The Routledge International Handbook of Domestic Violence and Abuse

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Concluding thoughts

Publication details
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Published online on: 18 Mar 2021

How to cite :- John Devaney, Stephanie Holt, Carolina Øverlien, Caroline Bradbury-Jones, Rebecca J. Macy. 18 Mar 2021, Concluding thoughts from: The Routledge International Handbook of Domestic Violence and Abuse Routledge
Accessed on: 29 Nov 2023

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Concluding thoughts

This Handbook has brought together scholars and practitioners from across the globe, with varying practice and disciplinary backgrounds, to explore the nature of domestic violence and abuse as well as the way it presents in different places and in various forms. The contributors have also explored how society and professionals might respond in ways which are likely to be helpful to both adult and child victims, while also recognising that domestic violence requires societal change if future generations are to be spared pain and suffering. In the Handbook, while recognising that many political actors have been allies, we have sought to highlight that much of the progress made over recent decades has been led by and driven by bottom-up/grass-roots movements, rather than the beneficence of governments and other national or global organisations.

In a previous book edited by some of us, we argue that policy, practice and research are not easily distinguishable, as they, rightfully, intertwine, connect and influence one another (Holt, Øverlien, & Devaney, 2018). Indeed, while the relationship between the three is considered complex, as editors for the Handbook, we aimed for this text to be a ‘knowledge platform’ that has the potential to play a ‘brokerage role’ or a ‘bridge’ among the three activities (de Haas & van der Kwaak, 2017, p. 11). As noted in the introduction, our intention, as editors, has been to curate contributions that summarise the latest thinking and understanding about what causes and sustains domestic violence and abuse, while also looking at the intersection with other issues that reinforce the inequalities which are so prevalent within and between societies internationally. These inequalities, primarily relating to gender, but also linked to other issues such as sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, disability and poverty, lie at the heart of the challenge that must be faced in responding to gender-based violence more generally, and domestic violence and abuse specifically. As editors we have sought to ensure that we were inclusive about who we invited to contribute to this Handbook, mindful that we are scholars working in high-income countries, and with our own experiences and biases that have shaped how we understand these issues. We are conscious that due to space, we have made choices about what to include, and just as importantly not include. We own the choices we have made, while also acknowledging that a different editorial team may have gone in a different direction. We are immensely grateful to each of the individuals who have contributed to the Handbook, especially as the majority
wrote their chapters during the recent and ongoing pandemic. In this concluding chapter we pull together some of the key themes which run through the Handbook and the implications identified by contributors for future policy, practice and research.

If you have had time to read at least a handful of the chapters in the Handbook, it will be clear that what we define as domestic violence and abuse is both wide and yet specific. It covers a range of types of behaviour, as outlined in Parts 3 and 4, but specifically this behaviour is enacted to exert power and control by one or more individuals over someone else with whom they have an ongoing or previous intimate or familial relationship. It is this issue of power and control, and its misuse, which characterises the nature and forms of domestic violence and abuse as outlined in many of the chapters in the Handbook. How we understand domestic violence and abuse can be framed in very different ways, as outlined in Part 2, and the way we understand what lies behind the thinking resulting in the behaviour, can lead to very different ideas about how society and professionals should respond, as outlined in Part 5. In Part 6 we have highlighted how research can help to shed light on these phenomena using a diverse range of methodologies and approaches. What is apparent is that our knowledge and understanding of domestic violence and abuse has developed significantly over the past thirty years as both policy makers and researchers have focused attention on the issue. We now have a much better understanding about the prevalence and incidence of many forms of domestic violence and abuse, and the impact in both the immediate and longer term for child and adult victims. More recently, the evidence of what works in helping victims, or those who use violence and abuse within their intimate relationships, has increased considerably, with notable improvements in the quality and robustness of the evidence produced. However, there is still much we do not know enough about, and the contributors to this Handbook are to be commended for identifying where those gaps are.

A common theme across many of the chapters is the gap between awareness by the public, policy makers and organisations delivering services, regarding the nature and impact of domestic violence and abuse. This applies, for example, to housing departments, health providers and the criminal justice system, where translation of this awareness into services and ways of working, needs to be attuned to the needs of victims and survivors. There are plenty of examples across the various chapters in this book of where policies and services are centred around the victim/survivor, but there are also lots of examples of this gap in both understanding and action.

In Part 2 we explored differing ways of conceptualising what causes and sustains domestic violence and abuse, and how the ways in which we think about these issues informs and influences how we respond. As noted in the introduction to this Handbook, we have adopted a socio-ecological approach in inviting contributions on both topics and perspectives. We want to avoid a simplistic approach of assuming that all perspectives are of explanatory equivalence, as it is clear that a gendered understanding of domestic violence and abuse is central to fully grasping the nature of the problem and where attention needs to be focused by policy makers, legislators and wider society. However, the chapters in Part 2 demonstrate the value of seeking to understand the phenomenon of domestic violence from different angles to recognise the nested nature of the individual’s context, their interpersonal and relational context, the community context, as well as the larger social environment (Heise & Kotsadam, 2015; Krug et al., 2002). Hence later contributions in the Handbook detailing responses to domestic violence and abuse draw out how we should seek to respond in reframing the inequalities in society. This is to be achieved through using all available levers, including legislation, to rebalance the inequalities between genders which create the context within which some individuals can seek to control, coerce and abuse their current or former intimate partner, and any children they may have.
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An important message from across this Handbook is the recognition that domestic violence and abuse is prevalent in all societies, and across all age groups, from those experiencing their first intimate relationships as young people, to adults in later life. We have also taken a position that children are equally victims of domestic violence and abuse (Overlien & Holt, 2019) with the impact having the potential to last into adulthood (Radford, Richardson-Foster, Hargreaves, & Devaney, 2019). In Part 3 contributors have argued that policies and services need to acknowledge and respond to the differing presentation and impacts across the age spectrum, drawing upon theories about the lifecourse. Thinking needs to be joined-up so that transition periods across the lifespan do not mean that some groups of people, for example those in the 'middle years', are excluded from research and policy (or remain hidden), and we need to be sensitive to the language we use, so that we keep in mind the gendered nature of abuse and do not conflate different forms of harmful behaviour, such as elder abuse and domestic violence.

In Part 4 we profile some of the many ways in which domestic violence may present. A recurring theme is the need for the public and service providers to move beyond looking at incidents of abuse, to recognising that most forms of domestic violence are about patterns of behaviour over time that minimise the space for action that victims and survivors have to live full and independent lives. In recent years our understanding of particular forms of harm, such as economic abuse or the use of animals to control victims, have improved, and it is encouraging to see that in some jurisdictions both services and protections have evolved to respond to these newly recognised harms. However, across all the chapters there is a call for further research to explore how these issues present and should be responded to in ways which recognise the heterogeneity of victims’ characteristics and circumstances, and the intersection of different aspects of disadvantage or discrimination.

This theme is picked up in Part 5 of the Handbook which presents the best available evidence, as well as practice and policy innovations, concerning responses to domestic violence and abuse. As seen from this section, current and innovative responses include helping address the needs of domestic violence victims and survivors (e.g., interventions with children who have experienced domestic violence and abuse in their families and interventions for violence survivors who care for these children), as well as the needs of those who are actively abusive toward their partners (e.g., trauma-informed, oppression-sensitive intervention for those who use domestic violence and abuse). In addition, current responses to domestic violence can include interventions (e.g., dating violence prevention), policy interventions (e.g., policy change-initiatives from gender-justice advocates), programmes (e.g., local community partnership to address domestic violence and abuse), services (e.g., approaches to ameliorate domestic violence victims’ emotional health) and strategies (e.g., domestic violence risk assessments). Likewise, and consistent with the social ecological model, this section’s chapters underscore how varied responses may be directed at individuals, relationships, families, communities and the greater social context. Two chapters, one on economic empowerment and one concerning housing responses, illustrate how important responses to domestic violence and abuse should be targeted beyond individuals and families toward communities, social groups and countries as a whole. Notably, each chapter offers important evidence-based guidance and recommendations to inform and guide responses to domestic violence and abuse. Considerable and important work has been conducted to date to develop and study a wide range of responses to domestic violence. Nonetheless, each chapter has also shown how all the responses described herein could benefit from increased research attention, particularly when such research is conducted in victim- and survivor-centred ways, in partnership with communities, and in ways that attend to the ecological validity of the research as much as the internal validity and rigour of the proposed methods.
In our final main section we showcase a diverse range of research designs and methodologies, illustrating the multiplicity of approaches to seeking answers to many of the questions raised by our chapter contributors in previous sections. As noted earlier, we have given particular attention to the often considered marginalised or less heard victims of violence and abuse, with a specific focus on children and young people dominating three of the ten chapters and marginalised women in a further two chapters. Across these five chapters we illustrate how innovative methodologies can be employed ethically and creatively to capture the lived experience, inform our understanding of that experience and contribute more robustly to the evidence base on ‘what works’. Reflecting a strong ‘research in practice’ theme throughout this section, the evaluative power of research to inform practice in an evidence-informed manner is also palpable, as is the clear ability for the three strands of policy, practice and research to connect.

It is important to recognise the gains which have been made in recent decades in addressing domestic violence and abuse at both a national and transnational level (Holt et al., 2018). However, we must also recognise that the gains made need to be constantly protected and championed to ensure that they are not lessened by those who would attempt to maintain the status quo, or to assert their dominance. At the time of completing this Handbook we are witnessing a roll back of legislation and safeguards in some countries in Europe including Poland, Russia and Turkey (e.g., Semukhina, 2020; Szwed & Zielińska, 2017) in spite of a strong international framework in The Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (The Istanbul Convention) (Council of Europe, 2011). We are also mindful that the rights we seek to protect in respect of domestic violence and abuse are indivisible from rights associated with political freedom, structural racism, poverty and climate inequality which are so very apparent in different parts of the world at the time of compiling this Handbook. Many of these issues intersect with gender inequality and gender-based violence, and benefit from a gendered analysis that informs more sophisticated political and service responses.

Finally, at the time of writing this final chapter that reflects on the significant development in our knowledge and understanding of domestic violence over recent decades, whilst simultaneously identifying areas and issues for future concern and consideration, we must acknowledge that this Handbook was completed during a global health crisis. Characterised by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2020) as a pandemic, Coronavirus or Covid-19 has wreaked havoc in the lives of individuals, families and communities across the world, killing people, spreading human suffering and upending people’s lives, resulting in a significant sense of threat and unpredictability. Globally, Covid-19 has been experienced most acutely since January 2020, with many countries imposing public health policies involving lockdown-style orders, restricting movement and human interaction.

While Covid-19 has been relentless and is attacking all segments of our populations, it has however been particularly detrimental to more vulnerable groups, including those living with domestic violence and abuse. Whilst lockdown and quarantine were and continue to be seen as essential to suppressing the virus in the community, an unintended consequence of such a policy has resulted in victims and those who abuse them being confined in close quarters for long periods of time, with subsequent sharp rises globally in the reported number of cases of domestic abuse and violence. Lockdown measures imposed by governments to help slow the spread of the virus have also altered the availability of support services, forcing professionals to find new ways of working with victims and their families through the crisis. Paradoxically, at a time of additional need, the availability of health and social services may be compromised and it may be challenging for professionals to complete accurate risk assessments with reduced access to families. Emerging empirical studies highlight the surge in demand for specialist domestic
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violence services and helplines (Kaukinen, 2020), the challenges faced by services in responding to the changing needs of families in an ever-changing environment (Banks et al., 2020; Øverlien, 2020), and the development of innovative practices by professionals internationally (IFSW, 2020). A full assessment of the impact may not be known for some time.

In conclusion, we hope that this Handbook can become a resource for students, practitioners and researchers in considering how we might better understand and respond to domestic violence and abuse in all its forms at a local, national and international level.

References


