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Male Victims of Domestic Violence

It never fails. When I am talking to a group about domestic violence, I can always count on someone to ask “What about male victims?”. In most audiences, someone knows one man who has been hurt by his wife or girlfriend. Domestic violence programs want to assure the public that our services are equally available to men and women. We certainly do not want to be accused of discrimination. In this environment, it is easy to create a gender-neutral attitude toward domestic violence. I have put much thought and some research into this question, and find that other domestic violence advocates struggle with this as well. Here is my best answer.

Let me assure you that advocates who work in the domestic violence field are like other professionals. We are not all radical, man hating feminists intent on destroying marriages. We do not think that all men are batterers and when we talk about domestic violence we are not pointing fingers at the men in our audience. Most of us have healthy relationships with men and value their roles in our lives. Many men also work in this field, although they are certainly outnumbered. We know that men get hurt by violence more often than women. Male violence kills more men than women – in fact three fourths of the victims of male homicide are other men. Then why are we concerned about male violence toward women? The reason lies in the context of the violence and it’s consequences. Let’s not forget that not long ago violence against women was actually legal, but violence against men has never been.

When we take a close look at statistics we learn that men mostly get hurt by strangers, whereas women get hurt by people they know and care about. Nancy Worcester, of the Domestic Violence Training Project, University of Wisconsin-Madison writes:

When someone is hurt by a stranger, they are very likely to want to report the crime, to want the other person prosecuted, and to hope they will never see that person again. If we are talking about violence by a partner, where there are shared children, dreams, identities, finances, and futures, we are in most cases talking about violence against women: we are talking about the on-going pattern of power and control that is domestic violence.

Domestic violence is certainly not gender exclusive but it is gender focused and reflects and is encouraged by societal power inequalities between men and women. There is much agreement that approximately 95% of heterosexual physical and sexual violence is male against female violence. If violence were not a gender issue, we would expect that heterosexual domestic violence would be equally perpetrated by women and men. Domestic violence is in fact an extreme example of gender inequality.

At Women Are Safe, Inc., we strive to be non-discriminatory in providing services. Even so, we provide services to very few male clients. Occasionally a court advocate assists a man who has filed an Order of Protection against his partner or we receive a hotline call from a man with concerns about the violence in his relationship. In the majority of these cases, both the victim and the batterer are male.

It is even more rare to receive a request for services by a man in a heterosexual relationship. In cases of male victim and female batterer, the level of fear or the extent of the injuries sustained simply do not compare to what we typically see in women who have been abused by men. The male clients we have

served almost always have financial resources to fall back on and are rarely, if ever responsible for the care and support of small children. Most have jobs or job skills. Never have we served a man in stark terror fleeing for his life or subjected to the types of long term humiliation and degradation we often see in female survivors.

In "Counseling for Heterosexual Women Arrested for Domestic Violence," Kevin Hamburger (1996) concluded that domestic violence by women and men show distinctly different patterns. In part, he writes:

- Although women are domestically violent, often at levels of severity similar to that of men, the impact of their violence is typically lower than the impact of men's violence.
- Women tend to commit violence less frequently than men do and for different reasons: Specifically women tend to initiate physical assault motivated by a need for self protection or retaliation of a previous assault by their partner. Men in contrast, tend to identify control or punishment as the primary motivations for assaults on their partner.

A very interesting point is made by Nancy Worcester. She writes, "If a woman is hurting a man, in general, the violence ends when the relationship ends. If a man is hurting a woman, the violence generally escalates and becomes most dangerous when the relationship ends."

Back to the question "What about male victims?" The dynamics of the abuse are clearly very different and deserving of a different response. Domestic violence is simply not a gender-neutral issue. Women Are Safe, Inc. offers our services to those men needing to discuss their options and victim rights. But the main focus in our work against domestic violence will remain focused on men's violence against women.

Mary Fox
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