



CYBERWOMEN



**Online violence
against women**

**INSTITUTE FOR
WAR & PEACE REPORTING**



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Symbolic violence

- **Objective(s):** Demonstrate for participants how to identify symbolic violence, and how to draw connections between symbolic violence and online gender-based violence.
- **Length:** 30-45 minutes
- **Format:** Exercise
- **Skill level:** Basic
- **Required knowledge:**
 - None required
- **Related sessions/exercises:**
 - Spectrogram¹
 - A feminist internet²
- **Needed materials:**
 - Flip charts
 - Pens or pencils
 - Colored sheets
 - Post-It Notes
 - Adhesive Tape

¹<https://cyber-women.com/en/online-violence-against-women/spectrogram/>

²<https://cyber-women.com/en/online-violence-against-women/a-feminist-internet/>

Leading the exercise

Part 1 - What is Symbolic Violence?

1. Begin with an explanation of what is meant by the term 'symbolic violence':

Symbolic violence is inflicted through impositions of gendered cultural norms and behaviors. Women are taught that "something" might happen to us if we decide to walk alone at night, dress a certain way, or act carelessly: fear becomes a normalized and accepted mental state.

This means that we, as women, are held responsible for any violence we might face, which in turn creates fear or even terror – this fear or terror generates a "mental map of forbidden spaces" for us, eliciting conditioned responses such as:

Feeling the need to return home at night in a taxi or with a companion; Walking more quickly or even running if we hear footsteps behind us; Unconsciously practicing self-censorship on social media and other online platforms; Deciding not to go out, or to dress a certain way, for fear of what may happen to us;

Furthermore, though women are made to feel responsible for the violence we experience, at the same time we are never provided strategies and resources to address that violence (aside from the conditioned responses above), nor to enjoy and occupy spaces, or to be free in our movement and speech and with our body and sexualities, etc.

Symbolic violence creates prohibited spaces and situations for women, thereby denying us our fundamental right to security and free movement; compounding this problem is the impunity often granted to our aggressors – often, they

are not questioned but rather pathologized as “crazy” or inherently unable to take control of or responsibility for their actions.

At this point, you may also want to discuss images of violence against women (symbolic or otherwise) which are disseminated and normalized through the media, and especially in online spaces.

Part 2 - Identifying Symbolic Violence for Ourselves

2. Hand out to each participant a small stack of post-it notes, on which they should identify and write down examples of activities they have stopped doing, or behaviors they have modified, because of the symbolic violence they experience as women occupying offline and online spaces. Once finished, gather the post-its and read aloud some of the examples shared – discuss these together as a group, commenting on possible motivations for changing these behaviors and perceived fears.
3. Immediately following the group discussion, explain that there are three main factors which construct and enable fear and terror in response to symbolic violence:
 - **Appropriation of the Female Body:** the female body is still seen as an object for male enjoyment, bring about a lack of security or confidence in the body’s own resources and capacities.
 - **Guilt and Shame:** these are both seen as permanent, unshakable elements that facilitate the perception of perpetrated gender-based violence as deserved or somehow acceptable.
 - **“Learned Helplessness”:** this is a psychological state that occurs frequently when events are seen to be uncontrollable – when the perception is that there is nothing that can be done to change the outcome of an action, the mental state adjusts accordingly

by sacrificing its agency to assert any control over that outcome (instead, accepting and normalizing it).

4. After explaining these three factors, ask participants what strategies they can think of to transform these factors into approaches for tackling symbolic violence! Have them write these down on their post-it notes. Below are some possible strategies that could be proposed:
 - Regaining control of your body's narrative, defining and asserting it as a territory of both pleasure and resistance.
 - Recognize and accept the damage which has been done to your body (physically or mentally), moving past any self-perception as a victim and instead building up the resilience of a survivor.
 - Build and sustain networks of support for yourself and others, both online and offline. We are never alone in this struggle.

References

- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Learned_helplessness
- <http://www.autodefensafeminista.com/attachments/article/277/MA%20NUAL%20Autodefensa%20Feminista.pdf>