

PREVALENCE AND CHARACTERISTICS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE: INSIGHTS FROM NATIONAL STUDY IN SERBIA

Valentina Opančina¹, PhD

Department for Radiology, Faculty of Medical Sciences, University of Kragujevac, Serbia
Cabinet of the Minister without Portfolio in Charge of Coordinating Activities in the Field of
Gender Equality, Prevention of Violence against Women and Economic and
Political Empowerment of Women, Government of the Republic of Serbia

Željko Brkić, PhD

Ministry of Interior, Government of the Republic of Serbia

ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study aims to determine the prevalence and characteristics of domestic violence at the national level in Serbia.

Design/Methods/Approach: We conducted a cross-sectional study on the Serbian population using retrospective data from January 2018 to December 2024. We included all events of domestic violence reported to the Ministry of Interior, Direction of Police in Serbia during the study investigation period. We examined the prevalence of domestic violence, the characteristics of the violence by its type, and the characteristics of victims (children and adults) and perpetrators, as well as lethal outcomes. All of the data was examined by each year and altogether, using descriptive statistics in SPSS software. The study received approval from the Ethics Committee.

Findings: During the study examination period, there were 199,200 events of domestic violence reported to the police in Serbia. The highest prevalence belonged to psychological violence with 66.56% of all domestic violence events, followed by physical, economic, and sexual violence. There were 228,683 victims during the examination period, out of which 29.82% were males and 70.18% were females. Out of all victims, 8.55% were children. There were two minor perpetrators among 208,850 of them. Out of all perpetrators, 80.83% were men, and 19.7% were women. During the study period, there were 316 lethal outcomes, being 0.16% of all reported domestic violence events.

Originality/Value: Domestic violence is a global problem and public health issue, affecting mainly women. Its prevalence varies from region to region. This is the first study of this type examining data on a national level after the implementation of the Law on Combatting Domestic Violence. The results of this study demonstrate the need for continuous monitoring, better preventive measures, and targeted policies that will contribute to reducing both the frequency and the most serious (qualified) forms of domestic violence in Serbia.

Keywords: domestic violence, violence against women, police, prevalence, Serbia.

¹ opancina.valentina@gmail.com



About the authors

Asst. Prof. **Valentina Opančina**, PhD, is a medical doctor and law degree holder, radiology specialist, neuroradiology subspecialist, has a PhD in interventional neuroradiology and is an assistant professor. She is also Advisor to the Minister for violence prevention and medico-legal aspects and is certified by Johns Hopkins University, USA, for prevention of violence. She is the holder of the Fulbright Award for scientific excellence, the White House and US President Award for civil activism, and the Award from the European School of Radiology and the European Society of Radiology for top 5 young radiologists in Europe. Her best research result is a first-author publication in the journal *Lancet*, the first-ranked world journal in the field of medicine. She has more than 60 published papers in national and international journals in the fields of medicine and medical law.

Željko Brkić, PhD, is a police officer by profession. He graduated from the High School of Internal Affairs in Sremska Kamenica and the Police Academy in Belgrade. He received his PhD title and defended his thesis from the Faculty of Law, University of Belgrade. He has dedicated his professional career to working at the Ministry of Interior of the Republic of Serbia, where he serves as Assistant Director of Police and Head of the Director's Office. From 2022 to 2024, he served as State Secretary at the Ministry of Interior Affairs. His area of scientific interest is police control, police education, and the integrity of police officers. He has published papers in national journals.

INTRODUCTION

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines violence as “an intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, against a group or community that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation” (WHO, 2005). Moreover, domestic violence (DV) has been reported as the most pervasive forms of violence. Worldwide, 40–70% of female murder is committed by their intimate partner. Domestic violence happens all over the globe, ranging from 15% in Japan to 71% in rural Ethiopia, according to WHO (Semahegn et al., 2015). Studies reported that about 2 million women experience injuries from intimate partner violence each year. Women of all ages are at risk of domestic violence. One in 4 women and nearly 1 in 10 men have experienced intimate partner violence (IPV) during their lifetimes. Also, around 41% of female IPV survivors and 14% of male IPV survivors experience physical injury related to IPV (Singh et al., 2022).

DV has various forms: physical abuse (punching, kicking, biting, choking, burning, shaking, and beating, and it can be severe enough to cause permanent damage or death), sexual abuse (as unwanted sexual activity, with perpetrators using force, bribes, or coercion and making threats), and emotional abuse (most often consisting of extreme verbal abuse that hurts someone emotionally, such as unreasonable expectations, questioning the spouse's decisions and perceptions, mentally pressing the partner to do something wrong, and mentally abusing them) (Bagheri et al., 2023).

Domestic violence is a public health issue that affects families, communities, and populations. DV is also costly to the health of society, leading to adverse physical and mental health outcomes, such as higher risk of chronic disease, substance misuse, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, sexually transmitted infections including HIV, miscarriages, and risky sexual health behavior (Kourti et al., 2021).

Domestic violence is a common and significant problem that is often underreported and not well recognized (Al Kendi et al., 2021). The most common domestic violence type is violence against women. Women are usually the victims of DV that derives from unequal power relationships between men



and women. Domestic violence affects the health and wellbeing of millions of individuals and families and is often not adequately addressed by health systems. It is banned in many parts of the world but also well hidden behind cultural customs, social norms, and religious beliefs (Alizadeh et al., 2021). Domestic violence is also widely recognized as serious human rights abuse. Women's successful campaigning raised the profile of the issue of violence against women (US conferences; Vienna, 1993; Cairo, 1994; and Beijing, 1995), which led to recognition of women's rights as an indisputable part of universal human rights (UNICEF, 2000).

In 2016 Serbia adopted the Law on Combatting Domestic Violence that focuses on violence prevention and victim protection. The Law entered into force in 2017. Domestic violence, in the sense of this law, is defined as "an act of physical, sexual, psychological, or economic violence by the perpetrator towards a person with whom the perpetrator is in a current or previous marital or extramarital or partnership relationship or towards a person with whom he is a blood relative in the direct line and in the collateral line up to the second degree or with whom he is related by in-laws up to the second degree or who is an adoptive parent, adoptee, foster child, or foster parent or towards another person with whom he lives or has lived in a common household" (Law on Combatting Domestic Violence, Official Gazette RS, 2016).

PURPOSE

This study aims to determine the prevalence and characteristics of domestic violence at the national level in Serbia.

METHODS

We conducted a cross-sectional study on the Serbian population using retrospective data from January 2018 to December 2024. The subject of the research is the state of domestic violence in Serbia. The research aimed to observe the prevalence and characteristics of domestic violence during the period of six years after the implementation of the Law on Combatting Domestic Violence.

The applied methodological procedure includes quantitative analysis of statistical data for insight into the trends and structure of domestic violence reported to the Police Directorate, Ministry of Interior in the period 2018–2024. We included all events of domestic violence reported to the Ministry of Interior, Direction of Police in Serbia during the study investigation period.

This study investigated reported incidents of domestic violence and not criminal complaints for committed crimes of domestic violence. Given that all registered incidents of violence for formal and other reasons do not result in criminal charges being filed (even though they represent domestic violence), reported incidents of violence to a greater extent reflect realistically existing violence than is the case with criminal violence applications.

In order to collect data, an inquiry was sent to the Ministry of Interior, requesting the data that related to the number of reported incidents of domestic violence during the study period. We examined the prevalence of domestic violence for each study year and during all six years of the study period. We also investigated characteristics of the violence by its type, characteristics of victims by age and sex, and characteristics of perpetrators by age and sex. We also investigated lethal outcomes of a reported incident of domestic violence. All of the data was examined by each year and altogether.



The data were obtained using the Unique Information platform system of the Ministry of Interior. The obtained data were analyzed using quantitative methodology. For analysis, quantitative descriptive statistics were applied to the data, using SPSS software. The study received approval from the Ethics Committee and approval from the Ministry of Interior of the Republic of Serbia.

FINDINGS

During the study examination period, there were 199,200 events of domestic violence reported to the police in Serbia. Examined study data showed that the highest prevalence belonged to psychological violence with 66.56% of all domestic violence events, followed by physical (around 38%), economic (around 4%), and sexual (less than 1%) violence.

There were 228,683 victims during the examination period, out of which 29.82% were males and 70.18% were females. Out of all victims, 8.55% were children. There were two minor perpetrators among 208,850 of them. Out of all perpetrators, 80.83% were men, and 19.7% were women. During the study period, there were 316 lethal outcomes, being 0.16% of all reported domestic violence events.

Table 1: Total number of domestic violence events by each year and by type of violence.

Year		Total number of domestic violence events	Type of domestic violence			
			physical	economical	psychical	sexual
<i>*One event can contain several types of violence</i>	2018	27,760	11,789	1,125	19,066	218
	2019	29,654	12,330	1,220	20,404	275
	2020	28,126	11,676	1,020	19,483	186
	2021	28,061	11,364	1,043	18,704	231
	2022	28,912	11,148	1,018	18,763	234
	2023	29,222	11,117	1,030	18,765	205
	2024	27,465	10,318	901	17,399	201

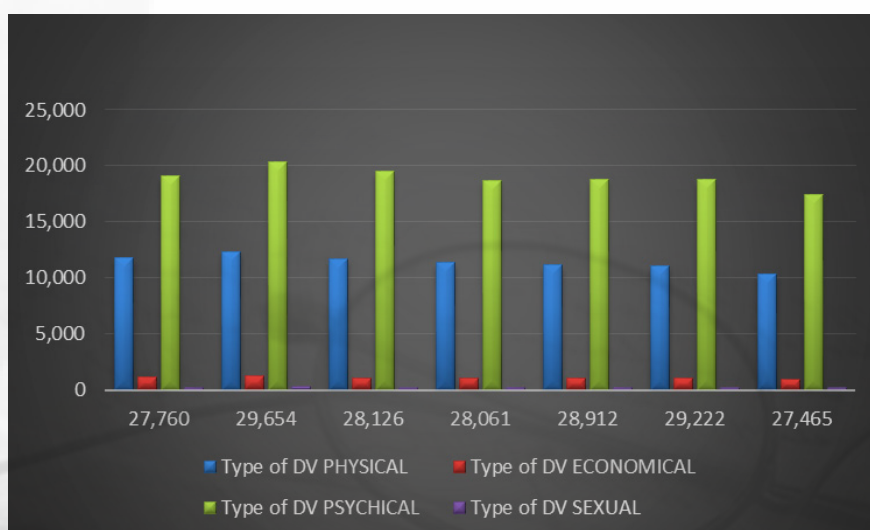


Figure 1: Distribution of domestic violence events by each year and by type of violence.

Table 1 shows the total number of domestic violence events by each year and by type of violence, while Figure 1 presents a graph distribution of domestic violence events by each year and by type of violence. The highest number of reported DV events was in 2019, and it was 29,654, while the smallest number was in 2024, being 27,465.

Figure 2 depicts the trend of growth and decline of reported domestic violence events during the study period. Our graphs show a significant decline of reported DV evidence during 2020 and 2021. It is important to keep in mind that during 2020-2022 there was the COVID-19 pandemic. The prolonged periods of confinement and enforced proximity during the COVID-19 lockdowns likely contributed to an increase in DV all over the world. However, underreporting of DV was observed.

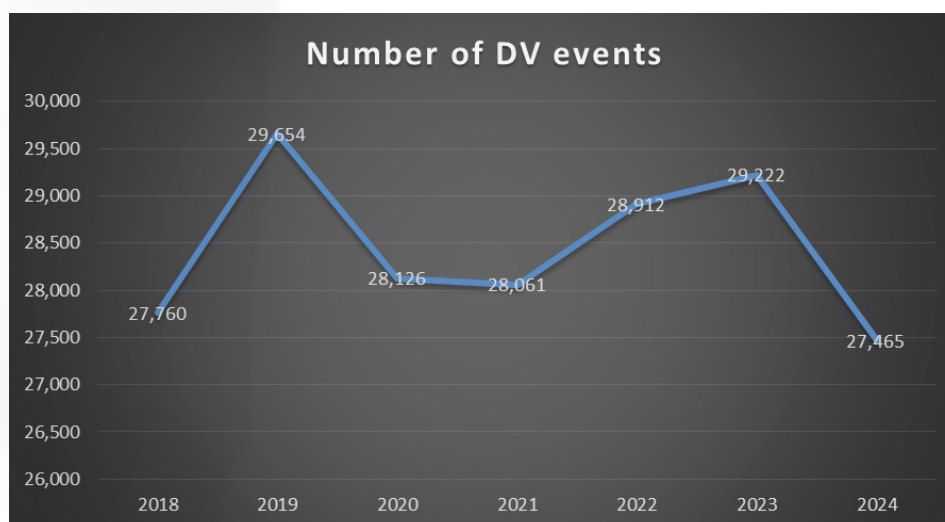


Figure 2: Trends of growth and decline of reported DV events.

Our study findings also show the distribution of victims by their sex, showing a significant difference in the number and percentage of female and male victims. The percentage of women who were victims of domestic violence ranged from 69% to 72% of women during the study period.

We presented the findings in Figure 3 and Figure 4.



Figure 3: Numerical characteristics of domestic violence victims by their sex.

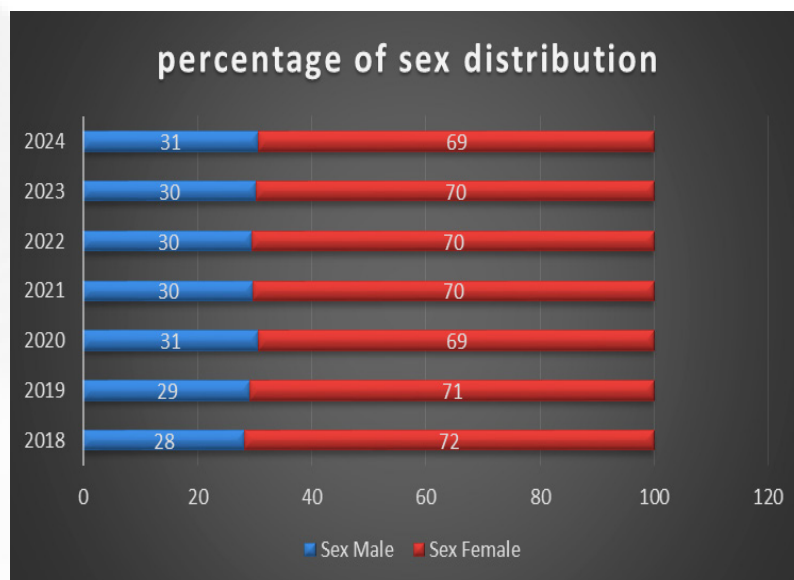


Figure 4: Percentage of sex distribution among domestic violence victims.

Study results also presented characteristics of DV victims by their age. There was a significant difference between minor and adult victims, presented in numerical values in Figure 5.



Figure 5: Characteristics of DV victims by their age.

We also investigated characteristics of DV victims by their age groups, dividing them into several groups: up to 14 years of age, 15-17, 18-20, 21-30, 31-40, 51-60, 61-70, and over 71 years. The most frequent were victims who were aged 31 to 40 years, which is clearly visible in Figure 6.

We also explored characteristics of the perpetrators, showing their distribution by sex (Figures 7 and 8). There was a significant number of male perpetrators, which varied from 23,661 men in 2018 to 23,173 men in 2024. There were 82% male perpetrators during 2018, 2019, 2020, and 81% of them in 2021, 80% of male perpetrators in 2022 and 2023, and 79% of them in 2024 (presented in Figure 8).



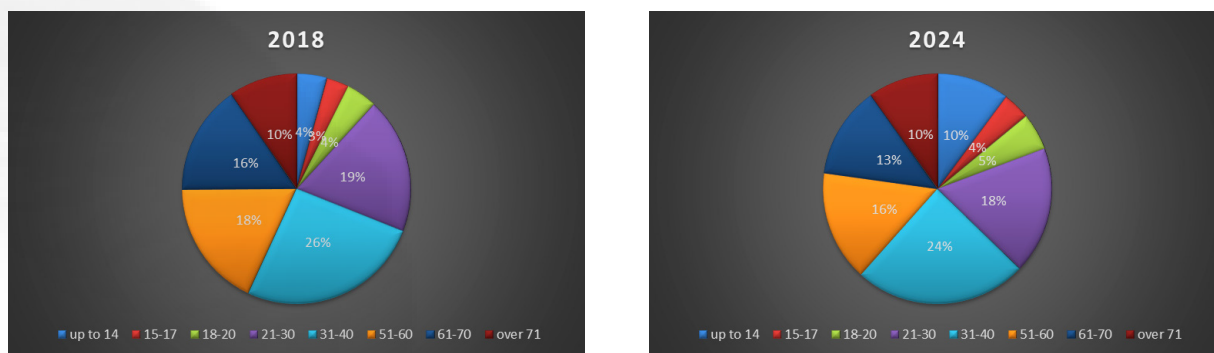


Figure 6: Characteristics of DV victims by age groups during 2018 and 2024.

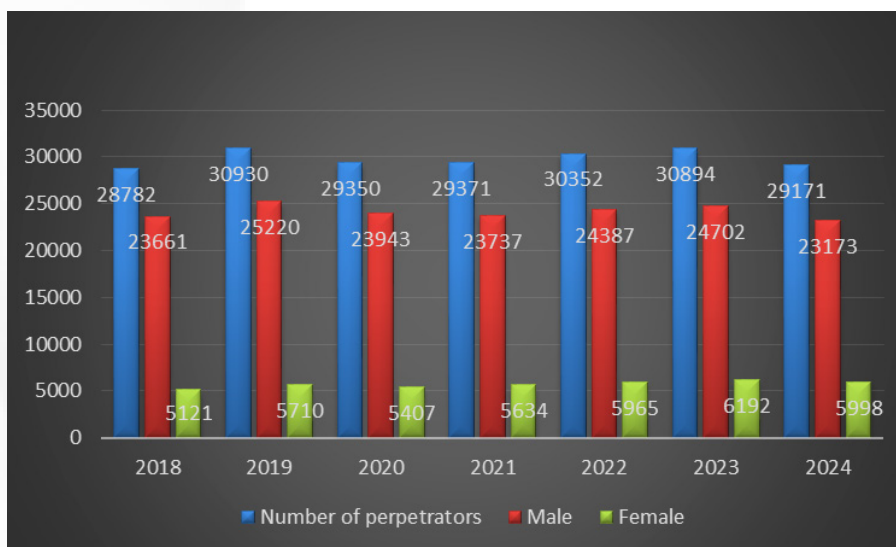


Figure 7: Characteristics of perpetrators by sex, using numerical values.

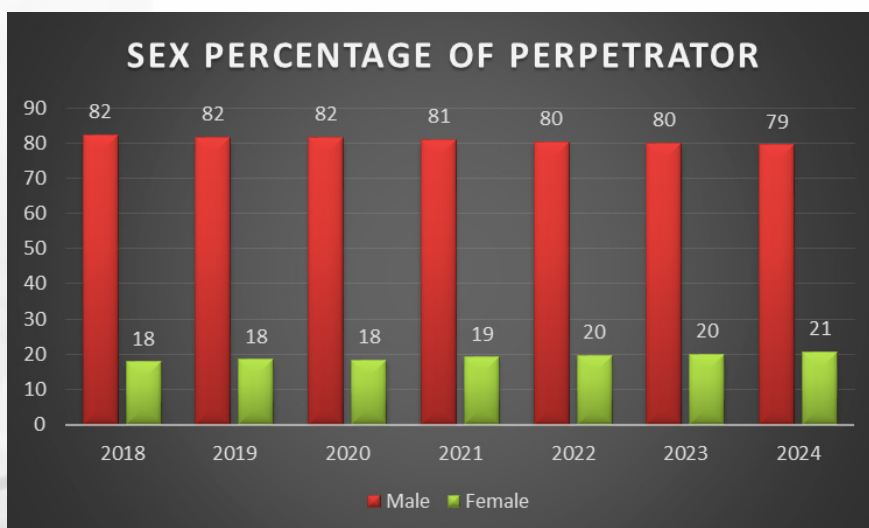


Figure 8: Characteristics of perpetrators by sex, using percentage distribution.

We also examined lethal outcomes of reported domestic violence events during the study period from 2018 to 2024. The number of lethal events is presented in Figure 9. The figure shows a decline of lethal events from 2018 to 2024, from 46 lethal events in 2018 to 33 lethal events in 2024. There is also a decline in the number of murdered victims during the study period, presented in Figure 10. There were 47 victims with lethal outcomes in 2018 and 37 murdered victims in 2024, showing a decline of 21%.

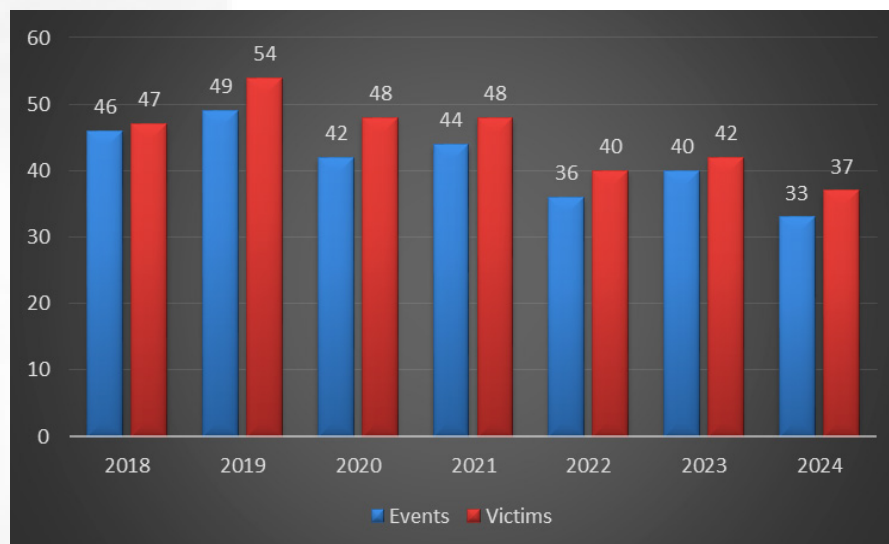


Figure 9: Domestic violence events with lethal outcome.



Figure 10. Trend of a decline in the number of victims with lethal outcome during the study period.

Also, when looking at the distribution of murdered victims by sex, there is a significant difference between murdered women and men, presented in Figure 11. There were 34 killed women and 13 killed men in 2018, while there were 21 killed women in 2024 and 16 killed men in this year. The gap between male and female murdered victims also shortens over the investigated years. When looking at the full study period, during these six years, 62% of murdered victims were women, while 38% of them were men (Figure 12).

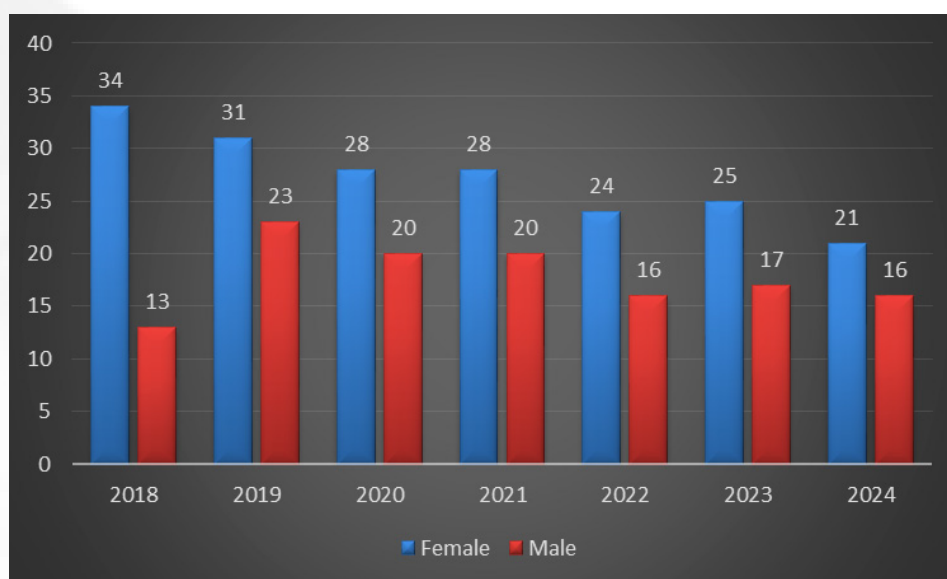


Figure 11: *Characteristics of victims with lethal outcome by their sex.*

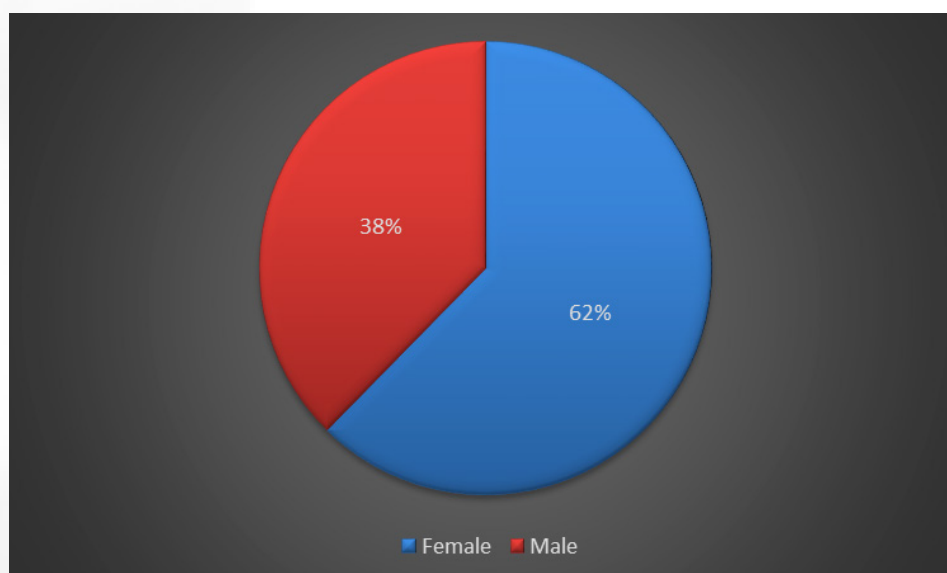


Figure 12: *Distribution of victims with lethal outcomes during the full study period.*

DISCUSSION

The findings of this national study open several important lines of discussion, including the high prevalence of psychological violence, the pronounced gender asymmetry among victims and perpetrators, the apparent decline in reported cases during the COVID-19 pandemic, the trends in lethal outcomes, and the broader implications for public policies and preventive measures.

However, results showed that particular attention should be devoted to children, not only as direct victims of domestic violence but also as secondary victims who are exposed to violence within the family environment. Although children accounted for 8.55% of all registered victims in the present study, this proportion should not be interpreted as indicating a limited impact of domestic violence

on the child population. On the contrary, international research consistently shows that children who witness violence between parents or other household members suffer serious and long-lasting psychological, emotional, and developmental consequences, even when they are not directly subjected to physical abuse. Exposure to domestic violence in childhood is associated with a higher risk of anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, behavioral problems, impaired school performance, and an increased likelihood of either victimization or perpetration of violence in adulthood. In this sense, children represent a particularly vulnerable group and should be viewed as secondary victims whose protection requires a specific and multidisciplinary approach involving the health, social welfare, educational and judicial systems.

Furthermore, the relatively small number of recorded child victims may also reflect underreporting, as violence against children often remains hidden within the private sphere of the family and is less likely to be disclosed to the authorities. Therefore, the results of this study underline the necessity of strengthening early detection mechanisms, mandatory reporting by professionals, and child-centered support services, as well as of developing targeted preventive programs aimed at breaking the inter-generational cycle of violence.

Also, our study is the first national study of this type, which examined the prevalence and characteristics of domestic violence events reported to the police in Serbia from 2018 to 2024. This time frame is crucial since it follows the implementation of the Law on Combatting Domestic Violence, which happened in 2017. During the investigation time period, results showed a decline in the number of murdered victims by 21%, going from 47 victims in 2018 to 37 murdered victims in 2024. There is also a decline in the number of murdered women among DV victims, going from 34 killed women in 2018 to 21 killed women in 2024 and showing a decrease of 36%. The number of murdered men showed an increase of 19%, going from 13 killed men in 2018 to 16 killed men in 2024. Serbia has around 6.62 million citizens, according to the latest reports. In that sense, the number of murdered victims in 2024 in Serbia was 0.00056% of the general population in Serbia.

The data from France shows that the number of victims of homicides related to domestic violence amounted to 119 in 2023 (Statista Research Department, 2025). Statista indicated a population of 68.25 million for 2023 in France (Statista Research Department, 2023). Moreover, the number of murdered victims of domestic violence comprised 0.00017 of the total population in France. When comparing data from Serbia and France on a yearly level, there is a higher number of victims of homicides related to domestic violence in Serbia. This suggests a need for continuous monitoring, better preventive measures, and targeted policies that will contribute to reducing both the frequency and the most serious forms and outcomes of domestic violence in Serbia.

In France, around 80 percent of domestic violence events were committed against women, as reports from 2023 show. In addition, it appears that the women most affected that year were those aged between 40 and 49 years old (Statista Research Department, 2025). In Serbia, the most frequent victims were aged 31 to 40 years. Also, women comprised 62% of homicide DV victims during our study period. If we compare this data, there is a significant difference in the number of sex distributions among murdered victims in Serbia and France, showing a significantly lower percentage of women as homicide DV victims in Serbia.

In 2022, an estimated 1,174 femicides were reported in Russia, making it the European country with the highest number of such crimes. Femicides, defined as the gender-based killing of women and girls, represent the most extreme form of violence against women. That same year, Turkey ranked second with 327 cases (Statista, 2022). Femicides in Russia and Turkey, compared to the numbers of the general population of 146.98 million and 85.33 million citizens, respectively, show rates of 0.00079% and 0.00038%.



Although Europe has made significant strides in advancing gender equality over the past century, gender-based violence remains a pervasive source of inequality across the continent. This type of violence underscores the disparities faced by women, particularly in terms of their safety and their psychological and physical integrity. Future strategies for combating domestic violence should be focused on a more comprehensive, digital-forward, legally unified, and multi-sectoral approach.

ORIGINALITY/VALUE

In conclusion, domestic violence is a global problem and public health issue, affecting mainly women. Its prevalence varies from region to region. This is the first study of this type examining domestic violence data on a national level in Serbia after the Law on Combatting Domestic Violence was enforced. The results of this study demonstrate the need for continuous monitoring, better preventive measures, and targeted policies that will contribute to reducing both the frequency and the most serious (qualified) forms of domestic violence in Serbia. Results also showed that particular attention should be devoted to children, not only as direct victims of domestic violence but also as secondary victims who are exposed to violence within the family environment.

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