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**Gender-based Domestic Violence: Perception Driven Evidence
from Armenia**

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Annotation

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Introduction

Empirical evidence shows that physical and psychological abuse negatively affects victims' health outcomes (Mechanic et al., 2008). Domestic violence that is motivated by power and control is often multidimensional. Still, before the victims can be identified and helped (either through self-identification such as seeking help, or with the help of relevant specialists such as healthcare providers), it is important that victims themselves, and people in their social environment recognize the different dimensions of violence to provide support to the victims. Perceptions of what constitutes abuse and violence may differ between cultures and socio-economic groups (Flood and Pease, 2009). How people, in general, conceptualize domestic abuse and in particular violence against women may have a detrimental impact on the level of domestic violence in society, health, and social outcomes for victims of violence (Tran et al., 2016).

Any form of violence, including gender-based domestic violence, can be exacerbated by social wellbeing, poverty, and traditional attitudes that preclude acknowledgment of the issue. Gender-based violence has profound causes and triggers that need to be explored and addressed. Over the last several decades, intimate partner violence (IPV) attracted considerable research attention. Academic literature has focused on identifying risk factors associated with IPV (Carney et al., 2007; Fang and Corso, 2008). Another strand of literature explores the attitudes towards IPV, which can be essential in shaping responses to IPV (Flood and Pease, 2009; Guoping et al., 2010). Attitudes are also important in outlining the normative aspect of IPV, such as being a cultural norm and shaping the role of women in a family (Pavlou and Knowles, 2001).

In this paper, we focus on distinguishing features of gender-based domestic violence in Armenia, one of the post-Soviet states. We explore the attitudes towards different forms of IPV. For this purpose, we use a household-level country-representative dataset from Armenia.⁴ In the survey, respondents reveal their perception of several forms of violence, which can be grouped *into (i) physical abuse, (ii) emotional abuse, and (iii) restrictions*. We refer to domestic violence as IPV, whereby the physical force or psychological abuse is inflicted onto a person by an intimate partner or another member of a household, intended to cause humiliation and intimidation (WHO, 2012). In the study, we also bring evidence from an Armenian NGO experience on distinct cases of gender-based violence in Armenia. The pieces of evidence, data- and experience-driven, enable to draw conclusive statements and elaborate on the directions of policy reform.

Despite gender-related studies on the post-Soviet area, gender-based violence remains one of the understudied topics in these countries (Johnson, 2007). Since the early stage of the Soviet Union's collapse, gender equality and equity has been highly contingent on the stage of socio-economic development and institutional capacity to address the issue from the legal perspective. Armenia is not an exception to this (GNEP, 2019). In fact, violence at a household level remains of the most vulnerable social issues, widespread in the country (CEDAW, 2016). Consequently, exploring the socio-economic factors explaining domestic violence can help policymakers to address gender-based violence in the country.

Armenia adopted the law on domestic violence in 2017. The government publishes periodic reports in compliance with the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

⁴ Survey data was collected through the initiative of Forum for Research on Gender Economics (FROGEE) funded by SIDA, in 2021.

In January 2018, Armenia adopted the Istanbul Convention that implies harmonization of national legal frameworks in protection and access to justice for women and general support services. However, gaps are identified in providing comprehensive legal protection from all forms of violence (OECD, 2019). In particular, existing studies on gender-based violence underline that legislative reforms in the region lag behind the implementation. The hindrance is embedded in multiple factors, such as inaccessible and ineffective justice systems; low awareness of rights; and wider governance issues that affect the public sector (Dugarova, 2018; UNFPA, 2015). The role of international organizations and civil society has been vital in addressing domestic violence-related awareness and human rights empowerment in Armenia. The outcomes of our study provide insights and data-driven evidence for Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) working on gender issues, as well as policymakers that can serve for their programs' development and implementation.

According to the National Statistical Service of Armenia and UN Women (2017), the proportion of ever-partnered women aged 15-59 years experiencing intimate partner physical and/or sexual violence at least once in their lifetime is 8 percent (in Georgia it is 6 percent and in Azerbaijan it is 14 percent). The physical and/or sexual IPV in the last 12 months in Armenia is 4 percent (in Georgia it is 1 percent and in Azerbaijan it is 10 percent). According to Armenia's Women's Support Center reported in 2017 at least 1 in 4 Armenian women are victims of IPV (Ishkanian, 2017). In the aftermath of the Nagorno-Karabakh war in 2020 and the shaken stability in the region, the issue of gendered impacts becomes more emerging. The reason for this is that gender aspects are not prioritized, gender-based violence is prevalent, and civil society is limited in politically and economically isolated disputed territories (Carter, 2021).

Our contribution to the existing literature is a fewfold. There are few academic studies exploring gender-based violence in post-Soviet states, and our study enriches emerging empirical literature. We narrow our study focus to exploring perceptions towards IPV as a particular form of gender-based violence, using unique survey data. Access to similar surveys conducted for selected Eastern European and post-Soviet countries enables us to identify those violence forms, in which Armenia is particularly sensitive. Importantly, we explore the socio-economic determinants of IPV in a causal relationship framework, which makes our results reliable from the normative perspectives.

The paper has the following structure. Section 2 describes the method and the data. In Section 3, we conduct causal analysis to identify the main drivers of socio-economic characteristics of perceived forms of violence. Results are in Section 4. In Section 5, we motivate discussion based on the experience of one of the Armenian NGOs. A part of that discussion is relegated to Appendix 2. Conclusion and policy recommendations are in Section 6.

Literature Review

There are numerous studies exploring the causal relationship between socio-economic determinants and IPV. This approach helps identify relevant target groups and develop policies to combat IPV. Another strand of literature (mostly psychology studies) looks at attitudes towards violence in individuals and whether they help predict violent behavior (see e.g., references in Wang, 2016). However, the literature is mostly silent on the perceptions of what does and does not constitute violence and how these perceptions are correlated with various socio-economic and cultural background factors, with some exceptions. Capezza and Arriaga (2008) and explore the factors that are associated with the acceptance of psychological aggression against women. They examine whether certain beliefs and past experiences predict perceptions of psychological aggression. The authors find that traditional gender role beliefs and being perpetrators of psychological aggression predict more acceptance of the psychological aggression.

Socio-Economic Factors and IPV

Empirical literature studies differentiated attitudes between males and females towards intimate partner violence against women (Ferrer-Perez et al., 2020). The consistently observed difference is explained along the lines of the feminist theory of gender-based violence. According to this theory, the social context serves either to foster or discourage intimate partner violence with a bearing incidence. Empirical literature confirms that gender is one of the key predictors of attitudes toward IPV (Flood and Pease, 2009; Gracia et al., 2015).

The literature suggests different forms of association between age and IPV. Johnson et al. (2015) shows that physical IPV among young adults tends to follow a non-linear pattern, with the probability of IPV rising until a certain age (17-20 years) and then falling. Other studies show that attitudes supporting IPV are more prevalent among older people (Gracia et al., 2015; Gracia and Tomás, 2014).

Education is negatively correlated with IPV (Gracia and Tomás, 2014). Wang (2016) concludes that education is expected to be one of the important factors associated with attitudes concerning IPV against violence, with a strong moderating effect on age, gender, and residency. Also, individuals with better financial situations are less tolerant towards IPV actions (see, e.g., Tusa et al., 2022).

Employment status is sensitive to physical abuse at a perception level (O'Campo et al., 1995). Generally, employment and implied economic status conditions economic stress of household. While IPV is observed in all social classes, the rates are found to be higher in households with lower socioeconomic status, experiencing unemployment or under-employment (Fox and Benson, 2006; Straus et al., 1980). Related to social status and implied housing conditions, the literature finds a negative causal relationship between household economic conditions and the risk of IPV (Fox et al., 2006, and the references therein).

Lanier and Maume (2009) find that the risk of IPV decreases among women living in rural areas, where potential victims can get a greater amount of help from family and friends. On average, high rates of violent crimes are reported in cities, but researchers acknowledge that violence (gender-based violence included) occurs in rural areas. Evidence on the link between rural/urban areas and IPV rates remains inconclusive.

Erten and Keskin (2022), one of the few studies exploring the awareness of legislation and perception of physical abuse and restriction, find no evidence of women's legal awareness and the risk of experiencing intimate partner violence. On the other hand, we do not find a significant relationship between trust and IPV perception dimensions. The literature, however, indicates the relevance of trust

in explaining trust. Trust is a vital factor for sensitive issues such as IPV against women (Strang et al., 2020).

There is a strand of literature finding a negative relationship between religiousness and IPV (Brinkerhoff et al., 1992; Ellison and Anderson, 2001, among others). In Christian communities, the teachings of the New Testament in the virtues of love, understanding, and forgiveness can explain this inverse relationship (Elliott et al., 2011). However, it is important to note that the view of gendered power in relationships can vary by faith tradition. Fundamentalist or literalist religious views, characterized by more literal and dogmatic interpretations of religious teaching, are associated with more traditional expectations of gender roles in relationships (Hoover and Coats, 2011). Warren (2015) develops an integrated model illustrating the mechanisms by which religiousness may serve to influence individual beliefs regarding intimate partner violence (IPV) and the potential for subsequent abusive behavior.

There are numerous studies, both qualitative and quantitative, finding such a positive relationship between the quality of the environment and IPV perceptions. (Yonas et al., 2011). Kirst et al. (2015) explores the effects of social capital and neighborhood characteristics on intimate partner violence and find strong significance between different risk factors inherent in the neighborhood and IPV. Consistent with the empirical literature, the authors find that higher levels of perceived neighborhood problems amplify the probability of the IPV occurrence.

Studies in the Context of Armenia

Several qualitative studies/reports explore local perceptions on skewed sex ratios at birth in the South Caucasus (Dudwick, 2015), women's lived experiences in Nagorno-Karabakh, and surrounding areas in Armenia and Azerbaijan (Twum et al., 2019). However, to the best of our knowledge, there are few studies looking systematically at the perception of gender-based violence in Armenia. Gender inequalities and gender-based violence remain understudied issues in the South Caucasus region (Carter, 2021). The constraints are related to a limited collection of gender-disaggregated data that is reflected in a low technical capacity, lack of political will, and social stigma (Fortuny Fillo and Negruta, 2020). For instance, domestic violence is considered to be a private family matter that remains tolerated.

Johnson (2007) compares domestic violence politics in Russia, Ukraine, Moldova, and Armenia, applying methods from comparative political science. The author finds that Russia's achievement in addressing gender violence is more substantial compared to other post-Soviet polities, especially Moldova and Armenia. One of the observations is that the Armenian society has been rather resistant to social campaigns regarding gender violence. Armenian NGOs have been struggling to bring the issue to newspapers and TV. Regarding the policy reforms, the author concludes that in the early stage of independence, there have been no reforms addressing gender violence. Also, gender violence politics has been developed in Armenia worst, compared to other countries. Another finding is that culture is an issue, though the conventional (and distinguished) role of women in the Armenian family.

In their academic paper, Kabir and Khan (2019) address IPV in Armenia in the causal relationship framework. The authors indicate that for Armenia, there is no empirical research conducted before on the women's empowerment status and its relationship with IPV. The authors explore the impact of IPV on the empowerment of Armenian women of reproductive age group. They use This cross-sectional data from the Armenian Demography and Health Survey Data for the period 2015-16. A total of 6116 women were selected from 8749 households in Armenia for interview using the multistage cluster sampling technique. Among other findings, they show that respondents aged between 35 and 49 years are more likely to face violence compared to other age groups. The respondents who lack decision-

making power are experiencing IPV (around 90 percent). The regression analysis reveals that the age of the respondents, number of children in the households, wealth index, and empowerment status are significantly associated with intimate partner violence. The main conclusion is that women with no empowerment are more likely to experience IPV compared to those women who are empowered in Armenian society.

Method and Data

Method

We construct our outcome variables from the following question: "I am now going to describe some interactions that can occur within a couple. Can you please tell me whether in your opinion these are examples of abuse within the couple, given that abuse can be physical, sexual, psychological, and economical?". Possible answers are Yes (=1) or No (=0). We group all variables into 3 groups: Physical abuse (1), emotional abuse (2), and restrictions on movements (3).

Composite measures on violence forms are constructed from the following options for an answer:

Physical Abuse (min = 0, max=4)

- 1) Beating causing severe physical harm (e.g. kicks)
- 2) Beating without severe physical harm (e.g. slaps)
- 3) Sexual act against the partner's will
- 4) Forced abortion

Emotional Abuse (min = 0, max=6)

- 1) Threat to do harm by using the couple's children
- 2) Verbal threats of physical violence ("I will kill you," etc.)
- 3) Constant humiliation, criticism ("you are a bad wife", "you are a worthless husband")
- 4) Quarrels, scandals, screams
- 5) Intentional refusal to get medical care
- 6) The requirement to show SMS, correspondence in social networks etc

Restrictions (min = 0, max=5)

- 1) Locking the partner in a room, apartment, house
- 2) Prohibition to communicate with friends and/or relatives
- 3) Prohibition to visit public places (shops, cinemas, cafes) without permission
- 4) Restrictions on access to financial resources
- 5) Prohibition to dress as one likes.

We assess the effect of socio-economic determinants on the three IPV dimensions. For this purpose, we estimate a three-equation seemingly unrelated regression (SUR) model, which enables us to take into consideration contemporaneous correlation of common unobserved factors.⁵ The model has the following form:

⁵ Zellner (1962) provided the seminal work on SUR. The method is explained by Greene (2018) in detail. Applications of SUR models are numerous, covering a wide range of topics and areas. For example, Khachatryan et al. (2017) estimate a 3-dimensional SUR model to assess the effect of capital structure on firm performance.

$$Phys_i = \alpha_1 + \sum_h \beta_{1,j} Ind_{i,h} + \sum_k \gamma_{1,k} HH_{i,k} + \varepsilon_{1,i} \quad (1)$$

$$Emot_i = \alpha_2 + \sum_h \beta_{2,j} Ind_{i,h} + \sum_k \gamma_{2,k} HH_{i,k} + \varepsilon_{2,i} \quad (2)$$

$$Restr_i = \alpha_3 + \sum_h \beta_{3,j} Ind_{i,h} + \sum_k \gamma_{3,k} HH_{i,k} + \varepsilon_{3,i} \quad (3)$$

where $Phys_i$, $Emot_i$ and $Restr_i$ are the physical abuse, emotional abuse and restriction measures, constructed from responses of the individual i , Ind and HH are the vectors of individual and household characteristics. The seemingly unrelated structure of the model is reflected through the variance-covariance matrix of the error term, $\varepsilon_t = [\varepsilon'_1, \varepsilon'_2, \varepsilon'_3]'$, which has an off-diagonal non-zero terms, $E[\varepsilon_{1,i}\varepsilon_{2,i}|X] = \sigma_{1,2}$, $E[\varepsilon_{1,i}\varepsilon_{3,i}|X] = \sigma_{1,3}$ and $E[\varepsilon_{2,i}\varepsilon_{3,i}|X] = \sigma_{2,3}$, X being the vector of all covariates.

The SUR model is tested by running the Breusch-Pagan specification test of independent errors. The null hypothesis is that there is no contemporaneous correlation of the error term. A rejection of the null indicates that SUR is a more appropriate method compared to estimating the two equations separately. A VIF multicollinearity test was run for all specifications. Variables included in the model have VIF value substantially less than 10. We use the asymptotically efficient, feasible, generalized least-squares (GLS) algorithm described in Greene (2018), to estimate the SUR model.

Zellner (1962) shows that SUR estimates are equivalent to equation-by-equation OLS estimates in two cases: (i) zero correlation among the errors (in our case, $\sigma_{1,2} = 0$) or (ii) the same regressors across all equations. We identify the same regressors for the three IPV dimensions, implying that our SUR and equation-by-equation OLS estimates will be numerically equivalent and may differ in significance due to large differences in standard errors. In our case, there are some differences in the significance of coefficient estimates from the SUR and equation-by-equation OLS.

We identify the list of control variables from the empirical literature on gender-based violence. Individual characteristics are age, gender, education, marital status, and employment. Another set of individual characteristics is derived from perceptions, such as religiousness, trust, and the quality of the environment. Household characteristics are financial situation, number of children, settlement type (rural versus urban), number of household members per room, and the quality of the environment.

Data

Our data comes from the survey conducted under the umbrella of the Stockholm School of Economics, within the project FROGEE. The survey has been conducted in 2021, for eight countries from the Eastern European region (Latvia, Poland, Belarus, Russia, Ukraine, Armenia, and Georgia) and Sweden. In the descriptive part of the study, we report the constructed IPV composite measures for all countries disaggregated by gender, to highlight the relative standing of Armenia. Such gap analysis helps identify the dimensions in which Armenia is particularly vulnerable.

In Figure 1, we plot average overall gender-based violence perceptions. High values indicate stronger perceptions. The lowest perceptions among men are observed in Armenia, with the highest perceptions gap between men and women. The observed pattern is sufficiently strong to record the very relevance of the gender-based violence issue in the country, at a perceptual level. In the neighboring country, Georgia, violence perceptions are at much higher levels, compared with those in Sweden and Poland. Also, the gender gap in violence perception is among the lowest in the countries under consideration.

In Armenia, both the (low) level and (gender) gap of the violence perception call for active and strategy-based policy actions to bring real changes to the country.

Figure 1. Average overall violence perception.

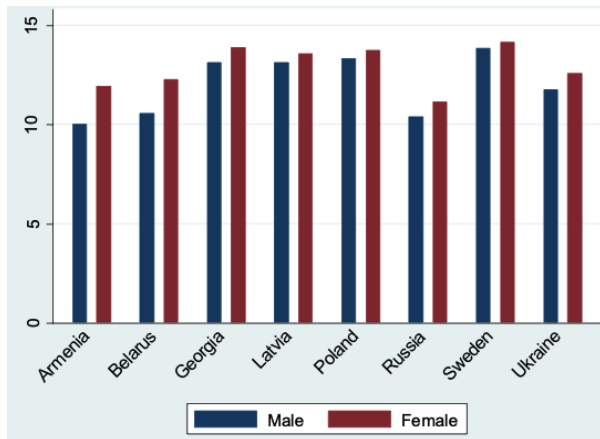


Figure 3. Average emotional violence perceptions.

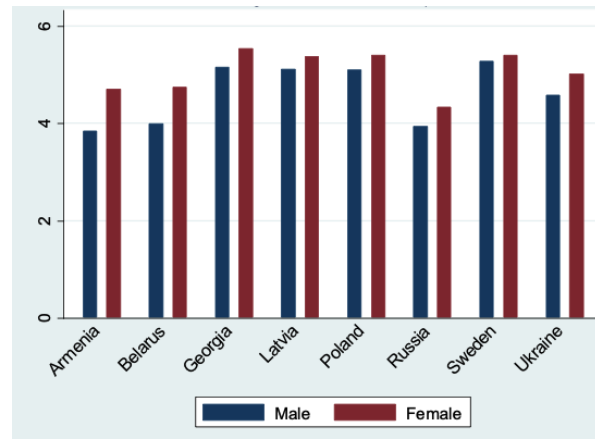


Figure 2. Average physical violence perceptions.

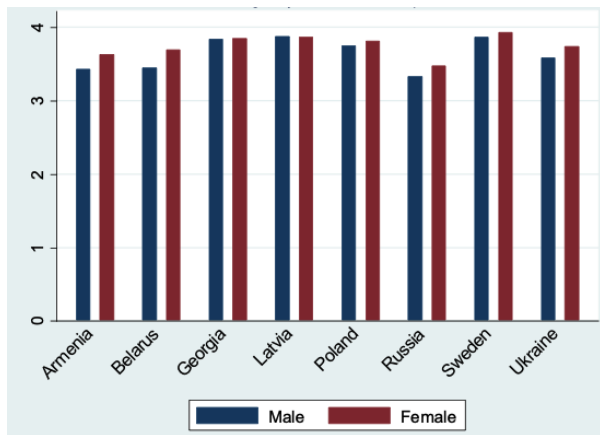
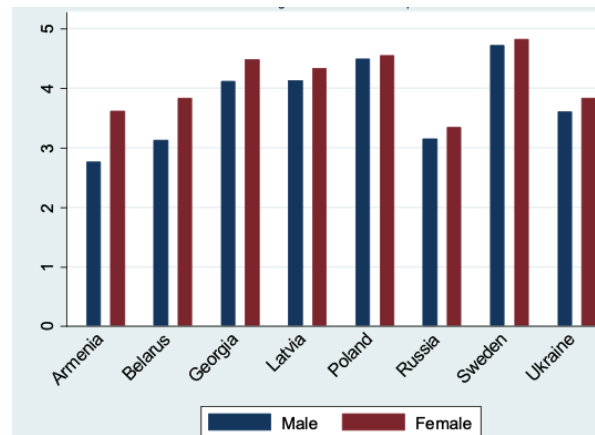


Figure 4. The average level of perceived restrictions.



In Figure 2, we plot average physical violence perceptions for the among men and women for the same set of countries. The variable under consideration is the same as the one in our analysis (dimension 1). Both the level and the gender gap of the IPV physical abuse dimension in Armenia are relatively low. Perceived physical abuse measures, both the level and the gender gap, are comparable with the corresponding levels in Belarus and Russia. Among the countries, men’s average perception of emotional violence is the lowest in Armenia. Women’s average perception is not that low in Armenia, resulting in the largest gender gap in the country. The relative standing of Armenia on the perceived restrictions is qualitatively the same as that on perceived emotional violence.

Overall, our conclusion is that, in Armenia, perceptions of gender-based violence are consistently low, largely explained by the very low perceptions among men. In fact, country representative data show that, among selected Eastern European and post-Soviet states, intimate partner violence at a perceptual (and hence awareness) level is the most sensitive in Armenia. This raises the urgency of large-scale and targeted campaigns on increasing the awareness of gender-based violence and legal policy reforms to enforce legal norms and bring changes in corresponding social norms.

In Table 1 we report summary statistics for the variables with corresponding observations entering the regression model. From the data, we eliminate responses with answers “Do not know” and “Refuse to

answer”. The proportion of females (0.534) indicates the dataset is gender balanced. In Appendix 1, we provide supplementary information for the context of variables, taken from the survey questionnaire.

Table 1. Summary statistics.

Variable	Mean	Standard deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Physical abuse	3.542	0.909	0	4
Emotional abuse	4.355	1.590	0	6
Restrictions	3.261	1.534	0	5
<25	0.099	0.299	0	1
25-34	0.252	0.435	0	1
35-44	0.218	0.413	0	1
65+	0.106	0.309	0	1
Female	0.534	0.499	0	1
Higher education	0.438	0.496	0	1
Upper and post-secondary	0.294	0.456	0	1
Married	0.676	0.468	0	1
Not married with partner	0.017	0.130	0	1
Stable or improving financial situation	0.657	0.475	0	1
Awareness of legislation	0.399	0.490	0	1
Employed	0.584	0.493	0	1
Children	1.820	1.359	0	8
Urban	0.612	0.488	0	1
Trust in other people	4.514	3.229	0	10
Religious background	3.171	1.733	0	5
Bad Environment	0.318	0.466	0	1
Bad Social	0.093	0.291	0	1
Person per room	1.488	0.900	0.142	7

Number of observations: 815.

Results

We report regression results in Table 2. Among the standard individual characteristics, female is the significant variable. IPV perceptions among women are systematically higher for all three dimensions. On average, women perceive a particular action from the suggested list as an abuse (physical or emotional) or restriction more frequently. In the case of physical abuse, women's perception is higher by 0.251 point. The corresponding magnitudes for emotional abuse and restrictions are close to one (0.93 and 0.932, respectively). Empirical literature confirms that gender is one of the key predictors of attitudes towards IPV (Flood and Pease, 2009; Gracia et al., 2015). In this context, our results are in line with the existing evidence. Marital status, on the other hand, does not shift IPV perceptions in our case, while the literature emphasizes its relevance in explaining IPV (Waltermaurer, 2012).

We find a lower-level perception of emotional abuse for respondents in the age group 25-34. Our result is somewhat in line with the finding by Karakurt and Silver (2013). The author states that, overall, emotional abuse is more common in younger individuals.

Table 2. Regression results

VARIABLES	(1) Physical abuse	(2) Emotiona l abuse	(3) Restrictions
Age: less than 25	0.177 (0.133)	-0.053 (0.226)	0.338 (0.216)
Age: 25 - 34	-0.003 (0.089)	-0.295* (0.151)	0.109 (0.145)
Age: 35 - 44	0.076 (0.088)	-0.229 (0.150)	-0.066 (0.143)
Age: above 65	0.041 (0.115)	0.284 (0.195)	0.269 (0.186)
Female	0.251*** (0.068)	0.953*** (0.116)	0.932*** (0.111)
Higher education	0.081 (0.083)	0.133 (0.141)	0.102 (0.135)
Upper and post-secondary	-0.016 (0.083)	-0.019 (0.142)	-0.130 (0.135)
Married	-0.042 (0.082)	0.009 (0.139)	-0.016 (0.133)
Not married with a partner	0.019 (0.245)	0.684 (0.416)	0.144 (0.397)

Stable or improving financial situation	0.039 (0.067)	0.266** (0.114)	0.184* (0.109)
Awareness of legislation	0.127** (0.064)	0.089 (0.109)	0.181* (0.104)
Employment status (1=employed)	0.124* (0.071)	0.140 (0.121)	0.042 (0.116)
Number of children	-0.009 (0.030)	-0.016 (0.052)	0.005 (0.049)
Urban / rural (1=urban)	-0.054 (0.067)	-0.238** (0.114)	0.020 (0.109)
Trust in other people	-0.014 (0.010)	-0.020 (0.017)	0.001 (0.016)
Religious background	0.029 (0.019)	-0.008 (0.032)	-0.037 (0.030)
Quality of environment (1=bad)	0.221*** (0.069)	0.235** (0.118)	0.242** (0.112)
Social environment (1=bad)	-0.022 (0.109)	0.312* (0.186)	0.238 (0.178)
Number of HH members per room	-0.081** (0.037)	-0.098 (0.064)	-0.170*** (0.061)
Constant	3.287*** (0.156)	3.914*** (0.265)	2.717*** (0.254)
Observations	817	817	817
R-squared	0.063	0.114	0.131

Note. Robust Standard errors in parentheses*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

We do not find significant relationship between education and perceptions on IPV types. The literature finds a negative correlation between education and IPV (Gracia and Tomás, 2014).

We find a positive relationship between the financial situation and perceptions on IPV dimension. Respondents reporting improvement in their household's financial situation are more likely to perceive characterized actions physical abuse or restriction. Tusa et al. (2022) show that individuals with better financial situations are less tolerant towards IPV actions

Our model shows that employed individuals are sensitive to physical abuse at a perception level. This evidence is consistent with the empirical evidence (O'Campo et al., 1995). Interestingly, we observe

that respondents living in urban areas reflect weaker perceptions towards emotional abuse. Lanier and Maume (2009) find that the risk of IPV decreases among women living in rural areas, where potential victims can get a greater amount of help from family and friends.

We find a positive relationship between the awareness of legislation and the perception of physical abuse and restriction. Erten and Keskin (2022) find no evidence of women's legal awareness and the risk of experiencing intimate partner violence. On the other hand, we do not find a significant relationship between trust and IPV perception dimensions. The literature, however, indicates the relevance of trust in explaining IPV: trust is a vital factor for sensitive issues such as IPV against women (Strang et al., 2020).

According to our model, religiousness has no significant association with the perceptions of IPV. As the discussion in the Literature section indicates, there is a strand of literature finding a negative relationship between religiousness. Our study suggests that the quality of the environment is one of the key factors driving perceptions of IPV dimensions. Respondents, reporting the bad situation in pollution or noise, or other environmental problems, are more sensitive toward IPV forms at a perception level. Our finding is in line with those of Yonas et al. (2011). We do not find such a strong relationship between social environment – it is significant only in the emotional abuse dimension.

Finally, we find a negative relationship between the number of rooms per household member and the IPV dimensions of *physical abuse* and *restrictions*. This finding can be interpreted within the negative causal relationship between household economic conditions and the risk of IPV (Fox and Benson, 2006)

Discussion of results from the perspective of the Armenian NGO's experience

It is documented that the main factor which conditions the persistent gender inequalities (including gender-based violence) is the set of traditional patriarchal norms in the South Caucasus region (e.g., Johnson, 2007). These social norms 'designate' strict gender roles (women as mothers and cares; men as breadwinners and decision makers). Also, these discriminatory social norms intersect with conservative religious attitudes and harmful customary practices (Carter, 2021).

An Armenian NGO's experience highlights several important aspects of women's vulnerability toward (domestic) violence. Women who request help from non-governmental service providers come from all walks of life: there are highly educated women and women with incomplete high school education; there are women employed in high-paying jobs and women who are not employed at all; women with children and women without children; women from villages and women from cities. The only factor unifying all those cases is that women request help, mostly as a result of severe physical abuse, and after giving their abusive partners a number of chances to change their behavior. These are women who no longer believe their abusive partners are willing and able to change, and they are afraid for their physical well-being, as well as for their children's health and well-being. Rarely do women request help if the abuse is only psychological or economic. It is interesting to note that those women who are employed have higher levels of physical abuse because their interaction with the outside world triggers their abusers. Most of the time, those abusers who prefer their partner to be employed control all the money earned by the woman, resulting in higher levels of economic abuse among employed women. Simultaneously, they feel jealous of their wives spending time outside the home, and thus many violent incidents happen around the topic of jealousy. In some cases, abusers make "surprise" visits to their partner's workplace to check on what they are doing, and violence may erupt in the workplace, too.

According to the NGO's observations, in Armenia, the majority of abusers have witnessed domestic violence in their family while growing up or have been themselves subjected to violence. Thus, abuse is a learned behavior and there is no particular "reason" for abuse to erupt in a family. Abusers are mostly non-violent outside the home, and it is very hard to detect abusive behavior by observing a perpetrator outside his home. *Abusers may be good employees and otherwise contribute to the well-being of their community, however, still be violent at home towards their wives and children.* Abusers exhibit *controlling behavior*, meaning that they try to control everything related to their wives, including with whom their wife talks, how she dresses, what she is interested in, etc. Hence, it comes as no surprise that the more the woman interacts with other people, the more her abuser gets triggered as he feels like he loses control of the woman. That is why there are many cases when women are restricted in their physical ability to move outside their home and their social contacts are monitored if not cut altogether.

Another important observation from the cases of women who requested support from non-governmental service providers is the distinctive features of urban versus rural settings. In the rural setting, there are significantly fewer opportunities for a woman to become self-sufficient to leave the abusive relationships. Besides, social stigma is stronger in a rural context, meaning that a woman's parents and other family members do not support the decision to leave the abusive husband and refuse to provide housing and other resources to support their daughter in her effort to leave abusive relationship. Women who live in rural areas tend to justify their abusive partner's behavior more than women who live in urban areas, interpreting some patterns of abusive behavior as the "norm". For example, one of the women who escaped from her violent husband with multiple injuries told the

social worker that she understands why her husband is beating her: “I couldn’t give him a son, I have given him two daughters, any man would be angry for that!”.

We further discuss the experience of the NGO with domestic violence cases, analyze the role of civil societies in addressing gender-based violence, and identify risk factors in Appendix 2. To sum up the observations from the NGO, we conclude that domestic violence is rampant in Armenia, affecting primarily women (and children) irrespective of their level of education, age, family, and social status. There are numerous interconnected factors contributing to domestic violence on the international, national, community, and individual levels. However, as widely recognized in literature, the root causes of domestic violence are gender stereotypes, especially in patriarchal societies. Gender roles that are socially constructed and transferred from generation to generation place men and women in different positions both within the family and in society at large. In the Armenian society, women are mainly expected to be housewives engaged primarily in domestic labor, whereas men are expected to take an active role outside the house and generate income for the family. Men are valued as they are believed to be the continuers of the family, given that hereditary traditions focus on men as recipients of inheritance.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

It is commonly acknowledged that gender-based violence is rooted in social structures and systems (Fleming et al., 2015). Understanding the underlying factors that condition the social norms, perceptions, and attitudes are crucial in order to address gender inequality and gendered violence. Given that public opinion is among the factors that influence public policy, the need for exploring social norms and perceptions becomes even more important (Burstein, 2003).

The Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence identifies four types of domestic violence: physical, psychological, economic, and sexual⁶. This convention calls for a coordinated response mechanism for combatting gender-based violence in general and domestic violence in particular. It lays out the responsibilities of governments in eradicating violence toward women and underlines the need to criminalize domestic violence and distinguish it from other types of violence that take place outside the intimate partnership of family members.

In this paper, we study the distinguishing features of gender-based domestic violence in Armenia. We explore perceived attitudes towards different forms of *intimate partner violence (IPV)*: *physical abuse*, *(ii) emotional abuse*, and *(iii) restrictions*. In the study, we use a unique household level (country-representative) dataset from Armenia. Our study consists of three major components. In the descriptive part of the study, we compare the average perception measures observed from Armenian respondents to their corresponding measures from six Eastern European and post-Soviet countries, and Sweden. Our main observation is that Armenia reports the lowest perceptions on most of the measures, very low values largely attributed to men. In the inference part, we explore the determinants of socio-economic characteristics of perceived IPV measures.

According to our data, for Armenia, the main drivers of IPV perceptions are gender, awareness of legislation quality of the environment, house conditions, and a few more factors that explain changes in either of the three dimensions. In the third part of the study, we motivate a novel-based discussion on one of the Armenian NGOs' experiences working with gender-based violence cases. While in the first two sections we provide evidence from perception-based quantitative data, it is highly important to draw a real fact-based (internal) evidence for the purpose of conclusive statements. Some of our data-driven observations are in contrast with those from the Armenian NGO's experience. For example, we observe high perception in rural areas, while the NGO's experience indicates violence cases, which seem to be peculiar to urban areas. Another interesting observation is that employment and favorable social status are not necessarily a signal of no violence in a family. Clearly, the experience of the NGO is case-based, which can be one reason for different outcomes. Another major reason can be that while our data-driven study explores perceptions, typical cases observed by the NGO are revealed violence.

Our recommendations synthesize the main findings and observations from both data and NGO cases. While some of them may look too generic, we emphasize the importance of fact-finding and hard observations behind.

⁶ Council of Europe, 2011. *Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence*, Article 3, Istanbul.
<https://rm.coe.int/168008482e>

Female empowerment. In the literature, initiatives to economically empower girls and women are linked to enhancing access to education and employment opportunities (Wang, 2016). In our study, higher education is not a distinctive feature for perception, which is surprising at the first glance. The quality of education, in this case, may matter. The heritage of an established and close-to-mandatory secondary educational system from the Soviet time resulted in a high rate of literacy and almost everyone having low secondary education. On the other hand, the emergence of too many higher educational entities since independence increased the access to higher education at the cost of very low quality. Our intake is, therefore, that the quality of education matters and not a degree.

Another important factor is curricula in educational entities covering topics on gender inequality and violence. Education can even serve as a tool for eradicating discrimination and violence. Education should be considered at all levels, in all year groups, and across the curriculum. Educational programs targeting adolescents can play an important role in a prevention policy, as the behaviors that facilitate violence tend to begin at this stage of life. That education is not among the determinants of the IPV perceptions in our model can be explained by the fact that existing (higher) educational institutions disregard the relevance of gender-based violence in social life at large.

Awareness raising. It is documented that a large portion of policies and programs aimed at eradicating gender-based violence leave out adolescence, a time of life when violent behavior begins to manifest. Awareness building and raising should not only focus on social norms but also on legal protection mechanisms, support systems, etc. The core objective of awareness-raising programs and initiatives is targeting the transformation of social norms vis-à-vis gender-based violence. In our study, we do not observe strong differences in IPV perceptions among respondents in different stages of life. Still, young respondents are less tolerant of emotional abuse, and awareness raising among young is a conclusive recommendation from the study. Awareness is linked to education. Our expectation was that respondents with higher education would have a distinguished attitude towards different forms of perceived violence if higher education programs contained and provided respective knowledge on gender-based violence, aimed at increasing awareness.

Work-place policy. We observe higher perceptions towards IPV for respondents with employment status. While this is interpreted in the context of better socio-economic conditions, the NGO experience shows that violence can be observed from husbands, who are successful in their workplace and enjoy high social status. In this respect, we find critical the role of workplace policies in addressing gender inequality and equity issues inside an organization. Disciplining mechanisms at a workplace can have a decisive impact on men to reconsider gender-implicated social norms and hence behavior. In this respect, the state and CSOs should advocate for a well-designed workplace policy that fosters an anti-discriminatory and ethical working environment whereby reporting mechanisms and support systems are in place. Job security and financial independence may condition the gender-based violence perception. Creating a workplace environment in which victims feel safe to self-identify and disclose their circumstances to their employers serves the interests of both employers and employees because it enables them to develop a safety plan together that minimizes the risk of violence at work. From the perception perspective, our study indicates the “help” of employment status to reflect a differentiated attitude towards physical abuse.

Overall, the social-economic well-being of households leads to a more respectful and tolerant society. Reinforcement of social protection systems and targeted programs for vulnerable households is an important channel toward this direction.

Appendix 1. Variable questions and answers (for selected variables).

Stable or improving financial situation

And looking back at your financial situation two years ago, i.e., in September 2019, would you say your household's financial situation today has

- 1) Greatly improved
- 2) Somewhat improved
- 3) Remained the same
- 4) Somewhat deteriorated
- 5) Greatly deteriorated

Awareness of legislation

Does your country have specific legislation aimed at punishing intimate partner violence?

- 1) Yes
- 2) No

Trust in other people

Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people? Please tell me on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means you can't be too careful and 10 means that most people can be trusted.

_____ (0..10)

Quality of environment (1=bad)

How about the area immediately surrounding your accommodation? Would you say it has troublesome pollution or noise, or other environmental problems?

- 1) Yes
- 2) No

Quality of social environment (1=bad)

Would you say it suffers from vandalism or crime?

- 1) Yes
- 2) No

Religious background

And what about your religious background? Thinking about the last month, how often do you pray?

- 1) More than once a day

- 2) Once daily
- 3) A couple of times a week
- 4) Once a week
- 5) Less than once a week
- 6) Never

Appendix 2. Reflection on practices and experience of an NGO assisting victims of domestic violence: the Armenian context

Relatively few cases of domestic violence are reported due to social stigma, women's lack of agency, and broad misconceptions, including the widely held belief that speaking out about domestic violence is an attack on the Armenian family. At a societal level, this translates to few government officials outwardly condemning violence against women; a lack of proper legislation to prevent, address, and punish perpetrators; and no mechanisms for social work agencies and police to protect victims. Even when women victims of domestic violence try to request help from police, the response is lax as the police prefer non-interference in "family matters" and most women are sent back to their abusive husbands with no protection.

Hence, civil society organizations, especially NGOs assisting women victims of domestic violence, play a crucial role in domestic violence prevention and intervention. NGOs working in Armenia follow internationally-approved protocols and best practices in assisting domestic violence victims. This implies comprehensive service provision for women that requires collaboration between psychologists, social workers, and healthcare providers. The backbone of this kind of intervention is helping the victim re-gain agency and make decisions regarding her own life. These decisions do not always coincide with what the professional service providers believe to be the best for the woman in her particular situation, however, women receive support irrespective of their decisions. These services include a 24/7 hotline, psychological assistance, healthcare support, legal representation in courts, vocational education or training to facilitate economic independence, childcare support, and psychological services for children. For cases with a high risk of homicide, confidential shelter is also provided to ensure the physical safety of the victim (and her child/children, if applicable).

It is widely known that domestic violence has a cyclic pattern, with three main phases: tension-building, violence explosion, and honeymoon. On average, it takes women around seven attempts before they finally decide to leave the abusive relationship and start a life of their own. Hence, services provided by NGOs are sensitive to these dynamics, and service providers make sure that even if a woman decides to go back to the abuser, she has resources and a safety plan that she could follow in case violence continues.

The typical experience of a woman victim of domestic violence who decides to reach out for help to an NGO is as follows: the woman calls the hotline, which is answered by a specially trained social worker. The social worker performs a risk assessment based on a questionnaire to determine the best intervention needed in the given situation. The risk assessment scores are divided into three parts: low risk, medium risk, and high risk. Below is the typical experience of a woman in each of the possible scenarios.

High risk. If the risk assessment score is high, it implies that the woman's life is in immediate danger and action should be taken right away to evacuate the woman from her abusive home. The confidential shelter is precisely for the purpose of physically protecting women from the danger of losing their lives or undergoing a serious injury. The social worker who performs the risk assessment proposes a plan for safely evacuating the woman and transferring her to the shelter together with her children. Once in the shelter, food and other necessary items, including clothing, are provided to the woman and her children. Most of the time women in shelters are highly traumatized and thus the first support they receive comes from a psychologist. As soon as the woman feels safe and is able to manage her trauma, legal consultation is provided to the woman for her to evaluate the different possible routes she can take. In case she decides to get a divorce, the lawyer works with her to represent her in court as well as manage child custody-related matters. Depending on whether the woman has any work or educational

experience, the social worker comes up with a plan to ensure employment and economic independence. Meanwhile, children also receive psychological help and are placed in a different school or kindergarten not to interrupt their education.

Medium and Low Risk. Women whose physical survival is not under immediate threat receive all the services described above, except for moving to the shelter. Individual plans are developed by social workers based on women's needs and interests. In most cases, women do not have employment and are economically dependent on their abusive husbands and/or their parents. Thus, service providers focus on long-term development plans that involve vocational training or other educational programs that will provide an opportunity for the women to get employment and be self-sustainable to leave the abusive relationship. Apart from the individual plan, women are offered to take part in group activities and trainings on domestic violence with other women in a similar situation for network-building purposes. Typically, women are interested in building relationships with other women that are going through similar difficulties in life. These relationships end up becoming a sort of self-help groups where women support each other and share resources with each other. Some of these women become actively engaged in advocacy and awareness-raising activities and are eager to share their stories to contribute to domestic violence prevention and break the stigma around it. There were cases when some of these women became a part of the shelter team and helped other women overcome their difficult experiences.

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Abstract

In this paper we focus on distinguishing features of gender-based domestic violence in Armenia, using perception-based survey data from 2021. We explore perceptions towards different forms of intimate partner violence (IPV) grouped into (i) physical abuse, (ii) emotional abuse, and (iii) restrictions. From the descriptive part, our main observation is that Armenia, compared to some Eastern European and post-Soviet states, reports the lowest perceptions and highest gender gap on most of the measures, with low values consistently attributed to men. In the inference part, we explore the determinants of socio-economic characteristics of perceived IPV measures. The main drivers of IPV perceptions are gender, awareness of legislation, quality of the environment, and house conditions. We also motivate a novel-based discussion on one of the Armenian NGO's experiences working with gender-based domestic violence cases. We provide recommendations in the contexts of gender empowerment, increase in awareness, and workplace policies.

Keywords: Gender-based domestic violence, intimate partner violence (IPV), physical abuse, emotional abuse, restrictions, Armenia.