

*Looking Back,
Looking Forward:
Two Decades and
Shifting
Perspectives on
Familial Violence*

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The feminist movements around the world over the past twenty years gave voice to outrage and concern over widespread 'hidden' familial violence. Feminist work on violence against women has forced recognition of the difference between what we now define as violence and how little of it was and is recognised as crime. Broadly speaking, violence involves inflicting emotional, psychological, sexual, physical and/or material damage. I include emotional and psychological harm because threat and intimidation, have consequences for how safe women, children, and men feel. Panic about criminal violence is often fuelled by fear, focused on the diffuse threat people feel from its potential. Curiously, this threat is typically associated with strangers, not those known (Pain 1993). Whether physical or psychological, the harm felt by the recipient of violence varies, as does the long-term impact on his/her everyday life. A recent experience of violence, or its threat, may have significant effects, altering an individual's routines and personal lifestyle or it may have little noticeable influence on daily life. Living within 'climates of unsafety', such as in a violent household, where typically women and children feel specially vulnerable to verbal, sexual and/or physical aggression also takes its toll.

We have learned that much of family violence involves women as the victims of their current and former partners, and also includes parents attacked by their children; children abused by their siblings and parents; women and men attacked by their same sex partners; and occasionally involves men attacked by their female partners.

Feminist research displayed how even the most serious incidents of sexual and physical assault failed to be considered appropriate for inclusion within categories of crime (Dobash & Dobash 1979; Family Violence Professional Educational Taskforce 1991). Silence about violence was unspeakable, for some, and when women and children attempted to speak out, they were often told that such behaviour was 'private' and could not be mediated by state agencies. The legacies of the unspeakable horrors of family life became the stuff of quiet resistance and survival, until the second wave of feminism, in the 1960s. This time the debates ripped open the known but denied suffering of all too many.

When women began to talk about their lives, not only with their current partners but during their childhoods, a catalogue of violence was retold. Sexual assault research on children and adult women suggests the common danger to sexual integrity is from those who have authority, access, and intimacy to their victims. Moreover, as Liz Kelly's recent research (1988) in England tells us, children's peers, especially their neighbouring and school-attending cohorts, harass, threaten and assault them more than adults and family members. Thus, when we think about violence within families, we must also think about families-in-context. Somehow, when we think about promoting safe environments within which children can grow and thrive, we fail to remember that the contexts of families' lives are also crucial.

Women's typical assailants are their intimate and former partners; male friends, acquaintances, co-workers, neighbours and clients are the most likely to threaten and to be violent to women. Violence, for women, arises largely from familiarity.

While all crime surveys should be considered to be underreporting incidence and prevalence of violence within families, the recent Canadian study is worth highlighting here (Statistics Canada 1994): half of all Canadian women have experienced at least one incident of violence since the age of 16; almost one-half of women who reported violence reported violence by men known to them and one-quarter reported violence by a stranger; one-quarter of all women have experienced violence at the hands of current or past marital partner (including common-law unions); one in six currently married women reported violence by their spouses; one half of women with previous marriages reported violence by previous spouse. Canadian women reported to researchers incidents which rarely came to the attention of the police: only six per cent of sexual assault and 28 per cent of physical assault incidents were reported to police (Statistics Canada 1994).

Violence and its threat is an acute reality for many women: fear of sexual violence has resulted in restrictions on lifestyle and mobility. Despite all the evidence that women encounter more danger at home, women take more precautions outside the home than do men (Stanko 1990; Gordon & Riger 1988). Clearly domestic violence and sexual assault are interwoven within women's

heterosexual relationships with men. Women are also targets for sexual harassment and pestering on the street (Gardener 1980; 1988; 1990), and may also be subjected to attack because they are or are perceived to be lesbian (*see* Mason in this volume); because they are women of colour or of minority groups; or because they are not able-bodied (Stanko 1990). So being female—in spite of our many differences—has profound implications for our lives.

So too men's lives have been interwoven by violence at the hands of other boys and men, often their neighbourhood and school mates. By all accounts, young men are the most at risk to personal violence. Violence contributes to the formations of men's relationships to various forms of masculinities, which may themselves be embedded within diverse experiences and structures of communities, class, ethnicities and so forth. Simply put, men position themselves among themselves, and all too often, women become the targets for their own exercise of power and status (Connell 1987).

In terms of domestic assault, feminist analysis has emphasised the impact of serial, intentional, and directed violence by men on women (Dobash & Dobash 1979; Hoff 1990). The meaning of violence for each party lies within the individual, collective and cultural understandings of being male or female. The men who use violence against women in domestic situations, as most notably Dobash and Dobash (1992) and Daly and Wilson (1988) observe, do so as

- a result of men's possessiveness and jealousy;
- an expectation concerning women's domestic work;
- a punishment for women for perceived wrongdoing; and as
- a prop to men's authority.

One of the perspectives forwarded to criticise the overwhelming evidence of women's experiences of domestic violence is to say 'but men are battered too'. Yet most men do not sustain the same level of serious injuries at the hands of intimates (unless they are killed, often in self-defence, by women they batter)—men's friends and acquaintances, even male strangers are more dangerous to them. While there may be men who report experiencing violence at the hands of their wives/partners, the meaning and intent of this violence does not have the overall collective impact on men's lives as such violence does for women.

Desmond Ellis, a Canadian researcher (1994), for instance, in a study of separating couples found that both women and men reported various forms of violence in about one-third of the separations, but that during the separation process, husbands are most likely to use violence to control their wives. Intentional hurting of wives by husbands increased during the last six months prior to separation, reports Ellis, but is not a unique phenomenon to estrangement. In other words, while some women may slap their husbands or throw the dinner dishes, there is little evidence that it 'means' the same thing to both partners (*see* Dobash & Dobash 1992).

Research suggests that women's ties to 'coupledom' are reflected in patterns of domestic abuse, in women's escape plans, and in the widespread, continued denial of the existence of such violence within presumably happy marriages. The significant contribution of feminist scholarship is that we finally see the ordinariness of violence within the home and within the ritual of courting.

Whilst 'families' may provide comfort, companionship, community, and identity to many, for others, those features entrap within domestic terror. Blinded by the rhetoric and promises of safety against the so-called danger of the outside world, these families become the very agency of abuse. But we must be very careful not to simply label these 'families' as not like us: it is far too easy to say that some families are 'dysfunctional' and therefore the problem is within that family. The evidence is too overwhelming about how gender, power and control are exercised within families which themselves are nestled within institutions and structures which privilege men's control over women and children.

We can no longer deny that these private experiences of violence have had a significant impact upon women's lives and have had devastating consequences for women who flee violence. While in many respects, vulnerability to violence at home is 'distinctively female', we must not forget the children who are subjected to assault—both physical and sexual—within the home, and those who witness their mothers being terrorised. One interesting finding of the previously cited Canadian study, for instance, is that women whose fathers-in-law used violence against their mothers-in-law, were five times more likely to have violence used against them. This is not to privilege the simplistic 'answer' to domestic violence—that it merely displays a cycle of abuse. We must continue to ask why, in so many cases, not all male siblings reproduce violence. The question must be asked: why don't some men use violence, especially those men whose brothers use violence? What kinds of support for non-violence do men find to minimise their use of violence? How have they resolved almost inevitable conflict which arises from heterosexual coupledom?

So far, the worldwide movement to halt violence in women's lives has no equivalent in the demand for a halt to the violence in men's lives. The retort—'some men experience violence at the hands of their partners'—is not sufficient to diminish the lessons learnt about women's experiences of domestic violence. Any discussion of the 'meaning' of violence must include the wider context of gender—that is being male or being female—and the resources, individual and cultural, that we have to draw on to live 'free' of violence.

Responses to violence in families: confronting institutional support for violence

In thinking about professional practice, we must take a woman's experiences of the violence she experiences, and use her observations of the man's dangerousness, and her own strategies for escape as the guide for any assistance to her. If we are trying to avoid a woman encountering lethal violence, we must be prepared to listen carefully to women when they describe the violence men use.

Any violence prevention work must address the issue of women's subordination as fundamental to understanding why and how women view sexual and physical integrity at risk. But it must also offer a range of flexible options to assist, not just a set of rigid guidelines where many (most) women and children fall between the nets. Lives are just too complicated to be neat. If we restrict ourselves to a legal framework, for instance, within which to solely define domestic violence as criminal violence, then we opt for a perspective on violence which individualises it, muting the wider contribution of gendered power and institutional support for it.

Approaches to assisting those confronting violence within their families must vary and be sensitive to maximising support from the widest possible spheres. These support structures should be knowledgeable about the patterns of domestic abuse within families, and available in:

- social and welfare provision;
- housing, including safe refuge and transitional housing;
- supportive outreach by pro-feminist and non-judgmental community based groups;
- education;
- criminal justice intervention;
- medical services;
- women's economic independence, including provision for child care.

None of these, in isolation, is sufficient.

The buzz words are 'multi-agency work'. I define 'multi-agency' not by the fact that care and knowledge about domestic violence is now reflected in the practice of professionals. Let me remind you that the support of family and friends still is the single most important reason women cite for breaking free of violence. But the obstacles they encounter from those from whom they seek assistance—whose job it is to serve—are often mentioned by women as hindrances to their escaping violence.

I urge you to think like non-violent, supportive friends and family—and use your position as a professional to assist. So please, keep those lines of communication open, take criticism graciously, learn to overcome barriers which may continue to exist among the variety of people in this audience, and do not feel afraid to demand accountable service for those experiencing violence. I continue to learn each day about how 'violence' works—and I continue to work to minimise its impact. If you live in a place where familial violence has not reached the agenda, then put it on it. Most of all, resist your government's complacency. After nearly twenty years of working in the area of violence against women, I continue to be amazed at how often we seem to have to reinvent the wheel. Take this opportunity to discuss with others what they have found useful and helpful. Think about the many different situations and contexts

within which lives are led, and find ways of innovating change to meet diverse needs.

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EDITORS' NOTE:

This paper has been abridged owing to space restrictions. The full paper can be obtained by contacting Dr E. Stanko, Department of Law, Brunel University, Uxbridge, Middlesex U88 3PH, United Kingdom.