
Decentring Gender-Based Violence: Central and Eastern European Perspectives in International Relations

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ABSTRACT	This introductory article advances a feminist rethinking of gender-based violence (GBV) from the perspective of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). Refusing to treat the region as a site of delayed development or exceptional violence, we position CEE as a source of theoretical insights for International Relations and feminist scholarship. Drawing on debates on the continuum of violence, intersectionality, feminist political economy, and the politics of knowledge production, we conceptualise GBV as a constitutive feature of contemporary political orders. We argue that violence operates across interconnected legal, institutional, economic, discursive, and military domains and must be understood in relation to broader processes of war, democratic backsliding, geopolitical contestation, and the global polycrisis. The article further reflects on the ethical and political challenges of feminist knowledge production in times of ongoing conflict and proposes solidarity, care, and pluriversality as key analytical and political horizons for future research on gendered violence.
KEYWORDS	gender-based violence, Central and Eastern Europe, feminist security studies, knowledge production, epistemic politics, polycrisis, patriarchy, decentring Europe
DOI	https://doi.org/10.32422/cjir.2127
PUBLISHED ONLINE	24 July, 2026

INTRODUCTION

Public debates about gender and women's rights often take unexpected turns during wartime. In Ukraine, this became visible in reactions to the Women's March held during the fifth year of Russia's full-scale invasion. The discussions around the demonstration became visibly contested, with media reports and activist accounts highlighting recurring claims that wartime is "not the right moment" to advance gender equality agendas alongside documented instances of hostility, including threats directed at the organisers. The critics framed feminist mobilisation as inappropriate in a context of compulsory military service for men, emphasising a perceived asymmetry in wartime obligations, and positioning gender equality claims as secondary to the imperatives of national defence (SMAGINA, 2026).

Yet, this interpretation obscured the more complex gendered realities of wartime Ukraine. More than 100,000 women currently serve in the Ukrainian armed forces, while many others contribute to the war effort as volunteers, medics, journalists, humanitarian workers, and civil society activists (PHILLIPS & MARTSENYUK, 2023). At the same time, the march highlighted concrete political concerns, including the discrimination faced by servicewomen and the controversial draft of a new Civil Code that activists argue could restrict divorce and introduce vague "moral" criteria into family law. Critics warn that the proposed legislation could narrow legal definitions of family and undermine protections for women and LGBTQ+ people, which raises broader concerns about the future of gender equality reforms in a country simultaneously fighting for democratic survival and European integration (SHANDRA, 2026).

The Women's March controversy therefore reflected not only a disagreement about feminism but also deeper tensions surrounding the gender order, citizenship, sacrifice, and belonging in a society at war (STRELNYK & PHILLIPS, 2025). More broadly, it revealed how armed conflict reshapes gender relations and creates new forms of vulnerability, exclusion, and violence. While war is often discussed through the language of national security and territorial defence, it also profoundly affects everyday experiences of gender, sexuality, family life, and bodily autonomy. Existing inequalities may be reinforced, while new forms of discrimination and violence emerge.

These dynamics are particularly visible in relation to gender-based violence. Across conflict settings, war can exacerbate domestic and intimate partner violence, intensify gendered economic insecurities, and create conditions in which women, children, LGBTQ+ people, and other marginalised groups face heightened risks of harm (JENNINGS, 2019; JOHNSON, 2022). Russia's invasion of Ukraine has also drawn international attention to conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV), as documented by international organisations, Ukrainian authorities, and civil society actors (OMELCHENKO, 2023). Such violence has affected women, men, and children and has become an important site through which questions of justice, accountability, protection, and recognition are negotiated in wartime and post-war contexts. At the same time, the visibility of CRSV has highlighted broader challenges of documenting violence, supporting survivors, and addressing the gendered consequences of armed conflict beyond immediate security concerns.

The debates surrounding the Women's March are therefore not merely an isolated controversy specific to the Ukrainian context. Rather, they reveal broader dynamics through which conflict and societal transformation intensify pre-existing tensions around gender, citizenship, rights, and belonging. Wartime reshapes understandings of who is entitled to protection, who is expected to sacrifice, and whose claims are recognised as legitimate within the national community (JENNINGS, 2019; JOHNSON, 2022). Yet war does not simply suspend gender politics in the name of national unity. On the contrary, moments of crisis frequently become sites where competing visions of society, democracy, and social order are contested and renegotiated. The Ukrainian case thus points beyond a single national experience, drawing attention to broader questions regarding how gendered norms and inequalities are reproduced, reinforced, challenged, or transformed under conditions of political rupture and uncertainty.

These broader questions are central to the concerns that animate this Special Issue. Across Central and Eastern Europe, the debates surrounding gender and gender-based violence often function as arenas through which wider struggles over political authority, identity, and social change unfold. Yet, scholarship and public discussions have frequently approached these processes through implicit comparisons with a supposedly more progressive Western Europe, positioning the CEE region primarily as a site of deficiency or delayed development (GRAFF,

2022; O'SULLIVAN & KRULIŠOVÁ, 2023A; ZORGDRAGER, 2024). Rather than reproducing such hierarchical framings, the contributions gathered here foreground Central and Eastern Europe as a site of knowledge production in its own right. In doing so, they demonstrate how struggles over gender, violence, and rights within the region illuminate broader global processes of militarisation, political backlash, and contested democratic transformation.

CONCEPTUALISING GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN THIS SPECIAL ISSUE (AND BEYOND)

Feminist scholarship has fundamentally transformed how gender-based violence (GBV) and conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) are understood, shifting them from marginal or private concerns to central features of political life. Early feminist interventions demonstrated that violence is not an incidental by-product of conflict or inequality, but a constitutive element of social and political organisation (KELLY, 1988; MACKINNON, 1993; CONFORTINI, 2006; ELSHTAIN, 2009). Drawing on feminist scholarship and reflecting, in 2023, on feminist lessons on war, Cynthia Enloe illustrated that the everyday workings of power, from militarisation to diplomacy, are deeply gendered, and violence is embedded within these processes rather than external to them (ENLOE, 2023). In this sense, the feminist project has not only exposed hidden forms of violence but has redefined what counts as violence in the first place.

This rethinking of violence has been particularly influential in analyses of war and nationalism. In her seminal work on the Yugoslav wars, Dubravka Žarkov (1997; 2007) demonstrated how, in these wars, wartime violence, including sexual violence, was intertwined with nationalist discourses and media representations that produced gendered and ethnicised identities. Rather than treating violence as a consequence of conflict alone, Žarkov showed how representations of gender, sexuality, and ethnicity actively participated in the construction of political communities and enemies. Her work highlighted that violence is not only enacted on bodies but also constituted through discursive and symbolic regimes that shape who can be recognised as a victim, perpetrator, or legitimate political subject.

At the same time, feminist efforts to render wartime sexual violence visible have themselves been subject to critical scrutiny. The former Yugoslav conflicts demonstrate that making violence visible is not inherently emancipatory. International feminist and humanitarian attention to wartime rape helped establish CRSV as a central concern of global security governance, yet it often relied on representations that reduced complex political subjects to vulnerable victims and reinforced hierarchies between Western knowledge producers and conflict-affected populations (E.G. HELMS, 2013; ŽARKOV, 2007). These tensions have informed subsequent critiques of extractive research practices and the coloniality of knowledge in conflict settings, including warnings against forms of “academic tourism” that benefit scholars more than the communities whose experiences are being studied (HENDL ET AL., 2024).

Another key dimension has been the politics of naming. As Elizabeth Frazer and Kimberly Hutchings (2020) demonstrate, feminist struggles to define “violence against women” and “gender-based violence” are not merely conceptual debates but political interventions that reshape institutional agendas and normative frameworks. Naming practices such as domestic violence, marital rape, or wartime sexual violence as forms of political violence challenges entrenched distinctions between public and private, and legitimate and illegitimate force. At the same time, these processes remain contested. Despite decades of feminist theorising and activism, the meaning of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) continues to be debated, which reflects tensions over the analytical scope, political strategy, and the relationship between theory and practice (for further discussion, see (ALLDRED, 2023; HAYNES & DESHONG, 2017; MYRTTINEN & SCHULZ, 2023)).

One way feminist scholarship has sought to address these tensions is through the concept of a continuum of violence. First articulated by Liz Kelly (1987), this approach conceptualises violence not as a set of discrete acts but as a continuous field linking everyday practices, such as harassment, coercion, and domestic abuse, to more visible forms of violence, including rape in conflict. While it did not resolve the debates over the definition of violence, the continuum perspective marked an early and influential attempt to move beyond narrow, event-based understandings of violence and continues to shape contemporary feminist analyses. It foregrounds the interconnectedness of different forms of harm across time and space, challenging distinctions between “ordinary” and “exceptional” violence.

As Cynthia Cockburn (2001; 2004) argues, the distinctions between pre-conflict, conflict, and post-conflict phases are analytically misleading; rather, these moments form part of a continuum within which gendered violence is produced and reproduced across interconnected social and political structures.

More recent scholarship has further expanded these insights by challenging the heteronormative assumptions embedded in dominant explanatory frameworks of wartime sexual violence. As Heleene Touquet and Philipp Schulz (2021) argue, queering these frameworks reveals how sexual violence against men is systematically obscured, and how gendered violence operates through the production and policing of masculinities as well as femininities. This perspective extends feminist critiques of representation and recognition by demonstrating how forms of violence become visible or invisible through gendered assumptions about vulnerability, victimhood, and harm.

Building on these insights, feminist scholarship has increasingly conceptualised GBV as operating across multiple interconnected levels rather than within a single domain of action or analysis (CAMPBELL, 2023). While early interventions focused on expanding the definition of violence, subsequent work has emphasised how different forms of harm are produced through the interaction of legal frameworks, institutional arrangements, epistemic hierarchies, social norms, and economic conditions. As Jacqui True (2012) demonstrates, gender-based violence is shaped by global political and economic processes, including militarisation, displacement, and structural inequality, which redistribute vulnerability and exposure to harm. At the same time, feminist security studies have drawn attention to the role of gendered narratives in shaping how violence is interpreted and explained. As Laura Sjöberg and Caron Gentry argue, dominant accounts of political violence rely on reductive gendered tropes, such as the “mother,” “monster,” or “whore,” that render women’s violence either exceptional or unintelligible, while reinforcing binary assumptions about victimhood, agency, and legitimacy. These narrative frameworks do not simply describe violence but actively structure its interpretation, obscuring the broader gendered logics through which violence is produced and justified (GENTRY & SJOBERG, 2015). From this perspective, SGBV cannot be understood solely as a series of acts or even as a continuum but must be analysed as part of broader systems of governance that organise power, belonging, and exclusion (WIBBEN, 2020). This shift also resonates with scholarship on structural and symbolic

violence, which highlights how legal and institutional arrangements, as well as everyday practices and norms, sustain conditions in which violence becomes both possible and, in many cases, socially tolerated (SEE, FOR EXAMPLE, BASTIA ET AL., 2023; BURKE ET AL., 2025; HEARN ET AL., 2025). In this sense, GBV emerges not only as a manifestation of inequality but also as a mechanism through which gendered hierarchies are, to this day, actively produced and maintained.

Within this broader framework, feminist scholarship has also differentiated between distinct, though overlapping, ways of conceptualising GBV, each foregrounding particular dimensions of the phenomenon. Legal and policy approaches have often relied on an individualised model of violence, focusing on identifiable perpetrators, acts, and victims (MAROTTA, 2023). This model has been central to establishing accountability, particularly through developments in international criminal and human rights law. At the same time, feminist critiques have consistently highlighted its limitations (MANJOO & JONES, 2018; THOMPSON ET AL., 2026). By isolating instances of violence as discrete events, individualised approaches risk obscuring the social relations and structural conditions that enable such acts to occur, while framing violence primarily through victimhood may reinforce gendered hierarchies and limit the recognition of agency and resistance (BERRY ET AL., 2025; CAMPBELL, 2018).

In response, alternative approaches have sought to re-politicise GBV by situating it within broader systems of power. Group-based and structural perspectives understand violence not simply as harm inflicted on individual victims but as a mechanism through which inequalities between social groups are produced, maintained, and enforced. Violence thus targets individuals because of their actual or perceived membership in particular gendered, sexual, racialised, ethnic, or other marginalised groups. Intersectional scholarship has been particularly important in demonstrating how experiences of violence are shaped by overlapping axes of inequality, including race, class, sexuality, and geopolitical position (CRENSHAW, 1991; COLLINS, 2017). These insights have also informed region-specific analyses (TASTOGLU & FREEDMAN, 2025). In Central and Eastern European and post-socialist contexts, Natasha Bluth (2026) expands on the work of Popova and Shevel (2024) on the diverging democratic development trajectories in Russia and Ukraine, highlighting how gendered violence is embedded in specific historical trajectories. Those include socialism,

post-socialist transformation, nationalism, and contemporary conflict, thereby complicating universalising frameworks of GBV (for a further interdisciplinary analysis of gender-based violence in Eastern Europe from the early modern period to the present (SEE MURAVYEVA ET AL., 2026)).

The institutionalisation of GBV within global governance, particularly through the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, has further shaped these debates. Since the adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, feminist activism has successfully positioned conflict-related sexual violence as a matter of international peace and security. However, a growing body of scholarship has critically examined the effects of this institutionalisation. While the WPS framework has expanded the recognition of gendered violence in conflict, it has also been criticised for narrowing the focus to sexual violence as an exceptional harm that is often detached from broader structures of inequality and everyday forms of violence (THOMPSON, 2019; SHEPHERD, 2020). Moreover, its emphasis on protection and victimhood risks reproducing gendered hierarchies while privileging state-centric and securitised responses.

These tensions become particularly visible in Central and Eastern European contexts, where, as recent research suggests, WPS agendas are often poorly implemented and largely symbolic, failing to address the multiplicity of gendered insecurities that operate at the domestic and regional levels. Rather than transforming underlying power relations, such frameworks can serve as formal commitments without any substantive impact, revealing a gap between global normative frameworks and the lived experiences of gendered violence (MYRTTINEN, 2022; O'SULLIVAN & KRULISOVÁ, 2023B).

These critiques point to a broader tension between expanding and containing the concept of GBV within policy frameworks. As Frazer and Hutchings (2020) suggest, the translation of feminist concepts into institutional settings does not resolve debates over meaning but reconfigures them within new political contexts. In practice, this often involves a shift toward forms of violence that are more visible, measurable, and actionable, while marginalising structural, economic, and discursive dimensions that are harder to capture. Against this backdrop, there is growing recognition that GBV must be understood as operating across multiple interconnected domains that extend beyond both the private sphere and armed conflict.

Feminist political economy approaches, for example, highlight how violence is linked to processes such as economic restructuring, labour precarity, and displacement, which shape patterns of vulnerability and survival (FEDERICI, 2004; TRUE, 2012; LYUBCHENKO, 2022; LINGHAM, 2024). Similarly, research on governance and institutions demonstrates how legal systems, bureaucratic practices, and security structures not only respond to violence but actively participate in producing and organising it (LAKE & HARTMAN, 2025). From this perspective, GBV is not confined to particular sites, such as the home or the battlefield, but is embedded in the broader organisation of social and political life.

COLONIAL PATRIARCHY AS A GLOBAL STRUCTURE OF INEQUALITY

Building on these insights, this Special Issue approaches GBV as a structuring feature of contemporary political orders, with particular attention to the contexts of war, transformation, and geopolitical contestation in Central and Eastern Europe. By situating gendered violence within the specific historical and political trajectories of the region, including the colonial, post-socialist transformation, ongoing conflict, and shifting geopolitical alignments, this Special Issue seeks to contribute to ongoing efforts to rethink GBV beyond established analytical and policy frameworks.

Against this backdrop, the Special Issue develops a conceptualisation of GBV not as a secondary or derivative effect of these global dynamics, but as a central mechanism through which political, economic, and social transformations unfold. In the context of what is often described as the global polycrisis (HELLEINER, 2024), marked by intersecting processes of war, authoritarian resurgence, economic precarity, and climate disruption (KANDIYOTI, 2019), GBV operates as both a modality of power across legal, institutional, discursive, and economic domains and a structuring condition of everyday life. Rather than treating GBV as an episodic breakdown of order, the Special Issue approaches GBV as constitutive of global inequalities. Militarisation, for instance, does not merely generate gender-based violence as a by-product; it reorganises gender relations, redistributes vulnerability, and legitimises hierarchies of sacrifice and protection. Similarly, the global rise of right-wing movements is not only discursively opposed to feminist gains but often accompanied by intensified forms of legal, institutional, and symbolic violence that regulate bodies,

families, and reproduction (*IBID.*). Climate-related crises and economic restructuring further exacerbate these dynamics, deepen existing inequalities and expose already marginalised groups to heightened forms of harm.

Such an understanding requires conceptualising patriarchy as a “structuring condition of global order” rather than a culturally bounded attribute (*JOHNSTON & MEGER, 2024*) embedded in colonial and imperial conditions. While the forms, intensities, and articulations of gender-based violence vary across contexts, they are embedded in global inequalities that link seemingly disparate sites. This perspective allows the Special Issue to avoid reproducing hierarchical narratives that position Central and Eastern Europe as uniquely or exceptionally prone to violence in contrast to a more “progressive” Western Europe (*PARVULESCU & BOATCĂ, 2022*). Instead, GBV is understood as a pervasive and adaptive feature of global political orders, manifesting differently across locations but rooted in shared colonial and imperial, as well as structural, conditions.

From this vantage point, Central and Eastern Europe emerges not as a peripheral case, but as a critical site for rethinking dominant assumptions about GBV and Europe more broadly. In this sense, this Special Issue contributes to the ongoing efforts to decentre and/or creolise (*IBID.*) Europe by foregrounding perspectives that illuminate how multiple historical trajectories, including imperial (dis)continuities, postsocialist transformations, and contemporary forms of inter-imperial entanglement, shape the production of both gender-based violence and resistance. Writing from Central and Eastern Europe does thus not entail exceptionalising the region. On the contrary, the analyses presented here demonstrate how insights generated from these contexts travel beyond them. The contributions highlight the political, structural, and institutional nature of GBV; the silencing, “un/speakability,” and normalisation of GBV; discursive and semiotic violence; the politicisation of trauma; militarisation and democratic backsliding; intersectionality and marginalisation; institutional failures and cultures of impunity; and feminist activism and agency.

FEMINIST WRITING, KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION, AND POLITICS OF RESPONSIBILITY IN TIMES OF THE POLYCRISIS

Writing about gender-based violence in the present conjuncture raises urgent questions about the conditions of knowledge production itself. This Special Issue has been conceptualised and written in a moment marked by overlapping and ongoing crises: Russia's war against Ukraine, Israel's genocide in Palestine, the US/Israeli invasion of Iran, and a broader global landscape shaped by authoritarianism, displacement, and ecological breakdown. These are not distant or concluded events, but unfolding realities that shape both who we are as academic subjects and the positions from which we write.

For us feminist scholars, this context complicates any straightforward analytical stance. As feminist research has long emphasised, violence does not occur in isolated moments but forms a continuum that links war, everyday insecurity, and structural inequalities (COCKBURN, 2004). To write in times of war and crisis, therefore, is not simply to document violence, but to grapple with its simultaneity, proximity, and uneven visibility across different contexts. It requires attentiveness to how certain forms of suffering become hyper-visible in global discourse, while others remain invisible, marginalised, or normalised.

At the same time, writing amidst ongoing violence raises ethical and political challenges. How can scholars analyse gender-based violence without reproducing hierarchies of victimhood or appropriating experiences that are not their own? How can feminist analysis remain critical of militarisation and armed conflict while also acknowledging the urgency of resistance in contexts of war? What kind of responsibility do we as scholars need to develop? These tensions are particularly pronounced in settings such as Central and Eastern Europe, where scholars may be directly affected by the conflicts they study, but they resonate equally in relation to other sites of violence, from Iran to Gaza to Venezuela and beyond.

Engaging these questions requires rethinking what it means to produce feminist knowledge under conditions of war and crisis. Rather than 'only' critically reflecting upon our own positionalities (GANI & KHAN, 2024), this

Special Issue embraces reflection, i.e. a centring of humility, and resistance to the temptation of performance (^(IBID.)). In this sense, writing about SGBV today is inseparable from broader struggles over whose knowledge counts, whose lives are grievable, and which forms of violence are rendered politically intelligible. By foregrounding perspectives from/in Central and Eastern Europe while situating them within a global landscape of intersecting patriarchal and imperial crises, this Special Issue seeks not only to offer fresh perspectives on gender-based violence but also to reflect on the possibilities of feminist scholarship engaging with questions of solidarity and care.

CONTESTED/CARING SOLIDARITIES

Solidarity and care cannot be taken for granted, nor are they automatic or innocent. They are shaped by geopolitical hierarchies, uneven visibility, and selective forms of empathy. The differential responses to contemporary conflicts, i.e. what is recognised as legitimate violence, whose suffering is publicly grievable, and which claims to justice are amplified or dismissed, reveal that solidarity and care are always politically mediated (^(SEE BINETTI ET AL., 2026)).

This raises difficult questions for both scholars and activists. What does it mean to stand in solidarity across contexts marked by radically different histories, positionalities, and exposures to violence? How can relationships be forged without reproducing hierarchies between those who speak and those who are spoken for, between sites that are rendered central and those that remain peripheral? And how can care be conceptualised not only as an interpersonal ethic, but as a radical political practice that confronts the multiple forms of gendered violence?

On the one hand, appeals to a shared global alliance risk overlooking the asymmetries that shape feminist struggles across locations. On the other hand, an exclusive focus on context-specificity can foreclose the possibility of building meaningful connections and collective responses to globally structured forms of violence. This Special Issue seeks to navigate this tension by approaching solidarity and care as practices that must be continuously negotiated while remaining oriented toward collective transformation. In this sense, care emerges as a central, yet ambivalent, category. Feminist scholars have long emphasised care as a site of resistance to militarised and extractive logics (^{(CANTILLON ET AL.,}

2023; HIMMELWEIT ET AL., 2014). At the same time, care can be co-opted into nationalist or exclusionary projects, for instance, when protection is mobilised to justify violence against those constructed as outsiders. Attending to care therefore also requires interrogating its conditions of possibility: Who is entitled to receive care, who is expected to provide it, and under what political, cultural and economic arrangements? Writing about SGBV in times of war and crisis thus involves engaging with the ethical and political dilemmas of proximity and distance, voice and representation, and critique and commitment. It requires acknowledging that feminist knowledge is produced within, rather than outside, the very structures of power it seeks to analyse. At the same time, it opens up possibilities for rethinking solidarity and care not as fixed positions, but as ongoing practices of negotiation, responsibility and collective transformation.

Moving beyond abstract universalism, we draw on Lazić and Stavrevska's (2024) suggestions to work towards pluriversality, plurivocality, and pluritudes. While these concepts were originally developed within the field of peace and conflict studies, we consider them equally valuable for broadening both the analysis and practice of addressing gender-based violence. They enable a shift from narrow, individualised, and state-centric understandings of violence toward approaches that recognise the plurality of lived experiences, the colonial and structural conditions underpinning violence, and the interconnectedness of bodies, territories, ecologies, and systems of power. In particular, pluriversality refers to the recognition that there is no single universal pathway to peace, justice, or liberation, but rather a plurality of coexisting worlds, ontologies, and political imaginaries. Closely connected, the concept of plurivocality emphasises the plurality of voices, silences, and experiences involved in the production of knowledge and calls for epistemic pluralism. The term pluritudes then refers to the plurality of collective and political possibilities through which peaceful coexistence may be organised, and an open space for imagining alternative forms of collective life based on relocation, communal autonomy, direct democracy, and relational forms of coexistence (ESCOBAR, 2020). These three dimensions are deeply interconnected and might help one work towards pluralising understandings of SGBV by centring multiple ontologies, voices, experiences, and political possibilities.

ROADMAP: GENDERED VIOLENCE, WAR, AND INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSES

The contributions in this Special Issue examine how gender-based violence is shaped by broader processes of war, democratic contestation, institutional transformation, and struggles over political legitimacy. Focusing on different empirical contexts, including domestic violence in Poland, conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) in Ukraine, and sexual harassment within the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU), these articles demonstrate that violence cannot be understood as an isolated or purely private phenomenon. Rather, violence emerges as deeply embedded in institutional cultures, militarisation, nationalism, and the politics of visibility and recognition. Together, the contributions reveal how periods of crisis and transformation reshape both the public understanding of violence and the possibilities for institutional and societal responses.

Sosnowska-Buxton and Ostaszewska's article "Hostages of/by the Language: The Origins, Process and Consequences of (Not) Talking About Domestic and Gender-based Violence in Poland" foregrounds the importance of language, discourse, and political imagination in shaping responses to domestic and gender-based violence in Poland. The authors argue that women and children become "hostages of/by language" when societies lack adequate conceptual and linguistic tools to name violence and render it politically visible. Drawing on feminist critical discourse analysis and norm translation theory, the article demonstrates that the debates surrounding domestic violence in Poland are inseparable from broader struggles over sovereignty, religion, national identity, and resistance to allegedly "foreign" liberal norms. Rather than presenting Poland simply as a backward or exceptional case of anti-gender backlash, the authors instead situate the tensions surrounding the Istanbul Convention within longer historical trajectories of silencing, legal marginalisation, and socio-linguistic underdevelopment. Importantly, the article shows that violence is reproduced not only through institutional failures but also through discursive omissions, euphemisms, and depoliticisation. In this sense, the contribution pushes the relevant scholarship beyond legal compliance frameworks by showing that implementation gaps are also fundamentally epistemic and linguistic.

The two Ukraine-focused contributions similarly highlight the relationship between violence and institutional structures, yet they also illustrate how wartime conditions may generate new forms of feminist mobilisation, political agency, and institutional reform. In “Testing the Norms of the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda: Ukraine’s Decolonial Feminist Response to Russia’s Conflict-Related Sexual Violence,” Johnson and Tsiko examine how Ukrainian feminist organisations responded to Russia’s use of CRSV between 2014 and 2024. Situated within broader debates surrounding the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda, the article explores whether the international norms surrounding CRSV can genuinely support local feminist organising or whether they reproduce hierarchical and colonial forms of knowledge production. The authors engage critically with longstanding feminist critiques that global CRSV frameworks often reduce women to passive victims while privileging certain forms of violence over others. However, rather than dismissing these frameworks altogether, the article demonstrates how Ukrainian feminists strategically appropriated the language of CRSV and the WPS agenda to secure international support, pressure the Ukrainian state, and advance institutional reforms. A key contribution of the article lies in its emphasis on feminist self-organisation and decolonial agency. The authors trace how Ukrainian feminist and women’s organisations, drawing on decades of activism against gender-based violence, rapidly mobilised following Russia’s full-scale invasion in 2022. These organisations provided humanitarian support, psychological assistance, legal advocacy, documentation of crimes, and public awareness campaigns, often more quickly and effectively than formal institutions. At the same time, the article shows that Ukrainian feminist actors did not uncritically adopt international frameworks, but rather adapted and expanded these norms through locally grounded, decolonial feminist perspectives shaped by Ukraine’s own historical and geopolitical experiences. In doing so, the article challenges simplistic assumptions that international norms inevitably impose Western epistemologies on local contexts. Instead, in this case, Ukrainian feminist organisations emerge as active translators, negotiators, and producers of knowledge.

Gordiienko’s article “Law, War, and Gender-Based Violence: Addressing Sexual Misconduct in the Ukrainian Armed Forces Amidst Ongoing Hostilities” shifts the attention inward toward the Ukrainian military itself, examining sexual harassment and gender-based violence

within the AFU during the ongoing full-scale war. While women's participation in the military has expanded dramatically since 2022, the article demonstrates that their formal inclusion does not automatically dismantle entrenched patriarchal structures or militarised masculinities. Instead, the increased female participation simultaneously exposes persistent institutional shortcomings and generates pressure for reform. Situating the AFU within the broader feminist scholarship on militarisation and hegemonic masculinity, the article analyses emerging legislative initiatives, gender advisory mechanisms, and institutional responses to sexual harassment.

Importantly, the article highlights the contradictory nature of the wartime gender transformation. On the one hand, women's participation in the military disrupts traditional gender norms and creates new forms of visibility, authority, and agency. On the other hand, militarised institutions continue to normalise hierarchy, silence, and forms of internal violence that are often obscured by patriotic narratives of national defence and sacrifice. Gordienko's analysis therefore demonstrates that women's wartime empowerment is neither linear nor uncomplicated. Rather, the military becomes a contested site in which feminist reforms coexist alongside persistent cultures of impunity and institutional resistance. Particularly significant is the article's discussion of gender advisors and gender focal points as intermediaries tasked with translating WPS norms into military practice. Their experiences reveal both the possibilities and limits of institutional change within highly masculinised environments.

The paper "The Invisibility of Violence Against Women in Prostitution: Hungarian Women's Narrative Strategies Within and Beyond the Industry" by Fanni Des explores how violence against women in the global prostitution industry is rendered invisible through structural, economic, and narrative mechanisms. Through an analysis of narratives of Hungarian women, the paper argues that prostitution is shaped by unequal relations between wealthier "core" countries and economically disadvantaged "semi-peripheral" countries, where women's bodies become commodified within global systems of exploitation. As such, the paper offers several insights: First, it highlights how post-socialist poverty and intersecting inequalities that particularly affect Roma women increase women's vulnerability to prostitution and trafficking. Second, it demonstrates that women in prostitution experience constant violence

from clients, pimps, and partners while receiving only limited institutional protection. At the same time, in prostitution, violence is often normalised through transactional and patriarchal logics, and systems of control intentionally undermine solidarity among women. Third, the paper emphasises the differences in how women narrate their experiences. While women still involved in prostitution often minimise or individualise the violence they experienced, those who have exited the industry and accessed shelters or therapy are better able to recognise their experiences as part of broader structural inequalities. Overall, the paper shifts attention to the severe psychological and social consequences of prostitution and links these inherently traumatic experiences to long-term feelings of shame, dissociation, and difficulties in intimate relationships. The article concludes that the invisibility of violence in prostitution is produced not by the absence of harm, but by patriarchal capitalist structures that silence women's trauma and sustain the global sex industry.

The paper "Researching the Un/Speakability of Gender-Based Violence in Academia: Promoting an Interdisciplinary, Intersectional, and Multi-Level Context-Oriented Approach" by Christa Binswanger, Melanie Fleischhacker, Eva-Maria Graf and Andrea Zimmermann, proposes an interdisciplinary and intersectional approach to understanding the "un/speakability" of GBV in academia, i.e. the difficulties victims, survivors and bystanders face in naming, voicing, and reporting their experiences. For this purpose, the authors develop a comprehensive research methodology that combines qualitative tools, such as interviews and discourse analysis, with quantitative surveys. This multi-level framework examines GBV at the socio-cultural (macro), organisational (meso), and individual (micro) levels and highlights how societal norms, institutional structures, and personal experiences are discursively intertwined. Together, these levels shape the recognition, reporting, and normalisation of violence within academic environments. The paper concludes that despite the high prevalence of GBV in academia, the reporting rates remain low due to both "network silence," including institutional silencing, failures by those in power to acknowledge violence, and self-silencing by victims/survivors; and the hegemonic masculine norms that normalise exclusionary and harmful behaviours. Though the recent UniSAFE survey has yielded important insights into GBV in academia, a qualitative analysis of the multi-level intertwinement of discourses and a genuine intersectional perspective are

still largely missing from this area. Although the framework developed by the authors is globally relevant and applicable, the paper pays particular attention to Central and Eastern Europe, emphasising the importance of analysing the region's diverse historical, political, and cultural contexts rather than treating it as homogeneous.

The paper "Discredited and Disgraced: Gender-Based Violence against Women Politicians and Journalists in Slovakia" by Kristína Gotthardová examines the rise of gender-based violence against women politicians and journalists in Slovakia following the 2023 parliamentary elections and situates it within broader processes of democratic backsliding and anti-gender mobilisation. Based on interviews with experts, politicians, and journalists, Gotthardová employs the concept of 'semiotic violence' to show how women are discredited through sexualised, nationalist, and misogynistic labels, including "prostitutes," "foreign agents," and "Soros's girls." These attacks not only target women personally but also the democratic and feminist values they represent. As such, GBV functions as a deliberate political strategy aimed at silencing ideological opposition, limiting women's participation in politics and journalism, and undermining democratic pluralism. Despite the widespread recognition of GBV as a structural problem, the paper laments that institutional responses to it remain weak, forcing women to rely on individual coping strategies such as resilience, self-censorship, or withdrawal from social media and public discourse. It concludes that the normalisation of such semiotic violence poses a serious threat to gender equality, freedom of expression, and democratic representation in Slovakia.

These contributions highlight the broader dynamics that resonate across the Special Issue. First, they demonstrate that gender-based violence is inherently political rather than private or exceptional. Whether occurring in the home, during armed conflict, in public, or within military institutions, violence reflects and reproduces wider systems of power and exclusion. Second, the articles collectively stress the importance of discourse, naming, and in/visibility. The ability to recognise violence publicly and institutionally shapes whether a meaningful intervention becomes possible. Third, the contributions point to the ambivalent role of international norms and frameworks. While instruments such as the Istanbul Convention or the WPS agenda may create opportunities for reform, their

implementation remains mediated by local political struggles, institutional cultures, historical trajectories, and translation processes. Finally, the articles underscore the central role of feminist activism and knowledge production in challenging institutional silences and exposing systemic failures. Feminist actors emerge not simply as advocates for women's rights but also as important political actors engaged in broader struggles over accountability, citizenship, and democratic transformation.

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NOTE

This Special Issue is based upon the work of COST Action CA23149 – Democratization at Stake? Comparing Anti-Gender Politics in CEE and NME Countries (Antigender-Politics), supported by COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology).

We are grateful to the anonymous reviewers of this Special Issue for their insightful comments and careful engagement with the manuscripts. We also thank the contributors for their feedback on this Introduction, which helped refine its framing and arguments. Particular thanks are due to Mila O Sullivan and Michal Kolmaš for their thoughtful comments and suggestions on earlier versions of this text.

Maryna Shevtsova acknowledges funding from the Research Foundation – Flanders (FWO) under grant agreement No. 1295522N.

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