

Hit like a Girl: Women Who Batter Their Partners

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Abstract

Domestic violence by women represents a blind spot for western society. Since 1977, multiple large scale international studies have demonstrated the women can and do beat, batter and murder their male and female intimate partners at a rate equal to or higher than that of man, yet this issue is not simply ignored but denied by society at large. Women's use of domestic violence is misrepresented by the media and denied by feminists, both of whom find the topic threatening. Despite this gender symmetry in domestic violence, media representations display male perpetrators 10 times more often than they display female perpetrators and when it is displayed, it is usually shown as humorous. For the media and the society it caters to, domestically violent women represent a failure of social control; women are not behaving in the expected manner. For feminists, domestically violent women threaten the victim paradigm upon which much of Second Wave feminist was based. This paper will examine the prevalence of domestic violence by women against their intimate partners, explore the societal myths and gender dogma that both hides and perpetuates this form of violence by women.

Key Words: Domestic Violence, intimate partner aggression, abuse, gender symmetry,

1. Introduction

If you were to visit the Great House of Montacute, Somerset, England, built in 1598, you can see a carving of a woman beating her husband with a spoon or ladle then also a carving of a procession of "Riding Skimmington". Skimmington was a European practice during the early modern period where a husband whose wife beat him would be paraded through the village, often riding a horse backwards. There are documented cases of Skimmington events as early as 15th century France and as late as the mid 19th century¹. It is called Skimmington after the skimming spoon which was the symbol then as a women's weapon, similar to the modern image of a rolling pin as a woman's domestic weapon against her partner. From art work such as Dawes' 1768 "Hen Peckt Husband", from old legal records such as Beattie's study of criminal women in pre-Victorian England, to references in the works of Dickens, it is clear that domestically abusive women were publically acknowledged until relatively recently². It is only since post-Victorian times that we have developed the over-simplistic representation of domestic violence as female victimization and male perpetration.

Is domestic violence by modern women a real problem? In 2000, Archer³ conducted a series of meta-analysis of over 80 U.S. and British studies of heterosexual partner violence and found that women were significantly more likely than men to have used physical aggression towards their partners and to have used it more frequently. Archer followed this with a review of international studies of domestic violence in 2006 and again found high rates of domestic violence by women in places as diverse as India, Japan, Jordan and New Guinea. Study after study have shown these results; the majority of women in a Canadian study admit to striking the first blow⁴, in a sample of over 1500 British men, half report being physically abused by a female intimate⁵, in

Russia, women were equally likely as men to perpetrate domestic abuse⁶. If we look at the 200 large scale representative national sample studies including 1999 Canadian General Social Survey, 1996 British Crime Survey, the 2001 US National Co-Morbidity Study, the 2005 National Alcohol and Family Violence Survey, the Australian 1999 Dunedin Health and Development Study, we see gender symmetry in intimate partner violence⁷. Women and men beat and abuse their intimate partners, their domestic partners and their dating partners at the same rate and frequency. It is beyond the scope of this paper to review the data on domestic homicide in details but the research to date shows that nearly 40% of all domestic homicides in the US are done by women⁸. Domestic violence by women is also a problem within lesbian relationships. Four major studies since 1986 have shown high rates of domestic violence within lesbian households^{9 10 11}. Domestic violence by modern women is indeed a real problem.

2. Denial and misrepresentation in research

Yet if one were to ask most people, they would deny awareness of the extent of women's domestic violence in western culture. This is in part due to the denial and misrepresentation of the issue by several groups, including Second Generation feminists, researchers and the media.

The discourse on gender symmetry in intimate partner violence by Second Generation feminists often involves claims that women's violence is less injurious than men's violence, as if this is a relevant issue. No one should be subjected to abuse, regardless of their physical strength. This argument also ignores the women victims in violent lesbian relationships, where the difference in body strength can be supposed to be less pronounced. Finally, it is important to recall that women compensate for any discrepancy in size by using weapons more often than do men¹².

Another common tactic utilized in the discourse of gender symmetry in intimate partner violence is the claim that women are only violent in self defense. This argument also does not withstand scrutiny. Rather than claiming only to use violence in self defense, many studies show that women report initiating domestic violence much of the time^{13 14}. Women also report being the sole aggressor against a non-violent partner¹⁵. Even when women do claim self-defense, witnesses often tell a different story. In a study that questioned domestically violent women, their victim partners, their mothers and their children, Sarantakos¹⁶ found that the violent women's own mothers and children said that these women were the sole aggressors and not acting in self defense. Women use violence against their partners for instrumental reasons such as retaliation¹⁷, to control their partners¹⁸, out of anger¹⁹ and for attention²⁰.

Language is another way in which the discourse of intimate partner violence denies the existence of female perpetrators. We talk about "battered women" and "women's shelters" but one never hears about battered men and there are no domestic violence shelters for men. We haven't developed appropriate language for this problem²¹.

Another place where the issue of intimate partner violence is misrepresented and denied is within the criminal justice system. Brown²² found that while 91% of domestically violent men are arrested when they injure their female partner, only 60% of violent women are arrested when they injure a male partner. This means that criminal justice statistics that review arrests for domestic violence are skewed in a way that suggests that women are not causing injuries during domestic assaults, when the reality is that the myth of the non-violent woman is being perpetuated by the police.

Social policy is also written in a way that ignores women's violence²³. Until relatively recently in the U.S., social control policies were written in a gendered manner; women are victims, men are perpetrators. At the end of the 20th century, western women owned the power to name and define domestic violence as well as write the social and legal policies about it. It is only recently that we are beginning to question the results²⁴. In order for social policy to deal with the

issue of women's intimate violence, organizations that set policy have to acknowledge its existence. Eugene Lupri²⁵, a sociology professor from the University of Calgary, reported that all his attempts to discuss women's domestic violence at the Alberta Roundtable on Family Violence were repeatedly blocked by the roundtable leadership, resulting in a skewed review of "family" violence due to systemic interference, and an updated social policy that maintained the "woman as victim" stance.

The misrepresentation of women's intimate partner violence often starts at the level of basic research. Some researchers have attacked studies that find high rates of domestic violence by women on the grounds of research methodology. Once research started showing gender symmetry in domestic violence, some scholars switched their attention from who initiated the violence to who was most afraid²⁶. This shifts the focus away from women's violence and instead requires men to overcome societal expectations and report their fear at the risk of stigma. Another tactic has been to claim that epidemiological data was somehow inaccurate and to recommend the use of emotional imagery and "personal narratives". It remains unclear how having violent women tell their narratives are more useful than studies counting the number of black eyes, broken bones and burns received by both genders²⁷. Relatedly, some researchers engage in a debate over agency and structure, suggesting women's domestic violence is irrelevant due to social structure and cannot be compared to men's violence. This dichotomous approach not only ignores women's capacity to make choices, but also ignores that women make their choices within the context of their perceptions of their social world²⁸.

Other researchers simply suppress evidence of women's violence by only publishing data about male perpetrators and women victims, even when the study had findings that show male victims and female perpetrators. That was done by the Kentucky Commission on the Status of women, which published only its data on male perpetrators but hid its data on female perpetrators showing that nearly 40% of the women engaged in non-defensive domestic violence²⁹. Another way to researchers have skewed the data has been to simply not ask women about their violence. The 1993 Canadian Violence Against women study took a survey tool that asked about both victimization and perpetration and removed all the perpetration questions, thereby biasing their data towards women's victimization and away from any perpetration. Researchers also engage in bias sampling, such as only using residents of a woman's shelter for their studies³⁰. One can also simply claim that one's research results prove that women only act violently in self defense even when that is not what the research findings actually showed, as when one researcher claimed that her study showed women only acted violently against their partners to "maintain personal liberty" despite the data actually showing that most of the women reported using violence out of anger. Or the researchers who, after presenting data that showed that women are more likely to use a weapon, more likely to seriously injure their victim and more likely to vandalize the victim's property, go on to claim that women are less of a threat than men (Henning & Feder 2004). Finally, researchers can try to perpetuate the myth that women are not domestically violent by attacking anyone who acknowledges women's violence. Straus³¹ noted that many researchers who have published on women's domestic violence have been subjected to personal and professional hazing, with the threats against Dr. Suzanne Steinmetz's children being the most heinous example.

Kierski³² noted that, when the topic of violence by women is mentioned within research, the topic is either quickly dropped or mutates into a discussion of ways that women's violence is somehow externally controlled. Women, who have fought for years to be viewed as having personal agency, are suddenly infantilized when the discussion turns to their domestic violence. Women couldn't possibly strike first, strike out of a desire for power and control, strike out of anger, strike in a way that is damaging, because women aren't strong, don't have power, don't desire power or control and never get angry. It is 2011, except in the field of domestic violence,

where it is still 1955, where many researchers of violence maintain a binary world view; men/women, perpetrator/victim, all ideal types.

3. Denial and misrepresentation in media and society

The media also misrepresent intimate violence as male perpetrated problem. For example, a study of domestic violence imagery in the media found that stories focusing on women as victims and men as perpetrators were ten times more likely to occur than stories about male victims and female perpetrators³³. Other studies have noted similar findings³⁴. The media also acknowledges domestically violent women in a way that makes them seem irrelevant. While the media doesn't write about domestically violent women often, it publishes comic strips about them with some regularity, showing a wife battering a husband with a frying pan, shoe or rolling pin. In Steinmetz's study of domestic violence in comic strips, 73% showed violence by women, 17% showed violence by men and the remaining strips showed equal violence³⁵.

Finally, society itself misrepresents intimate violence and denies the importance of women's perpetration. When asked to read vignettes about domestic abuse, Canadian police and Canadian students both rated the abuse by women as least severe or relevant³⁶. Surveys show that people around the world still view aggression and dominance as male traits rather than female traits³⁷. In a Chinese study of women's relational aggression, women who engaged in severe violence including using weapons claimed that this was not violence but was just "playful"³⁸. We have developed a degree of gender dogma which blinds us to domestic violence by women and over-focuses our attention on domestic violence by men. There is a degree of "engineered invisibility"³⁹ involved here. Constructing a discourse on violence as inherently male makes it difficult to perceive women's behavior as violent.

We can group all these various misrepresentations and denials of women's intimate violence under the heading Neutralization, as they all serve the function of neutralizing women's responsibility. When the discourse becomes one of claims of "backlash", then the focus is removed from women's violence. When the language of research includes the differentiating terms "violent men" and "women's use of aggression", it misrepresents violence as normative for men and not for women.

4. Consequences

What are the societal consequences of ignoring women's domestic violence, of pretending women are incapable of battering their male and female partners? Legally, it leaves the victims with limited recourse for safety. A study of requests for restraining orders in California showed that judges were 13 times more likely to grant a restraining order to a female victim than to a male victim⁴⁰. Female perpetrators are allowed to stay in the house with the victims when men call the police, although over 40% of male perpetrators are ordered from their homes when women call⁴¹. Women perpetrators are generally not arrested for battering their partners. In one study, while 15% of the men were arrested following a domestic abuse call by a woman, no women were arrested following a domestic abuse call by a man. The societal construction of domestic violence as a male behavior can lead to women feeling comfortable assaulting their partners. Brahan⁴² found that women in his study felt able to assault their partners because they knew their partner wouldn't retaliate, due to social and legal sanctions. When domestic violence results in homicide, female perpetrators average 6.2 years of incarceration, compared to 17.5 years of incarceration for male perpetrators of the same crime⁴³.

On a broader scale, the social consequences of this essentialist view of domestic violence are more insidious. By making gender behavior dichotomous, we ignore any diversity within gender groups, and end up holding invalid views that women and men engaging in solely contrasting behavior, generally with women's behavior being one of default. This allows women the luxury of

ignoring their own behaviors while simultaneously and hypocritically demanding that men regulate theirs. It promotes an apathy regarding women's violence which becomes self sustaining⁴⁴. If we don't ask about women's intimate violence, we don't see it; if we don't see it, we think it doesn't exist and don't ask about it. Instead, we must ask "would women act violently if they thought it would be tolerated or ignored and if so, in what context?". Women are most likely to be violent with a context that is congruent with learned gender roles, so we would expect to see more violence by women aimed at family members rather than strangers⁴⁵. While we can argue whether or not women have power in society at large, we need to recall that powerlessness does not equal innocence⁴⁶. We may lack official authority yet still be able to engage in immoral behavior.

Ultimately, all violence is complex and multi-determined with individual, social and cultural factors⁴⁷. Women's intimate partner violence occurs in the context of a significant double standard about violence and gender, with women's violence seen as funny or unimportant, or simply not seen at all. It is somehow always circumstantial and beyond women's control. It is time to move beyond simplistic, dichotomous thinking and biased research and recognize all types of intimate violence in order to stop it.

Notes

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