

SPECIAL REPORT

Fifty Domestic Violence Myths



Respecting Accuracy in Domestic Abuse Reporting

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RESPECTING ACCURACY IN DOMESTIC ABUSE REPORTING

Effective abuse-reduction programs need to be grounded in verifiable facts about the nature, extent, and causes of domestic violence. An early incident reveals this may not always be the case:

On January 28, 1993, a press conference was held in Pasadena, California to issue an ominous warning that the upcoming Super Bowl would be the “biggest day of the year for violence against women.” Based on that dire prediction, an article in the *Oakland Tribune* warned the event could cause men to “explode like mad linemen, leaving girlfriends, wives, and children beaten.” A national advisory was issued with this blunt advice: “Don’t remain at home with him during the game.”

Three days later the *Washington Post* ran a front-page story revealing there was in fact no evidence to support such claims. A representative of the Massachusetts Coalition of Battered Women’s Services later decried to the *Boston Globe* how the Super Bowl story “sensationalized and trivialized” the problem of domestic violence.

This episode later came to be known as the Super Bowl hoax. It would not be an isolated event. Indeed, rogue abuse statistics have become sufficiently widespread that researchers have published articles designed to refute such claims.^{1,2,3}

These myths have been disseminated by well-known political figures, government agencies, the mass media, and advocacy groups. Respected professional organizations such as the American Bar Association, American Psychological Association, and the American Medical Association have become parties to the disinformation, as well.

This Special Report compiles and analyzes 50 domestic violence (DV) claims made by various organizations and in legislative bills. But first we discuss the fundamental premise of domestic violence advocates, that patriarchal dominance lies at the root of partner aggression.

Does Patriarchy Cause Domestic Violence?

Domestic violence programs often make the claim that “domestic violence is all about power and control.” Indeed, it appears that our entire approach to stopping domestic violence programs has been premised on the belief that patriarchal dominance is the fundamental cause of the problem.⁴

Lenore Walker once explained, “The causes of men’s violence against women include preservation of men’s need for power and status.”⁵ Likewise two leading practitioners have posited that “men in contrast [to women] appear to use violence to dominate and control.”⁶ The Power and Control Wheel, which depicts strategies that persons can use to exert influence over another, is an educational tool used widely by domestic violence advocates.

But research paints a very different reality:

- One study found Mexican men who valued dominance and independence were *less* likely to resort to partner aggression.⁷
- One review concludes, “When comparing men’s and women’s use of controlling behaviors, research using nonselected samples has found that there are no differences in their overall use.”⁸
- Meta-analyses found no consistent link between traditional gender attitudes and partner assault.^{9,10}
- A 32-nation survey documented a link between dominance and physical aggression, but the connection turned out to be stronger for female-initiated than male-initiated aggression.¹¹

So interpersonal dominance has been found to have less impact, greater impact, or no impact on partner aggression, depending on the population surveyed and the way dominance is measured.

Psychologist Donald Dutton has termed the patriarchal dominance model a “fallacy.”¹² And clearly the patriarchal dominance theory cannot account for the existence of female-initiated violence, in particular the higher rates of partner aggression among lesbian couples.¹³ Despite the remarkable absence of scientific verification, many of the myths discussed in this Special Report can be traced back to a presumed power imbalance between intimate partners.

Analysis of Domestic Violence Myths

Below are 50 domestic violence claims organized into eight categories, along with an analysis of each claim. Most of these assertions appear widely in domestic violence programs and presentations.

A. Incidence and Nature of Domestic Violence

No.	Claim	Analysis
1	“Violence against women...”	Many DV claims begin with this phrase, implying intimate partner violence against men is so infrequent as to be unworthy of mention. Nearly 250 scholarly studies show women are at least as likely as men to engage in partner aggression ¹⁴ and that partner violence is often mutual. ¹⁵
2	According to the FBI, a woman is beaten every (fill in the blank) seconds.	The FBI does not tabulate information on domestic violence. ¹⁶
3	One in four women experience domestic violence sometime in their lifetimes.	Approximately equal numbers of men and women experience domestic violence during their lifetimes. The reported number of victims varies depending on how aggression is defined.

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4	Women are victims of 85% of all cases of domestic violence.	This statistic from the National Crime Victimization Survey understates and distorts the true incidence of domestic violence, since victimized men are less likely to view partner aggression as a “crime.” ^{17,18}
5	Domestic violence kills as many women every five years as the number of U.S. soldiers killed in Viet Nam.	This number is nearly eight times greater than the true figure, according to Department of Justice data. ¹⁹
6	When women engage in domestic violence, it is only for reasons of self-defense.	Self-defense accounts for only 10-20% of female partner aggression. ^{20,21,22}
7	The fact that only one in four victims of partner homicide is male shows that domestic violence by women is a negligible problem.	A woman’s initiation of violence is the strongest predictor of her subsequently becoming a victim of intimate partner aggression. ²³
8	92% of homeless women experience severe physical or sexual abuse at some time in their lifetimes.	This figure, cited in HR 590, ²⁴ comes from a single study done in Massachusetts and ignores the existence of domestic violence against homeless men. ²⁵
9	Minor incidents of domestic violence always escalate to full-scale battering.	In the majority of cases, partner aggression does not escalate, and in many cases attenuates without external intervention. ^{26,27}
10	A marriage license is a hitting license.	Fewer than 5% of domestic violence incidents involve couples in an intact married relationship. ²⁸ Marriage is the safest partner relationship.
11	At least 40% of law enforcement families experience domestic violence.	This claim, made by the National Center for Women and Policing, ²⁹ is based on studies that surveyed <i>all</i> forms of family conflict, including arguments and loss of temper. ³⁰ Most instances of family conflict do not involve physical violence.
12	Batterers are not fringe characters, but rather persons whom society regards as normal.	Studies of both male ³¹ and female ^{32,33} offenders show personality disorders are far more common among these persons. As violence becomes more chronic and severe, the likelihood of psychopathology approaches 100%. ³⁴

B. Causes of Domestic Violence

No.	Claim	Analysis
13	Domestic violence is all about power and control.	This mantra-like assertion was analyzed in the Does Patriarchy Cause Domestic Violence? section of this Special Report.
14	Men who assault their wives are living up to cultural prescriptions that are cherished in Western society. ³⁵	This gender-baiting claim is contradicted by the fact that domestic violence generally is <i>not</i> condoned in American society. Only 2.5% of US males approve of slapping a wife to keep her in line, ³⁶ whereas many more persons believe that a wife slapping her husband is acceptable. ³⁷

FIFTY DOMESTIC VIOLENCE MYTHS

15	Men are controlling in their relationships with partners.	A need for control is not a common cause of domestic violence, and when it is, women are as likely as men to be controlling. ^{38,39}
16	Domestic violence committed by women is justifiable, while partner aggression by men is not.	This claim represents an obvious double standard.
17	Domestic violence is not caused by poor anger management, communication problems, jealousy, stressful living conditions, childhood experiences, or economic conditions.	All of these have been found to be important risk factors for domestic violence. ^{40,41} For example, partner aggression is far more common among low-income partners. ⁴²
18	Men and women engage in domestic violence for fundamentally different reasons.	A study of causes of domestic violence found that 12 of the 14 reasons applied to both men and women. ⁴³

C. Consequences of Domestic Violence

No.	Claim	Analysis
19	Domestic violence is the leading cause of injury to women.	According to the US Department of Health and Human Services, the leading causes of injury to women are unintentional falls, motor vehicle accidents, and over-exertion. Domestic violence doesn't appear on the list of leading causes of injury. ⁴⁴
20	22% of all visits by females to emergency rooms are for injuries from domestic assaults.	This figure comes from a now-outdated study of an inner city hospital in Detroit, which found over one-third of the victims were actually men. ⁴⁵ The actual national figure is less than 1%. ⁴⁶
21	The March of Dimes reports that battering during pregnancy is the leading cause of birth defects.	The March of Dimes has never conducted such a study. ⁴⁷
22	Women can't walk out on an abusive relationship because they are fearful of losing their home and means of financial support.	This claim is true in some cases, but is one-sided because it ignores the fact that men can't leave an abusive relationship because they may fear for their child's safety or worry about losing the relationship with their children.
23	The annual cost of domestic violence is \$13 billion.	This figure, cited in HR 739, ⁴⁸ has never been verified by a reputable researcher. According to the Centers for Disease Control, the annual cost for female victims of domestic violence is about \$5.8 billion. ⁴⁹ The cost for male victims is unknown.
24	The annual medical costs for domestic violence are \$31 billion.	This figure, cited in HR 739, has never been verified. ⁵⁰ According to the Department of Justice, the correct number is about \$2 billion. ⁵¹

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D. False Allegations

No.	Claim	Analysis
25	False allegations of domestic violence are almost non-existent.	One study found 71% of civil restraining orders were unnecessary or false. ⁵² Another analysis found over half of restraining orders did not involve even an allegation of violence. ⁵³
26	If we were to prosecute persons who commit perjury, true victims would be less likely to come forward.	False allegations weaken the credibility of true victims, making it <i>less</i> likely they will file a complaint. False allegations also undermine public support for the national effort to stop domestic violence.
27	Even if they are not true, allegations of domestic violence help assure the domestic violence issue remains in the public eye.	False allegations divert needed services and resources away from true victims of violence. This claim reveals an easy disregard for the rights of the falsely accused.

E. Sexual Assault

No.	Claim	Analysis
28	According to Government estimates, approximately 987,400 rapes occur annually in the US.	This statement was made in HR 739. The actual number of rapes reported by the FBI is 90,427, <i>one-tenth</i> the number claimed in the bill. ⁵⁴
29	One in four women has been a victim of rape or attempted rape.	This claim by Mary Koss has been criticized on many grounds. For example, only 27% of women classified by the researchers as rape victims actually viewed themselves as victims of rape, and 42% of the putative victims later had sex with their “attackers.” ⁵⁵
30	Since 2001, rapes have actually increased by 4 percent.	This claim was made in HR 739. The FBI reports that female rapes have fallen dramatically since the 1970s. From 2001 to 2005 the rate of rapes continued to decline (0.6/1,000 women in 2001 to 0.5/1,000 women in 2005). ⁵⁶
31	89 percent of rapes are perpetrated against female victims.	This claim from HR 739 ignores the problem of male rape in prisons. A Human Rights Watch report cites a study that found 140,000 male inmates are raped each year in the United States, ⁵⁷ a number that is higher than the FBI report of female rapes.
32	Almost 50 percent of sexual assault survivors lose their jobs or are forced to quit in the aftermath of the assaults.	This statistic from HR 739 is an incidental finding from a non-representative sample of 27 women in the Atlanta, GA area. ⁵⁸ This figure has never been replicated.
33	One in four teenage girls has been in a relationship in which she was pressured into performing sexual acts by her partner.	This claim was made in HR 590. The actual percentages are 11.9% of teenage girls and 6.1% of teenage boys. ⁵⁹

F. Legal/Law Enforcement Response to Domestic Violence

No.	Claim	Analysis
34	From the very beginning, American jurisprudence has viewed wife-beating as an acceptable practice.	The Body of Liberties adopted in 1641 by the Massachusetts Bay colonists states, “Every married woman shall be free from bodily correction or stripes by her husband, unless it be in his own defense from her assault.”
35	The expression “rule of thumb” refers to the diameter of a stick or rod for which wife-beating was considered legal.	The phrase “rule of thumb” does not appear in legal treatises on English common law. ⁶⁰
36	Domestic violence is such a heinous crime that it warrants harsh criminal justice measures.	There is no good evidence that a draconian criminal justice response deters domestic violence, but a “get tough on crime” approach may in fact place persons at greater risk of victimization. ⁶¹
37	Restraining orders should be made freely available to victims of abuse.	There is little evidence that restraining orders prevent future violence, ^{62,63,64} and sometimes they escalate the conflict. ⁶⁵
38	Mandatory arrest has been proven to be effective in stopping future violence.	Mandatory arrest laws <i>increase</i> , not reduce, the risk of subsequent partner violence. ⁶⁶
39	Domestic violence cases are treated more leniently than other types of crime.	Felony domestic assaults are less likely, not more likely, to be dismissed by the court than non-domestic assaults. ⁶⁷
40	Women who kill their batterers receive longer prison sentences than men who kill their partners.	The average prison sentence for men who have killed their wives was 17.5 years; the average sentence for women convicted of killing their husbands was 6.2 years. ⁶⁸

G. The Workplace

No.	Claim	Analysis
41	According to the General Accounting Office, between 1/4 and 1/2 of domestic violence victims reported that they lost a job due, at least in part, to domestic violence.	The GAO report cited in HR 739 states a very different conclusion: “we cannot conclude that being a victim of domestic violence changes the likelihood that a woman will work.” ⁶⁹
42	35-56% of employed battered women are harassed at work by their abusive partners. ⁷⁰	This claim from HR 739 is based on three small, uncontrolled, and outdated studies that lack scientific validity. The respondents represent a highly selected population (women from abuse shelters) and the results are based on unverified self-reports.

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43	Female victims of intimate partner violence lose 8,000,000 days of paid work each year.	This one-sided statistic from HR 739 comes from a Centers for Disease Control report that omits consideration of male victims of domestic violence. ⁷¹
44	Homicide is the leading cause of death for women on the job.	This claim was made in HR 739. The leading cause of fatal workplace injuries to women is actually transportation incidents (43%). Homicides represent 35% of all fatal workplace injuries to females. ⁷²

H. Children and Custody¹

No.	Claim	Analysis
45	Abusive parents are more likely to seek sole custody than nonviolent ones.	This claim is derived from an American Psychological Association publication containing numerous claims that lack a scientific basis. ⁷³ The task force that produced this publication was headed by Lenore Walker, who was instrumental in organizing the Super Bowl hoax. The APA publication has now been withdrawn. ⁷⁴
46	25–50% of disputed custody cases involve domestic violence.	Many custody cases involve an <i>allegation</i> of domestic violence. However, only a minority of these allegations are substantiated as true.
47	False allegations are no more common in divorce or custody disputes than at any other time.	False allegations of sexual abuse in fact appear to be far more common during custody disputes. ⁷⁵
48	Children are safer with their mothers than with their fathers.	Data from the Department of Health and Human Services shows that 71% of children killed by one parent were killed by their mothers. ⁷⁶
49	Abusive fathers are successful in winning sole child custody about 70% of the time.	This figure appears to be an embellishment of a claim in a 1989 report by the Gender Bias Committee of the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court which claimed that in 70% of cases, fathers (not abusive fathers) were successful in winning some form of child custody, though not necessarily physical custody or sole custody. ⁷⁷ A re-analysis of the data concluded that “when mothers sought sole custody, the court granted the request at a rate 65% higher than it did when fathers made the same request.” ⁷⁸
50	Allegations of domestic violence have no demonstrated effect on the rate at which persons are awarded custody of their children.	This claim is refuted by a study that found judges were more likely to award sole custody to the non-perpetrator. ⁷⁹

¹ The claims in this section come from the American Bar Association’s sheet, “10 Myths about Custody and Domestic Violence and How to Counter Them.”

Twelve Strategies to Disguise the Truth

In reviewing the 50 domestic violence myths, the distortion strategies are found to fall into one of 12 categories:

1. *Make evidence-free claims*

This is the most common way the truth is distorted. Perhaps the most common example is, “Men are overwhelmingly the perpetrators of domestic violence,” an assertion routinely made without evidence or proof.

2. *Use definitional ruses*

Some persons use studies on verbal disagreements and arguments to claim the study results are indicative of physical violence. Other persons use the word “battering” to refer to any form of partner conflict, physical or not.

3. *Rely on information from crime surveys*

Domestic violence programs often use results from the National Crime Victimization Survey, even though it is known that the NCVS underestimates and distorts the true extent of partner abuse.

4. *Make faulty generalizations*

Persons often take information from a single incident or from a self-selected group such as abuse shelter residents, and then generalize this to the entire community.

5. *Collect information only on male-on-female violence*

This is a commonly-employed strategy. For example, the World Health Organization did an international survey on domestic violence, but neglected to interview men or to inquire about female-initiated aggression.⁸⁰

6. *Withhold data on female-perpetrated violence*

Some studies have collected information on female-perpetrated aggression but then withheld that data when reporting the research results.⁸¹ Examples include:

- a. A survey for the Kentucky Commission on the Status of Women collected information on both male and female perpetrators, but only the data on male abusers was published.⁸²
- b. One study of intimate partner terrorism ignored its own data on female-perpetrated violence.⁸³

7. *Misrepresent the findings of prior research*

Examples include:

- a. The WHO World Report on Violence and Health claims, “Where violence by women occurs, it is more likely to be in the form of self-defense.”⁸⁴ But the three studies cited by the report actually show self-defense is an infrequent explanation for female violence.⁸⁵
- b. One author stated her previous research showed “Males and females were found to differ in their motivations for using violence in relationships.”⁸⁶ But

her actual findings reveal males and females have very similar motivations for partner violence.

8. *Publish factually-deficient “fact sheets”*

Many domestic violence fact sheets purport to debunk misconceptions, but in fact create new myths and reinforce old ones. For example, the American Bar Association’s “10 Myths about Custody and Domestic Violence and How to Counter Them” has been found to contain many more misrepresentations than true statements of fact.^{87,88}

9. *Reject grant applications that propose to study male victimization*

Two documented cases illustrate that the grant award process has become biased:

- a. A 2005 solicitation from the DoJ National Institute of Justice prohibited “proposals for research on intimate partner violence against, or stalking of males of any age...”⁸⁹
- b. In one case, a reviewer gave a lower score to a proposed study because the application described partner violence as a “human problem of aggression, not a gender-based problem.”⁹⁰

10. *Instigate legal action*

A Florida researcher planned to evaluate the effectiveness of an abuser intervention program. But a zealous prosecutor took her to court, charging the study was unethical because they “already knew” such programs work.⁹¹

11. *Resort to defamatory gender stereotypes*

When Erin Pizzey, founder of the first abuse shelter in the world, toured England to publicize her book *Prone to Violence*, she was met by angry demonstrators carrying placards that read, “All men are rapists, All men are batterers.”⁹²

12. *Employ pressure tactics*

Family violence researchers have been subjected to slander campaigns, denial of promotion and tenure, and more for presenting information about female-initiated violence.⁹³ Erin Pizzey once described how persons tried to deny the existence of aggressive women: “Abusive telephone calls to my home, death threats, and bomb scares, became a way of living for me and for my family. Finally, the bomb squad asked me to have all my mail delivered to their head quarters.”⁹⁴

Researchers worry such tactics have created a “climate of fear that has inhibited research and publication” in this important field.⁹⁵

Nine of Ten Claims are False

This Special Report identifies 50 domestic violence claims and reveals how these assertions are false. But the concern is not merely the large number of dishonest assertions. The problem is, *the widespread existence of such myths has come to overshadow the truth of domestic violence*. Three examples illustrate this phenomenon:

1. The American Bar Association’s flyer, 10 Myths about Custody and Domestic Violence and How to Counter Them, contains 19 claims, of which 89% are unsupported, misleading, or wrong.⁹⁶
2. House Resolution 590 contains 22 findings. Twenty of them – 91% -- were found to be one-sided, misleading, unverifiable, or simply false.⁹⁷ Only two findings (pertaining to the need for abuse education programs in schools and to the risks to children exposed to domestic violence) were true.
3. The Security and Financial Empowerment (SAFE) Act, HR 739, contains 53 findings, of which 92% are found to be misleading, outdated, unverifiable, exaggerated, or wrong.⁹⁸

Overall, nine out of 10 claims made in these documents are myths, what professor Richard Gelles has somewhat whimsically referred to as “factoids from nowhere.”

Myths Don’t Help True Victims

This Special Report documents how exaggerated, misleading, and false statements about domestic violence have become commonplace. Indeed, many of these misrepresentations appear to be intentional.⁹⁹

Journalist Philip Cook has analyzed the widespread existence of these myths and reveals how resistant these myths are to correction. Cook concludes, “there is more false, falsely framed, or disingenuously deceptive information about domestic violence than any other significant public and social issue.”¹⁰⁰

These myths exert a myriad of harmful effects.¹⁰¹ In legal jurisprudence, such bias “creates unsupported presumptions of blame, presumptions of merit, presumptions of what may be in the best interests of children.”¹⁰²

The myths also impede the ability of programs to respond to the needs of victims and offenders. As researcher Miriam Ehrensaft explains, findings from recent studies remain “largely overlooked or discounted.”¹⁰³ In particular, these myths have served to divert our attention away from female-instigated and mutual violence.

The cumulative effect has been to hamper the overall effectiveness of abuse reduction programs. The National Research Council has expressed its concern that most domestic violence programs are “driven by ideology and stakeholder interests.”¹⁰⁴ As a result, “We have no evidence to date that VAWA has led to a decrease in the overall levels of violence against women,” decries one Department of Justice official.¹⁰⁵

Even worse, “these factoids and theory might actually be harmful to women, men, children, and the institution of the family,” explains researcher Richard Gelles.¹⁰⁶ Indeed, there is evidence that abuse-reduction programs are escalating partner conflict and discouraging victims from getting the help they need.^{107,108,109}

The choice is clear: Either we continue to disseminate misleading and false information that conforms to a self-serving ideological agenda. Or we move forward in our shared goal to help families become violence-free.

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