

## A Depth Psychological Examination

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### INTRODUCTION

A Depth Psychological Examination of Violence against Women Gender equality has been well-studied, debated, and lobbied for at local, national and international levels for at least the past two decades [1]. The issue of gender equality perforates multiple spectra such as education, employment, politics, civil rights and marriage. Differences in definitions, interpretation, contexts and aims regarding gender equality have made research into the matter difficult and divergent [2]. While research into the effects and causes of gender inequality remain inconclusive and diverse, statistics show that gender-based violence in general and violence against women in particular, continues to persist globally. Evidence of the abuse inflicted on women – whether verbally, emotionally, physically, economically or in any other form – has been so rampant that it has fueled civilian organizations and political leaders in pushing for equal rights and justice for women globally [3].

Much effort, both in research and in practice, has been put forth towards protecting women from abuse, seeking justice for victims of violence against women and ensuring a much safer environment for future generations of women. However, to be effective in achieving these goals, it is essential to understand the causes and motivations of perpetrators who inflict violence against women and the reasons why some women accept such violence. This paper will explore the continuing epidemic of violence against women from a depth psychological perspective by studying the causes and etiologies of violence against women, with a specific focus on the Middle East. I will present different perspectives and theories on the psychology of violence and relate such theories to violence against women. Lastly, I will present my own perspective on the causes and motivators of violence against women as taken from my studies in depth psychology and my personal experience as a witness to violence against women in the Middle East.

### VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND DEPTH PSYCHOLOGY

Violence against women, which is considered as a violation of basic human rights, has been well studied globally in the past few decades [4]. The continuing prevalence of this phenomenon has led anthropologists, psychologists, sociologists and political scientists to research on the causes, motivations and effects of violence against women on both the perpetrators of violence and their victims. Such studies resulted in varying explanations and theories regarding the issue; however, a common theme in these theories is that the tendency for violence against women appears to be culturally motivated for most persons [5-7]. This theme is also supported by statistics, as race and culture can be directly related to violence against women; which is particularly true in the Middle East [5-8].

In patriarchal societies such as many in the Middle East, women are believed and perceived to be objects possessed by men. Single women must be humble, covered and quiet. Women who lose their virginity before they are married are considered unclean and are often ostracized from their community and society. Before they are wed, women must obey an elderly male – a father, brother or uncle – in almost everything they do, and even with regard to who they are to marry. After they are married, women become the property of their husbands, who hold the right to control their movement and relationships. This power that men hold over their wives ultimately leads them to perpetrate violence on their wives, often to assert their superiority and to scare their wives so that the latter remain faithful.

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Related to the assertion of control and power over their significant other is the power of money to establish superiority. Because men are often the sole wage-earners in their families, holding and controlling how the family spends money also asserts their superiority and power. Based on my fieldwork, *Violence against Women in the Middle East*, this perception is evidenced by women who report that their husbands control how much money is spent on food and other necessities. Some women also report that they were, at more than one occasion, left at home with their children without any money to spend on food and were forced to beg their husbands for money to buy food, which was obviously pleasing to their husbands. There are also women who indicate that despite knowing about their husbands' infidelity, choose to remain in the relationship for a lack of choice, i.e., if they left their cheating husbands who control the money, their children may be left to die out of hunger and malnutrition. The imposition of power and control on women's economic, physiological and emotional needs allow men to ultimately control women's psychological health, thereby influencing their decisions and actions.

From a historical and cultural perspective, the enduring and prevalent practice of inflicting violence against women results from dominant patriarchal values and repressive societal and religious laws. The phenomena may be explained simply, and succinctly, in terms of cultural and religious traditions. By taking a depth psychological perspective, however, violence against women can be viewed as a result of collective forces that lead men to believe that it is their right and responsibility to dominate women, including their mothers, wives, daughters and sisters. From this vantage point, violence against women can be viewed as a cultural violence, as it stems from the collective unconscious, i.e., it is an archetype that is inherited and built into each individual's psyche. In this sense, the tendency to inflict violence on women not only stems from an inner tendency, but also emanates from one's culture and environment. As an archetype, culturally-accepted violence against women is intrinsic in both men and women – men see it as natural to be superior and women also perceive oppression to be normal or 'how things are.' These perceptions are not communicated or taught directly to people; rather they are built into their psyche and are thus manifest in personal encounters as the psyche influences thought, behavior, action and personality.

Violence against women may also be embedded in one's shadow. This is well illustrated by studying young Middle Eastern boys who grow up in a family and community wherein adult men inflict violence on women. While these boys may not be victims of violence – though there is evidence that some boys also become victims of gender-based violence – they are often witnesses to violence perpetrated on women or family violence [9]. Witnessing violence against women and without knowing how to

explain or understand such a phenomenon, these boys project themselves as the perpetrators of violence; thus collecting in their shadows such tendencies for violence against women. Additionally, children who witness domestic violence have greater tendencies to exhibit antisocial behavior and have dysfunctional relations [10].

## THE PSYCHOLOGY OF VIOLENCE AND ITS PREVENTION

High crime rates, reports of brutality among ordinary citizens and armed officers, riot acts and terrorism and the staggering number of domestic violence cases are indicative of the spread of violent behavior among people around the world. Much evidence in research and statistics exist on the forms, rates, and extent of violent behavior, which can occur within intimate relationships or among strangers. Given the prevalence of such behavior, academics, psychiatrists, social workers and other public servants have studied its effects on victims and have taken measures to help these victims heal and obtain justice. While much evidence exists on this issue and great steps have been taken to protect victims, experts remain divided on the perceived roots, causes and risk factors of violent behavior. The reasons and rationales of perpetrators of violence often have similarities yet remain complex so that identifying propensity for, or risk factors of, violence becomes difficult [11].

Asserted that there are no clear-cut defining factors that measure a person's risk for violent behavior. Rather, a combination of personal attributes – including personality factors, attitudes, and perceptions – and social contexts were found to be factors that influence violent behavior. As people's personalities are complex and relatively unpredictable and because people can have various reactions to different environment stimuli, it is close to impossible to lay out a concise list that identifies risk of violent behavior. However, psychologists and behavioral analysts provide general behavioral characteristics or habits that may indicate violent behavior, as developed from research and experience. Research has also revealed that certain stimuli, events and patterns have caused violent and deviant behavior in people who may or may not have histories of such behavior.

While there is no exact scientific way to determine predisposition or predict propensity for violent behavior, there are identified spectra through which violence – whether inflicted on one's self, on a loved one, or to a stranger – may be examined and understood. Such an insight into the forms, causes and effects of violence may assist psychologists, sociologists, criminologists and other professionals in designing ways to identify propensity for violent behavior, prevent acts of violence, treat violent behavior and to heal traumas caused by such acts towards victims. From a depth psychological perspective, these spectra provide a general categorical description of the underlying motivations for violent behavior, which a person

may not be aware of, as these motives lie in the shadow within one's personal unconscious. Gaining awareness of stimuli, circumstances or characteristics that identify risk or propensity for violent behavior will help control such behavior and lessen the damage such acts might cause.

### THE PERSONAL SPECTRUM OF VIOLENCE

When taken from a personified perspective, violence is perceived by its perpetrator as a pleasurable experience. Freud [12] indicated that violence that is inflicted on others as a means to attain organ-pleasure is derived from sexual instincts that are developed in some individuals. Inflicting violence on others as a form of pleasure is referred to as sadism. The pleasure attained by individuals in sadist acts result not only from inflicting pain or violence on others, but also exemplifies the pleasure achieved by exercising power over another person. Additionally, while sadist acts exhibit the perpetrator's power over another's physical well-being, such violent acts consequently affect the latter's emotional and psychological well-being. For some perpetrators, such exhibitions of power and violent behavior ultimately lead to homicide – the cessation of life of another human being.

Provided that sadist acts are carried out by perpetrators in order to feel and attain pleasure, it is important to understand how or why such persons feel pleasure when inflicting pain or violence towards others. Such an understanding will allow us to identify behavioral patterns that may be indicative of such emotions, which we can use to prevent future violent acts and to help them repress or lose the desire to inflict pain on others. Ideally, it would be best to recognize sexual sadism in persons ahead of time, i.e., when they are only preoccupied with sadistic sexual fantasies but have yet to act out such fantasies. This is, however, often difficult to identify beforehand as sexual sadists often keep their desires and fantasies to themselves. Additionally, there have been cases wherein people who have sadistic sexual fantasies find such to be repugnant and disturbing; thus they seek psychotherapy to rid these fantasies. However, some psychiatrists and psychologists argue that therapy would fail in some sexual sadists, who subsequently become psychopaths in adult life [13].

In sadism, the perpetrator is the subject and the person or victim on whom pain and violence is inflicted is the object [12]. When the perpetrator or the subject turns sadistic fantasies onto his own ego, thereby making himself the object, it is characterized as masochism. In psychiatry, masochists derive and experience pleasure in receiving pain, whether inflicted by themselves or by others. While some experts argue that the pleasure derived from sadism and masochism may not always be sexual [14]. Contended that these fantasies and compulsions derive from sexual instincts. It is agreed, however, that perpetrators often shift from sadism to masochism and vice versa, and that these personality characteristics should be identified and managed

before associated acts result in death, whether as suicide or homicide.

### THE CULTURAL AND ECONOMIC SPECTRA OF VIOLENCE

In the cultural aspect, violence is inflicted on others or one's self for various different reasons and purposes: gang members show violent behavior against other gangs to indicate their superiority, men inflict pain and violence on their female partners to show dominance and women inflict pain on themselves out of sacrifice for beauty or love. In the context of economics, people may inflict direct or indirect violence against others out of desperation, survival or economic reasons. Such acts of violence may be observed in times of crisis or disaster, as people fight against one another to gain access to food, water and shelter. As with sadism and masochism, risk factors for such behavior cannot easily be identified by simply examining personalities, attitudes and hypothetically desperate situations. For example, three persons who are exposed to the same desperate context, such as having lost their homes and families due to a tornado, may react differently: one may become violent toward the others as they scour for food, another may still be willing to share, while the other one may have suicidal tendencies. In other words, psychology or psychiatry cannot accurately predict what people might do when faced with difficult situations, especially when survival is on the line, because people have different attitudes, perceptions and cultural backgrounds.

Money as an archetype is similar and related to power. Money is part of our everyday lives and provides us access to most of the things we need and want. The possibilities one can achieve with the use of money makes it a powerful tool for which many people become obsessed. Greed, the intense desire to attain money and wealth, can subsequently bring out violent behavior in people as they seek to acquire more earthly possessions. There have been countless reports about people going to extreme lengths to obtain more wealth, such as tax evasion, plunder, theft, fraud, larceny and homicide. People who resort to these acts come from all ages, races, and educational and cultural backgrounds, have different personalities and attitudes and belong to different places in the economic ladder. The main similarity among such persons is that they are motivated by greed, which drives them to obtain more money regardless of who they hurt or what form of pain and violence they inflict.

On the other hand, there are people who resort to violent behavior in the quest for acquiring money not because of greed but for survival. There are also cases wherein ordinary persons with no prior record of violent behavior resort to theft and armed robbery when they find themselves without a job and having a family to feed. In such cases, the acquisition of money remains the objective but the motivation is no longer greed but, as they believe, necessity. Nevertheless, in both cases, there is no definite way to

identify which persons will become violent if placed in those contexts. As such, the prevention programs cannot be specifically-tailored to persons who are of higher risk for such acts because they are not readily identified. Means of preventing such acts would be general policies and programs such as social welfare assistance to unemployed and homeless persons and adequate policies that control wealth distribution and monitor assets of both government officials and private personnel.

### VIOLENCE AS A CONTINUUM

Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois [7] studied the rationales and implications of violence people inflict against each other from an anthropological perspective. The volume includes anthologies on violence and violent behavior that range from everyday violence inflicted by ordinary people against each other to massive explosions of violence in times of war and resistance. By aligning large-scale and compounded forms of human violence with routine everyday aggression, the editors emphasize the need to recognize that violence is intertwined in societal norms and evident even in everyday encounters. This proposition has several important implications. One important implication is that it debunks most theories about the causes and origins of violence. Through the anthologies included in the volume, the editors reject the idea that violence can be easily categorized, explained and directly linked to cultural motivations. Instead, they present violence as a continuum, ranging from small-scale everyday violence to large-scale historical forms.

While the authors did not dwell much on gendered violence, their proposed continuum indicates that violence against women does not only occur in the private domain, but is also evident in the public domain. Additionally, viewing gender-based violence in this continuum grays the distinction between the public and private; hence, more persons become witnesses to violence, which further incorporates violence into the collective unconscious. Following this theory, victims of violence and those who witness such violence are greatly affected psychologically by these violent acts to the point that they soon become agents of violence themselves. In this sense, there may be no clear demarcations between the agent of violence, the victim of violence and the witness to such violence.

### PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

Research reveals that there is no exact way of identifying violent behavior in people until they exhibit some form of violence and are examined by psychiatrists. When a person causes violence against others, he may be examined, diagnosed and treated by a psychiatrist for any mental or personality disorder so that he can function well in the future with less risk of inflicting violence against others. However, there are many cases wherein persons who inflict violence on others are not referred to, and treated by, physicians because these persons either have no access to such facilities

or they refuse to acknowledge that they have done something wrong and that they need psychiatric help. Such is often the case in violence inflicted against women. From my experience, men who abuse and cause harm to women believe they have a valid reason for doing so. In some societies and religions, men are literally upheld as the higher or superior sex and such a perception cause women to submit to the men in their lives even if it means constantly enduring violence and abuse.

There are also situations in which women remain in the relationship despite being aware of their rights and knowing that it would be wiser to separate themselves from their abusive partners. While some might consider such women weak, these cases only exemplify the power and control men have over these women, which I believe is a continuing form of abuse. And while it is critical to study the underlying motives of men who commit violence and abuse their women in order to design ways to prevent such behavior, it is also important to understand the mechanisms through which women become susceptible to submitting themselves so that men have such a high degree of power over them. Depth psychology, in this situation, can be used to examine both sides of the scenario – understanding motivations to inflict abuse and understanding motives and rationales to accept abuse.

I believe that the main reason and motivation behind acts of violence against women is power: men assert their power over women by abusing them and proving they have control over women's physical, emotional and psychological pain and suffering; and women may be susceptible to believe that there is power in being in such a relationship, i.e., that they are resilient because they are able to withstand abuse, and that accepting such abuse may mean that they help their men become more powerful and that such power and stature is transferred to them as their partners.

People who witness violence against women may react to such experiences in different ways. Some may become more inclined to become agents or perpetrators of violence themselves as they perceive it to be related to the possession of power; while others may be more inclined to not inflict violence against women, as they have learned and absorbed the negative effects of such violence to one's psyche. Similar to the explanation presented by Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois [7], persons who witness violence may also fall within a continuum in terms of violent tendencies, i.e., some may have very few tendencies to inflict violence against women while others may become extreme agents of such violence.

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