

# SEXUALITY EDUCATION TO PREVENT INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE

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**Abstract.** *The “discovery” of intimate partner violence in the 1970s by the feminist movement, which considered it to be a private affair between two people, showed that the phenomenon is a recurrent one, occurring in a wide range of romantic relationships, whether committed, dating, or casual, and both current and former, across races, social classes, ages, adults and adolescents. Research has shown that existing criminal justice, health and social interventions do not address intimate partner violence. Changing culturally constructed attitudes that make men dominant and controlling, women dependent and invisible, and the use of gender-sensitive policies are key to addressing violence against women. It is argued that comprehensive sexuality education, as a preventive measure that introduces an appreciation of personal needs in terms of the well-being of the other person and of society, can help to address intimate partner violence. The aim of this article is to show the importance of a sexuality education perspective in the prevention of intimate partner violence against women. The study shows that in order to prevent intimate partner violence against women and girls, it is important to develop the ability to recognise violence related to unequal power in relationships, to be able to name types of violence, and to be able to identify symptoms of violent behaviour. The research design used was qualitative research, semi-structured interviews to collect data, and the participants were women who had experienced violence in intimate relationships.*

**Keywords:** *comprehensive sexuality education, intimate partner violence, prevention.*

## Introduction

The World Health Organisation defines intimate partner violence in its 2002 report as behaviour, including physical aggression, sexual violence, psychological abuse and control, in an intimate relationship that causes physical, psychological or sexual harm to the persons involved (Krug, Dahlberg, Mercy, Zwi, & Lozano, 2002). The Italian researcher Troisi (2018) defines *intimate partner violence*, which takes place in a context of control and domination, with the most frequent perpetrator being the sometimes loving man, and the victim being the woman, as a systematically applied behaviour, with a particularly subtle and constant use of means of psychological influence that maintains a constant state of tension, anxiety and fear. The dynamics, duration and repetitiveness of such violence have led to it being identified as more damaging to health than catastrophic events (car accidents, hurricanes, earthquakes, floods, etc.) or physical or sexual assault by a stranger (Herman, 2006).

Although violence against women is recognised as a global health problem, interventions are not effective. The legal system, as a purely masculine structure,

is widely guided by traditional attitudes that excuse men and blame women (Moulin-Stozek, 2021). The health care system, which has historically focused on the diagnosis of illness and medical intervention, does not recognise its role in solving social problems (Kimmel, 2000). Social service institutions that have not seen the problem of intimate partner violence for a long time, and that have linked their activities to individual programmes to strengthen responsibility for life choices, to change the behaviour of the family and its members, and to improve interpersonal skills and conflict resolution, *aimed at adapting the family and its members to the social norms* (Gutierrez, 1987), are finding it difficult to adopt a different approach.

In turn, the lack of effectiveness of existing interventions to address intimate partner violence is even more pronounced in adolescent relationships (Gracia & Herrero, 2006). In the legal system, prosecution, punishment, and behaviour change programmes are difficult tools to apply due to age. Girls who have experienced violence, who are more likely than women to hide intimate details of their lives, and who find it harder to recognise the symptoms of inappropriate behaviour, have limited access to legal protection, health and social services, and violent online behaviour, as a new and unfamiliar phenomenon, is difficult to identify and to label as a criminal offence by all members of the general population (Moulin-Stozek, 2021).

In this way, societal attitudes, reinforced in families, values passed down from one generation to the next, which instil a sense of superiority in boys, giving them the right to control and dominate, and in girls, forcing them to be submissive and passive, also influence the attitudes and actions of service providers, making it difficult to effectively combat the phenomenon of intimate partner violence, especially in cases of children and young people. Research shows that, in the long term, positive change can be expected from a gender equality perspective, which creates the preconditions for a positive change in relations between men and women, in established traditions, stereotypes, behaviour, thinking and ways of acting. It is recognised that prevention is the most effective way of preventing violent relationships, and that by applying the principle of equality to *primary prevention* in the formal education system, it is possible to make the broadest possible contribution to shaping the attitudes of children and adolescents, to changing the values of their families and communities, and at the same time to reducing the level of tolerance of violence and to tackling the problem of intimate relationships in couples of all ages.

*The aim of this article* is to show the importance of a sexuality education perspective in the prevention of intimate partner violence against women. *The object of analysis* – sexuality education to prevent intimate partner violence.

## **Intimate Partner Violence in Sexuality Education**

While the importance of sexuality education is recognised, implementation is not smooth, however, a study of sexuality education programs in 155 countries showed that sexuality education programmes are dominated by generic topics such as health, body anatomy and hygiene (World Health Organization, 2021), the differences between the male and female body, and the thinking, acting and feeling aspects that go with it, are still over-emphasised. At the same time, it is now recognised that such an approach, which is described as a *conservative, traditional perspective of sex education*, is inappropriate and cannot contribute to reducing gender inequalities, in order to contribute to the solution of the problem of violence in intimate relationships through primary prevention (Giniotaitė, 2018). It is believed that the *perspective of modern, or Comprehensive Sexuality Education*, which contributes to the deconstruction and re-evaluation of culturally and historically formed attitudes (Galtung, 1990), the recognition and acceptance of different sexual orientations and practices, and at the same time, the development of critical thinking, the introduction of the principles of equality, human rights, creates the prerequisites for a more equal society, and thus the elimination of the problem of violence in intimate relationships in the long term.

### **Features of Traditional Sexuality Education**

As mentioned above, the traditional perspective on sexuality education does not see violence in intimate relationships as a cause of gender inequality. *Violence between men and women* is explained as a phenomenon influenced by biology, evolution or mental disorders, while *violence within the family* is explained as a result of poorly played roles, the inability to resolve conflicts constructively, the dysfunction of the family as a system and the resulting stress. From this perspective, men are seen as inherently more aggressive, competitive, dominant and controlling, while women, on the other hand, are seen as more passive, more emotional, and as linking their security and value to intimate relationships (Giniotaitė, 2018).

In contrast, the gender-based segregation in the traditional perspective is seen by scholars as a historically constructed construct. Galtung (2018) (cited in Dodi, 2019), a Norwegian sociologist and peace researcher, based on human physiology and hormonal phenomena, and DeKeseredy and Schwartz (2011), the fact that in 90% of cases abusers are able to behave in a non-conflict way in non-intimate settings, Kimmel (2000), who has pointed out that violence as a strategy for preserving one's own species is incompatible with the health problems of the partner and the children, and many other scholars disagree with the notion that gender determines the men's higher level of aggression, need for dominance and control, and that biology may justify a lower level of responsibility in the sexual relationship. As well as the fact that women are inherently more passive, tend to

be in the 'victim' role, or have higher levels of emotionality (Cavanagh, 2006). In turn, explanations of domestic violence in terms of the time family members spend together (Dobash & Dobash, 1979), the misrepresentation of gender roles or the tendency of children to replicate the patterns of interpersonal relationships seen in their biological families as if they were 'hollow beings' with no sense of justice and fairness, are not firmly established scientifically (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2011).

In this way, sexuality education based on traditional values, which establishes different expectations for the sexes, the right of men to dominate and control, and the right of women to be subordinate, is not only inadequate to deal with the problem of intimate partner violence, but also, on the contrary, tends to justify men's violent behaviour, and to portray it as a "normal" occurrence.

### **Comprehensive Sexuality Education Perspective on Intimate Partner Violence**

*Comprehensive Sexuality Education*, as opposed to the traditional one, is a perspective that aims to ensure equal access to all human rights for all members of society, regardless of age, race, religion or other personal identity traits. *Comprehensive Sexuality Education* in the case of intimate partner violence against women is a way of changing culturally held attitudes that privilege men and devalue women to an equal treatment of both sexes, increasing gender equality, and eliminating the preconditions for the existence of gender-based violence.

International law has been referring to sexuality education for young people and to measures that can help protect children from inappropriate behaviour and eliminate the transmission of violent patterns from one generation to the next since the beginning of the 20th century. *The Geneva Declaration on the Rights of the Child* (United Nations, 1924) of 1924 obliges states to ensure children's right to a socially responsible education and, at the same time, to prevent their economic exploitation, while the *the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (United Nations, 1989) combats physical, economic and domestic violence and ill-treatment (Article 19). The Council of Europe's *Lanzarote Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse* (Council of Europe, 2007) obliges to combat sexual violence against children (Article 10), and *the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence* (Council of Europe, 2011) ((hereinafter referred to as the CECPCVAWDV) enshrines the obligation to ensure the right of children and adolescents to be free from violence, not only in the family, but in their romantic relationships, through the use of primary prevention, primarily in formal education, as part of sexuality education.

The CECPCVAWDV (Council of Europe, 2011) is considered to be the main international legal instrument to combat intimate partner violence against

women/girls and identifies key themes in Comprehensive Sexuality Education to be included in the curricula. Article 14 of this legislation states that in order to change the culturally established different patterns of behaviour between men and women, to eradicate prejudices, traditions and all other practices based on the idea of women's inferiority, and adapted to the age and abilities of the learners, young people must be taught, on the basis of scientifically based information, about *equality between women and men, non-stereotypical gender roles, mutual respect, non-violent conflict resolution in interpersonal relationships, gender-based violence against women and the right to security of the person*. Existing research already confirms that the use of the Comprehensive Perspective on Sexuality Education contributes to the development of intimate relationships with respect for self and others (Kyegombe et al., 2014), the development of awareness, responsibility and autonomy in the decision to engage in sexual intercourse, contributes to the reduction of sexually transmitted infectious diseases among adolescents and the reduction of unintended pregnancies (Blum, Mmari, & Moreau, 2017), and the reduction of intimate partner violence in adolescents, and possibly later on in their lives (Holden, Bell, & Schauerhammer, 2015).

### **Methodology of Research**

Qualitative research is used to assess the experiences of women who have experienced violence in intimate relationships and to draw conclusions about the sexuality education programme, which enables the researcher to choose the style of interpretation and description that is acceptable to him/her, to look at the phenomenon in a broader and deeper way (Novelskaitė, 2012).

The sample of participants when performing qualitative research depends on the aim of the research (Bitinas, 2013). The sample elements for the qualitative study were selected using purposive sampling. The participants were 6 women (names have been changed in the study), aged between 33 and 52 from traditional families, living in urban and suburban areas, with and without children in common, who had experienced violence from current and former spouses. Such sample is sufficient, because when applying the semi-structured interview, the recommended sample size is from 5 to 30 people (Žydzūnaitė & Sabaliauskaitė, 2017).

The study, carried out in October, November and December 2020. The semi-structured interview method was chosen for the implementation of the research being one of the most convenient survey methods during which it is possible to obtain as much unstructured information about the research issue as possible, and to ensure less formal interaction between the researcher and the research participants.

The interview data were analysed using content analysis, which allows for drawing conclusions based on text (Bitinas, 2013). The category was selected according to the purpose of the work presented in the introduction, subcategories,

such as systemic violence, psychological violence, economic violence and sexual violence - as key concepts in international and local law relating to intimate partner violence (Table 1).

*Table 1 Recognising intimate partner violence (created by author)*

Category	Subcategory	Survey results
Factors that hinder the recognition of violence	Systemic violence	Gender roles justify violence
	Psychological violence	Violence is associated with love, caring for family and partner.
	Economic violence	Violence is associated with caring for family and children
	Sexual violence	Violence is treated as a marital obligation

The following ethical principles have been followed during the implementation of the qualitative research (interview): goodwill, respect for the dignity of a person, confidentiality, justice, voluntary approach, right to obtain accurate information (Bitinas, 2013).

### **Research Results**

According to the data of Lithuanian Department of Statistics (2020), women are the most frequent victims of domestic violence in Lithuania (80% of all cases of violence), with the number of women victims having increased almost 12 times in the decade after the Law on Protection against Domestic Violence of Lithuanian Republic (Lietuvos Respublikos Seimas, 2011) (hereinafter referred to as the "Law") came into force (Purvaneckienė, Venclovaitė, Stonkuvienė & Žiliukatė, 2019). According to the Ministry of Social Security and Labour of Lithuanian Republic (Lithuanian Department of Statistics, 2020), an average of 64% of battered women do not seek help. The reasons for this can be attributed to the gender-neutral definition of violence in the Law, the incomplete description of violent and coercive behaviour, such as psychological manipulation, persistent coercive acts, harassment, as well as the legal system's failure to recognise violence other than physical violence, the underfunding of institutions providing specialised services, societal attitudes towards women who have experienced violence, and the failure to ratify the CECPCVAWDV (Council of Europe, 2011), which is perceived as a threat to traditional family values (Pilinkaitė Sotirovič & Vaigė, 2017).

The prevalence of intimate partner violence in adolescent relationships in Lithuania is not known and no official information is published. Sexuality education as a preventive measure against domestic violence is legally regulated by the Order of the Minister of Education and Science of Lithuanian Republic *on the Approval of the General Programme for Health and Sexuality Education and Family Preparation* (Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of

Lithuania, 2016). However, the sexuality education programme is not smoothly implemented in the education system. There is no approved system for training teachers, there is a lack of methodology, and there is a traditional approach to sexuality, with a focus on physiological changes in the body, hygiene, and healthy lifestyles. Violence against women and girls, as a multifaceted and complex phenomenon, lacks attention: the concept of violence does not take into account the unequal power in intimate relationships, it does not consider violent relationships in a social context, and it does not provide a comprehensive list of forms of violence.

*Systemic violence.* Systemic violence is an IPV that differs from simple conflicts in its systematic control over the partner - complexity, dynamics, duration, repetitiveness, unequal relationships (Herman, 2006).

Women's stories show that more relationships on equal basis are hindered by cultural attitudes that divide responsibilities according to gender, with women delegating responsibility for the private, less valued „*And I stayed with the child all day long, I didn't do much.*“ (Jovita, 43 years old), and for men, for a public space that is more valuable and financially rewarding, giving them the right to dominate relationships „*What is allowed for a man is not allowed for a woman.*“ (Nijolė, 52 years old), to control the performance of marital duties „*I'm the wife, I have to...*“ (Jolita, 52 years old), punish with violence for disobedience „*My father said, you have to endure. All women suffer.*“ (Jovita, 43 years old).

*As soon as I got married, there were immediate demands that I have to do as he wants, because I'm the wife, I have to...* (Jolita, 52 years old).

*My father said, you have to endure. All women suffer. The role of a woman is that of a housewife. Besides, a woman needs a man. <...> Of course, every day I was waiting for my husband to come home from work, and it seemed like, 'Oh, there's food to be cooked, my husband will come home tired. And I stayed with the child all day long, I didn't do much.* (Jovita, 43 years old).

*In general, women have children and fall out of friendships. <...> If you are sitting at home, raising children, it's not a job.<...> He owns everything. I have nothing. What is allowed for a man is not allowed for a woman. They want you to listen to them.* (Nijolė, 52 years old).

*We're still a family, you choose together, you have to negotiate together, but that was not the case. He used to get what he wanted. <...> ...everything had to be his way. <...> He had the last word.* (Rita, 49 years old).

In this way, cultural attitudes based on gender, instilled in biological families, hinder the recognition and acknowledgement of systemic violence. Women who want a more equal relationship are forced by violence to conform to the rules of behaviour established in society, which, through sexuality education aimed at strengthening gender equality, by eliminating all practices, patterns of behaviour and attitudes based on the idea of women's inferiority, would be a precondition for the creation of egalitarian relationships (Kyegombe et al., 2014).

*Psychological violence.* Psychological violence is violence manifested in actions such as controlling, humiliating, degrading and belittling a partner, often justified by men's natural tendency to dominate, compete and envy (Troisi, 2018).

This study found that women have either never heard of psychological violence or have never heard of it „*Physical violence, of course, but I didn't know about psychological violence*“ (Audra, 51 years old), or are unable to recognise it. They equate their partner's actions such as intimidation, bullying, jealousy with love „*I thought, well, a man loves...*“ (Audra, 51 years old), prohibition to make their own decisions about an unplanned pregnancy with concern for the family “*I didn't really want to give birth, but he said you can't do anything, you have to and that's it*“ (Rita, 49 years old), humiliation and criticism with advice „*I didn't understand, because I thought that he was right and that I was a loser here and I was behaving badly.*“ (Vita, 33 years old).

*The husband comes home from work and either the phone will be smashed, the door will be slammed or the food will be thrown away. <...>... Physical violence, of course, but I didn't know about psychological violence, I thought, well, a man loves....* (Audra, 51 years old).

*When it was psychological, I didn't understand, because I thought that he was right and that I was a loser here and I was behaving badly.* (Vita, 33 years old).  
*I didn't really want to give birth, but he said you can't do anything, you have to and that's it. And I thought, he wants a bigger family, he cares, he loves.* (Rita, 49 years old).

Thus, the identification of psychological violence with the feelings that underlie the development of intimate relationships suggests that its recognition would be important for the prevention of any form of violence. The inclusion of the themes of love, care, respect, tolerance, jealousy, together with culturally widespread attitudes and gender stereotypes, in sexuality education curricula would help to develop young people's ability to identify potentially dangerous relationships in a timely manner.

*Economic violence.* Economic violence refers to manipulative actions aimed at controlling a partner's or family's finances, assets, forcibly keeping a woman in the home, or limiting spending (Dobash & Dobash, 1979).

The financial dependence of the women in this study on their partners was increased under the guise of motherhood, the family, constructs that reinforce women's subordination to men through the legitimisation of tasks such as childbirth, parenting, domestic work (Elshtain, 2002), followed by limitation of expenditure, isolation and exploitation. The study shows that women did not reflect the threat in their partner's behaviour, they saw it as a concern for the family „... he said, “*Well, why do you need to go to school? We can work together.*“ (Rita, 49 years old), my duty as a mother „...*of my daughter's disability I was unemployed.*“ (Audra, 51 years old) or to the normal difficulties of married life



*„I was taken to a farmhouse to live, <...>... no plumbing, nothing.“ (Nijolè, 52 years old).*

*I gave birth and didn't even go back to school, because he said, "Well, why do you need to go to school? We can work together. <...> ... ..they didn't even give me money to buy groceries, even though I was working in the family business. I couldn't leave home without him. (Rita, 49 years old).*

*Because of my daughter's disability I was unemployed, so he used to say, who are you without me... (Audra, 51 years old).*

*I was taken to a farmhouse to live, I was just like locked up with two children, no plumbing, nothing. <...>. I needed shoes, he said, what do you need them for. The children were small, but I went to work. (Nijolè, 52 years old).*

Economic violence is difficult to identify, according to research. However, talking about the form, consequences and causes of economic violence in the context of gender inequality will help to develop critical thinking in adolescents.

*Sexual violence.* Sexual violence is defined as acts or attempts of a sexual nature committed or attempted to be committed without the consent of the other person, through intimidation, manipulation or coercion (Troisi, 2018).

In this study, women were subjected to both force and intimidation through other forms of violence *„For me, it's not the worst thing...“ (Audra, 51 years old).* Ignoring and hiding sexual violence shows that it is the violence that is most socially normalised in society *„But so what, who do you complain to? Nobody will understand.“ (Jovita, 43 years old)* and, at the same time, for women experiencing violence, especially marital violence *„You live a family life, you are not forced to, but you have to.“ (Nijolè, 52 years old).*

*Yes, I experienced it, but, well... For me, it's not the worst thing... (Audra, 51 years old).*

*Making love was not pleasant. You live a family life, you are not forced to, but you have to. (Nijolè, 52 years old).*

*He used to force me. But so what, who do you complain to? Nobody will understand. I didn't tell anyone about it, because it's a shame, let alone go to the police. (Jovita, 43 years old).*

Symptoms of sexual violence, the more aggressive forms of which occur in the later stages of a relationship, are usually the result of attitudes that undermine women (Gustaitienė, 2005). Sexuality education based on gender equality, together with the CECPCVAWDV (2011) call for a special focus on increasing boys' level of responsibility, would be a possible primary prevention measure to combat sexual violence.

Thus, research on violent experiences shows that intimate partner violence is caused by unequal power relations. Sexuality education based on a clear terminology of violence, forms of violence and knowledge of the possible symptoms of violence could contribute to the earlier identification of signs of violence and the search for solutions for the future of intimate relationships.

## Conclusions

The study shows that the conservative traditional perspective on sexuality education treats gender as a biological, evolutionary factor, sees heterosexual relationships as the only appropriate ones, and encourages sexual relationships to be associated with marriage. In contrast, the modern science-based, comprehensive sexuality education perspective explains gender differences in social terms, recognises different sexual orientations, and encourages a conscious, informed sexual decision-making stance.

The study showed that women lack knowledge about forms of violence other than physical violence. Psychological violence is often equated with love and care, humiliation and criticism – for advice. Economic violence, which then escalates into economic exploitation, exclusion and poverty experienced by women, is seen as a concern for the welfare of the family. Sexual violence, the most socially normalised, as a woman's marital duty.

The study shows that the lack of sexuality education in the education system prevents the formation of different attitudes in favour of equal relationships and the intergenerational transmission of violent relationship patterns. The study confirmed that education on systematic recognition of violence, types of violence, and their symptoms would encourage questioning of social norms and the benefits of egalitarian relationships, and contribute to solving the problem of intimate partner violence against women in the long term.

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