

Violence against women: Key points

Written by Michael Flood, 4 March 2002.

Feminist contributions to understandings of men's violence

Women's experience of an enormous variety of forms of violence, directed at women as women. The many kinds of (& names for) gendered violence;

Domestic violence, family violence, wife-battering, intimate violence, intimate homicide, femicide
Sexual violence, sexual assault, rape, marital rape, gang rape, date rape, acquaintance rape, indecent assault, sexual harassment, sex-based harassment
Child abuse, child sexual abuse, paedophilia, incest
Homophobic violence, hate crime, lesbian-bashing
Elder abuse
Genital mutilation
Enforced prostitution
Enforced sterilisation
Enforced abortion
Killing of unwanted female babies
Enforced motherhood
Suttee execution or bride-burning; Footbinding; Witch-burning

Broadening definitions of violence. Physical violence typically is accompanied by other forms of abusive and oppressive behaviour. Such as;

Threats of violence, intimidation, sexual assault, coercion, emotional abuse, financial control, insults and mind-games, control and isolation.

And minimising or denying the violence, refusing to accept responsibility, and blaming the victim.

The consequences of this violence: social control and oppression. Men's violence reproduces men's authority over women.

Critique of pathologising and individualising explanations of men's violence (in which violence is seen as the actions of "sick" individuals, "psycho's", etc.) Instead;

Violence is a choice: Those who use violence choose where and when they do the violence. And how they use the violence: e.g, controlling where they hit, and with what degree of force.

Violence is perpetrated by normal men and in normal families, in the political context of a patriarchal society.

Violence and power:

Different forms of violence all share a link to *power and control*.

Men's violence is the expression of power over women and children. And violence also maintains power inequalities.

(Violence is also involved in power relations between men: men's violence against other men, such as pooker-bashing and bullying, maintains hierarchies of power among men themselves.)

Women resist and fight back. The recognition of women's agency and resistance. Shift in language from passive 'victims' to active 'survivors' (but not all women survive).

Links between men, masculinity and violence: Not biological, but social, cultural, and historical.

Factors related to violence against women at different levels of the social order

Macrosystem (the general views, attitudes and social relations of the culture at large)

- Male entitlement/ownership of women
- Masculinity linked to aggression and dominance
- Rigid gender roles

(I.e., men are more likely to use violence against women if they have hostile and negative attitudes towards women, adhere to rigid gender roles, see violence as manly and legitimate and desirable, and believe in rape/violence-supportive myths.)

- Cultural ethos that condones violence as a means to settle interpersonal disputes
- Acceptance of physical chastisement of women

Exosystem (the institutions and social structures, formal and informal. E.g., work, neighbourhood, social networks, identity groups.)

- Low socioeconomic status/unemployment
- Isolation of woman and family
- Delinquent peer associations

Microsystem (the immediate context in which abuse takes place, e.g. family or other intimate or acquaintance relationships)

- Male dominance in the family
- Male control of wealth in the family
- Use of alcohol
- Marital/verbal conflict

Personal history

- Witnessing marital violence as a child
- Being abused oneself as a child

(Source: Heise, Lori L. (1998) Violence against women: an integrated, ecological framework. *Violence Against Women*, 4(3), June)

Shifts and debates in feminist understandings

Analyses of masculinity and heterosexuality... E.g. in the late 1970s and early 1980s, a growing emphasis on men's violence as systematic and as central to male domination, and a growing critique of normative heterosexuality and masculine sexuality as fundamentally implicated in this violence.

Recognition of the presence of violence and other forms of coercion in everyday heterosexual relations.

Also counter-critiques of these analyses. E.g., of (1) a portrayal of masculinity as uniformly aggressive and predatory. Men, masculinities and violences are diverse. And of (2) a portrayal of patriarchy (men's power) as everywhere, all-pervasive and unchanging (and of non-oppressive heterosexual relations as unlikely if not impossible).

Dilemma faced by anti-violence activists: "in exposing the reality of violence, we risk gaining visibility at the price of promoting the image of women as victim and the notion of sex as all danger and no pleasure." (Heise, 1995: 126)

So... Remember women's agency and pleasure. And remind ourselves of what we are *for*. An eroticism based on consent, safety, and mutual pleasure. Just, empowering and pleasurable sexual and social relations between and among women and men.

Recent developments in feminist understandings

Sophisticated feminist-informed analyses of particular forms of violence, e.g. of gay/lesbian hate violence, elder abuse, etc.

Feminist work recognises that violence is shaped by race, class and other social divisions. Feminist attention to issues of difference. In relation to;

(a) The perpetration of violence.

E.g., to understand current patterns of violence in indigenous communities, we have to look at history — of colonisation, dispossession, the erosion of indigenous cultural and spiritual identity, and the disintegration of family and community (Queensland Government (Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy and Development), 2000: xii).

(b) The racism of the institutions which deal with violence.

E.g. the police, criminal justice and welfare systems. Greater surveillance, control and punishment of people of colour and poor people.

(c) The consequences of this for communities responding to violence.

E.g., effect on the ability and willingness of Aboriginal individuals and communities to report or respond to violence.

Also issues of context and culture. E.g., how the cultures of university campuses influence rape. Local political circumstances, eg rape in war.

Growing feminist attention to violence against women around the globe.

Feminist challenges to feminist understandings

Feminist understandings of interpersonal violence have been tested and challenged by the recognition of;

The sexual assault of males

Violence by women

Men's versus women's experience of violence

Both women and men are most at risk from (other) men. But...

Men are much less likely than women to be subject to violent incidents in the home. More likely to be assaulted in public places.

Violence against men is far more likely to be by strangers. Far less likely to involve partners or ex-partners.

Of all the violence men experience, far less is represented by domestic violence (less than 1 percent, versus one-third of violence against women)

Anti-violence work by and with men and boys

Men are part of the problem, and part of the solution.

Men's anti-violence activism has several key elements;

Based on the idea that men must take responsibility, both personally and through collective action, for ending men's violence.

Directed at other males, rather than at females.

Conducted often in alliance with and accountable to feminists.

Focused on preventative education, to make it less likely that boys and men will choose to be violent.

Cross-gender partnerships and alliances are crucial. So that men...

Don't reinvent the wheel.

Don't collude in dominant masculinity.

Can demonstrate their shared interests with women.

VAW will only cease when men join with women to put an end to it.