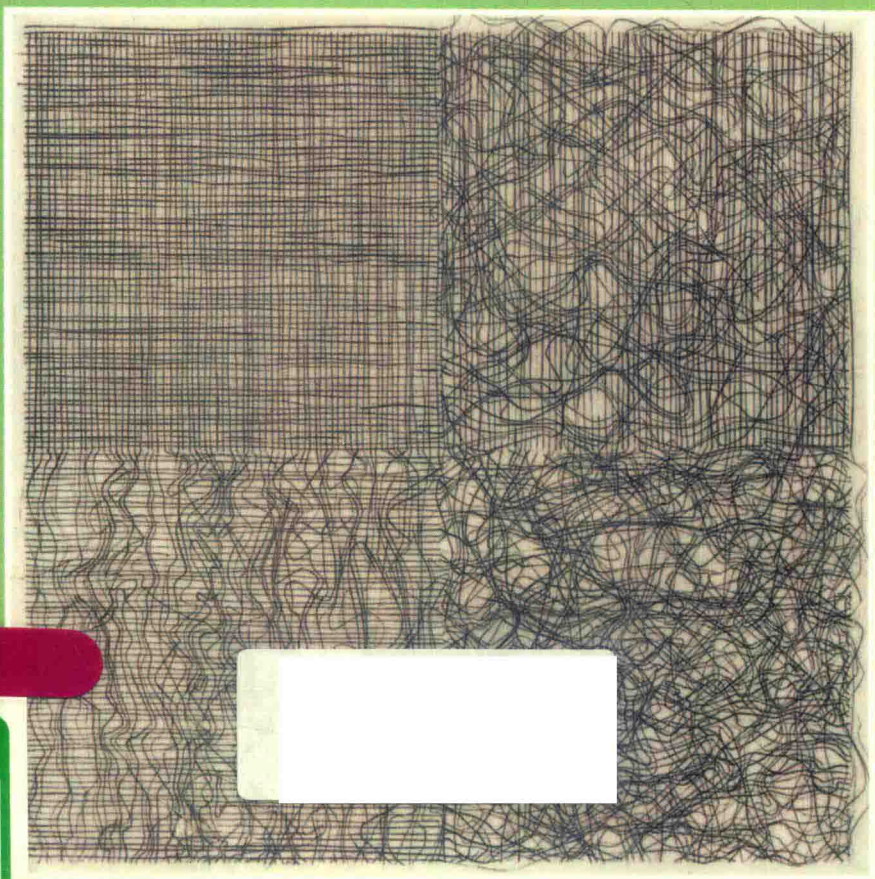


**Liz Kelly**

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# **SURVIVING SEXUAL VIOLENCE**



# Surviving Sexual Violence

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LIZ KELLY

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## Surviving Sexual Violence

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## Acknowledgements

Whilst 'breaking the silence' has become a feminist cliché in the past few years, it encapsulates an important fact. Feminism has provided a context in which many women, throughout the world, have been enabled to name their experiences of violence and abuse and to speak openly about them. This book was made possible by 60 women who chose to be part of this process. It is dedicated to them and all survivors of sexual violence.

As with any book and/or research project, there are many others to whom I am in debt for their support, advice and critical comments. I thank all of the following for their particular contributions: Catriona Blake, Louise Dunne, Annabel Farraday, Sophie Laws, Su Kappeler, Emma Kelly, Mick Kelly, Mary MacIntosh, George Okey, Kathy Parker, Jill Radford, Isobel Ros-Lopez, Penny Snelling, Betsy Stanko, Michelle Stanworth, Marga Suvaal, my local refuge support group, the British Sociological Association working group for women doing research on sexual violence, the Incest Survivors Campaign, the Rape in Marriage Campaign, and the Trouble and Strife Collective.

## Guide to transcription of interviews

Whilst transcribing the taped interviews on which this book is based I became aware of problems involved in transposing the spoken to the written word. Meaning in the spoken word is often conveyed through gesture, tone of voice and emotional expression. Surprisingly little attention has been paid to this issue in the research literature; the methods used in linguistics and conversational analysis are far too detailed for a number of in-depth interviews (in this case over 160 hours of tape). In order to retain some of the meaning that is lost in transcription, I developed a method for coding tone of voice and emotional expression. This guide explains aspects of this transcription coding which appear in the quotations from interviews:

A dash (—) indicates a jump; the spoken word is seldom as coherent as the written.

Three dots (. . .) indicate a passage of speech has been deleted.

Six dots (. . . . .) indicate a long pause.

*Italics* indicate that the word or words were stressed.

Emotional expression is recorded in brackets after the passage of speech it refers to: for example (angry), (ironic), (upset).

## Introduction

As I was thinking about the introduction to this book, two statements on the radio drew my attention. A woman speaker at the 1986 British Trade Union Congress urged trade unionists to take the 'epidemic' of cervical cancer seriously. In a commentary on international terrorism a male reporter stated that something must be done 'about the plague of violence that threatens our basic human rights'. When the incidence of cervical cancer is defined as an 'epidemic', what word could adequately reflect the vastly greater incidence of sexual violence in the lives of British women? When the impact of international terrorism is represented as a threat to basic human rights, what words could illuminate the fact that it is domestic terrorism which more directly threatens countless women's lives across the globe?

These examples do not simply illustrate the power of rhetorical speech. They highlight a deeper, more fundamental point: that it is only in relation to certain issues that such forms of argument are considered to be justified. When radical feminists point to the appalling incidence of sexual violence we are seen by many as hysterical and, even by other feminists, as placing too much emphasis on women's victimization. Most men and many women do not want to acknowledge the extent of sexual violence in, and its impact on, women's lives. It is still illegitimate for us to refer to it as being of 'epidemic' proportions, threatening women's 'basic human rights'. Yet a cursory reading of the UN Declaration on Human Rights in the light of recent feminist studies of the prevalence and impact of sexual violence highlights how many of these 'basic human rights' are still to be secured for women.

*Surviving Sexual Violence* is part of a growing body of feminist scholarship, primarily undertaken in but not restricted to first world liberal democracies, which documents the extent to which



women's and girls' rights to life and liberty are threatened daily. That such a fundamental assumption of liberal democracy is tenuous for the majority of the population yet not a major source of concern, suggests that there are vested interests at stake here – men's interests.

During the six months I was writing this book, a number of instances, or consequences of, sexual violence occurred to women in my social network: for example, an incest survivor attempted suicide twice in a week after a BBC Television Childwatch programme triggered her memories; a woman's life was temporarily devastated when her ex-husband raped her; two women were attacked near to their homes; a student's sense of safety was so undermined by a peeping tom that she left college; an incest survivor discovered her son's girlfriend was being abused; during 'rag' week, a woman teacher was pinned to the ground by several young men in masks and then photographed; three women were beaten up by their husbands/male lovers and, in just one week, in the refuge for battered women I work in one woman had a miscarriage and another her leg amputated as direct consequences of the violence they had experienced.

Despite feminist campaigns and actions in many countries which have, to a greater or lesser extent, made sexual violence a public issue, the prevalence and impact of sexual violence in women's lives is still not publicly acknowledged. In this context it is vital that the extent and range of sexual violence continues to be documented. Limiting our work to this, however, can result in women being seen as 'inevitable victims'. This book also records the other side of women's experiences: our resistance and strength in coping with and surviving abuse. Any woman who has gone through this process (and any woman who has supported another woman through the pain and despairing moments) will recognize the connection between victimization and survival. This book attempts to validate that knowledge and make some of it accessible to those without it.

*Surviving Sexual Violence* is based on a feminist sociological research project and has two basic aims: to present the 'findings' of the study; and to validate and give voice to women's experience and understanding.

There are points at which these two aims sit uneasily with each other, where to present the 'data' I have chosen to use figures and tables. I hope that overall the book can serve several purposes for

different audiences. It is a record of doing feminist social research; it presents detailed findings about the prevalence of sexual violence in the lives of 60 women; and it makes the voices of these women central to chapters 4 to 9.

Chapter 1 documents the process of conducting the research in the context of a broader discussion of what constitutes feminist research. Chapter 2 explores feminist theory which attempts to account for the link between men's interests and the abuse of women and offers some reflections on how to define sexual violence and on several contemporary debates. Chapter 3 presents a critical overview of the recent dramatic increase in social science research on rape, incest and sexual abuse and domestic violence. Chapters 4 and 5 build on some of the insights in feminist theory and suggest looking at sexual violence as a continuum, both in relation to extent of sexual violence and the range of men's behaviour that women experience as abusive. Chapter 6 highlights how it is in men's interest to deny this range and limit definitions of sexual violence, thus making defining one's own abuse a difficult and complex process for women. Chapters 7 and 8 document the side of women's and girls' experiences of sexual violence that is usually ignored – the extent of resistance during assault(s) and the variety of coping strategies used in coming to terms with the consequences of sexual violence. Chapter 9 reflects on how individual survival might be transformed into collective resistance in order to end sexual violence in the lives of women and girls.

Which parts of the book an individual reader reads, and the order in which they read them, will depend on their own needs and concerns.

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## 'Sharing a particular pain': researching sexual violence

*'It's only since getting a bit closer that I found out that one way and another it's happened to most women. Something similar, be it with their lovers, their husbands or whoever, has happened to them.'*

*'Because this society sanctions it, so long as it's alright to slag off women, to joke about women, there's always going to be the other end of the spectrum, where actual violence starts . . . . . and ends.'*

*'I felt more resentment about sex roles and the day in day out, as I see it, degradation of women. That's affected me more than the violence. But the violence has been part of it too. It has erupted through my rebellion against all the suppositions about women.'*

These three quotations from the interviews on which this book is based encapsulate the three core themes that run through it: that most women have experienced sexual violence in their lives; that there is a range of male behaviour that women experience as abusive; and that sexual violence occurs in the context of men's power and women's resistance.

The issue of violence against women has been an important focus for feminist theory and action in the current wave of feminism. The first rape crisis line was established in the USA in 1971 and the first refuge for battered women opened in England in 1972. Thousands of projects and groups now exist world-wide, offering safety, support and advice to women who have been abused. Campaigning and supportive work has also been undertaken around the issues of incest, child sexual abuse,

## 2 *Researching sexual violence*

pornography, prostitution and sexual harassment. Women in or from particular countries have also focused on forms of sexual violence specific to their culture.<sup>1</sup> Globally, the amount of work, often unpaid, undertaken by feminists around this issue is incalculable.

### **Getting and staying involved**

In 1973, after five months in a Women's Liberation Group, I joined a group which aimed to set up a refuge for battered women. I did not consciously choose to work on the issue of violence. I simply wanted to 'do something'. I became one of the founder members of the refuge group in my home town and, to the amazement of some (though not me), I am still an active member. Whilst in the subsequent fourteen years the group and I have changed enormously, it was there that I gained self-confidence, skills and an understanding of sexual violence and it is still the base for my feminist work and politics.

It was through supporting women in crisis, discussing theory and practice with other activists and comparing what I knew with what I read that the ideas informing the study on which this book is based arose. I noticed how many women had experienced more than one form of sexual violence yet these forms were separated from one another in feminist service provision, campaigning and research. This separation in practice contrasted sharply with the theoretical discussions of 'violence against women'. During the 1980s, a number of other studies have been published which address one or more of these issues,<sup>2</sup> but, at the time I began, most published work focused either on a specific form of sexual violence or on theoretical issues which assumed, rather than discussed, the links between forms of sexual violence. Experiences were seldom placed in the context of women's lives and, at that time, there was very little information or discussion about either incest and child sexual abuse or the long-term impact of sexual violence. I started the research project, therefore, with three main aims: to talk to a wide range of women about all the forms of sexual violence they had experienced; to explore how the various forms of violence were connected; and to investigate the long-term impact of sexual violence on women.

Throughout the research and the writing of this book I have

remained involved in both my local refuge group and several national campaigning groups. I was not involved in these groups because I was doing research and I did not 'use' them as sources of data. Involvement did, however, contribute in very direct ways as there was a continual exchange of information, ideas and support. Within the literature on research methods there is no term which covers this form of contribution, perhaps best described as 'active participation'. There is equally no term to cover the fact that I have talked to at least as many women again informally about their experiences of sexual violence as the 60 I interviewed. Whilst I kept no records of these conversations, I made mental notes if new insights emerged. As most women were interested in the research, I was able to discuss my current ideas and receive valuable comment and feedback.

### **But what is feminist research?**

Feminists have, since the early 1970s, criticized a range of academic disciplines for being gender blind.<sup>3</sup> As more feminists undertook research, increasing attention was paid to how research was done and the term 'feminist methodology' appeared within sociology. Being a feminist sociologist means that my discussion of research practice refers directly to my own discipline but many of the points I want to make apply across disciplinary boundaries. Part of my criticism of the discussion within sociology is that it ignores feminist research in other areas.

For a considerable period of time, I accepted, almost without question, that there was a feminist methodology, which drew on the practice of consciousness raising in stressing the importance of women's experience. Sophie Laws notes that within much of the sociological literature feminist research has been defined in terms of interviewing women. She suggests that this is in part due to a simplification of the original intention of consciousness raising.

The original purpose of consciousness raising, where women speak about their own experiences to other women, was to discover what women have in common, in order to produce theory about women's oppression. Now this last stage seems to have been forgotten and women speaking, whatever it is about and whatever they say, is seen as A Good Thing.<sup>4</sup>

#### 4 *Researching sexual violence*

She argues that much of the recent discussion of feminist methodology is linked to this interpretation and that, in a wider context, the focus on individual emotional release has become the most important function of consciousness-raising (perhaps accounting for the recent growth of self-help groups and feminist therapy).

This challenging interpretation led me to reconsider my perspective on feminist research and to see how limited the discussion of method had become. Rather than define certain methods as feminist, Laws asserts that what distinguishes feminist research is the theoretical framework underlying it. She suggests a minimal definition of feminism as 'a belief that women are oppressed and a commitment to end that oppression'.<sup>5</sup> For research to be feminist it must be predicated on both the theoretical premise and the practical commitment: its purpose being to understand women's oppression in order to change it. Feminism is, therefore, both a mode of understanding and a call to action.

Research is not feminist simply because it is about women and, equally, feminist research need not have individual women as its subjects. This definition allows for the fact that there is more than one theory explaining women's oppression and that a variety of research methods and sources of data can be, and are, used in feminist research. A major point of Laws' analysis is to reassert the importance of theory, partly in response to the prioritizing of experience by writers such as Liz Stanley and Sue Wise.<sup>6</sup>

A further limitation of the prioritization of experience is raised by Hester Eisenstein.<sup>7</sup> If women are to use only their own experience, or that of women similar to them, as the basis of their feminist politics and research practice, how are we to understand and take account of the differences between women? Prioritizing experience at the expense of reflection and theory can lead to a 'politics of identity'. In her attempt to make feminist theory inclusive of Black women's experience, bell hooks suggests that the ability to see and describe one's own reality 'is a significant step, but only a beginning'.<sup>8</sup>

Whilst accepting these critiques of the 'politics of experience' there is still a sense in which one's experience is fundamental to feminist research. Feminist researchers are themselves women and they are, therefore, located within the group whose oppression they seek to document, understand and change. This



locating of oneself within the group one is studying is not the same as Howard Becker's suggestion that sociologists take the side of the 'underdog'.<sup>9</sup> Feminist researchers do not have the privilege of choice; they are themselves within the underdog category. Angela McRobbie draws out one of the implications of this: 'Feminism forces us to locate our own autobiographies and our experience inside the questions we might ask'.<sup>10</sup> Feminists doing research both draw on, and are constantly reminded of, their own experience of 'the concrete practical and everyday experience of being, and being treated as, a woman'.<sup>11</sup> This does not mean, however, that it is only our experience, or the experiences of other women, which will be reflected in research; at least one feminist has suggested that we should study men.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, it is crucial that we explore the specific nature of our own experience, and that of the women who might be part of our study, in order to understand how it might differ from other women's.

Helen Roberts uses the sociological concept of 'reflexivity' to describe the process through which feminist researchers locate themselves within their work. Unlike non-feminists, we do not choose reflexivity as one research practice amongst many; it is integral to a feminist approach to research. Roberts notes that in being honest about this we

expose [ourselves] to challenges of lack of objectivity from those of [our] male colleagues whose ideological insight does not enable them to see that their own work is effected in similar ways by their experience of the world as men.<sup>13</sup>

The debate within sociology as to the discipline's status as a science, and the role of objectivity and values within this, has a long and complex history. The feminist critique of the construction of knowledge within a patriarchal framework has raised yet further questions.<sup>14</sup> To question the usefulness and, indeed, possibility of objectivity does not mean that feminist researchers reject any principles for ensuring that their work contains honest and accurate accounts. Barbara Du Bois, for example, maintains that feminist research should be: 'passionate scholarship . . . [which] demands rigour, precision and responsibility to the highest degree'.<sup>15</sup>

This discussion suggests that, whilst there are grounds for defining research as feminist, there is not, as yet, a distinctive