

Chapter 46

Family Violence: Not Only Women

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ABSTRACT

Using data from official statistics and surveys on victimization, this chapter aims to estimate the extent of domestic violence against men and examine the contraposition between female aggressors and male victims. More detailed knowledge both of women perpetrators and their male victims is believed to be useful for preparing appropriate programs of rehabilitation for the former as well as effective methods of intervention and help for the victims. The chapter reflects on the fact that, from the point of view of victimology, one of the risks to avoid is that of considering men as “second-class victims,” and from the criminological point of view, it is necessary to gain greater knowledge of the figure of the abusive woman, as well as focusing attention on the social representations of domestic violence.

INTRODUCTION

In the collective imagination, when the expression ‘domestic violence’ or ‘family violence’ is mentioned, thoughts go almost automatically to those situations where a woman is abused by a man. This may be due to the fact that this phenomenon is usually reported from a point of view exclusively focused on gender, setting forth a traditional and patriarchal image of aggressive masculinity and pacific or even passive femininity. In extreme synthesis, this outlines a scenario in which a man ill-treats a woman to control her, while the woman acts violently to defend herself only when she reaches exasperation (Storey, Strand, 2012, p. 637).

However, as the family is a social group made up of two or more individuals who live in the same home and who may be linked by relations of kinship, affinity and consanguinity (Barbagli, Bianca, 1993, pp. 29-30), it is clear that all the members of this group can unfortunately become victims of crimes committed against them by other members. Therefore, there may be cases not only of violence

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by the man against the woman, but also by the women against the man, by parents against the children, by children against the parents and by adult members against the older ones.

This chapter will concentrate on the phenomenon of domestic violence perpetrated by a woman against her male partner and will include data and accounts of research referring mainly to the North American, Australian and European contexts (with particular reference to Great Britain, France and Italy) as they are the ones the author knows best.

Regarding domestic violence, it is obviously undeniable and now universally known, also acknowledged by the Istanbul Convention¹ in the preamble that “violence against women is a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between women and men, which have led to domination over, and discrimination against, women by men and to the prevention of the full advancement of women”. In this regard, there are also those who maintain that “women do not and would not use IPV” [Intimate Partner Violence] “against men because IPV is an issue of power and control of which only men in a system of patriarchy are capable” (Hines, Douglas, 2009, p. 576). On the other hand, however, numerous definitions both of a scientific and juridical type of this phenomenon, as well as of IPV, also known as, IPA (Intimate Partner Abuse), are usually gender-neutral.

For example, the Australian Guide of the 2011 Social Security Act, when illustrating the behavior that gives rise to domestic violence or to family violence, refers to “someone”, “partner”, “family member” and to “person” as follows: “Domestic and family violence occurs when someone tries to control their partner or other family members in ways that intimidate or oppress them. Controlling behaviours can include threats, humiliation (‘put downs’), emotional abuse, physical assault, sexual abuse, financial exploitation and social isolations, such as not allowing contact with family or friends. Family violence means conduct, whether actual or threatened, by a person towards, or towards the property of, a member of the person’s family that causes that or any other member of the person’s family to fear for, or to be apprehensive about, his or her personal wellbeing or safety” (Australian Government – Australian Law Reform Commission, 2019).

A further example is that of the USA where in the criminal laws of 42 States, as well as in those of American Samoa, Guam, and Porto Rico, the definition of domestic violence is gender-neutral: domestic violence is “any criminal offense involving violence or physical harm or threat of violence or physical harm committed by one family or household member against another” (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2014).

Regarding Italy, the 2001 law on “Measures against violence in family relationships” refers, here again in a gender-neutral way, to: “injured person”, “spouse”, “people living together”, “member of the household”.

Lastly, in criminological literature, IPV is defined as “the actual, attempted, or threatened physical harm of a current or former intimate partner” (Storey, Strand, 2012, p. 636). In this last definition as well, reference is made, in a gender-neutral way, to the “partner”.

It is important to observe that the Istanbul Convention itself, again in the preamble, recognizes that men may also be victims of domestic violence, although this type of violence affects women disproportionately, but nevertheless domestic violence is defined in a gender-neutral way, in art. 3, section b, as follows: “all acts of physical, sexual, psychological or economic violence that occur within the family or domestic unit or between former or current spouses or partners, whether or not the perpetrator shares or has shared the same residence with the victim”.

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