

Sheltering women

Book review

Jung Park, Y, Fedler, J & Dangor, Z (eds) (2000) **Reclaiming women's spaces: New perspectives on violence against women and sheltering in South Africa**. Johannesburg: NISAA Institute for Women's Development. ISBN 0-620-25733-4.

*Lora Lempert and Tammy Shefer**
Women and Gender Studies
University of the Western Cape
Bellville

** Author to whom correspondence should be directed.*

Reclaiming women's spaces (2000) provides recent theoretical and applied work about the range and depth of violence against women in South Africa. Serving as an invaluable resource text for a wide audience - including legislators, scholars, lecturers, NGOs, international and local researchers, theorists and practitioners - the book provides a comprehensive current and historical account of legal, political, organisational and practice-based developments in the field of violence against women.

The text is divided into two sections which could both stand on their own and which may, indeed, attract different readerships: Part One is a broad overview of the history and contemporary context of violence against women - in its broadest definition, including physical, emotional, sexual and economic abuse, and it provides the contextual frame for a discourse of battering, rape and sexual abuse/harassment across the spheres of home, work and public realms. Part One provides an excellent overview, both international and local, of the social, political, and economic contexts of violence against women, including theoretical understandings (available to lay persons), and developments and shifts in legal, political, and social/community responses to the problem. Part Two has as its theme a narrower focus on the strategy of providing shelters for women survivors of male violence. This section articulates the argument of shelters as centres of activism and "sheltering" as expressions of women's empowerment and healing, while at the same time questioning the appropriateness of shelters in the South African context. Part Two provides an extremely informative and comparative analysis of international and local developments in this respect, and raises the key debates within this particular strategy for addressing violence against women.

As an edited volume, the book aims: to document the South African history and experiences of violence against women and of shelters, to document the stories and voices of women who have experienced violence, and to offer analyses of the issues

from a South African perspective. To accomplish these aims the chapter narratives are interspersed with quotations/stories from women. Additionally, original writings of the women victims/survivors are printed as part of the text. Unfortunately, and clearly contrary to the aims of the authors, the differing, and "less professional" font utilised calls attention to these pieces as "less than" rather than "equal to", which is an outcome that should have been avoided in the attempts to deconstruct the traditional power relationship between "expert" author and "women survivor". Nonetheless, other creative features of the text include the addition in some chapters of helpful glossaries of terms, especially for those historically mystified sectors (such as the realm of the law); a few interactive exercises at the end of chapters (more would have been welcomed); the generous illustrations of pointed political cartoons, primarily from the **Sowetan**; and the use of highlighted boxes that serve as illustrative "asides" supporting or detailing the primary arguments. Particularly remarkable in each of the chapters of the book are their integration and conceptualization of the problems. And each is ready with responses to the question of: "But what can I (as a provider, or a legislator, or a surgeon, or a citizen, or ...) do?" Each chapter ends with actions that would contribute to the elimination of violence against women. Best among these is Chapter Six, *Advocacy in the violence against women sector* (Fedler and the Gender Advocacy Project), which includes appendices on questions to guide legal advocacy strategies, key steps (tactics and problems) in strategic advocacy, and questions to guide strategic thinking.

Chapter One (Fedler and Tanzer) examines the universality of violence against women through a review of the international documents and forums that have provided action agendas for the elimination of violence against women. Through the lens of these international instruments, the authors link gender violence to gender equity and to human rights entitlements. They note, "where gender roles are under threat, violence against women is rife." As in other chapters, Fedler and Tanzer offer three steps for government in eradicating violence against women: public denunciation of customs and traditions supporting gender violence, allocating sufficient resources to projects attempting to address gender violence, and forming alliances and partnerships with NGOs to focus energy and resources in creating a just and equitable society.

Chapters Two and Three (Vetten) provide an even-handed, thorough discussion of the historical ("militarism and conflict of the apartheid era have left indelible marks on the country's psyche") and contemporary (post 1994 - "South Africa is slowly becoming literate in the vocabulary of gender violence") struggles to end violence against women, as well as the state and civil society responses to those initiatives. Focus is on the social psychological concept of gender identity and on the intersections of race with gender as these intersections influence both perpetration of and responses to violence against women in South Africa.

Chapters Four (Fedler, Motara, and Webster) and Five (Fedler with the Gender Advocacy Project) extend Vetten's analysis to the legal system and to NGO advocacy in South Africa. Chapter Four critically assesses the extent to which law, in essence "still male", can provide an effective remedy to violence that is situated in cultural, social, economic, and interpersonal levels of male privilege and entitlement. "Sometimes, changes in attitudes precede changes in law; sometimes, progressive laws mark the beginning of attitudinal shifts." Chapter Six (Tiefenthaler and Farmer), the final chapter

in the first section, provides a useful overview of economic issues pertaining to domestic violence in particular which is a helpful resource for those involved in lobbying.

Part Two takes off with Chapter 7 (Jung Park, Shaik and Rasool) which is a thorough overview of the international and historical perspective on sheltering, and which raises some of the debates about shelters. The chapter presents case studies from a range of countries, highlighting different trends in the sector. All are presented in an accessible tabular format. This chapter provides a good entry into Chapter 8 (Jung Park, Peters and De Sá) which is an analysis of the current context of shelters for abused women in South Africa. In this chapter the authors make a valuable comparative audit of all current operational shelters in South Africa, illustrated by a table which highlights some of the key characteristics of South African shelters. Particularly useful is the map which illustrates the location of shelters and which speaks boldly of the usual rural-urban divide and the advantaged versus disadvantaged regions in the country. Chapter 9 focuses more specifically on the role that shelters can play in terms of therapeutic intervention for residents. Particularly important for counsellors, this chapter provides a model and critical reflection on intervention strategies for survivors. Chapters 10 (Jung Park and Khan) and 11 (Gaitskell and Jung Park with Joseph) also contain two very specific and much-needed foci, respectively, on the children of abused women, and on the shelter workers themselves. The former focus is an oft-neglected one in the broader work on violence against women, particularly in the South African context. This chapter provides a valuable resource on the impact of such violence on the children as well as what their specific needs, emotional and material, may be once they enter the shelters. The final chapter will hopefully not be neglected as it raises some important issues in the area of provider care. Too often the impact of the challenging and emotionally draining work of supporting and caring for others is forgotten, especially for women who are, in the traditional scheme of things, not skilled in self-care.

In overviewing the book as a product for public consumption, the title is perhaps somewhat unfortunate. **Reclaiming women's spaces** may, like many valuable texts of this nature, speak only to the "choir" of already interested parties. Furthermore, in the South African context where "feminism" remains a questionable term, still largely conflated with notions of white, western, middle class women, the title may even alienate some – in spite of the text's clear positioning within critical, locally orientated feminist perspectives. Also, the title arguably does not reflect the complexity of content and may be easily dismissed (seen as important but "not something I need to read because I already know this stuff") by those working in service delivery. Not true – on the contrary the book brings together a wide range of information and debates that are key to the work of those in the sector, who frequently do not have the time to easily access such literature on their own. One of our concerns about Part Two is what is still left unresolved in the text – the strategic issue of the appropriateness of shelters for the South African context. A big worry here is that, faced with extraordinarily high levels of violence against women (rape, incest, abuse, and so on), feminists and providers may have absorbed "whole cloth" the models of their Western sisters – models which may have provided temporary relief to women in need, but which have not eliminated violence against women or the structures of male privilege and entitlement that undergird it.

Overall, this is a highly accessible, readable book that is reflective of the authors' own enmeshment within the sector and dedication to challenging violence against women in South Africa. This book should be required reading for anyone in direct service provision to girls/women who have been victims of intimate, interpersonal violence; for members of the legal system commissioned to protect; for medical providers rendering assistance for physical and emotional trauma; for researchers concerned with developing adequate explanations and appropriate intervention strategies; for students of violence seeking to understand causes and conditions; but most importantly, for legislators and heads of government agencies committed to enacting the goal of a non-sexist, non-racist society. While the compilation in total provides narratives that weave the complexities of intimate, interpersonal violence against women into frameworks for understanding and action, for those with limited time each of the single chapters can stand alone. Each chapter engages the cultural, social, economic, interpersonal, and physical levels of both male entitlement to and female consequences of violence against women so effectively that each can be read as a whole unto itself.