

MEN'S VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN : THE NEED TO TAKE RESPONSIBILITY

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The problem of violence has become a central part of European politics and of each human being in the European countries. We have heard reports of massive rape rituals in Bosnia, we are witnessing a Belgium in deep sorrow because of the slaughter of its daughters, we are experiencing gang wars in the inner cities, In every country, racism is creating death and pain and gradually the knowledge of violence against women and children in their own homes is reaching our consciousness.

Most of the time, this violence is talked about in the media in terms of gangsters, devils, murderers, bandits, drug addicts, blacks, nazis, rapists or just thieves, Very seldom are the perpetrators talked about as men, and almost never are they understood within the concept of masculinity. Even when the fact undoubtedly is that they are, in almost every case, men. One of the most important things is that we need to know more about how masculinity is created. What does it mean that the violators are men? What implications will this have for the understanding of violence? What is the specific relationship between masculinity and violence? And: How will it influence the politics of violence - the work against violence in the media, in the streets and in the society as a whole? These types of questions will be the guidelines of our talk here today.

Let us go straight to the heart of the problem. While the media and the public's attention are concentrated on the violence which occurs in the public sphere, they are forgetting the violence in the private sphere. Our claim is that the violence which we see in public is largely rooted in the private sphere, It is violence carried out in the private sphere which is transferred and extended into the public sphere. In other words, it is the private violence which should

claim our attention, and it is against this violence that the efforts to combat violence should be directed.

Focusing on private violence will also enable us to bring to bear a clearer gender perspective. Even though we know that women use violence against men and children, private violence mainly consists of men's violence against those nearest to them: girlfriends, wives and children. Let us therefore spend the few minutes we have presenting three perspectives on men's violence against women, in order better to get to know these men.

Think about the following situation:

1 - We are in the middle of a therapy session. We know that the man sitting across from us beats his wife. That is why he is here. But what is he telling us? What is his own story about the violence? Well, she had been out with some friends, and had promised to be home at a certain hour. She returns twenty minutes late. When he sees her coming through the door smiling, half apologetically, but nevertheless filled with the excitement of the world outside, he snaps. He hits her. During therapy, he says that he was provoked by the fact that she broke an agreement. It is all her own fault. This is the first mark of men's description of their view of the violence; it is her fault! The leader of the Norwegian centre Alternative to Violence (Alternativ til vold) describes this kind of refusal to accept responsibility on the part of men, thus "I feel small and master this feeling by making her even smaller. I am afraid and overcome this by making her even more afraid. I am hurt and overcome this by hurting her. I am afraid of being left and keep this in check by handcuffing her. I am dependent on her and handle this by making her even more dependent on me. I feel powerless and master the feeling by assum-

ing power and control over my immediate surroundings. I do not think of myself as afraid. I think of her as dangerous. I do not consider myself insecure, I consider her untrustworthy. I do not think of myself as being hurt, I think of her as a witch (1).

The picture drawn here is truly an amazing one. Men do not describe themselves as the subjects of their own actions. It is the women who are the problem, and it is the women who act in such a way that the men have to react. Interviews with abusive men show a striking lack of insight: They do not remember, they do not know and they do not understand what happened (2). Instead, the men reverse their feelings and project them onto their surroundings. There is an externalising and projection of men's own emotions. These men do not take responsibility for their own actions: in other words, we are left with a violent act with no real perpetrator. Our first perspective, then, is to see the men's actions as an act of violence without a subject.

2 - We have reached a later stage in the therapy. The man has started to tell us what he is feeling when she does not return at the time agreed on. He is afraid. Has something happened? He is insecure. Doesn't she love me anymore? Doesn't she care about me, who is left alone at home, waiting? Slowly he begins telling us about violence in his own home when he was a child. His father, who was like a ticking bomb. His mother, sitting in the bedroom crying, with bruises all over her body. Himself as a small boy - the heavy pain in his body with no language to express it, a pain he has never shared with anyone.

A new picture of this man is starting to take shape, A new story is slowly emerging. He is telling us about his own vulnerability and powerlessness. About emotions that have no language and which cannot be communicated. He is describing events in his own life for which there is no place in a man's world. For in a man's world, you are supposed to be tough and bear the hardships you are subjected to. The man in the therapy room is telling us about a sense of insecurity in his own emotional life which, were it known to others, would reveal that he is not actually a real man.

We are now beginning to understand why he insisted earlier that it was the woman who was to blame for his acts of violence. This feels far safer than admitting his own feelings of insecurity, feelings that break with our idea of genuine masculinity. To be vulnerable is unmanly. This perspective is what we call men's feeling of powerlessness.

3 - Still further on in the therapy sequence the man is starting to wonder why he becomes so angry. He tells us that somewhere inside he feels that he has a right of ownership over the woman. He feels that she should be there for him. When she does not come home exactly at the appointed time she is violating

claims he feels he has on her. She has, in a sense, broken a law and has to be punished for this. He feels a righteous anger towards her and violence breaks out.

Here we see how he is linking his violence to structures in society between men and women. In our modern-day Europe, the patriarchal idea that men have the power of determination over women still rules the ground. This both makes possible and justifies men's violence towards women. Many men do not even think they are doing anything wrong when they are beating women. The second perspective about men's feelings of helplessness is, in other words, not sufficient for understanding men's violence against women. We must add still another perspective that shows how men want women to nourish their egos, to exist to satisfy men's emotional and sexual needs. We call this perspective the structural legitimacy of violence.

We have presented three perspectives which can serve as a starting point for understanding the nature of private violence. It has to do with men without a subject, who are blaming their actions on others. It has to do with men who are experiencing a sense of powerlessness and with men who have internalised the feeling of supremacy the patriarchal culture gives us men and who put it into practice in concrete action against those nearest to them. If we combine these three perspectives, we see a man who is largely out of touch with his own emotions, without a sense of subjective responsibility, who thinks his use of force is justified and legitimate. When described this way, it is easy to see how the man using private violence resembles all other men in our society. For we find that much of the same logic is applied in relation to general problems, such as divorce cases, domestic conflicts, in the lack of proper relations between fathers and their children - the idea that it is the women who are creating the problems, that it is they who are making unreasonable demands or putting obstacles in the way, that it is their jobs that create the problems, or a host of other things. Rarely do the men themselves, based on self-reflection and empathy, take on responsibility for their own actions. For this reason, it is impossible to separate the violent man from the rest of us as "different", as a madman. He is one of us, like us and a carrier of the same social structures that give all men privileges in our society.

We emphasise this because our perspectives on the violence itself have great importance for the choice of strategies in the struggle against private violence - and it is important in order to realise the resistance which exists against focusing on this violence. Because there is a great deal of resistance against calling the violence by its true name, namely, men's violence against women.

Our perspective means first and foremost that it is

necessary to apply a gender perspective to violence. What we are seeing is masculinity gone astray, masculinity with little room for vulnerability, humility and devotion, a masculinity with a great deal of possessiveness and a masculinity with little capacity for shouldering its own pain and taking on responsibility for that of others. Before we say anything about the strategies in the struggle against the violence we must say something about the mode of existence of this masculinity.

A few years ago in the US, a small study was carried out in one of the country's large prisons. This showed that if there was one thing these men had in common, it was the absence of a father. Probably the same holds true for any prison. The men's descriptions of their fathers will be largely the same - as emotionally absent, physically absent and often as violent. But this is not the only context in which we will hear such stories. A Norwegian study has shown that many of the quite ordinary men questioned also had problems with an absent father (3). The answers may be categorised thus:

- 1- I don't quite know what to say about my father, because I didn't really know him.
- 2- I knew him as a father, but not as a person.
- 3- My father was absent or remote.
- 4- When not remote, he was often felt to be aggressive, controlling or tyrannical.
- 5- Their picture of their fathers is often the reverse image of the impression they themselves want to make.

This father, whom the children do not know is, as someone absent, remote, aggressive, the founder of our masculine culture. In most western countries, statistics showing the enormous extent of the absence of fathers are now emerging. In Europe, there are hundreds of thousands of sons who never see their fathers.

It is through their fathers that the sons are socialised and raised to be men, and if the fathers are not there, the sons' longing for their fathers often proves to take the shape of idealised father-images - where the void is filled by hypermasculinity. The German physician and psychoanalyst Alexander Mitscherlich described the fatherless society as early as 1963 (4). There is nothing to indicate that the system is very much better today. Recent studies from Norway tell us that fathers with small children are working longer hours than ever to meet financial commitments. The divorce rate is increasing and the result is that thousands of children every year lose day-to-day contact with their fathers. Only one third of divorced fathers manage to maintain regular contact with their children.

We are focusing on the fathers because a Norwegian study of violent men showed that most of

them had experienced a violent father (5). They had experienced fathers who abused the mothers and, unfortunately, the sons have a tendency to repeat the patterns set by their fathers. It is important to stress the fact that it was not they, themselves, who had been abused, but they had witnessed their fathers' violence against their mothers.

Another, decisive reason to focus on the fathers is that the sons also bring the private violence with them out into society. A socialisation towards violence in the home will often be supported by a tradition in the film and media industry fixated with violence which results in the use of violence in conflict situations both at home and in society in general. Violence has a tendency to underscore and emphasise masculinity. An unsure and emotionally crippled young boy may become a tough and feared man by using violence - he becomes a tough guy in his local environment. In this way, men, for a lack of a secure masculinity, can "elbow their way" into a masculinity of a kind that is well established in society. We are producing images of men which are passing on a violent norm of behaviour to those of our sons who are longing for a good father.

A teenager entering therapy said that he had become a member of the toughest gang in town because throughout his school years he had been taunted for being feminine. Now he wanted to prove to everyone that he, too, was a real man. The initiation was, as in the toughest American movies, to be beaten up by the other members of the gang. After that, he was in. But in on what? What did the community of the gang entail? It consisted of going around and beating up other youths, vandalism and other violent acts directed against their immediate surroundings. In this way, this young boy was trying to beat his path to masculinity.

We can, of course, say a great deal about the tradition of fatherhood in our culture, and about the psychological mechanisms operating in the father/son relationship, but time unfortunately will not permit us to do so here today. Instead, we will use the last few minutes of our time to present some strategies which may contribute to changing today's violent situation. We may summarise these under the heading "the need to take responsibility".

In the previously distributed material, we described two activities which we regard as important, namely the establishment of the treatment centre for violent men: Alternative to Violence (Alternative til vold) and the White Ribbon Campaign. Therefore, we will say no more about these at this point, but only refer to the written material (see appendix). Instead, we would like to say something about what may help give men a greater feeling of responsibility, empathy and self-knowledge. Three concepts which

contain a mode of masculinity which shows care instead of violence:

Three strategies :

1 - Responsibility for children

Europe today is in need of a revolution of fatherhood. A revolution which involves the fathers saying yes to their children and no to working long hours. A revolution based on the fact that not only women get children, but that men do too. A consciousness which demands a sense of lifelong responsibility towards that which one creates. A revolution where the language is changed - one does not, for instance, babysit one's own child, like fathers do today.

This revolution has started in many countries, where fathers are now participating fully at births, where they have formed special fathers' groups in connection with first-time births and where fathers have the right to a leave of absence after births. Many men today wish to take their responsibility seriously, and they are important in creating new images of men and fathers as caring persons. These rights must be introduced and developed in all European countries.

But fatherhood involves priorities. Fathers must tell themselves: "I will put my child first". Many men see themselves as indispensable at work - but do they ever ask themselves whether they are indispensable to their children?

But it is also important for the fathers to develop a language that will bring the sons into a different region to that land of toughness which rules the ground in today's male culture. Today we are teaching our sons courage and self-confidence in relation to sports and work. In these areas, they are supposed to work hard and make sacrifices, show what they can, do, but we are not teaching them courage and responsibility in relation to their own emotional lives and in relation to their fellow human beings. Sons must be given an emotional education, they must know and give voice to their own emotions. The sons must learn to be able to take responsibility for their own conflicts and vulnerability - and to be able to take responsibility for the results of their own actions.

2 - Taking responsibility for one's own actions

Men must dare to show new sides of themselves. Men must dare to break away from a culture of irresponsibility where they are pulling away from the arena of intimacy, where they hide behind grey suits, newspapers and uniforms. If we are to be good guides to our children, we must be able to share our experience, we must be able to talk about our own lives, show our inner lives, create an arena within ourselves which gives room for reflection, listening, compassion and devotion.

We must redefine the nature of our emotions. We cannot equate emotions and femininity. We must reclaim our emotional lives and, if possible, find a new language to express emotions. At the same time, we must learn from women. It must be possible for us to establish relations with women based on cooperation and common growth.

It is hard to break with a culture where we have learned to be autonomous and controlling, a culture which has robbed men of a language for intimate matters. This language has to be developed. Through new stories of a responsible masculinity we will create that responsible masculinity. We must establish a new malethic, based on two concepts: responsibility and caring.

3 - Responsibility for society

In many countries, there is today a great commitment to conserving nature. This commitment may often seem paradoxical, because what happens in nature is just a consequence of what goes on in society. A violent society must necessarily also create a violent reaction to nature.

Therefore, men must cease to turn their backs on violence. We must acknowledge it, interfere, interrupt and talk about the irresponsible nature of domestic violence. We must create a movement from self-interest to common interest, from taking to giving, from "I" to "we". We have a responsibility to interfere if we encounter private violence in the next flat. The family is not sacred, it is a frail construction in need of help. The White Ribbon campaign is an initiative which is aimed specifically at acknowledging and speaking out loud about the culture of violence - in order to change it.

But the work against a culture of violence also involves political work to change some of the most destructive arenas in our culture. The area is too vast to go into here, but it is clear that today's business trend to squeeze the maximum performance out of employees nurtures and creates violence. The struggle for reforms is working hours must be basic to creating opportunities for fathers to spend more time with their families - longer leavers of absence in connection with births, special quotas for fathers and shorter work days for fathers with small children will be the beginning of such a change. In addition, we are calling on politicians to concentrate their attention on the private instead of the public violence. In thoughts as well as in action.

And lastly, since we are in Strasbourg, where the French-Lithuanian philosopher Emmanuel Levinas started his career, we would like to pose the question of whether it is possible to create a new masculine ethic inspired by Levinas' theory of ethics. Is it possible to find a masculinity based on devotion, humility,

vulnerability and openness to one another, where men will enter what we will call the third birth, where from a state of narcissism, they are reborn into a state of living for others through responsibility and caring?

Appendix

In this article we should like to concentrate on the work against domestic violence, as an example of and a proposal for action in all European countries.

The reality of violence against women

Our knowledge about the amount of violence against women is slight. First of all, it is very difficult to enter the room of domestic violence - it is hidden, silenced and almost non-existent in the political and social debate. Secondly, little research is done on domestic violence. In Norway we have had a research programme, funded by the Norwegian Research Council, on violence against women and sexual abuse of women and children. After ten years we are now starting to know something about the mechanisms of violence, the relationship between power and powerlessness in this area. We have learned to listen to the voices of both the offender and the victim of the violence and we have started to build a policy out of this knowledge.

But still, we do not know very much about the extent of domestic violence. What researchers and other people working in this field have done is to make a qualified guess based on the numbers we know about: the number of children brought into hospitals because of sexual abuse (ten years ago this diagnosis almost didn't exist), the number of women staying in shelters for battered women, the number of men seeking help for a problem with violent behaviour, the number of women contacting police stations because of sexual abuse. We therefore estimate that in Norway, one hundred thousand men have a problem with violence, which equals six percent of the male population above the age of eighteen. Six thousand women are sexually abused every year and very few men are convicted for crimes, of this nature. Around five percent of the children are exposed to sexual abuse, most of them girls. As many as twenty percent of women in the workplace have experienced sexual harassment.

This is the reality of violence against women in Norway, and we do not think that it is any less in other European countries. The issue is, however, not the amount of violence, because domestic violence is by any standard far too frequent. We must keep our focus clear, and that is to work against the thinking which exists within masculinity: that it is acceptable to use violence against women.

What has been done ?

Twenty years ago, the focus of domestic violence was on battered women. The policy of the women's movement and of the government was to create shelters for battered women. These shelters were and are an important "room of their own" which creates safety and help. In the last seven years the focus has included men. The problem which was raised was: if nothing is done with the men, the violence will never stop! Out of pressure from both men and women, the Norwegian Department for Children and Family Affairs funded the first centre for battering men - Alternative to Violence (ATV). From the beginning, ATV has been a total success, with a long waiting list. The two psychologists working in the centre have developed new methods for working with men and violence - with both individual and group therapy. So far, the results have been very good, with reports that more than 80 percent of the men have never used violence after finishing the therapy. As a result of ATV's existence, several psychologists (men) around the country have started focusing specifically on men and violence and offering therapy for men with violent behaviour. This is very new, since the dominant theory within traditional family therapy has a lot of resistance against domestic violence. We think that it is necessary to focus particularly on men and violence within family therapy to be able to deal with it, or even to be able to see it.

But still, the very few therapists working with men and violence are not enough compared to the amount of violence. Our conclusion is that the existence of specific centres, like ATV, should be part of the effort against domestic violence in every European country. Centres like this have two specific advantages. Firstly, the only practical solution to the problem is to offer therapy for violent men. Shelters for battered women soften the pain, but do not fight its cause. Secondly, by treating men we are showing that we think men are not all bad. We are working with the causes of violence and this shows that men can change violent behaviour. This is the ethical dimension of centres like ATV.

Another important activity in Norway is the White Ribbon Campaign: Men against violence against women. This is a campaign by men, for men and about men. We started the campaign in 1993 and we organise events every year the day before and on Fathers' Day (which is the second weekend in November). The White Ribbon Campaign started originally in Canada in 1991, when a handful of men decided they had a responsibility to urge men to speak out against violence against women. They decided that wearing a white ribbon in the week leading up to the second anniversary of the massacre of 14 women at the University of Montreal engineer-

ing school would be a symbol of men's opposition to men's violence against women. The campaign was a big success, where thousand of men across Canada wore a white ribbon. Since then, the Canadians have organised white ribbon campaigns every year, and it has spread to Australia , the US and Norway, Wearing a white ribbon is a personal pledge never to commit, condone nor remain silent about violence against women. Our objective is to stimulate reflections and discussions that lead to personal and collective action among men. Violence against women is a topic which has never been spoken about among men. We want this to change - and we think that speaking about violence against women is one important step towards ending it. The advantage of the white ribbon is that it is immediately visible, which often raises people's curiosity - and the discussion is begun.

The campaign is working within schools, unions, workplaces, the military, with politicians, in the media. The work is done by volunteers only, except for a very successful cooperation in 1995 with the Norwegian organisers (Norsk Folkehjelp) of the Madrid Declaration: Say no to violence against women. We prepare different events for Fathers' Day each year, because we want to underline the responsibility of the fathers. Domestic violence is a family pain with consequences for the whole family. We focus on the need for fathers, husbands and lovers to take responsibility and show empathy instead of violence. To focus on Fathers' Day also gives the advantage of helping to create real alternatives. Because we have to help to help boys learn from birth that to be real men you do not have to be violent and that real men are caregivers. We do not think that men are naturally violent and we do not think that men are bad.

We are not male bashers. At the same time, we do think that many men have learned to express their anger or insecurity through violence. Many men have come to believe that violence against a woman, child or another man is an acceptable way to control another person. By remaining silent about the violence, we allow other men to poison our environments. We also allow picture of men as dangerous to stay alive. We are working to change this picture because we care about what happens in the lives of men. The White Ribbon Campaign is one possible way to raise consciousness among men of violence against women - and the colour of the campaign fits perfectly into the colour of the march against violence in Belgium. It would also be wonderful if the campaign, which already exists in several countries, were to spread to be a huge campaign among men against violence against women.

Without interest from, and work by, men in this area we think it will be very difficult to stop the violence. Domestic violence is a problem within existing masculinity and it is we, as men, who have to stop it.

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