

Violence against Women: A Phenomenological Perspective

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Abstract

The issue of violence against women is considered a grave violation of human rights that occurs across race, age, culture, and religion worldwide. It includes any act or conduct that may cause death or physical, psychological, or sexual harm to women – whether in the public or private sphere – that is done solely based on gender. The issue of violence against women has been discussed, debated, lobbied, and fought for in recent decades; and much research on the incidence, reporting, and implications of such violence against women has also been conducted in many regions and countries. These concerted activist efforts led to the first declaration that recognized the need to provide women the rights to equality, security, liberty, integrity, and dignity of all human beings. Even with such global efforts, and despite the existence of laws that punish men who perpetrate violence against women, the problem continues to persist worldwide. Academics thus deem it necessary to determine the underlying causes and motivations for such heinous acts in order to attack the problem at its roots.

Keywords: Women; Violence; Equality

Introduction

The question of what constitutes freedom is a highly charged issue that is often dependent on specific cultural. In this paper, I will briefly discuss violence against women and phenomenology to describe the context of the study [1]. Then, I will present the phenomenology of violence in general as the foundation of my analysis of this paper, and use the basic theories presented therein in my subsequent analysis of violence against women. I will then describe briefly Heidegger's hermeneutical phenomenology and differentiate it from Husserl's traditional phenomenology [2]. I will also present a brief review of current literature that approached violence against women through hermeneutical phenomenology. Lastly, I will use the hermeneutical phenomenological approach in analyzing the issue of violence against women – its causes and how it may be prevented.

Violence Against Women

Violence against women is a broad term that refers to any act of gender-based violence that may, or is likely to, result in physical, sexual, or mental harm or suffering to women. The term may also refer to threats of such violent acts, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life [3]. While there are several local, national, and international structures that aim to reduce the occurrence of violence against women worldwide – such as the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, and feminist organizations – the issue remains a global problem until now. In fact, violence against women continues to persist in developed and developing countries, showing that this issue or phenomenon is not restricted to economically-challenged regions alone. Additionally, statistics reveal that 85% of reported cases of violence against women worldwide were domestic or intimate partner violence [4]. Such statistics imply that women all around the globe may not even feel safe in their own homes, and may also indicate that women victims of violence often do not have anyone to confide to about the abuse they suffer.

Violence against women is reported to be most prevalent in Middle Eastern countries, as these countries remain largely patriarchal and misogynistic – two structures that enable men to undermine and oppress women without fear of punishment, imprisonment, or

alienation. Indeed, men in these regions often equate their dominance of their women with power, honor, and rightfulness. Such domestic and intimate partner violence ranges from emotional and economical abuse to physical and sexual abuse, including hitting, restraining, object-throwing, genital mutilation, rape, and prostitution. While there are several different social and cultural factors that influence the persistence and conduct of violence against women, these often result from the provision of unequal human rights and improper power relations between men and women.

As an international epidemic, violence against women occurs within and outside the home across countries, cultures, and religions. The number of reported cases of physical, sexual, psychological, or economic abuse against women remains high in Western and developed countries, while such acts are deemed ubiquitous in developing countries in Asia, South America, and Africa. The pervasiveness of this issue has led many academics, researchers, and activists to scientifically study the causes, roots, effects, and implications of such acts of violence on both women as the victims and on men as the perpetrators. These studies reveal a wide and complex array of cultural, religious, and political reasons behind acts of violence against women.

Nevertheless, the act had become deeply ingrained in the beliefs and habits of many that it has become difficult to alter their perceptions. It is thus believed that the complexity of the issue remains diverse across cultures and religions; hence, a deeper understanding may only be achieved by taking a phenomenological approach.

Phenomenology

Phenomenology developed out of the writings of Edmund Husserl in the early 20th century, as an attempt to develop a better

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understanding of experience in a much more comprehensive manner as compared to that of sensation-bound positivism [5]. In the simplest sense, Husserl's philosophical quest was to explore the structures of an individual's consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view [6]. Husserl's concepts were later on expanded upon by a circle of his followers and critics across different countries, including Germany, France, the United States [7]. These known advocates who took part in this philosophical movement included Heidegger [8], Merleau-Ponty [7,9].

Husserl [10] believed that the ideas and meanings that individuals developed were a direct result of their unique experiences, interaction, and reflection about worldly things. Each individual's experience differs to some extent from others; thus, he believed that we all have a personal and conscious relationship with tangible objects and constructs in our memory, and that we interpret and draw meaning from these relationships differently as part of intentionality.

Intentionality is the directedness of experience toward things in the world, which always proceeds from the subject since phenomenology focuses on the first person point of view. As we continue to interact with external objects, we maintain a reciprocal relationship with these objects and it is through these objective experiences that we develop subjective understanding.

Husserl [6] thus maintained that in order to understand our own subjective meanings of things, we must explore our experiences – our intentionality – with those objects. He further indicated that exploring our intentionality often includes disengaging ourselves from our natural and default attitude about objects and constructs, and moving toward a phenomenological attitude of self-reflection [6]. Phenomenology thus argues that one does not learn from experience alone, but from thinking about one's own experiences.

The Phenomenology of Violence

The causes, manifestations, and effects of violence have long been investigated by scientists and scholars as part of violence studies, and have been examined using tools and theories in various fields such as psychology, neurobiology, anthropology, religion, and others [11]. The focus of such studies, however, has been on crime, war, and oppression; and while these are in no doubt violent in nature, there are also other forms of violence and various other causes of suffering that need to be considered and analyzed in order to understand the roots and continuous effects of violence.

Violence can be perpetrated in various forms, and may be present in both sides of any dichotomy and in several facets of any spectra i.e., violence may be verbal, physical, psychic or structural; it may be individual (as in domestic violence) or collective (as in war or genocide); and it may be subtle or forthright. Fundamentally, experiencing violence involves all facets of human existence – body, mind, and emotions [11]. Explaining the human experience of violence is more an intent of the social sciences than phenomenology; rather, taking a phenomenological approach to violence requires one to adopt a radically descriptive analysis that recovers – and uncovers – the eidetic structures of human experience, which are deemed to be more significant in the psychological analysis of any phenomenon [12].

Much research from various perspectives on the extent, causes, and effects of violence – especially domestic violence, gender-based violence, genocide, and racial violence – already exist in literature. It is beyond the scope of this paper to elaborate on such forms and facets of violence. What I would like to put emphasis on is that by taking a

phenomenological approach – that is, by focusing on describing the experiences and recovering the eidetic structures of those experiences – we become aware of the subtle forms of violence that has been interwoven in the fabric of societal norms in such manners that we fail to recognize them as violence or oppression.

Gilligan [13] posited that people have defense mechanisms that establish their vulnerability to violence, which is similar to how the human body's vulnerability to communicable diseases depends on its defense mechanism – the immune system. He further indicated that our defense mechanism against violence is affected greatly by the experience of two emotions, shame and humiliation [13]. People thus engage in violent behavior when they believe that they do not have enough non-violent means through which they may reverse such feelings of shame.

Understanding the cause of the propensity for violent behavior paves the way for preventing violence i.e., to stop violent behavior we must stop the underlying causes, which is shaming and humiliating people by subjecting them to hierarchical, social, and economic systems characterized by class and caste, relative poverty, and dictatorship, thereby making them feel inferior [13]. This step should be taken in every relationship we have – our partners, parents, siblings, friends, colleagues, neighbors, and acquaintances. More importantly, however, we must radically change societal and political policies and practices that classify, isolate, and punish others for being less than, or different from, what we perceive ourselves to be.

Gilligan [13] indicated that when we isolate mentally-ill persons or patients with communicable diseases, we essentially take away their freedom of movement – their basic liberties – without much remorse or guilt; and that, in fact, this societal practice is a form of shaming and humiliating such persons with illnesses and disabilities. In other words, one of the basic protocols of science and medicine – to isolate those who may cause physiological harm to others – may very well be contributing to the vulnerability or propensity of such persons to commit acts of violence. Similarly, societal norms and laws teach us that the appropriate response to violence is punishment [14]. However, punishment is also a form of violence, and as such, this practice instills in us the notion of retribution in such a way that as victims, we regard retributive justice as the only means to satisfy our needs for, and rights to, acknowledgment and vindication [15]. Punishing perpetrators shames them, thus increasing their propensity for more violence, while victims and bystanders learn to feel good about inflicting violence on others in the guise of righteous or justified punishment. These feelings and processes create a cycle of violence – and violence will continue to persist, as perpetrators and victims continue to emerge and take part in this cycle. In other words, Gilligan [13,14,16] sought for a radical change in the way institutions work – especially in hospitals with mentally-ill persons and patients with communicable diseases, prisons, and in societies where the poor are given less privileges and opportunities – in order to stop the cycle of violence, or at least reduce its effect on the population and future generations.

Approaching violence phenomenologically taught us that certain societal customs, cultural standards, scientific protocols, and legal statutes promote violence in the guise of safety, security, and justice. These processes further the cycle of violence – making others feel inferior and shaming them, leading them to violence, which in turn leads their victims to become future perpetrators of violence. Gilligan [13,14,16] asserted that in order to put a stop to this millennia-long cycle of violence, we must change protocols, customs, and laws that degrade people to feeling inferior. I will later use this same perspective

to discuss the customs that allow violence against women to persist globally, and specifically in the Middle East.

Hermeneutical Phenomenology

The work of Edmund Husserl in this philosophical movement encouraged other academics to develop it as a discipline through which we enhance our understanding of human relationships, interactions, and other phenomena. Throughout the first half of the 20th century, various academics and philosophers wrote extensively about phenomenology and their own perceptions about the broad movement. The diversity of these writings and their subsequent followers led to the creation of several different types of phenomenology. These schools of thought in phenomenology vary in terms of their basic concepts, primary tenets, and approaches; and the use of each of these phenomenological frameworks in research depends largely on the study's research question and the epistemological lens through which the researcher operates [17].

Among the most controversial and significant schools of thought in phenomenology are two core and highly interrelated forms – existential phenomenology and hermeneutical phenomenology. Existential phenomenology was started and inspired by Martin Heidegger's pivotal 1927 text, *Sein und Zeit* (Being and Time), and focused on the study of concrete human existence, including experiences wherein we invoke free choice or action in concrete situations [18]. Heidegger [8] rejected the mind-body duality of human existence and asserted the existence of Dasein, which is the entity that allows humans to wonder about their own existence and question the meaning of their being-in-the-world. Put simply, Heidegger's existential phenomenology is ontological, as its aim is uncovering the meaning of being.

Hermeneutical phenomenology studies interpretative structures of experience i.e., how we understand and engage things around us in our human world, including ourselves and others. Significant contributions to this philosophical school of phenomenology were made by Hans-Georg Gadamer, a student of Heidegger. Gadamer put forward that understanding of meaning can only be achieved through dialogue and with an open mind to the opinion of others [17]. Additionally, any understanding or research of phenomena will always be influenced by one's preconceptions or existing knowledge; thus, understanding is, in its core, a fusion of horizons, as meanings are shared and derived from both parties. In other words, each person brings a history and adds value to a research environment when he begins to study that environment – there is no way that a researcher can observe, understand, or analyze a situation or phenomenon without infusing his own beliefs and thoughts about it. This back-and-forth movement or process of questioning, analyzing, and re-examining text, structures, or phenomena is called the hermeneutic circle [17].

In current research and philosophical practice, however, there is disparity among academics and researchers regarding the precise definition of existential phenomenology and hermeneutical phenomenology [17,19,20]. More specifically, certain academics refer to Heidegger's phenomenology as existential phenomenology [21], and others refer to it as hermeneutical phenomenology [17,22], while there are some who use both words to describe Heidegger's philosophical movement i.e., existential hermeneutics, or hermeneutical and existential phenomenology [20]. The overlapping concepts and tenets of these two types of phenomenology are evident even in Heidegger's own writings as he puts focus on phenomenology and existential ontology in his magnum opus, *Being and Time*, while he taught his apprentice to continue his work in expanding hermeneutics [23].

Whereas there are several inconsistencies regarding the exact name of Heidegger's phenomenological school of thought, its basic definitions, goals, and methods remain relatively uniform when discussed by contemporary academics. Additionally, most articles and books that refer to Heidegger's philosophical movement as hermeneutical phenomenology also emphasize the need for existential understanding [19] and the analysis of the existential structures of dasein [20]. Provided such, I will use hermeneutical phenomenology in analyzing the current paper's topic in order to bring focus to both concrete human existence and the structures of our experiences.

Approaching Violence Against Women through Hermeneutical Phenomenology

Heidegger's hermeneutical phenomenology rejected Husserl's use of phenomenological epoche or bracketing, and indicated that it would be impossible to completely and consciously reserve one's preconceptions when analyzing certain lived experiences, as these preconceptions form part of our current knowledge and being. In other words, Heidegger suggested that preconceptions, or prior understandings, augmented and improved interpretation, and as such, the researcher becomes a legitimate part of the research, as being-in-the-world of the participant [17]. Thus, taking a hermeneutical phenomenological approach in understanding the issue of violence against women implies that although I am no longer in the Middle East wherein I constantly witnessed violence against women, these experiences have already been ingrained in my consciousness in such a way that I am still able to understand the effects of implications of violence against women despite having distanced myself from further first-hand experiences of such violence. In this section I will first review current literature on violence against women that took the phenomenological approach, and then I will provide my own analysis of violence against women from the hermeneutical phenomenological perspective based on my studies and personal knowledge and experience of the issue.

Brief Review of Literature

Taking a phenomenological approach in studying the issue of violence against women means that the issue will be analyzed from the perspective of those women who have experienced such violence themselves. Focus will not be placed on statistics or social, political, or religious points-of-views; rather, what is important is to engage the persons involved in the phenomenon, and guide them towards understanding their experiences and uncovering the structures of those experiences.

Hayati [24] studied the lived experiences of Indonesian women who were in abusive marriages and had subsequently decided to terminate the marriage. By taking a phenomenological approach, the researcher was able to understand and analyze how and why Indonesian women are treated in a marriage, and how they react to such treatment from their husbands. Javanese women in Indonesia are taught and raised in the virtues of submission and obedience, as influenced by Islamic teachings [24]. As Islam is the most dominant religion, its teachings has been imbedded in the local culture and followed instinctively – like part of the collective unconscious; thus, it proved to be very difficult, almost unimaginable, for women to disobey their husbands and seek counseling for divorce. Hayati [24] indicated that the difficulties the women faced were evident in the time and effort they required to finally decide to terminate the marriage – it took at least 1 year and at most 4 years of psychological and legal counseling before the women decided on divorce.

Through phenomenological analysis, Hayati [24] identified nine emergent themes that describe the process from deciding to seek counseling and finally setting on divorce. Initially, the women reflected on their situation and their roles as women – they pondered how they would be accepted socially if they were to be divorced, and how people might not believe nor support them during and after the divorce process. Then, the women reflected on their personal beliefs and perceptions about their rights as women and as human beings. Such reflections led to personal debates between standing up for themselves or accepting the abuse for the sake of the family and their children. Through these reflections, they realized that if they lose themselves by readily accepting abuse, they will not be the best mothers they could be. When they subsequently discussed their plans to leave their husbands, the latter showed more remorse and affection towards them, which made the situation more difficult for the women. However, the women managed to stand their ground and saved themselves, recovered with the support of friends and family, and subsequently started a new life with an improved outlook for the future and higher respect for themselves.

In that study, the researcher merely formulated and asked the questions that served to guide the women's analysis and exploration of their individual consciousness. Taking the phenomenological approach allowed Hayati [24] to help the women explore and understand their experiences, and uncover their motivations and reasons for deciding on terminating the abusive marriage.

In a similar study, Thupayagale-Tshweneagae and Seloilwe [25] employed the hermeneutic phenomenological approach to investigate the lived experiences of women in Botsawana who experienced violence within an intimate relationship. Their analysis revealed that local sociocultural practices emerged as important factors that contributed to emotional abuse and made them susceptible to mental illness. These practices include age, ethnicity, payment of lobola (bride price), financial standing, change of name, and relocation to the man's residence [25]. Additionally, the women's employment and educational attainment also influenced their predisposition to abuse. Analyses performed in the study similarly revealed that it was shame – shame about their lack of employment, low salary, low intellect, lack of identity without the husband, age, etc. – that controlled how women reacted or accepted the abuse. The researchers further emphasized that in order for the women to successfully leave the abusive relationship, they needed to overcome the shame they associated with ending the relationship; thereby enabling them to start a new life with little feelings of shame or humiliation.

An In-Depth Analysis of Violence Against Women using the Hermeneutical Phenomenological Approach

In the issue of violence against women, hermeneutical phenomenology teaches us that one's reactions, perceptions, and interpretation of this international phenomenon and epidemic are greatly influenced by our preconceptions and experience about the topic. As I have become acquainted with several women victims of violence and have had witnessed the effects of such violent acts on women, my understanding and interpretation of such acts are greatly influenced by my experience and preconceptions. I cannot just forego my past experiences and knowledge of the physical and psychological ill-effects of violence against women when studying and writing about the topic, as this knowledge has already shaped my current perceptions and beliefs. Thus, my strong support and activism toward the eradication of violence against women, especially in the Middle East, will always be a reflection and effect of my experience and knowledge. Additionally,

taking a hermeneutic phenomenological approach maintains Heidegger's notion that the researcher is as much as part of the study as the participant; thus not only are the participant's knowledge of value to the research quest, but of equal value are the researcher's preconception and interpretation of the experience. As Heidegger succinctly put it, "Understanding is never without presuppositions. We do not, and cannot, understand anything from a purely objective position. We always understand from within the context of our disposition and involvement in the world".

By taking a qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological approach in a study of women who left abusive relationships, Bracken (2008) identified three essential themes surrounding the phenomenon. These were: disconnection from self and others, especially mothers; experiencing chaos related to extreme shame and terror; and experiencing strength and resilience in the face of minimal resources and support [26]. The results of this study resonated the insights and theories posited, which identified that feelings of shame and humiliation spark violent behavior in people, especially in those who feel very little guilt or remorse; and that acts of violence become a cycle of violence as the victims of violence also feel shame and humiliation, which will subsequently lead them to act violently against others.

Based on my experience and exposure to many Middle Eastern women who have been victimized by their spouses, fathers, uncles, and other men, the cycle of violence is not always evident to the people who experience it. Boys who witness their fathers abuse their mothers, or were also abused by their fathers, feel certain levels of shame and humiliation, as violent behavior – whether physical, psychological, or emotional – makes people feel inferior. These boys later grow up to become men and continue the cycle of violence. These boys – the victims eventually become the active perpetrators of violence, specifically, of retaliatory violence. They take the shame and humiliation they endured and direct it towards others by also inflicting some form of violence that they experienced or witnessed.

Such violent behavior may also transcend several forms or causes of shame. For example, if these boys were abused or victimized when they were young because of their economic status or intellect, they may still subsequently inflict violence against their partners in the future. This segment in the cycle of violence illustrates how the reasons or the causes of the shame and humiliation may not be the same for when the perpetrator was still a victim and when he was the perpetrator. As he was shamed – and abused – for being poor, he will shame and inflict violence on his partner for being a woman. In essence, it would not matter much what makes a person feel ashamed, as long as shame is directed and inflicted.

Conclusion

In summary, phenomenology is a study that focuses on the essence of consciousness based on first-person accounts and experiences; and hermeneutic phenomenology focuses on how we understand and engage things around us in our human world, including ourselves and others. Taking this hermeneutic phenomenological perspective, I find that violence against women can only be stopped if we halt all structures – including societal norms, laws, and religious beliefs – that make women feel inferior to men, thus making them susceptible to shame, humiliation, and all forms of violence. Additionally, those who suffered, and continue to suffer, violence and shame would need to undergo therapy and reconciliation in order to renew their psychological and emotional strength, thereby stopping the cycle of violence and shame. Arendt [27] succinctly compared this cyclical process of violence to

the laws of physics, “In physics, for every action there exists an equal and opposite reaction; therefore, it logically follows that for every act of aggression there must necessarily be a type of retaliation, whether that vengeance assumes a sublimated or direct form ” (p. 241).

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