

Violence Has No Gender

Recognising every victim without denying the realities of domestic and intimate partner abuse

Domestic violence is often discussed as though it belongs to one gender.

The public image is familiar: a violent man and a frightened woman. That image reflects a serious and widespread reality. Women experience intimate partner violence at devastating rates, and they are disproportionately affected by sexual violence, coercive control, serious injury and intimate-partner homicide.

But it is not the whole reality.

Men can also be beaten, threatened, humiliated, sexually coerced, financially controlled, stalked, isolated from their families and psychologically terrorised by a partner. Abuse can occur in heterosexual and same-sex relationships. It can be committed by women as well as men, and it can affect people of every age, culture, profession and social background.

Violence does not become less real because its victim does not fit the image we expected.

If our concern is genuinely with human suffering, the identity of the victim should never determine whether that suffering deserves recognition.

What do we mean by partner violence

Intimate partner violence is not limited to physical assault. It may include hitting, pushing or restraining; sexual coercion or assault; threats against a partner, children, relatives or animals; stalking; humiliation and psychological degradation; financial control; isolation; digital monitoring; destruction of property; threats of self-harm to prevent separation; and using children, immigration status, disability or private information as instruments of control.

The defining feature is not simply anger or an unhealthy argument. Couples can communicate badly, behave selfishly or experience serious conflict without one partner systematically abusing the other. Abuse involves harm, coercion, intimidation or control. It progressively reduces another person's freedom and sense of safety.

The most important question is not, "Which gender behaves this way?" It is, "Who is using fear, force or control - and who is being harmed?"

Equal recognition does not mean identical experiences

Saying that violence has no gender does not mean claiming that men and women experience every form of violence equally, for the same reasons or with the same consequences. They do not.

According to the World Health Organization, almost one in three women worldwide has experienced physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner, sexual violence by a non-partner, or both. Women also face a particularly severe risk of sexual violence and being killed by a current or former partner. These realities are connected to gender inequality, economic dependency, cultural expectations and historical patterns of male power. They must never be minimised.

At the same time, evidence also confirms that substantial numbers of men experience intimate partner violence. Data published by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show that both women and men report physical violence, sexual violence or stalking by an intimate partner, although women report higher rates overall and are more likely to experience related impacts.

These truths do not cancel one another. We do not need to deny women's disproportionate exposure to severe and sexual violence in order to acknowledge abused men. Nor do we need to silence male victims in order to defend services created to protect women.

Fairness is not achieved by pretending that every group has an identical experience. It is achieved by recognising every person's experience accurately and responding according to their needs.

Why male victims often remain invisible

Many victims struggle to speak about abuse. They may fear retaliation, feel ashamed of remaining in the relationship, depend financially on their partner or doubt that anyone will believe them.

Male victims may face additional barriers. A man who says that his female partner hits or controls him may be laughed at or told to "man up," defend himself or simply leave. But physical size does not make a person immune to abuse.

A victim may avoid defending himself because he fears harming his partner, frightening his children, being arrested or being identified as the aggressor. His partner may threaten false allegations, restrict access to his children or exploit the belief that a woman could not be abusive. If the behaviour is primarily verbal, financial, sexual or psychological, he may believe he has no right to describe himself as a victim.

When society tells men that vulnerability is shameful, silence becomes part of the prison.

Why female victims still require particular protection

Recognising male victims must never become a strategy for dismissing violence against women.

Many women live with a genuine fear of physical and sexual violence. Some face financial dependence, pregnancy-related vulnerability, threats involving their children or barriers created by legal and social systems. Women are also more likely to suffer certain forms of severe harm and to be killed by an intimate partner.

The mistake is not acknowledging the gendered dimensions of violence. The mistake is turning those dimensions into a rule that determines in advance who can be a victim and who can be an abuser.

We should be capable of holding two ideas at once: women experience particular and disproportionate dangers that require targeted attention; and men who experience abuse also deserve belief, protection and appropriate services. Compassion is not a limited resource.

The abuse that leaves no visible bruises

Some of the most damaging forms of partner violence do not leave marks on the body.

Psychological abuse can dismantle a person's confidence and perception of reality. An abusive partner may alternate cruelty with affection, deny events, blame the victim or persuade them that nobody else would love them. Financial abuse may prevent someone from accessing income or working. Digital abuse may involve tracking, password demands and constant monitoring.

Coercive control can transform daily life into a system of permissions. What appears from outside to be a functioning relationship can feel, from within, like captivity. The victim learns to calculate every word, expression and movement to avoid punishment.

This pattern can be inflicted by a person of any gender. The method may vary. The effect is the same: one person's world becomes smaller so that another can feel more powerful.

Sexual violence within relationships

Sexual violence does not cease to be violence because the perpetrator is a spouse or intimate partner.

Marriage, cohabitation and a history of consensual intimacy do not create permanent consent. Agreeing to sex once is not agreement to every future act. Consent must be freely given for the particular encounter and can be withdrawn at any time. A wedding vow is not a transfer of ownership over another person's body.

Sexual violence within a relationship may include forced or coerced intercourse; continuing after consent is withdrawn; sexual contact while a person is asleep, unconscious or unable to consent; threats or humiliation used to obtain sex; pressure until resistance feels unsafe; unwanted painful acts; forced participation in sexual material; sharing intimate images without consent; sabotaging contraception; reproductive coercion; or using money, housing, affection or access to children as leverage for sex.

The World Health Organization defines sexual violence according to coercion, not according to the relationship between the people involved, and explicitly recognises rape within marriage or dating relationships as sexual violence.

A person does not have to fight physically for an assault to be real. Victims may freeze, dissociate or submit because they fear what will happen if they resist. Submission under fear is not consent, and an absence of visible injury does not prove that an encounter was voluntary.

Rape within marriage

For much of history, legal and social systems treated marriage as though it gave one spouse - usually the husband - unrestricted sexual entitlement to the other. The consequences of that belief continue even where laws have changed.

A victim may struggle to name the experience as rape because the perpetrator is someone they once loved, chose or married. Religious, cultural or family messages may persuade them that sexual availability is a marital duty, regardless of fear, pain or unwillingness.

Rape is not defined by whether the perpetrator is a stranger. It is defined by the absence of freely given consent and the presence of force, coercion or an inability to consent.

Marital rape can be especially devastating because the person who should represent safety becomes the source of danger. The victim may continue living, sleeping and raising

children beside the person who violated them. Their home may no longer feel safe, yet leaving may carry financial, social, legal or physical risks.

Marital rape can affect people of any gender, although women are disproportionately affected by intimate-partner sexual violence. Male victims may face disbelief based on the assumption that men always want sex or can physically prevent unwanted contact. But physiological response is not consent. Neither arousal nor orgasm proves willingness.

Every person retains bodily autonomy within marriage. Love does not remove the need for consent. Commitment does not cancel the right to say no. Marriage is not immunity from responsibility.

Honour is never a justification for violence

Honour-based violence refers to abuse committed to defend or restore the supposed reputation of a family or community. The word “honour” can make such violence sound principled or culturally respectable. It is neither. There is no honour in coercion, imprisonment, assault or murder.

Honour-based abuse may involve forced or threatened marriage; assault and intimidation; restrictions on clothing, education, work or friendships; surveillance by relatives or community members; punishment for a relationship, refusing a marriage or seeking a divorce; threats connected to sexuality or gender identity; abduction or confinement; female genital mutilation; forced pregnancy or abortion; sustained pressure leading to suicide; and so-called “honour” killings.

The supposed offence may be nothing more than choosing a partner, ending a relationship, dressing independently, reporting sexual abuse or refusing a family decision. Sometimes a rape survivor is blamed for the violence committed against them and treated as though they brought shame upon the family. This reverses moral responsibility completely. The shame belongs to the perpetrator, not the person who was violated.

When the family or community becomes part of the abuse

Unlike many forms of partner violence, honour-based abuse may involve several perpetrators. A parent, sibling, spouse, cousin, extended relative or community member may monitor, threaten or punish the victim. Some commit violence directly; others arrange or conceal it, pressure the victim to return or reveal their location.

This collective dimension can make escape especially dangerous. A victim may not be able to seek refuge with relatives because those relatives are part of the controlling system. Mediation or family reconciliation can therefore increase the danger. Professionals must avoid contacting relatives or community representatives without the informed consent of the person at risk.

Although women and girls are disproportionately affected, men and boys can also be victims. A man may be attacked for refusing an arranged marriage, having a relationship the family rejects, being gay or bisexual, supporting a female relative’s independence or failing to conform to expected masculinity. LGBTQ+ people may face forced marriage, confinement, assault or attempts to “correct” their identity.

Acknowledging these victims does not erase the gendered nature of honour-based violence. It strengthens the principle that no family, culture or community has the right to remove an individual's freedom or bodily autonomy.

Culture can explain a context but cannot excuse abuse

Discussions of honour-based violence require care. The practice should not be used to stigmatise an entire religion, ethnicity or migrant community. No culture is a single voice, and many of the strongest opponents of honour-based abuse come from the communities in which it occurs.

At the same time, cultural sensitivity must never become moral silence. Respecting cultural difference does not require accepting forced marriage, sexual violence, coercive control or murder. Human dignity cannot depend on whether abuse is described as tradition.

We can reject prejudice against communities while also rejecting practices that violate individuals within them. The appropriate response is neither cultural hostility nor denial. It is informed protection, careful risk assessment, confidential support and accountability.

Abuse is not mutual simply because both people react

Violent relationships can be complicated. A victim may shout, retaliate, push an aggressor away or behave in ways that appear irrational to someone who has not lived under prolonged fear. An abusive person may present isolated reactions as proof that "both sides are equally responsible."

Sometimes both partners behave abusively. In other cases, apparent mutual aggression is part of a larger pattern in which one person exercises persistent control and the other reacts, resists or attempts to escape.

We must ask who is consistently afraid; who controls money, movement and communication; whether violence prevents separation; whether threats are escalating; what happens when boundaries are set; whether sexual contact is freely chosen; and whether relatives participate in the control.

Understanding context does not excuse harmful behaviour. It distinguishes unhealthy conflict from a sustained pattern of coercion and control.

When victimhood becomes an ideological weapon

Domestic violence should never become ammunition in a conflict between men and women. Yet discussions are sometimes reduced to competing declarations: "Men are the real problem," or "Women are just as bad." Statistics are selected to win an argument rather than understand suffering. Victims disappear behind the ideology.

If we exaggerate similarities, we risk ignoring the particular severity and danger many women face. If we exaggerate differences, we risk constructing a system in which some victims are treated as impossible. Neither approach is humane.

Research also requires care. Studies may measure different behaviours, time periods and consequences. A survey counting any physical aggression is not measuring exactly the same phenomenon as research focused on coercive control, injury, sexual violence or homicide. Reporting is affected by fear, shame and social expectations.

Statistics matter, but they should illuminate reality rather than replace it. Behind every number is a human being who may be living in fear.

We must evaluate behaviour not identity

No person has the right to terrorise, control, humiliate, assault or sexually coerce another person.

Being male does not make someone inherently violent. Being female does not make someone incapable of cruelty. Being physically strong does not make someone emotionally invulnerable. Belonging to a family, religion or culture does not remove a person's individual rights. Having suffered in the past does not give anyone permission to inflict suffering in the present.

Trauma may help explain abusive behaviour, but it does not excuse it. Mental distress, jealousy, alcohol, insecurity and fear of abandonment may increase volatility, but responsibility remains with the person choosing intimidation or violence.

We should judge actions honestly and consistently, without assigning innocence or guilt according to sex.

What genuine support should look like

Every victim should be able to seek help without humiliation or disbelief. This does not require every service to be identical. Women-only refuges, services for male victims, LGBTQ+ organisations, sexual-assault services, culturally informed programmes and disability resources can all coexist.

Victims of honour-based abuse may require specialist safeguarding because relatives or community members could be involved. Survivors of sexual violence may need confidential medical attention, trauma-informed psychological care and advice about preserving evidence, without being pressured into reporting before they are ready except where safeguarding duties apply.

A responsible system should take disclosures seriously, assess immediate danger and coercive control, recognise sexual violence within marriage, provide confidential psychological, medical and legal assistance, support victims of every gender, respond carefully when several family members are involved, protect children, hold perpetrators accountable and train professionals beyond traditional stereotypes.

When people believe there is nowhere they can go, abuse becomes easier to continue.

Listening without asking victims to prove their worth

Victims do not always behave as outsiders expect. They may leave and return, protect the person hurting them, minimise what happened, withdraw an allegation or appear calm while describing terror. Survivors of sexual violence may remember events in fragments, delay disclosure or continue communicating with the perpetrator. These responses do not mean the abuse was invented. Trauma does not produce one predictable pattern.

Leaving can be the most dangerous stage. A victim may remain because of children, money, housing, disability, immigration concerns, emotional attachment, shame, family pressure or hope that the partner will change.

Instead of asking, “Why didn’t you leave?” we might ask, “What made leaving feel impossible or unsafe?” Instead of asking, “Why didn’t you fight back?” we might ask, “What did you need to do to survive?” Compassion begins when interrogation gives way to understanding.

Violence has no acceptable gender and abuse has no honour

To say that violence has no gender is not to erase women’s experiences. It is to refuse to erase anyone.

It means acknowledging gendered patterns without turning them into absolute assumptions. It means understanding that women’s services remain necessary while insisting that male victims must also have somewhere to turn. It means recognising abuse in same-sex relationships.

It also means recognising that marriage never removes bodily autonomy. A spouse is not property. Sexual intimacy is not a debt. Consent cannot be inherited from yesterday, extracted through fear or assumed from a wedding ceremony. No concept of family honour can justify depriving another human being of freedom, safety or life.

A victim is not less deserving of protection because of their sex. A survivor is not responsible for the shame of sexual violence committed against them. An abuser is not less responsible because of their gender, relationship, family position or status.

We will not reduce domestic violence by deciding which gender deserves all our sympathy and which deserves all our suspicion. We will reduce it by recognising abusive behaviour early, challenging beliefs that excuse it, supporting those harmed and holding those who cause harm accountable.

Violence may have gendered, social and historical patterns. Its risks and consequences may not be identical for everyone. But violence has no rightful gender. Abuse has no honour. Safety, bodily autonomy, dignity and justice should belong to us all.

If you or someone you know may be in immediate danger, contact your local emergency services. When it is safe to do so, seek assistance from a qualified domestic-abuse, sexual-violence or honour-based-abuse organisation. Avoid confronting a potentially violent partner or involved family members without an appropriate safety plan.

Sources

- World Health Organization, Violence against women:
<https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women>
- World Health Organization, Violence against women health topic:
<https://www.who.int/health-topics/violence-against-women>
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, About Intimate Partner Violence:
<https://www.cdc.gov/intimate-partner-violence/about/index.html>