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Bridging gender and generational divides – Towards an integrated perspective on human rights and health in everyday life.

*Brückenschläge zwischen den Geschlechtern und den Generationen in einer gespaltenen
Gewaltdiskussion*

Today's conference will present a rich array of research results drawing on different perspectives to throw light on forms of violence that were long regarded as ordinary and inevitable. I should like to begin this day by looking at some of the tensions and contradictions within the process of social change that is highlighted by this research. It has become fashionable recently to discount working against violence as merely a tactical measure within gender wars. This criticism misses the central role that interdisciplinary cooperation has gained with regard to violence against women. From a broader point of view I would like to suggest how the differing and even fragmented viewpoints could be integrated in a human rights perspective, and why this is important.

1. Awareness of violence has become wider and deeper

When the first refuges for battered women and rape hotlines in the 1970s brought violence against women into public debate, many things seemed simpler than they do now. "Violence" referred to physical abuse exercised with impunity in the family and within immediate social networks, and to coerced sexual acts involving the body. It also included threats, humiliations, rejection and neglect as well as abusive dominance and control, but these were always to be seen against the background of the possible overpowering use of physical force, which explained why the victim was helpless to escape further humiliation and psychological damage. Physical violence symbolised all violence and was, at the same time, its very real foundation.

In the meantime, the understanding and concept of violence have broadened. This is not entirely new; even the early action research in refuges described psychological abuse as a form of violence alongside physical battering. The general definition of violence was violation of a person's physical or psychological integrity. Today many studies, for example looking at violence in schools, attend to psychological violence such as use of abusive language, social exclusion and ridicule, and include verbal attacks and actions intended to be emotionally hurtful in their questionnaires. However, the categories vary widely and the research data are thus scarcely comparable.

More recently, legislative reforms across Europe have begun to use a broader definition at least for domestic violence. These specific laws tend, however, to leave out entirely violations that occur outside of marriage. The major aim seems to be the protection of the family rather than to secure protection from human rights violations without an exception.

Thus, the broader view that would address all gender-based violence, wherever it may occur, on the one hand, and the effort to extend the definition of domestic violence beyond physical abuse on the other, seem to be mutually obstructive. This is the first of several contradictions that I will describe.

2. Both power and gender are now understood in more complex ways.

With respect to relations of power and dominance, things seemed simpler when the social movements against violence were younger. The insight then was: We live in a society with hierarchical structures that operate according to dichotomies, opposites of which one pole has greater access to power, privilege and social recognition than the other. It is much easier for men than for women, easier for adults than for children, to resort to violence as a response when their position of power is challenged in any way. Thus, in the early analysis the occurrence of violence signalizes where the power is.

Today our understanding of power, but also of gender, has become more complex. Without discussing any of them in detail, it can be said that all relevant theories of power today agree that it cannot be usefully thought of as a possession or a trait belonging to the powerful; rather, power is continually being brought forth and maintained in a process involving all participants. Whether on the larger scale of society or in the spaces of everyday life, power relations are a social order that is lived day by day.

Our thinking about gender, as well – and the term has been introduced into German with this accent – emphasizes its relational character. Current theories of gender relations and their configurations underline the practices by which gender meanings are continually being constructed. This process takes place in a field of forces shaped, on the one hand, by gender difference, on the other, by a symbolic hierarchy determining differing degrees of value, rights and power according to gender category, but also within each gender group. This gender order, as well, is lived in daily practice

Is this asking us to abandon the analysis of interlocking structures of gender and power that has been so important for the feminist awareness of violence? Not at all; the theory only becomes more exact and more complex. Women's complicity in men's power over them has been a feminist theme for a very long time. Violence is an element in the construction of gender and of power; that applies as well when women or girls exercise the forms of aggression more typical for them. Thus, the phenomenon „violence“ does not, as it earlier seemed, offer the key to revealing a gender order without ambiguity.

3. Advocacy and support for victims have generated contradictions in describing the problem.

Two social movements with differing points of view brought everyday violence to the fore in the 1970s. The women's movement denounced male violence against women as the most extreme expression of the abuse of power, and rejected explanations that framed the perpetrator as sick or himself a victim. Innumerable reports from women's experience supported the view that „perfectly ordinary“ men use violence, and most likely towards

women personally known to them, and that their violences are, as a rule, both controlled and controlling. All good perpetrator programs today work from the principle that a violent act is a decision to which there is always an alternative.

Around the same time, a new movement for child protection challenged the clichés describing abusive parents as a kind of monster. The new emphasis was on the inability of mothers and fathers to cope with the burdens and demands that they have not the resources to meet. Removal of the child from the abusive home was no longer seen as a solution, instead, help for the parents was seen as the best way to end the abuse. Child protection centers were to offer temporary safe accommodation while counselling worked with the parents.

Both movements emphasized that the violence is commonplace and embedded in ordinary life circumstances. At the same time, they painted very opposite portraits of the perpetrators. Women's advocates emphasized how the violence that men initiate serves to buttress their dominance and threatens both women and children. The new child protection activists suspected that this analysis served to deny the violence that mothers use against their children. While the women's movement underscored the power of the perpetrators, the child protection movement underscored their helplessness.

This split image of the perpetrator was repeated a few years later when child sexual abuse became a topic of public debate. It appeared in the early feminist assumption that only girls are victimized, because sexual abuse was interpreted as a direct extension of violence against women. In today's professional literature, child sexual abuse is described as extremely controlling, strategically planned and accompanied by the considered use of secrecy. We read that sexual abuse is apt to be found in middle-class families that present an intact impression to the outside world. By contrast, research and practical social work describe the parents who batter a child or abuse it physically as lacking resources, overburdened and apt to lose control, it is described as occurring particularly often in socially disadvantaged families.

However, retrospective victim survey cast doubts on the supposition that child sexual abuse and child battering appear in very different constellations. The overlap between those who have experienced one of these forms of violence or the other seems to be as much as half of the victims of either kind of violence. If that is so, the family circumstances cannot be so dramatically different. In a study by Hertha Richter-Appelt (1995), women who had experienced both physical and sexual abuse had usually been physically abused first, and this had gone on sometimes for years before the sexual abuse began. Could it be that sexual and physical abuse are more closely connected than is generally thought?

4. The fragmentation in the expert discourses suggests questions that have been asked too seldom.

The split in portraying perpetrators – as if different types of violent acts were carried out by entirely different people – indicate the depth of fragmentation in the discourses on violence. This fractioning of discourses was also evident in the contradiction that we have seen

between widening the concept of violence and narrowing the scope of intervention, and the contradiction between unambiguous identification of male power and complexity of involvement in its construction

Such fragmentation is, to begin with, not surprising. Hidden and forgotten problems are often first revealed by social movements that draw their force from a sharp focus on specific issues for indignation and mobilisation. Each movement has eyes only for its “own” issue. For our topic, however, there are powerful grounds not to let the divisions stand. Discussing violence in parallel but unconnected ways risks weakening the effectiveness of strategies towards reducing its occurrence. In theory and in practice it can be a dead end to address each of the different forms of gender-related violence in isolation from the others.

In particular, the discourse on gender-based violence has bracketed out forms that are seen as normal for ordinary masculinity: physical testing of strength, fist-fighting in self-defense, getting one’s way by hitting someone or threatening to do so. It is usually assumed that in such cases there are two “perpetrators” or actors, but no victim. Violence is identified as a problem only when this image can no longer be applied. For example, concern about increasing violence in schools is voiced because children „hit and kick someone even after the victim is lying on the ground and unable to fight“ (Bründel cited in Martin 1999, S. 19), no code of honor is respected. If these (male) children would only follow the honorable rules for masculine contests, the educators would find nothing disturbing about it: That’s just how boys are.

In the area of criminal prosecution, as well – although the concrete legal structures and procedures differ – the assumption in Europe is that there are fistfights that should not receive any attention from the police or the criminal justice system, because no-one is really harmed. This was assumed 30 years ago without any question when men hit their wives. Social movements against violence have profoundly shaken the legitimacy of direct patriarchal violence. But they have not eliminated the rule that hitting and physical fighting are a part of daily life for boys and men, and that state agencies – and according to some, educational authorities – should not intervene except under special circumstances. This widespread view fails to realize that the license for men to hit also implies the duty to learn to hit and to do it well. Even after the norm that a real man should control and discipline his wife and children has gradually lost force, the expectation has remained that a man ought to become competent in the use of physical violence as a “developmental task“ of childhood and youth.

The missing protest against physical attacks between and against men is no accident of a delayed social movement. Rather, it points to the fact that accepting and trivializing these forms of violence has an important function. Military training, for example, has always maintained the commandment that a real man must be willing to learn how to carry out and sustain physical attacks. Men are supposed to show physical courage, to protect the weak from danger, and to succeed in getting their way. It is part of everyday culture in films and TV that the hero will engage in fights to help Good conquer Evil. Studies of young people have found that male youths often attach high value to not being afraid to fight, and that they regard minor injuries as unimportant as long as they feel they have acquitted themselves honourably.

As long as these principles are maintained, we shall measure violence against men and violence against women by a double standard. A slap, a bloody nose, a black eye are considered grounds for intervention and protection when they happen to women; if they happen between men, no one needs to be concerned, and police and the justice system have no reason to be involved unless the attack was treacherous.

The entrenched practice of discounting fights between boys as „normal“ scuffles and skirmishes over status and the habit of seeing girls and women more readily as victims contribute to the social practices that sustain the traditional order of power and gender. This has, of course, solid grounds in social reality. When it comes to physical fights in a relationship, the woman has an objectively higher risk of injury than does the man. By adolescence the great majority of male youths have long since acquired some skill in physical struggle, whereas girls have had very little experience in this area. Courses in self-defence for girls aim to overcome this deficit. However, change is already underway.

5. An integrated approach cannot build on stereotypes.

If we locate the changes over the past 30 years in a wider context, we can discern two overall developments.

Firstly, the growing awareness of violence in everyday life, and increasing willingness to apply the same standards of peaceful conflict resolution to the private sphere as to the public, can be seen as a further stage in the process of civilization as described by Norbert Elias. The expansion of the concept of violence fits this analysis, as it is now used to include angry pushing or grabbing of any kind, verbal threats, psychological as well as physical aggression. We have a finer, more sensitive perception and a different moral sensibility for infringements. Consistent with this process is the demand for freedom from violence for men as victims as well as for women, the call for empathy, solidarity and support for every victim equally, whether young or old, woman or man, native-born or immigrant

Secondly, there has also been a broad and irreversible process of emancipation of women from their tradition-bound dependency status, opening and legitimating any and every choice of action equally for women and for men. In particular, the prohibition that forbid (middle-class) women to show aggression has broken down. Within this development – and it goes without saying that the ideal is no more full reality than is the ideal of non-violence in relationships and families – girls and women employ physical aggression as a way of expressing anger and as an instrument of achieving goals. In sports muscular and well-trained women demonstrate their physical ability. Among youth groups with an inclination to violence, girls no longer restrict their participation to looking on. And the High European Court has struck down the laws excluding women from armed military service as being a form of discrimination. Girls and women are proving themselves in the classic arenas where men have acquired their skill in the use of violence.

The tension between these two overall developments is of particular interest. IN the process of civilisation, men are being asked to become more like women, while the emancipation process encourages women to lay claim to masculinity. Clearly, the principle of gender

difference can no longer function to cover over the contradiction that society has maintained between non-violence conflict resolution on the one hand, readiness to fight physically regardless of the risk of injury on the other. It is time to make this contradiction an object of our thoughtful attention and action.

6. Wider awareness, new questions: Everyday violence as a human rights issue and managing aggression.

Modern European culture, with its expansive history of conquest and its very competitive economy, gives rise to high levels of aggression in its individual members, yet has cultivated very little in the way of skills to deal constructively with feelings such as irritation, anger or rage or with impulses such as malice or revenge. Most people have only a very limited repertoire for expressing aggressive impulses at all without harm to themselves or to others. A human rights perspective towards aggressive behavior in daily life needs to find a tenable foundation for making distinctions and deciding which acts under what conditions should be considered as violations calling for intervention on the part of the community.

Physical attacks that are considered a human rights violation when done to a woman are no less so when done to a man. But the converse also applies. If it is true that, to a certain extent „the experience of physical struggles with peers and with physical violence“ can promote the development of self-confidence in boys and contribute to a strong sense of identity enabling them to take risks and strike out on their own in later life, as Theodor Schulze (1983) found in his analysis of autobiographical descriptions of such experiences, could this not also be an experience of value to girls as well? When are physical skirmishes a part of the socialisation process, and when are they to be considered violence and thus reprehensible? And how can we address psychological violence, for which no-one calls the police, since they could not help? In the future, perhaps we will focus less on the categories of criminal law to determine whether violence has occurred and how severe it is. More attention to the health consequences could be a useful approach to gaining both a wider concept of violence that can include physical, sexual and psychological infringements of a person's integrity, and one that is more clearly defined.

Today we will hear the results of research projects that drew on a wide concept of violence in order to make the injuries of everyday life visible that women and men experience. In doing so, they throw light on a wide range of different occurrences that can cause pain. It will be a task for future discussion to consider how we should best use the term violence. Furthermore, we will hear the fruits of research that has accompanied projects on their way to new methods of intervention, and in doing so describes very practical answers to the question of what infringements the community is no longer willing to tolerate. All the research also points to connections between gender-based violence and violence against children – a topic that will receive separate attention in tomorrow's CAHRV-session. Interweaving the gender and the generational perspectives on violence has only just begun.

Cooperation and consultation between these research projects enabled us to experience the possibilities of a dialogue that can bridge the divides between differing perspectives. The research network CAHRV, that will begin its first conference here tomorrow, has the

ambitious goal of continuing to bridge these divides and to overcome the fragmentation of discourses.

In these difficult times we will need all of the activist power of the social movements that have struggled against gender-based and intergenerational violence. Linking together research in an integrated perspective thus does not serve to withdraw from the advocacy of social movements, but may contribute to bundling their energies more effectively, so that no-one be abandoned as a victim of violence.

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