

# Family Violence: A Men's or Women's Issue?

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## **Abstract**

This paper is an overview of research on family violence from the last four decades. The issue of domestic violence became increasingly visible as a social problem and as a family issue from the 1980s. We know that intimate and family violence is extensive, occurs in all society, culture, and historical time, and in all racial, ethnic, sociocultural and economic groups. The aim of this study was to answer to the following research questions: Intimate partner violence it an issue for men or women? Why do women stand beside their aggressor partners? What are the phases and tasks inside the process of leaving a violent relationship? Is the symbolic asymmetry of gender the background of intimate partner violence? What can we do? How can we better prevent the phenomenon? The sources of this review are the found in Anglo-Saxon literature. The conclusion underline that intimate and family violence is not a private matter, but an important social problem, is not an issue of women, but one of aggressive men, and of the society as a whole.

**Key words:** Family violence, gender asymmetry, the stay-leave decision-making process, prevention.

## **Résumé**

Cette étude est une synthèse des recherches sur la violence familiale menées au cours des quatre dernières décennies. Le problème de la violence domestique est devenu de plus en plus visible et a été défini comme un problème social et familial dans les années 80. Nous savons que la violence intime et familiale est généralisée et se produit dans toutes les sociétés, les cultures et les temps, et dans tous les groupes raciaux et ethniques, socioculturels et économiques. Le but de cette étude était de répondre aux questions de recherche suivantes: La violence entre les partenaires intimes est-elle un problème pour les hommes ou les femmes? Pourquoi les femmes restent-elles avec leurs partenaires agressifs? Quelles sont les étapes et les tâches du processus décisionnel pour sortir d'une relation violente? L'asymétrie symbolique du genre est-elle un facteur favorisant la violence du partenaire intime? Que pouvons-nous faire? Comment pouvons-nous mieux prévenir le phénomène? Les sources de cette synthèse sont celles trouvées dans la littérature anglo-saxonne.

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La conclusion souligne que la violence intime et familiale n'est pas une affaire privée, mais un problème social important, non seulement un problème pour les femmes, mais également celui des hommes agressifs et de la société dans son ensemble.

**Mots-clés:** Violence familiale, asymétrie de genre, processus de prise de décision en ce qui concerne les séjours en congé, prévention.

### **Rezumat**

Acest studiu este o sinteză a cercetărilor privind violența în familie realizate în ultimele patru decenii. Problema violenței domestice a devenit din ce în ce mai vizibilă, fiind definită ca o problemă socială și familială din anii 1980. Știm că violența intimă și familială este extinsă, are loc în întreaga societate, cultură și timp istoric și în toate grupurile rasiale, etnice, socio-culturale și economice. Scopul acestui studiu a fost de a răspunde la următoarele întrebări de cercetare: Violența partenerului intim este o problemă pentru bărbați sau femei? De ce femeile stau alături de partenerii lor agresori? Care sunt fazele și sarcinile din cadrul procesului de luare a deciziei de a părăsi o relație violentă? Este asimetria simbolică a genului un factor favorizant al violenței partenerului intim? Ce putem face? Cum putem preveni mai bine fenomenul? Sursele acestei sinteze sunt cele găsite în literatura anglo-saxonă. Concluzia subliniază că violența intimă și familială nu este o chestiune privată, ci o problemă socială importantă, nu doar o problemă a femeilor, ci și una de bărbaților agresivi și a societății în ansamblul ei.

**Cuvinte cheie:** violență în familie, asimetrie de gen, proces decizional, prevenire.

### **1. Is it an issue for men or women?**

For a long period of time, domestic violence was considered *a familial or an individual problem*, being perceived as a private matter, one of the people involved in an abusive relationship. On a historical scale, the society has taken just recently clear measures to protect the victims, and to sanction the domestic aggressors for all types of aggressive behavior.

When we analyse in detail the evolution of different types of violence against women, we find that not all data fall into a descending trend, as we expected. For example, in US, Straus and Gelles have carried out three national survey on domestic violence, using in-depth interviews with a nationally representative sample of 2143 respondents in 1976 (Straus, Gelles and Steinmetz, 1980), telephone interviews with a nationally representative sample of 6002 respondents in 1985 (Gelles and Straus, 1988), and telephone interviews with a nationally representative sample of 1970 respondents in 1992 (Straus and Kaufmann-Kantor, 1994). Their data show a decline of the rate of „minor violence” (that had a low probability of causing a physical injury) from 100 per 1000 women in 1975 to about 80 per 1000 women in 1985, and then rose to nearly 90 per 1000 women in 1992. More serious or severe acts of acts towards women (labelled as „severe assaults” or „wife beating” by the investigators), declined from 3.8 per 1000 in 1975 to 1.9 per 1000 in 1992.

When looking at the worldwide data regarding domestic violence the answer to our question seems to suggest that *it is an issue of women*, as long as they are the most numerous victims. Although some investigators report that the rate of wife-to-husband violence is about the same as the rate of husband-to-wife (Moffitt, Caspi, Rutter and Silva, 2001; Straus and Gelles, 1988; Straus, 2005), others find that women are more often the victims of family violence (Dobash, Dobash Wilson and Daly, 1992; Loseke and Kurz, 2005; Tjaden and Thonnes 1998 etc.). Data indicate that almost one third (aprox. 30 percent) of women involved in an intimate relationship report that they have experienced some forms of physical and/or sexual violence inflicted by the partner in their lifetime (WHO, 2012). In Romania, the situation is very similar, women being more often the victims, and men the aggressors. The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA; 2014) published the results of the most comprehensive study in the world so far on violence against women. According to this, 24% of Romanian women have suffered physical violence from their partner. In 2017, 20,531 murders and other violence committed among family members were reported to the police, according to the statistics of the General Inspectorate of Romanian Police (IGPR). Most of the aggressors are male adults (92%) and the majority of the victims are female adults (76%) and juveniles, and the facts happened at home; reported to previous figures in 2016, when there were 18,531 cases of domestic violence, there is an increase in the number of beatings and other domestic violence reported to the police, which shows an increase in the phenomenon, but it may also be a sign of increasing victim confidence in addressing authorities in such situations (RPCVF, 2018). The effects of domestic violence on women are important, numerous, varying from distress to trauma. They may include sleep disorders, self-blame, isolation, negative self-esteem, feelings of fear, guilt and shame, but also the clinical depression, clinical anxiety, suicidal tendencies, and posttraumatic stress disorder (Dănilă and Turliuc 2009a).

Since men are most often the aggressors, we may think that *it is more a man's issue*. Boys are the most violent siblings and offspring (Durose, Harlow, Langan, Motivans, Rantala and Smith, 2005). Generally, violence is related with the level of male hormone, the testosterone, violent males having an early age of the onset of offending of all types (Farrington, 1997), and childhood aggression predict later violence (Stattin, Gustavson and Magnusson, 1989). Also, the male aggressiveness is strengthened socially, fathers' games with their boys being more aggressive in general, than with girls, and aggressiveness of boys is more acceptable or even encouraged by parents (Turliuc, 2004). The responsibility for violent behavior is always that of the aggressor, regardless of the victim's conduct. There are always verbal arguments that can be used more effectively instead of force. Globally, 38% of murders of women are committed by a male intimate partner (Krug, Dahlberg, Mercy, Zwi and Lozano, 2002). Although not exhaustive, the lists of male aggressors are a guide for field specialists which help them make a difference

between aggressors and fake aggressors. For example, Cunningham, Jaffe, Backer, Dick, Mall, Mazaheri and Poisson (1998; see also Dănilă and Turliuc, 2009b) suggested that male aggressor have a low self-esteem, a higher interpersonal dependence than their partner, they believe in masculine supremacy and in traditional gender roles, use excessive control and isolation of the victim, have unrealistic expectations, tend to use self-destructive behaviors (smoking, alcohol or/and drug consumption etc.), to be hypersensitive, and to blame others for their actions .

What happens within the family affects the well-being of its members. The malfunctioning of family processes involves large individual (e.g., health problems) and social costs (e.g., divorce includes financial, emotional and social costs). Family violence is also *a social problem* (Loseke and Kurz, 2005) - alongside crime, poverty or decrease of government authority - an undesirable collective situation. Social problems must be analysed within the society in which they appear, in close association with the social order, with the distinct values and structures of this society; they are the unwanted and unanticipated consequences of socio-economic progress and institutionalized regulation of social behavior (Petcu, 1999). Family violence involves large social costs including the treatment of the physical and mental state of family members, and temporary intervention programs for violent families, for victims, for aggressors, for families with difficulty to resolve various behavioral disorders of children, supported by the state budget (Turliuc, 2007).

### **Why do women stand beside their aggressor partners?**

In her memoirs, *Crazy Love* (2009), Steiner describes her experience in surviving domestic violence. In her opinion, victims may stay with abusive partners because they do not know that they are abused, they think they are the only ones in the situation, and they can be the saviours of deeply troubled souls. This outcome is due to the specific nature of the family violence cycle which includes: the gradual occurrence of domestic violence, seduction of the victim, isolation of the victim, threatening the victim and checking her reaction, and the aggression, followed by the aggressor's regret. The question "Why the victim does not leave from the abusive relationship?" was answered by Steiner (2009) who suggested that it is extremely dangerous to leave the aggressor, because of long-term harassment, refusal of access to financial resources, court handling etc.

What other reasons do women have to stay in abusive relationships? Studies have shown that they stay because they want children to have a father, due to their financial dependency, because they believe they have contributed to violence, due to their negative self-image (Strube and Barbour, 1983). Women do not want to leave their partner, just to end violence (Landenburger, 1998), because they love their partner (Strube & Barbour, 1983), they think they can save the relationship, they do not want to give up their investment or because they hope that abuse will cease (Barnett, Miller-Perrin and Perrin, 2005). Women use denial or minimization

of violence, due to their fear of being alone or without the loved person (Werner-Wilson, Zimmerman and Whalen, 2000). Finally, another reason is fear for their own safety and for that of children, since 70% of domestic crimes are committed after leaving the aggressor.

### **The stay-leave decision-making process**

The decision to stay or to leave a violent partner was research in quantitative and qualitative studies. From the perspective of both types of studies, the process of leaving is a complex process that evolves over time and varies according to the dynamic interaction of individual, relational, environmental, and social factors (Barnett and LaViolette, 1993; Fiore Lerner & Kennedy, 2000). The process of leaving a violent relationship is often defined *as a journey* composed of several cycles of departure and return, before a definitive departure, assuming that every time the woman leaves and returns, she grows psychologically and takes steps toward a final departure (Brown, Linnemeyer, Dougherty, Coulson, Transgrud and Farnsworth, 2005; Ulrich, 1991). Landenburger (1998) suggested that most women are initially leaving the violent relationship to make clear that they want to stop abuse, and not to end the relationship definitively. But, after returning home, abuse becomes worse and the abuser is experiencing less and less remorse. Based on the qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews with women victims of intimate partner violence, Landenburger (1998) identified the phases of leaving the abusive relationships: the phase of bonding, resistance, disengagement and healing / recovery. Women go through these phases, but not necessarily in this order. The significance of abuse, interactions with the abusive partner, and the perception of one's own person influence their healing process. For a final departure to succeed, the beliefs of victims must go through a process of change (self-image become more favourable, they perceive better personal resources and qualities, coping skills, etc.). Ulrich (1991) indicate that women justify their decision of leaving by the need for personal growth, opposed to the need for safety.

Fiore Lerner and Kennedy (2000) applied Prochaska and DiClemente's (1986) transtheoretical model of change to the stay-leave decision-making process of battered women. This model of change is made up of five stages:

1) *Precontemplation*. At this stage, women do not realize the abuse, find it irrelevant, having no interest in, or intention to change the relationships with the perpetrator.

2) *Contemplation*. At this stage, women are thinking seriously about changing the unwanted behavior of their abusive partners within the next six months, being aware they have a problem, without taking action to change.

3) *Preparation*. At this stage women are seriously begin to plan the changes, intending to act to change behavior in the next month. But they can alternate between this stage and the previous one. Women passing through this stage use

active strategies to made changes in their relationship with the abusive partners. Some minor behavioral changes are implemented during this phase.

4) *Action*. At this stage women are actively engaged in change process. They had been out of an abusive relationship for less than six months. This change is about changing unwanted behavior and the environment that keeps it.

5) *Maintenance*. Women who have managed to reach this stage had been out of the abusive relationship for at least six months. The status of maintenance can be characterized in terms of stabilizing behavioral change and preventing the tendency to return into the abusive relationship and the recurrence of violence.

Fiore Lerner and Kennedy (2000) found that women who were in the action phase, or who had been out of an abusive relationship for less than 6 months, were not confident about their decision to leave and were more tempted to return to the relationship, whereas women who were in the maintenance phase were more confident in their decision to leave and less tempted to return to a violent partner.

In qualitative interviews with an unreported number of women at a battered women's shelter, Werner-Wilson and his colleagues (2000) found that women had to accomplish the following tasks before they could successfully leave their abusive partners:

- 1) became aware that they were in an abusive relationship, particularly if the abuse was emotional,
- 2) gain a sense of self separate from prescribed roles as a wife and a mother,
- 3) feel hopeful that their life would improve if they left the relationship,
- 4) learn about available resources that could assist with their difficult transition,
- 5) identify a safe place for themselves and their children once they left their abuser,
- 6) attend therapy in order to achieve all of the above tasks.

In another qualitative study of ten women who had left an abusive relationship, victims additionally reported that before they could permanently leave, they had to stop blaming themselves, and come to the conclusion that their abuser was to blame for the violence (Mills, 1996).

### **The symbolic asymmetry of gender and violence**

Beyond the evidence of genetic, hormonal or somatic asymmetry, the cognitive and behavioral differences between the two sexes, their social practices and relationships have been shaped and / or accentuated in their hierarchical relationship. This is the "director" of gender relations and the organizer of all gender representations, gender practices, and social hierarchy; this hierarchical report is based on a *symbolic asymmetry*, insinuated in the symbolic universe of the two sexes, in which the male sex has a generic value, a reference norm in relation to the female specificity (see Turliuc, 2004). It is as if one of the sexes is the norm, and the other is the exception.

Domestic violence replicates the dominant system of power and privileges: it avoids admitting dominance, avoids giving attention to the dominant group, and avoids introspection of dominant group. This favours the shifting of aggressiveness from one person to another, the avoidance of men's responsibility for their aggressive behavior, and the recognition that aggression is originated in hostile interpretations of ambiguous events and in cognitive distortions (Hall, 2015).

Due to the gender symbolic asymmetry, violence against women is also reflected in the cognitive structure of language. The victim's blaming occurs instead of the abuser's blaming. The blame of the aggressor involves the use of simple questions like:

- Why does Ion beat Maria?
- Why does a woman beat a child?
- What happens to men who are abusive?

Gradually, in the public discourse arise and are used questions which replace the guilt of the man with that of the woman, such as:

- Why was Mary beaten?
- Why does she stay with her husband?
- What did Maria do to her husband?

Women who have broken the silence are describes as women who criticize men, women who do not love men, or even women who hate men. Men's messages to these women can be: do not disturb the system and the status quo, men can sometimes say / do things women cannot say / do, or men can be heard saying words / things women cannot say.

What dimensions of the society' functioning explains the maintenance of abusive men? In fact, a multitude of factors contribute to this result. Domestic violence is shaped by the more negative stereotypes of women, the persistence of traditional gender values and roles, and the pressure of evolution towards more equal gender relations. Together with the traditional gender hierarchical report, other factors are: the system of religious beliefs, the ways of socializing boys, the definitions of masculinity, the family structures, the economy, the sport, the pornography etc. Family violence can be understood as an effect of concurrent actions or intersection of all these factors.

### **What can we do? Challenging the direct, structural and cultural violence**

Our society should try to achieve first the primary prevention of domestic violence. The primary prevention goal is to reduce the incidence of negative conduct in society and to prevent problems before they occur. Gelles (1993) suggested, for example, the following actions of primary prevention of domestic violence: elimination of norms that legitimize and even glorify violence in society and the family, as well as the use of violence as a form of detente in the media; reducing societal stress, provoking violence, such as stress from poverty, inequality

of chances and discrimination; foster families in a community network and reduce social isolation; changing the sexist character of society through educational development; breaking the cycle of domestic violence by learning alternative behaviors to violence as ways to control the relationship with your partner or child. These proposals advocate for fundamental changes in family life and society as a whole. It is often said that they are not realistic. However, such proposals are long-term solutions that require changes in the allocation of resources and the organization of each society.

Other forms of prevention manifest family violence involve the legal measures and the therapy. The predominant anti-violence political strategies resulting from both radical and liberal feminists in 1980's often focused on demanding state support services and juridical responses to violence against women. These demands included shelters, better legislation for women who are victims of violence, the effective removal of the aggressors, and their treatment. Just recently, in addition to Domestic Violence Law in Romania, Law no. 174/2018 (June, 2018) allows police officers to issue – when they notice an imminent risk for the life, physical integrity or liberty of a person engaged by an act of domestic violence – an interim protection order for a maximum period 5 days to reduce this risk until the court adopt a restriction order. While the importance of these services for the immediate wellbeing and safety of many women must be recognised, we cannot also forget their gaps, exclusions, and inadequacies; if state services do not address the structures of violence that support individual expressions of violence, they become accomplices in these structures through this omission (Hall, 2015).

Prior to the emergence of aggressive life-threatening conduct, the therapy can be recommended. Therapists know that in domestic violence, the aggressor has to do individual therapy before couple or family therapy. At the individual level can be addressed the problem of anger and other negative emotions management, the problem of self-control, self-esteem, frustration, anxiety or depression. Unlike individual therapy, where the problem is sought at the level of personality, in the couple or family therapy the problem is identified at the level of the relationship. Generally speaking, in couple therapy it is considered that both partners have their own contribution to the quality of their relationship, with the exception of domestic violence. It is the only situation where the general rule cannot be applied, the aggressor being the sole responsible for his actions.

Finally, the spectator's perspective in the prevention of family violence suggests that any person who is not an aggressor or victim in a particular situation (family members, friends, colleagues, etc.), who are in direct contact with abusive members of the social, cultural, vocational, school networks, the community must react and talk with the people involved, to talk with members of the various groups in order to condemn the acts of violence and the attitude of the aggressors. Social workers, psychotherapists and other professionals can bring clarity about how we communicate with all these people, what we talk to them, and how we support



them. Martin Luther King underlined that: "What hurts us the most are not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends!"

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In conclusion, this paper is an overview of research on family violence from the last four decades. The issue of domestic violence became increasingly visible as a social problem and as a family issue from the 1980s. We know that intimate and family violence is extensive, occurs in all society, culture, and historical time, and in all racial, ethnic, sociocultural and economic groups. Domestic violence happens between parents and children, between individuals who are dating, couples that are married, separated or divorced, also domestic violence occur in heterosexual as well gay and lesbian relationships. Many abusers behave in ways that include more than one type of domestic abuse, and the boundaries between some of these behaviors may overlap. Intimate and family violence is not a private matter, but an important social problem, is not an issue of women, but one of aggressive men, and of the society as a whole.

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