Book Reviews

Managing Violence against Women in the Face of Unequal Gender Power Relations:
A review of recent feminist accounts of violence in families

Wendy Weeks

After two decades of speaking out, resistance, refusal to suffer any longer, and social action by many women as part of the contemporary women's movement, violence in the home is now an issue on the public policy agenda in Australia. This is one of the major achievements of the women's or feminist movement in the seventies and eighties in Australia, leading to a statement about its unacceptability by the Prime Minister in April 1989 at the launching of a three year community awareness programme.

But Jocelynne Scutt's forward to *Working for Change* reminds us that a century ago Louisa Lawson spoke publicly about the need for women's refuges, spoke out against criminal assault in the home and asked 'Will it be believed, a hundred years hence, that such a state of things existed?' (McGregor and Hopkins, 1991 : xiii) It is a sobering thought. It reminds us that women have spoken out before – and again been silenced. It implies the significance of taking very seriously the project of understanding of what occurs in violence to women. The purpose of such a project is no less than to ensure that democracy moves out of the rhetoric of politicians and policy makers and into the bedrooms and kitchens of our neighbourhoods. Equalising gender relations, ensuring women have the respect and rights of full citizens, is to undertake the long haul of introducing democratic personal relations in everyday life, free of violent behaviour.

This essay will review the contributions of three recent publications to the range of contemporary debates and

practices addressing violence to women. Two of the books address the way in which the women's movement and the state have interacted to put the issue on the public policy agenda. These are Heather McGregor and Andrew Hopkin's Australian book entitled *Working for Change: The Movement Against Domestic Violence* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1991), and Gillian Walker's *Family Violence and the Women's Movement* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990) about the process whereby 'wife-battering' became 'family violence' in Canadian public policy and its effects. Walker's book makes its central focus the discourse about family violence, while the strength of McGregor and Hopkin's contribution is telling the story of the Canberra Domestic Violence crisis centre, in a way which is very useful for practitioners.

The third volume to be reviewed is the product of the Family Violence Professional Education Taskforce of the Ministry of Education in Victoria. It is entitled *Family Violence: Everybody's Business, Somebody's Life* (Sydney: Federation Press, 1991) and its purpose is to provide a resource book for professionals – doctors, lawyers, teachers as well as social workers. It is an example of further collaboration between community-based women's groups and State government personnel now seeking appropriate practice responses by professional workers.

The essay will briefly summarise each book and then discuss three issues. First, the way the issue of violence to women in the home is conceptualised and defined, significant as an abstract or intellectual exercise but because this

provides the framework for action. Second, the lessons and implications of the three books for professionals will be summarised. Finally I will comment on my view of the theoretical and practice issues ahead in the Australian context.

Family Violence
by *The Family Violence Professional Education Taskforce*

This publication aims to assist professionals – teachers, lawyers, doctors, social workers – to be knowledgeable for and sensitive to women and children in situations of violence who seek their help. It is an attempt to assist professionals to be part of the solution to violence against women, rather than to participate in keeping it invisible as they have often done in the past (See, for example, Healy, 1984). It locates the examination of violence in the home within an analysis of the status of women generally and the organisation of family life in Australia. Different family forms and the experience of Koori and non-English speaking families are emphasised. Chapter 3 provides an overview of research on family violence and Chapter 4 is an excellent and useful analysis of the various explanatory models, presented within a sound understanding of the politics of research.

The chapter on 'Support Services' is extremely useful for practitioners, and includes principles for practice (pages 131-132) which any agency staff meeting might do well to consider. Myrta Gonzales' discussion of issues for working with families from non-English speaking backgrounds is sensitively and knowledgeably written and contributes well to everyday practice.

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Chapter 6, on the law, is full of useful information – particularly for professionals in Victoria. The final contribution on the co-existence of child abuse and violence to women is a useful review of the literature on this topic.

This is a highly recommended source book especially useful for practitioners not familiar with the range of available literature. It is packed with useful, practical information, located within good reviews of the issues and debates.

Working for Change
by Heather McGregor and Andrew Hopkins

The strength of Working for Change is that it tells the story of the Canberra Domestic Violence Crisis Service (DVCS): its history (chapter 4), its organisational form (chapter 5), the operation of its service (chapter 6), its relationships with different levels of the police force (chapter 7) and its relationships with the courts and the legal system (chapter 8). This is especially useful for others involved in service delivery – both women's services and generalist services for both genders.

The description of the history and operation of the service is located within a discussion of social change in relation to domestic violence becoming a public policy issue in Australia. The authors attribute this to the actions of the 'grassroots' women's movement and to feminist women within the state, which they say occurred in the eighties. The account is a little unpersuasive in view of the opening both of Elsie refuge in Sydney and Women's Liberation Half-way House in Melbourne in 1974.

Given that refuges in Victoria were successfully negotiating funding with the State government in 1980, without disclosure of address, the account somewhat underplays the long campaign and successes of the women's liberation movement, outside Canberra. The lack of awareness of developments in other States leads to some inaccuracies; for example, claims about the DVCS being 'the first' when Domestic Violence Incest Resource Centre and Refuge Referrals (also a twenty-four service) were established earlier in Victoria. Similarly the use of inter-

vention orders in other States is overlooked. To my reading, the book also underemphasises feminist principles and rationales, preferring more widely used professional feminist terminology. That the authors may have been seeking to communicate with a wider audience than the women's movement, and so self-censured their analysis to be more acceptable, is a possibility not to be discounted. Feminist ideas and beliefs are frequently unpopular and often distorted in public ideology in Australia.

In spite of these limitations, Working for Change offers a very interesting and useful organisational case-study, and offers the possibility that grassroots or community-based feminists can work with state systems and professionals in the interests of women and children experiencing violence. This serves an important purpose when often relationships between community-based feminists and Stage governments are fraught with tension and misunderstanding, and are more antagonistic than co-operative. The Canberra service also provides an example of what the authors call a model of a 'hybrid' organisation, which uses a co-ordinator and participatory management rather than a pure form of collectivity, which will interest a number of community-based service providers.

Family Violence and the Women's Movement
by Gillian Walker[1]

When drawing on overseas studies for use in our local policy and service development, one has to be cautious about the different historical and social contexts. For example, overseas studies of the extent and nature of violence have been used too casually, and feed into the failure to find out what is actually happening here in Australia. However Walker's study is extremely useful because it documents and analyses the processes by which the concept 'family violence' was developed in Canada as a framework for public policy, and what this means for feminist conceptions of the issue, feminist services and the state. Not only is her method of analysis an excellent model of research, but the implications she unravels are useful warnings to us in Australia as we,

too, settle for the concept of 'family violence' to subsume and manage violence against women and gender power relations within the family.

Walker's book is a detailed historical study which reviews the process through which the issue of 'wife-battering' was put on the public policy agenda by the women's movement; how it became wife 'assault' (thus formulated as a legal problem) as feminists entered into discussion with state personnel; and how, over time, feminists adopted the term 'male violence', which was then subsumed into 'family violence' in protracted debates and discussions with professionals. Social researchers will enjoy her chapter 4 which shows how policy documents organise and re-organise concepts and social issues. Chapter 5 exposes the place of academic work in developing and legitimising particular concepts and approaches, and, by detailed analysis of many major theorists, shows how the knowledge of the women's movement (both women victims and refuge workers) has been incorporated into social science – often in limiting, rather than liberating, ways.

Walker's book is slow reading, covering an enormous amount of historical and conceptual ground. But, in my view, it is a classic and outstanding contribution to social policy and to feminist theory, and offers some timely and thought-provoking analysis to the Australian conceptualisation of violence against women in public policy.

Conceptualising Violence Against Women

The significance of Walker's study is to demonstrate how different terminology and concepts are not simply superficial linguistic debates, but contain different assumptions, different perspectives and experiences, and lead to fundamentally different frameworks and prescriptions for action.

From a historical and feminist perspective, 'the problem' of wife or woman battering is clearly gendered; related to gender power relations and the expression of widespread social inequality and distorted and impoverished conceptions of sexuality, family and community relationships. 'Gender power relations' is seen by feminists

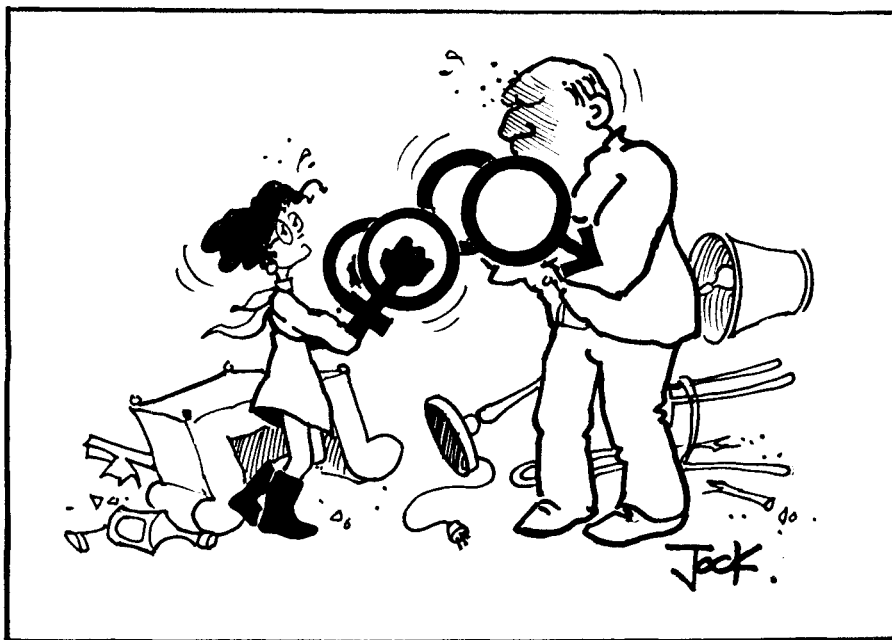as the most useful and explanatory concept, rather than violence per se.

The classic international feminist analyses began with Erin Pizzey's (1974) *Scream Quietly or the Neighbours Will Hear*, written on the basis of her work in England's first refuge or shelter. Schechter (1982) writing in the United States noted in a review of theories that, at that time, only the feminist studies located violence within families within the wider social context of gender power relations. Del Martin (1976, 1981) identified the pitiful failure of services to respond to wife–battering. Breines and Gordon (1983) in a widely used article were critical of the 'family violence' framework, and linked violence to adult women in families to incest and sexual assault. They identified violence as a reflection of unequal gender power relations, and gender as socially constructed within the family. To these authors 'Violence should therefore be conceptualised, not as a breakdown of social order, but rather as a power struggle for the maintenance of a certain kind of social order' (Breines and Gordon, 1983: 519). That 'social order' is, of course, patriarchy or the 'rule of the father', sometimes called 'male supremacy'. Elizabeth Wilson (1983), in her book entitled *What is to be done about Violence to Women*, (which is now out of print) linked violence to women across rape, domestic violence, incest, pornography and prostitution. She examined it in a historical context which showed the way in which sexuality had become distorted by violence as part of the 'commodification' of human beings, and women's bodies in particular. Her study described the interplay of law, policy and the media in the construction of the state's social response to violence against women.

Hanmer and Maynard's collection, published in 1987 under the title of *Women, Violence and Social Control*, contains a number of useful feminist analyses. The lead article is by Australian Anne Edwards and examines the changing conceptions of male violence as it has been socially constructed. Radford's chapter on 'Policing Male Violence – policing Women' and Kelly's much cited work on the 'continuum of sexual violence' are also in this volume. David Morgan's work on the way in which

some violence is normalised and legitimised by the state can also be found in this collection, and offers some useful starting points for researchers of male violence.

Scutt's (1983) Australian publication, *Even in the Best of Homes*, documented the cross–class nature of violence within the home, and has been pivotal in the debate in Australia.

In the three books which are the central focus of this review, family or domestic violence are taken as the current dominant conceptions of 'the problem'. McGregor and Hopkins side step the issue of conceptualisation and use 'domestic violence' and 'wife or woman-bashing' inter–changeably. They also express preference for the term 'victim', arguing that the local term 'survivor' 'tends to divert attention away from the fact that the woman is indeed the victim of criminal assault' (McGregor and Hopkins, 1991: xxiii). The Family Violence Professional Education Taskforce explain that the term 'family violence' is to avoid what was seen to be an earlier dismissive attitude to domestic violence ('it's just a domestic'), and imply that many professionals (and service users) in Australia are not yet ready to comfortably acknowledge the criminality of assault in the home.

In Walker's (1990) account of the Ontario debates, it becomes clear that gendered, 'class and structural issues'

(Walker, 1990: 207) can be fragmented into artificial ideological categories, through the processes of what she calls bureaucratisation; individualisation; professionalisation; and 'institutional absorption'. She shows how such processes 'have operated to frame wife–battering as a problem of the individual rights of women to protection from the violent acts of individual men' (p.207).

In this process, in the tradition of 'blaming the victim' spelled out by Ryan (1971), individuals become the problem. Women are labelled 'battered wives' (somehow a separate identity from their unequal status as women in the whole gamut of social life), and men become 'wife batterers' (or, in Australia, 'perpetrators'). The 'problem' becomes 'male violence' (not unequal gender power relations) and professionals within the state reformulate it as 'family violence', for response by the health and welfare services. The legal system claims it as criminal assault, and treats it by law and the penal system (which as Hatty, 1991, has pointed out in Australia has a poor record of reducing recidivism).

In summary, the account of what happened in Ontario shows that:

● Violence has become ideology. It is constructed as a single issue and 'reified' so it can be discussed without reference to the actor of the violence, the context of the action, or

variations in its extent. For example, 'violence' in a reified form can be discussed as 'breaking out' on the streets or in the family.

● The different experiences of members of different classes, racial and other minority groups within the legal and criminal processes can be downplayed.

● Violence against women is defined as an act by individual men against individual women, and criminalised. Male authority within the family remains unchallenged, but the individual criminals are punished and managed by the state, through its legal system. Or perhaps both parties become clients in the therapeutic programmes of the health and welfare services.

● Feminist claims for women's full citizenship remain marginalised. Walker claims that 'Family violence as ideology operates to turn away the feminist focus on the gendered organisation of power relations in the family' (p.216).

● The state, and all it sanctions in the media, in pornography, in terms of its own hierarchical gendered power relationships, is left unaccountable in terms of major re-structuring of gender power relations.

According to Walker, gender power relations within the family are thus reduced to categories which can be addressed through the legal and welfare system, without substantial reorganisation, and violence is 'managed'. This avoids far-reaching initiatives which increase democratic family group relations and greater equality between women and men. It avoids recognising feminist claims, and resourcing feminist services more substantially, and allows silence on other aspects of state power relations, while providing short-term management solutions in a limited 'social problems' framework. According to Walker:

Control of the issue is delivered to those in the social problem apparatus who are charged with maintaining 'the family' and who now have the means to enforce legal sanctions against individuals within the family unit'

(Walker, 1990: 110).

To highlight the debates about feminism and gender power, in a climate which most feminists experience as one of backlash to women's claims for full citizenship, Walker discusses alternative conceptualisations of the Montreal massacre in which fourteen women were murdered in the University of Montreal, Canada in 1989. This public mass murder was understood in public ideology as the act of an individual lunatic. Yet the man called the women 'feminists' as he separated them from the male students – he killed them 'not just because they were women but because they were women who stepped out of place. As such, they were, in his eyes, feminists and responsible for his failure and despair' (Walker 1991: 215).

VIOLENCE

In Australia, in the eighties and nineties, the debate about violence to women continues to shift from centre focus to being subsumed within the coverall of 'family violence'. The Victorian report, *Criminal Assault in the Home: Social and Legal Responses* (1985) was followed by legislation of intervention orders, which Scutt points out removed criminal assault back into the arena of civil disputes (Scutt, 1991).

The Australian National Committee on Violence Against Women (1991) recently published a position paper which challenges the 'family violence' construction. Its central concept is 'male violence', which is individualised by its definition as 'behaviour by the man, adopted to control his victim' (NCVAW, 1991: 4), presumably to

ground the effects of gender power relations in personal life. Its conception of violence is wide-sweeping in its reference to physical violence; threats; psychological abuse; social abuse ('which aims to isolate the woman from friends and family', p.5); economic abuse; sexual violence and harassment; racial violence and violence by carers to women with disabilities (pp.4–7).

In the current climate of economic rationalism, feminist analyses and special foci on sub-populations (even when they are 51%) are unpopular. The three year funding for community awareness of violence against women is insecure. In Victoria, the Community Education Taskforce in the Health Department has been abandoned, and the Family Violence Professional Education Taskforce in the Ministry of Education has been apparently reluctantly funded for one more year. Giving full and equal citizenship to women (and aboriginal people, and refugees, and residents from non-English speaking backgrounds, to say nothing of the unemployed) is expensive, and requires re-ordering of our social priorities. No-one involved in such social justice struggles can rest assured we have yet 'got it right'! What Walker's account offers is some lessons about how to be prepared to keep trying to obtain consensus on conceptualisation and frameworks to address problems and issues which are democratic, and which include women and men as individuals; which allow us to speak truth about power; and which holds the state accountable in all its operations.

Implications for Professionals

The major lesson for professionals from Walker is that we must be aware of our location within the state. The limits and uses of our knowledge suggests we abandon arrogance for an on-going, co-operative quest with the social movements which grow out of people's everyday experience. Walker notes that professionalism (with its values of objectivity and neutralism) always dampens the radical critique, and of this we should remain humbly aware and vigilant. The Family Violence

Professional Education Taskforce publication gives professionals the opportunity to be self-critical, informed, open to hearing painfully uncomfortable accounts of everyday life, and taking constructive action without 'taking over'. McGregor and Hopkins' account of the Canberra-based service offers an example of feminist activists and professionals within the main social systems working together.

Theoretical and practical issues ahead

If we are to develop useful local knowledge and locally informed practice in Australia, more Australian research and publications about successful projects are necessary.

Theoretically, there is a lot of work to be done to refine our conceptualisation. Walker's account is persuasive that 'family violence' ideology is inadequate. Yet the concept of 'male violence' does not necessarily lead us to a better future either – it is an ahistorical concept and can readily lead us to biologist explanations ('its all testosterone'); or to assuming men are and always will be violent – regardless of how we re-order our social relationships. Without discounting the insights of the 'continuum of sexual violence', the concept of 'male violence' also does not readily assist us in distinguishing why some men are very violent, others verbally violent, others violent to themselves (as in the extent of young male suicides), and others quite gentle souls.

Theoretically and practically, the needs and issues facing women victim/survivors of violence against them call for a linking of the personal and public aspects of their experience, as feminist analyses do. Only this will ensure that income security, jobs (which allow time for personal interests and responsibilities), affordable housing, education and leisure for women stay on the public policy agenda, along with violence which is too critical to ignore.

In an economic recession special vigilance will be necessary to ensure continued funding for women's services, and that services for men who

are violent are funded additionally, rather than using women's services funds. Family services – which might be better titled personal and community services – also require resourcing, but not at the expense of job creation, income re-distribution and cheaper housing.

The challenge to shift our ways of thinking to include democratic personal relationships and full citizenship for individuals will be likely to engage us for a long time to come. It would be exciting and useful, in this process, if the now twenty years of feminist theory and practice could be heard and learned from. This will be hard on the professionals, and especially the male professionals, because we get so used to enjoying our sense of expertise and authority, get set in our ways and mind-sets, and find it uncomfortable to learn. It is worthwhile when one glimpses understanding across the gender-gap, and probably the only way out of the long history of the 'battle of the sexes' and the tragic damage when it erupts into violence against women. ◆

Note

1 *Dr Gillian Walker, with Susan Penfold, is also the author of another important book, Women and the Psychiatric Paradox. She is currently the Director, School of Social Work, Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada.*

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