Book Review

Violence Against Women: Myths, Facts, Controversies

The first decade of the second millennium has not been an easy one. There is too much social, political and economic unrest in the world. In general, Canadians and Americans are mostly sheltered from the day-by-day life-and-death struggles taking place in many developing regions. At least, we have the luxury of turning off our TVs when the news is much too gory for our sensibilities. Hundreds of thousands in the developing world do not have the ability to turn off the rockets, the bombs, the hunger or the violence that daily bombards them. Yet, even as Canadians and Americans, we have not been totally immune to the polluting effects of the downturn in global markets, or the unrest in the world that usurps our tax dollars. The economic angst of the EU, the deceleration of the growth in the emerging economic powers like China and India are already taking a bite off the accustomed living standards of North Americans. The greed and the unethical practices of the financial institutions, the greed and incompetence of some world leaders who have acted and still act as war mongers do nothing but fuel the free-floating anxieties of the beseeched public. Suddenly, the current generation of North American youths is less likely to do as well as their parents. This is really a slap in the face for the rhetoric of the ‘American Dream’ which gave the impression that good times were forever. Canadian youth are also under immense pressure, both in the education and job markets.

In volatile times, economists, politicians and even the social scholars turn their attention to economics. In volatile times, politicians retrench and claw-back on social safety efforts. In volatile times, people’s generalized anxieties look for scapegoats, whether they are different countries, people with different belief systems, people of colour, immigrants, or the poor. Hyper-orthodox belief systems—of all kinds—start pointing fingers and playing blame games. One of the most important casualties in volatile times is women’s and children’s rights, safety and well-being. In the regressive ideologies that are spun, women’s issues are either totally ignored, due to lack of funding, or get negative attention due to scapegoating. At the time of this review, the Mitt Romney/Paul Ryan presidential hopefuls are already implying that the best course for women is to stay at home as full-time moms. Women who are not married to multimillionaires may not have that particular option in their disposal. The conservatives are also airing out their anti-
abortion views, anti-genetic research stance, and pro-gun ownership. One of their most vociferous positions is to retrench the marginal gains the Obama administration made on healthcare. Another is their disdain on social welfare. Romney already identified 48% of the American population as lazy, free-loaders. There is also a newly found zest in trying to reverse women’s hard-won rights over their own bodies. One of the populist proponents of the ultra-right (Rush Limbough) had the audacity to call a Georgetown Law School graduate (Sandra Fluke) a ‘whore’ on national TV. Ms Fluke’s alleged ‘sin’ was defending women’s reproductive rights.

The conservative Harper government is probably a few shades more benevolent than its southern counterpart. But even in Canada, the values are shifting to the far right. The ‘rights of the unborn’ and ‘abortion’ debates which seemed to have been unequivocally put to rest before, are receiving prods for resurrection. Fortunately, a controversial motion to study ‘when life begins’ was recently defeated in the House (Toronto Star, 27 Sept. 2012, A3). The unfortunate part was that the motion received 91 votes from the conservatives, eight coming from powerful cabinet ministers (ibid). The saddest part is that the (conservative) cabinet minister Rona Ambrose, who is responsible for the status of women, was one of the eight ministers who voted in favour of the regressive motion (Toronto Star, 28 Sept. 2012, A6). Women’s choices are again under attack, and some of those who are trying to set back the clock are precisely those who are entrusted to defend women’s rights.

It is within this backsliding political context that I applaud and welcome Walter DeKeseredy’s new book. The book succinctly overviews and summarizes the myths, facts and controversies on violence against women (VAW) in Canada and the US. Indeed, rather than forgetting about women, or pretending that their issues have been solved, volatile times are particularly dangerous for the health, safety and well-being of women and their children. So, I am delighted to see that DeKeseredy again brings his immense knowledge and expertise to shed light on different dimensions of this social problem. In this book, DeKeseredy carefully traces VAW’s structural roots, without ignoring its personal and social underpinnings or consequences.

The book consists of seven, well-written and well-organized chapters. In the first chapter called ‘What is Violence?’, DeKeseredy goes over the difficulties in defining VAW. Prudently but authoritatively, he highlights the pros and cons of both narrow and broad definitions. The first subsumes assaults covered under the criminal code, the second includes psychological, spiritual and economic hurts inflicted on women. Although the narrow versus the wide position is still one of the raging controversies in the field, I congratulate DeKeseredy’s staunch persistence in underscoring the hurt both physical and psychological
forms of violence engender. One of the additional themes in the chapter is addressing reporting problems in general, and under-reporting by women in particular. The second, but even more noteworthy theme in DeKeseredy’s first chapter is his attempt to refute the sex-symmetry arguments about violence. This theme is further explored in chapter three.

The second chapter is called ‘It Often Hurts to be a Woman in Canada’. In this chapter, although DeKeseredy’s focus remains on Canada, many US-Canada comparisons are provided to better contextualize the extent of the problem. The chapter summarizes intimate forms of violence, sexual assault, and femicide data, mostly from earlier surveys of Statistics Canada. Due to the lag between submission and actual publication of academic books, DeKeseredy’s work does not contain too much information from the 2009 survey results. Those results trickled into availability at the end of 2010, and the beginning of 2011, probably too late for this particular manuscript. However, the newer Statistics Canada findings do not contradict, but support DeKeseredy’s overall arguments about the widespread nature of VAW in Canada.

In chapter two, DeKeseredy takes pains in identifying exceptionally vulnerable groups of women within the continuum of gendered violence. Although no one knows the exact enumeration on categories, some groups of women are certainly more at risk than others. The chapter draws our attention to the plight of Aboriginal women, women going through separation/divorce, cohabiting women, poor/uneducated/unemployed or under-employed women, women with disabilities, and women in same-sex relationships. Two other themes that are discussed are the general silence surrounding VAW, and violent men’s propensity to under-report their own transgressions.

The third chapter is entitled ‘But Women Do it Too!’, and picks up on a theme that was already flagged in the first chapter. The theme is the erroneousness of sexual symmetry arguments. Sexual symmetry is either an intended or an inadvertent artifact of the CTS (conflict tactics scale). To his credit, DeKeseredy tries to untangle some of the strengths of the CTS measures from their notorious shortcomings. Indeed, the methodological problems of measurement of VAW through pre-constructed, pre-calibrated scales have produced much fuel for decades of backlash. The backlash is against women who endure violence in their intimate relationships. It is also against feminist scholars who study the phenomenon—myself included—and genuinely pro-feminist male scholars who have dedicated decades of their careers working against the epidemic of gendered violence—like Walter DeKeseredy, Martin Schwartz and numerous others. The CTS related debates, either at the purely methodological levels, or in their role of producing false
“equivalence” results of intimate violence, remain as a major controversy in the VAW literature. As in his previous publications, DeKeseredy again ads his resounding voice to the “non-equivalence” portion of the “equivalence” debates. I wholeheartedly agree with his stance, and celebrate his resolve in never letting this argument die down, despite the backlash.

Chapter four is called “Who Would Do Such a Thing?” Different theories about why men engage in violence against women in general, and against their intimate partners are revisited. As a seasoned sociologist, DeKeseredy is justifiably uncomfortable with intrapersonal (must be a sick person) arguments. Instead, and rightfully so, he emphasises the importance of the social context (masculo cultures, peer pressure), and the structural dimensions (poverty, poor housing, economic insecurity of women, gender inequality, male supremacy ideologies). In this chapter, DeKeseredy also focuses on the poisoning effects of widespread availability and increasing acceptability of pornography. Although he acknowledges that a causal link between violence and pornography has never been proven, there is an undeniable correlation between consumption of pornography and creation of unrealistic, and degrading perceptions about women. In a way, then, pornography is seen as another peg in the creation of a “logic of domination” (p. 66), an unhealthy and dangerous gendered environment within which women must work, live, establish relationships and raise children.

Chapter five provides many answers to the age-old, oversimplistic question of “Why Can’t They Just Leave?” The most astonishing answer to the naïve and possibly insensitive question by those who are not in the field is also the simplest answer: most women eventually do leave their abusers, either by fleeing into shelters, or seeking refuge in the homes of family/friends, or through separation/divorce. A few escape the abuse in death... and even fewer, through murder/suicides. The more difficult issue DeKeseredy explores in the chapter, is to understand the extreme difficulties facing women who want a change. Many factors like fear for herself and for her children trap women in abusive relationships. Lack of income, lack of housing, lack of social support systems are other hurdles women must negotiate. Moreover, long-term abuse takes a toll on the self-confidence of women, and may even engender self-doubt and self-blame. Lack of economic self-sufficiency is a real hurdle for women, and abusive men often play on their fears. DeKeseredy also emphasizes the variability of “collective efficacy”. In some segments of the society, neither the law enforcement nor the larger community will be too sympathetic towards women who want to terminate relationships. As in earlier chapters, in chapter five, DeKeseredy revisits the intersectionality of VAW and some
other status characteristics. He explores the repercussions of lack of communal support for Aboriginal, immigrant, refugee women, and for women of colour who are often caught between an abusive partner and a prejudicial, punitive and even a discriminatory community.

In chapter six, the consequences of VAW are discussed. DeKeseredy carefully summarizes the physical/health consequences as well as the psychological consequences of VAW. In the latter, he likens the effects of violence to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a condition that often plagues war veterans. In a way, VAW is also a war, a war that relentlessly subjugates women. For the newly initiated students in the VAW field, what is perhaps the most surprising is the magnitude of societal costs. These costs can never be accurately calculated, but even some conservative estimates range in many billions. What is important to highlight is that the societies are better off in shouldering the costs for prevention, rather than having to deal with the detrimental outcomes—after the fact. In a way, it is more important to pay-forward—my term—by providing education, jobs, decent wages, training police, judges, prosecutors, and shelters—DeKeseredy’s suggestions. It is much harder to deal with male violence which may negatively colour all social relationships, to deal with victimized women and children, to activate and sustain a punitive criminal system, and to deal with homicides and femicides. Although DeKeseredy is careful not to hierarchically order the social costs, he does underscore one of the highest social costs incurred by VAW. This cost involves children who witness violence, or who are directly or indirectly subjected to it, within their parental homes. Through exposure, there is a possibility that violence will get transmitted across generations.

The seventh and the final chapter is about what can be done. Again, as a sociologist, DeKeseredy’s preference is to respond to VAW at the social and structural levels. It is no wonder that he starts the discussion with the criminal justice responses, and tries to identify shortcomings in the existing system. DeKeseredy discusses the importance of both the executive and the symbolic (modelling, setting a standard) roles of the criminal justice system. He also makes a convincing call for more gender equality, both at home and in the workplace, and highlights not only the role but the obligations of a responsive government. How unfortunate it is that rather than taking heed from DeKeseredy’s policy suggestions, the conservative push is toward cutting back, rather than expanding or enhancing programs for women (my comment).

In the final chapter, DeKeseredy forcefully returns to the problem of pornography, and the overall negative climate pornography creates for women. Relatedly, he discusses the responsibilities of men, since beyond all, the VAW problem descends from men’s violence.
against women. Of course, all men are not abusers, and all men do not consume pornography, and/or participate in macho peer-cultures. But, for DeKeseredy, just being a benign citizen is not enough. Men are invited to take a public stance against those who abuse, hurt, denigrate and even kill women. Thus, DeKeseredy sees much benefit in pro-feminist social movements (like the White Ribbon Campaign), and their collective power to instigate a positive change. Surely, DeKeseredy recognizes the difficulty in openly declaring one’s pro-feminist inclinations. In his own pro-feminist life, research, teachings and publications that span more than a couple of decades, DeKeseredy himself has suffered from anti-feminist backlash. So, when he asks other men to do the same, his call is steadfastly backed up by his words, but also by his deeds and experiences.

For more seasoned graduate students and scholars in the VAW field, the utility of this book is more limited, since it is mostly a review and reiteration of controversial arguments and debates. Without taking away from DeKeseredy’s new effort to share his extensive knowledge in the field and his unwavering pro-feminist stance, I like to make two constructive comments.

1. I found the title which boldly states ‘Violence Against Women’ a bit misleading. The issues addressed in this book are predominately about VAW in dating and more long-term intimate relationships, in Canada and the US. With the exception of a focus on pornography, the book has made no attempt to cover other, just as insidious, outright terrifying and possibly fatal forms of VAW. From a long list of actual forms of violence, the omissions which puzzled me the most are stalking (criminal harassment), sexual harassment, and cyber harassment. DeKeseredy mentions these variations only in passing. He also touches on the plight of a female colleague who stopped teaching as a result of cyber harassment. Still, I would have liked to see a lot more discussion on these areas, since possibly many millions of young women, especially on college campuses, are being victimized in the virtual world (not to mention some older women, and some men). Both in Canada and the US, there have been suicides attributed to cyber attacks. Written by a renown scholar on college campus violence, I would have expected more on harassment, stalking and cyber forms of violence.

Also, the book makes no attempt to cover global forms of violence, although they effect, alter or end the lives of millions of women. Just to name a few notorious varieties, child or mail-order brides, sex-trade trafficking, mass rapes in war-torn societies, rapes that go along with ethnic cleansing/polluting, dowry and bride-price related crimes, FGM (female genital mutilation), female feticide, honour crimes, and gender-selection abortions. The list goes on, and on and on. Can I
legitimately criticize a short and concise book which aims to educate undergraduate students about the widespread VAW in North America? Of course not! A short, summary-oriented text can never address all forms of global violence. The latter would require many volumes. So, the source of my discomfort again lies in the unfortunate title: ‘Violence Against Women’ which promises a lot more than what the book covers.

2. The last point I want to make is about the agency of women. As a sociologist, as a criminologist and as a pro-feminist scholar, DeKeseredy has underscored the structural underpinnings of abuse and I wholeheartedly agree with his stance. I also agree with his call on men, to help stop the violence. Especially noteworthy is his call to men who do not abuse women, but who nevertheless avoid taking a public stance on the issues. Indeed, as fathers, friends, lovers, husbands, and colleagues, all men have a stake in putting an end to VAW. Of course, there are repercussions against pro-feminist men, there is an insidious anti-feminist backlash against those who openly put all their weight, all their resources, all their scholarship behind pro-feminist causes. DeKeseredy and many of his pro-feminist colleagues know better than most how relentless and vicious that backlash could be. However, and DeKeseredy’s genuine efforts notwithstanding, I have some unease about leaving the whole basket of eggs on men’s doors. As I have argued in the past, women are not just ‘victims’ who get either ‘abused by’ or ‘saved by’ men. Even when they are being victimized, women make choices, they design strategies, they attempt to protect their children, they devise ways to stay alive. Many other women, who may not be personally victimized by men should also take a stance. Women who stay on sidelines about VAW, and those who blame their sisters should also be included in DeKeseredy’s call for communal responsibility and change. Making a real and sustainable change in the VAW problem no doubt requires changes in men’s perceptions, proclivities and behaviours. But, it also requires acknowledging, supporting and strengthening the agency of women, who personally and collectively can author a change for themselves.

In sum, and like most of DeKeseredy’s earlier body of work, the new Violence Against Women book is a solid and timely addition to the existing Canadian (and US) collection of works in the field. It is a relatively short (only 127 pp. of text, 12 pp. of chapter notes, 22 pp. of references and 11 pages of index), easily readable synopsis of some of the current findings, methodological controversies, theory challenges, and policy alternatives in the VAW area. The real-life examples either from research or from the media interjected into numerous boxes of interest are well-chosen and thought provoking. I think, the policy implications
(Ch. 7) is a powerful ‘think and do list’ for creating positive change and bringing down historic blind-spots. I highly recommend this concise book for undergraduate students from sociology, social psychology, criminology, and social work related fields, and sincerely hope that DeKeseredy writes a follow-up text which subsumes the global concerns that have not received attention in this book.

Aysan Sev’er (Professor Emeritus of Sociology)
University of Toronto Scarborough
In Violence Against Women, award-winning author Walter S. DeKeseredy offers a passionate but well-documented sociological overview of a sobering problem. He starts by outlining the scope of the challenge and debunks current attempts to label intimate violence as gender neutral. He then lays bare the structural practices that sustain this violence, leading to a discussion of long- and short-term policies to address the issue. DeKeseredy includes an examination of male complicity and demonstrates how boys and men can change their roles. Throughout, he responds to myths that dismiss threats to women.

Abstract: This paper reviews the current empirical literature on the relationship between male peer support and woman abuse in intimate, heterosexual relationships. Suggestions for future quantitative studies.

Violence Against Women: Myths, Facts, Controversies. Walter S. DeKeseredy. Political Science. 15 February 2011. In Violence Against Women, award-winning author Walter S. DeKeseredy offers a passionate but well-documented sociological overview of a sobering problem. He starts by outlining the scope of the challenge and debunks current attempts to label intimate violence as gender neutral. He then lays bare the structural practices that sustain this violence, leading to a discussion of long- and short-term policies to address the issue. DeKeseredy includes an examination of male complicity and demonstrates how boys and men can change their roles. Throughout, he responds to myths that dismiss threats to women.