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CHALLENGING VIOLENCE THROUGH THE EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN: INSIGHTS FROM FORMERLY SOVIETIZED COUNTRIES

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Abstract: Intimate partner violence (IPV) – in other words, violence against women within intimate relationships – is one of the most pervasive human rights violations, and is an extreme expression of the unequal gender relations in society. Despite consistent efforts, it remains a concern for the entire EU, including the European formerly Sovietized countries, with a range of specific issues that affect it. The economic empowerment of women is positioned as a strategy against IPV at both the global and EU level, with a range of legal instruments having been adopted. While it affects IPV, it is also necessary to consider the detrimental effect of cultural norms, which include the broadly patriarchal nature of society and its manifestations, such as unpaid work or the double-shift phenomenon. If these persist (as in the case of the formerly Sovietized countries), the economic empowerment of women will fail to affect long-lasting change.

Keywords: Intimate Partner Violence Against Women, Domestic Violence, Women Rights, Women Empowerment, Economic Empowerment, Socio-Economic Empowerment, Economic Independence of Women.

Introduction

According to feminist theory, one root cause of violence against women and girls is inequality between men and women. In particular, discrimination and economic inequalities, including a lack of economic independence, can increase women's vulnerability to violence (OSCE, 2018). Worldwide, intimate partner violence (IPV), which is defined in this article as violence against women within intimate relationships,[3] is the most common form of violence against women, and is related to such factors as regional poverty and economic disadvantage (Benson, 2003, p. 207). As of 2025, in Europe (though statistical data must be interpreted with caution here),[4] the lifetime prevalence IPV is 17.7%. This number is even higher (21%; Fundamental Rights Agency [FRA], 2024) in the so-called formerly

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[3] In this article, the World Health Organization's (WHO, n.d.) definition will be used: 'Intimate partner violence refers to behaviour within an intimate relationship that causes physical, sexual or psychological harm, including acts of physical aggression, sexual coercion, psychological abuse and controlling behaviours. This definition covers violence by both current and former spouses and partners'. Furthermore, it shall mean violence that is directed against a woman because she is a woman, or that affects women disproportionately. Finally, due to the objective of the paper, the authors seek to underscore the domestic aspect of the definition of IPV.
[4] E.g., as will be discussed further, the Scandinavian states demonstrate high rates of IPV because of the low acceptability of IPV in society.

Sovietized countries. It is important to note that the authors intentionally reject the term 'post-Soviet states' due to its colonial connotations and instead advocate for the term 'formerly Sovietized', which includes the Baltic states and Soviet satellites – Members of the Warsaw pact – and aligns with the Central and Eastern Europe region (CEE; see Table 1).[5]

On a vaster scale, according to the UN Women (2024), gender-based violence worldwide affects 1 in 3 women in their lifetime. Moreover, despite general homicide rates decreasing, femicide cases have been rising continuously around the world in the last two decades. In 2023 alone, the UN registered 51,000 cases of the intentional killing of women or girls. While this number has decreased by 38,000 in comparison to the data from 2022, the fact remains that 60% of these murders are committed by (formerly) intimate partners or perpetrators from the victim's own environment (in comparison, only 12% of male homicides are perpetrated in the private sphere; Beckmann, 2024; UN Women, 2024).

According to data from 2025, two formerly Sovietized countries – Latvia (3.6) and Lithuania (1.5) – rank first and second in the EU in terms of the number of femicides per 100,000 women (World Population Review, 2025; Jakštienė, 2019).[6] In April 2020, figures such as these led the UN to describe the worldwide increase in domestic violence as a 'shadow pandemic' alongside COVID-19 (UN Women, 2020b, 2021).

The situation in reality may be even more disturbing when considering the rate of underreporting: only 14% of women in the EU (EIGE, 2023) and less than 10% worldwide (UN Women, 2020a) reported their most serious incident of IPV to the police. Furthermore, these victims may not receive adequate support (Gracia, 2004, pp. 536–537) due to cultural and societal attitudes towards gender roles as well as the shame and fear associated with domestic violence in general.

At what point does the economic factor come into play when elaborating on the IPV phenomenon? At the micro level, the economic factor (economic dependence) may pressure victims into staying in abusive relationships, which further worsens their situation and perpetuates the cycle of violence. At the macro level, IPV has profoundly detrimental economic effects on society as a whole. For example, the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) has estimated that it costs the EU €151 billion a year, making up 87% of the total cost of gender-based violence (EIGE, 2021).

By investigating these issues, the article aims to elaborate on the thesis that the economic empowerment of women constitutes an important factor[7] in responding to IPV, and that it should be at the heart of every national policy and piece of legislation. The example used to explore this topic is the context of women's empowerment in the formerly Sovietized states, as their specifics and peculiarities are of interest. Socially, these states missed the feminist wave of the 1980s and early 1990s, when women's rights began to be seen as human rights globally and violence against women became an indicator of gender subordination, because they were focused on gaining independence from the Soviet regime. These formerly Sovietized states not only shared comparable economic and political circumstances during the regime transitions of 1989–1991, but also have common histories of state-administered feminism under socialism, with all its implications. The first of these implications centres on the fact that women's rights were instrumentalized to improve the image of socialist regimes, without actually enacting substantive changes in women's lives. As Leinarte (2021) notes well, 'the regime never attempted to change the foundations of patriarchal stereotypes about men's and women's roles: from the very beginning of gender equality, the goal of Soviet policies was to free women from the confines

[5] In other words, instead of the term 'post-Soviet states', referring to the 15 European and Asian countries with contrasting backgrounds that emerged and re-emerged from the collapse of Soviet Union in 1991, we suggest the terms 'formerly Sovietized states' (referring to the Baltic States and other Soviet satellite states) and 'deSovietizing states' (referring to Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan). For further clarification, see Sagatienė (2023).

[6] For comparison, Germany's figure is 0.8 and Sweden's is 0.5.

[7] However, it is not the only factor. As will further be discussed in the article, gender equality, the existence of patriarchal norms, education, etc., are other significant factors in responding to domestic violence in general.

of the "bourgeois" family in order to transform them into a large, and until then, unexploited source of labour power' (p. 21). Second, women were still expected to fulfil traditional roles within the family and society, even as they entered the workforce and gained legal rights. Third, although these states promoted the participation of women in the workforce and education, women were underrepresented by quotas in key political institutions and lacked meaningful opportunities to shape policy agendas and governance structures. Fourth, despite rhetoric promoting equality, women faced lower wages and limited career advancement opportunities (e.g., by the end of the 1960s, women across the Soviet Union received approximately 60% of the wages of men, and this percentage did not change until the 1990s; Leinarte, 2021, p. 21). Finally, these states frequently lacked mechanisms for accountability and transparency in addressing gender-based violence, including IPV and discrimination, leaving women vulnerable to exploitation and abuse (IPV was simply considered a 'household conflict' – a private family matter, where male violence against a partner was normalized and legitimized by the patriarchal society; Fabian, 2010).

Of course, it is impossible to receive a complete picture of IPV behind the iron curtain, but reliable data was collected just after the collapse of the Soviet Union from within the jurisdiction of already independent states. This data is still available and presents intimidating numbers. In particular, according to a Lithuanian representative survey conducted in 1996 (a few years after re-gaining independence), psychological IPV in the country occurred in 41.7% of relationships, physical IPV in 35.6%, and sexual IPV in 25.8% (correspondingly, a 20% incidence of sexual IPV was reported in a Baltic survey conducted in 1994; Vilniaus universitetas ir Moterų studijų centras, 1996, pp. 16–17). What is most important within the scope of the present research is that the aforementioned Soviet regimes involving the fake emancipation of women and religious suppression led to a backlash in the post-Soviet period. Among other impacts, this led to the increased political influence of the church, which did not help the IPV rate because so-called 'traditional values' (Skulte et al., 2023, pp. 196–197, 206) contrasted the imagined and thus inexplicable 'liberal values' of the EU, such as gender equality. The 'conservative' face of society then began to be perceived as a protest against former Soviet policies; therefore, 'women did not play a central role in the democratization process in Eastern Europe; no widespread feminist organizations emerged' (Cooray & Potrafke, 2011). The authors contest that this is the reason why the scale of women's empowerment, as a tool to reduce the occurrence of IPV, is so specific in the formerly Sovietized states, which are lagging behind and only now trying to catch the once-missed train of feminism.

The methodology used in this article involves a comparative, interdisciplinary legal analysis closely integrated with core findings from feminist sociology. Based on the analysis of statistical data, global and regional (EU) policy documents, and legal regulation – along with the consideration of the historical context of the formerly Sovietized states – the article argues that a better understanding of the factors influencing the efficacy of economic empowerment in any given state would add relevant knowledge which would be useful in orientating public education and strategies, including legislation, prevention efforts, and empowerment programmes, to impact IPV and to empower women. The authors incorporate the case studies of formerly Sovietized states, Warsaw Pact members from the CEE region, to illustrate regional variation, and use secondary data sources, including national data and statistics from the EIGE, to support their claims. Qualitative assessments of legislative changes are combined with theoretical frameworks such as status inconsistency theory, relative resource theory, or Hochschild's (1989) 'second shift' to offer a multidimensional view on the research topic. The article concludes by presenting various socio-economic empowerment approaches to address the intersection between poverty and IPV more effectively. During the preparation of this work, the authors used an AI-assisted technology (DeepL language tool) to check grammar, spelling, and style. After using this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed, and take full responsibility for the content of the publication, declaring adherence to the highest standards of scientific integrity.

1. IPV as Gender (In)equality and International Standards

The scale of violence experienced by women, as discussed above, confirms that IPV is a gendered phenomenon. Undoubtedly, the relationship between men and women has long been characterized by the unequal distribution of power (Huis et al., 2020). Therefore, it is not surprising that the concept of women's economic empowerment has emerged as a result of the fight against gender inequality (UN Women, 2012). The language of 'gender equality' and 'women's empowerment' was launched by the feminist movement in the 1980s as a way of getting women's rights onto the international development agenda. Therefore, in the context of thousands of years of persistent and universal inequality, the economic empowerment of women coupled with efforts to eradicate IPV and gender-based violence in a broader sense seem very recent initiatives. Moreover, this comparatively recent effort does not yet seem to have become deeply rooted; on the contrary, the UN Women and UN DESA reports reveal that gender disparities are now worsening in the face of cascading global crises – the COVID-19 pandemic, economic crises, climate change, and conflict. As a result, it could take close to 300 years to achieve full gender equality in line with SDG No. 17 if the current rate of progress continues (UN, 2022).

What are the most pressing issues when it comes to gender inequality in the economic sphere? According to the Eurobarometer survey on Gender inequality, this issue continues to exist in Europe, with: women still being paid on average around 16% less than men per hour of work across the entire economy; women continuing to be underrepresented in leadership positions, including decision-making functions in politics and in corporate boardrooms; and women holding only 27% of seats in national parliaments and governments, 18% of board seats, and 3% of CEO positions. A recent research study on the CEE region (formerly Sovietized countries) confirms these results (McKinsey & Company, 2021), adding that although women make up more than 60% of college graduates in the CEE region, only around 37% of all managers are female, women hold around one-fifth of the executive roles in region and 8% of CEO positions, and 44% of leading companies in the CEE area do not have a single woman in an executive role. As these findings suggest, women are as ambitious as men, but they have more hurdles to cross for promotion. Simultaneously, persisting stereotypes surrounding traditional gender roles are at their peak, meaning that women still carry a disproportionate share of the burden of unpaid housework and caring for children, the elderly, and other dependents. With this 'double shift' problem on the rise, it warrants further discussion as a stumbling block on the path towards women's empowerment.

For many years, the UN faced serious challenges in its efforts to promote gender equality globally, primarily due to limited funding and the absence of a centralized authority to guide its gender equality initiatives. To overcome these obstacles, in July 2010, the United Nations General Assembly established UN Women, also known as the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women.[8]

The UN standard framework that advances gender equality includes the CEDAW Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (UN, 1979) and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (UN, 1995).[9] The Convention has provisions on employment in Article 11, economic and social benefits in Article 13, and rural women in Article 14, and mandates that governments pass laws to guarantee the complete growth and progress of women. The Beijing Platform for Action is the most comprehensive roadmap towards gender equality. It provides twelve interlinked critical areas that need to be addressed in national strategies to raise the position of women, such as: women and poverty, the education and training of women, women and health, violence against women, women and the economy, women in power and decision-making, women and the media, and women and the environment.

[8] When it comes to earlier UN initiatives, the 1946 ECOSOC resolution 11, which affirmed the political, economic, social, and educational rights of women (II) and established a functional Commission on the Status of Women, should be mentioned.

[9] This document saw 189 nations sign pledges under 12 crucial areas of concern for women, including violence against women and their participation in the economy.

The four key International Labour Organization (ILO) gender equality conventions are the Equal Remuneration Convention (No. 100), the Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention (No. 111), the Workers with Family Responsibilities Convention (No. 156), and the Maternity Protection Convention (No. 183). Conventions 100 and 111 are also among the eight fundamental Conventions of the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work (ILO, 2022).

Moreover, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (UN, 1966) upholds the equal right of men and women to the enjoyment of all of the economic, social, and cultural rights set forth in it. It specifically calls for fair wages and equal remuneration for work of equal value without distinction of any kind, as well as requiring that women are guaranteed conditions of work not inferior to those enjoyed by men.

As was recently reaffirmed by the UN,[10] empowering women in the economy and closing gender gaps in the world of work are key to achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals – particularly Goal 5 (UN DESA, n.d.),[11] to achieve gender equality, and Goal 8, to promote full and productive employment and decent work for all. Additionally, Goal 1 on ending poverty, Goal 2 on food security, Goal 3 on ensuring health, and Goal 10 on reducing inequalities tie into this aim.

From the perspective of the Council of Europe (CoE, 2018, para. 23), the economic independence and empowerment of women are prerequisites for gender equality and for the creation of equitable and sustainable societies. In this regard, the organization's legal instruments and policy guidance aim to achieve the advancement and empowerment of women and the effective realisation of gender equality in Member States. This includes conventions and recommendations adopted by the Committee of Ministers and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (CoE, 2010a, 2010b). For example, the Committee of Ministers' Recommendation on Preventing and Combating Sexism (2019, CM/Rec(2019)1) calls for specific actions in various areas such as language and communication, the internet and social media, the workplace, the public sector, and educational institutions to serve as crucial steps towards creating an enabling environment for the economic empowerment of women.

The European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) guarantees the principle of non-discrimination on the basis of sex by both Article 14 and Protocol 12 to the Convention. In addition, the European Social Charter establishes the enjoyment of economic and social rights without discrimination. The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (hereinafter the Istanbul Convention; CoE, 2011) is widely recognised as the most comprehensive international instrument to tackle violence against women and domestic violence in its many forms, including IPV.[12] In 2016, the Commission proposed the EU's accession to the Istanbul Convention, after which the Commission and the Presidency of the Council signed the Convention on behalf of the EU in 2017. Despite this fact, five EU Member States (all from the group of formerly Sovietized states: Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Lithuania, and Slovakia) have not ratified it, and the rest of the EU is facing difficulties in the implementation of the Convention (CoE, 2021). In May 2024, the Council of the EU adopted Directive (EU) 2024/1385, which aims to achieve the objectives of the Istanbul Convention within the EU's remit by complementing the existing EU acquis and Member States' national legislation in the areas covered by the Convention by 14 June 2027. Another revolutionary document that the EC has introduced is the long over-due Directive (EU) 2022/2381 on improving the

[10] In September 2024, the UN Member States recognised that the elimination of violence against women is an essential component of achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls, which are crucial for progress across all SDGs and targets (UN, 2024).

[11] This goal aims to stop child marriage and violence (including its most common form – emotional violence against women and girls).

[12] The Parties to the Istanbul Convention oblige themselves 'to contribute to the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women and promote substantive equality between women and men, including by empowering women' (Article 1, part 1b). Article 6 calls on authorities to promote and implement policies aimed at achieving equality between women and men and at empowering women. This obligation complements the obligation to condemn and prohibit discrimination contained in Article 4, para. 2.

gender balance among the directors of listed companies and related measures, which will be discussed later in this paper in more detail.

When it comes to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the OSCE Decision No. 10/11 on Promoting Equal Opportunity for Women in the Economic Sphere recognizes that women's participation in the economic sphere contributes significantly towards economic recovery, sustainable growth, and the creation of cohesive societies, and thus it is essential to security and stability in the OSCE region.

OSCE Decision No. 4/18 called on the participating OSCE members to take measures to provide equal access to quality education for all girls and strengthen the economic empowerment and economic independence of women, including by ensuring non-discriminatory employment policies and practices and providing equal access to education and training, equal remuneration for equal work, and equal access to and control over economic resources (OSCE, 2018, para. 10).

Important recommendations were made to national authorities in OSCE Decision No. 10/11 on Promoting Equal Opportunity for Women in the Economic Sphere (OSCE, 2011), which reflects a strategic and multi-faceted approach to advancing women's economic rights and opportunities. Measures include: gathering and analysing data to understand barriers hindering women's economic potential; evaluating budget distribution for the promotion of gender equality in the economy and implementing measures for equal economic participation and social protection for women, including supporting quality employment and self-employment opportunities; implementing or enhancing policies and legal frameworks to ensure equal labour market participation for women, including expanding childcare and nursing facilities; and promoting shared domestic, parental, and caregiving duties, which involves expanding paternity leave, non-discriminatory employment policies, and balancing employment with family responsibilities. This Decision also involves ensuring that structural adjustments do not discriminate against women. Conducting targeted awareness campaigns about the benefits of gender equality measures is of crucial importance as it allows for a focus on preventing social exclusion and discrimination against women. The Decision also mentions fostering dialogue with the private sector to ensure equal professional advancement for women and address pay disparities.

It is noteworthy that in 2021, the Swedish Chair of the OSCE took a progressive step by proposing a draft declaration focused on the economic empowerment of women. This initiative underscored the importance of enhancing women's roles in society, acknowledging their critical contribution to global security and conflict resolution. However, the proposal was ultimately blocked by Russia and the Vatican (Zarb, 2022). This incident aligns with the UN's concern about the slow pace of progress towards gender equality. Given such setbacks, the UN's prediction that achieving gender equality could take as long as 300 years seems increasingly plausible.

2. Conceptualizing Women's Empowerment

The economic empowerment of women constitutes just one element of the wider concept of women's empowerment. Conceptualising the empowerment of women requires acknowledging the systemic inequalities and power imbalances that women encounter and taking steps to address these challenges, with the aim of promoting both gender equality and women's rights. It is widely acknowledged that empowering women is crucial for various reasons, such as (but not restricted to) promoting gender equality, reducing poverty, improving health and overall well-being, and fostering increased engagement in the political and social spheres.

A key question remains: How can women's empowerment be measured? Researchers from different parts of the world analysing women's empowerment have developed different approaches in order to do so. Some authors perceive it as the ability to make 'strategic life choices' (Hansen et al., 2021; Kabeer, 1999; Kair & Khan, 2019), while some go further by diversifying it into personal (developing a sense of self-confidence, capability, and undoing the effects of oppression), relational (the ability to negotiate and influence the nature of and decisions made in a relationship), and collective relationships

(individuals working together to achieve an outcome as opposed to what each could have achieved on their own; Rowlands, 1995).[13] Kabir and Khan (2019) distinguish the empowerment of women at an individual level and within the household, which entails the ability to have control over financial issues and reproductive health. Turning to the research on the correlation between women's empowerment and the phenomenon of IPV, scholars typically examine proxies for indicators of women's empowerment, such as: economic independence (employment status, ownership of properties, and cash earnings); educational attainment and literacy; societal attitudes and justification for IPV (e.g., arguing with husband, refusal of sex, neglecting children, etc. as justification for domestic violence); and bargaining power relating to health, freedom of movement, and economic decision making (on family earnings or on household purchases; Vyas & Watts, 2009; Dalal, 2011).

This article focuses primarily on one element of women's empowerment: economic empowerment. While this is typically measured via educational attainment, employment, and income security, the authors would uphold the position of those researchers who apply more specific approaches by indicating 13 elements correlated with progress on women's economic empowerment. These can be categorised into: fundamental enablers (delayed marriage, education, family planning, legal rights for women to work, mobility and safety); opportunity and inclusion (decent working opportunities, digital inclusion, financial inclusion, property and assets, vocational and life skills acquisition); and the equality and security component (alleviation of unpaid care work, policies to promote workplace equality, social and workforce protection). These aspects all interplay with one another and reinforce the benefits of each, contributing to the greater economic empowerment of women (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, n.d.). Oxfam International (Kidder et al., 2018) is of the same opinion – women experience successful economic empowerment when: they have the freedom to decide how to use their time, resources, assets, and income; they are able to manage risk; and they can raise their standard of living and improve their financial situation. Thus, in order for this to happen, women must also have the independence and confidence to make decisions about their own lives independently of their partners while also having equal gender rights and being free from abuse.

One recent development that can be observed from a global perspective is that the interconnection between the empowerment of women and the concept of sustainability has been highlighted at the UN level. It has been shown explicitly that the empowerment of women, including in its economic aspect, helps to advance sustainable development and economies; thus, gender equality benefits everyone (UN Women, n.d.). This is the reason why international documents and standards such as the example outlined by Oxfam – which usually refer to the 'economic empowerment of women', or 'women's empowerment in the workplace, marketplace, community' in general (UN Women & Global Compact, n.d.) – derive *inter alia* from the gender equality dimensions of the 2030 Agenda and the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

3. The Economic Empowerment of Women and IPV: Practical Implications

In the Beijing Declaration, the UN advocated indirectly for the economic empowerment and advancement of women as a barrier against violence against women, and thus IPV *inter alia*. The drafters of the most comprehensive convention in the field, the Istanbul Convention, were also convinced of the need to empower women in order to put an end to all forms of violence covered by the scope of this Convention, and believed that it is essential to place an obligation on Parties that goes beyond the specific measures to be taken to prevent and combat such violence in order to achieve this goal. This ties in with the purposes of the Convention – in particular, the promotion of substantive equality between women and men, including by empowering women (Article 1(b)). In addition, rounding off the list of general preventive measures, para. 6 of Article 12 calls for the promotion of specific programmes and activities for the empowerment of women. This means empowerment in all aspects of life, including political and economic empowerment. This obligation is a reflection of the greater aim of achieving women's agency and reducing their vulnerability to violence (CoE, 2011).

[13] Another researcher terms it 'personal empowerment, empowerment in relation to others, and societal empowerment' (Hansen et al., 2021).

Research exploring the connection between economic empowerment and IPV in the Western world is comparatively limited. However, existing literature argues that it is indeed linked to the socioeconomic position of the couple (Barbier et al., 2022; Costa et al., 2016; Vyas & Watts, 2009). Furthermore, economic empowerment can be associated with a reduced risk of IPV and its recurrence. As an example, Sanders (2015), building on prior studies, underscores how financial or economic aspects intersect with IPV in at least four distinct ways: (i) poor women are vulnerable to abuse; (ii) women are often prevented from leaving an abusive partner due to economic dependence; (iii) a woman's economic status, as well as her ability to obtain or maintain employment, is significantly associated with, and affected by, intimate partner violence; and (iv) partners use a variety of intentional tactics that negatively affect the economic well-being of women. Sanders also adds that women on welfare are more likely to experience serious physical violence from their partners. Reichel (2017), analysing data from an EU-wide survey on violence against women, obtained similar results, concluding that there was a higher prevalence of violence among couples with lower socioeconomic status in the EU Member States. According to Reichel, women who reported problems with their household income also reported higher rates of IPV, and women suffered more often from violence if they did not have an equal say in their household income.

The economic empowerment of women can help to reduce IPV in several ways. First, it allows for increased financial independence. Naturally, women who are economically empowered and have greater access to resources are less likely to be financially dependent on their partners. This, in turn, reduces the power imbalance in the relationship and can reduce the likelihood of IPV. Women who are financially dependent on their partners are often at greater risk of experiencing IPV, as they may feel trapped in abusive relationships and unable to leave due to financial constraints. As Sanders noted, particularly in the case of low-income women, IPV victims frequently lack the means to start a new life for themselves and their children. Economic empowerment and longer-term support are thus equally important for short-term solutions such as crisis housing. Conversely, women with adequate resources are more likely to start living independently and avoid returning to an abusive partner. Second, economic empowerment raises the self-esteem of women, improves their sense of self-worth, and strengthens decision-making abilities, making it less likely that they will accept or tolerate abuse from their partner and thus enabling them to break the circle of violence. Finally, as is also argued further in this article, economic empowerment can challenge traditional gender roles and norms that perpetuate IPV. When women are seen as equal economic partners, this can shift societal attitudes and reduce the tolerance of IPV from a long-term perspective.[14]

The results of international research and the suggestions that they propose are straightforward enough. Unfortunately, however, practical experience reveals that strategies and formulas for the empowerment of women that rely solely on providing resources to women, while clearly having the potential to initiate the process of changing structural gender hierarchies, often do not work as smoothly in practice. This occurs due to the externalities described below, which are often overlooked.

4. A Lack of Efficiency in the Economic Empowerment of Women: What are we Missing?

4.1. Paradox Theory

A common problem for policies that seek to empower women is that they do not fully take into account the social and structural perspectives used to explain IPV. Programmes aimed at strengthening women's economic empowerment tend to stick to the easiest track and rely simply on providing resources for women. Of course, as the research shows, providing resources leads to the elimination of economic violence, which in turn is interconnected with physical violence. However, this is not considered to be a 'magic bullet', and its effects might be limited to developing countries (e.g., Pakistan, Jordan, Ghana, Ecuador, the Philippines; Khalid & Choudhry, 2018; Lenze & Klasen, 2017; Oduro et al., 2015; Antai

[14] This presents a closed cycle: women's empowerment shifts societal attitudes, and overly persistent social attitudes, in turn, block the empowerment process. For practical examples of women's empowerment in CEE, see Apolevič (2023).

et al., 2014). Meanwhile, social theories such as resource theory and relative resource theory, which are supported in numerous studies (Anderson, 1997; Hotaling & Sugarman, 1986; McCloskey, 1996), argue that married men who have few resources to offer (resource theory), or fewer resources than their wives (relative resource theory), are more likely than their resource-rich counterparts to use violence.[15] In other words, violence serves as a method of compensation for their lack of resources. Paradox theory is supported by a plethora of evidence showing that women's economic emancipation and access to employment outside the home, surprisingly, can lead to unintended consequences for their safety behind closed doors. In the case of the EU, research has found that the higher status of women in society is associated with higher rates of domestic violence against them (Gracia & Herrero, 2006). IPV experience from deSovietizing (Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova; Ismayilova, 2015) and developing countries (Rappaport, 1981; Dalal, 2011; Qasim & Asubaro, 2019; Green et al. 2015; Gupta et al., 2013) illustrates this paradox most acutely. This points to a need for policymakers to understand in more depth the structural conditions behind empowerment interventions and the increased incidence of IPV that go beyond access to the public sphere and independent income generation.

4.2. Inconsistency Theory (Gendered Resources Theory)

Economic empowerment interventions, primarily designed to provide women with the resources and tools to better negotiate their power position in relation to their partners and in society more widely, often fail to enact long-lasting change. To understand this trend, policymakers and other stakeholders, beyond paradox theory, must be aware of status inconsistency aftermath. This another sociological theory that indicates that IPV is more likely to occur when an individual's status is inconsistent with new norms or when the standard norms that govern the family structure become ambiguous.[16]

After a broad review of theoretical perspectives, Atkinson and Greenstein (2005) warn us not to downplay the importance of gender ideologies[17] in their explanations of IPV:

> On the one hand, for marriages involving egalitarian husbands – that is, those who believe that husbands and wives should share responsibility for both market and nonmarket production – husbands' relative income will not be associated with the likelihood of wife abuse. On the other hand, for marriages with traditional husbands – those who believe that husbands should be the primary breadwinner [who equate masculinity and providership] – husbands' relative income should be strongly and negatively associated with the likelihood of wife abuse. From the perspective of gendered resource theory, wives who are primary breadwinners and who have traditional husbands are at the greatest risk of abuse. (p. 1139)

Overall, the employment statuses of women and their partners will conflict with traditional patriarchal values and norms held in those societies that relegate women to the home to keep them dependent on their husbands, as the husbands seek to reaffirm their power within the household (Dalal, 2011). Therefore, policymakers must first seek to understand the specific cultural context of the country where they seek to introduce interventions for the economic empowerment of women as anti-IPV measures.

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[15] As the WHO notes, this particularly occurs when they start to misuse alcohol due to job loss. The WHO has found that problematic alcohol use is consistently and strongly associated with IPV, and that the risk of excessive drinking increases with the number of job losses and length of unemployment, serving as a double risk for women.

[16] This theory implies that if the husband lacks educational, income, or prestige resources, he may resort to violence to assert power in the family. Differences between spouses in income and educational attainment represent a disruption of traditional hierarchical roles and the distribution of power in intimate relationships that can result in violence (Rodríguez-Menés & Safranoff, 2012; Yick, 2001; Bailey & Peterson, 1995; Hindin & Adair, 2002; Riger & Krieglstein, 2000; Venis & Horton, 2002).

[17] Gender ideologies (as distinct from gender identities) are how one identifies oneself with regard to marital and family roles traditionally linked to gender. Historically, the idea that cisgender heterosexual men must be the breadwinner and provide for their families has been promoted by the patriarchal societal system. This causes many men to conform to such gendered norms, whether they strongly believe in them or are merely subconsciously operating within such an environment (Kroska, 2007)

Thus, within scope of this article it would be more reasonable to use the umbrella term 'socio-economic empowerment of women'. Furthermore, these policymakers must act at an acceptable pace, keeping in mind that a rapid change in traditional gender roles can lead to backlash, including via an increase in IPV, as men face social disapproval and feelings of inadequacy and frustration (Krishnan et al., 2010; an example of such a backlash will be discussed later with the case of Poland).

As is indicated in Table 1, the rate of physical and/or sexual IPV against women in formerly Sovietized countries remains above the EU average.

Table 1. IPV in formerly Sovietized countries, 2024[18]

	Women who have experienced physical violence or threats and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner in their lifetime (%)	Women who have experienced physical violence or threats, sexual violence, and/or psychological violence by an intimate partner in their lifetime (%)	Women who have experienced physical and/or sexual violence in the past 12 months and have not told anyone (%)
Bulgaria	9.3	20.5	31.8
Czech Republic	13.4	33.5	42.0
Estonia	21.8	41.2	26.2
Hungary	41.1	54.6	42.9
Latvia	16.1	30.1	23.6
Lithuania	16.6	30.7	28.0
Poland (no comparable data[19])	11.2	19.6	16.0
Romania	37.0	48.9	34.8
Slovakia	30.7	50.8	n/a
Slovenia	13.4	27.9	31.0
Average for formerly Sovietized states	21.0	35.8	27.6
EU average	17.7	31.8	31.0

This research confirms that in Europe (including formerly Sovietized countries), higher rates of domestic violence against women are associated with low egalitarianism (Gracia & Herrero, 2006; Sanders, 2015). This demonstrates the classical example of how inconsistency theory works in practice. On the one hand, interspousal equivalency in terms of socioeconomic status has been advocated for in these countries as a strategy to, amongst other aims, reduce IPV. As a result of these measures, women from formerly Sovietized countries already look economically (resource-wise) empowered (e.g., the EIGE money domains below do not show bad results compared with the EU average and, phenomenally, the subdomain of access to employment is even higher than the EU average).

[18] IPV data from FRA (2024) survey, and EIGE index (2024).

[19] According to a national survey, the IPV rate in Poland is 63% (KANTAR, 2019). At least under the previous right-wing autocratic government, Poland's femicide ratio is unavailable since the statistics office was not obliged to collect disaggregated data based on sex.

Table 2. The EIGE Gender Equality Index in formerly Sovietized countries[20]

	Domain of power, subdomain of political power (share of ministers and members of parliament, local municipalities)	Domain of power, subdomain of economic power (share of members of boards in largest quoted companies, supervisory board, or board of directors; share of board members of central bank)	Domain of power, subdomain of social power (share of board members of research funding organisations, publicly owned broadcasting organisations; share of members in the highest-decision making body of the national Olympic sport organisations)	Domain of money, subdomain of financial resources (monthly earnings and income)	Domain of money, subdomain of economic resources (risk of poverty and income distribution)	Domain of work (equal access to employment and good working conditions)	Domain of work (participation of women and men in the sectors of education, human health, and social work activities; quality of work, measured by flexible working time arrangements and job prospects)	Domain of time (allocation of time spent doing care and domestic work)
Bulgaria	55.9	52.5	69.4	56.4	78.7	85.6	58.7	76.5
Czech Republic	40.8	30.6	33.9	65.5	96.5	84.5	56.5	62.8
Estonia	61.3	16.9	34.1	67.1	81.6	94.2	65.4	92.2
Hungary	24.9	20.3	39.2	59.2	92.0	87.5	67.1	68.7
Latvia	43.7	51.6	57.1	61.0	79.4	91.2	65.8	69.9
Lithuania	62.0	52.8	52.3	63.9	78.7	92.8	62.5	68.2
Poland	47.0	43.8	30.3	68.1	93.3	83.6	58.5	74.0
Romania	32.6	18.1	60.0	64.1	82.6	75.7	60.2	80.7
Slovakia	37.3	26.3	28.6	56.5	98.1	88.6	59.4	69.3
Slovenia	62.3	53.8	61.2	73.8	97.9	88.5	65.6	77.1
Average of formerly Sovietized states	46.8	36.7	46.6	63.6	87.9	87.2	62.0	73.9
EU average	62.6	57.6	64.0	78.0	89.2	83.3	66.1	78.7

On the other hand, because of certain deeply rooted cultural norms inherited from the Soviet Union, policies for the socio-economic empowerment of women in formerly Sovietized countries do not work as efficiently as they should. These countries are still facing patriarchal challenges rising from the common history of state feminism under socialism, where the participation of women in the domain of power was only nominal and the regime never attempted to change the foundations of patriarchal stereotypes about the roles of men and women in both the public and private spheres. To illustrate this point, opportunities for women to participate in decision making were frozen in a formal quota system: the proportion of women deputed to the Supreme Soviet of the Lithuanian SSR in 1967 was 32.4%; in 1971, 32.33%; in 1975, 34%; and in 1980, 35 % (Leinarte, 2021, p. 157). Additionally, there were only one or two women in other governing structures, the highest Communist Party organs, and Councils of Ministers. During the restoration of independence, 14 women (10%) were elected to the Lithuanian

[20] The Gender Equality Index presented here derives from 2023 EIGE estimates. The UN also has a Gender Inequality Index, which is a composite measure reflecting inequality between women and men in three different dimensions: reproductive health (maternal mortality ratio and adolescent birth rate), empowerment (share of parliamentary seats held by women and share of population with at least some secondary education), and labour market participation (labour force participation rate; UN Development Programme, Human Development Report 2020).

Supreme Council in 1990; their number actually fell to 10 (7.1%) after the 1992 Parliamentary elections (Šeiduikienė, 1999, p. 40).

At present, quantifying the levels of patriarchy in formerly Sovietized states is not a realistic task, but research on gender equality and patriarchal systems, such as that conducted by EIGE, often uses various indicators to assess the status of women relative to men in different areas such as political representation, economic participation, education, healthcare, and legal rights. When studying the first three columns of Table 2, it becomes clear that the *domain of power* indicator within the Gender Equality Index amongst the formerly Sovietized states fluctuates the most, indicating unacceptably low (in relation to the EU average) egalitarianism and slow changes in gender norms toward the higher status of women in society. It comes as no surprise that even in the case of economically (again – not socio-economically) empowered women in formerly Sovietized states, cultural norms still dictate the power dynamics within marital relationships (stemming from a shared history of Soviet occupation) which, in turn, still fosters unhealthy attitudes towards IPV.

In this context, the recent backlash in Poland deserves separate attention. Most probably, the introduction of policies to empower women and rapid changes in traditional gender roles led to IPV in families. Unfortunately, this was also accompanied by the official position of the autocratic right-wing government under the Law and Order Party (PiS), which came into power in 2015. From then until 2024, the course of women's empowerment was considered too drastic for a government based on 'traditional values', and, as EIGE notes, gender mainstreaming was abandoned.[21] Polish NGOs – which advocate for women's empowerment with a strong emphasis on enabling them to access, manage, and participate fully in economic activities while also advancing their political, economic, and social rights – were deprived of state funding and forced to withdraw their activities. The backlash further resulted in a wave of IPV against women: although official statistics are unavailable, according to one national survey (KANTAR, 2019) up to 63% of women in Poland have experienced physical or sexual violence at the hands of an intimate partner at some point in their lives. Furthermore, in addition to grossly neglecting women's rights (such as via the near-total ban on abortion in 2020), the PiS essentially upheld the backlash by beginning to treat IPV not through the lens of violence against women, but through the lens of 'family violence' or 'crimes against the family'.[22] This reflected the general unwillingness of the government and the Polish Catholic Church to recognise IPV as primarily an issue of gender inequality (Anitha et al., 2025), and many international bodies thus highlighted the backlash issue numerous times.[23]

A reliable litmus test of whether a government seriously considers the detrimental effect of the patriarchy in fighting IPV through the socio-economic empowerment of women (speaking in sociological terms, this invokes not only paradox, but also inconsistency theory) is to analyse the ways in which the state accepts the obligations embedded in the Istanbul Convention.[24] As the Istanbul Convention ratification process showed,[25] the most striking resistance to the Convention can be seen in

[21] The only known gender mainstreaming tools were very limited consultation and engagement with civil society and few awareness-raising initiatives on gender equality. No training on gender equality was provided to government employees, and the integration of a gender perspective in policymaking was applied through occasional gender impact assessments.

[22] E.g., naming the Law and National Action Plan on Combating *Family* Violence and the Blue Card procedure (emphasis added; Government of Poland, 2005). Interestingly, funding for organisations helping women victims of domestic violence was cut, justified by the claim that their services discriminated against men.

[23] The 2021 GREVIO report invited Poland to recognise women's unique experiences with domestic violence and their overexposure to this type of violence, addressing its root causes. After her visit to Poland in February 2023, Reem Alsalem, UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls, also pointed out that unless women and girls enjoy the full spectrum of their human rights, no meaningful progress towards equality and prosperity can be realized in Poland (GREVIO, 2021).

[24] Article 12 of the Istanbul Convention places ratifying states under the obligation to take steps to promote cultural and social change and eradicate prejudices based on gender role stereotypes as a fundamental means of preventing gender-based violence.

[25] To date, the Lithuanian Parliament has not yet ratified the Convention. Poland only ratified it in 2014 after a long

formerly Sovietized states. In general, the CEE region, despite its European geopolitical orientation, has always been on the border between western and eastern civilization in a geographic and mental sense. As other researchers explain, this resistance is due to the massive ideological and artificially created[26] anti-genderism construct, which has reached beyond the traditional circles of conservative anti-feminism that sees women's rights (and their empowerment) as a threat to traditional and Christian family values (Pető, 2015; Von Gall, 2022), or even as a loss of national identity (Grabowska, 2014). Thus, in 2018 the Ordo Iuris Institute, an ultra-conservative Polish civil society organisation, proposed an alternative to the Istanbul Convention called the 'Convention on the Rights of the Family', which views strong families based on marriage as a union between a man and a woman as the best protection against IPV. The document also criticizes the Istanbul Convention for weakening the family under the guise of combatting violence, and proposes a 'more effective' model for fighting violence based on the proper identification of its actual determents like 'alcoholism, pornography, social atomization, the breakdown of family ties and the sexualization of woman in the public space'. In reality, the document shields the family from state interference and, consequently, weakens the Istanbul Convention (Erk, 2022). Hopefully, with the removal of PiS from power Poland will solve its deeply rooted gender mainstreaming problems.

Meanwhile, and on a more positive note, it is argued that in European countries in the future, the greater economic contribution of women as a result of their socio-economic empowerment 'should be less of a threat to their husbands as the separate spheres ideology continues to weaken' (Atkinson et al., 2005).

4.3. The 'Double Shift' Effect and Unpaid Work

The achievement of the empowerment of women faces a considerable number of stumbling blocks formed by paternalistic attitudes and misogyny that have direct links to IPV (Arsawati & Bunga, 2021, p. 26). For instance, one Polish survey reports concerning acceptance of violence in Polish society[27]; Dobash and Dobash (2015), in their book based on interviews with individuals who have murdered their intimate partners, note that most men who committed intimate partner homicide shared orientations towards women and discriminatory and chauvinistic views. In Lithuania, back in the transitional period of 1996, women victims of IPV 'didn't think that men held them as equal human beings' (22.7% of respondents), but rather as housekeepers satisfying male instincts (43.7%) (Vilniaus universitetas & Moterų studijų centras, 1996, p. 25).[28]

Paternalistic stereotypes are supported not only by socio-economic inequalities, such as the payment gap or the underrepresentation of women in higher positions, but also by the unpaid workload.[29] In relation to the unpaid workload, otherwise known as the 'double shift' phenomenon, many initiatives

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and forceful contestation process and with an interpretive declaration. During the constitutional crisis caused under the ruling of the ultra-conservative party, the Polish Constitutional Tribunal declared Article 6 of the ECHR as unconstitutional (24.11.2021 ruling K 6/21), and the prognosis on the pending case K 11/20, where the constitutionality of Istanbul Convention was challenged, was not promising. This changed at the last moment, when in January 2024 newly elected Prime Minister Donald Tusk finally withdrew the request to examine its constitutionality. In 2018, the Bulgarian Constitutional Court declared the Convention, and especially the concept of gender as used by the Convention, incompatible with the country's Constitution. In 2020, the Hungarian parliament passed a statement blocking the Convention. Moving beyond the EU, Turkey became the first country to withdraw from the Convention, the Russian Federation opposed joining it from the beginning, and the United Kingdom demonstrates prominent reluctance to ratifying it.

[26] This may seem illogical, since the Istanbul Convention deals not with gender, but first of all with domestic violence and inequality, outlining gender in only a few articles. Nevertheless, proponents of the patriarchy have picked it up and developed into a conspiracy theory about substituting biological gender with a social form.

[27] This includes over 10% of men who believe there is no such thing as rape within marriage and that, when it comes to sex, wives should always agree to what their husbands want (KANTAR, 2019)

[28] It needs to be added that the employment rate among the female respondents of the survey was equally as high as it is today: 86.4%.

[29] According to the ILO, 2 billion people each day work on a full-time basis without pay (as equivalent to women's unpaid work; ILO, 2018, p. 43).

seeking to economically empower women forget to address the impact that entering the public sphere and wage-earning activity might have on their domestic care duties. As Kabeer (2005) points out, women's access to paid work may indeed give them a greater sense of self-reliance and greater purchasing power, but if it is undertaken in double shift conditions that erode their health and exploit their labour, the costs of such empowerment strategies may outweigh their benefits (Haile et al., 2012; Krishnan et al. 2010; Ferrant et al, 2014; Frankiewicz, 2020). In other words, the paradox is that it may be better not to have a women's empowerment policy aiming *inter alia* at mitigating IPV at all rather than a women's empowerment policy in the circumstances of paternalistic double shift.

The problem of persisting gender inequalities in paid and unpaid work remains unresolved in the EU, despite the EU gender mainstreaming and economic empowerment policies undertaken. A similar problem remains in the United States. As Blair-Loy et al. (2015) observed, since the publication of *The second shift: Working families and the revolution at home* – a seminal book on the double shift phenomenon in the US written in 1989 by Arlie Hochschild – many aspects of the gender structure still remain the same. The revolution toward gender equality described by Hochschild is still stalled by three factors: (1) women continue to do most of the 'second shift' – the unpaid work of childcare and housework; (2) insufficient flexibility in the workplace for accommodating family caregiving needs; and (3) a deficit of public sector benefits, such as paid parental leave (Hochschild, 1989, p. 235).[30] Furthermore, the 'family myths' that reconcile women's second-shift burden with their explicit commitments to gender equality are still viable.[31] Hochschild's gender revolution, according to Blair-Loy et al., remains stalled by 'new bad news': blue-collar men disappear completely from the second shift. In their new leisure time, these prime working-age, high-school-educated white men do not generally take classes, help with housework, or read to their children. Instead, they perform two activities more than their l960s counterparts: they sleep longer and watch more television. Commentators such as Charles Murray explain this trend as a 'loss of moral values' (Blair-Loy et al., 2015, p. 439). To answer the question of whether this trend has appeared in Europe, *inter alia* among formerly Sovietized states, additional research is needed.

What is wrong with gender division of labour – where men spend more time in paid work and women more time with the children and the home, and at the same time they have similar amounts of leisure? The answer is that they do very different kinds of work, and Blair calls this a 'new kind of stall, in which women still face fewer opportunities for work involvement, pay, and public life while men spend less time with their children' (Blair-Loy et al., 2015, p. 439). The problem here is that women's work in this formula is non-remunerated, and not accounted for in national accounting systems (i.e., they are excluded from the realm of policymaking; Hirway, 2012). Court cases on evaluating unpaid work are still rare in practice, but one that could be highlighted in this context, comes from the Southern Andalusia region of Spain. In this case, the court ordered a man to pay his ex-wife around €200,000 for 25 years of unpaid domestic labour, based on the minimum wage throughout their marriage (the matrimony was governed by a separation of property regime, which in the case of divorce left the wife, who had dedicated herself to looking after the home, children, and the family, with no access to any of the wealth acquired by her career-developing husband). It is symptomatic that information on this ruling, dealing with unpaid domestic labour finally being paid, attracted so much attention in public discourse and made the headlines of global media outlets (France 24, 2023).

How does the double-shift situation look for women in formerly Sovietized countries? As the EIGE data in Table 2 (the domain of time) indicates, with the exception of Estonia (a Scandinavian-pattern state, where the percentage of time spent on household duties is approximately the same between men and

[30] As the author writes, 'women's move into the economy [was] the basic social revolution… However, the workplace they joined, and the men they came home to, had not changed as much or as fast'.

[31] 'Family myths often claim "equal sharing" while describing arrangements that are sharply unequal. These myths frequently include a belief that housework is naturally less burdensome for women than for men. Awareness of inequality is further cloaked by an "economy of gratitude", in which wives evaluate the fairness of their share of housework and child care compared to the experiences of other wives, while husbands compare themselves to other husbands' (Blair-Loy et al., 2015, p. 437).

women – 92.2%), the indicator of allocation of time spent doing care and domestic work in these countries is worse (although not as drastically as in the domain of power) than the EU average. This phenomenon can be explained through the socialist history of the region, when the labour market included women on equal terms but persistent differences between the salaries of men and women remained (women were paid one-third less than their male colleagues on average from the 1960s to the 1990s).

Compounding this discrimination, a double shift followed. As Leinarte (2021) describes, 'a full workday, low wages, two weeks of vacation annually, unaffordable eating establishments, poor selections of home appliances and neo-patriarchal gender roles forced women to accept a double burden of household', which, in the case of Lithuania in 1977, amounted on average to 34 hours and 45 minutes per week without any significant help from husbands.[32] Thus, with the increased number of employed women, their responsibilities in domestic work also grew, leading to the normalization of the double shift as a social and cultural norm.

What happened next, after the collapse of Soviet Union? One group of researchers explain the dynamic of formerly Sovietized countries with the help of the 'retraditionalization' thesis (Klingman, 1994, p. 256). The present authors refer to this as the 'backlash against fake emancipation', according to which women in postsocialist countries, still working full shifts, returned to the domestic sphere, traditional values, family life, and religion. It is also known as the 'domestication' thesis (Brunnbauer, 2002), in which it is assumed that the decreased political participation of women, the feminization of poverty, the rise of female unemployment, the return of the abortion debate, the increased influence of religious institutions, and the emergence of nationalist discourses played a key role. Another group of researchers come to the opposite conclusion: Kwak and Pascall (2005, p. 65) conducted research based on quantitative data (employment, care, household income, time, and political participation) for eight CEE countries, denying the return to 'traditional gender divisions'; and Newell and Reilly (2001) even claim that the situation of women improved based on the fact that differences in earnings along gender lines actually decreased in some Eastern European countries.

The present authors would disagree with the second group of researchers regarding the improved situation of women in formerly Sovietized states, as they still suffer from the unpaid work burden. This is despite claims that their earnings have become more closely approximated to those of men,[33] women are successful in their paid work, women's unemployment rates are low,[34] or, speaking in terms of this article, they already look economically empowered. Bulgaria best illustrates this phenomenon: according to 2019 Eurostat data, 'Bulgarian women are positioning themselves extraordinarily well among women in the EU in terms of labour market positions. In 2017, Bulgaria placed second in the EU-wide ranking of countries with 49% of all managerial positions held by women. In 2018 Bulgaria was among the four countries with the smallest gap between full-time male and female employment in the EU; on average, 63% of Bulgarian women and 71.1% of Bulgarian men between 20 and 64 years old worked on a full-time basis as compared to 56.2% of women in the EU and 74.4% of men' (Nenova, 2021, p. 161). Unfortunately, however, when it comes to unpaid work, the degree of gender differentiation remains unchanged: 'Bulgarian women continue to spend on average twice as much time as men on unpaid work on a daily basis: 4 h and 26 min compared to 2 h and 13 min. … Bulgarian women's daily total workload (paid and unpaid work) is approximately 1 h and 26 min more than men's, resulting in substantial gender differences in leisure time, which grant men one additional hour daily' (p. 161). The Bulgarian situation reflects the ambiguities of women's emancipation under socialism: women's participation in the labour force does not seem to influence the extent to which they perform

[32] For example, in Lithuanian villages, 76% of children under the age of seven were forced to help with domestic work in the home (Leinarte, 2021, p. 145).
[33] According to EIGE indicators from the domain of money in the subdomain of financial resources (monthly earnings and income), there is still a long way to go to reach the EU average.
[34] The EIGE indicators from the domain of work (equal access to employment and good working conditions) are very close to the EU average.

most domestic duties, which raises serious concerns, as Kabeer (2005) warned, about the 'leisure gap' and the well-being of women.

COVID19 shed light on the causes of the double shift or unpaid work situation, and finally solved the old dispute between new and neoclassical family models. Research suggests that it is the presence of social norms (Kleven et al., 2019) or the gender identity concept (Akerlof & Kranton, 2020), rather than differences in time availability or bargaining power,[35] that better explain the gendered specialization patterns observed among households during pandemics. This means that even if a man was unemployed and stayed at home, his teleworking and more economically empowered (higher-earning) wife would still take care of the household. As researchers from Spain, the UK, the US, Italy, and Germany have all observed, 'only in non-traditional families (those with an egalitarian gender-neutral pre-lockdown distribution of home production) was the employment situation of both members relevant in determining the distribution of domestic tasks during lockdown' (Farré et al., 2020).[36] The COVID-19 pandemic negatively impacted STEM women and their productivity, visibility, and recognition within the scientific publishing ecosystem: as Sugimoto and Larivière (2023) pointed out, women not only represent only 31% of global authorship in science, but also published one less paper on average than men in the 13-year period from 2008 to 2020, which includes the COVID-19 pandemic.

Regarding women from post-Sovietized states, the statistics illustrate that the burden of the COVID-19 pandemic fell disproportionately on them[37]: 54% of female (in comparison to only 25% of male) respondents with children under the age of 10 said that the pandemic made them more likely to consider scaling back their paid work (McKinsey & Company, 2021).

At first glance, for policymakers in charge of women's empowerment there are numerous work flexibility policies to help employees balance work with domestic responsibilities (teleworking, a flexible schedule, a four-day working week) and to finally refute the so called 'flexibility stigma' (Cech & Blair-Loy, 2014). In reality, as the research shows, without adequate social norms or a gender identity concept these measures have never been an effective solution – neither in pre-COVID times, nor during the pandemic, nor in the post-pandemic world – as the bulk of caregiving still falls on women and increases the conflict between work and family for them (Lott, 2018; Van Breeschoten & Van Hek, 2019; Chung & van der Lippe, 2018).

4.4. The Acceptability of IPV in Social and Cultural Norms: Victim Blaming

In the authors' opinion, the acceptability of IPV and the practice of victim blaming, which is associated with higher levels of acceptability, is the fourth stumbling block on the way to effective women's empowerment. IPV is always rooted in a social and cultural context, and public attitudes about what is or is not acceptable in intimate relationships reflect these social and cultural norms (Gracia, 2004; Corrin, 1996; CoE, 1999; Dobash & Dobash, 1992). The acceptability of IPV plays an important role in shaping the social environment in which victims are embedded: social environments that accept or even support IPV in some circumstances contribute to creating a climate of tolerance that makes it easier for perpetrators to persist in their violent behaviour, and makes it more difficult for women to disclose it (Straus et al., 1997; Fagan, 1990).

In many countries IPV is still prevalent, and victim blaming attitudes can be observed because many men and women believe that it is acceptable under certain circumstances – for instance, when it involves violence that is not considered to be extreme, severe, or repeated, when a wife burns a meal or goes out without her husband's permission, or when she neglects her children. Sometimes, tolerance for spousal abuse may depend on the source of past violence (Eze-Ajoku et al., 2020). Furthermore, the World Bank

[35] Traditional neoclassical and bargaining family models predict that household members with a lower attachment to the labour market specialise in home production (Becker, 1985).
[36] In this article, the authors outline other researchers from the UK, the USA, Germany, and Italy that have achieved similar results (Alon et al., 2020).
[37] For exact figures, see: UN Women (2020c, p. 42).

Group provides data on the European and Central Asia region, revealing that women are as likely as men – and sometimes even more likely – to believe that a husband is justified in beating his wife (Bjerde, 2022). Most research concerns a much wider scope, focusing on domestic violence against women rather than IPV. For example, Cracia and Herrero (2006) presented a 15-year research report on how the acceptability of domestic violence against women in general is perceived in the EU: according to the research, men more frequently considered that domestic violence against women is acceptable in certain circumstances (2.7% of men against 1.7% of women), and that the provocative behaviour of women is a cause of this violence. Moreover, the researchers presented worrisome results on positive attitudes towards perpetrators of domestic violence among men, where they found that men who know victims present lower levels of acceptability whereas men who know aggressors present higher levels. This suggests the existence of a certain level of acceptance or sympathy for the offender. In the aforementioned study, 32% of men knew a perpetrator of domestic violence against women in their social circle, and within this group of men domestic violence was seen as more acceptable or 'understandable', contributing to the condoning of domestic violence in some circumstances and reducing the probability of a known incident being reported, or help being offered to the victim (Gracia & Herrero, 2006, p. 128).

In the case of formerly Sovietized countries, the additional impact factor to be taken into consideration while explaining victim blaming and under-reporting is a difference in mentality. In Soviet times, due to the rule of imaginary 'feminism under socialism', IPV was considered an internal family matter until the very end of the 1980s. The general approach was to pretend it did not exist, and it did not even have a proper name – during that time it was covered under the term of 'household conflict'.[38] In post-Soviet times, IPV is still considered a private family matter, but this now comes as a result of the aforementioned protest against fake Soviet emancipation and amidst the return to imaginary 'family values'. This pushes conservative, especially religious, women to have a lack of interest in such legal instruments against IPV as the Istanbul Convention, or to be silent on the topic of IPV because 'my value is my family' (Skulte et al., 2023, pp. 209–210).

While reporting rates are getting better, they are far from good. In Lithuania in the 1990s, 76% of physical IPV victims did not turn anywhere because of 'fear of publicity and shame' (Vilniaus universitetas & Moterų studijų centras, 1996, pp. 16–17). According to public opinion polls in the 1990s, more than a half of the population believed that in general domestic violence is a private issue and should be solved by the family itself (EIGE, 2024; Purvaneckiene, 1997, pp. 16–23). According to 2024 Eurostat, FRA, and EIGE survey numbers, the percentage of Lithuanian women who have experienced physical and/or sexual violence in the past 12 months and not told anyone remains high, at 28%. Furthermore, only 55% of Lithuanians – compared to the EU average of 92% – consider it unacceptable for a man to hit his partner occasionally (EIGE, 2024), which assumes that most cases of IPV remain unreported and unsupported.

The Bulgarian stance on victim blaming should warrant outcry, where – especially after the Constitutional Court, in its Decision No. 13, June 27, 2018, deemed without reason that the ratification of the Istanbul Convention was unconstitutional – IPV numbers have gone from high to even higher. In Bulgaria, state institutions continue to blame the victim, and the courts often assign the survivor to mediation sessions with the aggressor (Advocates for Human Rights, 2020).

Clearly, along with the implementation of a women's empowerment strategy, public education efforts that challenge these attitudes of IPV tolerance and transmit the idea of social responsibility concerning

[38] As Leinarte (2021) describes, 'courts treated violence no differently from any other grounds for divorce, such as infidelity or irreconcilable character differences. And as men did not consider violence worthy of prosecution, they did not even deny it when it came up during divorce proceedings. The perpetrator could be prosecuted only if there was evidence that the violence had been systemic and life-threatening'. In other rare cases of prosecution, judges were of the opinion that 'the husband and wife are educated people and can make amends' (pp. 89, 91).

these issues are necessary.[39] Breaking the climate of social tolerance would increase the costs for perpetrators and contribute to the informal social control of domestic violence against women, and IPV in particular (Gracia & Herrero, 2006, p. 128). At the country level, differences in the acceptability of IPV among those who blame the victim and those who do not are greater in countries with higher levels of women's empowerment. This effect is particularly salient in countries that are more advanced in terms of gender equality, which may help to better understand why societies undergoing changes toward higher egalitarianism and women's empowerment often exhibit higher rates of IPV (however strange this might seem at first glance).[40] In other words, in countries where IPV is taken seriously, we see higher rates of IPV – for instance, the Scandinavian pattern of Estonia's rates of both physical and psychological violence is very high at 21.8% and 41.2%, respectively. In countries where it is not taken seriously, the data masks this problem and allows us to pretend that it does not exist.[41] This suggests that public education[42] and media campaigns challenging social attitudes towards IPV are basic tools to push social levels of acceptability towards zero.

5. What Can Be Done? Shaping International Policy Approaches to Economically Empower Women Considering the Broader Context of Domestic Violence, IPV, and Gender-Based Violence

As discussed above, the primary challenge facing formerly Sovietized countries in relation to IPV lies in the persistence of a deeply ingrained patriarchy inherited from the Soviet era, which, ironically, as a result of a backlash, was substituted by the same patriarchy, only now under the cover of 'traditional values'. These structural issues which continue to hinder progress are consistently reflected in annual research conducted by EIGE (2024), particularly in the political, economic, and social subdomains of power, where these countries demonstrate concerningly low scores. While the path to transformation remains long and complex, Estonia serves as a compelling example of progress, offering a *modus operandi* for other formerly Sovietized states to follow.

Leaving aside the vast topic of the patriarchy and turning to the primary focus of this article – the economic empowerment of women – it is evident that this issue is equally complex. Economic empowerment alone is not a universal solution to addressing IPV, domestic violence, or gender-based violence more broadly. Achieving meaningful empowerment instead requires a holistic approach, in which policymakers implement gender-sensitive – rather than gender-blind – legislation across all policy areas, including education, public health, and social security. Nonetheless, economic empowerment might make a difference by making women more independent and less vulnerable to violence.

The authors of this article believe that the policy approach to empowering women economically should be two-fold. It should first entail the effective enforcement of the prohibition and criminalization of IPV and gender-based violence in its broader scope (femicide, forced marriage, non-consensual dissemination of private images, cyber stalking, cyber harassment, etc.). Secondly, it should involve the

[39] For example, in her research Wang (2016) concludes that education that stops below secondary level is associated with a risk of justifying IPV.

[40] Wang (2016) comes to the same conclusion in relation to developed and developing countries (the females of developed countries are less accepting of violence perpetrated against them by their spouses/partners).

[41] Some Eastern European authorities use FRA Report data to claim that it is Scandinavia that has the largest problem with the IPV and domestic violence in general (comparing the data from Table 1, it can be seen that that the percentage of physical/psychological violence in Scandinavia looks higher than in the CEE region: Denmark – 27.5/45.0%; Sweden – 31.0/48.2%; Finland – 33.8/52.6%; FRA, 2024). According to the violence domain of the 2024 EIGE statistics, women in Sweden (41%) and Finland (53%) are more likely to disclose violent experiences, including violence from a non-partner. These high numbers are caused by the fact that women in countries where there is a lower threshold for what violence is 'tolerated' or 'understandable' are probably more aware of IPV, do not consider it or other degrading or humiliating sexual acts carried out by a non-partner as acceptable, and therefore might be more prepared to share their negative experiences.

[42] For instance, in Lithuania, the statistics reveal that a relatively small percentage (11.7%) of perpetrators had completed higher education, while the majority had completed only secondary education or vocational training (58%). See Statistics Lithuania (2021a, 2021b).

economic empowerment of women, the application of the principle of equal pay for equal work between men and women, and the payment/compensation/redistribution of unpaid domestic labour. In other words, it is impossible to talk about the economic empowerment of women without removing instances of IPV and any violence against women first, as physical and psychological safety is a prerequisite to thrive in social and economic terms. These two practical approaches will now be considered separately, starting from the international and continuing through the regional level.

Prohibition and criminalisation

In relation to prohibition and criminalisation, the UN model framework for legislation and policy on combating domestic violence against women implies that decision-makers should ensure that national solutions are human rights-based and comprehensive, because violence against women and IPV in particular should be understood as a violation of women's human rights and a form of gender-based discrimination. Deriving from those principles, legislation on violence against women should be in conformity with the UN General Assembly Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (resolution 48/104 of 1993), read together with Article 1 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, and CEDAW general recommendations No. 12 (1989) and 19 (1992). In practical terms, this implies that, ideally, national legislation should acknowledge that violence against women and domestic violence against women are forms of discrimination, a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women, a violation of women's human rights, and an example of discrimination against women. The legislation should also provide that no custom, tradition, or religious consideration may be invoked to justify domestic violence against women. The notion of 'comprehensive' legislation also means that it should be multidisciplinary, criminalizing all forms of violence against women and encompassing issues of prevention, protection, survivor empowerment, and support (health, economic, social, psychological), as well as ensuring the adequate punishment of perpetrators and the availability of remedies for survivors (UN DESA, 2010, pp. 13–14). Finally, it should apply a gender-sensitive lens to initiatives related to cross-cutting socio-economic policies, such as education, employment, healthcare, housing, access to public goods and services, and access to land and property.

At the EU level, President von der Leyen's political guidelines highlighted the need to prevent and combat violence against women, protect victims, and punish offenders as a key priority for the European Commission (EC). The Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025 (EC, 2020) announced EU measures to prevent these forms of violence, protecting victims, prosecuting offenders, and implementing comprehensive and coordinated related policies. The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan reiterates the commitment to combat violence that targets women and proposes legislation to this effect (EC, 2021). The European Parliament (EP) has repeatedly called on the Commission to propose legislation on violence against women and domestic violence, and most recently has adopted two own-initiative legislative reports based on Article 225 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), requesting the Commission to submit proposals on combatting gender-based violence and cyberviolence (EP, 2021b) and adding gender-based violence as a new area of crime listed in Article 83(1) of the TFEU (EP, 2021a).

Economic empowerment

Turning to the second approach, from the Council of Europe's perspective the economic dimension of women's empowerment requires: measures that support equal opportunities, equal pay for work of equal value, the abolition of discriminatory legislation and economic disincentives for women to work, paid maternity and paternity leave, paid parental leave for women and men, access to quality and affordable child care and other social services, a change in the male-dominated working culture, and a shift in attitudes and practices influenced by gender stereotypes (CoE, 2018, para. 43).

In this context, one of the most basic political and legal measures to implement would be the enforcement of the right to equal pay for equal work or work of equal value between women and men. This is one of the EU's founding principles enshrined in the Treaty of Rome and set out in 2006 in the

Recast Directive 2006/54/EC, as complemented in 2014 by Commission Transparency Recommendation 2014/124/EU. The latter called for a renewed push for gender equality and a reduction in the pay gap between men and women, recommending that Member States improve wage transparency through a 'toolbox' of measures, including allowing employees to request information on pay, reporting by companies, pay audits for large firms, and including equal pay in collective bargaining. However, despite this legal framework, the effective implementation and enforcement of the principle of equal pay in practice remains a challenge in the EU. A lack of pay transparency has been identified as one of the key obstacles to gender equality – namely, equal opportunities and the equal treatment of men and women in matters of employment and occupation (EC, 2013). The gender pay gap[43] in the EU remains around 14% and has a long-term impact on the quality of women's lives, their increased risk of exposure to poverty, and the persisting pension pay gap, which is 33% in the EU (Eurostat, 2020). A far-reaching proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and the Council to strengthen the application of the principle of equal pay for equal work or work of equal value between men and women through pay transparency and enforcement mechanisms was introduced in 2021. This will hopefully be adopted and eventually implemented, as the right to equal pay is not adequately applied nor enforced in practice and pay transparency is lacking in many Member States.

Furthermore, to implement a women's empowerment strategy and the 2020–2025 Gender Equality Strategy in the EU, in 2023, 10 years after the first proposal was made, the EC introduced the 'Women on Boards' Directive (EU) 2022/2381.44 This set transparent recruitment procedures in companies so that at least 40% of non-executive director posts or 33% of all director posts are occupied by the under-represented sex by the end of June 2026. In 2024, only 34% of board members in the EU's largest publicly listed companies were women, with a significant gap (average of 22%) in formerly Sovietized Member States (in 2024, only the Czech Republic and Romania slightly improved their ratio).

Table 3. Share of members of boards, supervisory boards, or boards of directors in the largest companies that are women, EIGE's calculation for 2024 (formerly Sovietized countries)

Country	**Share of women (%)**
Bulgaria	18
Czech Republic	26
Estonia	13
Hungary	11
Latvia	24
Lithuania	27
Poland	23
Romania	25
Slovakia	26
Slovenia	23
Average of formerly Sovietized states	22
EU average	34

Finally, regarding women's empowerment, the effective management of unpaid domestic labour requires separate attention. For example, in the EU, domestic work, child care, and elderly care are predominantly performed by women. The values of unpaid domestic work and unpaid family care amount to €2,655 and €470 billion, respectively, for a combined total of €3,125 billion (Francavilla et al., 2010, p. 58). These are billions which have never been paid to caregivers.

[43] The gender pay gap indicator measures the difference between the average gross hourly earnings of male and female paid employees, expressed as a percentage of the average gross hourly earnings of male paid employees.
[44] The directive constitutes a part of Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025, and puts companies under the obligation by 2026 to have 40% of the underrepresented sex among non-executive directors, or 33% among all directors.

Unfortunately, out of the formerly Sovietized countries, only Estonia, the standard-bearer of the region, demonstrates a gender distribution of domestic duties (92.2%) that is far above even the EU average (78.7%). Considering the substantial economic and social costs and implications associated with the gender gap in unpaid care and labour, policymakers should be more encouraged to focus on gender equality and strategies to enhance the work-life balance of men and women. The majority of remedies should concentrate around the 'recognize, reduce, and redistribute' steps (Elson, 2017).

Firstly, the 'recognize' step should cover initiatives that would recognise the worth of women's unpaid labour and should result in data collection, the analysis of unpaid care work, and the recognition of its value, i.e., financial benefits tied to child care and domestic work (maternity leave policies).

Secondly, the 'reduce' step should provide public services that decrease the burden of childcare and other types of unpaid work on women and free up their time for participation in the labour market. In general, empirical studies find a positive effect of affordable childcare on female employment rates (Vuri, 2016). Subsidized childcare and free access to formal pre-school are two types of measures that would empower and change the budgetary constraints of women with young children and, therefore, should affect their labour capacity.

Thirdly, the 'redistribution' step should encourage the redistribution of family-related obligations and child care responsibilities between men and women. Among these measures are programmes designed to make flexible work arrangements or compressed working hours accessible to men and women in equal measure (e.g., the French solution of altering conventional weekly hours to a more family-friendly 35 hours per week; Fagnani & Letablier, 2004). Active labour market initiatives geared at keeping women in the labour market may also assist in reducing unpaid work hours (Alonso et al., 2019). Moreover, improved labour market restrictions (such as laws regulating holiday time, maximum work hours, etc.) would discourage excessive working hours and the breadwinner-caregiver gendered specialisation patterns within families. Other useful policy examples include the recent adoption of work-life balance regulations by the EU (EC, n.d.), including Directive 2019/1158 that introduces paid paternity leave and seeks to reserve non-transferable sections of family childcare leave for men. National studies have revealed that these policies are beneficial for boosting the engagement of men with unpaid care and lowering the gender pay gap within households (Free Network, 2021).

In addition, it is essential for policymakers to acknowledge that further study is required to determine precisely how and why certain policies may assist families, and to adapt them to the particular national situation. Although many of the measures listed above will not fix the issue of women's empowerment overnight, they may be a crucial first step towards more global gender equality in the workplace and at home. Due to their link with IPV, they may also reduce its occurrence.

In the post-Soviet context, the approach to women's socio-economic empowerment presents unique challenges. While Soviet policies formally promoted women's labour participation through state-provided childcare and employment quotas, the post-transition period has seen varied approaches across different states. Today in the formerly Sovietized states, women's labour participation policy still does not complement work-life balance policies. To illustrate the point with EIGE numbers, 2024 was a phenomenal year in terms of improving the ratio within the domain of work participation in these countries, which even exceeded the EU average (e.g., Estonia scored 94.2%, Latvia 91.2%, Lithuania 92.8%, Poland 83.6%, Slovakia 88.6%, and Slovenia 88.5%). On the other hand, only Estonia implemented truly progressive work-life balance policies, introducing, e.g., parental leave that can be shared between parents and flexible working arrangements supported by digital infrastructure.[45]

Cultural norms and economic pressures in formerly Sovietized states continue to burden women with disproportionate unpaid care responsibilities, significantly limiting their career advancement

[45] See, e.g.: Ministry of Social Affairs of Estonia (2023) or State Social Insurance Agency of Latvia (2022)

opportunities and undermining their economic potential, as was highlighted while elaborating on the double shift phenomenon. In Latvia, despite a legal framework on gender equality being in place, women and girls aged 20+ spend 18.3% of their time on unpaid care and domestic work, compared to the 9.1% spent by men. In Poland, women spend far more time on household chores, and take care of children much more often than men (FROGEE, 2021).

The diversity of approaches across formerly Sovietized states demonstrates that policies on protective factors for IPV must be tailored to specific national contexts while addressing common challenges inherited from the Soviet system. Future research could particularly benefit from examining how successful policies from countries like Estonia might be adapted to other formerly Sovietized contexts.

Conclusions

The authors conclude that while economic empowerment plays a crucial role in preventing IPV, it cannot be considered in isolation from other factors, like inherited social norms. Furthermore, economic initiatives, if not accompanied by broader social changes in a timely manner, may even temporarily increase women's vulnerability to violence because they challenge existing power dynamics. This paradox highlights the need for a comprehensive **socio-economic empowerment** approach – one that addresses not only economic participation, but also deeply entrenched gender norms shaping women's roles in both the public and private spheres.

The analysis of formerly Sovietized states provides compelling evidence for this argument, as this region is marked by highly patriarchal societies. Here, in accordance with status inconsistency theory, even when women achieve economic empowerment they often remain constrained by the patriarchy, rooted in Soviet pseudo-equality, and hidden under the cover of so-called 'traditional values', which continue to foster unhealthy attitudes toward IPV. It comes as no surprise that the notion of fostering traditional values and making the privacy argument unites those European countries that have not ratified the Istanbul Convention, and that they all belong to the group of formerly Sovietized countries (Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Lithuania, and Slovakia).

Furthermore, despite formally adopting international and regional frameworks for protecting women's economic rights after the 1990s, these countries demonstrate varying degrees of success in implementation. Estonia, for instance, has pursued progressive policies, whereas Poland, under an ultra-conservative government from 2015 to 2024, has struggled to translate strong legal frameworks into real societal change. Poland's experience – where nearly a decade of political rollback on gender equality coincided with increased rates of violence – illustrates how weakening women's empowerment policies can directly exacerbate their vulnerability. This underscores how economic empowerment efforts must be accompanied by structural and cultural transformations; otherwise, progress remains superficial.

One of the key factors that can significantly undermine the effectiveness of empowerment initiatives, limiting their transformative potential, is the persistence of patriarchal attitudes and the disproportionate burden of unpaid (and thus not accounted for in national accounting systems) domestic work on women, often referred to as the **double shift**. Today, formerly Sovietized countries are facing ambiguities slightly reminiscent of the contradictions inherent in women's economic emancipation under socialism. Paradoxically, on one hand, women have greater purchasing power and, according to EIGE's money domain statistics, they look as though they are economically empowered (e.g., Lithuania and Bulgaria exhibit relatively high levels of women's economic participation). On the other hand, if it is aimed at simply increasing women's economic participation, the costs of this kind of empowerment strategy may outweigh its benefits, since the double shift at home erodes women's health and exploits their labour. Further analysis is needed to determine whether Hochschild's research on the 'stalled gender revolution' in the United States is applicable to formerly Sovietized states and the EU more broadly. Specifically, we must assess whether we are approaching a so-called 'loss of moral values' scenario, where blue-collar men increasingly withdraw from the domestic sphere and disappear entirely from the second shift.

Unfortunately, the outbreak of COVID-19 worsened the double shift issue and provided long over-due data for researchers proving that the gendered specialization patterns observed among households are explained not by the differences in time availability or bargaining power, but by social norms. Thus, according to the research results, even if a man is unemployed and stays at home, it is the woman – even though they may be teleworking and earning a higher salary (or, in terms of the article, is 'economically empowered') – who still takes care of the household. This pattern impacted the situation of women in formerly Sovietized countries even more significantly, as even in pre-lockdown conditions there were fewer families with an egalitarian, gender-neutral distribution of home duties.

To ensure that economic empowerment serves as a meaningful tool affecting violence against women in intimate relations, it must be integrated with **anti-discriminatory legislation**, **public health initiatives**, **educational programs**, **and strong legal protections**. In the very beginning, initiatives towards higher egalitarianism and women's empowerment, e.g., campaigns challenging social attitudes towards IPV, can, on the contrary, lead to an increase in the data on IPV rates. Estonia's IPV rate, including psychological violence, is very high, and this is typical for societies in the Scandinavian model. However, rather than pointing to an increased incidence rate, this shows a lower threshold within the society for when violence is 'tolerated' or 'understandable', while also demonstrating that Estonian women are more aware and more prepared to share their negative experiences. Ultimately, such temporarily negative phenomena would surely be more acceptable than avoiding admitting, confronting, and solving the root of the problem. Crucially, any of the aforementioned initiatives should be tailored to local contexts and guided by **disaggregated data** that informs targeted social and economic policies. A comprehensive approach requires a **gender-sensitive perspective at the highest political levels**, embedding these considerations into broader social policies. Furthermore, intersectoral collaboration across the municipal, regional, and national levels is essential for ensuring that empowerment strategies are both effective and sustainable.

The authors hope that this analysis contributes to the ongoing debate by examining the intersection of women's empowerment policies and IPV, emphasizing the need for a holistic and context-specific approach.

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