

MALE VICTIMS AND FEMALE AGGRESSORS: THE HIDDEN SIDE OF VIOLENCE BETWEEN THE SEXES

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The latest book by Dr. María de la Paz Toldos Romero, "Hombres víctimas y mujeres agresoras. La cara oculta de la violencia entre sexos" [Male victims and female aggressors: The hidden side of violence between the sexes] is a call to the recovery of common sense and humanism as indispensable guides for any scientist or professional interested in understanding the phenomenon of intimate partner violence.

The text is the result of over ten years of rigorous research. Its genesis was the doctoral thesis "Adolescencia, violencia y género" [Adolescence, violence and gender], defended by the author at the Complutense University of Madrid in 2002.

A necessary, courageous and even controversial book, certainly for some, as it contravenes the current *zeitgeist* that suggests that women are the sole and exclusive victims of violence between partners.

Thus, through the nine chapters of the book, the author argues her main thesis: heterosexual men, gay men and lesbians can also be the victims of intimate partner violence.

Initially, the author focuses on the necessary definition of the concept of violence and its separation from other related concepts. Toldos-Romero also re-evaluates intimate partner violence as a human and interpersonal phenomenon, as a type of gender violence that has different manifestations, which can affect both men and women and where the roles of the victim and perpetrator may be interchangeable.

This argument is complemented by the different definitions of the term "gender" and, by extension, the term "violence". This is not merely a semantic argument, but a dissertation on the negative consequences of the tergiversation of "gender" reflected in simplistic and general approaches, infiltrated throughout much of the scientific community and the media. In short, it is a call for common sense that forces the reader to rethink an issue dominated by the interpolation of miscellaneous ideologies, radicalisms and interests.

In the same vein, Paz Toldos analyzes the issue of "political correctness" in an excellent exposition on the underestimation of violence committed by women toward their partners. With remarkable courage and insight and building on extensive research in scientific and official sources, the author denounces the numerous biases and interests of different kinds that have perme-

ated the formation and survival of a subject that should never have been taboo: female violence.

In an attempt to break this taboo, the author defends her argument by providing numerous examples from the media, representative scientific studies and official data to substantiate another important idea: intimate partner violence (IPV) is mostly bidirectional. Despite these considerations, we must make the following proviso: at no time does Paz Toldos forget that, in the context of intimate partner violence, the consequences are often more serious for women than for men.

The book addresses the problem of female aggression in detail and presents some reasons why this phenomenon is not studied, citing as examples the "profitability" of abuse, the existence of double standards in the media and in the scientific community, pressure from radical groups or a simplistic understanding of violence as being primarily physical. However, the main contribution in the study of female aggression is the meticulous exposure of the kind of violence that is often more used by women: indirect violence, i.e. "social manipulation attacking the target in roundabout ways" (p. 25).

In subsequent chapters, the analysis turns to the other neglected victims of IPV: homosexuals and lesbians. From reading the text, we infer how the sex-gender system favors the existence of patriarchy and other associated phenomena, such as heterocentrism, sexism and homophobia. These are factors that may have profoundly influenced the fact that there are few or no studies on violence in same-sex couples in Spanish-speaking countries.

Thus, from information derived primarily from the English-speaking world, the author scrutinizes the violence between same-sex couples through its various manifestations and concludes that homosexual couples are equally as or more violent than heterosexual couples. From which it follows that the reductionist proposals that advocate men's domination of women as the *leitmotiv* of violence, are at least being contested.

Following on from there, the book delves into the motives that cause both men and women to use violence. To this end, a distinction is made between emotional or hostile violence (designed to hurt, and arising from anger or frustration) and instrumental violence (aimed at achieving objectives such as to control, influence, coerce or impress) and it is re-emphasized that both types of violence may be committed by both sexes. Thus, when power ceases to be the cornerstone of the analysis, it follows that the difference in the perpetration of violence is in the methods used, whether by men or women.

Next, the author expounds on the process by which men and women become violent. Having overcome the "sexist monkey" ap-

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proaches that argue that domination or control is the only motivation men have for committing violence against women, many myths about violence are analyzed, including a very popular one that deals with the man as the sole aggressor. This section of the text is where Toldos strengthens her theoretical position on the phenomenon of partner violence; instead of the theories that emphasize a single explanatory factor, the author explains her reasons for opting for an ecological theory that inevitably includes psychological factors which are, specifically, psychological mediators.

Finally, some ideas are developed that are crucial in the understanding, prevention and intervention of intimate partner violence. Perhaps the most important contribution is the shift of focus of prevention to "nonviolence." This means that instead of working on the prevention of risk factors, we should strengthen the protective factors based on the political, media, family and psychological aspects. It is in this last part where the author offers some concrete work proposals for the interested professionals.

It is notable that the work of Dr. Paz Toldos addresses such a controversial and politicized subject using arguments that are based on empirical evidence, rather than personal experiences or ideological convictions. Notwithstanding the rigorous and systematic nature of this work, its expository clarity, the logical organization of the text and especially the deliberate transparency of the author are exceptional.

It should also be emphasized that we have here a revealing analysis of intimate partner violence based on four aspects: the interpersonal, psychological, sociological and human aspects.

Interpersonal because, although the study of couple phenomena involves at least two people, many studies are based on the idea that one member is sufficient to explain the other and the relationship. Therefore, the author's approach is intended to treat this problem as a whole, without omitting any of the relevant parties or their behavior, using an interpersonal, systemic and interactional approach.

Psychological, which can be seen in the importance of psychological mediators without neglecting other explanatory factors. Also, it does not conceptualize violence as a result, but as a process. That is, without blaming the male or female victim or justifying the male or female aggressor, it considers the behavior of both as necessary to understanding the interactional process of violence.

Sociological, because it takes into account the importance of socio-cultural transformations and their effect on society and the lives of individuals; as well as gender issues from a neutral and inclusive point of view.

Human, because the author returns the human character to the problem of violence, an approach that undoubtedly extends the possibilities for understanding, prevention and social and psychological intervention.

Paz Toldos joins a small but growing list of researchers, such as Cantera (2004) or Trujano Martínez and Camacho (2010), who have challenged the spiral of silence on violence against men, which is perhaps the same as that which at one time consented to the unjust muteness on violence against women.

In the same vein, it should be noted that the author takes up the understanding of intimate partner violence with such academic and scientific rigor that the value of her work is increased by its possible echo in other areas beyond the scientific and academic

world. For example, the recognition of violence towards other victims could encourage the creation or modification of public policies to address partner violence without discrimination based on the sex or sexual orientation of the victims. Without prejudice to this, it should be noted that it remains for future research to include the study of violence in transgender couples.

Undoubtedly the work, the fruits of which we read in the text, has not been easy since Paz Toldos has had to overcome many dangers, and she has done so successfully in my point of view. Thus, for example, the fight against violence against women is never brought into question. On the contrary, it is encouraged. Even understanding that intimate partner violence is bidirectional, at no time is it suggested that the consequences of partner aggression are more severe for men than for women. Therefore any argument accusing the author of inciting a vacuous, superficial or sexist "counterculture" is unfounded.

Her intention is rather to spur debate and reflection on such basic issues as the awareness of biases in research or in forming the tribunals of public opinion. Paz Toldos even focuses insightfully on other biases that surround the study of partner violence: gender as a substitute for women, the gender perspective as a substitute for feminist perspectives, the hetero-centrism that governs much of the scientific community and which ultimately obviates homosexuals, the sexism that marks men with the indelible label of abusers and women as helpless, resulting in the generation and persistence of rigid dichotomies that do not necessarily correspond to reality.

Finally, the stimulus of debate and reflection that the author seeks has an indirect effect in the prevention of scientism, a fairly common mistake that overlooks the intricate web of ideologies, political and economic interests and even personal issues surrounding science. I believe that the intention of Paz Toldos is not, at any time, to emulate the entrenchment of the aged separation in the Anglophone context between those who defend the interests of women and "others", since the interests of men and women should not be -and never should have been- understood as a zero-sum game (Brush, 2005). In this sense, these types of study are more than welcome in Spain because they pave the way for a truly egalitarian and inclusive treatment between men and women and therefore for the understanding of intimate partner violence without being based on the sex or orientation of the members, but rather on their most important and undeniable condition, as human beings

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