

ECONOMIC VIOLENCE IN THE FAMILY IN ISRAEL: AN INVISIBLE FORM OF CONTROL AND THE ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITY OF THE STATE

WHEN CONTROL OVER MONEY BECOMES CONTROL OVER LIFE

Lulu Balous
Ph.D. student
Department of Psychology
Varna Free University “Chernorizets Hrabar”

Abstract: *Economic violence, also known as economic or financial abuse, is a pervasive yet often invisible form of domestic violence that operates through systematic control of financial resources, access to employment, and economic decision-making. While lacking the overt physical markers associated with other forms of abuse, economic violence profoundly undermines individual autonomy, dignity, and long-term security. Existing research demonstrates that economic control frequently functions as a central mechanism of coercive power within abusive relationships, restricting victims' ability to seek help or exit harmful environments.*

In the Israeli context, economic violence remains insufficiently recognized within legal, social, and institutional frameworks. Despite growing awareness of domestic violence more broadly, financial abuse is often normalized, culturally obscured, or misclassified as a private financial dispute. Studies and policy reports reveal significant gaps in legal recognition, professional training, and tailored support mechanisms, leaving many victims without effective protection or pathways to rehabilitation.

Drawing on existing empirical studies, legal analyses, and comparative international models, this article presents economic violence as a structural social problem rather than a private relational issue. It examines the phenomenon through ethical lenses of human dignity, social welfare, and human rights, highlighting the state's moral responsibility to address systemic forms of control that perpetuate inequality and harm. The article further outlines policy directions emphasized in the literature, including public awareness, legal reform, economic protection measures, and long-term support systems, while acknowledging cultural, political, and resource-related challenges to implementation.

By bringing economic violence out of invisibility, this article argues that addressing financial control within intimate relationships is essential not only for protecting individuals but also for strengthening democratic values, social justice, and collective well-being.

Keywords: *Economic violence; Economic abuse; Financial control; Domestic violence; Gender-based violence; Coercive control; Human dignity; Economic dependency; Human rights; State responsibility; Social policy; Israel.*

Economic violence, also referred to as economic or financial abuse, is one of the least visible yet most destructive forms of domestic violence. It occurs when one partner systematically controls household resources in ways that limit, weaken, and subordinate the other. This control may include restricting access to money, managing bank accounts unilaterally, preventing employment or education, sabotaging professional advancement, and creating continuous financial dependency. Over time, such practices erode autonomy, dignity, and the individual's ability to make independent life decisions.

Scholarly literature consistently shows that economic violence is not merely a financial dispute between partners but a structured pattern of power and control. Cohen (2018) describes economic abuse as a persistent behavioral pattern that produces long-term harm: reduced self-worth, learned helplessness, and chronic economic insecurity. Unlike physical violence, economic abuse often leaves no visible marks, which makes it harder to identify, report, and address.

Research indicates that economic violence is frequently embedded within broader patterns of domestic abuse. Dun (2021) emphasizes that financial control often accompanies emotional and psychological manipulation, reinforcing dependence and limiting victims' capacity to seek help or exit abusive relationships. In Israel, despite increased awareness of domestic violence in general, economic violence continues to receive limited recognition in public discourse, policy frameworks, and legal regulation (Levi, 2020).

This lack of recognition is not only social but also institutional. While Israeli law provides mechanisms to address physical and emotional violence, economic violence remains insufficiently regulated. Ben-David (2019) highlights the absence of explicit legal definitions and tailored protective measures, leaving many victims without effective remedies or clear institutional pathways for support. This gap raises a fundamental ethical question: what responsibility does the state bear when systemic forms of control undermine human dignity, autonomy, and basic rights?

Understanding Economic Violence within Domestic Abuse

Domestic violence is widely understood as a pattern of coercive control exercised within intimate relationships. It may take physical, emotional, sexual, psychological, or economic forms. Economic violence is a central yet frequently overlooked dimension of this continuum. It involves deliberate strategies designed to restrict financial independence and maintain dominance over a partner (Cohen, 2018).

Economic abuse may include monitoring every expense, denying access to shared income, preventing the opening of independent bank accounts, accumulating debts in the victim's name, or

obstructing employment opportunities. Dun (2021) notes that financial control often functions as the “invisible infrastructure” of domestic abuse: without money, victims lose mobility, choice, and the practical ability to leave.

In the Israeli context, economic violence is particularly difficult to identify. Financial dependency is often normalized within intimate relationships, and in traditional or patriarchal communities, male control over household finances may be perceived as legitimate or culturally appropriate (Levi, 2020; Shirazi & Levi, 2019). As Joseph (2017) explains, the absence of physical indicators and the normalization of financial hierarchy make economic abuse harder to prove using conventional legal tools.

Recognizing economic violence as an integral component of domestic abuse is therefore a necessary step toward effective policy and protection. Without explicit acknowledgment, victims remain trapped between social norms, legal ambiguity, and institutional inaction.

Structural, Cultural, and Gendered Roots of Economic Control

The literature consistently links economic violence to broader structures of inequality. Gendered power relations, patriarchal norms, and socioeconomic disparities form the foundation upon which economic abuse is built. Levi (2020) demonstrates how traditional gender roles—where men are viewed as providers and women as dependents—create fertile ground for financial control to become normalized rather than challenged.

Cohen (2018) and Shirazi & Levi (2019) argue that cultural norms can legitimize economic domination by framing it as responsible household management rather than abuse. In such contexts, women may internalize dependency as a moral obligation, while men perceive financial control as a rightful authority.

Economic dependency itself becomes a mechanism of entrapment. Ben-David (2019) notes that many victims remain in abusive relationships because they lack the financial resources necessary to leave. Sullivan (2019) further emphasizes that economic violence extends beyond immediate deprivation; it systematically damages future earning potential by preventing education, training, or stable employment.

Legal ambiguity compounds these dynamics. When economic abuse is not clearly defined or sanctioned, perpetrators face limited consequences, and victims encounter significant barriers to recognition and protection (Joseph, 2017; Dun, 2021). The result is an enabling environment in which control persists largely unchecked.

The Consequences of Economic Violence: Individuals, Children, and Society

The impact of economic violence extends far beyond immediate financial hardship. Research shows that prolonged financial control often leads to poverty, chronic instability, indebtedness, and social isolation (Levi, 2020). Psychologically, victims commonly experience anxiety, depression, and severe erosion of self-esteem, particularly when economic abuse is combined with emotional manipulation (Cohen, 2018).

Ben-David and Stern (2018) describe economic abuse as a form of “structural captivity,” where the lack of financial exit options increases the risk of long-term psychological harm. This captivity not only affects adults but also children who grow up in environments characterized by financial insecurity and coercive control.

Children exposed to economic violence may experience emotional distress, behavioral difficulties, and reduced access to educational and developmental resources. Over time, these experiences can contribute to intergenerational cycles of dependency and vulnerability, reinforcing patterns of inequality and social exclusion (Cohen, 2018).

From a societal perspective, economic violence generates cumulative costs: increased reliance on welfare systems, reduced labor participation, and long-term public health impacts. As such, it is not merely a private issue but a social problem with broad implications.

Economic Violence in Israel: Legal Gaps and Institutional Challenges

Studies indicate that economic violence exists across diverse sectors of Israeli society, yet remains largely invisible within institutional responses (Cohen & Berkovitz, 2021). In traditional and patriarchal communities, gender norms intensify women’s dependency and further obscure financial control as a form of abuse (Levi, 2020; Ben-David & Stern, 2018).

A report by the Ministry of Public Security (Rosenbaum & Mangan-Elmalih, 2016) documents recurring patterns of economic control, including constant monitoring of expenses, denial of access to financial resources, and enforced financial obedience. These practices significantly undermine victims’ sense of dignity and freedom, yet are often dismissed as internal family matters.

Legally, Israel lacks a comprehensive framework addressing economic violence explicitly. Although the Prevention of Domestic Violence Law (1991) provides mechanisms for protection, it does not adequately address financial abuse. Joseph (2017) describes a legal gray area in which victims struggle to obtain remedies, while Ben-David (2019) notes that authorities frequently frame cases as “financial disputes” rather than violence.

Comparative research highlights alternative approaches. Countries such as Canada and Australia have formally recognized economic abuse as a component of domestic violence, introducing legal tools and financial support mechanisms that facilitate victims' exit from dependency (Sullivan, 2019; Dun, 2021). These models illustrate that targeted legal recognition can significantly improve protection and outcomes.

The Ethical Responsibility of the State

The obligation to address economic violence is not only legal but ethical. Three ethical frameworks—Kantian ethics, utilitarianism, and human rights theory—offer complementary justifications for state intervention.

Kantian Ethics: Dignity and Autonomy

From a Kantian perspective, individuals must always be treated as ends in themselves, never merely as means. Economic violence reduces victims to instruments of control through financial dependence, violating their dignity and autonomy (Winerib, 2008; Cohen, 2018). When the state fails to intervene, it risks tacitly legitimizing practices that contradict this moral imperative.

Utilitarianism: Minimizing Harm and Maximizing Welfare

Utilitarian analysis supports intervention by highlighting the extensive social harm caused by economic violence: poverty, unemployment, trauma, and intergenerational disadvantage (Levi, 2020; Cohen & Berkovitz, 2021). Policies that prevent abuse and support victims reduce overall suffering and promote collective well-being (Dun, 2021; Sullivan, 2019).

Human Rights Perspective

From a human rights standpoint, economic violence constitutes a violation of fundamental rights, including dignity, equality, autonomy, and economic security (Sullivan, 2019). In democratic societies, the protection of these rights cannot be subordinated to claims of family privacy when systemic harm is present (Joseph, 2017; Ben-David, 2019).

Policy Responses and Implementation Challenges

The literature consistently identifies several key policy directions:

Prevention and Awareness

Public awareness campaigns and professional training are essential, as many victims do not recognize economic abuse until it becomes severe (Ben-David, 2019). Training professionals in welfare, healthcare, and law enforcement improves early identification and referral (Levi, 2020). Importantly, such initiatives must be culturally sensitive to avoid alienation or backlash (Cohen & Berkovitz, 2021).

Legal Recognition and Enforcement

Researchers emphasize the need to explicitly define economic violence within domestic violence legislation and to develop tailored legal tools, such as economic protection orders that secure access to resources and assets (Joseph, 2017; Ben-David, 2019).

Support and Rehabilitation

Legal recognition must be accompanied by material support: emergency financial assistance, legal representation, safe housing, and long-term economic empowerment through training and employment programs (Levi, 2020; Joseph, 2017). Barakat-Danieli et al. (2023) stress the importance of inter-agency cooperation and professional capacity-building within welfare systems.

Implementation Challenges

Resistance rooted in cultural norms (Shirazi & Levi, 2019), political opposition to legal reform (Cohen, 2018), and limited welfare budgets (Ben-David, 2019) present significant obstacles. However, scholars agree that inaction perpetuates harm and undermines fundamental rights (Cohen & Berkovitz, 2021).

Conclusion: Addressing the Invisible to Protect Human Dignity

Economic violence is a hidden yet profoundly damaging form of domestic abuse that operates through systematic financial control and dependency. As demonstrated throughout this article, economic abuse undermines individual autonomy, erodes human dignity, and restricts victims' ability to make independent life choices. Despite its severe personal and social consequences, economic violence remains insufficiently recognized within Israel's legal, institutional, and public frameworks.

The analysis presented here, grounded in existing research and policy literature, reveals that economic violence is not merely a private relational issue but a structural social problem rooted in gendered power relations, cultural norms, and legal ambiguity. The absence of explicit legal recognition and tailored protective mechanisms contributes to the normalization of financial control and leaves many victims without effective pathways to protection, recovery, and economic independence.

From ethical perspectives grounded in human dignity, social welfare, and human rights, the state bears a clear moral responsibility to address economic violence. Allowing systemic financial control to persist without adequate intervention contradicts fundamental democratic values and perpetuates inequality and harm. International experience further demonstrates that meaningful change is possible when economic abuse is formally recognized, legally addressed, and accompanied by comprehensive support systems.

Addressing economic violence therefore requires a multidimensional response that integrates legal reform, public awareness, professional training, and long-term economic empowerment for victims. Such an approach must be culturally sensitive, institutionally coordinated, and oriented toward restoring autonomy rather than merely managing harm. While significant challenges to implementation remain, continued inaction risks entrenching cycles of dependency and undermining the moral foundations of social protection.

Ultimately, confronting economic violence is not only a matter of policy effectiveness but an ethical commitment to safeguarding human dignity. Making financial control visible and actionable affirms the state's responsibility to protect individuals from coercion within intimate relationships and strengthens the broader pursuit of social justice, equality, and human freedom.

References

Ben-David, S. (2019). Economic violence in Israeli households: A legal and social perspective. *Haifa University Law Review*, 12(4), 44–60.

Ben-David, S., & Stern, T. (2018). The hidden costs of domestic violence: Economic violence as a social problem. *Journal of Family Violence*, 15(3), 45–58.

Barakat-Danieli, G., Yessar-Baruchovitz, D., Renan-Barzilai, A., & Binyamin, A. (2023). Unarticulated public policy? Professional identities in responses to economic violence. *Social Security*, 120, 99–130.

Cohen, M. (2018). Economic violence in the family: A sociological and psychological analysis. Tel Aviv University Press.

Cohen, M., & Berkovitz, Y. (2021). Understanding domestic abuse in Israel: Legal frameworks and social support. *Journal of Social Work in Israel*, 18(2), 105–120.

Cohen, M., & Berkovitz, H. (2021). Coping with economic violence in the family: A comparative perspective. *Journal of Policy Research*, 18(2), 88–110.

Dun, H. (2021). Economic control as a form of domestic violence: Legal responses and gaps. *Israeli Journal of Criminology*, 29(1), 87–95.

Joseph, L. (2017). A review of domestic violence laws in Israel: Addressing economic abuse. *Jerusalem Law Review*, 21(2), 63–74.

Levi, H. (2020). Economic violence in Israeli families: The impact of financial control on domestic abuse. Ben-Gurion University Press.

Rosenbaum, A., & Mangan-Elmalih, K. (2016). Report of the committee on domestic violence phenomena. Ministry of Public Security, Israel.

Shirazi, A., & Levi, H. (2019). Gender, culture, and financial control: A study of economic abuse in Israel. *Journal of Israeli Sociology*, 25(1), 85–99.

Sullivan, G. (2019). Advancements in economic abuse legislation in Canada and Australia: Lessons for Israel. *International Journal of Comparative Law*, 22(1), 102–119.

Winerib, A. (2008). Kantian ethics and domestic violence: The role of autonomy in state intervention. *Philosophy of Law Review*, 10(4), 103–112.