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## Battered Men: Implementing Educational Programs for an Overlooked Problem

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FEATURE: Battered Men

# BATTERED MEN: IMPLEMENTING EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS FOR AN OVERLOOKED PROBLEM

By Elizabeth Morales\*

**D**omestic violence against women is an ever-growing and important problem in today's society. Women make up the substantial majority of victims of domestic violence. In fact, former United States Surgeon General C. Everett Koop once referred to domestic violence as "women's number one health problem."<sup>1</sup> As it is, battered women have a limited number of resources that they are able to utilize if they need to seek counseling or help in leaving their abusive partner.

However, there is another group in this situation who have even less access to help and is often overlooked because the reported statistics are so few in number: battered men.

Reports from the Department of Justice documented nearly 150,000 cases against men ranging from attempts at violence to assault with a deadly weapon. There are battered men and abusive women that are not getting the

attention they deserve and the help that they need. There are a number of educational programs that lawmakers and legislators can implement that would ensure those battered men and abusive women get the help they need.

## SIMILARITIES WITH BATTERED WOMEN

**T**he topic of battered men has not been well-researched and not many articles or books have been written on it. However,

the few that have been written have found that there are overwhelming similarities between abused women and men. Both groups suffer from the cycles of abuse that show a specific pattern of behavior: the tension building stage, the battering stage and the remorseful stage.<sup>2</sup> Abused men are just as likely as abused women to fall into the condition of the "Battered Woman Syndrome."

Another similarity lies in the reasons that battered men choose not to leave their abusive mates. Like abused women, they love their batterers and fell in love with the person that they were before the battering began; they want to help their spouses and believe they can change

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*"The response of the therapeutic community ... is similar to the response of therapists and psychiatrists to abused women in the 1950's and 1960's: It's all in your head."*

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them; they have low self-esteem; they fear humiliation from friends, family and strangers.<sup>3</sup> It could also be argued that the degree of humiliation for men is higher than that of women since our society has a misconception that men

are the dominant partner in a relationship and any man who cannot control his wife is a "wimp."<sup>4</sup>

## THE NUMBERS

**I**t is important to note the division among women's and men's groups and educators on the number of abused men. In fact, finding statistics on the actual percentage of abused persons who are men is very difficult since the percentages vary greatly. The numbers depend

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on the location of the study and by whom it was conducted. Some women's groups have stated that men account for only five percent of domestic violence victims while men's groups argue that that number is 50 percent. Other studies, such as one conducted by the Michigan State Police in 1995, show that men were victims in over 20 percent of all domestic abuse cases.<sup>5</sup>

The United States Department of Justice released a survey in 1993 that showed one million women were victims of intimate violence

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***“It could also be argued that the degree of humiliation for men is higher than that of women since our society has a misconception that men are the dominant partner in a relationship...”***

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compared to 143,000 men. That would make men over 14 percent of the abused population, which is much higher than the number reported by some women's groups and much lower than the number reported by some men's groups. This same study also showed that men were 11 percent less likely than women to report any type of abuse. Thus, these surveys and studies cannot give a complete picture of the number of abused men in this country.<sup>6</sup>

### IS THERE RESISTANCE?

**M**en's groups and advocates of battered men argue that there is widespread resistance to the idea that women are capable of being batterers, and that men can themselves be battered. Phillip Cook, author of *Abused Men*, studied how therapists and counselors respond to men who have been abused. “For the majority, their response was that there is no response.” A therapist from Seattle expressed that the “response of the therapeutic community is one of denial in that it is similar to the response of therapists and psychiatrists to abused women in

the 1950's and 1960's: It's all in your head.”<sup>7</sup> This type of attitude may be a contributing factor in battered men's difficulties in finding help from the community and battered women's shelters.

A startling number of battered men report being turned away from shelters every year, even in cases where the female partner has been convicted of domestic battery. Many of the men that Philip Cook spoke with, were denied services by shelters in the past and were laughed at or harassed when they called for help.<sup>8</sup> At this point, battered men become not only a sociological issue but a legal one as well, since there are groups of men who have filed lawsuits claiming sex discrimination.<sup>9</sup>

Women's groups and shelters argue that they may not provide men with shelter or services for a number of reasons. The primary purpose of women's shelters is to provide a safe haven for women, and if bringing one man into their shelter would make the women feel uncomfortable

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***“It would be appropriate for legislators to implement programs that would raise public awareness and inform society that it is just as wrong for a woman to hit a man as it is for a man to hit a woman.”***

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or deter them from seeking help in the future, then they have to deny the man entry. Most shelters are not equipped with the space and resources to house men and women separately.<sup>10</sup> In addition, the shelters cannot trust men since one of the “battered” may be an abuser trying to find the location of the shelter. Finally, women's groups also argue that men have more resources and access to the finances in a relationship, thus they are more likely to be able to afford a motel without the woman finding them.

Various women's groups have argued that the “battered man” is purely a myth and that women are not capable of being as physically

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abusive as men. However, the degree of physical abuse has no bearing on whether or not someone is being abused. It is just as detrimental to throw an object, such as a vase, at someone's head, as it is to punch someone in the face. There still exists the feeling of betrayal and low self-worth, the same feelings that physical abuse often provokes.

### WHAT CAN BE DONE?

**T**oday, there is not a significant need for battered men's shelters except in metropolitan areas, where studies have shown that the problem occurs more frequently. The appropriate solution to this problem is not to create shelters for men. Since women are the majority of domestic violence victims, it is important for a majority of the shelters to exist solely for women to give them a place to escape. If more shelters were built for men, there would be a struggle for funding. Increasing the hostility between women's rights and men's rights groups would defy the purpose of helping both genders.

The first step in solving domestic violence towards men is educating the public. Most people may feel that the idea of battered men is absurd. However, this is because the public has not been fully educated about this topic. It would be appropriate for legislators to implement programs that would raise public awareness and inform society that it is just as wrong for a woman to hit a man as it is for a man to hit a woman. This educational goal could be achieved by implementing smaller-scale programs such as fliers in the workplace or larger scale activities like requiring grade school students to take a domestic violence class.

If the public's awareness was heightened, then first, men will feel that they are not alone and there are others out there that are being abused. This would encourage the victims to seek help more willingly without the fear of humiliation and ridicule from the public.

Second, the women who abuse the men will realize that they have a problem. They will come to discover that their actions are not normal

or socially acceptable and they need to seek help.

Third, by requiring students to take a domestic violence class, both sexes will learn that they should not tolerate an abusive partner and should look for signs of abuse before they are caught in the domestic violence trap. Both genders will also learn that it is not right to hit the opposite sex, regardless of what they may see or hear at home. Domestic violence programs can help reduce the recidivism rate by offering

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*“The reaction from police officers that are called to handle a domestic violence dispute is critical to the prosecution of the offender and the safety of the victim.”*

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children who are exposed to domestic abuse at home another outlet to express their feelings. This would also allow them to seek help either before any abuse starts in their own personal relationships or stop the abuse if it has already begun.

The education and heightened awareness of the topic of battered men should not stop with society in general. More specifically and importantly, those trained to assist the victims of domestic violence – such as employees of domestic violence programs and shelters, therapists, counselors and psychologists – need to know how to also help the abusive women and the abused men.

Programs need to be established requiring that these professionals abide by a certain standard in dealing with domestic violence. For example, the shelters and domestic violence programs that receive federal funding must be required to enroll their employees – everyone from the receptionist to the psychiatrists

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