Domestic Abuse as Terrorism

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A number of philosophers and feminist authors have recently equated domestic abuse with the ubiquitous and ill-defined concept of “terrorism.” Claudia Card, for instance, argues that domestic abuse is a frequently ignored form of terrorism that creates and maintains “heterosexual male dominance and female dependence and service” (Card 2003). Alison Jaggar, in a recent article, also concludes that an acceptable definition of terrorism will find rape and domestic violence to be terrorist acts (Jaggar 2005). Yet there seem to be several obstacles to any simple appropriation of the term “terrorism” for cases of domestic abuse. In this paper I will address what I take to be three significant problems that might be raised with regard to any attempt to identify domestic abuse as an act of terrorism. These problems include the fact that a) definitions of terrorism usually require clear political motivations, b) definitions of terrorism normally require that the terrorist intend to create a climate of terror, and c) adopting the term terrorism for cases of domestic abuse might appear simply inappropriate or unhelpful. I will argue, however, that each of these possible objections can be answered effectively and that domestic abuse rightly falls under the rubric of terrorism.

Virginia Held suggests in a recent article that current usage of the term terrorism often dissuades individuals and theorists from seriously examining what actions and groups legitimately deserve this label (Held 2005). For many, the term terrorism immediately evokes visceral feelings of moral condemnation and images of suicide bombers, Chechen rebels, or religious fanatics. Terrorism is perpetrated by “others” against “us” and is an example of unjustifiable moral depravity. Such usage assumes it would be ridiculous to consider whether terrorism might, in fact, be justified, or whether actions “we” commit might also be considered terrorist. This view is certainly in line with the message popularly promulgated by major media outlets, governmental officials, and pundits within the United States.
More level-headed theorists, however, note that this term should not be excluded from honest conceptual investigation—that there is a genuine question to be asked with respect to whether terrorism is always synonymous with moral impermissibility or if actions much closer to home might also fit rightly under the label of terrorism. In this vein, several philosophers and feminist authors have challenged the popular conception of terrorism and have suggested that domestic abuse should rightly be viewed as a form of terrorist activity. Claudia Card, for instance, claims that domestic abuse is a frequently ignored form of terrorism that creates and maintains “heterosexual male dominance and female dependence and service” (Card 2003, 179). Alison Jaggar, in a recent article, also concludes that an acceptable definition of terrorism must include rape and domestic violence as terrorist acts (Jaggar 2005). Domestic abusers, it is said, are terrorists living within our own homes (Johann 1994).

Feminist authors often see domestic abuse as a means of maintaining social norms and institutional rules through terror and violence, or the threat of violence, that perpetuate the “gender inequalities that maintain patriarchal relations and undermine women’s power, rights, and achievements” (Madriz 1997, 2). And terms like domestic abuse and intimate partner abuse are claimed to belie the severity, gender asymmetry, and systemic nature of domestic violence against women. In overlooking the extensive and interrelated social, political, and economic dimensions of such violence, and by employing vague and neutralizing terms like the ones mentioned above, most theorists have failed to characterize domestic abuse for what it really is. As Isabel Marcus writes, “Like terror directed at a community, violence against women is designed to maintain domination and control, to enhance or reinforce advantages, and to defend privileges” (Marcus 1994, 32). Just as terrorist acts, popularly understood, are perceived as efforts to undermine or maintain the power and privilege of political groups through violence and the threat of violence, so too, it is claimed, is domestic abuse employed to maintain particular power arrangements and privileges in the household, and derivatively, in the broader society that systematically disadvantages women. Consequently, theorists suggest that domestic abuse is a commonly overlooked form of domestic terrorism that coerces women into behaving in clearly detrimental ways and accepting disadvantageous social arrangements by means of institutionalized methods of violence and terror creation.

And yet while these authors’ efforts to apply the term terrorism to domestic abuse are undeniably effective in conveying a deep sense of moral condemnation concerning such acts, it is not so clear that this application, which runs counter to popular and academic parlance, is reconcilable with how the concept is generally employed and understood. In fact, there appear to be several points of incongruity that resist such efforts, points of contention that critics often appeal to in an effort to resist the idea that domestic abuse can or should be classified
as a species of terrorist activity. To make the claims of philosophers and feminists who wish to subsume domestic abuse under the heading of terrorism reasonable, therefore, it seems necessary to consider these points of contention in a way that theorists have thus far eschewed. The goal of this paper is to speak to these points of contention and thereby argue that consistency demands we recognize domestic abuse for what it truly is: terrorism.

More specifically, I will consider three obstacles that appear to strongly resist the claim that domestic abuse is rightfully a terrorist act. These obstacles include: 1) definitions of terrorism generally require that its perpetrators have clear political motivations, and it is not obvious that domestic abusers ever possess such motivations; 2) definitions of terrorism require that a terrorist intend to create a climate of terror, but it is rarely thought that domestic abusers have such intentions; and 3) an expansion of the term terrorism to cases of domestic abuse (even if legitimate) is likely to be perceived as inappropriate or unhelpful. I will attempt to convince the reader that domestic abuse has various necessary features of terrorism, and that terrorism lacks necessary features that would otherwise disqualify it from applying to domestic abuse.

Prior to engaging these problems, however, I want to briefly discuss the meaning of domestic abuse and how the concept is employed here. A distinction is often made in the literature between domestic violence, which normally consists of physical attacks against other members of the domicile, and the broader term domestic abuse, a term that includes threats, emotional and psychological abuse, and other forms of intimidation. I follow this distinction and include under the concept of domestic abuse all forms of physical and non-physical threats, intimidation, and violence between intimates. Furthermore, I also confine my usage of the term domestic abuse to violence perpetrated by men against women. Although domestic abuse is sometimes used to refer to any type of violence between household intimates, whether it is child abuse, elderly abuse, violence among same-sex couples, or violence against men committed by women, this paper’s focus is only on acts of domestic abuse committed by men against women.

This is for several reasons: First, both the prevalence and severity of violence against women by male intimates far outpaces all other forms of domestic violence. Second, violence against women occurs within a historical and enduring system of patriarchy that places them, as a group, in a particularly disadvantaged and vulnerable position with respect to other social groups. And finally, I don’t believe that the theorists who have most notably defended the claim that domestic abuse should be considered a terrorist action intended to include violence other than that committed by men against women. Consequently, in order to avoid any unnecessary complications, I too will restrict my usage of the term domestic abuse to violence by men against women in a domestic setting.
Most definitions of terrorism offered by philosophers and political scientists require that its operatives possess clear political motivations (Gus 2003; Kapitan 2003; Pojman 2003). Terrorism, Tomis Kapitan writes, is “the deliberate use of violence, or the threat of such, directed upon civilians in order to achieve political objectives” (Kapitan 2003, 48). Similarly, the U.S. State Department defines terrorism as politically motivated violence perpetrated by subnational or clandestine groups. This emphasis on political motivations, I surmise, is meant to distinguish violent acts perpetrated by what some authors have called “criminal gangs” from so-called legitimate acts of terrorism. Certainly, most cases of terrorist violence cited by theorists and highlighted in the media involve individuals fomenting a sense of terror among a civilian population, through violence and the threat of violence, with the intention of altering the political climate of a region. It simply isn’t enough for a group to cause terror among a population for nonpolitical reasons—to be a genuine case of terrorism, these theorists maintain, requires that the violence be a means to broader political objectives.

Requiring that terrorists possess definite political motivations, however, appears problematic if one’s goal is to argue that the concept of terrorism rightfully includes cases of domestic abuse. This is because domestic abuse does not, at least on its face, appear to involve any straightforward political motivations. Commonly understood, domestic abuse is merely an act of interpersonal aggression or intimidation directed against another without any regard for a wider political context. The legal systems of most states, for instance, treat acts of domestic abuse as equivalent to assault and battery of a stranger—a simple misdemeanor—and do not consider the possibility of any deeper or ulterior motivations on the part of the abuser. Furthermore, domestic abuse is widely perceived as the antithesis of a politically motivated action. Domestic abuse is an extremely under-reported crime (by both its victims and witnesses) because it is commonly believed to be a personal or private matter in which politics plays no role (Kelly 2003). The failure of police and courts to arrest and prosecute domestic abusers for fear of infringing on the realm of the private sphere has been well documented (Crites 1987).

Given these considerations, if an individual act of violence requires the presence of political motivations to be considered an act of terrorism, then domestic abuse does not appear to fit the bill. I will try to overcome this apparent incongruity in two ways. On the one hand, I will argue that there are good reasons for theorists to reject the claim that terrorism must necessarily be politically motivated, and, on the other hand, I criticize the still popular view that domestic abuse is merely a private (that is, non-political) act. In this way, I try to carve out sufficient space for the claim that domestic abuse is legitimately classified as terrorism.
Perhaps the first thing to note is that the line between personal and political motivations is fuzzy at best and nonexistent at worst. As Jaggar notes in her paper on terrorism, the distinction between personal and political motivations with respect to terrorism is often unclear both in principle and in practice (Jaggar 2005). It is not always clear, for instance, whether a particular terrorist act is committed for personal reasons (for example, eternal salvation, revenge, or moral indignation) or strictly political ones (for example, undermining one's current government, political recognition, influencing particular legislation). More often than not, the motivations of terrorists include a combination of overlapping personal and political motivations. Efforts to sharply distinguish between identical acts of violence—both equally meant to create a climate of terror—based on the presence of political rather than personal motivations are often untenable.

An examination of the use of the term terrorism, furthermore, shows that it has frequently and unproblematically been employed to describe acts of terror-creation that lack clear political motivations. For instance, the 1995 sarin gas attack in the subways of Tokyo by a religious cult was widely denounced as terrorist, but was believed to have been motivated largely by non-political reasons. Another recent example is the conviction of the D.C. sniper mastermind John A. Muhammad on terrorism charges even though it was widely acknowledged that his participation in the killing spree lacked any political motivation (Liptak 2005). Research into the wave of terrorist skyjackings that occurred during the 1960s found that many of the perpetrators' motivations could be traced to the desire to have achieved one successful and spectacular accomplishment at the end of a life of chronic failure and not to any political considerations. In fact, a large number of groups and individuals motivated largely by moral, anti-technological, and millennial fatalist views are widely identified as terrorist (Rodin 2004). Such observations about the use of the term terrorism, admittedly, are not sufficient to demonstrate that terrorism need not have political motivations—it might be claimed, for instance, that such usage is simply mistaken—but they do suggest that requiring political motivations is perhaps an unnecessary departure from the core meaning of terrorism.

I believe these considerations cast serious doubt on the claim that terrorism necessarily requires political motivations. Nevertheless, I also think there are strong reasons to reject the common-sense notion that domestic abuse lacks any sort of political motivation. That is, even if a critic argues that the previous examples of non-political terrorism were simply instances in which the term terrorism was misapplied, I will argue that domestic abuse involves political elements that justify recognizing it as an act of terrorism.

Numerous philosophers and feminist authors have pointed out in recent decades that though the family has historically been relegated to a purely personal sphere, and largely ignored by political theorists, it actually has important and far-reaching political import. As Susan Okin notes, feminists have “revealed
and analyzed the multiple interconnections between women’s domestic roles and their inequality and segregation in the workplace, and between their socialization in gendered families and the psychological aspects of their oppression” (Okin 1989, 125). The treatment and socialization that women experience in their domestic lives entails serious implications for their status (as a sex class) and power in the political arena. The family is the central source of society’s power structure and is thus integral to sustaining the power relations that exist in the public and, correspondingly, political world. Furthermore, the perpetuation of this distinction between private and public, although in many ways inescapable, has often gone too far by isolating women and thereby permitting, encouraging, and reinforcing violence against women.

Consider, for instance, the way in which the treatment and expectations of women in their domestic lives fundamentally impacts their political status and opportunities. Although the motivations of a husband who exhorts his wife to stay at home and care for the couple’s children might appear relegated to the private sphere, it is easy to see how this motivation contains unrecognized political aspects. Abuse in the home meant to coerce a woman into reproducing and maintaining the household, for instance, requires her to forgo the opportunity for jobs in government and other political fields, makes it less likely that she can adequately inform herself about social issues or participate in the processes of democracy, instills feelings of inferiority and fear of violence that prevent her from participating in the broader society, and results in a public silence concerning her interests and well-being—thereby reinforcing her invisibility in the political sphere. Domestic abuse is often a private means of political oppression and exclusion.

Thus to claim that the motivations of domestic abusers lack any political element is to fail to recognize the ways in which the relationships and power distributions in the family importantly affect a woman’s status and opportunities in the larger public and political community. If Bruce Hoffman is correct in claiming that all terrorism involves the quest for power, and it is clear that the relationships within the family are a basic source of political power in society, then it should not be surprising to find that women are often a target of terrorism with the motivation of maintaining patriarchal power dynamics in the political sphere (Hoffman 1999).

The point might also be made, as many feminists have done, that the private or domestic sphere is inherently political. Contrary to traditional distinctions, the domestic is a sphere of justice in its own right, and therefore actions that create and perpetuate inequalities within the household are analogous to similar actions taken in a public context. So while it could be countered that it is implausible that most men abuse their wives with the motivation to oppress and exclude them politically in the public sphere, a more appropriate drawing of the political to include the domestic sphere would allow for domestic abuse to be a
legitimately political act even if directed entirely at maintaining inequities within the home.

**INTENDING TO CREATE TERROR**

Let us suppose at this point that we have provided a reasonable response to the problem of political motivation. There are, I believe, still two significant obstacles to overcome in seeking to defend the claim that acts of domestic abuse should rightfully be categorized as terrorism. The first problem is found in the fact that current usage of the term *terrorism* often restricts it to cases of intentional harming. Most definitions of terrorism require that for an act to count as a legitimate instance of terrorism its perpetrators must have terror, and the ends this terror is meant to promote, as clear intentions of their actions (Kapitan 2003; Sterba 2003; Jaggar 2005). That is, it cannot be a legitimate act of terrorism if the perpetrators did not intend to create terror as a means to achieving some further premeditated goal—it is not terrorism, for instance, if the terror engendered and its corresponding effects were unintentional or accidental.

Take, for example, a paradigm case of terrorism—a suicide bomber indiscriminately targeting a civilian population—in which the perpetrator has the clear intention of terrorizing the population for the purposes of undermining a community’s resolve. Contrast this example with a situation in which someone creates a sense of terror among the population unintentionally (for example, perhaps he or she was tricked, had some false belief, or it was merely an unintended side effect) in which case this would not be considered a legitimate case of terrorism. The problem for theorists wishing to apply the concept of terrorism to cases of domestic abuse is found in the fact that it is seldom believed that domestic abusers possess such an intention to terrorize. Let me try to motivate this claim now.

A quick review of the literature concerning domestic abuse reveals a number of frequently cited factors with regard to the intentions or reasons why men abuse. One of the most frequent observations provided by researchers is the fact that many men often do not see threatening, intimidating, or controlling their partner as terrorizing (Kakar 1997). When asked, they often express a deep love and affection for their intimate, claiming that such treatment is for their own good and protection, and that they would never do anything that would seriously harm them. Conversely, it is common for the victims of domestic abuse to defend their partner’s acts of abuse—saying that they “deserved it” or that they “shouldn’t have done that”—because they too possess a belief that abusing women is sometimes acceptable or appropriate. Rarely is it ever suggested that men are intentionally terrorizing their partners—whom they generally claim to
love and care for—but rather that they are acting on the basis of an outdated patriarchal worldview or have anger issues.

Consequently, whereas I think it is clear that abuse often has the unmistakable effect of terrorizing women, it isn’t clear that this is necessarily most men’s intention in committing acts of abuse. Rather, it is often the case that men’s actions are the result of prejudiced or false beliefs about the nature of women or men’s supposed entitlement to control the household through coercion if necessary. The thought that such actions might constitute a terrorist or repressive environment is unlikely even to be considered. A man’s abuse is likely to result in a feeling of terror for his partner, but he, and often even she, might believe that violence is an appropriate method for resolving conflicts or punishing wrong actions.

In responding to this worry of intention I will adopt a tactic similar to the one I employed in addressing the problem of political motivation. That is, first I will suggest that there is good reason for theorists to reject or at least de-emphasize the role of intention in determining what counts as a genuine act of terrorism. I believe a good case can be made that theorists have misleadingly overstated the role that intention plays in assessing whether or not an act is a genuine case of terrorism. And second, I will argue that even if we do retain the requirement of intention it seems a persuasive case can be made that such intention does exist—although it is not perhaps where one would first think to look.

An important problem with theorists choosing to focus on an individual’s intentions rather than on the consequences of his or her actions is that it seems to preclude the possibility of identifying as terrorist any terror-creating or maintaining practice that has become socially invisible or has been assimilated into a society’s cultural norms. Consider, for instance, the case of racism. Much like the case of terrorism, many have argued that for an action to be racist it must involve racist intentions. The problem with this account, as many theorists have pointed out, is that it excludes as racist the actions of individuals who participate in practices or institutions that have racist outcomes but are deeply entrenched practices perceived as “normal” (Headley 2000; Corlett 2003; Winant 2004). As Howard Winant writes, contemporary racism “has been largely—although not entirely, to be sure—detached from its perpetrators. Indeed, in its most advanced forms it has no perpetrators; it is a nearly invisible, taken-for-granted, ‘commonsense’ feature of everyday life and the global social structure” (Winant 2004, 126).

Although overt discrimination is much rarer than it was a century ago, there are still many ways in which individuals participating in institutions and “common-sense” practices engage in racism without possessing a clear racist intention. Although my intuition leads me to think that individuals who unintentionally engage in racist practices are not as morally culpable as those with clear racist intentions, surely we still want to say that they are doing something racist at some level. And this suggests that viewing racism in the dichotomous
manner advocated by some theorists (that is, if it's intentional, it's racist, otherwise it's not) is much too simple. Instead, I believe we must view acts of racism as falling along a broad spectrum that includes both intentional and unintentional racist acts.

Returning to our topic of terrorism, I believe a similar argument is also applicable to terrorist acts; that is, we should recognize the existence of unintentional acts of terrorism. David Rodin, a philosopher who shares my view, suggests that many actions of the United States during the bombing campaigns against Iraq and Afghanistan, in which large numbers of non-combatants were killed, are "morally culpable to the same degree and for the same reasons that typical acts of terrorism are culpable" and should therefore be considered acts of unintentional terrorism (Rodin 2004, 769). In many instances, he notes, the negligence of the United States in determining whether or not a given target was genuinely a military one resulted in the unnecessary deaths of thousands of people and extensive terror among the civilian population. And although it can almost certainly be assumed that the United States was not intending to terrorize the civilian populations in these situations—insofar as it was naively hoping to be perceived as a "liberator"—it still seems appropriate to talk about the United States as involved in acts of terrorism. And the concept of "unintentional terrorism" seems to accurately capture the justified outrage often expressed by those denouncing many of the United States' actions as terrorist while highlighting an important distinction between American actions and those acts of intentional terrorism commonly associated with groups like Al-Qaeda or the Taliban.

These considerations lead, I believe, to a revised account of the role that intention ought to play in any definition of terrorism. If we accept that there is a broad spectrum of possible terrorist actions—from the clearly intentional to the unintentional—then intention seems important primarily in assessing a perpetrator(s) degree of moral culpability and not in deciding whether or a particular action is a legitimate instance of terrorism. As James Rachels argues, "intention is not relevant to deciding whether the act is right or wrong, but instead it is relevant to assessing the character of the person who does the act, which is very different. A pure heart cannot make a wrong act right; neither can an impure heart make a right act wrong" (Rachels 1989, 63-64). If this approach to identifying and classifying terrorism is accepted, then even if many domestic abusers lack an overt intention to terrorize their partners, we still have sufficient recourse to call their actions terrorist—although perhaps of the unintentional rather than intentional variety—and are therefore justified in including domestic abuse under rubric of terrorism.

Thus far I have argued that there is good reason to understand the concept of terrorism as including the possibility of both intentional and unintentional terrorist acts and thereby allowing for the possibility of domestic abuse being considered an act of terrorism even if its perpetrators create terror unintentionally.
What I want to suggest now, however, is that even if one is not completely convinced by this argument, and therefore still reluctant to recognize domestic abuse as a form of terrorism, there still might be a reasonable case to be made in defense of the intentional nature of domestic abuse.

The first step in presenting such an argument is to highlight the existence of a distinction between the intentions of an individual and the purposes or objectives of an institution or social practice in which the individual participates. Although an individual might engage in a particular practice for various personal or private reasons, the broader purposes of this practice might be very different. For example, a number of feminist authors have suggested that although men often have various private intentions in committing acts of rape—feelings of revenge, power, or sexual attraction—the overall objective of the institution of rape is to terrorize women into behaving “properly” (Brownmiller 1975; Griffin 1979; Card 1991). Rape accomplishes this by instilling feelings of dependency on male protection, tempering women’s efforts to be independent by engendering a sense of fear with respect to being the victim of a sexual crime, and supporting what Card calls “the protection racket” (Card 1991, 303–04). In other words, the institution of rape can be understood as possessing the objective of inducing women to accept various social conventions and norms favorable to the interests of men even though the individuals who carry out these acts rarely, if ever, possess this intention themselves. In the case of rape, men do not “need to have the aims or consequences of the practice ‘in mind’ as they do it” in order for the institution to be successful in its purpose of maintaining male social dominance and spreading its message of fear (298).

Returning to the topic of race, we can easily find a number of analogous instances of racist institutions even in the absence of individuals with racist intentions. Such cases of “institutional racism” include redlining by banks in the process of approving loans, the widespread tendency of those in media to value lighter skin, and racial profiling by law enforcement officials. It seems manifest that the participants in these institutions need not possess racist intentions in order for the institutions themselves to be racist.

Given these considerations, I would suggest that just as an institution can be racist without its practitioners possessing racist intentions, so too can an institution be terrorist without its practitioners possessing any overt intentions to create terror. The objectives of domestic abuse, as an institution, can be distinguished from the particular intentions of its individual perpetrators. And furthermore, as an institution, domestic abuse can be seen to embody a social activity and system of rules that seeks to terrorize women into accepting male dominance and female dependence through violence and the threat of violence. Although Card writes the following about the use of rape as a weapon of war, I believe the same could be stated with respect to domestic abuse, “the primary target is not women and girls. They are direct targets. The primary target is a people. A coercive
threat (message) is aimed at those who resist or might resist...” (Card 2010, 160). Although an individual may not have the intention of creating terror when he engages in a particular act of domestic abuse, the social practice of domestic abuse itself has the broader purpose and function of creating terror. Regardless of the private intentions of abusers, it seems reasonable to claim that the broader purposes of the social practice as a whole—which violently denies women “important material and symbolic resources,” while at the same time devaluing women as “secondary and inferior”—is terrorist in nature (Mullender 1996, 65).

**Calling Domestic Abuse Terrorism**

Having argued that neither concerns about motivation nor intention are sufficient to derail efforts to expand the concept of terrorism to include domestic abuse, the final obstacle that I will consider in this paper is the worry that such an expansion is either unhelpful or inappropriate. The goal of this paper might be viewed, as Rodin notes, as “an act of disreputable persuasive redefinition akin to arguments that seek to define inequality and poverty as forms of violence” (Rodin 2004, 769). Why should we expand the concept of terrorism to include acts of domestic abuse when it is already commonly acknowledged that they are both wrong? In other words, what is gained by defining domestic abuse as a species of terrorism, and do the benefits of such an expansion outweigh the risk of adulterating our current concept? Several of my own colleagues have expressed such worries and have consequently found the idea of expanding the concept of terrorism to be unattractive. Even if it is true that domestic abuse can be successfully subsumed under the conceptual rubric of terrorism, to do so would take us so far from common usage as to be decidedly prohibitive. In the absence of strong countervailing support for such an expansion, therefore, it might be thought wise to keep these two ideas conceptually distinct. I want to offer several responses to this concern and thereby suggest that labeling acts of domestic abuse as terrorism is not only conceptually legitimate, as the earlier parts of this paper have argued, but also pragmatically advantageous.

The first response is the straightforward observation that the word terrorism has a strongly pejorative connotation in our current society and that subsuming acts of domestic abuse under this term is likely to bring increased pressure to refrain from such acts. Although it is true that domestic abuse is already generally perceived as a wrongful act, valuable emotive leverage can be utilized in acknowledging domestic abuse as a form of terrorism. Many theorists who research domestic abuse lament that there is still an unfortunate degree of trivializing and disregard for domestic abuse as a serious crime. Kakar observes that “for ages, men have been able to physically, sexually, and psychologically
mistreat women with complete impunity from any legal or social sanctions” and because of this, society’s reactions to women’s poor treatment has been exceedingly slow to change (Kakar 1997, 19). Consequently, I think those seeking to expose and eliminate the harms of domestic abuse should be free to utilize the pejorative power of the term terrorism to their advantage—an observation that I think motivates many feminists who make the association between terrorism and domestic abuse.

It might be objected that the power of this reason will be quickly undermined insofar as expanding the term to encapsulate the broader framework of actions that include domestic abuse will attenuate the deeply pejorative connotation of terrorism. The term terrorism is strongly pejorative precisely because it is limited to describing a narrower collection of actions. Although I think this concern has some merit, I do not believe that its real target should be legitimate instances of terrorism, such as domestic abuse, but rather the explosion of spurious references that have increased exponentially since 9/11. The term terrorism is currently being employed across the world in a number of illegitimate and misleading ways. Examples include efforts by the Chinese government to characterize nonviolent Tibetan monks seeking independence as terrorists and the Egyptian government’s policy of imprisoning political opponents under anti-terrorism laws. If there is any genuine danger of attenuating the pejorative value of the term terrorism, then I believe it is to be found in these uses and not in efforts to expand the term to include legitimate cases of terrorist activity.

A second, and perhaps the most important, reason for identifying domestic abuse with terrorism is found in the fact that it enjoins us to look to our broader society and focuses our attention on the institutional and social factors that contribute to and are influenced by domestic abuse. As we have already seen, domestic abuse is treated largely as an isolated act of violence between individuals by both our legal system and the general population. This understanding, however, eschews the social circumstances and historical narrative in which violence against women occurs. Domestic abuse is not simply an isolated act but rather is, and has historically been, a means of cementing advantages and maintaining privileges for men in society while at the same time reinforcing women’s inferior status. It cannot be reduced to a private conflict between individuals because it entails, as we saw earlier, serious consequences for all women in both the broader social and political spheres.

Calling domestic abuse terrorism highlights the need for us to acknowledge and respond to these social and institutional factors. In recognizing the way in which abuse in the home negatively influences the opportunities, sense of self-worth, and status of women in society, it becomes clear that domestic abuse cannot be equated with mere assault and battery. The term terrorism, as Rhonda Hammer observes, more adequately captures the nature of domestic abuse, which is “far more extensive and interrelated to social, political, and economic
dimensions (which necessarily include relations of gender, race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality) than conventional thinking about what violence or abuse of women usually signifies” (Hammer 2002, 135). The term terrorism captures the genuine sense of debilitating fear and oppression that many women face within their homes and the enduring political/social consequences of this abuse.

Furthermore, publicly recognizing domestic abuse as terrorism is likely to increase the likelihood of implementing what I believe are several changes essential to efforts to reduce violence against women in the domicile. These changes include how a community sees itself as possessing various obligations to anticipate, prevent, and respond to domestic violence among its members. It also includes changes in what is deemed an appropriate response from law enforcement and the judicial system to cases of domestic abuse.

Publicly identifying domestic abuse as a form of terrorism is vital in fomenting the sense of community-wide moral disapproval crucial to reducing abuse. In discussing an essential step necessary to decrease domestic abuse, Richard Davis points to the pivotal role that the community plays in deterring the would-be abuser. He writes, “It is imperative that other men in the community hold abusers, who are for the most part men, accountable for their behavior. If there is no public shame or loss of public reputation in the eyes of one’s peers in the local community, then there is little reason to expect that person to change his behavior” (Davis 1998, 112). The obligation that the members of a community have to condemn domestic abuse is likely to be more easily fulfilled if the abuse is associated with the deeply iniquitous idea of terrorism. Not only does such an association highlight the many facets of the abuse—ensuring that it is no longer simply the private matter that terms like domestic abuse often encourage—but it also emphasizes the community’s role in permitting and contributing to the abuse.

On the one hand, identifying domestic abuse as terrorism makes it much harder for the members of a community to ignore it and brush it off as simply a private dispute between two adults. No woman in a community should have to live her life in a continual state of terror and intimidation. Irrespective of whether or not a woman has chosen to share a home with someone, there is no defensible private sphere that can support terrorist actions against another individual. Terms like domestic abuse are neutralizing and hide the seriousness and intersectional consequences that result from relationship violence—thereby encouraging the pernicious belief that domestic abuse is a private matter—in a way that terrorism does not. Thus in an effort to engender the deep sense of moral indignation within a community essential to dissuading individuals from engaging in acts of family abuse—through public shame and loss of reputation—and also increasing the sense of responsibility that a community believes it possesses in identifying and eliminating abuse, the term terrorism seems particularly suitable.
On the other hand, identifying domestic abuse as terrorism goes beyond a mere revaluation of the seriousness of abuse against women in the home, and the punitive and social consequences of engaging in such acts, by indicting the entire community in trying to eliminate it. Recognizing domestic abuse as terrorism would ideally prompt communities to ask questions that have hitherto been ignored, given domestic abuse’s current status as an isolated and private matter. Questions, for instance, inquiring into the social institutions and structures that encourage and are maintained by domestic abuse, questions that ask which individuals and groups benefit from the inadequate attention given to domestic abuse and that investigate the ways in which certain economic and social arrangements make it easier for men to abuse women. The answers to these questions are likely to require community-wide changes that involve efforts aimed at compensating for women’s disadvantages with regard to monetary resources and access to housing, lack of victim resources, and elimination of social norms that dissuade women from speaking out. As Lisa Frisch notes, “Resolution of the domestic abuse crisis will be achieved not through reactive policies but through education, change in cultural values, gender equity, revision of opportunity structure, reorganization of social class systems and elimination of economic imbalance” (Frisch 1992, 212). Calling domestic abuse terrorism, I believe, can assist in expediting this needed change in perspective by acknowledging its seriousness and illuminating the community’s responsibility and obligation to challenge it.

Turning now to the legal dimension, I think the conceptual shift involved in recognizing domestic abuse as terrorism would also facilitate several needed changes in the criminal justice system’s approach and response to domestic abuse. I mentioned earlier in this paper that domestic abuse is often treated in the legal system as equivalent to an assault against a stranger. This is plainly inadequate. We have seen in this paper that domestic abuse goes far beyond an isolated act of violence; it is often a source of brutal oppression and a miasma of fear that significantly disadvantages all women and induces them to act in clearly detrimental ways across a wide spectrum of socially valuable measures. A simple misdemeanor for committing acts of terrorism would certainly seem ridiculous in any other context. But because domestic abuse is not generally conceived of in a way that is cognizant of its authentic nature and consequences—because it is not acknowledged as a type of terrorism—abusers often receive little more than a slap on the wrist.

Let me conclude this paper with two possible concerns. First, it might be worried that recognizing domestic abuse as terrorism would contribute to the current othering of Muslims and the widespread anti-Muslim rhetoric found in Western nations. I believe there are good reasons for thinking that it would have the opposite effect. First of all, one of the best ways to combat the othering of Muslims—particularly with respect to the ubiquitous label of terrorism—is to identify similar actions in our own social practices. It is quite common, for instance, to
hear indictments of terrorism when pundits or politicians discuss Taliban agents publicly beating women for not dressing appropriately or Iranians stoning women for adultery. Yet the successful American businessman who privately beats and rapes his wife for similar reasons is inexcusably free of such condemnation. Recognizing domestic abuse as terrorism would ideally undermine this benighted hypocrisy and undercut attempts to portray Muslim actions as uniquely depraved. Recognizing domestic abuse as terrorism would challenge the widespread tendency to employ the term terrorism against Muslims “manipulatively in order to mobilize support and silence opposition” and depict their actions as simply “beyond the pale” (Bar On 2003, 161). As Kelly Oliver writes, the decision to classify an individual as a terrorist is often used to “normalize some forms of violence and pathologize others” (Oliver 2007, 129). However, by recognizing domestic abuse as an act of terrorism we resist efforts to portray all terrorist actions and perpetrators as equally and incommensurably evil. Identifying the affable neighborhood guy who abuses his wife as a terrorist would combat efforts to characterize all terrorists as fundamentally evil persons incapable of being reasoned with or morally reformed. Consequently, I would contend that rather than contributing to the othering of Muslims, recognizing domestic abuse as terrorism would be instrumental in challenging this attitude.

Second, it might be suggested that using the term terrorism to describe domestic abuse somehow detracts from the more “serious” cases of terrorism that involve spectacular displays of destruction and loss of life. In other words, it could be argued that efforts to equate domestic abuse with terrorist acts like 9/11 trivializes or minimizes the horrific nature of terrorism and the sacrifices of its victims.

Although I am hesitant to engage in any comparative analysis meant to assess the seriousness of domestic abuse, I hope some consciousness-raising might be adequate to assuage such objections. I believe this concern is compelling only to someone deeply unfamiliar with the ubiquity and severity of domestic violence against women around the world. As Card notes, domestic abuse against women is “better described as ‘low-profile’ than as ‘small-scale’” (Card 2010, 159). In the United States alone, for instance, domestic abuse is widely cited as the most common cause of non-fatal injuries to women nationwide (Kyriacou 1999; Rennison 2003). Studies in large non-Western countries like India find that 43.5 percent of women reported psychological abuse while 40.3 percent had been physically abused by their partners at one time (Burton 1999). In fact, approximately half the total number of deaths that occurred in the terrorist attack of 9/11 is reached every year within the United States as roughly 1300 women are killed by their partners (Rennison 2003; Websdale 2003). This number, however, pales in comparison to many other countries. Russia’s foreign ministry, for instance, reports approximately 14,000 deaths every year from domestic abuse (Amnesty International 2005). Tens of thousands of women are killed and
millions are the victims of family terrorism every year—if these numbers do not amount to a “serious” problem, then I don’t know what does. Although it is true that domestic abuse lacks the shock value of suicide bombers, and is unlikely to be found on the nightly news, it is its low-profile nature that makes it so insidious and capable of generating such continuing terror in so many women’s lives.

NOTE

I wish to thank Alison Jaggar as well as Hypatia’s anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments on various versions of this paper.

REFERENCES


