

Gender & Diversities Institute
&
Centro de Investigación en Estudios de la Mujer
Universidad de Costa Rica

National Identity: A Cultural Framework for Examining Gender-based Violence in the United States

Katherine Hanson
Gender & Diversities Institute at EDC
Newton, MA, USA

Gendered violence is not a new phenomenon. Myths, historic documents, plays, religious texts, news clippings, hushed conversations, and family stories all provide examples of violence directed at females, at gays and lesbians, and at both males and females who do not “fit” with the prevailing cultural assumptions about appropriate gender roles. Historically, gendered violence was often portrayed as “ordinary” or it was simply overlooked. Seen as a part of the norm rather than as a “dis-ease” within a society, this powerful dynamic both limited and damaged women and girls and functioned in the “out of consciousness” realm, maintaining the status quo structure of male dominance within many families and societies.

Whether it was a commonly accepted assumption that fathers/husbands owned their children/wives and could beat them as needed, the legal statute that prevented men from beating their wives with anything larger than the thickness of their thumb, or the more recent lyrics of popular music, the message is clear: women are appropriate targets of emotional and physical violence.

What is new is the global level of awareness of gendered violence, leading to interventions and prevention laws, policies, and practices. While the entire world seems poised to mobilize to end gendered violence, cultural and personal perspectives, vocabulary, and responses differ among different cultures, countries, societies, and communities. Many of these differences reflect the underlying sociocultural myths and paradigms of a country or community. Thus, responses to the same situation—a woman beaten by her male partner or an adolescent girl punched by her boyfriend—may look very different within different contexts. Exploring some of the socio-cultural assumptions that underpin a society's response to gendered violence can help build understanding and collaboration across countries or across communities.

Within the United States perspectives and responses tend to reflect a number of cultural assumptions that are grounded in the evolution of this nation. These aspects of our U.S. mainstream culture include individualism, racism and sexism, fairness, and civil rights. These should be understood as generalizations about the larger mainstream culture,

recognizing that there are variations and differences within the various sectors of society. These generalizations do not necessarily reflect the nuances of socioeconomic class, ethno-racial differences, or differences based on geography, religion, or even age. However, as components of the mainstream culture, they play a strong and often unconscious role in how individuals and institutions react to gendered violence.

Individualism

Perhaps one of the most well-known and prevalent characteristics of U.S. society is individualism and our infatuation with “the rugged individual.” Unlike more communitarian or communal societies, institutions and family structures in the United States grew out of the assumption that it was the individual who determines *his* fate, through *his* own efforts. The original Europeans who moved to the North American continent brought with them their belief in the individual. Many were fleeing from the structures and systems that limited their own roles. Others came to avoid further persecution, while still others came to get rich. Moving into an unknown environment, often with little but one’s own resources, fostered a sense of “man against nature” or “each man for himself.” This assumption that everyone could do it for themselves became so institutionalized that many children grew up knowing that “any American boy could grow up to be president.” The assumption that this applied only to males notwithstanding, United States society continued to foster the belief that it was up to the individual to make changes in his or her life. Social systems, family systems, and the schooling culture all promote this belief.

Individualism is also one of the U.S. characteristics that has supported the development of a more democratic society. The assumption that “no one is better than me” is bred into the U.S. psyche, as is the belief that individuals can make a difference. While the areas and ways in which questioning authority are in large part socially prescribed, there is a general sense that we don’t believe our leaders know more than we do or that they are any more skilled. As citizens in a democracy, we believe we can make a difference, so we often do.

Individualism can appear in responses to gendered violence in different ways. Often it leads to the assumption that the violence is between two people and does not involve the larger community. Second, it often supports responses and interventions geared to individuals. For example, a prevalent assumption has been that it is up to the woman to make change—to leave, to get out of the battering situation, to say no. Thus many early intervention programs focused on the female as controlling her fate. The reality is that the system of violence is much more complex and women who attempt to leave batterers are often murdered. At the same time, such assumptions overlook the important role of families, employers, and religious or civil institutions have in maintaining or dismantling the system of violence.

However, it is individualism that has determined that once defined as a problem, gendered violence could be solved. The hundreds of programs around the country began with a group of individuals, or even one person, saying there is another way--and finding that way. Whether it was Marie Fortune in Washington, a church-based group in East

Boston, or a group of men in Texas, most responses and interventions in the US began as community-based responses by individuals determined to end violence against women. It was on this foundation of community-based programs that larger advocacy efforts and academic research emerged, efforts that have supported the development of state and national laws and policies. These individuals did not wait for policies or decrees; they saw a problem and set about solving it.

Racism and Sexism

The twin concepts of racism and sexism are part of the founding paradigm of the United States. Since the incursion of the Europeans into the Americas, U.S. culture has promulgated a legacy of racism. The genocide against Indian people and the institutionalization of slavery of African captives, followed by the discrimination against Chinese railway workers; the internment of Japanese American citizens during World War II; the forced removal of Indian children from their families to attend boarding school or to become the children of white families; the declaring of many Mexican-America children as “retarded”; or the more recent rounding up of Arab-Americans all exemplify the racist assumption that mainstream whiteness is superior to “nonwhite.”

This deeply embedded racism has shaped many of our cultural institutions and assumptions. Until the Civil War, slavery was commonly held as acceptable in many parts of the country. Following the war, slavery as a visible institution disappeared but racist behaviors and beliefs continued. Newly freed slaves and free Blacks were often prevented from voting. They were denied access to education. Those who protested--and many who were random victims—were beaten, murdered, or driven away by roaming bands of whites who hid their identity behind white hoods (and were often the community leaders, bankers, and police). Violence against African Americans continued to be a constant in the lives of Black families in all parts of the country. This violence supported the patterns of education, work, and housing discrimination that segregated much of the majority of African Americans from the mainstream culture.

Over time this persistent pattern of institutionalized and by now often unrecognized racism extended to other groups marked as “of color, minority” including Indians, Mexican and other Latin Americans, Asians, Eastern Europeans, and Italians. This assumption of a certain kind of white superiority involved clear hierarchies of class and gender as well.

Based on European religious and social expectations about the role of women, a new brand of sexism developed within the United States. One cultural myth—that women were helpless, that they could not be trusted, that they had a biological restriction that prevented them from learning to the same level of men, that they cared only about looking good and being taken care of—was balanced with another. In the second, women were sexual predators or shrews who needed to be physically controlled. Institutions supported both myths, whether in the form of such devices as the institutionalizing of Victorian wives in asylums or in the legal discrimination against women owning property or being barred from schools or higher education. Women as a rule were expected to fit a certain acceptable picture, whether that was the Southern belle, Marilyn Monroe, or Barbie. For women of color, this focus on the “superiority of white

femaleness” and the parallel assumption that real women did not work outside the home further marginalized women of color, and often made them more vulnerable to violence from white males. And it offered no protection from violence by men within their racial/ethnic group.

Early work on “domestic violence” often documented stories of wives seeking assistance from pastors or priests and being told that this was their lot in life, that they were the ones who had to make changes and keep their husbands happy. Or they were questioned about what they had done to bring this on themselves. Family and friends often suggested women say and do nothing so that they did not bring disgrace to the family name. The assumption that violence was a husband’s right or that the wife just needed to accept violence allowed many to be blind to how pervasive and persistent violence was within the home.

Sexism and racism, although currently and overtly addressed within the public sphere, continue to influence our working assumptions about gendered violence and responses. For example, women who are battered are sometimes cast as “asking for it.” Violence against poor women and women of color is often seen as a common and acceptable part of “that culture” rather than a complex issue that includes the maintaining of an existing power structure. At times, women and girls who were beaten were stereotyped as poor and uneducated, rather than showing the reality that battering occurs within all economic, racial, and cultural groups. In many instances, initial responses to gendered violence focused on the needs and strengths of mainstream women, overlooking both the needs and strengths of women outside that mainstream.

Initial work focused on developing programs for women, with little distinction or introspection about the needs of women of different racial/ethnic/cultural groups. As the movement to respond to violence grew, more and more women of color demanded a voice and a role in developing programs that met their specific needs. And it was only much later that the realization that young girls were also victims of gendered violence developed. For a long time it was assumed that childhood and adolescence were times of safety and innocence. But with the work of such leaders as Barrie Levy, the larger culture began to recognize and respond to the needs of adolescents who were victims of “dating violence.”

At the same time, it was difficult for many to extend concerns about gendered violence to the gay and lesbian communities. Stereotypes about gay, lesbian, and bisexual people often created such myths as there was no lesbian battering or gay battering. Those who were targeted by groups of males and beaten because of their sexual identity had very little recourse and few if any shelters. A deeply ingrained hostility toward homosexual and bisexual people continues to support both overt and covert violence, such as in the case of a young man who was beaten, tied to a fence and left to die in a cold Montana field.

It is only fairly recently that the US movement to prevent and intervene in gendered violence has begun to bring all aspects of gendered violence into one cohesive

framework. This will strengthen the individual work of programs working with specific groups, and will also enable us to build a stronger anti-violence perspective nationally.

Fairness

One of the cornerstones of U.S. beliefs is justice—or fairness. It is integral to the guiding mantras developed at the start of the nation, whether that is the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution of the United States, or the pledge of allegiance with its words “with liberty and justice for all.” Although it may often run counter to other beliefs, the assumption of equality, that everyone is the same, that everyone should be treated fairly has defined our institutions, our interactions, and our identity. Sometimes seen as naïve by other nations, the U.S. culture continues to hold dear the idea of fairness and justice. It is this belief that has opened doors to new immigrants; that has led the country to respond to social, environmental, political, and economic crises in other countries; and that has fostered the development of much of our social policy and legislation. “Play fair” is not just a response to children, it is the way we develop our sports teams, our rules of public debate and governance, and our expectations for legal and interpersonal relationships.

Thus, gendered violence is not fair—victims of gendered violence are not being treated fairly by their abusers; they were often not treated fairly by police officers who did not respond to calls for help, by judges who refused to grant court ordered protection, or by hospitals who sent women back to batterers. As advocates began to make the link between fairness/justice and the experience of battered women, public support for strong intervention grew.

Civil Rights

Closely related to the sense of fairness and justice is the commitment to civil rights within the United States. The United States was developed as a legal and political system and as a people, we are a nation of law. We tend to agree to abide by the rules of law—it makes things fair—and once a law is approved, it becomes a guiding rule for public behavior among individuals and institutions. If it is the law, the majority of people try to abide by it.

It is this affiliation to the law that has changed many of our inhumane behaviors. While it was once the law that slavery was allowed, the law was changed and society changed. While it was once the law that some individuals, particularly African Americans, could not vote, the law was changed and society changed. While regulations and social mores once prevented married women from teaching or girls from taking classes in the skilled trades or women from having the right to own property or get credit in their own name, it was federal laws that eliminated these discriminations—and changed society.

As a pragmatic nation—citizens of the U.S. tend to be a nation of problem solvers (that sense of individualism)—we see a major social injustice as a problem to be solved by the law. For many, the abuse of rights is a day-to-day issue that must be solved—a

perspective that lends itself to action. We may spend hours in debate about ideas, but often it is with the intent to enact legislation or to change laws and legal interpretation. Therefore, there is also a reluctance to enact laws that cannot be enforced. There is a reluctance to sign agreements that will not be upheld.

For example, the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and early 1970s focused on achieving rights under the law for African American citizens: the right to go to school, the right to vote, the right to live in unsegregated housing, the right to ride on public transportation without being forced to sit at the back of the bus, the right to be served in any restaurant or to stay in any hotel. These were anti-discrimination laws, instituted after hard fought and bloody battles, that opened up much of U.S. society to marginalized and oppressed people. For many, these were not seen as basic human rights but rather rights due citizens as citizens.

Building on the vision and work of the Civil Rights Movement, the women's movement took much the same tactic—change the law so women were not discriminated against. Again, the movement was not cast as a human rights movement but as one of civil rights—women's rights as citizens. Pragmatically this resulted in legislation that opened up universities to women, opened up the workplace to women, ended overt discrimination in wages, and enabled many women to gain economic and financial control of their lives.

The discussion of the “larger” issues of women's rights, the philosophical underpinnings of the women's movement, and other similar discussions are often seen as academic and not part of daily life. There is often a tension between those who want to talk about the philosophical aspects of human/women's rights and those who engage in the political process or who see themselves as “average citizens, workers, and women.”

This response to rights abuses seems to vary from many other countries, where the framework is around human rights rather than civil rights. This may explain why conversations around human rights across countries can be difficult. For some, human rights is a larger construct around which one can frame both philosophical and political approaches, that enables individuals and groups to examine the roots and processes of oppression. For many in the U.S., the dependence on civil rights—rights under law—runs counter to such conversations, but rather pushes for action. Often the discussions about what the injustice mean and where it comes from begin after a law has been implemented. It is not that individuals and groups are unaware of the larger and deeper issues involved, but rather a cultural approach to solving a problem.

Similarly, as we began to address gendered violence within the United States, we began with our civil (legal) rights system. We saw that the laws protecting individuals from harm, abuse, battering, or murder were laws that stood to protect women and girls in violence. We turned to the police for help, we turned to the courts. And we began to draft new legislation on the national and local level to give individuals more protection under the law. These laws, combined with the approaches framed by our national culture, have supported the development of a large national movement to end gendered

violence, through the education system, through safe houses and women's shelters, to court advocacy programs, through workplace safety initiatives, and through the development of programs for boys and men.

In the process, it has changed the national culture from one that turned deaf and blind to violence against women, girls, and homosexuals to one in which we overtly discuss the issue and support efforts to stop it. This does not mean we have solved the problem—thousands of women and girls are still beaten each year. But it does mean that the U.S. has developed mechanisms to concretely and pragmatically make change. And for every person who remains violence free, for every home that remains violence free, for every person who can move from living in fear and pain to living a life of freedom and possibility—that is a great accomplishment.