

The invisible domestic violence – against men

More women are being convicted of domestic violence, but discovering the true number of male victims is a complex affair



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'Domestic violence has traditionally been understood as a crime perpetrated by domineering men against defenceless women.' Photograph: Jim Wileman

That women accounted for 7% of all convictions for domestic violence last year will come as a surprise to many. But what is not clear is whether the growing numbers of women convicted – a 150% increase in five years – represents a rise in actual cases of female-perpetrated domestic violence.

Domestic violence has traditionally been understood as a crime perpetrated by domineering men against defenceless women. Research spanning over 40 years has, however, consistently found that men and women self-report perpetrating domestic violence at similar rates. Professor John Archer from the University of Central Lancashire has conducted a number of meta-analytic reviews of these studies and found that women are as likely to use domestic violence as men, but women are twice as likely as men to be injured or killed during a domestic assault. Men still represent a substantial proportion of people who are assaulted, injured or killed by an intimate partner (50%, 30% and 25% respectively).

If the empirical research is correct in suggesting that between a quarter and half of all domestic violence victims are men, a question follows: why has women's domestic violence towards men been unreported for so long, and what has changed in the last five years to make it more visible?

One reason may be the feminist movement. Feminism took up the cause of domestic abuse of women in the 1970s, with the world's first women's refuge being opened by Erin Pizzey in 1971. Feminism understood domestic violence as the natural extension of men's patriarchal attitudes towards women, leading men to feel they had the right to control their partners, using violence if necessary. Feminists campaigned successfully to bring the issue into the public arena, thereby securing resources to establish services

to help victims. This activism and advocacy led to governmental and public acceptance that "domestic violence" was synonymous with violence against women.

Paradoxically, feminist concerns for female victims may also have led to the recent increase in arrests of female perpetrators. The disparity between prevalence study statistics and criminal conviction data of male domestic violence perpetration led US feminists to successfully campaign for mandatory arrest policies for domestic violence call-outs. Mandatory arrest policies coincided with a three-fold increase in the number of women arrested. In the UK, a pro-arrest policy was also introduced, requiring police forces to always consider an arrest in domestic violence cases. Although not eliminating police discretion, the policy undoubtedly diminished individual police officers' discretionary powers. The increase in female arrests for domestic violence suggests that when police officers were freer to exercise discretion, it was exercised more frequently in favour of female perpetrators.

Support for a feminist conceptualisation of domestic violence has been afforded by men's generally more visible violent behaviour. Men make up the majority of perpetrators of violence in public places, such as football matches and nightclubs. As men appear to be more ready, willing and able to use violence outside the home, the logical extension is that men are more violent than women per se. This argument has frequently been cited by researchers such as Professors Russell and Emerson Dobash as evidence against the veracity of figures showing large numbers of male victims of domestic violence, while ignoring the fact that men's aggression in public places is almost always directed towards other men.

In recent years, female violence has become a more public affair, with changes in drinking patterns being a likely contributing factor to more women being arrested for violent offences outside of the home. In addition, the widespread use of CCTV may have provided sufficient evidence for the police and CPS to override stereotypes of women as nonviolent. The erosion of the passive female stereotype is likely to result in more women being charged and convicted of offences generally, which might also result in increases in the conviction rates for women's domestic violence.

The dual stereotypes of the violent man and passive woman have undoubtedly obscured the existence of male victims of domestic violence in the past. Men were also unlikely to view their own victimisation as either domestic violence or a criminal assault, and so were unlikely to seek help.

Large sums of money have been spent on educational campaigns to encourage female victims to seek help. Until there are similar campaigns for men, it is unlikely that the true number of male victims needing help will be known. If the current trends continue however, women may find themselves increasingly likely to be charged with domestic assault, and men more likely to be offered help and protection.

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