

Domestic violence: It can happen to men, too

Studies increasingly suggest men are victims more often than we think; a toll-free national helpline in Maine is often the only source of help men can find

By David M. Fitzpatrick
SPECIAL SECTIONS WRITER

In a society where it's commonly held that 95 percent of domestic-violence victims are women, Jan Brown isn't the quietest attendee at domestic-violence seminars. At one meeting, a speaker was discussing how law enforcement determines the abuser in a situation. If a man slaps a woman and then she clubs him with a frying pan, he asked, who is the primary aggressor? It's the man, he said, because he hit her first.

"So I put up my hand and said, 'So if she slapped him and he got a frying pan, who would be the pre-dominant aggressor?'" Brown said. "And he goes, 'Is he in fear?' You would never ask that of women."

Brown has crusaded since 2000 to educate people that far more men are victims of domestic violence than we think, and that they deserve the same help women do. The Maine Coalition to End Domestic Violence assured me that their nine members do, in fact, serve men, but Brown says that she receives many calls from men who were unable to get services they need.

"I get calls from guys in Maine who say 'I tried to get help... they said they couldn't help me,'" she said.

Brown's mission began when a friend confided in her about the abuse he was suffering in his marriage. She set out to locate services, but was surprised to find that none existed, and even more surprised at the cold response she had from domestic-violence groups that helped women.

So she launched the toll-free Domestic Abuse Helpline for Men and Women on Oct. 27, 2000, and received 14 calls the first day of operation. Today, the service fields about 550 calls per month from around the country.

"Help can be anything from phone support to court advocacy to emergency shelter," Brown said. "Some guys call up and say 'I just want to talk. I want to work this out, and have somebody listen, and [have] somebody who's going to believe me.'"

Nationwide, there are over 2,000 services for battered women. Only a handful of them make the same services available to male and female victims.

Many men who call with claims of being abused by a woman are disbelieved and not helped. Because of the disparity in services, DAHMMW specializes in offering supportive services to men in relationships with abusive women.

The MCEDV claims that they also specialize in men, and of course that term is open to interpreta-

Social Metamorphosis

Since domestic violence found its spotlight about 30 years ago, the national force to help women has grown into a social-service juggernaut. That's great, says Brown, but the scales have tipped the other way: The law, the police, and domestic-violence groups routinely assume men are the

Brown says it's because of the belief that abused women are afraid of men, something echoed to me during several discussions with people from the MCEDV. That's certainly understandable, but Brown said it works both ways.

"Some of these guys are just as fearful of women," she said. "So why not teach the educators that a victim's a victim, and they can learn from each other?"

Brown says the women-only model is old-fashioned. In 1998, a co-ed shelter for victims of domestic violence opened in South Valley, Utah, and has been a fantastic success. And a model program in California has treated men and women for 17 years.

Domestic-violence programs regularly mix lesbians with other women, although abused lesbians are likely afraid of being abused by women. The idea is to not cultivate the belief that either gender should be inherently feared — that victims can find non-abusive relationships.

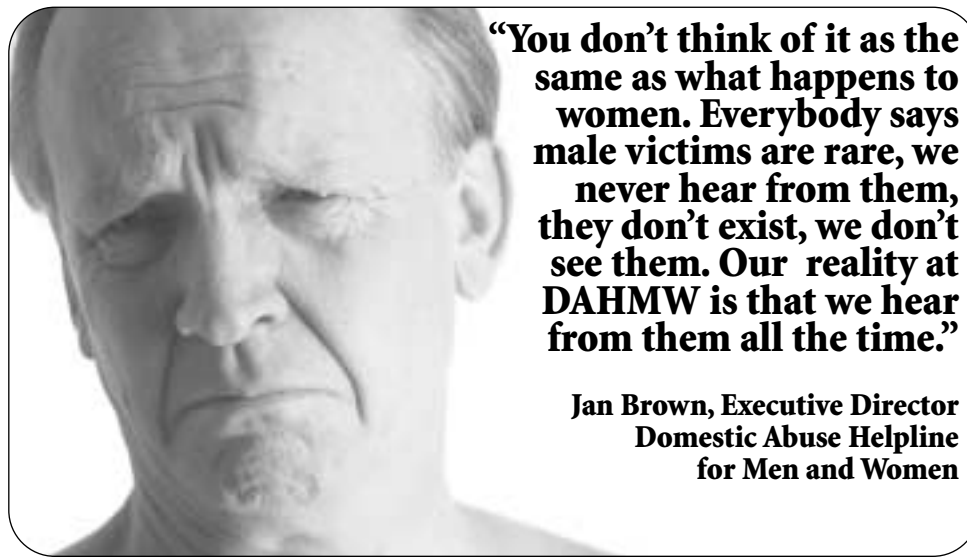
The Abusive Woman

In the old days, women were frequently disbelieved when they claimed abuse. Now, it seems, it's the men's turn to not be believed.

Law enforcement is often trained by battered-women's organizations, and they seem to hold that belief that 95 percent of victims are women. That number appears to come from a 1994 Department of Justice study, "Violence Between Intimates," and reputable domestic-violence programs online routinely cite it.

But a 2000 Department of Justice study reported that women were assaulted by intimate partners 1.3 million times per year, while men were assaulted by intimate partners 835,000 times. That puts male victims at nearly 40 percent of all intimate-partner violence cases. And a 2005 CDC report indicated that about a third of victims are men. Neither study notes who the perpetrators are, and many men may be victims of same-sex partners, but the numbers show that men may be victims far more than we think.

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**Jan Brown, Executive Director
Domestic Abuse Helpline
for Men and Women**

tion. About 80 percent of the DAHMMW's callers are abused men and others looking for help for a male victim, while the MCEDV serves mostly women. The MCEDV and its members insist they offer the same services to men, but that they don't provide group shelters for them. In the fiscal year from Oct. 1, 2007 through Sept. 30, 2008, the MCEDV reported that its nine member agencies provided sheltering for 961 people: 513 women, 443 children, and five men; men represented barely more than a half of 1 percent, and women outnumbered them more than 102 to one. Of those, 12,547 bed nights were for women; 46 bed nights were for men, representing 0.37 percent of total bed nights.

Those numbers show a great disparity of men served as compared to women, possibly the result of many factors, including fewer men seeking services.

abusers, not the abused.

"You don't think of it as the same as what happens to women," Brown said. "Everybody says male victims are rare, we never hear from them, they don't exist, we don't see them. Our reality at DAHMMW is that we hear from them all the time."

But men have nowhere to go; there are no battered-men's shelters in Maine. A recent federal-court decision in California says that while domestic-violence services must provide support regardless of gender, they don't have to co-house different genders. The result seems to be that men, including here in Maine, might get put up in a hotel for a few days or whatever the program's budget will allow, but lack the security of group shelters that women can access.

So what's the problem with co-ed shelters?

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Abuse

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There are plenty of studies, though, and they usually have wide ranges of numbers that don't always agree with each other. And even if men are coming forth more to report abuse by female intimate partners, they face an uphill battle when the police are called: When a man and a woman both claim abuse, the man is usually considered the primary aggressor.

Brown says that gives abusive women a great amount of leverage. While men often deal with women's physical abuse against them, it's the psychological abuse they don't handle well. Abusive women often control men by threatening to tell the cops he hit her first — or that she'll take his children away from him. That often scares men into compliance faster than anything, and is something Brown hears on the helpline all the time.

Abusive women who control the money in the household often have men completely under their thumbs. Disabled men or stay-at-home dads might not be able to escape their abusers so easily.

Time for Change

Brown has worked to become a member of the MCEDV, but so far has been unsuccessful. She'd like to be more involved with others in Maine, as she says it's difficult to function without collaboration. The MCEDV says the key requirement to being a member is that an organization must be a full-service organization, and DAHMMW doesn't qualify. MCEDV also pointed out that only nine full-service organizations are members, while there are many smaller groups that don't qualify, but with which the MCEDV works on a regular basis.

Brown says the first step is to educate everyone that domestic violence knows no gender boundaries, and her cause is starting to get attention. Denise A. Hines, Ph.D. of Clark University and Emily M. Douglas of Bridgewater State College, both in Massachusetts, conducted a study in 2007 and 2008 about abused men. They concluded that there are men who sustain severe violence and controlling behaviors from female partners and who seek help from various services, most often mental-health practitioners. A minority seek help from domestic-violence service agencies, but usually find them to be not helpful at all.

"These men report that, when they contact such agencies, they are referred to batterers' programs, are told that they must be somehow responsible for their own abuse, or, even worse, are laughed at," said Hines.

Hines and Douglas also found that, for every such experience, their odds of suffering post-traumatic stress disorder significantly increase.

In a second study, Hines and Douglas surveyed a random sample of directors of domestic-violence agencies nationwide. About half said they provide housing services to men, and most provide legal services. Hines noted an apparent disconnect between

reports from help-seekers and these agencies, with male victims reporting being turned away by many programs. Hines said that reports from the programs reflect the point of view of the director, not the entire agency, and the director's intentions may not get communicated to the front-line workers.

"There is clearly a need for increased training and education about male victims for mental-health practitioners, domestic-violence agency staffs, law-enforcement officials, and policy- and decision-makers," said Hines. "We know that there are men who are sustaining severe abuse from their female partners, but because domestic violence is viewed as a women's issue, these men have a hard time finding help."

Hines said that when men are turned away and accused of being abusers, they're further isolated. "By simply providing male victims with the same assistance, validation, and respect we give to female victims, we would be preventing much suffering," Hines said.

The majority of the men surveyed also have children, most of whom have witnessed their mothers abusing their fathers. "When we turn away the male victim and invalidate his experience, we do the same thing to his children," Hines said.

The Here and Now for DAHMMW

Those studies may bring more attention to the issue, but in the meantime Brown's national helpline runs on less than \$15,000 per year. There are no paid employees; about 50 volunteers, including the 28 people (mostly women) who work the phones, make it happen. Without being a member of the MCEDV, Brown said her organization misses out on funding opportunities it cannot get without being a member — but that, without that money, she cannot likely become a full-service organization in order to join. It's quite a Catch-22.

While Brown would love to have more robust funding and a paid staff, at the very least she needs more volunteers across the U.S. Many of the helpline volunteers are college students, and Brown talks with a handful of college students every year who are writing papers on the subject. She sees this as the early stages of changing preconceived ideas of domestic violence. Many of college students who volunteer aren't surprised to hear that men are victims because they have witnessed women being abusive. "It's a problem for everybody," Brown said. "No matter who you are or what gender you are, it doesn't matter. If you need help, you should get it."

If you are in an abusive relationship, call the Domestic Abuse Helpline for Men and Women at (888) 7-HELPLINE or visit www.DAHMMW.org. If you know someone, male or female, who is in an abusive relationship, please encourage that person to call or visit.

To learn more about the recent studies by Denise Hines, Ph.D. and Emily Douglas, visit Dr. Hines' "Men's Experience with Partner Aggressions Project" page at www.clarku.edu/faculty/dhines.

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Denise Hines, Ph.D.
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