Across the public/private boundary: contextualising domestic violence in South Africa

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abstract

In this article we plan to challenge two aspects of the public/private dichotomy based on its relevance in the South African context. Firstly, we question the assumption that women's experiences of violence are private and thus a secret, and secondly we assert that the notion of the 'public' includes social discourses on domestic violence that have not been adequately acknowledged and addressed. These discourses are powerful in determining women's decisions to act (or not) after experiencing domestic violence, and hence are potentially harmful to women. We conclude that the way the theoretical notion of the public vs private is understood fundamentally shapes intellectual and service responses. The result is that service providers, when working with survivors of abuse, are still operating from the base of inappropriate imported theories that neglect to explain domestic violence in convincing, local ways, which means that opportunities for assistance to women and men are lost.

keywords

public/private dichotomy, domestic violence, social discourses

Gender-based violence in South Africa affects all communities and takes many different forms. This ranges from violence that occurs at the level of intimate relationships such as domestic violence, intimate femicide and pervasive levels of coercive sex, to violence that occurs at various levels of the public sphere such as jackrolling, trafficking of women and 'witch' burning (Vogelman and Eagle, 1991; Bollen et al, 1999; Jewkes et al, 1999; Boonzaier and de la Rey, 2003). In such an environment, it is deeply unsatisfactory when theories on violence against women leave many issues central to the phenomenon only partially or superficially explained. In 'developing' contexts this problem is acute since theories used are often those imported from the North.

Criticism of the relevance of some domestic violence theories stemming from the first world for women in South Africa and other parts of the developing world is not new. Calls for indigenously developed, locally rooted research and theory in the field emanate from many quarters in South Africa (see Budlender and Bennett, 2004; Serumaga, 2005; Bennett, 2005). Some concerns expressed by authors include the conceptualisation of violence against women theories which include wholesale importation of 'northern' theories (Serumaga, 2005), difficulties in re-conceptualising and re-theorising in a post-apartheid environment (Serumaga, 2005), and narrowly defined fields of interest which neglect to theorise gender and violence, despite their relevance (Bennett, 2005). Other authors argue that there are problems with using domestic violence theories in policy and service provision because they tend to ignore local contexts (Budlender and Bennett, 2004). Finally, because historically the sector grew up as a response to a social
problem rather than being driven by a strong women’s movement, it is more practical and technical than ideological and theoretical. Whilst there has been a proliferation of research in this area and some theorisation, the micro-impact of these processes has often not been made explicit.

This article hopes to open up for discussion one area of unsatisfactory conceptualisation that reveals the potential impact of inadequate theory on violence against women responses. We will focus on the problems that emerge from the use of the well-theorised dichotomy of the public vs private spheres in terms of its local relevance and applicability to domestic violence situations in South Africa. Specifically, this article debunks the myth that domestic violence primarily occurs in the privacy of the home and that abuse is rarely witnessed. Moreover, this article suggests that a robust social discourse on domestic violence exists that is strongly patriarchal and potentially harmful to women because it deters survivors’ help-seeking. It is argued here that the way the theoretical notion of the public vs private spheres is understood fundamentally shapes intellectual and service responses. The result is that service providers, when working with survivors of abuse, are still operating from the base of inappropriate imported theories. By neglecting to explain domestic violence in convincing, local ways can mean that opportunities for assistance to women and men are lost. To support these arguments, data is drawn from focus groups conducted with women research fieldworkers.

**Theoretical framework**

One of the most important successes of the early liberal feminist movement was in revealing what went on behind closed doors. They politicised the use of the public/private dichotomy by showing how patriarchy is served by confining women to the private sphere, restricting their representation in the public realm, and obscuring the resulting oppression of women by the claim that the two spheres are of ‘equal importance’ (Moller Okin, 1991; MacKinnon, 1989; Evans, 1997). Radical feminists rejected the idea that women fit ‘naturally’ into the domestic sphere, and illuminated the insidious sexual division of labour that takes place in the private sphere, putting women at a disadvantage in terms of their labour responsibilities. They claimed that the public/private distinction:

... treats the private sphere as a sphere of personal freedom. For men, it is. For women, the private is the distinctive sphere of intimate violation and abuse, neither free nor particularly personal. Men’s realm of private freedom is women’s realm of collective subordination.

(Mackinnon, 1989:168)

Herein lies the origin of the powerful statement posited by radical feminists: ‘the personal is the political’. In other words, feminists have shown how the personal (that is, private) lives of individuals are intimately influenced and structured by public life, especially in terms of social policy and formal politics. The public/private split was a particularly powerful theoretical tool in exposing the hitherto under-described problem of domestic violence.

However, feminists from the developing world have objected to the usage of the public/private dichotomy as a feminist analytical tool. They have opposed the use of the split on the basis that it is not always applicable to their lives and lifestyles, and in particular, is often unable to incorporate contextual and historical social relations other than gender (such as race, class, ethnicity, sexuality) that mark particular societies (Reverby and Helly, 1992).

Although acknowledging its powerful historical usefulness, the use of the simple and commonly accepted theoretical split between the public and private is critiqued here by showing how, in the case of domestic violence, it does not serve the reality of South African
women's lives very well. This argument rests on the supposition that overt, openly acknowledged practices and conversations are not the only functioning social discourses and that, in fact, the discourses with the most power are often the ones that function at a level that seems hidden. Our critique of the theory of public vs private draws from the assumption that the discourse around domestic violence is less 'a discourse... than a multiplicity of discourses produced by a whole series of mechanisms operating in different institutions' (Foucault, 1998:33), all of which operate with various levels of power and influence.

Moreover, these different, often competing discourses on domestic violence also insert themselves strongly in theoretical development. In an in-depth literature analysis, O’Neill (1998) demonstrates this point effectively with respect to the relationship between theory and practice. Drawing on a rich tradition of discourse theory and analysis, O’Neill (1998) illustrates the power of discursive practices in the field of domestic violence by plainly foregrounding the link between how we think about phenomena and how we act on what we ‘know’. In other words, the way we understand violence against women in the home informs not just an overt theoretical perspective, but also how we talk about, respond to, allocate resources for and offer services for survivors and perpetrators of that violence.

**Methodology**

In 1999 and 2000 the first author of this article was involved in a national survey conducted by the Institute for Security Studies with 1 000 survivors of domestic violence. While the survey provided rich numerical data, unexpected findings emerged that could not be adequately explained. As a result, nine focus groups were conducted countrywide in order to obtain contextually rich information that could both explain the findings of the study as well as provide insight into the social discourses around abuse.

The focus group participants were locally-based research interviewers, all of whom were women counsellors working in NGOs and government. Survey interviewers were decided
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Focus groups provided an opportunity to draw on the knowledge and expertise of the interviewers in their capacity as service providers and community members. In this way, the socio-economic, cultural and historical contexts of women’s lives in these communities were highlighted.

It is the data from these focus groups that is drawn upon in this article as evidence to support our argument.

Public and private

How private is ‘private’?

It has often been argued that ‘gender violence has remained imperceptible... because its commission occurs within the private sphere of the home to which women are relegated’ (Fedler and Tanzer, 2000: 22). As discussed, the early feminist movement was very successful in politicising what went on behind closed doors, that is, in what they described as the private sphere. In South Africa, however, domestic violence in many instances is not a secret because the occurrence of abuse is not happening behind closed doors. Often those in the survivor’s immediate environment are aware of the violence, even if they do not actually witness it. Moreover, there are often people who directly observe abuse that occurs in intimate relationships. This claim can be substantiated in three ways.

Firstly, the notion of closed doors in South Africa doesn’t exist in the same way for many communities as it does in the ‘developed’ world due to the particular socio-economic circumstances of the majority of the population. For many poor families in South Africa, a number of people sleep under the same roof that either has no doors or is literally just one room due to dire economic straits and chronic housing shortages in this country (Meth, 2003), particularly in urban informal settlements. As one focus group respondent said:

...children were often in the same room, a result of the small size of most African households.
(Rustenburg focus group, North West Province)

Even in communities that are not desperately poor, families do not necessarily live in nuclear units. Parents, siblings and other extended family members live in the same house, as seen in a diverse range of South African communities (such as some ‘Indian’ and Afrikaans communities). Hence, if a person is being beaten or abused sexually or verbally, others living in the home are often aware of it.

Secondly, often shacks or houses are so close to each other or so poorly built, that neighbours are aware of the intimate dealings of families living next door, and thus are cognisant of domestic violence when it occurs, as the following interviewer states:

My neighbour beats his wife but I don’t call the police.
(Bloemfontein focus group, Free State)

Friends are also frequently aware that domestic violence exists in a household. Artz’s (1999) study in rural Southern Cape confirms that sometimes even the extended family that does not live there, as well as friends and neighbours, are also aware that domestic violence is occurring.

Thirdly, whilst the home environment is a common location for abuse, there is a large percentage of violence against women in South Africa that happens in public spaces (such as shopping areas or markets, bars or taverns, on the street, and so on) where there are often witnesses (Rasool et al, 2002). Even in the home, there are frequently other people present when abuse occurs. Rasool et al (2002:38) state, ‘As with emotional abuse, survivors of physical abuse were most likely to have experienced...
violence in the company of others.’ In the Rasool et al study, when survivors were asked if they were alone or in company at the time of the most serious incident of physical abuse, 60.4% in rural areas, 58.9% in urban areas and 63% of survivors in metropolitan areas indicated that they and their abusers were not alone during the incident.

In many cases, the witnesses are children and family members such as parents, in-laws and siblings, especially when abuse occurs at home. However, acquaintances, neighbours, colleagues and extended family were also common witnesses to abuse, particularly when women are beaten in the streets and public places (Rasool et al, 2002).

Hence, domestic violence is very often not a secret, since one or many people may know that it is occurring or may even have witnessed it. Family and community boundaries are far more permeable and fluid because in South Africa, for many women, the doors really are not ‘closed’. The occurrence of abuse in public places, the presence of others at the time of abuse, and the knowledge of abuse occurring by one or more people has not been satisfactorily accounted for in domestic violence theory.

How public is ‘public’?

The assertion that the ‘public’ can be understood as including the political sphere, social policy and the wider socio-cultural environment is unlikely to be controversial. However, not every response to domestic violence takes into account all these realms of ‘public’. We are concerned that discourses around domestic violence, which operate most strongly in the socio-cultural sphere, have not been adequately challenged. We contend, then, that when considering responses, ‘public’ is being understood primarily at the level of politics and social policy.

Although domestic violence has only recently entered the political domain (Fedler and Tanzer, 2000; Boonzaier and de la Rey, 2003), it is now firmly embedded in our social policies, such as the landmark Domestic Violence Act of 1998. However, this Act only meaningfully covers one aspect of the ‘public’ when it comes to responses and responsibilities: state institutions. This is inadequate in the case of domestic violence because social discourses that support the continuation of violence against women are persistent and enduring across communities.

Foucault’s (1998) theories alert us to the diverse functioning of discourses where public discourse that is overt and open often masks an unacknowledged but very vigorous conversation on the same topic that is just as, or even more, socially pervasive. Far from domestic violence being only a private matter, or a matter only for formal policy, and just as Foucault (1998:35) so famously claims about sex in the Victorian age, society ‘dedicate[s] themselves to speaking of it ad infinitum, while exploiting it as the secret’.

These discourses tend to privatise domestic violence, obstruct violence from becoming the business of the state and reinforce a patriarchal status quo, all of which can be deeply harmful to women.

In order to illustrate how an issue that has public consequences is continually privatised, and how pervasive harmful social (‘public’) discourses on domestic violence are, we use examples from the religious and cultural spheres.

The ‘religious sphere’ as public

Ideas about beating your wife and levels of acceptance thereof have historically functioned in religious teachings and practices and thus are an intimate part of public discourse on domestic violence. The discourse and responses of religious leaders are significant since Rasool et al’s (2002:99) study indicated that, ‘20% of women sought help from a religious person after the most serious incident of abuse’.

Some religions ‘endorse chastisement of a wife who does not know her place’ (Fedler and Tanzer, 2000:31), and when survivors disclose to religious leaders, they are often sent back to the abusive relationship in accordance with religious
constructions of the sanctity of marriage and a husband’s authority in the household’ (Boonzaier and de la Rey, 2003:1015). Data from the focus groups corroborates this:

... in the case of religious advisors they tend to reinforce the role of the woman as a martyr. They do not understand the needs of the woman and expect them to endure the abuse.

(Pietersburg Focus Group, Limpopo)

For the Catholics there is no divorce and how can they get out of the problem... the rules of the church say that they must stay. The priest doesn’t understand the problem, he is only concerned with Church activities and he tells you ‘try again’. He (perpetrator) acts nicely and the priest thinks you are lying.

(Kimberley Focus Group, Northern Cape)

Boonzaier and de la Rey’s (2003:1015) study also indicated that religious leaders from various faiths often support domestic violence if they believe the partner was ‘justified’ in using violence and they frequently ‘sanction discourses of the “good wife” by persuading her to tolerate her husband’s violence and to reconcile with him’. For example, a participant in their study revealed that she ‘... told the imam, “listen here, I want a divorce”. So he told me no, but I must reconcile with my husband...’

(Boonzaier and de la Rey, 2003:1015).

Clearly, within religious circles the appropriate behaviour in abusive situations is constructed strongly within a patriarchal discourse that prioritises the maintenance of a marriage above all else. This has an enormous impact on women’s lives and contributes to the acceptance of domestic violence in the public sphere.

‘Cultural and social practices’ as public

Similarly, there have long been cultural notions of how domestic violence should be dealt with when it happens, under what conditions it is acceptable and how much of it is acceptable. For many women who experience abuse, the actions of their partners and their own responses are located in culturally bound explanations of the causes of domestic violence, and prescribed notions of blame and responsibility.

Culture is an effective tool for affirming and maintaining male authority, across all races, religions and ethnic groups in South Africa (Ramphele and Boonzaier, 1988), and strongly permeates social discourses on domestic violence in ways that are harmful to women. Sideris (2005:104) confirms that, in South Africa, ‘culture retains a powerful place in specifying identity and gender conflicts... Confronted by challenges to male domination, representatives of [community] institutions are at the forefront of appealing to “culture” and “tradition” to reassert male authority.’ As a result, there are many women and men in communities who share the idea that at some level it is ‘culturally’ acceptable to beat your wife under certain circumstances, for example, if the husband perceives that the wife has transgressed her ‘culturally’ prescribed gender roles, such as being disobedient, or having extra-marital sex, as this quote from one specific cultural context illustrates:

It is culturally acceptable to hit a woman when you are angry. If a man makes a woman angry she must just apologise and has to respect the man. (It is) Cultural to beat women with a stick or a sjambok and not with an open hand (slap). If he has paid lobola she can’t go back to her family unless he tells her to ‘go home’. Then her family has to repay the lobola.

(Witbank Focus Group, Mpumalanga)
Beliefs as well as customs, such as bride wealth, which exist in many cultures, often mean that whole families or even communities can justify violence culturally and thus condone or ignore it.

Moreover, in many communities in South Africa, domestic violence disputes have to be dealt with by the elders of the community or traditional authorities, an indigenous legal system where punishment is meted out for what is considered 'unacceptable' behaviour in that community. These systems provide powerful communal ways of keeping women from seeking help external to community structures.

Data from the focus groups clearly elucidates the role of these systems in maintaining domestic violence:

It is... unlikely that the case would ever reach court especially the traditional court, as in order for a case to be heard it has to be presented by the woman's family.

(Rustenburg Focus Group, North-West Province)

A woman can't wake up one morning and decide to apply for maintenance. She has to go to her mother-in-law and talk to her. A family meeting will be called and they will decide whether or not she should apply for maintenance.

(Witbank Focus Group, Mpumalanga)

In the rural areas women do not go through the legal system, and the traditional courts do not really have a procedure for cases of rape, and if they do, they tend to blame women for encouraging the perpetrator.

(Rustenburg Focus Group, North-West Province)

These communal responses are crystallised in cultural discourses at the micro-level, which are exhibited in the responses of family and friends to a survivor. As Rasool et al (2002:99) indicate, a large percentage of women disclose abuse to family (60%) and friends (43%). They could play a supportive role, but it is common to find that families, particularly those in the older generation, minimise the abuse or collude with the abuser, as described below:

Families had a tendency to tell them to keep a roof on their problem thereby disempowering them. They also said that it was difficult to separate divorce from who you are actually divorcing, as in the case of African women, the whole family would be involved. The family could also be your friends, who although support you, encourage you to stay. This is an issue that goes back to lobola as a woman is not just married to her husband: her family is actually married to his family.

(Pietersburg Focus Group, Limpopo)

Their mother-in-law will say look what I have to deal with – it is part of marriage.

(Witbank Focus Group, Mpumalanga)

In Boonzaier and de la Rey's (2003:1014) study, when women consulted family, they 'were frequently advised to reconcile with their husbands. Standards of femininity as nurturing, caring, and reconciliatory were thereby reinforced.' The powerful discourse of reconciliation emerged clearly in the focus group discussions as highlighted in the Bloemfontein focus groups (Free State):

If you ask my mother about it, she says it is part of life. She thinks it is not serious especially if it happens on Friday night and he is drunk and he shows remorse.

My mother says that 'he is my husband... he was having a bad day, he is feeling bad... (She says) 'he is my husband... ’ and she teaches us the same thing.

Parents have a lot to do with it; they sit with you and say 'It has happened to every woman', 'How can you make a scene, you are bringing down the family name?
Clearly, discourses on domestic violence, and primarily discourses that support a patriarchal status quo, have long existed in the cultural sphere. These beliefs are persuasive and pervasive, and appear in such a wide range of communities that it cannot be said that they are not a part of general public discourse on domestic violence.

A political and social policy notion of 'public' is thus limited and leads to theoretical perspectives and interventions that do not account for the reality of domestic violence situations in South Africa. In truth, a powerful violence against women discourse has long existed in the realm of the 'public' if we recognise as public the religious and cultural spheres.

**Implications of locally irrelevant theory**

If 'public' focuses on social policy or formal political concerns alone, thereby ignoring socio-cultural discourses, and 'private' is understood as 'behind closed doors' and secret, then intervention strategies can be misguided as they do not respond to the actual circumstances and needs of affected women and men. Three possible consequences of a decontextualised understanding of public and private in relation to domestic violence are discussed below.
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The first consequence emanates from the assumption that a woman’s decision to seek help is a solitary undertaking and exists in isolation because abuse is ‘private’, that is, a secret and hidden. Domestic violence campaigns targeting women survivors often encourage disclosure without acknowledging that whilst women may not have disclosed, the abuse is known by those around her or has been directly witnessed. The responses or inaction of others often leads to the survivor’s non-disclosure or inaction. ‘Non-interference’ is easily justified by the privacy discourse (Artz, 1999), as illustrated below:

...If they are married they [the public] do not interfere... Especially if it is a stranger, they feel it is none of their business.
(Bloemfontein Focus Group, Free State)

Sometimes it is because they are there – he is trying to discredit you, bring you down. Even educated, professional men are very insecure – he will do anything to put you down in front of his friends.
(Bloemfontein Focus Group, Free State)

The lack of recognition in public policy of the existence of popular understandings, or hegemonic norms, that dictate social responses to gender violence, means that policy ignores a core element that determines a survivor’s help-seeking patterns after abuse. It is based on the false assumption that the abuse is hidden and hence attempts are made in public education campaigns to assist women’s disclosure of abuse. Whilst this is important in situations where nobody knows about the abuse experienced, it is problematic in situations where there are others who are aware of the abuse. This approach negates the influence of families and communities in the help-seeking decisions of the survivor. As a result, the isolation and alienation of women in these situations is increased and her attempts to seek help are ineffective and/or may be jeopardised by those in her environment.

The second consequence is directly related to the first. If service providers think of the location of abuse as private and don’t adequately recognise the impact of public (religious and socio-cultural) discourses on individuals, responses will be primarily focused on individual change through couples counselling or individual counselling of survivors and perpetrators. As Serumaga (2005:110) states, ‘Service provision [in South Africa] consists largely of reactive services by community-based and non-governmental organisations (CBOs and NGOs) and the state. Counselling, crisis management and handout services are the predominant approaches to managing and addressing issues of abuse’.

This is not to say that NGOs and CBOs never acknowledge the power of social discourses, or that some of their responses aren’t successful. Some organisations have conducted public education and awareness programmes, but these are often small, localised programmes, the effects of which are difficult to evaluate. In general, NGO engagement with social discourses tends to be piecemeal and at a very local level, largely due to a lack of resources (resource constraints mean most NGOs struggle to provide services to individual women, let alone whole families/communities at a significant level or volume). Rarely do awareness campaigns or policy challenge the inaction of others or recommend appropriate actions for extended family members, friends and other witnesses. Thus service providers might encourage women to act by disclosing abuse or by leaving an abusive relationship in isolation of the values that deter her attempts and within a system of values that have not changed. As a result, the impact of NGOs on damaging social domestic violence discourses is limited.

The third consequence emerges as a result of responding to domestic violence in the public
sphere primarily at the level of social policy and formal politics. Socio-cultural and religious discourses on domestic violence overwhelmingly reinforce patriarchal gender roles and norms, whilst traditional and religious customs help enforce the power of the family in maintaining and colluding with domestic violence. By ignoring the insidious influence of these discourses on public responses to domestic violence, we maintain these spaces as spaces of patriarchal control.

The complexity, power and pervasiveness of social discourses on domestic violence means suggesting useful interventions is difficult. Owing to the potency of these social discourses in supporting the continuation of violence against women, any significant attempt to assert the rights of women not to be routinely exposed to violence in their intimate relationships is likely to be highly contentious.

It seems the choices are stark: either powerfully reject domestic violence at all levels from service provision to the highest political authorities and undoubtedly alienate large sectors of the population, or continue with a 'softly', piecemeal, local approach that is more palatable to a broader audience but has very little impact on widespread harmful socio-cultural discourses. Although ideologically seductive, the former suggestion is potentially dangerous, particularly for the very women we are trying to protect. Thus solutions need to be found at a more modest, and thus far less powerful level. Certainly, intense work with communities with respect to helpful responses towards women whom they know are experiencing domestic violence would be of great benefit. Further, engaging with religious and cultural leaders in a much more concentrated and profound way, not shying from the inevitable controversy and conflict this would bring, could result in longer term protective changes across more communities.

**Conclusion**

This article asserts that in South Africa the assumption that abuse is a secret is false in many cases as various people at the micro level are either aware of the abuse a woman is experiencing, have been told about it, or have actually witnessed it. Moreover, the awareness of others about domestic violence challenges conceptions of public as merely formal politics and highlights the importance of acknowledging social discourses at the levels of the cultural and religious. It has been argued here that a decontextualised use of the public/private construct contributes to the continuation of violence against women by not challenging social discourses that continue to privatisate a public problem. If we continue to challenge domestic violence only at the level of politics and social policy, social discourses will remain oppressive and prevent women from seeking help, or render their attempts ineffective.

As a result, responses that do not acknowledge the depth and extent of the influence of these social discourses are problematic, and if we do not challenge these discourses at a fundamental level, we will continue to only chip at the edges of a vast social problem. As Haraway (in Hekman, 1999:141) suggests with her notion of the cyborg, ‘... in order to alter this picture, another picture must be constructed, and... this picture, like the picture it replaces, is political’. Changing social discourses is politically charged, yet this should not mean we abdicate responsibility for doing so.

**Notes**

1. Intimate femicide is the murder of a woman who is the perpetrator’s intimate partner (Vetten, 1996).
2. A form of gang rape prevalent in the townships during the 1980s/90s specifically targeting young women who rejected ‘traditional’ gender roles or who had aspirations to develop themselves educationally and economically (Mokwena, 1991).
3. We use the terms ‘developing’, ‘third world’ and ‘southern’ interchangeably. Similarly, we swap between the terms ‘northern’, ‘first world’ and ‘developed’ nations.

4. The terms violence against women, domestic violence and women abuse are used interchangeably in this article to refer to violence that occurs in intimate relationships. The choice of these terms is ‘... informed by feminist principles and is intended to acknowledge the gender-specific nature of the violence and the power disparities between perpetrators and victims’ (Boonzaier and de la Rey, 2003:1004).

5. Personal communication with Tina Sideris, 2005.

6. A Muslim religious leader.

References


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