
The Language of Violence against Women: Male Voice Domination in the Public and Private Domains

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Abstract

Violence against women (VAW) has been a long-debated issue for many things, including the authoritative male voice that often reduces (if not diminishes) women's voice in public and private domains. Often, the lines between the public/private dichotomy become blurred, and the traditional gender perception practiced in the private domain transcends to the public domain. This literature review scrutinizes the authoritative male voice in both the public and private domains within the violence against women discourse. This paper reports that the male authoritative voice is prevalent in both the private and public domains. Yet, the faint lines between the private and public domains cause the interference of a more structural authoritative voice toward the private domain. Even though the language of support enables the victims' and survivors' experiences to be verbalized, the support center staff are not all linguistically equipped to effectively elicit and report the experience. This ineffective elicitation and reporting open opportunities for the authoritative male voice to maintain its power in VAW cases.

Keywords: *violence against women; male voice; private/public dichotomy; the language of support*

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Introduction

Violence against women (VAW) has been a long-debated issue within the public/private dichotomy. Even though VAW is recognized to receive legal consequences in both public and private domains, the judiciary system still often fails to put a value on women's voices (Weatherall, 2019). Within the discussions of

VAW, the feminist perspective differentiates the public/private dichotomy between the family and the larger social order (Weintraub & Kumar, 1997). This public/private dichotomy is strongly tied to masculinity and femininity in which women are put within the family's private domain. This positioning often results in women's lower hierarchical status,

reflected in the imbalanced power between men and women in society.

In the VAW discourse, identifying a clear line between the public and private domains is often difficult. The public/private dichotomy often overlaps, and a clear separation between the two becomes difficult to identify. In domestic violence (DV) cases, the line between the public and private domains is blurred. Some cases of harassment and DV might fall into both public and private due to particular documentation on the public institution of the judiciary system or platforms of exposure (Anderson & Cermele, 2014; Ehrlich, 2021). In these instances, the perceived reality becomes highly dependent on the reality of the public domain, which is highly masculine.

The domination of masculinity in the VAW is translated into the authoritative male language in reporting, responding, and building the reality around the discussions. This paper would like to highlight that the male voice dominating the discourse of VAW does not necessarily come from the male sex. The male voice is “the perpetuation of a masculine-derived perception of reality” (Easteal, Bradford, & Bartels, 2012, p. 4) which is often embraced by both males and females, especially in a patriarchal society.

Therefore, in regards to the perpetuation of the strong masculine perspective in the VAW discourse, this paper explores the overlap between the public and private domains in VAW discourse and how the constructed reality is highly influenced by the masculine-derived language that the public institutions embrace. To elaborate on this, this paper will first briefly discuss the language of VAW in public and private domains, respectively. In the next part, the complicity of the public/private dichotomy when the private domain transforms into cases of the public domain will be discussed further. Focusing on various linguistics discussion of the previously published papers, this part will try to present how the language of masculinity interfere with the language of femininity. Finally, the last part will discuss the language used by the institutions aiming to give support to victims and survivors of VAW.

The Language of Violence against Women in the Public and the Private Domains

VAW invades both the public and the private domains, and it is often manifested in similar language. Most of the time, the voice that moves the legal system is male (Easteal, Bartels, & Bradford, 2012), whether it comes from a male or female source. The following sub-sections explain the phenomena in the language of VAW in public and private domains, respectively.

The Language of Violence against Women in the Public Domain

VAW in the public domain might take various forms, from direct aggression toward women (Jing-Schmidt and Peng, 2014; Makoni, 2021) to the excessive glorification of men (de Bres and Dawson, 2021), which emphasizes women’s lower status than men. This notion has rooted deeply in society as it manifests in the languages used in cases of VAW.

In modern society, online media has become the perfect source for studies in the public domain. Social media has become one of the platforms where aggressive language against women can be easily found. One study illustrates China’s strong patriarchal culture in the use of derogatory terms against women. Jing-Schmidt and Peng (2014) observed the use of a gender-based cyber slur reflecting misogyny in the Chinese lexicon of *biǎo*, which is translated into ‘slut’. In Weibo, the Chinese social media platform, the word *biǎo*, which has a strong negative connotation, collocates with words with a positive connotation. The dominant collocations for *biǎo* are *xīnjī-biǎo* (crafty slut), *nǚ shén-biǎo* (goddess slut), *lǜ chá-biǎo* (green-tea slut), *guīmì-biǎo* (best-girlfriend slut), and *shèngmǔ-biǎo* (holy-mother slut). The syntactic construction of these terms puts the word *biǎo* as the Head of the phrase, and this syntactic construction influence the semantic construction of the phrases. The positive connotations of the modifiers are overpowered by the negative connotation of the word *biǎo*. Thus, the terms become misogynistic labels to degrade women, which underlines and confirms the

traditional gender perspectives about the superiority of men.

Even though slurs are often found in verbal aggression, Anderson and Cermele (2014) argue that the dominant verbal aggression towards women on Twitter is not in the form of slurs. Instead, most derogatory cyber remarks on Twitter are targeted toward the traditional gender perception, which puts men to be more superior to women. The most common verbal aggression strategy on Twitter is more about how women are weak or are not as capable nor as reliable as men, such as *a coward*, *'poor little me'*, or *not a real gamer*. Jensen and De Castell (2013) identified explicit threats of rape and other violence in their study of the responses to *Feminist Frequency* about the absence of female protagonists in Xbox One E3 games. Again, the authoritative male voice resounds on the traditional notion of male superiority that silences the challenging female voice.

Stepping away from the social media platforms, Krook (2017) states that VAW is prevalent in politics around the world in the form of harassment, bullying, or even assassination to silence women's voices within the political landscape. Dalton (2019) underlines the strong idea of a mother as an idealized woman has caused great harm in the Japanese political landscape for women. Openly addressed criticisms from Japanese male politicians to female politicians revolve around this idea. He presents several examples, such as:

*'Shouldn't you hurry up and get married?
'If you don't marry, you won't have any
children so will end up in a nursing home
funded by other people's children's taxes'
'Can't you bear children?'
'You should have a child yourself first!'*
(Dalton, 2019, pp. 3-4)

Women's role as child bearers from a strong patriarchal perspective resounding in the language of male authoritative voice results in the labeling of a woman to be defective when refusing to conform to this norm. In cases where an apology is demanded, such as when Suzuki Ahikuro, a Japanese male politician, publicly shouted, *'Shouldn't you*

hurry up and get married?' to Shiomura Ayaka, a Tokyo metropolitan assemblywoman, in 2014, the public apology was made personal instead of structural. Generalizing the context by addressing the apology to other women who cannot marry or have children, the apology silenced the issue of the women's place in Japanese politics.

In the context of *sekuhara* (sexual harassment) in Japan, Dalton (2019) also argues that even as victims, women should use the polite form of language when confronting their male aggressors to protect their image as women and to avoid unwanted social consequences and being blamed as the initiators of the aggression.

Victim-blaming is also prevalent in Holoshitz and Cameron's (2014) article, where they studied the language of sexual violence in Congo news reports. The language of seduction and consensual sex terminologies in narrating the events are often used in the reports, and at the same time, they downgrade the perpetrators' agency. They also underline that when it comes to the perpetrators' identity, the news reports tend to make them less identifying by using collective identifiers such as *tribal groups*, *rebel movements*, or *government soldiers*. The ideological domination of the male voice supporting or taking cover in patriarchy tends to shift the focus to the victims and distorts the victims' reality.

The Language of Violence against Women in the Private Domain

In the private domain, the use of the term 'domestic violence' to describe VAW within the household or intimate contexts highly reduces its significance in the legal system due to the association of the word 'domestic' to be less important than that 'professional' terms (Easteal, Bradford, & Bartels, 2012). This labeling of 'domestic' highly influences the perception of how violence that occurs in the private domain is perceived as not 'real' violence in the legal system. An illustration of this phenomenon is given in Easteal (2001, p. 2) from a transcript of an interview by the police and the solicitor when interviewing a victim of domestic violence.

'Were you hit?'
'Were you bashed?'
'No', she responded.

It was elaborated that the violence involved the pinching of her breasts and nipples and the perpetrator jumping on her when she was lying down. However, these actions were not considered as 'hitting' or 'bashing' from the lens of the male voice.

In addition, cases of rape by intimate partners in the private domains tend to be considered less severe than cases of rape by strangers. Words such as 'inferred consent' or 'signaled consent' are used in describing intimate partner rape (Fewster, 2009). The failure of the victims to produce a straightforward objection of 'no' is deemed as a failure in meeting the standard of objection under the set parameters of the frontal objection of the male voice. Hence, it was considered an 'inferred consent'.

Furthermore, the male authority perspective in cases of intimate partner violence is prevalent. From the male perspective, Harris, Palazzolo, and Savage (2012) identified that the male voice dominates the discussion of intimate partner violence from twelve conversational transcripts of students between the age of 20 to 24 years old. Slurs and downgrade of women's agency were acknowledged. This finding is in line with a part of the discussion by Anderson and Cermele (2014) that identified the use of slurs such as 'bitch', 'whore', and 'slut', as well as threats of violence in 130 Civil Protection Order (CPO), petitions filed in 2010 to the U.S. Pacific Northwest court.

In conclusion, the VAW in the private domain shows a strong indication of a high degree of male voice practices, both in the intimate relationship context and the projected legal context. The female voice associated with softness, politeness, and obedience is ignored when determining the level of crime that took place within the domestic context. On the other hand, the frontal and authoritative male voice is set as

the standard of whether a crime is a crime or a domestic dispute or misunderstanding.

The Intersection of the Public and Private Domains

In most (if not all) cases of sexual harassment, sexual assault, and domestic violence, it is impossible to draw a clear line between the public and the private domains. What was private becomes public when documented in public institutions such as the judiciary court. Anderson and Cermele (2014) distinguish the private nature of the CPO and the public nature of Twitter tweets. However, they also argue that these two platforms can also be considered private and public at the same time. The verbal aggression reported in the CPO was private because it took place within the family or intimate relationship institution. However, once the CPO petitions are officially documented as court records, they will lose their private nature and become public. The complicity occurs when the verbal aggressions recorded in the CPO petitions cannot be used to give legal sanctions to the perpetrators. On the other hand, tweets fall in the public domain due to their impersonal nature and are regarded as expressions of free speech protected by law. Nevertheless, even though tweets can be publicly accessed, they are private because they are considered "backstage talk" which cannot cause direct physical harm.

In regard to the mitigation of women's agency in private domain cases that reach the public domain, Andrus (2011; 2012) analyses the ideology behind the hearsay rule in excited utterance and considers it a trustworthy depiction of an event in domestic violence cases. Analyzing the *US v. Hadley* trial record (2002), appellate discourses (2005), and the 911 reports and the trial excerpts, she applies the concept of fractal recursivity to find out that the dismissal of the victim's agency due to her excited utterance favors her position as a victim of domestic violence. The court admitted her excited utterance as a truthful portrayal of the event. Hildebrand-Edgar and Ehrlich (2017) support this argument by presenting a contradictive perspective using the *R v. Wagar* case. They elaborate on how the choice of linguistic style influences the

perception of the victim's credibility. While excited utterance is considered truthful, the victim's choice of powerful speech style is deemed to be untrustworthy. Even though a powerful speech style usually expresses more credibility than the powerless speech style, they argue that complicity occurs when the powerful speech style is performed by the victim. While claiming the victim's agency, the victim loses her credibility as an 'ideal' rape victim. Her assertiveness and confidence in retelling events and responding to the court's questions are considered a powerful speech style that violates the typical traits of an insecure and vulnerable victim. On the other hand, the assailant's strategy of using the powerless speech style of repeated apologies earned him credibility as the 'victim' of the assault he committed. Regarding the construct of violence against women, the media has brought a lot of contributions to the discussion of the victims' agency (Lorenzo-Dus and Bryant, 2011; Eades, 2012; Bou-Franch, 2013; Ehrlich, 2013). The limited perspective of the judiciary sometimes mistreated the victims of violence (Ehrlich, 2012; Jordan, 2015).

When it comes to the victims' identity construction, most victims cannot escape the private boundary of the events of violence and subconsciously embrace the traditional gender role assigned to them. Langan, Hannem, and Steward (2016) explore the victims' constructions of identity, ideology, and navigation of narratives in abusive discourses and identify ideological contradictions between the identity construction relation to empowerment. In their study of recorded inbound calls to New Zealand Victim Support's national contact service, Tennent and Weatherhall (2019) identified that most callers avoided using expressions directly linked to the assault. Using Conversation Analysis, they analyzed recordings of 396 inbound calls from 2015 to 2016. Out of all the recordings, only 20% of the victims used words closely related to violence, such as assault and violence. In contrast, the majority of victims did not address themselves as victims and used associative words that did not directly connect to the event. The majority of the callers used people and place references to describe the event. They addressed the perpetrators as husbands, ex-husbands, or ex-

partners. In addition, they referred to the location as our home and in jail. Tennent and Weatherall claim that the victims illustrated difficulties in narrating their experiences of violence and instead of building their disclosures by associating the aspects of the violence to the private domain. These studies of identity constructions present an illustration of how the victims are still tied to the private relation within the family or intimate relationship institutions.

In addition, Goodman and Walker (2016) identify the male perpetrators' strategies of identity and accountability management in sexual assault and domestic violence cases to be male-authoritative. In the intimate partner violence discourse, the analysis of the consultation transcripts from six male perpetrators undergoing court-mandatory probations reveals that they avoid further accountability by claiming that they do not remember most parts of the event while attempting victim-blaming. The use of a male-authoritative voice in the legal system is also strong in the Brazilian judiciary. De Freitas and Bastos (2019) argue that the choice of the courtroom language in the Brazilian courts often mitigates the responsibilities of the male-perpetrator from the sexual actions by textually putting them as non-agents in passive voice for the act of sexual intercourse even though the court uses active voice for other violent actions and put the perpetrators as the agents. In a separate section, the court chose to address the sexual assault events with a euphemism of "forced sex" instead of rape. In both cases, the court failed to acknowledge the serious crime of the assault by referring to it as either intercourse or sex. The deeply rooted masculine language of the public domain can also be seen from the association of the aggressor's motive as the inability to control his natural instinct as a male species (Stokoe, 2012).

The stronghold of masculinity in the courtroom can also be seen from the acknowledgment of hard evidence rather than verbal explanation. Ehrlich (2019) explores how strong arguments regarding sexual assault could be derived from public visual evidence and are accepted as a solid source of the truth. The presence of widespread use of

visual evidence circling on social media in sexual assault trials can provide solid evidence due to semiotic ideologies (Thurlow, 2017). Erlich shows how digital images taken from the public domain can provide a strong argument that consent was not given and that silence and passivity should be regarded as the inability to respond instead of consent. Using the visual image, solid arguments for non-consent can be presented. With the images also, the court was able to gain access to the event during the time of happening through real-time documentation. While favoring the victim's reality, the fact that the visual image can present un rebutted hard evidence in the courtroom can be seen as the reflection of the male voice in the legal system.

In summary, it is almost impossible to categorize most cases of violence against women into either private or public domains since most contexts can present more than one perspective, which influences the public/private dichotomy. Once the private domain crossover into the public domain, the male voice of the legal system might manifest in several forms: 1) the mitigation of women's agency, 2) the inability to escape traditional gender roles in constructing the victims' identity, 3) the downgrading of the male perpetrators' accountability, and 4) the construction of the male's ideal definition of violence in the form of un rebutted evidence to the event.

The Language of Support

Since a better understanding of violence will result in better planning on how to decrease the occurrence of violence (Lombard and McMillan, 2012), the role of support centers for victims and survivors is crucial in establishing a better understanding of the violence. However, not all the institutions offering support to the victims and survivors have a good understanding of the gender construction within the culture, and how a deeper understanding of the construction will help those people better respond to violence (Ehrlich, 2014; Tennent, 2019).

It was discussed previously that Tennent and Weatherall (2019) analyzed the inbound call recordings to the New Zealand Victim

Support's national contact service to find that most of the callers avoided using the terminologies directly connected to the assault. In the same study, they also identify that the words describing the violence used by the operator were drawn from a particular list of the institutional register and that the words cannot overcome the obstacles of the complexity of the victims/survivors' experience of violence. The limited vocabulary in the institutional register might influence the way the callers expressed their situation, and with better lexicons in the register, the victims/survivors' experience of violence might be better articulated.

In another light, collocation can be a valuable tool to show support (Brezina, McEnery, and Wattam, 2015). De la Ossa (2019) discusses the connection between collocative words of particular pronouns and the construction of meaning they represent in violence against women discourses. She studied the guidance text for domestic abuse survivors by Women's Aid based on the analysis of pronouns and how they illustrate solidarity in construction. The use of the first-person pronoun 'I' collocates with the action of separation from abusive relationships. This supports the construction of the survivors' agency and avoids victim-blaming as the text still puts the perpetrators as the responsible parties for the abuse. The contrast between the second-person pronoun 'you' and the third-person pronoun 'they' relies on the chosen action, whether to abandon or to stay in the abusive relationship. The collocation of 'you' with the act of separation, as of 'I', and how 'they' collocates with staying in the abusive relationships shows that the Women's Aid guidance text favors those who choose to leave the abusive relationships.

A study by Sutherland et al. (2019) shows that in Australian mainstream news, the representations of VAW have been extensively covered. However, the representation of women's voices in the reporting or the victims' reality was still underrepresented by the lack of explicit descriptions of the violent situation. A considerable proportion was put more on the reportage from the law and justice perspective than the survivors, advocates, or VAW experts. Deriving from this concern,

Easteal et al. (2021) conducted a study that compares the language of journalists reporting VAW before and after going through Australian training programs dedicated to improving VAW news reporting practices. As a result, the language of VAW news reporting becomes much more supportive of the female voice, presenting a more proportional report by eliminating sensationalism, including VAW experts' perspectives and VAW help-seeking information. Furthermore, the coverage also mentions coercive control beyond the isolated case by linking the VAW cases with broader social context. Two significant additions and changes in the reporting language are decreasing the degree of the perpetrators' excuses and victim-blaming portrayals. By doing these two significant changes, the language of the news reports becomes more objective and more supportive toward the victims.

Finally, in the discussions of victim/survivor support in cases of violence against women, language repertoire and flexibility become crucial in responding due to the psychological needs for support. However, despite good intentions, not all support centers are linguistically equipped and ready to provide worthy assistance and support to the victims, and this becomes something to discuss further.

Conclusion

The authoritative male voice is present in both public and private domains of the violence against women discourse regardless of the association of femininity to the private domains. In the public domain, verbal aggressions are primarily rooted in the traditional gender role assignment, which positions women as less capable than men. The cultural perception of the 'ideal' woman also becomes the controlling aspect of verbal aggression in the public domain. The belief that women are not as good as men and that women should do their job in taking care of their children can be heard loud and clear in verbal aggression. The private domain show more linguistic varieties in verbal aggressions. Slurs, threats of violence, and remarks related to body parts are strong in the private domain.

The fact that private cannot be taken away from the public in the discussions of violence against women has increased the intricacy of the issue. How the male voice controls the public domain is disadvantageous to the victims of sexual harassment, sexual assault, and domestic violence in the legal system. The judiciary language reflects the male voice, which often fails to recognize the women's agency and the victims' reality while successfully downgrading male perpetrators' accountability and defining male's definition of violence.

Finally, the language of support in the gender-based violence discourse is prominent to be fully capable of verbalizing the victims' and survivors' violence experiences. However, not all support center staff are linguistically equipped to do so. More research in discussing the language of support in violence against women discourse will contribute to a much better understanding of the practice of support, leading to better suggestions and a better understanding of the victims/survivors' experience. This better understanding will contribute to better planning of actions in reducing the occurrence of violence against women both in the public and private domains.

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