

Introduction to the Special Issue

Fostering collective responsibility in prevention and ending gender-based violence issues

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Gender-based violence is a major health, social, and human rights issue in the global context. It knows no social or economic boundaries and has devastating effects mostly on women and girls of all socio-economic backgrounds in developed and developing countries. Decreasing violence against women and girls requires a community-based, multi-pronged approach, and sustained engagement with multiple stakeholders. The rationale of the special issue is to emphasize the community and contextual aspects which are drivers of violence against women with the aim to understand the broader context and to contribute to cultural and community level prevention efforts. A specific focus of the papers in the issue is how to enhance community agency and collective responsibility in ending violence against women.

Keywords: *gender-based violence, community psychology perspective, preventive interventions, community capacity building*

1. Introduction

Gender-based violence is a major health, social, and human rights issue in the global context. It knows no social or economic boundaries and has devastating effects mostly on women and girls of all socio-economic backgrounds in developed and developing countries.

According to the World Bank (2019), the numbers are staggering: 35% of women worldwide have experienced either physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence in their lifetime. Globally, 7% of women have been sexually assaulted by someone other than a partner, and as many as 38% of murders of women are committed by an intimate partner. Two million women have experienced female genital mutilation or cutting. Despite the great advances in legislative, social, and cultural fields, alarming numbers of cases of the phenomenon are still reported (UN Women, 2020; WHO, 2020). Gender-based violence remains mostly invisible and underreported (EIGE, 2017) and its persistent representation is a private problem that mainly attributes to victims the responsibility for solving it (Leisenring, 2006). Above all, the fact is that it happens most in countries characterized by a patriarchal and

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post-patriarchal culture where increasing conflicts among women and men at the relational and cultural level are at stake (Rollero et al., 2019).

Patriarchy is a social and political system that treats men as superior to women – where women cannot protect their bodies, meet their basic needs, or fully participate in the society, and where men perpetrate violence against women without legal implications. These factors interact with several drivers, such as social norms, low levels of women’s empowerment, poverty, socio-economic inequality, and substance abuse (Dartnall & Channon 2024). Moreover, poverty, instability, and lack of education play a role in perpetuating violence against women in places where women have less social and economic power, or where laws protecting them are not enforced, specifically in poor rural areas.

This representation increases the victim’s perception of social isolation and the feeling of loneliness (Goodman & Epstein, 2020). Victims declare their high distrust towards institutions because of the low support and protection they perceived, above all during judicial processes, which are lengthy in EU countries, as highlighted by GREVIO (2021).

Moreover, scholars have pointed out that the absence of an extensive social support proximity network has long been viewed as a specific key precursor of intimate partner violence (hereafter IPV) (Browning, 2002; Lanier & Maume, 2009; Pinchevsky & Wright, 2012; Wright & Benson 2011). The absence of support influences victims’ choice not to leave their partners and consequently not to report the violence suffered because they don’t feel safe (Nicolaidis et al., 2003). Indeed, women are most at risk of violence when they separate from their partner (Campbell et al., 2007), and when they report to health services and file police reports (Gonzalez-Mendez & Santana-Hernandez, 2014). It is also worth mentioning that professionals, similarly to IPV victims, felt a sense of isolation and fragmentation in the management of IPV due to a) non-shared representation of IPV as well as disagreements about intervention procedures between different services and professionals handling IPV; and b) low, or better, no exchange between health and social professionals of proximity networks of women and perpetrators, and professionals directly involved in IPV contrasting services (Autiero et al., 2020).

Such an alarming situation implies the involvement of a community and contextual perspective. The need to adopt a multidimensional and ecological approach to gender-based violence is widely suggested by the World Health Organization, which draws attention both to the cultural dimensions, such as the transmission of a patriarchal culture by sexist stereotypes and prejudices and to the role and responsibility of all community stakeholders such as social professionals, legal health professionals, who work with gender-based violence (Di Napoli et al., 2019).

Decreasing violence against women and girls requires a community-based, multi-pronged approach, and sustained engagement with multiple stakeholders. The most effective initiatives address underlying risk factors for violence, including social norms regarding gender roles and the acceptance of violence.

Community psychology can help in promoting a responsible, supportive, and protective community for ending violence and in constructing a collaboration between services against gender-based DV. In particular, community psychology can facilitate the integration and dialogue among different services and invest in a social proximity network that involves social and health professionals that work with victims and perpetrators (Ogbe et al., 2020; Virkki, 2015).

2. The special issue's contributions: An overview of contexts, topics and actors' voices

The rationale of the special issue is to emphasize the community and contextual aspects which are drivers of violence against women with the aim to understand the broader context and to contribute to cultural and community level prevention efforts. A specific focus of the papers in the issue is how to enhance community agency and collective responsibility in ending violence against women.

The call arises from our awareness of the considerable presence of symposia and reports within the International Community Psychology Congress - Community Re-Generation, Bonds and Bridges Among People and Environments - in Naples (Italy) in September 2022. This call, therefore, arose from the interest in understanding how gender-based violence is approached in the community psychology perspective in the academic context as well as and in the context of organizations and how the interventions are carried out.

Then, the collected articles allow us to observe violence from different perspectives: the view of the victims, of men with and without a history of violence in intimate relationships, and of professionals.

The voice of victims of violence in intimate relationships is collected in the qualitative research conducted by Mondal et al. Their contribution addresses the barriers that women from the Rohingya community living in Bangladesh encounter when asking for help. The request for help for the victims is a very delicate moment because it implies that, on their side, they must overcome the sense of shame. On the other hand, it requires the existence of trustworthy people in the community that the women and their family members can reach out to. Therefore, an interesting point of the contribution is to not only look at the person seeking help but to focus also the responsibility of the community to this person seeking help. Looking at women in the Rohingya community, it appears interesting to consider how women's barriers are transversal and, in particular, how they call for the fundamental role of NGOs.

Violence, as underlined in the various contributions, knows no distinction between developing and developed countries. A common thread traces the difficulties of the victims in escaping violence as well as the difficulty of the male in recognizing himself in cultural models different from those that envisage the male as dominant. In line with Article 16 of the Istanbul Convention, the fight against violence proposes the involvement of perpetrators in the treatments dedicated to them and in prevention campaigns to avoid the perpetuation of violence.

The articles by Visser and Ndhlovu and Carnevale, Autiero, Agueli, Bozzaotra, Arcidiacono and Di Napoli. place emphasis on the males. From a preventive perspective, Visser's article discusses how to prevent cultural models centered on hegemonic masculinity in children for a change of direction in the perception of power in intimate relationships. Visser and Ndhlovu discuss then the effectiveness of an intervention with boys to make them aware of the male model of which they are bearers; they emphasize the need to intervene from the early stages of life not only to address the cultural dimensions of what is expected from a boy but also concerning the ways of expressing one's emotions in relationships. At the same time, Carnevale et al., focus on

preventing recidivism by increasing the perpetrators' awareness of and their adherence to treatments. In this article there is also a preventative innovative approach: placing the perpetrators into children's shoes through the use of virtual reality helps in the prevention of recidivism. The Carnevale et al. article proposes the effectiveness of using virtual reality in allowing perpetrators to tap into their own emotions making them face the responsibility for their actions and the negative effects they produce on children. Virtual reality is therefore recognized as a point of great support for activating initial recognition in perpetrators of violence and overcoming their initial forms of denial.

Guidi, Di Gesto, Hébert, Piltcher Haber Mandelbaum, and Guazzini discuss intentions to help IPV or non-partner sexual violence (NPSV) victims in Brazil, Canada, and Italy. The research delves into interesting cultural differences concerning the desire to help victims and the perception of one's self-efficacy in helping victims. The research strongly underlines the need to activate empowerment and self-awareness programs to activate one's responsibilities in the fight against gender-based violence.

Moreover, this special issue is enriched with four contributions that focus on promoting the construction of networks for complex interventions in the fight against violence.

Vargas Conde, Dulce, and Ornelas propose a participatory research project in which female survivors of violence and professionals questioned themselves on how to activate peer support networks. The study is very interesting because it offers a vision of victims who, based on their history of violence, can take an active, supportive, and empowering position for other women who, unfortunately, suffer violence. Therefore, the article allows us to think about creating synergistic support networks between professionals and victims of violence in combating this phenomenon.

Focusing on the feasibility of interventions to combat gender violence, the article by Abuel and Kapungu proposes a reflection on the importance of considering the specificities of each social and cultural context in the planning and implementation of interventions. Their discussion on the need to decolonize interventions from Western models when placed in realities such as the African context is stimulating. The paper introduces the possibility of involving girls in actions of change and prevention of violence which requires stakeholders from the local community to create a support network for interventions.

Activating new networks and putting the services that work with gender-based violence into dialogue with each other is the focus of Nullal's contribution, which questions how to strengthen the support of private security in combating violence, starting from how the private security service deals with violence, specifically with violence in intimate relationships. Among the various needs highlighted in the article, we would like to focus here on the need to promote an understanding and focused training activity on the issues of violence aimed at all those professionals who come into contact with it.

The article by Autiero and Procentese concludes the special issue. The article delves into the experience of professionals working to combat gender-based violence and, in particular, domestic violence in emergency conditions COVID-19. The study highlights the construction of protocols, to strengthen synergies between agencies, services and institutions and the need for a model of intervention during emergencies to prevent the risk of gender-based violence. Interesting stimuli come from the research conducted in which the element to be strengthened

is the use of technologies as a tool for proximity and support for victims in cases of violence, especially during critical moments of emergencies.

The works presented provide an articulated reading of the factors involved in the phenomenon of gender-based violence from the experiences in different geographical contexts, enriching the reflections on this specific issue.

We want to conclude this introduction by outlining some crucial needs in research and intervention to combat violence:

- 1) The importance of training service professionals, especially those not dedicated to violence but who primarily come into contact with violence, to counteract secondary victimization and help encourage women to report by supporting them in this delicate moment;
- 2) The creation of collaborative networks to strengthen the fight against violence - networks that include the voice of victims, professionals, but also of the local community and that allow violent actions to be seen as a collective responsibility;
- 3) The awareness that the culture of violence involves more and more perpetrators and bystanders to move away from a logic of only supporting the victim and therefore the need to enhance a culture based on respect for gender differences and on fair and equal power relations; and
- 4) The widespread use of new technologies and innovative tools to overcome obstacles linked to the dynamics of violent relationships, such as the reachability of the victim and overcoming emotional and cultural barriers in interventions with violence perpetrators.

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