



Figure 1.-Violence Against Men, Methods of Control, by Mr. James Hays June 2004.

### **Defining Domestic Violence and Abuse**

Just type in "domestic violence" in your search engine or step into any Family or Town Court in New York State and open any of the myriad of reference pamphlets regarding family violence and you will discover that the paradigm which has been constructed is one in which men are the perpetrators of domestic violence and abuse and

women, with “their” children as chattel, the victims of violence and abuse. The “accepted” exceptions to this rule, abused men, are written off as a statistical exception, an aberration. With this definition of the problem in place the systems to deal with domestic violence look at this from this paradigm only and are geared to respond and assist only when the problem fits the paradigm. Male victims of domestic violence are viewed as having the ability to protect themselves and are not viewed as being in need of services.

Domestic violence is described as “behavior - emotional, psychological, physical, or sexual abuse - that one person in an intimate relationship uses in order to control the other.”<sup>1</sup> It is in the application of this definition that we see the gender biases built into the system. The behavior described is that which is defined from the feminine perspective, that is, actions which women deem “controlling”. What of the male perspective regarding domestic violence? A look at figure 1 gives us an overview of the actions that men view as violent. Many of these actions when viewed from the feminine perspective are considered a woman’s individual rights. Because they are recognized as “women’s rights” but not recognized as “men’s rights”, any action on the part of a man to exercise his rights are viewed as an attempt to “control” the rights of women, an abusive action by definition.

The definition of “domestic violence” has also been watered down to include “domestic abuse” for those actions where government has taken an interventionist role. Domestic Violence in New York State Law is generally recognized as actions which would constitute a violation the NYS Penal Law in relation to menacing, harassment

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<sup>1</sup> Rio, Barbara, CSW, New York State Coalition Against Domestic Violence; Theresa M. Zubretsky, New York State Office for the Prevention of Domestic Violence; Sherry Frohman, CSW, New York State Coalition Against Domestic Violence. Dvsurvival kit, at <http://www.dvguide.com>.

disorderly conduct, assault between persons who are related, legally married, formerly married or have a child in common<sup>2</sup>. Domestic Abuse is those actions which a person feels are being used to control their behavior such as access to “family” income, making all the decisions, making “her” afraid by looks or gestures, or threatening to leave her. Domestic Abuse is defined by the recipient and may not be similarly defined by the person doing the action. Again, because the definition of abuse includes only those actions perceived by women to be abuse and they are considered to be the victim. Additionally, the drive to end “family violence”, that is any abuse directed towards women, has resulted in an acceptance of government intervention in the family even when the actions don’t meet provable criminal acts on the part of an individual. A woman who has been denied access to the checking account and hollered at by her husband for going out drinking excessively and carousing with men at night can dial 911 and tell the police that she is “afraid of” her husband and *he* stands a good chance of being arrested for menacing and at a minimum will suffer the indignity of government intervention including questioning about personal behavior, a lecture and advisement to restrain himself under threat of arrest. Her actions are defined as being within her rights, his actions are viewed as controlling her rights, and the response is to ensure that she has “control’ unlimited by him.

### **Male Victims of Physical Violence**

Regardless of the conduct of a party in an intimate relationship it is accepted that a violent response is not the answer. That is if the violent response is on the part of a

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<sup>2</sup> NYS Family Court Act Section 812 Subdivision 1.

man. Violent behavior on the part of women towards men is accepted in society<sup>3</sup>. Many have also dismissed male victims of domestic violence as perpetrators who were injured when women fought back in “self defense”. Both attitudes are consistent with the paradigm of male perpetrator-female victim. And what of the “few” men who are victimized? Well they can take care of themselves is the attitude used to dismiss the inaction on the part of service providers.

When an abused man does seek out assistance the overall response from service providers is one of disbelief and distrust. Domestic violence counselors are often trained to treat male callers with suspicion because they may be calling to find an abused woman. For those that do find a sympathetic ear they soon find out that the services are designed to handle women and that there are is no space for male victims. Law enforcement, prosecutors and court personnel are similarly distrustful of abused men and abused men often find themselves ridiculed as being less than manly. The paradigm of male perpetrator-female victim doesn't allow a response that doesn't fit the paradigm.

### **Where Are We Going From Here?**

What are the trends for the future? I believe that person(s) who enter help and assistance fields do so out of a kind heart. There is no malice on the part of any one individual, only incorrect education and application of facts and circumstances. To this end we have seen a greater acceptance of male abuse victims. Shelters and service providers are now beginning to accept abused men, at least in counseling and other services if not for shelters as none remain available. The growing focus of service

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<sup>3</sup> Cook, Philip W. *Abused Men: The Hidden Side of Domestic Violence*(1997) Westport, CT: Praeger Pg. 129 Figure4.1.

providers appears to be acceptance of an individual in need and not a response based on biases and assumptions.

Defining the problem is the first step. Then men must begin to speak out and define those actions which they feel are abusive towards them to others, especially physical violence perpetrated against them. Men are increasingly speaking out regarding the lack of reproductive rights; lack of parental rights and unequal treatment by government and society. Acceptance that no one, regardless of gender, deserves to be abused should be the standard together with equal treatment for those with like circumstance regardless of gender.