gender constructions
and violence
ambivalences of modernity
in the process of globalization
research project

centralizing gender and violence

Violence, especially violence against women, remains a predominantly political issue. Perceptions and evaluations of gendered violence vary across cultural and geopolitical contexts. Acts of physical, socioeconomic, or symbolic violence find different degrees of acceptance, and these differences can be neither bridged nor silenced. Even more important, to rank experiences and acts of violence hierarchically must not be condoned or legitimized, as is sometimes the case, albeit unintentionally or nonverbally.

Manifest or latent hierarchies obstruct the advancement of an international and transcultural feminist discourse. As a basis of this discourse, a mutual understanding of social and cultural reasoning is crucial. It is also necessary to clarify underlying theoretical perspectives and acknowledge that knowledge is situated. Western theories of violence focus predominantly on its physical forms, and it seems uncontested how to define physical violence:

“Physical violence has no cultural prerequisites; it is universally effective and need not be understood first” (Peter Imbusch, in: Internat. Handb. der Gewaltforschung 2002: 38).

But even on an intra-cultural level, there is no general agreement on what is considered as physical violence: Laughter was the reaction of most members of the German Federal Parliament when MP Gabriele Potthast stated in a 1983 plenary session:

“Thousands of women in the Federal Republic are raped every year: the vast majority of cases occur within marriage” (Bundestag - Plenarprotokoll 10/3, 30.03.1983: 35).

It is no coincidence that differences in the perception of what is perceived as violence correlate with gender differences, as feminists have been pointing out:

“Week by week and month by month, women are kicked, beaten, jumped on until they are crushed, chopped, stabbed, seamed with vitriol, bitten, eviscerated with red-hot pokers and deliberately set on fire - and this sort of
The victimization of women through patriarchal violence has been at the top of the agenda of the women's movement since the late 1960s. Meanwhile, the public discourse on battered women, rape and sexual abuse has brought about major changes in society - including changes in the legal system (e.g.: since 1997 marital rape has been prosecuted as a crime in Germany).

Feminist research on violence and gender, like feminist activism, has focused primarily on violence against women in the private sphere. But lately, the scope of inquiry has expanded. Violence against women in wartime has become a major issue, and has drawn attention towards consideration of concepts of masculinity:

"War, and military service as its substitute, offers men the opportunity to prove that they are real men." (Gabriele Mordt, Halle, 2002)

Masculinity and violence is a multidimensional research issue, as a brief look at empirical data shows. As is widely known, the majority of alleged criminals and murderers are men. (e.g. in Germany 2002, 76,5% of all suspects were men, according to the BMI). And yet, men are not only the main perpetrators, they are often also the majority of victims: in Germany, 56% of homicide victims are men, while worldwide the number is even more accentuated: 77,1% of all registered murder victims in 2002 were male. (WHO, World Report on Violence and Health, 2002: 274). Nevertheless, constructions and articulations of masculinity and their interconnections with violence are still blind spots in both the social sciences and cultural studies. Additionally, there is a lack of transnational approaches:

"While there is wide differentiation in the various disciplines and methods and although an international level of awareness from research into violence has been documented, there is still no international violence research effort per se" (Wilhelm Heitmeyer and John Hagan, Internat. Handb. der Gewaltforschung, 2003: 25).

**the challenge of a transnational discourse**

The central concerns of the project are the interrelations of violence and gender constructions in processes of modernization. Taking recent events like the attacks of September 11, 2001 and the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq into account, the categorical definitions and relations of physical, institutional respectively structural and symbolical violence in international contexts are reconsidered.

Besides a critique of the myth of a non-violent modernity, a consideration of both, (post)colonial violence and the Nazi genocide as *forms of modern violence* are essential to the analysis. The question of the “other modernity” is also raised - as it is analyzed by Aihwa Ong (2000) with reference to Southeast Asia.

The project team has developed a literature report on “Gender Constructions and Violence” (in German and English) which will be presented at the international project workshop in December 2003. The report draws and develops hypotheses that allude to the term ‘violence’, the relationship of gender and violence as well as international and intercultural theoretical dimensions of the discourse.
addressing ambivalences

When contemporary discourses on violence address cultural differences and differentiations, constructions of violence in Muslim societies are an almost omnipresent topic. Western perceptions of Muslim societies form the base of the hypothesis of a “Clash of Cultures.” To look at the connections between gender, violence and Islam means to reduce the research agenda by making it more controversial at the same time.

“Representations of Muslims as Other have always been highly gendered. Male Muslims have been portrayed as criminal, violent and macho. Women, on the other hand, have been portrayed as particularly victimized and submissive. ... European gender relations, in contrast, are constructed as egalitarian” (Umut Erel, London).

In December 2002, the project team organized the workshop

negotiating power, contesting violence, and assessing perspectives for transcultural approaches: gender and nation state in muslim societies

The resource speakers included political activists and academics from various disciplines: historians, political scientists, criminologists, psychologists as well as experts on Islam, media and law from South and North Africa, South East Asia, the Middle East, Europe and North America. The presentations and discussions were organized in four panels:

• Gender (In-)Equality and Trajectories of Nation States
• Strategies against Violence: Acting within National Legal Systems
• Masculinity and the Nation State in the Middle East
• In the Name of the Nation: Between Sacrifice and Agency

Violence against women is a major issue in women’s movements in Muslim countries - and although heavily contested, present in various discourses: e.g. religious, legal and political. In the last workshop panel, feminists addressed issues of martyrdom and its gender dimensions.

“... mothers of martyrs should not mourn, for they were chosen by God. However, ... those who gave or denied women the permission to cry and mourn were men. ... “They want to put rules even on our tears ... their control over our lives, marriages and destiny is not enough for them”” (Nadera Shalhoub-Kervorkian, Jerusalem).

The link between religion and violence was explored from various perspectives, emphasizing the complexity of the issue:

“In this age of globalization, women’s bodies and sexualities are increasingly becoming arenas of intense conflict. Conservative and religious right political forces are fiercely trying to maintain or reinforce traditional mechanisms of control over women’s sexuality and even create new ones ... the practices leading to violations of women’s sexual rights in the Middle East and the Maghreb are not the result of an Islamic vision of sexuality, but a combination of political, economic and social inequalities through the ages. In this context, religion is often misused as a powerful instrument of control with the goal of legitimizing violations of women’s human rights” (Pinar Ilkkaracan, Istanbul).
It is crucial to recognize the diverse, often contradicting positions within discourses on gender and violence. This multiplicity of voices has to be acknowledged to de-center the Western hegemony within academic networks.

**research network and cooperations**

The project is of an explorative type and aims at developing interdisciplinary and international research projects. Existing cooperations include:

Dr. Amatalrauf Alsharki, Media Studies, University of Sana’a, Yemen
Dr. Bozena Choluj, Cultural Studies, University of Warsaw, Poland and Viadrina University, Frankfurt/Oder, Germany
PD Dr. Christine Eifler, Social Sciences, Workgroup on Gender Dynamics in Violent Conflicts, Bremen University, Germany
Dr. Katrin Hoffman-Curtius, Art History, Berlin, Germany
Eleanore O. Hofstetter, Library Director, Towson University, Maryland, USA
Dr. Ronit Lentin, Ethnic and Racial Studies, Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland
Dr. Sheila Meintjes, Political Studies, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa
Dr. Gabriele Mordt, Sociology, Martin Luther University Halle, Germany
Dr. Konstanze Plett, LL.M., Jurisprudence, Centre for Feminist Studies, Bremen University, Germany
Dr. Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, Criminology and Social Work, Hebrew University Jerusalem, Israel

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Ulrike Lingen-Ali (Education)
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Carlotta Schulte Ostermann (stud. Social Sciences)

**funding**

Ministry for Science and Culture of Lower Saxony (MWK, April 2002 to March 2004) and German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD)

**website** [http://www.uni-oldenburg.de/zfg/research_projects.htm](http://www.uni-oldenburg.de/zfg/research_projects.htm)

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