

Domestic Violence in Rural Serbia: Etiological-Phenomenological Approach

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Abstract: The aim of the paper is to point out the etiological-phenomenological dimension of domestic violence in rural areas of Serbia. Although it reflects all the general characteristics of domestic violence, in the etiological and phenomenological sense, domestic violence in rural areas also has certain specifics that are important for a closer definition of the necessary prevention measures. Based on research conducted in rural areas around the world, the authors indicate in the paper that the causes of domestic violence in rural areas are the same in Serbia, namely traditional patterns of behavior, adopted cultural norms and geographical isolation. All forms of violence (physical, psychological, emotional and sexual) are present, as well as in urban areas of Serbia. However, violence in rural areas is much less often reported, due to the normalization of violence, the fact that everyone in small areas knows each other, shame, the presence of strong stereotypes, etc. The perpetrators of domestic violence coming from rural areas are most often men (in 90% of cases) and are mostly violent. Victims of domestic violence in rural areas are most often women, characterized by economic dependence, lack of personal income or property, the fact that they have nowhere to go. An additional problem is the lack of official statistical data on domestic violence in rural areas.

Keywords: domestic violence, violence against women, rural communities, etiological-phenomenological dimension.

INTRODUCTION

The differences between urban and rural areas are numerous and visible on several levels. Life in rural areas is shaped by geographical isolation, lower population density, specific social interactions and lifestyles, traditional patterns of behavior, life in extended families with pronounced male dominance (Bučar Ručman, 2019: 409–410). From a criminological point of view, the differences between urban and rural areas are also visible in terms of the form and statistics of crime (Donnermeyer, 2019a; Donnermeyer, 2019b; Carrington et al., 2014). Available research indicates that interpersonal disputes, drug and alcohol abuse, and domestic violence are very prevalent in rural areas. Crimes committed in rural areas usually have a personal connotation, with a special prevalence of violence against women (Hacin & Eman, 2019: 455–457).

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Domestic violence in rural areas is globally present and recognized as a problem in different parts of the world. In general, women in rural areas suffer various forms of discrimination due to poverty, unemployment, lack of basic education and health services, but also due to the traditional understanding of the subordinate role of women in relation to men (Council of Europe, 2011; Aldrich & Robyn, 2005: 2; Wendt, 2009: 175; Campo & Tayton, 2015: 1; Curran & Bonthuys, 2004: 3, 10; Koenig et al., 2003: 274, 278; Volkova et al., 2015: 103). The way of life, norms and values of rural communities are key to understanding the etiological-phenomenological dimension of domestic violence in these communities. The geographical isolation of rural areas strengthens male control in rural households and introduces women to subordination, loneliness and social isolation (Wendt, 2009: 175; Campo & Tayton, 2015: 5). Due to constant exposure to domestic violence in conditions of isolation, the victim is helpless, withdraws and finds it very difficult to resume or create new social contacts later (Wendt et al., 2017: 32–33). The lack of a developed public transport system, or its limited functioning in rural areas, makes it difficult to access help services located in remote, urban areas. And when offices for help are set up in rural areas, due to a lack of anonymity in small communities, residents refuse to seek help from these services (Stalford & Baker, 2003: 17–18; Donnermeyer, 2019a: 405).

The cultural aspect of life in rural culture implies traditional gender roles in which domestic violence is justified as an integral part of male family domination (Campo & Tayton, 2015: 3). Patriarchal value systems emphasize gender inequality and are a barrier for women to talk about violence, to report it and to seek help, because they believe that violence is a private matter that should remain within the family (Wendt, 2009: 176). A woman's decision to speak publicly about violence and seek help entails exposure to shame and stigmatization, gossip and "exclusion" from society (Campo & Tayton, 2015: 4). This is especially pronounced if the man has a significant role in the rural community (Johnson, 2000; Campo & Tayton, 2015: 4). The traditional division of labor in rural households deprives women of financial independence, thus women, even if they wanted to, for economic reasons cannot provide other accommodation, food, clothing and other necessities for themselves and their children (Campo & Tayton, 2015: 4).

The causes of domestic violence in rural areas can be viewed through locational and cultural factors. Location factors include geographical isolation, lack of means of transport and lack of resources in communities (in terms of lack of help services), and cultural factors include accepted/available use of weapons, poverty and lack of privacy (Youngson et al., 2021: 5).

While socio-cultural factors and socio-economic factors of domestic violence in rural areas do not differ significantly from the factors of domestic violence in general, geographical isolation is a special feature of rural areas that strongly enhances the effect of socio-cultural and socio-economic factors, thus bringing into synergy all the conditions conducive to the occurrence and maintenance of violence in rural families.

All forms of violence are present in domestic violence in rural areas: verbal violence through shouting and swearing; physical violence in the form of pushing, hitting, stabbing, denying medical assistance; sexual violence in the form of forced or unwanted sexual intercourse; financial violence through denial of access to money; violence in the form of isolation, in the sense of denying access to means of transport, telephone, other people, etc.; as well as emotional violence through humiliation, criticism, constant questioning (Loxton et al., 2003: 3).



Domestic violence in rural areas is tolerated and not reported. For women in rural areas, the family is the basis of personal identity, so the possibility of being left without property, inheritance, or family name, discourages them from reporting violence. In a violent environment, women from the countryside often retain their own religious beliefs and understanding of marriage as sacred, eternal and unifying (Wendt, 2009: 182). Non-reporting of domestic violence is also affected by distrust in the protection and assistance system (Campo & Tayton, 2015: 4) and difficult access to protection and assistance services, which are most often located in urban areas and are unable to respond effectively due to distance (Santi & Carrington, 2015: 233; Carrington et al., 2013: 6–7; George & Harris, 2014: 57–58).

The picture of domestic violence in rural areas of Serbia also fits in the presented picture of the ideological-phenomenological dimension of domestic violence in rural areas around the world and the reasons for not reporting this violence. Gender inequality, traditional and patriarchal value systems, norms and attitudes (SeCons & UNDP, 2008: 5), increasing geographical and social isolation of rural residents in Serbia due to mass migration from rural to urban areas (Mitrović, 2015: 37–38, 56), economic inequality and social exclusion are the main etiological factors of this form of violence. Attitudes towards domestic violence differ between women who come from villages and urban areas, women from villages in large numbers believe that it is justified for a husband to beat his wife if she neglects his children, if she goes out without his knowledge, or if she refuses to have sexual intercourse with him (Beker, 2017: 42; Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2014). In Serbia, too, women living in rural areas often have extremely conservative views on violence against women and believe that violence against women is a private matter that needs to be addressed within the family (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe [OSCE], 2019: 18). Due to the prevailing norms and stereotypes, as well as distrust in the competent authorities, domestic violence in rural areas is generally not reported (Directorate for Gender Equality, 2014). Women living in smaller places believe that men have stronger social connections, social contacts, they know employees who work in competent institutions, which allows them to avoid responsibility and the consequences of reporting violence (OSCE, 2019: 55).

METHODOLOGY

In Serbia, there is no systematic collection of data on all forms of violence against women, which would be classified according to the appropriate parameters. In recorded, documented cases of violence against women in the family and in partnerships, there is a lack of uniform records, incompatibility and inconsistency of records kept by different systems, different criteria used for data collection, which makes verification and comparison of data almost impossible. The problem is systemic in nature and its solution does not depend on an individual body or official (Protector of Citizens, 2014; Protector of Citizens, 2021). Also, there are no studies of gender-based violence that are specifically related to violence in rural areas. In general, research on gender-based violence does not cover all forms of gender-based violence and is often incomparable due to differences in methodology (Ignjatović & Macanović, 2018: 17).



Facing the complete lack of data on domestic violence in rural areas of Serbia, and in order to establish and supplement theoretical views and empirical data on domestic violence in Serbia, research on the etiological-phenomenological dimension of this type of violence was conducted in the form of a qualitative exploratory study of condition assessment. Bearing in mind the specific problems of research on domestic violence (Myhill, 2017; Ellsberg et al., 2001; United Nations, 2014; Ellsberg & Heise, 2005; Walby et al., 2016), the choice of a qualitative exploratory study to assess the situation was determined by the fact that it is a completely unexplored form of domestic violence in domestic conditions.

The subject of the research is the etiological-phenomenological characteristics of domestic violence in rural areas of Serbia and the necessary measures of preventive social reactions. The aim of the research is a qualitative assessment of the state of domestic violence in rural areas of Serbia, namely the assessment of ethological and phenomenological characteristics of violence as well as the assessment of the necessary measures of preventive social response based on the views of experts dealing with domestic violence. An interview was used as a research method, bearing in mind its importance when it is necessary to examine the views and opinions of experts on a particular issue. It is a semi-structured interview through a questionnaire with open-type questions. The interview was conducted on the basis of a previously conceived questionnaire, which was used as a survey technique.

The questionnaire on the etiological-phenomenological dimension of domestic violence in rural areas of Serbia contains general questions related to five different units relevant to the subject of research: the existence of research and official data on domestic violence in rural areas of Serbia, etiological characteristics of domestic violence in rural areas, phenomenological characteristics of domestic violence in rural areas, (non)reporting of domestic violence and reasons for non-reporting of domestic violence in rural areas, characteristics of the social reaction to domestic violence in rural areas with reference to the necessary prevention measures.

A deliberate sample of people familiar with the topic was used in the research. The subjects with the most knowledge, who were most informed about the topic and have the most experience in dealing with the problem of domestic violence in rural areas were selected for the respondents. Considering that Serbia implements the system of prevention of domestic violence envisaged by the Istanbul Convention, which promotes the implementation of coordinated policy, i.e. cooperation between the governmental and non-governmental sector, an intentional sample of people well familiar with the topic consists of experts from both sectors. As there is only one organization in the non-governmental sector that deals with the position of women in rural areas of Serbia, the Citizens' Association Amity, only one social worker from this sector is involved in the research, who is directly engaged in a special project to improve the position of women in rural areas (Citizens' Association "Strength of Friendship" – Amity, 2021). In order to ensure even geographical coverage when it comes to state institutions dealing with domestic violence, four social workers from the Centers for social work from Novi Sad, Belgrade, Kragujevac and Nis were interviewed, who have many years of experience in working with victims and perpetrators of domestic violence (there are no experts in social protection institutions in Serbia who deal specifically and exclusively with domestic violence in rural areas). The sample is intended to cover governmental and non-governmental sectors, but also to provide geographical coverage of different parts of the Republic of Serbia, bearing in mind that social workers from four representative Centers for social work from different areas of the Republic



of Serbia were selected. Also, the mentioned Centers have been conducting accredited programs of psycho-social treatment of perpetrators of domestic violence in Serbia since 2010, which justifies why they were chosen as experts in the etiological-phenomenological dimension of this type of violence.

RESULTS

When it comes to the existence of official statistics and other data on the prevalence and the etiological-phenomenological dimension of domestic violence in rural areas of Serbia, all respondents point out that there are no such separately selected data, and that they do not have any special data related to the rural areas in connection with their activities. Centers for social work, which work with victims and perpetrators of domestic violence, do not keep records of whether they come from urban or rural areas, with respondents from the Centers from larger cities (Belgrade, Novi Sad) indicating a small sample of perpetrators and victims who come to their Centers from rural areas. The non-governmental sector points out that, given the lack of research and official data, information about domestic violence in rural areas of Serbia comes from general research on violence against women, violence against the elderly, domestic violence and partner violence. They also point out the prevalence of violence against older women in rural areas, especially extreme physical violence and femicide, which is also confirmed by newspaper articles, according to which, for example, among the women killed in the first six months of 2021 alone, four of them were older than 64 and all four were from rural areas.

Regarding the etiology of domestic violence in rural areas of Serbia, respondents from the government sector point to similar causes of domestic violence in both rural and urban areas. The Centers for social work from Kragujevac and Nis, which records a higher number of cases of domestic violence from rural areas compared to Belgrade and Novi Sad, emphasize as special, key causes of domestic violence in rural areas the prevailing strong patriarchal value systems and traditional patterns of behavior and upbringing, as well as life in extended families that lead to a generation gap and mutual disregard for needs, with strong respect for power and dominance of male family members. Also, a more intense transgenerational transmission of male-dominated patterns of behavior that includes violence as a legitimate form of behavior is noticed. Centers for social work from larger cities (Belgrade, Novi Sad) did not indicate the existence of various causes of domestic violence in rural areas, bearing in mind that the perpetrators of domestic violence with whom they worked mostly came from urban areas. The respondent from the non-governmental sector also pointed out the patriarchal value system and traditional patterns of behavior in rural life as the predominant cause of violence against women in rural areas. She especially emphasizes the disenfranchisement of women, especially the elderly, because they do not have any property or regular income in their name, so they perceive themselves as less valuable, as a result of which they are subject to neglect, harassment and abuse. She also points out the illiteracy, or insufficient literacy among rural women, especially those over the age of 70, as a result of which they do not recognize domestic violence as an unacceptable form of behavior and do not report obvious physical violence. In complete economic dependence, rural women, especially the elderly, see themselves in the service of men, and they significantly justify the harassment and physical violence to which they are exposed.



Respondents who work with the perpetrators of domestic violence within the centers for social work do not indicate differences in the phenomenology of domestic violence committed in rural areas in relation to urban areas, and confirm that all types of this violence are present (physical, psychological, sexual and economic). However, physical and economic violence are perceived as more dominant forms of violence in rural areas. They see the reasons for this in the fact that women from rural areas generally do not recognize psychological violence as a form of violence, and even when they perceive it as violence, they show a very high degree of tolerance. As an important phenomenological characteristic, it can be noticed that until the moment of reporting, domestic violence in rural areas lasts longer than domestic violence in urban areas. Also, due to living in extended families that are characteristic of the village, compared to urban areas, violence is not only present between spouses, but also occurs more often between other family members (subsystem of parents or close relatives).

The respondent from the non-governmental sector stated that older women from rural areas of Serbia mostly only recognize physical violence. These women very rarely associate economic exploitation with violence. Even if they have a personal pension, they think that it is normal for younger family members to use it, as a result of which the needs of older women (the need for some orthopedic aids, clothes, shoes, the need to go to the doctor, etc.) are often completely neglected. Older women in the village often do not even recognize psychological violence as a form of violence (when the daughter-in-law or other family members do not say a word to her during the day; when they assign her a cup, a glass and a plate so as not to infect children; when they raise their voice to her; when they deny her the right to privacy or the right to make her own decisions; when they isolate her from friends or home activities, etc.). Forcing by a husband or partner to have sexual intercourse is not perceived by rural women as sexual violence, but as a marital obligation.

The perpetrators of domestic violence coming from rural areas are most often men (in 90% of cases) and are mostly violent. Their prejudices and attitudes are based on patriarchal beliefs and are difficult to change. Victims of domestic violence in rural areas are most often women, characterized by economic dependence, lack of personal income or property, the fact that they have nowhere to go because there is no place for them in their primary families, lack of understanding of what they should not accept as legitimate behavior, lower self-esteem and a higher degree of shame and embarrassment.

All respondents stated that domestic violence in rural areas is less frequently reported. The reasons for not reporting domestic violence in rural areas are: non-recognition and normalization of violence; the circumstance that everyone in small communities knows each other, so the victim avoids “disclosing” violence; more closed family systems, the presence of strong stereotypes, shame, embarrassment and fear of stigmatization, in the case of bringing family problems to the public; the dominant role of the man due to which it is considered that a woman should “put up with it”; fear that violence will intensify if reported; economic dependence; unavailability of information on help systems; lack of local community resources, problem of access to help services, lack of health care services; distrust of institutions because they have failed them earlier; distrust that anyone will trust and help them if they report violence, because a man who commits violence is valued and influential in the community. The fact that women from rural areas rarely report violence on their own is especially emphasized, but it is mostly done by their children or relatives,



they return to their families several times, so separation is difficult. At most times, violence with visible consequences is reported.

All respondents emphasize the importance of prevention when it comes to domestic violence in rural areas. The respondent from the non-governmental sector points out that in order to prevent violence against women in rural areas of Serbia, the first step is to educate women about what domestic violence is, what are its forms and specifics, in order to learn to recognize it. They should also be informed about the consequences of violence that are most often not associated with the violence they suffer, such as bad mood, feelings of fear and anxiety, loss of appetite, lack of choice in everyday things, suicide attempts, etc. The second step is to empower women not to suffer domestic violence, but to report it and seek protection, with clear instructions to whom and how to report violence, what their rights are and how to behave during the protection process. An example of a good practice is the association Amity, which has been taking these steps since 2016, and which also works on the education of professionals working to protect women from domestic violence.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The conducted research contains certain limitations that should be kept in mind when making a conclusion. First of all, by its basic design, it is exploratory and descriptive, and as such of a general nature with research questions of general content. The small total number of respondents in the intentional sample of people familiar with the topic is a limitation, but since it is objectively conditioned by the really small number of experts who are familiar with the issue of domestic violence in rural areas, it speaks for itself about the state of social reaction to this type of domestic violence. Despite the generality, bearing in mind the exploratory nature of the research, the results of the research indicate certain specifics of domestic violence in rural areas that could indicate the necessary priorities, as well as potential problems in designing measures to prevent this type of violence.

First of all, it is interesting to learn that the conducted research regarding the prevalence of domestic violence, and especially violence against women in rural areas of Serbia, indicates that even experts dealing with this issue in both the governmental and non-governmental sectors do not have any special records. Although not unexpected, this information is surprising given that Serbia, as a signatory to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, has the obligation to submit periodic reports on the implementation of the Convention to the Committee for the Elimination of Discrimination against Women whose obligatory part is reporting on the position of women in the rural areas according to special instruction in accordance with the General Recommendations (United Nations, 2003). This shortcoming was noted by the Committee for the Elimination of Discrimination against Women on the occasion of the last, fourth periodic report of Serbia (Government of the Republic of Serbia, 2019) submitted in February 2019, because of which the Committee recommends Serbia, as a state party, to “strengthen the collection of data on women in rural areas, classified by age, gender and geographical area, in order to assess their situation and the progress made over time”.

Although it reflects all the general characteristics of domestic violence, in the etiological and phenomenological sense, domestic violence in rural areas also has certain specifics



that are important for a closer definition of the necessary prevention measures. The etiology of domestic violence in rural areas of Serbia is assessed as very complex. The main cause of domestic violence is the concept and architecture of life in rural communities, which implies the life of the extended family in the same household with prevailing patriarchal systems of values and behavior, with traditional male domination, economic non-independence of women and self-perception as subordinates and less valuable. According to the surveyed experts, the phenomenological dimension of domestic violence in rural areas of Serbia is the same as in urban areas, all types of this violence are present (physical, psychological, sexual and economic). However, most often only physical violence is recognized as violence. Psychological abuse, sexual violence, and economic exploitation of rural women are legitimized through patriarchal patterns of behavior that imply marked male dominance. The perpetrators of domestic violence in rural areas are mostly men, the victims are mostly women. Due to living in extended families, violence is present not only between spouses, but also between other family members. By the time of reporting, domestic violence in rural areas has lasted longer than violence in urban areas. In the opinion of all respondents, it is reported significantly less than domestic violence in urban areas, which is a consequence of numerous reasons arising, both from the characteristics of life in patriarchal closed family systems, and from (un)availability and/or (dis)trust in the system of protection and assistance to victims of this type of violence. Most often, only physical violence with visible consequences is reported, and the report is very often not submitted by the victim of violence but by other family members.

It is interesting that none of the respondents specifically mentions the geographical location of the village as a factor of etiological nature or as a factor of not reporting this type of violence. This conclusion can be explained by the fact that the respondents work in the city centers for social work and state their professional experience in working on already reported cases.

When it comes to the social reaction to domestic violence in rural areas of Serbia, respondents agree that great importance should be given to primary prevention in the form of education about what it is and what are the forms of domestic violence and empowerment not to put up with violence, but to report it. However, according to the current situation, education and empowerment are mainly dealt with by organizations in the non-governmental sector, and only one organization deals with specific domestic violence in rural areas (Citizens' Association "Strength of Friendship" – Amity, 2022).

Estimates of the population of Serbia by gender and place of residence indicate that over 1,300,000 women live outside urban areas (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2018), which means that a really large number of women are potentially exposed to this type of violence. Elementary data on life in the countryside should be added to this which indicates that the location factors also affect the occurrence and maintenance of domestic violence in Serbia as well. According to the latest census, there are 4,709 rural settlements in Serbia, 1,200 are in the phase of disappearance and 1,034 settlements have less than 100 inhabitants in each of them, less than 50 inhabitants in 550, while 100 rural settlements have less than ten inhabitants each. As many as 500 villages do not have an asphalt road connecting them to another major place, about 2,000 villages do not have a post office, two-thirds of the villages do not have an ambulance, cultural center or library, 86% of rural settlements are in the process of depopulation (Mitrović, 2015).



In this context, the complete ignorance of the real prevalence of this form of violence is worrying. The absence of any special records of domestic violence in rural areas (despite the obligation to collect such data on the basis of ratified conventions and despite the legal obligation prescribed eight years ago to establish a single central record of domestic violence (Marković, 2019: 59; Stevanović et al., 2018: 138), which should separate violence in rural areas into a special category, is not just a “technical failure”. This fact, in our understanding, suggests that the specifics of this form of violence in practice are either not recognized at all, or are ignored. Although in Serbia, domestic violence in rural areas, both theoretically and in normative-strategic documents, is specifically specified, in practice, this violence does not stand out in terms of specially adapted protocols and programs of action. The National strategy for the advancement position of women and the promotion of gender equality (Government of the Republic of Serbia, 2009) identifies rural women as a multiple discriminated group in respect of which special measures are needed to eliminate discrimination against women and strengthening of equal opportunities for full realization of human rights. The concept of special measures for the empowerment of rural women has not been introduced into national legislation. Strategy for prevention and fight against gender-based violence against women and domestic violence for the period 2021–2025 (Government of the Republic of Serbia, 2021) recognizes rural women as a group of women from vulnerable social groups who are particularly exposed to the risk of gender-based violence. Still, there are not even the simplest separate records with elementary data.

CONCLUSION

Bearing in mind the number of women who live in rural areas of Serbia, as well as the fact that these women are recognized as a multiple discriminated group, the fact that there are no any special records of domestic violence in rural areas is worrying. For the time being, only one social worker in Serbia deals with domestic violence as a separate problem, within the framework of special project activities of one non-governmental organization. The awareness of the surveyed experts from the centers for social work that this is a special problem cannot be disputed, nor their will to address domestic violence in the countryside as such, but that is certainly not enough. Our research, despite its exploratory character, actually indicates that in any determination of practice or strategy of action, it is necessary to look at domestic violence in rural areas separately. There is a very specific etiological complexity (obdurate traditionalism of male domination, deep patriarchal patterns of behavior, and conservatism of the victim) of violence in rural families that requires a special approach and tailored programs. The etiological complexity and phenomenological specifics, which in general terms are indicated by this research, in terms of domestic violence in rural areas require a special strategic approach and additionally designed and organized prevention measures. Future research on domestic violence in rural areas should be directed towards obtaining the reliable data needed to build such strategies and measures.



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