

The Undoing and Violence Against Women

by Michael Curtis



Recent political events in the U.S. exemplify the maxim that people adhere to a narrative even when the facts they witness are otherwise. The maxim is also an inherent supposition of HBO's new high profile whodunit six week TV miniseries, *The Undoing*, in which the leading character Grace, a gifted clinical psychologist, has difficulty in absorbing the truth about her husband Jonathan, and remains in a virtual state of denial almost to the end. Grace disregards her own advice to one of her patients, the mind can go to great lengths to deny information that conflicts with truths one does not want to hear.

It is not exactly clear what the title *The Undoing* is supposed to mean, presumably referring to Grace's final acceptance of

the viciousness and deceitfulness of her husband in whom she had believed. Appropriately for psychologist Grace, "undoing" is a psychological term meaning a defense mechanism to deny threatening impulses by thinking or acting in a way intended to undo those impulses. The miniseries, *The Undoing*, is more a psychological thriller about a woman brutally murdered than a genuine whodunit because of the fact that the obvious suspect is the real killer of an enigmatic woman.

The six episodes of the miniseries mainly concern a privileged Upper West Side New York family living in an upper class style, Grace, successful therapist, Jonathan, seemingly a devoted husband, accomplished pediatric oncologist, Henry a well-adjusted son who attends an elite, expensive, private school, and Franklin, Grace's father, a wealthy individual living in an apartment on Fifth Avenue and visitor of the Frick Museum. Since most viewers will be watching while at home in lockdown, it is a pleasure to see New York City at its most alluring, if elitist manner, and to enjoy the stars, Nicole Kidman, Hugh Grant, and Donald Sutherland, who shine more brightly than the production.

The plot is full of red herrings and loose ends, and unclear motives, and various characters are trotted out as possible suspects for the murder of a rather mysterious woman, in a brutal fashion by smashing her head against the wall, and using her sculpting mullet to kill her. The obvious suspect and in fact the perpetrator is Jonathan who appears as a charming man, one pretending to be a devoted family man, but who in fact is an adulterer, a liar, a narcissistic sociopath, and a cold blooded killer who murdered his mistress.

In his attitude to women Jonathan has all the charm of a fictional Jeffrey Epstein. More important his fictional case illustrates the reality of a continuing pressing problem, violence against women by intimates as well as in general. The TV miniseries is a rather shallow and lack luster whodunit, but it is rewarding for indicating the prevalence of domestic

violence against women. It reminds us that in the U.S. in 2018, the last year for which statistics are available, on average three women were murdered by an intimate partner or lover every day.

Violence against women is a social and global as well as an individual problem, both a violation of their human rights and social justice and has serious consequences for health and well being. The memory of the O.J. Simpson case, a travesty in which he was tried and acquitted In January 1994 for the murder of his wife and her friend, is still vivid in the U.S. It is helpful that the World Health Organization has pointed out the comprehensive issue, that violence against women is a global problem of great proportion. One example is that in many countries, including Iran, Pakistan, Egypt and Lebanon, either violence against a female family member is legal, or there is no specific law dealing with domestic violence.

According to a definition by the UN, gender-based violence results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or mental harm or suffering to women, and deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life. The TV miniseries illustrates the physical and sexual harm, the aggression and psychological abuse by intimate partner violence.

The problem of violence has many dimensions. Some generalizations can be made. Men are more likely to use violence if they are poorly educated, are alcoholic, and believe they have a sense of entitlement over women. Similarly, women are more likely to experience domestic partner violence if they have low education, witnessed mothers being abused by a partner, and accept male privilege. The different types of violence include physical aggression, sexual coercion, psychological abuse, child abuse, trafficking, exploitation, female mutilation, forced early marriage and honor killings.

The figures are devastating. Global estimates in a 2013 analysis by the WHO using data from over 80 countries are that 1 in 3, 35%, of women in the world have experienced either physical and/or sexual violence. Most of this occurs in intimate partner violence. In the world, about 38% of murders of women are committed by a male intimate relative. About one third of all women who have been in a relationship have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner. More than 100 million females have undergone genital mutilation. About 70 million girls have been married before the age of 18 years. About 20% of women report being sexually abused as children. About 11 million females are trafficked around the world.

The troublesome reality is that in the U.S. in 2018 nearly 2,000 women were murdered by men, mostly by a gun. Almost all, 92% of the women, were killed by someone they knew. Of these, 63% were wives or other intimate acquaintances of their killers. Estimates are that the rate of murder in 2018 was 1.28% of 100,000 women. Black women are disproportionately affected by domestic violence, being murdered by males at rate of 2.85 per 100,000 compared with 1.03% of white women. Interestingly, most of these homicides were not related to any other felony crime. About 60% of Native American women have been physically assaulted in their lifetime by a spouse or partner. Reports indicate that females were often killed by males as a result of an argument between them.

Besides sexual abuse, violence against women has many consequences in matters of health, and economic and social affairs. The use of violence reduces or prevents equal participation in society and development, and increases costs. One estimate is that the cost of intimate partner violence in the U.S. in 2003 was \$5.8 billion, with reference to health care, legal, police and other social protection services.

One particularly heinous form of violence is honor killings,

mostly in the Middle East and North Africa, and most common in countries that are extreme proponents of Islam. These killings are common in some cities in Iran, where there have been 8,000 between 2010 and 2014, and in the Indian states of Haryana, Punjab, and Uttah Pradesh. About 20% of all murders in one province, East Azerbaijan, are related to honor issues. Honor killings are directed against women for a variety of reasons: refusing forced marriage, being the victim of rape, getting divorced, having sexual relations, or adultery. There appears to be a link between these killings and other factors, such as poor socioeconomic status, high rates of unemployment and poverty, and most recently policy responses such as lockdowns, because of Covid-19, and increased stress and isolation.

The issue of violence against women is being increasingly the subject of attention by official national and international bodies, by UN agencies, innumerable civil society organizations, and by women's movements. Their impact has been noticeable in areas such as health care, legal systems, and public campaigns to address the problem. Action has included support services for survivors of violence, and changes in the judicial system., education programs, community mobilization to change attitudes, and programs emphasizing prevention of different kinds of violence.

Some official action may be mentioned. In 1984, U.S. Congress passed the Family Violence Prevention and Services Act, now amended, that provides federal funding for victims of domestic violence by providing shelters and funding. In 1994 the Violence against Women Act was passed, acknowledging that domestic violence and sexual assault were crimes, and providing federal resources to help community responses to combat violence. The Act has been reauthorized and changed every five years. One such change in 2013 enhanced conditions of justice for Native American and LGBTQ women. However, the Act has encountered problems in Congress.

International agreements such as the Convention on the

Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women have led to developments holding that violence against women was a human rights concern in the United Nations. The UN General Assembly adopted in 1993 the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, and a special rapporteur was appointed to monitor activities. The UN position is to develop legal doctrines to counter gender based violence, and to make recommendations to eliminate violence and its root causes.

The UN has a Trust Fund , established in 1996, an interagency body , made up of 18 UN agencies to support programs , governmental and civil society organizations, aimed at preventing violence . The UN Women for Peace Association, founded in 2008, includes in its general mission providing services to those affected by violence and empowering women where they are at a disadvantage.

More attention is necessary. Estimates are that violence has increased during the Covid-19 pandemic. Paradoxically, the safety precautions, confinement, and distancing has restricted the ability of women to leave an abusive situation, and caused increased stress . So has the risk of sexual exploitation in exchange for health services while access to friends or helpful networks is restricted. Optimism is necessary, to see the opportunity in every difficulty and act on it.