Guest Editor’s Introduction

In North America, many feminist women and some feminist men strive to make life easier for women. The commonly addressed concerns range from work-related issues, such as equal pay for work of equal value, sexual harassment, and family-related issues, such as maternity leave and child care. Those of us who work in the area of violence against women in interpersonal relations also concentrate on wife abuse, child abuse, elder abuse, and even femicide. Of course, all of these are crucial issues deserving attention and in-depth study. Our feminist passions against the continuation of inequalities and our equally passionate commitment to creating positive social change often hold the thin line between many women and sheer despair. However, we recognize the fact that we must do more. We must also reach out to the pain and suffering of women who live and die worlds away from us. We must combine our social science skills with our feminist commitment to give voice to the suffering of women who may be silenced by the patriarchal traditions, laws, and practices of their own cultures.

Since the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, there has been an increased focus on violence against women as it exists in many patriarchal bastions of the world. Through the issues raised in the conference, committed feminist scholars and activists have learned a lot. We have also learned that there is much more to be learned. This special issue is just one more small contribution to the 5-year quest for learning and seeking social and global change.

In this special issue, some authors address the types of violence most of us know only too well, such as wife beating, rape, and harassment. Other authors address types of violence that most of us can hardly imagine, such as honor killings, wife burnings, and women as pawns in wars about ethnic cleansing. Examples are scattered across the globe, stretching from the Far East to Asia Minor and to eastern and southern Europe. Yet despite the geographic diversity, there are strong themes that link the otherwise
random appearance of different forms of violence. The themes can be summarized as the existence of patriarchal structures—sometimes closely connected to a feudal existence, sometimes fueled by a ruthless militarism, and often nourished by increasingly globalizing capitalist aspirations. Women’s choices and life chances are compressed between these macro forces and the more personal restrictions imposed by cultural traditions and male-centered practices. Their culturally determined powerlessness makes women targets for assault by men they know and men they do not know.

In the first article of this special issue, Aysan Sev’er and Gökçeçik Yurdakul attempt to explain the social, structural, and cultural roots of honor killings in rural Turkey. Their analysis combines socialist and radical feminist views to decipher the complex circumstances surrounding this heinous crime. They seek remedies in education, law, and politics, as well as international input and responsibility, without dismantling the desirable aspects of the moral and social fabric of Turkish culture.

In the second article, Patricia Albanese looks at how women’s bodies become an additional platform for battle in times of war. She uses the recent ethnic wars in former Yugoslavia to dispel myths that there are truly good and bad sides among the combatant forces. When it comes to crimes committed against women and female children, both sides can be victims and victimizers. Most civilian women, regardless of their ethnic affiliation, become exploited and degraded by all sides, including their own political systems. Racist, androcentric, and militant powers sacrifice women’s individuality and bodies in an attempt to either preserve their own “ethnic purity” or destroy that of the enemy.

In the third article, Chatzifotiou and Dobash explore violence against Greek women in marital relationships. Again, what we see are layers of patriarchal expectations and norms that create a fertile ground for men to mistreat their female partners, and equally binding circumstances for women to be absolutely silent about their violation. In this article, we also see the power of cultural norms that idealize family but ignore equity and equality among its members.

Johnson and Johnson’s article explores yet another atrocity: wife burnings that are still practiced in remote parts of India, although this practice was outlawed more than two decades ago. Although
similar practices exist in other parts of the world—Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh come to mind—burnings are one of the most serious problems that threaten rural women’s lives and sense of security in India. In their analysis, Johnson and Johnson highlight women’s life conditions, lack of opportunities, and their perceived worth as objects of exchange (the dowry system). How pragmatic cultural expectations about marriage may have been corrupted by an unchecked capitalistic ideology is also highlighted.

The final article by Naina Kapur also looks at India, this time from a sociolegal perspective. Again, we are exposed to the extreme difficulties some Indian women face, some of which are exacerbated by their caste position in the society. Kapur challenges the androcentric formulations of justice and instead explores alternatives to its delivery. The alternatives she favors give credibility to women’s experiences, insights, knowledge, and morality of care subsumed under women’s leadership. Kapur’s article also brings something that is desperately needed in the area of extreme violence against women: hope, even when the circumstances and gendered crimes may appear to be quite formidable.

During many months of work on the preparation of this special issue, numerous news reports assured me that the struggle for women is far from over. For example, in North America, the violent segment of the pro-life forces staged another attack on a Canadian doctor who is known to provide legal abortion services in a government-funded clinic. Sadly, the same doctor was also the survivor of an assassination attempt in 1994 by the same regressive forces. The goal appears to be robbing women of their choice by terrorizing those who help to preserve these choices (Sev’er, 1999; “Vancouver Abortion Doctor,” 2000). On Mother’s Day last year, a 28-year-old pregnant woman in Canada expecting her second child was poisoned by her husband. Neither the woman nor her unborn child survived (“Husband Charged,” 2000). In the United States, a Florida funeral home director stabbed his wife to death, then buried her body with another woman whose family held a closed-casket burial (“Slain Wife Buried,” 1999). In Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, a man set his wife on fire, causing burns to 75% of her body. The scarred woman said, “I’m scared; I know he’s coming back for me” (“Man Jailed 10 Years,”
1999). More recently, a routine traffic check in a remote part of Ontario revealed a grisly find. James Vernon Randall was carrying his 21-year-old common-law wife’s head in a box that was strapped to the back of his motorcycle. He had reported the disappearance of his wife 2 years before her severed head was discovered (“Grisly Find,” 2000). The coroner’s office is now taking a second look into the questionable 1992 suicide of Randall’s first wife (“Suicide of First Wife,” 2000).

In the Philippines, rebels took 21 captives and held them more than 5 months (at the time of writing this introduction, the captivity was continuing). A hostage who was released reported that female hostages were routinely raped by their captors (“Hostages Rapied,” 2000). In Toronto, a 27-year-old man splashed a liter of sulfuric acid on his former common-law wife’s face. Their 6-year-old son watched as his mother’s face was dissolved by the corrosive agent (“Woman Attacked,” 2000). In June 2000, there was yet another honor killing in Turkey. Fifteen-year-old Naime’s last request to her killers (her brothers) was for them to cover her eyes. Even this simple wish was not granted, because the brothers reported that they looked around but could not find anything to cover her eyes with (“Gozlerimi Bagla Abi,” 2000). Nora Ahmed was on her honeymoon in Cairo when her father chopped off her head for dishonoring her family. Her crime was that she had eloped (“Father Kills Own Daughter,” 1997). If these examples look like horrifying nightmares, they are worse: They are real.

We just celebrated the new millennium. It is 5 years after the cornerstone insights and the resolutions of the 1995 Beijing summit. Although there have been some achievements and gains to be claimed, there are also many gender wars still to be won. The task of eradicating violence against women across the globe is daunting. It is my sincere wish that this special issue will contribute to keeping the discussion alive.

REFERENCES


Aysan Sev’er
*University of Toronto at Scarborough*

*Aysan Sev’er is an associate professor of sociology at the University of Toronto. She has authored numerous books and journal articles on violence against women by their intimate partners. She also writes on sexual harassment, divorce, and gender and ethnic relations. She is currently completing an article on women survivors of partner abuse.*