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Men and rape

Book review

Vogelman, L (1990) **The sexual face of violence: Rapists on rape.** Johannesburg: Ravan Press.

Ann Levett
Child Guidance Clinic
University of Cape Town
Cape Town

Lloyd Vogelman provides the local reader with an overview of mainstream approaches to rape (feminist, psychological, sociological) in an inexpensive, 214 page paperback. In eight chapters, he examines interactions between social structures and processes and conventional ideas about gendered behaviour (sex roles is the term Vogelman uses). These structures and ideas, which he discusses as rape promoting factors, maintain and perpetuate the subordination of women to men. He briefly addresses links between economic exploitation, racial oppression, social violence and masculinity, in South Africa. Using material from interviews (of 29 Johannesburg men, in three groups comprising rapists, violent and non-violent men) and surveying the literature on rape, he exposes and explodes many common myths about rape (e.g. that perpetrators are usually strangers; that rape occurs in public places; that only women who deserve it or are looking for it are raped). Obtaining his sample from court records (acquitted rapists or those who had served a sentence), and by word of mouth, he did a semi-structured interview with each of these men. Vogelman reveals that these men often planned the sexual assaults, are quite self-congratulatory about their deeds, show little or no concern about the women involved (whom they often blame or hold equally responsible) and do not expect to be charged or convicted for criminal

behaviour. Several interviewees had devised cunning strategies to ensure that, if reported, no charges would be laid or upheld in a court: in other words, they understood the ways in which the law protects rapists. Vogelman's findings are not different from those reported for research on rapists in other parts of the world: on the whole these men had the usual range of excuses and justifications for their behaviour. But this is useful to know in itself, and since no other research concerning rapists has been reported in South Africa, Vogelman's local research on working class men is both important and timely, particularly as it is presented in a broadly feminist perspective on male violence. While this is a significant contribution, I do have some reservations about this study, however, and will argue these below.

An examination of the literature which has emanated from progressive left and liberal academics in South Africa over the past ten years, reveals a growing number of feminist papers and books. These deal with the patchwork of forms that the exploitation and oppression of women take in the patriarchal social formations of Southern Africa (Bozzoli, 1983). Some of the best-known researchers in this field presented the range of issues and debates concerning women's subordination at the Conference on Women and Gender in Southern Africa held in Durban early this year (e.g. Bozzoli, 1991; Bradford, 1991; Cock, 1991; Posel, 1991; among others). Furthermore, a recent general introduction to social psychology in South Africa (Foster and Louw-Potgieter, 1991) also discusses feminist issues.

Before premature rejoicing, however, the picture demands more attentive examination - after all, many feminist issues appeared on the political agenda of Eastern bloc countries 80 years ago, and have been articulated vociferously in western Europe and North America for many decades. Yet not much has changed for women structurally in those social contexts. Depending on historical circumstances and the social context, it has been possible for some women to resist patriarchal power, bucking certain aspects of the social constraints on women, while still bowing to male authority in a range of other contexts (Posel, 1991). Similarly, some men are critical of patriarchy but still maintain their privileged positions. This is especially true in the arena of what Kate Millett called sexual politics in 1970. For example, some women resist marriage, preferring the freedom of single parenting or not having children, but are constrained in most societies by their lack of access to help with childcare, or to abortion as a backup form of reproductive control. And, more significantly for this

review, male violence against women has not declined in the USA, nor have the legal processes instituted against rapists become more successful in spite of feminist challenges. (The reader is referred to Meintjes (1991) for a further discussion of this point).

In South Africa, women have been discussing sexual violence for at least 20 years; these discussions have spread from middle class circles into far wider circles of women (Russell, 1991). But male violence against women has not been addressed in any tangible way in terms of changes in men's attitudes, in legal processes or the successful prosecution of rapists or in the form of significant lobbying. On the whole, the majority of those occupying positions of power in South Africa today are still male in every political grouping. It is said that there are difficulties finding women prepared to enter the sphere of public politics - this dominantly masculine, vociferously competitive, arena. Part of the reason for this lies in sexual politics: the microsocial events of everyday interactions between men and women where male authority is so very difficult to dislodge. Largely related to the expectations and preferences of men, most women in South Africa would still rather see themselves mainly as wives and mothers, providing support and ensuring domestic comfort for men and children. Women struggle to maintain themselves, their children and grandchildren, often unassisted materially let alone emotionally by the men in their lives, bowed under the yoke of the double shift. Women do not appear to expect to be able to (allowed to?) contribute much change to the political arena, to make demands centred on the lives of women, let alone demand changes in an arena of private life such as sexual relating. The dominant agendas of 1991 as reflected in the media today centre on concern about violence but these do not relate centrally to sexual violence and to the fact that it is specifically **men** playing out the power struggles of patriarchy in the violent behaviours of vigilantes, comrades, gangs, etc.

While the issue of male subordination of women lies somewhere on the South African political agenda of the 1990s, it is lost in the fine-print (the parts which often change and disappear). Gender violence has received no attention on the formal platforms of 1991. Whether the political conscientisation which has been taking place among South African women since 1970 is going to make a difference to the future remains to be seen. The point here is that effective change demands that **men recognize the role they play in the subordination and exploitation of women and take more responsibility for their behaviour.** Also, **women need to be unconcerned about men's reactions to their demands for change in men's**

attitudes and behaviour.

Issues of reproductive responsibility, childcare, the care of the elderly, domestic violence as well as sexual violence, all of which which play significant roles in the continuing male domination of women, must be addressed. Changes in the structure of "the new South Africa" will not mean much for women unless these issues are vigorously confronted. The degree to which concerns of women are addressed at all, and the levels at which changes are implemented, will have a direct bearing on the daily lives of women, i.e. over half the population, and will be a benchmark in gauging the success of the South African revolution.

Women's issues can be taken up as tokens in token policy changes and legislation, or they can be addressed at a more sweeping and profound level which make demands on us all. This would require something from everyone - to review our ideas and attitudes, our use of language, and every aspect of everyday and conventional social practice (including our research methods), to sharpen our consciousness of the subtle ideological pressures within our own minds, and to put our hearts into new committments. These committments have to do with human rights and should include a healthy suspicion of power and violence and any form of collusion with them when they are closely associated with any group. The recognition and tolerance of difference cannot be used to justify subordination and exploitation. Any idea presented where group membership is used to provide justification for the exploitation and abuse of anyone, men or women, must be challenged (e.g. when exploitative behaviour is justified as "natural", or "traditional", or "caused by" apartheid or poverty).

What needs to be highlighted is the extent to which the range of male violence and male coercion of women is common in all socioeconomic strata and groups. This kind of comment, though present, is undermined in Vogelman's book by subtexts of which I think he is unaware. While his study raises feminist issues clearly and bravely, this hidden factor serves to maintain two illusions: one which separates the men he studied from other men in South Africa (which serves ultimately to preserve the status quo), and another which actually supports the agenda of male domination, through male bonding.

Many view rape and sexual abuse as a phenomenon of individual pathology unrelated to societal factors such as male domination and

unquestioned adult power over children and need to be exposed to a socially contextualised viewpoint. However, sexual violence concerns the relationships of **all** men to **all** women; although not all men are rapists, all women fear rape and every woman is a potential victim of male violence. The fear of rape is a very good example of male control of all women, as Vogelman makes clear.

He describes and analyses attitudes towards and ideas about women, rape and sexual relating held among "coloured" men from the working class area known as Riverlea in Johannesburg. He attempts to provide a depth of understanding of sexual violence from the perspective of the rapist within the South African context. This he does in a way which the intelligent reader is expected to extrapolate to the wider range of male behaviour towards women. However, Vogelman does not spell this link out in a way which will make it so real that the readers will pause to consider their own behaviour and experience. This is a facet of the subtext which undermines the value of the book.

Vogelman writes from the explicit viewpoint that rape is a socially produced phenomenon related to the unchallenged domination of women by men. To contextualise the discussion, he draws on the wellknown ideas of writers such as Susan Brownmiller (1975) and Diana Russell (1975). While there has been a tremendous amount of research in this area of gender-based violence in the last 10 years, much of it applicable to the South African context, this work has changed subtly. Initiated by feminist outrage in the late 1960s in the USA, more recent research has not been explicitly feminist, although still informed by the broadly psychosocial perspective shared by Vogelman. Feminist frameworks have been coopted and do not challenge the reader in the way the earlier work did; in fact the "feminist perspective" is now part of most everyday discourse about sexual violence, and is used by many researchers with little or no understanding of the fundamental challenges of feminist thought to everyday social life. Almost all research in this area published since 1980 falls into a view which factors issues such as masculine socialization, power and sexual politics into the broader explanation. However, the radical feminism which triggered the initial research on rape has become diluted in most current research into milder accounts of sex role socialization - socially learned behaviours added onto an unquestioned, fundamentally biological, view which assumes a "natural" basis to male aggression and predation, along with the notion that the learning process has gone awry for some men. The central point, that gendered subjectivity is woven

within the fabric of the individual's social context, and shapes behaviour in myriads of ways, is lost. In Vogelman's account, the "deviant development" of male violence is implicitly attributed to racism and capitalism and the effects of these socio-political structures on certain men. The reality of the continued existence of rape and sexual assault, along with male domination of women, in socialist and other societies is not confronted.

On page 14 Vogelman comments that when some of the "control" groups of men (not known to be rapists, but selected as comparison groups, some of whom had committed other crimes of violence and some of whom had not) told him they had raped women, he felt shocked. Vogelman's surprise is inconsistent with the feminist framework he has used and with his discussions in Chapters 2, 3 and 4, where he is explicit about the links between conventional male sexual attitudes and practices and rape. Why be surprised about behaviour which is consistent with being a man in contemporary South Africa? If he had taken a different slant in his interviews, and had carefully explored the definitions of rape used by these men, it would really have been surprising if (in the broadest sense of the term) there had been any nonrapists in the sample.

In another review of this book, Sterling (1990) raised questions about Vogelman's apparent collusion with the men he interviewed. She points out that he records how many of these men enjoyed the interview and felt good afterward, and suggests that this was a dubious consequence of the research. Sterling does not mention the male bonding processes crucial to patriarchy and sexual violence. It is obvious that the rapist interviewees derived psychological support (and implicitly understood approval through tolerance) for their behaviour through Vogelman's research. Of course I am not suggesting that Vogelman was aware of this, and it is this kind of issue which makes research so very difficult in sensitive areas: male researchers are probably needed to get such any empirical data together. At the same time, one wonders how the material would have differed had it been collected by a woman researcher. In some senses the male bonding process shaped the interview, the language used, the sequences of questions asked and how the information was explored further. I do not mean that I think the accounts given were fictional (perceived demand effects) but rather that the detail or emphasis (and the subtext) may have differed. The production of a narrative about a social event is an interactive social process in itself - the account is produced by both interviewer and interviewee in the social space understood to exist between them (including social attributes such as gender). Vogelman, as a

man, entered a particular worldview presented by the self-confessed rapists and other men. He is troubled about the women who were assaulted and about using the language used by these men which objectifes and diminishes the human rights of women (page 19), but he was unable to resist falling into the shared discourse of male power, and tells us he did so deliberately, to develop trust. The effects of reading some of the excerpts of the interviews are rather similar to reading pornography and the events seem singularly unidimensional. If we had access to the women's accounts of these same rape situations, and to interview material collected by a woman researcher, to compare with the men's accounts, we would have had a more comprehensive picture, but also a more paradoxical one exposing some of the women's resistance or insubordination to these situations.

For girls and women, symbolic rape and sexual assault are part of everyday life, as is subordination to male authority and exploitation in a range of contexts. Although honest and well intentioned, Vogelman's book cannot be divorced from this wider social context as reflected in the subtexts. While dressed in the garb of feminist and psychosocial argument, the book presents rape from the perspective of the rapist, and sets out to do so. Of course this is useful but what bothers me is that part of what we cannot help being prey to, in Vogelman's book, is an unsettlingly male voyeuristic experience. Although on one level he analyses and explains the violence and is clearly critical of the rapists' behaviour, simultaneously, on another level, sections of the book function paradoxically as a subtle celebration of male bonding, and successful male domination. Women come away from this book feeling chilled, fearful, despondent and in the grip of patriarchal power (victims only) rather than being facilitated into active resistence. Such conflicts of interest between conventional methodology and political aims dog most current research on gender violence. Ignoring the consequences of the presentation of such knowledge in this way undermines its value.

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