

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Profile and local perceptions regarding domestic violence in Bulgaria

Krasimira Petrova*, Velislava Chavdarova, Petya Trifonova-Dimitrova

Department of Psychology, University of Veliko Tarnovo, 5003 Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria

* Corresponding author: Krasimira Petrova, k.mineva@ts.uni-vt.bg

ABSTRACT

Domestic violence, regarded as a prevalent matter of public health, encompasses actions employed by an individual within a relationship to manipulate the other party. Although it has garnered considerable attention, the prevalence of domestic violence exhibits notable disparities across distinct regions within a nation, thereby indicating the impact of diverse socio-economic, cultural, and political elements. This study delves further into the available evidence concerning regional discrepancies in domestic violence rates, providing valuable insights into the factors that contribute to this phenomenon and its implications for policy formulation in Bulgaria. With the method of the survey and the conduct of focus groups, the perception of violence and the local characteristics were brought out. The quantitative research included 2800 respondents (100 from each administrative region of Bulgaria), and the qualitative included 700 respondents, who were in 14 predetermined culturally distinct regions. The main interest of that paper is how domestic violence looks in the perceptions of Bulgarians in different regions and what domestic violence looks like in Bulgaria. The main hypothesis posits that individuals' attitudes towards violent relationships are greatly influenced by their personal experiences with violence. We suggest that societal norms and stereotypes surrounding violence play a significant role in fostering "positive attitudes" towards aggressive behaviors.

Keywords: domestic violence; violence perception; local peculiarities of violence perception

1. Introduction

In the present socio-political context of Bulgaria, domestic violence is a pressing concern that greatly affects the dynamics of familial and interpersonal connections. This phenomenon is deeply ingrained in personal, cultural, and societal aspects, extending beyond physical aggression to encompass various manipulative actions that seek to assert control within intimate relationships. The importance of addressing this issue lies not only in its immediate consequences for victims, but also in its wider ramifications for public health and overall societal welfare. Our research delves into a thorough examination of this complex issue, emphasizing its intricate nature and the diverse viewpoints held in different areas of Bulgaria. This research is based on the understanding that domestic violence is not a uniform phenomenon, but rather influenced by a combination of socio-economic, cultural, and political factors that differ significantly across regions. These variations highlight the nuanced nature of domestic violence, which calls for a more tailored approach to comprehending and tackling this problem. Bulgaria is a nation characterized by its abundant cultural diversity and diverse socio-economic environments; it is crucial to comprehend the localized

ARTICLE INFO

Received: 27 November 2023 | Accepted: 20 December 2023 | Available online: 2 February 2024

CITATION

Petrova K, Chavdarova V, Trifonova-Dimitrova P. Profile and local perceptions regarding domestic violence in Bulgaria. *Environment and Social Psychology* 2024; 9(5): 2271. doi: 10.54517/esp.v9i5.2271

COPYRIGHT

Copyright © 2024 by author(s). *Environment and Social Psychology* is published by Asia Pacific Academy of Science Pte. Ltd. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), permitting distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is cited.

intricacies of domestic violence. The study presented in this report investigates these regional disparities, providing a detailed examination of the perceptions and occurrences of domestic violence throughout the country. This examination is essential for the development of policies and interventions that are effective and tailored to the distinct requirements and circumstances of each region. Using an approach that integrates quantitative surveys and qualitative focus groups, this study presents a thorough examination of domestic violence in Bulgaria. The focus of this report is to examine the perception of domestic violence among Bulgarians in various regions. It aims to unravel the intricate web of attitudes, beliefs, and experiences that shape individuals' comprehension and reactions to domestic violence. The underlying hypothesis suggests that personal encounters with violence greatly impact individuals' perspectives on abusive relationships, emphasizing the influence of societal norms and stereotypes in perpetuating specific attitudes towards aggression. The objective of this study is to present an extensive and empirically supported analysis of domestic violence in Bulgaria, shedding light on the geographical disparities and underlying determinants that contribute to this issue. By conducting this investigation, the report aims to inform the development of policies and strategies for intervention, advocating for approaches that are informed by the experiences of individuals impacted by domestic violence. The knowledge and perspectives gained from this research not only contribute to the scholarly discussions surrounding domestic violence but also provide guidance for policymakers, practitioners, and advocates who strive for a society free from violence. Bulgaria is in a socio-economic transition to modern times, after the fall of communism in 1989. This leads to an uneven distribution along socio-economic and ethnic lines. Therefore, for a theoretical framework, the study considers the findings that concern differences in attitudes depending on socio-economic differences.

Cultural norms and gender roles have a substantial influence on domestic violence rates. Research demonstrated that regions with prevalent patriarchal norms exhibited significantly higher rates of domestic violence^[1]. This underscores the significant impact of deeply ingrained cultural norms and gender stereotypes on violent actions within intimate partnerships. Educational attainment also plays a crucial role in the occurrence of domestic violence, as lower educational achievement has been found to be positively correlated with higher rates of domestic violence. Other study indicated that women with limited educational opportunities are more vulnerable to experiencing domestic violence^[2]. This research suggests that education empowers individuals by equipping them with the necessary knowledge and resources to disengage from abusive relationships. The availability of support resources, such as shelters, counselling services, and legal aid, plays a significant role in mitigating domestic violence rates. Research showed a correlation between an increase in domestic violence resources and a decrease in domestic violence rates^[3]. This study highlights the importance of easily accessible and readily available resources in preventing domestic violence incidents. There are several factors that have been substantiated by scientific evidence. One such factor is economic status, which has been extensively examined in relation to domestic violence. Comprehensive research in multiple communities in the United States, revealing a positive association between lower economic status characterized by poverty and unemployment, and higher incidences of domestic violence^[4]. This suggests that economic distress plays a contributory role in domestic violence cases. Substance abuse, particularly alcohol and drug use, is a well-known risk factor for domestic violence. From the other hand, there is a strong correlation between alcohol consumption and domestic violence, with areas of higher substance abuse reporting a greater incidence of domestic violence^[5]. The effectiveness of legal frameworks and their enforcement is a key factor in domestic violence rates. A comparative study across different regions, demonstrating that regions with strong domestic violence laws paired with rigorous enforcement had lower rates of domestic violence^[6]. The strength of the local legal framework and its enforcement influences the deterrence and reporting of domestic violence incidents.

All these factors can impact an individual's perceptions of domestic violence. These perceptions differ depending on the individual's place of residence. Studies conducted in different countries have indicated that individuals residing in rural areas are more likely to accept physical violence within domestic relationships. This may be attributed to disparities in women empowerment campaigns, limited exposure to alternative methods of managing interpersonal relationships, and lower levels of education in rural settings. Furthermore, socioeconomic factors, such as wealth, play a role in women's approval of domestic violence, with those in higher wealth categories being less likely to condone such behavior. Consequently, it is crucial to address these variations in perception and implement interventions and policies that consider the specific context of intimate partner violence and promote gender equality^[7,8].

In addition, there is evidence to suggest that socioeconomic factors play a significant role in shaping individuals' perceptions of domestic violence. Research findings indicate that women who have lower educational attainment, income levels, and are unmarried are more vulnerable to experiencing domestic violence. It is crucial for healthcare professionals to play a pivotal role in addressing domestic violence. To this end, antenatal care protocols should be modified to incorporate discussions on domestic violence and its underlying causes. This would enable healthcare providers to identify and offer support to women who may be victims of abuse. In terms of geographical location, the research revealed that domestic violence during pregnancy is more prevalent in rural areas compared to urban areas^[9]. Cultural, and societal norms, such as patriarchal beliefs and the subordination of women to men, can contribute to the acceptance of abuse^[10]. In conclusion, there are disparities in the perception of domestic violence depending on the place of residence. Factors such as residing in rural areas, socioeconomic status, and cultural norms have a significant impact on these perceptions. Addressing these disparities necessitates comprehensive interventions that promote gender equality, education, and awareness surrounding domestic violence. Similarly, research conducted in India revealed that all forms of violence, except for sexual violence, were more prevalent in rural areas^[11]. These findings suggest that residing in rural areas may increase the likelihood of experiencing and accepting domestic violence.

The main interest of that paper is how domestic violence looks in the perceptions of Bulgarians in different regions and what domestic violence looks like in Bulgaria.

The present study focuses on the perception of violence in different regions, as well as indicates the state of experienced and perceived violence in Bulgaria. The main hypothesis which leads the research are:

Hypothesis 1 posits that individuals' attitudes towards violent relationships are greatly influenced by their personal experiences with violence, specifically physical violence. This influence leads to a widespread acceptance and normalization of such behavior, regardless of whether the individual has been a victim or perpetrator themselves.

Hypothesis 2 suggests that societal norms and stereotypes surrounding violence play a significant role in fostering "positive attitudes" towards aggressive behaviors. This further perpetuates the normalization and acceptance of violence among individuals, even if they have not directly encountered it.

2. Methodology

This study examines gender-role stereotypes and attitudes within the context of Bulgaria during the period of April–June 2022. A total of 2800 respondents participated in the study, with 100 individuals from each administrative area. The selection of respondents was random in terms of religion and ethnicity. Participation in the study was voluntary and based on prior information about the research. Respondents were randomly distributed among district towns, small towns, and villages. Part of quantitative research is

survey which measure experienced violence with answer options yes/no/more than a year ago, were there any acts of aggression by the partner. Other part of the research is measuring attitudes toward domestic violence and gender-role stereotypes. Results of measured attitudes and gender-role stereotypes are published^[12].

Alongside with a quantitative study conducted between April and June 2022, focus groups were also carried out in predetermined regions of Bulgaria. These regions were chosen based on their folklore and cultural significance, as different regions in Bulgaria have distinct folkloric traditions that can influence family beliefs. For instance, families in the Rhodope Mountains may hold different beliefs compared to those re-siding in the Danube River Valley. Petrova, Tasevska, and Chavdarova^[13] created a comprehensive compilation of folkloric beliefs pertaining to the family in various regions of Bulgaria, which served as a guide for forming the focus groups. Despite Bulgaria being a small country, it is divided into seven folkloric regions, each with its own unique traditions, local holidays, preserved pagan rituals, and historical characteristics that are specific to that region. These distinct regional factors extend to beliefs about the family as well. For example, in the Rhodope region, women not only engage in physically demanding labour akin to men but also assume responsibilities for the family and children. This is due to the region's diverse population, which includes Turks, Christians, and Bulgarian Muslims, each with their own religious and ethnic customs that shape family behaviour. Anton Strashimirov is an author who extensively de-scribed the regional characteristics of Bulgarians. It is worth noting that regions with greater ethnic diversity, demographic challenges, and poverty tend to exhibit more pronounced traditional beliefs. Given the vast scope of Bulgaria's over 1300-year history, a comprehensive account of all these factors would be exceedingly complex. Consequently, the selection of areas for conducting the focus groups was based on these distinctive features. Each focus group consisted of ten individuals who were selected based on specific age and/or territorial criteria. Five focus groups were held in each designated area, representing various demographic groups, including individuals aged 55 and above, upper secondary school students (up to 18 years old), residents of a regional town, residents of a small town, and a mixed group comprising individuals of different ages and territories. The primary objective of the focus groups was to facilitate focused and nuanced discussions to identify and develop attitudes based on set principles. In this regard, the focus groups themselves served as the subject variable. The total participation in the focus groups amounted to 700 individuals, ensuring a representative sample of the Bulgarian population.

The focus groups were implemented by a team consisting of 8 researchers who worked in pairs. The research took place in various locations including Sofia city, Pernik, Blagoevgrad, Smolyan, Montana, Sliven, Burgas, Silistra, Veliko Tarnovo, Shumen, Varna, Lovech, and Pazardzhik. Prior to the focus groups, the researchers prepared a semi-structured questionnaire^[12] to guide the discussion on attitudes towards gender-role relationships within the family and their association with power dynamics. The focus groups were conducted in villages, small towns, and large cities, ensuring a di-verse regional representation. Additionally, the participants varied in age, with two focus groups including individuals over 50 years old, two focus groups including individuals under 20 years old, and the remaining three focus groups being mixed in terms of age. Consequently, each region comprised five focus groups, encompassing individuals from villages, small towns, and big cities, as well as those under 20 years old and over 50 years old. An additional mixed group was also included.

The research utilized quantitative methods to examine the prevalence of attitudes and stereotypes in different regions of Bulgaria, while also employing qualitative methods to gain a deeper understanding of the underlying factors behind these attitudes and stereotypes. This approach allowed for the development of an implementation algorithm, wherein quantitative data was first collected to assess the extent and distribution

of attitudes and stereotypes by area, followed by the structuring of focus group questions. The quantitative research involved students from various administrative regions who collected 100 surveys from random individuals, while the focus groups were conducted by qualified psychology teachers in the designated areas. Participation in both studies was voluntary and required prior consent from participants. The quantitative data was analyzed using statistical techniques such as descriptive statistics and cluster analysis, while the qualitative data was analyzed using thematic analysis. One limitation of the study is the inability to provide evidence for the applied propositions, which presents an area for future research.

3. Results

3.1. Survey results related with domestic violence perception

To visualize the results, descriptive statistics were made with the cross-tabulation method regarding the experienced violence in a Bulgarian sample. They include gender and data indicating whether violence was experienced, was experienced more than a year ago, was not experienced or the respondent did not wish to specify. Results are shown in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Crosstabs results for experienced and not experienced violence by gender.

Gender		Experienced violence				Total
		Yes	No	More than 1 year ago	Don't want to tell	
Male	Count	107	733	66	26	932
	%	27.0%	37.4%	21.8%	20.2%	33.4%
Female	Count	284	1203	234	98	1819
	%	71.7%	61.3%	77.2%	76.0%	65.2%
Not specified	Count	5	26	3	5	39
	%	1.3%	1.3%	1.0%	3.9%	1.4%
Count	Total	396	1962	303	129	2790
%	%	14.2%	70.3%	10.9%	4.6%	100.0%

According to distribution, a total of about 25.1% were victims of violence. This maintains the steady trend that about ¼ of the population has been part of such relationships at least once in their lives.

14.2% of the sample were victims of violence in the last year, 10.9% of the sample more than one year ago. 4.6% of individuals do not wish to specify. Only 70.3% are categorical.

Most of the victims of violence are women—over 70%.

The data on violence against men are interesting—the cases of violence against men are increasing, and the conclusion lies in the fact that 1 year ago there were about 21%, and those who experienced it in the last year were 27%.

Either way, the percentage is not negligible, either overall or as a trend.

To complement the analysis, descriptive statistics were also made regarding the type of aggression experienced, using only frequency analysis, regardless of gender and age, to examine the overall data. Results are shown in **Table 2**.

An interesting result is that the responses of only 828 people related to experienced violence, while at the same time 1556 respondents indicated the type of violence they experienced. This leads us to the conclusion that part of the people have experienced violence, but do not indicate such, and another part of

the persons do not perceive the experience as a pure form of violence, but rather as part of a pathological relationship.

Table 2. Distribution of types of experienced aggression by partner.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
Physical	139	5.0	8.9	8.9
Sexual	56	2.0	3.6	12.5
Psychological/emotional	315	11.2	20.2	32.8
Economical	70	2.5	4.5	37.3
Neglecting	153	5.5	9.8	47.1
Don't want to tell	607	21.6	39.0	86.1
More than one	216	7.7	13.9	100.0
Total	1556	55.5	100.0	
Missing	1249	44.5		
	2805	100.0		

It can be concluded that some of the pathological relationships between spouses are accepted as the norm, although they are defined as deviant on a declarative, cognitive level.

To complement the obtained interesting data, descriptive statistics were made using the cross-tabulation method, in which the responses regarding experienced/not experienced violence and type of violence were distributed. Results are shown in **Table 3**.

Table 3. Distribution of types of experienced aggression.

Experienced violence	Type of experienced aggression by partner							Total
	Physical	Sexual	Psychological/e motional	Economical	Neglecting	Don't want to tell	More than one	
Yes	89	30	113	24	27	29	80	392
%	22.7%	7.7%	28.8%	6.1%	6.9%	7.4%	20.4%	100.0%
No	17	11	119	29	99	463	28	766
%	2.2%	1.4%	15.5%	3.8%	12.9%	60.4%	3.7%	100.0%
More than year ago	32	13	78	17	26	32	103	301
	10.6%	4.3%	25.9%	5.6%	8.6%	10.6%	34.2%	100.0%
Don't want to tell	1	2	5	0	1	82	5	96
	1.0%	2.1%	5.2%	0.0%	1.0%	85.4%	5.2%	100.0%
Total	139	56	315	70	153	606	216	1555
	8.9%	3.6%	20.3%	4.5%	9.8%	39.0%	13.9%	100.0%

These results can be explained by the high tolerance for violence and, more specifically, its perception as something normal. The result is also not accidental - of those who denied violence, but indicated having experienced it, the percentage of physical, which is clearly perceived as “real” violence, as opposed to other behaviours to which there is tolerance, is the lowest.

In a Bulgarian sample, physical violence is perceived to the greatest degree of violence, while other behaviours which cause suffering are underestimated.

To facilitate the examination and description of the different profiles of the sample, cluster analysis was

used.

The first distribution was made between qualitative and quantitative variables—experienced/unexperienced violence qualitatively, respectively, in relation to attitudes and gender-role stereotypes. Clusters are combined with experienced/non experienced violence. Results are shown in **Table 4**. Description of clusters is after **Table 4**.

Table 4. Distribution of clusters by experienced/not experienced violence.

Cluster	YES		NO		More than year ago		Don't want to tell	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
1	0	0.0%	1094	55.7%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
2	0	0.0%	719	36.6%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
3	271	68.4%	0	0.0%	300	99.0%	128	99.2%
4	125	31.6%	152	7.7%	3	1.0%	1	0.8%
Combined	396	100.0%	1965	100.0%	303	100.0%	129	100.0%

First cluster (39.2% of the sample): Formed by 100% of individuals who indicated that they had not experienced violence, and the scales showed low values regarding tolerance of violence and existing gender-role stereotypes. These individuals can be perceived as a base that is stable, respectively low risk for both victimization and perpetration of domestic violence.

Second cluster (25.7% of the sample): Formed by 100% of individuals who have not experienced violence but have a relatively high tolerance for violence and high values of prejudice. Representing ¼ of those involved, poses some risk given the propensity to commit domestic violence and the possibility of “normalizing” violent relationships.

Third cluster (25% of the sample): Composed of 100% of individuals who indicated an answer other than “No”. They have values around the average regarding tolerance to mental, emotional, and verbal abuse. Means of gender-role stereotypes that target women.

It should be emphasized the far higher tolerance and stereotypes of the first cluster - persons who have not experienced violence. Strictly speaking, these individuals have a low tolerance for physical violence. This is the group of people who have experienced violence over time. Their tolerance values are “higher” in terms of mental and emotional violence, as well as verbal.

Tolerance for physical violence is low. This confirms the conclusion that mental and emotional abuse continues to be perceived as “normal”. The only thing with a sufficiently low probability of normalization is physical violence in 25% of individuals.

Fourth cluster (10% of the sample): Relatively equally distributed between survivors and non-survivors of violence. Impresses with high tolerance and strongly emphasized gender-role stereotypes.

A fourth cluster confirms that experienced and/or non-experienced violence in the context of domestic violence is not specifically related to stereotypes or tolerance. The reason lies deeper.

3.2. Qualitative analysis by local particularity

3.2.1. Large areas (regional cities)

For the participants from the capital, domestic violence is a taboo topic, a vicious circle in which violence seems to become the “norm”, becomes a part of everyday life. According to them, abusers give conflicting signals to the victim, confuse her and thus the relationship becomes toxic. The opinion is that the

man is more often the abuser, he is physically stronger, while the woman exercises more emotional harassment.

Escalation in the relationship is defined as “short-circuiting”. The understanding is that violence is not because of gender roles, but is a function of psychological problems, more often in the man. Often the abuser was previously a victim, and this is a developmental trauma.

According to the participants, jealousy is a strong factor for violence in Bulgaria.

Another important factor is the exercise of power and control over children. The feeling is that since the pandemic 2020 violence has increased quite a bit, especially against children and women.

According to the participants from the city of Montana, the mixing of generations gives rise to violent relationships. Several women share, “I’m divorced because we lived with my husband’s whole family, and I didn’t have a say and my opinion wasn’t respected.”

In Bulgaria, for partners to separate because of violence, “something very bad has to happen”, there is cover-up and excessive patience.

The participants from the city of Plovdiv claim that violence is a completely un-acceptable act, but the group is united around the opinion that Bulgarians are tolerant of it, and it often goes unpunished. Violence is explained by the inability to express fears and anger. A main factor behind the violence is the dynamic everyday life and high stress.

The family is indicated as a generator of violence. In the context of the relationship itself, a leading cause of violence is the inability to communicate between partners.

In the group from the city of Pazardzhik, it is claimed that society has long since lost its senses for the “small things”—conversations, shared dinners, a social atmosphere. The reasons for domestic violence are conflicts related to material things, as well as complexes and jealousy that someone lives better than you.

The group believes that the Bulgarian looks at the other, often competes, is envious, jealous, and afraid. And conflicts in the family are most often explained by jealousy, low income, social status.

Another view of the causes of conflict in the family is related to the child placed in the center, around which everyone zealously defends their point of view on upbringing—one parent supports, the other does not support certain behaviour and conflict arises.

The group explains the tolerance for frequent conflicts and violence by the fact that Bulgarians are afraid of foreign opinion and are afraid that there is nowhere to go when the violence is revealed. The increasing violence is also explained by the fact that the male sex is already weakening, it is complex. “They find it easier to reach out than to talk. There is a lack of communication—problems are not clarified, things that can be solved with two stories are not talked about.” The problem is that violence is accepted as something normal, whether it happens on the street or at home.

In the group from the city of Burgas, risk factors that provoke violence in the family are conflicts, individualism that overflows into selfishness, the lack of compromises and sympathy, of financial resources, of personal time for individual members, common activities, etc.

In the group from the city of Shumen, mental illnesses, upbringing, problematic family models, ongoing family problems, financial difficulties, abuse of alcohol and psychoactive substances, addictions, trauma, lack of parental control, bullying, misunderstanding between parents and problematic childhood are identified as causes of domestic violence.

According to the participants from Blagoevgrad, violence is perceived as some-thing that, once it gets to it, there is no turning back. The attitude towards physical violence is very extreme, given the claim that the people of this region are very close-knit and warm, and if they witness or even suspect something like this, they will take extreme measures. According to the participants, emotional abuse is equated with jealousy, which cannot be largely considered as something that is so disturbing or striking. The main factor behind the violence is the provocations of modern society, in the form of stress in everyday life, the dynamics in professional and personal relationships, the decisiveness of the clash between traditional and modernist understanding of family interactions. The modern family is reduced to “something with which a person feeds, and not something that feeds his soul and makes him seethe with a de-sire for full-fledged communication.”

According to the participants of the group in the city of Pernik, violence in the family can be from both sides, the so-called emotional violence is very often observed regarding whether the partner has the right to freedom and personal space.

According to the group, the main factors provoking violence are the financial factor, addictions, observed violence as aggressor and victim, jealousy also plays a huge role in provoking a beating. Restriction of freedom, desire for supremacy, lack of communication, lack of education, lack of upbringing in terms of parental capacity are the other reasons cited by the group.

3.2.2. Medium and little areas (municipal centres and villages)

According to participants from the Sofia region (Kremikovtsi), violence is an ex-pression of weak-minded people who destroy complexes. It is rooted in the family in which children grow up, as if there are sadists, there are also masochists. It is possible that there are also men who are victims, but they are ashamed to share it. They are more emotionally abused and deal with it by drinking. According to the group, violence is not gender-based, but has two sides, as “the process is two-sided, but not everything can be solved by fighting.” It is said that domestic violence comes from the greater rights of women and children now and is a reaction to a man’s powerlessness to cope. Before violence was “the order of things”, now it is considered a problem, “there is more volume now, now you can’t touch the child or raise your voice”.

According to the group from the city of Chirpan, today the male-female roles are equalized, the woman has more self-confidence, but this also leads to more conflicts and violence. A man’s frustration and inferiority sometimes lead to violence, but everything depends on the man—upbringing, environment, culture.

Participants claim that children who witness violence become violent, i.e., two patterns are possible which are related – you either become a bully or a victim. Violence is a pattern that is perceived through upbringing and a friendly environment, as men more often exercise physical violence, while women emotionally and passive-aggressively. According to a participant, “now there is more glasnost, at one time it was ‘fight and then go out and smile’”.

There is also “silent” aggression, which is more characteristic of women than men, “with physical aggression there are visible results, with silent - the result is the pub”.

The group from the Plovdiv region places an interesting emphasis on the fact that violence can be a consequence of justified anger - from a lie or from deception. It is perceived as common; it is also explained by the greater “physical strength of men”. Jealousy and insecurity are also cited as reasons for the violence. In order to escalate the violence, the respondents shared that women keep silent about the things they feel and think; therefore, they allow the man as stronger to beat them. According to the participants, physical violence is perceived as the most serious problem, while other types are underestimated (not indicated as

problematic). According to the group from a village in the Plovdiv region, financial and economic problems are leading to family violence - inflation, difficulties lead to tension, and tension leads to conflicts.

Unemployment and lack of housing lead to complexes, dissatisfaction, which sometimes erupt violently. Childhood problems are also cited as a secondary cause of violence.

The group from a small settlement in Pazardzhik cites the presence of patriarchal norms among men as the main reasons for the violence, followed by low self-esteem, alcohol abuse, poor home upbringing and mistrust between the parties in a relationship. A very important reason is the lack of conversation about violence—"they fight at home, and when they go outside, they put on smiles, as if there is no problem." The media is cited as a factor in the formation of violent relationships, but family upbringing occupies a prime position.

Regarding the topic of violence in a small town in Veliko Tarnovo region, the group splits into two. A part of her accepts that everything that happens in the family should stay there, and that what happens in the next yard is none of their business. The other part is of the opposite opinion, although it also expresses positions that slapping is more of an educational measure than a form of violence. Despite the findings, as a general opinion of the participants in the focus group, it can be concluded that violence is rather unacceptable and causes serious damage to the overall development of the family and the children in it.

In Gotse Delchev's group, financial and economic problems are brought to the fore—difficulties lead to tension, and this tension leads to conflicts. It is said that today's great opportunities in terms of choosing partners are also likely to provoke tension in the family in the form of jealousy and lack of communication. Stress at work, covid tension are also cited as a tense and violent plot leading to a predictable denouement. Eliciting these reasons also leads to an attempt to understand the violence, regardless of being critical of the act and calling it "unacceptable".

The group from the city of Nedelino believes that violence in the family is minimized, there is no way to get to something unpleasant considering that all family members live in the same home. In this sense, "no one will remain uninvolved in the presence of physical or mental harassment". According to the participants, the main factors provoking violence are the financial factor, which can provoke broken communication that would escalate into mental harassment, but according to them, "physical violence can be observed much less often". They share that even children are very sympathetic to the situation of their parents and try not to burden them with minor problems from their everyday life.

4. Discussion

The extensive data gathered in this examination of domestic violence in Bulgaria offers a plethora of valuable observations that necessitate a thorough scholarly discourse. The results defy traditional presumptions regarding the characteristics of domestic violence and its influence on beliefs, thereby emphasizing the intricate nature of this societal problem. The normalization of violence and its implications are a noteworthy phenomenon, particularly among individuals who have undergone violent experiences, particularly if these events occurred more than a year ago. This observation elicits important concerns regarding the enduring psychological consequences of violence and the strategies survivors employ to cope with such trauma. It suggests the possibility of a desensitization effect, which may be influenced by societal views on domestic violence and the presence or absence of support networks. Moreover, the normalization of violence presents a hurdle for intervention approaches, as it may impede the recognition of abusive behavior and deter survivors from seeking assistance. The perception that certain aggressive behaviors are considered normal is a concerning phenomenon among a substantial portion of survivors. This perception can be

comprehended by applying the social learning theory, which posits that behaviors witnessed or encountered in one's surroundings, particularly during crucial developmental stages, become ingrained as societal norms. This discovery emphasizes the significance of timely intervention and educational initiatives to modify such perceptions and hinder the perpetuation of the cycle of violence. The prevalence of societal tolerance towards domestic violence, as evidenced by the fact that only 40% of individuals surveyed hold negative attitudes towards it, despite 25% of respondents having personally experienced such violence, highlights a larger societal concern. This acceptance may be attributed to ingrained cultural norms, the stigma surrounding victims of domestic violence, or a limited understanding of the various forms of abuse that fall under this category. Consequently, it is imperative to implement comprehensive public awareness campaigns and educational endeavours that not only address physical violence but also encompass emotional and psychological forms of abuse. The study finds that economic factors, such as poverty and unemployment, play a significant role in domestic violence, which is consistent with previous research that has established a connection between economic stressors and a higher likelihood of domestic abuse. This association implies that interventions targeted at addressing economic difficulties could be crucial in decreasing the prevalence of domestic violence. The connection between childhood experiences and the development of abusive behaviors is a significant discovery with implications for the intergenerational transmission of violence. Individuals who have witnessed or endured violence during their childhood are more prone to displaying similar behaviors in their adult years. To tackle this issue, it is crucial to implement early intervention initiatives and provide supportive services for children who have been exposed to domestic violence. The presence of emotional deficits and communication issues, such as feelings of jealousy and a desire for dominance, within families indicates the necessity of incorporating emotional intelligence education and relationship counseling into domestic violence prevention approaches. These findings imply that interventions should not solely target victims but should also address individuals who are at risk or have been identified as abusers, equipping them with techniques for emotional regulation and effective communication. To conclude, the findings presented in this research offer a comprehensive understanding of the complex nature of domestic violence in Bulgaria. They demonstrate the intricate interaction between attitudes, experiences, and societal norms, which collectively influence the occurrence and perception of domestic violence. This analysis underscores the necessity of adopting a comprehensive approach to combat domestic violence, encompassing financial assistance, psychological assistance, public education, and alterations in cultural values. By prioritizing these domains, it is possible to not only offer immediate aid to victims but also establish a sustainable plan to prevent domestic violence in the long run. Different studies reveal evidence of the impact of different approaches that are aimed at changing attitudes and reducing violence. The research conducted on mental health nurses revealed that a training program designed to manage aggression did not result in significant changes in their attitudes towards the underlying causes of patient aggression^[14]. However, it is important to acknowledge that attitudes can be influenced by various factors, including individual personality traits. For example, there is a positive association between narcissistic personality traits and attitudes towards dating violence in university students^[15]. Likewise, in other research it's observed a notable impact of being exposed to violence in the domestic environment on youth attitudes towards violence and firearms^[16]. These findings suggest that while direct exposure to violence may not directly modify attitudes, other factors such as individual traits and exposure to violence can contribute to the development of attitudes towards violence.

It was discovered that the judgments individuals make regarding the limits of tolerance are significantly influenced by situational factors^[17]. Furthermore, other research provided evidence to suggest that violent attitudes exhibited by intimate partners contribute to the respondent's own perpetration of violence and mental health symptoms. Adolescents who observe adult role models engaging in violent behavior are more

likely to adopt supportive attitudes towards violence^[18,19]. Additionally, both attachment style and personality traits have a substantial impact on attitudes towards criminal violence^[20]. Moreover, the role model prosocial behavior is directly associated with a decrease in attitudes supportive of violence, and indirectly associated with reduced violent behavior through participants' attitudes towards violence^[19]. These findings highlight the notion that exposure to violence alone is insufficient to determine one's tolerance or intolerance towards violent relationships. Other factors, such as situational factors, partner attitudes, role models, and attachment styles, also play pivotal roles in shaping attitudes towards violence.

5. Conclusions

The thorough examination of domestic violence in Bulgaria, as supported by the data gathered, provides several crucial observations that are vital for comprehending and dealing with this intricate problem. These findings not only emphasize the multifaceted character of domestic violence but also emphasize the necessity for nuanced interventions and policies that are customized to address the dynamics involved. To begin with, the research findings indicate that the mere exposure to violence does not exhibit a direct correlation with individuals' attitudes towards violent relationships. In contrast to expectations, undergoing violent experiences does not inevitably result in an augmentation of intolerance towards such relationships. Surprisingly, for a noteworthy proportion of participants, past encounters with violence, particularly those occurring over a year ago, tend to normalize rather than intensify their acceptance of such relationships. This normalization process is of utmost importance, as it signifies a societal inclination to gradually reduce sensitivity or diminish the significance of violence over time. In addition, a considerable proportion of individuals who have experienced abuse view particular types of aggressive conduct as typical, unintentionally cultivating a context wherein violence is heightened, and the actions of the perpetrator are reinforced by indirect support. This observation emphasizes the necessity for extensive initiatives in education and awareness that confront and reshape prevailing societal attitudes towards violence and aggression. Despite these worrisome patterns, it is worth mentioning that a mere 40% of the participants in the survey demonstrate an unfavourable perception towards domestic violence. This discovery is particularly disconcerting given that a quarter of the respondents have personally encountered violence, yet a substantial portion of them maintain a permissive or apathetic stance towards it. This tolerance not only perpetuates the perpetration of violence but also impedes the efficacy of interventions aimed at addressing domestic violence. The analysis classifies the problem areas into separate groupings, with problem area 1 specifically addressing the psychological attitudes surrounding domestic violence. It is evident that domestic violence is primarily associated with physical aggression, while emotional and psychological forms of abuse are often disregarded. This lack of attention reveals a significant deficiency in the overall comprehension of domestic violence, emphasizing the need for more extensive education and awareness initiatives. Economic variables, such as socio-economic disadvantage, joblessness, and limited financial resources, have been recognized as substantial factors influencing the occurrence of domestic violence. Furthermore, early life experiences, encompassing inadequate parental guidance, neglect, and exposure to violence, play a pivotal role in shaping the behavior of individuals who perpetrate abusive acts. Additionally, deficiencies in emotional well-being, which manifest as feelings of jealousy, a quest for power and control, and other associated concerns, are identified as central issues. Finally, the research underscores the significance of communication difficulties within familial dynamics, encompassing both intimate partnerships and the process of raising children. These impediments to effective communication frequently amplify the circumstances, resulting in misinterpretations and confrontations that may escalate to instances of violence. In summary, the results of this investigation shed light on the intricate and interconnected elements that contribute to domestic violence in Bulgaria. Effectively addressing these matters necessitates a comprehensive strategy that encompasses

financial assistance, psychological treatments, educational initiatives, and awareness-raising campaigns. It is crucial to challenge and transform societal values and beliefs that normalize or downplay violence, thereby fostering a society that is better informed, empathetic, and proactive in the fight against domestic violence.

The main proposals for overcoming are summarized as follows: through psycho-logical counselling of the children, the abuser, and the victim; by changing the legislation in the direction of dropping the requirement for systematic violence, urgent and adequate response to signals and urgent removal of the abuser from the home, not the victim and the children. Maybe the most important interventions are related to early childhood and parenthood interventions directed to emotional relationships and increasing secure attachment styles. As it's mentioned in the social inheritance field "Social inheritance may be conceptualized on two levels. The first one is the common level associated with over personal aspects—social identity, ethnic identity, which are historically determined. From that level on, the conductors of social inheritance are the institutions that integrate the same values in the new generations. On the other hand, are the parents, who reduce reality to their own one, integrating the general reality the way it was experienced"^[21].

The approaches related to providing psychological and socio-pedagogical support follow the main forms of work, namely: individual work or case work; specialized group work; working with families; community work and inter-institutional support.

Legislation in the Republic of Bulgaria is limited in terms of measures aimed at dealing with the problem of domestic violence. They should be aimed both at prevention with a range of training courses^[22] and at intervention that is aimed after the act has occurred.

Inter-institutional support in solving a given social problem is the most appropriate form of work, as it includes the previous forms and implies the commitment of all participants in the process. One of the main principles of the helping process is the observance of complexity, understood as the mobilization of all resources, with accent on the activity of social assistance institutions involved with people at risk. This means creating inter-institutional teams whose role is to support and help those in need, each according to their competences.

Whatever form of social and psychological support is chosen, the basis is an adequate analysis of what is happening, that is, a realistic and objective assessment, intervention planning, control and evaluation of the measures taken and an overall assessment of the impact of the selected technologies. Considering the complexity of the phenomenon of domestic violence, this means a long-term, multilayered, multidirectional, and dynamic process, which, in addition to requiring the commitment of more professionals, also requires normative changes, and a sensitized civil society, and personal awareness and intolerance towards gender-based domestic violence.

Author contributions

Conceptualization, KP and VC; methodology, KP; validation, PTD; formal analysis, VC; investigation, KP; resources, PTD; data curation, KP; writing—original draft preparation, VC; writing—review and editing, PTD; supervision, KP; project administration, VC; funding acquisition, VC. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding

This research was funded by Iceland, Liechtenstein, and Norway, under the Financial Mechanism of the European Economic Area, thematic priority No. 4: "Increasing the contribution of civil organizations to gender equality and preventing gender-based violence", project No. ACF/817

Institutional review board statement

The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Institutional Ethics Committee of “St. Cyril and St. Methodius”, University of Veliko Tarnovo (protocol code 053/02.05.2023).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data availability statement

The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to ethical principles.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

1. Jewkes R. Intimate partner violence: causes and prevention. *The Lancet*. 2002, 359(9315): 1423-1429. doi: 10.1016/s0140-6736(02)08357-5
2. Kaukinen C. Status Compatibility, Physical Violence, and Emotional Abuse in Intimate Relationships. *Journal of Marriage and Family*. 2004, 66(2): 452-471. doi: 10.1111/j.1741-3737.2004.00031.x
3. Dugan L, Nagin DS, Rosenfeld R. Exposure Reduction or Retaliation? The Effects of Domestic Violence Resources on Intimate-Partner Homicide. *Law & Society Review*. 2003, 37(1): 169-198. doi: 10.1111/1540-5893.3701005
4. Benson ML, Fox GL. Concentrated Disadvantage, Economic Distress, and Violence Against Women in Intimate Relationships. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*. 2004, 41(3): 263-293.
5. Cunradi CB. Drinking Level, Neighborhood Social Disorder, and Mutual Intimate Partner Violence. *Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research*. 2007, 31(6): 1012-1019. doi: 10.1111/j.1530-0277.2007.00382.x
6. Simmons CA, Lehmann P, Collier-Tenison S. Men’s Use of Controlling Behaviors: A Comparison of Reports by Women in a Domestic Violence Shelter and Women in a Domestic Violence Offender Program. *Journal of Family Violence*. 2008, 23(6): 387-394. doi: 10.1007/s10896-008-9159-6
7. Doku DT, Asante KO. Women’s approval of domestic physical violence against wives: analysis of the Ghana demographic and health survey. *BMC Women’s Health*. 2015, 15(1). doi: 10.1186/s12905-015-0276-0
8. Ferdous N, Kabir R, Khan HTA, et al. Exploring the relationship of Domestic violence on Health Seeking behavior and Empowerment of Women in Pakistan. *Epidemiology, Biostatistics, and Public Health*. 2022, 14(1). doi: 10.2427/12231
9. Yanikkerem E, Karadaş G, Adıgüzel B, et al. Domestic Violence during Pregnancy in Turkey and Responsibility of Prenatal Healthcare Providers. *American Journal of Perinatology*. 2006, 23(02): 093-104. doi: 10.1055/s-2006-931802
10. Madhani FI, Karmaliani R, Patel C, et al. Women’s Perceptions and Experiences of Domestic Violence. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*. 2016, 32(1): 76-100. doi: 10.1177/0886260515585533
11. Nadda A, Malik JS, Rohilla R, et al. Study of Domestic Violence among Currently Married Females of Haryana, India. *Indian Journal of Psychological Medicine*. 2018, 40(6): 534-539. doi: 10.4103/ijpsym.ijpsym_62_18
12. Manolov MN, Ivanov IK, Chavdarova VA. Gender-Role Stereotypes in the Bulgarian Family: Cross-Generational Transmission of Gender Attitudes. *Societies*. 2023, 13(7): 152. doi: 10.3390/soc13070152
13. Петрова К, Тасевска Д, Чавдарова В. Study of the Ethnopsychological and Cultural Characteristics of the Bulgarian Family in the Context of Gender-Based Violence; Faber: Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria. 2021.
14. Hahn S, Needham I, Abderhalden C, et al. The effect of a training course on mental health nurses’ attitudes on the reasons of patient aggression and its management. *Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing*. 2006, 13(2): 197-204. doi: 10.1111/j.1365-2850.2006.00941.x
15. Erdem A, Sahin R. Undergraduates’ Attitudes toward Dating Violence: Its Relationship with Sexism and Narcissism. *International Journal of Higher Education*. 2017, 6(6): 91. doi: 10.5430/ijhe.v6n6p91
16. Slovak K, Carlson K, Helm L. The Influence of Family Violence on Youth Attitudes. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*. 2007, 24(1): 77-99. doi: 10.1007/s10560-006-0063-8
17. Trüdinger EM, Ziller C. Setting limits to tolerance: An experimental investigation of individual reactions to extremism and violence. *Frontiers in Political Science*. 2023, 5. doi: 10.3389/fpos.2023.1000511

18. Jankey O, Próspero M, Fawson P. Mutually violent attitudes: effects on intimate partner violence and mental health symptoms among couples in Botswana, Africa. *Journal of Aggression, Conflict and Peace Research*. 2011, 3(1): 4-11. doi: 10.5042/jacpr.2011.0017
19. Hurd NM, Zimmerman MA, Reischl TM. Role Model Behavior and Youth Violence: A Study of Positive and Negative Effects. *The Journal of Early Adolescence*. 2010, 31(2): 323-354. doi: 10.1177/0272431610363160
20. Simane-Vigante L, Plotka I, Blumenau N. Research of the Relationship of Criminal Violence, Adult Attachment Styles and Personality Traits of Violent Male Offenders. *Rural environment Education Personality (REEP): proceedings of the 11th International scientific conference*. Published online May 2, 2018. doi: 10.22616/reep.2018.015
21. Manolov M, Stoyanov I, Georgieva Z, et al. Social Inheritance in the Context of Psychology. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*. 2019, 07(07): 50-59. doi: 10.4236/jss.2019.77005
22. Манолов М, Иванов И. Public policies regarding gender-role stereotypes and attitudes leading to violent relationships in the Bulgarian family (policies and practices). *Faber: Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria*. 2023.