

And the Bear Just Keeps on Dancing: Violence against Women in the Context of a Violent Society

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I've had several people comment to me that the title of my talk today is "interesting." And I think that what they really mean to say is, "what the heck does it mean? What are you talking about?" So let me begin by explaining the title.

In 1996, I wrote a chapter for a book I co-edited with Kevin Hamberger; the chapter was entitled, "On Dancing with a Bear: Reflections on Current Debates of Domestic Violence Theorists." The chapter was about some of the key issues over which domestic violence theorists were heatedly disagreeing, and I discussed why I thought the debate was important and healthy. These were - and still are - complex issues without simple or straight forward answers, but we have to keep at it; we can't give up searching for the answers because the answers will inform how we respond to domestic violence. Not long before I wrote that chapter, I had heard former surgeon general, Jocelyn Elders, deliver a speech to a conference on the HIV/AIDS epidemic. In her speech, Dr. Elders beseeched the audience to keep searching for the best ways to prevent HIV infections and for an AIDS vaccine and cure. She said that these tasks weren't easy; they were like dancing with a bear. You can't sit down when you get tired; you have to wait for the bear to get tired. I decided that her analogy was appropriate for domestic violence researchers as well, so I quoted her and encouraged my readers to muster the stamina to keep on dancing.

Well, I have to say that until September 11th, I was starting to feel like we were really making some progress in our understanding of domestic violence and violence against women in general. I thought the bear might finally be getting a little tired. I edited the only international, interdisciplinary journal devoted exclusively to the problem of violence against women, and I have the advantage - no, it's really more of a privilege - to get to see some of the very best, the most innovative, research and practice in this field. The journal starts its eighth year of publication in January, and there is so much excellent work being done in this area that we have been publishing monthly for three years now. I was beginning to feel that services for abused women were growing and improving; research on the Violence Against Women Act was showing the significant impact this law was having on not only reducing violence against women but also on holding perpetrators accountable for their actions; and the programs for perpetrators were growing and improving.

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But September 11th changed my outlook – just as it changed everything else. It's not just that I'm feeling the sadness, shock, and concern that are affecting all of us, although I certainly am. It's something else; it's made me realize that some of the progress we have made could be eroded in the months to come, and that other problems that not paid much attention to, but should have, are likely to come to the fore. It's made the whole picture much more complicated, and there are no simple or easy solutions. And so the bear just keeps on dancing.

Prior to September 11th, I was planning to talk with you about trends in research in violence against women – our successes as well as the issues that we have not done so well in addressing. On the latter topic, I planned to include some of my own current research on violence against very poor women who live in public housing developments in Philadelphia. But after September 11th, my plans for this talk – and for so many other things – changed.

In the week following the terrorist attacks, I spent some time going through my address book, calling people I hadn't heard from in awhile just to make sure they were okay. I figured they were, but like everybody else, I was looking for reassurance. I was talking to a friend of mine who runs several programs for battered women in the Pacific Northwest and, after our initial catching-up talk, she said in a grave tone, "We're in trouble, you know. Our funding is going to be cut." I asked her what had happened. Had she gotten some kind of notice that previously guaranteed funds were being withdrawn? Had they been denied a grant? Was their fundraising campaign unsuccessful? No, she said, there was nothing that specific – yet. But she was certain that their funding sources, which were truly their lifeline, would be drastically reduced, if they did not dry up altogether, over the coming months. Everyone's attention would be focused on rebuilding and rejuvenating the economy. Money would be spent on defense and increased public security, too. Although we hadn't yet responded militarily, she was sure we would, and the country's attention – and money – would go to the war effort. "Yes," She said, "women's service agencies are in trouble." I tried to be reassuring; after all, that's what I was looking for, so I could certainly give some reassurance in return. But our conversation stuck with me; it made me think and it made me worry. Shortly after we spoke, there was an article in the New York Times about how it looked like our nation's budget surplus would now become a budget deficit, and how the debate was already underway about how resources that were growing more scarce should be spent.

Of course, since September 11th, I've paid a lot of attention to the news. Who hasn't? But besides trying to keep abreast of what's happening with the war, with continuing terrorist threats here in the States, and the economy, my conversation with my friend had also prompted me to look for reports about domestic violence against women generally, or domestic violence more specifically. October is Domestic Violence Awareness month. Usually during October, I see lots of programs on family violence, public service announcements and advertisements about how to help or where to get help, and public events, such as memorials for those who have been killed by intimates. But this month, I haven't seen that; in fact, I haven't seen much about domestic violence at all. I did read one newspaper article that said that incidents of domestic violence were down since September 11th. This has been followed more recently by an article saying that marriages are up; in the words of the New York Times, "terror attacks bring a finer focus to life affirming ritual." The implication of such articles is that intimate partners have stopped fighting; like the Republicans and the Democrats, they are unified against a common enemy now. They are turning about from their "individual" problems and focusing on a greater cause. And the terrorist attacks have made them appreciate one another – and life – much more.

Now this sort of thing does worry me. For one, it worries me because I don't think it's true. I don't think this is what's happening at all. Second, it worries me because I think that it causes us to miss the big picture. I think the events of September 11th and the current war in Afghanistan have connections with violence against women and meeting the service needs of women who have been victimized. To illustrate what I mean, let me ask you to do a little word association with me. You may

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close your eyes if you want, or if you have a pen and paper handy, you can jot down what first comes to mind as I read these words. The words are: honor, patriotism, heroes, cowardice, justice, poverty, rape, oppression, sexism.

Some of these words, especially the first five, are words that politicians have been and will be using a great deal because, like me, they know that in the minds of Americans these words generate particular images, and these images have strong emotions attached to them. Of course, these words mean different things to different people, a point to which I will return shortly. But regardless of what images these words conjured up for you, I want to emphasize that they are not discreet concepts. To the contrary, they are all connected. There is a common thread – or perhaps the more appropriate metaphor is a chain – linking them together. And this is a point I think many of us – those of us working to end violence against women and those of us concerned with terrorism and national security – have lost sight of, but one that we desperately need to regain if we are to move forward instead of backward, if we are to actually lessen the violence that permeates so many lives as we start the 21st century.

Let me first give you some history of the movement to end violence against women in the United States, which I think contains some clues as to why we are not seeing these vital linkages right now, and in doing this I will turn to the issues themselves and how I see them as inextricably linked.

The movement to end violence against women has been focused, for the most part, on battered women in the home. Although wife abuse was not “discovered” as a serious social problem until fairly late in the 1970’s, feminist activists addressed it much earlier. It was they, in fact, who thrust it into the public eye. The women who organized to raise public awareness about wife battering, as well as other forms of violence against women, and to help battered women by establishing hotlines, shelters, and other agencies – the women, in short, who formed the battered women’s movement – were a pretty radical lot. And they worked in a political and social climate that was fairly liberal, or at least open to liberal ideas and strategies. Their focus was primarily on social justice for women and on social change.

As the 1970’s came to a close, however, and we moved into the 1980’s, the political and social climate in this country changed dramatically. In 1980, Ronald Reagan was elected president and liberalism became a dirty word. Many of us watched and worried and continued to work for justice, as the hard-won gains of the 70’s were slowly eroded. But the battered women’s movement realized then that it had to do some changing if it was going to survive. Most of the programs that had been established were funded with government money. The activities and staff of these programs were increasingly coming under scrutiny by funders: Were they too radical? Were there lesbians in their midst? Were they encouraging women to leave men, to start families of their own, to forsake the traditional family?

During the late 1980’s, we saw drastic cuts in government spending on social programs and human services, and services for women were among the hardest hit. As resources dwindled, many within the battered women’s movement, in order to secure and hold on to ever-smaller bits of money, grew more and more conservative. Although some split off to form alternative organizations still committed to radical social change, the mainstream movement became less of a social justice movement and more of a social service movement. The activities of the movement also narrowed: hotlines, shelters, and similar programs struggled to survive, and instead of being one part of a larger movement for gender equality, for securing basic human rights for women, they became the movement focal point.

Lest I be misunderstood, let me make it clear that I am not saying here that those working in the movement were not (or are not) committed to gender equality and human rights for women. Nor am I saying that hotlines, shelters, and other services of this kind are not important. What I am saying is that as the political Right grew in power – as it rewrote the national agenda – the battered women’s

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movement found itself fighting some extraordinary battles over who would get money and how that money would be used. It was – and, I argue, it is becoming once again – a struggle for mere survival. When you are in the midst of that kind of struggle, it is difficult at best to see and to devote energy to the bigger picture. It is difficult to see how your programs and your issues are fundamentally connected to other items on the political agenda, such as national security and patriotism.

What happened during the 1980's was that groups whose interests and well-being are actually closely related – for example, women, the poor, single mothers, gay men and lesbians, people of color, immigrants and refugees – were divided. Although many of us belong to more than one of these groups simultaneously, we were forced to choose with whom we would identify and ally ourselves because a zero-sum game had been created: one group's gain was another group's loss. And I argue that this is precisely what we must avoid now, and we can do this by making explicit connections between international conflict, militarization, and violence against women.

Let me give you some examples of these connections. Let's go back to the news article reporting that domestic violence incidents have gone down since September 11th. What we find is that reports of domestic violence incidents have gone down; that's not the same thing as a decrease in the incidents themselves. What may be happening is that fewer calls are being made to the police and, when the police are called, they are not responding by making arrests or filing official incident reports. What makes me think this? Well, one reason is that research shows that during times of disaster, violence against women actually increases but women are less likely to report it and service providers are less able to effectively respond. For instance, Elaine Enarson, a sociologist who has studied violence against women in the aftermath of disasters, reports that domestic violence increases for several reasons: 1) weak relationships become even more strained; 2) disasters often disrupt certain services, such as phone service and public transportation, so if an incident occurs, helpers cannot be called or women without private transportation cannot escape an abuser; 3) but most important, battered women are socially isolated, and disasters isolate them even further, making them more vulnerable. Members of their social networks may be busy taking care of their own needs or helping others and are not available to help these women. Moreover, the police and other service providers are usually busy responding to other calls or emergencies that are deemed more pressing, so "domestics" become a much lower priority.

It may be possible, then, that the decline in the incidence of domestic violence reports following September 11th are a combination of women simply not calling for help because they see their own "personal" problems as unimportant, and the police not responding as they had prior to September 11th. In fact, a report in Philadelphia last week showed that violent crime in general in the city was up, but the police were too busy with security issues, calls about suspicious packages, and so on, to address it.

Another problem that I have not heard anyone discussing these days is violence against women in military families. Leora Rosen, who is currently with the U.S. Department of Justice, but formerly worked with the military, has done some of the most comprehensive research on this topic. She had found rates of domestic violence in the military to be high, and she had conducted studies to try to determine what factors contribute to this. A popular hypothesis had been that military life is stressful and that some men respond to stress by abusing their wives or girlfriends. But Rosen did find [sic] support for this hypothesis in her studies of military families. Instead, she found that the cultural norms of male peer support in the military contribute significantly to intimate partner violence, and these norms are reinforced more strongly in combat arms companies than in combat support companies. What are these norms of male peer support in the military? They are the cultural norms of what it means to be a soldier: to be tough, not weak; to confront the enemy with force, to not back down, to not negotiate. Indeed, there is no room for negotiation. Soldiers who exhibit these traits are praised by their peers; soldiers who show signs of weakness are derided as "girls" (or worse) and "homos" (or worse).

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These are the traits that are being used to extol our troops today; they are heroes, and our enemies are cowards. But no one is asking what consequences this may have for soldiers' families when they come home. At best, I have seen only one news story about the effect on children of having two parents in the military called to duty. Thus, another connection, another opportunity for the battered women's movement is slipping away.

Finally, what about the women of Afghanistan? President Bush has alluded to their poor treatment under the Taliban in a couple of speeches, but I have not heard much from other quarters about their circumstances. During the war in Bosnia, we became keenly aware of how sexual assault can be used as a weapon of war and how women are abused in refugee camps. According to the Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan, an indigenous human rights group, what the Afghani women are suffering and have suffered is far worse than what occurred in Bosnia. This is not only a result of the current conflict, but has been part of life under the Taliban rule, was rampant during the war with the Soviet Union, and occurred under the former rulers as well, the Jihadis. Much of the abuse that Afghani women have recently experienced is the result of the restrictions the Taliban has imposed on them. President Bush has noted that girls and women cannot attend school and they cannot work outside the home. They also cannot leave the home unaccompanied by a mahram (a close male family escort). This means, in turn, that many do not receive health care because they can be treated only by female physicians, and there are only 25 female physicians at the hospital to see all girls and women. For women living outside the city, a doctor's visit means a two to four hour drive or a two day walk, for which they must be escorted by a mahram. Many men refuse to accompany them, especially if the care is being provided by an international aid organization. Even though Afghanistan is nearly totally dependent on international aid, only eight to eleven percent of women report receiving such aid.

We know that women must wear burqas, but few of us know that they cannot wear thin stockings or allow their ankles to show when they walk, since they would be immodest. They cannot sing because their voices corrupt men; indeed, they cannot raise their voices when speaking in public or laugh loudly, because this leads men into corruption. Even their footsteps cannot be heard; they must make sure their heels do not click when they walk. The Taliban has ordered all windows to be painted, so women cannot be seen inside. All the women's public baths have been closed, which makes it very difficult for women to bathe at all, since there is little running water even in the cities.

These are really just a few of the restrictions. What if they are violated? Physicians for Human Rights reports that violations of the dress code and being unaccompanied by a male chaperone are the two most common offenses for women in Afghanistan and usually result in public lashings or stoning. Not infrequently, however, women are killed for their transgressions. They may be killed by a male relative for disgracing the family. This is an honor killing. It is considered justifiable; it is not considered murder. Or they may be publicly executed by the Taliban in the stadium. They may be hung or shot in the back of the head. All the while they remain invisible, since they are always covered head to toe with the burqa.

The suffering of Afghani women is taking place in society already suffering extraordinary deprivation. And their suffering is likely to increase as a result of the current war, as fundamentalists try to maintain their grip on the country. But the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan warn that bringing back the pre-Taliban government will not necessarily benefit women, since under their leadership women and girls are gang raped, abducted, sold by their male relatives to pay debts. In fact, when the Taliban first took power, many women thought they would be safer than they had been under the Jihadis.

Physicians for Human Rights has surveyed Afghan women, and the overwhelming majority – more than 90 percent – support women's human rights and feel that women's rights should be included in any peace talks that take place. I found this information on the PHR web site; I have not

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seen it in any newspaper accounts or heard it in any politicians speeches or any speeches or talks by members of the battered women's movement for that matter.

When I said these things to a group of battered women's advocates recently, they stopped me and said, "Hey, we get it. We're concerned about women's vulnerability following disasters, and about violence against women in the military, and about women in Afghanistan, too. Surely you must realize that?" Yes, of course I realize that, but my response is nevertheless, what are you doing about it? Are you publicizing these issues, lobbying Congress about them, actively fighting for their recognition, developing and implementing strategies to address them? But I am told, "We can't fight all the battles. There are too many. Right now and in the months to come we will be fighting just to keep our shelters open, our hotlines up and running. We only have the resources and energy to fight our own battles." This is precisely my point. To advocates who share these sentiments I must say: "These are your battles, too, for each of these battles is interrelated." The battered women's movement must return to its roots as a movement focused more broadly on social change, not narrowly on service provision. It must see itself as part of a larger movement, a social justice movement, not as a discreet entity with individual concerns.

But that's not all: We in this room must embrace these battles as ours as well. When we in academe think of our concerns and interests, we must look not only within, but also outside. We must look for our connections to others; we must recognize and foster our interdependence with other groups, rather than tunnel our vision to the academy. We must stand with and actively work for the causes of battered women, the poor, immigrants, and refugees – in short, with the marginalized.

I am reminded of the words of one of the Jesuit priests, Father Ellacuria, who was killed with five others and two women by the Salvadoran military in 1989. In a commencement address at Santa Clara University in 1982, Fr. Ellacuria said:

There are two aspects to a university. The first and most evident has to do with culture, with knowledge, the use of intellect. The second, not so evident, is that it must be concerned with social reality – precisely because a university is inescapably a social force, it must transform and enlighten the society in which it lives. But how does it do that? How does it transform the social reality of which it is part? Do everything possible so that liberty is victorious over oppression, justice over injustice, love over hate? Yes! Without this overall commitment, we would not be a university. The university must carry out this general commitment with means uniquely at its disposal. We as an intellectual community must analyze causes; use imagination and creativity together to discover remedies; communicate to our constituencies a consciousness that inspires the freedom of self-determination; [and] educate professionals with a conscience, who will be immediate instruments of such a transformation.

I call on you today to be these professionals with a conscience, instruments of social transformation. What is at stake? Equality – and by equality I do not mean sameness, but justly shared power and resources. Let me ask the question again: What is at stake? Nothing less than democracy itself.