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Research Articles

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
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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 Sjoberg 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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Researching the Un/Speakability of Gender-Based Violence in Academia: Promoting an Interdisciplinary, Intersectional, and Multi-Level Context-Oriented Approach

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ABSTRACT

This paper introduces an interdisciplinary, context-oriented, and multi-level approach to analysing the un/speakability of gender-based violence (GBV) in academia. It argues that in-depth understandings of GBV require attention to nationally and culturally embedded contexts alongside interdisciplinarity. Drawing on cultural studies, gender studies, and linguistics, the approach adopts a social constructivist perspective in which gender and sexuality are shaped by power relations and intersectional positionalities manifested in (non-)verbal practices and performances. Building on insights from the UniSAFE study, the contribution suggests going beyond existing approaches by proposing a multi-level, discourse-based framework encompassing macro-/socio-cultural, meso-/organisational and micro-/individual dimensions. This allows for a profound and contextualised understanding of the ambiguities, grey zones and difficulties of voicing GBV. It also links individual lived experiences to larger systems of power. The proposed research design integrates qualitative and quantitative methods, using multiple sites, researchers and sources. It offers a robust framework to examine GBV in Central and Eastern European academia and beyond.

KEYWORDS

gender-based violence, un/speakability, academia, interdisciplinarity, intersectionality, context-orientation, multi-level analysis

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INTRODUCTION

Gender-based violence (GBV) denotes a widespread, global phenomenon that affects all social contexts from the large-scale social, political, and economic levels down to organisations, communities and the lives and experiences of individuals. It can be defined as “any type of harm that is perpetrated against a person or group of people because of their factual or perceived sex, gender, sexual orientation and/or gender identity” (COUNCIL OF EUROPE, 2025). From a socio-cultural perspective, such violence is a manifestation of larger societal patterns of dominance and oppression, of “gendered systems of power” (FITZGERALD & CORTINA, 2018, P. 218). On the one hand, GBV is dependent on historical development and national frameworks and plays out differently in various European contexts. On the other hand, it is an expression of systemic (gendered) power relations and dependencies that is evident throughout Europe and Western societies. These gender relations are characterised by heteronormativity correlated with heterosexual desire (BUTLER, 1990), in which concepts of essentialised femininity and masculinity (HAUSEN, 1995; MAIHOFFER, 1995) are linked to existing narratives, norms and discourses surrounding violence (CAMERON, 2024). Feminist and queer movements have long been fighting for equal rights and against GBV, challenging societal forces that essentialise and normalise violent and misogynist discourses and practices. Yet, GBV persists on a global scale (BONDESTAM & LUNDQVIST, 2020, P. 389) and anti-feminism, a re-traditionalisation of gender roles and retro-sexism represent current trends (CAMERON 2024, P. 3FF; BUTLER 2024; PILYARCHUK & GRAF, 2026).

The normalising yet also the challenging of gender regimes thereby happens in and through language and discourse(s) (FAIRCLOUGH & WODAK, 1997; WETHERELL, 1998; LAZAR, 2014; WETHERELL & EDLEY, 2014), e.g., via formal policies or informal disclosures such as #MeToo (VON MIQUEL ET AL., 2025). Thus, to analyse these complex power relations in a comprehensive and precise manner, sufficient attention must be paid to the discursive interconnectedness of public discourse, institutional structures, individual and institutional practices and modes of subjectivation. Furthermore, all these aspects need to be considered in a context-specific manner. While there is a continued high prevalence of GBV in European societies as a whole (e.g., between 11% [the figure for Latvia] and 41% [that of France] of working women have experienced unwanted sexual behaviour at the workplace according to

an EU survey; ^(EUROPEAN UNION, 2024)), specific sectors and institutions such as the extremely gendered organisations of the sports sector and, more recently, academia have come to public attention in this regard. With 62% of the respondents having experienced GBV at their research institutions, the recent UniSAFE survey, which was funded by the EU and included 46 research organisations, yielded alarming results ^(LIPINSKY, 2024). Only 13% officially reported their experiences, pointing to the workings of a systemic, normalised and silencing gendered regime in higher education, which persists despite existing equality measures and interventions and is discursively perpetuated ^(PILINKAITĖ SOTIROVIČ ET AL., 2024).

Academia is often perceived as a seemingly gender-neutral, meritocratic organisation ^(HARK & HOFBAUER, 2018; JACKSON-COLE & GOLDMEIER, 2023). However, research on the glass ceiling or the leaky pipeline phenomena ^(MITTNER, 2023) has long evinced that academia, too, builds on and manifests larger societal patterns of oppression, which result in “inequality regimes” ^(ACKER, 2006). These regimes disproportionally affect some more than others, e.g., racialised women or LGBTQI+ people ^(FEDINA ET AL., 2018; UNISAFE, 2022A; GUSCHKE, 2023; PILINKAITĖ SOTIROVIČ ET AL., 2024). Accordingly, vulnerability to GBV depends not only on gender, but also on further social categories and contexts. GBV and such particular vulnerabilities in academia as an organisational context are still under-researched ^(PANTELMAUN & BLACKMORE, 2023). To date, only a few studies have taken a broader approach that considers social categories beyond gender ^(BONDESTAM & LUNDQVIST, 2020, P. 8; GUSCHKE, 2023). Furthermore, only more recently have “microaggressions [and other forms of GBV] and their gatekeeping role in academia at all levels” ^(BRANLAT, 2023, P. 173) received increased attention. Qualitative studies on the multi-faced lived experiences and understandings of GBV in the context of larger discursive contexts, systemic pressures and (gendered) organisational cultures are largely missing.

In this paper, we propose a specific methodology for an interdisciplinary, intersectional and contextualised multi-level research design to address these research gaps. Existing research on GBV in academia has primarily studied prevalence or experiences and perceptions of students ^(LIPINSKY & SCHREDL, 2023), considering academia primarily as an educational space. Yet, other academic groups such as, e.g., pre- and post-doc researchers or racialised staff members ^(GUSCHKE, 2023) in academia as a working space

would equally profit from a more context-specific and in-depth research going beyond prevalence and determinants (SEE PILINKAITĖ SOTIROVIČ & BLAŽYTĖ, 2023). Therefore, our suggested approach includes groups that are characterised by particular vulnerabilities or multiple inequalities, and focuses on the relation between their individual experiences and practices and larger – institutional and societal – systems of power. Un/speakability and affective framings thereby gain special attention, as GBV is closely related to victims'/survivors'¹ difficulties in terms of understanding, voicing and reporting (FERNANDO & PRASAD, 2019; HERSHCOVIS ET AL., 2021). As “part of the unspoken forces of organizational worlds” (HEARN & PARKIN, 2001, P. 11), silence and silencing play an important role in maintaining inequality regimes within organisations (PILINKAITĖ SOTIROVIČ ET AL., 2024). Understanding such “network silence” (HERSHCOVIS ET AL., 2021) means acknowledging all the different groups that have been subjected to GBV, and contributing missing insights into context-specific institutional and societal mechanisms that render possible the persistence of GBV.

All these aspects lead to challenges that need to be addressed by an adequate methodological design that would allow for analysing the different levels on which the violent effects of a gendered regime manifest themselves. The proposed approach responds to these methodological challenges. It has been designed in an interdisciplinary exchange between cultural studies, gender studies and linguistics as both social and cultural sciences to address the aspects raised here. It relies on a multi-level and mixed methods design which puts discourse centre stage and is qualitative at its core. Furthermore, it carries the possibility of a precise contextualisation that would move beyond simplified understandings, for example the understanding of *the* Central and Eastern European as a homogenous context. As it takes societal, institutional and individual factors into account, such an approach can be applied to researching any higher educational context. At the same time, it advocates a nuanced analysis of context-specific discourses and practices, facilitating an examination of their relationship to European policies addressing GBV or international norms emerging within higher education systems. In the context of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), this allows for a more complex understanding that unravels it as a region defined by diverse historical and political frameworks, discursive practices and understandings that cross national boundaries and ask for transnational collaboration. Such specificity is essential,

as curbing GBV requires policies and tools tailored to the particular realities of each context, while concurrently considering its overarching features.

The paper is structured as follows: in the first part, we outline relevant concepts such as GBV in academia as an extremely gendered organisation, and un/speakability. We also summarise the recent UniSAFE study with a particular focus on the CEE countries and conclude by formulating the research desiderata, which inspire our promoted research approach. This approach is detailed in the second part of our paper. We start out with theorising our interdisciplinary, intersectional and multi-level research design before addressing its potential operationalisation and challenges. While the suggested approach is suitable for any academic context, we end by discussing its application against the backdrop of CEE academia.

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AND ITS UN/SPEAKABILITY IN EUROPEAN ACADEMIA

Before presenting our own methodological approach, we will zoom in on some relevant concepts with regard to GBV in academia and summarise the state of the art of the existing research with a special focus on CEE. Furthermore, we will lay out the serious consequences of GBV centering on un/speakability and silencing especially on the institutional and individual levels as carved out by current analyses.

GBV IN ACADEMIA

Generally, GBV is conceptualised as a particular form of violence. Violence represents a socially constructed concept whose interpretation and perception have been shifting across times and cultures. Galtung (1990) introduced a triangular model of direct, structural, and cultural forms of violence that relate to physical force, attitudes, beliefs and symbolic spheres. As such, violence often spills out in and through language and discourses (BOU-FRANCH, 2016, P. 2). To concretise GBV, we draw on the definition from the recent UniSAFE project (2021–2023), an extensive EU funded research project which involved 46 research institutions (universities and research funding organisations) across 15 Eastern and Western European countries in a survey. The survey was disseminated to members

of staff and students (18 years and older) in Belgium, the Czech Republic, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Poland, Serbia, Spain, Sweden, Turkey, and the United Kingdom, and among an international association of mobile researchers (UNISAFE, 2022B). Sample data from 42,186 respondents was thereby collected, and it included data from four CEE countries: the Czech Republic, Lithuania, Poland and Serbia.

UniSAFE's broad understanding of GBV – an extension of the EU's definition in the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (COUNCIL OF EUROPE, 2011) – encompasses “all forms [of violence]: physical violence, sexual violence, psychological violence, economic violence, sexual harassment, gender harassment, and organizational harassment – in both online and offline contexts” (UNISAFE, 2022A). GBV exists on a continuum which includes a variety of actual or potential (violent, transgressive or demeaning) behaviours and related attitudes, ranging from sexist or offensive comments, bullying, exclusion, or sabotage to physical transgression, abuse, or rape (BONDESTAM & LUNDQVIST, 2020). Some of these forms are more explicit, clearly defined, and legally punishable, while others are implicit, subtle, and/or difficult to grasp or recognise, and thus often remain unpunished. The “more frequent, less intense, and often unchallenged gender harassment” (SOJO ET AL., 2016, P. 222) represents the most widespread form. It includes a range of non-/verbal, degrading, insulting and hostile behaviours such as sexist remarks and jokes, sexual references, and work-family or gender policing, e.g., comments about who is traditionally responsible for care and domestic work. Such behaviours often take the form of “microaggressions” (YEP & LESCURE, 2019). As such, they are hard to pinpoint, label and persecute, yet, according to Sojo et al. (2016, P. 222), these “low intensity experiences” nevertheless often have damaging effects due to their high frequency. GBV can thus be a “cumulative experience” in which harmful experiences add up over time (BERDAHL, 2007, P. 645) and these experiences tend to gradually escalate into more severe forms of violence. This continuum also bears on how people experience and react when it comes to reporting. Another significant factor is the social, institutional and national context in which GBV occurs.

To research GBV as a continuum and in all its forms in academia, institutions of higher education must be viewed and contextualized as “(extremely) gendered organizations” (ACKER, 1990; SASSON-LEVY, 2011).

A gendered organisation draws on and re-establishes gendered institutional norms and hierarchies and includes both vertical and horizontal gender segregations (ACKER, 1990, P. 140). A significant underrepresentation of women in leadership positions, their partial exclusion in some fields of work and markedly different experiences for those with a minority status are the consequences (SCHWITER ET AL., 2011; FLORES & BAÑUELOS, 2021). Sasson-Levy (2011, P. 393), who coined the concept of “extremely gendered organizations”, argues that the gendering of organisations occurs at the structural (e.g., policies), the cultural (e.g., ideologies about femininity and masculinity) and the interactional levels (e.g., interpersonal relations). To understand their simultaneous, intertwined and complex influences on the gendering of organisations, all three levels must be empirically and analytically considered.

Academia as a(n) (extremely) gendered organisation relies on a specific formation of subjectivity that can be conceived as bourgeois masculinity (MAIHOFFER, 1995). The central aspects of this kind of subjectivity are domination and (self-)subjugation (FOUCAULT, 1989), which are also key for becoming a successful academic. Therefore, a specific masculinity has evolved as hegemonic masculinity (CONNELL, 1995) in academia. It features the following characteristics: the ideal scientist and researcher, the “homo academicus” (BOURDIEU, 2001), is conceptualised as male, rational, knowledge-oriented, competition-driven, dedicated to his work, socially independent and without caring responsibilities (ZIMMERMANN & WEIBEL, 2020; ZIMMERMANN, 2022). Mechanisms of homosocial reproduction (VAN DEN BRINK & BENSCHOP, 2014) maintain this hegemonic masculinity in recruiting (NENTWICH ET AL., 2021) and male networking. Accordingly, the seemingly gender-neutral concepts of excellence and meritocracy stipulated for academia need to be questioned as they invisibly (re-)produce and privilege a historically developed form of masculinity that constantly asserts itself as hegemonic. It goes without saying that academia pressures male academics too by fostering and reproducing the above-mentioned characteristics of masculinity. Still, the concepts of excellence and meritocracy are proposed as a system of equal opportunities, gender and sexual neutrality, and a lack of biases, yet disregard “intersections of privilege with talent, effort and achievements” (JACKON & GOLDMEIER, 2023, P. 99). Major inequalities regarding gender and sexuality become visible, for instance, in skewed university

demographics, glass ceiling /cliff and leaky pipeline phenomena (MITTNER, 2023) and an overall chilly climate (BRITTON, 2017; LEE & MCCABE, 2021).

Such male- and masculine-dominated working environments as academia, with their hierarchical power structures and performance pressures as well as their precarious working conditions, are notorious for GBV (O'CONNOR ET AL., 2021). Also, in academia, power is placed in the hands of a few, turning them into gatekeepers for careers, funding, and professional advancement (SCHÜTZ ET AL., 2021; PANTELMANN & BLACKMORE, 2023; PANTELMANN & WÄLTJ, 2023). Within such an environment, it does not come as a surprise that GBV is a serious and extensive, even a ubiquitous and systemic problem (LIPINSKY, 2024, P. 6). Context-specific results might be difficult to compare (BONDESTAM & LUNDQVIST, 2020; LIPINSKY & SCHREDL, 2023), but current data show that the relevant numbers in the US-American and European context remain remarkably stable and high (HATTERY, 2022; ZIMMERMANN ET AL., 2023). Bondestam and Lundqvist found that GBV "occurs in all disciplines in higher education and is reported by all groups (students, doctoral students, all staff)" (2020, P. 401).

THE UNISAFE STUDY

In this vein, the recent UniSAFE survey reports alarming rates: 62% of the respondents had experienced at least one form of GBV since they started working or studying at their institution (UNISAFE, 2022A). Its more fine-grained analyses found that women (66%) and non-binary people (74%) are significantly more likely to experience GBV than other groups (except for physical violence, which was found more in the answers of non-binary people and men). Moreover, respondents who identify as LGBTQ+ (68%), who reported a disability or chronic illness (72%), and who belong to an ethnic minority group (69%) were more likely to have experienced at least one incident of GBV compared to those who do not identify with these characteristics (UNISAFE, 2022C). In relation to all the forms and intersectional dimensions, cismen are disproportionally less affected by GBV and it is mostly they who act as its perpetrators.

Unfortunately, the UniSAFE survey data was not interpreted in terms of nation states. Therefore, it does not provide a direct response to the question of the specificities of GBV in each individual participating

country's academia, including those of the four CEE countries – the Czech Republic, Lithuania, Poland and Serbia. But the results reveal that GBV is a serious and widespread problem throughout Europe, preventing, among other consequences, many talented academics from continuing in their fields. The systemic structures and power inequalities within academic institutions in these CEE countries bear resemblance to those in other European countries: the aggregated survey results provide evidence of various forms of GBV throughout European academia, including psychological violence, sexual harassment, gender harassment, economic violence, sexual violence, physical violence and online violence. Furthermore, some qualitative inquiries were conducted: Pilinkaitė Sotirovič and Blažytė (2024) conducted 54 individual interviews² which focus on individual experiences and highlight, e.g., that most often different types of violence interlink and overlap. Like in the UniSAFE study as a whole, the interviewees were not differentiated into national or institutional contexts or particular academic groups with specific vulnerabilities. Thus, the results contribute to Europe-wide understandings and not to understandings of specific contexts, such as specific CEE countries or intersectional positionalities. The interviews suggest that throughout Europe, hierarchical structures, power inequalities and institutional contexts like universities and research funding organisations (RFOs) facilitate GBV (IBID., P. 213 FF.).

Besides the online survey and interviews, the UniSAFE project also entailed a call for national expert reports that address some general specifics of each European country. The focus here was on policies and legal frameworks. A large number of CEE countries contributed such national reports, namely Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, and Slovenia (UNISAFE, 2021).³ All of these CEE countries except Serbia joined the EU after 2004. The national reports of the twelve CEE countries attest to similarities and differences that allow for an initial categorisation of how GBV is perceived and potentially addressed in existing policies. Regarding the similarities, all the reports from the CEE countries indicate negative reactions and resistance from academic and research institutions to the idea of engaging in the topic of GBV in academia; all the reports, however, also point out individual GBV cases that led to public attention and forced leaders and managements of universities and RFOs to react. Furthermore, in all the CEE countries, the topic emerged only after the country had joined the

EU⁴ – which might point to some influence of EU guidelines and requirements for education and research within the EU (*IBID.*). Still, there are major differences in the importance GBV is given in universities or RFOs within the group of CEE countries. A first overview of the legal, discursive and policy frameworks is provided by the “Report on the European Policy Baseline” (*FAJMONOVÁ ET AL., 2021*), which analysed and compared the country reports. Even though in all the participating CEE countries, GBV is addressed in a general law, there are significant differences among the countries in this respect: as such, only the Czech Republic has developed action plans for implementing policies to fight GBV in universities and RFOs based on the Istanbul Convention. It provides services for victims/survivors and requires evaluations and a report about the achievements in this area to the Secretariat of the Government Council for Gender Equality (*IBID., P. 95*). Yet, only in Lithuania and Romania did sexual harassment at universities become a public issue after the #MeToo movement started. Concurrently, the authors of the Czech national report highlight a huge lack of a general understanding of how harmful GBV is for victims/survivors in society. Thus, even if the Czech Republic has implemented significant steps at the level of institutional policies towards the elimination of GBV in universities and RFOs, the general societal attitude towards GBV shows little positive development: neither the #MeToo movement nor the Istanbul Convention was perceived in positive ways in the national media (*IBID., P. 5*). The authors of the Czech national report conclude that “the topic of GBV is still largely dismissed in Czech society” (*IBID.*).

THE UN/SPEAKABILITY OF GBV IN ACADEMIA

Regarding the consequences of GBV, young academics such as pre- and post-doc researchers are particularly vulnerable groups due to their existential dependency, the competitiveness in the research system and precarious working conditions (*EU 2022.CZ, 2022, P. 1*). Thus, an intersectional positioning due to age, employment status, care-responsibilities, sexual orientation, class, ethnicity/race or disability can foster additional organisational, economic or social power imbalances and dependencies and a particular exposure to GBV. Prior psychological studies about the effects of GBV in workplaces such as academia have also indicated that serious psychosocial, physiological and professional consequences occur not only for the individuals involved, but also for bystanders, teams and the entire

work organisation (BONDESTAM & LUNDQVIST, 2020, P. 402; FITZGERALD & CORTINA, 2018). The adverse effects for organisations may include a high personnel turnover, a spending of resources on cases or legal fees, reduced productivity and creativity and the employer having an overall bad reputation (E.G., LESKINEN ET AL., 2011; FITZGERALD & CORTINA, 2018).

Yet measures against GBV within gendered organisations are often resisted or met with a cultural re-gendering via discursive practices and a recreation of the organisation's gender hierarchy (PAWELCZYK, 2021, P. 552; PILINKAITĖ SOTIROVIČ ET AL., 2024, P. 3). Though measures and guidelines have been implemented to create safe spaces, "what has been done (...) [up] to this point has not been sufficient, nor effective, and [has been] too much centered on the individual" (BONDESTAM & LUNDQVIST, 2020, P. 412). Though the UniSAFE project adopted a holistic and systemic approach, it has not centred on understanding the intricate complexities and interdependencies that exist between individuals, organisations and larger systems. According to Hattery (2022), GBV in all its (non-)verbal forms is still used as a deliberate strategy and tool to maintain gender inequality in academia. It is employed to police and sanction particularly those who transgress hegemonic gender constructions or invert gendered hierarchies. Moreover, university leaders appear to make limited efforts to address GBV within their policies (HUCK ET AL., 2022), supporting those who possess and generate privilege and power, often for fear of losing reputation and prestige (PILINKAITĖ SOTIROVIČ ET AL., 2024, P. 1). This creates a "network silence" (HERSHCOVIS ET AL., 2021) on the organisational level that allows for GBV to persist as a taboo in academia (PANTELMANN & WÄLTJ, 2023).

Building on Hershcovis et al. (2021), Pilinkaitė Sotirovič et al. (2024) identified beliefs, behaviours and attitudes that contribute to organisational "network silence" and its three main dimensions, "silencing", "not hearing" and "self-silencing", and thus to unspeakability in academia. On the individual level, the effects of network silence play out as non-reporting, un/speakability and silencing. Most of the relevant survey-based research in academia documents that even if legal and societal attitudes and conditions have changed, the number of official reports of GBV is consistently low (E.G., MACNEELA ET AL. 2022A, 2022B): in this vein, the UniSAFE survey evinced that among the respondents who had experienced GBV, only 13% (23% of the staff members and 7% of the students) reported the incidents (for an

overview of similar results, see (BONDES-TAM & LUNDQVIST, 2020, P. 40)). The three main reasons for the non-reporting/remaining silent were insecurity about whether the incident was serious enough to report (47%), not recognising the behaviour as violence at the time (i.e., insecurity in recognising, interpreting, and labelling and thus conceptualising and expressing experiences; see also (VALLS ET AL., 2016) (31%) and a lack of faith in organisational reactions (26%) (UNISAFE 2022C; LIPINSKY, 2024, P. 22). Other reasons include fear of retaliation, particularly in connection with the future of one's academic and professional career (LINKOVA ET AL., 2023). Lipinsky (2024), however, found that reports of GBV increase with one's professional and academic status. This suggests inequalities in the access to support and in the distribution of negative professional and psychosocial consequences (IBID., P. 22FF).

In previous research, unspeakability has often been associated with rape and the hegemonic scripts and discourses that govern how rape trauma can or cannot be articulated (LONEY-HOWES, 2018; CAMERON, 2024). Such socio-culturally widely circulated and discursively powerful myths form the basis of "rape culture," which stereotypically shames femininity and blames victims/survivors, thereby causing additional emotional strain (LAVOYER, 2024). Yet, affirmative consent policies and laws, which are implemented in most European universities, imply a normalisation of resistance and voicing against GBV (METZ ET AL., 2021), and thus an acceptance of its speakability, creating further tensions for victims/survivors.

Especially in cases of stark power imbalances, remaining silent or self-silencing becomes a strategy against social isolation and retaliation alongside a loss of control (LIPINSKY, 2024; PILINKAITE SOTIROVIC ET AL., 2024). Network silence tends to support the gendered power relations and established networks of institutional breadwinners and to protect institutional interests, i.e., funds, rankings or prestige (IBID., P. 4–5). In such an atmosphere, those who seek to report incidents of GBV are perceived as tarnishing the institution; their claims are often belittled or "not heard". The reported incidents are framed as isolated cases, and the psychosocial burden of the reporting and responsibilities is placed solely upon those affected although "a systemwide change to the culture and climate in higher education is required" (NATIONAL ACADEMIES OF SCIENCES, ENGINEERING, AND MEDICINE, 2018, P. 176). Again, these aspects point to a high relevance of socio-cultural gender norms in academia: hegemonic masculinity leads to inequality

regimes that normalise and cover up the unspeakability of GBV. The discursive and affective practices involved are “part of the gendered domination of organizations” (PILINKAITĖ SOTIROVIČ ET AL., 2024, P. 3; FERNANDO & PRASAD, 2019) and influence possibilities of voicing, listening to and defining experiences of GBV on the individual level (CAMERON, 2024). All in all, network silence seems to be a core reason for the low reporting rates in today’s European academia. Further, an in-depth understanding of how such an atmosphere influences the lived experiences and practices of victims/survivors or bystanders seems to be urgently needed to bring about real change.

TOWARDS AN ENHANCED RESEARCH PERSPECTIVE ON GBV IN ACADEMIA

Regarding the unspeakability and silence surrounding GBV, applying “network silence” (HERSHCOVICS ET AL., 2021) to academia (PILINKAITĖ SOTIROVIČ ET AL., 2024) is an innovative and promising starting point for an analysis of GBV, as suggested in this paper. The concept of “network silence” does not only centre on the victim as the person who is silent but considered responsible for speaking up (HERSHCOVICS ET AL., 2021), but casts a wider scope of organisational responsibility for silence and pays attention to social network compositions and belief systems. Additionally, it allows for a discursive view.

Yet, the proposed interdisciplinary, intersectional and multi-level approach adopts an even larger scope and fills further gaps: it analyses individual, organisational and societal perceptions, forms and discourses of GBV, building on multi-level approaches as proposed, e.g., by Sasson-Levy (2011) or in the UniSAFE project. In contrast to the latter, however, it centres not on policy as its analytical basis and starting point, but on the discursive webs that permeate and are embedded in both society as a whole and academia. It also focuses on the individual meanings, perceptions, understandings and pressures, i.e., on the lived experiences of the individual. For the first time, non-reporting is related to the concept of un/speakability, which captures and explores the uncertainties, ambiguities, grey zones and difficulties of understanding and voicing GBV. Unspeakability allows us to investigate the discursive closures and affective ambivalences involved. At the same time, speakability points to the discursive circumstances that lead to speaking about GBV. Thus, un/speakability considers the lived experiences of individuals as an intertwinement

of personal, organisational and societal discourses and practices. In this way, the outlined approach also takes intersectional positionalities into account. While the survey as well as some qualitative contributions to the UniSAFE study did highlight the significant role of intersectional inequalities in GBV in academia, the dimension of the overlap of categories of difference such as gender and racialisation or multiple inequalities received rather limited attention (SEE, E.G., PILINKAITĖ SOTIROVIČ ET AL., 2024). Our multi-level approach provides suggestions for analysing intersectional inequalities and GBV in more depth. As such, a broad understanding of un/speakability underlies this paper and its approach that goes beyond rape discourses, myths and acts of sexual violence. The mechanisms and effects of silencing and self-censorship are investigated as they play out on the continuum of GBV and underlie individual and collective processes (HERSHCOVIS ET AL., 2021; DUFFY ET AL., 2023).

More generally, our proposed, predominantly qualitative research methodology takes the findings of the UniSAFE survey and the national reports as a starting point and zooms in on the relevant yet still under-researched aspects. The novelty of the proposed methodology lies in its potential for an in-depth, discourse-based examination of context-specific factors that lead to GBV in each national research and education setting. The discursive analysis of the specific context on the macro level allows us to understand how different discursive manifestations, i.e., dominant and alternative discourses regarding gender, sexuality and violence, shape GBV not only in each society, but also in its academia. This again helps us to map out specificities as well as differences on the micro, meso and macro level, such as the specifics in different CEE countries like the Czech Republic, Lithuania and Romania. As such, the specificities of GBV in a given CEE country can be examined within its unique historical, societal and cultural context. A final novelty is the focus on the embeddedness and intertwining of discourses, which influence and shape policies, organisational codes of conduct and reactions, expert opinions, as well as individual perceptions and interpretations.

To research the complex phenomenon of GBV and its un/speakability in academia in its nuances, roots and systematic embeddedness warrants an interdisciplinary, intersectional and multi-level approach that builds on a multi-source and multi-method analysis. Such an approach

can be adapted to specific academic environments such as those found in the CEE countries and beyond.

THEORISING AN INTERDISCIPLINARY, INTERSECTIONAL AND MULTI-LEVEL APPROACH

Our suggested approach draws on linguistics, cultural studies and gender studies within an interdisciplinary framework that is united by a social constructivist perspective to investigate GBV and its un/speakability in academia. The approach builds on the central assumption that gender and sexuality are routine non-/verbal and interactional performances and accomplishments in which discourse plays a vital role (WEST & ZIMMERMAN, 1987; BUCHHOLZ & HALL, 2004; EHRLICH ET AL., 2014; KIESLING, 2014; LEVON & BELINE-MENDEZ, 2016; GILDEMEISTER, 2020; BUTLER, 2024; CAMERON, 2024). We promote “a conceptualization of gender-based violence as discourse” (ESPOSITO, 2021, P. 3; SEE ALSO MERCÉ & MARUENDA BATALLER, 2026) and understand discourse as language use as well as discursive and social practice (FAIRCLOUGH, 1992; CAMERON, 2024). Discourse not only constructs and reproduces social identities and relations, but also systems of knowledge, cultural values and belief (CF. ESPOSITO, 2021, P. 2). In our shared interdisciplinary understanding, gender and sexuality as intersectional categories are intricately associated with other categories of discrimination such as ethnicity, race or age (CRENSHAW, 1989; HOLZLEITHNER, 2024). Therefore, intersectionality is a guiding perspective in the proposed methodology, embedded in the context-specificities of the respective nation state, the given organisation and the individual experience (RISBERG & PILHOFER, 2018; NASH, 2024).

This interdisciplinary framework combines the common and individual potentials of the three disciplines: linguistics, cultural studies and gender studies. Starting from the concrete linguistic expressions, linguistic analysis traces the (co-)construction and verbalising of GBV as well as its un/speakability in its intricate relation to cultural, organisational, and individual discursive meaning-making processes (CAMERON, 2024; MERCÉ & MARUENDA-BATALLER, 2026). Yet, linguistic analysis not only focuses on explicit performances, “the ‘there’ in the interaction” (KULICK, 2005, P. 616), but also investigates “what is barred from performance, what is not and cannot be performed – the not-there, the unsaid traces, the absent presences that structure the said and the done” (IBID.). Linguistic analysis

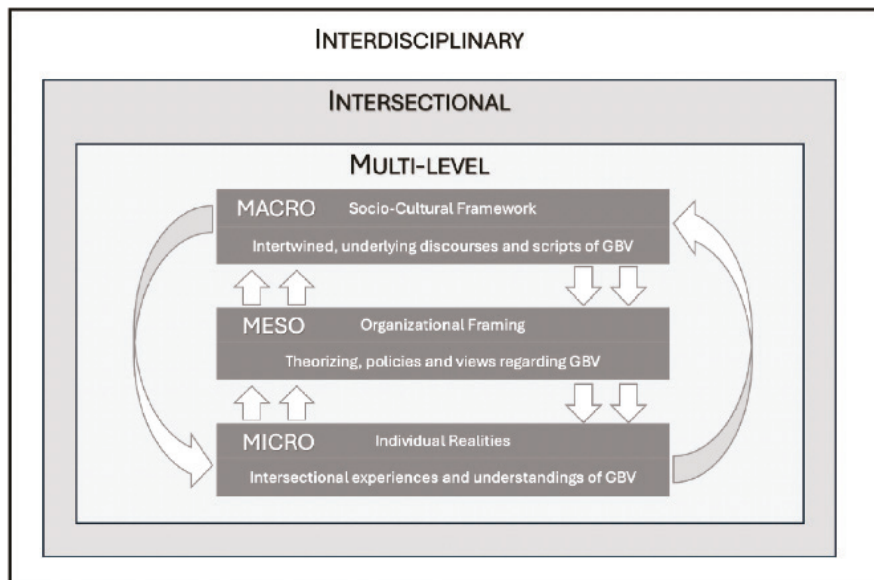
considers speakers as socialised into “what must remain unspoken and unspeakable”; it argues that in conversing, speakers also create silences (IBID., P. 620). According to Kulick (2005, P. 622), in this “dual indexicality of language”, what is said manifests also what is or must be left out. In this design, the linguistic analysis contributes to investigating and understanding GBV as expressed in concrete linguistic and ideological layers of language and discourse as well as in what remains unspoken and unspeakable. Cultural studies and gender studies, in turn, examine power, hierarchy and heteronormativity as core elements of gendered discrimination and violence. As Foucault (1976) argues in his study on sexuality and truth, discourses are produced and maintained by socially and culturally approved power structures. In particular, he showed the powerful knowledge-creating force of sexuality, including socially sanctioned violence. Sexualised violence became the basis for feminist criticism in gender studies in the 1970s (SCHMINCKE, 2015, P. 273FF.; BÜHRMANN, 1995). Women began to write about their individual and structural experiences of violence, e.g., in the medical system (BINSWANGER, 2020, P. 114). Gender studies interrogate and denaturalise structural and cultural dimensions of violence that are deeply embedded in the dominant gender order. This gender order is not only organised along the matrix of heteronormativity, but links masculinity with the authority to dominate and violate (MEUSER, 2010; BOURDIEU, 2011) and femininity with vulnerability (GEIER, 2005; BUTLER, 2011). Intersectionality studies have deepened the perspective of gender studies (and linguistics) showing that the impact of other societal differences on GBV and discrimination can lead to blind spots and unspeakability (CRENSHAW, 1989; ESSED, 1991; LEVON & BELINE-MENDEZ, 2016). An intersectional analysis addresses context-specific ways in which different dimensions of violence against subordinated or marginalised groups occur. In it, special attention is given to feminised, gender-nonconforming individuals, and racialised, migrantised and further marginalised “others”. Experiences of GBV within and among these groups not only relate to each other, but also rely on each other, potentially summing up and supporting its persistence (GRISARD ET AL., 2022, P. 8FF). Intersecting categories require special analytic and methodological attention regarding power hierarchies and their effects on discrimination as well as GBV in academia. They need to be considered on the whole continuum from the explicitly violent to the most subtle forms. In her recent study on discriminatory practices in Danish academia, Guschke (2023) highlights the impact of the intersecting categories of race, sexuality and gender. Her results show that racialised

and/or queer members face even more sexual harassment and discrimination than gender-conforming women.

Finally, as GBV is most frequently expressed in and through language use as well as discursive and social practices, a multilevel perspective helps to unpack the underlying dominant and alternative discourses surrounding gender, sexuality and violence. Such discourses are at play within the particular area of interest and the individual (non-)narrating of experiences. In any society, the normalising yet also the challenging of gender regimes happens via linguistic and discursive expressions and interventions (FAIRCLOUGH & WODAK, 1997; WETHERELL, 1998; LAZAR, 2014; WETHERELL & EDLEY, 2014). These larger discursive systems of power influence both organisations and individuals within said society, creating a context-dependent network of discursive intertwinements at different levels. To capture the complexity and continuum of GBV in academia, it is thus vital to investigate all of these levels with their differing unspoken rules, norms, understandings and discursive practices as well as their interrelatedness and embeddedness. To this end, the approach proposed here includes three distinct yet interrelated levels of discourse-based analysis: *the socio-cultural macro level, the organisational meso level and the individual micro level*⁵. This allows for addressing GBV and un/speakability as a personal, structural and social as well as private and public phenomenon (SEE BOU-FRANCH, 2016, P. 2; ESPOSITO, 2021). This multi-level approach facilitates a unique and under-employed focus on individuals or particular stakeholder groups (e.g., pre-/post-docs, non-academic staff, etc.) with a focus on both an individual's membership in a particular group and their individual intersectional positionality. It aims at carving out individual perceptions, ambiguities, and difficulties in the understanding, labelling and voicing of GBV, relating these issues to socio-cultural/organisational structures, norms and ideologies. Concurrently, while UniSAFE's organising principles for research and recommendations (i.e., the 7 Ps – policies, prevalence, prevention, proception, prosecution, provision of services, and partnerships) may play a role, the qualitative and explorative nature of this proposed research design leaves room both for other relevancies to emerge and for further differentiation of existing ones.

Figure 1 summarises and illustrates this approach to analysing GBV and un/speakability as well as the three levels and their interrelatedness in academia.

FIGURE 1: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY, INTERSECTIONAL AND MULTI-LEVEL APPROACH TO RESEARCHING GBV IN ACADEMIA



OPERATIONALISING AN INTERDISCIPLINARY, INTERSECTIONAL AND MULTI-LEVEL RESEARCH DESIGN

To investigate the un/speakability of GBV in academia from an interdisciplinary (i.e., linguistics, cultural studies and gender studies), context-sensitive and intersectional perspective on the macro/socio-cultural, meso/organisational and micro/individual levels, we suggest a research design that considers that multiple data sets should be collected at various research institutions to obtain a more comprehensive picture of the socio-cultural context under scrutiny. That is, we promote a research design which applies a multi-source, multi-site and multi-researcher framework (JOHNSON ET AL., 2017) alongside a multi-method QUAL-quan analysis (HESSE-BIBER, 2022).

In alignment with the approach outlined above, researching GBV at the socio-cultural/macro level entails naming and denaturalising the

structural and cultural dimensions of violence, discrimination and power that are deeply embedded in the dominant gender order. They surface in the form of discourses about masculinity, femininity, sexuality, victimhood, and shame. An analysis at this level addresses the intertwining of dominant and alternative discourses with general societal debates to find out how GBV is discursively conceptualised and discussed in a particular socio-cultural environment – such as a national context – and how this conceptualisation possibly influences the voicing of GBV and the limits of its speakability. As data for this level of analysis, a body of literature written by practitioners and experts from fields that aim to speak out against and counter-act GBV is proposed. This literature contains knowledge- and practice-based discourses about GBV in a specific context. The texts articulate a critique of social domination and power abuse by those who enact GBV and are based on the experiences of practitioners either working with victims of GBV or in related fields such as law or engaging in a (queer-)feminist critique of the current gender order, including GBV. The texts aim at awareness-raising and capacity-building to counter-act GBV on a societal, institutional and individual level. As such, these texts include both dominant and alternative discourses, those perpetuating a system of network silence and those challenging it. Alternative data sets to the practice literature on the topic may include social media debates, newspaper articles and other public discussions of GBV. The selected source type should, however, reflect social debates and possible counter-discourses as social practices.

Following Sasson-Levy (2011), in organisations as workplaces, views on gender, sexuality and violence become visible in the institutional framings of policies, in how their implementation is carried out and perceived and in how they are lived in interpersonal interactions. Within the concept of “network silence,” this is mirrored in aspects like silencing and not hearing (HERSHCOVIS ET AL., 2021). The analysis of the organisational or meso level therefore considers the legal, conceptual and procedural frameworks at the academic institutions of interest, including the discursive understandings of GBV that emerge from these documents. Though such documents also give access to national policies and frameworks, the question is how the procedural and theoretical frameworks are executed and put in practice. It is of interest which impact becomes visible regarding un/speakability, non-/reporting and their consequences and how these might

affect different members of universities in different ways. Relevant data for the analysis of the organisational level include legal or procedural documents of academic institutions (e.g., equality or diversity plans), publicly available mission statements, laws, policies, codes of conduct, brochures, websites, etc. Additionally, expert interviews (E.G., GLÄSER & LAUDEL, 2004) with relevant stakeholders (e.g., management, equal opportunity officers, employee representatives) are considered particularly promising means to understand how institutions actually approach, reflect on and deal with GBV. They help to gain more insights into the practices of implementing these theoretical texts but also into the socio-cultural discourses present in the organisational culture.

Finally, the state of the art above has evinced that the most pronounced gap concerns the individual/micro level, the intersectional lived experiences of the victims/survivors of GBV in academia, and the articulation of their own understandings and interpretations of the mechanisms and reasons for non/reporting or un/speakability. With the awareness that the socio-cultural and the organisational levels play into individual understandings, insights into individual perceptions become vital. Additionally, the greatest variation in experiences has been found between groups of people with different characteristics (LIPINSKY, 2024, p. 12); i.e., the various forms and manifestations of GBV affect different individuals and groups differently. At the individual micro level, the objective of this multi-level research design is to gain in-depth insights into the realities of everyday academic life, into the reflections and understandings of GBV, as well as into experiences with institutional and personal un/speakability, (non-) reporting, silencing, and their consequences. This helps to shed light on the societal and organisational forces maintaining inequality regimes and reproducing “network silence” and self-silencing (PILINKAITĖ SOTIROVIČ ET AL., 2024). Additionally, prevalence can be investigated here, though it is not at the centre of our approach.

Interviews represent the most promising data set here. Focus group interviews can provide insights into collective and shared experiences/situations as well as into co-constructed processes of meaning making and the multiple personal understandings and definitions of GBV (DEPPERMAN, 2013). Semi-structured individual interviews give a voice to victims/survivors as well as to bystanders of GBV, allowing them to narrate their

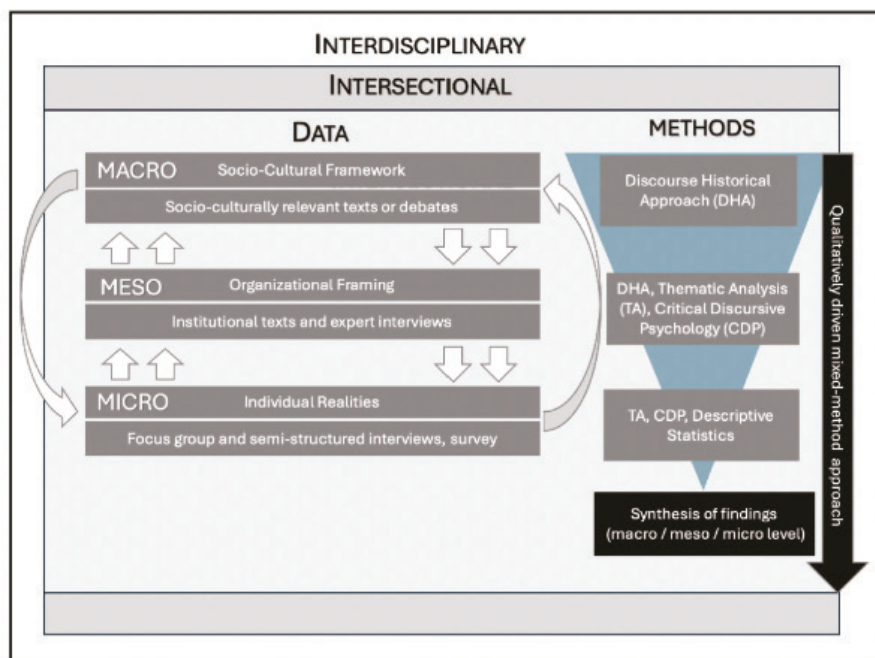
very own personally lived experiences. In addition, surveys, in turn, can generate quantitative data on a broader and anonymous scale, offering a more generalisable perspective on the phenomenon. When addressing prevalence, however, we propose a combination of this approach with qualitative data generation, e.g., using focus groups in a bottom-up process to generate a subset of questions tailored to a specific status group. It is particularly here at the micro level that intersectional categories can be investigated in the necessary qualitative detail. For this reason, collecting data from a diverse group of participants is vital.

Regarding our methodological approach to analysing this data, mixed methods research offers significant advantages for exploring issues of power and social justice (MERTENS, 2007). By thoughtfully combining qualitative (and quantitative) approaches, such a methodology can critically examine established assumptions about knowledge production, especially the relationship between researchers and participants whose voices have been silenced or unheard. Reflecting on power imbalances and context-specific practices within these interactions becomes essential. Furthermore, such a design promotes awareness of intersectional dimensions. This is made possible by applying a cyclical research model that starts with listening, fosters a continuous dialogue between various data types and their analyses and necessitates ongoing adjustments to the research process. This way, applying a mixed methods design provides a promising way to understand the un/speakability of GBV and its entanglement with power relations in academia and to develop counter-discourses and practices against discrimination.

Thus, a multi-method analysis, i.e., a qualitatively driven sequential mixed-method (QUAL-quant) approach (HESSE-BIBER, 2022) in which the quantitative part (i.e., the survey) is subordinated to the qualitative research, is suggested. The combination of various qualitative methods from linguistics, and cultural and gender studies – all based on critical and close readings of the collected materials – is facilitated via the Multi-Method Qualitative Text and Discourse Analytical Methodology (MMQTDA) (ALEJANDRO & ZHAO, 2024). This MMQTDA methodology allows for a complementarity of methods, the contextualisation of data, the unpacking of explicit and implicit dimensions of discourse, and the triangulation of findings (IBID., P. 467; SEE ALSO JOHNSON ET AL., 2017).

The qualitative analysis of the data collected at the multiple levels of interest is united by a discourse-based approach. Various discourse analytical methods – differing in their level of granularity – are chosen. For the socio-cultural framing, we propose analysing the practice- and knowledge-based texts using the Discourse Historical Approach (DHA) within Critical Discourse Studies (REISIGL & WODAK, 2017; REISIGL, 2018; WODAK & MEYER, 2016). This approach is particularly suitable for mapping underlying discourses and their embeddedness in gendered power relations. The same method is applied to the collected organisational texts such as legal or procedural documents. Through the use of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (TA) (BRAUN & CLARKE, 2022), a versatile method for developing, analysing and interpreting patterns across data sets, relevant themes for the development of open survey items can be derived from focus group interviews. In the analysis of individual and expert interviews, patterns in the form of recurring dilemmas, discourses, themes and (self-/other-)positionings are carved out from the participants' subjective experiences using TA and Critical Discursive Psychology (CDP) (WETHERELL, 1998). CDP allows for bringing together the micro levels of individual utterances and the socially constructed macro levels within interpretative repertoires, subject positions and ideological dilemmas. Therefore, it can be used to analyse un/speakability on the discursive level, e.g., in the form of (self-)silencing discourses or dilemmas, as well as on the individual level, e.g., via intersectional positionings. It also allows for a combination with Conversation Analysis (CA) (SIDNELL & STIVERS, 2013). The quantitative component suggested here consists of a standardised quantitative survey conducted across multiple universities. It is, designed to capture broad patterns and contextualise the findings of the qualitative research. For the survey data, descriptive statistics are calculated and open-ended responses are analysed using qualitative methods, such as TA, to identify common themes and patterns. These insights provide a rich understanding of the participants' perspectives, complementing the quantitative results. To deepen and interlink the emerging understandings of GBV at each level and generate valuable, in-depth insights regarding normalised structures, scripts and discourses in academia, the triangulation of methods, disciplinary perspectives and data culminate in a synthesis of all the salient findings and results. Figure 2 visualises the multi-level and multi-method research design and analysis.

FIGURE 2: A MULTI-LEVEL AND MULTI-SOURCE RESEARCH DESIGN FOR GBV IN ACADEMIA



THE CHALLENGES OF AN INTERDISCIPLINARY, INTERSECTIONAL AND MULTI-LEVEL APPROACH TO GBV

Given the sensitivity of GBV, ethical questions and the safety of both researchers and participants represent major challenges to be addressed in such a research project. Research in this area must navigate complex legal and ethical landscapes conforming to both current laws and research standards (STRUZIŃSKA ET AL., 2024). On the one hand, researchers working with such a topic need specific support in building awareness, sensitivity and self-care tools in order to avoid psychological and emotional stress. On the other hand, researchers need professional counselling not only to develop adequate interview and survey questions but also to recognise and appropriately react to trigger situations. In this way, they can help prevent (additional) psychological stress for and a re-traumatisation or re-victimisation of the interviewees and thus provide a safe (interview) environment. As such, a victim-centred and trauma-informed approach

is essential (UNHCR, 2026). The participation must be strictly voluntary, and all participants should be thoroughly instructed on their rights (e.g., their right to withdraw consent), the data handling and privacy as well as on the intent and sensitive content of the research. Anonymity must be guaranteed for both individuals and universities via (pseudo-)anonymisation and aggregated results for entire groups (e.g., post-docs). Furthermore, a thorough data management plan must be put in place as the research involves highly sensitive data. For instance, the original and raw data may only be available to the researchers involved during the processing and sensitive data may only be stored on secure university servers. This is essential to help secure the participation of both individuals and research institutions. Approvals from ethics committees are thus major hurdles and milestones in the research process.

Additionally, low participation rates, a lack of diverse participants, which is necessary for answering questions regarding intersectionality, and a lack of organisational commitment represent major risk factors of such a research approach. However, prior research (E.G., FERNANDO & PRASAD, 2019; PILINKAITĖ SOTIROVIČ ET AL., 2024) has seen an (unexpected) active participation in similar research projects. Providing an anonymous platform for victims/survivors and bystanders to be heard may result in an increased engagement (SCHREDL ET AL., 2023). Yet, a good access to participants needs to be ensured beforehand. Their recruitment must be carefully planned and carried out via various channels. While official documents and practice literature on GBV are publicly available, our multi-level approach is also dependent on the participation of (various) educational institutions (e.g., for expert interviews but also for the dissemination of information). Such a collaboration might be facilitated via pre-existing collaborations, academic networks and overarching associations (e.g., associations of equal opportunity groups). Furthermore, a guarantee of anonymity on the one hand and “hot feedback” (i.e., immediate practical feedback based on the obtained data and preliminary analysis) on the other might motivate participation.

Generally, interdisciplinary research bears risks in overcoming structural and cognitive challenges and reconciling epistemes (HOLLAND, 2013). For this reason, concepts such as “discourse” and “scripts” must be clarified in relation to their underlying conceptual and disciplinary frameworks.

This is facilitated by a common social constructivist perspective on discourse(s) and similar epistemologies. Choosing compatible (qualitative) methodologies is also key. This helps prevent misunderstandings and assures integration into a unified framework, which in turn allows for a synthesis of findings.

Finally, within a transformative and social justice paradigm (MERTENS, 2007), a final challenge lies in the opportunity to feed the results back to all stakeholders within the hierarchy of academic institutions, from the decision-makers to the participants, in order for the un/speakability of GBV to be acknowledged and heard.

CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK: UN/SPEAKABILITY AS KEY TO UNDERSTANDING GBV IN ACADEMIA IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE AND BEYOND

The suggested approach can break new ground in its interdisciplinary, intersectional and multi-level design and in its qualitative, discursive focus on the un/speakability of GBV in academia. Its multi-level framework thereby allows one to gain new knowledge about individual experiences embedded in and shaped by specific academic and societal contexts and can thus be applied to any academic context. While prior research predominantly investigated one level at a time, here, the socio-cultural macro, the organisational meso and the individual micro level, with their respective epistemes and discursive influences on the understanding of GBV and its un/speakability, are in focus together. The innovative potential lies in the newly developed concept of un/speakability of GBV being analysed as a means of socio-cultural 'silencing' that is intertwined with institutional 'not hearing' and personal 'self-silencing,' or as a means of speaking out while accepting the grey zones and insecurities connected to its lived experience. The envisioned methodological layout is a primer in its special attention to the intersectional relevancies of individuals that may prove to be particularly vulnerable and under-researched in the academic organizational system. The methodological operationalisation reunites different data sets from various locations within a QUAL-quan framework, integrating various qualitative methods which are complimented by a quantitative survey.

Through an iterative exchange between different sets of qualitative and quantitative data, the research approach allows for revealing nuanced and context-specific findings. In this way, the research design may serve as a model for investigating different stakeholders, e.g., non-academic staff, and various European and international contexts and thus has a wide range of potential applications. For instance, it becomes possible to move beyond an understanding of Central and Eastern European as a homogeneous context. While historical circumstances have led to certain similarities between the CEE countries, each country can be considered with respect to the specificities that are shaped, e.g., by nation state legislations and language policies. National, regional and international intersecting specificities are important for understanding how a particular gender order gains influence within a concrete academic setting.

More generally, in its multi-level conceptualisation, the research design allows for accounting for the influences of an increasingly globalised, internationalised, and ‘neoliberal’ education system; e.g., on the tabooing of GBV see Pantelmann & Wälty (2023). At the same time, it facilitates well-founded cross-border comparisons and in-depth localised research as it takes organisational and national context-specificities into account. It is therefore suitable for generating country-specific, multidimensional results and bringing intersectionality to the fore. As individual universities have so far been reluctant to have their institutions examined due to concerns about reputational damage, our approach is particularly well-suited for analysing the academic settings of whole countries. It can also be used to compare two or more countries with each other to identify both similarities and context-specific differences, which are essential for developing strategies and measures to combat GBV in CEE countries – and beyond.

ENDNOTES

- 1 For a discussion of the various terms see Herscovis et al. (2021, p. 1834) and Samelius et al. (2014).
- 2 "Interviewees were recruited from all over Europe, representing 20 different nationalities including both EU and non-EU countries. (...) The research participants represented a wide variety of disciplines within the social sciences, humanities, natural and medical sciences. During the research, interviewees were at various stages of their careers, from master's students to full professors, and held different lengths of work contracts in research performing organisations" (Pilinkaite Sotirović & Blažytė, 2024, p. 211)
- 3 "The countries were selected with a view to include both more and less advanced countries, countries with or without highly developed policies on gender-based violence in place, countries outside Europe that are significant in terms of mobility flows of researchers, and countries outside Europe that are the primary targets of international cooperation in Science, Technology and Innovation (STI) for the next programme period 2021–2027" (UniSAFE, 2021).
- 4 As Serbia has still not become an EU-member, it can be considered an exception in this regard.
- 5 While the recent UniSAFE study was also conceptualised as a multi-level project, the suggested macro level here is not related to legal frameworks and national policies, but to socio-cultural discourses and scripts related to GBV that become visible and observable in policies and regulations yet also in public discourses and other cultural artefacts as well as in (personal) narratives.

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Testing the Norms of the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda: Ukraine’s Decolonial Feminist Response to Russia’s Conflict-Related Sexual Violence

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ABSTRACT	This study examines how Ukraine's feminists responded to Russia's use of conflict-related sexual violence during 2014–2024, including whether the new norms of the Women, Peace, and Security agenda proved helpful. Drawing upon online research, our study finds that the responses of Ukrainian feminist organisations after the full-scale invasion in 2022 were prompt, inventive, and wide-ranging. Considering the decolonial critiques, we find it remarkable that Ukrainian feminists were able to strategically use the new norms against CRSV while adding their own more empowering language to enlist international support. This gave the activists enough leverage to insist that the Ukrainian state make bureaucratic and legislative reforms. The Ukrainian feminist successes do not mean that there are no problems in these norms or the Women, Peace, and Security agenda, but instead suggest how feminist criticism may help activists figure out how to navigate this complex environment and democratise the state of Ukraine.
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INTRODUCTION

In the first several years after Russia launched its full-scale invasion in 2022, the most prominent gender-related issue for international observers has been conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV). In June of 2022, soon after reports of CRSV came from Bucha (and other places such as Irpin and Mala Rohan), the Secretary General of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE, 2022) called out “sexual violence against women and girls, including rape, torture, trafficking and sexual exploitation occurring in Ukraine.” Human Rights Watch’s (2023) annual report on human rights singled out CRSV in Ukraine, the only gender-related issue they raised. By 2024, United Nations Ukraine (2024) documented over three hundred CRSV cases since 2022. In 2025, the European Court of Human Rights (2025) in *Ukraine and the Netherlands v. Russia* (IBID., ARTICLE 46-2 (C) (III)), found that sexual violence in Ukraine was “widespread and systemic” from the outset of the war in 2014, but “following the February 2022 invasion [such violence became] part of a military strategy to dehumanise, humiliate and break the morale of the Ukrainian population, as individuals and as a community, and to assert dominance over Ukrainian sovereign territory.” It concluded that the rape of women from February to September of 2022 – when Russia was expelled from the Council of Europe – was “systematic,” constituting “a weapon of war... an act of extreme atrocity that amounts to torture.”

To investigate the impact of such international attention from the perspective of Ukrainians, this article investigates how Ukrainian women and feminist organisations framed the issue and responded to CRSV during Russia’s war in Ukraine from 2014 through the middle of 2024. In the first two years after the full-scale invasion – when a rapid and comprehensive response was most needed – international organisations provided crucial resources, and Ukraine’s government implemented unprecedented bureaucratic and legislative reforms. However, observers argue that most of the direct support for survivors of CRSV and advocacy for reform has been provided by feminist and women’s organisations in Ukraine, not by government institutions or international organisations (E.G., GRUZINA, 2022; KRIVONOS ET AL., 2024; LEVCHENKO, 2024).

We find that Ukrainian feminists drew upon their three-plus decades of organising against gender-based violence (STRELNYK ET AL., 2025, P. 3) to mobilise quickly and effectively after the start of the full-scale war. Within months of the full-scale invasion, they created roadmaps of helpful information, documented and advocated for prosecution of CRSV, provided humanitarian assistance and psychological support, and raised awareness of the problem. To the extent possible in the context of our research conducted in 2024, we looked back at the activism since 2014, finding that some new organisations responding to CRSV were created after 2014, and others, founded much earlier, changed their agendas to better meet the needs of women impacted by the war, especially by CRSV.

In this way, this article contributes to the little existing research on this issue. Most notably, 25 important actors involved in responding to CRSV in Ukraine were interviewed in the book *Ukraïna ne movchyt'. Khronika protydyi SNPK (2022–2024 rr.)* [Ukraine is not silent. Chronicle of counteraction to the CRSV (2022–2024)] (LEVCHENKO, 2024).¹ The interviews point to the steep learning curve Ukraine has gone through in order to quickly build the systems of support that CRSV survivors need, from the initial emergency responses in the spring of 2022 to the more advanced institutionalised cooperation between government institutions, NGOs, and international actors.

The analysis here also speaks to broader theoretical debates. First, as we elaborate below, scholars have argued that Ukraine's civil society, especially the feminist component, had been hamstrung by the legacy of Soviet imperialism, NGO-isation, and language/regional divides until 2014, but after the 2014 Revolution of Dignity, it has been transformed by self-organising, which suggests that the NGOs were no longer substituting for a weak state but supporting democratisation (E.G., SHAPOVALOVA & BURLYUK, 2018; CHANNELL-JUSTICE, 2022). We find that the women's and feminist organisations' rapid and comprehensive response to CRSV was not just an upswell in light of the terrible war, but built upon this self organising, and the first two and half years of their efforts support the claim that this mobilisation supports democratisation, as the activists pressured the state to pick up responsibility for CRSV – and it did.

Second, feminist theorists have been critical of the emerging international norms related to sexual violence and conflict. Western feminists took up the issue after noticing the rapes during the Bosnian war in the early 1990s (and also those in Rwanda), and their attention to it, on top of the long-term efforts of feminists from the rest of the world, led to new international norms and laws that cast rape in war as a crime against humanity and a war crime in the Rome Statute establishing the International Criminal Court in 1998.² However, feminists from Southeast Europe, especially Bosnia, have argued that there are costs in the process of consolidating norms and laws against CRSV: individual women's experiences and agency were erased, leaving the women as mere victims and creating a colonial orientation toward women in postsocialist societies and a hierarchy of gender-related problems with CRSV at the top (HROMADZIC, 2007; SEE ALSO MILENKOVSKA, NO DATE). This critique has been consolidated in the broader peace literature. As summarised by Smith (2025), the shift from "war rape is natural" to "rape is [always a] weapon of war" "has constrained legal recognition, obscured lived experiences, and reproduced narrow narratives of ethnic hatred and gendered violence." Similarly, Haastrup (2022, p. 65) argues that "the issue of SV [sexual violence] ... has a seemingly outsized position," sucking up most of the air available for gender-related issues and casting women as victims.

These dynamics have been exacerbated with the expansion of the Women, Peace, and Security agenda – from its inception in UNSCR 1325 in 2000 – to include sexual violence in conflict.³ Feminist scholars from outside of Central and Eastern Europe have argued that the Security Council, as a venue for great powers, makes "strange bedfellows" for feminists (SAPIANO & RAGHUVANSHI, 2024). While most UN entities have moved to a concept of CRSV that includes sexual violence by civilians during a time of war,⁴ these critics have argued for an even broader concept of conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and for queering the agenda (BENIGNI, 2016; HAGEN, 2025). As Sasunkevich (2024, p. 363) notes, there remains a "feminist critical approach to peace building" outside of formal UN spaces, one that is more intersectional, more focused on the long term, and more responsive to indigenous knowledge and initiatives.

But there are additional problems in the Women, Peace, and Security agenda specific to Ukraine. While the agenda has strengthened norms

against sexual violence in war, and most European countries, including Ukraine, have made commitments to address CRSV within their National Action Plans for Women, Peace, and Security, Ukrainian feminists argue that the agenda is “Western-centric” (POTAPOVA & O’SULLIVAN, 2024). As O’Sullivan and Krulišová (2023, p. 626) point out, the region of Central Europe and Eastern Europe “has neither been a site of WPS knowledge nor has actively shaped the WPS norms at the UN and beyond” (SEE ALSO SANTOIRE, 2023). Hendl et al. (2024, pp. 185–186) argue that the agenda has proven to be ineffective in addressing the complex issue surrounding Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, caught up as it is between Russia and Western imperialities. On the one hand, increasingly since 2014, Russia’s representatives have been calling for a very limited understanding of sexual violence in conflict, one that does not include their use of such violence in Ukraine (JOHNSON & OLIINYK, 2026). On the other, Western feminist peace activists and networks who were crucial to establishing the agenda have repeatedly failed to see Russia as a colonial power (FEMINIST INITIATIVE GROUP, 2022; JOHNSON, 2023).

We found that Ukrainian organisations often chose the middle-of-the-road concept of CRSV, especially in English — in what appears to be a strategic move which allowed them to pull in international support and put the most pressure on the state — while sometimes adding their own more empowering and more expansive language. This shows how local activists, in the right circumstances, can leverage the new norms, even as such norms may be limited. The Ukrainian feminist successes do not mean that there are no problems in these norms or in the Women, Peace, and Security agenda, but instead suggest how feminist criticism may help activists figure out how to navigate this complex environment and democratise the state of Ukraine.

In the following, we provide the context of Ukrainian feminism (including the obstacles, accomplishments, and scholarly debates), describe our method in more detail, and then present our findings. Finally, we discuss the role of international actors, including transnational feminist groups, and the impact of this pressure and activism. In the conclusion, we point to some lessons for scholars of gender-based violence and Central and Eastern Europe.

FEMINIST ORGANISING BEFORE AND AFTER THE WAR: WITH OR WITHOUT THE STATE

To create an analytical framework to assess the Ukrainian feminist response to Russia's use of sexual violence, we briefly describe the emergence of organisations that came to play a role in this and summarise the debates in the scholarship on feminist organising.

POST-SOVIET FEMINIST ORGANISING BEFORE 2014

The feminist organising in Ukraine in response to the war faced long-term challenges. Soviet imperialism had crushed independent organising, and many women in the newly independent Ukraine rejected the Soviet commitments to women's emancipation (E.G. HRYCAK, 2006; PHILLIPS, 2008; FABIAN, HRYCAK & JOHNSON, 2016). It had also left Ukraine in a deep economic depression, forcing it to renege on its welfare state promises, and Ukraine became – and then remained – one of the poorest countries in Europe. Sarah Phillips (2008) found that women individually and then new organisations were forced to fill in the gaps of the failed welfare state, suggesting that these organisations were facilitating the neoliberal state. To survive, Ukrainian organisations began to take advantage of the availability of Western support, finding connections with Western foundations based in Moscow and Western capitals. But as elsewhere in the region and the world in general, such alliances required that many women's organisations formalise as NGOs, which, in turn, left them disconnected from local issues and simultaneously undermined grassroots groups (HRYCAK, 2006, p. 72). As Shevstova noted – in her June 18, 2024 book launch through the Aleksanteri Institute in Helsinki – these problems remain: Ukrainian “civil society is very NGO-ised and very neoliberal.”

One exception to this NGO-isation that is relevant to organising against CRSV is FEMEN, a “sextremist” organisation founded in 2008 that performed radical and attention-grabbing activities such as topless protests on issues such as sex trafficking (CHANNELL-JUSTICE, 2014). Troubling to many NGO feminists, FEMEN augured a type of more radical activism that spoke to the “rising agitation, even panic, around the female body as the most prominent site for social movement in the first two decades of the 21st century of Ukraine's politics” (ZYCHOWICZ & TCHERMALYKH, 2022, p. 172).

FEMEN attracted international attention, but Russian coercion drove them into exile in Paris in 2012.

Before Russia's invasion in 2014, Ukraine's women's movement was divided. Hrycak (2010, P. 49) found that the post-independence organisations split into three strands which rarely collaborated: those committed to Soviet models of emancipation, activists for Ukrainian independence, and scholars who explored feminist theory and believed the movement should focus on changing the curriculum in universities to address gender issues rather than politics. For Zhurzhenko (2001, P. 2), these ideological differences could be mapped in terms of the historical divide between the western part of Ukraine, where there was a long-term nationalist sentiment, and the south and east, where there was longer-term and more direct Russian control marked by coercive Russification. In eastern Ukraine, scholars founded the most successful of the Russian-language gender studies centres, the Kharkiv (originally Kharkov) Gender Studies Center. For Zhurzhenko (IBID., P. 10), this centre's Russian-language use reflects not only the Russian-language context of much of academia in Ukraine in the early 1990s, but also an ideological commitment to "post-Soviet" feminisms and a critique of the nationalism of Ukrainian feminisms.

The issue that most united feminist groups in Ukraine, especially those with foreign partners or funders, was violence against women (later recast as gender-based violence), which led to the establishment of several organisations that later took up the issue of CRSV (BARRETT, HABIBOV & CHERNYAK, 2012). One of the most prominent feminist organisations in Ukraine in the 1990s was La Strada Ukraine, an affiliate of a European network of organisations working against trafficking in women. According to Gruzina (2022), Women's Perspectives, organised in 1998, "was one of the first feminist organisations in Ukraine" and its goals included fighting against violence against women. Another important early organisation was the Women's Information Consultative Center, founded in 1995, whose main goal was to disseminate information about women's human rights inside and outside Ukraine. All three organisations became members of Women Against Violence Europe (WAVE), a network of European women's NGOs working toward raising awareness of gendered violence. Their activism was powerful, leading to the passage of Ukraine's 2001 Law on the Prevention of Family Violence, the first specific legislation in the

region to address domestic violence (HRYCAK, 2010; FABIÁN, HRYCAK & JOHNSON, 2016). But there were also critiques claiming, much like the critiques of CRSV, that gender-based violence was too prominent an issue in feminist organising in Ukraine, and that this focus too contributed to the NGO-isation and neoliberalisation of Ukraine's politics (PHILLIPS, 2008).

FEMINIST ORGANISING DURING AND AFTER THE REVOLUTION OF DIGNITY

Ukraine's civil society, including feminist organising, shifted dramatically with the protests on the Maidan in 2013–2014, laying the groundwork for its response to CRSV. As Channell-Justice (2022) chronicles, wide swaths of Ukrainian society began to self organise. “At a fundamental level, self-organization is the idea that if something needs to be done and there is a person who has the capacity to do it, then it simply should be done, rather than waiting for someone else (particularly a state body or political figure) to do it” (IBID., P. 5). In an argument resembling Phillip's (2008) critique of early mobilisation, Channell-Justice (2022, P. 13) argues that such self-organisation emerged out of state weakness, and while it is fluid and grassroots, such volunteerism can serve the neoliberalisation of the state that international donors desired. Volunteerism is also gendered, with men often mobilised around militarism, and women around caretaking (even as there has been a counter-narrative about women in Ukraine's military) (IBID., PP. 15–16). But after the sustained protests on the Maidan in 2014, self organisation “contributed to the reorganization of the state and the reconceptualization of citizenship,” suggesting the possibility of changing the state, not just being co-opted by it (IBID., P. 26).

After Russia's annexation of Crimea and support for the proxy regimes in eastern Ukraine that came only a few months later, women self-organised – and then formalised organisations – to respond to those displaced by the war as well as address other war-related needs, such as creating a database for missing persons (BENIGNI, 2016, P. 65). Benigni notes that this response included attending to CRSV: long-standing women's organisations, such as La Strada and the Ukrainian Women's Fund, “stretched... their staff and funding... to respond to new needs, for example PTSD among women, men and children (e.g. demobilize combatants and their families), conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence,

and human trafficking affecting impoverished and displaced peoples. The Kharkiv Human Rights group... started to document cases of sexual and gender-based violence” (IBID., PP. 65–66). She assesses that most of the response to CRSV in the early years of the war came not from the Ukrainian state, but from international organisations and NGOs that “stretched” themselves (IBID., PP. 75–76).

Scholars argue that the ideology of Ukrainian feminism also changed. Channell-Justice (2017) documents feminists at Euromaidan re-orienting themselves toward Europe, seeing it as offering a more progressive and promising future regarding women’s rights. Strelnyk, Yuzva, and Zlobina (2025, P. 7) argue that feminists also came to believe in the possibility that the Ukrainian state could represent their interests and that “the construct ‘post-Soviet society’ is no longer relevant for the analysis of Ukrainian society, which, in fact, has already completed the transition.” Others point to a more intensive decolonial reconsideration of past dynamics, and then a clear separation from Russian feminists (KOTLIUK, 2023; HRYTSENKO, 2022A, 2022B). Mayerchyk and Plakhotnik (2019) argue that the events at Euromaidan allowed a new feminist activism to emerge and circulate throughout Ukraine, but it was infused with militarised nationalism: “never before has the combination of feminism and militarized nationalism been so much normalized in public discourse” (IBID., P. 65); see also O’Sullivan (2019). Sasunkevich (2024) – as a participant observer in an unnamed small peace dialogue from 2017 to 2019 – found that solidarity was still difficult to build, especially when the Russian language was used.

FEMINIST ORGANISING AFTER 2022

In the face of the full-scale war, women’s and feminist organising has been transformed again. The most remarkable aspect was the immediate and widespread self-organising. As Phillips and Martsenyuk (2023, P. 6) summarise, the self-organising activities included the following:

providing meals, clothes, medicines, protective gear, logistics, information, support, and fuel delivery; identifying and helping vulnerable individuals; documenting war crimes; and others. Ukrainian women living abroad organize fundraisers and awareness-raising campaigns, contributing their various organisational, creative, business, and linguistic skills to the resistance effort... Women who were forced

to become refugees advocate for the needs of the Ukrainian community back home and abroad by organizing fundraisers, concerts, and marches... Ukrainian refugee women have organized several visible protests abroad to attract the attention of the international community to the importance of #SupportUkraine, #StandwithUkraine, and #SaveUkraineNow.

These responses were essential forms of support for Ukrainians. As Gorchynska (2023) explains, “[t]he large international funds that were supposed to help them were too slow and bureaucratic, they had difficulty reaching certain groups or needs: for example, those living in small towns, villages, closer to the front or under occupation.” After that first spring, the global attention waned, and even more was left for Ukrainian women themselves to do in terms of managing the society outside of the fighting itself (which women also did but in lower numbers than men).⁵ As Krivonos et al. (2024) note, “[w]ith insufficient state support, the burden of survival is placed on Ukrainian refugee women themselves... there is a danger of undervaluing the enormous communitarian reproductive paid and unpaid labor done by Ukrainian workers before and during Russia’s invasion.”

This self organising occurred alongside and in conjunction with existing women’s and feminist organisations. In their analysis of the post-2022 organising, Potapova and O’Sullivan (2024) found that

local civil society groups, specifically women’s rights, feminist, and LGBTQI organizations, were among the first to respond to the immense humanitarian crisis caused by the invasion. In the first few months most organizations switched their operations to the evacuation of civilians, operating shelters for the displaced, [and] providing immediate humanitarian, medical, and other types of assistance. Their connections to communities on the ground, understanding of needs, and access to solidarity networks locally and internationally made them effective responders – as has been the case in many other crises settings.

Gruzina (2022) and Strelnyk et al. (2025) made similar claims about feminist organisations’ responsiveness. The key gendered problems for feminist activists during the war included CRSV, but also other problems such as:

the growth of GBV [gender-based violence]... the increased burden of reproductive work on women; a deepening feminisation of poverty; an increase in the share

of vulnerable groups of women (e.g. widows and single mothers); a predominant share of women with children among war refugees; an increasing burden on feminised fields of employment (education, health care, social work); as well as a decrease in the political and expert visibility of women (Strelnyk et al., 2025, pp. 18–19).

These observers also pointed out the risks of such retooling and the resulting new focus on immediate humanitarian assistance for the future of the women's movement as a whole and the issue of gender equality (E.G. *IBID.*, 2025, P. 41).

While not eradicating them completely, the full-scale war also undermined ideological divides. The Moldova-born, Russian speaker, Irina Zherebkina, a cofounder of the Kharkiv Gender Studies, organised a conference calling for “solidarity, internationalism, anti-nationalism, and nonviolence” (GESSEN, 2023), see also (KHARKIV GENDER STUDIES, 2022; JOHNSON, 2023). Without acknowledging the reality of Russia's violent aggression and the risk of Ukraine's annihilation, this anti-militarist call landed wrong-footed for many Ukrainian feminists, who published their own Ukrainian feminist manifesto (FEMINIST INITIATIVE GROUP, 2022), which Zherebkina did not sign (SEE ALSO POTAPOVA & O'SULLIVAN, 2024). While Zherebkina remains more socialist and pacifist than most Ukrainian feminists, she also came out against Russia's war, which has impacted Kharkiv greatly.

This brief history and summary of the literature points to several issues to consider in our analysis of feminist responses to CRSV. The Soviet allergy to feminism explains why we are expansive in our understanding of what constitutes feminist organisations; women's organisations that do feminist work may not necessarily self-identify as feminist, though this was less true of the last decade. The emergence of NGOs as the dominant organising structure, their embrace of the issue of gender-based violence, and the professionalism required to address CRSV led us to focus on NGOs, but not exclusively so. Many feminist activists in Ukraine and Central-Eastern Europe called for mutual aid, namely a more reciprocal and horizontal relationship between the one providing and the one receiving aid at this particular moment, recognising that at another moment the situation could be reversed. Given the emergence of self-organising in Ukraine and the feminist call for mutual aid, we came to see that the best NGO

response would be one that combines the professionalisation and the self organising of feminism in Ukraine, with some sense of mutual aid and not just top-down humanitarian assistance. Furthermore, we were curious as to how feminist initiatives would deal with language and other ethnic and regional differences, including those beyond the Russian-speaking population, such as those of Crimean Tatar, Roma, or Jewish identity. Finally, we expected that organising against CRSV would be different in the period before 2022 than afterwards.

METHODS

To examine the feminist response to CRSV in Ukraine, we started with the women's and feminist organisations referenced in this scholarship on Ukrainian feminism and those listed in the reports we found on Russia's use of CRSV in Ukraine. We then examined all of those groups' websites and social media to see if they mentioned projects broadly connected to CRSV. The terms we used in our search were the following: 1) violence (наси́льство), 2) women in captivity (жі́нки в полоні), 3) women affected by war (жі́нки, які постраждали від війни), 4) CRSV (ЧПІК), 5) sexual violence (сексуальне наси́льство), 6) wartime violence (воєнне наси́льство), 7) gender-based violence (гендерно зумовлене наси́льство), and 8) victim of violence (жертва наси́льства). We used these search terms in English and Ukrainian to be expansive but found that most of the Ukrainian organizations were running their websites and social media in Ukrainian. We then followed the organisations' partners (and their partners, etc.) in a snowball sample until we reached dead ends.

Building on the questions raised by other scholars of Ukraine's feminist mobilisation, we analysed the organisations as to the following: 1) how the organisations framed the problem of CRSV; 2) what activities connected to CRSV did they engaged in; 3) whether they refocused on CRSV after the initial conflict in 2014 and especially after the start of the full-scale war in 2022; and 4) how ethnically intersectional their framing was. We note here that we found Facebook to be the social media platform most often used. Almost all the organisations also had Instagram pages. Many used YouTube to post information, and some also used Telegram, Patreon, LinkedIn, Twitter, and TikTok. Facebook seems to be the most conducive to organisations, but feminists were trying to reach a broad range of Ukrainians through multiple platforms.

While we acknowledge that relying on online sources may lead us to miss initiatives that work without an online presence, online activism was central in Ukraine in 2022–2024. Infrastructure for online life had been created during the COVID pandemic, and many institutions in the shifting war zone chose to operate online to limit risk and to reach Ukrainians across the country as well as Ukrainians abroad (UNDP, 2024). The bigger methodological issue is researching organisations' activities in 2014–2022 from the vantage point of 2024. Some organisations may not have survived, and others may have deleted or archived their posts, but given the reality that the war started in 2014, we wanted to try to capture these activities.

Our choice to conduct online research was also driven by concerns for our own well-being and legal status and our not wanting to take up activists' time or energy during an active war, commitments that we assert are also part of feminist methodologies of the region (JOHNSON, 2009; CARROLL, 2022; SEE ALSO DALL'AGNOLA, EDWARDS & HOWLETT, 2022), even as we commend others who have conducted feminist fieldwork in Ukraine recently (E.G. DEAN, 2024). This project is a collaboration between a US-born scholar (Johnson) without heritage in the region who was trained to study Russia and a Ukrainian immigrant now in law school. As a result of this project, Tsiko has become part of the legal activism in Ukraine, joining JurFem, an organisation we examine below. As part of building feminist solidarities during this war, we attempted to enact an "affective dialogue" in which emotions and power are fully taken into account (SASUNKEVICH, 2024). To check our findings, we spoke with other scholars of Ukraine, such as those at the Association for the Study of Nationalities, but also with activists from Ukrainian organisations when we encountered them in public places (e.g. Project Keshet Ukraine when they made a presentation at the Gender and Transformation in Central-Eastern Europe and Eurasia Workshop in May 2024) or in the context of fieldwork in neighbouring countries (e.g. in Latvia in 2024).

In this project, our methods are mostly inductive, attempting to follow the advice of decolonial feminist scholars from Central-Eastern Europe. Hendl et al. (2024, p. 189), though refusing to name all the problematic texts, call out the predominant international relations scholarship for its epistemic imperialism and essentialism, including its "lack of knowledge of women's resistance against the ongoing legacy of rape and sexual violence perpetrated by the Russian army... in countries they have occupied

and colonized.” Shevstova (2024), in the first book on the full-scale war from a feminist perspective, calls scholars of Ukraine to shift their research practices, including not starting with Western theory but with Ukrainian experience and collaborating with Ukrainian researchers (SEE ALSO KRIVONOS ET AL., 2024). As asserted by Phillips and Martsenyuk (2023, p. 4), scholars of Ukraine “must attend to the ways that women concomitantly resist the war and resist gender violence, and the strategies they use to fight for their rights, as Ukrainian citizens, and as women.” Sasunkevich (2024, p. 363) explains that a decolonial feminist approach to peace-building requires responsiveness to indigenous knowledge and initiatives. We heed the insights of Potapova and O’Sullivan (2024), for whom “a decolonial feminist vision of peace(s) entails conceptualizing peace as plural in the context of Ukraine’s double coloniality,” by considering Russian and Western imperialism and using the lens of intersectionality.

CASE STUDY: FEMINIST ORGANISATIONS RESPONDING TO CRSV

In the spring of 2024, we identified 10 organisations whose work connected to CRSV was visible online (see Table 1). These organisations included the three long-term stalwarts of Ukraine’s struggle against gender-based violence: La Strada Ukraine, Women’s Perspectives (which founded the Woman for Woman platform), and the Women’s Information Consultative Center (WICC). Two other such groups had deep roots in Ukraine: Project Keshet Ukraine, a part of a transnational Jewish feminist organisation founded at the end of the Cold War, and the Ukrainian Women’s Fund, founded in 2000. SEMA Ukraine, established in Ukraine in 2019, is the organisation most directly connected to the issue of CRSV as an affiliate of the transnational SEMA Global Network of Victims and Survivors of Wartime Sexual Violence. Reflecting the professionalisation of Ukraine over the last decade, the Ukrainian Women’s Lawyers Association established the platform JurFem in 2017 to connect women lawyers. The last two organisations – the Feminist Workshop, a feminist community based in Lviv in western Ukraine, and FemSolution, a grassroots organisation founded by women students at the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy in Kyiv to fight against sexism in the academy – were founded in the period after the Revolution of Dignity, representing a new generation of more openly feminist and more horizontal activism in Ukraine. Rounding out the list is FEMEN, which many may not see as a Ukrainian organisation since their exile, but which we include because they came up in our snowball sample.

There are many other women's organisations in Ukraine, some of which have provided support related to CRSV – e.g. Women's March (Marsh Zhinok, which has provided legal counselling) and Sphere (Sfera, which is intersectional in its inclusion of LGBTQ justice), but these organisations did not appear as focused on CRSV in our sampling of online messaging as the selected ones. We also found some international organisations that partnered with Ukrainian entities, most notably, the All Survivors Project (ASP), founded in 2016 through the UCLA School of Law, but did not include them as they are not Ukrainian.

**TABLE 1: FEMINIST ORGANISATIONS IN UKRAINE WORKING AGAINST CRSV
BY TYPE OF ACTIVITY (DATE ESTABLISHED)**

Names of organisations (date founded)	Roadmaps	Humanitarian Aid	Psychological Support	Legal Support	Awareness Raising
FEMEN (2012)					X
Feminist Workshop (2014)		X	X		X
FemSolution (2016)		X	X		X
La Strada Ukraine (1997) ⁶	X			X	X
Project Keshet (1989)		X	X		X
SEMA Ukraine (2019)	X		X	X	
Ukrainian Women's Fund (2000)				X	X
JurFem (2017)				X	
Women's Perspectives (1998) and its Woman for Woman platform (2020)		X			
WICC (1995)				X	X

Finally, we identified but did not include in our detailed study two feminist networks focused on the war or CRSV. In 2016, WICC co-founded the Women Peace Dialogue network to foster feminist conversations about peace in countries of the former Soviet Union, especially between Ukraine and Russia. They had a twitter presence in 2017–2018, showcasing meetings in Kyiv and abroad, including one related to Ukraine's UNSCR 1325 National Action Plan. As of the summer of 2024, we found no online presence of this network, but heard from its member Marta in Latvia that the members of the network were still communicating with each other via email, and there had been a meeting of it in Tbilisi after the full-scale invasion. In 2021, WICC created another network, the Mozhu [ICAN] network, to digitally link the actors involved in the implementation of UNSCR 1325.⁷

FRAMING OF THE PROBLEM

In examining how these ten Ukrainian feminist organisations addressed and focused on CRSV, we found that they all used a remarkably similar language in both their Ukrainian and English language texts. When writing in Ukrainian, the organisations often used the Ukrainian acronym for CRSV (СНПІК: Сексуальне насильство, пов'язане з конфліктом) (SEE ALSO LEVCHENKO 2024), but also the terms “sexual violence” (сексуальне насильство), gender-based violence (гендерно зумовлене насильство), and “women affected by war” (жінки, які постраждали від війни). In English-language materials, we found that the organisations almost always used the term “conflict-related sexual violence” (CRSV). Our findings thus suggest a strategic use of the concept of CRSV, especially for international audiences, but that the Ukrainian organisations were not limited to only this term when writing in Ukrainian. The use of the term CRSV obviously contrasts with Russia's language of “sexual violence in conflict” that marks most of the UN Security Council resolutions, but it contrasts less with some other concepts, such as conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV).

There were some variations and elaborations in their framing of the problem, however. On the one hand, FEMEN described CRSV as an intentional and integral weapon of war, arguing that the victims are unarmed civilian women who are often viewed as “possessions or extensions of the enemy, vessels into which man plants his seed and potential offspring” (FEMEN, 2022, PARA. 3). This language oversimplifies the problem in ways that

many scholars have criticised. On the other hand, some acknowledged that CRSV is often underreported or ignored due to fear or shame. La Strada, for instance, mentions that this topic is perceived as taboo in Ukrainian society (UKRAINIAN WOMEN'S FUND, 2023). This framing underscores that what these women endured was not ordinary violence or random terror, but a deliberate crime that could have been prevented by Russia. By choosing this language, the organisation reminds the audience that CRSV is not an incidental outcome of war; it is a crime that demands formal recognition.

By 2022, reflecting the self-organising ethic and feminist decolonial approaches of the previous decade, the Ukrainian organisations also demonstrated their commitments to terms that highlight the survival of victims. In Ukrainian, the organisations often use terms like “someone who was harmed” (постраждала) instead of the more passive “victim” (жертва). This choice is intentional. For example, SEMA Ukraine, in a Facebook post dated July 1, 2025, describes assaulted Ukrainian women as “those who suffered from the crimes of russia’s (sic) war against Ukraine” (постраждалих від злочинів війни росії проти України). On its English-language website, JurFem refers to people affected by CRSV as “survivors of CRSV” while in Ukrainian, they use terms like “one who suffered” (потерпіла) rather than victim (жертва), (JURFEM, 2025B). This survivor-centred wording avoids portraying the women as helpless and instead emphasises their strength and agency. It frames the women as having active voices in their own recovery. By using this language, Ukrainian women’s organisations reinforce the message that sexual violence is a war crime, and those affected deserve recognition and, more importantly, tangible support.

ACTIVITIES

By 2024, in accordance with the activation of Ukrainian civil society more broadly, we found that these organisations were engaged in five types of activities, almost all of them in more than one: (1) developing on-line roadmaps that provide information to women suffering from CRSV about where to get support; (2) providing direct humanitarian assistance, such as clothes, food, and apartments for relocated women; (3) providing mechanisms for psychological support, whether it is a group workshop or a private meeting with a psychologist; (4) providing legal support such as documenting cases of CRSV to support prosecutions or developing

a legal framework for responding to CRSV; and (5) fostering awareness through online or street actions. Below, we discuss these activities in more detail. While some of this activism was self-organising or was basically a “stretching” of already existing NGOs – given the inclusion of the fourth and fifth set of issues – we do not see the feminists letting the state off the hook, but instead temporarily stepping into an urgent situation.

(1) After the beginning of the full-scale war, two of the ten organisations started to provide roadmaps that serve the purpose of making it easier for women to seek appropriate help, whether psychological or legal. SEMA Ukraine's website provides an extensive collection of links to various resources, such as those providing psychological, medical, and legal support; the website even includes a list of support centres for survivors of sexual violence. La Strada's roadmaps were made available through webinars to highlight war-related issues and the resources that are available for women. This was perhaps the easiest kind of support to develop, but also an essential first step towards supporting women survivors of CRSV.

(2) More concrete was the humanitarian assistance provided by four of the ten organisations. In 2020, Women's Perspectives created the Woman for Woman platform to help women in emergency life circumstances, such as sexual and domestic violence. The platform amplifies the voices of women by publishing their stories on its website, but also allows Women's Perspectives to offer targeted assistance to those who articulate a need, such as for financial assistance, personal items such as hygiene products, or services. When a woman fills out a form asking for what she needs and tells her story, the organisation reviews the form to determine what assistance it can provide. With consent from the given woman, in addition to providing necessary help, the organisation also posts the story on its website. While it was not specifically focused on the war or CRSV when created, after 2022, their Woman for Woman Facebook page began to focus on stories of women who were internally displaced because of the war or were victims of CRSV. According to their website, some of the most common requests for help come from victims of domestic and sexual violence, women who suffered from the war, and women who currently live under occupation. The organisation also ended up providing some paid work opportunities to women relocated within Ukraine.

Similarly, by the spring of 2022, FemSolution started sending humanitarian aid to Ukrainian women impacted by war while also actively posting on their Facebook page regarding sexual violence during the war. They distributed medicine, hygiene products, baby food, and other aid they could acquire to women in both unoccupied and occupied territories (FARBAR, 2023). The Feminist Workshop too provided this kind of humanitarian help, but also babysitting services for women who were internally displaced to Lviv because of the war and apartments for activists through its project FemApartment.

Project Keshet has long been focused on gender-based violence in Ukraine and expanded the related work to include CRSV; for example, it held a 2023 workshop focused on preventing and responding to conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence, and the participants included women leaders of Ukrainian NGOs, leaders from the UN, and other women activists. However, their approach to humanitarian assistance was deliberately broader, with the understanding that those who had experienced CRSV should not be forced to retell their trauma but ask for any help that they might want. In 2022, Project Keshet provided small grants to displaced families, distributed hygiene products, but also rape kits, and then developed a project to distribute menstrual cups, a sustainable hygiene product. By 2024, they were distributing generators to hospitals and educational institutions as well as providing e-bikes for nurses to get around Donetsk. In an effort to create sustainable support for women during the war, Project Keshet's leader Vlada Nedak created the Women's Opportunity Fund to provide financial support in the form of grants to small businesses owned by women so that they could purchase equipment necessary for business development. In March 2024, the Women's Opportunity Fund was starting its fourth round with a plan to help 15 more grantees with 70 thousand Ukraine hryvnia (about \$1,786)

(3) After 2022, four of the ten organisations were providing psychological support, most commonly some type of trauma recovery service. Since SEMA Ukraine's original purpose was connected to sexual and gender-based violence related to conflict, psychological support was central to their efforts. They regularly helped facilitate various psychotherapeutic sessions and group meetings. This support continued into the summer of 2024. According to SEMA's Facebook post published on July 17, 2024,

through donations organised by Leopold for the Future, SEMA Ukraine covered transportation expenses for ten women so that they could participate in a retreat called “Together for You,” which included psychological group sessions. Additionally, on July 10, 2024, SEMA Ukraine posted on Facebook about its organising an international forum on “Post-Traumatic Growth of Women Affected by Sexual Violence in the Context of Prolonged War – Let’s Go, Sisters!”

The other three organisations were more inventive. The Feminist Workshop held sessions of an activity called “Worshipping Lilith,” during which women gather and discuss various gender-related issues and personal experiences, including sexual violence, in an anonymous environment. Their series of presentations called the “(ir)relevant” project analysed various forms of violence during war, including sexual violence used by Russia’s military (GRUZINA, 2022). Every month up until Spring 2024, they posted a video on YouTube in a series called “Ukrainian Feminist Kitchen,” a project during which Feminist Workshop activists from all around the world – meeting via Zoom – cook traditional Ukrainian dishes and discuss feminist subjects. They argue that these kinds of interactions make it easier to discuss sensitive and difficult subjects. Similarly, in Fall 2022, FemSolution introduced a project called “How are you” on their Instagram page. Through a Google Form link, women and queer individuals were welcomed to share their problems, emotional states, and worries anonymously. This project aimed to create a guilt-free space where women could openly express their feelings, complaints, arguments, anger, or happiness, allowing them to release the internal pain they were experiencing.

In 2022, working with experts in post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), Project Keshet introduced a gender-responsive SMS communications network called FemSMS. FemSMS shares trauma-informed messages with women across the nation, and these are followed by surveys. The surveys indicated that the women liked the messages and felt seen and supported. This creates a sense of community in which women can feel comfortable responding to their trauma and experience. As they explained to us, the idea was not to “bombard” women suffering from the war with assumptions that they were victims of sexual violence, but to create opportunities for them to process what has happened to them and their nation, and reach out for support themselves.

(4) Five organisations (and the Mozhu network) were involved in providing legal support connected to CRSV. WICC started doing so soon after the war started in 2014. In 2015, they developed what they called a “soldier’s card” to advocate for gender equality in the military and another informational card on how to prevent violence among military personnel. That year, WICC, along with the Ukrainian Helsinki Union for Human Rights, also organised an expedition to the Donetsk region to document cases of CRSV.

In 2016, the Ukrainian Women’s Fund, with some assistance from WICC and UN Women, supported a research that came to be titled the “Invisible Battalion”; it focused on women’s role in the military in the war on Donbass, and was led by Maria Berlinska. The resulting report was written by Tamara Martsenyuk, Anna Kvit and Ganna Grytsenko. The project was carried out at the National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy. Though the original report does not specifically address sexual violence, the research turned into a prominent advocacy project for Ukrainian women serving in the military (and also a photo project in cooperation with UN Women and then a documentary film). By 2020, the project explicitly included the issue of sexual harassment within the military.

In early 2022, before Russia’s full-scale invasion, WICC (along with Mozhu), was working on assessing the implementation of Ukraine’s Women, Peace, and Security National Action Plan, releasing a report in April which helped initiate an update of the plan through a collaboration between the government and NGOs, especially WICC and the Ukrainian Women’s Fund (MANOILENKO, 2024). Discussions and meetings to update the plan were held in the summer of 2022, with the revision released by the end of the year. The resulting revised National Action Plan elaborated five sets of tasks, two of which were connected to CRSV, namely “detecting and responding to CRSV” and “comprehensive assistance to victims of CRSV.” The “updated NAP... emphasizes the need for specific legal documents to be revised, as suggested by the lawyers involved in the update process, and underscores the importance of comprehensive assistance not only to the survivors but also to their family members and witnesses of these crimes” (IBID., P. 211). After this update, various women’s organisations have been involved in the creation of regional action plans in the regions of Donetsk, Zaporizhia, Poltava, Kyiv, and Kirovograd, including

WICC, SEMA Ukraine, JurFem, and Women's Perspectives (and also the network Mozhu and the Latvian organisation Marta; see http://plsz.gov.ua/info_scr/baza_rivn_prav.html).

After the 2022 full-scale invasion, SEMA Ukraine started documenting testimonies about the crimes of Russia's forces in Ukraine and directing efforts to prosecute the persons guilty of sexual violence. In a project called "RESILIENT TOGETHER: improving the system of response to war-related sexual violence – October 2022 – April 2024," the Ukrainian Women's Fund, collaborating with JurFem and La Strada, worked to create a legal framework to respond to CRSV. JurFem posted a series of articles covering legal issues, including laws regarding compensation and legal justice for the violence caused by Russia. Additionally, JurFem.ua has a section on its website dedicated to "Wartime Violence" and legal issues related to it. They provide analytical materials and information about the legal framework of CRSV in Ukraine.

(5) By 2022, seven of the ten organisations were bringing attention to issues connected to CRSV. La Strada, the Ukrainian affiliate of a transnational anti-trafficking effort, expanded its awareness campaigns to include all sorts of CRSV. For instance, they often posted related articles such as "Gender-Based and Domestic Violence in All-out War: Key Challenges and Powerful Countermeasures" (Dec 2022) and webinars like "Sexual Violence in War Conditions: Raising the Awareness of Journalists" (Aug 2022). In April 2024, La Strada Ukraine launched a campaign on their social media titled "Darkness will not hide violence" to bring awareness to the issue of domestic violence amidst the war. As for FemSolution, its members actively posted on the organisation's Instagram page regarding sexual violence during the war. Additionally, in 2023 they engaged in street activism, spreading posters in public spaces about abuse towards women and providing information on where women could seek help.

The Ukrainian Women's Fund, in partnership with Women's Health and Family Planning and the Ukrainian Foundation for Public Health, piloted a project in 5 regions (including occupied territories) – Zaporizhzhia, Dnipropetrovsk, Kharkiv, Donetsk, and Luhansk – called "Strengthening the Humanitarian Response to Violence against Women in Conflict-Affected Areas." The project aimed to distribute information regarding

gender-based violence to vulnerable population groups and to educate about and raise awareness of gender-based violence issues and resources available for survivors of violence via social media.

Some initiatives crossed the barrier into everyday life. For instance, on April 24, 2024, the Feminist Workshop posted a post on Facebook about their “Denim Day,” during which they wore jeans in support of women who have suffered from sexual violence and to highlight that one’s clothes, makeup, or behaviour are never a valid reason for sexual harassment. In their post, they explained that this internationally recognised day originated after a 1998 ruling by the Italian Supreme Court which overturned a rape conviction on the grounds that the victim’s jeans were so tight that she must have helped remove them, which suggested consent. This decision sparked global outrage and led to a protest by female members of the Italian Parliament, who wore jeans in solidarity with the victim. In 1999, Peace Over Violence established Denim Day in the United States to raise awareness of sexual violence and challenge victim-blaming. The Feminist Workshop concluded their post with some useful resources, including a hotline for victims of domestic violence. Several of these organisations, including Project Keshet, also regularly participate in the UN’s 16 Days to End Violence Against Women.

The most internationally visible was FEMEN. As indicated on their website, since 2014, reacting to the invasion of Ukraine has been part of their feminist activism. For example, on July 27, 2017, FEMEN activist Anna Aallein held a protest called “Putin kills” against the Russian aggression. After the 2022 invasion, FEMEN was more active. On August 22, 2022, in Berlin, their protestors walked topless with the slogan “Gas Embargo Now” during the Federal Government’s Open Day event. They interrupted German Chancellor Olaf Scholz’s speech to bring awareness to how buying gas from Russia is financing the war in Ukraine. In March 2022, FEMEN also organised a protest in Tbilisi, Georgia called “Stop Putin’s War” to protest against Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. The protesters insisted that there should be a “clos[ing of] the sky over Ukraine” and that the sanctions against Russia should be more aggressive. Although FEMEN’s Ukraine actions did not contain explicit mentions of CRSV, its activists have been vocal in other ways about it. On their blog – in a post titled “From Hell to Hell” published on March 13, 2022 – FEMEN take

a strong stand against CRSV:

Currently, hundreds of thousands of women are fleeing Ukraine to escape the war. They are not only fleeing death and destruction, they are also fleeing sexualized violence. Rape is an integral part of war. As with all rape, it is about power, dominating the woman, breaking her, bringing shame upon her. In war, rape is targeted to weaken the morale of the enemy and destabilize society.

As FEMEN's original focus was on sexual exploitation of Ukrainian women, CRSV was on their minds.

This analysis shows that by the end of 2022, the breadth of the Ukrainian feminist organising against CRSV was remarkable. While some of the projects seem less dynamic and less mutual than the kinds we were looking for, most were responsive to what the feminist groups were seeing on the ground, and some were particularly inventive. These achievements are even more remarkable given that the activists were themselves in the middle of the brutal war.

ADAPTATION BEFORE AND AFTER 2022

While we acknowledge the limitations of this research conducted in 2024, it seems that much of the organisations' responsiveness and inventiveness did not appear until after Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022. Six out of these ten organisations existed before 2014, but based on their online presence, it seemed that only three or four of those six (WICC, the Ukrainian Women's Fund, La Strada Ukraine, and maybe FEMEN) took the war seriously as an issue of gendered violence before 2022. The only organisation that directly focused on CRSV before 2022 was SEMA Ukraine. We recognise that looking at the organisations' online presence a decade out might not accurately capture the whole story. However, our examination of these organisations reveals that there was a groundswell of attention to the issue of CRSV in the spring of 2022, when horrible incidents of the first phase of the full-scale invasion came to light. All these feminist organisations paused their initial plans and switched gears to put their efforts into collectively fighting against Russian aggression and helping Ukrainian women.

By the time we started this project in January 2024, the attention to CRSV had begun to wane. This partially reflects the dynamics of the news cycle, but also as a representative from Latvia's Embassy in Ukraine put it to us, by then, everyone had been affected indirectly, if not directly, by the war. The violence and horror are almost universal even as the impact is gendered.

INTERSECTIONALITY

We did not find any conflicts over language use or about the various regions in the feminist response to CRSV, which reflected the shifts in feminist activism and society more broadly. All these entities used Ukrainian or English, not Russian, to communicate online. Instead, we found inclusiveness, especially in Project Keshet. As a feminist Jewish organisation, they have been supporting Jewish women and their communities in Ukraine in much of their work. But with the full-scale war – as indicated by their humanitarian assistance and psychological support projects – their focus was broadened to all Ukrainians even as they continued in some of their Jewish women-focused initiatives. In this way, Project Keshet was intersectional, helping to create a new inclusive Ukrainian political identity in seemingly different ways than the other organisations. We note that Project Keshet's actions also helped undermine Putin's claim, made when he launched the war, that he was fighting Nazis. While this is outside of our study, we also note that other groups have been providing support for LGBTQ people who experienced sexual violence because of the war (^{LGBT} HUMAN RIGHTS NASH SVIT CENTER, 2022; PROJECTOR, 2023). In these ways, these women's and feminist groups in Ukraine are helping to conceptualise "peace as plural" (POTAPOVA & O'SULLIVAN, 2024).

DISCUSSION: THE IMPACT OF UKRAINIAN FEMINIST RESPONSES

From the perspective of February 2026, the strong feminist organising after 2022 has significantly improved the state response to CRSV. In the first few months of the full-scale war, the scale and severity of the Russian forces' sexual violence in areas like Bucha and Irpin led the Ukrainian government – most notably Lyudmyla Denisova, the Ombudsperson for Human Rights – to express their outrage publicly. However, various

journalists and activists, including the “whole team from JurFem,” criticised her comments as sensationalist, disrespectful to the survivors, and not always supported by clear evidence, and she was dismissed by Ukraine’s parliament in May (DETECTOR MEDIA, 2022). Over the next several months, Ukraine’s Office of the Prosecutor General developed a special division dedicated to CRSV, and since then, the Ukrainian government has been proactive in documenting and prosecuting sexual violence committed by Russia’s armed forces (PRONCZUK & PETRICZKO, 2024). In 2022, Ukraine also revised a second National Action Plan for the UN Security Council’s Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on Women, Peace and Security as the first country in the world to do so during an active armed conflict (MANOILENKO, 2024), and it has been implementing it since then. Through the collective engagement of femocrats such as the Government Commissioner for Gender Equality Policy Kateryna Levchenko and women’s organisations, the new National Action Plan took defining and responding to CRSV much more seriously this time, and Ukraine ratified the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combatting Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (the “Istanbul Convention”). Ukrainian feminist scholars have labelled these policies as part of “the persistence of gender-transformative (feminist) policies during the war” (STRELNYK AT AL., 2025, P. 1, SEE ALSO LEVCHENKO, 2024). This is a remarkable contrast to the Ukrainian government’s failure to support survivors or prosecute CRSV experienced by Ukrainians between 2014 and 2022 (AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL, 2020, PP. 61–64).

In November 2024, the Ukrainian state took on new and unprecedented responsibilities to address CRSV as a result of and in coordination with Ukraine’s feminist activism, with the passage of the Law on Legal and Social Protection of the Rights of Victims of Sexual Violence Related to the Aggression of the Russian Federation Against Ukraine, and Urgent Interim Reparations (the Bardina Law) (VERKHOVNA RADA OF UKRAINE, 2024B, SEE ALSO ANOSOVA, 2025). The law – the first in the world to offer reparations during an ongoing conflict – officially recognises survivors of CRSV, providing them with legal status and access to state-funded services, such as medical treatment, legal aid, psychological care, and even financial assistance (VERKHOVNA RADA OF UKRAINE, 2024A). It reinforces Ukraine’s commitments under the Istanbul Convention and the Women, Peace, and Security agenda, but also indicates Ukraine’s efforts to align with international standards on victim-centred justice advocated by the feminist activists. JurFem was

not only a legal contributor to the Bardina Law, but also an implementation partner. In its February 2025 update on its website, JurFem (2025A) notes that its members were actively involved in developing the law's provisions. Moreover, they emphasise that "[l]aw itself is, of course, not enough." Effective implementation depends on bylaws and procedures that set up the Commission and structured referral pathways for CRSV survivors. JurFem also participated in a strategic session in February 2025, which was co-organised by the Ministry of Social Policy of Ukraine and the Global Fund for Survivors with the support of multiple organisations (IBID., 2025A). During the session, the organisations drafted the subordinate regulations and practical steps needed to effectively implement the Bardina Law.

A year later, the Global Survivors Fund (2025), a transnational organisation that has been promoting reparations for CRSV, published an impact report on the implementation of the Bardina Law, which entered into force in June 2025. They found that the first six months showed that reparations can work during war, not only afterwards: 654 survivors received interim compensation, with more applications still pending, and "the biggest verified registry" of CRSV cases in Ukraine was created (IBID., P. 14). At the same time, the Global Survivors Fund agreed with JurFem's opinion and stated that the effective implementation of the law requires proper protocols to run the Commission, staff training, and suitable funding (IBID., P. 17). Finally, in its impact report, the Global Survivors Fund stressed that follow-through is essential because survivors could otherwise lose trust in a programme that was carefully built and earned (IBID., P. 16). All these reforms – occurring during and after the increase in feminist activism – indicate that the Ukrainian feminist mobilisation led to more government responsiveness, not less.

Importantly, the NGO responses did not take away from the self organising of survivors of CRSV but foster it. In December of 2024, according to their Instagram page, some women survivors-activists founded an organisation specifically for women survivors of conflict-related trauma, including sexual violence, called Let's Act, Sisters! (Numo Sestry), which grew out of their making of a film of the same name that was shown at an international forum that SEMA Ukraine had organised in July of the same year. This grassroots initiative hit the ground running, regularly organising educational forums and resources, film screenings, and advocacy

campaigns that focus on survivors' voices, their healing, and raising public awareness of CRSV. In addition to this awareness raising, they provide roadmaps and other useful resources as well, including educational materials, and up-to-date news on laws and help for victims of CRSV. It is also worth mentioning the organisation Alumni, which was founded to support male survivors of captivity and torture, though its focus falls outside the scope of women's organisations.

As Ukrainian scholar-activist Iulia Anosova (personal communication, May 15, 2025) pointed out to us, it is important to recognise that these women's and feminist organisations did not work without international support. Most crucial were the Survivor Relief Centres that were set up in cooperation with the UN Population Fund in 2022 to address a variety of war-related issues, including CRSV, and which were located in 12 cities and three mobile units by 2024 (UNITED NATIONS POPULATION FUND, N.D.). In 2023, this project was augmented with an online platform called Aurora, a free and anonymous service for survivors of CRSV that aims to provide professional psychological support (UNFPA UKRAINE, 2023). There was also financial and legal support from the European Union and the Council of Europe as well as many individual European countries. International human rights advocates such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have worked since 2022 on examining the situation in Ukraine, including Russia's CRSV. CRSV in Ukraine has also been a focus for the United Kingdom-based thinktank Chatham House.

However, we also note that prominent transnational women's organisations were not able to successfully respond to Ukraine's post-invasion needs. These included the European networks WAVE and the European Women's Lobby.⁸ While activists and groups from places that had been under Soviet control have been more likely to be sympathetic to Ukraine, transnational peace organisations, such as CodePink and a coalition of peace activists who wrote a 2022 manifesto, continue to be blind to Russia's colonialism, supporting peace at all costs (FEMINIST ANTI-WAR RESISTANCE, 2022; JOHNSON, 2023). We did not find evidence of a Ukrainian affiliate of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, the main driver of the Women, Peace, and Security agenda.⁹ That Ukrainian feminists were able to achieve what they did without these transnational feminist groups' support makes their achievements even more remarkable.

Finally, while gender-based violence remains a prominent focus of international attention, the original focus on CRSV did not limit the international attention only to this issue, which was a concern for some critics. The UN Women's (2025) three-year review of the gender-related issues in Ukraine highlights women's agency and points to "rising unemployment; decreased decision-making power; greater domestic burdens; and a severe mental health crisis." Similarly, the OECD's (CESCA ET AL., 2025) analysis calls for women to be central to Ukraine's reconstruction, noting women's strengths in entrepreneurship, local governance, and serving in the military, while highlighting the problems of gender-based violence, the gender pay gap, unemployment, and "unpaid care responsibilities." This expansiveness, we argue, is a result of the insistence of Ukrainian feminists.

CONCLUSION: INSIGHTS FOR THE STUDY OF GENDER AND VIOLENCE

Our study shows the prompt, inventive, and wide-ranging responses of Ukrainian feminist organisations to CRSV, especially after the full-scale invasion in 2022. Despite many obstacles, especially Russia's continued attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure, the organisations' leaders transformed their organisations, exemplifying resilience, solidarity, and adaptability. Ukrainian feminists, prioritising inclusiveness and cooperation, have played a vital role in documenting war crimes and advocating for women's rights, while also addressing the immediate needs of women affected by war. We argue that this responsiveness contributed to new legal frameworks and notable government reforms without undermining the self organising of survivors. Given the other feminist and queer organising in Ukrainian society, including that related to women in the military, their activism did not forestall attention to other gender-related issues or the inclusion of LGBTQ+ people, or cast women as only victims, and in the last few years, survivors have organised themselves. In sum, in the middle of a full-scale invasion, Ukrainians created a multifaceted network of support for survivors of CRSV, successfully navigating a complex normative and funding environment given the need for international support for the war efforts, with no evidence that they undermined other causes.

This research contributes to the scholarly discussion of the transformation in Ukraine's civil society after the Revolution of Dignity.

The common wisdom until 2014 was that Ukraine, like other states recovering from Soviet-imposed state socialism, had a weak civil society, including the women's and feminist portion. The success of Ukrainian women's and feminist organisations in addressing the mass sexual violence of Russia's war, enlisting international support, and compelling government reforms, demonstrates a strong civil society, especially given the context of the largest land-war in Europe since World War II. While shared experiences of Soviet control still shape international feminist solidarities, this research contributes to the growing wisdom that postcommunism is no longer an important framework for Ukraine. This research also provides further evidence that the Russian language is no longer an important cleavage in Ukraine's society and that, even during martial law, Ukrainian organisations can continue to democratise the state.

Most broadly, this study contributes to studies of gender-based violence from the perspective of Ukraine. This article stakes a claim for the importance of including the violence that results from war as an issue that domestic activists work against. In scholarship, CRSV has mostly been seen as the province of transnational activists, perhaps partly because of the divide within political science between the fields of comparative politics and international relations. Using a more comparative politics approach as we do here makes visible the enormous efforts of Ukrainian feminists to use the available international norms connected to CRSV in a way that best suits them. While these norms remain more limited than what is called for by a Ukrainian decolonial feminist perspective, there is also agency in how the activists use and reframe them strategically. Norms are continually contested in transnational arenas, but also by activists as they attempt to localise them for their own contexts. These efforts by Ukrainian feminists demonstrate that there is more flexibility in the Women, Peace, and Security agenda, at least for a country on the margins of Europe, than was suggested by the most critical of the critics. At the same time, given the uphill battle that the feminists had to fight to expand the norms, including against many transnational feminists, this study also points out how much these international normative regimes and transnational women's peace networks still need to be decolonised when it comes to Central-Eastern Europe.

ENDNOTES

- 1 This book was part of an EU funded project titled "Let's stand together: Improving the system of support for victims of war-related sexual violence," a collaboration between several of the women's organisations we discuss below (the Ukrainian Women's Fund, La Strada-Ukraine, and JurFem).
- 2 The Rome Statute explicitly included sexual violence among crimes against humanity and war crimes: "Rape, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, forced pregnancy, enforced sterilization, or any other form of sexual violence of comparable gravity." Ukraine signed the Rome Statute in 2000, but only ratified it in 2024 (Russia signed but never ratified the Rome Statute, and then withdrew its signature in 2016).
- 3 As a member of the UN, Ukraine is subject to all the UN Security Council resolutions. Russia as a permanent member of the UN Security Council has voted for all of the Women, Peace, and Security resolutions.
- 4 The UN unit on CRSV conceptualises CRSV as the following: "rape, sexual slavery, forced prostitution, forced pregnancy, forced abortion, enforced sterilization, forced marriage and any other form of sexual violence of comparable gravity perpetrated against women, men, girls or boys that is directly or indirectly linked to a conflict" (United Nations Peacekeeping, 2024).
- 5 A big part of Ukrainian women's response to the war starting in 2014 was their joining the military "as volunteers, journalists, medical staff, and military staff, including in combat positions" (Philipps & Martsenyuk, 2023, p. 4). From December 2021 to December 2022, the number of women in the military almost doubled (Ibid.).
- 6 We note that Anosova (personal communication, May 15, 2025) told us that, based on her experience working with them, La Strada-Ukraine was also providing psychological support via a hotline as well as some humanitarian aid after 2022. We did not find any discussion of this in their online activities, however. She also added that in 2019–2020, La Strada-Ukraine developed a course with the National School of Judges on prosecution of sexual violence, with one of the four modules of the course being on CRSV.
- 7 Despite its having a similar name and focus as the International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN) for Women's Rights, Peace, and Security (<https://icanpeacework.org/>), we were told that Ukraine's Mozhu (ICAN) network is not affiliated with it.
- 8 Hrycak made this point at the 2024 convention for the Association for the Study of Nationality. Also, WAVE's (2025a, p. 25) efforts "responding to gender-based violence during war and in post-conflict settings" have included a toolkit (developed in 2022) and a manual (in 2023), with participants from Ukraine's Women's Perspectives and other groups from Armenia, Georgia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina. But in its description of its priorities moving forward, there is no mention of Ukraine and this massive war in Europe (WAVE, 2025b).
- 9 We did find a page on Ukraine on the WILPF website: <https://www.wilpf.org/focus-countries/ukraine/>.

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Websites of organisations in our sample that address CRSV in Ukraine

FEMEN, <https://femen.org/>
Facebook: FEMEN; Instagram: [femen_movement](#)

Feminist Workshop [Feministychna Maysternya], <https://femwork.org/en/>
Facebook: Феміністична майстерня / Feminist Workshop; Instagram: [femwork-shop](#); YouTube: Феміністична Майстерня; Telegram: Феміністичні події у Львові. Феміністична майстерня; Patreon: Feminist Workshop

FemSolution
Instagram: [@femsolution_org](#)

Let's Go, Sisters! [Numo, Sestry!]
Facebook: Нумо, сестри! and Нумо сестри (an account that was closed on April 28, 2025 due to technical issues); Instagram: [@numo.sisters](#)

La Strada Ukraine [Ukrayina La Strada], <https://la-strada.org.ua/en/>
Facebook: Ла Страда-Україна/La Strada-Ukraine; Instagram: [@lastradaukraine](#);
YouTube: La Strada Ukraine

Network of Ukrainian Men Who Survived Captivity And Torture (Alumni) [Merezha choloivikiv Ukraїny, yakі perezhlyv polon i tortury (Alumni)]
Facebook: Мережа чоловіків України, які пережили полон і тортури.

Project Keshar [Proekt Keshar], <https://www.projectkeshar.org/> and <https://www.projectkeshar.org/the-womens-opportunity-fund>
Facebook: Project Keshar; Instagram: [projectkesharusa](#); YouTube: Project Keshar

SEMA Ukraine, <http://semaukraine.org.ua/>
Facebook: Sema Ukraine; Twitter; Instagram: [sema_ukraine](#); YouTube: [sema_ukraine](#); Twitter: [@SEMAUkraine](#)

Ukrainian Women's Fund [Ukrayins'kyy Zhinochyy Fond (UZHD)], <https://uwf.org.ua/en/>
Facebook: Український Жіночий Фонд / Ukrainian Women's Fund; Instagram: [ukrainianwomensfund](#)

Ukrainian Women Lawyers Association's Jurfem, <https://jurfem.com.ua/en/home-page-2/>
Facebook: Асоціація жінок-юристок України "ЮрФем"; Instagram: [@jurfem.ua](#);
Linkedin: Ukrainian Women-Lawyers Association "JurFem"; Telegram: ЮрФем;
TikTok: [@jurfem.ua](#)

Women's Perspectives' Woman for Woman [Zhinochi perspektvy (Zhinka dlya Zhinky)], <https://www.woman4woman.org.ua/about>
Facebook: Жінка для Жінки; Instagram: [woman4woman.ua](#)

Women's Information Consultative Center (WICC) [Informatsiyno-Konsul'tatyvnyy Zhinochyy Tsent (IKZHTS)], <https://wicc.net.ua/en>
Facebook: Інформаційно-консультативний жіночий центр / WICC

NOTE

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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 East¹ (BUREK & SEKOWSKA-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 turn² (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 & STUDSRÖD, 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 secrecy. 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 footnote⁴): 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 publications⁵:

- 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, GLUSZEK-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 & STUÐSRÓÐ, 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 procedure⁶ (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-Kluczevska (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 2005⁸ (*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 (SEKOWSKA-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” (*pleć społeczno-kulturową*) 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 pleć (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 2023⁹ (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-disaggregated¹⁰ 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 it 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 world-view, 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 emphasising for the avoidance of doubt 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: *pleć 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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Law, War, and Gender-Based Violence: Addressing Sexual Harassment in the Ukrainian Armed Forces Amidst Ongoing Hostilities

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ABSTRACT

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has reshaped the gender dynamics in Ukrainian society, accelerating women's integration into the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU) and intensifying debates over discrimination in the military. By early 2025, more than 70,000 women were serving in the AFU, including thousands on the front line, which reflected both urgent wartime mobilisation needs and the longer-term advocacy efforts preceding the invasion. While the expanded enlistment has challenged entrenched gender roles and formal barriers to service, it has also exposed persistent shortcomings in institutional culture and legal mechanisms for addressing sexual harassment. This article examines how the war has magnified these tensions while generating momentum for reform. Drawing on an analysis of legislation, policy initiatives, and interviews with gender advisors, it explores proposed changes to military disciplinary rules, the role of the gender advisory network, and responses to internal military violence, highlighting prospects for a longer-term transformation of gender hierarchies in post-war Ukraine.

KEYWORDS

women in the military, sexual harassment, gender advisors, AFU, Ukraine

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INTRODUCTION

Russia's ongoing invasion of Ukraine, besides causing immediate effects such as casualties, destruction, and displacement, has significantly changed the gender dynamics within Ukrainian society (PHILLIPS & MARTSENYUK, 2023; STRELNYK, 2024; TRISKO DARDEN, 2023). The war has reshaped women's roles in both military and civilian sectors, creating new forms of agency with potential implications that may extend into the post-war period and contribute to a broader societal transformation, as evidenced by experiences in other national contexts (AROSTEGUI, 2013; BERRY, 2018; BRANNON, 2023; TRIPP, 2015; WOOD, 2008; YADAV, 2021). In the absence of conscription requirements for women, many have voluntarily joined the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU). By January 2025, the AFU totalled approximately 880,000 personnel, with over 70,000 women, including around 5,500 on the front lines.¹

These numbers show a 20 percent increase since 2022, highlighting both the extent of women's participation and its rapid growth during the war.² However, the expansion of women's roles in the AFU has been shaped not only by the immediate national security threat but also by a longer-term process of contestation.

Advocacy efforts and research, including the Invisible Battalion campaign launched in 2015, helped advance positive changes within the security and defence sector and shaped public perceptions of women in the military (INVISIBLE BATTALION, N.D.; MARTSENYUK ET AL., 2016). Coupled with ongoing mobilisation and increasing (wo)manpower demands, these initiatives gradually created momentum for institutional reform. This led the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine to revise regulations on combat positions and, in 2018, implement legislative reforms that guaranteed equal service opportunities for men and women.³ A set of further regulatory updates, finalised in 2022, removed the remaining formal restrictions and established parity in military service.⁴ Moreover, the ratification of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (the "Istanbul Convention") during the first year of the full-scale invasion (VERKHOVNA RADA OF UKRAINE, 2022) indicated that, despite the demands of wartime governance, addressing gender-based violence remained firmly on the legislative agenda.

The heightened visibility of the AFU during wartime has brought public attention not only to narratives of heroism and the shared cause of protecting the nation by both women and men but also to instances of discrimination and sexual harassment,⁵ as well as the inadequacy of the existing legal mechanisms available to female soldiers seeking justice (SKIBICKA, 2022; SOKOLOVA-STEKH, 2023). One account poignantly described women in uniform as “fighting two enemies at once – Russia, obviously, and the stereotypes and stigma faced every single day” (BOFFEY, 2023). As pre-full-scale invasion research by the Invisible Battalion astutely pointed out, “Wider enrollment of women in the military challenged the cult of hegemonic masculinity. Nevertheless, it is difficult to argue about the effectiveness of such changes in combating sexual harassment. As the number of women in the security and defence sector increases, so does the number and risk of sexual harassment [cases]” (HRYTSENKO ET AL., 2021, P. 15).

The growing willingness of Ukrainian servicewomen to speak publicly about sexual harassment since the full-scale invasion may have signalled a gradual shift in institutional culture, which contrasts with the silence that marked the war’s initial stages.⁶ However, existing procedures remain poorly equipped to handle such cases (HRYTSENKO ET AL., 2021), and most such incidents continue to be reported through civil society hotlines rather than the mechanisms established by the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine (NAKO, 2023). The fact that many Ukrainian women are risking their lives defending their country – while simultaneously facing risks of institutional violence – stands in stark contrast to dominant gender norms and the early depictions during the full-scale invasion that cast women primarily as civilian victims and men as defenders and combatants (UN WOMEN & CARE INTERNATIONAL, 2022). Women’s presence on the front lines and the resulting push to address sexual harassment may reflect not only the militarisation of their lives but also the broader societal transformations prompted by the conflict (PHILLIPS & MARTSENYUK, 2023). By situating sexual harassment within the broader reconfiguration of gender roles during the war, this article aims to analyse whether these developments signal a deeper transformation of institutional culture and societal gender hierarchies, and how emerging legal and institutional mechanisms seek to address discrimination and gender-based violence within the AFU.

Since the adoption of the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda through a series of United Nations Security Council resolutions, the roles

of women in war and peace contexts have received growing scholarly and policy attention worldwide (O'SULLIVAN, 2019; OTTO, 2010; SHEPHERD, 2016; SINGH, 2017). Within this framework, women are no longer viewed solely as victims of armed conflict but increasingly recognised as political and social actors whose experiences of war, while often marked by heightened vulnerability, can also generate new forms of agency (DUNCANSON & WOODWARD, 2016; KIRBY & SHEPHERD, 2024).

At the same time, feminist scholarship cautions that such recognition of women's agency unfolds within institutions historically structured by patriarchal power relations. The military, in particular, has long been identified as one of the state's most powerful sites for reproducing gender hierarchies and subordinating women (ENLOE, 1983; MACKENZIE, 2015). Defence and security institutions have traditionally been male-dominated, with the masculinisation of armed forces sustained not only through men's numerical dominance but also through organisational structures, practices, and symbols rooted in masculine norms (COCKBURN, 2001). Through processes of socialisation, discipline, and control, military institutions function as sites for the production and reinforcement of masculine identities (CONNELL & MESSERSCHMIDT, 2005). Traits culturally associated with masculinity, such as strength, toughness, and courage, are privileged, while those traditionally coded as feminine, including emotionality and care, are often devalued (CARREIRAS, 2017). These dynamics contribute to the maintenance of a hypermasculine institutional ideal that marginalises individuals who do not conform to dominant gender norms, most often women and minority personnel (COHN, 1997; ENLOE, 1983; CONNELL & MESSERSCHMIDT, 2005). Within this context, militarised masculinity has emerged as a particular hegemonic form closely associated with combat, aggression, authority, and the normalisation of violence (BELKIN, 2012; BASHAM, 2013). Such norms reinforce hierarchical relations not only between men and women but also among men themselves, privileging those who embody dominant martial ideals (CONNELL & MESSERSCHMIDT, 2005; KRONSELL, 2005).

The persistence of these gendered hierarchies has significant consequences for organisational cultures within armed forces. Research shows that masculinised, male-dominated occupations, including the military, tend to exhibit higher rates of sexual violence compared with civilian settings (STANDER & THOMSEN, 2016). Although policy reforms in many countries have formally expanded opportunities for women and minority groups

to serve in the military openly, sexual harassment and discrimination remain pervasive within military institutions (BONNES, 2019; WADHAM & CONNOR, 2023; NAKO, 2023).

The modern nation-state is built upon the sacrifices of those who fight on its behalf, with the military embodying the state's monopoly on legitimate violence and placing the use of force at the centre of the political order (MARVIN & INGLE, 1999; SASSON-LEVY, 2017). Because soldiers are expected to risk and often sacrifice their lives for the nation, they frequently occupy a privileged moral position within society. Acts associated with military violence are therefore often legitimised or tolerated as necessary components of the state's defence. However, violence within military institutions is not directed solely outward towards external enemies; it also operates internally as a mechanism of discipline and hierarchy (SASSON-LEVY, 2008). Within this structure, combatants are idealised as embodiments of loyalty, courage, and sacrifice, serving as key reference points for both military and national identity. Non-combatants, in turn, position themselves in relation to this idealised warrior figure, whose glorification reinforces the association between combat service and the highest form of civic duty (SASSON-LEVY, 2002; DUNCANSON, 2013). When a nation's political goals rely on military superiority, its ideals of masculinity become even more militarised, motivating men to enlist, and conversely, militarised values reinforce the centrality of the armed forces (GOLDSTEIN, 2001). Servicewomen's encounters with militarised masculinity show that while militarism is celebrated for patriotism, sacrifice, and defending the nation, it may simultaneously draw attention away from internal harms such as harassment or hazing. Official stories tend to minimise these abuses, emphasising discipline and loyalty while avoiding systemic accountability. In this way, the military reproduces itself not only through its defensive role but also through cultural ideas that normalise violence and reinforce masculine authority (STACHOWITSCH, 2012). Another effect of militarisation is the strengthening of political and military elites, which in some contexts enables the military to assume ruling power. National security rhetoric, combined with secrecy and censorship laws, further restricts freedoms of speech and movement, including those necessary for addressing discrimination and gender-based violence. As a result, militarised societies often become less democratic (COCKBURN, 2001).

Official narratives of sexual harassment shape how such practices are understood but often rely on denial or the displacement of responsibility. Such narratives commonly invoke a “zero-tolerance” rhetoric or attribute sexual harassment to a few isolated offenders (MACKENZIE, GUNAYDIN & CHAUDHURI, 2020). In doing so, they diffuse accountability, transforming violence into a collective concern without individual responsibility, while reinforcing the bonds of military fraternity (WADHAM, 2017).

Despite the scarcity of systematic global research on military institutional abuse, Western armed forces have increasingly faced internal reviews and organisational inquiries into sexual harassment since the late 1990s (ARBOUR, 2022; CALKINS ET AL., 2021; MINISTRY OF DEFENCE, 2019). The engagement of defence institutions with issues of diversity and discrimination must also be understood within the broader context of the past five decades, during which shifting social and political conditions, such as increased women’s representation in the public sector, evolving civil-military relations, and technological advancements, have shaped institutional priorities and practices (ENLOE, 2007; KING, 2013). Nevertheless, the denigration of women and sexual minorities remains deeply embedded in military culture, with relevant reforms typically arising only in the wake of a scandal, an investigation, and public pressure (WADHAM & CONNOR, 2023).

Given their long-standing reputation as resistant institutional terrains, militaries are particularly challenging environments for examining progress towards gender justice. For feminist scholars, state armed forces often serve as a barometer of women’s broader social and economic status (KENNEDY-PIPE, 2017). In this context, addressing gender-based violence within military structures provides a critical lens through which to examine gender dynamics and assess both the limits and possibilities of not only institutional but also societal transformation. This concern is underscored by the frequently cited observation that women in uniform may face a greater risk of sexual violence from fellow service members than from enemy forces (HILLMAN, 2009; WADHAM, 2017).

The question of how militaries respond to organisational violence during ongoing hostilities therefore offers a further valuable vantage point for examining what Wadham (2017, p. 241) describes as the “liberal potential of authoritarian institutions in liberal democracies.” Concurrently, wartime conditions may further complicate efforts to address such issues. Media

coverage of sexual harassment within the security sector during a full-scale war may remain limited due to concerns that a public discussion of its internal abuses could damage the military's reputation or undermine morale (NAKO, 2023, P. 64).

These tensions are not unique to Ukraine. Internal violence within militaries worldwide remains a persistent problem. A recent UN report on women in defence highlights that efforts to address sexual harassment and abuse within armed forces have achieved only limited success:

Despite efforts to address sexualized misconduct and abuse within armed forces, this remains a pervasive problem. Many countries have strengthened complaint and accountability mechanisms, but these are only effective when combined with enforcement measures and efforts to transform institutional culture. Given that harassment and discrimination undermine the welfare of women in the military and perpetuate a culture of impunity, more effective preventive measures and robust enforcement are unequivocally necessary (UNITED NATIONS, 2024, P. 15).

One institutional response to the persistent problems of discrimination and gender-based violence within military institutions has emerged through the implementation of the WPS agenda by NATO member states and partners. Since 2007, NATO has progressively developed mechanisms to operationalise the UN Security Council Resolutions on WPS, placing gender advisors and gender focal points at the centre of these efforts (BASTICK & DUNCANSON, 2018; GORDON & LEE-KOO, 2025; MORRISON, 2023). Within this framework, gender advisory networks are tasked with integrating gender perspectives into military planning, organisational policy, and operational practice. Their responsibilities may include advising commanders on gender-responsive decision-making, supporting the recruitment, retention, and advancement of women, and strengthening institutional mechanisms to prevent and address discrimination and sexual harassment.

In this sense, gender advisors and focal points function not merely as technical specialists but as actors embedded in broader processes of institutional reform. As Shepherd (2021) argues, the WPS agenda carries an expectation of a deeper structural transformation rather than symbolic inclusion alone. Gender advisors are therefore positioned to translate these normative commitments into everyday institutional practices. Their role has attracted increasing scholarly attention, particularly regarding their

potential to challenge entrenched norms within armed forces, including militarised masculinities and hierarchical gender orders (LEE-KOO ET AL., 2022). At the same time, research indicates that the transformative potential of gender advisory networks is often constrained by the very institutional environments in which they operate (GORDON & LEE-KOO, 2025). Militarised workplace cultures, limited institutional resources, unclear career pathways, insufficient training, and inconsistent leadership support can significantly restrict their effectiveness. Consequently, despite the presence of formal policy frameworks and official commitments to the WPS agenda, the work of gender advisors is frequently slowed, marginalised, or diluted in practice.

Situating gender advisors and focal points within this broader institutional context is essential for understanding their role in Ukraine's defence sector. As they are tasked with advancing gender-responsive reforms within historically masculinised and hierarchical military structures, their capacity to influence change may depend not only on legal mandates but also on organisational receptivity, political will, and the broader institutional momentum for reform. Against this backdrop, this article examines the factors driving legal amendments addressing sexual harassment in the Ukrainian military during the fourth year of Russia's full-scale invasion. It focuses on proposed revisions to the military disciplinary framework aimed at tackling discrimination and gender-based violence, as well as the emerging role of the gender advisory network introduced through recent legislative initiatives. The article concludes by considering the broader implications of these developments for gender dynamics within the armed forces and the evolving gender order in post-war Ukrainian society.

Methodologically, this research combines an analysis of legal and regulatory frameworks, policy initiatives, media sources, and survey data with qualitative evidence. The empirical component is based on nine semi-structured, in-depth online interviews with gender advisors and gender focal points.⁷ The interviews were conducted anonymously to ensure confidentiality and to encourage candid reflections on sensitive institutional dynamics. The participants were recruited through snowball sampling, whereby each interviewee suggested subsequent potential participants with relevant expertise and professional experience.

The interviews were analysed using an interpretive thematic approach that identified recurring patterns concerning gender dynamics

within the AFU, institutional responses to discrimination and sexual harassment, and the shifting role of gender advisors and focal points. Through an iterative close reading and a comparison of the transcripts, the themes were developed in dialogue with the article's broader analytical framework, enabling the empirical findings to inform the assessment of both institutional practices and potential legislative changes to the disciplinary statutes.

The research is further informed by the author's insider-outsider positionality. Having worked with military institutions since the onset of the full-scale invasion, the author possesses a contextual familiarity with and a professional access to them that facilitated trust-building and recruitment. At the same time, the author not being a service member and not occupying a formal position within the gender advisory structures of the AFU allowed for an analytical distance and reflexivity in interpreting the participants' accounts. This dual positioning shaped both the access to the field and the interpretation of the findings.

The article aims to contribute to the scholarship on women's integration into the military through a critical feminist lens by examining the case of addressing discrimination and sexual harassment within the AFU. It should be noted that this research focuses on internal military violence – acts committed by personnel against their fellow service members – while not covering certain forms of gender-based violence, such as conflict-related sexual violence.

While feminist scholarship emphasises that any empowerment gained through women's participation in the military is inherently fragile and shaped by complex power dynamics (COCKBURN, 2001; DUNCANSON, 2017; ENLOE, 2000; SEAGER, 1999), this work does not assume that military service constitutes the primary or sole pathway to empowerment or changes in the gender order. Instead, it emphasises the importance of viewing women's experiences of military service as potential sites of transformation, where traditional gender binaries may be challenged.

The article is organised as follows. It begins by framing women's enlistment in the AFU as both a response to national security threats and a catalyst for legal reforms, examining current mechanisms for addressing discrimination and gender-based violence along with their shortcomings.

The next section focuses on the proposed amendments to the Disciplinary Statute and the Internal Service Statute of the AFU, highlighting their potential benefits and limitations. This is followed by an analysis of the gender advisory network established within Ukraine's defence sector in line with NATO policies that assesses its current role and future prospects in addressing sexual harassment. The article concludes by reflecting on the broader implications of women's wartime integration into the military and their potential impact on the post-war gender order in Ukrainian society, while calling for further scholarly engagement with these issues once the reforms addressing gender-based violence in the military are fully implemented and their effects can be evaluated.

WOMEN IN THE AFU AND THE DRIVE FOR REFORM

As Segal (¹⁹⁹⁵) observed three decades ago, women's contributions to the military are often remembered selectively. During crises, their prior service is highlighted to justify their effectiveness in various roles. Yet, once the conflict subsides, a form of "cultural amnesia" emerges, with the women's participation minimised or erased entirely – until "a new emergency arises, [and] history is rediscovered" (^{IBID, P. 761}). This framework underscores the interplay between military needs, societal structures, and cultural norms: while the latter two often constrain women's participation, acute security threats can temporarily overcome these barriers. The Ukrainian case exemplifies this dynamic, as the existential threat posed by the Russian aggression that started in 2014 has both expanded and legitimised women's roles in the armed forces, even as gendered hierarchies within the military and society remain entrenched.

Motivations for women to join the AFU may be diverse and, at times, deeply personal (^{MIERIEMOVA, 2025}). For some, their enlistment is driven by a sense of civic duty or a desire to defend their country (^{BARKHUSH & OLLEY, 2025}), while for others it stems from a significant personal loss. The death of a husband, father, or son at the front often becomes a pivotal moment that converts grief into a commitment.⁸ While enlistment motivations differ, women's collective participation in the armed forces during the war has had a transformative impact. Voluntary enlistment not only heightened societal demands for their full integration but also revealed divisions between those with prior military experience and those entering the AFU from civilian life.⁹ Their greater representation in the AFU simultaneously

increased women's exposure to discrimination and gender-based violence, which showed that military service can pose a direct threat to servicewomen's safety. Furthermore, at the level of smaller units below the General Staff, non-normative forms of masculinity become more prevalent.¹⁰

Research presented in 2021 by the Invisible Battalion initiative identified sexual harassment as a persistent and systemic problem within the Ukrainian military (HRYTSENKO ET AL., 2021). The data on the prevalence of sexual harassment in the military at the time remained extremely limited, with publicly accessible statistics both scarce and inconsistent. The reporting was further hindered by the absence of anonymity and confidentiality, which could place victims at risk of negative consequences for their careers, reputation, status, and/or personal safety. The study connected such behaviour to broader structural and cultural factors, including deep-rooted misogyny, toxic masculinity, gender discrimination, and remnants of Soviet-era professional norms. It also noted that sexual harassment was often accompanied by related forms of misconduct such as abuse, homophobia, transphobia, and violence among servicemen. While emphasising that such issues are not unique to Ukraine and exist in armed forces worldwide, the research highlighted the lack of effective institutional mechanisms for addressing sexual harassment, noting that the complaint system within the AFU remains "fully controlled by the internal military hierarchy" (IBID., P. 22). As one of the interviewed gender focal points aptly observed, "If women are familiar with military culture, they are used to this hierarchy."¹¹

The enactment of martial law and mobilisation increased the total personnel of the AFU from 246,000 to approximately 700,000 during the first two years of the conflict (SLOVO I DILO, 2025), while the full-scale invasion also led to a 40% rise in the representation of women (Suspilne News, 2023). The influx of individuals from the civilian sector with no military background, alongside the greater visibility of female service members, has brought issues of discrimination and sexual harassment to the forefront. The invasion thus acted as a catalyst for change, challenging the traditionally rigid defence institution.¹² "Military culture began to develop from scratch,"¹³ under close societal observation, with incidents of discrimination and sexual harassment exposed and brought into the public spotlight (BOFFEY, 2023; SKIBICKA, 2022; SOKOLOVA-STEKH, 2023). At the same time, scholars caution that a wartime recognition of women's contributions

may prove temporary: although the public approval of and respect for both male and female combatants are currently high, such attitudes may shift once the hostilities end (KHROMEYCHUK, 2018; MARTSENYUK ET AL., 2019).

Soon after the full-scale invasion, however, the Ukrainian Ministry of Defence's leadership remained largely inactive on the highlighted issue of gender-based violence. The only response came from a then Deputy Minister of Defence, who publicly appealed to women experiencing harassment to write directly to her, promising she would "contact the police and bring them by the hand to investigate it" (50 VIDCOTKIV, 2023). This personal call, however, underscored rather than resolved the absence of mechanisms to address sexual harassment in the military.

Gender-based violence in the AFU remains a form of "latent criminality,"¹⁴ with its true scale difficult to determine due to a combination of several factors, including survivors' reluctance to report incidents and the complexities of identification and information-gathering processes. According to NAKO's 2023 monitoring of recommendations and research results from the Invisible Battalion cycle, the Ministry of Defence reported¹⁵ that between 2018 and 2022, there were no recorded appeals regarding sexual harassment or gender-based violence in the Ukrainian Armed Forces to the Ministry of Defence hotlines (NAKO, 2023, P. 51). Simultaneously, in 2022, the civil society organisation "La Strada – Ukraine," operating the National Hotline for the Prevention of Domestic Violence, Trafficking in Persons, and Gender Discrimination, received two appeals concerning sexual violence in the context of military service: one reported the rape of a servicewoman, and the other involved sexual harassment by a commander (IBID., P. 52). The hotline of the civil society organisation Legal Hundred reportedly received 136 appeals related to non-statutory relationships, with 85 from men and 51 from women in 2022 (IBID., P. 53). Most of these cases involved issues with the command, including complaints about leadership actions, bodily harm, and threats. Significantly, only one appeal, submitted by a woman, concerned sexual harassment. By July 2023, the Ukrainian Women Lawyers Association "JurFem" had received ten appeals from servicewomen regarding sexual harassment during their military service (IBID., P. 51).

These data suggest that affected servicewomen are more likely to seek support from public organisations than to report incidents within

their work environment. Many female service members hesitate to report such cases to their commanders or to law enforcement due to concerns about potential negative consequences within their units, as the resulting internal investigations, often overseen by the commanders themselves, are frequently perceived as biased, and as protecting perpetrators and reinforcing informal norms of “male solidarity” (IBID., P. 52).

In its recommendations, the Invisible Battalion’s research on sexual harassment in the AFU suggested limiting commanders’ involvement in the handling of sexual harassment cases to ensure maximum impartiality (HRYTSENKO ET AL., 2021, P. 26). However, to this day, the commander remains the “key figure in the functioning of the military unit”¹⁶ and retains full control over sexual harassment cases – a situation that cannot guarantee impartial consideration. The identification of discrimination and gender-based violence within existing mechanisms may also be limited due to several factors, including commanders’ reluctance to disclose information about incidents, internal silencing within units, and a general lack of awareness among commanders and personnel regarding what acts constitute sexual harassment.¹⁷ It should be noted that victims of sexual harassment include not only women but also men and members of the LGBTQIA+ community – an issue often misunderstood by commanders, who tend to frame sexual harassment solely as a “women’s problem.”¹⁸

Reflecting the urgency of the issue, a petition was registered on the official website of the President of Ukraine, demanding the implementation of the mechanism to combat sexual harassment and gender-based violence in the Armed Forces of Ukraine, and an end to the impunity of perpetrators (PETITION TO THE PRESIDENT OF UKRAINE, 2024). The petition successfully gathered more than 25,000 signatures, and at the beginning of 2025, a draft law was registered in the Ukrainian Parliament to introduce amendments to the Disciplinary Statute and the Internal Service Statute of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. It was aimed at improving mechanisms for maintaining military discipline and preventing discrimination and sexual harassment (VERKHOVNA RADA OF UKRAINE, 2025A).

“STATUTES DEFINE DRESS, HYGIENE, AND SLEEPING, BUT NOT WHAT SEXUAL HARASSMENT IS”¹⁹

Improving regulations on individual conduct and corporate ethics – particularly regarding sexism, sexual harassment, psychological and sexual violence, and discrimination in recruitment, service, and decision-making – was identified as a 2023 task for the Ministry of Defence and the AFU under the National Action Plan on the Implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (CABINET OF MINISTERS OF UKRAINE, 2020). In line with this commitment and following pressure from civil society that culminated in a petition, bill #13037 proposed amendments to the military disciplinary framework (VERKHOVNA RADA OF UKRAINE, 2025A). The bill was subsequently adopted by Parliament, which thereby enacted the amendments, and entered into force in March 2026 (VERKHOVNA RADA OF UKRAINE, 2026). The revisions to the articles of the Disciplinary Statute and the Internal Service Statute of the AFU have broadened the definition of military discipline to encompass compliance with gender equality legislation, as well as the prevention of and response to discrimination, gender-based violence, sexual harassment, and violations of sexual freedom and sexual inviolability.²⁰ While the new version of Article 4 of the Disciplinary Statute does not specify which acts constitute each category, the amendments indicate that such “improper conduct” may be expressed verbally or non-verbally (e.g., through words, gestures, body movements, etc.). The law further provides protections for whistleblowers, ensuring that those who report such incidents cannot face disciplinary measures or dismissal, and broadens reporting channels to commanders, military authorities, law enforcement, and other state institutions.²¹ Additionally, it mandates that a service investigation may be initiated either independently by the commander or upon referral from the unit responsible for ensuring gender equality or a gender advisor/gender focal point,²² with a provision for the latter to participate in the investigation.²³ The explanatory note accompanying the law linked it to international commitments, referencing the 2024 Washington Summit Declaration, which introduced NATO’s updated WPS Policy aimed at mainstreaming gender across all activities and structures. The law is also framed as compatible with NATO standards on gender equality and with UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (VERKHOVNA RADA OF UKRAINE, 2025A).

Before the law introduced amendments to the disciplinary framework, AFU servicemembers affected by sexual harassment in the military

had two primary options for reporting incidents of sexual harassment: they could report them to their commanders, who could themselves be implicated as perpetrators, or to law enforcement authorities.²⁴ A further channel was the Ministry of Defence hotline, but it ultimately rerouted complaints back into the chain of command (HRYTSENKO ET AL., 2021, P. 21). Even when reports were submitted, the cases often fell apart due to a lack of witnesses or physical evidence (NAKO, 2023, P. 59). By contrast, a central principle of anti-gender-based violence reforms in many Western militaries has been the removal of crime reporting and case management from the chain of command to ensure independent oversight.²⁵ In Ukraine, an alternative civilian pathway for addressing sexual harassment cases outside the military chain of command may soon be realised under the recently approved Law “On the Military Ombudsperson”²⁶ (VERKHOVNA RADA OF UKRAINE, 2025B).

The newly adopted law retains commanders’ involvement in the reporting and investigation process, which is consistent with the existing military disciplinary framework, but raises concerns that the new provisions could perpetuate systemic barriers. However, the inclusion of a gender advisor or focal point within the response mechanism offers a measure of optimism to most of the respondents of this research, as it may open new opportunities for identifying and investigating cases of discrimination and sexual harassment in the military, though not without acknowledging the challenges that remain to be overcome.

THE GENDER ADVISORY NETWORK IN THE UKRAINIAN DEFENCE SECTOR

In line with Ukraine’s NATO aspirations, the process of establishing gender advisory roles in its defence sector started in 2018, when a then Deputy Minister of Defence appointed gender focal points within the Ministry of Defence, subordinate military administrative bodies, and higher military education institutions (ALINEA INTERNATIONAL, 2023). At that time, Ukraine’s participation in NATO’s Partnership for Peace Planning and Review Process included the objective of building such a network, which was also outlined in the country’s first National Action Plan for implementing UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (SUSLOVA & ROOS, 2018). In 2020, full-time gender advisory positions were established within the AFU commands, and from 2021 onward, commanders have been appointing gender focal points in military units (ALINEA INTERNATIONAL, 2023; 50 VIDCOTKIV, 2024).

In March 2025, Ukraine's General Staff introduced the position of Gender Advisor to improve coordination between the Ministry of Defence and the different branches of the military (GENERAL STAFF OF THE ARMED FORCES OF UKRAINE, 2025). According to the current appointed Advisor, the Armed Forces currently have seven full-time gender advisors appointed in the AFU commands and 766 gender focal points, whose role is described as that of "a mediator who communicates with everyone to help an individual resolve their problem" (ZMINA HUMAN RIGHTS CENTRE, 2025). This description bears resemblance to the Model Regulation on Gender Advisors, approved by Ukraine's Government, which defines their main duties as providing consultations and offering recommendations to the leadership on implementing state policy on equal rights and opportunities for women and men, as well as preventing gender-based violence and discrimination (CABINET OF MINISTERS OF UKRAINE, 2020).

Yet, even as the legislation and intention seem to converge, important gaps remain. As the Gender Advisor of the AFU General Staff acknowledged, "There is no state budget for training gender advisors/gender focal points, no institution that prepares them; all of this is informal education" (ZMINA HUMAN RIGHTS CENTRE, 2025). Additionally, unlike gender advisors, gender focal points are nominated personnel who perform their responsibilities on a voluntary, part-time basis alongside their primary professional duties, which raises concerns about their capacity to effectively handle cases of sexual harassment (ALINEA INTERNATIONAL, 2023). There are no clearly defined standards for the skills or competencies required of gender focal points, which results in many appointees lacking expertise in the assigned area.²⁷ At the same time, institutional knowledge is frequently lost during personnel rotations or transfers.²⁸

Initially established as a gesture towards NATO's gender mainstreaming policies (NATO, 2021), Ukraine's relatively new gender advisory structure within the defence sector continues to face significant growing pains. There is hope that the legal amendments to the disciplinary framework will drive meaningful change by introducing full-time gender advisor positions in military units, as these gender advisors would replace the focal points who currently shoulder these responsibilities.²⁹ Some respondents also emphasised that the authority of gender focal points largely depends on their personal qualities. In contrast, a formal recognition of their role in investigations of discrimination and sexual harassment could strengthen

their standing in the eyes of commanders.³⁰ Realising this potential, however, will require adequate funding, the establishment of clear competency standards, and the institutionalisation of training. As one respondent noted, “Gender advisors are extinguishing fires when what is needed is gradual and sustainable prevention.”³¹

While most of the interviewees supported the institutionalisation of full-time gender advisors as a step towards progress, they also acknowledged that discrimination and gender-based violence cannot be addressed through structural reform alone. As one interviewee noted, “Personnel have to be taught first, not pressured by means of the law.”³² Ukrainian wartime policy indicates that enshrining gender equality in law is not a panacea for deep-seated inequality (Trisko Darden, 2023). This is particularly evident when extraordinary circumstances, such as war, bolster patriarchal institutions like national militaries. Military culture is gradually evolving, including in its approach to countering sexual harassment. Yet, this process remains incomplete and requires sustained capacity-building – not only within the gender advisory network but across the entire military hierarchy, from rank-and-file personnel to commanding officers.

CONCLUSIONS

The rapid expansion of women’s participation in the Armed Forces of Ukraine during Russia’s full-scale invasion has brought renewed attention to discrimination and sexual harassment within military institutions while simultaneously creating momentum for institutional reform. As the war accelerated women’s integration into the AFU, it also exposed long-standing structural problems embedded in the military culture, including the persistence of gender hierarchies, weak reporting mechanisms, and the limited institutional capacity to address gender-based violence.

The increased presence of women in the military has simultaneously expanded opportunities for their participation and heightened their exposure to discrimination and harassment. Evidence from civil society monitoring and interview data indicates that sexual harassment within the AFU remains largely underreported and continues to function as a form of “latent criminality” shaped by hierarchical command structures, concerns about career repercussions, and a lack of confidential reporting mechanisms. The persistence of these barriers reflects broader

structural issues identified by previous research, including the concentration of investigative authority within the chain of command and the absence of clear institutional procedures for handling complaints.

At the same time, wartime pressures and growing public scrutiny have generated momentum for institutional change. Legislative amendments to the Disciplinary Statute and the Internal Service Statute of the AFU represent an attempt to expand mechanisms for addressing discrimination and sexual harassment. Parallel institutional developments, including the potential evolving role of the gender advisory network and the establishment of the Military Ombudsperson, may suggest a promising framework for oversight and accountability. Yet, these reforms remain at an early stage, and their effectiveness will depend on implementation, institutional resources, and the willingness of the military leadership to address entrenched cultural norms. While the introduction of gender advisors and gender focal points has increased awareness of gender equality issues within the defence sector, their effectiveness remains constrained by limited institutional support, insufficient training, and the voluntary nature of many appointments. Without clear authority, stable funding, and systematic capacity-building, gender advisors risk functioning primarily as intermediaries or crisis responders rather than as agents capable of driving sustained institutional change.

The scale of Ukraine's armed forces also indicates that the war is no longer fought solely by a small professional corps but has become a collective social endeavour involving a large share of society. In this context, the way discrimination and sexual harassment are addressed within the security and defence sector may shape broader societal understandings of gender equality and accountability. Debates surrounding gender-based violence in the military are therefore increasingly intertwined with wider discussions about justice and gender relations in Ukrainian civilian life.

Against this backdrop, examining how the Ukrainian military responds to discrimination and sexual harassment provides an important lens through which to assess whether wartime institutional reforms may contribute to broader transformations in gender relations. Women serving in the AFU occupy a uniquely transgressive position within both the military and society more broadly. Their presence challenges long-standing

masculinist narratives of war and creates potential openings for renegotiating gender roles during Ukraine's post-war reconstruction.

At the same time, feminist scholarship cautions that any recognition of women's contributions during wartime may prove temporary. Although the public respect for both male and female combatants is currently high, historical experience suggests that such attitudes may shift once the hostilities end. Therefore, the growing number of women veterans is likely to make them an increasingly visible group in post-war Ukraine, yet existing veteran policies remain insufficiently developed to ensure that their voices, regardless of gender, are effectively incorporated into policymaking and public debate.³³

Overall, while the wartime expansion of women's participation and the emergence of new legal and institutional mechanisms may gradually reshape gender dynamics within the AFU, it remains too early to determine whether these developments will translate into deeper transformations of military culture and broader societal gender relations. Continued scholarly attention will therefore be necessary for evaluating the long-term effects of reforms addressing gender-based violence within the military and understanding how women's wartime integration into the armed forces may influence the evolving gender order in post-war Ukraine.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Ministry of Defence of Ukraine. (2025, March 8). Понад 5 500 жінок сьогодні служать на передовій – Сергій Мельник [Over 5,500 women are currently serving on the front line – Serhiy Melnyk]. <https://mod.gov.ua/news/ponad-5-500-zhinok-sogodni-sluzhat-na-peredovij-sergij-melnik>
- 2 Ministry of Defence of Ukraine, "Понад 5 500 жінок сьогодні служать на передовій."
- 3 According to the Law of Ukraine "On Amendments to Certain Laws of Ukraine Concerning the Provision of Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women and Men Throughout their Service in the Armed Forces of Ukraine and Other Military Formations," #2523-VIII, September 6, 2018.
- 4 According to the Order of the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine "On Amendments to the Order of the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine" #412/for official use only (DSK) dated June 20, 2012, #50, February 10, 2022.
- 5 In this article, "sexual harassment" is defined in accordance with the Law of Ukraine "On Ensuring Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women and Men" (2005, #2866-IV), which characterises it as actions of a sexual nature (that do not infringe upon a person's sexual freedom or sexual integrity) expressed verbally, nonverbally, or physically (including words, gestures, body movements, touching, patting, or similar conduct) that offend or humiliate a person's dignity and may create an intimidating, hostile, offensive, or degrading environment. The term is also used in line with the Law of Ukraine (2006, № 4797-IX) "On Amendments to the Disciplinary Statute of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, the Internal Service Statute of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, and the Disciplinary Statute of the Civil Protection Service regarding the improvement of mechanisms for ensuring military discipline and for preventing and combating discrimination and sexual harassment."
- 6 The Russian war against Ukraine began in 2014 with the illegal annexation of Crimea and the occupation of parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts in eastern Ukraine. It escalated in February 2022, when Russia launched a full-scale invasion.
- 7 Unlike gender advisors appointed to the commands of various AFU branches, gender focal points are nominated personnel within military units who perform dual roles. They carry out gender mainstreaming functions on a part-time, voluntary basis alongside their primary professional duties.
- 8 Interview with Gender Advisor 3 of the Ukrainian defence sector, August 29, 2025.
- 9 Interview with Gender Focal Point 2 of the Ukrainian defence sector, August 21, 2025.
- 10 Interview with Gender Focal Point 2 of the Ukrainian defence sector, August 21, 2025.
- 11 Interview with Gender Focal Point 1 of the Ukrainian defence sector, August 21, 2025.
- 12 Interview with Gender Focal Point 5 of the Ukrainian defence sector, September 14, 2025.
- 13 Interview with Gender Focal Point 2 of the Ukrainian defence sector, August 21, 2025.
- 14 Interview with Gender Advisor 7 of the Ukrainian defence sector, September 16, 2025.
- 15 Upon a request for information dated January 16, 2023.
- 16 Interview with Gender Focal Point 7 of the Ukrainian defence sector, September 16, 2025.
- 17 Interview with Gender Focal Point 9 of the Ukrainian defence sector, September 20, 2025.
- 18 Interview with Gender Focal Point 9 of the Ukrainian defence sector, September 20, 2025.
- 19 Interview with Gender Focal Point 6 of the Ukrainian defence sector, September 15, 2025
- 20 Amendments to Article 4 of the Disciplinary Statute of the Armed Forces of Ukraine.

- 21 Amendments to Article 87-2 of the Disciplinary Statute of the Armed Forces of Ukraine.
- 22 In Ukrainian, both roles are denoted by the same title – “радник з питань забезпечення рівних прав та можливостей жінок і чоловіків, запобігання та протидії насильству за ознакою статі.”
- 23 Amendments to Article 84 of the Disciplinary Statute of the Armed Forces of Ukraine.
- 24 Based on Article 110 of the Disciplinary Statute of the Armed Forces of Ukraine.
- 25 Interview with Gender Focal Point 2 of the Ukrainian defence sector, August 21, 2025.
- 26 Interview with Gender Advisor 8 of the Ukrainian defence sector, September 16, 2025.
- 27 Interview with Gender Advisor 3 of the Ukrainian defence sector, August 29, 2025.
- 28 Interview with Gender Advisor 4 of the Ukrainian defence sector, September 10, 2025.
- 29 Interview with Gender Advisor 3 of the Ukrainian defence sector, August 29, 2025.
- 30 Interview with Gender Focal Point 7 of the Ukrainian defence sector, September 16, 2025.
- 31 Interview with Gender Focal Point 2 of the Ukrainian defence sector, August 21, 2025.
- 32 Interview with Gender Focal Point 2 of the Ukrainian defence sector, August 21, 2025.
- 33 Interview with Gender Advisor 3 of the Ukrainian defence sector, August 29, 2025; Interview with Gender Focal Point 5 of the Ukrainian defence sector, September 14, 2025.

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Discredited and Disgraced: Gender-Based Violence against Women Politicians and Journalists in Slovakia

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the gender-based violence experienced by women politicians and journalists in Slovakia following the 2023 parliamentary elections, a period marked by democratic backsliding. Drawing on 14 semi-structured interviews with women politicians, journalists, and gender-equality experts, it analyses the forms and impacts of the violence, focusing on meaning-making processes, coping strategies, and motivations to remain publicly active. The findings show that women are frequently targeted through gendered attacks aimed not only at their personal lives and families but also at the values they represent, including democracy, human rights, and gender equality. These attacks often involve semiotic violence designed to discredit and disgrace them, such as accusations of being “foreign agents,” “prostitutes,” or “sell-outs.” The study identifies this violence as a context-specific mechanism linking gender-based violence with broader political attacks against ideological opposition. It demonstrates how such violence operates as a strategic tool to silence women and limit their participation, particularly in the absence of effective institutional protection, thereby undermining democratic governance and diversity.

KEYWORDS

gender-based violence, political violence, democratic backsliding, semiotic violence

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INTRODUCTION

Globally, women politicians receive death threats, experience smear campaigns such as the ones targeting Finnish Prime Minister Sanna Marin and New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern (MCCLURE, 2023) or, in extreme cases, are killed, as in the case of British politician Jo Cox in 2016 (COBAIN & TAYLOR, 2016). Recent years have seen several politically or socially active women leave the public sphere in Slovakia – President Zuzana Čaputová (BALOGOVÁ, 2023) and the politician Ďuriš-Nicholsonová left politics, a journalist resigned as editor in chief of a major newspaper (SME.SK, 2025), and several other journalists and reporters took extended breaks or stopped their careers. These events must be understood in the context of the violence and abuse targeting women in the public sphere as well as the increasing pressures from politicians and private groups aiming to influence the work of independent media and civil society (BÁRDY, 2024; MIKUŠOVIČ & BENEDIKOVIČOVÁ, 2024).

The phenomenon of gender-based violence against women in politics, recently expanded to include journalists, and human rights and gender-equality activists, has been conceptualised, theorised and researched by both scholars and practitioners. The focus of this work has been on understanding its forms, motivations, and consequences; researching its prevalence and developing practical tools to prevent or combat it. Violence against women in politics and the media has serious individual and societal consequences. The targeted women often experience psychosomatic harms, including anxiety, depression, sleep disorders, and post-traumatic stress disorder; and may respond with self-censorship or a withdrawal from public engagement (FEINSTEIN ET AL., 2025). Such violence can limit professional opportunities, cause economic harm and contribute to women's exits from political and journalistic careers (BECK ET AL., 2022; POSETTI & SHABBIR, 2022; OSCE OFFICE FOR DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS AND HUMAN RIGHTS, 2022). On the societal level, violence against women in public roles undermines participation, representation, and diversity by delegitimising women's competence and authority. It weakens democratic governance both by pushing women out of public life and by discouraging others from entering it, thereby posing a structural threat to democratic pluralism (BARDALL & MYERS, 2018; WOOD, 2024).

This journal article builds on the existing body of research on gendered aspects of democratic backsliding (KRIZSAN & ROGGEBAUD, 2018, 2019;

GRZEBALSKA & PETŮ, 2018), which focuses mostly on reversals of gender-equality policies or effects of backsliding on human rights actors or women's movements. Such research has focused on the Central and Eastern European region, especially Hungary, Poland, and Croatia. This article broadens the research focus to analyse the gender-based violence experienced by women politicians and journalists in the specific context of the Slovak Republic in the period following the 2023 parliamentary elections, which can be characterised by processes of democratic backsliding in combination with an anti-gender movement. Whereas the processes of gendered democratic backsliding in Slovakia have been studied, sufficient attention has not been paid to the intersections of gender-based violence and women's public participation in this context. This article explores the forms and impacts of the acts of violence that women sustained but goes beyond individual experiences and seeks to identify key meaning-making processes and narratives related to their coping mechanisms and motivation to stay active in public life. It analyses women's experiences based on 14 semi-structured interviews with women politicians, journalists and gender equality experts. The contribution of this study is twofold. First, it enriches the understanding of violence against women in politics by contextualising it within the democratic backsliding and anti-gender activism in Slovakia, while focusing specifically on women who advocate for democracy, human rights, and gender equality or who express criticism of the government. Second, it further deepens the understanding of the impacts of gender-based violence on women's participation in public life and democracy as such.

The findings demonstrate that women are commonly attacked in gendered ways, with the attacks targeting their appearance, personal or sexual lives, or families, but most significantly the values they represent. Acts of semiotic violence involving referring to them as "foreign agents", "prostitutes," "sell-outs" or "Soros's girls" and accusing them of betraying national interests and being enemies of the country, are used to render them discredited and disgraced. The author proposes that this rendering is a specific mode of semiotic violence to account for such abuse. This underscores the connections between violence against women in politics and wider patterns of political violence targeting political or ideological opposition. Further analysis reveals that gender-based violence against women in the public sphere in Slovakia is used as a strategic tool to abuse,

silence, and ultimately push women out of the public space and from specific areas of expertise. This is achieved by various attacks, but often those targeting women's families and their motherhood status. In cases of such attacks, the wellbeing and safety of families and children is deemed the deciding factor for the women's willingness and motivation to stay publicly engaged. Coupled with a lack of available reporting, protection, and support mechanisms, this leads to an internalisation and individualisation of the responsibility to cope with violence and the continued significance of the public/private divide when it comes to women's participation in public life.

STUDYING GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN POLITICS: CONCEPTUALISATION, TERMS AND APPROACHES

The phenomenon of violence against women in politics has gained attention and recognition globally in the last decades, both in the media and from researchers, and has been recognised to affect women all over the globe – from Latin and South America (PISCOPO, 2016B; SANÍN, 2020, 2022) to Europe (IPU & PACE, 2018), the Asia-Pacific (IPU ET AL., 2025; NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTE, 2020), Africa (IYER, 2021), and North America (RANEY, 2023; WAGNER, 2022). This violence affects not only female politicians, but also other women with public-facing roles, such as journalists, reporters, human rights defenders, or activists and feminists.

Considerable research measuring violence against women in politics has been undertaken with the goal of advocating for and implementing targeted measures to address and combat violence against women in politics. Most notably, IPU, the Inter-Parliamentary Union, carried out the first global research on sexism, harassment, and violence against women parliamentarians (2016). Several guides have also been published: IPU published *Guidelines For the Elimination of Sexism, Harassment and Violence Against Women in Parliament* (IPU, 2019) and the National Democratic Institute together with the International Women's Media Foundation published *Empower & Lead: A Guide For Women in Politics and the Media On Using the Media Safely and Effectively* (2023). UN Women also published a *Guidance note on Preventing violence against women in politics* (2021) and a *Benchmark for Political Parties on Preventing Violence against Women in Politics* published by the Political Party Peer Network et al. (2022).

The main approaches to conceptualising and studying this type of violence are the political violence approach, the concept of electoral violence, and the violence against women in politics approach. The political violence approach examines both women's and men's experiences with acts of political violence, framing them as attempts to drive individuals from politics, sometimes in the context of a failing rule of law, authoritarianism or general violence in connection with insecurity (PISCOPO, 2016B). Women may be targeted for their party affiliation, political views, or roles as public officials. The relevant research often compares men's and women's experiences (BJARNEGÅRD ET AL., 2022; HÅKANSSON, 2024A, 2024B), while the related policy responses focus on security measures and legal prosecution for the offences. Electoral violence as a concept focuses on violence experienced by candidates, but also by voters and other political party or campaign staff, and government officials. Electoral violence is understood as a tool to influence election outcomes – who gains or keeps power (BARDALL, 2011; BIRCH ET AL., 2020; BJARNEGÅRD, 2018; WOOD, 2024). This research strand often centres on countries in periods of political transition or unrest, or new democracies (BARDALL ET AL., 2018; HÖGLUND 2009; STALLONE & ZULVER, 2025). The third approach sees violence against women in politics as a form of gender-based violence rooted in inequality, patriarchy, and discrimination (KROOK, 2015; KROOK & SANÍN, 2016A). This violence aims to exclude women – and other marginalised groups, such as ethnic minorities, individuals with a diverse gender identity or sexual orientation – from political life. The attacks are understood as attempts to intimidate and delegitimise women and other individuals from non-hegemonic groups, and exclude them from participation and decision-making, thus reinforcing existing power structures. Research in this field focuses on barriers women face, the forms of violence they experience, and its impact on participation, with the related policy responses emphasising gender-sensitive tools, support, and prevention (KROOK, 2010; KROOK & TRUE, 2012; PISCOPO, 2016A).

Different forms of violence can be broadly organised into four distinct forms: physical, sexual, economic, and psychological violence. This organisation follows a categorisation proposed by Krook & Sanín (2016A) and is supplemented with the category of cyber-violence. Physical violence can include acts ranging from slaps, beatings, infliction of bodily harm, and throwing objects to extreme acts of violence like torture, kidnappings or killings. Sexual violence includes acts of sexual harassment, forced

sexual acts, rape and attempted rape. Economic violence includes being denied access to the resources necessary for the successful execution of one's mandate, such as funds, and access to an office, equipment or services (*IBID.*). Psychological violence includes all targeted acts that negatively affect the wellbeing, safety, and mental health of the targeted individuals. These can include threats, blackmail, and the spread of any abusive, violent, sexualised, humiliating or intimidating comments, texts, images or videos which are meant to harass, ridicule, shame, and/or discriminate against the victim (*BARDALL, 2013*). Women are particularly vulnerable to psychological violence, especially to claims related to morality and sexuality (*IBID.*). Acts of psychological violence are meant to inflict damage on the targeted women, possibly leading to their isolation or complete withdrawal (*KROOK & SANÍN, 2016A*).

Symbolic (*IBID.*) and semiotic violence (*KROOK, 2022*) are distinct types of psychological violence and highlight how discourse, representation, and signs are used to erase or delegitimise women. Symbolic violence makes women invisible or portrays them as incompetent, while semiotic violence more directly employs language, images or symbols to discipline and exclude women. Symbolic violence reproduces gendered and unequal hierarchies through discourses and practices that are common in society and may be culture-specific, oftentimes without the use of direct attacks or force.

The concept of semiotic violence is used to analyse and understand acts of violence perpetrated by language, images or body language. Semiotic violence draws on public signification, gendered norms and inequalities; and uses signs and symbols to discipline women and ultimately keep them from exercising their rights to political participation. Because it draws on socially and culturally significant signs and tropes, its acts are understood by society as being aimed at all women, not just the ones targeted (*IBID.*). Where symbolic violence draws on structural inequality by questioning women's suitability for politics, semiotic violence uses intentional discursive practices in the form of signs, language or images to attack and harm women in politics on both individual and collective levels. The different forms of gender-based violence against women in politics often occur simultaneously or as a continuum of violent acts, which makes it difficult to clearly distinguish between them.

Many of the previously discussed forms and examples of violence can be perpetrated online. According to the European Women's Lobby (2017), women are 27 times more likely to experience harassment online compared to men. Similarly, an Inter-Parliamentary Union survey revealed that 85% of women parliamentarians had experienced psychological violence and 58% had faced online sexual harassment and sexist attacks (IPU & PACE, 2018). Common forms of cyberviolence include doxxing – publishing of personal information, cyber-harassment, cyber-stalking, or sharing of claims, images or videos, whether real or fabricated with the use of artificial intelligence, without consent (BAKER ET AL., N.D.; BARDALL, 2013). There are several key aspects which characterise cyberviolence and make it especially damaging for women in public roles: the scope and speed of content sharing, the lack of accountability for perpetrators, difficulties with investigating and prosecuting such crimes, and the severity of the consequences (IBID., BARDALL, 2023). The speed, scope, and public character of cyberviolence make it difficult to identify the original source and perpetrator of the attack, a problem which is compounded by the option to stay anonymous on most platforms. Personal data protection and the difficulty with enforcing community standards and codes of conduct, often grant perpetrators a sense of impunity. Common consequences of cyberviolence include self-censorship, loss of political support, psychological harms, and withdrawal from social media or public life altogether (BECK ET AL., 2022; KOCH ET AL., 2025). Furthermore, cyber violence has a chilling effect – deterring women who witness it from entering politics (BARDALL, 2013).

Following the feminist tradition, this article recognises that violence against women in politics is a form of gender-based violence and takes a broad understanding of its forms. It conceptualises violence as multidimensional and intersectional, and as affecting different women in different ways depending on their different vulnerabilities and characteristics, such as their age, sexual orientation, ethnicity, or gender-identity. It further recognises that violence against women in politics can be culture-specific (DHRODIA, 2018; KROOK & SANÍN, 2016B; KUPERBERG, 2018) and that women from marginalised groups experience more severe violence and report graver impacts of it on their mental health – this is especially the case for queer politicians (STEPHENSON ET AL., 2025) and politicians from an ethnic minority (WATSON ET AL., 2025).

This research draws on the conceptualisation of violence against women in politics regarding its forms (physical, psychological, sexual and economic) as proposed by Krook and Sanín (2016A) with a specific focus on symbolic (IBID.) and semiotic violence (KROOK, 2022). It further builds on the concept of the public/private division of spheres. The division of public and private spheres has historically associated men with matters related to the public sphere, including politics, and women with the private sphere. Feminist critique has maintained that these two spheres are actually interconnected, as matters considered private are in fact regulated by the state and are thus political (PATEMAN, 1987; VERLOO & LOMBARDO, 2007). By entering the political and media spheres, women are symbolically transgressing this divide.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

The following section outlines the research methodology, including the sampling method, the selected analytical framework for the analysis of experiences of gender-based violence against women in public roles in Slovakia, namely the framework of gendered motives, forms and impacts (BARDALL ET AL., 2020), and a short contextualisation of the current socio-political climate in Slovakia. The analysis focuses on women's personal experiences of violence, while understanding the meaning-making processes and strategies they employ to come to terms and deal with violence. The findings of the analysis inform the conclusions about the consequences of violence on women's participation and presence in public life, and help identify emerging patterns of gender-based violence against publicly active women.

The aim of this research is not to quantify gender-based violence against women in politics and journalism and gender-equality experts, or to compare women's and men's experiences, but to account for the current social and political environment marked by aspects of democratic backsliding (BERMEO, 2016). The purposive sampling strategy was aimed at women politicians from oppositional political parties and journalists from established independent media, who were commonly targeted in the attacks. It was based on convenience and snowballing, with 24 politicians, journalists and gender equality experts contacted by email with information about the research goals and a request to participate. 14 in-person or

virtual interviews were conducted between April and May 2024. Among the 14 interviewees, there were eight members of parliament, one candidate running for the 2024 European Parliament elections, three journalists and two gender equality experts. The interviews with the politicians cover the respective periods since the start of each politician's active participation, either in politics or civil society, the interviews with the journalists focus largely on the period since the 2018 murder of the journalist Ján Kuciak, and the gender-equality expert interviews focus on the period after the 2014 protests against the ratification of the Istanbul Convention. The primary data from the qualitative interviews is supplemented with relevant, publicly available sources about politicians' experiences of gender-based violence. These are mostly related to President Zuzana Čaputová because her experiences took place before and during the time of the conducting of the interviews as well as because of the highly publicised nature and impacts of the events related to her.

Due to the sensitivity of the research topic and the public character of the respondents' careers, ethical considerations were implemented. All the respondents formally expressed consent and received information about the research, data storage and confidentiality.¹ The research design respected feminist research principles – sensitivity and an awareness of power dynamics and the character of elite interviews, which affect and shifts the power asymmetry. At the same time, all the respondents were able to actively intervene in the interview process by posing questions, refusing to answer or discuss any of the questions, and pausing or stopping the interview. All the interviews were carried out in a trauma-informed manner and with respect for the do-no-harm principle.

The collected data was analysed using the framework of gendered motives, forms and impacts (BARDALL ET AL., 2020). The analysis of the presence or absence of gender on three levels of analysis – in the motives, forms, and impacts of individual acts of violence – enables a rich and nuanced understanding of violence against women in politics. Such an understanding is not reductionist and recognises that experiences can have different – combined or mutually exclusive – gendered forms and impacts irrespective of the motivations behind them. The forms and impacts of acts of violence are shaped by the social and cultural context and related beliefs about gender norms and women's roles in relation to public participation (IBID.).

This is closely related to the concept of “gendered scripts,” which are culture specific and often rely on messages related to women’s social roles, sexuality, bodies or morality, which are used to deny their participation in and suitedness for public roles (KROOK & SANÍN, 2016B).

Much of the conceptual and theoretical work on violence against women in politics has been concerned with differentiating between acts of violence against women motivated by their gender and those that are not motivated by it – whether they are acts with the aim to ultimately push women out of politics or simply acts of political violence against somebody who happens to be a woman (BJARNEGÅRD, 2018; KROOK, 2023; PISCOPO, 2016B). This research, on the other hand, draws attention to the lived experiences of women and their understanding of the violence they experience with its gendered motivations. In the context of the anti-gender movement and democratic backsliding, the motivations become blurred and intersect, and the research focus is on the forms and impacts of acts of violence. The differentiation between individual acts and their forms and impacts allows for the identification and understanding of wider patterns of violence against women in public roles in the context of the increasing democratic backsliding and gender-equality backlash in current Slovakia.

The qualitative data from the 14 interviews has been transcribed and coded for the subsequent analysis. First, individual acts of violence or their patterns were coded using the motives, forms and impacts framework with the aim of identifying common themes across the interviews. Afterwards, narratives and themes related to how women themselves recount their experiences with violence, and how they make sense of them and cope with them, were identified.

THE CURRENT SOCIO-POLITICAL CONTEXT OF THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC

This research is set against the backdrop of the current social and political context in Slovakia, which is characterised by increasing democratic backsliding (ČUROŠ, 2024; NORD ET AL., 2025) with gendered aspects. According to Krizsan and Roggeband (2018), political and social attacks on gender-equality policies and women’s increased participation can be understood as gendered aspects of democratic backsliding and wider

trends of conservatism. In Slovakia, these have been on the rise since 2014, as exemplified by the protests against the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, over 30 legislative proposals aimed at restricting the right to abortion in the last six years (MOŽNOSŤ VOĽBY, 2025), and the changes at the Gender Equality Department under the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, and Family. These changes were related to its personnel as well as the replacement of the phrase “gender equality” with “equality between women and men” and “equality of opportunities” in strategies and documents (MAĎAROVÁ & HARDOŠ, 2022; MAĎAROVÁ & VALKOVIČOVÁ, 2021; VARGOVČÍKOVÁ, 2021).

Politically, the period since the 2018 murder of the investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée has been very unstable and marked by increasing polarisation. In the period between 2018 and 2025, Slovakia had six different governments, starting with the resignation of Prime Minister Robert Fico in 2018 after nation-wide protests only for SMER to win the September 2023 elections with Fico becoming Prime Minister for the fourth time. The current government, the fourth to be led by SMER-SD with Fico as Prime Minister, passed several laws negatively impacting the rule of law, democracy, civil society, and media freedom. An expansive amendment of the criminal code was adopted, and it reduced penalties and reclassified crimes, including financial crimes and corruption, and also dissolved the Special Prosecution Office (JOCHECOVÁ, 2024). The government has been critical of independent media, which manifested in the adoption of several laws and organisational changes – the public broadcaster RTVS has been dissolved and replaced with a new legal entity with a new leadership and structure, and there have also been attempts to restrict the freedom of access to information (NICHOLSON, 2024). Furthermore, governmental MPs and politicians have been boycotting the most important independent media, including the most-watched television channel, by refusing to answer their questions during press conferences, attend political debates involving them or give them interviews (IBID). Accusations against and attacks on media by governmental politicians have intensified after the attempted assassination of Fico in May 2024, for which he and others directly blamed the media and the opposition by accusing them of incitement to violence (ECPMF, 2024).

PROSTITUTES, AGENTS AND ENEMIES: SEMIOTIC VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN SLOVAKIA

Despite this article focusing primarily on semiotic violence, the respondents recounted their experiences with a wide range of violent acts and attacks, including a years-long experience with a stalker along the online-offline continuum, receiving a condom filled with semen in an envelope, being physically and verbally attacked in public, receiving death threats, and receiving unsolicited videos of naked or masturbating men. The period when the interviews were conducted was marked by a number of high-profile events related to gender-based violence against the then President Zuzana Čaputová, which sparked a wider debate about violence against women in politics, with several politicians sharing their related experiences in the media (MIKUŠOVIČ, 2024; TÓDOVÁ, 2024). An envelope with four bullets was sent to the president with the implication that they were for her, her partner and her two children; and a person also entered her private property at night despite security being present (KATUŠKA, 2023; SABO, 2024). During her entire term, Čaputová represented democratic and pro-European values and demonstrated her support for Ukraine. She vetoed several laws both before and after the 2023 elections, which put her in opposition with both governments, but especially with the government led by SMER-SD that entered office in 2023. Čaputová's presidential mandate was characterised by a constant stream of harassment, threats, and attacks perpetrated against her by various SMER-SD party members, including the Prime Minister, other MPs, public officials and their allies. These attacks were then further echoed and amplified by members of the public on social media in response to the politicians' outspoken incitement (BURKE, 2023). The attacks against Čaputová represent a clear example of a semiotic violence combining several context-dependent tropes – accusing Čaputová of being a prostitute, a foreign agent, and/or a sell-out to foreign political powers, especially the United States and, to a lesser extent, the European Union, which is often referred to as “Brussels” (HARZER, 2024). This trope is exemplified by an event which took place during a SMER party rally held during the 2022 Labour Day celebrations. On this occasion, Vice-Chairman Ľuboš Blaha asked the audience “Čaputová is a what? An American...?”, and the crowd repeatedly yelled back “An American whore” (KYSEL', 2022).

The strategy of accusing women of being prostitutes, agents, or sell-outs to other governments, individuals or interest groups has been repeatedly echoed by the interview respondents. The commonly mentioned figures who allegedly “sponsor,” buy, or give instructions to the women include the US financier George Soros, who is often targeted by Viktor Orban, and thus this form of violence is linked with the wider context of democratic backsliding, anti-gender movements and their strategies and narratives in other countries. Other examples of such semiotic violence include mentions of the targeted persons being affiliated with the US Embassy and also the Slovak financial group Penta. The respondents frequently mentioned that other politicians from the coalition headed by SMER-SD directly addressed such comments towards them during press-conferences, or in their videos or posts on social media; and the comments were then echoed by the general public on social media, particularly in the comment sections of the given respondent’s or other politicians’ posts.

In close relation to the mode of semiotic violence which attempts to discredit women aligned with progressive and democratic values, the respondents also mentioned further frequent attacks and abuse in the online space targeting them for representing values connected to gender-equality, progressivism, or the European Union. In the interviews the respondents reported that many of the attacks, perpetrated mostly by men, were triggered by their outspoken support of gender-equality, feminism, LGBTQ+ rights, and Ukraine, but in three instances also by their use of gender-sensitive language. Common themes in these acts of violence are accusations of being lesbians and engaging in sexual acts with other female colleagues, of being transgender, or of looking like a man and having manly features. Accusations targeting women’s gender identity, supposedly unfeminine appearance or sexual orientation are commonly directed toward women politicians due to the supposed role incongruity between the stereotypical characteristics of femininity associated with being a woman and the characteristics deemed as necessary for being a leader (EAGLY & KARAU, 2002; SCHNEIDER & BOS, 2014; SPORTELLI & D’ERRICO, 2025).

Other examples of attacks where women’s gender and value systems intersect include reactions to their support for Ukraine in the war of Russian aggression, where, for example, they are asked to go fight in the war, or attacks in relation to gender equality – for example, one perpetrator

rhetorically demanded that the given woman carry a fridge up four flights of stairs alone. Another respondent mentioned that when one advocates for human rights and inclusion of migrants, incitement to sexual violence and rape on social media often follows, which showcases a common strategy of far-right parties, namely that of portraying immigrant men as sexual predators, and women who support them as thus deserving of rape or “asking for it” (KÖTTIG & SIGL, 2020; SARRASIN ET AL., 2015).

The use of language was described both as a trigger and as a tool to discipline the respondents for their supposed transgressions. One respondent shared that she is frequently targeted for not using the traditional Slovak ending of female last names -ová, which is traditionally added to the male form of the last name and clearly genders the person as female. More women have been choosing not to add the ending to their name, as linguistically it represents a relationship of belonging and it could potentially also result in discrimination by gender, as a person's gender is thus easily inferred from their last name. One respondent said that her harassers frequently add it to her name to correct it, or accuse her of not being knowledgeable about Slovak grammar or making up the possibility to use her chosen last name as such:

They do it either by adding the “ová” to my name and telling me that's what I should be called, and that if I don't have it [the ending] there, then I'm just making it up, that I'm not following the rules of grammar and stuff like that, or, on the other hand, by attacking me sexually and asking me if I'm really a woman, or a surgically altered man, if I'm a transsexual.

There were also public cases where male members of the parliament misgendered women whose last names do not have the female ending despite working with them for months (JEDLEE PRODUCTIONS, 2025; TOP Z NRSR, 2023). This can also be seen as a practice of discipline where women are publicly humiliated and punished for not adhering to traditions associated with the Slovak language and culture, and thus these acts of violence are linked to attacks targeting the values of progressivism and gender-equality.

Three other respondents mentioned the use of gender sensitive and inclusive language as a trigger for abusive behaviour in the online space, particularly from older men (RUILOBA-NÚÑEZ & GOENAGA RUIZ DE ZUAZU, 2024).

The Slovak language is gendered, with nouns, adjectives, and verb conjugations all having a gendered ending. Furthermore, the traditionally generic masculine form of nouns and pronouns is considered default and neutral. The use of gender inclusive and gender sensitive language is usually put into practice by adding more forms of nouns or verbs or using gender-neutral nouns which are not in the generic masculine form. Several respondents mentioned that men respond by “mansplaining” (described as such by the respondents) when gender inclusive language is used in articles or on social media. One respondent described it as follows:

Recently, for example, I have repeatedly received messages, presumably from older men, who were very upset that I use gender-sensitive language. The emails were relatively polite, but there was always a subliminal message stating that this was the result of some frustration or trauma on my part, or some other personal issue, and that I should deal with it elsewhere and not by using gender-sensitive language.

Such reactions can be read as expressions of anger at women for becoming visible and wishes to erase them again, since gender inclusive language is seen as something abnormal, something foreign to Slovak culture and traditions, much like the other values these women represent, which are associated with progressive and pro-European values. Inclusive language is seen as empowering and political by those who use it because it underscores the presence and visibility of women in public and political spaces, but it can also be used to discipline individuals for their perceived transgressions against the standard and traditional form of the given language.

Intersectional acts of gender-based violence, including attacks on one’s ethnicity, ethnic minority belonging or sexual orientation, were reported as being particularly hurtful by the respondents. Ethnic minority belonging and minority sexual orientation were present in both the motives and forms of the attacks and acts of violence:

I make no secret of the fact that part of my family is Jewish, so they [the perpetrators] often bring it up, but, uh, it’s more or less just a photo collage sometimes; one reader even sent me one by mail, where he pasted my photo onto the body of a naked fat woman.

A respondent who identifies as Roma, identified three groups of attacks: racist attacks, then personalised gendered attacks targeting her appearance, ethnicity, or competencies and, lastly, attacks targeting the value system she represents politically. She holds that the attacks targeting her Roma ethnicity are the most violent and vulgar:

When it comes to the Roma people and community, it's totally hateful, and you can feel much more hatred and resistance there [in the attacks]. The specific topic, they don't even focus on it anymore. Uh, [they focus] not so much on me as on the whole topic of Roma inclusion or inclusion in general. It's as if they think that you are actually representing or personifying the whole community.

She further mentioned being held responsible for the problems the Roma minority is facing as well as being accused of being a “mutant” and being denied her Roma ethnicity because of allegedly being too educated for a Roma person. This demonstrates that some attacks are motivated by a supposed role incongruity between being a member of an ethnic minority and being a politician.

Another respondent frequently receives aggressive homophobic and transphobic messages but also fake images of herself with fabricated transphobic quotes. She described these attacks as particularly damaging for herself because she is the one going through all her messages and posts personally without any support from her assistants, as she considers that it is her responsibility to be in contact with her followers, but also for the followers, the majority of whom are queer: “I take care of my own social media; it is important for me to ensure safety for people who trust me and have certain expectations.” The attacks are motivated by her queer identity but also by her advocating for LGBTQ+ rights in her political work. Another respondent shared that the most intense attacks she received were triggered by her expertise on migration and motivated by her relationship with a foreigner, with the attacks peaking around the period of the refugee crises in 2015. These examples of intersectional acts of violence underscore that belonging in or having a relationship with a minority makes one vulnerable to gendered attacks which target the intersectionality in both the motive and form of the violent acts as well as oftentimes applying double standards to the individuals. One respondent

summarised the related responsibility as follows: “I have to prove myself twice as much as other women because I am underestimated both for being a woman and for being Roma.”

At the same time, experiences of intersectional violence lead to a significant loss of expertise; because many individuals focus on advocating for the rights of the minority or community they belong to or have ties to – the LGBTQ+ community, migrants, or the Roma minority, they are targeted both for their belonging to the said group and for their professional advocacy, policy, and political work. Their experiences with such personalised violence may result in their making a decision to specialise in another area in their political work. Two respondents whose experiences were discussed above now focus on completely different areas than in the past due to the severity and personal character of the attacks they sustained. Such a loss of expertise negatively affects governance, public policy, representation, and advocacy for minority and human rights.

MOTHERS, POLITICIANS AND JOURNALISTS: THE CONTINUED SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PUBLIC/PRIVATE DIVIDE

In this section the continued relevance of the public/private divide for women’s participation in public life, namely in the arena of politics and journalism, will be discussed. Women’s roles as mothers and caretakers will be elaborated on, initially in relation to the gendered forms and contents of the related attacks and later by looking at them as a relevant category for analysing the impacts of violence on women’s motivation and decisions to stay publicly active. Lastly, some individual narratives of women’s personal strength and motivation will be identified and discussed. When recounting their experiences with attacks and harassment, several respondents mentioned that attacks and threats targeting their families and especially their children, or attacks against them in the presence of their children are the most hurtful and damaging. These attacks are also the ones they consider the most threatening for their safety. One respondent shared this experience:

Those attacks, I don’t know if they can get any rougher than the ones I’ve experienced. The fact is that part of the attacks included threats made against my children, so it really has nothing to do with my work and they are small children

that nobody has ever seen or heard of and yet they were often threatened. I think that's probably the most vulnerable area for a politician and I don't want to make a distinction now between women and men but I guess in some ways, when they say that to a politician who is a mother against her minor children, it's very hurtful. It's very painful. And, uh, after these attacks, I don't know if anything has surpassed them, I have to admit, in the online space.

Another respondent similarly mentioned that when the harassment takes place in person, rather than online, and in the presence of her young daughter, it gets to her much more and makes her think about the boundary between the attacks being bearable and the attacks being too much. The thought of her daughter's possible future in Slovakia makes her consider potentially moving abroad. Moreover, threats against children and family members brought several respondents to report the incidents to the police and press charges, which underscores the severity of the attacks against family for the women concerned, and oftentimes these were the only incidents they officially reported to the authorities.

Furthermore, eight respondents mentioned that they are concerned about the mental health, wellbeing, and safety of their families, especially their parents and children, when it comes to acts of violence. Four respondents shared examples of times when their parents, families, or municipal office received hateful and threatening letters about them. Several respondents mentioned that they worry about the vicarious trauma inflicted on their families, and to protect them, they advise them not to read any social media posts or comments that target them:

From the very beginning, I have been warning my family not to read the discussions under my articles or reactions on Facebook. But of course, my sister reads them and is often frightened by it. My more distant family often tell me that they are afraid for me and express their support, but they also have concerns because, of course, these people imagine the situation to be even worse than it is.

Similarly, when asked about their motivation to continue to be publicly involved, multiple interviewed women mentioned that if their families and children were in danger because of their political or journalistic activity, they would end their career. These responses must be considered in the context of the decision of then President Čaputová not to run

for a second term of presidency, which was made public shortly before the interviews were conducted. Čaputová's family, especially her daughters, were common targets of attacks and Čaputová even mentioned the attacks on her family as a reason not to continue her political career and described them as unfair, unacceptable, and devastating for the entire society (BALOGOVÁ, 2023). These examples demonstrate that attacks on families and children of publicly active women are extremely efficient in threatening them and limiting their participation. By threatening or targeting their families, the perpetrators remind the women of their rightful place – in the home and taking care of their families, and the threats and violence should be understood as a punishment for transgressing the public/private divide and claiming a presence and voice in the public sphere. These examples underscore the continued relevance of the public/private divide as an analytical category for studying women's participation on two levels: on the level of the motives and forms of the attacks targeting children and families, but especially on the level of the impacts, where women read and understand the attacks as threatening and dangerous and base their decisions about the future on them. Therefore, in targeting women as mothers, the perpetrators use gendered forms and motives of attacking women as mothers with gendered impacts of limiting and threatening their willingness to stay publicly active and participate.

The impacts of attacks aimed at families are compounded by a lack of targeted and effective reporting and protection mechanisms available to women politicians and journalists. As mentioned above, in extreme cases women report acts of violence and attacks to the police, especially when they involve death threats, but the investigation and prosecution are often lengthy. One respondent filed a claim against her stalker, whose identity was known, but the process leading to his sentencing took two years and she had to provide printed copies of all electronic communication she received from him. Several respondents mentioned that in the past they used to report grievous threats to an official channel of the Ministry of Justice in charge of investigating and prosecuting extremism, but after the 2023 election, the branch is not functional. When asked about other mechanisms or resources available for reporting or protection, the respondents expressed a general consensus that reporting directly on online platforms is ineffective and time-consuming. One respondent said: "Only about 5% of what I report is ruled as violating the Community

Standards and is removed.” And another stated: “I have zero trust in institutions.” One extreme example was that of a respondent who created a collage of the different violent content she received to raise awareness of gendered violence only for the post to be blocked by the platform for violating the community rules. Only one respondent mentioned a targeted mechanism for journalists to report severe acts of violence as well as the available psychological support provided by her employer, which demonstrates an institutional recognition of violence targeting journalists, even if it is not gender-sensitive. Considering the lack of or insufficient reporting and protection mechanisms, an individualisation of responsibility for dealing with the attacks and violence has been identified in the form of a prominent narrative of personal strength, resilience and a strong mindset among the women respondents, and it was limited only by their families being targeted by the attacks.

Whereas there is a general recognition of the harmful and damaging character and consequences of gendered attacks against publicly active women, on a personal level most of the respondents cite their unique strength of character, mindset, or approach to life which enables them to cope with violence without severe negative consequences. “Online hate doesn’t affect me; it’s a matter of conscious decision,” “I feel like I have it under control and it doesn’t affect me much,” and “I steeled myself against it” are just some of the sentences uttered during the interviews. In two cases, the respondents revealed that their previous experiences with intense waves of violence gave them the strength and tools to deal with it in the future. One respondent suffered a mental breakdown after receiving death threats aimed at her and her children, which made her stop her advocacy and political work for two years, but she now reflects on the experience as follows: “I focused more on my work with children, but it also helped me to detach myself from those things and learn to cope with them. So now it didn’t catch me off guard and I wasn’t surprised.”

Interestingly, some women combine and link their unique strength and ability to withstand violence and attacks with not wanting to reveal their vulnerability and the impacts of the violence on them:

I'm saying, like, I accept it all as part of the job. It's just that a lot of times I get so hung up on the fact that actually, I understand that there's a lot of evil in society, but I don't actually want to talk about it [my experiences]. I don't even want to put it out there because it doesn't stop the evil, it just multiplies it, and there's no one to protect you and so we're kind of on our own; and at the same time, it's like I think that's why a lot of women either don't go into politics or when they do, they just give up and leave. I'm just not that sensitive piece of the puzzle.

This quote reveals the complex processes at play when it comes to coping with violence – the respondent feels that sharing her experiences and vulnerability could trigger further attacks against her or other women, as she recognises the structural character of violence against women, but at the same time sets herself apart from the others by claiming that she is “not that sensitive piece of the puzzle”. Another respondent shared how her understanding of the expectations people have of their political representatives affects what she is willing to share on social media, even when it conflicts with her internal preferences and motivations:

[...] sometimes I would like to use those social networks for a practical purpose – for example, [I could use them when] I don't know something, I'm looking for a recommendation for something, or I'm looking for a massage at a doctor's office or something, but I've learned not to show my weaknesses on those social networks, like in that sense, although I feel like it is very much part of my belief that we're not supposed to come off as indestructible workaholics. Unfortunately, even that is sort of judged: that we're expected to work here, and we're not entitled to go on vacations. We're not entitled to any sort of complaint; it's some sort of expectation of us.

A different respondent revealed her inner conflict when it comes to coping with such attacks: on one hand, she makes an effort to separate and ignore the negative content, but on the other hand she revealed an internalisation of the contents of the attacks aimed at her appearance when she mentioned that she actively works on improving her physical appearance with the hope of limiting the amount of attacks targeting it.

Collective meaning-making processes have been identified in understanding violence against women as a structural issue, but also when it comes to the recognition of violence as part of coordinated and targeted patterns. Most of the respondents identified the existence of coordinated and intense patterns of violence following specific events or periods of

political tensions, and this violence was often perpetrated or amplified by other political actors in the online and offline space. The respondents were oftentimes openly named and mentioned as culprits of certain negatively perceived events during press conferences or in videos posted on the social media channels of politicians, political parties, and individuals associated with them. Alternatively, the perpetrators directly shared social media content of the respondents in private groups, on private channels or via posts with messages of public incitement of further harassment.

Four respondents, three of them Members of Parliament, remember intense periods of online violence and harassment as having a severe impact on their careers. During her political career, one respondent was repeatedly accused of being directly responsible for the death of a public figure. The respondent was accused of being a murderer, and called a “torturer” or a “prison guard.” She was first targeted by oppositional politicians, and then by the general society. She describes the situation as follows:

And I was labelled as the culprit, so people also wrote to me that I was a murderer and that this would catch up with me, and they still write to me, but the harshest messages were triggered right afterwards. Unfortunately, that misinformation spread incredibly quickly: that there was going to be a murder and that the person in question was going to be martyred and I couldn’t counter it or even, like, prevent it from spreading really, incredibly quickly.

The severity and intensity of the attacks, which, according to the respondent, were directly encouraged by politicians writing hateful articles: “They were actually encouraging people and their voters to carry on in this way. So yes, they got a lot of incentives there for those people to actually do that and they have them even today, unfortunately.” These events led her to completely withdraw from social media for almost three years, during which she did not read any messages or comment sections, or even receive notifications on her phone. She only started to be active on social media again right before the 2023 election campaign. Another respondent identified paid troll accounts as the main perpetrators of abusive comments and she directly linked them to political figures and their activities: “Most of these attacks come from paid troll profiles; I am convinced that the government, and therefore coalition politicians, are working with many such paid trolls to systematically attack journalists in this way.”

Another example of an intense wave of violence and harassment lasting several years was the one experienced by a respondent working in public administration in the field of gender equality at the time of the increasing backlash against gender equality. The violence and harassment started after Slovakia published its first Strategy for the Protection of Human Rights and Gender Equality and signed the Istanbul Convention. The respondent reported that there were increasing pressures targeting her professional and private life during this period. There was a public petition against her, a conservative non-governmental organisation pressed criminal charges against her, and personalised letters attacking her professionally were sent to her place of employment. She also faced accusations of fraud because of her self-employment and had her home address made public, which is an example of doxxing. She describes the attacks as “very personalised, with the intention to scare and demotivate me.” In the end, the mounting pressures and disagreements with her leadership led her to resign and completely withdraw from public life, including social media, despite previously being actively engaged in it. Furthermore, after 15 years of working in the field of gender equality, she completely changed her career. Withdrawal from social media and public discourse is closely related to self-censorship, which is a common consequence of online violence (BECK ET AL., 2022; KOCH ET AL., 2025).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The findings confirmed that women politicians and journalists are attacked in gendered ways with the acts of violence commonly targeting their appearance, sexuality, personal life, age, or gender identity (IPU ET AL., 2025; VRIELINK & VAN DER PAS, 2024). In the context of current Slovakia they are most often attacked in connection with the progressive values they represent. These acts of violence employ semiotic violence to attack and discredit women by using context-dependent, politically charged tropes depicting them as “traitors,” “prostitutes,” or “agents of foreign powers.” Such labels sexualise, denigrate, and humiliate women as “prostitutes” or “whores” or portray them as subservient by calling them “agents,” “servants,” or “Soros’s girls,” which implies that they are dependent, corruptible, and unable to make autonomous decisions. In these accusations, women are rendered passive and subordinate to more powerful actors, typically the government, powerful men, or a foreign entity, who/which are presumed to influence, sponsor, and dictate their actions.

According to Krook (²⁰²², p. 375), semiotic violence entails “drawing on and reinforcing gender inequalities by using words and images – and in some cases, body language – to injure, discipline, and subjugate women.” She identifies two primary modes of semiotic violence: rendering women invisible and rendering women incompetent. These examples fit within this framework but also reveal a distinct, context-specific variation.

In the context of this research, women politicians and journalists are symbolically linked with foreign values and positioned in opposition to national values, and are thereby constructed as enemies of the state. Such harassment aligns with Bardall’s argument that women are especially vulnerable to attacks based on morality – in which they are portrayed as both sexually deviant and ideologically disloyal (²⁰¹³). These narratives further humiliate and subordinate women by objectifying them linguistically and associating them with active external agents such as “George Soros,” “Brussels,” or “the US Embassy.”

To capture these dynamics, a specific mode of semiotic violence is proposed here: rendering women discredited and disgraced. This reflects how sexualised and nationalist tropes combine to delegitimise women in politics. This strategy merges misogynistic language with conservative rhetoric to depict women, particularly those representing pro-European Union and pro-democratic values, as both morally corrupt and politically treacherous. In doing so, it combines violence against women in politics with broader patterns of political violence employed to undermine democratic opposition.

Against the backdrop of the anti-gender movement, acts of violence also commonly target women’s gender identity and sexual orientation in multiple ways: by directly misgendering them in spoken interaction, accusing them of being lesbians or transgender women, and using incorrect pronouns or changing their last names to align with traditional rules of correct grammar and language use. Some attacks were also triggered by women’s use of gender-sensitive and inclusive language or the gender-neutral form of their last name.

Further analysis of the recurrent themes revealed the continued significance of the public/private divide in the forms of the attacks, but, most importantly, in their impacts. Verloo and Lombardo (²⁰⁰⁷) claim

that: “[t]he public/private division is a key dimension of the conceptualizations of the main structures that contribute to maintain and reproduce gender inequality.” In this particular case, by entering public life, women bridge the public/private divide, which oftentimes becomes a reason for gendered attacks aimed at the women’s children or families. This can be read as a strategy to discipline them for their transgression of the public/private divide. The women’s interpretations of these attacks hints at an internalisation of the public/private divide, which attests to its continued significance. Their ability to protect and shelter their families from the violence becomes the deciding factor for their willingness and motivation to continue their public presence and engagement. Moreover, attacks on their family and children are often the only violent acts women report to the authorities. This tension between women’s public and private roles underscores their interconnectedness and the artificiality of their separation (PATEMAN, 1987).

The analysis of coping mechanisms and meaning-making strategies revealed a persistent gap and divide between the collective and individual levels. All 14 of the respondents recognised that gender-based violence and attacks against publicly active women are a structural problem, which was underscored by all of them making a reference to the attacks perpetrated against President Čaputová as well as the journalist Zuzana Kovačič-Hanzelová, who at that time made the public decision to take a break from her journalistic career in response to the attacks against her (KOVAČIČ HANZELOVÁ, 2024). All the respondents therefore acknowledged that attacks against women in the public sphere have a direct impact on women’s public participation, and they openly and often publicly denounced them and expressed their support to the affected women.

At the same time, on the individual level, when it comes to coping with personal experiences of violence, narratives of the individual’s ability to cope, and of their unique strength, character and mindset prevail. The responsibility to cope with violence is individualised, and the violence is dealt with privately and silently, and discussed only after a certain amount of time has passed and the problem has been resolved. However, some respondents reveal their hesitation to show vulnerability and publicly reveal the violence they experience and especially the toll it takes. Interestingly, most of the respondents talk about and denounce violence when it is targeted at other women, but only those women who have decided

to step away from their public role openly discuss the violence they experienced. These reservations about showing vulnerability and disclosing the extent and impacts of the violence one suffered highlight the internalisation of the public/private divide by the respondents themselves. Nevertheless, there are emerging practices of resistance and solidarity in this regard, such as the play *I Will Cut Your Head Off*, which premiered on International Women's Day in 2024 (*DPOH CONTENT, 2024*) and consisted of a theatrical reading of the attacks and harassment aimed at the then president Čaputová, or the public petition "Let's Say No to Harassment and Humiliation of Women," initiated by MPs from the oppositional Freedom and Solidarity party (*DENNÍK N, 2024; POVEDZME NIE URÁŽKAM A PONIŽOVANIU ŽIEN, N.D.*).

The findings demonstrate that existing legislation and institutional mechanisms frequently fail to effectively respond to gender-based violence against women in public life. The absence of adequate support, combined with targeted attacks that are often extended to their children and families, reinforces narratives of women's individual resilience and ability to cope with violence despite a shared awareness that gender-based violence against publicly active women is a structural problem. Moreover, the analysis shows that gender-based violence also operates as a deliberate political strategy used to harass, silence, and ultimately drive some women from public life. Such violence is not only perpetrated by anonymous actors but also incited or endorsed by political figures themselves. Gendered acts of violence then become part of broader de-democratisation strategies to repress political opposition, independent media, and civil society actors advocating for human rights and equality. This underscores the urgent need for robust EU-level mechanisms capable of addressing state-sponsored or state-tolerated abuse as well as a variety of targeted protection and support mechanisms for affected women on national and civil society level.

This research expanded the scholarship on violence against women in politics by situating the Slovak case within the wider trends of democratic backsliding and anti-gender movements, thus bridging these two research strands. It identified the key tropes and strategies used to target women critical of the government, especially the use of semiotic violence to render women discredited and disgraced. It shifted the analytical focus from whether gender explicitly motivates such attacks to how distinctly gendered their forms and consequences are, as the attacks ultimately undermine democratic participation, diversity, expertise and representation.

The main limitations of this research stem from the context-dependent findings about the experiences of gender-based violence by women who represent pro-European Union and democratic values as well as the current socio-political context. This context affects women's willingness to participate in such a research, as they may possibly fear the repercussions of their participation, and this fear can potentially lead to self-censorship during the interviews. Further research is needed to reflect and account for the experiences of women from across the whole political spectrum and a wider selection of media. Similarly, further academic engagement in this area could explore the individualisation of the responsibility to cope with violence among some women and how this relates to solidarity and (un)available targeted mechanisms for reporting, investigation, and support.

ENDNOTES

- 1 The quotes presented in the article don't include names, pseudonyms or information about the respondent's political party or employer, but due to the small number of respondents and their unique identities and circumstances, which were mentioned during the interviews, the full anonymity of all the respondents cannot be guaranteed.

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The Invisibility of Violence Against Women in Prostitution: Hungarian Women's Narrative Strategies Within and Beyond the Industry

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how violence against women in prostitution becomes socially invisible through the interplay of structural inequalities and narrative processes. Drawing on socialist and radical feminist theory alongside world-systems analysis, it conceptualises the prostitution industry as embedded in a capitalist patriarchy structured by relations between semi-peripheral and core countries, where women from semi-peripheral regions are disproportionately exposed to exploitation. The empirical analysis is based on twenty-five qualitative interviews with Hungarian women engaged in prostitution in both Hungary and Western Europe. The study focuses on how temporal, spatial, and emotional distance from the prostitution industry shapes the narration of violence and trauma. The findings show that women still in prostitution tend to normalise and minimise violence, reproducing individualising narratives of control and responsibility. In contrast, women who have exited the industry – often with access to shelters and therapeutic support – articulate more structural interpretations, linking their experiences to gendered and economic inequalities. The paper argues that the capacity to narrate trauma is socially conditioned and that distance from exploitation is a key precondition for making violence visible.

KEYWORDS

prostitution industry, violence against women, trauma narratives, capitalist patriarchy, world-systems analysis, semi-periphery, feminisation of migration

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INTRODUCTION¹

Violence against women constitutes one of the most pervasive yet underrecognised social and political phenomena in contemporary societies in social practice (PATENT, 2019; CHRISTL ET AL., 2024). Within the prostitution industry, violence against women is frequently normalised, privatised, or rendered invisible (MACKINNON, 1989; JEFFREYS, 2009; MOREIRA & MONTEIRO, 2012). This paper examines how such invisibility operates – structurally and narratively – among Hungarian women in the global prostitution industry in Hungary and Western Europe.

Feminist scholarship has long exposed the structural connections between patriarchy, capitalism, and the subordination of women (PATEMAN, 1988; MACKINNON, 1989; VON WERLHOF, 2007; JEFFREYS, 2009; O'NEILL, 2013; FEDERICI, 2012; MIES, 2014). However, the specific mechanisms through which violence against women in prostitution becomes socially invisible – particularly in semi-peripheral contexts – remain insufficiently theorised. Despite extensive debates on “sex work,” neoliberal agency, and trafficking, less attention has been paid to how women themselves narrate or silence experiences of violence within the global prostitution economy (MOREIRA & MONTEIRO, 2012; SUCHLAND, 2015, pp. 163–186) and the reality of women living on the semi-periphery who are involved to a large extent in the global prostitution industry (KATONA, 2020A).

This paper argues that the invisibility of violence against women in prostitution is sustained through both structural inequalities of the capitalist world-system and narrative mechanisms shaped by trauma and patriarchal discourse. By analysing the narratives of Hungarian women who have been involved in prostitution in both Hungary and Western Europe, the study demonstrates how spatial, temporal, and emotional distance from prostitution shapes the articulation of trauma and the visibility of violence. In addition, the given regional position determines whose voices society hears on the subject of the prostitution industry (DÉS, 2024). The paper thus seeks to connect macro-level political-economic processes with the micro-level production of meaning in women's self-narratives.

Immanuel Wallerstein's (1974) world-systems theory argues that the exploitative dynamics of capitalist accumulation can only be adequately understood at the level of the world-system rather than at that of individual nation-states. Uneven geographical development produces

structured relations of unequal exchange between different regions of the globe, which in turn shape their internal class formations (*IBID.*). Social relations within nation-states are therefore embedded in transnational structures of domination. Core countries systematically appropriate surplus from peripheral regions, while semi-peripheral countries occupy an intermediate position, simultaneously participating in both exploitation and subordination within the capitalist world-system (*WALLERSTEIN, 1974*). In this article, Hungary is approached as a semi-peripheral location within the European and global political economy, while Switzerland represents a core context. From a world-systems perspective, the global sex industry operates as a transnational market shaped by structural inequalities and uneven exchanges between core and semi-peripheral regions (*WALLERSTEIN, 1974; SASSEN, 2002*). Within this framework, women's bodies from economically disadvantaged regions are often commodified to sustain the prostitution industries of core countries (*DÉS, 2024*). Mies (*2014*) and Federici (*2012*) have identified the exploitation and invisibilisation of women's reproductive and sexual labour as central mechanisms of capitalist social reproduction.

Empirically, the paper draws on twenty-five qualitative interviews with Hungarian women engaged in prostitution in both Hungarian and Western European contexts. These narratives make visible the ways in which patriarchal and capitalist structures shape not only the material conditions of women's exploitation but also their modes of self-representation. By foregrounding women's voices from the semi-periphery, the study contributes to debates on global gendered inequalities and expands feminist world-systems analysis with an interpretive, narrative dimension.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, I will introduce the main theoretical approaches to the prostitution industry, and the next section situates violence against women within the capitalist world-system and feminist debates on patriarchy and sexuality. The following section then outlines the methodological approach of feminist empiricism and narrative analysis and contextualises the position of Hungarian women in the transnational sex industry. The final sections analyse the interviews, comparing the narratives of women who remain in prostitution with the narratives of those who have exited it, before concluding with some reflections on how narrative distance renders violence visible or invisible across semi-peripheral and core settings.

THE PROSTITUTION INDUSTRY, PATRIARCHY, AND VIOLENCE IN THE CAPITALIST WORLD-SYSTEM

KEY THEORETICAL DEBATES SURROUNDING THE PROSTITUTION

There are three dominant discourses surrounding the social phenomenon of prostitution. The first is the abolitionist discourse, which is associated with radical feminism. This approach interprets prostitution as a consequence of patriarchy and as an ultimate expression of the oppression of women (OUTSHOORN, 2004). It does not consider prostitution socially legitimate, viewing it instead as a form of institutionalised sexual violence against women. The radical feminist approach to prostitution is linked to the second-wave feminist movement² and its key figures, such as Catherine MacKinnon, Andrea Dworkin, and Sheila Jeffreys (O'NEILL, 2013). Radical feminism identifies the inequality between men and women – patriarchy – as the organising element of unequal social structures. It conceives of capitalism as the modern manifestation of patriarchy (FINN, 2015; VON WERLHOF, 2007). Within this framework, prostitution is analysed through the broader inequalities between men and women, the oppression of women, and the unequal sexual relations embedded in social contexts (Pateman, 1988; MacKinnon, 1993). Prostitution is thus traced back to a social belief grounded in women's oppression – namely, that men are entitled to use women's bodies for sexual gratification (GUTIÉRREZ, 2014; MACKINNON, 1993).

The second discourse frames prostitution as a form of work. This approach includes two main positions. The first, the liberal feminist perspective, conceptualises prostitution as just another sector of the market and refers to it as “sex work,” emphasising individual choice and labour rights within existing market structures. The second, the socialist feminist perspective, also uses the term “sex work,” but situates prostitution within broader structural inequalities. Rather than treating it as an ordinary occupation, socialist feminists characterise it as an exploitative labour that emerges from class-based marginalisation, gendered economic dependency, and the unequal organisation of social reproduction under capitalism (CARRIG, 2008; CSÁNYI, 2024B).

From this perspective, prostitution is not understood primarily as a freely chosen economic activity, but as a survival strategy shaped by the structurally constrained options available to working-class and marginalised women. Socialist feminism therefore contextualises the prostitution industry within capitalist patriarchy, emphasising how global and local labour hierarchies channel economically vulnerable women into the sex industry (O'NEILL, 2013). Like other forms of exploitative labour under capitalism, sex work is interpreted as rooted in historically produced inequalities rather than in individual preference alone (FEDERICI, 2004, PP. 61–63).

Liberal feminism, by contrast, focuses not on unequal social structures but on reforming the existing social order to ensure equal rights for women (FINN, 2015). Following the postmodern turn, feminist theory and activism began to emphasise women's agency. The concept of agency typically reflects an individualistic approach highlighting the importance of women's freedom of choice (JEFFREYS, 1997). As noted, liberal feminism maintains that prostitution should be treated as any other form of work within capitalism, referring to it as sex work (OUTSHOORN, 2004). From this perspective, voluntary prostitution exists, and therefore, women who choose to sell sex should be guaranteed legal and safe working conditions. At the same time, this approach stresses the importance of preventing and punishing coercion into prostitution (O'NEILL, 2013).

Four major regulatory models in core countries can be analytically distinguished in relation to these discourses (WEITZER, 2012, PP. 3–10; OUTSHOORN, 2004, PP. 1–12). The abolitionist model, associated with the first approach, criminalises the purchase of sexual services while positioning women in prostitution as victims in need of support and exit opportunities through the welfare system (CARRIG, 2008). The legalisation model conceptualises prostitution as a form of economic activity subject to state regulation, typically through licencing regimes, spatial zoning, and administrative control. In contrast, the decriminalisation model seeks to remove criminal penalties for all the parties involved in prostitution with the aim of reducing harm and improving working conditions without instituting a comprehensive regulatory framework. Finally, the criminalisation model prohibits prostitution by penalising both the selling and purchasing of sexual services, thereby framing it primarily as a matter of public order and morality.

The issue of human trafficking began to gain international attention after World War II, particularly through the work of human rights organisations. Trafficking occurs both within and across national borders, and sexual exploitation represents its most common form (UNODC, 2012). The term *sex trafficking* refers to the trade in women and girls for the purpose of sexual exploitation. Since the 1990s, international organisations have increasingly focused on trafficking originating from the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe (SUCHLAND, 2015, p. 5). Within this region, Hungary ranks among the main countries of origin for victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation (KATONA, 2020A).

Debates surrounding sex trafficking largely revolve around the concept of consent (MESHKOVSKA ET AL., 2015, pp. 382–383). The neoliberal approach – underpinning the decriminalisation of prostitution in core countries – assumes a clear distinction between “forced” and “voluntary” prostitution, proposing that victims of trafficking should be assisted in exiting the sex industry. In contrast, the abolitionist perspective argues that consent cannot be meaningfully applied in the context of prostitution; therefore, sex trafficking cannot be separated from prostitution more generally (JEFFREYS, 2009, pp. 38–61). Shapkina (2014) critiques dominant trafficking discourses for their individualist orientation and calls instead for a structural approach that would consider regional inequalities and the social positions from which women “consent” to sell their bodies.

Taking a position between the three mainstream approaches is not the focus of this study. Rather than adjudicating normative debates on prostitution policy, my aim is to examine how women's narratives of violence become structured and constrained within broader systems of inequality. For this reason, I rely primarily on Marxist and radical feminist traditions when interpreting sexuality and sexual acts. These approaches are particularly suited to my research questions because they conceptualise prostitution not merely as an individual transaction but as a social institution embedded in global relations of power, class, and gender. A Marxist-feminist framework allows me to connect women's lived experiences to the organisation of social reproduction, transnational labour hierarchies, and the semi-peripheral position of Hungary within the capitalist world-system. Without such a structural lens, the recurring patterns of vulnerability, violence, and circular migration documented in my

interviews would risk being interpreted as isolated individual trajectories rather than as outcomes of historically produced inequalities.

My approach is most closely related to the theoretical work of von Werlhof, who analyses unequal power relations between the sexes at the global level and identifies patriarchy as a fundamental organising principle of society (VON WERLHOF, 1980, P. 2007). In analysing my interviews, I also draw on analyses of sexuality and sexual acts by several radical (E.G. PATEMAN, 1988; MACKINNON, 1987, 1989; DWORKIN, 1993) and Marxist feminist authors (E.G. FEDERICI, 2012; MIES, 2014).

PATRIARCHAL SEX AND THE PROSTITUTION INDUSTRY

I approach sexuality as a socially and historically constructed domain that encompasses desire, norms of intimacy, gendered expectations, and power relations (MACKINNON, 1989; VON WERLHOF, 2007). According to feminist scholarship, sexuality is embedded in broader structures of patriarchy and capitalist social reproduction, shaping and being shaped by unequal gender relations (FEDERICI, 1975; MIES, 2014). In the context of prostitution, sexuality appears not as a private or purely interpersonal matter, but as an institutionalised and commodified practice structured by economic necessity and gendered hierarchies (PATEMAN, 1988; VON WERLHOF, 2007).

Within the capitalist world-system, sexuality functions as one of the central mechanisms through which gender inequality is reproduced. The patriarchal organisation of sexuality ensures that sex is oriented around male pleasure and the maintenance of women's subordination in both private and public life (MACKINNON, 1989, P. 318; CSÁNYI, 2020, PP. 31–32). These social expectations of what constitutes “natural” sexuality contribute to sustaining unequal relations within households and society at large.

The patriarchal construction of sexuality is therefore of fundamental importance for understanding the functioning of the sex industry. Pornography and prostitution both rely on the use and commodification of women's bodies, naturalising unequal relations between the sexes and legitimising male domination (MACKINNON, 1989; CSÁNYI, 2024A). Within capitalist patriarchy, violence against women becomes normalized – and often eroticized – as a natural part of sex (MACKINNON, 1989; RODRÍGUEZ-GARCÍA-DE-CORTÁZAR ET AL., 2025). The porn industry plays a key role in this process, shaping social

definitions of sex and pleasure while portraying male violence against women as inherent to sexual enjoyment (DEKESEREDY & CORSIANOS, 2015). The unequal sexual relations constructed by capitalist patriarchy thus permeate not only sexual acts themselves but also broader spheres of social life, where women are continually objectified as sexual beings (VON WERLHOF, 2007, p. 37).

Marxist feminist theory interprets sexuality in the context of the logic of capital accumulation. Within this framework, sex and reproduction are understood as forms of labour indispensable for the reproduction of the labour force and the capitalist economic system itself (FEDERICI, 1975; VON WERLHOF, 2007). Female sexuality is shaped to serve men's needs – both to sustain them in wage labour and to reproduce future labourers (CSÁNYI, GAGYI & KERÉKGYÁRTÓ, 2018, p. 6). Federici (1975, p. 90) further argues that the institutionalisation of heterosexuality functions as a mechanism for maintaining social reproduction, as the reproduction of wage labourers is presumed to occur within heterosexual relationships.

Radical feminism similarly identifies sexuality as one of the central instruments of patriarchal domination. At the structural level, women are constantly sexualised and treated as objects; at the interpersonal level, sexual practices themselves often reproduce male power through coercion and violence (MACKINNON, 1987, 1989; DWORKIN, 1993). Prostitution, pornography, and sexual harassment are thus not isolated phenomena but expressions of patriarchal sexuality that render women's subordination both visible and profitable.

In the global sex industry embedded within the capitalist world-system, women and girls – especially those from semi-peripheral and peripheral regions – are commodified as resources for profit (MIES, 2014, pp. 137–42; SASSEN, 2002). Pimps and intermediaries, often acquaintances or family members, exploit women's economic vulnerability, profiting from the sale of their bodies (SHAPKINA, 2014; DÉS, 2024). As Sassen (2002) describes, entire communities in poorer regions depend on women's migratory labour or the commodification of their bodies for survival – a phenomenon she terms the *feminisation of survival*. In this way, the capitalist world-system reproduces both gendered and global inequalities, embedding patriarchal violence within the very structures of sexuality and social reproduction.

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND TRAUMA IN THE CAPITALIST WORLD-SYSTEM

Drawing on socialist feminist and world-systems analyses, this paper conceptualises violence against women as a socially, historically, and economically determined phenomenon (MIES, 2014, PP. 145–175; DUNAWAY, 2018). Inequalities between women and men, and the subordination of women, constitute a defining structural foundation of the capitalist world-system. Within this framework, violence can be understood as a social practice that maintains gendered hierarchies across institutional and interpersonal domains (YOUNG, 1990, PP. 39–63). Its forms – ranging from sexual violence to domestic abuse – are shaped by class relations and the unequal exchange between core and semi-peripheral regions (WALLERSTEIN, 1974; WALBY, 1990; TOWERS, 2015). Economically privileged women have greater chances to escape violent relationships, while lower-class women face their enduring vulnerability, which often leads to their exploitation within global capitalist structures such as the sex industry (SASSEN, 2002; TOWERS, 2015).

Under capitalism, the nuclear family and the gendered division of labour reproduce women's dependence on men, confining them to unpaid reproductive labour and rendering their bodies and sexuality subject to male control (SECCOMBE, 2018; MIES, 2014, PP. 137–142). Consequently, women's experiences of exploitation, family life, and violence are deeply gendered and classed.

Feminist trauma theory situates the psychological consequences of such violence within these same social and economic structures. Trauma arises when external events exceed an individual's coping capacity and cannot be integrated into a coherent self-image (VIRÁGH, 2011). Yet, trauma does not occur in a social vacuum: its meaning and legitimacy depend on cultural norms and institutional recognition (BENEZER, 1999; AJDUKOVIC, 2004). At the same time, critical feminist scholars caution that the contemporary trauma discourse has increasingly shifted toward medicalised and individualised explanations, often obscuring the structural and gendered conditions that produce trauma (TSERIS, 2013). Feminist scholars such as Herman (1992) and Mies (2014) have shown that the pervasive violence experienced by women under patriarchal capitalism produces widespread yet socially invisible trauma. When institutions fail to acknowledge this violence,

they engage in institutional betrayal (PLATT, BARTON & FREYD, 2009), reinforcing women's isolation and silencing (HERMAN, 1992).

Trauma often resists verbalisation, as it manifests through fragmented memories or bodily symptoms (VAN DER KOLK, 2014). Feminist movements of the 1970s played a crucial role in naming these experiences and reframing them as collective rather than individual suffering (HERMAN, 1992; MIES, 2014). However, the language of trauma has also become a broader cultural framework through which suffering is recognised and legitimised in public discourse (BRITT & HAMMETT, 2024). At the same time, patriarchal narratives continue to trivialise or individualise violence – by blaming victims or depicting male aggression as a mutual conflict (ROSE, 1999; STARK & FLITCRAFT, 1988). Such narratives obscure the structural roots of violence and shape how women internalise trauma, often leading them to minimise or rationalise their own experiences (KATONA, 2017).

THE RESEARCH AIM AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

This study draws on feminist empiricism, which seeks to make visible the experiences of women whose lives remain obscured by patriarchal and capitalist structures. Feminist empiricism emphasises the epistemic value of lived experience and aims to transform the realities of lived experience into sociological knowledge (SMITH, 2005; LYKKE, 2010; NAPLES & GURR, 2014; ASHTON & MCKENNA, 2020). The primary aim of my research is to make visible the experiences of Hungarian women and women originating from Hungary's semi-peripheral region who are involved in the global prostitution industry. Feminist empiricism underscores the importance of examining women's everyday lived experiences in order to make meaningful claims about society (SMITH, 2005, PP. 45–146), given that capitalist patriarchy systematically conceals these experiences through the invisibilisation of women's unpaid reproductive labour and violence against women.

Following this framework, my analysis prioritises the perspectives and narratives of my participants, while acknowledging that the interpretation of their narratives inevitably reflects my own analytical positioning. As Skeggs (1997, PP. 1–16) emphasises, researchers have a responsibility to bring the everyday realities of working-class women into public discourse.

In her interpretation, feminist methodology challenges the traditional mechanisms of knowledge production and reveals hidden knowledges that emerge from unequal social relations, as well as the specific realities of different groups of women shaped by historically distinct power relations.

DATA COLLECTION³

My research is based on twenty-five semi-structured interviews with Hungarian women who were, at the time of the interview or in the past, involved in the prostitution industry in Hungary or in core countries. Between 2015 and 2016, I conducted ten interviews with Hungarian women in Zürich who were selling sex illegally on Langstrasse, a central street in the city. Between 2019 and 2021, I conducted a further fifteen interviews in Budapest and in Hungarian women's shelters with women who had been involved in the prostitution industry.

In Zürich, I undertook two internships as a social worker – one lasting one month, and another six weeks the following year – at a low-threshold service⁴ targeting women in prostitution. I conducted my interviews during these periods, namely between summer 2015 and autumn 2016, and also drew on my fieldwork experiences during the internships as part of my empirical material. The low-threshold service where I was based operates in all three zones in Zürich where prostitution is legal. Social workers are permanently present only in the so-called Strichplatz zone, but provide periodic services in other areas of the city where prostitution is illegal.

I was present in the field primarily as a social worker, but the women I interviewed were aware that I was also there as a researcher. Social workers play a significant role in reducing the additional harms women may face in the sex industry – for example, by facilitating access to condoms, lubricants, free health care, and exit pathways from prostitution. As a result, the women may view social workers as figures of authority, which can influence interview narratives and interactions. This dual role – social worker and researcher – may create a perceived need to give “correct” answers in interviews or lead the participants to withhold information for fear of losing access to support. Such sensitive pieces of information might include their illegal presence in certain locations, their relationships with pimps, or situations involving increased health risks, such as selling

sex without condoms due to financial need. My prior professional relationships with many of the participants meant I often knew about aspects of their lives in advance, which sometimes limited the disclosure of new information, particularly on stigmatised issues such as health problems or abortions. However, the related pre-existing trust also facilitated their openness about sensitive topics like exploitation by pimps, with women who knew and trusted me speaking more candidly than those with whom I had no prior contact.

Hydén (2008, pp. 8–9) emphasises that when conducting narrative research on sensitive topics, there is always the risk of occupying a position of power in relation to the interviewee, even in the absence of a formal hierarchical relationship – such as that between social worker and client – as was the case between myself and the participants in Switzerland who were selling sex. Power imbalances are also inherent to the interview format itself: the interviewee shares the most sensitive details of her life, while learning little about the researcher in the process. Moreover, in most cases, the interviews I conducted were shaped by power asymmetries grounded in class relations (KATONA, 2017, pp. 83–85): an educated woman living in considerably better economic circumstances was interviewing women who mostly came from working-class or impoverished backgrounds. My own role as researcher revealed how class differences limit the possibility of a shared female experience. Economic vulnerability is a decisive factor in one's entry into prostitution, and lower-class women form the largest segment of the industry (SUCHLAND, 2015). Analysing prostitution and sex trafficking therefore requires an explicit class perspective alongside feminist approaches to violence against women.

Three interviews were conducted with women who were selling sex in Budapest at the time of the interview; I met them through social institutions and carried out the interviews within those settings. The remaining twelve interviews were conducted with women who had exited the prostitution industry and were living in shelters. In Hungary, shelters provide accommodation for women escaping intimate partner violence as well as for victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation. I conducted interviews in two confidential shelters – one state-run, one church-run. The addresses of such shelters are kept secret to prevent abusive partners or pimps from locating the women. Therapy is generally available in these shelters,

and at the time of my interviews, most of the participants were engaged in therapeutic processes to address the traumatic experiences they had endured both in and prior to their involvement in the prostitution industry. The direction of the therapy, as well as the therapist's perspective, can influence the narratives attached to traumatic events, as the therapist and client together assign new meanings to those events (HERMAN, 1992, PP. 236–254). Thus, how my participants narrated their experiences was also shaped by their therapists' views, particularly regarding violence against women.

My interview participants were between nineteen and forty years old. Those who were still involved in the prostitution industry were generally in their early twenties, whereas those I interviewed in women's shelters were between thirty and forty years of age. The majority came from backgrounds of extreme poverty, and the sample was evenly divided between Roma and non-Roma women. Two participants had not completed the eight years of primary education. Twelve had completed primary school, six had vocational training, and two had attended a secondary vocational school (*szakközépiskola*). Three women held a general secondary school leaving certificate (*gimnáziumi érettségi*), which was the highest level of education attained among the participants. In my paper, I interpret the participants' narratives anonymously; when quoting from the interviews, I use pseudonyms. All the participants gave verbal consent to be interviewed prior to the start of each interview.

It is important to note that half of my sample consisted of women living in shelters who were officially recognised as victims of trafficking. In my paper, I focus on one segment of the stratified prostitution industry, namely participants from backgrounds of extreme poverty. Women from such backgrounds constitute the largest population within the global prostitution industry (CORRIN, 2005, P. 546).

I analysed the transcripts of my interviews using the ATLAS.ti software. Consistently with the feminist empirical methodology, the coding process was inductive, allowing themes to emerge from participants' narratives rather than imposing predefined analytical categories (SMITH, 2005). The 25 interviews were coded based on 78 codes, which related to the following themes: life course, traumatic events, violence, sex, the prostitution industry, relationships within the prostitution industry, relationships

outside the prostitution industry, living conditions, housing, attitudes toward Hungary, attitudes toward foreign countries, and future plans. The literature refers to the researcher's shame about using other people's stories for their own professional advancement as an *ethical hangover* (LOFLAND & LOFLAND, 1995, P. 28). This sense of shame is not most pronounced during the process of data collection, when the researcher is present in the situation and engaged in dialogue with the interviewees, but rather later, when the researcher is transcribing, analysing, and writing up the interviews.

HUNGARIAN WOMEN IN THE WESTERN EUROPEAN SEX INDUSTRY

The directions of global sex trafficking are likewise shaped by the dependent relations between former colonies and core countries. The main routes of sex trafficking originate in Asia, Africa, South America, and Eastern Europe, and lead to Western Europe, North America, and Australia (REINARES, 2014, PP. 16–56). As a consequence of colonisation, distinctions based on women's origins became entrenched, and these are also reflected in the sex industry: in countries where prostitution is legalised, the bodies of women from economically disadvantaged countries are typically those available for purchase.

After the fall of socialism in Hungary, with a drastic impoverishment of women and the more pronounced gender segregation in the labour market, lower-class women began to be channelled into the sex industry in increasing numbers. The number of businesses related to the sex industry and the rate and visibility of prostitution increased rapidly in the country in the 1990s (WATSON, 1993; EINHORN, 1993). As a result of the feminisation of poverty, the sex industry and prostitution became much more prominent and visible in post-socialist countries than before (WATSON, 1993, P. 472). In Hungary, regulations on businesses related to the sex industry were much less stringent than the corresponding regulations in other countries in the region, so in the 1990s, Western investors primarily targeted Hungary in this regard (GREGOR, CSÁNYI & DÉS, 2020, P. 64). The impoverishment of women in all segments of the sex industry provided a good basis for easily channelling lower-class women into selling their bodies. In addition, the film industry had the necessary infrastructure to shoot high-quality

pornographic films in the country (SZOVERFY MILTER & SLADE, 2005; GREGOR, CSÁNYI & DÉS, 2020). Watson (1993, p. 472) goes so far as to say that the sex industry that flooded Hungary in the 1990s was a symbol of the freedom that came with the change of regime in those years: *“no longer the cross, but the porn star”*.

Eastern European women began to appear in the sex industries of core countries in the 1990s. During this period, however, the prostitution industry was not yet defined to the same extent by migration processes between Eastern and Western Europe as it is today. After 2008, women living in poverty in Hungary, mostly Roma, began to appear en masse in Western European countries where prostitution had been decriminalised (ISLER & JYRKINEN, 2018; KATONA, 2020B). The literature attributes the mass appearance of Hungarian women in the sex industry in Western European cities to Hungary's accession to the European Union in 2004 and the resulting liberalisation of migration and labour market policies, and the following mass impoverishment that accompanied the 2008 global crisis: in the years following the 2008 global crisis; for example Molensteeg Street in Amsterdam's red-light district became known as “Nyíregyháza⁵ Street” (Siegel, 2011), and it was then that women commuting from small Hungarian towns and deeply impoverished Hungarian settlements began to flood the Swiss and German sex industries (FINGER, 2016). Hungarian women were overrepresented in the prostitution industry in the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, Switzerland and Austria during these years (SIEGEL, 2011; CLARK & MCARTHUR, 2014; KATONA, 2020B). Hungarian women involved in prostitution often follow a commuting pattern between Hungary and Western Europe, staying abroad for weeks or months before returning home. This form of circular migration is largely influenced by the prostitution regulations in Western Europe. Regulatory differences across countries shape not only the women's mobility patterns but also their experiences of the prostitution industry. In Hungary, prostitution occupies an ambiguous legal position: although formally legal for adults, the legal framework establishes “protected zones” where prostitution is prohibited while allowing municipalities to designate tolerance zones, which in practice are rarely implemented (FEHÉR, 2009, p. 218). Consequently, women engaging in prostitution are frequently subjected to routine fines and penalisation despite the formal legality of prostitution (BETLEN, 2013). By contrast, Switzerland regulates prostitution through a legalisation model based on designated zones and administrative oversight at the cantonal level (BÜSCHI, 2014, p. 725;

(DIEGMANN ET AL., 2012; ISLER & JYRKINEN, 2018). Because of this mobility, combined with the women's limited language proficiency, the legal precarity of prostitution, and the control exercised by pimps, the women's interactions with Western European welfare institutions tend to remain superficial (DÉS, 2024; FÁBIÁN ET AL., 2017; SEBHELYI, 2012). These regulatory differences shape the women's encounters with authorities without eliminating the structural vulnerabilities associated with poverty and a semi-peripheral position.

A large proportion of the women who enter the prostitution industry due to economic disadvantage come from Roma ethnic backgrounds (CORRIN, 2005, P. 546; PELLEGRINO, 2023, P. 23). In the case of Hungary, a key reason for this is that being of Roma ethnicity significantly increases the risk of poverty (BASS ET AL., 2007, P. 13; HAVASI, 2024, P. 64). Even before the regime change, Roma groups in Hungary belonged to the most vulnerable segments of the lower classes (KÓCZÉ, 2016, P. 46). Roma women living in poverty face not only gender- and class-based inequalities throughout their lives but also continuous discrimination from social institutions in Hungary (LADÁNYI, 1996; LADÁNYI & SZELÉNYI, 2002; SZALAI, 2002; BERNÁT, 2014). As a result of their economic and social disadvantages, Roma women often find the sex industry to be their only means of economic survival; moreover, due to their economic vulnerability, they are at much greater risk of becoming victims of sex trafficking (KÓCZÉ, 2011, P. 139). This confirms that prostitution is closely linked to inequality, poverty, and unemployment in society. The majority of women in prostitution come from conditions of extreme poverty, and most of those trafficked from Eastern Europe belong to minority groups, primarily Roma (CORRIN, 2005, P. 546). Due to poverty and racism, Roma women forced into the sex industry are further sexualised by stigmas commonly imposed on women of colour – wildness, impulsivity – which evoke associations with a “primitive” and tribal way of life (HANCOCK, 2008, P. 188).

MAKING VIOLENCE INVISIBLE: NARRATIVES FROM WITHIN AND BEYOND THE INDUSTRY

ISOLATION IN THE PROSTITUTION INDUSTRY: CONSTANT FEAR AND LACK OF PROTECTION

In the prostitution industry, women are exposed to a risk of violence from almost all the actors involved (SASSEN, 2002, P. 518; BÜSCHI, 2014).

My interviewees spoke of violence perpetrated against them by their pimps and partners. They also talked about violence from their users and how they often felt constantly threatened by other women. Anita said that she was thirteen when she was first beaten by her pimp, and that after this she was continually abused. Meanwhile, Liza reported violence from her users.

It was serious when Lacika jumped on the car. It was like a scene from the movies. It was 52 Earth Road. That was the most serious beating. I ran around the car. Obviously he couldn't catch me. He was fucking stoned, out of his mind. He jumped on top of the car, Fanni. And then he was kicking me like in the movies. I was thirteen at the time. I was beaten after that too, but that was the hardest. Then on the tractor wheel, he kept going. He threw me so hard on the tractor wheel that it is a miracle I didn't break my back.

Two of my clients⁶ outside (abroad) tried to strangle me and one tried to rape me.

In the women's narratives, violence often occurred when clients were dissatisfied with the sexual act or did not enjoy it, and when the women did not return the money they had been paid in such cases. Later, I will quote Sara, who, when asked if she had experienced violence in the prostitution industry, replied that she had, describing a man who had not ejaculated and became angry. This attitude illustrates a neoliberal logic within the prostitution industry: the sexual act is framed as a mere contract between two persons detached from the wider social context and from the woman herself (PATEMAN, 1988, PP. 189–218; JEFFREYS, 1997; EKMAN, 2013). When the sexual act did not occur as expected, the clients felt entitled to commit violence against the women. This was reinforced by a strong sense of patriarchal entitlement and the total subordination of women, which caused the clients to become violent when they did not get what they wanted for their money.

Liza also spoke of her constant fear of other women in the prostitution industry. The competition between the women is not merely an interpersonal rivalry but is often actively produced by pimp-controlled systems that rely on dividing the women and preventing solidarity to maintain the pimps' control and maximise profits (SHAPKINA, 2014).

My pimps mostly, and the girls. What you have to know about this industry is that there is always rivalry between the girls. If they see that you impress the pimp

on some level, or they just see that he likes you, then the girls will make life hell for [you]. By any means necessary, at any cost. No one can be above it and I have learned that. Like when they saw that my runner liked me, when they saw that she was happy with me, they made sure that it didn't happen. So it's quite a messy way of life. (Liza)

Anna recounted a story of being abused by other women's runners for standing in a place on the road that was "reserved" for women who belonged to them:

Once, just before Christmas, I was going to work at night, in the evening, and they had already noticed that I was walking alone. I had walked a lot during the day. If I missed the bus, there was no one to pick me up, and there were no customers. At the bus stop I went to see when the bus was going home from Félégyháza⁷, and as I walked through, each section was marked, so to speak, as belonging to someone⁸. And one came along, Sanyi, a little Gypsy kid, whose woman was standing on the corner, so to speak. I walked over to their place, and he drove over with the car and got out. By then I had a year and a half of experience of how to talk to people like that. He said: 'What the fuck are you doing in my spot?' And I said: 'Who the fuck are you?' And as soon as I said it, within two seconds he threw me to the ground, kicked me all over, and I literally peed myself.

A typical experience of the women I interviewed was that they were not protected from the violence perpetrated against them in the prostitution industry. They generally reported that the police in Hungary did not protect them, whereas the women who had been abroad tended to have more trust in the authorities. The authorities usually preferred to punish the women for selling sex outside of designated zones. However, there are very few such zones in Hungary, and when municipalities do designate them, they are typically in remote areas without infrastructure. This means that the women are even less safe in these zones than they would be in the city (BETLEN, 2013, P. 11). In contrast, women who work legally in the decriminalised prostitution industries of core countries are more often protected by the authorities there (KILVINGTON, DAY & WARD, 2001, P. 82).

Liza was taken to the police to be fined for providing sexual services in an illegal zone, which is prohibited and punishable under Hungarian prostitution regulations. She pleaded in vain to be detained at the police

station because she was being forced into prostitution by her pimps, but the police did not believe her:

For example, I stood outside at a bus stop and was fined 10–20,000 forints⁹. When I told the policeman that I was standing there against my will, he sarcastically replied, ‘So am I.’ Yes, that was the Hungarian police. Then they took me in for 72 hours, gave me a bill, and released me. I kept saying the whole time that I didn’t want to go out. I literally teased the policeman. I said I didn’t want to go out because my driver was waiting outside. And they didn’t believe me. This was Baranya County, near Pécs. They don’t really want to help girls like that there. When they found my best friend under the bridge, they realised that what I was telling them was not so silly. And then I was rescued by the police in Pécs from one of the families who were running [women]. Well, it’s almost like mafia fraud. They get away with everything.

In contrast, Kata had better experiences with the police in Zürich:

Yes, yes, I did [report what happened]. Everything. The police told me not to be afraid. That’ll get you 10 years. They’ll arrest you. Because he beat me so badly that I was hospitalised. He was punished for attempted murder. (Kata)

My interviewees were sometimes defended against abusive clients by men who themselves had abused them, such as pimps or landlords. Andrea told me that her pimp (her “boss”) defended her against clients who wanted to abuse her. Having him in the other room gave her a constant sense of security in Germany:

Well, quite often [I was mistreated]. By guests, I mean. Some of them came in drunk. [They] had to be thrown out. There was one that tried to be violent, but the boss was in the other room. So if something had happened, he would have seen it and he would have beaten him up. Because one had already done that. He came in, he took his shoes off, and then he changed his mind. He was drunk. He wanted to come back. The boss went down and beat him up.

My interviewees told me that they were afraid of almost everyone in the prostitution industry, which made them feel isolated and lonely. They rarely received protection from violence, and when they did, it was usually provided by actors in the industry who also abused them. They were

rarely able to build trust or solidarity with other women in similar situations, as the competition for the pimps' favour typically undermined such ties. The pimps often employed deliberate isolation techniques to make the women more dependent on them and easier to control. For instance, abroad they frequently ensured that women who spoke the same language were not placed together (CF. SHAPKINA, 2014, P. 196). By failing to protect the women even when they asked for help – and with Hungarian law allowing women to be punished for prostitution – the authorities, especially those in Hungary, played into the hands of the pimps, reinforcing the women's isolation from the outside world and from sources of support. These differences may also reflect the distinct structural positions of the countries involved. Switzerland, as a core country with a regulated prostitution sector, provides a more institutionalised framework for policing and oversight, which may shape the women's encounters with the local authorities (ISLER & JYRKINEN, 2018, PP. 6–9). By contrast, in semi-peripheral contexts where institutional protection is weaker, the women may rely more heavily on informal actors within the industry for forms of protection, even when these actors are simultaneously involved in their exploitation. These accounts therefore reflect not only individual experiences but also broader differences in regulatory and structural contexts (DÉS, 2024).

NARRATING VIOLENCE: SILENCING AND STORYTELLING

Research has shown that a high proportion of women in prostitution suffer from symptoms of PTSD (FARLEY ET AL., 2004; FARLEY, 2010). Dissociative disorders and anxiety symptoms are also overrepresented among women in prostitution (ROSS, FEARLY, & SHWARTZ, 2004). Hydén (2008), in his study 'Narrating Sensitive Topics', distinguishes between experiencing traumatic events and having knowledge of events that happened to oneself. In order to have knowledge about one's own experiences, it is important to have the space and opportunity to reflect on events and be able to put them into context. Until we can give meaning to our experiences, and until we have the opportunity to do so, they are difficult to narrate. This process can be particularly relevant for cases of traumatic events (BENEZER, 1999).

The women I interviewed while they were still involved in the prostitution industry often interpreted violent events as a natural part of life, as incidents that had no particular impact on them. Thus, a patriarchal

narrative of violence against women (ROSE, 1999) emerged in their accounts. In addition, the narratives of the women then active in the prostitution industry about violence and trauma were typically very brief. Rita recounted that once “a Serbian guy tried to shoot [her]” in Zurich, but she downplayed it, suggesting that it was a misunderstanding because her roommates had robbed him. Her story came across more like a gripping anecdote than a traumatic event:

Well, once a Serbian guy tried to shoot me. But it was a misunderstanding because I was in a room with two other girls and then, while I was in the shop, another girl stole from this man. I didn't even know about it because I didn't hear him come into the room. And this guy came back the next day. I let him come up to the room because I didn't know there was any problem and he pulled a gun on me and told me to give him his money back immediately. I said, 'What?' The best thing about it was that I didn't really understand German because I had been here for only a few months. And the other girl said, 'No problem, we'll call the police.' But I told her, 'Man, I've got a gun to my head, my God, and you're telling me there's no problem?' But actually, there was no problem after that. (Rita)

Sandra and Móni, when asked whether they had ever experienced violence in the prostitution industry in Zurich, responded with just one or two sentences. They confirmed that they had, but did not go into detail or express their feelings about the events:

- And did you have a violent experience here?
- Last year. Well, I didn't give the money back to the man, he was drunk and then he beat me up.
- And have you experienced violence since you've started working here?
- Well, I've had one or two [such experiences].
- And can you give me an example?
- Well, that they asked for their money back, or they really had to throw you out, or they didn't enjoy it and that's why they were angry. Things like that.

The women I interviewed in the shelters were much more capable of narrating the events that had happened to them. Sometimes they mocked my questions, and sometimes they framed their experiences of violence in a cynical way, thereby emotionally distancing themselves from the events. They also often verbalised that they did not want to talk about something

or could not find words to describe it. Kitti mocked me when I asked her if there was a downside to selling sex in the prostitution industry:

My main problem was probably being handcuffed to the edge of a bed all the time. Specifically. And if I didn't earn the daily limit, which was at least 1,000 euros, I ate my wages, which was quite often. (Kitti)

For Juli, cynicism was her way of narrating violent events that had profoundly shaped her life:

My father, apart from being an alcoholic, also had a hobby of molesting children, so my life, among others, fell into that category. (Juli)

Viki expressed that she was unable to articulate the disadvantages of the prostitution industry in Germany or to highlight specific incidents because for her, all the circumstances were so overwhelmingly bad:

Everything. I cannot express it. The circumstances themselves, everything was there. But no, I just [...]. I didn't know anybody, not to mention men, so everything, in all areas, everything. I didn't eat for those two weeks. I was very ruined. I wasn't happy with the money, but I knew that my family needed it and I did my best. (Viki)

Hydén (2008, pp. 11–18) also emphasises the importance of space in narrative research based on her work with battered women. She notes that when abused women leave their abusive partner, they not only leave the relationship but also move into a new space where they have the opportunity to give new meaning to their life stories and the experiences they endured. This may also hold true for narratives of violence in the prostitution industry: women who remain in the industry are at constant risk of further violence and are not given the space to reinterpret their experiences. Shelters provide not only a space free from violence but also the possibility of therapy, which can help the women verbalise their trauma, integrate violent events into self-narratives, and ascribe meaning to them (HERMAN, 1992, pp. 163–276). This facilitates the narration of trauma and the articulation of events. While the women in the shelters expressed emotions when recounting their traumas, the women still involved in prostitution at the time of the interview, even when they spoke about their violent experiences at length, typically did so without emotion. The relative absence

or brevity of explicit trauma narratives among the women still involved in prostitution should not be interpreted as evidence of an absence of trauma. Rather, the difficulty of the articulation itself may be understood as part of the traumatic process. Trauma can disrupt narrative coherence and affect the capacity to assign meaning to experiences (HERMAN, 1992; VAN DER KOLK, 2014). In contexts where violence is normalised or structurally embedded, an inability – or refusal – to elaborate on violent events may reflect the person's ongoing exposure to violence, survival strategies, or the absence of a safe interpretive space. Thus, silence and minimal narration are not indicators of insignificance, but forms of situated response shaped by both psychological and structural conditions (HYDÉN, 2008, PP. 11–18). The capacity to articulate trauma is itself socially structured, as the access to interpretive frameworks and safe spaces for narration remains unevenly distributed (BRITT & HAMMETT, 2024).

PATRIARCHAL SEX AND THE PROSTITUTION INDUSTRY

My interviewees typically experienced sexual acts in the context of the sex industry as traumatic events with long-term effects on their lives. The women who left the prostitution industry said that their experiences had lasting effects on their self-image, sexuality, and relationships with men, making intimacy and sex difficult even long after their leaving (DÉS, 2024). In capitalism, patriarchal sex appears as a consumer good whose production is the coerced responsibility of women (VON WERLHOF, 2007). My interview participants described sexual acts within the context of the prostitution industry as often accompanied by violence – sometimes so normalised that they did not explicitly define such acts as violent. They spoke of the commercial transactions in the industry as deeply distressing experiences that evoked feelings of disgust and required the use of psychoactive substances for them to endure them. Contrary to the neoliberal framing of the prostitution industry – which depicts these transactions as a selling of sex based on a mutual contract or free choice (CF. JEFFREYS, 1997, PP. 128–160, 2009, PP. 173–197; EKMAN, 2013) – the women's narratives described their feelings of revulsion toward men and toward themselves, their discomfort with touching strangers, and their discomfort with being touched by strangers. They experienced each transaction as involving their entire body and person, as acts in which their bodies, and they themselves, were used.

Several described the first transactions as the most emotionally shattering – the point at which they entered the prostitution industry and confronted what sexual acts mean in that context. The literature also observes that women often become aware of the abuse and violence present in the prostitution industry only upon their entry into it (SASSEN, 2002, P. 518). Gabi had to support her family through prostitution from adolescence. The first transactions left her with intensely negative feelings:

The first time I did this, I ran home crying and wanted to pour bleach over myself. I cried. It was bad. Someone touched me; I didn't understand what he was asking for. I would rather have killed myself, changed my life that way. But I told myself I could endure anything. I had to endure everything, even like this. (Gabi)

After Anna had agreed with her boyfriend that she would enter the prostitution industry temporarily to improve their financial situation, she later discovered that her boyfriend and his family routinely pimped women. She spoke of how, at the outset, she was terrified and felt unable to protect herself:

So we agreed on this, and the first two days were terrible, and then I found out that my godfather was also a pimp. Practically the whole extended family – when you looked further up – were all pimps. I didn't believe a lot of things until the first slap landed. It was enough when they first put me on the street to work: my hands and legs were shaking, I couldn't protect myself, and I had to deal with strangers, touch them, and do what they asked. Each one wanted something different – some smelled bad, and some were dirty. (Anna)

The interviewees who had already exited the prostitution industry described in their narratives how their experiences in the sex trade had long-term effects on their relationship to sexuality. They also spoke about how, more generally, their experiences in the prostitution industry continue to shape their relationship to themselves to this day. Anita, for example, after leaving the prostitution industry, felt sick even at the thought of sex. She expressed disgust at the fact that so many strangers had touched her.

So much time had passed, my mind opened up, I started going to school, and so on, and so on, but I couldn't love men because there had been so many. So many men had gone through me that it's disgusting. I can't even count them, Fanni.

I don't know. I can't even estimate. You understand? To actually say out loud how many people have touched me, have gone through me – it's sickening. It's better now that I might have my child, that I went two years without being with anyone. I just couldn't stomach it. (Anita)

None of my participants described any sexual acts in the prostitution industry as pleasurable. They cited coercion or economic necessity as the reason for their involvement in the industry and their engaging in the transactions (DÉS, 2024, pp. 83–104). The acts were typically described as producing distressing or negative feelings or, in a few cases, as emotionally neutral. The most common feelings associated with sexual acts in prostitution were exploitation, disgust, fear, a sense of dirtiness, and shame – emotions clearly visible in the narratives cited above. The presence of shame and disgust is characteristic of trauma narratives; shame can also appear when one is narrating personal experiences that are socially taboo or subject to judgment (BENEZER, 1999, p. 30).

Although most of my participants entered the prostitution industry under physical or material coercion, they felt shame about their past and had internalised the stigma the industry—and society more broadly – places on women in prostitution (JEFFREYS, 1997, pp. 152–172). Women tend to experience shame more frequently than men in society, and in the context of sexuality, women's shame is even more prevalent (BROWN, 2006). Moreover, in cases of violence against women, victim-blaming by society is common, and victims often internalise this blame, holding themselves responsible for the violence committed against them (ENANDER, 2010). My interview participants lived with ongoing shame about the transactions – shame that, for many, continues to shape their lives – despite the fact that they were generally coerced into the prostitution industry and into the specific transactions in which men used their bodies.

LINKING LIFE COURSE AND TRAUMA

The most significant difference in the ways the women who were still selling sex and those who had already left the prostitution industry framed their reasons for entering prostitution was that the women who were still in the prostitution industry almost exclusively cited poverty – i.e. economic necessity – as the reason. In addition to economic coercion,

some also mentioned pimps, the men who had “manipulated” them into the prostitution industry (DÉS, 2024, PP. 83–104). Economic coercion was also present in the narratives of almost all the women I interviewed in the shelters, but they also identified prior trauma as a reason for their entering prostitution. This difference in the narratives may also be explained by the fact that shelters typically house women who are victims of trafficking, i.e. women with a documented history of being trafficked by a pimp who forced them into the sex industry. However, one's proximity to or distance from the prostitution industry may also explain the differences in how women narrate their entry into the industry. Emotional distance and the therapeutic support available in shelters can help women give new meaning to their experiences of trauma (HERMAN, 1992, PP. 236–254). Vera articulated that she believes she would have had more opportunities in her life if her family had been supportive and her childhood less difficult.

I could have achieved a lot more in life if I had a family that really supported me and pushed me and didn't pull me back. (Vera)

Kitti cited her history of childhood incest as the reason for her entering the prostitution industry and explained how it influenced her to seize every opportunity to escape from home:

Well, I got into it in the first place because my father raped me when I was ten and I ran away from home. And I was always looking for a partner who would be there for me, who would provide me with some kind of security, and they really liked to take advantage of that. (Kitti)

There is evidence from a range of research that women who have been traumatised in the prostitution industry are over-represented among women who have experienced prior trauma, particularly victims of childhood sexual abuse (COUNCIL OF PROSTITUTION ALTERNATIVES, 1991, PP. 139–155; STARK & HODGSON, 2004). As discussed above, the narrative of trauma can only truly become possible when the victims of a traumatic event feel safe. It is then that they gain experience in narrating the trauma, in finding a place for it within a new self- and worldview. In general, what we remember most are the events that were significant in our lives and that profoundly shaped our self-narratives and worldviews. These events often involve tragic and traumatic experiences. However, when our entire self-image and worldview

are challenged by an event, our memory functions differently (VAN DER KOLK, 2014, PP. 172–199). We often try to avoid or suppress traumatic events and the memories associated with them. In the case of violence against women, these processes are even more difficult because of society's sexist attitudes, which reinforce the non-verbalisation of violence and trauma.

VIOLENCE AS A PERSONAL FAILURE OR STRUCTURAL CONDITION

Social institutions (such as the police, the courts, the social care system, and child protection agencies) often frame violence against women as an individual problem, placing responsibility on the victim rather than on social structures. They question, relativise, and blame the victim for the violence that has happened to her (FAST & KINEWESQUAO, 2019), especially in Hungary (PATENT EGYESÜLET, 2019). In doing so, they disconnect the responsibility of society and unequal social structures from the phenomenon. In the narratives of the women still involved in the prostitution industry, the patriarchal narrative of violence against women (ROSE, 1999) often appeared even when they recounted violence experienced by others. Hanna claimed that even if someone was violent to her, she could handle it:

The man was not violent to me. I could handle it. (Hanna)

The illusion of control appeared in the narratives of most of the women still in the prostitution industry. Just as victim blaming was a common narrative for women who were themselves victims of violence, so too was the idea that they had failed to take good enough care of themselves. Acts of violence against others were often framed as resulting from those women's failure to protect themselves or their having done something wrong. Esther expressed this view about other women:

Actually, I don't think the problem here is the circumstances. The problem here is that there are so many stupid girls and they make the problem for themselves. (Esther)

Victim blaming, according to attribution theory (HEIDER, 1958), is rooted in the individualistic belief that individuals are responsible for their own experiences of violence, including sexual violence, rather than social

structures. This self-protection mechanism allows individuals to feel they have control over what happens to them. By contrast, naming social structures as responsible for the violence implies that individuals who belong to groups at higher risk of victimisation (e.g. women in the case of violence against women) have no control over whether or not violence happens to them (GRUBB & HARROWER, 2008). Victim blaming thus contributes to the structural process of rendering violence against women invisible in society.

In the narratives of the women who had already exited prostitution, other women with whom they had sold sex appeared more frequently as part of stories of community and solidarity – even though rivalry was mentioned by nearly everyone as a constant element of the prostitution industry. For the women who had left, violence appeared much more as something inherent to prostitution itself: a phenomenon in which all women involved in prostitution, by virtue of their involvement, are victimised. Kata and Berta could not identify a single specific “wrong” within the prostitution industry; instead, they described the very fact of being in it as traumatising:

You must know now, though I might be stupid to think it, that a whore is a whore. It's very difficult to get out of it. Because if someone has it and can forget it – well, not me, because I really suffered with it. I was psychologically exhausted, I was ruined, and physically I felt like I was being taken advantage of. And I think I can work it out because I forgot my past, but I still remember and will remember this whoring and... anyway, that's it.

What? Nothing. Bitch, bitch. Whatever. Whatever. The downside is the spiritual stuff that's going on inside.

Thus, the relationship between prostitution and violence was not narrated as a one-off event affecting only some individuals in the sex trade, but as a social phenomenon that is inherently violent and psychologically destructive. The fact of the women having once been involved in prostitution meant that the trauma endured would forever remain part of their identity.

In Juli's narrative, a sense of guilt was added to a sense of solidarity with other women: These girls are just passing through Hungary. There were one or two who

were specifically Hungarian; the rest were Romanian, Transylvanian, or from neighbouring countries such as Slovakia. They chased big dreams. There would be a lot of money from this. Many of them got hooked. Not necessarily physically, but mentally. I lived through and saw a lot of abuse. And I did nothing. (Juli)

In Juli's account, violence is described as something she and many other women in prostitution had suffered. She also expressed guilt for not being able to protect other women who were victims of violence, or for failing to intervene. This guilt often surfaced when violence and deaths were discussed in the interviews. It was reinforced by the competitive dynamics of the sex industry – where women were pitted against each other by pimps to maximise profits rather than forming alliances of solidarity. Among trauma survivors, guilt for not being able to help others in the same situation is common. Even if it was materially impossible, they often feel responsible for not having protected others. Similarly, van der Kolk (2014, pp. 184–203), in her therapeutic work with war veterans and survivors of violence against women, repeatedly encountered the persistence of guilt over peers who had been killed or had suffered violence.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper has been to compare and analyse the narratives of violence and trauma among women involved in prostitution and those who have exited the global industry. The analysis highlights how violence is rendered invisible in the prostitution industry. My conclusions are based on interviews with women from lower-class backgrounds from semi-peripheral countries who typically sold sex in both semi-peripheral and core contexts. Their exposure to violence did not vary by region. The women I interviewed faced the risk of violence from almost all actors in the industry. They lacked protection from and trust in authorities, especially in Hungary, and were often “protected” by those who also abused them, which reinforced their isolation. Even those who did not report direct experiences of violence described their constant fear, while many avoided verbalising this fear due to the unspoken norm that it should remain hidden.

The women still in prostitution often recounted violent events briefly, without emotion, framing them through patriarchal and individualistic

narratives: they invoked an illusion of control and blamed themselves or other women. By contrast, the women who had exited prostitution adopted more structural interpretations, situating their experiences within unequal social relations and integrating prior traumas into their accounts of entry into the industry. This divergence reflects the dynamics of trauma: individuals often suppress or trivialise traumatic experiences when they cannot integrate them into their self-image (HERMAN, 1992; VAN DER KOLK, 2014). A temporal and spatial distance from violence – especially in the supportive environment of shelters – enables emotional distancing and the creation of new meanings. Safe spaces and therapy provide conditions under which trauma can be verbalised and integrated into a coherent self-narrative (HYDÉN, 2008).

The non-verbalisation of trauma also contributes to obscuring the structural inequalities that underpin the prostitution industry. Patriarchal norms reinforce silence, victim-blaming, and relativisation of violence, keeping women's experiences invisible in both the industry and the capitalist world system more broadly (PLATT, BARTON & FREYD, 2009). At the same time, the women in shelters often expressed stronger solidarity with others who had shared similar experiences. While rivalry in prostitution is shaped by patriarchal power and men's demands (YOUNG, 1990; FEDERICI, 2004), the shelters offered opportunities for solidarity, which helped the women reframe their individual trauma as part of collective structures of inequality (HERMAN, 1992; MIES, 2014).

The invisibility of violence in prostitution does not signal an absence of harm but rather the success of patriarchal capitalism in transforming women's trauma into silence. Recognising and politicising this silence is essential for feminist analyses that seek to expose the global hierarchies sustaining the sex industry.

ENDNOTES

- 1 This article is a revised version of one chapter of my doctoral dissertation, defended at Corvinus University of Budapest in 2024 (Dés, 2024).
- 2 The second-wave feminist movement began in the late 1960s and, according to the academic literature, lasted until approximately the 1980s. During this period, the movement focused on issues arising from the structural oppression of women. Such issues included violence against women, female solidarity (sisterhood), the androcentric nature of society, and gender inequalities in both the private and public spheres (Finn, 2015).
- 3 Some research materials presented in this article have been already analysed in an earlier publication and my dissertation (Dés, 2020; Dés, 2024).
- 4 Low-threshold services are support services designed to be easily accessible to marginalised populations, offering assistance without strict entry requirements or formal procedures.
- 5 Nyíregyháza is a city in northeastern Hungary with approximately 120,000 inhabitants. The city contains several segregated neighborhoods – such as Huszártelep – where socio-economic indicators are significantly below the urban average (Fábián et al., 2017). During the 2010s, women from these marginalised areas were disproportionately represented in the prostitution industry in Western Europe.
- 6 The women frequently referred to the men who purchased sexual services in the prostitution industry as “clients.”
- 7 Kiskunfélagyháza, a Hungarian town in Bács-Kiskun County.
- 8 On streets where the women stand, each runner typically has their own section(s).
- 9 25–30 euros.

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