
Leigh Goodmark, *Decriminalizing Domestic Violence: A Balanced Policy Approach to Intimate Partner Violence*, University of California Press, 2018. ISBN 9780520295575. Hardback £70, Paperback £25, eBook £25.

Antonia Porter*

Goodmark is the first to acknowledge that by writing a book entitled, *Decriminalizing Domestic Violence* she is being immediately provocative and should expect ‘some serious pushback’ (ix). Writing from a distinctly US perspective, yet with resonances beyond the US, she starts by questioning the state’s primary response to domestic violence as crime. She is not, in fact, proposing full decriminalization, knowing this to be ‘unlikely’ and ‘probably unwise’ (142). Instead what she proposes are alternative frames through which to view intimate partner abuse which, in turn, prompts her to suggest parallel modes of state reaction and, importantly, pre-emptive action.

In the last 30 years, conceived through the law and order paradigm, the United States has reacted to domestic violence with characteristic penal zeal: mandatory arrests, no-drop prosecutions and (hyper) incarceration. In chapter one, Goodmark briefly outlines the drawbacks of the state reliance on criminalization: the approach absolves the state from having to confront the underpinning structural arrangements that incubate the offending behaviour; it disproportionately and negatively impacts already marginalized women (‘women of color’, for example, are less likely to voluntarily engage the criminal justice system); incarceration reduces the life chances of the ex-prisoner and impacts on families, ‘deforming’ the lives of those connected to the prisoner (17); criminalization does little to prevent domestic violence and its huge costs still afford little protection to the intended beneficiaries. She argues that in making criminal justice the principal response, alternatives remain underdeveloped. Given that most people subjected to abuse do not engage the police, policymakers’ priorities should be with the economic, public health, community and human rights avenues she proposes.

Given Goodmark’s background as a family lawyer, the stance she takes in this book is unsurprising. For, once exposed to the broader ramifications of ongoing domestic violence and coercive control in families, it is difficult to see the violent incident that typifies the criminal trial as reducible to a seemingly isolated and individually situated level. The innovative gender-violence clinics that she runs at Maryland Carey Law School – which employs her students to promote ‘restorative dialogue circles’ and sexual violence prevention curriculums in schools – indicate that Goodmark is willing to ‘put her money where her mouth is’ as far as some of her proposals are concerned.

The strength of this book is the clear chapter structure that signals the alternative frames and modes of analysis Goodmark proposes. Firstly, recognising the manifestation of violence as flowing from material and economic deprivation, she makes persuasive claims about how neoliberal policies, the global recession and austerity have magnified economic instability and exacerbated the underprivileged material conditions that breed intimate partner abuse. Secondly, the public health approach introduces the reader to understanding domestic violence in terms of the social

* ESRC Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Kent Law School, University of Kent, UK.
Email A.D.Porter-28@kent.ac.uk.

determinants – education, community, social support, physical environments, adequate nutrition, racism, and gender inequality – that contribute to the social stressors cited as causal. Thirdly, Goodmark would welcome community responses and organization as a means of holding perpetrators accountable (including through restorative justice) and as an effective way of shifting community norms that tolerate intimate partner violence. And fourthly, in light of the US's woeful record on ratifying international human rights treaties aimed at ending violence against women, Goodmark reflects on how integrating human rights into multi-sectoral contexts could provoke holistic solutions.

The book is certainly broad in scope, yet, through each chapter's lens, Goodmark crystalizes the alternatives to the criminal legal response. In the final chapter, Goodmark summarizes her vision of this multi-faceted approach in which funds are shifted away from courts, police and prosecutors and re-directed, inter alia, into programmatic controls in communities and NGOs. Guided by 'feminist first principles' (154), Goodmark is clear that survivors should be consulted and their needs fore-fronted. Thankfully, Goodmark is also realistic that criminal justice still has a part to play (in ameliorated form) but she considers its part ancillary and reserved for the habitual or serious offender.

Though Goodmark's aims and ambitions are laudable, for this reader, serious questions remain about meting out community justice in the area of domestic abuse. Goodmark herself draws attention to the safety concerns regarding restorative justice in relation to intimate partner violence not least because 'at this point' such practices are 'based largely on ideology and conjecture, rather than data' (97) with few programmes being available for evaluation. Given the huge potential for restorative justice in these circumstances to perpetuate a perpetrator's manipulative control over their (ex)partner, the appropriateness of such intervention remains highly questionable until further research is undertaken; albeit Goodmark infers that fledgling studies have been encouraging.

The reservations held by this, ostensibly, pre-disposed and sympathetic reader, highlight the extent to which the crime control imperative has become hegemonic, hindering our visions for transformative modes of analysis. Goodmark's brave and undoubtedly controversial provocation must be commended for its endeavour but, if her proposals to engage communities are to enjoy any degree of implementation, we must do more to empirically test, ground and evaluate their potential.