

Blood on Whose Hands?

The Killing of Women and Children in Domestic Homicides

by the Women's Coalition Against Family Violence; The Coalition, Melbourne, 1994, 155 pp; distributed by Federation Press; \$10.00.

For more than one reason, *Blood on Whose Hands?* is a ground breaking piece of work. First, there is the process which led to its publication; a collaborative effort between surviving family and friends of the women and children who have been murdered and the members of a community-based network.

Many of us will remember the Domestic Murders Commemoration held in 1989 at Melbourne Town Hall as a powerful and moving experience which highlighted the extent of domestic homicide, where brave survivors told the stories of those who had been silenced by murder. The book is an extension of this process, giving voice to survivors, often in spite of real fear of retribution and, in every case, exposing painful memories.

Admittedly, it is not an easy read and on numerous occasions I found myself struggling against tears reading the poignant and painful accounts of the survivors.

Christine lived only twenty-eight short years — the last three a mixture of terror and abuse. Physical and emotional abuse commenced soon after she began living with him. Dinners would be thrown in her face, her artwork broken, her ideas abused, her daughters beaten, her friends made unwelcome, the childcare arrangements messed and her family scorned...

Before her death my sister had the courage to leave. In leaving she told people her living horror story. That she had the courage to tell it and that he no longer had any power in that relationship became her death sentence. [Carmel, sister pp.17 and 18]

Kevin Crowe was sentenced to six years with a minimum of four and a half, of which, with remissions, he served only two and a half years. He was convicted of manslaughter because the jury somehow found that Christine had been partially responsible for her own death because she had left him.

For the first time in Australia, the book also presents domestic homicide in its full context, highlighting the complicity of our social, economic and legal systems and of the media. It analyses the way women are blamed for violence per-

petrated against them, shows that the experiences and lives of women and children are consistently absent in all associated processes, and that there is an undeniable attempt by all institutions involved to justify the behaviour of the killers. In all cases in the book, there had been a history of violence; many women had left or tried to leave and all had, one way or another, suffered at the hands of police, courts and professions.

The book indisputably shows how violence by men against their partners, ex-partners and children is regarded differently in our society from any other form of violence. It is explained away as a private matter and usually perversely portrayed as somehow being the fault of the victim.

This attitude prevails years after the beginning of feminist intervention in domestic violence and at a time when much of the rhetoric is generated by highly visible State and Federal Government campaigns. Provisions regarding restraining orders were introduced in Victoria in 1987, in New South Wales in 1983, in South Australia, Western Australia and Queensland in 1982 and in Tasmania in 1985, yet as the book so clearly and depressingly shows, these orders offer no protection when the police and courts fail to enforce them. It will come as no surprise to most readers that legislative change does not change the attitudes of police: they continue to fail to initiate intervention orders and to make arrests when men breach those orders.

Women and children pay the price for this pervasive attitude; each year in Victoria alone 40 women and children are killed in domestic homicides and thousands more live in fear of brutality, economic deprivation, emotional and psychic torture.

I said to the police, 'Does she have to be killed before you do anything?' Basically he said yes. I went back to the sergeant after she was killed and asked him, 'So a bit late now?' He didn't say anything. [Anne p.70]

The fundamental premise of *Blood on Whose Hands?* is that we, as a community, all collude in the denial and that it is societal attitudes as a whole which must change.

As a surviving family member, I invite society to share my, and my family's pain. I also invite society to share the blame and guilt for my sister's death. Because it is we, as a society, that allowed her killer to believe that he had 'ownership rights' over his wife. Even to the point of murdering her — because he lost control of his 'possession'. My pain and anger are

as strong today, as when Jill was murdered, ten years ago. My sister did not deserve to die. [Judy p.145]

Interweaving the stories of the murders of nine women and three children, the book is organised into chapters which focus on the way social and economic systems, the criminal justice system, the police professionals and the media are complicit in failing to acknowledge the nature and extent of domestic homicide. It is rigorous analysis which is, nevertheless, refreshingly different from more academic and legalistic accounts, again because of the position from which it speaks.

As one example of the many areas covered, the book shows how men abuse and murder children in an attempt to control women, and that women and children are often witnesses to violence perpetrated against each other, including murder. Several of the women and children documented were killed on access visits — visits either ordered by the Family Court, despite its knowledge of a history of violence, or agreed to by women because of the threats of their ex-partners and their fear of losing custody. There is clearly a dangerous disjunction between the Family Court's 'no fault' approach and its requirement to maintain the best interests of the child. Even more horrifying, men who murder their ex-partners continue to have rights to apply for access and custody of children, despite the devastating trauma that this must cause the children.

Blood on Whose Hands? is an important book which has been a long time in the making. Despite its disturbing and confronting subject matter, it is easy to read, skilfully edited, strikingly beautiful and due all the acclaim it has received.

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Handbook For Legal Interpreters

by Ludmilla Robinson; The Law Book Company Ltd 1994; 170 pp.softcover; \$35.00.

Lucy Robinson's opening quote in her preface to this book will no doubt raise a smile among interpreters and strike a chord with others involved in the use of interpreters in the legal system. A judge addresses a Turkish interpreter who has