

Peace on Earth Begins at Home:

Reflections from the Women's Liberation Movement

Judith Lewis Herman

Chapter 8 in Martha Minow,
Breaking the Cycles of Hatred: Memory, Law, and Repair
Commentaries Edited by Nancy Rosenblum

Princeton University Press, 2002, pp 188-199.

How can we stop violence against women? This has been a central question facing the international women's movement in the last three decades. As feminists have sought to name and understand the vast scope of this problem, we have also begun to think about political violence in new ways. In this paper, I would like to expand on some of the commonalities of violence between nations and between intimates.

First, a point that may seem obvious, but that is all too often overlooked, is that violence works. People often use violence successfully to get what they want. In sexual and domestic life, violence is used worldwide by men to dominate women. In the US, a recent large-scale national survey, conducted by the National Institute of Justice in collaboration with the Communicable Disease Center, reports that 18 % of women have been victims of rape, and 22 % have been beaten by an intimate partner (Tjaden and Thoennes 1998). Most such crimes are never reported to police. Victims fear the consequences of disclosure, because more often than not, the perpetrators are well-respected men, and their crimes are socially condoned.

The high prevalence of sexual and domestic violence is by no means unique to this country. Throughout the world, crimes such as wife-beating, rape, rape-murder, honor killings, dowry killings, and witch-burnings serve a political function of intimidation, reminding women of their place (UNFPA, 2000). These acts of violence, often carried out in a ritualized fashion similar to lynching, are both expressions of a system of male supremacy and a means of perpetuating it. (Brownmiller, 1975).

When it comes to communal or national conflict, people also frequently use violence to get what they want. One group of people may want to drive another group out of a disputed territory or kill them and take possession of their land. A recent example would be the campaigns of "ethnic cleansing" in the Balkans. Or one group of people may want to establish tyranny over another in order to benefit from their labor and service. The Apartheid system of South Africa represents an extreme modern example. These crude aims, common to the long history of warfare, have lost none of their popular appeal in the modern world, though they may

be cloaked in modern racist, religious or nationalist rhetoric. They can not be realized without systematic resort to violence.

Systems of Coercive Control

While violence is necessary to establish and maintain a system of dominance, it is rarely sufficient. A well established system of coercive control aims to legitimate the power of the perpetrator, so that overt displays of force are rarely required. When dominance achieves legitimacy, the violence upon which it ultimately rests is hidden, minimized, or excused. Violence is also far more effective when combined with other methods of control. As battered women say: it's not just the violence. It is the entire system of coercive control that enables a batterer to control his family, a gangster to control a neighborhood, or a small ruling elite to establish tyranny over an entire nation. Similar methods of coercive control are practiced worldwide, whether in the vast political prisons of a police state or in the intimate prisons of abusive families (Amnesty International, 1973). The perpetrator seeks to monopolize and control the sources of information, to isolate his victims from any potential social support, and to suppress any signs of autonomy or initiative. Isolation may be carried out by physical seclusion and restraint, or just as effectively by shaming and social degradation. Autonomy and initiative are broken down by intrusive regulation of the patterns of daily life, by capricious enforcement of inconsistent and petty rules, and by interspersing feared punishments with occasional unpredictable rewards. These methods, consistently applied, tend to reinforce the belief that the perpetrator is all-powerful and break down any external signs of resistance.

For some perpetrators, however, outward submission is not enough. They are satisfied with nothing less than total surrender of the will. This is the ultimate fantasy of the totalitarian dictator, the torturer, the pedophile, the sadist (Goodwin, 1993). As long as the victim is able to maintain any degree of dignity or self-respect, the perpetrator's dominance is not complete. Perhaps the most effective way to destroy a victim's self-respect is to force her to betray her

own moral principles or her most valued relationships. Once this has happened, the victim may offer no further resistance, because she no longer feels that she deserves to live.

Many systems of coercive control develop elaborate degradation rituals to destroy the victim's moral identity and to alienate her from family and community. The sociologist Orlando Patterson describes these rituals as an essential feature of slavery (1982). Degradation rituals are also highly developed in totalitarian systems and in some religious cults, and they are central to the practice of violence in intimate relationships.

We do not yet understand how individual perpetrators, in privacy, manage to re-invent the same coercive methods that are practiced in totalitarian political or religious systems. In many authoritarian, all-male organizations, initiates may be taught to participate in demeaning or frankly violent attacks on women as part of group bonding. For example, research on the prevalence of rape on college campuses has found that assaultive and coercive behavior toward women is fostered in groups such as sports teams or fraternities (Koss, 1994). The pornography industry is another common cultural transmitter of sadistic fantasies and practices. A frank ideology of domination pervades the pornographic media; indeed, some feminist theorists have proposed that the erotization of dominance is the defining characteristic of pornography (MacKinnon and Dworkin, 1997). A considerable body of literature suggests that pornography renders most viewers more callous toward women, and reduces inhibitions among men already disposed to sexual violence (Malamuth and Donnerstein, 1984).

Another important link between private and political violence may also be found in the organization of the commercial sex industry. Prostitution of women and children occurs worldwide. We have little reliable data on the full scope of the sex trade; we do know, however, that it ranks very high in the commerce of the world. The power to buy sex is an accepted male entitlement in many cultures, including our own. We also know that the demand for commercial sex can not be fulfilled without recourse to violence. Women, even desperately poor women, simply do not volunteer for prostitution in anywhere near sufficient numbers to satisfy the

market. This is the case even in countries where prostitution has been decriminalized or legalized. Moreover, a major portion of the sex trade involves children and adolescents, who cannot volunteer, and therefore must be recruited by deception or force. The sex trade, whether on a local, national, or international level, is largely controlled by criminal gangs (Hughes, 2000).

John Keegan, the military historian, calls attention to the durability of so-called “irregular” forces throughout the ages and across cultures (1994). These are cohesive and secretive groups of men, often bound by elaborate symbols and rituals, an ideology of heroic superiority, contempt for civilians, especially women and children, and a glorification of violence. In modern terms they are the gangsters, the secret police, the death squads, the paramilitaries of the world. They are the “made men” who carry out programs of ethnic cleansing and keep dictatorships running. They are also the men who organize the local and global traffic in drugs, guns, and sex.

Systematized methods of coercion are part of the working repertoire of local gangsters. In prostitution, these methods must be developed to a high art, since the entire enterprise depends upon the control of women’s bodies. Thus the pimp, a familiar figure throughout the world, may be an important intermediary between the practices of private and political violence.

The sex trade might also be considered an endemic reservoir in which methods of coercive control are maintained and refined, to be called upon in times of war. The enslavement of so-called “comfort women” by the Japanese military during World War II is an example that has only recently been brought to public attention. In this case, an existing criminal enterprise was nationalized and incorporated essentially unchanged into the war-fighting machinery of the state. In the propaganda of the time, this practice was legitimated through the common fiction of the willing victim; the prostituted women were officially called “patriotic volunteers for the Emperor.” Their true status was more apparent in the popular epithet “sanitary public toilets.”

The social dishonor of these women was so extreme that even 50 years later, in the first lawsuit filed against the Japanese government, only one victim was willing to reveal her name. Kim Hak-soon, a sixty-eight-year-old Korean woman, testified that she decided to come forward only after all of her close relatives were dead, so that her disclosures would not bring shame upon them. The feminists who exposed these atrocities pointed out that while official state sponsorship of prostitution ended with the war, widespread trafficking in Asian women persists to this day, with passive if not active collusion of the authorities (Watanabe, 1994).

Resistance and Intervention

For victims of intimate violence, effective resistance begins with understanding that violence is a means to an end. If the purpose of the violence is to establish dominance, then the strategy of resistance must engage the entire system of coercive control rather than reacting to isolated acts of violence. A new conceptual language is often required to clarify the nature of the problem and to challenge the rationalizations and excuses that legitimate the violent behavior. Battering, stalking, and sexual harassment are terms developed by the women's movement to describe types of calculated and relentless oppression to which women are frequently subjected.

In this country it has taken three decades for the feminist movement to effect a significant change in public attitudes toward sexual and domestic violence. In each instance, it has been necessary to reframe public understanding of these crimes, so that they are understood not as episodic, impulsive acts of "passion" but as systematic efforts to keep women in a subordinate state. As awareness of domestic violence has increased, as more services and legal protections have become available, and as social tolerance for domestic violence has declined, it appears that more women are escaping sooner from violent relationships. We are even beginning to see some hopeful signs that in this country the death rate from domestic violence has begun to decline (Fox and Zawitz, 2000).

For individual victims, the path to recovery begins with the ability to name the problem and disclose it to others. As in the case of the so-called “comfort women,” victims who speak out often risk public disgrace as well as retaliation by the perpetrator. That is why the organizing strategy of the feminist movement begins with the creation of confidential relationships in small groups of women, where secrets can be shared without shame. The mutual support of the group is a powerful antidote to the fear and isolation imposed by the perpetrator. Once victims feel some sense of belonging, they may find the courage to expose the violence and to challenge its legitimacy.

The next step is the creation of a safety plan. This is a concept developed most fully in the battered women’s movement. Establishing safety is a complex project that requires careful attention to each woman’s particular circumstances. She must come to a realistic assessment of the risks she faces and develop a strategy for self-protection and economic survival. She must consider whether she can remain in her own home environment, whether temporary flight to shelter or a safe haven may be necessary, and whether and under what circumstances she might seek intervention. These considerations are fraught with danger, because initial signs of resistance are likely to be met with an escalation of violence.

There is no one formula for ending the violence. There is considerable evidence, however, that appeasement does not work. Most perpetrators respond only to clear and decisive intervention by persons in a position of authority. This intervention may take the form of a civil protection order, police arrest, or, in the most serious cases, criminal prosecution.

For bystanders who might wish to help stop the violence, several obstacles may present themselves. Apathy may be the most obvious impediment to action, but apathy may be a mask for ignorance, confusion, or fear. Bystanders may fail to recognize a pattern of coercive control and may tend to dismiss incidents of violence as an unfortunate aberration or as a private quarrel for which both parties are equally to blame. The perpetrator’s denials and rationalizations are

often convincing, especially when buttressed by claims of familial sovereignty. Bystanders are often deterred by the argument that the victim's plight is simply none of their business.

It may be also difficult for bystanders to empathize with the victim. Most victims do not behave according to sentimental notions of nobility and innocence. People who have been subjected to coercive control are often profoundly demoralized. Their capacity for initiative and autonomous action may have broken down under the domination of the perpetrator. Their behavior may appear ambivalent or even at times frankly self-destructive. This makes it all too easy to blame them for their own predicament.

Then there is the practical difficulty of confronting perpetrators. Because so much is at stake, most perpetrators are not inclined to give up without a fight. Bystanders who seek to intervene may risk harm to themselves, and the cost of intervention is generally more than anyone wants to pay. Token displays of concern, or even of force, are rarely effective. Establishing safety is a serious undertaking, requiring careful strategy, well-coordinated mobilization of resources, and sustained attention over a prolonged period of time. It is hard to stay engaged without becoming as obsessive as the perpetrators themselves.

For all of these reasons, bystanders often fall into a pattern of ineffective intervention. Long periods of denial or appeasement may be punctuated by brief episodes of arbitrary resort to force. This inconsistent behavior may actually worsen the plight of victims and deepen their feelings of isolation and despair.

One of the first studies of police intervention in domestic violence cases demonstrated that a policy of mandatory arrest was the most effective deterrent to further incidents of violence (Sherman and Berk, 1984). I believe that such policies were effective because they were clear, simple, and consistent, and because they forced the police to take domestic violence seriously for the first time. Mandatory arrest policies provided a powerful antidote to ingrained police attitudes of ambivalence or frank sympathy for perpetrators. More recently, many advocates for battered women have argued that such policies are too inflexible, and should be modified to

allow greater self-determination for victims (Mills, 1998). Clearly, any intervention that denies power and agency to victims is ultimately self-defeating. Intervention is most likely to be effective when it is based on a strong cooperative alliance between the victim and the intervening third parties.

Analogies in the political realm are legion. The recent history of peacekeeping efforts in the Balkans offers a tragic lexicon of ambivalent and ineffective interventions. For years, bystanders ignored or misinterpreted clear indications of a murderous policy of domination. It was only too easy to rationalize inaction by attributing the violence to “ancient ethnic hatreds,” for which all parties were equally to blame, rather than to one group’s organized and systematic aggression (Malcolm, 1996).

A textbook example of an ineffective “safety plan” would be the establishment of the so-called “safe haven” in the Bosnian city of Srebrenica. In this case, the peacekeepers did not merely fail to deter aggression, but actually facilitated it, both by their own inadequate display of force, and by their efforts to prevent the persecuted group from organizing in its own defense. The tragic result was a massacre in which peacekeeping troops were forced to act as accomplices.

This outcome was only too predictable to anyone who has worked for any length of time in the battered women’s movement. Belatedly, would-be peacekeepers discovered the same principles that have proven effective in cases of domestic violence. The violence stopped only when the bystanders finally took a clear and unambiguous stand in defense of the victims and intervened with sufficient force to contain the aggressors.

Recovery and Reconciliation

Once safety has been established, survivors often need assistance to recover from the effects of prolonged and repeated exposure to violence. Fear, bitterness, shame, and self-hatred may persist long after the relationship of coercive control has ended. In order to

overcome the legacy of violence, survivors need the opportunity for some kind of reckoning with the past. They need to be able to make sense of their experience to themselves and to tell their stories to others. And they need some form of social acknowledgment of the injustice they have suffered, in order to restore their dignity and repair their sense of connection to a larger community (Herman, 1992).

Then there is the question of what is to be done with the perpetrators. People who have grown accustomed to getting their way by force have little incentive to change. Battered women have learned this the hard way. Many, if not most victims of domestic violence do not initially wish to end the relationship; they simply want the violence to stop. They often hope for reconciliation and are eager for their partners to seek “help.” Batterers, however, rarely think there is anything wrong with their behavior. Even those who genuinely regret the violence generally feel entitled to control their partners, and view violence as a legitimate last resort.

Treatment programs for batterers have had limited success in changing these attitudes. Their main effect seems to be on victims rather than on perpetrators. The supervision of a domestic violence treatment program buys battered women some time to get their lives together, so that they are prepared for permanent separation if it becomes clear that their partners are not going to change. For sex offenders, the treatment success rate is even more uninspiring. Motivation for change is generally low. Most perpetrators deny or minimize their offences, blame others for their troubles, and seem to lack empathy for their victims. A court mandate is generally needed to enforce even token compliance. At best, long-term treatment offers the kind of close external monitoring that seems to be required if these men are ever to be integrated safely into their communities (Barbaree and Marshall, 1998).

Crimes of violence against women are still, for the most part, crimes of impunity. Most victims do not seek justice in court. Among those who do, a surprising number are not primarily interested in seeing the offender punished. Rather, they want to ensure that the offender will no longer be permitted to abuse other people or to profit from his crimes. In addition, they often

want some material restitution for the harm done to them. But beyond these concrete and practical measures, what victims want most is vindication. They want the bystanders, finally, to take a stand. They want public acknowledgment that what the perpetrators did to them was wrong. They want the burden of shame lifted from their shoulders and placed where it belongs.

In the US, the Victims of Crime Act (1984) introduced a number of reforms designed to make it easier for victims to seek justice. These include first, the possibility of obtaining compensation for the expense of medical or mental health treatment, based on an administrative complaint. This grants victims some recognition of the harm that has been done and supports their efforts to recover, without requiring them to endure the rigors of an adversarial legal process. Because victim compensation funds are drawn from fines on convicted offenders, the award of compensation constitutes an indirect form of social restitution. No compensation can ever fully remedy the harm of violent crime. Victims derive great moral satisfaction, however, from the knowledge that offenders have been compelled to contribute to their recovery.

Additional reforms aimed to make the criminal justice system less intimidating to victims and encourage them to come forward. Courts were staffed for the first time with Victim-Witness Advocates, who could explain the complexities of the legal system, help victims prepare for trial, and accompany victims in court. In cases where the offender was convicted or pled guilty, victims were granted the opportunity to address the court at sentencing, giving what is called a "Victim-Impact Statement." These measures were designed to give the victim greater voice in the justice system and to restore trust between the victim and her community. Recent studies indicate that such reforms do indeed increase victims' sense of satisfaction with the justice system (Kilpatrick et al, 1998).

In the political arena, countries emerging from war or dictatorship face similar questions of justice and restitution. How can amends be made to victims? How can perpetrators be held accountable? How can victims and perpetrators go on living in the same community? Like

victims of intimate violence, victims of political violence need a respectful and open forum for public witnessing and acknowledgment of their wrongs. Granting victims a voice is particularly important where crimes have been committed under the cloak of state legitimacy.

The most highly developed recent example of such a forum on a national level is South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). In this unprecedented experiment in national consciousness-raising, testimony was heard from over 20,000 people, and hearings were broadcast daily on radio and television. Like the victims of sexual and domestic violence, the vast majority of the victims of state-sponsored violence who testified before the TRC did not seem interested primarily in punishment of the offenders. Rather, they sought restoration of their own sense of dignity, through public recognition of the injustices they had suffered (Krog, 1998).

Because amnesty for political crimes was contingent on individual confessions, the TRC was also very successful in breaking down the perpetrators' denials. With over 8,000 confessions, the TRC was able to document organized criminal activity at the highest levels of government (Meredith, 1998). These revelations, though they came as no surprise to the black majority, established an uncontested history of massive, state-sponsored human rights violations that discredited the Apartheid system even among many of its white beneficiaries.

However, granting amnesty to perpetrators left unresolved the question of accountability. Like the perpetrators of sexual and domestic violence, the vast majority of offenders who filed amnesty applications felt entitled to power and did not regret their crimes. They confessed simply to avoid the risk of prosecution (Gobodo-Madikizela, 1999). Once they acknowledged the facts, they were acquitted of any further responsibility for either apology or restitution to their victims. It is hard to imagine satisfactory social reconciliation under such conditions.

The VOCA model for victim compensation, though it was developed for individual crime victims, might be useful also for nations attempting to rebuild in the aftermath of war or dictatorship. This model offers a new way of resolving the vexed question of accountability, by placing the burden of restitution on criminal perpetrators *as a group*. This avoids the twin pitfalls

of accountability that is either too specific or too general. Holding individual perpetrators accountable for compensating their victims is too specific. Too many legitimate claims will go uncompensated, simply because the particular torturer, rapist, or murderer can not be identified or caught. On the other hand, holding an entire society accountable for the crimes of a minority is too general. It is not clear, for instance, that a democratic successor government can justly be required to pay reparations for crimes committed under a previous dictatorship that was detested by a majority of its own subjects. Often, as in the case of South Africa, it is hard to give priority to the claims of victims when an entire country has been plundered and impoverished.

In the VOCA model, the monies for victim compensation are not drawn from general tax revenues, but rather from a trust fund based on fines levied on convicted perpetrators. Thus, the government does not assume direct responsibility for the damages, but it does assume responsibility for bringing perpetrators to justice, collecting fines, and recovering any stolen assets. Symbolic show trials of a few egregious offenders are less important, in this model, than systematic enforcement of the law against endemic criminal behavior. Compensation for any particular victim does not depend on conviction or the particular person who wronged her, but perpetrators as a group are held accountable for making some amends, both to victims and to the community.

The case of the women forced into prostitution by the Japanese army during World War II illustrates the importance of the principle of accountability. Because the Japanese government refused either to apologize or to compensate victims, a group of former “comfort women” attempted to press their claims in the US courts, arguing that ordinary limits of jurisdiction did not apply in cases of massive human rights violations. This case challenged both the traditional concepts of sovereignty that have protected state-sponsored violence, and the traditional

concepts of privacy that have protected sexual and domestic violence. It also exposed prostitution as a form of organized crime at the intersection of the public and private spheres.

Although private donors offered compensation to the victims, most refused to accept the money, even though many are elderly and in need. Clearly, these women understand that money alone is meaningless as a form of restitution. They rightly insist that those responsible for the crimes, individually or as a group, must be the ones to pay damages. It is not the place of bystanders to offer compensation. Bystanders can contribute much more to social healing by joining with victims in their fight to hold perpetrators accountable for their crimes. When victims perceive that the larger society recognizes the legitimacy of their cause, and is willing to take action on their behalf, social reconciliation can begin.

References

- Amnesty International (1973). Report on Torture. London: Amnesty International Publications.
- Barbaree HE, Marshall WL (1998). Treatment of the sexual offender. In Wettstein RM (Ed.). Treatment of offenders with mental disorders. New York: Guilford.
- Brownmiller S (1975). Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Fox JA, Zawitz MA (2000): Homicide trends in the US. US Department of Justice: Bureau of Justice Statistics.
- Gobodo-Madikizela P (1999). Personal communication.
- Goodwin JM (1993). Human vectors of trauma: Illustrations from the Marquis de Sade. in Goodwin JM (Ed): Rediscovering childhood trauma: Historical casebook and clinical applications. Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Press.
- Herman JL (1992). Trauma and Recovery. New York: Basic Books.
- Hughes DM (2000). Men create the demand: Women are the supply. Lecture at Queen Sofia Center, Valencia, Spain (November).
- Keegan J (1993). A history of warfare. New York: Knopf.
- Kilpatrick DG, Beatty D, Howley SS (1998). The rights of crime victims--Does legal protection make a difference? Washington, DC: National Institute of Justice Research in Brief (December).
- Koss M (1994). No safe haven: Male violence against women at home, at work and in the community. Washington DC: American Psychological Association.
- Krog A (1998). Country of my skull. Johannesburg: Random House South Africa
- Malamuth N, Donnerstein E (1984). Pornography and sexual aggression. New York: Academic Press.
- Malcolm N (1996). Bosnia: A short history. New York: New York University Press
- MacKinnon CA, Dworkin A (1997). In harm's way: The pornography civil rights hearings. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press
- Meredith M (1999). Coming to terms: South Africa's search for truth. New York: Public Affairs.
- Mills LG (1998). The heart of intimate abuse: New interventions in child welfare, criminal justice and health settings. New York: Springer.
- Patterson O (1982). Slavery and social death. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press

Sherman LW, Berk RA (1984). The specific deterrent effects of arrest for domestic assault. *American Sociological Review*; 49: 261-272.

Tjaden P, Thoennes N (1998). Prevalence, incidence and consequences of violence against women: A national survey. Washington, DC: US. Department of Justice NCJ 172837.

UNFPA (2000): *Lives together, worlds apart: Men and women in a time of change*. New York: United Nations Population Fund.

Watanabe K (1994): Militarism, colonialism, and the trafficking of women: "Comfort Women" forced into sexual labor for Japanese soldiers. *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*; 4: 3-16.