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Social and Cultural Aspects of Domestic Violence in Kosovo

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Abstract

In our society, marriage and the family enjoy special protection, and these are guaranteed by the Constitution. The institution of marriage and family relations are regulated by family law and are protected by criminal law. There are many forms of domestic violence, such as physical violence, psychological violence, violence against children, violence against women, violence against parents, etc., and unfortunately, we encounter almost all types in the society we live in today. Domestic violence is often seen more as a private matter rather than a violation of fundamental human rights, which hinders the proper addressing of cases and encourages the silence of victims. In many cases, due to social stigmatization and fear of judgment or losing family status, victims are reluctant to report the violence. Furthermore, economic inequality and the low employment rate of women strengthen their dependency on abusive partners, forcing them to remain in violent relationships. Effective addressing domestic violence requires an integrated approach and inter-institutional cooperation. This includes not only the implementation of existing laws but also the provision of protective and rehabilitative services, as well as the creation of mechanisms for monitoring violence and protecting victims.

Keywords: domestic violence; patriarchy; victim stigmatization; economic dependence; gender equality

Introduction

This paper addresses the social and cultural aspects of domestic violence in Kosovo, analyzing the impact of traditional norms, patriarchal culture, the stigmatization of victims, economic dependency, and the role of education in this phenomenon.

Therefore, the study of this paper will analyze the social impact on the perception of domestic violence, the education of perpetrators, the role of education in changing violent behaviors, and empowering victims, education in schools and communities, the age of the perpetrator as a factor of domestic violence, the gender of the perpetrator as a factor of domestic violence, the number of family members as a factor of domestic violence, etc.

The study of this paper will particularly focus on the role of education as a key instrument in changing attitudes and behaviors that encourage violence. Through educational programs, perpetrator training, and victim empowerment, violence can be reduced and discriminatory social norms transformed.

In addition, the need for a coordinated inter-institutional approach is emphasized, where cooperation between the state, civil society, and the international community should be continuous in order to provide effective protection for victims and the rehabilitation of perpetrators.

The paper concludes that domestic violence in Kosovo cannot be treated merely as an individual problem, but as a complex phenomenon closely linked to social and cultural norms. Therefore, for effective addressing, not only the implementation of existing laws and strategies is required, but also a gradual transformation of the social mentality that would lead towards gender equality and the elimination of violence.

Social Norms: How Culture and Society Influence the Perception of Domestic Violence

The family represents the living community of parents and children, as well as other relatives if they live in a common household (Zejneli, 2007, p. 88). Criminal law contains a series of provisions that ensure protection from domestic violence. Healthy families and family relationships have long been considered fundamental conditions for a successful generation and a stable society with a secure perspective for the future. Family conflicts, conflicts between husband and wife, conflicts between parents and children, multiple divorces, family abandonment, and child

abandonment are increasing the number of victims every day (Aliu & Zejneli, 2017, pp. 213–221).

Domestic violence is a behavior driven by the need for control. It can start with threats, disturbing calls, and stalking (such as following the victim when they go to work and threatening them), progressing to unwanted sexual relations, physical confrontations, and even worse, to death. Domestic violence is usually not an isolated incident and often becomes more severe and more frequent over time. Many perpetrators are not violent in other relationships, such as at work or with friends (Aliu & Zejneli, 2017, pp. 213–221). They constantly deny domestic violence and the significance of this violence. When confronted with their abusive behavior, they tend to blame their partner for provoking them or refuse to accept responsibility.

In Kosovo, traditional norms and patriarchal culture have a significant impact, as they influence domestic violence to be seen as a private matter. Men are viewed as the primary authority in the family, while women are treated as submissive and forced to comply. Traditional norms contribute to the silence of victims of domestic violence, as their fear stems from the prejudice and stigmatization they may face from society. This silence makes it difficult to report cases and conduct research related to domestic violence (Kosovo Women's Network [KWN], 2015, p. 40).

In many rural families, reporting an abusive husband is considered shameful, and for the sake of honor, women are forced to remain silent to avoid being excluded from the family and separated from their children, especially in patriarchal families where divorce is viewed negatively. Unfortunately, the family is the one that influences these cases negatively, as they do not allow the victim to report the case, telling her: *"Don't report it, you must preserve the family's honor, it will become very public."* These are some of the reasons that prevent the victim from reporting the violence, as she experiences insecurity and fear of losing her family and financial support, which forces her to stay in an abusive relationship (Association of Journalists of Kosovo, 2025).

According to a 2019 UN Women study, 31% of people believed that violence is a private family matter and that neighbors should not intervene, while 29% perceive violence as a normal part of every family relationship (UN Women, 2019).

Victim Stigmatization

The two main factors influencing the stigmatization of victims of domestic violence are gender inequality and women's economic dependence. This occurs due to inappropriate treatment by authorities, as victims feel blamed, often lacking information about their rights and protective mechanisms, and receiving inadequate treatment from the police and their lawyers. They feel the need to report violence in order to receive support, but they also have the sense that, as victims, they will be blamed again. According to a 2023 report by Amnesty International, these are some of the obstacles that victims face at every stage, and naturally, this improper, blame-shifting approach toward the victim, coupled with the denial of information, has negative effects on reporting and pursuing cases of domestic violence (Amnesty International, 2023).

In Kosovo, victims remain silent due to shame and fear of stigmatization. This climate of silence occurs because violence is seen as an issue that should be resolved within the family. According to OSCE's 2019 testing, it was found that family members often expect the victim to forgive the perpetrator for the sake of the family or even the children. Furthermore, family members have an emotional and psychological impact on the victim, telling them things like *"Don't break the family over a single kick', " Don't break the family over a slap,"* etc. For this reason, many victims remain silent due to social shame and do not report the case (OSCE Mission in Kosovo, 2019).

The impact of economic dependence plays a significant role in reporting cases, as women feel powerless and lack alternatives. According to statistics, only 17-18% of women are employed in Kosovo, and their property ownership is minimal. Due to this economic dependence, victims feel *"guilty"* when seeking help, as they cannot live without financial income (Amnesty International & BIRN, 2023).

The Role of Education in Changing Violent Behaviors and Empowering Victims

Violence is any act or failure to act by one person toward another that results in harm to physical, moral, psychological, sexual, social, or economic integrity. Domestic violence is defined as any act of violence between individuals who are or have been in a family relationship (Zejneli, 2018, p.86).

Education is the key to sustainable cultural change. In 2022, the Presidency of Kosovo issued several recommendations for the prevention of domestic violence, recommending that the logistical capacity of the Kosovo Police be increased for teams monitoring and handling domestic violence cases, that free legal aid be provided to victims regardless of their socio-economic status, and that cooperation for awareness be strengthened so that victims are aware of free legal assistance. Additionally, the integration of anti-violence modules in primary and secondary education levels, revision of school textbooks to include gender equality, increasing the number of psychologists and pedagogues in schools, and inter-institutional cooperation were recommended (President of Kosovo, 2022).

The OSCE structure in Kosovo bases its mission on the adoption and implementation of non-discriminatory legal frameworks and policies, placing special emphasis on the empowerment of women, gender equality, and women's rights. At its core, its mission is to create programs to improve women's access to property and inheritance rights. Its mission also supports the police in conducting gender-sensitive investigations in cases of domestic violence and supports the Women Judges and Prosecutors Forum to encourage a diverse and representative justice system. According to the OSCE, interventions should be made, and attention should be paid to the education of professionals, starting with the police, social services, journalists, and preventive programs. Therefore, there should be gender-sensitive training and education for perpetrators to change their behavior (OSCE & Council of Europe, 2019).

As for the role of education in changing violent behaviors, it represents a key instrument for changing behaviors that encourage domestic violence, acting on three levels:

Education of Perpetrators

The Government of the Republic of Kosovo and the Ministry of Justice, in cooperation with the Council of Europe, presented the first National Program for the treatment of perpetrators of violence against women in 2023, a program that has been unique in the region (Office of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Kosovo, 2023). Through this program, a different model is introduced, which includes: integrated psycho-social treatment, inner transformative change, supported by international expertise and piloted in the institutional field. Based on the standards of the Istanbul Convention, the program aims to balance criminal responsibility with

rehabilitative psychosocial interventions. The ultimate goal of this program is not only punishment but also providing a path for transformation to reintegrate into society with shared values.

The program is based on successful psycho-social models aimed at preventing the recurrence of abusive behaviors, by combining these elements (Council of Europe, 2021).

- Analysis of the factors that provoke domestic violence;
- Training for controlling the perpetrator and developing their emotional intelligence;
- Improvement of communication with the family and the development of a responsible role within the family;
- After release from correctional institutions, continuous support and supervision should be provided.

The National Program for the Treatment of Domestic Violence Perpetrators started its first pilot phase at the Dubrava Center, where a 6-month psycho-educational training was held, with the participation of about 20 perpetrators of violence (inmates). This training aimed at: changing behavior, raising awareness about responsibility, and improving family communication (Council of Europe, 2024).

A key component of the program was also raising awareness about the consequences of violence on children, who often experience severe psychological trauma either as witnesses or direct victims.

Through the pilot program in Dubrava, it is expected to contribute to:

- The implementation of the Istanbul Convention (Article 16);
- The integration of punishment and rehabilitation;
- After release, building capacities for monitoring their behaviors and attitudes.

The Council of Europe, in collaboration with the Kosovo Academy of Justice, has launched the HELP platform (Human Rights Education for Legal Professionals). This platform is a type of course for legal professionals on domestic violence and violence against women. These courses aim to change the handling of cases by institutions and to build a more sensitive approach toward victims (Council of Europe & Kosovo Academy of Justice, 2020).

More than 50 participants took part in this course, following seven online modules under the supervision of local trainers. The course included judges, prosecutors, police officers, and victim lawyers. The benefits from this course are:

- Empowering justice professionals, such as judges, prosecutors, police officers, and victim lawyers, to respond more sensitively in handling domestic violence cases.
- Developing knowledge in adopting international standards, including the Istanbul Convention and the case law of the European Court of Human Rights.
- Harmonizing local laws with international standards, enabling professionals to act in accordance with the needs of the local jurisdiction.

The Kosovo Women's Network (KWN) and the Council of Europe, in collaboration, organized a conference titled *"Breaking the Cycle of Violence,"* where it was recommended that there be development of education programs and rehabilitation of perpetrators within the legal framework. These should include:

- To organize trainings to raise awareness about the consequences of domestic violence that will be displayed;
- To encourage changes in attitudes and gender norms among men as potential perpetrators of domestic violence;
- After institutional treatment of domestic violence cases, there should be continuous monitoring (Kosovo Women's Network & Council of Europe, 2023).

Education and Empowerment of Victims

The Organization for Social Integration and Development – Follow Up, is one of the organizations that supports women and girls who have experienced domestic violence. Its goal is to assist in the reintegration process into society, as well as advocate and educate to spread its message as widely as possible (Follow Up, Education & Advocacy, 2023).

Follow Up has implemented programs for professional training, provided psychological and legal support to victims, and offered necessary equipment for life after sheltering, with the aim of reintegrating victims into society by contributing to building self-confidence and integration.

International studies show that training or programs held for education and empowerment of women lead to a reduction in violence, by creating more self-confidence, increasing self-esteem, and enabling them with communication skills.

Education in Schools and Communities

The Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Education in Kosovo, as part of their global campaign *"16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence,"* organized educational discussions in the early hours of class at *"Ahmet Gashi"* Primary School in Pristina. These discussions focused on gender equality and domestic violence in the school environment. The students were informed about promoting gender equality, reporting violence in schools, and how to influence their communities and families to support victims of violence (KosovaPress, 2024).

As part of this campaign, the organizations UNFPA, UN Women, and local institutions have organized informational sessions in schools in Gjakova, Gjilan, Dragash, and other municipalities, focusing on raising awareness about domestic violence and protection from violence (UNFPA Kosovo, 2024).

The Age of the Perpetrator as a Factor in Domestic Violence

The connection between age and crime has been studied for a long time. Quetele (Ketele) considers age as one of the most important factors influencing crime trends (Zejneli, 2018, p. 116).

Researchers try to explain the causes of crime variability depending on age groups and the factors that affect the spread of crimes among younger populations (Telegrafi, 2023). They emphasize various factors, among which the most important are: the demographic composition of the population, the importance of the younger age group in society, and the high level of activity among these age groups.

According to statistics and reports on domestic violence cases, the age group between 20 and 50 years shows the highest level of domestic violence. Violence within these age groups results from a life stage marked by stress related to economic responsibilities, long-term stability, and family roles, which can lead to aggressive behavior toward family member (Telegrafi, 2023).

According to international studies, it is found that men aged 18-35 are considered perpetrators of violence due to:

- Experiencing violence during childhood;
- Harsh economic conditions (poverty, unemployment);
- High hormone levels, such as testosterone;
- Social norms, tradition, and culture (World Health Organization [WHO], 2023).

Statistical and psychological analyses show that individuals of young and middle age are more involved in acts of violence due to various psycho-social, cultural, and economic reasons.

Table 1

A comparative overview of Kosovo with the countries in the region regarding age groups that have committed domestic violence

Country	High-risk group	Year	Comments
Kosovo	20–40 years old	2023	The highest number of reported cases
Albania	25–44 years old	2022	The same problematic gorup according to INSTAT (Institute of Statistics of Albani)
North Macedonia	30–50 years old	2022	Greater focus on unemployed men

Gender as a Factor in Domestic Violence

Gender is the primary factor in domestic violence, where patriarchy and legal insecurity favor men as perpetrators of violence, while women, females, and children remain the primary victims who are limited in their ability to seek protection from institutions. Case studies of domestic violence in Kosovo and the region show that men are primarily the perpetrators of domestic violence, while women, females, and children are the main victims of violence, despite some exceptions.

UN Women highlights that 54% of women over the age of 15 have experienced physical, psychological, or sexual violence from their partners (UN Women, 2024).

There is a great injustice toward victims regarding the reporting of cases, which are met with irresponsible treatment, both by the police when receiving information

about reporting domestic violence cases, and a lack of concrete protection. Victims are stigmatized, especially women from minority communities (Amnesty International, 2023).

UN Women has published a regional meta-analysis titled *"Voices of YOUth,"* which addresses gender-based violence, stereotypes, gender roles, and toxic masculinity, with the attitudes and experiences of young people in the Western Balkans (UN Women – Voices of Youth, 2023), they reported that toxic masculinity is more associated with the aggressor, meaning the dominance of masculinity is more widespread in Kosovo, Bosnia, and Albania, which represents a dangerous factor for the continuation of violence in future generations.

32% of young people surveyed reported that they had been witnesses or victims of violence against women, either in their families or in public spaces. Over 60% of the men surveyed declared that they support the patriarchal stereotype, stating that the husband is the "*head of the family.*"

It can be concluded that due to stigmatization, fear, and shame from society, the main obstacles preventing young people, especially young girls, from reporting violence or participating in awareness-raising campaigns for violence prevention are significant.

The Number of Family Members as a Factor in Domestic Violence

Families with more members are more exposed to violence due to economic capacity, limited living space, shared psychological stress, and tension within the family, which can lead to an increase in conflicts and violence within the household. According to data, the average number of family members in Kosovo in 2023 was 5.2, the highest in the Western Balkans, which means that multiple generations live together, including grandparents, parents, and children, who may affect the limitation of their privacy and increase daily stress (Kosovo Agency of Statistics, 2024).

International studies show that families with more than six members experience tension and domestic violence, and this occurs due to:

- Lack of privacy and physical space;
- Unequal gender responsibilities;
- Unemployment and economic stress within the family (Frontiers in Public Health, 2023).

The most frequent cases of violence occur in municipalities with rural populations because their families are extended, where social control is lower, and institutional intervention is more difficult (Kosovar Centre for Security Studies [KCSS], 2024).

Women living in large families in Kosovo have reported that due to family pressure and support, they are forced to remain silent and raise their children in a tense family environment (Reddit, 2022).

To address the negative impact of violence in families with a large number of members, economic and psychological support for large families is essential. The state and municipalities should provide social assistance, training for parents with many children to help reduce stress, a key factor in violence. Community centers should be created in rural areas, offering activities, legal and psychosocial counseling for women and children, especially for those women experiencing violence. The creation of special courses related to the economic empowerment of women would positively impact women so that they are not dependent on their abusive partners. Regular awareness campaigns should be held, either through television, social media, or schools, to inform families about the fundamental rights of women and children and to break the myths, enabling them to live in a family without violence and stress.

Conclusion

Domestic violence in Kosovo is a complex social and cultural phenomenon, influenced by patriarchal norms and traditional expectations for gender roles. These norms affect the perception of violence as a private issue, hindering the reporting of cases and reinforcing the economic dependence of victims. Social stigmatization, fear of prejudice, and the lack of financial independence force victims to remain silent, making it more difficult to access legal protection mechanisms and the appropriate social services (Kosovo Women's Network [KWN], 2015).

Education and training are key instruments for changing the mentality and behaviors that fuel violence. Educational programs for perpetrators, victim empowerment, and training for legal professionals contribute to raising awareness about the consequences of violence, improving institutional responses, and empowering victims to seek protection and justice (Council of Europe, 2019; Council of Europe & Academy of Justice of Kosovo, 2020; Follow Up, Education & Advocacy, 2023).

In addition to individual treatments, community education and awareness campaigns in schools and municipalities promote gender equality and change social perceptions that sustain domestic violence (UN Women, 2019; UNFPA Kosovo, 2024).

Only the combination of legal enforcement, education, awareness, and the gradual transformation of social mentality can lead to the elimination of violence and the securing of fundamental rights for all family members. In conclusion, domestic violence should not be treated merely as an individual or family problem.

It is a phenomenon closely linked to cultural and social structures, and addressing it requires a combination of legal, social, educational, and psychological measures, as well as a long-term commitment to gender equality and the protection of human rights (Lomazzi, 2023).

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