

Book Review Editor
Ruth Stewart



**EVEN IN THE BEST OF HOMES,
Violence in the Family**
by Jocelyne Scutt, Pelican Books
1983, 315pp. \$9.95.

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In 1978 Jocelyne Scutt began to formally investigate violence occurring within families. This book is based on the case histories of 312 participants in Australia who documented their experiences of family violence. The abuse covered includes spouse assault, marital rape and murder, child physical abuse and child sexual molestation.

In the introduction Scutt clearly states her feminist perspective and I feel that this perspective is the book's strength. It provides a framework to understand the structural causes of domestic violence. Such a framework provides an impetus for effective social action to combat the problem. However I felt that the book's main limitation was that it failed to look at why particular families are more susceptible to abuse occurring than others.

The book has an historical overview of the development of the law as it relates to the family. Scutt argues that although the face of the law has changed it is men's interests that the law represents in its interpretation and execution. She effectively uses case material to support this contention. It is only since the late nineteenth century that married women have been granted legal rights to property similar to single women, or have been granted the right to seek custody of the children of the marriage.

The book is then divided into chapters dealing with child abuse, child sexual molestation, spouse assault, marital rape and marital murder. Each chapter examines the extent of the violence inflicted and the effect on the victim(s). Usually the perpetrator is male, but in some cases may be the wife or mother. She examines many of the current ideas relating to family violence and finds that these are not confirmed from her study. When looking at child sexual abuse for example, she found that the majority of mothers neither knew about nor colluded with the sexual exploitation of their children, and that the daughters did not actively encourage the sexual behaviour. Both these ideas are common in our community and are often used as excuses for

taking no action or for avoiding placing responsibility with the perpetrator for his behaviour.

The remaining chapters examine the support and assistance available to victims of family violence. In the main women victims refused to seek help from family and friends, and where they did so, they found that the support they required was not forthcoming. This was also true of the support services and others that women went to.



Scutt argues convincingly that people are reluctant to intervene because society holds the views that the family is 'a stable unit defying outside intervention' (p.214) and that what occurs within the family is a private matter. Those men who were victims of spouse assault, who asked for help in fact received it.

Scutt examines the role of police in assisting victims of domestic violence and argues that the current laws are adequate to deal with it but that they are not adequately enforced.

In dealing with the experience of women in the courts she concludes that until 'fairness

extends to both women and men then discrimination through the legal system will continue to ensure that women who are victims of domestic violence find little help in the process of going to court' (p.259). Throughout the book the message is that women and children do not have equal rights with men, that they are less powerful, and have less access to resources. She argues that this contributes and leads to their victimization. Rather than men abusing women and children because the men are powerless she argues that they do so because they are powerful. Looking at ways of ending domestic violence she argues that if the laws already in existence were applied 'with non-sexist neutrality' then victims of domestic violence would be protected.

She goes on to argue that violence will continue until men and women have equal rights and that it is inequality in relationships in the family unit that must be eliminated. She argues that it is economic inequality that is at the base of unequal political and social power and that this must change for the current unequal relationships to alter. Scutt argues that it is men who have to alter these inequalities as they are in a position of power.

In reading the book it was not the incidence, nature or effects of the violence committed within families that was so powerful to me, but rather the extent to which our society condones this violence and legitimizes it, by either not believing victims, by not acting, or by encouraging women and children to remain within the family unit in the face of violence. Anyone who has experienced this personally or who has worked with women or children in this situation will be familiar with the experiences described.

The book provides overwhelming evidence of abuse suffered in families, and challenges the reader to evaluate his/her assumptions that the family in its current form is necessarily the best place for the realization of the optimum potential of its members.

While accepting the analysis offered relating to women's comparative inequality with men and the function of this in perpetrating family violence I found myself with questions such as why do some women collude with the abuse of their daughters when others in similar socioeconomic positions protect them? It was here that I fell back to considering individual members' psychopathology and their interrelationships, areas the book rarely covers.