

## **Gender-Based Violence against Women in Intimate and Couple Relationships. The Case of Spain and Italy during the COVID-19 Pandemic Lockdown**

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# *Gender-Based Violence against Women in Intimate and Couple Relationships. The Case of Spain and Italy during the COVID-19 Pandemic Lockdown*

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## **Abstract**

This article addresses the issue of gender-based violence against women (GBVAW) during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. With an emphasis on intimate partner violence (IPV), it focuses on the degree of government responsiveness to this issue and compares the cases of Spain and Italy: two European countries that – from March to May 2020 – were among the hardest hit during the coronavirus pandemic. The aim of this paper is twofold: to investigate how the two nation-states dealt with violence against women (VAW) during the pandemic – which mostly refers to intimate and couple relationships – and to compare their different degrees of government responsiveness in this specific section of progressive social policies. While COVID-19 was spreading, the country ruled by Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez proved to be very active in advancing practical guidelines and measures to deal with GBVAW, whereas Italy, governed by Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, didn't act likewise. The article adopts a multi-method approach and argues that the way a specific society presents a social phenomenon influences its response in terms of policies. Furthermore, this investigation claims that the dialogue between civil society and the institutional level needs to be reinvigorated in order to comprehensively address GBVAW. Perhaps, by presenting a comparison between similar cases in a situation of emergency, this article could serve this aim.

Keywords: gender-based violence against women, government responsiveness, COVID-19.

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## 1. Introduction. What are we talking about?

Gender-based violence against women (GBVAW) is a multidimensional phenomenon that incorporates several theoretical approaches and acts on multiple levels. Being a deeply rooted social issue, GBVAW has generated numerous debates and it has been defined in various ways (Walby, 1990; Heise, 1998; Casique, Furegato, 2006; Taylor, Jasinski, 2011). Together with the theoretical definitions, nation-states contextualization, and law adoptions of normative texts that are able to contrast the phenomenon of GBVAW have also been quite variegated. For instance, Spain and Italy have different ways of debating policies on violence against women (VAW), which is clear in the definitions they use at the national level. Spain considers gender violence by referring to the 2004 Organic Law on Gender Violence, a law approved by unanimity of all the groups in Parliament and also known as *VioGen*, and makes reference to gender violence against women between partners or former partners (*pareja or ex-pareja*). The general website of the Spanish Ministry for Equal Opportunities uses this definition: '*Gender violence has been an invisible phenomenon for decades, being one of the clearest manifestations of inequality, subordination and power relations of men over women*'<sup>1</sup> and the law of 2004 specifies that gender violence includes all forms of physical and psychological violence including attacks on sexual freedom, threats, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty<sup>2</sup> (Article 1.3, Organic Act 1/2004 of 28 December on Integrated Protection Measures Against Gender Violence). On the other hand, Italy refers to the definition used in the UN General Assembly resolution 48/104 of 1993, known as 'The Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (DEVAW)', and defines it as '*any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life*'.

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<sup>1</sup> In the original language (Spanish): 'La violencia de género se ha constituido como un fenómeno invisible durante décadas, siendo una de las manifestaciones más claras de la desigualdad, subordinación y de las relaciones de poder de los hombres sobre las mujeres'. It also asserts that: 'La constatación de esta situación marcará un antes y un después en la consideración legal y social de los derechos y libertades de las mujeres' ('The confirmation of the existence of this situation will mark a before and after in the legal and social consideration of the rights and freedoms of women'), therefore emphasizing the social and economic changes that this power relationship has on women's lives precisely because of the structure of society.

<sup>2</sup> In Spanish: 'La violencia de género a que se refiere la presente Ley comprende todo acto de violencia física y psicológica, incluidas las agresiones a la libertad sexual, las amenazas, las coacciones o la privación arbitraria de libertad'.

Measures taken by several countries during the 2020 pandemic have shown that male violence perpetrated against women is a problem that can be exacerbated in times of crisis, and that a careful response by institutions is necessary.

Despite the fact that the Spanish Government, like the Italian Government, welcomed the guidelines and the call to action of United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres to address the ‘horrifying global surge in domestic violence’<sup>3</sup>, reactions between the two countries were quite diverse. In Spain, this sparked widespread institutional awareness, active participation in movements and involvement of the whole civil society, which helped to develop practices and policies to address GBVAW during the unfortunate confinement. Conversely, Italy decided to limit its actions to informing about the risks of gender-based violence. For example, one tactic was simply leaving behind leaflets in pharmacies on how to recognize GBVAW without creating real responses, such as distributing national and regional funds to respond to the upsurge in intimate partner violence during the pandemic, or enabling a protocol of action to report cases of violence – like pharmacies as in the Spanish case. In Italy, as is often the case when policies on VAW are at stake, there was poor integration of approaches and perspectives from multiple sectors of civil society combined with a lack of communication with institutions. This condition, which had hindered clear responses from the political establishment in the past (Feci, Schettini, 2017), was even worse during the pandemic.

This article addresses the issue of GBVAW in intimate and couple relationships during the emergence of the COVID-19 lockdown and presents differences in the level of government responsiveness (Montoya, 2013; Htun, Weldon, 2012) between Spain and Italy: two European countries that were most affected by the pandemic from March to May 2020.

The first section of this article focuses on the different international approaches to the phenomenon of male VAW in intimate and couple relationships. Later, it pinpoints multiple theoretical approaches which are useful in revealing the occurrence of domestic violence during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. Then, it follows the methodological section where specific paragraphs present the two cases of Spain and Italy. Finally, the last part of this article compares the experiences of the two European countries and discusses the consequences in terms of policies to combat GBVAW in intimate partner relationships.

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<sup>3</sup> See [un.org](https://www.un.org) for more information about the statement by UN Secretary-General António Guterres.

## **2. The international debate and theoretical framework on gender-based violence against women (GBVAW) and intimate partner violence (IPV)**

Since the early 1990s, awareness for GBVAW has increased in all parts of the world. The international community has progressively developed a wide range of documents and declarations which have led to regional and national policies to end male violence against women (VAW).

In 1995, the United Nations (UN) declared that ‘women’s rights are human rights’ (Art.14, Beijing Declaration, 1995) thus inserting gender-based violence into a debate that considers it to be a set of discriminatory practices. The 1995 Beijing Conference represented one of the momentous events that reflected on women in society and took into account multiple contexts including social, economic and religious realities, as well as emphasized the sphere of human rights when debating international policies to contrast VAW (Bunch, Carrillo, 1991; Bodelón, 2013; Swanton, 2019). The platform, which was produced as a result of the meeting in China, expresses the will of the international community – represented by national governments’ delegations, women’s associations, and NGOs who took part in the parallel sessions of discussion at the forum on women in Huairou – to ‘*ensure the full exercise by women and girls of all human rights and to take effective action against violations of these rights, and freedoms*’ (Article 23, Beijing Declaration, 1995).

In 1995, conceiving VAW as a human rights problem opened the debate, both within movements and governments, towards taking action to ‘respond’ to the demands of civil society (Weldon, 2006). Already in 1993, the issue of male violence perpetrated against women became of public knowledge and was therefore a public issue, regardless of the place where it occurs, be it public or private life (Article 1, Vienna Declaration, UN/GA 48/104). At the UN level, it was only because of the platform of Beijing that the international community collectively recognized GBVAW as an obstacle to women’s rights, freedoms and personal development.

Later on, in collaboration with the UN, the Council of Europe (CoE) – a sub-regional organization between the international UN and the regional European Union (EU) – dealt with GBVAW during the Istanbul Convention in 2011. At a lower level, the EU signed the Istanbul Convention of 2011 and fostered both soft law and binding documents to member states (Walby, 2004; Montoya, 2013). The way these international bodies have addressed male VAW has been crucial to both the degree of government responsiveness in terms of policies, and the way social movements have mobilized in different world areas (Weldon, 2006). This element might be one of the reasons for the differences between the approaches in Spain and Italy. Moreover, the rejection of the

unequal status of women in societies and the effective condemnation of GBVAW as a form of discrimination (EIGE, 2016) – established by international declarations and documents of the UN, CoE and EU – have proved to be of crucial importance. These declarations and intentions have emphasized how the terminology used to address this social problem has extremely deep cultural and linguistic roots (Wendt, 1999; Eastel et al., 2012; Corradi, Donato, 2019), and how it plays a fundamental role in disciplining both the regulations and the political strategies to address the fight against VAW.

Theoretically, the concept of VAW is part of a broad debate which has generated plenty of definitions and approaches. However, in the last few decades, there are two main paradigms on which the literature has been arguing: gender violence (GV) and violence against women (VAW). The first considers male domination and patriarchy over women as the most relevant problems that lead to violence because women inside the society occupy a position of inferiority (Walby, 1990; Merry, 2006; Taylor, Jasinski, 2011). The second paradigm develops in an ecological model (Casique, Furegato, 2006) and acknowledges diverse, intersecting dimensions among personal, situational and socio-cultural factors (Heise, 1998: 263). The individual or personal level refers to the dialogue inside the couple – or the two main individuals involved in the violent situation. The relational level relates to known environmental dynamics concerning friends and family which might prevent or foster violent behaviors. The relational level considers the broader level of society and the prevalent culture it possesses. There are multiple other ways in which the phenomenon has been framed (Walby et al., 2017) such as GBVAW (Baker, Leicht, 2017) but also male violence against women – an expression that is having ‘fortune’ because it enables to indicate both the aggressor and the victim (Flood, 2011; Ciccone, 2017). However, despite the fact that many debates have populated the discussion on this specific section of progressive social policies, these two main paradigms still lead the international community.

On a global scale, contemporary society women’s movements and activists of the new wave of feminism – those who share the claims of the *ni una menos* movement born in Argentina and the American *#metoo* – are asking the international community and their national governments to be more responsive to comprehensively address the fight against gender-based violence and to challenge the structure of gender relationships. Consequently, women are starting to fight against vulnerability and believe that they are equal to men, and men are – willingly or not – going to deal with this new balance of power (York, 2011). Indeed, most social scientists agree that gender-based violence in domestic environments is highly correlated with the stress of gender relations in which men persistently try to maintain their male authority and do not challenge the paradoxical character of the doxa (Bourdieu, 2001; Burt, 1980).

Moreover, perpetrating violence – ranging from physical and emotional violence, to psychological assaults, homicide and sexual assaults – exacerbates conservative gender roles built on man's superiority and increases the sense of vulnerability and weakness in women who are abused and feel trapped (Adler, 2003; York, 2011). Therefore, the fight against gender-based violence towards women is truly 'a struggle to change the contexts (legal, cultural, economic, political) that shape the way men and women experience their individual and social attitudes, collective practices and symbolic gender representations' (Pitanguy, 2011: 562).

Dealing with VAW is not a mere emergence; it is rather deeply rooted in the gender structure of specific societies (Yodanis 2004; York, 2011) and it includes understanding and determining the main actors involved in the process of both eliminating and preventing VAW, among these are the state (its role), social movements, and supranational bodies (Corradi, Stöckl, 2016). The paragraphs that follow will explore how GBVAW has been dealt with in a very curious and intense period of human history – the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown – and how intimate partner violence (IPV) was one of the first social issues made clear by the dynamics related to the unprecedented nature of a wide-scale lockdown.

### **3. A comparative analysis between Italy and Spain**

The article adopts multi-method research (Collier, Elman, 2008; Seawright, 2016) based on a careful reconstruction of events and an assessment of the level of government responsiveness to GBVAW during the COVID-19 emergency. In detail, the research analyses the degree of government responsiveness between the Spanish and Italian governments to IPV during the pandemic using multiple studies on this issue (Weldon, 2002; Htun, Weldon; 2012; Roggebang; 2012, Montoya, 2013).

For this study, the following research questions are formulated:

RQ1: What variables determined the extent to which governments responded to domestic violence against women during the pandemic?

RQ2: What were the differences and what were the points of contact between the two countries?

In order to answer these research questions, this paper employs multiple qualitative approaches – as in multi-methods research – and compares similar cases (Dogon, 2002). Spain and Italy are two nation-states that belong to the southern European model and are often considered similar because of the public policies they choose to adopt (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Montoya, 2013; Cimigalli, 2014). However, the two countries have very different characteristics



in terms of government responsiveness and the capacity to tackle the phenomenon of broad gender-based violence and specifically male VAW in intimate relationships. This peculiarity has continued throughout the three month period of confinement due to the pandemic and has produced largely different effects in the two nation-states. Thus, the careful reconstruction of the degree of government responsiveness can account for a set of qualitative approaches including process tracing, comparison between the ministerial sites of the two countries<sup>4</sup>, studies that clarify this aspect of progressive social policies (Htun, Weldon, 2012), and interviews in Spanish and Italian with targeted individuals<sup>5</sup> about the responses employed by the two nation-states from March to May 2020, during the lockdown period of the pandemic. The interviewees include: a) activists in movements and organizations; b) NGOs leaders and members; c) members of national and international institutions that work on GBVAW. Even though the article does not refer to the effectiveness of such progressive social policies, the analysis of the responsiveness and the comparison between these two Mediterranean countries might allow stakeholders and researchers to reflect on better practices to implement and ways to tackle broad social issues of GBVAW and IPV.

#### **4. ‘Estamos contigo, la violencia de género la paramos unidas’: the case of Spain**

In Spain, the emergence of the coronavirus has brought with it a series of measures to prevent and denounce IPV against women in a widespread way. Since the beginning of March – including the declaration of the state of emergency on March 13 and its entry into force on March 14 – Spain has created a series of additional alternative measures to its usual ones to condemn cases of

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<sup>4</sup> The sites selected for the investigation are the general ministerial sites. In detail, the research focuses on the site of the Ministry of Equality in Spain ([violenciagenero.igualdad.gob.es/](http://violenciagenero.igualdad.gob.es/)) and the site of the Department for Equal Opportunities ([pariopportunita.gov.it](http://pariopportunita.gov.it)) in Italy. The study analyses and compares government responsiveness on the basis of: 1. Awareness campaigns; 2. Decrees to combat GBVAW; 3. Emergency protocols to request help in case of GBVAW; 4. Attention services available; 4. Presence and clarity of the news in the specific section of GBVAW/IPV.

<sup>5</sup> Although the analysis period of this research runs from March to May 2020, the interviews – a total of 20, equally distributed in the two countries – were conducted until July 2020 and they are part of a broader research which compares the government responsiveness of Italy and Spain on male violence against women in the last two decades.

gender-based violence<sup>6</sup>. Spain already has the 016 helpline to report such incidents of maltreatment and violence, which has existed since 2006. In Italy, the National Domestic Violence Hotline number is 1522, also known as the pink number.

As the lockdown came into force, the Spanish Ministry of Equality reported that calls to the 016 services had dramatically increased. In the last 15 days of March, calls were already 16 percent higher compared to 2019, and 47 percent higher than the previous year from April 1 to 15. In just one month, the services related to 016 received 116 online requests. Since the launch of WhatsApp's psychological support service on March 2, until March 29, 168 women have used the service. Moreover, relevant online consultations from March 14 to 31 increased from 26 in the year 2019 to 100 in 2020. And from April 1 to 15, the numbers increased from 20 in 2019 to 150 in 2020. The geolocation system of the *Alertcops* application, which sends a signal with the victim's location to the police, also increased. In March 2020, calls made to the toll-free number 016 to ask for information and help in the case of gender violence increased 10.5 percent and online requests increased 182.93 percent compared to statistics from the previous year in the same month. Furthermore, according to data from the Ministry of the Interior, the app was used 1,432 times in the first month alone. In Spain, about a quarter of calls to the domestic violence hotline made in March came from friends and family<sup>7</sup>, thus reflecting what the current vice-president of the *Asociación de mujeres juristas*, Altamira Gonzalo, said, 'the data from 016, show that women have not lost their confidence. However, they must be aware that there is a way out'<sup>8</sup>.

While the number of calls and requests for help increased, and as declared by the Ministry of the Interior of the Spanish Government, the number of actions to protect victims of gender violence (GV) was high in the first 30 days of lockdown, the overall number of domestic violence complaints decreased as the lockdown came into force<sup>9</sup>. For this reason, in the period of confinement – exactly two days after the beginning of the quarantine – the Spanish Government with the Royal Decree 12/2020 of March 31 decided to declare 'essential' all services involved in the integral protection of victims of gender-

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<sup>6</sup> See [lamoncloa.gob.es](http://lamoncloa.gob.es) for more information about the emergency measures created by the Spanish Government during the pandemic in order to address GBVAW.

<sup>7</sup> See [eige.europa.eu](http://eige.europa.eu) for more details.

<sup>8</sup> In Spanish (original language): 'Pero los datos del 016 demuestran que las mujeres no han perdido la confianza. Tienen que saber que hay salida'. See [elpais.com](http://elpais.com) for more details about the interview.

<sup>9</sup> Information retrieved from <https://violenciagenero.igualdad.gob.es/>.

based violence, services such as anti-violence centers<sup>10</sup>, and all the places which give secure housing, legal counseling and psychological support (Ruiz-Pérez, Pastor-Moreno, 2020). These measures led to a sharp increase of calls to 016 in the following months. In April, there was a noticeable peak because the number of calls registered was 60 percent higher than in April 2019, and in May there were 8,414 calls, which is 41 percent higher than that same time last year<sup>11</sup>. This may also be due to the multiple campaigns set in motion by the Spanish Government such as ‘*Estamos contigo, la violencia de género la paramos unidas*’<sup>12</sup>, which emphasizes that gender-based violence is not a private assumption, but a violation of human rights affecting the whole of society. Spain also released an easy-to-read guide designed for women seeking assistance and updated mapping of the services of autonomous communities and cities again, as a response from the government delegation against gender-based violence.

In this regard, the government launched an emergency plan for gender-based violence during the COVID-19 pandemic and approved a specific decree. The latter, in addition to recognizing essential services to victims of GV, establishes that autonomous communities can use the funds of the State Pact that were not spent in 2019 to fight against GV. It also specifies that the funds will be distributed and used in measures to strengthen specific services<sup>13</sup>— about 100 million euros for the autonomies and 20 million euros for local authorities, according to last year’s distribution.

Therefore, the Spanish Government’s responsiveness was quite intense from the first moment of the pandemic and reflected the already strong collaboration and dialogue between the institutional level and civil society (Shachar, 2001; Walby 2004; Htun, Weldon, 2012; Montoya 2013). To reiterate, since the beginning of the emergency lockdown, a special service was created to respond to cases of violence during confinement. It is called *Mascarilla 19* – an initiative born outside the peninsula in the Canary Islands – and is promoted by the Official Pharmacists Association. In very receptive times, it has spread throughout the Spanish national territory; a measure that is part of the efforts of the country to stop the coronavirus curve without igniting instances of GV. It works in this way: pharmacies act as a safeguard to which one can turn for help and report cases of GBVAW. The protocol when a person comes to the

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<sup>10</sup> Real Decreto-ley 12/2020 of urgent measures to protect and assist victims of gender-based violence, of March 31. Available at: <https://www.boe.es/boe/dias/2020/04/01/pdfs/BOE-A-2020-4209.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> See [ine.es/](http://ine.es/) for more information.

<sup>12</sup> In English: ‘We are with you, together we are going to stop gender violence’.

<sup>13</sup> See [boe.es/boe/dias/2020/05/19/pdfs/BOE-A-2020-5135.pdf](http://boe.es/boe/dias/2020/05/19/pdfs/BOE-A-2020-5135.pdf) for more information about the distribution of the funds.

pharmacy for assistance is that the pharmacist alerts the police and the special section of 'gender violence' for the prosecution, all with great discretion.

Additionally, the President of the Spanish Government himself, following the debate on a case of GV, declared in a tweet in March: '*In these days of confinement, the victim and the abuser live together for more hours and the risk is higher. You are NOT alone. I appeal to the responsibility of all of you if you suspect any case of #violenciamachista*', thus emphasizing the urgent call to continue assisting all those in need of support in cases of violence. Since the beginning of the lockdown, hotels were immediately licensed to host victims of violence and their children. This was a sign of awareness and sensitivity that is already well established in Spain – where there is constant attention to the requests of women, feminist movements and the government. With the help of the femocrats who populate the parliamentary discussion at *la Moncloa*, Spain is able to actively respond to requests from the women's movements in order to tackle the issue at hand (McBride, Mazur, 2013; Roggeband, 2012; Alencar et al., 2020).

##### **5. Disaggregated responses to the reality of 'Violence is a system': the reaction of Italy to IPV during the pandemic lockdown**

According to the latest data from the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT), 2 million women in Italy between 16 and 70 years of age (equal to 13.6 percent of the total population) have suffered physical or sexual violence from partners, or former partners, in their lives. Approximately 855,000 women suffer violence from their current partner. The issue is, no doubt, of paramount importance. On the Italian peninsula, there has certainly been great participation and activism, especially by associations such as *D.i.Re – Donne in Rete contro la Violenza* (Women on the Net Against Violence), to address IPV during the period of lockdown, despite the apparent lack of dialogue between the government and the people. For instance, *D.i.Re* revealed that from March 2 to 5, the requests for help from women to the anti-violence centers of the *D.i.Re* network increased by 75 percent compared to the previous year. However, at the same time, all the main associations involved in the fight against domestic violence registered a drop in contacts. Between March 8 and 15, calls to the pink number 1522 (public utility service promoted by the Presidency of the Council of Ministers and the Department for Equal Opportunities) also halved: 496 compared to 1,104 in the same period of the previous year. In detail, there are more women accessing anti-violence centers and these are also women who have already turned to the same service before. The new complaints are

only 28 percent of the interactions compared to 78 percent in the last statistical survey made in 2018, and compared on a monthly basis.

ISTAT shows a first analysis of the trend of help requests made by using the 1522 helpline, available at the national level and requested by the Istanbul Convention of 2011 (Art. 24). In detail, there are two options to access the 1522 services: by chat and by phone call. Despite a decline in calls at the beginning of the lockdown, as previously shown, both phone calls and messages via chat to ask for help increased during the three months of confinement in comparison to the same period of time in the previous year. Also, all the calls made by mistake declined in the same span of time. Since March 22, the trend of demand by women in need remains constantly high, even though contacts to the helpline dropped during weekends and holidays. Furthermore, according to the Department for Equal Opportunities, the number of total requests from March to May increased almost three times in 2020 compared to 2019. And, broadly, the number of people who contacted 1522 doubled in the same three months.

The reasons behind this new drive to contact the helpline have been associated with numerous sensibility campaigns that the Department for Equal Opportunities has decided to put forward, especially in April 2020, using hashtags like *#nonseisola*<sup>14</sup> and *#escidalsilenzio*<sup>15</sup>, as well as broadcasting them all over the country (on television and across the internet). It is interesting to note that the typology of violence that people are asking for help with via chat or call is mostly physical violence perpetrated by their partner, IPV, followed by psychological violence. In detail, the number of physical violence cases spiked from 980 in 2019 (March-May) to 2,383 in 2020; whereas, the number of psychological cases almost doubled and reached 1793 cases<sup>16</sup>. However, the number of reports to the police decreased by 3.7 percent in 2020 compared to 2019. Importantly, it was already made clear in 2019 that IPV is an extremely alarming situation since 81.2 percent of femicides happened inside the family<sup>17</sup>. But government responsiveness was not – and is still not – very reactive to the current situation, despite the dialogue that exists within civil society, especially since the network of the anti-violence centers has improved and the Department for Equal Opportunities hears out what is asked. For example, on April 29, an extra 5 million euros were requested for funding to support anti-violence centers during the COVID-19 emergency<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> In English: ‘you are not alone’.

<sup>15</sup> In English: ‘come out from the silence’.

<sup>16</sup> All these numbers refer to the reports made using the helpline service 1522.

<sup>17</sup> Information retrieved from [1522.eu](https://www.1522.eu)

<sup>18</sup> See <https://www.direcontrolaviolenza.it/> for more information.

As for the degree of responsiveness in Italy, it is not as dynamic as Spain. The initiative taken by Spain, *Mascarilla 19*, has been considered valid to combat GBVAW; the government supported the first model used in Spain, which is largely due to a campaign with the hashtag *#liberapuoii*. However, it translated into different procedures and intentions, as revealed in this interview:

In Italy, in my opinion, it was a good initiative because it is not completely useless to read something that explains what to do. But the problem here in Italy is the direct passage with the protocols of action. I talked to the anti-violence centers about this story, and they told me that they were *totally excluded* from this thing and for me it is absurd not to talk to those who have been dealing with these things for a long time. For example, if we were informed, we could have done training and could have made it even more practical. So the problem was the scarce dialogue and the fact that the ministry has done this thing and then another group has brought the information on social media without being sure about what it was all about. Moreover, pharmacists told me that they were contacted by the ministry only to give information in case they were in such a situation and therefore it was not established to contact the anti-violence centers. (Italian activist and journalist, interviewed in July 2020).

In April 2020, the Minister for Family and Equal Opportunities, Elena Bonetti, decided to release 30 million euros to combat male VAW. However, the funds provided last year by the Department for Equal Opportunities have had difficulties reaching the regions that do not apply any action plan to combat GV. While the dialogue between the civil society and the government on an institutional level does exist, it still has a few problems and shortages, which emerged in this interview:

Eh, no there is dialogue and also Bonetti for example did everything we told her. However, what she could not do was to get the money immediately because she had to go through the regions... so there is an answer, there is a strategic plan, but the problem is the difficulty of dialogue between the state and the regions to have an effective and prompt response. Also, in the 2017-20 plan, the regions have responded in a very different way and some of the funds have not yet been given and others have, and if they are not given, they go back to the Court of Auditors, they are lost... so suddenly the funds of 2017, 2018 and 2019 have been given but without real planning and 3-4% of the amount goes to the anti-violence centers, the rest goes directly to the lawyers, etc. Therefore, we rely a lot on civil society when everything else is watering down. (Italian chairwoman of an association dealing with gender-based violence and member of international organizations on the subject, interviewed in July 2020).

During the same interview, this was also stated: 'Violence is a system. It is not a piece, they are integrated policies, so if we do not create integrated policies is all relative'. This aspect is a notable indication that marks the differences between the Spanish and Italian cases, addressed in the following paragraph.

## **6. Differences and similarities between the two Mediterranean countries: to inform versus to act**

The previous paragraphs have shown how these two countries on the northern shore of the Mediterranean reacted in profoundly diverse ways when they had to address intimate partner violence against women during confinement. If we make reference to the index of government responsiveness to VAW created by Htun and Weldon (2012), there are several differences between Spain and Italy which became even clearer during the March to May lockdown. Indeed, these differences are the expression of the historical background of the two Mediterranean countries, of the diverse women's and feminist movements, and of the presence of women and femocrats in the political administrations. The index has multiple sections according to the following services: shelters and rape centers, legislation pertaining to domestic and other forms of violence and sexual assault, training professionals who respond to victims, prevention and awareness-raising programs, and policy coordination. In the context of a specific emergency on multiple levels, and if the comparison of services which were present before the pandemic escalation was excluded, the way this index is structured helps to understand what has actually been done by the two countries' administrations and how the separate governments have fostered ways of engaging their citizens within the public sphere (Allegretti et al., 2012).

In detail, Spain approved the Royal Decree 12/2020 and decided to consider all services that protect and assist victims of gender-based violence as essential, while Italy neither approved a specific contingency plan, nor allowed local services – such as ensuring a direct protocol to follow at pharmacies – to take place in the country. In Spain, the services offered by the government delegation against gender-based violence have been manifold since 2004 – no exceptions – even during the lockdown. In detail, the services and attention of the institutions continued to be constant and improved at the national level throughout the pandemic. Among them, there is a telephone service of attention and protection for victims of GV called ATENPRO, a monitoring system through telematic devices to control restraining orders that is guaranteed by the government delegation against GV (López-Ossorio, 2019), as well as a complete monitoring system in cases of GV. The system is managed by the

Secretariat of State for Security of the Ministry of the Interior, which did a competent job during the pandemic, as was presented in the paragraph about Spain.

Further, on the issue of government responsiveness to GBVAW, the two presidents also used their socials in different ways. The decisions taken by Pedro Sanchez, the Minister of Equality, and the government's delegation against gender-based violence to declare the centers essential service during the pandemic, and to engage on social media platforms by asking for urgent measures and assistance, were certainly not replicated in Italy. Although the television campaigns were quite different and the pink number continued to work, the Italian Government's level of responsiveness to women's needs and, for instance, to the requests of the *D.i.Re* network centers which are engaged in the fight to eliminate male violence against women, received little superficial attention. The dialogue within the institutional level was created but it was not bolstered. Therefore, as with the initiative of asking for help at pharmacies, it was not mediated with experienced workers at anti-violence centers. Furthermore, other initiatives ended in the mediatic propaganda of stopping VAW, but were not supported by measures that were supposed to be placed at the regional and local levels.

Differences and commonalities between the countries reflect two main distinctions which define their policy-making agendas on issues of GBVAW: the lack of an integral law on the matter in Italy (which has existed in Spain since 2004), and the different historical backgrounds. In Spain, the presence of independent movements is very constant and it influences the decisions of the political agenda, which has continued to remain true during the pandemic; whereas in Italy, there are fewer feminist movements and more *femocrats* (women who play a role in the government and administrations). Hence, between the two Mediterranean countries, a discrepancy becomes clear. The Italian Government has decided to inform, whereas the Spanish administration has taken steps to act against GBVAW during the COVID-19 pandemic and, as in the case of this paper, during the three month period of lockdown. A faltering procedure that informs about the violence is what happens in Italy, compared to acting and proceeding head-on in Spain, with great institutional awareness of the movements and the whole civil society, which prepares practices and policies in order to eliminate all forms of GV.

## **7. Conclusion**

Laws and policies aimed at preventing and fighting violence against women (VAW) have populated the daily debate of nation-states, no exception made for



the lockdown period of the current COVID-19 pandemic. Stopping violence is, indeed, paramount in framing the state's political life, citizens' expectations, and broadly societies in modern times.

As stated in the first section of this article, the research argues two things: that the way a specific society presents a social phenomenon influences its responses in terms of policies, and that the dialogue between the civil society and the institutional level needs to be reinvigorated in order to comprehensively address gender-based violence against women (GBVAW). Furthermore, the differences in the way nation-states legislate on a given issue have obvious effects on the types of violence that are qualitatively and quantitatively taken into account for future debates on the social problem that must be tackled<sup>19</sup>.

Crises and lockdowns can exacerbate moments of violence and re-establish hierarchies of power within a household that may usually be milder. This is because contact with the attacker is usually less frequent in normal times, for example, when the attacker is at work or engaged in outdoor activities. Action and government responsiveness were crucial during the confinement period of the coronavirus pandemic and publicity campaigns were essential in creating awareness. They were able to show women, even without direct contact with them, how to get out of a situation of intimate partner violence (IPV). In Spain, the decision to have places that function as safeguards – services such as pharmacies that are often frequented because they are indispensable and arouse less suspicion – are of crucial importance for women. This enables women to know that there are accessible services at their disposal and that there is a way out of violence.

And, there is also a plurality of violence perpetrated by mostly men against women, as in Spanish *violencias machistas*, and plenty of measures that the Istanbul Convention (2011) has put forward for states to prevent domestic violence. However, times and contexts vary widely and a common framework to tackle this issue seems far from reality at the moment because, as COVID-19 has demonstrated, this pandemic goes much further than physical health; it encompasses psychological, mental, individual abilities and possibilities to overcome emergencies and inequalities.

As the United Nations (UN) Secretary-General António Guterres declared, '*For many women and girls, the threat looms largest where they should be safest. In their own homes*'<sup>20</sup>. At a time when, at the national level, it seems that emergency situations, gender inequalities and the plight of women take second place (Castellanos-Torres et al., 2020), at the UN level, co-leaders of the Generation Equality

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<sup>19</sup> See [eige.europa.eu](http://eige.europa.eu) for more information.

<sup>20</sup> See the [undp.org](http://undp.org) for more information about the Inter-Agency Statement on Violence Against Women and Girls in the Context of COVID-19

Forum Action Coalition on Gender-Based Violence have shared a joint leadership statement for targeted investments, commitments and innovative new ways of tackling the exponential increase in GBVAW during the pandemic.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, GBVAW is a *pandemic* of global magnitude (Rivera and Alcón, 2020:7) precisely because the ‘tyranny of the urgent’ (Smith, 2019) includes the structural problems of society.

In conclusion, tackling this social phenomena has become one of policymakers’ most alluring goals. Nevertheless, discrepancies are evident. Gender-based violence is, indeed, a widespread social issue. While it is not an emergency in the sense that it does not present itself now for the first time in history, but it is in its critical moment ever. GBVAW is a massive dilemma to solve, a complicated matter to tackle, and an extremely dense Pandora’s Box to open when analysing reports and statistics. By considering and comparing Spanish and Italian Government responsiveness, it remains clear that the need for cultural evolution and critical thinking is undeniably the most complicated—but indispensable—point to begin with, and perhaps this period of confinement will lead us to rethink our lives and actions as social, human beings.

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<sup>21</sup> See the [unwomen.org](http://unwomen.org) website for more information about the statement.

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