

EQUALLY SAFE IN PRACTICE FRAMEWORK

CONTINUUM OF VIOLENCE – MAKING THE CONNECTIONS

The concept of a continuum of violence against women was developed by Liz Kelly (a leading scholar in this field) in *Surviving Sexual Violence* (1988)¹. Her concern was to change the standard approach from categorising VAWG as episodic and deviant incidents (defined in law as crimes) of extreme cruelty and harm, to recognizing that it is normative and functional: an everyday context for the lives and experiences of women and girls all over the world. She argues that isolated concentration on manifestations of severe, horrifying and excessive physical and sexual violence against women leads investigators to seek explanations in individual pathology and abnormality (of perpetrator and/or victim). This approach distances the acts and their motivations from the structures and norms of 'acceptability', 'decency' and 'respectable society'. Kelly claims, rather, that aberrant forms of VAWG, recognized in law as crimes, are at one end of a broad spectrum of socially sanctioned male aggression, coercive behaviour, notions of entitlement and deep-rooted patriarchal norms. So, for example, 'stranger' rape is on a continuum of normalized behaviour, including misogynist jokes, sexual harassment, intimate intrusions, coerced sex with dates or partners. These are all included in the everyday experiences of women and girls, and for which there is widespread tolerance. (Zero Tolerance research found that up to 1 in 2 young men and 1 in 3 young women believe that forced sex is justifiable in certain circumstances).

Traditional cultural practices such as female genital cutting, foot-binding and so-called honour killings are condemned by white Westerners as barbaric, but socially acceptable Western cultural practices – including norms and body rituals of emphasized femininity - may also be construed as controlling, manipulating or exploiting women. Most women and girls are used to ordering their daily lives around the restrictions to safety and freedom of movement which the background threat of men's violence imposes. They have learnt to constrain their own activities.

The idea of a continuum should not be taken to mean that there is a hierarchy of seriousness or severity based on physical force/harm, but instead reflects the continuum of complex and interlinked experiences of harassment, violation, abuse, constraint for individual women, and operational to a greater or lesser extent as social, legal and cultural sanctions. These prevailing realities and the implicit threats they carry to safety, autonomy and wellbeing, have the effect of limiting women's capacity or space for action, and hence violate human rights.

'Typical' behaviour and 'aberrant' violence and abuses shade into one another along the spectrum, without clear demarcation. This is characteristic of many women's experience of

¹ Kelly L. (1988). *Surviving sexual violence*. Cambridge, UK: Oxford, UK, Polity Press.

domestic abuse, where a partner who seems initially charming, protective and loving may imperceptibly become possessive, demanding, jealous and controlling, using a range of strategies which may or may not include physical violence, but which have the effect of frightening, isolating and constraining the woman's capacity for action, and of extracting those services to which the man feels he is entitled.

Research, policy and practice has tended to categorise and investigate diverse 'events' and settings of gender-based violence (domestic abuse, rape and sexual assault, child abuse, culturally sanctioned harmful practices, sexual exploitation) in distinct 'silos'; but it is vital to recognize their commonalities in terms of function, impact and consequences. Domestic abuse, traditional harmful cultural practices, sexual harassment and assault, child incest, commercial sexual exploitation, forced marriage, economic and structural discrimination, internet porn, stalking, trafficking for sexual or domestic labour, abuse of women and girls in conflict or refugee contexts: these are all instrumental forms of coercion, constraint and abuse. They function to control and limit the status, movement, integrity, opportunities and rights of women, and to facilitate privilege and entitlement.

In Scotland, most men may not choose to perpetrate violence or abuse against women they encounter. Most men recoil from the excesses of domestic and sexual violence, and sympathise with women who experience it (though only a few are motivated to engage in proactive opposition to gender-based violence). But even the 'good guys' are beneficiaries of systematic and cultural masculine privilege which confers everyday freedom of movement, status and opportunities less straightforwardly available to women and girls. This is what Raewyn Connell calls the patriarchal dividend.

'In spite of significant social changes in recent decades, men continue to grow up with, and are socialized into, a deeply misogynistic male-dominated culture, where violence against women – from the subtle to the homicidal – is disturbingly common. It's normal. And precisely because the mistreatment of women is such a pervasive characteristic of our culture, most men, to a greater or lesser extent, have played a role in its perpetuation. This gives us a strong incentive to avert our eyes.'

Jackson Katz (2006) ²

Regardless of the setting or context of VAW, the impacts and consequences for women are remarkably consistent across the continuum. For millions, these consequences are serious, cumulative and long term:

- Threats and harm to safety

² Katz J, (2006), [The Macho Paradox: Why Some Men Hurt Women and How All Men Can Help](#). Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks.

- Limits on space for action, agency, capacity
- Physical harm, injury, disability, infection, illness, death
- Psychological harm – anxiety, depression, chronic fear, stress, trauma
- Betrayal and sometimes destruction of self-worth, esteem, ability to trust
- Dishonour, shame, disgrace, stigmatization (cultural, religious, social)
- Negative impacts on earning power, achievements, livelihood, ability to recognize or fulfil potential, place in society, status

Women who experience violence in different contexts may variously be characterized and responded to as victims, casualties, survivors; they may also be perpetrators and colluders with violence.

Intersections and differences

While the continuum model enables an understanding of the commonalities and functionality of VAW, it is vital also for an explanatory framework to account for the distinctiveness and differences which shape the context and consequences of violence in real lives, and in diverse circumstances. It is neither true nor helpful to suggest that domestic abuse, or other forms of VAW, affect all women equally regardless of race, class, disability, religion, sexual orientation, community, location, economic or educational resources.

Individual women and social structures are affected in particular ways by the intersections of oppressions and circumstances, around aspects of their identity. These operate not just as an accumulation of discriminations, but each interacts with the others to constitute multidimensional and complex situations. Experiences and meanings of violation are mediated and compounded through other categories of discrimination and inequality, including racism, poverty, age, cultural imperialism and disability.

An intersectional approach takes seriously the need to research and give voice to stories and experiences of VAWG from diverse perspectives. Only in this way will it be possible to represent and address particular needs arising from all the different strands which constitute the full picture of real lives. A gender analysis is necessary, but not sufficient to account for all the structural inequalities, discrimination and risk factors which contribute to injustice and violations in the lives of diverse women. These present considerable and urgent challenges for service providers and policy makers:

- Forms of VAW are separated in law, research, policies and service provision, but are intertwined in women's experiences
- Disjointed thinking and working are major obstacles to effective and appropriate responses to need. Practitioners and organizations must be able to understand these connections and to make links within and across traditional boundaries

- Women and girls in particular groups may be targeted or vulnerable to violence and abuse, and have limited resources to resist or to support themselves
- For example, those in residential care, with social, physical or mental health vulnerabilities live in a context of statistically high rates of abuse
- Women who are refugees, migrants and asylum seekers may face added challenges because they have uncertain status, language difficulties, no knowledge of their rights, suffer prejudice and stereotyping, and often carry a personal legacy of abuse and fear of authority
- Those who have experience of serious victimization at the hands of men are disproportionately represented in custody, with criminal convictions and/or severe mental health/substance misuse problems which are rooted in their complex experiences of violence and abuse.
- The strong correlation between domestic abuse and child sexual abuse is attested in research literature, but has not yet resulted in an integrated policy or provision framework.

A consistent gender analysis lies at the heart of making sense of the theoretical and practical connections between VAWG in and across many contexts.

