Hostages of/by the Language: The Origins, Process and Consequences of (Not) Talking About Domestic and Gender-Based Violence in Poland

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ABSTRACT	Domestic and gender-based violence (D/GBV) in Poland has long been relegated to the margins of political, legal, and social agendas, as it was overshadowed by "more pressing" issues such as economic transition, EU accession, or wartime security. Despite Poland's ratification of the Istanbul Convention (2015), its implementation remains partial and contested. Scholarship has documented the silencing and invisibilisation of women and children in contexts of D/GBV and international politics (e.g., Enloe), yet little attention has been paid to language as a literal and discursive barrier and opportunity in this regard. This paper asks how women and children are "hostages of/by language". Drawing on feminist critical discourse analysis, sociological imagination, and norm translation theory, we analyse Polish politicians' speeches, media reporting, and Catholic Church communications (2015–2025) to show how discursive silences and terminological struggles obstruct recognition and policy, making naming a necessary condition for protection.

KEYWORDS	linguistic silencing, domestic and gender-based violence, discursive invisibility, norm translation, institutional failure, Eastern Europe, political instrumentalisation, epistemic injustice
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INTRODUCTION

Domestic violence (DV), a pervasive form of gender-based violence (GBV) in which men entrap and abuse women and their children as co-victims (KATZ, 2022; WIĘCEK-DURAŃSKA, 2025; NIK, 2024), is, we argue, in Poland rendered invisible, depoliticised, or reduced to convenient political virtue signalling in Poland (TOMCZYK, 2024; GRZYB, 2023; KELLY & WESTMORLAND, 2016). This process renders women and children hostages of and by language, both symbolically and materially. DV is designated to the sphere of the "private", as states construct a boundary between what counts as security and what does not, and between the legitimate domain of sovereignty and the supposedly apolitical and private – that is, unimportant – realm of family life (ENLOE, [1989]2014, 2004; JANION, 2009; MARCUS, 1994; HOLM-HANSEN, 2020). However, DV undermines state legitimacy by exposing the failure of governments to protect the most fundamental security of their citizens: the right to live free from violence in their own homes. It destabilises communities, burdens legal and health systems, and erodes trust in institutions, which are effects that spill across borders through migration, international human rights monitoring, and global security discourses (ENLOE, 2014, 2004; TRUE, 2010). Unlike the broader category of GBV, which can be absorbed into development frameworks and technocratic strategies (DEKESEREDY, 2021; KELLY & WESTMORLAND, 2016), DV disrupts the very architecture of sovereignty (PATEMAN, 1988; MACKINNON, 1989). To foreground DV in international relations is therefore not to narrow the lens, but to confront directly how the private is constitutive of the international, and how "private" violence corrodes the rule of law (E.G. YOUNG, 1990; ENLOE, 2014, 2004).

Academic debates on DV, especially in the context of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, also known as the Istanbul Convention (henceforth, the Convention), stress that there is a sharp implementation-politics gap in this case, and this applies also to the debates in Europe's East[1] (BUREK & SĘKOWSKA-KOZŁOWSKA, 2020; GÜNEY, 2023). While GREVIO monitoring documents uneven progress on core obligations in Europe's East (e.g., coordinated services, risk assessment, and the digital dimension of abuse), several states in the area have turned the treaty into a proxy battleground over the "gender ideology" (COUNCIL OF EUROPE, 2024). Research shows that the outcomes of this hinge on the relative strength of gender equality as opposed to anti-gender advocacy coalitions, with the opposition reframing

the Convention as a foreign, value-imposing instrument rather than a violence-prevention framework (GWIAZDA & MINKOVA, 2023; GRZEBALSKA & PETŐ, 2018). This contestation has produced divergent legal paths; e.g., Bulgaria's Constitutional Court blocked its ratification in 2018, Hungary's parliament refused its ratification in 2020, and Czechia's Senate rejected its ratification in 2024 (BRIN, 2018; NARDOCCI, 2025; AP, 2024). Poland also illustrates this volatility. Under the former populist conservative government, Poland has often been portrayed as emblematic of an anti-gender, anti-Western, anti-women, anti-law, and broadly conservative turn[2] (E.G. GRAFF & KOROLCZUK, 2022; OSTASZEWSKA, 2024; STANLEY, 2019) as it undertook official steps to withdraw from the Convention. But in 2024, the new government withdrew the prior challenge and recommitted to the Convention (GOV.PL, 2024).

We argue that framing Poland solely through this lens risks fetishising the state and its people as the Other, reducing a complex socio-political landscape to a simplistic, deterministic narrative rooted in Western hegemonic perspectives (E.G. MÜLLER, 2018; MUHARSKA, 2006; HENDL ET AL., 2024) – and, at times, produced for the West by the East (BOSAK & MUNIVRANA VAJDA, 2029) – through a language that may not fully fit local realities. Internationally, Polish political actors frequently invoke D/GBV, yet the implementation of Poland's national policies consistently falls short of its (inter)national commitments (cf. the Polish EU Presidency, (GOV.PL, 2025)). To account for these discrepancies, we examine the discourses surrounding the Convention and D/GBV more broadly, drawing on Zwingel's (2012, P. 124) conceptualisation of norm translation as a process that enables "different avenues of cross-cultural encounters and transmissions of meaning", while acknowledging that such exchanges are inherently uneven – marked as much by mutual enrichment as by subordination.

Considering that Polish is still a new language in the field of D/GBV (ZIELIŃSKA-POĆWIARDOWSKA & SOSNOWSKA-BUXTON, 2023), and that it lacks adequate translations of key terms such as, e.g., gender or survivor, points to processes of invisibilisation and silencing with historical roots. This absence is especially striking given that suffering is revered and valorised in Catholicism (SOSNOWSKA-BUXTON & STUDSRØD, 2024; KEDZIOR, 2018; CLOUGH, 2017). How is it that a deeply Catholic country has not developed its own vocabulary for predominantly female suffering? Is it surprising that there is tension, even hostility, toward linguistic and theoretical imports from other

languages and societies that do not share Poland's historical trajectory and legal systems? Our aim here is to examine Poland's responses to DV (via the Convention) not merely as failures of "international" liberal norm translation (ZWINGEL, 2012; GWIAZDA & MINKOWA, 2022; KRIZSÁN ET AL, 2024), and to show that language itself emerges as a significant barrier in this case, as it limits the development of Poland's own discursive and policy frameworks for addressing and preventing DV, but it also provides an opportunity where potentially distinctive ways of knowing can be negotiated.

We argue that Polish women and children affected by DV are hostages *of* the language because the Polish language does not provide words to describe their experiences, so they remain unnamed, and therefore publicly and politically invisible. This framing aligns with feminist and discourse-theoretical approaches that see language as constitutive of reality, and as shaping what is thinkable and speakable (BAXTER, 2008; JØRGENSEN & PHILLIPS, 2002; SPENDER, 1985). By contrast, when we say they are hostages *by* the language, we cast language as an active captor, an institution that deliberately withholds the means of expression and reproduces silence and secrecies. Our use of the phrase "hostages of/by the language" is thus a deliberate choice; it signals that the silencing is not necessarily the result of a single actor's will but a consequence of entrenched linguistic, socio-cultural, and political structures. While these alternative phrasings are rhetorically powerful, they risk obscuring the structural and material dimensions of the problem, which are also profound, namely the lack of shelters, the lack of financial support, the lack of proper funding for the DV sector, and poor child maintenance enforcement (SOSNOWSKA-BUXTON, 2022; SOSNOWSKA-BUXTON ET AL, 2024; GREVIO, 2021). In other words, the discursive silencing of women and children is inseparable from the material conditions that sustain it, as the absence of a language that would name their experiences adequately is mirrored by the absence of concrete institutional support, leaving them invisible, unheard and unprotected. By using this framing, we wish to reverse the centrality of meaning at the level of culture and discourse and refocus our attention on the meanings deployed in everyday social settings (JACKSON, 2001, P. 289).

In this paper, we focus on DV, understood as violence perpetrated against a woman and/or, crucially, against her child(ren) by a close relative and/or her current or former spouse or partner, most likely a man.

We foreground three interdependent dimensions: (i) a child is a victim of DV when witnessing it, not only when it is directed at them (cf. the Convention); (ii) children are weaponised by fathers to entrap and further abuse mothers; and (iii) mothers may be coerced into harming their children to avert worse paternal violence or to protect themselves (STARK, 2007; KATZ, 2022). Accordingly, we treat the mother and child as co-victims (SOSNOWSKA-BUXTON, TOMCZYK & OSTASZEWSKA, 2024; KATZ, 2022). Furthermore, we understand DV as multidimensional phenomena constituted by an interrelated assemblage of actors (*inter alia*, victims, perpetrators, institutional structures, policymakers, media discourses, and language) and an assemblage of continued violences, including intimate partner and sexual violence (including child sexual abuse), and psychological, economic, and technology-facilitated abuse across/in different social spheres (KELLY, 1987; KELLY & WESTMORLAND, 2016). Often, it is underpinned by coercive control, a systematic *gendered regime* of intimidation, isolation, surveillance, degradation, and physical and/or sexual assaults that terrorises women and children, who thus live in fear and entrapment ((STARK, 2007; ANDERSON, 2009; KATZ, 2022), see also the Convention).[3]

We begin this article by discussing our methodology, reflexively explaining the theoretical frameworks that inform our analysis, and explicating the reasons for the particular time-frame, the methods used for the data collection, and the data analysis process. We then outline a silencing imagination of DV, exploring its historical, political, social, and linguistic origins and processes. In the analytical section, we examine the silences and weaponisation of D/GBV, focusing on the language used and not used to discuss it in Polish broadsheet newspapers, in public statements by politicians across the political spectrum, and in pronouncements by Catholic Church leaders. Our aim here is to continue challenging the DV taboo in Poland, to name the problem, to show an *Other* way of thinking about violence at home that departs from the dominant English discourse, and to start freeing women and children from the clutches of language.

METHODOLOGY

We write as feminist scholars who are invested both academically and politically in the production of useful knowledges, the commitment to gender equality and the recognition of gender and sex as fundamental

analytical categories (SOSNOWSKA-BUXTON ET AL., 2024, P. 341), also see (OSTASZEWSKA, 2013; LETHERBY, 2003; BJØRNHOLT, 2021; LAZAR, 2007). For us, feminist research praxis (PRAXIS, SEE MARX, 1845/1978) matters because our positionalities shape our scholarship, and what and how we research, but also how the research process itself can reproduce power relations and, crucially, how it can be mobilised to disrupt them. Feminist research is never neutral; it is simultaneously epistemological and political, and strives to be ethical, but it can also be complicated and contradictory (SOSNOWSKA-BUXTON, 2025A; LETHERBY, 2003). It is precisely this understanding that makes our own positionalities analytically relevant. Aneta was born and raised in Poland, while Patrycja was born in Poland but has spent most of her life abroad. Our experiences in navigating both Polish and international contexts sensitise us to the socio-culturally specific ways in which D/GBV is experienced and understood. We do not claim to have universal access to understanding and knowledge production; rather, we present particular narratives of lived experiences.

These commitments to feminist praxis and positionality directly inform how we think about and operationalise methodology in this study. For us, methodology is a strategic conceptual framework that brings together the methods we employ and the theories we mobilise in our analysis. Our approach is deliberately eclectic, and was chosen to address the problem at hand, D/GBV, rather than to advance totalising or universalising theories (MAYNARD, 1995; LAZAR, 2007). Methodological eclecticism allows us to remain attentive to context, contradiction, and power, and to respond to the specificity of the Polish socio-political landscape. This choice is also motivated by our aim to forge a new analytical pathway that would account for Poland's distinct socio-cultural and politico-historical trajectory. As Grzyb (2023, P. 1393) notes, Poland's modern social formation "was built on the basis of the logic of national liberation, not capitalism (the key assumption underlying [some] feminist theories), as it was in Western societies". Rather than importing analytical frameworks developed for different historical contexts, we therefore assemble a toolkit that is responsive to Poland's local conditions while remaining in dialogue with feminist theories.

Central to our approach is C. Wright Mills' (1959 [2000]) sociological imagination, which enables us to connect private troubles with public

issues. Thus, we situate women's and children's individual experiences of D/GBV within broader historical, socio-cultural, linguistic, and institutional contexts. We stress that for meaningful change to occur, public issues must also be transformed into political issues (JACKSON, 2016; BURAWOY, 2008; DELPHY, 1984), as through political processes such as legislative reform, policy intervention, and the development of a language that would enable speaking out can D/GBV be effectively addressed. We draw extensively on the feminist sociological imagination to illuminate the gendered hierarchies that structure D/GBV (JACKSON, 1999, 2001, 2016; LETHERBY, 2003, 2018; SOSNOWSKA-BUXTON, 2025A). In addition, we mobilise norm translation to examine how D/GBV is named, reframed, or silenced. This allows us to highlight the difficulties involved in implementing international legal instruments, here specifically the Convention, which are not simply matters of legal compliance or political will. Rather, they hinge on how "international" categories are, or are not, translated into local languages, discourses, and socio-cultural repertoires (ZWINGEL, 2012).

This eclectic approach does not imply methodological arbitrariness, but reflects a context-sensitive way of conducting research in which theoretical concepts function as analytical tools that guide the interpretation of discursive patterns.

DATA ANALYSIS

We conducted the data analysis in Polish and subsequently translated selected quotations into English. In the translating, our priority was readability and capturing the intended meaning rather than providing a literal word-for-word translation. While the data were analysed in Polish, the themes were developed in English. Our analytical framework draws on feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA) (LAZAR, 2007, 2017), which emphasises how language both reflects and reproduces gendered power relations. Feminist CDA extends critical discourse analysis (E.G., FAIRCLOUGH, 1995; WODAK, 1997), arguing that discourses not only describe social reality but also constitute it – shaping the ways in which gender, violence, and family are imagined and negotiated in the public sphere (E.G., TALBOT, 2010). This allows us to analyse not only what is said about D/GBV but also what remains silenced or euphemised. Additionally, following Gill (2007) and Lazar (2007), we analyse discursive practices that marginalise women's and children's voices and legitimise institutional ignorance.

The analysis involved:

1. Identifying discursive sites where gendered power relations are most visible (policy texts, media, written interviews, parliamentary speeches);
2. Establishing feminist-informed selection criteria (texts that reproduce or contest silences around D/GBV were selected);
3. Selecting cases that are information-rich and ideologically significant;
4. Justifying the inclusion of cases based on their critical relevance, not their frequency.

The sampling process was iterative, evolving as the analysis revealed new configurations of power dynamics. We adopted a purposive sampling strategy (PALINKAS ET AL., 2015) combined with a case study approach (CROWE ET AL., 2011) to guide the data collection. This strategy reflects our feminist epistemological commitment to situated knowledge and the critical examination of discourses that sustain or resist inequality. To this end, we conducted searches using Google, parliamentary archives, X, and newspaper databases, applying the following keywords (the Polish terms are in the corresponding footnote[4]): gender, gender-based violence, domestic violence, violence in the family, Istanbul Convention, femicide, and murder. However, our main challenge was not the selection strategy itself but the limited availability of data in certain category areas, which narrowed the range of cases and discourses we could examine. Nevertheless, we examined a diverse set of publications[5]:

1) Broadsheet newspapers: *Rzeczpospolita* (RP.pl) (centrist-conservative) and *Do Rzeczy* (dorzeczy.pl) (right-wing nationalist, influenced by the Catholic Church), and an assortment of left- and liberal-leaning online news sites, such as *Onet.pl, Newsweek.pl* and *Oko.press.* These sources allowed us to map how the topics are framed across ideological lines, which roughly align with the major political parties.
2) Political texts such as parliamentary and public statements, interviews, and social media posts from representatives of the major political parties. Political elites reflect and actively shape public discourse (MILLS, 1959; STĘPIŃSKA, WRZEŚNIEWSKA-PIETRZAK & WYSZYŃSKI, 2020; ONISZCZUK, GŁUSZEK-SZAFRANIEC & WIELOPOLSKA-SZYMURA, 2020), and thus analysing what political discourse they "do" is crucial for understanding the presence or absence of political will and how D/GBV becomes, or fails to become, a political issue.

3) Polish Catholic Church communications such as pastoral letters, press releases, and public statements by bishops and church-affiliated organisations. These sources help us understand how D/GBV is moralised, sacralised, or silenced within compulsory Catholicism (SOSNOWSKA-BUXTON & STUDSRØD, 2024).

We focus on the period from 2015 to 2025 to capture major shifts in Poland's political and discursive landscape. 2015 marks the electoral victory of PiS, which redefined gender politics, promoted "traditional family values", and intensified attacks on the Convention (ratified in 2015) while instrumentalising D/GBV and calling gender "Ebola from Brussels" (KOROLCZUK & GRAFF, 2018). The period spans the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2021), when rising rates of DV were framed globally as a "shadow pandemic." Thus these two years provide a key moment for observing whether D/GBV was reframed as a political issue in Poland. At the time, it was the then Human Rights Ombudsman (RPO) who formally asked the Ministry of Family and Social Policy (MRPiS in Polish) under PiS about measures taken to support victims of DV. The Ombudsman highlighted the absence of coordinated, visible, and well-publicised state information for victims at a time when isolation significantly heightened risks of DV (RPO, 2020). In response, the ministry pointed to Poland allegedly having the "lowest rates of domestic violence in the EU" and listed a series of vague activities and existing provisions, such as helplines and the Blue Card procedure[6] (MRPIPS, 2020) – which means that there are only two sources of help for DV victims (to our knowledge at the time of writing) as we were unable to find any references to additional sources made by the then minister Marlena Maląg (PiS Minister of Family and Social Policy) on social media. We understand this as a non-decision – an exercise of power through inaction or deflection – where issues are deliberately kept off the policy agenda or addressed only symbolically (MCCONNELL & 'T HART, 2019; BACHRACH & BARATZ, 1963).

The Polish government's approach deflected the problem by downplaying its scale, offering only symbolic references to existing measures, and shifting responsibility to local authorities instead of committing to a coordinated national strategy. Włodarczyk-Madejska and her colleagues (2023) observe that during the pandemic, DV services and provision were essentially stopped via indirect messaging from the state indicating that everything was closed, as victims reasoned that no help was available, which led, amongst other things, to a drop in calls and Blue Card procedures.

During the pandemic, the Catholic Church did not issue any official statements directly addressing DV.[7] The absence of publications in this area can be considered negative data, which might indicate that DV was not formally treated as a pastoral priority during this period.

The period also spans the Russian full-scale invasion of, and war on, Ukraine (2014–), which shifted socio-political attention toward security and humanitarian concerns, and thus led to further deprioritising of DV (which seems odd, considering the Women, Peace and Security agenda) despite the heightened risks of trafficking and conflict-related GBV (potentially) experienced by refugees, and the conflicted feelings and emotions that Ukrainian women who were victims of DV perpetrated by Ukrainian men, now war heroes, have about the outbreak of the war, and speaking out about their experiences (SEE GULIŃSKA & TROYAN, 2025). The analysis extends to 2025, which means that the period also includes the electoral defeat of PiS (2023) and the actions of the new "pro-democratic coalition" government (BILL & STANLEY, 2025), which has pledged to implement gender equality measures and fully comply with the Convention (100 KONKRETÓW, 2023).

SILENCING IMAGINATION

Enloe (2004, PP. 73–74) argues that when D/GBV is met with professional inaction or publicly trivialised, or women's experiences are silenced, genuine democratisation is likely to be undermined. By "silencing imagination," we mean discursive processes and practices, both temporal and spatial, which frame D/GBV as a private trouble not worthy of losing political or financial capital over, and which thus further hinder the public and individual understanding of the issue and the range of possible institutional responses. In Poland, DV has historically been marginalised in political, academic, and public discourse, remaining legally underrecognised, linguistically underdeveloped, and socially normalised, which reflects broader silences that shape how the issue is understood and addressed.

HISTORICO-LEGAL SILENCING

Domestic violence clearly existed in Poland in the past, but as Brzeziński (2024) shows, archival sources rarely recognise DV as a distinct category, instead framing it as an ordinary "spousal conflict". Violence by

husbands and fathers against wives and children was both socially permissible and legally sanctioned (see Sosnowska-Buxton, 2025a). After the First World War, Poland established a women's police force to address issues concerning women and children, an initiative that, while progressive for its time, may have reinforced the notion that DV belonged solely within the realm of "women's and children's issues", and was therefore less serious than crimes like robbery or male-on-male violence (Boruch, 2025). Yet this development was remarkably ahead of its time, as it anticipated contemporary practices in which women subjected to male violence can request support from female professionals, such as medical staff or police officers. During the Polish People's Republic (1944–1989), as Klich-Kluczewska (2014, p. 184) observes, DV "was one of the most literal areas of silencing." Following the fall of communism, Poland – emerging as what Eisenstein (1993, p. 312) terms a "male democracy" – along with much of the wider West, prioritised market reforms over social welfare, framing matters of economic transformation as the era's "important things" (Ostaszewska, 2024; Zielińska-Poćwiardowska & Sosnowska-Buxton, 2023; Kubisa, 2017; Janion, 2009). Shelters for women and children abused by the women's male partners did not appear until after 1989 (Dominiczak, 2008).

In 1997, amendments were introduced to the Penal Code, broadening the definition of crimes involving violence, including violence against close relatives (*Polish Journal of Laws* No. 88, item 553, as amended in Article 41a, paragraph 1). However, this did not constitute a standalone law on DV, as such a law was first introduced in 2005[8] (*Journal of Laws* of 2005, No. 180, item 1493). Poland signed and ratified the Convention in 2012 and 2015, respectively, which was met with radical resistance from the Catholic Church and populist right-wing political actors. The then President of Poland, Bronisław Komorowski (KO, at the time an opposition President), though under criticism, defended his decision to ratify the Convention, cautiously noting that the language of the document was "not fully adequate to the sphere of Polish culture and customs [...]" (Dziennik.pl, 2015). Then in 2020, the government threatened to withdraw Poland from the Convention (Sękowska-Kozłowska, 2020). In 2025, the current liberal government failed to meet its legal obligations under Polish law to produce reports on the implementation of the National Programmes Against Violence in the Family for 2023 and 2024, despite being repeatedly called upon to do so (RPO, 2025), and no reason for the delay has been provided.

With the exception of the early reforms in 1997 and the adoption of the 2005 Domestic Violence Act under the SLD-led government, all the major legal amendments related to DV in Poland (those of 2015, 2020, and 2023) were introduced during the PiS rule. Crucially, these changes were not the results of government initiatives alone but came after sustained pressures from NGOs and international monitoring bodies, and a massive discursive battle. Despite these changes, the law remains incomplete; it does not recognise coercive control as a crime, post-separation DV is completely absent from it, and courts still allow claims of so-called "parental alienation" to be raised in parental authority and access cases, even in those where DV is documented, thus placing women and their children at risk (SOSNOWSKA-BUXTON ET AL., 2024).

LINGUISTIC SILENCING

The Polish language lacks a comprehensive vocabulary, not conceptual frameworks, to fully capture the phenomenon of D/GBV and its various forms, as well as a precise legal translation of the term gender (ZIELIŃSKA-POĆWIARDOWSKA & SOSNOWSKA-BUXTON, 2023; OSTASZEWSKA, 2025). The concept has no true legal, social, or linguistic equivalent. The word gender is typically translated as a Polish phrase literally meaning "socio-cultural sex" (*płeć społeczno-kulturowa*) or left untranslated as the English term is used, yet its meaning is often unclear, awkwardly explained, or interpreted in multiple, sometimes contradictory, ways (SEE SOSNOWSKA-BUXTON, 2022; TITKOW, 2007). Thus, the term for GBV is a mouthful: *przemoc ze względu na płeć (społeczno-kulturową)*, which literally means "violence because of socio-cultural sex." While academic debate is both necessary and productive, linguistic ambiguity becomes problematic in dealing with material issues such as D/GBV, where precision directly shapes policy and protection. As Banasiuk and Stępkowski (2018) note, *gender* has no formal legal recognition in Polish law and tends to be framed as a grammatical case, and the binding versions of the Convention remain the English and French texts. This creates significant challenges for monitoring and evaluating the implementation of the related legislation in Poland, opening the door to weak legislation, inconsistent policies, and politicised interpretations.

The research on women affected by D/GBV further highlights linguistic and cultural tensions. The lack of adequate terms to name and

describe D/GBV is an example of what Miranda Fricker (2007) calls epistemic injustice. She argues that the absence of appropriate linguistic and conceptual resources is neither accidental nor epistemically neutral, but rather the product of power relations that systematically marginalise the experiences of certain social groups. This is evident in cases of women and children victims' testimonies, where the described experiences of violence are questioned, minimised, or rendered unintelligible within dominant social discourses. Terms such as *victim, survivor*, and *victim-survivor* (in both English and Polish) often fail to resonate and are frequently rejected (SOSNOWSKA-BUXTON, 2022; ZIELIŃSKA-POĆWIARDOWSKA & SOSNOWSKA-BUXTON, 2023; SOSNOWSKA-BUXTON & STUDSRØD, 2024; TOMCZYK, 2024). In Polish, the term *survivor* lacks an adequate translation, is grammatically male, and carries strong associations with Holocaust memory, which complicates its use in the context of D/GBV (SOSNOWSKA-BUXTON, 2022). As Plummer (1995) notes, cultural resources for self-construction are historically contingent, and as Jackson (2001) argues, identities emerge within specific modes of subjectivity. The relative absence of the *survivor* discourse in Poland therefore reflects not a simple "norm translation failure" but a distinct repertoire of meaning-making available to women navigating violence.

This raises questions about the near-universal use of such terms in international scholarship and legal frameworks, as they risk misrepresenting the experiences of women whose voices are already marginalised. As Klich-Kluczewska (2014, P. 167) observes, feminist proposals to use *survivor* rather than *victim* sought "to revalorise women who had been wronged", yet this also complicates the clear-cut perpetrator-victim dichotomy that mirrors gender relations. By destabilising this binary, *survivor* invites more nuanced understandings of the process of survival and recovery from violence, but can also obscure gendered inequalities and overlook the term's historical and linguistic resonances in Polish. Consequently, the term *survivor* has yet to fully enter the Polish socio-cultural consciousness, where narratives of reclaiming power or "rising from the ashes" (TOMCZYK, 2024) are rare, suggesting either a different mode of recovery or a reluctance to embrace this discourse.

SOCIO-CULTURAL SILENCING

Domestic violence is framed as something that happens in "pathological families" (families made up of weaklings who are also poor); it is an individual dysfunction where a person cannot control their (his) emotions, has learnt that conflicts or disagreements are solved by violence or is violent because of addiction (NIEBIESKA LINIA, 2021). It does not happen to good people – here "good" is implicitly understood to mean a person who is Catholic, heterosexual, married, and, above all, Polish (SOSNOWSKA-BUXTON, 2022). This is especially relevant in a country where compulsory Catholicism (SOSNOWSKA-BUXTON & STUDSRØD, 2024) operates as a parallel system of regulation, shaping not only sexuality but also family life, reproduction, and sex (not gender) roles. When D/GBV is acknowledged as occurring, it is explained as not following God's plan, or natural law, to which one must submit (SEE, FOR EXAMPLE, POKORNA-IGNATOWICZ, 2014). This logic casts those who experience DV as socially inferior, (co-)responsible, and morally suspect, deepening stigma and discouraging disclosure (KOŚCIAŃSKA, 2021). The silence is reinforced by a broader socio-cultural "covenant of secrecy", where the imperative to protect the family and its members, especially men, outweighs the imperative for victims to seek safety and justice (TOMCZYK, 2024).

Silencing imagination makes speaking about D/GBV difficult and, at times, almost impossible. When there is no vocabulary to name what one is experiencing, how can it be spoken about? When no one speaks about it or names its victims publicly, how can the victims do that? When there is no education on the subject, how can it be recognised as D/GBV rather than as part of the "normal" order of things? When sex is viewed solely as a means of procreation (SOSNOWSKA-BUXTON & STUDSRØD, 2024), the very concept of marital rape becomes linguistically and socially unthinkable and impossible. In such a context, D/GBV can be framed as desirable or necessary, as can be seen in phrases like "spare the rod, spoil the child" or "if a husband does not beat his wife, her liver will rot" (RÓŻAŃSKA-DABISZ, 2019; NIEBIESKA LINIA, 2004). Furthermore, limiting the ability to name D/GBV in ways that resonate with local experiences, not in spite of them, renders D/GBV less visible and easier to dismiss as a private trouble, but also easy to weaponise. On the other hand, however, it is also a site where new meaning-making is possible and, we argue, necessary.

DISCUSSION

In this section, we discuss four key themes, aiming to examine the linguistic and narrative choices across media, political, and Catholic discourses on D/GBV, and showing that the "translation of global norms into domestic practice remains principally incomplete" (ZWINGEL, 2012, P. 684). Yet these very discursive sites also signal emerging shifts which suggest a gradual opening of new vocabularies of accountability and care, even within enduring frameworks of silencing.

NAMING AS (A)POLITICAL ACTS

The ambiguous nature of naming means it is never purely descriptive, but always implicated in power. Naming is *political*, an act of making visible, contesting erasure, and aligning with particular ideological positions, but it can also function as an *apolitical* or depoliticising gesture, presenting itself as neutral, technocratic, or merely administrative, thereby muting conflict and redistributing attention away from key actors and structural inequalities. For example, when serving in opposition, Katarzyna Kotula (Left) criticised the PiS government's refusal to acknowledge the gendered nature of DV, emphasising that women constitute the vast majority of its victims. In her X post, she noted:

> The debate on the report of the National Programme for the Prevention of Domestic Violence. The report nowhere mentions 'gender-based violence' even though the statistics are unequivocal and clearly show who the victims are in the vast majority of cases. A denial of reality (KOTULA, 23 JANUARY 2020).

This rhetorical choice is significant; she does not explicitly mention the word "women" but leaves the fact that most DV victims are women implicit, as though it were self-evident. By relying on the assumption that readers already understand that "the victims" are overwhelmingly women, Kotula both highlights the obviousness of the gendered pattern of DV and frames the state's omission as an act of wilful silencing and erasure rather than oversight. Her language constructs a moral binary of those who recognise that the data are aligned with "reality", and those who avoid gendered language and are positioned as denying it. This framing strengthens her critique but also reveals a broader challenge in public discourse, where

(not) naming "women" as a political category is weaponised in ideological battles. Importantly, Kotula's implying of "women" came at a time when struggles for women's rights were intensifying. In this sense, her message can be interpreted as both a pre-emptive critique of the then government, issued shortly before (22 Oct 2020) the so-called Constitutional Tribunal's restriction of access to abortion (22 Oct 2020) and the National Women's Strikes that followed (for further discussion, see (FRĄCKOWIAK-SOCHAŃSKA ET AL., 2022; OSTASZEWSKA, 2017, 2018)).

However, when Kotula assumed the position of Minister for Equality and was publicly challenged on X with the claim that DV against men is being ignored, her framing appeared to shift. Rather than reasserting the primacy of gender/sex as a naming and organising category, she responded in a way that emphasised gender neutrality and apparent inclusivity:

> Violence against men is not being ignored – the very name uses "domestic violence" rather than "violence against women". Statistics collected since last year also include data concerning men. We are currently gathering such data for 2023[9] (KOTULA, 23 MAY 2024)

This is revealing. First, it reframes DV as gender-neutral by foregrounding the term "DV" as inclusive of male victims (but not non-binary people), and thus Kotula implicitly distances herself from her earlier insistence on naming its gendered dimension. Second, Kotula highlights the technical and administrative improvements, such as the collection of sex-disaggregated[10] statistics, rather than engaging in a normative argument about who is most affected. Such a rhetorical move can be read as an attempt to strike a conciliatory tone and demonstrate ministerial impartiality, or as a pragmatic response to the political pressures of governing, where maintaining public legitimacy may require acknowledging male victimisation explicitly. But this also highlights ways in which D/GBV can be deployed for political virtue signalling and to convey a message that is needed or useful at this particular point in time without doing anything material, such as (not) delivering statistics and statutory reports. This contradiction shows that D/GBV, although potentially politically costly, is a potent political discursive and signalling device (ENLOE, [1989] 2014, 2004). Thus, following Enloe (IBID., P. 81), we wonder if a woman living in Poland is "allowed to tell her story, and even more so if she is permitted to assign to

it her own political meaning", as "this woman could be deemed a threat to both the movement and the fragile nation."

In 2023, during a parliamentary debate on the Report of the Committee on Social Policy and Family on the government bill amending the Act on Counteracting Domestic Violence, one of the points of contention was the change of the term "violence in the family" (*przemoc w rodzinie*) to domestic violence (*przemoc domowa*). While framed as an act of technical compliance with the Convention, this lexical change became a symbolic and ideological battleground. Politicians appeared inconsistent in their likes and dislikes of this term change which did not always follow the parties' public discourses (New Left MP, (SEE KUCHARSKA-DZIEDZIC, 2023); PiS MP (SEE WARGOCKA, 2023)) and itt was deemed cosmetic and pointless by a Konfederacja MP:

> The very idea of redefining the title of the act already seems questionable. [...] So it's like six and two threes. Both are equally inadequate. I am not at all convinced that we even need a separate law on violence, specifically in the home. What difference does it make whether violence occurs here or there, it should be punished the same way. [...] In line with the leftist trends blowing in from the West, PiS heroically defends us against them by adopting them prematurely [...] so that they don't impose it on us, we quickly adopt it ourselves (SOŚNIERZ, 2023).

This statement both politicises and depoliticises DV. On the one hand, it shows the material absurdity of the cosmetic changes, stating that they are like the difference between "six and two threes". On the other hand, these changes are also cast as "the leftist trends blowing in from the West". This positioning both exaggerates the reforms as an ideological threat and trivialises them as meaningless adjustments, thereby undermining their legitimacy from two directions. Moreover, the materially and structurally important aspect of DV, that it should be treated in the same way as other forms of violence, regardless of whether it occurs in private or in public spaces, is invisibilised in the process. This point is not without merit, considering that other forms of violence seem to be more readily believed and more adequately punished, unlike DV (BURDZIEJ, BRANICKA & HOFMAN, 2022; GRZYB, 2020).

INSTITUTIONAL NEUTRALISING

Institutional neutralising is the process by which official interventions invisibilise the gendered regime of DV while framing these shifts as technocratic. As a PiS MP noted, "This is the terminology associated with EU directives in this area. We are adjusting our language to them" (WARGOCKA, 2023). This dynamic illustrates norm translation, in which international norms are domesticated through the language of progressive modernisation or importing Western standards. In this sense, the translation of norms itself becomes a new symbolic battleground, but unevenly. Thus, in 2023 EU-compliant terms, there is a person experiencing violence (*osoba doznająca przemocy*) and a person using/applying violence (*osoba stosująca przemoc*), but nobody seemed to have noticed that, or opposed, this shifted DV from a structural injustice and human rights violation to a private dispute between interchangeable and gender/sex-less actors. Such a linguistic neutralisation is not merely semantic; it works to obscure power asymmetries, redistribute blame away from perpetrators, and reposition victims as participants in conflict rather than subjects of rights violations (SOSNOWSKA-BUXTON, 2025B). This norm seems to have been translated almost by osmosis (MERRY, 2006).

In principle, removing the terms victim (*ofiara*) and perpetrator (*sprawca*) might seem like a progressive move (in our view, this is a generous reading), given the negative connotations of *ofiara* in Polish (akin to "weakling") (SOSNOWSKA-BUXTON, 2022). While the removal of the stigma attached to the category of victim may be justified, it is far less clear why the same logic should apply to the perpetrator, especially when this renaming is explained as "removing stigmatisation" (SRP, 2020). Furthermore, both *ofiara* (grammatically feminine) and *sprawca* (masculine) are gendered, so in Polish these terms are not linguistically or politically neutral. Neutralising both obscures power relations and risks erasing accountability, what Manne (2018) terms *himpathy* (i.e. the privileging of the feelings of perpetrators over those of victims). This is especially jarring as DV is a human rights violation, and since DV is rarely reported, the perpetrators are still not prosecuted *ex officio* if the violence is considered a "petty crime" (ŻACZKIEWICZ-ZBORSKA, 2020), leaving the burden of initiation on the victims, and the perpetrators are rarely found guilty or face significant consequences (GRZYB, 2020). From a feminist critical discourse analysis perspective, such changes cannot be

seen as merely semantic but as part of broader gendered struggles over meaning-making and responsibility (SOSNOWSKA-BUXTON, 2025B).

Another example of institutional neutralising of DV is the disagreement over its cause. As Zbigniew Ziobro (2020), a former Justice Minister and Attorney General (*PiS-Suwerenna Polska*), put it:

> When it comes to preventing violence and the legal measures to be taken in this area, I fully support them. But when it comes to defining the causes of this violence, I believe they are being falsely defined and, at the same time, ideological content is being imposed that contradicts scientific findings in the fields of biology and genetics is being imposed.

While this statement unequivocally condemns DV and affirms the need to combat it, it simultaneously shifts the battleground to its supposed causes. This move is significant, as it diverts attention away from the material reality of violence and redirects it into an ideological debate cast as a struggle between left and right. By framing DV as a matter of biology or genetics rather than as a structural injustice, the statement contradicts decades of empirical research, attempts to institutionally neutralise it, diminishes the visibility of the victims and seems to excuse (or understand) the perpetrators. Obviously, there are disagreements about the causes of DV, but these are not reducible to a simple binary (DEVANEY ET AL., 2021). Instead, they concern a complex constellation of social, cultural, economic, and psychological factors that cannot be collapsed into genetic determinism. This is dangerous because such a misunderstanding of DV is awkwardly written into Polish law, which stipulates that perpetrators are to be directed to psychologists to work on their conflict resolution skills and self-control, while at the same time, the Act defines DV as "deliberate" (Dz.U. 2023 poz. 535). This misunderstanding of DV has been built into systemic responses (legal, social, psychological) which are inadequate in their provisions and do more harm than good (ZIELIŃSKA-POĆWIARDOWSKA & SOSNOWSKA-BUXTON, 2023; SOSNOWSKA-BUXTON, 2025B). This demonstrates that when an international norm is perceived, rightly or wrongly, as foreign, unfit, or incompatible with domestic specificities, it can hinder necessary legal reforms, leaving the discourse at the level of rhetoric instead of its being translated into material change.

Lastly, newspapers across the political spectrum neutralise DV because they tend to render the perpetrators invisible. Their headlines often suggest that relationships themselves are violent or that violence happens by itself. For example, *Newsweek.pl* (ŚWIĘTOCHOWICZ, 2025) ran the headline "How domestic violence escalates" (*Jak eskaluje przemoc domowa*) and Onet.pl (SZCZERBATY, 2025) "On domestic violence cycles" (*O cyklach przemocy domowej*); such phrases erase agency and frame violence as an autonomous process rather than the actions of a perpetrator. Or this rather astonishing headline from Do *Rzeczy* (2020): "Not only beating. The country helps victims of violence" (*Nie tylko bicie. Państwo pomaga ofiarom przemocy*). On the surface, the first clause appears to broaden the recognition of violence beyond physical assault, yet in practice, it reinforces a narrow hierarchy of harms, with "beating" as the baseline. The second clause shifts the discursive focus away from victims' experiences and structural failures, foregrounding instead the benevolence of the state. Here violence itself is rendered abstract and agentless, while the state becomes the active and almost paternalistic subject ("the country helps"), and thus the headline depoliticises responsibility and masks institutional complicity. The effect is a form of victim silencing. The media appear to align with international expectations (acknowledging DV, showing a state response) but in fact reframe the issue in ways that neutralise its political charge. The translation of the norm into "objective" journalistic language preserves its surface legitimacy while hollowing out its emancipatory content. In effect, what is "translated" is not the feminist or rights-based understanding of DV, but a sanitised, depoliticised version that centres the state as a helper rather than a duty-bearer and erases the perpetrators as rights violators.

FAMILY SANCTITY

By family sanctity, we mean the discursive construction of the family (heterosexual, Catholic, and married, as described above) as a sacrosanct, morally inviolable institution, one that is constitutionally protected, culturally idealised, and symbolically positioned above critique. Within this framework, the family is imagined as the cornerstone of social order and the guarantor of national and religious continuity (GRAFF & KOROLCZUK, 2022; POKORNA-IGNATOWICZ, 2014; TITKOW, 2007). Violence within the family is therefore discursively unspeakable, or recast as the product of external threats such as ideology, addiction, or cultural decline rather than as a structural and

gendered hierarchy problem.

PiS rhetoric framed the Convention as "ideological," accusing it of "redefining sex" and "attacking the family." For example, the PiS MP Małgorzata Sadurska put it as follows:

> The Convention has a nice title. We all agree that violence must be combated. But it is a strictly ideological document. It is a document that imposes a certain worldview, leads to a redefinition of sex, and undermines a fundamental value in our society, which is the family. The family is constitutionally protected (SADURSKA, 2015).

This framing portrays the Convention not primarily as a legal tool to combat DV, but as a vehicle for an unwelcome ideological change, while positioning it in opposition to traditional Polish family values (the family as sacrosanct). The discursive and norm translation clash revealed here is between competing gender regimes: one that elevates *the family* as a moral cornerstone and resists exposing its internal harms, and another that insists that *families* cannot be shielded from scrutiny when they are a site of violence. As Joanna Senyszyn (SLD) emphasised in 2023:

> Of course, the PiS parliamentary group has presented an ideological justification for changing the name from "violence in the family" to "domestic violence" because according to PiS, the family is sacred and nothing bad happens within it. So it's worth recognising that the greatest harm is done within families. PiS also does not want to admit that this is the terminology of the anti-violence Istanbul Convention. (Bell) Let's stop pretending: violence occurs within the family and it must be fought by every possible means. We will see whether this bill will contribute to that sufficiently during its implementation. Thank you (SENYSZYN, 2023).

This clash is further demonstrated in the amendment prepared by the Ministry of Family and Social Policy (MSiPS), headed by PiS, where it proposed changing the term "violence in the family" to "domestic violence" because the former "stigmatises the family and suggests that the family is the only environment in which acts of violence occur" (KROPIWIEC, 2022). Furthermore, the governing body of the Polish Catholic Bishops' Conference (KONFERENCJA EPISKOPATU POLSKI, 2020) similarly criticised the Convention for introducing "elements of gender ideology," promoting changes in social and cultural roles, and challenging traditional family

structures, while affirming its support for measures that protect family life. The statement also welcomed a citizens' initiative to withdraw from the Convention and replace it with an International Convention on the Rights of the Family. While acknowledging that the Convention aims to combat discrimination based on biological sex, the Bishops criticised the document for introducing elements of gender ideology and attributing some causes of DV to religion and tradition (specifically, in Articles 3(c), 12(1), 12(5), and 14(1) of the Convention).

The Bishops' Conference emphasised that marriage – the lasting union of a man and a woman – and their complementary roles of motherhood and fatherhood, enshrined in the Polish Constitution, form the foundation of social life (referring to the biblical passage Gen. 1:27–28). It also supported legal measures to protect family life, while identifying alcoholism, addiction, and the pornographisation of culture as primary sources of family crises and violence (KONFERENCJA EPISKOPATU POLSKI, 2020). In contrast, Bishop Piotr Jarecki acknowledged that DV disproportionately affects women and emphasised that this global problem cannot be ignored, stating that he did not advocate for denouncing the Convention despite its perceived ambiguities (KRZYŻAK, 2020).

This position reflects a broader moral framework within (Polish) Catholicism in which women's suffering tends to be recognised and valorised when it aligns with ideals of motherhood and familial sacrifice. However, when women name their experiences as violence or injustice, they challenge the patriarchal order of the Church, which renders their suffering morally suspect (SEE ADAMIAK, 1999; SZWED, 2015; CF. DALY, 1973). Consequently, Catholic discourses fail to recognise D/GBV as "violence," instead interpreting it as a personal failure, a moral weakness, or a "cross to bear". As Sosnowska-Buxton and Studsrød (2024) argue, the Polish Catholic home is depicted as a safe haven: Church primates and Law and Justice (PiS) politicians claim that DV does not occur in the home when Church teachings are followed.

What appears as ideological resistance to norm translation may therefore reflect a deeper *category mistake* – a clash not merely of values, but of epistemological and ontological orders. The Convention's gendered framework is rooted in liberal-secular understandings of rights,

personhood, and harm, while the Polish articulation of *family sanctity* emerges from a communitarian and theologically grounded ontology in which the family is a moral subject rather than a potential site of injustice. Treating the Polish resistance as a mere "anti-gender" backlash risks overlooking how different knowledge systems, moral logics, and social imaginaries mediate norm reception. Addressing such tensions within norm translation therefore requires more than discursive alignment; it demands engagement with the plural epistemologies that shape how "violence," "family," and "rights" are locally understood and negotiated.

PERSONALISING VIOLENCE

During our analysis, we observed an interesting phenomenon: Donald Tusk, the current Prime Minister of Poland and a seasoned politician, featured prominently in the media and political discourse on DV. We termed his approach to DV as *personalising violence* – a discursive strategy in which an actor draws on personal experiences of DV or is drawn in as somehow personally responsible for DV perpetrated by one of his employees by the opposition press to frame broader moral and political issues. In a widely circulated interview, Tusk recalls:

> I think that, by Polish standards, we have far less domestic violence, less beating of children or scuffles between spouses. I did hit my son a few times in my life, and I regret it to this day. I never laid a hand on my daughter. [...] Perhaps my personal experience at home played a role. My father used to say: 'I did this and that. On the chair, take off your trousers. Ten lashes with the belt." Until I wet myself. I remember it to this day, and I know how cruel an experience it is for a child (TUSK, 2019).

Tusk engages in personalising violence by recounting his own use of corporal punishment, that is, a form of DV perpetrated by a family member against a child, and also his experiences of it. Tusk situates himself within a shared moral terrain, one recognisable to many Poles, and brings DV out of abstraction and into lived experience, aligning his personal confession with political clout. Its *confessional* tone resonates within Poland's Catholic cultural framework, where confession and absolution serve as moral technologies of both accountability and redemption. By acknowledging wrongdoing ("I did hit my son… I regret it to this day") and contrasting it with moral restraint ("I never laid a hand on my daughter"), Tusk performs

a kind of secular confession that mirrors religious practice. This rhetorical act enables him to simultaneously acknowledge his personal culpability and claim moral reform – signalling the internalisation of the norm that *DV is wrong*. The invocation of intergenerational transmission ("My father used to say… Ten lashes with the belt") further reinforces this narrative of inherited violence and its repudiation through reflection, thus positioning Tusk as a participant in, and now a reformer of, the national moral order.

However, the gendered dimension of the account is striking. Tusk's narrative naturalises corporal punishment of sons, while distancing him from DV against daughters. This differentiation reflects enduring gender hierarchies in which DV against male children may be construed as a legitimate means of disciplining future men, whereas DV against female children and partners breaches the moral boundaries of acceptable behaviour. The selective visibility of certain forms of DV (DV against sons) and the continued silence around others (DV against female partners and children) reveals how some acts are more readily integrated into the discourse of personalisation and confession, while others remain unspeakable or politically untenable. Notably, Tusk says "scuffles between spouses" as an example of DV, which shows how profoundly he misunderstands it.

What is striking in Tusk's confessional framing is not only what is said, but what remains unsaid. In his framing, DV is not constructed as a threat to safety or rights, but as a domain of individual moral shortcomings, intergenerational patterns, or personal experience. This framing effectively separates DV from the register of security and absolves the state of the responsibility for DV prevention, protection, and accountability. Personalising violence, whether through autobiographical confession or through attributing symbolic responsibility via relations of loyalty and proximity, creates the conditions for its further instrumentalisation in political debate. In such cases, DV becomes a rhetorical device that is selectively mobilised against political opponents while sustaining structural impunity and the depoliticisation of state responsibility.

This dynamic is further evident in Do *Rzeczy's* reporting on DV. While the outlet does cover DV in a relatively comprehensive manner and often acknowledges its gendered nature, the tone shifts when political figures from opposition parties are implicated in it. For instance, in reporting on

the alleged DV committed by an employee of Donald Tusk (DO RZECZY.PL, 2024), this narrative construction means that the alleged acts of violence are not framed solely as a private matter subject to legal investigation, but as events that reflect on the prestige and credibility of an opposition leader who is now Prime Minister. The repeated use of Tusk's name in headlines ("Head of Tusk's security accused of domestic violence") and throughout the article stresses the symbolic position the accused held, his then role as the pinnacle of his career and his closeness to political elites. By repeatedly referring to Tusk, the reporting blurs the boundaries between the individual's alleged behaviour and the reputation of the political figure with whom he was associated. Domestic violence thus becomes a vehicle for political attack, as guilt is transferred through networks of loyalty and professional service. This strategy functions as a form of attributional politics in which an opposition leader is implicitly tainted by the behaviour of an associate. The violence is no longer addressed in terms of its social causes or the lived experiences of the person affected, but as a sign of corruption, weakness or failure within a political camp, and a personal failure of its leader. In this way, the structural and systemic dimensions of DV are minimised, while its symbolic value for political competition is amplified. Partisan weaponisation of DV is done when opponents are implicated in it, which shows that DV remains a tool of political contest, not merely a human rights concern. This tactic is deployed across the political spectrum and is not limited to conservative or right-wing outlets. For example, see Rutkowski (2025) for *Gazeta.pl* or the wider coverage of PiS politicians (yes, plural) who were charged with and convicted of DV.

HOSTAGES OF/BY LANGUAGE: THE CONSEQUENCES

Across the political and media discourse, women and children remain "hostages of/by language" trapped precisely because of and by its absence. The persistent refusal to adopt an explicitly gendered terminology in Poland both reflects and reproduces institutional inertia. While language reforms are necessary, they are insufficient if not accompanied by enforcement mechanisms, education, and a broader socio-cultural transformation. Political actors across the ideological spectrum are equally capable of deploying or silencing D/GBV when it is politically expedient, but without making substantial and evidence-based material changes. This dynamic exemplifies what Bachrach and Baratz (1963) describe

as non-decision-making, a politics of omission whereby the absence, or weaponisation, of a vocabulary leads to an absence of reports, prosecutions, and ultimately justice because DV is profoundly misconstrued. As Kościańska (2021, p. 150) observes, "Some judges of Poland's Supreme Court and courts of appeals believe that the motives for rape do not have to be sexual. Rape may serve, for instance, to humiliate the victim. Others, on the contrary, think that [the] sex drive represents the keystone". It is worth emphasiszing for the avoidance of daubt that "rape is a crime of violence, control, degradation and intimidation. It is not about sex but about power" (THE SHORE – NHS, 2026). When DV is not discussed in accurate and gendered terms, such profound misunderstandings, disguised as legal interpretations, can take root, shaping not only judicial reasoning but also public perceptions of violence, regardless of what (inter)national law says.

This misunderstanding is deepened by the Catholic Church and the PiS party, whose ideological framings distort the nature and causes of D/GBV. In these framings, the traditional definition of the family determines which forms of violence are recognised and which are ignored or considered a "private trouble, an internal matter". The Church and PiS put lives at risk by insisting that families must remain together and merely "learn" alternative ways of resolving conflict – this is a wilful blindness compounded by a systemic and endemic lack of research on D/GBV in Poland.

The absence of an appropriate and resonant vocabulary for naming these phenomena further hinders public and individual understanding, perpetuates harmful myths, and obstructs the development of effective responses. Thus, psychological and therapeutic programmes aimed at preventing perpetrators of DV from continuing in their abusive behaviour, while promoting self-control and non-violent conflict-management skills, were introduced under the new DV prevention law of 9 March 2023, which came into force in June 2023. We wish to emphasise, however, that perpetrators of DV act deliberately, not because they have lost control. To our knowledge, these programmes have been evaluated only once, in 2020, with the findings indicating that the gains were modest and highlighting the willingness of the participants as key, and the follow-up lasting a year (WOJNOWSKI, 2022) – these are hardly hallmarks of effectiveness and lasting change. Internationally, assessments of similar initiatives are conducted

regularly, and these too tend to report only limited improvements (see Hester et al., 2025). This raises a critical question: how is it possible that in Poland, no systematic evaluation has been undertaken to determine whether public funds are being used effectively in this case and whether such programmes deliver a measurable impact?

Problematic language persists in public reporting on DV: for example, "Victims of Domestic Violence *Still Do Not Seek Help*. Experts Sound the Alarm. According to experts, the findings of the Supreme Audit Office (NIK) regarding domestic violence in Poland – even though they cover previous years – remain relevant today. There is still a shortage of safe places for those experiencing violence; sometimes they do not seek help, and the procedures continue to fail them" ((Senkowska, 2025), our italics). Such reporting further entraps victims in/by stigmatising language and material absences of shelters, while limiting their choices for seeking help by making them (co-)responsible for DV and choosing to stay with their abusers or not seeking help, which further waters down their recognition as victims by society (Rüsch et al., 2005; Sosnowska-Buxton, 2025b).

CONCLUSION

In this article, we traced how D/GBV in Poland has been kept at the peripheries of politics, policy, and the public imagination, and how language has been central to that marginalisation. Historically, "more important things" (Janion, 2009), such as state-building, market reforms, EU accession, and wartime security, displaced D/GBV from the agenda. Our analysis shows that linguistic resources mirror and further exacerbate this neglect. The Polish language still lacks a settled, resonant vocabulary for D/GBV, especially terms that centre those who experience violence without loading them with shame. English categories such as gender, survivor, and victim-survivor are imported unevenly, often contested, and frequently rejected by the very women they are meant to describe. The term gender itself has no clear legal anchor in Polish law, which creates room for institutional drift and political point-scoring. Seemingly technical terminological shifts (e.g. the shift from "family violence" to "domestic violence", or that from "victim/perpetrator" to more neutral terms) signal modernisation and inclusion, but also depoliticise a structurally gendered harm when not coupled with material protections (e.g. ex officio prosecution, shelters, funding, and enforcement).

Our analysis is situated in a broader context in which Europe's East often writes for the West, employing Western conceptualisations that do not resonate locally. In doing so, the region risks fetishising its own experiences, while Western actors frequently fail to acknowledge that norms may be interpreted differently from how they are interpreted in the West or that socialisers may need to reconsider their positions (HOFFERBERTH & WEBER, 2015, P. 82). Drawing on Kalmar (2022), the Polish case discussed here reveals not so much a deficit or delay in the implementation of international norms, but rather the presence of distinct regimes of knowledge, history, and religion through which global frameworks for combating D/GBV are filtered, negotiated, and re-signified. What appears as resistance, failure, or non-compliance reflects deeper epistemological and ontological divergences rather than a simple lack of political will or institutional capacity.

This marginalisation of D/GBV has consequences that extend beyond language, norms, or cultural differences, as it constitutes a significant international security concern, and exposes the state's inability or unwillingness to guarantee bodily integrity, safety, and equal citizenship to all its members. Thus, it cannot be seen as the state's neutrality in relation to gendered violence (MACKINNON, 1989), but as an indicator of gendered hierarchies embedded in the institutional organisation of the state itself. What remains unspoken, unnamed, or relegated to the private sphere signals not only a discursive failure, but structural arrangements through which some forms of harm are rendered tolerable, invisible, or politically expendable.

Our findings indicate that both broadly conservative and liberal actors are equally capable of instrumentalising or invisibilising the fight against D/GBV for political gain, both domestically and internationally, in ways that cannot be neatly aligned with ideological labels. We identified four discursive dynamics. First, naming is never neutral. Refusing to name women as disproportionately affected by DV erases gendered hierarchies and women *per se*; naming only in the aggregate transforms a public injustice into a generic *domestic* problem. Second, institutional neutralising replaces political responsibility with administrative tidiness, changing labels while leaving impunity intact. Third, sacralising the family renders DV unspeakable and reframes prevention as a cultural or religious defence rather than as a matter of rights and safety. Fourth, personalisation, including autobiographical confessions, can condemn abuse yet still

individualise it, obscuring the structural order that produces predictable victims and perpetrators. Crucially, these dynamics affect not only women but also children, who remain trapped as co-victims when language and law fail to recognise their experiences of violence.

In Poland, DV is kept invisible not only by political choices and institutional failures but also by a lack of politicisation of words. Women and children remain hostages of the language when the lexicon fails them, and hostages by the language when institutions weaponise silence or impose foreign categories without local resonance. Freeing them requires building a language that is locally rooted and legally precise, and binding that language to concrete guarantees of safety, justice, and support. This means that "filling in the silence" (GEMMETTE, 2000) must involve not only discursive innovation but also institutional transformation (funding shelters, enforcing child maintenance, and reporting obligations) so that naming violence would become a political issue, thus leading to meaningful change. Naming is not the whole solution, but without naming, there is no solution to build.

Lastly, the question of norm translation in Poland is not a question of whether international standards, such as the Convention, are "implemented" in Poland. Rather, it is a question of how their meanings are negotiated, resisted, or silenced in social interaction (as mediated through social media, newspapers, and speeches at the parliament). This translation is not simply linguistic but deeply political: the lack of a resonant Polish vocabulary for D/GBV exemplifies how norms cannot travel untouched. Yet within this linguistic captivity and ideological contestation, openings emerge – spaces where new meanings, understandings, and ways of naming DV are beginning to take shape. Here, norms are not merely lost in translation but are finding their way through, resonating with the local sociological imagination. As research on and for Polish women grows, these new meanings will move from the peripheries of Europe's East to their rightful recognition as epistemologically and ontologically valid.

ENDNOTES

1 We use Europe's East deliberately to signal the racialisation and othering of people from this part of Europe; for further discussion see, e.g., Lewicki (2023); Kalmar (2023); and Boatcă (2006, 2013).

2 It is important to explain the specificity of the Polish party system to readers less familiar with it. None of the main parties is a single, unified party; rather, each represents a coalition or merger of several political formations. PiS is an amalgamation of *PiS* and *Solidarna Polska*, it is the former ruling coalition, and it represents the ultra-conservative right. *Koalicja Obywatelska (KO)* is an electoral alliance made up of *Platforma Obywatelska, Nowoczesna, Inicjatywa Polska*, and *Zieloni* representing centrists and liberals. *Lewica* (Polish Labour) emerged from the merger of *Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej* and *Wiosna (Nowa Lewica)*, and includes *Polska Partia Socjalistyczna* and *Unia Pracy*. The composition of these groupings and their internal dynamics have shifted over time, creating an even more complex political landscape, and thus, this is a rough guide and not an in-depth elaboration. The current government is itself a broad coalition of *KO, Nowa Lewica (NL)*, and a smaller coalition of *Polska 2050* and *Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe (PSL)*, parties that have divergent views on gender equality and related policies. In addition, the far-right *Konfederacja (Confederation)* plays a distinct role on the political scene, positioning itself outside the mainstream blocs while promoting nationalist, quasi-libertarian and ultra-conservative agendas.

3 We wish to emphasise that DV laws are relevant to LGBTQI+ people. Research on GBV against LGBTQI+ communities in Poland remains limited (Amnesty International, 2022). Winiewski (2021, p. 130) notes that in the period of "2019–2020, 68.54% of LGBT respondents (N=13,093) experienced at least one type of violence due to their sexual orientation or gender identity." This number refers to GBV broadly, not specifically DV. We emphasise this importance of such research and encourage Polish academics to conduct and submit research on LGBTQI+ communities.

4 Gender: płeć społeczno-kulturowa/gender; gender-based violence: przemoc ze względu na płeć; domestic violence: przemoc domowa; violence in family: przemoc w rodzinie; Istanbul Convention: Konwencja Stambulska; femicide: kobietobójstwo; murder: zabójstwo.

5 We have not counted the number of publications as this was not the aim of our work.

6 The Blue Card procedure (Niebieska Karta) is a formal system used to respond to DV, bringing together police, social services, healthcare, and education professionals to protect victims and coordinate support without requiring the victim's consent to start the process.

7 The only document of this sort that was identified, the *Standards of Child Protection in Parish Ministry* (Drobinski et al., 2024), which was issued after the DV murder of an eight-year-old boy named Kamil, frames child protection as the Church's "evangelical mission". Yet it erases the gendered reality of DV, omitting women as its main victims and men as its primary perpetrators.

8 By comparison, England and Wales introduced their first dedicated DV legislation with the Domestic Violence and Matrimonial Proceedings Act 1976 (Centre for Women's Justice). Scotland followed with the Matrimonial Homes (Family Protection) Act 1981, and Northern Ireland followed with the Matrimonial Proceedings Order 1988. In Europe's East, Slovakia criminalised DV in 1999, and Czechia in 2007.

9 Please note that as of February 2026, such statistics have still not been released.

10 As per Istanbul Convention stipulations.

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