

Towards Women's Security - Local and Global

State Library

3 December 2015

Securing women's lives: Taking private terrorism seriously

First I wish to acknowledge the people and elders, past and present, of the Kulin nations on whose land we meet today.

I also want to acknowledge colleagues [Associate Professor JaneMaree Maher](#) from Monash University, [Dr Kate-Fitz-Gibbon](#) from Deakin University and [Professor Sandra Walklate](#) from University of Liverpool who are joint authors of the ideas that inform this presentation.

Terrorism and family violence are prominent in local and national debates about crime and security. Post 9/11, terrorism has moved to the center of western country's risk portfolios. Consistent with this, Australian national security statements and priorities focus heavily on measures aimed at addressing the threat of terrorism. Recently family violence has garnered unprecedented attention. Victoria has had a \$40m Royal Commission and state and national governments have announced significant funding initiatives. Victoria has inaugurated a Minister for the Prevention of Family Violence, Tasmania has established a Cabinet Committee to oversee family violence reforms, Victoria Police have appointed an Assistant Police Commissioner to lead the first ever Family Violence Command in Australia and earlier this year Queensland published the findings of a special taskforce into family violence. Australian of the Year, Rosie Batty, is a family violence survivor and tireless advocate for the cause.

My aim here today is to contrast the approach to terrorism and family violence and critique the rationales for these different approaches. My contention is that while family violence is increasingly *recognized* as a serious crime it is not *treated* as a serious threat to security in the way that terrorism is. I maintain that although family violence has been *politicized*, unlike terrorism, it has not been *securitized* and that this contrast reflects and reinforce ideas and attitudes that exclude and undervalue women's security. I argue that in order to enhance women's security and demonstrate

that women's lives matter we need a paradigm shift in the way we think about and respond to family violence.

In order to contribute to and work towards achieving this paradigm shift we **first** need to think carefully about terminology. In current discussions of family violence what is typically being spoken about is intimate (ex)partner violence and this is what I focus on here today. Intimate partner violence is gendered violence. There *are* male victims of intimate partner violence and female perpetrators but it is incontrovertible that women are the overwhelming victims and men the overwhelming perpetrators. When I speak about intimate partner violence here today I am speaking about violence against women. In discussions about national security the term terrorism is exclusively associated with acts of public violence carried out by strangers. There is, however, a long tradition of feminist writings and activism that challenges the binary between public and private violence that disadvantages women. The public/private binary has historically excluded the violence that we experience at the hands of men we know from the protection of the law. This exclusion is highly significant because women are far more likely to be assaulted by men they know than strangers. Intimate partner violence is the most common type of violence against women, affecting 30 per cent of women worldwide. The line of feminist thought and action challenging the public/private violence dichotomy extends from Frances Power Cobbe's powerful 1878 essay on 'Wife Torture in England', to feminists lawyers and bureaucrats in the 1980s in Australia who pushed for reconceiving 'just a domestic' - a phrase that both trivializes and privatizes - to 'criminal assault in the home' - a phrase that emphasizes violence, legal transgression and, flowing from these, the imperative of the police and courts to intervene. In 1995 Johnson coined the term 'intimate terrorism' to capture the experience of intimate partner violence. More recently Rachel Pain places 'family terrorism' and international terrorism in the same problematic frame: the recourse to violence. Earlier this year Rosie Batty used the term 'family violence terrorism' to highlight the nature, seriousness and extent of this type of gendered violence and point out that it is the poor sister to public terrorism in the allocation of resources.

Continuing in the feminist tradition that challenges the private/public violence dichotomy I will from this point on refer to public and private terrorism to denote what are more typically referred to respectively as terrorism and family violence.

Now I want to highlight the different way that we treat public and private terrorism. Although private terrorism is today recognized as a serious crime, the risk that this type of crime poses to women's security is widely tolerated. The research that colleagues and I have undertaken and research by others indicates that perpetrators of private terrorism are typically given many opportunities to offend after their offending is brought to the attention of authorities. Intervention orders are designed to prevent repeat acts of private terrorism. However breaches of these orders, which are criminal offences, are not responded to as if they denote an emergency in women's lives that seriously threatens their security. Police often fail to act when notified of breaches, or are slow to intervene and sometimes police need to be made aware of multiple breaches prior to taking any action. The penalties for breaches imposed by courts tend to be relatively lenient and where men are found guilty of private terrorism they are given more lenient sentences than they would be if found guilty of similar violence in other contexts. Acts associated with public terrorism, even where no act of terrorism has taken place or been attempted, are punished severely and long periods of imprisonment are typically imposed in order to eliminate future risks to the public.

Our research, led by Dr Kate Fitz-Gibbon, demonstrates that opportunities to prevent intimate partner homicides, are frequently missed in the lead up to fatal acts of private terrorism. We conclude from this, and other research about the response to private terrorism, that risks to women's security are widely tolerated within the system. In summary the approach to private terrorism is one we describe as 'post-crime', in that typically serious harm must occur, and often repeatedly, before the perpetrator's capacity to inflict further harm is curtailed. Tragically serious interventions such as arrest, charge and incarceration, often occur only after fatal acts of private terrorism: this despite women's disclosures of private terrorism and/or requests for assistance from the police and courts.

Public terrorism, by way of contrast is considered too big a risk to approach in a post crime fashion. Instead massive resources are geared towards **preempting** public terrorism. There has been a deal of public commentary and debate about the disparity of funding available to private versus public terrorism. Despite recent welcomed funding initiatives there is still far more funding devoted to fighting public terrorism

over private terrorism. In the public terrorism arena a precautionary approach is mobilized with the underlying principle that it is better to be safe than sorry. Intelligence agencies, police and the government work together in a coordinated manner to ensure that would-be-public terrorists are deprived of even the first opportunity to offend. Those in government have made it clear that police and intelligence agencies will be given all the powers and resources they request to deal with public terrorism. On the other hand, services dealing with private terrorism are under resourced and frequently overwhelmed and unable to respond to demands for crisis intervention.

The different approaches to public/private terrorism may seem a matter of simple common-sense. The attacks on the United States in 2001 where approximately 3,000 people were killed and the recent attacks in Paris where 90 people were killed, graphically demonstrate the human costs of public terrorism. Although women are regularly killed in acts of private terrorism, surely the deaths of these women, regrettable and tragic though they are, are not as significant as acts of public terrorism when we consider the devastation of mass casualty attacks. Yet a close look at the evidence reveals a different reality. Private terrorism is responsible for more deaths than public terrorism, though the deaths from the latter are in the pattern of regular single murders rather than less frequent and more random mass murders. At least one woman is killed every week in Australia as a result of private terrorism. Private terrorism is the leading contributor to death, disability and ill-health in Australian women aged 15-44. Our calculations suggest that since 2001 more than *twice* as many women are killed *each year* in Australia in intimate partner homicides than people killed in Australia as a result of public terrorism. Whatever way the relative risks of fatalities from public terrorism and private terrorism are calculated, in Australia, typical of other western countries, private terrorism represents a greater risk.

The threat of public terrorism, however, is judged, not only on what has already happened or on the evidence of known risks based on the type of statistics set out above, but also on what *might* possibly happen. In contrasting the priority given to public terrorism over crimes against women one Victoria Police detective opined ‘we are ignoring known threats to investigate potential ones.’ Private terrorism should be treated as seriously, or more seriously, than public terrorism and other types of

violence because we know it has the highest potential for lethal violence. It has long been argued that deaths from private terrorism are the most preventable types of homicide because the risk factors- that is a history of private terrorism- are well known. Why then do we not respond to private terrorism as seriously as public terrorism and other forms of violence? Is it the context of gender inequity that reflects and reinforces the lower value placed on all aspects of women's lives? Is it the history of gender relations that considered a man's home his castle and women and children his chattels? In earlier eras private terrorism was condoned, in the recent past it was widely accepted as 'just a domestic', and today, though recognized as a serious crime, the risk of private terrorism to women's security continues to be tolerated.

What would it look like to take private terrorism as seriously as public terrorism? How could we mobilize a paradigm shift so that the risk to women's security from private terrorism is afforded the recognition it deserves? I have suggested that a change in language might be necessary to highlight the continuities rather than the differences between private and public terrorism. This will of course not be sufficient. A shift in funding priorities is also necessary and this needs to spread beyond crisis support services. Funding crisis services adequately to deal with acts of private terrorism is necessary but we need to acknowledge that the values and ideas that support private terrorism are woven into the fabric of social, economic, and political relations of gender and these need to be addressed.

A precautionary approach to both public and private terrorism is entirely compatible. Many of the existing preemptive approaches to public terrorism have been convincingly critiqued as ineffective, counter productive and contrary to human rights. **However** recent research indicates that societies with higher levels of gender equality are at less risk of public terrorism, though the causal pathways through which gender equality affects the occurrence of public terrorist events have yet to be fully explored (Salman, 2015). We can't afford to wait until these causal pathways are mapped. If public terrorism is a national emergency, and private terrorism surely is, then we need to take precautions and immediately address the plethora of ways in which women are seen and treated as unequal, while not forgetting the women, far too many, whose security needs to be immediately and urgently addressed.

[Jude McCulloch](#)

Professor of Criminology

Monash University

jude.mcculloch@monash.edu