Family ambiguity and domestic violence in Asia: Reconceptualising law and process

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The book *Family Ambiguity and Domestic Violence in Asia* (2013; Brighton: Sussex University Press) raises pertinent questions as to why the incidence of domestic violence has remained as a continuing scourge. The Focus section in this issue of The Newsletter provides the abridged version of select articles within the book. Seven scholars examine comparative experiences in the Asian context in order to gauge the effectiveness of family regulations and laws in diverse national, cultural and religious setting. Although the issue of violence against women (VAW) has received much attention from scholars, social activists, policy makers and international agencies, violence in the home has persisted. Though a universal phenomenon, VAW is also context specific. As domestic violence (DV) per definition takes place within a family setting, the specific forms of families and their supporting ideologies greatly affect the specificities of DV in particular contexts. Comparative cultural and national responses to the issue have shown that the ambiguity of family underscores some of the gaps between the conceptual, legal and process-oriented solutions to the eradication of VAW in society.

Maznah Mohamad and Saskia Wieringa
Family ambiguity and domestic violence in Asia continued

The culture defence discourse and the right to family and privacy, act to seal the family as an isolated and autonomous unit. A human rights perspective is needed to re-situate the family within the justice system. Violence against women is reinforced by the state conception of family as a private domain, as well as the notion of the harmonious family being the foundation of the nation. Male authority over the family and the women in it is further imposed as a religious norm.

As has long been acknowledged, the family is no longer seen as primarily a site of production and reproduction, but also as a locus of tension and conflict, with violence among intimate partners being one of its manifestations. By conceptualising this issue as stemming from the family context, bestriding the private-public domain, this collection of research articles aims to uncover some of the sources of the difficulties and paradoxes in understanding domestic violence as an all-encompassing problem, from its legal to its cultural dimension.

Articles in this Focus section start from the conceptualisation of family as sited within both public as well as private domains; and herein lies the source of its ambiguity. When the state intervenes in family matters (as in policies on reproductive health and in criminalising domestic violence) the family is treated as a public concern. However, the state takes a liberal stance on respecting individual human rights or even multicultural rights, when the sacredness of family as a private domain is emphasised. There are also extremes in degree of state intervention upon the family. States that enforce Sharia - Muslim laws - do not even limit the extent of their intervention upon private, individual and family lives, but for the most part, reinforce masculine dominance. Other states are selective about when and how they intervene. If domestic violence is conceptualised as a private hurt that leads to public harm, the state criminalises the offence; but when domestic violence is presented as being rooted in gender inequality and in need of more than just a legal solution, then the nature of state intervention may be more ambivalent.

Contextualising the analysis of domestic violence within the notion of family ambiguity thus allows the issue to be explored from its multi-faceted aspects. At the policy-level, it is hoped that these questions can throw new light on how the state should relate to the family as an ‘ambiguous’ unit, often used to represent the unified state, yet in contrast to the state itself when ‘family’ is considered a private domain. By theorising and presenting field evidence around the issue of ‘family ambiguity’ this volume studies the various intervention measures used to affect family and its positive and negative possibilities. The three main focal points of the book - Concept, Law and Process - are explicated below.

Concept

Articles under the rubric ‘concept’ capture some of the more salient debates surrounding the issue of domestic violence. There are conceptual issues that are still not reconciled or continue to be disputed, yet contribute towards how advocacy, law, policy and cultural norms are being shaped.

Culture-as-defence

One of the more prevalent defences of why violence happens in the home is that certain cultural and religious doctrines allow for its use, and that by using it, the boundaries of cultural and religious distinctiveness are defended. Hence, domestic violence can be viewed as being a culture in and of itself, explains Aza in her article. But she cautions that culture merely represents a socio-political symbolic discourse, which changes over time. By analysing several international cases of domestic violence, Aza excavates how and why domestic violence continues to be erroneously placed within culture and why the intersecting issues of privacy, culture and honour with violence have gotten in the way of granting justice to victims of domestic violence. The culture defence discourse and the right to family and privacy, act to seal the family as an isolated and autonomous unit. A human rights perspective is needed to re-situate the family within the justice system. In this, state action and inaction sometimes work against this as they tolerate, if not encourage, domestic violence.

DV: Neutral or gender-based?

Another conceptual paradigm that has muddled the debate on domestic violence is the question of whether domestic violence should be seen as a neutral wrong rather than one that is specific to gender discrimination. The profound ambiguities that these debates reflect are relevant to the Asian context. It shows how universal the idea of family and its link to the perceived dichotomy between private and public has become. As our Asian case studies illuminate, at one level there is successful mainstreaming of the domestic violence issue implying feminist collaboration with institutions such as social work, healthcare or the criminal justice system. However, these are not necessarily in tune with the feminist position on domestic violence, as a form of violent discrimination against women.

The other dilemma is that while the human rights approach has succeeded in eliciting a state response to domestic violence, criminalisation must also include preventative and protective support measures. However, there is still scant recognition that violence is intrinsically related to gendered inequality between men and women, a conceptual flaw that would need to be addressed all over the world.
Family as state construction

In exploring the breadth and depth of domestic violence, the family as social construction forms part of the intriguing puzzle. Just as state prerogatives have shifted, so has the image of the family. Nandy traces the trajectory of family regulation vis-à-vis domestic violence in India, where there have been major shifts in legislation and its discourse. Outlining ancient Indian family’s attempts at self-regulation, to modern state-based regulation, Nandy’s contribution makes note of different forces that have buttressed the notion of family privacy and sanctity all along. She argues that rights to conjugality have always superseded that of the individual’s.

In locating family as a state construction, Ganapathy analyses the tenor of state paternalism when the proposed Bill on Family Violence was rejected after 30 days of parliamentary debates in Singapore. The grounds for this was that it would be detrimental to the family. The bill was said to be at odds with the state’s defined role of the family, considered the “fundamental building block out of which larger social structures can be stably constructed”. Popular sentiment has it that criminalisation is neither an appropriate nor an effective method to deal with abusers against their own family and that social service agencies are preferred over police intervention. 

Provisions in the 1987 Philippine Constitution define Philippine sexuality, and shape Filipino’s “consciousness of what is acceptable and unacceptable, what is normal, and what is deviant or perverse”, as Alipio argues. Marriage, the family and the nation are interlinked. The Constitution “recognizes the Filipino family as the foundation of the nation” and therefore the state will actively promote its development. Additionally, The Family Code of 1988 explicitly proclaims that parental authority over the family and the women in it is further of the harmonious family being the foundation of the nation. Male authority over the family and the women in it is further imposed by various laws.

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