

Gender-Based Violence: Attitudes & Prevention

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Introduction to Attitudes and Gender-Based Violence (GBV)

Attitudes toward **Gender-Based Violence (GBV)** represent a crucial and complex area of psychological and sociological inquiry, serving as foundational elements that either perpetuate or challenge cycles of abuse. These attitudes are not merely passive opinions; rather, they are deeply internalized cognitive, affective, and behavioral dispositions concerning the acceptability, justification, or severity of violent acts perpetrated against individuals based on their gender identity, perceived gender, or non-conformity to established gender roles. Understanding these underlying beliefs is paramount, as societal tolerance or condemnation of violence often dictates the prevalence, reporting rates, and effective prevention strategies employed by communities and institutions. A permissive attitude, for instance, often manifests as the normalization of controlling behaviors or the minimization of harm, creating environments where violence can thrive unchecked by social sanctions or legal repercussions. Conversely, robustly negative attitudes toward GBV are essential drivers for intervention, victim support, and the implementation of effective legislative frameworks designed to protect vulnerable populations, illustrating the critical role of public opinion in shaping safety and justice outcomes.

The study of attitudes toward GBV necessitates a careful distinction between explicit, consciously held beliefs and implicit, often unconscious biases that shape reactions in high-stress or ambiguous situations. Explicit attitudes are those readily expressed when discussing topics like domestic abuse or sexual assault, typically conforming to socially desirable norms, such as universally stating that violence is inherently wrong. However, implicit attitudes, which are harder to measure and often rooted in cultural scripts and deep-seated stereotypes, frequently reveal underlying tendencies toward **victim blaming** or excusing perpetrators, particularly when the victim's behavior deviates from traditional or expected norms. This duality highlights why public awareness campaigns, which typically target explicit attitudes, often fail to fully eradicate the problem, requiring instead more nuanced interventions that address the cognitive roots of bias and prejudice that underpin the deep-seated acceptance of violence within certain social spheres.

Furthermore, attitudes function within a broader socio-ecological framework, meaning they are influenced by factors ranging from individual personality traits to macro-level institutional policies and pervasive cultural norms. At the individual level, factors such as low empathy, strong adherence to hypermasculine ideologies, or a personal history of trauma can significantly shape one's view of violence and its acceptability. Moving outward, family dynamics, peer group acceptance of aggression, and institutional responses, such as how the police or judiciary handle GBV cases, heavily influence the prevailing climate of attitudes. The collective attitudes of a society, therefore, act as a psychological thermostat, regulating the emotional and ethical response to violence; when this thermostat is set high, indicating tolerance or minimization, violence is often marginalized or dismissed, significantly delaying necessary societal mobilization and effective resource allocation against this pervasive human rights violation.

Defining and Measuring Attitudes toward GBV

Defining attitudes toward GBV requires researchers to move beyond simple agreement or disagreement with generalized statements condemning violence. Instead, rigorous measurement typically focuses on assessing three key dimensions: cognitive acceptance, affective reaction, and behavioral intention. Cognitive acceptance relates to the belief systems that rationalize or minimize GBV, often encompassing pervasive myths about rape or domestic abuse, or the acceptance of traditional gender roles that legitimize male dominance and control within intimate relationships. Affective reaction gauges the emotional response to violence, such as feelings of outrage, pity for the victim, or, conversely, indifference or even subtle approval of the perpetrator's actions. Finally, behavioral intention assesses the likelihood of the individual intervening, reporting the abuse, or supporting prevention efforts, providing a practical measure of how latent attitudes translate into actionable responses within a community context, thereby offering a comprehensive picture of an individual's psychological orientation toward the issue.

Measurement tools for assessing these complex attitudes must be carefully constructed to overcome the significant challenge of **social desirability bias**, which is particularly strong in sensitive areas like GBV where respondents fear appearing prejudiced or immoral. Standardized scales, such as the Acceptance of Modern Myths about Sexual Aggression (AMMSA) or scales measuring hostile and benevolent sexism, are frequently employed because they utilize indirect phrasing or situational vignettes to probe underlying beliefs without explicitly asking respondents if they condone violence. For example, presenting a detailed scenario where a victim is intoxicated and then asking respondents to rate the degree of responsibility attributed to the victim allows researchers to quantify the extent of victim-blaming attitudes, which are strong, reliable proxies for overall permissive views on sexual violence and abuse. The reliability and psychometric validity of these measures are absolutely critical for drawing accurate conclusions about population-level tolerance or rejection of violence.

A particularly important conceptual distinction in the measurement domain is the required separation between attitudes toward the perpetrator and attitudes toward the victim. Permissive attitudes toward GBV often involve simultaneously excusing the perpetrator's actions, perhaps attributing the violence to stress, provocation, or uncontrollable impulse, while simultaneously scrutinizing and blaming the victim by questioning their clothing, sobriety, or decision to stay in a volatile relationship. These complementary attitudinal biases work synergistically to maintain the social status quo, ensuring that responsibility is shifted away from the aggressor and onto the target of the violence. Effective measurement must capture this dual mechanism, recognizing that societal tolerance is often built on a foundation of both perpetrator exoneration and victim devaluation, which necessitates specific methodological approaches, often utilizing multi-item scales focusing on attribution of causality, responsibility, and perceived deservedness of the outcome.

The Role of Gender Norms and Stereotypes

Traditional and rigid **gender norms** serve as one of the most powerful structural determinants of attitudes toward GBV, providing ideological justification for hierarchical power structures that inherently place men in dominant positions and women in subordinate roles. These norms dictate acceptable behaviors for men, such as emotional restraint, assertiveness, and physical strength, and for women, such as passivity, nurturance, and emotional expressiveness. When violence occurs, particularly within intimate partner relationships, these norms are frequently invoked to normalize the perpetrator's behavior as a legitimate means of maintaining control or enforcing traditional roles, while simultaneously judging the victim harshly for failing to fulfill their prescribed duties or for provoking the aggressor through perceived disobedience. The acceptance of the notion that "a man should be the primary authority figure of the household," for example, is highly correlated with tolerance for controlling behaviors that often escalate into physical or psychological abuse, revealing the deep ideological roots of permissive attitudes toward domination.

Relatedly, **gender stereotypes**--generalized and often inaccurate beliefs about the characteristics of men and women--play a critical role in shaping how GBV incidents are perceived and evaluated by third parties. Stereotypes often portray men as inherently aggressive, impulsive, or sexually driven, leading to the minimization of their responsibility when they commit violence, suggesting that the behavior is merely an exaggerated or natural form of male impulse that is difficult to control. Conversely, stereotypes of women as weak, overly emotional, or manipulative can lead to profound skepticism regarding their claims of victimization, fueling the belief that they fabricated or exaggerated the abuse for secondary gain. These cognitive shortcuts profoundly influence the attitudes of jurors, law enforcement personnel, and the general public, often resulting in systemic failures to recognize, report, or prosecute GBV effectively, as the perception of the event is filtered through highly biased and culturally conditioned lenses.

The concept of **hostile sexism** is particularly relevant here, defined as overt antagonism toward women who are perceived as violating traditional roles, often manifesting as beliefs that women are trying to control men or gain unfair advantage in societal structures. Hostile sexism is a robust predictor of permissive attitudes toward rape and sexual harassment, as it provides a readily available framework for viewing female victims as somehow deserving of their fate due to their perceived defiance or challenge to male authority. However, even seemingly positive stereotypes, captured by **benevolent sexism**, which involves the belief that women must be protected and cherished, can contribute significantly to GBV tolerance. Benevolent sexism reinforces the dependency and fragility of women, justifying male control and restricting female autonomy in the name of protection, which in turn creates a social climate where possessive and controlling behaviors, often early and potent precursors to physical violence, are viewed through an affectionate or devoted lens rather than an abusive one.

Mechanisms of Victim Blaming and Justification

Victim blaming is arguably the most insidious manifestation of permissive attitudes toward GBV, functioning as a powerful and widespread psychological mechanism that allows observers to maintain a comforting sense of order and personal safety. The core psychological engine driving victim blaming is the **Just World Hypothesis**, a pervasive cognitive bias suggesting that people generally get what they deserve and deserve what they get, implying a fundamental fairness in the universe. When confronted with the reality of seemingly random, unfair violence, individuals often feel existentially threatened, and rather than accepting the unsettling randomness of the world, they defensively attribute responsibility to the victim. This attribution allows the observer to believe that if they themselves behave appropriately, such as by adhering to safety precautions or avoiding perceived risky situations, they will successfully avoid a similar fate, thus restoring their crucial sense of control over their own lives and significantly reducing the anxiety related to their own vulnerability.

Beyond the Just World Hypothesis, justification for GBV often relies on techniques of neutralization, originally developed in criminology but highly applicable to attitudinal studies. These techniques allow individuals to rationalize or minimize the moral severity of the violence without overtly rejecting societal norms against violence. Common neutralization strategies frequently observed include **denial of injury**, where the observer claims the violence wasn't serious or the victim exaggerated the harm; **denial of the victim**, which involves asserting that the victim deserved the abuse due to prior provocation or bad character; and **condemnation of the condemners**, which shifts focus onto the perceived hypocrisy or unfairness of those who criticize the perpetrator. When these specific justifications are widely accepted within a community, they transform individual acts of violence into socially tolerable or regrettable occurrences, thereby lowering the collective ethical threshold for what constitutes unacceptable behavior and reinforcing permissive attitudes across the social landscape.

Furthermore, the mechanism of **fundamental attribution error** plays a significant, distorting role in justifying violence, particularly regarding intimate partner violence. Observers tend to attribute the perpetrator's actions primarily to transient situational factors, such as stress, alcohol consumption, or a temporary loss of control, thereby mitigating their responsibility. Conversely, they tend to attribute the victim's responses, such as staying in the relationship, delayed reporting, or emotional fragility, to internal, dispositional flaws, such as inherent weakness, irrationality, or masochism. This asymmetrical attribution of causality shields the perpetrator from full moral and legal responsibility and simultaneously devalues the victim's experience, making it easier for bystanders and institutions to dismiss the seriousness of the abuse. This cognitive distortion is highly reinforced by cultural narratives that prioritize the sanctity of the family unit or protect the reputation of the male aggressor, often at the direct expense of the victim's safety and credibility.

Psychological Predictors of Permissive Attitudes

Several key psychological variables reliably predict an individual's tendency to hold permissive attitudes toward GBV, offering crucial targets for preventative psychological interventions. One of the most significant and well-documented predictors is high levels of **authoritarianism**, which is characterized by a high degree of submission to perceived authority figures, rigid adherence to conventional social norms, and marked hostility toward out-groups or those who deviate from the norm. Individuals high in authoritarianism often view violence as a legitimate and necessary tool for maintaining social order and enforcing traditional hierarchies, making them far more likely to excuse perpetrators who are acting to "correct" perceived disorder or defiance, particularly in contexts involving violations of traditional gender roles. This personality trait predisposes individuals to accept rigid, punitive approaches to conflict resolution, often viewing victims as disruptive elements who must be disciplined or controlled.

Another critical and inversely related predictor is low **empathy**, specifically the diminished capacity to understand or share the feelings of others, particularly those in distress or experiencing suffering. A lack of affective empathy makes it profoundly difficult for observers to internalize the real suffering caused by GBV, significantly reducing the emotional barrier against accepting or minimizing violent acts. When empathy is deficient, the cognitive mechanisms of victim blaming and justification operate more freely and effectively, as the moral outrage typically triggered by witnessing suffering is severely attenuated or absent. Research consistently demonstrates that targeted interventions aimed at increasing perspective-taking abilities and emotional recognition can significantly reduce permissive attitudes by strengthening the empathetic connection to potential or actual victims of gender-based violence, thereby bolstering the moral imperative to reject violence.

Finally, strong adherence to **hypermasculine ideologies**, which culturally emphasize toughness, emotional suppression, risk-taking, and dominance over women, is strongly correlated with holding attitudes that condone violence. These ideologies often frame violence or aggression as a necessary and defining component of male identity and an appropriate, even expected, response to challenges to one's perceived masculinity or authority. For those who strongly endorse these traditional masculine scripts, violence is not seen as a moral deviation but rather as a necessary performance of gender, making the justification of aggressive acts a natural consequence of maintaining their self-concept. This specific psychological cluster of beliefs creates a fertile ground for the acceptance of male sexual entitlement and the minimization of female consent, directly fueling permissive attitudes toward sexual and domestic violence across diverse populations.

Societal and Cultural Influences on Attitude Formation

Attitudes toward GBV are profoundly shaped by the macro-level structures of society, particularly

the prevailing cultural norms related to sexuality, power distribution, and methods of conflict resolution. Societies characterized by high levels of structural **gender inequality**, which can be quantitatively measured through factors like economic disparity, political underrepresentation of women, and unequal access to resources like education, typically exhibit significantly higher levels of tolerance for GBV. In these contexts, violence often functions as an unofficial, yet highly effective, mechanism for enforcing gender stratification, and permissive attitudes reflect a societal consensus that maintaining the existing patriarchal power structure is implicitly more important than protecting individual safety and autonomy. Furthermore, cultural acceptance of corporal punishment or generalized aggressive conflict resolution within the family unit also tends to spill over, normalizing violence within intimate and familial settings as an acceptable means of communication and control.

The role of **legal and institutional frameworks** is also critically important in shaping collective attitudes toward violence. When legal systems fail to adequately define, investigate, and rigorously prosecute GBV--or when police and judicial responses are consistently characterized by skepticism toward victims, delays, or minimal sentencing--the institutional response sends a powerful and damaging message that the crime is not taken seriously by the state. This institutional apathy reinforces permissive attitudes among the general public, suggesting that if the formal structures of society do not prioritize these offenses, they must be minor or private matters best left unresolved. Conversely, strong, well-enforced laws, coupled with public education about victims' rights and perpetrator accountability, signal a clear and unambiguous societal rejection of violence, thereby contributing significantly to the erosion of tolerance and encouraging active bystander intervention.

Furthermore, **cultural scripts and myths** surrounding romance and relationships significantly influence attitudes toward intimate partner violence by normalizing problematic behavior. Narratives that romanticize possessiveness, extreme jealousy, and intense emotional declarations--often prevalent in popular media, literature, and music--can dangerously blur the lines between intense affection and coercive control. For example, the deeply ingrained cultural belief that "true love overcomes everything" or that "jealousy is a sign of deep love" can lead individuals to interpret early warning signs of abuse as mere passion or devotion, thereby minimizing the severity of controlling behaviors and fostering permissive attitudes toward emotional and psychological abuse. These pervasive cultural scripts are particularly difficult to counter because they are woven into the very fabric of entertainment and socialization from a very young age, requiring sustained deconstruction.

The Impact of Media and Socialization

Media consumption serves as a powerful and ubiquitous agent of socialization, significantly influencing the formation and reinforcement of attitudes toward GBV across all age groups.

Exposure to pervasive and often graphic representations of violence in film, television, music, and video games can lead to **desensitization**, effectively lowering the emotional impact and perceived severity of actual violent acts in real life. When media consistently portrays sexual or domestic violence as sensationalized, trivialized, or even associated with positive outcomes for the perpetrator, it subtly communicates a message of acceptability and inevitability, contributing directly to permissive attitudes. Moreover, media often rigidly reinforces harmful gender stereotypes, depicting women as sexual objects or perpetual victims and men as aggressive heroes or entitled figures, thereby validating the underlying ideologies that fuel and sustain GBV tolerance within society.

The rise of digital media and the internet has introduced new, highly complex challenges, particularly through the proliferation of online hate speech, overtly misogynistic communities, and the rapid, anonymous dissemination of non-consensual imagery. Exposure to highly toxic and aggressive online content, such as that found in certain male-centric forums and subcultures, correlates strongly with increased acceptance of sexual aggression and hostile sexism. These digital echo chambers validate extreme permissive attitudes, normalize the dehumanization of women, and provide strong social reinforcement for individuals who hold views that would be socially unacceptable offline. This specific form of digital socialization accelerates the adoption of violence-justifying attitudes among specific demographic groups, requiring the development of targeted digital counter-narratives and sophisticated educational strategies to interrupt the cycle of online radicalization and normalization of violence.

Beyond mass media, primary socialization within the family unit and educational institutions plays a foundational and enduring role. Children who are raised in environments where conflict is habitually resolved through aggression, or where gender inequality is explicitly taught or implicitly modeled by parents, are significantly more likely to develop permissive attitudes toward GBV later in life, perpetuating intergenerational cycles of abuse. Conversely, educational settings that actively promote critical thinking about rigid gender roles, emphasize emotional literacy, and utilize comprehensive sexuality education programs that focus heavily on consent, healthy boundaries, and mutual respect have proven effective in challenging and disrupting the intergenerational transmission of violence-justifying attitudes. Early intervention in the process of socialization is crucial because core attitudes become highly resistant to change once they are solidified during the formative years of adolescence and early adulthood.

Strategies for Attitudinal Change and Prevention

Effective prevention of GBV requires comprehensive strategies aimed directly at modifying deeply entrenched permissive attitudes at both the individual and systemic levels. One highly successful approach involves structured **bystander intervention programs**, which are designed not only to educate individuals about the nature and prevalence of GBV but, critically, to empower them to

recognize and safely interrupt potentially harmful situations before they escalate. These programs work by directly challenging the social psychological phenomena of diffusion of responsibility and the normalization of violence, thus transforming passive observers into active agents of change and accountability. By providing concrete intervention skills and confronting common barriers to intervention, such as fear of retaliation or social awkwardness, these strategies directly attack the behavioral component of permissive attitudes, making intervention a social expectation rather than a rare act of heroism.

Another essential strategy involves systematically **challenging harmful gender norms and stereotypes** through widespread educational initiatives and targeted social marketing campaigns. These efforts must move beyond simply stating that violence is wrong and instead focus on deconstructing the ideological foundations that justify it, such as rigid definitions of masculinity and femininity. For instance, programs that promote non-violent, respectful, and emotionally expressive forms of masculinity have shown significant promise in reducing adherence to hypermasculine ideologies, thereby reducing one of the strongest psychological predictors of permissive attitudes toward aggression. This work requires sustained, community-wide dialogue and engagement rather than isolated, short-term campaigns, ensuring that new, positive norms are adopted and internalized across generations.

Finally, large-scale, structural change is fundamentally necessary to create social environments where permissive attitudes cannot successfully thrive. This includes advocating for and implementing robust **legal and policy reforms** that ensure swift and consistent accountability for perpetrators and provide robust support, protection, and credibility for victims. Furthermore, institutions across society, including schools, workplaces, and faith organizations, must adopt clear, non-negotiable policies against GBV and implement mandatory training that addresses implicit bias and victim-blaming among staff and leadership. When institutions consistently communicate a zero-tolerance message and back it up with fair and transparent enforcement mechanisms, the collective societal attitude shifts decisively, moving away from tolerance and minimization and toward the active, ethical rejection of gender-based violence as a fundamental violation of human rights and dignity.