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Addressing Violence Against Women from Critical Feminist Perspectives: Challenging the Politicization of Violence Against Women

By Gwen Hunnicutt¹

Abstract

A major accomplishment of women's rights scholars and activists has been to make violence against women (VAW) visible. After decades of struggle, in a dramatic turn, VAW has become a highly politicized topic since the mid 1990's, and even more so after 9/11. An unfortunate side-effect of the increased recognition of harm done to women is that the issue of VAW is sometimes co-opted by the state and used in service of their political projects. In this paper I present the political co-optation of VAW as one of the pressing challenges facing scholars who conduct research on the problem of VAW. The issues detailed here have been debated in the transnational feminist theory literature and the feminist international relations (IR) literature for the last two decades. Yet, the issues detailed in this paper rarely appear in mainstream VAW research. This paper is an effort to encourage cross-fertilization between these fields and to outline key issues of engagement regarding the issue of the politicization of VAW. After detailing the problem of political co-optation, I then go on to offer ideas about how to proceed as scholars and activists in a political climate where the issue of VAW is routinely misused as a tool by the state to serve political ends.

Keywords: Violence against women, State co-optation, Representations, Critical feminism

Introduction

A major accomplishment of women's rights scholars and activists has been to make violence against women visible (McMillan, 2007). After decades of struggle, in a dramatic turn, violence against women (hereafter VAW) has become a highly politicized topic since the mid 1990's, and even more so after 9/11 (Mason, 2017). An unfortunate side-effect of the increased recognition of harm done to women is that the issue of VAW is sometimes co-opted by the state and used in service of their political projects (Bumiller, 2013; Corrigan, 2013; Doezema, 2010; Gruber, 2009; Gullace, 1997; Hirschkind & Mahmood, 2002; Hua & Nigorizawa, 2010; Hudson & Leidl, 2015; Kumar, 2004; Mason, 2017; Nayak & Suchland; Russo, 2006; Shepard, 2008; Stringer, 2014; Tickner & Sjoberg, 2011; Thornsby & Alexander, 2008; Tripp, Marx-Ferree and Ewi, 2013). The term "state" is employed here to include leaders, powerful institutions and agenda setters that make up an elite governing body. This includes American foreign policy, political campaigns and the criminal justice apparatus.

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The politics surrounding VAW are often hidden, obfuscated, or even unconscious (Corrigan, 2013). While every policy, program, study and initiative may ostensibly be about preventing violence and promoting peace, there may be a whole subterranean agenda hitched to the effort to “save and protect” women where anti-VAW campaigns have actually enabled state imperial interests (Mason, 2017). There is tremendous political currency in fighting VAW. Powerful entities may use the issue to advance a moralistic image for nations, international organizations, political parties, or candidates. Conceptions of gender closely associated with violence are used to legitimize war, to advance economic development agendas, or are employed to paint a humanitarian image on exploitative practices (Kumar, 2004; Leatherman, 2011; Mason, 2017).

In this paper I present the political co-optation of VAW as one of the pressing challenges facing scholars who conduct research on the problem of VAW. The issues detailed here have been debated in the transnational feminist theory literature (Grewal and Kaplan, 1994; Nagar and Lock Swarr, 2010; Alexander and Mohanty, 2010; Mohanty, 2003) and the feminist international relations (IR) literature for the last two decades (Nayak and Suchland, 2006; Tickner and Sjoberg, 2011). Yet, the issues detailed in this paper rarely appear in mainstream VAW research. This paper is an effort to encourage cross-fertilization between these fields and to outline key issues of engagement. This paper is a call to establish cross-collaboration, theoretical caution and effective communication across these disciplinary boundaries regarding the issue of the politicization of VAW. Feminist international relations scholars explore the ways in which gender matters manifest in global politics. Transnational feminist theorists explore the gender issues across borders, particularly within a neo-liberal context. Mainstream VAW scholars seek to uncover the empirical causes and consequences of VAW. For purposes of this paper, I employ the term “violence against women” instead of “gender-based violence” because it is used overwhelmingly in the mainstream empirical literature on VAW and in rhetoric and legislation from governing bodies.

In this paper, I issue a call for scholars and activists who study VAW to consider the ways in which the issue of VAW is used as an instrument in achieving political interests. After detailing the problem of political co-optation, drawing from the transnational feminist and feminist international relations literatures, I then go on to offer ideas about how to proceed as scholars and activists in a political climate where the issue of VAW is routinely misused as a tool by the state to serve political ends. Because the feminized concept of “vulnerability” is foundational to the success of political co-optation, I consider key issues in the literature surrounding the distortion of the term, vulnerability. Finally, I explore tensions associated with relying on the state to intervene in the problem of VAW and lay out some critical questions that scholars of VAW may consider moving forward.

Co-optation of Violence against Women in Service of Political Projects

While the state is not a monolithic actor with a fixed set of intentions (Watson, 1991), the state holds governmental power, and can enact and enforce laws to maintain an economic system that represents their interests (Gramsci, 1971). The state also maintains political influence over civil society institutions such as education and religion, where particular ideologies aligned with state interests are disseminated (Sassoon, 1980). Civil society institutions therefore operate as tools of the state to popularize their ideology (Neito-Galan, 2011). A global capitalist economy refers here to a political economic system characterized by integrated transnational markets and their corporate and state actors who pursue the aim of endless capital accumulation (Kotz &

McDonough 2010). This current historic globalized economy is sustained by cultural and political convergences across countries which are key to the configuration of the hegemonic global capitalist market. An ideology more commonly referred to as neo-liberalism is disseminated to support this global economic system. Neoliberal ideology is a political belief system deployed to sustain this economic system (Harvey 2005).

These political and cultural convergences described above can be observed in the politicization of VAW. The “cause” of VAW may top political agendas for a whole host of reasons: to justify the military intervention, to serve economic-development projects, nation building, to advance a moral agenda, or to place a humanitarian valence over an otherwise exploitative institution (Russo, 2006; Shepherd, 2008; Leatherman, 2011, Mason, 2017). It may be used to perpetuate racist beliefs about “dangerous others,” to justify militarization or condemnation of another culture, to erase or elide government geopolitics and violence, to carry out acts of cultural imperialism, or even used by political entities to divert attention away from broader social problems (Nayak and Suchland, 2006; Tripp, Ferree and Ewig, 2013).

Prior to the 1990’s there was scant attention from policy makers about VAW. Harrington (2016) points out that political actors almost never evoked rape, for example, as a human rights problem prior to 1990. The 1990’s saw a surge of political interest in VAW as a national security issue (Harrington, 2016; Enloe, 2000). Since 2001, contemporary U.S. security issues have centered on terrorism. Locating women in ‘war on terror’ militarized spaces who ostensibly need rescuing acts as leverage for continued warfare (Russo, 2006). Since the state is a gendered institution, it engages in the masculinized practice of the chivalrous rescue of endangered females, enabling the state to claim an image of paternal benevolence (Hollander, 2001; Leatherman, 2011). The state is a gendered institution to the extent that it reflects and reproduces gendered social relations and inequality through its policies, rituals and practices. Even while using a vocabulary of liberation, state actors may be employing emancipation rhetoric in order to pursue government objectives, often related to economic agendas, development and security (Mason, 2017; Leatherman, 2011).

This strategy of evoking images of the violation of women to justify political projects is not new, however. Gullace (1997) uncovered the gendered underpinnings of foreign relations during World War I. The representation of an international crisis as a threat to the family took on great significance between 1914 and 1918 where the British government marketed the war on the basis of alleged crimes against women (Gullace, 1997). Mason (2017) analyzed hegemonic rhetoric on VAW from powerful actors, revealing its connection to developmental objectives from the World Bank, the UN and American foreign policy makers. Mason (2017) studied discursive framings that create “urgency” around VAW in the development-industrial complex. Mason (2017) argued that the creation of this urgency obscures our understanding of a complex problem, foreclosing possibilities for alternative forms of violence intervention, and reproducing existing power relations. Ultimately, Mason’s (2017) research uncovered that VAW has been considered a problem alongside national security concerns, post-9/11 national security and neo-liberal economic growth. Moreover, Mason (2017) concluded that much of the rhetoric surrounding VAW did not lead to funding allocations or meaningful anti-violence interventions.

The “rescue” of victims of VAW may also be launched in order to advance a moral agenda. When then President Bush championed anti-sex trafficking legislation, the move was couched in terms of moral clarity “...not global labor equity, not participatory equality, and not life-saving health interventions and systems for women and men” (Miller, pg. 18-19). The problem, of course, is that while the state’s ‘liberation projects’ might serve to establish a government’s moral position,

a moral outrage agenda does little to address fundamental systems of power that aggravate VAW. In the case of women who are “rescued” in other parts of the world, framing the problem in terms of morality often serves to characterize their entire culture as backward (Hua and Nigorizawa, 2010), thus mobilizing public support for “correcting” another society with force. When governments evoke the rights of vulnerable populations, they may at the same time be shoring up legitimacy to address other security issues. Indeed, there is a parallel relationship between the discursive constructions of “vulnerable subjects” and “vulnerable states”—a version of “governing through crime” (Hyndman, 2004; Mason, 2017, Simon, 2007).

As secretary of state, Hillary Clinton (2009-2013) made VAW a top priority during her tenure. Hillary suggested that VAW was a national security concern (Hudson & Leidl, 2015) because it was linked to poverty and gender inequality, characteristics which also signaled a fragile state prone to terrorism and threats to the United States. Proposed legislation titled the International Violence Against Women Act (I-VAW) also linked U.S. security concerns with women’s rights, claiming that ending VAW would protect the U.S. Mason (2017) found that in both the I-VAW and the Hillary Doctrine, the strategies for ending global VAW involved military strategies and criminalization of the “other” which emphasized securitization rather than empowerment. Mason (2017) concluded that the urgency of saving women from violence is communicated in tandem with maintaining imperial domination.

Since the state is itself a gendered institution, the project of rescuing women could also be an exercise in reasserting a national identity, one that is rooted in masculinity—a version of masculinity that emphasizes the nation as a capable protector (Leatherman, 2011). The state can demonstrate its legitimacy, strength, authority and capacity to govern by displays (real or fictionalized) of defending, rescuing and protecting vulnerable women (Nordstrom, 1999). “Vulnerable” women have been “instrumentalized” in a variety of U.S. military interventions (Tripp, Ferree and Ewig, 2013). Rescuing women serves to strengthen this military apparatus and, in turn, the state ensures public approval of the enemy. Depicting ‘victims’ as incapable of helping themselves, and coupling that with an assumption of state superiority creates a hugely influential image that can be used to justify U.S. intervention, most notably the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 (Hirschkind and Mahmood, 2002).

Consequences of the State Co-optation of Gender Violence

There are numerous direct and indirect consequences of state co-optation of VAW, most notably, the reproduction of sexism (Leatherman, 2011). When the state and mainstream media contribute to the hypervisibility of a particular case or type of VAW, a certain gender ideology is perpetuated and solidified in our cultural imagination. Since the image of the ‘vulnerable women’ is the lynchpin in these cultural imaginings, these rescue narratives reinforce a gender ideology of women as dependent (Hua and Nigorizawa, 2010). The state’s co-optation of VAW and rescue narratives, then, end up reproducing sexism, hierarchical power relations between men and women, and women’s subordination to men (Nayak and Suchland, 2006). These paternalistic liberation efforts may actually perpetuate a new strain of sexism, one that casts women and defenseless subjects, rather than actually empowering women and creating social arrangements where agency and violence-free lives are possible.

Another major consequence of the state’s appropriation of VAW is the creation of a particular brand of victimhood (Stringer 2014). The more entrenched select victim narratives become, the more that we craft a particular image of victimhood, and endow victim status only to

“pure victims” who are in no way liable for their own victimization (Loseke, 1999). People who don’t fit the common victim profile may be denied services or passed over not counting as “worthy victims” (Loseke, 2001). Victim narratives create actual conditions where the presence of vulnerability and lack of agency becomes the threshold for “authentic” victims (Hua and Nigorizawa, 2010). Indeed, “victims” are situated in their own hierarchy, where some are afforded protection and others are ignored. The politics of violence and safety has a lot to do with gender and class, and how much it will serve a particular political body to “intervene” (Abu-Lughod, 2013).

Another consequence of the state using VAW as a tool in service of political projects is the perpetuation of violence, particularly towards men. By focusing on women as victims, but not men, war is still a justifiable endeavor and men are also not extended the right to have violence-free lives, nor are they offered the same moral outrage given to female victims. Additionally, where language evokes chivalry, or protecting women, then violence is required to maintain that hierarchy of protection. In this rescue scenario, retaliatory violence is expected. In this sense, the prevention of violence (against women) perpetuates other forms of violence (against ‘perpetrators’). Indeed, rates of domestic violence are higher during wartime, and military personnel tend to have higher violation rates than the general population (Nordstrom, 1999). The conditions in Afghanistan were only exacerbated by U.S. intervention. Indeed, the increased militarization of Afghan society actually exposed women to more violence (Hirschkind & Mahmood, 2002). The upshot is that by evoking the rescue of women to strengthen the state and the military apparatus, both nationalism and war incite additional violence (Nordstrom, 1999).

Another result of the co-optation phenomenon is that the state’s (often false) liberation projects might actually undermine true efforts to prevent VAW. Since rescue narratives that accompany political “intervention” employ stereotypical constructions of victimized women as passive subjects, these hero narratives may distract us from the “actual” structural causes of VAW. Moreover, rescue rhetoric might take the place of real social change. Taking the example of sex trafficking as one form of VAW, Denise Brennen (2014) points out how, despite the proliferation of (largely unregulated) NGOs working on sex trafficking, media attention and conferences, the everyday life struggles of formerly trafficked persons remains misunderstood and unaddressed. Instead, the onslaught of attention has mostly served to cast trafficked persons as a category of helpless victims. Empowering formerly trafficked persons requires dealing with poverty, offering services that will assist them with securing safe places to live, driving, and getting a car. Brennen (2014) points out that most organizations that claim to “raise awareness” of trafficking do not actually offer direct services to formerly trafficked persons, thereby undermining their chance for personal agency.

One of the most profound consequences, with serious implications for daily existence, is the way in which the state’s framing of VAW perpetuates our culture of fear. Gender violence issues are regularly deployed in fear politics (Glassner, 2009). Focusing on the constant defense of our own victimization as well as saving innocent “deserving” others from the same fate has the effect of fueling of the culture of fear. This outrage and fear then becomes capital for political campaigns, which result in women feeling even more vulnerable. To the extent that we view women and girls as the most inviolable group in society, their abuse will provoke the most outrage and fear (Nordstrom, 1999). Since violence is both the product and producer of gender, the stories we tell about VAW amplify our fears and impact our perceived vulnerability. And, of course, perceived vulnerability along gender lines is constructed independently of actual realities of violence (Hollander, 2001).

Finally, a subtle consequence of the state's promulgation of rescue narratives undermines efforts at personal agency for people at risk for VAW. Men (or masculinized entities, like the state) that "rescue" women only reinforce the notion that women are vulnerable relative to men, since those who are invulnerable are regarded as protectors, while those who are weak are seen as in need of protection (Hollander, 2001). Keeping the vulnerability trope in play perpetuates the idea that men and the masculinized state apparatus are capable of protecting women, rather than promoting the idea that women can protect themselves, and that communities can be empowered to make their own environments safe. Moreover, the "helpless victim" motif solidifies the notion of the autonomous man, who has the capacity for choice, action and free will (Hutchings, 2013). There exists an extensive and eloquent body of work on the complex subject of vulnerability (Abu-Loghod, 2013; Butler, 2004; Creek and Dunn, 2011; Doezema, 2010; Fineman 2008, 2010, 2011; Gilson, 2016; Memmings & Kabesh, 2013; Hollander, 2001; Hutchings, 2013; Madhok & Philips, 2013; Miller, 2004; Stringer, 2014). A brief consideration of this issue is presented next.

The Politicization of the Vexing Concept of Vulnerability

One key site of tension surrounding the politicization of VAW has to do with "victim politics" and in particular casting women as vulnerable subjects. Vulnerability to harm is certainly an important area of concern for governments as they consider the markers of well-being for its citizens. Vulnerability is also a feature of our shared humanity (Butler, 2004) and is a universal condition given our corporeal realities. Recently, however, there has been a marked increase in rhetorical emphasis on victim-centered narratives among policymakers—a discursive strategy used to shore up a benevolent image of the state and serving as a selective tool in advancing a neo-liberal agenda (Hyndman, 2004; Munro and Scoular, 2012). While there is both potential for the state to be productive or regressive and duplicitous (Munro and Scoular, 2012), state actors may reorganize 'victim talk' in ways that uphold the values of neoliberalism (Stringer, 2014).

Gilson (2016) explores the "vexing" nature of vulnerability, particularly surrounding sexual violence, since the term is so closely linked to dependency, weakness and femininity. Since it is a feminized concept, vulnerability is easily exploited to become an effective political tactic (Gibson, 2016). Martha Fineman, who has written extensively about the concept of vulnerability acknowledges that it is a "grossly under-theorized" and "ambiguous" concept (2008, p.9). There is an extensive debate on the stereotyping of survivors of VAW as either "helpless victims" or "empowered agents" (for a review of this debate, see Creek and Dunn, 2011). Martha Fineman (2008, 2010, 2011) and Judith Butler (2004) have argued that the concept of vulnerability has potential to empower, express a shared human experience and take feminism beyond equality debates. However, even scholars who advocate for a turn to vulnerability are cautious about its potential for misuse, particularly by policy makers.

The state's successful appropriation of VAW to bolster political projects hinges on evoking the vulnerable woman trope. Indeed, particular gender scripts are repeatedly used to legitimize militarism and violence (Leatherman, 2011). For example, war seeks legitimacy by characterizing the state as the protector where men are fighting to defend women (e.g. protecting family) at home or abroad (Leatherman, 2011). Pattinson (2008) calls this the "masculinization of the protector role" and the "feminization of the one who needs protection." The morality theater where the state plays the role of the savior requires a helpless, forlorn, female subject in order for the narrative to be successful.

The idea of rescuing vulnerable people (women) is foundational to military projects (Enloe, 2000; Leatherman, 2011; Abu-Lughod, 2013). Of course, when anti-VAW agendas are co-opted by political organizations, these paternalistic liberation efforts to “rescue” women may not really be about saving women at all, but instead may be used as a tool to advance a less obvious political agenda (Mason, 2017). Furthermore, the political co-optation of VAW by the state may result in a range of profound consequences. One tell-tale sign is if state institutions fail to connect the dots between global economic production and VAW (Leatherman, 2011).

Politically motivated victim-speak may swing in the other direction of framing victimization as an artifact of personal responsibility, thereby perpetuating a neoliberal agenda. In neoliberal ideology, agency is expressed in such a way as to eclipse oppressive social structures that produce unequal social realities and to evoke the idea of self-determination in order to shift the burden of action or non-action back to the individual (Hemmings and Kabesh, 2013), which renders subjects as what Kimberly Hutchings (2013) terms either “choosers” or “losers.” If VAW is framed as something that all self-determining individuals can avoid, and agency is the vehicle to ensure personal safety, then the experience of violence can be conceived of as a failure of the “autonomous self,” rather than a result of social inequalities. If the consequences of actions (or non-action, not “choosing” the right associations, clothing or destination) are “individualized,” then we run the risk of VAW once again being ignored, dismissed, and trivialized. If victimization can be made to appear as an artifact of choice or personal responsibility, then political and social change is avoided. Such ‘victim talk’ then becomes a problematic way for governing bodies to elide social inequalities and ignore structural disorders that produced the harm in the first place.

Survivors themselves may engage in “victim speak,” reproducing these vulnerability narratives in the telling of their own story. Paradoxically, the vulnerability script has wide cultural purchase: formula stories with pure victims—pure evil and pure innocence (Loseke, 2001). Moreover, once a survivor of gender based violence speaks, their story is then subjected to scrutiny and evaluation. Since telling a story about ourselves is itself a politically formed practice, survivors of VAW are subjected to evaluation of whether or not they are “credible story tellers” or have cleared the threshold of victimhood (Jobe, 2008). Jobe (2008) investigated the cases of 32 women who claimed to have been trafficked for sex and were seeking asylum in the UK. Trafficked women’s accounts were compared to other trafficked women’s account—all of which were understood within a dominant narratives of sex trafficking, VAW and prostitution. It turned out that their cases were considered more credible if professionals or officials validated their stories. While it is important to allow survivors of VAW to give their own accounts of their experience, these narratives must be understood within the existing political context.

Since the idea of a vulnerable subject (woman) is key in the production of state and militaristic projects (Nayak and Suchland, 2006), the framing of VAW in dichotomous terms, accompanied by familiar narratives of powerless women, may actually work to perpetuate the very problem it seeks to remedy. From this perspective, it is easy to see why a state-based intervention of violence against women is transphobic. These dominant gender paradigms are useful to the extent that heteronormative dichotomous gendered identities structure these familiar narratives of femininity and vulnerability. A key part of anti-violence work, then, includes dismantling powerful cultural stereotypes and rejecting false dichotomies of female/male, private/public, and victim/perpetrator binaries.

Rethinking Alliances with the State

Anti-violence women's movements have been wildly successful in raising awareness among criminal justice practitioners regarding issues of violence against women. Over the last forty years, these social movements have primarily relied on the state to intervene and prevent violence against women (Gruber, 2009). The advantages and trouble of state involvement have been debated extensively among feminist theorists (Brown, 1995). This reliance on state intervention resulted in a strengthening of law and order politics, the same "get tough" legislation backed by conservatives (Gottschalk, 2006; Hunnicutt, 2009). This unlikely alliance between anti-violence activists and "get tough" politicians has contributed to alarmingly punitive conditions in the United States, exacerbating racism, sexism, classism and other systems of oppression that contribute to VAW in the first place (Davis, 2003; INCITE!, 2006; Gruber, 2009). In retrospect, while the anti-violence women's movement was enormously forward thinking at the time, the unanticipated outcomes resulted in some regressive ideas and practices about how to solve the problem of VAW (Miller, 2004; Bumiller, 2013).

The invitation for the state to solve the problem of VAW has produced a number of problematic outcomes (Gilson, 2016). Too often the state has acted as an instrument of political power (Cruikshank, 1999) rather than an unqualified positive intervention. Evoking a vulnerable victim narrative by policy makers not only fails to excavate the complex causes of VAW, but uncritically accepts the criminal justice system as the means to correct the problem (Munro and Scoular, 2012).

Ironically, and perhaps inescapably, the reliance on the state—a hierarchical entity—to discipline males can reproduce paternalism, as well as other systems of domination (Gruber, 2009; Brown, 1995). Moreover, anti-violence activists and scholars are faced with the conundrum of how the state responds to violence with violence. The state has modeled and continues to model the very kinds of violence against which we organize (Smith, 2005) and criminal law no longer provides the positive social transformation or achievement of social justice that VAW scholars seek (Gruber, 2009). If we are indeed practicing peace, does the reliance on the violent state apparatus make sense, particularly given its high rate of ineffectiveness and misappropriation of VAW issues?

We are left with maintaining a delicate balance between defending rights to be free from harm, while also critically examining the problems that protection might bring, or what Miller (2004) describes as the "freedom/protections paradox." Moreover, now that there is overwhelming agreement among scholars about the devastating effects of the expansion of the prison industrial complex, particularly among communities of color, (Alexander, 2010), we are compelled to find ways to address VAW without expanding incarceration (Smith, Richie, Sudbury and White, 2006). With a state that has co-opted VAW and instrumentalized it to service political projects, and a criminal justice system that has failed to provide safety for survivors of sexual and domestic violence, we must develop alternative strategies for addressing VAW (Smith, et al., 2006).

The suggestion to move beyond hopes of the state as a protector is not meant to devalue or render illegitimate the court battles won, rights earned, and laws passed, but rather to bring to the forefront those issues which the state has not been held accountable for. Instead of relying upon the justice system, we must focus on forming communities that will hold violent offenders accountable (Smith, 2005). We must also think creatively about solutions to VAW which do not rely upon the state. Since the state solution has failed, a transfer of agency to communities is a promising move. This work of empowering individuals and communities to create environments where violence becomes "unthinkable" (Smith, 2005) may include rejecting a criminal justice

system that often invalidates experiences of victimization. This work may also involve shifting the role of the state away from a paternal one and instead placing citizens in the active role of participating in decisions and policy, where... “the view of a survivor as a “rape victim in need of services” is repositioned to that of a citizen able to participate in creating the policies affecting her life” (Miller, 2004: 28).

Lessons for Scholars

To begin the work of challenging the practice of the state’s co-optation of VAW, it is necessary to make room for critical evaluations of stock narratives, and avoid formula stories with dichotomized conceptions of male perpetrators and female victims which imply female vulnerability and male aggression (Doezema, 2010). In addition, theorizing about VAW should include a complicated understanding of global processes that produce VAW (Hua and Nigorizawa, 2010); explanations of how VAW itself generates power for national and global entities (Nayak and Suchland, 2006); an accounting of how the perpetual retelling of VAW narratives contributes to perceived vulnerability (Hollander, 2001); explorations of the power processes involved in producing knowledge about VAW; considerations of how dominant constructions emerge and are incorporated into policy (Doezema, 2010); and mapping of those power structures that support VAW.

Over the last forty years, our understanding of VAW has grown in complexity, taking into account intricate power dynamics. Scholars have noted that there are several layers to consider when crafting explanations of VAW: interpersonal, institutional and systemic (Nordstrom, 1999). Popular narratives about VAW hone in on almost exclusively on micro-level details. Focusing just on interpersonal circumstances elides the institutional networks that profit by telling stories about vulnerable subjects (Doezema, 2010). Further, this narrow view of just the interpersonal veils larger systems of violence that sustain relations of domination and exploitation in the first place (Žižek, 2008). Is it possible that our focus on sensational, corporeal, and interpersonal features of violence distract us from the structural causes of VAW? Instead, theorists might tease out the very structures in which such violence is cultivated. The more that structural causes are rendered invisible, the more ripe VAW issues are for state appropriation, and the more that the state itself is “off the hook” for its own role in the production, co-optation and amplification of VAW.

Scholars working on the problem of VAW should be wary of urgency rhetoric surrounding VAW. In feminist international relations theory, the term “tyranny of urgency” distinguishes between low priority versus urgent social problems (Enloe, 2004), where long term perspectives are eclipsed by the pressure of immediate demands (Jacobson, 2013). This tactic is used in securing widespread cultural mobilization for political projects. The urgency with which the state must act prevents us from reacting mindfully and without enough time to fully understand underlying causes.

In addition to recognizing a “fake sense of urgency” (Žižek, 2008) we might also resist feeding into the cultural appetite or fascination for sensational violence. That is, VAW should be made visible, but not so much that it becomes a spectacle fit for appropriation. Instead, VAW should be made visible, but indirectly so, focusing as much on the structural violence and the social context surrounding violent events. We might also counter the political co-optation of VAW by employing a language of support, empowerment, coalitions, alliances and solidarity rather than “rescue” (Abu-Lughod, 2013). We might also model for the state appropriate ways to handle this problem by practicing observation rather than intervention (Abu-Lughod, 2013).

The study and prevention of VAW is important, but it is a challenging time to be a VAW scholar in a political climate where research output and activism are routinely co-opted by political interests to serve political ends. Scholars and activists must work to avoid the seductive urgent calls to “stop the violence;” to guard against the alarm that would rush us prematurely toward “intervention” (Doezema, 2010; Mason, 2017). It is important to take time to put reality in context and shift to a more complicated understanding of VAW, particularly within the scope of global economic relations. In this age of co-optation, scholars might aim to study physical violence and really “see” it as a manifestation of structural violence. Can we situate the study of VAW within a larger landscape where political and economic conditions that create violence become visible? Political and historical context is important to include when seeking to uncover oppression and human suffering (Abu-Lughod, 2013).

The practice of state co-optation of VAW provides some important lessons surrounding work on prevention and intervention, namely to practice emancipatory politics and to recognize that we are not saviors. Moreover, prevention and intervention should be designed with input from the individuals who are we are trying to protect. The state’s unsavory practices of the appropriation of VAW issues highlight areas in need of reflection. When working on anti-violence projects, at every juncture, we might consider how our own hierarchical thinking impacts our helping efforts (liberators, helping the less fortunate, etc.). We can avoid following in lockstep with state practices by continually checking our efforts to make sure that we are not simply reproducing systems of inequality, that we are not also practicing another form of ‘domination disguised as liberation,’ and that we are not denying agency in the name of “helping” (Abu-Lughod, 2013; Brennan, 2014).

The conceptualizations, narratives and theories that we produce have profound implications for the actual lived experiences of VAW survivors. Scholars are in a unique position to provide a critique of those unquestioned assumptions about men, women, violence and gender relations that abound in the public sphere. When scholars work to make VAW more visible, we might also explore the implications associated with increased visibility of VAW. Visibility and sensitivity to VAW has increased in the last forty years, which certainly counts as progress, but hypervisibility, or visibility without a politically informed context carries its own set of consequences.

As scholars doing empirical work on VAW, we must be attentive to the ways in which the discursive constructions about rescuing women from harm are utilized in service of regressive state agendas that end up in harmful consequences of increased social control without meaningful redress (Munro and Soular, 2012). We must also be sensitive to the narratives we tell about violence survivors and a critical engagement with the concept of vulnerability. Miller (2004) reminds us:

“It is, thus, an absolute necessity to think carefully about the placement and shape of such stories, sifting through them and timing them in such a way as to avoid perpetual retelling of the story of the sexually abused victim who needs only rescue rather than a demanding woman who needs rights and social justice as a citizen” (pg. 31).

In these frames, stories and theories, may we continually ask “Who counts? Who is left out? What are the conditions of inclusion and exclusion? Are we allowing survivors of VAW to speak for themselves? Are we imposing narratives of victimization on VAW survivors? At every juncture, let us ask ourselves what kind of power arrangements are we invested in (Nordstrom,

1999; Abu-Lughod, 2013)? Are we doing the work of creating safe places, confronting poverty, offering security and respect, while refusing to participate in sensational depictions of their lives? As these political projects come and go, will the lives of VAW survivors have changed? Will people be any safer? Are we challenging state power or colluding with it? Does the urgency to end VAW truly reflect the reality of the issue or is it being used in service of shoring up existing power relations? If we do not critique the politicization of VAW, our research may be used at the expense of survivors' well-being and safety.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper has been to highlight the politicization of VAW. This work offers key insights from the feminist IR and transnational feminist literatures on the political co-optation of VAW. It is my hope that the intended audience for this paper, researchers who study the causes and consequences of VAW, will embrace a commitment to question political practices surrounding VAW. I recommend that VAW scholars critically assess existing state agendas that are being served by anti-VAW initiatives. We have reached an historic moment where all VAW research and activism must turn a critical eye toward the power relations that might be appropriating the cause in order to serve political agendas.

There is evidence that the redress of VAW may serve as a governance strategy. Since 2001 we have seen a shift in discourses in conventional understandings of global harm against women. Of course, not all government interventions are seeking to further their own developmental and security aims. Yet, increased protection may mean increased policing, which may, paradoxically, render survivors even more 'vulnerable'. Cruikshank (1999) cautions us to regard any state-sponsored programs of empowerment with critical circumspect, particularly those framed in rhetoric of vulnerability. Increases in security and discipline are effective at distracting attention from the very social conditions that give rise to VAW in the first place.

Part of what makes VAW such a politically rich issue is the stereotypical ways in which perpetrators and victims are framed. When 'victims' and 'perpetrators' become gendered terms, the notion of a perpetrator is masculine, while the victim becomes distinctly feminine. Such a rigid category solidifies perceptions of women as intrinsically non-violent and vulnerable (Hollander, 2001; Barnes, 2008, p.38; Hua and Nigorizawa, 2010). These stereotypical constructions not only limit our understanding, they produce politically rich narratives that make co-optation more likely. The various meanings of vulnerable women may result in regressive consequences that anti-violence advocates must attend to. Therefore, the work of anti-VAW scholarship includes emphasizing agency and challenging vulnerability motifs. Using hero rhetoric, and mass-marketed approaches to "save" lives serves to bolster the image of the savior, but it doesn't necessarily work to help keep people safe from VAW or to help survivors take charge of their lives. Further, Stringer (2014) points out that since neo-liberal values can shape the language of suffering, harm and well-being, great care must be taken in deploying terms such as agency, victim, choice, responsibility and oppression. The key question, then, is how can VAW scholars produce "counter-hegemonic victim talk" (Stringer, 2014) by re-conceptualizing terms like vulnerability and re-appropriating terms like victim?

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