

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE: THE LEGACY
Mid-Columbia Symposium
October 25, 1996
by Judith Armatta, J.D.

Childhood is a time of carefree innocence. It is a time where children are protected from the harsh realities of the world they're born into. Where they're given freedom to play, laugh, experience the beauty of the world. Where their needs are anticipated and met by adult caretakers. Where they're attended to and loved. That's our national myth and aspiration. For some children it's true. Sadly, not for all.

For a child whose mother is being terrorized by her partner, the world looks very different from our hopeful image. It is a world of hypervigilance, where the child looks through frightened eyes like a wild animal in an environment that harbors potential danger at every turn. The child listens for footsteps, for a change in tone of voice, a hardening of muscles, a glazing of the eyes, an imperceptible rise in tension. Ever on alert, the child practices invisibility, compliance, obedience, anticipating parental wishes. Or the child acts out in imitation and rage.

It is a world where a child hears a mother belittled, criticized, threatened in torrents of abusive words. Where a father or father surrogate insists on deference to his wishes and disregards those of other family members. Where, despite everyone's efforts to please, there comes the inevitable explosion.

In this world, the child watches the mother being hit, pushed, slapped, punched, choked, kicked, thrown down the stairs. The beating and its aftermath go on far into the night. And the next morning, the child gets up, dresses and goes off to school, a temporary refuge. If the child cannot perform, the sanctuary offered by school may also elude.

The world is also physically dangerous to the child. Standing between mother and father in a futile attempt to protect her, the child is struck. Or knocked down the stairs for looking the wrong way.

The child becomes a caretaker at age 4 or 6 or 9, getting hot packs for mother's black eye, comforting her, listening to her complaints, taking care of younger siblings. The child has no needs of her own. She's hardly present, having taken refuge deep inside herself for safety. Or the child throws tantrums, fights with siblings and playmates, defies teachers and other authority figures, becomes truant, joins a gang, uses drugs and alcohol, is assaultive, perhaps suicidal.

Holidays for these children are often eagerly anticipated, for they are children still, but

nearly always disappointing. The colored lights, packages and decorations of Xmas provide one more forum for a father's control. The fourth of July picnic becomes an opportunity to get drunk and abusive.

Children in these homes are faced with ethical dilemmas far beyond their years. Whether to call police to protect their mother, while sending their father to jail. Or worse, whether to take one life to save another. At 7, 9, 11, 13 children are making these choices.

At 7, "Tom faced a terrible dilemma. . . . [H]e had to judge whether or not his father was going to shoot his mother. His father often picked up the shotgun and threatened his mother whenever he was jealous and thought she might leave. His mother could usually talk him into putting away the gun or call his grandmother to come and talk sense into father. Tonight seemed different. His father seemed more upset than usual and yelled at his mother that he would kill her so nobody else could ever marry her. Tom decided to go to the neighbors to get them to call the police. The police came and used skilled negotiations to avert a tragedy. Tom's father went to jail for six months for threatening his mother and for dangerous use of a weapon. Tom told the shelter staff that he ruined his father's life by calling the police. 'If it wasn't for me, he wouldn't have a criminal record, and maybe my mother would have stayed with him.'"

What if Tom were older and had attempted to defend his mother? More than 60% of boys in jail for murdering a parent or parent figure were abused or witnessed abuse by the decedent.

I'm reminded of a story told by Texas police officer Mark Winn about his violently abusive stepfather. When he and his brother were quite small, they put cleaning solvent in their stepfather's wine. Then they sat themselves down on the sofa to watch him drink it and die. He drank it, but it didn't even make him ill.

It is disturbing to think of two little boys bent on committing murder. It is equally disturbing to think of the abuse that drove these little ones to plan it as the only way out. For me, it is shocking in its familiarity. Before we were old enough to go to school, my sister and I planned my father's death. Our chosen method was to put cleaning solvent in his whiskey bottle. It didn't work for us either.

I wonder how many other children are faced with this dilemma at the age of 4, 5 or 6? If statistics are any reflection, many of you experienced your mother's abuse, even if you didn't attempt to murder her abuser.

Somewhere between 8 and 12 million women have been abused by their intimate partners

in the United States. Every year, at least 1.8 million women experience domestic violence. Between 1500 and 4000 of those are murdered. At the same time, over 3 million children are at risk of exposure to the abuse of their mothers each year.

The effect of intimate partner violence on children has been ignored or minimized. Traditionally, judges in deciding custody ask, "Did he hit the child?" If not, he's considered at least an equally fit parent to have custody. If we consider the world I have described, is there really any question that the child is impacted whether or not he's hit?

Children are affected by domestic violence in three ways. They are accidental victims, invisible victims and intentional victims. I'll address the physical abuse first.

Abuse of a mother is the single greatest risk factor for child abuse. This is a critical fact for prevention and intervention efforts. Professionals who assess for one must assess for the other. Obviously, this means there must be cross training. And, since wife abuse predates child abuse in most cases, early intervention in domestic violence plays a significant role in child abuse prevention.

Studies show that children in homes where mom is being abused are 15 times more likely to be abused themselves than children not in such homes. As Dr. Evan Stark reports on his research at Yale,

"45% of mothers of abused and neglected children were themselves battered, ... if a child was abused (rather than neglected), the mother was more likely to have been beaten as well, and ..., in the vast majority of cases, the same man was responsible for assaulting the mother and child."

There's an important piece of de-mythologizing in this finding and it proves true throughout the country. The myth is embodied in the popular view of abuse: dad hits mom. mom hits child. child kicks dog. Neat, but, for the most part, research doesn't support it. In fact, the primary abusers of women and children are men. Women are the primary neglecters of children. This doesn't mean women don't abuse children. They do, in horrible ways. Nor does it mean women are good and men are bad. It is the result of socially constructed roles, with attendant privileges. If our fears of being discredited and marginalized keep us from acknowledging the gender-basis of domestic violence, we'll never address the root causes. We will continue to have a growth industry in shelters, emergency rooms, jails and social service agencies.

As Dr. Stark reports, studies indicate that from 53-70% of the men who batter their spouses also abuse a child. As I pointed out in my description, children are often hit trying to protect their mothers or they simply get in the way. These are the accidental victims. Children

are also hit intentionally. They are hit because they cry or make too much noise or talk back. Like their mothers, they are hit for any reason and no reason. They are often treated as extensions of their mother and used manipulatively to control the mother.

In 1994, Mikal Gilmore wrote a book about his brother Gary, called Shot in the Heart. Some people may be more familiar with Gary Gilmore and his family from the book by Normal Mailer, The Executioner's Song. Gary Gilmore was raised in Oregon in a family where his father regularly beat his mother and then the children. Gary gained fame after killing two people and successfully lobbying to be executed by firing squad. Here's what his brother Frank Jr. says about their father's abuse.

"When Dad would grab the razor strap and go haywire on us . . ., he wasn't talking to us about anything that we'd done wrong, nor was he telling us how we needed to improve our behavior. It was simply that we had upset him. He was angry with us and it was his way of getting revenge. He wasn't doing it to teach us anything, except possibly to fear him. . ."

His brother Mikal continues,

"Frank Jr. now believes that the beatings had as much to do with the relationship between my father and mother as with any desire to discipline rowdy children. Frank Gilmore would beat his sons until his wife intervened. She would come in and let him know that she was angry, that he had gone far enough, and then he'd start a fight with her."

Nationwide, fathers and father surrogates are responsible for more than 2/3rds of neonaticides and infanticides. Battering often begins when a woman becomes pregnant. 30% of pregnant women are battered. They are twice as likely to miscarry and 4 times more likely to have low birth weight infants than women who are not battered. Battering of the mother accounts for more birth defects than any disease for which we immunize pregnant women.

Studies are also beginning to report an increased risk of sexual abuse to girl children where the mother is battered. One study reports that these girls are six and a half times more likely to be sexually abused. This is not so surprising when we consider that abusive men are narcissistic and self-involved, motivated by the need to control others for their purposes.

Adolescence is a danger time for all children, for battering men cannot tolerate independent self-hood in anyone they perceive as "belonging to them". Tragically, courts are more likely to give fathers custody and extended visitation with adolescents. At the same time, teens face stereotypes of being manipulative, disobedient and less credible than adults. Too many of them learn they are not going to be believed or protected -- and they fall silent until

adulthood when they and society will have to deal with the longterm effects of buried abuse.

The invisible victim is the child who is not hit intentionally or accidentally, but who witnesses the abuse and lives within the pattern that is domestic violence. I'd like to clarify that domestic violence is more than incidents of physical abuse. It is a pattern of coercive control where one partner in an intimate relationship uses his power (social, economic, physical) to make his partner dependent and submissive. Because of its continuing nature within the context of a relationship it is far more dangerous and frightening than most stranger assaults. It involves a variety of tactics, violence being only one, including isolation, name-calling, control over resources and decisions, threats, use of children, abuse of pets and destruction of property.

Invisible victims are often not considered victims at all. As I said earlier, judges too frequently rule that spouse abuse is irrelevant in a custody or visitation dispute if the child has not been hit. Children who "merely" witness abuse of a parent manifest sleep and eating disorders, have higher rates of illness, attempted suicide, drug and alcohol abuse, running away and prostitution and other delinquent behavior. Because of sex role socialization, boys tend to act out more aggressively; girls more passively. Terror at home interferes with the child's cognitive, affective and social development. After all, who is paying attention to the child's development? Often, it's all mom can do to stay alive, deal with the physical and emotional consequences of abuse, and keep the children fed, clothed and physically healthy. Emotional and social development is a luxury. Obviously, school performance may suffer as well.

As Dr. Judith Lewis Herman describes in her book Trauma and Recovery,

"In this climate of profoundly disrupted relationships the child faces a formidable developmental task. She must find a way to form primary attachments to caretakers who are either dangerous or, from her perspective, negligent. she must find a way to develop a sense of basic trust and safety with caretakers who are untrustworthy and unsafe. She must develop a sense of self in relation to others who are helpless, uncaring, or cruel. She must develop a capacity for bodily self-regulation in an environment in which her body is at the disposal of others' needs, as well as a capacity for self-soothing in an environment without solace. She must develop the capacity for initiative in an environment which demands that she bring her will into complete conformity with that of her abuser. And ultimately, she must develop a capacity for intimacy out of an environment where all intimate relationships are corrupt."

While the dad hits mom, mom hits child, child kicks dog theory doesn't explain child abuse in domestic violence homes, there is a grain of truth in it. Women who are being battered experience parenting deficits because of the battering. They are far more likely to physically

discipline their children, which may cross the line to physical abuse. Their primary focus is on their abusive partner and meeting his needs in order to prevent or reduce the violence. Life and death issues take precedence over concern for child development. As mothers experience health problems due to the abuse, they have fewer resources for their children. There is a significant risk for self-medicating with drugs and alcohol. According to one study, abuse preceded alcohol addiction in half of all female alcoholics. Victims of battering are 4 times more likely to report a suicide attempt than non-victims.

It is these deficits on which courts tend to focus in deciding which parent should have custody of the children. It does not occur to many judges that the attitudes which led a man to abuse his wife will also affect his children negatively, such as his low tolerance for individuation and use of physical force to maintain control. Like the rest of society, there is general ignorance of the high correlation between men who abuse spouses and men who abuse children. Too few judges think there is cause for further inquiry when a man who beats the mother of his children claims to be a loving parent. Nor do they seem to consider that the cause of the battering lies with him and will be carried with him into his future relationships. In a study by Daniel Sonkin, 93% of battering men admitted abusing a previous partner. Does this judicial ignorance reflect a hidden belief that battered women are somehow to blame for their abuse?

Before the judge, a battered woman looks like a woman who has been beaten, humiliated and abused over a long period of time. Her batterer looks like your average nice guy, calm, in control, stable, often financially secure. And, quite exceptionally, he wants custody of his kids. Ever since *Kramer v. Kramer*, we have tended to applaud and reward any father exceptional enough to actually want to spend caretaking time with his children. It's not surprising then that fathers are awarded custody of children in the majority of cases where it's contested. I know of no studies that show how many of these custody winning dads are also wife beaters, but I'd guess it's a majority, giving substance to their threat that if she ever leaves he'll take the kids away from her. For women who don't lose in court, the threat is accomplished illegally. Of the more than 350,000 parental kidnapping cases each year, the vast majority are by fathers, over half of whom are known wife abusers.

When women are able to safely leave their abusers, much of the harm done to the children during the abusive relationship is healed. As Stark concludes after reviewing the potential negative impacts on children from experiencing adult domestic violence, "[M]any of these risk factors abate within 6 months to 2 years after a woman and her child enter a shelter for battered woman [sic] or are safely removed from the batterer."

Where children remain in an abusive environment throughout their childhood, the effects of that experience last far into the future. In adulthood, children suffer from post traumatic

stress, suicidal ideation, depression and a wide range of physical ailments. Not to mention their need to catch up with arrested social and affective development.

There is one critical point I'd like to make. It concerns the so-called intergenerational cycle of violence. Here again we have a popular myth: Adults who abuse others were themselves abused as children. More specifically looking at the population of children in homes with a mother-abusing father, we say that boys grow up to be abusers and girls grow up to be victims.

I confess that my first gut objection to this popular conception is that I grew up in one of those homes and I didn't go out looking for comfortable abusive environments to settle down in. In fact, I was quick to leave at the first hint of repeating my mother's role. Now, that doesn't mean I didn't have problems in figuring out how to act in intimate relationships. I wish I had all the money I've spent on therapists over the last two decades. Maybe I wouldn't be living from paycheck to paycheck and I could reduce my personal deficit. Nevertheless, I find it objectionable to "sentence" little boys and girls to adult lives of being perpetrators or victims.

An incident that increased my skepticism of the intergenerational cycle of violence theory occurred when I was a member of the Governor's Task Force on Sex Crimes Against Children. A young father came to testify about the sexual abuse he had experienced as a boy. He broke down in tears when he told us that he worries every day that he might sexually abuse his own children because it happened to him. This man was living a sentence imposed upon him by a society, including the healing professions, that seeks simple solutions to complex problems -- and attempts to confine violence and abuse to "those people," who are separate from and unlike the rest of us.

The truth is messier and requires a lot more of us than identifying and intervening with "dysfunctional" families. Before I get to that, let me say that research so far does not support the intergenerational cycle of violence theory. It does show there is a greater risk of being violent for children who are abused or exposed to violence. But that is not the same as saying abused children become abusers, or all abusive parents were themselves abused. A literature review indicates that perhaps as many as 30% of children who are abused become abusive parents. That means 70% do not. Now that's significant.

As Dr. Stark concludes,

"[T]he vast majority of currently violent adults were not abused as children. Even among those who were [abused as children], the vast majority. . . [70-71%] do not become violent adults. While boys experiencing violence as children in . . . [one study] are disproportionately violent as adults, 90% of all children from violent homes and even

80% from homes described as 'most violent' do not abuse their wives."

We have a lot more to learn about modeling, hitting and the repetition of violence. We do know that intergenerational transmission is complex. We also know that a large number of kids who are abused or witness abuse do not repeat it. If they don't learn it at home, where do they learn it?

The family is embedded in a culture. Ours is a particularly violent culture, so it's easy to see how people might select violence as a means to get what they want, whether or not they experienced it at home. Television, movies, MTV, video games, newspapers, books for those who might still read, advertising, peers, state violence such as capital punishment, war and the dehumanization and exploitation of the poor -- all are sources of learning violence outside the family. But we also know that abuse in intimate relationships is not just about violence. It is about someone with social, economic and physical power in relationship to his partner using that power to control his partner and bend her to his will. Many tactics, including violence, are available to him.

If you haven't noticed, I'm using gendered terms, though I realize that makes some people uncomfortable these days. I do so for a reason. Domestic violence is gendered. In 95% of the cases men abuse women. It is a privilege our society gives them, if they choose to use it. It is embedded in history, the social order and its institutions. Only recently, has society begun to withdraw the privilege -- at the insistence of the women's movement.

However, the privilege still exists. For the majority of men who batter women there are few if any consequences. Domestic assault, except in very egregious cases, is a misdemeanor crime despite its terroristic nature. Few men go to jail for it. Nor do many face criticism or accountability from their peers, families, work sites or communities. In fact, we continue to look at the battered woman's behavior. Why does she stay? Has she got "battered woman syndrome"? Has she "learned helplessness"? What is her psychological make-up? What causes women to get hooked up with battering men in the first place? Does she love too much? Is she codependent? What is she doing to provoke him?

We now know that women are at increased risk of getting killed or seriously injured when they leave abusive men. 75% of the most serious injuries occur after she's left. 50-75% of murders do, too. Let me tell you a real life story to bring this all home. This is only one of numerous similar tales I hear, but it's the most recent.

A woman called me who had been in an abusive marriage for 27 years before she left. She stayed because she didn't have the money to leave, but mostly because he said if she ever left

him he and his buddies would do whatever they wanted to the couple's three little girls. He was abusive to the children as well, but if she was there, she could protect them from the worst abuse and assure that they had medical attention afterwards. She left when the girls were all grown and after he nearly killed her in an incident where her car exploded. Now, she lives in another state, where she is "safe."

Sometime during those 27 years, however, she had a little boy. He's 10 now. The law says that a noncustodial father has the right to visitation with his child unless there is an exceptional and overriding reason to limit visitation. Because of the danger to her son, the mother asked the court to grant supervised visitation. The court refused. Once a month, the child is put on a bus to visit his father in a nearby state. He also visits on alternating holidays and for summer vacation. The boy told his mother and sisters of being beaten, being denied medical care for a broken arm, being repeatedly threatened, verbally abused and humiliated. Neither child protective services nor the court would listen to the mother. She's just being vengeful, a clear case of parental alienation syndrome. Her legal bills are over \$30,000. Her take home pay is \$600 each month. Once every month, the mother is forced to put her small son on a bus to visit his father. Despite his tears, despite the nightmares after he returns, despite the diarrhea for the week following each visit. On the one occasion she couldn't tolerate it and kept the boy at home, she was held in contempt of court and ordered to pay \$1000. She knows if she denies visitation and goes to jail, the father will get custody of the child.

Every couple of weeks I hear at least one similar story -- of battered women who have left their abusers only to find they are still controlled and hurt by these men through access to their children. And it is done with the active assistance of the law and other social institutions. It is a clear example of how institutions support male abuse of women. Without that collusion, we could end woman abuse much more easily.

It is the same with child abuse. Abuse of children like abuse of women is rooted in a history of ownership, servitude and being considered less than fully human. Family comes from the Latin "familia" which refers to the male head of household and all his possessions, chickens, cattle, geese, servants, women, children. For most of our history, women and children were chattel, the legal word for property, owned by men. They had no independent legal identity, and certainly no legal rights. Over the centuries, women have fought for and gained legal recognition of their independent self-hood. Children have not been so lucky. Children remain the possessions of their parents. The state will only intervene to protect the child where there is demonstrable harm. Where husbands can no longer physically chastise their wives, parents are free to hit children in the name of discipline. The argument is over when hitting crosses the line from discipline to abuse. This is state-sanctioned violence as surely as the rule

of thumb in former times, by which the law allowed husbands to beat their wives with a rod no bigger than their thumb.

Abuse of women and children will continue until institutions stop sanctioning it. This is the origin of the pithy explanation by battered women's advocates for why men batter: Because they can.

Until women have full equality in society -- social, economic and political -- and until society itself is based on egalitarian instead of hierarchical principles, violence against women and children will continue. As Jim Wallis states in his outstanding book, The Soul of Politics,

"What most still will not admit is the pattern that underlies and fuels the violence. The name of the pattern is patriarchy--the subordination of women to men. It is a structure of domination. And like the division of the world between rich and poor and the institutional character of white racism, sexism is also systematic, with clear social purposes.

"In male-dominated societies, the imbalance of power between men and women is deliberate--it is a system of both control and exploitation. As long as the differential of power between genders is so great, various forms of violence and abuse will continue. When women earn only two-thirds the pay of men for the same job, when they are subject to sexual harassment on those jobs, when key social and religious institutions still refuse to grant half the population full dignity and equality, or when women must also bear the disproportionate weight of responsibility for child rearing, the power imbalance persists."

Surely there is a better way of forming human relationships than giving one person or group power over another person or group and distributing status and resources according to this exercise of power. We can all think of a better way. It's just that we're so embedded in the old way. And we keep focusing on individual pathology, ignoring the social pathology that gives rise to a good portion of it. As long as we do that, social structures that create the opportunities for abuse of women and children will carry it forward well into the next century.

To stop abuse of women and children we must first recognize it and become fully informed about its nature and extent. Abuse of women and children is not confined to the home or to personal relationships. When one out of four children in this country lives in poverty, and our answer to this outrage is to take away the pitiful, humiliating public assistance we've provided -- that is violence. When the gap between rich and poor has grown beyond that in any other industrialized country in the world and women are primarily clustered in low wage jobs -- that is violence. When women can earn more by selling their bodies than their intelligence and

skills, and are thereby placed outside the circle of community -- that is violence. When children are denied a quality education, and thus confined to the margins of society for the rest of their lives -- that is violence. When large numbers of women and children have no access to health care -- that is violence. When courts give children into the custody of the fathers who beat and sexually abuse them -- that is violence. When 40% of all Oregon women go to court unrepresented because they cannot afford legal services -- that is violence. When we imprison women who defend themselves from abusive mates when society could or would not -- that is violence. When we remove children from their mothers because the mothers failed to protect them from abusive fathers -- that is violence.

What I'm trying to show here is that domestic violence does not occur in isolation and it will not end if we limit our efforts to individual cases. Or even to the issue of domestic violence. Violence against women and children occurs in the family -- and outside the family as well. Because of their inferior status in society, women and children are legitimate targets at home or on the street. They are targets of individual violence and social policy violence, as are other marginalized groups. The shift that needs to be made is to bring all "out" groups in. And that means that we build true community where everyone's needs are met and everyone has the opportunity to develop to their fullest extent.

The only way I see for doing that is to inform our policy decisions with an underlying value system that honors all life. In such a system, we could not bear to have one person suffer needlessly. Nor could we bear to be the cause of another's suffering -- by taking more than our share, by making their humanity subservient to our own. As Jim Wallis says, "[W]e have a very real stake in one another's lives. And the circumstances of the most vulnerable among us are always the best test of our human solidarity with one another."

Wallis says further,

"The moral requirements of relationship and community serve to correct our human tendencies toward individual selfishness and exploitation of our neighbors and the earth. Today the fundamental covenant that holds life together has been profoundly damaged. . . . Our deep need is to find a way to connect. The broken relationships must be healed; everything now depends upon our making connections."

"When politics loses its vision, religion loses its faith, and culture loses its soul; life becomes confused, cheap, and endangered. Nothing less than a restoration of the shattered covenant will save us. That will require a fundamental transformation of our ways of thinking, feeling, and acting."

I can assure you the covenant Jim Wallis speaks of is not the contract on America. That is a contract informed by the backlash against the small changes made by the various movements for social justice. It seeks to maintain a status quo of power and resource distribution among elites by exploiting popular fears and insecurities and scapegoating those who have demanded a seat at the table. That status quo is the major promoter and supporter of violence against women, as it is for so many other social problems from environmental ruin to violence against gays and lesbians and the killing or imprisonment of the majority of young African-American men in this country.

When faced with the overwhelming task outlined by Jim Wallis and in the face of a virulent backlash, the tendency is to shrug our shoulders and turn on the t.v. At such times, I remind myself of the incredible changes we humans have made despite seemingly insurmountable odds. South Africa, which labored for 50 years under Apartheid and much longer under white domination, is free. Nelson Mandela is not only out of prison, but political leader of his country. The shift in power was not accomplished by a coup, but by the continuing daily struggles of the majority South African people and their allies. Ultimately, there was a change in consciousness that led the white rulers to accept a different view of the world and the future.

When I think of South Africa, I am heartened. I once again believe what I did at 20 -- that we can make significant social change to a world that is more humane, loving and inclusive. And, when I am discouraged, I know there's no other choice but to continue working. I think of the children who have no podium and the women whose voices have been silenced. Someone must speak for them. I know many of you join me in that. Thank you for all your good work.

