

Did Intimate Partner Violence Increase After the First COVID-19 Lockdown? A Study with Women Attending Antiviolence Centers in Italy

Patrizia Romito^a, Laetitia Marchand-Martin^b, Martina Pellegrini^c, Marie-Josèphe Saurel-Cubizolles^b

Abstract

Aim of the study is to analyze the evolution of intimate partner violence (IPV) after the first COVID-19 lockdown with women attending antiviolence centers (AVCs) in Italy.

Of 292 women attending an AVC in 2020, 238 were victims of IPV; they were interviewed with a standardized questionnaire, including some open-ended questions. Questions concerned the evolution of violence after the lockdown; women's fear; and socio-demographic variables. Women's spontaneous comments were collected. Analyses focused on the increase in four types of violence: controlling behaviors and physical, sexual, and economic violence.

After the lockdown, the evolution in violence was not uniform: for instance, physical violence increased for 22% of women and decreased for 55%, whereas controlling behaviors increased for 29% and decreased for 36%. In open-ended questions, women attributed this increase to the perpetrator's need to regain control as after the lockdown, the women had regained some freedom. Cohabitation with the violent partner during the lockdown was the most important factor related to the increase in the four types of violence after the end of the lockdown. Most women were afraid of the perpetrator, particularly if they had cohabitated with the perpetrator during the lockdown: the increase in each type of violence was associated with women reporting fear.

Women interviewed in this study reported high levels of partner's violence and fear after the lockdown, particularly if they had cohabitated during the lockdown. Governments should provide the resources to prevent violence and

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support the victims; these measures must be included in post-Covid-19 recovery programs.

Keywords: intimate partner violence, COVID-19 pandemic, fear.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic had a devastating impact on the health, social relations, and finances of millions of people and communities. Natural disasters, including epidemics, have been found associated with an increase in violence against women and children (Bourgault et al., 2021). From the beginning of the crisis, many were concerned that the world would see a “horrible global surge in domestic violence” (United Nations, 2020).

This study aimed to analyze the evolution of intimate partner violence (IPV) against women after the end of the first COVID-19 lockdown in Italy.

1.1. *IPV: frequency and characteristics*

IPV is very frequent: a review covering 161 countries and based on population samples estimated that 27% of women 15 years or older had experienced physical and/or sexual violence by a partner in their lifetime and 13% in the past year (Sardinha et al., 2022). In Europe, during their adult lives, 22% of women have experienced physical or sexual violence and 43% psychological abuse or controlling behavior by a partner or ex-partner. These proportions are 19% and 38% in Italy. In the 12 months before the survey, 4% of the entire European population and 6% of women in Italy have experienced physical or sexual IPV (European Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014).

From the 1990s, the Duluth model of domestic violence put at its center the man’s will to dominate and control his partner (Pence & Paymar, 1993). Evan Stark (2007) further developed the concept of coercive control: a multiplicity of behaviors aimed to control, humiliate, intimidate, and frighten the woman and to restrain her liberty. Coercive control may or may not include acts of physical or sexual violence (Stark & Hester, 2019). Studies have shown that situations characterized by partner’s “coercive control” or by “psychological violence” have a strong negative impact on victims’ mental health, even after controlling for physical or sexual violence (Dokkedahl et al., 2022).

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This situation is also described as “everyday terrorism”, with fear as a central element. According to Rachel Pain “Fear is not just a by-product of domestic abuse; it is a key element that keeps it going” (Pain, 2012, p.14). Fear, for self or one’s children, can be both an obstacle and a drive to seek help or leave the violent man (Romito et al., 2022a; Shaheen et al., 2020) and may be present long after the woman has left him (Pomicino et al., 2019; Salcioglu et al., 2017).

Post-separation violence can be understood by recognizing that at the core of IPV is the desire to control the woman and limit her freedom. IPV in its various forms may continue or worsen when the woman and the children try to escape control and regain their freedom. It may continue long after the woman has left the violent partner and is not living with him under the same roof (Brownridge, 2006; Sharp-Jeffs et al., 2018). In Great Britain, 52 of 55 women separated from a violent man and attending a dedicated service were still experiencing IPV in the 2 years after the separation; one woman was killed (Radford et al., 1997). In Italy, among a sample of women interviewed 3 to 5 years after attending an antiviolence center (AVC), 40% of those who were separated were still experiencing IPV (Pomicino et al., 2019). Data from national surveys confirm the trend: in Great Britain, among women who had experienced IPV during the relationship, 37% continued to experience violence after the separation (Walby & Allen, 2004). A separated woman is five times more likely to be killed by an ex-partner than a married and still cohabiting woman (Brownridge, 2006).

1.2. IPV during the COVID-19 pandemic

In Italy as in most countries, from March 2020, governments enacted serious measures to contain the COVID-19 epidemic (Donato, 2020). Schools, non-essential services, and shops were closed; travelling and going out, except for buying groceries, was forbidden; going to the pharmacy or hospital was usually permitted, but people were refrained from doing so for fear of contagion. In some countries and at some times, these measures were so severe as to be described as a “lockdown” or quarantine. This situation involved factors potentially leading to an increase in IPV: notably, forced cohabitation day and night with a violent man, difficulties in seeking and obtaining help, stress due to the fear of illness and professional or financial worries. Institutional bodies and women’s associations immediately raised concerns that IPV might increase (Simonovic, 2020). Very quickly, large online surveys were launched to explore the evolution of violence during the lockdown: an increase in violence among women living with a partner, especially if both were

quarantined, was observed in Spain (Arenas-Arroyo et al., 2020) and Argentina (Gibbons et al., 2020). In Bangladesh, results from a longitudinal study of personal interviews showed that among women already experiencing emotional or physical IPV, more than half reported that the IPV had increased since the lockdown (Hamadani et al., 2020).

However, other studies had more contradictory results. A study in Tunisia (Sediri et al., 2020) of highly educated women and another study in the United States (Lindau et al., 2021) of a large and socially more heterogeneous sample showed that although for some women, violence increased during the lockdown, for others it decreased. In Germany, three representative population surveys were used to compare the prevalence of physical and sexual IPV before and after the pandemic: the study found no increase in either type of violence linked to distancing measures, but certain forms of violence decreased (Kliem et al., 2023).

These mixed results could be explained in part by the couple's cohabitation status: for women who lived with an abusive partner, the lockdown may have been associated with increasing violence, but for women who did not live with the partner, the distancing measures implemented during this period may have led to a decrease in violence and stalking. This hypothesis was explored in a study of women attending an antiviolence center in Italy: more than half were not cohabiting with the abuser during the lockdown (Romito et al., 2022b). During that time, two distinct patterns emerged: partner/ex-partner violence increased for 28% of cohabitating women and 8% of non-cohabitating women and decreased for 12% of cohabitating women and 56% of non-cohabitating women. For the other women, IPV remained stable. The trends were confirmed after adjustment for the relevant socio-demographic factors. In qualitative studies, women victims of violence by non-cohabiting partners told how much relieved they had felt during the lockdown (Romito et al., 2021; Vives-Cases et al., 2021).

A study in Turkey of female homicides confirmed the protective role of COVID-19 distancing measures (Asik & Ozen, 2021). The probability that a woman was killed by a partner or ex-partner decreased by 84% during the lockdown as compared with the same period from 2014 to 2019. The authors put forward two hypotheses to explain this trend: one was the practical difficulties of ex-partners approaching the women during the lockdown, coupled with the increased probability of getting caught. Another explanation was linked to femicides occurring more frequently when women try to leave the abuser (Brownridge, 2006): the decrease in femicide may be explained in part by a decrease in women leaving the violent partners because of financial difficulties and reduced functioning of social and judicial services during this period (UNODC, 2021).

1.3. The present study

This analysis is part of a wider study aiming to analyze the evolution of IPV at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic among women seeking the services of AVCs in an Italian region. In previous work, we analyzed this evolution during the first lockdown in Italy (from March 9 to May 4, 2020), with both quantitative (Romito et al., 2022a and b) and qualitative strategies (Romito et al., 2021). The aim of the present paper was to describe the evolution of IPV after the end of the first lockdown, analyze the living conditions of women that were related to the increase in four types of violence - controlling behaviors, physical, sexual, and economic violence - and show the impact of the increased IPV on the feeling of fear among women.

2. Methods

2.1. Study design and procedure

An observational study was carried out in five AVCs in XXX, northeastern Italy. The participant AVCs are affiliated with the national network Donne in Rete contro la Violenza (DiRE) and corresponded to about 90% of structures helping women exposed to violence in this region. Between June 3 and September 30, 2020, after the end of the first lockdown, 379 women sought services in person or by phone from an AVC in the region; 292 completed the standardized questionnaire (response rate 77%): 238 were exposed to violence by a male partner or ex-partner (IPV in the present text) and were included in the analysis.

Women were interviewed by AVC advocates in the context of their usual interactions; questionnaires were anonymous, and before the interviews, women signed an informed consent form. To capture women's subjective experience, all comments women made during the interview were recorded verbatim by the advocates. The study was approved by the ethics committee of the University of Trieste.

2.2. Questionnaire and measures

A standardized questionnaire was developed for this study. It was the result of the collaboration between the researchers and the advocates of the AVC and was based on both a previous questionnaire used with a similar sample of women (Bastiani, 2016) and the working experience of the advocates.

2.2.1. *Violence indicators*

The evolution of violence was assessed with a set of nine items asking women if each type of violence increased, stayed the same or decreased after the end of the first lockdown as compared with during the lockdown. When a type of violence was not present, the code “Not applicable” was attributed. Types of violence performed by the partner or ex-partner were psychological; controlling behaviors; threats of hurting/killing the woman; physical; sexual; stalking; telephone or cyber-violence, including revenge porn; economic violence; and threats of suicide. To identify the specific violent situation for each woman, we computed an indicator of “diversity of violence” as follows: 1) women who experienced four or fewer types of violence, 2) those who experienced five or six types, and 3) those who reported seven, eight or the nine different types of violence. These data were reported by the women as they experienced them at the time they responded to the interviewer. An open-ended question asked women about their opinions of the reasons for any change in IPV occurring during the lockdown.

2.2.2. *Socio-demographic indicators*

Interview questions asked about age (in a three-class variable by 5 years), educational level (in two classes: low or intermediate/high), and nationality (in two classes: Italian or not) of the woman at the time of the survey. Another question asked about the presence of a child (or children) less than 18 years old with the violent partner or ex-partner (yes/no). The employment status of women was assessed and included in the analysis in a three-class variable (employed, precarious professional situation, housewife or not employed). Financial stress was assessed by asking the woman to subjectively evaluate her financial situation. This factor was used in two classes (good or very good vs not good or very bad). A question assessed whether the woman cohabitated with the perpetrator during the lockdown (yes/no).

2.2.3. *Women’ fear indicator*

Women’s fear of the perpetrator was evaluated using a single question: “Since the end of the lockdown, were you afraid of the aggressor/of the violence?” with the following four proposed answers: 1, yes, as in the lockdown period; 2, more; 3, less; 4, no I am not/was not afraid. We computed a binary

variable (yes/no): women had been afraid if they answered 1, 2 or 3 and not afraid if they answered 4.

2.3. Analysis strategy

We first conducted a descriptive analysis of the sample and calculated the frequencies of the different types of IPV and their evolution as well as the distribution of the diversity of violence. Second, we analyzed the percentage increase in four types of violence (out of the nine collected): 1) controlling behavior (yes/no); 2) physical violence (yes/no); 3) sexual violence (yes/no) and 4) economic violence (yes/no), as reported by the participants for the period before completing the questionnaire after the end of the first lockdown. Physical and sexual types were chosen for their traditional role in shaping the concept of IPV; they are the most studied types, and the only ones considered in many studies (Sardinha et al., 2022). The central role of controlling behaviors has become evident in recent years (Stark, 2007). Economic violence was chosen mainly because it is a form of violence that stems directly from the patriarchal model, which combines control over women's material living conditions and possibly theft, concealment, or misappropriation of the woman's own property (Postmus et al., 2020).

Using bivariate analyses, we observed how these percentages varied depending on the socio-demographic characteristics of women. Then we performed multivariate analyses using logistic regression models: odds ratios (ORs) and their 95% confidence intervals (CIs) quantified the associations between each indicator of increased violence and the women's characteristics that were associated on bivariate analyses at $p < 0.20$.

Third, we analyzed the extent to which the proportion of women who were afraid of the violence/partner varied depending on these situations of increased violence and the diversity of violence. For that, we used bivariate analyses. The denominators varied depending on the number of women who were victims of each type of violence, except for the diversity indicator, which concerned all women in the analysis. Quantitative data analysis involved using SAS v9.4.

3. Results

3.1. Participants

The 238 women were mainly over age 35 (Table 1). Just over one-quarter of the women were foreign nationals; about half (58%) had one or more minor

children with the perpetrator. Slightly more than one-quarter of the women did not have an occupational activity, and more than half rated their financial situation as “not good” or “very bad”. Three quarters of the women had a low or intermediate level of education. About half of the women were not living with their partner or ex-partner during the first lockdown.

Table 1. Description of women’s characteristics (n=238).

	N	%
Age (years)		
≤ 35	67	28.2
36-45	89	37.4
> 45	82	34.5
Citizenship		
Italian	175	73.5
Not Italian	63	26.5
Has a child <18 years old with perpetrator		
No	100	42.0
Yes	138	58.0
Employment status		
Employed	109	45.8
Precarious professional situation	66	27.7
Housewife or otherwise not employed	63	26.5
Self-evaluated financial situation		
Good or very good	96	40.3
Not good or very bad	142	59.7
Educational level		
Low or intermediate	178	74.8
High	60	25.2
Cohabitation with partner during the COVID-19 lockdown		
Yes	104	43.7
No	134	56.3

3.2. Frequency of violence at the time of the interview

Table 2 depicts the frequency of nine types of violence and their variation (decrease, stability, or increase) after the end of the lockdown. The most frequent type of violence reported by the women was psychological violence. This type was followed by economic violence and controlling behaviors, then, for more than half of the women, physical violence, threats of killing or hurting, violence by phone or Internet, and physical stalking. Less frequently, women reported threats of suicide by the partner and sexual violence. From women’s answers to the nine items concerning the period after the end of the first lockdown until the survey, the diversity of violence may be described as follows: 37% of women (87/238) reported four types of violence or less, 31% (75/238) five or six types, and 32% (76/238) seven or more types (not shown).

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Table 2. Description of intimate partner violence (IPV) types at the time of the interview and evolution since the end of lockdown (LD).

Type of IPV	All sample		Evolution of violence since the end of LD (as compared with the LD period)			
	N	% occurrence	N	% increased	% stable	% decreased
Psychological violence	238	96.6	230	40.0	32.2	27.8
Controlling behaviours	238	68.5	163	29.4	35.0	35.6
Threats of hurting/killing the woman	238	58.8	140	30.0	32.1	37.9
Physical violence	238	63.9	152	23.0	22.4	54.6
Sexual violence	238	29.4	70	20.0	31.4	48.6
Stalking (physical)	238	56.7	135	37.8	24.4	37.8
Violence via phone or web (insults, threats, revenge porn, sexual harassment)	238	58.0	138	36.2	29.0	34.8
Economic violence	238	70.6	168	29.8	40.5	29.8
Threats of suicide	238	33.2	79	16.2	29.7	54.0

3.3. Evolution of violence after the end of the lockdown

The increase by specific type of violence was more frequent for psychological violence, stalking (physical) or violence by phone or the Internet. Physical violence and partner's threats of suicide decreased for more than half of the respondents and sexual violence for almost half of the women. The types of violence for which we observed about three-thirds equivalent of increased/stable/decreased were controlling behaviors or threats of hurting/killing (Table 2).

3.4. Bivariate associations between socio-demographic characteristics and an increase in violence

Table 3 presents the association between the main women's demographic and social characteristics and the increase in the four types of violence. Women's age was associated with only an increase in controlling behaviors, with women 36 to 45 years old more often reporting this increase than younger or older women. Not having minor children with the perpetrator was associated with only an increase in physical violence. Women's citizenship as well as educational level were not associated with an increase in any type of violence. Women with a precarious employment status more often reported an increase in sexual violence as compared with employed women or housewives; these differences were at the limit of significance knowing that the statistical power

was the least for sexual violence because only 70 women were concerned. Women who described their financial situation as “not good” or “very bad” reported an increase in sexual and economic violence more often than women with a good situation. Cohabitation with perpetrator during the lockdown was strongly associated with an increase in all four types of violence reported after its end.

Table 3. Increase in the four specific types of violence after the end of the first COVID-19 lockdown (LD) by women’s demographic and social characteristics.

	Increase in			
	Controlling behaviours (N) %	Physical violence (N) %	Sexual violence (N) %	Economic violence (N) %
All women	(163) 29.4	(152) 23.0	(70) 20.0	(168) 29.8
Age (years)				
≤ 35	(54) 20.4	(48) 22.9	(27) 18.5	(43) 32.6
36-45	(62) 41.9	(55) 20.0	(27) 22.2	(70) 31.4
> 45	(47) 23.4	(49) 26.5	(16) 18.8	(55) 25.5
P value	<0.05	NS	NS	NS
Citizenship				
Italian	(117) 31.6	(102) 22.5	(39) 15.4	(113) 27.4
Not Italian	(46) 23.9	(50) 24.0	(31) 25.8	(55) 34.5
P value	NS	NS	NS	NS
Child <18 with perpetrator				
No	(70) 32.9	(63) 38.1	(28) 25.0	(63) 34.9
Yes	(93) 26.9	(89) 12.4	(42) 16.7	(105) 26.7
P value	NS	<0.001	NS	NS
Employment status				
Employed	(75) 29.3	(62) 19.4	(26) 11.5	(68) 27.9
Precarious	(44) 27.3	(49) 22.4	(20) 35.0	(49) 32.7
Not employed	(44) 31.8	(41) 29.3	(24) 16.7	(51) 29.4
P value	NS	NS	0.13	NS
Financial situation				
Good/very good	(63) 27.0	(56) 21.4	(23) 4.3	(58) 20.7
Not good or very bad	(100) 31.0	(96) 24.0	(47) 27.7	(110) 34.5
P value	NS	NS	0.03	0.06
Education				
Low or intermediate	(123) 27.6	(119) 22.7	(56) 21.4	(129) 30.2
High	(40) 35.0	(33) 24.2	(14) 14.3	(39) 28.2
P value	NS	NS	NS	NS
Cohabitation during COVID-19 LD				
Yes	(69) 42.0	(72) 38.9	(33) 39.4	(73) 43.8
No	(94) 20.2	(80) 8.8	(37) 2.7	(95) 19.0
P value	0.003	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001

Percentages were compared by chi-squared test, NS: non-significant at p>0.20

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3.5. Multivariate models of increase in violence

Table 4 shows the same associations by multivariate analyses adjusted for age, having a minor child, perceived financial situation and cohabitation status. For an increase in controlling behaviors, the women’s age remained a significant factor, and cohabitating during the lockdown was a high-risk factor for an increase in controlling behaviors even after the end of the lockdown. The increase in physical violence was more likely for women who did not have a minor child with the perpetrator and those who cohabitated during the lockdown. Sexual violence as well as economic violence increased more for women who lived with the partner versus the others.

Table 4. Multivariate analysis of factors associated with an increase in four specific types of violence.

Current social characteristics	Increase in			
	Controlling behaviours N=163 aOR (95% CI)	Physical violence N=152 aOR (95% CI)	Sexual violence N=70 aOR (95% CI)	Economic violence N=168 aOR (95% CI)
Age (years)				
≤ 35	0.33 (0.14-0.79)	1.05 (0.36-3.08)	0.78 (0.16-3.75)	1.17 (0.49-2.79)
36-45	1	1	1	1
> 45	0.30 (0.12-0.77)	0.78 (0.26-2.30)	0.63 (0.10-3.98)	0.69 (0.28-1.68)
P value	0.01	NS	NS	NS
Child <18 years old with perpetrator				
No	1.66 (0.77-3.58)	4.18 (1.67-10.46)	1.20 (0.28-5.20)	1.41 (0.65-3.06)
Yes	1	1	1	1
P value	0.20	0.002	NS	NS
Self-evaluated financial situation				
Good or very good	1	1	1	1
Not good or very bad	1.05 (0.50-2.22)	0.99 (0.41-2.42)	3.87 (0.38-38.86)	1.60 (0.74-3.50)
P value	NS	NS	NS	NS
Cohabitation with partner during COVID-19 lockdown				
Yes	2.96 (1.42-6.16)	6.14 (2.37-15.87)	16.83 (1.96-144.58)	3.02 (1.47-6.22)
No	1	1	1	1
P value	0.004	<0.001	0.010	0.003

3.6. Women's subjective explanation for the increase in violence

About 60% of the women provided some explanations for the reasons IPV decreased, increased or did not change after the end of the first COVID-19 lockdown as compared with during the lockdown. Among the women experiencing an increase in violence, the more frequent explanation was related to the role of control by the partner: if during the lockdown, the woman's enforced isolation had fulfilled the man's need for control, with the end of the restrictive measures and women's newfound freedom, the need to impose control returned.

Not having me under control because I went back to work, he gets worried and nervous (case 123).

With the possibility of going out, he became jealous and controlled me because he thought I was cheating on him, whereas when I was at home, he was calmer (case 156).

(During the lockdown), he had the security that I couldn't move, I had no contact with anyone, so there was no external conditioning. Now he has no control (case 160).

Husband is more jealous [now] that I can move freely and am no longer confined to the house (case 166).

(Violence) increased because he can no longer control me like when we were at home (case 279).

Some women mentioned the role of alcohol.

If he doesn't have me under tight control, his violence increases. I started going out to work again and he started drinking again (case 212).

(During the lockdown), he couldn't go out, didn't drink and didn't hang out with his friends all the time; it was convenient for him to be a little lamb. (Violence) increased now, because of the reopening of the bar and because I became independent and go out again (case 245).

Another common explanation was linked to the threat of separation: the situation having worsened during the lockdown, the woman decided to leave the partner, and the violence escalated.

Even before the confinement he was unwell, always agitated; during the confinement it escalated. In May, I decided to leave him. I informed him that I no longer wanted to be with him, and he did not accept the separation. Violence increased (case 161).

Because of the divorce letter (case 224).

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(During the lockdown), he worked mostly out of town and was jealous and controlling; lately he saw me determined to leave him. (After the lockdown, violence increased) because I was even more determined to leave him (case 268).

In June, we broke up and there was an escalation (case 281).

In another case, the increase of violence was linked to judicial interventions. A woman reported that IPV had decreased during lockdown because, following her complaint, the partner was under house arrest. But, after the end of lockdown,

Released from house arrest, he started persecution again (case 263).

3.7. Violence increase and women's fear

Table 5 presents the percentage of women who were afraid of their violent partner according to the diversity of violence and the increase in the same four types of violence.

Table 5. Being afraid of violence by partner after COVID-19 lockdown by violence indicators in all sample and by cohabitation status.

	All sample		Cohabitation		Non cohabitation	
	(N)	% afraid	(N)	% afraid	(N)	% afraid
	(238)	73.1	(104)	78.8	(134)	68.7
Number of violence types						
1-4	(87)	59.8	(42)	64.3	(45)	55.6
5 or 6	(75)	82.7	(33)	93.9	(42)	73.8
7-9	(76)	79.0	(29)	82.8	(47)	76.6
P value		0.002		0.006		0.07
Controlling behaviours increase						
No	(115)	74.8	(40)	82.5	(75)	70.7
Yes	(48)	87.5	(29)	86.2	(19)	89.5
P value		0.07		NS		0.09
Physical violence increase						
No	(117)	66.7	(44)	75.0	(73)	61.6
Yes	(35)	85.7	(28)	85.7	(7)	85.7
P value		0.03		NS		NS
Sexual violence increase						
No	(56)	66.1	(20)	65.0	(36)	66.7
Yes	(14)	92.9	(13)	92.3	(1)	1/1
P value		<0.05		0.07		NS
Economic violence increase						
No	(118)	69.5	(41)	78.0	(77)	64.9
Yes	(50)	88.0	(32)	87.5	(18)	88.9
P value		<0.01		NS		<0.05

Taking into account the strong differences according to the cohabitation status described above, this table also shows the percentages of fear separately for women who cohabitated and those who did not. Women who cohabited during the lockdown were more often afraid than those who did not live with their partner or ex-partner (79% vs 69%, $p=0.08$).

Women who were exposed to more than 4 types of violence were more often afraid of the aggressor than those exposed to fewer types; there was no clear difference between the two classes: five or six versus seven to nine types. Considering the whole sample, women were more often afraid when each of the four types of violence increased, all four differences being statistically significant. The stratification by cohabitation status showed similar results in both subgroups, with increasing violence associated with increased frequency of fear.

3.8. Women's comments concerning fear

During the interview, some women spontaneously mentioned being afraid or scared or commented on situations that had been a source of fear.

(After the lockdown), I blocked all accounts from which he had resurfaced, and he is abroad, but the fear before was not there while now it is present (case 1).

A few days ago, he was sentenced to 9 years in prison for sexual assault and mistreatment. He is going to appeal, and these days I am very afraid that he will hurt me (case 66).

We fight all the time, I am afraid he will lose control, I am afraid he will stalk me (case 79).

I'm afraid I can't take it anymore. He threatens me and I'm afraid he will catch up with me in (city name) (case 122).

He seemed out of control, and I was afraid (case 127).

Escalation of violence, very afraid that something will happen to me as well as to my mother and the dog (case 135).

I saw with my own eyes the violence on children by my ex and I got scared, I realized that I must do something (case 231).

Escalation of violence; fear I had never felt before (case 232).

I was afraid he might hurt me (case 260).

I was afraid of everything, and I didn't understand. I was in love and didn't understand the situation (case 282).

I was fed up, but I didn't know what to do. I was afraid (case 291).

I was scared because he was threatening to kill me (case 293).

4. Discussion

Not all women attending AVCs in the northeast of Italy experienced an increase in IPV after the COVID-19 lockdown; for those who did, the main factor was cohabitation during the lockdown with the violent partner. According to the type of violence considered, between 9% and 20% of non-cohabiting women had experienced an increase in violence after the end of LD, while this increase affected between 39% and 44% of cohabiting women. On multivariate analyses, having cohabited with the aggressor was strongly associated with an increase in all four types of violence after its end.

The present study adds the important information that cohabitation during the lockdown has a strong impact also in the period after the lockdown. Qualitative responses from women regarding the reasons for violence's increase, and their spontaneous comments contributed to a better understanding of the post-lockdown situation. One reason was linked to the impact of separation: the increase in IPV during the confinement convinced the woman to end the relationship, which in turn led to an exacerbation of the man's violence. In a qualitative study (Romito et al., 2021), women who lived together during lockdown described a couple relationship characterized by longtime partner domination and psychological abuse, not always recognized as "violence." The exacerbation of these behaviors during lockdown, coupled with the concerned messages about IPV conveyed in the media, led some women to recognize violence as such and to the decision to separate, a decision that in turn led to an increase in violence. However, of note, also in other studies, some women expressed positive feelings concerning the lockdown precisely because of inducing an increase in IPV, which led to the decision of ending the relationship, a decision they would have long wanted to make (Brunori & Caterino, 2020; Romito et al., 2021; Vives-Casas et al., 2021).

At least for women who had previously cohabited, the situation presented contradictory aspects: on the one hand, leaving a violent partner involves the risk of heightened violence (Brownridge, 2006), and on the other, separation, including the cessation of cohabitation, seems a necessary step to put an end to violence. A longitudinal study of women attending an AVC in Italy indicated the importance of ending all contacts with the abuser (Bastiani, 2016), a conclusion also reported in the study of Bell et al. (2007) in the United States: in a sample of women who sought help for IPV, after 1 year from the beginning of the study, those who completely separated from the perpetrator had the highest quality of life. In another Italian study, among women who had attended a dedicated service 3 to 5 years before the interview, 40% of those who were separated and 61% of those still living with the perpetrator were experiencing partner/ex violence (Pomicino et al., 2019).

The other and more frequent explanation given by the women interviewed related to the man's need to control his partner. This need had subsided during the lockdown because women and children were shut at home: restrictive measures had prevented them from any freedom. At the end of the lockdown, when women had regained some liberty, the man's violence had begun again. Authors of a study in Austria formulated the same hypothesis to explain the evolution of IPV in the lockdown period (Lampe et al., 2021). In our study, the women interviewed spontaneously mentioned the theme of the man's need for control, which indicated that they clearly perceived its centrality in IPV. The importance of this element and its centrality in IPV is beginning to be recognized, so much so that now some countries such as Scotland consider coercive control a criminal offense (Stark & Hester, 2019).

Comparisons between our results and those from other studies are not easy because no other study separately considered IPV in the lockdown period and the period after its end, and only a few have considered the cohabitation status as a possible explanation for the discordant results regarding the evolution of IPV (Lindau et al., 2021; Sediri et al., 2020). In our previous study, during the lockdown, sharing a residence with the perpetrator represented a strong risk factor for increased IPV (Romito et al., 2022b), while the distancing measures activated to reduce the spread of the virus acted as a protection for non-cohabiting women, as demonstrated in Asik & Ozen (2021) femicide study. These results point to the utility to impose and rigorously apply distancing measures to protect the victims of IPV from further violence.

Not having minor children with the perpetrator was associated with the increase in IPV after the lockdown. The role of children in the beginning or the evolution of violence is not clear. In a recent review of risk and protective factors for IPV, children are not even mentioned (Yakubovich et al., 2018). Concerning the lockdown period, some studies found that the presence of young children was associated with an increase in IPV (Arenas-Arroyo et al., 2020; Peitzmeier et al., 2022), whereas another study found, as we did, that childless women were more at risk (Lampe et al., 2021).

Women 36 to 45 years old were more likely to be exposed to increasing partner violence after the lockdown than were younger or older women. The associations between age and victimization are complex: Sanz-Barbero et al. (2019) found that the prevalence of physical and/or sexual IPV in the last 12 months was greater among young women than among other respondents but was of less severity. In the same study, the authors observed an association between age and seeking help: among victims of IPV, 52% of women aged 35 to 54 years filed a police report versus 24% of young and elderly women; the authors assumed that mature women had a greater capacity to activate themselves and seek help (Sanz-Barbero et al., 2019). The mature women in our

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sample might have been particularly active in seeking help or resisting their partner's impositions, thus triggering an escalation in men's controlling behaviors.

Explaining the relationships between the increase in the four types of violence (control, physical, sexual, and economic violence) and women's age and the presence of minor children is difficult. All the analyses suggested that this sample of 238 women consists of two or more distinct groups, for which the frequency of violence and its evolution over the period observed may have been different (Romito et al., 2021). Non-cohabiting women, for instance, are a heterogeneous group, and include women who had cohabitated and then left the partner to live on their own as well as women who had an intimate relationship but did not share a residence. Because of this heterogeneity of the sample, we cannot establish linear and general associations applying to all the indicators of violent situations.

Fear is a central element in IPV: a climate of insecurity and fear reinforces the perpetrator's control over the victim, even beyond the single acts of violence (Pain, 2012). Fear is frequent among female victims of violence, it can last long after the woman left the perpetrator (Brown et al., 2021; Pomicino et al., 2019), and it can have contradictory effects: paralyzing the victim or, conversely, pushing her to take action to end the violence (Buchanan et al., 2013). During the COVID-19 pandemic, other fears were added to fear of the perpetrator: the fear of contagion and disease, the fear of losing one's job with the consequent economic problems, and, in general, the fear induced by the sense of isolation and uncertainty about the future. Surprisingly, very few studies consider fear of the perpetrator during the pandemic, and no study, except our own, has considered it after the end of the lockdown.

Most female victims of IPV interviewed in an Italian study (Romito et al., 2022a) reported being afraid of the perpetrator during the lockdown: fear was linked to the severity of violence that was associated with not having left the house during the lockdown but also with the likelihood of seeking help. In the present study, fear was associated with both the intensity of the IPV and its aggravation. Women's spontaneous comments allowed for contextualizing and adding depth to quantitative results: women were scared and feared violence to others close to them or of being killed. Because of the escalation of violence post-lockdown, one woman experienced "a fear she had never felt before". Non-cohabiting women less frequently reported being afraid than did cohabiting women, which agrees with the evolution of IPV in the two groups. There is evidence that inducing fear is a central strategy of the aggressor and that fear may influence the victim's behavior in different ways, interacting, in extraordinary situations such as a pandemic, with other factors or sources of fear. This should be better studied and understood.

The data from this study clearly indicate the central role of cohabitation with an abusive partner in the increase of IPV. This is an important result, as the decision to end cohabitation is difficult and requires personal and social resources: women need to be guaranteed a “basket of resources” (Kelly et al., 2014), including protection, housing, social and legal support even after separation, specialized counseling for them and their children, and, if necessary, training to re-enter the world of work. The COVID-19 epidemic has exacerbated some violent situation: even more than before, governments need to take actions to prevent IPV and to support the women victims, and, as noted by Sardinha et al. (2022), these measures must be included in post-COVID-19 recovery programs.

4.1. Limitations and strengths

Our data are not from the general population, nor do they represent all women who are victims of IPV; it is a sample of women who asked for help because they had approached an AVC. Results are limited by the composition of the sample, and by the specific context, a severe epidemic; they should be tested with samples of women from the general population and in more “normal” periods. Nevertheless, the sample has the merit of being multicentric, reflecting the northeast region of Italy. It is of moderate size, which led to small numbers for certain analyses, and we were not always able to draw clear statistical conclusions.

The data were collected by a research survey, using a specific data collection instrument enriched by the women’s free responses. The database includes a wide range of social and demographic data to help obtain a better description of these situations of acute violence; unfortunately, we do not have reliable data on the violent partner.

The open-ended questions in our questionnaire offered the respondents the opportunity to make their voices heard (O’Cathain & Thomas, 2004) and to illustrate more vividly what they were experiencing, as in their descriptions of their fear of the perpetrator. Their responses added new information to the understanding of the evolution of IPV, revealing the process that from the exacerbation of violence during the lockdown, led to the decision to end the relationship and then to a further increase in violence around or after separation after the lockdown. The role of the man’s need for control over his partner in the increase in violence after the lockdown was also revealed in women’s answers to the open-ended questions.

We obtained this valuable material because of the women interviewed and the experience and dedication of the advocates who interviewed them. The

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women who attended the AVCs were very trusting of the advocates; for this reason, even though they were at a very difficult time in their lives, they agreed to participate in the study and talk about their experiences, beyond answering only closed questions. By doing so, they contributed greatly to a better understanding of IPV.

5. Conclusion

IPV predates the COVID-19 pandemic and unfortunately is continuing after its end. It affects and sometimes destroys the lives of millions of women and children, leaving their communities traumatized and impoverished. Although unwelcomed, COVID-19 and the related measures represented a natural experiment that improved our understanding of the dynamic of violence against women and offered new suggestions for action. It is now a matter of making them a priority and putting them into practice.

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