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Gender

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Gender

Gender is a key feature in patterns of interpersonal violence and abuse. Who abuses whom and how is underpinned by gender inequality. That is also reflected in the Istanbul Convention, which states that the Convention:

...is grounded in the understanding that gender inequality is a cause and consequence of violence against women...This means recognising the gendered nature of violence against women as rooted in power imbalances and inequality between women and men. (Istanbul Convention, Council of Europe 2011)

Meanings attributed to, and expectations associated with, gender also impact on the ways in which professional approaches to perpetrators, victims or survivors, adults and children are played out. Gender is of crucial importance to understanding the impact of interpersonal violence and abuse on individuals, and understanding what may work in overcoming victimisation. At the same time, sexuality, age, class, race, disability intersect with gender and creates different experiences and outcomes. For instance, prevalence and general surveys indicate that age intersects with gender such that the use of and impacts of violence and abuse appear to be more intense for younger age groups, especially under 25 (Walby and Allen, 2004; Hester and Donovan, 2009).

Stark (2007) focuses on the processes of gender inequality involved in violence and abuse, calling the processes involved in domestic violence, prostitution and other forms of heterosexual violence against women “coercive control”. Drawing on research into hostages as well as work with women who have experienced abuse from male partners and others, Stark argues that theories highlighting power and control do not take us far enough. Instead, he uses the idea of coercive control, as this is where the individual aims specifically (in instances of domestic violence) ‘to usurp and master a partner’s subjectivity’ (p. 205). He concludes ‘The result is a condition of unfreedom (what is experienced as *entrapment*) that is “gendered” in its construction, delivery and consequence’ (p. 205). The violence used in coercive control:

...is designed to punish, hurt or control a victim; its effects are cumulative rather than incident-specific; and it frequently results in severe injury or death. ...the victim’s susceptibility to injury is a function of the degree to which her capabilities for defence, resistance, escape or to garner support have been disabled by a combination of exploitation, structural constraints and isolation. (Stark, 2007: 205)

Taking a wider, historical, view, of violence, abuse and gender, Hester (1992) argues that violence and abuse ‘work’ and impact on individuals to sustain, create and re-create social inequalities. The use as well as threat of violence and abuse has the effect of controlling individuals’ lives, and serves, within the context of gender inequality, to construct men as more powerful than women. Thus, violence against women serves as a means of socially

controlling women's lives, where men as individuals or as groups may exercise and maintain power over women and over other men via women's bodies. Individuals have to actively maintain and perpetuate their power over another. This takes place, as in the maintenance of any social order, by pressure to consent, including force, the threat of force and discursive pressures (Hester 1992: 1-2). While interpersonal violence and abuse are experienced materially and bodily, the impact may vary between individuals due to their location in particular sets of social relations and different contexts (Hester, 2004). For instance, the impact of domestic violence on heterosexual men may be less severe than the impact on heterosexual women (Walby and Allen, 2004), while the experiences of lesbians living in abusive relationships may be more heterogeneous than those of heterosexual women (Ristock, 2002; Donovan and Hester, 2007).

The relationship between gender, inequality and violence is of course something that is not straightforward, and is indeed contested. There has been a long and often heated debate in the Western academic literature regarding gender and interpersonal violence and abuse, with a questioning of the extent to which gender is an issue in the use and experience of violence and abuse. For instance, questions have been raised as to whether domestic violence is gender symmetrical - used equally by men and women in heterosexual relationships, or whether it is asymmetrical - with men and women using violence in different ways and with different consequences. However, the distinctions are often methodological, the product of using particular instruments, questions and samples (Archer, 2000; Kimmel, 2002). Similarly debates have been evident in relation to child abuse, where questions have been raised about the extent of child sexual abuse, and gender of perpetrators (Russell and Bolen, 2000; Farmer and Owen, 2000).

To take one example, that of domestic violence, we can see that a reliance on a particular survey instrument in the United States and increasingly elsewhere, the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS), has contributed largely to the notion that domestic violence might be gender symmetrical. Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz (1980) developed the CTS in the attempt to provide replicable data on the incidence and prevalence of interpersonal violence. In its original format the CTS monitored how many times a man or woman had been violent towards their partner in the previous twelve months and how often the partner had been violent towards them in the same time period. The outcome of using this methodology led the researchers to conclude that heterosexual women and men were equally violent and that this type of interpersonal violence could be conceptualised as 'mutual combat' (Straus, 1999). However, the emphasis on 'tactics' without contextual reference, and limitation of impact to physical injury (Straus, 1999), has meant that studies using the CTS have often found it difficult to differentiate experiences of victimisation by men and women, where controlling behaviours may play an important part (Archer, 2002). Moreover, the CTS approaches rely on and compare self-reports of perpetration by men and women as if these were indeed

comparable. Yet evidence from qualitative research with women and men in heterosexual relationships indicates that answers to questions about abuse are gendered, with women tending to overstate, and men tending to underestimate, their violence against their partners (Miller, 2001; Hearn, 1996).

Heterosexuality, Gender and Inequality

In heterosexual contexts, constructions of power and violence are highly gendered, and linked to culturally constructed and idealised forms of masculinity and femininity – what has been termed ‘hegemonic masculinity’ and ‘hegemonic heterosexuality’ (Connell, 1987). The social construction of masculinity as embodied in heterosexual men, helps to explain for instance domestic violence as the exertion of power and control by men over women in intimate relationships within contexts of gender inequality (Hester, 2004). In same sex relationships gender is not as prominent in positioning individuals within relationships and in interactions and constructions of power and violence. There is, however, still evidence of gendered norms impacting on experiences and outcomes of violence and abuse for lesbians and gay men (Hester and Donovan, 2009).

Not only is heterosexuality deemed the dominant sexuality – what may be termed ‘hegemonic’ – but within the idealized heterosexual context male and female sexualities are perceived and construed as different and unequal. MacKinnon, for instance, referring to the construction of what we consider ‘normal’ heterosexuality, argues that ‘male and female are created through the eroticization of submission and dominance’ (1987: 136). Thus, men’s power and women’s social inferiority have become ‘sexy’. The process of constructing women as erotic, or ‘sexy’, objectifies them, positioning women as subordinate and men as dominant. We can see this process especially clearly within pornography (according to the English *Criminal Justice and Immigration Act 2008*, an image is ‘pornographic’ if it has been produced for the purpose of sexual arousal), and it may be acted out more generally within heterosexual relations: where male sexuality objectifies the female object of desire, while female sexuality is objectified by the desired male subject (Hester, 1992: 1). The huge growth in internet and video/DVD pornography (involving sexual exploitation of both adult women and children) and other forms of sexualised markets, have helped to normalise the eroticisation of dominance, and thus also sanctioned gendered inequality and objectification of women (Itzin, 2000). For instance, in-depth research from the US (Frank, 2003), where 30 men who frequented strip or lap dancing clubs were interviewed a number of times, found that over half of the men said that one of their motivations for visiting clubs was to escape the rules of conduct required when interacting with women in unregulated settings. The men found interactions with women more generally constraining. As one of the respondents said:

You can go in there and shop for a piece of meat, quote unquote, so to speak. I mean, you want to see a girl run around naked. Have her come over, pay her to do a dance

or two or three and walk away and not even ask her name. Total distancing. (Frank, 2003: 66)

The normalization and general availability of pornography, lap dancing clubs etc, also creates a context where sexual violence becomes equated not only with gendered power, but more directly with male success. Bailey (2000) has pointed out that this may have detrimental consequences for vulnerable children and adolescents, such as the viewing of violent and pornographic videos by male adolescents who currently have no prospect of success in their own lives:

Beyond the immediate content of violent and pornographic videos is the all too often spoken and unspoken message that violence and sexual assault are acceptable and related to individual success and satisfaction (Bailey, 2000: 210)

In a further example, Messerschmidt (2005) explores how sexual violence as a 'masculine practice' enabled a teenage boy (Zack), who was bullied at school, feel good about himself. It made him feel 'dominant, powerful and heterosexual' (p. 208). Zack was bullied and beaten up by his male peers over a number of years for being fat. He ended up feeling 'pretty crappy about myself' (p. 206). In order to feel more like his peers, and to respond to the 'masculinity challenges' expected by them, 'he eventually turned to expressing control and power over his youngest female cousin through sex' (p. 207). Over a period of three years he sexually assaulted his cousin 'by using a variety of seemingly nonviolent manipulative strategies' (p. 207). Messerschmidt concludes, that while dominant meanings associated with masculinity helped to create a power divide between Zack and other boys at school, 'in the brief, illusory moment of each sexually violent incident – in which the sex offender practiced special and physical dominance over his cousin - Zack was a "cool guy"; the subordinate was now the dominant' (p 208). Here we see in action the links between power and gender, and how the acting out of a gendered male sexuality creates and re-creates gender inequality between Zack and his cousin.

To continue with the exploration of the importance of gender and sexuality to how violence and abuse 'work', and the normative practices associated with abuse, a further example, based on a compilation of women's experiences of sexual violence, will be outlined. The example illustrates in particular the processes of coercive control, as identified by Stark (2007), used in a context of gendered inequality, and especially the elements of entrapment. The process may also be seen as involving the 'grooming' otherwise associated with children being drawn into sexual abuse and exploitation.

He asks her to dance. She accepts. (She wants to or she doesn't want to but she's afraid of hurting his feelings, she's afraid of making him angry, she wants a man to dance with.) He asks her out, she accepts. (She wants to, or she doesn't want to, but all her friends have got blokes, she's afraid of making him angry, he might feel hurt, she can't go out if she's on her own.) He kisses her. He puts his hand on her leg, her

breast, her cunt. He wants to see how far he can go. She lets him. (She wants to or she doesn't want to but he's taken her out after all, and spent money on her, she needs a lift home, she doesn't want to seem a prude, he might be angry.) He asks her to sleep with him. She accepts. (She wants to, or she doesn't want to but she thinks she might as well, she can't back off now, it might be OK, she's flattered that he wants her, he might be angry.)

Or she refuses. He tries to persuade her. He tells her he loves her. He says she doesn't love him. He calls her a prude, immature, frigid. He says he 'needs' sex, so if she won't come across, he'll have to find a girl who will. Each time they meet he carries on a bit further, a bit further. (Why not go all the way?) He buys durex to demonstrate his sense of responsibility. Each time she finally tells him to stop, breaks away, he gets angry, he rages, he sulks; he tells her how bad it is for men to be left 'excited'. (Prick-teaser!) He teaches her to suck him off. He works towards his goal, which is to have, to possess this woman'. (London Rape Action Group, in Hester, 1992: 65-66)

Within this script, both the man and the woman are active participants. However, their different and gendered positions, means that it is the woman who gradually complies and becomes victimized. The action is geared towards the man. For the man the scenario appears to represent a normal heterosexual encounter. For the woman it is not so straightforward, and there is a tension between her apparent wish to become involved, and the encounter being intrusive and abusive. Indeed, this is a common rape scenario, where the woman is left confused because she is not sure that her feelings of violation and intrusion are correct, or whether it is the man's version (that the events are normal and merely what should have happened) is indeed correct. Again, we see how coercive control within a heterosexual context is linked to gender inequality – and draws on, creates and re-creates such inequality.

Gender, Domestic and Sexual Violence

Data on the prevalence of heterosexual domestic abuse in general populations show that both men and women may be violent against their partners. However, there are differences between men's and women's use and experiences of domestic violence, especially when frequency and impact are also taken into account. The national victimisation surveys from a number of countries, including the United States and United Kingdom (Tjaden and Toennes, 2000; Slashinski et al., 2003; Povey et al., 2008) suggest that while men and women in heterosexual relationships may use a similar range of domestic violence behaviours, there are also important differences. In particular, men administer a greater amount and more severe abuse to their female partners than the other way round. Women are also more likely to use services, including health services and the police. The British Crime Survey (Povey et al., 2008) found that men tend not to report partner abuse to the police because they consider the incident "too trivial or not worth reporting" (p. 67).

As a consequence of the more severe domestic violence and abuse that is used by men against their (usually female) partners, men are also the largest group to be recorded as domestic violence perpetrators by the police (Buzawa and Buzawa, 2003; Hester, 2006). This asymmetrical pattern of men as the main domestic violence perpetrators has been reflected in police records across many areas of England (Hester and Westmarland, 2005; Hester, 2006). Typically, the vast majority of intimate partner violence perpetrators recorded by the police are men (92%) and their victims mainly female (91%) (Hester and Westmarland, 2007).

Research comparing cases of domestic violence involving female or male victimisation recorded by the police (Hester, 2013) also showed that violent and abusive behaviour between heterosexual partners in contact with the police is gender asymmetrical. While cases were very varied, there were significant differences between male and female perpetrators of domestic violence in many respects. Men were the perpetrators in a much greater number of incidents; the violence used by men against female partners was much more severe than that used by women against men; violence by men was most likely to involve fear by and control of female victims; women were more likely to use weapons, often in order to protect themselves. In addition, the police were more likely to describe female perpetrators as alcoholic, or mentally ill, although alcohol misuse by men had a greater impact on severity on outcomes. The research highlighted that men and women – both as victims - were using different approaches to managing their own safety, which were linked to their different, gendered, positions of power. The men were more able to take an active approach, removing themselves from the vicinity of the violent partners, removing weapons or imposing restraints. In contrast, women in fear of their partners had to negotiate safety by giving in to the demands of the violent men, in ways that appeared to compromise their safety in the longer term even further.

Whether or not an individual is perceived as a perpetrator or a victim can be complex, and involves gendered perspectives and constructions by the professionals involved. In research on police interactions with domestic violence victims and suspects in the United States, DeLeon-Granados and Long (2000, in DeLeon-Granados et al., 2006) observed how male domestic violence suspects were able to influence decisions made by officers at the scene of the crime using ‘an often-subtle but powerful language’ that ‘conspired against female victims and helped male suspects to minimize their actions, deny responsibility, and shift blame’ (p 361). The authors argue that ‘Batterers work to manipulate the system not only to protect themselves from punishment but also as a way to maintain positions of power in their intimate relationships’ (DeLeon-Granados et al., 2006). The types of gendered dynamics described by DeLeon-Granados et al. (2006) and Miller (2001), whereby men in criminal justice settings may minimise their actions and consequently the blame on themselves, or women may minimise their experiences of violence from male partners, were also echoed to some extent in the research by Hester (2009). For instance, men were able to minimise their

own violence by not providing a statement to the police in some cases where their partners had used violence in retaliation or self-defence, and/or they had themselves been extremely violent. In contrast, women who were victimised, at times withdrew statements, minimised or denied that violence had taken place against them where male partners were also very threatening and controlling (Hester, 2009).

Implications for Policy and Practice

As indicated in the sections above, gender is an important consideration in understanding the nature of victimisation, the experiences and impacts of violence and abuse, for different individuals. Gender (let alone sexual orientation, age, ethnicity etc.) consequently has a bearing on service use, service need and seeking help. Acknowledging and engaging with the specific experiences and needs of different groups and individuals, whether female, male, or LGBT are thus important, are issues with which practitioners and policy makers need to engage, and require that the specific contexts of abuse for the individual concerned be understood.

Understanding how gender inequalities and processes influence how individuals may use, experience and embody violence and abuse is important: it allows focusing of services to those who need them, and allows consideration of possibly different experiences and different needs for individuals.

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