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Violence in families

Male victims

Domestic violence has received increasing media attention during the last 20 years. This has framed the problem as essentially one of assaults by males on female partners. But there is a forgotten and ignored figure in domestic violence cases – the 'battered' male.

In fifteenth- and sixteenth-century France and England, society ridiculed and humiliated any husbands thought to have been battered and dominated by their wives. In France, for instance, a 'battered' husband was trotted around the streets seated backwards on a donkey while holding its tail. In England, 'abused' husbands were strapped to a cart and paraded around town. According to Dobash and Dobash (1979), such treatment arose out of the expectations of patriarchy.

Although the patriarchal view persisted into the twentieth century, during the past 50 years there has been a definite shift in

people's attitudes towards marital relationships. Beginning in the 1970s, writers such as Erin Pizzey exposed the hidden secret of domestic violence and terms such as 'domestic violence' and 'battered wife' found their way into everyday speech. The view of 'husbands as victims' is more likely to be a subject of cartoons or of jokes and it has led to heated academic discussion about the extent of the problem.

The issue of domestic violence by females is controversial. Females are generally perceived to be law-abiding, dependable in a crisis, 'naturally' calm and able to defuse anger and hostility in others while suppressing it in themselves. It is thus not surprising that society finds the notion of violent women disturbing.

Signposts

This article provides interesting and useful information about an aspect of family life that is often neglected – domestic violence against men. As well as providing additional evidence to show that family life can be *dysfunctional* for some members, it also raises important issues of *methodology*. Domestic violence is known to be a very difficult area to research, which leads to different researchers producing different results. Additionally, the particular reluctance of male victims to come forward and discuss their problem raises questions about perceptions of male and female roles in society.

The problem with definitions

There are those today who are still dubious about the use of the term 'domestic violence'. Davidson (1995), the founder and coordinator of the only advice service in Britain to counsel male victims, argues that the perpetrators of domestic violence are seen to be almost exclusively men who are acting out their 'natural' traits – aggression, physical strength and violence. It is automatically accepted that the male partner is the perpetrator and the female is the victim. This perception has resulted in certain radical feminists arguing that only *women* can be victims, not men.



The most dangerous room in the house?

The denial of men as victims of domestic violence has caused some to argue for a change in the way we describe such a phenomenon. Perhaps 'domestic abuse' is a better term, because disputes of this nature are of no universal type or form; the term covers physical abuse, emotional abuse, verbal abuse, psychological abuse and sexual abuse. Evidence suggests that both males and females are capable of those five forms of assault.

Battered men – the evidence

The findings of a study conducted at Leicester Royal Infirmary about a decade ago ('Adult domestic violence' (1992) *Health Trends*, 24) concluded that almost equal numbers of men and women were being assaulted in their homes, and that assaulted men received more serious injuries than women, lost consciousness more often, and required admission to hospital on more occasions. There are very few similar studies in Britain compared to numerous studies conducted in Israel, Puerto Rico, Finland, Denmark and Sweden, where men's refuges already exist, and which provide evidence of the incidence of violence by women against their male partners.

Box 1 Data on domestic violence, British Crime Survey 1999

- 4.2% of women and 4.9% of men said they had been physically assaulted by a partner in the past year, making 6.6 million incidents in total.
- Women were twice as likely as men to be injured by a partner and three times as likely to have suffered frightening threats.
- 23% of women and 15% of men said they had experienced domestic assault at some time in their lives.
- 2% of women and 5% of men had been assaulted on three or more occasions.
- Young women, aged between 20 and 24 years, were the most at risk of assault. Up to three out of ten had been assaulted by a partner at some time.
- 99% of all assaults reported by women were committed by men, compared to 95% of domestic assaults on men which were committed by women.

Source: C. Mirrlees-Black (1999) *Domestic Violence*, Home Office Study 191, HMSO

Research by Brown (1990) on 300 male and female undergraduates involved in long-term, cohabiting relationships showed that 29% of women admitted that during arguments with their partners they had resorted to 'unprovoked' physical violence, including hitting, punching and attacking with heavy or sharp-edged objects. Brown's findings confirm the importance of the effects of early socialisation within this social arena. Both men and women who had experienced severe physical abuse and punishment in childhood were three times more likely than others to

use violence as a way of resolving conflict in their adult relationships.

George (1992) argues that the kitchen is the most dangerous room in the house – for men. His study found that over 80% of men reported that violence inflicted upon them had involved the use of household objects, including scissors, kitchen knives, vases, a frying pan, an iron bar, a baseball bat and hammers.

The first full British survey of domestic violence against men and women was conducted in 1994 by MORI. The study

Box 2 British Crime Survey 2000

The British Crime Survey for the year 2000 reported the following:

- Domestic violence accounted for one in four incidents of violence reported to the BCS.
- Domestic violence represented 10% of the violent incidents reported by *men*.
- Domestic violence represented 40% of the violent incidents reported by *women*.
- Studies suggest that one in four adult women will experience domestic violence at some point.
- Men also experience abuse within their relationships, but they are less likely to report being hurt, frightened or upset by what has happened. They are also less likely to be subjected to a repeated pattern of abuse.
- It is estimated that an incident of domestic violence occurs within the UK every 6 to 20 seconds every day, 365 days a year.

revealed that close to one in five (18%) men reported being victims of domestic violence by a wife or female partner, compared to 13% of women by a husband or male partner. In total, the survey suggested that almost 3.5 million men in Britain had been, or were currently, victims of domestic violence. As George (1992) argues, these figures are probably an underestimate, as many men would feel unable to admit to being abused by their female partners.

Figures from the British Crime Survey published in 1999, suggest a rather different picture. These were based on data collected in 1996 (Box 1).

Different surveys

Problems of method are important here. Different surveys throw up very different rates of abuse (see Box 2). It has also been claimed that some studies underestimate the true extent of domestic violence as they do not include divorced or separated 'couples'. Some studies only cover violent acts that may have occurred in the single preceding year and fail to take into account previous contexts and past circumstances when other attacks occurred, or the nature and scale of injuries sustained. In some cases females – and some males – may be frightened of reporting assaults.

Abuse of men underplayed?

Why have these male victims been largely ignored? First, the stigma attached to this topic: men are perhaps more likely to feel humiliated and ashamed about coming

Synoptic links

For those students choosing *Crime and Deviance* as their synoptic topic, this article provides the opportunity to make some synoptic links. Taking domestic violence (against males and females) as an example of deviant and possibly criminal behaviour, use information from the article and your own knowledge to complete the grid below.

Domestic violence as an example of deviant behaviour

Links to theories/ perspectives	
Links to research methods	
Links with other substantive topics	

forward and admitting they are 'victims'. Because of pride, shame, fear of ridicule or disbelief, men on the whole do not talk about such incidents to friends or family, let alone the police.

Second, the existence of the 'battered husband' is concealed by the lack of reliable empirical data, partly due to the selective inattention to this topic by both the media and researchers, although some daytime talk shows on television are starting to highlight the issue.

Why do men stay in abusing relationships?

Most researchers accept that many women, particularly those in low-income families, find it difficult to escape abusive relationships because of their financial dependence on their male partners. Walker (1979) showed that men stay in violent relationships for some of the same reasons that women do. Three main factors influence an abused man's decision to stay:

(1) First, there are financial reasons. It is often assumed that men's greater economic resources allow them to move away from disruptive marital situations. Not only do men tend to earn more than women, but they have greater access to credit and are less likely to be tied to the home because of children. However, although males, as a group, have considerably more economic security than women, if the husband leaves the family, he is still legally responsible for a certain amount of economic support for children, in addition to the cost of a separate residence for himself.

Thus, financial concerns are often a consideration for men contemplating a separation.

(2) It is often assumed that a father's ties with children are not as binding as those of a mother. In fact, the male partner often becomes the victim when he steps in to protect the children and consequently becomes the target of abuse. Abused men are often afraid to leave for fear that further violence might be directed towards their offspring. Abused male parents may choose to stay and, ironically, sometimes perpetuate the mother's violence towards their children in doing so.

(3) Early popular accounts of battered wives 'blamed the victim', suggesting that women were somehow to blame for their own victimisation. This may also be a problem for battered men, because of the 'chivalry factor' — the gendered notion that any man who would hit a woman, even in retaliation, must be a bully.

Conclusion

The stereotypical view of domestic abuse — that it is *always* directed by violent men at 'damaged' women — must be reassessed. Younger women may be the perceived main victims of repeated domestic violence but, as sociologists, we should be aware that they are not the only ones.

References and further reading

Alder, E. (1981) 'The underside of married life: power, influence and violence' in L. H. Bowker (ed.), *Women and Crime in America*, Macmillan.

Websites

For domestic violence generally and details of the 'Hitting Home' campaign, search the BBC news pages (not a 'whole web' search) and enter 'domestic violence' as the keyword. Search on:

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/>

You can also get information from:

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/health/hh/>

For particular reference to the issue of domestic violence against men, go to:

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/health/hh/men.shtml>

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