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THE CONCEPT OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AND ITS TYPES

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Annotation: This article explores the theoretical underpinnings of gender-based violence (GBV), tracing its historical development from cultural norms to its recognition in legal and human rights frameworks. The study also provides a comparative overview of legal and sociological definitions, emphasizing the difference between GBV and domestic violence, presenting a comprehensive typology of gender-based violence, classifying it into physical, psychological, sexual, economic, digital, and structural forms. It emphasizes how these forms are interconnected and often reinforced by digital platforms and institutional structures. It analyzes the sociocultural and psychological roots of gender-based violence and examines how patriarchal power structures, gender norms, and systemic inequalities shape perpetrator behavior and affect victims' mental health

Keywords: Gender-based violence, patriarchy, human rights, feminist theory, social structures, symbolic violence, physical violence, sexual abuse, economic violence, cyber violence, institutional violence, digital harassment

Gender-based violence (GBV) has emerged as a significant area of interdisciplinary study and policy concern, engaging scholars and practitioners in fields as diverse as sociology, law, psychology, public health, and human rights. The theoretical foundations of GBV are deeply rooted in historical developments, socio-political contexts, and evolving legal norms. The recognition of gender-based violence as a social problem is a relatively recent phenomenon in legal and academic discourses, although the practices it encompasses are historically entrenched. In pre-modern societies, violence against women and gender minorities was often institutionalized and normalized through religious, cultural, and patriarchal systems. Acts such as marital rape, female genital mutilation, and honor killings were not only tolerated but sanctioned under certain customary and religious laws.

The rise of feminist movements in the 1960s and 1970s marked a pivotal moment in the conceptual development of GBV. Radical and socialist feminists critiqued the patriarchal structures that subordinated women and identified violence as a mechanism of male dominance and control. Seminal works, such as Susan Brownmiller's *Against Our Will* (1975), redefined rape as an act of political power rather than mere sexual deviance. By the 1990s, GBV had become an established concept in international human rights law, particularly following the 1993 United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, which formally recognized violence against women as a violation of human rights. [1]

Over time, the term "gender-based violence" expanded beyond violence against cisgender women to include individuals of all gender identities, especially recognizing the vulnerabilities of transgender, non-binary, and gender non-conforming people. Contemporary scholarship thus frames GBV as a multidimensional phenomenon resulting from the intersection of gender norms, power hierarchies, and structural inequalities. The definitions of GBV differ across legal systems and academic disciplines, reflecting varying understandings of gender, violence, and social justice. From a legal perspective, GBV is typically defined in terms of acts that result in, or are likely to result in, physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to individuals on the basis of their gender. The United Nations defines GBV as: "Any act of gender-based violence that

results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering... including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life." This legal definition has been adopted and adapted in various international treaties, such as the Istanbul Convention (2011), and national legislations. [2]

In sociological terms, GBV is analyzed not only as discrete acts of harm but as systemic practices rooted in gendered power relations. Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *symbolic violence*, for example, helps elucidate how subtle, everyday practices – such as sexist language or institutional exclusion – reproduce inequality and normalize aggression against marginalized genders. Gender-based violence is thus seen not merely as deviant behavior but as a reflection of broader socio-structural conditions, including patriarchy, heteronormativity, economic dependency, and state inaction.

Moreover, intersectionality theory, as advanced by Kimberlé Crenshaw, has added complexity to sociological definitions by highlighting how race, class, sexuality, and other identities compound vulnerability to GBV. [3] For instance, a low-income Black transgender woman may face multiple, intersecting forms of violence that cannot be understood through a single-axis framework. Although often used interchangeably, gender-based violence and domestic violence are distinct yet overlapping concepts. Clarifying the difference is essential for accurate legal categorization, policy design, and academic analysis.

The theoretical foundations of gender-based violence are built upon decades of interdisciplinary research and activism. From its historical emergence as a feminist issue to its current status as a global human rights concern, the concept of GBV continues to evolve. Legal definitions provide the necessary tools for prosecution and protection, while sociological frameworks uncover the deeper structural roots of violence. Differentiating GBV from domestic violence allows for more targeted and effective interventions. A comprehensive understanding of these foundations is essential for scholars, lawmakers, and practitioners committed to combating all forms of gendered harm and fostering a more just and equitable society.

Gender-based violence (GBV) encompasses a wide spectrum of harmful behaviors directed at individuals based on their gender identity or expression. Its multidimensional nature requires a nuanced typology that accounts for the forms, mechanisms, and contexts in which such violence occurs. The most commonly recognized typologies of GBV fall under these four interrelated categories. These forms may occur simultaneously or independently and often overlap in complex ways.

- Physical Violence: Physical gender-based violence refers to the intentional use of physical force with the potential to cause harm, injury, disability, or death. Common manifestations include hitting, slapping, choking, burning, or use of weapons. In many societies, physical violence is most often perpetrated by intimate partners, reflecting deep-rooted power imbalances and patriarchal norms. Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) is a major subcategory here, disproportionately affecting women and marginalized gender identities. World Health Organization (WHO) data show that globally, 1 in 3 women experiences physical and/or sexual violence in her lifetime, most often by a partner. [4]
- Psychological Violence: Also known as emotional or mental abuse, psychological GBV includes behaviors that cause emotional harm and undermine a person's sense of self-worth, agency, and mental stability. It encompasses threats, intimidation, humiliation, isolation, and manipulation. Unlike physical violence, psychological abuse leaves no visible scars, yet its impact is equally profound and long-lasting. Victims often experience anxiety, depression, PTSD, and suicidal ideation. Despite its severity, psychological GBV remains underreported and often underestimated due to societal normalization of emotional control, particularly within patriarchal family structures.
- Sexual Violence: Sexual GBV includes any non-consensual sexual act or attempt to obtain a sexual act through coercion, threats, or force. It ranges from harassment to rape and includes practices such as marital rape, sexual exploitation, and trafficking for sexual purposes. Cultural taboos and victim-blaming attitudes contribute to widespread underreporting of sexual

violence, especially in conservative or patriarchal societies. Furthermore, legal systems in many countries still lack specific legislation criminalizing spousal rape or addressing consent comprehensively.

- Economic Violence: Economic GBV involves actions that control or restrict a person's access to financial resources, employment, or economic independence. It can manifest in forced financial dependence, denial of inheritance or property rights, wage theft, and prohibiting access to education or work. In many cases, economic abuse is embedded in traditional gender roles that prioritize male financial control within families or communities. It reinforces dependency and limits the victim's ability to leave abusive relationships or assert autonomy. Economic violence also includes discriminatory workplace practices, such as unequal pay, sexual extortion (sextortion), and occupational segregation based on gender.

In the digital age, the internet has become a new frontier for gender-based violence, introducing novel forms of abuse that mirror and amplify offline harms. Online/digital GBV refers to acts of violence carried out through digital means, including social media, messaging platforms, and other online technologies. Cyberbullying involves the repeated use of digital communication to harass, intimidate, or threaten someone. Gendered cyberbullying often targets women, feminists, and LGBTQ+ individuals through misogynistic messages, public shaming, and death or rape threats. Online harassment may be orchestrated by individuals or coordinated groups (e.g., digital mobs), particularly targeting outspoken or visible figures such as journalists, activists, and politicians.

Non-Consensual Distribution of Intimate Images (Revenge Porn): This form of digital sexual violence entails sharing private sexual content without consent, often by former partners as an act of retaliation or control. Victims suffer from reputational damage, psychological trauma, professional consequences, and, in extreme cases, suicidal behavior. The gendered nature of this phenomenon is evident, as women are overwhelmingly targeted, while perpetrators often remain legally unpunished due to legislative gaps. Emerging technologies like deepfakes have enabled the creation of non-consensual explicit content using synthetic media, disproportionately targeting women and public figures. These manipulated images are used to discredit, blackmail, or sexually exploit victims. Additionally, gendered disinformation campaigns – false narratives that reinforce gender stereotypes or attack gender equality – undermine democratic institutions and human rights advocacy efforts.

Digital tools are increasingly used by abusers to monitor, control, or stalk victims. This includes GPS tracking, spyware installation, or constant checking of communication logs. Such digital coercion limits autonomy and fosters a climate of fear and dependency. Online GBV is especially concerning because of its global reach, anonymity of perpetrators, and the viral nature of harmful content. Yet, digital platforms have been slow to address abuse, and existing legal frameworks are often inadequate for redress. Beyond individual acts, gender-based violence is embedded within and perpetuated by larger societal structures and institutions, making it systemic in nature.

Structural GBV refers to the normalization of violence through gender ideologies that position men as dominant and women as subordinate. Cultural norms that valorize male aggression, female submissiveness, and heteronormative family roles contribute to the widespread social acceptance of GBV. From early childhood, gendered socialization perpetuates beliefs that justify male entitlement and female obedience, laying the groundwork for tolerating abuse. Judicial systems in many countries reflect and reinforce gender inequalities. Police may dismiss complaints of domestic violence as "private matters," courts may blame victims for sexual assault, and legal definitions of rape may exclude marital or non-penetrative acts. Furthermore, institutions such as religious authorities, traditional councils, and even healthcare systems may trivialize or ignore GBV due to patriarchal biases. For example, some legal systems require corroborating evidence or proof of physical resistance in rape cases, effectively placing the burden of proof on victims. Others fail to criminalize forced marriage or treat honor killings as mitigated crimes. These legal blind spots serve to institutionalize impunity for perpetrators.

Economic systems that limit women's access to resources, land, or credit reinforce dependency and increase vulnerability to violence. Political structures that exclude women from leadership or policy-making perpetuate male-dominated agendas, often sidelining GBV as a low-priority issue. Moreover, conflict and displacement exacerbate structural GBV. During war, women and girls are often subjected to mass sexual violence, trafficking, or forced labor, with little institutional recourse. Gendered violence is used as a weapon of war, a strategy of terror, and a method of ethnic cleansing.

Understanding gender-based violence (GBV) requires more than categorizing its forms or documenting its frequency. A comprehensive academic investigation must explore the sociocultural and psychological dimensions that sustain, justify, and reproduce such violence across generations and geographies. These dimensions include the root causes embedded in patriarchy and power structures, the psychological impact on victims, and the behavioral and socialization patterns of perpetrators. Gender-based violence is not random or episodic – it is deeply embedded in the power hierarchies of patriarchal societies. Patriarchy, understood as a system of male dominance institutionalized through cultural, legal, and religious means, is the principal ideological engine of GBV.

Patriarchal systems position men as natural authority figures in family, political, and economic spheres. In such systems, male violence against women is often normalized, excused, or minimized. Feminist scholars such as Sylvia Walby and Judith Lorber argue that patriarchy is not merely about individual attitudes but about systemic privilege and institutional control, wherein male aggression is socialized as protective or disciplinary rather than oppressive. [5] Religious doctrines, customary laws, and family traditions frequently reinforce male superiority, thereby legitimizing control over women's bodies, movements, and choices.

From early childhood, individuals are socialized into rigid gender roles – men are expected to be assertive, dominant, and unemotional; women are encouraged to be submissive, nurturing, and self-sacrificing. These prescriptive norms create a fertile ground for GBV, as any deviation from the ideal gender role may invite punishment. For instance, women who assert independence, express sexuality, or reject male advances are often subjected to verbal abuse, harassment, or violence. Men who exhibit vulnerability or refuse to conform to aggressive masculinity may also become targets of violence, showing how GBV enforces gender conformity through coercion.

At the core of GBV lies an unequal distribution of power – economic, social, legal, and emotional. This imbalance manifests in various contexts: husbands exerting control over wives, employers over female workers, teachers over female students, or institutions over marginalized gender identities. Michel Foucault's theory of power illustrates that such control is not always overt but often internalized, normalized, and diffused across relationships and institutions. [6] Violence becomes a tool to assert or re-establish lost dominance, particularly in moments when women gain economic independence or challenge traditional roles.

The sociocultural and psychological dimensions of gender-based violence reveal the depth and complexity of the problem. Rooted in patriarchal power structures, reinforced by gender norms, and perpetuated through institutional complicity, GBV is sustained by systems as much as individuals. The psychological toll on victims – ranging from trauma to social stigma – is compounded by societal neglect and legal failures. Meanwhile, perpetrators are often socialized into violent roles, operating under entitlement and seeking control rather than mutuality or respect. Any serious response to GBV must therefore address not only the symptoms of violence but its causes. This includes transforming cultural narratives, reforming legal institutions, expanding mental health services for survivors, and restructuring the socialization of boys and men. Only then can the cycle of violence be broken – not temporarily, but structurally and enduringly.

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