

# The Impact of Domestic Violence on Society

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**ABSTRACT:** *Domestic violence is broadly defined as a form of physical, emotional, sexual, psychological, and economic abuse of another person. Regardless of one's race, gender, or economic status, domestic violence between partners, parents, etc., the author hypothesizes that only through educational programs can one reduce the impact this social issue has on victims, their families, friends, co-workers and health care providers.*

By definition, domestic violence is a pattern of abusive behavior in any intimate relationship that is used by one partner to maintain a sense of control over the other. Domestic violence is further defined as physical or sexual violence within the family. This includes sexual abuse of children and physical abuse of elderly parents (Etter & Birzer, 2007). Domestic violence occurs without regard to race, age, sexual orientation, religion, or gender. It matters not if one comes from upper-, middle-, or lower-class families. Domestic violence occurs in both same-sex relationships as well as opposite-sex relationships. It should also be noted that domestic violence affects other family members, friends, and co-workers (Office on Violence Against Women [OVW], n.d.). If a child grows up with domestic violence, he is, in effect, taught that violence is a normal way of life. A behavior inculcated by the very people who are supposed to provide him with love and comfort. This sets in motion a vicious cycle where children of abusers become abusers themselves.

Unfortunately, domestic violence is very prevalent in our society. In the United States, it is estimated that between two to four million women are victims of domestic violence every year. It is probable that every 18 seconds someone is a victim of domestic violence. In one research study it was determined that approximately 80.8% of accused abusers were male as compared to 19.2% of female offenders. While females do abuse, most reported offenders are male (Etter & Birzer, 2007).

There seems to be three main characteristics of men who batter their partners; frustration or stress, gender roles or learned behavior, and alcohol (Etter & Birzer, 2007). The excessive consumption of alcohol is a major contributor to domestic violence. Approximately 43.5% of State prisoners victimizing a family member and 53.8% victimizing nonfamily members were using drugs or alcohol when they committed the offense of domestic violence (U.S. Department of Justice [DOJ], 2005).

Generally, when the subject of domestic violence is discussed, one thinks about physical abuse. However, there are many types of abuse that fall under the umbrella of domestic violence. The major areas of concern with respect to domestic violence are physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, economic abuse, and psychological abuse.

## *Physical Abuse*

Physical abuse includes anything that causes physical pain such as hitting, biting, or slapping. It also includes denying a partner medical care or forcing a partner to use drugs or alcohol (OVW, n.d.). Women who are victims of physical abuse often go to their local hospital emergency room for treatment. Some main areas of concern these women report are they do not have an opportunity to talk to the healthcare provider about the abuse due to the presence of a third party. There is a lack of assessing the safety of the patient by medical professionals and the risk for further abuse by the perpetrator who is present during the examination, and a failure to provide the patient with avenues of available resources. There is currently ongoing education and training for healthcare providers in an effort to help the patient at a time when she is the most vulnerable. Many survivors feel that if the healthcare provider had substantiated that abuse had taken place during the medical examination, along with reassuring condolence, there would be a life-changing alteration in the way the victim feels about herself (Rhodes, Frankel, & Levinthal, 2007).

The state of Kansas has adopted a forward-thinking law. It is known as the Protection from Abuse Act (PFA). A Protection of Abuse Order is an order of the court that legally restrains the conduct of the abuser and prohibits the abuser from any contact with the victim. Initially, a temporary order is issued by the court against the alleged

abuser. An evidentiary hearing is scheduled and the order is then served to the abuser. Depending on the outcome of the evidentiary hearing, a PFA order may be made permanent by the court. If the alleged abuser violates the terms of the PFA, they may be arrested. Conditions specified by the PFA usually state there is to be no contact with the victim, but it may also dictate that the abuser be evicted from the residence. Temporary custody of minor children may also be specified by the court. According to the Kansas Attorney General's Office, from 1992 to 2001, the number of PFA filings has almost doubled. In Kansas, the PFA has proved to be a useful tool in the state's efforts to prevent domestic violence. Abusers may be arrested, convicted, and incarcerated for violating the protection order. This can occur through a situation involving various acts ranging from visiting the person's house to committing a new assault. A beneficial change with this law is the police no longer have to tell a battered woman that there is nothing they can do until the abuser beats her up again. This law gives the police the leverage they need to arrest the abuser for any violation of the PFA order. The PFA law is a step in the right direction, although there are some domestic violence offenders that continue to violate orders from protection even after their marriage or relationship with the victim has ended.

One important piece of federal legislation has been passed over the course of the last two decades is known as the Violence Against Women Act of 1994. This legislation was designed to improve interstate criminal justice enforcement and provide adequate funding for criminal justice interventions and social services for the victims of abuse. The VAWA focuses primarily on six areas: safe streets for women, safe homes for women, equal justice for women in the courts, stalker and domestic violence reductions, protection for battered immigrant women and children, and provisions for strengthening existing laws. These goals are accomplished through the use of grants, education and training programs, and pro-arrest policies (Cho & Wilke, 2005).

Not everyone agrees that aggressive law enforcement, such as mandatory arrest policies, have the best long-term outcome. Although it is generally agreed that arrest may assist the victim in the short term, a fear may exist that the end result will leave the victim even more vulnerable to violent abuse. On the other hand, many people think that the problem of domestic violence lies with lenient law enforcement and sentencing; they feel that our laws should be enforced more strictly (Cho & Wilke, 2005).

If a male is the victim of physical abuse it is often ignored because it is too embarrassing for both the male and female. Husbands may not leave their abusive partners since their financial responsibility will continue, the wife could quite possibly still be allowed custody of the children, and the husband would lose the comforts of his home. Most men of abuse will not retaliate physically to a beating because of the social stigma that is attached to "wife beaters." Instead, they will try to make their wife feel guilty about the physical abuse (Etter & Birzer, 2007). One area that women confess as a catapult for aggressive behavior is jealousy, coupled with poor anger management skills. They believe that their spouse or partner is not committed to the relationship. A common scenario is that the male spouse returns home late at night and the woman then confronts him at the door. All too often the verbal confrontation ends up turning into a physical dispute, and one or both partners may be arrested. When asked, women are likely to say that their aggression was a way to protect themselves (Henning, Jones, & Holdford, 2008).

It is the opinion of some that a vast majority of the women who have been arrested for domestic violence turned out to be victims of abuse who had decided to defend themselves when their partner attacked them. "Treatment for these women should focus on prior victimization, safety planning, anger management, assertiveness, and other issues related to the suppression of women" (Henning et al., 2008).

### *Sexual Abuse*

Sexual abuse includes marital rape, forcing sex after physical violence has occurred, or something such as one partner treating the other partner in a sexually demeaning manner (OVW, n.d.). Incest is also considered a form of sexual abuse.

### *Emotional Abuse*

Emotional abuse consists of undermining the self-esteem of one's partner, or upsetting the balance of one's relationship with their children (OVW, n.d.). It may include constant criticism, threats, and jealous control, such as isolating the woman from friends and family. Emotional abuse, also known as emotional battering, may be taken less seriously than physical abuse. However, emotional abuse may leave long-term emotional scars, which could be more damaging than scars caused by physical attacks (Braden-Maguire, 2005). It is widely recognized that emotional abuse contributes to both depression and low self-esteem in battered women.

Interestingly enough, research has shown that

a battered woman who has killed her spouse will be judged guilty more often when the abuse she has suffered is emotional rather than physical. These results indicate that the use of physical violence by a battered woman is perceived as more justifiable when she has experienced physical abuse (Braden-Maguire, 2005, p. 407).

Economic abuse means to make one partner financially dependent on the other by maintaining complete control over the finances. This is often seen both in marital relationships as well as older children-aging parent relationships. Another way to abuse someone financially would be to deny them the freedom to be gainfully employed (OVW, n.d.). This type of abuse is readily seen in instances where the victim has immigrated to the United States. The victim is generally solely dependent on his or her abuser, who is their legal sponsor as well as their financial support. A research study was done to explore the barriers faced by victims of domestic violence who are Korean immigrants in the United States. Oftentimes, barriers are grounded in the very nature of the Korean culture. The main barrier is the Korean community itself, which tends to find fault with the victims of domestic violence and therefore the victim has no place to turn to and no one to rely on within their community. There is a very strong fear among Korean immigrant women that their in-laws will retaliate if they report such abuse to authorities. There is also a lack of education in that for the most part, Korean women immigrants are not aware about the Violence Against Women Act or the Immigration Act of 1990. These Acts allow battered immigrant women and children to self-petition for permanent residency. This would free battered women from some of the control that abusers often have over them (Shim & Hwang, 2005).

Research has demonstrated that women of color and women from refugee communities typically avoid seeking help from the police for fear that it would bring shame or dishonor to the family. The main reason that Korean victims of domestic violence refuse to seek counseling or outside help is described as saving face, or *chae-myun* (Shim & Hwang, 2005, p. 323). It has been further discovered that Korean victims of domestic violence avoid police intervention due to their lack of trust and a fear of authority figures. Even with this fear, Korean victims have said they prefer police intervention rather than help from the Korean community. This is because they fear that involvement by their own community would bring even more shame and dishonor to their family (Shim & Hwang, 2005). The Korean culture is very strongly rooted in family, and it is often difficult to break through

that culture. The abuser of Korean domestic violence victim is all too aware of such beliefs.

It has been noted that the most emphasized goal of arrest policies is to punish the batterer and to treat domestic violence as a crime. While the judicial system may very well focus on punishing the abuser, the victim may wish to be protected in ways other than having their spouse arrested. Through a Mandatory Arrest Policy, an abused woman loses her autonomy first by her abuser and then again by the police because she has no control over the situation. In Korean culture, there is concern that once an arrest is made, the victim has no other choice but to leave her spouse. This would almost be equal to ending the marriage, and may be against the victim's will at that moment (Shim & Hwang, 2005). This is a perfect example of why we must be ever mindful of the many cultures within the United States as we push for further legislation against abusers.

Although it is widely recognized that family and intimate partner abuse occurs across all economic groups, it seems to be most prevalent in low economic groups. Severe violence against both women and children is highest among families with low incomes or with male partners that are either unemployed or have a low paying job. It has been determined that poverty increases a poor woman's vulnerability to partner abuse (Bassuk, Dawsom, & Huntington, 2006). The woman sees no way out of her poverty and feels that she must stay with her partner.

Psychological abuse means to cause fear by intimidation. It means to threaten physical harm to self, partner, children, pets, or property. This is a very powerful way to manipulate one's partner (OVW, n.d.). Often psychological abuse is used in conjunction with physical or sexual abuse. Recent data suggest that a growing number of women are being arrested for assaulting their partners. It has been found that women were more likely than men to have been prescribed psychotropic medications, to have attempted suicide, and to show evidence of some sort of personality disorder. On the other hand, men were more likely to have problems with substance abuse, either drugs or alcohol, and show signs of early conduct disorder. A female domestic violence offender most probably has dealt with years of psychiatric problems (Henning et al., 2005). It is unclear to me if the reason for such emotional problems lie within a dysfunctional or abusive relationship, or if she entered the relationship with emotional baggage. It is generally agreed that a female offender needs individual treatment, rather than the group counseling that is most often used for male offenders (Henning et al., 2005).

If a woman experiences either physical or sexual abuse as a child, there is a much higher degree of likelihood that she will be victimized by an abusive partner later in life. "Women may learn the victim role when they watch parents engaged in physical fighting" (Bassuk et al., 2006, p. 388). Several studies have also documented high incidences of child sexual abuse among women who have been abused. One study of very poor women found that if there is a childhood history of physical or sexual abuse, there was a four times greater risk that she would be victimized by her partner as an adult (Bassuk et al., 2006). This demonstrates a need to educate these women so this cycle can be broken. If this is the way they have learned life is supposed to be, then they won't realize there is something very wrong with their partner's behavior. I feel this is very much a psychological issue; dysfunction breeds dysfunction.

In light of our current military activities, I wondered if people who had gone to war had any lasting emotional problems that would make them more apt to commit an act of domestic violence. One study revealed that people in the military, albeit a veteran or current military soldier, that experience in military service did not yield itself to manifest aggressive behavior towards their partners or their children. In fact, the study showed that "male veteran status appears to lower the odds of an occurrence of common couple violence" (Bradley, 2007, p. 205). An explanation for this may be because "the military teaches its recruits that the use of violence must be controlled and carefully channeled" (Bradley, 2007, p. 205). Like many of the research articles have pointed out, this too, is a learned behavior.

Although it is widely recognized that domestic violence is a widespread problem affecting both genders, all races, and all social classes, we seem to be light years away from finding a solution. The answer is not found in a "one-size fits all" mentality. Our current laws work to enforce the safety of the victim of the abuser, yet we still hear of many instances where the victim was later killed by her abuser. At what point do we forgive the victim, who, acting out of raw, primal fear for her life, takes the life of her abuser? Why aren't the many social programs

we have in place not addressing the problem of domestic violence?

I feel that the answer lies in education. We must educate the abuser, so they will fully understand the dramatic negative impact their actions have on themselves as well as family, friends, and co-workers. We must educate the victims so they will understand the abuse is not because of anything they have or have not done. It is not the fault of the victim, they must also realize that they don't have to stay in an abusive relationship. We must educate our children so they will grow up to realize that violence is not the answer to how one should handle life's stressors. We must also continue to educate our healthcare providers so they will be better equipped to handle the issues of domestic violence when they are faced with caring for victims of abuse. I truly believe that knowledge is power. Knowledge feeds the human spirit, allowing us to overcome the adversities that we are faced with. Even the population that does not have much formal education is capable of learning how to deal with the problems of domestic violence.

I do believe there are people who abuse that are pure evil. And I agree that these people should be put in prison so their victims will be safe. After reading these research articles, I have come to believe that the majority of abusers lack the coping skills necessary to deal with life's frustrations. Research has shown that all too often they turn to alcohol as a means to deal with their stressors and then the situation escalates until they physically harm someone they probably deeply love. I find that to be the most disturbing and confusing element of domestic violence. In almost all cases, the offender abuses those who look to them for love and support. While domestic violence is prevalent in society there are ways in which we can help alleviate the problem and try to put a stop to it before we those we love are hurt.

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