

No safe haven: male violence against women at home, at work, and in the community [book review]

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Abstract:

No Safe Haven is the excellent final product of the American Psychological Association's Task Force on Male Violence Against Women. Spearheaded by a renowned group of scientists, the Task Force was charged, in 1991, with reviewing current research on the prevalence, causes and impact of violence against women at home (intimate violence), at work (sexual harassment) and in the community (rape/sexual assault), and to recommend clinical and community-based interventions, legal changes and policy initiatives to address the violence. The task force and the book are designed to inspire health professionals to address the crisis of violence against women and to provide new insights into the problem.

Keywords: book review | gender | violence | violence against women

Article:

No Safe Haven: Male Violence Against Women at Home, at Work and in the Community

Mary P. Koss, Lisa, A. Goodman, Angela Browne, Louise F. Fitzgerald, Gwendolyn Puryear Keita, and Nancy Felipe Russo

American Psychological Association, Washington, DC, 1994

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This book, which is one of a growing scholarly and policy-based literature on violence against women, is a welcome contribution to the library of both seasoned and novice researchers and

practitioners. Its unique and best contribution to the field is that it considers in one place the multiple forms of violence that women experience. As the authors correctly note in their introduction, the 'convention of separately labeling, defining, and describing discrete forms of violence against women' works to 'distort the nature of women's subjective experiences' (p. xv). Although the organization of this book does not completely overcome that convention, having separate sections, of three chapters each, on intimate violence, sexual harassment and rape/sexual assault, it flaunts convention by offering, in three additional chapters, a synthesis of common themes that emerge from the study of violence against women.

Those with roots deep in the field will benefit from the excellent synthesis of the literatures on gender, women's psychology and violence. They may also appreciate the opportunity the book provides them to consider the methodologies, controversies and research directions of their own specialization in the context of, and against, the science emerging from the study of the other forms of violence against women. In addition to the above, those new to the field will benefit from the, albeit too brief, historical perspective the book provides. Newcomers will receive insights into the controversies, pitfalls and challenges that have plagued and confronted research and social change in the field. They will also learn about the activist and policy/legal history that both predates and parallels the scientific *contribution* to the field.

I highlight the word *contribution* because, as the book makes clear, the scientific community has not always produced knowledge that contributes to the reduction of this 'endemic epidemic'. Indeed some of the themes that emerge from the book's integrated exploration of women's experiences with sexual and intimate violence and harassment are that much of our theory, research and practice have been conducted outside the realities of women's lives, and have failed to recognize that gender is the key determinant shaping violence against women in all its manifestations. As the authors discuss, particularly in the book's excellent first chapter, complex psychological, social, economic and political relations between men and women define and direct the occurrence, meaning and sanctioning of sexual and violent behaviors. Consequently, gender's 'relationship to violence must be conceptualized and addressed at institutional and individual levels' (p. 5). However, our exclusion of gender and of women's experiences from much of the study of violence, and from our social response to victimized women, has all too often resulted in inappropriate clinical intervention, institutional neglect, individual and psychologically dominated research, and analyses and interpretations of data that are blind to the gendered sociocultural context within which women live and manage the violence they experience. The failure to consider gender's relationship to violence is particularly evident in the way we have chosen to define, conceptualize and measure violence, particularly intimate violence. This book forces the conclusion that research on intimate violence, *as compared with* research on sexual violence, is left stunted because of these choices.

No Safe Haven also provides an excellent summary and critique of the 'battered woman's syndrome', gives much needed consideration to different theoretical and conceptual linkages between victimization and physical and psychological illness, and provides an extensive critical review of post-traumatic-stress-disorder (PTSD) as *the* emerging diagnostic construct and theoretical basis for understanding women's reactions to victimization. As the authors point out, the PTSD conceptualization offers strength to our work and research in this field, but its unexamined application is premature. In particular, PTSD offers a more narrow

conceptualization of women's experiences with victimization than research has uncovered. It excludes the predictable shattering of victims' basic assumptions about self and the world, and it does not easily accommodate the continuous nature of much of women's victimization (e.g. ongoing sexual victimization or battering in intimate family or work relationships) or the reality of women's ongoing vulnerability and susceptibility to violence.

In the end, *No Safe Haven* leaves readers with the impression that the next frontier of research and practice on women's victimization must be built on three realities if it is to effectively challenge the culture and context that give rise to and shape violence against women: (1) the origins and meaning of sexual violence, battering and sexual harassment are gendered; (2) the violence is traumatic not acute; and (3) violence as it is experienced by women and as it is consequential to their lives needs to provide the foundation for our work. Clearly, we have much work left to do. However, fortunately, the final message of this book is that researchers and practitioners from the different 'specialties' of violence against women have much to learn from and share with each other. Analytic and conceptual approaches that emphasize the importance of women's experiences with violence can help us integrate our theories, interpretations and social responses across the existing chasms created by the often false and distorting decontextualized focus on the particular form the violence takes. As the authors conclude 'the various forms of violence frequently cooccur, succeed one another, and blend together to form a pervasive culture of violence within which women must conduct their daily lives' (p. xv). While the reality of women's daily lives may be a more complex place to start research than the decontextualized analytic approach of our past, it will, hopefully, prove a more effective place.

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