

Communities Against Violence Network (CAVNET)

June 29, 2004

Men As Victims of Intimate Violence

By Marc Dubin

There have been a series of articles published recently in major newspapers addressing the question of the degree to which men are victims of intimate violence. (Cathy Young , "In Abuse, Men Are Victims, Too", published in the Boston Globe, June 16, 2003, and Karen S. Peterson, "Studies Shatter Myth About Abuse", published in USA TODAY, June 24, 2003).

As a man who has prosecuted domestic violence, served as Special Counsel to the Violence Against Women Office at the Justice Department, and serves as Executive Director of CAVNET (Communities Against Violence Network (www.cavnet.org), a nonprofit that networks experts and advocates nationwide and provides a comprehensive online database on the subject, I want to try to respond to some of the issues raised in these articles:

Karen Peterson reports that:

"(T)he newest findings challenge the feminist belief that "it is men only who cause violence," says psychologist Deborah Capaldi of the Oregon Social Learning Center. "That is a myth."

Feminists make no such claim, and I challenge anyone to find any feminist who has said that. Rather, feminist scholars ask merely that we get the facts right - women far outnumber men as victims of intimate partner violence, and intimate partner violence is deadlier for women. What do I base this on? Try reading the Justice Department's studies, which are conducted impartially, and which are based on police reports, FBI reports, and the National Crime Victimization Survey. What does the Justice Department say about intimate partner violence? That women are victims of violence by intimate partners far more often than are men. How much more often? Well, according to the Justice Department, which oughta know, 85% of intimate violence is committed against women. Only 5-15% of intimate violence is committed against men. And, please be sure to notice that that figure includes same sex violence. The real myth? That feminists (or anyone else with any credibility) claim that "it is only men who cause violence". Perhaps Karen and Deborah should read the Justice Department's study, and perhaps they can give us a source for their mistaken assertion.

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Karen Peterson reports that:

"The number of women who hit first or hit back is "much greater than has been generally assumed," Capaldi says. (Capaldi) says she is surprised by the frequency of aggressive acts by women and by the number of men who are afraid of partners who assault them."

It is essential that before we debate the question of the importance of the "number of women who hit first or hit back" that we understand this question in the context of intimate partner violence. Intimate partner violence, also often referred to as "domestic violence", is more than merely a question of hitting or aggression. Intimate partner violence is about a pattern of conduct, over time, in which one individual exercises power and control over another, characterized by isolation from friends and family, control over money, belittling, diminishing of self esteem, and physical violence. It is distinguishable from situational violence which may occur episodically in the course of a relationship, such as someone throwing a plate in anger or frustration during an argument. One needs to examine the motivation and purpose of the abuser's activity - is it a pattern of conduct, over time, designed to exercise power and control? We also need to distinguish intimate partner violence from self defense (the women who hit back). Self defense is not intimate partner violence - it is a legal response to criminal behavior. Perhaps Ms. Capaldi is surprised by what she refers to as "aggressive acts by women", but she needs to understand that aggressive acts are not the same thing as intimate partner violence. Aggressive acts can be used in intimate partner violence, but there are many ways that batterers engage in intimate partner violence without being aggressive, and plenty of acts of aggression and self defense that are not intimate partner violence.

Karen Peterson reports that:

"Capaldi and two other female researchers call for a re-evaluation of treatment programs nationwide. Such programs focus on men and ignore women...."

Focusing on men in treatment programs makes sense, since 85% of intimate partner violence is engaged in by men, including gay men. According to the Justice Department, 588,490 victimizations by intimate partners in 2001 were against women. In contrast, in 1993 men were victims of 162,870 violent crimes by an intimate partner. By 2001 that total had fallen to an estimated 103,220 victimizations. Before we debate this though, let's recognize that there is no consensus that treatment

programs for male batterers actually work. Far too many courts make the mistake of ordering perpetrators into “anger management” classes, in the mistaken belief that intimate partner violence is about anger, a mistake that is similar to equating “aggression” with intimate partner violence. Classes that ignore the issues of power and control present in intimate violence do not work, and far too many perpetrators learn how to appear to be in control of their anger while simultaneously engaging in power and control and revictimizing their partners. Treatment programs which address the issues of power and control have a better likelihood of success, but unfortunately there is no hard evidence that these programs work either. Jail, not treatment, is sometimes the appropriate response – this is criminal behavior, after all.

By all means, let’s increase funding to programs that address intimate partner violence by women - this will mean more money for research into lesbian battering, an understudied and underserved population.

While we are on the subject of programs addressing intimate partner violence, let’s all commend the police, prosecutors, judges, and victim service agencies that have been addressing this problem - their work is having profound success. The most recent Department of Justice reveals that intimate partner violence is decreasing, for men and women. The Department of Justice reports that:

“The rate of intimate violence against females declined significantly between 1993 and 2001, dropping by nearly half (49%). The rate of intimate violence against males fell 42% between 1993 and 2001.”

Source: Intimate Partner Violence, 1993-2001, U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, February 2003. NCJ 197838 www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/abstract/ipv01.htm

Victim blaming is an old tactic of those guilty of wrong-doing - let’s try to focus on why so many men engage in intimate partner violence, rather than placing the blame on the ones they choose to victimize.

Let’s also recognize that for women, intimate partner violence is deadlier than for men. Women are at far greater risk of fatal victimizations by an intimate than are men. The Department of Justice reports that:

“In recent years, about 1/3 (33%) of female murder victims were killed by an intimate. In contrast, 4% of males were killed by an intimate. The number of men murdered by intimates dropped 68% between 1976 and 2000, the year of the most recently available data. In 1976, an intimate murdered 1,357 men; in 2000, 440. The number of women killed by an intimate was stable for two decades but declined after 1993. Between 1976 and 2000 the number of women murdered by intimates fell 22% from 1,600 to 1,247. These statistics include same sex relationships.”

Source: Intimate Partner Violence, 1993-2001, U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, February 2003. NCJ 197838 www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/abstract/ipv01.htm

The article by Cathy Young contains similar errors. She writes:

“But the underlying approach is still one that assumes the perpetrators are men and the victims are women, ignoring the complex picture of family violence that emerges from nearly three decades of research.”

I do not assume that the perpetrators are men, but I don't recommend ignoring reality either - I simply recognize that the Justice Department has shown that in the vast majority of cases of intimate partner violence, the perpetrator is male (and that this includes gay men). She writes, without citing any studies at all, and ignoring entirely the Department of Justice's work, that:

“(S)tudy after study shows that anywhere from one-third to half of spousal or partner assaults are female-on-male.”

Wrong. Asking men in a bar does not a study make.

She also writes:

“Earlier this month, a New York woman was charged with beating her former boyfriend to death with her high-heeled shoe.”

She fails to note that the Grand Jury did not indict her, found that she had been abused and acted in self defense, and that the woman was released.

Shoddy reporting does not a true reality make either.

Perhaps the editors should review the research before allowing this type of reporting to pass as helpful. For more information on intimate partner violence, visit www.cavnet.org.

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