

Rachel N. Clift

Prof. Moss

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The Effectiveness of the Violence Against Women Act

The Violence Against Women Act, or VAWA, was passed in 1994 under former United States President Bill Clinton in an attempt to address intimate partner violence, dating violence, sexual assault, and stalking (Meyer-Emerick 4). Seeing as recent statistics show that 1.3 to 5.3 million women experience domestic violence each year (Armstrong et al. para 1)--and that annually, domestic violence affects one in four women and one in seven men (Aday 5)--violence against women is clearly still a prominent issue. Despite this, we must look at how prominent the issue is in comparison with the frequency of intimate partner violence twenty-five years ago (when the act first passed) to determine how successful the legislation has actually been. According to several sources, although violence carried out against women is still a major issue that needs further addressing, VAWA has actually been wildly successful in a number of different ways, abstruse and apparent.

The Violence Against Women Act has been reauthorized by Congress three times since its initial passage in 1994 (Armstrong et al. para 14), but its purpose is still said to be premised on the same two primary goals named by the United States Congress at the time of the act's inception: to "enhance investigations and prosecutions of offenders;" and to "provide for a number of grant programs to address the issue of violence against women from a variety of

angles including law enforcement, public and private entities and service providers, and victims of crime” (Aday 8). One major focus of the ambitious act has been to improve the manner in which law enforcement (police officers, judiciary, etc.) responds to intimate partner violence through Coordinated Community Response, which utilizes collaborative efforts by the community along with other resources “to hold offenders accountable and support survivors” (Sierra para 4). A number of non-profit organizations have worked to support this goal by communicating with judges and officers about the nuances of domestic violence, as well as bringing about networks in which law enforcement is given the opportunity to train with domestic violence service providers (Sierra para 4). Being that empathy for someone is most effectively evoked in individuals by the formation or previous existence of a personal relationship with that victim, having law enforcement work closely with service providers as well as directly with survivors of relationship violence makes sense. In addition, Congress (within the legislation) and said non-profits openly holding law enforcement accountable for its historic lack of action taken to prevent domestic violence was perhaps one of the most immediately helpful and empathetic results of the passage of VAWA. In her book entitled “The Violence of Women Act of 1994: An Analysis of Intent and Perception,” author Meyer-Emerick speaks about the importance of educating women about their rights under the legislation, and praises the act’s mandate “that women and their advocates have been consulted about policy implementation” as well as the fact that such consultations must be documented (Meyer-Emerick 5).

The Violence Against Women Act, though far from perfect, has well proven its effectiveness on not only the annual rate of intimate partner violence, but the ability of women in

the United States to feel safe enough to report said violence. According to Armstrong, Modi, and Palmer in their article for the *Journal of Women's Health*, Results from a study undertaken at the University of Kentucky show that following the legal enforcement of mandatory arrest laws under VAWA, there was a 51% increase in the rate of domestic violence reports (Armstrong et al. para 10). This indicates that victims likely feel more confident that law enforcement will express support and empathy as a result of the legislation (and of the organizational work discussed in the previous paragraph as well); and that should law enforcement act harmfully or not at all, victims will be supported in their endeavours to get help elsewhere. Further evidence for this claim can be found in results taken from a survey of women in a shelter: 85% voiced their support of mandatory arrest policies, with 77% of this sample stating that mandatory arrest policies “reduced the burden of responsibility for survivors” (Armstrong et al. para 10). While a positive emotional response from victims shows a partial victory by the legislation, the effectiveness of the act can be further determined by looking at how intensely the frequency of intimate partner violence has dropped in the past twenty-five years.

In addition to the positive effects on victims' relationships with law enforcement, numbers from the Bureau of Justice Statistics mentioned by Armstrong, Modi, and Palmer express an overall decrease in the annual rate of relationship violence: The rate of domestic violence against females dropped by an impressive 53% between 1993 and 2008--“from 9.4 victimizations per 1,000 females aged twelve years or older to 4.3 victimizations per 1,000” (Armstrong et al. para 10). The rate of intimate partner violence against men decreased significantly as well, falling 54%--“from 1.8 per 1,000 aged 12 years or older to 0.8 per 1,000” (Armstrong et al. para 10). The annual number of victims, male or female, of intimate partner

violence saw an immense drop between 1994 and 2010 with about 2.1 million cases being reported in 1994 to roughly 907,000 in 2010 (Armstrong et al. para 10). Instances of fatal domestic violence also decreased between 1993 and 2007, though unfortunately not as dramatically as instances of nonfatal violence: The number female victims decreased by 26%, and the number of male victims decreased by 36% (Armstrong et al. para 10). The aforementioned report from the University of Kentucky found a 63% decrease in nonfatal crimes and a 24% decrease in fatal crimes (Armstrong et al. para 10). The less impressive drop in nonfatal crimes is likely due to the fact that most cases of intimate partner violence are not fatal, and are not carried out by individuals with an intent to kill. To willfully commit murder, it is assumed that one must be unable to feel the normal senses of empathy and human connection that most feel. The vast majority of people have enough impulse control to keep from killing another person, regardless of how angry they are, implying that only a small pool of people would even have the psychological ability to commit homicide. If the individuals within this small pool of people do not even have the emotional or ethical capability to keep from murdering someone, it can be assumed that the prospect of their actions will not be affected by a change in legislation, either. Alternatively, the remaining perpetrators of domestic violence do not show these psychopathic tendencies, and although they may get angry enough to severely injure a partner, the concern over getting arrested or the late arrival of a corrective emotional response will keep these individuals from actually killing their victims. This being said, it may be unfair to critique VAWA based on statistics surrounding rates of fatal relationship violence.

Although the issue of intimate partner violence is far from being solved, the overall positive results of the Violence Against Women Act of 1994 have proven that with ethical

intentions and a human focus, assertive legislation can be extremely useful in protecting victims of domestic violence physically and emotionally. By focusing closely on six specific areas--safe streets, safe homes, equal justice in the courts, stalker violence reduction, distinct protections for battered immigrants, and provisions made to strengthen pre-existing laws (Cho and Wilke 126)--VAWA thoroughly works to protect a diverse myriad of sufferers coming from all walks of life. With the rise of awareness surrounding relationship violence, specifically sexualized violence, victims will hopefully find that further legislation similar to VAWA may come as a result of this outspokenness and heightened media attention.

Works Cited

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