

# **Barriers to Reporting Domestic Violence in Kazakhstan**

Amina Akhmadiyeva

Department of Sociology and Communication, Corvinus University of Budapest

Sociology MA, second year

Dr. Beata Nagy

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## Table of Contents

|                                                     |                  |
|-----------------------------------------------------|------------------|
| <b><i>I. Introduction .....</i></b>                 | <b><i>1</i></b>  |
| <b><i>I.2 Definitions.....</i></b>                  | <b><i>2</i></b>  |
| <b><i>II. Literature Review .....</i></b>           | <b><i>3</i></b>  |
| <b><i>II.2 Theoretical Framework.....</i></b>       | <b><i>3</i></b>  |
| <b><i>II.2 Previous Research Findings .....</i></b> | <b><i>5</i></b>  |
| <b><i>III. Research Questions.....</i></b>          | <b><i>15</i></b> |
| <b><i>IV. Research Methods .....</i></b>            | <b><i>16</i></b> |
| <b><i>V. Findings.....</i></b>                      | <b><i>18</i></b> |
| <b><i>VI. Discussion.....</i></b>                   | <b><i>30</i></b> |
| <b><i>VII. Conclusion .....</i></b>                 | <b><i>35</i></b> |
| <b><i>VII.1 Limitations .....</i></b>               | <b><i>35</i></b> |
| <b><i>VIII. References.....</i></b>                 | <b><i>36</i></b> |

## **I. Introduction**

Being a pervasive social issue, domestic violence has been heavily affecting people from both developed and developing parts of the world. In the case of Kazakhstan, the problem is especially prevalent. According to the head of the service for protection of public interests of the General Prosecutor's Office in Kazakhstan, Marat Abishev, approximately 80 Kazakhstani women die due to domestic violence each year, while 4000 women suffer from domestic physical injuries (mild) that were caused by perpetrators (Nurmaganbetova, 2023). Abishev further claims that in the past 10 months, around 50000 cases of domestic violence have been recorded, yet this number is far from the reality as he notes that the issue is severely underreported in the country (Nurmaganbetova, 2023). In this regard, United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner reports that domestic and sexual violence cases tend to be underreported due to the culture of silence (2016). This is because of the cultural and traditional narrative that domestic violence is a "family matter," that should be resolved within familial relations (Human Rights Watch, 2019).

Other social, cultural, economic and psychological barriers might also be the reason for the discouragement of women from reporting abuse. For instance, the decriminalized nature of domestic violence could be one of the causes for underreporting. According to Human Rights Watch (2023), Kazakhstan's law on Prevention of Domestic Violence does not recognize domestic violence as a stand-alone criminal offense. Instead, it is considered to be an administrative offense where only a warning or 15 days (or less) arrest is imposed for "the intended bodily harm to the spouse" (Sultan, 2020). This law was supposed to be altered to strengthen the protection of victims of violence in 2020. However, in 2021 the new draft law on Combating Domestic Violence was withdrawn because of the need for further consultations (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Since then, the law was not changed, presumably making it difficult for victims to report abuse due to lack of protection and fear. Human Rights Watch further notes that police and crisis centers might not be sufficiently trained to properly respond to the occurrence of cases (2019).

Taking all of this into consideration, it is now important to examine what kind of economic, social, cultural and economic barriers hinder victims of domestic violence from reporting incidents of abuse by shedding light on the real-life incidents, personal experiences and thoughts of victims of domestic violence. It is also significant to address the involvement of police, if they contribute to the underreporting issue and whether support services address as

well as try to solve the problem. In the Kazakhstani context, it seems that there is also a lack of research that addresses the issue of barriers to reporting abuse through the perspective of victims, police and social workers. Hence, I would like to investigate this issue of underreporting through triangulation and cross-validation in order to get comprehensive and holistic understanding of barriers. I will employ qualitative research methods, namely semi-structured interviews with three stakeholders: victims of domestic violence, police officers and social workers. The research questions that will be explored are:

1. What are the primary social, cultural and psychological factors that prevent victims of domestic violence from reporting abuse in Kazakhstan?
2. How does the law enforcement system/police in Kazakhstan influence the reporting and handling of domestic violence cases?
  - a. To what extent does it contribute to underreporting?
  - b. What are victims' personal experiences with the law enforcement system/police?
3. How do support services address and deal with the barriers to reporting domestic violence?
  - a. How effective are their measures in encouraging reporting?

I will use framework of radical and Marxist feminism: specifically, how structural inequality relates to underreporting (Rauhaus, Sibila, and Johnson, 2020); Resource theory: how access to resources creates economic dependencies on perpetrators, which hinders reporting (Gelles, 1985; Goode, 1971). I will also focus on the concept of patriarchy (Dobash & Dobash, 1979) and on the framework of five faces of oppression (Young, 2009) to further analyze the results.

## ***1.2 Definitions***

It is also important to define the concept of domestic violence that I will use in this paper. I will primarily refer to Hamby (2017)'s definition of violence which states that violent behaviour incorporates 4 main elements: intentional, unwanted, nonessential and harmful. Further, domestic violence will be defined as “a pattern of behavior in any relationship that is used to gain or maintain power and control over an intimate partner” (United Nations, n.d., para 1). The United Nations notes that domestic abuse includes physical, sexual, emotional, economic or psychological actions or behaviors that “frighten, intimidate, terrorize, manipulate, hurt, humiliate, blame, injure, or wound someone” (n.d., para 1).

## **II. Literature Review**

Having been widely viewed as a private matter, domestic violence is, in fact, one form of crime that needs to be criminalized. As was noted by Edwards (1989); Stark (1993), criminalization of domestic violence is an essential symbol that demonstrates the moral unacceptability of the action (as cited in Hoyle & Sanders, 2017). It also serves as an important step that minimizes the occurrence of future cases of domestic violence by addressing and holding the aggressor accountable on a legal and governmental level (Dobash & Dobash et al., 1996, as cited in Hoyle & Sanders, 2017). However, being a sensitive issue that affects the nature and dynamics of the whole family, domestic violence also completely differs from most other types of crimes (Hoyle & Sanders, 2017). In that sense, there can be several disadvantages of reporting the abuser for the victim, including financial costs to the whole family due to fines along with potential abuse from the perpetrator as a way to punish the victim for involving officials and police (Hoyle & Sanders, 2017). Hence, drawbacks outweighing the benefits of seeking legal help, domestic violence tends to be a hidden, private issue that continues to occur within the domestic setting.

Such underreporting of the cases of intimate partner violence, however, causes significant social and personal difficulties for victims as well as broader community. That is to say, victims and their families may experience emotional, psychological and physical distress, which can get to extreme points. Meanwhile, underreporting of the cases might create “dark figure of crime,” where police will not be aware of the true number of cases happening in the society (Baumer & Lauritsen, 2010, as cited in Wallace et al., 2019, pp. 3-4). Further, as was noted by Doorewaard (2014), underreporting hinders the allocation of resources that would aid victims and will not give a rise for interventions that could prevent domestic violence from occurring (as cited in Wallace et al., 2019). It can be inferred then that underreporting of domestic violence is a striking issue that needs to be addressed and researched.

Taking all of this into account, it is important to look at the issue from different theoretical perspectives and explore diverse barriers that prevent women from reporting. First, underreporting will be viewed through the lens of Resource theory as well as Feminist theory. Then, existing literature and findings will be divided into thematic approach and discuss different barriers that prevent women from reporting abuse.

### ***II.2 Theoretical Framework***

One of the main theories that could illuminate the reasons for underreporting of domestic violence is resource theory. According to Ali and Naylor (2013), “in a relationship,

the person who is more resourceful in terms of income, occupational status, and education may have more say and power” (p. 616). In other words, individuals with more resources in a relationship tend to be more powerful than their partners. Goode (1971), standard resource theorist, also notes how in a relationship women with fewer resources are at higher risk of abuse: “Within the family itself, the harsh fact must be faced that the member with the greater strength and willingness to use it commands more force than others do” (p. 628). At the same time, he notes how men with fewer resources (class differences) can be more abusive. Vyas and Watts (2009) also explain how women having less resources than their partners, can lead to more abuse because of the marital dependency.

In the context of domestic violence, this allocation of resources and marital dependency might be the reason why women with more financial power, including economic stability, alternative housing options as well as social support are more prone to leaving abusive relationships and households. On the other hand, women who are economically dependent on their partners, do not have necessary resources to be fully independent (housing, being able to take care of children alone, etc.) and do not have any social support, might decide to stay with their partners no matter how abusive they can get. Hence, this theory could shed light on the important economic reasons of underreporting of domestic violence and will be used in this dissertation to explain barriers to reporting domestic violence.

This work will also use the contextual framework of radical and Marxist feminisms which reflect on the concept of patriarchy as a structural root of women’s oppression. They provide nuanced perspectives on why women stay and not report the violence that they experience in a domestic setting. The theory focuses on gendered as well as societal power dynamics that contribute to victims’ decisions. Describing the patriarchal nature of society, the theory emphasizes how men desire to control women and often express it through violence. As was stated by Dobash and Dobash (1979): “The use of physical violence against women in their position as wives is not the only means by which they are controlled and oppressed but it is one of the most brutal and explicit expressions of patriarchal domination” (p. 9). In other words, men use domestic violence as a way to control women and maintain their dominance in a patriarchal society. In the same vein, Rauhaus, Sibila, and Johnson (2020); Ali and Naylor (2013) claim that patriarchal culture and gender disparity are the leading causes of domestic violence occurrence.

In the context of underreporting, patriarchal structures, men’s possessiveness of women and male dominance might play key roles in discouraging women from reporting. This is because patriarchy became part of societal norms, which might discourage women from

challenging gender and power imbalance that exists in the society. They might feel disempowered and dependent on their abusive, dominant partners. In the same vein, according to Young's (2009) framework of five faces of oppression, concepts of exploitation, powerlessness and violence could demonstrate the ways in which women might be discouraged to leave. She notes how power imbalance in an abusive relationship might lead to intimidation, the feeling of fear and powerlessness, making it difficult for victims to leave, sometimes due to concerns of safety. The author explains women oftentimes face gendered exploitation from men's side as their "energies and power are expended, often unnoticed and unacknowledged, usually to benefit men by releasing them for more important and creative work, enhancing their status or the environment around them, or providing them with sexual or emotional service." (p. 62). In that sense, she mentions that women are socialized to be more empathetic, supportive and good at "smoothing over interactive tensions" (p. 62).

Framework of radical and Marxist feminism also identifies structural inequality and gender stratification as one of the causes of underreporting. In that sense, social structures and norms might limit women's access to resources, which makes them economically dependent on their male partners, who earn more money (Rauhaus, Sibila, & Johnson, 2020). Hence, limited financial resources might serve as a barrier to reporting violence and leaving the abusive partner, especially in cases where children are involved. This theory along with the concept of patriarchy and five faces of oppression will be used in the dissertation to explore the issue of underreporting of domestic violence.

## ***II.2 Previous Research Findings***

Existing literature reveals that there is a complexity of the barriers that hinder reporting of domestic violence. Different concepts that were identified in the previous findings can be divided into emotional, economic, cultural and social barriers as well as the influence of police and social workers. The table below (*table 1*) provides detailed information on the concepts that will be discussed in this section.

| <b>Emotional Barriers</b> | <b>Economic Barriers</b>         | <b>Cultural and Social Barriers</b> | <b>Involvement of Police</b>         | <b>Involvement of Social Workers</b>                    |
|---------------------------|----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>Fear of the Abuser</i> | <i>Dependent Economic Status</i> | <i>Culture of Silence</i>           | <i>Ineffectiveness of the Police</i> | <i>Ineffectiveness of Healthcare and Social Workers</i> |

|                                |  |                                                        |                                                 |                                  |
|--------------------------------|--|--------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| <i>Embarrassment and Shame</i> |  | <i>Patriarchal Nature of Cultural and Social Norms</i> | <i>Fear and Negative Experience with Police</i> | <i>Social Workers Perception</i> |
| <i>Family Protection</i>       |  | <i>Religion</i>                                        | <i>Police Perception</i>                        | <i>Interventions</i>             |

**Table 1: Barriers to Reporting**

**Source: Author's Compilation**

Previous findings demonstrate that some emotional barriers such as fear of the abuser, feeling of embarrassment and shame as well as desire to protect family cause underreporting of domestic violence by victims.

One of the primary reasons why women tend to stay silent and not disclose incidents of abuse to officials and police officers is the fear that it will enrage their partners and lead to further abuse. According to a study by Rose et al. (2011) on barriers of victims' disclosure of domestic violence to mental health service workers in the UK, women identified that they are scared to disclose incidents of abuse as it might result in further violence by the perpetrators. In the same vein, Birdsey and Snowball (2013)'s survey of victims attending domestic violence services revealed that 13.9% of the respondents indicated "fear of revenge or further violence from the offender" as the primary reason for not reporting their partners to police (p. 5). These results were the most commonly cited across the participants.

Looking at the causes behind this fear, a qualitative study by Fugate et al. (2005) demonstrates that 17 of the interviewed women in Chicago were threatened by their partners with further violence and even death. Similarly, Wolf et al. (2003)'s study on barriers to seeking help from police revealed that female respondents considered drawbacks of involving police as far greater than the potential advantages. In that sense, some participants expected their abusers to punish them, some were threatened to get killed if they notify the officials, while some reported that they have already experienced further violence after their perpetrators were released from prison. Hence, it can be inferred that fear of the abuser, fear of further violence or even fear of death serve as an important emotional barrier that does not let victims report the incidents of domestic violence.

Another emotional barrier is the feeling of embarrassment and shame that can occur as a result of contacting police or disclosing the domestic violence case to relatives, family, or

social workers. The concept of “culture of pretence” that was used in the study by Francis et al. (2017) on barriers to recognizing and disclosing domestic violence, serves as a good example of how feelings of embarrassment can arise when revealing the true nature of victims’ partners. According to the authors, “culture of pretence is a state of being where abuse is not acknowledged, not always identified or recognised and for all appearances to those outside the relationship, everything is ‘normal’” (Francis et al., 2017, p. 2207). For the participants of this study, breaking this culture of pretence by revealing the true picture of the abusive relationship to others was correlated with feelings of shame, humiliation, and embarrassment. This is because after creating a perfect image, which was reinforced by others outside the relationship, victims felt stuck and unable to disclose the truth as they did not want to be judged. Instead, they wanted to keep meeting the expectations of those who perceived their relationship to be normal and abuse free. According to authors, this further made women feel “imprisoned and trapped” as they “felt they could not leave because they no longer had their own identity or autonomy to make decisions” (Francis et al., 2017, p. 2206).

Similarly, numerous studies demonstrate that shame and embarrassment act like an emotional obstacle for victims who strive to end their abusive relationships. For example, Wallace et al. (2019) reveal that 20% of their female participants report embarrassment and shame as the main barrier to reporting of violence to the legal officials. 11.8% of Birdsey and Snowball (2013)’s research participants indicate feeling embarrassed or ashamed to report. In the same vein, Othman et al. (2014)’s study on Malaysian women’s barriers to discussing domestic violence demonstrates that women were embarrassed to talk about abuse due to self-blame and belief that it was their own fault. They thought that other people would judge them for reporting. Female participants in a research by Mogstad et al. (2016) also feared judgment and gossip. This is because they did not want to identify as victims, considering it to be embarrassing, shameful as well as weak. Being afraid of relatives’, family members’ and police officers’ views that they might have overreacted, they preferred to just leave their abusive partners instead of reporting the domestic violence to the police.

Women also tend to reveal how feelings of shame, embarrassment and fear of being criticized or judged were connected to the feeling of isolation and loneliness (Fugate et al., 2005). The authors note that this is one of the techniques of abusers in such strained dynamics, where they isolate and shame women in order to prevent them from disclosing information to others. In that sense, 87.48% of women in the study indicated isolation as the barrier that did not let them report. In other words, even though they wanted to discuss the issue with someone, they felt lonely and isolated from other people. Hence, it is possible that feeling of

embarrassment, shame and isolation could be one of the primary factors hindering domestic violence reporting.

Along with the feeling of shame, victims of domestic violence tend to experience a desire to protect their families and children, which causes them to remain silent. For instance, Rose et al. (2011)'s participants stated that they have a fear that their family lives would be disrupted and a lot of things, which were stable, will change. Similarly, women in the study by Othman et al. (2014) were afraid to break their families apart. They "felt a strong belief in maintaining family unity in all matters," and did not want to separate their kids from their father (p. 1503). While, in the research by Wolf et al. (2003), women were afraid that their children would be taken away from them by the police. They thought that child protective services would consider a home where domestic violence is present as unacceptable for children and remove them from there. In the same vein, some women in Fugate et al. (2005)'s study experienced fear of losing their children to child protective services.

Some women were also scared for their abusive partners and wanted to protect them in order to preserve their families. Fugate et al. (2005) note that these women usually excuse their husbands' abusive patterns as they do not want to end the relationship. Hence, contacting a police officer was perceived as a step to an inevitable break up, which they did not want to happen. It can be inferred then that women strived to protect their families, children and relationships, which acted as a barrier to reporting the abusive behavior of their partners.

Turning to economic barriers, dependent economic status is another significant obstacle that leads women to avoid reporting domestic violence. According to a research by Wallace et al. (2019), 21% of 130 participants did not report domestic violence cases due to their dependent financial status. Similarly, in a study by Reina and Lohman (2015) on Latina women's reasons for not reporting domestic violence, most of the respondents note that financial insecurity and unstable residency status make them abstain from reporting. In that sense, their low economic situation did not let them gain necessary resources to leave their husbands, making them financially dependent on their abusive partners to survive. The authors state that for Latina women to be able to report and leave their partners, there is an extreme need to be fully responsible for their financial situation. In this regard, oftentimes women might feel gratitude towards their abusive partners who have been financially providing them for a long time (Othman et al., 2014). This leads them to keep being economically dependent on them and creates a barrier to reporting abuse. Hence, it can be inferred that economically dependent status might be one of the key barriers that prevent women from reporting.

There are also several cultural as well as social barriers such as Asian culture of silence, patriarchy and its effects on culture and social norms, as well as religion, which could be seen from the existing research and previous findings.

One of the primary reasons why women tend to not report is the culture of silence across different nations and the idea that domestic violence should be a private issue. For example, Natarajan (2017) in their study about Indian women's barriers to disclosing abuse, claim that "traditional Asian values emphasizing close family ties and harmony may discourage Asian women from disclosing violent victimization" (p. 302). They go on to explain that women "have been socialized to be subservient to their husbands and to accept mistreatment as their destiny" (Natarajan, 2017, p. 302). In other words, there is a spread of an idea that violence inside the household should stay there and not be revealed as women need to be silent about the abuse. Some women in the study by Mogstad et al. (2016) also stated that domestic violence is a private issue that does not need to involve outsiders such as police. They even noted that "Police interference was also seen to violate culturally correct procedures" as it is unacceptable and disloyal (p. 8). In that sense, participants believed that such incidents of abuse should be resolved in a culturally accepted way: within familial relations, using in-laws and their guidance. However, as the authors claim, this puts pressure on victims to stay silent and their personal opinions and physical as well as mental well-being are not considered. This is detrimental for victims and serves as a significant barrier that does not let them disclose information about domestic violence.

Along with culture of silence, culture of *uyat* (shame in Kazakh) is an important barrier that can be seen in the Kazakhstani context. The concept is defined by Shelekpayev (2020) as "a set of repressive practices in relation to individual or groups and their reactions to certain events, including the condemnation of obvious or perceived misconduct, guilt and imposition of guilt, body shaming, victimization and victim blaming, invention of (false) morality – that can be manifested through emotional and physical abuse" (translation as cited in Thibault & Caron, 2022, p. 1). According to Thibault and Caron (2022), it "constrains individual's behaviours and encourage them to conform to the dominant social norms" (p. 1). These social norms oftentimes derive from "heteronormative conservative gender order, kinship solidarity as well as hierarchical family relations in which elders hold significant power" (p. 1-2). Hence, doing something that does not correlate to these norms is shameful.

Moreover, the culture of *uyat* is also quite nationalized as it demonstrates how women are supposed to be symbol of the nation. Kambekova (2019) explains that in Kazakhstan *uyat* is created by people in order to control women and their behavior. There is an idea that women

are supposed to be a “beautiful image of the mother goddess, guardian of the nation, but is completely deprived of her place in this imagined society, and thereby deprived of the rights and privileges” (para 5). She notes how home and hearth are the most important symbol of spiritual value that needs to be protected, and this falls on the shoulders of women. Deviation from this image in any way will result in people shaming the actions of a woman. In the context of domestic violence, it would be shameful for victims to discuss this issue as they would fail to keep their family together and be judged for divorcing their partners.

Culture of silence and *uyat* is also closely intertwined with the patriarchal nature of culture and social norms that persist in the society and discourage victims from reporting. As Natarajan (2017) notes: “It is widely held that domestic violence, especially wife abuse, is common in traditional, patriarchal societies where women are considered second-class citizens whose worth is defined by their husband’s position in society...” (p. 307). The author claims that women’s extreme patience and tolerance of violence as well as decision to not report are due to their socialization process. In the Indian case, women are brought up with the notion that they should always respect their husbands, while men are socialized to believe that they are authority figures within the household. Husbands could also sometimes punish their wives when they deserve it. It can be inferred then that the ways women are socialized, and taught gender and traditional norms make them reluctant to report abuse.

Similarly, in the context of Kazakhstan, cultural norms in the country might be a causing factor for abuse and women’s reluctance to report. Snajdr (2005; 2007) who focused on the connection between culture, religion and domestic violence, reports that Kazakh boys are taught to be “bosses” who are one step above girls. Further, several Kazakh traditions during marriage might encourage the beating of the wife. *Kalym*, bride-price, when the groom's side of the family gives money to the bride’s family as a way of saying thank you for raising her. However, some might interpret it as the bride becoming the groom's property. Hence, domestic violence may occur as a culturally normative act of a man’s authority and dominance over his wife. That is why, women might believe in male dominance and choose to not report abuse.

Domestic violence might be a norm in a family where the victim was brought up, creating a vicious circle of normality of abuse in her future family. Mogstad and colleagues (2016) claim that several of their research participants believed that their experience with domestic abuse was not unique as their mothers were able to endure it. Therefore, they decided that violence was not a significant reason to go against cultural expectations and break the family. Hence, it can be inferred that cultural and social norms where patriarchal structure and

male dominance is present could be a barrier that discourages women from reporting domestic violence.

Another similar barrier that makes women reluctant to report is religion and its impact. According to Othman et al. (2014), Buddhist victims might consider violence to be karma, while Muslim women tend to believe that divorce is a sin that needs to be avoided. The authors note that Muslim participants experience difficulty in reporting as they try to avoid getting a divorce or separation and strive to preserve family unity since it is “the most important social institution in Islam” (p. 1508). Meanwhile, a study by Lichtenstein and Johnson (2009) on African women’s barriers to reporting, revealed that church-going women are pressured to lead exemplary lives and follow traditional gender roles. This is because several ministers claim that culturally normative women’s obedience and male dominance should be preserved as in biblical roles. Hence, religious women following different religions might feel reluctant to report domestic violence cases due to their faith that family needs to be saved and gender roles need to be followed.

Looking at the role of the police, its ineffectiveness at handling domestic violence reports and aiding victims is another reason why women are reluctant to report. As was noted by Voce and Boxall (2019), “The police have an important role to play in the prevention and de-escalation of domestic violence” as they at least should provide short-term protection to victims of domestic violence (p. 8). Further, the authors claim that police should be a gateway for women and help them access other important services that could provide them with immediate, long-term help. Nevertheless, the authors state that in the case of Australia, only 21% of women who experienced domestic abuse have reported the incident to the police due to the fear of not being believed.

Similarly, in Trinidad and Tobago’s context, local residents have lack of faith in the effectiveness of the police at solving crimes and helping victims (Wallace et al., 2019). Meanwhile, a study by Wolf et al. (2003) demonstrates that a victim's previous experience with the legal system left them with minimal or no penalty at all being imposed on their perpetrators. Such results were not worth the effort and courage that they gained to come forward with their report, which is why women noted that they would be highly unlikely to report the incidents to police unless the punishment was fair. Some of the women in the study also noted that there is a need to have physical evidence of the abuse in case of reporting, which is difficult to get unless you are severely beaten up. In the same vein, Hoyle and Sanders (2017)’s respondents revealed that whenever they tried to pursue a prosecution, the complex process made them realize that prosecution might not really lead to a successful end, creating additional problems.

Instead, it was more effective to leave their partners or opt for other means that would help them end violence.

Police can also side with the abusers, leaving victims without any support. In a study by Mogstad et al. (2016), research participants, “when asked what they believed would happen if they approached the police as victims of abuse” revealed that the police would be unhelpful as they share the same attitude as the abusers do (p. 10). It can be inferred that police took abusers’ side in most cases, leaving victims alone and unprotected. Similarly, in a research by Fugate et al. (2005) 39% of women who did not report the abuse to police, indicated that it was not useful nor needed as police was ineffective at solving their issues. Further, Birdsey and Snowball (2013) demonstrate in their paper that 17.1% of their respondents who did not report the cases of domestic violence claimed that police “are not sufficiently understanding or proactive in their handling of DV” (p. 6). Hence, it can be inferred that the ineffectiveness of police at handling domestic violence cases is another important barrier that does not let victims contact them and report their incidents of abuse.

Looking further at the ineffectiveness of police and support services, there also seems to be an existence of secondary victimization. Secondary victimization can be defined by the European Institute for Gender Equality. (n.d.) as “when the victim suffers further harm not as a direct result of the criminal act but due to the manner in which institutions and other individuals deal with the victim” (para 1). The authors note how secondary victimisation can be induced through “repeated exposure of the victim to the perpetrator, repeated interrogation about the same facts, the use of inappropriate language or insensitive comments made by all those who come into contact with victims” (para 1).

Some literature also distinguishes fear of police and negative experience with it that happened with victims of domestic violence, which makes them reluctant to seek for help and report the abuse in future cases. For example, respondents in the study by Birdsey and Snowball (2013), identified bad experience with the police as one of the leading reasons for not reporting the crime again. Particularly, 10.4% or 1 in 10 participants of the research did not report the case of abuse to the police as their prior experience was disappointing and unsuccessful.

Encounters with police can exacerbate underreporting of future incidents of domestic violence. In a research by Wolf et al. (2003), several of their female respondents did not feel satisfied with their prior experience with legal officials, which caused them to hesitate to ask for help from the police. This is because of the potential misidentification of the victim as the abuser that might or has already taken place with research participants. According to the authors, misidentification of the victim oftentimes arises when they try to defend themselves

and, as a result, leave some marks on the perpetrator. It was noted that there was a fear among victims that police will not identify their actions as self-defense, instead putting a label of abuser on them. There was also a high possibility, as respondents claim, that police might befriend the abuser, which exacerbates their fear of contacting police officers for help. This is because of the manipulation tactics that abusers are eminent for: “Victims viewed their batterers as very smart and manipulative in being able to convince others, including the police, that they had not committed any abuse or that the victim had been at fault” (pp. 124-125).

Police can also tend to delay the response to domestic violence incidents, creating a feeling among the victims that abuse within the household is not a serious crime. In that sense, Wolf et al. (2003)’s respondents feared to contact the police as they believed that it would only be helpful in extreme crisis situations and that they might be otherwise judged by the police for calling them. In this sense, a study by Horwitz et al. (2011) on the police officers’ experience with domestic violence cases revealed that victims might believe that they are “undeserving of police assistance” as police could act with them “in an arrogant and rude manner” (Stephens & Sinden, 2000; Wolf et al., 2003, as cited in Horwitz et al., 2011, p. 619).

In a similar way, a study by Fugate et al. (2005) revealed that their research participants were very hesitant to call the police as they were afraid. This is because police intervention is commonly considered to be completely different from interventions of social workers or counselors and agencies. The authors note that “medical care and counseling are more often interventions directed at the victim, whereas much police intervention is focused on the abuser” (p. 303). This creates a feeling that police might be the one in control of the encounter, making victims fear that their perspectives and thoughts might not be taken into account during the intervention. Hence, it can be inferred that previous negative experience with the police as well as feeling of fear of being judged, not believed could be important barriers that hinder reporting of abuse cases.

It is also important to look at the perception of police officers about their effectiveness and readiness to handle domestic violence cases. In a study by Horwitz et al. (2011), which focused primarily on the police officers and their thoughts about domestic violence, it was revealed that some policemen tended to blame or feel frustrated with the victims. This is because they believed that situation was preventable and only one police officer expressed frustration with the perpetrator. At the same time, they also demonstrated that there was a fault of the larger criminal justice system and service provider system. Policemen believed that their ineffectiveness was due to the complexity of factors and that they also felt “frustration, disillusionment, feelings of powerlessness and detachment” (p. 622). The participants of the

research also discussed how they felt empathetic towards victims and felt powerlessness when abusers were not properly punished.

However, sometimes they believed that this happened due to “the victims’ lack of cooperation or inability to appear in court” (p. 623). This creates a complexity for the police since they are not able to protect the victims properly and effectively. The authors also note how some police officers presume that they have the necessary training and are well capable of creating interventions to stop the abuse from occurring as long as the victims cooperate. Yet at the same time, some of them reveal how “their efforts would only create temporary relief for the victims and their witnessing children” (p. 623). In other words, there is a mix of differing opinions among police about their effectiveness and capability to interfere with domestic violence incidents and help victims. Some police officers reckon that the larger criminal system, lack of training and preparedness to deal with victims and abusers exacerbates underreporting. While some claim that victims do not cooperate, creating issues for the protocol, not realizing that victims’ lack of cooperation might be due to their own ineffectiveness.

Another important reason why women tend to not disclose their experience of abuse is the ineffectiveness of the sector of healthcare and social workers. In the study by Othman et al. (2014), for example, health care providers were more likely to ignore physical signs of abuse on victim’s bodies and fail to ask about them, even if victims were willing to talk about them. Women also described how physicians were not empathetic and did not demonstrate any kind of interest towards their issues. The authors note that for victims, it is important that healthcare workers ask them questions themselves and encourage them to talk about abusive encounters rather than waiting for them to start on their own. Furthermore, healthcare workers seem to be unprepared to deal with victims as there was inadequate practical support and lack of genuine interest in helping them. In the same vein, Fugate et al. (2005)’s research participants believed that agency or counselor could not help them and that there was no point in addressing their issues. Meanwhile, 74% of women stated that seeking medical care was not useful for them.

Looking at the perspective of the healthcare and social workers, staff can feel unease and not be confident enough at helping victims who have experienced domestic violence. In a research by Rose et al. (2011), mental health professional felt uncomfortable while dealing with such “delicate” issues as there are factors that affect their preparedness such as “lack of training regarding domestic violence, lack of time, lack of effective interventions and patient-related factors such as non-disclosure and fear of offending the individual” (p. 193). Hence, it can be inferred that healthcare, medical, social and mental health workers tend to have insufficient

training and might not be effective enough to address domestic violence reports, which creates a barrier for victims.

Some papers also discuss how to resolve this ineffectiveness of different sectors and how to properly intervene in order to help victims to report the occurring abuse to the police or social workers. A study by Natarajan (2017) identifies encouragement to ask for help from the officials. The author believes that there is a need to create additional voluntary service centers who could act like “guardians” for the victims and aid them in overcoming their fears and barriers that hinder them from reporting their abusive partners. At the same time, the Natarajan (2017) states that voluntary services cannot be “substitute for legal protection and there is an urgent need for law enforcement to reach out” to women and encourage them to report (p. 315).

### **III. Research Questions**

Taking all the existing literature into account, I would like to examine if some of the mentioned barriers can be visible in the context of Kazakhstan. In order to explore the barriers that hinder victims of domestic violence from reporting abuse in Kazakhstan, it would be necessary to look at the issue from the perspective of victims, who could shed light on the primary social, cultural, psychological, economic factors that prevent them from reporting. Further, it would be important to examine the role of law enforcement and its impact on underreporting as it can create additional barriers that influence victim’s decisions. For that, it would be also necessary to look at the perspective of police. Lastly, I would like to examine how support services mitigate and address these barriers, which is why a perspective of social workers would be needed.

1. What are the primary social, cultural and psychological factors that prevent victims of domestic violence from reporting abuse in Kazakhstan?
2. How does the law enforcement system/police in Kazakhstan influence the reporting and handling of domestic violence cases?
  - a. To what extent does it contribute to underreporting?
  - b. What are victims’ personal experiences with the law enforcement system/police?
3. How do support services address and deal with the barriers to reporting domestic violence?
  - a. How effective are their measures in encouraging reporting?

These research questions are expected to comprehensively explore various facets of domestic violence underreporting and unravel the complexities of the issue. They will also examine the

nuanced experience of victims in their interactions with authorities, police and social workers. The results are projected to demonstrate intricate dynamics of the problem and help to create interventions that would break the barriers hindering reporting.

#### **IV. Research Methods**

In order to examine real life instances of domestic violence cases and explore perceptions of respondents from the first person perspective in my research, I employed qualitative research methods, namely semi-structured interviews with victims of domestic violence, police officers and social workers. I used convenience as well as purposive sampling methods to recruit participants as most of them are either from my circle of friends and family or are in close contact with my family members. That is to say, victims of domestic violence were chosen from a self-help support group of domestic violence victims (informal organization) where one of my relatives currently works at. Police officers were contacted through a relative, who is a police officer herself. Lastly, social workers who work with victims of intimate partner violence were found through a social worker who works with disabled children. The sample of the research turned out to be N=12, with 5 victims of domestic violence, 5 police officers and 2 social workers. During the recruitment of the research participants, several social workers were unwilling to participate due to lack of time, energy and personal beliefs that the research will not be helpful, which is why the sample only consists of 2 members of the support system. All research participants are located in Kazakhstan, Oskemen city and are in their late 20s – early 30s (for victims and social workers), and early 30s – early 40s (for police officers) (see *table 2* below for main characteristics and demographic data).

| <b>Pseudonym</b> | <b>Occupation</b>   | <b>Gender</b> | <b>Age</b> | <b>Ethnicity</b> | <b>Location</b> | <b>Marital Status</b> | <b>Number of children (victims of DV)</b> |
|------------------|---------------------|---------------|------------|------------------|-----------------|-----------------------|-------------------------------------------|
| Diana            | Stay at home mother | Female        | 29         | Kazakh           | Oskemen         | Married               | 3                                         |
| Aizhan           | Teacher             | Female        | 31         | Kazakh           | Oskemen         | Divorced              | 2                                         |
| Yenlik           | Cashier             | Female        | 27         | Kazakh           | Oskemen         | Married               | 1                                         |

|          |                     |        |    |        |         |          |   |
|----------|---------------------|--------|----|--------|---------|----------|---|
| Zarina   | Doctor              | Female | 28 | Kazakh | Oskemen | Single   | 0 |
| Nazerke  | Stay at home mother | Female | 30 | Kazakh | Oskemen | Divorced | 1 |
| Moldir   | Police Officer      | Female | 32 | Kazakh | Oskemen | Married  |   |
| Serik    | Police Officer      | Male   | 42 | Kazakh | Oskemen | Married  |   |
| Nurlan   | Police Officer      | Male   | 35 | Kazakh | Oskemen | Married  |   |
| Yerzhan  | Police Officer      | Male   | 33 | Kazakh | Oskemen | Single   |   |
| Zhansaya | Police Officer      | Female | 40 | Kazakh | Oskemen | Married  |   |
| Shyryn   | Social Worker       | Female | 28 | Kazakh | Oskemen | Single   |   |
| Saule    | Social Worker       | Female | 34 | Kazakh | Oskemen | Married  |   |

**Table 2: Description of the Study Population**

**Source: Author's Compilation**

In the case of the victims of domestic violence, all of them underwent the last incident of abuse approximately 4-6 months ago at the closest. Hence, it is safe to say that the current general state of their physical health is good enough. Their general state of mental health is also stable and improved as they use the services of a psychologist in their self-help support group.

Each respondent was selected on a voluntary basis and oral consent form was taken from victims due to ethical considerations, while written consent form was taken from police officers and social workers. Participants were notified that their responses will be recorded anonymously and that their personal information will not be disclosed under any circumstance. They were also informed that they can skip any question which might make them feel uncomfortable or stop the interview at any time.

I conducted interviews online since all of the participants currently reside in Kazakhstan. Depending on the preferences of the respondents, the platform for online interviews was either Zoom or WhatsApp. The duration of each interview was around 1- 1.5 hours and the language of communication for the participant pool was Russian. Research participants had a chance to choose whether they would like the interview to be recorded or not. In case they said yes, only their voices were recorded. If they refused to be recorded, I took notes during the interview and later reached out to them in case some information was missing or to check the accuracy of my notes. For victims of domestic violence, I also suggested making research anonymous to protect their identities due to the sensitivity of the topic. In case they

wanted the research to be completely anonymous, my relative, who served as a gatekeeper, asked them to create pseudonyms and not tell me their real names throughout the data collection. During the interviews, they could also turn off their cameras to hide their faces. For police officers and social workers, I was aware of their real names, but altered them in later sections to avoid disclosure of their identities. It is also important to note that I slightly changed some parts of all respondents' stories in later sections to prevent reidentification, leak of significant personal information and avoid other potential risks that might occur.<sup>1</sup>

After the data collection, all interviews were transcribed for data analysis. However, only excerpts from the interviews which will be mentioned in the later sections were translated from Russian to English. During the analysis of the data, I employed thematic analysis to identify common and recurring themes across interviews with three main stakeholders. The interviews were coded by color-coding method where each theme was highlighted with a specific color in the transcript. The results and overview of the findings will be discussed in sections below.

## **V. Findings**

Having discussed and listened to the stories, feelings and thoughts of research participants, I noticed the similarities in respondents' experiences with domestic violence underreporting. The findings demonstrate that there are certain emotional, economic, cultural and social barriers that hinder victims from reporting incidents of abuse.

Looking at different stakeholders within the study, it was identified that respondents within each group (victims, police officers, social workers) often emphasize similar obstacles and issues related to the reporting of domestic violence incidents.

The interviews with victims revealed that some of the most common emotional barriers hindering the reporting of abuse include their fear of the abuser, them wanting to protect their

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<sup>1</sup> Taking into account the sensitivity of the subject, I intended to employ elements of participatory research methods that were used in the study by Kondakov (2018). In his study about sex workers' personal experiences in St. Petersburg, the author implemented a method where sex workers interviewed other sex workers. He believed that this way research participants would be more comfortable in sharing their thoughts and feelings. In my research, I gave each victim of domestic violence a choice to be either interviewed by me or by my relative (gatekeeper) who works at the self-support help group. Since they know her personally, I figured that they might be more willing to discuss their personal lives and cases of abuse with her. However, all 5 respondents stated that they would be willing to be interviewed by me, which is why this method was not fully employed.

family as well as them feeling embarrassed and ashamed to report. Victims often tend to be afraid of their abuser due to the possibility of the abuse recurring. They believe that their partners will or have already experienced how they got even more furious after the disclosure of the abuse to other people (family, friends, police, etc.), leading to additional and sometimes more serious abuse. Most victims also mentioned that they do not report the incidents of violence to officials nor family members in order to protect their family and keep it together. Sometimes for the sake of children, or sometimes due to the belief that abuse is temporary and that their partners are good people who do not deserve to be penalized or detained. Victims also report how they feel embarrassed and ashamed to reveal their partners' dark side to other people in the society, which is why they do not disclose any information regarding violence that occurs.

Most victims also discuss how cultural and social barriers usually become the main reason for not reporting the abuse. They note how pressure from the society, which tends to be quite traditional and conservative in Kazakhstan, forces them to remain silent. In that sense, they believe that culture of *uyat* (shame) and silence creates the idea that familial relations should stay private and not disclosed to others, especially police and officials. There is also a barrier of patriarchal nature of social norms in Kazakhstan, where men are socialized to be one step higher than women, creating a belief that women should be patient and understandable. Furthermore, religious views also play a key role in underreporting incidents of domestic violence as some of them create a belief that women should be submissive and shall not divorce their husbands.

Victims also often mentioned how their dependent economic status leads them to remain silent when it comes to abuse. Some of them, especially those who do not have a stable source of income (stay at home mothers) or those whose salary is relatively lower than their partners, tend to be economically dependent on their perpetrators to survive. This is especially the case when there are children in the picture as women without their own source of income believe that they will fail to provide for their kids.

Victims further discuss how there is a major lack of trust in police as well as existence of previous negative experience with them that does not let them contact or seek help from the law enforcement system. This is due to lack of empathy and concrete attempts to help victims from the side of the police. Victims also discuss how the decriminalized nature of domestic violence in the country, where domestic violence is only an administrative offense, makes them hesitant to report. Their main narratives of support services are mostly negative, where they believe that police and social workers are ineffective and cannot properly aid them.

Similarly, police officers in the study reveal that victims might feel pressured to remain silent due to the culture of *uyat* and silence, patriarchal social norms, fear of the abuser, feeling of embarrassment and shame, desire to protect the family, dependent economic status, and decriminalized nature of domestic violence. Interestingly, they also mention how victims might have negative experiences with police officers as they might be on the abusers' side and have traditional views which support the idea that violence should be a private issue. Some police officers, mostly men, claim that they try to unite the victim and abuser in order to keep the family together, sometimes for the sake of children. Some male police officers also mention how usually victims are at fault for the incidents of domestic violence. They tend to blame the victim for the occurrence of the abuse. At the same time, other police officers feel ashamed for not being able to protect and properly help victims. They think that the main problem is the lack of professional training within the system. Officers do not feel confident enough in their abilities to aid victims and resolve the conflict.

In the same vein, the social workers' main narratives of barriers correspond to other stakeholders' perspectives. Social workers identify fear of the abuser, dependent economic status, culture of silence and *uyat*, patriarchal nature of social norms, feeling of embarrassment and shame, desire to protect their families, religious views, and decriminalized nature of domestic violence as the main barriers. This group of respondents also mention how some of them might not be well-trained for assisting victims, which creates additional issues. Interestingly, some social workers discuss how they feel pressured to do work beyond their requirements. In that sense they do not encourage women to report if they do not want to due to lack of energy, resources and time to convince victims. At the same time, some mention how even if they try to convince victims to report, it does not lead to a successful outcome as victims refuse to report under any circumstance.

Perceptions and narratives of all three stakeholders seem to align with each other and demonstrate the complexity of the issue. All stakeholders also revealed the potential solutions and interventions that could be used to solve the problem of underreporting. Each barrier and concept that was mentioned above (see *table 3* below) will be discussed in this section separately.

| <b>Emotional Barriers</b>                 | <b>Cultural and Social Barriers</b>       | <b>Economic Barriers</b>         | <b>Involvement of Police</b>                             | <b>Involvement of Social Workers</b>                                  |
|-------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>Fear of the Abuser</i>                 | <i>Culture of Silence and Uyat</i>        | <i>Dependent Economic Status</i> | <i>Lack of trust and negative experience with police</i> | <i>Lack of professional training (both police and social workers)</i> |
| <i>Protection of the Family</i>           | <i>Patriarchal Nature of Social Norms</i> |                                  | <i>Ineffectiveness of the Police</i>                     | <i>Ineffectiveness of Social Workers</i>                              |
| <i>Feeling of Embarrassment and Shame</i> | <i>Religion</i>                           |                                  | <i>Police Officers' Experience and Perception</i>        | <i>Social Workers' Experience and Perception</i>                      |
|                                           |                                           |                                  | <i>Decriminalized nature of domestic violence</i>        | <i>Interventions and possible solutions (all three)</i>               |

**Table 3: Themes and concepts that were identified during data analysis**

**Source: Author's Compilation**

One of the primary emotional barriers that was mentioned among victims of domestic violence is their *fear of abuser*. In that sense, all women who suffered from domestic violence previously noted that they tend to stay silent and not report nor discuss the issue with their family members (own parents, siblings, etc.) is the fear that the abuse will reoccur. Strikingly, most of the victims reveal that they were afraid that reporting or including other people in the issue will enrage their husbands or partners (in case of cohabitation without marriage) and eventually lead to more serious incidents of domestic violence. Aizhan, who has divorced her abusive husband, gave a sad example of this bad experience:

*“My ex-husband was usually a very impatient and angry person in general... so at first I never told anyone about him occasionally beating me, I felt like he would get even more furious, and who knows... maybe even hit our kids.”* (Aizhan, victim)

Even if women wanted to inform their environment about the happening of violent situations, some of them revealed that their husbands or partners directly threatened them to not disclose the incidents of abuse to anyone as it would ruin their reputation. A victim intensely remembers:

*“My ex-husband once said: “please do not tell anyone about the beating, both of us know I will hurt you even more if you do, so just don’t even try, it will ruin our reputation as a family.” (Nazerke, victim)*

Similarly, some of the respondents note that talking about the incidents of physical violence with their family members or officially reporting it to the police was not something they could do as their husbands or partners explicitly told them they would “kill them.”

Still, their bad situation did not remain hidden before their environment. Social workers in the study also revealed that sometimes women are afraid to report or discuss the issue with other people as there is a chance that their abusers might end up punishing them even more or even killing them.

Some victims also claim that even if they reported the incident to the police, their abusers would eventually come back home after less than 10/15 days of being detained, which will exacerbate their anger and lead to more abuse. In that sense, police officer Moldir explains that there were incidents when perpetrators would go back home after their detention is over, and then return shortly after due to another, but sometimes even more serious, incident of domestic violence. It can be inferred then that one of the primary emotional barriers that does not let victims of domestic violence report abuse is the fear of their perpetrator and the possibility of exacerbated violence.

Victims of domestic violence further identify their need to *protect their family* as one of the key barriers that makes them remain silent about incidents of abuse. In this regard, most women, especially those who have children, reveal that they refuse to report or discuss the issue with other people as they want to preserve their families and make sure that their children grow up in a full house. For instance, Nazerke, who has a child, vividly remembers how, at first, she did not tell anyone about the abuse that she was experiencing. She explains that it was because her son was just a 2-year-old toddler when the first incident of violence occurred. Nazerke desperately believed that the physical abuse was a one-time thing, but when it turned into a more serious and regular matter, she was contemplating whether to talk about the violence to her own parents or report her husband to the police. She ended up not reporting her husband for the sake of her child:

*“He was just a baby and I wanted him to grow up with a father, in a full house, but I really wanted to divorce my ex-husband.” (Nazerke, victim)*

However, when the abuse became intolerable, Nazerke ended up talking about it to her own family and her parents convinced her to divorce her husband and move in with them.

Interestingly, some women also did not strive to report their partners because they wanted to protect them. This is surprising as victims wanted to defend those who were directly harming them. Respondents reveal that the reason behind this was the belief that abuse which they are experiencing is temporary and will end soon. In that sense, victims whose partners or husbands were previously very caring, sweet and gentle, believed that the abuse is just an out of character, abnormal occasion that will not happen again. Zarina, who was in a cohabitation without marriage with her ex-boyfriend remembers:

*“My ex was such a sweet and gentle boyfriend so when he hit me for the first time, I thought he was just stressed about work and other stuff and believed that it was just a one-time thing. But then it turned into a manipulation because he would hit me and then apologize and be extremely caring again, so I did not want to report him to the police, I loved him at the end of the day.”* (Zarina, victim)

Strikingly, police officers and social workers also mention how women often tend to care about their perpetrators and do not want them to face any legal consequences. They want to protect them and keep their family together. It can be inferred then that victims can feel the need to protect their families, including their children and even the perpetrators, which does not let them report the violence.

Another important emotional barrier that was discussed by respondents is *the feeling of shame and embarrassment* that can occur when mentioning the incident of abuse to other people. That is to say, victims of domestic violence revealed that they did not want to report their partners to police or talk about it with their relatives, family members and friends because they felt embarrassed that it happened to them. For example, Diana, a mother of three, explains how her family always had an image of an exemplary family where love and traditional values thrived. She notes that their relatives often used them as an example of how family should look like.

Hence, for her to break the news and ruin this perfect image that her relatives have created was embarrassing. She felt like she should keep the incidents of domestic violence in a secret to avoid gossip, judgement and protect her family's reputation. Diana also notes that she did not want to disappoint her relatives and wanted them to keep believing in the perfect family image.

Similarly, some women in the study also reported how they did not want to ruin good reputation of their abusers. They revealed that their husbands or partners were always very

good, compassionate and kind people, but most importantly very caring fathers. Therefore, relatives, friends, work partners surrounding them perceived these perpetrators as generally good people. Women did not want to ruin this image and felt like it was shameful and embarrassing to reveal that their partners were abusers. At times, they also felt like it was their own fault that abuse occurred, which is why they blamed themselves, were ashamed to notify other people and seek for help:

*“Sometimes I thought it was my own fault because I do not know when to stop talking during arguments, I get as angry as he does and can say some harsh things, so I felt like if I didn’t do it he would never hit me”* (Yenlik, victim).

Related to the feeling of embarrassment and shame, almost all respondents (victims of domestic violence) further reported that they experienced a *culture of silence and uyat* (uyat means shame in Kazakh). In that sense, women felt like it was shameful to disclose such sensitive information about their family to other people as it was “uyat” or something that was not acceptable in Kazakh society. A victim, for example, explains:

*“I did not want to report because I knew people will tell me it is uyat to publicly tell others about things happening in my family, I knew I will be judged and will be hot topic for gossip.”* (Yenlik, victim).

Similarly, both police officers and social workers mention “culture of uyat” and how it is generally not socially acceptable to talk about private issues of the family or divorce with your partner. For example, they note how people often expect wives to tolerate their husbands even if they are abusive or manipulative, and if they cannot save the family, it is uyat (shameful). Hence, it can be inferred that culture of silence and uyat is an important barrier that prevents women from reporting abuse in fear of being judged. The concept of “culture of uyat” will be further discussed in detail in the discussion section.

Another very important cultural and social barrier that was often discussed by the respondents is the *patriarchal nature of the social norms* in a Kazakhstani society. All three stakeholders note there is a clear traditional gender roles division within familial relations in the country, where men are the head of the family, breadwinners and dominants, while women are supposed to be submissive and caring. It appears that women, being socialized to respect their husbands and put them above themselves, are often reluctant to report the abuse. Police officers in the study reveal that women tend to remain silent because they think it is the norm to tolerate your husband and it is normal to experience abuse.

Similarly, some victim respondents also reveal how the idea that men are more important creates this barrier for them to discuss the abuse with other people. In that sense, they

note that they do not feel comfortable talking about the abuse because they know others will most likely think that they were the ones who pushed and enraged their partners. In other words, they felt like society would put all the blame on them and justify the actions of their perpetrators. This is not surprising, as victim blaming is a very common issue in modern traditional society:

*“In Kazakhstan, and honestly everywhere around the world, victims are often the ones who get blamed for whatever happened to them, be it rape or domestic violence. It is very sad but I understand why women do not want to talk about it, most victims that I worked with told me that they did not want to be judged”* (Yerzhan, police officer).

Patriarchal nature of the social norms goes hand in hand with religious views that preach male dominance and female obedience. In that sense social workers in the study mention how some women that they have worked with refuse to separate from their partners or report them due to the Muslim belief that men are one step higher than women. They thought that women have to endure hardships, but be patient, respect their husbands and preserve the family. Divorce is also considered to be a sin in Islam, which is why religious women do not want to report and break up their families.

Some of the victims in the study, whose families or whose partners' families are religious also mentioned how they did not want to report their partners due to the fear of outrage from their religious relatives. Diana, who is still married to her perpetrator, mentions:

*“I was born in a pretty religious family and my husband's family is also religious. Partially, I did not want to divorce because of that, I thought we can work it out eventually.”* (Diana, victim).

Hence, it can be inferred that the patriarchal nature of social norms as well as religion can play an important role in underreporting of domestic violence.

Talking about economic barriers that hinder victims from reporting, *dependent economic status* is often mentioned by respondents. In this regard, most women who do not have a stable source of income, who do not work or have relatively lower salary in comparison to their abusive partner, tend to stay in the relationship and not report the incidents of violence to the police. This is primarily due to being economically dependent on their partners to survive. For example, both Diana and Nazerke (stay at home mothers) reveal that their husbands/ ex-husbands are the main breadwinners in the household. They note that this was one of the main reasons why they did not report nor separate with them (in case of Nazerke she divorced her husband after some time). Both women are also mothers, which was an additional important factor since they did not have enough resources to move out and provide for their children.

*“We have three children and I do not work, he did not let me work and wanted me to be a full-time mother, so I could not leave with three kids even if I wanted to, what would I do?”* (Diana, victim).

Diana’s statement also demonstrates how the abuser was the one who did not let her have financial independence, creating direct dependence on him.

This financial insecurity also translates into victims who have lower paying jobs. For example, in the case of Yenlik who works as a cashier, her husband gets paid relatively more as he is an accountant. She notes how all familial expenses are on her husband’s shoulders, while her own salary is only used for her own personal expenses. Yenlik told me that when the incidents of abuse started appearing, she was hesitant to leave her husband because she did not feel confident enough in her own economic status. She felt like she would not be able to find a decent place nor raise her child while working full time. Hence, she did not try to report or leave him.

In the same vein, police officers and social workers indicate how most of the time women opt out from leaving or reporting due to their financial dependence on their perpetrators. A police officer notes:

*“Even my own cousin refused to tell me about her abusive husband because she did not know what to do without him, she wasn’t working. But then my parents invited her to live with us for some time, I think women should just ask for help.”* (Serik, police officer).

Social workers also reveal that women tend to feel extremely anxious and scared about leaving or reporting if they do not have necessary resources such as accommodation, or enough salary to do so. Hence, it can be inferred that dependent economic status can be a very crucial factor that influences underreporting.

Turning to the barriers that are related to the *involvement of police*, most respondents indicated that there is a major lack of trust in police along with previous negative experience with them that makes victims abstain from contacting officials and law enforcement system. That being said, all victims revealed that they do not trust police officers since they might and, interestingly, oftentimes do choose to side with the abuser. Respondents claim that police officers, usually male ones, can victim blame and make women feel insecure as well as uncomfortable. This is not surprising as victim blaming and police siding with male perpetrators due to male solidarity can be visible in the whole country. This is because domestic violence cases that are mentioned in the news and media usually demonstrate how police aren’t actively involved in helping the victim.

In this regard, social workers mention how the issue of lack of trust is extremely important since it fuels victims' unwillingness to be in contact with police.:

*"Most policemen are men and they usually try to justify the actions of male abusers, either by saying directly or by simply disregarding victims' claims."* (Shyryn, social worker).

Women not trusting police also emerges from the negative past experience that victims had with the law enforcement system. That is to say, women who have previously already contacted or have been involved with police officers regarding domestic violence are less likely to report new incidents of abuse if the previous experience was not successful. For example, Aizhan, remembers her first experience with police in an unpleasant way. When she experienced a serious incident of abuse from her ex-husband (severe beating), she had to immediately report her case for her own and her children's safety. When she was taken to the hospital, police officers who were questioning her were extremely rude and made her feel like it was her own fault that she was beaten.

*"They kept asking me questions like what did I say to make him this angry, and then they proceeded to tell me that I should just forgive him for our children."* (Aizhan, victim).

Hence, it can be inferred that there is a lack of sympathy from police officers as they feel like it is mostly women's own fault that abuse occurred.

The *ineffectiveness of the police* can be also visible in cases where police officers seem to perceive domestic violence as a minor offense that should not be taken very seriously. In this sense, respondents note how police officers might completely disregard the severity of the incidents and look at the issue as if it is a normal practice to beat your spouse. For example, a victim notes how police officers that she has encountered did not take her claims seriously:

*"I contacted the police once, right after the severe incident, and even when they saw my swollen face, they did not even try to show any compassion."* (Zarina, victim).

Zarina explains that she was specifically told to just go to her parents' house and calm down because "it was not that serious." This was also because she was not married to the perpetrator and police officers partially judged her for living with a man before getting married to him. It was as if she deserved to be beaten.

These findings also align with the actual *perception of the police officers* in the study. Looking at their personal experience and views related to domestic violence, it was interesting to reveal how some police officers confirmed victims' claims about victim blaming and siding with male abusers. For example, some male police officers stated that violence usually occurs

due to women's own fault. One of them believes that women tick off men by their words or actions, which leads them to getting beaten up:

*"I think women should just respect men more and not anger them, usually they just talk a lot of nonsense, get jealous and so on, of course we do not like it."* (Nurlan, police officer).

Meanwhile, some police officers claim that it is the victims' fault that they do not report the abuse on time. They believe that if women simply contacted police after the first incident, the abuse would stop, and they would not be harmed again. This is interesting, because it appears that police officers are not aware of the underlying reasons for underreporting and do not understand the complexity of the situation.

Some police officers also do not take domestic violence as a serious crime. Surprisingly, it seems like they do not even see the actual issue, it is almost hidden from their perspective. Even if it is apparent that violence has a strong impact on women, police officers do not try to support women.

At the same time, some police officers in the study note how they are aware of the complexity of the issue and try to help women as much as possible. For example, Serik notes that even if the system itself is flawed, whenever he gets a domestic violence case, he tries his best to support and aid victims. Similarly, female police officers also mention that they feel sad when they cannot properly help victims and try to assist them as much as possible. Hence, it is interesting to see various perspectives of police officers who either exacerbate underreporting or encourage women to not stay silent.

Police ineffectiveness and lack of support is also tightly intertwined with the *decriminalized nature of domestic violence* in the country. That is to say, domestic violence is merely an administrative offense instead of a criminal one in Kazakhstan. This, as respondents claim, is one of the main barriers that hinder women from reporting abuse. Victims, for example, note how reporting does not seem like a useful measure since the consequences of that are not worthwhile. This is because abusers either get fined or detained for a maximum of 15 days, after which they return to their homes. Victims believe that this will either anger their perpetrators even more or lead to additional financial problems since fine will be paid from the family budget.

*"When I learned that he will have to pay a fine for this, I was contemplating what to do since it would be like I would pay for my own suffering. There is honestly no point in reporting."* (Diana, victim).

Similarly, social workers in the study reveal that most of the women they work with do not see a reason for reporting since there are no distinct and concrete repercussions for abusers. They think that domestic violence should be criminalized, and abusers should be actually imprisoned to learn their lesson. Police officers hold the same view and state that the system has failed domestic violence victims, making it seem like it is not a serious crime. Hence, it can be inferred that the decriminalized nature of domestic violence is one of the important factors that makes women hesitant to report the abuse.

Such decriminalization of domestic violence can also be the reason why police officers *lack professional training* in helping victims. That being said, police officers in the study note that one of the factors that lead to underreporting is their inability to effectively assist victims and encourage them to report. They mention how there are no specific trainings and instructions on how to act, how to show compassion and how to handle the cases. Police officers state that their actions are usually mechanical, and they do not necessarily know how to adequately assess the risks and communicate with victims. For example, a police officer notes:

*“I know for a fact that male police officers do not know how to handle victims’ emotions and how to show compassion, they are very straightforward. I think it could be a reason why women do not contact the police, they feel judged.”* (Moldir, police officer).

In the same vein, the issue of lack of training can be also seen among social workers. Police officers in the study reveal that they usually refer victims to support services, which sometimes cannot properly help them either. Zhansaya explains that some social workers are not actually qualified or very well educated to effectively address victims’ concerns and issues. Social workers in the study confirm this as they note how sometimes they might not feel confident enough to handle the cases and need to practice.

In this regard, *ineffectiveness of social workers* could be another barrier that hinders women from reporting. Victims in the study reveal that sometimes social workers can have similar views like police regarding the innocence of abusers. For instance, they note that some social workers might encourage women to stay in abusive relationships for the sake of children. This is surprising as it appears that the support systems that are intended to help women get out of abusive relationships, rather urge them to forgive their perpetrators and stay. Victims note that this is not always the case, but there are definitely some social workers who foster traditional ideas and views on them. Hence, sometimes women do not strive to contact support services since they do not think that it will be effective and helpful.

Looking at the *perception and personal experience of social workers* themselves, it was interesting to reveal that some of them feel unprepared and not confident enough to deal with

victims of domestic violence. They mention how sometimes they feel overwhelmed by the amount of work that they have to do. This leads them to not want to do additional work such as encouraging women to report. For example, Saule notes how if women she works with do not want to report or divorce, she does not convince them since she is already overworked and emotionally burned out. This is interesting because it would seem that it should be part of their job. However, social workers, having lots of paperwork to do, do not feel emotionally ready to handle additional burden on their shoulders.

All of these barriers that were discussed reveal the important issue of underreporting. Stakeholders also mention *possible interventions and solutions* to address this issue and encourage women to report the incidents of abuse. For example, all three stakeholders mention how criminalization of domestic violence would be an important step at enhancing the reporting of abuse. The existence of significant legal consequences for perpetrators could significantly influence women to report since they would not feel the financial burden or fear that abuse will reoccur.

Another possible intervention that was discussed is the need for additional trainings and proper education/ improved protocols for police officers and social workers. Stakeholders believe that if police and social workers would be aware of how to properly handle domestic violence cases without judging, blaming or questioning victims, reporting would significantly increase. It is also important that support services and legal officials do not impose their traditional views on victims with an intention of judging them.

## **VI. Discussion**

This analysis intended to explore the questions of what kind of psychological, economic, social and cultural barriers hinder victims from reporting abuse; how police influences the reporting and handling of domestic violence cases; and how support services address and deal with the barriers to reporting domestic violence.

Looking at the barriers that were revealed in the study, it is now important to conceptualize them, look at the similarities with previous research and discuss the theoretical framework that can explain the reasons behind the existence of these barriers.

Most of the barriers that were identified confirm some of the previous results of other researchers. That being said, emotional, economic, cultural and social barriers that were uncovered in this study reflect and support findings of existing literature. For example, looking at the emotional barriers, respondents in this research similarly mention how they do not try to

report the abuse due to the fear of the abuser and a fear that abuse might reoccur (Rose et al., 2011; Birdsey & Snowball, 2013). Oftentimes, victims of domestic violence are either directly threatened by their abusers (Fugate et al., 2005) or are afraid of the abuse getting even more serious and harmful (Wolf et al., 2003).

This could be potentially explained by the concept of patriarchy that is discussed by Feminist theorists. Gendered power dynamics that are driven by male dominance and desire to control women can oftentimes lead to violence (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Rauhaus, Sibila, & Johnson, 2020; Ali & Naylor, 2013). This is because, in a patriarchal society, men are considered to be more dominant and powerful, which creates gender disparities and inequalities. Such patriarchal reinforcement of gender roles and expectations might be the exact reason why women try not to report the incidents of abuse. They fear their abuser because they are afraid of the repercussions of challenging the authority, dominance and reputation of their partners. Women feel disempowered as they are aware that men would opt to more violence as a response to being challenged. Men might feel how their male dominance is threatened, which they try to regain through acts of violence.

Women also abstain from reporting due to the desire to protect their families. Respondents mention how they do not want their children to live without their fathers and did not want to break their families apart. This is similar to findings by Rose et al. (2011) as well as Othman et al. (2014). Interestingly, respondents also mention how they strive to protect their abusive partners (Fugate et al., 2005). This is especially striking and unusual as women still seem to care about their partners who physically, mentally and verbally harm them.

This could be explained by the concept of exploitation that was discussed by Young (2009). Women face gendered exploitation as they are usually expected to serve and please men. They are socialized to be more flexible, caring, and empathetic so that men around them can feel supported. It seems that women are merely a tool intended to fulfill men's emotional needs, boost their reputation and improve the environment around them. At the same time, women's efforts go unrecognized and unappreciated. It can be inferred then that women might try to protect their abusive husbands, even when they are being hurt, because they are socialized to care for their male partners as well as be flexible and unproblematic for male benefit.

Another crucial emotional barrier that was revealed is feeling of embarrassment and shame. Women in the study were very embarrassed to talk about the abuse to other people, which is similar to findings by Wallace et al. (2019); Birdsey and Snowball (2013); Othman et al. (2014); Mogstad et al. (2016). They were afraid of judgement and gossip and did not want to ruin the perfect family image that other people have created for them. This corresponds to

and could be explained by culture of pretence (Francis et al., 2017). Culture of pretence is a state where domestic abuse is not acknowledged by those outside the relationship as they only see the outer picture where “everything is normal.” For victims, this culture of pretence creates pressure to conform to these societal expectations. They do not want to be judged, which drives them to present a false exaggerated image of themselves, their circumstances and relationship with their abusive partners. In the study, respondents note how revealing the true nature of their relationships and the abusive behaviour of their partners correlates with feelings of shame, embarrassment and humiliation. Hence, breaking the culture of pretence is extremely difficult for victims since they are trapped in societal pressure and expectations.

Feeling of embarrassment and shame is closely tied to the barrier of culture of silence and *uyat*. All victims in the study mentioned how one of the main reasons why they do not want to report is the culture of *uyat* that does not let them talk about private issues of the family. Other stakeholders also reveal how women are expected to tolerate their husbands and keep the family together. This is because otherwise, it is “*uyat bolady*” or “is going to be shameful.” This culture is similar to the Asian culture of silence that was mentioned by Natarajan (2017), where women are socialized to be subservient to their husbands and endure hardships in silence without involving other people. Culture of *uyat* is also about staying silent and not disappointing other people.

Culture of *uyat* is a very strong and powerful regulatory mechanism. It includes repressive practices such as victim blaming and victimization which can be also displayed through emotional pressure (Shelekpavev, 2020). This culture directly constrains people’s behavior and actions, urging them to conform to the dominant and heteronormative social norms that are based on conservative gender order (Thibault & Caron, 2022). Hence, doing something that does not correlate to these norms is shameful.

Further, culture of *uyat* being quite nationalized, demonstrates how women are supposed to be a symbol of the nation and maintain a certain image of a good keeper of the hearth (Kambekova, 2019). This image is created to control women and their actions, as deviation from this image will result in shaming the woman. Hence, in the context of domestic violence reporting, victims would be shamed if they fail to keep their family together as a good keeper of the hearth is supposed to.

The culture of *uyat* further demonstrates the patriarchal nature of social and cultural norms that exist in Kazakhstan. Distinct gender role division with male dominance and superiority can be visible through respondents’ stories and thoughts. Women seem to be socialized to respect their partners and put them above themselves, which makes them reluctant

to report (Dobash & Dobash, 1979). They also do not feel comfortable talking about the abuse due to the potential victim blaming as society would justify actions of the perpetrators since they are men. This is a direct demonstration of the patriarchal nature of social and cultural norms that are present in Kazakh society (Snajdr 2005; 2007). Similarly, it can be visible in the context of religion, where Muslim women tend to put their husband one step higher than themselves, which does not let them report. They try to respect their partners and endure the hardships just to keep their family as a good keeper of the hearth.

Interestingly, this can be also visible and supported by the perception of police officers who explicitly noted how women are the ones to blame for the occurrence of domestic violence. There is a certain male solidarity where male officers tend to support other men and victim blame women. It is no wonder that women do not trust police and have negative experience with them. They do not feel supported and do not feel heard, because their opinion and situation does not seem to be important when it comes to a conflict with a man. It appears that men, even when they are at fault, will be preferred and supported by the society. It can be inferred then that the patriarchal norms that exist in Kazakh society serve as a barrier to reporting.

Gender disparities existing in the patriarchal society can be also visible through structural inequality where women are financially dependent on men to survive. That being said, some women in the study, specifically those who are housewives or those who have lower salary, do not report the incidents of abuse as they do not have resources to leave and start their separate, independent lives. This is especially the case for women who have children. Radical and Marxist feminist framework explains that social structures and norms generally limit women's access to resources, creating financial dependencies (Rauhaus, Sibila, & Johnson, 2020). In the context of underreporting, this is the exact reason why women might choose to not leave and report their partners. They feel powerlessness (Young, 2009) and dependence that captures them into this abusive relationship.

Resource theory also explains how financial dependencies can be correlated with the existence of abuse. Goode (1971), standard resource theorist, notes how in a relationship women with fewer resources are at higher risk of abuse. This is because women, having less resources than their partners, can experience more abuse because of marital dependency. (Vyas & Watts, 2009). This dependency is also the reason why they stay with their abusive partners and do not strive to report them. There seems to be a vicious circle, where women, being dependent on their partners, do not leave, while their partners keep encouraging them to stay financially dependent by not letting them work.

Looking further at the ineffectiveness of police and support services, there also seems to be an existence of secondary victimization (European Institute for Gender Equality, n.d.). There is a clear image of how victims suffer and feel uncomfortable while interacting with officials and support services. This can be visible through the stories of respondents, as police and law enforcement, sometimes even support services do not show any compassion, empathy to the victim. Instead, they invalidate their feelings and experience, victim blame them and side with the abusers. Oftentimes, they also encourage women to stay with their perpetrators to keep their family together. Hence, this is a very important barrier that creates hardships for women who strive to report the abuse.

Another important barrier related to law enforcement is the decriminalized nature of domestic violence. The phenomenon, where domestic violence is only an administrative offense brought a lot of indignation from the public and served as one of the main reasons why women did not strive to report. With this law, abusers were only fined, given a warning or detained for a maximum 15 days. The law has not been changed even when people signed different petitions over the years.

However, this year, there was a public resonance due to the murder case that involved the ex-minister of economy of Kazakhstan. Kuandyk Bishimbayev brutally beat his wife to death in a public restaurant, which he owns. The severity of the issue lead to the trial being public, where anyone could observe it through online services. The trial is still ongoing right now. This case, being extremely important, has impacted the law about domestic violence in the country. During the process of writing this thesis, On April 12, 2024 a new law criminalizing domestic violence was passed by the senate and on April 15, 2024 it was signed by the president. This new law, which is called “Law of Saltanat” (Saltanat Nukenova, woman who was killed by Bishimbayev), brought new changes where from now on abusers can be fined a higher amount, can be penalized with 200 hours of correctional labour or detained for minimum of 50 days. Furthermore, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev instructed the law enforcement system to increase the number of female police officers by 750 units. It is expected that more women in police will be responsible for domestic violence cases, specifically where female victims were harmed. Female investigators will be the primary initial interrogators in these cases so that victims will feel as comfortable as possible. This gives a lot of hope that the decriminalized nature of domestic violence will no longer affect women while they are making a decision to report.

## **VII. Conclusion**

To encapsulate, this project examined barriers that hinder women from reporting abuse. By conducting semi-structured interviews with three different stakeholders: victims of domestic violence, police officers and social workers, I examined real life incidents of domestic violence and compared views, thoughts and experiences of respondents. It turned out that there are different emotional, cultural and social, economic barriers that hinder women from reporting their abusive partners. These include fear of the abuser and the possibility that abuse will reoccur, desire to protect their family, including their children who they want to grow up in a full house as well as their abusive partners who they care for. Also, there is a feeling of embarrassment and shame that can affect women and make them abstain from reporting.

Some of the cultural and social barriers include culture of silence and *uyat*, where women are shamed for disclosing private issues to others and for not being able to keep their families together. Patriarchal nature of social and cultural norms that exist in Kazakhstan along with religious views are other barriers that hinder women from reporting. Economic barriers are related to the victims' financial dependencies and lack of resources that do not let them confidently leave their partners and start a new life.

It was also revealed how police officers and social workers might be ineffective at tackling and addressing the issue. There is a huge lack of trust in police and the existence of negative experiences that discourage women from reporting. Lack of professional training, lack of empathy and compassion from these groups create a huge obstacle for victims. Social workers also do not strive to resolve the issue of domestic violence underreporting due to being overwhelmed and not prepared to deal with additional stress and work. Further, decriminalized nature of domestic violence as a barrier, perception of police and social workers as well as some of the potential solutions and interventions were discussed in the study.

Hopefully, this study will help to raise awareness and possibly aid to create interventions and policies to tackle the issue.

### ***VII.1 Limitations***

It is important to note that the study has several limitations. One being that there is a very limited number of respondents who were interviewed (N=12). Hence, the results of the study cannot be generalized for the whole population. Furthermore, there might be other important and differing barriers that were not covered in this study, which might be significant for creating interventions.

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