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# The Cultural Roots of Violence against Women: Individual and Institutional Gender Norms in 12 Countries

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**Abstract:** To discuss the cultural roots of violence against women (VAW), this study focuses on individual gender norms, prescriptive gender role expectations, moral justification of VAW, and institutional gender norms that define gender cultures, that provide opportunities for VAW, and legitimize roles and behaviors. We used indicators of gender norms related to VAW from different sources to provide an overview of 12 countries (Armenia, Cyprus, Czechia, Germany, Greece, The Netherlands, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Slovakia, Turkey, and Ukraine). The indicators include individual gender role attitudes and justification of wife beating from the World Values Survey; information on national legislation and institutional discrimination from the Social Institution Gender Index from the OECD; and each country's position on the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence—a transnational platform with relevant transformative power that has been opposed by anti-Europeanists. Although situations vary significantly in the different countries, this explorative study suggests that eradicating the cultural roots of VAW is more difficult in societies in which rigid traditional gender roles and a strongly patriarchal culture in legislation and institutions are supported by moral views legitimizing violence as a form of punishment for challenging prescribed gender roles.

**Keywords:** gender norms; violence against women; values; moral norms; gender culture



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## 1. Introduction

Violence against women (VAW) is “the most pervasive and yet least recognized human rights violation in the world” (Heise et al. 2002, p. 5). This violation can occur in several forms, such as violence in close relationships, sexual violence (including rape, sexual assault, and harassment), psychological and economic violence, trafficking in women, forced prostitution, slavery, and different forms of harmful practices, such as child and/or forced marriages, female genital mutilation, crimes committed in the name of so-called honor, forced abortion, forced pregnancy, and forced sterilization.

Scholars (Abramsky et al. 2011; Flood and Pease 2009; Heise et al. 2002) tend to consider individual, relational, community, and society-level factors to explain VAW.

Experience of childhood abuse or having witnessed marital abuse during childhood (Abramsky et al. 2011; Heise et al. 2002) alongside the frequent use of alcohol are considered key potential predictors of violent behavior against women at the individual level.

At the family/couple level, relevant factors are perduring marital conflict and male control of family wealth and decision making (Hotaling and Sugarman 1986), as well as relative educational and economic power (Abramsky et al. 2011; Bhalotra et al. 2020; Koenig et al. 2006), especially if they challenge traditional gender roles (Zhang and Breunig 2021).

At the community level, isolation of women and peer groups that legitimate men's violence increase the risk of VAW. In particular, men's peer groups have a strong influence on the tolerance of intimate violence (Flood and Pease 2009). Also, in some communities, female peer groups justify wife abuse by blaming victims' presumed negative actions or/and their bad character. In this way, they preserve the idea that everyone gets what they deserve and, by not identifying with the victims, they feel safer (Correia et al. 2015).

Messages transmitted by mass media, including advertisements and video games, can distort women's role in society, objectify them, and thereby concur in perpetuating misogyny and legitimizing VAW (Flood and Pease 2009).

Studies have found that VAW is more frequent in societies in which gender roles are particularly rigid and the idea of masculinity is strongly linked to dominance and male honor (Alesina et al. 2021; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Heise 1998). Gender norms, which are social norms defining gender roles in societies, are therefore particularly relevant in understanding VAW and the differences that might be observed when comparing countries by their prevalence of VAW.

This study aims to contribute to the discussion on the cultural roots of VAW and to address gender norms at different levels. Individual gender norms influence, for example, attitudes toward gender roles and moral views that justify violent behavior when expected gender roles are not observed. Institutions, too, can transmit specific gender cultures and can have a potential transformative power. National legislation and transnational organizations dealing with human rights—and even more specifically those addressing gender equality and VAW—provide opportunities for people to legitimize and allow, or criminalize, certain roles and behaviors. In the long term, institutional gender norms have a strong impact on individual and family gender norms, thus defining the cultural bases for more (or less) egalitarian societies.

After addressing these issues theoretically, this paper will empirically describe gender norms in the domestic domain, providing an overview of 12 countries (Armenia, Cyprus, Czechia, Germany, Greece, The Netherlands, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Slovakia, Turkey, and Ukraine) by using indicators of gender norms at individual, national, and transnational levels.

## 2. Gender Norms and Violence against Women

Societies differ in the way they define the proper roles for women and men, according to different economic, political, and social historical pathways, which have led them to develop different gender cultures—or systems of norms and values that express the “uniform assumptions (that) exist about the desirable, ‘correct’ form of gender relations and the division of labor between women and men” for each society (Pfau-Effinger 1998, p. 150). The way gender cultures develop is a process that refers to the intertwined relationship between individual, relational, and institutional levels of gender relations. Following this reasoning, gendered violent acts and the legitimation of VAW cannot be explained by only considering psychological aspects or micro-level interactions. The structural and cultural context in which individuals are embedded orient and shape their behaviors, providing a common framework of what is socially desirable, acceptable, and tolerated. Acknowledging the gender cultures, and more specifically gender norms, of a certain society is crucial to understanding the deeper mechanisms of VAW legitimization.

Gender norms are prescriptive norms that, according to the definition given by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), refer to “standards and expectations to which women and men generally conform, within a range that defines a particular society, culture and community at that point in time.” This definition suggests at least three important underlying aspects and mechanisms.

First, it refers to the socialization processes building on conformity to social expectations and related social control mechanisms. When individuals are exposed to a social norm, including through socialization, they tend to include that norm in their value system. Exposure can occur in a variety of ways: through education and socialization, personal experience, or because it is mandatory in one's life context. Prescriptive gender norms, therefore, convey expectations of girls' and boys' roles in the family and society, as gender-appropriate appropriate behavior and emotional management.

Exposure to an abusive family environment, traditional masculinity, and misogynist culture reproducing stereotypical views of men and women can contribute to transmitting and reinforcing gender cultures based on unequal relationships. This can result in an inability to recognize the equal rights and dignity of both girls and boys, women and men with the consequential risk of legitimizing violence against women (Alesina et al. 2021; Flood and Pease 2009; Heise 1998; Ismayilova 2015; Sikweyiya et al. 2020).

Second, gender norms are situated; they are a specific characteristic of a society, in a certain historical moment. In other words, gender norms can change over time, and a variety of gender norms can exist across the globe at the same moment. Therefore, the prescriptive gender norms of any society reflect the different economic, political, and social historical pathways of each society, having developed within the broader structural and cultural dynamic of those societies (Inglehart and Norris 2003; Pfau-Effinger 2004).

Third, the tendency to conform to the prescriptive gender norms in a particular society is intended as a general process. This implies that the dominant ideas about masculinity and femininity, as well as the prevailing family model, determine what can be considered appropriate roles for men and women in that society. Such gender norms impact people's lives at individual, domestic, and social levels. However, this does not mean that only one coherent culture is present, but rather that alternative and competing gender beliefs can coexist. Over and above being a sign of societal complexity, competing gender norms offer the potential for social change, pointing to the transformation of gender relations and a widening of both women's and men's opportunities.

The idea of how women and men are expected to behave is shaped by injunctive gender norms that can be moral norms that are internalized through the socialization process and that operate within the individual or social norms such as informal statements and expectations about gender roles in a certain social group. However, they can also be legal and institutional norms that are imposed by the state and that define whether opportunities and rights are equal (or not) between women and men.

Policies, regulations, and norms can promote social change towards more egalitarian societies and can fight VAW or, on the contrary, they can perpetuate gender inequalities and tolerance for gendered-based violence—perhaps even normalizing it. This study refers to individual moral norms and pays specific attention to institutional gender norms to show how institutions at national and transnational levels provide a common cultural framework within which individual and community moral norms, values, and behaviors develop.

### *2.1. Gender Role Attitudes and Moral Norms*

Any society and social group are characterized by prevailing cultural values and social norms that regulate the social life in that specific society. Sociocultural norms are societal rules of conducts that express the general expectations of behavior and views based on shared beliefs within a specific cultural or social group and cover any aspect of social life. In relation to the content of this study, two subsets of sociocultural norms are particularly relevant: gender norms and moral norms.

Gender norms at the individual level concern beliefs about gender roles and imply judgments regarding certain behaviors and roles. Scholars often refer to this concept by the term gender role attitudes (GRA). These are beliefs about the perceived appropriateness of social roles for men and women that translate into gender role expectations to which women and men have to conform in their social context. Typically, they concern the gendered division of paid work and unpaid care work between men and women (Davis and Greenstein 2009; Grunow et al. 2018). Traditional GRAs reflect role expectations based on gender specialization such as, for example, expecting that men assume responsibilities in the public domain of life, taking on economic and power roles, while the domestic sphere is considered women's social space because of their care responsibilities. Progressive GRAs are expressed by those who do not construct aprioristic boundaries and support women's engagement in the public domain as well as men's involvement in unpaid care responsibilities in the domestic sphere (Albrecht et al. 2000; Cunningham et al. 2005).

Moral norms are “the rules of morality that people ought to follow” (Harms and Skyrms 2008, p. 434). In other words, they are standards to follow that might have positive (or negative) outcomes for both the self and others and build on the notion of reciprocity to regulate social relations (FeldmanHall et al. 2018a). Moral norms therefore play a relevant role in guiding people’s behavior, particularly when it comes to gender relations and human rights. Moral norms can be considered “an element of social consciousness” (Bogdanova 1974) because they settle the relationships that any person has with society and its members. Moreover, moral norms represent standards that can be used to evaluate and judge personal behaviors and therefore guide conduct. The ideas of fairness and justice underlie the concept of morality (De Waal 1996). But what is considered fair? And how does one restore justice when violations of social norms occur? For example, in societies in which patriarchal gender cultures persist, and especially in those where women are perceived as male property, the violation of prevailing gender norms can be reactions aimed at reestablishing the violated norm. When this is combined with the acceptance of physical punishment as a form of social control, violent behaviors against women (and/or children) can become the predominant method for restoring order (Heise 1998).

Traditions, historical practices, and prevailing values in society can reinforce the normative power of such moral views. As the experiments conducted by FeldmanHall et al. (2018b) clearly show, the preferences in restoring justice are shaped by the moral preferences prevailing in the social environment. This means that the moral values of the society and the group consensus are powerful drivers for reinforcing the legitimization of violent conduct used to restore gender norms and preserve hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005), as in the previously mentioned cases of male and female peer groups condoning men’s violence against partners because “they did something wrong and they deserve it” (Correia et al. 2015; Flood and Pease 2009).

In some cases, sociocultural norms are particularly rigid in applying a gender order to social relations and defining women’s subordinate position to their husbands. This might be further reinforced by patriarchal religious ideologies emphasizing male authority or control and female submission. These normative beliefs give men the right to punish their wives if they do not behave correctly, and women tend to accept it (Glick et al. 2016; Lawoko 2008), which leads to a situation in which most violence is morally justified because the perpetrators believe what they are doing is right (Fiske and Rai 2014). The subtle dynamics of moral judgments to justify such acts do not belong to any specific religious denomination or world region. On the contrary, discourses legitimizing this form of patriarchal social control have been reported by scholars studying male-perpetrated violence in intimate relationships in Christian faith communities in the United States (Knickmeyer et al. 2010; Westenberg 2017); Muslim-majority societies (Alkan and Tekmanlı 2021; Douki et al. 2003; Ouzgane 2008; Tarar and Pulla 2014); some African societies (Adjei 2018; Adjei and Mpiani 2022; Alesina et al. 2021; Lawoko 2008); Asian societies (Niaz 2003; Nilan et al. 2014); and post-Soviet countries and European countries.

## 2.2. National and Transnational Institutional Gender Norms

Institutional discourses have a crucial role in promoting egalitarian gender relations and recognizing human rights. Policies, regulations, and laws explicitly state what is and what is not allowed, guarantee and protect rights, and encourage or discourage practices and behaviors. The normative power of institutional gender norms acts at two levels. First, they create an opportunity structure wherein people can exercise their human rights, preferences, and values. A law that forbids certain jobs for women is structurally providing society with restricted opportunities for women to choose to perform that job and excluding them from the related economic and self-determination benefits. Second, institutional norms also express a specific gender by transmitting a certain idea of which roles women and men are expected to play in that society and, implicitly, a concept of family and gender relations. A law that prohibits women from driving public transport

vehicles, for example, is not only limiting women's structural opportunities, but it also states that that is not a job for women.

National legislations are therefore particularly relevant in shaping gender role expectations (Korpi 2000; Sjöberg 2004; Stier et al. 2012). Even when social policies allow traditionally patriarchal patterns in gender relations to be overcome by giving women and men equal opportunities to define their life choices, national laws define violence against women and how perpetrators are pursued. This provides an institutional framework for the tolerance of VAW—whether violence is condoned and eventually legitimized or whether it is recognized as morally unacceptable and a violation of human rights at the societal level.

In a globalized world, transnational platforms for gender equality and the fight against VAW have a potentially transformative power because they can promote cultural change towards more egalitarian societies by common, supranational guidelines and goals, with relevant impacts on national legislation and international cultural debate. Examples of these transnational platforms with transformative power on local gender norms follow:

- The European Gender Mainstreaming (Lomazzi and Crespi 2019; Moser and Moser 2005), which was implemented by the European Union in 1997, promotes gender equality within the EU through internal policies, recommendations, and the implementation of four-year action plans to which national policies should align. These are to be consistent with European values, which include gender equality.
- The Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, which was accepted by the United Nations in 1979, covers forms of gender discrimination in several domains of life.
- The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, better known as the Istanbul Convention, is a unique transnational platform with a specific focus on gender-based violence against women, which is of specific interest to this study.

The Istanbul Convention defines violence against women as a human rights violation and is the first legally binding global instrument aimed at preventing violence, protecting victims, and eliminating the impunity of perpetrators. The Convention has been open for signature since 2011. Countries that sign it indicate their interest in being engaged in the process, but it is only with ratification and subsequent entry into force that they will be required to adhere to it. In these cases, states are required to adapt their national law and provide information necessary for monitoring the implementation of the obligations defined by the Convention. Among these obligations, states must provide a whole range of methods of ensuring effective assistance to victims of violence, including the training of appropriate professionals to ensure victims' access to health and social services to facilitate their recovery and establishing adequate shelters and telephonic lines of support. Furthermore, states are obliged to incriminate persecutory acts; punish any sexual violence; and penalize forced marriage, female genital mutilation, and sexual harassment. Particularly interesting for the focus of this study, Article 42 of the Convention states that "culture, customs, religion, traditions or so-called 'honor'" cannot be used as an excuse to justify acts of violence, with the clarification that "allegations according to which the victim has transgressed cultural, religious, social norms or traditional customs concerning appropriate behavior" cannot be adduced.

The Convention has been signed by 45 of the 46 member countries of the Council of Europe (CoE) and ratified by 38. Despite its innovative and transformative mechanisms, the Convention of Istanbul was not unanimously applauded. The Convention uses the term "gender" instead of "sex" to refer to the social determinants that shape different and unequal life experiences because of the social interpretation of sex. Article 3(c) defines gender as "the socially constructed roles, behavior, activities, and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for women and men." While the Convention specifically addresses violence against women and does not include LGBTQI+ rights, it has been attacked because some conservative and religious actors and radical-right populist groups consider it to be a vehicle of the so-called "gender ideology" and a threat to the traditional

division of roles between women and men in society (Berthet 2022; Graff 2014; Paternotte and Kuhar 2018).

### 3. Materials and Methods

Using several sources of data at the micro level, information about national laws and macro indicators, this section attempts to clarify prevailing gender norms in each country by paying particular attention to gender norms in the family and domestic domain. This exercise, which is limited in its form considering the complexity of local gender cultures, aims to empirically explore gender norms, with specific regard to VAW, in 12 countries used as exemplary cases. As further explained later, the selection of countries depends on the availability of data on all the indicators used for gender norms.

Of the 12 countries, 11 are members of the Council of Europe (CoE). These are Armenia, Cyprus, Czechia, Germany, Greece, The Netherlands, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Turkey, and Ukraine. Russia, which was a CoE member until 2021, is also included.

#### 3.1. Indicators of Gender Norms

##### 3.1.1. Institutional Gender Norms

To consider the potential implication of transnational gender norms, this study will map the adoption of the Istanbul Convention in each country. To consider the legislative differences, the national situation regarding institutional gender norms will be described using the Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI) provided by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The SIGI (OECD 2019m) focuses on the institutional basis of gender inequality and looks at discriminatory social norms and laws in four areas, namely:

- (a). Restriction of women's access to equal rights regarding family life (e.g., in the case of inheritance, parental authority, legal marriage age, marriage and divorce rights, and women's role in the household).
- (b). Restriction to physical integrity, including violence against women and women's control over their bodies and reproductive autonomy (e.g., protection against rape, domestic violence, sexual harassment, female genital mutilation, and missing women).
- (c). Restriction to productive and financial resources (e.g., access to economic resources, land assets, and power).
- (d). Restriction to civil liberties and limitation of women's access to social and political participation (e.g., citizenship rights, political voice, freedom of movement, and access to justice).

Within these four areas, 16 indicators, which were built using 27 variables, are combined to compute scores for each dimension and for the overall SIGI (see SIGI Report—OECD 2019 for details on methodology). The SIGI ranges from 0%, indicating no discrimination, to 100%, indicating absolute discrimination. Countries are graded into five groups according to their level of social institution discrimination based on the score achieved. The classes are very low level of discrimination (SIGI < 20%); low level of discrimination (20% < SIGI < 30%); medium level of discrimination (30% < SIGI < 40%); high level of discrimination (40% < SIGI < 50%); and very high level of discrimination (SIGI > 50%).

As well as the overall SIGI scores, scores for the sub-indexes of family discrimination and restriction to physical integrity are also included in the report, and the overview indicates how VAW—particularly domestic violence and (marital) rape—is defined in the national laws (as reported by OECD reports).

##### 3.1.2. Gender Role Attitudes and Moral Norms

The most recent data available from the World Values Survey (WVS) (Haerpfer et al. 2022) are used to grasp gender and moral norms at the individual level.

To measure gender role attitudes (GRA) in the domestic sphere (Lomazzi 2022), WVS includes the statement “A preschool child is likely to suffer if his or her mother works.” The respondents were asked to express their agreement from 1 to 4 (1 = strongly agree; 2 = agree; 3 = disagree; 4 = strongly disagree). To ease the reading of the results, the scores have been reversed to have the same direction as the SIGI score, in which a higher score means a higher level of discrimination. In this way, the highest GRA score (4) indicates the most traditional view on gender roles. In the following overview, we will provide both the mean and the percentage of respondents who agree with the statement.

Among several measurements of moral norms, the WVS provides a measurement of the justifiability of VAW. In particular, the respondents are asked whether they think a man beating his wife can always be justified, never be justified, or something in between. The respondents can express their opinion by using a scale from 1 (never justifiable) to 10 (always justifiable). In the following overview, we will provide both the mean and the percentage of respondents who affirm that it is never justifiable.

While the measurement of GRA is available for about all the CoE countries covered by WVS, the item on justifiability of VAW is available only for 12 CoE countries. Due to this, the study is limited to this subset of countries.

Table 1 provides a synthetic overview of the countries' gender norms by using the indicators previously described. The country cases will be discussed later.

**Table 1.** Synthetic overview of gender norm indicators by country.

Country	Istanbul Convention (s = Year of Signature; r = Year of Ratification; e = Year of Entry into Force; w = Withdrawal)	SIGI—Overall Score (%; 100 = Highest Discrimination) *	SIGI—Family (%; 100 = Highest Discrimination) *	SIGI Physical Integrity (%; 100 = Highest Discrimination) *	Traditional GRA in the Domestic Domain (Mean Value, 1–4; 4 = Highest Traditional View) **	“A pre-School Child Suffers If the Mother Works” (% Agree + Strongly Angry) **	Agreement with “A Pre-School Child Suffers If the Mother Works” Gender Gap (%F-%M) **	Justifiability for a Man Beating His Wife. % “Never Justifiable” **	Justifiability for a Man Beating His Wife. Gender Gap (%F-%M) **	Lifetime Physical and/or Sexual Intimate Partner Violence (%) <sup>1</sup> ***
Armenia	2018 (s)	28	33	35	2.37	40.9	1.2	90.2	12.1	8.2
Cyprus	2015 (s); 2018 (r); 2018 (e)	28	42	12	2.53	50.1	−7.8	90.4	1.3	15
Czechia	2016 (s)	20	27	13	2.20	32.2	−4.5	62.9	10.5	21
Germany	2011 (s); 2017 (r); 2018 (e)	15	18	15	2.11	29.1	−6.6	95.7	2.8	22
Greece	2011 (s); 2018 (r); 2018 (e)	27	45	9	2.36	40.4	−0.1	93.1	5.5	19
The Netherlands	2012 (s); 2015 (r); 2016 (e)	16	24	13	1.74	14.3	−8.9	80.4	6	25
Romania	2014 (s); 2016 (r); 2016 (e)	17	28	8	2.21	36	3.6	84.6	6	24
Russia	-	22	23	15	2.35	38.3	−1.1	61.3	15	Official National Statistics Not Available
Serbia	2012 (s); 2013 (r); 2014 (e)	20	33	7	2.30	37.3	−5.6	63.9	8.9	17
Slovakia	2011 (s)	17	26	6	2.02	24.9	5.9	68.9	5.9	23
Turkey	[2011 (s); 2012 (r); 2014 (e)] 2021 (w)	25	33	8	2.55	53	−1.9	75.0	2.1	38
Ukraine	2011 (s); 2022 (r); 2022 (e)	21	23	14	2.67	58.2	3.9	62.0	11.9	26

\* Source: (OECD 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2019d, 2019e, 2019f, 2019g, 2019h, 2019i, 2019j, 2019k, 2019l); \*\* Source: (Haerpfer et al. 2022); \*\*\* Source: Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), 2019. OESCE-led Survey on Violence against Women: Main Report. Vienna, Austria: OSCE Secretariat. <https://evaw-global-database.unwomen.org/> (accessed on 14 November 2022).



## 4. Gender Norms and VAW: An Overview of 12 Countries

### 4.1. Armenia

According to the OECD (OECD 2019a), Armenian institutions' discrimination is low (28%), but it is medium when it comes to family discrimination and physical integrity (the scores are, respectively, 33% and 35%). Traditional views on gender roles still prevail in the domestic domain (40.9%), which might be related to the strong association, rooted in the history of national struggle that afflicted Armenia for centuries, between motherhood and women's identification with their nation (Beukian 2014). In the context of the several attempts of (forced) assimilation, genocide, Soviet regime, and war, the development of a female model devoted to sacrifice and care for her family and the nation was embedded in the general self-identification with the nation, therefore making motherhood a crucial symbol for the construction of the Armenian national identity. The country signed the Istanbul Convention in 2018, but it has not yet been ratified, and there is no legislation addressing VAW specifically. Rape, which has been addressed by the Criminal Code since 2013, is punishable by three to six years imprisonment (eight to fifteen years if the victim is younger than 14), but it does not cover marital rape. There is no legislation addressing domestic violence specifically. The OECD (2019a) refers to under-reporting acts of gender-based violence (GBV) and a lack of data. Women's complaint files are often withdrawn because of family or spousal pressure and concerns about their lack of economic independence, which hampers their ability to survive without their husband's material support. According to official statistics, 8.2% of ever-partnered Armenian women aged between 18 and 74 reported having experienced intimate partner physical and/or sexual violence at least once in their lives since age 15. While 90.2% of Armenians think that a man is never justified in beating his wife, there is a marked difference between men and women: 95.7% of Armenian women never justify this act while only 83.6% of men share that opinion.

### 4.2. Cyprus

The overall SIGI score is 28%, indicating low discrimination in Cyprus's social institutions. However, there is a big gap between the high discrimination in the family (42) and the very low discrimination in physical integrity (12). This might be a reflection of national legislation that, under European Gender Mainstreaming, provides a legislative framework of equal rights, while traditional social norms are difficult to overcome. Half of the people living in Cyprus express traditional views on gender roles (mean is 2.53). Fewer women than men support traditional gender roles (46.5% in contrast to 54.3% of men).

Cyprus signed the Istanbul Convention in 2015, and it came into force in 2018. VAW is included in the general plan to promote gender equality. Rape (including marital rape) is a crime. The perpetrator can face life imprisonment and ten years for attempted rape. Domestic violence has been included in Cyprus's law since 1999 (with amendments in 2000 and 2004). The legislation covers physical, sexual, and psychological abuse. Economic abuse is not covered. Perpetrators are punishable by two years in prison. In addition, an active program of sensitization, prevention, and improving victim support services is in place. In Cyprus, 15% of women aged between 18 and 74 reported having experienced intimate partner physical and/or sexual violence at least once in their lives since age 15. Of the people living in Cyprus, 90.2% believe a man is never justified in beating his wife, with the opinions of men and women on this point tending to converge more than in the other countries included in this study.

### 4.3. Czechia

Social institution discrimination is low in Czechia (SIGI score is 20%), with a very low score in physical integrity. Traditional roles in the domestic domain (GRA mean is 2.20) are supported by about a third of the population (32.2%), reflecting the slow transition towards a more progressive view in this area, probably as a result of the Soviet heritage, despite the general transition towards Western values (Manea and Rabušić 2019).

As Fellegi (2019) points out, in recent years populist and conservative politicians have identified a so-called “gender ideology,” which they see as a threat to Czech society, in the European and transnational values around gender equality and feminism. This narrative presents an obstacle to the implementation of more efficient strategies to promote gender equality and combat VAW, including the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, which was signed in 2016. However, the Strategy for Equality of Women and Men, adopted in 2014, also includes specific goals addressing VAW. An action plan to fight VAW and GBV was launched in 2015. Since 2004, domestic violence has been punishable by up to three years imprisonment—more if there are aggravating circumstances. The definition comprises physical, sexual, psychological, economic, and other forms of violence. Official statistics report that about two out of ten women aged between 18 and 74 reported having experienced intimate partner physical and/or sexual violence at least once in their lives since age 15. According to WVS data, 62.9% of people living in Czechia believe it is never justifiable for a man to beat his wife. This means that more than three people out of 10 consider it justifiable to a certain extent. Women tend to condone this action less than men (68% of women in contrast to 57% of men say it is never justifiable). In 2010, stalking was introduced in the Criminal Code. An online platform for counseling on domestic violence has been provided. Rape is defined in the Criminal Code, and perpetrators face imprisonment of between six months and five years. Marital rape is not explicitly mentioned.

#### 4.4. Germany

Germany displays very low social institutional discrimination (15%), overall and in its components. However, individual views on gender roles in the family are not particularly progressive. Almost one out of three people support a traditional and gendered division of roles when it comes to the domestic sphere. This might also be supported by policies supporting the “one and a half breadwinner” family model in which women are expected to work part-time (Pascall and Lewis 2004) despite the increase of female breadwinner families in Germany (Jurczyk et al. 2019).

Having ratified the Istanbul Convention in 2018, the government adopted several legal changes to bring the national legislation in line with the Convention’s standards. In addition to the Criminal Code (which also criminalizes honor killings), specific legislation (the Protection against Violence Act) addresses VAW. Nevertheless, the latest evaluation by the Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO) reports serious gaps concerning the poor level of risk assessment, a need to improve the use of protection orders and emergency barring orders, and a lack of support services and shelters. A national action plan (or national coordination) is still lacking, which causes a relevant disparity between the federal states.

The Criminal Code addresses rape (including marital rape) and perpetrators face no less than two years of imprisonment, which can increase in the cases of aggravated assaults. The Code also covers domestic violence, and its definition includes, among others: abuse of a position of trust, sexual assault, rape, insult, abandonment, stalking, and causing bodily harm. Wife beating is generally stigmatized: 95.7% of people in Germany consider this behavior never justifiable, with a very small gender gap in this view (2.8). However, domestic violence is a serious issue: 22% of adult women reported having experienced intimate partner physical and/or sexual violence at least once in their lives since age 15.

#### 4.5. Greece

In Greece, social institution discrimination is low (27%), but institutional discrimination in the family is very high (45%), which is the highest among the 12 countries. This means that traditional gender norms persist in Greece and appear particularly hard to change. This is reflected in the individual support for traditional gender roles in the domestic domain (2.36), and about two out of five people believe that preschool children suffer if their mother works. Scholars (Dagkouli–Kyriakoglou 2021; Daskalaki et al. 2021)

argue that the persistence of traditional gender norms in Greece is partly due to the strong influence of the religious conservative tradition and partly to the familyist welfare system that supports and perpetuates the traditional family model (Dagkouli–Kyriakoglou 2021).

Greece signed the Istanbul Convention in 2011 and ratified it in 2018. However, a national plan to prevent and combat VAW was already in place by 2009. The plan facilitated the creation of a helpline for female victims of GBV, a sensibilization campaign, and a protocol to train lawyers to deal with GBV. The most recent national plan addresses domestic violence, rape, sexual harassment, and human trafficking. Thanks to this legislative framework to protect the right to physical integrity, the level of institutional discrimination in this dimension is very low (9%). Despite these measures, VAW remains high, with reduced resources for victims (e.g., many shelters have closed) and extremely long delays in criminal proceedings. Sexual violence is not addressed specifically by the law, but rape is a criminal offense under Law 3500/2006. Until this law, rape and sexual assault within the family were not criminalized. The punishment for rape is from 5 to 20 years of imprisonment (longer for aggravated assault). The penal code defines domestic violence as a criminal offense and also addresses violence against former partners and unmarried partners. It includes sexual, psychological, and physical violence but does not cover economic violence. Of women aged between 18 and 74, 19% reported having experienced intimate partner physical and/or sexual violence at least once in their lives since age 15. The justification for a man beating his wife is very low—one of the lowest in the countries covered by this study—with 93.1% of the respondents believing this behavior to never be justifiable. Women tend to justify it slightly less than men.

#### 4.6. The Netherlands

Much like Germany, The Netherlands displays very low discrimination within its social institutions. Discrimination in the family is higher than in Germany but still low (24%). The “one and a half breadwinner” family model is prevalent, with women working part-time while also taking care of the home and children (Pascall and Lewis 2004), but GRAs are quite progressive. Only 19.1% of men and 10.2% of women support traditional gender roles in the domestic domain, which may be a result of the steady increase of acceptance of mothers working in paid employment and growing support of an equal division of family responsibilities over the last few decades (Kraaykamp 2012).

The Istanbul Convention came into force in 2016, but The Netherlands already had an integrated policy approach against interpersonal violence, with wide local engagement in combating VAW and child abuse. Rape, including marital rape, is a crime under the Dutch Criminal Code, and it is punishable by 12 years of imprisonment. Domestic violence, which is addressed by the Criminal Code, is defined as the abuse of a position of trust, sexual assault, rape, insult, abandonment, stalking, causing bodily harm, and more. The directive on domestic violence and honor-related violence establishes rules regarding the procedure for investigation and prosecution. Cases of domestic violence, for example, can be prosecuted even if the victim does not file a complaint, except for stalking, which does require the victim to lay a charge. In general, measures to prevent and combat domestic violence are gender neutral. Despite this legislative framework, moral views condoning domestic violence are more widespread than in the other European Union member states included in this study. According to the WVS data, 80.4% of Dutch respondents affirm that it is never justifiable for a man to beat his wife, with very little difference between women’s and men’s responses (6). This means that one out of five people think that it is, to a certain extent, morally acceptable. This could explain the high percentage (25%) of adult women reporting having experienced intimate partner physical and/or sexual violence at least once in their lives.

#### 4.7. Romania

According to the SIGI, Romania presents a very low level (17%) of discrimination in social institutions, higher discrimination (28%) in family institutions, and very low (8%) in physical integrity.

The OECD (2019f) reports that gender norms are still quite traditional, with gendered segregation of responsibilities; women are mainly seen as caregivers and men as primary breadwinners. Data from the WVS indicate that a significant share of the Romanian population (64%) embraces more egalitarian gender norms. Compared to previous research (Voicu and Tufiş 2012) reporting more traditional views as a reflection of the societal structure during the communist regime, it seems that more egalitarian values are becoming the norm across the population.

Since Romania ratified the Istanbul Convention in 2016, the existing legislative framework on preventing and combating domestic violence and VAW has improved, and a nationwide campaign of sensibilization and prevention has been rolled out. A national strategy against VAW has been in place since 2013. The Criminal Code defines rape as a crime and explicitly refers to marital rape. The punishment is from three to ten years of imprisonment. A pre-existing clause allowing a perpetrator of rape to escape conviction by marrying the victim was removed in 2000. Since 2003, domestic violence comprising physical, psychological, sexual, and material abuse has been recognized by Romanian law. It also includes denying women their fundamental rights and freedoms, and women can request restraining orders. Shelters are—in principle—available, but there are very few, and most of them are not run by private entities. According to the OECD (2019f), domestic violence is still perceived as a family matter. According to national statistics, 24% of women have experienced lifetime physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence, and WVS reports that about 15% of the respondents consider it to be, to a certain degree, morally justifiable for a man to beat his wife.

#### 4.8. Russia

Despite the low level of institutional discrimination and the moderate (38.3%) support for traditional gender roles in the domestic sphere, a traditional backlash is revitalizing patriarchal gender roles, claiming that it is a way to protect and reinforce national identity in a context of increasing authoritarianism and anti-Europeanism (Doğangün 2019; Muravyeva 2018; Skorniakova et al. 2020). This started in the 2010s when the Russian Federation's Family Policy Concept for 2014 to 2025 included the explicit aim of restoring traditional family values with women's main responsibility devoted to care (OECD 2019g).

Russia did not sign the Istanbul Convention and has been excluded from the Council of Europe since the 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

There is no specific law addressing VAW. The phenomenon is prevalent, but official data are missing. Women belonging to the LGBTI+ community are particularly exposed to discrimination and VAW. Until 2017, domestic violence was a criminal offence under the Criminal Code, but it was decriminalized by removing from the list of criminal offences the provisions for those beating close persons causing physical pain but not inflicting harm or other consequences. According to the OECD report (2019g), the amendment resulted from the pressure of conservative groups disapproving differences in treatment of offences committed within or outside the family and the Russian Orthodox Church arguing the lack of moral and legal grounds for such provisions. Services for victims, such as hotlines, shelters, and health services, are lacking. Among the countries covered by the current study, Russia is the one with the lowest percentage (61.3%) of people who believe a man is never justified in beating his wife, which means about four out of ten people condone this behavior to a certain degree. However, the gender gap is the highest (15), with 68% of women stating that it is never justifiable in contrast to 53% of men. Sexual violence is addressed by the Criminal Code, but marital rape is not included. Reliable statistics on sexual violence and rape are lacking, and social pressure to drop complaints is reported to be high (OECD 2019g).

#### 4.9. Serbia

Even though Serbia displays a low level of discrimination in its social institutions, the situation appears particularly uneven with very low discrimination (7%) in the dimension of physical integrity but medium (33%) in the family dimension. The conservative political and religious discourses support traditional gender norms, resulting in the intensification of patriarchal gender roles within the domestic realm (Drezgić 2010). This is reflected in the WVS data, which show that about 37% of respondents support traditional gender roles.

The Istanbul Convention, which came into force in 2014, has precedence over domestic legislation. Serbia implemented a strategy for gender equality, with a focus on reducing gender stereotypes and harmful cultural norms and GBV sensibilization. The OECD (2019b) points out that, despite the general improvements, several elements need to be addressed. There is a lack of shelters and no national helpline. Intervention is slow in emergencies, and domestic violence is still often seen as a domestic matter by police.

Domestic violence is a criminal offense with a punishment of up to 15 years of imprisonment. Since 2016, the legislated prescribed procedure for dealing with perpetrators of domestic violence includes removal from the home. Domestic violence includes sexual, physical, psychological, and verbal violence, as well as restrictions on freedom of movement and communication.

Poverty, the trauma of wartime atrocities, and gender norms that legitimate violence serve to keep domestic violence high in Serbia. According to official statistics, 17% of adult women report having experienced domestic violence at least once in their lives. Only 63.9% of the WVS sample said it is never justifiable for a man to beat his wife, with the views of women and men being close—the gender gap is 8.9. This means that at least three out of ten people consider this violent behavior somehow morally acceptable.

Rape is defined as a crime against humanity; it is gender-neutral and includes marital rape. Penalties are from 2 to 18 years of imprisonment with aggravation prolonging the term.

#### 4.10. Slovakia

Much like other countries covered in this study, the very low level (17%) of social institution discrimination in Slovakia is qualified by uneven levels in the other domains, ranging from a very low level of 6% in physical integrity to a low level of 26% in the family domain. This is reflected in gender norms at the individual level with 25% of respondents supporting the traditional division of paid work and unpaid care work for men and women, respectively. More women (27.7%) support traditional gender roles than men (21.8%). Similar to other post-Soviet countries, and in particular to Czechia, the transition towards more progressive views considered to be “western values” remains slow and is impeded by anti-Europeanist sentiments. These attitudes also hamper the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, which is seen as a threat to traditional culture rather than an opportunity to protect women (Cernohorská 2019; Fellegi 2019).

Slovakia only signed the Convention in 2001. There is no national legislation on VAW, but existing laws criminalize several forms of violence. However, the national response to VAW does not meet international standards (OECD 2019i). The Criminal Code addresses rape, including marital rape and rape of ex-spouses and cohabitantes. Perpetrators face from 7 to 25 years of imprisonment. Domestic violence is a criminal offense punishable by three to eight years of imprisonment.

Domestic violence is widespread, and it continues to be a problem for women, particularly because victims are still often stigmatized (OECD 2019i). Official statistics report that 23% of ever-partnered women aged between 18 and 74 have experienced intimate partner physical and/or sexual violence at least once in their lives since age 15. About 69% of the WVS sample in Slovakia believe that a man is never justified in beating his wife, with a minimal gender gap (5.9). However, this means that three out of ten people consider this form of VAW morally justifiable to a certain degree.

#### 4.11. Turkey

The [OECD \(2019k\)](#) defines a context of low (25.5%) discriminatory social institutions in Turkey but with wide variability between the domains, ranging from very low (8%) for physical integrity to medium (33%) for family. Following a multidimensional process of re-emphasizing traditional gender norms after a long period of legal reforms to promote gender equality ([Ün 2019](#)), gender norms at the individual level are quite traditional and shared by about half of the people without any remarkable differences between men and women (54% and 52% women, respectively).

Alongside concerns regarding the patriarchal U-turn of several legislative instruments covering abortion, the stigmatization of women as anti-patriotic sinners and murderers, and the increased control on women's bodies through the moral control of women's sexuality, dress code, and code of behavior in public ([Doğangün 2020](#)), scholars and the international community are concerned about VAW. Turkey was the first country to sign the Istanbul Convention in 2011, and it came into force in 2014 with the implementation of legislation aimed to combat VAW. This included domestic violence laws, criminalizing "honor killings," and plans to raise awareness and promote inter-agency cooperation.

After years of furthering women's rights and improving legislation towards gender equality, Turkey has recently started embracing the road towards authoritarianism, with a strong U-turn towards patriarchal gender norms following a religious-conservative agenda ([Aydin-Düzgüt and Tocci 2015](#); [Doğangün 2019](#)). In line with anti-European values and anti-gender ideology, the Convention has been accused of threatening the traditional values of Turkish society. In 2021, Turkey withdrew from the Istanbul Convention.

The main legislative framework on VAW remains Law No. 6248 of 2012, which addresses domestic violence but does not criminalize it as such, and there is no prosecution of or punishment for perpetrators. The [OECD \(2019k\)](#) states that many legal regulations on VAW are more aimed at protecting the family as an institution rather than protecting women.

Domestic violence continues to remain a serious and widespread problem. Statistics show that 38% of ever-partnered women aged between 18 and 74 have experienced intimate partner physical and/or sexual violence at least once in their lives since age 15. About 75% of Turkish respondents believe that a man is never justified in beating his wife—with a minimal gender gap. As reported by [Alkan and Tekmanlı \(2021\)](#), religious beliefs contribute to the moral acceptance of VAW: rebelling against one's husband is believed to be a sin and domestic violence, still considered to be a private matter, the legitimate punishment.

Honor killing has been criminalized with a penalty of life imprisonment. However, sentences can be reduced, and the judges are allowed to consider anger or passion caused by the "unjust act" when passing sentence. The Criminal Code addresses sexual assault and rape (including marital rape) with penalties from 2 to 12 years of imprisonment. However, sentences are often reduced, citing men's good behavior during the trial or the victim's provocative behavior ([OECD 2019k](#)).

#### 4.12. Ukraine

As recently pointed out by scholars ([Nehring 2022](#); [Tarkhanova 2021](#)), the transition towards a more gender-egalitarian society needs to be understood in the general context of Ukraine's transition. This path follows the parallel pathway characterized by nation-building efforts following the collapse of the Soviet Union and a progressive identification with Europe, which is also a reaction to the Russian threat.

The [OECD \(2019l\)](#) reports low (21%) discriminatory institutions, with discrimination slightly higher (23%) in family but lower (14%) in physical integrity. Traditional GRAs in the domestic sphere are supported by 58% of the population, with women (59.8%) being slightly more traditionalist than men (55.9%), which is in line with the historical prioritization of women's caregiver roles and the importance given to motherhood as a crucial element of the Ukrainian national identity ([Tarkhanova 2018](#)).

Ukraine signed the Istanbul Convention in 2011, but its intended 2016 ratification was prevented when conservative and anti-gender ideology movements dominated the debate and derailed the process. However, since the Russian war, Ukraine's process of Europeanization has accelerated, and—in this context—the Convention was finally ratified in 2022.

Currently, there is still no national legislative framework to address VAW but, with the Convention coming into force, the government will have to implement new regulations to the standards required. The Law on Preventing and Combating Domestic Violence of 2016 addresses physical, sexual, psychological, and economic violence. Further to the provision of restraining and prohibiting orders, offender registration, and treatment programs for offenders, the law provides for victim services such as shelters, helplines, and legal aid. Rape is considered a criminal offense under the Criminal Code and is punishable by imprisonment of up to five years, but the legal definition does not include marital rape.

War and displacement are causing a dramatic rise in poverty and vulnerability, exposing women to increased risks of VAW and sexual exploitation. This will require that the national government and the international community adopt a gender-sensitive perspective in the political management of the war and—even more importantly—its aftermath.

## 5. Concluding Remarks

The current study provided a theoretical framework for reflecting on gender norms as the cultural roots of VAW. By adopting a multidimensional approach to gender norms, the study contributes to the existent literature by offering original insights on the aspects that can help understanding the cultural context condoning VAW. This multidimensional approach has been applied theoretically and empirically, providing a proxy for the measurement of gender norms.

It focused on individual and institutional gender norms, with a strong emphasis on the role played by transnational platforms because of their potentially transformative power on national legislation and gender cultures.

It explored gender norms in 12 countries by using indicators of gender norms at the individual and institutional levels. Particular attention was paid to each country's position on the Istanbul Convention and its legislative framework to combat VAW.

This research has several limitations. To investigate societal gender norms more properly, it would be necessary to encompass a broader perspective on gender equality, and the discussion should be conducted in the light of the socioeconomic and political patterns of each country, with in-depth analysis of the impact of religious, moral, and political values that, especially in some countries, are strongly associated with gender equality support. In this paper, we could not speculate on the gender cultures of each country included in the study but could only describe specific aspects of gender norms. Future research should investigate deeper the interplay of gender norms and other structural and cultural aspects of societies, including the potential influence of equal rights movements.

An additional limitation derives by data availability constraints. This not only restricted the number of countries for which the investigation was possible, but also the analysis depends on the availability of indicators on the topics explored. For example, the measurement of gender role attitudes in the domestic sphere available in WVS consists in only one item. While other sources (for example, the European Values Study) can provide a better operationalization and stronger measurement of this concept by using three or more items (Lomazzi 2022), moral views on domestic violence are not included in the same data collection. These considerations therefore made the WVS, which allows for the same individuals to have information on both the aspects, the best compromise.

Nevertheless, some elements for further reflection can be summarized as follows.

In societies in which gender roles are particularly rigid and the idea of masculinity is strongly linked to dominance and male honor, VAW tends to be more frequent (Alesina et al. 2021; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Heise 1998). Especially in cultures in which violent punishment is an accepted form of social control, the violation of prevailing

gender norms can provoke reactions aimed at reestablishing the violated norms. This can result in people—even women—justifying domestic violence in accordance with certain moral views. Among the countries included in the current study, this seems to be the case in Czechia, Slovakia, Turkey, Russia, and Ukraine.

International platforms appear to play an important role as reference points in combating gender inequality. For example, European Union member states included in the study display low or very low levels of institutional gender discrimination, largely because national policies are inspired by, or should be aligned with, the European gender mainstreaming framework. However, this is not always reflected in individual gender norms, probably because of historical gender regimes based on traditional gender roles, as is the case in Germany or in Greece, where religious influences reinforce the traditional model, and the long economic recession and austerity might have loosened the connection with European authority.

The gap between progressive institutional gender norms and traditional views at the individual level might be interpreted as a sign of potential social change, driven by institutional norms. However, this relationship is not always intuitive. The Netherlands, for example, presents controversial gender norms. Considering its legislative framework and its liberal views on gender roles, the moral acceptance of domestic violence is higher than one would expect, a phenomenon that, incidentally, affects one out of four adult ever-married/partnered women.

In general, the transformative power of the Istanbul Convention is indisputable. Even in countries already equipped with legislation to prevent VAW, the adoption of the Convention facilitated the systematization of the legislative framework and introduced relevant changes not only to combat VAW but also to push for cultural change by, for example, criminalizing domestic violence and marital rape and prosecuting the perpetrators. By challenging the traditional patriarchal gender norms, the Convention is stimulating forms of radical dissent. In several countries, conservative–religious positions endorsed by politicians and religious movements have inspired anti-feminist and anti-gender ideology narratives that depict gender equality, feminism, and LGBTI+ equality as a Western or European threat to the traditional family values that are integral to the nation. This narrative is quite strong in countries such as Russia and Turkey, which are shifting towards authoritarianism (Doğangün 2020), but it is present also in EU member states such as Czechia and Slovakia (Cernohorská 2019; Fellegi 2019).

Regarding the moral tolerance of VAW, two situations can be identified among the countries covered by this study: the post-Soviet countries, where the condoning of violence against women derives from moral values and religious fundamentalism meeting the political discourse related to Europeanization (Darakchi 2019; Johnson 2009; Tarkhanova 2021), and EU member state countries where, despite legislation, cultural norms rooted in patriarchal gender norms are still used to justify gendered violence and play down male crime against women (Busso et al. 2020; Latcheva 2017; Weil et al. 2018).

In conclusion, rigid traditional gender roles combined with a strongly patriarchal culture in legislation and institutions, supported by moral views legitimizing violent behavior, appear to be the fatal mix generating, maintaining, and reinforcing the cultural roots of violence against women. Acknowledging the cultural processes that justify and legitimize VAW is pivotal to efficiently combatting it. Because of the multidimensional and multilevel nature of gender norms, interventions both from a bottom-up dynamic—for example, from human rights movements, which are not investigated in this paper—and from a top-down approach—with legislation and policies—as well as gender training and awareness-raising analyses for those who legislate, interpret laws, and the judiciary, are needed to promote a slow but sustainable cultural shift.

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## Note

- <sup>1</sup> Proportion of ever-partnered women aged 18–74 years experiencing intimate partner physical and/or sexual violence at least once in their lives since age 15.

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