



Domestic Violence: Local Activities - International Issue

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Since violence against women in the family has been made public by the international women's movement beginning in the 1970ies in Western States and after 1989 also in Eastern Europe a rapidly growing number of institutions and networks emerged. There exists a growing number of networks on the level of the European Union, which supports the anti violence work and research on this topic.

About 30 years of research mainly in Western post-industrial societies show that in the analysis of violence towards women it is important to differentiate between culturally induced individual (or group) oppression by men and the way this is made possible by societal structures based on gender inequality. Therefore hierarchical family relations and personal behavior of men are one aspect to look at, the structural societal set-up the other. The extent of gender-specific violence can be interpreted as an extreme consequence of the hierarchical construction of gender relations, which seem to justify a personal and sexual subjugation of women and in the extreme even violence towards women. Without this structural component individual violence would not all together fade away, but would lose its societal and cultural back-up. Cross-cultural studies show the interconnection between a comparatively equal gender structure and little gender and generation violence and vice versa. The complexity of gender violence makes a theoretical position necessary which analyzes individual aggression (mostly male) and individual suffering from violence (mostly female) - often over many years - on the background of structural and cultural conditions including the multifaceted connections and breaks between these backgrounds and personal social practices.

1 Domestic Violence as a worldwide public issue

In the English language the proverb "my home is my castle" is very popular, meaning the private sphere is to be kept private and of nobodies business. The legitimacy of a private sphere is a historical achievement of bourgeois societies since it means safety from state surveillance. But because of the hierarchical gender structure it also grants unseen and at worst unlimited power to the dominant male gender: men being head of the household - legally or socially.

With the slogan "the private is political" the international women's movement started in the 1970ies to make public what happens to women in the private sphere. Women broke the societal convention "to keep in the family what is in the family", by making physical, psychic and sexual violence against women public. Thereby international women's movement not only made the public successfully aware of the fact of violence against women in the home but also achieved to make violence against women and girls an issue of human rights.

The Fourth United Nations World Conference on Women 1995 in Beijing states, that "violence against women is a manifestation of the historically unequal power relations between men and women" (United Nations 1996, 75) and defines violence against women as

“any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life” (Ibid, 73).

The European Union engaged in the issue by publicly denouncing violence against women and by taking various legal and financial actions. The governing body of the EU, the European Commission set up a program in aid of cross-national research and projects against women violence (Daphne). Thereby the EU funds projects such as

- WAVE (Women against Violence Europe) (<http://www.wave-network.org>), a European Information Center with an office in Vienna since 2001 and a network embracing about 2000 organizations (shelters and women’s help organizations)
- and starting in 2005 a special program for NGOs in the 10 new member states as “preparatory action to support civil society” (http://europa.eu.int/comm/justice_home/funding/support_ngo/funding_support_eu.htm, 12.8.2005).

The member states of the EU took various more or less far reaching actions against violence against women. For example the German government agreed on a “plan of action to fight against violence against women” in 1999 (BMFSFJ 1999) including prevention, laws, cooperation between state institutions and NGO’s, kick-off support of NGO networks, dealing with perpetrators, education of professionals, and international cooperation, all of which can be seen as a starting point in the right direction, foremost the new law, making it easier for victims of domestic violence to stay in the family home.

Also the European Counsel (1997) set up a group of experts on violence against women and organized conferences around the theme, reaffirming the position taken by the United Nations and applying it to Europe.

To sum up: Since the last decade in the 20.th century the international women’s movement succeeded in achieving international attention to the issue of domestic violence including some financial and legal support, which is an important step in the quest for human rights for women in the home.

2 Facts and Figures on Domestic Violence

About 25 years of research mainly in Western post-industrial societies show that the family and its environment are central places of male violence against women. According to summoned up research data of various states in the European Union, the USA and Canada about 10-25% of marriages/ partnerships are violent (depending on the definition of violence), out of these about 5% severely violent; that is to a very large extent violence of men towards women, in much fewer cases women are violent (very rarely the man will be visibly hurt) (Schröttle 1999). A differentiated picture of partner violence is shown by a representative Dutch study by René Römken (1997, 111). 5 % of the interviewed women spoke of mutual forms of violence, in 4% without injuries. 21% reported unilateral violence. This unilateral violence is differentiated by Römken in women exposed to “light forms” of violence (such as a box on the ear) 1-2 times a year in specific contexts which did not accelerate (15%) and “heavily” mistreated women, who suffered repeated violence such as “being beaten, kicked, hit with a fist, choked, hit with an object, and threatened or abused with a knife or gun”, leading to injuries which needed treatment (Ibid. 1997, 100). The violence accelerated, had

increasingly no specific context and included other forms of control and force, not rarely also sexual up to sadistic forms of violence, which caused in the women fear of the partner, that is fear to stay as well as fear to leave (6%).

This latter form of violence can be understood as part of the “cycle of violence”, analyzed by Lenore Walker (1984) when forms of increasingly severe violence together with intermittent friendliness lead to a state of “learned helplessness” in women, preventing them from taking action. But the late state of numbness some of these women fall into also needs to be seen as a mechanism for survival, since it is known, that the most dangerous stage for battered women is the time when they want to leave or have left the relationship. Remaining in a harmful situation has many reasons (such as feeling responsible for the family) and can be a result of the violence which leads to losing self esteem and can not be interpreted off hand as characteristic of the personal set-up of a woman.

In order to grasp different forms of violence - especially concerning sexuality - and the various stages of self-awareness in women’s lives Liz Kelly (1988) developed a “concept of a continuum of violence”. In her research on battered women in Great Britain she found that quite a number of women went through a process of understanding what had happened to them after they left the violent situation. They started reinterpreting their experiences looking for an appropriate language before they could name them as violence. Their experiences of not respecting their bodily, psychic and sexual integrity by their partner were so entangled in the cultural set-up, and not fitting public stereotypes of rape or of battering, that women regarded what happened to them for a time as fate or as normal. This shows that the definition of acts of transgression and violence especially in the private sphere, where intimacy is part of personal relationships, depends on cultural constructions and historical developments and always involves the question of who has powers of definition and naming and who not.

A good example of this construction of social reality is alcohol. The societal acceptance of not being responsible for your action while being drunk has an important role in playing down and excusing male violence towards women (Egger, R. et al. 1995). These excuses are often shared by the women as long as they want to or need to stay, making it for example possible to separate the violent drunken man from the nice sober man and caring father, picking up the cultural image of the man with two faces (Mr. Jekyll and Dr. Hyde). It is rather seen as a cultural duty of a women to keep her partner from drinking, a habit he can be freed from by selfless love of his wife. The other way round: a man keeps on drinking because his female partner does not care enough about him and the family. Christian religion plays an important part in this family ideal.

There are of course also other forms of domestic violence apart from partner violence which need to be taken into account, but have to be dealt with in their own contexts: violence against children, against disabled and elderly.

To sum up: violence against women in the home is internationally widely spread, takes on different forms and is culturally supported by traditional views on the role of men and women.

3 Theoretical understanding of Domestic violence

I would like to start with an example from Hesse, Germany to sum up my points so far and to lead to theoretical understanding:

A 55 year old civil servant in the justice system hits his wife with a big hammer, leaving her crippled and dependent on care for the rest of her life, because she wanted to separate from him after 34 Years of marriage martyrdom. The civil servant always had been dutifully correct with a high sense of duty and was seen as integrated. But according to the evidence given by the now grown up son, he had beaten his wife regularly. In public both partners kept up the image of a good marriage. A neighbor gave evidence that the couple always used to hold hands while taking a walk, what she found astonishing after so many years of marriage. The court sentenced the man for tried slaughter to only 7 ½ years imprisonment, because it took into account his alcoholism making him less responsible (Frankfurter Rundschau 20.12.1996).

The example shows that violence against women is not restricted to lower classes. It often remains hidden because women try to keep up normality as long as they don't see an alternative for themselves and their children. It also shows how dangerous leaving can be and that the legal system makes excuses for alcoholism. An other point is of great importance: the son was a witness of his parents violence while growing up, which shows that children always have to suffer from couple violence, either as witness or as victim (Kavemann 2000). These children often react with behavior disorders, physical or psychic problems and need special pedagogical or psychological professional treatment. This effect of domestic violence on the next generation has to be taken into account by legal and social work interventions: A man who is violent towards his female partner cannot be a good father as long as he does not stop his violence and is willing to confront himself with his former behavior and the ongoing harmful consequences for his children.

In the analysis of violence towards women and their children it is important to differentiate between culturally induced individual oppression by men and the way this is made possible by societal structures based on gender inequality (Brückner 2002). The latter leading to the phenomenon that many forms of male violence are not perceived as such, that perpetrators have little or nothing to fear and only very rarely feel guilty (Godenzi 1996). Therefore hierarchical family relations and personal behavior of men - and for that matter of women -are one aspect to look at, the structural societal set-up the other. Both dimensions need to be altered in order to ensure human rights for women "the human action-potential and objective structures" (Becker-Schmidt 1985, 94).

The vast extent of gender-specific violence can be interpreted as an extreme consequence of the hierarchical construction of gender relations, which seem to justify a personal and sexual subjugation of women and in the extreme even violence towards women. Carol Hagemann-White (1997) put it this way: The specificity of gender violence is, that the perpetrator acts upon his advantage as structurally stronger person. Without this structural component individual violence would not all together fade away, but would lose its societal and cultural back-up. Cross-cultural studies show the interconnection between a comparatively equal gender structure and little gender and generation violence and vice versa (Levinson 1988).

This finding is reaffirmed by a representative Swiss study (Gillioz et al. 1997) which shows that male violence corresponds with a marked demanding position and a strong conviction of male dominance including the idea of possession of one's wife, including her body and of having the right to control her actions. That means the majority of violent men is convinced of their legitimate right to subordination of women.

Since both partners play an active part in the setting up of the relationship („doing gender“), which also goes for the social praxis of the reproduction of a hierarchical structure, it is important to also look at the traditional image of women. The traditional female role stresses the responsibility for a happy family and a content husband, suggesting that it is her duty alone to produce their being content and asking from her to give up her own interests in order to serve others (Brückner 2000). This work of love in order to care for the husband (and the family) means becoming dependent, and at the same time making the other dependent on oneself. But since the relationship remains a hierarchical one in violent relationships the realization of his dependency can make a violent man even more aggressive (Godenzi 1996).

To sum up: The complexity of gender violence makes a theoretical position necessary which analyzes individual aggression (mostly by men) and individual enduring of violence (mostly by women) - often over many years - on the background of structural and cultural conditions including individual social practices of doing gender. Ending violence against women therefore needs a new, democratic based gender and generation concept.

4 Local activities concerning domestic violence

The activities of the international women's movement always had - beginning in the 1970ies - and still have a twofold approach (Brückner 2002):

1. political action such as demonstrations, meetings, information on the issue via the media and lobbying,
2. concrete projects to support women and their children such as shelters and counseling services.

Women's NGO's against violence against women in the family and in partnerships therefore have several focuses:

- At the **political level**, they create a space for women's issues in the public domain, and establish concrete places for women to turn to, thereby breaking taboos on domestic violence.
- At the **social level**, they offer help in social and personal crisis situations specific to women.
- At the **professional level**, they have opened up a new perspective on social care work and social care education, focusing on a non-hierarchical organizational structure, setting emancipation as a professional goal, and using methods based on equality, self-development, and women-oriented approaches.

For example in Germany there exist about 400 shelters (where about 45.000 women and their children turn to per year) and an even higher number of counseling services (Deutscher Bundestag 2001). Quite a few of these NGO's though have to worry increasingly about their financial situation, since most of them depend on state subsidies, granted on a yearly base.

The basic structure in women's shelters is quite unified (Brückner 1996): they do crisis intervention for new coming women and children, apply a system of continuous individual counseling (for financial, social and personal problems), have regular obligatory house assemblies (to clarify joint tasks and solve conflicts), and undertake child care for the resident

women and often work with individual children who have developed behavior or psychic problems because of witnessing violence or having become a victim themselves, more often through the father but not rarely also through their mothers. The central decision-making body in the shelter is the team of professionals (mainly social workers). This power structure reflects the development of shelters in many countries, as they are managed by the employees and not by the community of women, as was the original intention of the women's movement.

Most of the shelters and counseling services are part of regional, national and international networks, thus creating a better chance to fight for their issues and to challenge the hindrances. Christa Wichterich (2000) calls the ongoing process of networking by changing back and forth between local and global action "glocalisation". Looking at this process from a German perspective the first shelter was started in England in 1971, local groups of women in Germany picked up the idea and opened the first shelter in Berlin 1976, then the growing numbers of shelters in each of the districts (Länder) formed networks according to the federal structure of Germany. Later on national networks developed, which then joined the European network WAVE (Kortendiek 2001). These national and international networks depend on a strong local base, because otherwise solidarity and exchange of ideas lack implementation and they will turn into a bureaucratic apparatus – especially when they are state financed - and do not represent anything in real women's lives any longer. Networking according to Beate Kortendiek (2001) is a great chance but can also become a trap, for example when "best practice" models are imported without regard to local situations. Also the question of power, who defines what and why as best practice, has to be considered.

In a growing number of countries (for example all German speaking countries Austria (Fröschl 2003), Switzerland (Egger, Th. 2004), and Germany (Kavemann et al. 2000)) new frameworks to fight domestic violence developed after the issue has been taken up by politicians and by local authorities during the last decade at the center of which are:

- (1) New criminal and civil laws such as "go-orders" making violent persons leave (always around 90% men) and those enforcing the right of victims to stay in the home;
- (2) communal round tables and local coalitions against domestic violence (embracing many institutions and agencies involved in domestic violence, women's aid projects, men's projects working with perpetrators, Youth Services, police, attorney etc.), which so far often worked against each other or ignoring each other.

This development does not make shelters less important, because the number of women and their children seeking a safe place has not fallen. Rather more women can be reached through diversification: that is shelters for endangered women, pro-active counseling (actively asking women if they want counseling after police intervention), and a variety of other counseling services. Mostly the new policy of go-orders is successful, with the exception of very violent men, who remain a hazard for the woman and the children (Fröschl 2003). The vast majority of women reached by pro-active counseling reacts positive. Least developed so far is the dealing with perpetrators, since only a very small number faces trials or can be reached by men's counseling services.

This development of combined local action in the face of better laws, protecting the victims and prosecuting the perpetrators, started in the German speaking European countries in Austria, modeled after the first project of this kind, the Domestic Abuse Intervention Project (DAIP) found in the 1980ies in Duluth, Minnesota (USA) (Duluth Project Team 1994). The

greatest remaining shortcomings concern the situation of migrant women experiencing male violence because of their often precarious legal status and – at least in Germany - the situation of children witnessing or becoming victims of domestic violence because of insufficient numbers of socio-psychological support agencies and because of insufficient legal support concerning custody which encourages to make children part of the power play of the father against the mother. The rights of violent male partners often remain untouched, including visiting rights after separation often supported by social services. Apart from unsolved problems like these this new development is all together seen critically by some radical women activists, who fear that positions in favor of women get lost through main-stream cooperation, and that women NGO's loose ground.

To sum up: By opening up shelters local actions of the women's movement gave women and their children a safe place to flee to. These places remain important for women with safety and other support needs on short term basis. But since the goal of the women's movement always has been to make the home a safe place for women, policies have been successfully broadened. Perpetrators are to leave the home and the possibility for women to stay is strengthened via the legal system and new forms of local cooperation of all institutions and NGO's involved. This policy needs to make sure, that the support of the victims of domestic violence and their safety remains the central issue.

5 Conclusions

The complexity of the issue of domestic violence with the focus on violence against women and their children makes a multidimensional strategy necessary. The main goals of action are:

- Prevention: The societal condemnation of domestic violence against women and their children,
- Protection: Police and legal procedures to increase the safety for women in the public as well as in the private sphere; which needs to include making perpetrators responsible for their deeds;
- Provision: Establishment of supporting state and NGO agencies and projects granting professional help and counseling.

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