
8. The sex of sexual violence

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This chapter explains how feminists have sought to understand the sex of sexual violence, particularly rape. These debates are centrally about the nature of heterosex in patriarchy; but they are also inextricably about the nature and structure of feminism itself, from the consciousness-raising speak-outs of the Women's Liberation Movement to the relationship of feminism to the state. Whilst rape is, of course, a material reality, it is also a discourse (Gavey 2005): how we experience rape is at least partly determined by how we are able to understand it. The language of rape (Ehrlich 2001) constructs a field in and through which experiences of rape – particularly but not exclusively the experiences of female victim/survivors and male perpetrators – can/not be understood and therefore actioned. Thus, feminist theory and research around rape and sexual violence, although most typically located in the social sciences, do not only reside there, and much important work has come from other disciplinary traditions, particular those that study representation.

In the context of this volume, it should go without saying that feminist activism, research and theory have been genuinely ground-breaking and life-changing in the ways in which they have documented and challenged rape and other forms of sexual violence. At its best, feminist work has done this in a way which has centred victim/survivors, allowed for varied experiences to be heard and understood, and provided practical support and advocacy. Within feminist debate there is a clear understanding that women's experiences of sexual violence are both diverse and connected. Diverse in range – from one-off violent acts to repeated, routinized instances of sexual violence, assault and harassment across a lifetime – these are nevertheless connected points on what Liz Kelly (1988) influentially called the 'continuum of sexual violence'. This continuum both exists within any individual woman's lifetime and connects different women's experiences under patriarchy, even as these experiences are differentiated in relation to overarching socio-political structures (for example, in conditions of war or systems of slavery) as well as through the intersections of gender with other structural forms of oppression such as race, dis/ability, age or sexuality. This is the ground on which this chapter is built; but my focus here is more narrowly to survey feminist debates about the sex of sexual violence.

Although this chapter adopts a structure which is broadly chronological – moving from an analysis of rape as violence-not-sex originating in the 1970s through to a reconsideration of the sex of sexual violence from the 1980s onwards – this is by no means a strictly linear movement. I am writing this in 2018, around the first anniversary of the publication of sexual assault allegations against Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein. Since Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey’s *New York Times* article was published in October 2017, barely a day has gone by without a linked media story. Feminism – or more accurately, a popular understanding of feminism – is the ground on which much of the coverage of the Weinstein case, and the subsequent explosion of survivor discourse under the banner #MeToo, has been constructed. It therefore provides useful examples, throughout this chapter, for working through some of the tensions in the way that feminists have engaged with questions about the sex of sexual violence.

VIOLENCE, *NOT* SEX

A view still commonly attributed to feminists in popular discourse around rape is that rape is about violence, not sex. This formulation seems to have its origins in Susan Brownmiller’s *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (first published in 1975), or – perhaps more accurately – in the way the arguments of the book were taken up both in feminist campaigning and in popular discourse. Tellingly, in the personal statement that prefaces *Against Our Will*, Brownmiller positions herself as ‘a woman who changed her mind about rape’ (1986, p. 9). Brownmiller’s trajectory, as sketched in these few pages, is from being a journalist ‘who viewed a rape case with suspicion’, who then listened sceptically to friends’ accounts of rape, before her ‘moment of revelation’ at a public speak-out on rape (1986, pp. 7–9).

This context is important as it highlights the extent to which the violence-not-sex analysis is a *reactive* one, emerging from a context in which rape is not taken seriously, and women’s stories are not heard or believed. Louise Armstrong – whose work on incest I will return to shortly – notes that early second-wave feminists developed their analysis of men’s violence against women and girls in a context where that violence was variously ‘permitted’ or ‘denied’ (1996, p. 17). So, for instance, at the time Brownmiller’s book was written – and indeed, into the 1990s in both the US and the UK – men could not be charged with the rape of women they were married to. The marital rape exemption was based on an historical understanding of women as men’s property, and a man was permitted to do as he liked with his property. This notion of women as chattel has not

entirely gone away; this idea permeates many accounts of violence against women in prostitution where the man's purchase is deemed to license his actions (or 'permit', in Armstrong's phrase), and the woman's acceptance of payment is suggested to invalidate the possibility of abuse. The denial of abuse, on the other hand, is the reconstruction of an abuse narrative to mean something else. Armstrong's example here is Freud's re-writing of the evidence of incest presented by his female patients, which he reconstructed as fantasy-not-abuse (1996, pp. 16–17). Together, these examples demonstrate that the feminist framing of rape as violence-not-sex was (and is) a response to a context in which rape was seen *only* as sex, based on its meaning for men and ignoring the experiences of the women and children they abused. This context is now typically referred to by feminists as a 'rape culture' (Buchwald et al. 1993) and, indeed, this is a term which has gained popular currency in English-language news media since the early 2010s (Phillips 2017).

In her helpful overview of feminist theorizations of rape, Rebecca Whisnant (2017) suggests that feminists moved on from the violence-not-sex position fairly quickly as its limitations became clear. The most significant of these limitations was that emphasizing violence and, relatedly, injury reified popular misconceptions of rape as a rare and extreme crime. This downplayed much of what feminists had learned from the speak-outs, both about the everyday, routinized nature of much rape and sexual assault and about women's strategies for survival. The construction of rape as a crime of violence-not-sex was also one that many women struggled to square with their own experiences and, as Catharine MacKinnon (1987, pp. 85–92) argued, downplayed the interconnectedness of violence and (hetero)sex in a patriarchal context.

However, Whisnant perhaps understates the extent to which the violence-not-sex position influenced the development of service provision for victim/survivors and the wider popular discourse about rape. For example, in her ongoing work on the history of the feminist anti-violence movement in Scotland, Jenny Wartnaby demonstrates that the emphasis on rape as a crime of violence – *not* sex – permeated materials produced by local rape crisis centres in the early 1980s.¹ Partially responding to critiques outlined above, there was a broadening out of violence-not-sex to power-not-sex in certain contexts. Although there are important distinctions between these positions, for my purposes here it is the fact that they are united in constructing sexual violence as *not* sex that is most significant. Nor is this an historical curiosity: this formulation is still very much

¹ Jenny Wartnaby is a PhD student at the University of Strathclyde, and these findings derive from her doctoral research.

in use in frontline services, often in the context of challenging rape myths. Similarly, the violence (or power), *not* sex, formulation was in evidence in some feminist responses to the allegations against Harvey Weinstein. Here, the insistence that this was *not* about sex was a means of insisting on the seriousness of his actions against a cultural context that had for decades condoned his abuse (as *just* sex). It was also an understandable response to Weinstein's own initial statement in relation to the allegations in which he presented himself as a man out of touch with changing sexual mores, attempting to reframe the story as one about sexual morality and conduct, *not* violence and the abuse of power.

One of the enduring legacies of the violence-not-sex framing is the emphasis on the trauma of rape and the positioning of women as victims, not survivors. Again, these legacies have played out in responses to the women accusing Weinstein as well as the many millions more who asserted #MeToo in 2017. With a wide range of male behaviour under scrutiny, this has been – in many ways – a moment when the feminist analysis of the continuum of men's violences has been at the forefront, as I discuss in the next section. At the same time, a popular discourse in which 'real' rape (Estrich 1987) and sexual assault are always and only devastating (and, so, rare) clashes with the assertion that rape and sexual assault take many forms and are depressingly routine – something feminists have been documenting for decades, but which has taken on a new urgency in light of #MeToo. These tensions have, for instance, played out in the circulation of photographs of Rose McGowan and Ashley Judd with Weinstein *after* he had allegedly assaulted them. Stereotypical ideas about 'real' rape do not map onto these glamorous red carpet photographs, and have been used by Weinstein supporters (and, indeed, by his legal team) to cast doubt on the rape narratives. The logic here seems to be that because the women are pictured smiling with Weinstein at public events, they can't possibly be 'real' victims of sexual abuse at his hands. Their survival in and of itself places their account in doubt, but their continued existence in the glamorous and sexualized realm of Hollywood is even more troubling: because they publicly present themselves in this sexualized context, doubt is cast on their account of violence. Sexualization trumps violence, as feminists working on rape representation in mainstream media have documented for decades (see, for example, Estrich 1987; Benedict 1992; Boyle 2005).

It is important to be clear that I in no way want to minimize the trauma, as well as physical or economic harms, that many women experience as a result of rape or other forms of sexual assault. Nor do I want to suggest that there is no longer a need to speak of this trauma in the public sphere. Given the shame which continues to adhere to sexual victimization, speaking out remains important both for (some) individual survivors and for

any feminist understanding of – and response to – rape and other forms of sexual assault. What I am reacting against here is, instead, a universalizing narrative around rape trauma which is the legacy of the emphasis on violence. If rape is consistently presented as the worst possible thing that could happen to a woman, then women's survival and ability to speak out is automatically suspect. Moreover, this is simultaneously an *individualizing* narrative with personal and psychological – not social, political, cultural – solutions.

This is brilliantly illustrated by Louise Armstrong in her book *Rocking the Cradle of Sexual Politics: What Happened When Women Said Incest* (1996). Armstrong was among the first women in the US to speak publicly about incest – or, more accurately, to speak and be heard (1996, p. 2) – and her 1978 book *Kiss Daddy Goodnight* was foundational. In *Rocking the Cradle of Sexual Politics*, Armstrong explores how, in the intervening years, the public silence (and silencing) of the issue was transformed into apparently endless noise. Incest – particularly in its most sensational and unusual forms (its most recognizably *violent* and *injurious* forms) – increasingly came to occupy centre stage in media contexts from talk shows to soap operas. These media treatments, she notes, were not only sensationalist but also, crucially, consistently emphasized personal trauma and enduring psychological impacts. Her argument is that this defused the specifically *feminist* analysis at the heart of the original speak-outs on the issue: the understanding that, by sharing experiences, women were forging a *structural* analysis of their position in a patriarchal society (Armstrong 1996, p. 11). As Armstrong memorably argues, as the issue was more widely taken up, this feminist recognition that the personal is political was lost. No longer part of a wider feminist analysis, the emphasis was simply on the imperative to speak: 'the personal is – the public', as though publicity was the end in itself (1996, p. 3). Subsequently, the emphasis on therapy effected yet another transformation: 'The personal is – the personal' (1996, p. 38).

Armstrong's work is a salutary reminder of the double-edged sword of speaking out in a heavily mediated context. Her writing also raises important questions about what gets lost with the emphasis on the sensational and devastating. As feminist research in this area continually emphasizes, there is no one way – and certainly no right way – to survive rape, and a universalizing narrative can make it more difficult for some women to name their own experiences and so to seek appropriate support and redress (Estrich 1987; Gavey 2005). However, the development of feminist research and theory around men's violence against women has – in different ways – also retained the legacy of the violence-not-sex position. Although violence and crime are not synonymous, the 'focus on crime' – which Liz Kelly (2012, p. xix) identifies in feminist interventions

from the late 1980s onwards – can be understood as part of the same reaction against the routine minimization of women’s experiences and the insistence on taking them seriously. For Kelly, one of the consequences of this emphasis has been that ‘research, policy and practice has concentrated on intimate partner violence and, to a lesser extent, sexual assault’ (2012, p. xix), meaning that the ‘everyday, routine intimate intrusions’ which women experience largely slipped from the agenda. And there are other implications antithetical to a feminist politics. Alison Phipps (2014, p. 41), for example, argues that international activism on violence against women – couched in the language of crime – can be co-opted in neo-conservative rhetoric to justify culturally, politically and economically imperialist projects. In a similar vein, Kristin Bumiller (2008) explores the ways in which feminist anti-violence movements have become publicly and politically associated with crime control, something that has racialized implications, particularly in a US context.

Arguing that rape is violence-not-sex has been – and is – an important strategy for insisting on the (criminal) significance of rape and the necessity of focusing on women’s experiences of what men experience as sex in contexts where rape is permitted and/or denied. It remains the case that when something is seen as ‘sex’ it is very difficult to at the same time insist that it is also violence: sex makes violence invisible as such. In my own research, the clearest examples I have found of this are in the way the porn industry talks about the abuse of female performers. The industry is more than willing to acknowledge that its production practices are abusive. However, by framing these narratives as sex – and as sex to which the women consent – any harm is rendered invisible; harm becomes, instead, part of the sexual appeal of porn itself (Boyle 2011). Nonetheless, as I have demonstrated in this section, the legacy of the violence-not-sex approach has been to leave marginalized many women’s experiences of rape which do not – or do not straightforwardly – fit this model, and to emphasize crime and state responses. In the next section, I explore how and why feminists put sex back into sexual violence.

THE VIOLENCE OF (HETERO)SEX

If one of the reasons for feminist framing of rape as violence *not* sex was to overturn the dominant understanding of rape *as experienced by men* (in other words, as sex), then it may seem counterintuitive that the sex of sexual violence was to become so central to feminist approaches from the 1980s onwards. Catharine MacKinnon – one of the key theorists of the sex of rape – clarifies the feminist rationale for this shift perfectly,

however. MacKinnon argues that by seeing rape as violence-not-sex ‘we fail to criticize what has been made of *sex*, what has been done to us *through sex*, because we leave the line between rape and intercourse, sexual harassment and sex roles, pornography and eroticism right where it is’ (1987, pp. 86–87). For MacKinnon, it is important for feminists to understand the sex of sexual violence because sexual violence is a large part of what (hetero)sex *means* – to women as well as to men – in a patriarchal context. Part of the evidence that MacKinnon and others have drawn on in developing these arguments is the testimonies of victim/survivors who have experienced the violence done to them as sexual, with sometimes enduring implications for the ways in which they experience sex. However, this argument does not solely hinge on victim/survivor experience. Rather, it asks us to consider how heterosex is made meaningful in the context of unequal gender relations in patriarchal contexts. This means understanding certain commonalities between ‘what has been made of’ consensual heterosex and sexual violence, as well as considering the ways in which socio-cultural understandings of heterosex and gender roles more broadly provide the ground on which sexual violence occurs. In exploring these arguments in this section, I will draw upon Liz Kelly’s work on the continuum of sexual violence (1988) and, in considering the broader contexts in which we all make sense of sexual violence, gesture towards her later work (2005), which explores the conducive context contemporary societies provide for sexual violence.

First, however, a caveat: it is not only women who are victim/survivors of sexual violence; nor is it the case that sexual assault is exclusive to heterosexual contexts. Measuring sexual violence incidence and prevalence is notoriously fraught, but a consistent pattern which does emerge across time and place is that sexual violence is disproportionately experienced by women and perpetrated by men (Walby et al. 2017). A feminist analysis is first and foremost about seeing these as *gendered* patterns: to paraphrase MacKinnon, sexual violence exists because of what has been made of gender. As R.W. Connell argues:

Most men do not attack or harass women; but those who do are unlikely to think themselves deviant. On the contrary they usually feel they are entirely justified, that they are exercising a right. They are authorized by an ideology of supremacy. (1995, p. 83)

In other words, violence against women is entirely compatible with how masculinity, and heterosexual masculinity specifically, is personally, politically, culturally and socially enacted. Although Brownmiller is often credited with advocating the violence-not-sex position, her understanding of rape as linked to gendered power relations is consistent with this

approach. For Brownmiller, after all, rape is ‘nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which *all* men keep *all* women in a state of fear’ (1986, p. 15).

In this context, it is not only men who experience sexual violence as sexual: women too have come to understand an inextricable link between (hetero)sex and violence. Here I want to turn to Liz Kelly’s influential work on women’s experiences of sexual violence in which she argues that the pervasive nature of men’s sexual violence means that women make sense of individual actions in relation to a continuum of related experiences across a lifetime. For Kelly, the continuum can allow us to identify a ‘basic common character that underlies many different events’ and/or ‘a continuous series of elements or events that pass into one another and cannot be readily distinguished’ (1988, p. 76). Importantly, Kelly’s research points to the way that experiences that the women in her study did not necessarily define as sexual *violence* were essential elements of this continuum, shaping how they *did* understand more readily recognizable acts of sexual violence. Kelly’s work decentres legalistic definitions to instead emphasize women’s understandings of their experiences, including the ways in which women make sense of sexual violence in relation to their experiences and expectations of gender and (hetero)sexuality. This can mean understanding rape on a continuum with other *sexual* experiences: a continuum of choice and coercion.

This understanding of the continuum has, for instance, underpinned work on forced marriage by Sundari Anitha and Aisha Gill. They refer to consent and coercion in relation to marriage as ‘two ends of a continuum, between which lie degrees of socio-cultural expectation, control, persuasion, pressure, threat and force’ (Anitha and Gill 2009, p. 165). As with the research which led Kelly to propose the continuum (1988), Anitha and Gill are able to highlight important connections between women’s everyday experiences – of constraints on marital consent – and criminal, violent acts against them. They are concerned with dismantling binary ways of thinking which have disadvantaged women (not least in the legal system) when their experiences have occupied a ‘grey area’ in-between coercion and consent.

How feminists name and conceptualize experiences that fall in these ‘grey areas’ remains a live question. If an act fits a legal definition of rape, for instance, to what extent is it helpful for feminists to insist on using the language of rape even if women themselves do not think of it in that way? Many feminist theorists now use a range of terms which are more organic to women’s lived experiences. For instance, in her book *Just Sex? The Cultural Scaffolding of Rape* (2005), in which she draws on a number of studies with women about their experiences of sexual violence and

of sex, Nicole Gavey deploys a range of different terms to capture the complexities in the ways women narrate these experiences. These terms include: forced sex, unwanted sex, coerced sex, unjust sex, obligatory sex and sort-of-rape. This is not to say these experiences are not *also* rape; but to recognize that conceptualizing them only through a criminal lens does not necessarily do justice to women's experiences, particularly when these involve known men.

Fiona Vera-Gray's recent work on street harassment is similarly concerned with 'the project of defining the world from women's phenomenological position' (2016, p. 2). Vera-Gray is interested in women's daily experiences – precisely the kind of experiences the emphasis on violence and crime can obscure – and this leads her to reconceptualize street harassment as *intrusion* and, specifically, *men's* intrusion. It may seem surprising that by centring women's daily, lived experiences Vera-Gray chooses a language that centres men's behaviour. However, Vera-Gray notes that in a context where women learn to see themselves as sexual objects, intrusions such as catcalling may at times be experienced as wanted or desired: this does not, she argues, mean that they cannot also have negative impacts. She argues, 'in practicing intrusion [men] are unaware of whether particular practices are wanted by individual women' (2016, p. 7). In other words, she focuses on the sense of (sexual) entitlement underpinning men's behaviour in contexts where consent is never sought, and on the routine adjustments women make to their own behaviour to manage, ameliorate and avoid these behaviours.

It is important to note here that in Kelly's original conceptualization of the continuum she is clear that placing women's experiences on a continuum is *not* intended to establish a hierarchy of seriousness or injury (with the exception of sexual murder). Echoing Vera-Gray's work, popular discussions around the #MeToo movement have similarly demonstrated that sexual harassment does not need to involve physical violence or sexual assault for it to have both material and psychological impacts. Speaking on the BBC panel show *Have I Got News For You* (3 November 2017), comedian Jo Brand captured this point beautifully in her response to a male panellist's dismissive comment that emerging abuse allegations in the Westminster Parliament were not 'high-level crimes':

I know it's not high level, but it doesn't have to be high level for women to feel under siege in somewhere like the House of Commons. And actually, for women, if you're constantly being harassed, even in a small way, that builds up. And that wears you down.

#MeToo has been highly effective in bringing to the fore exactly these kinds of experiences and the ongoing work this requires from women to

continually make judgements about safety and risk in public and private interactions.

#WhyIDidntReport, a hashtag which emerged in response to Donald Trump's dismissal of sexual assault allegations against his Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh, has further extended this conversation. The #WhyIDidntReport responses have, amongst other things, pointed to the myriad ways in which women internalize men's sexual entitlement to their bodies and accept responsibility for men's sexual arousal. This equation of women with sex makes speaking out about sexual violence doubly hazardous for women as it simultaneously, and at times contradictorily, positions us as victims and as sexual temptresses, bearing the responsibility (and, so, shame and guilt) for sex, but none of the desire. In this context, it should not be surprising that many women marginalize the public significance of the sexual assaults they experience (for example, by not reporting) whilst internalizing the impacts of these assaults. These accounts also provide compelling evidence that just because something is experienced or recognized by victim/survivors to be sexual, does not mean it is necessarily experienced as pleasurable. Women have a lot of sex they do not want and do not enjoy, and do so for a variety of reasons ranging from explicit force to gendered expectations of appropriate behaviour: this is the continuum of choice and coercion.

It is equally important to note that Kelly's continuum is about establishing connections, *not* about stating equivalence. Some of the popular backlash against #MeToo has distorted this aspect of the argument to suggest that feminists are incapable of telling the difference between unwanted – or intrusive – sexual touching and rape. In a longer discussion of the use of the continuum in feminist theory (Boyle 2019), I have argued that this is why it is important to think of continuums in the plural. So, for instance, the continuum of choice and coercion in heterosexual interactions which Anitha and Gill refer to above may intersect with but is not identical to a continuum of sexual violence which brings together women's experiences of non-consensual activity. What I refer to as 'continuum thinking' in feminist theory should be precisely about establishing connections that allow us to see broader patterns: it is *not* about suggesting that different experiences on the continuum are equivalent. This approach allows us to see the contexts in which (hetero)sex and violence are interrelated, without conflating one with the other. Thus we don't have to replace violence-not-sex with sex-is-violence: we can rather understand the violence that is made of sex as different points on a continuum which opens up a critique of heterosex in patriarchy without insisting that heterosex is always and only violence.

Continuum thinking, then, is about seeing connections (not equiva-

lences), and it should also be distinguished from analogous thinking. Ironically, as MacKinnon was so influential in putting the sex back into sexual violence in feminist theory, some of her subsequent work has sought to make more analogous connections. She has, for instance, argued for conceptualizing rape as torture (1993), and she is not alone in this approach, with other feminist scholars making compelling connections between global terrorism and domestic abuse (see, for example, Pain 2012, 2014). However, situating rape and domestic abuse – most commonly experienced by women in private – in relation to hostage-taking, torture and terrorism runs the risk that women's experiences of male violence can only be recognized analogously when they can be related to experiences of violence in which victims are not, typically, targeted because of their gender. As Clare McGlynn (2008) notes in relation to MacKinnon's rape-as-torture argument, there is also a danger that using such extreme analogies disguises or minimizes experiences of male violence, which do not cause explicit or long-term injury or fear. This can also make women more reluctant to name or report their own experiences if these did not also involve explicit physical violence or injury (Gavey 2005): precisely the problem that feminist critics have observed with the violence-not-sex position. There is an additional paradox inherent in this analogous thinking in that it risks making men's violence against women most visible when its gendered dimension is denied and when it looks most like men's own experiences of extreme violence (also Nayak and Suchland 2006, p. 472; Cameron 2018).

Finally, it is also significant to note that Kelly always envisaged continuum thinking as applicable to men's behaviour as well as female experience, to allow us to explore and expose the interrelationships between what is constructed as 'normal' and 'aberrant' for men (Kelly 1988, p. 75), as also suggested in the quotation from R.W. Connell at the beginning of this section. I have already noted how, in his initial response to sexual assault allegations, Harvey Weinstein drew on precisely this notion of a continuum of more or less acceptable behaviour to claim that he misunderstood where to draw the line. This allowed him to suggest that his crime was one of sexual misreading rather than criminal violence. This has been a fairly common response from high-profile men accused of sexual harassment and assault (and their defenders) in this period: to refute the abusive nature of their behaviour by insisting that it was simply the norm in a particular time period, work context or social group. And, on this point, there is a certain agreement between feminists and sexual violence apologists. What Weinstein and feminist theorists arguably share is an understanding that his behaviour was *not* inappropriate according to patriarchal logic, but rather an expression of what men are promised, what they are

continually told about their position in the sexual order. Of course, where Weinstein and feminist theorists differ is in what responsibility we think individual men should bear for this. That rape is a system which benefits *all* men – as Brownmiller argued – does not mean that *individual* men are not responsible for their own behaviours within the wider conducive context provided by rape culture.

CONCLUSION

As this chapter has demonstrated, how we think about the sex and the violence of sexual violence remain vexed questions for feminism. However, that there are different approaches to these questions does not mean that we cannot extract some broad principles.

First, feminist activism, research and thinking around sexual violence and rape has always aimed to transform women's lives, and this means that it must respond to the wider contexts in which sexual violence and rape are (mis)understood. The violence-not-sex (or, relatedly, power-not-sex) position which originated in feminist thinking has fulfilled a particular function in contexts where to acknowledge the sexual has, in common practice, meant a simultaneous denial of the violence. That this position has never entirely gone away, despite well-documented limitations, should not be surprising as the sex-not-violence frame it was reacting against has also persisted.

However, the sex of sexual violence has long been a feminist concern: how rape and sexual assault are experienced and understood are contingent on 'what has been made of sex', to use MacKinnon's helpful formulation. A second principle of feminist work in this area can therefore be identified as a recognition that sexual assault is never experienced in a vacuum. A third principle that follows from this is that the contexts which are most salient to understanding specific instances of rape and sexual assault will vary. This is enshrined in what I have, following Kelly, called continuum thinking: the feminist push to see the ways in which different aspects of women's experiences are linked, without insisting on false equivalences between them.

Finally, the arguments outlined in this chapter point to the need for ongoing action on multiple fronts. Justice for women within the criminal courts remains important, but an exclusive focus on the criminal justice system or other forms of legal or institutional redress does not allow us to see the whole picture of rape and sexual assault. One size does not fit all, but what should remain consistent across feminist approaches is an understanding of how rape and sexual assault function within a gendered

social order. If the meaning of rape and sexual assault is indivisible from 'what has been made of' heterosex, it is equally bound up in 'what has been made of' gender. This must also be accompanied by a commitment to recognizing the diversity of women's experiences even as we acknowledge their common characteristics, and a determination to both support victim/survivors and challenge perpetrators.

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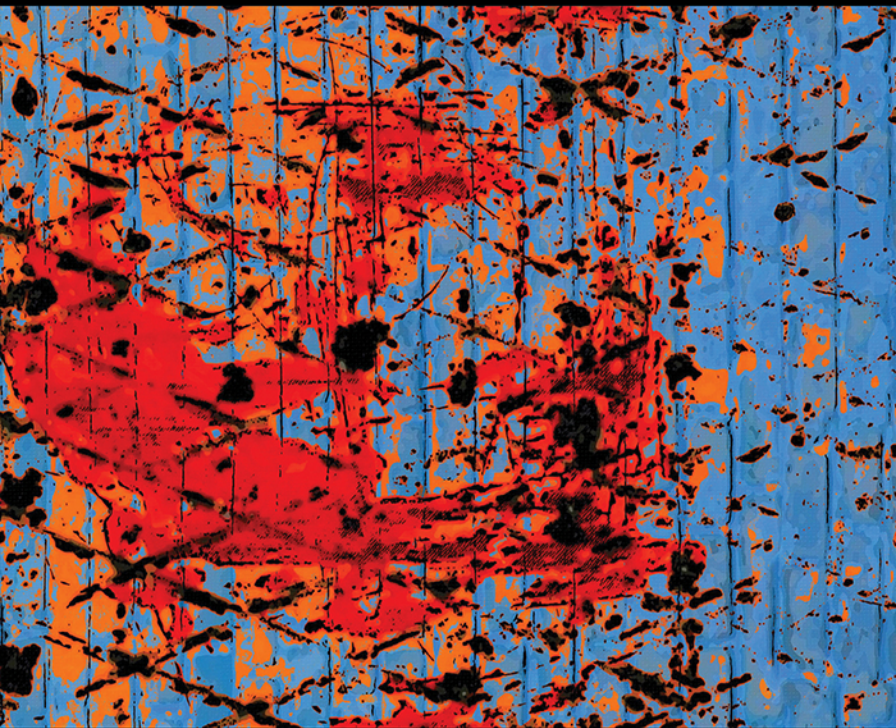
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HANDBOOK ON Gender and Violence

Edited by
Laura J. Shepherd



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Handbook on Gender and Violence

Edited by

Laura J. Shepherd

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