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Theorising Men’s Violence Towards Women in Refugee Families: Towards an Intersectional Feminist Framework

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Violence against women perpetrated by male partners, or ex-partners, is one of the most concerning and prevalent public health issues in the world today and is a major cause of injury and mental illness among women and children. Violence against women occurs in most societies irrespective of culture, socio-economic status or religion. Nevertheless, it has been identified that immigrant and refugee women are particularly at risk in cases of domestic violence (Eastal 1996; Narayan 1997; Human Rights Watch 2000; Walter 2001; Perilla 2003; Kang Kahler & Tesar 2003). To make sense of this issue, we articulate an intersectional feminist framework that we used to analyse the results of an empirical investigation of men’s violence against women in refugee families in Melbourne.

Although this research has investigated the complex field of domestic violence, culture, trauma and historical and contemporary disadvantage, it has a fundamental prerequisite standing that regardless of past and current experiences; men must take responsibility for their violence against women. Our concern is to understand how male domination manifests itself within each culture and emerging, changing cultures in the diaspora, to explore the connections with men’s violence against women within the unique domain of the refugee experience.

The Contemporary Literature on Violence Against Immigrant and Refugee Women

The majority of studies in this field are culture-specific rather than cross-cultural, and focus on immigrant and visible minority (or culturally and linguistically diverse populations) rather than refugee communities. The refugee experience adds another level of complexity to the culture-specific studies. The standpoint of authors differs according to whether the prevalence of domestic violence in particular immigrant or culturally and linguistically diverse groups is perceived as higher than in the general community, or whether prevalence is similar and it is migrants’ specific experiences that make them less likely to seek or find effective interventions. Menjivar and Salcido’s review of the literature found that domestic violence was indeed not higher among refugee communities; however, it was their specific experiences, including lack of host-language skills, unemployment, uncertain legal status, and prior experiences in their home countries that reinforced strategies by perpetrators and prevented women seeking assistance and early intervention (2002, p. 901). Regardless, the literature invariably finds that cultural values and immigration status enhance the complexities normally involved in cases of domestic violence. The literature concerning domestic violence in culturally and ethnically-diverse populations living in developed western countries is concordant that cultural difference, gender roles, feminism, shame and collectivism often combine with factors related to the experience of migration to place immigrant and refugee women at heightened risk from domestic violence. For example, culturally-mediated factors that are at odds with contemporary white western values and norms include the fear of losing face and shaming family by disclosing abuse, and community and marriage commitments taking predominance over individual welfare of women are well described. Issues including social isolation, low-socioeconomic status, racism, inadequate access to or knowledge of services and supports have been duly identified (Eastal 1996; Goldolf et al 1998; Bui & Morash 1999; Sharma 2001; Yoshioka et al 2001; Yoshioka 2003; Bui 2003; Bhuyan et al 2005).

Literature referring to the domestic violence and the experiences of refugees settling in developed countries is sparse despite concerns from service providers and policy makers that these communities are experiencing domestic violence and that it is negatively affecting wellbeing and the chances of successful settlement. Refugees and humanitarian entrants by definition have escaped persecution in their home country or have been subject to substantial discrimination amounting to gross violation of human rights in their home country (Pittaway 2005).

Rees (2004) argues that many of the issues increasing the risks associated with domestic violence for immigrant families are compounded for refugee families who are more isolated, have reduced opportunities to learn English and find employment, and some of whom experience ongoing mental and physical effects of torture, rape and trauma. Pittaway (2004) describes the pre-arrival experiences, traditional masculine identities and the settlement challenges and barriers as important factors in the incidence and manifestations of domestic and family violence and the safety of women in wealthy receiving countries. Refugee women are unable to flee domestic violence by returning home because of state persecution and the other significant risks to their wellbeing and lives.

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Friedman (1992) focused her study on the rape and sexual assault of refugee women and the psychological trauma and physical health effects (including injuries, venereal disease and pregnancies) on refugee women. Because refugee women have often fled hostile environments where rape and the abuse of women was a weapon of war and persecution, or a common occurrence in refugee camps, the effects of abuse among refugee women need to be accounted for in health and welfare policies and interventions in receiving countries. Friedman argues that where women's chastity and honour is viewed as the property of men, rape is seen as a violation in the eyes of husbands and communities and can lead to increased violence against women. Friedman also contends that refugee men, following the trauma of violence in their home country and the stress of settlement in a different country, use domestic violence as a means of gaining control and re-establishing power (1992, p. 65).

Sharma (2001) similarly argues that some refugee men tend to use violence as a means for solving problems and dealing with stress and expressing their feelings. Living under dictatorial regimes, where violence has been used to dominate and control are extenuating factors (2001, p. 1414).

Feminist scholars and advocates have argued that immigrant and refugee women are often disadvantaged and discriminated against when they are defending cases of gender-based violence. The double jeopardy of patriarchal beliefs and world-views impacting on the rights of women prior to leaving the home country as well as once in the home country appears particularly insidious. There is an unambiguous conflict in Australian and western laws which on the one hand legally prohibit rape and violence against women and on the other hand exhibit standards which clearly resonate with the patriarchal values of male defendants on the grounds of cultural custom. Refugee women have had claims for justice following a rape or sexual assault undermined when the perpetrator (in many cases the husband) has used the cultural defence of his traditional and cultural right to have sex with his wife at his discretion. Regardless of cultural values refugee and immigrant women have the right to equal treatment before the law and as a consequence men should not be exonerated from gender-based crimes using a cultural defence (Dimopoulos 1995).

Clearly, cultural, social and political contexts are important factors in understanding the nature and occurrence of domestic violence among culturally and linguistically-diverse populations. Whilst acknowledging the strengths of feminist interventions that consider the social context of abuse, demystify power relationships, and focus on women's empowerment, Sharma contends that such interventions fail to acknowledge the entire spectrum of diversity that exists among women and for perpetrators (2001).

Yoshihama (2000) and Ho (1990) have argued that whilst research has shown how patriarchy supports and is reinforced by domestic violence, some western feminist analyses have offered a mono-cultural analysis of domestic violence, without regard for socio-cultural variations in the experience and manifestations of domestic violence across cultures. Yick (2001) agrees that social science theories from Anglo-Western perspectives have failed to capture the realities of domestic violence among ethnic minority groups. She examined feminist theories and their application to domestic violence in Chinese immigrant families and found that interventions should include a broader analysis of the family, where the individual woman is often required to protect the family as the crucial aspect of her social identity, and the associated risks of ostracism and criticism she might encounter as a result of help seeking for violence perpetrated by a partner or spouse (Yik 2001, p. 552; Ho 1990).

Similarly, when reflecting on her research with Samoan communities in New Zealand, Crichton-Hill found that western interventions in domestic violence, centred around the Duluth Model, (developed by Pence and Paymar in 1993 in which physical and sexual violence is conceptualised as forms of power and control), do not adequately take account of the cultural complexity of domestic violence and in particular the unique dynamics of Samoan culture (2001, p. 203).

Towards an Intersectional Theoretical Framework

Despite the argument that Western feminist analyses ignore socio-cultural variations in the experience of domestic violence across cultures and that some white Western feminist frameworks are unable to capture the complexity of violence against women in culturally and linguistically-diverse communities, our reading of the literature has uncovered a history of feminist-inspired theory of cultural difference in the context of gender and class.

While historically some expressions of Western feminist theory may have given insufficient attention to women of colour, in the late 1980s African-American and third world feminists introduced the concepts of 'intersectionality' and interlocking systems of oppression (Collins 1991; Mohanty 1991). These feminists argued that some expressions of white Western feminism were unable to analyse the complexity of women's lives. By failing to sufficiently acknowledge the experiences of marginalised women, gender relations were granted a primary status and other forms of inequality were seen as secondary. It was argued that one of the results of this neglect is that women who were relatively privileged were insufficiently aware of the problems faced by working-class and black women (Zinn et al 1986). To fully understand gender inequality then it would be necessary to move beyond the experiences of middle-class white women and to explore the impact of class and ethnicity on women's lives.

During the 1980s and 1990s, African American feminists explored how the intersections of race, gender and class impacted on the lives of marginalised people. Collins (1991) and others emphasised the importance of seeing race, gender and class as 'interlocking systems of oppression'. These feminist perspectives grounded in the diversity
of women's lives explored the interconnections between class, gender and race as they were experienced by women in specific contexts. Feminism was thus faced with the challenge to develop a theory that is able to address the complexity of how these different dimensions of women's (and men's) lives are woven together.

The main premise of intersectional theory is that gender oppression is modified by intersections with other forms of inequality and oppression (Sokoloff & Dupont 2005). It is notable, however, that most of the uses of intersectional analyses are focussed on the intersections of oppression. As Acker (1999, p. 53) has observed, we 'know more about how gender, class and race are intertwined in the lives of members of relatively subordinate groups than we do about the lives of those in more influential positions'. Intersectional analysis needs to move beyond the study of those who are subordinate on all levels of social division to explore the experiences of those who occupy positions of both privilege and subordination.

Not all men, for example, benefit equally from patriarchy just as not all white people benefit equally from racism. This means that most people cannot be categorised solely as privileged or oppressed. Some men may have access to some forms of privilege and not others. So while men may be privileged in some situations, some will be marginalised in others. While refugee men may exercise power over their female partners at home, in the context of the public sphere and paid work, they are likely to be dominated by Anglo-Australian men who have secure citizenship status and associated rights and privileges.

What an intersectional analysis makes clear is that almost everyone experiences both privilege and subordination. Black feminist criticisms of white feminism draw attention to the fact that while white women are oppressed by their gender positioning, they also receive privileges through their whiteness. Similarly, we would add, that while non-Western immigrant men are oppressed by class and racial hierarchies, they still receive some forms of gender privilege. These examples demonstrate just two of the ways in which one may be both privileged and oppressed at the same time.

While many people find it relatively easy to identify their experience of oppression because it feels painful and uncomfortable, they often find it harder to recognise how their thoughts and actions oppress others because they are often normalised in the culture. A concept that has been used to understand some of the ways in which privileged people sustain their dominant position is 'internalised domination'. Pheterson (1986, p. 147) defines internalised domination as 'the incorporation and acceptance by individuals within a dominant group of prejudices against others'. The concept of internalised domination may explain in part 'why significant numbers of people from the dominant group seem to hold oppressive thoughts and exert oppressive behaviour but do not consider themselves to be oppressive' (Mullaly 2002, p. 145).

Given that most people can be seen to exhibit both some degree of penalty and privilege, it is equally necessary for individuals to see themselves as belonging to privileged groups as well as to oppressed groups. An intersectional analysis can help to deal with this complexity and assist oppressed groups to challenge exploitation and domination affecting their communities.

Intersectionality and Understanding Men’s Violence Against Women

What does an intersectional framework mean for understanding men's violence against women in refugee communities? Crenshaw (1997) was one of the first theorists to apply intersectionality to men's violence against women. She argues that domestic violence services designed for white middle-class women will be of limited value to women from culturally-diverse backgrounds. Donnelly et al. (2005) suggest that the notion that violence affects all women equally is a form of 'colour blindness' and that service provision flowing from this idea is embedded with white privilege.

Hunter (1996) argues that if feminist theory ignores race and ethnicity, it is incomplete. She notes that there is a different meaning to male domination when it is refracted through the lens of race, colonisation and class oppression (Hunter 1996, p. 140). In her view, some radical feminist approaches to violence against women have been centred on the experiences of white middle-class, heterosexual women.

While it is clearly evident that women from all classes and ethnic groups and in all societies can be victims of men's violence, there is an implication in this premise that violence against women is the same 'across class, ethnic, cultural and other divisions' (Eggar 1993, p. 3). Richie (2000, p. 2) acknowledges that the feminist view that 'any woman can be battered' was part of a strategy of not stigmatising the class and race of the victims of men's violence. However, she argues that this strategy was 'based on a false sense of unity around the experience of gender oppression' and that it has not come to terms with the analysis of race and class (Richie 2000, p. 2). As a consequence, the unique experiences of low-income, non-Anglo and refugee women have frequently been neglected.

Clearly, there are dangers in acknowledging class and cultural variations in men's violence against women. We do not want to contribute to the false belief that violence against women is only something that happens to 'others' (Crenshaw 1997). We have to be careful not to simply blame the culture of the immigrant or refugee family. All women, whatever their cultural or ethnic background, are at risk of experiencing violence (Ely 2004). Sokoloff and Dupont (2005b) note that when we acknowledge that culture may be a part of the problem, there is a tendency to blame culture and to regard non-white cultures as more tolerant of men's violence than white cultures. There is simply no evidence to suggest that ethnically-diverse families are more violent (West 2005).
Strategies for violence prevention, though, need to be mindful of culturally-specific factors in particular communities (Nayak et al 2003). We are not attributing culture itself as a key determinant of violence against women. However, we are interested in how gendered violence is shaped by other forms of oppression that cross cut gender divisions (Sokoloff & Dupont 2003b) including during settlement for recently arrived refugees. We also want to examine how patriarchy functions differently in diverse cultures. Almeida and Dolan-Delevecchio (1999), for example, illustrate how patriarchy takes a different form in many Asian cultures. In our view, domestic violence is a manifestation of gender inequality and the institution of patriarchy manifests both universally and differently through cultures. In advocating an intersectional analysis, we are proposing that it is important to identify both similarities and differences in men’s violence against women in diverse cultures and communities. Some areas of commonality that seem to transcend particular cultures include such factors as community acceptance of violence against women and the low social status of women, although, these common factors are likely to be expressed in culturally-specific ways. These factors are likely to be exacerbated in the context of oppressive political structures, civil wars and fundamentalist religious beliefs (Ely 2004). Furthermore, refugee cultures have to make adjustments to the dominant culture in Australia and some of these adaptations increase the risk factors for domestic violence (Cousineau & Rondeau 2004).

Definitions of what constitutes violence against women will vary from culture to culture (Gartner 2000). We need to be conscious of these cultural variations without necessarily accepting cultural justifications for abusive practices (Cousineau & Rondeau 2004). We know that cultural explanations can be used to legitimate men’s violence against women (Sokoloff & Dupont 2005). This is the case where a particular ethnic group living in Australia is commonly ascribed as being more intrinsically violent and consequently their behaviour is considered beyond a western critique or comparison. As Olkin (1999) points out, while some cultures and religions do appear to be in opposition to gender equality, we should not conclude from this that they are necessarily more patriarchal than Western societies. In exploring the role of culture in relation to violence against women, we must also recognise that white norms and behaviours are also cultural (Volpp 2003) and can manifest in ways that are less obvious, or are concealed under seemingly more liberal theories of gender equality and anti-violence.

On the one hand, intervention strategies against domestic violence in refugee communities need to ensure that they don’t reinforce cultural values that tolerate violence against women, while on the other hand they need to be mindful of not undermining the value of cultural difference and community integration (Gartner 2000). Acknowledging oppression beyond gender is important. Similar to the case presented by Australian Indigenous women (Aboriginal Women’s Task Force 1999), refugee women may be reluctant to name their experiences of violence because of their awareness of how their male partners have experienced oppression both in their home communities and in Australia (Donnelly et al 2005).

A number of feminist writers have drawn attention to the implications of differences between women’s experience of violence for understanding men’s violence. Bograd (1999, p. 2), for example, argues that men’s violence is ‘not a monolithic phenomenon’. In her view, intersectionalities and multiple oppressions shape the meaning and nature of men’s violence. Thus class, ethnicity and sexuality will impact upon women’s experience of violence through the victimisation of classism, racism and heterosexism. While it is clear that all men who use violence ‘exercise some form of patriarchal control, men’s relationships to patriarchy differ in patterned ways depending on where they are socially located’ (Bograd 1999, p. 2).

Intersectionality and Responding to Men’s Violence Against Women

We need to understand the ways in which masculinities are influenced by race, class and ethnicity in challenging the violence of marginalised men (Coker 2001). There is a complex debate about the relationship between class and racist oppression and men’s violence against women. To consider the influence of class and inequality related to ethnicity could be interpreted as ‘colluding with the man in helping him find excuses for his violence’ because it moves away from the notion of ‘sole responsibility’ (Watson 2001, p. 92). However, this ought not to be interpreted as an argument for excusing men of responsibility for their violence. We are not suggesting that class and racist oppression can explain men’s violence. As Kappeler (1995) notes ‘not everyone experiencing the same oppression uses violence. That is, that these circumstances do not “cause” violent behaviour’ (1995, p. 3). Thus while the power structures must be addressed to significantly reduce men’s violence, we still need to address the behaviour of individual men within the constraints of those power structures (Kappeler 1995).

There are only a few examples of the implications of an intersectional analysis for working with marginalised men who are violent to their women partners. Augusta-Scott (2001) says that many of the men he works with are oppressed by racism and poverty. In his view, these men are ‘often both powerful and powerless at the same time’ (Augusta-Scott 2001, p. 40). While they have power and control in their relationships with women, these men simultaneously experience powerlessness relative to that of men who are white and with a higher socio-economic status. For refugee men, power is experienced within the domestic sphere; however, it is often the converse situation outside of domestic relationships. While facilitators need to be aware of how violent men can use their experiences of injustice as a way of avoiding responsibility, particular experiences of social or political marginalisation need to be acknowledged in the engagement with these men.
A number of male writers who have emphasised the importance of race and class in working with violent men have tended to do so from a position that holds feminism responsible for what they regard as a simplistic gender analysis (for example, Watson 2001 and Hurst 2001). Such men fail to acknowledge the diversity of feminist analyses and the recognition over the last thirty years that most feminists have given to the intersections of racism, class and gender. However, how successfully these feminist inspired theories have been integrated into male perpetrator programs remains an important issue to consider (Pease 2004/2005). Arguing that intervention often does reflect a feminist understanding of multiple-oppressions, McLean (2001) suggests that some of these seeming omissions may have more to do with men’s misinterpretation of feminist theory and practice. Kelly rightly notes that even in the 1970s and 1980s there was awareness of differences in relation to race, class and sexuality (2002, p. 2). Laing (2002, p. 2) also observes that ‘feminist writing and activism has attempted to grapple with the ‘interaction’ of gender, race, class and ethnicity in order to more fully understand all the dimensions of the socio-political context in which violence against women occurs’.

In spite of the developments in intersectional theory, Laing (2001, p. 4), in citing Almeida and Durkin (1999), says that most services for both women and men ‘have failed to address the intersectionalities of race, class, culture and sexual orientation’. She advocates Almeida and Durkin’s (1999) ‘cultural model’ which locates personal responsibility within the context of multiple oppressions arising from colonialism and racism as a way forward. Thus there is a need to develop programs and interventions with violent men that recognise the impact of class, race and ethnicity on men’s lives. Almeida and Lockard (2005) advocate the development of culture circles and the importance of building communities that promote collaboration and non-violence. Community-based, culturally competent interventions in specific communities (Smith 2005) as well as multi-level empowerment based interventions (Rees and Pease 2007) have been recommended as important approaches in trans-cultural and refugee contexts to address domestic and family violence.

Conclusion

This article has underscored the importance of thinking about refugee communities, settlement and domestic violence in more complex ways than has previously been evidenced in policy and practice. We have argued that many feminist theorists have included an analysis of ethnicity and class in considering domestic violence; however, it appears that these theories have not filtered through to influence policy or practice in Australia. Crenshaw (1994) says that domestic violence is only one form of oppression and control and our study supports this view. We argue that social injustices impacting on refugee communities, occurring at multiple sites, requires urgent attention if refugee women are to feel safer in their own homes. This is not to imply an argument of causality, but rather to emphasise the compounding factors that can make refugee families vulnerable to violence, its effects and outcomes. In this context, while it is important to continue to locate and respond to domestic violence as something that occurs in the private sphere, we must also situate it within the wider public sphere. For refugee and humanitarian entrants, the act of domestic violence intersects with systems of gender inequality including culture, residency status, class, prior trauma, cultural alienation, social exclusion and racism in particular ways. Domestic violence manifests through universal patriarchal foundations, as well as with culturally and socially mediated causes and on these grounds the responsibility for violence needs to remain with the perpetrator as well as with governments and societies that perpetuate inequalities and disadvantages extending beyond gender. For example, it would be unproductive for violence against refugee women to be viewed as the product of racism and consequently diminish the responsibility of refugee men to address it.

Consequently, we recommend that a theory of intersectionality inform policies and health and welfare practices concerning refugee communities and domestic violence. There is more than a need to widen services to make them more culturally appropriate; there is a requirement to develop models and practices of social change (Pratt and Sokoloff, 2005) that reflect the complexity of issues that impact on the lives of refugees during settlement. Analysis of domestic violence in the refugee context requires a specific appreciation of patriarchy as it manifests through cultures, as a way of ensuring that critique remains focused on the factors that place women at risk, rather than on pathologising broader cultural frameworks. An intersectional analysis reveals the collusion of male privilege, racism, colonialism and class privilege, and helps to facilitate a critique of our own intersected identities (Pratt & Sokoloff, 2005).

[1] This project is published as: Rees, S. and Pease, B. (2006) Refugee Settlement, Safety and Wellbeing: Exploring Domestic and Family Violence in Refugee Communities. Immigrant Women’s Domestic Violence Service, Melbourne. The main objective of the study was to investigate the relationships between domestic violence and gender, traumatic history, social and economic context, cultural difference, and changed identities. Ethnic groups included in this study were communities from Iraq, North and South Sudanese, Ethiopian and Bosnian, Serbian and Croatian communities.

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