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MODELING THE RISK OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN BETWEEN FORENSIC EXPERTISE AND PROTECTIVE PUBLIC POLICY

Paula-Magdalena HOTIN[1]

Abstract: This article examines the modeling of violence risk against women as a methodological and institutional problem situated at the intersection of sociology, criminology, clinical psychology, and forensic psychiatry. The study develops an interdisciplinary framework that combines a structured critical review of risk assessment instruments with a contextual analysis of European evidence and Romanian institutional conditions. Its working hypothesis is that risk does not function as a fixed behavioural constant, but as an evolving structure generated by the interaction among individual, relational, contextual, and institutional factors. The article analyses actuarial, structured clinical, and hybrid approaches, identifies dynamic variables with high predictive relevance, and argues for the calibration of assessment protocols to the Romanian socio-legal environment. The contribution lies in formulating an operational framework that connects forensic expertise, victim protection, and public policy while keeping explicit the limits of prediction and the need for coordinated institutional response. The proposed sequence begins with threshold screening and source verification, continues with structured identification of escalation indicators and victim exposure, and moves toward case formulation that integrates perpetrator history, dynamic change, coercive control, and institutional response capacity. It also links assessed risk to protection planning, review intervals, and reassessment after critical events.

Keywords: violence against women, risk modeling, forensic expertise, public policy, dynamic risk factors, coercive control, Romania.

Résumé : Cet article analyse la modélisation du risque de violence à l'égard des femmes comme un problème méthodologique et institutionnel situé à l'intersection de la sociologie, de la criminologie, de la psychologie clinique et de la psychiatrie judiciaire. La recherche élabore un cadre interdisciplinaire fondé sur une revue critique structurée des instruments d'évaluation du risque et sur une analyse contextuelle des données européennes ainsi que des conditions institutionnelles roumaines. L'hypothèse de travail affirme que le risque ne constitue pas une constante comportementale fixe, mais une structure évolutive issue de l'interaction entre facteurs individuels, relationnels, contextuels et institutionnels. L'article examine les approches actuarielles, cliniques structurées et hybrides, identifie des variables dynamiques à forte pertinence prédictive et soutient la nécessité d'adapter les protocoles

[1]PhD Student, Department of Sociology, Faculty of Philosophy and Social-Political Sciences, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași, Bulevardul Carol I 11, 700506 Iași,, paulahotin@gmail.com

d'évaluation au contexte sociojuridique roumain. La contribution réside dans la formulation d'un cadre opérationnel reliant expertise forensique, protection des victimes et politique publique, tout en maintenant explicites les limites de la prédiction et la nécessité d'une réponse institutionnelle coordonnée. La séquence proposée commence par un filtrage initial du seuil de risque et par la vérification des sources, se poursuit par l'identification structurée des indicateurs d'escalade et de l'exposition de la victime, puis aboutit à une formulation de cas intégrant l'historique de l'auteur, les changements dynamiques, le contrôle coercitif et la capacité de réponse institutionnelle. Elle associe enfin l'évaluation du risque à la planification de la protection, aux intervalles de révision et à la réévaluation après des événements critiques.

Mots-clés : violence à l'égard des femmes, modélisation du risque, expertise forensique, politique publique, facteurs de risque dynamiques, contrôle coercitif, Roumanie.

Rezumat: Articolul analizează modelarea riscului de violență asupra femeilor ca problemă metodologică și instituțională situată la intersecția dintre sociologie, criminologie, psihologie clinică și psihiatrie judiciară. Cercetarea dezvoltă un cadru interdisciplinar bazat pe o revizie critică structurată a instrumentelor de evaluare a riscului și pe o analiză contextuală a datelor europene și a condițiilor instituționale din România. Ipoteza de lucru afirmă că riscul nu funcționează ca o constantă comportamentală fixă, ci ca o structură evolutivă produsă de interacțiunea dintre factori individuali, relaționali, contextuali și instituționali. Articolul examinează abordările actuariale, clinic-structurate și hibride, identifică variabile dinamice cu relevanță predictivă ridicată și susține necesitatea calibrării protocoalelor de evaluare la contextul socio-juridic românesc. Contribuția principală constă în formularea unui cadru operațional care leagă expertiza forensică, protecția victimelor și politica publică, menținând explicite limitele predicției și necesitatea unui răspuns instituțional coordonat. Secvența propusă începe cu un screening inițial al pragului de risc și cu verificarea surselor, continuă cu identificarea structurată a indicatorilor de escaladare și a expunerii victimei, apoi avansează către o formulare de caz care integrează istoricul agresorului, schimbarea dinamică, controlul coercitiv și capacitatea de răspuns instituțional. Cadrul leagă evaluarea riscului de planificarea protecției, de intervale de revizuire și de reevaluarea după evenimente critice.

Cuvinte-cheie: violență asupra femeilor, modelarea riscului, expertiză forensică, politică publică, factori de risc dinamici, control coercitiv, România.

1. Introduction

Violence against women remains one of the most persistent forms of social harm and one of the most difficult domains for institutional anticipation. The forensic problem is not limited to documenting past aggression in intimate relationships, but extends to the disciplined estimation of future escalation under conditions of uncertainty, incomplete information, and variable institutional capacity across the wider field of violence against women. Risk assessment therefore occupies a strategic position between scientific knowledge, clinical judgment, and public protection.

Comparative European data confirm the scale of the phenomenon. The EU-wide survey on gender-based violence (Barbier et al., 2022) indicates that violence

by an intimate partner remains a major component of women's exposure to interpersonal harm across member states, while Romanian indicators remain high in both prevalence and formal victim registration (Eurostat, 2022; EIGE, 2023). These figures do not establish a full causal explanation by themselves, but they justify the methodological importance of improving the quality, consistency, and institutional usability of risk assessment procedures.

The article starts from a precise research question: how can violence risk assessment regarding violence against women be organised so that it avoids the weaknesses of purely intuitive judgment, does not reduce evaluation to actuarial scoring alone, and remains applicable within the evidentiary and institutional constraints of the Romanian context? The working premise is that risk is not a fixed trait of the perpetrator but a structured probability field produced by the interaction of prior violence, current dynamic factors, victim vulnerability, relational dynamics, and institutional response capacity.

The contribution pursued here is deliberately delimited. The article does not claim to validate a new predictive instrument on Romanian case data. Instead, it undertakes three linked operations: a structured critical review of the main theoretical and methodological traditions in violence risk assessment; a secondary contextual analysis of comparative European and Romanian institutional data; and the formulation of an operational framework that can orient forensic assessment, safety planning, and future empirical validation studies. This delimitation is essential because a doctoral-level argument requires that the scope of inference remain proportionate to the available evidence.

2. Research design and methodology

The study uses a structured critical review design combined with a secondary contextual analysis. The review component maps the principal theoretical and methodological traditions in violence risk assessment concerning violence against women, while the contextual component examines comparative European and Romanian institutional data in order to delimit what can realistically be implemented in local forensic practice.

The documentary corpus was organised around four analytic blocks: theories of risk and violence prediction; principal assessment instruments used in partner violence and violence against women contexts; dynamic and victim-related domains relevant for ongoing assessment; and Romanian legal-institutional conditions affecting evidentiary access and implementation. Priority was given to manuals, methodological reviews, meta-analyses, and institutional reports that are directly relevant to forensic assessment rather than to general descriptive literature on domestic violence.

The empirical component is limited to secondary descriptive interpretation of comparative data for the period 2015–2022 and to institutional materials concerning Romania. The function of these data is not to validate a predictive algorithm, but to establish contextual necessity, identify implementation

constraints, and prevent unsupported generalisation from literature produced in substantially different legal and service environments.

Methodologically, the article proceeds in three steps: first, conceptual clarification of the status of risk in forensic reasoning; second, critical comparison of instruments and domains; third, conversion of those findings into an operational framework with explicit stages, decision logic, and limits of inference. This sequence is what transforms the text from a simple narrative review into a doctoral-level methodological article.

3. Risk as a theoretical and forensic concept

Risk, in forensic use, is neither a metaphysical property nor a deterministic forecast. It is a probabilistic judgment about the likelihood, gravity, and possible imminence of future harmful conduct, inferred from a structured combination of empirical indicators and professional interpretation. In the context of violence against women, this judgment becomes especially complex because the phenomenon is temporally dynamic, relationally embedded, and institutionally mediated. The same individual may present different levels of dangerousness depending on separation processes, access to the victim, control dynamics, substance misuse, legal interventions, and the quality of protective support available to the victim.

This is why violence risk assessment cannot be reduced to a binary distinction between „dangerous" and „not dangerous". Such simplification contradicts both the literature and the practical realities of forensic work. Hart and Logan (2011) argue that the proper object of assessment is not an abstract propensity but a case-specific formulation integrating historical regularities, situational conditions, and mechanisms of escalation. Their approach is important because it shifts forensic reasoning from static labeling to structured explanation.

Theoretically, three major models dominate the field. The actuarial model relies on statistically derived predictors and fixed weighting systems (Andrews & Bonta, 2010; Quinsey et al., 2006). Its advantage lies in transparency and reproducibility, especially when large validation samples exist. Yet it also has limits. A score can identify average recidivism probability in reference groups without adequately representing the singular interaction of coercive control, victim entrapment, recent separation, and institutional failure present in individual cases.

The structured professional judgment model, by contrast, retains explicit domains and evidence-based indicators while leaving room for integrative case formulation. This model is especially important in intimate partner violence because the assessor must evaluate not only prior assaults but also patterns of domination, jealousy, surveillance, threats, and the victim's actual possibilities of escape or protection. SPJ therefore recognises that forensic rigor does not require the exclusion of judgment, but its disciplined organisation.

A third position combines actuarial baselines with clinically and contextually informed interpretation. This hybrid logic is increasingly persuasive because it acknowledges two methodological truths: first, historical violence and criminal records remain powerful baseline indicators; second, acute risk often depends on dynamic changes that static scoring alone cannot adequately register. The forensic challenge is not to choose once and for all between numbers and judgment, but to specify how each should function within a coherent assessment sequence.

4. Risk assessment instruments and their methodological logic

The literature on risk assessment in partner violence identifies several instruments with recurrent use in forensic, correctional, and policing contexts (Campbell, 2005; Guo & Harstall, 2008). Their significance is not identical, because they differ in purpose, construction, and inferential scope. Some estimate recidivism probabilities using actuarial methods, while others guide a structured judgment process. A methodological article must therefore distinguish between the logic of these instruments before proposing their adaptation to local practice.

The Ontario Domestic Assault Risk Assessment (ODARA) is one of the best-known actuarial tools in this field. Developed to predict recidivism in domestic assault cases, it uses historical and criminal justice variables that can be scored relatively quickly and with acceptable inter-rater consistency (Hilton et al., 2004). Its strength lies in identifying baseline risk through variables such as prior domestic incidents, non-domestic criminality, substance abuse, and threats. Its limitation lies in the fact that it is built primarily for recidivism prediction rather than for full forensic case formulation or victim-centred intervention planning.

The Spousal Assault Risk Assessment Guide (SARA) belongs to the structured professional judgment tradition. Its utility does not derive from a final actuarial score, but from the way it organises the evaluator's attention across domains such as criminal history, psychosocial adjustment, assault history, current offence factors, and relational instability (Kropp, 2008; Kropp & Hart, 2015). The importance of SARA lies in the fact that it provides a disciplined framework for interpretation without pretending that all relevant violence mechanisms can be captured through fixed weighting.

Meta-analytic research supports the broad utility of structured and actuarial approaches (Hanson, Helmus, & Bourgon, 2007), while also showing that predictive performance varies depending on setting, population, and outcome measure. Helmus and Bourgon (2011) note that SARA-related research supports meaningful predictive value, but not at a level that would justify mechanistic use detached from contextual analysis. Similarly, Olver and Jung (2017) show that actuarial and SPJ-informed tools may offer incremental prediction when used carefully, though their value depends on the quality of implementation.

A broader methodological lesson emerges from comparative reviews. Risk instruments are not interchangeable technical objects that can simply be imported

from one jurisdiction to another without adaptation. Nicholls et al. (2013) emphasise that the quality of assessment depends not only on the instrument but also on evaluator training, data availability, organisational context, and the operational purpose of the assessment. A tool designed for policing triage may not satisfy the evidentiary or explanatory needs of forensic psychiatry or judicial decision-making.

For the Romanian context, this distinction is decisive. Any operational framework must avoid two symmetrical errors: the belief that international tools can be copied without calibration, and the opposite belief that professional intuition alone is sufficient where local validation is incomplete. The defensible position is a calibrated integration of available instruments into a staged assessment process that recognises their differential strengths.

5. Dynamic risk factors, victim vulnerability, and coercive control

Historical predictors matter, but they do not exhaust the structure of violence risk against women. A central finding across the literature is that dynamic variables often determine whether a case remains stable, intensifies, or becomes acutely dangerous. In other words, the assessor must distinguish between risk background and risk activation.

Dynamic factors include recent escalation in frequency or severity of abuse, violations of prior protection measures, threats of homicide or suicide, stalking behaviour, obsessive jealousy, substance-related disinhibition, acute psychiatric destabilisation, unemployment combined with status frustration, and separation-related crisis. These variables matter because they modify the temporal horizon of risk. A person with a long history of coercive behaviour may remain dangerous over time, but a sudden separation attempt or legal complaint can sharply alter imminence.

The concept of coercive control is especially important here. Stark (2007) argues that partner violence is often not reducible to isolated incidents of physical assault, because it may operate through an ongoing regime of intimidation, isolation, surveillance, humiliation, and deprivation of autonomy. This insight has direct forensic relevance. Cases with relatively fewer documented physical assaults may still involve a severe violence risk when coercive control is intense, and the victim's exit options are weak. Any assessment model that focuses only on visible injury events risks underestimating dangerousness.

Victim-related and contextual variables also require explicit consideration. Violence risk is not only a property of the perpetrator; it is also conditioned by the victim's exposure, level of support, dependency relations, access to shelter, credibility afforded by institutions, and the presence of children. This does not mean shifting responsibility onto the victim. It means recognizing that the probability of repeated or escalating violence depends partly on whether the victim can effectively obtain protection and whether institutions can act in time.

This point is methodologically important because many predictive tools were initially constructed around offender-centered variables. A doctoral-level framework must go further. It must recognise that the true object of assessment is an interactional field in which offender propensity, victim vulnerability, coercive control, and institutional response are mutually implicated. Only under this broader conceptualisation can the assessment be linked meaningfully to protection planning rather than to abstract prediction alone.

6. Empirical contextual analysis: European evidence and the Romanian institutional setting

The empirical literature and institutional reports converge on a point of high relevance for this article: violence against women remains a large-scale social and administrative problem across Europe, but risk management capacity differs substantially between states. This means that the same assessment model may function differently depending on reporting practices, police responsiveness, judicial speed, victim services, and interinstitutional coordination.

The European Institute for Gender Equality reports that Romania continues to face substantial challenges regarding violence against women, including underreporting, limited-service accessibility in some areas, and uneven institutional response. Eurostat data and related EU survey findings confirm that partner violence and other forms of gender-based violence remain socially prevalent, while official cases reflect only part of the actual phenomenon (Eurostat, 2022; EIGE, 2023). This gap between prevalence and institutional visibility has direct consequences for assessment. If prior incidents are not formally recorded, reliance on administrative history alone will systematically underestimate baseline risk.

The Romanian context also illustrates the difference between normative legal progress and practical implementation. The legal availability of protection orders and emergency interventions is a necessary development, but not in itself a guarantee of adequate protection. GREVIO's evaluation of Romania points to implementation weaknesses involving access, consistency, coordination, and victim support pathways (Council of Europe, 2022). These weaknesses matter because risk assessment has no autonomous value outside an action system able to convert assessment into timely protection.

From a forensic perspective, this environment imposes several constraints. First, documentation may be fragmented across police files, court records, medical services, social services, and psychiatric information. Second, victims may withdraw complaints under pressure, dependency, or fear, thereby creating misleading impressions of reduced danger. Third, rural and peri-urban inequalities may influence access to protective services, shelter, transportation, and legal advice. Under these conditions, the evaluator cannot simply apply an instrument mechanically. Assessment must include a contextual reading of what institutional barriers mean for the actual evolution of risk.

The Romanian setting therefore supports the central methodological argument of this article. What is needed is not the uncritical import of a foreign tool, but an integrated framework that can combine structured evidence domains with sensitivity to local implementation deficits. Empirical contextualisation does not replace assessment methodology, but it determines whether methodology remains realistic.

7. An operational integrated framework

On the basis of the literature review and contextual analysis, the article proposes an operational integrated framework for assessing violence risk against women in Romania. The framework is not presented as a validated national instrument, but as a methodological architecture designed to organise assessment in a transparent, reproducible, and institutionally usable manner.

Stage 1 concerns case intake and source triangulation. Assessment should never rely on a single narrative source when additional records are available. The minimum evidentiary architecture should include, whenever feasible, the victim interview, the perpetrator interview, prior police or judicial records, previous protection measures, medical or psychiatric information, and documentation regarding children or other dependent persons exposed to the violent environment. Missing sources must be registered as limitations of the assessment, not silently absorbed.

Stage 2 concerns structured screening and baseline orientation. ODARA-type information can be used to identify historically anchored recidivism indicators, while SARA-type domains can organise the evaluator's attention to current perpetrator behaviour, recent escalation, and victim vulnerability. Stage 3 then moves from screening to formulation. At this point, the assessor integrates static history, current dynamic domains, relational patterns of coercive control, victim-specific exposure, and institutional response capacity into a transparent written explanation of why the case presents low, moderate, high, or imminent risk.

Stage 4 concerns management linkage. A risk classification has no methodological value if it does not correspond to an action structure. High and imminent risk categories should trigger immediate protection planning, rapid communication with competent authorities, explicit documentation of access-to-victim barriers, and short review intervals. Moderate risk should trigger targeted monitoring of dynamic variables and compliance with existing measures. Low risk should not mean absence of concern, but rather lower current probability under presently available information.

Stage 5 concerns temporal discipline. Because violence risk against women is dynamic, reassessment must be event-based as well as periodic. Review is required after breaches of protection measures, separation attempts, new threats, substance-related destabilisation, release from custody, major psychiatric decompensation, or significant changes in victim support conditions. Without a

reassessment rule, the assessment collapses back into a static label detached from the temporal logic of violence.

Stage 6 concerns reflexive documentation. Every assessment report should distinguish clearly between observed facts, collateral information, professional inference, and residual uncertainty. This requirement is not stylistic. It is the condition under which risk assessment becomes auditable, ethically defensible, and usable for future institutional learning. In this form, the integrated framework proposed here becomes more than a theoretical synthesis: it becomes a reproducible protocol skeleton that can later be validated on Romanian forensic case series.

8. Discussion and limitations

The revised argument permits a more precise statement of contribution. The article does not establish the predictive superiority of a newly constructed Romanian tool, because the available material does not support such a claim. Its contribution lies instead in methodological clarification: it separates review from validation, baseline estimation from case formulation, and perpetrator risk from victim vulnerability, and it translates those distinctions into a staged assessment protocol.

This distinction matters for doctoral quality. A doctoral article must not intensify its conclusions beyond its empirical base. For that reason, the present text has limited its empirical component to contextual secondary analysis and has made explicit that local validation remains an open research task. Such delimitation strengthens rather than weakens the argument, because it aligns the level of claim with the level of evidence.

Several limitations remain. The article does not analyse Romanian case files, does not estimate predictive coefficients, and does not test inter-rater reliability in local practice. It also depends partly on institutional reports and comparative indicators that were not generated for the specific purpose of validating forensic assessment tools. These constraints prevent direct claims regarding local psychometric performance.

Even with these limitations, the framework has practical and research value. Practically, it offers a disciplined architecture for assessment under conditions of incomplete information. Scientifically, it specifies the next necessary steps: local field testing, calibration of thresholds, reliability studies across professional groups, and longitudinal follow-up linking assessment conclusions to subsequent outcomes.

9. Conclusions

Violence risk assessment concerning violence against women cannot be reduced either to intuitive professional impression or to mechanical score calculation. A rigorous approach requires conceptual discipline regarding the

object of prediction, explicit separation between static and dynamic information, attention to victim vulnerability, and a documented relation between assessment and intervention.

Within the Romanian context, the article supports a cautious but firm conclusion: structured assessment is necessary, feasible only under conditions of institutional adaptation, and scientifically credible only if future research undertakes local validation on case-based data. The operational framework formulated here provides a defensible starting architecture for that next stage of doctoral and applied work.

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