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## **Men, masculinities and gender violence**

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\* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

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***Men, masculinities and gender violence***

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“It would be a good thing if public opinion was quite clear about the fact that not all men are aggressors and that many men are opposed to aggression and violence. I think that the most important struggles in the world, for Human Rights, against violence, against torture... cannot be left to a single social group. Just as the black movement cannot be left solely to black people. Women’s struggles cannot be left solely to women. Men need to show solidarity, because they are living proof that there are men who repudiate this form of aggression and will do everything in their power to ensure that the number of people who practice violent acts – which unfortunately is very high across all classes and all parts of the world – continues to be reduced by democratic opposition on the part of both men and women.” – Boaventura de Souza Santos (2002)

Studies carried out in various Latin American countries have pointed out that a significant number of women claim to have been the victims of acts of physical violence committed by a partner. In some countries, the percentage of women who claim to have been physically abused by a man is as high as 50%. The lowest figure is 20%. In Brazil, in particular, an estimated 300,000 women tell of being physically abused by their husbands or partners each year. More than half of all women murdered in Brazil were killed by an intimate partner<sup>1</sup>.

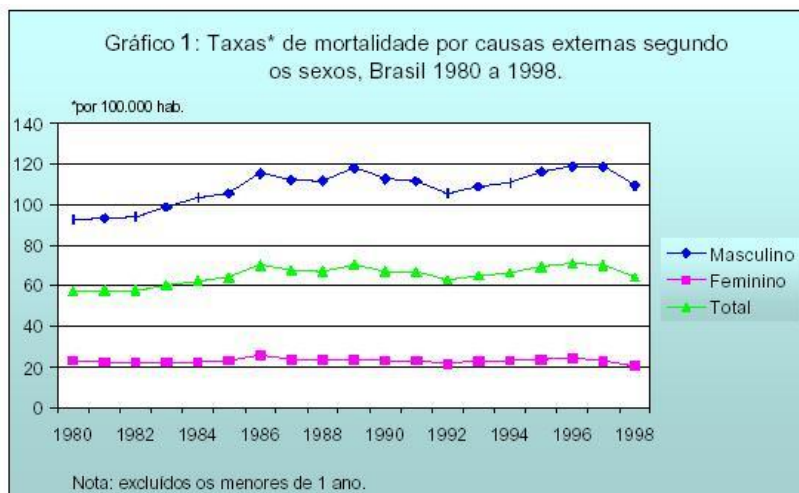
Studies carried out with men also provide evidence of the seriousness of the situation. In Rio de Janeiro, research published in 2003, based on interviews with 749 men aged between 15 and 60, showed that 25.4% admitted to having used physical violence against their partner. 17.2% admitted to having used sexual violence and 38.8% admitted having insulted, humiliated or threatened their partner at least once<sup>2</sup>. In Recife, in 2002, a questionnaire was applied to a total of 170 new recruits in the armed forces. In response to the question “Are there times when a woman deserves a beating?” 25% replied “Yes;” 18% replied “Maybe.” Moreover, 18% admitted that they “had physically abused a woman.”<sup>3</sup>

If the problem of violence on the part of men against women is to be seen from a gender perspective, male socialization and sociability and what it means to be a man in modern societies must also be studied. Generally speaking, men are educated, from an early age, to respond to social expectations in a proactive manner, in which risk and aggressivity are not something to be avoided, but day to day experiences. The idea of taking care of yourself is generally replaced by a destructive or self-destructive posture.

This idea develops in various different ways in different places: in children’s play, in a mass media that is segmented according to age and sex, on the streets, in schools, houses, bars, barracks, monasteries, prisons and on the battlefield. ... Whatever the place, brutality is repeatedly used as an instrument in the process of becoming a man. This is because violence is frequently seen to be a typical male trait in resolving conflicts. Men are, in general, socialized to repress their emotions, so that anger, and even physical violence, are socially acceptable ways of expressing emotion for men.

The fact that these ways of expressing emotion are not only accepted but often encouraged by society may lead to serious acts of violence, including the murder of women and of other men. The figures for homicide, suicide and road accidents as causes of mortality among males speak for themselves.

Violent deaths are much more common in men than in women in a variety of countries. According to figures published by the OPAS (1998)<sup>4</sup> for the year 1994, it can be concluded that the sharpest differences are to be found in Andean countries (5.6 – Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela), in Brazil (4.7) and in Mexico (4.3). The lowest ratios were found in North America (2.4 – the United States and Canada) and the countries of the Southern Cone (3.0 in Argentina, Chile, Paraguay and Uruguay)<sup>5</sup>.



Source: Minayo, Souza e Silva (2001)

Figure 1 – Rates of Mortality due to external causes, by sex. Brazil 1980 – 1998

Note: children of less than one year of age are not included in the statistics.

In Brazil, mortality due to external causes has been on the rise, both in absolute terms and as a percentage of the total mortality rate. The Southeast region and the State of São Paulo show the highest figures for these types of causes of death, although huge increases are occurring in the Mid West region and other States in the North and Northeast of the country. This indicates the extent to which the problem has become part of everyday reality in Brazil. Unlike developed countries, where the most common external causes of death are road accidents and suicide, in Brazil, homicide comes top of the list, followed by road accidents and the homicide rate has gone up far more than that of the other causes of death. (Boletim CIS No. 1 – Health Information Technical Group – CIS of the Health Secretary of the State of São Paulo – SES)

**Table 1.** Mortality due to external causes, by sex

SEX	Homicide	Suicide	Road Accidents
Men	91.8%	81.1%	80%
Women	8.2%	18.9%	20%
Total Number of Cases	41,694	6,505	29,796

**Source:** the Ministry of Health/Funasa/CENEPI – Mortality Information System. (1999)

Furthermore, census data collected from the Brazilian prison population showed that an overwhelming percentage of prisoners are men.

**Table 2.** Brazilian Prison Population, by sex - Brazil 2003.

SEX	% of Prison Population
Men	95.6%
Women	4.4%
Total Number of Inmates	284,989

Source: Ministry of Justice/National Prisons Department (June 2003)

These data show that men are put in contact with violence in various settings, often as deliberately by way of hierarchical power relations in society that define male domination over women. To put it another way, the same power system that authorizes men to behave in an aggressive fashion and “to uphold their rights in the name of honor” is the same system of power that places them in a situation of vulnerability.

This does not imply that men should be seen as victims. As the feminist movement has shown, this is definitely not the way forwards towards full citizenship. However, facts such as these need to be analyzed from a gender perspective, bearing in mind the socialization processes that lie behind them.

Explanations from the field of biology and genetics seek to show that there is a relation between male violence and their physical make-up. Some claim that men supposedly carry a hereditary predisposition in their genes and chromosomes that justifies aggressive forms of conduct. Others put their faith in explanations in terms of hormones. However, the association between masculinity and power and violence is not solely the result of (nor can it be reduced to) biological and genetic factors. It is constructed and perpetuated by historically and culturally determined social relations; it is constructed by the social division of labor, and socialization in the family, school, daily life and trivial everyday acts.

It is true that studies show that many men abuse and violate women. However, these same studies show that the number of men who do not commit this kind of violence is far greater. Not all men are, in principle, aggressive, and many actively reject and condemn violence, especially violence against women. If **not all men are violent**, how can it be argued that violence is part of the male identity?

Our purpose is to rethink these models of socialization and seek to involve men, from an early age (children, adolescents, and young people) in efforts to end violence against women in public and private places. Gender violence is a social phenomenon and, therefore, should be confronted using a range of strategic policies and direct social interventions at different levels of society.

**Education:** activities involving schoolchildren, teachers and technical and administrative staff in public and private sector schools, the production and dissemination of public information material and the training of primary and secondary school teachers.

**Health:** Action aimed at basic public health care units, leading to strategies that highlight the idea that violence against women is a public health problem, principally in the area of women's health.

**Justice, public safety and human rights:** Action aimed at professionals who draw up and implement legal measures relating to domestic and family violence, including penalty centers and alternative measures, the Judiciary, Public Ministries, Public Defense Lawyers, schools for judges, prosecutors, defense attorneys and arbitrators. Family law courts and children's and adolescents' courts, police academies, the special police stations for crimes against women, prisons, custody councils, probation offices for young offenders and NGOs.

**Programs for Young People/Youth groups** – To apply a gender perspective to work with young men that involves: a) engaging men in discussion of gender inequalities; b) encouraging men to take on childcare responsibilities; c) assuming responsibility in issues of sexual and reproductive health; d) encouraging non-violent means of resolving conflict.

**Employment** - Activities that involve workers and employers, companies and trades union and urban and rural communities.

**Public Policy** – Dialogue with governmental bodies to promote social control and try to broaden the social impact of campaigns to prevent violence, when related to sexual and reproductive rights.

An important action strategy has been the **Brazilian White Ribbon Campaign**, whose overall aim is to raise awareness of the issue among men, and involve them in the struggle to end violence against women. This action runs in parallel to that taken by organized women's movements and other organized movements that seek equity and human rights, by way of action in the fields of health care, education, employment, social work, justice, public safety and human rights<sup>6</sup>. More specifically the national campaign proposes:

- to make young and adult men aware of the repercussions of violence against women in their own lives and those of other men and to put forward proposals for changing attitudes and behavior towards women;
- to integrate young and adult men into the campaign, turning them into active participants capable of passing on the campaign's goals to other men;
- to publicize the campaign as widely as possible and spread awareness of the facilities already in existence for dealing with violence against women;
- to involve shapers of public opinion by way of the mass media in the effort to publicize the campaign;
- to encourage public policy at municipal level that strengthens the development and sustainability of action taken in this area.

This campaign originated with an incident that became known as the Montreal Massacre. On 6 December 1989, a 25 year-old young man (Marc Lepine) burst into a classroom at the Polytechnic in the city of Montreal, Canada. He ordered some 48 men who were in the

room to leave, leaving only the women. Shouting, "You're all feminists!" this man then began to shoot frenziedly about the room, killing 14 women at point blank range. He then committed suicide. In a suicide note he argued that he had done what he had done because he could not tolerate the idea of women studying engineering, a course, he believed, should be available only for men.

This horrific crime mobilized public opinion across the country, generating widespread debate about the inequalities between men and women and violence this leads to. A group of men consequently decided to form an organization to tell the world that, though there are men who commit acts of violence against women, there are also many men who repudiate such violence. They chose a white ribbon as their symbol and adopted the following slogan: never commit violence against women and don't turn a blind eye to it.

They thereby launched the first White Ribbon Campaign: men for an end to violence against women. In the first year of the campaign, 100,000 white ribbons were distributed among Canadian men, mainly between 25 November and 6 December, the week when there are a series of actions and public demonstrations in favor of women's rights and against violence. The 25<sup>th</sup> of November was proclaimed International Day for Eradicating Violence against Women by UNIFEM, a United Nations organization. The 6<sup>th</sup> of December was chosen so that the deaths of those women (and the sexism that caused it) might never be forgotten.

Working together with various United Nations bodies, especially UNIFEM, and in partnership with women's organizations, this campaign has now been run in various other countries: in Asia (India, Japan and Vietnam); Europe (Norway, Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Spain, Belgium, Germany, Portugal and the UK), Africa (Namibia, Kenya, South Africa and Morocco), Israel, Australia and the United States.

In Brazil, in 1999, some activities were introduced relating to this issue, with the aim of extending our network, and raising the awareness of professionals and society at large. In 2001, we officially launched the campaign, promoting a variety of activities, including: the distribution of white ribbons, T-shirts and information leaflets, the holding of public events, marches, debates, themed workshops, interviews with newspapers and magazines, petitions etc. These activities are being run in partnership with a variety of different institutions, especially from the women's movement.

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## NOTAS

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- 6) National Management Committee: Pernambuco (PAPAI Institute); Rio de Janeiro (Promundo and NOOS Institutes); Brasília (UNESCO); São Paulo (CES, ECOS and Prómulher) and Acre (Acrean Women's and Men's Network).