Chapter-17

Sexual Violence

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Abstract

The success of feminist campaigns to place sexual violence on the agenda of the state has resulted in significant social policy advances in Australia. The focus of social policy reform over the last twenty years has challenged community and government beliefs that intimate sexual violence is a private matter which has no place in the public work of the state. A successful challenge to this by feminist activists has resulted in a persistent focus on tertiary levels of intervention providing sympathetic and victim centred care after the sexual assault reducing further harm.

The development of apprehended violence orders, sexual assault law reform, the provision of refuges and sexual assault and domestic violence services, the refinement of policy and procedures for the care of victims post assault are all examples of tertiary intervention. While all these are important initiatives and may contribute to the prevention of further harm or the reduction in repeat offending, they constitute an intervention after the initial offence, and thus do not embody a primary preventative potential. Other

Introduction

Combating sexual violence is disagreeable to easy quick fix solutions so popular among politicians and crime prevention specialists. The reasons are complex but would include some if not all of the following factors. The first is that much sexual violence still remains hidden, or unrecognised, and thus remains outside the social infrastructure of normalisation. Second, those who are most vulnerable to victimisation tend also to be among the populations in the community with the least social resources to do much about it when they experience intimate sexual violence. They are disproportionately young women, concentrated in rural regions or metropolitan areas marked with social disadvantage. Women aged 16 to 20 have an estimated victimisation rate of 113.1 per 100,000 compared to an average of 38.8 per 100,000. There are perplexing regional differences with sexual assault rates on the whole higher in rural areas, especially in the Far West, the Central West, the Northern Western and the Murrumbidgee statistical divisions of NSW.

Responsiblising Women Neoliberal Social Policy

The 1990's especially has seen an increasing reliance on neo-liberal social policies which focus on the at risk individual, and the exclusion from social or public support those considered irresponsible in managing their risk. This period has also been characterised by a shift to market driven decentralised policy initiatives and a greater competition for scarcer government resources in a shrinking welfare sector.

Our concern is that these strategies have shifted the responsibility for preventing sexual violence even more toward the victim. Prevention strategies conceived within a neo liberal social policy framework have focused primarily on women taking action to avoid victimisation. Some of them even project an avowedly feminist approach. Project Sister USA, for example, runs a variety

social policy initiatives have placed hope in education programs in schools and universities, mass media campaigns and in crime prevention strategies.

of programs aimed at preventing sexual assault. Included is a list of tips to assist women in avoiding sexual assault. Using the acronym prevent they suggest women:-

- Put change in your wallet for a ride home.
- Recognise the early signs of potential assault.
- Examine your surroundings constantly and carefully. Verbalize your resistance loudly.
- Exhibit confidence in potentially threatening situations.
- Never assume sexual assault can't happen to you.
- Travel in groups.

Public Awareness Prevention Strategies

Public education strategies have been another key tool in challenging victim blaming attitudes and providing more knowledge to the community. Many of these have been endorsed by government and are seen as major initiatives in preventing sexual violence. Certainly there are some successful examples from the public health field in quit smoking campaigns and safe-sex messages to combat sexually transmitted diseases that embody a primary preventative focus. However, the quit smoking campaign used the powerful medical profession as a catalyst for change in the case of smoking and it is questionable whether the message has reached young people or lower socio-economic groups.

The safe sex campaign's impact upon the gay men's community was successful in making safe sex sexy but it also achieved this by targeting a loose but defined community. The success of the strategy is partly due to the way the safe sex discourse was harnessed to the collective processes of cultural transmission in the gay community. The strategy did not just aim its impact upon at risk individuals. It aimed and arguably had an impact on the collective solidarities of that group. However the success in changing the unsafe sexual practices of men who did not identify with the gay community was questionable. Both these examples suggest the need for targeted campaigns which involve key players in the desired

behavioural and communal change. Importantly these strategies break with the medical and psychological models of targeting only at risk individuals.

Education for Prevention

Education programs in schools have consistently been identified as a key strategy for reducing violence in society. It is a strategy that has been supported by key government inquiries and task forces. The assumption is that by exposing children and young adults to alternative messages promoting non-violence, conflict resolution and the respect for diversity and difference in addition to the promotion of tolerance for others, violent behaviour in adults will be prevented. Structured anti-violence programs have been developed within NSW Education Department Schools but their consistent implementation has been hampered by the voluntary nature of school involvement.

Rebounds Effects

More alarming is that the very attitudes and behaviours at odds with ethical sexual behaviour can be exacerbated by the quick-fix workshop approach to rape prevention education. Winkel & De Kleuer found a perpetrator-focused educational strategy aimed at reducing domineering masculine behaviour backfired as stereotypes were unintentionally reinforced among the cohort. While culturally relevant material was rated highly by Black men and lead to a decrease in rape supportive attitudes, rebound occurred for some participants and not others.

Socio-cultural approaches to Rape Prevention

The propensity to normalise intimate sexual violence is deeply embedded in the cultural beliefs and practices of individual community members and institutions. Attempting to promote collective change in such deeply ingrained beliefs about gender and relationships between men and women is a tall order for programs that may only provide several hours of alternative messages. The wider socio-cultural context that promotes rape myths and cultural attitudes has tended to be over-looked by the rape prevention

programs we have analysed. Nearly all were framed within the narrow confines a psychological discourse that saw the problem as one of an individual pathology. The influence of peer group pressure on constructions of masculinity and femininity, notions of manliness and conquest, and the diversity of people who both experience and commit sexual violence strategies, clearly also need to be addressed in such programs.

These factors suggest social policy initiatives that seek simple answers to wicked problems are rather limited. In the case of sexual violence, it is not enough to try to prevent it through two hour or one day workshop based education programs. Yet this remains a popular policy. Social policy initiatives in this area have rarely recognised the potential harm such minimalist educational interventions may have. The research discussed above from the US and Canada indicates how complex it is to prevent sexual violence through educational programs alone. Despite this a long held belief by government and anti-violence advocates that short-term workshops in educational settings is a key strategy in reducing violence against women persists.

The power of this policy discourse is clearly reflected in a recent announcement by the Australian Federal Government to spend over $700,000 to fund community organizations to develop and run more than 1,200 domestic violence prevention workshops for young people. Referring to this initiative, Senator Ellison recently asserted Ideas discussed and lessons learned by young people in the workshops will flow on to their families, schools and the wider community. One has to ask in light of the above research, how does he know this and where is the evidence to support this anticipated outcome?

Conclusion

I would like emphasize that sexual violence poses an obstacle to peace and security. It impedes women from participating in peace and democratic processes and in post-conflict reconstruction and reconciliation. As a tool of war it can become a way of life once entrenched in the fabric of society, it lingers long after the guns

have fallen silent. Many women lose their health, livelihoods, husbands, families and support networks as a result of rape. This, in turn, can shatter the structures that anchor community values, and with that disrupt their transmission to future generations. Children accustomed to acts of rape can grow into adults who accept such acts as the norm. This vicious cycle must stop, as we cannot accept a selective zero-tolerance policy. Today's adoption of resolution 1960 on sexual violence, is an important step in that direction. It is for that reason that Slovenia joined in co-sponsoring it. We gratefully acknowledge a Small ARC Grant Preventing Intimate Sexual Violence awarded in 1999 and the research assistance of Tracey Folk.

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