



DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN ROMANIA IN THE PERIOD 2019-2020

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Abstract: *Domestic violence is a harmful social phenomenon, present in all contemporary societies, affecting people regardless of social class or nationality. The first part of the study aims to analyse the evolution of the phenomenon of domestic violence during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic. The second part deals with the theoretical background necessary to understand this social problem. By means of secondary data analysis and correlation with the scientific literature, we carry out, in the third part, an analysis of the situation of domestic violence in Romania in the period 2019-2020. The data is provided by the National Agency for Equal Opportunities, which in turn takes them from the General Directorate for Social Assistance and Child Protection by means of standardized forms that the Monitoring Directorates fill in following the centralization of the institution's work. As for the limitations of the present research, they result from the underreporting of domestic violence cases in the context of the restrictions associated with the pandemic period, which contributes to the reduction of available information and creates difficulties in assessing the social picture behind the studied phenomenon. Unfortunately, the data cannot be considered nationally representative in the context of under-reporting, compounded by the lack of methodologically sound ways of registering domestic violence cases. Even though numerically the data includes enough cases to be able to perform an extensive trend analysis from 2019-2020, there is a risk that certain social categories, especially privileged ones, are not represented comparably in the reports made available by social welfare institutions.*

Keywords: *domestic violence, victim, perpetrator, COVID-19 pandemic.*

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1. Introduction and context

In order to contextualize the evolution of the phenomenon of domestic violence in our country, we recall that one in four women in Romania claimed in 2014 to have been physically or sexually assaulted by one of the partners they had or were in a relationship with at the time of their participation in the survey (United Nations, 2015). In the same year, 6% of the respondents stated that they had been victims of domestic violence in the last 12 months. The problems caused by this phenomenon not only affect the victim, but also children, who become more prone to antisocial behaviour and juvenile delinquency after witnessing domestic violence (Müller-Fabian, 2018). Tolerating this social problem leads to discouraging victims from seeking support and to the intensification of domestic violence throughout society (Garcia, 2004).

Next, starting from the theoretical analysis, we will explain the fundamental theories through which the phenomenon of domestic violence can be understood. Our starting premise is that domestic violence is a social problem that affects society regardless of class, religion or ethnicity (Ray, 2011).

Although underreporting of domestic violence is inevitable, especially during the pandemic period when people were forced to stay indoors, we consider it relevant the pattern change of domestic violence and risk factors before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this article we track data on forms of domestic violence and their prevalence by socio-demographic categories. Statistics provided by the National Agency for Equal Opportunities for Women and Men (ANES) show a significant change in the manifestation of violence between 2019-2020.

The main limitation of the study is that the reporting of domestic violence cases was affected by the pandemic context and its associated restrictions. The number of people who turned to social welfare institutions such as the General Directorates of Social Welfare (DGASPC), Social Welfare Directorates (DAS) or the Public Social Welfare Service (SPAS) was lower in 2020 than in 2019. However, the trends in the typologies of situations encountered by social assistance representatives have undergone notable changes, from which we believe we can extract valuable information about the social picture of the social categories studied.

Another limitation lies in the fact that public institutions in Romania provide profoundly different data on the magnitude of the phenomenon of domestic violence. This limitation is not only evident from the number of cases identified, but especially from the socio-demographic categories covered in the reports of public institutions. Explanations for the differences in the reporting of cases are more related to the victims' interactions with the various public institutions involved. For example, the number of those who call the 112 emergency service is higher than the number who seek help from social assistance, which in turn is higher than the number of victims who take legal action against the perpetrator. ANES data from 2019-2020 suggests a 20% decrease in the number of domestic violence cases, while data provided by the IGPR claims a 3% increase in the same period (Ilie, 2022b). Significant progress could be made in the reporting of domestic violence cases from health institutions. Unfortunately, at the moment, financial constraints, and the overload of existing staff

with various activities lead to difficulties in implementing a unified and standardised digitised system for reporting domestic violence cases that come under the care of public health institutions.

In our opinion, the current legislative framework creates limitations for victims in reporting situations of abuse that go beyond physical violence. A major difficulty is also the reduced ability of victims to report psychological or social violence and the difficulty of proving such acts, which can make victims feel discouraged for practical reasons from seeking help from the authorities.

2. The influence of the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic on the phenomenon of domestic violence

Our research hypothesis is that periods of social instability or socio-economic crises, facilitate the aggravation of social problems such as domestic violence (Molyneaux, 2019) (Graham-Harrison, 2020). The evolution of the phenomenon of domestic violence in the European Union can be characterised as positive in the period before the COVID-19 pandemic. In Western European countries, during the 2000s, a quarter of women were victims of domestic violence at some point in their lives (Council of Europe, 2002). On the other hand, by 2022, a United Nations statistic suggests that the proportion of domestic violence victims will fall to one in five women in the European Union (European Parliament, 2020). Although at European Union (EU) level, the problem of domestic violence followed a decreasing trajectory until 2020, unfortunately, the pandemic period led to a change in the dynamics of this phenomenon (Wijk, 2021).

France, like other EU countries, experienced an increase in the number of reported cases during the lockdown period (March and April 2020). The increase was 32% in a single week compared to the same week of the previous year. Lithuania is another example of this trend. During three weeks of lockdown in April, the number of cases increased by 20% compared to the same period during 2019 (EIGE, 2023).

We believe that a relevant issue is the under-reporting of domestic violence cases. This social problem should be seen as an iceberg, the tip of which is the only visible part of the whole. Internationally, the pandemic period has led to changing trends in the reporting of domestic violence cases. In countries such as Germany, France and Lithuania, the number of known cases increased in 2020, but there are also examples of countries where reporting has decreased, such as Portugal and Romania (EIGE, 2023). In our opinion, differences in trends are natural if we consider variables such as trust in authorities, fear of infection with COVID-19 following interaction with public institutions, addressability of social welfare services and access of victims to social welfare services.

In Romania, underreporting of domestic violence varies in terms of information provided by different institutions. The number of beneficiaries of social services addressed to combat domestic violence represents a small segment compared to the number of calls to the 112 emergency services, which in turn includes only a part of the cases (Ilie, 2022a).

The main reason why the number of calls to 112 overwhelmingly exceeds the number of cases reported to health or social welfare institutions is that the police is the first, and in many cases, the only public institution with which the victim interacts in the event of domestic violence. A 2018 study conducted for ANES confirms that the police is the first public institution that victims interact with in case of abuse. Thus, 93% of respondents consider the police as the first institution that should intervene in the resolution of a case of domestic violence (CCSAS, 2018).

In conclusion, even if there is enough data on domestic violence in the European Union to be able to make an exhaustive analysis of the phenomenon, in Romania we are facing structural and social limitations, both for reasons of institutional architecture and because of a relatively small number of people who turn to public services following a situation of domestic violence. Understanding the real magnitude of domestic violence in Romania is limited in the absence of a dedicated, nationally representative study conducted over the last three years (2020-2023).

3. The main defining features of domestic violence

Domestic violence is an all-encompassing term that includes a series of deviant, aggressive, violent behaviours aimed at causing harm to the victim and conferring power and superior status to the aggressor (Bonea, 2015; Bonea, Buligescu and Mihaiu, 2022; Stanciu, Ștefănescu, Mihăilescu, 2022). More specifically, domestic violence means any form of abusive or aggressive behaviour that takes place in a family, domestic setting and that involves the exercise of power and control by a family member or intimate partner over the other member, through the use of physical violence, or through emotional, sexual, social or economic abuse. The term 'domestic' refers to the occurrence of violent episodes, referring to a restricted, confidential, isolated setting, away from outside influences, but not necessarily restricting the occurrence of abuse or its consequences (Bonea, 2020; Hogaș, 2010; Rennison and Welchans, 2000). Given that most victims are female (Carmo et al., 2011; Rennison and Welchans, 2000; Wisner et al., 1999), domestic violence can also be viewed from the perspective of gender and gender roles (Muehlenhard and Kimes, 1999).

Domestic violence can manifest itself in many forms, and one of the most common is *physical violence*, which involves the use of brute physical force by the perpetrator to subdue, intimidate, disarm and injure the victim. Bodily harm to the victim has serious medical consequences both physically and mentally (Coker et al., 2000; Fikree and Bhatti, 1999; Hand et al., 2009; Richardson et al., 2002).

Further, *psychological abuse* aims to undermine the victim's self-esteem through manipulation, blackmail, insult and demeaning, taunting, threatening and intimidation, removing the victim's independence and autonomy, and distorting the victim's perceived reality, etc. (Gentry and Bailey, 2014; Kelly, 2004; Stark, 2012). Psychological abuse can cause severe psychological trauma that is difficult to treat, such as anxiety and depression (Houry et al., 2006; Roy, 1977). In this case, control is achieved through non-physical techniques, with the abuser gaining power over the victim's thoughts, feelings, and actions.

The definition of *economic abuse*, described by actions such as: controlling and exploiting the victim's financial resources; preventing the victim from holding a job; accumulating debts in the victim's name; coercing and threatening the victim to give up any kind of income and especially possible career advancement; exploiting the victim through work; putting the victim in debt; confiscating valuable personal assets such as jewellery, money, telephone and laptop or any other object that can be valued; prohibiting the victim from taking part in the couple's financial decisions, etc. (Postmus et al., 2020; Sharp-Jeffs, 2015).

Further, *social abuse* is translated as deliberate isolation and control of the victim's social connections and support networks. It is a common tactic used by the perpetrator, so that through threats, coercion, manipulation and excessive control, but especially by limiting access to any support, resources and information from outside, control over the victim is maintained (Conner, 2013; Wilt and Olson, 1996). Marital rape, on the other hand, refers to sexual assault or rape that occurs within a marital relationship; the two are either married or living in a consensual union, in which one partner forces the other partner to engage in unwanted sexual acts (Bergen and Barnhill, 2006; Martin et al., 2007; Pagelow, 1988). For a long time, marital rape was not considered a serious crime because it was considered part of a husband's rights over his wife in marriage (Bennice and Resick, 2003; Gelles, 1977; Proulx and Bearegard, 2014).

A very serious form of abuse is *sexual abuse*, because it involves the humiliation, coercion and especially the degradation of the human being, reducing it to a simple object, thus violating its bodily integrity, human dignity and fundamental rights. Sexual abuse means any sexual activity performed without the consent or by coercion of the victim (Bonea 2020, 2022; Krantz and Garcia-Moreno, 2005; Muehlenhard and Kimes, 1999). On the other hand, marital rape refers to sexual assault or rape that occurs within a marital relationship, the two are either married or living in a consensual union, where one partner forces the other partner to engage in sexual acts undesirable (Bergen and Barnhill, 2006; Martin et al., 2007; Pagelow, 1988). For a long time, marital rape was not analyzed as a serious crime because it was considered an integral part of the husband's rights over his wife in marriage (Bennice and Resick, 2003; Gelles, 1977; Proulx and Bearegard, 2014).

Neglect can be interpreted as the guardian's inability to provide for the basic needs of the child or, in the case of the partner, being kept in a state of social isolation as well as material deprivation. The fact that more than half of neglect victims report that this type of abuse happens on a daily basis suggests a very high degree of neglect. At the same time, the measurement of neglect intervals is less relevant than for other forms of violence, as the form of manifestation of this abuse is latent. A relevant distinction with regard to neglect is that between actual and potential neglect (Dubowitz, 2013). Neglect, like other forms of domestic violence, can have negative effects on children by limiting their ability to develop healthy social relationships and by limiting their long-term economic productivity (Currie, 2010).

In conclusion, family relationships where domestic violence occurs are characterized by an imbalance of power, where the aggressor tries to establish and maintain control over the victim. In the context of domestic violence, abuse is defined by a toxic, harmful and

negative relational dynamic that takes place between an abuser and his victim. Abuse takes two main forms, as follows: 1) active abuse; 2) passive abuse. Active abuse refers to overt and direct acts of aggression or violence against a partner or family member, involving intentional and overt behaviour aimed at exercising control, power and dominance over the victim. It is the clear intention to harm and control the victim by force, intimidation and coercion. Passive abuse, on the other hand, is a more subtle, even indirect form of abusive behaviour (Bonea, 2017, 2020; Crane, et al., 2013). Passive abuse can be described as neglect, indifference, disregard, withdrawal of affection, manipulation, etc. These actions aim to create a hostile and oppressive environment, leaving the victim feeling powerless and emotionally drained (Dixon et al., 2007; Hegarty and Roberts, 1998).

4. The main factors leading to domestic violence.

Key theories.

In general, domestic violence is delineated, defined, maintained and justified according to several enabling factors, such as: childhood experience of aggression within the family of origin; increased degree of social isolation of the family or couple; existence of specific elements of gender discrimination and strict gender socialisation; increased degree of social tolerance of domestic violence; limited or non-existent access to information and resources; low level of education; large cultural-religious differences between the two life partners; existence of psychological problems or predisposition towards aggression and violence, etc. (Bolen and Scannapieco, 1999; Bonea, 2020, 2015, 2016; Coleman and Straus, 1990; Dutton, et al., 1994; Fonseca, et al., 2012; Straus and Yllo, 1984; Zamfir, 1999-2000).

The essence of explaining the defining elements of domestic violence includes a number of theories that examine the main causes and enabling factors responsible for the occurrence and maintenance of domestic abuse and violence (Zamfir, 2022, 27). Thus, a brief analysis of the most important theories is necessary, aimed at providing well-defined views on the issue. Therefore, the explanatory theories of domestic violence can be divided as follows: A) Theories oriented towards the individual and the marital relationship: Konrad Lorenz's view of human aggression; Social learning theory; Victim-aggressor attachment theory; Marital power theory; Traumatic relationship theory; Theory of learned helplessness; Theory of the cycle of violence; Theory of the wheel of power and control; Exchange theory; B) Socially oriented theories: Feminist perspectives; Culture of violence theory; Social stress perspective; General systems theory (Bograd, 1999; Bonea, 2012, 2020; Dempsey and Day, 2011; Harne and Radford, 2008). Also, in order to explain violence against children, we mention: Intergenerational transmission theory of behavioural patterns and Culture theories. Each of these theories, despite its limitations, is important in order to better understand the causality and dynamics of domestic violence as a whole. In what follows, we will briefly review each of these theories.

We begin our analysis with Konrad Lorenz's (2021) *view of human aggression*, defined as a primary instinct for human survival, namely, from a positive perspective, even necessary for the evolution of the human race. Thus, aggression responds to an external

threat, being a means of self-defence, of protecting valuable resources such as territory, food or partners. Broadly speaking, human aggression can be analysed from two main perspectives: a) positive aggression, defined by the instinct to survive, to fight and pursue goals, but above all to be inventive, constantly progress and modernise on all levels of social, economic and family life; b) negative aggression is described by the direct intention to cause physical, psychological and economic damage to the victim (Lorenz, 2005, 20-24). In the context of domestic violence, positive aggression can manifest itself when an individual perceives a threat to his or her partner or family, leading to a defensive response aimed at preservation and defence. On the other hand, negative aggression can be seen as a result of frustration, power imbalances and unresolved conflicts within a relationship, leading to aggression directed towards a family member. We therefore see a rather simplistic interpretation of aggression, whereas domestic violence is a multifaceted problem, influenced by various factors including various socially learned behaviours (Berkowitz, 1969; Lore and Schultz, 1993).

Further on, the *Social Learning Theory* brings to the fore the learning of violent behaviour through observation and imitation, in certain justifying contexts and under conditions where various advantages and rewards can be found. In short, individuals learn behaviours, attitudes and values by observation, then by imitation and then by reinforcement in their social environment (Bandura, 1963, 1977). Moreover, individuals who have witnessed and/or been victims of abuse in their families of origin have 'learned' domestic violence. In other words, individuals acquire aggressive and violent behaviors as they internalize patterns they witnessed in their environment (Cui et al., 2010, 688). The influence of social norms and cultural factors is very important in the process of learning and reinforcing behavior. Therefore, societal attitudes that promote aggression as well as patriarchal beliefs and values that support strict gender roles may contribute to the emergence of aggressive behaviour (Abbassi and Aslinia, 2010; Bonea 2012, 2020; O'Leary, 1988).

The Theory of the Victim's Attachment to the Aggressor shows that individuals who have suffered various childhood traumas in their family of origin may be more likely to engage in toxic relationships where they may become victims or offenders (Zamfir et al., 2022, 30). Also, the victim's attachment to the abuser leads to the development of strong emotional bonds, based on the so-called traumatic bond or Stockholm syndrome, described by a series of elements such as: strong attachment and dependency between victim and abuser; love, loyalty and fidelity; justification of the abuser's abuse; concealment of the physical traces of the abuse; the victim's efforts in anticipating the abuser's desires and satisfying them; self-isolation from others outside the marital relationship; refusal to leave the abuser, etc. In conclusion, in such a relationship what is called "cyclicity of violence" takes place, where everyone has very well-established roles (Ahmad et al., 2018; Dutton, 1988; Straus, 1990; Wallace, 2007). The victim may simultaneously develop attachment and fear towards the aggressor as a survival mechanism, while the traumatic bond is created, with the distortion of their perceived reality taking place with the help of the aggressor's manipulations (Buchanan, 2013; Park, 2016).

The Cycle of Violence Theory shows that most abusive relationships follow a certain predictable pattern. Specifically, the occurrence of violence tends to escalate over time,

in a repeated cycle of rising tensions, followed by the violent incident and then reconciliation. The cycle usually starts with small conflicts and tensions, which gradually escalate until an explosive episode manifests itself in violence. Subsequently, the abuser may show remorse, apologise and promise to change his behaviour, leading to a period of calm or a 'honeymoon' phase before the cycle begins again (Hyde-Nolan and Juliao, 2012; Pagelow, 1992; Walker, 1983).

An interesting view is offered by *the Power and Control Wheel Theory*, which emphasizes the role of the aggressor's dominance over the victim through violence. Control of the victim is achieved through various tactics such as: physical violence, emotional abuse, isolation, intimidation, threats and coercion, blackmail, denial of abuse and economic control (Burge et al., 2016; Katerndahl et al., 2010; McCue, 2008).

The Marital Power Theory also proposes to examine the role of power imbalances in marital relationships, thus domestic violence can be understood as a manifestation of unequal power dynamics between partners, with imbalances that can arise from various sources such as: social, economic, cultural factors, etc. These power imbalances can create an environment in which one partner has a disproportionate amount of control and influence over the other, which can lead to the use of violence as a means of asserting or maintaining power. Historically, patriarchal social structures have attributed more power and authority to men, while women were assigned subordinate roles. At the same time, gender discrimination in the workplace and in society has led to disparities in economic power within marital relationships. In other words, economic dependency, where one partner relies heavily on the other partner for access to financial resources, can create a power imbalance in the marital relationship. Moreover, social norms and expectations about relationships, gender roles and family structures can influence the power dynamics in relationships between men and women. For example, cultural norms that perpetuate male dominance may contribute to the normalisation of domestic violence (Babcock et al., 1993; Oropesa, 1997; Tang, 1999).

On the other hand, *the Exchange Theory* examines domestic violence through the lens of costs and rewards. Individuals weigh the benefits and drawbacks of their relationships, including the costs associated with leaving an abusive partner, before making any decisions. Specifically, factors such as economic dependency, fear of retaliation, social stigma and lack of support can influence victims' decision-making. Thus, individuals engage in various relationships on a cost-benefit basis. This theory may underlie victims' explanations for not leaving the abusive relationship, valuing the costs as much greater than the benefits (Arthur and Clark, 2009; Brinkerhoff and Lupri, 1988).

Of particular importance is *the Traumatic Relationship Theory* through its proposed analysis of the role of trauma in intimate relationships. Violent episodes between intimate partners can create a traumatic environment for victims, leading to a unique set of challenges and responses, with repeated incidents of aggression, coercive control, emotional abuse and other forms of maltreatment. So, we can speak of a cycle of trauma, which often begins with a phase of rising tension, followed by an acute violent incident, followed by a period of calm and reconciliation. Each episode of violence or abuse can cause significant emotional trauma for the victim, leading to a range of serious short and long-term consequences. Traumatic bonding refers to the emotional

attachment that forms between victim and abuser as a result of the intense and traumatic experiences they share. This bond can create conflicting emotions in which victims may simultaneously love and fear their abusers. Over time, victims may experience a range of specific symptoms, such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, described by the following: Accumulation of frustration and fear; emergence of feelings of insecurity; chronic physical pain underlying the victim's exposure to a prolonged period of psychological abuse; emergence of somatic reactions to the sight of the abuser and anticipation of the abusive episode; deterioration in the victim's quality of life; deterioration in physical and mental health; permanent use of certain medicinal substances such as painkillers or sleeping pills; occurrence and acceleration of anxiety episodes; occurrence of depression; general state of nervousness and permanent restlessness; inability to make decisions about oneself due to acute lack of concentration and mental instability, etc. (Bonea, 2020; DeJonghe et al., 2008; Jones et al., 2001; Lehmann, 1997; Tehrani, 2004; Walker, 2016).

The Learned Helplessness Theory complements the Traumatic Relationship Theory, offering valuable insights into the victim-aggressor relationship by examining the psychological processes that contribute to reinforcing the victim's sense of helplessness in relation to the aggressor. Thus, individuals who repeatedly experience uncontrollable and aversive events may develop a sense of helplessness. Over time, victims of domestic violence may come to believe that their actions cannot in any way influence or change the circumstances of the abusive relationship in which they find themselves (Seligman, 1972; Maier and Seligman, 1976). This belief stems from an on-going history of abuse, which can erode self-efficacy and sense of control. The sense of learned helplessness develops through a three-step process: 1) victims experience repeated episodes of abuse, which they perceive as uncontrollable events, so that the belief arises that they cannot prevent the abuse; 2) victims generalize this sense of powerlessness to other areas of their lives, convinced that they lack control over their own destiny; 3) victims may exhibit passive or avoidant behaviors as a result of learned helplessness (Farmer and Tiefenthaler, 1996; Launius and Lindquist, 1988; Renner and Slack, 2006).

We continue with socially-oriented theories, where we find in the foreground *the Feminist Perspectives*, which, in short, are the response to patriarchal culture and strict gender socialization, gender inequality and the promotion of male superiority over women in the family and society. Domestic violence is maintained against the background of the promotion and perpetuation of unequal power relations between men and women in the family and in society. Men are perceived as clearly superior to women, which can lead to power imbalances in certain circumstances (DeKeseredy et al., 2007; Johnson, 2011; Lawson, 2012; Lenton, 1995). At the same time, feminist theories also bring up the concept of coercion and control in the context of the exercise of power and control over women in marital relationships (Anderson, 2009; Walby and Towers, (2018). More specifically, feminist perspectives sum up several theories, starting from patriarchy theory, according to which domestic violence is the result of a patriarchal social system in which men hold power and control over women. In other words, patriarchal society is organised around values and norms that favour men over women (Bettman, 2009; Tracy, 2007). Also, the perspective of strict gender socialization promotes aggressive behaviors that are learned and internalized in a culture

where gender stereotypes and gender roles are very pronounced. Thus, men are taught to be dominant, strong, and aggressive, while women are taught to be submissive, passive, and dependent (Alsawalqa et al., 2021; Fulton, 2017; Santana et al., 2006).

The importance of socio-cultural factors responsible for the emergence and perpetuation of aggressive behaviour of individuals is emphasised in the *Culture of Violence Theory*. For example, different societies may have norms, values and beliefs that tolerate or even promote aggression and violence as justified behaviour in certain circumstances. These cultures prioritise power and domination through violence, including contributing to the prevalence of domestic violence. Individuals' attitudes and behaviours are influenced to respond violently to conflict in intimate relationships. The roles of cultural norms surrounding gender and power dynamics within couples are two very important elements in the process of developing and sustaining domestic violence. Traditional societies based on patriarchal norms reinforce strict gender roles where men hold power, creating unmanageable imbalances (Levinson, 1988; Sokoloff and Pratt, 2005).

We cannot ignore *the Social Stress Perspective*, which offers interesting and timely explanations of the role of social factors as well as stressors in explaining the causes of domestic violence. This perspective suggests that domestic violence arises from the tension and pressures that individuals experience, based on various social stressors (Gelles and Straus, 1987). Individuals are more likely to resort to violence when faced with significant stressors that strain their ability to cope effectively with everyday challenges. These stressors can be both external and internal and vary between individuals and contexts. External stressors refer to social and environmental factors such as financial hardship, unemployment, poverty, inadequate social support networks, neighbourhood violence and exposure to other forms of adversity. On the other hand, internal stressors refer to personal factors that increase an individual's vulnerability to violence and may include: mental distress, mental health problems, substance abuse, past trauma, adjustment difficulties, etc. (Gelles, 1999; Straus and Gelles, 1986; Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 2017).

A global perspective is provided by *the General Systems Theory*, proposed by the biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy in 1936, which takes into account the different layers of influence on individuals in their relationships. Each system contains certain spatial and temporal limits, and is subject to influences from the environment (input), while on the other hand it will have certain responses, reactions (output). Also, the interdependence and interconnectedness of elements within a system, as well as changes from outside, can affect the whole system through change. Any system has well-defined boundaries that separate it from the external environment, so that through the interactions between the components that make up the system a certain dynamic, a pattern of behaviour is established (Bertalanffy, 1950, 1975). Extrapolating, domestic violence is influenced by many factors, including individual, interpersonal, community and social. In this context it is important to understand how certain factors interact to shape the occurrence and maintenance of domestic violence, such as: personal characteristics, relationship dynamics, community resources and cultural norms, etc. (Bonea, 2020; Whitchurch and Constantine, 1993; Zosky, 1999).

Further, in order to explain the phenomenon of violence against children, we recall *the Theory of Intergenerational Transmission of Behavioural Patterns*, which brings to the fore the reproduction of violent behaviour from one generation to another (Kaufman, 1993).

From this point of view, people who have witnessed episodes of domestic violence in their family of origin are more likely to practice and accept this behavioural pattern (Dunlap, 2004). Thus, intergenerational transmission of behavioural patterns may help to formulate an explanation for the over-representation of people from disadvantaged backgrounds in welfare institutions. Even if domestic violence affects society, the intergenerational transmission of behavioural patterns that are tolerant or even facilitative of domestic violence may be associated with low-income or minority people experiencing discrimination.

The Theories of Culture can be used to understand the phenomenon of domestic violence from the perspective of the influence of patriarchal culture in traditional communities (Miller, 1958; Wolfgang, 1967). The predisposition to evaluate gender relations on the basis of traditional culture can be a risk factor in terms of preventing domestic violence. At the same time, cultural polarisation based on urban-rural divides, intergenerational differences, religious affiliation or membership of different religions can create friction within the family, both between partners and in their relationship with their children. Cultural incompatibilities can cause conflicting expectations about the status and role of the partner.

Theories play a crucial role in understanding and addressing the complex problem of domestic violence, and are valuable tools in on-going efforts to understand, prevent and respond to it, and are thus able to provide varied explanations of causal factors.

5. The situation of domestic violence in Romania in 2019-2020

This research uses secondary data provided by ANES, aggregated and broken down by age, gender, residence environment. The data captures the early period of the pandemic, specifically 2020, which is compared with the 2019 data. The calculation formula used was $\left(\frac{n_{2020} - n_{2019}}{n_{2019}}\right)$. All negative percentages represent decreases in the domestic violence rate in 2020 compared to 2019. It should be noted that domestic violence was underreported in 2020 due to lock-down measures (social distancing, self-isolation, quarantine, and work from home). All positive percentages show the increase in domestic violence of the investigated variables. Percentages marked in grey represent totals and percentages for which light grey has been used represent increases for the variables investigated. The limitations of the research are given by the short time horizon, by the exceptional nature of the measures put in place, by the fact that the ANES data mainly captures domestic violence against children (80% are children under 17 years old) and less so against women (20% are women over 18 years old), unlike the data from the General Inspectorate of the Romanian Police (IGPR) (Ilie, 2022a and 2022b), which refer exclusively to violence between partners. However, ANES data show that only 31% of victims have filed complaints with the police, while a 2015 report by the Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) shows that almost a quarter of women in Romania have been victims of physical and sexual violence by their current partner and only 14% have filed complaints with the police (Bonea, Buligescu, Mihaiu, 2022). There is a possibility that domestic violence is underreported.

The data provided by ANES, which we will present below, shows an improvement of the situation during the pandemic period. This data is contradicted by European trends and statistics provided by the IGPR. We can only say with certainty that reporting at the level of social care institutions has decreased.

In analysing Table 1, it should be taken into consideration that the data refer to both partners and their children. It can be seen that the risk associated with domestic violence cases in 2020 for victims is higher for people who reported experiencing poor living conditions, 3680 cases, or 67%. Next is violence suffered in the family of origin with 735 cases, or 13% of the total, then victims who are isolated from family and friends 477 cases, or 9%, followed by victims who named excessive alcohol consumption, 359, or 7%, those who have a family member affected by neuropsychiatric diseases count 125 cases, only 2%, criminal history 69 cases, only 1%, drug consumption 31 cases, also 1%. In the fourth column it can be seen that in the same year the number of reports for risk factors associated with domestic violence of victims decreased by 20% of the total and by categories of enabling factors by between -9% and -37% compared to the previous year. An exception is victims who named criminal history as a risk factor, where there was an increase of more than two and a quarter times. In terms of the number of cases, the increase is not very large, from 21 reported cases to 69, but this trajectory underlines a change in trend. During the pandemic period, more than three times as many victims required social welfare services when they had previous criminal convictions (see Table 1).

Table 1. Associated risk to the domestic violence cases, during the period of reference for victims

Risk factors	Victims in 2019	Victims in 2020	Victims in 2020/2019	Risk factors	Victims in 2019 (%)	Victims in 2020 (%)	Victims in 2020/2019 (%)
Excessive alcohol consumption	437	359	-18%	Excessive alcohol consumption	6%	7%	-18%
Drug use	34	31	-9%	Drug use	0%	1%	-9%
Criminal record	21	69	229%	Criminal record	0%	1%	229%
Neuropsychiatric diseases	198	125	-37%	Neuropsychiatric diseases	3%	2%	-37%
Poor living conditions	4453	3680	-17%	Poor living conditions	65%	67%	-17%
Violence in the family of origin	993	735	-26%	Violence in the family of origin	15%	13%	-26%
Isolation from family and friends	712	477	-33%	Isolation from family and friends	10%	9%	-33%
Total	6848	5476	--20%	Total	100%	100%	-20%

Source: Data processing based on ANES statistics.

Further, Table 2 shows the risk associated with domestic violence cases during the reporting period for perpetrators. The determining role of poor living conditions can be noted, with the highest values, 2626 cases, or 41%, followed closely by excessive alcohol consumption 2152 cases, or 34%, a history of violence in the family of origin predisposing the perpetrators to repeat domestic violence 833 cases, representing 13%, followed by a criminal history 347 cases, or 5% of the total, neuropsychological illness 231 cases, about 4%, isolation from family and friends 95 cases, only 1%, drug use 77 cases, only 1%. From the fourth column it can be seen that the number of reports for risk factors associated with domestic violence for perpetrators decreased, except for poor living conditions which increased by 10%.

We can say that the lockdown measures and the economic contraction have been felt in the increased poverty of the perpetrators and have led to an increase in domestic violence. It can also be seen that in 2020 the indicator of precarious living conditions increased profoundly. On the other hand, excessive alcohol consumption decreased, due to the closure of bars and restaurants, drug use decreased, the share of criminal history as a risk factor decreased, due to self-isolation, and the isolation of perpetrators from family and friends decreased. If we compare the totals in the second table, we can see that in 2019, compared to 2020, the share of other risk factors in determining domestic violence cases has changed marginally for victims, between 1% and 2%. Excessive alcohol consumption and drug use, together with precarious living conditions, were higher risk factors in 2020 than in 2019. In contrast, isolation from family and friends, violence in the family of origin and neuropsychological illnesses accounted for a smaller share of total domestic violence cases in 2020 compared to 2019. Drug use remained constant in terms of the number of victims reporting it as a risk factor, with a smaller decrease than for the other indicators. However, drug use accounts for only 31 cases out of 5476 or less than 1% of all risk factors listed by victims, whereas for perpetrators it represents more than double the cases (see Table 2).

Table 2. Associated risk to the domestic violence cases, during the period of reference for aggressors

Risk factors	Aggressor in 2019	Aggressor in 2020	Aggressor in 2020/2019	Risk factors	Aggressor in 2019 (%)	Aggressor in 2020 (%)	Aggressor in 2020/2019 (%)
Excessive alcohol consumption	2798	2152	-23%	Excessive alcohol consumption	39%	34%	-23%
Drug use	121	77	-36%	Drug use	2%	1%	-36%
Criminal record	505	347	-31%	Criminal record	7%	5%	-31%
Neuropsychiatric diseases	265	231	-13%	Neuropsychiatric diseases	4%	4%	-13%
Poor living conditions	2393	2626	10%	Poor living conditions	33%	41%	10%

Risk factors	Aggressor in 2019	Aggressor in 2020	Aggressor in 2020/2019	Risk factors	Aggressor in 2019 (%)	Aggressor in 2020 (%)	Aggressor in 2020/2019 (%)
Violence in the family of origin	1044	833	-20%	Violence in the family of origin	14%	13%	-20%
Isolation from family and friends	124	95	-23%	Isolation from family and friends	2%	1%	-23%
Total	7250	6361	-12%	Total	100%	100%	-20%

Source: Data processing based on ANES statistics.

Table 3 shows the distribution of victims of domestic violence by type of violence during the reporting period by gender. It can be seen that in 2020 most cases were through deprivation and neglect numbering 6081 cases, psychological violence amounted to 2404 cases, physical violence was reported 2169 times, followed by sexual violence with 443 cases, social violence 229 cases, in the category of economic violence there were 213 cases and only one VVF case resulted in the death of the victim. It can be noted that in 2020 most cases are through deprivation and neglect. Their number was 6081 cases, of which 3137 victims were underage girls and 2944 underage boys. Poverty pushes perpetrators to neglect their children and deprive them of material goods (Stanciu, Mihăilescu, Ștefănescu, 2022).

The number of cases of physical violence against minors in 2020 was 2169, of which 1701 were against girls and 468 against boys. The gender reporting gap is overwhelming, more than three times higher for girls than boys. A potential explanation for the much lower number of male victims of physical abuse may be that, after a certain age, the capacity for self-defence differs significantly by gender, which could primarily lead to limiting the severity of potential abuse. Another explanation relates to the socialisation of boys and the fact that male gender norms imply "physical endurance/durability", e.g. showing a higher tolerance to pain, engaging in fighting, competing in sport; autonomy, e.g. being financially independent, protecting and providing for families; emotional stoicism, e.g. not behaving like girls or showing vulnerabilities, facing problems alone; and heterosexual prowess, e.g. having a high number of partners, exercising control over partners in relationships" (Kågesten et al., 2016). From this, it appears that boys' aggression is tolerated and encouraged, whereas emotional expression is repressed.

Further, the number of cases of sexual abuse against minors in 2020 was 443; underage girls make up the majority of these situations, 374 of which ended up in the care of social welfare institutions. A total of 69 of the victims of domestic sexual abuse during the same year were boys. The proportion of cases of sexual violence against minors decreased in 2020 compared to 2019 in terms of victims, but the frequency of sexual abuse increased.

Social violence is one of the forms of abuse against minors that worsened during the pandemic period by gender. According to the data published by ANES, compared to 2019, in 2020 young minors were abused by limiting social ties by 8% more than in 2019, and girls by 14%. Gender differences in reporting of this form of abuse are major, suggesting that parental control is more authoritarian for young girls. In the analysis of these data, it is worth recalling the pandemic context, whose limiting effects in terms of social life have favoured this situation (see Table 3).

Table 3. Distribution of victims of domestic violence (cases) by type of violence during the reporting period by gender

Year	2019				2020				2020/2019			
	No. of cases	Gender		Total cases by gender	No. of cases	Gender		Total cases by gender	No. of cases	Gender		Total cases by gender
M		F	M			F	M			F		
Physical	3056	788	2318	3084	1875	468	1701	2137	-39%	-41%	-27%	-31%
Psychological	2956	1071	1860	2957	2186	909	1495	2420	-26%	-15%	-20%	-18%
Sexual	601	99	502	607	410	69	374	444	-32%	-30%	-25%	-27%
Through deprivation/neglect	6900	3209	3689	6865	5719	2944	3137	6071	-17%	-8%	-15%	-12%
Economic	286	112	170	286	189	67	146	196	-34%	-40%	-14%	-31%
Social	213	49	155	213	200	53	176	228	-6%	8%	14%	7%
VVF cases resulting in death of the victim	3	1	2	3	1	0	1	1	-67%	100%	-50%	-67%
Total	14015	5329	8696	14015	10580	4510	7030	7030	-25%	-15%	-19%	-18%

Source: Data processing based on ANES statistics.

For the year 2020, the distribution of victims of domestic violence by age shows a disproportionate number of cases of neglect and deprivation, particularly among children under 17. For this category of victims, neglect was reported 5964 in cases, as we see in table 4. The next highest form of violence against minors in terms of the number of cases reported was psychological violence, with 1799 victims. Sexual violence was also more prevalent for minors than for adults, with 419 cases compared to 25.

The nature of abuse against one's own child, who is over the age of majority, is profoundly different than in the case of minors. The predominant forms of violence encountered in this age group are physical, psychological and social violence. The number of victims of physical abuse among adult beneficiaries of social work services in 2020 was 1365 compared to 772 minors. Poverty and an upbringing in which it was considered that "beating is ripped from heaven" may be among the factors responsible for domestic violence against minors. "A 2017 World Vision Romania study shows that more than half of parents believe that beating is for the child's own good and one in ten

believe that beating occurs because of the child. The Save the Children report also showed that one in five parents believed that beating is a means of education." (Dobreanu, 2020). According to UNICEF (2021), "There is a lack of parenting education programmes, and socio-cultural norms that promote violence as an acceptable disciplinary measure are persistent". This is related to social norms and shows that education, unfortunately, is also done in many families through the use of physical aggression.

Looking further at the age variable, in 2020 compared to 2019, social violence for minors increased and for the age group over 18, violence through deprivation neglect increased by 114%, economic violence increased by 15%, and sexual violence remained stable at 25 cases, while domestic violence decreased (see Table 4).

Table 4. Distribution of domestic violence victims (cases) by type of violence, in the reference period, by age

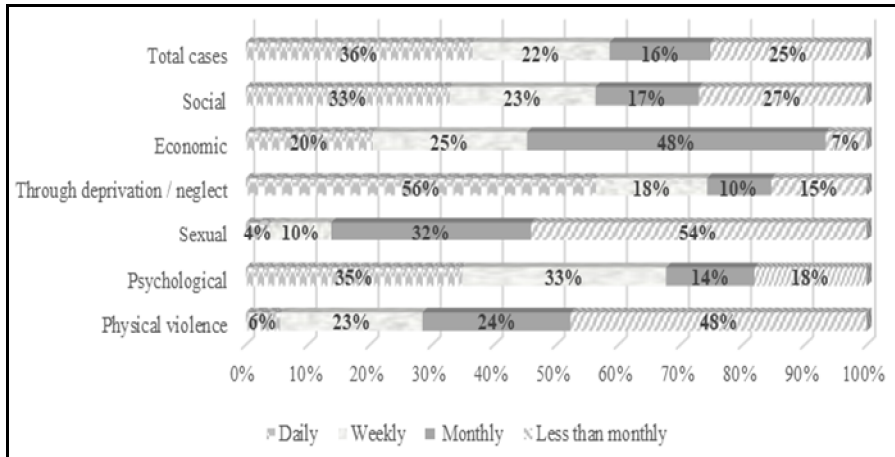
Year	2019				2020				2020/2019			
	No. of cases	No. of victims of domestic violence by age group		Total no. of victims of domestic violence by age group	No. of cases	No. of victims of domestic violence by age group		Total no. of victims of domestic violence by age group	No. of cases	No. of victims of domestic violence by age group		Total no. of victims of domestic violence by age group
		0-17	Over 18 years old			0-17	Over 18 years old			0-17	Over 18 years old	
Physical	3056	1237	1847	3084	1875	772	1365	2137	-39%	-38%	-26%	-31%
Psychological	2956	2138	819	2957	2186	1799	621	2420	-26%	-16%	-24%	-18%
Sexual	601	582	25	607	410	419	25	444	-32%	-28%	0%	-27%
Through deprivation/neglect	6900	6815	50	6865	5719	5964	107	6071	-17%	-12%	114%	-12%
Economic	286	211	75	286	189	110	86	196	-34%	-48%	15%	-31%
Social	213	84	129	213	200	100	128	228	-6%	19%	-1%	7%
VVF cases resulting in death of the victim	3	1	2	3	1	0	1	1	-67%	100%	-50%	-67%
Total	14015	11068	2947	14015	10580	5329	8696	14025	-25%	83%	195%	0%

Source: Data processing based on ANES statistics.

The data on the frequency of violence confirms the hypothesis that repeated physical violence is required for the victim to seek public services. A UK study suggests that on average, high-risk victims live with the perpetrator for 2.3 years and medium-risk victims for 3 years before receiving help (Walby, 2004). More than half of victims were physically assaulted 12 times or more during 2019. 6% of victims were actually physically assaulted daily, almost a quarter weekly, another quarter every month. At the same time, psychological violence occurred for 68% of victims every week or daily. From this we can deduce that abusers have developed a specific behavioural pattern,

integrated into the usual routine, and this social problem manifests itself with a much higher frequency than other forms of domestic violence, except neglect. Educational level and background can be considered predictors of psychological abuse against children and women. In 2014, 63.4% of those who committed reported acts of psychological abuse had elementary education and 58.6% of the total came from rural areas (Rada, 2014) (see Figure 1).

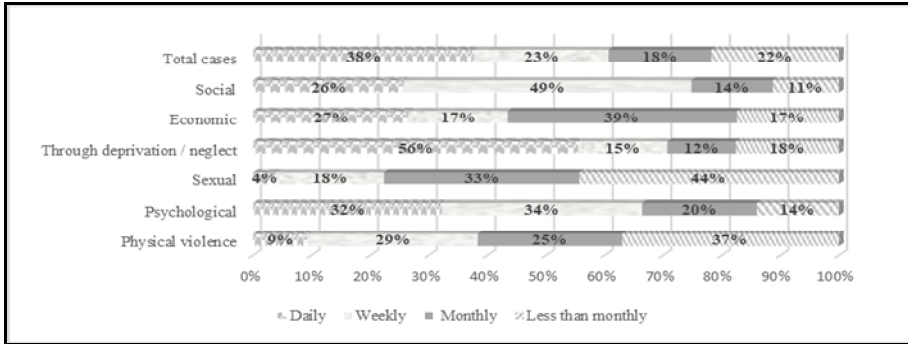
Figure 1. The frequency of domestic violence by types of violence in 2019



Source: Data processing based on ANES statistics.

The frequency of sexual violence increased in 2020, from 10% to 18% for the weekly range. The monthly range of sexual violence also increased from 32% to 33%. Uninterrupted access of perpetrators to victims clearly contributes to this change. The lockdown period and the limitation of potential leisure activities increased the frequency of sexual violence (Kamenetz, 2020). Like sexual violence, the frequency of physical violence worsened significantly in 2020 compared to 2019. If in 2019, 6% of victims claimed that they were physically assaulted daily; in 2020 the percentage reached 9%. The frequency of weekly physical violence also increased from 23% to 29% in the specified range. At the same time, weekly social violence increased in 2020 compared to 2019, economic violence increased the frequency of daily violence in the same interval (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. The frequency of domestic violence by types of violence in 2020



Source: Data processing based on ANES statistics.

In conclusion, following the analysis of the data provided by ANES, it appears that the year 2020 can be characterized, in terms of the frequency of domestic violence, as a year in which the most serious forms of abuse have intensified. Acts of violence against minor children have worsened, both in terms of the severity of the forms and the frequency. Major recipients of services for victims of domestic violence in the social welfare sphere are disproportionately exposed to physical violence compared to minors. The decreasing impact of certain risk factors, including alcohol and drug use during the pandemic period, should be noted. This change can be explained by the lockdown measures and those affecting the HoReCa sector. Offenders had restricted access to pubs, bars and clubs in 2020 and thus a significant decrease in this risk factor can be explained.

6. Discussion and conclusions

In this article, we have shown that the reporting of domestic violence cases decreased in 2020, at least according to the data of social welfare institutions. The number of calls to the 112 emergency services increased in 2019-2020 by 3%, but after police intervention, victims did not seek help from other institutions to a comparable extent.

Risk factors have undergone major changes in the context of health restrictions during the pandemic period. For example, alcohol and drug consumption decreased, while the precariousness of living conditions increased. The COVID-19 pandemic reduced the social activities of the population and forced victims to live in the same space as the perpetrators for a longer period of time. As a result, the worst forms of domestic violence have increased, even though the total number of people seeking help from social welfare institutions has decreased. By intensification, we refer to the increase in the frequency of victim-reported abuse for domestic violence in the worst forms: physical daily violence by 15%, weekly sexual violence by 37%, monthly psychological violence by 16%, less than monthly economical violence by 52%.

With this study we try to draw attention to the fact that the majority of victims of domestic violence who end up in the care of the state are children. Lack of resources of their own, coupled with total dependence on the abuser, leads to situations where abuse occurs on a daily or weekly basis and victims, whether minors or adults, are forced to accept this reality due to lack of alternative. For this reason, the accessibility of public social services must be significantly improved so that victims and potential victims can find a way out of an abusive situation, even if they do not have sufficient material resources to live independently.

We argue that in order to alleviate this social problem there is a need for campaigns dedicated to increasing the willingness of victims to seek help when faced with an abusive situation. Also, services dedicated to abusers should be expanded to prevent relapse and help families affected by this social phenomenon to lead a balanced life.

Another conclusion is that, at European level, reporting trends during the pandemic period have been heterogeneous between countries, regardless of the East-West distinction. While in France the number of reported cases increased, in Portugal it decreased. The same comparison can be made between Romania and Lithuania.

The phenomenon of domestic violence affects people regardless of class, religion, ethnicity, or community, and expanding the possibilities for victim support is a national priority.

Authorship

Georgiana-Virginia Bonea (GVB) wrote the theory part that includes the definition of domestic violence from chapter 3 and wrote chapter 4, regarding the specific explanatory theories. Bianca Buligescu (BB) performed the calculations and made the tables and graphs from chapter 5, drawing the work methodology. Horia Mihai (HM) and BB performed the analysis in Chapter 4. HM wrote chapters 1, 2 and 6. BGV formatted the work. BGV and HM did the proofread of the work. The research was carried out between April 2023 and August 2023.

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Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declare no conflicting interests.

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