

GENDER AND VIOLENCE. DIVERSITY AND DIFFERENCE

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Keywords: violence, gender-based violence, types of violence, effects of violence.

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Summary

This chapter focuses on violence as a diverse and differentiated phenomenon, and particularly on violence against women as the most persistent form of violence. It describes the different forms of gender-based violence, the risk factors and the consequences of it. The article highlights inequities in power and resources between men and women as the roots of violence against women. It finishes by numerating some pending task in the fight against gender-based violence.

1. Introduction.

Violence, including all its manifestations, can be considered as the worst global epidemic responsible for uncountable lives interrupted or harmed physically, psychologically, sexually and economically all around the world. As many as 1.6 million people die every year because of violence. But the number of lives eroded by non-fatal acts of violence every year is immeasurable.

Although the problem of violence has just gained particular attention lasting recent decades, it is an old problem for most societies. In some ways violence looks like a constant in the history of humanity through its different manifestations—wars, social oppression, homicides, rapes, or domestic violence are certainly not new events. But the persistence of violence throughout history should not be interpreted as evidence of its unavoidability. In fact, there are communities more violent and other less violent, and in

each community we can find violent and non-violent individuals, indicating that violence is not unchangeable or invincible.

Today it is recognized that violence—whatever the form it takes—constitutes both a human right issue and a public health matter. A life free of violence is a basic human right acknowledged in diverse International Treatises and it refers not only to the violence in public spaces but also to domestic violence, against men as well women. The Declaration and Action Plan for the Second World Conference on Human Rights in 1993 was a step forward in this direction, by defining violence against women as a violation of human rights. In health terms, intentional violence is the first cause of death in many countries, with an estimate of 120 000 homicides a year and a three days per person per year lost because of violence just in the Americas region.

Violence is not, however, inherent to human life. The factors that contribute to violence can be modified, whether they are individual features or social conditions. As long as they can be identified and changed, it is possible to reduce and, at some point, to fully eliminate violence.

2. Violence, Diversity and Differences.

Generally speaking violence is any act (or omission) that could produce harm to the well being of a person. However, several aspects of the definition have been (or still are) controversial. One first issue is the intention to harm as essential or not to the definition of violence. Can an act be called violent when there was no intention of harming someone? The answer varies depending on whether we emphasize the actual consequence of the behavior or if the intention of the behavior.

Usually a criminal justice approach to the problem of violence would put more emphasis on the actual consequences of violence, while from the public health perspective the definition of violence emphasizes the intentionality of the behavior more than the final consequences. The emphasis on the intention of the behavior—whether or not to cause harm—is important to many because it permits distinguishing a harm caused intentionally from a harm caused accidentally. On the other hand, looking at the actual consequences of the violence may overlook some violent acts that do not cause visible harm, but equally or even largely can affect a person's well-being, like constant humiliation.

Nevertheless, many acts that can be considered as violent, using the public health approach, are not considered criminal acts in most criminal codes; this includes psychological abuse, some omissions, deprivations and neglects. Then, to serve the purpose of fully understanding the causes of violence, its different manifestations and the actions required to eliminate all forms of violence from societies, it seems more useful to adopt the broader definition of violence given by the public health perspective.

The World Health Organization defines violence as:

“The intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high

likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation”.

This definition also considers the possibility of exerting violence through differences in power, not only physical force, which broadens the definition and the understanding of violence; it also acknowledges violence that does not necessarily result in death or injury, but in the same way harms individuals and societies.

When we think of violence the first idea that comes to our minds is that of murder or beating, that is, physical violence. But violence refers to many different behaviors that can be differentiated into different types of violence, and there is also diversity in the experience of violence—by region, by gender, by age—all of which suggest a multi-dimensional phenomenon more than a homogeneous fact. Thus, as long as violence refers to diverse and differentiated experiences, it requires the convergence of multiple disciplines and perspectives to be correctly addressed.

2.1. Different types of violence.

To distinguish among the different types of violence we could focus on different aspects of the violence: the motives or reasons for violence (political, economic, social or emotional), the space or context where it takes place (the streets, the institutions, the household), the aggressor/victim gender relation (male-to-male, male-to-female, female-to-male, female-to-female), the aggressor/victim relationship (intimate partners, relatives, unrelated), the nature of the aggression (physical, emotional, economic, sexual), the number of people involved (unipersonal, interpersonal or collective) and the direction of violence (self-inflicted, toward other(s)). These different dimensions that can be considered to characterize the violence are not excluding, but are in fact intercrossed and all present in each simple act of violence.

The most broad and general classification of violence distinguishes between *social violence* (violence that occurs in public places and usually between strangers) and *domestic violence* (the violence that takes place in the household and usually between relatives). Both types of violence are more and more incorporated in policy agendas, in part because high levels of violence are occurring in many societies, but also because of the recent disclosure of domestic violence as a public matter.

The World Report on Violence and Health outlines three major types of violence: (a) self-directed violence, or violence that a person inflicts upon himself or herself, (b) interpersonal violence or violence inflicted by another person or by a small group of individuals and (c) collective violence, or violence imposed by larger groups such as states, militia, political groups or terrorist groups.

To identify more specific types of violence, each of these three major forms of violence is divided into other categories. The self-directed violence is subdivided into suicidal behavior and self abuse; interpersonal violence is divided into family and intimate partner violence and community violence, and finally collective violence is subdivided into social, political and economic violence. The sub-categories of interpersonal violence differentiate between the violence that takes place in the family (committed against children, intimate partners and the elderly) and violence that occurs outside the

family (committed by acquaintances or strangers), while for the subcategories of collective violence the distinction is based on possible motives for violence.

Additionally, attending to the nature of violence, four types of violence can be identified: physical, psychological, sexual and deprivation or neglect. Definitions of these four types of violence are provided later on, in the section on violence against women.

2.2. Diversity in the experience of violence.

There are important differences between men and women, as groups, regarding the kind of violence that they most significantly experience. Most violent incidents that women go through correspond to male aggressors, most often a spouse or relative, and take place in the household; while, in contrast, most incidents of violence experienced by males take place in public places, from another male, friend or stranger.

The difference in settings and victim/aggressor relationship that primarily characterize the violence that women and men experience define a significant difference in the emotional impact of violence for them. The fact that most of the violence against women comes from someone with whom they have a close emotional relationship and daily contact, means a high negative emotional impact of violence for women. In a different way, the most frequent case for men is male-to-male aggression from strangers or acquaintances, with low emotional impact.

There are differences too in the types and magnitude of violence endured by men and women. In all regions male homicide rates are significantly larger than female rates, and this gap tends to be larger in regions with high-income inequality. Males accounted for 77% of all homicides worldwide, with rates more than three times those of women. Furthermore, in the same year, 60% of all suicides occurred among males. Men are also more likely to be killed or injured in wars or in youth and gang-related violence than women.

Finally, there are significant differences in the prevalence of violence by region and countries. Evidence suggests that Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America are the most violent regions in the world, with homicide rates more than twice the world average and also high levels of domestic violence. Rates of violent deaths also vary according to country income levels; in the year 2000 the rate of violent deaths in low-to-middle income countries was more than twice the rate in high-income countries (32.1 versus 14.4 per 100 000 population respectively).

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Biographical Sketch

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