

The Abuse of Men

An Enquiry into the Adult Male Experience
of Heterosexual Abuse



Lynne Renoir

INTRODUCTION

The abuse of men by their female partners is a serious social problem, largely unacknowledged by society. It has the effect of exacerbating a sense of disempowerment which many men experience today. This study explores the nature and extent of abuse against men, how they are affected by it, and the social structures which enable the abuse to occur. My hypotheses were that the pain men experience as victims of female abuse is of such a magnitude that they are often unable to bear it, and also that there is a widespread prejudice against men which works against a just resolution in situations of heterosexual conflict.

The origins of the bias against men lie in certain philosophies within feminism, which label a wide variety of historical and cultural developments with the single term 'patriarchy'. This simplistic reduction enables the proponents of these philosophies to condemn men as a whole for the problems of civilization.

Background to the study

My interest in this subject arose from my experience over the past twenty years in treating male patients with muscular problems. As I saw the pain in their faces and felt the tension in their bodies, some of these men began to tell me of the women in their lives who were treating them in ways which seemed to be negating of their sense of self and destructive of their ability to function.

In my research of the literature in this field I discovered that whereas studies of male victims investigate mainly physical abuse, those relating to the abuse of women cover physical, sexual and psychological abuse. I felt, therefore, that it would be appropriate to carry out a similar wide-ranging enquiry with regard to men.

My initial contact was with the editor of a men's magazine held in the State Library of New South Wales. He provided the names of various organizations which conduct groups for men. These fall into two categories: support groups, where men share their experiences in an environment of trust; groups which are open to the public (including women) and are working towards reform of the law and public policy. I forwarded to the convenors of these groups an information sheet about my research. This was circulated to members of the support groups either by post, email or at group meetings. I was invited to address meetings of the groups working for reform.

Included on the sheet was an invitation for men who had experienced abuse to be participants in the research project, and to phone me to arrange an interview. The limitations I imposed were that the period of the abuse had been at least twelve months and that the relationship had now ended. I did not want to include men whose sense of empowerment was such that they ended the relationship after the first abusive episode. Also, I wanted to avoid creating additional emotional stress on men who were still living with the abuser. Through unstructured interviews I asked the men to tell me their stories, with particular reference to their feelings about the incidents. I interviewed fortyeight men from the eastern mainland States, Tasmania and New Zealand. Twenty-one interviews were

conducted in Sydney in the homes of participants. For those who lived at a distance I recorded the interviews on the phone. The average duration of interview was one hour. For the protection of participants, all names and identifying particulars have been changed.

Reflections on the Study

In choosing the method of unstructured interview, I was seeking to enter as deeply as possible into the world of the participants. As I had been a victim of male abuse, I felt I would be able to empathise at a deep level with the pain and loss of self respect which an abused person experiences. I was strongly influenced by theorists such as Maslow, who advocates an I-thou relationship between the researcher and the subject involving a 'mystical fusion' in which knowledge of the other arises through becoming the other (Rowan in Reason and Rowan (eds.) 1981 p.84). Krieger feels that when we discuss others we are always talking about ourselves. She believes that we should 'see the world as self' (1991 p.5), and in this regard I found myself resonating with the participants' feelings of shame, anger and betrayal.

Since the participants had suffered abuse by a woman, my role as a female researcher was an ambivalent one. I found myself wanting to give to the men the kind of empathy which they had not received from their partners. I also wanted them to know that, as a result of my own experience, I understood the shattering effects of abuse. In the early interviews I disclosed what I had suffered at the hands of a man, but I then became concerned about a possible perception by participants that I might hold negative attitudes towards men, or even that I might be a radical feminist in disguise who would use the information against them. I then discontinued the disclosure on the grounds that it could influence the way participants presented material.

An assumption I brought to the research process was that the abused person must be given a voice. In my own experience, while I was 'under the roof' of the abuser, I had no rights. Had I disclosed to anyone what was happening I would have either been disbelieved or told to be submissive. Fine states that when we opt to engage in social struggles with those who have been oppressed, we probe how we are in relation to the contexts we study (in Denzin and Lincoln (eds.) 1994 p.72). It seemed to me that abused men are silenced the way I was, or if they do speak, they are not heard. A frequent question asked by participants was, 'You do believe me, don't you?', and they would offer to show me legal documents to substantiate their stories.

Incidence and Forms of Abuse

Gender Comparison

McNeely and Robinson-Simpson found that women have a higher mean and median rate for perpetrating severe violence than men (1988 p.186). A bibliography compiled by Martin Fiebert (1998) examines 95 scholarly investigations (aggregate sample size over 60,000) which show that women are as physically aggressive, or more aggressive, than men in their relationships with their partners. Straus (1996) states that although women are more likely to receive injuries, men are more likely to be victimized by their wives. He claims that women also initiate violence rather than only becoming violent in response to their own victimization (cited in Mignon 1998 p.141).

Forms of Physical Abuse

Sniechowski and Sherven (1995) found that women more often use weapons than do men (82% of women; 25% of men). Cook states that according to a study of 328 married couples published in the *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 'Women were significantly more likely to throw an object, slap, kick/bite/hit with fist and hit with an object' (1997 p.38).

In two Australian studies, the most common type of male behaviour which resulted in abuse was minor violation of household rules, and the three most common reasons women gave for abuse of their husbands were: to resolve the argument, to respond to family crisis, to 'stop him bothering me' (Sarantakos 1998; 1999). The stories of the participants in this project confirm the kinds of abuse outlined above.

JASON: She would throw hard objects at me, like photos, bottles, plates. This would happen if I did things like not putting clothes in the proper place, or not hanging a towel up. If we were out and she wanted to go home and I didn't, she'd put on one of these tantrums.

KEVIN: She burnt a hole in my arm and hit me in the face with a cooking pot that split my eyebrow. She picked up a hunting knife and threatened me with it. I took that one off her and she took out another one and she threatened to cut my eye out and I could watch her kill Karen. We struggled for the knife and it went into her thigh. She then took out an AVO against me.

ANDREW: She'd throw things at me — whatever she could find — ashtrays or anything heavy. Sometimes she seemed like a person possessed. She would grab me by the genitals. 'I'll rip your fucking balls off' she'd say. Then if I restrained her by holding her shoulders she would try to bite me or kick me.

BRUCE: Once when I was about to drive off to cricket, she put her head through the car window and smashed a dish of Farex in my face, cutting my eye.

ROY: I had to work long shifts and often when I came home, I'd find my wife had left the children (the youngest was only a few months) and had gone down to the club, drinking and playing the poker machines. Sometimes when I went to get her, she'd smash a glass or a bottle across my head. Several times I had my head cracked open.

STUART: She would get mad about anything at all and go off her head. She'd throw whatever was in her hand at the time — firewood, pitchforks, rocks. Once she threw a cup of hot coffee all over me. Then when I tried to run away she threw a glass bowl of nuts.

On another occasion she threw the cutlery container at me — knives and forks went everywhere. Then she picked up a carving knife and was trying to stab me. I grabbed her wrists and managed to escape. I ran to my car, but she ran after me with a glass in her hand and screamed, 'You get in that car and I'll break the windows'. Then she hit me with the glass on the side of my face. It severed my temporal artery. I was losing a huge amount of blood and she was still screaming at me.

IAN: She used to scratch me on the face and neck. One night I was lying in bed, half asleep. She came in, and with a full-blooded fist she punched me in the left eye. She had her engagement ring on and the huge stone nearly gouged my eye out.

EVAN: Her abuse? Hitting with fists about my face and body. Kicking my legs. Biting at my protective arms. Throwing shoe polish or bottles at my head. Poking me in my face and body while screaming in my face. Once she knocked me down from behind and bit my right hand badly.

GEOFF: After she'd blown up about some triviality, I would just keep quiet, but then I'd be subjected to three or four hours of ranting and raving on what I was doing wrong. If I tried to leave the room, it would result in something being thrown. It started with things like fruit, but then she'd throw things that belonged to me, or something that someone in my family had given me and it would get smashed — usually something made of glass. Then she began to throw things directly at me. Once she threw the heater at me and it broke. But if ever I left the house, she'd lock me out. In the end I'd just sit there and agree to everything she said, knowing that within a few hours, if I was lucky, she'd run out of steam.

MICHAEL: Our baby was very sick, and I said she should take him to the doctor. She was furious that I should make a suggestion about the baby. She started screaming and throwing things all around the house. Then she said she would take the children and leave and she grabbed the car keys. I knew she was in no fit state to drive, but I was particularly worried about the baby, so I stood at the door of his room and would not let her get him. She went to the kitchen and came back with a carving knife. She stuck it into my stomach and I knew she was about to stab me. I held on to the blade and it cut my fingers to the bone. Then she went back to the kitchen and threw a pot with chip fat at me. It hit me in the forehead and I nearly passed out.

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