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## International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy



## Book Review

**Kate Fitz-Gibbon, Sandra Walklate, Jude McCulloch and JaneMaree Maher (eds) (2018) *Intimate Partner Violence, Risk and Security: Securing Women's Lives in a Global World*. London, UK: Routledge**

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For more than 40 years, a large international group of feminist scholars, including the editors of, and contributors to, *Intimate Partner Violence, Risk and Security*, have repeatedly demonstrated that the abuse of women is one of the world's most compelling social problems and that private violence constitutes one of the greatest threats to women's health and safety. What are the outcomes of this important work? Fitz-Gibbon, Walklate, McCulloch and Maher correctly point out in the introduction to their path-breaking volume that feminists have undoubtedly 'changed the story' about intimate partner violence (IPV). For example, there are now shelters for battered women, as well as rape crisis centres. Additionally, international policies and statements now portray women abuse as more than individual acts of violence against individual women. Rather, they equate various types of male-to-female violence with a violation of human rights and link these harms to other forms of violence and structural violations against women. This perspective is clearly stated in the *Report of the Fourth World Conference on Women*, held in Beijing, China in 1995.

While much more than the above has been achieved, also included in Fitz-Gibbon et al.'s introduction is alarming evidence that IPV rates are increasing. Certainly, the extent of sexual assaults on North American college campuses has increased. Thirty years ago, it was estimated that at least 25 per cent of female students at institutions of higher education experienced one or more types of such victimisation. Today, surveys like the one my colleagues and I recently conducted at West Virginia University are uncovering rates that are 10 per cent higher. One would then think that governments would view the risk of private violence against women as just as, if not more, serious than other types of violence, such as terrorist attacks similar to those that occurred in the United States on 11 September 2001. Sadly, this is not the case, and there continues to be a rabid anti-feminist backlash against progressive efforts to reduce and prevent intimate femicide, sexual assault, nonlethal variants of physical violence and other forms of what Fitz-Gibbon et al. refer to as 'private terrorism'. They remind us that:

While tens of billions of dollars are spent on countering terrorism and other issues deemed to be national security threats, services aimed at preventing IPV and supporting victims and survivors remain under severe strain and in some cases are subject to significant cuts (2018: 7).

The main objective of their anthology is to directly address this problem by repositioning the risk of IPV as a major site of global and national security.

Fitz-Gibbon et al. achieve this goal by including 14 chapters written by scholars from a range of disciplines and from different countries, including those based in North America, Europe, Australia, the United Kingdom, South Africa, Brazil and New Zealand. It is beyond the scope of this review to summarise each offering, but I guarantee they all make important contributions. Further, I would be remiss if I did not state that each chapter rejects the false dichotomy between public and private forms of violence. As stated by Fitz-Gibbon et al. in the conclusion to their volume, each chapter:

differently documents, examines and analyzes the limits and opportunities of current attempts to prevent violence against women and imagines what it would mean to take the risk of women's live and women's security seriously in ways that would work to end such violence and promote a sustainable 'peace' (2018: 271).

Indeed, there are no simple solutions to the risks to women's health and security caused by private terrorism, which is made explicit throughout the book.

There is a wealth of critical criminological research on government or state crimes. What is lacking, though, are feminist analyses of such crimes of the powerful. Hence, this book will be warmly received by those who study and theorise state-perpetrated violence against women. The contributors add more evidence to support the assertion that states contribute to the harmful broader social forces that are related to IPV and that they are often 'facilitators' and 'collaborators' of the abuse of women.

Fitz-Gibbon et al.'s anthology has many other strengths and it definitely enhances a social scientific understanding of violence against women. I do, nonetheless, have some concerns about the use of the term IPV. In this current era, many feminist scholars use this gender-neutral definition instead of gender-specific ones such as 'violence against women' and 'women abuse' that were commonly used in the 1980s and 1990s. They contend that IPV reflects more inclusiveness regarding the types of relationships in which violence is experienced (e.g., married and non-married, current and former partner, same and opposite gendered). This point is well taken but, particularly in North America, the most aggressive supporters of gender-neutral terms are anti-feminist academics and activists who assert that women are as violent as men. This claim lacks empirical support, especially when considering that proponents of the sexual symmetry of violence thesis artificially obscure injurious behaviours that display marked sexual asymmetries, such as sexual assault, strangulation, separation/divorce assault, stalking, image-based sexual abuse and homicide.

Federal, state and provincial governments in North America, too, have contributed to making gender-neutral definitions part of everyday popular discourse. The claim that 'women do it too' has been, for example, used in the United States to undermine the *Violence Against Women Act* (VAWA) and efforts to support it. Now, VAWA, due in large part to the lobbying efforts of conservative men's groups, views women and men as victims of intimate violence and sexual assault and allows for the provisions of services to men. Yet, VAWA was passed, in part, because the existing gender-neutral laws were not being enforced equitably in the context of the patriarchal subordination of women.

There are other problems with gender-neutral definitions. For instance, they do not address who initiates the violence, variance in physical strength and fighting competence between men and women, the extent of willingness to use this violence and whether violence is in self-defence. My criticisms of the term IPV are subject to much debate and I must heavily emphasise that the editors of, and contributors to, *Intimate Partner Violence, Risk and Security* do not portray private

violence as sexually symmetrical or as a gender-neutral problem. Thus, my comments should be interpreted as cautionary notes about the potential misuse of definitions that are now seen as more acceptable to a broad range of community groups and that are capable of encouraging collaboration and broad-based community ownership of the issue.

In sum, Fitz-Gibbon et al.'s volume is destined to stimulate new avenues of feminist inquiry and will surely help 'change the story' about violence against women. It is also essential reading for anyone seeking progressive alternatives to the status quo means of responding to women's security.

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