

Critical Dialogue

Intersectional Advocacy: Redrawing Policy Boundaries Around Gender, Race, and Class. By Margaret Perez Brower.

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In this innovative and important new book, Margaret Perez Brower draws crucial attention to the role of organized advocacy in the federal policymaking process. She focuses her attention in particular on groups that lobby on behalf of women from underrepresented groups, notably Black and Latina women. These women are at the intersection of multiple identities, often falling through the cracks of public policy throughout the United States. Perez Brower studies these groups through the lens of violence against women policy, starting with an analysis of the 1994 Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) all the way through the act's 2000, 2005, and 2013 reauthorizations.

Perez Brower traces the rise of intersectional advocacy, both on the ground in American politics and among scholarly communities throughout the 1990s and 2000s. She argues that the framing of the Violence Against Women Act was done through traditional policy pathways and focused on the white, cis-gender, woman, and citizen, who is abused. She contends, for example, that redirecting efforts to combat domestic violence toward criminalization—a hallmark of the 1994 bill—is counterproductive for women from low-income and minority communities because of interrelated inequalities in economic opportunity, housing, and policing. Perez Brower focuses her attention on the communities of color who do not trust law enforcement and are therefore reluctant to reach out for help and also points to the abused immigrant woman who is not eligible for many of the services created by VAWA simply due to her citizenship status. These are powerful arguments that she makes eloquently and comprehensively.

Perez Brower argues that groups advocating on behalf of marginalized women in American society must do several things in order to be successful in realigning policy to serve them more effectively. First, the groups have to

be able to connect multiple issues affecting their groups, such as connecting domestic violence with immigration laws that exclude immigrant women from domestic violence services. Second, the group has to be willing to cross the boundaries that were set by the original policies—and which excluded their groups. Third, they must work to forge connections across the policies affecting underserved people—in this case, women—in the minds of the public, elected officials, and policymakers. As Perez Brower says, this may include “pressuring policymakers to adopt new policies, laws, or institutions; they also sometimes recommend dismantling existing institutions or projects and replacing them with other types of structures” (p. 36).

Using her original data collection of testimony from representatives of advocacy groups in Congress on the original VAWA and its reauthorizations through 2014, Perez Brower illustrates advocacy in action. Because members of Congress organize hearings to amplify some policy goals over others, they purposely invite specific groups to testify. As such, these committee hearings can provide insight into which groups are considered part of the policies' boundaries. She shows the growth over time of the number and diversity of voices on behalf of low-income and minoritized women and how Congress subsequently responds in its policy revisions, up to a point. In fact, the degree of intersectional advocacy between the original VAWA passage in 1994 and the third reauthorization in 2013 shows a nearly 12-fold increase in the amount of advocacy that occurred in these hearings. In other parts of the book, she presents original survey experiment data that explains how these groups can effectively mobilize their members to gain a stronger foothold in policy making.

Perez Brower also explains the various ways marginalized groups linked domestic violence to policies that affected them. This includes connections to welfare, immigration, and tribal law. However, the requirement that federal laws be reauthorized makes it doubly challenging for marginalized groups to link VAWA to their policies because, as Perez Brower says, they must “contest threatening proposals and defend past victories” (p. 95). A policy success that may be found in an earlier reauthorization could easily be erased in the next.

Using interview data from 43 organizational leaders, Perez Brower provides insight into the strategies these leaders deployed to link housing, healthcare, and incarceration to VAWA. The analysis of the Latina Network, for example, demonstrates how separately addressing violence against women and unaffordable housing means women who are victims of domestic violence—often women of color—lose out. Because housing assistance at the state and local level is temporary, victims who need longer-term assistance have no one at the local, state, or federal level to reach out to when they exhaust their transitional housing. Similar challenges arise for Sisters Against Violence who rightly point out that most health-care policies related to domestic violence assume that everyone trusts and can afford hospital care. Again, these organizations have to work to first link these policies with domestic violence and then advocate for reconfiguring them to better address women's needs. Perez Brower argues that even relatively “new” policies in the area of domestic violence at the federal level have adopted an infrastructure that is not flexible enough to effectively serve all the communities that need help.

Given our own research in the area of VAWA and domestic violence, we welcome Perez Brower's work to push for a holistic policy approach to save women from injury and death at the hands of abusers. Structural racism in policing and judicial adjudication can produce core problems such as onerous cash bails and dual arrests for Black women who call law enforcement for help. At the same time, in our work on lethal domestic violence, we have learned that bail hearings can be crucial points in time to remove an abuser from a household and remove a gun from an abuser. We wondered if any of the organizational leaders featured in Perez Brower's book spoke about firearm laws and domestic violence in their interviews or testimony before Congress. We encourage more scholarly work to assess how better training of both law enforcement and judges to recognize aggressors and potential lethality in domestic violence cases can address the concerns Perez Brower raises.

We also believe that Perez Brower's argument would have been even stronger if she had the opportunity to include the 2022 reauthorization of VAWA in this book. The 2018 election brought more women of color to Congress, and this gave support to more senior members, such as Sheila Jackson Lee (D-TX), to fight for a revised version of VAWA in the House of Representatives. After 2020, when the Democrats gained control of the Senate, and Joe Biden was elected president, the momentum carried across all three branches, and after nine years, VAWA was reauthorized. The groups that Perez Brower focused on in her book played a large role in getting VAWA across the finish line and are important to this policy

history. Including the 2022 reauthorization as part of the analysis—even tangentially given the impending publication of the book—would have accomplished four things. First, it would have boosted the evidence for intersectional advocacy for the Native American community, which we feel could have been explored more. It also would have provided even further evidence of the compelling argument Perez Brower makes about intersectional advocacy, policy linkages, and reconfiguring policy. Third, it might have more fully illustrated the relationship between legislators—both supporters and opponents—and these organizational leaders. We would have liked to see a more extensive discussion of the interaction of these groups with key legislators who worked to amplify the policy goals of the advocates she studies. Fourth, it could have illustrated the path dependence that exists in the issue area of women's security. Representative Sheila Jackson Lee and Senator Lisa Murkowski (R-AK) were able to use the momentum of the 2022 VAWA reauthorization to close the boyfriend loophole—which expanded federal restrictions on firearm access to dating partners convicted of domestic abuse—when Congress passed the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act in June of 2022.

In terms of violence against tribal and indigenous women, during the 2013 VAWA reauthorization, Murkowski sponsored the creation of Special Domestic Violence Criminal Jurisdictions (SDVCJs) which aimed to close a glaring hole in criminal justice policy that prevented tribal governments from prosecuting non-Native Americans who committed domestic violence on their lands. The majority of violence committed against Native women on tribal lands is committed by non-Native men. Although this was an important step in providing justice to Native American abuse victims, it only applied to Tribal Nations that were a part of Indian Country. This resulted in 228 out of the 229 tribal nations of Alaska being excluded from this law. Based on the program's success, and at Murkowski's urging, the 2022 VAWA reauthorization expanded eligibility for SDVCJs to include Alaska Tribal Nations. Additionally, this program—now known as SCJs—now goes beyond crimes of domestic violence to allow tribal nations to prosecute a broader range of crimes that also negatively affect Native women.

In this rapidly changing policy arena, we believe that *Intersectional Advocacy* will launch a whole new stream of research centered more strongly on the ways in which voices for marginalized women in America struggle to gain a louder voice in our lawmaking process. To that end, we look forward to seeing the paths that Margaret Perez Brower takes moving forward and joining her in the important effort to illustrate the reach and depth that violence against women policy merits in our scholarly community.