



# Gender Based Violence. Responsibility, Prevention, Response, Actions

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## Abstract

In this paper, we argue that a more specific definition of gender-based violence is required. Drawing on key insights from the social sciences, we propose a framework that provides a more precise basis for understanding the relationship between gender and violence. This framework examines the issue at four levels: responsibility, prevention, contrast, and actions within interaction and structure. The paper offers a more comprehensive view of gender-based violence that includes women and girls, while taking into account the disproportionate impact of such violence on women.

**Keywords:** *women; girls; cyberviolence; health; power*

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## 1.Introduction: different forms of Gender Based Violence and responses to new questions

This Special Issue brings together some of the most notable papers presented at the 2024 International Conference on Gender Violence, held at the University of Salerno. It underscores the importance of communication aligned with sociology's public role, particularly in engaging young people and those involved in training, professional development, and specialization courses. A central reason for this monographic issue is the fact that violence often does not receive the prompt attention and intervention it urgently requires, resulting in delayed or inadequate public and institutional responses. Nevertheless, violence against women—and its impact on their identities and bodies—has, over time, fostered significant and growing social dissent. Since the Istanbul Convention (2011), there has been an unprecedented focus on the social and health-related consequences of violence against women.

Public and private organizations often support women who have been subjected to violence, offering them protected pathways that include first aid, healthcare, shelter, meals, and assistance for their children. However, providing such support from the moment violence is reported is a complex but essential process. Though it may seem extensive, it is critical to preventing long-term physical and emotional deterioration in women who have experienced violence (Lawn and Koen, 2021), as well as for safeguarding their overall

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well-being and capacity to participate fully in social life. Recent data confirms that women subjected to violence frequently endure not only emotional suffering but also physical illnesses, including cancer, infectious diseases, gynaecological disorders (Mascarini et al., 2023; Cersosimo, 2025a), and chronic conditions that affect various bodily systems throughout their lives.

The term 'gender-based violence' encompasses evolving discourses that are descriptive, interpretive and political. However, the criteria for categorising violence as 'gender-based' are often implicit.

This Special Issue, therefore, argues for a clearer, more specific framework with which to define gender-based violence, while still allowing for the necessary flexibility to apply the concept to various contexts and forms. Drawing on key insights from the social sciences, we propose a framework that defines gender-based violence through four interrelated levels: responsibility, prevention, response, and action, in both interpersonal interactions and structural contexts. This approach provides a more comprehensive understanding of gender-based violence and acknowledges its disproportionate impact on women and girls.

Primary prevention programmes for gender-based violence GBV aim to promote change by addressing the root causes and drivers of GBV at a population level. Social norms — contextually and collectively derived expectations of appropriate behaviour — play a crucial role. Examples of norms that perpetuate GBV include the belief that women hold less power in public and private spaces, that women's safety is less important and that men have the right to discipline women and children. In order to evaluate the effectiveness of GBV prevention programmes, this issue seeks to establish valid and reliable methods of assessing changes in social norms and personal beliefs that sustain or tolerate the various forms of GBV over time.

From femicide to beatings, from stalking to cyberviolence, from the use of force to revenge porn: violence in its various forms, explicit and implicit, symbolic and systemic, visible and invisible, has too often continued to be a dramatic expression, and in many cases challenging to perceive and combat, of the power exercised by those who are stronger, biologically or in terms of legislation that is still open to interpretations with patriarchal and socially punitive consequences for women.

Violence manifests in both overt and covert forms, from femicide and physical assault to stalking, cyberviolence, and the use of force and revenge porn. All too often, these acts reflect the power exerted by the stronger party, whether biologically or through legal systems that still permit patriarchal interpretations and punitive consequences for women.

Violence inflicts physical harm and damages identity, violating bodily and symbolic integrity. It humiliates and marginalises victims, with clear repercussions for their roles within families, including with regard to their children, as well as in professional and social spheres.

As with all forms of crimes, violence continually evolves, necessitating new tools for intervention and prevention. The current rise of gender-based cyberviolence represents a significant social, cultural, legal, and political challenge within the broader spectrum of gender-based violence, particularly prevalent in digital environments. This issue has become an urgent social, political, and cultural emergency that needs immediate attention to protect the millions of women affected, especially young women, who are the most vulnerable group. The repercussions of this violence resonate on both individual and societal levels.

The definition and digital dimension of gender-based violence cover a wide range of acts committed online or through technological tools, all part of the continuum of violence

that women and girls also experience in the domestic sphere. It is such a vast phenomenon that there is no single definition to explain and understand its different characteristics. The growth of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and social networking sites (SNS) has created new opportunities for violence, particularly against women, girls, and sexual and gender minorities. Abuse arising from this (ICT and SNS) is expressed through cyber violence, which includes cyberbullying, online harassment, online dating abuse, revenge porn, cyberstalking, shallowfakes, sextortion, deepfakes, and so on. Interaction and communication processes, which are generally builders of knowledge, have now become mediators of violence. Therefore, the online space has become an unsafe environment for relationships, filled with hatred and aggressive, discriminatory behaviors (S. Tirocchi, M. Scocco, & I. Crespi, 2022). Within this context, violent practices and comments proliferate, from the use of explicit sexual judgments to the dissemination of threats, the adoption of vulgar language, and a persistent tone of anger and hatred, which gradually become normalized in everyday online interactions, eroding any dimension of affection and humanity within relationships.

Cyberviolence is part of the continuum of violence and highlights how its various manifestations, which are intrinsically linked, derive from a common cultural root. It is no coincidence that gender-based violence against women and girls, cyber-VAWG, is a phenomenon that reinforces the dynamics of discrimination, marginalization, and exclusion of women from society, in manifestations that are not isolated but are fueled by institutions, even those apparently most affectionate, yet marked by profound inequalities and structural discrimination. Therefore, as many feminists have argued (Cockburn, 2004; Davies, 2015), violence in online relationships should be seen as part of the "continuum of traditional violence," or rather, as an extension of it. Information technology is used to perpetrate acts of violence against women within a broader system of oppression (Commission on Human Rights, 2018). This reproduces a cultural tradition that supports the status quo of male domination (Bourdieu, 1998), which offline interactions reflect online, marking a manifestation of unequal power relations between men and women that generate inequalities in access to power. The two spaces, the real one, expressed in everyday life, and the virtual one, are a unique place where this violence manifests itself. Offline and online cannot be separated from their unified expression, the articulation of a culture in which social and environmental relations have already changed and continue to change the lives and consequent life stories of women (Cersosimo, 2025b).

Recent years have been marked by an increase in violence in everyday life, in various forms, particularly towards the most vulnerable individuals, first and foremost women, then minors, disabled people, migrants, and the elderly. This has been matched by a series of important statements and initiatives by institutions, health services, and civil society which, within the more general problem of violence, have highlighted how violence against women often has a series of direct effects of physical and emotional suffering, if not directly fatal, on the women themselves, all in their different degrees of severity, with incalculable consequences also on their children and families (Cersosimo, 2025a).

In our work, we are aware that any reference to tradition can be a means of reproducing and reinforcing gender roles, models, and relationships based on stereotypes, and in contrast to the differences within new generations. Consistent with every phase of crisis involving traditional roles and identities, this one too, in its rejection of the latest, generates anxiety, frustration, and disorientation in many areas, particularly among men, shifting the understanding of the new from recognition to the search for answers that block it through violent and aggressive behavior or the recourse to norms that reintroduce sanctions to deal with emergencies and social phenomena that can no longer be postponed.

This work, together with those who follow it, aims to promote an interdisciplinary debate on the subject, questioning what socio-cultural transformations may be most

appropriate for prevention capable of countering violent actions, investing in and implementing a culture of awareness among generations and genders, and presenting the results of research and action research. For the reasons above, this monographic issue helps further our long-term reflection on violence against women. The following are identified as part of the discussion: identifying the following as part of the discussion: abuse of various types, forms, and duration, carried out in private and public spaces, in the family, at work, in leisure activities, and other places of daily life; power inequalities as a relational form between sexes and genders; the resulting tacit violence in everyday life, as in situations and places of work and relationships; violent languages and every day life; actions to combat violence with appropriate experimental programs for abusers.

## **2. Data on violence in Italy. Interpretation**

In 2024, the Ministry of the Interior reported a 20% increase in the number of women who experienced violence. The Report of the Criminal Analysis Service of the Central Criminal Police Directorate indicates the continuity of these crimes. In November 2022, it was reported that, between 1 January and 20 November 2022, 273 homicides had been recorded, of which 104 were female victims. Of these, 88 were killed in a domestic/intimate setting, and their partner or ex-partner killed 52. To date, 266 homicides have been recorded for the period from 1 January to 10 November 2024, with 97 female victims. Of these, 83 were killed in a domestic/intimate setting, and their partner or ex-partner killed 51. Comparing the number of homicides in the above period with the same period last year, it can be seen that the total number of incidents has decreased by 11% (from 299 to 266), as has the number of female victims (from 106 to 97).

Crimes committed in the family/domestic sphere have also decreased overall, falling from 132 to 127 (-4%), and the number of female victims has fallen from 87 to 83 (-5%). Compared to the same period in 2023, there has been an additional decrease in homicides committed by partners or ex-partners, falling from 63 to 58 (-8%), as well as a further decrease in female victims, dropping from 57 to 51 (-11%). While some people experience home as a friendly, safe, and loving place, it is important to recognise that many others experience it as something completely different. In their essay on domestic life, Chapman and Hockey (1999) discuss the discrepancy between idealistic representations and the reality faced by some.

The idea of a harmonious family unit is challenged by studies of the darker, less obvious side of family life: violence and abuse. In such contexts, the failure of those who are aware to intervene and combat this violence contributes to an increase in heinous acts of domestic violence throughout the course of life the women affected (Di Donna et al., 2024). In the last two years, the average age of women killed has also changed: one in five victims is now over 70. In 2024, approximately one in five victims were women over 70, killed by their husbands after marriages lasting 40 to 50 years. The motives for these murders vary widely, ranging from possessive rage over alleged infidelity to freeing the victim from illnesses such as Alzheimer's disease, or even simply for possession and authority over others. Furthermore, at the other extreme, gender-based violence is increasingly affecting younger victims and perpetrators, particularly in the form of gang violence against girls. Notably, there has been an exponential increase in gang violence against girls under the age of 13, rising from 4% to 10% in the last five years. It is disheartening that we have to resort to a shared sense of horror. Then there are young women under the age of 35 who experience both gang violence and revenge porn, i.e., the dissemination of sexually explicit images. These crimes are mostly perpetrated by young

men, who are primarily responsible for gang sexual violence. 65% of them are under 35, and one in four of these is a minor. While the number of femicides remains consistent with previous years, it is striking that the majority of victims are between 18 and 34 years old, and the perpetrators, who are always identified, belong to the family circle. According to the 2024 Criminal Analysis Service Report, the root cause is 'that pathological sense of possession which excludes the possibility of self-determination: girls and young women who are prevented from living and fulfilling themselves'.

We allow violence to be widely present in our lives through sensationalising it, which has grown in parallel with generations' increasing autonomy and therefore with the likelihood that it will become more commonplace, perhaps accompanied by the written, real or symbolic message that 'the images may be disturbing'. In many cases, violence, which does not exist in isolation but is constructed within relationships through image, language, bodily expression, silence, aggression, and isolation, acquires a fascination and expresses a power greater than other forms of power. It is capable of superior dynamics and execution, moving faster than democracy. The fewer weapons it has, the stronger it feels. Indeed, one could point to its seductive ambivalence: hands that can caress and destroy, and caress again; compliments that are normal in one context but interpreted as shyness, embarrassment or resistance in another; a premise that a 'no' is not a 'no', but a promise to give in; a seductive strategy; a desire to increase desire.

Sex, love, and eroticism are unthinkable as separate entities; yet each is committed to its independence on a journey with a cultural history. Zygmunt Bauman (1999) was one of many to point this out. Beyond this, however, the problem of love, eroticism, and the violence that follows is clearly universal (Paz, 1993), including here. Among these, violence often rears its head at the beginning as an apparently innocent and desirable game of love. Then it attempts to assert itself in a contradictory manner, before or after taking centre stage and becoming part of the relationship's emotional vocabulary. In short, it tries to gain citizenship and does so through the binomial of violence and domination, which has an imaginary fraction of the unique dimension of the relationship.

The report by the Police Criminal Analysis Service (2024) shows that extremely high figures of gender-based violence cannot be dismissed as a legacy of the past. Unfortunately, the 'pathological sense of possession' behind so many femicides and acts of gender-based violence against women is not a legacy of the past. This is confirmed by the age of the victims and, above all, the increasingly young perpetrators. The latest report on young people and gender-based violence by the Central Criminal Police Analysis Service (2024) refers to "extremely high figures". This massive wave of violence is articulated in the daily occurrence of femicides, assaults, and the censorship of all forms of autonomy. It is accompanied by the return or renewal of patriarchal, familial, and institutional cultures, which are often based on a profound ignorance of natural processes. This ignorance usually reinforces stereotypes and can even act as a catalyst for the spread of disease and infection. This has been accompanied by the re-emergence of contradictory positions that seek to downplay many manifestations of violence as subordinate or incidental. Incredibly, the burden of proof is often reversed, with the victim being transformed into the direct or indirect perpetrator.

As Arendt (1970) said, those who hold power, see it change and see the possibilities of maintaining it diminish, have always chosen the shortest route to avoid giving it up and reproduce it, that of violence in all its forms, from the most seductive and apparently acceptable to the most authoritarian and unquestionable. This is also because in times of fear, apprehensive moods permeate all areas of existence and security is given priority over

freedom, justice and solidarity (Sofsky, 2005), while in the cultural sphere, there is a preference for reflecting on past issues and inventing new traditions so that reliability, loyalty and discipline are propagated as social values, rather than as real actions that can be traced back to responsibilities, including institutional ones, in order to prevent and find forms of opposition that are not only legal or juridical, but which can also promote behaviours other than violent ones.

### **3. Concluding remarks for future actions**

In order to effectively prevent gender-based violence, we must ask ourselves several important questions. The socialisation of violence suggests that it is being legitimised in new ways within new power structures. We should consider the idea that reflecting on submission and resignation raises the question of how we subjectively define violence, just as we do with all human phenomena. Is violence only significant if it is perceived subjectively? Can violence be defined objectively? Is an act of violence one that aims to impose a person's will through physical or psychological pain, thereby subjugating them to the control of another? Furthermore, can non-heterosexual norms and non-binary gender roles create contexts in which violence occurs? Which gender differences could trigger violence in relationships? Is it the perception of difference that breeds hatred and violence?

At least two approaches to prevention and action are necessary.

The first must involve helping women to rebuild their lives outside domain of violence. Sensitive issues such as violence can threaten the interests of those in positions of power, and the reality of domestic violence conflicts with the idea of the home as a safe haven from the violent aspects of society (Bergen, 1993). Social recognition and change empower the voices of women who have experienced violence, giving weight to their personal stories (Plummer, 1995). This emphasises the importance of placing their narratives and experiences in a broader social context (Harding, 2007). Recognising the problem as social in nature makes the study of sensitive issues a means of building solidarity among women. The trauma, shame, and scars inflicted on victims by interpersonal violence are addressed as persistent burdens on their lives. In many cases, shame has been found to play a role in keeping abuse hidden and preventing victims from seeking help (Thaggard & Montayre, 2019). In this way, researchers can maintain a concurrent public and private research focus, examining how traumatic experiences and painful secrets affect women's relational, social, and work lives. This approach also validates Hill Collins' (1998) notion of the 'past in the present'. Indeed, the weight of the past can create vulnerability that must be considered when trying to escape violence, whether perceived as an escape route or a supportive experience. Frequently, these vulnerabilities can adversely affect the ability to maintain social relationships that existed before the onset of violence. A significant consideration for this woman is that social networks can have a profound impact on a person's well-being and health by encouraging social participation and engagement, as well as fostering real-life connections. These connections may include meeting friends, attending social events, fulfilling occupational or social roles, participating in group recreational activities, and engaging in various social activities. Through these interactions, social networks help define and reinforce meaningful roles, such as those related to family, work, and community, which in turn provide a sense of belonging and attachment. These roles provide women with a coherent and stable sense of identity, reinforced within the context of the network, which offers a space for them to perform and perceive their roles. Additionally, being part of a social network enhances

opportunities for socialization, friendship, and knowledge sharing, helping to prevent marginalization and loneliness. This connection brings meaning to a person's life, allowing them to move beyond isolation and closer to the social sphere. The actions that connect women who are victims of abuse and violence to the broader community are only mandatory to the extent that they involve reciprocity. As noted by Cersosimo (2024), these actions inherently imply that when one dedicates effort to help others, they are also helping themselves. This idea was already reflected in Rousseau's writings (1762, later published in 1997, p. 43).

The second approach focuses on young people in particular, encouraging them to engage in peer-to-peer prevention regarding online relationships. This is because, as Habermas (2001) pointed out, we need to go beyond the informed and appropriate intervention of the law. He argued that rules cannot regulate social relations on their own. Indeed, the legitimacy of legality can only be derived from a procedural rationality that is rich in moral, cultural, and social content. In other words, legal norms alone cannot solve the problems of a complex society, where social relations must be understood, interpreted, and explained in the context of the values, norms, and sanctions that apply to the actions being performed. Reaching and informing young people is therefore crucial because they could play a key role in affirming gender equality if they are consciously educated.

We need to embark on a path that goes beyond legal measures to combat or contain these forms of online violence. The most important issue is recognising that cyber, technological, and digital violence is a continuum of traditional violence. The Beijing Conference of 4 September 1995 set a revolutionary agenda for women's rights almost thirty years ago. Representatives from 189 countries unanimously adopted the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. This historic document set out a vision for equal rights, freedoms, and opportunities for women everywhere, regardless of their circumstances, and continues to influence gender equality and women's movements worldwide. The Declaration defined gender-based violence as a disparity in access to resources and power between men and women, which triggers a combination of domination and violence. However, this equality is still not present, and the forms of violence perpetrated in real life today also exist online. In 2023, therefore, digital gender-based violence was included in a UN Women resolution aimed at improving the construction of paths to equality and justice, and at curbing all forms of violence against women, including digital violence.

Currently, it is more important than ever to plan and intensify awareness campaigns that focus on violence and cyber violence against women and girls. These campaigns should highlight the urgent need for an educational approach that integrates a gender perspective into the creation of literacy programmes explicitly aimed at digital environments. These are "non-neutral" environments where new relationships based on hatred and conflict are developing. The aim is to promote safety on the internet and impart knowledge about digital rights and responsibilities. This requires acknowledging that cyber-VAWG is a distinct form of gender-based online violence that must be considered in legislation without overlooking its social dimensions. This perspective is essential to ensure that media education efforts do not perpetuate gender stereotypes (Ringrose, Harvey, Gill & Livingstone, 2013), and to promote gender well-being strategies that consider the social and cultural context in which digital practices take shape, not just skills development. Furthermore, the DeStalk project, launched by the European Union, aims to train professionals working with victims or in programmes for perpetrators, as well as police officers, local authorities, and stakeholders, to combat cyber violence against

women. However, the programme has yet to be activated (European Network for Work with Perpetrators of Domestic Violence, 2022).

The scars of gender-based violence may be invisible, but they are there: “the internet never forgets”. Today, we live “onlife”, and there are those who, like Rushkoff (2013), say that the digital world has not eliminated the separation between offline and online, between public and private activity, but rather the distance between now and then. The past has rushed into the present and is no longer on an appropriate or even predictable scale; it is out of reach. A forgotten accident, forgotten violence, hate speech can reappear in the present like an explosion, threatening a woman's reputation, job, face, marriage, and daily life. All this leads us to tell younger women to use everything that technology allows them, because, as we said at the beginning, TikTok is also a form of political activism for young people, on which to reflect on specific issues: they know a lot about it, but many, countless digital memories are not deleted. Even photos, videos, and words used in a specific context can be taken out of context, reproduced ad infinitum, and even recontextualised, and private relationships and interactions, which are intended to be communicated to a select few, can then become public in a downright embarrassing way. This is a challenge that girls, in particular, may encounter. Many women who have experienced cyber violence have felt a profound sense of shame, leading some to take extreme measures. In the digital environment, boundaries are often unclear and difficult to trace, which gives perpetrators a sense of impunity, irresponsibility, and a lack of awareness regarding the impact of their actions.

To conclude by identifying new avenues for reflection and thinking about younger people, I do not want to deny or hide the fact that there is also gender violence within gender and against gender, as P. Chesler said years ago in *Woman's inhumanity to woman*: in which she wrote about rivalry, envy, and malice within the female world (2001). However, it is difficult for women to talk about how other women have hurt them and how they have hurt them. Among the actions to be taken, there may be one that has yet to be implemented, which would involve women creating safe and familiar spaces where they can discuss everything, both on a social level and in the context of their work and experiences of suffering. Focusing the conversation on this topic is the first step towards initiating the process of change, and the discussions that arise could be as liberating as the first feminist self-awareness groups were.

Underlying this is the awareness that the current forms of violence require, first and foremost, a critical assessment of what has been achieved and implemented, and the identification of timely measures, rooted in the local area, even in places that have so far been excluded from reflection, in order to identify responsibilities, countermeasures, containment and further prevention.


Therefore, as Carla Nespolo reminded us, men and women must be vigilant, because if we were to take a step backwards concerning our fundamental rights, Italian democracy would also take a step backwards. After all, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, women's progress was synonymous with democratic progress.

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