HUSBAND ABUSE: FACT OR FICTION?

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During the last thirty years, ideologies, theories and policies relating to domestic violence have changed radically. As a result of this, community concern and state policies shifted considerably towards protecting and supporting abused wives. Although this shift was justified by the extreme severity of the problem and the relative inadequacy of relevant policies of the past to address wife abuse effectively, it nevertheless led to a partial neglect of other types of domestic violence. Particularly wife-to-husband abuse has been totally ignored and neglected, and even taken to be the fault of the victim. This paper explores the status of husband abuse, by re-assessing relevant trends and developments in Australia and other countries, and presents a review of empirical evidence which shows that husband abuse is more common and more serious than it is generally believed to be, and that it is the task of the government to address spouse abuse by means of policies and practices which are free from a sexist bias.

Introduction

Over the past thirty years, community response to wife abuse resulted in radical changes in the perception and treatment of domestic violence. The tireless efforts of many feminists and other activists to highlight the severity of wife abuse brought domestic violence under the microscope of public scrutiny, re-defined ‘normalities’ in dyadic relationships, exposed injustices, initiated reforms, instituted a pro-victim and pro-women culture, and set in place policies and practices which offered a more constructive solution to the problem of wife abuse and a relatively safer place for women to live in.

Although these changes improved significantly the status of women, and civilised interpersonal relationships in dyadic systems, they also led to a
feminisation of spouse abuse and of domestic violence in general, and to an invisibility of husband abuse. This was accompanied by a marked shift of relevant policies from a pro-husband to a pro-wife position, a bias in favour of abused wives and against abused husbands (who are being ignored and disbelieved), and a new philosophy which equates spouse abuse (and domestic violence in general) with wife abuse, where husbands are the primary perpetrators and wives the primary victims (Adams, 1988:191; Grace, 1995:3; Kurz, 1993:88, 99; Saunders, 1988: 90; Seth-Perdie, 1996; Thorpe and Irwin, 1996:6).

Kurz (1993) epitomised this attitude to domestic violence (and through this to abused husbands) in statements such as ‘only violence against women should be evaluated as a social problem requiring concern and social intervention’ (reported in Gelles and Loseke, 1993:63); or ‘only men can be perpetrators of violence’ (Kurz, 1993:88); or ‘women are typically victims and not perpetrators of violence in intimate relationships’ (Kurz, 1993:99). This is not a single voice but rather a common belief shared by the vast majority of those dealing with domestic violence (see eg Dobash and Donash, 1979; Schechter, 1982; and Tierney, 1982), and a principle that is widespread among most current writers on this subject.

Domestic violence is generally seen as a manifestation of patriarchal values; or a symptom of a social structure which is predominantly patriarchal and embedded in stereotyped male and female gender roles (Seth-Perdie, 1996) and of male supremacy (McGregor, 1990; Lazarus and McCarthy, 1990); a tool in the hands of men which is used ‘to control female intimates’ (Kurz, 1993:90) and not the result of individual failings of the relationship. It is an expression of male power that is used by men to reproduce and maintain their relative superiority and authority over women (Adler, 1992:269), which is encouraged and expected by the society (Hopkins and McGregor, 1991); and a reflection of system rules which assign men the right to own and control women (OSW, 1991:7), and a by-product of the system that holds women subordinate and oppressed (OSW, 1992:5).

This perception of domestic violence has been manifested (through intense lobbying, conditioning and policy implementation) in the minds of many Australians, has been reproduced in the media, supported by many academics, researchers, interest groups, advisers and consultants, and policy makers, and is reflected in relevant social policies. The outcome of this is reverse discrimination. Yllö and Bograd’s (1988) statement on wife abuse that ‘when men’s lives, values and attitudes are taken as the norm, the experiences of women are often defined as inferior, distorted, or are rendered
invisible' is now valid in reverse. With women being at the centre of focus and concern of social policies and professionals, and also in the majority amongst those dealing with and deciding about domestic violence issues, as well as with the dominant social philosophy using women as the core of the argument, men have become the villains, and their experiences as victims of abuse are questioned, trivialised, disbelieved, considered to be an aberration, or not serious enough to require social intervention, and are therefore rendered invisible.

Apart from the resulting invisibility and neglect of this form of domestic violence and the implied lack of sensitivity to the plight of abused husbands and their suffering in the hands of their spouse, there is also the problem of blaming the victim. In the face of evidence that the presence of wife-to-husband abuse is beyond contention, husband battering is wittingly or unwittingly justified by many writers as an act of self-defence against male aggression. 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 (Gelles and Straus, 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).

How valid are these views of domestic violence? Are the beliefs and principles that constitute the basis of current policies on domestic violence in this country valid? Is there evidence to show that men are the only perpetrators of spouse abuse? or that women are the only victims? And is it correct that women who assault their husband do so in self-defence? The evidence presented below is expected to shed some light on these fundamental questions.

**Husband Abuse: No Case to Answer?**

1. Australian data
In Australia, research on husband abuse has been systematically neglected. Applications for grants to conduct research in this area have been rejected, and the government never initiated a study of this problem as it did for wife abuse or child abuse. The few data that are currently available were collected by accident, e.g. when studying wife abuse (through phone-ins or through studies of persons seeking emergency treatment in hospitals) or other forms of domestic violence. In this sense, data on husband abuse are limited and...
can rightly be considered as the tip of the iceberg. Nevertheless, as we shall see next, they offer strong evidence that husband abuse is not a fiction. Below are a few examples.

1. The Queensland Domestic Violence Task Force – investigating wife abuse – reported in 1988 that 6.2 percent of the victims of domestic violence were male; in Victoria and in Western Australia the proportions of male victims of violence were 4 percent and 7.9 percent respectively (QDVTF, 1988: 13).

2. Data from the Victorian Injury Surveillance System (VISS) for 1995 show that 28 percent of all domestic violence victims in need of hospital care were men who were assaulted by their partner. If we consider in our computation also the ‘probable’ victims, namely males or females whose injuries were not confirmed as being the result of domestic violence, but were not sustained in street assault, mugging or robbery either, the number of male victims outweighs the number of female victims (Coochey, 1995).

3. An in-depth analysis and medical records of domestic violence held by the Victorian Injury Surveillance System conducted by the Monash University Accident Research Centre in 1994 revealed that more than one in five (49 of the 288) victims of domestic violence were men (Hartfield, 1995:13). Further, figures on apprehended domestic violence orders (ADVO), undertakings given by spouses to the courts not to harm the partner, and injunctions for personal protection under section 114 of the Family Act show that a considerable number of such orders and injunctions are taken against the wives.

4. One quarter (25.6 percent) of the cases of domestic violence studied by the author in Australia, were found to be families with abused husbands, and an even larger proportion entailed mutual assault.

5. Roberts and associates (1993) who carried out a study of domestic violence in hospital emergency departments identified a substantial number of abused males. A replication study (Robbé et al., 1996) conducted a few years later revealed similar trends.

6. Newspapers have often reported cases of husband abuse (Hartfield, 1995). For instance, the Northern Territory News reported on September 18, 1996 (p. 7) that an Army sergeant whose wife was shot dead by a female police officer following a domestic dispute - told the coroner’s court that he ‘was glad that his wife was dead because that way she wouldn’t beat [him] any more’. The report revealed that his wife ‘hit him with a police baton and her fists, threw him against the wall, and chased
him with a knife on several occasions'. The New Woman gives us another example. The January, 1997 issue describes the plight of a guy who after five years marriage decided to divorce his wife, 'because he could no longer take the slaps, punches and clawing through which she expressed herself'. The reporter noted that: 'It took a fractured skull and countless bruises before Tony decided to leave his violent wife' (Reuben, 1997: 57). More vivid and convincing accounts of husband abuse have been shown in TV documentaries. Popular press may refer to isolated anecdotal evidence; however, it does show facts which cannot be discarded.

7. Many professionals and volunteers working in the area of wife abuse stated that they had come across many cases of husband abuse. Many stressed the seriousness of the problem, including severe physical violence (punching, kicking or throwing the disabled or intoxicated husband against the wall). Some noted the effects this form of domestic violence has on the husband, the children and the family in general, while others deplored the fact that nothing is done to combat this problem. The common statement made by such workers was that ‘our hands are tied’, the resources available to them for such cases were limited, and that abused men ‘had nowhere to go’ for assistance and protection.

This brief review shows that in Australia, despite the paucity of relevant research, there is enough evidence to show that husband abuse does exist, that public and official views that husband abuse does not exist are incorrect and wrong, and that changes in this area are long overdue. If, despite the lack of public interest in the problem, the negative attitudes to husband abuse, and the cultural prescriptions which inhibit husbands to talk about their problem, cases of husband abuse become public, it is reasonable to expect that the cases identified in these studies are just the tip of the iceberg, and that a full study of this issue will bring to the surface many more and more complex and surprising cases of husband abuse.

2. Overseas data
The trend in husband abuse identified in Australia is more evident in other countries where results of systematic empirical research on this issue are available. For instance, an Internet search (EXCITE) some time ago produced almost 500,000 documents on husband abuse. This figure was below that of wife abuse (just above 700,000), but relatively large nonetheless. Apart from this, headlines in the popular press (such as ‘6 ft, Macho, and beaten by his wife’ (Kirsta, 1989), and ‘Wife shot dead, hubby...
'glad' appear regularly in newspapers and magazines, in many parts of the world (BM. 1993; Brot, 1993).

Turning our attention to the more serious literature, to books and scholarly articles we find a similar trend. The examples of such studies, so diverse and - sometimes - contradictory they might be (eg regarding details in trends and propositions), demonstrate a direction in the findings, which supports the notion that husband abuse exists, is a serious problem, and in terms of extent and frequency of occurrence, as serious as wife abuse. These sources inform us, for instance, that:

- husband abuse is as real as any other form of violence (Jones, 1981; Browne, 1987; Wilkerson, 1990). Many women are aggressive against their husbands, (McLeod, 1984; Shupe, 1986; Smith, 1992; Stacey, and Cantacuzino, 1993). Hence, men are equally victims of spouse abuse and battering (Bates, 1981; Burstall, 1993; Edwards, 1992; George, 1994; Greenfield, 1992; Macchietto, 1992; Steinmetz and Lucca, 1988).
- husband abuse is so serious that one can talk about a battered husband syndrome (Steinmetz, 1977, 1978, 1977-1978, 1980). It is noted here that husbands are being assaulted in high proportions and therefore deserve the attention battered women receive.
- women assault their husbands/partners at a rate that is about the same as the rate of assault by men on female partners (Sorenson and Telles, 1991; Tyree and Malone, 1991; Straus and Gelles, 1990; Brush, 1990; Schulman, 1979; Nisonoff and Bitman, 1979; Scanzoni, 1978). The latest British Crime Survey (1999) reported very clearly that husbands and wives assault each other in equal proportions. Tjaden and Thoeness (1997) report a three to one ratio of assaults by men compared to women, but (a) as Straus (1999) already noted this may be related to methodological factors rather than to actual differences in behaviour; and (b) even the reported 3:1 ratio is alarming!
- several studies report that assault rates by husbands and by wives are not only equal, but that the rate of assaults by wives is even higher than the rate of assaults by husbands: Gelles and Straus produced findings relating to national surveys conducted in 1975 and 1985 showing that the rate of wife-to-husband assault was slightly higher than the rate of husband-to-wife assault; when considering reports of women only, the trend was the same: the overall rate of assaults by wives was 124 per 1000 and by husbands 122 per 1000; this was true for minor and severe assaults (Gelles, 1974; Straus and Gelles, 1986, 1988, 1990; Straus, 1993). In a similar fashion, O’Leary and associates (1989) reported that in their study
31 percent of men and 44 percent of women admitted to having been aggressive against their partner before marriage and 27 percent and 36 percent respectively 18 months after marriage. In addition, figures from Canada relating to studies in Manitoba and Calgary show a similar trend with women being more abusive than men; this relates to the overall violence index, and the severe violence index (Brand and Orne, 1986; Sommer, 1994). Finally, a BBC poll conducted in 1994, reported in the Dominion (9.12.1994), found that 18 percent of men and 13 percent of women were assaulted by a partner.

- higher assault rates by women were also reported among dating couples (Arias et al. 1987; DeMaris, 1987; Lane and Gwartney-Gibbs, 1984; Sugarman and Hotaling, 1989).

- the most unreported crime is not wife abuse but husband abuse (Langley and Levy, 1977; Daly and Wilson, 1988; Nagi, 1977). Under-reporting abuse is very common among husbands (Ruback, 1994; Stanko and Hobdell, 1993; Henmann, 1996) simply because male victims (a) ‘don’t tell’, are not believed even when they tell, are laughed at and ridiculed when they tell, and are finally blamed for the assault if they tell; (b) are likely to downplay the seriousness of abuse and consider it not serious to talk about it, let alone report it to the authorities (this is more so among abused husbands with long histories of domestic violence, eg having witnessed/sustained violence at home, or having experienced violence at school or in the community as children); (c) are dependent on the abusive wife; (d) are powerless, traumatised and disbelieved when they talk about their plight, therefore they do not disclose easily their secret to strangers and even to relatives and friends; (e) consider it improper and demeaning to admit that they are not in a position to take care of themselves and that they need assistance to settle their differences with their wives; and finally (f) know that telling about their plight will have no effect on their status: the government cannot help them anyway.

percent in a current and 73 percent in another relationship (Lie et al., 1991), 46 percent (Coleman, 1990; Kelly and Warshafsky, 1987), 76 percent (Elliot, 1990), or 17 percent for gay and 22 percent for lesbian couples (Gay and Lesbian Community Action Council, 1987- quoted in Elliott, 1996), and, finally, ‘as much as’ among heterosexual couples (Elliott, 1996:3).

- the proportion of violent incidents involving weapons is higher in female-to-male violence than in male-to-female violence, i.e. 85 percent and 25 percent respectively (McLeod, 1984). (Unless, of course - as one commentator put it - one uses the closed fist as a weapon!)

This is just a brief summary of the major trends of research conducted in the area of domestic violence and spouse abuse and certainly not an exhaustive list of all relevant studies. However, the same trend is described in a more detailed review of more than thirty empirical investigations, compiled by Straus and Gelles (1990); and in another more recent and more extensive review containing 95 scholarly investigations of assaults by women on their spouses or male partners (79 empirical studies and 16 reviews and/or analyses), prepared by Martin Fiebert (1998). Both reports are consistent with the findings of a meta-analysis of studies related to gender differences in aggression conducted by Eagley and Steffen (1986): all conclude that there is no difference between the extent of assaults by husbands and assaults by wives.

### Women Hit in Self-defence

The overwhelming evidence that women are perpetrators of spouse abuse as much as (if not more than) husbands is beyond contention. Small and intensive investigations as well as large and extensive (national) studies such as those in the USA, UK and Canada attest to this. This has been accepted by many critics who have begun to re-assess their views on domestic violence and to look for new options. Yllo (1993), for instance, while stating categorically that ‘domestic violence cannot be adequately understood unless gender and power are taken into account’ (p. 47), notes also that working on the assumption that only women can be victims and only men perpetrators is not a ‘sufficient lens for understanding violence’ and adds that this is a ‘challenge to all of us [feminists] to deepen our views’ (p. 60).

Nevertheless, the overwhelming evidence of the presence of husband abuse does not seem to have had an impact on theory and practice regarding domestic violence. The most common response to this evidence is that women assault the men who beat them, i.e. they hit in self-defence. The
argument here seems to have shifted from the position ‘Husband abuse does not exist’, held until recently, to ‘Husband abuse exists but it is a form of self-defence’.

However, there are several questionable points in this argument that are being overlooked. In the first instance, there is no valid empirical evidence to confirm this. Most studies supporting this point are based on research drawing on ‘clinical’ and non-representative samples, including women who have been abused by their husbands, or who killed their husbands. In most cases these studies use perpetrators of husband abuse as their informants: they ask women to state whether they hit their husband in self-defence, and whether they think their behaviour is a genuine form of self-defence, which is methodologically unacceptable. Obviously, the argument in favour of self-defence deserves more serious consideration.

Let us start from the beginning: What do we understand under self-defence. A common definition of self-defence is: ‘the use of equal force or the least amount of force necessary to repel danger when the person reasonably perceives that she or he is in imminent danger of serious bodily damage or death’ (Walker, 1993: 208; 1990). Hence, important for self-defence to occur is the fact that (a) the wife is exposed to an imminent danger; (b) this danger is expected to cause serious bodily harm or death; and (c) that self-defence entails ‘equal force or the least amount of force necessary to repel danger’. Based on this, is there evidence to show that any of these elements of self-defence are present when the wife assaults her husband? Let us explore this question.

1. In the majority of cases, women abuse their husband when there is no imminent danger or threat of death or serious bodily damage. Pearson (1997a; 1997b) reports that 90 percent of the abusive women of her study assaulted their partner because they were furious or jealous, or frustrated and not because they tried to defend themselves. Sommer (1994) in her Canadian study found that only 9.9 percent of abusive women stated that they acted in self-defence (interestingly the proportion of men acting in self-defence was 14.8 percent). In most cases, they fight not to prevent imminent danger of death or grave bodily harm, but to get even, to inflict injury and often to escalate the violent incident. In such cases, women responding to domestic violence are more likely to be combatant spouses than self-defending victims: female-to-male violence entails fighting back rather than acting in self-defence; in most cases they are exchanging shove to shove, kick to kick, blow for blow or insult for insult (Renzetti, 1992; Saunders, 1988).
Further, our study of the 68 cases of husband abuse (Sarantakos, 1998) shows that in most cases, women use violence to stop the build-up of tension. The alleged attack by the husband which is thought to trigger the assault by the wife presents no threat to the wife or the family; the wife does not seek refuge after the assault; she is in control of family life; and her assault exceeds the husband's alleged aggression. This is consistent with findings reported by Straus (1993), who, after having supported the thesis of self-defence in previous publications (see above), following new evidence argues now against it, noting that 'about as many women as men attacked their spouses who had not hit them during the one-year referend period' (p. 74). A similar trend is reported by other writers (Mould, 1990; McNeely and Robinson-Simpson, 1988; 1988a) who show that in the majority of cases female assaults are not a response to male aggression.

2. Many studies have shown that in violent families women are more likely than men to strike the first blow. States and Straus (1990), who asked husbands and wives to state who hits first when violence occurs in their household, reported that according to men, husbands strike the first blow in 44% of the cases, and their female partner in 44% of the cases; in 12% of the cases the respondents 'couldn't remember'. But, according to women, husbands hit first in 43% of the cases, and wives strike the first blow in 53% of the cases; 5 percent could not remember. In our study (Sarantakos, 1997) the findings are similar: 46 percent of the husbands reported that they gave the first blow and 48 percent claimed that the wife struck the first blow. Further, 41 percent of the wives stated that the husband gave the first blow, and 52 percent that the wife gave the first blow. In a small number of cases, women hit first in response to abuse on the part of the husband but in the majority of cases, abuse was not proceeded by wife abuse. Certainly, hitting the first blow does not necessarily mean aggression; and it does not mean that therefore the wife was not acting in self-defence. She may hit to prevent further damage, or to respond to husband's aggression. However, when taken together with the nature of husband's behaviour that allegedly triggers abuse by the wife, with the nature and extent of wife-to-husband violence, and with the fact that abusive wives hit their partner repeatedly, do not seek protection after they assault their partner and they are in control of their relationship (Sarantakos, 1998), hitting the first blow is an indicator of aggression more than of self-defence.
3. Women abuse their husbands more than once. In many cases, wives abuse their husbands in every single violent incident, often for several years. This is not consistent with the notion of self-defence, which exists only if it is an isolated violent incident (Marrujo and Kreger, 1996:28). The argument that repeated abuse is inflicted in self-defence is not convincing also because self-defence often invokes severe retaliation on the part of the husband, and this normally deters women from repeating such actions. It follows then that if a woman hits her husband repeatedly for long periods of time, and he does not retaliate, the husband is in no position to assault the wife in the first place, and her aggression does not constitute self-defence.

4. Women, when asked to explain the reasons for assaulting their husband, list self-defence not within the major reasons. In our wife abuse study (Sarantakos, 1997), the five most common reasons given were: to resolve the argument (1st place), to respond to family crisis (2nd place), to ‘stop him bothering me’ (3rd place), to ‘defend myself’ (4th place), and to prevent it from happening again (5th place). In a more recent analysis (Sarantakos, 1998) the proportion of wives who stated that they assaulted their husband in self-defence was just over ten percent.

5. Justifying spouse abuse on the grounds of self-defence is morally wrong and also inconsistent with current policies and principles. Accepting abuse on the grounds of self-defence particularly when there is no evidence of imminent danger of death or grave bodily harm suggests that we allow, legitimate and justify domestic violence, which is not correct. Apart from this, if we accept self-defence as a justification of violence, all cases of wife abuse where the husband assaults his wife in response to her violent attacks and in order to defend himself must be equally accepted as legitimate and justified; a proposition which obviously is not acceptable.

6. Many women justify husband abuse not in terms of self-defence. In our husband abuse study, many abusive wives admitted having abused their husband, and accepted responsibility for it, or admitted having hit him and justified it or rationalised it by arguing that this act was not abuse (‘I just hit him’) or that it was the fault of the husband (‘he made me do it’, or ‘he deserved it’).

7. Many husband/partner killers do not act in self-defence. Studies show that the majority of women who killed their husbands or lovers did so not in response to prior abuse or threat of abuse; in most cases they were violent and impulsive and had previous arrests and convictions (Mann, Sotirios Sarantakos: Husband Abuse: Fact or Fiction? 241
The overall propensity of women to violence is high enough to suggest that they do not act in self-defence; in their study, McNeely and Robinson-Simpson (1988) found that women have a higher mean and median rate for perpetrating severe violence than men; they conclude that ‘female aggression is not merely a response to male aggression’ (p. 186).

The notion that abusive wives abuse their husband in self-defence rests in most part on speculation. There are no studies which have examined in detail the complex issue of husband abuse (eg how the violent incident started, how it progressed to aggression, what was the nature of husband’s aggression, what was the wife’s response, etc.), and which could demonstrate how husband abuse is constructed, and to what extent husbands contribute to their own plight. Although it cannot be denied that there are cases in which women abuse their husband in self-defence, the view entertained by many critics that husband abuse is nothing but a form of self-defence, or that most abusive women act in self-defence has no empirical basis.

**Summary and Conclusion**

This review revealed a number of distinct and undeniable facts. It showed that husband abuse is a real problem, and one which is more common than one is led to believe; husband abuse affects enough people to deserve the concern of the community and the state. The review shows further that the notion of self-defence is not valid: the majority of abusive wives do not assault their husbands in self-defence.

In more general terms, this review demonstrated that domestic violence is not a homogeneous problem that occurs in one form only; and that men and women are not homogeneous social categories, where men are the only perpetrators and women the only victims. Although many women suffer in the hands of their husbands, not all women in violent families are victims of violence; and although there are men who abuse their wives, not all men in violent families are perpetrators of violence. Similarly, while our social order is patriarchal, not all families live in patriarchal relationships; many families are democratic, and some even matriarchal. Perhaps as a result of women’s movement, many women no longer allow themselves to be subjected to the types of treatment they took for granted even a few decades ago. In a nutshell, the problem of domestic violence is not monolithic and homogeneous; in many cases it entails wife abuse, and in other cases it entails husband abuse, child abuse, elder abuse and parent abuse.
And yet, this reality is totally ignored, and views supporting it are discarded and discredited. There are many reasons for this. In the first place, the vast number of abused wives and the severity of abuse cloud the vision of policy makers and professionals, and lead to wrong decisions and to false or inadequate measures. In a similar fashion, a number of writers reject husband abuse as a problem because it is feared that this eventually will attract public attention and may reduce public spending on wife abuse, or even ‘direct attention away from the victimisation of women and the function of male dominance’ (Saunders, 1988: 90; 1986). Morrow and Hawxhurst (1989) note on this that accepting women as perpetrators of spouse abuse (a) will endanger funding committed to wife abuse; (b) will harm the public image of the battered women’s movement; and (c) would endanger a feminist gender-specific analysis of battering that viewed battering as a consequence of male privilege and power in society’ (p. 58).

More to the point, Kurz (1993) notes that accepting husband abuse as a part of domestic violence will have serious consequences on theory and practice of wife abuse; for instance, it will (a) reinforce existing popular conceptions that women cause their own victimisation by provoking their male partners’ (p. 98); (b) ‘lead to policy outcomes that are harmful to women’ (p. 99); (c) motivate funders to decrease support for shelters for battered women and support the introduction of shelters for battered men (p. 99); (d) ‘reinforce the individualistic bias in the field of counselling’ (p. 99) getting away from women as the focus of attention and concentrating on ‘clients’, ‘individuals’, ‘persons’, etc.; and (e) “encourage police who operate under mandatory arrest statutes to arrest women in ‘domestic’ disputes” (p. 99).

This resistance against accepting husband abuse as a real problem is evident in many sectors of our society. For instance, Australian printed media show very little interest in reports on husband abuse. Although newspapers have been reporting information relating to husband abuse in a very positive manner, other types of printed media hold rather discriminatory and conservative views. Personal communication with Australian academics reveals that manuscripts on husband abuse rarely pass the editorial board of scholarly journals, and certainly not the editor’s desk of Australian book publishers.

Such attitudes to and practices on husband abuse help sustain a biased impression of what domestic violence is all about, and inhibits further progress and development in the right direction. Grant applications for research on husband abuse have systematically been rejected because
husband abuse is of low priority, not a topical issue, not a real problem that
deserves public attention and funding, or that such a questioning is not
politically correct. And support networks established to deal with domestic
violence in our community are only for victims of wife abuse and not for
abused husbands. There are no shelters for them to turn to when in danger
and in need of protection. As one social worker put it, 'the whole social
system is not tuned up adequately to receive distress messages from
husbands... We men pay to establish systems to protect those who abuse us'..
Husband abuse is seen as an oddity, an aberration, something people can do
without, a fact that Australians tend to discard, and an act that is most likely
to be justified as being the fault of the husband.

A negativist attitude to husband abuse is sustained also within the
training schools of professionals such as social workers, social welfare
officers and counselling psychologists, most of whom have learned to
interpret domestic violence as wife abuse, and in a framework that does not
account for husband abuse, and to believe that one can end domestic
violence by counselling abusive husbands (NCP, 1999). Echoing views such
as those of Kurz (1993:88), Dobash and Donash (1979), Schechter (1982)
and Tierney (1982) they learn that only women can be victims of abuse, only
evidence against women should be evaluated as a social problem requiring
concern and social intervention, and only women deserve to be protected and
to be allowed in the safety systems established by the society for victims of
domestic violence. Social workers and welfare officers are often exposed to
training materials and ideological principles and imperatives which are
'gynocentric and misandric', as one social worker put it. These workers are
thought to enter their practice with a distorted vision of domestic violence, a
relative lack of sensitivity to husband abuse, a bias in favour of wife abuse,
lack of skills to deal effectively with abused husbands, and a relative
inadequacy to deal with this type of problem in general.

Experience over the last 25 years has shown that, in the area of wife
abuse, successful intervention requires a full understanding of the status of
the victims in the community and particularly of the state of mind of the
victim. We have learned over the years that social policy is expected to work
towards making victims of violence visible and empowering them to
overcome violent aggression at home (Knight and Hatty, 1987). It is only fair
that the same principles apply to all victims of violence, not only to women.
It is therefore time that husband abuse is seen in the same light and under the
same conditions as any other type of domestic violence.
The notion that domestic violence is an one-way traffic from the diabolic husband to the angelic wife, and that husband abuse simply does not exist, is an aberration, or is just an act of self-defence, is just a poor excuse for wife-to-husband assault and requires serious reconsideration. It is more reasonable to suggest that violent families are diverse, as diverse as its people, with some families experiencing wife abuse, with the wife being the primary victim and the husband being the primary perpetrator, and others experiencing husband abuse, with the husband being the primary victim and the wife the primary perpetrator. The presence of the one form of domestic violence does not negate the presence of the other. Hence, current views that wives are the victims are correct in as far as they relate to certain types of families (perhaps those in which wives end up in hospital wards, police stations, or at the shelters). And the views that husbands are victims are correct in as far as they relate to other families. The fact that abused husbands do not appear in hospital wards, police stations or shelters is not proof that they are not victims of violence; they simply have to be sought elsewhere.

This discussion demonstrates very clearly that we are now compelled to accept the fact that husband abuse is a serious form of domestic violence, existing next to wife abuse, and demanding attention and state intervention. The state, while maintaining a strong commitment to abused wives, must turn its interest, policy and action to the other side of spouse abuse; the side which so far has been neglected, misrepresented and suppressed. It should realise that practical 'political and ideological factors are blinding us to the plight of a whole category of victims' (Henman, 1996:8), and should assure that such impediments are eliminated. As Murray Straus (1993) noted a few years ago, 'the problem of violence by wives is very real, on par with the problem of battered women, and to dismiss it has just real consequences'. It is time for us to realise that the problem of husband abuse is too large and too serious to be ignored. As the Canadian Senator Cools stressed a few years ago 'the time for male bashing must come to an end if we are going to understand the dynamics of social behaviour, the dynamics of deviant and pathological behaviour and the enormity and complexity of this problem' (Vienneau, 1995).

References


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