

Violence against women: Diversifying social responses

Maria Perez-y-Perez

The inaugural international conference, Violence Against Women: Diversifying Social Responses, held in Montreal, Canada, in October 2006, was organised by RÉSOVI, a research team committed to “social responses to violence against women”. This report from Maria Perez-y-Perez highlights the issues associated with violence against women that are of particular concern internationally.

The RÉSOVI team is part of the Interdisciplinary Research Centre on Family Violence and Violence Against Women (CRI-VIFF), which is an active partner in the Alliance of Five Research Centres on Violence within Canada. For RÉSOVI, the conference was originally intended as an opportunity to share their research findings at the completion of a 5-year research project. However, recent social policy responses introduced in an attempt to combat the many types of violence perpetrated against women in Canada, were considered homogeneous in approach and intent. This was highlighted by the results of RÉSOVI's own research which indicated that for many women in Canada, the social responses designed to protect them could sometimes have the opposite effect and, thereby, increase the risk of experiencing violence. These findings prompted the decision to organise an international conference on violence against women.

Researchers, practitioners, policy makers and students from more than 40 countries came together at the three-day interdisciplinary conference held in Montreal. Participants were able to share their knowledge, experiences and insights about violence against women and the social responses developed to combat such violence in various places around the world. Importantly, the issues considered by presenters focussed on ways in which to refine the understanding of how different social contexts and inequality impact on designated groups of women and their experiences of violence, and the strengths and limitations of government and community initiatives to address the specific needs of women.

The Governor General of Canada, Michaëlle Jean, in her opening address, stressed Canada's crucial role in eradicating all forms of violence against women. This is being achieved by

breaking down barriers to inequality and building an environment where harmony and respect are valued above all else to ensure that women's rights are upheld, and to protect the dignity of women. Jean encouraged researchers, practitioners, policy makers and students to continue to break the silence and to encourage dialogue on the issue of violence against women. She congratulated the conference organisers for their foresight and their contribution to this vision.

The key themes of the conference were: violence against women in different social contexts and living conditions; social responses to violence against women; major debates and issues relating to social responses developed to address violence against women. These themes were the focus of approximately 150 presentations. Forums and workshops also provided opportunities for participants to share their own experiences of the strategies they were using in the struggle to have violence against women recognised as an important social issue. Such “brainstorming” facilitated interdisciplinary debate around the development and funding of appropriate social service responses, for example criminal justice and therapeutic intervention practices, and the political and social recognition of violence against women.

Addressing the scope of violence

Presentations based on research findings, practice experiences, or informed commentary addressed the different contexts and places in which violence develops and occurs - where its effects are felt most - examining the motives, dynamics and function of violence perpetrated by individuals, groups, populations and societies. The physical and mental health consequences of violence and abuse in the lives of women were also highlighted, including conditions such as depression, anxiety,

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psychosomatic symptoms, eating disorders, and sexual dysfunctions. The effects of violence upon the reproductive health of women was particularly noted, such as the increase of sexual risk-taking among adolescents, the transmission of STDs - including HIV/AIDS, and unplanned pregnancies. Presenters underlined the need for appropriate social policy and human service responses to be developed and implemented.

The societal impact or cost of violence against women was the subject of a number of workshops that I attended. This drew attention to the substantial burden on health care systems and resources, indicating that women who have been physically or sexually assaulted use health services more than women with no history of violence, in turn increasing health care costs. The economic consequences of violence and abuse in terms of domestic or intimate violence were also discussed. For urban women in particular, domestic violence is linked to poverty. Research indicates that opportunities for abused women to move out of poverty are slim; conversely, the possibility of entering poverty is extremely high particularly when cultural factors are included (Downe, 2006; Purvin, 2006). Battered women often have to cease regular work activities due to the abuse they sustain, and many women are forced by their circumstances to take sick leave because of physical and psychological harm. This creates a situation of employment instability that has detrimental effects upon women's career paths - interfering in educational attainment and economic mobility. Women often find themselves locked into precarious, low-paid employment. They are often trapped in socioeconomic circumstances in which they continue to be vulnerable to abuse and other negative outcomes associated with poverty (Chanda & Rahman, 2006; Dominguez & Purvin, 2006; Lacroix & Brigham, 2006; Purvin, 2006; Severson & Postmus, 2006). Ultimately, the poverty status of families is perpetuated over several generations curtailing the life chances of daughters and grandchildren (Dominguez & Purvin, 2006).

Discussions on the social responses to violence against women highlighted local and national attempts to combat the problem with varying degrees of success. For example, the contradictions and accomplishments of different social policies on domestic violence and the shifting roles and responsibilities of government and community organisations

in prevention strategies and responses to domestic violence all had an impact on how effective these actually were (Resko & Veneskey, 2006). Further issues included policies that define battering or domestic violence as a social problem; the shifts between woman-centred and family-centred policies; service recommendations; and governments' conceptualisations of their responsibility in terms of funding and administrative oversight for action on and responses to domestic violence (Resko & Veneskey, 2006; Tutty, Ursel, & Douglas, 2006).

Social responses to violence against women outside the realm of domestic violence underlined the difficulties encountered by governments in attempting to define the nature of violence and how to respond appropriately. For example, in the case of sex workers, social and legal responses have tended to be paternalistic and archaic, and driven by notions of "morality". In turn, these result in the exclusion and stigmatisation of prostitute women in what can be considered to be a form of social violence in itself (Damant, Gagnon, & Noël, 2006; Deslauriers, 2006; Pérez-y-Pérez, 2006).

Reflections on globalisation and gender relations

Globalisation has impacted upon gender relations in complex and contradictory ways. A number of social structures exist that support the gender imbalance and disguise its inequity, making it appear natural and universal. For example, existing and new constructions of citizenship are predicated upon civic duty (the payment of taxes, public office, military service/duties) from which women have often been excluded through the public/private dichotomy and the subordination of women within the family. Moreover, the role of men in the public arena has been supported by divisions between productive and un(re)productive work, relegating women's work to low or

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We hope that we have succeeded in inspiring all actors of society concerned by the question of violence against women because we are convinced that the mobilization of communities is at the heart of the solutions of the future.

— Dominique Damant, Director of CRI-VIFF, October 2006

negative economic value and status. Although globalisation has opened up new spaces, and the possibility of undermining the traditional gender hierarchies and devising new bases for gender relations, power has become fragmented through the emergence of new social formations, often to the detriment of marginal groups populated largely by women (Downe, 2006; Smit, 2006). Since the state is no longer the sole institution that defines identity and belonging, we see the dispersal of power through what has been termed non-democratic forces, such as corporate enterprises, markets, and movements of capital. The repercussions of this can be seen in the increasing feminisation of poverty (Damant, 2006; Smit, 2006).

The weakening of the effective decision and policy-making power of individual governments, notably in economic and labour force policies, has seen governments unwilling to assert the rights of their workers in order to avoid discouraging crucial investment. Economic systems which value profits often do so at the expense of female labour (Lambert & Martinez, 2006). Women are seen, and hence favoured, as a passive, compliant workforce that will accept low wages without demanding labour and human rights (Namal, 2006). The traditional sexual division of labour (the location of women in employment to which they are regarded as inherently suited; for example, the caring professions, domestic

work or textiles industries) has been furthered through the addition and recognition of new locations and forms of work (services industry, tourism, work in free trade and export process zones). What remains constant is the low economic value accorded to work performed primarily by women in conditions of exploitation, poor job security, violation of human rights and the link to violence perpetrated against women (Oxman-Martinez, Lacroix, & Hanley, 2006; Resko & Early, 2006).

It would be an oversimplification to state or make the assumption that the consequences of globalisation have been exclusively detrimental for women or that they have had the same impact in all locations. In some situations, the global pursuit of profit has enhanced employment opportunities for women, where previously they did not exist, thus decreasing women's vulnerability to violence and/or exploitation. While initially these situations may have been exploitative (and in the case of sex work – illegal), they have, nevertheless, facilitated some degree of economic independence for many women. This, in turn, has provided the space for women to assert their own agency and has generated the self-esteem that comes from such independence. My own research paper on the decriminalisation and "professionalisation" of sex work markets in New Zealand, which I presented at the conference, argues this point (Pérez-y-Pérez, 2006). In other situations, the consequences have led to powerlessness and sexual exploitation. For example, Monica Smit's (2006) keynote address highlighted the linkages in some countries between economic transition and an increase in trafficking and forced prostitution of women and children.

Indeed, recent history has repeatedly demonstrated the fragility of women's advancement that appears to be threatened by change. Gender relations have been shown to

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be fluid and subject to constant (re)negotiation within the family, the workforce, and the community. In many instances, women have participated in national self-determination movements, but the social reconstruction that has followed national liberation has not included guarantees of their rights. Further, it became apparent during the course of the conference that forms of inequality exist regardless of a state's prevailing political ideology. The particular manifestations may differ, but the reality of women's subordination remains constant. Advancement in women's interests is susceptible to being lost through political, economic, and societal changes, those that are deemed generally progressive and those that are destructive.

The way forward: five key conditions

As a result of the conference, five key actions or conditions were identified that were considered vital to achieving the elimination of violence against women, and to consolidating and protecting the already-existing and effective social responses to such violence. The first condition calls for the need to reaffirm that violence against women exists, to maintain an awareness of the problem by developing a network of international experts in the area of violence against women. The second condition calls for violence to no longer be considered an individual problem, but rather to be perceived as a social problem. The third condition calls for social responses to violence to be consistent. Thus, all actors directly concerned, such as the police, courts, health services, humanitarian aid organisations, and child protection services, must adopt a common vision of the problem of violence against women and how to address it. The fourth condition requires an international awareness campaign on violence against women to be implemented and maintained. Finally, the fifth condition concerns funding and calls for investment in areas where there is no funding, the protection of existing funding, and, importantly, that new funding be made available for "new realities". This will also enable the four previous conditions to be put in place and action to be taken. The five key conditions, which formed the basis of a consensus agreement, were arrived at through formal (forum feedback) and informal exchanges between the 500 conference delegates. In introducing the consensus at the closing of the conference, Dominique Damant, Director of CRI-VIFF, called for collective

responsibility: "Women should not carry the shame of violence, rather this shame should be carried by the whole of society."

In conclusion

In a statement to the Commission on Human Rights in 2002, the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, Radhika Coomaraswamy, called women's issues "the greatest challenge of the international human rights movement" (as cited in Willmott, 2003). Ms Coomaraswamy states: "For many women and girls in the world ... the family is not always the site of care and nurture. Though some are subject to the brutality of individual family members, others suffer violence because cultural practices sanction the violence and make it legitimate and acceptable within the greater society" (as cited in Willmott, 2003). Moreover, such structural forms of abuse are not always seen to constitute violence. They are often embedded in the economic and social life of the community. As Downe (2006) suggests, because of the link to notions of culture, these forms of violence are particularly tenacious and can, therefore, be extremely difficult to eradicate.

Though attitudes towards and assumptions about violence against women have been reassessed in contemporary contexts, research presented at the conference asserted that gender-based violence continues and appears to remain unabated. Though the answer would seem deceptively simple, the solution is complex: Gender inequality fuels violence against women, and the power imbalances it creates are not easily rectified. Clearly the scope of violence experienced as a result of these factors would remain behind closed doors if such gatherings of researchers, practitioners, academics, students, professionals, and policy makers, made possible by the conference in Montreal, did not take place. Indeed, the conference has brought to light the responses, the diverse approaches to working towards – albeit step by step – the goal of eliminating all forms of violence against women. Changing societies overnight is unrealistic; however, the overarching message from the conference is that change is achievable in ensuring that women have the voice, influence, and resources to assert their priorities, rights, and dignity and to achieve a sense of security, stability, and safety. The inaugural RÉSOVI conference on violence against women has been a step in this direction.

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Sexual abuse and subsequent suicidal behaviour: Exacerbating factors and implications for recovery

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Suicidal behaviour is a cause of concern among many Western countries; in general it is most common among young women, although young men are more likely to complete suicide. This research used qualitative methods to explore the narratives of 24 New Zealand women, to examine the events leading to, and implicated in the recovery from, suicidal behaviour.

The research confirms sexual abuse as a common precursor to suicidal behaviour; several women asserted that they would not have attempted suicide if they did not have a sexual abuse history. Importantly, the women noted that the effects of sexual abuse were exacerbated by problems with disclosure, linking to issues of control, with implications for intervention and recovery. Many of the women stressed the problematic nature of the forms of

intervention they accessed; some regarded their experiences of intervention as reinforcing their feelings of lack of control.

The key points are:

- This research found that most considered sexual abuse to be the most important factor in their becoming suicidal, although other factors were involved. However, it is important to note that not all suicidal young women will have been sexually abused and not all young women who have been sexually abused become suicidal.
- Many of the women spoke of difficulties in disclosing the abuse, including: being too ashamed to disclose; not having anyone they considered appropriate to tell; fear of not being believed – and this fear being justified; unhelpful or detrimental responses.
- Sexual abuse often led to feelings of powerlessness, which has implications for treatment and/or therapy. Research participants spoke passionately of the

need for therapy to be a partnership, in which the timing and process of disclosure of abuse was under the control of the abuse survivor, following the development of a trusting relationship. However, this may raise difficulties for the therapist whose priority is to deal with the cause of suicidal behaviour quickly.

In conclusion, while sexual abuse alone is neither necessary nor sufficient in itself to lead to suicidal behaviour, the majority of participants felt that if they had not been sexually abused and/or if their disclosures of sexual abuse had been handled appropriately they would not have become suicidal. Furthermore, the need for shared control in therapeutic relationships raises issues for the timing and process of disclosure.

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