

The Continuum of Violence Against Women

This concept was first outlined by Liz Kelly in *Surviving Sexual Violence (1988)*

- We need to change the framework for observing and analysing VAW – it is not necessarily deviant and episodic, but rather it is *normative* and *functional*: an everyday context for the lives and experiences of women and girls all over the world
- Investigations and public concern, if concentrating on the extremes of horrific cruelty and violence, may focus on these manifestations in isolation, but this is unhelpful if explanations and responses are sought
- In fact, they are extremes at one end of a spectrum of socially sanctioned male aggression, coercive behaviour and patriarchal norms
- For example, child sexual abuse/incest can be mapped on the continuum of 'normal' patriarchal family structures and relationships; rape is at the extreme end of a spectrum of sexual harassment and intimate intrusions which women and girls experience all the time
- 'typical' and 'aberrant' violences shade into one another without clear demarcation
- All the different and varied manifestations of events, acts and behaviours must be located within the overarching gender order of inequality and domination, and understood as functioning to maintain that order (whether overt and personal, or hidden and structural)
- Without knowledge and critique of the *context* we cannot fully understand the meaning and consequences of VAW

Research, policy and practice has tended to categorise and maintain *distinctions* between many different and diverse 'events', but it is vital to recognise their *commonalities*: forms of coercion, abuse and assault which are used to control, constrain and limit the lives, status, movement and opportunities of women, and to facilitate the privilege and entitlement of men

So a definition of VAW might include the notion of 'a continuous series of elements or events that pass into one another and cannot be readily distinguished'.

- The idea of continuum should not be taken to mean a hierarchy of seriousness/severity
- It reflects the continuum of complex and interlinked experiences of harassment, violation, abuse, assault in the lives of individual women and children
- Although we usually say that domestic abuse is the most prevalent form of VAW, in fact most girls and women can recall at least one, if not many, incidents of 'intimate intrusion' (sexual harassment)
- In women's lives, there may be the experience of repeat victimisation by the same perpetrator, repeat victimisation by different perpetrators, who may be known (most common) or strangers (also widespread)

- The **forms** VAW takes include physical, sexual, against mobility, psychological/emotional, economic
- The **setting/contexts** can include domestic, workplace, education, community, public space, media, war/conflict, State, refugee/migration/globalised movement
- The **impacts, meanings and consequences** are remarkably consistent across the continuum of VAW:
 - threats to safety
 - limits on 'space for action' , agency, capacity
 - physical harm, injury, disability, infection, illness, death
 - betrayal/destruction of self-worth, safety and trust
 - dishonour, shame, disgrace (cultural, religious, social)
 - impact on earning power, achievements, livelihood, place in society, status
 - women who experience violence in different contexts may variously be characterised as victims, casualties, survivors, and also perpetrators/colluders

Intersectionality

There is an important and increasingly acknowledged recognition that individual women and social structures are affected in distinctive ways by the intersections of oppressions and circumstances (disability, sexuality, age, class, ethnicity, nationality/status, poverty, beliefs/ideologies). These are not just an accumulation of discriminations, but each affects the others to constitute multidimensional lived compounds of complex experience: layers of domination affect not only the experience of abuse, but also the resources, support and opportunities to survive/end it.

Any understanding of VAW must take account of the important commonalities, but also of the contextual, constructed distinctive aspects of the experience of VAW in real lives. The categories, policies and service provisions which effectively enable us to see and respond only to part of the complex story are practically limited and theoretically inadequate for disclosing and examining the roots of gender inequality and the constraints/violations used to control the lives of women from before birth until death