

Reviews

Chris Cunneen & Julie Stubbs Gender 'Race' and International Relations: Violence Against Filipino Women in Australia Institute of Criminology Monograph Series No 9, Sydney (1997) ISBN 186451051*

In 1987, a 17-year-old Filipina was shot five times at close range by her 41 year-old Australian husband. The man was charged with murder but indicted only of manslaughter on the basis of diminished responsibility. The Australian court ruled that at the time of the murder the husband was "suffering from an abnormality of the mind that substantially impaired his mental responsibility for causing his wife's death". On February 3, 1988, he was sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment, with a non-parole period of six years. In the last four years, however, he has been on parole. Otherwise, he would have been freed on February 3 this year.

That a convicted murderer of a Filipino woman could be let off with a light sentence and possibly claim yet another victim is the very reason why the publication of the book *Gender, Race and International Relations, Violence against Filipino Women in Australia* is of utmost relevance. Its significance increases by several fold at a time when murders and disappearances of Filipino women migrants all over the world have reached alarming numbers. Chris Cunneen and Julie Stubbs, authors of the book, examined 27 cases of deaths and disappearances from 1980 to 1995 of Filipino women and children in Australia. Their conclusions validate the public outcry within the Filipino community against the uncommonly high level of violence against Filipinas in Australia.

The book represents the final report of research conducted by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC), an Australian government body, that showed Filipino women were six times more likely to be victims of spousal homicide than Australian women in general. This research was a response to representation made by the Centre for Philippine Concerns-Australia (CPCA) in 1994. CPCA is an organisation of Filipino migrants that started documenting the incidence of murders of Filipino women in 1989 after another Filipina, Gene Bongcodin, was strangled to death by her ex-husband. The man pleaded guilty to manslaughter and was sentenced to eight years' imprisonment with a minimum of five-and-a-half years.

I distinctly remember the shock that overcame the Filipino community in Australia when news of the sentence broke out. I was then living in Sydney and was an active member of CPCA, which vigorously campaigned for a murder conviction. The incident galvanised us to look more closely into the conditions of Filipinas who were married to Australian men. The information we unearthed about the violence in these marriages was devastating. First, we found that domestic violence was a common occurrence in many of these relationships. Second, we discovered a disturbing pattern of more and more deaths and disappearances.

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Third, we realised that the violence extended to Filipino women in general and was manifested in a number of ways, such as sex tourism, prostitution and trafficking. Fourth, we began to see that all these had created a racialised and sexualised construction of Filipino women, an image shaped and even popularised by international media.

Stubbs and Cunneen bring all these realities together and draw from many other studies undertaken over the years to produce an insightful analysis of violence against Filipino migrant women in Australia. Melba de Guzman-Marginson, staunch advocate for Filipino women in Australia and national coordinator of CPCA, believes that the book's contribution is its analytical framework that so clearly illustrates how racism, sexism and First and Third World relations have significantly interplayed and impacted on the violence experienced by Filipino women living in Australia. It was Marginson who presented the tales of murders to the Australian government and who challenged the HREOC to look into spousal homicides among Filipino women.

In the beginning of the book, the authors define the 'intersectional approach' they adopted in analysing the findings of the research. Central to this approach is the examination of the 'manner in which Filipino women are constituted with respect to race/ethnicity, class and gender and with respect to other axes of social location such as age'.

Cunneen and Stubbs effectively apply this approach in their examination of the case studies and in their interpretation of the findings.

The research revealed that Filipino women are over-represented in cases of homicides. More accurately, the findings showed that *Filipino-born women aged between 20 and 39 were found to have a homicide victimisation rate, which is 5.6 times that of Australian women in the same age group*. On the other hand, the homicide rate of Filipino men in Australia is substantially lower than that of Australian men. Stubbs and Cunneen concluded that the empirical evidence available shows that 'homicide is a specific issue for Filipino women in Australia' and clearly indicate that concern over the level of violence against Filipino women is well founded.

Through a closer examination of the 27 deaths and disappearances of women and children used as case studies, the authors unveiled the nature of violence at the personal level. According to them, the critical features of the homicides were their gendered and domestic nature. The homicides were highly patterned by particular social relationships and were not random killings. In almost all the cases, the killers were male partners or ex-partners and the killings were domestic in nature. In all of them, the perpetrators were non-Filipinos coming from culturally diverse backgrounds and many of them met their Filipino partners in the Philippines. On the average, the men were 13 years older than the women. In most cases, domestic violence occurred before the homicides.

While many of these 'findings' have previously been cited in many other studies and reports about violence against Filipino women in Australia, Cunneen and Stubbs bring the analysis one notch higher. They go beyond presenting the facts by tracing the trends and discovering the racial and gender patterns in the cases they studied. Particularly enlightening is the discussion on the role of masculinity and violence in constructing a male fantasy of Filipino women. The authors cite previous studies on masculinity and murder that identify homicide as a masculine offence with masculine power and control being central features in spousal homicides. The following explanation demonstrates the depth of understanding Cunneen and Stubbs have of the issues:

'The racialised and sexualised construction of Filipino women is fundamental to understanding their position in male fantasy. The male fantasy about Asian women incorporates

exotic sex, and promise of a relationship with complete security and compliance and a fantasy about love which transcends age difference. The final aspect of this fantasy is that the relationship can be bought cheaply through an agency or arranged simply through the use of informal networks. In other words, it is a completely commodified fantasy that requires nothing more than money or a credit card number. This fantasy is particularly powerful and damaging since it can be mobilised to justify and authorise First World men's access to an power over women on the basis of mythical 'natural' characteristics'.

'What happens when men attempt to live out these fantasised relationships and the women involved refuse to comply, refuse to be treated as commodities?'

In answering this question, the authors point out this male fantasy becomes lethal for Filipino women when it is integrated back into the relationships that resulted in their deaths and disappearances. The killings are a heightened or extreme instance of domination, which has been mediated by representations of 'Asian' women in general, and Filipino women in particular, as both passive and sexual beings, as the embodiments of male desire.

Cunneen and Stubbs reveal that two interwoven processes become apparent in some of the case studies.

First, violence emerges as a resolution to conflict for the male when he attempts to assert absolute dominance and authority and the women resist.

Second, the Filipino women become re-invented as manipulative and self-seeking people who simply marry western men to leave the Philippines. In other words, women's actions are re-interpreted through the lens of a stereotype of Filipino women as sexually promiscuous gold diggers seeking foreign nationalities so they can bail themselves out of the pit of poverty. They are seen at best as complicit in the violence against them, or at worst, deserving of their violent fates. The men, on the other hand, are constructed as victims who merely gave their spouses and partners the punishment they deserved.

The strength of this book lies, as I see it, in three things. First, the insightful analysis of the many issues around violence against Filipino women in Australia. Second, its careful consideration of earlier research and work on the issue. Third, its rigorous scholarship that manages to avoid the pitfall of reducing the gruesome murders into emotionless statistical data or treating the subject matter in heavy academic terms.

In the end, however, this book serves a useful purpose not just in terms of allowing us to understand the phenomenon of murders of Filipino women in Australia in the hands of their male partners, but also to convince policymakers and law enforcement authorities that action is needed now. The findings and analysis presented in the book have affirmed what many have been saying for years. What is required from the Australian government at this point is the political will to conduct an official inquiry and take decisive steps to arrest the intensifying violence directed at Filipino women.

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