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# Interpersonal Violence Against Women

## The Role of Men

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Attempting to solve the problem of interpersonal violence by dealing with the private problems of individuals is a strategy doomed to failure. With high-level social forces combining to facilitate rape, abuse, and stalking, programs to end these problems must be painted with broad strokes. Male peer support is an important aspect of society giving permission to men to assault women or to encourage or ignore others who do so. Programs such as bystander education that encourage male leaders to speak out are essential. Schools and governments must put more money into education programs to protect youth. American society was outraged when a professional football player was accused of mistreating and killing fighting dogs. Hollywood, meanwhile, virtually cannot portray the mistreatment of animals. We need to move toward a society where the same level of outrage accompanies acts of interpersonal violence against women.

**Keywords:** *interpersonal violence; violence against women; male peer support; prevention programs*

Many years ago there was a story told so often it became a cliché. Because we have not heard it for a while, it might be useful to drag it out again in a new context. In any of the story's variants a group of people were being tested for mental health, common sense, or intelligence. They were told that it was essential to keep as much water off the floor as possible to prevent damage. They were issued mops, and a faucet was turned on. The winners in this exercise were not the ones who devoted their lives to mopping as long and hard as they possibly could, but the ones who went over and turned off the faucet.

In many ways this can be applied to the problem of interpersonal violence against women. The authors here have cumulatively put in more than 20 years work in the shelter house movement, and have only the greatest respect for those who are devoted to the sometimes dangerous and always difficult cause of protecting and sheltering battered women from their intimate partners. Unfortunately, such aid sometimes does not solve the problem. It may ameliorate various pieces of the damage caused by violent men, although it may also make things worse, possibly even leading to a male backlash that results in the death of the women (Dugan, Nagin, &

Rosenfeld, 2003). Shelters have been called “band-aids” to the problem, but sometimes they might not even be that.

Generally, the first call of social scientists is for funds to study the problem more. At least on the level of discovering how much interpersonal violence against women exists, we have and have had for many years ample evidence that a phenomenal amount of such violence is committed in North America every day (not to mention the rest of the world). It is not that we do not have enough data, although the issue is sometimes purposely confused by men’s rights groups claiming that minor or self-protection violence by women must be counted as equal to extreme or injury-causing violence by men. The problem is that our policies do not reflect the extraordinary amount of information already in our possession.

To speak directly to the issue of programming, there are several major problems with programming over interpersonal violence against women. In a short article we will center our comments on three issues, although they will not be given equal attention.

### **Programming—Attention and Money**

The first problem is one of attention and money. In a badly divided country where politics and media-induced moral panics too often overrule logic, money tends to flow to the issues *du jour*, rather than the most important problems. Barry Glassner (1999) asks whether we as a people are afraid of the wrong things. The American media and the populace following behind are afraid of whatever is being newly hyped: terrorist attacks, road rage attackers, methamphetamine, rape drugs, school shootings, and other events that are statistically relatively rare. Meanwhile, statistically more likely events are ignored: homelessness, the lack of proper medical care, particularly among pregnant women (leading to a truly embarrassingly large infant mortality rate) and children, malnourishment of children; the most extraordinarily low literacy rate in the Western World. A large percentage of our population is highly organized to protest against abortion, for example, but once the child is born there seems to be much less interest in helping to keep the child alive, or later to educate the child. And, of course, various studies have provided statistics that show that as many as one in four college women are the victims of some sort of sexual assault and more than 10% of all women are physically abused.

In the United States today, in addition to War in Iraq, the popular place to spend money is on the prevention of terrorist attacks, even in places where it boggles the mind to imagine a terrorist attack ever occurring; and fighting wars against either more minor outbreaks of drug use, or relatively harmless drugs. There is very little call to spend more money, for example, on preventing stalking, a crime that absolutely terrorizes many women and even men. National Institute of Justice-sponsored studies, for example, estimate that more than 13% of college women were stalked in one school year, most often by what they characterize as an intimate partner (Office

on Violence Against Women, 2007). Looking at all Americans, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that a smaller but still amazingly large number of women have been stalked in their lives (1 in 12 to 1 in 14), and a smaller but still significant number of men (1 in 50) (Basile, Swahn, Chen, & Saltzman, 2006). Not to misrepresent the situation, there has been an enormous reaction to these statistics, resulting in most states passing laws on stalking, and the federal government beefing up similar laws. Stalking incidents are now counted so that reports can be written. There does not, however, seem to have been much imaginative interest in developing programs beyond increasing penalties for people we don't often convict, and keeping track of reports. Programs to actually stop stalking are not very popular.

The same CDC basic study also looked at forced sex, and found that in a national study that victimization rates have remained constant since the 1990s, and that most victims (female or male) were 17 or younger at the time of the first forced sex (Balile, Chen, Black, & Saltzman, 2007). In other words, we have been fairly ineffective not only in preventing *physical* abuse of women and children, but also in preventing *sexual* abuse of intimate partners and their children.

One of the most popular pieces of U.S. legislation is the Violence Against Women Act, but most American programs dealing with the results of such violence operate on shoestring budgets. Worse, for a long and complicated set of reasons, those who try to provide services for victimized women find that to maintain funded facilities they must conform to governmental requirements. To get money from county mental health budgets their clients often must have diagnoses and prognoses. Services must be aimed at the individual problems of the client. Child Protection Services often are required in the first instance to try to maintain the family, even if one member is a batterer or child sexual abuser. Services, money, and programs do not deal with broader social forces in America. Miller and Iovanni (2007) make it clear: "These concessions have shifted the discourse and action away from challenging the root causes of battering—including issues related to power and privilege—and away from prevention efforts" (p. 294).

Most important of all, in a climate where most violence against women consists of men harming women, it is not the women who will stop violence by changing. Rather, men will need to change if there is to be a reduction in the amount of violence against women in North American society. The main place this has been recognized is with the development of batterer intervention programs for men. Although a variety of programs have been tried, and the political popularity of "doing something" have made them the darlings of judges, for the most part they have not been very successful (Jackson, Feder, Davis, Maxwell, & Taylor, 2003; Saunders & Hamill, 2003). One or two hours now and then of counseling, perhaps an emphasis on anger management, and the lack of a system that motivates men to attend and enforces their attendance, all have created a flawed system in most of the country. Most recently attention has been centered on sophisticated programs of coordinated community response plans among courts, probation, shelters, and other community agencies. The main thrust

of these programs has been to sweep offenders off the street and lock them up to prevent them from repeating their offenses. These programs have been subject to the most detailed evaluation of any batterer intervention programs, but unfortunately what seems to be the finding is that any changes that come from judicial oversight demonstration projects have come in incapacitation, not in changes in attitudes or deterrence (Harrett, Schaffer, DeStefano, & Castro, 2006). In other words, once the men are let go, they pose the same danger that they posed before.

What all of these programs have in common are two things. First, they deal with men one at a time. To incapacitate all of the spousal assaulters in North America would require a hard-to-imagine further dramatic expansion of our already extraordinarily overloaded penal system. Yet, the problem only gets worse. If men leave batterer treatment programs or batterer incapacitation jail cells and return immediately to their patriarchal families, patriarchal places of work, and patriarchal places of leisure, it is hard to imagine that there will ever be any change in their attitudes, and eventually in their behavior. And, of course, this is exactly what we have been finding.

Few programs have dealt with the problems that started this article: turning off the faucet. If we live in a patriarchal society that encourages male violence against women, we must deal with that society, not only with men one by one. To take an example, a tremendous amount of outrage was unleashed on Atlanta Falcons quarterback Michael Vick in 2007 when he was alleged to have taken part in the killing of two dogs. It was not only a campaign by the radical People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, but a broad national sense of outrage. People do not like to see dogs harmed. Imagine a Hollywood movie that featured the torture and death of a dog. It will not happen. A few hundred men can be killed in a movie, often very graphically, and rape scenes are no problem at all. In real life, a full-time scorekeeper would be required just to keep track of the number of college and professional athletes in the United States and Canada who have been accused or convicted of beating or raping women, let alone assaulting and/or killing men. It would be quite understandable if Michael Vick were sitting in prison wondering why murderers, rapists, and vicious assaulters of women were playing sports without penalty today. The outrage and economic pressure (e.g., losing lucrative endorsements) just is not there in America for people who harm women. Just dogs.

As we shall see later, the first step thus in programming for the end of interpersonal violence is to actually program for it.

## **Violence Against Women as a Cause of Crime**

Today there has slowly been a growing recognition that being a witness to woman abuse as a child is dangerous to healthy development. We have known for quite some time that many adult criminals grew up in homes marked by domestic terrorism, where they were forced to witness and sometimes experience woman abuse on a

regular basis. We know that although they were still children, these witnesses to violence against women act out in serious problematic ways, and suffer from important stress and strain that can lead to drug and alcohol use as time goes on (Emery, 2006).

What has not been commonly recognized has been the relationship between the two. If we have a large number of adult criminals with this background, then we can make the direct connection that growing up in a home marked by extensive violence against women can be seen as a cause of some unknown but certainly large amount of the juvenile and adult delinquency in America. This has been mostly studied in terms of whether there is an intergenerational effect, where children grow up to beat their wives. What has not been studied is the extent to which children who live in terroristic households grow up to join gangs, commit armed robberies, use and sell illegal drugs, commit burglaries, and generally become what society calls street criminals (Schwartz, 1989).

Thus, one important area for study in the future is the extent to which ending interpersonal violence against women can be seen as a strategy for reducing adolescent and adult criminal behavior in later years.

### **Male Peer Support**

Some years ago we proposed a male peer support model of woman abuse, which has been tested many times on both college and community populations, including a national representative sample (Schwartz & DeKeseredy, 1997; Sinclair, 2002). This complex model starts with the proposition that the ultimate cause of woman abuse is societal patriarchy, and provides a corollary that more patriarchal men are more likely to be batterers. What is different about this model is that it suggests that the focus of our attention should not be on women's behavior, but on men's behavior. Unfortunately, and this is very difficult to say, services for women are good to ameliorate many kinds of pain. Counseling and therapy can be very important for dealing with the individual suffering of woman, and can help them look at their lives to see if they wish to make changes. Shelters can provide short-term protection, and under some circumstances longer term protection, if they can separate the woman some physical distance from the abuser. However, shelters may not solve the problem. Shelter house directors are fond of saying that under the best of circumstances—if this particular woman is put into a permanent protective environment—batterers will just go on to their next victim; it is hard to see how this can solve any problem except for one particular woman one particular time.

### **Solving Problems**

The most obvious beginning in most introduction to sociology books is the distinction made by C. Wright Mills: the difference between private and public troubles.

Private troubles are terrible. One may have cancer or gangrene, be unable to find housing or a sufficient amount of food to eat, or any of a host of other problems. For most of us, sleeping under a bridge in the winter while in pain would be a terrible thing, but it is a private problem; it is *our* problem. To be a sociologist is to look at public problems. If it is not one person who is homeless, but a large percentage of the population, then there is a confluence of social forces here that causes a broad amount of pain. The same applies to interpersonal violence against women. Centering attention on counseling, batterer intervention, protection orders, shelter houses, and the like will not end the problem of male violence, although it may ameliorate the private troubles of some smaller group of women.

There is an emerging number of men who believe that if men are the problem here, then men have to be part of the solution. Jackson Katz (2006) in particular has written on this subject, decrying the fact that so few institutions that affect young males (e.g., schools) actively program to try to reduce misogynist and violent attitudes. Meanwhile, these same institutions may through sports, games, role models, films, and other devices work hard to reinforce the notion that men have an entitlement to be in charge, and to force their way if women resist. Katz has found that there are many men willing to listen, if not actively participate in bystander intervention, having been silenced all their lives for fear of not being manly. He developed his extremely popular MVP program with athletes, the Marines, and others, not because these men are the most difficult or dangerous, but because they make effective leaders: If football linemen can speak out against violence against women, others may feel similarly enabled. Others (e.g., Banyard, Moynihan, & Plante, 2007) have found that bystander education can be effective and long lasting.

What these programs point out is something that we have long known in dealing in crime, which is that informal social control is more effective than formal social control. For more than a decade men have been recommending a variety of informal social controls. Ron Thorne-Finch (1992), for example, has suggested a variety of one-on-one confrontations that men can make to convince their colleagues not to engage in abuse or sexist jokes. Rus Ervin Funk (1992) argued that men could reduce violence against women by engaging in extensive efforts at what he calls "educational activism." DeKeseredy and Schwartz (1996) argued that men can work in community and local political forums to develop political and informational campaigns. None of these ideas are likely to have an immediate dramatic impact, but all might begin to have a smaller impact, chipping away at the problem.

Rather, what is needed is a major national effort to end interpersonal violence against women. The Michael Vick example may be a good one. There are many similar ones of course, such as when filmmakers portrayed the death of an animal, and did not make it clear enough that it was not a real animal. Why do people get so upset by the death of animals, but not women? In Pittsburgh, a sports radio personality pointed out that Michael Vick would never have gotten into as much trouble if he had limited himself to raping women. He got into trouble, and was removed from the air, but the



fact remains that he was right. Why do most athletes accused of battering or rape end up with the charges dismissed and the woman complainant vilified (Benedict, 1997)?

Many of the activists cited here recommend individual level patterns of confrontation and struggle to let people know that such behavior and the attitudes that facilitate it is not acceptable (Banyard et al., 2007; DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 1996; Katz, 2006). However, this is not enough. Although there are education programs across the country in this area, there must be significantly more. What is needed is a national level discussion of programming sufficient to change people's overall attitudes, to where, who knows, maybe raping a woman will come to be seen as bad as killing a pit bull.

## Conclusion

The main argument in this essay has been that interpersonal violence against women will not be ended by ameliorative efforts aimed at women. These may be necessary, important, and useful for the women involved, but they will not stop the flow of violence. It is just as unlikely that individual programs such as batterer intervention programs will have much effect, especially if they remain short interventions that have little effect on men's overall environment. Rather, what is needed is major intervention aimed directly at the patriarchal attitudes that facilitate interpersonal violence against women in the United States, and that allow men who commit such crimes to get away with them.

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