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Understanding the Economic and Social Context of Gender-based and Domestic Violence in Central and Eastern Europe – Preliminary Survey Evidence

This brief presents preliminary findings from a cross-country survey on perceptions and prevalence of domestic and gender-based violence conducted in September 2021 in eight countries: Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, Latvia, Poland, Russia, Sweden and Ukraine. We discuss the design and content of the study and present initial information on selected topics that were covered in the survey. The collected data has been used in three studies presented at the FROGEE Conference on “Economic and Social Context of Domestic Violence” and offers a unique resource to study gender-based violence in the region.

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While the COVID-19 pandemic has amplified the academic and policy interest in the causes and consequences of domestic violence, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has tragically reminded us about the gender dimension of war. There is no doubt that a gender lens is a necessary perspective to understand and appreciate the full consequences of these two ongoing crises.

The tragic reason behind the increased attention given to domestic violence during the COVID-19 lockdowns is the substantial evidence that gender-based violence has intensified to such an extent that the United Nations raised the alarm about a “shadow pandemic” of violence against women and girls ([UN Women on-line link](#)). Already before the pandemic, one in three women worldwide had experienced physical or sexual violence, usually at the hands of an intimate partner, and this number has only been increasing. The tragic reports from the military invasion of Ukraine concerning violence against women and children, as well as information on the heightened risks faced by war refugees from Ukraine, most of whom are women, should only intensify our efforts to better understand the background behind these processes and study the potential policy solutions to limit them to a minimum in the current and future crises.

The most direct consequences of gender-based and domestic violence – to the physical and mental health of the victims – are clearly of the highest concern and are the leading arguments in favour of interventions aimed at limiting the scale of violence. One should remember though, that the consequences and the related social costs of gender-based and domestic violence are far broader, and need not be caused by direct acts of physical violence. Gender-based and domestic violence can take the form of psychological pressure, limits on individual freedoms, or access to financial resources within households. As research in recent decades demonstrates, such forms of abuse also have significant consequences for the psychological well-being, social status, and professional development of its victims. All these

outcomes are associated with not only high individual costs, but also with substantial social and economic costs to our societies.

This policy brief presents an outline of a survey conducted in eight countries aimed at better understanding the socio-economic context of gender-based violence. The survey, developed by the FREE Network of independent research institutes, has a regional focus on Central and Eastern Europe, with Sweden being an interesting benchmark country. The data was collected in September 2021 in Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, Latvia, Poland, Russia, Sweden and Ukraine. The socio-economic situation of all these countries irrevocably changed with the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, the ongoing war, and its dramatic consequences. The world’s attention focused on the unspeakable violence committed by the Russian forces in Ukraine, the persecution in Belarus and Russia of their own citizens who were protesting against the invasion, and the challenges other neighbouring countries have faced as a result of an unprecedented wave of Ukrainian refugees. This change, on the one hand, calls for a certain distance with which we should judge the survey data and the derived results. On the other hand, the data may serve as a unique resource to support the analysis of the pre-war conditions in these countries with the aim to understand the background driving forces behind this dramatic crisis. In as much as the gender lens is necessary to comprehend the full scale of the consequences of both the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, it will be equally indispensable in the process of post-war development and reconciliation once peace is again restored.

Survey Design, Countries, and Samples

The survey was conducted in eight countries in September 2021 through as a telephone (CATI) survey using the list assisted random digit dialling (LA-RDD) method covering both cell phones and



land-lines, and the sampling was carried out in such a way as to make the final sample representative of the respective populations by gender and three age group (18-39; 40-54; 55+). The collected samples varied from 925 to 1000 individuals. The same questionnaire initially prepared as a generic English version was fielded in all eight countries (in the respective national languages). The only deviations from the generic version were related to the education categories and to a set of final questions implemented in Latvia, Russia and Ukraine with a focus on the evaluation of national IPV legislation.

Table 1 presents some basic sample statistics, while Figure 1 shows the unweighted age and gender compositions in each country. The proportion of women in the sample varies between 49.4% in Sweden and 55.0% in Belarus, Russia and Ukraine. The average sample age is between 43 (Armenia) and 51 (Sweden), while the proportion of individuals with higher education is

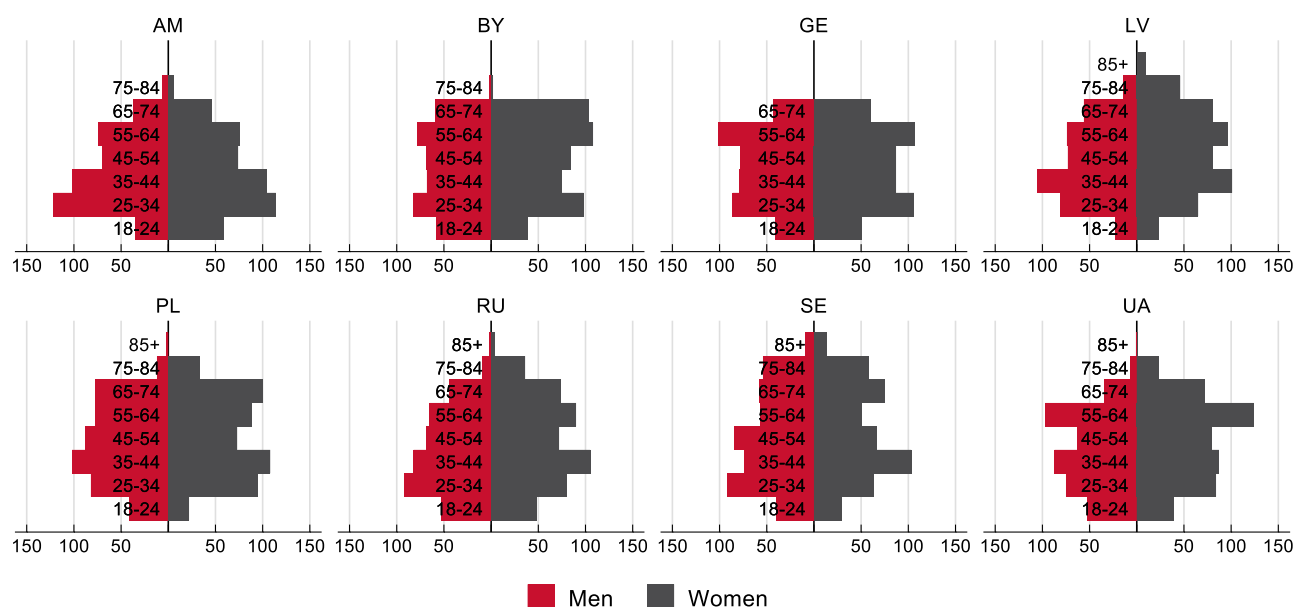
between 29.3% in Belarus and 55.4% in Georgia. The highest proportion of respondents living in rural areas could be found in Armenia at 62.9%, while the lowest was in Georgia at 24.1%. Figure 1 illustrates good coverage across age groups for both men and women.

Table 1. FROGEE Survey: samples and basic demographics

	Sample size	% of women	Average age	% with higher education	% in rural areas
Armenia	925	51.8	43.1	44.8	62.9
Belarus	925	55.0	46.5	29.3	54.6
Georgia	925	53.7	45.0	55.4	24.1
Latvia	926	54.0	49.6	47.1	35.7
Poland	1,000	51.9	48.6	51.0	36.7
Russia	925	55.0	46.6	35.2	56.8
Sweden	925	49.4	50.5	52.0	43.4
Ukraine	925	55.0	47.2	35.2	56.8

Source: FROGEE Survey on Domestic and Gender-Based Violence.

Figure 1. FROGEE Survey: gender and age distributions



Source: FROGEE Survey on Domestic and Gender-Based Violence.

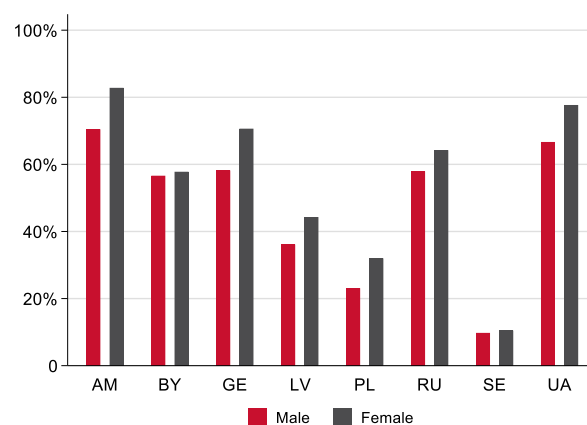


Socio-economic and Other Characteristics

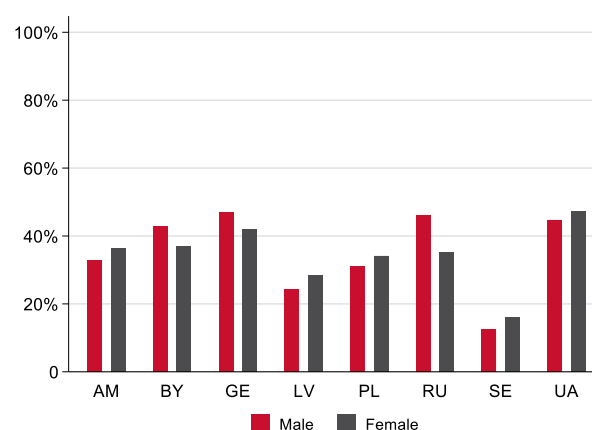
To be able to examine the relationship between different aspects of domestic and gender-based violence to the socio-economic characteristics of the respondents, an extensive set of questions concerning the demographic composition of their household and their material conditions were asked at the beginning of the interview. These questions included information about partnership history and family structure, the size of the household and living conditions, education and labour market status (of the respondent and his/her partner) and general questions concerning material wellbeing. In Figure 2 we show a summary of two of the latter set of questions – the proportion of men and women who find it difficult or very difficult to make ends meet (Figure 2A) and the proportion who declared that the financial situation of their household deteriorated in the last two years, i.e. since September 2019, which can be used as an indicator of the material consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. We can see that the difficulties in making ends meet are by far lowest in Sweden, and slightly lower in the other EU countries (Latvia and Poland). The differences are less pronounced with regard to the implication of the pandemic, but also in this case respondents in Sweden seem to have been least affected.

Figure 2. Making ends meet and the consequences of COVID-19

a. Difficulties in making ends meet



b. Material conditions deteriorated since 2019



Perceptions and Incidence of Domestic and Gender-Based Violence and Abuse

Frequency of differential treatment and abuse

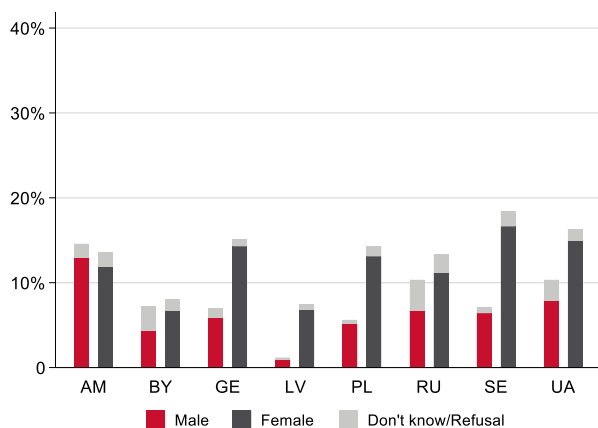
The set of questions concerning domestic and gender-based violence started with an initial module related to the different treatment of men and women, with respondents asked to identify how often they witnessed certain behaviours aimed toward women. The questions covered aspects such as women being treated “with less



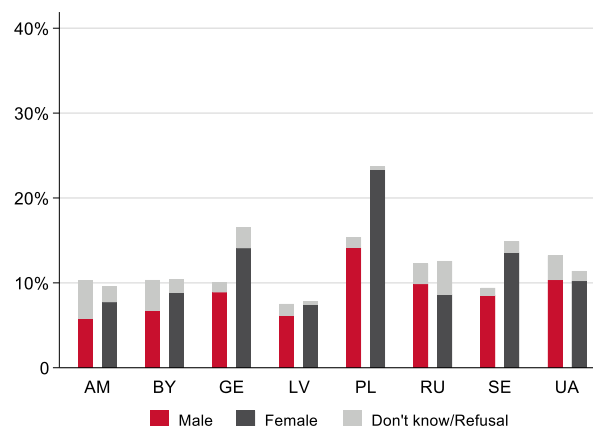
courtesy than men”, being “called names or insulted for being a woman” and women being “the target of jokes of sexual nature” or receiving “unwanted sexual advances from a man she doesn’t know”, and the respondents were to evaluate if in the last year they have witnessed such behaviours on a scale from never, through rarely, sometimes, often, to very often. We present the proportion of respondents answering “often” or “very often” to two of these questions in Figure 3A (“People have acted as if they think women are not smart”) and 3B (“A woman has been the target of jokes of a sexual nature”). We find significant variation across these two dimensions of differential treatment, and we generally find that women are more sensitive to perceiving such treatment. It is interesting to note that the proportion of women who declared witnessing differential treatment in Sweden is very high in comparison to for example Latvia or Belarus, which, as we shall see below, does not correspond to the proportion of women (and men) witnessing more violent types of behaviour against women.

Figure 3. Frequency of differential treatment (often or very often)

a. People have acted as if they think women are not smart



b. A woman has been the target of jokes of a sexual nature



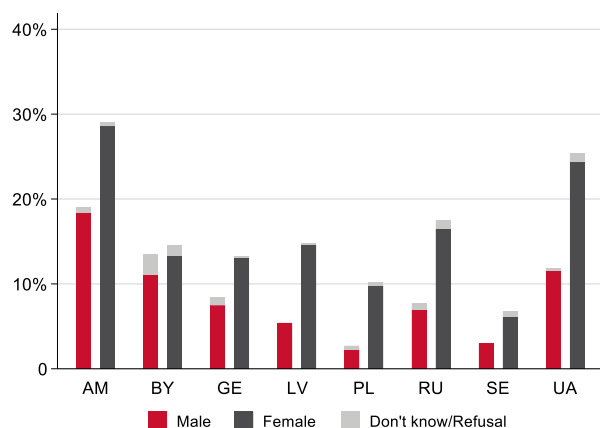
Source: FROGEE Survey on Domestic and Gender-Based Violence.

Questions on the frequency of witnessing physical abuse were also asked in relation to the scale of witnessed behaviour. Here respondents were once again asked to say how often “in their day-to-day life” they have witnessed specific behaviours. These included such types of abuse as: a woman being “threatened by a man”, “slapped, hit or punched by a man”, or “sexually abused or assaulted by a man”. The proportion of respondents who say that they have witnessed such behaviour with respect to two of the questions from this section are presented in Figure 4. In Figure 4A we show the proportion of men and women who have witnessed a woman being “slapped, hit or punched” (sometimes, often or very often), while in Figure 4B being “touched inappropriately without her consent”. Relative to the perceptions of differential treatment the incidence of a woman being hit or punched (4A) declared by the respondents seems more intuitive when considered against the overall international statistics of gender equality. The proportions are lowest in Sweden and Poland, and highest in Armenia and Ukraine. However, the perception of inappropriate touching by men with respect to women (Figure 4B) shows a similar extent of such actions across all analysed countries.

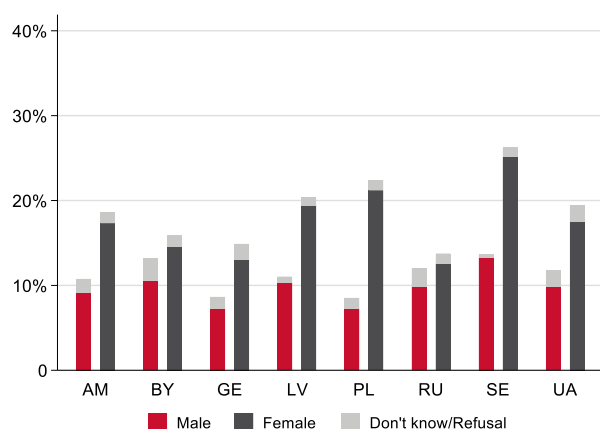


Figure 4. Frequency of abuse (sometimes, often or very often)

a. A woman has been slapped, hit or punched by a man



b. A woman has been touched inappropriately, without her consent, by a man



Source: FROGEE Survey on Domestic and Gender-Based Violence.

Perceptions of abuse

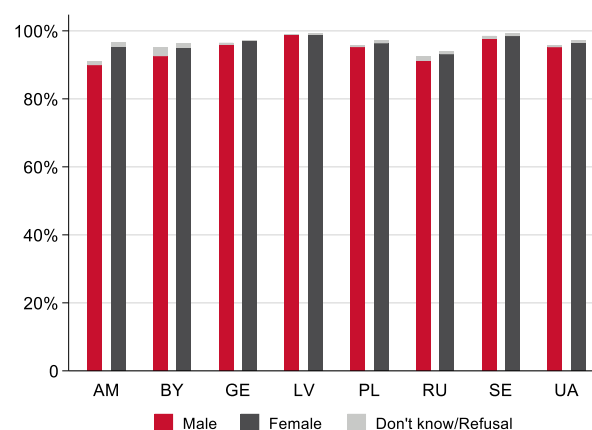
The questions concerning the scale of witnessed behaviours were complemented by a module related to the evaluation of certain behaviours from the perspective of their classification as abuse and the degree to which certain types of gender-specific behaviours are acceptable. Thus, for example respondents were asked if they consider “beating (one’s partner) causing severe physical

harm” to be an example of abuse within a couple (Figure 5A) or if “prohibition to dress as one likes” represents abuse (Figure 5B). This module included an extensive list of behaviours, such as “forced abortion”, “constant humiliation, criticism”, “restriction of access to financial resources”, etc. As we can see in Figure 6, with respect to the clearest types of abuse – such as physical violence – respondents in all countries were pretty much unanimous in declaring such behaviour to represent abuse. With respect to other behaviours the variation in their evaluation across countries is much greater – for example, while nearly all men and women in Sweden consider prohibiting a partner to dress as he/she likes to be abusive (Figure 5B), only about 57% of women and 36% of men in Armenia share this view.

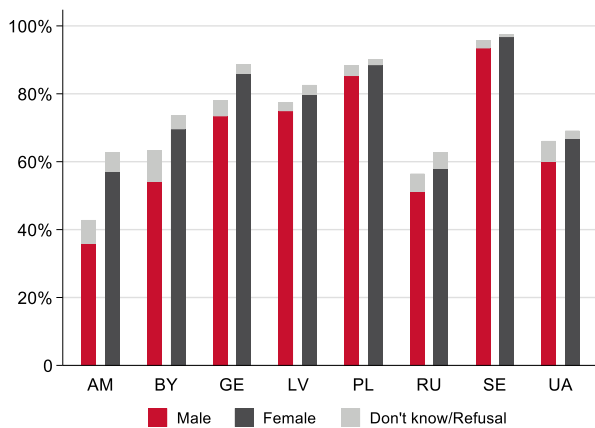
The questionnaire also included questions specifically focused on the perception of intimate partner violence. These asked respondents if they knew about women who in the last three months were “beaten, slapped or threatened physically by their intimate partner”, and the evaluation of how often intimate partners act physically violent towards their wives.

Figure 5. Perceptions of abuse: are these examples of abuse within a couple?

a. Beating causing severe physical harm



b. Prohibition to dress as one likes

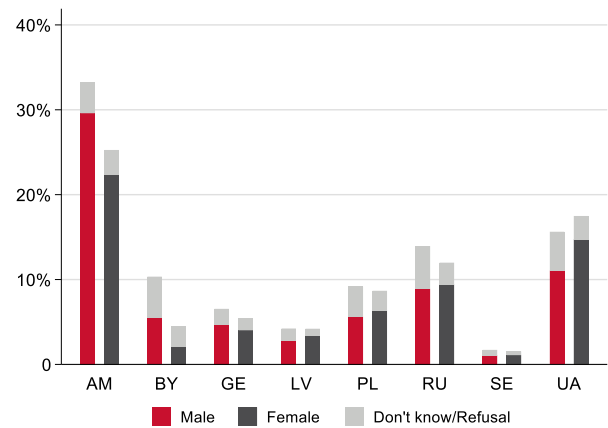


Source: FROGEE Survey on Domestic and Gender-Based Violence.

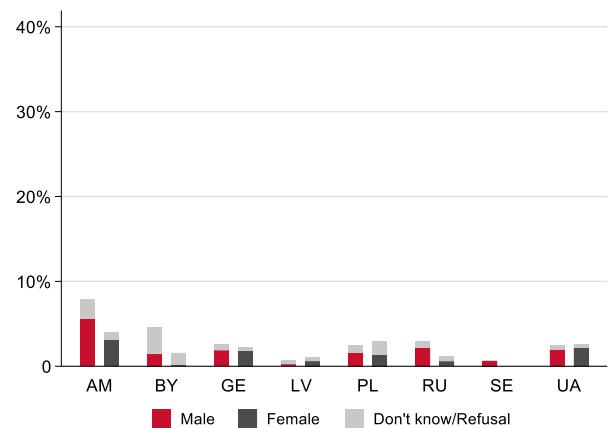
A further evaluation of attitudes towards violent behaviour was done with respect to the relationship between a husband and wife and his right to hit or beat the wife in reaction to certain behaviours. In Figure 6 we show the distribution of responses regarding the justification for beating one's wife in reaction to her neglect of the children (6A) or burning food (6B). The questions also covered such behaviour as arguing with her husband, going out without telling him, or refusing to have sex. As we can see in Figure 6, once again we find substantial country variation in the proportion of the samples – both men and women – who justify such violent behaviour within couples. This was particularly the case when respondents were asked about justification of violent behaviour in the case of a woman neglecting the children. In Armenia as many as 30% of men and 22% of women agree that physical beating is justified in those cases. These proportions are manyfold greater than what can be observed in countries such as Latvia, where 3% of men and women agreed that abuse was justifiable under these circumstances, or Sweden, where only 1% of men and women agreed.

Figure 6. Perceptions of abuse: is a husband justified in hitting or beating his wife

a. If she neglects the children



b. If she burns the food



Source: FROGEE Survey on Domestic and Gender-Based Violence.

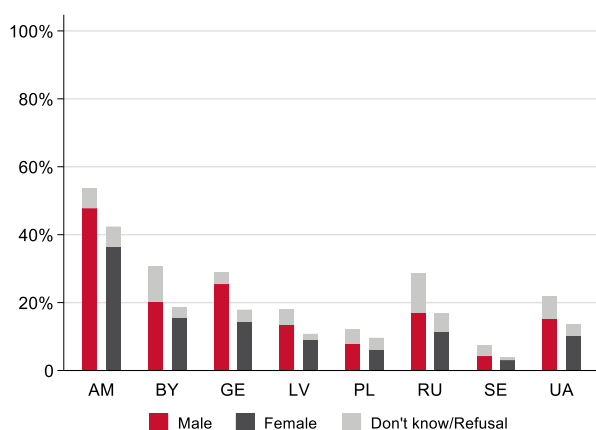
Seeking help and the legal framework

The final part of the questionnaire focused on the evaluation of different reactions to incidents of domestic and gender-based violence. Respondents were first asked if a woman should seek help from various people and institutions if she is beaten by her partner – respondents were asked if she should seek help from the police, relatives or friends, a psychologist, a legal service or if, in such situations, she does not need help. In



Figure 7 we show the proportion of people who agreed with the last statement, i.e. claimed that it is only the couple's business. The proportions of respondents who declare such an attitude is higher among men than women within each country, and is highest among men in Armenia (48%) and Georgia (25%). Again, these proportions are in stark contrast to men in Sweden, or even Poland, where only 4% and 8% of men agreed, respectively. Nevertheless, looking at the total survey sample, a vast majority believe that a woman who is a victim of domestic violence should seek help outside of her home, indicating that at least some forms of institutionalised support for women are popular measures with most people.

Figure 7. Proportions agreeing that domestic violence is only the couple's business



Source: FROGEE Survey on Domestic and Gender-Based Violence.

The interview also included questions on the need for specific legislation aimed at punishing intimate partner violence and on the existence of such legislation in the respondents' countries. The latter questions were extended in three countries – Latvia, Russia and Ukraine – to evaluate the specific sets of regulations implemented recently in these countries and to facilitate an analysis of the role IPV legislation can play in reducing violence within households. Legislation on domestic violence is relatively recent. During the last four decades, though, changes accelerated in this respect around the world. Legislative

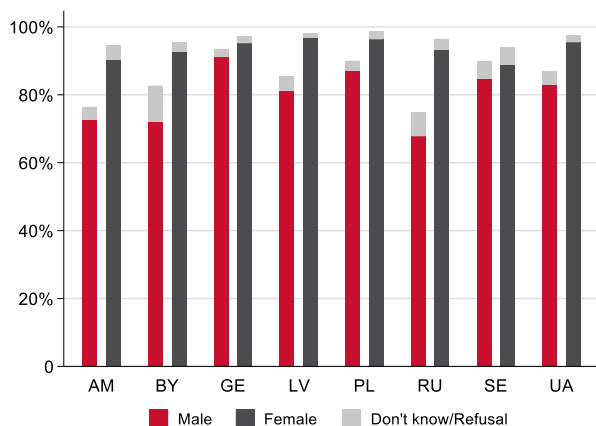
measures have been introduced in many countries, covering different aspects of preventing, protecting against and prosecuting various forms of violence and abuse that might happen within the marriage or the family. Research strives to offer evaluations on what legal provisions are most effective, in a setting in which statistics and information are still far from perfect, and as a consequence of the dearth of strong evidence the public debate on the matter is often lively. For legislation to have an effect on behaviour through shaping the cost of committing a crime, on the one hand, and the benefit of reporting it or seeking help, on the other, or more indirectly through changing norms in society, information and awareness are key. For how can deterrence be achieved if people do not know what the sanctions are? And how can reporting be encouraged if victims do not know their rights? The evidence on legislation awareness is unfortunately quite scarce. A survey of the criminology field (Nagin, 2013) concludes that this is a major knowledge gap.

Figure 8 shows the proportions of answers to questions concerning the need for and existence of legislation specifically targeted towards intimate partner violence. We can see that while support for such legislation is quite high (Figure 8A), it is generally lower among men (in particular in Armenia, Russia and Belarus). Awareness of existence of such laws, on the other hand, is much lower, and it is particularly low among women. It should be pointed out that all countries have in fact implemented provisions against domestic violence in their criminal code, but only around half of the population, sometimes much fewer, are aware of that.

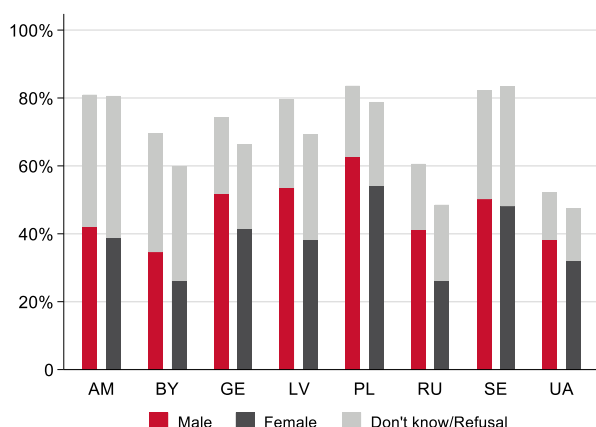


Figure 8. *Need for and awareness of IPV legislation*

a. *State should have specific legislation aimed at punishing IPV*



b. *Country has specific legislation aimed at punishing intimate partner violence*



Recent reforms of DV legislation that were implemented in Russia in 2017, in Ukraine in 2019 and in Latvia just a few months ago (at the time of the survey, the changes were at the stage of a proposal) were the subject of the final survey questions in these countries. We find that awareness of these recent reforms is very low in all three countries, and knowledge about the reform content (gauged with the help of a multiple-choice question with three alternative statements) is even lower. Our analysis suggests that gender and family situation are the two factors that most robustly predict support for legislation, while education and age are associated with awareness

and knowledge of the reforms. Minority Russian speakers are less aware of the reforms in both Ukraine and Latvia, in Ukraine are also less likely to answer correctly about the content of the reform, and in Latvia are less supportive of DV legislation in general.

Analyses of this type are useful for policy design, to better understand which groups lack relevant knowledge and should be targeted by, for example, information campaigns to combat DV, such as those many governments around the world implemented during the covid-19 pandemic.

Future Work Based on the Survey

The above is just a small sample of the rich source of information that has resulted from conducting the survey. Already from this simple overview we can see some interesting results. There are, for example, clear differences between men and women in perceptions of how common certain types of abusive behaviour are. However, for many questions differences between countries are larger than those between men and women within a country. Interestingly such differences are also different depending on the severity of the abuse or violence. In Sweden the perception of women being victims of less violent abuse is higher than in some other countries where instead some more violent types of abuse are reported as being more common. This could, of course, be due to actual differences in actual events but it is also possible that there are differences in what types of behaviour are considered to represent harassment and abuse in different societies. More careful data work is needed to try to answer questions like this and many others. Currently there are a number of ongoing research projects based on the survey results, three of which will be presented at the FREE-network conference on “Economic and Social Context of Domestic Violence” in Stockholm on May 11, 2022. Our hope is that this work will help in taking actions to prevent gender-



based abuse and domestic violence based on a better understanding of underlying cross-country differences in social norms and attitudes and their relation to socio-economic factors.

About FROGEE Policy Briefs

FROGEE Policy Briefs is a special series aimed at providing overviews and the popularization of economic research related to gender equality issues. Debates around policies related to gender equality are often highly politicized. We believe that using arguments derived from the most up to date research-based knowledge would help us build a more fruitful discussion of policy proposals and in the end achieve better outcomes.

The aim of the briefs is to improve the understanding of research-based arguments and their implications, by covering the key theories and the most important findings in areas of special interest to the current debate. The briefs start with short general overviews of a given theme, which are followed by a presentation of country-specific contexts, specific policy challenges, implemented reforms and a discussion of other policy options.





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