



**MEASURING THE SHADOW PANDEMIC:**

**VIOLENCE AGAINST  
WOMEN DURING  
COVID-19**

**COUNTRY REPORT: UKRAINE**

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the day-to-day lives of women in Ukraine: they feel less safe, experience more frequent incidents of abuse and harassment, and have seen impacts of this on their mental and emotional well-being over the past year. Among the drivers of these feelings, external stressors such as food insecurity and family

relations stand out as having a significant impact, not only on experiences of safety (or violence) but also on women's well-being overall. This research delves into the relationships between measures of violence against women (VAW) and the demographic, behavioural and socioeconomic factors related to them.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, an Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)-led survey showed that 26% of women in Ukraine had experienced physical violence and/or sexual violence since the age of 18.<sup>1</sup>

Since the pandemic began, rapid assessments conducted by UN Women using administrative data from police, VAW hotlines and other service-providers suggest an increase in reported cases of violence against women and girls. Measures implemented to limit the spread of the pandemic, such as lockdowns and curfews, have had an impact on VAW risk factors, especially for women and girls who face multiple forms of discrimination.

Within this context, UN Women commissioned Ipsos to conduct a rapid gender assessment survey on the impact of COVID-19 on women's well-being and safety in 13 countries across regions. In adapting the surveying methodology to be feasible in the COVID-19

context, proxy measures on experiences of VAW are used to collect data on sensitive topics to reduce the risk to the respondents, and thus may not be directly comparable to other studies conducted before the pandemic.

Having reliable data that are collected in line with methodological, safety and ethical standards, without putting women at greater distress and risk of violence, is critical to informing where policies and programmes can respond to the UN's system-wide efforts to scale up actions to address VAW in the context of COVID-19.

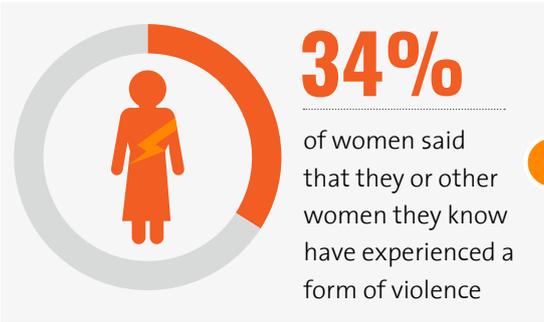
This report details the findings of the survey in Ukraine in May 2021. The survey was conducted with women aged 18 and older who have access to a mobile phone – a population that is estimated to be 92% of the total population aged 16 years and older in Ukraine, skewing slightly towards women when considering gender.<sup>2</sup>

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1 Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). 2019. Well-being and Safety of Women. [https://eeca.unfpa.org/en/publications/well-being-and-safety-women?\\_ga=2.135913009.1051312910.1623949493-1011250752.1623949493](https://eeca.unfpa.org/en/publications/well-being-and-safety-women?_ga=2.135913009.1051312910.1623949493-1011250752.1623949493)

2 Statista. 2017. "Ukraine electronic device usage." <https://www.statista.com/statistics/362800/electronic-device-usage-ukraine/>; Media Landscapes. N.D. "Mobile ownership: Ukraine." <https://medialandscapes.org/country/ukraine/telecommunications/mobile-ownership>

# KEY FINDINGS



Verbal Abuse



Denied Basic Needs



Sexual Harassment



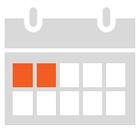
**8%**

of women feel unsafe in their homes.



**9%**

said this has gotten worse as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.



**19%**

of women live in households with conflict among adults at least weekly.



**12%**

said conflict between adults has become more frequent as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.



**30%**

of women think that the experience of verbal or physical abuse at the hands of a partner is common for women in their community.



**59%**

said this has gotten worse as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.



**26%**

of women think that physical harm, abuse and harassment are a problem for women in their community.



**14%**

of women think physical harm, abuse, and harassment has gotten worse since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.



**45%**

of women feel unsafe walking alone at night.



**14%**

of women feel unsafe walking alone during the day.



**22%**

of women think that it is common for women to be harassed in public.



# 2. PERCEPTIONS OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

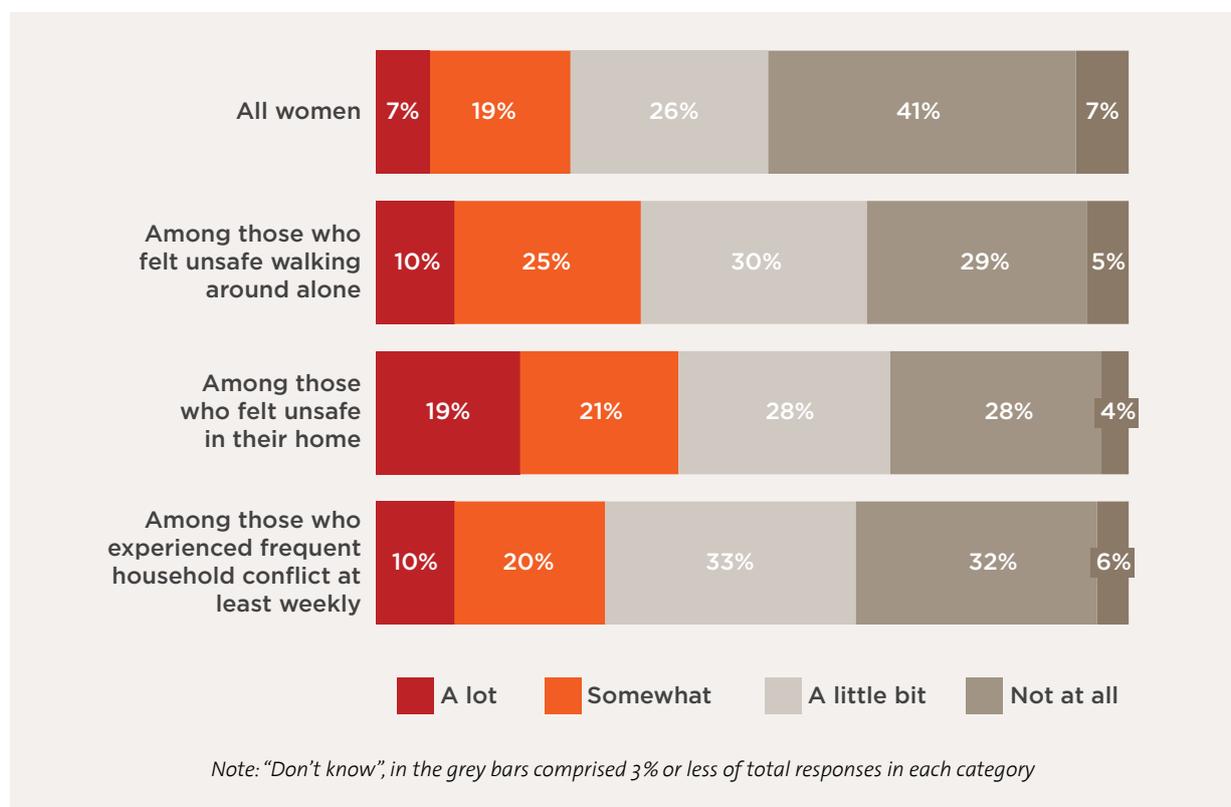
## 2.1. Perceptions of violence against women in the community

When asked about violence, abuse and harassment in their community, over a quarter (26%) of women said they believe it is a problem<sup>3</sup> and another 26% said it was a little bit of a problem.

Violence, abuse and harassment in the community were more likely to be perceived as a problem by women who: live in urban areas, earn an income, had decreased income since

the start of the pandemic, are employed or students, and women who likely experience food insecurity. Women who said they have safety concerns inside or outside of their household cited feeling unsafe walking alone, experiencing frequent conflict or feeling unsafe in their homes. Women who perceived that violence, abuse and harassment is a problem in the community are also more likely to be food insecure than women who do not perceive it as a problem.

**FIGURE 1**  
Extent to which violence, abuse or harassment was a problem in their community



<sup>3</sup> This combines the responses "A lot" and "Somewhat" when asked about the extent of the problem.

However, only 14% of women said that violence, abuse and harassment have increased in their community since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and an overwhelming majority reported that they have stayed the same (77%).

The feeling of increased violence, abuse and harassment in the community appears to be correlated with tensions already existing in the household, as it was reported mostly by women living in households with frequent conflicts and women who have felt unsafe inside their home in the last six months. These results highlight the continuum of experiences and feelings of violence by women in private and public settings, and the impact that stay-at-home measures can have on women.

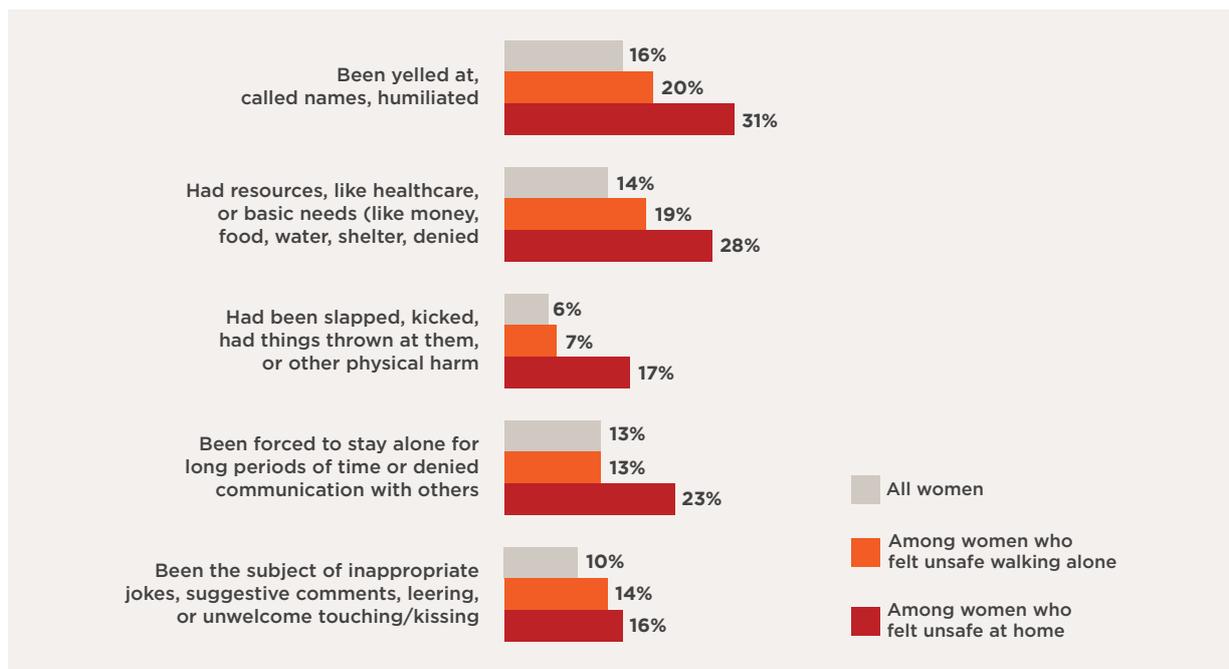
## 2.2. Proxy measures of violence against women in the community

When considering ways of measuring violence against women at the community level, it is important to keep in mind the context of the

study. Due to the remote nature of this survey, indirect questions were asked as proxy indicators of VAW, meaning it is not possible to distinguish respondent experiences from those of other women in their community or to know whether this experience occurred within or outside of the household. Therefore, while data from this study should not be interpreted as prevalence data, it nevertheless provides critical information on the impact of COVID-19 on women’s perceptions of safety and well-being.

Women were asked whether they or any woman they knew had experienced different forms of VAW, such as violence, denial of basic needs, sexual harassment, restrictions or verbal abuse. Women who felt unsafe in their home were more likely to report this. More particularly, experiences of physical abuse were more reported by women who said they feel unsafe walking alone, single women and those who feel unsafe in their homes.

**FIGURE 2**  
**Percentage of women who reported experiencing or knowing another woman who has experienced different types of violence, by their feelings of safety**



# 3. SAFETY IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

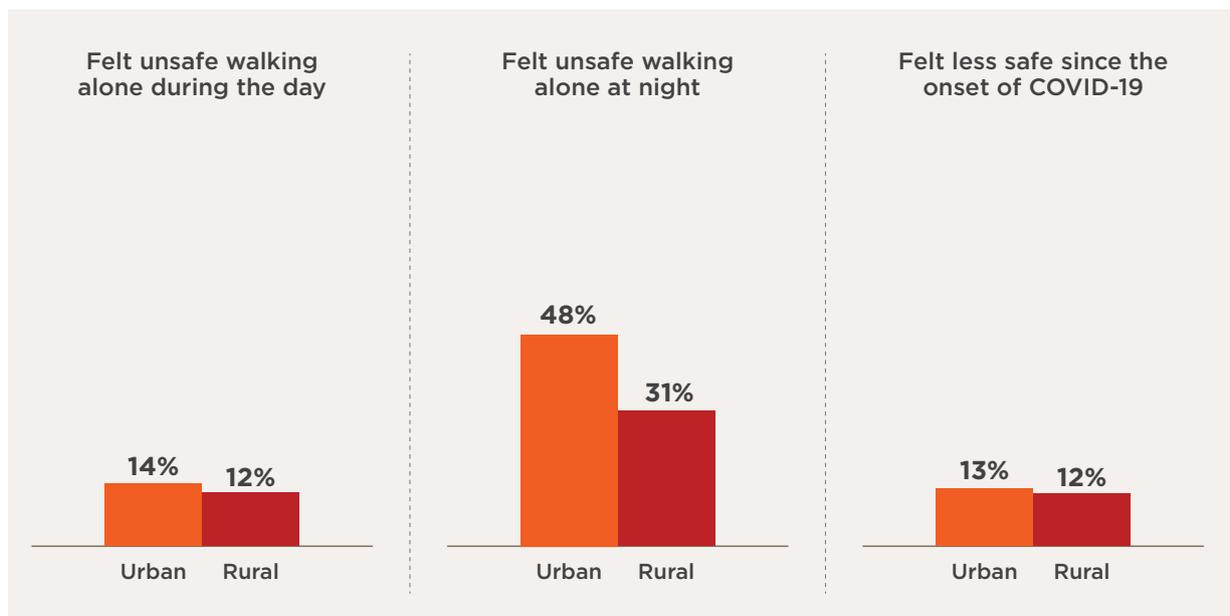
## 3.1. Personal safety in the public sphere

When out in their communities, the majority of women said they feel safe walking around the areas where they live during the day (86%), but this drops to just 37% when asked the same question about walking alone at night, and the majority (68%) said their feelings of

safety have not changed since the onset of the pandemic. Women aged 60 or older were less likely to feel safe in public than younger women, whether during the day or at night.

Experiences of safety also differed across urban and rural areas, with women living in urban areas significantly more likely to feel unsafe walking alone at night (48%) than women living in rural areas (31%).

**FIGURE 3**  
Perceptions of safety while out in public, by location



It is notable that the range of responses as to how the pandemic has affected feelings of safety while out in the community is some-

what small, even when considering demographic factors.

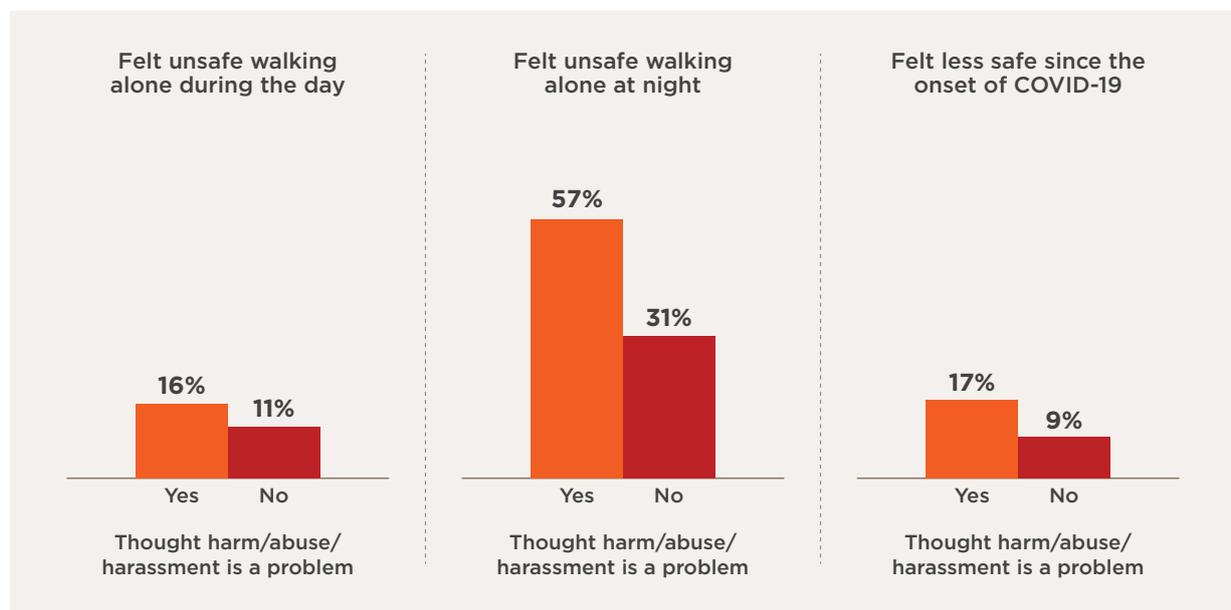
### 3.2. Women’s perceived safety in the public sphere

There is a relatively strong trend that women’s perception of their own personal safety is deteriorating, although this is not necessarily consistent with how they think about women’s safety in the community at large.

More than twice as many women said they themselves have felt unsafe at night (45%), as compared to only 22% of women who said it is common for women to experience safety

issues at night. However, women who perceived violence, abuse or harassment to be a problem were nearly twice as likely to say they have felt unsafe walking alone at night, suggesting that personal experience may be affecting community perceptions more broadly. This lack of safety while walking alone at night was particularly felt by women who reported generating an income for their household and by employed women, perhaps related to the fact that they tend to spend more time in public spaces.

**FIGURE 4**  
Percentage of women who feel unsafe by their perceptions of safety in their communities



Less than half of women (49%) expected that women experiencing harassment or abuse in the public sphere would seek help, and of those, 39% said they expected women to go to the police.

Though it is clear that women have an increased sense of anxiety and fear outside of

the household, this has not stopped them from engaging in public life. The majority of women (77%) said they leave their house daily and still see their friends and social groups with either the usual or reduced frequency despite constraints related to the COVID-19 pandemic and shifting feelings of public safety.

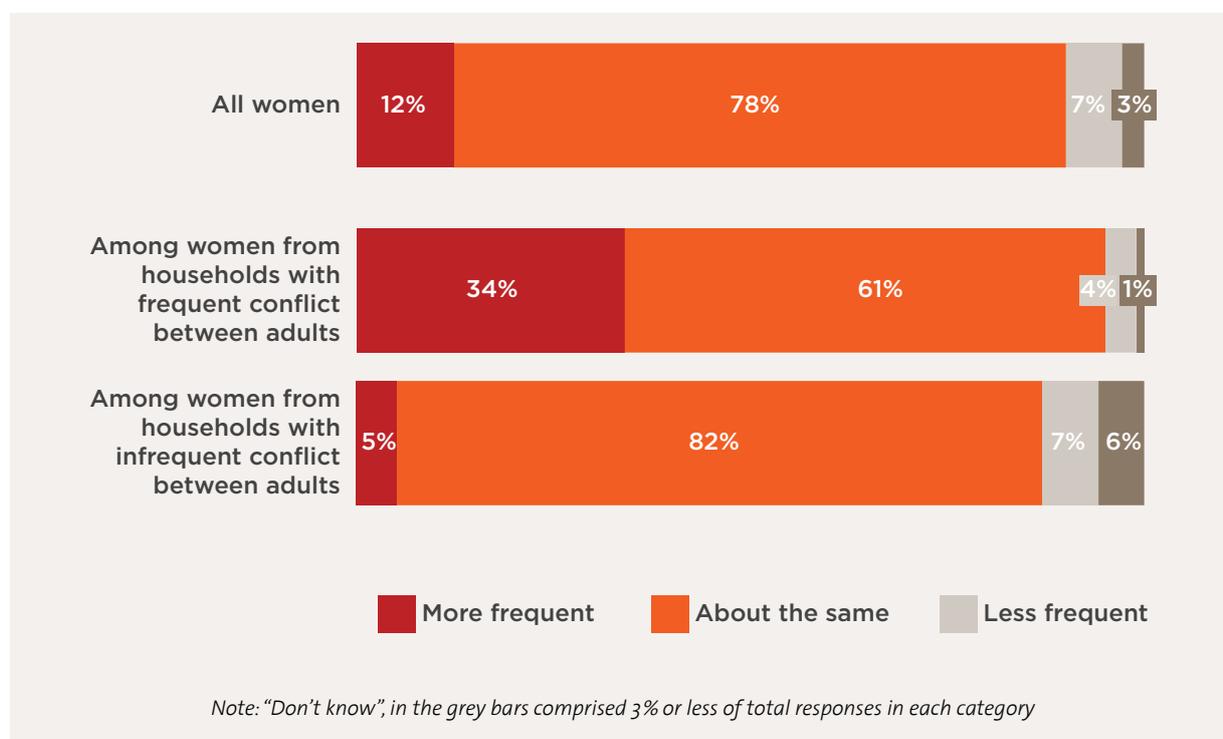
# 4. SAFETY INSIDE THE HOME

## 4.1. Personal safety inside the home

When it comes to safety within the household, 19% of women said that there has been conflict between adults in their household at least weekly over the past six months and just over 1 in 10 women (12%) said that conflict has become more frequent since the onset of COVID-19.

Those who experienced household conflict more often were more than eight times more likely to say that the frequency has increased as a result of the pandemic compared to those who did not, suggesting that existing household tensions have been exacerbated.

**FIGURE 5**  
Changes in household conflict as a result of COVID-19

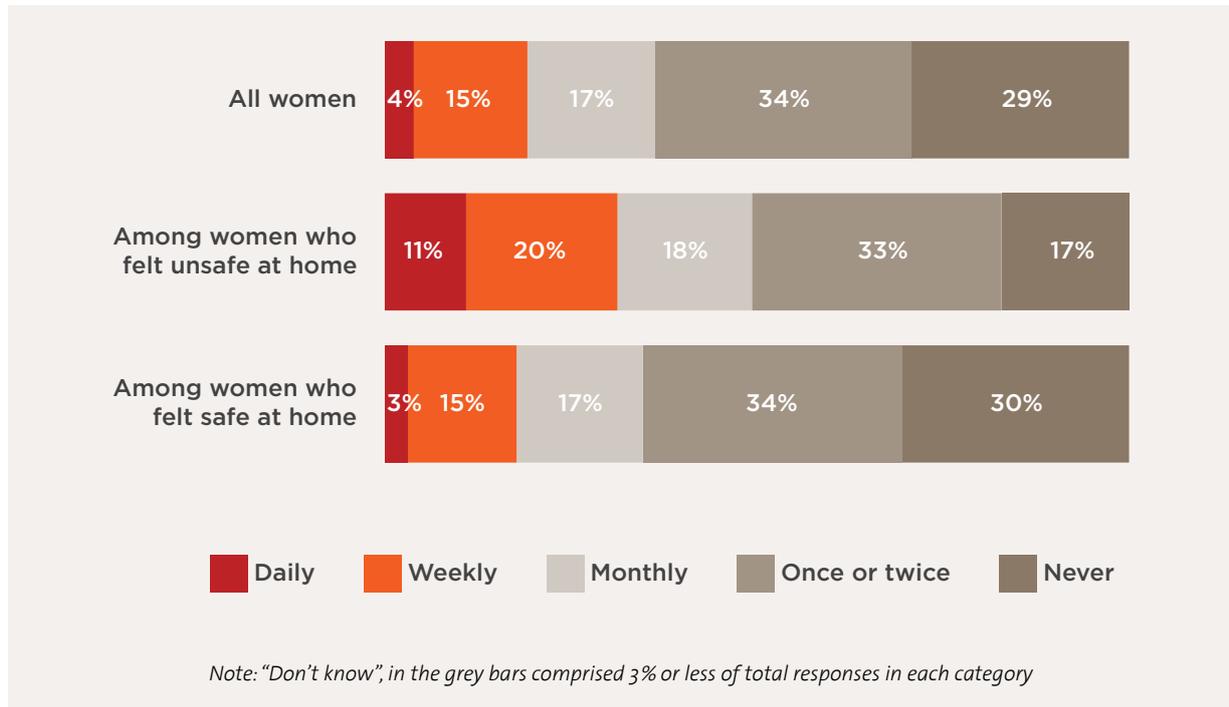


Despite this, less than 1 in 10 women (8%) said they have felt unsafe in their household in the last six months, and 9% of women said that the COVID-19 pandemic has worsened their

feelings of safety. Those who experienced frequent conflict (at least weekly) between adults in the household were significantly more likely to have felt unsafe in their homes.

**FIGURE 6**

**Frequency of household conflict, by women's feelings of safety at home**



Women who felt unsafe in their homes were more likely than those who feel safe to be moderately or severely food insecure, to have children, to generate an income, or to jointly head their household – again indicating that external stressors and relational status alike can significantly impact household dynamics.

Among the minority of women who felt unsafe in their homes in the past six months,

there were various reasons for feeling unsafe, most prominently that there had been physical violence or verbal abuse perpetrated by adults in the household, or due to an inability to reach out for help. Women living in rural areas, unemployed women and women who reported a decrease in income over the past year were among those most likely to report feeling unsafe in their home.

FIGURE 7

Reasons for women feeling unsafe in their homes, among the 8% who reported feeling unsafe

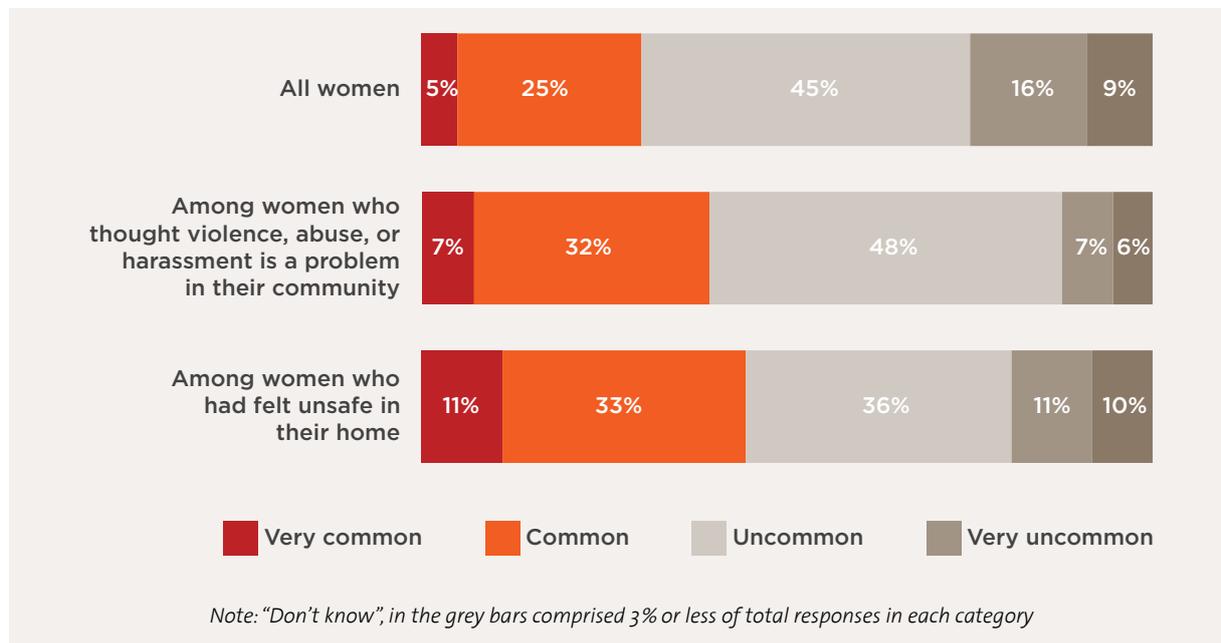


#### 4.2. Women’s perceived safety inside the home

When considering the broader community, 30% of women said they think that the experience of verbal or physical abuse at the hands

of a partner is common for women in the Ukraine. However, among women who perceive violence, abuse or harassment as a problem in their community, this increases to 39%. The majority of women (59%) said things have gotten worse since the start of the pandemic.

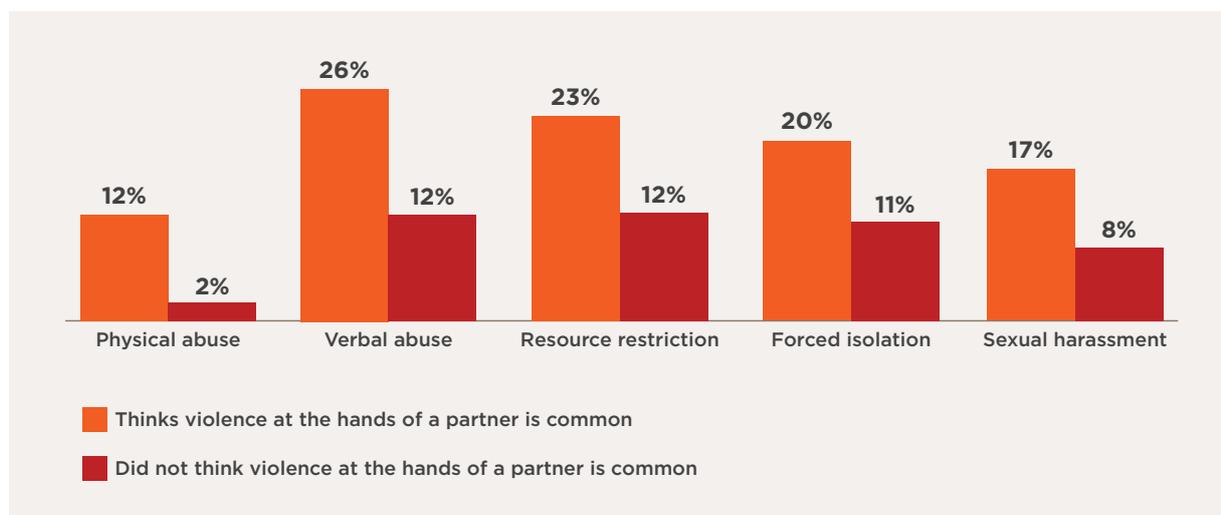
**FIGURE 8**  
Perceptions of partner abuse



Women who said they live in a household with frequent conflict between adults were twice as likely to report that it is common for women to experience violence at the hands of a partner compared to women living in households that rarely or never argue (44% versus 22%). Separated or divorced women and those who

reported feeling unsafe in their own home were also much more likely to think that abuse at the hands of a partner is common. This was also true of women who said they or a woman they know has experienced any type of violence, and this was particularly pronounced for physical abuse and sexual harassment.

**FIGURE 9**  
Percentage of respondents who reported knowing of or experiencing different types of violence, by whether they think violence at the hands of a partner is common



These data points suggest that women may be including their own experiences when reporting on the experiences of women in their community, while bolstering the evidence-based theory that women who have experienced VAW, whether directly or indirectly, are more likely to think that abuse is common in the community overall.

Unlike experiences of violence outside the home, only 27% of women said they believed that a woman would seek out help if she experienced verbal or physical abuse at the hands of a partner, suggesting a strong stigma of

reporting domestic violence at the hands of an intimate partner. In addition, the sources of support differed, as only 25% of respondents expected women to go to the police, while 36% said women would seek support from family and 12% would go to friends.

According to this research, it is twice as likely for domestic abuse to go unreported when compared to violence that occurs in the public sphere, indicating that domestic violence may be underreported to authorities in comparison to other forms of VAW.

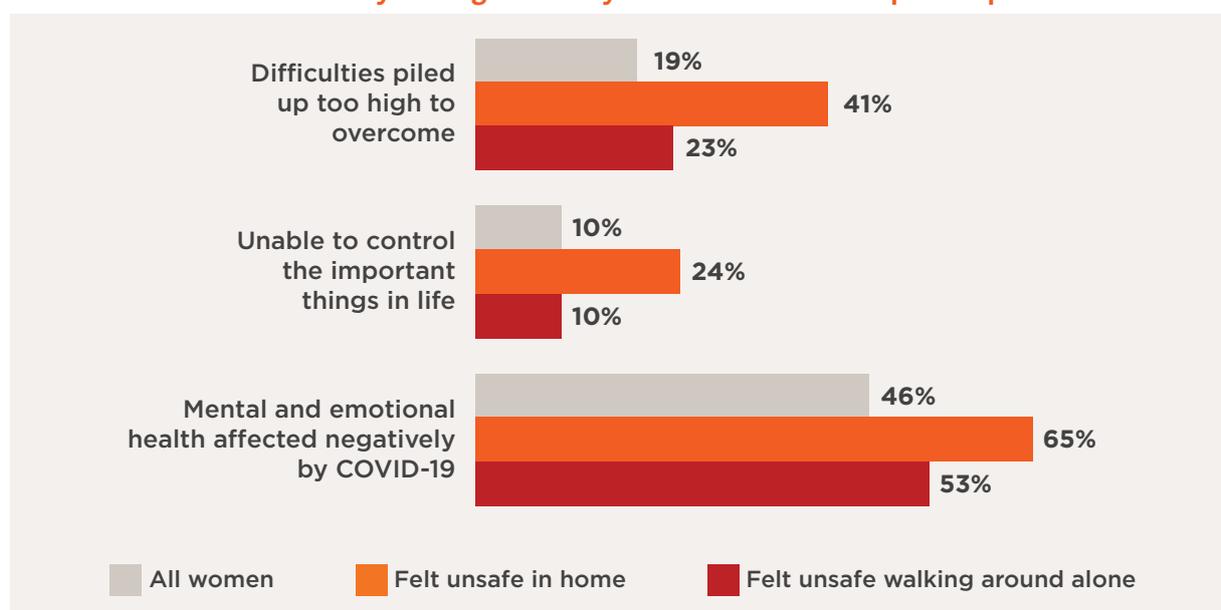
# 5. IMPACTS OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

The study indicates strong relationships between measures of VAW and changes in women’s behaviour and their feelings of mental and emotional well-being.

Feelings and experience of safety (or a lack thereof) may be a major driver of women’s ability to handle personal problems in their life, as

well as their mental and emotional well-being. Women who said they felt unsafe, whether it was in their home or in the public sphere, were more likely to report issues with mental health and to say that the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted them negatively.

**FIGURE 10**  
Measures of mental health by feelings of safety in the home and the public sphere



Women who reported experiencing safety issues also said that the COVID-19 pandemic had an exclusively negative impact on their lives at significantly higher rates when compared to women who had not experienced safety issues inside or outside the household. Additional hardships also perpetuated feelings of instability for women’s emotional and physical well-being. This is notable in the connection between mental health and food insecurity, as women whose mental health has worsened as a result of the COVID-19 pan-

demic are more than twice as likely to be food insecure (27%) as women whose mental health has not changed due to the pandemic (12%).

Violence against women in both public and private spheres is also observed when analysing women’s socialization and movement patterns. Women who reported feeling unsafe in their own home were more likely to say they saw their friends rarely and reported a lower frequency of leaving their house on a daily basis than women who felt safe in their homes.

# 6. RECOMMENDATIONS

The impacts of COVID-19 on VAW in Ukraine are significant, impacting women in both public and private spheres. With one in five women experiencing food insecurity and over one in four saying they have lost income, mostly due to the COVID-19 pandemic, external stressors that can increase the risk of VAW are on the rise in the country.

As a result of the intersectionality of VAW, policy and programmatic interventions require tailoring to the factors driving different experiences of VAW. Not only does the type of response that is best suited to address VAW vary based on the specific experiences of women, but the resources they seek out vary as well. This work stresses the importance of partnering with the existing infrastructure and organizations working on preventing and responding to VAW to empower communities with the full suite of resources they may need to provide adequate support to women and girls. Considering this, the research supports three recommendations:

**1. Interventions that are meant to address VAW should consider how policy interventions in other areas may alleviate some of the root causes of VAW, which are disproportionately felt by women.**

The intersection and continuum of VAW calls for a comprehensive policy framework on VAW, which mainstreams the issue and its impact across all policy areas. As reflected in the survey, some of the associated root causes are socioeconomic status that leads to vulnerability factors. More specifically, the results of this survey call for the need to further link economic programmes – including programmes intended to address the economic and social impacts of COVID-19 – to initiatives on ending VAW, as they highlight the reciprocal causal

effects of both vulnerability and infringements on women's rights. As with any programme implementation, however, it is critical to acknowledge the impacts of changing power dynamics within the household on relational stress between family members, as well as the downstream effects that may result. To that end, VAW prevention programmes should be fully integrated across national and local policies and programmes aimed at addressing vulnerability and VAW risk factors that have increased as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

**2. Trust in existing institutions and community-level infrastructure in Ukraine should be capitalized on to bolster women's confidence and feelings of safety while moving around public spaces.**

These types of initiatives could help improve feelings of safety for women that are often out in their communities for work or because they are socializing with others. Similarly, improving resources available at local police stations, including providing training or capacity-building, may encourage women to report violence, abuse or harassment that happens in their communities. Police departments may be able to serve their communities more effectively by providing dedicated staff who are familiar with VAW to respond to complaints of this nature.

**3. The challenges associated with intra-household conflict will require programmatic interventions that are sensitive to traditional gender roles and as well as to the limits of trust in institutions.**

Centralized resources may not be accessible for all women experiencing violence from a partner or other household member, not only because domestic violence is often considered

a private matter but also because of a lack of accessibility and fear of repercussions. Such cases require careful placement of resources in more informal channels where women feel comfortable reporting, for instance through women’s centres and community leaders who are trained on how to handle VAW reporting.

As with programmatic gender mainstreaming, it is important to consider the impacts that interventions may have on particular external stressors, such as intentional or accidental shifting of gender roles and norms that could easily do more harm than good if not carefully accounted for.

## 7. METHODOLOGY

The survey was fielded via Computer-Assisted Telephone Interviewing using random-digit dialing to mobile numbers between 5 May–11 June 2021. The total number of completed interviews was 1,205. During the survey period, Ukraine saw a steady decline in COVID-19 cases in tandem with a successful vaccine campaign. Most of the country was experiencing some form of lockdown or restriction throughout the study, but these have steadily eased up throughout the campaign. Relative to its neighbours, Ukraine has experienced severe impacts from COVID-19, with over 2.2 million cases at the end of field work, as well as over 50,000 deaths.<sup>4</sup>

The sample was drawn via random-digit dialing among the population with mobile phone numbers, so the sample population is limited to women aged 18 or over with mobile phone access. Women over age 60 were also specifically targeted with an existing database to ensure adequate coverage of this age group. The percentages for each age group under age 60 from this survey match the percentages for each age group from Ukraine’s State Statistics Service 2020 Census data.<sup>5</sup> To account for the under-sampling for women over age 60, reported data are weighted to match Census figures.

Age group	Percentage of adult women based on Census data	Percentage of adult women from sample data
18–29	14	16
30–39	18	20
40–49	17	19
50–59	17	17
60+	34	27

4 Reuters COVID-19 Tracker: <https://graphics.reuters.com/world-coronavirus-tracker-and-maps/countries-and-territories/ukraine> (accessed May 2021)

5 State Statistics Service of Ukraine. 2020. “Resident Population of Ukraine by Sex and Age on January 1, 2020.”

# DEFINITIONS

**Community:** A term referencing the geographic area in which the respondent lives.

**Food insecurity:** This study used the World Food Programme/Food and Agriculture Organization formulation to measure food insecurity with an eight-statement battery of questions. These data can be used to establish estimates of the proportion of the sample who are moderately or severely food insecure, which can also be disaggregated by other variables of interest through the use of the FAO Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES) module<sup>6</sup>. Any references in the report to prevalence of moderate

or severe food insecurity represent estimates of the prevalence and should be interpreted as such.

**Partnered:** A term referring to women who are married or living/cohabiting with a partner.

**Violence against women:** Any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.

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