

Exploring Change and Continuity in the Context of Gender Inequality:

The Example of Domestic Violence

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Abstract

This paper explores, through examples, the varying factors that have contributed to both change and continuity in gender inequality as it applies to the issue of domestic violence. Drawing on historical and theoretical perspectives, it considers the explanations for domestic violence and the actual/proposed prospects for change in relation to domestic violence and gender inequality more generally. Amongst other factors the paper highlights change in terms of lowered rates of domestic violence and types of victims. It is argued, however, that, despite some changes related to eliminating gender inequality in the context of domestic violence, such change has been limited. This is demonstrated through such factors as the continuity of public attitudes that tolerate domestic violence underpinned by unequal gender stereotyping and the continued predominance of women as victims of domestic violence. This has resulted in the continuity of domestic violence as a prominent social issue and would suggest that unequal gender ideologies and stereotyping prevail. By way of response it is suggested that Feminism and/or other social structural explanations be considered. This may account for the continuing occurrence of domestic violence and the possibilities for change including, crucially, what factors are involved in domestic violence and why these are unlikely to alter. Ultimately this may offer some insight into how attempts to eliminate gender inequality through policy, social and economic change can be achieved.

Keywords: Gender; feminism; domestic violence; inequality; social change.

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Introduction

This paper aims to critically review the social changes that have occurred in relation to gender inequality in terms of public attitudes and government responses towards domestic violence. In so doing it will present the main arguments that demonstrate the existence of change within the area of domestic violence, beginning with a brief contextual discussion of explanations of social change and subsequently taking account of some of the key developments that have taken place since the mid 19th century up to the early 21st century with respect to domestic violence, before addressing some of the continuities and implications of domestic violence. The paper will conclude that despite some change relating to domestic violence: decline in reported incidence rates; shifts; an increased tendency to pass legislation concerning domestic violence; improved campaigning and efforts to police domestic violence, in other areas there has been comparatively little change, perhaps as the result of the continuing influence of unequal gender ideologies and stereotyping. This means domestic violence continues to exist, indicative of the limitations of such changes to fully eradicate domestic violence and the need to incorporate a more critical reading of change in this area if gender inequality is to be more effectively tackled.

Explanations of Social Change

Varying explanations have been proposed in attempting to understand change in society. Within Sociology, for example, the functionalist perspective advances the notion that society is comprised of interdependent functions, all of which require to work in conjunction to ensure social cohesion. In this context then change may be understood as part of an ongoing quest (and subsequently adjustment) for equilibrium or a sense of social consensus and integration. By contrast conflict theories, including the Marxist theory of change, understand social change not as a search for social consensus and harmony but as the result of a struggle for advantage between classes or other groups (Marshall, 1998).

Perspectives on Domestic Violence

In attempting to account for and understand an aspect of gender inequality, notably domestic violence and the potential for social change, there are a number of explanations, predominantly social science based, that may be considered, of which Feminism is particularly influential. The main premise of a feminist reading of domestic violence is that it is a gendered act that occurs as a result of men believing that they may use violence as a means of controlling their female partners; men are viewed as ultimately more violent, with women primarily using violence against men as a form of self-defence. In terms of the prospect of social change with respect to domestic violence, feminism is generally sceptical; it has been argued, for example, that as long as the institution of marriage and belief in the use of force as a way of controlling wives continues, (Kurz, 1989) women will continue to constitute an ‘appropriate victim of physical and psychological abuse’ (the Dobashes, cited in Kurz, 1989:496). Other explanations have been advanced which have been similarly helpful in explaining the occurrence, meanings and implications of domestic violence. These include: family violence theory which implicates all family members other than just parents, including children as perpetrators of violent behaviour, arguably an area worthy of future research focus; closely related social learning based theories (Kurz, 1989, Hoffman, 1994, Felson, 1996); social structural based explanations which locate perpetrators’ violent behaviours in the context of unequal access to material resources and status inconsistency (Hoffman, 1994); and biological and psychological perspectives focused on physiological effects of alcohol (McKenry et al, 1995) and the impact of stress (Umberson et al, 2003).

Domestic Violence: Pre-19th Century Position

Domestic violence is one area that has arguably been the source of much social change, particularly in a western world context. From antiquity onwards many societies could be characterised by their tolerance and use of violence. Individuals were used to the prospect of violence and death in their everyday lives within the public sphere and this similarly applied in the private sphere, hence the acceptability of domestic violence.

Domestic violence was thus quite a common occurrence. It was typically directed towards wives by their husbands and was rarely subject to intervention by neighbours, family or the authorities. Underlying this acceptance of domestic violence was an influential belief system related to one's gender and the place of sex roles. Critical to this belief system was the notion of male supremacy. Men were assigned almost all aspects of power in most areas of social life including the home (Hunt, 1992). This provided the rationale for the use of moderate physical force against wives, children and servants as a means of maintaining their position and overall order in the household. This notion of male authority and right to use physical force as a means of control extended into the public sphere and was tolerated and even authorised in some cases by legal and religious heads; indeed the idea of '*patria potestas*' (Ruff, 2001, 133) i.e. an all powerful husband and father had long been ingrained in civil codes. There was little, if any, challenging of this legal situation owing to the influence of a strong biblical mindset amongst men and women where women were typically viewed to have temperamental and unruly behaviours, requiring some degree of disciplinary control (Ruff, 2001).

Domestic Violence in the 19th Century

By the 19th century, however, there was clear indication of change. Ruff has associated this change with what he terms the 'civilising process' whereby a greater number of individuals were becoming aware of and sensitised to the issue of domestic violence (2001: 252). This coincided with emerging socio-political debates amongst the middle classes concerning the citizenship of women and working class men. Working class men were increasingly portrayed as savage wife batterers who were undeserving of the right to vote if they acted irresponsibly as husbands. In this context some of the upper and middle classes viewed themselves as protectors of vulnerable female victims of domestic violence, stressing education and punishment as two means of tackling the 'problem' (Clark, 2000: 34). As a result, a major change in public attitudes could be observed whereby individuals were increasingly more likely to report cruelty to the authorities who, in response, became more willing to consider measures of intervention. What

followed was a series of changes mainly within the policing and court system, including The 1853 Act for Better Prevention of Aggravated Assault upon Women and Children, which enabled six month prison sentences to be given to husbands found guilty of cruelty towards their wives, and the 1878 Matrimonial Causes Act, which offered some women scope for making a claim for divorce on the grounds of cruelty provided they could prove a certain incidence of physical assault (Hearn, 1996). Such changes did not eliminate domestic violence altogether and men continued to be favoured in almost all legal proceedings, however they did indicate a general move towards the improvement of women's rights and, arguably, established the foundations for further change in relation to responses (by the public and state) to domestic violence (Clark, 2000).

Domestic Violence after 19th Century

Although the 19th century witnessed several key changes in the response to domestic violence, this was mainly in relation to public attitudes. Arguably, it was not until the early 20th century and beyond that more evidence of change emerged in relation to government responses. Historically, as previously discussed, state responses were limited in scope and typically reflected the view that domestic violence was a private issue requiring little if any public intervention. However, in recognition of the growing public abhorrence of domestic violence, governments were forced to address and respond to the issue accordingly. Consequently, government response throughout the 20th century (and currently within the 21st century) was characterised by a more punitive and intense approach to responding to domestic violence which, arguably, increased awareness of the issue, enabling women to challenge something that was previously tolerated although devoid of public recognition. Simultaneously, various other social, economic, and legal/ political landmarks for women were taking shape, including the introduction of equal opportunities related legislation in the form of the 1975 Equal Pay Act and Sex Discrimination Act leading to amongst other changes, the influx of women into the traditionally male-dominated higher education sector and professional labour market (Crompton, 1992) and a breakdown of the traditional domestic division of labour

(Gershuny, 1992), highlighting the relevance and significance of moves towards greater equality between the sexes at this time. In addition, the development of Feminism (second-wave) was becoming increasingly influential by the 1960s, stimulating discussion and providing explanations for a variety of social issues, including violence against women again highlighting the general climate of the time in which issues of gender inequality were being called into question and increasingly subject to change (Humm, 1995).

Contributing Factors in the Changing Nature of Domestic Violence and Gender Inequality

Decline in Rates of Domestic Violence

The results of such actions and events have contributed to perhaps one of the most significant changes to have occurred in relation to domestic violence and, potentially, the achievement of gender equality - a decline in domestic violence incidence rates. Research by the BBC (Easton, 2009) and Greater London Authority (2008) indicates that domestic violence is becoming less significant, with statistics highlighting a general downward trend in the number of domestic violence crimes. Based on such statistics it cannot be said with any certainty, however, that cases of domestic violence (and thus gender inequality) have declined, particularly given the fact that the statistics do not necessarily take account of the number of additional domestic violence cases that are unreported by victims or unrecorded by police.

Nature and Scope of Existing Legislation

A perhaps more notable change pertains to the extent and impact of domestic violence legislation. Crucially there is now more and ongoing recognition of domestic violence as a social problem which has been reflected by the varying changes in legal and criminal justice responses. Beginning with the passing of the initial domestic violence specific law-

the 1976 Domestic Violence and Matrimonial Proceedings Act which enabled injunctions, exclusion/protection orders and arrest in the case of breach of injunctions (Hearn, 1996: 26), a series of specialist laws including The Domestic Violence Act (2007) and The Housing and Homeless Persons Act (1977) official definitions (Home Affairs Select Committee, 1993, Amnesty International, 2008) and legal arrangements e.g. introduction of domestic violence courts (Walklate, 2007) have followed which have sought to ensure that victims of domestic violence receive adequate legal protection and financial and emotional support where required. This marks a clear transition from earlier state action which in legislative terms tended to work in favour of men, reinforcing the gender hierarchy in society, to a system which more evidently supports and encourages female victims to report domestic violence and is therefore evidence of change in gender inequality.

The Influence of Campaigns

Legislative change has been accompanied by and given added support by extensive campaigning efforts that have initiated worldwide campaigns to end all forms of violence against women, using strategies including one to one engagement with communities and individuals highlighting the recognition that there is a need to influence and transform public attitude if domestic violence and gender inequalities are to be eliminated (Amnesty International, 2008, United Nations, 2008).

Enhanced Policing

Another change to have occurred in relation to domestic violence can be observed through the development of policing of domestic violence. A significant feature of contemporary policing on domestic violence has been the introduction of specialist domestic violence officers. Following Home Office and other research recommendations in the 1990's police forces in England and Wales began the recruitment of officers specially trained in dealing with domestic violence, of which a total of 42 out of 43 forces

participated, and 36 of the 42 forces involved had specially designated officers with specific responsibilities relating to domestic violence (Plotnikoff and Woolfson, 1998). This is again reflective of a marked change in state response, highlighting an increasing recognition by the police as to the importance of domestic violence.

Types of Victims

In addition to changes in the incidence rates of domestic violence cases and legislation, campaigning and policing, a change has also occurred in the typology of domestic violence victims. Previous analyses have indicated that women tend to be the most likely victims of domestic violence. Increasingly however focus has shifted from women to other potential victims in cases of domestic violence including children (NSPCC, 2007), same-sex couples (Whiting, 2007) and men (Mankind, 2010/2011, Gadd et al, 2002, Flynn, 1990). Recent research has demonstrated an increasing trend in domestic violence cases where men in particular are victims of their female partner's violent behaviour but often struggle or refuse to seek justice due to the conceptual/social difficulties in reporting such incidents, raising significant questions about perceptions of how serious violence must be before it is reported or warrants official intervention (Campbell, 2010, Parity, 2007). In response to emerging cases of violence involving men, same-sex couples and children, Feminism, which has generally remained silent on the issue of female violence has gradually adapted to consider female violence. Common factors cited for female violence have included self-defence (Saunders, 1989). Increasingly however this has been developed to suggest that there is a need to more critically consider the use of violence by females. This would entail an exploration of women's violence and how it may differ (and be justifiable in some cases) according to cultural context, meanings, motives and the wider social implications women attach to their use of violence (Renzetti, 1999). While the findings of such research are negative, particularly for newer categories of victims, they do suggest an improvement in terms of a decline in the number of female domestic violence victims and an increasing commitment to capturing the voices of females involved in domestic violence, whether as victims or perpetrators.

Continuity of Domestic Violence and Gender Inequality

Predominance of Female Victims

Despite the above factors suggesting that there has been much change in relation to domestic violence, and thus a move towards greater gender equality, there is evidence to suggest that these changes have not been significant enough to constitute a major change in gender inequality. One such continuity relates to the ongoing predominance of women as victims and men as perpetrators of domestic violence. As demonstrated by Scottish Government research, the proportion of individuals who had experienced either threats or force during the period 1995- 2002/3 was generally higher for women than men (Scottish Government, 2007). Indeed it has also been shown that domestic violence accounts for and has increased in percentage as the most common type of violence directed against women (compared to violence by an acquaintance comprising the most common type of violent crime for men); 30% of women in 1995 for example reported incidences of domestic violence, a figure which rose to 64% by 1999 (Scottish Government, 2002). This would suggest two things; that little change has occurred in the prevalence of domestic violence and crucially that domestic violence is an issue that still predominantly affects women and thus, may be considered a gendered issue.

Tolerance and Acceptance of Domestic Violence

It would also appear that there has been limited change in relation to public attitudes towards and acceptability of domestic violence. An apparent continuity concerns gender role stereotyping with both men and women expressing the view that domestic violence is something that can be tolerated and is even necessary in some cases. This is supported by a recent report which demonstrates that the number of women applying for and obtaining non-molestation orders has declined (Sparrow, 2008). This proclivity towards acceptance of domestic violence would suggest that traditional gender role stereotyping continues to influence the way men and women think about domestic violence. It thus

appears that, to some degree, men and women continue to adhere to the concept of sexism. A belief developed through early socialisation and enacted through such institutions as the criminal justice system and labour market, sexism is based on the separation of roles and modes of behaviour according to sex (with males typically associated with aggression, independence and public visibility and participation. By contrast women would tend to be characterised as passive, confined to a largely private, domestic-based context and almost entirely economically dependent on her husband). In this context, the use of violence could be considered by some as justifiable where it appears that prescribed and ingrained social roles and behaviour are challenged and under threat; an idea which possibly still prevails in places within contemporary society.

It is also possible that contemporary attitudes condoning domestic violence are influenced by 19th century beliefs related to family life. At this time women (and children) were widely deemed the property of their husbands, a view supported socially and legally. Men were condoned in their use of violence to punish the behaviour of their wife and/or children thus ensuring the continuity of the traditional family structure based on distinct separate roles e.g. man, wife, child. Based on this it is possible to gain an understanding of the roots of current beliefs surrounding the roles of men and women in a family context, particularly the place of violence as a means of upholding the core family structure.

Elsewhere there is evidence to suggest prevailing gender assumptions exist amongst young people in relation to the necessity and tolerance of domestic violence. A key finding of one report was that young people thought domestic violence was more acceptable in cases where partners had been unfaithful, with boys more likely to tolerate domestic violence than girls regardless of sex of the victim or situation. At least 2 in 5 of both boys across the two year groups studied and 40% of the girls in the study were accepting of domestic violence in this situation (Bell, 2008).

Difficulties in Policing Domestic Violence

A further area in which change has been limited is within legislative state responses. A suitable example of an area where change has been less evident is policing. While the introduction of specialist domestic violence officers has been a significant development in the policing of domestic violence, it has been fraught with difficulties pertaining to the commitment to managing these officers and extensive officer workloads, often involving little training, support or professional recognition suggestive of a lack of commitment to overcoming the problem of domestic violence (Plotnikoff and Woolfson, 1998).

Discussion

Social change may be considered a contested term fraught with ambiguities and difficulties. It creates ideological and theoretical difficulties in defining social change as well as the constraint of defining exactly when social change was said to have occurred (Abercrombie and Warde, 1992). This paper has adopted a similar critical approach to the notion of social change with respect to domestic violence. While it has demonstrated a transition in gender inequality owing to a shift in both government/state responses and public attitudes from a conception of domestic violence as a tolerable means of disciplinary control over women, to a more sensitised view of domestic violence as a social and moral problem requiring formal intervention, it has also shown the extent and impact of these changes to have been limited in parts meaning domestic violence and the problem of gender inequality continues to exist. This may be reflective of the ongoing influence and importance of ideas about gender ideologies and equality; for example, continued tolerance of domestic violence by both sexes and reluctance/inability to acknowledge female on male domestic violence cases amongst male victims and authorities or to a lesser extent difficulties in defining domestic violence. Whether this is the case or not it remains that there is a need to examine and understand social change in this area (and others) more critically from the standpoint that change cannot be taken for

granted; it is not necessarily positive in nature, fixed, stable or apparent in structure, rapid in implementation; and crucially always separate from the notion of continuity. In doing so it may be prudent to consider a range of sociological based theories including Feminism and social structural perspectives which advance explanations as to why domestic violence occurs and its prospects for change. Crucially such explanations may further our understanding of change in relation to domestic violence; how it occurs, its extent, limitations, nature and what and why some factors are unlikely to change, leading to an insight into how change in policy, social and economic implications and ultimately gender inequality might realistically be achieved.

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