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Does abuse depend on gender? Men as a victim of women's violence

ABSTRACT. The aim of this article is an attempt to reflect on what violence is and what effects it can cause. The conventional wisdom has been that women are victims and men are perpetrators of violence and abuse. Social schemes describe women as fragile and vulnerable. However, women can be equally aggressive, dominating and use violence. Each year acts of violence against men increase and it is very important to be aware of this phenomenon. Usually men hide the fact of being abused out of fear of public stigma, felling bashful, being laughed or losing respect of their family. This paper aims to show how important this problem is and explore new ideas and possible solutions for victims of violence, as well as to improve preventive measures for abused men.

KEYWORDS: violence, violence against men, aggression, intimate partner violence, sexual harassment, victims of violence

Characteristic of violence against men

Problem of violence is continually current in literature and media. Violence touches different sphere of our lives and different environments. Nowadays this phenomenon is more and more visible and worryingly it increases. But how exactly do we define violence? In subject literature there is five forms of violence: 1. physical violence—which is a form of behavior that aim to hurt the victim by causing him or her pain. What is important—this behaviours are against victim will and in the end can cause body damage, make one's wellbeing worse or even take your life; 2. psychological violence—it aims to lower one's self-esteem and by using humiliation, degrading, putting a victim to shame, threatens and intimidation, cause victim's fear arousal; 3. sexual violence—contains all behaviors starting with unwanted sexual comments through forcing a partner to have sex and ending with genitals damage; 4. economical violence—where the victim starts to be financially depended on offender. It contains overcontrolling

one's expenses, removing by force victim's earned money, theft, taking loans without victim permission, holding the victim back from going to work or destroying victim's personal belongings; 5. neglecting—failing in taking proper care of both physical and emotional needs of someone. Neglecting behaviours can be both conscious acts as well as unconscious and may be caused by lack of offender competences or interest (Makara-Strudzińska & Sosnowska, 2012, p. 57–61). What should be stressed though is, that mostly all those kinds of violence are combined by offender. WHO (World Health Organization) definition though seems to reflect that as it defines violence in these words:

> 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 (World Health Organization, *World report on violence and health*, 2002, p. 5).

Usually when we use term "violence" people associate it with men and almost automatically think about men as offenders and women as victims. It is difficult to be surprised taking into consideration historical and cultural influences which have shaped some of later discourses regarding abuse. Historically, men's violence and abuse of women was sanctioned by legal and social norms. And even though laws such as this one do not exist anymore in modern, western societies, there are still some cultures in the world, where violence against women is considered to be socially 'normal' and accepted. For instance, in some Asian countries killing of wives is practiced to preserve 'family honor' (Krug et al., 2002). What is more, most of the literature surrounding the topic of intimate partner abuse is influenced by feminist perspectives of women as victims (Walby, 1990). Maybe those are some of the reasons why the phenomenon of men abuse is so hard to be believed as a problem and women's abuse of men is still a peculiar taboo. Thus, it's not only women who became victims. It's a stereotype that is being repeated in society and there is a social scheme describing women as fragile and weak individual comparing to strong and dominating man. Those kind of schemes, publicizing men violence and depreciating women violence, lead to those stereotypes. In reality though, there are situations where a man is a victim and a woman is a perpetrator. But this kind of violence configuration is very bashful for men. They don't want to be perceived as weak individual who can't stop his wife, partner or female boss from

abuse. That is why barely never they report abuse. And this in turn implicates lower statistics and lower scale of problem in public opinion. If anything, men are reporting abuse more eager to social workers and look for help in social help centers, rather than reporting abuse to the Police (Wai-Man Choi et al., 2015, p. 217–226). Drijber's et al. research seems to show similar results. According to their research of 380 males who were victims of their partner violence, 32% of them talk to police officers about what happened, whereas only 15% reported it (Drijber, Reijnders & Ceelen, 2013). Therefore, it is common yet not publicized problem. Women have almost the same tendency to use violence against men as men against women. There are research showing that women are able to perform acts of violence. If we take into consideration physical aggression, studies show that as many women self-report perpetrating as do men. Cercone, Beach and Arias studies on collage samples, found that men and women commit similar rates of physical aggression (Cercone, Beach & Arias, 2005). Straus research on the other hand, indicates on higher prevalence of women who commit physical aggression (Straus, 2004).

A representative study of 6,002 men and women showed in National Family Violence Survey carried out in USA, found that 4,8% of wives reported using violence against their husbands and 3,4% of husbands reported using violence against their wives (Straus & Gelles, 1990). Carmo and Grams carried out their research on 4746 people being a victim of their partner violence. 11,5% of them, which is 535 people, were men, whereas the rest were women. The most common form of violence they indicate was scratching—almost 20%, fist hitting—16,7% and hitting using blunt objects—16,6%. In Drijber research that was mentioned before, 67% of responders experienced both physical violence such as barging, kicking, biting or hitting, and psychological violence such as insulting, ignoring or stalking. The Polish Institute of public opinion in 2012 conducted a survey and the results showed that men more often comparing to women declared to be emotionally abused by being insulted (22%) or cutting down from their family and friends (12%). What's more, every tenth men, which was 10% of all male responders, experienced violence from their partner while being in relationship and every fifth—20%, was psychologically abused. What's important, the survey showed that men (22%) as likely and often as women (21%) experienced both physical and psychological abuse (Research statement, (2012). *Domestic violence and conflicts*. Warsaw: Public Opinion Research Centre).

Women as violence perpetrators—characteristic of women who use violence

Biological base of violence is aggressiveness which is an instinctual human behavior—both for men and women. Historically, males were considered to be more aggressive and more likely to be a perpetrator, whereas women were considered to be 'weaker gender' and associated with hearth and home, maternity, female traits such as fragility, obedience and being emotional. Nowadays, there is more and more information in the body of literature emphasizing the fact that every woman as well as every man has some aggressive elements and desires in their personality and it depends on individual how and when they decide to use it. Women's dominating forms of aggression are more indirect and psychological rather than direct and physical. For instance, women are more likely to needle, gossip, irritate, verbally insult or humiliate. Thus, it is often difficult for men to not only realize that they are a victim, but also to name those behaviours out loud as violence. What's more, consequences of women's violence are therefore not as visible and obvious, because there is no direct physical suffering or pain but there are deep, emotional, negative experiences and thoughts which may significantly disorganize victim's life (Crick, 1997; Bjorkqvist, Osterman & Lagerspetz, 1994; Konopka & Frączak, 2013).

There are some factors that determine if and to what extent aggressive behoviour appears. One of them may be childhood trauma and cultural and social conditions. Several studies suggest that there are high rates of childhood abuse and trauma among women who use violence. Among Swan et al. research of women using intimate partner violence, there were 60% of them who experienced neglect and emotional abuse, another 58% who experienced sexual abuse, 52% who were physically abused and 41% who were physically neglected (Swan et al., 2005). Those who experienced childhood abuse and neglect have higher risk of repeating those aggressive behaviours in their adult life. A lot of women transfer those aggressive, violent behaviours and attitudes towards their husbands, sons, fathers or uncles (Bodzon, 2013). Several studies where experiences of childhood abuse have been found to be a risk factor for women's violent and abusive behavior toward others, seem to confirm that. (Sullivan et al., 2005; White & Humphrey, 1994). A high correlation between women's use of violence and them being victimized is not uncommon (Johnson, 1995). According to Johnson (1995), women who were victimized were 10 times more likely to be perpetrators of violence in their intimate relationships than non-

victimized women. Siegel study of 136 women found that experiences of being hit or beaten by a parent predicted women's violence against their partners. What's more childhood experiences of sexual abuse predicted women's use of violence against intimate partners and also the partners' use of violence against them.

Other factors may be biological factors connected with limbic system, central nervous system and personality traits. Explosive personality characterizes by lack of ability to control anger, very strong and sudden humor changes which lead to sudden acts of aggressiveness. Similarly, psychopathic personality characterizes by lack of emotionality and pangs of conscience, sudden explosiveness, aggressiveness, tendency to be cruel and violate other's boundaries. There is higher chance of exposure aggressive behaviours if one has either explosive or psychopathic personality. Damages of CNS resulting from serious head injuries can influence on individual ability to solve difficult situations and problems and control their impulsiveness. As a result, these lacks abilities can foster aggression which is even more exposed in difficult and frustrating situations. Of course, there is no one bio-psych-pathological pattern of perpetrator. Nevertheless, some of violent aggressors may characterize by different biologically connected factors.

Another very important factor that should be taken into account is psychological functioning and condition of individual. The effects of childhood abuse are far reaching and influence both physical health and psychological adjustment into adulthood (Thompson et al., 2002). There are some of psychological conditions such as depression, substance abuse, anxiety or posttraumatic stress disorder that have been associated with traumatic experiences and domestic victimization. The prevalence of these conditions is high among women who use violence against their partner. Swan et al. in their study used some variables measuring psychological functioning of women using violence against their male partners. They found that 69% of sample women met criteria for depression, 24% took psychiatric medication, almost one in five were suffering from either alcohol or drug problems and one in three met criteria on a PTSD. Similar conclusions derived from Dowd et al. study (2005) were they evaluate 107 domestically violent, heterosexual women referred to an anger management program. They found a high prevalence of depression—67% of responders, substance use problem—67%, bipolar disorder—18% and anxiety issues—9%. Overall women tended to have histories of childhood attachment disruptions and victimization, mental health problems and substance abuse.

Intimate Partner Violence

In many countries, to describe violence between partners, mostly the term 'domestic violence' has been used. However, the word 'domestic' as violence terminology suggest connotation with family and that it is happening only in families or marriages. Also, it can encompass child or elder abuse or abuse only by any member of a household. Because of this adequacy problems, more recently, many adopted the term 'Intimate Partner Violence' which seems to be wider definition that encompass more than just a household and better describes violence between partners. One of the subjects that use this term is World Health Organization. They describe it as:

> Intimate partner violence refers to any behavior within an intimate relationship that causes physical, psychological or sexual harm to those in the relationship. Such behavior includes: acts of physical aggression—such as slapping, hitting, kicking and beating; psychological abuse—such as intimidation, constant belittling and humiliating; forced intercourse and other forms of sexual coercion; various controlling behaviors—such as isolating a person from their family and friends, monitoring their movements, and restricting their access to information or assistance (World Health Organization, *Understanding and addressing violence against women*, 2012, p. 1).

What is worth noticing is that this definition acknowledges controlling behaviors in addition to physical, psychological and sexual abuse. What's more, it contains words psychological 'harm' which implicate that intimate violence is not only physical, act-based phenomenon, which is very important and need to be stressed, as some people believe that violence has to be connected with acts of violence and only in this case they can report abuse. Nevertheless, it may be problematic for men who may not identify acts of their partner behavior as harmful when objectively its psychological violence.

Intimate partner violence may have different patterns and nature. Johnson's (2005) typology may be helpful to show that the nature of abuse can be various. In his theory of intimate partner abuse distinguishes four patterns of intimate partner abuse within relationships: situational couple violence, mutual violent conflict, violent resistance and intimate terrorism. The first two categories: situational couple violence and mutual violent conflict are, according to Johnson, equally perpetrated by men and women whereas the other two are describing to be perpetrated by men

and experiencing by women. According to his theory, violence in relationship depend on each individual controlling behaviors and he distinguish this kind of behavior as something that is not directly done to individual. In situational couple violence there is no pattern of control within the relationship. Johnson claims that this pattern of violence is the most common form of abuse between couples as it is likely to occur during arguments where partners, or one of them, yell and assault the other. But because neither of partners have control motives this kind of abuse is not escalating over time. The violence here is a reaction to some particular situation that evoke the behavioral reaction. The next pattern—mutual violent conflict is according to Johnson the rarest of the patterns of violence and it characterizes by both partners being equally controlling and violent to each other. Another pattern—intimate terrorism is a pattern where one of partners is both violent and controlling to another one who is neither violent nor controlling and because of that it is particularly harmful for a passive individual. Even though intimate terrorism is the first of two patterns in Johnson's typology named as gender asymmetrical it may be successfully used as a framework to support victims regardless of their gender. The last pattern—violent resistance is quite similar to the previous one, but here, one of the partners is intimate terrorist, so is both violent and controlling whereas the other one is violent but is not controlling. According to the author of this typology, it may be often observed in relationship where a woman 'hit back' a man but receive not only violence, but also controlling behavior in return (Johnson & Ferraro, 2000; Johnson, 2006). To prevent intimate partner violence, WHO, based on literature review recommends organizing media and advocacy campaigns to raise awareness, reform civil and criminal legal frameworks or building coalitions of government and civil society institutions. (World Health Organization, *Understanding and addressing violence against women*, 2012). School-based education and early prevention may reduce violent behaviors in later live. It is also very important to remember and educate that violence is not only happening in configuration men to women, but also women to men.

Abused men characteristic

Abused men's psychological state of mind is very complex and full of mechanisms not allowing him to reveal his real feelings. Behavior of abused men is similar to abused women's behavior. A man starts to lose his self-es-

teem, feeling helpless and doesn't understand this difficult relationship he was involved into. He also may feel guilty and looking for responsibility of his partner's aggressive behaviors in himself. Hence, an abused man is waiting for another attack, he feels shocked when it happens again, but after making the situation soften by his partner and after promises of happy later life, he believes and wants to trust it's true. And then, like in a cycle, it all happen again and again. A man has to deal with his subjective feelings of being ashamed and being a victim. Very often someone who is a victim is also equate with being a victim in general, in all of his life spheres. It makes a man who is a father being perceived as a failure by his children and as a consequence of his failure, their mother cannot communicate with him, so she is aggressive. In this way a man seems to be a bad one in his children's eyes, whereas a mother is a poor woman having a failure husband. This all cause feeling fear of being rejected by man's family, friends or colleagues, especially when one has socially high position or position that aims to protect others like policeman, firefighter or doctor. A man may feel lack of understanding and acceptance by those who surrounds him. This all cause a man feeling lonely, abandoned in his relationship and fearful from reporting a violence to accurate services. (Thureau et al., 2015). Very often to describe their abusive situation, a man focusses and reports on facts, not their feelings. According to Bodzon (2013) they describe abusive incidents as hurtful, they can draw conclusions from those situations and logically and precisely place it in the timeline. They often don't want to be called 'victims' and are rather avoiding identifying as one and if they're looking for any help at all, it is usually reduced to legal service. What is also characteristic, while describing an abusive or harmful situation, a man may use passive form like the situation wouldn't involve him and like he would be just an observer. It may be extremely difficult for the man to realize that he is a victim, call it out loud and let the thought of being a victim be in his consciousness. Those kinds of mechanisms that male victim of intimate partner violence may have, surely make going through internal conflict harder and more difficult. Sometimes, after being violated for a very long time, the consequences may have the character of PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) such as intrusive memories, avoidance of thinking or talking about traumatic events, negative changes in thinking and mood like feeling hopeless about the future, feeling detached from family and friends, having negative thoughts about yourself, feeling emotionally numb. It also might cause change in physical and emotional reactions like overwhelming shame or guilt, trouble sleeping, drinking too much or other self-destructive behaviors. As it comes to

PTSD though, in the body of literature, there is more statistics taking into consideration women and children, therefore, there is still a need to proceed studies on men.

Conclusion

Violence is a very important global social health problem. Social perception of violence or, being even more specific, intimate partner violence as mainly female issue have caused the development of measures, research perspective and methodologies unable to capture the full picture of male victimization. Violence against men is considered to be phenomenon of minor importance than violence against women. It is still insignificant and there are many stereotypes that it is more difficult to harm men because of their strength. Men, stereotypically, are being considered to be more aggressive than women, whereas it's not true in every case. That is why there are more often considered to be perpetrators rather than victim. Nevertheless, there is more and more men being a victim and it is a challenge for professionals and helping services to treat both genders equally as it comes to violence, to control one's stereotypical thinking or prejudice and to treat this phenomenon and research on male victimization reliable so service providers could adjust their interventions to male victims and help them more successfully.

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