

# INTERVIEW

Lori Chambers talks with Aysan Sev'er

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Aysan Sev'er, University of Toronto, writes extensively on sexual harassment, intimate partner abuse of women, links between separation and violence, and such cross-cultural forms of wife abuse and extreme violence against women as "honour killings" and "dowry murders." Her latest book on women who have left their abusive partners *Fleeing the House of Horrors* [see review in this issue] was awarded the Canadian Women's Studies Association 2004 Annual Book Prize. She is also the founder and the general editor of *Women's Health & Urban Life Journal*.

Lori Chambers, Lakehead University, serves as Secretary of the Canadian Women's Studies Association/ Association Canadienne d'Etudes des Femmes, serving as a member of the selection committee for the CWSA/ACEF Book Prize for three years. She also sits on the Editorial Board of *Atlantis*

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Chambers

I loved your book and think that it provides a powerful reminder of the urgency of domestic violence as a social problem.

In the introduction you are clear about your feminist commitment to eliminating violence against women and you speak movingly of your first exposure to family violence as a volunteer translator in the early 1970s. Did any specific incident bring you to this topic as a researcher, or were you compelled by the evidence from your book on divorce, or by the weight of examples to which you were indirectly exposed in the classroom?

Sev'er

First of all, let me start by saying that receiving the CWSA Book Award [2004] is a special honour for me. This book represents not only a very difficult research project I conducted on a very sensitive topic, but also represents the voices of women who have been often ignored or marginalized in at least a long portion of their lives. By honouring my book, the CWSA has honoured and legitimized their often lonely and isolated struggles.

Now, coming back to your question: it is true that my 1970s exposure to Rosie, a severely abused young woman, became the single most important event that made me aware of violence issues. It is also true that other events contributed to this interest during most of my career. Talking about this issue, teaching about this topic, some other studies I conducted on divorce, and hearing the stories that my students have told me kept up and increased this interest. My volunteer work at a women's shelter also added to the passion. So, in hindsight, what happened is that I incrementally developed a passion and a hunger for

understanding about violence against women by intimate partners, after my jolting experience of meeting Rosie. Even though I did not have the sociological or feminist tools to articulate this experience in the early 1970s, what was so unnerving for me was to think that Rosie loved her husband, and as an immigrant woman, her husband was still the closest person she would rather be with, as abusive as he was. In other words, as unique as her individual trauma was, Rosie represented many women. For me, this aspect makes abuse a social problem, rather than an individual misfortune.

Chambers

In chapter one, you affirm that abuse "goes beyond the bruises, cuts and broken bones. It also includes impairing self-esteem and confidence and hollowing out souls" (20). I agree, but how does one measure or evaluate the impact of such abuse (asked from the perspective of a legal historian)? More importantly, how should the law and society respond in order to eliminate this form of violence?

Sev'er

As I tried to show in many different chapters of my book, I am very well aware of the dilemma women/feminists feel about incorporating psychological forms of abuse into discussions/analyses of violence against women. Rightfully, what is at stake here is the possibility of "diluting" violence, and opening the floodgates to men's complaints. However, as I tried to argue, the "hollowing out souls" is something real for many women I came across, and it is the product of years and years of erosion of who they are. In my view, the complete degradation and the relentless assault on women's self-esteem and confidence are serious forms of abuse that are in need of feminist analysis. We should not shy away from acknowledging, studying and confronting such abuse. This form is different and much more insidious than just calling someone names or shouting or nagging, which women are sometimes

accused of. This form of abuse dismantles their personhood.

How do we measure it? The question you ask is very relevant. I don't think we can develop fancy scales (like the CTS scale I critically evaluate in my book) to measure this type of abuse, because such scales do not capture the essence of this type of abuse. However, when women are given a chance, they do articulate better than anyone else what this type of abuse did to them. One of my interviewees said she felt as if she was under a thick layer of cement. Through her words, I was able to "hear" and "see" and "feel" the intensity of her suffocation, and I am sure that my readers also felt this through the choice of her words. I think this is a form of measurement without the need to attach a quantitative value to make her experience legitimate. Although they may use totally different words, we can measure the prevalence of suffocation in abused women's lives, or the loathing they develop towards their bodies that have been labeled as fat. Individual experiences can lead us to the formulation of dimensions that clarify abuse and its impact.

How should the society respond to psychological violence? I think the key to this question should lie in early (and later) socialization and education. Maybe, in a "perfect" world, young children would learn about the importance of self-esteem just like they learn about reading, writing and math. The key is not only to develop a healthy concept of the self, but also to develop a healthy respect for other selves. In a more "realistic" world, the early school system could take on the emotional educative role, since personal family experiences may be much too varied and unreliable.

The response of the law is also problematic. Fortunately, there is already a precedent in the United Nations CEDAW (Convention to Eliminate Discrimination against Women) and DEVAW (Declaration to Eliminate Violence Against Women). These two documents clearly

imply that psychological violence, degradation and placing hurdles on women to prevent them from becoming who they want to be are all forms of violence. I am not suggesting a rigid codification of every possible instance of violence into laws since such codification may not be viable (or even desirable). However, through the eyes of a sensitized criminal justice system, the interpretation of abuse can easily incorporate the non-physical damage done to women. The closest example I can think of is Canada's Criminal Harassment (stalking) legislation. To my understanding, this legislation recognizes the terror women might suffer, although they may not have been physically injured. On behalf of the women, society could also ensure/demand monetary (access to housing, income etc.) as well as restitutive (counseling, therapy) compensations.

Chambers

You make the controversial assertion that in some "cultural contexts, men's behavior towards their partners will feed on pre-existing negative views of women and wives and find a sanctified milieu for the abuse they inflict. Political tendencies in Canada, however, minimize the role of culture in this equation, inadvertently denying an acknowledgement of the additional risks that some minority and immigrant women experience" (25). How can we promote understanding and discussion of the cultural component of abuse without perpetuating stereotypes and vilifying particular ethno-cultural communities? What legal changes are necessary to respond to such socio-cultural specificities?

Sev'er

Indeed, I make this assertion, but with a genuine fear that the concept of "culture" may be used to create new stereotypes or fuel the existing stereotypes against certain ethnic/racial/cultural groups. In Canada, we do take a lot of pride in having "universal" policies and "culture-blind" laws. On the other hand, every shelter worker, social-worker, law enforcement officer or lawyer

I ever talked to had come to the conclusion that we must be further sensitized to cultural variations. Understanding, responding to, and/or protecting women and their children is contingent on understanding the milieu within which their subjugation occurs. Unfortunately, just pretending that these things do not matter does not make the cultural vulnerabilities go away. I am afraid that we will do more disservice to abused women if we ignore their heightened vulnerabilities due to some cultural/patriarchal expectations that surround them. For example: in some patriarchal, tribal cultures, it is customary to kill women who complain about their marriages and seek a divorce. When people immigrate to Canada or any other host society, they do not check their entrenched belief systems at Customs. They bring it in with them. Thus, some immigrant women will be beaten to a pulp, but still refuse to call police, or seek shelter, or contemplate a divorce because a woman knows that what chains her has many more tentacles than her husband's abuse. Some extended families will inform the woman that she should not leave, no matter what happens, because she will bring "shame" to the families. Even some helping agencies may differentially treat her due to the visible symbols of her cultural affiliation, all under the guise of cultural blindness. These are realities for many abused women, and our "culture-blind" laws, as well-meaning as they may be, often fall short of helping their specific needs.

I think at least part of our dilemma is resolvable through attempting to really understand the complexities of cultures and to unpack the reification of the term. Each culture has strengths, and each culture has weaknesses. If we really attempt to understand them, cultural strengths can be summoned in dealing with the cultural weaknesses. Painting everyone with the same brush under the auspices of "culture blindness" will condemn women to increased risks. I think, as social scientists, it is partially our responsibility to

explore the complexities of culture rather than artificially removing culture from our language or as an incredibly powerful axis in our analyses.

Chambers

You point to the inevitability of the emotional drain on the researcher engaging in this type of work. How might these issues be addressed more widely within Women's Studies as a discipline so that we prepare ourselves for the emotional challenges of research? Given the mainstream emphasis on "neutrality" in research, how do we balance these concerns?

Sev'er

Like most other colleagues of my generation, my own academic career trained me about the "neutrality," "objectivity," and all other important constructions of the positivistic science. It is/was difficult to free myself as a researcher from these restrictions and chains. What is more, women of my generation did this more or less on our own, each one of us "inventing our own wheels." Most of us did it at a cost, too! Even when I was writing the book which we are discussing right now (*Fleeing the House of Horrors*), one of my highly respected (male) colleagues asked: "What are you going to say when they ask you about the generalizability of your results?" I remember the look on his face when I said "I am going to tell them that my results are not generalizable." I think he wanted to send me back to an introductory course on research methods!

There is almost always an "Achilles heel" with any really meaningful research, regardless of the topic. This vulnerability is that much more pronounced in research on violence. Our feminist methods courses must address the difficulties, and as researchers, we must talk about our own experiences and vulnerabilities. Text-book methods are desirable, but much too artificial in relation to the unpredictabilities embedded in research, especially when research involves the intimate lives of people. Yet students often come out of methods courses

thinking that if something goes wrong in their work it will be reflective of their incompetence. Things may go wrong despite the competence of the researchers. And, go wrong, they do! If we are free to share the methodological weaknesses without fearing to be negatively judged, the next generation of studies will be more immune to similar mishaps. However, traditionally, judgments have been so severe that most researchers have learned to impersonalize their work, and artificially cleanse it from the mishaps. I think the greatest accomplishment (or failure) of positivist methods expectations has been to produce immaculate methods accounts rather than immaculate methods experiences. Like immaculate births, immaculate methods are not possible; at least, not in social sciences.

I am heartened to see that more and more feminist authors are starting to add their honest experiences in the beginning of their books. As researchers, we are not perfect, and it does not help our research one bit if we pretend we are. The research process is not perfect either. However, despite many "imperfections," our research can be insightful and meaningful if we are as honest as possible about what we see, where we stand, and whether we allow ourselves to really "hear" what women tell us. Objectivity is not bad in itself, but demanding uncompromised objectivity is not realistic. The same goes for neutrality. As researchers, we often study issues that intrigue us, and this does not make our research bad, although it certainly may taint our claim for "pure objectivity." I think the challenge is not so much in trying to pretend to be objective, but rather trying to reflect the reality that is reflected to us, with the cognizance of our own stance and biases. It is also crucial, I think, to let our audience (students, readers, colleagues, etc.) know about where we stand and why, and let them decide for themselves about the merit of what we have done.

Chambers

You assert that we have before us a "challenge to create definitions of love based on mutuality, integrity and respect rather than on a conceptualization of power, control and possession" (137). How would you envision this project of transformation? Related to this, how do we raise a generation of young women to recognize the telltale signs of violence, jealousy and possessiveness?

Sev'er

To be honest, I do not know the magic bullet that slays the monster of violence. I wish I did. However, being a die-hard educator, I will place my bet on the early as well as life-long socialization and education processes. I think self-respect is learned, and those who truly respect themselves do not allow others to abuse them and/or do not feel the need to abuse others in order to cover up their own bruised selves. Whether we like it or not, some of this early learning takes place within the family environment. However, some families are the worst place for the development of a healthy self. I guess schools can provide a more neutral environment to expand the learning to include not only the basics, but also the interpersonal and gendered relations. I think giving children and youth a "safe" environment to explore their developing selves with nurturing male and female role-models is crucial. Preferably, male and female role-models should be holding equal or equivalent power and status positions. Within this context, discussions about the personal, social and cultural consequences of violence may also be explored and conflict resolution without reverting to violence can be practised. I think training girls as well as boys is a must, if we hope to positively impact their future interrelations.

The telltale signs of violence can be subtle or overt. Almost all of my respondents mentioned such signs. However, like most societies, our own society also gives mixed messages when it comes to complex feelings

such as love. Overtly or covertly, we teach girls that love involves selflessness and sacrifice while at the same time we teach boys that love includes possession, control and dominance. I think we still have a way to go in de-feminizing love for girls/women and de-masculinizing love for boys/men. Then, and only then, girls may be more likely to see the danger signs of controlling behaviours that are often precursors to other forms of abuse. Men may also learn more balanced conceptualizations of love and reaching out to others.

Although I truly believe what I said about the importance of the socialization process, I equally believe that the elimination of violence requires structural changes. Governments, business, education must develop the resolve to break down stereotypes that denigrate women, and equalize the opportunities that are extended to boys/girls/ and men/women. We all hear about pay equity, childcare, affordable housing and a host of other promises that have serious implications for women's lives, at least during election times. However, women are still more disadvantaged than men in all of these dimensions. We all hear about the fact that the criminal justice system is gender and culture blind, but know they are infested with both hidden biases and discrimination. Unless we assure equity and equality at the macro level, it would be unrealistic to expect it to develop within intrapersonal dimensions.

Chambers

Your revelation that three-quarters of your participants had experienced a negative interaction with professional support systems is shocking and disturbing. It is imperative that this be improved. What suggestions would you make for the transformation of support networks?

Sev'er

Indeed, this aspect is very bothersome! Since the 1970s shelter movement, there has been a lot of emphasis on changing the stereotypes of women victims of partner

violence, and I am sure that many gains have been made. To my knowledge, many Canadian front line professionals (police, social workers, etc.) are utilizing gender-sensitive training programs to create special units to deal with intimate violence. Nevertheless, the experiences of my respondents clearly show that much more needs to be done!

I think we have to direct more energies and efforts to education and awareness programs about violence. When efforts are "patchy," we end up in the situation that my interviewees have described. For example, if we concentrate all of our efforts on training and sensitizing the police, women may still have negative experiences in their dealings with social workers, medical personnel, legal and paralegal personnel, judges, etc. Work loads, language and cultural barriers also compound the problems. I think our sensitivity building programs should also address the wear and tear that dealing with intimate violence engenders in front-line workers. These are not easy things to talk about, let alone resolve, even in highly sensitized feminist circles. The issues are that much more treacherous amongst the general population.

The inroads that feminist efforts have made into the realm of intimate violence may not be as deep as one may think. Often, abused women are still shunned by neighbours, extended family and friends. The following episode shows that not only the women, but people who work with them are also tainted, at least, in some people's minds. Shortly after my book was published, I was invited to talk on an interactive radio show (from Calgary). During the forty or so minutes of the program, numerous callers did everything possible to tell me that the "real" victims of interpersonal violence were men, since women "lied," "cheated," and "badgered" their mates. I myself was accused of being too naïve in falling for such "lies." The highly respected host of the show was also very sympathetic to the cynicism of his callers. Although very

unnerving, this was surely an eye-opener for me. The prejudice against victims of abuse is so deep-rooted that I don't think we can solve the problem unless we confront it at all levels. Training the police or other front-line workers is a must, but not enough since abused women's negative experiences come from varying sources.

Chambers

It is brave and important that you address the issue of women's own violence within relationships (with partners and with children). How do we promote discussion of these issues - and thereby provide information necessary to improve services that these women need - without perpetuating stereotypes that women contribute to their own victimization or that they are equally violent to men? Was this section of the book particularly challenging to write?

Sev'er

To say that writing this portion was "difficult" does not really do justice to the heart-wrenching dilemmas I faced and continue to face. As your question attests, the reasons are obvious: when we talk about women's own violence, we open the flood-gates to every undesirable prejudice against women victims of violence. Such efforts are in danger of being misunderstood by well-meaning but naïve readers as well as by those who call themselves "gender-neutral." Such efforts are simply dangerous because backlashes deliberately misuse the findings to dismantle the feminist gains in the violence area. I also fear that some feminist colleagues saw this portion of my work as an act of disloyalty to the feminist cause, and some even said so to my face.

So, what drove me to include the infamous chapter on women's violence? The simple answer is that it contains important information the women chose to tell me. As a feminist, I did not (and still do not) feel justified in censoring part of their experiences while at the same time claiming to give "voice" to these women.

It is their voices that talk about abuse and their voices that talk about their own violence.

I believe that there is a qualitative difference in when and how women use intimate violence. Many feminists, including the Dobashes from the U.K., and Bart from U.S., have written on this qualitative difference. For example, women generally use violence as a last resort, rather than as a preemptive strike. They may also use violence to protect their children. Although rare, they may kill if and when they feel that they are going to be killed.

Of course, this does not excuse their violence, but helps to put women's violence in a context that is less likely to be misused or exploited by anti-feminists. However, because of our fears of addressing women's own violence, most of these arguments are still at the "hypothetical" level. In contrast, the experiences of my respondents are not hypothetical, yet very much in line with what feminists have hypothesized but have been reluctant to test. Thus, the experiences of my respondents not only allow theoretical insights but also may carry policy implications.

On this issue, I would like to go a step further and make a more general observation. I am afraid that the more "respected and respectable" feminist theory and feminist research gets, the more protective we become in preserving this "respectability" in the eyes of the mainstream. This is a dilemma, because one of the major premises of early feminist thought was a critique of the rigidity of the mainstream. As an aging feminist, I still want to retain the "freshness" feminist thought brought to academe where hard questions were asked and discussed despite their possible repercussions. I wish we could retain some of that freshness and belief in change, rather than let our fears (of being judged, of being misunderstood, of being misused) block the questions that need to be asked. Your questions touched upon some of these aspects (difficulty of dealing with psychological abuse;

difficulties dealing with women's own violence; difficulties with dealing with culture), and I am so glad they did. Undoubtedly, these are difficulties that I have no clear answers for, with the exception of the strong belief that we should keep on addressing them until we have clear (or clearer) answers.

Chambers

In retrospect, are there aspects of this project that you would have approached differently?

Sev'er

Wish lists on what we could/should have done are endless. This research is no exception. Without going into details, there are two things that I really would have liked to do differently. The first one is to turn my work into a longitudinal, panel study. It would have been very insightful if I could have re-visited the same women after a year, and maybe even after a few years. I talk about the enduring effects of the abuse they have suffered, often in women's own words. Not only as a researcher, but also as someone who has been privy to some of the most intimate details in these women's lives, I would have liked to see if/how time mends and heals some of these wounds.

Another aspect from my wish list would be the ability to interview the children. I wrote a lot about the children of abused women, indirectly, through what their mothers told me. As a feminist sociologist, I believe that in ending (or not being able to end) the violence, the children are the key. Obviously, there were telltale signs that children suffered tremendously due to the violence they witnessed or directly suffered. My research would have been much more insightful if I could have also given voice to their experiences.