

# Blaming and Reclaiming Culture

## The role of culture in responding to domestic and family violence

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On the 15th of October 2007, the Immigrant Women's Domestic Violence Service, DVIRC, Elizabeth Hoffman House, and the Islamic Women's Welfare Council, with support from the City of Melbourne, held a national seminar on Blaming and Reclaiming Culture: The role of culture in responding to domestic and family violence.

Speakers included Joumanah El Matrah, of the Islamic Women's Welfare Council; Rose Solomon from Elizabeth Hoffman House; DVIRC's Libby Eltringham; Danny Blay, from No To Violence; Diana Orlando, of the Immigrant Women's Domestic Violence Service, Robyn Miller from the Department of Human Services, facilitator Maria Dimopoulos from Myriad Consultants and as keynote speaker, Professor Leti Volpp, international expert on feminism, multiculturalism and the law.

Drawing on her extensive experience, Leti Volpp discussed the myriad ways in which culture is seen as the cause of violence against women, not just in social attitudes, but within the legal system. While many have advocated against cultural defence, saying it is irrelevant and should be banned from the courtroom, Professor Volpp says it's more complicated than that, and needs further consideration. Recognising culture levels the playing field for minority groups, and the beliefs and values of the defendant often are significant. She described cases where women were the defendants and culture was relevant and intrinsic to their defence.

However, she raised several difficulties inherent with this practice. Should we use cultural stereotypes in order to help individual women, this could work against women in future – sometimes because they don't fit that stereotype, and are therefore punished more harshly. As she highlighted, some races of women are expected to be tougher and are therefore not helped, while others are more readily seen as victims.

How do we, Leti asked, as workers in the sector, use culture when it is relevant, for example in relation to gender based asylum? Are we then using racism to combat sexism, by saying a particular culture is bad and we need to help women escape the sexism of their country? This has led to the claim by some, that minority cultures are purely patriarchal, and should become extinct. But culture can be an extremely positive thing, and many do not want to be 'liberated' from their culture. It is important to remember that culture is not simply a matter of unchanging rituals, subordinating women across time.

The difficulty facing us, as Professor Volpp outlined, is how to appropriately talk about domestic violence in relation to culture. One argument is that DV is DV no matter what, and that responses and issues, for example safety and privacy, are applicable to all irrespective of culture as she outlined however, there are numerous cultural-specific issues for survivors of domestic violence. Victims may be fearful of police corruption, may have been threatened with deportation, might not know about child support, shelters, or any other assistance and many services are unable to accommodate for languages other than English.

Professor Volpp also exposed the stereotyping involved in blaming culture for bad behaviour, including family violence. In white culture (which is usually invisible as is whiteness itself), bad acts are seen as bad individuals' behaviour, whereas in minority cultures, bad acts are seen as

reflective of a bad culture. To illustrate this point she gave several examples, such as the research into mothers who killed. She noted that while first world women are killed by DV, third world women suffer death by culture. She drew an analogy between dowry murders in India, and domestic violence homicides in the US, stating “they burn their women, but we shoot ours”.

Joumanah El Matrah outlined some of the problems associated with a cultural analysis being applied to family violence. Primarily, she noted that taking culture into consideration often means assuming a certain knowledge of a culture – even a better knowledge than those within it.

While this happens amongst workers in all sectors, she cited a particular case where the presiding judge read the Koran and determined that a Muslim woman could not be granted an early divorce due to violence, as the Koran said that violence was permissible and to be expected, and so the wife should have known and accepted it.

Joumanah also pointed out that the concept of culture is used to group people – often incorrectly. She questioned who it is that defines a particular culture, and its members, and whether these delineations can be assumed to be correct.

Even when an opinion is sought from a representative of a culture, the responses given will not necessarily reflect those of everyone affected by such a definition. As Joumanah highlighted, it is men – and specifically conservative, patriarchal, religious men at that – who are consulted on cultural issues, not women such as herself. This propensity is even more evident in the legal arena, where various interpretations of Islam may well be relevant to proceedings, but it is consistently religious males who are perceived to be the experts and the representatives, often to the detriment of women.

Robyn Miller addressed the issues of culture as they pertain to children affected by family violence. She highlighted the

importance of seeking advice and working in partnerships, particularly with cultural consultants. As she explained, being culturally sensitive means recognising what we don’t know, and seeking to find out. Workers cannot be expected to fully understand all cultures and thus need to be curious and humble – acknowledging they don’t know and need help or advice from cultural consultants.

Robyn stressed that it is better to use a translator or therapist who speaks in the victim’s mother tongue, even if they are fluent in English. She noted that culture was highly relevant when selecting carers for children, using the example of Indigenous children being placed with white families, who might well be appropriate carers in other regards, but cannot provide for the child’s culture.

Robyn pointed out that the issues of violence and abuse are cross-cultural. In families where there is partner violence, the likelihood of child abuse also occurring is thirteen times higher. We must not accept culture as an excuse in any instance.

Whilst acknowledging that there is more to culture than language, Danny Blay noted that there are currently no language specific men’s behaviour change programs. He raised several points to consider, when questioning whether or not programs need to incorporate culture, or just be available in other languages – including that class, geography, culture etc is considered for every man in behaviour change programs irrespective of background; that ALL cultures and religions are used as an excuse for DV; but rates of violence from men in other cultures are no different to rates for white, western men. Men from CALD communities however, are less likely to access services.

Danny discussed family violence as being largely about male dominance and control, and the ways this is misinterpreted as culture. He used the example of child brides in Afghanistan – generally excused as a cultural practice, rather than being acknowledged as men’s ownership of

women. Danny also questioned who is the keeper of culture – who made the rules, and who enforces them? He summed it up by stating that men’s experience, background or culture is never an excuse for violence, and no culture has any right to take priority over women’s safety.

Rose Solomon, from Elizabeth Hoffman House, outlined some of the culture-specific issues of family violence for Indigenous women in Victoria, such as transgenerational violence which often sees grandmothers, mothers and daughters concurrently affected. She outlined issues for workers to consider such as women not seeking help from services, because their relatives might also be there, or may actually work there.

Rose noted that Victoria has one of the lowest Indigenous populations in the country, but the highest (reported) rates of family violence. She concurred with other speakers that we need to understand the impact of culture, without using it as an excuse and minimising its effects. She stated that the underlying issues are the same, for example power and control, and therefore responses need to be same.

Libby Eltringham broached the topic of violence against women in mainstream culture, noting the tendency to believe that violence is more common in other cultures - despite displays of women’s degradation on mainstream popular culture television shows. This stereotype is nowhere more obvious than in media depictions, where perpetrators from within Australia’s mainstream culture are referred to in terms such as ‘respected businessman’ or ‘former police officer’, with news reports focused on their jobs, the women’s affairs, provocation and so forth, perpetuating common myths about men driven to violence, unable to help themselves. Women are blamed, with no gender or power analysis considered. Culture is simply invisible.

Whereas men from ‘other’ cultures who kill their wives or abuse their children are reported first and foremost in relation to their race or religion. To illustrate her

point, Libby discussed the recent case of Qian Xun Xue, whose father abandoned her at a railway station, after murdering her mother. Media reports centred on the man’s Asian appearance, and then his background as a Chinese Thai Chi Master.

As Libby surmised, these experiences of violence and oppression are at once unique and the same. Cultural issues do make them unique, but violence issues, such as power, are the same. The impact of violence for these women and children was certainly the same irrespective of their race or culture, or that of their partner or father.

Diana Orlando discussed the difficulty of wanting to be culturally sensitive, but not to step back from addressing violence issues. She observed that all interactions are cross-cultural - just because people may have the same background doesn’t necessarily mean they have an understanding of particular individuals or of certain situations. Diana also mentioned the problem of people trying to be culturally sensitive or empathic to refugee men, and therefore overlooking their violence. Obviously they still need to be held accountable, regardless of their circumstances. What we need, Diana proposed, is an opportunity to critically reflect on womanhood and masculinity, on violence and on violence prevention.

The speakers’ presentations and audience questions throughout the day raised numerous topics and concerns, giving us all much to consider when dealing with cultural issues. Significantly, as facilitator Maria Dimopoulos reminded us to bear in mind: culture is not frozen. And nor is its relation to family violence. As Professor Leti Volpp so aptly juxtaposed: Domestic Violence is not a part of anyone’s culture/ Domestic Violence is a part of every culture.

