

Book Review

Romito, P. (2008). *A Deafening Silence: Hidden Violence Against Women and Children*. Bristol, UK: Policy Press.

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We must ask ourselves why we find it acceptable to talk about victims of accidents at work or an earthquake or terrorist attacks and instead are filled with embarrassment if we talk about women who are the victims of male violence. (p. 168)

In *A Deafening Silence: Hidden Violence Against Women and Children*, Patricia Romito presents a thought-provoking and thorough examination of the mechanisms through which society hides, denies, and minimizes violence against women and children worldwide. More specifically, this book makes the provocative argument that despite the fact that it is most often *male* violence that is being discussed, popular discourse on violence toward women and children, both in mainstream society and in academia, often overlooks and ignores the important dimension of gender. By removing gender from gendered violence, Romito claims that the violence is being systematically hidden and distorted. Although she admits that the discourse surrounding violence against women and children has risen substantially in recent years, this discourse does not get at the heart of the problem unless it specifically addresses *who* is committing this violence and *how* it is being covered up by society. The focus of her analysis, then, is not violence against women per se but rather society's responses to and handling of that violence. Romito accomplishes this through a comprehensive examination and synthesis of literature, including research with international data. With the inclusion of international data, her analysis is strengthened because it allows her to show that many issues surrounding male violence against women and children exist across countries.

In the first chapter of her book, Romito examines the frequency of varying forms of abuse, including violence against women throughout their life cycle, and the relationship between gendered discrimination and violence. Here she reviews a broad array of international research and draws attention to the ways in which gendered violence is defined, recorded, and covered up. Particularly interesting is the way in which she disputes individual-level explanations for violence that deal with the characteristics of individual men. She replaces this presumption by arguing that confronting male violence is such an arduous task because it is built into social structure through the ideology of patriarchy. For example, Romito writes,

Far from consisting of behavior that is deviant or can be explained by the psychological problems of the individual man, male violence represents a rational means, which in order to work effectively, as in fact it does work, needs an organized system of mutual support and widespread complicity by society. (p. 22)

The structure of a patriarchal society is precisely the framework in which male violence is made possible. It is also the reason why it is so difficult to challenge; its eradication necessitates “bringing into question a structured and deep-seated system of control and privilege” (p. 22).

In her second chapter, Romito explains the theoretical framework guiding her work. Specifically, she employs materialist feminism in opposition to psychology or any naturalistic explanations for gender differences as the context of her analysis. In using materialist feminism, Romito analyzes the relationships between men and women in social rather than natural terms. Instead of occurring naturally, gendered relationships and roles are produced through social interaction. From this framework she also examines the ideology of patriarchy as a system that maintains society’s acceptance of male violence by presenting the subordination of women as natural and legitimate.

In this same chapter, Romito presents a very interesting application of Albert Bandura’s cognitive strategies that individuals often employ to resolve moral dilemmas. Such dilemmas may arise between awareness of a moral injustice and not taking action. For example, a moral dilemma may arise between witnessing or being aware of male violence and not being able or willing to react. These cognitive strategies allow individuals to change the meaning of the event and redefine the actions as something else, thus helping to hide and deny the action. This application is useful to her analysis because it illustrates the cognitive mechanisms individuals employ that ultimately hide male violence on a social level. It also lends support to her theoretical framework by providing an example of how relationships between men and women (in this case, violent relationships) can be understood in social terms. By illustrating how individuals work to cognitively redefine events to reduce the moral dilemma or dissonance that arises from awareness of male violence, Romito counters the proposition that it is inherently a “natural” phenomenon. If male violence were naturally (i.e., biologically or psychologically) occurring rather than socially enforced, the moral dilemma would not arise and these “hiding strategies” would be unnecessary.

Finally, at the end of the second chapter Romito draws attention to issues concerning the validity of her analysis. She wards off criticism by pointing out that the data included in this book come from many different countries, “where history, culture, religion, traditions, economic development, laws, organization of services and rates of violence also differ widely” (p. 39), and therefore generalizations should be made carefully. One of the strong points of Romito’s analysis is her willingness to provide such caveats to interpreting and generalizing international data throughout the text.

Particularly valuable to this work, the third chapter examines the specific tactics and strategies for hiding male violence that have been discussed more generally in earlier chapters. She defines strategies as “complex, articulated maneuvers, general methods for hiding male violence and allowing the status quo, privileges, and male

domination to be maintained” (p. 43). Similarly, she defines tactics as “tools that may be used across the board in various strategies, without being specific to violence against women” (p. 43).

Based on these definitions, the author identifies six techniques employed by society to hide male violence: euphemizing, dehumanizing, blaming, psychologizing, naturalizing, and separating. Each of these tactics is used on a daily basis to aid in hiding the violence, and the author’s in-depth individual examinations of them provide solid evidence for her argument.

Many of these tactics for hiding male violence are subtle, but the strength in Romito’s writing and analysis is her ability to show that their power comes precisely from their subtlety and their social invisibility. For example, the landmark of this innovative work is the author making us aware of the linguistic exclusion of the expression *male violence* in literature on violence against women and children. This is part of a euphemizing tactic to help individuals negotiate the moral dilemma and uncomfortable experience of specifically addressing male behavior. This subtle technique of linguistic avoidance is systematic, however. “The results of such a process,” Romito suggests, “are resounding: men disappear from the discourse on violence by men against women and children” (p. 45).

In this same chapter, Romito critiques the ways in which family systems theory and attribution theory address issues of male violence. She makes the strong assertion that proponents of these theoretical approaches add to the denial of violence by attributing blame to the victim or by keeping the violence hidden within the home. Romito also challenges and refutes many popular myths in the United States surrounding male violence against children during divorce. In particular, she addresses the accusations made by several “New Fatherhood” movements, which claim that there is often an increase in false reporting of child abuse made during marital separation as a result of “parental alienation syndrome.” This syndrome suggests that reports of child sexual abuse made during separation are *always* false and represent aggressive, hysterical, and spiteful mothers. Arguments such as these redirect the blame for male violence onto mothers, with the effect of hiding the actual child sexual abuse perpetrated by fathers. In the last chapter of the text, Romito critically examines legitimization and denial as two primary strategies that emerge from analyzing literature on male violence. Specifically, she considers how male violence is legitimized both within and outside the family, how denial is used to refute incest and pedophilia, how victims themselves engage in denial, and the phenomenon of women silencing themselves about male violence. Specific attention is paid to the sexual abuse of children inside the home and the prostitution industry within the public realm. Romito charges that there is no difference between the two, as both involve abuse, and she feels prostitution itself is intrinsically violent. Legitimizing strategies are most often employed to reduce the moral dissonance of both actions as well. The violence is not necessarily hidden as much as it is reconstructed as a legitimate act and therefore no longer defined as violence. For example, Romito

describes how sex tourists seeking children may maintain that there are no negative consequences for the girls they are hiring or that it might be better to earn a living as a prostitute than to perish from hunger. In both of these examples legitimizing strategies are used: the first representing a distortion of the consequences, the second illustrating advantageous comparison. By changing the meaning of the behavior in both examples, it is then thought of as a legitimate act rather than an act of violence, thereby hiding the violence inherent in child prostitution.

Romito's analysis synthesizes a strong theoretical framework and a seemingly exhaustive review of international research on various forms of male violence toward women and children. She easily makes the connection between individual acts of violence and the larger system of patriarchy creating a social milieu of complicity. The author's strong writing style forces the reader to challenge his or her own preconceived notions about gendered violence. She successfully argues that the first step in combating violence against women and children involves specifically addressing the perpetrators of such violence rather than solely focusing on the victims. Romito does admit that this may be an arduous and uncomfortable task when she writes, for instance, that there is

talk about violence towards women and children, but almost never of male violence, even if they describe husbands raping, maltreating and killing their wives. Rereading this text and international documents, in which the adjective "male" is added to the word violence, has the effect of a punch in the stomach, because it confronts us with a brutal reality. It is this reality we are trying to escape from when we use euphemisms or generic and imprecise terms. (p. 5)

She also challenges the widely held assumption that violence against women is difficult to combat because victims are silenced. She suggests instead that "we have gone from silence to noise, but with what capacity to get to the bottom of male violence and prevent it?" (p. 5). To hear the cacophony of victims' voices, the system of patriarchy that provides the framework for our social structure and provides the mechanisms to hide male violence against women and children must be challenged.

This is a valuable work because of its substantial contributions to the discourse and literature on violence against women and children. A challenging criticism to this book is that nonacademic readers might find the text inaccessible because it is so heavily laden with facts and data. The paradox, however, is that the inclusion of such a wide range and exhaustive list of research is also one of the book's major strengths. I recommend this text for upper-division undergraduate or graduate courses on gender for a critical analysis of violence against women and children.

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