

# Theoretical Perspectives on Understanding Gender-Based Violence

Jeffrey Kurebwa, Bindura University of Science Education, Zimbabwe

## ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the various theoretical perspectives that have been developed by various scholars to understand gender-based violence (GBV). These theories are very important as they influence on the interventions that can be taken to reduce GBV. The following nine theoretical perspectives will be discussed in this article: psychological, sociological, feminism, exchange, resources, stress, economic exclusion, intersectional, and ecological. This study will look at the strength and weaknesses of all the theoretical perspectives.

## KEYWORDS

Feminism, Gender, Gender-Based Violence, Intersectionality, Survivor, Victim, Violence Against Women

## INTRODUCTION

Theories are important because they influence the actions chosen to address Gender Based Violence (GBV) and frame the general understanding of a social issue (Bowman, 2002; Jasinski, 2001). Understanding the causes of GBV is important for those who seek to prevent, predict, or intervene to avert the occurrence of violence within intimate relationships (Cunningham, 1998). GBV which is also termed Violence against Women (VAW) is a field where the link between theory and practice has been quite explicit (Holtzworth-Monroe & Saunders, 1996). Theory development has proceeded from a wide range of disciplines including criminology, law, psychiatry, psychology, public health, social work, sociology, and women's studies (Jasinski, 2001; O'Neil, 1998).

## Definition of Gender-Based Violence

GBV is defined as an umbrella concept that describes “any form of violence used to establish, enforce, or perpetrate gender inequalities and keep in place unequal gender-power relations.” (Fulu, Warner, Miedemak, Jewkes, Roselli, & Lang, 2013) This includes intimate partner, physical, sexual, and/or emotional violence, non-partner, physical or sexual violence, child marriage, and female genital cutting (FGC). GBV cuts across economic and social status, ethnicity, and geography. GBV has major implications for almost every aspect of health and development from access to and use of health services to educational attainment, economic growth and full enjoyment of human rights. It is rooted in gender-based power inequalities and puts women at a disadvantage because they generally do not enjoy the same economic, political or social status as men.

This study also adopts the United Nations (UN) General Assembly's 1993 definition of 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” (United Nations, 1993). This definition's reference to “gender-based” violence is an acknowledgment of its origins in gender inequality; as such, laws, institutions, and social and community norms tend to tolerate and condone violence against

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women, helping to enforce it (Heise, Ellsberg, & Gottemoeller, 1999; Bott, Morrison, & Ellsberg, 2005). The analysis of types and forms of violence experienced by girls and women is organized roughly by the life stage in which they occur.

VAW is described in the Beijing Declaration 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 in public or private” (Carrillo, Connor, Fried, Sandler & Waldorf, 2003, p.19). VAW is mainly perpetuated through cultural norms and traditions, reinforces male dominated power structures and systems that are commonly referred to as patriarchy. Linked to this assertion Kilmartin & Allison (2007, p.5) clearly show that it is “any attack directed against a (usually female) person due, at least in part, to a disadvantaged position within male-dominated social systems”. Furthermore Kilmartin & Allison (2007, p.5) noted that GBV is entrenched in a complicated spider’s web of “privilege, toxic masculinity and patriarchy”. This is evidenced by the common belief in many African societies that women and children ‘belong’ to men and do not need to have control and decision-making powers within the home and in public spaces as well. These negative patriarchal elements are re-enforced by cultural norms and traditions that include dowry or *lobola* payments. These further weaken women’s ability to be in charge of decisions-making and their livelihoods. Although *lobola* was intended in its design as a way of strengthening relations between families when marriage happens, it has been misinterpreted many times to reflect that a woman has been sold off to a man and hence is entailed to do as instructed by the man. Stewart (1992, p.159) indicated that once *lobola* is paid the woman, her child bearing and earning ability is entirely owned by the husband. In Africa, debates on the usefulness of *lobola* have been intensified with others arguing that *lobola* makes women commodities. On the other hand, *lobola* payments in many cultures still remain an important aspect that has to happen to legitimise marriage.

One of the main violations that women and girls experience globally is rape (Carrillo, 2003, p.11). Rape is often treated as a crime of passion rather than a misogynist act. Rape and any form of sexual violence are often dealt with as personal, private and domestic matters, which should be managed within the household set-up. Rape has been reported as a way of attacking, subjugating, hurting women in countries where civil wars have raged for many years for example the Democratic Republic of Congo. In peaceful times in many countries in Africa, raping of women and children still occur and the perpetrators are never brought to justice. This often promotes a culture of silence as women and children lack the voice to open up and seek justice within systems that do not recognise gender disparities.

Violence perpetrated against a person because of their sex and the status they have in a given society or culture is a sexist phenomenon, rooted in inequalities that exists between men and women around the world (Baker & Cunningham, 2005). Given the historical dominance and discrimination of women by men and the disproportionate number of women and girls who are victims of violence, one generally speaks of VAW, although men and boys also experience GBV, especially sexual violence (UN Women, 2015; Council of Europe, 2011; WHO, 2013). The Istanbul Convention recognises that VAW is one of the social mechanisms by which women are held in a subordinate position to men (Council of Europe, 2011).

## Theoretical Perspectives

There are various theoretical perspectives on GBV. This section discusses the main theoretical frameworks that have been used by various scholars in trying to explain, understand, and providing interventions to end GBV.

## Psychological Perspective

Early psychological framework of GBV focused clearly on psychological and psychiatric factors (O’Leary, 1993). The assumption was that one or both partners had certain abnormal characteristics that made them prone to violence. For example, women were thought to be masochistic and men to

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