

The many shades of violence against women: A call to action

Abstract:

Confronting gender-based violence is a key area of concern and one that calls for urgent action. These debates have become particularly relevant in light of the Covid-19 pandemic and the unveiling of underlying inequalities. Amongst the many unintended consequences of the pandemic lies the increased risk of domestic violence for vulnerable women who have been required to self-isolate. There is increasing evidence that we are facing more than one pandemic with quite worrying and widespread problems in global systems, whether they relate to public health or to human rights. As academics, we can contribute by theorizing with intersectionalities, translating research into practice, engaging with our local communities and creating non-stigmatized environment. But most of all, we can advocate for victims.

Keywords: Gender-based violence, violence against women, domestic violence, domestic abuse, covid-19 pandemic

Violence against women has received increasing attention globally. Yet, it persists, and remains a human rights and public health issue. Recent events such as the murders of Sarah Everard, in the United Kingdom, and Gabby Petito, in the United States, have heightened the need for discussions about gender-based violence and abuse perpetrated by strangers and intimate partners. These debates have become particularly relevant in light of the Covid-19 pandemic and the unveiling of underlying inequalities in many contexts (Bradbury-Jones & Isham, 2020; Campbell, 2020; Fisher et al., 2020; Foley and Cooper, 2021; John et al., 2020; Van Gelder et al., 2020). Violence against women can include a wide variety of acts ranging from verbal harassment and emotional abuse to physical or sexual abuse (WHO, 2012). Femicide sits at the extreme end of the continuum. Originally coined by Russell in 1976, the term was used to describe an act motivated by a misogynist culture (Radford & Russell, 1992) and was later redefined as the killing of women due to their gender (Russell & Harnes, 2001). Despite the rising rates of femicide, Weil (2016, p. 1133) acknowledges that it remains an “invisible or quasi-invisible phenomenon” in certain subject areas. Thus, it becomes even more pressing that we consider situations where women are under the threat of being killed (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2003), since violence in different forms may escalate to femicide (Zara & Gino, 2018). Research by Zara and Gino (2018) suggests that this escalation occurs more frequently within an intimate relationship.

Domestic violence refers to violence that occurs within the home sphere and is often used to indicate violence that is perpetrated by a partner (Bradbury-Jones & Isham, 2020). The United Nations General Assembly defines violence against women as “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life” (UNGA, 1993). Studies show that domestic violence tends to amplify during moments of crisis,

and with the 'Stay at Home' message associated with responses to Covid-19, many women have been faced with a 'home' that is not a safe place. This so-called 'pandemic paradox' (Bradbury-Jones & Isham, 2020) sheds light on an issue that is not necessarily new. Several countries have already reported an increase in domestic violence as families may be sheltering at home with a violent perpetrator (Campbell, 2020). There are reports of increased calls to domestic abuse helplines by about 25% in different parts of the world such as the United Kingdom, and an almost 50% increase in calls in Brazil (Bradbury- Jones & Isham, 2020). Reports also show a rise in calls in Australia, China, Cyprus, Spain and the United States (Bright et al., 2020; Peterman et al., 2020).

Violence against women has been described as "the most pervasive yet least recognized human violation in the world" (Heise et al., 2002 p. S5). But what constitutes violence? An anthropological review by Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois (2004, p. 1) frames it as a "slippery concept" and a cultural construct (Merry, 2011) as "the social and cultural dimensions of violence are what give violence its power and meaning" (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois, 2004, p.1). Gender, in particular "shapes the meaning of violent acts differently for women and men" (Russo & Pirlott, 2006, p. 179). Hence, we find that the complexities and variabilities of women's life situations make it even more challenging to address (gender-based) violence, especially considering the many layers of women's structural and cultural oppression in different contexts.

The Brazilian case is noteworthy. The country once occupied the 5th position in the domestic violence crime index, but the actual picture may be much worse since social norms concerning the acceptability of domestic violence may lead to under-reporting (Miranda & Lange, 2020). Furthermore, widespread machismo is still prevalent, with a patriarchal nuclear family where women are expected to behave in certain ways according to traditional gender roles (Santos & de Hilal, 2018). A study from the Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada (IPEA) demonstrates that a large percentage of the Brazilian population believes that violence is ultimately attributed to women who do not behave well or wear provocative clothes (Cerqueira et al., 2017).

Brazil is also one of the few countries that has invested in women-only transportation. Women's experiences with sexual harassment and abuse in public transit is an international issue (Gekoski et al., 2015) and they are more likely to be exposed to violence in their daily commutes in countries with high levels of gender inequality (Dunckel-Graglia, 2013). The entrenchment of gender inequality within public transportation is meant to ensure equal rights to mobility (Dunckel-Graglia, 2013); however, the approach has been labeled 'design out of fear' (Koskela & Pain, 2000).

As cities such as Rio de Janeiro (Brazil) and Mexico City (Mexico) invest in pink women-only subway cars, is this a solution to a problem, or does it normalise violence as part of men's behaviors, putting the onus (yet again) on women? As academics, how do we advance such issues? How do we give voice to women, specifically those in precarious conditions? Can we contribute to the debate by sharing our own stories, helping recognise trauma and dismantle the stigma associated with domestic violence?

First, we can help by theorizing and articulating how aspects of gender interact with other factors to influence violence as "predictors, meanings, and outcomes of gender-based violence are multifaceted and differ for women and men—as perpetrators and as victims" (Russo & Pirlott, 2006, p. 181). These should consider the complexity of gender and how it intersects with other dimensions, including "stigmatized identities that may elicit prejudice and discrimination, confer differential access to power and privilege,

and converge with gender to magnify or diminish risk for experiencing violence” (Russo & Vaz, 2001, p. 280).

Second, we can engage in academic activism by translating our research into public policy (Baird, 2020). To disrupt gender-based violence trends, we need evidence as well as a deeper understanding of contextual circumstances at multiple levels. A transdisciplinary approach that connects us and draws us out of our research silos may help promote social change. By engaging those who might otherwise be subjects as co-researchers - perhaps through action research - we are not changing others ‘out there’ but changing *with* others (Reason & Bradbury, 2012). Policymakers need community expertise and knowledge and relegating vulnerable women solely to the realm of care may exclude them from the response development (John et al., 2020).

Third, we can become familiar with our local organisations to signpost available resources for those in need of immediate help. Domestic violence is a public health issue that requires an integrated community response (Solomon & Taylor, 2015). At a minimum, there must be free services available for women as the lack of financial resources and help from a support network means that a woman in an abusive relationship may not have a place to go (Anderson et al., 2003; Martin et al., 2000). According to Johnson (1992), a woman’s decision to return to an abusive relationship is primarily a function of the benefits of staying outweighing the costs of leaving. This is particularly relevant when a woman is unemployed or when she has a negative perception of herself (Yamawaki et al., 2012).

Fourth, we can tell our stories. There is a pressing need to challenge and reduce the (still existing) stigma surrounding domestic violence and abuse, thus changing beliefs, attitudes and power relations (Link & Phelan, 2001). For that, we must proactively create and maintain non-stigmatizing environments (Murray et al., 2015). One possible approach is to highlight the stories of survivors to empower individuals who overcame violence, also challenging stereotypes. Wherever we are, it is likely that survivors are closer than we imagine – *they are me, they are one of us, they are all of us*. While I am not telling my story here, below are some of the messages that I wish someone had shared with me years ago:

- If your partner punches a hole on the wall, just above your head, during an argument (even if they do not hit you) – *that is violence*.
- If your partner puts their hands around your neck, on your throat or over your mouth (even if they do not hit you) – *that is violence*.
- If your partner threatens to harm you in any way (e.g., saying they will hit you or kill you if <you fill in the blank>) – *that is violence*.

Domestic violence is a crisis that affects us all. It involves complex dynamics and it is not always clear who is in danger. Community and family scholars can advocate on behalf of victims as there is much to do to address the lack of agency and feelings of shame, at the individual level, and to create adequate support, at the community and societal levels. Moreover, the indirect effects of gender-based violence reach far and wide. In addition to the women themselves, their children and families, physical and mental health consequences have social and economic costs to workplaces, governments and societies. So, we must ask ourselves, how else can we respond to the spiralling numbers of violence against women, since the very social structures within which we operate already mirror inequitable gender relations? It is time to reclaim academia as a force for change.

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