

## From Marginal to Globalised Issue: Three Decades of Research and Activism on Violence Against Women

Presented by *Liz Kelly* at her *Inaugural Professorial Lecture*,  
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This lecture is a personal reflection on a history of visionary activism and engaged social research - a history in which I am deeply implicated, the three decades represent my feminist biography and two of them my career in research.

Two weeks ago with my colleague Linda Regan I was directing a British Council international seminar on policy development and violence against women. Participants came from 20 countries and one of our presenters said she had this sense of working with 'the world in a room'. Tonight is like speaking with my life in a room. Some of you here today have known me all my life, some since I was an idealistic young woman, and we worked together in a small city to establish groups and organisations which transformed our own lives as much as those of the other women who used them. Some of you have known me since I began to do research, and we have been linked through our efforts to create knowledge that made a difference. Others of you know me and the Unit through our attempts to create bridges between women and children's experiential knowledge, the voluntary and state sectors. And some of you are more recent acquaintances, from the point at which I and the Unit gained forms of status and respect that we never imagined possible; we have links through work directed at policy and practical change.

The breadth of this audience has been in mind when preparing this lecture.

The lecture is in four parts - a brief overview of the three decades and the links with globalisation, how the work of CWASU is located within this. We then turn to some shifts in my own thinking and the final section looks at some of the challenges for future decades.

### *Globalisation and the three decades*

These summaries of the three decades are somewhat crude, draw on a context of living and working in the UK, whilst recognising international responses. What I am attempting to map are the links and the separations between activism, research, policy and theory. There are many histories to be told here. For example, apart from the UK, only some of the Scandinavian countries within Europe have significant research on violence against women, although many European countries have specialist services, and extensive law reform. We are fortunate in the UK to have five research centres on violence against women and/or children - there are none in the rest of Europe - although one is currently being established in Uppsala, Sweden.

The 1970s were the decade in which feminists in many locations re-discovered violence, uncovering realities that our fore Sisters had known, but which had been re-buried as the first wave of the women's movement waned. It was also a time of creativity, vision, optimism and naiveté - we created new forms of response and protest, changed and invented language, challenged stereotypes and woman blaming. There was a deeply held belief that it was possible to create a new kind of revolution, one in which the private sphere, gender and sexuality were placed at the centre of political concern. It is difficult to recall quite how difficult and even at times scary raising issues of violence was initially - but there was immense resistance to accepting that 'sexism' might

be an issue deserving of attention, that men might have to reflect on how they behaved in public and private. Attending student union meetings as part of a women's liberation group in the mid-70s involved running a gauntlet of hisses, jeers and insulting comments. Many groups - and the one I worked with was no exception - spent months and even years establishing that there was a problem of domestic violence in their locality. We had no research to draw on.

The ways women's groups organised was also innovative - the idea that women would and could work with and for each other, create their own institutions and non-hierarchical ways of working represented both a challenge to what existed and to the women involved - we had to learn how to do accounts, write reports, mend leaking taps. I have always thought that women's refuges, rape crisis groups and women's centres were the most effective retraining programmes for women - there are many extremely successful women today whose life course was changed through having their sense of what was possible expanded.

Most feminist groups attempted to operate with democratic principles, both in terms of having a non-hierarchical structure and not seeing or treating those who needed support as 'clients'. Success involved not just enabling women to take control over their lives, but also that they included themselves within a collective movement against violence. Some of these ways of working are no longer popular and some of the experiments did not work - most obviously what has later been termed a 'false equality' between women in distress and danger needing access to services, and those who had access to knowledge and information to support them. At the same time, however, many things we now take for granted in public policy and practice - participative training, workshops, user consultation, flat management structures - were pre-figured by feminist organisational principles and practices.

By the end of the 1970s some of the first research reports using a new framework for understanding violence - particularly rape and domestic violence - were published. Several uncovered data showing that these crimes had histories, and most demonstrated the extent to which violence was hidden or if not either minimised or understood as the woman's fault. The documentation of women's lives, and the absence of understanding and intervention were powerful tools in establishing a legitimacy for the issues, and the need for change.

In the 1980s there was a period of consolidation and expansion of services like refuges, rape crisis centres and self-help groups alongside extending the range of forms of violence and abuse we recognised and understood - child sexual abuse, sexual harassment at work, coercion in the sex industry. It was also the time when a strong research base developed in the UK, although by the end of the decade it had narrowed to concentrate primarily on domestic violence. The combination of services and research provided a platform from which to critique statutory responses and propose changes - one outcome being the government circulars from the Home Office and Department of Health. However, at this point much of the interaction between activist groups and state agencies was oppositional in tone and content, the voices of women's advocates were loud and impatient, the responses of practitioners and policy makers defensive and irritated. Quietly, and simultaneously, however other currents were running - feminists were getting qualifications in social work, probation, law, housing and joining the state sectors. Individuals - usually women - within these and other institutions, such as the police and civil service, recognised the criticisms as ones they themselves had tried to raise from within. It was the coalescence of these processes at local levels, often linked to new research findings, which resulted in pockets of innovation and cross-sectoral work. For example, at the same time as the Cleveland crisis occurred, in other parts

of the country new approaches to child sexual abuse in the family had emerged drawing on feminist thinking which positioned mothers not as collusive, but as the non-abusing parent.

Many countries also embarked on the first phase of legal reform in the 1980s, although this was more limited in the UK, and again research findings were marshalled to demonstrate both the need for reform, and the problems with existing frameworks.

During this period the issues of diversity became a matter of both debate and urgency - within women's organisations, feminist theory and research. The debates were often uncomfortable and painful as women in majorities had to confront the extent to which they failed to include - and even in worst cases deliberately excluded - minorities. Access to support and redress for Black and ethnic minority women, disabled women, traveller women, lesbians became priorities for many organisations - and this too has subsequently moved into mainstream thinking through equal opportunities policies.

As recognition of the scale of violence against women increased, the vital role of the new forms of provision was acknowledged. Many autonomous women's groups became more linked to state funding - in the UK primarily via local government. Demand for services also increased, and some elements of professionalisation emerged. None of these shifts were uncontested, internal debates were often fractious and unresolved. At the same time the national political context in the UK was indifferent at best, and hostile at worst, to both gender violence and women's activism. As a consequence of these multiple factors, the link between direct support work and campaigning, which had been integral to feminist responses in the 1970s, weakened by the end of the decade.

In terms of research the 1980s represent the decade in which feminist scholars launched a trenchant critique of how knowledge about women - and gender relations more broadly - was created. The traditional view that research participants were 'objects' of study, that researchers should take a position of studied indifference to both the topic and the people involved were roundly rejected. Feminist researchers recognised that they were engaged in the study of matters in which they had interests, and sought to treat participants with respect. It was not just that new issues were being studied, but that they were being explored in new ways. This was most evident in the revolution in qualitative methods, and the in-depth interview with women became the paradigm for feminist research. So much of what feminist critiques exposed and questioned has now become accepted practice within research methodology, and the profound questions about what counts as valid knowledge, why and for whom fed into the epistemological crisis within social science and science more broadly as we came to the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The 1990s were undoubtedly a decade of global reach, involving international recognition of violence against women and the creation of national plans of action - which incidentally the UK still does not have, although Scotland can claim to have one on domestic abuse. State institutions began to take their responsibilities seriously developing new policies and ways of responding; mandatory arrest policies; domestic violence courts; sexual offences courts; specialist investigative and prosecution teams; sexual assault centres, programmes with offenders; and co-ordinated community strategies are some of the most obvious international examples. Alongside the promotion of multi-agency work, many countries also created innovative law reform, this time drawing on examples from other countries and with greater awareness of why previous change had been ineffective. The 1990s were also the decade of domestic violence - this one form of gender violence came to dominate national and international agendas, joined early in the decade

by the re-discovery of rape during war and conflict, sexual exploitation of children and towards the end by a strong emphasis on trafficking in women.

The research agenda took varied forms in different places, but everywhere both methodology and research questions became more sophisticated. In 1993 Statistics Canada published the 'Violence Against Women Survey', which had used extensive consultation in developing the questions and protocols, beginning what Sylvia Walby has called the 'fourth generation' of prevalence studies. Evaluation research emerged, looking at why interventions did and did not work - most obviously with respect to perpetrator programmes and reform in police responses. And here in the UK research demonstrated the connections between domestic violence and child abuse. The agenda for researchers now extended beyond establishing the problem and documenting lived experience, to a more direct engagement with questions of policy and practice.

At the same time as this rich vein of applied empirical study was developing feminist theory at an academic level became more and more disconnected from everyday life, appearing to many outsiders (and some insiders) to have entered the realms of abstraction which earlier feminist critiques had held in contempt. At the end of the 1990s, therefore, feminist research on violence has continued its links to activism, developed a strong policy content, yet is marginalised within feminist theory and women's studies. None of the UK research units are located in women's studies departments, and internationally most researchers on violence against women appear to be based in social work rather than sociology departments. There is more than a little irony involved here.

Throughout all three decades, researchers and activists have emphasised how routine, everyday certain forms of violence against women and children are - challenging the previous presumptions that these were rare, random events, committed by deranged, sick men. Locating abuse close to home - and even within the family - was extremely discomfiting for many people. Yet in less than two decades it is now widely accepted that the home can be a dangerous place. What has been less easy to establish is that assaults by known men - whether it be physical or sexual or both - can be as serious and brutal as those by strangers. Criminal and civil justice systems still minimise domestic violence, social workers find it hard to name incest as child rape, and there is a widespread view that rape by a current or ex partner is less serious than that by a stranger. These perceptions have proved remarkably resistant to change, and represent significant barriers to equal and consistent intervention and response.

### *Globalisation*

In terms of globalisation, there is no doubt that violence against women has become an arena that connects, and even on occasion unites, women across the planet. It was not always thus, during the first two decades activists from many developing countries saw this issue as a preoccupation of the west, less important in the majority of women's lives than issues of basic survival such as clean water, access to land and food. Considerable unease was also expressed at the use by privileged western women of examples of forms of violence against women that were located elsewhere - FGM in Africa, sati in Asia. The casting of violence against women as a human rights issue, alongside community activists in poorer countries discovering the extent to which violence and abuse narrowed the life chances of the women and girls they worked with, provided ground for dialogue and exchange.

Globalisation processes are also directly implicated in forms of violence against women, creating new contexts and mechanisms for mistreatment. Sex tourism, mail order and online marriage bureaux and trafficking in women are only possible because international travel is now widespread and affordable, the economic and social power imbalances between developed and developing worlds, and the demand across the world from men to purchase sex with disenfranchised women and children. The growth and accessibility of child pornography has been hugely promoted by the Internet, as has the ability of sexual abusers to network across national boundaries.

At the same time an incontestable benefits of globalisation is that women's networks now snake around the globe and back again. It was not the good will or political acumen of the UN that resulted in the declaration on violence against women and human rights in 1993, but a global coalition of women from every continent who created a new understanding of human rights and lobbied at each and every opportunity. But we are not making the most of these new possibilities - research and models from the USA continue to dominate our understandings and responses. Other approaches and work of outstanding insight and quality from the majority of the planet continues to be marginalised. Part of our recent shift of emphasis has been to pay more attention to Europe, and to work closely with researchers and groups in Africa and Asia. As a consequence, the best practice which we are now able to promote spans the globe.

### *The Unit*

So where does the work of CWASU fit in this big picture? We can only claim to have functioned in the last decade, although the Unit was founded by two UNL staff members in 1987. I joined as the first employee. Our beginnings were small, but full of ambition - to establish feminist perspectives in research, training and policy. Initially this was limited to child sexual abuse, but we rapidly developed a framework which made links across women and child abuse, and combined research with training and consultancy. In this respect and others we bucked various trends and orthodoxies. This is not the occasion to rehearse the contributions of CWASU, other than to say that over thirteen years we have completed over 25 research projects, developed a research practice that combines quantitative and qualitative methods, have strong links with the voluntary and statutory sectors, have set ourselves the aim of creating useful knowledge, and using research findings in our own training and advocacy work. We have also endeavoured to work with each other and all who participate in our research with respect, and to face, rather than ignore, difficult and contentious issues, such as abuse *by* women.

Most recently through our work as special advisors to the British Council, we have had the enviable opportunity to meet and work with activists and researchers from around the globe. That this has enriched our lives and understanding is an understatement.

Our continued existence, not to mention success, is all the more remarkable, when you take into account that we are entirely self-funded. It is yet another irony that we have extensive recognition externally, but have no long-term security within our own university. Our ability to link research, theory and policy development in recent years was made possible by a gift from an external funder which freed up time from the endless cycle of grant applications and delivery of reports.

These stories - both the big picture and that of CWASU - tell of complex and overlapping processes, where the trajectories of activism, research, policy and theory connect and separate,

move in the same and different directions. And within the same account it is possible to focus on extraordinary change and impact and at the same time continued struggle and marginalisation. To opt for a career working on violence against women and children is a decision to take risks, to have a marginal, outsider status. No matter how much the mainstream recognises violence against women, focussing on it totally places you in an uneasy position. This is as true for police officers, as for researchers and front line service providers. Child and woman abuse, and the uncomfortable questions it raises about relationships between men, women and children, still evokes discomfort in many.

The paradox of simultaneous recognition and marginalisation is also evident in government responses - at least in England and Wales. The Crime Reduction Programme has, for the first time, allocated national money - to the tune of £8 million - to violence against women projects. Certainly reason for celebration on one level, but also food for thought when placed in the context of more than ten times this figure being invested in new responses to burglary. And despite commitments before the 1997 election by the Labour party, there is still no national framework for ensuring that the most fundamental provision - refuges and rape crisis centres - have a secure funding base - yet over a hundred million pounds was invested recently in the rough sleepers initiative for 4000 people.

### *Violence against women in feminist history*

Violence against women is an arena where some of the best aspirations of feminism and feminists have been made real: global coalitions which thrive on diversity; continuing and challenging connections between research, activism and public policy; legal reform based on recognition of women's physical integrity and sexual autonomy; and the creation of safety and options to women and girls whose lives have been dominated and controlled. At the same time it is also the arena where the extent of what remains to be done is most visceral. Can we claim with any certainty to have done more than make the range and extent of abuse visible, identify flagship projects, and document the continued failure of both justice and welfare systems to respond adequately? Does any country have a credible claim to have created an effective and consistent system of provision, protection and prosecution, yet alone to have seriously begun the crucial task of prevention? The only indication I am aware of is that in the late 1990s for two years running Canada has reduced the number of domestic homicides.

We are a very long way from the ambition of the women/s liberation movement - later adopted by the UN and COE - of ending violence against women. But we, and by we here I mean women and men across the globe involved in this work at every level, *we* have changed the world. Violence against women is now defined by the UN and many national governments as both a fundamental violation of women's human rights and a continuing barrier to achieving equality between women and men. The themes of domestic violence, incest, rape sexual harassment and trafficking appear in popular media on every continent. The new responses we imagined and created in the 1970s - refuges, helplines, support groups - are now considered basic requirements and have, arguably, even in some instances become institutionalised themselves.

## *Contradictions and complexities*

What the last 30 years has taught me is that there are no simple answers, or even simple questions in this field. Contradictions and complexities lurk in every corner, there is only time this evening to illustrate this with two examples: the concepts of victim and survivor and encouraging women and children to speak out.

One theme I keep returning to is the unintended consequences of abandoning the term victim. In the 1970s feminists were acutely aware of the negative meanings that attached to the term victim - it was shaming and implied passivity and powerlessness. The alternative survivor was intended to draw attention to the ways women and children resisted abuse and the huge efforts they made to cope with its many consequences. My PhD research used this framework. But not all women and girls do survive. And in these days where feminist theory ties itself in knots to demonstrate women's agency and avoid the taint of victimisation, violence against women represents something of a conundrum. It demonstrates vividly the extent to which women's agency can still be removed from their control or be so constrained, and overwhelmed by legacies of abuse that women choose to act in ways that endanger, and even end, their own lives.

Some feminists have tentatively begun a limited reclamation, in the sense that status as a victim is important in at least two ways: it locates you as someone who has been wronged; and within legal and policy arenas defines you as deserving of redress and resources. There are some examples internationally of 'victim laws' - for example in Switzerland and Finland - that are founded on understanding that the act of victimisation removes agency and weakens the position of the victim. The role of the law is to enable the retrieval of agency in order that rights to redress and justice can be exercised. These laws have also stretched the understanding and position of victims within the justice system - no longer only a witness or a complainant, but a stronger and supported party in a complex formal process. Questions of concepts and definitions have been at the heart of feminist work, perhaps in the next decade we can create new meanings that no longer make victim and agency contradictions in terms.

The feminist orthodoxy that 'breaking silence' and 'speaking out' is necessarily a good thing also turns out to be more complex than it at first appeared. In many countries it is no longer the case that violence against women is hidden and 'unspeakable' - yet it continues to be redefined and minimised within institutional responses. Recent research in the UK by Betsy Stanko and Debbie Crisp (Crisp and Stanko, 1999) and Cathy Humphreys (2000) in Switzerland by Corinna Seith (2001) and Australia by Jan Breckenridge (1999) highlights how much information institutions have which they neither recognise, nor use. In many contexts women and children do tell, but those trusted with this knowledge fail to act on it to either provide safety and sanctuary for victims or any form of sanction on perpetrators.

In other contexts women and children still choose to use silence as a survival strategy, when the consequences of telling are further danger in the absence of support. Honour cultures in which honour killings take place are the most extreme example, where telling about rape or sexual abuse can literally cost women their lives. In this belief system the dishonour which her victimisation brings on the family is considered only retrievable by her death, usually at the hands of a young male family member. Few if any countries in the world legally permit honour killing, in at least five the context is used in mitigation in sentencing. Today in 2001, literally half of the occupants of the women's prison in Amman, Jordan are there not because they have committed any crime, but

because protective custody is the only way their safety can be guaranteed. In case anyone is tempted to think these are forms of violence confined to 'elsewhere' - at least three young Asian women in the UK have been murdered because of this set of beliefs. At a more mundane level it is the potential costs of 'speaking out' that act as barriers to reporting of all gender violence, and underpin many women's decisions not to pursue cases. If we are asking women and children to tell, to report, then we have a responsibility for ensuring that there are systems of protection in place that work, and that they have access to redress and support.

### *Challenges for the future*

When I first thought about this lecture I envisaged at this point engaging in a little feminist stock taking - creating a balance sheet of what has been lost and gained over the three decades. But last week this shifted into a focus on the challenges for the next decades. The change of direction was prompted by two of the presenters - Jane McMahon and Hilary McCollum - at the British Council seminar. They were discussing prevention and national policy development respectively, and both independently stressed the importance of vision - specifically of having a vision of where we wish to be, of what a world in which gender violence no longer exists would look like. They asked the profoundly challenging question of whether we really believe woman and child abuse is preventable, not inevitable - not at the level of rhetoric, but in terms of conviction and desire. And do we place prevention at the centre of our thinking, rather than it being an optional extra.

In the next decades we must ensure that some forms of violence against women are not forgotten, and that we develop integrated policy and responses. The history I outlined is full of examples of forms of violence appearing and disappearing from public and political concern. There are many international examples of an 'integrated approach' meaning much more than has yet been realised in the UK. In Scandinavia, Sweden, Finland and Norway have action plans, research programmes and government funded co-ordination projects. The Swedish response to Beijing was to pass legislation on violence against women - presciently called 'Women's Peace' which amongst other things made the purchase of sexual services a crime making it the first country to criminalise the demand side of prostitution, created an offence of 'gross violation of integrity' which makes possible prosecution in domestic violence and child sexual abuse cases for the course of conduct, not just specimen offences. They have also placed a requirement on state services to monitor their work on violence against women. The Swedish crisis centres - often mistakenly compared to refuges/shelters - provide support and sanctuary to women across a range of forms of violence and abuse.

In parts of Africa and much of Asia many projects work in this way, and grow organically, adding new elements when women and children's unmet needs are revealed. Few projects there, for example, would develop without addressing economic issues through micro-credit schemes, training and education, nor without some linked public education element aimed at the community. In Namibia women police and prosecutors have combined into a specialist team working on both woman and child abuse, with remarkable success. And there, as in South Africa and Nicaragua, men of good faith are organising in ways that put their more privileged brothers to shame, to develop work with men, and protest by men, about gender violence. We also have much to learn from NGOs in developing countries about working with and in communities. These are just some of

the reasons why in the 21<sup>st</sup> century we should pay more attention to Europe, Africa, Asia and South America; international best practice extends beyond Duluth, Minnesota.

Everywhere across the globe we face the problem of implementation. Even in countries where they have enviable law reform and a plan of action, changing practice so that it is coherent and consistent continues to be a challenge. One indication of change is that there are now professionals in every institution who are as frustrated as outsiders have been for several decades. We cannot afford to wait another three decades for deep attitude change; it is time to focus on changing what they do. It is also the responsibility of government to ensure that their commitments on woman and child abuse are not undermined through other policy initiatives - such as performance indicators.

There are also new challenges for researchers. Do we really know what we think we know? Do we know what women are looking for when they report rape? Is what we know about domestic violence based - in the main - on those who use refuges and report to the police? Are there differences amongst perpetrators that we have failed to explore? Much risk assessment in relation to both domestic violence and sex offending assumes that we already know what factors are and are not significant in assessing dangerous.

Are we willing to look for and see change? It is not good enough to repeat research findings that are 15-20 years old. Is it possible that women suffering domestic violence are seeking help at an earlier point - before they have been assaulted 35 times? And if they are does this mean they are looking for different things? How do we explain the continued increase in the reporting of rape to the police, when the criminal justice system is less effective in prosecuting rape than 20 years ago? What are the consequences of sexual harassment being subsumed into the gender-neutral concept of bullying at work? And are the models of provision that we created in the 1970s what women and children want and need in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

There are also dangerous questions which we need to dare to begin to explore. At least one activist from the USA - Valli Kanuha (1996) - has tentatively raised the question of whether there are differential prevalence rates across social groups. We know that violence against women and children occurs in all social groups, social status and economic security do not protect women and children. But as research findings become more sophisticated and global in reach, it is clear that rates of violence, not just reporting, are not consistent across social groups or between societies.

This issue also challenges us at a theoretical level - how to map the relationships between child and woman abuse and gender equality. The conventional approach has assumed that as women become more equal economically, socially and politically, then violence against women will decline. Data from Sweden suggests this model may be too simplistic. The country that on a state policy level has done most to establish formal equality between women and men, has the highest level of reported rape per head of population in Europe. Discovering this recently reminded me of a hypothesis Diana Russell proposed many years ago. If violence against women is an expression of men's power, challenges to that power may, in the short term at least, result in increasing rather than decreasing levels of abuse. If there is any truth in this proposition, the implications for social policy and intervention are as many as they are profound.

### *Concluding thought*

A participant at the British Council seminar used the metaphor of embroidery to describe the global work on violence against women. I like this image - good embroidery takes time and patience, every stitch counts, it requires many colours, different threads and stitches - and as anyone familiar with needlework knows sometimes you have to unpick a section and begin again - but now with the knowledge of what was not right the first time. We have three decades of stitching to draw on - my hope is that in the next decades we can unravel some of the knots and work on the same design.

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