strengthen victim support, demonstrating a commitment that already meets or exceeds the 2024 Directive's standards. (Republic of Austria, 2026; Bundesgesetzblatt, 2025).

- **The 'gold standard' (Spain):** Ley Orgánica 1/2004 established an integrated framework for protection against gender-based violence, while the Ministry of the Interior's **VioGén** system, operational since 2007, integrates information, risk assessment, monitoring and victim protection. In this context, civil society can align its awareness and signposting role with mature institutional pathways. (Spain, 2004; Ministerio del Interior, n.d.).

- **The Mature System (Portugal):** Portugal has a developed policy framework led by the *Comissão para a Cidadania e a Igualdade de Género* (CIG) and the *Estratégia Nacional para a Igualdade e a Não Discriminação* (ENIND) 2018–2030, whose current action plans cover 2023–2026. Domestic violence is a public crime in Portugal. In this mature system, Neighbourhood Watch networks would focus on integration into existing institutional channels rather than creating parallel mechanisms. (CIG, 2023; CIG, n.d.).

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Countries in transition (Italy, France, Germany)

These nations possess strong legal frameworks but often struggle with the practical application, such as bureaucratic delays or slow institutional responses. In this context, the role of citizens is that of a 'sentinel'.

- **The 'accelerator' (Italy):** The Codice Rosso reform (Law No. 69/2019) introduced accelerated procedural obligations for specified offences involving domestic and gender-based violence. Civil society can support victims by encouraging timely use of formal reporting and support channels, without substituting for judicial or police functions. (Italy, 2019).

Critical environments (Eastern Europe)

These regions often face political resistance to ratifying the Istanbul Convention and the new EU Directive. In some cases, there is even ideological hostility towards the very concept of gender-based violence. However, even countries that have not ratified the Istanbul Convention - such as Hungary, Bulgaria, or the Czech Republic[8] - will be required to transpose EU Directive 2024/1385 by 2027, as EU law takes precedence. It is also important to note that the situation is not static and several of these nations are actively working to improve their domestic frameworks. In the Czech Republic, for example, despite the Senate's rejection of the Istanbul Convention in 2024, a robust debate is actively pushing to modernise the legal definition of rape and enhance domestic victim support.

- **A statement of human rights:** in these contexts, civil society should apply European directives as a strong political act. By proactively adopting these standards, independent citizen networks uphold and advance fundamental human rights in territories where the state struggles to provide sufficient guarantees. In such environments, the initiative of civil society serves as a vital lifeline, functioning as a primary social safety net that bridges the gap between victims' needs and the absence of institutional protection.

Extra-EU perspective: The United Kingdom

Although outside the EU, the UK model serves as a benchmark for EUNWA demonstrating that the integration of civil society in the fight against domestic abuse is both possible and highly effective.

- **Best practice:** the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 is a landmark piece of legislation that legally recognises economic and coercive abuse. British civil society associations have already developed specific 'toolkits' for volunteers, offering a proven roadmap for training citizens to recognise and safely signpost complex forms of non-physical domestic abuse. (United Kingdom, 2021; Home Office, 2023; Neighbourhood Watch Network, n.d.).

[8] Following a high-profile domestic violence case in the beginning of 2026, which sparked public outcry, Magyar's government has announced zero tolerance for violence against women as well as a series of reforms to strengthen protection for women. Still, no official announcement or legislative action on ratifying the Istanbul Convention has been reported. Human Rights Watch has explicitly urged the new government to ratify the Convention.

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In these contexts, the actions of civil society embody civil subsidiarity: as a Civil Society organisation, the movement fosters a bottom-up culture of protection aligned with European standards. Where national legislation is still being aligned, civil society acts as a community support network, ensuring citizens are aware of their rights and available resources, bridging the gap between victims' needs and institutional responses.

5.2 Preliminary scoping of European collaborations: Neighbourhood Watch and victim support systems

Methodological note and limitations

This chapter offers a preliminary overview of selected approaches, as examples of good practice, identified through EUNWA's outreach and available public information. Its purpose is not to provide a complete European mapping, but to highlight different possible models of interaction between Neighbourhood Watch groups, local authorities, police, and professional victim support services. These examples should be further validated with national associations and competent institutions before being used as a basis for operational protocols.

This section is based on a preliminary scoping exercise conducted by EUNWA through direct outreach to selected national Neighbourhood Watch associations, complemented where possible by publicly available information. A significant number of contacted associations did not respond; non-response should not be interpreted as evidence that no collaboration exists. In some countries, cooperation may occur informally at local or municipal level without being formalised at national level or publicly documented. For this reason, the following examples are presented as indicative case studies and starting points for further verification, rather than as an exhaustive comparative survey. (EUNWA, 2026).

A more developed model: The United Kingdom

The United Kingdom represents the most mature example of synergy between the Neighbourhood Watch Network and independent charities such as Victim Support. While maintaining distinct operational roles, they work in close partnership within 'Community Safety Partnerships' facilitated by local authorities and the police.

- **Specialised toolkits:** the UK network provides its coordinators and volunteers with specific information packs on complex issues, including domestic abuse, stalking, and anti-social behaviour.
- **Victim care hubs:** in several counties, such as Hampshire, Neighbourhood Watch coordinators are active members of 'Victim Care Hubs', which include independent domestic abuse advisors and women's shelters. The Neighbourhood Watch group acts as a 'social sentry', reassuring the community and facilitating discreet access to these professional services.

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Austria: integrating with the barring order system

Given the long-standing police power to issue immediate barring orders, community networks in Austria can play a highly specific role. Rather than intervening during an emergency, trained volunteers act as an early warning system. By safely signposting victims to the Frauenhelpline or reporting objective signs of severe escalation to authorities, the community helps ensure police have the necessary context to enact a barring order, thus removing the perpetrator and securing the victim's home environment.

Portugal: activating the public offence mechanism

Because domestic violence is a public offence in Portugal, community networks operate in a legal environment that strongly supports third-party reporting. The focus for volunteer groups is on training residents to document objective facts and securely relay them to law enforcement or the CIG (Victim info service). This ensures that investigations can commence based on neighbourhood observations, reducing the pressure on the traumatised victim to act as the sole accuser.

Estonia: a trust-based community safety model

Eesti Naabrivalve (Estonian Neighbourhood Watch) provides a vital perspective on the methodological boundaries of civil society intervention. (Eesti Naabrivalve, n.d.).

- **Strategic positioning:** at present, the organisation deliberately operates without formal agreements with victim support centres or specific operational protocols for domestic abuse. Its historical and primary focus remains strictly on local safety, prevention, and fostering trust between neighbours.

- **The methodological challenge:** the Estonian experience highlights a crucial operational boundary. As an inherently trust-based, bottom-up community structure, introducing sensitive social issues through overly institutional or top-down mechanisms carries a severe risk. Residents may begin to perceive the network as an intrusive 'monitoring structure' rather than a supportive community safety net.

- **Gradual integration and signposting:** the current strategic direction firmly avoids duplicating the work of professional support organisations. Instead, Eesti Naabrivalve aims to explore how to gradually strengthen local awareness, recognition, and safe signposting methodologies, ensuring that the foundational trust—which makes these community networks effective in the first place—is rigorously protected.

The absence of a formal domestic-abuse role for Eesti Naabrivalve should not be confused with an absence of structured victim-protection mechanisms in Estonia. GREVIO has highlighted the country's Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC) as a promising practice. Introduced as a pilot in 2015 and extended nationwide in 2019, MARAC provides a local, victim-focused framework bringing together police, victim-support professionals and specialist NGOs to address high-risk

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domestic violence cases and reduce the risk of serious harm or death. (GREVIO, 2022).

For Neighbourhood Watch organisations, the significance of this model lies not in becoming part of professional risk assessment, but in understanding where community action should lead. Awareness, observation and safe signposting belong at community level; risk assessment, case management and protective intervention remain the responsibility of trained professional services. This separation of roles helps preserve the trust-based character of neighbourhood networks while ensuring that concerns can ultimately connect with an appropriate safeguarding system.

The Netherlands: local and municipality-led pathways

The Dutch experience, represented by Stichting WABP, provides a collaborative model that is not formalised at a national level but emerges organically through local structures and municipal engagement. (Stichting WABP, 2025).

- **Decentralised nationwide network:** Stichting WABP facilitates a nationwide network of neighbourhood prevention groups focused on safety, awareness, and community engagement. Because these groups are locally organised and volunteer-driven, their integration with social or care services develops organically and varies per municipality.

- **Local informal connections:** while, at this stage, Stichting WABP lacks formal national partnerships with victim support or anti-violence organisations, robust informal connections exist locally between WABP groups, municipalities, and community police officers (wijkagenten). These structures allow resident observations to indirectly reach the proper care or support services.

- **Operational focus and signalling:** volunteer guidelines focus strictly on observation, safety, and responsible communication. Volunteers are explicitly instructed not to intervene in social or care-related situations. However, when they encounter vulnerabilities like social isolation or domestic tensions, they are instructed to relay these concerns through existing local channels to the police or the municipality, who are better equipped to respond.

- **Intersection of safety and social vulnerability:** WABP groups increasingly bridge the gap between crime and social fragility. By raising awareness about issues like cybercrime and fraud targeting elderly residents (e.g., ‘fake police officer’ scams), the networks bolster resilience among vulnerable groups, as well as safety and social cohesion.

- **Challenges and future steps:** a key challenge is maintaining clear boundaries between citizen engagement and professional care responsibilities. Future steps include increasing awareness among volunteers and exploring how signalling pathways can be clarified, without changing the core role of WABP as a low-threshold and accessible safety network.

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Ireland and Sweden: social prevention approaches identified for further verification

In these countries, the focus is placed on leveraging the social environment as a preventive tool.

- **Ireland:** through initiatives like 'Muintir na Tíre' (Community Alert) and Neighbourhood Watch programmes, official guidelines actively encourage cooperation with social agencies to foster a 'caring environment' for the elderly and vulnerable, identifying signs of domestic abuse or severe isolation as part of their community mission. (Muintir na Tíre, n.d.).
- **Sweden:** within the framework of 'Grannsamverkan' (Neighbourhood Cooperation) and the SAMBO network, citizens and local police can choose to organise 'safety walks' (Trygghetsvandringar) as one of several ways to engage in neighbourhood cooperation. These walks offer an opportunity to map both physical vulnerabilities and social risk factors, and domestic concerns can be referred directly to 'Brottsofferjouren' (Victim Support Sweden). (Samverkan mot brott, n.d.).

5.3 Synthesis of findings and common challenges

Based on the limited examples identified, a preliminary pattern appears to emerge: Neighbourhood Watch groups are most appropriate when they act not as substitutes for professional services, but as community-based observers, trust-builders, and access facilitators. However, further consultation with national associations, victim support organisations, and public authorities is required before drawing broader conclusions.

Romania's recent experience illustrates the difference between legal alignment and effective local implementation. GREVIO welcomed the country's 2026 reforms addressing femicide, stalking, online violence and image-based abuse, but found that specialist services remain insufficient and unevenly distributed, administrative data are not harmonised across law enforcement, justice, health and social services, and professional training and the enforcement of protection orders require further strengthening. For Neighbourhood Watch associations, the lesson is operational: community awareness and signposting can be effective only when volunteers know which professional services are available locally and referral pathways are reliable. National associations should therefore map local support capacity, maintain verified contact information and build formal links with specialist services, while avoiding any assumption that community volunteers can compensate for gaps in institutional provision. (GREVIO, 2026b).

Moving forward, EUNWA will continue this mapping exercise by inviting national associations to validate, correct, or expand the information presented here, with particular attention to formal partnerships, informal referral pathways, training materials, and safeguarding protocols.

The Estonian safeguarding experience further suggests that community-based awareness is most effective when it can ultimately connect with structured, victim-centred and multi-agency professional pathways. (GREVIO, 2022).

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Methodological note. The following table provides a high-level comparative overview based on publicly available institutional sources. It is intended as an operational orientation tool for Neighbourhood Watch associations and should not be read as a legal opinion. Because national legislation and implementation measures may change, each entry should be periodically reviewed against official sources, including Council of Europe treaty records, EUR-Lex, European Commission materials, GREVIO reports, and national government publications. Legal and policy information checked as of 7 September 2026; the Romania entry was updated on 26 September 2026. National implementation may evolve, particularly in view of the June 2027 transposition deadline for Directive (EU) 2024/1385. (Council of Europe, 2011; Council of Europe Treaty Office, 2026; European Parliament and Council, 2024; selected national primary sources listed in References).

Table 2. Transposition and regulatory alignment for EU Member States

Country	Istanbul Convention 2011 (international standard)	Directive EU 2012/29/EU (Victims)	Directive EU 2024/1385 (Violence against women - deadline: June 2027)
Austria	✅ **Ratified** (2013). Fully incorporated into the Criminal Code.	**Transposed** (*Strafprozessänderungsgesetz* 2013). Strong focus on psychosocial assistance in trials.	**Aligned**. Proactive transposition already underway (BGBl. I Nr. 45/2025), addressing digital offences (cyber-flashing) and strengthening support.
Belgium	✅ **Ratified** (2016). 'Stop Femicide' Law (2023).	**Transposed** (Amendments to the Code *d'Instruction Criminelle*).	**Aligned** (advanced). The recent 'Stop Femicide Law' (2023) anticipates many themes of the directive.
Bulgaria	❌ **NOT ratified**. Ruled unconstitutional on the grounds of the concept of 'gender'.	**Transposed** (Criminal Procedure Code), but with critical issues highlighted by the EU regarding access to services.	**Critical**. Has not ratified the Istanbul Convention. Strong political resistance regarding the concept of 'gender'.
Croatia	✅ **Ratified** (2018). Femicide is a specific offence (2024).	**Transposed** (Criminal Procedure Act).	**Aligned**. Introduced the offence of femicide in 2024.
Cyprus	✅ **Ratified** (2017). Femicide is a specific offence (2022).	**Transposed** (Law 51(I)/2016).	**Aligning**. Recent law criminalises femicide.
Czech Republic	❌ **NOT ratified**. Senate rejected ratification in 2024, and the government formally withdrew from the process in 2026 citing ideological opposition to 'gender'.	**Transposed** (Victims Law 2013).	**Critical**. Has not ratified Istanbul. Heated debate on the definition of rape.

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Table 2 (continued)

Country	Istanbul Convention 2011 (international standard)	Directive EU 2012/29/EU (Victims)	Directive EU 2024/1385 (Violence against women - deadline: June 2027)
Denmark	✅ **Ratified** (2014). National laws based on consensus.	**Not applicable** (Opt-out on Justice and Home Affairs).	**Not applicable**. Not bound by the directive, but has strict national laws on sexual consent.
Estonia	✅ **Ratified** (2017).	**Transposed** (Criminal Procedure Code).	**Needs adaptation**. Lacks a specific definition of stalking in the criminal code.
Finland	✅ **Ratified** (2015).	**Transposed** (Act of 2016).	**Aligned**. Law on sexual offences based on consensus (2023).
France	✅ **Ratified** (2014).	**Transposed** (*Code de procédure pénale* 2015).	**Aligned**. Strong laws on street harassment and cyberbullying. Opposed the definition of rape in the directive. Redefined rape as a non-consensual sexual act in October 2025.(*)
Germany	✅ **Ratified** (2017).	**Transposed** (*Opferreformsgesetz* 2015).	**Needs adaptation**. Opposed the inclusion of rape in the directive due to EU competence reasons.
Greece	✅ **Ratified** (2018).	**Transposed** (Law 4478/2017).	**Aligning**. Recent toughening of sentences following a wave of femicides.
Hungary	❌ **NOT ratified**. Ideological opposition to the concept of gender.	**Transposed**.	**Critical**. Does not ratify Istanbul. Ideological opposition to the 2024 directive. Open clash with the EU on these issues.
Ireland	✅ **Ratified** (2019). The 2021 Stalking Act.	**Transposed** (Criminal Justice Act 2017).	**Aligned**. 2021 law on stalking and harassment.

(*) Based on the Gisèle Pélicot case, the new law explicitly states that **consent** must be "freely given, informed, and able to be withdrawn", directly addressing gaps in handling drug-facilitated sexual violence. In April 2026, MEPs voted to urge the EU Commission to propose legislation establishing a common EU definition of rape based on freely given, informed, and revocable consent. This would require all member states to align their laws.

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Table 2 (continued)

Country	Istanbul Convention 2011 (international standard)	Directive EU 2012/29/EU (Victims)	Directive EU 2024/1385 (Violence against women - deadline: June 2027)
Italy	✅ **Ratified** (2013). Fully operational. Femicide is a specific offence (2025).	**Transposed** (Legislative Decree 212/2015). *The 'Codice Rosso'* (2019) improved timeliness.	**Aligned**. Already advanced on stalking and revenge porn. Will need to adapt regarding prevention and mandatory training.
Latvia	✅ **Ratified** (Only in 2023). At present under political pressure to withdraw.	**Transposed** (Criminal Code).	**Critical**. Ratified Istanbul only in 2023 Domestic legislation still weak.
Lithuania	❌ **NOT ratified**. Despite a 2024 Constitutional Court ruling confirming its compatibility with the Constitution, strong political opposition in Parliament continues to block ratification.	**Transposed**.	**Critical**. Has not ratified Istanbul. Law on protection from domestic violence exists but needs strengthening.
Luxembourg	✅ **Ratified** (2018).	**Transposed**.	**Aligned**.
Malta	✅ **Ratified** (2014). Very advanced laws. Femicide is a specific offence (2022).	**Transposed** (Victims of Crime Act).	**Aligned**. Very advanced laws on gender-based violence and femicide.
Netherlands	✅ **Ratified** (2015).	**Transposed** (Implementation Act 2015). Integrated into the Code of Criminal Procedure.	**Aligned**. 2024 law on sexual offences (consensus).
Poland	✅ **Ratified** (2015). But past political threats of withdrawal.	**Transposed**.	**Complex**. Past threats to leave Istanbul. Recent 'Anti-violence' laws (2020) are good.

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Table 2 (continued)

Country	Istanbul Convention 2011 (international standard)	Directive EU 2012/29/EU (Victims)	Directive EU 2024/1385 (Violence against women - deadline: June 2027)
Portugal	✅ **Ratified** (2013). Domestic violence is a public offence.	**Transposed** (*Estatuto da Vítima* 2015).	**Policy framework advanced**. Domestic violence is a public crime; CIG and the ENIND 2018–2030 framework provide the institutional basis for continued alignment with Directive (EU) 2024/1385.
Romania	✅ **Ratified** (2016). Law No. 53/2026 defines femicide and introduces prevention mechanisms.	**Transposed** (Law No. 211/2004, as amended). Protection orders were expanded in 2024.	**Aligning**. Recent reforms address stalking, online violence and non-consensual intimate images; implementation gaps remain in services, data, training and enforcement.
Slovakia	❌ **NOT ratified**. Parliament formally blocked ratification, maintaining strong political and ideological opposition to the treaty.	**Transposed**.	**Critical**. Has not ratified Istanbul. Lacks a systemic framework.
Slovenia	✅ **Ratified** (2015). Redefinition of rape (2021).	**Transposed**.	**Aligned**. Redefinition of rape (consensus) in 2021.
Spain	✅ **Ratified** (2014). *'VioGén'* system is EU leader.	**Transposed** (*Estatuto de la víctima* 2015).	**Leader** (Already transposed de facto). 'Only Yes is Yes' law and VioGén are more advanced than the EU directive.
Sweden	✅ **Ratified** (2014). Consensus law (2018).	**Transposed**.	**Leader**. Laws based on consensus since 2018.
Ukraine	✅ **Ratified** (2022). Signed 7 November 2011; ratified 18 July 2022; in force since 1 November 2022.	(Outside EU). Directive 2012/29/EU is not directly applicable.	(Outside EU). Directive (EU) 2024/1385 is not directly binding. Ukraine is monitored under the Istanbul Convention through GREVIO.
United Kingdom	✅ **Ratified** (2022). Domestic Abuse Act 2021.	(Outside EU)	Domestic Abuse Act 2021. Very advanced on coercive control and economic abuse.

Sources for Table 2: Council of Europe Treaty Office status records (including Ukraine), EUR-Lex, and selected national primary sources listed in the References. The table is an orientation tool, not legal advice. Status checked 7 September 2026; Romania entry updated 26 September 2026.

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Appendix A. Glossary of terms

Criminological and psychological terms

- **Coercive control:** a strategic pattern of behaviour used by an abuser to create dependency and strip a victim of their autonomy through isolation, regulation, and intimidation.
- **Cycle of violence:** a social cycle theory developed to explain patterns of behaviour in an abusive relationship, typically moving through the phases of tension building, explosion, and the 'honeymoon' period.
- **Dark figure of crime:** the portion of crimes that go unreported to the authorities and remain undiscovered by official statistics.
- **Gaslighting:** a sophisticated form of psychological manipulation where the perpetrator seeks to sow seeds of doubt in a victim, making them question their own memory, perception, or sanity.
- **Intimate partner violence (IPV):** acts of physical, sexual, psychological, or economic violence committed by a current or former spouse or partner.
- **Teen dating violence (TDV):** physical, sexual, or psychological abuse within a relationship between adolescents or young adults.
- **Vicarious trauma:** the emotional and psychological residue resulting from empathetic engagement with the traumatic experiences of others.
- **Victim blaming:** a devaluing process where the victim of a crime or an abusive act is held entirely or partially responsible for the harm they suffered.

Legal and institutional terms

- **CAHVIO:** the Ad Hoc Committee on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, responsible for drafting the Istanbul Convention.
- **Directive 2012/29/EU:** the foundational EU legislation establishing minimum standards for the rights, support, and protection of all victims of crime, guaranteeing their access to specialised services.
- **Directive (EU) 2024/1385:** the first binding EU legislation specifically addressing gender-based violence and domestic abuse across all Member States.
- **GREVIO:** the independent expert body responsible for monitoring the implementation of the Istanbul Convention by the Parties.
- **Istanbul Convention (2011):** the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, regarded as the global 'gold standard' for legal protection.
- **Secondary victimisation:** further harm caused to a victim not as a direct result of the criminal act, but through the way institutions or the community respond to the victim.

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Operational and community terms

- **Bystander intervention (5 Ds):** a globally recognised framework (Distract, Delegate, Document, Delay, Direct) that allows citizens to safely interrupt potentially harmful situations.
- **Civil subsidiarity:** the principle where organised citizens or NGOs act in a complementary role to the state, addressing social needs where official institutions may be less present.
- **Key performance indicators (KPIs)**: quantitative or qualitative metrics used to evaluate the effectiveness of community safety programmes (e.g., emergence rates or social cohesion indices).
- **Signposting:** the act of directing a victim toward professional support services (such as helplines or shelters) without attempting direct psychological or legal intervention.
- **Social sensor:** an evolution of the traditional Neighbourhood Watch volunteer, trained to detect 'weak signals' of social distress and domestic vulnerability rather than just property-related crimes.
- **Target hardening:** the strengthening of the security of a building or installation in order to make it more difficult for an intruder to enter.

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Appendix B. Ethical commitment and confidentiality agreement for active roles

Beyond verbal advice

Community safety schemes often rely on trust, common sense and informal neighbourly cooperation. However, when a Neighbourhood Watch scheme chooses to address sensitive issues such as domestic violence, vulnerability or safeguarding, verbal guidance alone may not be sufficient for those who take on active responsibilities.

It is therefore advisable for individuals who assume an active role in domestic violence awareness, safe signposting, coordination, training, or the handling of sensitive information to sign a formal ethical commitment and confidentiality agreement. This document does not turn ordinary residents into investigators, nor does it create a professional safeguarding role. Rather, it confirms that those who take on specific responsibilities understand the limits of their role, the importance of confidentiality, and the need to refer concerns to qualified professionals.

At the same time, EUNWA recognises that Neighbourhood Watch schemes operate differently across Europe. In some countries, participation in a scheme requires formal membership of an association; in others, residents may take part in a local scheme without becoming members of any legal entity. For this reason, the signing of a confidentiality agreement should not be treated as a general condition for ordinary participation in a Neighbourhood Watch scheme, unless national or local rules expressly require it.

Structuring a formal ethical commitment

Due to the diverse legal frameworks across Europe and the strict requirements of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), EUNWA does not provide a universal, one-size-fits-all template. Instead, each national association, local network, municipality, registered charity or scheme organiser should draft its own formal agreement, tailored to its legal structure and operational model.

When creating this document, organisations must clearly define the chain of responsibility. It should be explicit to whom the person is making the commitment, for example the national association, the local scheme organiser, the municipality, or the registered charity. It should also be clear who is responsible for securely storing the signed document, for how long, and for what purpose, in order to protect the signatory's personal data.

A robust ethical commitment should be guided by the following structural principles:

- **Role-based application:** the agreement should apply to individuals who assume active or trained responsibilities within the scheme, such as coordinators, administrators, domestic violence awareness contacts, safe signposting volunteers, or persons handling sensitive information. It should

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not automatically apply to every resident or ordinary participant in a Neighbourhood Watch scheme.

- **Voluntary nature and non-prejudice:** signing the ethical commitment should not be a general condition for ordinary participation in a Neighbourhood Watch scheme, nor should refusal to sign prejudice an individual's ordinary membership of an association where such membership exists. A person who chooses not to sign may continue to participate in the general activities of the scheme, subject to the ordinary rules of respectful and lawful conduct.
- **Condition for active roles:** while signing should not be required for ordinary participation, it may be made a mandatory condition for assuming an active role involving domestic violence awareness, safe signposting, coordination, training, moderation of communications, or access to sensitive information. This ensures that operational roles are entrusted only to individuals who formally accept the necessary privacy, safeguarding and professional-boundary standards.
- **Annual renewal:** where a person holds an active role, the commitment should be reviewed and, where appropriate, re-signed on an annual basis in order to maintain high levels of awareness and responsibility.
- **Data protection:** the organisation or scheme organiser must ensure that the signatory's own privacy is protected. The agreement should clearly state how the signature and any personal details will be stored, who will have access to them, the lawful basis for processing, and the applicable retention period.

Core operational standards

The core of the commitment should require the signatory to formally agree to the following operational standards:

- **Objective observation:** a commitment to note only objective facts and potential hazards, explicitly avoiding judgement on the lifestyle, choices, relationships or private circumstances of neighbours.
- **Strict confidentiality:** an acknowledgement that confidentiality is the first layer of protection for victims. Signatories must not disclose names, details, assumptions or identifying information regarding incidents or suspected incidents of domestic abuse in public group chats, private conversations, informal exchanges or gossip.
- **Personal safety boundaries:** a recognition of their limitations as citizens. Signatories must agree never to intervene physically in dangerous situations, unless acting in immediate self-defence, and to entrust emergency management to law enforcement and emergency services.
- **Respecting dignity:** a commitment to treat every victim, presumed victim or vulnerable person with dignity, avoiding pitying attitudes, public exposure, intrusive questioning, victim-blaming or any action that could lead to social exclusion or secondary victimisation.

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- **Professional boundaries and signposting:** an acknowledgement that the role of the signatory is not to investigate, mediate, diagnose, provide legal advice, offer psychological support, confront alleged perpetrators, or manage a victim's case. Their role is limited to safe observation, confidentiality, and signposting towards qualified professionals and emergency services.
- **Continuous training:** an acceptance of the requirement to participate in relevant information sessions or training activities organised by the scheme, association or competent partners, recognising that good intentions without competence can be harmful.

Consequences of a breach of the ethical commitment

While signing the ethical commitment should not be required for ordinary participation in a Neighbourhood Watch scheme, adherence to its principles is fundamental for anyone who holds an active or trained role. As national and local organisations operate autonomously, specific procedures will depend on their internal rules, legal structure and national law.

A clear breach of these operational standards may trigger two levels of consequences:

- **Removal from active role or internal measures:** any internal measure should be determined exclusively by the relevant national association, local network, municipality, registered charity or scheme organiser, in accordance with its own rules and procedures, where such procedures exist. As a general principle, the organisation should be able to suspend or remove a person from an active role if their conduct undermines confidentiality, victim safety, community trust or the integrity of the scheme.
- **Individual legal responsibility:** if a person discloses sensitive information, makes defamatory statements, breaches privacy or data protection rules, interferes with law enforcement activity, or exposes a victim to risk, they may face personal civil or criminal liability under national law. The signed ethical commitment can help demonstrate that the organisation or scheme organiser had clearly prohibited such conduct and had defined the limits of the active role. However, the legal effect of such a document will depend on the applicable national framework.

This approach allows Neighbourhood Watch schemes to remain inclusive and accessible to ordinary residents, while ensuring that those who take on sensitive operational responsibilities are held to a higher standard of confidentiality, safeguarding and professional boundaries.

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Appendix C. Measuring the invisible – Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)

Evaluating the effectiveness of a Neighbourhood Watch programme oriented towards the prevention of domestic violence requires a paradigm shift compared to traditional police metrics. We cannot rely solely on a decrease in crimes (which might simply indicate a drop in reporting); rather, we must measure the increase in trust and cohesion.

Here are the key performance indicators (KPIs) that we suggest monitoring:

1. The emersion rate (vs crime rate)

- **The error:** thinking that an increase in calls to law enforcement is a negative sign.
- **The right metric:** in the early stages of the project, an increase in reports (especially preventive ones or requests for information) is an indicator of success. It means that the 'dark figure' is emerging and the wall of silence is crumbling.
- **Indicator:** the number of contacts or requests for advice made to volunteers or anti-violence centres originating from the monitored area.

2. The social cohesion index (social capital)

Domestic violence thrives in isolation. A connected neighbourhood is inherently safer.

- **The right metric:** measuring connections, not crimes.
- **Tool:** a short, annual anonymous questionnaire for residents, featuring questions such as:
  - 'Do you know the names of at least 3 neighbours?'
  - 'If you heard screams in the apartment next door, would you know what to do?'
  - 'Would you feel comfortable asking a neighbour for help if you were in difficulty?'
- **Objective:** a progressive increase in positive responses indicates that the protection network is strengthening.

3. The reduction of high-severity emergency interventions

In the long term, the goal is not to eliminate conflicts entirely (which is impossible), but to intervene before they become lethal.

- **The right metric:** monitoring the severity of reported incidents.
- **Objective:** shifting from interventions for 'severe injuries/hospitalisation' to interventions for 'verbal disputes/disturbances'. This shift indicates that the

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neighbourhood's early warning system is working, allowing for de-escalation before the violence becomes physical and irreversible.

4. Beyond traditional metrics: operational benchmarks

Following established European best practices for large-scale citizen participation, additional metrics should be monitored to evaluate the health and legitimacy of the network:

- **Neighbourhood coverage rate:** the percentage of residential districts within a specific municipality that have at least one active, registered community group.
- **Municipal referral index:** the number of local authority websites (municipalities or police) that explicitly list the association as the recommended partner for citizen safety initiatives.
- **Administrator training density:** the ratio of certified group administrators to the total number of active groups, ensuring that every local unit has at least one leader trained in domestic violence signposting.
- **Digital platform adoption:** the number of local authorities that have integrated a shared administrative dashboard or management software to coordinate the network, indicating a formal shift towards data-driven civil subsidiarity.
- **Institutional reciprocity score:** the frequency of structured meetings or joint awareness campaigns conducted between the association and local police forces.
- **Volunteer retention and satisfaction:** annual metrics regarding the length of service of group administrators and their perceived confidence in handling sensitive domestic issues.

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Appendix D. Implementation roadmap (phase by phase)

Expanding the scope of a citizen network to include the social monitoring of domestic abuse and vulnerability cannot be improvised. To safely activate a community group focused on personal protection, we strongly recommend following this structured four-phase pathway. This measured approach ensures the network remains a trusted, bottom-up resource rather than devolving into an intrusive surveillance entity.

Pre-phase: legal and safeguarding review

Before implementation, each national association should review the framework with local legal advisers, victim support professionals, safeguarding experts, and data protection specialists. This preliminary review should ensure compliance with national law, safeguarding obligations, GDPR requirements, and existing referral procedures.

The objective of this pre-phase is to adapt the EUNWA framework to the national and local context before volunteers are recruited, trained, or activated. No domestic violence awareness or signposting activity should begin before this legal and safeguarding review has confirmed clear boundaries, reporting channels, and responsibilities.

Phase 1: the institutional alliance (months 1-2)

Rationale: building institutional trust and acknowledging administrative lead times.

Before recruiting neighbours or launching public chats, the core organising committee must establish robust connections with local professionals. This two-month window is essential to navigate public sector bureaucracy and to align the association's goals with local policing priorities.

- **Initial contact:** arrange meetings with local law enforcement (e.g. community policing units) and the regional anti-violence centres or victim support NGOs.
- **The correct approach:** present the association's strictly defined 'signposting' methodology. The guiding question should be: 'How can our network serve as a safe, preliminary antenna without hindering your professional operations or duplicating your role?'
- **Outcome:** secure a formal partnership or endorsement, ensuring volunteers have a verified referral pathway from the outset.

Phase 2: selection, screening and role assignment (month 3)

Rationale: prioritising quality over quantity and ensuring ethical alignment.

When dealing with sensitive social issues, recruitment must be a deliberate process. A full month allows for the careful assessment of candidates, ensuring the network is composed of individuals who understand the gravity of their role.

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- **Profile assessment:** coordinators and active volunteers must be balanced, empathetic, and discreet. It is crucial to filter out those demonstrating a 'vigilante' or 'sheriff' mindset.
- **The ethical boundary:** make the signing of the formal ethical commitment and confidentiality agreement a mandatory condition for any volunteer assuming an active role in domestic violence awareness, safe signposting, coordination, or handling sensitive information. This requirement should not affect ordinary membership of the association, but it should be mandatory for operational roles involving sensitive safeguarding responsibilities.
- **Role assignment (the Designated Community Contact):** to streamline communication and protect sensitive data, local groups may appoint a specific 'Designated Community Contact' for safeguarding issues. While the selection remains the autonomous decision of the local network, EUNWA strongly recommends applying strict, objective criteria. The ideal candidate must demonstrate a proven track record of discretion, lack a 'saviour complex', and hold the natural trust of the neighbourhood. This role requires a balanced, emotionally grounded individual who strictly respects professional boundaries and accepts that their mandate ends at safe signposting. Once selected—and conditional upon signing the ethical commitment (Appendix B)—this volunteer does not act as a counsellor, investigator, or amateur social worker. Instead, they serve as the trained focal point for neighbours who are unsure how to act upon a suspicion of domestic abuse. Their sole mandate is to listen discreetly, enforce the group's confidentiality rules, and provide the reporting neighbour with the correct professional helplines or emergency pathways.

Phase 3: mandatory training (month 4)

Rationale: coordinating external expertise and ensuring skill assimilation.

Goodwill without competence can be dangerous. A dedicated month for training is required to coordinate the schedules of external professionals (psychologists, police, or social workers) and to allow volunteers to process complex concepts like vicarious trauma.

- **The curriculum should cover:**
  - Recognising the subtle, non-physical signs of abuse (including economic and coercive control).
  - Privacy rules and the strict enforcement of 'operational silence' within group chats.
  - Safe communication strategies ('radical normality') and practical simulations on how to effectively call emergency services (112/999).
- **Tooling:** provide every trained volunteer with the official 'Resource sheet', containing verified local helpline numbers for safe signposting.

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Phase 4: activation and maintenance (from month 5 onwards)

Rationale: transitioning to operational status with a mature foundation.

The network becomes operational only after four months of rigorous preparation. This ensures that the first 'live' interactions are handled with the necessary maturity and professional distance.

- **Digital hygiene:** launch the communication channels (e.g. WhatsApp or Telegram groups) with rigid moderation rules to immediately suppress any attempts at gossiping or public reporting of sensitive issues.
- **Psychological maintenance:** institute quarterly 'debriefing' meetings. Guided by a professional or an experienced coordinator, these sessions allow volunteers to discuss critical situations anonymously and alleviate emotional tension.
- **Continuous improvement:** establish an annual review where volunteers renew their ethical commitments and participate in refresher courses to maintain high standards of social awareness.

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Appendix E. Emergency and support numbers in Europe

In the event of immediate danger, the absolute priority is ensuring physical safety. Subsequently, it is crucial to know the contact numbers for psychological and legal support.

1. The single emergency number: 112

Across the entire European Union, the 112 number is active free of charge, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, from any landline or mobile phone.

- **When to call it:** if an assault is in progress, if screams indicating a life-threatening situation are heard, or if the victim requires immediate medical or police assistance.
- **Features:** operators are trained to handle emergencies and can connect to multilingual interpreting services.

2. National helplines (anti-violence numbers)

These numbers provide a listening ear, legal advice, psychological support, and referral to anti-violence centres. They are almost always anonymous, free of charge, and active 24/7.

Table 3. Main active numbers in European countries (reference list)

Country	Number	Notes
Austria	0800 222 555	Frauenhelpline
France	3919	Violences Femmes Info
Germany	08000 116 016	Hilfetelefon Gewalt gegen Frauen
Italy	1522	Anti-violence and stalking number
Portugal	800 202 148	CIG (Victim info service)
Romania	0800 500 333	Agenția Națională pentru Egalitatea de Șanse
Spain	016	Leaves no trace on the telephone bill
Sweden	020 50 50 50	Kvinnofridslinjen
Poland	800 120 002	Niebieska Linia (Blue Line)
United Kingdom	0808 2000 247	National Domestic Abuse Helpline

Note: these numbers do not replace 112 in life-threatening emergencies.

3. Helplines for children

Many countries also have helplines specifically for children, for example Rat auf Draht (147) in Austria and De Kindertelefoon in The Netherlands (0800-0432). However, the

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European Union also has installed a cost free and anonymous helpline for children and adolescents under 116 111. It is active in many EU countries.

4. Updated official database (WAVE Network)

As services and numbers are subject to change, EUNWA recommends consulting the official interactive map maintained by WAVE (Women Against Violence Europe) to find the nearest specialised support services in every European nation (including non-EU countries).

FIND HELP NOW: for the complete, real-time updated list, visit: www.wave-network.org/find-help

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Appendix F. Suspecting domestic violence

Table 4. Dos and Don'ts checklist

SUSPECTING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE - CHECKLIST DOS AND DON'TS		
Recognising signs	**Do** watch for signs: frequent loud arguments, injuries explained poorly, isolation, fear, controlled movements, financial dependence, children or adolescents seeming distressed (fear, depression, injuries). Be a signposter not a police officer!	**Don't** dismiss recurring "accidents," shouting, or signs of control as "normal family noise" or cultural differences.
Safety	**Do** prioritise the immediate safety of the victim, children, and yourself; call emergency services (e.g. 112) if there is an active threat or violence is in progress.	**Don't** put yourself or the victim at greater risk by confronting the abuser or intervening physically. This may provoke further harm to the victim or yourself.
Reporting	**Do** report concerns or incidents to the police (non-emergency line for non-urgent suspicions; emergency line for danger in progress). Note dates, times, and what was heard or seen.	**Don't** delay contacting the police or emergency services assuming "it's a private matter" or that someone else will report it. Silence enables the abuse to continue. **Don't** wait for "proof" as bruises may not be visible.
Approach to the victim	**Do** use a quiet, private moment, if safe, to ask sensitively, "Are you okay? Is there anything I can do?" Listen without pressure. Explain that you may need to involve authorities for their safety.	**Don't** judge or blame the victim. **Don't** approach the victim directly as they may not be safe to talk freely. **Don't** press for details, demand proof, or make the victim feel they must justify their situation. **Don't** promise outcomes you cannot guarantee. **Don't** expect (immediately) a positive or grateful reaction.
Confidentiality	**Do** respect the victim's privacy and share information only with those who need it (police, support services) to protect safety.	**Don't** gossip with other neighbours, post on social media, even on the common residential WhatsApp group, or identify the victim/family publicly. This can endanger them further.

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Table 4 (continued)

SUSPECTING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE - CHECKLIST DO'S AND DON'TS		
Supporting the victim	**Do** provide trustworthy information about local support services, shelters, and helplines (e.g. national domestic violence helpline). Offer to keep a record of incidents if they wish.	**Don't** tell the victim what they "must" do, pressure them to leave immediately, or judge them for staying. Leaving is often the most dangerous time.
Children	**Do** treat children's safety as paramount as witnesses or victims and ensure police/child protection services are informed. **Do** take children and adolescents seriously when they show signs that indicate something is wrong.	**Don't** question children yourself in a way that could traumatise them or compromise any later investigation. **Don't** attribute "strange" behaviour to them being children or adolescents.
The abuser	**Do** keep communication minimal, neutral, and safe; avoid provocation.	**Don't** confront, threaten, shame, or try to "mediate" between the abuser and victim — this can trigger retaliation.
Evidence	**Do** record factual observations (dates, times, exact words heard, descriptions) and keep them securely. Hand them to police if requested or with the victim's consent.	**Don't** investigate or collect evidence illegally (recording without legal basis, entering the home, taking photos of people), or destroy anything. This could violate privacy laws, endanger the victim, or put you at legal risk.
Community action	**Do** raise awareness through Neighbourhood Watch meetings, share helpline numbers, and build a supportive, non-judgemental environment.	**Don't** organise vigilante action, "name and shame" campaigns, or collective harassment of a suspected abuser.
Self-care	**Do** take care of yourself being aware of the emotional toll for yourself; seek mental support and debrief with a neighbourhood watch coordinator, police or support services if needed.	**Don't** take on the role of rescuer, counsellor, or investigator beyond your competence — that is the role of professionals.
When in doubt	**Do** err on the side of caution when unsure whether a situation is dangerous, and contact a neighbourhood watch coordinator, the police or a domestic violence helpline for guidance.	**Don't** wait for "absolute proof" before acting. Domestic violence is often hidden and escalates over time.

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ABOUT EUNWA

Founded in 2014, **EUNWA (European Neighbourhood Watch Association)** promotes the exchange of experience and knowledge among its member associations and organisations, encouraging the sharing of good practices, operational protocols and crime prevention strategies.

EUNWA acts as a bridge, facilitating mutual understanding and cooperation among national Neighbourhood Watch associations across Europe.

Our strategic objective is to **strengthen a collaborative network connecting the Boards of national organisations and security experts**, providing a platform for exchange that respects the autonomy of each organisation and contributes to building a safer and more connected Europe.

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