

# The socialization of wife battering

by Janet Murie  
of The Peak, Vancouver

For years now, when Punch hit Judy children have laughed. And when animated cavemen grabbed women by the hair and dragged them into caves, children have laughed. But when Daddy hits Mommy it is no longer funny. Everybody tries to pretend it never happened. And children learn that that is an acceptable outlet for anger.

Wife battering has thus become the most accepted and most frequently committed crime, as well as the least talked about.

Women have become the culturally legitimate receptors of violence. Legitimate because in the eyes of those who make the laws, it is their fault. She likes it, or deserves it, or asks for it. The victims are blamed for the crimes committed against them.

Men who beat their wives rarely ask for help. That they have a serious problem is seldom admitted, because the crime is so common. They get no reinforcement for admitting it, because "everybody does it."

Dale Trimbull runs groups for men who beat their wives, and says that sharing their feelings is a tremendous relief for them. When they join the group they are usually beyond blaming their wives, and are looking for better ways to deal with frustrations in their relationships with women. They learn to take responsibility for what they don't like and change it.

Men who batter their wives are almost always very dependent on them. When something threatens that relationship, such as pregnancy, three becomes a crowd and he begins to beat his wife.

Very often the men are unemployed. They have little power in a world they are supposed to control and their self esteem is low. They feel that their wives are the one thing they can or should be able to control. This is particularly true if the woman is doing well at work or in school.

These men tend to be unable to share a range of feelings with people. Their lives are very rigidly controlled. But men who are violent towards their wives seldom use violence outside the home.

A high percentage of men were beaten as children and have learned no other way to deal with their frustrations with a marital relationship.

In slightly less than half the cases, alcohol is a contributing factor. Trimbull feels, however, that the emotional component is present before men begin to drink.

Women who accept being beaten were also very often products of homes where their mothers were beaten, and have no other concept of marriage.

Very often battered wives accept the blame put upon them by their husbands. "I guess I deserved it," said Janet, "I can be pretty cheeky sometimes."

Because many men do not begin to beat their wives until pregnancy,

their marriages are based on love and trust. This makes it very difficult for women to leave their husbands, and many keep hoping he will change and everything will be "like before." Many still love and respect their husbands. Some women attempt to leave their husbands before they are emotionally ready to make the break, and must leave three or four times.

"Letting go is very bad," said Gloria, who staffs at the Vancouver transition home. "You could be letting go of the shits, but it is going from the known into the unknown."

"Your physical wounds heal, so you keep going back," said Carole, in her second marriage with a man who beats her and in a transition home for the fourth time. "But there comes a time when your love is just not enough. This is my last time in a transition house."

Women are generally economically dependent on and physically weaker than their husbands. This contributes in making it difficult to break away.

One common myth is that women do not fight back. They do. Almost always. And it makes it worse. Active resistance is usually their first reaction, but because of the more severe beatings they get, women learn to react passively. They stop communicating with their husbands in every way, particularly sexually.

When a woman has decided she has had enough of being beaten, the resources she has to turn to are

limited. She is able for welfare, but that is an immediate solution. Worker compensation offers financial assistance for victims of violence, but this does not extend to women who have been beaten by their husbands. The board is worried if crafty women will have their hands hit them for the money.

If she lives in Vancouver, a woman may go to the Vancouver transition home if they have a vacancy. They are only able to accommodate six women and their children at a time and must turn away at least as many women as they accept. Living in British Columbia is an advantage if you are a battered wife who have five transition houses here. That is more than in the other provinces combined.

The one month woman spends in a transition home is a time of tremendous learning about herself.

It is the low point in most women's lives. Their self esteem has plummeted to the lowest possible depth. She has nowhere to go but up, and not do. Some go back to their husbands, but not many.

Characteristic of the women staying there is a lack of hope. They hope their husbands will change, or their lives on their own will be better; they constantly look towards the future and what lies ahead. They are deeply frightened of where that may be, but are proud of themselves for finding the strength to leave.

"At first it's trying," Carole said. "It takes at least three days to orient yourself. I was anxious to leave and get my life straightened out. Women in the state of mind when they come here just need space which they haven't got. There are so many people and kids here. I just want to separate myself from everything and everybody."

For the first few days the feeling of the women is euphoric. They want to talk about everything. They are very, very angry.

They stay in a lot. It depends on how many people are "out there" who they are close to and can trust. Many are afraid of being followed by their husbands.

The police and the legal system constitute the major problem for women in attempting to leave their husbands, according to Gloria and Judy, both staffers at the home. They feel that the friendly approach taken by police after being called only condones the husband's actions.

"Police are contemptuous of women who don't leave. They feel that women who leave and then go back deserve to be beaten," Judy said.

That police don't like to deal with family disputes is notorious. They are famous for their inefficacy in dealing with wife beating, and other incidents of family violence. Constable Montgomery, of the Burnaby RCMP, was even reluctant to talk about it.

"Wife battering is treated as common assault. But it's not just

wife beating that's the problem. It happens both ways. Husband beating has become a major problem. Our main concern is the protection of house and property."

Women staffing the transition home were very critical of the police because, they claimed, they go out of their way to discourage women from laying charges.

"I've sat here and listened to a police officer stand at the door and talk to a woman for more than an hour until she agreed to drop the charges. There was one bizarre case where the police spent several hours promising a woman they'd lay charges against her husband and then did not do so," Gloria said.

As if this pressure is not enough, a woman very often must live with the man she is taking to court for beating her.

Police and family court also encourage women to drop charges. It is used as a bargaining tool in cases of family violence.

Statistically, most women are murdered in the bedroom, while most men are killed in the kitchen. Women seldom fight back in earnest unless they have a weapon. The most convenient is usually a knife.

Also interesting is a territorial explanation. The kitchen has long been the domain of the woman, where she rules barefoot and pregnant. The bedroom, on the other hand, is the territory of the male, whose sexual libido has long been claimed to be more important than that of the female.

There is no legal inhibition for a man to beat or kill his wife. The courts often find he has had sufficient motivation to do so. In France and Belgium, if a man finds his wife with a lover the maximum penalty for killing both is three years. In the U.S.A. a law prevents a wife from suing her husband for assault and battery.

If you are a woman and are going to die violently, chances are one in three that you will be killed by your husband.

But still people are reluctant to admit that a problem exists. People keep hoping it will go away, like an annoying itch or stomach ache.

But women who are being beaten are becoming more and more vocal. They are no longer afraid to speak up. The atrocities of the police and courts are being reported in the newspapers. Everyone knows about and is shocked by the man from Prince Rupert who followed his wife into a hospital to beat her again. It has become a fashionable subject to write about.

There are solutions. Fattah feels that the major problem is sexism. If that can be changed, much of the problem will disappear.

Providing adequate assistance for women who have been beaten will help. So will encouraging women to report incidents to the police.

The police must change. They need to be properly trained in how to deal with family violence. They need to learn that women deserve as much respect as "regular people."



## Women and Film: damaging stereotypes

by Wendy Hunt  
of The Ubysey

Women want to be subjugated. This conclusion is inescapable if you believe many of the movies being shown today. Violence coupled with sex is the drawing card attracting audiences and winning the big buck in a competitive business.

Violence against women in film is based on out-moded sexual stereotypes. Men control women and sex becomes something men do to women. Violence is the key to not only controlling women's behavior but to awakening their sexual desires as well.

Sadomasochism plays a large role in sexual violence. Often the woman provokes violence against herself. Any sympathy for her plight diminishes since it is her fault.

Women are often portrayed as sex objects devoid of personality or worth outside the sexual sphere. This attitude also legitimizes violence used against them because the audience does not identify or empathize with an object.

Degradation of women used to be confined to pornographic films. Even soft porn films such as Emmanuelle and The Naughty Victorians which are billed as erotic rather than obscene portray women as malleable objects. Their personalities are shaped by sexual desire and experience.

Emmanuelle is a young woman who is sexually awakened through several adventures. She is presented as the ultimate sexual partner: passive and willing to be used.

The Naughty Victorians show how a man unleashes a woman's sexual desire through bondage. She is eventually grateful for this and later she helps him repeat the experience with other women. When the women of The Naughty Victorians finally rebel it is not so much inspired by the violation of their bodies but by the man's feeling of natural superiority over them. But instead of rising to his level the women must degrade him to theirs by having

sexual revolution. A young woman who is filled with self-hate and feelings of sexual inadequacy searches for death by picking up men in bars. One evening after a brief encounter she panics when the man is reluctant to leave her apartment. When she screams, he panics and hits her over the head with a lamp—killing her.

The movie version, however, concerns itself less with exploring character than taking full advantage of sexual scenes. It exploits sadomasochism. The woman is stabbed repeatedly by her assailant while being raped. The phallic symbolism of the knife is hard to miss. A snuff film for the masses.

Looking for Mr. Goodbar moralizes about women's sexual behavior and not even Diane Keaton in the lead role can hide the sexist quality of the film. If women play around, they'll end up dead. And what's more they bring it upon themselves.

Violence against women rarely illuminates old sexual stereotypes. Rather than criticizing these stereotypes violence presents them in a positive light. It panders to them in order to provide cheap thrills. The intimate blending of sex and violence springs from, appeals to and propagates these sexual stereotypes at one and the same time.

Sexual stereotypes are deeply ingrained in our society and in ourselves. Film-makers use them as an easy and well-travelled route to the big money. Sexual violence hooks the mass market through these widespread stereotypes.

Many people are not upset by sexual abuse and dismiss its importance in shaping our attitudes toward each other. The treatment accorded women in film would provoke outrage if aimed at ethnic or religious groups. Yet women are reluctant to speak out on their own behalf fearing the label prudish, humorless or overly sensitive.

Sexual violence debases women and men by categorizing their emotions and actions. Women must demand the respect awarded human beings. To do less is to demean ourselves.



The Silent Partner currently playing in Vancouver gets off to a fast start. A central character beats up a female prostitute beginning with twisting her nipple and ending by crushing her face against the sauna wall with his foot. He apparently rapes her too but the audience only hears about that later.

The director, Daryl Duke, could say this scene sets the character up as psychotic but the explanation is thrown into doubt by the unnecessarily graphic detail and highly sexual context which moves the emphasis from elucidation to titillation.

When the psychotic finally kills his girlfriend by sawing her head off, the audience has little sympathy for her.

This couple has a sadomasochistic relationship which is reasonable as some mutual need must have drawn them together. But because the woman provokes her lover by taunting him with her other sexual exploits, she gets what she seems to be asking for. The audience finds it even easier to rationalize her death because they know she has double-crossed him in business as well as sexually betraying him.

When the woman begins to provoke her lover, she is in a submissive sexual position crouching on the floor. He beats her with her belt and it is obvious this is a game which they have played before. They get carried away and he kills her. Unfortunately, the director also gets carried away. Excessive violence does not develop character. It only excites and in this case reinforces the idea that women love abuse.

It is interesting to note this psycho practices his form of sexual intimidation only on women and they succumb. He gets rather chummy with the man who steals his money and then stands up to him. When the killer finally dies, he is dressed like a woman. Is the moral of this story men kill, women die? Men are powerful, women weak?

Looking for Mr. Goodbar began as a telling novel by Judith Rossner about the 60s and the

him gang raped by a group of men. Only men are capable of punishing other men. This leaves the women impotent as people controlling their lives and demonstrates their sexuality depends on men for its shape and physical expression.

Woman as sadomasochist and sex objects has left the back alleys and arcades and is surfacing in 'legitimate' film. Sexism hides behind the facade of entertainment or art. A Boy and His Dog and The Nine Lives of Fritz The Cat use sexual violence to get a laugh. The Silent Partner and Looking For Mr. Goodbar try to legitimize sexual violence by calling it an integral part of characterization.

A speaking dog adds novelty to the sci-fi film, A Boy and His Dog. The new approach obscures the fact the film is based on the old myth of bonding. Man is man's best friend and no woman can possibly measure up. Women are only useful for intercourse. As the boy says after coming upon a mutilated woman who has been gang raped, "Ah, why'd they cut her? She could've been used another two or three times." Guffaws from the audience.

The true test comes when the boy must choose between the girl or the dog who is dying of hunger. The woman becomes literally dog meat. As they trot off into the sunset after a hearty meal, the dog says he appreciates the boy's "sacrifice". The boy has sacrificed his object of sexual gratification as if the girl's life was his to dispose of.

The Nine Lives of Fritz the Cat culminates in a scene of sexual violence after having portrayed women as sex objects throughout the film. A female horse provokes her rabbit lover into whipping her with a chain because she repeatedly says she wants to leave his creepy friends. While he beats her, his friends egg him on excitedly.

Fritz as the most sensitive of the lot, asks later why Rabbit hit her so hard. Hurting her a little bit seems perfectly acceptable in the context of this film. After all Horse suffers no permanent damage and it is all done in fun.