

Genderpeace

A story about trafficking, domestic violence and violence against women

Rebecca Dudley

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‘Genderpeace: Unfolding Powerful stories about gender and peace,’ at Riddell Hall, Belfast.

The conference was intended to explore ‘gender conscious’ practices of peacemaking. It has been published in a book of the same title given to conference participants. The conference and publication were organised by Mediation Northern Ireland with support from the European Union Regional Development Fund.¹

Peace to those who are far off and peace to those who are near

(from Eph 2.17)

1. Qu Mei Na and her story

In June 2004, the body of a 22 year old Chinese woman was found in Belfast. She had been stuffed in a bin bag, in the boot of a Ford Escort parked at a petrol station in Antrim Road. This story starts here.

A woman was murdered far from her home. When her body was discovered, no one could be found who knew her name. It’s a story about trafficking, domestic violence and violence against women.

¹ The Genderpeace conference was part of the MOST project run by Mediation Northern Ireland - a four year Peace III funded project aimed at developing and supporting key institutional capacity in Northern Ireland by enhancing resilience to address issues of segregation, racism and sectarianism.

The press reported that police confirmed that links with both Triad gangs and a suspected brothel in North Belfast were possible lines of inquiry.² However, the next day police were looking at the possibility that her murder was a ‘domestic incident’ and not linked to criminal gangs.³

Using dental records, a passport photo and fingerprints, it took police two months to identify the young woman. Her name was Qu Mei Na, from Dalian City in Liaoning province of China.⁴ It seems she was in Ireland for 18 months. She had travelled from Dublin to Belfast by bus several days before her murder. In August 2004, the police officers who detected the crime travelled to north-eastern China to inform her parents of the death of their only child.

In March 2005 a Methodist church in Craigavon conducted a memorial to honour her life, attended by church people, the Chinese Welfare Association and police officers.⁵ They remembered a young life and the grief of her family, affirming the dignity of a woman whose body had treated as rubbish.

Some months later, the Joint Committee on Human Rights at Westminster issued a call for evidence about the nature and scope of human trafficking in the United Kingdom. By then, I had changed jobs and was working for the Children’s Law Centre, after several years of working on Human Rights for Women’s Aid. Thinking about Qu Mei Na, I decided to collect evidence.

I already had a day job, so after the washing up was finished every night, the research began. Most nights I worked late, sometimes past midnight. What happened to Qu Mei Na? Who else was out there in the shadows? I wanted to find out what professionals knew: social workers, clergy, Women’s Aid, Simon Community, Citizen’s Advice, lawyers. People told me about the world of

² Maureen Coleman, 'Who Is She? Links with Underground Sex Trade and Triad Gangs Feared', *Belfast Telegraph* (2004).

³ Claire Regan, 'Murdered Woman 'Was Strangled'', *ibid.*

⁴ Bimpe Fatogun, 'Victim's Parents Informed of Murder of Only Child', *Irish News* (2004).

⁵ Maureen Coleman, 'Services for the Chinese Murder Victim', *Belfast Telegraph Digital- Online Archive* (2005).

abuse and exploitation they were seeing: 'We try to say what is happening,' one social worker said. 'but no one wants to know.' Other researchers helped too: Neil Jarman at ICR told me about some obscure police stats; Linda Moore at University of Ulster helped me with research methodology.

After 8 weeks of double shifts and weekends, I had found evidence of women and girls trafficked for sexual exploitation, foreign nationals and local, exploited labour, and unaccompanied minors who disappeared from social care. Throughout, I asked about Qu Mei Na. The answers were curious:

'I did ask about the young woman murdered but this was not regarded as trafficking as they [in context this referred to 'police'] say she was a prostitute by consent.'⁶

And:

'The Chinese woman found murdered in the boot of the car—there is so much silence! But from rumours it appeared that she was brought over on false pretences and had been charged outrageous sums of money. She had been working in a restaurant. She didn't want to go into prostitution and the rumours were that she escaped from Dublin to Northern Ireland, and then she was tracked down and killed.'⁷

I began to understand that trafficking for sexual exploitation is on a continuum of violence against women and girls. They have so many things in common. For example, for every expression of violence against women and girls--whether rape, domestic violence, prostitution and involvement in the sex trade, or trafficking—there is a perception in wide currency that victims have given their consent to abuse. That perception, of consent, is the largest single reason for social attitudes that tolerate abuse of women and girls. The killer of Qu Mei Na

⁶ Email correspondence to author 18 November, 2005.

⁷ Conversation with author, December 9, 2005.

used this perception for his defence. At the trial, he professed to be her caring boyfriend. She wanted to be a prostitute, he said. He killed her, he said, in a fit of righteous anger, he loved her so much.

Forms of violence against women are connected by the danger that goes up when women try to escape, as Qu Mei Na had evidently tried to do. There are links too, in the difficulty recognising the problems, and the difficult burden of proof.

In January 2005, Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland submitted testimony to Westminster, the first research on trafficking on Northern Ireland, 75 pages. The press asked the police about it, and they said that there was no evidence a problem. But that is not surprising. Like other forms of violence against women, trafficking comes to light first when people escape and find help: clergy, social workers, and community workers. Like other forms of gendered violence against women, like domestic violence, law enforcement and statutory agencies would be the last to know. Against the denial, Women's Aid stood their ground: trafficking is happening here. A few months later two of us travelled to parliament to testify; there is a web link to the testimony in your materials.⁸

Meanwhile, police read the research and used it as one starting point for their work. Within constraints of confidentiality and safety, I helped police as much as I could with networking and training. One day in 2007 I got a phone call from a police detective I had never met before. He had just come from court. Two men had been convicted of the killing of Qu Mei Na. The first was convicted of murder, assault, and false imprisonment; the second of assault, false imprisonment and assisting an offender.

⁸ <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/jt200506/jtselect/jtrights/uc1127-i/ucmemo4.htm>

In 2008, the Northern Ireland Office began supporting Women's Aid to provide safety and support for women who had been trafficked for sexual exploitation. In addition to thousands of victims of domestic violence and thousands more of their children, Women's Aid has since then supported over 100 women and girls who have been trafficked. The next year UK government signed a Council of Europe treaty binding them to certain obligations for safety support and justice. In 2013, Women's Aid staff, police officers, journalists and lawyers and social service providers, politicians, and church people are working on trafficking. Trafficking for sexual exploitation and labour has been well documented. The Chief Constable regularly refers to police work to catch traffickers and rescue victims.

This is great. But there is a final challenge I would like to note here. It comes up regularly in conversation usually with earnest church people (a bit like myself).

⁹ The dialogue goes along these lines:

Person: What can we do....about trafficking in Northern Ireland?

Me: Trafficking for sexual exploitation is mostly a crime of violence against women. If your church is concerned about trafficking it should be concerned about violence against women. What you can do is start with the most common form of violence against women, domestic violence. There probably aren't victims of trafficking in your church. But I am certain there are victims of domestic violence.

At that point I am reminded of the gospel story where the guy gets an answer he doesn't like, and his face falls, and he walks sadly away.¹⁰ Women's Aid has

⁹ First, the person professes shock at the explosion of trafficked people in Northern Ireland. But, I reply, there is not an explosion of trafficked people in Northern Ireland. Trafficking is a symptom of inequality. The numbers in Northern Ireland, and the world, are proportionate to widening inequalities and movements of people.

¹⁰ See Mark 10: 17-30

this sort of conversation regularly, drawing the links between the forms of coercive power and control that create both domestic violence and trafficking.

Patterns of coercive control of women takes many forms, and trafficking is one.

. Trafficking is closely linked to other forms of organised exploitation (prostitution as it is usually practiced) and violence (violence in the home). Like other gender based violence, trafficking exploits inequalities: gender, age, disability, immigration status, ethnicity. Women and girls vulnerable to trafficking have often fled childhood abuse or domestic violence. Domestic violence also follows patterns of coercive control, growing in frequency and severity, it can lead to mental and physical harms and sometimes death.¹¹

2. Violence against women and peace-making

In passing, I want to note that human rights standards make connections between the forms of violence against women, inequality and discrimination. The UN Committee charged with protecting and defending women's rights against discrimination write the following: (CEDAW preface, Gen Rec 19):

‘violence against women is a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between women and men,’ and that

‘violence against women is one of the crucial social mechanisms by which women are forced into a subordinate position compared with men.’

At its root, violence against women in all its forms is a threat to both democracy and peace. Peace in spaces that are public is no peace at all until peace has extended to intimate and private spaces of society. In the early 1990s Rhonda Copelon made a convincing argument for parallels of the experience of domestic violence with the experience of torture in detention. She concluded,

¹¹ The vast hinterlands of internet porn, for example, frequently are records of a series of crimes being committed. For example, I once heard a report of a rape where a woman said she realised credit card details being taken in another corner of the room as the assault took place.

‘Gender violence illustrates paradigmatically the impossibility of imagining democracy or peace without addressing inequality and oppression at every level, from the official to the intimate.’¹²

The experience of Women’s Aid, for example, has a lot to offer those who wish to be peace-makers. Why? Because since the late 70s, when Northern Ireland was the principle conflict site of Europe, the movement against domestic violence was building spaces of safety, support and justice. The activists learned that to succeed, they had to challenge abuse in all its forms and the social attitudes that tolerate it.

In the final part of this comment, about trafficking, domestic violence and violence against women, I would like to make four proposals for ‘gender conscious practices of peace-making.’

i. Acknowledge the power of community.

You may have heard the saying that it takes a village to raise a child. I would like to suggest to you some variations. First, it takes a lot of people to collude with injustice and oppression when it happens on a grand scale. But equally, second: it takes a lot of people to expose it and challenge it. When I started asking, people had already been working in the shadows with victims of systematic sexual exploitation for years. They told their stories to me. Then lawyers, journalists, politicians and others carried it further, and now as we speak Women’s Aid workers and others are stuck in, helping victims get their lives back. It takes a village. You don’t have to do it all. Figure out the part that falls to you.

¹² Rebecca Cook (ed.), *Human Rights of Women: National and International Perspectives*, ed. Bert B Jr Lockwood (Pennsylvania Studies in Human Rights Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994) 636. at page 145.

ii. Challenge walls, starting with the ones in your head.

When women started talking about their experiences of violence in the home, the result was the famous feminist saying that the ‘personal is political.’

Domestic violence wasn’t just random relationship breakdown, but symptom of power imbalance in society. Domestic violence wasn’t just one family misfortune but a social and political issue that challenged society.

If you know feminist theory you know it often starts by challenging what we see as a false dichotomy between public and private spheres, in this case public and private violence. For example, there is a social attitude, still shared by court officials and others, that the law is for public violence; and violence in the home is private. It has taken fifty years to get more judges and police to intervene in the violence that happens in private, and there have been great strides.

From within the Christian tradition the walls between the public and private bring to mind words in a letter for the church in Ephesus in the ancient world. ‘Speak peace to you who were far off and to them that were near ‘ (Eph 2.17). The letter was trying to persuade people to allow their faith to break down the walls separating a wider community. In that case, those who were near were those in the same religious tradition as the writer, the Jews; those who were far off were everybody else.

In the case of trafficking, people seem to feel it is much easier to speak peace to those who are safely far off, like, say, adolescent girls from Bulgaria and Moldova. Speaking peace to victims nearer to hand may feel more uncomfortable, say for example, a young northern Irish girl down the road, perhaps in contact with the law, also systematically coerced and abused by her boyfriend to provide sex for his friends.

Do you make a distinction between public and private violence and abuse? Or perhaps you find it easier to speak peace if people who are the victims of

violence and abuse seem to be far away and harder if they are near? These dichotomies are psychological walls and barriers to justice and peace. Challenge walls, starting with the ones in your head.

iii. Equip yourself to use more tools for peace-making, including an analysis of power.

In his seminal works on building sustainable peace, JP Lederach draws from the Hebrew Bible in Psalm 85, to remind us of four components of reconciliation. He quotes,

‘Truth and mercy have met together, justice and peace have kissed.’

To cover all four areas, truth and mercy, justice and peace, we need a range of tools. What are the tools in your toolbox to make peace? Perhaps you are a skilled facilitator as human vulnerabilities are exposed and shared in stories. But do you also have tools to help analysis the workings of power? For example, have you looked at human rights standards and how they work? Human rights standards, for example, provide measured and careful language to describe abuses of power. Human rights mechanisms include methods of bringing public awareness and accountability for them. More generally, are you equipped, trained, aware of other tools for justice, truth as well as mercy and peace?

Domestic violence, trafficking and other gendered crimes against women are coercive power and control. Sometimes peace-making is about finding out the truth about crimes that have been committed, and bringing offenders to justice.

iv. Acknowledge our share of the destructive conflicts of society.

I have said to you that trafficking exploits inequalities. As inequalities widen in the global world, the numbers of people trafficked will reflect that. We need to sharpen our tools to analyse power. We also need to acknowledge our own

involvement with the destructive conflicts that shape society. These are words in a commitment to the peace-making Corrymeela community. But they are consistent with a feminist approach that exposes overlapping forms of discrimination and abuse in which we are all entangled.

We need to make sober assessments of power, and not from the moral high ground, but from the ‘moral low ground,’ if you like. Some years back I led a session with women who were experiencing domestic violence, all white Northern Irish women. We were talking about discrimination as an excuse for abuse, including for example, racial and homophobic abuse. At the end, one of the women said, ‘Every woman should take this course. It made me think about whose rights I am not respecting and who in my life is not respecting mine.’ Well, exactly.

In fact, we all collude with forms of trafficking, because trafficking and other forms of exploitation need customers. Not just the sex trade, though yes, plenty of customers there. Maybe not us. But exploited labour can fuel conflict and violence too. We have other entanglements with power and violence. We carry reminders in our pockets and purses now. Take out your mobile phone. And consider this with me: every item we own with a screen needs Casseterite and Columbite-tantalite,...aluminum, lead, copper, tin, and in cases, gold end up in circuit boards of electronics, smartphones and laptops. If we trace supply lines...the journey takes us to places where destructive conflicts rage, like the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Human rights researchers have documented that Congolese minerals find their way to almost all electronics, and all big electronics companies are implicated. The stakes in this conflict are immense; winners, the local crime gangs and roving armies, take control and get rich from these minerals behind so many of our screens.

At least 8 million people have died in the DRC since 1999. From those who have survived, and about those killed, we hear obscene stories, on an inconceivable scale, of sexual violence and violence against women. I am not trying to paralyse you with guilt. If you are, go back to the first point. You don't have to do it all. Break down the walls we construct between public and private violence, near and far. Analyse power and how it is used. Then if we are honest, we will acknowledge our involvement in the destructive conflicts that shape this community we live in: our street, our world.

Four proposals for gender conscious peace-making practice:

- **Build community** and do the part that is yours to do.
- **Challenge walls** starting with the ones in your head; between violence in public and private spaces between those who are far and those who are near.
- **Consider your tools**, including an analysis of power.
- **Take the 'moral low ground.'** Consider how you and I contribute to destructive conflicts.

To Mediation Northern Ireland, thank you for this invitation to reflect on these issues. To all of you peace-makers, may I wish you all very well in the next chapters to your own stories.

Rebecca Dudley

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