

*Independent Civil Society Report  
to the Monitoring Process of the  
Council of Europe Convention on Preventing  
and Combating Violence against Women  
and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention)  
Regarding the Implementation in Germany*

# **Institutional Betrayal and Secondary Victimization**

## **Empirical Findings on Structural Gaps in the German Support System**

**An Independent Civil Society Assessment of the Istanbul Convention based on  
the Lived Realities of Survivors of Domestic Violence**

*Submitted to the Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO)*

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## Executive Summary

# Institutional Betrayal and Secondary Victimization: Empirical Findings on Structural Gaps in the German Support System

*A Civil Society Assessment of the Istanbul Convention based on the Lived Realities of Survivors of Domestic Violence*

## Background and Purpose

This independent report presents a civil society-based assessment of the implementation of the Istanbul Convention in Germany. Based on the analysis of **232 survivor testimonies**, it provides insight into how protection mechanisms are experienced in practice and identifies **systemic dynamics** that are not fully reflected in official data.

Unlike administrative or institutionally mediated data, this report draws on **direct, anonymised accounts** from survivors, including individuals who are often underrepresented in formal evaluation processes. It thereby offers access to experiential realities and institutional dynamics that are not fully captured by existing monitoring frameworks. In situations where access to protection is shaped by complex interpersonal and structural dynamics, these remain only partially visible, despite their **significant impact on survivors' help-seeking behaviour**.

The findings indicate a **profound and persistent gap** between formal international protection standards and the lived realities of survivors. Rather than isolated shortcomings, the data point to **recurring structural patterns** within the German support system. Notably, the findings suggest that, under certain conditions, institutional responses may contribute to uncertainty, loss of trust, and the **withdrawal of survivors** from formal support structures. In many cases, institutions intended to provide safety are not experienced as reliably protective environments; instead, interactions with institutional actors are described as contributing to **further harm**.

The findings further indicate that *peer-based* and civil society support structures are consistently described by survivors as more effective in providing **recognition, safety, and stabilisation**. This contrast provides additional insight into how support mechanisms are experienced under conditions of vulnerability.

Taken together, the findings align with what has been described in international research as *Institutional Betrayal*. They indicate that these dynamics are not marginal but **structurally embedded**, raising serious concerns regarding the effective implementation of the Convention and the fulfilment of *due diligence* obligations.

## Core Systemic Issues

The analysis identifies a set of recurring systemic failures that undermine the effective implementation of the Istanbul Convention in Germany:

### 1. Fear of Seeking Help and Institutional Coldness (Articles 5 and 18)

State support is frequently experienced as **unpredictable or insufficiently protective**. **46.0%** of survivors who did not seek state assistance cited fear of negative institutional consequences, such as the potential loss of child custody. Among those who did seek help, **64.1%** evaluated

state interventions as insufficient. Furthermore, **69.4%** reported not being taken seriously, and **53.3%** indicated that they were not believed. These findings point to a **critical erosion of trust** in state institutions and raise serious concerns regarding the fulfilment of *due diligence* obligations.

## 2. Gaps in Expertise on Coercive Control (Article 15)

The data reveal **significant deficits in specialised knowledge** among state professionals, including police, youth welfare services, and family courts, particularly regarding *coercive control*, psychological violence, and perpetrator manipulation strategies. **75.0%** of survivors identified this lack of expertise as a **central safety risk**. Survivors report that these knowledge gaps frequently lead to misinterpretations of risk, credibility, and the dynamics of abuse.

## 3. Family Courts as High-Risk Contexts (Article 31)

Family court proceedings, particularly in custody and visitation cases, emerge as **critical sites of risk** for survivors and their children. Survivors report recurring patterns in which protective actions are reframed negatively, and situations involving violence are interpreted as mutual “*high-conflict*” dynamics. Safety concerns raised by mothers are frequently reinterpreted as “*resistance to contact*” (*Bindungsintoleranz*). These practices are associated with **enforced contact arrangements despite reported risks**, raising profound concerns regarding compliance with Article 31 and the prioritisation of safety.

## 4. Blocked Potential of Civil Society Support (Article 9)

The data highlight a clear contrast between the perceived effectiveness of civil society support and its **structural marginalisation**. While only **12.0%** of survivors report state support as helpful, nearly **95.0%** evaluate *peer-based* civil society support as highly effective. Despite this, these structures remain **underfunded, insufficiently recognised, and poorly integrated** into formal protection systems. Additionally, **16.8%** of survivor-led initiatives report experiencing **administrative barriers** imposed by state actors.

## Priority Recommendations to the State Party

In order to strengthen alignment with the Istanbul Convention and ensure the effective fulfilment of *due diligence* obligations (**Article 5**), the following measures are recommended:

- **1. Structural Accessibility and Protection:** Establish **integrated “One-Stop Shop” support centres** that provide coordinated access to legal, psychological, and financial assistance, thereby preventing referral loops and reducing systemic barriers (**Article 18**). Introduce **safe and confidential reporting mechanisms**.
- **2. Professional Training and Accountability:** Implement **mandatory and continuous trauma-informed training** for all relevant professionals, including judiciary, law enforcement, and child protection services (**Article 15**). Develop **binding qualification standards** for court-appointed experts in high-risk cases.
- **3. Protection in Family Law Proceedings:** Ensure that **survivor and child safety is consistently prioritised** in all custody and visitation decisions, in line with **Article 31**. Establish **clear procedural safeguards** to prevent the misinterpretation of protective behaviours as parental non-cooperation.

- **4. Strengthening Civil Society Structures:** Provide **sustainable funding and structural integration** for specialised civil society organisations and survivor-led *peer support* initiatives (**Article 9**). **Remove administrative barriers** that hinder the work and accessibility of these essential support structures.
- **5. Monitoring and Oversight:** Establish **independent oversight mechanisms** to review cases involving *secondary victimisation* and institutional misconduct. **Strengthen data collection** and monitoring systems to ensure transparency and accountability.

### Closing Statement

Taken together, the findings and recommendations point to **systemic gaps** that require **coordinated structural responses** across multiple levels of the protection system. These findings highlight the need for **structural reforms** to ensure that the implementation of the Istanbul Convention translates into **effective, reliable, and survivor-centred protection** in practice.

# Germany's Protection Gap: Empirical Findings on Institutional Support for Survivors

## THE TRUST DEFICIT

**64.1%**

**rate state support as insufficient**  
 Nearly two-thirds assessed state interventions as "not helpful at all" or inadequate for their safety needs.



**69.4%**

**were not taken seriously**  
 A dominant majority felt their reports were dismissed or minimized by state authorities.



**53.3%**

**were not believed**  
 More than half reported experiencing an institutional atmosphere of skepticism regarding their accounts.



**46%**

**fear negative consequences**  
 Avoided seeking help fearing retaliatory actions or negative outcomes from the state, such as losing child custody.



## THE EXPERTISE VACUUM

### LACK OF SPECIALIST EXPERTISE

**75%**  
 report a lack of specialist expertise

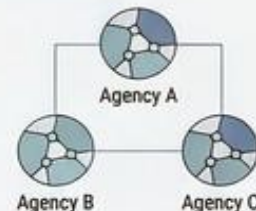


Three-quarters identified that police, youth welfare offices, and courts lack fundamental knowledge regarding coercive control and manipulative perpetrator strategies.

### COERCIVE CONTROL

A systemic pattern of dominance, intimidation, and isolation that authorities frequently misinterpret as "parental conflict" or "mutual high-conflict."

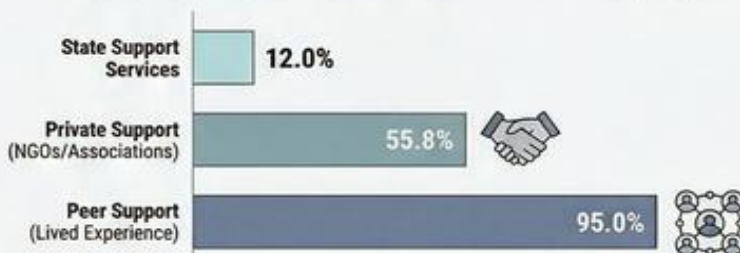
**58.3%**  
 experienced "The Referral Loop"



Survivors were frequently passed between different agencies without receiving coordinated or continuous support.

## EFFECTIVENESS COMPARISON

### PERCEIVED HELPFULNESS OF SUPPORT SYSTEMS (2025)



**16.8%**  
 report state obstruction

Survivor-led initiatives reported being actively hindered by state institutions twice as often as they were supported by them.

Figure 1: The Institutional Protection Gap

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Context and Urgency: The Gap in the Protection System

Domestic violence and abuse within relationship structures characterised by *coercive control* and psychological violence remain a serious human rights concern in Germany. Although the Federal Republic of Germany ratified the Istanbul Convention in **2018**, the empirical data provides consistent indications of a substantial gap between the formal legal framework and the lived realities of survivors.

The findings point to **recurring systemic patterns and structural shortcomings** in the implementation of the state's protection mandate. For many survivors, the risk does not end with leaving an abusive relationship. Instead, the data indicates that exposure to harm may continue within institutional contexts, including interactions with police, family courts, and youth welfare services.

These reported experiences raise serious concerns regarding the effective implementation of the Convention, particularly in relation to the state's due diligence obligations (**Article 5**) and the requirement to prevent *secondary victimisation* (**Article 18**).

The present report is based on the systematic analysis of **232** survivor testimonies and aims to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how protection mechanisms operate in practice. By documenting recurring patterns across institutional interactions, it provides an empirical basis for identifying areas where further action may be required to ensure effective protection.

### 1.2 The Significance of Experiential Expertise

The inclusion of survivor perspectives is a central prerequisite for assessing the practical implementation of the Istanbul Convention. Without the systematic integration of lived realities, statistical and administrative data alone remain insufficient to adequately capture the effectiveness of protection systems.

This report therefore treats survivors' experiential knowledge as an indispensable analytical resource. The findings provide consistent empirical indications that **structural shortcomings** in specialised knowledge among state actors – particularly in recognising *coercive control* – may contribute to recurring misinterpretations in institutional responses.

As reflected in both trauma research and human rights analysis, such **recurring systemic patterns** may undermine protection outcomes and contribute to processes of *secondary victimisation*. In international literature, these dynamics are described as forms of *Institutional Betrayal* (cf. Jennifer Freyd & Smith, 2014) and *Court and Perpetrator Induced Trauma (CPIT)* (cf. Dalgarno, 2024).

By systematically integrating the voices of **232** survivors, this report provides an evidence-based foundation for GREVIO to assess how protection mechanisms operate in practice and to what extent they effectively fulfil the Convention's requirements.

### 1.3 Objectives and Guiding Principles

The primary objective of this report is to identify **recurring systemic patterns and structural shortcomings** reflected in the empirical data and to support GREVIO in assessing where further action may be required to ensure the effective protection of women and children.

The analysis and resulting recommendations are guided by the core obligations of the Istanbul Convention, which serve as the normative and analytical framework of this report. In particular, the assessment is structured around the following provisions:

- **Article 5** – State obligations and due diligence
- **Article 9** – Cooperation with civil society
- **Article 15** – Training of professionals
- **Article 18** – Protection and support, including the prevention of *secondary victimisation*
- **Article 31** – Custody, visitation rights, and safety

By systematically aligning the empirical findings with these provisions, the report aims to contribute to a structured evaluation of how protection mechanisms operate in practice and to what extent they fulfil the Convention's requirements.

### 1.4 Context of Origin and the Author's Expertise

The present empirical survey and the resulting report on the implementation of the Istanbul Convention in Germany emerged from a clear and practice-driven necessity: to systematically document and analyse recurring patterns in the **experiences of survivors** who report that they did not consistently experience protection within the state support system, but instead encountered **additional burdens**.

The report was independently authored by Stefanie Reich in cooperation with the association T.o.B.e. e.V. (Overcoming Toxic Relationships), which supported the nationwide dissemination of the survey across Germany. The association did not act as a commissioning body but functioned as an access point to a particularly hard-to-reach group of survivors whose perspectives are often underrepresented in formal evaluation processes.

In her role within T.o.B.e. e.V., the author regularly facilitates trauma-sensitive peer exchange formats and has developed a qualification concept for trauma-informed peer expertise. This approach integrates knowledge of trauma-related processes, *coercive control*, and the practical challenges survivors face when interacting with institutional systems.

The conceptualisation of the questionnaire, the systematic analysis of the **232** datasets, and the preparation of this report were carried out independently, on a voluntary basis, and without state funding.

This independence constitutes not only an expression of civil society engagement but also a relevant methodological condition. It enables close proximity to the lived realities of survivors, which may be filtered, relativised, or insufficiently captured within formal institutional contexts.

Through this independent and practice-based approach, the report provides empirically grounded insights into **recurring systemic patterns and structural shortcomings** as they are experienced by survivors themselves.

**2. Methodology and Evaluation Procedures**

**2.1 Study Design and Data Collection**

To assess the practical implementation of protection measures under the Istanbul Convention, a survivor-centred research approach was applied. This approach is designed to capture institutional dynamics that may not be fully reflected in administrative or statistical data.

A total of **232** survivors participated in the survey (N = **232**). Data collection was conducted between April and October **2025**.

The survey was distributed **nationwide across Germany** through the civil society organisation T.o.B.e. e.V., using an established network that enabled access to a diverse and otherwise underrepresented population of survivors.

The analysis follows a mixed-methods design, combining descriptive quantitative analysis with a qualitative, inductive content analysis of **133** detailed free-text responses. This methodological triangulation enables both the identification of recurring systemic patterns and a deeper understanding of individual experiences.

To ensure accessibility and facilitate participation from potentially hard-to-reach groups, the survey was designed as an anonymous and low-threshold format. This allowed participants to report sensitive experiences within a protected setting.

The findings should be interpreted as indicative of **recurring systemic patterns and structural shortcomings** rather than as statistically representative results for the general population.

**2.2 Survey Instruments**

The questionnaire was designed to capture both statistically evaluable trends and the contextual depth of survivors’ lived realities.

**Table 1: Overview of Survey Instruments**

Question Type	Function within the Report	Analytical Objective
<b>Closed-ended questions (Yes/No)</b>	Collection of baseline data (e.g. utilisation of state support)	Enables quantifiable evaluation and direct comparability
<b>Multiple-response questions</b>	Mapping complex support pathways (e.g. parallel use of multiple services)	Identification of patterns in help-seeking behaviour and institutional interactions
<b>Open-ended free-text questions</b>	Detailed accounts of experiences with authorities and institutions	Provides qualitative depth and enables the identification of recurring systemic patterns, including experiences of institutional responses and potential secondary victimisation

## 2.3 Evaluation Procedures

The data analysis followed a mixed-methods approach conducted in three systematic steps:

**a) Quantitative analysis:** Descriptive statistical analysis of frequencies and percentages was used to provide a structured overview of how different support services were accessed and evaluated.

**b) Qualitative content analysis (inductive):** This step involved the systematic coding and thematic clustering of free-text responses. Through this process, recurring patterns - such as reported *victim–perpetrator role reversal* and challenges related to trauma-informed expertise - were identified.

**c) Analytical synthesis:** The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings (triangulation) enabled a comprehensive analysis of the data. This approach allowed for the identification of **recurring systemic patterns and structural shortcomings**, including patterns associated with experiences of *secondary victimisation* in institutional contexts.

This report is available in both a **German and an English version**, each addressing different audiences and purposes.

The German-language report presents the findings in close alignment with the original structure of the qualitative data and is primarily oriented towards national stakeholders, including policymakers, practitioners, and civil society actors.

In contrast, the present English-language report is designed for an international audience. While it is based on the same empirical material, the presentation of findings follows a thematically reorganised analytical structure. This approach aims to enhance clarity and accessibility, particularly in relation to key concepts such as coercive control, institutional responses, and systemic risk factors.

The analytical reorganisation does not alter the underlying data or findings, but represents a different structuring of the same empirical material. A detailed mapping of the analytical structure between the German and English versions of the report is provided in Annex D.

## 2.4 Validity and Relevance

Although the sample does not claim statistical representativeness for the general population, it demonstrates a high degree of internal consistency. The density and convergence of accounts across different regions and institutions provide consistent empirical indications of **recurring systemic patterns and structural shortcomings** within the German support system.

The methodology is specifically designed to align with GREVIO criteria for assessing state due diligence (**Article 5** of the Istanbul Convention) and the prevention of *secondary victimisation* (**Article 18** of the Istanbul Convention).

This study constitutes an exploratory, survivor-centred inquiry. Its relevance lies in its capacity to identify recurring systemic patterns and to document lived realities that may not be fully captured in official state data.

### **Mandatory Legal Safeguard Statement and Interpretation of Findings**

The findings presented in this report are based on an anonymous and voluntary survey of survivors of domestic violence and reflect their self-reported experiences.

The collected data constitutes a systematic analysis of these accounts. Independent legal, administrative, or forensic verification of individual cases was not within the scope of this study.

The purpose of this analysis is to identify recurring patterns and structural dynamics from the perspective of survivors. The findings should not be interpreted as a legal assessment of individual institutions or persons in specific cases, but rather as empirically grounded indications of recurring systemic patterns and structural shortcomings within the protection system.

The qualitative quotations included in this report have been strictly anonymised and serve to illustrate typical dimensions of experience. They do not claim to represent individual cases in their entirety.

The results of this study are to be interpreted within the context of an exploratory mixed-methods research approach. The findings do not establish causal relationships but identify correlations and recurring patterns within the dataset.

### **3. The Anatomy of Institutional Failure**

A functioning protection system requires that state institutions recognise risks and place the safety of survivors at the centre of all interventions, as mandated by the Istanbul Convention (**Article 18**), including the obligation to prevent *secondary victimisation*. However, the qualitative and quantitative data from the **232** respondents point to a substantial discrepancy between this international legal standard and the institutional reality in Germany.

The findings do not merely reflect gaps in knowledge regarding complex and less visible forms of abuse. Rather, they point to **recurring systemic patterns and structural shortcomings** in the fulfilment of the protective mandate, including in situations where physical violence is evident.

As reflected in trauma research, such structural dynamics – where support systems reproduce power imbalances and fail to adequately recognise survivor experiences – are conceptualised as forms of *Institutional Betrayal* (cf. Freyd & Smith, 2014; Gómez et al., 2016).

#### **3.1 The Illusion of Evidence: Manipulating Physical Violence (Article 5)**

A common institutional assumption is that authorities respond decisively when visible physical evidence is present. However, the qualitative analysis of survivor testimonies reveals indications of a different pattern: institutional responses are frequently described as being influenced by perpetrator framing strategies, which may result in failures of protective action even when physical injuries are clearly documented.

## Qualitative Evidence

„The police asked first, as I sat covered in blood on the pavement: ‘Have you been drinking?’ And: ‘These are family disputes.’“ (cf. Annex C, Cluster 3: Institutional Coldness and Trivialisation)

### Systemic Pattern

Survivor accounts indicate **recurring patterns** in which situations of unilateral violence are reframed within institutional contexts as mutual “parental conflict” or “*high-conflict*” dynamics. Where such reframing occurs, the evidentiary value of survivor accounts is significantly undermined, which is experienced by survivors as a delegitimation of their reports, even in the presence of visible injuries. This pattern is consistent with established research on coercive control, which highlights that violence is often embedded in broader strategies of domination and may be misinterpreted when assessed as isolated incidents (cf. Stark, 2007).

These patterns raise serious concerns regarding the effective fulfilment of due diligence obligations under **Article 5** of the Istanbul Convention.

### 3.2 Gaps in Professional Expertise and the “Halo Effect” (Article 15)

When institutional responses fail even in cases involving physical violence, this points to deeper systemic pattern, particularly **structural shortcomings in professional expertise** regarding psychological abuse.

### Empirical Evidence

**Quantitative: 75%** of respondents report that police, youth welfare offices, and courts lack fundamental expertise in recognising manipulative perpetrator strategies and psychological violence, particularly *coercive control*.

### Qualitative

„Another time, two male police officers came, and since I was crying the whole time, but my husband lied very calmly, they didn't believe me.“ (cf. Annex C, Cluster 2: Perceived Victim–Perpetrator Role Reversal)

### Systemic Pattern

The data provides consistent indications that insufficient training in recognising complex abuse dynamics—such as *coercive control*, *gaslighting*, and covert forms of domination—may contribute to recurring misinterpretations in institutional responses. This pattern aligns with established research on *coercive control*, which conceptualises psychological violence as a continuous and strategic pattern of domination that is often difficult to detect without specialised training (cf. Stark, 2007).

In such contexts, perpetrators are often described as presenting as **calm, coherent, and credible**, while survivors, experiencing acute stress or trauma responses, may appear **emotionally distressed**. Trauma research demonstrates that such emotional responses are

**typical reactions to prolonged exposure to violence** and should not be misinterpreted as indicators of unreliability or instability (cf. Herman, 1992/2015).

In the absence of trauma-informed expertise, these dynamics may lead to **systematic distortions in credibility assessment**: survivors' trauma-related responses are interpreted as indicators of instability, while perpetrators' controlled behaviour is interpreted as reliability. In psychological research, such distortions - where evaluations are shaped by surface-level impressions - are described as the *Halo Effect* (cf. Thorndike, 1920; Nisbett & Wilson, 1977).

### **Implications under the Istanbul Convention (Article 15)**

These findings raise serious concerns regarding compliance with **Article 15** of the Istanbul Convention, which requires the adequate training of relevant professionals. In practice, this expertise gap may constitute a significant safety risk, as relevant indicators of harm may be misinterpreted or overlooked.

### **3.3 Institutional Coldness and the “Referral Loop” (Article 18)**

When institutional responses fail to adequately recognise complex abuse dynamics (see 3.2) and trivialise even visible physical evidence (see 3.1), the data points to a deeper **structural issue**: across a substantial proportion of cases, survivors are not perceived as individuals in need of protection, but are assessed within institutional frameworks that do not adequately capture the dynamics of violence.

#### **Empirical Evidence**

**Quantitative:** **69.4%** of respondents report that they were not taken seriously by authorities; **53.3%** state that they were not believed; and **58.3%** report being referred from one agency to another without receiving effective support.

#### **Qualitative**

*„Social workers and employees of the [youth welfare office/Jugendamt] shift responsibilities back and forth. Concept guidelines take precedence over individual help. Little to no engagement, rather processing cases to have peace.“* (cf. Annex C, Cluster 3: Institutional Coldness and Trivialisation)

#### **Systemic Pattern: The “Referral Loop”**

The findings suggest that institutional responses are often neither coordinated nor sufficiently protective. Instead, they are characterised by fragmentation and repeated referrals, which are associated with insufficient professional recognition of complex abuse dynamics.

This dynamic – conceptualised here as a **“referral loop”** – requires survivors in situations of acute vulnerability to navigate complex and often opaque administrative structures, without their level of risk being reliably recognised or adequately addressed.

Such patterns are consistent with what trauma research conceptualises as *Institutional Betrayal*, where **institutions fail to provide protection** and thereby **contribute to the amplification of harm experienced by those who depend on them** (cf. Freyd & Smith, 2014; Gómez et al., 2016).

These dynamics are associated with reported experiences of **devaluation, erosion of trust,** and, in many cases, the **withdrawal of survivors from support systems.**

#### **Implications under the Istanbul Convention (Article 18)**

These institutional dynamics raise serious concerns regarding the effective implementation of **Article 18** of the Istanbul Convention, which requires coordinated, trauma-informed, and protective support, as well as the prevention of *secondary victimisation*.

Where protection systems fail to adequately recognise risk and repeatedly channel survivors through institutional processes, this may significantly limit the effectiveness of protective measures and contribute to additional burdens for those affected.

### **4. The Reversal of Blame: Systemic Disempowerment and Institutional Vulnerability**

#### **4.1 The Blind Spot Regarding "Coercive Control" and Institutional Gaslighting (Articles 5 and 18)**

Understanding the recurring failure of protection measures requires an analysis of both the psychological dynamics of domestic violence and the corresponding institutional responses. The empirical data highlights **systemic patterns** in which state actors face significant challenges in recognising non-physical forms of violence, including *coercive control*, as well as manipulative perpetrator strategies.

Research on *coercive control* highlights that perpetrators often present themselves as rational, composed, and cooperative, while survivors may appear distressed, reactive, or emotionally overwhelmed as a result of prolonged exposure to abuse (Bancroft, 2021; Herman, 1992/2015). These dynamics can create conditions in which institutional assessments are influenced by **surface-level behavioural impressions** (which may be influenced by cognitive biases such as the *Halo Effect*) rather than underlying patterns of control and harm.

These structural challenges are associated with **recurring patterns of victim–perpetrator role reversal** within institutional contexts. In such cases, **protective actions** by survivors are frequently **reinterpreted as problematic or obstructive behaviour** (sometimes framed as “resistance to contact” or, in the German context, as *Bindungsintoleranz*), while perpetrator strategies remain insufficiently recognised or are misinterpreted as cooperative or compliant conduct.

This dynamic contributes to a **systemic disempowerment** of survivors and increases their **institutional vulnerability**. It is further associated with situations in which **indicators of risk are not adequately identified**, thereby affecting the effectiveness of protection measures.

The data points to structural limitations in institutional responses in Germany, where violence is not consistently recognised – even in cases involving physical evidence – while complex forms of psychological abuse, such as *coercive control*, **remain insufficiently identified.**

## Empirical Evidence

**Quantitative:** 75% of respondents report that police, youth welfare offices, and courts lack fundamental expertise in recognising manipulative perpetrator strategies and psychological violence, particularly *coercive control*.

## Qualitative

“I was gaslighted: in the [family counseling center], in the Youth Welfare Office [Jugendamt], and in court. When I mentioned child abuse, the father was given more rights and I was told to shut up – I wasn’t to make such serious accusations. These institutions claim to deal a lot with abuse, but they said based on how I behave, the children and I haven’t been abused. The father is allowed to continue abusing the children.” (cf. Annex C, Cluster 4: Structural and Institutional Violence by Authorities)

## Systemic Pattern

The qualitative testimonies consistently describe violence not as isolated incidents, but as *coercive control* – a continuous pattern of dominance, isolation, and psychological pressure (cf. Stark, 2007). A central mechanism within such dynamics is *gaslighting*, which systematically undermines the victim’s perception of reality.

The findings provide consistent indications that, in the absence of specialised training, institutional responses consistently align with perpetrator narratives. Attempts by survivors to report subtle or non-physical forms of abuse are regularly reinterpreted as indicators of paranoia, exaggeration, or psychological instability.

This dynamic results in a **structural reversal of credibility**: perpetrators’ accounts are reinforced, while survivors’ perceptions are invalidated.

Where institutional responses mirror and reinforce the patterns of denial and distortion present within the abusive relationship, this dynamic can be conceptualised as **institutional gaslighting**.

## Implications under the Istanbul Convention (Articles 5 and 18)

The failure to recognise *coercive control*, in combination with **structural shortcomings in specialised training**, contributes directly to the pathologisation of survivors. This dynamic leads to a significant erosion of trust in state institutions and frequently results in the withdrawal of survivors from support systems.

These patterns raise serious concerns regarding the prevention of *secondary victimisation* (**Article 18**) and constitute a substantial barrier to the effective implementation of the state’s due diligence obligations under **Article 5** of the Istanbul Convention.



Figure 2: The Competence Vacuum

#### 4.2 Perpetrator Dynamics: Violence as a "Belief System" and the "Halo Effect" (Article 15)

To understand recurring failures in the protection of survivors, it is necessary to examine the psychological dynamics underlying perpetrator behaviour. The empirical data indicates that violence in domestic contexts is not primarily the result of a situational loss of control, but rather part of a **strategic pattern of dominance and control**.

These findings align with established research on perpetrator behaviour, which conceptualises domestic violence as a **deliberate and goal-oriented pattern** rooted in systems of control and

entitlement, rather than impulsive or uncontrollable actions (cf. Bancroft, 2002/2021; Stark, 2007).

### **Empirical Evidence**

*Quantitative:* **75%** of respondents report a **significant lack of professional expertise** within state institutions regarding manipulative perpetrator strategies, covert forms of narcissism, and psychological abuse.

### **Qualitative**

*“My ex-partner [...] lives in his own reality, which he can present very believably. In public, he has never misbehaved or acted unusually; it is impossible for outsiders to understand what happens when the front door is closed. Emotional abuse and psychological violence are hardly provable...” (cf. Annex C, Cluster 1: Perceived Gaps in Professional Expertise)*

### **Systemic Pattern**

The testimonies provide consistent indications of behavioural patterns that align with established psychological research. Drawing on the work of Bancroft (2002/2021), these dynamics can be understood as rooted in a *belief system* characterised by **entitlement and control**. Within this framework, abusive behaviour is not random, but purposeful, internally justified, and selectively enacted in situations where control is perceived to be threatened.

A key institutional vulnerability arises from the fact that these dynamics rarely present as overt aggression. Perpetrators may **adapt their behaviour strategically** in institutional settings, presenting themselves as calm, rational, and credible, or even as victims.

In the absence of specialised training on *coercive control* and manipulative dynamics, institutional responses may be influenced by this form of strategic self-presentation. In particular, such dynamics can interact with cognitive biases such as the *Halo Effect*, in which surface-level impressions – such as calmness or coherence – shape overall evaluations and influence credibility assessments (cf. Thorndike, 1920; Nisbett & Wilson, 1977).

Within institutional responses, this dynamic contributes to a **structural asymmetry of credibility**: controlled behaviour by perpetrators may be interpreted as reliability and parental competence, while trauma-related emotional responses by survivors may be misinterpreted as indicators of instability. This pattern is consistent with trauma research, which demonstrates that trauma responses are frequently misread as psychological weakness rather than recognised as adaptive responses to violence (cf. Herman, 1992/2015).

As a result, institutional actors may become vulnerable to perpetrator framing strategies. The empirical data indicates that these distortions are not incidental, but reflect recurring structural patterns that may contribute to the **misidentification of risk** and the **reinforcement of abusive dynamics**.

### **Implications under the Istanbul Convention (Article 15)**

These recurring patterns suggest that gaps in professional training regarding perpetrator psychology may contribute to **failures in protective interventions**. The absence of mandatory, trauma-informed expertise increases the likelihood that manipulative strategies remain

insufficiently recognised and that credibility assessments are influenced by surface-level impressions.

This raises concerns regarding the implementation of **Article 15** of the Istanbul Convention, which requires the **adequate training of relevant professionals**. Without such expertise, institutional responses may remain susceptible to manipulation and are frequently experienced by survivors as unreliable.

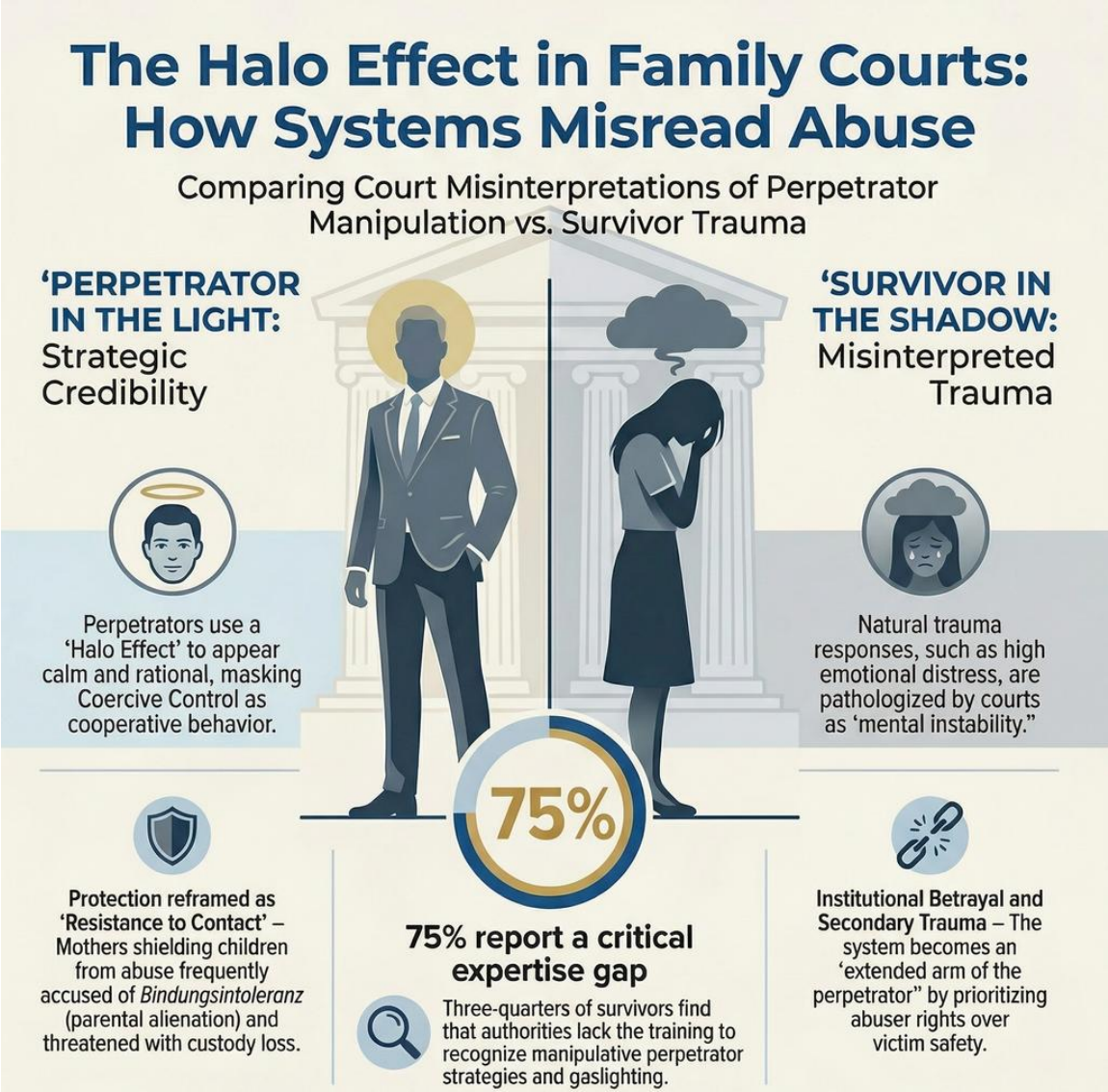


Figure 3: The Halo Effect In Family Courts

### 4.3 The Weaponisation of "Parental Alienation" and Institutional "Forced Contact" (Article 31)

The empirical data provides consistent indications that family courts and Youth Welfare Offices (*Jugendämter*) are frequently experienced by survivors as **institutional high-risk environments** for themselves and their children. Instead of reliably ensuring protection, institutional responses are often described as resulting in the **penalisation of protective mothers**.

## Empirical Evidence (Quantitative)

The survey indicates a high level of institutional fear among survivors. **46.0%** of respondents who did not seek state support cite fear of negative consequences – specifically concerns regarding intervention by Youth Welfare Offices or re-traumatisation. Additionally, **41.1%** report feeling actively pressured by authorities during their interactions.

### Systemic Pattern 1: Reframing Violence and the Pathologisation of Protection

*“I was accused of mental illnesses by the Youth Welfare Office [Jugendamt], which I had to refute. I am fully capable of parenting and yet there were three attempts to take the children into care [Inobhutnahme].” (cf. Annex C, Cluster 4: Structural and Institutional Violence by Authorities)*

*“To support the father's wishes regarding the financial settlement, the Youth Welfare Office [Jugendamt] threatened the children with child and adolescent psychiatry.” (cf. Annex C, Cluster 4: Structural and Institutional Violence by Authorities)*

The data provides consistent indications of recurring patterns in which situations involving unilateral violence and *coercive control* are **reframed within institutional contexts as mutual “parental conflict”** (“high-conflict separation”). In this process, protective actions by mothers aimed at safeguarding their children are frequently interpreted as obstructive behaviour.

In this context, terms such as “resistance to contact” (*Bindungsintoleranz*) or concepts related to *parental alienation* are applied (cf. Hammer, 2022).

In the German professional context, such interpretations are at times discussed in relation to concepts of parental alienation. However, these concepts are not derived from survivor self-descriptions in the present data, but are referenced here to situate the findings within broader professional and policy debates.

The findings indicate that such interpretations may contribute to a **structural reversal of roles**, in which protective behaviour is problematised while indicators of abuse risk are insufficiently recognised.

### Systemic Pattern 2: Institutional Pressure and Enforced Contact

*“The [regional] Youth Welfare Office [Jugendamt] acted against me in favor of the violent father. Although our daughter came back from the visitation appointments bruised by the father, the Youth Welfare Office decided that a bad father is better than none at all. Our daughter was repeatedly forced to the father against her will. [...] The Youth Welfare Office and the family judge protected the perpetrator.” (cf. Annex C, Cluster 4: Structural and Institutional Violence by Authorities)*

The findings suggest that these dynamics may culminate in situations where **significant pressure** is placed on mothers to facilitate contact between children and the abusive parent. Testimonies describe that such pressure can include the **threat of legal consequences**, including custody restrictions.

The data further indicates that the prioritisation of contact arrangements may occur even in the presence of **reported safety concerns**. Exposure to ongoing *coercive dynamics* and conflict has been associated in research with an increased risk of post-traumatic stress and other adverse outcomes in children (cf. Lange, 2021).

#### **Implications under the Istanbul Convention (Article 31)**

These patterns raise serious concerns regarding the implementation of Article 31 of the Istanbul Convention, which requires that incidents of violence be taken into account in decisions on custody and visitation and that the **safety of the victim and children be prioritised**.

Where contact arrangements are pursued despite reported indicators of risk, this may undermine the effective implementation of these obligations and contribute to **continued exposure of children and survivors to harm**.

#### **4.4 "Litigation Abuse" and the Coerced Silence of Survivors (Articles 5 and 31)**

The structural shortcomings identified in family court proceedings are not limited to gaps in protection; they are also associated with dynamics described in international research as *litigation abuse* (or *post-separation abuse*) (cf. Dalgarno, 2024). The empirical data indicates that legal proceedings be used as a means of **continued control**, resulting in **sustained psychological strain and financial burden** for survivors.

#### **Empirical Evidence (Qualitative)**

*"The defendant's lawyer was very brash, loud, and insulting (no one in court asked him to articulate himself calmly and objectively). High lawyer and court costs [...] Judiciary officials did not intervene when the defendant insulted me, but acted as if they were friends. Downplayed." (cf. Annex C, Cluster 4: Structural and Institutional Violence by Authorities)*

*"In court and at the Youth Welfare Office [Jugendamt], my experiences of violence and those of the children were not taken seriously; the lawyer for the [father of the child] pulled out the 'resistance to contact' card due to my supposedly 'invented situations' and attacked my psychological stability because of my therapy." (cf. Annex C, Cluster 2: Perceived Victim-Perpetrator Role Reversal)*

#### **Systemic Pattern: The Coerced Silence**

The data suggests that, where *litigation abuse* is not adequately recognised, survivors face **substantial structural risks** when disclosing experiences of violence (see section 4.3). In this context, a recurring pattern emerges: legal strategies and institutional responses create conditions in which the disclosure of violence is experienced as carrying **significant potential negative consequences**.

The findings further indicate that survivors report being advised in legal contexts to limit or avoid disclosing experiences of domestic violence in family court proceedings. This dynamic reflects a structural adaptation to institutional conditions in which protective actions are at risk of being **reinterpreted as obstructive behaviour** (e.g. "resistance to contact" / *Bindungsintoleranz*).

As such interpretations may be associated with adverse legal consequences, including custody-related decisions, survivors report **significant pressure to remain silent** about violence in order to protect themselves and their children from further legal and institutional harm.

### **Implications under the Istanbul Convention (Articles 5 and 31)**

These patterns raise serious concerns regarding the implementation of the **due diligence obligation under Article 5** and the requirement to **prioritise the safety of victims and children** in custody and visitation decisions under **Article 31** of the Istanbul Convention.

A legal environment in which the disclosure of violence is experienced as carrying significant risks of negative consequences may **undermine access to protection** and compromise the effectiveness of legal safeguards intended to ensure safety.

## **5. Institutional Betrayal as a Systemic Logic**

The experiences detailed in the previous chapters cannot be understood as isolated administrative errors. The empirical data points to **recurring structural patterns** within institutional responses to domestic violence.

In international trauma research, such systemic failures of support systems are conceptualised as *Institutional Betrayal*. Coined by psychologist Jennifer Freyd (2014), the concept describes the harm that occurs when institutions **fail to adequately protect individuals** who depend on them or respond in ways that do not meet their protective obligations. This includes both active misconduct and the failure to provide appropriate protection or support.

A central premise of this concept is that institutions, under certain structural conditions, may not only fail to protect, but may themselves contribute to the **creation or intensification of harm**. *Institutional Betrayal* therefore does not refer solely to individual errors, but to **systemic dynamics** within institutional structures.

This theoretical framework provides a lens for interpreting the empirical findings presented in this report. The data indicates that survivors frequently experience institutional responses not only as insufficient, but as contributing to the continuation and, in some cases, the **escalation of harm**. Recurring patterns identified in this report – such as the misinterpretation of violence, the pathologisation of protective behaviour, or the discouragement of disclosure – can be understood within this framework.

These findings align with established research on *Institutional Betrayal*, which demonstrates that inadequate or dismissive institutional responses can exacerbate existing trauma, increase vulnerability, and contribute to **long-term psychological and psychosocial harm** (cf. Freyd, 2014; Freyd & Smith, 2014; Gómez et al., 2016).

The concept of *Institutional Betrayal* thus provides a structured framework for understanding the experiences documented in this report not as isolated incidents, but as expressions of **broader structural challenges** within the protection system, including situations in which institutional responses may **fail to ensure safety and protection**.

## 5.1 From Isolated Incidents to Structural Patterns (Articles 5 and 18)

The testimonies documented in this report point to recurring patterns that cannot be explained by individual experiences alone, but instead reveal **structural deficiencies** in the implementation of the state's protection mandate.

### Empirical Evidence (*Quantitative*)

The data indicates substantial challenges in the perceived effectiveness of state support. **64.1%** of survivors evaluate state support as insufficient or “not helpful at all”. Furthermore, **69.4%** report that they were not taken seriously by authorities, and **53.3%** state that they were not believed.

### Qualitative

The cluster analysis of the free-text responses supports this pattern: **30.1%** of reported negative experiences refer to structural and institutional violence by authorities, while **22.6%** describe experiences of *victim-perpetrator role reversal* and blame-shifting within institutional contexts.

### Systemic Pattern

These findings provide clear indications that the reported experiences are not isolated, but reflect **recurring structural dynamics** within institutional responses. The data suggests that, under certain conditions, institutional interactions are experienced not only as insufficient, but as contributing to the persistence and, in some cases, the **intensification of trauma-related harm**.

In particular, where protection needs are not recognised or are misinterpreted, survivors report that institutional responses can exacerbate existing stress, undermine their credibility, and increase their vulnerability. This dynamic corresponds with established research on *Institutional Betrayal*, which shows that inadequate or inappropriate institutional responses can contribute to the chronicisation of trauma-related harm (cf. Freyd & Smith, 2014).

As a result, institutional systems are, in significant parts, **not experienced as reliable sources of protection**, but as unpredictable and potentially risk-laden environments.

### Implications under the Istanbul Convention (Articles 5 and 18)

These **recurring structural deficiencies** raise serious concerns regarding the implementation of the state's **due diligence obligation under Article 5** of the Istanbul Convention. Where institutional responses **fail to provide adequate protection** or are experienced as counterproductive, this may undermine the effectiveness of these obligations.

Furthermore, the reported experiences indicate an elevated risk of *secondary victimisation*. Article 18 requires that support mechanisms are designed to **prevent re-traumatisation**. Where institutional interactions are experienced as dismissive, invalidating, or retraumatising, this points to **gaps between the Convention's standards and their practical implementation**.

## The Institutional Protection Gap

While 82.2% of survivors actively seek help from the state, a survey of 232 respondents reveals a profound discrepancy between formal legal protection and institutional reality.



**69.4% were not taken seriously.**

Survivors reported an atmosphere of institutional coldness and dismissal when reporting abuse.



**64.1% rated state support as insufficient.**

Nearly two-thirds of survivors found official interventions to be "not helpful at all" or ineffective.



**53.3% reported being not believed.**

Authorities frequently met survivors with skepticism, reproducing the power dynamics of the original abuse.

Figure 4: Structural Patterns Of Institutional Betrayal

### 5.2 The Amplification Effect: Court and Perpetrator Induced Trauma (CPIT) (Articles 5 and 18)

Research on *Institutional Betrayal* demonstrates that institutional responses can significantly affect the trajectory of trauma, particularly where protection is not effectively ensured. The empirical data from this survey provides consistent indications that interactions with state institutions are frequently experienced by survivors not merely as unhelpful, but, under certain conditions, as contributing to the **intensification of trauma-related harm**.

#### Empirical Evidence (Quantitative)

The data indicates a **substantial loss of trust** associated with the support system. **46.0%** of respondents who did not seek state support cited **fear of negative consequences Implications under the Istanbul Convention (Articles 5 and 18)**

These **recurring structural deficiencies** raise serious concerns regarding the implementation of the state's **due diligence obligation under Article 5** of the Istanbul Convention. Where institutional responses **fail to provide adequate protection** or are experienced as counterproductive, this may undermine the effectiveness of these obligations.

Furthermore, the reported experiences indicate an elevated risk of *secondary victimisation*. Article 18 requires that support mechanisms are designed to **prevent re-traumatisation**. Where institutional interactions are experienced as dismissive, invalidating, or retraumatising, this points to **gaps between the Convention's standards and their practical implementation Implications under the Istanbul Convention (Articles 5 and 18)**

These **recurring structural deficiencies** raise serious concerns regarding the implementation of the state's **due diligence obligation under Article 5** of the Istanbul Convention. Where

institutional responses **fail to provide adequate protection** or are experienced as counterproductive, this may undermine the effectiveness of these obligations.

Furthermore, the reported experiences indicate an elevated risk of *secondary victimisation*. Article 18 requires that support mechanisms are designed to **prevent re-traumatisation**. Where institutional interactions are experienced as dismissive, invalidating, or retraumatising, this points to **gaps between the Convention’s standards and their practical implementation** – such as re-traumatisation or intervention by the Youth Welfare Office (*Jugendamt*) – as their primary reason.

### **Systemic Pattern 1: CPIT and the “Trauma Loop”**

*“After a hearing in the family court, my nerves were completely shattered. My parents had to call the emergency doctor because I couldn’t breathe anymore.” (cf. Annex C, Cluster 5: Secondary Traumatization and Emotional Consequences)*

These findings align with recent international research describing similar dynamics as *Court and Perpetrator Induced Trauma (CPIT)* (cf. Dalgarno, 2024). The data provides consistent indications of a recurring structural pattern – conceptualised here as a *“trauma loop”* – in which institutional procedures may be used by perpetrators as part of ongoing *coercive dynamics*.

This dynamic is associated with what can be described as *systemic fear (Systemangst)*, whereby survivors withdraw from formal support systems and increasingly perceive state intervention not as a safeguard, but as a **potential risk to their own safety** and that of their children.

Such patterns are consistent with research on *secondary victimisation* and help-seeking behaviour, which shows that negative institutional responses can lead to **avoidance of formal support systems** and increased vulnerability (cf. Campbell, 2006; Herman, 1992/2015).

### **Systemic Pattern 2: The “Second Trauma” and Systemic Fear**

*“I have almost exclusively experienced violence, discrimination, and re-traumatization through support services. The [institutional] violence was worse than the perpetrators themselves.” (cf. Annex C, Cluster 5: Secondary Traumatization and Emotional Consequences)*

The consequences described by survivors are severe. Interactions with authorities and courts are frequently experienced as a **“second trauma,”** and in some cases as more distressing than the original abusive relationship. This dynamic contributes to a pattern described here as *systemic fear (Systemangst)*, in which survivors withdraw from formal support systems due to the perceived risks associated with institutional intervention.

As a result, state involvement is no longer experienced as protective, but as **unpredictable and potentially harmful**, particularly in situations involving ongoing conflict and custody-related proceedings.

### **Implications under the Istanbul Convention (Articles 5 and 18)**

Where judicial and administrative environments are experienced as retraumatising and contribute to the **avoidance of help-seeking**, this may significantly undermine the effectiveness of the state’s protective mechanisms.

This indicates a **structural risk** that protection systems may fail to reach those most in need, thereby limiting the practical effectiveness of the Convention’s safeguards.

Such dynamics raise serious concerns regarding the implementation of the obligation to prevent *secondary victimisation* **under Article 18**. Furthermore, they point to potential shortcomings in the fulfilment of the state’s **due diligence obligations under Article 5**, as protection systems rely on accessibility and trust in order to function effectively.

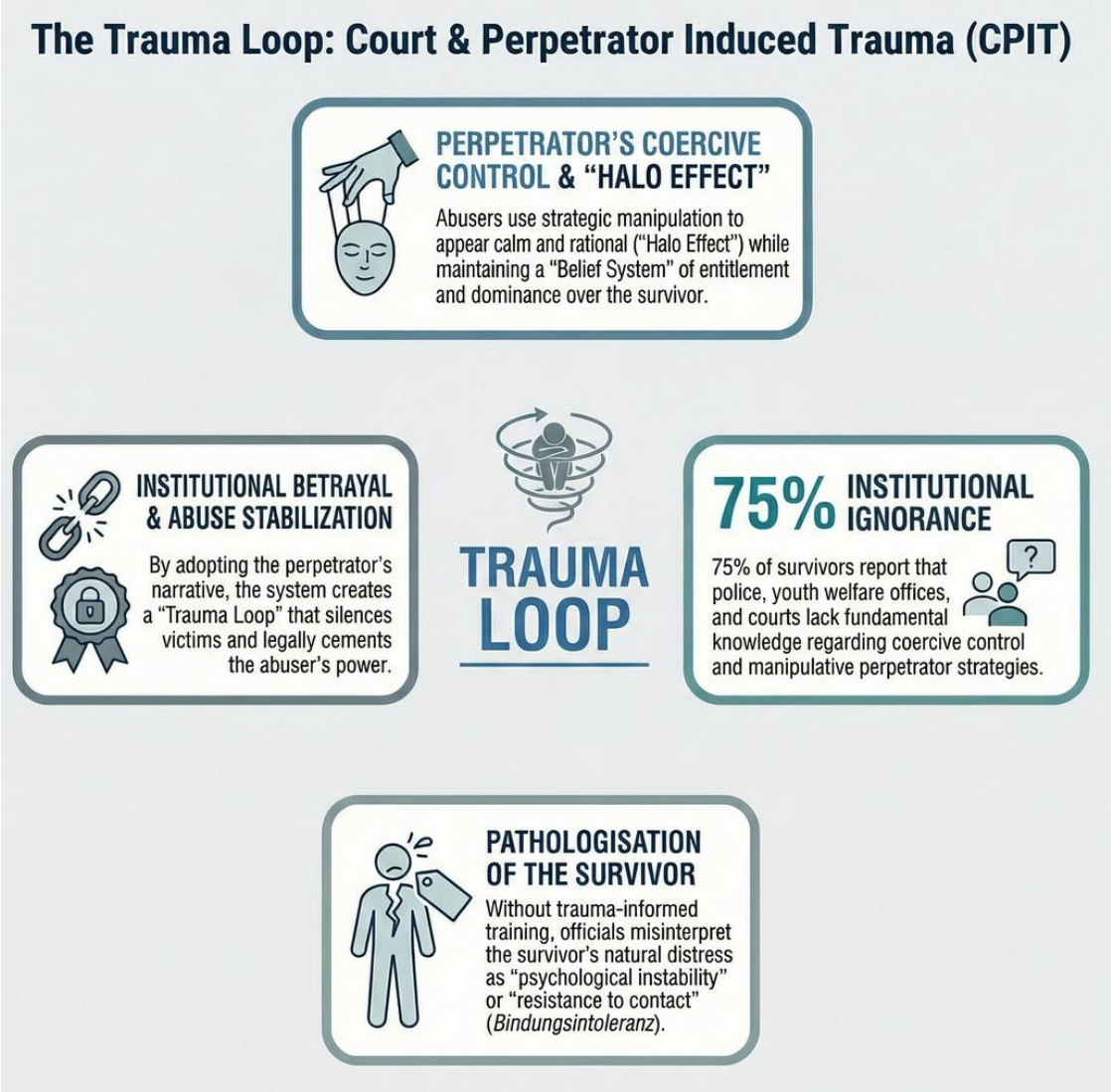


Figure 5: The Trauma Loop: Court And Perpetrator Induced Trauma

**5.3 The Institutional “Echo Chamber” and the Reinforcement of Inter-Agency Dynamics (Articles 5 and 18)**

The structural failure described as *Institutional Betrayal* rarely occurs in isolation within a single agency. The qualitative data provides consistent indications of **reinforcing inter-institutional dynamics**, in which independent protective perspectives are overridden by the repeated adoption of aligned narratives.

## Qualitative Evidence

“The Youth Welfare Office [Jugendamt] did not take me seriously regarding my children needing help. The police did not take me seriously and initially doubted my situation of violence despite photos. Parental counseling pressured me to force my children into supervised visitation. The court is not familiar with psychological violence at all, nor is the Youth Welfare Office [Jugendamt].” (cf. Annex C, Cluster 4: Structural and Institutional Violence by Authorities)

“‘Come back’ when criminal proceedings are underway [...]; ‘it is your responsibility that your child can build trust in the father again’ ([Guardian ad litem]); ‘there are much worse cases than yours’ (Youth Welfare Office [Jugendamt], family counseling, [Guardian ad litem]) – maybe I should have stayed until he injured me so badly that I had to go to the hospital and not ‘just’ have bruises... no one is interested in psychological violence.” (cf. Annex C, Cluster 3: Institutional Coldness and Trivialisation)

### Systemic Pattern: The Institutional Echo Chamber

The testimonies provide consistent indications of an institutional “echo chamber.” This term refers to a dynamic in which assessments and interpretations circulate between institutions and become stabilised over time, **without sufficient independent verification or correction.**

Instead of conducting independent, trauma-informed risk assessments, the involved institutions – such as Youth Welfare Offices, court-appointed experts, guardians ad litem (*Verfahrensbeistände*), and family courts – may **adopt and reinforce assessments from one another.**

Where *coercive control* is initially reframed as a “parental conflict” by one institution, this interpretation can be taken up by other actors, incorporated into expert evaluations, and ultimately **formalised in judicial decisions.**

Such dynamics correspond to mechanisms of institutional reinforcement described in research on *Institutional Betrayal*, where organisations may **reproduce dominant narratives while disregarding conflicting perspectives** (cf. Freyd, 2014; Gómez et al., 2016).

Legal analyses further support this interpretation. Studies by Wolfgang Hammer (2022, 2024) describe structural constellations in which institutional assessments become stabilised through processes of “*alliance formation*” between actors, as well as the emergence of quasi-independent “*subsystems*” within family court proceedings. These analyses highlight the risk that assumptions and evaluations are transferred between institutions **without sufficient independent scrutiny.**

Taken together, these dynamics can create a **self-reinforcing institutional loop** in which initial misinterpretations are stabilised across agencies. As a result, survivors describe encountering systems in which access to corrective perspectives is limited and effective protection is **not reliably ensured** in situations of ongoing abuse.

### Implications under the Istanbul Convention (Articles 5 and 18)

The absence of independent, multi-perspective control mechanisms within judicial and administrative processes may limit the effective identification and assessment of violence.

Where institutional actors reinforce existing interpretations without independent evaluation, this raises concerns regarding the implementation of the state's **due diligence obligation under Article 5**.

Such self-reinforcing institutional dynamics may contribute to the consolidation of perpetrator advantage and are experienced by survivors as contributing to severe *secondary victimisation*, in tension with the requirements of **Article 18** of the Istanbul Convention.

#### **5.4 The Institutionalised Competence Gap: Lack of Qualification as a Structural Risk Factor (Articles 5, 15 and 31)**

The dynamics of institutional self-reinforcement described in Chapter 5.3 are closely linked to an additional structural factor reflected in the empirical data: a perceived lack of specialised expertise among institutional actors in dealing with complex forms of violence.

The survey results indicate that **75.0%** of respondents perceive a **lack of adequate professional competence** within the institutions involved. This assessment is supported by legal and academic analyses, which identify **structural inconsistencies in qualification standards** across family court proceedings.

Academic and legal analyses highlight significant variations in training requirements and professional qualifications among key actors within the system (cf. Hammer, 2022; 2024). In particular, the following structural aspects are identified:

- **Court-appointed experts (Sachverständige):** According to these analyses, there are **no consistently binding minimum standards** regarding trauma-related or psychological expertise required for the preparation of expert reports in family court proceedings.
- **Guardians ad litem (Verfahrensbeistände):** Qualification pathways for this central role vary considerably, and consistent, standardised professional requirements are largely absent.
- **Judicial practice:** Structural challenges are also identified with regard to the preparation of judges for handling highly complex cases involving domestic violence and child protection.

The empirical data suggests that these structural conditions may directly affect the quality of risk assessments in cases involving violence. Where decisions in highly sensitive contexts are made without consistent and specialised professional standards, the **risk of misinterpretation and insufficient protection** increases.

In combination with the institutional “*echo chamber*” dynamics described above, such competence gaps may contribute to the stabilisation of initial assessments, which are insufficiently questioned as proceedings progress.

#### **Implications under the Istanbul Convention (Articles 5, 15 and 31)**

Article 15 of the Istanbul Convention requires States Parties to ensure **appropriate and systematic training** of all relevant professionals involved in the protection of victims.

Where, as indicated by both empirical data and academic analyses, significant inconsistencies in qualifications and expertise exist, this may affect the effective implementation of this obligation. This issue is also closely linked to the State’s **due diligence obligation under Article 5**, as well as to the requirements of Article 31, which mandate that the safety of victims and children must be a **primary consideration** in custody and visitation decisions. In the absence of consistent, trauma-informed expertise, there is a risk that these obligations **cannot be fully realised in practice**.

Taken together, the findings presented in Chapters 4 and 5 reveal a **consistent structural pattern**: gaps in expertise, combined with self-reinforcing institutional dynamics, contribute to conditions in which the recognition of violence is impaired and **protective responses are not reliably ensured**.

These dynamics do not operate in isolation. They interact and reinforce one another, creating systemic conditions in which misinterpretations can persist, risk assessments may be compromised, and **access to effective protection is limited**.

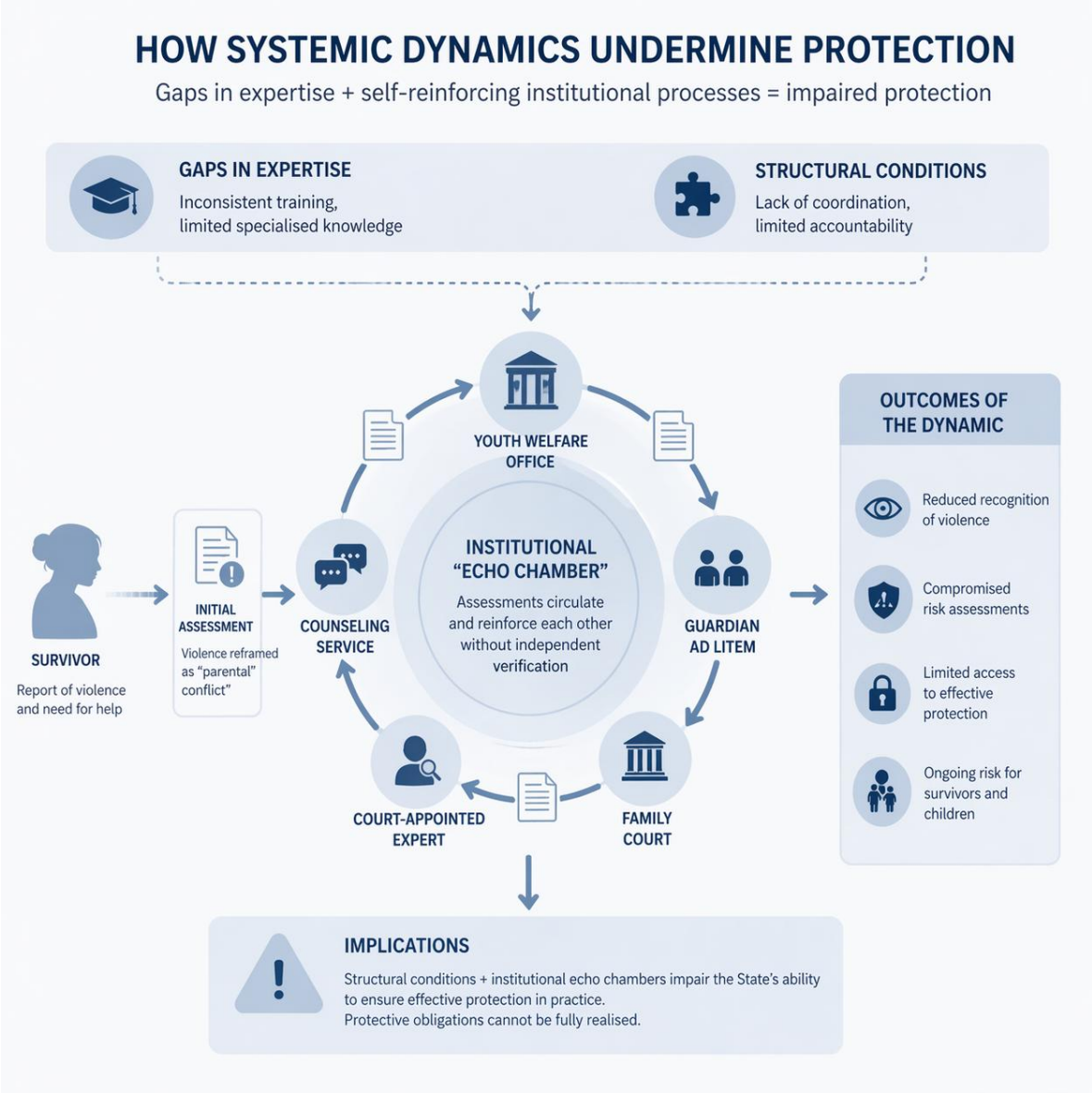


Figure 6: How systemic dynamics undermine protection

This has direct implications for the implementation of the Istanbul Convention. Where institutional responses are shaped by structural limitations in expertise, coordination, and accountability, the **practical realisation of the Convention’s protective obligations is at risk**.

The following chapter outlines key areas for **structural reform** aimed at addressing these systemic challenges and strengthening the effectiveness of protection mechanisms in practice.

## 6. Civil Society Lifelines and the Blockade of Peer Support

Following the analysis of recurring structural challenges (Chapters 4 and 5) and the resulting *systemic fear* reported by survivors, the empirical findings point to a central question: where **effective protection and emotional stabilisation** are currently accessible to survivors in Germany.

The data provides clear indications that the psychosocial “safety net” perceived as effective is **predominantly provided by private networks, self-help groups, and specialised civil society organisations**, rather than by state institutions.

In this context, civil society support structures – particularly *peer-based* forms of support – emerge not as complementary elements, but as **central components of practical protection and stabilisation**.

### 6.1 The Statistical Discrepancy: State Provision vs. Peer Effectiveness

The evaluation of the perceived effectiveness of support services reveals a **substantial and systematic discrepancy** within the German support landscape.

#### Quantitative Evidence

- Only **12.0%** of respondents perceived state support services (e.g., police, courts, youth welfare offices) as helpful overall.
- In contrast, **55.8%** of survivors rated private and civil society support as significantly more effective.
- *Peer support* (support provided by individuals with *lived experience*) is rated as particularly effective: nearly **95%** of those who utilised peer-based services described them as highly meaningful and helpful.

#### Systemic Pattern

These findings provide clear empirical indications that civil society and peer-based support structures are not perceived merely as supplementary components of the support system. For a majority of survivors, they represent the **primary – and in many cases the only – reliably accessible source** of crisis stabilisation, orientation, and support.

This discrepancy points to a **structural imbalance** within the protection system, in which highly effective forms of support are located predominantly outside formal state provision.

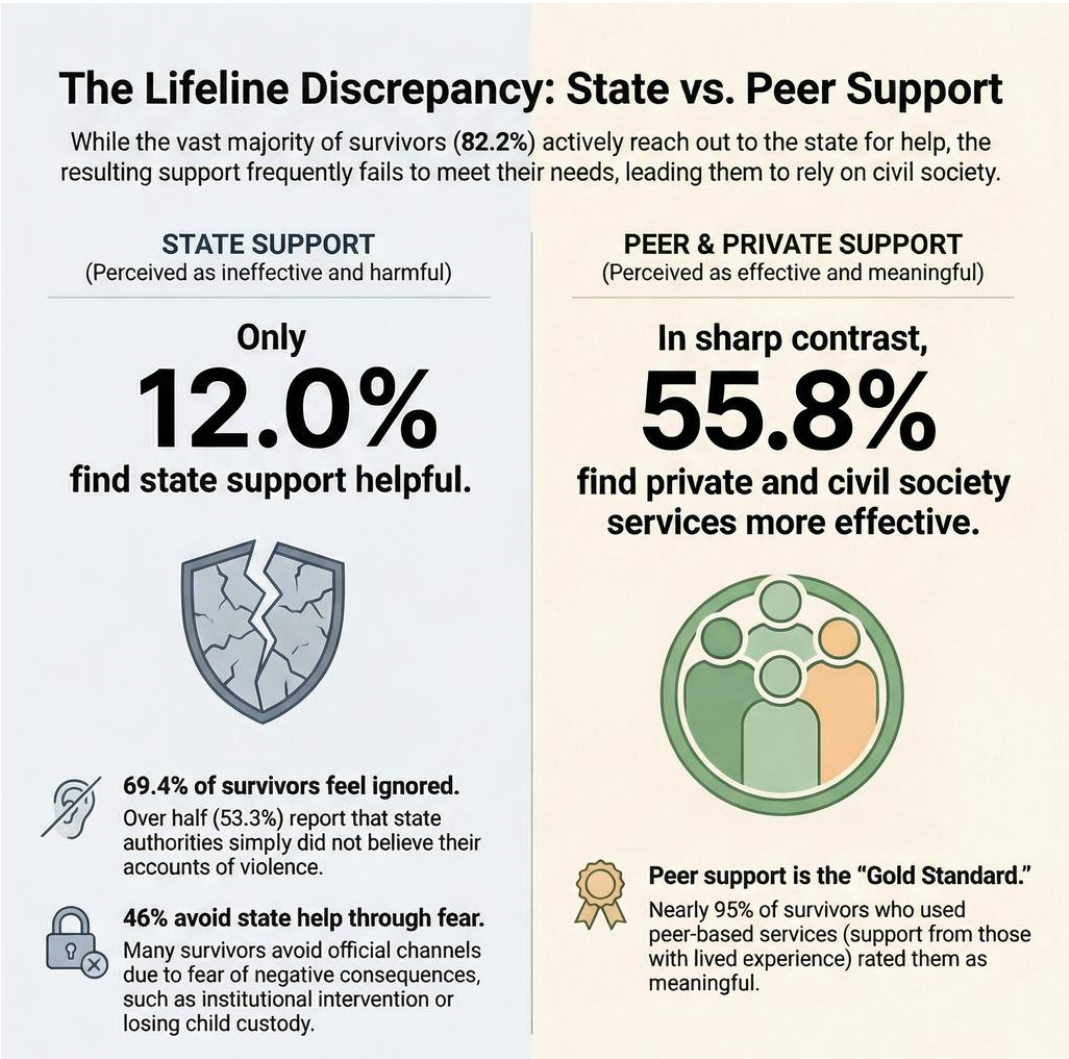


Figure 7: The Lifeline Discrepancy: State vs. Peer

**6.2 The "Gold Standard" of Lived Experience (Article 18)**

The data indicates a **clear discrepancy** between the perceived effectiveness of state services and *peer-based support*. While institutional responses are associated with low levels of perceived effectiveness and acceptance among respondents, *peer support* is evaluated overwhelmingly positively. This difference is consistently linked to specific psychological and relational mechanisms that are perceived as insufficiently present within current institutional frameworks.

**Systemic Pattern: Validation instead of Pathologisation**

The effectiveness of *peer support* is closely linked to the unique qualitative resource of shared *lived experience*. While survivors frequently report experiences of *pathologisation*, disbelief, and

administrative reduction within state institutions, peer-based settings are described as providing **immediate recognition, credibility, and emotional validation**.

Survivors further report that *peer-based support* reduces the need for repeated justification of their experiences. Because peers are often able to recognise manipulative perpetrator strategies – such as *coercive control* or *gaslighting* – based on *lived experience*, recurring patterns of institutional misinterpretation, including *victim–perpetrator role reversal*, are less likely to occur.

This enables a **direct validation of survivors’ perceptions**, which trauma research identifies as a central prerequisite for stabilisation (cf. Herman, 1992/2015). These findings are consistent with research emphasising the importance of safety, recognition, and relational validation in recovery from interpersonal trauma.

Research on *peer support* further supports this interpretation, highlighting that shared *lived experience* can enhance trust, reduce stigma, and promote emotional stabilisation through mutual understanding and relational safety (cf. Solomon, 2004; Mead et al., 2001).

Furthermore, *peer support* operates on an equal footing, which is described as counteracting the disempowerment frequently experienced in institutional contexts. Such relational dynamics are closely associated with processes of *co-regulation*, which are considered central to the restoration of psychological safety following trauma (cf. Porges, 2011).

### Qualitative Evidence

“In the self-help group, I was understood immediately. One does not have to constantly justify oneself. I could feel empathy and was taken seriously. It helps in trying to forgive oneself and no longer looking for the fault in oneself.” (cf. Annex C, Cluster 7: Self-Help and Peer Support)

### Implications under the Istanbul Convention (Article 18)

The strong reliance on *peer support* highlights a **structural gap in state provision** as perceived by survivors. Where institutional responses do not provide trauma-sensitive validation and recognition, many survivors turn to alternative support structures to access safety and stabilisation.

This dynamic indicates that **essential functions of victim support** – particularly those related to validation, empowerment, and the prevention of *secondary victimisation* as required under Article 18 – are, in practice, often fulfilled by civil society and peer-based actors rather than by the state system.

## 6.3 The Exploitation of Survivor Expertise and Institutional Blockade (Article 9)

Despite the documented effectiveness of *peer-based support*, the empirical data reveals a **profound structural paradox** within the German support system. While essential functions of psychosocial stabilisation are, in practice, largely carried out by civil society and survivor-led initiatives, these structures remain **structurally underfunded, insufficiently integrated**, and, in numerous cases, are reported to face **active institutional barriers**.

## Empirical Evidence

**Quantitative:** The survey indicates that survivors attempting to establish support services encounter institutional barriers more often than support. **16.8%** report being hindered by state institutions, compared to only **8.4%** who report receiving support. In total, nearly **30%** of respondents state that they experienced active obstruction during the implementation of their initiatives.

### Qualitative

*“We are filling the gaps the state leaves behind, yet we have to fight for every cent while being treated as ‘amateurs’ despite our expertise.” (cf. Annex C, Cluster 8: Blockade of Civil Society Work and Missing Funding)*

### Systemic Pattern: Structural Marginalisation and Devaluation of Survivor Expertise

The data provides consistent indications that survivor-led initiatives are not systematically recognised as integral components of the protection system, despite their demonstrated effectiveness. Instead, accounts indicate recurring patterns of **institutional marginalisation**, including administrative barriers, lack of funding, and limited formal recognition.

This dynamic reflects a broader structural discrepancy between the practical reliance on civil society support and its institutional positioning. While survivors describe *peer-based structures* as essential for stabilisation and recovery (see section 6.2), these initiatives frequently operate under conditions of **structural insecurity**.

Research on victim support systems highlights the importance of sustainable funding, institutional integration, and recognition of specialised expertise in ensuring effective protection and recovery (cf. Council of Europe, 2011; Kelly & Westmarland, 2015). The absence of such structural support may significantly limit the long-term sustainability and accessibility of these services.

## 7. Conclusions and Recommendations

The empirical data from 232 survivors provides clear and consistent indications of a **substantial discrepancy** between the formal obligations of the Istanbul Convention and the institutional reality in Germany.

Across multiple domains, institutional responses are described by survivors not as reliably protective, but as contexts in which processes of *secondary victimisation* occur and, under certain conditions, risks may be intensified. These findings indicate that, in practice, existing protection mechanisms do **not reliably ensure safety** for individuals affected by domestic violence.

Taken together, the findings presented in this report point to **systemic challenges** in the implementation of the Convention’s core obligations. In particular, gaps in recognition of complex forms of violence, inconsistencies in professional expertise, and limitations in coordination and accountability contribute to structural conditions in which effective protection is not consistently achieved.

To support the effective fulfilment of the state's *due diligence obligation* (**Article 5**) and to strengthen the prevention of *secondary victimisation* (**Article 18**), as well as to address identified gaps in training, victim protection, and institutional cooperation, the following **structural reforms** are recommended:

### 7.1 Mandatory Specialised Qualification and Trauma-Informed Expertise (Article 15)

**Empirical Basis:** The data provides clear indications that a substantial proportion of survivors perceive a lack of specialised expertise among professionals regarding *coercive control* and manipulative perpetrator strategies. **75%** of respondents identify this deficit as a **significant safety risk**, particularly in relation to misinterpretations and perceived *victim–perpetrator role reversals*.

#### Recommendations

- **Mandatory Training:** The State Party should ensure the implementation of **compulsory, continuous, and standardised trauma-informed training** for all relevant professionals, including judges, youth welfare officers, and law enforcement personnel. This training should explicitly cover psychological violence, *coercive control*, perpetrator strategies, and trauma-related responses.
- **Binding Accreditation Standards: Binding qualification and certification standards** should be established for family court experts (*Gutachter*) and guardians ad litem (*Verfahrensbeistände*). In cases involving indicators of violence, only professionals with demonstrable specialised and trauma-informed expertise should be assigned to assess or evaluate custody and visitation arrangements.
- **Integration of Lived Experience:** The **systematic integration of qualified peer experts** into the training and professional development of state actors should be ensured. Lived experience provides essential practical insight into *coercive control*, *gaslighting*, *manipulative perpetrator strategies*, and the institutional dynamics through which violence may be misinterpreted or minimised. This perspective should form a mandatory component of relevant training programmes.

### 7.2 Family Court Reform and the Prioritisation of Safety (Article 31)

**Empirical Basis:** The data provides clear indications that family court proceedings are frequently experienced by survivors as **high-risk contexts**. Survivors report adverse consequences when attempting to protect their children, particularly in relation to interpretations associated with “*resistance to contact*” (*Bindungsintoleranz*) and related concepts.

#### Recommendations

- **Prioritisation of Safety:** The State Party should ensure that the **safety of the victimised parent and children is consistently and demonstrably prioritised** in all custody and visitation decisions. Practices that place significant weight on maintaining contact in the

presence of reported safety concerns should be subject to systematic review and reform.

- **Mandatory Risk and Lethality Assessments:** Judicial procedures should require the **systematic use of structured, evidence-based risk and lethality assessments** prior to ordering, maintaining, or expanding contact arrangements in cases involving allegations or indicators of domestic or psychological violence.
- **Recognition of Coercive Control:** Legal and judicial frameworks should ensure the explicit recognition of psychological violence and *coercive control* as **serious forms of child welfare endangerment**. Clear procedural safeguards should be established to **prevent the misclassification** of such cases as mutual “*high-conflict*” (*Hochstrittigkeit*) situations

### 7.3 Sustainable Funding and Integration of Peer Structures (Article 9)

**Empirical Basis:** The data provides clear indications that *peer-based support* is perceived as highly effective, with approval rates reaching approximately **95%**. At the same time, **16.8%** of survivor-led initiatives report experiencing administrative barriers in their efforts to establish or maintain support structures.

#### Recommendations

- **Structural Financing:** The State Party should ensure **sustainable, long-term, and accessible funding mechanisms** for specialised civil society organisations and peer-support networks. The current reliance on unpaid or self-funded contributions by survivors to provide essential psychosocial support services indicates a **structural imbalance** that requires correction in order to ensure sustainability, accessibility, and continuity of support.
- **Binding Cooperation Standards:** **Clear and binding cooperation frameworks** should be established to support effective collaboration between state institutions and civil society actors. These frameworks should include mechanisms to **prevent and address administrative barriers** reported by survivor-led initiatives, including practices of delegitimisation, exclusion, or obstruction at municipal and state levels.
- **Recognition of Peer Expertise:** *Peer-based support* and *survivor expertise* should be **formally recognised as integral components** of the protection system. This includes their structured integration into service provision, training, and support pathways, in line with the obligations under **Article 9** of the Istanbul Convention.

### 7.4 Independent Monitoring and Ombudsman Offices (Articles 5 and 18)

**Empirical Basis:** The data provides clear indications that existing complaint mechanisms are frequently described as **insufficiently effective** by survivors and civil society actors. Reported experiences suggest that concerns regarding institutional conduct are not consistently subject to comprehensive, transparent, and reviewable procedures.

For example, according to the organisation T.o.B.e. e. V., perceived structural barriers were dismissed as “disagreements” without formal hearings of the complainant or relevant witnesses. Such accounts raise concerns regarding the **transparency, effectiveness, and procedural robustness** of existing complaint and review mechanisms.

### Recommendations

- **Independent Ombudsman Offices:** The State Party should establish **independent oversight bodies** at federal and state levels with a clearly defined mandate to review reports of institutional conduct in family courts, youth welfare offices, and related actors. These bodies should operate transparently and structurally independently from the institutions under review.
- **Multi-Perspective Review:** Ombudsman structures should incorporate **multi-disciplinary expertise**, including the involvement of qualified peer experts. Their experiential knowledge can provide critical insights into *coercive control, gaslighting, and complex victim–perpetrator dynamics* that may not be fully recognised within purely administrative or legal frameworks.
- **Review Authority in High-Risk Cases:** Ombudsman offices should be equipped with clearly defined authority to initiate independent review procedures in cases where institutional decisions – such as enforced contact arrangements – may pose a **significant risk to the safety** of survivors and children.

### 7.5 Establishment of Integrated “One-Stop Shops” (Article 18)

**Empirical Basis:** The data provides clear indications that the current support system is **structurally fragmented**. Survivors describe navigating institutional processes as burdensome and exhausting, frequently referring to a “**bureaucratic marathon**”.

Empirical findings show that **58.3%** of respondents experienced being referred between multiple agencies without receiving effective support. In response to this fragmentation, **32.8%** of respondents explicitly identify the need for **centralised and coordinated access points** for support services.

### Recommendations

- **Centralised Support Structures:** The State Party should establish and adequately fund **integrated “One-Stop Shop” support centres** that provide coordinated access to legal, psychological, housing, and financial assistance. Such structures are essential to reduce fragmentation and ensure **timely, accessible, and continuous support**, particularly in crisis situations.
- **Integration of Peer Expertise:** Qualified peer experts should be structurally integrated into these centres. Survivors benefit from continuous trauma-sensitive support, recognition, and validation, particularly when provided by individuals with *lived experience*, from the initial point of contact onwards.

- **Holistic Case Management:** Support pathways should be **actively coordinated** across services through structured case management. Survivors should not be required to repeatedly recount traumatic experiences to multiple institutions, as this practice increases the risk of *secondary victimisation* and contributes to experiences of *institutional coldness* and disengagement from support systems.

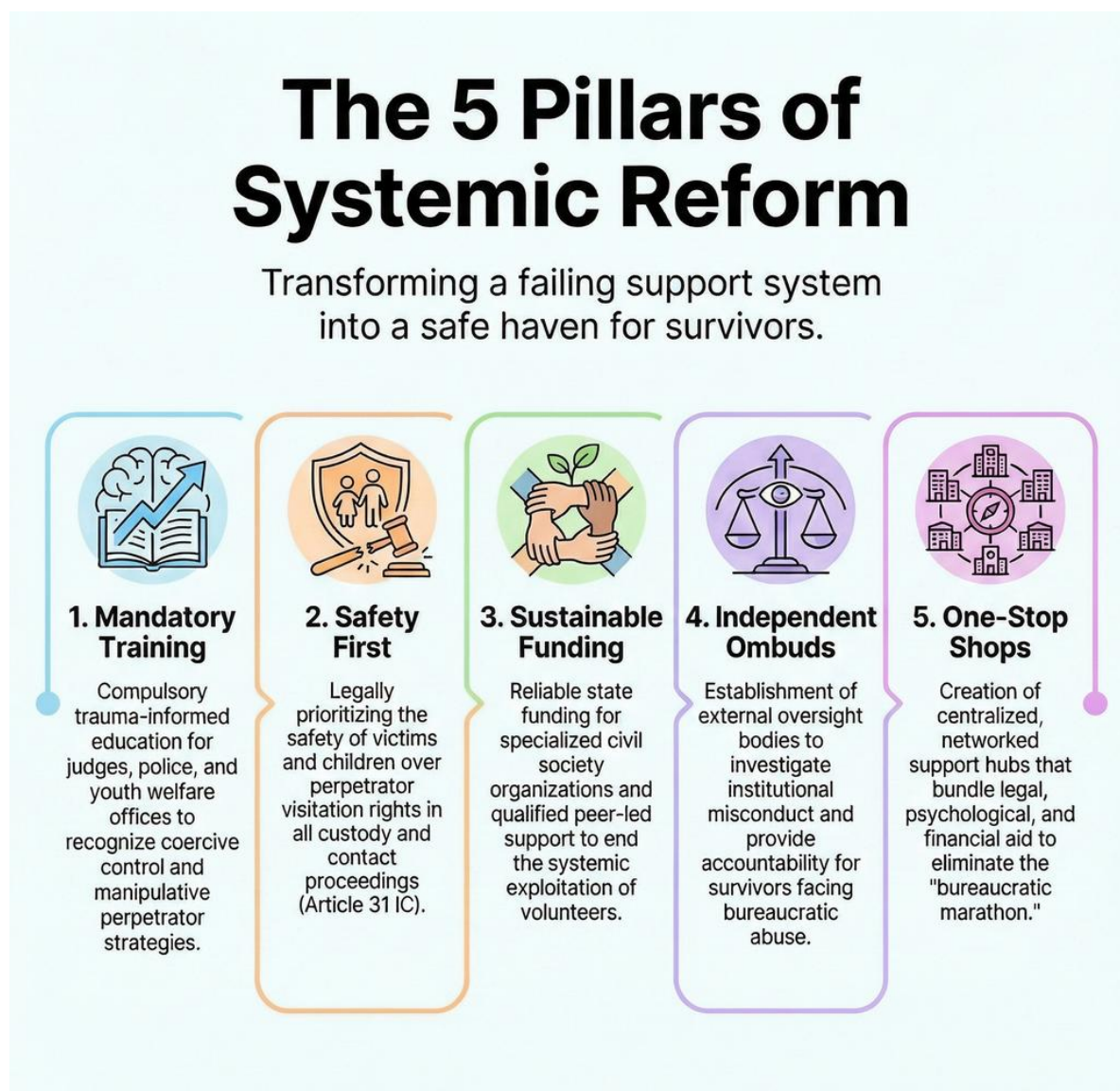


Figure 8: The Five Pillars Of Systemic Reform

## 8. Concluding Remarks: Between Commitment and Lived Reality

The findings of this report demonstrate a **persistent gap** between the obligations set out in the Istanbul Convention and the lived realities of survivors in Germany. The data indicates that protection mechanisms are not implemented reliably in practice and do not consistently ensure the **safety of those affected**.

A central finding of the analysis concerns the assessment of credibility. Survivors often seek support at a point of heightened vulnerability, particularly in the context of *post-separation violence*, which is associated with increased risks of escalation. At precisely this stage, when protection is most urgently needed, the data shows that reports of violence are **frequently not recognised** or adequately taken into account, significantly undermining the **effectiveness of protection measures**.

The findings further indicate that institutional processes can be **instrumentalised by perpetrators** to maintain or intensify existing dynamics of control and abuse. Where risks are not adequately identified or prioritised, survivors and their children remain in **situations of ongoing danger**, including within the context of family law proceedings.

At the same time, a consistent and significant pattern emerges: survivors describe civil society and, in particular, *peer-based* support structures as **substantially more effective** in providing recognition, safety, and stabilisation. This discrepancy highlights that key elements of effective protection are **not yet sufficiently reflected** within formal support systems.

Taken together, the findings point to two interrelated challenges: the **inconsistent implementation** of state protection measures and the **insufficient structural integration** of existing effective support mechanisms. Under these conditions, the effective implementation of the Convention's protective framework is **significantly compromised** in practice.

The Istanbul Convention establishes a **binding human rights obligation**. Its effectiveness depends not only on formal compliance, but on its **consistent and reliable implementation** in practice.

The findings of this report point to a critical reality: where protection systems do not respond effectively, survivors remain exposed to ongoing harm despite seeking help. In such contexts, institutional responses not only fall short of providing protection, but can contribute to the **continuation or escalation of violence**.

This includes situations in which patterns of *coercive control* are not recognised, where credibility assessments are influenced by surface-level impressions, and where protective actions by survivors are misinterpreted or reframed. In recurring cases, survivors describe institutional processes in which assessments are repeatedly adopted and reinforced across different actors, resulting in **self-reinforcing structures** that limit correction and reduce the **visibility of risk**.

The Convention is not merely a political commitment or a formal framework; it establishes binding human rights obligations, including the State's due diligence responsibilities and the requirement to **ensure effective protection in practice**. As long as survivors and their children remain in situations where protection is not effectively ensured, as long as institutional processes contribute to **increased burden and risk**, and as long as key forms of effective support are **not systematically integrated** into the protection system, the full realisation of these obligations remains **unmet in practice**.

This report is intended as a contribution to ensuring that protection for survivors does not remain a **formal commitment on paper**, but becomes a **lived reality** – and that those who have

experienced violence are no longer required to struggle for the **rights guaranteed to them under the Istanbul Convention** and whose implementation Germany has committed to.

## Epilogue: The Last Word Belongs to a Survivor

**"We want to be part of the change."**

*"I wish for change to begin. Change in how survivors of violence are treated, and change within a system that has thus far failed us. I wish for institutional violence to end. I wish for a system that acts instead of leaving us alone. A court that protects and is just: trauma-sensitive, empathetic, and child-centred, rather than defined by victim-perpetrator role reversals and manipulation.*

*I did not initially want to speak out on current public debates. But when I see politicians and performative activists showing up at highly publicised events on days like November 25th or March 8th—perfectly styled, a glass of champagne in hand, smiling for the cameras—it leaves me stunned. Often, it feels like nothing more than a photo opportunity. Afterwards, they simply go on vacation, having long forgotten what they just stood in front of the camera for. For us survivors, this kind of engagement does absolutely nothing to address our fundamental realities.*

*Nor does it help us when debates are instrumentalised to distract from the true causes of violence by stoking racist narratives. Violence against women is not a problem that can simply be blamed on origin or religion. The real problem is that men—completely regardless of their origin, skin colour, or background—hold toxic notions of partnership. A woman is not property to be controlled and commanded. This is about the abuse of power, control, and patriarchy.*

*The fact is: Here in Germany, women are being systematically broken and destroyed, while our children are robbed of their childhood because a system completely fails and offers no protection. We are emotionally, psychologically, physically, and economically abused—and even after separation, we are stalked and further terrorised.*

*When we survivors raise our voices, we are not merely ignored due to institutional misconduct—we are actively endangered and massively harmed by this systemic failure. Our efforts in the peaceful fight for our children's childhood and our own protection are repeatedly trampled into the ground.*

*But we finally want change. **We want to be part of the change.***

*We need reforms in custody and visitation law, mandatory continuous training for legal professionals and youth welfare officers, preventive perpetrator programs, and more safe spaces.*

*And I have one very specific wish: **The expansion of Survivor Councils (Betroffenenräte).** We need a seat at the table—not only at the federal level, but also at the state and municipal levels. We need the opportunity to engage in productive dialogue and learn from one another within a protected framework. We must work together to develop systemic changes and new concepts for the treatment of violence survivors and their children."*

## 9. References and Academic Framework

The structural analysis of the empirical data in this report is informed by established international research on trauma, domestic violence, and institutional responses.

### 1. Academic Literature

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## 2. Media and Public Discourse

- **taz.de (2025).** *Juristin über Macht am Familiengericht: „Frauen trauen sich nicht, über Gewalt zu berichten“.* → Referenced as an illustrative example of public discourse and reported systemic challenges in family court practice in Germany.
- **taz.de (2025).** *Streit um das Sorgerecht: „Im Zweifel für den Vater“.* → Referenced as an illustrative example of public discourse and reported systemic challenges in family court practice in Germany.

# Annex

**Confidential – for GREVIO eyes only**

## Institutional Betrayal and Secondary Victimization: Empirical Findings on Structural Gaps in the German Support System

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An Independent Expert Assessment of the Istanbul Convention based on the Lived Realities of Survivors of Domestic Violence

### **Confidentiality Notice and Access to Qualitative Data:**

For reasons of strict victim protection, compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), and based on the specific consent provided by the participants, access to the qualitative raw data and open-text responses is strictly limited. The testimonies documented in this Annex are made available exclusively to the experts of GREVIO as empirical evidence. This section is explicitly not intended for public dissemination and must not be shared with third parties, governmental authorities, or the Government of the Federal Republic of Germany. Access by third parties is entirely excluded in order to protect those affected from potential reprisals or secondary victimization.