

Domestic Violence and the Male Victim

Ann Lewis and Dr Sotirios Sarantakos

Abstract

Over the past few decades, 'domestic violence' has been defined as violence by men against women and children, and women's violence against their male partners has been considered to be either non-existent, or the fault of men, or has been trivialised and justified in a variety of ways. This paper challenges this notion of abuse against males and, using data from a study of men abused by their female partners, argues that domestic violence against males exists, that their voices are not heard; and that the refusal to acknowledge the existence of this form of abuse is part of a fundamental disempowerment of men which has arisen from a tacit acceptance in society of the radical feminist agenda. The paper concludes that domestic violence is not an issue of gender, and that official policy should be directed to providing the kind of help for abused men which up until now has been available only to women.

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Introduction

Over the past thirty years, the focus of research and public attention shifted from couples (or rather men) to women. This is most obvious in the area of domestic violence (DV) where public interest and concern has almost exclusively focused on women, leading to *feminisation of domestic violence*, and implying an *invisibility of the male* victim (Sarantakos, 1999). This is justified by a new philosophy which equates domestic violence with wife abuse, where husbands are taken to be the primary perpetrators and wives the primary victims (Adams, 1988:191; Dobash and Dobash, 1977-78, 1980, 1992; Grace, 1995:3; Kurz, 1993:88, 99; Saunders, 1988: 90; Schechter, 1982; Seth-Perdie, 1996; Thorpe and Irwin, 1996:6; Tierney, 1982), and the conviction that "only violence against women should be evaluated as a social problem requiring concern and social intervention" (Kurz, 1993, reported in Gelles and Loseke, 1993:63), that "only men can be perpetrators of violence" (Kurz, 1993:88), and that "women are typically victims and not perpetrators of violence in intimate relationships" (Kurz, 1993:99).

This interpretation of family violence implies further that women's aggression is a reaction to men's actions toward them, *blaming the victim* for his plight. It is argued, for instance, that a wife who beats her husband has herself been beaten and that her violence is the violence of self-defence (Straus and Gelles, 1990; Pagelow, 1985; Saunders, 1988); that when women assault their husbands they do so to defend themselves and to prevent further damage (Wolfgang, 1957); they use violence as the last resort (Totman, 1978), and that they are usually subjected to violence for a number of years before they assault or kill their spouse (Browne, 1986; McCormick, 1976, quoted in Bauman, 1997). This perception of DV resulted in a marked shift in relevant policies from a pro-husband to a pro-wife position, and a bias in favour of abused wives and against abused males, who are being ignored, neglected and disbelieved.

The validity of this perception of DV and the relevance and efficiency of the policies that are informed by this paradigm have been seriously questioned by many

writers (for a summary of such studies see Archer, 2000; Fiebert, 1998; Sarantakos, 1998b, 1999), who, using extensive empirical evidence, demonstrate that men and women are equally violent against each other, and that although men might on average cause more damage to their spouses, women's violence is by no means harmless, but very destructive. Although the validity of these findings is hard to refute, the question as to the nature and structure of husband abuse (used throughout the paper as the counterpart of wife abuse to denote abuse of males by their female spouse/partner) is still being contested, and requires stronger and more convincing answers, to overcome doubt and disbelief among the critics of husband abuse.

More particularly, there is a need for qualitative evidence that explains thoroughly and directly the internal structure of husband abuse, that is, the way it is constructed, the extent husbands and wives contribute to the creation of the problem, the system of power, the presence of abuse prior to the wife's assault, etc. There is simply a need for qualitative data that would provide a clearer and more convincing presentation of facts relating to male victims of DV, that will shed light on the reality of this problem. To provide such data is the purpose of this paper. The main concern of the analysis is to ascertain whether there are families in which wives abuse their male partners, and if so how genuine these cases are, what do they contain and how can they be explained.

Methodology

This paper presents findings gathered through a study of abused men from Australia and New Zealand, conducted by A. Lewis. The respondents were identified in a variety of ways but predominantly through contacts with men's support groups. This informal and non-systematic sampling construction is justified by the fact that there are no sampling frames available to draw samples from; apart from this, abused men do not respond readily to calls to participate in surveys, particularly when they are still living with their abusive spouse.

Initially an information sheet about the proposed study was sent to men's support groups and to organizations working for reform of family law, asking for assistance with the project. Included was an invitation for men who had been abused by their female partners to phone the researcher for an interview. It was also stated in the information that men who were to answer this call were supposed to have been

abused by their partner for at least twelve months and that the relationship has already ended. Confidentiality and anonymity of the respondents was assured. This avenue to assuring respondents for the study was successful and led to the identification of 48 respondents. Their background was rather diverse, with their occupations ranging from tradesmen to medical specialists. The majority of the respondents were of Anglo-Celtic background, and the age range was thirty to sixty-five. Twenty-one of the respondents lived in Sydney.

Data collection was accomplished by means of unstructured interviews. This was consistent with the nature of the study, which was qualitative and as such placed strong emphasis on DV as seen from the point of view of the respondents, allowing scope for exploration and for collection of personal stories, and for detailed description of their feelings at the time of the abuse, and of the effects violence had on their lives.

It goes without saying that a qualitative study based on a non-systematic sampling model cannot claim representativeness and therefore its design does not allow inductive generalisations (see Sarantakos, 1998a). Nevertheless, in its qualitative context, the study allows analytical generalisations, and is equipped with the required attributes to address effectively the research question. Analytical generalisations can provide a logical and methodological basis for explaining issues such as whether there are males who feel abused, what this abuse entails, how male victims of domestic violence experience such an abuse, how destructive this is felt to be, how males respond to it, and how they think it affects their life. In summary, the findings are expected to help better understand women's violence against their male partners, what it contains, and how and why women's violence is viable in a modern egalitarian society.

Findings and discussion

1. Women's violence

The study revealed a number of trends which allow a clearer understanding of what women's violence against their partners entails. The first finding of this part of the study is that abuse of males by their female partner is a real problem, with women abusing their spouse/partner in a manner which is felt to be not markedly different to

that of husbands abusing wives. In most cases, violence was reported to begin in a mild form as 'expressive' violence and to quickly develop into a serious family problem. When the relationship became gradually more committing, particularly through the birth of children and common ownership of house, and emotional dependence, the problem became manifested in the relationship, and rather difficult to control. It was also found that the types of violence inflicted by women on their partners were diverse, but serious nevertheless, causing considerable damage to the victims. Respondents stated that, over the history of their relationship, they experienced types of violence listed below.

(a) *Physical assault - Verbal assault*: The most commonly reported form of violence was unreasonable and unprovoked verbal attack: endless shouting, calling names, insulting, etc. paralysed the man's ego and his defence system to the breaking point. On the physical side of the problem, most common were reports of husbands being kicked, scratched and punched, or having their hands and arms bitten while trying to protect themselves, throwing or making direct contact with weapons such as knives, bottles, plates, photos, ashtrays, hot irons, and hot liquid, causing the man serious injury, often requiring medical attention.

(b) *Psychological abuse*: Abusive wives were reported to target the husband's feelings and emotions, and the 'soft spots' that affect his mood, self-esteem, and confidence. An example of this is a man's feelings as a father, where women would accuse him for being inadequate or that even the kids were not his (*'they're not your kids anyway; you've only been a sucker; I've been having affairs with other men all the time'*). His capacity as a worker is another example (*'who did the work for you?' 'whose palm did you grease?'*). Women would also put down their partner's body shape, his sense of colour, his ethnic background, his mental capacity, his economic or social status, his friends, the way he fixed things around the house, and the way he cooked a meal.

(c) *Abuse of money and property*: Abuse included also cases of inappropriate and improper use of money, financial deprivation, misuse/damage of property, eg destroying husband's cloths, and ripping out the windscreen wipers. Peter, an abused partner, describes one such example as follows: *She kept making demands that I earn more money, so I finished up working three jobs, seven days a week. But no matter*

how much I earned, she would spend it all on luxuries and abuse me because we were getting deeper into debt.

(d) *Social control*: Wives controlled the husbands relationships with friends and his freedom in general by using a variety of means ranging from lying down in front of the car to prevent him from leaving the home, to locking the husband in the house, or removing his credit card to restraint his mobility and independence.

(e) *Domination and control*: Abuse was not just a sum of violent acts, but in almost all cases it constituted a system that was imposed upon the abused spouse, that dominated his whole life. The study reported that abusive women assumed total control of the relationship eg by getting hold of power producing resources, imposing themselves upon the husband by enforcing authority over him or indirectly making serious threats to frighten him into submission.

(f) *Intimidation and fear*: In most cases, the wife's intent to control and dominate the husband entailed efforts to induce fear in him relating to his personal safety as well as the fate of the children and property in general. She would often threaten to burn the house down, hurt the children or animals, or kill herself, him or the children: she would often drive dangerously to frighten him, and make him realise how serious and dangerous she could be. This generated intimidation, insecurity, and fear in the husbands and the family members in general.

(g) *Child abuse*: Many women were reported in this study to also abuse their children, including all possible violent acts, ranging from verbal abuse to physical and emotional abuse. In such cases, the husband felt totally powerless to interfere. Stuart, an abused partner describes a 'mild case' of child abuse in the following example: *'My daughter was using paint brushes and she kept putting them in her mouth. My partner said to her, 'if you like it so much you can drink it' and she forced the liquid down her throat.'*

(h) *Abusing relationships*: Abuse took many other different forms such as disappearing from the house without explanation, sleeping in the spare room, locking the husband out of the bed room, treating the man 'like a boarder', not passing on messages, or refusing to communicate with him.

(i) *Sexual abuse*: Women used sex as a form of punishment, or as a means of manipulation, with some demanding sex at any hour of the day or night, or in a manner the partner disliked or was unable to perform. If the man did not comply, the

woman would go on the attack, making derogatory remarks about his virility ('if you really loved me, you would cut off your penis' or 'What are you, a man or a mouse?'). Retaliation for 'non-performance' included things like humiliation (often in front of friends), criticising his manhood, making threats to have affairs with other men, or just locking the man out of the house.

(j) *False allegations of violence*: Wives did not hesitate to make false allegations of violence to achieve their goals. Geoff, an abused partner, described one of his experiences as follows: '*She started punching me violently. As I moved away, one of the punches landed in the door frame and she broke her hand. She told everyone I had attacked her with a cricket bat.*'. In other cases, after a fight with her partner the wife would run to the police making false allegations of violence; when a trace of injury was present, her allegations were thought to be substantiated; it was automatically assumed it was the fault of the male.

In some cases the severity of the abuse decreased with time, with victims becoming increasingly more tolerant, to avoid confrontation or displeasing the wife, at least until they felt safe to leave. In most cases, the severity of assaults increased, with males becoming increasingly disappointed and pessimistic, resisting, revolting and questioning the presence and legitimacy of violence. In all cases, the experiences were most painful and destructive, ultimately leading to full breakdown of the relationship.

2. *Experiencing abuse*

The intensity of pain that victims of women's violence experienced in their home was evident in their statements but also in the manner they described their experiences, the tone of their voice and the kind of descriptions they used to show their suffering. However, all sources of information converge to demonstrate that all respondents have suffered immensely in the hands of their wives. Regardless of the severity of the attack, the pain was almost always the same. The most common experiences of the victims are briefly described below.

(i) *Pain, loss and betrayal*: The most obvious response was physical pain, physical discomfort, ill health, inability to function properly, eg when they could not use their arms, legs, hands, etc. fully, limited movement, also as a result of controlled resources, car use, threats, etc., and reduced productivity at home as well as at work. In the view of the respondents, this issue, despite its severity, has not received

adequate attention, mostly due to the fact that men are normally thought to be strong enough to cope with physical attacks and to deal with their consequences. Loss was evident in all aspects of their lives, including property and finances, loss of friendships, loss of trust, loss of children and personal loss. Another issue which many men reported to have affected their well-being significantly was betrayal. They felt they had opened up themselves to their partner, shared their sense of inadequacy, their fears and vulnerabilities, and then the woman used the information as ammunition against them.

(ii) *Fear, and psycho-somatic symptoms:* Men reported also symptoms such as tightness in the stomach, muscular pain, racing pulse, thought distortion, and panic attacks. Perpetual fear and being 'on guard' were experienced by most participants. Other commonly expressed reactions were, feelings of lack of control and inadequacy and constant denigration of the man, which often caused him to accept his partner's view of him, and to lose self esteem. As Ada, an abused male, noted: *'It got to the point where what self esteem I had, had gone. I was afraid to even attempt to do anything, because I knew within myself that I was going to fail - or she would tell me I'd failed. So it just wasn't worth trying.'*

(iii) *Confusion:* Several men reported confusion and uncertainty, and found they could not continue in their jobs. Their skills were so affected that they risked injury. But the belief that the abuse was all their fault was also common. Many were led to believe that women were superior to men, so when the abuse started, they assumed they must have done something wrong. The woman would blame the man for all her feeling states and he would be manipulated into feeling guilty.

(iv) *Despair:* This situation was compounded by the fact that there was no other option for them but to either leave or accept the situation as it was, at least up to the time when leaving would be possible. This sense of powerlessness often led to intense emotional pain and feelings about death. The methods the men used to avoid potentially violent situations included avoiding close contacts with the wife, remaining calm and passive, locking themselves in a safe place, getting home late, staying at a friend's place but without divulging the reason, sleeping in the car, the bath tub, shed, garage or wherever they could find shelter.

(v) *Disempowerment:* As noted by many writers (Young, 1997), respondents stated that powerlessness at home is exacerbated by the fact that it is reinforced and

solidified in the community through the response of friends, the professionals, and the authorities, who respond to men's complaints and call for help with mistrust, disbelief, and ridicule. Here, defending himself against her attacks is pointless and counterproductive: his self-defence will be interpreted as attack, and he will lose more than gain from this (freedom, children, house etc.). Yet, when the woman claims to have been assaulted or makes false accusations of sexual molestation of their children, everyone listens, believes her, trusts her and employs all available means (eg Apprehended Violence Orders). This situation is well documented (see Cook 1997:62; Green 1998:213; Ambrose et al. 1983 cited in Smith 1998:24; Jacob 1986 cited in Smith 1998:12; Sarantakos, 1999; Arndt, 1995:225).

The study shows clearly that women's violence against their partner is a real issue and a serious problem. Women engage in persistent, often unprovoked physical and verbal attacks, humiliate their partner, force him to be totally accountable to them, threaten his safety and that of his children, manipulate him into staying in the relationship, and persuade others (including authority figures) that she, not he, is the victim, and in so doing they destroy any sense of personal power and autonomy which the man may once have possessed.

Women's violence and feminism

The findings of this study offer sufficient evidence showing that women's aggression against their partner is a hard and indisputable reality, and that it is not different from men's violence against their female partners. This is no longer a contentious issue; many other overseas and Australian (Hagon, 2000; Sarantakos, 1998b; Stockdale, 1998, 1999) studies have provided similar results. Hence, the question is no longer whether or not women abuse their male partners but about the factors which contribute to this problem and to the sustenance of this privileged position of women in the context of the family and the society. There are obviously many factors contributing to this, but the most relevant and also most important is radical feminist philosophy. This holds that the sexes are adversarially poised; that all forms of oppression are derived from the power men have over women; and that men are a class of abusers, from which arise individuals with greater or lesser abusive capacity.

It is for instance argued that phallocracy is 'the most basic, radical and universal societal manifestation of evil', and the underlying cause of genocide, racism, nuclear and chemical contamination, and spiritual pollution, with men being the 'enemy', to be blamed for the present situation (Daly, 1984). It is argued further that, 'the penis is linked with rape, manhood is synonymous with violence, maleness is a violation of an innately feminine nature, and indeed masculinity itself is no more than an abominable fiction or construct that "progressive" politics must attempt to destroy' (Tacey, 1997). So extreme these views might be, they have become a part of our public domain (Sheaffer, 1997) and constitute the basis of our policies. Hence, men are thought to be powerful and women powerless, and therefore men are the violent spouses and women the victims.

Violent experiences at home, accompanied by tolerant social practices and community attitudes as well as social policies treating men as the villains even when they are the victims, and making systematic efforts to 'resocialise' them to submission, cannot but lead men to alienation and disempowerment. Men gradually succumb to feelings of self-hatred when faced with accusations that they are bad people who must be blamed for what is wrong with the world and who cannot expect to be treated with kindness or consideration (Thomas, 1993). Further, since victim-hood is associated with innocence, the alleged moral disparity between the sexes, as expounded in radical feminism, is given even greater credence because of women's past oppression. Taking the moral high ground has allowed women to act towards men in the roles of judge and executioner. Despite the pain and humiliation experienced by the participants in this study, many still held to the idea that 'women are better than men'.

Further, external, institutionalised oppression results in the creation of 'distress recordings' (Whyte, 1998a); they internalise the endless criticism that drenches society, and this leaves them feeling discouraged, isolated, guilty, depressed, angry, and vulnerable to interacting with other men's negative recordings (Whyte, 1998b). Because of the shift in the perception of men and the prejudice against them in the public domain, women are now in a position of being able to exploit that power to the detriment of men. A woman can abuse a man with impunity, since she knows he will have little, if any, recourse in the legal system, and that in the event of a breakdown in the relationship, she will have custody of the children and can use them as a weapon against her partner.

Disempowerment has traditionally been seen as the result of an interaction between powerful and oppressed groups. Whyte (1998a) suggests that the oppression of men does not fall within this definition. He states that there is no well-identified powerful group which oppresses men; it is the whole of society. A similar argument is used by Fauldi (1990) when she asks 'Why don't contemporary men rise up in protest against their betrayal?... Why don't they challenge the culture as women did?' Her answer is that whereas women were fighting against something identifiable, male domination, men have no clearly defined enemy. Men cannot be oppressed when the culture has already identified them as the oppressors and when they see themselves that way.

Conclusion

This research showed that the abuse of men by their female partners is a real family problem, and a serious problem indeed, which varies little from the abuse of women by their spouse. Men in families with abusive wives suffer all consequences of violence abused wives experience, which are as damaging and as traumatic as assaults by men. Although in the cases studied, the severity of physical assaults by wives is not as high as that of some inflicted by males, they are serious and damaging nonetheless. Abusive wives make more use of weapons and other instruments than abusive husbands, and the rate of women killing their husbands is high enough to demonstrate the destructive capacity of women in their families. The fact that the number of mothers killing their children exceeds by far that of father attests to this (Thomas, 1993). The study verified, further, the presence of male disempowerment which has disastrous effects on the well-being of males in families and the society, and inevitably on their relationships at home and on their children.

These findings have implications for theory, the family and for social policy. In the first instance, the study proves that the public image of abused husbands portrayed by media driven by feminist paradigms is incorrect and misleading and misrepresents reality. Males are not the 'diabolic husbands' who oppress and tyrannise their female partners. In the word of a counsellor who has been dealing with male victims of DV for several years, *'Men are not the violent time bombs that propaganda lead us to*

expect; this false image is the result of politicised hysteria and tendentious surveys' (LFAA 1998).

The view of the participants in this study present a clear image of the above. They were mostly quietly spoken, non-aggressive men. When they were being attacked they exercised restraint, either removing themselves from the vicinity or trying to reason with their partner in an attempt to calm her down. In the interviews they were more than willing to acknowledge personal deficiencies, and to make all kinds of allowances for their partner's behaviour. These men did not fit the radical feminist view of men as oppressors.

Men are certainly not the diabolic monsters, and women not the angelic creatures that hold the monopoly of victim hood. The damage they cause to their partners, their children and their aged parents is a testimony for their destructive violence, which unfortunately remains hidden and - more so - is excused, justified and even glorified by media and women's groups. As a politician noted some time ago, men too are victims and women too are perpetrators; neither sex has a monopoly of vice or virtue. Unfortunately, feminist aggression and male tolerance and respect for females corroborated in creating a situation where maleness is disregarded, bashed and trivialised and female victim hood unjustifiably promoted and supported, for the benefits of the DV industry, which obviously is in the hands of feminists.

Vested interests and the urge for keeping 'the business going' necessitate that the image of the battered, victimised and maltreated wife remains alive and at the top of the political agenda; only then can funds be guaranteed and sustenance of the industry assured. Obviously, accepting the fact that women are equally dangerous and destructive at home works against their business interests and is to be suppressed. Hence, abuse of males by their female partners is trivialised, ignored and excused, the high proportion of husband murderers (in the USA more than 40 percent of all spouse murders) is either suppressed or justified and excused as self-defence, and the high proportion of female child abusers and child murderers (much higher than that of men) is suppressed and ignored. Moreover public figures present an image of DV as being a male crime.

Further, even men themselves are made to believe they are the villains who do not deserve acknowledgment and remedy. As critical social theorists noted, adherence to this kind of ideology ultimately becomes a form of false consciousness in that it

may conceal unjust social practices (Mezirow 1990). It can cause the members of an oppressed category to believe that there is something intrinsic and natural about the way they are treated, rather than something socially constructed. Certainly nothing new, feminists were talking about this process for some time now to justify their claims for equality regardless of the views and attitudes of women; but is not thought to be applicable to men.

Finally, where there is a discrepancy between official policy and the manner in which it is implemented, it can be difficult for disempowered individuals to realise that they are in fact part of an oppressed group, and that the unacknowledged policies and practices which work against them have arisen because of a perception in society that they are given exactly what they deserve. It is therefore important that policies addressing male victims of DV entail the task to elucidate men about their real status and that they cannot continue to be seen as oppressors, and that in many cases they have become the oppressed. The pain and humiliation of being abused by a woman, together with the lack of response to their predicament within the public arena, should cause them to challenge those structures which have undermined their belief in themselves as worthwhile human beings. And the government has the task to facilitate this by abolishing policies based on discrimination, bias and prejudice, and by taking a fair and balanced view of gender in the family and society.

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