



In an Abusive State: How Neoliberalism Appropriated the Feminist Movement against Sexual Violence

By Kristin Bumiller

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In an Abusive State puts forth a powerful argument: that the feminist campaign to stop sexual violence has entered into a problematic alliance with the neoliberal state. Kristin Bumiller chronicles the evolution of this alliance by examining the history of the anti-violence campaign, the production of cultural images about sexual violence, professional discourses on intimate violence, and the everyday lives of battered women. She also scrutinizes the rhetoric of high-profile rape trials and the expansion of feminist concerns about sexual violence into the international human-rights arena. In the process, Bumiller reveals how the feminist fight against sexual violence has been shaped over recent decades by dramatic shifts in welfare policies, incarceration rates, and the surveillance role of social-service bureaucracies.

Drawing on archival research, individual case studies, testimonies of rape victims, and interviews with battered women, Bumiller raises fundamental concerns about the construction of sexual violence as a social problem. She describes how placing the issue of sexual violence on the public agenda has polarized gender- and race-based interests. She contends that as the social welfare state has intensified regulation and control, the availability of services for battered women and rape victims has become increasingly linked to their status as victims and their ability to recognize their problems in medical and psychological terms. Bumiller suggests that to counteract these tendencies, sexual violence should primarily be addressed in the context of communities and in terms of its links to social disadvantage. *In an Abusive State* is an impassioned call for feminists to reflect on how the co-optation of their movement by the neoliberal state creates the potential to inadvertently harm impoverished women and support punitive and racially based crime control efforts.

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In an Abusive State: How Neoliberalism Appropriated the Feminist Movement against Sexual Violence By Kristin Bumiller Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #419363 in Books
- Brand: Brand: Duke University Press Books
- Published on: 2008-04-25
- Released on: 2008-04-25
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.25" h x .58" w x 5.88" l, .70 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 232 pages

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Editorial Review

Review

"*In an Abusive State* provides a needed and instructive retrospective of the violence against women movement. Kristin Bumiller brings into focus the uneasy alliance between feminists and the state by looking critically at the official conduct of rape trials and domestic assault cases, as well as the routine surveillance of women considered 'dependent.' Using extensive empirical analysis, she exposes the limitations of strategies that attempt to incorporate feminist practices within mainstream institutions. This important and timely book will set the agenda for a new era of feminist activism—one that begins with the realization that mounting fundamental challenges to systems of social control means working outside of the existing institutional structures of the state."—**Martha Albertson Fineman**, Robert W. Woodruff Professor of Law, Emory University

"Built on demanding scholarship, informed by collective feminist praxis, *In an Abusive State* engages the lives of women experiencing the personal trauma of and institutional responses to sexual violence. Committed, reflective, accessible, and challenging, Kristin Bumiller critically maps the structural relations of inequality and marginalization underpinning women's relationships to the authoritarian state and its regulatory institutions. Internationally significant, her excellent analysis exposes the policy deficits of restraint and criminalization and of attempting to affirm rights without addressing women's social, political, and economic exclusion."—**Phil Scraton**, Queen's University, Belfast, author of *Power, Conflict, and Criminalisation*

"Kristin Bumiller describes a sane, intelligent path through the cyclical race and gender passion plays that have spun out—and spun out of control—on the national media stage. From the Central Park Jogger case to O. J. Simpson, Bumiller is never polemical. This book provides much-needed perspective as she details the conscious and unconscious ingredients in how such polarization is choreographed, and how boundaries are subtly but intransigently marked."—**Patricia J. Williams**, James L. Dohr Professor of Law, Columbia University, and columnist for *The Nation*

From the Publisher

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From the Back Cover

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