**Title:** Challenging the Gendered Discourse of Domestic Violence: Comments on the Istanbul Convention

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The *Istanbul Convention* (Council of Europe, 2017) is arguably a landmark policy, designed to tackle domestic violence across the continent. At present this has been signed by 44 members of the European Council, and has subsequently been ratified in 22 of those nations. As with many corresponding legislative examples within individual nations, the definition provided for ‘domestic violence’ is characteristically ‘neutral’ in its use of language in terms of gender or sexuality, in this case making no reference to either:

‘“domestic violence” shall mean all acts of physical, sexual, psychological or economic violence that occur within the family or domestic unit or between former or current spouses or partners, whether or not the perpetrator shares or has shared the same residence with the victim’ (p. 8)

Using the UK government’s definition as a corresponding national example, this aspect is even clearer, as the current definition illustrates:

‘Any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive or threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between those aged 16 or over who are or have been intimate partners or family members regardless of **gender or sexuality**. This can encompass but is not limited to the following types of abuse: Psychological, Physical, Sexual, Financial, Emotional’

These definitions, like most legislative language, therefore do not make any distinctions based on gender or sexuality, and include several different ‘types’ of abuse, covering a wide range of actions. However, beyond this, large proportions of the *Istanbul Convention*, as well as the official title for the treaty (*Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence*) are deeply influenced and shaped by gender, along with accompanying stereotypes surrounding domestic abuse. In other words, whilst the convention provides some gender-inclusive overarching principles, such as the statement that:

‘The implementation of the provisions of this Convention by the Parties, in particular measures to protect the rights of victims, shall be secured without discrimination on any ground such as sex, gender, race, colour, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, association with a national minority, property, birth, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, state of health, disability, marital status, migrant or refugee status, or other status’ (p. 8)

There are numerous gender-specific references throughout the treaty. From recognising:

‘…with grave concern, that women and girls are often exposed to serious forms of violence such as domestic violence, sexual harassment, rape, forced marriage, crimes committed in the name of so‐called “honour” and genital mutilation, which constitute a serious violation of the human rights of women and girls and a major obstacle to the achievement of equality between women and men’ (p. 6)

and

‘…that women and girls are exposed to a higher risk of gender‐based violence than men’ (p. 6)

To stating that the aims of this treaty are to:

‘protect women against all forms of violence, and prevent, prosecute and eliminate violence against women and domestic violence’ (p. 7)

and

‘contribute to the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women and promote substantive equality between women and men, including by empowering women’ (p. 7)

This document presents the distinct impression of legislation that is specifically focused on eliminating domestic violence perpetrated towards women and girls. As such the language in this document sits firmly congruent with the general stereotype that domestic violence happens almost exclusively towards women and girls, and that men (who ‘may also be victims of domestic violence’ p. 6) rarely become as such (and if they do, they are distinctly *not* a priority).

This approach is particularly worrying when contrasted against the patterns and picture of abuse and victimization shown through available statistics. For example, whilst figures for male victims aren’t available across Europe (in and of itself part of the issue), statistics produced by the Office for National Statistics in the UK (ONS, 2016) support a portrait of domestic abuse that is varied, complex, and not defined by one gender over the other. For example, 1 in every 3 domestic violence victims is male, and 13.2% of men (compared to 27.1% of women) say they have been the victim of domestic abuse since they were 16. Roughly 1 in 6 men (vs. 1 in 4 women) will suffer domestic abuse in their lifetime, and in any given 12 months in the UK 600,000 men (and 1.3m women) will experience domestic abuse. In addition, men and women suffer equally severe consequences at the hands of their abusers, both physically and psychologically (Hines, Brown, & Dunning, 2007; ONS, 2016).

This begs the question of why the language in such important policy, such as the *Istanbul Convention*, is so gendered, and where the stereotypes it is supporting come from? A convincing argument comes from understanding the role of ‘Social Cognition’, otherwise known as our understanding of the social world in which we live. Across the course of our lifetime we continually absorb knowledge about how our social relationships operate, building up mental representations or ‘schemas’ which act as sets of rules as to how people are ‘supposed’ to act and situations are ‘supposed’ to go. One of the most fundamental schemas is our understanding of gender, and the associated characteristics assigned to men and masculinity, and women and femininity. This ‘Gender Schema Theory’ was outlined by Sandra Bem in 1981, and when we examine the characteristics typically associated with men (i.e., Aggressive, independent, strong, dominant) and women (i.e., Passive, interdependent, weak, emotional), it is easy to see how men are much more likely to be seen as aggressors and perpetrators, and women as recipients and victims of acts like domestic violence.

In addition to this general information about gender, we will also build up ‘Scripts’ for specific events. For example, when entering a restaurant, we know how this event will usually go and the sequence of actions that will follow upon us entering (i.e., being given a menu, ordering, eating, then paying etc.). We build up a similar type script for domestic violence, drawn from both our general gender schemas, and specific depictions that we might pick up from the world around us (i.e., in the popular media). As a result of this natural cognitive process, many people view domestic violence through a very narrow, over-simplified lens, represented by the stereotype outlined above (i.e., an aggressive, strong man physically attacking a smaller, weaker woman.

Most of the time, social cognition and the shortcuts it produces (known as ‘heuristics’) help us in our day to day interactions. They allow us to make assumptions that save our brain the time and effort it would take to work out every detail of any given scenario. However, when we examine examples such as domestic violence, this can lead to severe and damaging consequences. For example, several studies have highlighted that evaluations on several measures, such as severity, trauma, responsibility, intervention, and punishment etc. are influenced by victim and perpetrator gender (Poorman, Seelau, & Seelau, 2003; E. P. Seelau, Seelau, & Poorman, 2003; S. M. Seelau & Seelau, 2005). For example, scenarios involving a male victim and female perpetrator are evaluated as less serious than those involving a female victim and a male perpetrator. Results such as these are explained by existence of stereotypes not only about each gender (i.e., men are strong and tough and can ‘handle’ physical assault), but also about the crime (i.e., men can’t be/aren’t the victims of domestic abuse). Judgements regarding same-sex domestic abuse (an even less well known phenomenon), fall somewhere between the two scenario types outlined above, and are again subject to evaluation against existing stereotypes (as well as societal prejudices).

Further implications exist for male victims when they chose to report their abuse (which is rare). Male victims often describe negative experiences with peers and services (Dutton & White, 2013; Tsui, 2014; Tsui, Cheung, & Leung, 2010), and counsellors themselves both recognise and feel impeded by domestic abuse and gender stereotypes when working with male victims (Hogan, Hegarty, Ward, & Dodd, 2012). Negative experiences are also reported for interactions with the criminal justice system, particularly police officers (McCarrick, Davis-McCabe, & Hirst-Winthrop, 2016). Worryingly, male victims are often automatically cast as the perpetrator and arrested, even when they have made the complaint (McCarrick et al., 2016). Other studies suggest that officers assign more blame to male victims for their victimisation (Stewart & Maddren, 1997), and victims often report the belief that officers won’t take any action (Drijber, Reijnders, & Ceelen, 2013). Whilst more research is needed, clearly there are serious consequences associated with the stereotypes surrounding domestic abuse, with male, gay, and lesbian victims of domestic violence regarded as fundamentally less ‘in-need’ than female victims by social networks, services, and even within the victim’s own minds.

Even with acknowledgement of the limitations of both the statistics and research presented above, a mismatch between domestic violence stereotypes and reality is plainly evident, and unfortunately, documents such as the *Istanbul Convention* serve to only reinforce these unhelpful, inaccurate and dangerous stereotypes. Furthermore, whilst the convention *alone* is not responsible for perpetuating such stereotypes, documents such as this are particularly important considering their reach, coverage, and publicity. In this sense, they help to shape the broader, societal narrative surrounding domestic abuse as ‘a gendered crime’, ‘a manifestation of patriarchal oppression’ etc. that serve to fundamentally undermine and exclude male victims, and victims within homosexual relationships.

So how do we begin to change this? An increasing amount of work is already being done to advocate on behalf of male victims, and, as such, there has been a slow but steady rise in discourse in the public and political sphere surrounding male victims (e.g., identification of the absence of a male-only domestic abuse refuge in London, UK, Hunte, 2017). However, five key areas of improvement are desperately needed.

First, even greater efforts are needed to challenge the current political and societal narrative that portrays women as the exclusive victims of domestic violence. For example, whilst the language used in legislation *is* often neutral, the term ‘Violence Against Women and Girls’ is frequently used in reports on domestic and sexual violence, and as the name for strategies designed to tackle these crimes. This fundamentally undermines the experiences, needs and existence of male victims, and, importantly, this prejudice is often mirrored in inequality of funding and support (e.g., no male-only refugees currently exist in London).

Second, services (e.g., police forces, prosecution services, and other professional bodies etc.) need to respond, immediately, to the specific needs of male victims in their provision and training. In addition, whilst many services argue that their training is ‘neutral’, many programmes don’t consider the very specific and nuanced experiences of female vs. male victims (and those who are victims in homosexual relationships). In this sense, a dedicated effort to provide gender-inclusive as opposed to ‘neutral’ training is required.

Third, the academic community must continue investigating which factors influence judgements and attitudes towards domestic violence, in an effort to educate and inform policy and discourse. Greater efforts must also be made to use more diverse methodology to examine abuse in ways that are more representative of its occurrence (i.e., abuse over long periods of time vs. singular incidences; dual-perpetrator abuse vs. distinct perpetrator and victim scenarios). Furthermore, non-politicised models of domestic violence require urgent development. In other words, models are required that *account* for gender, but are not determined or driven by specific, political, and gendered narratives (i.e., feminism and the Duluth model)

Fourth, the media needs to increasingly provide varied and more nuanced representations of domestic violence to audiences, to broaden stereotypical understandings of abuse. This is particularly important considering a) the broad reach of the media (including social media and internet) in today’s world and b) the powerful indirect that this type of material can have on stereotype formation. Finally, on a broader, societal level, we must increasingly open our minds to the complexities of domestic violence and abuse as a crime, and guard against utilising stereotypes when confronted with a victim in need of our help.

In conclusion, it is becoming increasingly clear that whilst domestic violence is a crime that is deeply coloured and influenced by gender, it is not a crime that is committed exclusively by one gender towards another, and substantive and immediate action must be taken to acknowledge the wide range of perpetrators and victims, as well as behaviours and circumstances involved when domestic abuse occurs, particularly in legislative documentation and policy. It is action that we owe *every* victim of domestic violence.

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