

Gender-Based Violence and Intimate Partner Violence in Greece During the COVID – 19 Pandemic

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Abstract: Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly during lockdown periods, there has been an increase in cases of Gender-based Violence (GBV), Intimate Partner Violence (IPV), and Domestic Violence (DV) globally. This increase has been characterised as a “shadow pandemic” or a “second pandemic”. While previous research has shown a correlation between Violence against Women and times of crisis, little attention has been paid to the Greek context, which revealed a worrying increase in femicides in 2021. In particular, the significant response of civil organisations, women’s rights activists, and the #metooGR social movement in 2021 brought several GBV cases to public attention, triggering social mobilisation towards the fight for gender equality, elimination of GBV, and social justice. This research investigates Greece as a case study, focusing on GBV in the form of IPV in Greece since 2020, particularly during the first and second lockdown. To theoretically ground this investigation, a literature review on the topic has been conducted, complemented with statistics from annual reports on Violence against Women from 2019, 2020, and 2021, which were conducted by the General Secretariat for Demography and Family Policy and Gender Equality, a governmental actor dedicated to these matters. These annual reports are a newly formed initiative in Greece. Furthermore, through expert interviews with members of civil society and women’s rights activists, the discussion will move forward to the unique protection challenges faced during the pandemic, combined with newly invented ways to fight GBV and IPV, while giving survivors a possible way out even during this unique occasion. Based on the secondary data analysis and interviews, an increase in IPV is observed, accompanied by a lack of alignment between legal provisions and law enforcement, and a lack of an established action plan that can assure prevention and protection for women from the moment they experience violence until the closure of their case.

Keywords: GBV, IPV, Violence against women, Covid-19, Greece, Gender rights

1. Introduction

The aim of this research is to investigate how gender-based violence (GBV), specifically intimate partner violence (IPV), was affected during the COVID-19 pandemic, with a focus on lockdown periods in Greece in 2020 and 2021. Additionally, it aims to identify possible challenges and alternatives for women's protection under these circumstances.

The COVID-19 pandemic was referred to as a "shadow pandemic" or a "second pandemic" in relation to GBV and IPV by the international community, academic circles, and civil society (UN Women; Donato, 2020). These notions were used to emphasise the increase of related incidents during the lockdown periods and call for immediate action (Donato, 2020; Al-Ali, 2020).

This paper compares the increase of GBV and IPV during the pandemic with literature about violence against women (VaW) in times of crisis (Al Gasseer et al., 2004; Keller, 2008; Peterman et al., 2020). The literature shows that there is always an interconnection between the increase of GBV, IPV, and domestic violence in situations characterised as public crises (Donato, 2020). This is supported by data from UN Women reports, which highlight the alarming reality around VaW. Before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, 1 out of 3 women had experienced some kind of violence, with most violent acts being perpetrated by an intimate partner.

To explore the link between public crisis and the increase of VaW, taking Greece as a case study, three research questions are formulated:

RQ1: What are the insights provided by International Law and National Law in Greece related to women's rights, their protection, and the positive obligations of states in times of crisis?

RQ2: What was the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the relevant restrictions imposed for protecting public health on GBV/IPV in Greece during national lockdowns, and how does this link to the existing literature related to VaW in times of crisis?

RQ2: What were the protection challenges and realities faced during national lockdowns in Greece, what was lacking, and what could be other possible solutions?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Contextualising Violence Against Women (VaW) and Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)

Violence against Women (VaW) is a phenomenon that affects public health and represents an important risk factor for the physical and psychological health of women. It contributes to the regular violation of their rights (Krantz & Garcia-Moreno, 2005; Watts & Zimmerman, 2002). Frequently, we come across the term Gender-based Violence to describe violent expressions towards women, highlighting that the violence expressed is linked to women's gender identity. There can be a variety of violent expressions used to harm women in different contexts, cultures, and religions. The World Health Organisation (WHO, 2002) distinguishes three main categories of Violence against Women: a) self-directed, b) interpersonal violence, and c) collective violence. In this paper, the focus is shifted towards interpersonal violence and more specifically, Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) against adult women, exercised by a male partner (Krantz & Garcia-Moreno, 2005; Watts & Zimmerman, 2002). IPV is referred to as the most common type of VaW that exists regardless of culture, context, religion, and social status (Krantz & Garcia-Moreno, 2005; WHO, 2002). WHO (2002) underlines that 1 out of 3 women globally will experience, or they have already experienced, some kind of violence coming from an intimate partner. IPV entails partnerships such as husband/wife, cohabiting partners, partners who do not share the same living space, as well as former partners and ex-husbands (Dawson et al., 2019; Krantz & Garcia-Moreno, 2005; Watts & Zimmerman, 2002). The type of violence used in the cases of IPV can have different manifestations, including physical abuse, sexual abuse, psychological violence - deprivation or neglect (Donato, 2020; Krantz & Garcia-Moreno, 2005; Mittal & Singh, 2020; Watts & Zimmerman, 2002). Deprivation and neglect frequently are accompanying forms of violence, although they can be employed alone (Krantz & Garcia-Moreno, 2005; Mittal & Singh, 2020). They refer to controlling behaviours over the actions of women, with emotionally abusive characteristics, that mainly imply and establish the subordination of women in a relationship through violent means, enforcing at the same time the position of the man in the household as dominant (Donato, 2020; Krantz & Garcia-Moreno, 2005; Watts & Zimmerman, 2002).

2.2 Crises as Contributing Factors to GBV in the Form of IPV

Previous research highlights the significant role of crises as potential risk factors contributing to the increase, exacerbation, and perpetuation of different forms of gender-based violence (Al Gasseer et al., 2004; IOM, 2018; John et al., 2020; Keller, 2008; Mittal & Singh, 2020; Peterman et al., 2020). The interconnection between crises and VaW has been repeatedly observed, and their consequences seem to affect a large number of women annually (Donato, 2020). Keller (2008) argues that in situations of crisis, sexualised forms of violence are highly employed and account for one of the most common human rights violations. Historically, rape, as an example, has been found to be a systematic means of warfare used to affect the enemy in multiple ways (IOM, 2018; Keller, 2008; Watts & Zimmerman, 2002). The same applies to other types of crises, such as economic crises, public health crises, cases of natural hazards, civil unrest, and broadly public emergencies (John et al., 2020; IOM, 2018; Mittal & Singh, 2020; Peterman et al., 2020).

Research has investigated how pandemics are found to affect women's rights and the violence performed against them (Mittal & Singh, 2020). The results of these works confirm the allegations of the relation between public health crises and the rise of numbers in the incidents of violence against women. Similarly, HIV has been found to affect the violence perceived by women in multiple contexts, both Western and non-Western (Dawson, Kates & Ramaswamy, 2018; Sikira & Urassa, 2015). Based on Dawson et al. (2019), HIV-positive women are more likely to experience IPV in the US, while based on Sikira & Urassa (2015), the HIV crisis caused an increase in the incidents of IPV in Tanzania in the form of wife battering. The main underlying cause in the context of Tanzania was the suspicion of extramarital affairs (Sikira & Urassa, 2015). Similar findings present research related to Ebola and Zika, where the public health crisis led to extreme violence against women (Davies & Bennett, 2016; John et al., 2020; Onyango et al., 2019). Especially in the case of IPV, the situation was particularly critical since due to the isolation and the restrictions, women could not escape the abusive environments, putting their health into even higher risk (Davies & Bennett, 2016; Onyango et al., 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic is recognised as one of the biggest public health crises in current history (UNDP), having affected our lives significantly since 2020, while specifically challenging the lives of women across the globe. Since the early beginning of the pandemic and the related restrictions imposed for the protection of public health, there have been increased concerns related to the safety of women, especially of those who experience forms of intimate partner violence (Al Ali, 2020; Jenyo, 2020; Luna, 2020; Mittal & Singh, 2020).

Historically, pandemics have been confronted using quarantine as an effective measure to control the spread of highly contagious diseases (Mittal & Singh, 2020; Pentaraki & Speake, 2020). Quarantine for this purpose dates

back to the 14th century, according to Mittal & Singh (2020). The COVID-19 pandemic was also addressed using the same approach (Donato, 2020; John et al., 2020). The imposition of local movement restrictions and lockdowns was a commonly adopted practice to protect people at the state level (Al Ali, 2020; Donato, 2020; John et al., 2020). As a result, people spent most of their time at home. However, this was not the safest option for everyone, including women (Al Ali, 2020).

From the beginning of the first COVID-19 outbreak in 2020, it became obvious that the pandemic would negatively impact women's rights in various ways. There was a worrying increase in the numbers of gender-based violence (GBV), intimate partner violence (IPV), and domestic violence (DV) reported (Al Ali, 2020; Donato, 2020; EIGE, 2021; Jenyo, 2020; Luna, 2020). Local lockdowns put women facing IPV/DV at even greater risk, threatening not only their physical health but also their mental well-being (Mittal & Singh, 2020).

2.3 National Legal Framework

Greece fully respects and aligns with the legal requirements provided by International Law related to women's rights, violence against women, as well as the position of women in society. Therefore, the Greek state has taken legal actions at the domestic level to ensure that women enjoy their rights safely. Greece ratified CEDAW in 1983 (OHCHR) and was also among the first countries to sign the Istanbul Convention, which was ratified under state law 4531/2018. Additionally, the Greek state recently put into force the National Action Plan for Gender Equality 2021-2025 through the General Secretariat for Demography and Family Policy and Gender Equality (GSFPGE) (GSFPGE 2nd annual report). The above demonstrates the commitment of the Greek state, at the legal level, since the early 1980s to fulfill and protect women's rights.

3. Sociopolitical and Economic Context of Greece in 2020 – 2021

During the pandemic, the Greek government took measures aimed at preventing and controlling the spread of the virus, such as the use of medical masks, social distancing, and locally imposed movement restrictions that entailed kilometre regulation accompanied by the use of written certificates or SMS providing valid justification for movement.

At the same time, Greece, like many other countries, started facing a new wave of economic crisis as a result of the pandemic, while still recovering from the great economic crisis that lasted around ten years, from early 2009 to late 2018, with the public healthcare system (PHC) being one of the most affected public sectors (Tzanis, 2021). To put this into perspective, it is enough to check the numbers of the expenditure dedicated to the public health sector, which is equivalent to 5% of the GDP, lower than the EU average, which is 7.2%. This translates into weak primary healthcare and other inefficiencies. Hence, the pandemic found the PHC system already in a vulnerable position, bringing it to the edge of fully collapsing from the early days of the COVID-19 outbreak (Giannopoulou & Tsobanoglou, 2020).

During the years 2020 and 2021, Greece faced a series of conservative propositions compromising women's rights, such as the family bill, which threatened the rights of women facing IPV, the fertility conference, which opened the space for counter-abortion dialogues, as well as the high number of femicides in accordance with the Law of Domestic Violence (Gill, 2021; GSFPGE, 2021; Human Rights Watch, 2021). These concerning situations, coupled with the increase in violence against women from the beginning of the pandemic, resulted in considerable societal mobilisation, triggering the #metoo movement in Greece, known as #metooGR.

4. Method

For this research, a combination of methods was employed. The literature review provides the necessary context to respond to RQ1. Next, a comparison of existing statistics regarding IPV in Greece in the years 2019, 2020, and 2021 is presented and discussed to respond to the needs of RQ2. Finally, the discourse of experts/members of organizations that support women, members of civil society, and women's rights activists contributes to this dialogue through individual interviews to support RQ3.

Secondary Data Analysis is employed to answer RQ2 (Trzesniewski, Donnellan & Lucas, 2011), borrowing statistical data produced by the General Secretariat for Demography and Family Policy and Gender Equality, as presented in the Annual Reports on Violence against Women, with a focus on the national helpline SOS 15900, the most approachable output for help during local movement restrictions. Thematic analysis is used to analyze the interview data, since the main aim of the research at this stage was to focus on the quality of the experiences in relation to the phenomenon examined (Willig, 2013). This research employs thematic analysis in the frame of social constructionism to respond to RQ3.

4.1 Participants and Data Collection Method

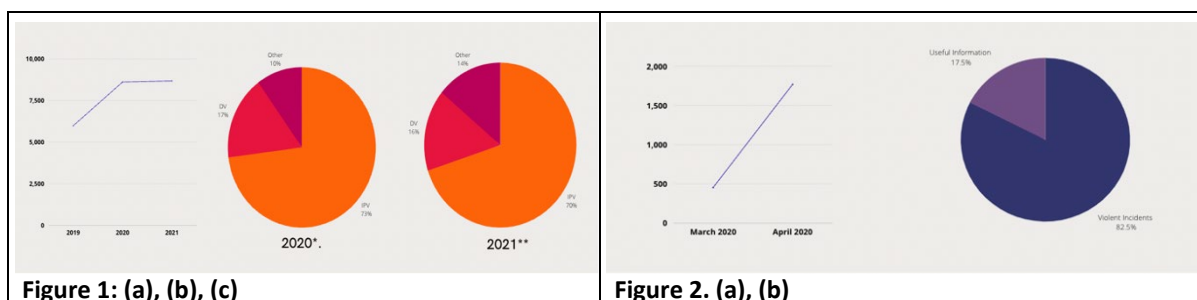
For the qualitative research part, three women were recruited using the convenience sampling method (Tsiolis, 2014), which means that interviewees were selected based on their availability and willingness to participate in the research. Online semi-structured interviews lasting an average of 30 minutes were conducted. The interview guide consisted of 11 questions and explored four main thematic areas:

- The participants' general knowledge of Violence against Women and Intimate Partner Violence
- The participants' beliefs and knowledge about Times of Crisis
- The participants' opinions about Times of Crisis and their relationship with GBV and IPV
- The participants' opinions regarding GBV & IPV in Greece during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021.

5. Results

5.1 Secondary Data Analysis

In 2019, the helpline SOS 15900 received 5984 calls whereas in 2020 and 2021 the calls were 8609 and 8669 accordingly (Figure 1a). These numbers demonstrate a progressive increase in calls during the COVID-19 restrictions, with the majority of the calls referring to IPV incidents (Figures 1b and 1c). The rest of the calls either referred to Domestic Violence or other non-signified reasons (Figures 1b and 1c). The first annual report also includes a dedicated section to the lockdown period concerning the calls received by the helpline. A major increase during the period of the 1st national lockdown compared to the pre-COVID-19 period is observed. In March 2020, a month before the imposed restrictions 454 calls were received (Figure 2a) whilst in April 2020 when Greece was under national lockdown 1769 calls were received (Figure 2a) 82.5% of which reported violent incidents and were seeking support (Figure 2b). Unfortunately, there is no relevant data in the second annual report to allow further comparisons for the second year of the pandemic.



F1: In these diagrams we see (a) the number of the calls received by the help line (b) the percentage of IPV in the calls received in 2020 (c) the percentage of IPV in the calls received in 2021.

F2. In these diagrams we see (a) the numbers of the calls received in March 2020 and April 2020 (b) the percentage of reporting violent incidents in April 2020.

5.2 Thematic Analysis

Through the thematic analysis, three main themes emerged from the participants' discourse. These themes are:

- COVID-19 as a Social Crisis affecting IPV.
- Gap between the legal provisions and law enforcement.
- The lack of a well-established action plan for the protection of Women.

5.2.1 COVID-19 as a social crisis affecting IPV

At the domestic level, the participants' beliefs are in accordance with literature that connects the phenomenon of the increase of IPV with situations of crisis (IOM, 2018; Keller 2008). Translating this belief to Greek society during 2020 and 2021, under the severe impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the movement restrictions, the participants comment that any claims about the increase in violence perpetrated in the domestic sphere are believed to be true. The participants' knowledge on the matter comes from both their profession/activist action, but also from their social experiences. Another important aspect discussed in the interviews is the expected character of this increase considering the nature of the COVID-19 imposed restrictions. Based on the participants' reasoning, people in different types of intimate relationships were forced to spend most of their time at home with zero or very limited opportunities for social activities and decongestion. Therefore, the

survivors found themselves spending all their time with their perpetrators in a closed environment, which put them under serious threat.

Worker in the protection of survivors of Gender- based violence and their children

[...] I definitely consider Covid as a social crisis which for sure influenced much more vulnerable groups of our society. It didn't influence the same ways all the people neither regarding the gender nor in matter of class, nor in matter of status eg., refugees. Therefore it is definitely a social crisis with great social impact, mostly in poverty and violence. [...] Therefore I would put it as a great crisis which according to the research we know that affect women disproportionately [...] we see it everywhere, in war and in a situation like that [...] From the experience from the organisation and my personal experience there is increase and it is somehow expected when we speak about domestic violence or intimate partner violence [...] it is expected since the relations are more tensed when people are forced to spend more time together and they don't have any social alternative [...] according to the organisation we had an increase at least of 10% of people approaching the organisation comparing to previous years

5.2.2 Gap between the legal provisions and law enforcement

All three participants demonstrated knowledge about the commitments of the Greek state and its obligations under international human rights law related to women's rights. As a result, they all had comments about law enforcement when it comes to women's rights, especially concerning intimate partner violence. The participants made specific claims about the lack of efficient law enforcement that actually responds to the needs of women in Greece. According to the participants, the current procedures are demotivating and make survivors hesitant to report their cases. Even if survivors do report their cases, a long and complicated process awaits them, full of challenges and obstacles, without any reassurance that their case will be resolved and justice will be served. For these reasons, all three participants emphasised the need to readjust practices and action plans to better respond to survivors' needs and ensure substantial protection for them.

Member of association for the rights of women

[...] The challenges for every woman is the day after. Well I spoke now, I have to leave and go home (participant speaking about the reporting). In terms of work, in terms of housing etc. [...] The point we face a lot of bureaucracy and quite a delay is when women try to enter the safe shelters. It is required for women to do some medical exams etc and it takes at least 15 days, the best case scenario, in order for her to enter (a shelter meaning), these 15 days her husband will have killed her 15 times. [...]

5.2.3 The lack of a well-established action plan for the protection of Women

This theme reflects the participants' concern about the lack of a holistic, well-organised, and tailored action plan that establishes a protocol of actions to enable the full and efficient protection of women in such periods. The participants recognise the state's effort to enhance the work of the helpline SOS 15900 by advertising it on Greek TV. However, based on the participants, these efforts were not enough to respond to the broad character and the dimensions that IPV received during the lockdowns. Despite the helpline's importance, the participants believe that there should have been an action plan that would involve various ways for women to seek help. Consequently, it is highlighted that although communication, either via phone or email, during movement restrictions is a smart approach for assistance, such actions entail risks for women living in abusive environments. If revealed to the perpetrator, such actions could potentially exacerbate the violence, putting women in a worse position than before. This relates to Pentaraki & Speake's (2020) argument that women living in controlling abusive environments might face deprivation of means of communication, or the means available in the household might be controlled. Consequently, even if there are protection paths like that, it does not necessarily mean that they are accessible by the survivors without any risk.

Member of association for the rights of women

[...] The General Secretariat has ensured us that there will be more actions during the crisis. [...] There are only a few as we saw. Take as an example the reasons justifying movements (referring to the SMS that was required for all movements outside home), it was saying I will go to the doctor, I will go to the supermarket. We has asked from the state in the reasons one related to domestic violence that should be included. They did not include it. [...]

6. In Conclusion

Based on both the secondary data analysis and the data derived from the thematic analysis, it is found that in Greece, there has been an increase in IPV due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the related restrictions, which is an expected phenomenon based on the literature review. The literature supports that crises are high-risk factors for the health of women and the violence they experience (Donato, 2020; IOM, 2018; Keller, 2008; Mittal & Singh, 2020). Although quarantine is proven as an adequate measure to encounter public health emergencies, it has been proven to affect Intimate Partner Violence and Domestic Violence (Mittal & Singh, 2020; Pentaraki & Speake, 2020). As a result, the nature of the restrictions negatively impacted women's rights in Greece, while exacerbating the life conditions in domestic environments where violence was prevalent.

Situations of a public health crisis such as COVID-19 provide an enabling environment for existing inequalities and violence deriving from them to flourish. The International Legal Instruments provide all the necessary input for the states to protect and fulfill women's rights. Particularly about Violence against Women, the Istanbul Convention and the four main pillars provided, give a clear perspective on the issue of violence against women and ways to combat it. In Greece, despite the legal framework being present, a gap between the provisions and practices is noticed. This gap between legislation and practice seems to put women in more danger since it functions as a demotivating factor for women to act in favour of their rights. Therefore, actions need to be taken to ensure the full implementation of the ratified provisions. Additionally, training of actors involved in cases of violence against women seems necessary in conjunction with an allocation of funds that will respond to the real needs of Greek society regarding violence against women (IOM, 2018).

Drawing from the above, Greek society and the recent experiences in 2020 and 2021 appear to be quite vulnerable in such terms. To conclude, considering that pandemics might be present regularly in the future, there is an emerging need to address past and potential GBV concerns, as well as their capacity to challenge discriminatory social and gender norms. Thus, the immediate transformation of systems that perpetuate gender inequality is of crucial importance to positively impact women's and girls' health, safety, and well-being on a long-term basis.

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