

Human Rights & Human Welfare

Volume 9

Issue 10 *October Roundtable: An Annotation of "The Women's Crusade" by Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn*

Article 3

10-1-2009

Violence in the House

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Recommended Citation

Hite, Katherine (2009) "Violence in the House," *Human Rights & Human Welfare*: Vol. 9: Iss. 10, Article 3. Available at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/hrhw/vol9/iss10/3>



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Violence in the House

Abstract

There was something particularly haunting in reading this Kristof and WuDunn piece during the week's major US headlines: a girl in California had been imprisoned for eighteen years in the home of a man who kidnapped and raped her, fathered her children, and employed her in his small enterprise—a business card design and printing agency. Business clients interviewed for the story appeared completely taken aback. Clients had always found the now twenty-nine-year-old Jaycee Dugard “professional, polite, and responsive” as well as “creative and talented in her work.” Others expressed similar shock, recounting that Ms. Dugard “was always smiling.” Ms. Dugard’s kidnapper and rapist was also the father of her two daughters, whom neighbors said were “well-mannered, like normal girls, who loved Hannah Montana.”

Keywords

Human rights, Women's rights, Intimate violence

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Violence in the House

by Katherine Hite

There was something particularly haunting in reading this Kristof and WuDunn piece during the week's major US headlines: a girl in California had been imprisoned for eighteen years in the home of a man who kidnapped and raped her, fathered her children, and employed her in his small enterprise—a business card design and printing agency. Business clients interviewed for the story appeared completely taken aback. Clients had always found the now twenty-nine-year-old Jaycee Dugard “professional, polite, and responsive” as well as “creative and talented in her work.” Others expressed similar shock, recounting that Ms. Dugard “was always smiling.” Ms. Dugard’s kidnapper and rapist was also the father of her two daughters, whom neighbors said were [“well-mannered, like normal girls, who loved Hannah Montana.”](#)

The story of Jaycee Dugard captured intense US attention for a week, and television talk news continues to debate its many disturbing dimensions—the psyche of the perpetrator as well as the victim, the way in which the legal system released the perpetrator years ago for previous sexual abuse offenses, the complicity of the perpetrator’s wife, the blindness of the neighbors. What proves unusual about the story, however, is not that Ms. Dugard was missing or raped, but that the atrocious acts were carried out by a non-relative or family acquaintance. According to the [US Justice Department](#), in a typical year, approximately 797,500 US children (younger than eighteen) go missing, an average of 2,185 a day. Only a fraction is attributable to someone unfamiliar to the young person.

In the United States, 15 percent of sexual assault and rape victims are under the age of twelve, like Jaycee Dugard. Another 29 percent are between the ages of 12 and 17. And one in six women (17.7 million American women) has been a [victim of serious sexual assault](#).

In my quick search for the details surrounding the story of Jaycee Dugard, the day’s (September 12 th) CNN videos that appeared in rows on my computer screen included the story of Annie Le, a missing Yale graduate student (now dead); Haleigh Cummings, a missing five-year-old girl in Florida; and Karen Wright, a missing middle-aged California hairstylist whose husband is the chief suspect. The missing girls and women cross US geography, class, and race.

It thus simply boggles the mind that in this article, Kristof and WuDunn dissociate human rights violations against US women from those around the globe. Why do the authors tell these stories and not others? Give me a woman in Pakistan beaten by her husband and I’ll give you a woman in Tennessee murdered by her husband, a US soldier, on September 8 th, or a woman who was shot and killed by her UC-Irvine graduate student estranged husband on September 13 th. We have a term for this: [“intimate violence.”](#)

Perhaps it would not have been so egregious a dissociation had Kristof and WuDunn used less patronizing language about the women who constitute their subjects, writing, for example, of an Indian woman with “chocolate skin, black hair, and gleaming white teeth— and a lovely smile” here, of a “round-faced” Pakistani woman there. The article is chock-full of characterizations of women that reproduce the degradation the authors are purporting to describe. The classic “othering,” the patronizing tone, irreparably distracts the reader from the very important

denunciation of violence against women throughout the globe, as well as the valuable work of organizations like the Global Fund for Women.

Indeed, why the very title, “Crusade”? What is this meant to evoke? Religious righteousness? A simple story of good and evil? West and the rest? If we are to imagine that another world for women is possible, we need to globalize the atrocities, which mean a fair share of self-implication, confronting our own dirty laundry, putting our house in order as we lecture about what must be done elsewhere. I would like to see Kristof and WuDunn now take on one of the latest issues to surface in the [US health care reform debate](#): it turns out that in at least eight US states, injuries suffered from wife-beating are classified as a pre-existing condition that allows insurers to discriminate against or deny women their benefits. Then we might have a conversation about what US actions like the occupation and devastation of Iraq or the bombing of wedding parties in Afghanistan or Pakistan mean for women trying to hold up half the sky.

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