

# **The COVID-19 crisis and the “ignored pandemic”: Gender-based violence experienced by women with a migration background in Germany**

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## Introduction

Like in many countries around the world, gender-based violence has long been a pervasive issue in Germany, affecting individuals of diverse cultural, social and economic backgrounds. An EU-wide survey has reported that around 37% of women in Germany have survived physical attack or threat of violence during their lives (FRA, 2014). The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated this problem, with reports of domestic abuse and other forms of violence increasing during lockdowns. As the country continues to grapple with the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is crucial to address the ongoing crisis of gender-based violence and take steps to ensure the safety of women and to provide adequate support to those affected. This policy brief analyses the impact of the pandemic on gender-based violence in Germany, highlights key areas for policy intervention, and provides recommendations for addressing this pressing issue in the post-pandemic context.

Across the world, there has been a surge in reports of gender-based violence, with lockdowns, border closures, a reduction in support through services and other pandemic-related measures forcing survivors to stay in environments conducive to abuse. To illustrate the lack of global awareness of the problem, the United Nations has referred to the increase in violence against women and girls as a “shadow pandemic” (UN Women, 2020). By examining the German case in the context of the global trend of increased gender-based violence during the COVID-19 pandemic, we can identify common underlying causes and develop more effective strategies for preventing and responding to this global crisis.

## Gender-based violence during and after the COVID-19 pandemic

Gender-based violence (GBV) targeting women is defined as “any act that results in, or is likely to result in physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life” (United Nations, 1995, p. 48). It is among the most serious and widespread human rights violations in the world, encompassing a range of harmful acts that are directed against women and girls because of their gender (Heise et al., 2002). As times of crisis have been linked to an increase in gender-based violence (Brink et al., 2021), the COVID-19 pandemic has raised significant concerns about its impact on women and their exposure to violence (López Belloso et al., 2022).

To control the spread of COVID-19, governments introduced a range of containment measures, including school closures and home working requirements (Ebert and Steinert, 2021). These measures have had unintended consequences on women’s risk of experiencing domestic violence. Quarantine measures that have forced families or partners to spend more time at home in confined spaces, as well as other economic factors such as loss of employment and illness, are known risk factors for GBV (Amarel et al., 2020). In addition, social isolation measures made reporting and early detection of abuse even more difficult, especially as many support services were forced to close their facilities and move their services online. The result was the exclusion of many people who did not meet the eligibility criteria for digital services and the failure to identify many cases where face-to-face contact was not possible (López Belloso et al., 2022). Government responses all over the world were insufficient, with just “0.0002% of the overall COVID-19 response funding opportunities going into [GBV prevention and response]” (Oxfam, 2021, p. 10).

## Impact of COVID-19 restrictions on gender-based violence in Germany

In 2020, the German Federal Minister for Family Affairs said they expected the number of cases of domestic violence<sup>1</sup> to increase during lockdowns

(BMFSFJ, 2020). Quarantines have exacerbated the situation of women, especially those who have been affected by or were at risk of violence before the pandemic. A representative study conducted online in April-May 2020 among women in Germany aged 18–65 years (n=3800) found that “the risk of physical conflict was more than double” for households placed in quarantine in comparison to households that were not placed under quarantine (Ebert and Steinert, 2021, p. 433). Overall, the survey found that 3% of women had been involved in at least some form of physical conflict at home and close to 4% had been forced by their partners to have sex. Quarantine measures were also associated with a notably higher risk of emotional abuse: 2% said they were not allowed to leave the house without their partners’ permission, 4% felt threatened and close to 5% of women’s partners monitored their digital contacts. Although the data cannot be compared to pre-pandemic years, these numbers are alarming. Opportunities to escape to friends and workplaces were limited, along with restricted access to support services (Neubert et al., 2020). Low-threshold services that were available at any time, however, were used more frequently during the pandemic than they had been before. The national helpline (*Hilfetelefon*), which was available in 17 languages, recorded an increase in demand by 17% (SOLVODI, 2020). In North Rhine-Westphalia, a total of 29,155 cases of domestic violence were recorded in 2020. This represents an increase of almost 8% compared to the previous year (Landeskriminalamt NRW, 2020). The number of cases also increased in Hamburg, where 5,397 cases of domestic violence were registered, an increase of 9% and the highest figure in 10 years (Raddatz, 2021). Lower Saxony (+7%) and Berlin (+6%) showed the same upward trend (Landespolizeipräsidium Niedersachsen, 2020; Polizei Berlin, 2020). Bavaria was the only state with a decline in recorded domestic violence (Innenministerium Bayern, 2020).

Overall, the *Federal Criminal Police Office* (BKA) reported a 4% increase in intimate partner violence (IPV), with 80% of survivors being women (BKA, 2020). IPV is a form of domestic violence limited to violence between partners. Studies show that women with a

migration background, who more often lack financial, social and educational resources, are disproportionately affected by IPV (Schröttle and Khelaifat, 2011). Despite the fact that women with lower education and income levels are not more susceptible to severe abuse than their counterparts with higher educational and socioeconomic statuses, examinations of risk factors concerning partner violence among women with a history of migration have revealed that “a higher level of education and socio-economic status, having an independent income and occupation appear to be protective factors” (Schröttle and Khelaifat, 2011, p. 193). A global meta-analysis by Tan and Kuschminder (2022) demonstrates a higher prevalence of IPV among women with a migration background compared to local populations. In Germany, the first large-scale representative study on violence against women carried out in 2003 on behalf of the *Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women, and Youth* confirmed these findings. A secondary analysis examining the connections between health, migration background and violence showed that “women of Turkish origin, by comparison, reported violence at the hands of their partners more often, and it was more severe and more frequent than violence reported by women of German origin” (Schröttle and Khelaifat, 2011, p. 189). The BKA data also showed that during the pandemic, women with a migration background living in Germany were also at higher risk of IPV and were more likely to experience violence. Women with a migration background accounted for 31% of the total number of recorded cases in 2020, despite representing 27% of the total female population (BKA, 2020). However, this alarming connection was not highlighted in the report.

Due to quarantine measures, survivors of IPV faced limited options to leave violent situations at home, often leaving women under the constant control of the perpetrator. Particularly problematic was the situation for survivors of IPV living in refugee shelters with their husband or partners, where they are officially “obliged to live according to the *Wohnsitzauflage* and *Residenzpflicht* (residence obligation) and cannot escape male violence” (SOLVODI, 2020, p. 2). Also, in order to acquire a residence

title independent of the husband, women are subjected to a three-year period of marriage. They will receive the independent right of residence in Germany only if the marriage has existed in the federal territory for at least three years until the time of separation, which leads to a strong dependence on the partner in the case of a violent relationship. However, this three-year period is suspended in the case of proven domestic violence (Handbook Germany, 2023). Lack of knowledge about support options, as well as language barriers, can make it more difficult for women with a migration background who are survivors of domestic violence to access counselling and support services and thus to free themselves from violent relationships (Schröttle and Glammeier, 2014).

### State responses to gender-based violence

The examples above demonstrate the importance of understanding gender-based violence using an intersectional approach to explore how a range of factors such as gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity and residential status that interact to create distinct vulnerabilities. In 2018, Germany signed the *Council of Europe's 'Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence'* (known as the *Istanbul Convention*), providing signatory states with a binding international human rights instrument to comprehensively combat all forms of violence against women (COE, 2011). Its implementation requires several government interventions, some of which have already been put in place in Germany. The *Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence* (GREVIO) monitors how each state implements the *Istanbul Convention*. It published its first evaluation report in 2022, containing several recommendations, some of which are urgent and have yet to be fully implemented in Germany. However, the report identifies the reform of the law on sexual offences and the establishment of a national helpline as steps in the right direction. The group has criticized the lack of a national strategy and a central strategic framework, which results in inadequacies in the provision of support and protection for women who are survivors of GBV. They point to significant safety concerns for women due to the lack of domestic violence

shelters in many parts of the country and major barriers in women's admission to shelters. Disability, residence status, age and the number of children may impact women's access to safe accommodation and, in some cases, force women to return to live with the perpetrator (GREVIO, 2022).

Women's shelters are perpetually overcrowded, with no free places available. According to the research network CORRECTIV (2022), there is a nationwide shortage in shelters of around 3,500 places. The GREVIO report also points to significant safety concerns in refugee shelters for those who have fled gender-based persecution or experienced sexual or GBV while fleeing, even though they are considered particularly vulnerable (GREVIO, 2022). The intersection of gender, migration background and uncertain residency status thus results in a unique social location (Palència et al., 2014) which is characterised by a "significantly higher" risk of being exposed to gender-based violence (Tan and Kuschminder, 2022, p. 7). Although there are interventions targeting GBV affecting communities with migration background, such as a campaign against physical chastisement in families of Turkish origin and the publication of letters of protection against female genital mutilation in different languages (BMFSFJ, 2012), the prevalence of IPV during and before the COVID-19 pandemic highlights the need for further policy interventions in Germany. Although the problem of domestic violence has been a matter of public and political awareness for years (BMFSFJ, 2014), political measures remain absent in Germany (Oxfam, 2021). In fact, government services that are central to providing help and support to affected women were less responsive during the pandemic, as shown by a study that examined the domestic violence support system at the time (Meier and Gloor, 2022). The institutions involved in the study noted that cooperation with the authorities had deteriorated during the pandemic, in particular with the offices of Foreigners' Registration, Youth Welfare, Legal Application and the Job Centre.

To combat the problem of gender-based violence in Germany, further awareness raising is needed to enable women with a migration history to

make use of existing support services. This should include publicizing the existing counselling and support services as well as strengthening trust in support systems. In order to reach the target groups, multilingual information materials, networking with migrant organisations and the use of low-threshold services not associated with the issue of domestic violence are considered important for disseminating information and building trust for women with a migration background (Müller and Bohne, 2015). Changes can also be brought about at a structural level. Strengthening resources such as education, language skills, professional and social integration of women with a migration history can enable women to free themselves from abusive relationships (Schröttle and Glammeier, 2014). Policies must address the specific needs of women who face multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, to enable women to exercise their right to a life free from violence and persecution.

### Conclusion

Gender-based violence in Germany has been a long-standing issue, affecting individuals from diverse backgrounds. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated this problem, leading to an increase in domestic violence and abuse during lockdowns. This aligns with the global trend of heightened rates of GBV during the pandemic. Quarantine measures and limited access to support services have trapped survivors in abusive environments, making it difficult to report and escape the violence, suggesting an even higher estimated number of unreported cases. Thus, the pandemic has created a "shadow pandemic" of increased violence against women and girls globally (UN Women, 2020).

Women with a migration history are particularly at risk. Statistics show an increased risk of being exposed to intimate partner violence for this group. Furthermore, there are safety concerns in refugee centres, especially for those who have already experienced GBV during their flight. Women with a migration background have had additional difficulties accessing support services due to language barriers and uncertain residence status. During the pandemic, there was a lack

of adequate state intervention, despite affected women being particularly vulnerable at the time. The overcrowding in women's shelters even before the pandemic points to significant gaps in the prevention of GBV and in the support available for affected women. Furthermore, the existing support systems report a deterioration in communication and cooperation with state authorities.

An intersectional approach is crucial to understanding the complexities of GBV. Efforts should focus on raising awareness among the population with migration history, providing multilingual information materials, and strengthening resources for women with a migration history. Structural changes, such as improving education, language skills, and social integration, can empower women to leave abusive relationships. Policies must consider the specific needs of marginalized women to ensure their right to a life free from violence and persecution. Overall, addressing GBV in Germany requires comprehensive policy interventions, effective support systems and a commitment to intersectionality. By recognizing and addressing the underlying causes, society can work towards creating a safer and more inclusive environment for all individuals.

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## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> In Germany, violence against women is subsumed by the authorities under the terms domestic violence and intimate partner violence, and no clear distinction is made between them. Therefore, the terms used here are those used in the studies cited.

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