

Making Connections - Building Bridges: Research into Action - Ten Years of the Child and Woman Abuse Studies Unit

Presented by *Liz Kelly* at *The Child and Woman Abuse Studies Unit Tenth Anniversary Event*, University of North London, 1997.

Also published in *The British Journal of Social Work*, 1998, 28, 601-613.

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This paper is an overview of the work and perspective of CWASU between 1987 and 1997. It has involved much summarising and selection, and inevitably means some areas have been neglected, others emphasised. Rather than offer a bland outline of the work we have done, we have chosen to use this opportunity to reflect on and analyse the contribution of CWASU to feminist approaches violence against women and children.

The idea of the Child Abuse Studies Unit was conceived in 1986, when two feminist lecturers in Social Work at the then Polytechnic of North London - Mary MacLeod and Esther Saraga - had a vision which they made happen. They saw a need for a forum and a base from which to develop feminist perspectives on child sexual abuse, and the faculty enabled and encouraged their ambition. Together with colleagues from within and outside the institution a ground breaking conference *Child Sexual Abuse: Towards a Feminist Professional Practice* was held in the spring of 1987. The account of that conference (MacLeod and Saraga 1988) makes clear that from the outset the Unit was committed to being part of struggles to create an inclusive feminism; a feminism which could address similarity and difference simultaneously.

Liz Kelly was appointed as the only full-time staff member in September 1987, with a brief to develop research, information and networking. Linda Regan and Sheila Burton were appointed in 1989ⁱⁱ. Many other women have worked on temporary contracts, student placements and in a voluntary capacity over the ten yearsⁱⁱⁱ, and their input has played a part in the history and achievements of the Unit. Over the years we have also worked closely with individuals, groups and organisations who have made our work possible by commissioning research, training and consultancy. Some have contributed far more, by expanding our understandings of the necessity of, possibilities for, and myriad obstacles to, making a difference in the lives of children and women. Their contributions to the continued existence of the Unit and our thinking is incalculable. But the last ten years would not have been possible without the thousands of women and children, and now some men, who have participated in our research projects. Our debt to them is immense. The only way we know to repay the debts we have incurred is to continue trying to produce work that is of use, to use the privileged and public position we have to advocate for understandings, policies and practices which more accurately reflect the realities and complexities of child and woman abuse.

Continuity and change

A number of changes of emphasis and direction have occurred during the ten years, some of the most significant are outlined below.

- The initial full-time post was funded by ILEA for one year, renewable to two and the post holder was to establish the Unit as a centre for feminist research, training, information and networking.
- The second year's money never came, so for nine years the Unit has been entirely self-financing; the institution provides us with our room, but all other services have to be paid for, from paper clips to computers. It is no mean achievement that a centre for feminist research has survived nine years of market academia.
- This reality meant that we had to concentrate on work which generated income - research and training became our key activities. There have been times when the continued survival of CWASU has depended on undertaking pieces of work which had nothing to do with violence, but which paid our wages. Continuation has also meant doing the research which was possible/fundable, which has not always been what we would have chosen.
- In the early years Mary MacLeod and Esther Saraga developed an important training initiative, and CWASU ran a number of small, but significant conferences and regular seminarsⁱⁱⁱⁱ. The Unit functioned at this time as a forum, and helped create networks.
- In 1991 the founding mothers of the Unit took up posts outside the university, and the central focus of activity shifted to research, with training and speaking being used as the conduit for communicating findings and frameworks which emerged from current and completed projects.
- The first research contract we gained was a project on domestic violence. From the outset the Unit was never confined to child sexual abuse, and our perspective has always been one which seeks to make connections. To more accurately reflect this the name was changed in 1994 to the *Child and Woman Abuse Studies Unit (CWASU)*.
- Throughout the ten years we have built, developed and maintained links with statutory and voluntary sectors, researchers, practitioners and policy makers both within the UK and internationally. We attend many more practitioner and policy conferences than academic ones.
- Some of these connections have spanned the whole ten years, others have been more time limited. Many contacts are single ones where we provide the information or network links an enquirer needs. Others have become mutually sustaining and rewarding, the kinds of exchanges which make working in the field of child and woman abuse so enriching.
- In the last few years the Unit's work has expanded into the areas of evaluation, policy research and most recently work on individual legal cases.
- From 1998, for the first time since 1987, the Unit will have core funding for one post for two years; providing much needed time for reflection, writing up and securing a longer-term future.

Working with difference

The five staff who have worked in the Unit came from different feminist perspectives and had varying connections with the Women's Liberation Movement. If some of the more pessimistic formulations of feminist perspectives reflect reality then our last ten years ought to have been impossible; since between us we span not only socialist and radical feminism, but also a range of other differences which included both our personal histories and identities. The most significant of these turned out to be our respective connections to the statutory and voluntary sectors. These histories also ensured that the work of the Unit was - from the outset - understood as having a

practical purpose; all of us have wanted to be part of making a difference in the lives of children and women.

Understanding and negotiating our differences has not been easy, and there have been many occasions where insecurities and/or assumptions got in the way; and even some points where we were not sure we could continue to work together. But that is the story it is easiest to tell, a story which fits into the increasingly popular 'feminism never worked' discourse. It is not the story we want to focus on to mark and celebrate ten years of work. The more difficult task, and one which many feminists seem unable or unwilling to undertake, is to trace and acknowledge the multitude of ways in which differences can be a source of strength, a way of not just sharing knowledge and skills, but also valuing individual perspectives and expertise. We have learnt - not always comfortably - to create an alternative currency of value which recognises the strengths we have between us, whether this be writing, teaching, training, laying out questionnaires, understanding computer analysis. It is one of the many contradictions of feminism that conflict and difficulty can be a context in which insecurities are overcome, confidence grows, respect develops and insights emerge. Negotiating differences has continued as our lives have produced new areas of difficulty and identity to be struggled with.

These internal challenges were extended through our relationships with others outside the Unit, who have challenged us in myriad ways over the years. In our research and training we endeavour to reflect an inclusive perspective, addressing issues of race, class, age, disability and sexuality especially how they intertwine and intersect with gender. Both constructive dialogues and connections and challenges made in frustration and anger have deepened our understanding of difference. As for most feminists some of these exchanges have been difficult and painful, but at the same time they have been a spur to critical thought and necessary reflection.

Making connections and building bridges was one of the key aims of the Unit, it is an integral part of our history that this was something which took place inside as well as outside of our work together. One of the outcomes has been that our own explorations with each other to find a shared place on which to stand has meant the Unit has never been afraid of exploring complexity, of admitting that there are gaps in feminist theory and practice, of asking hard questions to which we have not had any immediate answers or solutions.

In assessing the last ten years we have chosen four themes to explore: developing a feminist research practice; using research findings; achievements and frustrations and challenges for the future.

Developing Feminist Research Practice

One of the contributions the Unit has made is to feminist research. At the beginning there was an acceptance of the then feminist orthodoxy - that feminist research was research with, by and for women, and that only qualitative methods were adequate for feminist research (see Kelly 1988 for more detailed discussion of this). Over the ten years we have broken with virtually all of those assumptions, and moved to a position where we see our feminism as providing the theoretical backdrop to our work, and methods as tools through which we explore research questions. Some examples of the ways we have moved beyond the 1980s orthodoxies about feminist research are

summarised below (see Kelly, Regan and Burton 1992; Kelly Burton and Regan 1994 for more detailed discussion of some of these issues).

- We use questionnaires often, and have come to see their value not just in terms of access to larger numbers of respondents, but also in the control they provide to participants. It is far easier to choose not to answer certain questions in self-report written responses than it is in interpersonal interaction. We also think that some young people and adults choose to tell things where they can be anonymous which they would not say directly to another person. Thus we no longer believe that face to face interviews are the 'best' way to get more accurate estimates of the prevalence of sexual violence. What appears to matter more is the way questions are asked (Kelly, Regan and Burton 1991), and providing of multiple opportunities to reveal difficult and painful experiences.
- We have done research involving men - as policy makers, workers and most recently as perpetrators of domestic violence (Burton, Regan and Kelly 1998).
- Whilst we hope the end result of our work is 'for' women and children, in the first instance it is more often 'for' funders, policy makers and practitioners.

Negotiating our way through ideal constructions of feminist research has also led us to question another presumption - that participation in research not only can, but *ought* to be, empowering. Any research involving the powerful, and in our area of work especially perpetrators, leads you to question this injunction. But even with women and children we have come to think that this is a grand claim to make, an impossible standard to always meet; since we often do not really know what the impact on individuals of involvement in research has been. We now work with rather more humble aspirations: to do no more harm; to endeavour not to exploit; and where possible give something back. Some of the ways we do this include:

- Using what we know to construct questionnaires and interview guides, so that they can accommodate complexity^{lv}, not place responsibility on survivors and take participants into and out of discussion of painful issues.
- Including 'reality checks' in all our questionnaires and interviews which ask for feedback about participation.
- Automatically including information about support services which participants are encouraged to take away with them.
- Ensuring we allow time for 'debriefing' and discussion of issues, especially where we are using in-depth interviews.
- Working with staff in our access points so that they both respect confidentiality but are also ready to pick up any difficulties raised by participation for individuals.

We also learnt very early to not presume we 'knew' what was in our data, simply because we do all the coding and data preparation. Our subjective sense of what was there was sometimes askew when the data was analysed. For example, in the prevalence study of sexual abuse we were certain that there were significantly more reports of brother/sister incest than previous studies, but this was not in fact the case^{lv}. In all of our completed projects issues and findings which we did not anticipate have emerged. The most recent example came from the evaluation of DVIP - a project that works with violent men and with abused women (Burton, Regan and Kelly, 1998). Two strong principles have informed feminist perspectives on men's programmes: accountability to women and an absolute principle that any use of violence should result in suspension from the programme. These two principles were in conflict for DVIP, since at least one woman requested that her partner not be breached because of violence, since the time he attended was the only time she had free of his presence.

In analysing and writing up our research three central themes have emerged: noticing what is new or challenges our preconceptions; paying attention to what matters most to children and women; and the implications and nuances of definitions, naming and conceptualisation. All involve questioning what is often 'taken for granted', and making connections between experience, practice and theory. In wanting to move forward with issues - whether it be at the level of policy or theory - there is a temptation to forget the basics; but several of our recent projects reveal that it is precisely these basics which matter most to children and women (at the same time as they reveal some of the core dynamics in interpersonal violence). The inputs from workers and agencies which children and women consistently report mattering most to them are: that someone named what was happening/had happened to them as violence/abuse; a clear message that it was not their fault; that abuse is the responsibility of the abuser; being told and believing they were not alone; and being told and thus being able to feel that they deserved something better. Taking what women and children have said seriously has a range of implications.

- These basic messages should inform policy and practice - too often the processes of naming and making sense of violence are presumed, meaning that services and interventions start at a point which women and children have not yet reached - seeking resolution (see also Kelly 1996a). For example, there is little point in telling a woman how she can leave a violent man, when she has not yet been able to name and understand what is happening to her as violence.
- The potency of these basic messages at the level of meaning tells us vital things about the ways impacts of abuse are always intertwined with broader social and cultural meanings, and with the fact that abuse is also about the power to define reality and exert control over meaning.
- In our wish to accommodate complexity in theory and practice, we need to step back occasionally and ensure that we have not forgotten basic principles and understandings.

Using research findings

The framework we work from in using our research, and the uses we hope others are able put it to, is reflected in Liz Stanley's (1990) observation that:

... feminism outside of the academic mode has insisted on the crucial need for useful knowledge, theory and research as practice, on committed understanding as a form of praxis ('understand the world and then change it'), and also on un-alienated knowledge (p12).

In so far as this reflects our positioning, we are located both inside and outside the academy. We aim to create useful and accessible knowledge, to connect theory and practice in ways that can be used to make a difference.

One of the ways we use our own research is in training, which has always been a core activity for the Unit. Mary MacLeod and Esther Saraga's experience and skills were sources of inspiration and insight not only to the participants on their courses, but to the Unit staff who had far less experience and confidence in this area. Training provided by CWASU has always been undertaken from a feminist perspective, but constructed and delivered in ways which encourages debate and questioning what had previously been taken for granted. We do not focus on skills or procedures, but on developing a perspective - Mary and Esther called their training 'thinking time' - time to reflect and explore different ways of making sense and understanding issues which are

surrounded by myth, victim-blame and poor practice. The training and speaking which we currently undertake spans basic awareness through to working with women's organisations to explore difficult and complex issues such as their position on men's programmes and abuse by women. The Unit has played an important role in taking feminist perspectives into training, and as importantly in encouraging and enabling women's organisations to believe that they have expertise to offer. In the case of domestic violence the training manual we produced with Andrea Tara-Chand and Hammersmith and Fulham Council has become a key resource in the field.

We also use writing, speaking and training to make connections - between forms of violence against women and between child and woman abuse. This is one of the most important contributions the Unit has, and continues to make. Our conviction in the importance of this broader perspective has many strands.

- It is the accumulation of forms of woman and child abuse across the population as a whole, and in individual lives, which illuminate the extent to which violence is a key strategy in maintaining inequality.
- Whilst forms of child and woman abuse may be separated in law^{lvii} and in institutional policy and practice they are not separate in women and children's lived experience.
- Having a wider perspective fosters an openness to forms of abuse which have not yet been adequately documented and/or which are culturally specific.

The other way in which the Unit has been committed to making connections is through networking. We seek to act as a link point, between those seeking information and who might be able to best provide it. The founding conference had as one of its aims to bring together feminists from the voluntary and statutory sectors, and that continues to be a strand in our work. As is connecting survivors and their supporters to the support services and/or campaigns which they need. We promote the projects and models of work which we believe represent current best practice, both within the UK and internationally. The Unit's international connections have increased, and we endeavour to connect them with other organisations. We are also contacted regularly by isolated groups and individuals with minimal funding who are working in countries where these issues are not yet on the public agenda; we support them by sending packages of publications and information.

The most recent way in which we have been able to make connections in practice is through providing expert opinions for criminal and civil legal cases. In contrast to the medical model of expert evidence, which seeks to demonstrate the individuality and difference of the person, we are developing an approach which maps out the relevant research knowledge, and seeks to fit individual women's lives into this broader picture. We locate women's actions and situation within this collective experience and wider context.

Achievements

Writing a section on our achievements has been the hardest part of this paper. In outlining them we are acutely conscious that we are part of a much broader network, and where we have made a difference it is often because a sympathetic climate has prevailed, in no small part due to the work of many others. What follows are examples which illustrate the kinds of contributions which the Unit has sought to make.

Within the broader context

- The most significant achievement must be that CWASU has survived for ten years, and for the most part done work we have wanted to do.
- A variety of connections - both with individuals and organisations as well as between forms of child and woman abuse - have been made and maintained.
- CWASU has contributed, along with others in the field, to an increasing interest in research amongst practitioners, an awareness that it can be both a tool in arguing for resources and policy change, but also that it can offer insights which inform direct work.
- We have developed an approach to methods which we call 'feminist research practice' and have a confidence in choosing the methods that are appropriate - to the research question and/or the amount of funding available.
- We have developed connections with other researchers and worked as cross institutional teams on several projects.

Specific contributions from CWASU's work

- Gaining an ESRC award in our first two years to conduct the prevalence study of sexual abuse in childhood. This study has encouraged questioning understandings of child sexual abuse which focus on either 'stranger danger' or 'daddy danger'.
- Challenging the construction of mothers of children who were sexually abused by fathers as 'collusive'; becoming part of such a powerful feminist critique that the guardians of family dysfunction shifted their position markedly.
- Having the basic findings from that study used for one of the first Zero Tolerance posters.
- Doing background work with journalists which fundamentally changed the perspective a piece was made from - the first one of these was a piece for *Newsnight* in 1990 which looked at child pornography as a record of sexual abuse.
- Editing the special issue of *Child Abuse Review* with Margaret Kennedy on disability and abuse.
- Being part of the group which put the connections between domestic violence and child abuse on the public agenda, and developing a practice principle that woman protection can be the most effective form of child protection.
- Exploring the terms 'victim' or 'survivor' in writing, research and training (Kelly, Regan and Burton 1993; Kelly Burton and Regan 1996), and pointing to the ways in which they have become an oppositional dualism which neglects the survival strategies women and children use whilst violence is occurring and underplays the damaging legacies of abuse which cannot be 'recovered' from.
- Writing *Splintered Lives* which both located sexual exploitation within child sexual abuse and represented the beginning of continuing relationships with the major children's charities (Kelly et al 1995).
- Beginning to create a context in which a feminist approach to abuse by women and violence in lesbian relationships can develop (Kelly 1991; Kelly 1996b).
- Working with a Group of Specialists for the Council of Europe which produced a report on violence against women and a Plan of Action (Kelly 1997b).
- Developing a critical analysis on the rehabilitation of the concept of 'paedophile' (Kelly 1997a), which was recently supported in a piece in *Community Care* (Kennington 1997).

Feedback from organisations and individuals which suggests that the work of CWASU has made a difference is sustaining in a field which is distressing, and in terms of the scale of the problem can be dispiriting. One example highlights the way in which a perspective developed in an academic

context can have effects in individual cases. A recent civil law case involved a woman with three children, one of whom has special needs. She was going to be evicted from her flat as a 'noisy neighbour' because of her ex-husbands ongoing harassment. The expert testimony provided by CWASU pointed to the way her safety had been ignored, and the case was settled by re-housing the family in a newly build three-bedroom house.

Frustrations and challenges

There is another side to the CWASU story; one which speaks of frustrations at the limits of what has been possible. The pressures of time, resources and woman power have been considerable constraints.

- Contract research means constantly having to move on to the next funded piece of work. The Unit has the most extraordinary data sets from eleven completed projects, some of which have never been written about apart from our final report to funders. In our training and public speaking draws on this body of knowledge, but much of it is not widely available.
- CWASU has a considerable collection of resource - ranging from hundreds of research papers through to handbooks and practice guidelines from the UK and internationally. These have never been catalogued, and thus are not accessible to others. But even if they were in principle available the facilities do not exist for public access. Beyond this local limitation, however, there is much exciting research, policy and practice development in Europe, but which cannot be used to inform policy and practice because of language barriers. This means that the point of reference for everyone in Europe is usually the USA, a transatlantic reliance which will only be shifted if a resource base exists to translate research and resources.
- One irony of CWASU's position is that whilst its work has been part of shifting policy and practice perspectives in a broad sense, since Mary and Esther left the work and perspective of the Unit is no longer integrated within the teaching programme at UNL.

Making more of a difference

Looking towards the future, CWASU's ambition is to continue to make a difference. In the shorter term more time will be allocated to writing up some of the unpublished work, taking stock, making more international connections and creating a web site.

One of the challenges all feminists face as we approach the end of this decade and century is how to hold onto what is already known, whilst expanding our understanding and perspective. Too frequently there is a sense of re-inventing the wheel; having to go back to the beginning because the knowledge base is so fragile. Feminist ideas remain in the public, inform policy and practice where they are nurtured and sustained, but can disappear like sand astonishingly quickly. Alongside making connections and building bridges feminists need to find ways which ensure that the principles of a feminist perspective takes root, whilst still being flexible. Ensuring that the framework within which it is possible to make a difference in children and women's lives is one of the greatest challenges as we approach the millennium.

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Footnotes

- (1) Linda Regan was appointed as a researcher and Sheila Burton as administrator to the training programmed and research project. After two years Sheila became a full-time researcher.
- (2) We want to acknowledge here: Julie Bindel; Kate Bunney; Dianne Butterworth; Kate Cook; Julia Greenwell; Anne Goldie; Mumtaz Karimjee; Sheila King; Kemi Lawal; Alison McGibbon; Carol O'Brien; Jill Radford; Lindsay River; and Rachel Wingfield.
- (3) For example, in 1990-1993 conferences were organised on Developing Whole School Policies, Organised Abuse and Joint Working and the seminar series which ended in 1992 addressed issues such as physical abuse of children and abuse by women. All were innovatory at the time, and a number picked up issues which feminists have since been accused of ignoring.
- (4) Most of our questionnaire include open ended questions where we invite participants to explain why they have responded in particular ways, and which provide opportunities for them to have a 'voice' about the issues in question.
- (5) This is a salutary warning not just to researchers, but to practitioners. It is dangerous to assume that your 'sense' of what is going on is accurate, since what we take note of is often what interests or surprises us, rather than what we already know to be the case. This is often evident in training where social workers, police officers and other practitioners offer as disproof of a general point the one or two cases they have dealt with which do not fit, whilst disregarding the many cases which do correspond to the model outlines.
- (6) In fact some forms, such as domestic violence, are not recognised in law but subsumed within broader categories such as offences against the person.