

## Chapter 7. Intimate Combat: Violence and Intimidation

Civilization tries to contain the use of force to arbitrate human affairs but cannot stop it. In its many forms, aggression is a normal and persistent part of social life, regardless how much we try to deny it. Aggression can serve mainly as an emotional outlet that reduces a painful state of anger. When applied strategically, however, it becomes an effective means for controlling other people. Over the span of many centuries, the state has attacked one form of private violence after another, claiming for itself the sole right to use force. But the state cannot eliminate aggressive impulses. Intimidation remains a part of social life. And it plays a part in the relations between the sexes.

Mutual hostility and resentment typify relations between the sexes far more than most would like to admit. Sexual desire, emotional intimacy, children, economic dependence, and the sheer weight of shared experience tie men and women together. But contrasting sexual identities, distinctive emotional identities, divergent relations to children, differing positions in the division of labor, and general sex inequality strain those ties, often to the breaking point. Some members of both sexes become totally disaffected. They remain constantly, noticeably hostile toward the opposite sex. Almost everyone else sometimes generalizes a bout of anger ignited by someone of the opposite sex to that sex as a whole. No amount of romantic ideology can extinguish the emotional distance and anger incited by these complex relations.

Men's use of force and threats against women has become a topic of social concern and theoretical interest. Critical voices have exposed rape, wife battering, and the harassment of working women in their hiding place behind the ideology supporting gender inequality. Feminists and sympathizers have complained long, hard, and bitterly. The mass media have explored these patterns of aggression between the sexes for their news and entertainment value. New social agencies and improved legal remedies have appeared. In parallel with these public developments, theorists have tried to show how aggression between the sexes results from inequality or how it produces women's subordination.

While research on this topic has taught us much in recent years, some defective ideas have won new popularity. Many still believe that men's greater physical strength explains their capacity for unreciprocated violence against women. Others think that the differences between penises and vaginas explain why men rape but women do not. Still others claim that men are fundamentally more aggressive than women. Some writers have also come to believe that aggression is the essential determinant of men's dominance. For example, Susan

Brownmiller declared "female fear of an open season of rape. . . was probably the single causative factor in the original subjugation of woman by man, the most important key to her historic dependence."<sup>139</sup>

These ideas are wrong. The pattern of aggression between the sexes has reinforced and helped to sustain inequality, but, in recent centuries anyway, it has reflected women's subordination more than it has caused it. Men's dominance has relied on their control of the political and economic systems. Personal violence and intimidation have given intimate expression to men's social dominance, but they do not seem to have played an important role in sustaining it.<sup>140</sup>

Women and men have differed little with regard to the hostility they experience or the amount of aggression they wish to display. Yet, they faced divergent opportunities to act aggressively and they differed in the effectiveness of their actions. Women probably experienced an impulse to attack men as often as men felt that way toward women. But women's social status would not let them use force as men could. Instead, women have typically expressed aggression toward men more through psychological efforts to demean. This strategy has little effect on women's subordination.

### **The Pattern of Male Aggression**

Before trying to explain the role of violence in the relations between women and men, we need to assess clearly the form this violence takes. Violence toward women ranges from brutal attacks to subtle intimidation. Rape most explicitly joins force and brutality to sexuality. Wife beating and attacks on lovers and girl friends unite coercion with enduring intimacy. Verbal and physical harassment create a diffusely threatening atmosphere in public places such as the street or work place. Some argue that pornography constitutes a form of symbolic violence.

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<sup>139</sup>Brownmiller, Susan. *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1975, p.6.

<sup>140</sup>Political power does, however, mean that collective force in the society was controlled by men, and in that form the intimidation of male power has been a primary component of women's subordination.

**RAPE**

Rape embodies the most direct, uncontrolled sexual hostility. Many arguments over the exact legal and theoretical definition of rape have attempted either to restrict or extend its coverage. Still, most people agree that rape occurs when men use violence to sexually abuse women. More precisely, rape refers to sexual intercourse--genital, anal, or oral--obtained without the victim's consent by force or intimidation.

*Victims and Rapists.* In the past, each year about 2 of every thousand adult women in the United States suffered rape. This estimate comes from victimization surveys that ask people about their experiences with crime. Police statistics give lower estimates because they depend on victims' willingness to make official reports of their humiliation.<sup>141</sup> The real rate is certainly higher than this. Attempts to assess women's lifetime vulnerability to rape have proved difficult. A conservative, rough estimate predicts 20% to 30% of all women who passed through adolescence in the past decade will suffer rape sometime during their lives if recent rape rates persist.<sup>142</sup> Thus, while most women have never been raped, many have. Moreover, most women have known other women who were raped. The incidence rate of rape substantiates women's fears.

The rape rate varies considerably by women's social status. Women who are young (16-25), single, poor, and members of minority groups have the highest vulnerability.

The women in some social categories face a higher vulnerability to rape largely because they are in the same groups that produce more rapists. The men who rape women come from all walks of life. Still, the most common rapist is young, single, lower class, and the same race as his victim.<sup>143</sup> Thus the men who rape have similar social profile as their victims. Most likely, this merely reflects rapists' propensity to attack women in their own social milieu and status group.

Why should more men in these groups rape women? Probably the reasons resemble those for other violent criminal actions. These men become frustrated by the gap between the aspirations suggested by the dominant culture and the opportunities to achieve them more than men in other social categories. They also more often lack commitments to families and jobs that enforce a sense of responsibility. Such conditions easily lead men to displace their anger onto

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<sup>141</sup>Bowker, Lee. "Rape and Other Sexual Assaults." Pp. 180-189 in **Women and Crime in America**, ed. Bowker. New York: Macmillan, 1981.

<sup>142</sup>Johnson, A. G. "Prevalence of Rape in the U.S." *Signs* 6 (1980):137-146.

<sup>143</sup>Bowker, Lee. "Rape and Other Sexual Assaults." Pp. 180-189 in *Women and Crime in America*, ed. Bowker. New York: Macmillan, 1981, p. 182; Katz, Sedelle, and Mazur, Mary Ann. *Understanding the Rape Victim*. New York: John Wiley, 1979.

women. No social category is immune to producing rapists or rape victims. Nevertheless, youth, economic marginality, and being single greatly heighten the odds a person will become part of a violent, sexual episode.

Victimization surveys show strangers commit about three-quarters of all rapes. Men known to the victim account for about one-quarter of all rapes. This probably underestimates the amount of rape by acquaintances. Women shy from defining sexual events as rape (to themselves as well as others) when people they know abuse them. Regardless, these numbers suggest that rape regularly involves both anonymous attacks and outbursts of sexual violence among acquaintances.

*Sexually Directed Violence.* Rapists want power more than sexuality. Rapists typically do not either seek or get much sexual pleasure. Many rapists are impotent, many others report a dislike for sex, and most can get sex without resorting to violence. Most rapists, this implies, either don't want sex or they already have it without raping. Research on the motives of rapists shows they rarely gain sexual pleasure--only one-third of all rapes are even completed.<sup>144</sup> Moreover, it's obvious that a frightened, cold, and resistant woman will give little sexual pleasure. It is impossible that anyone could rationally expect rape to produce good sex. Only self-deception on a grand scale could lead to such a conclusion.

Rather than pursuing sexual pleasure, most rapists want to express either power or anger. Some researchers, who recently studied both rapists and victims, have characterized rapist's motives.<sup>145</sup> They distinguish *power rapists* from *anger rapists*. The power rapist, suggest the researchers, tries to gain his victim's willing submission to his advances. Typically, he lacks interpersonal skills and feels inadequate, and he seeks to overcome inadequate identity through enforced sexual conquest. Power rapists frequently fantasize that their victims will become excited and finally welcome sex. The anger rapist seeks to degrade and hurt his victim by physically abusing her and forcing her to perform especially humiliating acts. Typically, he hates women, feeling rejected and wronged by them. Anger rapists expect and want their victims to be horrified and mortified either to allow expression of their anger or, more rarely, to feed sadistic eroticism.

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<sup>144</sup>Bowker, Lee. "Women as Victims: An Examination of the Results of L.E.A.A.'s National Crime Survey Program." Pp. 156-179 in *Women and Crime in America*, ed. Bowker. New York: Macmillan, 1981. p. 172.

<sup>145</sup>Groth, A. Nicholas; Burgess, Ann Wolbert; and Holmstrom, Lynda Lytle. "Rape: Power, Anger, and Sexuality." *American Journal of Psychiatry* 134 (1977):1239-1243.

According to these researchers, power rape is more common than anger rape, but it is difficult to accurately estimate the difference in rates.<sup>146</sup>

Rape rarely increase's a man's long term power over a woman. Except within marriage, rape is usually a singular event. Whether strangers or acquaintances, men rarely try to rape the same woman on separate occasions. A woman may lose her attraction as a victim for a rapist after the first time. The increased likelihood of punishment also deters rapists. Whatever the causes, rape differs from other, persisting forms of aggression between a man and woman. The rape is often the whole of their relationship and almost always ends it.

This suggests rape is a sexually charged act of violence by which some men seek to purge their anger toward women and prove their power over them. Rape attacks an essential resource that women can attempt to control for their own benefit in a male dominated society: female sexuality and the right to refuse access. Being illegal and socially condemned, it is a renegade act, even if the renegades are members of the dominant caste.<sup>147</sup>

According to the findings of victimization surveys, women are ten times more likely to suffer assault (about 1 1/2% of all women annually) than to be raped. And about one-half of these assaults are by acquaintances, most of whom are men.<sup>148</sup> This suggests that while rape is a particularly virulent form of violence, most male attacks on women expresses anger and dominance without invoking sexuality.

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<sup>146</sup> Using samples of convicted rapists and women admitted to hospital emergency care with rape as their chief complaint, the researchers found that 56% of their rapists had committed power rapes while 44% committed anger rapes; however, 80% percent of the victims suffered power rapes while 20% suffered anger rapes. The discrepancy reflects three problems in the data: one kind of rapist may be more likely to commit multiple offenses, one kind of rapist may be more likely to be convicted, and one kind of rape victim may be more likely to seek emergency care. Additionally, the rapist and victim may have disparate recollections and knowledge of the event.

<sup>147</sup>Rape has always been illegitimate, but where women have been strict dependents of men the prohibition has concerned the violation of men's rights more than the victims. When women are chattels, their abuse is an abuse of the men who possess them, just as the abuse of a slave is a crime against her or his owner. This does not negate the real affection that many men have probably felt for wives, sisters, daughters, and other women. But legal norms and social rights are another matter.

<sup>148</sup>Bowker, Lee. "Women as Victims: An Examination of the Results of L.E.A.A.'s National Crime Survey Program." pp. 161,167.

**NONSEXUAL ASSAULT**

Much violence occurs between women and men without overtones of sexuality. They threaten, throw things at, strike, beat up, and use weapons against each other. Most of this violence occurs in intimate relations. According to one conservative estimate, based on survey data, about one-eighth of all husbands and wives act violently toward their spouses at least once each year in the United States.<sup>149</sup> And, each year, about four percent of all husbands engage in violent acts that have a high likelihood of resulting in physical injury to their wives. Violence in marriage is commonplace.

Unlike the one-way street of sexual violence, nonsexual violence is a two-way avenue: both women and men assault their spouses and lovers. Research shows little difference in the proportion of wives and husbands who resort to violence against each other. Upon consideration, there is nothing strange about this discovery. There is no a priori reason to expect women to experience less frustration or fewer aggressive impulses than men. They share entrapment in the same marriages rent by the inescapable consequences of gender inequality and all the other pressures of social life. But people cling to a belief that women are less aggressive or that their subordination stops them from attacking their husbands. This is false.

Men's assaults on their wives prove more consequential, however, than women's violence toward their husbands. Men more often start violence. We do not know what proportion of wives' violent actions begins as a response to earlier violence by their husbands, but we can guess it is high. Husbands' assaults are also considerably more effective. Husbands' actions threaten or produce serious injury much more often. Wives' violence is commonly more expressive and symbolic without any threat of escalation into serious harm. Moreover, men are more likely to be recurrently violent, sustaining a pattern of threatening behavior.

Thus wives and husbands show a similar rate of aggressive impulses toward their spouses, but male violence much more often threatens or results in serious harm to the victim.

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<sup>149</sup>Strauss, Murray; Gelles, Richard; and Steinmetz, Suzanne. *Behind Closed Doors: Violence in the American Family*. Garden City: Anchor Books, 1980, p. 36.

**SEXUAL MOLESTATION AND HARASSMENT**

Women suffer from considerable abusive sexual attention that falls short of rape but includes the practice, threat, or symbolism of violence. This includes any form of sexual contact made against a person's wishes. Aware that their advances are unwelcome, men touch and kiss women, they rub their bodies against women's, and they call out sexual invitations or slurs. Such behavior is common in dating relationships, in marriages, and in male dominated social arenas or gatherings. Casual sexual contact is a mutually accepted component of seduction and mating. Outside those circumstances, however, men often indulge in intrusive sexual acts knowing full well that they are unwanted.

Sexual harassment occurs when one person subjects another to unwanted sexual attentions, verbal and physical, with an implicit or explicit threat of further abuse. Verbal sexual harassment includes comments, invitations, suggestions, and threats. These intimidate women by reminding them of their vulnerability to assault. Physical sexual harassment includes pinching, pushing, feeling up, stroking, or preventing the passage of women. Women suffer sexual harassment from anonymous men in public places (e.g., streets, buses and trains, stores, schools, gyms, bars), from bosses and coworkers in work places, and from fathers, brothers, and others in families.

Sexual harassment gains its significance not from its severity, but from the combination of its ordinariness and the implicit threat it always carries. When sexual harassment is severe, bordering on rape or battery, the event itself does become traumatic. But most incidents of sexual harassment are less severe, not because extreme cases are rare, but because milder harassment is so common that it is normal. We have no statistics for the incidence of harassment. Still, for most women who leave the safety of their homes, we can safely guess harassment is an everyday experience. This recurring harassment always carries an implied (or explicit) threat of heightened violence or abuse. This exaggerates the intimidation fostered by rape and violent assault. Harassment regularly reminds women that assault is possible. It makes all men appear a potential source of violence.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>150</sup>Numerous analysts consider pornography symbolic violence, which would suggest that it should be considered here. Whatever its consequences for the relations between the sexes, however, pornography is largely produced for male consumption. Women do not suffer from it directly. The sexual and violent symbolism used in advertising, the arts, and the media is consumed by both sexes, but, while it may reinforce male violence, it is a sufficiently distinctive phenomenon to merit separate treatment.

### **The Consequences of Violence Against Women**

The pattern of violence between women and men reinforces and sustains women's subordination throughout society. Women learn a generalized terror of the possibilities for unprovoked male violence. In response, they restrict their lives by foregoing opportunities, they avoid gender inappropriate behavior that might stimulate violence, and they become dependent on individual men. Under these conditions, most women necessarily accumulate distrust and anger toward men. When they inevitably express these deep emotions, it exacerbates men's already existing reciprocal distrust and anger. This feeds fuel to the fire of violence. It is an ugly circle.

#### **FEAR OF MEN**

Most women in the United States fear the violent potential they suspect lurks in all men. Women vary considerably in their personal experience of fear. Some have an unfailing confidence that suggests extraordinary luck or detachment. Some have exaggerated anxieties that verge on paranoia. The average woman falls somewhere in between. Most women will know, directly or indirectly, other women who have suffered rape. Almost all will have known women who suffered some kind of assault. All women experience male harassment. Together these sustain a pervasive threat that every woman may become a victim.

Women know that most men pose no serious threat most of the time, of course. But the diffuse threat of sexual violence means that women can never be sure which men might be more prone to violence. Nor can women feel certain what conditions will cause any particular man to resort to violence.<sup>151</sup>

Therefore, women fear men as men--in a way that men possess no reciprocal fear of women. The fear is deeply felt because it is continuously reinforced. By

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<sup>151</sup>It is difficult to assess whether women's fear of male hostility is heightened because of its relationship to sexuality. Rape is undoubtedly women's most profound general anxiety about men, although other forms of violence and harassment are far more common. The depth of this fear is commonly associated with the belief that rape violates women's sense of identity in a peculiarly harrowing way. This appears reasonable, but it becomes somewhat less clear when we compare other groups. For example, when devalued castes in societies face arbitrary violence and persecution for their group identity--as did Jews in Nazi Germany or homosexuals in the United States--do they experience any less intense anxiety because the violence is not itself sexual? I don't think we know the answer to this. It appears plausible that the humiliation and deep anxiety attached to rape results not simply because of some inherent characteristic of sexual assault, but also because the social conflict between women and men transforms women's control of their sexuality into a defining characteristic of their identity.



its apparent unpredictability and arbitrariness it is amplified to a general state of terror.<sup>152</sup>

### **INVISIBLE BOUNDARIES**

Fearing male violence and harassment, women restrict their lives. This reduces their opportunities. Women learn to fear characteristically male settings, such as classes, occupations, or clubs. Women lack an equal sense of freedom to go places at night, including to work or to study. By avoiding participation in male arenas, women lose opportunities (already limited for women) to further their lives. Women's fear of harassment has probably had less effect on women's opportunities than other processes such as direct simple discrimination. Still, restriction of opportunities has been a visible and significant effect of violence.

### **TOE THE LINE**

Harassment and violence directly sanction women who violate gender identity norms or ignore their subordinate status. In all areas of social life, violence and intimidation sanction people who would stray outside the range of behavior considered socially acceptable. Here, however, as in other systems of inequality, it is not the community as a whole, but the dominant group who controls the violence.

In other times, feudal serfs and plantation slaves were in this position. They learned they should not depart too far from the approved restrictions on their behavior. Otherwise, they could expect threats followed by violence from members of the dominant class.

Similarly, women who transgress gender norms have risked physical abuse from their husbands and other men. If they deviate from their culturally prescribed identity women also commonly forfeit community protection from violent men. Women entering forbidden professions, speaking out and refusing deference, or rejecting motherhood have all faced these sanctions.

### **DEPENDENCY**

Surrounded by the potential for arbitrary violence, women reduce their independence further by attaching themselves to male protectors. Women avoid many places, e.g. some kinds of bars or late night streets, unless they are in the company of a man. Women commonly look to *their* men for security when other men become threatening. Men accept responsibility to shield the women attached to them from intimidation or abuse by other men.

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<sup>152</sup>Sheffield, Carole J. "Sexual Terrorism." Pp. 3-19 in *Women: A Feminist Perspective*, ed. Jo Freeman (3rd ed). Palo Alto: Mayfield, 1984.

By accepting one man as a shield against others--whether temporary or permanent--a woman accepts a debt of deference and relative subordination to the man. In our modern era this bargain between protection and deference may elude any explicit expression. We shrink from its crudeness and disguise it. Still, women use men as guardians from others and men do not yield this service for free.

### **PAST AND PRESENT**

All these effects of male violence and harassment have varied historically. At one time, the law and social mores gave men great latitude to practice violence toward female dependents and women lacking any male protector. Then men could openly claim the legitimate right to beat their wives. Women could hope for legal protection or retribution against potential transgressors only if they obeyed the rules. They had to accept their dependency on men and families and conform obediently to gender prescriptions.

For more than a century, social rejection of male violence has been on the rise. Over time the legal restrictions and cultural disapproval of male violence have grown. Women have gained civil and economic independence. As a result, the consequences described above are much more transparent for the past than the present. Nonetheless, while it is true that male violence toward women is less now than at some other periods, it is an error to allow our discomfort with the explicit description of these effects to mislead us into believing they are no longer relevant.

### **RESENTMENT AND RESISTANCE**

Women's fear and dependency produced by the pattern of violence between the sexes reinforces and increases gender conflict. As discussed, women come to possess a general terror of the possibility for male violence. This anxiety causes them to restrict their activities. They pass up opportunities. They avoid gender inappropriate behavior. And they defer to those men whom they use as protection against all others. Unavoidably, this produces great resentment among women. The sanctions against displaying such resentment cause it to be hidden. Sometimes women even turn it inward to the point of self-loathing. This hostility joined with dependence encourages indirect means of resistance. With women this has often meant the use of manipulation and sexual resistance. But women's expression of generalized anger toward men also magnifies the hostility and frustration men already feel toward women. This in turn increases men's aggressive impulses.

Thus the pattern of male violence adds to women's subordination by restricting them to acceptable female activities and increasing their deference

toward men. Women's efforts to defy this pattern will generally fail. Moreover, their resistance exacerbates the violence they are combating.

### **What Causes the Pattern of Violence Between Women and Men?**

To explain the role of violence in the subordination of women it is not enough to establish the range and magnitude of that violence and to show how it contributes to sustaining gender inequality. In addition, we need to explain why and how this pattern of violence occurs.

It is the pattern of violence rather than the identity of the men who commit it that concerns us. We want to explain the rate of violence rather than explain why some men are more violent than others.

The more extreme form that violence takes, then the fewer men who commit it. Rapists are rare. But large numbers of men engage in lesser forms of violence. Recall, for example, that about two million men act violently toward their wives annually in the United States. Most men engage in some harassment or symbolic acts that reinforce women's fears. Moreover, almost all men accept the conditions of women's anxiety over male violence. They may condemn it in the abstract but they ignore it in practice.

Thus while only a small minority of men assault women with serious violence, their actions are embedded in, and sustained by, a larger pattern of violence. This pattern incorporates all women and men in the society. It is this pattern that demands explanation.

### **RECASTING THE QUESTION**

A good way to gain insight into this problem is to turn it inside out. Let's ask a different question. Why do women not act as violently toward men as do men toward women?

This twist of thought may seem surprising at first. A more ordinary and obvious approach would focus on why men display so much violence. This easily leads to an apparently self-evident inference. Since the pattern of violence reinforces male power, men must practice violence to sustain their power. This reasoning has become commonplace in feminist writing.<sup>153</sup> This idea (to which I return below) holds some truth, but begs the question.

Surely if violence gives a group power, reciprocal violence by women should also improve women's social position. So why don't women do the same as men? The solution to the problem of violence requires us to focus on the relation

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<sup>153</sup>For example in Brownmiller, Dworkin.

between women and men and the differences between their behavior. It is a mistake to look only at men.<sup>154</sup>

Shifting the theoretical problem toward the relative absence of female violence alerts us to ask comparative questions. Do the sexes differ in the motive to use violence? Do they differ in the means to use violence?

Efforts to account for male violence based on common sense have suggested some misleading ideas. These ideas emphasize inherent differences. They claim men's strength, or men's aggressiveness, or even men's penis account for male violence. Before considering better ideas, let's see what is wrong with these.

### **WELL BEATEN PATHS TO NOWHERE**

*Do the Strong Prevail?* Asked to explain the imbalance in violence between the sexes, most people will include mention of men's greater strength. Women, they suggest, can't assault men because they are just too weak. This assessment has a surface validity. Men are bigger and stronger in most couples. Nonetheless, this idea represents faulty reasoning.

Physical strength does not normally determine the capacity for violence. This would only be true only if unarmed individuals come upon each other in some isolated place. Otherwise, weapons minimize the significance of size differences.

Women who carry and are willing to use weapons can defeat enraged husbands or anonymous rapists who depend merely on the advantages of strength. Similarly, collective violence defeats individual violence. A group of women can effectively beat up a wife batterer, no matter how large and strong he is.

This means that men's strength advantage can only give them an advantage for violence if women are unwilling or unable to use weapons or band together in self defense. Strength differences cannot explain women's lack of violence toward men. Instead, the issue of strength differentials leads to a greater problem. Why have women not used weapons or numbers in their defense?<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>154</sup>This conceptualization of the problem does not assume that violence is a natural activity of all humans that has somehow been suppressed in women. Instead, it assumes that there is no consequential inherent gender difference in the potential for violence. The problem is to explain what social conditions bring out this potential more among men than women. To do this, it is as necessary to ask why women do not act more violently (given that their circumstances certainly provide as much provocation) as to ask why men do. When asked together, these become two sides of the same question.

<sup>155</sup>A minor defect in this explanation for male violence is that it mistakenly encourages the assumption that men's strength advantage in couples is the simple result of biological destiny. This is false. Much of men's strength advantage results from the greater conditioning men experience while growing. And while the average size of men is greater than the average size of women, most men have met women larger than they. If men and

*Fainthearted Women?* Considering the motive to act violently sometimes suggests another flawed explanation. Men might exhibit more violence because they are more aggressive than women. If true, this would sidestep the whole question of differences in the capacity for violence. But this idea also fails on closer examination.

The postulate that women are less aggressive than men proves to be an illusion. It confuses greater male violence with its explanation.

Research has generally shown that boys display more aggression than girls.<sup>156</sup> Yet, the findings must be interpreted carefully. We know that adults socialize boys toward aggressive, competitive behavior and girls away from it, just as boys are taught to enjoy tools and girls to play with dolls. Girls learn to withhold their aggression. Even more they learn to channel it differently than boys. They learn to emphasize psychological warfare conducted with words, emotions, and other means over physical conflict.<sup>157</sup>

The evidence about adult aggressiveness supports this hypothesis. One review of numerous studies of anger and aggressiveness discovered only one consistent difference between adult women and men. Men more often use physical aggression in the absence of anger.<sup>158</sup> This suggests that the sexes have similar aggressive impulses, but divergent responses to them.

But the most telling evidence probably comes from the study of family violence. As discussed above, in their survey of American families, Strauss, Gelles, and Steinmetz found that wives used violence toward their spouses just

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women were randomly paired, men would be larger in the majority of couples but women would be larger in a significant minority. But considerably fewer couples with a larger woman occur in practice. What does this mean? It suggests that men and women avoid creating couples that would reduce men's physical advantages. This implies that a significant social process ensures that men have greater strength than their wives, rather than the outcome being a simple product of biology. This does not refute the possible significance of men's greater strength, but shows that a process of social selection reinforces and exaggerates the natural differences between women's and men's physiques.

<sup>156</sup>Maccoby, Eleanor E. And Jacklin, Carol Nagy. *The Psychology of Sex Differences*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974.

<sup>157</sup>This means that much of the research on differences in aggression begins with faulty assumptions because it fails to define aggression in a gender neutral manner. When studying aggressive motivation, it is inappropriate to make restrictive assumptions about the forms of behavior used as indicators of the motivational state.

<sup>158</sup>Frodi, Ann M.; Macaulay, Jacqueline; and Thome, Pauline Ropert. "Are Women Always Less Aggressive than Men? A Review of the Experimental Literature." *Psychological Bulletin* 84 (1977): 534-660.

as often as did husbands. Women were less effective, but not less expressive of hostility.

In short, women do not experience fewer aggressive impulses than men, but women are much less likely to engage in violence as a result. The explanation lies elsewhere.<sup>159</sup>

*For the Want of a Penis . . .* Another common sense explanation for women foregoing violence toward men suggests simply that women are incapable of raping men. This is a widely heard response to questions about rape. And rape is the archetype of violence toward women. Obviously this idea falls short because it does not apply to the other forms of violence by men against women. But this idea arises so often, we should pursue it further. Its logical flaws are revealing.

Curiously, it is entirely the wrong question to ask if women can rape men. The relations between the sexes are not symmetric. Women would use a different form of violence to express the same kind of sexual hostility that leads men to rape.

As discussed above, men rape to express anger and dominance, not sexuality. Extreme violence of men towards women emphasizes sexual violation (ie., rape) because women depend on sexual resistance--accompanied by a morality of virtue or a culture of provocation or both--as a resource against male power. By forcing sex on a woman, a man attacks what he sees as her source of power over him, stripping her of her security.

If a woman forces sex on a man, it would not be a violation similar to rape. Recall that the inequality between women and men in modern societies produces an opposition characterized by female sexual resistance and male sexual obsession. Consequently, women would come closest to an analogous violation of men through castration.<sup>160</sup> Through castration, or some similar attack on a man's sexual potential, women can halt a man's sexual activity. This corresponds

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<sup>159</sup>Biologically oriented explanations also sometimes make much ado about differences between female and male hormones. It is suggested that testosterone makes men more aggressive than women (and accounts for variations in the aggressiveness of men). Overall, the evidence does not support this position. The relationship between testosterone levels and aggressiveness in males is meager if it exists at all. Such a hormonal explanation of the preponderance of male violence and harassment compared to women would make sense only if two conditions held true: first, that there was a strong relationship between hormonal levels and aggressiveness among men, and second, that all men consistently show a higher level of aggressiveness than all women. Neither of these is true.

<sup>160</sup>It is impossible for there to be any exact female counterpart to rape because sexuality does not have the same significance as a resource for men as it does for women.

to men's use of rape to force sex onto a woman. The question then becomes, why don't women castrate men as often as men rape women?

On first examination, this may appear too extreme. Consider, however, some supporting ideas. Efforts at castration may take a range of concrete forms. These go from the merely symbolic to the effective cutting up of a man's genitals. While women's attempts for the surgical extreme are rare, their forays into symbolic castration are common. The image of the castrating woman has had long currency in our culture. Men's anxieties over castration, both real and symbolic, are well known. These fears are the counterpart of women's fears of rape. Conversely, men's hostile fantasies of raping women probably find their equivalent in women's hostile fantasies of castration. As is true of other forms of violence, however, for reasons yet to be explained, women are much more likely to limit themselves to symbolic violence and psychological assaults.

Psychological castration may be more apropos as the counterpart of rape than physical assault, anyway. While women's sexuality is a source of power, men's sexuality is an expression of power. Men's power comes from elsewhere. Symbolic castration does not limit itself to men's sexual powers, but extends to belittling a man's general competence and rendering him ineffective. The term *castrating bitch* refers to women who undermine men's sense of worthiness and their superiority over women. A castrating woman is one who uses psychological and intellectual skills to deny men the superiority that their structural position would otherwise award them. Recall that rape is motivated by anger and the desire to prove power. The complementary act by women must also be an attack on men's sense of power and security, and it is women's attempts to do this that earn them the pejorative characterization of *castrating*. In both rape and symbolic castration, power, not sex, is the critical issue.

The analysis to this point has shown that neither relative weakness nor a deficiency of aggressive impulses can account for women acting violently toward men less than happens in the reverse. This implies that social conditions must cause women either to express aggression by means other than physical violence or to suppress their violent impulses entirely. We must therefore ask how and why women and men typically have different opportunities and consequences associated with the use of violence as a result of their social inequality.

**WHO HOLDS THE WHIP?**

A similar pattern of unreciprocated violence also characterizes other systems of social inequality, and it is helpful to compare the problem of gender violence to them. Lords practice unreciprocated violence against serfs. Members of the slave holding class have a right to injure slaves. Even parents have a right to punish their children. In none of these cases can members of the subordinate group practice violence toward the dominant group.

Several common conditions appear to account for the low rates of violence by members of the subordinate group against their *bettors* in each of these systems. Members of the subordinate group do not own weapons and lack experience with them. Members of the subordinate group are tied as dependents to members of the dominant group. They lack autonomous organization. Together these conditions mean that members of the subordinate group are ill prepared for collective violence and that they have limited resources as individuals.

On the other side, members of the dominant group view any violence toward themselves by a subordinate as a provocation to collective rebellion. They therefore close ranks to punish the violator. Moreover, the dominant group controls the means to collective violence through the legal system (and military). They use it to selectively punish individual violence by members of the subordinate group against the dominant group. They limit the penalties against the dominant group for similar violence.

In short, by various mechanisms the collective might of the dominant group empowers them as individuals to exercise violence toward the subordinate group. It simultaneously prevents people in the subordinate group from adopting either equivalent collective organization or individual violence. Gender shows a similar pattern linking inequality to violence.

**IT'S HARD TO HIT WHEN YOU'RE DOWN**

As individuals, women are at a disadvantage compared to men less because of differences in strength than because they are inexperienced in combat and the use of weapons. Women rarely own guns. Few were in the military. They have little experience of physical combat as youths. Most have less athletic skill than men. Women are effectively barred from pursuits by which men gain these advantages. They face social disapproval if they attempt to transgress the norms through individual effort.

*One Against Many.* Women have had to rely on their individual capabilities for aggression, however undeveloped. They have generally been dependent on men. Meager employment opportunities and a marginal political status have forced women to sustain their ties to men to protect their social identity and way



of life. This has made them afraid to extend help to each other if it were to jeopardize their relations with men. Women's domestic responsibility has deprived them of the freedom and structural supports that men have. Without these, women could not create ties to give them mutual support against men.

*Organized Strength.* Moreover, men's dominance of the legal and political systems has given them institutionalized support to use violence. In their extreme form, some legal systems have granted men the right to kill their wives. In contrast, women have been subject to severe penalties for any violence. Legal systems like our own have shown a blind eye on male violence against women so long as it did not threaten the rights of other men or outrage public standards. In part, this simply reflects the distorted vision of male holders of power who believe the ideology of male domination and male rights. In part, it has also represented self-conscious consideration of the requirements for male power. In past centuries, before the legitimacy of male dominance had become shaky and suspect, legislators, judges, and social commentators openly expressed the belief that men's right of violence against *their* women was an important tool keeping women in their place.

The ultimate cause of unreciprocated male violence toward women is the political and economic power of men that allows male violence while restraining female violence. Inequality and the complex pattern of interminable conflicts between the sexes engenders enormous distrust, frustration, and anger on both sides. But only men can express such feelings through harassment and violence. The one sided exercise of violence and intimidation also reinforces power.

Male violence, therefore, is not merely expressive, but it is also instrumental. Men who use harassment against unattached women discover that it succeeds in keeping them in their place. Men who use intimidation with their spouses may find it an effective means of maintaining wifely subservience.

In the abstract, this could occur in the opposite direction as well. But women cannot get away with using violence effectively against individual men. Women do not engage in violence against men, because women lack social power.

*Male Violence and Male Silence.* None of this implies, or depends on, universal male violence toward women. In modern societies, and probably all others, most men never engage in serious violent acts toward women. But almost all men participate in the pattern of harassment and intimidation with some regularity, and they gain the benefits of women's fear of more violence because men generally tolerate other men's violence toward women. This does not mean that men anywhere practice or condone uncontrolled violence toward women. But it does mean that men have consistently overlooked most minor forms of intimidation practiced by other men, unless their *own* women were the object of it. Moreover, they have been inconsistent and sluggish about protecting

unattached women from unpredictable violence by anonymous men or protecting dependent women from their husbands.

### **The Motives and Effects of Aggression**

Because of their subordinate status, women had to rely on the subtler techniques of psychological warfare, while men could indulge in physical intimidation and violence. Women have lacked weapons and combat experience, they have been economically dependent on men, they have had no autonomous organization, and they have been unsupported by male dominated political and legal systems. As a result, men have known that they need not fear social retribution and that they could get help from other men if they needed it, while women have known they were isolated and vulnerable to punishment. Men have had and used coercive power. Women have had to use the means at their command: sexual resistance has been one and psychological aggression another.

The opposition between female and male sexuality has also caused the sexes to express their aggression differently. Owing to gender inequality and conflict combined with the unavailability of sex, women's sexuality in our society came to emphasize sexual resistance while men's sexuality embodied an obsessive search for sex and conquest. In consequence, the aggressive impulses of each sex toward the other became attached to the objective of violating the other's sexuality. By rape, men can overwhelm women's efforts at sexual resistance, eliminating women's control over their sexuality and robbing them of their attached sense of integrity. Through castration women can carry sexual resistance to the extreme of denying men any continued sexuality. Both sexes thus express their aggression toward each other by attacking the source of their deepest resentments and each other's power. But men have monopolized coercive power in society and therefore only they have used physical abuse ranging from harassment through battering to rape.

This does not mean that men have been free to use violence against women without sanction. Men have always tried to protect their dependent females against the violence of other men, or they at least promised protection if women accepted *their* man's dominance. And displays of unpredictable, unrestrained male violence against women that threatened public security have commonly provoked suppressive efforts by the surrounding community. But men, nonetheless, have had a liberty to intimidate and physically abuse women dependent on them and women lacking a male protector. Women have not possessed a similar liberty to use physical aggression toward men, because they have been socially subordinate.

The pattern of aggression between the sexes has reinforced women's subordination. Women's use of psychological ploys to belittle and frustrate men

have probably been effective in reducing the quality of men's lives. But it has also increased men's desires to control women without having any significant effect on men's social power. In contrast, men's use of physical aggression, while it surely similarly increased women's anger at men, did effectively reduce women's social power. Male violence toward women comprises a small minority of men who commit violent rape, a sizeable minority who beat their wives and other women, the majority of men who sometimes harass women, and all men who accept and legitimate male violence. Since women never have known which men might commit serious violence or what conditions might prompt any individual man to use violence, they have lived in a terror of men that has circumscribed their lives and made them willing to accept dependence for safety.

Because the imbalance in violence between the sexes owes more to inequality than it contributes, the increases in gender equality over the past two centuries has included a decline in men's liberty to use unreciprocated violence against women. We may be more aware of male violence now, but that is because it no longer appears legitimate. Also, when men had an unchallenged capacity to intimidate women with the threat of violence, they may not have often needed to carry out the threat for it to be effective. Men today have considerably less freedom to use violence against wives, daughters, or women without attachments to men. Violence and intimidation persist, however, and they cannot be expected to disappear while inequality continues.

### Appendix: Pornography

Interpreted as a form of symbolic violence, pornography has elicited a great amount of attention by both feminists and anti-feminists in recent years.

One popular feminist interpretation claims that all or most pornography represents male desires for submissive and humiliated women is probably wrong. This interpretation concerns what motivates interest in the majority of pornography, for example, the nude photography in popular magazines like *Playboy* and *Penthouse*.

Unquestionably, some pornography portrays women (or men) in extremely degrading and violated ways. Most thoughtful people in our culture would condemn vivid visual displays of bound, maimed women, undergoing severe physical torture. They would agree that such material represents a form of hostility toward women that should not be popularized.

The interpretation that all pornography is symbolic violence suggests that popular pornography merely represents the same objectives in veiled form. Men supposedly use the images of naked women to conjure violent fantasies.

It is not, however, valid to infer that extreme forms of some phenomena simply reveal the essential meaning otherwise disguised in all the more ordinary forms. The motives prompting general interest in novels are not revealed by examining terrible, outrageous, or bizarre novels. The true value of human morality is not defined by the behavior of psychopaths. Extreme examples of any phenomenon can be worthy of explanation and they can often contribute to our understanding of the general phenomenon. But it is always wrong to assume that the extreme examples offer purer instances of the basic phenomenon. It is more likely that extreme examples involve mutations of the phenomenon that minimize and reduce the visibility of its general causes.

An emphasis on interpretation over explanation in feminist analyses of pornography contributes to the problem. *Interpretation* is an analytic approach more at home in literary pursuits than in social science. Interpretation concerns an identification of the symbolic meaning attached to some phenomenon. Thus, the interpretation of a fictional work tries to describe one way in which the reader can think of or understand the work. The idea of interpretation is considerably less restrictive than explanation, and has weaker demands for evidence. It necessarily invokes a subjective approach and commonly denies that there is any objective means to determine the relative truth of two interpretations. Here I want to explicitly emphasize that I am concerned with the explanation of pornography.

The most evident common feature of popular visual pornography is that it depicts women as sexually wanton. The women portrayed in various stages of

undress and positions of sexual display appear to be inviting, aroused, and uninhibited. The models are selected and photographed for attractiveness, of course, which is a simple response to people's general preference to fantasize sex with more attractive partners. But the models in popular pornographic photographs are not presented as if they were submitting to an undesired and feared sexual assault, as many feminist interpretations imply. Instead, they are portrayed to communicate desire. They do not appear passive, but excited. In short, they suggest not women who resentfully allow men to use their bodies, but fantasied women who reciprocate the active, intense sexual desire a man might feel.

That men should find pornography satisfying because it depicts women as sexually wanton is also consistent with the frustrations common to sexual interactions between women and men in this society. As discussed before, sexual identities in this society provoke men to seek sexual encounters and women to resist them. Men's experience of women's sexuality commonly involves female passivity, disinterest, and inhibition in the face of male demands. Men respond by feeling sexually frustrated and rejected. Not surprisingly, this means that most men look for support in forming compensatory fantasies in pornography. Popular pornography comes to their aid not by displaying reluctant, submissive females a man can control, but enthusiastic, excited women who embrace the man's desires with their own.

Violent pornography appeals to those men whose frustration with sexual relations, combined with all the other frustrations possible in the relations between the sexes in this society, have resulted in a hostility toward women that overshadows other components. Some degree of hostility toward the other sex is apparent in most people, and must be recognized as an almost unavoidable result of the system of sex and gender. There is no reason to assume that it is more prevalent or intense in either sex. Nor should it be assumed the dominant orientation of either sex toward the other. But it does become dominant among a minority, and for the male minority violent pornography fills their needs for compensatory fantasies by depicting women who punished as a sexual act.