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# Gender System Justification, Gender Differences and Attitudes Towards Women' Victimization

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**Abstract:** According to the literature, women are actively participating in the victimization of their group because of their positive attitude towards established societal norms. This thesis is supported within the theoretical framework of system justification, which defends the thesis that individuals, both men and women, are motivated to perceive existing social arrangements as fair and legitimate. In this sense, it is admitted that women who strongly justify the gender system are less motivated to adopt collective behaviors to improve or challenge the unfavorable position in which they are living. As a result, they are likely to accept or endorse the domestic or family abuse that they are suffering. The present research falls within this perspective. It examines the causal link between gender system justification, gender differences, and attitudes toward women' victimization. Thus, it formulates the hypothesis that gender difference does not moderate the relationship between willingness to justify the system and attitude towards women' victimization. Participants are 126 students of both sexes enrolled in different faculties of the University of Dschang (Cameroon). Their age varies between 15 and 41 years (M. = 21.41). They completed a questionnaire measuring, respectively, the willingness to justify the gender system and the attitude towards women' victimization. The data collected provides empirical support for the hypothesis of the study. They reveal that the relationship between gender system justification and attitudes towards women' victimization is positive for both women and men. These results reveal the different dispositions through which men and women participate mutually in maintaining asymmetrics gender relations.

**Keywords:** Gender System Justification, System Justification Theory, Gender Difference, Victimization, Attitude Towards Female Victimization

## 1. Introduction

In today's societies, the victimization of individuals and groups is a recurring phenomenon. This implies a real or perceived imbalance of physical and social power between individuals [37]. It refers to the negative acts frequently performed by an individual or group towards another, often unable to defend themselves. It can take a structural or direct form [36, 45, 46]. The first relates to all stigmatizing or discriminatory behavior towards a person or a group. The second concerns violence directly inflicted on an individual or a group. It can be violence resulting from wars, colonization, ethnic conflicts, repression and abuse [45]. This research is particularly interested in victimization resulting from abuse; domestic or family violence against women in

particular. Concretely, it is the physical, psychological and sexual assault inflicted on women [10]. Physical assault refers to the act of pushing, beating, kicking, knocking down or hitting a woman in order to harm or even kill her. Psychological/emotional aggression involves the act of intimidating, controlling, remaining silent, insulting or humiliating a woman in order to weaken her psychologically. Sexual assault reveals the use of force or intimidation to coerce a woman into having sex without her consent [2, 7, 19]. The prevalence rates of gender-related victimization are high across continents and countries [14, 19]. In Cameroon, for example, the survey carried out by the Cameroon Association of Women Lawyers reports that since 1998, in the Center region, out of 100 married women, 88 say they are victims of domestic violence [3]. These prevalence rates are

of concern, since the experience of victimization generates various psychosocial problems such as depression and loneliness [20]. According to recent literature, women are, themselves, actively participating in their victimization because of their positive attitude towards societal norms that legitimize these practices [19]. In Jordan, for example, shared cultural values and norms help to legitimize the victimization perpetrated against children and women. Violence against women is widely seen as a family affair, which in certain circumstances affects large numbers of children and adults throughout their lifetimes. The values defended in this country make women particularly vulnerable to physical problems and sexual assault [2, 7]. They are victimized physically, psychologically and sexually in contexts as diverse as academia, workplace and family [38]. In this country, victimization experienced in the family, still known as domestic violence, is seen as a legitimate strategy that a husband can use to discipline his wife [1].

In collectivist societies in general, and Arab and African societies in particular, the victimization of women is seen as the expression of male power which is exercised in order to ensure the superiority and control of man over woman or any other family member [38]. Indeed, from birth, male roles such as maintaining family honor, stability and reputation are taught to male children. Thus, the first son is usually referred to his father and takes his place upon his death in order to take responsibility for the whole family. Girls, on the other hand, learn to be polite, passive and docile. Husbands assume the role of provider of financial services and are seen as the masters of the household, while wives assume roles related to child rearing and household maintenance. Men strictly regulate women' behavior and are responsible for monitoring and protecting the dignity or reputation of the family. In these societies, the patriarchal structure and the way of life of the family are also affected by major social values such as mutual support and responsibility, family cohesion and solidarity, harmony between family members and their family private life. Men enjoy greater power, privilege and control over women. They therefore have the right to punish them for reprehensible behavior [1]. The honor of a man is measured by the devotion of his wife. Once she deviates from ethical and social norms, it is not only the husband's duty to restore the honor of the family, but the family and the tribe take responsibility for it. Sometimes the severe punishment applied to the woman's deviant behavior ends in retaliation or her murder [30].

Collectivist societies are conservative on gender roles. In general, the behaviors of men and women are strictly defined and formed on the basis of the established system. In some families, it happens that the father is violent towards his wife who, for her part, abuses children, while male children adopt these behaviors towards female children [1]. These authors examined the relationship between marital satisfaction and the type of violence (physical, psychological and sexual) exercised against women. Their investigations show that dissatisfaction with marriage leads to the adoption of violence against women. Likewise, there is a relationship between dissatisfaction with marriage and women's exposure to some type of violence. In this type of situation, to avoid being victims of violence, women decide to abide by established social and cultural rules [1]. However, this conformity is the mechanism which accentuates, in certain situations, the approval of existing social arrangements defended by system justification theory [12].

The system justification theory [25, 28] is the framework within which this study fits. It provides explanations for the understanding of attitudes which do not seem to serve the personal interest of the individual, nor that of his group. It predicts that individuals are motivated to perceive existing societal arrangements as legitimate, even at the expense of their personal and collective interests [21, 22, 23]. The perceived legitimacy of such arrangements increases these people's support for the status quo. This is seen as much among the advantaged as among the disadvantaged. Indeed, the paradox underlying system justification theory relates to the fact that the disadvantaged are no less likely than the privileged to believe that social system is legitimate and good [9, 11, 33]. On the contrary, the motivation to justify the system is particularly strong among them. The reason is that certain situations of inequality, themselves, increase the level of system justification among relatively weak people. This particular causal explanation has been suggested in the literature on the antecedents of system justification [25, 41].

The original formulation of system justification theory addressed the role of stereotypes in legitimizing social inequalities [25]. Since then, it has been broadened and focused on beliefs that legitimize existing arrangements, such as belief in meritocracy [34]. Thus, it admits that particularly inegalitarian or insidious systems can paradoxically increase the motivation to perceive existing social arrangements as fair and legitimate, even if these systems are painful, humiliating or unfair [25]. In this wake, the literature indicates that the motivation to justify the system depends on a number of variables, including threat of the system, low sense of personal control, dependence and inevitability of the system [8]. For example, the study conducted by [40] report that feelings of helplessness increase motivation to support the system. The same effect is produced when individuals perceive social system as stable or inevitable [31]. This disposition increases due to the fact that system justification functions as a defense mechanism against the constraints of the society. According to the literature, cognitive dissonance is produced by contradictory cognitions generated by a system which puts the individual and his group at a disadvantage, thus forcing him to perceive the said system as legitimate to remedy that emotional and cognitive uncomfortable state, since he is not inclined to adopt hostile attitudes and behaviors towards the said system in order to modify his low status [42]. In line with this hypothesis, the disadvantaged sometimes support and justify the social order to an even greater degree than the advantaged, especially insofar as they are more inclined to believe that economic, gender or status differences are required [24].

In gender-based relationships, men tend to seek superiority and autonomy, while keeping women in a disadvantaged

position [44]. As a result, like the latter, they use, benevolent or ambivalent, descriptive or prescriptive, simple or complementary stereotypes, to justify the dominated position in which women find themselves [8, 17, 29]. They are generally unaware of the unfavorable status they occupy, and like to develop practices and beliefs that are in agreement with their oppression. In this logic, certain women' socialization practices push them to unconsciously justify the gender inequalities they are confronted to [6]. Thus, the use of stereotypical attributes not only promotes the maintenance of gender inequalities, but also contributes to women' life satisfaction [35]. Within the framework of system justification theory, adherence to these stereotypes increases the feeling that the system as a whole is meant, fair and legitimate. A study reveals that simply activating the attributes of benevolent and complementary sexism in individuals increases the support of men and women for traditional sexual arrangements, and for the social system as a whole [29]. Subsequent studies supplement these observations by reporting in particular that adherence to gender stereotypes positively affects the perception of dependence on the system and its legitimacy [8].

The motivation to legitimize the system leads women to perceive the inequalities and discrimination of which they are victims less [34]. According to some researches, women who strongly justify the gender system are less inclined to act collectively to challenge it and improve their own group's status [5, 27, 26]. Likewise, when they believe in a just world, they have no inclination to protest, since they are convinced that in a just world everything works as it should [39]. Therefore, they are reluctant to oppose the abuses perpetrated against them. In accordance with this logic, the conviction with which men and women adhere to sexist ideologies favors their acceptance of domestic or family abuse [18]. However, it is known that sexist ideologies fulfill a function of justifying the system [17, 29]. Despite this, it is difficult to find empirical work specifically focused on the causal link between system justification and attitude towards abuse against women, considered as a form of victimization towards this sexual category. Similarly, previous studies do not specify whether or not there is a moderating effect of gender difference on this causal relationship; hence the interest of this research. The main question to which it wants to answer is formulated as follows: what is the effect of gender difference on the relation between gender system justification and attitude towards victimization of women, considered as a low status group in gender intergroup relations?

## 2. Hypotheses

In accordance with the theoretical predictions of gender system justification [8, 18, 27], the present research defends the thesis that gender difference does not moderate the relationship between the gender system justification and attitude towards women' victimzation. More specifically, it predicts that: 1) the willingness to justify the system is positive for both men and women; 2) system justification positively affects the attitude towards women' victimization; and 3) the relationship between gender system justification and attitudes toward women' victimization is as positive for men as it is for women.

## 3. Method

### 3.1. Participants

The participants are 126 students of both sexes, enrolled in different faculties of the University of Dschang (Cameroon). They are between 15 and 41 years old (M = 21.41). They were randomly selected in the university campus. Instruments of data collection were distributed to them after obtaining their consent to participate in the research.

### 3.2. Material and Procedure

The measurement of gender system justification was done using the [43] scale. This psychometric method consisting of 8 items was constructed to measure the degree of approval of inequalities between men and women. By way of illustration, items 1 and 2 are respectively formulated as follows: "Men and women leave with the same chances in life"; and "In general, our society allows both men and women to get what they deserve". In the present study, this scale has a good internal consistency index ($\alpha$ =.72). The task of the participants is to give their opinion on the different items using a 7-points Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The aim is to assess the degree of participants' support for existing sexual arrangements. Therefore, the higher their scores, the more they are considered to be in favor of established gender inequalities in society.

The attitude towards female abuse is assessed using a scale constructed in the Asian context [47]. It has 3 dimensions, including: 1) approval of male privilege; 2) approval of situation-specific violence; and 3) the perceived lack of alternatives to deal with abuse. This psychometric method is composed of 14 items, with respectively 4 items for the dimension "approval of male privilege" (example: A husband should have the right to discipline his wife); 6 items for the dimension "approval of violence specific to the situation" (example: A husband or a lover has the right to hit his wife if she has had sexual relations with another man); and 4 items for the dimension "perceived lack of alternatives to deal with abuse" (example: A woman should move out if her husband hits her at home). This scale also has a good internal consistency index in the present study ($\alpha$ =.74). For each item, participants are asked to give their opinion on a 7-points Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

## 4. Results

The results of this study are presented in three stages. First, we analyze the Means (M) and Standard Deviations (SD) of the participants' scores on the different measures. Next, we present the Correlation Matrix between the variables. Finally,

we give an account of the linear regression matrix between the different variables of the study.

**Table 1.** *Descriptive statistics of the different variables according to gender categories.*

| Measures | Women (N= 68) | | Men (N= 57) | | General tendencies (N= 126) | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | M | S-D | M | S-D | M | S-D |
| Gender system justification | 35.78 | 8.38 | 34.18 | 9.95 | 35.80 | 9.81 |
| Attitude towards women' victimization | 66.03 | 10.34 | 62.46 | 15.85 | 65.14 | 12.94 |
| Approval of male privilege | 15.52 | 4.83 | 14.27 | 5.31 | 15.07 | 5.07 |
| Approval of violence specific to the situation | 30.78 | 6.74 | 29.46 | 9.46 | 30.59 | 7.95 |
| Perceived lack of alternatives to deal with abuse | 19.72 | 5.38 | 18.73 | 5.37 | 19.42 | 5.36 |

Table 1 indicates that the willingness to justify gender system is high among participants (M = 35.80, SD = 9.81). The same general trend is observed for the attitude towards women' victimization (M = 65.14, SD = 12.94). These trends do not differ across gender categories, since women justify the system (M = 35.78, SD = 8.38) just as much as men (M = 34.18, SD = 9.95), although the difference between them is not significant. The scores relating to the positive attitude towards women' victimization also reveal the non-differentiation between the categories (women: M = 66.03, SD = 10.34; men: M = 62.46, SD T. = 15.85). This is also seen in the different dimensions of the last variable. More specifically, participants mutually approve male privileges (female: M = 15.52, SD = 4.83; male: M = 14.27, SD = 5.31), situation-specific violence (female: M = 30.78, SD = 6.74; male: M = 29.46, SD = 29.46) and perceived lack of alternatives to deal with abuse (female: M = 19.72, SD = 5.38; males: M = 18.73, SD = 5.37). These results support research hypothesis 1.

**Table 2.** *Correlation matrix between system justification and attitude towards women' victimization according to gender categories.*

| Measures | Women r (p) | | | | Men r (p) | | | | General tendencies r (p) | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 2. | .03(>.05) | - | | | .13(<.01) | - | | | .003(>.05) | -1 | | |
| 3. | .18(<.05) | .59**(<.01) | - | | .38**(<.01) | .65**(<.01) | - | | .25**(<.01) | .62**(<.01) | - | |
| 4. | .02(>.05) | .72**(<.01) | .19(>.05) | - | .12(<.01) | .90**(<.01) | .39**(<.01) | - | .02(>.05) | .82**(<.01) | .29**(<.01) | - |
| 5. | .19(<.01) | .49**(<.01) | .01(>.05) | -.05(>.05) | .21(<.01) | .69**(<.01) | .18(>.05) | .47**(<.01) | .22*(<.01) | .58**(<.01) | .09(>.05) | .23*(<.01) |

Note: the correlation is significant at the.05 level; 1 = Gender system Justification; 2 = Attitude towards women' victimization; 3 = Approval of male privilege; 4 = Approval of situation-specific violence; 5 = Perceived lack of alternatives to deal with abuse.

Table 2 indicates that the general trend of the link between gender system justification and attitude towards women' victimization is positive but not significant (r =.003, p>.05). This positive link is also perceived between gender system justification and approval of male privilege (r =.25, p <.01), approval of violence specific to the situation (r =.02, p>.05) and perceived lack of alternatives to deal with abuse (r =.22, p <.01). These results support research hypothesis 2. Cross-category analyzes confirm these observations. They reveal that the willingness to justify the system is positively linked to the attitude towards women' victimization, both among women (r =.03, p>.05) and men (r =. 13, p <.01). This disposition is also positively related, in both categories, to the approval of male privilege (women: r =.18, p <.05; men: r =.38, p <.01), violence specific to the situation (women: r =.02, p>.05; men: r =.12, p <.01) and perceived lack of alternatives to deal with the abuse (women: r =.19, p <.01; men: r =.21, p <.01).

**Table 3.** *Linear regression matrix between system justification and attitude towards women' victimization according to gender categories.*

| Measures | Women | | | | Men | | | | General tendencies | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | B | S.E | T | P | β | S.E | T | P | B | S.E | T | P |
| 1. | .04 | .15 | .29 | .77 | .21 | .22 | .93 | .03 | .04 | .12 | .03 | .97 |
| 2. | .11 | .07 | 1.55 | .12 | .20 | .07 | 2.97 | .00 | .13 | .05 | 2.93 | .00 |
| 3. | .02 | .09 | .22 | .82 | .11 | .13 | .88 | .08 | .02 | .07 | .24 | .80 |
| 4. | .13 | .08 | 1.65 | .10 | .11 | .07 | 1.57 | .02 | .12 | .05 | 2.52 | .01 |

Note: Predictor = Gender system Justification; Dependent variables: 1 = Attitude towards women' victimization; 2 = Approval of male privilege; 3 = Approval of violence specific to the situation; 4 = Perceived lack of alternatives to deal with abuse.

This regression matrix reveals that the general trend in the strength of the effect of gender system justification on attitudes towards women' victimization is positive but not significant (β =.04, t =. 03, p>.05). This tendency is also observed between gender system justification and approval of male privilege (β =.13, t = 2.93, p<.01), approval of violence specific to the situation (β =.02, t =.24, p>.05) and perceived lack of alternatives to deal with abuse (β =.12, t = 2.52, p<.05). Cross-category analyzes reveal that the willingness to justify the system positively, but not significantly, affects the attitude towards the women' victimization as much among them (β =.04, t =.29, p>.05) than in men (β =.21, t =.93, p<.05). This is also observed for the approval of male privilege (women: β =.11, t = 1.55, p>.05; men: β =.20, t = 2.97, p<.01), approval of violence specific to the situation (women: β =.02, t =.22, p>.05; men:

β =.11, t =.88, p>.05) and perceived lack of alternative to deal with abuse (women: β =.13, t = 1.65, p>.05; men: β =.11, t = 1.57, p<.05). These data support research hypothesis 3. In addition to these results, additional analyzes relating to the comparison of means (ANOVA) reveal that women and men do not differ in the willingness to justify gender system (F (1, 126) = 1.40; p>.05) and in the attitude towards women' victimization (F (1, 126) = 1.39; p>.05). These analyzes point in the same direction as the results reported above. Thus, they provide empirical support to the main prediction of this study, that gender difference does not moderate the relationship between system justification and attitude towards women' victimization.

# 5. Discussion

This study tested the hypothesis that gender difference does not moderate the relationship between gender system justification and attitude toward women' victimization. More specifically, it was expected that: 1) the willingness to justify the system would be positive for both men and women; 2) system justification positively affects the attitude towards women' victimization; and 3) the relationship between gender system justification and attitudes toward women' victimization would be positive for men as it is for women. Data collected from the study provides empirical support for this prediction. Indeed, these indicate that the more participants justify gender system, the more positive is their attitude towards women' victimization. In this logic, these results confirm the idea that system justification tendency increases the willingness to legitimize existing sexual inequalities. It involves pro-outgroup favoritism, stigmatization of victims of aggression, or rationalization of status differences between groups. In the same vein, it negatively regulates the intentions of collective protests directed against unfavorable policies [28]. Under gender conditions, as is the case in this study, it reduces the motivation of the disadvantaged to act collectively to improve ingroup's subordinate position [5].

This study confirms that women too do not disapprove of violence against ingroup's members. The reason is that they are usually unaware of the unfavorable status they have. Very often, they develop practices and beliefs which in no way challenge their oppression. Likewise, during their socialization, they have been confronted with certain practices which push them to unconsciously justify gender inequalities [6]. In this wake, cultural norms and values are able to make a population potentially vulnerable [15]. Indeed, in cultures where social control is exercised from a rigid system, individuals and their actions are subordinate to family and ethnicity. From this perspective, women are seen as much less valuable than men, and should legitimately be disciplined by them. In the same vein, the literature maintains that social and cultural norms are integral parts of the symbolic dynamic which constitutes a central pillar in the regulation of intergroup relations and the negotiation of their continuity or discontinuity of the established social order

[12]. This implies that in contexts where these standards are very rigid, disadvantaged individuals and groups will be strongly motivated to rationalize existing arrangements on the same basis as favored individuals and groups.

This study was conducted in the Cameroonian societal context where it is accepted that cultural norms and values are preserved and propagated from generation to generation through different forms of practices such as legends, proverbs, songs, myths and rituals [4]. These allow us to understand the processes of sociocultural legitimation of women' victimization. Indeed, the culture transmitted by proverbs is generally of a sexist type, because it conveys the conception of women' inferiority [13]. For example, among the Betis, people of Centre and South Cameroon, women are made to pronounce the hymn to violence formulated as follows: "I love when my husband beats me, there I feel that my lion still has all his strength" [13]. In this ethnic group, popular imagery sees women as masochists, conveying the idea that they associate domestic violence and love.

Approval of women' victimization is not confined only to psychosocial and sociocultural variables. Religion, too, is an instrument of women' oppression by men. Indeed, the patriarchal character of religions has the consequence of reinforcing male supremacy [16]. They promote wife's submission and legitimize husband's right to correct her. As an example, in the [32] it is written that: "virtuous women are obedient (to their husbands) and protect what needs to be protected with Allah's protection and as to those whom you fear disobedience, exhort them, get away from them in their beds and beat them". Christian religion is also essentially patriarchal. The biblical family is endogamic, patrilineal, patriarchal, patrilocal, extended and polygamous... The father, like the God whom he adores, has all the rights over the men and women of his household. In certain circumstances, he can sell his children or offer them as a sacrifice [13].

# 6. Conclusion

The objective of the present study was to assess the causal relationship between gender system justification, gender differences, and attitudes towards women' victimization. In this sense, the hypothesis tested predicted that gender difference does not moderate the relationship between system justification and attitude towards women' victimization. In detail, it was expected that: 1) the willingness to justify the system is positive for both men and women; 2) system justification positively affects the attitude towards women' victimization; and 3) the relationship between gender system justification and attitudes towards women' victimization is as positive for men as it is for women. The results support these predictions. More specifically, they show that gender system justification and attitude towards women' victimization is equally positive for both men and women. It means that, despite their position as a disadvantaged group, women participate as much as men in legitimizing asymmetric gender relations. From this perspective, this research falls

within the same theoretical framework as previous studies which state that women who justify gender system do not engage in collective behavior to improve the unfavorable status of their group. Likewise, it agrees with the works which show that adherence of men and women to ideologies that legitimize gender inequalities favors their willingness to legitimize domestic or family abuses.

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