Promoting Healthy Relational Norms and Messages

to Fight Violence Against Women

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According to the World Health Organization, intimate partner violence, also known as domestic violence, is the most common type of violence against women. It accounts for 40 percent of all women killed worldwide. As such, it is a core component in addressing women's equality. One of the root causes of intimate partner violence is control and manipulation in relationships. This is particularly dangerous to women who nationally and globally, are more likely to be on the lower end of this inequality. In society, we are exposed to themes of control from a young age and this shapes our ideas of what is normal in intimate relationships. Such messages and ideas set the stage for a wide range of abuses, including physical violence. As a relational issue, intimate partner violence calls for individuals and society as a whole to work to promote healthy norms and messages that support equal and non-violent relationships.

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN THE POST 2015 AGENDA

Time and again, ending violence against women is recognized as a vitally important component that must be addressed in order to successfully achieve the other targets of women's equality. UN Women has recognized that one of the shortcomings of the MDG framework is that it failed to address structural causes of inequality. MDG3, which sought to promote gender equality and women's empowerment, was tracked primarily through the single target of education. While this is a fundamental part of women's equality, it failed to address structural elements of gender discrimination such as violence against women. The danger of not addressing this issue is that structural causes of women's inequality are left unchanged and become invisible (UN Women).

In considering the Post 2015 Agenda, UN Women has made these structural causes priority, targeting three critical areas of women's equality and rights that must be addressed as we move forward. One of these areas is freedom from violence. In the 2013 report calling for a stand-alone goal of gender equality, UN Women states, "for gender relations to be transformed, the structures that underpin them have to change: women and girls should be able to lead lives that are free from violence" (2). They call for strong action to be taken against this injustice, considering it a centerpiece in the framework for a Post 2015 Agenda (UN Women).

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THE IMPACT OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Violence against women not only inflicts physical and psychological harm but also constrains women's rights through fear and manipulation, affecting every other area of women's equality. From education and work, to political and economic rights, to women's health and child mortality, each of these factors are negatively affected by violence against women. In as much as a women is in fear of violence, she is hindered in exercising her rights and hindered in fulfilling her potential. Indeed, women's equality cannot hope to be reached without prioritizing this issue. As stated in a report funded by the U.S. Department of Justice, "Women's health simply cannot be disentangled and addressed without consideration of women's freedom from violence" (Hart 46).

Not only is addressing violence against women imperative for attaining gender equality, but it is also a key component in strengthening societies as a whole. Just as the consequences of violence against women are multifaceted, they are long reaching. Violence comes at a great cost to society affecting not only individuals but children, communities, and entire nations.

REALITIES AND DEFINITIONS OF INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE

In the United States, 76 percent of all female homicides are committed by a known offender ("Intimate Partner Violence: Attributes of Victimization" 3). An overwhelming 40-50 percent are committed by former or current husbands, partners, and boyfriends ("Selected Research Results on Violence Against Women"). These statistics on an international scale look no different, holding at a steady 40 percent of all women killed globally. According to the World Health Organization, intimate partner violence IVP), also known as domestic violence, is the most common type of violence against women worldwide.

The term "intimate partner violence" was recommended to replace "domestic violence" by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). It is preferred for it's ability to distinguish between violence from intimate partners and other forms of family violence such as child and elder abuse. However, in a majority of uses, the terms are interchangeable.

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) defines intimate partner violence as physical, sexual

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and psychology methods of violence and abuse used to achieve and maintain power and control over an intimate partner.

The astounding numbers surrounding intimate partner violence make abuse in relationships the biggest target in eliminating violence against women.

INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE IN ADOLESCENT RELATIONSHIPS

Intimate partner violence begins to show up at a young age in teen dating relationships. According to the American Medical Association, one in five adolescent girls has been physically or sexually abused in a dating relationship (Newcomb). In a study of youth in the U.S., 33 percent reported some kind of abuse. Several studies suggest that this number is higher (Offenhauer).

Adolescence is an important time in development for learning to navigate intimate relationships and also in formulating ideas about what is normal and healthy. But for many adolescents, the ideas being formulated under the influence of society, media and peers, are far from ideal.

Control is one of the first risk factors that can begin to play out in teen dating relationships. For many adolescents, the idea of undying love can become confused with unending control. Important components of healthy relationships like trust are often not exhibited or learnt and are exchanged instead with manipulation. A belief pattern forms in which being loved by someone equates to being controlled by them. From this perspective, behaviors like possessiveness and jealousy begin to register as love and care (Reppucci).

Many girls reflecting on previous violent dating relationships say that they considered their boyfriends to be protective and looking out for them when they engaged in controlling behaviors. One girl, after describing cycles of manipulation and threats said, “At the time, I took it as a sign that he really loved me, he wanted me so much” (Reppucci).

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AMY'S STORY

Amy, a victim of teen dating violence, considered herself to be so in love with her boyfriend, she was incapable of seeing the abuse. She describes him as being her "first actual real love." He began abusing her after just one month of dating, yet she stayed with him for three years. During that time he would humiliate, kick, hit, and choke her. Possessive and controlling behaviors included him not allowing Amy to have any male friends, constantly accusing her of cheating, and having her followed by friends as spies. Frequently he would go out for the night taking Amy's money and car. Amy said, "I loved him with all my heart and refused to see what he was doing to me as abuse." When asked what she would share with others experiencing dating violence she said, "Love is very blind and sometimes you're so blinded that you don't even realize you're being abused" ("Amy's Story").

Stories like Amy's are not uncommon. You can get an idea of just how many adolescents and teens identify with these experiences by looking at the number and contents of responses on community forums where teens have shared their stories.

AN INVISIBLE PROBLEM?

Research into violent teen dating relationships has shown that these teens often believe that there is nothing wrong or abnormal. Many teens describe the abusive relationships as positive, serious and committed. They report being highly satisfied with them and often continue in them for long periods of time. Teens in violent dating relationships are unlikely to seek help because of their perceptions of what is normal in relationships and what constitutes as abuse (Reppucci).

This remains true across all ages. Less than half of intimate partner violence cases are ever reported to the police (Violence by Intimates). Victims of domestic violence frequently do not seek assistance until the abuse has escalated and is longstanding (Hart 94). One of the reasons is that a significant number of women in abusive relationships do not recognize it as abuse. Many consider it to be normal, love even. Nothing is done and no problem can be solved unless the victims themselves believe that what they are experiencing is indeed abusive and illegitimate.

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One of the greatest obstacles we face in fighting violence against women is the underlying perception that such abuse is normal. There are a wide range of ways in which societies can propagate the idea that violence in intimate relationships is normal. Four primary methods are through relational norms of control, gender roles, media, and exposure to inter-parental abuse as a child (Hart 93).

RELATIONAL NORMS OF CONTROL

One way in which a normalcy for intimate partner violence is created in society is through widely accepted relational norms of control—the basic idea that it is acceptable to control those we are in relationship with. This idea is one of the primary precursors to violence. Those who believe it is normal to control or be controlled in relationships are much more likely to experience abuse, either as perpetrators or victims.

A study conducted on 600 women in New York between the ages of 15 to 24 found that two-thirds were victims of controlling behavior. In almost 50 percent, these controlling behaviors coincided with domestic abuse. Controlling behaviors identified in the study included displays of anger or jealousy when the woman interacted with another man, demanding to know where the woman would be at all times, and restricting contact with others. These controlling behaviors themselves can have as much of an effect on women as physical violence and there is ample evidence-based research to support that they are causally linked (Hart 13).

This concept of control continues to be reinforced through each of the other three factors.

GENDER ROLES

In societies with patriarchal roots where men are ascribed dominant gender roles, these patterns of control in relationships are particularly damaging to women.

Men who conform to societal beliefs that they have a right to control and discipline their partners are more likely to enact physical violence (Hart 15). Social norms that allow males to abuse females are frequently reinforced through male peer groups and fostered by traditional

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ideas about masculinity. In relationships where a woman believes that it is normal for her partner to exercise power over her, she is less likely to recognize abusive behavior (Hart).

The effects of these ideas about gender roles can be seen on an international scale. UNICEF reports that globally, almost half of 15 to 19 year olds think that a husband is justified in beating his wife under certain circumstances.

MEDIA

Media, including social media, plays an important role in perpetuating these societal norms and shaping victim's perceptions of intimate partner violence. Not only does media have a tendency to glamorize violence but it is inundated with reinforcing messages about abuse, its normalcy in society, and the roles men and women take.

So many of our films depict women as victims, dominated by their male partners. Not only is such abuse shown as normal, but the way out is frequently portrayed by a male hero coming to rescue the woman from her abusive partner. This reinforces a message that men are both the perpetrators and the savior, and in both roles they are in control. Neither element of these stories—the abuse nor the rescue—empowers women. These messages reinforce the idea that it is normal for women to be controlled by men; we simply hope that they are good men. In addition to such storylines, media messages regularly reinforce stereotypes about masculinity, objectify women, and portray sexual violence as normative and acceptable (Thompson).

It is true that media tends to be the scape goat of societal problems while it is only one among many factors. However, it is non-the-less important to consider how it continues to make intimate partner violence normal within society.

CHILDHOOD EXPOSURE TO INTER-PARENTAL VIOLENCE

One of the other primary factors that continues to make intimate partner violence normal within society is exposure of children to inter-parental violence.

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A national survey conducted by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention found that the number of children in the US who are exposed to intimate partner violence on an annual basis is between 10 and 20 percent. Conservative estimates put it at more than 15 million children. When you consider how many will witness intimate partner violence during childhood or adolescence, the statistics rise to an incredible 33 percent of all children in the US (Hart 41).

Another way to look at the numbers is to consider how many children of abused mothers will witness the abuse. In the United States, that number is 88 percent. 88 percent of all children whose mothers suffer abuse are witnesses of it. 64 percent witness the abuse by age three. Only 30 percent of these children ever receive counseling ("Selected Research Results on Violence Against Women").

Studies show that parents drastically underestimate the exposure of their children. In instances where parents reported that children were not exposed to the violence, 21 percent of these children were able to give detailed accounts of incidents (Hart 41).

Of all the instances in which children witness intimate partner violence, in 78 percent of them the abusers are male (Hart 40). This constitutes a mass impact not only on violent relational norms but also gender roles within violence.

THE EFFECTS OF CHILDHOOD EXPOSURE

Witnessing abuse in early years also plays a role in whether or not an individual is able to identity abuse in adulthood, according to a report released by the National Criminal Justice Reference Service. It also greatly increases an individual's risk of becoming either a victim or a abuser later in life. Men who witnessed domestic violence as children are twice as likely to abuse their intimate partners as men who did not (*Research Round-Up: Children & Domestic Violence*). Similarly, women who witnessed domestic violence as a child have twice the risk of victimization (Hart 86).

One explanation for the increased risk is that exposure to intimate partner violence during childhood impedes children's capacity to regulate emotional responses within situations of

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conflict. This limitation increases their risk of engaging in violent relationships (Hart 86). In addition, children can come to see violence as a tool for exerting power or resolving conflict (*Research Round-Up: Children & Domestic Violence*). As a result, those who witness domestic violence as a child are more likely to use violence in their adult relationships whenever conflict arises (Hart 86).

These findings were reemphasized in a study of adult couples who engaged in intimate partner violence. The study sought to understand what type of violence these couples were most commonly exposed to as children and found the most common type to be inter-parental violence (Hart 62).

In particular, the effects of childhood exposure to inter-parental violence, form a cultural cycle in which children who witness intimate partner violence are more likely to engage in it as adults, exposing their own children. This cycle is aided by the other three factors—media, gender roles and relational norms of control. Together they constitute four primary ways in which society promotes un-healthy messages about intimate relationships and depict abuse as normal.

FROM ADOLESCENCE TO ADULTHOOD

Each of these factors play a role in the ideas adolescents form about relationships. Gender norms and media messages are often reinforced through peer interactions. Those who witness themes of control and manipulation or incidents of violence at home are even more likely to fully assimilate these into their ideas of love. Without contradicting messages or examples, control and even violence can become a part of an adolescent's understanding of what it means to be in an intimate relationship (Newcomb).

The levels of violence being experienced in teen dating relationships are incredibly concerning when coupled with research that shows once relationship violence begins in early adolescence, it tends to persist into adulthood. In fact, several studies have found that for most adults engaged in domestic violence either as victims or perpetrators, that violence started in adolescence (Hart 86).

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Teens carry the patterns of aggression learned in early relationships into relationships later in life, making teen dating violence a priority in addressing violence against women.

GLOBAL TO LOCAL APPROACH

These findings are not by any means restricted to the United States or any one region of the world. Intimate partner violence is an issue that crosses cultural, economic, and geographic boundaries (Thompson). In many, if not most of the countries of the world, issues of gender roles and male dominance are prevalent, as are ideas of control and violence in relationships.

The Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey found that with other variables accounted for, controlling behaviors by husbands or partners were associated with four times greater likelihoods of domestic violence. Based on their research, they concluded that controlling behaviors by a husband or partner are significant precursors to both physical and psychological abuse (Antai).

The implications of child exposure to inter-parental violence are also witnessed across geographic and cultural bounds. A study conducted in Mexico showed that 60 – 70 percent of children who witness domestic violence will engage in violent relationships later in life. Tanya Moreno who directs Community Education and Outreach at the Community Against Violence organization in Taos recognizes the importance of communicating healthy messages about relationships to adolescents. Her work centers around youth in an effort to stop domestic violence before it starts (Thompson).

In the United States, more than 1 in 3 women have experienced rape and or physical violence by an intimate partner (Black). In North Carolina, the rates are even higher with 43.9 percent of women having experienced rape or physical violence by an intimate partner as compared to 35.6 percent nationally (Black). Those aged 18-34 are the most vulnerable, experiencing the highest levels of intimate partner violence. 54 percent of female rape victims were first raped before the age of 18 and women who were raped in childhood are twice as likely to be raped as adults (“Intimate Partner Violence, 1993–2010”).

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SOLUTIONS

Given the potential severe and longstanding consequences of teen dating violence, there is a strong need for prevention and intervention efforts that focus on the quality of relationships and educating teens on healthy relational norms (Reppucci).

A study in New York found that educational programs reduced sexual harassment by 26-34 percent six months post follow-up (Taylor). The study was conduced on class-room based curricular in 30 public middle schools. Over 2,500 students participated in an intervention program called *Shifting Boundaries*. Six sessions covered topics such as consequences of domestic violence, forming healthy relationships and gender construction. As a part of the intervention, students also identified unsafe spots which were then given security presence. As a whole, the program was found to reduce sexual harassment by 26-34%.

The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey highlights the importance of such school programs in fighting intimate partner violence: “From preschool through the teen years, young people are refining the skills they need to form positive relationships with others. It is important to promote healthy relationships among young people and prevent patterns of dating violence that can last into adulthood. It is also important to reinforce respectful relationships among peers to prevent sexual harassment and bullying” (Black).

Compass Center is one organization within North Carolina that is addressing teen dating violence in their efforts to fight violence against women. Compass was the result of a 2012 merger between the Family Violence Prevention Center of Orange County and The Women’s Center. It’s mission is to help individuals and families prevent and end domestic violence and become self-sufficient.

In addition to their domestic violence services, Compass has created programs targeted towards adolescents. Their program work with schools in the Chapel Hill/Carrboro district. Their largest, *Teens Climb High* is an empowerment program for middle school girls, specifically targeting those from low income families. It operates with after-school and enrichment activities and is complimented by two additional, specific programs that are available to both boys and girls.

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Start Strong is a teen dating violence prevention program that Compass offers to 6th and 8th graders through health education classrooms. The program focuses in on preventing dating violence by providing healthy messages on what relationships look like. It discusses bullying, violence in the home, and dynamics of healthy relationships.

In addition to their teen dating violence prevention program, Compass also runs a complimentary program to help adolescents think critically about media in the role on gender and image construction. M.A.G.I.C (Media Analysis of Gender and Image Construction) is a presentation based program available for both middle and high school youth. As a form of media literacy, it trains adolescents on how to analyze messages being portrayed by the media, giving them the skills to think critically and either accept or reject the messages. Compass has found that learning to evaluate media is an important process for adolescents to be able to recognize unhealthy behaviors encouraged by the media and avoid them.

CONCLUSION

Violence against women is not only a pressing issue, but a core component in addressing every other area of women's equality. With the vast majority of violence against women being intimate partner violence, it is by and large a relational problem—one that spans across ages and geography. The normalcy of abuse and control in relationships must be confronted as a part of preventing violence against women.

As stated by The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey, "The promotion of respectful, nonviolent relationships is not just the responsibility of individuals and partners, but also of the communities and society in which they live. It is important to continue addressing the beliefs, attitudes and messages that are deeply embedded in our social structures and that create a social climate that condones… intimate partner violence" (Black).

As a relational issue, intimate partner violence calls for individuals and society as a whole to work to promote healthy norms and messages that support equal and non-violent relationships.

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