

Epidemiological analysis of gender violence in the European Union

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Título: Análisis epidemiológico de la violencia de género en la Unión Europea.

Resumen: Existe una gran heterogeneidad regional y desconocimiento de la situación actual de la violencia de género (VdG) en los diferentes países de la Unión Europea (UE-28). El objetivo del presente trabajo es determinar la prevalencia actual de la VdG y de feminicidios en la UE-28 y en particular en España. Consiste en un estudio descriptivo observacional (análisis de documentos) seleccionando y analizando datos de las diferentes modalidades de la VdG y de feminicidios en los 28 países de la UE. Letonia, Dinamarca, Reino Unido, Suecia, Bélgica, Finlandia, Eslovaquia y Luxemburgo tienen tasas más altas que la media de la UE en todos los tipos de VdG y Finlandia, Hungría, Irlanda del Norte y Letonia poseen las incidencias más altas en feminicidios. Con respecto a España, el 0.13% de las mujeres fueron víctimas de VdG y se producen 2.3 feminicidios anuales por cada 1.000.000 mujeres, situándose España entre los países con tasas más bajas. Se concluye que el maltrato psicológico es el más prevalente en la UE-28, sin embargo, existe una dificultad para la comparación de datos de los diferentes países debido a la inexistencia de una conceptualización legal común de la VdG.

Palabras clave: Violencia de género; Unión Europea; Epidemiología; feminicidio.

Abstract: There is a great regional heterogeneity and ignorance of the current gender violence (GV) situation in the different countries of the European Union (EU-28). The aim of this paper is to determine the current prevalence of GV and femicides in the EU-28 and in Spain in particular. This study consists of an observational descriptive study (document analysis) which selects and analyses data belonging to the different modalities of GV and femicides in the EU-28 countries. Latvia, Denmark, United Kingdom, Sweden, Belgium, Finland, Slovakia and Luxembourg possess higher rates than the EU average in all types of GV while Finland, Hungary, Northern Ireland and Latvia possess higher incidences rates in femicide. With respect to Spain, 0.13% of women were victims of GV and 2.3 femicides per year occur for every 1.000.000 women, with Spain being among the countries with the lowest rates. It is therefore concluded that psychological abuse is the most prevalent within the EU-28, however, it is difficult to compare said data from different countries due to the lack of a common legal conceptualisation of GV.

Keywords: Gender-based violence; European Union; Epidemiology; Femicide.

Introduction

Violence against women is considered a universal, complex and multidimensional phenomenon that affects all social classes (Menéndez, Pérez, & Lorence, 2013). Although there is a widespread mentality of rejecting the justifications for violence throughout the world (Pierotti, 2013), it is still a major problem. With regard to the existence of physical and/or sexual violence towards women by their partner, a global prevalence of 30% is collected (World Health Organization [WHO], 2013). Based on data from the United Nations (UN) collected in 2015 on the prevalence of physical violence against women by their partner, the averages were prepared by region (see Table 1).

Table 1. Prevalence of physical violence against women by their partner worldwide.

Year (%)	2014	
	Range	Average
Region		
Oceania	7.6-61.1	37.6
Asia	4.5-64.6	22.5
Africa	5.6-56.9	32.7
Europe	3.6-39.7	19.7
America	7-61	28.2

Note. UN (2015)

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Femicide is the most extreme expression of gender violence (GV). The International Court of Crimes against Women first proposed the term in 1976 to define the intentional killing of a woman by a man on account of being a woman (Vives-Cases et al., 2016). In 2017, there were 87,000 intentional homicides of women, 58% of them were carried out within the family and 34% were committed by their partner (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2018). The region with the highest percentage of femicides in relation to the homicides of women that occurred in 2017 was Oceania (42%), followed by Africa (38%) and America (35%). Asia (31%) and Europe (29%) were below the global average. The data show a homogeneous distribution in relation to the prevalence of cases of physical violence determined by the UN in 2015.

The interest in the prevention of violence and gender equality is common in all the countries of the European Union (EU-28), so in 2006 the European Institute for Gender Equality, EIGE (European Parliament, 2017) was created, in charge of the collection, analysis and dissemination of information on equality and GV. In 2011, the Council of Europe Convention on the prevention and fight against violence against women and domestic violence, known as the Istanbul Convention (Council of Europe, 2011) was established. Article 3 sets out the definition of GV and domestic violence that must be included by all the countries that ratify the Convention. Thus, violence against women should be understood as:

Violation of human rights and a form of discrimination against women, and shall designate all acts of violence based on gender that imply or may imply for women damages or sufferings of a physical, sexual, psychological or economic nature, including threats of performing such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of freedom, in public or private life. (Council of Europe, 2011, Art., 3a)

Likewise, domestic violence will be understood as any act of abuse that occurs in the family or in the home, regardless of whether the perpetrator shares or has shared the same domicile as the victim (Council of Europe, 2011, Art., 3b).

Article 11 sets out the need to collect reliable and regular data on GV taking into account all the specifications contained in the document. However, despite the existence of a conclusive legal basis, there is a clear lack of knowledge about the real situation of GV in the different countries of the EU-28.

In Spain, for example, there are multiple organizations that collect figures on GV. The National Statistics Institute (INE) recorded 31,286 victims of GV in 2018 (INE, 2019). With respect to fatalities, from 2003 to 2019 more than 1,033 victims were counted (Government Delegation against Gender Violence, 2020). These data affect society's concern about the problem, reflecting in the barometer carried out by the Centre for Sociological Research (CFSR) in November 2019, in which 5.7% of respondents rated GV among the country's three main problems (CFSR, 2019).

The objective of this paper is to analyse the current prevalence of GV and the incidence of femicides in the EU-28 and in detail in Spain.

Method

Data Bank

In order to collect GV prevalence data in the EU-28 Member States, the data accumulated by the European Union Fundamental Rights Agency, FRA (2014) and the European Statistics Office (Eurostat) were used as the unit of analysis for this study, with data updated in 2019 (Eurostat, 2019). Next, to have a more detailed analysis of Spain, population data (INE, 2020) and GV figures from the INE (2019) and the Government Delegation against Gender Violence (2020) were collected.

Variable coding

With regard to the design, it is in the form of an observational descriptive study (analysis of documents and statistics) according to the classification of Montero and Leon (2007) in order to analyse the variables obtained from the different databases consulted.

Firstly, the search for updated epidemiological data on GV in the EU-28 was carried out in the electronic records of the FRA, Eurostat and EIGE. The figures on the different

types of GV were extracted from the study carried out by the FRA in 2012 (published in 2014) in which 42,000 women from the 28 EU Member States were interviewed. In the FRA database, in order to collect the appropriate information for the study, situations related to physical, sexual, psychological and economic violence by a partner from 15 years of age were filtered (FRA, 2014).

The figures of intentional homicides of women at the hands of their partner were collected from Eurostat (2019). Femicide rates in the different countries of the EU-28 were calculated with the number of homicides (Eurostat, 2019) and the population data of women in each country collected by Eurostat (2020). Annual incidence was calculated as the number of cases in that year per 1,000,000 women.

Specifying the situation in Spain, the prevalence rates were calculated taking into account the total number of GV cases in the country committed in 2018 and published by the INE (2019) and the population census (INE, 2020). From these general data, a differentiation was made by age brackets, calculating the percentage of female victims of GV in Spain for every 1,000,000 women.

The incidence of femicides for every 1,000,000 women in Spain was obtained from the data of women murdered by their partner (Government Delegation against Gender Violence, 2020) and the population census of women in that same year (INE, 2020).

Results

The percentage of GV cases in the different EU-28 Member States can be seen in Table 2. Of the 42,000 women surveyed who answered questions related to GV suffered since the age of 15, 40,192 had had a partner at some point of their life. Considering the prevalence percentages and the EU-28 average, 8 countries have a higher than average prevalence in all types of violence: Latvia, Denmark, the United Kingdom, Sweden, Belgium, Finland, Slovakia and Luxembourg; and 9 countries have lower than average rates: Spain, Austria, Croatia, Slovenia, Malta, Ireland, Cyprus, Greece and Portugal. The country with the highest percentage of women who had suffered physical violence at some point in their lives from their partner was Latvia (31%), followed by Denmark (29%), the United Kingdom (28%) and Finland (27%) while those with the lowest percentages of victims of this type of violence were Spain, Austria, Croatia, Slovenia and Poland (all of them with 12%). The type of violence with the lowest average percentage is sexual (7%), with Denmark, the Netherlands and Finland presenting the highest prevalence for this type of violence (11%). Psychological violence is the type of violence with the highest percentages (43%), with 15 countries above the average, with Denmark and Latvia reaching 60% of women victims of psychological violence. Regarding economic violence, all countries are around the average (12%) with the highest prevalence in Bulgaria (17%) and the lowest in Portugal (8%).

Table 2. European prevalence of the different types of GV.

Type of violence (%)	Physical	Sexual	Psychological	Economic
Country				
Austria	12	6	38	11
Belgium	22	9	44	14
Bulgaria	22	9	39	17
Cyprus	14	4	39	10
Latvia	31	9	60	15
Denmark	29	11	60	14
UK	28	10	46	14
Finland	27	11	53	14
France	25	9	47	11
Sweden	24	10	51	10
Lithuania	24	4	51	15
Romania	23	5	39	12
Netherlands	22	11	50	11
Slovakia	22	8	47	15
Luxembourg	21	9	49	13
Germany	20	8	50	11
Hungary	19	7	49	13
Estonia	19	7	50	14
Czech Republic	19	7	47	16
Portugal	18	3	36	8
Greece	18	5	33	9
Italy	17	7	38	13
Ireland	14	6	31	10
Malta	13	6	37	11
Poland	12	4	37	12
Slovenia	12	4	34	9
Croatia	12	3	42	11
Spain	12	4	33	9
EU-28 average	20	7	43	12

Note. The author, using data from the FRA study (2014)

The incidence of femicides for every 1,000,000 women in 2017 in the different EU countries is presented in Table 3. 10 of the countries have no data collected and 2 of them (Cyprus and Malta) point to 0 femicides in 2017. Finland (6.1), Hungary (5.3), Northern Ireland (5.3) and Latvia (4.7) are the countries with the highest incidence of femicides. On the other hand, Greece (1.3), Slovakia (1.4), and Italy (1.8) are the countries with the lowest number of femicides per 1,000,000 women, followed by Spain, the Netherlands and Lithuania (2).

Table 3. Number and incidence of femicides in the EU-28 in 2017.

Incidence 2017	<i>n</i>	For every 1,000,000 women
Countries		
Austria	(-)	(-)
Belgium	(-)	(-)
Bulgaria	(-)	(-)
Cyprus	0	0
Latvia	5	4.7
Denmark	(-)	(-)
England and Wales *	63	2.4
Scotland*	7	2.5
North Ireland*	5	5.3
Finland	17	6.1
France	108	3.1
Sweden	(-)	(-)
Lithuania	3	2

Incidence 2017	<i>n</i>	For every 1,000,000 women
Countries		
Romania	52	5.2
Netherlands	17	2
Slovakia	4	1.4
Luxembourg	(-)	(-)
Germany	153	3.7
Hungary	27	5.3
Estonia	(-)	(-)
Czech Republic	13	2.4
Portugal	(-)	(-)
Greece	7	1.3
Italy	56	1.8
Malta	0	0
Poland	(-)	(-)
Slovenia	3	2.9
Croatia	9	4.2
Spain	47	2

Note. The author, based on the data of intentional homicides of women by their partner in 2017 (Eurostat, 2019) and the population rate of women (Eurostat, 2020).

Boxes with (-) mean there is no data.

* Eurostat separates the United Kingdom into England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, so there is no overall data for the United Kingdom.

Analysing the above data, Spain is one of the countries with the lowest prevalence rates in the EU-28, both in the different forms of GV and in the rate of femicides.

The epidemiological data of GV in Spain, differentiating age brackets can be seen in Table 4, and the incidence of femicides in Spain is shown in Table 5. The age brackets with the highest prevalence of both GV and femicide are the age groups between 18 and 49 years old. In GV, the groups with the highest prevalence would be those aged between 30 and 39 years (0.33%), 18 and 29 years (0.32%) and 40 and 49 years (0.2%). The age ranges with the highest rates of femicides per 1,000,000 women are the groups aged between 40 and 49 years (5.7), 18 and 29 years (3.5) and 30 and 39 years (3.2). The smallest percentage of victims of GV is observed in those over 60 years of age (155.6) and in femicides in those under 18 years of age (0.2). Global data shows a prevalence in which a total of 1,313.6 per 1,000,000 women are victims of GV and 2.3 women per 1,000,000 were killed by their partner in 2019.

Table 4. Prevalence of GV victims in Spain per 1,000,000 women.

GV 2018	<i>n</i>	Victims of GV per 1,000,000 women	%
Age range			
Under 18 years	677	167.7	0.02
18 to 29 years	9,020	3,227.8	0.32
30 to 39 years	10,459	3,303.9	0.33
40 to 49 years	7,560	1,970.5	0.2
50 to 59 years	2,553	739	0.07
Over 60	1,017	155.6	0.02
Total	31,286	1,313.6	0.13

Note. The author, from the data collected from the INE on GV (INE, 2019) and population data from the INE from July 1, 2018 (INE, 2020).

Table 5. Incidence of femicides in Spain per 1,000,000 women.

Femicide 2019	<i>n</i>	Femicide per 1,000,000 women
Age		
Under 18 years	1	0.2
18 to 29 years	10	3.5
30 to 39 years	10	3.2
40 to 49 years	22	5.7
50 to 59 years	7	2
Over 60	5	0.8
Total	55	2.3

Note. The author, based on data collected from the Government Delegation against Gender Violence (2020) and population data from the INE from January 1, 2019 (INE, 2020)

Conclusions

The highest prevalence rates of GV are observed in Oceania and Africa respectively, compared to them Europe is the world region with the lowest prevalence rate. Even so, 22% of women who have had an intimate relationship with a man report experiencing physical and/or sexual violence at some point in their lives, and 43% have suffered some form of psychological violence from their partner (FRA, 2014).

There are important differences in the prevalence rates of the different EU-28 Member States that may be due to multiple individual, political and socio-cultural factors. A recent meta-analysis on dating violence concludes that factors related to the socio-community environment (for example, belonging to dangerous neighbourhoods) are closely associated with the perpetration of dating violence (Gracia-Leiva, Puente-Martínez, Ubillos-Landa & Páez-Rovira, 2019). Several studies show that there are no significant differences between GV aggressors and other male offenders in terms of the psychopathological characteristics of the offenders (Juarros-Basterretxea, Herrero, Fernández-Suárez, Pérez & Rodríguez-Díaz, 2018; Sjödin, Wallinius, Billstedt, Hofvander & Nilsson, 2017) or their educational level (Loinaz, Marzbal & Andrés-Pueyo, 2018). However, convicted criminals do have higher levels of acceptance of intimate partner violence than men in the general population (Martín-Fernández et al., 2018) and psychopathic traits that act as predictors of the GV commission (Fernández-Suárez, Pérez, Herrero, Juarros-Basterretxea & Rodríguez-Díaz, 2018). A recent study on the implications in the treatment of offenders, differentiating between those who acted violently only against the partner and generally violent aggressors, showed that the men who benefited most from psychological treatments were those who generally acted violently, therefore, it is concluded that all criminals, regardless of the type of crime, benefit from treatments against GV (Cantos, Kosson, Goldstein & O'Leary, 2019). Regarding young people, significant beneficial effects have been found in both aggressors and victims who have undergone therapeutic interventions (Yanez-Peñuñuri, Martínez-Gómez & Rey-Anacona, 2019).

From the results obtained, it is concluded that Denmark and Finland have the highest epidemiological rates in all forms of violence except economic violence, with the Czech

Republic and Bulgaria being the countries with the highest percentages of this type of violence (FRA, 2014). The risk factors and to what extent they influence the phenomenon of GV are not known exactly. One of the most studied variables has been gender equality and discrimination. However, this fact contradicts the Nordic Paradox, which reveals that countries with a very high score in the Equality Index (EIGE, 2019) such as Sweden (83.6 points), Finland (73.6 points) and Denmark (77.5 points) have higher levels of GV than other EU countries. No determining explanation has been found for why this is the case (Gracia, Martín-Fernández, Lila & Ivert, 2019; Gracia and Merlo, 2016; Wemrell et al., 2019) but the relationship between hostile sexist attitudes and GV has been demonstrated (Juarros-Basterretxea, Overall, Herrero & Rodríguez-Díaz, 2019). Hostile sexist attitudes also influence health professionals who have a lower level of involvement in identifying women who are victims of GV in their workplace (Noriega, Juarros-Basterretxea & Herrero, 2020).

Of the different forms of GV, psychological violence is the most prevalent type of abuse in all EU countries. In Spain, in 2015 the Macro-survey on Violence against Women (Government Delegation for Gender Violence, 2015) was published, which indicates that psychological violence, particularly control violence (surveillance and restriction of hours, places and contacts of women with friends and family, among others) is the most prevalent type of abuse being suffered by one in four women (25.4%). This manifestation of violence must be considered with special attention due to the high frequency in which psychological abuse, verbal aggression and abuse by control are not considered as GV by the population (Government Delegation for Gender Violence, 2014) and because it is the type of violence with the highest probability of occurrence when it is repeated (López-Ossorio, González, Buquerín, García & Buela-Casal, 2017). In adolescents and young adults, a relationship has been found between high levels of emotional dependence and the existence of psychological abuse, both in victims and in offenders (Martín & Moral, 2019), with higher levels of emotional dependence in young men in the general population (Valle & Moral, 2018).

The analyses carried out on femicide show a heterogeneous distribution as in the study of the prevalence of GV cases. In this regard, high rates are observed in Finland, Northern Ireland, Hungary, Romania and Latvia with incidences that oscillate annually between 4 to 6 cases per 1,000,000 women, and compared to them the group consisting of Lithuania, the Netherlands, Spain, Italy, Slovakia and Greece with significantly lower incidence figures ranging from 1 to 2 cases per 1,000,000 women.

Although the prevalence rates of femicides in the EU appear to be low, in the context of the partner, women have a five times greater risk of being killed by their intimate partner than men (UNODC, 2014). Spain, compared to the European average, is one of the countries with the lowest rates of femicide. The policies implemented in the country have

allowed the creation of specialized institutions in the prevention of GV and promote the preparation of studies on the subject, such as, for example, the Detailed Review of the cases of femicides in Spain that aims to study the psychosocial characteristics of femicides to understand and prevent this problem (González et al., 2018; González-Álvarez et al., 201). In order to perform a reliable categorization of GV aggressors, it is necessary to carry out information-gathering using self-reports and official records (Weber, Taylor, Cantos, Amado & O'Leary, 2019).

One of the main problems for collecting data and comparing them in the different members of the EU, which in particular includes the annual GV figures, is the lack of a common terminology in all Member States, although the Istanbul Convention included a definition of GV and of domestic violence to be used by the countries that ratified the Convention.

Not all countries have laws to regulate and prevent GV (see Table 6). According to the compilation of legal definitions of the different EIGE member states (2016), 10 EU countries do not have any law that regulates GV or domestic violence and, of the 18 countries that do have regulations, only Sweden, Belgium, Ireland and Spain differentiate GV from domestic violence. Likewise, there is no unification of conceptualisation among the countries that have regulations, thus, the Czech Republic recognises as domestic violence the mistreatment of people who live in the same residence without having to have any kinship ties. Spanish Law is the only one of all the Member States that includes in its regulations that gender violence must be exercised by men against women. These data support the need to carry out a common conceptualization of GV for all EU countries in order to collect reliable and comparable data.

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Table 6. Existence of legal conceptualization of GV in the EU countries.

Countries	There is a GV or domestic violence law	Differentiates GV from domestic violence
Austria		
Belgium	X	X
Bulgaria	X	
Cyprus	X	
Latvia		
Denmark		
UK	X	
Finland		
France	X	
Sweden	X	X
Lithuania	X	
Romania	X	
Netherlands	X	
Slovakia		
Luxembourg		
Germany		
Hungary		
Estonia		
Czech Republic	X	
Portugal		
Greece	X	
Italy	X	
Malta	X	
Poland	X	
Slovenia	X	
Croatia	X	
Ireland	X	X
Spain	X	X

Note. The author, from the legal definitions of the EU Member States collected in the EIGE (2020).

Taking into account all these limitations, it is necessary to establish the epidemiological characteristics of GV setting global guidelines used by all member states that ratified the Istanbul Convention to understand the phenomenon in depth and proceed to the implementation of efficient and effective policies in the prevention of GV.

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