

# Perceptions of Male Batterers

In the past men who committed violence at home were protected by public attitudes that blamed the victim. Mieko Bond describes a Merseyside campaign tackling these misperceptions.

**O**n average, a woman suffering domestic violence will be assaulted 35-37 times over a period of seven years before she seeks help. Almost 50 per cent of murders of women are the result of domestic violence. Motivated by these findings, a Merseyside project was established to tackle the issue of male violence towards women and children. This 'Zero Tolerance' campaign was set up by the Merseyside Health Action Zone and Safer Merseyside Partnership with three main approaches: a mass media education campaign to educate and raise awareness about domestic violence; a freephone helpline offering support and information; and improvement and coordination of service provision for victims and survivors.

A recent research project to measure the success of the education campaign, initiated by the funders and managed by Nacro's Social Programs Unit, involved gathering information from focus groups of the public (survivors of violent relationships, women, men, children and minority groups) and professionals (the police, health, housing, volunteer, women's aid and minority groups) to analyse attitudes to male batterers. As a result of the 'Zero Tolerance' campaign, all the groups in the study demonstrated a comprehensive understanding of the factors leading males to become batterers. This outcome shows that awareness-raising should continue to consolidate the societal consensus that

men are culpable for their abuse of women partners.

Analysis of the data shows an intersection of public attitudes and academic discourse — perhaps the most interesting discovery is the batterer-blaming approach manifest in the wide array of existing explanations the focus groups gave for why men abuse (Stanko *et al.*, 1988). Furthermore, less of a victim-blaming approach was taken compared to cross-national studies such as the recent study in five countries in Asia (Tang *et al.*, 2002). The explanations for male violence within the family given by the professionals and public in Merseyside consist of themes of power and control, punishment, stress, previous patterns in the family, economics and alcohol. These display a wide variety of perceptions of why men abuse, and reflect contemporary academic literature and use of multi-dimensional models to understand risk factors that cause batterers to be violent (Holtzworth-Munroe & Stuart, 1994). The explanations offered by the groups in Merseyside also suggest the importance of the media's role in shaping attitudes towards domestic violence against women.

## Blame

The bulk of professional and public opinions on violence against women suggest that male batterers are at fault for their abusive behaviour (Stanko *et al.*, 1998). The explanation that violent men abuse because they want to exert power over or control their partners is the most common reason given by both the professionals and the public. The groups indicate that such violence is something men use in an intimate relationship to get what they want and/or that men resort to violence because they can do so with impunity.

Descriptions in the groups for these techniques of violent control led to ideas such as lack of self-esteem and stress as auxiliary causes. Furthermore, the men's group echoed feminist theory and posited that there was a power imbalance between men and women's relationships that cause violence and that should not exist (Dobash & Dobash, 1979).

The groups' explanations demonstrated that they believe men are violent simply because they feel like it, and will blame their violence on the woman or make an excuse:

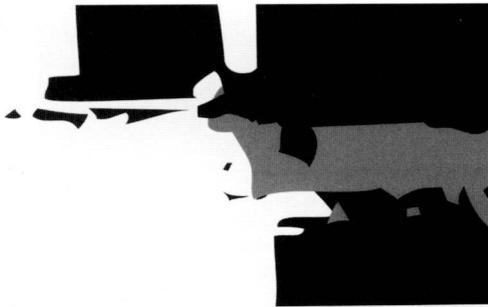
"I think that anybody who knows anything about domestic violence will think well, they come up with a million and one excuses just like that, and better ones actually sometimes..." (Survivors of violence).



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The 'Zero Tolerance' to domestic violence campaign in Merseyside established a freephone helpline to give support and practical advice to victims. The helpline, 'Worst Kept Secret', continues the effective media advertising strategies of the 'Zero Tolerance' campaign. Survivors of domestic violence were consulted in designing ads for the helpline, which are distributed across Merseyside as posters, postcards and beer mats.

Alcohol is traditionally associated with violence against women (Jasinski & Williams, 1998). All of the groups linked alcohol to abuse, but maintained that it was not an excuse for abusing partners, where the consensus was that, "they can't blame it on... if they're drunk... that's no excuse..." (Children's Group).

Some discussions gave rise to perceptions of 'risk factors' for male violence, and although not stated as such gave the impression that male batterers abuse for reasons beyond their control. For example, one theme that was raised by most groups was that men abuse because they had experienced abuse in their past (Holtzworth-Munroe & Stuart, 1994). Some debate was generated on this point; however, some group members pointed out that a personal history of abuse did not automatically cause men to be violent. Furthermore, there were economic perceptions focusing on three themes: money stress, job stress and unemployment issues. These explanations excused batterers, explaining why they might abuse due to loss of status, position or self-esteem when a livelihood was not available.

There were very few comments that overtly or subtly suggested that women were at fault for men's violent behaviour.

One of them was from the children's group, which suggested men may physically punish women due to infidelity, "If you sleep with someone else outside the marriage then the man might get irritated" (Children's Group).

The literature notes that batterers are highly jealous and mostly fabricate accusations of supposed infidelity (Bowker, 1983). The attitude that men may be violent because women have supposedly been unfaithful must be discouraged in awareness-raising campaigns because it shifts blame from the perpetrator to the victim.

### **Public attitudes and academic discourse**

The variety of responses by the groups about why men abuse reflects the academic literature with its breadth and sophistication. For example, Holtzworth-Munroe & Stuart (1994) have constructed several typologies of batterers that discuss what risk factors contributed to these men becoming violent. Many of the focus group explanations echo these ideas, such as themes of family origin experiences as one factor contributing to the development of an abusive man. Furthermore, the groups also discussed other theories including feminist concepts and diagnoses from the literature on psychopathology, emphasizing the group's breadth of opinions. Literature on marital satisfaction contains studies on attribution of blame in violent relationships that connects to the groups' explanations that male batterers blame women for the violence (Jasinski & Williams, 1998). One men's group observation echoes Bograd's (1988) explanation of gender structure disparities: "The sentiment again, I mean you've got to agree there is a power relationship between men and women that shouldn't exist but does." (Men's Group). Power relations and inequality were clearly recognized as constituting the root of this problem.

The children's and men's groups (in that order) were the most assertive in their batterer blaming approaches and gave the most descriptions involving power and control with an emphasis on punishment. The professional groups commented on all the themes, except for economic issues. The volunteer professionals who work with victims of violence were the most batterer-blaming, the police were batterer blaming, with the housing sector commenting the least on any position.

There were subtle differences between the public and professionals, with more detailed descriptions of male batterer processes by the public. The public were also more batterer blaming.

The responses raised by the groups illustrated a wide array of reasons for why men abuse, especially dealing with themes of power and control, previous learning, and economics. Groups have identified several categories of reasons for abuse, developing a multi-dimensional view of why men use violence. They applied both a crime prevention approach to controlling both violent physical outbursts but also the subtle psychological form of abuse that traditional feminine and batterer programme literature discuss, such as blame techniques. Finally, there were more negative attitudes towards the male batterer, where the causes of violence were directly linked with premeditated male desires to violate and injure women.

### **The value of education campaigns**

There are several practical outcomes to shaping attitudes of the public and professional sectors of community. Wide-reaching

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educational campaigns can encourage family and neighbours to help victims of domestic violence. Media can bring the issue of violence against women to public debate and increase the pressure for change. If professionals change their attitudes as a result of such educational campaigns, they will then positively effect the shaping of policy and laws. Media campaigns can galvanize community will to raise or allocate funding to increase the number of shelters available for women leaving violent relationships, and enlist help and volunteers from the public. Hopefully, such social change can inspire women in violent relationships to leave their partners. And finally, educational campaigns socialize a public to shame abusers or cause them to desist because they think their violence will be socially condemned.

The Merseyside media educational campaign was a success, as measured by the extent to which blame was assigned to men for their abuse. The next interesting area is to look at views on women victims of violence by men in this study, and juxtapose the two results. Based on these results, campaigns should be continued, targeting less frequently mentioned causes of violence, and challenging lingering notions that reduce responsibility.

"I think it is a power thing and I think it's a general attitude. Really what we want to do is change some of our attitudes in society and maybe we should be trying to do that." (Men's Group)

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## Developing MAPPA

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dynamic of the Prison Service's more confident focus upon resettlement (and its significant contribution to treatment and the duty to co-operate role of other agencies) highlights another emerging characteristic of public protection. This characteristic is the recognition that managing the risks posed by offenders does not only concern criminal matters.

However, none of this obviates the need for robust work in the community; and it is in the community and WITH the community that the greatest challenge for MAPPA is to be found. Extending involvement in public protection to other agencies which already play a role in this area, but without the help and support of criminal justice and other colleagues, signals the formal engagement with the community. If we are able to achieve as routine good practice, the involvement of health and housing professionals for example, we will advance the cause of a more mature and less punitive response to offending behaviour. Paradoxically, it is actually being soft on crime and criminals if we deal with them solely as criminal problems. It is much harder, and tougher on offenders, if we understand and thereby deal effectively with the risks offenders present as having diverse social, economic as well as personal and criminal characteristics.

Ultimately this requires a mature response from local communities which too often, and understandably, default to the NIMBY syndrome. Under the umbrella of the MAPPA, the NPD is sponsoring pilots like 'Circles of Support and Accountability'. 'Circles' have been shown in Canada to have a very beneficial effect on helping sexual offenders resettle successfully. They are based upon the recruitment (using careful selection) and training of volunteers from the local community in which a sex offender is to resettle on release from custody to support and to help hold the offender to account for his behaviour. This is an illustration of the type of community engagement with public protection which the MAPPA seeks to nurture. The introduction of other agencies to the MAPPA and the appointment of 'lay advisers' will both help to build upon achievement to date. The real challenge comes in informing and educating local communities. However, as Hilary Benn remarked in a recent speech referring to the firebombing of the home of a children's doctor in the summer of 2000, there is a long way to go when the public has still to distinguish between a paedophile and a paediatrician.

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