

SPECIAL REPORT

Education for Injustice

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An article in the *Daily Herald* in Austin, Minnesota, described a domestic violence training program:

Local law enforcement agents, social workers and county employees sat by helplessly Thursday night as “Lenny” savagely punched and pulled “Maria’s” hair, then kicked her while she was on the ground.¹

Did anyone who attended this program notice the gender bias? Would they have been surprised if the roles had been reversed—if Maria was shown pummeling a prostrate Lenny? Or if it turned out that Maria had provoked the incident by attacking Lenny with a kitchen knife?

Each year millions of dollars, many of them monies from the Violence Against Women Act, are spent on education and training. These activities shape the understanding of judges, prosecutors, legislators, and others regarding domestic violence. These perceptions eventually influence legal decisions, government policies, legislative initiatives, and funding priorities.²

Many VAWA-funded activities are educational in nature. The following sections of VAWA refer to information, education, or training in their titles:

- Section 105: The Violence Against Women Act court training and improvements
- Section 111: Grants for law enforcement training programs
- Section 204: Training and services to end violence against women with disabilities
- Section 205: Training and services to end violence against women in later life
- Section 302: Rape prevention and education
- Section 303: Services, education, protection, and justice for young victims of crime
- Section 403: Public awareness campaign
- Section 503: Training and education of health professionals in domestic and sexual violence
- Section 833: Domestic violence information and resources for immigrants and regulation of international marriage brokers

But what if these educational efforts were one-sided and misleading in their content? What if they provided a systematically biased depiction of the partner abuse issue? Would that undercut the effectiveness of efforts to curb domestic violence? Could that undermine judicial impartiality?

What the Research Says

Hundreds of studies have analyzed the extent, nature, and causes of domestic violence. With remarkable consistency, research demonstrates the following:³

- Each year one in seven American couples experience some form of intimate partner aggression.⁴
- Women are at least as likely as men to engage in partner aggression.^{5,6}
- In about half of all cases the aggression is mutual.^{7,8}
- Self-defense accounts for only 10-20% of female partner aggression.^{9,10,11}
- About 38% of persons who suffer an injury from partner aggression are male.¹²

Some studies have found that women are actually more likely than men to engage in physical abuse. Psychologist John Archer’s meta-analysis concluded, “Women were slightly more likely than men to use one or more act of physical aggression and to use such acts more frequently.”¹³ Likewise, researcher Renee McDonald noted in her study, “Differences were observed in the rates of male and female partner violence, with female violence occurring more frequently.”¹⁴

Most Male Victims Are Missed by Crime Surveys

A number of crime surveys have purported to pinpoint the prevalence of domestic violence. But their findings are misleading. For example, the Department of Justice has conducted two major surveys of intimate partner abuse:

- National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS)
- National Violence Against Women Survey (NVAWS)

The NCVS reported that men represented 16% of all victims of physical abuse, while the NVAWS pegged the male victimization rate at 39%.¹⁵

Which study is correct?

Neither—for the simple reason that men are far less likely to consider a shove, slap, or a kick to be a “crime,” especially when the act is perpetrated by a wife or girlfriend.¹⁶ Thus, men report the incident less frequently. One study found that male domestic violence victims are nine times less likely than female victims to summon the police.¹⁷ As researcher Donald Dutton explains, “These surveys, in turn, tend to filter out male reports of victimization.”¹⁸

The following sections assess whether domestic violence education and training programs are consistent with established research findings.

Department of Justice Office on Violence Against Women

The DoJ Office on Violence Against Women (OVW) website features information about domestic violence. One page encourages men to “take the pledge” to stop violence against women.¹⁹ Nowhere does the OVW website invite women to take a pledge to cease violence against men.

More ironic is the OVW page on teenage dating violence, which states,

Twenty percent of teenage girls and young women have experienced some form of dating violence. Female victims of teen dating violence are also at greater risk for many other issues, such as substance abuse, sexual activity, pregnancy, and suicide.²⁰

That OVW page also highlights the federally sponsored Choose Respect Initiative, which is based on a 2003 survey of high school students. The survey found that 8.9% of males and 8.8% of females reported that they had been a victim of physical dating violence during the previous year.²¹ But the OVW page contains no mention of the fact that teenage boys are victims of dating violence to the same extent as teenage girls.

Judges

Judges play a pivotal role in the interpretation, implementation, and enforcement of the nation's laws. Their rulings not only determine the outcome of the case at hand, they also send a signal to law enforcement personnel and prosecutors regarding the types of cases deemed worthy of judicial action.

Training Courses

Curricular materials designed to train judges have been found to present a misleading depiction of domestic violence.

The National Family Violence Prevention Fund has developed a national judicial education curriculum, which states that its purpose is to help state court judges “assess cultural dynamics that cause women to hide domestic violence” and “understand the potential dynamics between immigrant battered women and their abusers.”²² The book's description does not mention immigrant battered men or indicate that half of all abuse is mutual.

The **West Virginia** Coalition Against Domestic Violence has published a judicial education handbook titled, “For a Safer State of Family.”²³ The handbook all but ignores male victims and is equally adamant in discounting female aggression:

Domestic violence educators are often challenged to use gender-neutral language when talking about intimate partner abuse. However, domestic violence is not gender neutral. The fact remains that the vast majority of heterosexual victims are women and the vast majority of heterosexual perpetrators are men.

In its section on homosexual relationships, the handbook notes that “saying women cannot abuse women” is a form of psychological denial. The book never acknowledges that ignoring female-on-male abuse also represents denial.

The book simplistically asserts that “domestic violence is a pattern of coercive control used by one person to maintain power and control in a relationship.” That statement ignores the large body of research that shows that partner aggression is caused by many factors, including unemployment, history of childhood abuse, and alcohol and drug abuse.²⁴

Given the gender bias found in training materials, it is not surprising that the actual presentations made to judges are also slanted.

For example, judicial education programs typically refer to the perpetrator as “he,” while victims are designated as “she.”²⁵ One former court counselor in **Wisconsin** remarked that, despite his initial disbelief in the presenters’ “standard formulation” (i.e., domestic violence is a by-product of male abusers’ need for power and control), he found that the presentations still “shaped my deeper mindset.”²⁶

One **New Jersey** training program went beyond mere one-sidedness—it explicitly instructed judges to ignore due process protections. One presenter, a sitting judge, dispensed this advice: “Your job is not to become concerned about all the constitutional rights of the man that you’re violating as you grant a restraining order. Throw him out on the street, give him the clothes on his back, and tell him, ‘See ya’ around.’”²⁷

If there were any doubts about his intentions, the judge further emphasized, “So when you say to me, am I doing something wrong telling these judges they have to ignore the constitutional protections most people have, I don’t think so.”

The programs stress that judges should issue restraining orders liberally in order to keep their names out of the newspapers. Another judge says he warns his judges, “If you don’t follow the law after I told you what to do, I will guarantee that your name will be in the headlines. That’s not a threat. That’s an absolute promise on my part.”

Attendees were given additional warnings that lacked any notion of judicial impartiality and restraint:²⁸

- “If you’ve got any hint whatsoever there’s a problem, sign the TRO. Don’t take the chance.”
- “Quite frankly, the standard really is by a preponderance of credible evidence. That’s what the law is. But what he’s saying to ya, ‘Don’t make that mistake at three o’clock in the morning.’ You may be a little tired. Err on the side of being cautious.”
- “So don’t get callous about the fact that these people are pestering you again. You know, grant the restraining order.”

Benchbooks

Many judges rely on benchbooks to summarize state laws and other key information about domestic violence. A review of these books reveals widespread bias:

- **Alabama’s** Domestic Violence Benchbook contains the long-discredited claim, “National crime statistics show that about 95% of spouse-abuse victims are women.”²⁹ No citation is given for those “national crime statistics.”
- The benchbook from the **New Mexico** Judicial Education Center opens with this openly distorted explanation: “The discussion in this chapter will assume a heterosexual relationship with a male abuser unless otherwise indicated.”³⁰
- The cover of the **Ohio** Domestic Violence Benchbook shows evocative photographs of five abused females, but none of abused men.³¹
- The **Tennessee** Domestic Abuse Benchbook includes demonstrably false statements such as “Women are unlikely to commit homicide except in self-defense.”³²
- The **West Virginia** benchbook states unequivocally that “women are overwhelmingly the typical victims of domestic violence” and features the controversial Power and Control Wheel³³—the same diagram that appears in the previously discussed handbook by the West Virginia Domestic Violence Coalition.

National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges

The National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges is an association of over 1,800 judges and judicial officers who work in juvenile and family courts. The NCJFCJ has established a Family Violence Department that has released a number of publications, including “Managing Your Divorce: A Guide for Battered Women”³⁴—but no guides to help battered men.

The NCJFCJ’s page on Family Violence states one-sidedly, “Domestic violence puts millions of women and their families at risk every year.” The page about its Greenbook project refers to battered mothers, but makes no mention of battered fathers.

With the help of a grant from the federal Office of Violence Against Women, the NCJFCJ is now developing a curriculum that, according to its website, “engages a critical mass of state court judges and judicial officers in:

1. learning how to identify and resolve issues that arise in court cases involving violence against *women* and children,
2. exercising leadership to end and prevent violence against *women* and children in the community, and
3. advancing the state of knowledge about how the justice system can intervene in and prevent violence against *women* and children.”³⁵ [emphasis added]

One wonders how the NCJFCJ can turn its back on nearly 200 studies that show that women are as likely as men to engage in domestic violence, and that half of all partner aggression is mutual. And one worries how a one-sided curriculum endorsed by a national organization of judges could sway judicial decision-making and undermine the legal presumption of “innocent until proven guilty.”

Therapist Edward Dunning recounts his experience with a male client who was punched repeatedly by his wife. She was arrested twice on domestic violence charges and was later convicted. Although the man had no history of domestic violence, the divorce court judge somehow regarded the wife as the true victim and granted her sole custody of their son. Dunning notes, “It’s not unusual for violent women to be granted custody of the children.”³⁶

Lawyers

The American Bar Association, the national trade organization for attorneys, has openly advocated for the Violence Against Women Act. The ABA has also published a report with the provocative title, “When Will They Ever Learn? Educating to End Domestic Violence.”³⁷

The report opens with this claim: “Experts estimate that 2 to 4 million American women are battered every year,” a statement attributed to former surgeon general Antonia Novello. But family violence researcher Richard Gelles has debunked the “2 to 4 million battered women” statistic, as well as other faulty claims made by Novello.³⁸

Ignoring the well-known fact that domestic violence is concentrated in low-income populations,³⁹ the ABA report warns, “Law students and law professors are just as likely to be victims or perpetrators of domestic violence as other members of society.”

The report makes this emotional plea: “It is time for law schools to fill this desperate gap in legal education by incorporating domestic violence law into core curricula courses, upper level courses, and clinical programs.”

The ABA Commission on Domestic Violence has also published a fact sheet, *10 Myths about Custody and Domestic Violence and How to Counter Them*, which has been found to filled with more half-truths and misrepresentations than truthful statements.⁴⁰

Law Enforcement Personnel

The Violence Against Women Act also funds training programs for law enforcement personnel. Again, serious bias has been documented.

One police officer from **New York** discovered that the training in his state was run by

the Office for the Prevention of Domestic Violence, not the Division of Criminal Justice Services, the state agency that is responsible for setting police training standards. Why? “The DV people didn’t want the police control over the training because police training is heavily influenced by the Constitution and constitutional protections in the areas of arrest and reporting”—in other words, the DV training session espouses arrest procedures that ignore due process protections.⁴¹

A **California**-based officer described the domestic violence training classes he had attended as “so dripping with male hatred that everyone in the class felt uncomfortable, male and female officers alike.” He also criticized his state’s must-arrest laws:

They also removed arrest decisions from the responding officer and we repeatedly had to arrest the man, whose only crime was physically repelling the woman attacking him. In the hundreds of domestic violence phone calls, perhaps 90% to 95% were false, yet I saw children’s and men’s lives destroyed irrevocably due to vindictive, greedy, spoiled, mentally imbalanced, and/or drug-infested women perverting the judicial system.⁴²

One retired police officer from **Illinois** explained, “I recall the ‘indoctrination seminars’ that I was required to attend during our yearly police in-service updates. The State’s Attorney would send a domestic violence advocate to deliver their Catherine MacKinnon-inspired policy speech. This person was usually someone who worked for a DV shelter or hotline.”⁴³

Biased training can translate into inappropriate police response, as this case reveals:

David Woods of Contra Costa, California, was repeatedly assaulted by his wife, including having a liquor bottle cracked over his head, being kned in his groin 16 or 17 times, and having a shotgun pointed under his chin. At one point, his wife called the police requesting protection from herself.

When the police arrived, they promptly wrestled Mr. Woods to the ground. Despite his protests, the police would not release him until the couple’s daughter informed the police, “No, it’s not my daddy. It’s Momma.”⁴⁴

Other Professionals

Training manuals, curricula, and courses have been developed for other professionals as well. This is only a partial listing:

- The Simmons School of Social Work in Boston has developed a domestic violence training program that misrepresents the research by making statements such as, “Between 21% and 34% of all women will be physically assaulted by an intimate male during adulthood.”⁴⁵

- The Department of Justice has funded a curriculum for dentists that makes the statement, “9.2 percent of women who sought care for physical assault by a partner saw a dentist,” but makes no corresponding statement about male victims of physical assault.⁴⁶
- CounselCare, which bills itself as providing “Christian counseling by experienced professionals,” has developed a Safe Relationships Manual that relies on crime survey statistics, thus glossing over the problem of male victimization.⁴⁷
- Even journalists are instructed on how to properly cover the DV issue. The **Washington** State Coalition Against Domestic Violence has developed “Covering Domestic Violence: A Guide for Journalists and Media Professionals.”⁴⁸ The guide carefully avoids any mention of female-initiated aggression.

Public Information and Education

The Violence Against Women Act and other governmental programs also support informational programs and services designed for the general public. Several examples follow:

- The **Minnesota** Advocates for Human Rights has a training module called “Myths and Realities of Domestic Violence.”⁴⁹ The module consistently refers to “battered women” but makes no reference to “battered men,” and, additionally, makes the false claim that “research shows that women are victims in 95% of domestic violence cases.” It’s ironic that a training program designed to counter myths would end up endorsing them.
- The Judiciary of **Rhode Island** has a web page that explains, “Domestic violence is not just a shame ... It’s a crime.” The page then lists several criteria for DV, including: “Are you concerned about your relationship?” and “Does your partner tell you what to do?”⁵⁰ These statements blur the distinction between normal partner discord and true physical violence.
- In one **West Virginia** case, the presenter at a public lecture first made light of a young male who had been molested by a female teacher. He then went on to denigrate a male abuser in another incident, calling him a “scum bag.” When an attendee approached the presenter, suggesting that his comments were inconsistent with research, he was ordered to leave the session.⁵¹

Hotlines

The Violence Against Women Act also supports hotlines designed to assist abuse victims. These hotlines exist at both the national and state levels.

The National Domestic Violence Hotline has a fact sheet called Abuse in America.⁵² In 13 of the 17 bullets listed, men are characterized only as perpetrators and women as victims. None of the bullets refer to males as victims or give any indication of the mutual nature of many abusive incidents.

One bullet makes the disturbing claim, “1 out of 3 women around the world has been beaten, coerced into sex or otherwise abused during her lifetime.” That global statement is supported by a single American study on dating violence among adolescent girls. By any standard, the NDVH “fact sheet” is lacking in factual content.

At least part of the bias that exists at domestic violence hotlines can be traced to the training their counselors receive. In one case, the director of the **California**-based Rainbow Services admitted that trainers had instructed them to profile callers based on gender, treating all male callers as perpetrators, regardless of the actual circumstances.⁵³

Injustice in the Pursuit of a Moral Agenda

This Special Report has reviewed a variety of training manuals, curricula, educational programs, and other informational resources directed at judges, lawyers, law enforcement personnel, the lay public, and others.

Many information sources make no concession to the problem of female aggression. For example, the DoJ Office for Violence Against Women website implies that only girls are at risk of teenage dating violence, while carefully avoiding any mention of a federal survey showing that teenage boys are equally likely to be victims.

Websites like these call to mind the Yiddish proverb, “A half-truth is a whole lie.”

Some of the materials and programs acknowledge that women sometimes are aggressors, but then claim that women constitute the “overwhelming” majority of abuse victims, thus implying that the problem of male victimization is so rare as to be unworthy of further discussion.

Some use phrases like “research shows” or “studies indicate,” but cite only crime surveys or studies that interviewed only women, never mentioning that such studies are inherently flawed. Often the statements are mutually contradictory, and the research citations are outdated or simply wrong.

In sum, not a single educational program identified in this report reflects the well-established research findings on intimate partner aggression—that women are at least as likely as men to engage in abusive behavior. It should be noted that many of these programs are supported by grant monies from by the Violence Against Women Act.

But the biases go beyond misrepresentations of fact. Often materials employ emotionally charged phrases like “battered women.” In some cases, training programs refer to men in ways designed to elicit contempt or with such epithets as “scum bag.” One training program was described by an attendee as “dripping with male hatred.”

The misrepresentations contained in this report go beyond the occasional misstatement or overzealous claim. Rather, this analysis documents a consistent disregard for the truth, a campaign of willful disinformation.

This report is not the first to reveal the falsehoods that permeate the domestic violence industry. Family researcher Richard Gelles has noted that “policy and practice seemed to be more influenced by ideologies and political values than actual research and evidence.”⁵⁴ Journalist Phil Cook has documented how industry advocates have resorted to threats of physical violence against researchers who reported their findings on female abusers.⁵⁵

How did this situation come about? Family violence expert Murray Straus offers this explanation:⁵⁶

“... social scientists tend deliberately to close their eyes to excesses and incorrect statements by feminists because they do not want to undermine feminist efforts to bring about a more equitable society. Thus, avowedly feminist scholars have suppressed data on violence by women. ... *History is full of atrocities carried out in the service of a moral agenda.*”

In far too many cases, female aggressors are denied help,⁵⁷ male victims are treated as perpetrators,⁵⁸ restraining orders are issued with no claim of physical violence,⁵⁹ persons are falsely accused and arrested,⁶⁰ and constitutional protections are circumvented⁶¹—all in the name of curbing partner abuse.

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