Kelly, Liz. "Unspeakable Acts (1991)." *The Trouble & Strife Reader*. Ed. Deborah Cameron and Joan Scanlon. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010. 62–70. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781849662956.ch-009>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 26 April 2023, 15:04 UTC.

Copyright © Deborah Cameron, Joan Scanlon and the contributors 2010. You may share this work for non-commercial purposes only, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher, and provide a link to the Creative Commons licence.

9. Unspeakable Acts (1991)

Liz Kelly

The fact that most lesbians and feminists have been reluctant to discuss violence by and between women has not prevented the issue from reaching the public arena. The 'discovery' of women who have sexually abused children, the current case in the US of the first female serial killer (Aileen Wuornos is a lesbian charged with murdering five men), and the case of Lisa Steinberg (a six year-old whose death resulted from abuse at the hands of her adoptive parents) all made headline news. A new knee-jerk reaction amongst policymakers in local councils, and even some police officers, is to include lesbians and gay men in discussions about domestic violence.

Our caution and irritation at 'women do it too' statements were justified, since the speaker was seldom concerned about the issues, and usually motivated by a desire to dismiss feminist analysis. But today, avoiding the issue of women's use of violence represents as much of a threat as we previously felt talking about it did. If we fail to develop feminist perspectives we are handing over this issue to the professionals and the media. Silence also means that we will continue to fail those women and children who have suffered at the hands of women. We all know that our failure to name and find ways to confront issues of power between women has been the downfall of too many women's groups, projects and campaigns (not to mention friendships and relationships). So what is at stake here is not simply what we stand to lose, but also what we might gain.

Definitions

Before looking at evidence of women's use of violence, it is important to explore how it is defined in lesbian/feminist communities, and consider how non-feminist researchers and practitioners are defining abuse by women. In both these areas, confusions abound.

There is a tendency within lesbian/feminist communities to use words in ways that confuse rather than distinguish between forms of behaviour. In a piece called 'Therapism and the taming of the lesbian community' Joan Ward notes that

Therapism has taught us to find everything equally upsetting. I see lesbians respond to minor disagreements with other women as if they had been raped ... We are so emotionally vulnerable that we cannot distinguish between a philosophical difference and a physical assault.

We will not develop either new ways of dealing with conflict or ways to support women abused by women if we equate all disagreements or misuses of power with sexual or physical assault.

Violence/abuse is the deliberate use of humiliation/threat/coercion/force to enhance personal status/power at someone else's expense, to constrain the behaviour of others, and/or to get one's own needs met at others' expense. While some aspects of behaviour between women, and between women and children, do fit this definition, others do not. Our starting point must be to understand how the many variations of 'power over' are used, responded to and challenged in relationships between women, and to distinguish between forms which do and do not use overt force and violence.

The professional literature also produces overly inclusive definitions, whose hidden agenda is to deny that most physical and sexual violence is committed by men. Many strategies have been used to limit the forms of men's behaviour that count as sexual violence, but in relation to women the reverse process is used, for example, by broadening the definition of 'sexual abuse of children'. One study of sexual abuse of children in the US recorded a much larger percentage of female abusers than previous studies. Careful investigation of the data revealed that women were being defined as 'co-perpetrators' if they were thought by professionals to have known about the abuse and not reported it. Mothers who played no part in the abuse were transformed into female abusers.

A popular strategy is to suggest that women have many opportunities to sexualise interactions with children, particularly babies; that mundane, everyday child care offers the perfect cover for sexual abuse, but there are few reported cases because it is so 'normalised'. Abuse thus defined covers touching a baby's genitals whilst changing their nappy and allowing children to sleep in the same bed. Interestingly, no-one has written impassioned articles about the injustice of making 'innocent' mothers insecure about touching their children. This construction of motherhood as suspect has a long history. Freud was far more comfortable developing a mythology of the maternal seductress than acknowledging the reality of paternal abusers.

Another strategy is to extend the category 'woman'. Several recent studies of reported cases record higher figures for women as abusers. When the statistics

are examined in more detail a large proportion of the female abusers are under 18. 'Women' includes girls, sometimes very young ones. I am not questioning the impact of abusive behaviour on any child, but to call a four, five or six year-old an abuser presumes their understanding is the same as that of an adult.

Theory building

Feminist analysis of men's violence is only fragile if it is underpinned by the essentialist belief that aggression is inherent in men. Masculinity and femininity are culturally and historically variable constructs, which individuals 'fit' more or less comfortably. Taking social construction seriously, including the fact that women do not live outside patriarchal ideologies and practices, means we *can* locate women as abusers within a feminist analysis — but it is complicated.

Placing interpersonal violence on the political agenda, challenging the Right's idealisation of family and heterosexuality and the Left's focus on economics and state social control, has been one of the achievements of this wave of feminism. We demonstrated that the use of explicit force and coercion was a common feature in many heterosexual encounters. Theoretical analysis highlighted that violence is a form of 'power over', whose use tends to follow the contours of social inequality. Sexual violence is an expression of male supremacy; racial violence is an expression of white supremacy. The use of force by dominant groups is often socially legitimated, although both its use and legitimacy may be resisted and challenged.

This structural analysis provides us with ways of exploring women's access to, and use of, violence. Following its logic, the most likely targets for violence by women are children, the only group over which women have socially legitimated power. Since the sexual is currently constructed as a potential arena of power for men, however, women are less likely to sexually abuse children. The next potential target for violence by women is other women — physical fights between girls and young women are not that uncommon. The least likely target is men. Where women do use violence intending to harm adult men — for example when abused women kill their husbands — they tend to use weapons to 'equalise' the power dynamics.

Blaming women

Women using violence or abuse seem to be acting outside and against constructions of femininity and motherhood. This is in contrast to men, for whom using violence is consistent with traditional masculinity. This acting against femininity is especially marked when the abuse is sexual. It is the 'unwomanliness' of female aggression which partly accounts for the outrage and blame attached to women who do act in this way.

High-profile commentators have recently suggested that the time has come to ask 'why people do it': gender is now irrelevant. But how can it be, when these same professionals make glib statements about how much worse it is to be sexually abused by a woman, especially for boys? One of them told *Women's Hour* last year, 'When the last taboo is broken, the effect is devastating'.

Is it the same interaction when abuse is perpetrated by a woman? Many survivors' accounts suggest not; they talk of additional senses of betrayal — suggesting that as children and adults we expect women to behave in womanly, i.e., not violent, ways. An example is the book *When You're Ready*, a moving account of a woman coming to terms with her mother's physical abuse. By contrast the sexual abuse she experienced from an adult male is referred to in passing, as if it were unremarkable and played no part in her subsequent distress.

Women, children and physical violence

In the majority of cultures throughout the world, the use of threat and violence to control and 'discipline' children is not only acceptable but widespread. While the forms such control takes may vary, suggestions that excessive violence is used only within specific groups — usually working class and Black families — are just another mystification to implicate everyone but the white middle/upper class. Authoritarian (and non-authoritarian) child care practices exist within all social groups. Hitting children remains one of the few forms of interpersonal violence that is not legislated against in the majority of countries.

There are at least four forms of physical violence used by adults against children: the occasional smack; harsh discipline; explosive, unexpected and — to the child — undeserved outbursts; brutal, sadistic treatment which is justifiably named torture. It is the latter two which concern social workers and are covered by the term 'abuse'; as with violence against women, only the extremes provoke state intervention.

Very few studies provide us with information on how many women use these various forms of physical violence. The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC), who until last year produced the only national figures for reported child abuse, collapse men and women into categories like 'parents'. We know that women use violence somewhat less frequently than men and are less likely to commit the most sadistic assaults. That said, however, the numbers of women and men are much closer than for any other category of violent behaviour (the exception here is female genital mutilation — which is an act of violence done to girls by women). Physical violence towards children cannot, therefore, be so clearly viewed as gender-specific.

Our failure to explore this issue is most evident for me in recalling the work I did for many years in Women's Aid refuges for women escaping domestic violence. We chose the name 'refuge' to represent our vision of a haven, a place of safety. Yet that safety was never truly extended to children. By seeing ourselves in alliance with other women, supporting their struggles to get free of abusive men, we neglected the fact that the needs of children and those of women are not always the same. Our house rules often included 'no violence', but only a minority of groups applied that to women's relationships with children. Like the social workers we were so determined not to imitate, we justified our non-intervention by talk of 'different values'. Reflecting on my part in this hypocrisy, I can see that simply extending house rules to include children is not the answer, although it is an important beginning. The acceptability of physical violence towards children, the fact that many of us may have used it against our own children, demands a more complex approach. Talking honestly and openly is a crucial starting point: about women's relationships to children; about how for many women an impoverished, constrained and oppressive reality determines their experience of motherhood; about the social expectation that we 'control' children and the legacy of belief systems which promote a 'spare the rod, spoil the child' philosophy.

Women and sexual abuse

We have known about, yet chosen not to focus on, women's use of physical violence towards children. Similarly, evidence of women sexually abusing children has produced not only resistance among feminists but also denial. We did not, and do not, want to believe that women act in this way. In working on this piece I went back to books I read some time ago, and noticed how little attention I had paid to the evidence on women as abusers. If we continue this deliberate avoidance we fail survivors who feel that we do not want to hear what they need to say, and leave a huge space in which anti-feminist ideas and practices can develop. It is possible to recognise that some women sexually abuse children without losing sight of the reality that it is mostly men who commit sexual violence. That position opens the way for us to explore the similarities and differences between sexual abuse by women and men, and ask whether the explanations we have developed for men's behaviour also apply to women.

The information we have about women who sexually abuse is extremely limited, in part because they are few in number, and also because we currently lack the rich insight of survivors' accounts. Most published studies suggest that some 3% of adult sexual abusers are women. In *The Secret Trauma*, a study of women's

experience of incest, Diana Russell recorded a 7% figure for women as abusers (one mother, three other adult relatives and six sisters or cousins). Comparing women's abuse with men's, she notes that more of the female abusers were adolescents at the time, and more incidents were single events. She suggests that because female abusers use less force, abuse less frequently and there is less age difference, the abuse is less traumatic. However, these factors do not predict the impact of abuse by men on women. Is this the mirror image of the 'it's worse if women do it' position?

Kathleen Faller, an American social worker, has published the largest and most careful study of female abusers. She reports on 40; 14% of abusers seen in one programme during 1978–87. Her findings reveal a different pattern of offending: three quarters of the women abused alongside men in a 'family sex ring' (18% of male abusers were in this category), 15% were single mothers who were defined as 'merged' with their children, relating to them as a 'surrogate partner', and 10% were defined as 'psychotic'. (The last two categories raise the question of whether we accept such explanations, which we have rejected for male abusers.) The accounts of the children confirmed that in the family sex-ring cases it was usually men who initiated sexual abuse (although in at least two cases it was women); that women's role in the abuse was secondary and they committed fewer and less intrusive acts. A number of the children stated clearly that they knew their mothers were being coerced and did not want to commit the abuse.

A study of sexual abuse in daycare confirms this pattern whereby the majority of adult women who sexually abuse act in concert with male abusers. Finkelhor, Williams and Burns studied 270 cases, involving 382 abusers (220 men and 147 women) and 1639 children. Women were involved in 36% of cases, and in all of those with multiple perpetrators. In 63% of these they were related to at least one of the male abusers who were either male partners or sons. However, there were 27% of women who sexually abused independently.

Evidence of lesbians sexually abusing children is still more rare; limited to one or two case studies. However, I have spoken to two lesbian/feminist social workers who have encountered such cases. The abuse has been either of lesbians' own children or children and young women they have befriended.

I have yet to come across an account of a woman with a 'career' of sexual offending who targets and 'grooms' large numbers of children she does not know in order to sexually abuse them. The only example I can think of is women who recruit into the sex industry. But here the motivation tends not to be personal sexual access to the girl/young woman, but financial gain.

The circumstances in which women sexually abuse do not excuse their behaviour, nor detract from the impact of their abuse on the child, but we do need to explore what these differences mean. Is it appropriate to link the ways in which some children and women are coerced in sex rings? Where women are not coerced, is there the same connection between sex and violence, power and pleasure that we have documented in relation to men? Whilst the numbers of lesbians sexually abusing children may be tiny, what responses are appropriate? There are complex questions too about the levels of responsibility we can or should attribute to women when they too are being abused; when they fail to challenge men's abusive behaviour; and when — as in the case of genital mutilation — they act within cultural belief systems which legitimate violence.

Violence between lesbians

Constructing alternatives to the medical pathological model of lesbianism was, and remains, an important facet of lesbian feminist politics. As our work increasingly highlighted the oppressive nature of heterosexual relationships for women, it was important, personally and politically, to have an alternative vision. One of the successes of feminism over the last 20 years has been to create spaces where women feel able to question heterosexuality, where lesbians can be visible and to some extent affirmed.

But both the external hostility and the positive energy inside lesbian feminism have led to an idealisation of lesbian relationships. Many women who came to lesbianism through the WLM were both unprepared and unwilling to face the fact that some of the behaviour we criticized in heterosexual relationships also occurs between lesbians. Voicing this publicly seems to undercut not only our political analysis of male power and heterosexuality, but also our optimism about lesbian relationships. This collective refusal has been, in part, responsible for the difficulty many lesbians have in naming their experience as abuse or violence, especially if it includes coercive sex.

When some women did courageously talk about their own experiences they, and others, placed their accounts within a heterosexual domestic violence framework. Certainly women's accounts do suggest similarities. When I read *Naming the Violence* the resemblance of the stories lesbians told to those I had heard from women abused by men both alarmed and disturbed me. They described persistent undermining of self-confidence; repeated criticism, often in front of friends; the use of threats and violence to enforce demands and/or reinforce negative interpretations of the woman and her behaviour; isolation — cutting women off from their friends

and potential sources of support and validation; extreme levels of sexual jealousy and possessiveness, sometimes accompanied by coercive sex; and dire warnings about the consequences of telling others.

But do these echoes amount to an explanation? Part of our explanation of men's sexual violence has been the centuries of entitlement they have had in relation to 'their' women and children. There is no such social legitimisation of lesbian relationships, let alone a 'right' of one partner to have power and control over the other. For me there remain unanswered questions about violence between lesbians. I want a framework which does more than map heterosexual theory onto lesbian experience.

We also have to consider what practical support and services we should be providing, both to lesbians who are being abused and, more contentiously, to lesbians who abuse. (Some of these issues also apply to women who abuse children.) Can we afford to take the view we have with heterosexual violence, that we will not work with abusers? If we think men should work with abusive men, isn't the logical corollary that lesbians should work with abusive lesbians? What forms of protection can we create which work, which do not involve women having to resort to state agencies and the legal system? Do lesbians need their own refuges? Should we be working with police domestic violence units to develop specific procedures for lesbians?

Other issues

Here I have only looked at the behaviour of adult women. Interactions between girls and young women need a fuller exploration. The fact that a high proportion of female sexual abusers are girls and young women must be addressed. How many of them are doing what used to be called 'acting out' — trying to make sense of their own abuse by re-enacting the experience whilst changing roles? How many act with full knowledge that what they do hurts the other child, but go ahead anyway because it makes them feel good?

We must also look at women who, in the context of their paid work, use violence as a form of control and/or power. The contexts range from women in the prison/police service/armed forces, through to women working in residential institutions caring for children and young people, elderly, sick and disabled people. A different but equally important issue is the circumstances in which women use or endorse the use of violence in the context of political struggle. These phenomena challenge essentialist constructions of women as 'non-violent', and raise questions about the influence of brutalising contexts on behaviour.

In our discussions about abuse by and between women we must begin from an honest admission of the many ways in which women deliberately hurt/betray other women, and of our own failure to explore this. We need to return to small groups to discuss relationships between women and between women and children. This process will enable us to develop a framework within which we can both describe and explain, which in turn will be the spur to action and change.

References

- Evert, Kathy and Inie Bijkerk (1987), *When You're Ready*. Walnut Creek, CA: Launch Press.
- Faller, Kathleen (1987), 'Women who sexually abuse children', *Violence and Victims* 2.4.
- Finkelhor, David, Linda Williams and Nanci Burns (1988), *Nursery Crimes: Sexual Abuse in Day Care* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications).
- Lobel, Kerry (ed) (1986), *Naming the Violence: Speaking Out About Lesbian Battering*, Berkeley, CA: Seal Press.
- Russell, Diana (1984) *The Secret Trauma: Incest in the Lives of Girls and Women*, New York: Basic Books.
- Ward, Joan (1990), 'Therapism and the taming of the lesbian community', *Sinister Wisdom*.