

# Conflict, Gender, and Violence

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## Violence Against Women/ Violence Against Men: Comparisons, Differences, Controversies

### 1. Introduction: Beyond the perpetrator-victim dichotomy

Awareness of gender-based violence resulted from feminist struggles to make private abuse an issue of public concern. In the process of recognition, three characteristics became evident: sexualised violence and repeated physical abuse involve acts of men against women; they occur most frequently as violence against known women, in the home, the family, or the environment of everyday life; and such violence is exercised with impunity, socially tolerated and excused, the perpetrators consider it legitimate. Once given the opportunity to share their experiences with others similarly victimized, women described their realizing that the abuse had very little to do with who they were or what they did: Rape or abuse was directed at them as women, and part of the humiliation arose from being made to feel interchangeable, like an object. All of these aspects converged in the naming of "violence against women".

In the years that followed, activists insisted that intervention, services and policies of social change focus clearly on men's violences against women, and in particular towards known women. Men

were faced with the classic choice: either be part of the solution, or be justly considered part of the problem. Overcoming gender-based violence seemed to consist in challenging and changing men's role as perpetrators.

Feminist analyses have become both broader and more subtle over time, including much analysis of the ways in which norms of masculinity diminish and harm men while granting them privilege or "patriarchal dividends". Nonetheless, differentiated approaches seem much more difficult when it comes to sexualised and interpersonal violence, where men enter the discourse primarily as (potential) perpetrators. From time to time, data are produced to show that men are targets of violence to a similar extent or even more than women, but even then, the discussion tends to stop with the numbers. Aside from polemical claims and counter-claims, there has been no significant men's movement to challenge the multiple ways in which boys and men are expected to endure violence without taking on the role of a victim. Sexual abuse of young boys has gradually been recognized as a serious problem, but sexual violence against adolescent boys and adult men is still largely denied or trivialized, and there is almost no literature (or practical services) on the numerous types of physical attacks that occur between men from the point of view of the victim suffering pain or injury<sup>1</sup>. Research data that suggest a high prevalence of men-on-men violence rarely focus on the suffering that results due to violence.

There are, however, good reasons for directing serious attention to men's victimization. It seems probable that in any society that denies men visibility and respect as victims, their collective sensibilities for empathy with the pain of another human being will be diminished. They will be trained to meet, or to pre-empt, attacks with counter-attacks, thus learning skills that become part of their repertoire for managing conflict. Both social patterns will increase the probability of men's violence in conditions of domination, where they need not fear counter-attacks.

This said, it must be pointed out that such considerations remain fully within the framework of man-as-perpetrator; it is an indirect recognition of victimization, as when violence against women is

addressed out of a primary concern for the ensuing risk to the children. Such considerations are legitimate as long as they do not obscure the fundamental human right to respect, personal safety and freedom from abuse. Addressing violence against men is necessary first and foremost because human rights are indivisible.

The present paper emerges from a tentative discussion seeking ways to make all forms of gender-based violence a serious concern, without obscuring what we have learned over the past thirty years about the specific power dynamics in violence against women and the embeddedness of such violence within patriarchal gender relations (Hagemann-White and Lenz 2002). It is a discussion that lends itself to misunderstandings at every turn, but offers the promise of a new level of insight as well as new alliances in practice.

## 2. The controversy about women and men as victims of domestic violence

Every attempt to open a discussion on men as victims of violence comes up against the great US debate on prevalence data and methodology (see Straus 1991; Gelles and Loseke 1993) and on "battered husbands" (Steinmetz and Lucca 1988; Saunders 1988). This debate needs, first of all, to be put into context. Whereas in Europe violence against women was first brought to public attention by the feminist movement, the US discussion springs from two separate sources. The women's movement turned first to issues of rape and sexual violence, while at the same time a small group of family sociologists began studying the use of physical aggression within the family.

The study of "family violence" was shaped by the desire to measure incidence and prevalence, to be followed by the identification of correlations and further statistical analysis. Thus, the definition of phenomena to be measured occurred at a very early stage, before extensive qualitative knowledge was available, and in an era in which sexualised and intimate violence was still generally covered by a blanket of silence and shame. Thus, a fairly simple construct of "conflict tactics" was devised, based on the assumption that research

was looking for families with inadequate skills in handling disagreements. A list of items, describing acts that might occur in the course of an argument or a fight, was put together and then arranged in a sequence according to the family sociologists' view on what is "more" or "less" severe, and in consideration of the sequential order the instrument was labelled a "conflict tactics scale" (Straus and Gelles 1990).

Over the years, this instrument has been repeatedly tested and validated. Once it had been established as a working tool, further studies faced the expectation to replicate or compare their data, and thus to use the same tool, in a process that soon became self-perpetuating. It is an excellent example of both the strengths and the weaknesses of mainstream US social research. As a pragmatic construction, it generates numbers in multiple settings. This fits well with the dominant model of epidemiology in the US: violence is seen as a public health problem, and the purpose of research is to accumulate data and identify main causes and effects, so that policy can act to eliminate the germ and thus stamp out the disease. The weaknesses of this type of research are also familiar: cultural context is ignored, little attention is given to complex interactions or to exploring the nature of the phenomena; and blatant generalisations enter into all stages of the process. For example, the Conflict Tactics Scale is built on the premise that any form of physical aggression is "more severe" than any form of psychological aggression. In the most influential studies, it is assumed that women and men are equally free to describe to a telephone interviewer how they are treated by their spouses. There is no room for description of abuse unrelated to conflicts, and no way to locate single acts of "hitting" or "kicking" in the situation or sequence of events in which they occur.

In fact, the political agenda driving this research in family sociology is primarily oriented to preventing child abuse, and more broadly, corporal punishment as an accepted means of enforcing norms and/or expressing feelings within the family. The theoretical framework is fairly simple, and Murray Straus, the most influential author of this school of thought, has articulated it repeatedly. It postulates a demarcation line between all kinds of non-physical

aggression and the act of hitting. Whoever crosses that line is in danger of using increasingly harmful forms of physical violence, but also of receiving physical violence (Note the complete parallel to the dominant US model of illegal drug use or, in an earlier period, alcohol). Family violence, in this model, is possible because children learn at an early age that hitting people is permitted within the family; if we could teach people never to hit their children for any reason, we could hope for non-violent families. According to this model, women who defend themselves against abuse by hitting, much as we might understand self-defence, are in danger of contributing to this spiral of increasing physical violence. Only prohibition can avoid destructive excesses.

In the US, where an estimated 90% of parents use physical punishment, a research agenda that highlights the damage that can result is certainly addressing an important social problem. At the same time, the theoretical model is far too simple to be generalized, and it lacks sensitivity to gender issues, or, indeed to more complex dynamics of family, social environment, and culture. While the simplicity of the instrument has made it easy to use, it is difficult to know just what the numbers mean that can emerge from using it. It seems clear, by now, that use of the CTS in a representative population gathers very little information on the type of chronic abuse and battering that has appeared in shelters (cf. Straus and Gelles 1990). Numbers sufficient for statistical analysis emerge for families or couples where physical aggression occurs not more than once or twice a year, and the data usually indicate that both women and men report hitting their partners with about equal frequency. Such studies can tell us about habits of family life: In which regions, social classes or life circumstances is causing physical pain to a child, a sibling, or a partner accepted or relatively normal? They are entirely inadequate for gathering information about gender-based violence, showing only the tip of the iceberg. More elaborated instruments have been more successful (Tjaden and Thoennes 2000).

European research and policy have followed a different pattern (Hagemann-White 2002). A social problems approach with a strong current of ethical concerns gave priority to a multifaceted description

of the nature of the phenomena, understanding the dynamics of victimization, and gathering data to evaluate what measures and actions might be helpful. These approaches have been closely linked with informing policy on the national and on the European level. In consequence, a quite different model from the epidemiological has emerged, which emphasizes circular connections among gender inequality, discrimination throughout society, and violence against women (see for example Godenzi 1996; Fawcett et al. 1996; Hammer and Itzen 2000). The numerical study of prevalence and incidence has emerged – building on the pioneer work of Römken (1992; 1997) in 1986 – only since the mid-1990s (Hagemann-White 2001), under the influence of the Canadian national study (Johnson 1996); and this research has drawn on a broad base of qualitative knowledge to develop differentiated instruments as well as responding to ethical concerns, and given great attention to gender sensitivity.

The strength of the European approach rests on a foundation of qualitative exploration and social intervention as the necessary precondition for gathering valid numbers on a large scale. Its corresponding weakness is the dependency of research on prior social movements and social services that create a public discourse, reduce shame and silence, and empower victims to speak out. Since this has not occurred with men who suffer violence, little is known about them from research.

### 3. Denial and silencing of men's victimization

The gender culture of modernity is centred on an "autonomous" masculine subject whose relationship to others and to the world is based on self-assertion, a struggle between competing claims, and undertaking projects to overcome, reshape, and transform what is merely given or natural. In a capitalist economy, competitive achievement is crucial, and in the 19th century, even physical violence between men in the workplace was sometimes encouraged as a sign of the vigorous will to win (Connell 1995). Under the rule of culturally exalted (or hegemonic) forms of masculinity, winning is everything.

In this context, the concept of a masculine victim seems a contradiction in terms: one is either a man or a victim (Lenz 1996). As late as the end of the 1980s, sexual abuse of boys was widely thought to be simply impossible (cf. Enders 1990).

Writings from the men's movement, although widely different in their aims and perspectives, have both described and harshly criticized the initiation practices and forms of cruelty that have been institutionally tolerated or demanded within all-male settings such as boys' boarding schools, sports teams, street gangs, armies, and prisons; much has been written about the expectation that boys and men endure pain without complaint. Yet, very little space has been given to the victims' own perceptions and suffering, to the immediate and long-term damage to their health and their sense of self-esteem. Many progressive male psychotherapists and social workers seem to avoid engaging themselves with male victims of violence by other men (Lenz 1999). Silence on victimization seems to be a requirement of hegemonic masculinity.

Men are socialized to function in a culture of bodily assault as a routine feature of everyday life. They may be subjected to unilateral and practically unlimited violence if they fail to so function, as reports from basic military training in all countries in the past and the present make clear, or if they remind other men of the possibility of failure. Thus, in prisons, the supposed homosexual is subjected to especially brutal gang rape by heterosexually identified prisoners, and the physical weakling will quickly be pressed into sexual and domestic service for a dominant male (Gilligan 1996). Within interactions of civil society, casual physical aggression of men against men is perceived as normal, thus obscuring humiliation and abuse from view even when it is openly visible. Little attention, either in research or in social intervention, has been given to the significant amount of domestic violence within homosexual relationships, due to the implicit attribution of the violations to homosexuality as such (Finke 2000).

Violence is a key instrument of underlining or enforcing social exclusion. Men identified as outsiders – in the EU countries these could be blacks, Arabs, Turks, refugees, or the homeless – may be chased on the streets and beaten or killed. Man-on-man rape and

sexual abuse is widespread, profoundly shameful, and routinely denied: by witnesses, by the law, and by the victims (e.g. reinterpreted as sexual initiation) (Hillmann et al. 1990; Mezey and King 1992; Lenz 2000). Little is known about the circumstances and motives: Do the abusers seek to further humiliate a man already perceived as inferior, as is the case during ethnicised wars, or have they extended their concept of the "woman" to include some males, granting themselves a wider range of sadistically tinged sexual satisfaction?

No small amount of violence is exercised by women within the home and the family, particularly when they are in a position to do so without encountering restraint, as when disciplining children (Steinmetz 1980; Elliott 1995; Bange and Enders 1996). Data suggest that domestic violence by women in the couple relationship may increase when men grow older, especially since wives are likely to be younger and may gain more equal physical strength (Wetzels et al. 1995). Within pre-existing power relationships, as between adult and child, or professional and psychiatric patient, women also can and do perpetrate sexual as well as physical abuse, and the victims may be male as well as female. Last year, for example, the sexual attack of a female nurse on a male patient was the trigger for requesting a seminar for the medical and nursing staff in a German psychiatric clinic in order to address sexual violation of patients by clinical personnel. The incident had led to great difference of opinion among the staff, most of whom are women. The question was whether a male patient can actually be raped, and what is the "normal" response of a man to a woman's invasion of his intimate or sexual sphere.

Men who have been victimized, as well as the very few professionals (doctors, psychologists, pedagogues, and social workers) who are receptive to hearing their experiences, report again and again that they encounter considerable resistance to the perception of men's vulnerability. The great majority of doctors and therapists minimize the violation of boys and men or refuse to realise that the events have taken place at all (Lenz 1996).

Counsellors and psychotherapists seem to fear vulnerability in men, because this touches on a dark side of the therapists themselves: their own experience of being at someone's mercy, helpless to defend

and protect themselves (Peichl 2000). To recognize the violated man forces the male professional to come to terms with his own "weak", i.e. subordinate feminine side. This painful process can call into question the therapists' own understanding of masculinity as well as his self-image as a competent helper (Lenz 1999).

#### 4. Stakeholders and dissenters in the construction of the debates

The issue of violence against men is bound into political struggles in complex ways. Although Western culture and media present physical violence among men and among boys as legitimate, necessary, and normal, when the issue of victimization is raised, the debate often turns on the question of violence by women against men and boys. On the most obvious level, the figure of the "battered husband" may function to challenge recognition of women's victimization, and more fundamentally, all of women's advocacy politics. Gender-neutral surveys, especially those using the CTS, generally find that men report domestic incidents of hitting approximately as often as women do. These data are sometimes used politically – and at first blush, surprisingly – not to call for appropriate (and gender-sensitive) services for the hidden population of battered men, but rather to demand eliminating services or to reject legal intervention altogether. This seems to imply that the women who call a hotline or seek safety in a shelter are the same women whose men report being victimized, thus confirming the old stereotypes of the violence-prone couple with whom all intervention is futile. In fact, however, the argument seldom goes that far, and it seems more likely that the entire debate is occurring on a symbolic level, where the existence of suffering and injured human beings needing support and safety disappears. Public discourse on violence against women is interpreted as a code message about the moral superiority of women over degraded, because violent, men. Proof that women, too, can be violent against men is taken to invalidate the fundamental premise of all equality policy. It sometimes emerges that the entire debate, as it is carried out in the media and on

the Internet, cloaks a controversy about child custody and visiting rights when a woman initiates divorce (and perhaps more profoundly about a women's right to initiate separation).

In 2002, after granting money for a prevalence study on violence against women, the German government issued a call for bids on an explorative study on violence against men, with the explicit intention of preparing the ground for a gender-sensitive quantitative study. In the discussions that followed, it was often assumed without question that the aim should be to measure women's violence against men. This exclusive focus on the female perpetrator may distract attention from men's much more frequent and traumatic, real victimization by forms of violence that establish and underpin male hierarchy and dominance, and norms of masculinity. It reasserts silently the premise that men do not suffer when such violence occurs, that the participants in a fist fight, an initiation or punishment ritual, or an abusive attack are warriors, not victims, and that they emerge "bloody but unbowed" having proven themselves "real men". To admit to being a victim thus is equivalent to the public admission of not being a real man.

Research on violence avoids the vulnerability of men. In part, this follows from the construction of the subject of scientific inquiry as a knower simultaneously male and without gender. The gaze of the scientific knower is thus directed outward, seeking objective knowledge of the world as it is. In this world of science, the inner world of thoughts, feelings, and motives is also constructed as a realm of facts. Thus, men have questioned and studied all manner of things, except themselves. As Friebe writes: "The drama of the talented man is that he cannot look at himself. With cool rationality and technical intelligence he has, as it were, displaced himself outward, objectified himself and postulated himself to be 'objective'." (Friebe 1995: 9) This is true for psychology as well, where men only become salient when their behaviour deviates from that masculine norm, for example as criminals (Schmitz 1994: 820).

The past decade has seen the growth of men's studies, both as a critical voice coming from men's projects of change, and within such fields as the sociology of health, psychosomatic medicine, or clinical psychology. It is striking that most of these writings, even those

centrally organized around the damaging effects of dominant models of masculinity, such as Hurrelmann and Bründel (1999), fail to make any mention of men's suffering through physical or sexual violence. A familiar theme in masculinity literature is the damage to boys and men by the psychological power of women as mothers or pre-dominant carers, but this discussion also shapes the image of the man as one who must learn to resist, separate himself, (re-)gain control, and overcome susceptibility to feelings that give women too much influence. In critical men's studies, the need to change that very image is a main focus, yet even there, it is the man as (potential) perpetrator due to his lack of empathy and his training in dominance that is seen as the issue. Both in theory and for political action, the connection between men and violence is reduced to men as perpetrators. The violated man is not a subject of political interest. Indeed, we might say that men must act as perpetrators in order to receive attention to their vulnerability. If a man is identified as a perpetrator, he receives the attention of a huge apparatus – from the public prosecutor to the social worker, from the police to the lawyer, all striving to overpower and control him. This extends even to practical projects that do work with men on their experiences of victimization: In the public eye, and when their funding needs justification, they present themselves solely as originators and service providers with the goal of changing the violent behaviour of perpetrators of violence against women.

There are several possible explanations for this avoidance behaviour. Certainly, the claim to work against violence towards women positions male professionals as active protectors and champions of women and children, and defines their work as an active struggle against the forces of evil, which then can be felt – despite all declarations to the contrary – as outside of the self. It should be noted, however, that feminist projects also tend to prefer as allies men who position themselves in these terms – while at the same time distrusting them. The definition of the client as perpetrator also creates an automatic shield of distance, which protects the male speaker (researcher, social worker, therapist, or political activist) from too close an identification; the need for distance may arise from fear of vulnerability, repressed own experiences, or submerged homophobia.

It is notable that controversies on the "correct" methodology of perpetrator programs all seem to focus on issues of control: either it is vital to confront the violent men with effective social control, or it is vital to avoid giving third parties (such as the police, or feminist projects) control over what happens in the men's groups. Much seems to be at stake in avoiding the admission of unmitigated vulnerability and neediness.

### 5. Theoretical considerations: how gender relations shape the patterns and probabilities of victimization

Within the wide range of actions with the potential to be violent, physical assault and injury (including all kinds of coerced sexual penetration) retain a unique and central significance, since there is no real escape from one's own body. The threat to bodily integrity and, in the last resort, to life, lends potency to psychological attacks or social exclusion. Physical violation also mobilizes cultural body practices, especially gender and race; on the interpersonal level, both acts of violence and experiences of violation are probably always gendered, as well as being racially or ethnically shaped. Even when both are men, or women, white or black, violence asserts the proper place of the body in a social order. Thus, we may safely assume, even knowing that some forms of victimization are still invisible, that women and men will have gender-related and different experiences of violence. Gender-neutral research will necessarily gloss over or deny important aspects.

Despite its emphasis on gender, the successful political discourse addressing violence has drawn heavily on a "social problems" approach. Such an approach sees certain groups within society as unfairly disadvantaged, and other groups as unable to function smoothly within institutional and market frameworks (sometimes these are the same groups, and one phenomenon is taken to explain the other). The task of policy, then, is to provide resources, services, or sanctions and thereby reduce the extent of the problem. Within this

tradition, particularly strong in the social democratic and corporatist European states, feminist activism was able to divert resources to intervention strategies and create political alliances for change.

At the same time, framing the issue as a social problem may actually tend to reproduce the gender basis of violence. Hegemonic constructions of masculinity and femininity are both supported by, and support the use of violence, but they also define the "legitimate victim". Thus, abuse of the wife within the family could be established as a scandal, underpinned by the norms that women should expect to be protected and provided for when they marry, that the home should be a safe haven complementary to the harsh competitive outside world, a place where needs are met. Attitudes towards sexual violence have remained much more ambivalent, especially when a woman has been willing to strike up a casual acquaintance in a public location such as a bar. Disapproval of trafficking in women is sharp, but it is difficult to mobilize protest against shipping such women back to where they came from, as if it were a sanitary measure cleaning the country of sin. And it remains persistently difficult to get a clear focus on women as actors who sometimes use violence against those dependent on their care.

Hegemonic masculinity defines men as active agents in control of even the most passionate impulses: possessive sexuality and rational violence form a precarious bridge over the contradiction between desires and postulated invulnerability. Men are taught to mask neediness as legitimate demands or rights. Within public discourse on gender-based violence, men appear either as emotional cripples who cannot express their needs any other way than by violence, and thus deserve understanding and help, or as invulnerable actors who must be called to account and punished. These images allow little room for a human both vulnerable and responsible, able to grow and change.

Hegemonic femininity has been challenged by feminism much more thoroughly in its dual definition of women as "strong mothers, weak wives" (so the book title by Miriam Johnson). Nonetheless, speaking of violence seems to lead imperceptibly into recasting the woman in these very terms, as a victim (the term "survivor" is no less



dramatic), as one who bravely struggles, for example, to care for her children as best she can, while suffering great wrongs. This image is often reproduced and mirrored in the self-perception of feminist activist projects. As a result, the woman herself may be cast as an object of counselling, services, intervention, and education. Again, vulnerability and responsible decisions seem not to mix; active desire and passive suffering seem unable to exist in the same person.

The feminist movement has used violence against women as emblematic for patriarchy, while at the same time working pragmatically for social change here and now. This, it would seem unavoidably, has partly slipped into reaffirming the very gender relations that were meant to be challenged. At the same time, it must be said that throughout the entire past 30 years of activism in the field, strong – and when necessary unashamedly self-critical – feminist voices have raised all of these issues again and again. Voices of men questioning or rejecting hegemonic masculinity have been fewer and their collective efforts towards change, as Connell (1995) has pointed out, unstable. Our closing question to the discussants of this paper is thus: How can we create a discourse on gender and violence based on mutual respect and empowerment?

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## Notes

- 1 Only since violence in schools has been reframed as "bullying" (especially in Scandinavia and the UK) do we see some studies of the effects on the victim; but this new framework - like the substitution of "mobbing" for harassment at work - tends to suppress considerations of gender.

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# Work with Perpetrators of Domestic Violence in Germany

## 1. Project WiBIG: "Evaluation of intervention projects against domestic violence"

Even after more than 20 years of public discussion in Germany<sup>1</sup> about the male violence that many women experience in domestic relationships, it continues to be necessary to take initiative to improve women's situation. Although significant progress has been made over the past few years, the problem of violence in gender relations nevertheless has not yet been solved and new strategies are under discussion (Hagemann-White 1992; Hagemann-White et al. 1997).

The intervention projects against domestic violence take this discussion as a starting point for improvements. Intervention projects are institutionalized networks for inter-agency and community cooperation. Since the middle of the nineties, the number of such projects in Germany has been steadily growing. They differ in size, structure, and focus but in the end all pursue the same objectives: to reduce violence against women, prevent its continuation, and ensure its social condemnation. The intervention projects work to hold perpetrators of violence systematically accountable and to optimize intervention and support for women and their children. The projects strive to ensure better access for those seeking help and to reach those groups of women who up to now have not been reached by any support program (Kavemann et al. 2001).

These far-reaching goals are implemented through cooperation forums that aim to include all institutions, agencies, projects, and