

WOMEN'S COALITION AGAINST FAMILY VIOLENCE
Blood On Whose Hands? The killing of women and children in domestic homicides, Brunswick, Vic: Women's Coalition Against Family Violence, 1994. Distributed by Federation Press, rrp \$10.00, ISBN 064617 9241

Blood On Whose Hands? The Killing of Women and Children in Domestic Homicides is a book which aims to change community attitudes towards domestic violence, and to challenge the legal system to provide a more effective response to that violence. The book presents case studies of nine women and three children killed in the state of Victoria in domestic homicides, and documents the reality and extent of domestic violence which preceded the homicides. The book draws on a wide range of sources including the stories of family and friends of the victims of homicide, coroner's files, media reports, court transcripts, the files of the Director of Public Prosecution, medical evidence, witness statements and police files. It provides an insight into the lives of the victims of domestic homicide and of their families, the history of the relationship in which the homicide occurred, and the failings of the criminal justice system and of the community more broadly to respond to that violence. As this book demonstrates, it is this context which is too rarely examined in court and which tends to be absent from media constructions of the events.

Through reconstructing the context in which the homicides occurred *Blood On Whose Hands?* presents a compelling challenge to many of the myths about domestic homicides. These were not acts undertaken by "passionate" men out of control. The killings were not isolated, aberrant acts. In each case the man who ultimately killed his partner or child had previously used a range of abusive behaviour to exercise power and control over his family. In most of the cases examined in the book the men involved killed women and/or children from whom they were separated. A common theme emerging from the cases studies is that police had failed to act, or had been ineffective in dealing with the violence which had been reported to them, and court orders had not been enforced. Access hand-overs provided the site for several of the homicides.

Among the strengths of the book is the manner in which the stories of family and friends of the homicide victims are contrasted with the "case" as constructed by the courts and/or the media. The allegedly objective and neutral official accounts are revealed to be anything but objective or neutral. Frequently the history of domestic violence was not raised in the court, even where documentary evidence of that violence was available. Stripped of this context the men's use of lethal violence seems aberrant and inexplicable, except by reference to some assumed provocation on the part of the victim, or some other external event. The book documents the frustration and anger of the friends and families of those who had died who felt that the courts had failed to hear the full story, and that it had been the victims and their families who were judged rather than the offenders. The book highlights particular concerns with the use of provocation as a defence by the men in a number of the cases documented, especially where women's decisions to leave a relationship or to exert some independence in the relationship were constructed by the defence, and accepted by courts, as provocation warranting the reduction of charges from murder to manslaughter, and/or resulting in discounts on sentences.

The analysis of media reporting of the homicides depicts the manner in which domestic homicides were reported in terms of prevailing stereotypes informed by psychological understandings of the violence. Men who committed homicide were depicted as troubled rather than dangerous, as victims themselves of external factors, out of control or just in love, such as in the headlines "Despair prompts killing"; "Cheque man snapped"; "Sick man shot wife six times" and "Love pulled the trigger". In other cases the media focus seemed to be on providing some moral assessment of the dead woman by engaging in speculation about her fidelity, temperament or other characteristics.

Blood On Whose Hands? is not a comprehensive study of a representative sample of homicide cases. Others have done that work and this book has an altogether different focus. However, it represents a significant contribution to the strong Australian literature concerning homicide which has developed over the last decade with Alison Wallace's ground breaking study *Homicide: the Social Reality*, the work of Ken Polk, Heather Strang and others. This is a book with a strong message, an important objective and a relevance not confined to the state of Victoria. It is likely to be of value to a wide audience, and any proceeds from the book go to the Victorian Women's Trust to fund community education concerning violence against women and children.

Julie Stubbs

Faculty of Law, University of Sydney