From the patriarchal vision to the empowerment of women through secondary victimization and victim blaming

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Abstract

The essay aims to reflect, in the theoretical framework of Bourdieu (1998) on the types of violence whose effects translate into an objectification of women and into a social reproduction of attitudes typical of patriarchal society which, declining into habitus, crystallize in the daily behavior of individuals and institutions. In this context, violence against women (Istanbul Convention 2011) reiterates, even today, a social structure based on asymmetric power relations which does not allow them to acquire the determination necessary to escape from "natural" subordination. Violence remains hidden and, very often (Grevio Report 2019), produces a sense of distrust even in institutions as in the case of the phenomenon of secondary victimization (Vonderhaar and Carmody 2015) which, once again, explains delays in fighting violence. For these reasons, the prevention of violence requires a cultural approach inspired by the principles of gender equality, also considering the possible bias of A. I. in terms of gender stereotypes, which is capable of increasing women's empowerment, making them "capable" (Sen 1979) of carrying out own choices in autonomy and freedom (Grignoli 2022) for a sustainable social future.

Keywords: violence; secondary victimization; institutions; gender equality; self-determination .

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Introduction

Sociological analysis investigates on whether and how nature and/or culture are "conditioning" and/or "determining" in the production of gender identities (Decataldo and Ruspini 2014, Sugamele 2015).

In particular, it is undeniable that biological differences establish the sex and reproductive function of each individual, but it is also unquestionable that cultural elements - within a given context (time, space and place; Tönnies 1887), characterised by peculiar normative common-sense orientations and personality values in "reciprocation" (Bourdieu, 1998) with each other - "structure" people's gender identity, establishing their belonging, their role and their expectations (Crespi 2008).

In this scenario, one of the issues most debated by social scientists over time, that is the issue of inequality and, in this case, that between men and women, comes into play.

This inequality has been passed down to more advanced societies by modern society (Ruspini 2018), through patriarchal structures valorisation, as pioneering explained - in 1884 - by Friedrich Engels in his work *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, and later recall, with variations and new proposals, by other well-known theorists, such as Pierre Bourdieu.

In advanced societies, so, social reproduction, in order to maintain the typical behaviours of patriarchal society, through the *habitus* of individuals, structure the social system in asymmetrical power relations between men and women where women lack the self-determination to leave their subordination "natural" state.

Within this framework, the phenomena of violence very often remain hidden, and this behaviour produces, in the victims (women), a sense of distrust in Institutions, as in the case of the phenomenon of secondary victimization that has been defined as «the victimisation that occurs not as a direct result of the criminal act but through the response of institutions and individuals to the victim» (Council of Europe 2006; Vonderhaar and Carmody 2015).

It should be drive by the principles of gender equality and it should be able to empower women, it should act like women "capable" (Sen 1979) to do their own choices in autonomy and freedom (Grignoli 2022) for a sustainable social future.

Gender inequality: from Patriarchal structures to Word-Embedding Association Test (WEAT)

Friedrich Engels, retracing the history of societies and that of class inequality, stresses the equality issue, including that between men and women - for a fair sexual division of labour - as at the foundation of "hunting and gathering societies", where men are hunters and women are dedicated to the care of the fields and the gathering of fruits, and of "horticultural ones".

Therefore, discrimination against women takes hold in "agricultural society" which attributes to men the productive role outside houses and to women a mere reproductive role - as well as educational role of traditional values - within the domestic dimension (see: John Stuart Mill's work The Servitude of Women).

These conditions, inherited from paternalistic societies in which the authority of men (or *pater familias* of ancient Roman memories) and the consequent subordinate position of women are legally legitimised, are socially acceptable in capitalist society in the light of the oppression of women, their categorization as subordinate subjects and their exclusion from social, public and political space.

In addition, for capitalist society, patriarchal power is legitimized, historically and culturally, through the representations of men, strong workers, active subjects, and that of fragile women who are not perceived - and even less cannot perceive themselves - as equal to men (Meagher 2011).

Moreover, women are extremely disadvantaged subjects when they are the "synthesis" of two exceptionally powerful and prevalent systems of oppression: race and gender (Collins 2019, Crenshaw 1989, Hill Collins 2022).

Unfortunately, these prejudices are also present in the most advanced societies, so much so that Artificial Intelligence (AI) systems demonstrate, for example, through the Word-Embedding Association Test (WEAT), how with language, they also "absorb" implicit prejudices, associating - in the workplace - words linked to the female sex (such as "woman" and "girl") with artistic ones and much less with mathematics (Nosek *et al*. 2002a).

In fact, according to Nosek *et al*. (2002a; 2002b), Sweeney (2013), Barocas and Selbst (2014), Datta *et al*. (2015), technologies may perpetuate cultural stereotypes.

For example, Caliskan *et al.* (2017) shows that «text corpora contains recoverable and accurate imprints of our historic biases, [...] reflecting the status quo distribution of gender with respect to careers or first names» (Caliskan *et al.* 2017). Also, Nosek *et al*. (2002b) underlines that while women are associated with a home-related language, men are associated with a work and career-related language. In coherence, European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA 2022) demonstrates that exists a connection between AI gender-occupation biases and the employment dimension gender gap.

The result is relevant, as it highlights how a language overlaps with historically rooted cultural prejudices and stereotypes, of which a human being may not even be aware. This is because language and culture have always influenced each other.

Some lessons: power and symbolic violence

According to this *file rouge*, Pierre Bourdieu argues that cultural variables, having the strength to give shape to the different types of power/authority «imposed through orders, but also the power that is exercised unconsciously [...]» (Bourdieu 2012), allow in their association with social structures with gender roles (social and family), to accept the social supremacy of men on women.

In coherence with Pierre Bourdieu's thought, the relationship between the social and the cognitive structure represents «one of the most solid guarantees of social domination», giving rise to that symbolic power that allows one to «act on the world by acting on the representation of the world» (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992).

In this way, symbolic power, also defined as implicit (Lukes 1974), manifests itself through a form of violence, which is also symbolic (Bourdieu 1998) and which arises from the internalization of models that pass through the body, the profound feeling of every individual, the unconscious memory that is rooted since childhood, through family and social relationships.

In particular, symbolic power, which in its creation legitimizes domination, is paradoxically generated precisely by the dominated. In fact, it is described in Bourdieu's words as «that form of violence that is exercised on a social agent with his complicity» (Bourdieu 1998), that is, as demonstrated, that domination practised on women by men, through the male supremacy power consolidated in history.

Therefore, symbolic violence «is established through the adhesion that the dominated cannot fail to grant to the dominant (thus to the domination) when, in order to think about his relationship with the dominant, he only has tools of knowledge that he has in common with him and which, being simply the embodied form of the relationship of domination, make this relationship appear natural» (Bourdieu 1998).

For a typical life the "Sexualized habitus"

To better understand the categories of perception in the society, are inevitably those created by domination, they «not only exactly reflect the established order [...] [but] impose themselves with all the appearances of objective reality» (Bourdieu 1979). Thus, the dominant representations of society translate into what Bourdieu defines *habitus* (Bourdieu 1980), that is, into a set of "rules" acquired during the phases of socialization that prescribe a way of existence: this «modelling work creates differences between male and female, differences that circulate from the body to the unconscious, reinforcing the effect of naturalness of reality. Relations of sexual domination are thus, for Bourdieu, somatised. […] Sex, understood as the construction of sexual categories and oppositions, is […] first and foremost a symbolic language that structures reality and practices» (Negretti 2008).

In particular, to facilitate the *habitus* functioning in relation to the difference between men and women, "sexual *habitus*", it is possible to consider the choice of studies after college made by women and men: girls "don't find STEAM (*Science, Technology, Engineering, the Arts and Mathematic*) interesting", so - although if they are not forced - very rarely attend STEAM courses.

Indeed, social conditioning is incorporated by *habitus*, in this case gender which leads girls to exclude choices that would be "too atypical".

In the *habitus*, agency and structure meet, the individual will and the social conditioning that characterize the environment in which individual is formed.

Thus, in the words of Pierre Bourdieu «the construction of the world and of agents takes place within structural conditions; therefore, agents' representations vary according to the position (and the interests associated with it) and according to their *habitus*, as a system of perception and evaluation schemes, as cognitive and evaluative structures that are acquired through the lasting experience of a position in the social world» (Bourdieu 1994).

Social representations is natural: Sociodicy and symbolic violence

Bourdieu shows how the symbiosis between cognitive structures (typical of the individual subject) and social structure (proper to the social systems themselves), which operates through incorporation into the *habitus*, is based on the description-prescription dialectic. In this framework, in which symbolism reigns supreme, the most powerful systems are those which, while they seem to describe a social reality, such as the relationship between men and women, actually prescribe a way of existence.

In fact, the «constancy of the domination of men over women does not arise from the social transformation of a natural order, but from its opposite, that is, from the naturalization of a social relationship of inequality and subordination. This naturalization, which Bourdieu calls sociodicy, is also inscribed in the symbolic structures of society [...]; such symbolic structures are imposed on the dominated. Symbolic violence [...] is a form of domination that implies the relationship of complicity (conscious or not) of the victims» (Corradi 2009).

Therefore, the legitimation of power has its roots in social representations, perceived as natural, because they are incorporated by individuals. So, symbolic violence is an "hidden" type of violence, present in face-to-face interaction, but which works only to the extent that it is recognized as violence, coercion, or intimidation.

Symbolic violence presupposes that the subjective structures - the *habitus* - and the objective relationships are in agreement, that "what is appropriate has been internalized" (Krais and Gebauer 2009: 65, Crenshaw 1989), in other words, the subordination of women compared to men.

Violence: from the "field" to the "intersectionality" concept

As stressed, a person is not considered for his ability to act in the world, but he is evaluated for the cultural-external categories in which he has been positioned. The different positions that the individual occupies in the "field", such as the sphere of social life which has its own rules, generates a network of relationships between individuals lead to an internal conflict where the dominant ones are committed to maintaining the *status quo* and the dominated are working to change it, but there is also an external one, where barriers are erected at the entrance to the field.

The fundamental concept is that *habitus* is related to different fields, giving rise to different outcomes depending on the case. It is consequently possible that a person may find themselves more or less disadvantaged, within power relations, depending on the field in which they operate at that moment.

This concept is very clear in examining intersectional studies and the general concept of intersectionality. In 1989 Kimberlé W. Crenshaw coined this term to describe how the experience of African American women was subject to forms of discrimination and domination that neither feminist nor anti-racist theory had managed to grasp. Intersectionality aims to clarify how forms of exclusion and discrimination intertwine with social class, gender, and ethnicity to shape the socioeconomic and power inequalities that we observe every day in our present.

In this case, women, beyond their abilities or gifts, are brought back to certain categories, attitudes, and roles. This position contrasts with the autonomy of the person, and it becomes a denial of subjectivity and, thus, their body, the primordial place of passive synthesis of the person, offers others the possibility of its objectification.

Violence reduces women to a dominated object, crystallizes them, fixes them within a rigid model of identity and reduces the uncertainty of thought around the categories that should classify and understand the body itself and the person.

In this context, phenomena of violence that very often remain submerged (Grevio Report 2019), producing in the raped subjects (women) also a sense of mistrust in institutions as in the case of the secondary victimization (Vonderhaar and Carmody 2015).

Secondary victimisation

Among the social conduct reproduced on an institutional and socio-cultural level is so-called secondary victimisation, as we said - taking up the Council of Europe definition - is the indirect response of institutions and individuals towards victims of gender-based violence: stereotyped attitudes and prejudices, even unconscious ones, may be put into practice, which produce further consequences on their bio-psycho-social well-being, affecting their empowerment.

For example, data from a research conducted by the network Di.Re - Women in Networks Against Violence, state that as many as 27% (or 1,568 out of more than 5,000 subjects) of the women involved in the research claim to have been the object of institutional victimisation (Di.Re 2021).

Secondary victimisation is, moreover, exacerbated in the presence of minor children by social services and the courts (Di.Re 2021). Secondary victimisation, therefore, recalls violence in its different types and manifestations of power and abuse, often interacting with each other.

Victim Blaming as a social phenomenon

Victim blaming is the behaviour of attributing guilt and blame to the violence victim and not to the perpetrator (Ryan 1971). It is an attribution that can be carried out not only by all the institutions responsible for the victim care, but also by the family, by the friends and by parental network in general. These blaming actions can be enacted by shifting blame into the victim through judgements, thoughts, attitudes, and behaviour.

This is an inversion of the social order because roles are reversed: the aggression committed is transferred to the victim who would have acted in such a way as to deserve that physical and verbal or even psychological violence, which is often translated into the words: "*she wanted it, she liked it, it was her fault, she asked for it*".

Thus, must be emphasised the role of society in which there are still shared «cultural norms that endorse violence as an acceptable method of resolving conflicts; norms that accentuate men's power over women and children» (WHO 2002) and in which a general inequality between men and women persists; a rigid perception of gender roles and gender stereotypes, combined with the consideration of violence as a means of resolving conflicts and tolerance towards it in relationships.

A further element is the banalisation process that makes aggression an accepted and established "social" practice. It is real in our society that "justifies" violence as a life approach, where also persists a general inequality between men and women legitimised by a rigid perception of gender roles and by a "cage" of behaviour built on gender stereotypes. It is also possible that a process of banalisation of violence is a way making aggression as a "normal" social practice.

As anticipated in the preceding paragraphs, it is what Bourdieu (1979) calls symbolic violence, a suffer "gentle and almost invisible" violence which in a hidden way that conditions us, orients us in everyday life and gives us a view of the real world. It is the process of "labelling" (Becker 1968; 1971; Taylor, Walton and Young 1973) that sees the victim as blame deserving and as validating the injury suffered.

This attitude finds confirmation, also, in its de-humanization-objectification and degradation of the other (Wertham 1949) where the victim is deprived of intrinsic qualities. It is a disintegrative shaming (Braithwaite 1989) that stigmatizes and excludes the offended person, consequently creating a class of "excluded" subjects about whom to assign "pity" feelings (Lorenzetti and Ribon 2017).

In fact, the violence against women phenomenon, especially if physical and sexual but not exclusively, has impactful consequences on the victim who suffers a double isolation and a double stigmatization (Goffman 1963), assuming the blame for what happened, incorporating it to herself, thinking "she deserved" the aggression, thinking "*I was wrong, I don't remember well*". She closes herself behind silence and fear.

Then, victim blaming, women report difficulties in terms of autonomy, confidence with compromised self-esteem (Bates 2017); they may develop a sense of shame and guilt

that become paralyzing emotions to any possibility of redemption and, in many cases, requests for outside help. Their social credibility is violated, linked to the image that is compromised between private and public sphere because they are exposed to public derision. Women experience a feeling of emptiness, loneliness, and perpetual judgment. And it is precisely this aspect that it crucial in order to fight known and the hidden violence and to work on prevention and awareness-raising interventions.

These are all risk factors that can no longer be ignored but they must be recognized and reported from and in legal, social and health contexts: in fact, victim blaming contributes growing a discriminatory culture, objectifying women, and contributes to violate human rights, not only of women but for all.

Conclusions

Within the theoretical framework of reference and the suggested literature, it is necessary to reflect on the dissemination and cultural reproduction of gender-based prejudices, particularly those against women. This reflection must necessarily consider the impact of A. I. and machine learning in the gender stereotypes of social reproduction which affect - also through virtual contest (Varsha 2023) - the women's potential empowerment in terms of requests for help, of the possibility of actively participating in the promotion of activities to contrast the phenomenon of violence.

The engagement of women and men in issues concerning gender relations, the new technologies use, the habitus "crystallisation" and the nature of language used, must be central in sociological and interdisciplinary reflection. Among the processes there is the role of socialisation as a preventive tool of violent behaviour for new generations. In fact, «the deconstruction (also) from the male side of patriarchal systems of privilege is indeed a fundamental step in achieving gender equality and in ending the impunity of perpetrators of this type of violence also because, while it is true that the majority of perpetrators of violence against the female gender are men, it is also true that no boy is born a perpetrator but, certainly, if he is grow up in a context that minimizes, normalizes and generates sexism, gender inequality and violence against women, he will not think through an "innate" sense of rejecting the idea of prevaricating over others and therefore also over women» (Onida 2023).

In this context, it is important to not forget the ambitious project to promote women's empowerment through the concept of gender equality, central to the Italian Constitution (Italian Constitution, articles 3, 51 (paragraph 1), 37 (paragraph 1), 117 (paragraph 7), 29 (paragraph 2), 37 (paragraph 1), 48 (paragraph 1), but also in all that international discipline aimed at incorporating the gradual overcoming of the patriarchal model and the continuous process of transformation of societies (Universal Declaration of Human Rights - Article 16). Are fundamental also the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (Article 23) and the basis of the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (Convention of Istanbul, 2011 signed, but entering into force in the EU on 1st October 2023) and the Strategy for Gender Equality 2020-2025, as well as constituting one of the objectives of the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development.

These all-transversal priorities are crucial, together with the territorial and generational ones, of the Italian National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR) with the "The Istanbul Convention, a lifeline for women and girls and an essential component of Europe's human rights framework".

In conclusion, as stated by FRA (2022), «any future development of algorithms needs to be accompanied by bias measurements, which allow a better understanding of the impact predictions have on decision-making. Only in this way can better, more consistent, and less discriminatory decisions become a reality» (FRA 2022).

Authors contributions
Although the result of a common reflection, paragraphs 1 and 9 must be attributed to all authors, while paragraphs 2, 5 and 6 to Daniela Grignoli, paragraphs 3 and 4 to Danilo Boriati and paragraphs 7 and 8 to Mariangela D'Ambrosio.

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