

Claims about 'Husband Battering'

Michael Flood¹

A recent research project claimed to find that men and women are equally likely to be the perpetrators of domestic violence (Headey, Scott and de Vaus, 1999). Studies such as these have been taken up by anti-feminist men to claim that 'husband battering' is widespread. In the article below, Michael outlines a critique of such claims.

Men in fathers' rights groups and men's rights groups have been claiming very loudly for a while now that domestic violence is a gender-equal or gender-neutral phenomenon — that men and women assault each other at equal rates and with equal effects. They claim that an epidemic of husband-battering is being ignored if not silenced.

To substantiate their claims, men's rights and fathers' rights groups draw on a body of American studies which use a particular methodology for measuring violence. This is the CTS (CTS), developed and used by Murray Straus, Richard Gelles, Suzanne Steinmetz and others (Steinmetz, 1977/78; Steinmetz and Lucca, 1988; Straus *et al.*, 1980, Straus and Gelles, 1986, 1990).

The claim that domestic violence is gender-equal received further support with the publication in Melbourne of a study which claimed to show that men and women assault each other at equal rates (Headey *et al.*, 1999: 58). This found that 5.7 per cent of men and 3.7 per cent of women had been physically assaulted by their partners in the last 12 months (*ibid.*: 59). This study again used the CTS, in which men and women are asked whether, in the last year, they or their spouse had ever done any of a series of violent acts: hit with a fist or an object, slapped, shaken, scratched, or kicked, their partner.

There are four problems with the claims about 'husband battering' made by men's

rights advocates. Firstly, they only use these authors' work selectively, as the authors themselves disagree that women and men are equally the victims of domestic violence. Secondly, they ignore the serious methodological flaws in the CTS. Thirdly, they ignore or dismiss a mountain of other evidence which conflicts with their claims. Finally, their strategies in fact are harmful to men themselves, including to male victims of violence.

Selective use

The authors of the American CTS studies stress that no matter what the rate of violence or who initiates the violence, women are 7 to 10 times more likely to be injured in acts of intimate violence than are men (Orman, 1998). Husbands have higher rates of the most dangerous and injurious forms of violence, their violent acts are repeated more often, they are less likely to fear for their own safety, and women are financially and socially locked into marriage to a much greater extent than men. In fact, Straus expresses his concern that 'the statistics are likely to be misused by misogynists and apologists for male violence' (cited in Orman, 1998).

Methodological flaws

The CTS (CTS) has three key flaws as a way of measuring violence. Firstly, it leaves out important forms of violence, such as sexual assault, choking, suffocating, scratching, stalking, and marital murder. Most import-

¹ Michael Flood was involved for several years with Men Against Sexual Assault, running anti-rape workshops in high schools and community education campaigns such as the White Ribbon Campaign. He now runs anti-violence workshops for boys in high schools, in conjunction with the Domestic Violence Crisis Service. At present he is also doing a PhD in Women's Studies at the Australian National University, researching heterosexual men's sexuality and safe/unsafe sex. Michael can be contacted at PO Box 26, Ainslie, ACT 2602. Or e-mail him at: michael.flood@anu.edu.au

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antly, CTS studies exclude incidents of violence that occur after separation and divorce. Yet Australian data, e.g. from the *Women's Safety Survey*, shows that women are as likely to experience violence by previous partners as by current partners (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1996: 8). And that it is the time around and after separation which is most dangerous for women. International data shows similar patterns. For example, the U.S. Department of Justice reports that 75.9 per cent of spouse-on-spouse assaults occurred after separation or divorce, with a male perpetrator 93.3 per cent of the time (U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Family Violence*, April 1984, p. 4).

Secondly, CTS studies such as Headey *et al.*'s treat violent acts out of context. They only count violent acts. They do not tell us whether the acts were in self-defence. They do not distinguish between offensive and defensive acts. They do not tell us whether they were a single incident, or part of a pattern of violence. They do not tell us whether the act was intended to hurt the other person; a joking kick or a slapped hand are counted the same as a violent kick or blow to the face. Most CTS studies do not tell us whether the victim was injured, or how badly (Dobash *et al.*, 1992). These studies only look at violence in one year, and they don't consider the history of the violence in the relationship. And, obviously, the murder of partners and ex-partners cannot be measured by self-report surveys.

Headey *et al.*'s survey did ask about injuries, and they found that men are as likely as women to be victims of domestic assaults that lead to injury and pain (and the need for medical attention). They note that this runs counter to medical and police records, that this is the finding in which they have least confidence, and that these issues need further research (Headey *et al.*, 1999: 60–61).

Most CTS studies also ignore the issue of fear and intimidation. Headey *et al.*'s survey did ask about threats and intimidation, and it was here that they found the only statistically significant gender difference in domestic violence in the survey. More women (7.6 per cent) than men (4 per cent)

said they felt 'frightened and intimidated' (Headey *et al.*, 1999: 59).

Rather than seeing domestic violence as referring only to physical acts such as hitting or pushing, we need to recognise that verbal, psychological and emotional abuse is an important aspect of domestic violence.

Thirdly, the CTS depends only on reports *either* by the husband *or* the wife despite poor interspousal reliability. Like other CTS studies, Headey *et al.*'s study only questioned one respondent from each household and did not include people married or partnered to each other (Headey *et al.*, 1999: 57). Other studies show that wives and husbands disagree considerably both about what violence was used and how often it was used, and that wives are more likely than husbands to admit to their own violence (Szinovacz, 1983; Jouriles and O'Leary, 1985).

Conflicting evidence

To make the fifty/fifty claim about husband battering, men's rights and fathers' rights advocates must also ignore or dismiss a mountain of conflicting evidence, from crime victimisation surveys of the population, numerous studies using methodologies other than the CTS, calls made to domestic violence centres and services, hospital statistics on how people were injured, and applications for intervention orders.

This massive body of evidence continues to show that men are more often the perpetrators of domestic violence than are women, that women are more often the victims of domestic violence than are men, and that when boys and men are the victims of violence this is usually violence by other boys and men.

Anne Ferrante *et al.*'s exploration of all sources of data on domestic violence in Australian finds the consistent result that females are 88–92 per cent of victims in most sources (Ferrante *et al.*, 1996: 104).

Of all the forms of violence to which adult men are subject, only a very small proportion of this is represented by domestic violence. From police records, domestic violence accounted for 13.6 per cent of all forms of violence against women, but only

1.3 per cent of violence against men; while from victimisation surveys, one-third of violence against women was domestic, versus less than 1 per cent of violence against men. (The reason for the lower percentage of domestic incidents among the police statistics is that women are less likely to report a domestic than a non-domestic incident (Ferrante *et al.*, 1996: 104).)

Ferrante *et al.* define 'domestic violence' as referring only to criminal violence inflicted by one partner to another, which occurs between partners and ex-partners including those in boy/girlfriend relationships (*ibid.*: 3).

Crime victimisation surveys in Australia reveal further aspects of the violence experienced by men, and how it differs from violence experienced by women. If we compare men's and women's experiences of personal attack, threats, and sexual assault, we find that incidents against men are far less likely than incidents against women to occur in the home (10 per cent versus 43 per cent), they are far more likely to involve strangers (75 per cent versus 31 per cent), and they are far less likely to involve partners or ex-partners (1 per cent, versus one-third of female incidents) (Ferrante *et al.*, 1996: 56-61).

Some people claim that men are less likely than women to report domestic violence, out of shame or chivalry or the fear that they won't be believed. However, the available evidence finds instead that men are more likely to call the police, more likely to press charges and less likely to drop them (Schwartz, 1987; Rouse *et al.*, 1988; Kincaid, 1982).

A further reason why studies using the CTS and similar methods are unlikely to capture the true character of domestic violence is to do with the *samples* of such studies. Headey *et al.* acknowledge that their chosen method, a survey, may under-report extreme violence, that some victims of extreme violence are in refuges and so not available to surveys (Headey *et al.*, 1999: 57, 61), and that perpetrators and victims of severe violence may be less willing to admit what is going on than people in milder situations (*ibid.*: 61).

Surveys such as this tap into what one researcher calls 'common couple violence'. This is where couples have conflicts which occasionally involve 'minor' forms of violence, which only rarely escalate into serious forms of violence, and this violence is roughly gender-equal (Johnson, 1995: 285). This kind of violence in couples is the product of a violence-prone culture in general.



However, surveys such as the one by Headey *et al.* are likely to miss a second important form of domestic violence, what Johnson calls 'patriarchal terrorism'. This represents some husbands' practice of a terroristic control of their wives. It involves the systematic use of not only violence, but also economic subordination, threats, isolation and other control tactics (Johnson, 1995: 284). This violence is patriarchal because it is based in patriarchal ideas of male ownership and control of their female partners. This second form of domestic violence involves much more frequent violence (although the men using this can also control their wives using other tactics), the violence is more severe, and it is very likely to escalate over time.

Men's experiences of violence

Some victims of domestic violence certainly are men. Some of these male victims have been subject to violence by other men — by brothers, fathers and step-fathers, male friends and acquaintances, and gay male partners. And some have been assaulted by women.

Male victims of domestic violence deserve the same recognition, sympathy, support and services as do female victims. And they do not need to be 50 per cent of the victims to deserve these (Orman, 1998).

There are also some important differences between men's and women's experiences of domestic violence. When men are subject to domestic violence by women, the violence is not as prolonged and nor is it as extreme, they are far less likely to be injured, they are less likely to fear for their own safety, they are less likely to be subject to violence by their ex-partners, and they are likely to have more financial and social independence.

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We also need to remember that a great deal of violence by wives against husbands is retaliatory or in self-defence. When women are physically violent towards their male partners, very often this is in the context of having themselves been subject to violence by that man. And in the situations when a woman kills her male partner, typically this is in the context of his violence to her over a long period.

However, if our concern genuinely is 'violence done to men', then we should not be concentrating our efforts on violence by women to men in the home. Men are frequently the victims of violence, and mostly this is violence by other men. Men and boys are bashed up outside the pub and on the street, bullied at school, sexually assaulted as children, subject to brawls on the sporting field, bashed in the home, bashed in public toilets, injured or killed in the course of robberies, muggings and burglaries, killed by parents, injured in workplace initiation rituals, shot on the battlefield, and daily experience frequent 'aggro' and put-downs and threats.

Yes, often the victims of violence are male. And in the vast majority of cases, so are the perpetrators. Boys and men are most at risk of physical harm, injury and death from other boys and men.

Males are about 60 per cent of homicide victims in Australia, and close to 90 per cent of those accused of homicide (Carcach and James, 1998: 3). Seventy-five per cent of victims of serious assaults, and 90 per cent of suspects, are male (Australian Institute of Criminology, 1990: 26). Physical and verbal harassment of boys in schools is common, and according to a recent national survey the harassers of boys are largely other boys (Collins *et al.*, 1996). In incidents of harassment and violence to gay, lesbian and bisexual students and teachers, 71 per cent involved male-only perpetrators (Griffin, 1994). One in four young male inmates in jail is sexually assaulted by other, male, prisoners (Heilpern, 1998).

There is thus a widespread pattern of male/male violence. The fact that this is ignored in favour of spurious claims about women's violence towards men is a sym-

ptom of the *political agendas* which in fact guide men's rights claims.

Political claims

Men's rights and fathers' rights claims about violence stem more from political and anti-feminist motives than they do from a genuine concern for male victims of violence. These men are using women's alleged violence against men as a way of resisting and discrediting attempts to deal with men's violence against women.

Some individuals and groups also make claims about violence as part of broader agendas to do with the Family Court, custody and access issues. It is a common complaint among fathers' rights groups that women falsely allege domestic violence and/or child abuse to gain a tactical advantage in family proceedings, although actual research on such allegations contradicts this (Kaye and Tolmie, 1998a: 53-55). Fathers' rights groups also claim that domestic violence either doesn't really exist or is the responsibility of both parties, and that other forms of behaviour by women are just as abusive, such as verbal abuse, denial of men's sexual needs, denial of access and divorce (*ibid.*: 55-57).

Perhaps most troubling is that when fathers' rights groups do acknowledge men's violence, they usually blame the violence on factors outside the men who perpetrate it, such as the custodial parent, Family Court or *Family Law Act* (Kaye and Tolmie, 1998a: 57). 'In an ironic twist, male violence is used by these groups to demonstrate how victimised men are by the family law system' (*ibid.*: 58). In Kaye and Tolmie's account of the rhetorical devices used by fathers' rights groups in presenting their position, this is part of one device, a *claim to victim status*.

So far I've said that men's rights and fathers' rights agendas are based on questionable evidence, and they are dangerous for women and children. But there's another problem: Men's rights agendas in fact are harmful to men themselves.

Harm to men

Fathers' rights advocates such as the Lone Fathers' Association have attacked services for women, such as women's refuges, while calling for either parallel services for men or

services for both men and women. There are five ways in which the agendas and activities of fathers' rights groups in relation to domestic violence are harmful for men themselves.

- They focus on the wrong target (women or feminism, rather than unhealthy and destructive models of manhood). As far as violence done to men is concerned, for example, the problem primarily is violent models of manhood and an ethic of mutual combat and honour in masculine culture. To end the violence we will have to change these models, such that toughness, aggression and insensitivity stop ruling men's lives.

- They taint as backlash the call for recognition of violence experienced by men. The more quickly that people such as the Lone Fathers' Association drop their obsession with proving that domestic violence is gender-equal, the easier it will be for others to *hear* of the fact of men's subjection to domestic violence. The whole focus on proving that women hit men as much as the reverse is a monumental distraction from the very real need to get services and support for male victims.

- They antagonise potential supporters. Attacking existing services for female survivors (or feminism in general), does male survivors of violence a disservice. It is an attack on the very people who brought the issue of interpersonal violence to public attention in the first place and who have been leaders in this field. It unnecessarily antagonises the women and men in existing anti-violence services who could be usefully involved in responding to male survivors and who could be key supporters of services directed at male victims.

- They are based on a simplistic 'You've got it, we want it too' logic which may not provide the most appropriate services for men. It is striking how often the things men's rights men call for are the mirror image of things established by three decades of women's movements. You've got a women's health centre or a refuge, we want a men's one, and so on. This 'us too' approach is motivated more by a knee-jerk logic of equality than by an informed appraisal of the kinds of services men are going to use and like.

- They undermine the protections available to both female and male victims of violence. Fathers' rights groups have criticised and attacked the operation of Domestic Violence Orders or Apprehended Violence Orders, claiming that false allegations of domestic violence and child abuse are routinely made and that alleged victims of such crimes are too readily believed. These efforts undermine the safety and protection available to both female *and* male victims of violence.

Fathers' rights groups have prioritised the prevention of false allegations of child abuse over safeguards for genuine victims of abuse, and have made 'expressions of sympathy for men who are so distressed by their loss of access to the children they purportedly love that they *murder* the objects of their affection!' (Kaye and Tolmie, 1998b: 181).

Conclusion

The claim that women and men are physically violent towards each other in equal rates and with equal effects is demonstrably false. Claims by some men's groups of widespread 'husband battering' have less to do with a genuine concern for male victims and more to do with political agendas regarding the Family Court and other anti-feminist concerns.

Certainly we need to provide services and resources for men, as for women, which are gender-just and oriented towards enhancing their lives. What we don't need are ideologies and services which involve spurious claims about women's violence, incite men to murderous anger, pit men against women, and fix men in feelings of powerlessness and blame.

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