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AN END TO VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Over eight hundred feminists crowd into the hall. They've been stopping traffic in central London at November's annual Reclaim the Night march, in a crowd 2,000 strong. The atmosphere is jubilant and friendly. As the crowd settles down and women make space for each other on the floor, the speeches begin. One after another, women speak about violence: an activist from an Asian women's domestic violence project, a representative from a teacher's union. Finally, organizer Finn Mackay takes to the stage. Her rabble-rousing speeches are legendary and tonight's is no exception.

> We have marched together tonight as women because we have a struggle to win and each of you knows it. We live in a society where all of us, in all our diversity, know what it is to live with the fear, threat and reality of male violence … It is a shame on our society that there an estimated 80,000 rapes every year, over 300,000 sexual assaults – and meanwhile, a rape conviction rate that stands at the lowest it has ever been, one of the lowest in Europe at only 5.3 per cent.

The crowd cries out, 'Shame, shame!' Mackay continues:

> You have marched for the two women every week murdered by a violent male partner. For the one in four women who are raped. For the five thousand young people prostituted on our streets tonight as every night. For our sisters around the world who represent the poorest of the poor, those most displaced by wars, those without education, those most affected by environmental destruction… You have sent a message to those who would silence us, to those who would keep us in the home where we are actually most at risk. You have said, we know. We know that it is always safer to resist.[1]

When we asked feminists what issues most concern or interest them, one of the most frequently mentioned was violence against women. Worldwide, at least one in three women will be beaten, coerced into sex, or otherwise abused in her lifetime.[2] A survey of young British women by *More* magazine in 2005 found that 95 per cent don't feel safe on the streets at night, and almost three-quarters worry about being raped.[3]

When we say violence is a feminist issue, what do we mean? Don't men suffer violence too, and don't women commit it? Are feminists sexist for concentrating on violence against women? It's true that men are victims of violence (they are more likely to suffer violence than women, although this violence is mostly perpetrated by other men), and women are violent too. *All* campaigns to stop violence are important. But certain types of violence do affect women (and people who transgress gender norms) more, and we will make no apology for focusing on these issues. And, since men's violence is such a huge global problem, stopping violence against women will no doubt help reduce male victimisation too.

Violence against women takes many forms: forced abortions, female infanticide, female genital mutilation, acid throwing, child

sexual abuse, rape, forced prostitution, dowry and honour violence, domestic violence, elder abuse, and more. It is a huge topic, so this chapter will be limited to several major issues mentioned often in feminist circles: rape and sexual violence; domestic violence and abuse in intimate relationships; everyday harassment; and violence suffered by women in the sex industry.

Rape and sexual violence

In the UK, the Home Office estimates that around 21 per cent of girls and 11 per cent of boys experience some form of child sexual abuse; 23 per cent of women and 3 per cent of men experience sexual assault as an adult; and 5 per cent of women and 0.4 per cent of men suffer rape.[4] Only around 15 per cent of rapes are reported to the police, so it is estimated that, in total, around 80,000 women are raped every year in the UK.[5] Worldwide, the situation is just as shocking. In up to half the world's nations, marital rape is not a crime. In Sudan and Afghanistan, raped women can be prosecuted for adultery and even sentenced to death. Rape is a weapon of war, ethnic cleansing and genocide. The Democratic Republic of Congo, Darfur, Sierra Leone and Uganda have all been highlighted as particular areas of concern:

> Abduction, rape, and sexual slavery are … systematic and widespread in the conflict in Sierra Leone. Rape victims often suffer extreme brutality. In one case, a 14-year-old girl was stabbed in the vagina with a knife because she refused to have sex with the rebel combatant who abducted her. In another, a 16-year-old girl was so badly injured that, after her escape, she required a hysterectomy.[6]

Yet even in countries at peace, justice for rape victims is often close to impossible. In England and Wales, the 2006 conviction rate for reported rapes was around 6 per cent, down from about 32

per cent in the 1970s, and one percentage point below Ireland. In Scotland, the conviction rate is less than 3 per cent. This has been described, rightly, as a national scandal; Britain has the lowest rape conviction rate in Europe (in France in 2006 the conviction rate was 25 per cent; Luxembourg's 85 per cent is the highest).[7] At the same time, Rape Crisis Centres are regularly under threat of closure. In 2008 69 per cent of centres said they were 'unsustainable' due to lack of funding.[8]

Public opinion on rape bears litle resemblance to the facts. A 2005 poll demonstrated that only 4 per cent of respondents knew how many rapes occur in the UK each year, with most guessing less than 5,000. People also overestimated the percentage of reported rapes that ended in a conviction. A third of respondents felt that the victim was totally or partially responsible for the rape if she had had many sexual partners or wore 'sexy or revealing clothing'. A third believed that if she had flirted beforehand, she was partially responsible.[9]

'Cry-rape girl, 20, dragged man into toilets for sex to claim £7,500 compensation.' *Daily Mail*, 14 August 2009

'Mother who cried rape after meeting man on dating website is jailed.' *Daily Mail*, 22 July 2009

'Calais migrant "cried rape as revenge against people smuggler who failed to get her into Britain".' *Daily Mail*, 29 July 2009

'The rape lies that ruined our lives: Taxi driver and his wife reveal the devastating cost of a drunk teenager who cried rape.' *Daily Mail*, 22 May 2009

'Jail for wife who falsely accused husband of rape because "she wanted him out of her life".' *Daily Mail*, 3 July 2009

'My cry-rape hell: Wrongly accused man tells of his 11-month nightmare.' *Daily Mail*, 17 September 2008

It's mind-boggling that despite this appalling state of affairs, whenever one hears about rape in the media, the tone is suspicious. As writers at the satirically named blog *Feminazery*[10] pointed out, a search on the *Daily Mail* website for the term

'rape' brings up page after page of 'cry rape' stories.[11] But false accusations are no more likely to be made in rape cases than in any other crime,[12] and our priority should be the fact that over 1,500 people are raped in the UK every week.

Contrary to popular belief, the cards are stacked against women when it comes to challenging rapists. Rape is more likely to be committed by someone the woman knows than a stranger. Maybe it was her husband or a friend. Making it public might be embarrassing; people might not believe her, and friends and family may ostracize her. If she decides to go to the police, the chance of her having proper evidence collected or being taken seriously is low. Ellie Blogs, a police constable who blogged about her experiences dealing with rape and domestic violence cases, reveals that 'there can be a definite "eye rolling" culture when certain types of rapes are reported. Male officers in particular often have doubts about women who report rapes.'[13]

If the victim is believed, agreement is made to prosecute and the case reaches court, she may have to face her rapist and suffer hostile personal questions. The 1999 Youth Justice and Criminal Evidence Act has improved things somewhat in that victims are supposed to be protected from questions about their sexual history or behaviour, and the statutory definition of consent now includes a test of 'reasonable belief' in consent. Even so, she'll face a jury who will come into the court having read 'cry rape' stories in the press. Location is crucial: in Cleveland she's eleven times more likely to see her rapist convicted than in Dorset.[14]

The system can fail so many times that a rapist can be left to commit dozens of crimes before finally being convicted. London taxi driver John Worboys was estimated to have assaulted at least eighty-five women over several years. The police fear the total number of victims could be much greater.[15]

Blaming the victim

Victims are told – or it is at least implied – that rape is, to some degree, their fault; that if only they hadn't drunk so much/walked down the street alone/flirted with that boy, or if they had worn flat shoes or trousers/carried a rape alarm, it wouldn't have happened. Well-meaning campaigns focus on warning women to protect themselves but neglect targeting potential perpetrators, as if rape was an inevitable consequence of being female.

Rape is regularly presented as the woman's responsibility, especially if she has drunk alcohol. Cara at *The Curvature* blog explains:

> When someone actually bothers to do a *responsible* study about how alcohol affects rape, they do indeed find that a large number of victims were intoxicated at the time of the assault. They also find that in most cases where alcohol was involved, both parties were drinking. And in cases where only the victim or the perpetrator was drinking, the rapist was more than twice as likely as the victim to be intoxicated.
>
> But I'll just keep on holding my breath for that article titled 'Alcohol tied to risk of being a rapist.' I'll wait for the simply *rational* advice that men shouldn't drink because there's a relatively small chance that drinking will cause them to rape someone. Can't you see it right around the corner? A time when a woman makes a rape allegation and people accusingly ask the man *well were you drinking*?[16]

In 2009, writer Ben Goldacre exposed a classic example of victim blaming in a *Daily Telegraph* article entitled 'Women who drink alcohol, wear short skirts and are outgoing are more likely to be raped, claim scientists at the University of Leicester.'

> It was based on the unpublished and unfinished dissertation of a Masters student and got the story entirely wrong. The title of the press release for the same research was 'Promiscuous men more

> likely to rape', which gives you some small clue as to how weirdly this story was distorted by the newspaper.[17]

Goldacre telephoned the student and asked her about the article's claims. She responded:

> We found no evidence that women who are more outgoing are more likely to be raped, this is completely inaccurate, we found no difference whatsoever. The alcohol thing is also completely wrong: if anything, we found that men reported they were willing to go further with women who are completely sober … When I saw the article my heart completely sank, and it made me really angry, given how sensitive this subject is. To be making claims like the *Telegraph* did, in my name, places all the blame on women, which is not what we were doing at all.[18]

Feminists are angry about rape and the harmful myths surrounding it. The fact is that women's drinking does not cause rape. Neither does what they wear. Rapists cause rape. Instead of putting all the responsibility on women, why don't we focus on teaching men – from a young age – that rape and sexual violence are always absolutely wrong?

Abuse and violence in intimate relationships

> 'Wife stabbed for bad cooking.'
> 'Wife stabbed in explosion of fury.'

These headlines introduced one story of domestic violence that appeared in a local paper when we were working on this chapter. It's one of many thousands that happen each day worldwide, and includes many features typical of domestic violence cases. The woman was stabbed in the stomach and chest with a knife she was using to peel onions; her husband had criticized her cooking and she responded by telling him (an out-of-work taxi

driver) to get a job. He attacked her. He stopped when he saw how badly she was bleeding and called an ambulance; when paramedics arrived, they found the floor slippery with her blood. Her lawyer underlined his lack of care for his injured wife. His lawyer blamed the man's actions on an unhappy marriage with a large age difference. Episodes of violence had characterised the marriage; the woman had reported some to police, but withdrawn her complaints. His response to his wife's comment about his unemployment – challenging his traditional masculine role – is also fairly typical; domestic violence is perhaps most prevalent in situations where a man's perceived right to control his partner is called into question.

But in another way this story is different from most: it's one of the few where a prosecution was successful and where improved domestic violence services (owing to years of feminist activism) were instrumental to the prosecution and to safeguarding the woman against further violence. The presiding judge jailed the man for four years. The woman survived but needs ongoing physiotherapy. The police officer explained that this prosecution had been successful because of close working between the woman and officers specially trained to protect domestic violence victims.[19]

In the UK, about one in four women and one in six men experience abuse or violence from a partner at some time during their adult lives.[20] In 77 per cent of domestic violence incidents recorded by the British Crime Survey, the victim was female.[21] Globally, figures vary and are collected differently, so it's not always easy to compare directly, but Table 3.1 shows the proportion of women who have experienced abuse by a partner in a range of countries.

Other types of discrimination often combine with sexism to make certain women at increased risk of violence or reduce their access to support services. For example, a study of partner

TABLE 3.1 Percentage of adult women who say they have experienced physical abuse by a male partner or intimate

Pakistan	80
Bolivia	70
Ukraine	50
Egypt	47
South Korea	38
USA	31
South Africa	25
Japan	15

Source: Based on figures in Joni Seager, *The Atlas of Women in the World*, 4th edn, Earthscan, Brighton, 2009, pp. 28–9.

violence in Massachusetts found that 34.6 per cent of transgender people reported being threatened with physical violence by a partner, compared to 13.6 per cent of non-transgender persons.[22] Women with disabilities are up to twice as likely to be victims of sexual assault and violence.[23]

As with many crimes, it's difficult to get accurate figures, since people rarely report domestic abuse, and may be reluctant to tell researchers about it (perhaps for fear of reprisals). Researchers debate the extent to which women are the overwhelming majority of victims and men the overwhelming majority of perpetrators. Some point out that where women commit acts of violence, it is often in self-defence against an abusive partner, and most agree that it's normally women, not men, who are subjected to the most serious and ongoing physical assaults.[24] In 2007/8, 35 per cent of UK female homicide victims were killed by a current or former partner, compared to 6 per cent of male victims.[25] A reliable estimate suggests that the ratio of male-perpetrated to female-perpetrated violence is around 4 to 1.[26]

Another type of violence predominantly affecting women is so-called 'honour' violence. The United Nations Population Fund estimates that worldwide around 5,000 women die annually in honour killings, while the media quote an estimate of ten to twelve per year in the UK.[27] Some believe the true number is higher, and others point out that the label 'honour killings' obscures the similarity between gender-based violence within a whole range of ethnic groups. As Humera Khan from the An-Nisa Society in London explains:

> Just because honour issues are not associated with white people does not mean that it does not happen. It happens, but not in the way that people talk about it when it happens in a Muslim or Asian context. … If an honour killing in these communities occurs it is usually referred to as a 'crime of passion'. But underneath this, the basic drivers such as pride and honour are still the same even if the motives are different.[28]

In honour-related violence, more than one perpetrator may be involved, including extended family members. For instance, for 'Sakina', a Pakistani woman interviewed in a British refuge:

> [My mother in-law] started hitting me and then pushed me down the stairs. I was semi-unconscious, but that didn't stop her with hitting me around the head with her shoes till I completely passed out. I can't remember the amount of times I have been abused; it was a daily thing with my husband, his mother and sister getting involved. Sometimes I had an iron thrown at me but not by my husband, he only used to punch and kick me.[29]

Forced marriage can be seen as a form of honour-based violence; families use physical or psychological coercion to make a young person agree to a marriage, sometimes to someone from the parents' country of origin. According to specialist South Asian women's project workers, women seeking help because of rape,

financial abuse or psychological abuse are often in forced marriages.[30] The UK's Forced Marriage Unit deals with approximately 1,600 cases each year;[31] this, women's groups say, is a fraction of the real total. Rahni Binjie, project manager from Roshni Asian Women's Aid in Nottingham, explains:

> There are periods towards the end of the education process when women are taken out of school. The girls just stop coming to classes and the schools don't seem interested in following it up.… We've had women who have disappeared from the education system – and who then disappear from the system as a whole. We don't know if they've been taken abroad or killed or anything – we've got no idea.[32]

If they have been in the UK less than two years, migrant women find it hard to leave abusive husbands because unless they can provide 'evidence' of abuse they have 'no recourse to public funds', making benefits and housing inaccessible.

Feminists are also concerned about early marriage because, generally speaking, at younger ages women are less able to assert their rights and needs (especially if their husbands are significantly older). In some countries, the difference between girls' and boys' experiences is significant, with girls being forced to marry at a younger age to older men. In Niger, 70 per cent of girls are married by the age of 19, compared to only 4 per cent of boys. In Honduras, the figure is 30 per cent of girls compared to 7 per cent of boys.[33]

Patriarchal attitudes and domestic violence

> 'I was sometimes justified in hitting [her]. I never hurt her badly physically – I never cut her or beat her senseless.… She'd always [argue] until there was really no alternative.'
>
> *Why did you hit her?*
>
> 'I was wanting to show her who was the boss.'

Is there something she could have done to stop you being abusive to her?

'Yes. Keep her mouth shut.'

Have you wanted to stop being violent to her?

'No. She's my wife.'[34]

As these excerpts demonstrate, sexist and patriarchal attitudes seem to be a major contributor to domestic violence. The victim's perceived infractions of her feminine role are used as justifications; violent men seek to regain control by subduing their partners.[35] Domestic abuse of women, whether physical, sexual, psychological or financial, is rarely a one-off incident but is often part of a pattern where one partner (usually male) tries to maintain power and control over the other (usually female, often his wife). Indeed, arguments over a woman's cooking, housework standards, money, sex, going out with friends and arguing back are regularly cited by offenders as provocations for their 'explosions of anger'.[36] Feminists commonly argue that domestic violence is prevalent where men believe they have a right to control 'their' women.[37] Researchers Rebecca and Russell Dobash say that 'the social positioning of marital partners supports men's control and domination of women through various means, including the use of force.'[38] Domestic abuse is therefore not just about an individual's anger problems or high standards in the kitchen but an issue of sexism, deeply rooted in the history and culture of many societies.

Just as domestic abusers justify their actions by evoking patriarchal notions of male ownership, perpetrators of honour violence rationalize it through the concept of honour. A family or community's honour is believed to reside in its women's adherence to patriarchal behavioural expectations. Women who defy their parents' authority (for instance by rejecting their parents'

choice of marriage partner), become too 'Westernized' or have sex outside marriage are perceived to have brought shame on the family. The dishonoured family may be socially ostracized, damaged economically (if their businesses are boycotted) or simply lose social status. In extreme cases, dishonour is 'dealt with' through violence.

Some societies are more patriarchal than others and in very specific ways, with patriarchy interacting with a country's economic, legal, religious and cultural conditions. In an analysis of honour-related violence in Pakistan, Tahira Khan argues that the capitalist system of private property is fundamental to women's oppression. She concludes with a statement applicable to a whole range of types of male-against-female violence worldwide:

> Honour-related violence is all about the inseparable deep connection between economic interests and sexual conduct of men and women. Honour-related violence is a story of male anxieties about keeping women within their defined spaces and marked boundaries and male worries about female transgression and defiance.[39]

Hence more shelters for women, or harsh prison sentences for abusers, are not sufficient to eliminate domestic violence; many argue that only a fundamental structural change to the economic world order, coupled with a demolition of the sexist attitudes that justify the violence, can make this happen.

But whilst sexism and patriarchy have major roles to play in violence towards women, this does not account for male victims of domestic violence or explain violence within same-sex relationships. Any partner violence is serious and specialist support services for all victims are necessary. But what must not happen is for increased awareness of male victims (who themselves suffer due to sexist assumptions that men cannot be victims) to lead to funding cuts for female survivors – in particular, for women

already disadvantaged by poverty or racism, who experience the most injurious and systematic abuses and are the most likely to be killed. Interventions must be targeted appropriately.

Everyday harassment

> Barely a day goes by when I am not harassed in the street. I probably first really noticed it when at fifteen, an older 'gentleman' started masturbating beside me on the bus.…
>
> I have been groped in broad daylight, I have been forced to get on buses that are going nowhere near my destination to get away from men forcing themselves on me at bus stops, I've been groped and grabbed at in clubs, I had to quit a bar job due to a regular thinking he was allowed to grab my arse. I've been flashed at outside my house. And I've had all the filthy comments, leers and jeers you could ever wish for. It never stops.…
>
> I try SO hard not to let it alter my behaviour, but sometimes it just gets too much.… I am so resentful of a society where one half of the population is so … arrogant, they can force their way into the consciousness of the other half without endorsement or invitation.[40]

Many women and girls are incredibly angry and frustrated about everyday harassment. A number of our survey respondents mentioned this, and the impassioned stories of street harassment contributed by hundreds of women to a post on *The F Word* demonstrates that this is an issue affecting many women and girls.

As Martha Langelan points out in *Back Off! How to Confront and Stop Sexual Harassment*, so-called 'low-level' public harassment can have a powerful cumulative effect on women, creating an undercurrent of fear.[41] Blogger Noble Savage explains how this affects her desire to go jogging in the evenings:

> In the summer, we fear wearing a dress or a top that is too revealing, even if the weather is unbearably hot, lest we are catcalled and

> groped by leering passers by whose aggressions seem to rise in conjunction with the temperature.
>
> In the winter, as the elements make car breakdowns and accidents more likely, we freeze in fear at the thought of accepting help from a stranger and would rather sit in our icy, broken cars while we wait hours for the orange flashing lights of the accredited and vetted roadside cavalry, doors locked and fingers on the panic button of our mobile phones.
>
> In the spring, as everyone comes pouring back onto sidewalk cafés and parks and out of the stupor of hibernation, smiles and comments about the lovely weather between strangers have to be monitored and reined in for fear that exchanging passing pleasantries will give a man the 'wrong impression' and invite him to pester us for a date or a number or a smile.…
>
> So I can't help but feel a bit like a caged hen… as I look out my window at the autumnal city streets and then forlornly at the running shoes gathering dust at the front door.
>
> Post-feminist world, indeed.[42]

Whether it's changing the route home to avoid quiet streets or harassment hotspots like building sites, calling home to 'check in' before walking the ten-minute journey home from the train station, sitting near the doors on buses, crossing the street to avoid a lone man, or clutching keys in your hand *just in case* someone attacks you… we've all been there. But as Langelan points out, the street is *public space*. It is our human right to walk around freely, without fear.

There's nothing wrong with giving women practical advice to keep them safe. But as with rape, feminists often feel that far too much attention is paid to putting the problem in women's hands, telling women to cope by restricting their freedoms. We need to work for a world where women are not harassed by men, or made to feel afraid, and where this behaviour is not accepted as normal. After all, as Langelan says:

> From men who do not harass women, we can also draw another important conclusion about the nature of sexual harassment. That so many men choose not to engage in harassment makes it clear that this behaviour is neither biologically determined nor inevitable.[43]

Violence against women in prostitution

The sex industry, of which prostitution forms a large part, has been one of the world's major growth industries in the late twentieth century. The growth and normalisation of pornography, military prostitution, and the ease and affordability of 'sex tourism' have made sex a significant part of the economy in countries including Thailand (14 per cent of GDP), Indonesia (2 per cent) and the Netherlands (5 per cent).[44]

Ask feminists what they think of prostitution and you'll encounter widely divergent views. Even the terminology is the subject of intense debate: are women in the sex industry 'sex workers' or 'prostituted women'? How can one generalize about such a diverse range of people anyway? But whatever their opinion, all are very concerned about violence against women who work in the sex industry. This was an issue mentioned by many feminists we surveyed (several of them sex workers or ex-prostituted women).

Sex workers suffer high rates of physical violence. It is estimated that street workers are sixty to a hundred times more likely to be murdered than women who are not prostitutes;[45] the 2006 murders of five street-working women in Ipswich are a reminder of this. Reactions to their murders ranged from shock to voyeuristic fascination – and the sort of chilling indifference voiced by journalist Richard Littlejohn:

> We do not share in the responsibility for either their grubby little existences or their murders. Society isn't to blame … in their

> chosen field of 'work', death by strangulation is an occupational hazard. That doesn't make it justifiable homicide, but in the scheme of things the deaths of these five women is no great loss.… Frankly, I'm tired of the lame excuses about how they all fell victim to ruthless pimps who plied them with drugs. These women were on the streets because they wanted to be.[46]

Interviews with 138 women in Managua, Nicaragua, revealed that 44 per cent had been physically assaulted by a client.[47] A study of England and Scotland found that two-thirds of 240 prostitutes had experienced client violence.[48] Few report these incidents to police; in fact, in many countries, sex workers suffer violence from the police. A study in Botswana, Namibia and South Africa found 'extensive evidence of police abuse towards sex workers, including sexual violence and beatings.'[49] Women talk of having to develop a sixth sense to protect themselves, but with many in the English and Scottish sample dependent on drugs (63 per cent of the street-working women, but only 1 per cent of indoor workers, cited this as their main reason for prostitution), this 'sixth sense' is perhaps less functional.[50] Transsexual and transgender sex workers are in greater danger. In Suzanne Jenkins' study of 483 escorts, nearly half of transsexual women reported feeling physically threatened as a result of their work, as opposed to a quarter of the non-transsexual women and 19 per cent of the men.[51]

Alongside violence, sex workers often suffer other health risks. The world of commercial sex is marked by inequalities.[52] Often those with the best pay and conditions are native-born women with legal residency, working with others in a safe building where they can choose their clients, with access to condoms and health-care services. The worst conditions are experienced by immigrants, women forced into prostitution, and trafficked women who cannot speak the language and don't trust the authorities, whose earnings

go mainly to their pimps or traffickers. In between those extremes women experience varying degrees of harm, sometimes including psychological distress, drug addiction, physical violence, difficulty in entering other employment and health risks (especially HIV/AIDS and hepatitis B and C).[53]

Even women working in superior conditions face risks absent from other avenues of work. Teela Sanders, an academic who advocates treating prostitution as a job rather than as exploitation, explains that it is a particularly hazardous occupation where client violence is an ever-present danger. Her book *Sex Work: A Risky Business* was based on interviews and participant observation in British massage parlours. She discusses the techniques women use to protect themselves, such as not answering the door to suspicious-looking men or large groups of young men.[54] Many prostituted women (trafficked or drug-addicted women) are less able to protect themselves from violence than Sanders's interviewees.

Emotional harm also constitutes a significant cost for many sex workers. On the basis of twenty years of interviews with prostituted women, Kathleen Barry explains that, to survive emotionally, women have to distance themselves from what they are doing, to disengage emotionally during the sex act, while simultaneously 'acting as if the experience is embodied', acting out the part of the happy and submissive sex worker that the client desires.[55]

It is important to recognise that there are a variety of reasons why women find themselves in prostitution. The deepening of global inequalities has increasingly made women in economically deprived or politically unstable regions turn – or be forced – into selling sex. Lack of educational qualifications, insecure family backgrounds (growing up in state care or having lost parents to AIDS, for instance), experiences of childhood sexual abuse,

homelessness, drug addiction, famine, natural disasters, ethnic conflict and civil war are other factors.[56]

However, there are sex workers who claim not only to participate by free choice, but to enjoy it. Kari Kesler, self-identified 'third-wave lesbian sex radical feminist', admits that her choice of sex work doesn't mean it's a perfect industry to work in – but neither is any job:

> The question I wrestle with is whether agency within prostitution is by definition still a form of oppression for women.… I strongly feel that this agency is not mere delusion. Like heterosexuality in general, prostitution represents a 'hard bargain', a process of negotiation, like courtship rituals and marriage, for access to the female body between two socially and economically unequal parties. The … patriarchal culture continues to produce this uneven playing field between men and women, but within that uneven field, women make affirmative and relatively liberatory choices.[57]

Advocates of sex work say that women choose it because it is a convenient and legitimate way to earn money. It's easy work to get, fits around other commitments (like study and childcare) and, if you operate independently, can provide more autonomy than working for a boss. In countries without a welfare state or other means of support, it can be a way out of poverty. Eva Rosen and Sudhir Venkatesh talked to sex workers in an inner-city area of Chicago, and concluded that sex work is 'a short-term solution that [in their term] "satisfices" the demands of persistent poverty and instability, and it provides a meaningful option in the quest for a job that provides autonomy and personal fulfillment'.[58] As writers like Belle de Jour reveal, it is possible for women at the top end to make quite large sums.[59] In contrast, at the bottom end of the market in the streets of France and Italy, prices have not changed in twenty years, and penetrative sex with a condom costs only twenty to thirty euros.[60]

Different socio-economic, political and national circumstances shape women's experiences of sex work and its relative desirability. Men don't 'need' to buy sex any more than women do – doing so is a cultural, not a biological, desire. There is evidence that demand can be reduced,[61] and in fact demand varies from country to country. In affluent post-industrial nations, only a minority of men (around 10–15 per cent) buy sex,[62] but in rapidly industrialising countries figures are far higher (in Thailand 80–87 per cent of men have paid for sex, with 10–40 per cent admitting to doing it in the past year[63]).

For prostitutes' clients, buying sex is part of their male gender role. The phenomenon of sex tourism (popular destinations are Eastern Europe, Thailand and the Dominican Republic) fuels and justifies male demand, since buying sex on holiday or a stag weekend is considered by many men as a leisure activity, perhaps akin to buying a beer. As researchers who interviewed men who buy sex in London found, buying sex reflects an underlying sense of male entitlement. For those men, paying for sex is framed as an acceptable part of being a man and justified as a consumer choice (it is, they explained, 'the world's oldest profession'[64]). The response from this man was, the researchers say, 'not uncommon':

> There's no questions asked, there's no crap, I could, go out with a girl, take her to a bar, spend a lot of money, but now I could just give her the £40 and you have a half hour with her, and you get anything you want! … you know, straight in and there's no questions asked and that's basically it … I've taken girls out, and ok, I take her for a meal, that cost me bloody £40 … you don't get bugger all after that.[65]

Prostitution, for most women, is at best a choice in confined circumstances. If better alternatives (state welfare, support by charities and alternative employment) were available, many would

not choose it. And for unwilling sex workers, prostitution *itself* is surely a form of violence.

Sex trafficking is an obvious example of forced prostitution. It involves recruiting by deception and then transporting women and children across national boundaries by force, then selling them for sex. Sometimes moved frequently within and across destination countries, women are controlled and made to have sex with (or endure rape by) many men for a pittance, since traffickers often demand that they work for years to 'repay' the cost of their transportation.

At the end of 2006, an estimated 1.2 million people worldwide were working as sex slaves, having been trafficked. Annually, an estimated 500,000 to 600,000 are trafficked for sexual exploitation across national borders, with more trafficked within their own countries.[66] Factors such as poverty, withdrawal of state welfare services (following the rapid transition from communism to capitalism in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, for example) or an unhappy family life make women vulnerable to exploitation and willing to take a chance when answering a (bogus) advertisement for a 'dancer' or 'waitress' overseas.

Some argue that trafficking figures are exaggerated, and most so-called 'victims' are in fact enterprising women choosing to travel abroad to find work. Laura Agustín believes that the 'rescue industry', which often forcibly returns women to the country they desired to leave, harms women more than it helps them, serving only to curtail immigration.[67] Research by Nick Mai into one hundred UK-based migrant sex workers suggested that the majority were not trafficked, but rather entered sex work mainly for economic reasons, and knew that this was what they were coming to the UK to do.[68]

However, whatever the prevalence of sex trafficking is, victims undoubtedly suffer greatly. Within a sample of 287 girls and

women trafficked from Nepal to India from 1997 to 2005 and later repatriated, 38 per cent tested positive for HIV, with 61 per cent of those trafficked below the age of 15 infected.[69] And of 207 women released from trafficking situations in Europe, over half showed symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder and twelve or more physical health symptoms (such as fatigue, stomach pain or dizzy spells) within the first two weeks of their release (these figures declined to 6 per cent for both when they had received care for at least three months).[70]

Challenging violence: the feminist response

Sometimes it seems that day after day the news headlines report women being murdered or raped; indeed, the United Nations' Trust Fund to End Violence Against Women has described this as a global emergency. It's easy to listen to all of this and feel helpless, but the good news is that feminists are resisting.

Organising public awareness campaigns

It's midday on a normal Tuesday at Mitre Square in London. Whilst city workers eat their lunches in the sunshine, a group of strangers slowly approach a bench and flowerbed. Seemingly unconnected, each lays down a token – ribbons, candles, flowers, poems. After observing a minute's silence, they walk away, leaving an explanatory note behind them for the curious onlookers. This is a feminist flashmob organized by London's Female Art Collective to pay respect to women who have been victims of violence and demand that it stops. According to the press release,

> The action will be recorded and shown as part of a mix-media art piece which addresses issues to do with violence against

> women. These include the lack of respect with which the victims and these events are treated, the glamorization of violence by the media, and the invisibility and the denial of the fear and the taboo.[71]

As with many of the issues in this book, it's not just laws that we need to change but attitudes. Feminists are trying to raise awareness of violence against women among the general public through actions like this, and then to change attitudes.

In 2003, a California-based collective called the South Asian Sisters produced *Yoni Ki Baat* ('Vagina Monologues' in Hindi), a play inspired by Eve Ensler's very successful *The Vagina Monologues*. The play showcased a collection of submissions from Desi women throughout the country, exploring South Asian women's unique experiences of violence, sexuality and love for their vaginas. It has been performed at several colleges and community spaces and grows in popularity each year.

In several countries, feminists have organised 'Hollaback' projects, where harassed women snap photos of their harassers and upload them on a website along with an account of what happened. In the UK, Anti-Street Harassment documented hundreds of women's experiences of street harassment. This became a powerful testament of women's anger and frustration, a twenty-first-century example of the 1970s' feminist concepts of consciousness-raising and 'the personal is political'. The organizers also ran training sessions and workshops.

In India, the Blank Noise project aimed to challenge street harassment, known there as 'eve teasing', through art projects (such as showing the clothing women were wearing when they were targeted, with the words 'I Never Ask For It'), awareness-raising, and direct action. One project challenged women to walk 'unapologetically', refusing to do any of the things that women do to avoid being a target. Organiser Jasmeen comments:

> Our street actions over the last few years have been based on emphasizing small simple scenarios – which can be challenging even though they appear 'normal' and everyday. For instance – should it be hard to just 'stand' on the street as an 'idle' woman? Would you 'dare' try it?[72]

In the UK, a campaign called The Truth Isn't Sexy worked over three years to raise men's awareness of sex trafficking by distributing 200,000 beer mats and 10,000 posters in pubs, clubs and student bars nationwide. They gained media coverage of the issue and spoke at smaller-scale events.

Similar campaigns have been run to change attitudes about rape. In the UK Truth About Rape published and distributed postcards with the aim of countering widely held victim-blaming beliefs and inaccurate information about the conviction rate and the extent of false accusations.

Feminists whose priority is to support and improve conditions for sex workers have organised a variety of public awareness projects. These have included the New York-based magazine *$pread*, launched in 2004 to 'illuminate the sex industry', 'build community' and 'destigmatize sex work by providing a forum for the diverse voice of individuals working in the sex industry'.[73] Projects also include writings by sex workers and their allies[74] and collaborative websites such as 'Sex Work Awareness' and 'Sex Work 101'. A key priority has been destigmatising sex work. In Canada, sex-worker project Stella provides advice on how to respond to a sex worker's request for help:

- Be careful about overgeneralizations and avoid merging this woman with the stereotypes surrounding her.
- Adopt an open-minded attitude. Watch, listen and ask questions to understand her world of references and her experiences.
- Validate and focus on her needs and expectations: reassure her and consider her, above all, a person like any other.[75]

Fund-raising and lobbying for specialist services and specialist crime teams

Adequate provision and care for victims of violence are crucial; this includes funding for Rape Crisis Centres and helplines, which are frequently under threat. Specialist care is required for groups with particular needs, such as sex workers, some minority ethnic women, disabled women, lesbians and transgender people. UK examples include Imkaan, Southall Black Sisters and Broken Rainbow (for LGBT people).

A misapplication of equal opportunities legislation has resulted in some local councils requesting that services expand their remit to include *all* victims, not just specific sectors of the community, or lose funding. However, specialist services are vital. It would be unacceptable to expect male rape victims to use a service aimed at and staffed by women, just as it would be unacceptable to expect a South Asian woman threatened with honour violence, or a lesbian asylum-seeker abused by her partner, to use a generic service that may not be able to help with the complexities of her specific situation.

In some cases, feminists have taken it upon themselves to fill gaps in specialist services. The anti-capitalist group Feminist Fightback organised a 'Sex Worker Open University' event in London in 2009, providing workshops and training. In Guatemala, which in 2005 had the second-highest illiteracy rate in Latin America and an estimated 17,000 women in (legal) prostitution, sex workers formed a football team, which raised awareness about discrimination they suffer and funds to help them exit prostitution.[76]

The UK Network of Sex Work Projects (UKNSWP) has produced a *Good Practice* booklet on exiting the sex industry, which explains the issues and considerations involved in exit programmes.[77] In London, Trust and the Poppy Project specialise

in helping vulnerable women escape prostitution; the latter provides specialist help for trafficking victims. Globally, the Global Alliance Against Trafficking in Women and the Coalition Against Trafficking of Women work to counter trafficking into sex work.

Finally, feminists are arguing for more specialist approaches by the justice system and police to handle crimes like rape – specialist rape prosecutors, for instance. For example, the Metropolitan Police's Project Sapphire has specially trained officers to deal with rape investigations. Nevertheless, a recent review of 677 allegations reported to the Metropolitan Police found only a 5.3 per cent conviction rate, indicating that there remains significant work to do.[78]

Organising for improved legislation and international cooperation

Each government needs an adequate legal framework for violence against women and a national plan against which progress will be measured, to ensure it is implemented effectively. The United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women held expert groups on good practice in legislation on violence against women (2008) and good practices in legislation to address harmful practices against women (2009). One recommendation from these groups was for thorough and accurate statistical data (such as records of rape conviction rates). 'There remains', they state, 'an urgent need to strengthen the knowledge base on all forms of violence against women to inform legal development.'[79] The European Policy Action Centre on Violence Against Women, a division of the European Women's Lobby, advocates using a common framework across countries to monitor progress in combating violence against women. In the UK, feminists will be keeping a close eye on the government's 2009 Strategy on Ending Violence Against Women and Girls to ensure delivery of its promises.

When it comes to prostitution, the feminist community is deeply divided on what the legal approach should be. One group of feminists, the advocates of regulation and legalisation, consider the selling and buying of sex to be neutral acts that men and women should be free to engage in, for a fair market price and in safe, non-coercive and de-stigmatised conditions. Where it is not free and fair, steps need to be taken to make it so, such as legalising it and providing safe zones for it to take place and contraceptive and other health-care services. They argue that the Swedish model advocated by abolitionists – in which men are prosecuted for buying sex and women are offered help in exiting the industry – forces prostitution underground, making it riskier for women. For example, Laura GW, 24, believes that

> The criminalisation of prostitution and other forms of sex work leaves women and men who work in this trade unprotected by law and stripped of their human rights. This leaves them susceptible to violence and sexual abuse, with nowhere to turn because in the eyes of society they are criminals … decriminalisation of sex work would also make it easier for safer sex regulations to be put in place and adhered to, as well as allowing prostitutes to work for a set rate to prevent them being exploited. Although many sex workers are forced to work as prostitutes, there are those who choose sex work as a profession. If we remove the stigma associated with sex work through legislation that legitimizes it, it will encourage openness and thoughtful debate rather than treating it as taboo.

For another group, the abolitionists, prostitution is a fundamental part of women's oppression by men; while a minority of sex workers are independent and successful, prostitution is almost always exploitative for women, almost never the result of free choice. Legalising prostitution is not, they believe, the right solution, since wherever it has been legalised (e.g. in the Netherlands, Germany or Australia) prostitution has increased

and the illegal sector has flourished, allowing the sufferings of the majority of sex workers (who work illegally) to continue. Furthermore, legalisation stimulates demand, making buying sex an acceptable part of what it is to be a man and encouraging traffickers to continue exploiting young women.[80] UK campaigns such as 'Demand Change!' achieved legal changes in 2009 to criminalise buying sex from a person who has been exploited. Abolitionists argue that if prostitution was curtailed, the money that customers pay sex workers and their pimps and controllers would be spent elsewhere, creating alternative employment for women who would otherwise have worked in the sex industry. Many of these feminists believe that buying sex can never be ethical. The Coalition Against Trafficking of Women argues for

> decriminalisation of women in prostitution; criminalisation of those who buy women and children, and pimps, procurers and traffickers; rejection of State policies and practices that channel women into conditions of sexual exploitation; and education and employment opportunities that enhance women's worth and status, thereby diminishing the necessity for the women to turn to prostitution.[81]

Organising prevention and education programmes

Researchers suggest tackling demand for commercial sex by exploring, in schools and media campaigns, some of the ambivalences expressed by male buyers, for example about the impact of buying sex on their long-term relationships. They also suggest, based on the case of one London borough, that markets might shrink if local newspapers, where most clients discover brothel locations, ceased accepting advertisements for commercial sex.[82]

White Ribbon Campaign, a worldwide campaign that began in 1991 in Canada, is a male-run group that encourages men and boys to wear a white ribbon symbolising their commitment to resisting and challenging violence against women.

In Ethiopia, girls' clubs have been set up to educate girls about the importance of education and the harmful effects of early marriage. Girls in trouble frequently report plans of an early marriage to friends or the head of the club or women's association. Also in Ethiopia, local organisations form 'early marriage cancellation committees' involving people from all sectors of society. When the committee is informed of an early marriage arrangement, they alert law enforcement or assist with legal representation.[83]

Conclusion

In this chapter we have seen how violence affects women. But, as the chapter has suggested, global poverty and economic inequality can put women at greater risk of violence. Poverty can contribute to war, putting women at risk of rape or death; poverty can restrict women's ability to escape domestic violence or leave prostitution. So, it's understandable that many feminists concentrate on wider economic issues, criticising capitalism, or calling for an expanded welfare safety net for women. As the next chapter investigates, equality at work and in the home is therefore a major focus of feminist organising.

Take action!

1. Support violence prevention campaigns such as White Ribbon; organise a speaker or session at your school, university or organisation. Ensure that the seminar addresses men as well as women.
2. Support your local Rape Crisis Centre, refuge or specialist service. Donate, fund-raise or volunteer.
3. Challenge messages you hear that imply that violence against sex workers is acceptable, inevitable or less important than other kinds of violence.
4. Give constructive feedback on government and police campaigns on violence. Respond to consultations, and keep a close watch on government strategies on violence.
5. Challenge myths about rape or prostitution: put up posters, write to newspapers, distribute postcards or start an Internet awareness campaign.