Chapter 39


Martine Herzog-Evans
University of Reims, France

ABSTRACT

In 2013, the author was commissioned by the mayor of City A, North East France, by the prosecutor and the main local social work and reentry charity, Association A, with the mission to evaluate the host of local programmes addressing violence against women (VAW). This qualitative study is still ongoing for one more year, but has already yielded very significant findings, for if at first glance, the desire to do tackle VAW is shared by most practitioners (with the notable exception of family courts), in the field, the reality is quite disheartening. Our first finding is that most practitioners are oblivious to the dangers incurred by battered women and virtually no efficient measure is taken in this respect. Another finding is that practitioners are not organized in collaborative networks and operate sequentially or parallel to each other with virtually no collaboration or information sharing. We also worryingly found a systematic denial of the gendered nature of VAW, with many practitioners clearly believing they are essentially situational with shared responsibility.

INTRODUCTION

On 27 July 2003, the famous French actress, Marie Trintignant, who was shooting for a film in Vilnius, was transferred to hospital in a profound coma. She died on 1 August of that year. Her partner, Bertrand Cantat, an equally famous singer in France, was arrested for having battered her to death. In Lithuania, Cantat was sentenced to eight years and incarcerated there, before being transferred back to France and being paroled, after serving five years. Unsurprisingly, in view of the notoriety of the protagonists in...
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this case, but also because Marie Trintignant’s own mother and father were also famous actors, this case remained in the headlines for a very long time. It was the start of a long-overdue realisation that domestic violence against women was a common phenomenon and it boosted political decisions to address it. Until then, French entrenched patriarchy (Alwood, 1998; Dubu et al., 2015) had relegated this issue in the private sphere and the legal system had manifested no concern over the condition of suffering women. A series of law reforms was subsequently enacted: the law of 4 April 2006, which generalised the aggravating circumstance attached to violence when committed between partners or spouses and facilitated the removal of the perpetrator from the family home; the law of 9 July 2010, which allowed family judges to issue a restraining order, if they were made aware of such violence; the law of 4 August 2014, which made mediation illegal in cases of domestic violence and generalised the, until then, experimental, Great Danger Phone for high-risk situations. Lastly, in 2014, France ratified the 11 May 2011 Istanbul Convention of the Council of Europe on preventing, and combating violence against women, and domestic violence.

In spite of this essentially legal response to domestic violence, France is not different from other jurisdictions, when it comes to the prevalence of this crime. A recent report by the French statistic institutions INHESJ (National Institute for the Superior Studies on Safety and Justice) and ONRDP (National Organisation for Demographic Studies) (INHESJ-ONRDP, 2013) estimated that 174 voluntary homicides and 61,297 acts of voluntary violence had been committed by a spouse, partner, ex-spouse, or partner in 2012 against their female partner, spouse, ex-spouse, or partner. However, official data grossly underestimate the true picture of violence against women (hereafter VAW), an offence which is par excellence highly covert. American data are by far more pertinent when they reveal, for instance, that 25 to 30% of women check into hospitals’ Accident and Emergency in relation to VAW (Johnson, 2008) or when they estimate, on the basis of a representative sample, that women are thirteen times more frequently victimised than depicted in national data (Stark, 2007). Such data do not even include other types of abuse, such as stalking, sexual abuse, or the rape of a spouse or partner, which are typically registered via other sources, in spite of being typically inflicted in the context of a continuum of VAW. As the World Health Organisation (hereafter WHO) repeatedly states, VAW represents the first health risk for women in the entire world (WHO, 2013a) and is ‘a global health problem of epidemic proportions’ (2013b; 2016: 1). In other words, the prevalence of VAW is endemic and considerable, and it essentially victimises women, although negationism has become rampant over the recent years. Unfortunately, the literature does not allow for complacency: VAW is essentially a male offence, grounded in a culturally constructed and historically supported feeling of entitlement; yet it is largely resistant to treatment, which suggests that the best way forward remains to protect women’s safety.

THE LITERATURE

Two Conflicting Discourses

In the literature, one can easily detect two opposing camps. This is well reflected by the use of tag-like vocabulary and revealing hashtags on Twitter. Those who deny the specificity of VAW use the neutral term Interpersonal violence (hereafter IV). For those belonging to this camp, the violence in question takes place in the context of interpersonal disagreement or conflict, and is equally committed by women and men. There is nothing cultural or historically embedded in what happens at home, and, in fact, men