women such as `honour killing' and `dowry murders'. Her latest book on women who have left their abusive partners (Fleeing the House of Horrors, University of Toronto Press) has received the Canadian Women’s Studies Book Award (2004). She is also the founder and the general editor of Women’s Health & Urban Life journal.

Wilfreda E. Thurston (Ph.D.) is an associate professor in the Department of Community Health Sciences, an adjunct associate professor in the Faculties of Kinesiology and Nursing and the Director of the Institute for Gender Research at University of Calgary. Her program of research and training includes development and evaluation of health promotion programs and health services; frameworks for effective services; public participation in health policy development; studies of determinants of health in women and prevention of violence against women.

In the current issue, Zinat Ara’s work focuses on sex-workers in Bangladesh and the deplorable conditions within which they carry out their work. Ara discusses three distinctive types of sex workers, each group with its own problems and challenges. Those who roam the streets, ‘service’ clients behind railway stations or inside condemned buildings are the ones who are at the bottom of the hierarchy. Aside from the unimaginably harsh conditions of their sexual labour, they have to put up with the contempt of the society they live in. Another group of women are sold to the trade, sometimes to pay-off debts their parents have incurred, at other times, through abductions. They work in crowded brothels where even minimal level of hygiene is nonexistent. Others work in hotels, having to pay for rooms on an hourly basis. Although there are discernable differences in the living and working conditions of sex workers, they all have to deal with threats to their mental and physical health. Sometimes, male purchasers abuse and rape them to ‘break-them-in.’ The bonded women work long hours, ‘service’ many clients each and every day, rarely with a chance to clean up between clients. These women neither have the ability nor the power to ask for safe-sex methods. Therefore, they are at risk for all types of sexually transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDS. They repeatedly get pregnant, and have to use unsafe and unorthodox methods to rid themselves of the burden. Those who have children have to stretch their meagre means. Many experience abuse and reduced pay for having given birth. Since their woefully inadequate income does not cover anything more than day-by-day expenses, those who are pregnant or sick often continue working, or face immediate eviction. Those who die are pushed into the river, without having someone to demand accountability for their wasted lives. Their macabre life conditions have little hope other than some fledgling government and NGO initiatives. The only ray of hope is in studies and reports that bring these issues into international awareness and rip open the shroud of ignorance affluent societies claim.
If Ara’s work is on women who have fallen through the sexual exploitation grid, Aysan Sev’er’s paper is about the control and exploitation of women who are expected to remain pure. Ironically, violence or threat of violence permeates the lives of the so called ‘pure’ women as well. Sev’er reviews extreme forms of violence committed against women and girls in classic patriarchies. Some historical, others current, the examples of violence she reviews are female infanticide, Chinese foot-binding, dowry and bride-price systems, forced virginity tests, genital mutilation and honour killings. The unifying goal of classic patriarchies, Sev’er argues, is to control women’s sexuality and reproduction and the methods range from controlling their freedom, confining their movement, mutilating parts of their bodies or outright killing those who appear to challenge the system. Women who have very little power on their own, find some power in enforcing the rules of the patriarchal system. Patriarchies turn not only men against women, but also turn older women against the young. This pattern is also seen in Ara’s work in this issue, where sardarnis (brothel owner women) exploit younger sex workers, but all sex workers aspire to be sardarnis at some point in their lives.

Although some of the patterns seem to be reduced or eliminated over the years (female infanticide, foot-binding), other violent crimes against women are actually on the rise (selective abortions, dowry deaths, honour crimes). In a way, strong patriarchies have ways of re-inventing their methods of subjugating women. The states within which these crimes occur are sometimes reluctant and at other times, unable to reverse the patterns, even when they become signatories to universal conventions and declarations. The implementation of human rights and women’s rights usually takes the back stage in the politics of global economics. Sev’er cautions us against the efficacy of unidimensional steps in combating patriarchal violence. Instead, she urges us to simultaneously address the issues at the international, state and regional levels. She also suggests that there must be a place for the local elders in engendering positive change or else changes will be sabotaged.

Douglass Brownridge’s inquiry is focused on women’s risk to violence in renter versus owner-based housing. He sets out to explore the link between house ownership status and violence, the types of variables that contribute to risk and implications for violence prevention.

In this work, numerous variables relating to life course and male domination and control are subjected to analysis through quantitative statistical models. The main independent variable of interest is home ownership and the dependent variable of interest is violence against women as measured by Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS). What the results show is that both life course and domination variables explain the variations in violence risk, which makes Brownridge conclude that although home ownership is obviously important, it is not a panacea in and of itself. It is more likely that home owners are discernibly different from non-owners in age, socio-economic dimensions, perceived sense of power, aboriginal or immigrant status, length of the relationships they are in, etc. It is the permutations of these variables that reduce the violence risk in owners as opposed to renters.

Although interesting and certainly important, Brownridge’s work can only pave the way to additional research questions rather than providing answers to violence in women’s (especially in poor women’s) lives. Part of the problem future researchers must address lies in different conceptualizations. For example, renter versus owner status of women is likely to be determined by (depend on) rather than being independent of some of the variables that Brownridge uses as control variables. Part of the problem is due to secondary analysis of large data sets that were collected for a very different reason. For example and as Brownridge amply cautions us about, most variables of interest are measured by single indicators. How much confidence we can place in measuring complex concepts with single indicators is anyone’s guess. Part of the problem is that some of the most important variables linked to violence are absent because they were not available in the data set (such as separation/divorce, pregnancy etc.). Again, Brownridge adequately cautions us about their absence, but the powerful effects of these variables remain infused in the results in ways we cannot see. The exclusively
quantitative measurement of violence (such as the CTS) has its own drawbacks. Although Brownridge makes the best of the data he has, the data he has are not capable of answering some really important questions about women’s risk for violence, regardless of whether they rent or own their homes. What Brownridge’s work amicably does is to shed light on links which other researchers should pursue.

Graham and Thurston address immigrant women’s general adjustment, coping mechanisms, support systems and what all these mean for their health. One of the interesting premises they start from is that immigrants to Canada are usually in very good health because of the selection they go through in the immigration process. However, over-time, research shows that they lose this positive edge and become more and more similar in health of the Canadian born population. One would think that immigrating to an affluent country with a universal healthcare system will further improve their health, but this does not seem to be the case.

Graham and Thurston’s qualitative work sheds light on why this might be so. Through face-to-face interviews, immigrant women tell us about the stresses in their lives. One area which seems to be particularly stressful is due to access to employment, whether their own or their husbands’/partners’. Another area of stress is related to changing roles. At least some women who have held jobs/careers in their country of origin seem to be pushed into full-time homemaker roles to assure the well-being of their husbands and their children. Other sources of stress come from the loss of family/friend/maid services and help. A particularly troublesome point is how the changes in their lives have a toll on their self-perception and identity. As one respondent confessed, some end up hating themselves.

Despite the difficulties immigrant women face, Graham and Thurston’s work also focuses on their strengths and resilience. For example, women devise coping mechanisms by taking language courses, skills training, finding transient jobs or volunteering. They seem to manage staying optimistic even when the difficult circumstances in their lives continue. In other words, these women are not helpless victims. They are active agents in their own lives and in the lives of their families.

However, the authors rightly caution us against too much optimism. They argue that we should resist replacing the traditional ‘individual victimization discourse’ with an ‘individual coping discourse’, since both discourses mask the impact of structural inequalities. Of course, structural inequality are embedded in job opportunities, poor pay, poor housing and inadequate child-care. Some may argue that even our educational system is not free of class-based biases. Although Graham and Thurston’s participants were not necessarily adversely affected by them, isolation and violence by partners or random violence in poor housing complexes also stain immigrant women’s lives and their health. We already saw a glimpse of this in Brownridge’s work in this volume.

Aysan Sev’er
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