
Male Bashing

Charles Derry

NOTE: This article attempts to accurately portray typical male interactions as they relate to women. Crude or offensive language is often used in such interchanges. Though the author has attempted to keep this language to a minimum, eliminating it entirely would reduce or obscure his efforts to reveal male support for violence against women.

At first glance, it looks like men don't care that women are being raped, beaten, bruised, pushed around, punched, slapped, kicked, bitten, thrown, tied up, locked in, followed, interrogated, humiliated, mutilated, tortured, terrorized, shot, kicked, choked and bludgeoned to death by their husbands, boyfriends and ex's. At first, it does seem as though we just don't care. But with a closer look, it appears that the general silence or apathy most men show toward the issue of men's violence against women is only a disguise. It's a mask that comes undone at the first hint of female resistance. Usually, at the slightest suggestion that men shouldn't attack or terrorize women, the veil of silent disregard which protects men's privilege to abuse women drops.

In its place rises an arsenal of male resistance that is often startling in its scope, not only by the sheer number of tactics deployed but also by the sophistication with which they are executed. What first appeared to be male disinterest, now reveals itself to be quite the opposite. Women's passionate or angry cries for relief are met with resistance. Men really *do* care about violence against women. But they care in a way they would rather not talk about. Men care that the violence is happening and they care that it continues. And quite frankly, they are sick of having to hear about it. Men become angry, if not immediately, then eventually, when it is brought up because ultimately it is a moral challenge that demands that we give up the privileges we have from being in power. It means that sexism has to stop and few men will support that. Sexism is, after all, a good deal for men.

When I was 17 years old, I first considered seriously what it would mean if women were really equal to me. Within two minutes of serious thought, I came up with the crux of the matter. "I'd have to give some stuff up." I considered that possibility for another 30 seconds or so, and decided, "Naw, why should I?" With that, I decided to continue with the culturally accepted male attitudes, beliefs and behaviors into which I had already been fully and comfortably indoctrinated. No one saw me make that decision. No one challenged me about the rightness or wrongness of it. I was not identified as criminal or aberrant in any way. My life went on as usual with a slight increase in my awareness that it was better to be a guy than a girl. I had few complaints. Women were women and I was a teenage guy basically trying to figure out how to get in their pants. (I also wanted to get to know them as a person too, of course. I wasn't an "animal," after all, like some guys I knew). Basically, I considered myself a "good guy."

How do we explain the following information?

- Violence will occur at least once in two-thirds of all marriages (Roy, 1982).
- Approximately 95% of the victims of domestic violence are women (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1983).

- 50% of women will be beaten by their lover or husband more than once in their lifetime (Walker, 1979).
- Research suggests that wife-beating results in more injuries that require medical treatment than rape, auto accidents, and muggings combined (Stark & Flitcraft, 1987).
- In the United States, a woman is more likely to be assaulted, injured, raped, or killed by a male partner than by any other type of assailant (Browne & Williams, 1987).
- An estimated 3 to 4 million American women are battered each year by their husbands or partners (Stark et al, 1981).
- 21–30% of college women report violence from their dating partner (Wolf, 1991).
- In the U.S., it is estimated that a woman is raped every 1.3 minutes. 75% of rape victims know their attacker (National Victim Center and Crime Victims Research and Treatment Center, 1992).
- In one study 25% to 60% of the male students admitted to some likelihood of raping a woman if they could get away with it (Russell, 1988).

Who is assaulting these women? They are assaulted by millions of men who still consider themselves “good guys.” They are daddies and granddaddies, bosses and co-workers, priests and ministers, friends and acquaintances, judges and legislators, husbands and boyfriends. They are men who know the women they assault. While seventy-five percent of women who are sexually assaulted know their assailant, one hundred percent of victims of domestic assault know theirs. If all the “good guys” got up off the couch and did something to stop their own and/or other men’s violence, violence against women would stop. Sexism would flounder then fall apart, much like the Soviet block of the early 90’s fell apart after they stopped running over their citizenry with tanks. If all the men who are currently beating and raping women stopped, would all the other men who had not been violent to this point start being violent to keep sexism in place and male power intact with all its privileges?

What is happening to men that we can beat and rape this many women? We are not talking about individual psychopathologies with these numbers. We are talking about normative male behavior that fits on a continuum that starts with silent disregard of women and moves on to sexist jokes, comments and behaviors, to harassment, rape, assault and murder, all happening within an environment of male supremacy. Somehow we (males) are just better than you (females). It is our Godgiven or natural right to be obeyed and listened to and feared, if necessary, to get our way, or just for the fun of it. In fact, when we get down to it, it is about getting our way and having a good time while we are doing it. We’re just having some fun. Often men will reveal this in their resistance to women’s complaints about sexist behavior. Men will say, “Hey, can’t you take a joke? We were just having some fun.” And men mean it. We do these things to women because it’s fun. We bond with other men this way. But we do so at women’s expense. We see a woman go by and we comment to each other on her “ass, tits, or legs” and what we’d like to do to them (“the ass, tits or legs”). Our friends then chide us for not being manly enough to do anything with “the ass, tits or legs.” We laugh together and slap each other on the back or push the other away. We are bonding. Getting closer and having a good time doing it. We like each other. We like being guys . . . and how we relate to women is integral to our definition of our manhood, of ourselves.

Male identity is dependent upon a particular type of relationship with women. What type of relationship that must be, is often clarified by how we resist women when they challenge our sexism and violence. It is quite common—if not the norm—that when a woman or women as a group say to men, “Don’t beat and don’t rape us,” that men respond by saying, “You must not like men.” Feminist women in general and women working in the anti-rape and anti-battering movements are often labelled as manhaters or accused of attempting to emasculate men when they ask men to stop beating, raping and killing women. Now, as a man, it was important for me to ask myself, what does a woman asking me to not rape or beat or kill her have to do with my manhood? Why is that so often our first response? We reveal ourselves in that response. We reveal how true it is that manhood is defined by our relationship to women and how important it is that this relationship be one of male domination and female subordination.

Men also have an understanding that manhood is not only about who I am as a man but that I'm also part of an institution called manhood. Manhood is seen as something to defend. A society "built," run and protected by men is called "patriarchy." The critical role violence and abuse plays in maintaining patriarchy is so imbedded in our individual and collective psyches that we understand any challenge to male violence as a threat to our manhood. And so we resist.

Further evidence that male identity is rooted in our domination of women exists in examples of men's interactions with each other. Suppose there are five or six guys gathered at a bar, workplace, school, party, etc., and as a woman walks by, one of the men starts making remarks like, "*Hey, good lookin', where you going so fast? How about coming over here and giving me a big kiss?*" to which the rest of the guys start laughing and adding their own comments that invariably become cruder, like, "*Hey, why don't you come and sit on my face . . . How about a little head . . .*" etc., etc., etc. By this time the men are having an uproariously good time. The woman, meanwhile, is just trying to get to the bathroom.

What if one of the men in the group interrupted the laughter and backslapping by saying something like, "*That was really offensive. You guys just treated her like a piece of meat. You should apologize to her.*" How would the other men react? First, they would look at him like he had grown another head and then, after the initial shock (about two seconds) they'd go after him. "*What the hell is wrong with you? What's the matter, don't you like girls? Are you a faggot or something?*" Generally, he would be ridiculed and ostracized from the group.

This scenario again reveals much about male culture and identity. First of all homophobia is used to begin the process of getting him back in line. The message is: the right kind of man is a heterosexual man. Secondly, to be the right kind of heterosexual man, you must be willing to abuse women. None of those men would consider that the answer to "*What's the matter, don't you like girls?*" is "*Yes, I do like girls/women. That's why I'm not willing to abuse them or participate by silently watching you do it.*" Thirdly, this scenario obviously supports male hatred of women. In no way is real support of women considered manly, unless, of course, you are "rescuing" some helpless woman somewhere which certainly does not disrupt the power roles of sexism.

When men support women and commit to an equal sharing of power in their relationships with women, they are questioned, harrassed or even threatened by other men. Consider the simplest of examples. A man is out with other male friends and leaves the table explaining that he told his wife he would call if he was to be later than 10:00 PM. It is not uncommon for him to hear something like, "*She's gotcha on a pretty short leash there, Bobby,*" accompanied by other similar rhetoric and laughter. Or, if a man participates in more traditional male recreation like fishing, hunting or bowling, etc., but also balances his time with his wife, thereby not always being available for the guys, he'll inevitably hear, "*Oh, the old lady let you out of the house, huh?*" followed by banter about who's wearing the pants in the family. These exchanges between men are all reminders and evidence of who is supposed to be in charge.

A power structure as pervasive and grandiose in design as sexism must be constantly monitored and maintained by an overwhelming majority of men for it to be successful. Feminist critique of male behavior is often responded to by men as though it were the men who were actually the victims of feminists. This attempt to describe himself as a victim of those he victimizes is a tactic commonly used by men who batter. It is an attempt (often successful) to divert attention away from his abusive behavior. He insists that she is the one who is abusive, and he's the real victim here. Her abusiveness includes behaviors like complaining when he breaks a promise, or is drunk for the third time this week, or humiliates her in front of her family and friends, or slaps her across the face. Her complaints about his behavior are defined by him as abuse.

Men, in general, will use this same tactic by naming women's critique of male behavior as "male bashing." Men will refer to presentations about domestic violence or sexual assault as just more "male bashing." In the book, *1984*, George Orwell coined the phrase "double speak." It is when the meaning of a word is reversed. In the case of the term "male bashing" it seems appropriate to be clear about what, in fact, male bashing is. Male bashing is when a man grabs a woman by the back of the hair and bashes her head into the wall or cupboard or door. Male bashing is when he takes her by the throat and pins her against the wall with one hand and bashes her in the face with the other. That's male bashing. Or when he throws her to the ground and kicks her in the stomach

and then stomps on her head . . . that's male bashing. It's not when she is finally able to get to her feet and then says to him, "*You don't have the right to beat me like that.*" That's not male bashing. That's a woman naming the behavior and saying it should stop. Who does it benefit if society looks at that couple and says, "*Man, what a bitch. That poor guy can't get a moment's rest. Why doesn't she just leave him alone? Then nobody would get hurt!*"

Male bashing is a phrase that is used as a tactic to divert attention away from the reality of men's violence. If successful, it is a diversion that allows men to continue their assaults. It is a phrase that provides support for men's continued control of women by violent means. It is an insistence that women change their behavior, not men. It is a call to arms; an attempt to keep women in line; to shut them up within the roles of their prescribed subordination.

The first privilege of being in power is to be comfortable. This includes comfortably abusing and "if need be" killing those with less power. If those being abused complain or go so far as to confront the powers that be, inevitably causing the powerful some discomfort, it is those doing the confronting that are ultimately breaking "the rules" thereby "victimizing" the powerful. It is from this privilege of comfort that men respond emotionally to feminist critique.

I would like to examine some, not all, but some of the common responses that "good men" have toward feminist politics. Men who fall asleep or walk away while women ask for safe lives and equal opportunity are obvious in their contempt for women. Men who immediately and boisterously respond with intimidating gestures are also obvious about their power agendas. Likewise, those men who find the whole notion of women's equality to be so "insignificant" as to be laughable, reveal their hatred of women. It is the resistant "good guys," however, that are more difficult to recognize as "ally" or "enemy." They're fun, empathetic men who seem to be women's allies, but are just missing that one critical point that would assist them in actually "getting" what sexism is all about. A woman may feel that if she just keeps talking and presenting her case from different angles that eventually he's bound to get it because she know he's a good guy who would want to understand . . . but he doesn't. And when she gets angry, he gets uncomfortable and before you know it, he's her victim, not the other way around.

He's the guy who goes to a feminist lecture and afterwards says "*I agreed with a lot of what she said but I think she'd be more effective if she said it a little differently. I think if she weren't quite so angry, it would be easier for men to 'hear' her.*" Or, he may say, "*Not all men are bad.*" He's angry and disappointed that she lumped all men into one category again (and he knows he doesn't belong there). He doesn't need "*to spend his evening going to a lecture and being 'shamed' for an hour and a half.*"

I like the fact that shame comes up. I always think it's a good sign. I think it's fairly common for men being confronted with the reality of men's oppression of women to experience shame. Shame is married to responsibility. When a man feels shame, it is because, on some level, he is identifying his responsibility for either perpetrating some of the abuse described or supporting its perpetration. If you are a man raised practically anywhere on the planet, you will not have escaped, in some way, perpetrating and/or supporting the perpetration of sexist abuse, either physically or otherwise, upon women. It's part of being a man. And while we are not responsible for being born into a sexist society and therefore, inevitably becoming sexist ourselves, we do get to decide when we become adult men whether or not we will continue to support the status quo of the male oppression of women. We do get to choose to stop our sexist behavior and create a definition of manhood that is divorced from the woman-hating, violence-prone stereotypes we inherited from our fathers.

Stopping our sexism begins with understanding our sexism. How am I responsible for the rape down the street, first, as a man and second, as an individual, and are the answers mutually exclusive? Unfortunately, many men experience shameful feelings when identifying their sexism and are reluctant to take responsibility even for these feelings, much less any broader responsibility for ending rape. Rather than look closer at why they are feeling shameful, they point a finger far away from themselves and toward the other, who has "shamed them," becoming forever relegated to that growing number of men who "support" women but just had a "bad experience" with feminists. How fortunate to come so close to identifying your responsibility for the rape, murder and general degradation and hostility women live with everyday and be pulled back from that task by claiming victimization yet again.

Many men get their cake and eat it too at this point. They're the nice guys—especially with their women friends. They get to enjoy the benefits afforded them by virtue of their gender and yet they don't have to hit a single woman (well, maybe once a long time ago) or rape anyone. They can sit back and enjoy the benefits that rape and battery afford them. All the while they are sure to do their part in maintaining the ideology and environment necessary for the violence to continue, even while they protest its occurrences. To their woman friends, they are appalled by the violence of other men but with their male friends they still crack jokes about "tits, ass and legs" or they still laugh at them. But they sure as hell don't confront those jokes or other sexist behaviors with the guys. Cake and eat it too . . . it's good to be a good guy. Everybody likes him.

There are some men who start by being angry and then ask themselves, what is it about a woman asking me not to rape her that makes me angry? Why am I responding that way? Often the answer is about protection. It's about protecting the fact that, if "no" means "no," there are a lot of men who have sexually assaulted women and never called it rape. It's about women not having the right to complain about men's behavior and certainly not to be angry about it. Subordinates don't have those rights. It pisses us off when she breaks that rule. We know what's next. Next, she's going to want us to start "giving some stuff up." She will want us to stop having fun at her expense and I'm not sure I want to. And I don't like being asked because then I have to think about it and then I might have to stop.

She'll be asking me to stop using porn and do the dishes and take out the garbage and share with the laundry and kids, and pretty soon she'll want equal say about how the money is spent or just want her half which I know will leave less for me. And then I'll be competing with her at my next job interview or for my next promotion and it's bad enough competing with just half the population much less everybody so the hell with this. Maybe I ought to just sit back down again before somebody sees me thinking about this.

When you "get up off the couch to do something about sexism" as a man, the first thing you run into is your privilege. Many, many men simply sit back down and catch their breath when they realize how dangerously close they came to giving it all away. And so they don't go beyond their anger or sense of victimization. They sit comfortably within it and relax.

But some men don't. Some go through a similar process and instead of "sitting down" quickly before someone sees them, they go "Oh, damn, now I'm going to have to give some of this up if I really mean what I say about equality and justice." And they begin that process. And some men feel deeply ashamed of how they have treated women and how they have supported the sexist brutality of patriarchy and how they often enjoyed it. But rather than run from that discomfort they embrace it and use it as a guide for dismantling their sexism. They resolve to become accountable to women by committing to stop their sexism and their support for it. They are willing to listen to women's reality and understand their responsibility to challenge themselves and other men to end male violence and oppression of women. They begin to act privately and publicly confronting the sexism of their male friends and male institutions. Men who seriously commit to ending sexism understand that we cannot be silent in that effort. Our silence supports our privilege. Our silence is our privilege. Through our silence women will continue to be prisoners in their homes and on the streets. They'll be attacked, raped and murdered. Nothing negative will happen to us if we are silent. If we act, it will cost us. That cost will vary from man to man and action to action but knowing what we know now, how can we continue with business as usual and still consider ourselves "good men"?

Charles Derry is a pro-feminist activist who has worked with men who batter for ten years as well as being involved in local, state and national anti-sexist men's activist groups. He currently works as a private consultant on domestic violence issues and is the co-founder of the Gender Violence Institute in St. Cloud, Minnesota.

REFERENCES

- Browne, A. and Williams, K.R. "Resource Availability for Women at Risk: Its Relationship to Rates of Female-Perpetrated Partner Homicide." Paper presented at the American Society of Criminology Annual Meeting, November 11-14, 1987, Montreal, Canada.
- Bureau of Justice Statistics. *Report to the Nation on Crime and Justice: The Data*, Washington D.C.: Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice, October, 1983.
- National Victim Center and Crime Victims Research and Treatment Center, *Rape in America, A Report to the Nation*, 1992.
- Roy, M. (ed.), *The Abusive Partner* New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Co. 1982.
- Russell, D. "Pornography and Rape: A Causal Model," *Political Psychology*, Vol. 9, No. 1, 1988.
- Stark, E. et al. "Wife Abuse in the Medical Setting: An Introduction for Health Personnel," Monograph Series No. 7, National Clearinghouse on Domestic Violence, Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, April 1981.
- Stark, E., Flitcraft, A. "Violence Among Intimates: An Epidemiological Review," in Haslett et al. (eds.), *Handbook of Family Violence*, 1987.
- Walker, L.E. *The Battered Woman*, Scranton, PA: Harper & Row, 1979.
- Wolf, N. *The Beauty Myth*, New York: William Morrow & Co., 1991.