

Violence against women, a systematized review

La violencia contra la mujer, una revisión sistematizada

Armenio Pérez-Martínez

Universidad Laica Vicente Rocafuerte de Guayaquil, Ecuador
aperezm@ulvr.edu.ec
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9491-6938>

Aimara Rodríguez-Fernández

Universidad Laica Vicente Rocafuerte de Guayaquil, Ecuador
airodriguezf@ulvr.edu.ec
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6654-2588>

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Abstract

Violence against women is a serious public health problem, with a marked social and economic impact. The objective of this article is to synthesize the theories that explain violence against women, contributing, from a theoretical perspective, to the understanding of risk factors. The research is basic and descriptive; the analytical-synthetic method was used to establish the essential elements of the information collected and formalize conclusions in this regard. The search for bibliographic sources was carried out in the Google Scholar database. Theories such as the cycle of violence, traumatic union, paradoxical punishment, battered women, among others, are presented. In addition, the importance of factors such as poverty, victimization, dysfunctional families, ineffective educational and judicial systems is recognized. Risk factors for gender violence were identified according to the different theoretical positions analyzed. The conclusions recognize the conduct of a significant amount of research on violence against women in the context of the pandemic. The proposal of theoretical foundations for each of the risk factors was made, which contributes to future research, especially in the Latin American space. It is considered that theories must be understood within the very dynamics that this phenomenon presents, focused on the variety of criteria, elements, variables, causes, consequences, conditions, etc.

Keywords

Violence, gender, theories, risk factors, relationships, social sciences, learning, communication.

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Resumen

La violencia contra la mujer constituye un grave problema de salud pública, con un marcado impacto social y económico. El objetivo de este artículo es sintetizar las teorías que explican la violencia contra la mujer, contribuyendo desde una perspectiva teórica a la comprensión los factores de riesgo. La investigación es básica y descriptiva; el método analítico-sintético se utilizó para establecer los elementos esenciales de la información recopilada y formalizar conclusiones al respecto. Se efectuó la búsqueda de fuentes bibliográficas en la base de datos Google Scholar. Se presentan teorías como el ciclo de la violencia, la unión traumática, el castigo paradójico, la mujer maltratada, entre otras. Además, se reconoce la importancia de factores como la pobreza, la victimización, familias disfuncionales, sistemas educativos y judiciales poco efectivos. Se identificaron los factores de riesgo para la violencia de género según las distintas posiciones teóricas analizadas. Las conclusiones reconocen la realización de una cantidad importante de investigaciones sobre violencia contra la mujer en el contexto de la pandemia. Se realizó la propuesta de fundamentos teóricos para cada uno de los factores de riesgo, lo que contribuye para futuras investigaciones, sobre todo en el espacio latinoamericano. Se considera que las teorías deben comprenderse dentro de la propia dinámica que presenta este fenómeno, centrados en la variedad de criterios, elementos, variables, causas, consecuencias, condiciones, etc.

Palabras clave

Violencia, género, teorías, factores de riesgo, relaciones, ciencias sociales, aprendizaje, comunicación.

Introduction

Violence against women (VAW) is a serious health problem and a violation of the human rights of this group of people. 30% of women have been abused by someone else at some point in their life (World Health Organization, 2021). A significant number of these violent acts are committed by their partner or ex-partner. There are multiple ways of exercising violent against women, related to the lack of equality, opportunities and rights, wage discrimination and, in some cases, it comes from the State that does not guarantee equity in access to power.

VAW affects their reproductive capacity, as well as their physical and psychological health, especially when they are victims from an early age; it generates behavioral patterns that make them submit to situations similar to

those that they lived in their childhood and adolescence. Many women are victims of homicides and murders, others go as far as suicide to escape the situation of violence in which they live (Huisman, 1996). The abuse and assault of women by their partners has increased over the past three years. The involvement of this social phenomenon has increased dramatically in recent decades, due to the lockdown caused by the COVID-19 pandemic worldwide.

VAW has existed throughout history; however, there is enough evidence to know it is increasing worldwide today. For the World Health Organization (OMS, 2021), it can be unequivocally stated that violence against women is on the rise and widespread in the world. It is a problem with a global impact that affects a significant number of women and requires immediate solutions from all possible sides of intervention: public, state, sectoral policies, legal strengthening, speed in confronting and solving cases, community intervention, school, family, professional mental health services, etc.

Article 1 of the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women recognizes that violence against women is:

Any act of violence based on female membership that results in or may result in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, as well as threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life. (ONU, 1993, p. 1)

VAW can be within the family, within the community, or committed by the state. This very multilateral body has established a series of mechanisms, agreements, resolutions and meetings to address this social problem that affects all continents significantly.

VAW is a specific type of deviant behavior that is committed by the specific gender condition. Gender violence includes, in addition to violence against women, the investigative treatment of aggressions to the LGBTIQ+ community, presents historical and contemporary nuances, areas and characteristics that are not taken into account in the theories used in this article, so the study focuses on violence against women, because of their gender condition.

This article aims on making visible the importance of recognizing the theoretical support of VAW research, which allows to set aside traditional and reductionist positions that have characterized it as a phenomenon associated with psychopathological disorders of the aggressors and the lack of social skills of the victims. Therefore, the objective is to identify the theories that explain violence against women, contributing from a theoretical perspecti-

ve to the understanding of risk factors. This in turn will enable the design of more effective prevention strategies aimed at vulnerable groups in this type of violence (Saavedra, 2022).

It is important to narrow down the scope and limitations of the analysis that is proposed. Specifically, it is related to VAW and not all crimes of gender-based violence. In addition, the theories respond to the area of knowledge of the social sciences, taking on particular cognitive meaning, since their support is found in court cases that have been analyzed by professionals who will serve as experts specialized in courts and hearings.

This article is an effort to make the problem visible and provide knowledge for its prevention. The theory helps to better understand social phenomena; at least, they contribute to explaining a part of them; they provide solidity to the empirical findings and contribute to making explanations and predictions according to the scientific principles and assumptions that support them. Theoretical proposals make it possible to argue about VAW, its characteristics, regularities and implications.

Materials and method

A theoretical and documentary research was carried out, recognizing that the analysis is carried out from primary theoretical sources of scientific information (Hernández *et al.*, 2014). It is pure basic research because “it is carried out within a theoretical framework to increase scientific knowledge, without the need to contrast it with any practical aspect” (Muntané-Relat, 2010, p. 221). The level of knowledge obtained is descriptive, since a logical-epistemic-retrospective study of the theoretical background of violence against women is developed. The analytical-synthetic method is predominantly used to establish the essential elements of the information collected and make conclusions about it.

The procedure proposed by Saúl *et al.* (2012) has been used to collect and analyze the information. This procedure proposes to search the data from the delimitation of the criteria of consultation and discrimination of sources (Muntané-Relat, 2010). The consultation criterion used was the theory of violence against women. Primary sources of recognized academic prestige were used (Sánchez-Meca *et al.*, 2011). Among the limitations of this study

is that it does not intend to hierarchize or value each of them individually, but tries to show its most significant elements (Morocho and Calle, 2021).

The search was carried out in the Google Scholar database using as filters the date of publication of the last five years, mostly articles in Spanish were used. The criteria for inclusion of the articles are:

- To be a peer-reviewed scientific journal article.
- The format used in the publication can be digital or printed.
- The research contained in the article is empirical in nature.
- It can be conducted by authors of any nationality.

The following were used as exclusion criteria:

- To be a manuscript published as a memoir of the congress.
- To be a theoretical article.

Initially, 178 articles were identified from the search. Duplicates were removed, and the initial number was reduced to 144. Then a screening process was performed, using the CASP-e methodology as a quality indicator. The number of articles that were part of this systematic review is 32.

The main reasons for discarding items are related to the following criteria:

- 34 articles are duplicated (obtained from different databases).
- 50 articles are theoretical or respond to intervention designs, so their main contributions are not useful for this study.
- 38 items do not allow the precise identification of sample elements (size, type, selection criteria).
- 24 articles do not allow to identify elements of the methodology used (applied instruments, methodological strategy).

Results

Epidemiological data on violence against women

According to OMS (2021), VAW by an intimate partner is a serious public health problem and a violation of their human rights. The agency's global estimates that one in three women have experienced some form of violence,

most of it by an intimate partner. This type of violence affects women's physical, psychological, sexual and reproductive health. Estimations of this type of violence are increasing in all geographical areas (Pérez and Trigozo, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic has created an enabling environment for VAW at home. The global lockdown implemented in 2020 and part of 2021 led to higher levels of stress in families and an increase in unemployment, increasing precariousness in households. In addition, access to women's protection services, public health services, the functioning of police and judicial institutions were reduced (OMS, 2020).

Main consequences of violence against women

The consequences of VAW are evident on all sides of victims' lives. Most authors recognize that injuries can be classified into physical, psychological, and social. The most common physical injuries found in women victims of violence are: contusions, stab wounds, firearm wounds, scuffs, bruises, and superficial wounds on the face, neck, head, breasts, and abdomen (Muellemann *et al.*, 1996). Other injuries can be found near the genital organs such as bruising and ecchymosis if the victim suffered sexual abuse.

Among the main psychological consequences for victims of VAW are adaptive disorders, acute stress disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder. Other symptoms that appear after violence are: anxiety, depression, startle reactions, negative perceptions of health and behavior, alcohol and drug use, anger, guilt, among others. Also, the loss of self-esteem, the effect on the meaning of life and future projections.

From the social point of view, the most studied consequences have been the change in personal interrelationships; avoidance behaviors and isolation. However, it is considered that the main psychosocial effects are linked to the loss of support from family and friends, all of which will generate the lack of protective factors against the risk of experiencing this violence.

The risk factors recognized by OMS (2021) as generators of violence against women must be taken into account when designing programs for intervention and/or prevention of this type of abuse. The risk factors are conditions (not self-sufficient, but with the capacity to influence), which generate situations of aggressiveness against women. The presence of any of them should attract attention to prevent abuse and aggression against women by their partner, employer, doctor, or any member of society (Morochó and Calle, 2021).

Table 1 presents the different risk factors presented by OMS (2021) related to theories and research that support these criteria, especially in the Latin American context.

Table 1
Risk factors recognized by OMS (2021)
and their relationship with other authors

WHO risk factors (2021)	Authors' proposals
Low level of education (perpetrators and victims of sexual violence).	Velasquez <i>et al.</i> (2019) Fabián <i>et al.</i> (2020)
Exposure to child abuse (perpetrators and victims).	García & Mendoza (2018); Méndez <i>et al.</i> (2022)
Witnessing scenes of domestic violence (perpetrators and victims).	García and Calle (2021)
Antisocial personality disorder.	Morales (2022)
Harmful use of alcohol.	Morillo <i>et al.</i> (2021); Avilés (2021)
Harmful male behaviors, such as having multiple partners or condoning violence attitudes.	Soledispa-Saltos and Rodríguez-Álava (2021); Durán, and Patiño (2021); Silva (2021)
Cultural norms that grant privileges or superior status to men and inferior status to women.	Parra (2021); Saavedra (2022); Villa-Rueda <i>et al.</i> (2022)
Women's limited access to paid employment.	Pérez and Valdelamar (2020); García (2021); Seminario-Córdova and Paredes (2021)
Limitation on laws based on gender equality (discriminatory laws, etc.).	Zaikoski (2018); Thill (2019); Cevallos (2021)
History of violence.	Morán (2019); Enríquez <i>et al.</i> (2020); Morocho and Calle (2021)
Difficulties of communication between the members of the couple.	Carrascosa <i>et al.</i> (2018); Carrascosa <i>et al.</i> (2019)
Marital fights and dissatisfaction.	Camacho (2020); Pérez and Trigozo (2021); Aliaga e Infante (2021)
Belief in family honor and sexual purity.	Gómez (2018); Thill (2019)
Ideologies that perpetuate man's sexual privileges.	Vega (2018); Santana and Caballero (2020)
Insufficient legal sanctions for sexual violence.	Zaikoski (2018); Gómez (2018); Cevallos (2021)

Explanatory theories of violence against women

With the theoretical and methodological advance in psychological, sociological, anthropological investigations, from an integrative approach of the social sciences, it has come to eliminate the belief that the cause of VAW depends on the personality and behavior of the abuser. The analysis of VAW at the individual level leads to the use of a psychiatric model, where explanations based on mental disorders, alcohol and other harmful substances, personality disorders, etc. prevail (García, 2016).

This idea remained for decades in the social imaginary and the academic community did not conduct studies to contrast this belief. Therefore, the psychopathological perspective of the aggressor became the first theoretical reference of VAW. This is also a consequence of the recent rise of Forensic Psychology, and the importance it has devoted to this particular type of violence. However, a thorough analysis highlights the importance of valuing the influence of the environment and social institutions such as family, friends, etc.

The perspective of psychosocial analysis is oriented towards the search for environmental factors such as stress, learning, family structure and the transmission of intergenerational violence. The latent intersubjectivity in VAW goes beyond the pathological limits and is structured in part by psychosocial components such as mental representations, beliefs, norms, and other components of organizational culture. Family breakdown and dysfunction began to be analyzed as a cause of VAW.

The perspective of sociological analysis emphasizes the influence of social inequality, poverty, marginality and patriarchy on VAW. It is influenced by the so-called ecological or bioecological model, where the State and social control mechanisms play a decisive role in confronting attacks against women. The role of education and community in providing alternative behavioral patterns to male chauvinist culture is being considered.

In the definition of VAW, most international bodies agree on the main arguments. García (2016) argues that VAW is:

A coercive pattern of conscious and intentional behavior that, by action or omission, manifests a family member causing harm or threat of physical harm to another, repeated psychological abuse, sexual assault, progressive social isolation, deprivation, intimidation or economic coercion. (p. 155)

VAW in the couple should not be seen as isolated or casual. The cycles of violence are based on theories of traumatic union (Dutton and Painter, 1981), paradoxical punishment (Long and McNamara, 1989) and intermittency (Dutton and Painter, 1993), which hold that in the couple's relationship there is an intermittency between good treatment and bad treatment. All of them emphasize that VAW does not arise suddenly, "but is usually the result of a more or less prolonged process that begins with abusive behaviors and that subsequently increases in intensity and frequency" (Álvarez *et al.*, 2016, p. 34).

The cycle of violence (Walker, 2012; Palop, 2019) consists of three phases. The first is the stress accumulation phase. It characterizes by the increase in hostilities on the part of the aggressor, especially from the verbal and psychological point of view, although physical violence may exist; intimate partner conflicts begin, and the woman fails to explain the situation; she even justifies this behavior. The behavior of the woman is submissive and blamed for the situation.

In the explosion phase there is an intensification of physical and sexual violence, accompanied by verbal and psychological attacks that may peak. This stage is usually when help is sought, and the relationship stops. The woman experiences significant physical, sexual, and psychological injuries. In the reconciliation phase, the aggressor makes every effort not to leave his victim, expressing regret and making promises and strategies of emotional manipulation. Throughout the cycle, violence is increasing (Jáuregui, 2006). Over time, the cycle of violence returns, this time with an increase in assaults and injuries that are caused to the woman.

The abused woman theory (Walker, 2012) describes the symptoms that women exposed to long-term violence can develop. The author states that VAW increases aggressiveness gradually and in a staggered manner. The first signs of violence were verbal assault and emotional abuse, as well as small signs of physical assault, such as slapping or squeezing of limbs. The woman acts with passivity, reinforcing the aggressiveness of the abuser. Over time, aggressive behavior becomes more acute. The abuser could express his intentions to change and maintain conciliatory behaviors.

Social learning theory recognizes that a person who has been a victim or exposed to behavior patterns of domestic violence is more likely to commit abuse and assault against women in the family environment. The family has not become a space for conflict resolution, decision-making and assertive

communication among all its members. Therefore, the models of violence put into practice in the family are learned by its members (Bandura, 1973). It intervenes in tolerance towards violence (Gelles, 1972; Finkelhor *et al.*, 1988). In the family environment, the conditions for the development of both a future victim and a potential aggressor may be created. The evidence of intergenerational violence allows to affirm this theory, since in homes where violence was experienced, they have generated new violent subjects (Gelles, 1972; Browne, 1993; Walker, 2012).

From the theory of stress and coping with social situations, the situational analysis of VAW is proposed, based on the presence of situations that trigger it as a behavioral pattern. This type of violence is associated as a result of two essential factors. On the one hand, there is structural stress and lack of coping resources in the family nucleus. For example, the relationship between precarious socioeconomic conditions and family and/or gender-based violence. On the other hand, there is the use of force, aggression and violence as a cultural norm in certain societies (Straus *et al.*, 1980).

The systemic theory of gender violence uses the social system model as a support (Giles-Sims, 1983). The understanding of VAW moves away from the individual and pathological explanation, to commit to obtaining alternatives or channels of action other than violence. It also focuses on enunciating the need for feedback from the VAW system, as well as, the fulfillment of objectives by the aggressor.

The resource theory of domestic violence is based on a sociological position that all institutions and social systems depend, to some extent, on the force or threat. In this case, force is related to the control of economic, social and personal resources (Goode, 1971). Individuals who need to maintain a dominant position in the family, but lack access to these resources, could resort to violence as a means of imposing their domination.

The theory of exchange is grounded in the economist's cost-benefit stance. Part of the recognition of the theory of rational action where human actions will always be evaluated from the effort that must be made and the benefits that are obtained from its realization. Therefore, VAW will be used as long as the benefits of doing so outweigh the costs. Given the low rate of reporting of these crimes, the reactive role of public institutions on these issues, and the inadequacies of the regulatory legal framework, the costs presented to the aggressor are really low. The most significant reward is family power and control.

Patriarchy theory focuses on the explanation of the need for a patriarchal social order to do economic and social processes. When applied to the family, this theory points out that it leads to the submission and historical oppression of women at the hands of men. This dynamic has given rise to historical patterns of abuse and violence against women, who have been perceived as inferior beings, means of exchange, sexual objects, among other roles (Dobash and Dobash, 1979). This perspective uses the social structure to understand violence directed towards women.

Violence is also perpetrated by women, although to a lesser extent than men. However, it cannot be said that gender-based violence is exclusive to men just because women do not have such a relevant presence as aggressors (Stemple *et al.*, 2017; Mgozeli and Douma, 2019). The integrative theory of gender-based violence is a perspective that includes all possible determinants of violent behavior. García (2016), refers it is used to explain domestic violence, of which violence against women is part.

Conclusions and discussion

One of the most relevant social science studies on VAW was conducted by the Metropolitan Police of London (Richards, 2003). This investigation revealed three critical moments in which VAW tends to increase. The first is the moment of separation. The study indicates that the first two months after the break-up of the relationship are decisive, since a significant number of homicides against women by their partners occur in this period. The threats must be taken into account, since the coping and adaptation mechanisms are adjusting.

Pregnancy and the birth of a new child can lead to the emergence or intensification of abuse, due to the vulnerable situation experienced by the future mother. Gelles (1988) argues that there was a 30% higher risk of violence for a pregnant woman compared to one who is not pregnant. Therefore, changes in family dynamics resulting from the pregnancy and birth of a new child can become a stressor for the aggressor and start or increase acts of violence against women.

A third significant element found in the London Metropolitan Police study (Richards, 2003) was the escalation phenomenon. This has been described as increasing the frequency and intensification of attacks against women.

According to Sonkin (1987), men who committed violent behavior with previous partners or the current partner are more likely to commit such behavior in the future; whereas women who are victims of VAW will be more likely to be victims of this type of violence again than of other types of aggression.

Another topic of analysis from the perspective of behavioral sciences is the relationship between animal abuse and violence against women. The Arkow (1997) criterion that identifies a correlation between cruelty to animals and VAW is shared. In many cases, the mistreatment of pets is used as a sample of what the aggressors can do against other people in the family, especially against women. According to Ascione (2007), when conducting a study with women residing in shelters to prevent abuse, 57% said that the aggressors had assaulted their pet.

Studies addressing the relationship between unemployment and VAW have been found. Job loss and economic stability are a risk factor for intimate partner aggression. According to Stuart and Campbell (1989), unexpected changes in job stability may be associated with an increase in VAW. Other studies also refer to the relationship between alcohol, drug, and illicit drug use and its relationship to violence (Stuart & Campbell, 1989).

An important and little analyzed aspect, especially in the Latin American context, is the so-called reciprocal violence. Currently, an important research group on VAW has identified a type of violent reciprocity behavior between men and women, which has not been fully analyzed or applied in social science arguments. The perception that intimate partner violence is one-way (male mistreating female) is not met, at least, in all cases of assault. Archer (2000) has stated that women can become even more violent than men. In Spain, it is recognized that men have also experienced fatalities of their female partners. Women may be equally prone to intimate partner abuse, although they are more likely to be injured (Archer, 2000). In reference to this study, it was determined that women are more likely to slap, throw objects, bite and kick (54.8%) than men (45.2%); while men (69.5%) are more likely to repeatedly beat and even cause death than women (30.5%).

In research conducted by Muñoz-Rivas *et al.* (2007) in a Spanish university, it was possible to observe that both men and women admitted to having carried out violent behaviors towards their partners, such as: pushing, grasping with force and pinching. Therefore, violence as a dynamic of intimate relationships varies depending on the sex of the aggressor and the victim, the age, the type of violence used (verbal, physical, psychological, sexual).

The impossibility of leaving the relationships of the woman victim with her abuser is explained from several theoretical positions.

- Abused woman syndrome, based on the abused woman theory (Walker, 2012), works in a similar way to Stockholm syndrome, in this case, the permanence relationship between the hostage and her abductors.
- Paradoxical adaptation syndrome (Montero, 2001). The victim accepts the excuses and arguments of her aggressor, withdraws complaints, tries to restore family harmony, does not inform family, friends or authority, or tries to seek specialized help.
- Presence of feelings of guilt, coping strategies related to denial, submission, avoidance and passivity, emotional or economic dependence (Sepúlveda, 2005).

The data provided by international organizations indicate the increase in cases of VAW, favored by the context generated by the pandemic, the difficult economic situation, the maintenance of the macho culture, the low effectiveness of public policies, the low efficiency of social control mechanisms and the low impact of educational and community processes. This reality supports the importance of research on this type of aggression from the theoretical, methodological, instrumental and practical perspectives.

The risk factors associated with this type of behavior have been analyzed by various international institutions; which must be analyzed from a systemic and comprehensive perspective. The proposal of theoretical foundations for each of the risk factors proposed by OMS (2021) was made, which contributes to future research, especially in the Latin American context.

The theoretical positions that explain the phenomenon of VAW are diverse. The contributions of the social sciences help to identify the foundations that enjoy greater recognition within the academic community and the organs of justice. This article does not disregard any of them; it is considered that all must be understood within the dynamics of this phenomenon, focused on the variety of criteria, elements, variables, causes, consequences, conditions, etc.

It is important to know the increased risk of VAW in cases of pregnancy, relationship breakdown without social support, loss of employment, substance use, violence against pets, prolonged periods of confinement. These factors should be analyzed in the context of the couple, and not from one of their members.

It is recommended to promote research where theories can be applied, to carry out meta-analytical studies and to systematize the most relevant results. It is considered that the relationship between violence against women and other types of violent behavior is little addressed by these theories, so it is recommended to develop this line of research in the future.

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