

Silence. Secrecy. Shame. Changing the narrative of gendered violence

*Domestic violence is a profound, systemic, social issue that warrants both our sustained attention and action. **Odessa Hamilton** dispels a number of misconceptions around the issue, as she discusses the behaviours of men and women, along with the possible causes of this violence. She recommends changing the narrative and calls on corporations to step up to the plate and help deal with domestic violence amongst their employees.*

A critical caveat

It is time to expel the myths that distort our perceptions of the dyad of abuse in domestic violence. Let us not ignite a battle of the sexes. Not all men are perpetrators. Not all perpetrators are men. Equally, victimisation is not exclusive to women. Irrespective of the gendered configuration, domestic violence is a violation of human rights. Still, the distribution of abuse informs us that most incidences of violence are perpetrated by men and there is a statistical slant toward victims being women. Worldwide estimates indicate that 1 in 3 women have been subjected to domestic violence in their lifetime ([WHO, 2021](#)). There are, curiously, a plethora of statistical reports on the number of women who experience domestic violence, but a dearth of prevalence statistics or formal estimates of men who have perpetrated domestic violence. This knowledge deficit has limited the development of effective evidence-based, preventative interventions ([Hales & Gannon, 2021](#)). Any other societal trauma experienced at this scale would be dealt with as a crisis, with the solemnity it deserves. But domestic violence has been normalised; rendered a personal issue of unimpressive magnitude, unworthy of legitimate attention or widescale action, and is likely why the corporate voice on this matter has become silent.

“The... classic framing of violence against women – as some mysterious deviant man, hiding in the shadows, waiting to attack – preserves the stranger-danger illusion.”

The stranger-danger illusion

Given that domestic violence is a profound, systemic, social issue, it warrants both our sustained attention and action. Perhaps due to an increase in reporting during the COVID-19 pandemic, in addition to a growth in civilian journalism, domestic violence has become somewhat of a *hot topic* of recent. But despite this putative paradigm shift, the longevity of this interest is yet to be seen. Representations of domestic violence in the media, or historically lack thereof, has been a longstanding concern, particularly as the media yields the power to shape consumer opinion. Although media content may be critically absorbed, the frequency and the way that news is textually and visually represented promotes or hinders certain interpretive frames, with some narratives being privileged over others. This has serious ramifications for societal opinion and, thus, social action ([Lloyd, 2020](#)). The fundamental flaw in the classic framing of violence against women – as some mysterious deviant man, hiding in the shadows, waiting to attack – is that it preserves the stranger-danger illusion. When, in truth, most violence against women is domestic, occurring within the purported security of an interpersonal relationship. Granted, there is an inherent difficulty in reporting incidents of domestic violence given the silence, secrecy, shame, and ensuing underreporting. But sensationalist coverage, gaslighting, denial, and ensuing disillusionment, reinforces the insidious and unrelenting nature of domestic violence that erodes society. It contributes to the psychological trap that millions of people find themselves in, irrespective of their individual characteristics.

Mr Nice Guy

It is important to dispel other misconceptions, such as incidences of domestic violence being alcohol- or drug-fuelled, by the uneducated, the poor, or convicts, by those who lack power in other domains. Unfortunately, perpetrators of abuse and violence are not normalised as *everyday people*, so we continue to be shocked, in disbelief when they are identified, caught, and exposed. Despite popular belief, they are often charismatic, shrewd, funny, and charming. Traits that together develop into a spontaneous and organic attraction. Perpetrators are uniquely motivated to construct magical, yet fictitious, conditions that feature women at the centre of their worlds. For women, this engenders an artifice of psychological safety and security, as they tread the proverbial Venus flytrap. A good reputation is also central to the longevity of abuse – and escape from punishment for that matter! The intention is to conceal abuse, making it imperceptible and challenging to prove. It is very often strategic – a game of chess if you will. Yet, there exists a shadow persona. Aggressive. Forceful. Intimidating. Violent.

Boys will be boys

There are a number of potential reasons for why boys may grow up to become abusers as men. With exception to psychopathology, childhood traumatisation, unresolved trauma, and unregulated, misplaced anger are all pathways to adulthood dysfunction. Exposure to toxic familial exemplars is also a high-risk factor for generational dysfunction by way of learned behaviours. The amplified role of pornography in shaping a warped sense of reality is an additional overlooked concern, along with sports culture, gaming, and the romanticisation of gangs, which can evoke antipathy, hostility, and brutality. Then, irrespective of merit, males are judged less, questioned less, labelled less, and are afforded more opportunity.

“... insinuating a choice to abuse. Consider why most perpetrators do not attack their managers, their friends, their colleagues, their neighbours...”

The liabilities of male socialisation include a false sense of what masculinity is, unrealistic expectations, and a desensitisation to the wellbeing of others. Society *creates the monster*, then acts surprised by the monster it has created. It is not biological, so it is not inevitable. Distorted societal depictions of masculinity prime men toward abusive behaviours. We celebrate and, thus, foster risk taking, recklessness, anger cloaked in bravery, bravado veiled in strength, irritability justified, and violence excused – after all, *boys will be boys*. The weight of societal expectations oppresses the natural male disposition, with clichéd depictions of masculinity; powerful, strong, confident, bold, courageous, assertive, independent, wealthy. Thus, when a man fails to live up to these specious archetypes, it creates an internal void and insecurity that he is typically ill-equipped to manage, given men are seldom taught to manage their emotions adaptively. Instead, as a rite of passage to manhood, they are taught to *suck it up* and *fight it out* because *big boys don't cry*. It is time that we change what it means to be a boy, and ditch unhelpful caveman stereotypes.

Abuse reflects the attitudes, beliefs and value system of the perpetrator, ideals held around gender roles, and a sense of entitlement. Abusers characteristically lack self-awareness and introspection, and yet they manage to demonstrate restraint toward others – insinuating a choice to abuse. Consider why most perpetrators do not attack their managers, their friends, their colleagues, their neighbours. Abuse is not subject to impulsivity. It is not an accident. It is not a mistake. What it does reflect, however, is a power imbalance.

Gift-wrapped apologies

The adage is that it starts with relational interdependency and ends in death. But the reality is far more nuanced than that, and as a proviso, relationships are distinct; no one-size-fits-all. There are temporal contrasts between domestic violence cases. They can present as a number of isolated cases overtime – triggered by heightened periods of stress poorly managed. Equally, abuse can be sequential and progressive. There is, nonetheless, credibility in extrapolating from common experiences, with an acknowledgement of the variance. Ironically, there are often classic [not necessarily linear] stages of abuse that prove effective, predominantly, because they are latent, and thus, unanticipated and unseen. Initial stages resemble a natural part of intimate relationships. However, soon follows a downward trajectory toward chaos and toxicity, with violence being the last piece of the puzzle. It starts with charm and seduction. Isolation. The moral high ground is set (with likes and dislikes – first in others, then in you). A power imbalance is established through suppressed decision-making. Emotional abuse; blaming, minimising, coercion, and disparaging. Intimidation and threats of violence, trailed by gradual escalations in physical violence. All beautifully *gift-wrapped* in excuses and apologies. Then follows ‘control maintenance’; commonly by way of economic restraints, leveraging children, or threats of exposure of information or images shared within the sanctity of their union. It is only upon reflection that victims tend to comprehend their progressive loss of power and control. What is poorly understood is whether perpetrators proceed deliberately through these stages like cognitive guide, or whether it is a behavioural enigma that causes a symmetry in dysfunctional comportment between abusers. Be it as it may, this pattern of abuse allows for a clear and systematic strategy for information dissemination of classic warning signs, such that they become instinctively recognisable for what they truly are – premeditated abuse, manipulation, and exploitation. There is a trifecta of reasons for this level of transparency. Perpetrators cannot be allowed to hide behind this shield of secrecy. Knowledge is power, so victims must be better informed. Society should be enlightened to the challenging dynamics at play to disrupt the silence and reduce the curse of shame.

“Corporations seem to have lost their voice in the matter but are not immune to its effects.”

Victimology 101

Plausibly a consequence of parental or familial exemplars normalising abusive behaviours, a challenge is that victims tend not to think of themselves as victims, so they fail to develop self-empathy. Harder still for women who yield power and influence in other domains, who are educated, who have wealth; a cognitive dissonance develops, making it harder to accept their victimisation. Remarkably, victims of abuse typically view the perpetrators as weak, helpless, and deserving of their pity, which reinforces the status quo in abuse. Consider this dynamic: you have an evidently troubled and traumatised, perhaps even previously abused partner, who you believe needs your help. You have a choice of the heart. To turn your back on him, on the chance that he might become abusive. Then you resume your search for love. This choice requires a conscious rejection of societal primers about femininity, nurturing, eternally patient, tolerant. Alternatively, you accept that you might, to some extent, become collateral damage in his process to healing. After all this is love and love is sacrifice. In this choice, you become the *hero* of his story to help him *face his demons*, to help him break this cycle. Needless to say, the latter is the popular choice. Conceivably due to a selection bias in victims, chosen for their compassion, loyalty, and resilience. Alas, the behaviours of the perpetrator become the responsibility of the victim.

“Men have become invisible in discourse that is predominately about them. Consider the language that is used; ‘domestic violence against women’, as opposed to ‘male perpetrated domestic violence’.”

Why doesn't she just leave

The shroud of silence over domestic violence is deafening. A subject deemed taboo, vulgar, even among friends, such that victims become isolated. One consequence of the silence, secrecy and shame is that each new victim is made to *reinvent the wheel*, so to speak – coming to their own revelation and idiosyncratic ways of surviving the abuse. Some see no hope and no way out; contributing to a lesser-known suicidality statistic of 500 women per year who experience domestic abuse. For each day that we wake up, *bright-eyed and bushy-tailed*, at least one woman decides it will be her last. Some, by contrast, possess an eternal hope for amelioration – convinced that *the sun will shine again*. Others, shamed to secrecy, operate like a functioning alcoholic – ordinary by day, beaten by night – lacking the psychological resources to leave. Equally, financial dependency or complications with children can make leave efforts feel untenable. Some victims of abuse develop subclinical and pathological forms of psychopathology that frequently go unreported and untreated, making it harder to leave. It is also dangerous to leave. Circa 75% of deaths in domestic violence cases occur after or at the point of separation. Then there is the issue of long-term stalking and harassment – whether in person or virtually. Although victims may find themselves facing insurmountable barriers to support, those barriers are not always of a physical, practical, monetary nature, they can also be perceptual, emotional, or psychological. Without clear indication of viable support, the experience of domestic violence can be lonely, soul-destroying, and terrifying.

Changing the narrative

It is time that we change the narrative around domestic violence. Reframing domestic violence as a societal problem. It is imperative that we move swiftly away from victim blaming and this peculiar hostility toward women who experience such violence. Part of the problem is that dominant groups are seldom challenged to consider their dominance, power, and privilege, which propagates and further asserts their dominance. Men have become invisible in discourse that is predominately about them. Consider the language that is used; '*domestic violence against women*', as opposed to '*male perpetrated domestic violence*'. Some may gasp at the latter suggestion, but the former is equally unacceptable. As it currently stands, domestic violence has become an issue centrally defined by its significance to women dismissing, entirely, its relevance to men. These skewed formulations of domestic violence alter the fabric of the dispute and direct interventions toward targets that are not the main source of the problem. It is argued that framing domestic violence as a woman's issue gives rise to men tuning out of the conversation (similar to the effect seen in wedding planning or shopping). We equally need to walk away from broad stroke generalisations to all men everywhere. Men must have a seat at the table to address domestic violence. They too have a positive role to play in ending this dyad of abuse. Men have a distinct perspective and an ability to send powerful messages about healthy relationships, the perils of violence, and the leveraging of power for good (Pease, 2008). To be transformative, we must eliminate the us-against-them philosophy. This is a societal issue. From an epidemiological standpoint, much is to be said about societal constitutions that cultivate a series of biopsychosocial exposures that synthesize into dysfunctional behaviours predominantly in men. In many ways we have all become victims of gender roles that too often develop into unfortunate and dangerous conditions.

Corporate response

The expected role of corporations to yield their influence for impactful and sustainable change may feel abstract, perplexing, even bizarre. But this is because domestic violence, even by name, has been framed as a domestic affair; personal and private. However, we need a whole-society approach. Corporations seem to have lost their voice in the matter but are not immune to its effects. Although exogenous to organisations, there is an inescapable spill-over of domestic violence into the workplace. The truth is, employees cannot reasonably be expected to maintain this divide of being beaten, raped, stalked, controlled, accosted, and disparaged at home, with a looming fear of death, only to *shake it off* and walk audaciously into work each day being remarkable, effective, sharp, witty and in all ways exceptional. There is need for corporate advocacy. Given the absence of a miracle panacea, a layered response is proposed. Policy change, information dissemination, and a referral scheme as an avenue to funded specialist support. Even though the total societal cost of domestic violence is estimated at £23 billion per annum, £2.7 billion of that is borne by organisations alone. Costs come primarily through a loss of economic output and injury-related absenteeism (Walby, 2004). Then there is the issue of reputation. Domestic violence can prove a threat to brand-equity when an exposed perpetrator is identified as an employee. There is much to be said about proactive risk management in place of retrospective crisis management. Organisations are, thus, also encouraged to publicly *break the silence*; to demonstrate an unequivocal position against violence; to make clear that their values are not aligned with, nor do they sanction, nor do they tolerate violence, by any employee at any time. We can sit in denial or accept the unfortunate truth that there is complicity in silence.

This piece was originally written in honour of White Ribbon Day and to mark the 30th anniversary of the Global '16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence'; annual campaigns calling for the end of male violence against women.



Notes:

- *This blog post represents the views of its author(s), not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.*
- *Featured [image](#) by [Kelly Sikkema](#) on [Unsplash](#)*
- *When you leave a comment, you're agreeing to our [Comment Policy](#).*