

# 'Infant Warriors': boys, mothers, men and domestic violence

Beatrix Campbell argues that the Government's take on anti-social behaviour and young offenders misses the crucial factors of gender and domestic violence.

When New Labour added to its five priority pledges to the 1997 electorate the fast-tracking of young offenders through the criminal justice system, it was undoubtedly giving voice to the exasperated communities fallen upon hard times, weary of infant warriors making their lives a misery. The heavy hand was not welcomed by the professions working with young offenders. They knew better.

But the promise of evidence-based policy-making, a multi-disciplinary approach to young people engaged in anti-social behaviour, and of course more money, encouraged these professions to live in hope.

The *Crime and Disorder Act 2000* did at least suggest that young offenders' bad behaviour would be addressed in the context of questions: where did

Interventions against anti-social behaviour were to be coupled with Parenting Orders. They, too, were inscribed in the multiple messages emanating from the Government: the rhetoric of sorting out crap parents on crap estates, expressed as measures to "reinforce parental responsibility"; and the potential to provide resources to help meet the needs of struggling parents. New Labour's legislation created contexts that might enable professionals to do the joined-up writing that the Government was not doing for itself. What we already knew was that anti-social behaviour and violence were thoroughly gendered. It was clear from the pilot schemes created in the context of the *Crime and Disorder Act* that more than 80 per cent of children and young people involved were boys and over 80 per cent of the parents involved were mothers. Huge insight into the politics of that problem

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the bad behaviour come from? What's going on in their lives? What are their circumstances? Although the government's populism about young people in trouble was echoed in an equally primitive populism about parents – a.k.a. mothers – that derived from a rather misogynistic angst about the collapse of civilisation as we know it, many hoped that society might now learn something about the lives of both young people and their parents that were producing mayhem.

Young offenders, we already knew from the Howard League's research into locked-up teenagers, were young people who had been offended against. The new political environment might, despite itself, begin to address that. We knew that when we talked about anti-social behaviour we were talking largely about boys. Might we, at last, begin to address the correlation between crime and masculinity that has existed since criminal records began?

When we looked into the 'anti-social behaviour' that takes place behind closed doors we discovered that men's violence against women produces one call every minute to the police asking for assistance for 'domestic violence' (Stanko *et al.*, VRP 2002). The new dispensation might begin to connect the dots between public and private violence and disorder.

has emerged from on-going work in Sunderland (one of the pilot areas which has issued most Parenting Orders), where most of the mothers were themselves the victims of domestic violence.

The catastrophe at the centre of these relationships, which bled across the larger community landscape, was of disempowered, defeated mothers, victimised by men who were wreaking havoc. "It was very frustrating," said one of the professionals I spoke to, "the boys were watching their mothers beaten to hell by their fathers, and the fathers were misogynists." These fathers were also beyond the reach of services, which had no mandate to address what was palpably a thoroughly gendered scenario. That knowledge is, by now, part of a collective 'common sense' that challenges the older conventional wisdom that boys go mad when they don't have dads, that civilisation is menaced by feral children immaculately conceived by mothers with slack morals and no parenting skills. Despite the best efforts of professionals who learned from the Sunderland pilot, and tried to engage the Home Office and the Youth Justice Board, the gross impact of domestic violence on mothers and sons is not to be found in Government guidelines. The parenting guidelines attached to the *Crime and Disorder Act* refer only to 'inadequate' or 'harsh and

erratic' parenting as risk factors, and cite no references to the significant volume of research on domestic violence and its impact on children.

Look for it in the Youth Justice Board's guidelines on parenting orders, *Parenting – Key Elements of Effective Practice*, and it's not there. "It is not specifically built in, but we'd hope it would develop," explained a YJB spokesperson. But it was already obvious to some researchers that domestic violence needed to be in the collective mind if it was to be addressed: if you don't expect to see it you don't see it. "It won't come out unless you create a climate," commented a researcher involved in evaluating Parenting Orders, who acknowledged that gender and domestic violence did not emerge from the pilots because research is, of course, driven by what is funded. What was not funded was the link between dangerous fathers, disempowered mothers and dangerous sons. "We picked it up from Sunderland, and we held on to it as an issue, and we've been trying to alert people to it, but it's not explored in enough depth. We've been saying domestic violence! But not loud enough."

In any case, the Government's approach to anti-social behaviour and parenting, conceived before the first tranche of pilots, was not then amended by the evidence they yielded: the approach was 'rolled out' before they were evaluated.

So, the approach was generalised despite the Home Office and the Youth Justice Board commissioning no work on gender and crime and anti-social behaviour, no work on domestic violence and the disempowerment of mothers as a risk factor, and no work on the differential impact on boys and girls. "It was a classic decision – not to wait for the evaluation. Everything is supposed to be evidence-based, but you pilot something and don't wait for the evaluation," commented one academic. And although the Government has improvised several punitive initiatives towards young people and parents since 1998 they've been in the absence of contemporary research, "We just don't have research on what is going on in young people's lives, there isn't any research looking at the differences between boys' and girls' offending, and the links to domestic violence." Professionals in community safety and youth justice teams struggle with the different – and contradictory – discourses emerging from the Government: the punitive tough stuff from the anti-social behaviour wing, and the holistic approach associated with the multi-disciplinary Youth Offending Teams that try to unite the concerns of communities with a useful approach to young people at risk, often living with mental illness and routine violence. "It is difficult to find one young person we work with who hasn't got the full range of difficulties, and that includes domestic violence," said one community safety manager, "but there is a real dichotomy in the messages coming from the Home Secretary and ministers dealing with crime, and the heavy end, the Anti-Social Behaviour Unit. The Youth Offending Teams are saying custody

doesn't work, you have to look at the circumstances in the young person's life." The YOT culture – cross-disciplinary attention to young people's needs – at least offers the opportunity to investigate what is going on in young people's lives. The Youth Justice Board is currently involved in a tracking project to get young people themselves to describe their 'circumstances' and what is going on in their lives. That may yet be revelatory.

Feminist research and professional expertise has already shown the ideologies that sponsor private and public behaviours, that reveal the logic of violence, chaos and coercion for boys and men. As the Australian academic Bob Connell has argued, violence is a resource, a "system of domination" that is a way of making masculinities (Connell, 1995).

Violence, according to the American scholar Iris Marion Young, should be seen as "a social practice" which its victims endure as part of their everyday lives, "it is always on the horizon of social imagination".

But the Government, the Home Office and YJB are reluctant to confront the stark correlations between gender, violence and anti-social behaviour in the culture at large, still locating them in private pathologies, rather than the social structures in which we are all made. The effect is that the catastrophic drama between those beaten mothers and their frightened, frightening sons is still not being addressed. ■

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