

The implications of social stereotypes and COVID-19 on domestic violence

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Abstract. Domestic violence is not the modern-day problem, nor is it unique to our country and society. People have long been known for their cruelty and ruthlessness. Nevertheless, it was only in the last century that systematic scientific research and study of it as a social phenomenon began along with the formation of the relevant legislative and normative framework. The issue of domestic violence has utter importance and it is crucial to discuss this topic not only when another case makes it to the news or social media, but to reason out the given phenomena in order to analyze what are the causes and the consequences, as well as defining and determining factors. Discussions and related events should be systematic and not just after the high-profile violence case commonly causing short-lived outrage in the media, as it is quickly forgotten and overlaid by other scandalous and gruesome news. Domestic violence has horrible social and psychological consequences. The urgency of this problem has become even more acute in the light of recent events - COVID-19 pandemic. The exact data confirmed by studies are not yet available, nevertheless, it is undeniable that a number of victims of domestic violence has been increased.

Keywords: Aggression, domestic violence, marital conflict, social stereotypes, Pandemic, COVID-19.

Introduction. Despite numerous studies and theories regarding aggression and domestic violence, to date the questions are far more than the answers. There is no theory that fully explains the origins and

manifestations of aggression as to why one person chooses a violent strategy of behavior in a particular situation and the other does not. The situation is similar in the case of the victims. Consequently, aggression is the result of the interaction of many personal and socio-cultural factors, and it is this interaction that encourages or reduces it in a certain environment (Myers D.G. 2010).

Main part. Unfortunately, there are no accurate statistics on domestic violence in Georgia, as only in extreme cases do people ask for the help from the relevant agencies. Although, even with these incomplete data, it is easy to see the raising tendency day by day.

When we talk about domestic violence, firstly, we need to distinguish between the notion of domestic conflict and domestic violence. Despite the differences of opinion, a number of conventions and regulations define violence quite specifically (Esquivel-Santovena, Esteban Eugenio; Lambert, Teri; Hamel, John. 2013)¹². Among them is the Law of Georgia on Prevention of Domestic Violence, Protection and Assistance to Victims of Domestic Violence. The law distinguishes five types of violence and defines each of them: "Domestic violence means the violation of the constitutional rights and freedom of one family member by neglect and/or physical, psychological, economic, sexual violence or coercion" (Article 3)¹³. As for conflict, it is usually a normal and natural process, but often the problem is the approach to family conflict, as well as ways to resolve and overcome it. Whether it will be possible to solve the problem positively depends on the attitude and understanding of the family members as well as of the society towards this problem. Consequently, family conflicts are significantly different from other types of conflicts and are much more complex, with dire consequences.

¹² <http://domesticviolenceresearch.org/pdf/PASK.Tables14.Revised.pdf>

¹³ <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/download/26422/3/ge/pdf>.

Domestic violence is characterized by cyclicalality, its subjects are interdependent and it is often hidden from those around it and the public. Of particular interest in this regard is Lenore Walker's theory of the "cycle of violence", which defines the development and dynamics of violent relationships in the family (Walker L E., 1989). According to this theory, domestic violence is characterized by certain patterns and it consists of several cycles and phases: The first phase - threats, increase in tension. Verbal abuse, minor physical confrontation, and escalation of family tensions occur during this time. According to Walker, this phase can last for months and even years until tensions reach a peak and a much more serious, violent incident occurs. The second phase is the act of violence, the incident. It lasts for several hours and is likely to end in tragedy, but often after this serious incident, the abuser, for various reasons, asks for forgiveness, the victim is forgiven, and here begins the third phase - the so-called "honeymoon". At this point, the victim feels that such cases will not happen again and the abuser will change for the better, which is just an illusion. Over time, tensions rise again and the cycle of violence repeats itself. Forms of violence are usually getting worse and worse. It should be noted that in all cases of violence the phases listed may not be performed consistently and with this precision and the process itself may be different, although usually this cycle is constantly repeated and we get a closed circle from which it is very difficult to escape.

A special place in the factors contributing to violence belongs to social risk factors, including e.g. tolerant attitude towards domestic violence, degrading the status of the child in the relationship between parent and child, which implies strict upbringing as the preferred method of raising a child, and in many cases means acceptance of methods of physical or psychological violence against a minor; Also strict gender

roles for men and women in family relationships, etc. It is such views and social perceptions that shape these stereotypes, behaviors, and attitudes.

In general, in the process of socialization, obviously, people try to choose a highly successful model of behavior, and if violent behavior is successful and often unpunished, the probability that they will prefer such a strategy of behavior is quite high (Aronson, E., 1999). The formation of social and cultural notions or stereotypes always takes place in a specific historical context. Consequently, our modern life is influenced by patriarchal traditions, as well as the Soviet totalitarian past, the mass violence of the period following the declaration of independence, social and economic crises, so on and so forth.

Stereotype is not an unequivocally negative concept. Moreover, it is a function of the psyche to adapt to the environment and is one of the expressions of schematic thinking. The term is of Greek origin. "στερεός" means solid, and "τύπος" means imprint, impression. This name referred to a heavy printing plate in the printing house, which was used to print the same text many times. The term "stereotype" was used in the social sciences for the first time in 1922 when the American journalist Walter Lippmann published his work "Public Opinion"¹⁴.

A stereotype allows people to perceive the reality around them without an extra effort, since stereotypes involve a standardized collective experience and offer a kind of scheme of events, a common formula - this stereotypical perception is activated automatically. However, often stereotypes distort the perception of reality, perceiving an object or situation without individual determinants, which can often lead to negative attitudes and discrimination.

¹⁴ <https://wps.pearsoncustom.com/wps/media/objects/2429/2487430/pdfs/lippmann.p>

Domestic violence is an event that grossly violates fundamental human rights. No one is born as a victim, but is shaped by the influence and efforts of family, environment, social stereotypes and cultural norms. It is very difficult for the victims to speak out loud about humiliation they experience. Often they are confronted not only with the abuser but also with the system, if they do not have friends and family to support them (Walker L E., 1990). Unfortunately, the social environment is often not on the side of the victims, but of the abusers. Especially if there was an appeal to the police, which led to the arrest of the abuser and imprisonment. In such cases, the victim is advised to let it go. Witnesses are also a problem, as their testimony and position are often crucial in cases of domestic violence. Witnesses are reluctant to expose a friend or neighbor and thus "create an additional burden", which exacerbates the syndrome of impunity and even encourages the abuser to commit acts of violence again (Finley L., 2013). The victim may even become the object of public reprimand, criticism, and even stigmatization instead of empathy. Stigma, on the other hand, is a set of negative stereotypes and a pronounced social label that can completely devalue a person, causing the victim to feel guilty, helpless, and even more chained, depending on the violent environment in which he or she lives (World Health Organization, 2013)¹⁵.

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared the spread of COVID-19 as a pandemic¹⁶. A state of emergency has been declared in many countries, including Georgia. The pandemic has become a major impediment to economic, social, and political activity around the world. The vast majority of the population is in self-isolation or

¹⁵ World Health Organization. Violence against women: fact sheet no. 239. 2013 <https://web.archive.org/web/20140414100345/http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs239/en/>

¹⁶ <https://www.who.int/news>

quarantine to prevent infection with the virus. This prevents the spread of the virus but at the same time isolates a large number of potential abusers and victims in one space. In times of crises, including epidemics, there is an increasing trend of violence against women. During the current pandemic, cases of domestic violence increased by one third globally (for example, the number of domestic violence reports in France increased by 30% after quarantine, in Argentina - by 25%, in Cyprus - by 30%, in Singapore - by 33%). An increase in domestic violence cases has been reported in Canada, Germany, Spain, the United Kingdom, the United States, and other countries (European Parliament, 2020)¹⁷.

It is a fact that domestic violence has horrible social and psychological consequences which includes feelings of shame and guilt, hopelessness, constant stress, issues with self-identity, low self-esteem and so on (Capaldi, Deborah; et al., 2012).

The risk of violence in such a case is aggravated by various circumstances, for example, fear caused by a pandemic, stress, deteriorating economic situation, which may become a provocative factor for the abuser (European Parliament, 2020). At the same time, the victim spends more time with the abusive family member, which makes it difficult to escape - the victim may not be able to isolate and, consequently, call the law enforcement agency. In 2018-2019, one of the most common crimes in Georgia was domestic violence. A significant segment of the victims of this crime (88%) were women. During the COVID-19 pandemic the cases of domestic violence undeniably

¹⁷ European Parliament. COVID-19: Stopping the rise in domestic violence during lockdown. 2020. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/portal/en>

increased, even though the exact data confirmed by studies are not yet available (UN Women, 2017)¹⁸.

From the few of the surveys that have been conducted during the pandemic in relation to violence, we can further discuss the one that was conducted in Georgia by “Safari” with the support of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. This research has shown that due to the pandemic and lockdown the risk of conflict has increased between the people living under the same household, regardless of their stratified affiliation. Both quantitatively and qualitatively, psychological and physical violence were named as the most common forms of domestic violence during the COVID-19 period. However, forms of economic and sexual violence were also added to them.¹⁹

Conclusion. Although a number of activities have been carried out over the past decade to prevent domestic violence, including through various media outlets, more activities are required to see the positive changes, which means raising public awareness and conducting an appropriate educational campaigns to provide people with information about their rights and obligations, as well as mechanisms and guarantees for protection (Council of Europe, 2013)²⁰. The recent events have made it clear that we as a society need to become proactive, fight against domestic

¹⁸ UN Women. The national study on violence against women in Georgia. 2017. <https://georgia.unwomen.org/ka/digital-library/publications/2018/03/the-national-study-on-violence-against-women-in-georgia>

¹⁹ https://www.ge.undp.org/content/georgia/en/home/library/democratic_governance/covid-domestic-violence-state-services.html

²⁰ Council of Europe. "Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence". 2013.

<https://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/EN/Treaties/Html/210.htm>

violence, protect the victims and allow them to speak up. In this process it is very important to overcome existing harmful stereotypes. Of particular concern is the principle of non-interference in the affairs of others, which is still firmly established in our society, that domestic violence is only the business of this family, which is compounded by distrust of law enforcement agencies (Halket, Megan Mcpherson; Gormley, Katelyn; Mello, Nicole; Rosenthal, Lori; Mirkin, Marsha Pravder, 2013). It should also be noted that the relevant institutions should assist and help victims as well as perpetrators in the process of rehabilitation, which unfortunately, remains a serious problem to this day.

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