

# Understanding the Continuation of Violence in the Texas Church Shooting

Written by Elina Penttinen and Ada Schwanck

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The Texas church shooting on Sunday 5<sup>th</sup> of November was the deadliest mass shooting done by an individual in Texas. In a small town of Sutherland Springs in Texas, during a Sunday service at a local Baptist church, a man dressed in black and wearing a skull face mask and ballistic vest was reported entering the church fully armed and started a shooting spree (Dart 2017). Eye-witnesses report him yelling “Everybody die” and shooting small children point-blank in response to them crying (Santos 2017). He shot to death 26 people and wounded 20 (Dart 2017).

The mass-shooting has raised discussion in the US media about gun control, mental health issues, and on the history of abuse by the shooter against his first wife and small step son (Abadi 2017; Allen & Graham 2017; Blinder, Philipps & Opiel Jr. 2017; Dart 2017; Jeltsen 2017; Moravec & Berman 2017). Apparently the domestic violence charges and time served in prison should have prevented the perpetrator from buying the weapons used in the mass killing (Moravec & Berman 2017). What has been emphasized is that the church incident was motivated by a domestic situation and not by racial or political reasons (Moravec & Berman 2017). The animosity and threat of violence towards his second wife and her family had continued even though the relationship had ended. The perpetrator was reported sending angry text messages to his mother in law prior to the incident on Sunday morning (Jeltsen 2017). The church in Sutherland Springs was a place where the mother in law often visited, but the reports do not tell whether the gunman expected the mother in law to be in the church in the given Sunday morning. In this way the case could be defined as a post-separation violence, which is common after abusive relationships ends. Often, ending the abusive relationship is the time of greatest risk for deadly violence towards former partner and children. In this case post-separation violence lead to the killing and wounding of church goers unrelated to the abusive relationship.

In this article we aim to address both the complexity of the Texas shooting as a mass-scale violence and continuation of an abusive relationship. We argue that taking into account incidents of violence which take place in the Global North and are related to domestic violence, is also relevant for the research on gender based violence in the context of IR. In the context of IR, gender based violence is often researched in terms of looking at large scale gendered abuses in conflict areas. Therefore, the focus turns on conceptualizing gender-based violence as something which happens ‘elsewhere’ in conflict and post-conflict zones, or the term can be used to conceptualize systematic gender-based violence in the Global South. We argue for analyzing violence in the context of the Global North with a similar framework as used in the analysis of gender based violence elsewhere is necessary in order to understand how deeply embedded hierarchic gender order is to a range of manifestations of violence. What is at stake is the understanding of agency and subjectivity of the targets of violence, which is either required or denied depending on the level of analysis. Whereas the targets of gender-based violence can be framed as passive victims to cultural and political circumstances, which they have little or no control over, targets of domestic violence in the Global North can be viewed as a problem related to particular relationship. What is relevant here is to recognize how the Texas mass-shooting defies simple categorizations and thus reveals something crucial about the way gender based violence operates in the Global North.

The argument of recognizing male violence against women known to them as part of a wider problem of gender based violence is at the core of feminist research on violence. The key premise of feminist research on violence is that gender-based violence stems from the hierarchic gender order, which is based on normative heterosexuality and

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gender binary that is seen in itself a practice of violence (McKey 2005; York 2011). Therefore, the heterosexual social contract which assigns women a specific gender role as mothers, nurtures and caretakers naturalized by their biology is a practice of normalized discrimination (Karhu 2016). The basis of the diverse manifestations and practices of violence is the normative violence of hierarchic gender order. The poststructuralist feminist approach on violence (Butler 2004, 2009, Karhu 2016) maintains that the range of manifestations of violence such as war on terror, hate crimes, gender-based violence, intimate partner violence (IPV) and sexual abuse are not separate or distinct forms of violence, but rather forms of continuation of violence of hierarchic gender order. These forms of violences and violations are informed by gender norms and normative notions of gender that are based on hierarchic dualisms between male-female, masculine and feminine. Therefore violence against women in wars, for example, is not a spillover of war to the private sphere, but based on the normative violence which informs the public-private distinctions. Thus, violence is not the discontinuation of social order, but rather the other way around, violence is the continuation of normative gender order.

The challenge here is to think beyond the ontological separation between public and private spheres and how this can enable to account for the complexities of extreme manifestation of violence such as the Texas shooting. The public-private distinction also informs what kinds of violences are seen as relevant for public discussion. McKey (2005: 17) argues that even though every one in four women in Britain experiences violence during their life time by men known to them, this does not raise as much public discussion as the violence perpetrated by strangers in public places does. This reflects the implicit assumptions about what is considered as unacceptable violence at societal level and what kinds of violence is seen as up to partners in adult relationships to figure out on their own. We argue that this refers to the level of responsibility for individuals who are targeted by violence. The partner who is abused in an adult relationship can be seen as responsible for ending the abuse and the relationship, whereas in the context of large scale violence the targets are not seen to have such possibilities. Or intimate partner violence can be seen as problem of personal psychopathologies such as narcissism or continuation of violence from family of origin (Elmquist & al 2016) and thus fundamentally different from systematic violence such as rape as a strategy of war. Moreover, violence in the privacy of the home and family may be seen as a normal part of relationships (Velonis 2016). But if violence in public and private spheres are seen as manifestations of hierarchic gender order, also intimate partner violence can be seen as a large-scale manifestation of violence, albeit it takes place in the private sphere.

The Texas mass-shooting highlights the complexities of this issue. The perpetrator had a long history of reported violence. He had abused his former wife and threatened to kill her after a speeding ticket. He had beaten his stepson when he was only three years old and fractured his skull. In addition, he had a long history of harassing and stalking his ex-girlfriends as well as a rape charge. He was arrested on animal cruelty charges in 2014, which lead to a two year deferred judgment, which prevented him from buying handguns in 2015. After the two years animal cruelty charged ended he was able to pass the background checks and buy the weapons used in the Texas shooting. (Blinder, Philipps & Oppel Jr. 2017). It is still unclear why the AirForce did not enter the domestic violence charges and time served in prison to the database. What is relevant here is to highlight the continuation of violence from small-scale (private) to mass-scale (public) and begin to recognize where the boundaries between public and private are drawn. This is relevant as the boundary between public and private also highlights what kinds of violence is tolerated in society or seen as individual responsibility.

We argue that recognizing the continuation of violence in cases such as the Texas mass-shooting is more than tracing the individual history of the perpetrator. What is required is raising the public discussion on gender. In this case the reporting of the Texas mass-shooting is consistent to the previous storylines of mass-shooting incidents in the Global North. Looking for answers to the large-scale atrocities, media and authorities often pathologize the individual perpetrator; looking for mental health problems, childhood trauma or in this case signs of previous violent behavior. The circulation of the narrative of the lone gunman, "acts of evil" (Allen & Graham 2017) or "senseless crime" (Jeltsen 2017) omits the links to cultural and societal context of the incident and erases the key question of how domestic violence and mass violence are connected in this and other mass-shootings in the US. This framing can be used to distance from the fact that the majority of the mass-shooting are done by men. This in our view enables to distance violence against women and children in the Global North as a problem of deranged individuals who have serious mental health issues. Instead of taking domestic violence seriously as a social and cultural problem which can be an early warning sign of large scale violence, it is reduced to individual psychopathology. The

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prevention and protection of violence is also seen as a responsibility of the target. In the Texas case the former wife had succeeded in protecting herself and the son by pressing charges, which lead to a conviction of the perpetrator. However, it is after this incident when something failed and the violent history of the perpetrator did not prevent him from buying weapons. Could the distinction between private and public forms of violence still play a role in this? In other words, even though mass-shooters often have a background of domestic violence, it is still unimaginable to link the two.

What is important to note here is that it is not only the reporting and the media which produce narratives that reiterate the categorizations of violence and reinforce the public and private distinction. Research on violence also reiterates categories of violence: it is either focused on violence based on severity such as large-scale mass-violence, extreme sexual and physical violence such as rape and torture or it is focused on small scale violence such as intimate partner violence, rape and sexual abuses. In this way the diverse forms of violences are seen as somehow separate and ontologically distinct. However, these categorizations are problematic as these reinforce another hierarchic distinction between us and them, self and other, rational and irrational. It seems that violence is always done by someone else than who we are. The act of evil of the lone gunman in Texas is a convenient way to distance the manifestation of male violence to women known to them as a problem of an individual and not society. It prevents from asking questions of how violence is part of masculinity and how male violence is normalized. How is it that more men than women use of violence as a means to exert power and control in a relationship? How is male violence normalized in culture ranging from cultural ideals of boys and men to cultural products such as popular music and film? In order to build understanding on the complexity of the mass-shooting it is important to question how these incidents reflect and reiterate cultural and normative notions of gender in the Global North.

In our research[1] we emphasize a multifaceted, or non-fragmented approach to research on violence in the context of IR which moves beyond categorizations of violence between public-private, intimate- international, wartime-peacetime violence as ontologically separate and distinct forms of violence. We argue that moving beyond categorizations in this way is relevant in order to expose how deeply embedded violence is in our culture and society. The goal is to build understanding on how violence manifests and continues on multiple levels in order to find new ways of preventing violence and responding to victims in constructive ways which supports their recovery. The recognition of intimate partner abuse as a manifestation of heteronormative gender order can be deeply powerful for the target of violence as it enables to see how the violence one has been subjected to is part of a wider problem. Most importantly recognizing gender-based violence as a global problem challenges the researcher in IR to pay attention to how it operates in the Global North. Acknowledging that violence is an integral part of our society allows us to find more proactive and sustainable solutions to violence than simply reacting to a violent incident after it has happened. It also highlights the fact that experiencing violence is not exceptional but rather common to us all.

## Notes

[1] The research project: Incorporating Vulnerability: a non-fragmented approach to feminist research on violence is funded by the University of Helsinki, Three year grants. (2015-2018).

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**Elina Penttinen**, is the principal investigator of the project, *Incorporating Vulnerability: a non-fragmented approach to feminist research on violence*. She works at University of Helsinki as a university lecturer in Gender Studies. She has published widely on gendered experience of war, compassion-based methodology, globalization and sex-trafficking. Currently she develops feminist analysis on healing trauma from emotionally abusive relationships. She is the author of *Gender and Mobility: a critical introduction* (2017) Rowman & Littlefield; *Joy and International Relations: a new methodology* (2013) Routledge, *Globalization, Prostitution and Sex-Trafficking: corporeal politics* (2008) Routledge. She teaches courses on feminist methodology, scientific writing, gender and culture and supervises doctoral thesis projects in Gender, Culture and Society doctoral program.

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