



GENDERED DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND ABUSE IN POPULAR CULTURE

Edited by

**Shulamit Ramon, Michele Lloyd
and Bridget Penhale**

EMERALD STUDIES IN POPULAR CULTURE AND GENDER

Gendered Domestic Violence and Abuse in Popular Culture

Emerald Studies in Popular Culture and Gender

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Representations of gender are inherent in popular culture. This new book series explores many different strands of contemporary 'culture', encompassing, cinema, television, graphic novels, fashion studies, reality TV – all within a critical framework of class, ethnicities, gender identities and embodiment.

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Gendered Domestic Violence and Abuse in Popular Culture

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Prologue

Gendered Domestic Violence and Abuse, Popular Culture and the Digital Revolution

Michele Lloyd

Introduction

Domestic violence and abuse (DVA) is among the most significant public health concerns, and efforts to increase awareness have not translated into less violence. The influential role of popular culture and the media in informing and reflecting public opinion on issues such as DVA emphasises the importance of examining the potential messages conveyed to consumers. The digital revolution and the rise of social media are influencing everyday life, and in the current climate of increased screen time, analysing popular culture appears more relevant than ever. With DVA showing no signs of abating, how it is portrayed in popular culture has implications for how we understand and tackle this enduring problem. Examining DVA in popular culture enables us to explore how it is ascribed meaning in different media and how such representations might be reinforcing or challenging myths surrounding DVA.

DVA can happen to anyone and occurs across all ethnicities, social classes, sexualities, ages, (dis)abilities, communities and urban and rural geographies. It affects people of all backgrounds though not to the same extent as poverty is a social marker in relation to the distribution of risk (Ray, 2011). While both men and women can be victims, statistics consistently show women experience it in more severe and repeated forms (Women's Aid, 2014). Identifying the causes of DVA is key to preventing it from happening. Popular cultural framing significantly influences where causal responsibility for DVA is positioned on the 'individualistic-societal continuum' (cf. Iyengar, 1990, p. 25). While some see DVA as resulting from individual pathology, others see it as the consequence of structural inequality embedded within wider society and affecting individual agency. It is the latter of these two explanatory positions that reflects the approach of this book. As explored in this collection, our concern is that framing DVA through an individualistic lens has the effect of downplaying the need for societal responses and for attitudinal and social change.

Added to these considerations is the dimension of gender. We use the term gendered DVA in this book in recognition of women being considerably more

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likely than men to experience DVA and in recognition of violence against women and girls being rooted in power imbalances and inequality between men and women. The male-dominant gender order has been identified as both a cause and consequence of violence against women and domestic violence. In relation to the gendered nature of DVA [Harne and Radford \(2008, p. 7\)](#) explain that ‘...traditional power relations of male-dominant societies not only make the choice to use violence more available to men than women, but also facilitate their ability to use a range of controlling strategies rarely available to women’. Taking the example of economic abuse, the gender pay gap and pension pay gap in the United Kingdom mean that men have more means at their disposal for financially controlling their partners ([Harne & Radford, 2008](#)). In countries where girls’ and women’s access to education is limited and their resultant employment opportunities restricted, they may have less means for independence and may be more vulnerable to abusive and controlling relationships. This is not to imply that educated women are immune to abuse since DVA cuts across all backgrounds. The role of gender in DVA must be acknowledged given that, across cultures, it is primarily men who perpetrate it and women who experience it. Using the term gendered DVA is not to suggest that only women are adversely affected. We recognise the negative impacts of DVA on everyone, including male victims, perpetrators, children, other family members and not only on female victims.

At the same time as recognising the gendered nature of DVA, contributors to this volume also take account of intersecting inequalities such as race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, age and (dis)ability, which apply to both women and men. Attributes of this kind intersect in ways that shape individual and collective identities, and [Crenshaw’s \(1991\)](#) concept of intersectionality provides a safeguard against reductionism when referring to women’s experiences of DVA. [Collins and Bilge \(2016, p. 49\)](#) also caution against conceptualising women, or men, as one homogeneous group and advocate an intersectional approach to tackling gender violence: ‘Solutions to violence against women remain unlikely if violence against women is imagined through singular lenses of gender, race, or class’. Whilst the analytical framework of this collection is premised on gendered DVA, this is by no means the same as adopting a gender-only lens, as the varied chapters herein testify. Women’s and men’s experiences of DVA vary according to their characteristics and intersectional vulnerabilities, and nonintersectional thinking belies the complexity of DVA. In sum, DVA is a complex issue with complex causes, consequences and solutions, as examined in this collection.

Media in Popular Culture

Popular culture is influenced by a country’s social mores and the media, in its varying and diverse forms, plays a role in shaping as well as reflecting social mores and values. Part of the function of the media is to communicate information to audiences, and in conjunction with this function the media is, to varying degrees, reflective of public opinion. The meanings attached to subjects like DVA will be informed by, and formative of, media representations.

The digital revolution has brought great diversification of communication means and information sources. A plethora of fast-paced news, information and entertainment is available to the digitally connected consumer. Increasing numbers of people are able to publish online and the ease of production signifies competition to more established media brands. However, the veracity of information cannot always be tested and has led to concerns regarding the spread of fake news and misinformation from which profits are readily made (D'Ancona, 2017).

There is now greater interplay between analogue and digital media forms in both the way they are produced and consumed. While the term 'mass media' has been used to convey the notion of a large, simultaneous audience, the growth of digitised media and information sources has resulted in the concept of 'mass media' becoming less tenable (Jewkes, 2015). It is now common to hear a range of terms such as mainstream/traditional media, digital journalism and social media, although these cannot be conceptualised as separate entities since mainstream media, generally newspapers, television and radio, engage in digital news practice and use social media platforms to convey their 'mainstream' content.

Media brands have different social standings and reputations in society, accordingly performing different functions and meeting different needs related to the attitudes, beliefs and cultural tastes of consumers. Characteristics such as media organisations' values, ideology, proprietorial control, editorial independence, working practices and output material will differ as will their target audiences. Newspapers in the United Kingdom, for example, comprise both the quality and popular press across the 'serious-sensationalist continuum' (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000, p. 102). This continuum intersects with newspapers of left and right political persuasions along with centre ground titles.

An organisation regarded by some to be of notable pedigree is the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) – a public service broadcaster funded by a licence fee. Since it was founded in 1922, the BBC's mission has been to 'inform, educate and entertain' (BBC, 2019, p. 8). Despite its longstanding strapline, the BBC's output has raised questions as to whether it is moving more towards entertaining the public through sensationalising some of its news content (see Lloyd's chapter in this volume). Although it is incumbent on the BBC to provide impartial output, it has been variously accused of both left- and right-wing bias (Edwards & Cromwell, 2009), and this has been increasing in recent years following the United Kingdom's referendum result in 2016 to leave the European Union which had a divisive effect on the country. Other media companies will have their own aims and vision with some more inclined towards entertaining than informing the public, though there is at times a hybridisation of material in the format of 'infotainment'.

A central tenet often associated with functioning democracies is media freedom. In conjunction with the principle of media freedom, based on the human right of free speech, the laws of defamation, obscenity and fair trial must be observed together with ethical considerations of 'do no harm' (Frost, 2019). The content of what is published or broadcast will also be influenced by audience sensitivities and tolerance levels: 'If people find what is being published unacceptable, they'll stop reading or watching the publication reducing its impact and

obliging it to reconsider its publication choices' (Frost, 2019, p. 13). The advent of digital media and proliferation of news outlets mean consumers are able to vote with their feet more than ever before, as well as have more outlets via which to express their views.

With the expansion of networked communication and new entrants into media markets, the media landscape has changed permanently. The development of digital and social media challenges old media behemoths. Digital connectivity has been influential in disrupting established media hierarchies and enabling communication from previously unheard voices: '...social media communication has given rise to a new dynamic of communication that breaks away from the traditional linear flow of content from certain (privileged) producers to (ordinary, powerless) consumers, as well as changing the distribution processes that were at the core of assumptions about power in the mass media' (Khosravini & Unger, 2016, p. 206). The reach of social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram is vast, and users are able to reach out to their own networks and beyond. The digital revolution enables audiences to engage in dialogue regarding output from media organisations with ease. People can participate in online discourse and publicly criticise instances of racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination they identify in the media and popular culture.

In relation to the issue of DVA, both positive and negative representations are evident within popular culture. In the United Kingdom, there have been a number of media productions favourable towards victims of DVA in the varying media formats of documentaries, dramas and soap operas on television and radio which, based on audience feedback, have helped raise awareness and understanding of DVA. Of particular note is the award-winning television drama based on true events titled '*Murdered by My Boyfriend*' first shown on the BBC in 2014.

Alongside examples of constructive and sensitive media handling of abuse, there are examples of less favourable representations where cultural and sexist stereotyping is reproduced. It is not uncommon for women to appear as targets of abuse, in song, film, television and through to video games such as *Grand Theft Auto 5*, one of the best-selling entertainment products, where gamers are rewarded for mugging or killing women. Our previous research into UK newspaper representations of intimate partner domestic violence found evidence of women victims being divided into deserving and undeserving categories by social class and respectability (Lloyd & Ramon, 2017). There were examples in our research and in other studies of media coverage of DVA functioning to individualise and privatise what are also social and political problems. A number of chapters in this collection examine how the media often contrive to apportion blame on the recipients of abuse.

Legislative Context

DVA takes many forms including psychological, emotional, physical, sexual and financial or material. Violence in the domestic sphere can comprise 'honour-based' violence, female genital mutilation and forced marriage. DVA is rarely an

isolated or one-off incident, although it can be. More usually, it is a pattern of abusive behaviour taking place over an extended period of time. In fact, DVA has the highest rate of repeat victimisation of all crime and around half of cases involve direct child abuse (Women's Aid, 2014). Women in the United Kingdom experience abuse an average of 35 times before contacting the police (Kennedy, 2005) indicative of the difficulties in disclosing abuse often connected to feelings of guilt, shame and stigma. The framing of DVA as an individual problem also means that a perception of nothing being possible to remedy the situation is much more likely. DVA victimisation is gendered; females were the victims in 75 percent of the domestic abuse-related crimes recorded by the police in England and Wales in the year ending March 2019 and were 74 percent of domestic homicide victims in the two years ending in March 2018 (Office for National Statistics, 2019). There is growing awareness that domestic abuse is not just about physical violence and assault. In 2015, controlling or coercive behaviour in an intimate or family relationship became an offence in England and Wales (Home Office, 2015).

Controlling and coercive behaviour can entail subjecting victims to isolation, continual monitoring, verbal abuse, reputational damage, restricted or no employment and financial dependency. It can also take the form of psychological manipulation known as 'gaslighting' (so called after a 1938 stage play 'Gaslight' in which a husband turns down the gas lights at home, and when his wife asks if the lights have been dimmed, he replies it is in her head and that she is going insane). Such manipulation has various consequences including victims not recognising they are being abused, isolated or monitored or being led to believe the abuse is their own fault or is normal behaviour.

During the consultation period for the offence of controlling or coercive behaviour some opposition was expressed. The *Daily Telegraph*, a national daily newspaper in the United Kingdom with right-of-centre political views, expressed its reservations on its front page referring to the proposals as '...a significant incursion by the State into what have previously been regarded as private affairs' (Daily Telegraph, 2014, p. 1). The lexical choice of 'incursion' appears to depict such legislation as an intrusion into private family matters. However, rather than interfering or undermining private matters, the offence of controlling or coercive behaviour aims to protect victims subjected to abuse including threats of violence.

In the United Kingdom, at the time of writing, the landmark Domestic Abuse Bill for England and Wales is making its passage through parliament. The draft legislation proposes to introduce the first statutory definition of domestic abuse which will include nonphysical and economic abuse. As well as other measures, perpetrators of domestic abuse will no longer be able to cross-examine victims in family courts. In addition, several countries have signed the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, known as the Istanbul Convention (Council of Europe, 2011). The Convention has not been signed yet by Azerbaijan or Russia, while a number of countries have signed but not ratified it yet, among them the United Kingdom (as of April 2020). The aim of the Convention is to promote international cooperation and ultimately to eliminate violence against women and domestic violence.

As this book was nearing completion early in 2020, the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic was spreading across countries and increased the likelihood of different forms of DVA. Many people were facing lockdown and required to stay at home, only leaving for limited reasons such as shopping, medical needs and work purposes. The lockdown meant that victims behind closed doors were at heightened risk of domestic abuse. Abusers often isolate their victims, and there were concerns that lockdown measures were being used opportunistically to cut off victims from family, friends and additional sources of support. It is also possible the worldwide economic contraction resulting from COVID-19 will exacerbate the risk of economic abuse and coerced debt. Organisations have reported an increase in the number of recorded cases of DVA in more than one country. Media reports soon detailed the rise in DVA around the world due to lockdowns, echoing patterns of increased abuse during previous crises such as Ebola. As the COVID-19 emergency unfolded, the social dimensions of the crisis became increasingly apparent exposing the vulnerability of hidden victims and highlighting the need for continued, coordinated action and sufficiently resourced services to tackle DVA.

Activism and Backlash

Amid current international attention on sexual harassment, abuse and exploitation, this is a particularly timely collection. The issue of abuse has come increasingly to prominence with the global #MeToo movement which has revealed the prevalence of gender-based harassment, assault and violence. The movement has helped uncover male-dominated power structures that facilitate the perpetuation of male violence against women and other forms of gender-based abuse. The Me Too movement is helping survivors disclose their experiences of abuse and unburden themselves of internalised shame and guilt carried around with them for years. Other movements such as #WhyIStayed and #TimesUp have also been raising awareness of issues concerning domestic violence and sexual harassment, respectively. Campaigning on criminal cases has included high-profile and well-publicised ones involving Harvey Weinstein and Jeffrey Epstein. Movements such as Me Too are helping to reset cultural attitudes towards gender-based harassment and abuse.

There are, however, signs of a backlash amongst those who believe men are being disadvantaged by efforts to bring about greater gender equality. Progress made in relation to areas such as women's education, employment, reproductive rights and participation in public life has been perceived as paradoxically contributing to harassment and abuse against them. Since DVA is about power and control, if men feel they are losing male privileges and ceding power to women, some may wish to reassert their control through the use of violence and abuse. Akin to attacks on feminism more generally, there have been efforts to misrepresent the Me Too movement and cast it as a witch hunt or as antimen. Antifeminist sentiments are frequently expressed on social media. Trolling on the Internet has emerged as well as 'genderolling' which aims to harass and threaten vocal women into silence (Seymour, 2019). Some trolls are emboldened by anonymity: 'For those on social media, anonymity dramatically reduces accountability' (D'Ancona, 2017, p. 52).

Seymour (2019) notes that trolls are predominantly white men who attack mainly, but not exclusively, women, black people, queer and transgender people and the poor. Again, this appears indicative of the way some trolls fear losing power and control and react against it.

It is important to acknowledge that the backlash against feminism is not the preserve of men as some women have also raised objections to social movements they see as harming relations between men and women. As with many social and political issues, discourse on feminism is an area some in the media like to present in exaggerated, polarised ways – puritanical feminists pitted against bewildered men uncertain of what constitutes acceptable behaviour. Such media distortions impede efforts to campaign for equality and address power imbalances between men and women.

Journeying in Reverse

In view of the extensive international focus on violence against women and girls, this collection is an appropriate book for our times. Despite cross-border appetite for change, there are indications that violence and abuse are not always met with appropriate responses from welfare services and criminal justice systems. The UK implementation of some of its legislation on gender-based violence has been poor. Very few prosecutions and convictions for female genital mutilation have occurred despite it being illegal in the UK since 1985. Several domestic homicide reviews have highlighted failings by the police and partner agencies in cases of domestic abuse and stalking. Similarly, with regard to child abuse and child deaths, serious case reviews have found weaknesses in multiagency working including lack of information sharing. DVA committed all too often by family members, especially parents, occurs globally and public scandals around child abuse and grooming have taken place in many countries (see chapters by Marshall and Goddard and Gill and Day in this volume). In relation to the problem of elder abuse and neglect, there is increasing recognition but continued underreporting and lack of responsive action worldwide (see Penhale's chapter in this volume).

Cultural conceptions of DVA as 'not serious' or 'nobody else's business' or even 'not my/our problem to deal with' are likely to affect the enactment and tolerance of abuse and determine responses from external services such as the police. Some view behaviour in the home as not the responsibility of the state. In addition, in some quarters, there has been a reaffirmation of women's place being in the home. During the COVID-19 lockdown measures, some in the UK media reported the stories of professional women being back in the home, who told of how they were enjoying having the time for cooking, cleaning and parenting, which seemed to be a positive experience for them, yet it is the tone and message of the coverage that is a concern since it reheats gendered stereotypes of what constitutes the paragon woman and strategies for achieving her. There are also signs of a resurgence in traditional attitudes towards male power and entitlement. If male abusers are sanctioned by patriarchal norms which uphold the expectation

and acceptance of male power over females, the implications for tackling DVA will be far-reaching.

With reference to the United States and Russia, it would seem just such a journeying in reverse has been occurring regarding their respective positions on DVA. The Trump administration in the United States has narrowed the definition of DVA so that it constitutes only physical harm; psychological harm, financial abuse and coercive control are no longer covered by the definition, in direct contrast to the aforementioned draft legislation for England and Wales, which will include nonphysical and economic abuse in the first statutory definition of domestic abuse. These definitional changes in the United States signal a return to patriarchal attitudes and jeopardise feminist gains since the 1970s. The United States has also had some notorious cases of men accused of killing their wives being found not guilty. Contemporary parallels can be drawn from the highly visible case of Nicole Brown Simpson, once married to O. J. Simpson, who did not always receive an effective response when reporting domestic violence to the police on many occasions before she and her partner Ronald Goldman were killed in 1994. In addition, women's rights campaigners have expressed concern about the restrictions on reproductive rights enacted in the United States since Trump became President.

There have also been changes in Russia regarding the strengthening of traditional values in relation to the family and male power within it. In 2017, certain forms of DVA were decriminalised in Russia for first-time offenders and are classified as administrative, rather than criminal, offences. Statistics indicate that such decriminalisation has resulted in a dramatic decrease in the number of cases being reported and to even greater underreporting of DVA in Russia ([European Court of Human Rights, 2019](#)).

A hardening of attitudes towards gender and equality issues is also becoming apparent elsewhere. [Grzebalska and Pető \(2018\)](#) discern that Poland and Hungary are undergoing an *illiberal* transformation entailing, amongst other elements, antigender policies which serve to undermine equality and human rights. In 2019, LGBT people in Poland were the target of homophobic remarks from government officials, and it is not uncommon for nongovernmental organisations working in the field of equality and human rights to be denied public funding ([Human Rights Watch, 2020](#)). In Hungary, the government has been tightening its control over academic freedom and announced a ban on gender studies in universities in 2018. In addition, media pluralism is diminishing in Hungary with more organisations communicating a progovernment stance, and the country has no reliable statistics on DVA ([Human Rights Watch, 2020](#)).

Another worrying pattern found across many countries concerns those found guilty of DVA receiving lenient sentences and victims being held responsible for their own abuse. In recent years, activists and victims in Russia have been using the media and social media to raise awareness of DVA and lenient punishments. A key case in point was that of Margarita Gracheva whose husband, Dmitri, cut off both her hands with an axe in 2017. Surgeons managed to sew her left hand back on and she has a prosthetic right hand. Her lawyers informed her that she needed to go on national television to generate pressure from public opinion