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Intimate Partner Violence: The Ripple Effect of Education, Research and Advocacy

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In October 2012, SUNY Buffalo Law School with funding from the Baldy Center for Law and Social Policy hosted a conference, Intimate Partner Violence: The Ripple Effect of Education, Research, and Advocacy, to commemorate the 20th Anniversary of the Women, Children & Social Justice Clinic at the Law School. The title of the conference describes the reverberating work of the clinic. Education of law students creates new advocates with new ideas to imagine and implement evolving responses to intimate partner violence. Education flows into evidence based research, in collaboration with community partners, to better understand the full range of issues involved in intimate partner violence. Evidence based research streams into informed advocacy to prevent and respond to intimate partner violence. The articles in this Special Symposium Issue address different aspects of the education/research/advocacy triad while also exploring geographic ripples. Education in the classroom leads to work in the local community. Expertise at the local level ripples out to advocacy at the national and international scale. With each broadening circle, efforts begun at the clinic-level reach unforeseen destinations in terms of geographic reach and policy development.

Suzanne E. Tomkins, co-founder of the Women, Children & Social Justice Clinic at SUNY Buffalo Law School provides the history of the Clinic and explains its past work and expansive mission. Her article frames the Special Symposium Issue by providing background on the education, community response, and national/international work of the Clinic. As she mentions in her article, “countywide protocols first written in Niagara County have been adopted for use in surrounding counties and have also been utilized in Russia, Ukraine, and most recently in Belo Horizonte, Brazil.”¹ Within her poignant retelling of the Clinic history and collaborative initiatives, she illustrates the relationship between clinical legal education to address intimate partner violence, the feminist

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¹ Suzanne Tomkins, 20 Years of Domestic Violence Advocacy, Collaborations, and Challenges: Reflections of a Clinical Law Professor, 22 BUFF. J. GENDER L. & SOC. POL’Y 1, 3 (2014).
movement, and wider social justice advocacy. In describing the reasoning behind changing the name of the Clinic to Women, Children & Social Justice, Tomkins explains, “The social justice component expresses our mission to broadly address intimate partner violence experienced by gay, lesbian, transgendered persons, children, and any other persons in the community experiencing intimate partner and/or family violence.”2 The work moves from the classroom to the community to national and international collaborative projects. In looking back, she states:

What is different now, twenty years later, is that we have a close network of committed advocates throughout the various systems that have been created. We also have a body of research to support our reform efforts. Most importantly is that rather than having to span a division across professions, we have the ability and history to sit down, present our concerns, create mutual understandings, and reach out across constituencies for support when needed.3

Leigh Goodmark elaborates on the interrelationship between the battered women’s movement and clinical legal education. She critically examines the work of both to focus attention on the empowerment of women and away from a narrow legal response to intimate partner violence. She writes, “The particular problem with excessive reliance upon state intervention in domestic violence cases is that such interventions delegate power to the state to make decisions about women’s lives.”4 She expounds by explaining, “To the extent that the state substitutes its own judgment for the woman’s, in ways that the woman might not invite and that might even prove harmful to her, such policies are disempowering for women subjected to abuse.”5 Goodmark’s article includes a caution for advocates including Clinicians and law students, imploring that they address larger issues beyond the legal definitions and responses to avoid being forced “to continue to respond to symptoms rather than attacking the problem of abuse at its roots.”6

Dr. Catherine Cerulli and her colleagues pick up this call to move beyond traditional legal responses to intimate partner violence. Using Community Based Partnership Research, Cerulli and her team champion

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2 Id. at 6.
3 Id. at 12.
5 Id. at 38.
6 Id. at 42.
client-centered advocacy. Rather than focusing on conviction rates or other traditional evaluations of legal success, Cerulli and her team worked to develop both a day care center and a mental health clinic within the Family Court to serve the needs of children and of caretakers. Cerulli and her team re-use the Family Court—the bastion of the legal response to intimate partner violence—to expand its work to encompass extra-legal services through “therapeutic justice.” “The ultimate goal of this article is to stimulate further dialogue about how universities and courts can partner to initiate and sustain therapeutic justice in a meaningful way...to improve litigants’ physical and mental health.”

Remla Parthasarathy encompasses all forms of cultural identity in urging an expansion of the standard Power and Control Wheel to include the use of culture as an intimate partner violence tactic. She illustrates the pervasive nature of culture and imbeds it within the basic understanding of intimate partner violence. To truly engage in client-centered advocacy urged by Goodmark and Cerulli, Parthasarathy demands recognition of the pervasiveness of culture in the weapons of intimate partner violence and in the success of the interventions.

Aruna Papp’s story, movingly told at the conference, moves beyond the personal to distinguish between honor killing and intimate partner violence. “Violence against women in Western societies, differs from the violence perpetuated in communities where the ideology of family honour is the norm...Crimes committed in the name of family honour differ from intimate partner violence, child abuse, crimes of passion, and other forms of violence against women.” While Parthasarathy and Papp both discuss the role of culture in understanding intimate partner violence, Papp pushes to distinguish culturally-based forms of violence that are not between intimate partners so the safety of the victim can be properly understood and addressed.

The student channel by Elizabeth Monachino contributes to the advocacy linking various legal responses to intimate partner violence. She urges a reform of New York State Law to create a rebuttable presumption against awarding custody to batterers when there is evidence of intimate partner violence perpetrated against a parent.

Together, these six articles display the breadth of clinical legal education and collaborative community advocacy in addressing intimate partner violence in 2014. Twenty years ago, the critique of legal responses and cultural identity were unimaginable. The reach of clinical legal education into the national and international arenas was not foreseen. The

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ripples have travelled far in twenty years. With client-centered advocacy, community based evaluation, and culturally aware responses on every level, clinical education and community responses have evolved to address the pervasive problem of intimate partner violence. And yet, the problem persists in rural and urban communities throughout the nation and throughout the world.

We hope that the articles in this Special Symposium Issue continue to spark debate and challenge current norms. It is only with constant critique and careful preparation of future advocates that we, together, will employ education, research, and advocacy to end the personal and community scourge of intimate partner violence in our communities, nation, and world.