

From Gender Violence to Gender Democracy: What Will It Take?

Chic Dabby

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Introduction

In the early days of my work in the domestic violence field, I was baffled when the Power and Control Wheel was juxtaposed next to the Equality Wheel. How, I wondered, were we to get from one to the other? Should we focus on batterer intervention programs? Should we teach men to change their behavior? Yes, but what else?

This restless question was answered in part by seeing the extraordinary range of activism and organizing in marginalized communities to address domestic violence. And, what proved equally illuminating, was understanding the analyses, agendas, and strategies of movements – especially the civil rights and women’s movements – and how they intentionally grew a politics of solidarity with other activists and causes.

Now, when we analyze domestic violence we go beyond identifying the quartet of physical, sexual, emotional and economic abuses; and especially in the wake of backlash claims about gender symmetry, we examine the trio of context, intention, and injury/harm. This, in fact, is exactly what movements have done. In minoritized communities, oppression was the historical context, it was the currency. The intention of the majority was to disenfranchise, preserve the patriarchal core of class, gender and race privilege. Injuries were inflicted with impunity – from letting dogs loose on black people to killing them; from withholding voting rights and not permitting inheritance transfers for women to prescribing the thickness of the stick they could be beaten with – the ‘rule of thumb.’

As our work expanded from domestic violence to address other forms of gender-based violence, such as trafficking or reproductive coercion or corrective rape, we have needed to recalibrate our analysis. Just like the GPS that monotones in slight desperation, “recalculating, recalculating.” And indeed, sometimes it feels like our analysis of gender-based violence is constantly being recalculated as new types of violence against women appear or as old ones acquire new levels of misogyny. Notice how high the volume has been turned up by patriarchy on just access to reproductive *health*, let alone to reproductive *rights*.

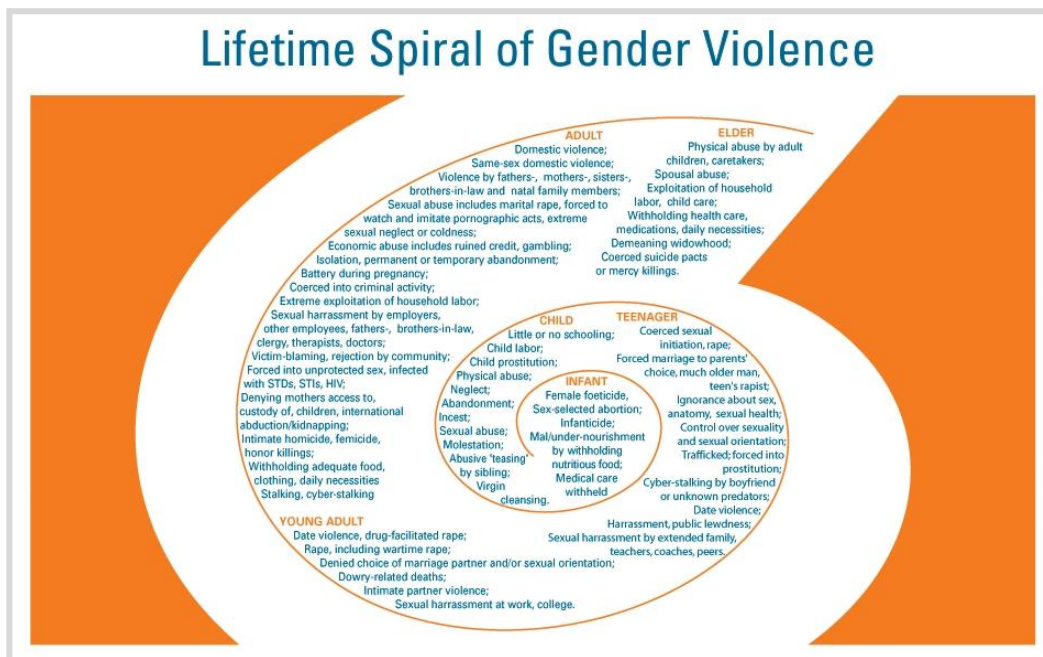
Examining gender-based violence therefore means taking into account contexts, intentions, and resulting injuries and harms: who did what to whom, for what purpose, and with what results. And violence is more than discrete incidents of physical abuse; but long-standing oppressive practices smuggled in as cultural traditions, the exercise of coercive control, sexual violence by familial and state actors, and the various types of abuses on the Lifetime Spiral of Gender Violence.

Gender Violence: The Most Extreme Expression of Gender Oppression

The presence of gender violence tells us about the presence of inequality; the extent of the violence tells us about the extent of the inequality.

- In a 10-country study, 15-71% of women reported physical, sexual, and emotional abuse by an intimate partner at some point in their lives.¹
- The world's five most dangerous countries in which to be born a woman are (in descending order): Afghanistan, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Pakistan, India, and Somalia.²
- In Cambodia, the forensic test necessary to bring a rape charge costs two weeks' wages.³
- In combat zones, it is now more dangerous to be a woman than to be a soldier.⁴

The Asian & Pacific Islander Institute on Domestic Violence developed the *Lifetime Spiral of Gender Violence* to illustrate that gender-based violence is universal and historical. It is not an unfortunate incident; not women's bad judgment, bad luck, or provocation; not about being in the wrong place at the wrong time; not a matter of abusers or rapists who inexplicably 'snap'. Violence against women occurs in the contexts of additional oppressions based on class, race, age, sexual orientation, disability, gender identity, and/or immigration and refugee status.



¹ World Health Organization. (2005) *WHO Multi-country Study on Women's Health and Domestic Violence against Women: Initial results on prevalence, health outcomes and women's responses*. Geneva, Switzerland: García-Moreno, C., Jansen, H. A.F.M., Ellsberg, M., Heise, L., & Watts, C.

² "The World's Five Most Dangerous Countries for Women." TrustLaw. Thomson Reuters Foundation, 15 Jun 2011. Web. The appearance of India, rapidly developing into an economic superpower was unexpected; but it is ranked as extremely hazardous due to levels of female infanticide and sex trafficking.

³ UN Women (2011) *Progress of the World's Women 2011-2012: In Pursuit of Justice*.

⁴ United Nations Security Council. (2008). *Security council demands immediate and complete halt to acts of sexual violence against civilians in conflict zones, unanimously adopting resolution 1820 (2008)* [Press release]. Retrieved from <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2008/sc9364.doc.htm>

In the *Lifetime Spiral of Gender Violence*:

- **Lifetime** emphasizes the reach into every life stage: infancy, childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and later life. Abuses can be confined to one stage in the lifecycle, continue into subsequent stages or repeat in different ones – they can become part of the developmental fabric of everyday life.
- **Spiral** emphasizes the vortex of gendered harms that can destroy or compromise well-being, a sense of self, relationships, mother-child bonds, bodily integrity, and physical, sexual and mental health.
- **Gender** emphasizes who gets harmed: that women and girls are overwhelmingly the targets of devaluation and victimization; that sexism, misogyny, and violence are linked; and that patriarchy, entitlement, and impunity are sanctioned.
- **Violence** emphasizes
 - The types and range of assaults, degradations, and deprivations perpetrated;
 - Victimization and vulnerability; and
 - The location of varying perpetrators across the lifespan: the withholding of an infant girl's nutrition and care by a grandmother; incest by an uncle in childhood; cyber-stalking by a boy friend in school; sexual harassment by a college coach or an employer; being denied or forced to disavow one's sexual orientation by homophobic parents; domestic violence by intimates; elder abuse by caregivers and adult children.

Thus, the spaces of growth, learning, love, desire, become dangerous.

Gender Inequality & Sexism

We cannot however rest at analyzing gender-based violence because sexism and misogyny are foundational to inequality, and far more pervasive. Violence is the most extreme expression of gender oppression, but cultures of patriarchy also rely on sexism. Patriarchy is about the social relations of power between men and women, women and women, and men and men. It is a system for maintaining class, race and/or gender privilege and the status quo of power. It is also used to patrol and enforce culturally prescribed gender roles.

As agents of change, analyzing sexism over the lifecourse allows us to confront its practices in our communities. Let me give two examples. Maintaining the tradition of men and boys eating first and getting served the best food, repeatedly confirms female devaluation and male entitlement. (Men do not even have to be concerned if female family members ate well or ate enough.)

What about batterers denying mothers access to or custody of their children?

What is the evidence of patriarchy and sexism here? First, patriarchy reinforces community norms that children belong to their father. Second, sexism gives permission to conclude that the mother must be unfit and the father is nobly stepping in. Third, standards for good fathering are set extremely low and standards for good mothering, very high – smoothing the way for fathers. Lastly, all too often in custody disputes the implicit assumption is that battering men still make good dads, but battered women do not make good mothers.

Equality for women is a work in progress everywhere, even in the global north.

- In 2011, the U.S. ranked 47th in gender equality among the world's 47 most developed nations;⁵ it ranked 68th globally on the wage gap between male and female full-time workers;⁶ it had the highest maternal death rate of any industrialized nation; and lagged behind 30 developed countries for mothers' well-being.
- In Latin America, there have been six *Presidentas*⁷ since 1990; but electing women does not necessarily signal progressive change. For example, while Laura Chinchilla promised to create a national daycare system, she opposed gay marriage and abortion. Furthermore, patriarchy still remains deeply entrenched. In a poll in 18 Latin American countries, 36% of respondents said women should stay in the home rather than work – same as did in 1997.⁸ Hostility to gays changed in that period but perceptions of women's roles had not evolved.

Gender Democracy

The term gender democracy evokes the many dynamic paths to gender equality and equity that civil society, cultures and individuals take. I first heard the term used by our Central Asian sisters in Tajikistan – they found it resonated better at the community level than the term gender equality. Gender democracy conveys strength, freshness, liberation.

Equality is critical to liberation, but equality is not a matter of catching up, or narrowing the gap towards an ideal. It is in fact a radical demand marked by fundamental shifts in the access to, and distribution of wealth, resources, and power. Is gender equality a radical or a fundamental demand?

From Gender Violence to Gender Democracy: What Will it Take? This question captures the urgency of articulating what works and why. Whilst the anti-domestic violence movement has successfully built resources and recourses for battered women, we have not stopped men's violence against women. What will it take to do that? Whilst we have developed post-violence responses, we need strategies for pre-violence societal change. What will it take to make gender democracy, not gender violence, normative?

What Will It Take?

1. Making Gender Central
 - Putting gender equality first, privileging gender over race;
 - Addressing sexism, misogyny, inequity, inequality;
 - Analyzing patriarchy, power;
 - Changing gender roles, expectations;
 - Redistributing power: building women's power, making women's autonomy central; and
 - Rewriting masculinity.

⁵ United Nations Development Programme. (2011). *Human Development Report 2011 - Sustainability and Equity: A Better Future for All*. New York, NY.

⁶ World Economic Forum. (2011). *The Global Gender Gap Report 2011*. Cologny/Geneva, Switzerland: Hausmann, R., Tyson, L., and Zahidi, S.

⁷ Violetta Chamorro, Nicaragua, 1990; Mireya Moscoso, Panama, 1999; Michelle Bachelet, Chile, 2006; Cristina Kirchner, Argentina, 2007; Laura Chinchilla, Costa Rica, 2010; Dilma Rousseff, Brazil, 2010.

⁸ Corporación Latinobarómetro. (2009). *Latinobarómetro Report 2009*. Santiago, Chile.

2. Making Equality Central
 - Investing in well-being to benefit everyone;
 - Investing in women and girls, not only in services for them;
 - Building economic equality, security;
 - Changing the basic conditions that disadvantage girls and women; and
 - Building women's power and self-reliance in new ways, in practical ways.

3. Confronting and Engaging Community, Culture
 - Welcoming community leaders who focus on preventing gender violence instead of preventing change;
 - Re-defining culture as a liberating, not restricting, force;
 - Confronting all forms of oppression, including homophobia; and
 - Making community the subject, not the object, of change.

4. Stopping Men's Violence
 - Addressing the range of male predation, coercive control and abuse by public and private actors;
 - Stopping family complicity: e.g. domestic violence by in-laws, early forced marriage by parents, honor-related abuses and crimes;
 - Teaching community leaders to support victims and survivors, to condemn victim-blaming, and to sanction abusers;
 - Taking away permission and impunity for abuse and undermining its societal reinforcements; and
 - Building systems that are gateways, not barriers, to services.

5. Building Movements of Solidarity
 - Clear analyses that can be well-understood;
 - Anticipating and planning for backlash, and being prepared to respond; and
 - Changing strategies for a changing world - identifying strategic, winnable goals.

6. Re-Designing Power to Ensure that:
 - Power is shared in egalitarian, dynamic ways;
 - Power is mutually given, agreed to, intentional; it is not assumed or seized
 - Power is negotiable, that equal power is not a 50-50 split but the ability to negotiate how it is divided;
 - Power can be trusted and will act in trustworthy ways; and
 - Power is accumulated in order to be distributed.

Finally, gender democracy will mean replacing relationships of power with relationships of meaning.