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Violence Against Men in Intimate Relationships

It is a common assumption that men are only exposed to violence in the public space, while women are exposed to violence in intimate relationships. We regularly read about “mindless” or “gratuitous” violence, in which men are both the victims and the perpetrators. Such violence generally takes place in public spaces. In the last few decades we have become increasingly aware of the violence inflicted on women and children behind closed doors, in our homes. It is the violence that takes place within intimate relationships which has been the main subject of research in Norway and internationally—which in a host of countries has, in part, prompted the provision of help and intervention.

Recent research in Norway, based on various quantitative studies in which both women and men have been asked the same questions, has led to an increasing focus on violence in families and other intimate relationships which also affects a large number of men (Pape and Stefansen 2004; Haaland et al. 2005; Sogn and Hjemdal 2009; Thoresen and Hjemdal 2014). Despite this, violence towards men in intimate relationships is a relatively unexplored field in the Nordic context. In particular, research is severely lacking on the experiences of men who are the victims of violence in intimate relationships, and the help they might need. This book
aims, in some small way, to fill this gap in our knowledge. In international research there are few narrative studies on male victims of partner violence (Allen-Collinson 2009a, b; Corbally 2015).

There has been some conflict in international research (and international debate around domestic violence) between those who claim gender symmetry—that violence is more or less equally distributed between women and men—and those who believe that domestic violence is almost wholly a question of men’s violence against women (Archer 2002; Kimmel 2002; Dobash and Dobash 2004). Much of this discussion is based on statistical analysis of domestic violence. We do not aim, therefore, to engage in this debate directly, since our analysis is a more phenomenological analysis of men’s experiences of being subjected to violence and their help-seeking.

Aims and Objectives

This book is divided into three sections: a summary of prevalence studies; a survey; and qualitative research interviews. The latter sub-study comprises the main body of this book and includes three separate interview studies.

This book has two overarching objectives. First, we want to give men themselves the greatest space possible to tell their stories. Many people will find it improbable, or hard to understand, that a man might be subjected to systematic and serious violence from a female partner. The idea that a woman may be the aggressor, rather than the caregiver, can be counter-intuitive and stands in opposition to social norms of femininity (Richardson 2005). This book takes as its point of departure that violence and gender must be empirically investigated rather than assumed in studies of violence. It has therefore been important for us to offer quite detailed descriptions of events and experiences of violence, not because the experiences of violence inflicted on men differ enormously from those of women who are similarly exposed, but because we are generally unused to this switch in gender. Secondly, we will investigate the new empirical evidence about violence against men in intimate relationships, and look at ways in which this can bring greater nuance and a wider understanding to the more established theories of violence in intimate relationships.

The questions that form the basis of this study are as follows:
• What do prevalence studies from the Nordic countries tell us about the vulnerability of men, the characteristics of the violence, the relationships in which violence takes place, its consequences and the help available?
• How do men experience being subjected to violence in intimate relationships?
• What kinds of help do these men require?
• Of those men who have sought and received help, what are their experiences?
• Is there public awareness of the help available to men?
• Can new empirical research about men bring a more nuanced and wider understanding to the more established theories of violence in intimate relationships?

The project comprises three sub-studies that aim to address these questions. The first of these is a literature study of Nordic prevalence studies of violence against men in intimate relationships.

The second consists of a questionnaire about awareness among the Norwegian public about the help that is available, including crisis centres, family protection offices and centres against incest and sexual assault, and the level of awareness that these are (also) available to men. The questionnaire further includes a survey of whether the male respondents who had been subject to violence in intimate relationships had sought help, and, if not, why this was the case.

It is important to note that services offered in Norway for men experiencing violence in intimate relationships are relatively unusual. There are 19 centres for victims of incest which have, since their inception in the 1970s, treated both men and women who have experienced sexual abuse within or outside the family. There are also 40 crisis centres, which were originally traditional crisis centres for women, similar to those in various other countries, but which opened their doors to men in 2010. In 2010 the government introduced a new a gender-neutral law in relation to crisis centres, making it mandatory for local councils to offer services to men and women on an equal basis. Since then, the proportion of men at crisis centres has steadily increased.
In the third sub-study we interviewed 28 male victims about their experiences of violence within intimate relationships. Here our focus is on the kinds of relationship in which violence takes place and the consequences of that violence on these men, both now and in the past. We also investigate the experiences of men who have received help. In particular, we have been concerned with the experiences they have with the family protection service, crisis centres and centres against incest and sexual assault.

Based on the information gathered from these three sub-studies, we discuss how a greater understanding of violence against men in intimate relationships can help challenge and further develop established theories of violence in intimate relationships. Finally, we offer recommendations for possible improvements to existing services offered to men exposed to violence in intimate relationships, including sexual abuse.

What Is Violence in Intimate Relationships?

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines violence as “the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation.” The use of physical force or power also includes neglect and all forms of physical, sexual and psychological abuse (Krug 2002, p. 5). The Norwegian therapist and scholar Per Isdal’s definition goes further in defining the effects of violence on the victim: “Violence is any act directed at another person which causes injury, pain, fear or humiliation, thereby causing the other person to do something against their will, or to refrain from doing something they want” (Isdal 2000, p. 18).

The most concrete way to identify a violent act is to define various forms of violence. Isdal (2000) suggests that the following forms of violence are the most relevant when researching violence in intimate relationships:
• Sexual violence: all violence that involves sexual acts or sexual approaches (sexual harassment/violation, abuse, rape).
• Physical violence: violence involving physical contact (kicking, hitting, pulling, biting, etc.).
• Psychological violence: verbal or similar violence that frightens and harms others (threats, humiliation, controlling others, isolating others, etc.).
• Latent violence: violence that works by virtue of its possibility. Having experienced violence means that one knows that can happen again. Violence is then present by virtue of its possibility, and it controls others through mood/temper, tone of voice, how a door is opened, the way someone leaves, etc. The risk of further violence can control everything the victim does without any actively aggressive behaviour.
• Material violence: violence against inanimate objects (breaking objects, destroying things that matter to others, etc.).
• Economic violence: control of another person’s financial resources or economy.

In this book we have chosen to capture a wide spectrum of men’s experiences of violence, in which all of the above-mentioned elements are included. Most books on violence in intimate relationships do not discuss sexual abuse. We have however chosen to include this, and have interviewed men about their experiences both as children and as adults. This is because sexual violence against men is under-communicated, these men are often subject to multiple victimisation, and we wanted to throw light on the need of these men for help. Most sexual abuse of men is perpetrated by members of their families or others who are close, often in relationships of trust (see Chap. 6). We have additionally included and looked at the threat of being denied contact with their own children/sabotage of that contact, as well as pressure and coercion from families, including honour-related violence.

In this book, violence in intimate relationships is understood to mean violence or threats of violence within couples, families, including the wider family, friendships and other relationships of trust or dependence.
Both Nordic and international studies on violence in intimate relationships have generally focused on the violence of men against women and children within the family. Over the years a number of different terms have been used when referring to this violence in these studies: wife abuse, wife battering, family violence, domestic violence, gender-based abuse, intimate partner violence (Dobash and Dobash 2015).

Theories in this field have been largely based on the findings of clinical and epidemiological studies of women and children who have been abused, as well as population studies on partner violence. The most groundbreaking theory of violence in intimate relationships since the 1990s is to be found in sociologist Michael P. Johnson’s empirically based typologies of intimate terrorism and situational violence (Johnson 1995, 2008). Johnson defines intimate terrorism as a partner’s use of serious physical and/or sexual violence combined with various control strategies that either directly or indirectly aim to dominate the partner. Such control strategies may include the use of emotional abuse, isolation, threats, humiliation, harassment and influencing the children to turn against the partner (Johnson and Leone 2005). Intimate terrorism and situational violence are concepts that are also used in today’s research to identify and classify violent acts and patterns of violence, and have been central in the design of questionnaires in both international and Nordic prevalence studies of violence in intimate relationships. The three most recent Norwegian studies into violence have utilised Johnson’s typologies in designing questionnaires to identify various patterns of violent behaviour in partner violence (Thoresen and Hjemdal 2014; Haaland et al. 2005; Pape and Stefansen 2004).

Johnson’s typologies are also dominant in international research in the field. Advocates of both the gender symmetry perspective (Archer 2002; Straus 2011) and the more traditional feminist perspective on men’s violence against women (Kimmel 2002; Dobash and Dobash 2004, 2015) take Johnson’s concepts as a starting point for their discussions.

Implicit in Johnson’s perspective on intimate terrorism is a theory of gender power based on the idea that men as a group dominate women as a group, and that serious systematic physical violence and control are
motivated by a desire for dominance and oppression. The socially defined gender roles lead to victimisation of women. Johnson (2006, 2011) claims that it is generally men who perpetrate this form of partner violence and that the motivation is linked to men’s need to dominate women.

Australian researchers Sarah Wendt and Lana Zannettino discuss this in their book *Domestic Violence in Miscellaneous Contexts*, pointing out that Johnson asserts that “almost all” those perpetrators who feel the need to control their partners are men:

The indication “almost all” is used here to acknowledge that this type of violence has been identified in lesbian relationships and that some women terrorise their male partner but, as Johnson (2011) has argued and distinguished over time, the primary perpetrators in heterosexual couples are men, and gender plays an important role. (Wendt and Zannettino 2015, p. 3)

Wendt and Zannettino use Johnson to assert that there are grounds to focus on male perpetrators and female victims. And their book does in fact deal with female victims. Over the last ten years, however, there has been a growing recognition that men can also be subjected to serious and systematic violence, from both women and men. Norwegian and international prevalence studies have included different forms of control strategies based on Johnson’s typologies, and used them in various ways to distinguish those individuals who are subjected to extensive control combined with severe physical and sexual violence (intimate terrorism) from other victims of violence.

Despite Johnson arguing in his later work that some women perpetrate violence that can be defined as intimate terrorism, he continues to claim that the vast majority of “intimate terrorists” are men: “intimate terrorism is perpetrated almost exclusively by men”. Johnson has therefore focused on male perpetrators in his work.

With respect to implications for the question of gender symmetry, these types of domestic violence differ dramatically. In heterosexual relationships, intimate terrorism is perpetrated almost exclusively by men, whereas violent resistance is found almost exclusively among women. The other two types are gender symmetric. (Johnson 2006, p. 1003)
Several researchers have attempted to criticise Johnson’s typologies and his emphasis on men’s violence against women, and have made increasing efforts to establish that there is far more symmetry between men and women in both situational violence and intimate terrorism than he claims (Morgan and Wells 2016; Dutton 2011; Straus 2011; Hines and Douglas 2010a, b). Straus, for example, works within another theoretical paradigm, claiming that the use of violence must be seen in the light of earlier experiences of violence through which perpetrators have learned to accept violence in childhood, either as victims or as witnesses to violence, and that this can explain the gender symmetry which is found in prevalence studies (Straus 2011). Other, more individualising theories, such as social learning theory, have influenced programmes for perpetrators of violence with the aim of teaching perpetrators new non-violent strategies for dealing with family conflict (see Scott 2004). Dutton (2012) argues from the perspective of personality and that the role of early attachments and past childhood experiences can make some people more prone to partner violence than others (see also Follingstad et al. 2002).

Another form of violence that Johnson identifies, which is the most common form in intimate relationships, is situational couple violence. This form of partner violence is not linked with a general pattern of (or desire for) general control and dominance; rather, these episodes of violence are a result of a situational conflict that may be triggered by everyday stress or discussion escalating into violence (Johnson and Leone 2005, p. 323). Such violence is termed milder and is believed to have less serious consequences for the individual than the violence defined as intimate terrorism. Relationships between those couples affected by this are assumed to be more equal, and both parties can exercise violence. Despite this episodic and situational violence being “mild” or less detrimental, this does not mean that it is altogether harmless, nor that it cannot lead to fatal consequences (Johnson and Leone 2005). If a relationship is dominated by conflict and such violence occurs frequently, this may cause one or both parties to suffer mental and physical injury (Johnson 2008, p. 63).

Central to Johnson’s thinking is that situational partner violence and intimacy terrorism follow different patterns. In his later work, Johnson introduced the concepts of mutual violent control and violent resistance (Johnson and Ferraro 2000; Johnson 2008). Violent resistance denotes physical violence that is exercised when the victim of intimate terrorism
uses physical violence in situations as a form of self-defence. This is violence exercised in specific situations such as a violent response or counter-reaction to a partner’s ongoing violence, dominance and control (Johnson 2008). We find that neither mutual violence nor violent resistance is particularly relevant to our material. On the contrary, the men we have interviewed tell us that they are proud of not having reacted to violence with violence. In some situations, the men held the women back, grasped them or even laid them on the ground to avoid being exposed to violence themselves. In such instances, men use their physical superiority to defend themselves, but this could not be seen as violent resistance.

We wish to point out that we find Johnson’s perspective too narrow, and that it hinders both research on female perpetrators and any general understanding and acceptance that male victims in heterosexual relationships exist. Our research is thus a contribution to the understanding of the intimate terrorism to which men are exposed.

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