

# On Violence as a Feminist Problem: Producing Knowledge on Sexual and Gender-based Violence<sup>1</sup>

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[W]e are all still trying to understand how patriarchal power works, and the masks the wielders of it don to escape accountability.

Cynthia Enloe, *The Big Push*, 2017, p. 127.

## Abstract

In her recent analysis of the persistence of patriarchy in contemporary social life, Cynthia Enloe (2017) describes her experience of fighting against sexual harassment at her university in the 1970s. As Enloe describes, the women's movement named and politicised this then 'unfamiliar form of power abuse'. For Enloe, this experience revealed the value of generating accurate conceptualisations for effective political action, and was crucial for developing her analysis of gendered violence from war to peace. At the same time, she and her feminist colleagues grappled with the challenge of how to conceptualise this 'sexualised abuse'. The questions they confronted, she remarks, will still seem familiar to us today.

As Enloe suggests, feminists have named and politicised sexual and gender-based violence, but still confront important conceptual and political questions about these forms of violence. This paper reflects on current feminist knowledges of gender-based violence. It first outlines key feminist approaches to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), and then considers their resources and limitations for building 'accurate conceptualisations for effective action' against these continuing forms of patriarchal violence (Enloe, 2017, p. 127).

**Keywords:** Sexual and gender-based violence, violence against women and girls, feminist theory and practice, feminist knowledge.

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In her analysis of the persistence of patriarchy in contemporary social life, Cynthia Enloe describes her experience of fighting against sexual harassment at her university in the 1970s. For Enloe, 'naming the problem felt revolutionary'.<sup>2</sup> Since the 1970s, sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) has become what Sara Ahmed calls 'problems with names' (2015, p. 8), and there is now a rich body of feminist knowledge about these forms of violence. However, as Enloe describes, we are still grappling with the problem of how to conceptualise these forms of patriarchal power, and how to develop effective political strategies to fight them. This paper reflects on current knowledge of SGBV. It first outlines key feminist approaches to SGBV, and then considers their resources and limitations for building 'accurate conceptualisations for effective action' against these continuing forms of patriarchal violence (Enloe, 2017, p. 127).

### Conceptualising Sexual and Gender-Based Violence as a Feminist Problem

As Enloe describes, the feminist naming of women's experiences of SGBV was a political act that changed our understanding of these forms of violence. Frazer and Hutchings argue that a 'major achievement of feminist theory and practice has been to transform conceptualisations of [SGBV] as political violence, and thereby shift political understandings and agendas'. However, they also point out, 'the meaning of "violence" within feminist theory and practice remains contentious' (Frazer and Hutchings, 2020, p. 200). As can be seen in the the shifting nomenclature of 'violence against women and girls', 'gender-based violence', and 'gender-based violence against women and girls', '[f]or most forms of VAW there have been debates about how they should be named, with multiple shifts in language over the last four decades' (Kelly, 2015, p. 146), as well as debates about feminist strategies and concepts of SGBV.

These debates reflect the ongoing feminist struggle to change political understandings and agendas of SGBV, in which feminists from the former Yugoslavia have played a key role. These struggles have culminated in the acceptance of the prohibition on SGBV as an international norm under international human rights and international criminal law, (see, for example, Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women General Recommendation 19 (1992)). While these international norms build on decades of feminist activism and knowledge production, they do not fully capture feminist conceptions of SGBV.

### Feminist Concepts of Sexual and Gender-based Violence

While the meaning of SGBV is highly debated, nevertheless feminist approaches understand it as a spectrum of violence occurring in a range of social relationships and contexts. SGBV includes different forms of violence, such as rape, domestic violence, sexual harassment, street harassment, and threats, and 'different *types of violence* (physical, sexual, psychological, emotional, and economic)' (True, 2021, p. 9). In these

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2017/nov/06/feminist-laura-bates-cynthia-enloe>

feminist approaches, the category of SGBV includes four elements: (1) women's experiences of violence, (2) those experiences include a wide range of acts (3) that exist in a continuum in peace-time and war-time, (4) and express unequal gender orders.

The **first element** is that women's experiences of violence are crucial for building an understanding of SGBV. Feminist approaches use many ways of capturing these experiences. However, the idea of women's experiences has empirical, analytic, and political dimensions. The empirical dimension examines the phenomenological experience of SGBV, and accounts for violence from the experiential standpoint of women. The analytic dimension examines these experiences at a collective level beyond the individual, and explains them as structural and social phenomena. The third dimension is political, and examines these experiences as forms of unequal or oppressive gender power relations.

The **second element** is that SGBV is a form of violence. The name of this category of violence, and which forms of violence it includes, are fluid and contested. However, feminist approaches share the understanding that SGBV refers to violent acts, practices, and relations, which involve force (whether physical or symbolic), or the exercise of power that damages others. The **third element** is that SGBV consists of a continuum of violence in both peace-time and war-time. Building on Liz Kelly's (1988) idea of the continuum of sexual violence as a continuous series of multiple and related acts, so-called 'peace time' SGBV is seen as 'situated along a continuum both in terms of time and space, and the varied forms and manifestations reflect this' (Manjoo 2012, p. 27). Moreover, conflict-related SGBV is seen as part of a continuum of gendered violence in peace and war. As Cynthia Cockburn argues, there is a continuity between peace-time, war-time, and post-conflict SGBV, as gendered violence persists across 'preconflict, conflict, peacemaking, reconstruction' (2004, p. 43).

The **fourth element** is that SGBV expresses unequal gender orders in society. The conceptualisation of 'gender' and the 'gender order' in feminist approaches is highly varied and debated, and reflects the wide explanatory range of feminist theory. However, feminist approaches emphasise how SGBV is 'structured through heteronormative gender norms and practices' (Moser 2001, p. 31), which express an 'unequal, compulsory, binary gender order' (Frazer and Hutchings, 2020, p. 209). They share an understanding that hierarchical power relations structure gender relations, and that these hierarchical gender orders produce SGBV.

### Current Feminist SGBV Models

While the feminist category of SGBV is built on these four conceptual elements, nevertheless different models of SGBV have developed in feminist approaches. These models are generally implicit and theoretically underdeveloped. However, it is possible to identify three key models of individual, group, and structural SGBV, and the recurring issues within and across them.

### *The Individual Harm Model*

This first model focuses on SGBV as a form of individual violence. This model understands SGBV as a direct harm to the person and/or as a violation of individual rights (see, for example, True 2021). The idea of ‘direct harm’ conceives SGBV as the intentional violence of an individual actor. It focuses on direct physical violence, and draws on the conceptual and legal frameworks of criminal law. The idea of rights violations conceives SGBV as a discriminatory breach of individual rights. It focuses on violence as a breach of fundamental rights, such as the right to physical integrity, sexual autonomy or equal treatment, and draws on the conceptual and legal frameworks of international human rights.

There is a long-standing feminist debate regarding the conceptual and political limitations of this model. The strong feminist critique of the individual harm model contends that it is form of Western liberal legalism that individualizes social harms, makes women into victims, and asks the state to protect women (see, for example, Halley 2018; Engle 2020). Accordingly, it argues that such a model cannot address women’s agency, wider social relations of oppression, or recognize that the state itself is part of those wider power relations. Moreover, it criticizes the cultural (Western) specificity of such a model, and the idea that it is possible to construct universal definitions of SGBV. Following this argument, then we should abandon all attempts to engage with law and state in the struggle against SGBV.

However, other feminists emphasise the importance of engaging with law and state because they establish norms against SGBV and provide accountability and redress to its victims (Gill 2018). Feminists have long highlighted the reality of socially sanctioned violence against women in war and peace. Given this, following the strong feminist critique may simply end up reinforcing gendered cultures of impunity, because violence against women is a category of violence traditionally regarded as permissible and impunable (Nedelsky 2011, p. 361). Nevertheless, using the individual harm model requires confronting the inadequacy of existing legal concepts of SGBV as criminal harms and rights-violations, and the failure of legal mechanisms to adequately address it. We are left, then, with the profound challenges of reforming existing laws, and developing alternative feminist models of justice at national and international levels (see Campbell 2022 for further discussion).

### *The Group-Based Harm Model*

The second model shifts focus from the violence against the individual to violence against the social group. It understands SGBV as violence against members of the social group, ‘women’, and against the ‘gendered’ social group itself (see, for example, Catherine MacKinnon 1987). This model understands SGBV as socially created harms, which are group-based and gender specific. It describes SGBV as a gender-specific form of violence, which has gendered forms, practices, patterns and consequences. It also highlights the gendered symbolic and epistemic violence that ‘renders direct

physical violence against women or feminised actors unremarkable or uninterpretable' (Frazer and Hutchings, 2020, p. 201). In this model, SGBV creates social groups of women (and certain men) as feminised victims, *and* social groups of men as masculinised agents of the existing gender order (Blagojević, 2001, p. xi), because it is integral to the construction of hegemonic 'masculine status and identity' (Schulz 1998, p. 1761, see also Confortini, 2006).

Two key debates emerge in relation to this model. The first concerns whether this model assumes that women exist as *a priori* group, who are unified by their homogeneous experience of SGBV. Such an assumption would 'essentialise and privilege women's experience, and treat women as an undifferentiated category' (Frazer and Hutchings, 2020, p. 202). To avoid this problem, feminists such as Patricia Hill Collins (2017) have argued for an intersectional approach, which accounts for women's different experiences of victimization, support, and justice. Accordingly, an intersectional approach requires understanding how intersecting power relations and structures produce SGBV, construct victimized groups, and shape social responses to their experiences (see Alcoff 2018, Zarkov 2019).

The second debate concerns the conceptualization of SGBV as a gender-based harm. Too often, approaches using the group-based harm model collapse ideas of biological sex (bodies identified as biologically female or male), gender identity (social norms of femininity or masculinity) and gendered social groups (socially structured categories of persons as women and men) (see Campbell 2019). To explain SGBV requires addressing clearly gendered patterns of male perpetration and female victimisation, and the hierarchical gender relations that produce them. However, it also requires explaining the operation of 'gender' in female perpetration and non-female victimisation, such as male victims, or those targeted because of their sexuality or failure to conform to gender norms. How to conceptualise SGBV as a gender-based harm remains a key challenge in feminist theory and practice.

### *The Structural Violence Model*

The third model understands SGBV as an either an effect or an element of structural violence. This model shifts from focussing on direct violence (the intentional physical violence of individual actors) to indirect violence (the violence of social structures that harm persons). It emphasizes the structural violence of political, economic, and social inequalities that produce SGBV (Frazer and Hutchings, 2020, p. 209). Postcolonial and queer feminist approaches also emphasize the structural violence of cultural orders, such as Maria Lugone's critique of 'gender' as a colonial classification system that produces 'the systematic violence inflicted on women of colour' (2007, p. 188), and Judith Butler's critique of gender norms as forms of 'normative violence' (1999 xx, see also Boesten 2019).

An important development of this model is found in social reproduction theory. Feminists such as Maria Mies (1999) and Silvia Federici (1999) argue that violence against

women is an integral part of capitalist accumulation. This is because capitalist accumulation relies on the use of violence of men against women to sustain the sexual division of labour within nation-states, and the international division of labour between core and periphery states. In this approach, SGBV is part of social reproduction not only within nation states, but also in the political and economic domination and exploitation of states by other states. Accordingly, it is not possible to ‘separate “violence against women” ... from a global state of violence’, as Francoise Vergès (2022) describes. In this approach, SGBV is an an integral part of the reproduction of intersecting systems of exploitation and domination in patriarchal, imperialist, and capitalist global social systems.

However, the structural violence model is also the least developed of all three models. It provides few elaborated concepts or theories of SGBV, and raises three important but unanswered questions. The first question is how to conceptualise SGBV as structural violence. Should SGBV be seen as an effect of structural violence, as ‘a continuum that spans interpersonal and structural violence’ (Manjoo 2012, p. 27), or as an integral element in systems of structural violence (Confortini 2006)? The second question concerns how to explain SGBV as a form of structural violence. How and why do systems of structural violence produce SGBV? What is the relationship between SGBV and other forms of systemic violence at national and global levels (see Meger 2021)? Finally, this model raises the political question of what strategies should be used to fight SGBV. After all, if structural violence produces SGBV, then should our efforts be directed to changing those structures, rather than responding to SGBV itself?

### **Producing Feminist Knowledge On SGBV**

These SGBV models, then, generate a set of unresolved political and theoretical debates. These debates all point to the current challenges of building feminist knowledge about SGBV. These challenges concern (1) the object and subject of research, (2) models of knowing, and (3) values in research (see also Campbell 2018).

#### *The object and subject of research: The ontological challenge*

This challenge concerns how to conceptualize SGBV as an object of feminist investigation. The changing and diverse nomenclature used to describe this object is indicative of this ongoing problem. Building more precise ways to name and define SGBV is important but of itself insufficient to address the challenge of developing an adequate concept of the object of investigation. If SGBV remains an important category of feminist analysis, then it is necessary to consider whether it should only be used to indicate a specific set of harms, what is included and excluded from that category, and when it should be used. It is also important to consider when the concept of ‘violence’ captures what we are seeking to describe, and when other ideas of inequality, injustice, oppression, domination, or exploitation may be more useful.

Central to this ‘ontological’ challenge is the question of the subjects of SGBV, that is, the victims and/or perpetrators of SGBV. Indicative of this challenge are ongoing debates concerning whether SGBV concerns gendered subjects (as in ‘VAWG addresses violence that either intentionally or disproportionately affects women and girls’), or gender-neutral subjects (as in ‘gender-based violence exploits gender inequalities, differences, and hierarchies, be they among women, girls, men, boys, or people who do not identify with binary gender’) (True 2021, p. 9). Adding more categories of identity or new SGBV forms does not adequately resolve this issue. For example, adding ‘female perpetrators’ or ‘male victims’ to our analysis does little to illuminate our understanding of SGBV unless it also addresses the importance of gender relations for explaining its causes and consequences. To meet the ontological challenge requires further development of the concepts, models, and theories of SGBV.

#### *Methodologies and methods: The epistemological challenge*

The epistemological challenge concerns how to develop appropriate methods and methodologies for building feminist knowledge about SGBV. Building knowledge *is* crucial for building theoretical understanding and political strategy. As Haraway describes, feminists need ‘a more adequate, richer account of a world’ (1991, p. 187). The long-standing debates in feminist theory and practice in this area indicates this challenge does not simply concern a question of how to generate more and better “data”. Rather, it also shows that building feminist knowledge about SGBV involves political work in its aims, generation, interpretation, and application. The epistemological challenge, then, is to explore what existing feminist methods and methodologies might then be useful in this task, and to develop new feminist methods and methodologies that can provide a fully understanding of, and better response to, SGBV.

#### *Values, ethics, and politics: The axiological challenge*

Producing feminist knowledge about SGBV will always raise the question of values, ethics, and politics. The issue of values cannot be avoided in this area. The emergence of SGBV as an object of academic study reflects particular values, as it reflects the idea that this violence is a social problem that should be studied. As Sandra Harding (1986, p. 22) points out, ‘deciding what phenomena in the world need explanation, and defining what is problematic about them’ always involves cultural and social values. Ideas of epistemic value, such as objectivity or bias, also inform the basis on which we choose particular methods or methodologies. Ethical values also configure how we investigate so-called ‘sensitive research’, particularly given that SGBV is a social and political issue. Finally, political values also shape this work, whether because we seek to intervene in a highly politicized field, aspire for our work to provide a sound ‘evidence base’ for better policies, or have wider commitments to a more just world. The axiological challenge, then, provides a reflexive account of the politics, values, and ethics that inform knowledge production about SGBV.

The axiological question cannot be answered by the individual researcher or activist alone, as it involves building knowledge and strategies in collective action and solidarity. For this reason, it requires building what Haraway describes as ‘webs of connection called solidarity in politics and shared conversations in epistemology’ (1991, p. 191), such as the knowledge exchange of the UNIGEM conference. A crucial strategy for building feminist knowledge about SGBV, then, is building feminist epistemic communities. Following Lorraine Code (1991) and Helen Longino (1997), feminist communities of knowers generate knowledge and negotiate political goals and practices. In these negotiations, the knower is responsible and accountable to feminist politics. This accountability and responsibility challenges knowers to acknowledge and address the social, discursive and material inequalities that constitute our epistemic communities. Feminists have developed numerous material and epistemic practices that attempt to resist the reproduction of the existing social relations that position women as other than speaking subjects. Those practices, including equity of access, a politically aware use of language, redistribution of resources and non-hierarchical relations, actively work to construct democratic epistemic communities.

Enloe’s experience of fighting sexual harassment in her university shows how crucial building feminist knowledge is for naming and fighting SGBV. Given this, we need to recognise the importance of building feminist epistemic communities for moving beyond fear or silence. Ultimately, the challenge of building knowledge on SGBV is to build our webs of connection called solidarity in politics and shared conversations in epistemology. Only then can all women become speaking subjects, moving beyond fear or silence.



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