

BATTERED WOMEN: SOME RELEVANT VARIABLES

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THE PROBLEM The battered woman phenomenon is the most under-reported offense in the United States. Blackened eyes, broken bones, depressed spirits and panic characterize women who call a crisis center for help. Like other crimes against the weak and dependent, such as rape and child abuse, woman battering has been largely ignored in a violence prone male dominated society.

. Perhaps 60 percent of all married women endure some form of physical abuse by their husbands (Fleming 1979 115). Only 2 percent of abusing husbands are ever prosecuted (Jacobson 1977). Child abuse and rape are punishable as felonies, and great strides have been made to offer services and protection for the victims. But only in very recent years has woman-beating been recognized as a major social problem. Abused and beaten women are now being seen as victims of violence. Through crisis centers, special telephone lines, and refuge shelters for the estimated 30 million women and their children subject to abuse, public and private agencies are slowly being made aware, and trying to rescue these adult female victims.

THEORIES AND TRENDS

. To understand why a women has problems deciding to leave a violent relationship, one must understand the part that sex-role socialization and power hierarchy have played. "In the beginning, human beings lived in a state of promiscuity. Lineage in early days could only be reckoned by the female line. Women, as mothers, were the only discernible parents and received a high degree of consideration and respect" (Martin 1976 25). Engels wrote: "all primitive societies passed through this initial stage of human relations; it was the precursor to all other stages of social development" (1948 42). He

speculates that the transition from group marriage and the extended family to the pairing marriage - what we call the nuclear family - overthrew the mother right, and enforced monogamy.

. Monogamy probably was woman's answer to sexual attack, and physical battering if she resisted, by males in her tribal group. Her fear of rape, and not a natural inclination toward monogamy probably was the factor in the original subjugation of women by men. This is the key to women's historic dependence and her domestication by protective mating. In giving up her freedom for protection by a mate, a women belonged to the mate in payment for this service. She suppressed her inherent power and worth as a human being for security. If she tried to think for herself or question the norms for her sex, she was abused, beaten, or punished.

"Disappointed and disillusioned by the inherent female incapacity to protect, she became estranged .. from other females, a problem that haunts the social organization of women to this day. And those who did assume the historic burden of her protection - later formalized as father, brother, husband, clan - extracted more than a pound of flesh. They reduced her status to that of chattel .. Man's forcible extension of his boundaries to his mate and later to their offspring was the beginning of his concept of ownership" (Brownmiller 1975 16).

. The power and dominance exerted by the male evolved into authority, and the division of labor and parallel roles became institutionalized. These sex role differences originally stemmed from the basic physiological differences such as strength, menstruation, and pregnancy (Steinman & Fox 1974). The functional roles that preceded from these physiological differences led to a basic value judgment on the superiority of

man over woman.

. Females traditionally occupy domestic roles of sexual property, wife, mother, housekeeper and cook. The restricted nature of these roles have held them in a position of ignorance and dependence. Those seen as weak and powerless will often be used and abused by the powerful. "One of the most bizarre .. conditions imposed on women by men was the legal concept that when two people marry, they become one in the eyes of the law .. It was easy to conclude (because they were legally one person) that a husband could not be charged with beating his wife" (Langley & Levy 1977 35).

. Many men today see their home as their castle in which they are the king, passing judgment and imposing penalties for infractions. They are socialized by society to cope with stresses and threats to their masculinity by aggression and violence. Wife beaters are classed as alcoholics, psychotics or simply as bullies. These profiles can be explained as learned response and frustration reaction by men attempting to maintain a masculine role which is inflated. For many victimized wives, their indecision on whether to take the cruelty can be explained as a learned response and frustration reaction is their attempt to maintain a deflated feminine role (Pizzey 1974). The woman battering syndrome is learned through socialization, and both parties are actually victims. A husband who beats his wife is usually carrying out a role model which he learned from his parents and other adults and the role is brought into play when social stresses become intolerable (Steinmetz & Straus 1975). "Family violence as a learned pattern of behavior is modeled on the father and accepted by the mother (Langley & Levy 1977 59). People who saw their own parents use physical violence are likely to use it themselves as adults, while those who were rarely struck as children are less likely to participate in spousal violence

(Gelles 1972).

. Why do women stay with husbands who beat them? Case studies offer 7 answers: 1) Poor self image; 2) belief that the husband will reform; 3) economic hardship; 4) children's need for economic support; 5) doubt that they can survive alone; 6) belief that divorce is stigmatized; 7) difficulty for women with children to find work (Truninger 1971).

. In a British survey, among 79 battered wives who left their husbands, these reasons were given for returning: 1) he pleaded and promised to reform; 2) he threatened or performed further violence 3) I had nowhere else to go; 4) the children were still in the home; 5) love or pity for the husband (Gayford 1975).

. Fear is probably the common factor and the most obvious explanation. Paradoxically, it is the most commonly disregarded (Martin 1976). Underlying the thought of leaving is fear ".. that he will hunt you down and beat you again, and perhaps kill you." Fear distorts reason. The woman finds herself at the mercy of a seemingly omnipotent force. Alternatives vanish in the wake of all-consuming fear. "Fear is an arousal state, (but) the possibility exists that females show immobilization and other passive behavior primarily when they are afraid. A battered woman has good reason to become immobilized in the face of a threat" (Maccoby & Jacklin 1974 167).

. A major reason that a battered woman remains with her husband centers around her attitude relative to attitudes of her family, peers, and society. The combination of these attitudes forms a cultural habit of violence. The stronger the cultural habit, the more difficult it is to break out, and the woman sees her violent world as normal. If she thinks her life does not differ from anyone's else, she is unlikely to take steps to change it, even though she is painful and wretched. It relates to many questions. 1) Was there spouse abuse in her

parent's home? 2) Are her friends and relatives also battered? 3) Is it expected in her social circle that men occasionally beat their wives? 4) Does her husband presume the right to beat her? 5) Does he feel that she needs beating sometimes? 6) Does the battered wife presume this? 7) What do others expect of her? 8) Is divorce unacceptable, and perseverance a virtue? 9) What is the level of marital violence in the community? 10) What is the wife's subjective meaning of violence? 11) Do others living in the house apply external constraints? (Langley & Levy 1977).

. Economic dependence may force the battered wife to stay (Jacobson 1977). She may lack skills for any work other than mother and housewife. If she is employed usually she earns far less than her husband - an average of 41 percent less. This heightens her fear of crisis awaiting her separation from her economic support. It is a vicious circle. The home is her responsibility, as seen by her husband and herself. Anything wrong, from dust on the window sill to dishes in the sink is her fault. Instead of telling her that the bathroom bowl is dirty, he may stick her head in it, warning that she won't get off so easily the next time. To the woman herself and some courts of law, she is getting what she deserves. At the court trial, it remains the battered woman's responsibility to convince the judge that she is truly a victim. Since male police and judges are socialized to see women as housewives and sexual objects, it is difficult to obtain justice.

. "Police ignore the victim's need for protection and medical assistance. Prosecutors impose extraordinary conditions on a woman complaining of assaults and harassment by her husband or former husband. After she passes these tests of her intent to prosecute, pleas of minor infractions are accepted and suspended sentences or adjournments in contemplation of dismissal are recommended to the

court. Judges impose light or suspended sentences. The injured wife who persists does not receive the protection of having her assaultive husband jailed. These failures of the legal system restrict the victim's liberty, forcing her to suffer beating which over the years increases in frequency and severity" (Jacobson 1977 5). Police and court responses such as these are commonplace, and women caught in this trap often surrender their rights to keep from being beaten to death. The right to protection from bodily harm is doubtful between spouses. Family crisis calls make up a quarter of all calls to the police, and the police are reluctant to intervene, since 22 percent of all police fatalities occur in this environment (Steinmetz & Strauss 1972). The family has been validly called a people wrecker as regards beaten women and children (Putney 1972).

. The need to make wife beating an enforceable crime is apparent, but many women cannot afford the luxury of waiting for this awareness to permeate society. They are in danger now, and must depend on other forms of intervention. "A battered wife shelter in every city and every county could help, but it is like putting a bandaid on a cancer (Pizzey 1974 39). The civil rights movement has brought the human rights issues to public attention. Violence against women is one of them. Women's crisis centers, shelters, hotlines, support groups, and consciousness raising groups have been serving many women since the early 1960's and the rebirth of the feminist movement. Shelters have been established, and many allow lodging and meals for several weeks in order for the woman and her children to have an appreciable break from her former environment with time for serious thinking and planning for her future. At Woman's House in St Paul Minnesota, the best known refuge in the United States today, peer counseling is the crucial factor. The strength she sees in others

like herself allows the battered woman to see her own power. She no longer feels isolated knowing that even if she decides to return home, there is a bond between herself and other women (Martin 1976).

METHOD This study involves data collected over six months from calls for help from 86 battered women to the Young Women's Christian Association Women's Resource Center in Oklahoma City. The subjects ranged in age from 17 to 62, with the number of children ranging from none to 8, and a mean of slightly over 2 children. The ages of the children varied from newborn to adult, and 84 percent of the women were unemployed. About 75 percent of the subjects called from their homes, and 25 percent telephoned from the homes of friends, relatives, or neighbors. Services most often requested were 1) counseling and support (40%); 2) emergency shelter (38%); and 3) legal advice (33%). Less frequently requested services were protection, employment, medical, food, clothing, housing, and welfare assistance.

RESULTS About 10 percent of the battered women were single, and were being beaten by their boyfriend; 5 percent were divorced, and still being beaten by the ex-husband; and 85 percent were trapped in a brutal marriage with very little awareness of available alternatives. Ten rather diverse cases will illustrate the sample. 1) The husband, a bigamist, broke the door down, beat her up, and scattered her clothes in the street. The police did not help. 2) Her husband beat and kicked her so violently that she could hardly walk, and then beat the family dog on the table until it defecated in agony. She merely wants to pray that God will make it better. 3) Her husband, a felon beat and choked her until she blacked out. He beats her often, and sexually assaulted her daughter by a previous marriage. 4) She is aged 24, with 4 small

children, and 5 months pregnant, married to the spouse 8 months. He is seeing other women, but returns home each week, beats her up again, and leaves. 5) Her husband has hospitalized her twice from beatings, and threatens to kill her if she seeks to prosecute or divorce him. She's terrified. 6) She is 8 months pregnant, and afraid her husband will kill her. 7) Her husband is cruel and sadistic. He told her that if she did not take the children and get out, he would kill her. She has no marketable skills, and seems totally lost. 8) She called from the public library, and is afraid to go home. Her husband went on a violent drunk the night before, and she took the children and ran. 9) The husband drinks and becomes insanely violent, throws furniture and recently hit her with a lamp. The neighbors called the police. 10) The husband drinks 3 bottles of rum daily, and becomes violent. She fears for herself and her children and needs shelter and counseling.

The feelings and problems most often reported by these women were: 1) fear for self and children; 2) confusion and inability to cope; 3) inadequacy and passiveness; 4) lack of feeling, emptiness and sadness, and 5) hatred and anger. There were also feelings of isolation, low self-esteem, nervousness, suicidal tendencies, obesity, craziness, drug addiction, loss of memory, and rejection. They described their husbands as: 1) alcoholic or heavy drinker; 2) violent temper; 3) unloving and unfeeling; 4) insecure, immature; 5) macho. Other terms used to describe them were: workaholic, jealous, low self concept, high strung, promiscuous, and mentally ill. Injuries to the women included contusions, broken bones, dislodged teeth, and one woman had her hair set afire. Types of abuses most mentioned were beating with fists, and threats to kill.

CONCLUSIONS The role of alcohol in the battered woman tragedy is overwhelming. It figures in the

vast majority of cases. Other studies have estimated alcohol involvement in 60 percent of the cases, but this sample suggests more than 75 percent drinking problems.

. Eighty-five percent of the women were not employed, 88 percent were mothers, and 33 percent had no access to transportation. Virtually all accepted the traditional role of wife and mother, and many thought that they must deserve to be punished. For those who had young children in the home the children were physically and otherwise abused along with the wife-mother. The children, of course, are even more vulnerable than the women.

. About 40 percent requested shelter and counseling. A place away from the danger, and psychological and social support were factors of great importance to these women. About 33 percent requested legal advice, and were considering prosecution and divorce. The most common emotion was fear. Many continued to live a life of terror. These fears centered on bodily damage inflicted by their tormentors, and threats on their own and their children's lives. The husband's threat to kill had dire meaning for them.

. Theorists agree that power is the issue, and sex role stereotypes the problem. Men are taught that to be "masculine" is to be powerful, in complete control, and that a man dominates a woman. Women are taught that to be feminine is to be helpless and dependent, and that a woman submits to a man. Most had parents who served as models for such roles, which supports the intergenerational "cycle of abuse" theory.

. Both the battered woman and her husband appear to have low self-esteem. A woman beater usually feels powerless in other areas of his life. Whether he has a good job or is out of work, he sees himself as a failure. Physical violence is a symptom of stress and manifests his inability to cope. His wife is the one person he can dominate and abuse without fear of reprisal. A woman

who endures this abuse soon sees herself as helpless and inferior. Both assaulting husband and battered wife are locked into a game in which the payoff is violence inflicted and accepted, as an affirmation of their loser position. The prevalence of this violation of human rights is an indictment of the norms and values of our society. The battered women are beginning to ask important questions. They want to know that others believe that violence and beating is unacceptable. They want to know how they can become more assertive, and overcome their passivity. They want to know if their children will be emotionally damaged. They want to know if others believe they can live differently, and have a better life. They wonder if they can survive without a man. Their call for help is a beginning.

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