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Divorce as Liberation from Violence: The Role of Legal Protection and Women's Shelters

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Divorce as Liberation from Violence: The Role of Legal Protection and Women's Shelters

Clara Schäper*

March 12, 2026

Abstract

Does increased legal infrastructure empower victims to leave abusive relationships? Structural barriers often prevent victims of intimate partner violence from seeking help, with two-thirds of female victims in Europe neither reporting incidents nor accessing support. I study Germany's 2002 Act on Protection against Violence, which introduced residence bans in shared households and temporarily awarded victims sole use of the dwelling, summarized as "the aggressor goes, the victim stays". Using divorce records (1998–2005), linked on the county-level to a hand-collected database of women's shelter and counselling center openings (1970–2023), I estimate how divorce numbers changed in the period after the reform relative to the period before. I show that divorces rise markedly in the three years following the reform and decrease in the fourth. Trends are driven by female-initiated filings and are concentrated in West Germany, with increases appearing more persistent among non-German filers over time. To assess whether effects vary with support availability, I classify counties by pre-reform infrastructure of women's shelters and counselling centers. Changes are muted where services already existed and strongest in areas lacking support infrastructure at the time of the legal change. These patterns are consistent with a two-stage model in which pre-existing support had already led abusive marriages to dissolve and/or deterred their formation, leaving a smaller stock of detectable abusive unions.

JEL-Codes: J12, J16, J18, K36, K42
Keywords: domestic violence, gender, violence against women and girls (VAW)

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1 Introduction

Violence against women and girls (VAW) remains one of the most pervasive human rights violations worldwide, affecting one in three women globally (World Health Organization, 2021). A particularly harmful form of VAW is intimate partner violence (IPV), defined as physical, sexual, or psychological harm inflicted by a current or former partner. IPV not only threatens women's physical safety but also undermines their autonomy, labor market participation, and long-term well-being (Bindler et al., 2020). Operating at public and private levels, VAW perpetuates systemic gender inequalities and is very costly for both the victim and the state (Bindler and Ketel, 2022; Bhuller et al., 2023; Currie et al., 2022; Aizer, 2010).

Prevalence rates are alarmingly high across contexts. In the United States, nearly one in three women report having experienced severe physical violence by an intimate partner during their lifetime (Smith et al., 2018). In Europe, one in five women report having experienced physical or sexual violence by a partner since the age of 15 (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014). Strikingly, two-thirds of victims neither report incidents to the police nor access support services (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014). In Germany, the country I study in this paper, a nationwide representative victimization survey conducted in 2003 found that one in four women aged 16 to 85 had experienced IPV, with two-thirds of these cases involving severe physical or sexual violence (Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ), 2004).[1] Divorced or separated women were more than twice as likely to report having experienced IPV compared to married women. This association might reflect both that violence can precipitate separation and that separation itself can be a moment of heightened risk. In either case, marital dissolution and separation from a partner represent a crucial pathway toward liberation from abuse, as these likely enables women to end cohabitation in violent relationships (Adams et al., 2024). Importantly, measuring IPV is inherently challenging due to stigma and underreporting, which is why the surveys cited here rely on carefully designed victimization survey methodologies and confidential interview protocols aimed at minimizing reporting bias (see e.g. Eurostat (2021)). These figures highlight both the scale and persistence of the problem and motivate closer attention to the role of institutional frameworks in shaping women's ability to seek safety and protection.

This paper studies whether legal reforms targeted at victim protection can empower women to leave abusive relationships. I examine the 2002 *Act on Protection against Violence* in Germany, which institutionalized the eviction of aggressors from shared households and granted temporary residence rights to victims, summarized as "the aggressor goes, the victim stays". Using divorce records from 1998–2005, linked at the county level to a hand-collected database

[1] This survey remains the only available representative nation-wide survey focused on IPV in Germany to date and provides the benchmark for understanding the scope of unreported violence. A new nationwide survey on violence across all genders, commissioned jointly by BMFSFJ, BMI, and BKA, is currently underway but has not yet been published. Appendix A provides a detailed chronicle of all victimization studies, including regional ones and those that are not IPV focused in Germany. See also (Bundeskriminalamt (BKA), 2024) for a German summary of these surveys.

of women's shelter and counselling center openings dating back to the 1970s, I document how divorce filings changed in the years following the reform relative to the period before. My empirical approach proceeds in three steps: (i) a national pre/post comparison to establish whether divorces rose after the law, (ii) an analysis of yearly dynamics to capture the timing of changes, and (iii) a heterogeneity analysis contrasting counties with and without pre-existing support infrastructure. To rationalize these findings, I also develop a static two-stage model that formalizes how legal reform and support infrastructure lower exit costs and may deter violence, and derives predictions about the direction and potential magnitude of divorce responses in the context of the German reform.

Empirical evidence on whether violence-targeted laws empower victims to leave abusive spouses is limited. Prior work on criminal-law responses, such as mandatory or warrantless arrest, has focused primarily on whether reporting of cases and violence incidence has changed, finding mixed effects: more recent studies suggest deterrence (Chin and Cunningham, 2019; Rainer et al., 2025), while earlier work indicates potential backfire through reduced reporting or retaliation (Iyengar, 2009). These approaches primarily target perpetrators via immediate temporary arrest, in which cases frequently result in police statements made by victims being retracted, leading to the charges against the perpetrator ultimately being dropped (Foureaux Koppensteiner et al., 2024). Other studies, not focusing on reforms targeting violence directly but analyzing the effect of divorce laws that lower the costs of getting a divorce, find that these laws are associated with reductions in domestic violence through both actual marital dissolution and improved within-household bargaining (Stevenson and Wolfers, 2006; Sanin, 2023; Brassiolo, 2016). Finally, recent work highlights suggestive evidence that improved infrastructure availability is positively associated with victims of violence leaving their abusive partner in Finland (Adams et al., 2024).

The reform studied in this paper shifted the emphasis toward victim protection even in the absence of a victim filing an official criminal report, including making a police statement against their abuser. On 1 January 2002, Germany enacted the *Act on Protection against Violence* (*Gewaltschutzgesetz*), institutionalising civil protective measures including restraining orders, contact bans, and, crucially for married or cohabiting couples, the temporary transfer of sole residence rights to the victim, without requiring a criminal complaint by the victim (Federal Ministry of Justice and Consumer Protection, 2025). Contemporary legal commentary noted that the reform directly affected marital cohabitation and even described it as a form of "state-assisted divorce," given the special constitutional protection afforded to marriage in German law (Eicke, 2008; Krugmann, 2006). This underscores why divorce filings are an especially informative outcome for assessing the reform's implications for victim protection.

Germany provides an interesting case to study, because regional support infrastructure was already widely, but quite heterogeneously spread across Germany, when the law was introduced. Women's shelters, established since the late 1970s, offer safe refuge; counselling centers provided psychosocial and legal assistance. This pre-existing network created variation in the

costs of leaving across German counties. In line with the paper's research design, I treat the 2002 law as a national reform that affected all counties and use infrastructure heterogeneity to assess whether the same reform is associated with different changes across counties with and without prior services.

To interpret these relationships, I develop a simple two-stage model that formalizes how the legal reform and support infrastructure shape women's decisions in abusive marriages.[2] In the pre-reform environment (Stage 1), women face barriers to leaving due to limited outside options like earnings potential and individual constraints like language barriers, or the lack of close-by social or family networks, which meant that even severe abuse often did not result in separation. In this stage, women residing in areas with access to support services are more likely to leave abusive relationships as their costs of leaving are lower than for women residing in areas without help infrastructure. In the post-reform environment (Stage 2), the 2002 Act on Protection against Violence lowers the cost of leaving by granting enforceable residence rights to victims, directly. At the same time, the reform may have deterred abuse by raising the probability of detection and punishment as well as potentially increasing the severity of punishment for perpetrators, making remaining in marriage more attractive to some women. The overall impact on divorce is therefore theoretically ambiguous: reforms both reduce the cost of leaving and can reduce the incidence of violence. The model predicts stronger increases in divorces in counties without prior support services, where the baseline stock of constrained marriages was larger, and more muted increases in counties with well-established infrastructure. It also predicts potential decrease in divorces as deterrence and compositional changes in the marriage stock take place.

For the empirical analysis I assemble two novel datasets. First, official divorce register data from family courts (1998–2005), aggregated to the county–year level and normalised per 1,000 inhabitants, distinguishing the initiating spouse and whether a filing was contested. Second, a hand-collected dataset of women's shelter and counselling center openings across Germany since the 1970s, used to classify counties by pre-reform availability and exposure intensity. Together, these data sources allow the study of the interplay between a national legal reform and local institutional support.

As mentioned above, the empirical strategy proceeds in three steps. I first estimate pooled pre/post differences to establish average changes in divorce filings after 2002 relative to the period before, controlling for county characteristics and general trends. I then trace the annual dynamics relative to the 2001 baseline to identify variation in timing of changes in the number of divorces. Finally, I assess heterogeneity by comparing counties with and without pre-existing

[2]The model focuses on exit decisions within marriage, consistent with the main outcome of the empirical analysis, which is based on administrative divorce records. Comparable administrative data on cohabiting couples and their dissolution are currently not available in Germany, which limits the ability to extend the framework to non-marital partnerships. The potential role of cohabitation dynamics is however discussed later in the paper, when interpreting the empirical results and in the discussion of the mechanisms and limitations.

support infrastructure to test whether the association between the reform and divorces differs by institutional context.

The findings show that divorce filings rose significantly after 2002 for both divorces filed by women and men. In the main pooled pre/post specification with linear time trends, divorces filed by women increase by 7.7 percent relative to the 2001 baseline of 1.24 divorce filings per 1000 inhabitants; the increase for men is a 6.7 percent increase from a baseline of 0.76 divorce filings per 1000 inhabitants. Looking at dynamics in these changes, I can show that women's filings exhibit a distinct post-reform spike peaking in 2003, while men's filings largely continue a gradual pre-existing upward trend before declining in the fourth post-reform year. These dynamics are consistent with the law being associated with a release of a latent stock of abusive marriages, followed by a decline that is consistent with either deterrence effects or compositional changes in the stock of marriages.

A key question I address is whether the impact of the reform depends on the availability of support infrastructure, i.e., whether the reform risks remaining ineffective in the absence of additional infrastructure or can act as a substitute where none exists. I find that the overall changes are muted in counties with prior infrastructure and are most pronounced in counties that had no prior infrastructure. This is consistent with my set-up static two-stage model in which abusive marriages were already more likely to have dissolved (and potentially less likely to have formed) in areas exposed to infrastructure prior to the reform, leaving a smaller stock of detectable abusive marriages when the reform was introduced. The muted effects are particularly pronounced in counties with a high density of help facilities and are mainly driven by the presence of women's counselling centers rather than women's shelters. This helps distinguishing two potential mechanisms through which support infrastructure may affect separation decisions: (1) information provision and legal guidance provided through counselling services, and (2) physical protection through shelter provision. The results suggest that the counselling channel appears to be particularly relevant for enabling divorce filings.

Heterogeneity analysis further indicates that the findings seem to be largely driven by West Germany. It further shows that the increase in the number of divorces was stronger and more persistent over time, remaining at a stable higher level compared to pre-reform numbers over the whole observed post period among non-German filers. Moreover, in contrast to German women, the interaction with pre-existing local support infrastructure is not statistically significant for non German women. This pattern is consistent with non-German women being more likely to face higher baseline barriers to leaving abusive relationships, such as potential language barriers, smaller support networks, and less knowledge of institutional support, so that the reform appears to have been particularly consequential for this group.

This paper contributes to three strands of literature. First, it relates to research on the economic costs of IPV. Several studies document severe consequences for victims, particularly in healthcare costs and labor market outcomes (Bindler and Ketel, 2022; Adams et al., 2024; Bhuller et al., 2023; Aizer, 2010; Anderberg et al., 2016; Currie et al., 2022; Gutierrez and

Molina, 2021; Ornstein, 2022). My paper complements this work by focusing on marital dissolution as a measurable pathway out of abuse and by highlighting the central role of institutional structures in enabling such outcomes.

Second, it connects to research on legal reforms and their impact on IPV. Prior studies have examined mandatory arrest laws, no-drop prosecution policies, and other legal tools, finding mixed effects on reporting and violence (Aizer and Dal Bo, 2009; Iyengar, 2009; Rainer et al., 2025; Chin and Cunningham, 2019; Miller and Segal, 2019; Foureaux Koppensteiner et al., 2024). My paper complements this literature by studying a different type of reform: a victim-protection law that operates through residence rights rather than criminal sanctions, and by showing how its effects depend on the presence of local support infrastructure.

Finally, this paper builds on studies analyzing the role of support services in the form of women's shelters and counselling centers. Prior work has shown that shelters can reduce domestic homicides (Schechter, 2021) and that specialized courts can increase reporting (García-Hombrados et al., 2024; Sviatschi and Trako, 2024). Recent German evidence similarly highlights the pivotal role of easily accessible and subsidised help infrastructure as a first access point for women after experiencing violence (Ebert and Steinert, 2025). I extend this line of research by combining a newly collected dataset of shelter and counselling center openings with administrative divorce data, thereby documenting how support services interact with national law to shape the likelihood of leaving abusive marriages.

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows. Section 2 describes the institutional background. Section 3 presents the theoretical framework. Section 4 introduces the data and empirical strategy. Section 5 presents the main results for the pre/post analysis, while Section 6 presents the analysis on heterogeneities by pre-reform infrastructure availability. Section 7 and Section 8 discuss implications and avenues for future research.

2 Institutional Context and Stylized Facts

2.1 The Act on Protection against Violence

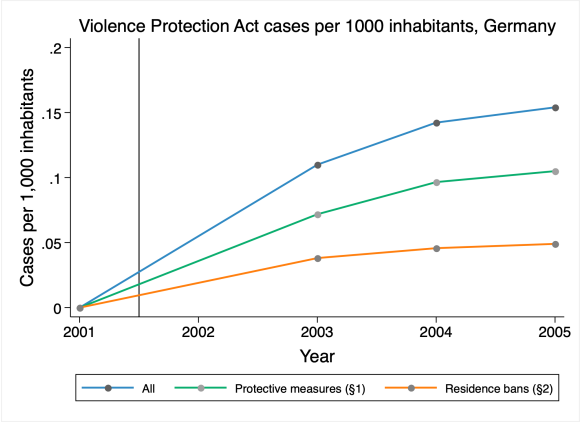
The central institutional change that I analyze in this paper is the introduction of the *Act on Protection against Violence* (*Gewaltschutzgesetz*), which was enacted on the first of January 2002.

The Act introduced two types of measures. Paragraph 1 established court-issued protection orders, such as contact or approach bans (e.g., prohibiting the offender from approaching the victim's home or workplace), applicable regardless of whether victim and offender cohabit. Paragraph 2 regulates residence bans in cases in which both the offender and victim share a household and states that the victim should be granted sole use of the dwelling, even if tenancy or ownership rests with the aggressor, which is publicly referred to as "the aggressor goes, the victim stays" (Federal Ministry of Justice and Consumer Protection, 2025). Crucially, since the

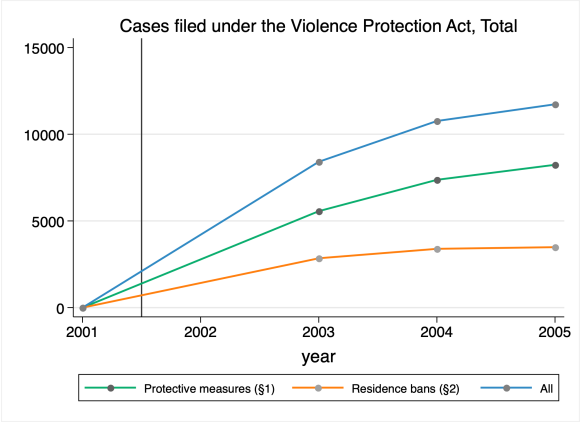
introduction of the Act in 2002, protective measures no longer depended on the victim filing a criminal complaint, marking what was widely referred to as a paradigm shift in the handling of domestic violence: For the first time, violence in the family was, by law, no longer treated as a private matter but as a serious societal problem, that would result in state intervention through police, courts, and administration, directly touching upon fundamental security needs (see e.g. Deutscher Juristinnenbund e.V. (2012); Eicke (2008); Stürmer (2005)). For married couples, this can be referred to as a state-sanctioned interruption of marital cohabitation. Legal scholars even described the law as a form of "state-assisted divorce" (Krugmann, 2006), highlighting its direct relevance for marital stability and divorce decisions (Eicke, 2008).

Figure 1: Act on Protection Against Violence filings over time, Germany

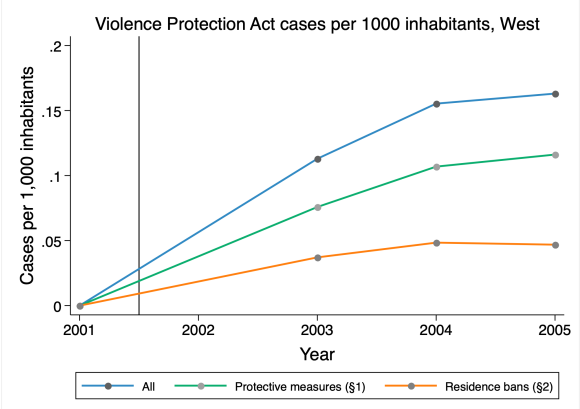
a: Germany (per 1,000 inhabitants)



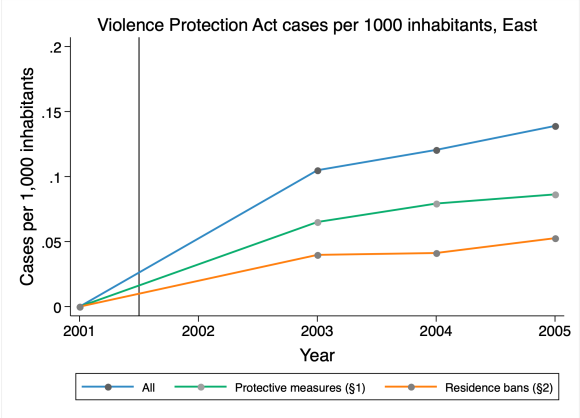
b: Germany (absolute numbers)



d: West Germany (per 1,000 inhabitants)



e: East Germany (per 1,000 inhabitants



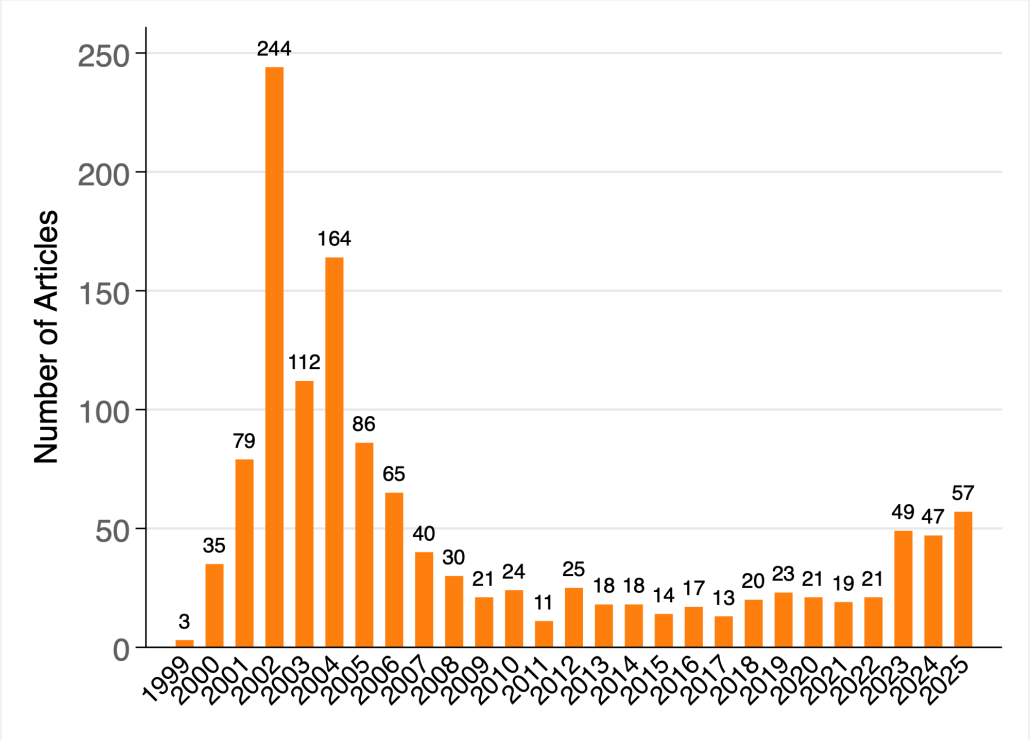
Note: The figure shows the number of cases filed under Act on Protection Against Violence (all cases, protective measures under §1, and residence bans under §2) between 2001 and 2005. Note that the documentation started only in 2003 and changed from 2006 on which is why I only include cases up to 2006. *Source:* Statistisches Bundesamt (Destatis) (2021)

In practice, the Act quickly reshaped police and court procedures. When called to suspected cases of domestic violence, officers are since then trained and legally equipped to issue immediate eviction orders (*Wegweisungen*), typically valid for 10–14 days. During this period, aggressors' keys are usually confiscated, and in some regions victims are provided with an emergency phone

to be able to contact the police in case of the offender not binding to the eviction order (Eicke, 2008). These short-term police orders give victims a crucial window to assess their situation. Regional police laws were quickly adapted to embed this new practice, though provisions and legal framework vary across states: Bavaria for instance remains the only state without a dedicated legal clause in its police law to date, whereas Schleswig-Holstein recently extended the maximum eviction period that the police can impose, originally set at 14 days in 2004, to one month in 2022 (see Table B1 for an overview of when and how different states have included the residence bans formally in the state police laws). In states without a specific paragraph on domestic violence in their police law, enforcement relies on a combination of more general police law provisions, and the actual handling is largely subject to how the police interprets and applies these provisions in practice.

If the victim applies to the local family court for a longer protection period during the police eviction period, the police order usually bridges the time until a longer-term Paragraph 2 residence ban is issued. Such a ruling can extend housing rights for up to six months, without the need for a prior hearing of the aggressor or a criminal complaint by the victim. In this way, police action (short-term eviction) and court intervention (longer-term residence bans) complement each other.

Figure 2: Media reporting of "Gewaltschutzgesetz" ="Act on Protection against Violence"



Note: The figure shows the annual number of articles mentioning the term "Gewaltschutzgesetz" (the name of the Act) across all nationally available newspapers in Germany, starting in 1999 when media coverage first began. *Source:* GENIOS Newspaper Database (accessed June 2025).

For the assessment of the impact of the law, one would ideally want to have empirical evidence of the salience of the law and if the law and police evictions were actually imposed

as a result of the Act on Protection against Violence. One can think of this as a first stage. While there is no data available on the individual case or county level, there is evidence on the number of court rulings under the Act since 2003 on the federal state level. From 2003 onward, family court filings under the Act are systematically recorded through monthly reports of local courts (see Statistisches Bundesamt (Destatis) (2021)).[3] Figure 1 Panel b shows that the law resulted in over 7500 protective measures based on Section 1 and about 3000 residence bans based on Section 2 of the Act in 2003. Panel a shows that this corresponds to almost 0.05 residence bans per 1000 inhabitans in the first year after the introduction of the reform and then stabilizes at this level in the following years, confirming that courts consistently enforce long-term evictions in practice. This shift demonstrates the reform's effectiveness in lowering the threshold to initiate physical separation for victims of domestic violence. While the number of cases per 1000 inhabitants appears only slightly higher in West Germany (Panel c) compared to the East (Panel d), Figures B1 and B2 show that the development of registered cases between states, varied quite substantially.

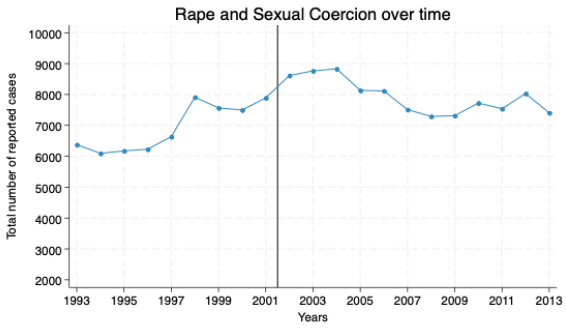
Another indicator of the reform's salience is public awareness. Figure 2 plots the annual number of newspaper articles mentioning the Act since 1999, when media coverage first began, across all nationally available newspapers in Germany.[4] Media attention peaked in 2002, the year of the law's introduction, with 244 articles published. While these outlets primarily reach a more educated readership, the sharp spike nevertheless highlights the law's broad public visibility at the time of its enactment.

[3]According to the Federal Criminal Statistical Office, no data on the number of police eviction orders are available. Their number is likely higher than court rulings, since court rulings are often preceded by a police eviction, but not all police evictions result in a subsequent court ruling under the Protection against Violence Act.

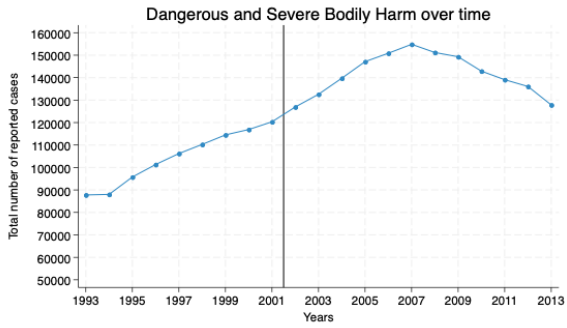
[4]The following nationwide newspapers, continuously available in the GENIOS newspaper database since 1998, are included: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ), DER SPIEGEL, Süddeutsche Zeitung (SZ), Der Tagesspiegel, DIE WELT, DIE ZEIT, Frankfurter Allgemeine Magazin, Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung (FAS), Frankfurter Rundschau, Handelsblatt, Mitteldeutsche Zeitung, Stern, Nordwest-Zeitung, WELT am SONNTAG, WirtschaftsWoche.

Figure 3: Criminal Case Development before and after the Violence Protection Act

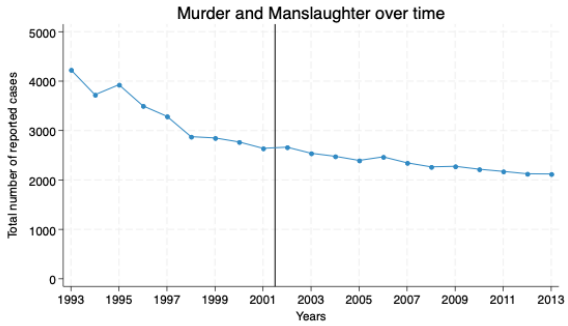
a: Rape and Sexual Coercion



b: Dangerous and Severe Bodily Harm



c: Murder and Manslaughter



Note: The figure reports annual case counts for selected violent crimes. Panel a reports crimes with the classification code "111000", panel b those with code "222000" and panel c displays the sum of codes "010000" (murder) and "020000" (manslaughter) *Source:* Bundeskriminalamt (2023).

Finally, while this paper focuses on the dissolution of marriages, it is important to note that one of the central critiques of the Act concerned the continued weakness of criminal prosecution in cases of domestic violence. The Federal Association of Rape Crisis Centres and Women's counselling centers (bff) emphasized in their ten-year evaluation of the Act, that many proceedings were dismissed or never initiated, and that three quarters of surveyed counselling centers had never observed an arrest warrant being issued for violations of the Act (Bundesverband Frauenberatungsstellen und Frauennotrufe (bff), 2012). This highlights the dual character of the reform: while victim protection improved substantially, progress in holding perpetrators legally accountable was considered limited by practitioners working within the support infrastructure.

At the same time, however, Figure 3, Panel a shows that reported cases of rape and sexual coercion, among the most prevalent forms of IPV, increase markedly after the Act came into force in January 2002, before falling back in 2005. This pattern is consistent with the idea that a latent stock of abusive cases was brought to light once the improved legal framework lowered barriers to reporting. The figure also illustrates an earlier sharp increase after 1997, the year marital rape was criminalized. Panel b plots reported cases of dangerous and severe bodily harm, which rose steadily until 2007, with a slight visible change in slope around 2001–2002. The 2003 Federal Criminal Statistical Report explicitly linked this rise to strengthened institutional

responses following the Act (Bundeskriminalamt, 2003). Panel c presents data on total number of murders and manslaughters in Germany over time. Here the trend is one of gradual decline, with no visible break in 2002, apart from the continuation of a long-term downward trajectory.

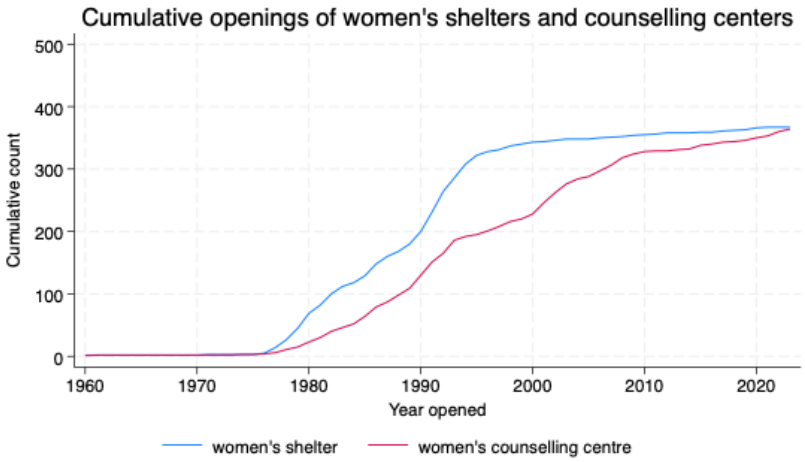
Taken together, these stylized facts suggest that while the reform directly increased the number of enforceable civil court rulings, it may also have led to raised reporting of IPV crimes, reflecting improved institutional responses and greater victim willingness to come forward (Bundeskriminalamt, 2003).

2.2 Women's Shelter and Counselling Centers

In Germany, the support system for women affected by IPV has gradually evolved over the last decades. Women's shelters are a central component, offering women (and their children) safe refuge and a place to reorganize their lives. Figure 4 displays the development of the openings of these shelters and women's counselling centers per year since the 1960s. One can see in Panel a, that openings really started to emerge in the 1980s and 1990s, while new openings for shelters did not occur as much anymore since the early/mid 2000s. Counselling centers, by contrast, experienced another increase in the years between 2000 and 2010. The overall availability changed from no dedicated women shelters or counselling centers in 1975 to over 700 women shelters and counselling centers across Germany by 2020. Importantly, all of the counselling center openings after 2002 occurred in counties that already had at least one form of infrastructure in place, meaning the expansion after the Violence Protection Act mostly reinforced existing regional networks rather than extending coverage to previously uncovered areas. These statistics are based on my own self-collected database of exact opening dates, which I describe in more detail in Section 4.

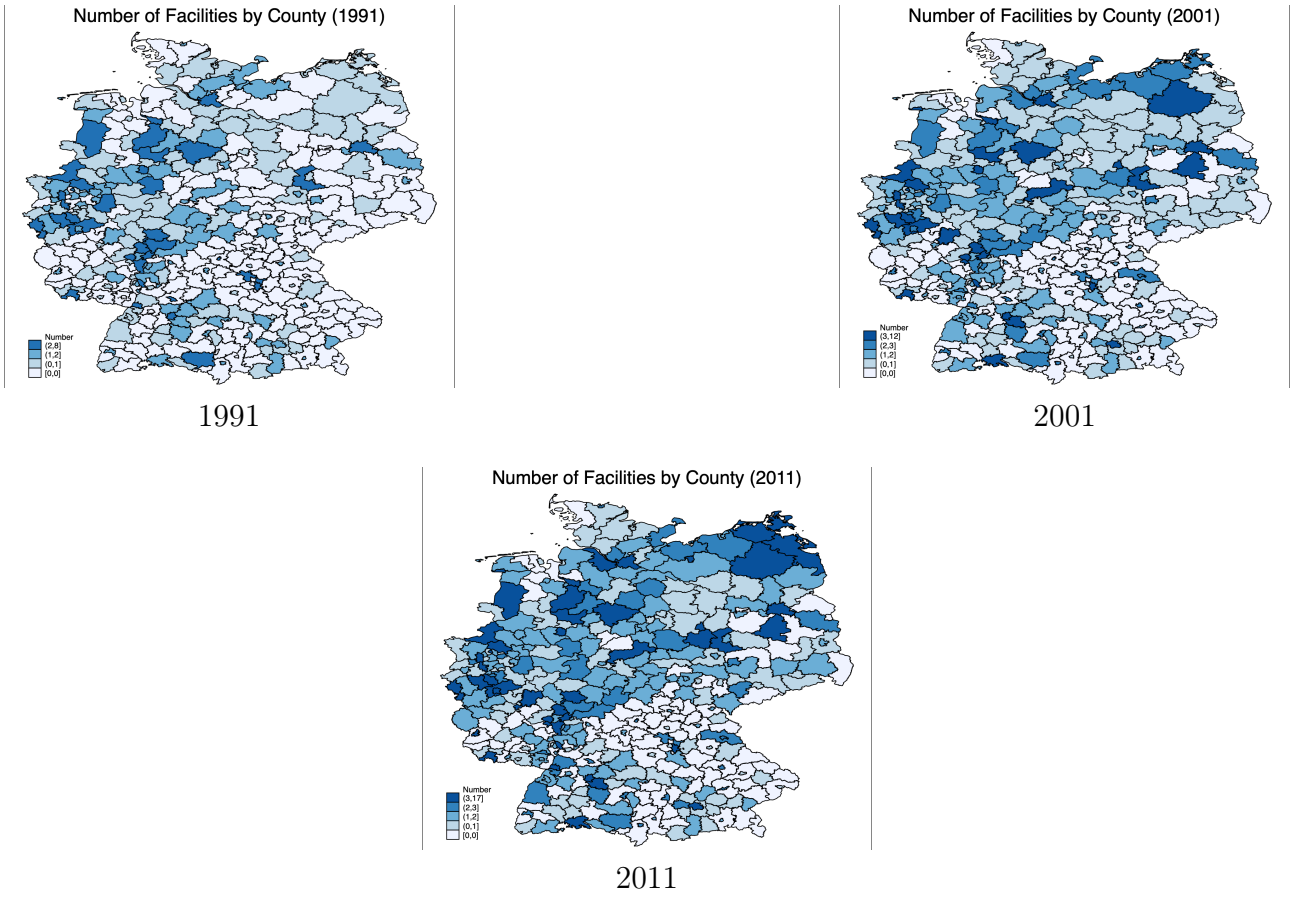
In addition to physical safety for women and their children, shelters and couselling centers provide psychosocial counseling, assistance with administrative and legal matters, and other forms of support needed during this challenging time of the victim's life. Because my database records the opening dates of both women's shelters and counselling centers separately, the empirical analysis can distinguish between these two types of infrastructure. This allows me to examine whether the reform interacts differently with counselling services, which primarily provide information and legal guidance, and shelters, which provide additional physical protection. While in the last 50 years, availability of shelters increased, the German provision still remains well below the demand and committed numbers as per Istanbul Convention (2011), the Council of Europe treaty on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (see e.g. (Deutsches Institut für Menschenrechte, 2024; Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend (BMFSFJ), 2020; Ruschmeier et al., 2023)).

Figure 4: Roll-out of women's shelters and counselling centers over time and by region



Note: The figure shows the number of shelters and counselling center openings over time. *Source:* Self-collected data.

Figure 5: Roll-out Over Time



1991 2001

2011

Note: The figure shows the number of shelters and counselling center openings over time in the different German counties. *Source:* Self-collected data.

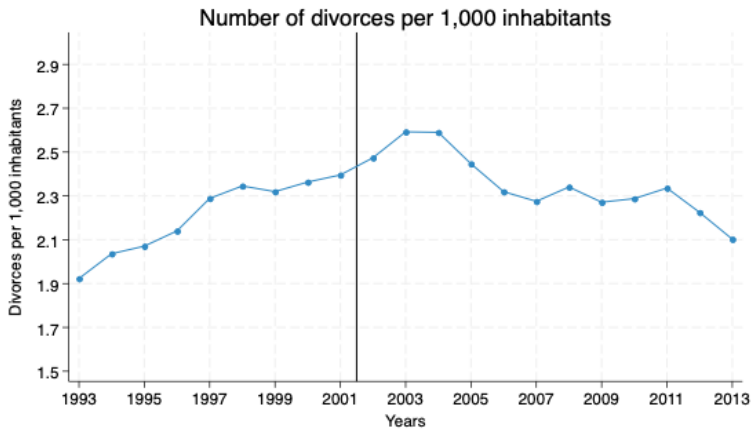
Figure 5 shows the number of facilities by county in 1991, 2001 (pre-reform), and 2011. In 1991 there was already substantial regional variation across Germany, with (south-)eastern

counties showing comparatively fewer facilities than the western counties. From 1991 to 2001 availability increased, but differences across regions remained. By 2011 coverage is broader overall, yet regional gaps persist, and especially the south continues to display relatively low counts of help infrastructure facilities.

2.3 Divorce Law and Registration of Cases

The main outcome I consider in this paper is the number of divorces per 1,000 inhabitants. Figure 6 plots all divorces (including those registered after three years of separation) from 1993 to 2013. Divorces show a steady upward trend in the ten years before the reform, with two notable breaks: in 1997, when the slope of the increase rose sharply before flattening again around 1999, and in 2003, one year after the Act on Protection against Violence, when the increase accelerated again between 2002 and 2003 before declining in 2005. Since 2006, divorce numbers have stabilized at around 2.3 per 1,000 inhabitants, before declining again after 2011. Note that the trend around the years of the reform visually roughly resembles the development of reported cases of rape and sexual coercion over time, as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 6: All divorces over time, Germany

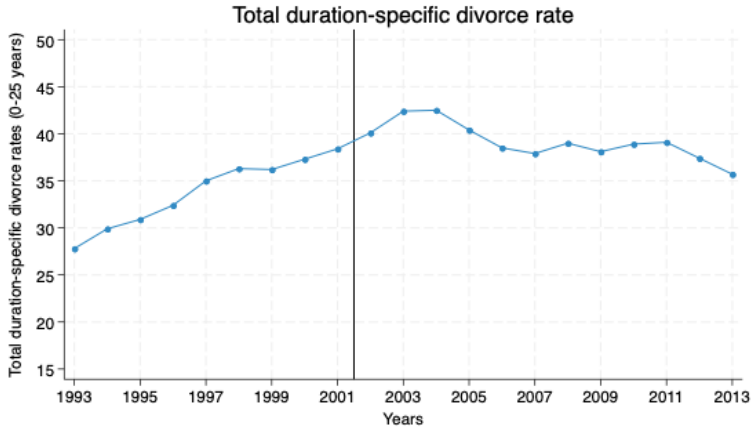


Note: This figure displays the number of divorces in Germany (all divorces). *Source:* GENESIS data base from the Federal Statistical Office (Destatis).

In principle, divorce trends can also be expressed relative to the number of marriages rather than the total population. These duration-specific rates are reported by the Federal Statistical Office only at the national level. Figure 7 therefore plots the total duration-specific divorce rate for the same period for the whole of Germany. This measure is calculated as the divorces of a marriage cohort per 100 marriages of the same cohort, for marriages lasting 0 to 25 years. In 2001, for example, given a marriage duration of between 0 and 25 years, around 38 in 100 marriages ended in divorce. While this is arguably the more intuitive measure, my analysis relies on divorce register data at the county level, which are not linked to marriage registers. For this reason, my main outcome throughout the paper is the number of divorces per 1,000 inhabitants. Reassuringly, the divorce rate and the number of divorces per 1,000 inhabitants

follow largely the same pattern over time, with the divorce rate showing about 10 percent more cases in 2003 compared to 2001, and the number of divorces per 1,000 inhabitants showing about 8 percent more cases.

Figure 7: Total duration-specific divorce rate over time, Germany



Note: This figure displays the total duration-specific divorce rate, calculated as the divorces of a marriage cohort per 100 marriages of the same cohort, for marriages lasting 0 to 25 years. Reading example: Given a marriage duration of between 0 and 25 years, around 38 marriages ended in divorce in 2001. *Source:* Federal Statistical Office (Destatis).

Since the 1977 Marriage Law Reform Act, (West-) Germany has had a unilateral no-fault divorce system. Under this law, consensual or unilateral divorces can usually be granted after one year of separation if the court accepts that the marriage has "irretrievably" broken down.[5] However, if such proof is lacking and one spouse refuses to consent, the divorce can only be granted after three years of separation. In 2001, these marriages after three years accounted for about 9 percent of all cases nationwide. Because they reflect procedural delays rather than new marital breakdowns, and because I estimate divorce changes per year up to four years after the reform, I exclude them from the main analysis. Including these cases would enlarge the estimation sample without necessarily capturing reform-related changes.[6]

Contested divorces after one year capture situations where one spouse resists separation but the court nonetheless accepts sufficient evidence that the marriage has failed. These cases are potentially particularly relevant in the context of intimate partner violence, as they may reflect situations in which the resisting partner exercises greater coercion than in unilateral divorces where consent is granted. For this reason, I treat contested divorces as a separate outcome, alongside all divorces, divorces filed by women, divorces filed by men, and those filed jointly by both spouses (for a more detailed data description and sample selection see Section 4).

[5] I also examine so-called hardship divorces (Härtefallscheidungen), which are divorces granted before the usual one-year separation period. These are extremely rare in Germany, representing only 1.7% of all cases in 2001. In situations involving domestic violence, they require victims to prove repeated abuse, which often imposes an additional burden of proof.

[6] As a robustness check, I also estimate all models using this larger sample of divorces. The results closely resemble my main findings and are available upon request by the author.

3 A Two-Stage Static Model of Household Decision-Making under Violence, Institutional Support, and Legal Constraints

3.1 Conceptual Framework

For women, leaving an abusive relationship can carry high financial, physical, psychological, and social costs (Müller and Schröttle, 2004a; Bhuller et al., 2023; Adams et al., 2024). This section introduces a two-stage model to formalize how the availability of support infrastructure in the form of women's shelters and counselling centers, as well as legal reforms such as the 2002 Act on Protection against Violence, may shape women's decisions to exit abusive marriages. The model describes how married women weigh the decision to stay or divorce, facing a certain probability of violence, and taking into account both the costs and the outside options associated with leaving. It considers how institutional interventions like the 2002 reform might both lower the cost of exit and deter violence, i.e. reduce the probability of remaining in an abusive marriage. In the first stage, I describe the pre-reform environment, where decisions are made under varying local availability of support infrastructure. The second stage then introduces the 2002 Act into this environment, capturing how the reform changes incentives.

3.2 Stage 1: Pre-Reform Environment

In the model, women differ in several dimensions: their idiosyncratic utility from marriage ε_w (e.g., companionship, social status), their disutility from experiencing violence d_w, the probability of experiencing violence π, their outside option o_w (e.g., earnings potential, family support), and individual constraints z_w (e.g., minor children in the household, immigration status, coercive control) that increase the cost of leaving.

In the pre-reform environment, women choose between staying in the marriage or exiting through divorce. They maximize utility:

$$\max \{u_m = \varepsilon_w - \pi d_w, \quad u_d = o_w - c_w(s)\},$$

where u_m is the utility from staying in the marriage and u_d is the utility from getting a divorce, i.e. leaving the marriage. The cost of exiting an abusive relationship, induced on the women, when getting a divorce is given by:

$$c_w(s) = c_0(z_w) - \alpha_s s,$$

where $s \in \{0, 1\}$ indicates the presence of at least one local support service such as a shelter or counselling center, $\alpha_s > 0$ captures the cost-lowering effect of such services, and $c_0(z_w)$ represents baseline exit costs increasing in constraints z_w.

A woman exits the relationship if:

$$\varepsilon_w < \pi d_w + o_w - c_w(s),$$

i.e., when the utility from marriage is smaller than leaving the partner. Before the legal reform introduction, which marks the Stage 2 of this model, women facing high exit costs (e.g. no shelter, $s = 0$) or low outside options and high individual constraints (e.g. language barriers, no social support network) would endure severe abuse because the threshold to leave was very high. Others with lower c_w or higher o_w and especially, with access to help infrastructure could more easily escape violence through divorce.

3.3 Stage 2: Legal Reform and Endogenous Violence

Following the introduction of a legal reform such as the 2002 Act on Protection against Violence, women reassess their choices under an updated institutional context. Legal protection is introduced with an indicator $\ell \in \{0, 1\}$, where $\ell = 1$ reflects the availability of protective legal measures such as restraining orders and enforceable police intervention in forms of residence bans of the abuser. The cost function becomes:

$$c_w(s, \ell) = c_0(z_w) - \alpha_s s - \alpha_\ell \ell$$

The updated decision rule is:

$$\varepsilon_w < \pi(s, \ell) d_w + o_w - c_w(s, \ell)$$

All else equal, for a given woman $(\varepsilon_w, d_w, o_w, z_w)$, the introduction of legal protections ($\ell = 1$) makes the right-hand side smaller (since c_w falls), thereby relaxing the condition to leave. In other words, some marriages that were "just tolerable" before may no longer satisfy the inequality once exit costs drop – those women will now opt to leave when previously they would have stayed. The reform thus should empower more women to exit abusive marriages, by lowering c_w.

3.4 Potential Deterrence Effect on Abuse Probability (π)

In addition to changing women's choices, the infrastructure and legal environment are also expected to influence the behavior of potential abusers. The presence of help infrastructure, the threat of potential restraining orders and of increased police enforcement, and general heightened legal vigilance can deter violent behavior.

The probability of experiencing violence, π, is thus endogenous and depends on the institutional environment. Drawing on Becker (1968) and Ehrlich (1973), a potential abuser commits

violence if the expected benefits outweigh the utility from legal activity, $U(y_{\text{legal}})$:

$$(1-p)\cdot U(y_{\text{crime}}) - p\cdot f > U(y_{\text{legal}})$$

Here, p denotes the probability of detection and punishment and f represents the severity of punishment, which I both assume to be increasing in s and ℓ. Thus,

$$p\uparrow \Rightarrow \pi\downarrow \quad \text{and} \quad f\uparrow \Rightarrow \pi\downarrow$$

If no legal reform is in place, p might be quite low (domestic violence often went unreported or with little immediate consequence historically), and f might also be low or not credibly enforced. In that case, an abuser might feel "safe" committing violence. Under the Becker–Ehrlich framework, the probability π of violence can be viewed as the probability that the above inequality holds – i.e. the chance the offender in question decides that abusing is "worth it." If one increases either the likelihood of punishment ($p\uparrow$) or the harshness of punishment ($f\uparrow$), the left-hand side of the inequality (net expected benefit of violence) shrinks, making it less likely to hold. In short, raising the expected cost of crime might deter the crime. The legal reform ($\ell = 1$) and improved shelter and couselling networks ($s = 1$) both contribute to raising the probability that domestic violence is detected and punished. For example, with shelters and counselling centers actively assisting victims, it may be more likely that abuse gets reported to police (increasing p). With restraining orders and more vigorous police response, an abuser who violates an order can face immediate consequences (increasing both p and the effective penalty f, since now there is a clear legal violation). Overall, the reforms send a signal that domestic violence is taken seriously by authorities (recall that post-2002 it's treated as a public offense, not a private matter). As a result, a rational offender perceives a higher chance of being caught and punished for violence. In the set up model, this will thus reduce π, the equilibrium probability of violence. In other words, some potential abusers will be deterred and will refrain from violence when faced with higher risks.

To summarize, I expect π to decrease after the reform (all else equal): $p\uparrow$ leading to $\pi\downarrow$, and $f\uparrow$ leading to $\pi\downarrow$. This deterrence effect means that not only can more women leave safely, but some may not need to leave at all because the incidence of abuse is lower (their husbands are less likely to offend under stricter enforcement).

3.5 Predictions from the Model

Combining the above elements, the theoretical model yields several key predictions about how the Act on Protection against Violence and the availability of shelters and counselling centers might affect outcomes, such as domestic violence incidence and abusive partnership dissolution through divorces:

Impact of Legal Reform with vs. without Infrastructure: In regions or contexts with a

well-developed shelter and counselling network ($s = 1$), many women already had relatively lower exit costs prior to the law (due to infrastructure reducing c_w). The new legal reform still helps these women (further lowering c_w by α_ℓ and lowering π through deterrence), but it will likely primarily benefit those cases that were most constrained – i.e. women who even with help infrastructure could not leave before (perhaps due to severe z_w constraints). In other words, the reform might reach deeper into the pool of "harder" cases, but the marginal improvement may be smaller because shelters had already enabled many to exit or avoid abuse. By contrast, in areas without prior shelter support ($s = 0$), the same legal reform is essentially the first dedicated help infrastructure these victims receive. Here the reform will affect more "marginal marriages", i.e. women who were on the fence or unable to leave at all, now suddenly have some protection framework that might enable them to leave. I therefore expect a stronger impact of the law in places that lacked shelters, since α_ℓ reaches women of an initially high(er) leaving cost. In summary, the protective effects of the 2002 law should be larger where shelters were absent, and somewhat attenuated where shelters were already helping victims.

The *deterrence channel* implies that π (the probability a woman experiences abuse) will decline after the reform, especially in the presence of enforcement. Abusers face higher expected costs (greater chance of police intervention and punishment), so they might reduce or stop their violent behavior. This would imply a decrease in domestic violence incidence in the post-reform period. Importantly, this drop in violence should occur even among some couples who stay together (the marriage continues but with less abuse due to fear of consequences). Thus, the reform would theoretically be predicted to have a violence-reducing effect. Importantly, this prediction cannot be tested with the available data, as there is no measure of actual violence incidence at the individual or county level over the full observation period.

This model thus highlights the theoretically ambiguous effects of support institutions. Both shelter infrastructure and legal reform may increase divorce filings by empowering exit, or decrease them through deterrence. Whether empowerment or deterrence dominates is ultimately an empirical question.

4 Data and Empirical Approach

4.1 Data

4.1.1 Sample Criteria and Outcomes

Divorce register database: My main outcomes come from the official German divorce register. The divorce data cover the period 1998–2005 and are based on case-level reports from family courts. These reports include the county of registration and identify which spouse files for divorce as well as demographics of the spouses such as gender, age, and nationality.[7] I

[7]Note that the register also records whether the couple had children at the time of filing. I however identified some discrepancies in the coding of these cases over time. The data are currently being reviewed by the Statistical

analyze several measures of divorce incidence, with particular attention to whether the wife initiates the divorce (either with the husband's consent or against his will). I exclude divorces finalized more than three years after the initial separation, because my data extend only four years beyond the reform.

Based on the individual information on the spouses filing for divorce and the case-specific information, I construct county–year measures of different types of divorces, normalized per 1,000 inhabitants using county population as the denominator. The resulting outcomes I evaluate are: (i) the total number of divorces, (ii) divorces filed by women, (iii) divorces filed by men, (iv) divorces filed jointly by both spouses, (v) divorces filed by women that were contested by the husband, (vi) divorces filed by men that were contested by the wife, (vii) divorces filed by German women, and (viii) divorces filed by non-German women.

I also examine so-called hardship cases ("Härtefallscheidungen"), which allow divorce before the usual one-year separation period. These are extremely rare in Germany (1.7% of cases in 2001) and, in situations involving violence, require victims to prove repeated abuse. Many therefore forgo this additional burden of proof and instead unilaterally file for divorce, which is granted once the couple has credibly lived apart for one year and the court deems the marriage "failed."

4.1.2 Infrastructure Measure

Women's shelter and counselling center database: To capture the availability of support infrastructure, I compile a novel dataset on women's shelters and counselling centers in Germany. As a baseline, I use the comprehensive list of all institutions maintained by the German Association of Women's Shelters as of 2023.[8] Of the 746 institutions listed, 369 are shelters and 377 are counselling centers.

I supplement this baseline information of all centers with a short survey with all listed shelters and counselling centers, requesting data on their year of opening and initial capacity, reaching back to the mid-1970s.[9]

The dataset documents the expansion of protective services over time, though it does not capture closures. To validate the data and ensure that closed shelters are not systematically missing, I compare the number of operating shelters in my database on the state

Offices, and heterogeneity by the presence of children will be incorporated in future versions of the paper once the coding is clarified and harmonized. These cases are of particular interest, as they are likely to reflect situations with higher z_w and therefore higher baseline costs to leave an abusive relationship, i.e. individual constraints to get a divorce are higher for this group of couples.

[8]The baseline list was retrieved in May 2023 from Frauenhauskoordinierung e.V. – Shelter and Counseling Center Search. See Figure C1.

[9]Given strict data security protocols, a standard survey link could not be used. Instead, each institution (both shelters and counselling centers) received a pre-structured table requesting the year of opening and initial capacity. For those institutions that did not reply to the survey, I completed the opening years based on web-based research Through these two methods I obtained opening years for all but 11 institutions. For these remaining ones, I imputed average opening dates at the state level. Capacity information was unfortunately reported very inconsistently and contained too many missing values to be used systematically in the analysis. Appendix C presents the initial map of institutions as well as the survey email sent to the shelters.

level with numbers published by the Federal Ministry in 2012 (Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend (BMFSFJ), 2012). The numbers align closely across states, supporting the accuracy of the dataset for at least the last ten years. In addition, a keyword search in the GENIOS newspaper database for the German phrases "Frauenhaus" AND "muss schließen" ("women's shelter" AND "must close") and "Frauenberatungsstelle" AND "muss schließen" ("women's counselling center" AND "must close") yields a total of only eleven results between 1960 and today, further suggesting that closures have been very rare events.

At the same time, the overall supply of shelters in Germany remains well below demand and below the commitments under the Istanbul Convention, underscoring the structural shortage of protective services until today.

4.2 Descriptives

In Table 1, I present baseline means of county-level characteristics and divorce outcomes for the year 2001, separately for East and West Germany as well as for Germany as a whole. All counties are recoded to match the 2023 administrative boundaries, which correspond to the county composition used in the regional characteristics statistics (INKAR) that I merge to the dataset (Bundesinstitut für Bau-, Stadt- und Raumforschung (BBSR), 2025). This results in an analysis sample of 400 counties, of which 76 lie in East Germany and 324 in West Germany.

The descriptive statistics reveal substantial regional differences in socioeconomic conditions. Eastern counties are on average smaller and less densely populated, with markedly higher unemployment rates (17.3% versus 7.1% in the West), lower GDP per capita, and a much smaller share of foreign residents (2.3% compared to 8.6%).

Turning to divorce outcomes, the average number of divorces per 1,000 inhabitants is 2.15 across Germany, with slightly lower values in the East (1.98) than in the West (2.19). This pattern reflects East Germany's distinct divorce trajectory: divorce numbers, which were initially higher in the East, dropped substantially after reunification in the early 1990s and only gradually began to catch up thereafter.

The number of divorces filed jointly by both spouses is comparatively low, at 0.15 per 1,000 inhabitants, which corresponds to about 7 percent of all divorces. These cases can be considered "amicable" divorces, where both partners agree to separate and coordinate the process together. In the East, joint filings make up about 4 percent of divorces (0.08 out of 1.98 per 1,000), compared to 8 percent in the West (0.17 out of 2.19).

Women are the main initiators of divorce: in 2001, 1.24 divorces per 1,000 inhabitants were filed by women, corresponding to about 57 percent of all filed cases in the database, compared to 0.76 per 1,000 filed by men (35 percent). In the East, women accounted for 65 percent of filings (1.29 out of 1.98), while in the West the share was 56 percent (1.23 out of 2.19).

Table 1: County descriptives, including divorce baseline means per county, 2001

	Germany	**East**	**West**
Control variables			
Population density	523.5 (671.9)	334.4 (557.3)	567.9 (689.3)
Unemployment rate (%)	9.00 (4.83)	17.34 (3.04)	7.05 (2.54)
Foreign population share (%)	7.38 (4.68)	2.27 (1.61)	8.58 (4.35)
GDP per capita (1,000 EUR)	24.43 (11.03)	17.17 (4.43)	26.13 (11.42)
Rent subsidy (%)[10]	91.34 (5.96)	89.24 (5.86)	91.83 (5.88)
Women aged 15–65 (total)	68,672 (79,138)	77,193 (134,663)	66,673 (59,199)
SPD vote share (%)	37.52 (9.49)	41.23 (5.39)	36.65 (10.03)
Divorce outcomes (per 1,000 inhabitants)			
All divorces	2.15 (0.43)	1.98 (0.53)	2.19 (0.40)
Filed by both	0.15 (0.23)	0.08 (0.15)	0.17 (0.25)
Filed by women	1.24 (0.29)	1.29 (0.38)	1.23 (0.27)
Filed by men	0.76 (0.20)	0.61 (0.18)	0.79 (0.19)
Filed by women (contested)	0.12 (0.26)	0.23 (0.41)	0.09 (0.20)
Filed by men (contested)	0.06 (0.14)	0.11 (0.19)	0.05 (0.13)
Filed by German women	1.17 (0.28)	1.27 (0.37)	1.14 (0.25)
Observations (counties)	400	76	324

Note: Table shows means per county in 2001 with standard deviations in parentheses. *Source:* Control variables: Bundesinstitut für Bau-, Stadt- und Raumforschung (BBSR) (2025); Divorce outcomes: Research Data Centre of the Federal Statistical Office and Statistical Offices of the Federal States of Germany (2025), own calculations.

Contested divorces, which are those initiated by one spouse, actively opposed by the other, but ultimately granted by the court after one year of separation, are relatively rare, accounting for about 6 percent of all divorces, for those filed by women (0.12 out of 2.15) and about 3 percent of all divorces for those filed by men (0.06 out of 2.15). These cases are more common in the East, where women's contested filings correspond to 12 percent of all divorces (0.23 out of 1.98), compared to 4 percent in the West (0.09 out of 2.15). Divorces filed by men, contested by women, make up 6 percent of all divorces in the East (0.11 out of 1.98) and 2 percent in the West (0.05 out of 2.19).

Finally, most divorces are filed by women with German nationality, who account for about 94 percent of women's filings (1.17 out of 1.24 divorces per 1,000 inhabitants). The remaining 6 percent are filed by non-German women, almost all of them in West Germany (0.09 out of 1.23, about 7 percent of women's filings there) compared to only 0.02 in the East (about 2

[10] Among housing-allowance recipients (rent component only).

percent of women's filings), reflecting the much smaller share of foreign residents in the East at the time.[11]

Overall, these descriptive patterns underscore both the regional disparities in socioeconomic context and the importance of distinguishing divorce dynamics by gender and contestation, which provide the basis for the subsequent analysis.

4.3 Empirical Strategy and Model Specifications

This section outlines the empirical strategy I use to investigate how the number of divorces changed after the introduction of the 2002 Act on Protection against Violence. The reform constitutes a national law that affects all of Germany simultaneously, for example through changes in police practices, restraining order enforcement, and other protective measures, regardless of local shelter infrastructure. Given this setting, the empirical strategy proceeds in three steps.

First, I use pooled before/after specifications (see Equation 1) to establish whether any systematic change in divorce outcomes occurred following the reform, controlling for potential confounders on the county and state level, as well as including a linear time trend. This national pre-post design captures the average post-reform shift across the entire country.

Second, I estimate a dynamic specification (see Equation 2) that estimates year-by-year deviations from the pre-reform baseline year of 2001. This allows me to assess the timing and persistence of the potential changes in divorce numbers.

Finally, I extend the analysis to examine heterogeneity in infrastructure by classifying counties into those with and without shelter or counselling center infrastructure at the time of the reform and running a pre-post model to estimate the interaction of the reform and having been exposed to infrastructure prior to the reform. This estimation is introduced in Section 6. All models are estimated for the full sample of counties as well as separately for East and West Germany to account for state-level differences in baseline levels and potential responsiveness to the reform.

4.3.1 Pooled Pre–Post Estimation with Linear Trend

The first step of the empirical analysis examines whether the number of divorces changed on average after the introduction of the 2002 Act on Protection against Violence, by comparing the post-reform to the pre-reform period. The main specification includes a common linear time trend to account for general developments in divorce numbers over time that are unrelated to the reform.

$$y_{ct} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \cdot \text{Post2002}_t + \beta_2 \cdot t + \alpha_c + \mathbf{X}_{ct}\gamma + \varepsilon_{ct}, \tag{1}$$

[11] Note that foreign nationals can file for divorce in Germany if German courts have jurisdiction, typically because at least one spouse resides in the country.

where y_{ct} denotes the outcome of interest, i.e. the number of divorces per 1,000 inhabitants in county c and year t, Post2002$_t$ is a dummy variable equal to 1 for years from 2002 onwards and 0 otherwise, and t is a linear time trend. County fixed effects α_c control for time-invariant unobserved heterogeneity at the county level, and $\mathbf{X}_{ct}$ is a vector of time-varying county-level controls. The error term ε_{ct} is clustered at the county level. The main estimate of interest is β_1, which captures the associated change in the number of divorces per 1,000 inhabitants.

The control vector $\mathbf{X}_{ct}$ includes the population density, unemployment rate, foreign population share, GDP per capita, the share of households receiving housing benefits, the number of women aged 15 to 65, and the SPD vote share matched to the next federal election (i.e., 1998, 2002, or 2005, depending on the year). This specification captures the average change in divorce outcomes in the post-reform years, net of long-term linear trends and observed time-varying county characteristics.

4.3.2 Dynamic (Year-by-Year) Model

In a second step, I estimate a dynamic specification to capture the temporal evolution of divorce outcomes around the reform. This model estimates year-by-year deviations from the pre-reform baseline year 2001:

$$y_{ct} = \beta_0 + \sum_{k \neq 0} \delta_k \cdot [\text{Year} = 2001 + k] + \alpha_c + \mathbf{X}_{ct}\gamma + \varepsilon_{ct}, \tag{2}$$

where $[\text{Year} = 2001 + k]$ are year-specific dummy variables capturing deviations from 2001. County fixed effects α_c control for time-invariant heterogeneity, while $\mathbf{X}_{ct}$ is the same vector of time-varying controls as above. The coefficients δ_k measure the annual difference in the outcome relative to 2001, net of controls.

5 Results

The results are presented in three steps. First, I estimate the average change in divorce filings after 2002. Second, I examine the year-by-year dynamics of divorce rates around the reform. Finally, I analyze how the reform's association with divorce varies by the availability of local support infrastructure.

5.1 Post-Reform Average Changes in Divorce Filings

Table 2 presents the estimates of β_1 from the pooled before/after specifications for several divorce outcomes. Each column corresponds to a different specification: column (1) includes no controls, column (2) adds state and county fixed effects together with time-varying county characteristics, column (3) additionally includes a common linear time trend and presents the main specification as described in Section 4.3.1, Equation 1, and column (4) further adds

county-specific linear time trends to account for potential within-county trends unrelated to the reform.

Table 2: Post Estimates for Divorce Outcomes

Divorce outcomes (per 1,000 inhabitants)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
All divorces	0.131***	0.182***	0.149***	0.141***
	(0.014)	(0.016)	(0.019)	(0.023)
Filed by women	0.010	0.058***	0.096***	0.091***
	(0.010)	(0.011)	(0.013)	(0.016)
Filed by men	0.088***	0.090***	0.051***	0.050***
	(0.006)	(0.007)	(0.008)	(0.010)
Filed by both	0.034***	0.034***	0.002	0.000
	(0.006)	(0.008)	(0.008)	(0.009)
Filed by women (contested)	-0.012	0.001	0.012	0.012
	(0.019)	(0.020)	(0.020)	(0.019)
Filed by men (contested)	-0.001	0.005	0.006	0.007
	(0.005)	(0.006)	(0.004)	(0.006)
Controls	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
County FE	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Linear Time Trend	No	No	Yes	Yes
County × Linear Time Trends	No	No	No	Yes
N	9600	9600	9600	9600

Note: Each column reports the coefficient on the Post-2002 indicator from a panel regression of the given outcome on Post-2002 (and additional terms as specified) using 1998–2005 data. Specifications in columns (2)–(4) include state and county fixed effects and the full set of controls. A common linear time trend is included in columns (3) and (4), and column (4) additionally includes county-specific linear trends. Outcomes are measured as divorces per 1,000 inhabitants. N denotes the number of *county* × *year* observations. Robust standard errors, clustered at the county level, are reported in parentheses. ***, **, * denote significance at the 1%, 5%, and 10% levels. *Source:* Control variables: Bundesinstitut für Bau-, Stadt- und Raumforschung (BBSR) (2025); Divorce outcomes: Research Data Centre of the Federal Statistical Office and Statistical Offices of the Federal States of Germany (2025), own calculations.

For all divorces combined, the estimated association with the post-2002 period is positive and statistically significant across all specifications. The size of the estimate remains relatively stable across specifications, with the main estimate in column (3) at 0.149. This corresponds to an increase of approximately 6.9% relative to the baseline mean of 2.15 divorces per 1,000 inhabitants in 2001 (Table 1).

When disaggregating by filing spouse, distinct patterns emerge. For divorces filed by men, the estimate is large and highly significant in the raw comparison (1) and in specification (2), but the magnitude declines once a linear time trend is added. In the main specification (3), the coefficient is 0.051, amounting to a 6.7% increase relative to the pre-reform average of 0.76 per 1,000 inhabitants. For divorces filed by women, by contrast, the estimate is close to zero in the raw estimation, but becomes positive and statistically significant once state and county fixed effects are included. The estimate further increases once linear time trends are accounted

for: in column (3), the coefficient for women is 0.096, corresponding to a 7.7% rise relative to the baseline mean of 1.24. Joint filings increase significantly in columns (1) and (2), but the association disappears once linear time trends are included.

These shifts suggest underlying time trends affecting estimates for divorce filings differently by gender and type, which further motivates examining the year-by-year dynamics in the next section.

For contested divorces, the results differ from the overall pattern. Divorces filed by women and contested by men remain statistically insignificant across all specifications. Similarly, for contested divorces filed by men, the coefficients are small and not statistically distinguishable from zero in any specification.

Table D1 reports results separately for West and East Germany. The post-2002 increase is concentrated in the West, where the main specification (3) shows a rise of 0.163 divorces per 1,000 inhabitants, about 7.4% relative to the West German baseline mean of 2.19 (Table 1). Women's filings increase by 0.104, or 8.5% relative to their baseline mean of 1.17, while men's filings rise by 0.055 from a baseline of 0.79, so by about about 6.9%. In the East, the only clear association appears in column (2), where all divorces rise by 0.097 per 1,000 inhabitants (about 4.9% relative to the East German baseline mean of 1.98), driven mainly by men's filings increasing. This estimate becomes small and not significant once we include a linear time trend.

Finally, Table E1 explores heterogeneity by nationality, displaying results from the main specification (3), including linear trends. The post-reform increase appears for both German and non-German women, though the relative change is larger for non-German women: about 7.6% (German) compared to 10% (non-German) when benchmarked against their respective baseline means of 1.17 and 0.07 divorces per 1,000 inhabitants. Table F1 shows results for the number of hardship divorces from the main specification (3). There appear no significant changes in the number of hardship cases filed by men or women, looking at the pooled regression estimate.

To assess whether these changes reflect gradual take-up, temporary spikes, or whether some dynamics are absorbed by the inclusion of a linear trend, I now turn to the year-by-year analysis.

5.2 Year-by-Year Dynamics in Divorce Filings

This section examines the same divorce outcomes as in the previous section but now traces their development year by year around the reform. Unlike the pooled post-reform estimates, these specifications do not include linear time trends, allowing a clearer view of how divorce numbers evolve relative to the 2001 baseline.

Figure 8 illustrates the year-by-year deviations in divorce outcomes relative to 2001. For all divorces combined, coefficients show a modest upward trajectory already before 2001, reflecting the stronger pre-trend in divorces filed by men. After 2002, all divorces increase further, peaking in 2003 at an increase of 0.18, relative to 2001. This corresponds to an increase of roughly 8.4%

relative to the baseline mean of 2.15 divorces per 1,000 inhabitants (Table 1), before returning closer to baseline by 2005.

For divorces filed by women, there is no evidence of pre-trends: all coefficients before 2001 are close to zero. Starting in 2002, however, women's filings rise immediately, reaching a peak in 2003 at an increase of 0.078 divorces per 1,000 inhabitants, which represents a 6.3% increase relative to the baseline mean of 1.24. The estimates then decline again substantially by 2005. This dynamic pattern helps explain why the pooled post-2002 estimates become larger once linear time trends are included.

By contrast, divorces filed by men follow a somewhat different trajectory. They appear to be on a steady upward trend already before 2001, which continues in the immediate post-reform years. The increase peaks at 0.050 divorces per 1,000 inhabitants in 2003, corresponding to about 6.6% relative to the baseline mean of 0.76, before declining again in 2005.

For divorces filed jointly by both spouses, coefficients are significantly negative in the years before 2002 but start to rise gradually afterward. The upward slope becomes steeper from 2002 on, with the series peaking at 0.068 in 2005 (about 45% of the 2001 baseline mean of 0.15). This pattern helps explain why the pooled pre/post estimates turn insignificant once linear time trends are included.

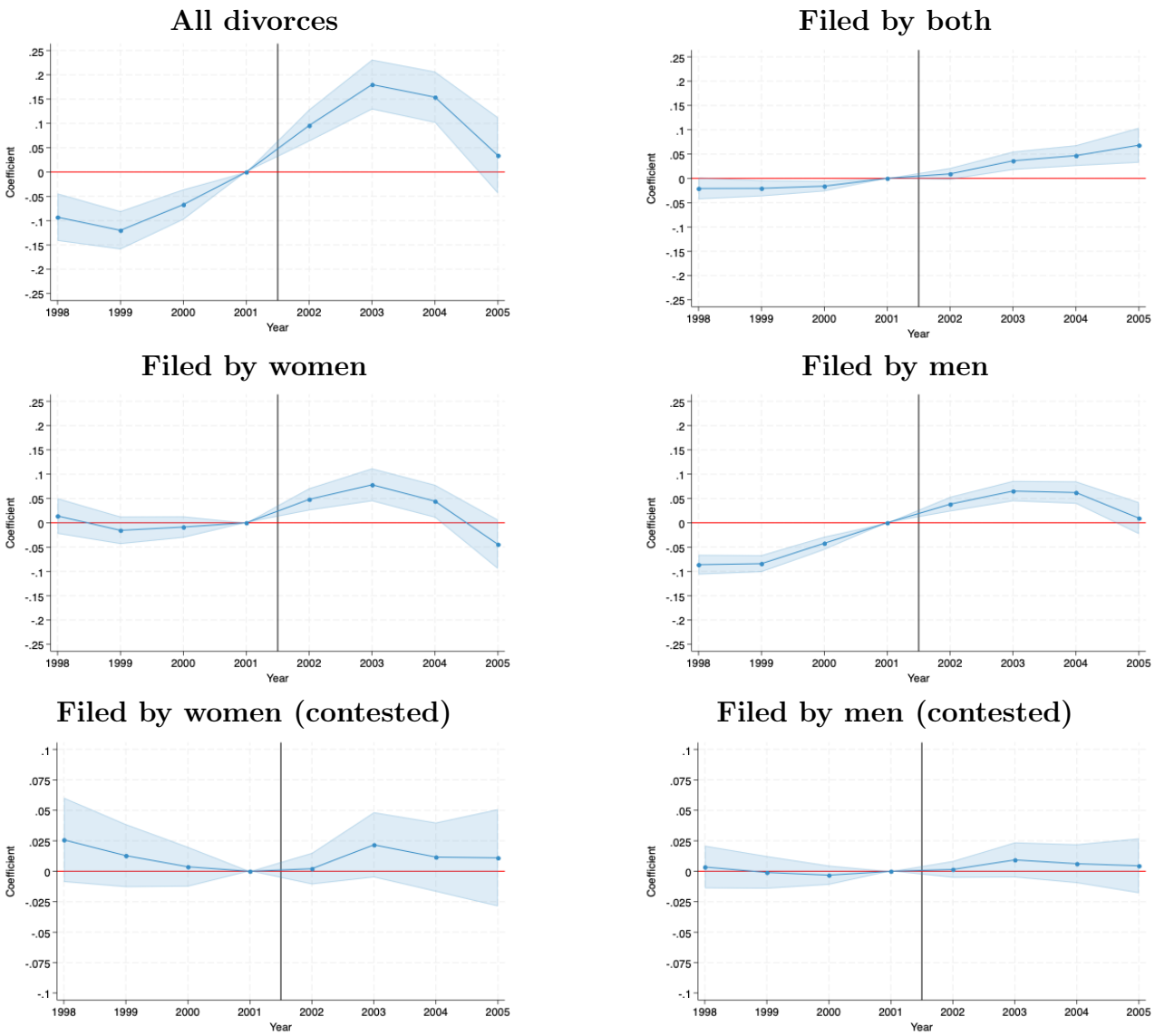
For contested divorces, coefficients are small and statistically insignificant for the whole sample. Figures D1 and D2 confirm that most observed dynamics are driven primarily by West Germany.[12] A noteworthy detail is that divorces filed by women but contested by their husbands had been on a steady downward trend prior to 2002 in West Germany. After the introduction of the reform, however, this decline appears to have halted, with contested divorces stabilizing around the 2001 level continuously until the end of the observation period in 2005. A similar, though less pronounced, pattern emerges for divorces filed by men and contested by women.

When disaggregated by nationality, the dynamic estimates show that both German and non-German women, as well as men, experience post-2002 increases in divorce filings (Figures E1). For German filers these resemble the overall patterns closely. Notably, for non-German women the estimates not only rise after the reform but also remain significant and positive beyond 2004, suggesting a more persistent shift compared to the temporary spike observed for divorces filed by German women. For divorces filed by women, the coefficients were slightly negative and trending upward prior to 2001, before increasing sharply after 2002. The estimate reaches 0.016 additional divorces per 1,000 inhabitants in 2004, corresponding to about 23% of the baseline mean of 0.07 in 2001. For men, the pre-reform pattern mirrors that of German men, with stronger upward pre-trends that continue to grow until 2003 before stabilizing thereafter.

[12] In the East German subsample, standard errors widen substantially after 2003. This is due to the inclusion of SPD vote shares as a control variable, which are matched to the subsequent federal election year. From 2003 onwards, the model incorporates the results of the 2005 election, when SPD support declined markedly in several East German counties. This additional variation makes estimates less precise without necessarily reflecting changes in divorce behavior.

Lastly, Figure F1 shows no significant change in the number of hardship divorces after 2001 compared to earlier years.

Figure 8: Year-by-Year Deviations in Divorce Outcomes, Relative to 2001



Note: Each panel plots year-specific coefficients from regressions of the indicated outcome on year dummies, relative to 2001, using 1998–2005 data. All models include state and county fixed effects, and a full set of time-varying controls. Outcomes are measured as divorces per 1,000 inhabitants. Confidence bands indicate 5% significance levels. Robust standard errors are clustered at the county level. *Source:* Control variables: Bundesinstitut für Bau-, Stadt- und Raumforschung (BBSR) (2025); Divorce outcomes: Research Data Centre of the Federal Statistical Office and Statistical Offices of the Federal States of Germany (2025), own calculations.

Overall, the dynamic estimates point to a sharp but temporary increase in divorces filed by women following the reform, consistent with the detection of a latent stock of marriages, followed by a decrease in the fourth year after the reform. For men, the pattern looks more like the continuation of a pre-existing upward trend, though both series converge to a decline after 2004, hinting at longer-term deterrence or compositional changes in marriage formation.

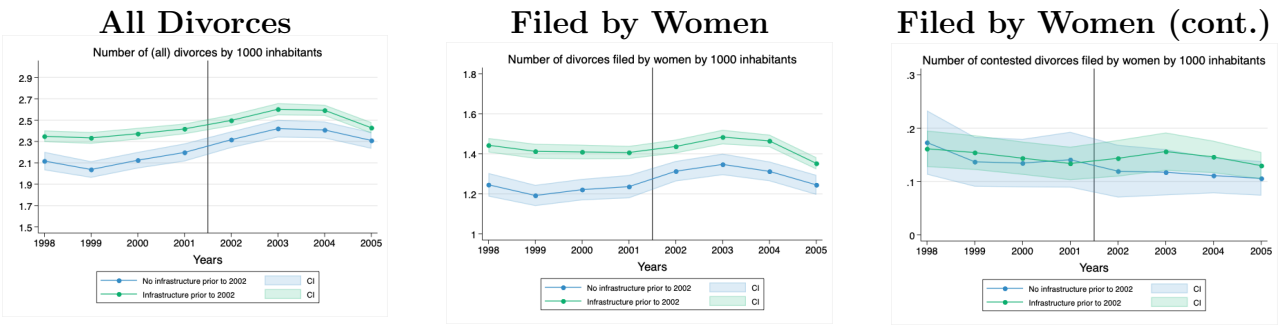
These patterns suggest that a stock of divorces may have been revealed through the reform, with potentially fewer abusive marriages persisting in the longer run.

6 Heterogeneities by Pre-reform Infrastructure Availability

6.1 Descriptives by Infrastructure Availability

The previous section has shown that divorce filings rose in the years after the reform, particularly those initiated by women. A next question, directly following from the theoretical model predictions, is whether these changes unfolded differently depending on the presence of local support infrastructure. In counties where women's shelters and counselling centers already existed before 2002, women had lower leaving costs because these services provided immediate protection and assistance. The reform still lowered costs further in these areas, but its main effect in such contexts was likely smaller and concentrated among the most constrained cases, i.e. women who could not leave even with access to local services. By contrast, in counties without prior infrastructure, the 2002 law effectively acted as the first dedicated mechanism to reduce leaving costs. In these places, the reform was more likely to enable women on the margin of leaving, to separate, leading to a predicted stronger overall impact. In line with the model, I would therefore expect larger increases in divorce filings in counties without pre-existing infrastructure, and somewhat smaller changes where shelters or counselling centers were already in place.

Figure 9: Divorces over time by county infrastructure exposure



Note: The figure plots county-level raw means of divorces per 1,000 inhabitants (including divorces registered after three years), averaged separately for counties with and without a women's shelter or counselling center prior to 2002. The left panel shows all divorces, the middle panel divorces filed by women, and the right panel divorces filed by women contested by men. *Source:* Divorce measures: Research Data Centre of the Federal Statistical Office and Statistical Offices of the Federal States of Germany (2025), own calculations; Infrastructure measure: self-collected database of women's shelter and counselling center openings (1970–2023)

Figure 9 provides a first visual impression by plotting divorce trends separately for counties with and without prior infrastructure. It indicates that, prior to 2002, raw divorce numbers were consistently higher in counties that already had shelters or counselling centers. After the

reform, the gap between counties with and without infrastructure narrows slightly, suggesting that counties without prior services may have caught up once the law reduced barriers to separation from abusive partners. This pattern is visible for all divorces and for divorces filed by women. By contrast, for divorces filed by women and contested by men, no clear differences emerge across county types, nor are there visible changes after 2002.

Table 3: Baseline county characteristics by infrastructure exposure, 2001

	With infrastructure	**Without infrastructure**
Population density	651.17 (744.29)	195.32 (198.12)
Unemployment rate (%)	9.64 (4.93)	7.38 (4.15)
Foreign population share (%)	8.12 (4.98)	5.46 (3.09)
GDP per capita (1,000 EUR)	25.96 (12.09)	20.48 (6.15)
Rent subsidy (%)[13]	92.63 (5.42)	88.03 (6.01)
Women aged 15–65 (total)	78,087.35 (90,297.46)	44,460.14 (24,671.79)
SPD vote share (%)	39.40 (8.74)	32.70 (9.69)
CDU vote share (%)	38.32 (11.22)	48.94 (14.69)
Observations (counties)	288	112

Note: Table shows means per county in 2001 with standard deviations in parentheses. *Source:* County characteristics: Bundesinstitut für Bau-, Stadt- und Raumforschung (BBSR) (2025); Infrastructure measure: self-collected database of women's shelter and counselling center openings (1970–2023)

6.2 Estimation Strategy – Interaction Model

To formally assess whether there are heterogeneities in the changes of divorces post reform, depending on infrastructure presence, I estimate an interaction model comparing counties with and without shelter and counselling center availability before the 2002 legal reform. The specification allows the association between the reform and divorce outcomes to vary by pre-existing infrastructure. The regression equation is:

$$y_{ct} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \cdot (\text{Post2002}_t \times \text{Shelter}_c) + \alpha_c + \alpha_s + \alpha_t + \mathbf{X}_{ct}\gamma + \varepsilon_{ct}, \tag{3}$$

where $Shelter_c$ is a dummy variable equal to 1 if a women's shelter or counselling center existed in county c before 2002. The interaction term β_1 captures whether counties with pre-existing support infrastructure are associated with different changes in divorce outcomes after the reform. In this specification, I include county, state, and year fixed effects, as well as the full set of controls. Standard errors are clustered at the county level.

[13] Among housing-allowance recipients (rent component only).

To explore potential heterogeneity in the type of infrastructure and the intensity of exposure, I focus on two dimensions. First, I distinguish between counties that had at least one women's shelter prior to 2002 and those that had at least one counselling center. Second, I construct a measure of the intensity of support infrastructure prior to the reform, classifying counties into no, medium, and high density categories, measured as the number of shelters and counselling centers per 1,000 inhabitants.[14]

Finally, since the reform coincided with a federal election year, I interact the post-reform period with a dummy indicating whether county-level vote shares for the SPD, the main governing party at the time, were above or below the median in the 2002 election, to account for the possibility that observed heterogeneity across counties partly reflects shifts in the political climate rather than the reform itself.

6.3 Results

Table 4 presents the interaction estimates between the post-2002 period and the presence of pre-existing infrastructure, reported for all divorce outcomes. Each column corresponds to a different model specification. Column (1) provides simple pooled estimates without controls. Column (2) adds time-varying county characteristics. Column (3) further includes county and year fixed effects together with a common linear time trend. Column (4) serves as a robustness test, adding an additional interaction between Post-2002 and a categorical indicator for whether the SPD vote share in the 2002 federal election was above or below the median, to test whether heterogeneity across counties is explained by political shifts rather than infrastructure.

The theoretical model predicts that the law should be associated with stronger increases in divorces in counties without prior infrastructure (where baseline exit costs were highest) and more muted increases in counties with pre-existing infrastructure. This is precisely what emerges in Table 4.

Across all specifications, the interaction coefficients are consistently negative for the number of divorces overall and for divorces filed by women, indicating that the post-2002 increase in divorces is less pronounced in counties with pre-existing shelters or advisory centers. For divorces filed by women, the estimates are statistically significant in all specifications and remain highly stable in magnitude once controls and time trends are introduced. This stability reinforces the interpretation that the availability of infrastructure attenuated the responsiveness of divorce filings to the reform.

[14] Additional results using a categorical measure distinguishing whether new openings occurred between 2002 and 2005 are available upon request. These specifications show that new openings after 2002 were not driving the results, since all new openings occurred in counties that already had prior infrastructure.

Table 4: Interaction Estimates: Infrastructure × Post-2002 for Divorce Outcomes

Divorce outcomes (per 1,000 inhabitants)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
All divorces	-0.072**	-0.066**	-0.067**	-0.089**
	(0.029)	(0.030)	(0.029)	(0.030)
Filed by women	-0.054**	-0.051**	-0.054**	-0.065***
	(0.020)	(0.020)	(0.020)	(0.021)
Filed by men	-0.024*	-0.021	-0.023	-0.034**
	(0.012)	(0.018)	(0.017)	(0.015)
Filed by both	0.005	0.006	0.010	0.010
	(0.012)	(0.013)	(0.013)	(0.012)
Filed by women (contested)	0.030	0.026	0.032	0.025
	(0.021)	(0.021)	(0.021)	(0.016)
Filed by men (contested)	0.015	0.012	0.016	0.010
	(0.012)	(0.012)	(0.012)	(0.013)
Controls	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
County FE	No	No	Yes	Yes
Year FE	No	No	Yes	Yes
Linear time trend	No	No	Yes	Yes
Post2002 × SPD(2002)	No	No	No	Yes

Note: Each column reports coefficients on the interaction between pre-2002 infrastructure availability (indicator equals 1 if a women's shelter and/or a counselling center existed in the county before 2002) and a Post-2002 indicator, using data from 1998–2005. Column (1): no controls. Column (2): time-varying county controls. Column (3): adds county and year fixed effects and a common linear time trend. Column (4): adds an interaction between Post-2002 and a binary indicator for above-median SPD vote share in the 2002 federal election. Outcomes are measured as divorces per 1,000 inhabitants. Robust standard errors clustered at the county level in parentheses. ***, **, * denote $p < 0.01$, $p < 0.05$, $p < 0.10$. *Source:* Control variables: Bundesinstitut für Bau-, Stadt- und Raumforschung (BBSR) (2025); Divorce outcomes: Research Data Centre of the Federal Statistical Office and Statistical Offices of the Federal States of Germany (2025), own calculations; Infrastructure measure: self-collected database of women's shelter and counselling center openings (1970–2023).

Table 5 reports the separate coefficients for the post-2002 period and infrastructure availability alongside the interaction term. These can only be shown for specifications (1) and (2), since year and county fixed effects in the richer models absorb the estimates of the Post-2002 and infrastructure indicators. Looking at the Post-2002 estimates together with the interaction, these results imply, that divorces filed by women rise by about 6% compared to their 2001 baseline mean in counties without infrastructure but only around 2% in those with help services. For all divorces, the corresponding increases are roughly 12% compared to about 3%, though

here the interpretation should be more cautious given that men's filings followed different linear trends, which are not taken into account in the given specifications.

For divorces filed by men, the interaction coefficients are also negative but smaller in size and less robust across specifications. Jointly filed divorces show no systematic differences between counties with and without infrastructure, with all coefficients close to zero and statistically insignificant.

Turning to contested divorces, the estimates for women's contested filings are positive across specifications but not statistically significant. For men's contested filings, the coefficients are positive but likewise indistinguishable from zero. These patterns suggest that infrastructure primarily moderates unilateral exits initiated by women, while contested divorces remain relatively rare and less systematically related to pre-existing services. Similarly, Table F2 shows no significant differences for hardship cases.

Table 5: Full Interaction Model: Infrastructure × Post-2002 for Divorce Outcomes

	All divorces		Filed by women	
	(1)	(2)	(1)	(2)
Post-2002	0.183***	0.247***	0.049**	0.076***
	(0.024)	(0.025)	(0.016)	(0.017)
Infrastructure	0.238***	0.003	0.180***	0.016
	(0.043)	(0.039)	(0.030)	(0.033)
Post × Infrastructure	-0.072**	-0.066**	-0.054**	-0.051**
	(0.029)	(0.030)	(0.020)	(0.020)
Controls	No	Yes	No	Yes
State FE	No	Yes	No	Yes
Observations	9600	9600	9600	9600

Note: Estimates from models (1) and (2) corresponding to Table 4. Standard errors in parentheses, clustered at the county level. ***, **, * denote $p < 0.01$, $p < 0.05$, $p < 0.10$. *Source:* Control variables: Bundesinstitut für Bau-, Stadt- und Raumforschung (BBSR) (2025); Divorce outcomes: Research Data Centre of the Federal Statistical Office and Statistical Offices of the Federal States of Germany (2025), own calculations; Infrastructure measure: self-collected database of women's shelter and counselling center openings (1970–2023)

Tables D2 and D3 present the interaction estimates separately for West and East Germany. The negative associations for divorces filed by women observed in the full sample again appear to be driven by the West, where counties with pre-existing infrastructure show systematically smaller increases in female filings after 2002. In the East, overall and unilateral divorce coeffi-

cients are negative but less robust across specifications. By contrast, contested divorces in the East stand out. For both women's and men's contested filings, the interaction term is positive, indicating higher levels in counties with prior infrastructure after the reform.

Finally, Table E2 shows that the post-2002 increase in divorces filed by women is significantly muted in counties with pre-existing infrastructure for German women, while no interaction is observed for non-German women. This result is consistent with the model predicting that women with high baseline costs, such as potential language barriers, smaller personal networks or less institutional knowledge, are more dependent on all services. Non-German victims of violence likely face higher barriers to accessing institutional support, meaning the reform may have operated more uniformly for them, regardless of local service availability.

Taken together, the results align closely with the theoretical model. The law appears to be associated with stronger increases in divorces in counties without prior shelters, where exit costs were highest, while increases are more muted in counties with infrastructure, where women already had stronger outside options. Importantly, these findings remain robust even when accounting for the political federal election in 2002, suggesting that the observed heterogeneity is indeed linked to the role of support infrastructure rather than contemporaneous political change.

6.3.1 Shelters vs. Counselling Centers and Intensity of Exposure

Separate estimations by infrastructure type show that the presence of counselling centers is more consistently associated with attenuated increases than the presence of women's shelters (Table G1). Counselling centers also appear to drive the positive interaction with divorces filed by women and men that are contested by the other spouse. This interaction, already visible in Table 5, becomes statistically significant when the post indicator is interacted with a dummy for the presence of at least one counselling center rather than a dummy for any infrastructure.

Lastly, I classify counties into tercile categories of low, medium, and high intensity of help infrastructure, measured as the number of facilities per 1,000 inhabitants in 2002. Table G2 suggests that the mitigating role of infrastructure stems almost entirely from counties in the highest tercile of help facility exposure. These patterns point to a stronger moderating effect in counties with a denser provision of help infrastructure, consistent with the idea that such infrastructure shapes exit behavior more effectively once it is firmly embedded in the local context and more readily accessible to potential victims.

6.4 Mechanisms

To shed light on the mechanisms behind the main results, I draw on the 2003 representative victimization survey of women in Germany. This survey provides information on (1) whether respondents knew about available help services, (2) whether they knew about the new Protection Act, (3) whether they reported using any help infrastructure when they had experienced

violence, and (4) whether they contacted the police when they had experienced violence.[15] Examining these outcomes helps to understand which groups were more or less likely to make use of institutional support, and how this aligns with the patterns observed in the divorce data.

The descriptive baseline means of the four outcomes, displayed on the bottom of the table, highlight important gaps between awareness and actual usage: 63 percent of women report knowing that specialized help exists, but only 13 percent know about the 2002 Protection Act, which - at the time of the survey - had already been introduced over a year before the interviews took place. Among those who report having experienced IPV in their lifetime, 32 percent say they used some help infrastructure when in need, and only 19 percent were in contact with the police.

Table 6 shows that awareness of services is strongly shaped by individual characteristics. German women, those with higher education, and those with higher income are significantly more likely to know about both help services and the new Protection Act. These are also the groups for whom the baseline costs of leaving violent relationships are likely the lowest. In other words, women facing higher baseline costs of leaving are also less aware of the very help infrastructure that reduces those costs.

An interesting pattern emerges when comparing knowledge of help services versus knowledge of the Act. In states with more help infrastructure, women are more likely to know that support services exist.[16] By contrast, in states with less infrastructure, women are more likely to know about the Protection Act. This suggests that support services and legal provisions may act more as substitutes than complements when it comes to awareness on the new legal protection, echoing the finding that the law mattered most where prior infrastructure was missing.

Turning to column (3), which captures whether victims of IPV report having used any help infrastructure, divorced women stand out: they are about 11 percentage points more likely to report such usage. This result should be interpreted with caution, as it is not defined whether the ex-husband was the same partner who abused them. Still, it suggests that services become particularly relevant at the time of separation. This aligns with the divorce results, where infrastructure was most closely linked to women's unilateral exits, which likely are much more dependent on legal, psychological, and other forms of support.

Police contact in column (4) shows another mechanism at play. Women who experienced IPV "at home" are significantly more likely to have contacted the police, highlighting that when experiencing domestic violence women appear to be more reliant on law enforcement than when they experience it outside the home. Non-German women stand out as well: despite being less likely to know about services or the law, they are more likely to have contacted the police. This suggests that women who are more likely to face language barriers, to lack close-by social or family networks, or to have insecure residency status often turn to the police as their most

[15]The survey question on help infrastructure covers a broad set of institutions (including legal counselling, social services, and health services), not only women's shelters and counselling centers.

[16]Note that infrastructure is measured here as the population-weighted number of women's shelters and counselling centers at the state level, since I can only connect my database to the survey data at this level.

Table 6: Associations between local infrastructure and knowledge, use, and reporting (2003 survey)

	All women		Women with IPV experience	
	(1) Knowledge of help	(2) Knowledge of Act	(3) Used help	(4) Contacted police
Infrastructure				
Help infrastructure	0.026***	-0.014**	-0.031	-0.012
	(0.007)	(0.005)	(0.021)	(0.019)
Demographics				
German	0.164***	0.053**	0.009	-0.166*
Divorced	0.012	0.032	0.104*	0.098*
Children	0.015	-0.001	0.008	0.099**
Age	0.011***	0.010***	0.005	-0.002
West Germany	0.092***	0.051***	0.147*	0.010
Education & Empl.				
Education	0.131***	0.087***	-0.024	-0.079*
Income	0.014***	0.008***	-0.002	0.000
Labor force status	0.015	0.008	-0.037	-0.044
Experiences of violence				
Physical violence	0.029	0.011	0.068	0.161***
Sexual harassment	0.121***	0.006	0.015	0.017
Sexual violence	-0.009	0.034*	0.004	0.072*
At home			0.086	0.142***
Baseline mean	0.634	0.129	0.319	0.191
Observations	7,713	7,583	811	780

Note: Each column reports coefficients from regressions of the indicated outcome on local infrastructure and controls. "Help infrastructure" is measured as the number of women's shelters and counselling centers per state (Bundesland), weighted by state population. Other controls (not shown): age squared, regional population, population density. Outcomes are measured as binary indicators. Robust standard errors in parentheses. *, **, *** denote $p < 0.10$, $p < 0.05$, $p < 0.01$. Results are descriptive; coefficients reflect conditional associations. Experiences of violence may overlap. *Source:* Victimization survey Germany (Müller and Schröttle (2004b)); Infrastructure measure: self-collected database of women's shelter and counselling center openings (1970–2023).

immediate option.

Finally, women in West Germany are more likely than those in the East to know about services, to know about the Act, and to have used available help.

7 Discussion

This paper provides the first systematic empirical analysis of the 2002 Act on Protection against Violence in Germany and its implications for marital dissolution. The findings document several key stylized facts. First, the descriptive evidence shows that the new legal provisions were immediately taken up in courts, indicating that the reform was not only symbolic but actively used to grant victims legal protection. Second, the analysis demonstrates that the law is associated with an increase in divorces per 1,000 inhabitants, particularly those filed by women, consistent with the notion that lowering exit costs allowed more women to leave abusive mar-

riages. The dynamic specifications highlight a sharp spike in divorce numbers in 2003, one year after the Act was introduced, followed by a decline from 2004 onward. This pattern suggests that the reform unlocked a stock of latent divorces, after which dissolution stabilized at lower levels, plausibly because fewer abusive marriages remained or fewer such marriages were formed in the first place.

The heterogeneity analysis underscores the importance of pre-existing infrastructure. Counties with women's shelters and counselling centers already in place show systematically smaller increases in divorces after the reform, indicating that these institutions had lowered exit barriers even before legal protections became available. Conversely, in counties without infrastructure, the law was the first formal institutional tool enabling exits, which explains the larger post-2002 rise in divorces there. Regional differences also matter. In East Germany, where more liberal gender norms and divorce acceptance historically lowered barriers to exit, the interaction between infrastructure and the Act is associated with more contested divorces being granted. This suggests that in contexts where divorce was already socially more feasible, infrastructure seems to have played a complementary role in particularly resistant cases, helping courts enforce exits against coercive partners. By contrast, in the West, particularly in areas without prior infrastructure, the reform's main role, when it comes to divorce outcomes, seems to have been to unlock a broader stock of marriages that could not be dissolved before.

A particularly noteworthy finding concerns women with a migration background, namely non-German women. They are more likely to divorce after the reform, with this trend continuing to rise through 2005 and showing no interaction with infrastructure availability. At the same time, survey evidence shows that non-German women are less likely to know about support services or the Violence Protection Act, yet more likely to contact the police once violence occurs. This combination points to a vulnerability gap: women with the weakest social networks and greatest need for institutional support are least likely to benefit from preventive information, but more likely to rely on authorities in acute situations. Targeted outreach and multilingual information campaigns are therefore essential to ensure equal access to protection.

Taken together, these findings show that the 2002 reform contributed to shifting the boundaries of state protection in intimate relationships. Divorce, in the context of abusive marriages, should not be viewed negatively but as a pathway to safety and autonomy. At the same time, the results highlight the limits of legal change in isolation: infrastructure, awareness, and targeted outreach remain crucial for ensuring that protections reach all women, especially those most vulnerable.

7.1 Limitations

While the theoretical model generates several testable predictions, some cannot be examined in the German context due to severe data constraints. Divorce registers only capture legal marriages, meaning that cohabiting partnerships, where a considerable share of intimate partner

violence occurs, remain outside the analysis. One can therefore not rule out that a decrease in divorces is paralleled by an increase in domestic violence in cohabiting, non-married couples. In other words, testing deterrence effects separately would require precise individual-level information on IPV incidence, regardless of marital status. Such data is both extremely scarce and not coherently captured in Germany (see Appendix A). Consequently, the paper relies on indirect indicators and aggregate trends at the county level, which limits the ability to disentangle incidence from reporting and exit dynamics. Moreover, although the women's shelter database allows classification of counties into before and after an opening, most openings occurred in the 1980s and early 1990s, well before the availability of harmonized outcome and control data. This makes a separate analysis of the effect of shelters on their own not possible in this paper.

8 Conclusion

Violence against women and more specifically IPV remains pervasive worldwide, and institutional frameworks might play a key role in shaping whether victims can exit abusive relationships. This paper examines how legal reforms aimed at victim protection shape women's ability to leave abusive marriages.

The analysis focuses on Germany's 2002 *Act on Protection against Violence*, which institutionalizes eviction orders and grants temporary residence rights to victims. Using county-level divorce register data linked to a novel database on women's shelter and counselling center openings, I document how divorce filings evolve around the reform.

The results show that divorces per 1,000 inhabitants rise sharply in the immediate aftermath of the reform, peaking in 2003 before declining by 2005. The increase is driven primarily by divorces filed by women, consistent with the reform lowering barriers to exit. Heterogeneity analysis reveals that the rise is concentrated in West Germany, more persistent among non-German filers, and strongest in counties lacking pre-existing support infrastructure, measured by the presence of women's shelters or counselling centers. By contrast, counties with a relatively high density of help infrastructure, particularly those with counselling centers, show much more muted increases. This aligns with the theoretical model that I set up to rationalize the behavior of women in potentially abusive marriages: where infrastructure has already reduced leaving costs, many marginal exits have likely taken place before the reform, leaving a smaller pool of marriages affected by the new law.

At the same time, survey evidence highlights persistent inequality of access: non-German women are less likely to be aware of or use services, yet more likely to contact the police, suggesting that those with the highest barriers to exit rely mainly on emergency enforcement.

The broader policy environment reinforces these challenges. The expansion of shelters and counselling centers largely stalled after the early 2000s, despite many facilities operating at or above capacity and Germany remaining well below the targets of the Istanbul Convention (Deutsches Institut für Menschenrechte, 2024; Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen

und Jugend (BMFSFJ), 2020; Ruschmeier et al., 2023), with some counties still lacking any help infrastructure today. This points to a persistent infrastructure gap, even as the incidence of violence remains high.

A main limitation of this study is that I can only observe the dissolution of marriages. I cannot rule out that the increase in marriage dissolutions has been accompanied by an increase in victimization in other forms of partnerships and cohabitation. Enabling exits from marriage is therefore only one piece of the puzzle in combating IPV, as many women experience violence outside of marriage. Continuously strengthening help infrastructure thus remains essential to ensure that protection extends to all women, regardless of partnership status.

Future work should further investigate how such victim protection-centered reforms affect reporting, prosecution, and the incidence of violence, ideally by linking institutional reforms and support infrastructure to complementary data such as health records, prosecution statistics, or crime reports. Such evidence might help clarify whether the observed divorce patterns reflect empowerment, deterrence, or compositional changes in marriage.

In sum, the study shows that legal reforms like the 2002 Act on Protection against Violence extend beyond symbolic codification: they reshape the feasibility of leaving abusive relationships and might act as a (temporary) substitution, when there is a lack in the availability of local support infrastructure.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this work the authors used ChatGPT (OpenAI) in order to improve clarity and style. After using this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the content of the published article.

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Appendices

A Overview of Victimization Surveys on Violence Against Women in Germany

Germany has conducted several population-based victimization surveys since 2004 that document experiences of violence in partnerships or family settings. A German-language overview of these surveys is provided in the 2023 *Lagebild Häusliche Gewalt* (Bundeskriminalamt (BKA), 2024), on which this following summary draws. These surveys vary in scope, target population, and methodological design, limiting direct comparability. Some focus exclusively on women, others on men, children, or mixed-gender populations. Survey instruments differ with respect to sample size, reference periods, and the operationalization of violence.

The first representative nationwide survey on violence against women was conducted in 2003. It included 10,264 women aged 16 to 85 and found that 40% had experienced physical or sexual violence since age 16, and 25% reported having experienced such violence in a (current or former) intimate relationship (Müller and Schröttle, 2004b). Follow-up analyses based on the same data found that in 20% of existing relationships, women experienced physical, sexual, or psychological violence, and that 6% of women in ongoing partnerships were affected by severe forms of abuse (Schröttle and Ansorge, 2008).

In 2012, the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) conducted a cross-national survey that included 1,534 women in Germany aged 18–74. The study reported that 35% had experienced physical or sexual violence since age 15, with 71% reporting health consequences. 8% had experienced such violence in the 12 months prior to the interview FRA (2014).

The 2017 German Victimization Survey, conducted by the German Federal Criminal Police Office, included general modules on crime victimization and reported some aggregate insights on domestic violence. A follow-up study "Sicherheit und Kriminalität in Deutschland" (SKiD 2020) estimated that 6% of women experienced sexual violence in the past year.

In 2021, a second wave of the EU Gender-Based Violence Survey was conducted with 2,419 women in Germany. It found that 26% had experienced physical or sexual violence since age 18 and that 20% had experienced intimate partner violence (IPV) Eurostat (2022).

The ongoing LeSuBiA study (Lebenssituation, Sicherheit und Belastung im Alltag), aims to close current data gaps through a comprehensive, gender-inclusive design. With a targeted sample of 22,000 persons aged 16 and above, the study captures psychological, physical, sexual, digital, and controlling forms of violence using detailed behavioral instruments. Data collection and preparation for scientific use is ongoing.

In addition to these federal studies, several German states have carried out complementary regional surveys. In Lower Saxony, population-based surveys in 2012 and 2021 reported that

5.7% of respondents had experienced partner violence in the past year (6.7% of women, 4.6% of men). Psychological violence was the most prevalent (5.1%), and only 0.5% of affected individuals had contacted police LKA (2022). In 2023, a follow-up survey reported a 12-month IPV prevalence of 1% for women and 0.6% for men LKA (2024). In North Rhine-Westphalia, a 2019 study with 23,850 respondents found that 6.2% of women and 6% of men experienced psychological, physical, or sexual violence in a current or former partnership in the prior year. Severe violence was more frequently reported by women LKA (2020).

As emphasized in the 2023 *Lagebild Häusliche Gewalt* (Bundeskriminalamt (BKA), 2024), methodological heterogeneity across these studies - including differences in sampling design, reference periods, and question wording - limits the direct comparability of prevalence estimates.

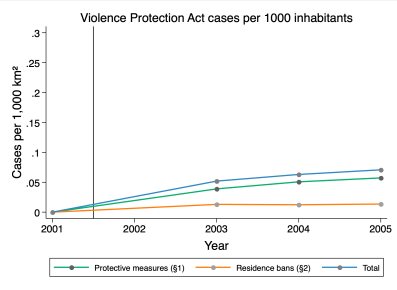
B Act on Protection against Violence - State Police Laws and Filings over time per 1,000 inhabitants

Table B1: Inclusion of Dedicated Sections on Domestic Violence in State Police Laws

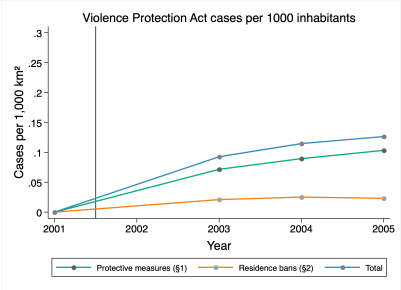
State	**Year since**[17]	**Max. duration of police eviction**	**Paragraph / Legal reference**
Baden-Württemberg	2008	14 days	since 2021: §30, before §27a PolG BW
Bavaria	–	since 2024: 1 month	Art.16 BayPAG
Berlin	2003	14 days	§29a ASOG Bln
Brandenburg	2004	10 days	§16a PolG Bbg
Bremen	2001	10 days	§12 BremPolG
Hamburg	2001	10 days	§12b SOG Hmb
Hesse	2002	14 days	§31 HSOG
Mecklenburg-Vorpommern	2001	14 days	§52 SOG M-V
Lower Saxony	2003	2003: 14 days; 2019: not specified	§17 Nds SOG[18]
North Rhine-Westphalia	2001	10 days	§34a PolG NRW
Rhineland-Palatinate	2004, revised 2019	2004: not specified; 2024: 14 days	§13 PolG RP
Saarland	2004	10 days	§12 SPolG
Saxony	2004, rev. 2011	2004: 7 days; 2011: 14 days	§21 SächsPolG
Saxony-Anhalt	2003	14 days	§36 SOG LSA
Schleswig-Holstein	2004	2004: 14 days; since 2022: 1 month	§201a LVwG SH
Thuringia	2007	10 days	§18 PAG Thür

Note: Information on the legal provisions is based on (Eicke, 2008, 150), while information on the maximum duration of police eviction measures is drawn from (Eicke, 2008, 234). The "Year since" column indicates when specific paragraphs specifically dedicated to domestic violence were included in state police law. Bavaria is the only state without a dedicated section in the police law to date. Police relies on the general eviction clause under Art.16 BayPAG. For Baden-Württemberg changes in the law, see Version of 13 January 1992 and Version of 6 October 2020.

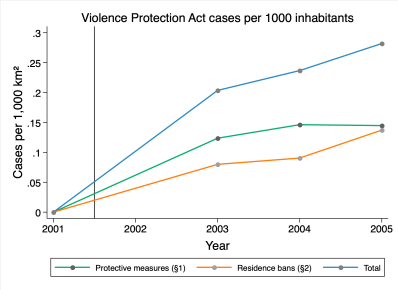
Figure B1: Act on Protection against Violence filings per 1,000 inhabitants by state: West Germany



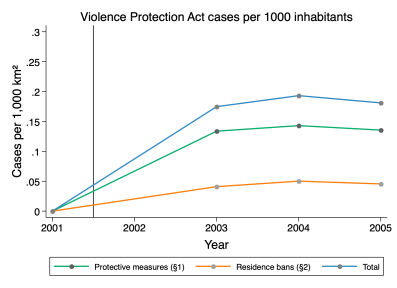
Baden-Württemberg



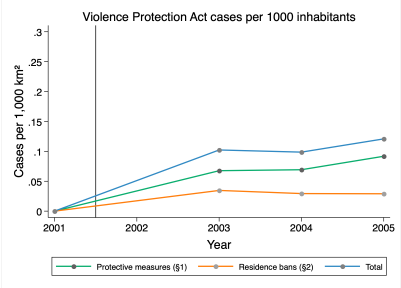
Bavaria



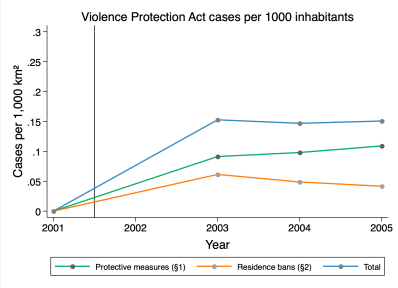
Bremen



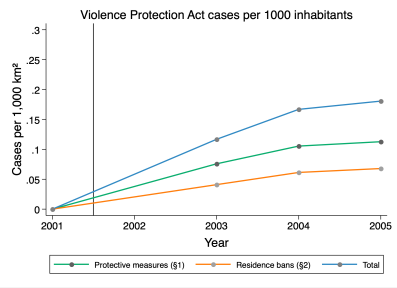
Hamburg



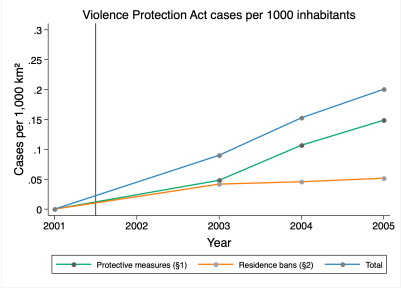
Hesse



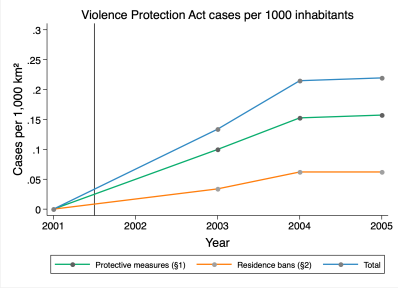
Lower Saxony



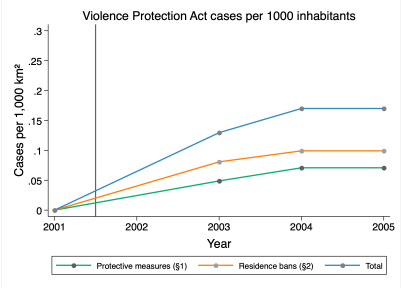
North Rhine-Westphalia



Rhineland-Palatinate



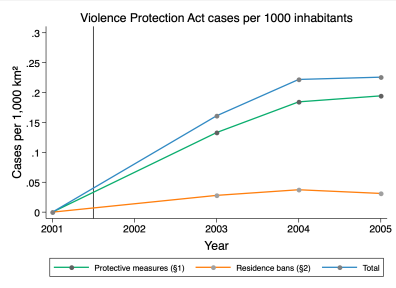
Saarland



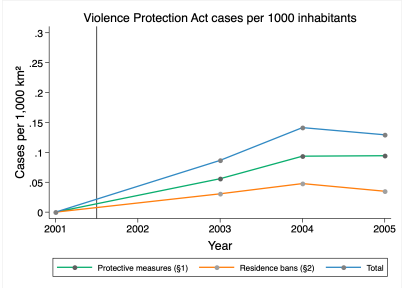
Schleswig-Holstein

Note: The figure shows the number of cases filed under the Act on Protection against Violence (all cases, protective measures under §1, and residence bans under §2) between 2001 and 2005. Documentation changed from 2006 onward, which is why only cases up to 2006 are included. *Source:* Statistisches Bundesamt (Destatis) (2021).

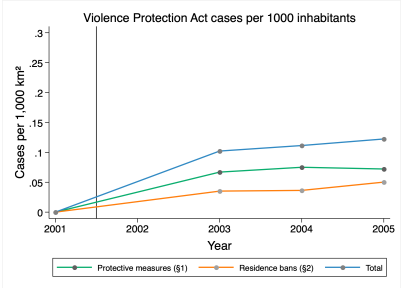
Figure B2: Act on Protection against Violence filings per 1,000 inhabitants by state: East Germany



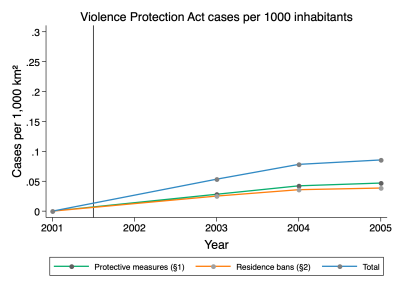
Berlin



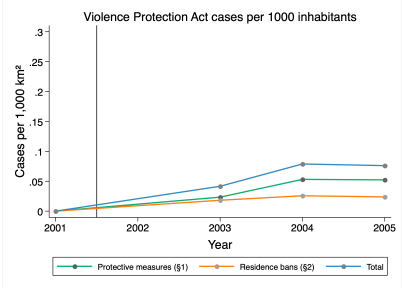
Brandenburg



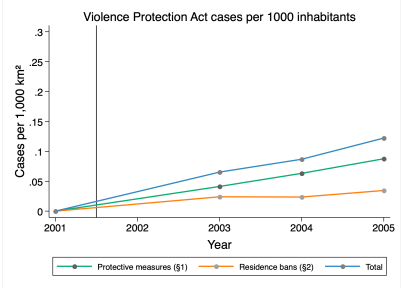
Mecklenburg-Vorpommern



Saxony



Saxony-Anhalt



Thuringia

Note: The figure shows the number of cases filed under the Act on Protection against Violence (all cases, protective measures under §1, and residence bans under §2) between 2001 and 2005. Documentation changed from 2006 onward, which is why only cases up to 2006 are included. *Source:* Statistisches Bundesamt (Destatis) (2021).

C Generation of the Women Shelter and Counselling Center Database

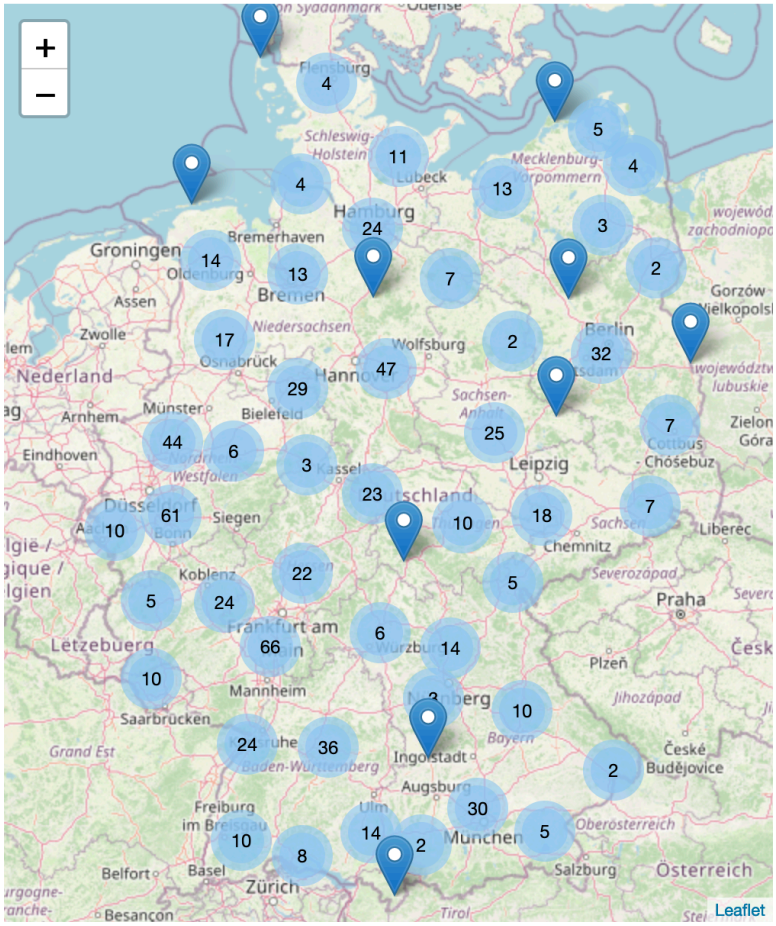


Figure C1: Original list of counselling centers and shelters in Germany from the official webpage of The Association of Women's Shelters (Frauenhauskoordinierung / FHK) https://www.frauenhauskoordinierung.de/hilfe-bei-gewalt/frauenhaus-und-fachberatungsstellensuche

Liebes Frauenhaus- und/oder Beratungs-Team,

Ich führe für das Deutsche Institut für Wirtschaftsforschung Berlin eine Erhebung zum Thema Schutzorte für Frauen in Deutschland durch.

Um ein möglichst genaues Bild für meine Bestandsaufnahme erstellen zu können, brauchen wir noch einige Informationen zu Ihrer Einrichtung.

Ich möchte hier betonen, dass es uns ein besonderes Anliegen ist, Ihre Einrichtung als sicheren Schutzraum zu respektieren und sicherzustellen, dass unsere Kommunikation vollständig vertraulich bleibt. Ich möchte Ihnen daher versichern, dass sämtliche Informationen, die Sie uns zur Verfügung stellen, nur zwischen uns bleiben und nicht mit Nennung des Namens Ihrer Einrichtung veröffentlicht werden.

Es wäre sehr freundlich, wenn Sie uns die unten genannten Informationen (die wie ich hoffe nicht sensibel sind) zur Verfügung stellen könnten. Dazu können Sie einfach die unten stehende Tabelle soweit ausfüllen, wie sie zu den einzelnen Items Angaben machen können. Am Wichtigsten ist es für unser Forschungsvorhaben das Gründungsdatum der Einrichtung zu erfassen. Hier würde das Jahr schon reichen, aber je genauer, desto besser. Alle zusätzlichen Informationen, die zu einem entsprechenden Punkt relevant sein könnten, können Sie gerne in den jeweiligen Feldern vermerken.

Information	Bitte ausfüllen:
Gründungsdatum der Einrichtung	
Gründungsdatum des Vereins (falls zutrifft)	
Anzahl der verfügbaren Plätze bei der Eröffnung der Einrichtung	
Anzahl und Umfang (in %) der (bezahlten/unbezahlten) Mitarbeitenden bei der Eröffnung der Einrichtung	
Anzahl der verfügbaren Plätze heute (2023)	
Anzahl und Umfang (in %) der (bezahlten) Mitarbeitenden heute (2023)	
Anzahl Freiwillige Mitarbeitende	

Ich bedanke mich bereits im Voraus für Ihre Unterstützung!

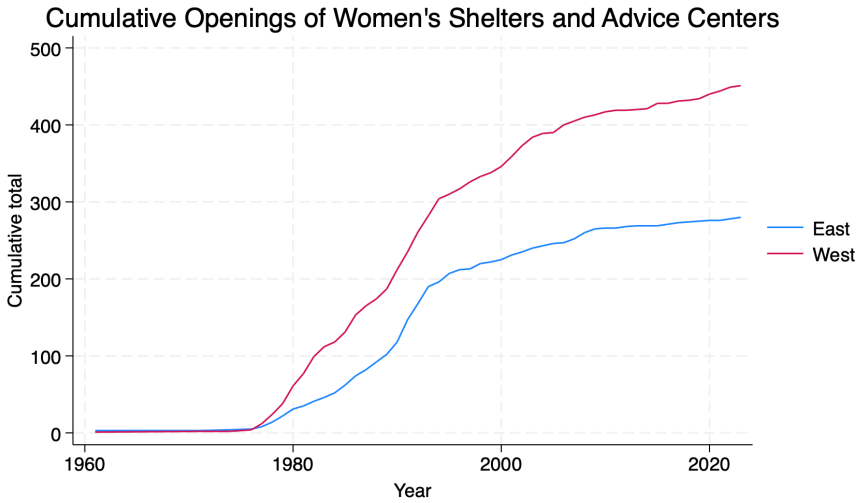
Mehr Informationen zu mir und meiner Forschung finden Sie hier:
https://www.diw.de/de/diw_01.c.800247.de/personen/schaeper__clara.html

Sollten Sie weitere Fragen haben, können Sie sich jederzeit gerne bei uns melden!

Mit freundlichen Grüßen

Figure C2: Email sent to all counselling centers and shelters

Figure C3: Roll-out of women's shelters and legal counselling centers over time and by region



Note: The figure shows the cumulative number of women's shelters and legal counselling centers opened over time, separately by region (East/West). *Source:* Self-collected data.

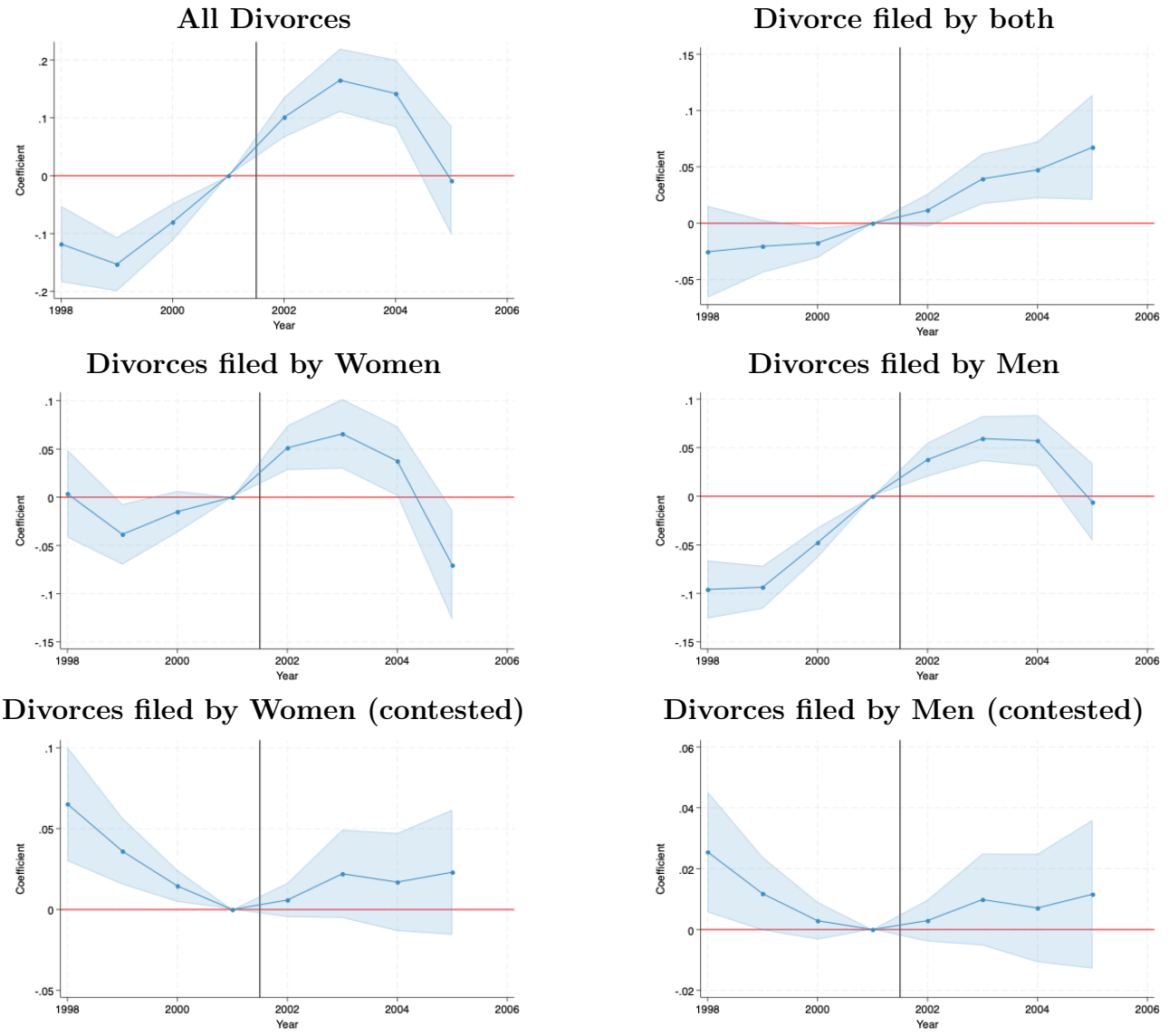
D Heterogeneity by West- and East Germany

Table D1: Post Estimates for Divorce Outcomes: West- and East Germany

Divorce outcomes (per 1,000 inhabitants)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
A. West Germany				
All divorces	0.160***	0.195***	0.163***	0.163***
	(0.014)	(0.017)	(0.020)	(0.025)
Filed by women	0.037***	0.069***	0.104***	0.105***
	(0.009)	(0.011)	(0.013)	(0.017)
Filed by men	0.089***	0.090***	0.055***	0.050***
	(0.006)	(0.008)	(0.009)	(0.010)
Filed by both	0.034***	0.036***	0.004	0.003
	(0.007)	(0.009)	(0.009)	(0.010)
Filed by women (contested)	-0.006	-0.004	0.017**	0.017**
	(0.008)	(0.010)	(0.007)	(0.008)
Filed by men (contested)	-0.001	0.001	0.008*	0.009*
	(0.005)	(0.006)	(0.004)	(0.005)
N	2592	2592	2592	2592
B. East Germany				
All divorces	0.008	0.097**	0.065	0.039
	(0.038)	(0.049)	(0.059)	(0.069)
Filed by women	-0.105***	0.019	0.058	0.039
	(0.029)	(0.032)	(0.040)	(0.048)
Filed by men	0.081***	0.080***	0.029	0.023
	(0.013)	(0.020)	(0.022)	(0.025)
Filed by both	0.032*	-0.002	-0.022	-0.023
	(0.013)	(0.024)	(0.017)	(0.015)
Filed by women (contested)	-0.039	0.021	0.009	0.021
	(0.032)	(0.039)	(0.031)	(0.043)
Filed by men (contested)	0.001	0.025	0.005	0.013
	(0.015)	(0.020)	(0.017)	(0.020)
N	608	608	608	608
Controls	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
County FE	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Linear Time Trend	No	No	Yes	Yes
County × Linear Time Trends	No	No	No	Yes

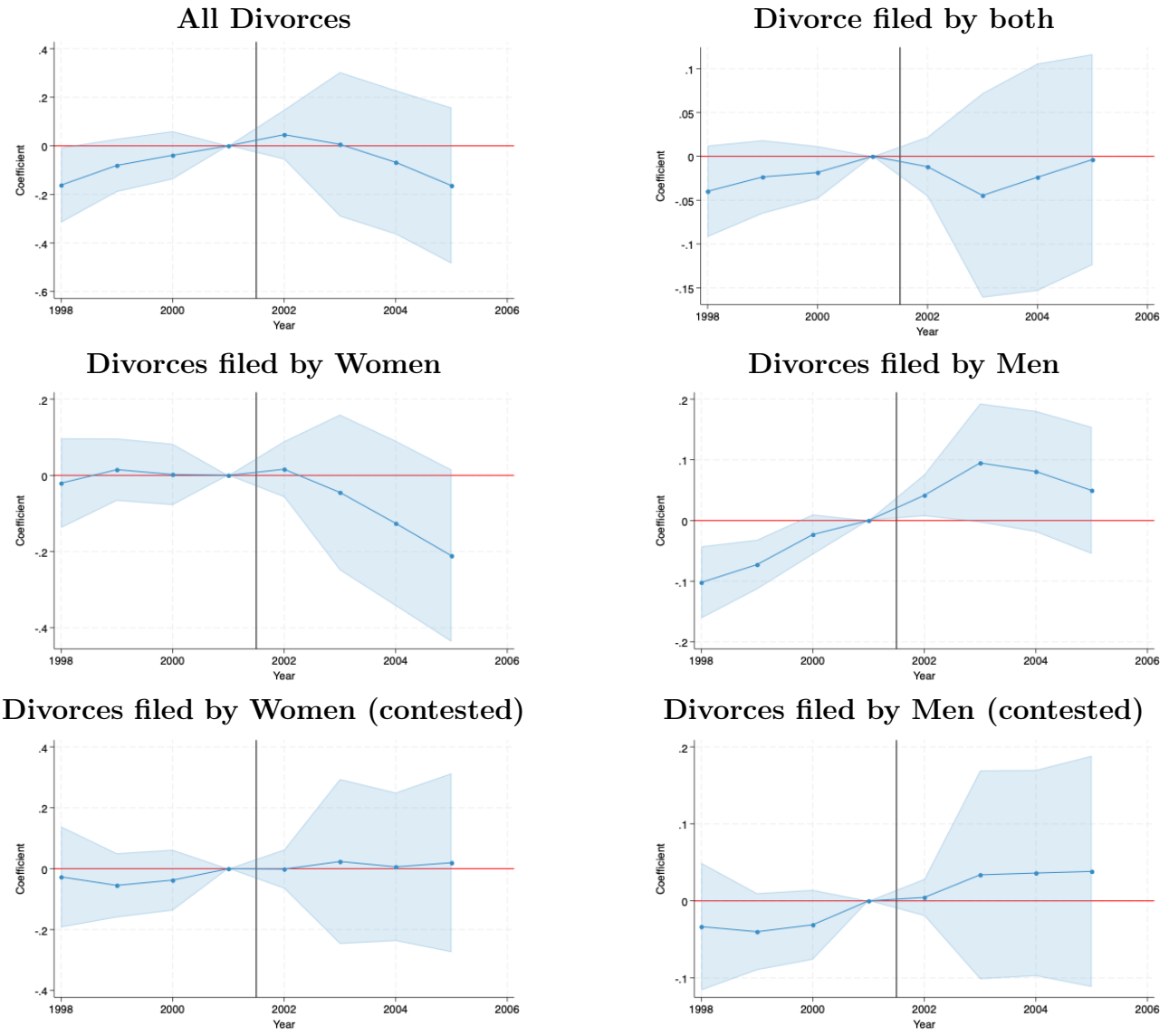
Note: Each column reports the coefficient on the Post-2002 indicator from a panel regression of the given outcome on Post-2002 (and additional terms as specified) using 1998–2005 data. Specifications in columns (2)–(4) include state and county fixed effects and the full set of controls. A common linear time trend is included in columns (3) and (4), and column (4) additionally includes county-specific linear trends. Outcomes are measured as divorces per 1,000 inhabitants. N denotes the number of $county \times year$ observations. Robust standard errors, clustered at the county level, are reported in parentheses. ***, **, * denote significance at the 1%, 5%, and 10% levels. *Source:* Control variables: Bundesinstitut für Bau-, Stadt- und Raumforschung (BBSR) (2025); Divorce outcomes: Research Data Centre of the Federal Statistical Office and Statistical Offices of the Federal States of Germany (2025), own calculations.

Figure D1: Year-by-Year Deviations in Divorce Outcomes, Relative to 2001, West Germany



Note: Each panel plots year-specific coefficients from regressions of the indicated outcome on year dummies, relative to 2001, using 1998–2005 data. All models include state and county fixed effects, and a full set of time-varying controls. Outcomes are measured as divorces per 1,000 inhabitants. Confidence bands indicate 5% significance levels. Robust standard errors are clustered at the county level. *Source:* Control variables: Bundesinstitut für Bau-, Stadt- und Raumforschung (BBSR) (2025); Divorce outcomes: Research Data Centre of the Federal Statistical Office and Statistical Offices of the Federal States of Germany (2025), own calculations.

Figure D2: Year-by-Year Deviations in Divorce Outcomes, Relative to 2001, East Germany



Note: Each panel plots year-specific coefficients from regressions of the indicated outcome on year dummies, relative to 2001, using 1998–2005 data. All models include state and county fixed effects, and a full set of time-varying controls. Outcomes are measured as divorces per 1,000 inhabitants. Confidence bands indicate 5% significance levels. Robust standard errors are clustered at the county level. *Source:* Control variables: Bundesinstitut für Bau-, Stadt- und Raumforschung (BBSR) (2025); Divorce outcomes: Research Data Centre of the Federal Statistical Office and Statistical Offices of the Federal States of Germany (2025), own calculations.

Table D2: Interaction Estimates: Infrastructure × Post-2002 for Divorce Outcomes, West

Divorce outcomes (per 1,000 inhabitants)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
All divorces	-0.047	-0.040	-0.048	-0.075**
	(0.029)	(0.030)	(0.030)	(0.032)
Filed by women	-0.036*	-0.033*	-0.043**	-0.057***
	(0.019)	(0.019)	(0.020)	(0.021)
Filed by men	-0.018	-0.014	-0.021	-0.029**
	(0.013)	(0.013)	(0.014)	(0.014)
Filed by both	0.008	0.007	0.015	0.011
	(0.014)	(0.014)	(0.015)	(0.014)
Filed by women (contested)	0.010	0.005	0.008	-0.000
	(0.020)	(0.021)	(0.021)	(0.017)
Filed by men (contested)	0.004	0.001	0.003	-0.001
	(0.013)	(0.013)	(0.013)	(0.013)
Controls	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
County FE	No	No	Yes	Yes
Year FE	No	No	Yes	Yes
Linear time trend	No	No	Yes	Yes
Post2002 × SPD(2002)	No	No	No	Yes

Note: Each column reports coefficients on the interaction between pre-2002 infrastructure availability (indicator equals 1 if a women's shelter and/or a counselling center existed in the county before 2002) and a Post-2002 indicator, using data from 1998–2005. Column (1): no controls. Column (2): time-varying county controls. Column (3): adds county and year fixed effects and a common linear time trend. Column (4): adds an interaction between Post-2002 and a binary indicator for above-median SPD vote share in the 2002 federal election. Outcomes are measured as divorces per 1,000 inhabitants. Robust standard errors clustered at the county level in parentheses. ***, **, * denote $p < 0.01$, $p < 0.05$, $p < 0.10$. *Source:* Control variables: Bundesinstitut für Bau-, Stadt- und Raumforschung (BBSR) (2025); Divorce outcomes: Research Data Centre of the Federal Statistical Office and Statistical Offices of the Federal States of Germany (2025), own calculations; Infrastructure measure: self-collected database of women's shelter and counselling center openings (1970–2023).

Table D3: Interaction Estimates: Infrastructure × Post-2002 for Divorce Outcomes, East

Divorce outcomes (per 1,000 inhabitants)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
All divorces	-0.154*	-0.158*	-0.129	-0.137*
	(0.089)	(0.087)	(0.080)	(0.079)
Filed by women	-0.099	-0.106*	-0.076	-0.082
	(0.064)	(0.063)	(0.056)	(0.055)
Filed by men	-0.051*	-0.057**	-0.040	-0.044*
	(0.027)	(0.029)	(0.026)	(0.025)
Filed by both	-0.004	0.005	-0.013	-0.010
	(0.027)	(0.025)	(0.026)	(0.025)
Filed by women (contested)	0.141**	0.139**	0.153**	0.148**
	(0.066)	(0.068)	(0.062)	(0.065)
Filed by men (contested)	0.0687**	0.0675**	0.0752**	0.0752**
	(0.033)	(0.033)	(0.030)	(0.030)
Controls	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
County FE	No	No	Yes	Yes
Year FE	No	No	Yes	Yes
Linear time trend	No	No	Yes	Yes
Post2002 × SPD(2002)	No	No	No	Yes

Note: Each column reports coefficients on the interaction between pre-2002 infrastructure availability (indicator equals 1 if a women's shelter and/or a counselling center existed in the county before 2002) and a Post-2002 indicator, using data from 1998–2005. Column (1): no controls. Column (2): time-varying county controls. Column (3): adds county and year fixed effects and a common linear time trend. Column (4): adds an interaction between Post-2002 and a binary indicator for above-median SPD vote share in the 2002 federal election. Outcomes are measured as divorces per 1,000 inhabitants. Robust standard errors clustered at the county level in parentheses. ***, **, * denote $p < 0.01$, $p < 0.05$, $p < 0.10$. *Source:* Control variables: Bundesinstitut für Bau-, Stadt- und Raumforschung (BBSR) (2025); Divorce outcomes: Research Data Centre of the Federal Statistical Office and Statistical Offices of the Federal States of Germany (2025), own calculations; Infrastructure measure: self-collected database of women's shelter and counselling center openings (1970–2023).

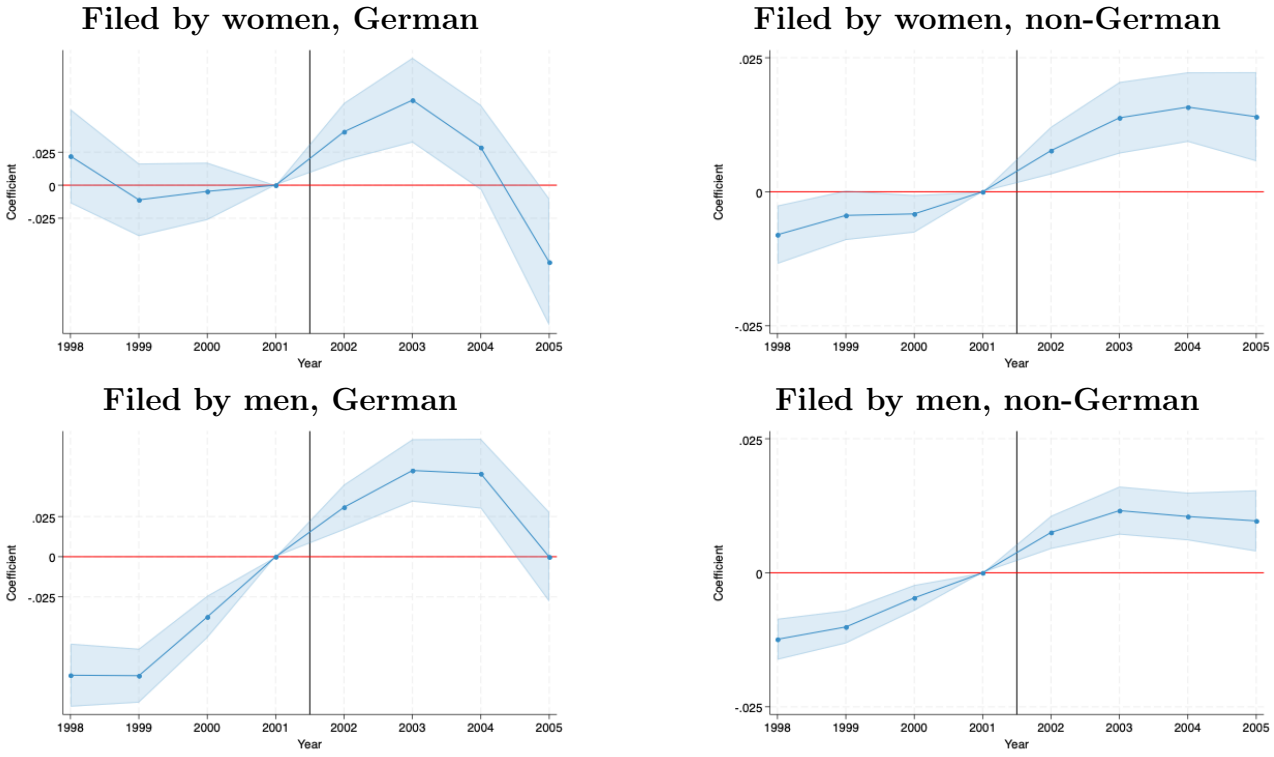
E Heterogeneity by Nationality

Table E1: Post Estimates for Divorce Outcomes by Nationality and Filer Gender

Divorce outcomes (per 1,000 inhabitants)	German	Non-German
Filed by women	0.089***	0.007**
	(0.013)	(0.003)
Filed by men	0.044***	0.007***
	(0.008)	(0.002)
N	9600	9600

Each column reports coefficients from regressions of divorce outcomes (per 1,000 inhabitants) on a Post-2002 indicator, estimated separately for German and non-German filers using the pooled specification in Equation 1. The table shows results for divorces filed by women and by men. All models include controls, state and county fixed effects, and a common linear time trend. Robust standard errors, clustered at the county level, are reported in parentheses. ***, **, * denote significance at the 1%, 5%, and 10% levels. *Source:* Control variables: Bundesinstitut für Bau-, Stadt- und Raumforschung (BBSR) (2025); Divorce outcomes: Research Data Centre of the Federal Statistical Office and Statistical Offices of the Federal States of Germany (2025), own calculations.

Figure E1: Year-by-Year Deviations in Divorce Outcomes, Relative to 2001 by nationality



Note: Each panel plots year-specific coefficients from regressions of the indicated outcome on year dummies, relative to 2001, using 1998–2005 data. All models include state and county fixed effects, and a full set of time-varying controls. Outcomes are measured as divorces per 1,000 inhabitants. Confidence bands indicate 5% significance levels. Robust standard errors are clustered at the county level. *Source:* Control variables: Bundesinstitut für Bau-, Stadt- und Raumforschung (BBSR) (2025); Divorce outcomes: Research Data Centre of the Federal Statistical Office and Statistical Offices of the Federal States of Germany (2025), own calculations.

Table E2: Interaction Estimates: Infrastructure × Post-2002, by Nationality (Specification 4)

Divorce outcomes (per 1,000 inhabitants)	German	Non-German
Filed by women	-0.055**	0.001
	(0.019)	(0.003)
Observations	9600	9600

Note: Each cell reports the coefficient on the interaction between infrastructure availability and the Post-2002 indicator from a panel regression using 1998–2005 data. All models include state, county, and year fixed effects, a full set of controls, and a common linear time trend. Outcomes are measured as divorces per 1,000 inhabitants. Robust standard errors clustered at the county level in parentheses. ***, **, * denote $p < 0.01$, $p < 0.05$, $p < 0.10$. *Source:* Control variables: Bundesinstitut für Bau-, Stadt- und Raumforschung (BBSR) (2025); Divorce outcomes: Research Data Centre of the Federal Statistical Office and Statistical Offices of the Federal States of Germany (2025), own calculations; Infrastructure measure: self-collected database of women's shelter and counselling center openings (1970–2023).

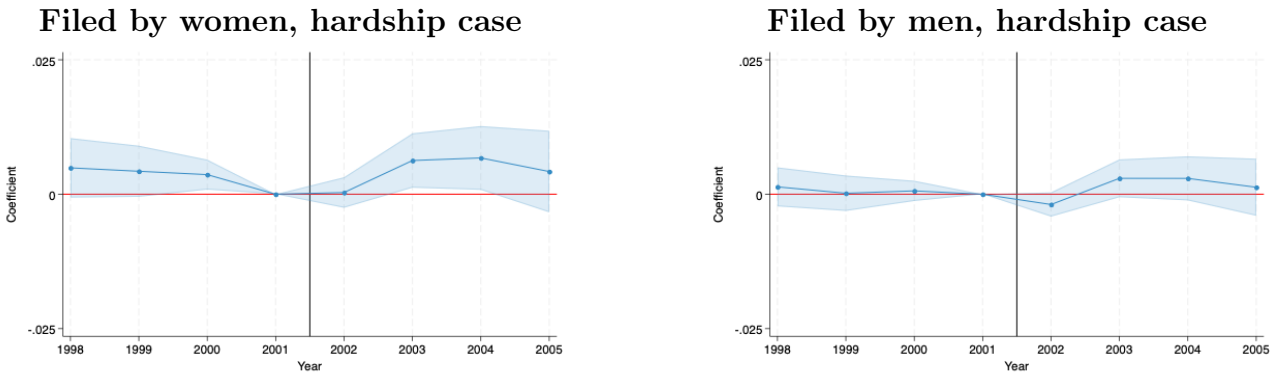
F Estimation Results for Hardship Cases

Table F1: Post Estimates for hardship cases

Divorce outcomes (per 1,000 inhabitants)	Hardship
Filed by women	0.001
	(0.002)
Filed by men	-0.001
	(0.001)
N	9600

The column reports coefficients from regressions of hardship divorce outcomes (per 1,000 inhabitants) on a Post-2002 indicator, estimated separately for divorces filed by women and men using the pooled specification in Equation 1. All models include controls, state and county fixed effects, and a common linear time trend. Robust standard errors, clustered at the county level, are reported in parentheses. ***, **, * denote significance at the 1%, 5%, and 10% levels. *Source:* Control variables: Bundesinstitut für Bau-, Stadt- und Raumforschung (BBSR) (2025); Divorce outcomes: Research Data Centre of the Federal Statistical Office and Statistical Offices of the Federal States of Germany (2025), own calculations.

Figure F1: Year-by-Year Deviations in Divorce Outcomes, Relative to 2001 for hardship cases



Note: Each panel plots year-specific coefficients from regressions of the indicated outcome on year dummies, relative to 2001, using 1998–2005 data. All models include state and county fixed effects, and a full set of time-varying controls. Outcomes are measured as divorces per 1,000 inhabitants. Confidence bands indicate 5% significance levels. Robust standard errors are clustered at the county level. *Source:* Control variables: Bundesinstitut für Bau-, Stadt- und Raumforschung (BBSR) (2025); Divorce outcomes: Research Data Centre of the Federal Statistical Office and Statistical Offices of the Federal States of Germany (2025), own calculations.

Table F2: Interaction Estimates: Infrastructure × Post-2002, Hardship Cases (Specification 4)

Divorce outcomes (per 1,000 inhabitants)	Hardship
Filed by women	0.001
	(0.003)
Filed by men	0.002
	(0.002)
Observations	9600

Note: Each cell reports the coefficient on the interaction between infrastructure availability and the Post-2002 indicator from a panel regression using 1998–2005 data. All models include state, county, and year fixed effects, a full set of controls, and a common linear time trend. Outcomes are measured as hardship divorces per 1,000 inhabitants. Robust standard errors clustered at the county level are in parentheses. ***, **, * denote $p < 0.01$, $p < 0.05$, $p < 0.10$. *Source:* Control variables: Bundesinstitut für Bau-, Stadt- und Raumforschung (BBSR) (2025); Divorce outcomes: Research Data Centre of the Federal Statistical Office and Statistical Offices of the Federal States of Germany (2025), own calculations.

G Heterogeneity by Alternative Infrastrucutre Measures

Table G1: Interaction Estimates: Shelters vs. Counselling Centers

	Women's Shelter		**Counselling Center**	
Divorce outcomes (per 1,000 inhabitants)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
All divorces	-0.044	-0.040	-0.056**	-0.053*
	(0.028)	(0.028)	(0.028)	(0.028)
Filed by women	-0.029	-0.031	-0.044**	-0.044**
	(0.020)	(0.019)	(0.020)	(0.018)
Filed by men	-0.017	-0.016	-0.011	-0.010
	(0.011)	(0.012)	(0.012)	(0.012)
Filed by both	0.002	0.007	-0.002	0.002
	(0.012)	(0.012)	(0.008)	(0.014)
Filed by women (contested)	0.023	0.024	0.043**	0.045**
	(0.019)	(0.019)	(0.018)	(0.019)
Filed by men (contested)	0.011	0.012	0.024**	0.025**
	(0.011)	(0.011)	(0.010)	(0.011)
Controls	No	Yes	No	Yes
County FE	No	Yes	No	Yes
Year FE	No	Yes	No	Yes
Linear time trend	No	Yes	No	Yes
Observations	9600	9600	9600	9600

Note: Each column reports coefficients on the interaction between pre-2002 infrastructure availability (indicator equals 1 if a women's shelter or a counselling center existed in the county before 2002) and a Post-2002 indicator. Columns (1) and (3) show results without controls. Columns (2) and (4) report the full specification including state, county, and year fixed effects, a common linear time trend, and time-varying county controls. Outcomes are measured as divorces per 1,000 inhabitants. Robust standard errors clustered at the county level in parentheses. ***, **, * denote $p < 0.01$, $p < 0.05$, $p < 0.10$. *Source:* Control variables: Bundesinstitut für Bau-, Stadt- und Raumforschung (BBSR) (2025); Divorce outcomes: Research Data Centre of the Federal Statistical Office and Statistical Offices of the Federal States of Germany (2025), own calculations; Infrastructure measure: self-collected database of women's shelter and counselling center openings (1970–2023).

Table G2: Interaction Estimates: Exposure intensity, measured by number of infrastructure facilities in a county per 1,000 inhabitants

Outcome	**Exposure**	(1)	(4)
All divorces	Medium	0.026	-0.016
		(0.032)	(0.028)
	High	-0.102**	-0.074**
		(0.037)	(0.036)
Filed by women	Medium	0.013	-0.012
		(0.022)	(0.019)
	High	-0.077***	-0.069***
		(0.025)	(0.024)
Filed by men	Medium	0.006	-0.015
		(0.014)	(0.012)
	High	-0.033**	-0.022
		(0.016)	(0.015)
Filed by both	Medium	0.008	0.012
		(0.016)	(0.014)
	High	0.008	0.017
		(0.015)	(0.016)
Filed by women (contested)	Medium	0.044*	0.041
		(0.022)	(0.023)
	High	0.024	0.040*
		(0.024)	(0.024)
Filed by men (contested)	Medium	0.022	0.020
		(0.013)	(0.013)
	High	0.011	0.020
		(0.014)	(0.014)
Controls		No	Yes
County FE		No	Yes
Year FE		No	Yes
Linear time trend		No	Yes
Observations		9600	9600

Note: Each column reports coefficients on the interaction between a categorical variable classifying counties in terciles by intensity of facilities available in 2002 and a Post-2002 indicator. Intensity is defined as the number of all women's shelters and counselling centers per 1,000 inhabitants in a county. I classify counties into terciles of the 2002 distribution, with the lowest tercile (i.e. counties without facilities) recoded as the reference category (Low = 0). Medium and High correspond to the second and third tercile of the distribution. Column (1) shows results without controls. Column (4) reports the full specification including state, county, and year fixed effects, a common linear time trend, and time-varying county controls. Outcomes are measured as divorces per 1,000 inhabitants. Robust standard errors clustered at the county level in parentheses. ***, **, * denote $p < 0.01$, $p < 0.05$, $p < 0.10$. *Source:* Control variables: Bundesinstitut für Bau-, Stadt- und Raumforschung (BBSR) (2025); Divorce outcomes: Research Data Centre of the Federal Statistical Office and Statistical Offices of the Federal States of Germany (2025), own calculations; Infrastructure measure: self-collected database of women's shelter and counselling center openings (1970–2023).