

Domestic Violence: Alcohol and Other Distractions - a Grassroots Perspective

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The subject of domestic violence is well researched and documented. Feminist researchers and academics have thoroughly examined the issue, laws have been changed, a national community education program is being launched today. Yet somehow, despite law reform, research and academic discourse, we live in a society which collectively condones violence in the home, a society where 20 per cent of people think violence is justified in some circumstances, and 33 per cent of people consider domestic violence should remain a private matter (Office of the Status of Women 1988).

That domestic violence is on the agenda of a conference about alcohol is no surprise. An estimated 80 per cent of all Australians believe alcohol to be a major cause of domestic violence (Office of the Status of Women 1988). That domestic violence is on the agenda of a conference about crime is an encouraging sign, because few people give domestic violence criminal status. This paper shall argue that domestic violence is a crime and must be responded to as a crime if social change is to occur; that domestic violence is not caused by alcohol; and finally, that the popular social construction of violence being caused by, or associated with, alcohol is a dangerous construction, which distorts far more than it clarifies and hides far more than it reveals.

Although this paper will draw on academic discourse indirectly, it will refer mainly to information and experiences and wisdom gained from listening to victims of violence through the author's experience as a grassroots worker. It is the author's belief that it is the survivors of violence in the home who are the most 'invisible' in the literature (Knight & Hatty 1987).

Domestic Violence in the Context of Patriarchy

It is important to place domestic violence in a social context to be fully aware of the institutionalised nature of the crime (French 1986). If we take time to ponder on the state of the world about us, there are some horrifying and disturbing factors which seem out of reach, which are beyond an ordinary person's comprehension, and which render individuals powerless. Globally, we see a

world full of strife, or international and inter-racial hatred and conflict, of political assassination and terrorism, and we are fearful in the knowledge that the major powers are in possession of enough nuclear warheads to destroy the world's population several times over. Violence and the threat of violence form the ultimate weapons of any society for protecting itself against invasion or attack. Violence is used to regain power and control as all societies inevitably resort to violence or threaten violence in attempts to solve strategic problems. War is a legitimised violent encounter between nations. Furthermore, it is the world's men who have been asked to go to war, to violently respond to threats, attacks, invasion, to a loss of power and control. Because war has been glorified, violence has become a legitimated form of male behaviour. Men become heroes and thus a moral judgement about the legitimacy of male violence is established. The outcome of this process is that violence becomes implicit in the institutionalised definition of masculinity (Connell 1987).

The legitimacy of social inequalities of all forms has similarly been established throughout history. White peoples' assumed superiority over coloured people has resulted in violent assaults on countries and people. Assumed superiority of some groups over others has taken the world to war. Inequality globally means that people die of starvation and deprivation while others die from overindulgences of various kinds. It is considered legitimate that wealth lies in the hands of a few, while the majority live in poverty. Pertinent to this discussion, men at birth become members of the superior gender and are automatically empowered to have superior rights, roles, opportunities and power, in comparison to females (French 1986).

Domestic violence occurs throughout the world; it occurs in our society, and often in the house next-door. To be understood it needs to be placed in the context of wider power relations (McIntyre 1984), in the overall social context outlined above (Breines & Gordon 1983); a context which feminist writers refer to as patriarchy. Patriarchal analysis places the primacy of violence in the social system, and from a practitioner's point of view, offers the only cogent response to domestic violence in the literature to date, for it takes the wider context into account and avoids the dangers resulting from a focus on distractions like alcohol and other associated variables which we tend to see 'next-door' and which form the basis of commonsense knowledge. This patriarchal analysis places responsibility for the violence with the perpetrator, and does not blame or implicate the victim. Furthermore, it suggests strategies for social change.

Definition of Domestic Violence

The inappropriateness of the term has been discussed in the literature. The term 'domestic violence' probably evolved as a result of the perceived need for a tidy, all inclusive description of the various types of violence occurring in the home (McIntyre 1984). However, a clear picture of what we are talking about is lost

when we use the term. The word 'domestic', because of its common usage in relation to warm, cosy lounge rooms or sunny gardens or picnics by the river, tends to soften the word 'violence' and thus trivialise the issue.

A common attitude is that violence in the home is not as serious as violence in the streets. Somehow, the social construction of violence perpetrated by strangers results in outrage over a street massacre, yet the social construction of violence perpetrated by a family member often results in a judgment that 'she must have deserved it'.

At another level, the answer to the question of how domestic violence is trivialised depends upon a analysis of power. When domestic violence occurs there is always an inequality of power in the relationship. Thus, domestic violence refers to child physical, or sexual abuse, incest, serious deprivation of either physical social, emotional or economic needs, and to physical, sexual psychological abuse of a partner, and even to murder. It is the use of power over others, the abuse of ascribed power and the expression of a need for domination and control.

What is not obvious from the term is that the victims of the brutality which occurs in the home are overwhelmingly women and children and that brutal treatment by a member of a household leaves another or others living in fear. Unlike conflict, which naturally and expectedly occurs between equals, where there is violence there is an identifiable victim, and there is an inequality of power.

The author's definition of what constitutes violence in the home is any behaviour by a more powerful household member which invokes fear for safety or results in physical or psychological damage in another. Many people do live in fear - fear of a beating, fear of death, fear that the threats they have heard will be carried out, fear that their child will be raped or beaten. So that fear of violence is with these women and children every day of their lives. Not fear of strangers, but fear of a close family member.

Why then is this form of violence not regarded seriously? The answer lies in the patriarchal values of marriage and family, and to the fact that the victims are overwhelmingly women. The ideal family is a socially constructed concept, a desirable social arrangement sought by most Australians. The mythology tells us that families provide us with happiness, food, love and safety. Thus we gather ourselves together in groups called families in search of security, intimacy, and fulfilment according to the promise of patriarchal values. Our value system encourages us to go on believing in these attractive ideals, and blinds us to the violent reality we refuse to accept. As the arena for the socialisation process, the family becomes the mediating link in the production of gendered behaviour and the oppression of women. If domestic violence were to be taken seriously, there would be a massive disruption to these social arrangements.

Lastly, the term 'domestic violence' evokes a response from society which is incongruous with a criminal offence. If we talk about assault, criminal violence, sexual assault, torture, murder, we are clearly referring to behaviours generally accepted by society to be crimes. If we talk about domestic violence, society reacts with scepticism and suspicion. Why? We must turn to our history for an explanation.

The History and Law in Relation to Domestic Violence

It is important to remember our history, lest we forget. Although it is true that in very recent years gender inequality has been progressively removed from statute law, the law in the past was thoroughly gendered. For example, until recently, women had no choice but to relinquish all rights to individuality and to her name if she married a man. Until recently, women did not have the right to vote. Until recently, women were paid less than men for doing the same work. And so on.

Not only did the law institutionalise gender inequality but it actually encouraged violence by husbands against their wives. For example, in British common law, women were considered, until recently, to be the property of men, that is, the property of the father before marriage and the husband after marriage. Husbands were authorised to 'chastise' their wives with 'any reasonable instrument'. This was modified, allowing men to beat their wives as long as the weapon they used was no thicker than the man's thumb. Until recently, men were able to claim compensation for the damage to their reputation if their wife was raped.

The history of social intervention is not impressive. At the turn of the nineteenth century, the problem of family violence was taken up by the discipline of psychology (Allen 1982). Violence in the home was regarded individualistically. Experts expounded theories about violent men and female victims. It was claimed, for example, that men are violent because of some internal abnormality. Females are victims because they are masochistic. Violence occurs because women work. Violence occurs because women stay at home. Men are violent because they have stressful jobs. Men are violent because they do not have a job. Men are violent because they were beaten as children. Women are victims because they were beaten as children. Men are violent because they drink too much. Women are beaten because they drink too much. Whether an intervention was being made by a lawyer, doctor, magistrate, police officer, marriage counsellor, next-door neighbour or psychologist, invariably the victim was blamed. Somehow, the welfare of victims was not paramount. The violence was seldom addressed by members of the helping professions, and refuge workers were among the few who validated women's experiences.

One thing we do know is that when a plethora of expert opinions, theories and contradictions emerge and change does not occur, the experts are not looking at, or seeing, the bigger picture. They have become distracted. To demonstrate this

point the topic of alcohol will be used.

Alcohol and Domestic Violence

Domestic violence is a subject surrounded by mythology. Domestic violence is perpetuated by mythology. One of the many myths is that domestic violence is caused by alcohol. 'If only we could dry these blokes out, we'd stop domestics.' These are the words of many police officers. 'He only does it when he's drunk.' The words of many victims. 'He's as gentle as a lamb when he's sober.' The words of the next-door proponents of the alcohol theory. 'It's the grog that does it.' The words of many perpetrators.

There are many problems with this theory. Firstly, alcohol is certainly involved in some incidents of violence in the home, but many incidents of violence in the home do not involve alcohol. Secondly, alcohol consumption occurs in households where there is no violence, and many alcohol dependent people are not violent. In other words, alcohol consumption is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for domestic violence to occur.

In any case, reports by victims of domestic violence which indicate that violence is more likely to occur when the perpetrator is drunk (Western Australian Task Force on Domestic Violence 1986), must be questioned. Experience in listening to victims who claim alcohol involvement, is that on further enquiry, they will very often relate violent incidents when the perpetrator has not been drunk. Alternatively, victims will report that the perpetrator is drunk most of the time, including times when there is no violence.

A dangerous aspect of the association between alcohol and domestic violence relates to the belief that people cannot be held responsible for what they do if they are drunk. Judges and magistrates have been known to regard alcohol as a mitigating factor in violence, thus the perpetrator is less culpable. Moreover, the alcohol is held partly responsible for the violence and the perpetrator is partly excused. Further, perpetrators of violence commonly blame the alcohol as an excuse for their violence and women are seduced into accepting that it is the 'alcohol's' fault, giving alcohol animate status. This further depowers women, for they conclude that the man is not responsible for his violence. If women believe, as they invariably do, that if the drinking stops the violence will stop, they are more likely to stay living in the violent relationship. They will go on believing, often for many years, that they can help stop the violence and save their marriage by focusing on alcohol consumption - if alcohol is the cause, then he just has to stop drinking.

Thus women are blinded to the broader implications, and are encouraged, yet again, to take over the responsibility of what is happening. If they were to consider some different questions - 'how is it that, although drunk, he has the

presence of mind to beat you where it will not show?'; 'why doesn't he beat you up in front of your friends when he is drunk?'; 'why do you become mellow and carefree when you're drunk?' - then women will begin to understand the violence in a context of unequal power relations, and not be so inclined to accept the alcohol myth.

It is often claimed that alcohol consumption has a disinhibiting effect on behaviour, and this may well be true. Nevertheless, some questions must be asked here. If alcohol consumption disinhibits behaviour, then an underlying attitude must be present to allow this disinhibition to occur. Alcohol consumption does not cause violence. Rather, the role alcohol has, is to uncover and unleash ingrained attitudes. The necessary condition is a belief that under certain circumstances, a man has a right to be violent. This attitude or belief may not be articulated or even conscious, but is obvious behaviourally. Finally, many women report violent assaults that come from nowhere, no conflict, no trigger, no understandable explanation. These unpredictable violent assaults occur when alcohol has been consumed or when it has not. The necessary condition is a conscious or unconscious belief in male supremacy.

Distractions

From listening carefully to the wisdom of battered women, it is clear that there are many distracting theories of violence which act as obstructions to social change, and alcohol must be placed in the list of distractions. Others are stress, economic hardship and unemployment, conflict, social class, poverty, drug abuse, and so on. Certainly, one or some of these factors are present in domestic violence some of the time. But not one is present all of the time.

Women as property

Feminists have long been making a patriarchal analysis of domestic violence, yet the issue they raise shakes the very foundations of our culture. The wounded and beaten survivors of violence tell stories of being owned, of being controlled, and being possessed by their violent partners. They all speak of having fewer rights than their partners, of being treated as inferior objects, and of having lost their sense of who they really are. These women are not free. They live in fear, in social isolation, emotional and often economic deprivation, and they are controlled. They very often accept blame for what is wrong, blame for the fact that their home is not a safe place, blame for the fact that their family scenario does not live up to the patriarchal promise.

Changing attitudes about gender inequality is a slow and difficult task. Workers in the field aim to break down the barriers and explode the myths which surround domestic violence. However, gender inequality is so ingrained in our history, in our culture and value system, and in our political and economic systems, that the task seems impossible. Law reform generally precedes practice in the process of

social change. However there is so much at stake, one wonders if the law reform towards gender equality will ever be reflected in practice. Yet, how can we tolerate a society which is so reluctant to give people the fundamental right to be safe in their own home?

Law reform

The re-emergence of the women's movement, and the development of a sophisticated and credible feminist theory became the driving force towards the criminalisation of the domestic brutality which society and the law for so long had failed to acknowledge. Thus law reform occurred (in most states) and domestic violence is on the agenda of a conference about crime.

The spirit of the legislation (Domestic Violence Ordinance, ACT 1986) is:

that nobody
under any circumstances
no matter what
ever
deserves to be treated violently.

Thus the written law acknowledges the fundamental right of people to be safe in their home. The law reform is aimed at facilitating social change, and the legislation has the potential to achieve social change. It is based on values of equality and self-responsibility, and is free of the influences of dominance and oppression. Yet the practised law is influenced by private attitudes, because the police, lawyers and magistrates, like the people next-door, are ordinary members of our society who are consciously and unconsciously imbued with patriarchal values and beliefs.

A police officer who says 'we'll take him away to sober up' is blinded to the fact that a violent assault has occurred. A solicitor who says 'don't you want to give home one more chance?' is considering the future of the marriage is most important and is blinded to the fact that s/he is encouraging a woman to live in fear and danger. A magistrate who says 'I can't remove this man from his house' is blinded to the fact that it is the woman's house too, and she has had to flee from it.

Most relevant here are patriarchal values of ownership of property, violence as an overt symbol of patriarchal power, marriage and the family as contemporary vehicles for the reproduction of patriarchal values, and the hierarchical nature of all groups within our society. Hierarchical social structures give some people more rights than others and some people power over others.

It is important that we stand behind the law reform so that momentum is not lost, and that we resist the temptation to become distracted. The law can have a powerful effect in the moulding of social values in some circumstances, and a rigorous enforcement of the domestic violence legislation would, over time, have

a considerable impact on the legitimacy of the belief that violence is an acceptable form of behaviour in the home.

Conclusion

Distractions, attitudes and social change

The problem with scientific research is that it reduces human experience to a set of statistics which are used to make claims about causes and which have an impact on responses and policies. If a variable is shown to be related to a problem, it is believed that by manipulating the variable, the problem will be reduced. This analysis ignores the relationships between the variables, and fails to address the wider context, and the complexity of the issue. Often, too, variables become causes in people's minds.

While ever there is a focus on the claim that violence is associated with alcohol, social change will be impeded, and at best we might have strategies to reduce alcohol consumption with no necessary reduction in the level of violence. Likewise, if the focus is on conflict, then resources will be put into programs to teach conflict resolution, and the underlying power inequality is not addressed. And so on for all the other distractions.

Resources must be channelled into changing attitudes, and more importantly, towards the empowerment of women. Regardless of how much a man drinks, if he has an attitude that women have a right to equality, that he is not entitled to self-righteous superiority, that he is not the owner of the family members, that he has no right to possess and control anybody, and that he is absolutely responsible for his own behaviour, no matter what, then he will not be able to behave violently towards a woman or child, ever again. However, the prognosis for change in perpetrators is very poor because hardly ever do violent men accept responsibility for their behaviour, and hardly ever do they actively want to change. Their promises about change are generally about getting the woman back.

Lastly, until women are in a position of social and economic equality, in relation to men, there will always be violent oppression.

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