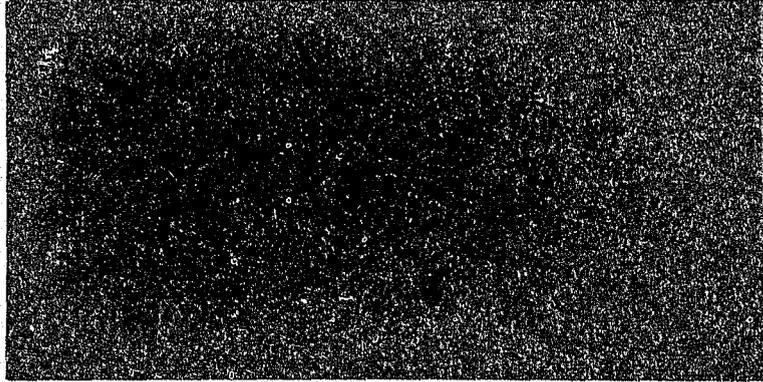
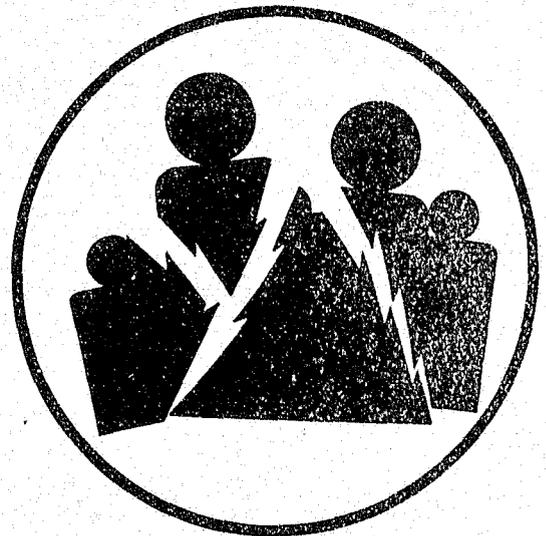


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national clearinghouse on **domestic violence**



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PROBLEM STATEMENT

BATTERED WOMEN: A NATIONAL CONCERN

APRIL 1980

BATTERED WOMEN: A NATIONAL CONCERN

Violence within the family has occurred throughout history. Today, in the United States it is a way of life for many families. Child abuse has been recognized as a problem of startling proportions and recently, abuse of the elderly has begun to receive attention. While all the family members may be affected by violence, the following is a discussion of one specific form of family violence--wife beating.

The Problem

Wife abuse is a major social problem. A recent national survey established that at least two million women are beaten each year by their husbands. One out of six couples reported some violence during the survey year; and when questioned about the entire period of their marriage, one out of four couples reported some violence. The researchers conducting this national survey speculate that even these figures underestimate the extent of family violence.¹

A 1979 Louis Harris survey in Kentucky supports these findings. Ten percent of the wives interviewed reported physical abuse during the prior 12 month period and 21% reported some violence during their marriage.² During that same 12 month period only 2% of the women interviewed reported assaults outside the home. Based on these reports, the most dangerous place for a woman to be is not in the streets, but in her own home.

Domestic violence can result in severe injury to the victim and even death. Women who are abused are generally beaten repeatedly and suffer injuries serious enough to require emergency medical attention. One study

of hospital emergency room services found that almost half of the 1400 women treated in the emergency room had injuries resulting from being beaten, though this was not always reflected in their records. It was estimated that battering occurred approximately 10 times more frequently than physicians usually identified.³

Battering tends to escalate over time leading, in some instances, to murder. According to the 1977 FBI Uniform Crime Reports, two-thirds of all homicides in the United States were committed by persons who were either a friend, relative, or acquaintance of the victim. In half of these cases, the murders occurred between husbands and wives.

Spousal violence can also endanger persons outside the family, particularly the police. Close to one-fifth of the police deaths and 40% of police injuries in 1975 resulted from intervention in family disputes.

Children, whether physically abused themselves or witnesses to the abuse of their mothers, are also victims. A study by the American Humane Association found that in 20% of reported child abuse cases, spouse abuse also occurred.⁴

While all of the causes of wife beating are not known, some characteristics of this type of family violence have been identified. Any woman could be the target of abuse. Family violence is not confined to a single group. It occurs in families of every economic, racial, religious and educational group. Pregnant women are often the targets of abuse.

The first step in addressing this problem is to recognize that wife abuse exists and to condemn it as wrong. Battered women are often ashamed

to admit being beaten. They fear being blamed or rejected by their friends and families or being subjected to retaliatory attacks from their partner. When they do speak out, they often are not believed. Many people prefer to think this kind of violence does not happen because they do not know how to respond. This denial does not help protect battered women, rather it further erodes their self-esteem.

One of the first questions usually asked is why don't they leave? Some do, many do not. We do know that women who remain in abusive relationships do not want to be beaten. There are many reasons why they may not leave. It is difficult for any person to leave a marriage relationship and to begin again a life on her own. For women generally, it is a step for which they have little preparation. For those women who have been beaten repeatedly as well as subjected to cruel verbal abuse, it is substantially more difficult. Cultural norms and religious beliefs often reinforce a woman's perception that she is guilty and that she has failed.

The options abused women face are limited. Abused women are likely to be financially dependent upon their husbands, with little work experience or job opportunities. Since they frequently have young children, child care must be located as well as a job.

Some battered women do not want to separate because they may love their husbands and want to maintain the relationship, but want the beatings to stop. And for others, even leaving the violent relationship does not always end the problem. Abusive husbands may pursue wives who leave.

The Response

There are few places that a battered woman can turn to for help. The police are often the first to be called, yet they may be reluctant to intervene or make arrests. Social service, medical, and mental health agencies have also been slow to respond. Their efforts have been hampered by a lack of awareness and lack of skills in recognizing and assisting abused women. In addition, the resources of all these agencies are already overburdened.

In some communities, help is available for battered women and their families. Many women's groups and other organizations such as YWCAs, have established emergency shelters providing immediate safety away from home. Shelters also provide and help battered women find needed services such as counseling, job training, legal advice, and child care. Some shelters also provide counseling for the couple or for the abuser. When battered women use shelter services, they find out that it's not just happening to them, but to many women.

Battered women, whether they choose to stay or to leave, must have a range of services available to them. An aware community with trained and sensitive service providers is needed to support and assist battered women and their children. Social supports, sanctions and resources are necessary to ensure that violence by one person against another is not acceptable, either at home or in the street.

FOOTNOTES

1. Murray A. Straus, "Wife Beating: How Common and Why?" Victimology: An International Journal, 2:77 Nos. 3-4; 445.
2. Louis Harris and Associates, Inc., "A Survey of Spousal Violence Against Women in Kentucky." Kentucky Commission on Women, Study No. 792701; 2.
3. Evan Stark, Anne Flitcraft, and William Frazier, "Medicine and Patriarchal Violence: The Social Construction of a 'Private' Event." International Journal of Health Services, 9:79, No. 3; 467.
4. Annual Statistical Report: National Analysis of Official Child Neglect and Abuse Reporting, 1977. American Human, Englewood, Colorado. Contract #105-78-1104 for the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect Administration for Children, Youth, and Families.

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