

Home Affairs Select Committee
Inquiry into Domestic Violence 2007

Submission by Dr M.J.George, F.R.S.A.

Executive Summary

The prejudice and discrimination practiced by the Government and State against male victims of domestic violence is such that the former Skimmington punishment of such men is now incorporated into official doctrine and policy so as to constitute an abuse of male victims' Human Rights.

Brief Biography

This submission is by Dr M.J. George, F.R.S.A. an academic who has published numerous research papers in academic journals concerning domestic violence since 1994. He also made submissions to the 1992 Home Affairs Select Committee, the 1995 Special Public Committee (HofL) inquiries into domestic violence and Home Office, Cm 5847, 2003. He has been a frequent speaker at conferences, in the press and media.

Introduction

1. Despite the submission of evidence of male victims of female perpetrated domestic violence to each of the three previous Parliamentary inquiries into domestic violence (1974 and 1992 Home Affairs Select Committee, 1996 Public Bills Committee of the House of Lords) and to the 2003 Safety and Justice consultation (Home Office Cm 5847) their findings and recommendations have addressed the subject of violence and abuse between intimate partners as something that exists almost exclusively or only by males against females. Submissions on behalf of male victims were ignored. No specific witnesses have ever been called to give expert testimony on male victims and the considerations and recommendations and legislation such as the Violence, Crime and Victims Act, 2004 that have followed have assumed erroneously that, at very best, measures appropriate to female victims will suffice when applied in the alternative.

History Revisited

2. In published academic evidence (1,2, 3) it has been shown that a long standing historical prejudice and discrimination existed against male victims of female perpetrated domestic abuse which formerly expressed itself in public humiliations of male victims, known as Skimmington processions (3). Whilst these were lay phenomenon their existence over centuries clearly signalled official sanction. Indeed official backing of prejudice and discrimination against male victims was evident at the very highest levels of government and legal system as demonstrated by a former Lord Chancellor (2).

3. In the modern era such lay prejudice, discrimination and victimisation of male victims has ceased to be enacted publicly. However, it has been argued that the prejudice that gave rise to the Skimmington remains and is now practiced as a discrimination and abuse of Human Rights of victimised men within the policy and consideration of domestic violence by Government and State institutions such as the Law, Police, Social Services and Local Government agencies (2,3,4).

4. Hence it has been advanced that it is now within the formalised mechanisms of Parliament, the Law and the operation of the State that a modern form of the Skimmington exists to the detriment of men who have suffered violence and abuse from female partners, but who refuse to use violence and abuse against their female partners (2,3,4).

Prejudice and Discrimination

5. A number of sources all indicate that male victims experience prejudice and discrimination in the apparatus of the modern State (1,2). This is even evident from the material available from the House of Commons Select Committee. The Committee should take on board the strength of prejudice that has been found to exist against male victims, as opposed to the sympathetic response female victims receive. This is aptly illustrated by an academic study that asked people to respond to 3 scenarios; a victimised wife, a victimised male homosexual and a victimised husband (5). The victimised wife was more positively rated than either victimised males and the female perpetrator less negatively rated than either male perpetrators. Most significant was the fact that the heterosexual husband victim was rated much less favourably than the homosexual male victim. Given the well recognised virulent prejudice against male homosexuals the finding that the heterosexual male victim is the subject of an even greater prejudice puts the prejudice commented upon above into its full context. It is severe and extreme. It is little wonder given this finding that this severe prejudice finds expression as discrimination in Government and State policy towards male victims of domestic violence, both homosexual and particularly heterosexual victims.

The Power of Myth and the Myth of Power

6. In the construction of domestic violence as an issue of public concern it is easy to see, given the above, how women victims quickly became acknowledged and deserving of sympathy and support from the public, government and hence state (2,4). In fact concern for female victims since the 1970s was just a re-awakening of concerns that had been expressed in Victorian times when Parliament sought to provide protection to women by invoking harsher penalties against wife beaters (2,3). However, with a growing women's movement willing to advocate for female victims the prejudices against male victims that found a focus in previous times in the Skimmington were to pervade such advocacy to the detriment of male victims whose existence and plight was either denied or trivialised. For instance the repeated use of the myth of the 'rule of thumb' has been oft repeated by women's advocates to seek to deny even the possibility of male victimisation

(4). In reality evidence shows that over a long period of English history women victimised by male partners could use the law to seek protection and redress against them as is shown by Westminster Quarter Session records 1680-1720 (4) as well as numerous other examples. The reality is that no such 'rule of thumb' ever existed that allowed men to chastise wives lawfully, even though some through history have thought that it may have existed (4). So whilst the plight of women victims is now highlighted in society dark forces of prejudice work to deny and trivialise male victims and their plight by the use of 'fictive' statements and 'groupthink' propaganda (4) to reinforce the use of the Skimmington in official practices associated with domestic violence.

7. The purpose of this propaganda is, however, the same as the message of the Skimmington – to reinforce the notion of men as head of the household and powerful. The Skimmington in its punishment of male victims was designed to tell all men, in furtherance of the ideas of 'oikos' derived from ancient Athens, that they should not disclose the realities of their domestic situation so as to keep the notion that men were 'head of the household' alive rather than the reality that men and women have lived with one another over history negotiating and agreeing the distribution of relationship power in the majority, although not all, of relationships (4). Thereby, in general, men have not been 'head of the household' in anything but stereotypical conception (2,4) but they dare not declare it. In so doing the reality of their domestic situation in many cases as 'altogether another story' has remained hidden.

Under Reporting Males, Under Recording Authorities

8. Key within the considerations of Parliamentary committees looking at domestic violence has been statistical sources which give measures of intimate victimisation. The sources that seem most used and relied upon are either criminal justice statistics or those derived from the British Crime Survey. It can be argued that it is exactly these statistical sources that under-estimate male victimisation, which is compromised by a general reluctance of males to report any kind of victimisation, let alone domestic abuse by a female.

9. For instance, it has been found in studies of male on male violence that even when serious injuries are sustained males are often reluctant to acknowledge they have sustained injury in an assault or are reluctant to report to Police or other agencies (6). This is also true in studies of intimate assaults whereby, for instance, in a study in Leicester Royal Infirmary less than 50% of male victims of domestic assaults were willing to identify the perpetrator (7). There is considerable evidence that where men suffer assaults by female partners a number of factors result in failure to report. Fear of ridicule, not seeing what their partner has done as a crime and accepting female violence as 'just something to be put up with' are amongst a considerable number of rationalisations used by male victims which result in failure to report..

10. However, the statistical validity of such sources is also compromised by the failure of recording of instances of male victims by police and other agencies which may also be traced back to the generalised, yet severe, prejudice against male victims already explained. A yet more insidious

distortion of such official statistics is that male victims often complain and some studies have found that female perpetrators often use threats to make complaints to the Police as part of their abuse of male victims. This was found in a survey undertaken for Channel 4 Dispatches programme in 1999 (for details see <http://www.dewar4research.org>) where female perpetrators were more likely to phone Police than has been found for female victims and did so more frequently. Hence a distortion of the figures can occur whereby a female is mistakenly ascribed as being a victim, whilst a male victim is mistakenly ascribed as a perpetrator. Consequentially these male victims were very critical of the police. An Australian study has examined cases in which males claimed to have been victimised, whilst their female partner claimed to have used violence in self-defence (8) . By taking the testimony of the women's children and their own mothers it was established that in almost all the cases studied the woman was the real perpetrator and the vast majority of women admitted this when confronted by the evidence of their own children and mothers. However, in many cases the authorities, such as Police and Family or Criminal Courts, had believed women's initial claims and had acted against the men in some way. Hence a particularly disturbing aspect of the exercise of the prejudice and discrimination against male victims is the latitude it allows violent abusive women to manipulate agencies such as the Police and Courts to further victimise and abuse their male partners.

Violent Females and Injured Males

11. Amongst the problems of identifying male victims is the lack of the ability of even highly trained professionals, like psychiatrists, to be able to recognise violent females. In studies undertaken on the assessment of dangerousness (i.e. propensity to commit violence) by psychiatrists it has been found whilst they assess dangerousness in males at much better than chance levels, they assess dangerousness in females at less than chance levels (9). In other words even highly qualified medical professionals would be better off using a blindfold and a pin to assess which females are potentially violent according to this research. This state of affairs results from an obsession within the field of criminality and violence research on male violence such that the characteristics of the violent male are well established, yet almost un-researched in the case of violent females (10). Given this it is no wonder that Police Officers, for instance, often get it wrong when attending domestic incidents where the victim is male.

12. Much research on domestic abuse has established that many male perpetrators have personality disorders. However, personality disorders are the one psychiatric diagnosis most biased along gender lines whereby males are more likely to be seen as anti-social and hence culpable, but females hysterical and thus victims, even when the actions of both are equally anti-social (11). Research has identified that female perpetrators of domestic assaults often show the same characteristics of personality disorder established as a feature of male perpetrators (12).

13. Despite such evidence the general perception is that, as males are on average bigger and stronger than females, assaults by females on males are

unlikely or not serious or injurious when they occur. This presumption that size and strength inhibit women's assaults on men is belied by research conducted by this author that showed women were 2 times more likely to assault a man, rather than another women, across all categories of relationship from stranger to intimate (13). For serious assaults this imbalance rose to 4:1. Women prefer to assault men as many men feel they cannot respond likewise and women use this male chivalry to their advantage to make assaults with impunity.

14. To overcome size and strength differences assaultive women often use weapons when assaulting male partners. For instance burns units see men who have had boiling liquids thrown over them by female partners (14) and a vast array of weapons are described as being used by male victims, including the proverbial rolling pin, but more worryingly often sharp, pointed or heavy objects (1,2). In several studies of admissions of victims to emergency departments it is the male victims who are described as having suffered the most serious injuries and are more likely to have lost consciousness (1,2). Moreover male victims also report the same kind of severe emotional and psychological trauma as female victims at being victimised, whether injured or not (15).

15. It is an irony of the hidden plight and enforced invisibility of male victims that their existence and prevalence is given credence and unimpeachable testimony by assaultive women. In academic surveys which seek to investigate what assault adult intimates have either suffered or perpetrated upon one another it is women who report prevalently that they have assaulted male partners (see <http://www.csulb.edu/~mfiebert/assault.htm>) and more prevalently than women, themselves, say they have been assaulted by male partners. An interesting testament to this disclosure of the situation of male victims by women is contained with a government study; Home Office Research Study 191 (16). Seeking to check the influence of partners being present when respondents answered the survey the Home Office researchers found that in the case of male respondents the presence of a female partner increased male victimisation prevalence. Quite simply some males declined to identify they had been assaulted by their female partner, but when present their female partner corrected them and reminded them she had assaulted them (6 at page 98).

Concluding Remarks

16. This submission presents evidence to the Committee to highlight the fact that without the committee being able to overcome the present prejudiced and biased 'groupthink' surrounding domestic violence, that keeps male victimisation hidden and unaddressed, it will not have any credibility in its deliberations nor change policy and practice so that the Human Rights of male victims do not continue to be violated so completely and assiduously.

The Committee needs to act to inform the institutions of State such as the Police and Courts that no longer can the lines of a poem on the plight of battered husbands

‘No concerned jury damage for him finds
Nor partial justice her behaviour binds’

written by the writer Marvell, a contemporary of Shakespeare, be allowed to hold sway such that the bias towards females and against males in domestic violence policy and practice (17) is changed to one of equality and justice which is manifest and real.

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