

Domestic violence as a reflection of the social (re)production of inequality. A critical analysis of the role of power and control in reference to gender equality.

Violence against women is predominantly domestic, and women who are victims of domestic violence face a number of challenges as a result that are in addition to escaping the violence that is directed at them. The United Nations states Domestic violence “can be defined as a pattern of behavior in any relationship that is used to gain or maintain power and control over an intimate partner.” (UN, 2024). Violence is not only physical but psychological, financial, emotional... violence is about control. The UN goes on to explain that “This includes any behaviors that frighten, intimidate, terrorize, manipulate, hurt, humiliate, blame, injure, or wound someone.” (UN, 2024). Regardless of an individual’s social standing, any discrepancy in power can result in vulnerability. There is no particular type of person who is more likely to become a victim, “Domestic abuse can happen to anyone of any race, age, sexual orientation, religion, or gender.” (UN, 2024). Which is to say there is no innate connection between gender and domestic violence, however there is a distinct trajectory of gender power.

“Globally, the number of males has exceeded the number of females since the mid-1960s.” (Mankind, 2024). It is important to note that men can also be victims of domestic violence, however statistically it is women who are most likely to have a recognised experience. “One in seven men (13.9%) and one in four women (27%) will be a victim of domestic abuse in their lifetime” (ONS figures 2022/23). Regardless of gender discrimination, domestic violence is a stain on humanity. If gender is not the primary concern then what is it about power and conflict in other institutions of society that place women in dangerous and vulnerable situations?

Social reproduction theory is often associated with the barriers to social mobility and efforts by Tony Blair to create a classless society with social mobility (White, 1999). In this essay the focus is on the position of women within society that have experienced domestic violence. Escaping the narrative of victimhood is more than moving from a violent partner, it involves navigating the legal and social justice system or courts and police, establishing financial independence and often relocating with children to a new unfamiliar location. Seeking, building and maintaining power.

Kendra Strauss writes that social reproduction refers to the “the varied processes involved in maintaining and reproducing individuals and societies over time.” (Strauss, 2022). In the case of victims of violence escaping the narrative of victimhood can be a difficult process. This essay asks

the question – what elements in society form barriers for victims of domestic violence to achieve independence, autonomy and gaining control and power over their own lives.

In a world of social actors, fluid dynamic changes and a call for the reproduction Of traditional values, there is a pressure on women to uphold social values and morality. Martusewicz debates the concept of society “developing a discourse that endowed traditional values of motherhood and domesticity“ woman’s role in society is prescribed based on gender. How society perceives women is reflected in the subjective possibilities for women; access, expectancy and experience. Woman as victims of domestic violence is a globally recognised phenomenon, a trope of reality. Regardless of social upset in reference to these crimes, domestic abuse has become a trend. “The police receive a domestic abuse-related call every 30 seconds.” (Refuge, 2024). It is institutionally recognised as a pattern, “Yet it is estimated that less than 24% of domestic abuse crimes are reported to the police.” (Refuge, 2024).

Something so identifiable that our media and entertainment outlets utilise it. “From film to television to music videos, song lyrics, t-shirts and advertisements, violence against women is often portrayed as normal or erotic. Some critics say that such attitudes conveyed in the media can set the stage for actual violence against women,” (PBS, 2024). Normalising the presence of violence, ingrained into the culture of social interaction, of gender, of women.

“Just like in real life, the way domestic abuse is portrayed in movies and on television can vary greatly and includes abuse of every kind–physical, psychological, emotional, sexual.” (The retreat, 2022).

An example of the Social reproduction of inequality is gender based violence, a threat to agency and power. Women are taught to expect violence, “Women adapt their behaviours and carefully navigate public spaces, workplaces and, sometimes, also home environments, to minimise their chances of getting harmed. That robs them of vital opportunities and experiences that men can take for granted.” (Buitendijk, 2021). This social truth is reflected in the lives of every single woman. “Globally, 35% of women experience physical and/or sexual partner violence, or non-partner sexual violence, at least once in their lives.” Women are less likely to pursue areas typically dominated by men in society, creating a gender divide in all areas of society.

Male dominated careers and social expectations, “Just 8% of working women in Europe are in male-dominated industries.” (Catalyst, 2023). industries and occupations are arguably reinforcing harmful stereotypes that make it difficult for women to excel. For example women as predominant

caregivers in families yet industries commonly misrepresented and undervalued women through lack of access. “women are 14% less likely to be promoted than men.” (Gaskell, 2022). This glass ceiling women are forced to face within the workplace is merely a building within the world of barriers women face. In reference to domestic violence, “Across the globe, women working in male-dominated industries are more likely to experience sexual harassment than those working in other industries.” (Catalyst, 2023). Violence, gender inequality, and power imbalance is exercised within the workplace.

The social reproduction of inequality Is the workplace as an example of violence against women a staple of society recognising male dominance, this power over women. This highlights the vulnerable position of women in society as victims of gender typology that reproduces inequality through exercised gendered roles within and outside of the workplace. Limiting a woman’s ability to obtain higher wages, positions and opportunities limits their access and ability to identify and leave difficult situations such as domestic violence. “When you have no access to money and other economic resources, the barriers to escaping domestic abuse can seem insurmountable.” (Women's Aid, 2019). The economics of abuse is a prime example of the transition between power and control. Financial autonomy is vital in a victim of domestic abuse. The Power and Control Wheel created by the Domestic Abuse Intervention Project reflects this principle, presenting “a clear lens through which to examine domestic violence.” (Thehotline, 2024). How actions of control such as cohesion and isolation both physical and material are examples of power imbalance.



This is also reflected in the home, the heart of domestic violence. In 2010 a survey for visitGuernsey found “86% of the British public agreed with the statement ‘I would welcome a return to traditional British values’” (yougov, 2010). Family breakdown and growing divorce rates are often cited as symptoms of the loss of traditional values. This implies a return to lower divorce rates and women in the home thus supporting the nuclear family ideology. Changing demographics of British society are seen as a threat to the traditional values.

However this nostalgic view fails to recognise the historic misery of women locked into domestically violent relationships. “Harmful social norms that sustain GBV include women’s sexual purity, protecting family honor over women’s safety, and men’s authority to discipline women and children.” (Perrin & Marsh, 2019). These norms and values have been integrated within society from its foundation, a prime example being religious scripture, Eve was made from the rib of Adam as a response to Lilith being created in the likeness of man and Adam losing control. (Kadari, 2009). The imbalance of gender equality has been reflected in the history of mankind from its origins.

The Social Norms and Beliefs about GBV Scale Was a study took into account the cries and values of 603 men and women from the age of fifteen and up as reflection of three subscales, the “Response to Sexual Violence,” “Protecting Family Honor,” and a “Husband’s Right to Use Violence” within the domains of personal belief and social norms.

Whilst it is recognised this study cannot provide a full account of the complex nature of global inequality and gender dynamics it does however show an insight into the relationship between institutional networks, the impact of social norms, change and value and the role of social actors within a global narrative of inequality. “By triangulating its findings with GBV experiences and perpetration and assess its generalizability across diverse settings.” (Perrin & Marsh, 2019). This is supported by the concept of group differences and individuality. The study found particular geographical locations, specifically those identified to maintain religious influence, were “less willing to speak out against social norms that support husbands’ rights to use violence against their wives or norms that support not reporting sexual violence to protect family honor.” (Perrin & Marsh, 2019). The study also recognised the importance of interpreting findings based on “context, culture, and religion which inform social norms and personal beliefs.” (Perrin & Marsh, 2019). Although admit many of these factors as generalisable in the context of “Social Norms and Beliefs about GBV scale – the ability to interpret and apply the scale in a broader context to make it relevant and meaningful to GBV prevention programs being implemented and evaluated in diverse

low-resource and humanitarian settings.” (Perrin & Marsh, 2019). Which is to say there is an essence of globally relevant internalised norms in reference to women as victims of domestic violence; which as previously mentioned is reflected in a multitude of our media and history dating as far back as the bible.

“Violence against women has been accepted and even condoned throughout history.” (PBS, 2024). Regardless of the legislation implemented in the last 200 years, domestic violence is still a terrifying reality for many. (introduce) “In the 18th Century, English common law gave a man permission to discipline his wife and children with a stick or whip no wider than his thumb.” (PBS, 2024). For an issue that has been prevalent for over 200 years and not only reinforced but encouraged by institutions of its time, the first law against domestic violence did not occur until 1976 in The Domestic Violence and Matrimonial Proceedings Act (The center for women's justice, 2016). The institutions have not changed, power still remains in the hands of governing bodies that originally produced them.

This is not to say that change has not occurred, however there is an argument to be made for the individuals we as a society solicit power to “In the social world, power is a concept with two very different meanings--'power to' and 'power over.' . 'Power to' refers to the ability of a person to change the circumstances of his or her life by creating and exercising options. 'Power over' refers to the ability to limit the options of others.” (Abuse&Relationships, 2018). However historically women have been placed in a position of inequality based purely on gender for centuries. “Women have been denied the right to education, employment, and political participation based solely on their gender. For example, in the United States, women were not allowed to vote until 1920, and it was not until the 1960s and 1970s that women began to achieve greater social and economic equality.” (Oswald, 2023). How is a woman to obtain let alone maintain a position of power and control within society when they are not even blessed with the same opportunities of self empowerment as men?

Foucault believed that power is disindividualize, “it seems to be inherent in institutions rather than the people who work in them.” (Foucault, 1988). For example the education system and the ability to discipline people without the use violence. Violence is a form of oppression that reflects an exertion of control rather than actual power. “How is it that, in our societies, ‘the truth’ has been given this value, thus placing us absolutely under its thrall?” (Foucault, 1988). These social facts, such as recognising a teacher as an authority figure to their pupils or men as a dominant figure over women reinstate the individual's power and thus their control. A woman who has no financial freedom is not in a position to escape violence due to a lack of societal funding for these issues, “A lack of funding

across services proved to be a further challenge to those supplying domestic abuse support, with 44.2% of organisations reporting that they delivered services that should be provided by a statutory agency, under a public statutory duty.” (Womensaid, 2024). However there is an argument to be made for the lack of women in positions of influence for these shortcomings. “Only 30 women in the world serve as Head of State or Government. Women hold only 21% of the ministerial positions, and of all national parliamentarians, only 26% are women. According to UN Women, at the current rate, gender parity in national legislative bodies will not be achieved before 2063. While women make up half the world's population, they are still not represented at the highest levels.” (Gomez, 2023). The problem with these social ‘truths’ and recognised global knowledge as referred to by Foucault, is how social actors use them in practice. A woman will always be a victim within a society they cannot gain any standing within, the lack of accountability of institutions, access for women across all sectors including finance, education and health care are just a few examples of how inequality is reproduced by society. Foucault's primarily addresses the relationship between power and knowledge, how they are used as a form of social control through various institutions. Because social structures are largely valued over individual acts, Durkheim termed “social facts.” These social facts are attributable to the actions of individuals, the product of intentional action and power imbalance.

These are just a few examples of the barriers victims of domestic violence face in their attempts to avoid reoccurrence, obtain financial and physical security and escape their status as victims thus creating a cycle of victimhood. The perpetuation of victim status of women who experience domestic violence. “Individual perceptions of victims play an integral role in the societal response to domestic violence, as well as victims' responses to their own victimization.” (Policastro, 2013).

Becker coined Labeling theory as an approach as social deviance highlighting how agents of social control attach stigmatizing stereotypes to groups, which in response limit, adapt and maintain how those attributed with these labels behave. A social actor's investment in society/ the network of social relationships reinforces the significance of an individual's ability to identify and manage their position within society.

Women as victims of domestic violence are labeled as such by society therefore face a blockade of societal expectation and assumption. It is the social implications of the label ‘victim’ which presents the social reproduction of inequality. A branding of a woman's position in society, the implications of which not dissimilar to that of a physical scar holds a significant weight of pain, recovery and an overhanging presence of ownership. Women are being set out in society as cattle to slaughter, raised in confinement without the means of survival outside of the prescribed rules of their

environment, their rearing. Regardless of age, experience and individual identity, women are brought up in a society that pities victims yet supplied little means of support.

There will always be more victims as they're will always be more women.

The cycle continues, institutions survive and society functions.

In conclusion, the global community which accepts gender inequality at face value as a building block of society from its creation not only reinforces the repression of women and thus makes way for increased levels of domestic violence, but reproduces elements of social inequality that force women into staying in unsafe situations. The lack of access to women in the workplace to obtain higher paid positions directly impacts their ability to obtain financial stability and thus reduce the number of women in positions of power and control. Reinforcing the narrative of women as traditional figures and guardians of morality. Pure and vulnerable to the cohesion of men, men within the home, men within the power place and men within recognised positions of authority. All institutions govern a world in which women make up 50% of the population. Women are victims of domestic violence and global ignorance, inequality is reproduced by the lack of notable change within society from as far back as the creation of Adam. To mitigate change, one must first understand the role of women within a society that is largely dependent on male intervention due to male influence. Access to education, financial support and work opportunities are the founding principles for global change in regards to women as victims of domestic abuse however the narrative of victimhood will only change with a rise in gender neutral norms and values. The reproduction of inequality is simply maintenance of power and control.

~ Jasmine Williams

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