

**Class One- What is Gender Violence?**  
**Notes & Questions**  
(revised 1.10.2020)

The question, “What is gender violence?” should be understood as two questions. First, what is *gender* violence? What distinguishes gender violence from other instances of violence? Second, what is *gender violence*? What forms of subordination and discrimination should be categorized as violence?

In the U.S., one common meaning given to “gender violence” is to understand it as co-extensive with “violence against women” (VAW) in the form of sexual assault, domestic violence (DV) or intimate partner violence (IPV), and stalking. It is no accident that these are the central categories of violence addressed in the federal Violence Against Women Act, the most significant legislation to address violence against women. A number of scholars and activists argue that it is essential to adopt a VAW frame. Failure to do so makes invisible the systemic gender subordination that is the root cause of most IPV and sexual harm. Identifying that women are the primary victims opens up avenues of advocacy and policy reform that address gender subordination. For example, Elizabeth Schneider, in describing the early history of the U.S. Battered Women’s Movement, argues for the importance of creating “battered women” as a “definable group or category.”

The theoretical approach to battering that developed from the battered women’s movement was explicitly political. ... First, ‘battered women’ were set forth as a definable group or category, with battering regarded within the larger context of ‘power and control’; physical abuse was a particular ‘moment’ in a larger continuum of ‘doing power,’ which might include emotional abuse, sexual abuse and rape, and other maneuvers to control, isolate, threaten, intimidate, or stalk. .... [T]he problem... [was] understood within a systemic framework... of gender subordination, which included gender role socialization; social and economic discrimination in education, workplace, and home; and lack of access to child care. ....” [¶] “Domestic violence was linked to women’s inferior position within the family, discrimination within the workplace, wage inequality, lack of educational opportunities, the absence of social supports for mothering, and the lack of childcare.

ELIZABETH SCHNEIDER, BATTERED WOMEN & FEMINIST LAWMAKING (2000) 22-23.

But a number of scholars and activists argue that the VAW frame’s focus on interpersonal (individual) violence makes invisible the *state-perpetrated* violence that is disproportionately experienced by poor women of color, immigrant women, and lesbian and transgendered women.

A further criticism of a focus on interpersonal violence is that it tends to lead to remedies that are similarly individually based, rather than based in changing social conditions. Thus, a second form of criticism focuses on the failure of public policies to address injustices – racial, economic, sex, sexual orientation, sexual identity, immigrant – that create differential risks for experiencing domestic violence. These scholars argue that gender violence should encompass these intersecting forms of injustice that create and maintain violence against women. This structural

approach to understanding gender violence would focus on creating remedies that are particularly helpful for women who are the most vulnerable to violence.

A third criticism argues that a definition centered on “violence against *women*” (VAW) omits IPV experienced by male victims (whether in straight or gay relationships). Others argue that the ways in which VAW has been implemented in services and policies presumes a male-on-female subordination dynamic that is a poor fit for women experiencing violence from non-male partners.

A fourth criticism argues for defining the concept of “gender violence” more broadly to include any violence that seeks to reinforce or maintain gender hierarchy. In this framing, police violence may be a result of gender hierarchy.

### *Focus Questions*

- 1) In light of the brief overview provided above, think about the benefits and the limitations of the definitional boundaries adopted by each author. What is illuminated by a gender neutral frame? What is made less visible?
- 2) DeKeseredy’s describes the move in sociological research and theory away from the earlier “violence against women” frame to the gender neutral frame “intimate partner violence.” He argues that this change reflects the ascendancy of liberal feminism over radical feminism and is a result of a conservative backlash against feminism. In contrast, Julie Goldscheid argues that the gender specific frame, “violence against women,” “no longer does the work feminists hoped it would do” (p.310). What accounts for the disagreement between DeKeseredy and Goldscheid?
- 3) Focus on the “intersections.” What structural inequalities create greater vulnerability to physical and sexual violence? Pay careful attention to the empirical NISVS data on sex/race/ethnicity differences (NISVS). The section of the UN report on “violence against women who face multiple forms of discrimination” (p48) is also useful in this regard.
- 4) The UN Special Rapporteur US Report on Violence Against Women provides a thorough discussion of forms of violence against women, including violence against women in custody. Note, too, the description of current remedies and the conclusions and recommendations.

5) discusses violence against women in custody,