
What Women Need to Know About Domestic Violence: An Update for the Millennium

by Phyllis B. Frank and Gail K. Golden

Understanding Domestic Violence: Putting It in Context

The feminist movement to end violence against women is almost 30 years old, and these years have taught us much. We have come to understand that the problem of violence against women is not a problem of individual men who are abusing individual women. The problem is a systemic one, an outgrowth of centuries of patriarchal privilege which has defined man's relationship to woman in terms of domination, entitlement and ownership.

In other words, men abuse the power they inherit by virtue of their gender, and use this power to control the women with whom they are partnered. This abuse of power is based on a sense of entitlement which is most often invisible, and in fact is accepted as a cultural norm. This entitlement encompasses the privilege to define the way one's wife (and children) ought to conduct themselves in every aspect of their lives. Although the manifestations of male entitlement vary in different cultures throughout the world, it is a rare culture in which this paradigm simply does not exist.

What is 'battering'?

With this as the context, we define domestic violence as a pattern of controlling and coercive behavior which can involve physical, sexual, economic, emotional, and psychological abuse. It is earmarked by an atmosphere of fear for the woman, and/or a pervasive sense of a lack of freedom. She can experience this as a wide range of self-constricting behaviors. Such behaviors can include not going to work or school because he disapproves, not going out when he won't allow it ("He won't let me"), limiting or hiding friendships, hanging up the phone when he walks in, etc. A most common manifestation is related to money, in that many women have no independent access to family funds and need to ask or bargain for necessities. Another indicator of his abusiveness can be her felt need to ask for 'permission' related to aspects of her own life.

Who is a 'Batterer'?

The word batterer is a heavy-handed one which at first glance would seem to refer only to a man who physically or sexually assaults his partner. This common usage of 'batterer' has made it difficult for most women to consider their partners in the group of men under discussion. In the light of our increased understanding of the range of behaviors described above, we believe it is important to keep trying to find a more accurate word.

'Battering' should be replaced by a term or phrase which is more fully inclusive of the range of patriarchal behaviors manifested by most men in our lives. Many different words and phrases have been suggested and tried, but all have been found to be imperfect e.g. 'controller', 'dominator', 'oppressor', 'abuser'. Until we develop language which is both accurate and 'user friendly', we will continue using the terms 'batterer' or 'abuser'. We do this with the hope that the reader can nonetheless embrace what the battered women's movement understands these words to mean.

Men referenced as batterers or abusers are not necessarily bad men. They may have no malevolent intention, and may be pillars of the community, as well as charming and appropriate to others. With their wives, however, they are acting out the roles that have been ascribed to them. Herein lies the problem. These very roles in turn contribute enormously to the constriction of women's lives, and thus to domestic violence.

So then, is a batterer a thug, someone who has broken the law? Sometimes, but mostly not. Women who are suffering at the hands of their partners are most often with men who have done nothing illegal. Rather, such men may be disrespectful, devaluing, controlling, belittling, or just plain 'mean'. For our purposes then, the word batterer not only references the perpetrator of illegal acts, but also includes the man who commits daily, invisible indignities against his wife or partner, in a way that constricts her life and her sense of self.

So, can a woman be a batterer?

This question comes up so frequently, that it seems important to answer, even at the risk of being repetitive. Remember that the definition of battering rests on the sexist imbalance of power between men and women, and the abuse of privilege, entitlement, and control which men can exercise in patriarchal cultures. In this context, women cannot be batterers. It is the case, nonetheless, that women do engage in a variety of behaviors that mimic male battering. These include violent assaults, verbal abuse, as well as sexual and economic maneuvers. Although the behaviors may look similar, there are critical differences.

Most women who are assaultive are, in fact, battered themselves (including psychologically tormented, devalued, degraded etc.). A single event of her fighting back is just that--an event. In contrast, true battering is a pattern of ongoing, abusive tactics of control. Much of the confusion around this issue has been caused by an event-driven criminal justice system which is often called to assess a single event in which the woman may appear to be the batterer. Historically, police have not been trained to contextualize such incidents and have been unable to identify the primary aggressor. Most women employ such apparently abusive tactics in resistance, as coping mechanisms, and as survival strategies.

Partners or husbands may be annoyed, hurt or even injured but they do not live in fear and terror of their mates. Nor are they subjected to an ongoing pattern of control, which constricts their freedom and their lives.

We answer this question, then, not only for those who may mistake 'who is the batterer', but also for women themselves, who often feel deep shame, guilt and responsibility for their otherwise confusing responses.

What are the Attributes of Batterers?

We have come to understand that domestic violence is not a problem of particular types of men who abuse particular types of women because of family background, psychopathology, personality traits, or external stressors. Research clearly indicates that men who batter come from every class, occupation, ethnic group, personality trait, IQ level and family background. Men who abuse may be stressed or bored, noticeably volatile or seemingly mild mannered, charming or rude. The problem is not in the complexity of the individual.

Men utilize a wide array of tactics to control and dominate the women they are partnered with, not because they suffer from individual psychopathologies, but because they are socialized in cultures which encourage, support, or condone their right to do so. Though each ethnic, religious and cultural group has unique roles and expectations for men and women, the reality of male entitlement is a common thread that runs throughout. (This does not negate the fact that individual men or groups of men suffer oppression in the larger culture because of race, class, age, ableism etc. Nonetheless, within the personal household, the same men will enjoy entitlement vis a vis their female partner.)

Are There Warning Signs?

There is no way to look at a man and know whether he is, or will become a batterer. At any time in the relationship, a man can suddenly, without warning, begin to exercise his sense of entitlement and right to

control. The loving, gentle, concerned behavior of the courtship, for example, can change on the wedding day, after the honeymoon, during pregnancy or ten years later. In this regard, no woman who currently finds her partner acting abusively should hold herself to blame for his actions. Nor should she blame herself for not knowing sooner.

Having said this, it should also be noted that certain behaviors are in fact red flags. They include:

- Private or public insults
- Any physical assault
- Persisting in driving in a manner that frightens the passenger
- Demeaning comments about friends or family
- Outbursts of temper

Other behaviors that are cause for concern include:

- Possessive or jealous behavior
- Frequently showing up uninvited, in a way that feels intrusive
- Excessive focus on her appearance or clothing
- Strong opinions about how she could change, improve her life or herself
- Overprotective behavior

Behaviors such as those in the second list can be particularly seductive. We live in a world that highly romanticizes men as rescuers, and women as damsels in distress. The experience of being the center of someone's attention is one that most women appreciate and desire. For this reason, an extreme version of attentiveness is hard to view as problematic, most especially when we are young, or in the beginning euphoria of any new relationship. Sometimes it is hard to tell when he has crossed the line from being an ardent suitor to an over controlling captor. Because the progression can be in such small increments, many women do not realize that their lives have been wholly taken over until they are deeply invested in children, homes and extended family. Separation at this point may be unthinkable and there seems to be 'no exit'.

Is My Husband a Batterer?

This is a very difficult question. Why? The implications of saying 'Yes', even to oneself, are manifold.

Saying yes generates complex and disturbing thoughts in women such as:

- I have failed.
- People will blame me.
- He's such a 'nice guy', I won't be believed.
- I will have to leave him.
- I can't leave him.
- He is a good father.
- I made my bed; I have to lie in it.
- It's my fault.
- He wasn't like this before I met him, or with his previous partner.
- I am ashamed.
- I love him.
- He is wonderful most of the time.
- I don't want to be alone.
- No one else will ever love me.
- I will bring shame to my family/community.
- He needs me.

So, is your husband a batterer?

For all of the reasons already stated, and some not yet discussed, this is a hard question to answer.

Because the issue is so embedded in the patriarchal norms of most cultures, it may have never occurred to you that you are married to a ‘batterer’. Thus, if it has even occurred to you as a possibility, there is a very real likelihood that you are. Perhaps in reading this, you are beginning, for the first time, to have an uncomfortable sense of recognition. In any case, the beginning of a healthier way of living your life rests in acknowledging your own truth. Pretending that we are all right when we are not deters any possibility of change. Admitting our truth is a necessary first step. What makes this so hard?

Is it My Fault?

One thing that makes this so difficult is that women often assume that a man’s abuse is her fault. He certainly will tell her this and so will others- friends, family, clergy, etc. Women blaming is at the very core of patriarchal structures. In fact, blaming any oppressed group for its own victimization is a common tactic and is all too familiar to people in marginalized communities. To her question, ‘Is it my fault?’ the answer is a resounding ‘NO’! Does this mean that women are perfect? Of course not. Men may have a range of valid critiques about their partners, and any of us can always improve ourselves. Do her human frailties ever cause his abusiveness? Though he may say so, it is not the case.

Another problem in acknowledging a man’s abusiveness is that many women mistakenly feel that once his abuse is named, it will be incumbent upon the woman to leave. Problematically, our culture is much harsher towards women who are with abusive partners, than it is towards the abuser. The often heard question ‘why does she stay?’ assumes that a woman is stupid for being there. This derision obscures the many compelling realities of women’s lives. These realities include: children, finances, immigration status, aging parents, social and cultural pressures to be coupled, religious teachings, the difficult status of a ‘divorced woman’, his threats, career concerns, and so much more.

Some women do choose to leave. But, It is also possible for a woman to acknowledge her partners abuse and still maintain her life, as she knows it. She does not have to leave. Staying may be her best choice, given the other available options. In making a difficult but thoughtful choice, she enhances her sense of self-authority. When those around her respect her choice as a valid one, they enhance her sense of self-esteem. Her own behavior, previously seen as inept, can be reframed with an appreciation for her considerable coping skills and her everyday survival strategies. A woman’s ability to assess and then exercise options rests on a clear understanding of her situation.

Will It get Better or Worse? (Will he stop abusing her?)

On the positive side, any individual who deeply wants to explore an issue and make personal, profound shifts and changes can do so. On the other hand, behavior is tenacious when it is culturally supported as normative and is rooted in deeply entrenched beliefs and attitudes.

People of color know this to be true about racism, Jewish people know this to be true about anti-Semitism, lesbians and gay men know this to be true about heterosexism. There are always a handful of people who undergo radical personal changes, and go on to repudiate their own privilege in order to embrace justice for all. For example, the German, Oscar Schindler (the hero of [Schindler’s List](#)) did this. Sadly, such people are few and certainly not the norm. Waiting for a man who is abusive to make the profound personal change needed to give up his control and treat his partner with respect and compassion is to wait for an occurrence which happens only rarely.

Can a woman do anything that will get a man to stop being abusive?

The sad answer to this question is NO; she cannot get him to stop. Only he can do that.

Many people will counsel a woman to amend her behavior, try harder to please him, and to attend to the specific complaints which he uses to justify his abuse of her. As mentioned earlier, she may concur that his complaints are based in some reality: she may really be a poor housekeeper, she may forget to pick up his shirts, she may bounce checks often. It is vital to note that even in instances wherein women are behaving in unacceptable ways, this never justifies abuse in return. And many women who have altered their behavior drastically discover that their partners continue to abuse them, citing completely new offenses.

What about therapy, counseling, batterer's programs etc.?

Countless women have made heroic attempts to employ every possible existing strategy to change men. These strategies include efforts such as couples' counseling, anger management classes, conflict resolution, batterer's intervention programs, alcohol and substance abuse counseling, family therapy, stress reduction, individual therapy or psychoanalysis for him. All of these programs can and do claim a discreet number of 'success' stories. The larger picture however, is that none of these programs, nor all of them together, have ended the violence against women in this country.

The collective experience of battered women and their advocates across the country conclude that these efforts do not succeed. In fact every single one of these efforts can result in supporting a man in his escalating and continuing abuse towards the woman.

(For further information, contact the authors for a draft of a soon to be published article, "Mental Health Treatment with Men Who Batter".)

Does substance abuse cause battering?

No. This is a common misunderstanding that has historic and honorable roots. The very foundation of the temperance movement (led by women and often dismissed as comic) was based on women's perceptions that men who terrorized and assaulted their families did so under the influence of alcohol.

In passionate determination to end this violence against women and children, the temperance movement was born. This early movement was attributing men's violence towards women to alcoholism, and not sexism. Sadly today this historic misconception still has popular support.

What we now understand to be true is that alcoholism and sexism co-exist, but that one does not cause nor eliminate the other. For example, many men achieve sobriety but continue to be abusive to their partners. On the other hand, many seriously abusive men are substance free and can, in fact, be quite health conscious. For further information, contact Nyack Hospital Addiction Services, Nyack, NY 10960, 845 348-6765.

Then what interventions are valuable?

The most promising developments in the effort to stop the abuse of women have not been in the programmatic interventions for individual men. Socio-political responses, befitting a systemic problem, have, in fact, begun to make a difference. A systemic response is a comprehensive coordinated community effort: every institution in a community does its part in holding perpetrators accountable for their acts, and also provides extensive supports, including shelter, for women who are the victim/survivors. When a whole community treats violence against women as totally unacceptable behavior, instead of a private, predictable and acceptable family problem, things begin to change.

Recent examples of discernible shifts in social norms are related to driving while intoxicated and cigarette smoking. These behaviors were once thought harmless, or in the instance of drunk driving, even funny. When the reality of their damaging consequences was exposed, these behaviors became the focus of intense social and political pressure. Drunk driving deaths decreased when whole communities were no

longer amused by drunkenness, and instead responded to drunk drivers with outrage and serious penalties. Similarly, cigarette smoking is far less acceptable than ever before - and is disallowed in more and more public and private settings.

So what can an individual woman do?

If you have begun to suspect that this article may apply to you, stay open to that possibility. Learn more. Read books. ([When Love Goes Wrong](#) is a good start). Talk to other women. A very courageous, and yet important step is to call an agency that offers support groups for women who are verbally or physically abused. (A local battered women's service or NOW chapter might be good places to start.) If the idea of a group makes you uncomfortable, you can talk to an advocate or counselor who specializes in supporting women in similar situations.

If he won't change, and I choose not to leave him, what is the value of getting help for myself?

Men's abusiveness (emotional and physical) escalates in intensity and in frequency as years go by. Being connected with supportive resources over time can build the network women may require during crisis. In addition, you will learn that you are not alone; you are not the only woman in a situation like this, and the collective knowledge of those who have gone before you invariably proves to be helpful.

Women who are abused routinely have their sense of themselves damaged and diminished. As a result, the ability to do effective decision-making and evaluation of options is compromised. Help for oneself can effectively ameliorate this problem.

What if he agrees to get help, or is forced to get help?

It is doubtful that he will stop abusing you because he is getting some kind of help. This is often very disappointing to hear, as we are all looking for ways to get individual men to stop abusing.

No one wants a man who abuses to stop the abuse more than his partner. Is it any wonder that when he either agrees or is ordered to attend some kind of service or program, partners are filled with hope? We are not suggesting that hope be eliminated. We are saying that the state of hopefulness often obscures reality and causes the relaxation of her vigilance, resulting, once again, in increased danger. In response, we suggest that while maintaining hope, women stay in touch with their own truth. They know the man that they are partnered with better than anyone else. No service provider, no therapist, no clergy, no mother, no relative knows him better than she does. So, for safety's sake, we strongly suggest that a woman continue to make plans based on who he is, not on who she hopes he will become. (Remember... waiting for Oscar Schindler).

Are battered women from marginalized groups different?

First of all, women in marginalized and oppressed groups must close ranks with their men to protect their community from the ever-present onslaughts coming from mainstream culture. This often results in suppressing the equally present reality of violence against women from within the community at the hands of their own partners.

Domestic violence is not unique to any specific community and in fact is universal. At the same time there are aspects of every culture's life, history and experience, which are unique. South Asian Indian women have different challenges than Orthodox Jewish women, or African-American women, or Latinas, etc.

Many women in marginalized groups live in insulated communities, which are vital to their very existence. Women who expose domestic violence in such communities can risk the loss of acceptance and membership.

Most religions are patriarchal and male dominated. While certain traditions elevate and affirm women in

certain respects, these traditions can co-exist with other norms, which diminish and hurt women. The collective experience of battered women has only begun to have an impact in many traditional communities.

Are their special events in families that trigger violence?

There is no event that triggers violence. The violence is not in the event; it is in the man. However, men who are abusive, particularly men who use tactics of public humiliation and shame, have special opportunities to do so at important family events like a wedding, a birth or a death.

Events within the family that challenge the status quo, may also create flash points. Many women adhere to certain behaviors which are designed to keep the peace. For example, she may always make sure that his dinner is on the table and that the children are bathed and put to bed when he comes home. This may reduce the chance that he will 'make a scene.' So long as she is able to focus on him and his needs, he may not be abusive. However, people and families grow and change. The children get older and stay up later. She may take a job to help family finances. Her mother may be in the hospital with a serious illness. Any of these occurrences will disrupt the status quo and he may, for the first time, become abusive in order to maintain his control.

So, where do we go from here?

The 911 tape of Nicole Brown Simpson created a national classroom for all of us to become aware of the hidden devastation of domestic violence. Her terror was real, and her status did not protect her. Still, as we enter the new millennium, with all the progress that we have made in the last twenty-five to thirty years, we have yet to emerge from centuries of sexist mythology, and the patriarchal underpinnings of our present society. The battered women's movement, almost thirty years old, enters the new century with ever increasing energy and dedication to end domestic violence, and to create safety and justice in the lives of all women. Today, because of the battered women's movement, many women live freer and safer lives. But our work is far from done.

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