

# Battered women - and men

By Cathy Young | July 16, 2009, Boston Globe

LYNN Rosenthal, a veteran of the battered women's advocacy movement, was named to the new post of White House counsel on violence against women on June 26. On the same day, a conference opened in Los Angeles disputing the basic tenets of the movement Rosenthal represents - such as the view that domestic violence is overwhelmingly a male crime against women rooted in patriarchal power. Speakers argued for new policies based on a fuller understanding of the problem. Is there a way to bridge the gaps between these competing paradigms?

Challenges to feminist orthodoxy on domestic violence are often seen as anti-feminist backlash from angry men. But this conference, "From Ideology to Inclusion 2009: New Directions in Domestic Violence Research and Intervention" (sponsored by the California Alliance for Families and Children), could not be so easily dismissed. The speakers included scholars, social workers, and counselors; about half were women.

Among the stars was sociologist Murray Straus, co-founder of the Family Research Laboratory at the University of New Hampshire who helped pioneer domestic violence research in the 1970s. His findings shed light on the plight of battered women, and he became a hero to feminists - until he began to study female violence.

Straus's finding, corroborated by dozens of studies, is that women assault their partners about as often as men. Moreover, they do not act only in self-defense but are as likely as men to hit first, and with similar motives: anger, insecurity, controlling one's partner.

No one at the conference argued for complete equivalency in partner abuse. Women are two to three times more likely to be injured due to disparities in strength. Still, Straus and other presenters such as social scientist Deborah Capaldi, a researcher for the National Institutes of Health, insisted that female aggression must be taken seriously, and they emphasized three facts. First, if the message is that hitting your partner is wrong, it should include everyone. Second, "harmless" slaps may lead to an escalation that endangers the woman. Third, if "only" one in three or one in four people injured due to partner violence are men, that's hardly trivial.

Another dogma of the battered women's movement is that violence is the batterer's strategy of "power and control." This ignores not only mutual violence but such factors as substance abuse and psychiatric disorders.

Kenneth Corvo, associate professor of social work at Syracuse University, delivered a scathing analysis of the "Duluth model" of batterer treatment, devised by advocates for battered women and relying on a rigid view of abuse as "male privilege." In much of the country, this is the only type of court-mandated batterer treatment - despite evidence that it is largely useless, he said. Among other things, the system fails women who want their abusive partner to get anger management or drug and alcohol counseling, not feminist indoctrination.

It also fails violent women, who often struggle with a host of mental and emotional problems.

Michelle Carney, associate professor at the School of Social Work of the University of Georgia, deploras a “don’t talk to me about it” attitude toward the issue of female perpetrators. Two therapists who counsel violent women agreed that the problem is persistently minimized. An abusive woman may end up being taken to a battered women’s shelter.

Male victims, meanwhile, often have nowhere to turn. Jan Brown, a Maine resident, realized this 14 years ago when a male friend was leaving an abusive marriage. In 2000, Brown founded the Battered Men’s Helpline, now the Domestic Abuse Helpline for Men and Women; it provides counseling, support, and financial assistance when possible. Brown says she often encounters suspicious attitudes; the Helpline has been refused membership in the Maine Coalition to End Domestic Violence, making it tough to get grants.

How can we move toward inclusion when ideology dominates the domestic violence field? One step forward would be for Rosenthal to open up an ongoing, truly inclusive dialogue on the issues. The conference materials included a quotation from President Barack Obama about “ensuring that scientific data is never distorted or concealed to serve a political agenda.” Presumably, even a feminist one.

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**Here's the link to the Ned Holstein interview on NPR attacking the domestic violence field and promoting "women are violent too":**

**<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=106820029>**