

around gender identity and space for those interested in cultural studies, social geography and women's studies.

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Policing sexual assault

Jeanne Gregory and Sue Lees; Routledge, London 1999. £15.99, Pbk, ISBN 0-415-16388-9

This substantial (217 page) study covers a vast number of issues in an intelligent and thought-provoking manner, dealing not only with the oft cited and still shockingly low conviction figures in rape and sexual assault trials, but delving deeply into the highly hegemonic police culture, and the role of the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) in perpetuating a climate within which serious sexual offences are, in the vast majority of cases, either downgraded on prosecution, 'no-crimes' or thrown out by the CPS prior to trial.

The book is divided between original research undertaken by the authors into women's experiences in North London of reporting rape and other major sexual crimes, and a far-ranging review of the ways in which the criminal justice system has responded to feminist calls for reform of the treatment of victims of domestic and sexual assault. It provides a clear overview of the interconnected roles of organs of the state involved in policing, the dominant discourse on female sexuality, and the construction of the 'classic victim' whose case is likely to lead to conviction.

A groundbreaking chapter on male rape is included in this book, and the comparisons between conviction rates for male and female rape, police handling of complaints and the gendered meaning of sexual assault are considered from within a feminist discourse. While for both genders, experiences of interview and psychological effects on victims remain similar, the heterosexism displayed by police officers in their recording of assaults of men is starkly outlined. In contrast to the discussion of police paradigms of gay male sexuality, the absence of discourse around lesbian experiences of sexual assault was clearly lacking, although this may well be as a result of the reluctance of lesbian-identified women to discuss their traumatic experiences. I was particularly struck with the fact that the issues of 'race' and disability were pervasive throughout the in-depth analysis of sexual assaults, although within the context of this study, learning disability was the primary disability considered, and in the main, within the context of male victims of rape. However, the sensitive issues of 'race' and ethnicity were considered when analysing types of assault reported, the prevalence of intra-racial assaults, police and CPS attitudes to prosecution and the outcomes of sexual

assault complaints. A useful review of the literature around perceptions of ethnicity and sexuality was also included in the chapter on 'the decriminalization of rape'.

Gregory and Lees have produced a stark indictment of the criminal justice system, while discussing in a balanced and fair manner the various attempts at core reforms within the police force, CPS and individual force and local area initiatives to ease the trauma of rape complainants. Of major interest in this book, and in my opinion worthy of more than the two chapters allocated to the findings, are the sections dealing with primary research undertaken by the authors into complainants' experiences of reporting sexual assault, the treatment they received at the hands of the police, (predominantly male) police surgeons, and most worryingly of all, the blatant disregard for the victim's psychological and in some cases physical well-being evidenced by CPS practices which left many women not knowing the outcome of their complaint, or even aware of whether the defendant had been convicted or the case dropped.

I was left with a sense of anger after reading it; anger against the system which fundamentally fails most victims of sexual assault and also fails those police officers and prosecutors, who in a number of cases were acclaimed by rape victims for their sensitivity and supportiveness. On a potentially more positive note, the final chapter suggests ways in which the English legal system can move forward in dealing with sexual offences, taking the knowledge gleaned from a number of innovative pilot projects, and international reforms of judicial practices and sexual assault legislation. Touching on Humans Rights discourse and the concept of the 'competing rights' of defendants and victims, Gregory and Lees conclude with an argument for a shift in the legislative conceptualization of sexual assault to take account of the 'widespread abuse of male power and control over women and children'.

In all, this is a book that is written in an accessible style, and provides useful reference to a large number of research projects and theoretical writings on gendered experiences of violence. While I feel that the authors do not do enough justice to their own research into victims' experiences of reporting sexual assaults, and (as a very minor criticism) an assumption is made that the reader will have some degree of knowledge of legal procedures and terminology, this study will prove of critical interest for students of criminology, women's studies and the general feminist reader who wishes to understand more about the policing and treatment of victims of sexual assault.

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