



Wife Beating: The Silent Crime

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There is nothing new about wife beating. It has always happened, everywhere. Often it is accepted as a natural if regrettable part of woman's status as her husband's property. Throughout history unlucky women have been subjected to the whims and brutality of their husbands. The colloquial phrase "rule of thumb" is supposedly derived from the ancient right of a husband to discipline his wife with a rod "no thicker than his thumb." In the U.S. the statistics reflect no unprecedented epidemic of domestic violence, but only a quite recent effort to collect figures—often inexact, but startling even when allowances are made for

error—on what has always existed: ¶ Nearly 6 million wives will be abused* by their husbands in any one year. ¶ Some 2,000 to 4,000 women are beaten to death annually. ¶ The nation's police spend one-third of their time responding to domestic-violence calls. ¶ Battery is the single major cause of injury to women, more significant than auto accidents, rapes or muggings. What is new is that in the U.S. wife beating is no longer widely accepted as an inevitable and private matter. The change in attitude, while far from complete, has come about in the past ten to 15 years as part of the profound transformation of ideas about the roles and rights of women in society. In cities and states scattered across the country, legal structures and social service networks, prompted by grass-roots women's organizations, have begun to redefine spouse abuse as a violation of the victim's civil rights and a criminal act of assault subject to the same punishments as other acts of violence. Marital abuse has been called "the silent crime." Bringing it out into the open by talking about it is the first step toward a solution. But for most people, including even the victim and the abuser, the almost reflex-like response to the subject is to deny that such abuse exists. In fact, however, a 1979 FBI report stated that 40% of women killed were murdered by their partners, and 10% of men by theirs. (Many of the women acted in self-defense.) When it comes to squabbling around the house, women give as good as they get. But a domestic spat is not battering, which involves a pattern of escalating abuse in a situation from which the victim feels she cannot escape. Because they are usually physically stronger than their wives, men are less likely to be battered; for reasons of pride, they are also far less likely to report it. Sociologist Murray Straus, an expert on family violence, nonetheless estimates that each year 282,000 men are beaten by their wives.

Personal testimony indicates that any female, regardless of class or race, can become a battered wife. In Stamford, Conn., a woman married to a Fortune 500 executive locked herself into their Lincoln Continental every Saturday night to escape her husband's kicks and punches. She did not leave him because she mistakenly feared he could sue for divorce on ground of desertion and she, otherwise penniless, would get no alimony.

Barbara, 30, a middle-class housewife from South Hadley, Mass., was first beaten by her husband when she was pregnant. Last summer Barbara's husband hurled a dinner plate across the kitchen at her. His aim was off. The plate shattered against the wall and a piece of it struck their four-year-old daughter in the face, blinding the child in one eye.

In Miami, Diane, 27, a receptionist, said she married "a real nice guy," a Dr. Jekyll who turned into Mr. Hyde a week after the wedding. "Being married to this man was like being a prisoner of war. I was not allowed to visit my family. I couldn't go out on my own. He wouldn't even let me cry. If I did, it started an 'episode.' "

In a Duluth shelter for battered women, Lola, who married 19 years ago at age 18, said her husband was losing control more frequently: "He gets angry because he's coming home with a bag full of groceries and I didn't open the door fast enough. Because he didn't like the way I washed the clothes. Because the supper's not ready. Because supper's ready too soon."

In Atlanta, Rita, 30, told **TIME'S Roger Witherspoon** that her husband William, 40, a hospital worker, asked her to come into the bedroom during a birthday party she was giving for neighborhood children. "He slapped me blind. He pulled the shotgun from the wall and dared me to move. I cried and asked him why he was bothering me. He just tore my clothes off. He said I was a bitch and used other ugly words. I asked him not to do that because the children and their parents were here. But he just left the room and told everyone to leave. Then he told me to get back in bed and that we were going to make love. I said no. But he had the .38 and a knife and hit me. I got in and we did it. My nose was still bleeding."

An extraordinary number of abuse cases involve guns or knives. In Los Angeles, Harry Whalen, 48, a curtain installer, is serving a 15-year-to-life sentence for killing his fourth wife, Betty, 35. She was hiding in a Long Beach, Calif, women's shelter, seeking a divorce. Whalen caught her in her lawyer's office parking lot and begged to hold the couple's small child. He then ordered Betty into his van and drove off. Three months later her body was found in a shallow grave in the desert; she had been shot in the face. One of Whalen's former wives reported later that he had threatened to kill her too.

Many men, and even many women, believe that abused wives have a masochistic streak that keeps them in the home long after the beatings have begun. But Michigan Psychologist Camella Serum dismisses such assumptions as folklore. "Masochism has no relevance in this situation. It is just another way to blame the victim. The reason she stays has nothing to do with loving the pain or seeking the violence."

Battering follows a cycle: first a buildup of tension, then a violent explosion, and finally a period of remorse and apologies that rekindle hope that the batterer will change and remain loving. Karla Digirolomo, 26, executive director of the New York State Governor's Commission on Domestic Violence, describes her experience in her first marriage as typical. When she was pregnant her husband broke her nose. She told everyone she had fallen down. The obstetrician never questioned the bruises on her body. "I felt worthless, totally to blame, responsible for my husband's actions. I kept thinking, 'If I had done something different, things would improve.' You gradually change. You think, 'If I can stop doing x, y or z, then nothing will happen.' You assume all responsibility."

If the woman does not leave or seek help after the first episode, it can be taken as a sign of acquiescence, which usually leads to more violence. But it is extremely difficult to pack up and go, even if a woman can afford to. Explains Jane Tolliver, a counselor in the Atlanta

Y.W.C.A.'s battered-women's program: "They've been told by their ministers and their families that a good woman can change a man." These women represent society's traditional values. Says Tolliver: "They are nurturing. They want successful marriages. And it is precisely those things that trap them."

Often a battered woman has grown up with violence and accepts it as a pitiful form of caring, or at least as something inevitable in a relationship. She may feel desperately that the world is a dangerous place and that she needs a protector, even a man who beats her. Ashamed, terrified that any resistance will provoke greater violence, isolated from her family and friends, often without any means of support other than the husband, many a battered woman sinks into despairing submission, from which the only escape is eventual widowhood, her own murder (or, perhaps in a flash of retaliatory rage, her husband's), or suicide. According to a four-year study of a major metropolitan hospital completed this year, 25% of all women's suicide attempts are preceded by a prior history of battering.

Domestic violence is lethal, and not only to women. A 1978 article in *Police Magazine* reports that 40% of all police injuries, and 20% of all police deaths on duty, are the result of becoming caught in a family dispute. Risks aside, answering domestic-disturbance calls is the bane of policemen everywhere. "We end it for an hour or two and do a lot of paper work," says Officer Lawrence Santos of Harlem's 25th Precinct. To a frightened woman, though, even a reluctant policeman offers more hope than an insensitive one. Sergeant Louis Mancuso of Manhattan's Ninth Precinct, for example, does not think arrests are always the best solution. He believes there are often extenuating circumstances, observing after hearing about one brutal assault, "Maybe she wasn't giving him what he needed sexually." Detroit Executive Deputy Police Chief James Bannon explains such lingering attitudes. "Police officers are as violent in domestic relations as others. Probably more so."

Doctors, social workers and psychiatrists have frequently been even less helpful than the police. Evan Stark, research associate at Yale's Institution for Social and Policy Studies, and his wife, Dr. Anne Flitcraft, in a study of family violence, concluded that the medical profession and social agencies "are an essential part of the battered syndrome." Says Stark: "They treat the women like they are crazy." Doctors fail to note signs of abuse, label battered women psychotic or hypochondriacal, prescribe tranquilizers and tell them to go home, and "make a woman doubt her own sanity" by sending her to a family therapist.

The first shelter for battered women opened in a private home in Pasadena, Calif., in 1964. There are now approximately 800 in the country. All of them have waiting lists, and the demand is staggering. The Y.W.C.A. alone has 210 shelter or service programs such as hot lines, safe-home networks and counseling programs in 30 states. From 1978 through 1980, the Y.W.C.A. sheltered 46,100 women and children and gave counseling to 50,000 women.

But they estimate they cannot accommodate 80% of those who need assistance. In a new and ironic effort to provide more services, at least 14 states earmark funds for domestic-violence programs by imposing a surcharge on marriage licenses.

MOTHER IS A GOOD PERSON. MOTHER IS A HAPPY PERSON. MOTHER IS A NICE PERSON. MOTHER IS VERY, VERY PRETTY. Those kind words were painted on a poster by a child whose mother had found refuge at Crescent House, the first battered-women's shelter in New Orleans. Crescent House serves more than 500 clients a year, housing 25 women and children at a time. Like all such shelters, it is initially a place for battered women to hide. It also offers help in deciphering the demoralizing puzzle of welfare offices and court procedures, and in aiding victims to imagine an alternative future. Almost as important, a shelter is a place where a woman will be believed and listened to. In 13% of wife-abuse cases, children have also been assaulted, and shelters provide a refuge for them, too. In keeping with their efforts to break the cycle of violence, almost all shelters have firm rules against spanking.

What kind of man would hit a woman? Not only hit her, but blacken her eyes, break the bones in her face, beat her breasts, kick her abdomen and menace her with a gun? There is a very good chance that he was beaten as a child. Perhaps because of his early trauma, he is often emotionally stunted. Michael Groetsch, director of probation for the New Orleans Municipal Court, sees scores of accused wife abusers every week. "There is a very interesting analogy between a male batterer and a two-or three-year-old child," Groetsch says. "His tantrums are very similar to those of a two-year-old. Like a narcissistic child, the batterer bites when he's throwing a tantrum. I have seen many women come in with teeth marks all over their arms and legs."

The wife beater probably drinks, although, as Groetsch points out, "he drinks to beat, he doesn't beat because he drinks." Unemployment does not cause battering, but hard times make it worse. In Youngstown, Ohio, for example, where the unemployment rate in 1982 reached 21%, domestic violence increased a staggering 404% over 1979.

Craig Norberg, a founder of the men's self-help group RAVEN (Rape and Violence End Now) in St. Louis, says the typical spouse beater is unable to cope with the traditional notion of masculinity. "Not maleness, but the traditional male role, which requires men to be stoic. It requires men to not need intimacy, to be in control, to be the 'big wheel,' and when there is a problem to 'give 'em hell.' The difficulty is that nine out of ten men fail at that list, at least in their own judgment."

Indeed, the batterer is often afflicted with mind-bending insecurity. The man's wife, says Psychologist Walker, is "the emotional glue that holds him together." As a consequence, he is desperately afraid of losing her. "All the time I knew she was going to leave me," says

William, the Atlanta birthday-party batterer. "She liked to play the song Slip Away, and I knew she was going to do it." Explains Dick Bathrick, a clinical psychologist who with a colleague runs the only program for wife abusers in Georgia: "The husband is trying to make her be closer to him by controlling her physically—and he doesn't realize that he's driving her away."

The last time William saw his wife he beat her until he tired. "When it was over," he says, "I picked her up off the floor and kissed her and told her I was sorry. I wanted to feel the pain that she felt. So I kissed her. Her nose was running and she was crying, and I loved her very much."

Such displays of tenderness are not unusual. "He may send her roses if she has left," says Michigan Psychologist Serum, "but it's not out of love. It's out of a desire to regain control." Indeed, batterers can be very calculating, both in how they deal with their wives and with the authorities once they are caught. They are frequently charming to a fault. Says Therapist Jeffrey Perez, who runs a program for batterers in New Orleans: "These guys are real slick and real glib. They can play therapy off against the court system and not have to be responsible."

The first self-help group for abusive men was formed in Boston in 1977. There are now about 50. Very few men go to such centers on their own. Either their partner has left or is threatening to, or they are attending under court order. By and large, they do not believe they have done anything wrong, sometimes insisting that they are not batterers at all. Those who own up to being violent frequently believe their wives are at fault. Nick, 33, an unemployed New Yorker who chose a six-week counseling program over 90 days in jail, is franker than most. "Most of the time I thought I was right. It [the violence] was called for." If they stay in a treatment program, and very few do without a court order, some men reach a kind of self-awareness that results in a more pacific nature. In a spouse-abuse workshop in Rockland County, N.Y., a man named George, 50, reported at the end of six weeks, "If a husband takes control of himself, a wife cannot make him hit her." As awareness goes, this particular insight might make Freud gape, but George's wife Susan reports no violence for the past 18 months. Historically, batterers have fallen between the cracks, being neither nuts nor criminals, at least by the standards of the day. "A man beats up his wife because he can," says University of Rhode Island Sociologist Richard Gelles, one of the pioneers in the study of family violence. Indeed, a man usually does not beat up his boss or male acquaintances. The consequences—loss of job, a charge of criminal assault, an old-fashioned black eye—are simply too great. Now the consequences are rising for violence against one's wife. Shelters for abused women have created a safety net for wives who previously would have been afraid to take their husbands to court. Newspapers, judges, hospitals, neighbors, even a growing number of once

exasperated police officers, are beginning to understand the dimensions of the problem. More important, states and municipalities are putting laws on the books that give women a realistic chance of getting protection and redress through the courts. As Franci Livingston, an attorney with the Center for Women Policy Studies in Washington, points out, "Ten years ago there were no real, specific laws providing remedies for women. If a woman wanted protection using the courts, she would have to get it as part of a domestic-relations proceeding—meaning separation or divorce."

At that time, police could not make an arrest without actually witnessing violence or seeing compelling physical evidence of abuse. Nowadays such requirements are being eased. In Michigan, for example, a law allowing police to arrest batterers for misdemeanor assaults on grounds of "probable cause" was passed in 1978 and became a model for other states. In Massachusetts, women can walk into any court and receive an immediate emergency restraining order against an abusive husband.

The Los Angeles city attorney's family-violence program, which began four years ago, was one of the first to recognize that domestic violence is a crime, not a private matter, and should be prosecuted as such. The decision to prosecute is taken out of the victim's hands. Explains Deputy City Attorney Susan Kaplan: "Out of 5,000 domestic-violence cases that cross our desk each year, half of the victims want to drop the charges.

Now the woman is told misdemeanor charges will be pressed anyway. Will she testify? It never even comes to that. Once the husband realizes, 'Hey, this is a crime, this is prosecutable,' he pleads guilty right there."

According to the National Center on Women and Family Law, one-third of the women who come to shelters have also been sexually assaulted by their mates.

Only four years ago, such violations were so accepted that California State Senator Bob Wilson protested a California law allowing prosecution for marital rape by saying, "If you can't rape your wife, who can you rape?" Today, 17 states have abolished laws that excluded husbands from rape prosecution.

The tightening of laws against wife beating has resulted in higher conviction rates. In Duluth, for example, 82% of those arrested for spouse abuse are convicted, up from 20% in 1979. Still, only a fraction of abusive husbands are reported to the authorities, much less arrested and convicted.

For the glib, angry men who pummel their wives, a brush with the law sometimes has a sobering effect. A recent Police Foundation working paper concluded: "It is clear that the recidivism measure is lowest when police make arrests." New York's Karla Digirolomo agrees: "In general, arrests work because they give the message to the man that such

behavior is inappropriate. They also give the message to the woman that somebody will help her."

The crackdown represents an important shift in how the nation views wife abuse. No longer does a woman have to go it alone in a legal system that is stacked against her; no longer does she have to deny the suggestion, either stated or implied, that she got what she deserved. Now the courts and the community are swinging to her side—and the bullying husband is beginning to pay the price. —By Jane O'Reilly. Reported by Barbara B. Dolan/Duluth and Elizabeth Taylor/New York

*Courts and social agencies use terms such as marital abuse, spouse abuse and wife battering to describe serious or repeated injury by a person with whom the victim has a relationship involving cohabitation and sexual intimacy. Some 50% of the incidents involve persons no longer or never legally married.

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