

Book Review

The victimization of women: Law, policies and politics

Michelle L. Meloy and Susan L. Miller

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The American criminal justice system has always placed an emphasis on apprehending and punishing criminals. However, an often overlooked and forgotten party that can play a pivotal role in the ‘crime equation’ is the victim. This has changed in recent years with victimology successfully carving out its space within criminology as a thriving and vibrant theoretical and empirically driven subdiscipline. Within victimology, a particularly vexing issue is victimization that often occurs out of the public sphere – the victimization of women and girls. In their book *The Victimization of Women: Law, Policies, and Politics* Michelle L. Meloy and Susan L. Miller poignantly unravel the complexities that shape experiences of victimization suffered by women. In the opening pages, the authors clearly state that the goal of writing this book is ‘... to present in a readable, coherent manner the major debates, controversies, quagmires, unintended consequences, and unanswered questions about victims, victims’ rights, and victim-centered policies’ (p. 4). The authors have accomplished these goals and then some. One of the greatest strengths of this book is that the authors have successfully paid attention to the details, yet managed to do so in such a way as to make the writing accessible to a broader audience. This book is not for a novice, but rather is catered to the college student or academic wishing to expand their knowledge on the topic of violence against women and girls.

Meloy and Miller’s book is divided into seven chapters with Chapters 1 through 4 focusing on macro-level factors, and Chapters 5 and 6 focused on micro-level factors that impact female victimization. Chapter 7 concludes with a discussion that recaps the important arguments raised in previous chapters, as well as suggestions for future research and policies related to violence against women and girls. Chapter 1 provides a typical introduction to the book with a brief overview of each of the chapters. The latter half of Chapter 1 provides a good overview of the parameters of the book and how the authors are operationalizing violence against women and girls. According to Meloy and Miller, they are focusing specifically on ‘crimes of personal violence committed by (mostly) men against (mostly) women and girls, such as sexual assault and rape, battering and, to a lesser extent, stalking’ (p. 11). During the course of providing this explanation, the authors acknowledge that violence committed by women against men and violence in homosexual relationships does occur, but for the sake of drawing boundaries, they focus solely on female victims and male aggressors.

Chapter 2 focuses on how society views and treats victims of crime, a process the authors refer to as the social construction of ‘the victim’ (p. 22). The authors discuss two competing



ideologies associated with victimization, a *victim culture* and *victim empowerment* perspective. According to Meloy and Miller, proponents of the victim culture perspective write for the lay audience and do not ground their arguments in empirical data. In many respects, the victim culture perspective harkens back to the days of victim blaming as they ‘... view female victims of male violence in particular as beleaguered, fragile, and hysterical, and fabricating or exaggerating their harms’ (p. 24). In contrast, Meloy and Miller argue that proponents of the victim empowerment perspective tend to be scholars who conduct and publish scientific research that is written for an academic audience. This perspective (unlike the victim culture), ‘... does not simply construct victims as completely innocent pawns, nor does it accept the simplistic depiction of victims as responsible for their own victimization’ (p. 29). The authors conclude this chapter with a discussion of date rape and battered husbands as case studies to illustrate the comparisons between how victim culture and victim empowerment perspective would address these topics. The take away message from this chapter is that the media tends to latch onto victim culture arguments and that victim empowerment proponents (that is, academics) need to do a better job getting their voices heard through disseminating their findings to the media and larger audiences.

The next two chapters add more context to the social construction of victimization with Chapter 3 (guest authored by LeeAnn Iovanni) focusing on issues associated with measurement and reporting of victimization, and Chapter 4 focusing primarily on the media’s role in shaping depictions of victims. Chapter 3 provides a thorough overview of the history of intimate partner violence (IPV) from a socio-legal perspective, and presents findings from both national quantitative data and qualitative data, and community-level surveys and interviews. This section highlights issues that can arise from attempting to measure IPV, such as reporting errors as well as racial and ethnic differences regarding classifications or definitions of ‘violence’ within the household. While the arguments in this chapter are clearly articulated and the statistics and research very sound, the guest author’s tone and writing style stands apart from the rest of the book. However, this slightly distinct tone added a very strong voice and worked as the glue that held the first half of the book together with the last half. Chapter 4 provided a thorough discussion of the media’s role in shaping images of crime victims. The largest contribution this chapter made was highlighting the fact that *who* the victim is has as much of a force on shaping the story being presented as characteristics and attributes of the offender. This chapter added a significant amount of detail about the importance of ones sociodemographic characteristics shaping not only life circumstances, but also life outcomes as individuals come into contact with the criminal justice system. Implicit in earlier chapters, but placed more at center stage for Chapter 4 was the role that race, class and gender play in defining and legitimizing who is and is not viewed as a *true* victim.

Up to this point in the book, the focus has been on structural-level factors that can play a role in shaping experiences and outcomes for female victims of violence. Chapters 5 and 6 transition to individual-level factors with chapter 5 discussing the topic of sexual victimization and 6 the topic of unintended consequences that result from stricter IPV policies – namely the arresting of female victims accused of battering. Chapter 5 first provides an overview of sex-offender laws followed by findings from qualitative interviews with 29 convicted male sex offenders. While it was interesting to read about male sex offenders’ motivations and justifications for their offending, this chapter felt a bit out of place given the goals established early on in the book. The take away message from this chapter is presented near the end, which is calling for sex offenders to receive intensive community-based



treatment and supervision rather than prison time. This recommendation appears to be the thread holding the remaining chapters together. Chapter 6 transitions back to one of the more central topics, IPV, and makes similar pleas as Chapter 5 to explore options other than formal criminal justice intervention to address violence against women. Chapter 6 was undoubtedly the strongest chapter of the entire book. The discussion was clear and concise, yet thorough enough to cover important historical topics about arrest and prosecution policies. The authors accurately conclude that while these policies were founded on best intentions, they often end up backfiring and can leave victims in a worse position than they were in before the criminal justice system's intervention. Another key strength of Chapter 6 is the discussion provided about the civil 'costs' that female victims of violence can incur, such as: welfare and child support issues, unsecure or lack of housing, and criminal records from battery charges. As was the case with Chapter 5, Chapter 6 also presents qualitative findings, this time from participant observation conducted with 95 female 'offenders' charged with IPV. The findings from this research point to arguments discussed earlier in the book; female 'aggressors' often are responding in self-defense and out of protection for themselves and others. The conclusions and policy recommendations section of this chapter ended on a strong note and similar to Chapter 5, called for intensive treatment programs for batterers.

The concluding chapter of the book ends on a high note through critically analyzing what current policies and funding agencies are doing to minimize female victimization. The authors are critical of politicians using violence against women and girls as their soundboard, as well as the overwhelming urge that many larger national agencies have to throw money at the issue, primarily through steps taken by the criminal justice system. Rather, the authors acknowledge that violence against women and girls is systemic and built into our patriarchal system that values masculinity and devalues femininity. In an effort to overcome these built-in inequities, the authors conclude with calling for a concentrated effort to get at the problem before it becomes a problem. Instead of simply intervening after violence has occurred, the authors call for education and prevention strategies that would target youth before they become future victims and aggressors. The authors illustrate that this is not a novel idea and that the United States is lagging behind other countries such as Australia, New Zealand and Canada, which have built prevention of violence against women into their school curriculum.

All in all, *The Victimization of Women: Law, Policies, and Politics* is a very useful and engaging book. While many of the strengths have been discussed above, a couple criticisms should be noted. First, while I commend the authors for including original qualitative research in Chapters 5 and 6, these sections felt a bit disjointed from the rest of the chapter and needed to be better integrated into the larger framework of the book. Second, in the authors' operationalization of violence against women and girls, they mention that stalking was an issue they would be covering. While acknowledging that they would cover stalking to a lesser extent (p. 11), aside from a brief passing over here and there of the topic, a separate discussion of stalking was nonexistent. Minor criticisms aside, this is a fantastic book that I would suggest to anyone who does research on victimization of women and girls. Along with academics, students would significantly benefit from reading this book and I could see many professors adopting this text as a supplemental reader in their courses.

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