

Domestic violence isn't one-sided

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A few years ago, a woman arrived home from work in Saskatoon to find her husband, who had obviously spent the day drinking, complaining of irritation with their fractious child. She insisted she needed to rest before making dinner. She awoke to find him in a rage straddling her and brandishing a kitchen knife, which he used to cut her abdomen. Bleeding, terrified, she managed to call 911. The police arrived within minutes. They observed her plight, spoke to her husband and then, responding to the unspoken but powerful institutional guidelines routinely applied in such cases, arrested ... her. In spite of her wound, she spent the night in a jail cell, and was released the next morning.

As it stands, this story makes no sense -- and indeed would have aroused national indignation if it were completely true. But I deliberately misled the reader on one particular. In the real story, by no means a unique one in police archives, the genders were reversed: The man arrived home after a 12-hour shift; the child's mother was drunk; the man lay down; the woman stabbed him in a rage; the police didn't take his injuries seriously; they accepted the woman's explanation -- probably self-defence -- and arrested the man.

Unfortunately, such gender bias in the law-enforcement system and beyond is typical, not exceptional. A double standard for men and women, applied in cases of intimate partner violence (IPV) -- as well as in family law, including spousal support and child custody cases -- has become commonplace in most Western societies over the last 25 years. And in spite of a widening stream of incontrovertible statistical evidence to the contrary, the myth persists that it is women, and only women, who are the victims of IPV.

The stereotype that unprovoked men purposefully assault women, and never the reverse, is so ingrained in our public discourse that participants in research on IPV -- not just lay people but health professionals as well -- presented with a scenario in which one partner abuses another, perceive it as abuse only if the assaulter is identified as male.

The reality, borne out by independent peer-reviewed studies as well as StatsCan, is that women commit more severe IPV, and more IPV in general, than men. For all kinds of relationship types, females are unilaterally more violent than males to non-violent partners. More females strike first in IPV (men are conditioned not to strike first in our society) and, contradicting received wisdom, fear of their male partner is rarely a factor amongst violent women. Actually, both male and female victims of IPV report equal fear levels of "intimate terrorism".

Of course, some battering males abuse passive women -- about 3% annually, far fewer than implied in skewed studies by women's groups. But in spite of sensationalized cases, spousal homicide perpetrated by either sex is extremely rare. As many mothers as fathers practice child abuse alone or in tandem, and far more women than men murder their children.

Interestingly, IPV occurs more frequently in lesbian than in heterosexual relationships, supporting the view that relationship dynamics, not gender, fuel domestic violence. Honest research points to a norm of "assortative mating": The violence-prone tend to seek each other out for anti-social behaviour.

And yet our government, our social services and our judiciary prescribe remedies

based on a false and simplistic view that denies not just the unprovoked violence committed by women in relationships, but the number and severity of the assaults engaged in by both partners in mutually violent couples.

Indeed, it is fair to say that no other area of established social welfare, criminal justice or public health depends on such weak and biased evidence in support of mandated practice as does IPV. The model of "treatment" for IPV that flows from this false understanding is not the kind of therapy that could benefit both male and female perpetrators. Instead, our system prefers "intervention" -- against men, never women -- and a "psychoeducational" model of behaviour modification that essentially amounts to inculcating the radical feminist political viewpoint.

Where does the gender bias come from? Ideology. Radical feminism insists that men -- all men -- by their nature pursue power and control for its own sake. As a result, we become complicit in the myths of gender politics. So when a crazed individual male with a bizarre personal back story shoots women, we hold candlelight vigils. But when a vengeful woman cuts off a man's penis, he becomes fodder for standup comedians, while she is hailed as a symbol of female empowerment.

IPV is a serious issue in our society. Responding to it through the default demonization of one sex and victimization of the other is an insult to scientific integrity, a stumbling block to rehabilitation, a strong contributing factor in many arbitrarily ruined lives, and a shameful blot on our human rights record.

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