# BATTERING and family Therapy

A Feminist Perspective





## A Feminist Perspective

Marsali Hansen & Michèle Harway



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To the two men whose support, love, respect, and appreciation of these two strong women facilitated our creative process

## **Foreword**

Violence against women has been part of everyday life since the beginning of recorded history. For centuries it was so normative that no sanctions existed against it. Men enjoyed safety from societal intrusion within their homes, which were seen as their castles. Men's patriarchy over their families was purchased at the expense of an invisible horde of women who were beaten in their homes. The primary response of a battered woman during these times was to attempt to minimize violence by catering to the every mood and whim of her partner. Often, however, violence occurred repeatedly, leading the woman to realize how illusory was the belief that she could control her husband's behavior. But there were virtually no resources that would permit escape, and the social sanctioning of male violence left the battered woman without even the hope of support or validation from family and friends. Formal questioning of the appropriateness of men's beating their wives began only within this century. Prevalence data revealing the enormous proportions of the problem have been available for fewer than 20 years.

Today, behavioral scientists recognize the gendered nature of the violence in women's everyday lives. The victims of male violence are made vulnerable to abuse primarily because they are women. Naming the types of violence by creating such terms as battering, acquaintance rape, and workplace harassment has validated women's experiences and empowered them to speak of those experiences. However, the terms also may have impeded scholarly development, because they divided researchers into tiny camps, obscured the multiple, different victimizations sustained by many women, and discouraged a conceptualization of male violence that recognizes its common causal pathways.

Contemporary policy-making has been characterized by a perceptual blackout about violence in the family. Recognition of the true scope of battering has been precluded, because to do so would contradict prevailing idealizations of the traditional American family. Naturally, without accurate description of the size of the problem, institutional responses were inadequate. Nevertheless, the past several years have seen one formal system after the next-mental health, criminal justice, and medicine-step forward to assert what it could contribute to the victim of domestic violence. There have been many gains, such as the creation of protection orders and mandatory arrest policies, inclusion of violence considerations into custody decisions, and implementation of emergency room protocols. All too often, however, these resources are more illusory than real, because practitioners fail to incorporate practice standards promoted by professional associations and because the services cannot be accessed by women who lack financial resources. Psychological treatment of batterers and their partners from a family therapy model also has been sharply criticized. Practitioners have often failed to detect battering, and, even when they have identified it, they have proceeded with treatment plans that ignored the violence.

On October 20, 1992, the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) communicated to its Council of Deans the urgent need to include education on domestic violence in medical training at all levels, from undergraduate through residency and continuing education. This communication concerning voluntary compliance was prompted by proposed legislation, H.R. 4846, introduced by Representative Ron Wyden (D-OR), that would have mandated inclusion of "significant training in identifying victims of domestic violence and in providing treatment for medical conditions arising from such violence" as a condition for an institution's receiving federal funds from the Public Health Service. The AAMC and other medical organizations have historically opposed curriculum mandates, and their strategy to head off this one is to revise the curriculum proactively. There is an important message in this for those who train health care practitioners of every type. It is time to get serious about domestic violence.

This book is about three "F"s: family violence, family therapy, and feminist thinking. Both feminism and family therapy incorporate concepts of power, but the conceptualization from the latter perspective is male defined, and male dominance is typically taken for granted. Some writers have questioned the fruitfulness of attempting to integrate feminism with family systems therapy because of the two perspectives' fundamental incompatibility in understandings of power (Bograd, 1988). Without major restructuring, attempting to integrate feminism and family therapy may be

Foreword

a case of rearranging deck chairs on the *Titanic*. Feminists have questioned the appropriateness of family therapy for domestic violence because application of this conceptual framework to battering implies the wife's coresponsibility for the violence. Harway and Hansen acknowledge that the contemporary family is a system in which the balance of power is inherently unequal. Consequently, with certain well-described exceptions, the chapter authors assume an individual approach to treatment. Although therapy might sometimes be conducted in groups, such groups would not mix perpetrators and victims.

The contributors to this volume are experts in the field of family violence. They consider family violence from theoretical, empirical, legal, and treatment vantage points. The theoretical material includes discussion and critique of various models of family violence, including the feminist model. Legal scholars address judicial options for the battered woman and delineate therapists' ethical duties when treating violent families. The impact of domestic violence on child custody decisions is also addressed, as is the use of the battered woman syndrome in legal arguments for self-defense in cases where victims are accused of killing their partners. Several contributors review the meager body of scholarship in this field to date and observe that little of it has been notably feminist in theoretical underpinnings. Among the topics that have been studied are the psychological impact of battering on victims and their children, and violence in lesbian relationships. Contributors offer useful suggestions for obtaining relevant information about ongoing violence without involving the victim in the treatment of the batterer in ways that could make her vulnerable to retaliation. Also discussed is the triaging of cases in which both domestic violence and alcoholism are present. Finally, in recognition that the cause of family violence is the batterer, the editors have included material on the characteristics of offenders and their treatment.

For me, the most troubling material in this book is the information provided on current practice standards for violent families, as reflected by surveys of family counselors and psychotherapists. These data suggest to me that the concern of medical educators to include domestic violence in their curricula should be extended to the other helping professions as well.

Mary P. Koss, Ph.D.

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Marsali Hansen Michèle Harway

POSTSCRIPT: The order of the editors' names was determined by a flip of a coin.

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## An Overview of Domestic Violence

MICHÈLE HARWAY MARSALI HANSEN

#### Prevalence of Domestic Violence

"You are more likely to be physically assaulted, beaten, and killed in your own home at the hands of a loved one than anyplace else, or by anyone else in our society" (Gelles & Straus, 1989, p. 18). This statement by two of the most respected researchers in the field of family violence reflects the findings of numerous studies of the prevalence of domestic violence in our society. Gelles and Straus's 1975 First National Family Violence Survey (cited in Gelles & Straus, 1989) indicated that 1 out of every 6 wives reported that she had been hit by her husband at some point in her marriage. This study, based on interviews with a national sample of more than 2,000 families, also indicated that about 1 woman in 22 (3.8%) is the victim of physically abusive violence each year, with the average battered wife being attacked three times each year. Attacks take the form of severe beatings in 6 cases out of 1,000 and involve the use of guns or knives in 2 cases out of 1,000.

Gelles and Straus's Second National Family Violence Survey (including interviews with an additional 6,000 families) indicated again that 1 out of 6 American couples experienced an incident involving a physical assault during 1985 (cited in Gelles & Straus, 1989). Projections have been made that 8.7 million couples experienced at least one assault during that year. Most of these assaults involved "minor" violence (e.g., pushing, slapping, shoving, or throwing things); however, in a projected 3.4 million households the violence had a high risk of causing injury. Straus and Gelles

(1988) suggest that these numbers probably underestimate the correct incidence of domestic violence, and that true rates could be as high as twice those reported to them. Other researchers also point to the serious underestimation of the prevalence of domestic violence from these figures: for example, Steinmetz (1977) estimates that fewer than 1 of every 250 spouse assaults is reported.

Gelles and Straus's study results are consistent with those coming from government studies. A U.S. Department of Justice study of "intimate victims" involving interviews of 136,000 Americans found 3.8 million incidents of violence among intimates during a four-year period. A third of these incidents took place between relatives, and more than half were between spouses or ex-spouses (Lentzer, 1980).

By contrast, the National Crime Survey of 60,000 households reports dramatically lower rates than those of the National Family Violence Survey (2.2/1,000, in contrast to 116/1,000). The difference in reporting may be an artifact of the method used in collecting the data: The National Crime Survey was presented to respondents as a study of crime, whereas the Family Violence Survey was presented as a study of family problems. Most people do not think of family violence as a crime, thus fewer incidents of domestic battery may have been reported (Gaquin, 1977-1978). In an overview of a number of studies using the Conflict Tactics Scale (an instrument used to document frequency and severity of conjugal conflict, including incidents of domestic violence), Straus and Gelles examined data from 12 studies (conducted mainly by other researchers). The number of violent episodes reported in these studies ranged from 121 per 1,000 couples to 510 per 1,000 couples. The rate of 510 was for assaults experienced by battered wives when they were dating their husbands.

That conjugal violence is not restricted to married or cohabiting couples is supported by other data: Straus and Gelles's surveys indicate that between 22% and 67% of dating relationships involve some kind of violence.

#### Seriousness of Domestic Violence

Conjugal assaults tend to have more serious consequences than other types of assaults. The National Crime Survey indicated that conjugal assaults accounted for 12% of assaults ending in serious injury, 16% of assaults requiring medical care, and 18% of assaults requiring victims to miss at least one day's work (while constituting only 5% of total reported assaults). Thus serious injury as a result of domestic violence is highly likely.

Okun (1986) studied 300 residents of a battered women's shelter in Michigan. For these women, an average interval of almost five years had elapsed from time of first assault in the relationship until arrival at the shelter. Shelter residents had endured an average of 59 assaults each. Prior to intake, each woman had, on the average, experienced more than 5 assaults every four weeks, for an annualized frequency rate of more than 65 conjugal assaults per year. More than 20% stated that they were being assaulted twice or more per week. Of the women who had ever been pregnant during their abusive relationships, 62% had been assaulted during a pregnancy. Two-thirds of the sample had experienced at least one assault in which they were extensively beaten up or worse. One in 6 had been threatened with a knife or gun by her partner and 1 in 30 had actually been attacked with a knife or gun. These 300 women reported on intake 28 fractures (most commonly of the nose or jaw) and 22 serious injuries not involving fractures (chronic back injuries, torn ligaments, dislocations, ruptured eardrums, broken teeth, lacerations, stab wounds, bullet wounds). These injuries included only those that were sustained at the time of intake, not previous injuries. Of this group, only 24% had ever received medical treatment for injuries sustained during conjugal assaults. The remainder had wanted medical treatment but were prevented by their partners from obtaining it. Some 69% of these women had experienced at least one assault that resulted in police intervention, and more than 17% had received multiple visits from the police.

In many cases, domestic violence is extreme enough to result in murder, with lethality in cases of wife battering most likely to occur when the woman tries to leave. Dobash and Dobash (1977-1978) report that 70-80% of women who are murdered are killed by their husbands, other members of their families, or close male friends. Straus and Gelles's (1988) data also support these findings, indicating that women are seldom murder victims outside of the home. Women constitute only 21% of stranger homicide victims, but 76% of spouse murder victims. At the same time, women themselves commit only one-tenth of the nonspouse murders in the United States, but commit nearly half (48%) of the murders of spouses or close friends.

Both Walker's work (see Chapter 16, this volume) and that of Gelles and Straus suggest that women who murder their spouses most often do so in self-defense after years of physical abuse: "Human beings can absorb outrageous violence over long periods of time with barely a whimper and rarely a cry for help. Every one of the women we have met who has slain her husband did so after years of cruel physical and mental punishment" (Gelles & Straus, 1989, p. 19). Okun's (1986) data indicate that 54% of the battered women he interviewed had forcibly retaliated in self-defense

on at least one occasion, and 37% said that they did so sometimes, often, or usually. Women's violence is usually in self-defense, and is less likely to inflict damage because women are smaller and less aggressive (Gelles & Straus, 1989). Women who murder have often been recipients of more serious battering than women who do not (Browne, 1987; Walker, 1989b). Most of these women had sought help repeatedly prior to acting.

## Impact of Prevalence and Seriousness of Domestic Violence on Clinical Practice

The data reported above confirm that domestic violence is widespread and has the potential for being quite serious. Data from national surveys indicate that psychotherapists who are working with violent families need a comprehensive understanding of wife battering because of the likelihood that at some time during their clinical practice they will have to treat a violent couple, or someone involved in a violent relationship, even if they do not specialize in the treatment of violent families. Because violence is underreported and the seriousness of violent episodes may be understated, it is particularly important that psychotherapists be skilled in recognizing violence and in intervening appropriately.

This book focuses on critical concerns involved in the treatment of violent couples. The authors agree with the feminist perspective that a social and physical power differential exists between men and women and that therapists need to acknowledge this social reality in their assessment of couples. It is our intention to bring together in this volume three issues of importance to mental health practitioners: family violence, family therapy, and feminist thinking. These issues are considered from empirical, theoretical, legal, and practical viewpoints by chapter authors who are experts in their fields and whose work appears together in one volume for the first time.

#### Social and Historical Context

The position of women throughout history has been well documented (Hilton, 1989). Women were regarded as property, and laws were directed toward their protection as property, throughout England and America until well into the nineteenth century. Within this perspective, the severity of wife beating was restricted only by the customs of the community in which it occurred (Dobash & Dobash, 1977-1978). The severity of violence, therefore, has long been dictated by community attitudes, and women who were beaten by their husbands have been recipients of a standard that was

not applied to other crimes. The standard that husbands were allowed to "chastise" their wives with "a whip or rattan no bigger than the thumb" was practiced by the courts well into the last century (Saunders, 1977). Though wife abuse became illegal in two states in 1871 (Dobash & Dobash, 1977-1978), it was not until the temperance movement began to focus on women battered by drunken husbands that spouse abuse was carefully examined. Likewise, it was only when women won the right to vote that the property standard became an issue. Even with these reforms, wife abuse has been tolerated by the courts to a far greater degree than have other forms of assault; police are reluctant to arrest, prosecutors are unwilling to prosecute, and judges hesitate to convict (Archer, 1989; Meier, 1987). Only with the increased strength of the women's movement in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s has the outrage over battering returned, and states have begun to revise their legal codes regarding domestic violence (Caringella-MacDonald, 1988).

Several serious concerns arise in the identification of the social perspective on spouse abuse. First, because spouse abuse is often viewed as a private concern by both the community and the agencies assigned to protect members of the community (Archer, 1989; Mugford, Mugford, & Easteal, 1989), battering may not be recognized and intervened in as quickly as other crimes. Mugford et al. (1989), for example, indicate that one-third of respondents they surveyed believe that domestic violence is a private matter.

An additional concern is the prevalence of the perception that spouse abuse is justifiable under certain circumstances (Dobash & Dobash, 1977-1978; Mugford et al., 1989). Such a perspective can result in the oft-cited "bitch deserved it defense" used by some men who kill their wives. Defending themselves with the argument that any man would have responded in a similar manner given the extreme provocation of living with such a woman, some men who have killed their wives have been reported to receive lighter sentences than those found guilty of other homicides (Goodman, 1989).

Sociological theory suggests that battering is used as a means of control in the marital relationship—a means through which men assert their patriarchal authority. Dobash and Dobash (1977-1978) refer to their own research to support this perception by documenting the direction of assaults. In their sample of 3,020 cases, husbands were rarely assaulted by their wives (1.1%); women were attacked in 75% of the cases, and only 15% of attacks on women occurred outside the home. General acceptance of battering is supported by both legal and case data; wife abuse is viewed and responded to with less outrage and milder consequences than is violence committed against other identified groups.

#### Causes of Violence

Several psychological and sociological theories have attempted to explain the violent family, including descriptions of what types of individuals are violent or victims of violence and descriptions of what conditions result in violence in families. Approaches that explain an individual's predisposition to be violent or to submit to violence as related to personality factors have led to psychiatric diagnoses and explanations for domestic violence that include a description of the battered woman's personality as deficient (as critiqued in L. S. Brown, 1991; Walker, 1991), a view that has been challenged by feminists and other theorists. Other theoretical approaches have explained the behavior of battered women as arising out of learned helplessness (Walker, 1984a), as normal reactions to pathological situations (Root, 1992), as arising out of traumatic bonding (Painter & Dutton, 1985), and as the result of power imbalances over time (Dutton & Painter, 1981). Batterers have been described as sexually aggressive, as alcoholics, and as having violence-prone personalities (Hotaling & Sugarman, 1986; Walker, 1984a). Other theories have described violence as arising out of dysfunctional relationships in which the violence is mutually caused (Giles-Sims, 1983). Sociological theories describe violence as occurring because of cultural norms that permit and, in some subgroups, encourage violent behavior, and because of the very nature of the family itself, which is conflict ridden and has high potential for violence (Straus, 1980).

## **Context Within Which Battering Occurs**

"Men who assault their wives are actually living up to cultural prescriptions that are cherished in Western society—aggressiveness, male dominance and female subordination—and they are using physical force as a means to enforce that dominance," assert Dobash and Dobash (1979, p. 24). Because this feminist view suggests that battering is neither unusual in our society nor pathological, no book on domestic violence informed by a feminist perspective would be complete without a consideration of the social context within which violence occurs. For this reason, we comment here on some sex role stereotypes that may maintain battering as the societal problem it is today.

The traditional family is a system in which the balance of power is inherently unequal, mimicking other relationships of men and women, where men have usually held the power and women have been subservient to those in power over them. Frieze, Parsons, Johnson, Ruble, and Zellman