

OP-ED REPLY to BOSTON GLOBE

The myth of gender symmetry in domestic violence

Although we are always pleased to see media coverage of the important social problem of domestic violence, "Battered women—and men" (July 16) perpetuates the myth of gender symmetry that is promulgated by the sponsors of the California conference on intimate partner violence.

The research literature is quite clear that there is more than one major type of intimate partner violence, and the gender patterning of the major types is quite dramatic. The coercive, controlling violence that most of your readers associate with the terms "domestic violence" or "battering" is perpetrated almost entirely by men. This, of course, is the violence that is seen most often in the criminal justice system, in shelters, and in hospital emergency rooms. According to a Department of Justice report looking at non-fatal violence during the period 2001-2005, White women were 5 times more likely to be victims of intimate partner violence than White men, African American women were over 3 ½ times more likely to be victims of intimate partner violence than African American men, and Latina women were over 7 times more likely to be victims of intimate partner violence than Latino men. This is also the type of violence that we see all-too-often in news reports of domestic homicides and murder/suicides. According to the FBI's Uniform Crime Reports, twice as men as women murder their intimate partners, and domestic murder/suicides are almost exclusively male-perpetrated.

The myth of gender symmetry comes from research on the other major type of intimate partner violence, what the research literature calls "situational couple violence." In this type of violence there is no general pattern of coercive control, but arguments have a tendency to escalate to violence. And although this type of violence is perpetrated about as often by women as by men, it is hardly symmetric in other important ways. As your reporter points out, in this type of violence women are much more likely than men to be injured, to fear their partner, and to suffer long-term psychological damage.

Although situational couple violence can also be serious, even deadly, the coercive controlling violence that includes an on-going pattern of abusive behavior used by one person to control and subordinate an intimate partner is the major focus of most shelter work and of the "Duluth model" that is the basis of many batterer intervention programs. It is this behavior that creates the fear, intimidation, and extensive damage that receives most of the media attention to intimate partner violence. Studies that focus on this behavior, whether through arrest rates, shelter data, or studies of batterer intervention programs, find that it is primarily men who perpetrate this behavior (although there are some women as well) and that it is primarily women who are victimized by this behavior (although there are some men as well).

While all victims of domestic violence, regardless of gender deserve help and support, to mischaracterize this population as being equally divided between men and women ignores the fact that it is mostly men in this society who feel the need to control their intimate partners through a pattern of violence combined with other means of coercive control. Prevention and

intervention efforts will not be effective if they do not attend to what these men think it means to be a man, and how they understand the roles of men and women in marriage and other intimate relationships.

All violence is abhorrent and we must do what we can to prevent all intimate partner violence, whether it is perpetrated by men or women. In that undertaking, however, it is important to understand the distinctions among the major types of such violence, and the real role that gender plays in them.

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