Dysfunctional Couple Communication as Precursor to Gender-Based Violence: From Silent Threat to Overt Aggression

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Abstract

Gender-based violence is never a sudden event, but rather the culmination of a gradual relational and psychological process, triggered by complex dynamics that often manifest below the threshold of immediate recognition.

This article analyzes the precursors of gender-based violence—such as implicit or explicit threats, coercive control, social isolation, cognitive distortions, and traumatic bonding—considering them as early warning signs of risk. In clinical settings, recognizing these early indicators is essential to prevent escalation and interrupt the cycle of violence before it evolves into more severe forms.

Through an interdisciplinary perspective that integrates criminological, psychopathological, and sociological literature—supported by institutional sources (EIGE, WHO, FRA)—this contribution aims to identify those "weak" behaviors that precede violent escalation and that, if properly recognized, allow for effective preventive interventions.

The early detection of these elements enables us to interpret violence as a progressive sequence rather than an unexpected episode, thus providing both theoretical and practical tools for risk assessment and targeted intervention. The discussion concludes by emphasizing the need for a coherent system of monitoring and multidisciplinary response, one that translates risk awareness into protective action. Viewing violence as a progressive sequence rather than an isolated incident also allows for the refinement of clinical and operational tools in risk evaluation and targeted clinical intervention.

Keywords: gender-based violence; precursors acts; coercive control; early warning signs; relational risk; escalation; dysfunctional factors.

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1.Introduction

Gender-based violence (GBV) represents one of the most complex and persistent violations of human rights in the contemporary era, with an impact extending far beyond the individual level, affecting family, social, health, and economic spheres. Contrary to common perception, it does not manifest as an isolated or sudden act; it is often a silent, insidious process that finds fertile ground in patriarchal cultural models, structural inequalities, and deeply rooted emotional distortions.

This paper aims to provide a technical-scientific exploration of the precursor acts of gender-based violence—behaviors and relational dynamics that, while not immediately constituting crimes, represent genuine risk indicators for escalation toward more severe forms of abuse. Through an interdisciplinary examination integrating criminological analysis, psychopathological perspectives, and sociocultural reflection (Calderaro et al., 2025a), this work seeks to construct a theoretical and operational framework capable of identifying these sentinel signs.

Drawing from definitions developed by authoritative international bodies such as the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) and the World Health Organization (WHO), this paper examines the primary early indicators of gender-based violence, highlighting their predictive value within the phenomenon's cyclical dynamic. Special attention is given to risk assessment models, such as the SARA and ZEUS protocols, which serve as operational tools to translate theoretical insights into concrete prevention and protection interventions.

2. The Structural Roots of Gender-Based Violence

Gender-based violence is a structural, systemic, and transversal phenomenon rooted in patriarchal sociocultural models where gender inequality is normalized and often legitimized by implicit norms and historical legacies.

According to the United Nations' definition, gender-based violence includes "any form of aggression based on gender that causes, or is likely to cause, physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women. This definition also encompasses threats, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, regardless of whether they occur in the public or private sphere" (United Nations, 1993; World Health Organization, 2021).

Gender-based violence can affect both women and men, but the majority of victims are women. This type of violence is not an isolated event but a social, cultural, and relational process that manifests in various forms, from domestic violence to femicide, stalking, and sexual violence. It is fueled by structural inequalities and mechanisms of power and control. Data from the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) show that approximately 33% of women in Europe have experienced at least one episode of physical or sexual violence by a partner or ex-partner in their lifetime (European Institute for Gender equality (EIGE), 2024; European Union Agency for fundamental rights (FRA), 2014; WHO, 2021).

The phenomenon takes on particularly alarming connotations when considering the growing number of femicides, many of which are preceded by behavioral and psychological signs that are underestimated or not detected. In response to this critical issue, EIGE published a strategic document in 2021 that identifies a series of early indicators of violence in intimate relationships, useful for assessing the risk of escalation and developing effective prevention interventions (European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), 2019).

In this context, it can be said that gender-based violence is part of a behavioral continuum that escalates from symbolic prevarication to physical subjugation, including less

overt but no less damaging forms such as economic abuse, systematic devaluation, emotional isolation, and control exerted through digital tools. This continuum is supported by a cultural framework that legitimizes the idea of possession and submission of women, reinforcing male dominance.

In the legal field, the 2011 Istanbul Convention, ratified by Italy in 2013, officially recognized gender-based violence as a human rights violation and a form of discrimination. The text emphasizes that such violence is both a cause and a consequence of structural inequality between sexes and requires integrated policies, educational interventions, and institutional commitment to be effectively counteracted (Council of Europe. Council of Europe Portal. Action against violence against women and domestic violence Istanbul Convention, 2011).

Beyond its individual and relational dimensions, the phenomenon also has a collective and systemic impact: it produces significant consequences in terms of public health, social well-being, and collective safety. Gender-based violence is a primary risk factor for the mental and physical health of women, with effects often extending to children, family members (Serban, 2023, 2025), and the community as a whole (World Health Organization (WHO), 2021).
Furthermore, the literature highlights a significant link between exposure to gender-based violence and socioeconomic inequalities.

Women with fewer economic resources, lower levels of education, or those belonging to ethnic minorities are more vulnerable, both in terms of risk exposure and in their ability to access protection and support services (United Nation Women, 2022). Such inequalities further aggravate the power imbalance between victims and perpetrators, making it more difficult to report abuse, leave a violent relationship, and undergo psychological recovery.

3. Typologies of Gender-Based Violence and the Phenomenon's Scope in Europe

Gender-based violence manifests through a plurality of forms, each acting with different intensity, visibility, and impact, but all aimed at maintaining an asymmetrical power dynamic between the perpetrator and the victim. The main typologies recognized by European institutions are: physical violence, which includes pushing, slapping, punching, biting, strangling, burning, and the use of blunt objects or weapons; sexual violence, which includes rape, forced intercourse, harassment, and any form of non-consensual sexual coercion; psychological violence, expressed through threats, humiliation, intimidation, isolation, pathological jealousy, and coercive control; economic violence, which is achieved by imposing financial dependence, preventing access to money or employment, and controlling resources; and stalking, a pervasive form of persecution that often precedes or intertwines with relational violence and can include surveillance, shadowing, unwanted contact, and recurring threats.

According to data collected by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) in a survey of over 42,000 women in 28 EU member states, 22% of respondents reported having experienced physical violence by a partner at least once in their lifetime, while 5% reported episodes of rape or attempted rape by a partner (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), 2014). Psychological violence is the most widespread, with 43% of women reporting at least one episode of threats, humiliation, isolation, or coercive control (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), 2014).

Economic violence, although less frequently reported, affects approximately 12% of women who live or have lived in intimate relationships, highlighting a subtle and progressive pattern that often accompanies other forms of abuse (European Union Agency for

Fundamental Rights (FRA), 2014). Stalking also presents significant data: one in five women (18%) reports having experienced obsessive harassment, in most cases by an ex-partner, with an average duration of episodes exceeding six months (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), 2014).

EIGE, in its monitoring of the phenomenon in Europe, highlights that the prevalence of violence is higher in countries with significant gender inequalities and less access to protection services. The Gender Equality Index shows an inverse correlation between the degree of gender parity and the prevalence of domestic violence: the more fragile the system of equality, the higher the social tolerance for abusive behaviors appears to be (European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), 2023).

4. Sentinel Behaviors and Dysfunctional Factors in the Genesis of Abuse

Gender-based violence does not emerge suddenly but develops through a gradual process, marked by a series of precursor behaviors that manifest over time, often in the form of disturbed relational dynamics, the exercise of control, and the progressive erosion of the other person's freedom. These acts, also known as early warning signs, represent structural risk indicators in both a preventive and investigative and judicial context.

The behavioral models that precede gender-based violence outline a testable and predictable trajectory that can be used for early risk identification. Among these, the "Cycle of Abuse" model, introduced by Lenore E. Walker in 1979, is a central reference. Based on an extensive survey conducted through interviews with 1,500 women victims of violence, Walker identified a cyclical model composed of three recurring phases: the first phase is the **"tension-building phase,"** where the partner shows the first warning signs, is irritable, possessive, and threatening, acting in an intimidating or aggressive manner while the woman tries to avoid conflict through emotional control and appeasement; this is followed by the **"acute violence phase,"** where the incident occurs. This phase is characterized by sudden and very intense explosions of anger and physical and sexual violence. This leads to the third and final phase, the **"honeymoon phase,"** where the partner shows remorse, apologizes for their actions, tries to reconcile with the victim, justifying themselves and promising to change, thereby reinforcing the victim's emotional bond and dependence (Walker, 1979).

This last phase is followed by a period of apparent calm, and then the cycle repeats with increasing escalation. The moments of calm reinforce the victim's hope, while promises of change mask control strategies.

A central aspect of the precursor acts of gender-based violence consists of the perpetrator's **cognitive distortions**—dysfunctional ways of processing reality and the relationship with the partner that create a favorable context for the emergence of violent conduct. These distortions tend to manifest from the initial stages of the relationship and can take various forms, including a dichotomous view of the partner, who is initially idealized and then systematically devalued. To this is added the external attribution of responsibility, through which the abuser shirks responsibility for their actions by justifying their behavior with statements such as: "you provoked me," "it's all your fault," or "I lost control because you..." This dynamic also includes the denial of the harm inflicted and the tendency to minimize the severity of their own behaviors. According to a 2025 study published in *Behavioral Sciences*, the main predictive variables for these distortions are: ambivalent sexist attitudes, i.e., the coexistence of protective and denigrating elements in the perception of women; low self-esteem; traumatic childhood experiences; and relational instability (Medinilla-Tena, Badenes-Sastre, & Expósito, 2025). These factors contribute to building

an internal narrative that justifies or rationalizes violence, making it difficult for the perpetrator to recognize its scope and for the victim to understand the risk.

A further anticipatory element is **traumatic bonding**, a psychological construct that describes the strong attachment that can develop between a victim and an aggressor in the presence of an intermittent abusive relationship. Dutton and Painter, pioneers in the study of this phenomenon, have shown how the cyclical nature of abuse, particularly the alternation between violent acts and affectionate or protective displays, triggers a form of emotional dependence in the victim very similar to that observed in contexts of captivity or in dysfunctional relationships with parental figures during childhood (Calderaro et al., 2025b). The trauma is not only caused by the violence but also by the emotional confusion that results from it. The victim struggles to distinguish between safe and dangerous moments and develops coping strategies that strengthen the bond rather than breaking it. This type of attachment, based on emotional discontinuity and the intermittent reduction of the threat, can be a decisive factor in the victim's failure to report the abuse, self-blame, or social withdrawal (Dutton & Painter, 1993).

Another key precursor to violence is the social and cultural normalization of abusive behaviors, often disguised as forms of attention or care. Obsessive jealousy, controlling movements, interfering in family or friend relationships, and the invasion of digital privacy are frequently presented as expressions of love or concern. In educational and cultural environments lacking emotional literacy, these signs are not recognized as dangerous by either the victim or the social context, but are accepted as personality traits or aspects of a couple's life. The most recent literature highlights how social tolerance for victim-blaming, controlling attitudes, and possessiveness constitutes a powerful risk amplifier, delaying external intervention and hindering the victim's request for help (Inmaculada Valor-Segura, 2011).

The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) highlights that within the framework of intimate partner violence risk assessment and management, it is possible to identify a series of specific behavioral indicators that serve as reliable predictors of the evolution and potential recurrence of violence. These dynamics tend to emerge from the initial phases of the relationship but are frequently underestimated or misunderstood by both the victim and the surrounding social context. Among the most relevant are: the social isolation of the victim, carried out by progressively separating her from family, friends, work, and school contexts, making the woman increasingly dependent on her partner.

Associated with this is systematic coercive control, which is expressed not only through rigid behavioral demands but also through the use of technology to exercise a form of continuous digital surveillance (checking messages, geolocation, access to social media profiles, etc.). Another indicator with high predictive value is pathological jealousy, frequently associated with feelings of possessiveness and a constant need to exert exclusive control over the partner—elements that can degenerate into both psychological and physical violence. To these is added economic violence, which involves controlling resources, bank accounts, and/or wages, or prohibiting work, with the aim of making the victim completely dependent on the partner. Finally, previous violent behavior, even in prior relationships, is a key indicator. According to EIGE, every past episode, even if isolated, increases the risk of recidivism, especially if accompanied by explicit threats of death or physical harm (European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), 2019).

These signs are not mere communication difficulties but are part of a coercive pattern in which the violent individual tends to establish systemic dominance over their partner to

create a progressive relational asymmetry. The relationship thus becomes a space of power, not reciprocity.

From a psycho-behavioral perspective, precursor acts are often linked to learned dysfunctional models rooted in the perpetrator's childhood or adolescence. Early exposure to violent family models, witnessing episodes of domestic violence, and the absence of emotional containment and balanced educational figures are factors that increase the risk of acting out abusive behaviors in adulthood (Ellsberg et al., 2015).

The World Health Organization (WHO) clearly identifies three levels of early warning signs:

- **Behavioral level:** includes observable behaviors that suggest a coercive process is underway, such as verbal threats, repeated humiliations, manifestations of obsessive jealousy, social isolation of the victim, and attempts at extreme control over relationships, movements, and/or communications.
- **Psychological level:** this level includes more subtle but equally significant attitudes, such as obsessive control, constant surveillance of the partner, inability to handle rejection, systematic use of intimidation as a tool for control, and the adoption of a dichotomous view of the partner, alternating between phases of idealization and moments of devaluation. All are signs of a pathological dependence disguised as attention or constant presence. These are signs that indicate a structural fragility of the self and a predisposition to relational violation.
- **Environmental level:** includes all external factors to the relationship that create fertile ground for violence. These can be economic stress, job insecurity, social isolation, substance use and abuse, and belonging to violent and marginalized contexts. This level also integrates the cultural and normative level, which leads to the social acceptance of rigid gender roles or tolerance for subjugation (World Health Organization (WHO), 2010).

The WHO model helps to understand the complexity of the phenomenon and allows for an integrated risk assessment in which signs from different contexts contribute to producing a more precise mapping of vulnerability.

Within the legal system, assessment tools have been developed to identify the risk of violent escalation and, in particular, femicide. One of the most widespread is the **SARA protocol (Spousal Assault Risk Assessment)**, which integrates static factors (such as prior violence, psychiatric diagnoses, etc.) with dynamic factors (reactions to separation, access to weapons, etc.).

Specifically, SARA is one of the most widely used international tools for assessing the risk of recidivism in domestic violence, particularly against intimate partners. Originally developed in Canada by P. Randall Kropp and Stephen D. Hart in 1995, it has undergone numerous revisions over time, including the most recent, SARA-V3 in 2015.

Unlike algorithmic predictive tests, this protocol is based on a Structured Professional Judgment (SPJ)approach, which is a structured but flexible assessment by qualified professionals, such as criminologists, forensic psychologists, social workers, and law enforcement (Randall Kropp & Hart, 2000).

SARA was originally structured on a 20-item grid covering two main areas: risk factors related to the propensity for violence and risk factors related to the joint relationship between the perpetrator and the victim. These were rated on a scale of 0 to 2, allowing for a total score range from 0 to 40. The factors assessed ranged from previous violent conduct, substance use, and the presence of behavioral disorders to the relational history, threats, and attempts at control (European Federation of Psychologists' Associations (EFP), 2016).

The SARA-V3 protocol, on the other hand, consists of 24 assessment items divided into three sections:

- **Nature and Context of Abuse (Intimate Partner Violence - IPV):** includes eight items aimed at analyzing the frequency, severity, and methods of the assaults, with particular attention to the potential presence of recent escalation.
- **Perpetrator Risk Factors:** composed of ten items that include the presence of previous convictions for violence, psychiatric diagnoses or personality disorders, problems related to alcohol or substance abuse, and childhood abuse or violence witnessed. These elements represent "immobile" variables that cannot be changed but form the basis of accumulated risk over time.
- **Victim Vulnerability Factors:** assesses, through six items, conditions that increase the victim's exposure to risk, such as economic dependence, social isolation, linguistic or cultural barriers, the presence of minors, or pregnancy (Risk Management Authority, 2019).

The SARA protocol allows precursor signs of violence, which might be underestimated, to be placed in an evaluative grid capable of capturing the relational dynamics pre-violence. It thus becomes a preventive reading device, able to recognize the evolution of abusive behavior from its earliest manifestations.

In Italy, initiatives such as the **ZEUS protocol**, originally implemented at the Milan Police Headquarters, provide for the perpetrator of threatening conduct to be formally warned and then referred for a series of psycho-educational interviews aimed at raising awareness and modifying the violent behavior. The data collected show that intervention in the pre-criminal phase can prevent escalation and significantly reduce recidivism (State Police (Polizia di stato), 2023).

5. Conclusion

The analysis of the precursor acts of gender, the SARA protocol, allows precursor signs of violence, which might be underestimated, to be placed in an evaluative grid capable of capturing the relational dynamics pre-violence. It thus becomes a preventive reading device, able to recognize the evolution of abusive behavior from its earliest manifestations.

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The data collected show that intervention in the pre-criminal phase can prevent escalation and significantly reduce recidivism-based violence allows for moving beyond a merely emergency and repressive perspective, favoring the adoption of a genuinely preventive approach based on the recognition of "weak" signals and the promotion of a relational culture based on awareness and mutual respect.

As demonstrated by the data reported by bodies such as EIGE, the World Health Organization, and the European Commission, violence never arises from a neutral context, but is the result of progressive interactions, control strategies, and systemic failures in protection.

Elements such as the perpetrator's cognitive distortions, relational asymmetry, traumatic bonding, and social tolerance for abusive behaviors represent central components in the management of abuse. The timely recognition of these signs, supported by structured assessment tools and validated operational protocols, allows not only for safeguarding the

safety of victims but also for intervening with potentially dangerous individuals before they commit a crime.

The integration of behavioral, environmental, and psychological data, as proposed by the WHO and the most recent SPJ (Structured Professional Judgment) models, represents an advance in the field of violence prevention. In particular, tools like the SARA-V3 and the ZEUS protocol show that action based on early risk assessment can genuinely reduce the probability of recidivism and prevent the transition from tension to a harmful event.

However, the challenge remains to build a coherent and multi-level system of monitoring and response that integrates theoretical analysis with timely operational practices. Knowing the signs is not enough; this knowledge must be transformed into alert and intervention mechanisms to act in the pre-criminal phase and break the cycle of violence before it turns into a tragedy.

In this context, prevention means reading what is not yet visible and acting on what could still be avoided.

Authors contributions
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