

OPINION

Fighting back

Men and women against violence and abuse

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The European Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) published a large scale research study into violence against women. In each of the 28 member states of the European Union, using the same methodology and asking the same questions, 1500 women were interviewed as to their experience of violence, who had committed that violence against them (man or woman) and whether they experienced violence before the age of fifteen. The research study has unearthed some very interesting data: what types of violence have women and girls experienced? What gender is the perpetrator? FRA is very generous with its' data and makes it fully available, urging us to do our own analysis, to compare ourselves with our neighbours, to look at possible explanations for differences. We will most certainly do that. But there is other interesting and recent research too. The Sexpert research by the University of Ghent found that not only women are victims of transgressive sexual behaviour. Sometimes men are too. Domestic violence is as common in lesbian couples as it is in heterosexual couples. 'Most intimate partner violence occurs in both directions, and in all sorts of relationships, regardless of the sexual preferences or ethnic background' says researcher Sabine Hellemans (De Standaard, 11.03.14).

Patriarchy as dogma

When research shows that women commit as much intimate partner violence as men (Strauss, 2006), the next question is about motivation and result. The result is indisputable: women are left with far more serious wounds far more often. Now motivation. Do men want to dominate because of a patriarchal logic that tells them they are the boss and women must submit? Feminists swear blind this is the case. This has however become a paradigm, an unquestionable starting point. For years society has pumped money into academic feminism, into institutions designed to improve the equality of women and men, into national and European programmes against violence against women. Has it all been to no avail? Happily there are many areas in which great progress has been made. Women do study far longer and better than ever before, the pay gap is slowly closing, more professions are open to women, and they are reaching the top in business and in politics. Not yet fully, there are still barriers and glass ceilings, it is true, but can we claim that the patriarchy still stands unchallenged? No. For how long can you keep up that framework as an explanation for everything, including violence against women? Or to put it differently: why does the FRA only investigate violence against women in their research? Should social scientists not question such paradigms?

The respected FRA researchers know full well that there are studies which show that men also suffer sexual violence and intimate partner violence (extreme domestic violence with the intent to intimidate). The FRA does not deny that women can be offenders, for they explicitly ask the question as to who committed the violence. But FRA's mission is clear from their press release *'the survey shows that policy makers need to recognise the extent of violence against women, and ensure that responses meet the needs and rights of all victims of violence against women in practice and not just on paper'*. I do not for a moment doubt the noble intentions of the FRA, nor those of the politicians who commission their research. But what are we doing here? What kind of picture of women and men are we painting for the public, for our contemporaries, for our sons and daughters?

Representation and stigma

We imply violence is all around. That much is true. We imply women are always victims and men are never victims. That isn't quite right. Women are victims of domestic violence far more often than men, but not always. We fail to acknowledge male victims and in doing so, we perpetuate a taboo. We portray women as victims without any agency. That is not right. Most intimate partner violence is bi-directional. That means that women and men take turns at being victim and perpetrator. Women do unacceptable things too. They scream and shout, hit and kick. Women are not always perfect mothers, who care for their children and simply accept abuse. That is a stereotype too. Isn't it time to step out of our naïve indignation and recognise that there is aggression in every one of us? That violence is not something other people do? Would real prevention not entail recognising our own aggression and our own doubtful behaviour and doing something about it? By accepting it as something 'of our own' we can start to deal with it. We can be strong, and leave the labels of victim or perpetrator behind.

The simple right to a life without violence has been gained in Belgium. It is inscribed in laws that should be guaranteed by policy, police and justice. Laws have to be put into practice, it is not acceptable that the kits for sexual aggression, which provide crucial evidence, are often left to gather dust instead of being used in court. It is not acceptable that prosecutors still decide not to bring many cases of domestic violence to court. But by focussing all our prevention and research efforts on violence against women, as is the case in the FRA research, we are missing something that is going on in the real world. That reality is that men suffer violence too. At home, in the streets and in war situations. Add up all the non-domestic violence, and the figures become far more equal for men and women. By spotlighting women's trauma, we are forgetting men's traumas.

All people

We cannot and should not accept violence as given, something that happens in all cultures and through the ages. Violence is not acceptable neither in the streets, nor at home. Not if it is done by men, nor if it is done by women. Not towards partners, and certainly not towards the elderly or children. Everyone is entitled to safety and freedom, those are fundamental human rights. In order to deal with violence, you need all people, everyone. In order to avoid stereotypical gender roles being translated into violence at home, you have to work with the men. To prevent parents passing

on their own suffering to their children, you have to work with women and men. Preventing violence begins in your own circles, begins at home, begins with yourself.

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