

**Introduction to Sociology – Final Paper**

Ombeline de Chauvigny

Collégial International Sainte-Anne

Introduction to Sociology

Professor Marcello Scarone

November 10th, 2023

Violence has always been a sensitive and well-researched topic. Sociologists have been interested in seeking and understanding what sociological factors could cause violence. Are social systems of power and hierarchy the reason for such violence? Do people kill others because of social rejection? Is violence learnt through your education or society? Is joining a gang correlated to the use of violence?

However, while violence as a whole has always been in the heart of mainstream sociology, domestic violence has not. It is not a new phenomenon and yet it still has not been studied in sociology. Domestic violence can be defined as a pattern of coercive behaviour exerting power and control in an intimate relationship through intimidating, threatening, harmful or harassing behaviour. (Camordy, 2006. Stark 2007. Brush, 2009). Furthermore, since sociology is the study of the society, its institutions, and its relationships between individuals one could wonder if domestic violence is helped by social institutions or caused by social norms. Domestic violence is more often than not experienced by women and enforced by their male partner. “Women the overwhelming majority of survivors and victims, and men the great majority of perpetrators.” (Hearn, 2014)

Domestic violence against women has been considered as a ‘global public health problem of epidemic proportions’ (WHO, 2013) and is therefore a highly relevant issue as it has not been resolved or talked about enough. Psychology has interested itself in the subject of domestic violence but the subject of the role of society in how it could affect this behaviour has not been researched.

Therefore, one could ask themselves what social characteristics, norms and values can explain domestic violence. This paper will focus on bringing awareness on the sociological factors explaining domestic violence and what sociological solutions can be brought forward.

1. Background and Context:

Domestic violence has always been present around the world, the word “feminicide” which means the illegal killing of a girl or woman (Cambridge Dictionnary) and which has lately taken on new meaning as reclaimed by the feminist movement and given the sense of killing females because of their sex, has been in dictionaries since the 1700’s. However, the action has not always been condemned. The same reasoning works for domestic violence, and since it has been around for a long time, it can be theorized that it has been around since the shift from pre-industrial societies to post-industrial societies as it created a more individualist society with the apparition of marriage, it is primordial to regulate the issue. (Hearn, 2014). Furthermore, it is not regulated by law to an appropriate extent, especially depending on the different countries.

However, one of the biggest issues with understanding domestic violence is the lack of naming and framing, what is or is not considered domestic violence is mainly up to the researcher to define. For example, the researcher needs to define what is violence first. Here it can be understood as “physical and threats thereof; sexual; emotional/verbal/psychological; economic/nutritional; reproductive/medical: social; spatial, temporal and representational” (Hanmer, 1996). Then they need to name what domestic violence is, and because of the lack of definition it takes on many names such as intimate partner violence (IPV), conjugal violence, partner violence, abusive relationships, coercive control, violence against wives, violence against know women and many others. This lack of cohesive definition makes it hard to understand, frame and tackle the issue.

Furthermore, historically, woman have been deprived of rights, they were not considered as human beings and even less as partaking citizens in society. This led to banalization of domestic violence as it was not punished by law or could be enforced and encouraged by societal norms. For example, the idea of masculinity is associated with being strong and dominant, therefore, when a men showed dominance (more often than not violently) over his wife or partner it was seen as normal as it fit the criteria and standard of the time. Over time the idea that the male has to keep in check his female has been shown to stem from misogyny and the mindsets are changing. However, the issue of domestic violence is still of big relevance today, efforts and changes have been made such as the criminalization of the action in the United States of America and other countries (Team, 2023) which shows an improvement although the situation is still critical.

The issue stems from many interrelated factors that range from sociological, psychological to cultural and will be discussed later.

2. Consequences and Impact:

Domestic violence is not a one impact action, while some might think it only affects the individuals (either the survivor or the perpetrator), it actually effects multiple levels in society, when ‘private troubles’ become public knowledge, there may be various consequences (Emerson & Messinger, 1977; Emerson, 2015). In reality, domestic violence affects individuals, communities, and the society.

The consequences on individuals are mostly psychological effects. For example, a survivor of domestic violence could present physical trauma going from small injuries to long lasting consequences and even death. They could also be victims of isolation, stunted personal development and emotional trauma. However, those psychological consequences have sociological repercussions. For example, emotional trauma actually affects up to four generations (Pigeon, 2023), what is called generational trauma, and therefore, the behaviour of the offspring of the abused woman in society and actions of society affects grandly their behaviour. Additionally, what the literature highlights is the extreme breadth in potential health effects due to domestic violence – encompassing physical, sexual and reproductive, and mental health, with potentially has large impacts on levels of women’s morbidity and mortality (WHO, 2013).

Moreover, there are sociological consequences on communities due to domestic violence. There is a breakdown of trust in the community when IPV occurs. Indeed, if the neighbours are aware of the abuse going on but do not intervene, it is a turning point for the victim that no longer has faith in their community. The community weakens and it could lead to its disappearance. Domestic violence also leads to higher criminal activity as it can lead to property damage and harassment. On top of that domestic violence leads to elevated healthcare costs. Furthermore, families and communities bear the burden of housing and caring for victims. (Skaperdas et al., 2009)

In addition, there are also many consequences on society such as the economic cost of dealing with domestic violence as Skaperdas et al., 2009 says, on the macro level, the costs of responding to domestic violence drains budgets for the health, justice, housing, and other sectors, and drags down overall growth and productivity. Furthermore, domestic violence is caused but also causes gender inequality which affects society as it creates what could be qualified as social classes. It creates an imbalance of power between males and females and impacts every sector of a woman’s life from professional to personal.

Domestic violence impacts every circle of life and society, and goes from psychological, physical effects to economic and societal ones.

3. Factors and Root Causes:

Domestic violence can be understood based on the historical point of view of how women were treated. As they were not considered as human beings, their bodies and lives were not their own and therefore their issues, such as experiencing violence because of their partner, did not matter.

Some root causes also include but are not limited to gender inequalities: financially, professionally, and socially. Indeed, as women are not equal to men they are not respected, represented, or heard and are more likely to be victims of domestic violence. Power dynamic or rather the imbalance of power between men and women is also one cause of domestic violence. Sociologists have been interested in wanting to know why there is a power imbalance and what contributes to it. Additionally, social norms, cultural norms and social institutions are factors that amplify the issue of domestic violence. These beliefs shape behaviour and create inequality between men and women leading to domestic violence. These beliefs are helped and shaped by social institutions (effectiveness of police officers, do victims speak up etc.), for example the legal system or the healthcare system are made by men for men and help domestic violence’s banalization. Violence against women function as a system.

The three paradigms of sociology can explain domestic violence as follow. For the conflict theory, Marx and Engels have recognized that the first societal oppression “coincides with that of the female sex by the male” (Engels, 1972), this means that regardless of their socio-economic background a women’s first experience of oppression is the one of the males. Furthermore, since Engels and Marx see potential violence in the division of class, they can also see a potentially violent relation to sexual/gender relations. (Hearn, 2014)

Domestic violence is explained by the separation of males and females that create a division of “classes”.

Functionalism is the sociological theory that explains society as parts functioning together. Functionalism because of its institutions that have predefined roles, contributes to the stereotype of male having to keep in check females and therefore could be seen as encouraging domestic violence. In a more extreme point of view, functionalism could see domestic violence as a mechanism of social change because if societal norms shift from accepting violence to refusing it, then instances of domestic violence will decrease to match up with the new expectations of the system.

With the symbolic interactionism theory, domestic violence can be helped by symbolic symbols and labelling theory. By giving meanings to objects or ideas, they are fixated in time and cannot change. When behaviors do not evolve, they are stuck in past beliefs and expectations of the society, therefore, it can lead to thinking a woman has to be cooking and cleaning for her husband while he is working and providing income. This means that when this equilibrium shifts since the expectations and beliefs do not, behaviours adapt to match up with the old beliefs and can lead to domestic violence. Plus, certain behaviours may carry symbolic meanings of control, submission, power etc. which lead to a normalization of domestic violence. The theory also highlights the importance of the social construction of reality and how societal norms and expectations contribute to the dynamics of abuse inside a relationship.

These three theories explain domestic violence based on their own understanding of society, and based on their definitions, solutions can be found.

4. Solutions and Interventions:

Domestic violence is an issue that needs all the attention it can get as it is crucial for a functioning society to exist to have all of its members be safe and therefore, able to participate and enrich society.

Findings solutions to fix this issue starts by the simple fact of acknowledging that there is an issue. Domestic violence needs to stop being normalized, banalized or even fetichized by society and by males. Indeed, the idea that there needs to be a dominant partner in a relationship and that this dominance is illustrated by violence is a myth that need to be deconstructed to move forward. Awareness needs to be raised on the issue, and more and more research needs to be done to understand the causes of domestic violence and how to resolve the problem.

Some more concrete solutions that can be easily installed are investing in more support services and shelters. It is crucial for women and men who denounce their abuser to be able to do so in the safest way possible, they must be accompanied and supported throughout their journey and investing in shelters and hotlines are perfect examples of “safe haven” that could be provided for the survivors. Communities need to be more involved in the denunciation of domestic violence which means there needs to have more community engagement. This could translate into posters calling for bystanders’ action, community support groups, collaboration with local enforcements etc. If we stop normalizing domestic violence, stop being passive when it happens and start reaching for the victims and denunciating abusers, the issue of domestic violence can be helped. Additionally, some resources that can help survivor are economics program, that would help survivors be independent with their money as opposed to being dependant on their abuser, getting help with job training and financial training would be huge steps forwards towards reducing domestic violence; free counselling and therapy to better re-integrate society and deal with the trauma for the survivors and to get to the root of their violence for the abusers; international cooperation and information sharing is also crucial to be able to tackle this issue with more of an intersectionality point of view (meaning being able to understand the difference of treatments in domestic violence received by victims because of their different realities).

Furthermore, the most important step to take is to be able to write comprehensive legislature and be able to enforce it properly. To do so it is crucial and absolutely necessary to frame and define domestic violence with exactitude, laws need to be clear and precise to be effective.

Conclusion:

When COVID-19 was declared a pandemic, each government, community, and individual saw the importance of the issue and were ready to make sacrifices to tackle the problem to be able to go back to a “normal” life. Solidarity and engagement were seen everywhere to help those in need. Domestic violence has been declared an epidemic by the World Health Organization and yet, instead of trying to resolve the issue, governments, communities, and individuals could be by their lack of action letting it turn into a pandemic. It is crucial to start taking the issue as seriously as it is and find solutions to put in place.

The causes and factors of domestic violence are numerous and on multiple level of society, it ranges from gender inequality and power imbalance to more theoretical factors with the three paradigms of sociology. Additionally, it is very important to understand that there are as many consequences as there are causes and that domestic violence impacts not only the individuals but society as a whole. In fact, there are many economic, legal, criminal consequences that impact how society functions. However, there is also an ocean of solutions which are offered, and it only takes one to start solving the issue. Solutions include a large range of support systems for the victims but also the abusers. The most important solution to put in place though is the need for a clear definition of what is domestic violence that can lead to precises laws and a good enforcement of those laws which will reduce incommensurably the problem.

It is necessary to stop wearing masks and pretend that the issue is not yours to tackle. You can and should do your part to help build a better society and future for the people of tomorrow.

Bibliography

Boethius, S., & Åkerström, M. (2020). Revealing hidden realities: Disclosing domestic abuse to informal others. *Nordic Journal of Criminology*, *21*(2), 186–202. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2578983x.2020.1787725>

*Femicide*. Cambridge Dictionary. (n.d.). https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/femicide

Gracia, E., & Merlo, J. (2016). Intimate partner violence against women and the Nordic paradox. *Social Science &amp; Medicine*, *157*, 27–30. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2016.03.040>

Hearn, J. (2014). Why domestic violence is a central issue for sociology and social theory: Tensions, paradoxes, and implications. *Gender a Výzkum / Gender and Research*, *15*(1), 16–28. <https://doi.org/10.13060/12130028.2014.15.1.98>

Skaperdas, S., Soares , R., Willman , A., & Miller , S. (2009). Valuing the impacts of domestic violence: a review by sector . In *The costs of violence* (pp. 63–79). essay, Conflict, Crime and Violence Team, Social Development Department, World Bank.

Team, B. E. (2023, October 17). *A history of domestic violence: Has anything changed?*. BetterHelp. https://www.betterhelp.com/advice/domestic-violence/a-history-of-domestic-violence-how-much-have-things-changed/

Walby, S., Towers, J., & Francis, B. (2014). Mainstreaming domestic and gender-based violence into sociology and the criminology of violence. *The Sociological Review*, *62*(2\_suppl), 187–214. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-954x.12198

World health Organization. (2013). Global and regional estimates of violence against women:

prevalence and health effects of intimate partner violence and non-partner sexual violence <https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/85239/9789241564625_eng.pdf?sequence=1>