

## Masculinities, men and violence

written by

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Each year in November and December in Europe and many other countries and regions, the 16 Days of Activism against Gender Violence Campaign is held. The main aims of the campaign are to combat gender-based violence against women and “symbolically link violence against women and human rights”<sup>1</sup>. In this way the founders and organisers of the campaign underline the fact that violence is not a gender-neutral phenomenon. In the majority of cases, especially regarding domestic violence, victims and perpetrators represent specified genders, usually women and men respectively. However, in some regions/countries/communities or social groups the idea of connecting violence with gender (in)equality is neglected or at least unrecognised. Representatives of such milieus disseminate the notion that violence is gender neutral, and both men and women are **equally** inclined to become either perpetrators or victims of violent acts,<sup>2</sup> despite the fact that such a standpoint is inconsistent with the actual state of affairs. Therefore, the main goal of the following essay is to show that violence is a strongly gendered phenomenon and to present the intersection between violence and its perpetration, men and dominant forms of masculinity. The argument will be based both on a sociological analysis of masculinities and violence issues as well as on empirical findings and data on violence perpetration and its victims<sup>3</sup>.

According to Pierre Bourdieu, one of the most influential European sociologists, masculinity is a specific type of social game in which violence plays an important role. In other words, (traditional/dominant) masculinity is a socially constructed phenomenon based on several foundations, among which physical power, aggression and violent behaviours are the most prominent ones. For Bourdieu, violence is one of the various “masculine games of competition” that men learn to play as part of their socialisation process. In his book *Masculine domination* (2002), the French sociologist shows how these ‘games’ help to reproduce masculine domination. Moreover, in his opinion:

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/16DaysCampaign>

<sup>2</sup> Such a notion is propagated in Poland for example, where initiatives on “degendering” violence are very popular (see [https://www.facebook.com/PrzemocNieMaPlci/info?tab=page\\_info](https://www.facebook.com/PrzemocNieMaPlci/info?tab=page_info); <http://masculinum.org/przestan-akceptowac-przemoc-wobec-dzieci/>; <http://natemat.pl/76931,jak-nekajana-nas-kobiety-20-proc-mezczyzn-pada-ofiara-przemocy-psychicznej>) and in official discourse the term ‘gender-based violence against women and children’ is often replaced with the much more neutral term of ‘violence in the family’ (see <http://www.niebieskalinia.pl>; <http://www.niebieskalinia.org/>).

<sup>3</sup> It is important to underline that data on the scale of violence are difficult to collect and analyse: “(...) due to different data sources, it is not easy to get a realistic overview of gender-based violence. Therefore it is important to distinguish between data from criminal statistics on the one hand and from prevalence studies on the other hand. Prevalence studies try to estimate the number of unknown cases of which the number is still very high. Criminal statistics show reports to the police or convictions and thus often underestimate the real situation” (Scambor et al. 2013).

*(...) manliness must be validated by other men, in its reality as actual or potential violence, and certified by recognition of membership of the group of 'real men' (2002: 52).*

Another sociologist, Anthony Whitehead, claims that the connection between men, masculinity and violence is reflected in the issue of 'heroism'. Following Whitehead, heroism is one of the most important elements of (traditional/dominant) masculinity in contemporary societies: "(...) implying that men who face conflict or danger have to transcend their fear in order to prevent themselves from being placed in the highly precarious position of a 'non-man'" (Whitehead 2005). Consequently, for many men (and boys) interpersonal violence is a rather attractive (and sometimes seems to be the only) option in many situations and interactions with other men or with women. Moreover, male violence can be 'inclusive', implying that those involved are 'worthy opponents' in the male games of competition and accordingly affirming each other's status as a man. However, it can also be 'exclusive', in that the other is excluded from those competitive games. The victim of such exclusion is forced into the position of the 'non-man' and is thus devaluated, feminised and endangered all at the same time. Therefore, men's violence can be seen as both a result and a precondition of certain aspects of gender inequality. Men's violence is a product as well as means of gender-specific socialisation and other societal practices that contribute to the reproduction of 'masculinity as heroism'. The notion of heroism and its association to violence perpetration is also invoked by Scottish academics Rebecca and Russell Dobash:

*The ideal of heroic masculinity is often associated with aggressive bodily display where the objective is not to employ the body in actual violence but to use it as a means of intimidation. Yet the perpetration of and participation in violent encounters are equated with masculinity, regardless of the outcome, even the scars and wounds of the "loser" may be useful for display and status conferring among some young males (1998: 15).*

Bourdieu's, Dobash & Dobash's and Whitehead's opinions seem to be shared by Jackson Katz, a former American football star currently working as an anti-violence activist and educator. In his famous book *The Macho Paradox. Why some men hurt women and how all men can help* (2006) he argues that violence is a central aspect of traditional masculinity and in so called "men's culture" violent behaviours are still implicitly and explicitly supported:

*In spite of significant social change 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 is normal. And precisely because the mistreatment of women is such a pervasive characteristic of our patriarchal culture, most men, to a greater or less extent, have played a role in its perpetuation (2006: 9).*

Moreover, Katz asserts that violence should be primarily seen as a men's issue and that the discussion of the problem should be shifted from victims (usually women) to perpetrators as the vast majority of perpetrators are men.

According to the data gathered by the team of the "Role of men in gender equality" project (Scambor et al. 2013), men are the perpetrators of 79.2% to 100% of assaults<sup>4</sup>, 95.2% to

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<sup>4</sup> Data refer to convicted criminals.

100% of rapes<sup>5</sup> and 71.4% to 100% of homicides<sup>6</sup>. Moreover, according to data collected by a research team from the Fundamental Rights Agency on violence against women in the EU (2014):

*The majority of physical and sexual violence reported in the survey was carried out by male perpetrators (2014: 51).*

*The vast majority of the perpetrators of the most serious incidents of sexual harassment across all perpetrator groups are men. For example, perpetrators from the employment context are male in 86 % of cases (2014: 113).*

In general regarding research on the perpetration of violence (Hall 2002, Scambor et al. 2013), men form the majority of perpetrators of physical and sexual violence perpetrated against women and children as well as against other men. Moreover, one of the most common forms of male violence is domestic and intimate partner violence, and in Europe this type of violence is perpetrated by men in 66% to 96% of all cases (Scambor et al. 2013). It is also important to underline, once again, that despite common beliefs, domestic violence is not a gender-neutral phenomenon and is not symmetrical (Puchert and Scambor 2013, Scambor et al. 2013, Kimmel 2002, Johnson 2006 and others):

*Overwhelmingly, it is men who use violence against women partners, not the obverse (...) That is not to say that no women has ever been violent. Obviously, this is not true. The main pattern of violence among intimates, however, is one of violence perpetrated by men against women. Of course, individual cases of women's violence exist, but such cases do not alter the fact that the overall pattern of intimate violence is dominated by men as abusers and by women [and children K.W.] as the abused (Dobash et al. 2000: 3).*

Therefore, discussions on the perpetration of (domestic) violence acts should not be focused on finding a non-existent balance between male or female perpetration; the main issue should be almost exclusively the problem of male violence. However, in such discussions there should also be a place for male victims who, in the majority of cases, are victims of violence perpetrated not by women but by other men, as the term gender-based violence is not limited only to opposite genders but can also be used in the context of violence perpetrated and experienced by representatives of one gender. According to Raewyn Connell (1995), an Australian scholar from the field of critical studies on men and masculinities, masculinity is not a monolith, as men differ from each other, and the differences are based on race, class, sexual orientation, age, (dis)ability, education, migration backgrounds etcetera. Some men differ from each other more than individual men and women from, for example, the same class. Therefore it is much more sensible to use the plural term *masculinities* than the singular *masculinity*. However, according to Connell:

*To recognize diversity in masculinities is not enough. We must also recognize the relations between the different kinds of masculinity; relations of alliance, dominance and subordination. These relationships are constructed through practices that exclude and include, that intimidate, exploit, and so on (1995: 37).*

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<sup>5</sup> Data refer to convicted criminals.

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As mentioned above, man-to-man violence contributes to the reproduction of masculine dominance and gender inequality. It is not a coincidence that there are particular groups of men who are most likely to be either perpetrators or victims of this type of violence. The perpetrator groups consist mostly of men who represent dominating groups in certain societies. They are heterosexual, of reproductive age, relatively healthy, and usually their race, religion and ethnic backgrounds are also dominant. The best example of such men, in the North American context, is the WASP – White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (from the middle class). On the other hand, among male victims are usually men from so called marginalised groups: non-heterosexual, elderly, from ethnic and religious minorities, with some sort of disability, homeless etcetera. It is worth mentioning that men, in a different pattern to women, are more likely to be victims of violence perpetrated in the public sphere. According to data gathered by the “Role of men in gender equality” project, men in the EU and EFTA states represent 44% to 87.5% of victims of serious assaults and 46% to 100% of homicide victims (2013: 122).

Since the victims of this kind of violence are men themselves, supporting actual or potential male victims of violence should be considered an important step on the path towards gender equality, together with actions that aim to combat violence against women and children. Furthermore, the *cliché* that men are not vulnerable, and the corresponding idea that men’s injuries or harm are nothing to worry about, belong to the same traditional image of masculinity that is the basis of men’s violence. This *cliché* is itself an aspect of an unequal gender order and needs to be overcome. In order to implement gender equality, deconstruct hegemonic masculinity and combat men’s violence, a focus on men and masculinities instead of on the illusion of gender-neutral violence seems to be the most important task in our society.

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