



# **Women, violence and strategies for action**

Feminist research,  
policy and practice

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edited by

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and Lynne Harne**

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# Contents

	<i>Notes on contributors</i>	ix
<b>1</b>	<b>Introduction</b> <i>Jill Radford, Lynne Harne and Melissa Friedberg</i>	1
<b>2</b>	<b>Stalking and paedophilia: ironies and contradictions in the politics of naming and legal reform</b> <i>Liz Kelly and Catherine Humphreys</i>	10
<b>3</b>	<b>Feminist strategy and tactics: influencing state provision of counselling for survivors</b> <i>Tina Skinner</i>	25
<b>4</b>	<b>Virtual violence?: pornography and violence against women on the Internet</b> <i>Terry Gillespie</i>	40
<b>5</b>	<b>Prostitution, pornography and telephone boxes</b> <i>Ruth Swirsky and Celia Jenkins</i>	57
<b>6</b>	<b>Damaged children to throwaway women: from care to prostitution</b> <i>Melissa Friedberg</i>	72
<b>7</b>	<b>Sexual violence and the school curriculum</b> <i>Lynne Harne</i>	86
<b>8</b>	<b>Shifting the margins: black feminist perspectives on discourses of mothers in child sexual abuse</b> <i>Claudia Bernard</i>	103

viii Contents

<b>9</b>	Supping with the Devil?: multi-agency initiatives on domestic violence <i>Ellen Malos</i>	120
<b>10</b>	Caught in contradictions: conducting feminist action orientated research within an evaluated research programme <i>Emma Williamson</i>	136
<b>11</b>	Domestic violence in China <i>Marianne Hester</i>	149
<b>12</b>	Theorizing commonalities and difference: sexual violence, law and feminist activism in India and the UK <i>Jill Radford</i>	167
	<i>Index</i>	185



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x Notes on contributors

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# 1 Introduction

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Jill Radford, Lynne Harne and  
Melissa Friedberg

*Women, Violence and Strategies for Action* continues the project of presenting contemporary feminist research on men's violence arising from discussions in the British Sociological Association Violence Against Women Study Group.<sup>1</sup> Like earlier books in the series (Hanmer and Maynard 1987; Hanmer *et al.* 1989; Hester *et al.* 1996) it introduces some new directions in feminist work, the changing contexts in which it is occurring, and connections between research and activist intervention strategies in feminist struggles.

A central aim is to present recent research findings and theoretical developments in relation to a range of forms of sexual violence including: domestic violence (Malos; Williamson; Hester); sexual harassment (Kelly and Humphreys; Harne); rape and sexual assault (Skinner; Radford); prostitution (Swirsky and Jenkins; Friedberg); pornography (Gillespie; Swirsky and Jenkins); and child sexual abuse (Kelly and Humphreys; Harne; Bernard). Consequently, the book advances the knowledge base surrounding the problem of sexual violence. A number of chapters refer to the way feminist work has placed this issue on local, national and global policy agendas (Kelly and Humphreys; Gillespie; Harne; Malos; Hester; Radford).

Over the last 25 years the subject has been variously named as 'violence against women', 'sexual violence' or 'gender violence'. The politics of naming and definition, an important theme in feminist theorizing, have been central to work in this field, shaping the development of research and knowledge creation. Feminist definitions, grounded in the experiences of women and children, have developed with the growth of feminist knowledge and understanding, as an outcome of research.

Earlier research named the problem as 'violence against women'. While it signifies the gendered nature of the violence, a limitation of this early concept was its failure to specify any connection with the abuse of children, although the interconnectedness of woman and child abuse has been a longstanding

theme of feminist analysis. In this volume contributors explore this interconnectedness from a range of standpoints.

Gillespie's examination of computer pornography (Chapter 4) identifies one connection in the massive growth of pornography which records and celebrates violence and abuse of women and children on the Internet, whether real or virtual. She also problematizes the ease of access to this material by children in the computer age.

While computer pornography is a relatively new issue, Harne (Chapter 7) records that concern about sexual violence in schools is an issue around which feminists have made significant interventions since the 1980s. However, her research indicates that, as we approach the millennium, sexual harassment and sexual abuse are being downplayed, and inadequately addressed in education policy. This she argues is a consequence of postfeminist notions that equality has been achieved, which has prompted something of a backlash against school provision for the girl child.

Friedberg (Chapter 6) highlights another link between sexual violence against girls and women in exploring the routes from care homes to prostitution. There are complex and interrelated issues connected to girls' and women's involvement in prostitution which were not only not addressed by the care system but exacerbated by it; e.g. girls' involvement in prostitution while in care which continues into their lives as women.

In an examination of the dilemmas facing women as mothers of children who have been sexually abused, Bernard (Chapter 8) explores how the sexual abuse of children impacts on women as mothers and partners of abusive men. Her chapter, which centres on the experiences of black mothers, criticizes the partiality of analyses which neglect racism and fail to recognize how women's experiences are structured through racism as well as sexism. For black women, protecting their children from racism as well as sexual violence poses complex and sometimes apparently contradictory dilemmas around divided loyalties which influence their help-seeking strategies. The Report of the Inquiry into the murder of Stephen Lawrence (Home Department 1999) demonstrates yet again the high levels of racism both in white communities and statutory agencies, which may seriously compromise them as sources of support.

Liz Kelly's (1988) concept of a 'continuum of sexual violence' represented a significant theoretical shift. Rather than focusing on the different forms of violence and abuse as discrete issues, the continuum recognizes commonalities between them in women's experience and theoretically as forms of violence underpinning patriarchal power and control. Developed to facilitate theorization of these commonalities and connections, the continuum is constituted through difference: the different forms of sexual violence, their different impacts, and the different community and legal responses to women, positioned differently, within and between cultures and through history. It illustrates the hollowness of the frequent criticism that radical feminism, in focusing solely on commonalities in women's experiences, offers universalistic explanations. Critics' claims that radical feminism fails to engage with speci-

ficity, change and difference in women's experiences and in relation to wider power structures, are misplaced. This anthology, by both including a global dimension and experiences of women and children often excluded from research agendas – black women and girls and women involved in prostitution, for example – further demonstrates that this criticism lacks foundation.

It is the global perspective which, following the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) 1992, has been influential in effecting a more recent shift to the language of gender violence.<sup>2</sup> However all three concepts: violence against women, sexual violence and gender violence continue to hold political and theoretical currency (see Kelly and Radford 1998), and all are used in this volume. Presenting feminist research and activist collaborations at the global, national and local levels carries forward the global feminist aims of 'bringing Beijing home' by illustrating the significance of thinking globally while acting locally in the development of feminist resistance strategies in relation to gender violence.

### Changing international contexts

The changed global context, highlighted by the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women 1995, and subsequent conferences like the 1996 International Conference on Violence, Abuse and Women's Citizenship, Brighton, has resulted in the inclusion of feminist activists and researchers in consultative processes by international bodies and many national and local governments. These initiatives were informed by feminist understandings of and research on gender violence, its nature, impacts, prevalence and critiques of the limited responses on the part of law, police and community.

Both Hester and Radford locate their contributions in the context of developing cross national collaborations in relation to research, law and policy initiatives. Radford (Chapter 12) engages in a comparative analysis of sexual violence, law and feminist activism in India and the UK, while Hester (Chapter 11) explores research and policy development in relation to (primarily) domestic violence in China. These chapters point to the ways sociohistorical specificity shapes the meaning, forms and nature of gender violence and has informed legal, policy and feminist responses. These discussions record the different histories of research and activism in these countries. In India, as Radford illustrates, the history of activism around rape is longer and more continuous than that of the UK, while, as Hester reports, violence against women and children in the home are connected concepts in China. Despite the many differences, both authors highlight the salience of the continuum of sexual violence in relation to developing strategies for resistance and change.

In addressing pornography on the Internet, Gillespie (Chapter 4) has identified a global issue requiring global solutions in relation to regulation and legislation. However, as she indicates, this work is still in its beginning stage in international forums, and is predominantly being conducted within

#### 4 Jill Radford, Lynne Harne and Melissa Friedberg

non-feminist discourses. Although some feminists are involved in international collaborations, this is an issue where more feminist engagement is needed if feminist analyses of pornography are to gain influence at a global level.

The difficult question of regulation of pornography generated through prostitution is also tackled by Swirsky and Jenkins (Chapter 5) in the context of local concerns about the promotion of prostitution in London and Brighton's telephone boxes. These authors also review the ways in which feminist research can both be facilitated and constrained by the competing standpoints and positioning of different interest groups.

### Changing national contexts

The changed international context has also had an important influence on national governments. Signatories to the Beijing Declaration are now required to report regularly to the United Nations on progress made on 12 'critical areas of concern' relating to the 'advancement of women and the achievement of equality between women and men' as a matter of human rights (United Nations 1996: 33). 'Violence against women' and 'persistent discrimination against and violation of the rights of the girl child' are respectively the fourth and twelfth of these critical areas, and as such are issues centrally included in government reports to the UN. That feminist research and activism features significantly in many national reports is a testament to the widespread influence of feminist work in this area.

While the timing of the Beijing Declaration 1995 meant that, in the UK, it fell to the Conservative government to submit the first national report, the change in government in 1997 marked a significant shift in the political climate in which feminist research and activist interventions are conducted. The election of a New Labour government brought with it both new potential and new contradictions for feminists working in this area. On the one hand, New Labour appears less hostile to feminist interventions than the previous government. In substantive terms New Labour's commitment to 'the elimination of domestic and sexual violence against women' was signified in its consultation document *Peace at Home* (Labour Party 1995). In government, this commitment was reflected in its encouragement of local government initiatives for *Tackling Violence Against Women* (Cabinet Office 1998). So despite the fact that New Labour's promised national strategy is still awaited at the time of writing, in some ways the new political culture appears more favourable to feminist research and involvement in policy making in this area than at any earlier period.

However, as is also becoming increasingly apparent, attempts to eliminate or mediate the impact of gender violence in societies committed to upholding the dominance of patriarchy, white supremacy, heterosexuality and multinational capitalism are not without contradictions. This is evident in New Labour's policy of *Supporting Families* (Home Office 1998) which affords

only two pages to the question of domestic violence. The tensions between the stated policy of 'supporting marriage' and dealing effectively with violence against women are unresolved in this document. For example, it endorses the Family Law Act 1996, introduced by the former Conservative government, which simultaneously simplifies the process of applying for injunctions against domestic violence, yet lengthens the time it takes for married women with children to gain a divorce (Hester and Harne 1999).<sup>3</sup> Promoting marriage 'as the surest foundation for raising children' (Home Office 1998: 5) serves to further marginalize children who spend some or all of their childhood outside of that institution, for example, children living with lone parents, children of lesbians as well as those in institutional care. It further strengthens a discourse which can lock women and children into abusive relationships, ironically 'for the sake of the children', as Bernard notes in Chapter 8. As Friedberg (Chapter 6) finds, an ideology which promotes the heterosexual nuclear family as the 'heart of society' (Home Office 1998: 1) impacts negatively on the already difficult experiences of, and further stigmatizes children in institutional care. Although stating that some of the government's proposed changes in Social Services are positive moves, she critiques their limitations in addressing some of the core problems in the care system. Further, *Supporting Families* makes no mention of the recognized problems in the Children Act 1989, which claims to prioritize the welfare of the child, but in practice continues to be interpreted through the presumption that children need contact with violent and abusive fathers, thus compromising their and their mothers' safety. Although New Labour claims to be tackling racism, there is no reference in *Supporting Families* to the problems in immigration law with its notorious 'one year rule' which presents some black and migrant women with 'a stark choice' between remaining with violent husbands or facing deportation (Southall Black Sisters 1995).<sup>4</sup>

While New Labour's commitments around violence against women are indeed welcome, its failure to understand its nature as structural violence rooted in the power relations of patriarchy, heterosexuality and masculinity as currently constructed, inevitably limits its capacity to respond with effective measures, either at the level of law change or in social policy. Kelly and Humphreys (Chapter 2) examine tensions and contradictions arising from shortcomings of recent legislation introduced to secure protection against sexual harassment and child abuse. However both the Protection from Harassment Act 1997 and the Sex Offenders Act 1997 focus on 'stranger danger', and fail to recognize the greater prevalence of these forms of abuse within (former) familial and intimate relationships.

Mirroring this reluctance to engage with what is considered to be the private sphere, is a reluctance on the part of government to engage with sexualized violence. While as is reflected in the work of Malos and Williamson (Chapters 9 and 10), considerable efforts have been made by government bodies and statutory services to address the problem of domestic violence in the UK, issues of sexual assault and sexual harassment have been the subject of less intervention. These issues are still represented as 'controversial',

as Skinner, Swirsky and Jenkins, Friedberg, Harne, and Radford all indicate in different contexts.

The questions of coercive sexuality and traded sex seem too close to the heart of the patriarchy for governments and policy makers, anxious to resolve the 'crisis of masculinity', to give serious attention to. This lack of attention disregards the abuse of women involved in prostitution and the impacts of prostitution on women more widely, issues raised by Swirsky and Jenkins, and Friedberg (Chapters 5 and 6). Similar neglect has also characterized responses to sexual harassment and sexual assault, issues which have declined in prominence in the UK (Harne, Chapter 7; Radford, Chapter 12).

Kelly and Humphreys (Chapter 2) emphasize the importance of recognizing the changed political context which has opened new doors to collaborative working with state agencies and national government, but note that strategic thinking is necessary if this is to be achieved without losing sight of feminist visions and theoretical understandings of sexual violence as central to the power relations underpinning patriarchal control.

### **Changing local contexts**

Feminist engagement with multi-agency collaborations at the local level has a longer history (Skinner, Malos, Williamson). Yet as all three note, multi-agency alliances can also generate tensions. Political clarity and strategic engagement are needed in sustaining a feminist influence in the development of service provision. Malos, in her review in Chapter 9 of the structure, organization and working practices of multi-agency domestic violence forums, attempts to analyse what makes for good practice and how it can be evaluated. She opens by posing some complex questions for feminists responding to the challenge of finding strategies for working collaboratively with local government and statutory agencies, positioned within bureaucratic and hierarchical structures, and operating within professional rather than feminist discourses.

Similar issues are raised by Skinner in Chapter 3, who also in the context of inter-agency consultations around rape and sexual assault, raises important theoretical questions about the nature of feminist strategies and tactics, and the criteria used to evaluate their efficacy in terms of both long-term progress towards the realization of feminist visions, as well as short-term gains in terms of achieving beneficial change for women and children. Like Kelly and Humphreys, she points to the need for feminists to reflect on how the changed political context impacts on the development of strategy and tactics in feminist activism.

### **Changing academic contexts**

The work presented here has also been conducted within a changed academic climate. In the UK, research around gender violence, despite its contemporary

global influence, has been labelled controversial and marginalized since the 1970s. In the late 1980s new challenges emerged from the postmodern/poststructuralist domination of contemporary social theorizing 'which presents a false dichotomy between radical social constructivism and various forms of universalism and essentialism' (Mellor 1997: 7). Advocates of the post-it discourse, for example, have joined with the more traditionally reactionary forces in promoting the agendas of men's movements, in an attempt to mount a more sustained attack on the substance and content of feminist research in relation to male violence (see Burgess 1997; Featherstone and Trinder 1997). With the support of the mass media, these challenges have recreated a political climate unfavourable to feminist analysis and research.

The impact of a changed academic and research context is a primary focus of Williamson, and Swirsky and Jenkins (Chapters 10 and 5). These chapters identify how academic concerns with scholastic achievement, income generation and research ratings impact on feminists as academic researchers. Both chapters explore how the changed academic context of the late 1990s aggravates already complex relations of accountability. Williamson explores the ways collaborative working with an inter-agency domestic violence forum and voluntary sector women's organizations raise additional demands in relation to accountability of the research process. She articulates some of the complexities and ethical questions this raises for a research student simultaneously required to meet academic criteria of scholarship and excellence and be accountable to community-based women's organizations. Swirsky and Jenkins discuss similar ethical and political dilemmas in the context of contract research sponsored by a private sector company and a local authority relating to prostitution, a subject which continues to be controversial within feminism and wider society.

## Conclusion

All contributors engage with the research, politics and process, contributing to debates around the nature of feminist research methodologies in the context of feminist activism. From a range of research locations and contexts spanning the local to the global, contributors identify the challenge of holding on to feminist visions in research, policy interventions and activism with a view to realizing the feminist aim of making the kind of changes that matter to the lives of women and children. The chapters demonstrate that working simultaneously towards the longer term goal of eliminating sexual violence and the shorter term aim of generating beneficial changes in legal protection, provision of appropriate services and in prevention policies within patriarchal structures involves dealing with difficulty and contradictions. However, it also demonstrates that contributors, as feminist researchers, are working to develop creative and strategic approaches to the dilemma of reform or transformation traditionally defined by malestream social science as irresolvable.

## Notes

- 1 The British Sociological Association Violence Against Women Study group, its influence, composition and aims, described in Hester *et al.* (1996) continues to meet regularly. It welcomes new members committed to furthering its aims of making links between feminist activists, academic researchers and policy makers, and producing research which will make a real difference to the lives of women and children within anti-racist and anti-oppressive practice.
- 2 CEDAW (1992) stated that the general prohibition of gender discrimination includes:

gender based violence – that is violence which is directed at a woman because she is a woman or which affects women disproportionately. It includes acts which inflict physical, mental or sexual harm or suffering, threats of such acts, coercion or other deprivations of liberty.

CEDAW affirmed that violence against women constitutes a violation of women's human rights.
- 3 The implementation of Part II of the Family Law Act, which includes clauses lengthening the time it takes to get a divorce, has been postponed by the government owing to opposition by those seeking a divorce.
- 4 The government has since announced some concessions to the One Year Rule, whereby women experiencing domestic violence within the twelve month period may be allowed to remain in this country, if there is an injunction, a criminal conviction or a police caution against their partner.

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