

Research Brief

Intimate connections: Lone actor mass casualty attacks, violence against women and misogyny

Introduction

Male violence against women, especially in family and intimate relationships, has historically been considered 'private' violence. In recent decades unprecedented policy attention has been directed at family violence, and intimate partner violence in particular, as the most common type of family violence and violence against women (World Health Organisation 2013). This attention has accompanied increasing recognition of the public harm of 'private' violence (State of Victoria 2014-2016). Regardless, the dichotomy between what is considered public and private violence remains embedded in government policy, research and media reporting. This dichotomous approach is also hierarchical in the sense that 'public' violence is considered a greater threat to security than 'private' violence. This view persists despite evidence that 'private' violence against women results in far more death and injury than 'public violence' (Walklate et al 2019: 66-68). Mass casualty attacks are a form of public violence high on western states national security agendas. This research brief considers the growing body of evidence that demonstrates the intimate connection between lone actor mass casualty attacks in western countries, male violence against women, and misogyny.

The public/private violence dichotomy

Male violence against women, particularly intimate partners, has long been considered as distinct, separate and less significant than violence directed at strangers and the public (Scutt 1990: 445-62). There is a vast body of feminist scholarship that challenges the dichotomous approach to national security and women's everyday security (Stanko, 1990). This includes work which highlights the similarities and continuities between those acts of violence, categorised as terrorism in mainstream discourse, and 'patriarchal' (Johnson 1995), 'intimate' (Johnson 2008) and 'everyday terrorism' (Pain 2012) experienced by women. Framing violence against women as a form of terror (ism) locates women's security in the same frame as the 'public' violence associated with national security (Walklate et al 2019). Pain in her analysis of 'everyday' terrorism emphasises the political and social dimension of such terror by emphasising that 'domestic abuse, and the corrosive effects of the fears of those who suffer it, are not simply an issue of individual or family conflict—they relate to, and [are] sustained by, social inequalities at the level of society' (2012: 8). A notion of a continuum of violence is central to feminist scholarship on gendered violence (Kelly 1988). Cockburn (2013: 1) posits 'that violence of different types, on different scales and in different periods can be perceived as a series, a succession of events that have something in common and may be causally linked'. The continuum of violence perspective is a key feature of research that illuminates the connections between mass casualty attacks, violence against women and misogyny.

Mass casualty attacks

Mass casualty attacks include multiple homicides or injuries deliberately inflicted by an individual or group of individuals. For the purposes of this brief, the term is used to refer to attacks that are carried out in public and target strangers, noting however that targets frequently also include women known to the killer and killings in private dwellings. Those who engage in these activities are referred to by a variety of terms including mass murderers, mass killers, mass shooters, and terrorists. Clemmow et al 2020 suggest, given the overlap in categories, that lone actor

grievance-fuelled violence might be a useful generic term. The coordinated September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States by members of Al-Qaeda, were for a time considered the paradigmatic example of a mass casualty attack, and western states' primary national security threat (Ericson 2006). However, most mass casualty attacks, including terrorist attacks in western countries, are committed by lone men (Gill et al 2014). As a result, policy attention has increasingly turned to the threat posed by lone actors (McCulloch et al 2018), including 'lone wolf terrorists' (Hamm and Spaaij 2017).

The connection between mass casualty attacks and violence against women

Mass casualty attacks by lone actors, violence against women and misogyny are connected in three primary ways. First many of the biographies of lone actors included documented histories of violence against women. One Australian study published in 2004, focused on five men who committed mass casualty attacks, found that they had highly personal agendas arising from their own specific social situation and psychopathology, but no history of 'interpersonal violence' (Mullen 2004). More recent research, however, concludes that most lone actor attacks in western countries are carried out by men that have a known history of violence against women. Marganski's (2019) United States' study, concludes that '[c]ompelling evidence connects mass murder, a highly gendered phenomenon, to other types of violence; namely, VAW. . . One need not go far to learn about perpetrators' histories of domestic violence, sexual assault, stalking, online harassment, or other crimes' (8). Diaz et al (2019) considering violent extremism and misogyny point to a growing list of findings about the known histories of domestic abuse and misogyny in most perpetrators of acts of violent extremism. McCulloch et al (2019) similarly note that '[e]vidence of violence against women in the backgrounds of lone wolf terrorists continues to emerge' (443; see also Smith 2019).

The second connection between violence against women, misogyny and mass casualty attacks is that the latter often include violence against women. United States' research finds that mass shootings are often 'intermingled with acts of domestic violence'. Between 2009 and 2018, nearly all such shootings were committed by lone adult men who typically shot an intimate partner or family member as part of the shooting rampage (Everytown 2019). Criminologists Hamm and Spaaij 's (2017) US study of lone wolf terrorists between 1940 and 2016 found 'a noteworthy connection between lone wolf attacks and abuse of women' (122). Feminist scholars have, however, critiqued the author's framing of violence against women. According to McCulloch et al (2019) their analysis misrepresents many of the perpetrators as men who *turned* violent rather than violent men who escalated or continued their violence against women to include members of the public (447).

The third connection between violence against women, misogyny and mass casualty attacks is found in the category of attacks explicitly motivated by the hatred of women. This type of attack, which often specifically targets women, but also includes children and men amongst its victims, has been confined to North America but is seen to pose an increasing threat to Australia and other western countries (Tomkinson et al 2020; Hoffman et al 2020). In 1989 25-year-old Marc Lépine deliberately targeted and murdered 14 women at a university in Montréal in Canada. He left a note, blaming feminists for ruining his life (McCulloch and Maher 2020). More recent attacks have been carried out men who self- identify as 'incel' (involuntary celibate), who are part of the Men's Rights Movement, closely linked to white supremacy and argued to be an underestimated violent extremism threat

(Anti-Defamation League 2018).

Conclusion

Despite the evidence of the intimate connection between violence against women and mass casualty attacks police, security agencies, government, policy makers, and researchers have been slow to make the link. Where the connection is made its significance is often downplayed or misunderstood by adherence to a logically unsustainable distinction between 'private' and 'public violence'. The failure to take the connections seriously undermines efforts to better prevent and respond to lone actor mass casualty attacks, reflecting a continued tendency to deny, minimise excuse and normalise violence against women, particularly against intimate partners.

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