

# Introduction

Gender violence is not a new problem. It takes place in virtually all societies around the world, but only in the last thirty years has it become visible as a major social issue. Historically, forms of violence taking place within the family were treated as less serious than those occurring in the public sphere. Much of recent feminist activity has been directed toward reformulating the legal and cultural notion of the private sphere of the family, in part to foster societal and legal intervention into families. In the 1990s, gender violence was defined as an important human rights violation for the first time. Now it is considered the centerpiece of women's human rights.

Despite its near universality around the globe, local manifestations of gender violence are highly variable. They depend on particular kinship structures, gender inequalities, and levels of violence in the wider society. They vary depending on how gender is defined and what resources are available to those who are battered. Violence against women in the home is shaped by patterns of marriage and the availability of divorce, by conceptions of male authority and female submission, and by the family's vulnerability to racism, poverty, or marginalization. The prevalence of sexual violence against women during armed conflict depends on ideas of militarized masculinity and the use of rape to dishonor enemies. Some legal systems are far more effective in punishing gender violence than others, and communities vary a great deal in the kinds of informal and formal social support they offer victims of violence.

Although women are disproportionately the victims of gender violence, in many situations men are also victimized. Male rape in prison, torture of men in wartime, patterns of hazing and harassment in male organizations, and homophobic assaults on gay men are only a few of the kinds of violence directed against men. Both men and women are targeted by the cultural practice of genital surgeries, although those performed on women are generally more severe. Violence between intimate partners includes women's attacks on men as well as men's on women, although women are more likely to be injured. Individuals in same-sex relationships use violence against their partners at about the same rate as those in opposite-sex relationships.

Although gender violence is often an assault by a male on a female, this is hardly a universal feature of male behavior. The large majority of men do not practice gender violence against women, and many seek to intervene to protect women as well as other men from gender violence. While gender violence is a widespread pattern, it is far from a universal one.

Gender violence is embedded in enduring patterns of kinship and marriage, but it can be exacerbated by very contemporary political and economic tensions. In recent years, increasing economic inequalities, warfare, nationalism, and insecurity have increased rates of gender violence. For example, in China, where domestic violence was traditionally legitimated by a family system based on male authority, female obedience, and filial piety, with the tumultuous changes of the last half century such as the Cultural Revolution, the one-child policy, the turn to a capitalist economy that has eliminated much of the socialist welfare system and forced many women to lose their jobs or retire early and to share a husband with a concubine, the incidence of domestic violence is on the upswing (Liu and Chan 2000: 74–84; Human Rights in China 1995). In many parts of the world, the kinship-based systems that long served to control violence within families are weakening in response to urbanization, wage labor, mobility, and the economic and cultural effects of globalization. Neoliberal economic policies which reduce state and community support for the poor affect women disproportionately, making them more vulnerable to violence. Poor men are also more likely to experience violence from other men and from their female partners than wealthy men.

Many forms of gender violence are part of wider conflicts such as ethnic attacks, military occupation, warfare, and movements of refugees. Migration of peoples across borders increases their vulnerability to violence, particularly when migrants are illegal or unprotected in the country of arrival. Warfare and local armed conflict between religious, ethnic, or regional groups often rely on rape and violence against women, while it is primarily women and children who flee these situations and become refugees. In wartime, men are often the victims of sexualized forms of torture as well as brutality in the course of combat.

Violence in intimate relationships is inseparable from societal conflict, violence, and injustice. As this book shows, interpersonal gendered violence and structural violence – the violence of poverty, hunger, social exclusion, and humiliation – are deeply connected. It is impossible to diminish violence against women without reducing these other forms of violence and injustice. The conditions which breed gender violence include racism and inequality, conquest, occupation, colonialism, warfare and civil conflict, economic disruptions and poverty. Impunity for violators contributes in important ways, whether they are violent spouses, so-called “honor” killers, or political leaders. Patterns of kinship and sexuality provide the justifications for gender violence and determine the possibilities of escaping it. Given this context, it is not surprising that three decades of activism around the world have increased awareness of the problem but not slackened its incidence. Only the achievement of a more just and peaceful world will improve the safety of both women and men.



## Defining Gender Violence

In this book, I define gender violence as violence whose meaning depends on the gendered identities of the parties. It is an interpretation of violence through gender. For example, when a blow is understood as a man's right to discipline his wife, it is gender violence. When a mob lynches an African American man for allegedly raping a white woman, the violence is defined through gender and race. Thus, the meaning of the violence depends on the gendered relationship in which it is embedded. These relationships are used to explain and even justify the violence. For example, a man may justify hitting his wife because she was disobedient. A prisoner might explain his anal rape of a fellow prisoner by saying that the victim less than a man because he was a sexual predator against children. A soldier can explain raping an enemy woman as a way to dishonor his enemy. Not everyone who commits gender violence tries to justify it, of course, but when individuals do offer explanations of the incidents, they typically draw on ideas of gender and its responsibilities and entitlements.

Understanding gender violence requires a situated analysis that recognizes the effects of the larger social context on gender performances. When men abuse women in intimate relationships, they use the violence to define their own gendered identities. A batterer often wants to show the woman that he is in control or to prove to other men that he controls her. He may view the violence as discipline that the woman deserves or has provoked. Perhaps she failed to take care of the house or has dressed provocatively and awakened his suspicions and jealousy. Men often use violence to establish power hierarchies, both against other men and through raping other men's wives. This form of gender violence is a fundamental strategy of war as well.

Gender violence is now an umbrella term for a wide range of violations from rape during wartime to sexual abuse in prisons to insults and name-calling within marriages. Although the early movement against gender violence in the USA centered on rape and battering in intimate relationships, the movement now uses a far broader definition both in the USA and internationally. International activists continue to expand the scope of violence against women, to include cultural practices such as female genital cutting, illegal acts such as dowry deaths, the trafficking of women as sex workers, the effects of internal wars such as displaced people, and the vulnerability to violence experienced by migrants in the context of contemporary globalization. The scope of gender violence is continually changing.

Gender violence occurs throughout the world, but it takes quite different forms in different social contexts. It is located in particular sets of social relationships, structures of power, and meanings of gender. It does not fall into any simple pattern, such as being more prevalent in traditional societies than in modern ones. There are no universal explanations for gender violence. It is best understood in terms of the wide variety of particular contexts that shape its frequency and nature. Although enhancing gender equality is commonly thought to diminish gender violence, more



egalitarian societies are still plagued by widespread violence. Traditional or rural societies are not systematically more violent than modern or urban ones. In fact, the transition to a modern, capitalist society can exacerbate gender violence, as it has done in China. Violence does not diminish with the shift to more modern or urban forms of social life, but it may change its form and meaning.

## Defining Violence

An introduction to gender violence must begin by exploring its key terms: “violence” and “gender.” Violence, like gender, is a deceptively simple concept. Although it seems to be a straightforward category of injury, pain, and death, it is very much shaped by cultural meanings. Some forms of pain are erotic, some heroic, and some abusive, depending on the social and cultural context of the event. Cultural meanings and context differentiate consensual or playful eroticized forms of pain from those of a manhood ritual and those from a cigarette burn on a disobedient wife. Gender violence is both physical and sexual. Although historically there has been a division between activists working on domestic violence and those focused on rape, in practice the two usually happen together. Domestic violence frequently takes sexualized forms, while rape is typically violent. Gender violence is often the result of a jealous desire to control another’s sexual life. Violence can be erotic. In recent years, the terms “sexual assault” and “sexual violence” have been used to indicate the interrelatedness of sexual and physical forms of violence.

Activists in the battered women’s movement have expanded the meaning of gender violence from hitting and wounding, including rape and murder, to a far more varied set of injuries and degradations. Leaders in the field emphasize the emotional and psychological dimensions of gender violence, recognizing that it includes insult, humiliation, name-calling, driving by a person’s house and calling out insulting words, telling a woman that she is fat and useless and will never be attractive to other men, and myriad other insults. Some battered women told me that these assaults on their self-esteem hurt more than blows. Gender violence includes threats, harassment, and stalking – actions that evoke fear even when there is no physical harm. Injuries to those one cares about, including children, pets, or personal possessions, or threats to injure them, are also forms of violence. The plate thrown against the wall subtly says, “It could have been you.” A lack of care such as withholding money or food from a partner or child can also be considered violence. Threats of sorcery or supernatural injury are forms of gender violence that evoke fear and the threat of harm. Violations that a person experiences as a result of racism, class humiliation, and poverty often have gendered dimensions.

In their overview of anthropological work on violence, Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Philippe Bourgois emphasize that violence is a slippery concept that cannot be understood only in physical terms. It also includes assaults on personhood, dignity, and the sense of worth and value of a person (2004: 1). Violence is fundamentally



a cultural construct. “The social and cultural dimensions of violence are what give violence its power and meaning” (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004: 1). They argue that there is no simple “brute” force, but that violence has a human face and is rarely “senseless.” Instead, it often has meanings that render it heroic, justified, reasonable, or at least acceptable. From an anthropological perspective, violence as an act of injury cannot be understood outside of the social and cultural systems which give it meaning.

Nor are the meanings of violence stable, since they depend on the social position of the observer and the social context of the event. Some violence is interpreted as legitimate, such as the actions of state police controlling unruly mobs, while other violence is defined as illegitimate, such as that of the protesting mobs themselves. Police violence against criminals is to some extent authorized while the violence of criminals is not. One person’s heroic revolutionary is another’s terrorist. These distinctions are often murky. When a community lynches an offender because the police fail to act, as has occurred in parts of Bolivia, it can be defined either as legitimate community policing or as illegitimate vigilante justice (see Goldstein 2004; 2007).

### Structural violence

An important dimension of violence is structural violence, violence that impacts the everyday lives of people yet remains invisible and normalized. It includes poverty, racism, pollution, displacement, and hunger. Structural violence is usually concealed within the hegemony of ordinariness, hidden in the mundane details of everyday life. Violence is sometimes highly visible, as revolutionary violence or state repression, but it is often hidden in the everyday violence of infant mortality, slow starvation, disease, destitution, and humiliation (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004: 2). Structural violence is intimately connected to more interpersonal forms of violence. For example, upper-caste men in parts of India use the rape of lower-caste women to maintain their dominance (e.g. Srivastava 2002: 272–275). Bourgois’s work on crack dealers in East Harlem, New York reveals links between self-destructive substance abuse, the gendered violence of family life and adolescent gang rape, and the structural violence of US urban apartheid (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004: 3). Scheper-Hughes argues that the family is a violent institution, but sees its violence as responsive to larger socio-economic conditions which make violence the only option (2004: 3). In postcolonial societies, such as Papua New Guinea, violence is embedded in systems of power such as colonialism, family institutions such as bride price, development projects and their large-scale environmental degradation, and the poverty and social exclusion experienced by poor rural migrants to the city who face unemployment and residence in squatter settlements without adequate drainage and sewage systems or clean water. They confront high levels of violent crime as well as disease (see Dinnen and Ley 2000: 2–3). Violence here includes the violence of police and security forces as well as the fear of sorcery.



## Domestic violence: a case study

Dora's story (a pseudonym) illustrates the complex blending of threats, fear, and physical violence in domestic violence situations. Her story comes from a small town in Hawai'i during the early 1990s, the beginning of the battered women's movement. Dora is in her early twenties, a mainland white woman from a middle-class family with two years of college and an adequate family income. When I interviewed her she said, "I had the stereotype that it doesn't happen to people like me with a house and education. I thought it just happened to welfare people." Like many other battered women, Dora turned to the courts only after years of violence from her husband. She wrote this account of the violence in 1992 as a request for compensation as a crime victim:

Sam and I have been together for almost five years. There has been abuse on and off for the first few years. This past year has been the worst, it got to the point where he would beat me at least once a day and for about four weeks he beat me two or three times a day. It was so hard living with him. I have no family out here, only myself and our son. I lived in constant fear of Sam, never knowing of his coming here, afraid of what he was going to be like. Sam has threatened me with guns, spear guns, knife on one occasion. He would drag me down the hill by my hair, rip my clothes off of me, smash pans over my head. We had to replace or fix all but two doors in our house because he threw me through the other doors.

There was so much constant abuse it seemed like it would never end. Many times I thought that when I died it would be because my husband killed me. I was afraid to have him arrested because I knew he wouldn't stay in that long and I thought that he would kill me when he got out. Finally, on May 31, 1992, I couldn't deal with it. We were driving home from Hilo, my husband was sitting in the back of our truck. I was driving because Sam was too drunk. We were driving down the road and he reached through the back window and grabbed my face, scratching my face, then he tried to choke me and I felt that if he got open the door he would kill me. I looked over at my son in his car seat. He was frightened, screaming, crying and I knew I couldn't put up with this terror any more. I managed to drive away when he got out of the back to open my door. I just wanted the hell that my life had become to end. Since that time Sam has started ATV classes [a violence control program] and is making much improvement. He knows that he needs to change to keep his family, and that abusing me is wrong. I feel that calling the police was the hardest, and best thing I ever did.

They had been married for three years, and he had abused her most of the time. Dora explained his violence in terms of his cultural background, saying that in Samoa it is the man's responsibility to keep the woman in line. After this incident, Dora called the police to help her get her things and go to the shelter, but the police let him follow her alone into the bedroom, which frightened her. Then the police started "talking story" with him, discussing where to go fishing. They took him away, but only to his sister's house which was four houses away. Ten minutes later he was back. The next day he was still there and she called the police, discovering that he



had a 24-hour restraining order against him. This meant that he got arrested for violating the order of the court. Dora said that she always thought that if he were arrested, he would kill her, so his sister went down and posted bail. Using the law clearly represented a powerful challenge to him.

Dora got a restraining order against Sam that prohibited him from seeing her, but he came to visit her at the house anyway. Two weeks after the incident they went together to family court, which required both of them to attend Alternatives to Violence (ATV), the feminist batterer intervention program. “It was scary going to court. I didn’t know if they would send him to jail. But I was also glad because he had to go to classes now.” Both attended meetings at the ATV program. She was pleased that the court required him to attend ATV because otherwise he would not have gone. Three months later, Dora told me that things had gotten a lot better. He had not been violent for three months and she had learned a lot about his controlling actions toward her. Before it felt like she was in prison, forced to go places with his family who didn’t like her because she was white, but now she was better able to gauge what was happening to him. Although Dora thought that the police were overly lenient, telling her that there was hardly a scratch on her and that they couldn’t arrest him, the family court judge firmly said this was wrong and was concerned about her safety. Dora was reluctant to see the violence she experienced as a crime worthy of court intervention. This was the first time she had been to court, and she did not know anyone else who had tried. Although the police treated the problem as relatively unimportant, the stern family court judge and the feminist ATV program convinced her that what she had endured was a serious form of violence. Clearly, she learned a new way of defining the everyday threats and attacks she had long experienced in her marriage.

### Gender policing: violence against transgendered people

People who fail to conform to normative expectations of male or female appearance or behavior face high levels of violence and murder. The term “transgender” refers to people whose gender identity or expression does not conform to the social expectations for their assigned sex at birth (Currah et al. 2006). People who fail to conform to heterosexual male and female identities face gender policing in the form of harassment and violence. This violence, often delivered randomly by strangers, is a mechanism for enforcing what has been called a heteronormative binary system. This refers to the requirement that all humans fit into a binary – that is, male and female – heterosexual arrangement of gender identities. Those who fail to conform face a variety of forms of violence. For example, in 2003 Gwen Araujo, a transgender teenager from a small town in California was killed by a group of young men who beat her to death with a shovel after discovering that she had male genitalia. Their attorneys argued that she was guilty of “deception” for not disclosing her identity to them. As Currah et al. (2006: xiv) point out, this incident is only one of thousands of hate crimes against transgender people. A study by a Boston activist group, Gender



Public Advocacy Coalition or GenderPAC, reported that over the past ten years, more than 50 young people under 30 were violently murdered for their failure to conform to gender stereotypes (Gender Public Advocacy Coalition 2006). Most of the murder victims were biologically male but presented themselves as more or less feminine. Many were black and Latina. They were killed by young males in acts of unusual violence. Research suggests that violence against transgender people is related to their gender variance, with those who regularly pass as either gender reporting a lower frequency of violence (reported by Dr. Scout, Director of National LGBT Tobacco Control Network, speaking at Baruch College, New York 2007; see also Namaste 2006). David Valentine's study (2003) of transgendered sex workers in New York City shows how those who are poor are less able to protect themselves from violence and murder. They have more dangerous jobs, such as street prostitution, and are less able to afford surgery in order to pass more effectively. Those without the funds to biologically reshape their bodies to conform to their gender identities are less successful at passing as the other gender and therefore face a greater risk of violence. Even when a person does not experience violence directly, these narratives create an environment of danger and threat. Thus, violence ranges from physical injury and death to threats and forms of humiliation and degradation that injure a sense of self even when the body is spared.

## Defining Gender

In the social sciences, the concept of gender has changed dramatically over the last 30 years. The new conceptions redefined the movement in very significant ways. Before the 1970s, most social scientists failed to pay attention to what women thought or did. In anthropology, for example, with some notable exceptions such as Margaret Mead, women were portrayed in the background or were neglected altogether. The first anthropologists to think about gender simply tried to add a focus on women. They began to write studies of kinship in which women were agents rather than pawns and of politics that included women's struggles for power in the extended family.

Anthropologists who began to focus on women in the 1970s were primarily concerned with explaining women's universal subordination to men (see Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974a). This was a political as well as an analytic problem, raised by feminism and the contemporary interest in Marxist theories of class and power (see di Leonardo 1991b). Sherry Ortner (1974) attributed women's inequality to a cultural linkage between women and nature and between men and culture, while Michelle Rosaldo saw women's subordination as the result of their embeddedness in the private sphere while power resided in the public sphere (Rosaldo 1974). While these dichotomies were analytically useful, they did not help us to understand the myriad ways gender shapes social relationships (see Sanday 1981). Micaela di Leonardo (1991b) points out that the nature/culture dichotomy is not universal and was





formed in the Enlightenment, while the private/public sphere was developed in nineteenth-century Europe. Neither describes universal features of women's and men's lives.

However, challenging the distinction between the public sphere and the private sphere was politically important to feminists. Seeing women as embedded in the private sphere excluded them from politics, power, and authority. It situated them in the protected sphere of the home and family where they were governed by men. It justified the state's reluctance to intervene in the family, even in cases of violence. By locating men in the public sphere and women in the private sphere, this ideology legitimated gender inequalities. Under the claim that "the personal is political," advocates for battered women battled to tear down the walls between the public and the private to enable social and legal intervention into violence in families.

Studies of other societies suggested that women's subordination was less intense in small-scale hunter-gatherer societies (Shostak 1981). Some anthropologists searched for matriarchies – societies in which women exercised power – but found only myths that women in power abused it and destroyed the society (Bamberger 1974). Feminist social scientists began to focus on violence as a major explanation for the universal subordination of women.

Out of this intellectual ferment and political activism came several significant developments in the sociological theory of gender (see e.g. Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974b; di Leonardo 1991a; Ginsburg and Tsing 1990; Lamphere, Ragone, and Zavella 1997). Here I focus on the contributions of anthropology, but this was a very interdisciplinary intellectual movement. Three developments are particularly important: the shift from sex to gender, from roles to performances, and from essentialized gender identities to intersectional ones. Each of these theoretical changes had a major impact on the gender violence movement, particularly in the USA.

### Sex to gender

Anthropologists initially discussed women through the framework of sex roles and sex differences. Sex differences were understood to be rooted in biological features. Sex roles were sets of expectations of behavior rooted in particular sociocultural systems based on sex differences. As anthropologists looked more carefully at sex roles, however, it became clear that they were highly variable and that they were produced through social processes of learning and training that instilled ideas about what it means to be a man or a woman into each person's consciousness. Instead of referring to sex roles, anthropologists adopted the concept of gender to talk about the social dimensions of sex differences. This term expresses the idea that differences between men and women are the product primarily of cultural processes of learning and socialization rather than of innate biological differences. "Sex" refers to genitalia while "gender" describes the social aspects of how men and women are expected to act. This term has now become international. For example, when the Chinese word for gender is translated back into English, it becomes "social gender."





However, even the concept of sex is less certain than this analysis suggests. A person's sex is also a product of cultural definition. For example, a study in Brazil of men who dress as women but work as male prostitutes suggests a very different division by sex than the conventional male/female divide on the basis of genitalia (Kulick 1999). These men, referred to as *travesti*, enjoy anal penetration as a sexual experience. They seek to transform their bodies into a more feminine shape through hormones and silicone injections. When they have sex through anal penetration of other men, they are socially defined as men, and when they are penetrated by other men, they are defined as not-men, as sharing gender with women. Similarly, effeminate gay men who enjoy anal penetration also acquire the identity of not-men, or women. Thus, Kulick argues, the distinction between men and women, or more accurately men and not-men, depends on the role a person plays in the sexual act, with the penetrator retaining a male identity and the penetrated taking on the not-man identity, or the gender of a woman. It is because they desire to be appealing as women that the *travesti* devote substantial energy to producing buttocks and female curves in their bodies, but they are clear that they are men, not women. Thus, not only is gender a culturally created and defined social position, but so also is sex. It cannot be seen as a clear biological category any more than gender.

### Role to performance

In a second development, anthropological theory has shifted from role to performance. In the 1970s and earlier, anthropological research focused on exploring the discrete roles of women and men in every society. Roles were sets of expectations of behavior that evoked sanctions when individuals failed to conform. They were shared, expressed as norms, and relatively stable, although they were not necessarily always followed. Although societies differed in their gender roles, they shared an emphasis on the centrality of gender as the basis for the division of labor – of the tasks each person was expected to do based on their identity. One study, for example, showed that every society had a distinct set of male and female tasks (Parker and Parker 1979). As the authors listed the tasks allocated to women and to men in societies around the world, they described them as differences in sex roles.

However, the concept of role proved too simple and static to describe the way gender operates in social situations. Since the 1980s, anthropologists have increasingly theorized gender as a performance directed at an audience (see Butler 1990). As a performance carried out in a particular situation, gender is expressed in different ways depending on the context. The same person can enact gender differently for different audiences. Such an analysis sees gender as created through the performance of tasks and activities. For example, in Segura's study of Chicana women in white-collar jobs in California, she argues that gender and race-ethnicity are not simply categorical statuses but accomplishments: identities produced through dynamic interaction and performance (Segura 1997: 293). As women do work, particularly in female-dominated jobs, they also "do gender," enacting what they see as the essential





nature of women. Women in service jobs, for example, affirm themselves both as workers and as women. Employment in supportive service tasks enables them to do work and do gender at the same time. They reaffirm themselves as members in good standing of gender and race-ethnic categories. They establish themselves as Chicanas through work, family activities, child care, and a host of other activities. For these Chicana women, doing housework or child care allows them to accomplish both gender and race-ethnicity. In contrast, those who challenge these traditional patterns undermine their culture-ethnic maintenance (Segura 1997: 295). Thus, occupational segregation on the basis of gender and race is maintained as women seek jobs that reinforce the way they think about themselves and their membership in groups (Segura 1997: 305).

The connection between the performance of an identity and maintaining membership in a gender/race group is a serious obstacle for those who wish to act differently. For example, Kath Weston (1992) demonstrates how certain kinds of work, such as automobile repair, incorporate expectations of risk-taking and physical strength which are not inherently necessary to the work but reinforce the gendered performance of the work. Men carry heavy toolboxes not because it is necessary but because it shows that they are enacting male strength.

During the 1980s and 1990s, as anthropology moved to a more performative understanding of gender, it saw gender less as a fixed role than as an identity produced through action. Gender is closely linked to other social practices and identities and is a fundamental dimension of power relationships. The analysis was contextual and comparative. Some explored the role of gender, sexuality, and violence in larger processes such as colonialism. For example, Ann Stoler (1997a: 375) pioneered the examination of colonialism from the perspective of race and sexuality, noting that there is a close relationship between the sexual control of European women and racial tensions and anxieties. The conversion of colonized women into concubines and “keeps” represented an important part of the colonial theft of resources and reinforced racial hierarchies, while anxieties about sexual attacks on European women by allegedly “primitive” men of color fueled mechanisms of policing and control over both (Stoler 1997a: 377, 381). Both in the American South and in many colonial contexts, violence and the practice of lynching African American or colonial men was justified by the need to protect white women from them.

From a performative perspective, doing violence is a way of doing gender. In some situations and contexts, the performance of gender identities means acquiescing to violence or being violent. By putting up with violent assaults without complaint, minimizing the violence, calling it deserved, or treating it as inevitable, women “do” gender. Just as some women steer away from less “feminine” jobs, they may resist labeling their experiences as crimes. The woman who refuses to put up with male violence and takes her batterer to court risks defaulting on her gender performance. She faces exclusions and pressures from both his kin and her own. When a man uses violence against a partner whom he suspects of flirting with another man, he also accomplishes gender. His actions demonstrate that he is a man who cannot be cuckolded, who is in control of his woman, and who is a person of power and



authority. When men batter women, they are performing masculinity not only for the woman but also for other men, who assess their masculinity by the performance (Connell 1995). Men in batterer treatment groups also perform gender as they discuss their own violent actions (Anderson and Umberson 2001). As in Segura's example, however, gender performances are refracted through race and class, so that notions of how to do masculinity in the face of a woman's apparent disobedience are shaped by specific cultural expectations. Performing masculinity among young white street youth in the USA, for example, is quite different from the way it is enacted among older middle-class African American professionals.

As theoretical work on gender developed in anthropology, it became clear that a dichotomous model of men and women was too simple. Research showed that male and female gender identities fall along a continuum from masculine to feminine. Some individuals are at either end, while many are closer to the middle. In some social situations, those in the middle face considerable pressure to conform to the ends, while those who refuse the terms of the continuum altogether face sanctions and even violence, as happens with some transpeople. Work on gay/lesbian identities played a critical role in moving anthropological analysis toward a notion of gender performance that was not organized into binaries but that recognized wider variability and multiple sexualities (e.g. Rubin 1975; Lewin and Leap 2002). As anthropologists moved toward a more performative model of gender, they criticized earlier models of gender that assumed universal characteristics of men and women.

### Essentialism to intersectionality

The third shift in anthropological theory was from essentialism to intersectionality. This move was similarly reflected in new ways of thinking about race and class in the American battered women's movement. Anthropologists labeled modes of analysis that assumed that male and female identities were more or less fixed as essentialism. They critiqued this idea, arguing instead that gender is always defined and redefined in interactions as it is performed for different audiences. For example, Matthew Gutmann's (1997) study of male identities in a lower-class neighborhood of Mexico City revealed a wide diversity of ways of performing masculinity in this context. He challenged assumptions that masculinity is defined only by concepts of machismo. Instead, he found increasing engagement of men in housework and child care. Younger men are particularly likely to play with and care for their children and to say that they are not macho since they help out at home and do not beat their wives, an important attribute of machismo. Theoretical work on gay/lesbian identities has also contributed in significant ways to challenging essentialist theories of gender and recognizing the variability of gender performances (Lewin 1996).

Essentialism argued that men and women are basically the same because of their gender. However, feminists pointed out that people are defined by a host of other identities based on race, class, ethnicity, nationality, disability, sexual orientation, and many other characteristics as well as gender (Crenshaw 1994). Any notion that

there is a single, stable identity of “woman” or “man” fails to recognize this diversity. Gender is therefore intersectional, shaped by the way it interacts with other identities such as race and class. Thus, “woman” means something different for an upper-class, urban, educated, secular, wealthy white woman than it does for a poor, rural, evangelical Christian white woman living on welfare.

Although this argument makes sense analytically since it recognizes the complexity and variability of women’s life situations, it inhibits political organizing along gender lines. A strength of the 1970s and 1980s women’s movement in the USA was its insistence that all women share common problems of subordination to men. While this made good political sense, it ignored the diverse situations of women, particularly the differences between wealthy and poor women or white women and women of color. For example, a major issue in the women’s movement of the 1960s was women’s inability to work outside the home. But this was a middle-class women’s problem. Poor women, single women, and many poor minority women had always worked; it was largely educated, middle-class white wives who were excluded. Thus, the demand to participate in the labor force was not a universal problem but one specific to women of a particular social class and marital status. Making claims in the name of “women” obscured these differences, and emphasized the demands of some women while ignoring those of others, such as the improved working conditions and better pay wanted by poor women.

The early feminist movement against violence was largely white and middle class, although some women of color played critical roles in the anti-rape movement. In the last two decades, the battered women’s movement has developed a far more varied and nuanced understanding of the intersections among gender, race, and class (see Schechter 1982). Thinking about gender intersectionally, which means looking at race, class, and other identities as well as gender, reshapes the analysis of gender violence. For example, the situation of a poor woman being beaten by her husband is very different from that of an affluent woman who has far more resources to escape the relationship. But a woman with no income living with a rich man is also imprisoned. For example, in a letter to the school newspaper a college graduate expressed her frustration and vulnerability to violence.

### **Speaking against violence**

To the Editor:

Seven years ago, I graduated from Wellesley College with sky-high confidence and a belief that I could take on the world – and win.

The atmosphere at Wellesley, along with wonderful professors, had taught me to expect success and not to settle for anything less. But, life is not always filled with success – there are usually mixes of ups and downs. Unfortunately, during the last seven years, my life has been filled with more downs than ups.

For six years, I was trapped in a violently abusive marriage – a relationship where I often woke up in the morning not sure that I would survive until that night.

Even though I eventually escaped – only two months ago – those last six years have exacted a terrible toil on my family and loved ones. And I am left with physical and



emotional scars. My youngest child – a baby boy – was murdered by my husband. And my daughter remains trapped in Russia with my husband.

But, these terrible years have taught me two important lessons; lessons that unfortunately I had to learn the hard way.

First, I learned that the skills that Wellesley had equipped me with – skills that were designed to help me take on the world – were also skills that kept me strong even during the darkest periods and always kept me from giving up.

And second, and perhaps most importantly, I learned that some issues – like domestic violence – cut across all income, education, racial and social lines.

Simply being a confident, intelligent Wellesley woman does not protect one from the ravages of domestic violence. In fact, these very facts sometimes make it more difficult to cope with the problem if it occurs.

I remember so many times my pride battling with my fear.

And too often, my pride would win out; I would remain silent, and I would be battered and tortured on a daily basis. But, when I finally did speak out, I found out that it was not so scary – that there were people out there who were willing to listen and support; people who were not going to judge and criticize.

I will never know if I would have done things differently, if my son would still be alive today or if I would have saved myself hundreds of trips to doctors, hospitals and emergency rooms and police stations in America and Russia. In fact, given the pervasive attitudes and misconceptions about domestic violence in Russia, and the unwillingness of authorities inside of the country to address and combat the violence, I have doubts that anything that I would have done or said would have changed my horrific situation. But still, I have doubts and I wonder. I do not know for sure.

But what I do know for certain is that silence never solves the problem of domestic violence. It didn't for me and it won't for anyone else who is in an abusive controlling relationship.

Speak up. And remember the voice that you are developing here – a voice that may someday lead a Fortune 500 company, teach future generations astrophysics or write a bestselling novel – is also the best tool to keep yourself safe.

The statistics are startling. The personal stories of abuse survivors are horrifying. Make sure that you do not become yet another statistic. Wellesley Alum '97 (*Wellesley News* (May 5, 2004))

Racism shapes gender violence in many ways. A poor woman of color is doubly disadvantaged in finding paths to escape violence and in seeking alternative housing and forms of support (Crenshaw 1994; hooks 1997; Smith 2005). Women of color experiencing violence face particular dilemmas in their use of the police. While calling the police is typically the first line of protection for women experiencing violence, this means turning the men of their community into the hands of a system often seen as oppressive and racially biased. As the number of incarcerated and supervised African American and Native American men mushrooms, women find themselves reluctant to summon the police against them (Davis 2001; Incite! 2006). Immigrant women who are battered face difficulties if their residence in the country depends on their spouse. Their partners may resist filing the papers to make them legal residents (Mendelson 2004). In the USA, immigration officers often challenge





women's marriages, asking if they have married only in order to immigrate (Bhattacharjee 1997). Despite some legal protections for immigrant women who are victims of domestic violence, such women are especially vulnerable (Coutin 2000). They may be more socially isolated, lack the dominant language, and feel that their presence in the country is completely dependant on their partner's acceptance.

One of the enduring challenges of the violence against women movement is the tension between the political value of gender as an essentialized category versus the analytical value of the intersectional analysis of gender identities. Since essentialism is the claim that all women are, in significant ways, the same, it facilitates the argument that all women are subordinated by gender violence. This position was enormously effective in promoting the battered women's movement since it enabled activists to argue that battering is not just a problem for some sectors of the population, such as the poor or those with drinking problems, but for all women. Feminist scholars in the 1970s argued that violence was central to the subordination of all women. For socialist feminists such as Susan Schechter, "Woman abuse is viewed here as an historical expression of male domination manifested within the family and currently reinforced by the institutions, economic arrangements, and sexist division of labor within capitalist society. Only by analyzing the total context of battering will women and men be able to devise a long-range plan to eliminate it" (1982: 209). By defining violence as fundamental to patriarchy and patriarchy as a set of institutions and ideologies that subordinates all women, violence against one woman became violence against all. Countering this violence was not just a matter of changing the lifestyles of the poor or alcoholics but of changing women's subordination overall.

Despite the political power of this position, it implicitly foregrounded the problems of middle-class white women while ignoring the very different experiences of differentially situated women. Women of color have increasingly argued that the movement is too focused on the situations of white women, and that approaches such as criminalization fail to take into account their very different life conditions (Davis 2001; Incite! 2006). In other words, essentialism is both politically expedient and analytically flawed. This dilemma reappears in the human rights movement against violence against women, discussed in Chapter 4.

## Contemporary Conceptions of Gender Violence

Gender violence is now an umbrella term for a wide range of violations from rape during wartime to sexual abuse in prisons to insults and name-calling within marriages. International activists continue to expand the scope of violence against women to include cultural practices such as female genital cutting, illegal acts such as dowry deaths, the trafficking of women as sex workers, the displacement of women during civil wars, and the violence experienced by migrants in the context of contemporary globalization. Local, national, and regional movements around the





world challenge the legitimacy of many of these practices along with the international movement. During the 1980s and 1990s, women's movements used the major UN conferences on women to solidify their definition of gender-based violence and build international political momentum for acting against it. In the early 1990s the global feminist movement succeeded in establishing that violence against women was a human rights violation. In 2001 a leading human rights NGO, Amnesty International, defined violence against women as a form of torture, and in 2004 it mounted a global campaign against violence against women ([www.amnestyusa.org/violence-against-women/stop-violence-against-women-svaw/page.do?id=1108417&n1=3&n2=39&n3=1101](http://www.amnestyusa.org/violence-against-women/stop-violence-against-women-svaw/page.do?id=1108417&n1=3&n2=39&n3=1101)).

Yet global campaigns to reduce gender violence encounter the dilemma of asserting universal standards for women's physical safety while also respecting cultural difference. This is a very complex and unresolved issue. Critiques of female genital cutting, for example, often become criticisms of cultural practices fundamental to a social system. The major documents supporting women's status globally, such as the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women, urge governments to redefine gender roles to eliminate prejudices and customary and other practices based on the idea of the inferiority of the sexes or on stereotyped roles for men and women. More recent statements, such as the Beijing Platform for Action of 1995, urge governments not to use culture, religion, or tradition to avoid their obligations to end violence against women. On the other hand, global feminists are sensitive to cultural difference and to the importance of respecting different ways of life. The relationship between feminism and respect for cultural difference is a difficult one, constantly subject to debate and renegotiation. A strong relativist position that refuses critique in the name of protecting culture is antithetical to feminist commitments. Chapter 4 discusses this dilemma in more detail.

## Theorizing Gender Violence

### Beyond patriarchy

During the early years of the battered women's movement, activists argued that violence against women is the product of patriarchy. Patriarchy referred to family and societal arrangements in which males exercised predominant power. Men batter women, the argument went, because they can. Indeed, the initial concern with gender violence came from feminists' efforts to understand why women are subordinate to men. But, clearly, this explanation is far too simple. While patriarchy justifies and enables gender violence, many other factors account for gender violence as well. Gender violence is deeply rooted in cultural understandings of gender and power, whether it takes place within a marriage or among strangers. For example, when a woman of one ethnic group is raped by a soldier of another ethnic group during wartime, the act is a dramatic demonstration of the dominance of the rapist's group.







Moreover, the theory that gender violence is the product of patriarchy takes a heteronormative perspective that imagines all forms of violence occurring in opposite-sex relationships. However, research shows widespread patterns of violence in lesbian and gay relationships as well. Lesbian violence reflects interlocking subordinations based on race, class, gender, and sexuality rather than just gender inequality (Ristock 2002: 22).

Violence within lesbian relationships has been neglected by the battered women's movement in the past, since theories of patriarchy lead activists to see women as victims only of men. Yet stories of violence within same-sex relationships suggest that many of these incidents are also framed by struggles over power. On the basis of interviews with 70 lesbian and bisexual women about their stories of sexual assault, Girshick (2002) emphasizes the need to build a more inclusive feminist vision of domestic violence and sexual assault. Rather than placing patriarchy at center stage, she suggests examining the questions of power over others, a model which accounts for patriarchy, racism, classism, ableism, and other oppressions. Stories from the women she interviewed support this idea. Marianne's story provides one perspective on lesbian violence (Girshick 2001: 31–35).

“When Marianne (a pseudonym) was 19 she began a relationship that seemed promising. She was “awestruck” by her partner, eight years older, who seemed world-wise, confident, and safe. Her partner was well liked, had a job and apartment, and family she visited often. After about four months into this four-year relationship, Marianne realized that her partner liked controlling what she did, who her friends were, what they did together.” According to Marianne:

She'd get mad and throw things around the apartment, she'd take things of mine and throw them (or throw them out), she tossed the TV out a window and smashed it, etc. After a while she'd hit me or push my face, hard, if I did something she disliked or didn't do when she asked or demanded. She constantly threatened to leave, told me I was worthless or dumb, told me my friends (I didn't have many) were idiotic, told me I was unattractive or ugly, and so on. I was extremely anxious that she would leave. I also hated how things were going, and thought it was all my fault. After about a year she'd progressed to full-blown rampages, beating on me with things (a chair, thrown books, pans from the kitchen). I tried fighting back but she was strong and completely wild. Sometimes she would beat on me until I was crying and subdued (and hurting), then she'd tear my clothes off and force me down, then force her fingers or other objects inside of me, kiss me roughly suck on my skin to make marks that sometimes bled, hit me on the breasts, etc. She'd ask me to “do” her and I'd try to do what she wanted, but it was hard, she wanted me to almost hurt her or actually hurt her. I felt awful about this but she'd destroy stuff if I didn't, and at the time I owned very little. One time she literally raped me with a plastic dildo. This went on for several years. I finally left her when my current lover (who is not abusive at all) gave me safe haven.

For years, Marianne felt she caused or deserved what happened to her. She did not have words to label the sexual violence against her. In fact, at the time she might





have called it “consensual.” But today, Marianne calls what her partner did to her “rape” or “assault.” It was years before she admitted she’d been hit. It took therapy and dealing with childhood incest to face the trauma of the sexual abuse within her battering relationship. The post-traumatic stress impacts of the abuse against her included

flashbacks, fear, pain, a sense of haunting, a sense of defeat (that I hadn’t managed to escape my childhood after all), incredibly low self-esteem, nightmares, a wish to die or hurt myself physically, [and] hopelessness.

Marianne wished there had been a lesbian-specific hotline and a lesbian-friendly shelter. Looking back, she realizes that if someone had noticed and approached her about the abuse perhaps she would have left sooner. Because she felt it was her fault, Marianne didn’t tell others about what was happening. Without resources, including money to pay for therapy, Marianne was alone.

Ristock (2002) argues that feminist theories of battery construct a series of binaries – such as perpetrator/victim, male as batterer/female as passive victim, powerful/powerless – that are too restrictive and heterosexist to understand violence against women. Work by scholars on gay/lesbian identities has brought these binaries into question. For example, Ristock’s interviews with lesbians who have experienced abuse indicate some shifting between abuser and abused roles and shows that there are situations in which violence is not about control. Abused lesbians sometimes attack their abusers, just as abused women do in heterosexual relationships. A widely used legal defense for women who kill their batterers, the battered women’s syndrome, claims that the experience of battering creates such feelings of helplessness, fear, and desperation that the victim is driven to kill. This theory replicates the powerful male batterer/helpless female victim binary and ignores the role of anger and desire to retaliate on the part of the murderer. The feminist framework which looks to patriarchy as the explanation for violence also relies on the binary of powerful males/powerless females and does not describe the complexities of violence or the experience of violence within gendered relationships.

In her ethnographic study of violence in a poor community in Brazil, Sarah Hautzinger (2007) complicates the offender/victim binary. She finds that men’s violence is both an effort to assert honor by controlling their women and a response to their own vulnerability in economic and social terms. Moreover, women are battered both because they are in highly subordinate and vulnerable positions and because they are attempting to contest their gendered positions of inferiority. Thus, violence can be “contestatory,” as couples struggle for dominance in the relationship, rather than only one-sided. Hautzinger refers to the latter form of violence, when it is extreme and imposed on a hapless victim, as “intimate terrorism.” Her analysis suggests areas of women’s agency as well as domains where men live with substantial constraints on their lives which they manage through violence against their partners. Hautzinger is clear that paying attention to men’s vulnerability does not excuse their violence, but it does help to understand it.





## Anthropological Perspectives on Gender Violence

Much research on gender violence considers its causes within family dynamics or childhood experiences. There is a rich body of research on psychological dimensions of gender violence. While recognizing the importance of interpersonal and psychological factors, this book examines the social contexts within which gender violence takes place. Using an anthropological approach, it examines gender violence from the perspective of family, community, state, and world. The anthropological perspective emphasizes culture and context rather than psychological or biological dimensions of violence. It focuses on the meanings of gender violence in various situations. Its comparative approach shows how gender violence is related to larger patterns of social inequality such as class and racial discrimination, histories of colonialism, and ethnic inequality and hostility as well as patterns of gender inequality, family organization, and marriage arrangements. There are connections between racial violence and spouse abuse, between ethnic conflict and rape, between nationalism and male aggressiveness, between living in an occupied state and beating up wives. There are many forms of gender violence, but all are embedded in larger structures of power and violence and shaped by cultural meanings of race, class, nation, family, and marriage as well as gender. Understanding gender violence requires looking both at the intimate details of family life and at geopolitical considerations of power and warfare. In order to understand gender violence, it is necessary to understand the world.

The anthropological perspective on gender violence has four dimensions. First, it sees this issue as created by social movements and political debates, subject to change over time. Rape and violence within intimate relationships are of course ancient practices with a global distribution; what is new is the creation of a global social movement which names these phenomena, links them to gender practices, and sees them as basic to gender subordination. But the violence which is targeted in this movement changes over time. The early movements focused on specific cultural practices, such as female genital cutting or husbands hitting and killing their wives. More recent conceptions have expanded to include state actions such as the treatment of women in prisons and during warfare as well as more indirect forms of violence, such as the disproportionate number of women who become refugees, the cutbacks of social services for poor women with children, or sex-selective abortion and infanticide.

Second, an anthropological perspective recognizes that gender itself is not fixed but performed for audiences in various contexts. Gender is defined by kinship systems and forms of marriage as well as nationalisms which see women as mothers of the nation and men as its soldiers and defenders. During the height of British militarism and imperialism, for example, there was an effort to improve the number and health of children in order to strengthen the nation. Working-class women were targeted by the government as caring for their children inadequately and therefore failing to serve the empire (Davin 1997). In the early twentieth century Congolese women were similarly trained in practices of motherhood in order to reduce infant mortality and to increase the number of laborers available to the colonial masters (Hunt 1997: 288–289).



Third, an anthropological perspective means that interpersonal behavior must be understood within wider contexts of power and meaning. For gender violence, this means that it is critical to understand how violence between individuals is a dimension of violence by states, by communities, and by institutions. For example, men who live in an occupied country may become more violent both to occupiers and to the women they live with. Those who routinely use violence in their lives, as police or as soldiers, tend to use violence interpersonally as well. People for whom denigration on the basis of race or class is a familiar experience are less likely to resist when they experience abuse on the basis of gender as well. These are only a few examples of the way larger structures give meaning to interpersonal, intimate violence for perpetrators and for victims. These structures also determine relative power and ease of exit in relationships and the forms of recourse available to those who suffer violence. They define the meanings of masculinity and femininity and provide the contexts within which they are performed.

Fourth, an anthropological perspective is comparative. Gender violence is a global phenomenon. It takes place all over the world, although at different frequencies and in different forms. For example, gender violence in the USA tends to be male battering of women in intimate, romantic relationships, while in China an important part of gender violence is battering of elderly parents and children, reflecting the different patterns of family life. Gender violence in China includes mortgaging or selling wives or children, infanticide, abandoning wives, and kidnapping women to sell as wives. As the economy shifts from a planned socialist system to a market one, the radical disruptions in work and social security have increased levels of violence against women (Human Rights in China 1995). Women in some parts of India face violence in the context of disputes over the dowry they have brought to the marriage as dowry becomes an important form of cash income for grooms and their families. Military and police in the USA use violence against their partners at far higher levels than the general population. This is a global phenomenon, but its manifestations are highly variable, depend on local systems of meaning, kinship structures, gender inequalities, and levels of violence in wider society. As we shall see, societies vary greatly in the extent to which gender violence is defined as a legal violation and in the availability of help from the law. The rest of this book examines the variability of gender violence and its relationship to structural violence in various parts of the world.

## Measuring Gender Violence

Studies all over the world report gender violence, but it is very difficult to develop any numerical measure of its frequency. Part of the difficulty is the fact that often the same incident can be interpreted as abuse or as discipline. Surveys that rely on asking people how often they have experienced violence will miss these events. It is widely recognized that rape victims are very reluctant to report this violence, and it is likely that women in many parts of the world share this concern with reference to violence as well. The other approach to measuring gender violence is to count how many

cases come to some official agency for help. Clearly this shows how often women define their problems as warranting help and are able to or choose to ask for assistance, but such an approach clearly misses many cases where women think the violence is their due, they fear retaliation for complaints, or they lack state institutions that will show sympathy and act on their complaints. Chapter 5 discusses these measurement issues in more detail.

Despite these difficulties, there are many efforts to survey the frequency of gender violence worldwide. WHO published a report in 2005 on violence against women by male intimate partners based on interviews with 24,000 women in 15 sites in 10 countries: Bangladesh, Brazil, Peru, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Thailand, Japan, Samoa, Namibia, and Serbia and Montenegro (World Health Organization 2005). Earlier studies from 35 countries had reported that between 10 and 52 percent of women had been physically abused by an intimate partner at some point in their lives and between 10 and 30 percent had experienced sexual violence from an intimate partner (WHO 2005: 1). The WHO study, initiated in 1997, found significant national and urban/rural variation, with between 15 and 71 percent of women who had ever been in an intimate relationship experiencing physical or sexual assault during their lifetime (WHO 2005: 5). Most sites fell between 29 and 62 percent, with the lowest rates in Japan and the highest in rural areas of Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Peru, and Tanzania. Rates for intimate partner violence in the last year ranged from 4 percent in Japan and Serbia and Montenegro to 54 percent in Ethiopia (WHO 2005: 5). The most common act of violence was being slapped and the next most common being hit with a fist. Most of these acts represent a continuing pattern of abuse, with over half of the women who had experienced a violent act in the past 12 months reporting that it had happened more than once. Moreover, the research found a significant overlap between physical and sexual violence in most sites, with between 30 and 56 percent of women who had experienced any violence reporting both physical and sexual violence (WHO 2005: 7).

Women also reported high levels of emotional abuse such as insults, belittling, intimidation by smashing things, or threats of harm: between 20 and 75 percent of women reported one or more of these actions, mostly within the past 12 months (WHO 2005: 9). It is, of course, very hard to reliably count these events by asking women to recall incidents because they may or may not interpret them as emotional abuse. Women frequently reported their partners engaging in controlling behavior such as isolation, ignoring them, or accusing them of being unfaithful, with a frequency of 21 percent in Japan to almost 90 percent in urban Tanzania. This behavior tends to accompany physical and sexual violence (WHO 2005: 10). Women also reported high rates of physical and sexual violence by non-partners after the age of 15, particularly in Samoa (65 percent) and Peru (28 percent urban, 32 percent rural). Surprisingly, only 5 percent of Ethiopian women reported this problem. Finally, few abused women turn to formal services such as shelters or authorities such as police, religious leaders, or NGOs: between 55 and 95 percent of physically abused women said that they had never gone to these agencies for help (WHO 2005: 18). Clearly, the pattern of intimate partner abuse is widespread globally, but its incidence is also quite variable among countries and between rural and urban settings. No simple explanation seems possible.



In practice, what actions constitute gender violence depends on how these actions are made meaningful. Cultural interpretation makes everyday events meaningful. Recognizing an act as gender-based violence depends on judging the behavior as an offense. Who the offense is against, why it happened, and who is responsible for redressing it are all matters of cultural interpretation. Even the boundary between acceptable and unacceptable violence is a cultural one which is subject to change over time. Some forms of violence are viewed as appropriate discipline while others are seen as excessive violence. Paradoxically, violence is both solidly observable and infinitely open to interpretation. The physical substrate of violence is about pain, injury, and death but its conversion into a social offense depends on culturally embedded understandings of gender, family, community, and nation. It is both physical and cultural at the same time.

Within family relationships, some forms and situations of violence are seen as legitimate discipline while others are interpreted as abuse. Whether or not a person will describe herself as abused depends on how she interprets a slap, a blow, or an insult. The same act of violence by a husband toward his wife can be defined as acceptable discipline for her misbehavior or as a crime. The context and the prevailing norms of gender performance distinguish them. Moreover, the line between what is abuse and what is discipline can and does change over time. In a dramatic example of the interpretative nature of gender violence, staff at the women's center I studied in Hawai'i said that when women first came to the center, they would minimize the violence they experienced. After several weeks or months of participating in a support group, they reinterpreted their experiences as violence. Before, the blows had appeared natural or even as a sign of love, but as they discussed them with other women and staff, they came to see them as abusive, as violations of their rights, and even as crimes. Many women accept some forms of violence as justified if they feel they have violated rules or expectations. For example, a nationwide study in India in the late 1990s indicated that over half the women (56 percent) questioned thought that some of the things women did merited violence from their husbands.<sup>1</sup>

## Conclusions

Violence is part of the performance of gendered identities, whether as men attack their wives to prove to other men that they are in control of their sexuality, or as men attack other men defined as enemies to escape accusations of cowardice. Gender

<sup>1</sup> The National Family Health Survey, a major study of 90,000 households, asked questions about domestic violence for the first time in the 1998–1999 survey. It reported that 56 percent of ever-married women thought it was legitimate for their husbands to beat them for infractions (International Institute for Population Sciences 2000: 73). The same study reported that 21 percent of women have been beaten or mistreated since they were 15, and 19 percent of women by their husbands, although it is likely that this figure is under-reported because of shame and fear (International Institute for Population Sciences 2000: 74–75).





violence is a highly variable phenomenon that takes shape within particular social arrangements. It is never distinct from larger systems of social inequality and power based on race, class, and strength, nor is it distinct from other forms of violence such as warfare, state oppression, racism, or caste differentiation. The identification of any act of violence or threat as gender violence is always a matter of interpretation within a particular social and cultural context. It is clear that this identification can and does change over time with the introduction of new ideas about what gender violence is. It also changes with new political and economic relationships. For example, shifting from subsistence life in a village to an insecure urban squatter settlement that lacks the support of friends and kinsmen may increase gender violence.

Despite claims that there is a simple, widely applicable explanation of gender violence rooted in the power of men over women, it is not possible to develop any simple model that adequately describes this diversity or the way it changes over time. Instead, it is important to locate interpersonal violence within wider social patterns of power and inequality. The main theme of this book is the continuity between interpersonal and societal violence. Societies define acceptable and unacceptable forms of violence and determine which kinds of violence should be punished. Any person's vulnerability to violence depends on the extent to which social institutions define this violence as illegitimate and set up mechanisms for controlling it.

The rest of the book explores gender violence from the perspective of the cultural meanings of this violence, the social conditions that produce it, the social movements that have defined it, and the approaches that deal with it. Chapter 2 describes the way social movements in India, China, and the USA raised public awareness of the issue and defined it as a serious social problem. Chapters 3 and 4 look at forms of intervention. Chapter 3 explores how the legal system in the USA works to control gender violence through the criminal justice system and Chapter 4 describes the emergence of a global human rights movement focused on violence against women. Chapters 5, 6, and 7 examine some of the conditions that produce gender violence: Chapter 5 focuses on the effects of racism, poverty, and migration; Chapter 6 on violent cultural practices in families; and Chapter 7 on war and the dilemmas of refugees. Chapter 8 concludes with the argument that gender violence cannot be changed without working to transform the relations of inequality and violence in the larger society as well.

### Questions for Further Discussion

- 1 What is the difference between interpersonal violence and structural violence? How are they connected? Explain how social and cultural systems give violence meaning, and consider the way the meaning of violence changes over time and across contexts.
- 2 Explain why each shift – from sex to gender, from roles to performances, from essentialized gender identities to intersectional ones – has shaped the way we understand gender violence today. Do you think these shifts have moved activism forward? Why or why not?





- 3 Analyze the vignettes by Dora, Marianne, and the Wellesley alumna like an anthropologist. How is gender performed, violence understood, and power produced in their narratives? How do they describe the role of the family, the community, and the state? How do other forms of identity (including race, age, sexuality, and class) inform their stories? When did they come to understand their predicament as gender violence? What similarities and differences do you see?

## Video Suggestions

*Ferry Tales*, by Katja Esson (USA, 2003), 40 minutes

Academy Award Nominee for Best Documentary Short, *Ferry Tales* speaks to the various ways gender is performed. Every morning in their commute to Manhattan, a group of women – suburban and urban, white- and blue-collar, black and white – come together in the ladies' bathroom of the Staten Island Ferry to put on make-up and discuss anything from handbags, divorce, sex, domestic violence, and their experience with September 11th. These straight-talking, no-nonsense women illustrate how the intersections between race, class, gender, and age inform their identity as they leave their roles as mother, wife, and professional behind.

*Georgie Girl*, by Annie Goldson and Peter Wells (New Zealand, 2001), 70 minutes

In 1999 a mostly white, conservative, rural constituency elected a former prostitute to New Zealand's Parliament. Georgina Beyer (born George Beyer) became the world's first transgendered person to hold national office. *Georgie Girl* chronicles the life of this one-time sex worker of Maori descent, from farm boy to celebrated cabaret performer to grass-roots community organizer. Interviews with major government officials, everyday voters, family, and friends are intertwined with footage of her on stage in nightclubs and in Parliament, which together make for an engaging story of identity, politics, and the overcoming of prejudice.

*State of Denial*, by Elaine Epstein (South Africa/USA, 2003), 83 minutes

*State of Denial* is a sensitive portrayal of the everyday violence – both interpersonal and structural – that HIV/AIDS patients encounter in post-apartheid South Africa. Racism, poverty, a struggling middle class, poor sanitation, limited access to education and health care, social stigma, labor demands, and, not least, an unresponsive president and powerful drug cartels contribute to what has become the leading killer in South Africa. Embedded in the film are insights into how the epidemic impacts women in particular as mothers, daughters, nieces, volunteers, and sex workers.

