

# The Framing of Gender-Based Violence Discourses in Mainstream Development: From a Human Rights Violation to a Development Barrier

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## Abstract

*This chapter discusses the emergence of gender-based violence (GBV) as a grassroots women's organisations' concern, and how it later became a human rights issue and a priority in the mainstream development agenda. The anti-GBV movement is deeply rooted in a human rights approach and in defending the right of women to a life free of violence. However, mainstream development and governmental initiatives have increasingly framed the fight against GBV in instrumental terms, situating GBV as an obstacle to development. The chapter uses a feminist lens to critically analyse mainstream discourses and their implications for policy and development programs aimed at reducing GBV rates.*

## Introduction

There is widespread agreement that gender-based violence (GBV) is a global pandemic of alarming proportions and one of the major obstacles to development. Worldwide, one in three women experience violence in their lifetime, with a majority of perpetrators being men (WHO et al., 2013). Although the global scope and magnitude of the problem is generally understood, it is often overlooked that it affects all women. While many women actually experience

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### How to cite this book chapter:

Escrig-Pinol, A. 2021 The Framing of Gender-Based Violence Discourses in Mainstream Development: From a Human Rights Violation to a Development Barrier. In: Randell, S., Yerbury, H. and Escrig-Pinol, A. (eds.) *Gender and Learning in Rwanda*. Pp. 93–106. Sydney: UTS ePRESS. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5130/aag.h>. License: CC BY-NC-ND.

violence, the fear and threat of it is common to all, influencing women and girls' thoughts and actions at all levels: from the most intimate aspects of life at home, to participation in public, political, and economic activities (Pickup et al., 2001).

Rwanda is a global leader in gender equality. It was the first country in the world to enshrine gender equality in the constitution and to have over half of the seats in Parliament held by women (World Economic Forum, 2016). However, traditional patriarchal values and attitudes prevail and rates of domestic violence remain very high (ONE UN, 2014). The case of Rwanda illustrates how major gains towards gender equality in some spheres—while they ought to be celebrated and recognised—cannot be taken as indicators of the achievement of gender equality and the eradication of GBV at a societal level.

Discourse framing, a concept coined by Erving Goffman in the mid-1980s, explains the process by which discourses impact an audience or societies at large by selecting and disseminating specific frames or approaches through an agenda-setting exercise (Viladrich, 2012). The international development complex has set the global development agenda and framed mainstream development discourses for over half a century, with important implications for global issues ranging from agricultural practices to family relations.

This chapter looks at the emergence of GBV as a priority in the mainstream global development arena and examines the evolution and current framing of GBV discourses by development institutions. The chapter employs a post-colonial feminist (PCF) lens to critically examine the trajectory of the discourses guiding anti-GBV interventions. The analysis shows that the anti-GBV movement initially emerged as a grassroots claim for the right of women to a life free of violence, an approach that human rights advocacy groups kept but mainstream development institutions put aside in favour of another approach framing GBV as a brake to national development. Currently, the latter approach prevails, combined with a rhetoric of human rights as a supporting argument.

In the next section I define mainstream development and GBV for the purpose of this chapter, and briefly introduce the theories underpinning the analysis presented, namely, critical post-development and PCF. Then, I move onto the analysis of the human rights-based discourses underpinning the fight against GBV early on, and the macroeconomics discourse that mainstream institutions and organisations have taken up more recently. The analysis of each approach using a PCF lens includes a summary of how it became the dominant discourse, some past and recent applications, and the main critiques it received. Lastly, I summarise the arguments put forward in the chapter and present some of their implications for development policy and practice.

## Theoretical Underpinnings and Conceptual Framework

### *Mainstream Development and Post-development Theories*

Mainstream development in this chapter refers to the primary discursive framework underpinning policies and programs developed and implemented by multilateral institutions, bilateral donors, and large international NGOs. Development as a field originated after World War II with a clear focus on promoting economic growth through classic liberal economics. Soon after, the concept broadened up to include political and social modernisation. In the late 1960s, dependency theories marked the return to a narrow notion of development tightly controlled by nation states. The rising of alternative thinking mostly from the global South<sup>1</sup> challenged this understanding of development and introduced new themes such as human flourishing, participation, capacitation, and agency. Consequently, mainstream development broadened again to become an enabling instrument designed to increase people's choices. In a cyclical fashion, with the advent of neoliberalism in the 1980s, development theories re-focused on economic growth.<sup>2</sup>

In the 1990s, opposition to the hegemonic neoliberal principles sparked a quest for alternatives to the mainstream development paradigm. Critical approaches frame development as an apparatus sustaining unequal material relationships and processes which structure engagement between the global South and the global North (Wilson, 2015). Amongst them, post-development theories conceive international development as a failure and search for alternative answers. In the past three decades, post-development has deconstructed the dominant development model, and, more recently, post-development thinkers have focused on theorising viable alternative systems and articulated different strategies to contest the mainstream paradigm (Escrig-Pinol, 2012).

### *Post-Colonial Feminism*

PCF emerged in the 1980s as a response to western-centred feminism, which failed to capture the experiences and knowledges of women from other cultures, and to post-colonial theory for not addressing issues of gender. PCF scholars introduced the concept of 'double colonisation' as the way to signal the double oppression endured by women over the centuries: from colonial powers and from patriarchy (Ashcroft et al., 2013; Mohanty, 1988). While simultaneously examining patriarchy and the consequences of colonialism, PCF underscores the importance of paying attention to the ethnic, cultural, and historical background of women from non-western culture<sup>3</sup> (Ashcroft et al., 2013).

Post-colonial feminists have contributed to the analysis of development by focusing on the deconstruction of the patriarchy embedded in mainstream development practices and have emerged as one of the multiple voices

proposing alternative paradigms (see, for instance, Lind, 2003; McEwan, 2001; Mohanty, 1988; Mohanty, 2003; Narayan, 1989). PCF has the potential to contribute to the critical exploration of relationships between cultural and global economic powers. Moreover, it points towards a radical reclaiming of the political in both public and private spheres (Escrig-Pinol, 2012).

### *Defining Gender-Based Violence*

There is no single definition agreed upon or term used by all concerned when discussing male-perpetrated violence against women (VAW). Given the ongoing debate around naming this issue, it is important to clarify the meaning for the purpose of this chapter. In mainstream development the two most commonly used terms are VAW and GBV. When examined, they both present strengths and drawbacks. GBV is a broad term that emphasises the importance of gendered identities to violence. However, it is not explicit about the disproportionate impact this violence has on women (Merry, 2009). While VAW explicitly recognises the impact on women but fails to capture the gendered power dynamics underpinning these acts of violence.

Violence is an expression of power. In most societies, social, economic, and political power remains largely in the hands of men, thus, power is socially gendered (Sen, 1998). Women-perpetrated violence against other women exists marginally, while the pervasiveness of male-perpetrated VAW responds to historically entrenched patterns of unequal power relations between men and women. In recognition of this gendered power imbalance at the root of widespread VAW, in this chapter we will speak of GBV. Moreover, some experts argue that framing the issue in terms of gender rather than women is an effective strategy for involving both women and men in resolving the societal issues that create gender inequalities (Vann, 2002).

GBV encompasses sexual violence, intimate partner or spouse abuse (i.e. domestic violence), emotional and psychological abuse, sex trafficking, forced prostitution, sexual exploitation, sexual harassment, harmful traditional practices (i.e. female genital mutilation, forced marriage, infanticide of girl children), and other discriminatory practices at the structural level based on gender (Vann, 2002). The term labels a wide range of acts of violence committed disproportionately against women and girls for being female, and based on how a particular society assigns gender roles and expectations to women.

### *Gender-Based Violence in the Mainstream Development Discourse*

Development literature addressing GBV has explored the multiple effects it has on women, communities, societies, governments, and economies. An ever-growing body of research demonstrates that GBV denies women's most

fundamental rights and impedes their human development; hinders women's participation in development; limits the efficiency of development projects; constitutes a public health threat; places a very high economic burden on governments, and has an impact on national productivity (Escrig-Pinol, 2012). While acknowledging the harmful impact of GBV on individuals, families and society at large, the focus of the anti-GBV discourse adopted by mainstream development to craft policy and programs has shifted over time. There have been two distinct approaches taken up by dominant development organisations and institutions: the women's rights discourse and the macroeconomics discourse. The rights-based approach appeals to the right of women to live a life free of violence (Sen, 1998), whereas the macroeconomics approach is an umbrella category for all discourses focusing on the economic cost of GBV, including the impact of GBV on national productivity, income generation, social services, and development funds (Buvinic & Morrison, 2004; Day et al., 2005). This section introduces these two approaches with applied examples, and brings forward critiques from a PCF stance that expose their limitations.

## **The Women's Rights Discourse: Gender-Based Violence as a Human Rights Violation**

### *Emergence and Applications*

The human rights approach to GBV is rooted in the belief that acts of violence against women and girls violate a number of principles enshrined in international and regional human rights instruments, including the right to life, equality, security of person, equal protection under the law, and freedom from torture and other cruel, inhumane, or degrading treatment (Vann, 2002). In the 1990s, international actors paid increasing attention to the GBV crisis. Sparked in part by the gaining momentum of the global feminist movement, the United Nations and numerous non-governmental organisations developed strategies to tackle VAW.

In the early 1990s, GBV was still largely a taboo and seen as a private matter, a family issue. Governments would not admit that widespread VAW took place within their borders, and even less acknowledge their responsibility for implementing policies or allocating funds to programs and services to address it (Spindel et al., 2000). The emergence of violence as a crucial concern for women occurred organically, arising from grassroots women's movements from the global South (see Carrillo, 1991). Women made alliances, lobbied states and municipal governments, and used international rights law and continental and regional organisations to draw attention and to seek redress from oppressive gendered social relations and practices (Manuh & Bekoe, 2010). In this way, GBV came to the forefront of national and global agendas thanks to grassroots women's movements and feminist organisations. Initially,

approaches to GBV emphasised the impact of violence on the physical and psychological well-being of women (Yodanis et al., 2000), but soon it grew to become a matter of women's rights (Carrillo, 1991).

During the 1990s and 2000s, major developments in the field of human rights resulted in the recognition of VAW as a fundamental abuse of women's human rights. In 1993, the United Nations World Conference on Human Rights held in Vienna placed VAW on the human rights agenda. That same year, the UN General Assembly's adoption of the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women added to the gains made in Vienna (Pickup et al., 2001). The Declaration condemns physical and emotional violence against women in the home, the community, and when condoned by the State, as an abuse of women's fundamental human rights (Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, 1993). It frames VAW as a social mechanism by which women are forced into a subordinate position compared with men, and thus a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women. The momentum created by the Vienna Conference led to calls for women's rights to be mainstreamed within the human rights discourse. Some scholars argue that the success of the human rights discourse to frame GBV as a global issue is partly due to the fact that it does not separate out the 'developing' from the 'developed' world, what led to an understanding of VAW as a worldwide problem (Sen, 1998).

### *Main Critiques*

Of all development concepts and tools currently in fashion, human rights and their international legal articulations remain the most popular. Bilateral development agencies, multilateral organisations, and transnational NGOs have embraced the centrality of human rights in the development discourse and rely on their universality. They have permeated into all development discourses and agendas to the point of being implicitly assumed by most development actors. Human rights lay at the core of the leading global development instruments like the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Post-colonial scholars have criticised the Western values underpinning human rights and critically examined the problems caused by the indiscriminate application of human rights-based development initiatives globally. Similarly, PCF warns that the principle of universality central to the human rights framework is problematic, as it assumes the applicability of Western-centric notions of rights to all societies (Man, 2018; Sen, 1998). PCF points at three key issues with the mainstream human rights-based discourse application to international development. First, the legal and professionalised nature of much of the rights work; second, its top-down approach; and third, a focus on

civil and political rights, while sidelining social and economic rights (Yuval-Davis, 2006).

Within the human rights approach, strategies aimed at protecting all women from violence have focused on integrating gender issues into human rights instruments and on expanding the role of the state in protecting women. Organisations and institutions dealing with human rights tend to focus on enforcing women's civil rights and political freedoms, and have often overlooked the fact that women's ability to claim these rights and freedoms is constrained by poverty and the denial of their economic and social rights (Amnesty International, 2010; Pickup et al., 2001). Some PCF scholars argue that research focusing on the life experiences most common to women reveal principles of human rights that do not necessarily reflect the universe of such rights as they are commonly understood. While typical human rights cases involve issues like the political activist imprisoned for the expression of her views, other forms of oppression and GBV are not always recognised as human rights violations at the international and national levels. Widespread forms of violence relevant to women but commonly excluded from human rights-based approaches include issues related to marriage, procreation, labour, property ownership, sexuality, and other manifestations of unequal citizenship that are routinely viewed as private and reflective of cultural difference (Binion, 1995).

## **The Macroeconomics Discourse: Gender-Based Violence as a Brake to National Development**

### *Emergence and Applications*

During the late 1980s and the 1990s a new perspective on GBV emerged. Instead of focusing on women's rights, it highlighted the economic losses to individuals and societies resulting from women's suffering of violence. This approach examines how much it costs to individuals, governments, and the private sector when women are, for instance, injured or prevented from joining the labour market. Although researchers take different approaches to answer this question, they all aim at demonstrating the financial impact of VAW at different levels (Yodanis et al., 2000), and, ultimately, at linking it to the national economy. There is some evidence of the attention paid to the cost of VAW in early development research. For instance, although primarily framing GBV as a human rights issue, Carrillo (1991) contends that many work hours are lost as a result of violence, not to speak of the costs of providing services to the victims. The macroeconomics discourse rapidly gained weight among development actors during the 1990s—it was a good fit for the new emerging global economic system, neoliberal capitalism. Researchers and practitioners also adopted this view and engaged in all kinds of measurements. International Financial Institutions (IFIs) took the lead in introducing this approach in the

mainstream development field. For instance, in 1993 the World Bank calculated that rape and domestic violence accounted for about 5% of the total burden of disease among women aged 15 to 44 in developing countries (Sen, 1998). Their argument was that for economic growth to be effective, women must enjoy good health, which may be jeopardised by violence. A technical report of the Inter-American Development Bank maintained that violence against women and children is an obstacle to economic development since it impacts on various education indicators (Buvinic & Morrison, 2004). For instance, it argued that abuse adversely affects a child's performance in school and, consequently, his or her future productivity, which in turn will also lower the government's return on investment in education. In a recent brief, the World Bank (2018) claimed that in some countries, VAW is estimated to cost up to 3.7% of their GDP—more than double what most governments spend on education. Another application of this discourse appears in an article published in the *UN Chronicle* arguing for the inclusion of direct expenses for services to treat and support abused women and their children and to bring perpetrators to justice to the already high costs of GBV for national economies (Manuh & Bekoe, 2010).

The UN MDGs guided the mainstream international development agenda for 15 years (2000–2015). This international instrument was criticised for omitting substantive issues, such as GBV (Fehling et al., 2013), and for applying a narrow definition of gender equality and women's empowerment (Mohindra & Nikiéma, 2010), leaving behind the broader vision promoted by the women's movement in the 1990s. Adopted in 2015, the SDGs for 2030 have become the guiding framework for international development policy and programming globally. The specific goal focusing on women and gender issues, Goal 5, incorporates targets related to GBV. The document's preamble states that 'ending all forms of discrimination against women and girls is not only a basic human right, but is also crucial to accelerating sustainable development. It has been proven time and again, that empowering women and girls has a multiplier effect, and helps drive up economic growth and development across the board' (United Nations Stats, 2017). This text reveals how despite the dominance of the macroeconomics approach in development discourses, there is still an accompanying rhetoric of GBV as an obstacle to women's enjoyment of their right to a life free of violence.

### *Main Critiques*

Early PCF critiques of development interventions focused on deconstructing women's role in development as passive recipients of interventions and aid by highlighting women's agency (Mohanty, 1988). However, from the late 1990s onward, a neoliberal approach to gender gave way to an exaltation of the entrepreneurial, hard-working woman as the new ideal female subject, actively contributing to development and the economy (Wilson, 2015). This paradigm

switch occurred across all globally dominant development institutions. In the 2000s, the World Bank's slogan 'Gender equality as smart economics' became a paradigmatic example of the turn in mainstream development towards neoliberal discourses on gender and GBV, which guided their interventions (Wilson, 2015). Thus, the macroeconomics approach can be seen as an alignment of discourses on GBV with this larger shift in framework on gender issues, and with the neoliberal paradigm more broadly.

Development programs focused on tackling GBV have become embedded in market dynamics and logic, and have increasingly taken an approach that argues for the eradication of GBV due to its high socio-economic costs. One strategy put forward for calculating the costs associated with GBV was to estimate the willingness of individuals and societies to pay for lives free of GBV. This has been used to measure the welfare loss occasioned by GBV, but the approach did not gain popularity because of the reticence to estimate the willingness to pay for what many still consider a human right—the right to live without violence (Morrison et al., 2007). This example illustrates why mainstream development has not let go of the rights-based discourse completely, and often supports the dominant framing of GBV as a break to development with a mention to human rights.

PCF argues that VAW is functional to the current unequal and exploitative global development and economic model, as it effectively excludes women from decision-making positions where they could contest it and begin to transform it (Pickup et al., 2001). A central criticism to the macroeconomics discourse currently guiding development initiatives is that, by focusing on the relationship between GBV and economic indicators, it fails at tackling the root causes of VAW, resulting in programs and policies largely ineffective at reducing gender inequality (Escrig-Pinol, 2012). For instance, targeting women in economic development initiatives such as income-generating or microfinance programs has not been linked to a reduction of VAW, and has in some instances sparked an increase of violence against them (Gibbs et al., 2017).

## Conclusion

Mainstream development discourses have evolved from framing GBV as a threat to women's human rights to validating the fight against GBV in instrumental terms as an obstacle to national development. The chapter has examined this trajectory, which responds to an alignment of mainstream development discourses to the neoliberal turn driving the global economy. A critical analysis using a PCF lens reveals several distinct problems related to the two approaches discussed. I argue that while the human rights discourse ignores issues regarding the universality of the Western-centric human rights paradigm and focuses on civil rights and political freedoms, the macroeconomics discourse reduces women to productive and reproductive beings. Furthermore,

a fight against GBV based on its detrimental effect on the current neoliberal exploitative global economic system, may suggest that VAW only matters as long as it impacts financial indicators.

This shift in rhetoric has had a material impact on the type of initiatives put forward by development institutions, and reduced their potential for effecting real change towards gender equality. In practice, the two leading approaches result in policies and programs that differ considerably, while human rights discourse led to interventions centred on physical violence and access to justice, the macroeconomics discourse led to interventions aiming at reducing the costs to communities and states by, for instance, promoting women's access to the formal labour market. Applying a PCF lens to critically review these mainstream discourses and their implications for development programs and policy may assist development actors in designing interventions more attuned and responsive to the nature of GBV, deeply rooted in power inequalities between women and men.

PCF understands GBV as a manifestation of the double oppression women suffer. From men to maintain their position of power in patriarchal households and societies, and from neocolonial systems and institutions to maintain a global order based on the exploitation and oppression of marginalised groups by hegemonic powers. The dominant macroeconomics discourse is based on the real concern that VAW limits the effectiveness and efficiency of national economic development initiatives. This chapter suggests the need for converging discourses so that the costs of GBV are known and taken into consideration, while interventions are mostly directed against the underlying causes of violence, i.e. a system of unequal gender relations, allowing women's interests to be addressed holistically.

The analysis of the two dominant narratives presented in this chapter has employed an interdisciplinary social science approach to examine GBV discourses in the context of global development initiatives and neoliberal globalisation. Although the specific orientation of the two discourses diverges, they both fit into an overarching neoliberal paradigm that rewards individual responsibility and self-sufficiency. I suggest that Goffman's framing theory is a fitting conceptual and methodological framework to examine mainstream discourses, and that it could also be a useful tool to generate alternative discourses more aligned with understanding GBV as an instrument of 'double oppression' for women.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Global South broadly refers to low-income countries in the regions of Latin America, Asia, Africa, and Oceania, but also comprises low-income regions from mid- and high-income countries in Europe and North-America (Dados & Connell, 2012). The term was coined in the late 1960s but was popularised in the 2010s by post-colonial scholars as an alternative to expressions such as ‘third world’, ‘developing’, or ‘underdeveloped’ countries.
- <sup>2</sup> For further information on the history of development, see, for instance, Pieterse (2010).
- <sup>3</sup> Sometimes discussed as Third World Women in the post-colonial feminist literature.

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