



Domestic Violence

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Definition

Since the 1960s, there has been growing awareness regarding the issue of domestic violence as a form of violence against women, which has been largely influenced by the work of feminist activist and scholars in North America and Europe (Dobash and Dobash 1992). Other terms have been used to describe the same phenomenon, including domestic abuse, spousal abuse, wife battering, marital violence, intimate partner violence. Though there is no doubt that this problem has existed for much more than five decades, the tendency to label it as 'private matters' or 'marital disagreements' has obscured the reality of women living with abuse in their home.

At a general level, domestic violence can be defined as the means used by a man in order to assert his control and domination over his intimate partner, whether they are married or not (Mullender 1996). It can involve incidents of physical and sexual violence, as well as verbal, psychological and financial abuse. Though some of its manifestations may be associated with particular cultural or religious groups – e.g. forced marriage and honour killing in South-Asian communities – domestic violence affects women from all classes and backgrounds.

Main Issues

As a social problem, domestic violence is a gendered phenomenon that is mostly perpetrated by men towards their female partners – though some men may experience abuse at the hands of their female partners and domestic violence can be present in same-sex relationships. While recent statistics have suggested similar rates of domestic violence towards men and women, these studies present methodological issues and therefore provide a partial and erroneous view of the phenomenon. Indeed, strong research evidence demonstrates that women experience more frequent and severe violence, and suffer more injuries as a result of the violence. In addition, women are more likely to fear for their lives and to be killed by their intimate partners.

There are therefore significant consequences for women who have experienced domestic violence. Indeed, domestic violence affects women's safety and well-being, as well as their physical and mental health. Isolation is also an important feature of women's experiences of abuse, and some groups of women are particularly vulnerable to isolation and violence – e.g. disabled women, women with precarious immigration status, and women who do not speak the dominant language in the country they live.

While domestic violence has long been seen as an 'adult' problem, there is now growing recognition that it also affects children who are exposed to the abuse of their mothers (Hester et al. 2007). Over the last two decades, research has emphasised the short-term and long-term consequences of exposure to domestic violence, particularly on the children's development and functioning. In contrast, limited work has focused on children's and young people's perspectives on domestic violence (Mullender et al. 2002).

Critical Placements and Perspectives

Over the last four decades, there has been growing social awareness of domestic violence as a problem affecting both women and children, and social workers have been instrumental in the implementation of policies and practices in this field (Mullender 1996). However, there has been a patchy and uneven recognition and understanding of the issue in health and social care agencies.

In most countries, there is no state agency specialised in working with women who live with domestic violence. In this context, refuges and outreach services, generally feminist-based community organisations, have provided assistance and support to a large number of abused women and their children. These organisations may not always have sufficient long-term financial resources, but given the recognition that some of the manifestations of violence may be associated with particular groups it might be necessary to further develop specialised services for women from black and minority ethnic communities.

The growing awareness that children are also affected by the abuse of their mothers has led to the recognition of children's exposure to domestic violence as a child welfare matter. This has led to the development of policies and practices that aim at protecting and supporting these children. However, child protection social workers have been criticised for blaming women for their partners' violence, while failing to engage with men and challenge their abusive behaviours.

Furthermore, in order to tackle this social problem it appears necessary to develop policies and practices that engage with male perpetrators, but also to design prevention programmes.

References

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