

Silent victims: both mothers and fathers can be violent

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Our culture assumes domestic violence is invariably committed by men, but data reveals a high number of women are abusers.



Jennifer Aniston slaps her onscreen boyfriend, Will Forte.

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There was a funny discussion recently on the new ABC television show *How Not to Behave*. One of the hosts, Gretel Killeen, started complaining about “manspreading” — men sitting with their legs apart. “Men sitting with their legs so wide apart you’d think they are about to give birth,” she quipped.

The male host, Matt Okine, suggested men sit that way simply because it is more comfortable. “For whom?” asked Killeen. “For my balls,” Okine responded, with a funny explanation involving a grape ending up in a wine-making process after being squashed at the apex of two adjoining rulers.

Manspreading has attracted attention on public transport in New York because of men’s spread legs sometimes taking up more than their allocated seat space. The city ran a campaign: “Dude, Stop the spread, please. It’s a space issue.” Fair enough. It makes sense to promote consideration for others in public spaces — but, as always, the public discussion descended into talk about male aggression. It’s all about patriarchal men claiming their territory, sneered the feminist commentators.

Hardly a day goes by without some new story appearing that rubbishes men.

After being criticised non-stop for about a half-century, it’s probably time men had a right of reply, British journalist Peter Lloyd writes in his recent book, *Stand By Your Manhood*. Arguing that men have spent decades as the target in a long line of public floggings, Lloyd comprehensively but with surprising good humour outlines the “dismissive, patronising and skewed” narrative about heterosexual men that has dominated mainstream media and public policy for so long.

“So why is it that, today, there has never been a worse time to be a man?” Lloyd writes. “Rubbing the male of the species and everything he stands for is a disturbing — and growing — 21st-century phenomenon. It is the fashionable fascism of millions of women — and many, many men, too. Instead of feeling proud of our achievements, we men are forced to spend our time apologising for them. When people chide us for not being able to multi-task or use a washing machine we join in the mocking laughter — even though we invented the damned thing in the first place.”

Lloyd’s examples of this skewed public discussion include many that should make any - rational woman squirm.

Like his comment on the front-running US Democrat candidate: “Hillary Clinton once said — remarkably, with a straight face — that women have ‘always been the primary victims of war’, not the men who get their legs blown off in the battlefield in Iraq. Or Libya. Or Sudan.”

He mentions that in Nigeria, Boko Haram set fire to a school dormitory killing 59 sleeping boys — the third tragedy of its kind in just eight months. There wasn’t a peep about this, yet two months later when the same terrorist organisation kidnapped a group of schoolgirls the world mounted a viral campaign in minutes. “What gives? Why is boy’s life worth less — or worthless?” questions Lloyd.

Isn’t it odd, he asks, that men’s health is not given any priority, given that men die five years earlier in a life expectancy gap that has increased 400 per cent since 1920? Lloyd’s book includes an Australian example of the disparity in health funding. Data from our National Health and Medical Research Council shows a “spectacular gender gap” with “men’s health problems being allocated a quarter of the funding women’s research gets”. Lloyd quotes a News Corp article showing funding specifically targeting men’s health ranks 36th in health research priorities, just behind sexually transmissible infections.

Yet where the anti-male bias reaches its zenith is in the witch-hunt over domestic violence. In their determination to promote what is a very serious social problem — the violence of some men towards their partners — the zealots controlling public debate on this issue are absolutely determined to allow no muddying of the waters. Violence by women is dismissed as irrelevant, violence against men is routinely ignored or seen as amusing.

A few months ago a promo for a “screwball” comedy, *She’s Funny That Way*, ran in all our major cinemas. It featured three successive scenes showing different women slugging men in the face, followed by a woman sniggering, “Wham, bam, thank you, ma’am.” Audiences found that hilarious and there has been not one word of protest about the promotion.

Anyone speaking out about the circumstances that drive men to violence is reined in. Look at what has happened to Rosie Batty. Who could forget this extraordinary woman speaking with such compassion about her mentally ill former partner, Greg Anderson, within days of him murdering their young son. “No one loved Luke more than Greg, his father,” she said, explaining Anderson’s mental health had deteriorated after a long period of unemployment and homelessness.

How disappointing, then, to hear her speech at Malcolm Turnbull’s first major policy announcement, the launch of a \$100 million women’s safety package. “This is a gender

issue,” she said firmly, mouthing the party line — not one word of compassion for men, nothing about men and children who are victims of female violence.

Open your eyes, Rosie. The epidemic of violence you are rightly so concerned about isn’t just about men. Didn’t you notice Melbourne mother Akon Guode, who has been charged with murder after driving her car with her four small children into a lake? Or Donna Vasyli, arrested after her Sydney podiatrist husband was found with seven stab wounds.

Why is it that when a woman was charged last month with murdering her partner in Broken Hill, the story sunk without a trace and domestic violence was never mentioned in the media reports?

Around the country there are government departments struggling to cope with daily reports of child abuse, most often by their mothers. Yes, it is appalling that so many children grow up in homes terrorised by violent fathers, but abuse by mothers is surely part of the story of violence in the home if we are really concerned about protection of children and breaking the cycle of violence.

Bill Shorten’s wife, Chloe, recently gave a speech boasting about her husband’s and her mother’s commitment to the eradication of violence against women. Funnily enough her talk mentioned a book, *Scream Quietly or the Neighbours Will Hear*, written by the woman who set up the world’s first refuge, Erin Pizzey. Clearly Chloe Shorten’s speech writer isn’t up on the politics of domestic violence. Pizzey is now world famous for her strenuous campaign arguing that domestic violence is not a gender issue.

“I always knew women can be as vicious and irresponsible as men,” she wrote, describing her childhood experience with a mother who beat her with the cord from an iron. She points out that many of the women in her refuge were violent, dangerous to their children and others around them.

Pizzey’s honesty has attracted constant attacks — she was forced to flee her native England with her children after protests, threats and violence culminated in the shooting of her family dog.

The 76-year-old started her own “White Ribbon Campaign” to counter “40 years of lies”, the constant male-bashing misinformation that dominates the domestic violence debate. The feminist White Ribbon Campaign that operates here and overseas is a prime offender.

“We must stop demonising men and start healing the rift that feminism has created between men and women,” says Pizzey, arguing that the “insidious and manipulative philosophy that women are always victims and men always oppressors can only continue this unspeakable cycle of violence”.

This brave, outspoken woman is one of a growing number of domestic violence experts and scholars struggling to set the record straight about violence in the home. There’s Murray Straus, professor of sociology from the University of New Hampshire and editor of several peer-reviewed sociology journals. Back in 1975 he first published research showing women were just as likely as men to report hitting a spouse. Subsequent surveys showed women often initiated the violence — it wasn’t simply self-defence. These findings have been

confirmed by more than 200 studies of intimate violence summed up in Straus's recent paper, *Thirty Years of Denying the Evidence on Gender Symmetry in Partner Violence*.

It's true that physical violence by women may cause fewer injuries on average because of differences in size and strength, but it is by no means harmless. Women use weapons, from knives to household objects, to neutralise their disadvantage, and men may be held back by cultural prohibitions on using force towards a woman even in self-defence.

Straus's review concludes that in the US men sustain about a third of the injuries from partner violence, including a third of the deaths from attacks by a partner. (In Australia, men made up a quarter of the 1645 partner deaths between 1989 and 2012.) And proportions of non-physical abuse (for example, emotional abuse) against men are even higher. Women are about as likely as men to kill their children and account for more than half of substantiated child maltreatment perpetrators.

(The world's largest domestic violence research database published in the peer-reviewed journal *Partner Abuse* summarised 1700 peer-reviewed studies and found that in large population samples, 58 per cent of intimate partner violence reported involved both the female and male partner. See <http://bit.ly/1GNOjoN>.)

Strauss has spent much of his working life weathering attacks for publicising these unwelcome truths about violence, regularly being booed from the stage when he tried to present his findings. On two occasions the chairwoman of a Canadian commission into violence against women claimed publicly he was a wife-beater — after repeated requests she finally was forced to apologise to him.

Straus has received death threats, along with his co-researchers, Richard Gelles and Suzanne Steinmetz, with the latter the subject of a campaign to deny her tenure and attempts made to rescind her grant funding.

“All three of us became ‘non persons’ among domestic violence advocates. Invitations to conferences dwindled and dried up. Librarians publicly stated they would not order or shelve our books,” Gelles says.

It would be nice to report more civilised debate over this issue in Australia but, sadly, here too lies and bullying are par for the course. Look at what happened to Tanveer Ahmed. This Sydney psychiatrist has long written about taboo topics, such as reverse racism or denial in the Muslim community, which got up the nose of the Fairfax Media audience. Two years ago he ended up losing his column over plagiarism charges.

Ahmed had spent six years as a White Ribbon ambassador but this all came unstuck this year when he wrote an article for *The Australian* that pointed to the pernicious influence of radical feminists on public debate over domestic violence and suggested the “growing social and economic disempowerment of men is increasingly the driver of family- based violence”. Boy, did that bring them out in force. Fairfax columnist Clementine Ford condemned his dangerous message, which “prioritises men’s power over women’s safety”, adding that she didn’t have time for “men’s woe-betide-me feelings”. After a tirade of attacks on social media, White Ribbon asked him to step down, informing him that to be reinstated he would need to undergo a recommitment program. Shades of Stasiland, eh? There’s a fascinating twist to this whole saga. Heading up White Ribbon Australia’s research and policy group is

Michael Flood, who is on the technical advisory group for the UN's Partners for Prevention, which has produced research papers supporting the essential points Ahmed makes about the links between men's social disempowerment and violence towards their partners.

Flood has spent his career focusing on men's violence, from his early years teaching boys in Canberra schools about date rape through to alarmist papers suggesting pornography promotes male aggression, to his latest role as pro-feminist sociologist at the University of Wollongong. Despite his years in academe he's happy to play fast and loose with statistics when it comes to demonising men.

"Boys think it's OK to hit girls." Back in 2008 this shocking news about teenager attitudes to violence led to headlines across the country. The source was a press release by White Ribbon Australia reporting on a publication by Flood and Lara Fergus that made the extraordinary claim: "Close to one in three (31 per cent) boys believe 'it's not a big deal to hit a girl' ."

Politicians jumped on the bandwagon, and everywhere there were calls for the re-education of these horrible, violent young men.

Flood and his colleagues had it totally wrong. The research actually found males hitting females was seen by virtually all young people surveyed to be unacceptable. Yet it was quite OK for a girl to hit a boy — 25 per cent of young people agreed with the statement "When a girl hits a guy, it's really not a big deal". When the error was brought to their attention, White Ribbon finally issued a correction and sent letters to newspapers, but of course none of these had the impact of the incorrect, misleading media headlines splashed right across the country.

A simple mistake? Well, perhaps, but there actually has been a steady stream of misleading statistics about domestic violence and it's a full-time job trying to get them corrected. The person who has taken on that daunting task is Greg Andresen, the key researcher for the One in Three Campaign, which seeks to present an accurate picture of violence in the home. The Sydney man somehow manages to challenge much of the deluge of misinformation about domestic violence while also working a day job and rearing a young family.

The campaign's reference to "one in three" refers to the proportion of family violence victims who are male. Our best data on this comes from the Australian Bureau of Statistics' Personal Safety Survey in 2012 that found 33 per cent of people who had experienced violence by a current partner were male.

Confusingly, there's another "one in three" figure constantly bandied about in domestic violence discussions, referring to the proportion of women who have experienced violence during their lifetime. This figure actually refers to all victims of incidents of physical violence, not just violence by partners, and about one in two men experience similar violence — as explained in an excellent report just released by Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety.

The One in Three website (oneinthree.com.au) opens with a startling image of a man with battered nose and a shocking shiner plus the slogan, "It's amazing what my wife can do with a frypan." That certainly makes the point but the strength of this site is the solid statistical analysis — more than 20 pages dissecting misleading statistics aired over Australia's media.

Here's one example from ABC's Radio National: "A recent survey in Victoria found family violence is the leading cause of death and ill health in women of child-bearing age."

Andresen draws on Australian Institute of Health and Welfare data to show the top five causes of death, disability and illness combined for Australian women aged 15 to 44 are anxiety and depression, migraine, type 2 diabetes, asthma and schizophrenia. “Violence doesn’t make the list,” he concludes.

The same nonsense about domestic violence being the leading cause of death in young women also appeared on Sky News last year, spurring psychologist Claire Lehmann to do her own analysis, which she published in her blog (<http://bit.ly/1Km1xEg>) on White Ribbon Day. Lehmann made it clear she supports the important work of the campaign but, she writes, “what I do not support, however, are dodgy statistics and false claims which belittle this good cause”.

In great detail she demonstrates how the dodgy statistics stem from misleading analysis of a VicHealth report and presents all the Australian data from the ABS and AIHW showing the claim is totally absurd. Yet the ABC, presented with all the data, still concluded the claim was accurate.

One of the tactics used by domestic violence campaigners is to highlight only men’s violence and leave out any statistics relating to women. “A quarter of Australian children had witnessed violence against their mother,” South Australia’s Victims of Crime commissioner Michael O’Connell thundered in August 2010.

This statistic came from a Young People and Domestic Violence study that showed almost an identical proportion of young people was aware of domestic violence against their fathers or stepfathers. Yet this barely got any mention in the media coverage.

Whenever statistics are mentioned publicly that reveal the true picture of women’s participation in family violence, they are dismissed with the domestic violence lobby claiming they are based on flawed methodology or are taken out of context.

But as Andresen says: “We use the best available quantitative data — ABS surveys, AIC (Australian Institute of Criminology) homicide stats, police crime data, hospital injury databases — all of which show that a third of victims of family violence are male. The same data sources are cited by the main domestic violence organisations but they deliberately minimise any data relating to male victims.”

A recent episode of the ABC’s satirical comedy *Utopia* showed public servants who ran the Nation Building Authority all in a twit working out how to knock back a Freedom of Information request. It made for great comedy watching the twists and turns of the bureaucrats seeking to refuse the request, assuming it was better to block it “just to be on the safe side”. Pretty funny considering this fictional FoI request turned out to relate to a harmless, long-finished multi-storey carpark.

The bureaucrats must run around like headless chooks when they receive the regular FoI requests sent to all government bodies regarding the long-term cover-up of the gender of child abuse perpetrators.

Imagine the scene at the AIHW when they received FOI requests relating to a long-term cover up regarding the gender of child abuse perpetrators.

The one time this body published this data was in 1996 and showed 968 male perpetrators to 1138 women. Since then FoI requests have produced data only from Western Australia, namely state Department for Child Protection figures that showed the number of mothers responsible for “substantiated maltreatment” between 2007 and 2008 rose from 312 to 427. In the same period the number of fathers reported for child abuse dropped from 165 to 155. Easy to see why bureaucrats would be nervous of figures like that.

Queensland Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk recently made headlines by calling for campaigns against domestic violence to include male victims.

Her comment was met by a barrage of complaints from domestic violence services warning her not to recognise male victims at the expense of women.

According to Pizzey, that’s the real issue. It is all about funding. In a 2011 article for *The Daily Mail* she argued domestic violence had become a huge feminist industry, “This is girls-only empire building, and it is highly lucrative at that.”

Pizzey has spent most of her life speaking out about the lies being promoted by this industry to protect their funding base and begging audiences not to create a domestic violence movement hostile to men and boys.

“I failed,” she concludes sadly, but she hasn’t given up. Her message is clear: “The roots of domestic violence lie in our parenting. Both mothers and fathers can be violent; we need to acknowledge this. If we educate parents about the dangers of behaving violently, to each other and to their children, we will change the course of those children’s lives.”

As Lloyd so eloquently points out, domestic violence is only one of many issues where men are being demonised, where the exclusive promotion of women’s priorities leaves men with a dud deal. His book explores issues such as paternity fraud, schools failing boys, circumcision, becoming a weekend dad, men’s sex drive, pornography and the early death rate.

Ironic, considering how often we are told men still hold all the power.

It’s about time those male newspaper editors, politicians, bureaucrats and other powerful men started asking hard questions about the one-sided conversation that leaves so many men missing out. And maybe women who care about their brothers, sons, fathers, partners and male friends may care to join in.