


Article

# Intimate Partner Violence in Vulnerable Contexts: A Case Study

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**Abstract:** A case study of domestic abuse is presented from the perspective of the socio-structural basis of gender violence. The research analyzes gender violence based on the accounts of a group of 30 women who have suffered abuse and have filed reports at the Judicial Unit for victims of domestic violence in the city of Cuenca (Ecuador). Survivors agreed to express their voices and experiences voluntarily and in a natural context. The results demonstrate, on one hand, the enormous weight of social pressure and stereotypes, with the resulting fear, guilt, and sense of helplessness. On the other hand, the guarantees of safety and assistance from the institutions that should protect them have not always been within reach, nor have they been sufficient.

**Keywords:** intimate partner violence; vulnerable contexts; the construction of difference; microaggressions; qualitative research; voices and narratives

## 1. Introduction

The social, political, and economic structures that configure national and international spheres are shaped by power struggles. In countries with higher standards of democracy, these power struggles are confronted with a greater number of mechanisms for restraint and balance. Yet, in countries with lower rates of internal democracy, countries in conflict and countries operating under the burden of corruption, where education is minimal and economic inequality at a peak, power struggles become unbalanced in favor of the most powerful. There is a great inequity in social, political, and economic structures, which forms the foundations for poverty and gender inequality, among others. Within these structures, housing inequality, gender-based violence, and abuse thrive and prosper [1]. From this perspective, Billaud and Direnberger (2021) [2] debate and challenge the view of gender violence as a private, primarily psychological issue, given that the deep interrelations between gender violence and social inequality clearly underscore the injustice and illegality that lie at the heart of gender violence. These perspectives, emerging from gender studies, which consider gender violence as a politically based violence that has a bearing on the violation of human rights, are now permeating international institutions in terms of actions towards equality and equity. In particular, the ones that raise their voice the most are the closest to the most disadvantaged populations, such as the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (CEPAL) [3], the organizations supporting health linked to the World Health Organization (WHO) [4], and the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) [5], as well as various scientific societies such as The Lancet [6]. Within these organizations, inter-institutional projects and coalitions are brought together, good examples of which are The Generation Equality Forum and the Action Coalition [7], which count on cooperation between institutions such as the UN, UN Women, UN Human Rights, and UNICEF, among others. Among the differentiated programs, the no less ambitious project RESPECT Women [8], led by the institutions mentioned above, should be highlighted. Using the framework of interrelated responsibilities, we focus on conceptualizing the issue of intimate partner violence (IPV).



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Today, the issue of gender violence, including femicides [9], dating violence [10,11], intimate partner violence [12], domestic violence, and similar denominations, according to different countries and communities, remains latent within society, far from diminishing. Statistics on gender violence have been disseminated to varying degrees by governments and international organizations [13], showing an increase during the COVID-19 pandemic [14,15].

Considering that gender research and studies are a way of inscribing a multiple, intercultural, diverse, and social perspective in science, we aim to present a research study on abused women, carried out in Ecuador. Although many pro-feminist activists and sociologists strongly believe that any attempt to explain domestic violence potentially condones it [16], the intention of our study is not to justify it, but to make it visible and to learn about its causes, contexts, and consequences.

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a paradoxical combination of affection and aggression [17]. Even though it takes place in the intimacy of a home, gender violence is a social phenomenon that represents both a human rights and a public health problem, as pointed out by UN Human Rights [18] and WHO [19]. A society with gender differentials will always be an unjust society. In these vulnerable societies, strong social stereotypes emerge about the roles and identities of men and women and become normalized as absolute truths; truths that go unchallenged and that favor men [20]. For this reason, it is important to analyze how a social context of stereotypes and a culture of patriarchal privilege favors the presence of domestic abuse.

### *1.1. What Is Socially Accepted: The Construction of Difference*

There are key concepts to consider within the conceptual framework of the cycle of gender violence that stems from the complex web of social stereotypes. One of these is the sexual double standard that refers to the acceptance of different criteria for the evaluation of the same sexual behavior in men and women [21]. This double standard of judgement is often based on patriarchal and religious views, and on forms of domination and discrimination that are culturally and socially determined. It affects all social spaces in which women move, diminishing their opportunities.

Another concept that has its origins in social stereotypes, which underlies the relationship between abuse and privilege, is the concept of entitlement, understood as rights, power, and privilege acquired due to the fact of being male, which may explain the sense of power and its connection to various types of abuse, including economic, emotional, physical, and sexual. In their study, Warrener and Tasso (2017) [22] demonstrate how a sense of entitlement is positively correlated with all types of abuse and is the best predictor of coercive behavior and microaggressions. This sense of entitlement usually generates a sense of shame in women. This powerful sense of privilege on the part of the aggressor has repercussions on dependency, insecurity, and subjugation in victims.

### *1.2. What Society Allows: Social Support on the Profile of the Aggressor*

There are characteristics of the profile of the aggressor that are socially accepted. For example, multiple authors coincide that so-called coercive control entitles the male to possession, exclusivity, and control in many social spaces, where traditional gender norms often still occupy an important place in the development of dating violence among adolescents, especially in vulnerable countries [23]. The consequences of coercive control consist of physical and psychological sequelae that last a lifetime, making them more vulnerable to staying in abusive relationships. This kind of control, identified as attempts to manage and restrict a partner's actions and thoughts, may be seen, from a 'machista' or male chauvinistic social perspective, as a characteristic of protection of the lover towards a weaker woman, when the reality is the compulsive behavior of the aggressor [24]. Control always reduces decision-making power, imposes limitations on independence, and diminishes the essence of the person being controlled. In a study with perpetrators undergoing treatment, Barbaro and Raghavan [25] found that coercive control was present in 61.73% of participants. Ac-

According to the authors, all the so-called controlling behaviors of aggressors affect all aspects of their partner's life, including daily actions, the use of economic resources, relationships with family and friends, educational and employment opportunities, and sexuality, thus impeding any free decision-making by the partner. Paradoxically, this form of control or psychological abuse occurs in highly dependent aggressors. Controlling behaviors and coercive control at the beginning of a relationship can be considered a warning sign for other forms of harm and a precursor for abuse [26]. So, why does anybody detect it at the beginning of a relationship? Evidently, control over a partner is socially justified and sexist attitudes mark the social acceptability of intimate partner violence [27]. Nayak and Suchland [28] underline how dominant political institutions, ideas, and discourses determine what 'counts' as gender violence, and how responses to gender violence must engage metanarratives about gender, race, class, and nation.

Another socially allowed concept is anxious attachment. People who have a dependent and anxious attachment, who are distrustful and jealous of their partners, always suspecting infidelity, are more likely to use control and violence [29]. The high levels of anxiety characteristic of paranoid or compulsive personality disorders can translate into a strong attachment, in such a way that the perpetrator, frustrated by trivial or imaginary events, reacts with anger or hostility, and chooses poor resolution strategies, providing a disproportionate and dysfunctional response. There is a documented correlation between attachment anxiety and the perpetration of intimate partner violence. This fact would lead us to investigate whether people with paranoid personality disorders may be more prone to violence in their relationships.

Diverse interpersonal factors (aggressiveness due to the partner's refusal to maintain proximity), intrapersonal (level of control), and biological (testosterone) variables can be considered in relation to the aggressor. On an intrapersonal level, Chester and DeWall [17] believe that perpetrators usually exhibit various types of psychopathologies. Personality disorders are usually associated with abuse but can be difficult to detect. Ropper et al. (2019) [30] highlight the sequelae that survivors of intimate partner violence often suffer from, such as the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), hypertension, post-traumatic stress disorder, sexually transmitted diseases, and urinary tract infections. Reidy et al. (2016) [31] add that, in adolescents, psychological scars, fear, and anxiety are more permanent. Further, there are personality traits that make the victim susceptible to staying in an abusive relationship; women who have experienced abuse scored higher on post-traumatic stress disorder diagnostic scale; and women victims often exhibit characteristics such as low self-esteem, family and social isolation, dependence (economic and emotional), insecurity, inferiority, submissiveness, and passivity. The study by Esteves Pereira et al. [32] may be useful to investigate specific personality traits, cognitive schemas, and/or possible diagnoses that are more common among these victims and make them more vulnerable to remaining in abusive relationships. Undoubtedly, personality disorders in one or two members of a relationship alone do not determine gender violence, but when they intersect with negative social and economic variables, the likelihood is reinforced.

Bundock et al. (2020) [33] point out a sense of stigma, shame, and fear as barriers that prevent adolescents from seeking help. Other barriers identified included not wanting to leave the relationship, fear of reprisals by the partner, believing that their partner loves them, and fear of further violence. A study by Duval et al. (2020) [10] found, among the complex web of risks of gender-based violence in adolescents, factors such as the consumption of drugs, toxic sexual behaviors, personality disorders and attitudes of machismo, as well as experiences of family violence or child abuse and affiliation with certain social groups or gangs. In their research, Badillo-Viloria et al. 2019 [34] found that many university students had engaged in risky sexual behavior one or more times: vaginal sex without a condom (73%), fellatio without a condom (60.3%), number of partners with whom they engage in sexual behavior (66.2%), and unexpected sexual experiences (54.4%). Although the research of McNaughto et al. (2017) [35] recognizes conflicts of acculturation, family disruption, and

beliefs and norms associated with belonging to a certain class, they underline that patterns of involvement in gender violence demonstrate great heterogeneity and complexity.

### *1.3. What Is Socially Accepted: Social Construction of the Profile of the Victim*

Gender violence occurs within social contexts that shape how survivors judge themselves and are evaluated by others. Given that these are crimes of an intimate and sexual nature which violate social norms of what is appropriate and acceptable, survivors can experience a lack of understanding and social rejection and develop a social stigma of guilt. Cultural and political factors (e.g., stereotypes, lack of legislation, and support units) create a social backdrop in which victims feel they deserve violence. To understand and correct this type of violence, it is extremely important to address the process of socialization in which the internalization of inequality takes place (dichotomous beliefs and values around capacities and abilities according to sex). With relation to risk factors and protection, today, being a woman continues to be a risk factor. While it is true that low self-esteem, neurotic attachment, and dependency are lethal risk factors for women, they are also influenced by multiple sources of stereotypes such as the subtle and powerful persuasion of the media, including advertisements, which leads them towards a stereotypical point of view on love and relationships.

According to the Mexican activist and academic Marcela Lagarde [36], what characterizes abuse and femicide in vulnerable countries is the impunity of the aggressor and the difficulty in ensuring the safety of the victim. If there were no social tolerance of violence against women, there would be less tolerance of such crimes by the government, and vice versa. It is extremely difficult for a victim to be courageous enough to overcome fear when social structures are not sensitive to the issue. Seeking help and social support depends on the proximity of victim assistance units, whose creation depends on government policies. Another difficulty, in these vulnerable nations, is that the woman may agree to abandon her working life, at the beginning of the relationship, induced by her partner or social stereotypes; after the abuse she will find it more difficult to achieve her independence and leave the circle of violence. In this sense, True (2012) [37] outlines that when women have access to productive resources and enjoy social and economic rights, they are less vulnerable to violence across all societies.

We must question the ways in which social culture continues to prevent women from leaving the cycle of violence. Indeed, very few interactions in their daily life, with the media, religions, schools, and with their families reinforce women's sense of dignity, personal freedom, economic independence, or the prevention of toxic relationships. Socially, women receive a larger reward if they forgive, not if they complain, and if they believe the promises of the abuser, since breaking a cycle of violence does not usually bring about any social rewards.

## **2. Materials and Methods**

When following the parameters of conceptual development outlined above, the following research questions were drawn up:

1. How did it begin, and what was the type, severity, and frequency of the violence suffered by the group of women?
2. What are the causes and motives that this collective attributes to gender violence, and was there a sense of guilt or a decision to forgive?
3. What were the difficulties faced from this group of women when they chose to report the violence they suffered?
4. What experiences did these women have in terms of the reporting process and receiving support?
5. What prospects does this group foresee to overcome the violence they have experienced?

### *Participants, Context, and Process*

The study analyzes gender violence based on the voices of a group of 30 women who have suffered abuse in a province of Ecuador. Voluntary participation was requested from women who came to file a report at the Judicial Unit for victims of domestic violence in the city of Cuenca (Ecuador). Women over 18 years of age freely and voluntarily accepted to participate in the study with a qualitative approach, which enabled us to make use of a guided interview with open-ended questions, in which the women interviewed could provide free and open answers and therefore recover their voices, thoughts, and opinions. The interview open questions are correlated with the research questions. The key methodological step is to interpret the meanings emerging from the personal narratives and to develop an effective and objective tool for categorizing and coding. In this process, systematically reading and reflecting on the complete set of accounts has led to the ability to distinguish meanings that allow for a coherent structure of categories, codes, and subcodes. Interpretation involves matching the meanings of the voices with the research questions to shape the categories, while the conceptual and contextual frameworks devised provide guidance in this search for meanings. Both help us to develop the codes and establish the subcodes to discriminate between the different responses of the participants. The context of the participants has been explored in detail since the interpretation needs to be situated within the contextual fabric.

In sum, all participants offered their voices on all interview questions. The work team read and reread the interviews, clarified, and discussed them until they agreed on the interpretations of the voices. It is a triangulation work and a very recursive one. Due to the heuristic nature of the methodology, process revisions are frequent until a perfect consistency between codes and meanings is found. The categories were defined by the research questions, codes were defined to align voices and conceptual perspective, and the subcodes establish the discriminations between voices in the same code. The narrative units that best exemplified the code were chosen and were added to the results presentation.

The detail presentation of all partial results is not feasible here due to space limitations, so the overall results are presented.

### **3. Results**

With respect to sociodemographic data, the results essentially show the following: the age range of most participants is between 30 and 50 years old. Approximately 50% of survivors had more than three children, 66% were already divorced or separated, and 23.33% were single. Furthermore, 33.33% had remunerated jobs, and the rest had occasional work or unremunerated jobs. All were residing in the urban area.

Based on an analysis of participants' narratives and using the category and codes tool designed, an overview of the results is presented with some examples of the accounts provided under each category. Not all codes and subcodes are described and exemplified by their width of space. In any case, the most significant are reflected, and at the end of each category a qualitative table has been introduced, showing the prevalent frequency levels (high, medium/moderate, and low) with which the subcodes appear in the narratives.

#### *3.1. Category 1. Lived Experience*

Regarding the violence experienced, the reports principally describe it as physical and psychological violence. In terms of psychological abuse, insults, and humiliation are most frequently mentioned. Social isolation and the extension of abuse to children are mentioned less frequently. In terms of physical abuse, survivors' accounts list, from a higher to lower degree: isolated blows, death threats, and beatings. In terms of onset and frequency, most respondents reported it as early, progressive, and frequent. The following are examples to illustrate the codes relating to initiation, frequency, and types of violence.

### 3.1.1. Code 1.1 Initiation of Violence

#### Subcode 1.1.1 from the Beginning

“Well, actually, I could say that violence, or I knew how to define violence, ever since I got together with my husband, which was, unfortunately, from the time we were dating, but I let it happen thinking that maybe with marriage, with children, he would change, because if he needed some kind of help, I could give it to him, but unfortunately it didn’t turn out like that . . . ” (Participant 01)

“He’s been like this his whole life, he’s always treated [me] badly, because the in the time I was married, two months after I got married, he hit me almost all the time. He hit me for any little thing . . . ” (Participant 27)

### 3.1.2. Code 1.2 Type of Abuse

#### Psychological Violence and Economic Control 1.2.1

##### Subcode 1.2.1.1 Insults and humiliations

“ . . . The rest of the abuse was always verbal insults, including undermining me in front of my children, insulting me in front of them. I considered it to be part and parcel of being married, as my mother sometimes used to say.” (Participant 19)

“ . . . Because he offended me all the time; he told me that I was ugly, that no one would want me with my children.” (Participant 28)

##### Subcode 1.2.1.7 Economic Control

“.. Then, when it was final, he took the last bit of money I had and left me out on the street . . . ” (Participant 20)

### 3.1.3. Code 1.3 Type of Abuse

#### Physic and Sexual Abuse 1.3.1

##### Subcode 1.3.1.1 Death threats/terrorize

“ . . . He told me ‘if you’re not going to be with me you’re not going to be with anyone; if I see you with someone I swear I’ll kill you.’ . . . He used to tell me that . . . he threatened me a lot.” (Participant 02)

The follow Table 1 shows all the codes and subcodes of the category. The narrative unit can be registered in more than one subcode in certain cases.

**Table 1.** Category 1.

Category	Codes	Subcodes	Prevalent Frequency
Category 1. Lived experience	Code 1.1 Initiation of violence and frequency	1.1.1 From the beginning	High
		1.1.2 Progressive	Moderate
		1.1.3 Frequent	High
Code 1.2 Type of abuse 1.2.1 Psychological violence and economic control		1.2.1.1 Insults, and humiliation	Very High
		1.2.1.2 Continued lies	Low
		1.2.1.3 Declared infidelity	Low
		1.2.1.4 Abandonment threats	Low
		1.2.1.5 Child abuse	High
		1.2.1.6. Social isolation	High
		1.2.1.7. Economic control	Moderate
Code 1.3 Type of abuse 1.3.1 Physic and sexual abuse		1.3.1.1 Death threats/terrorize	High
		1.3.1.2 Isolated blows	Very High
		1.3.1.3 Beatings	High
		1.3.1.4 Non-consensual relationships	Low

### 3.2. Category 2. Motives and Causes

In relation to the causes and excuses given by the aggressor when abusing victims, they were most frequently centered around accusing them of being whores, and of producing sentiments of repulsion and rejection. On the contrary, survivors perceived that the aggressor abused them when he arrived home drunk (37%), had been with other women (14.57%), due to compulsive jealousy (14.57%), and due to being irascible or mentally ill. These last two assumptions would add up to 23%, and when combined with compulsive jealousy and alcoholism, we have a picture that suggests a high presence of personality disorders. This is in no way an excuse for the aggression, nor a reason for the partner to tolerate it. You can see the details in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Category 2.

Category	Codes	Subcodes	Prevalent Frequency
Category 2. Motives and causes	Code 2.1 Motives given by the aggressor	2.1.1 She is useless	Medium
		2.1.2 She is a bad woman	High
		2.1.3 She disgusts him	High
		2.1.4 Family machismo	Low
		2.1.5 He can't control himself	Low
	Code 2.2 Motives and causes as perceived by the victim	2.2.1 Without work/in precarious	Low
		2.2.2 Arrive home upset/tired	Low
		2.2.3 Arrive drunk	Very High
		2.2.4 Womanizer/infidelity	High
		2.2.5 Hot-tempered character	High
		2.2.6 He lived family machismo	Low
		2.2.7 Rejection (I disgusted him)	Low
		2.2.8 Compulsive jealousy	High
		2.2.9 Envy/insecurity	Low
		2.2.10 Mental illness	Medium

#### 3.2.1. Code 2.1 Motives for the Aggressor's Abuse of the Victim

##### Subcode 2.1.1 She Is Useless

"The 'Why can't you do something useful, you're good for nothing, you're trash', and the insults ... " (Participant 01)

##### Subcode 2.1.5 He Cannot Control Himself

"... Yes, because he was really drunk and supposedly didn't remember that in his drunken state, he thought I was someone who wanted to hurt him, and he didn't realize it was me ... " (Participant 30)

##### Subcode 2.1.4 Family Machismo

"Because it's what they taught him as a kid: the man commands and the woman obey ... " (Participant 28)

#### 3.2.2. Code 2.2 Motives and Causes as Perceived by the Victim

##### Subcode 2.2.6 Family Machismo

"I would tell my mother-in-law to help me talk to him, and she would say: 'that's the way it has to be, women have to put up with it so that they learn.' So, I stayed ... it's their culture ... " (Participant 02)

##### Subcode 2.2.5 Hot-Tempered Character

"... He comes home from work, and I serve him food, he didn't say a word to me. I already said he's got a bad temper, he came home from work in a bad mood, when he picks up the plate and it flies ... " (Participant 02)

### 3.3. Category 3. Guilt and Forgiveness

According to the accounts, survivors feel guilty in approximately 36% of cases; the rest say that they do not feel themselves to be to blame. Conversely, only 6.72% state that they did not forgive the aggressor, and 5.88% of accounts include that the aggressor never asked them for forgiveness. The rest justify forgiving the aggressor in taking him at his word that he would change (26%). If we add this figure to the 13.45% of those who confess to doing so out of love, the 7.56% out of feeling guilty, and those who recognize emotional blackmail (15.13%), we have a complete manipulation of 62% of the victims. Another group claimed to do so out of fear, out of resignation, for their children, or out of social shame, to lesser frequencies, as you could see in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Category 3.

Category	Codes	Subcodes	Prevalent Frequency
Category 3. Guilt and forgiveness	Code 3.1 The victim feels guilty	3.1.1 Yes.	Moderate
		3.1.2 No	High
		3.1.3 Sometimes	Low
Code 3.2 The victim forgives		3.2.1 She forgave for believing that he would change	Very High
		3.2.2 She forgave him for love	High
		3.2.3 For the children	Low
		3.2.4 As something normal	High
		3.2.5 Due to family/social shame	Medium
		3.2.6 She forgave him for feeling guilty	Low
		3.2.7 She forgave him out of fear	Low
		3.2.8 Forgave him for emotional blackmail	High
		3.2.9 Not forgiving	Low
		3.2.10 He never apologized to me	Low

#### 3.3.1. Code 3.1 Guilt?

##### Subcode 3.1.1 Yes, She Feels Guilt

“... Why didn't I keep quiet the times he had cheated on me? I should have kept quiet. That's what I thought ... ” (Participant 15)

##### Subcode 3.1.1 Yes

“... Because firstly I always thought that my obligation as a wife was to put up with him, apologize for him and support him in everything. So, I always felt like I wasn't a good enough wife, not a good enough colleague ... ” (Participant 12)

#### 3.3.2. Code 3.2 Forgiveness?

##### Subcode 3.2.1 She Forgave for Believing That He Would Change

“And I kept thinking that I can change him: I can change that, I can make him a better person ... ” (Participant 04)

##### Subcode 3.2.7 She Forgave Him out of Fear

“... The truth is, I forgave him out of fear. Because sometimes if I did do something, sometimes I did want to say no, stop. But he was more violent. So, my silly reasoning was I have to forgive him so he won't hit me.”

##### Subcode 3.2.8 She Forgave Him for Emotional Blackmail

“At the beginning he said I was a bitch and those kinds of insults, he told me that I didn't love him, that I was cold, and things like that. And at first, I thought maybe I am like that: I blamed myself for everything that happened, and I thought that what he was doing to me was normal ... ” (Participant 05)



### Subcode 3.2.10 He Never Apologized to Me

“I never, never really felt a real sense of remorse, a sincere apology from him. . . . And of course, I felt like I had to try harder so that he wouldn’t get annoyed, and those episodes wouldn’t happen anymore.” (Participant 26)

### 3.4. Category 4. Barriers to Reporting

In contrast to what is said about forgiveness, the obstacles to reporting the aggressor to the police are most frequently cited as shame in the eyes of the family and the social environment (48%). The fear of being left with nothing financially also appears as an obstacle, as do love and hope (26%). Despite these barriers, survivors took the final decision to file a report out of fear that their children might be affected, because of the accumulation of abuse, or for fear that, in this progressive cycle of violence, the aggressor would end up killing them. With the decision taken, they first asked for help from family and neighbors (25.26%), 55% contacted the institutional services at their disposal (police, court of justice, health services), and a minority say they turned to NGOs and to God (Ecuador is a Catholic country). The details are in Table 4.

**Table 4.** Category 4.

Category	Codes	Subcodes	Prevalent Frequency
Category 4. Barriers to reporting	Código 4.1 Barriers to legal complaint	4.1.1 Due to economic difficulties	Medium
		4.1.2 For their children	Medium
		4.1.3 Due to the reaction of their parents and relatives/ Social shame	Very High
		4.1.4 For believing in his will to change/ For love	Very High
		4.1.5 She thought it was normal	High
		4.1.6 She does not believe in justice	Low
Code 4.2 Reasons of final decision on reporting	Code 4.2 Reasons of final decision on reporting	4.2.1. Her children were afraid	High
		4.2.2. Because she was afraid that he would kill her	Moderate
		4.2.3. Due to accumulation of abuse	Very high
Code 4.3 Reporting and support	Code 4.3 Reporting and support	4.3.1 Family/neighbors	Very High
		4.3.2 Police	Moderate
		4.3.3 Social and health services	High
		4.3.4 NGOs	Low
		4.3.5 God	Low
		4.3.6 Court of justice	High
		4.3.7 Did not ask for help	Low
Code 4.4 Fear and loneliness	Code 4.4 Fear and loneliness	4.4.1 Released	Higher
		4.4.2 Distraught	Low
		4.4.3 Safer	High
		4.4.4 Less secure	Low
Code 4.5 Assistance received	Code 4.5 Assistance received	4.5.1 Psychological	High
		4.5.2 Legal	Moderate
		4.5.3 Spiritual	Low
		4.5.4 Economic/work	Low
Code 4.6 Circle of violence	Code 4.6 Circle of violence	4.6.1 She completely abandoned the circle	High
		4.6.2 She partially abandoned it	Low
		4.6.3 She has not left	Low

### 3.4.1. Code 4.1 Barriers to Legal Complaint

#### Subcode 4.1.2 for Their Children

“ . . . Very, very scared . . . I felt scared, scared because I had tried three times to leave, to leave him and he always found out. Then once he tried to kill my son because he told me if you leave me, I’ll kill him, I don’t care. So that, more than anything else, held me back. All the knives belonged to him.” (Participant 13)

#### Subcode 4.1.3 Due to the Reaction of Their Parents and Relatives

“... If I reported him, I knew that his whole family would come after me... To say yes, you are this, you are that you are the other, you are trash... To say whatever, they want to me. I was prepared for all of it... ” (Participant 23)

“Being judged by society, by the family. My family, because my grandmother is like... as I say, she’s one of the old generations: I’ll kill you if you and your husband split up, you must put up with it. Shame, fear... ” (Participant 19)

#### Subcode 4.1.1 Due to Economic Difficulties

“... I can’t do it alone, as they say. I have three children and I can’t get by and support them by myself;... bad, bad, because I also said no, I don’t have a job and with the financial situation as it is I would suffer for them and for myself as well... ” (Participant 24)

### 3.4.2. Code 4.2 Reasons of Final Decision on Reporting

#### Subcode 4.2.2 She Was Afraid That He Would Kill Her

“... I went back and that’s when it hit me like never before. And that was the last straw, I reacted, I said no, and I went to the village health center.” (Participant 15)

#### Subcode 4.3.4 NGOs

“... Then he abused my daughter; on the basis of what I found out from my daughter, that’s why I came here, and the foundation, Casa M.A., accompanied me to the Cantonal [Protection] Board.” (Participant 21)

### 3.4.3. Code 4.4 Fear and Loneliness

#### Subcode 4.4.2 Distraught/Panic

“... I felt guilty again. I mean, he had that capacity, I mean, I felt guilty. At that time my father had died, so apart from feeling lonely, I felt bad, I had nowhere to go, I had no money, I had nothing... ” (Participant 30)

“I’ve never been one to react, or to... to shout at him, or to even insult him, I’d rather keep my head down... ” (Participant 12)

“... But I think I really realized that the problem was not him, but it was me, because I depended on him, like my world came to revolve around him, I stopped doing all the things I did before because... I relied a lot on what he thought and what he said... ” (Participant 11)

#### Subcode 4.5.1 Psychological Assistance

“There, I was told a lot of things, that you can’t be a humiliated woman. You must be valued. I felt protected by them; yes, yes, I felt much, much safer, because they can help... ” (Participant 27)

### 3.5. Category 5. After ...

In this category, narratives emerge concerning survivors’ personal and social responsiveness and their expectations for the future. Emotionally, 81% of the accounts express that the woman feels liberated, calm, and safe after filing the report, and 17% anxious and insecure. Furthermore, 48.57% of the voices profess they feel they have escaped the cycle of violence, yet 20% feel that despite reporting, they remain amid the nightmare. In relation to the support received, it can be observed that psychological and legal help is provided in the best-case scenario. Additionally, 36% of accounts consider that the abuse has left a negative impact on them, and the rest confirm that they have overcome it.

In terms of embarking upon a new life path, 19% perceive themselves as lonely, but most say they feel supported. While 21.31% stated that they are financially independent, 11.24% of participants do not have any assets of their own. Faced with his new path, 35.82%

see the abuse suffered as a having a negative impact; the rest have overcome it and consider that one positive aspect is that they have learnt something and will not go through the same thing again. Furthermore, 40% see their future as uncertain: they remain fearful and lack the strength to overcome it. The remaining 60% feel optimistic, liberated from violence, can take care of their children, have a job, and some are even in new relationships. As can be analyzed, and can be appreciated in Table 5, abuse always leaves behind a burden that can only be overcome with help and resilience.

**Table 5.** Category 5.

Category	Codes	Subcodes	Prevalent Frequency
Category 5. After ... New life? Future?	Code 5.1 Personal and Social responsiveness	5.1.1 Yes, alone	Moderate
		5.1.2 I feel supported	High
		5.1.3 Economic independence	Medium
		5.1.4 No economic independence	Low
Code 5.2 Emotional remnants	Code 5.2 Emotional remnants	5.2.1 It has left a negative mark on me	Moderate
		5.2.2 I have overcome it	Moderate
		5.2.3 I see the positive so as not to go through the same thing	Medium
Code 5.3 Future Perspectives	Code 5.3 Future Perspectives	5.3.1 Feels outside of violence	Moderate
		5.3.2 Optimistic	Moderate
		5.3.3 She has started new relations	Low
		5.3.4 She has got a job	Low
		5.3.5 She can take care of her children	Moderate
		5.3.6 She continues to be afraid	Moderate
		5.3.7 She does not think she can get over it	Very Low
		5.3.8 Uncertain	Low

### 3.5.1. Code 5.2 Emotional Remnants

#### Subcode 5.2.2 I Had Overcome It

“ ... The truth is that it has helped me because I feel calmer ... When the estrangement started because of filing the report for physical violence, I was quite afraid. I couldn't sleep. I was anxious and agitated. Sometimes I even felt like I was suffocating. I was quite scared. But now that a few months have passed, I feel quite calm because I feel that I made a very good decision; he believed that I would never leave his side, that I would put up with everything ... ” (Participant 12)

### 3.5.2. Code 5.3 Future Perspectives

#### Subcode 5.3.6 She Continues to Be Afraid

“ ... What would it be like, I'm afraid, I mean I'm still afraid of seeing him, I haven't seen him but I'm afraid, but thank God, I haven't seen him and I have the 'Help' button so that maybe the police will come; but if I do see him when I'm alone I'm afraid that maybe he'll come and push me or something like that ... ” (Participant 06)

#### Subcode 5.3.4 She Has Got a Job

“ ... I've worked on myself a lot; my self-confidence, my self-esteem; believing that if you are able to do a lot of things and believe in what you do, then that's where autonomy starts. So ... From then on, I started a small business ... I began, for example, to make vegetarian meals and deliver them to people's homes ... ” (Participant 17)

#### Subcode 5.3.7 She Does Not Think She Can Get over It

“ . . . But I don’t think I’m cured yet, because every time I talk about it my head spins and I get a strange feeling; . . . because I’m not cured yet, it could be that these days, for example the past few months, I’m no longer living this violence that you are this and that and here you do this, no, but those words are still stuck in my mind, and there’s a part of me that still believes that, and thinks that all people are going to do me the same harm, so I kind of put ugly and negative things around me . . . ” (Participant 03)

After the filing the report, most of the accounts express a sense of liberation of having left the cycle of violence, the optimism of having started upon a new trajectory and having been able to remove themselves from the nightmare. However, not all of them find the necessary resilience, and one group of victims expresses the weight of their experience, the continuity of fear, and how their strength has abandoned them. It is not always possible to forget or overcome traumatic experiences without help. There are two factors that need to be addressed: most survivors do not have a decent job: many work in market stalls, family jobs, or carry out occasional work. Ecuador is developing a women’s protection system, given the high rates of gender-based violence, but social protection actors are still inadequately trained, at best. Likewise, there are still attitudes of machismo present among some of these actors (judges and police). To have been able to handle filing a report indicates a great strength in the participants.

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1. The Sociopolitical Structure

Human rights guarantee the right to physical, economic, and decision-making autonomy for all women [38]. The political powers are responsible for ensuring these rights. Governmental institutions, whether they are health, civil protection, legal, or social assistance institutions, must succeed in not only liberating women from their aggressors, but ensuring that the survivor is able to assert her autonomy and exercise her rights [39]. Countries and environments where government institutions fail to ensure women’s safety, due to lack of resources or a lack of will and awareness, make it virtually impossible for affected women to break free from violence. The essential role that organizations play in responding to violence against women becomes even more necessary [40,41]. Lazarus-Black and Merry (2003) [42] observe that, given that it is the slogans and discourse of the institutions in power that determine what ‘counts’ as gender violence [28], it is necessary to establish a system of human rights and laws backed by international agreements in a local-global interface, as Jacqui True recommended (2012) [37], which seeks to identify the bonds between diverse aggressions against women and macrostructural processes in strategic local and global sites to find causes and remedies.

### 4.2. The Sociocultural Structure

In certain environments, patriarchal social pressure and a culture of privilege may require adolescent girls and adult women to be highly dependent within family and social contexts. Therefore, families with religious, traditional, and hierarchical values can have a negative influence and be of little help when the victim wishes to leave the cycle of domestic abuse. Similarly, impoverished or vulnerable families, and those in environments of conflict or corruption are also unable to provide much help. Gender violence is one more aspect of the inequity of the environment [43]. According to Meltem Ince-Yenilmez (2022) [12], in a more democratic and ethical social structure, these same factors—education, culture, political rights, citizenship, and laws—are what would counteract gender inequality. It is also true that the positive warmth of parents and peers, when defending the survivor in the face of a culture of patriarchal privilege, can play a protective role [44], as can well-trained counsellors [45].

Traditional norms and gender stereotypes have always deterred women’s attempts to assert their autonomy. Women’s sense of autonomy and determination has never been

promoted in the face of the languid vision of women in romantic and idealized love fostered by social control. Nowadays, determination in women has been identified as a protector against the perpetration of violence. Along with the determination towards autonomy, social interaction—if it is not toxic—aids women in their liberation. In short, a new cultural and educational structure is needed to counteract stereotypes and social pressure aiming to thwart women's autonomy. The family environment often advised that women wait on the aggressor's change of behavior. This "optimistic bias" has been documented, even among groups identified as being "high risk", including abused women, regarding their predictions about their likelihood to return after leaving their abusive partner [45].

In the fight against social stereotypes, we must be vigilant against the invasion of the media, which propagate the idealized cultivation of romantic love. Further, the gaze and focus must be directed, not only on women: it is also key to alert men to the traps the patriarchy has in store for them. Many victims, in the beginning, do not consider psychological abuse as gender violence due to a lack of social awareness. In their studies, Orpinas et al. 2013 [46] found that perpetration was associated with a less affectionate dating relationship, which may disprove the idea of romantic love that sometimes deceives the victim. This patriarchal view leads women to adopt wrong and counterproductive attitudes. Many women consider it their duty to forgive the aggressor due to social pressure and the dependency they have acquired. However, forgiveness does not change situations or people. Too many women spend too much time navigating between guilt and forgiveness, placing themselves in situations of real, physical danger. No authority nor hierarchy has the privilege or the right to disregard a woman. Women must be warned that no person, religion, sect, gang, or social group should rob them of their own dignity, and that no form of love should harm their dignity.

The rehabilitation of survivors needs to work on self-esteem, autonomy, and regaining the sense of lost personal dignity. Prevention in patriarchal and male chauvinistic countries should encourage young women to abandon their dependence on families and social nuclei when these structures urge them to place traditional conventions, silence, and social decorum above their dignity and autonomy as individuals. Additionally, in this context, mothers are often accomplices or abettors in patriarchalism within families. We agree with Sardinha and Nájera Catalán (2018) [47] that the permissibility of gender violence is rooted in the political, economic, geographical, and socio-cultural spaces, where what a victim needs is solidarity to be able to escape the cycle.

#### 4.3. Women's Determination and Sisterhood

Often, government policies of education and employment opportunities for abused women, and more so if she has children, are the only possibilities open to women who leave their aggressors. Poverty or economic dependence on the aggressor can only be overcome in countries where financial support and the possibility of access to a job make it possible for the victim to become economically independent. In this respect, conciliation should allow women to retain their paid jobs or to continue their studies after childbirth, to safeguard their economic autonomy. As Claudia García-Moreno et al. (2015) [1] affirm, governments must focus on the political, social, and economic structures that subjugate women, and design actions and commitments to stop abuse and support. Women have to be decisive and consistent in the struggle for their own economic autonomy, by decisively embarking on an education and employment path that will lead them towards this autonomy [48].

Sisterhood among women and participatory approaches are the greatest forces to enable women to break out of the cycle of violence [49]. The most effective intervention programs are based on *sorority*, participation, and critical discussions about relationships and vigilance when it comes to micro-aggressions, producing greater resolution and shared decision-making in families [50]. Undoubtedly, the rise of feminist movements forced many governments to improve their policies towards women [1]. The words of Marcela Lagarde resonate in Latin American feminism; feminism is collective, and the feminist cause is sisterhood solidarity [36]. Today, there are environments in which women victims and

survivors cannot maintain their autonomy and sorority is the only way to overcome the social and political structures of privilege and inequality.

We should not conclude without expressing a little self-criticism as academic researchers. More critical feminism stresses that European and North American feminism has, in some ways, failed in the analysis of the political and economic effects of globalization on the life trajectories of women in the South (Africa, Asia, and Latin America). Certainly, there has been little concern in understanding the impact of global economic and political power on widening inequalities. In our field, we have not sought, for example, to provide a representation of academic feminism from the South in academic journals in the North, which represents less than 5% of publications. How can the issues of our sisters be understood if we do not offer them space in which to raise their voices? [51].

## 5. General Conclusions

1. The emerging subcodes referring to the weight of the family and the social stereotypes in the victims appear with high prevalence in almost all categories, indicating the constraints the sociocultural context structure places on women.
2. The subcodes concerning psychological and physical abuse are prevalent, indicating that the sociopolitical structure, local police, or public health institutions do not detect or intervene in situations of clear abuse.
3. The sensation of loneliness, fear, and abandonment that the victims feel, before, in, and after the reporting, as the coding evidence, confirms the thesis of scarcity of institutional support inserted in the sociopolitical structure.
4. The lack of economic support and job opportunities are barriers to reporting and the period after, which is a big problem in these vulnerable areas; all this denotes a lack of economic government support actions.

Faced with fear, women find no answers. We want to finish with a narrative from two brave women that expresses that resilience is not enough: the institutional lack of care, sensitivity, and support is a structural injustice.

“I was talking to other women who were there in the court, and they felt the same way, it was like fear. I, just like the other women, was completely alone that day.” (Participant 25)

“ . . . It really brought me a very big disappointment, very strong but very strong, because I myself have had to really move the trips, the meetings; I myself have had to meet, I remember a long time ago, myself with the former vice president of the republic, with the ministers, with the people of the prosecutor’s office, that is, with everyone, with all these activist groups. I’m sorry for saying this, but they only show up to appear on the screen, so there’s no one, but no one who really supports you from the bottom of heart . . . ” (Participant 26)

In short, the results present that the weight of stereotypes inscribed in family and social structures (neighborhood, religion, . . . ) are the main influence on victims to endure abuse and stop reporting.

Secondly, the results show that, despite the strength of the survivors, the institutional, political, economic, judicial, public health, and education structures are not sufficiently alert, sensitized, and prepared to help the victims to escape in a tolerable way from the circle of violence.

Additionally, the criteria that validate qualitative research have been considered, mainly the validity of conceptual constructs (foundation and theoretical precision), data reliability, credibility, coherence, and internal consistency, with strictness. In this inductive and deductive way, step by step, reality and theory has been questioned to form a conceptual foundation in social reality.

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