

OPINION USA

Spouse abuse: A two-way street

Not only do women instigate most domestic violence, but they hit men more frequently and more severely.

By Warren Farrell

Just as bad cases make bad law, so can celebrity cases reinforce old myths. The biggest myth the O.J. Simpson case is likely to reinforce is that domestic violence is a one-way street (male-to-female), and its corollary, that male violence against women is an outgrowth of masculinity.

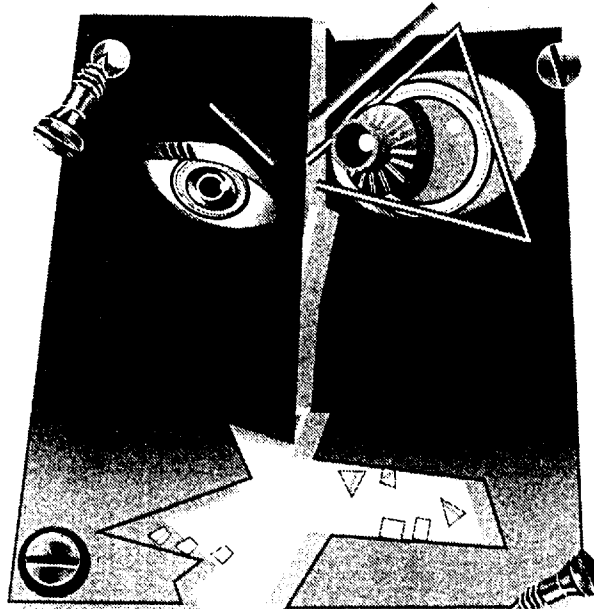
Given my background with the National Organization for Women, these assumptions died hard. And an initial check of research in the United States and Canada seemed to confirm them: More than 90% of domestic violence reports to the police come from women, not men. But then the picture became more complex:

► About a dozen studies in the United States and Canada asked *both* sexes how often they hit each other; all of them found that women hit men either more frequently or about as often as the reverse.

► Two of the main studies — by Suzanne Steinmetz, Murray Strauss and Richard Gelles — assumed men hit women more severely, so they divided domestic violence into seven levels of severity. They were surprised to discover that, overall, the more severe levels of violence were conducted more by women against men.

A caveat: Men hitting women did more damage than the reverse. But this caveat carried its own caveat: It was exactly because men's hits hurt more that women resorted to more severe methods — like tossing boiling water or swinging a frying pan into his face. In the Census Bureau's National Crime Survey, involving 60,000 households every six months for 3½ years, women reported using weapons against men three times as often as men acknowledged using weapons against women. Overall, even the women acknowledged they hit men more than men hit women.

The key issue, though, is who initiates this cycle of violence. Steinmetz, Strauss and Gelles found to their



By Suzy Parker, USA TODAY

initial surprise that women are more likely to be the initiators. Why? In part, the belief that men can take it — they can therefore be a punching bag and not be expected to hit back.

I was still a bit incredulous. I asked thousands of men and women in my workshops to count all the relationships in which they had hit their partner before their partner had ever hit them, and vice versa. About 60% of the women acknowledged they had more often been the first to strike a blow; among the men, about 90% felt their female partner had been the first to strike a blow.

When 54% of women in lesbian relationships acknowledged violence in their *current* relationship, vs. 11% of men and women acknowledging it in any of their heterosexual relationships, I realized domestic violence was not only a male-to-female phenomenon.

I still felt violence was an outgrowth of masculinity. And I was half right. Male-to-male violence is so much

an outgrowth of masculinity we don't abhor it, we applaud it. But male-to-female violence marks a man as a sissy. That is, when a man hurts a woman, it is seen as a deviation from masculinity, not a sign of masculinity.

Why the dichotomy? The very purpose of male-to-male violence was to train young men to die in war so everyone else might live — even women who were older. Its purpose was to protect women, not hurt women.

Why do we protest domestic violence against women and not even know about violence against men? When it comes to protecting women, we unconsciously expect men to be the disposable sex. That's why neither feminists nor masculinists object to male-only draft registration. That's why we jump from Simpson's possible murder of his ex-wife to a condemnation of men and their violence but fail to make the parallel logical leap from Ronald Goldman's death, most probably defending Nicole Simpson, to thanking men for their protector role.

Is it fair to blame only men for male-to-male violence? No. Male-to-male violence is rewarded by female love. Historically, there are no legends of the beautiful princess marrying the conscientious objector. Today, when a football player loses his position on a football team, the cheerleader cheers for his replaceable part. Women fell in love with *An Officer and a Gentleman*, not *The Private and the Pacifist*.

Understanding that domestic violence is a two-way street has opened my mind to understanding that domestic violence is a momentary act of power designed to compensate for an experience of powerlessness. I don't automatically discount O.J. Simpson's "suicide" note that he was a battered man any more than I would discount that Lorena Bobbitt was a battered woman. When we understand the powerlessness both sexes experience that precedes violence, we will focus on communications skills that allow both sexes to feel listened to and loved rather than frustrated and powerless.

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