

Degendering of the  
problem but a  
gendering of the  
blame: domestic  
abuse and rape



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In the world of today, there is increasing pressure from the feminist side that there should be gender equality. The targets of gender equality are generally as follows: women's rights as human rights, equal participation in political and public life; the economic independence, the empowerment of girls and boys through the education systems; and removing imbalances in society.

For this purpose, many legal issues are seen through degendering.

Degendering is the reorganizing, improvising, development and evaluation of policy processes, so that a gender equality perspective is incorporated in all policies at all levels and at all stages, by the actors normally involved in policy-making.

While this may seem as a sound policy making base, when it comes to discussion of issues such as domestic violence and rape, such degendering of the problem renders justice impossible to obtain, for women are often the victims and males are often the batterers and rapists. Statistics and studies can prove this gender imbalance that exists in the context of these issues. Hence, degendering of problems such as domestic violence and rape prevents the genderization of the blame and consequently pushes women into the background.

Degendering of the problem of domestic violence and gendering of the blame:

According to an article by Nancy Berns, " political discourse on domestic violence obscures men's violence while placing the burden of responsibility on women". When men are discussed as the batterers in the issue of domestic violence, there is a resistance from men. Two main strategies are

used to push the responsibility of domestic violence on women: first, degendering the problem and then, gendering the blame. Nancy Berns calls this resistance as patriarchal resistance which opposes “ a feminist construction of the problem”. The arguments that favor the men’s viewpoint are based on “ normalization of intimate violence, cultural and structural factors that foster domestic violence and the distortion of women’s violence”.

Normalization of intimate violence:

According to the U. S. department of Justice’s Bureau of Justice Statistics (2001) National Crime Victimization Survey results indicated that, during the period of 1993-1998, over 50% of violent crimes involved intimate partners or family members (Jackson et al, 2001). Male perpetrators of domestic violence attempt to achieve a view which accommodates their violence. Male violence against women is referred to in different ways in different countries. In UK and USA it is often called ‘ battering’, ‘ woman battering’, ‘ wife abuse’ or ‘ marital rape’ ( Bograd 1988, 1990; Gary 1991; McKay 1994). However, it is commonly referred to as domestic abuse or domestic violence (Grew 1991; Premier’s Department 1991). Terms such as family violence and ‘ spouse abuse’ are also being used to refer to male violence against women.

According to Barnardoss Staff in his research paper titled “ Domestic Violence – Criminal Assault in the Home” using terms such as domestic, spouse or family has the effect of degendering the issue of domestic violence (Staff, 2006). They obscure the fact that such violence is usually perpetrated by the males in the family. When the issue is degendered, violence is

interpreted as an outcome of an interpersonal conflict and solutions are often aimed at reducing conflicts. This degendering approach assumes there is gender equality in the relationship.

But the following statistics tell a different story:

- On average, more than three women are murdered by their husbands or boyfriends in this country every day. In 2000, 1, 247 women were killed by an intimate partner. The same year, 440 men were killed by an intimate partner. Women are much more likely than men to be killed by an intimate partner (FVPPF, 2006).
- In 2000, intimate partner homicides accounted for 33. 5 percent of the murders of women and less than four percent of the murders of men (FVPPF, 2006).
- Evidence exists that a significant proportion of all female homicide victims are killed by their intimate partners (FVPPF, 2006).
- 1 to three million women are physically abused by their husband or boyfriend per year (FVPPF, 2006).

According to 2005-2007 statistics, 73% of Domestic violence victims are female; 58% of family murder victims are female; 83% of spouse murderers are male; 1200 women are killed by intimate partners every year; 37% of all women treated in emergency wards are victims of domestic abuse; 31% of all women homicide victims slain in the U. S. have been killed by their intimate partners; Domestic violence is the number one cause of

homelessness in 44% of the cities surveyed. Based on these statistics, one <https://assignbuster.com/degendering-of-the-problem-but-a-gendering-of-the-blame-domestic-abuse-and-rape/>

can easily see that degendering the problem of domestic violence will only prevent formulating effective solutions (Mother Jones, 2005).

Cultural and Structural factors foster domestic violence:

Domestic violence can be seen as a form of control behavior exhibited by men to control the behavior of their female partners. According to the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, December 1993: " Violence against women is a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women, which have led to domination over and discrimination against women by men and to the prevention of the full advancement of women..." The same report point out that domestic violence is mostly perpetrated by males who are intimate and in a position of trust such as husbands, boyfriends, fathers, fathers-in-law, stepfathers, brothers, uncles, sons, or other relatives (UNICEF, 2000).

Hopkins and McGregor (1991: 67) argue That domestic violence is not due to interpersonal conflicts but rather it ' is a manifestation of patriarchal values of male supremacy, involving factors such as ownership of property, power and control, female subordination and the institutions of marriage and the family' (Staff, 2006) Cultural factors also contribute towards getting the woman into a cycle of abuse.

Even when she is still in the womb of her mother, a girl child faces the threat of sex-selective abortion in cultures where a son is preferred (UNICEF, 2000).

During childhood, girls are exposed to child abuse, malnutrition and lack of access to medical care and education and other kinds of discrimination

based on gender. Issues such as domestic violence are often manifestations  
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of historically unequal power relations between man and woman (UNICEF, 2000).

According to the UNICEF report, “ factors that contribute to gender differences include: socioeconomic forces, the family institution where power relations are enforced, fear of and control over female sexuality, belief in the inherent superiority of males, and legislation and cultural sanctions that have traditionally denied women and children an independent legal and social status”. Sometimes, in more developed countries, a reverse of this argument also holds true. A woman’s increasing financial independence is often viewed as a threat that leads to increased male violence.

This is more so when the male partner has no job and feels powerless at home. Moreover, cultural ideologies in the form of religion and tradition have often legalized chastising and beating of wives. The fact that males control the family finances often give them the decision making powers, leading to male dominance at home. Tradition has permitted killing of errant daughters and wives in the name of preserving family honor. Alcohol consumption by men and isolation of women in their families are also some of the other factors that contribute towards increased domestic violence. Thus we find that cultural and structural factors also work towards degendering the issue of domestic violence.

Distortion of women’s violence:

Father’s rights groups in Australia have complained that women often indulge in false accusations of domestic violence, in order to gain a tactical advantage in issues such as child custody and property settlements and also <https://assignbuster.com/degendering-of-the-problem-but-a-gendering-of-the-blame-domestic-abuse-and-rape/>

to take pleasure in making men suffer (MRA, 1998). Critics of a feminist-centered approach to domestic violence say that men are also sometimes victimized by women. Straus and Gelles have found through their study that female contribution in domestic violence is as much prevalent as that of the male (Staff, 2006).

However, Berns points out “ no matter how much violence there is or who initiates the violence, women are as much as 10 times more likely than men to be injured in acts of domestic violence” (Berns, 2001, p. 267). “ Arguing that men and women are equally violent is the most significant and frequent strategy used for degendering the problem,” argues sociologist Nancy Berns. As a result of degendering the problem of domestic violence, the female victim is projected as the person responsible for the abuse. Due to degendering, the female victim is encouraged to become more confident and be empowered to end the abuse. Thus along with degendering the problem, the blame is also gendered.

Numerous psychological theories help in gendering the blame:

- The psychological position correlates domestic violence with the personality traits of individual men and women. Men who are violent against women are viewed as having some abnormal psyche (Orr, 1991), whereas the women who are being abused are seen as masochistic or depressed (Horsfall 1991). This psychological approach shifts the focus of responsibility for domestic violence from the perpetrator to a ‘ personality defect’ of either the abuser or the abused. In this case, more often than not, women are often seen to provoke the violence by either their action or inaction; an example of this

would be a woman not having her partner's food on the table when he arrives home (Maynard, 1993).

- In the 1960s and 1970s various sociological approaches emerged and one of these was based on the learning theory that held gender differences were often learned outcomes due to socialization. They acquired values and behavior patterns that are gender specific from their experiences. This approach also helped in degendering the issue of domestic violence. Lenore Walker's theory (1979) tried to explain that the helplessness and weakness of women in the face of domestic violence was mostly learned. However, Connell (1987) points out that this approach does not include the dimension of power in gender relations. It thus avoids the issue of male domination that is developed through institutional arrangements that keep the women entrapped in domestically abusive circumstances. It also genders the blame and holds the woman responsible for the abuse due to her learned behavior.

- The response of a woman towards domestic violence also sometimes degenders the problems and genders the blame. Women who are abused often lose their self esteem and they begin to believe that they cannot survive without their male partner. As they are repeatedly accused by their male partners, they begin to believe that they are responsible for the violence. Women often do not protest against domestic violence mainly because they hope that things might change and they say because they 'love' him. Some women consider marriage a sacred commitment that they cannot break and are also concerned that children need their father for their all round growth. Many women are financially dependent on their spouses.

Some women are not aware of their rights and many choose to live in the <https://assignbuster.com/degendering-of-the-problem-but-a-gendering-of-the-blame-domestic-abuse-and-rape/>



domestic abuse scenario due to fear of society. Whatever be the reason, when a woman decides to accept the abuse and stay with the abuser, then, there is silent support for degendering the problem and gendering the issue.

Degendering of the problem and gendering the blame - in the case of rape:

Rape is a crime of concern in the United States. recent report from the Johns Hopkins School of Public Health and Gender Equity reveals that worldwide “ at least one woman in every three has been beaten, coerced into sex, or otherwise abused in her lifetime” (CALCASA, 2001). In 2005, there were 191, 670 victims of rape, attempted rape or sexual assaults according to the 2005 National Crime Victimization Survey. Of the average annual 200, 780 victims in 2004-2005, about 64, 080 were victims of completed rape, 51, 500 were victims of attempted rape, and 85, 210 were victims of sexual assault.

Historically, rape has existed since ancient times and there has always been a shroud of secrecy draped over it mainly because, rape and other forms of sexual violence have been commonly accepted throughout civilization. Rape and sexual violence have been traditionally accepted by male dominated societies due to conventional attitudes regarding gender, sex and proper interpersonal relationships.

In the early 20th century, sexual violence in America had been explained as a result of environmental stress, poor education and mental incompetency. Rape was something men just did, especially under special circumstances like war. During the 1940s and 1950s, rape was frequently dismissed by assigning a mental disorder to the victim (CALCASA, 2001). Sexual assault was not considered a social problem until the 1970s. The demand for

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women's rights supported the rights of sexually assaulted victims as well and wanted to hold the perpetrators of the crime accountable. It was very difficult to get the public to recognize that there was a problem and it was difficult to get the rape victims to talk. Thus we find that historically, rape was degendered and the blame was mostly gendered on the woman. There were also many myths regarding the issue of rape.

- Rape was generally done by strangers and was due to uncontrollable sexual urges.
- Rape only happened to women who were "asking for it" by their conduct or provocative dress.
- Rape occurred only infrequently.

All the above myths help in degendering the issue of rape that is by definition gendered.

Until the 1980s, rape cases were not reported to legal authorities mainly because women felt ashamed to let other people know that they were rape victims. This was due to personal and societal barriers. Moreover, during the 1970s, women who reported rape were often re-victimized by court proceedings (CALCASA, 2001). Established rape laws required a victim to produce three kinds of proof in order to obtain a sexual assault conviction: corroborating evidence, the fact that she had resisted her attacker, and proof of her past sexual innocence. Here the law seems to indirectly gender the blame on the woman. It assumes that if the woman had not resisted her

attacker or if she has had a history of sexual misconduct, there is no way that raping such a woman would be a crime.

However, major changes took place with the publication of Susan Brownmiller's "Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape" in 1975.

Brownmiller moved the nation through her arguments. She pointed out that rape was the only violent crime that required victims to resist. She defined rape as follows: "Rape is not a crime of irrational, impulsive, uncontrollable lust, but is a deliberate, hostile, violent act of degradation and possession on the part of the would-be conqueror, designed to intimidate and inspire fear."

16 So far, rape laws had safeguarded the rights of the accused, and now, it had to safeguard the rights of the victim as well. Given that over 99% of rapes happen to women, where the perpetrators are men, rape falls under the category of "violence against women" and "crimes against women".

The argument that men can be raped too falls flat due to the fact that men who are raped are most often raped by other men.