



## **Male Violence and Male Privilege**

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Male violence and male abuse of power are undeniable facts of our lives. Their effects are felt by women, children, other men with less power and the earth. We will be examining in particular male violence against women, situating it within the context of male privilege.

To look at male violence against women, it may be instructive to start with rape. Male rape of women is male violence against women in one of its most devastating forms. It involves the total violation of a woman's body, mind and spirit. And when we listen to and take victims seriously, we know that its effects are debilitating long after the act itself.

What is almost as horrifying as rape is how normative it is in our culture: one in 2.5 women is a victim of sexual assault in her lifetime. One in three females is sexually abused before age eighteen. In a 1988 survey of 1,700 Rhode Island junior high school students, a quarter of the boys and a sixth of the girls said that a man has the right to have sex with a woman without asking, as long as he has spent money on her. A majority of the boys and a near majority of the girls said that it's permissible for a man to force sex on a woman if the couple has dated for six months. Historically, the cultural response to rape has been to ask questions like, "What was she wearing?" "Where was she walking?" "What did she do to stop it?" Now battered and raped women are requiring us to label victim-blaming for what it is and to see how victim-blaming relieves us from asking more disturbing questions like, "Who is doing this to women? And why?"

One reason it's difficult for men to answer these questions is because it threatens to lessen the distance between us and "those other guys" who brutalize women. When we first began working with men who batter women, we kept waiting for the monster to come through the door. Seven years later, we're still waiting. Most of the men we've seen, whether self-referred or mandated by the courts or the military, seem normal to most of the people who know them. They just happen to be committing criminal offenses at home. FBI crime statistics tell us that close to 40 % of all men living intimately with women have battered their partners during the course of the relationship. By "battering" we mean the use of and repeated threat of physical force to dominate and control a woman. From this definition and these statistics, we might conclude that battering is "normal" behavior in this culture. Seventy-five to ninety percent of rapes are committed by male acquaintances: family members, co-workers, classmates, dates, boyfriends, husbands. Battering and rape aren't, as many of us would prefer it, being committed by pathological freaks. Women are most often victimized by men they once trusted and loved. Why?

The answers that generally mean most to the men going through our program include the following: Men batter women because, in the short term, it works; i.e., the violence temporarily stops a woman from doing what threatens or challenges our authority. Men batter women because they can get away with it. Until recently, men could batter women without experiencing consequences such as her leaving or their arrest, prosecution, conviction and sentencing. Most men know that no matter who starts the fight, they can generally overpower a woman. And finally, men have been socialized to believe we have the right and the privilege to dominate and control women. Physical force (battering and rape) are the extremes to which we resort if necessary to maintain that control.

When we say men batter because they can get away with it and it "works," we are describing some of the workings of patriarchy, a system of male control over women, a system of male privilege.

To talk about male privilege, we have to talk about ourselves from the perspective of the other. From within male reality the term "male privilege" doesn't signify; it has no meaning -- it's invisible; it's just the way things are. How does a fish talk about water? This famous conundrum applies to white men talking to other men about our position in the world. The name feminists have given to our position -- male privilege -- doesn't exist in "common parlance," which is the language of the dominant group, the culture-definers. Rich Vodde notes that

"It is doubtful that the term (male privilege) existed or had any meaning until women began to expose their oppression and name their oppressors. It is a phrase whose meaning was articulated by the experience of women who were its victims . . . It is a new phrase, born of broken silence . . . As it left the mouths of those women who did not need a definition to know what it meant and entered the realm of general discourse, its meaning became contested . . ."<sup>1</sup>

Notice we have again circled back to the problem of the difficulty of expressing certain thoughts in general discourse or common parlance. The above quote includes two more terms from women's reality: "oppressors" and "oppression." In the battle for the power to define reality, most men reject those terms as applying to us. We label them and those who use them as "strident," "hysterical," "man-hating," because it is in our interest to discredit them. Men of color in a white-dominated, i.e. racist, society also experience oppression, but they share some of the "perks" of sexism in terms of power over women, especially in relation to women of color. Gay men experience the benefits of male privilege and the oppression of homophobia.

When we began to work with men who batter, we ran into this problem of conflicting definitions, conflicting realities. We entered the work with an assumption that you the reader probably share -- that we were good guys (non-batterers). The guys we worked with were bad guys (batterers). This assumption was immediately confronted from two directions: first, many of the guys referred seemed quite like us. And second, the women who hired and supervised us began confronting us on *our* behavior.

At first they insisted that we audiotape the group. We resisted, claiming that some men wouldn't tolerate that and might even drop out. At the time, that thought came more readily to our minds than the implications for the women's safety. Once we began recording, our supervisors critiqued our conduct of the group as revealed by the tapes. They pointed out the ways we didn't confront assumptions of dominance and privilege. A man who was a "star" in group (he was verbal and concerned for other men) turned out to be requiring his partner to stay at home and answer the telephone for his business. She had no car and wasn't allowed to leave at any time. He drove a Cadillac.

The supervision sessions were difficult for all of us. Gus would get sinus headaches and have to go sit in the bathroom. Our supervisors had to face fears -- that we would feel they didn't have the authority to criticize us, that we would quit or at least go away mad if they were too critical (i.e. honest), that they would betray themselves and other women to avoid hurting our feelings.

Gradually through being confronted, from listening and reading, we came to acknowledge that the experience of oppressed peoples, those not in power, is different from ours in the dominant class. Our group so controls the definition of what is, that we need not even know there is any other view. We came to see that we shared the dominant world view, that there wasn't as much difference between us and batterers as there was between men and women. So there wasn't much of a we/they split (in our groups). We were all participants/beneficiaries in the "continuum of male controls over women."<sup>2</sup>

Most of us can see how we benefit from sexism in terms of having easier access to higher-paying jobs. But we balk at the idea that we benefit from women being raped or battered. To understand how all men "benefit" from battering is to see something of the complicity we all share in the act. While many of us don't rape or batter women, those of us in relationships with women find that our partners frequently make decisions based on how to avoid subjecting themselves to male violence: Decisions like where and when to walk, whom to talk with and what to wear. These decisions are often powerfully influenced by whether or not a man (spouse, lover, friend) is available to accompany a woman on that walk. They have an

unspoken agreement that she depends on a man to protect her from being raped or threatened by violent men. So men end up determining if women get to go out and where they go. And we don't mind having that control. More than once, batterers in our program have noted the irony in their partners' relying on them for protection from "those violent men out there." This form of control never gets named. It's classic male privilege, in all its invisibility, with all its power.

This information came to us by listening to women's reality. Listening, we began to get a better sense of who we are and how we operate. We came to see that a cardinal principle of male-dominated reality, of male privilege, is the assumption that *others are there for me*. By "others" we mean whoever we can put in one-down (service) positions. Thus the principle might be called the principle of hierarchy. Each of us according to his own position in a hierarchy has access to the services of those below him.

In our Western version of patriarchy, traditionally this meant a white, male god at the top, the Pope, secular leaders like the President and corporate executives next, followed by middle management, professionals and religious leaders, then workers (who might still be heads of households), then white families (women and children) and, at the bottom, people of color.

As you can see, male privilege also includes the assumption that reality is what I (and my kind) say it is. Adrienne Rich has said, "Objectivity is just male subjectivity made (sacrosanct)." A man is defining a woman's reality and claiming the truth when he says:

1. "She was being provocative; she had on a see-through (too short) dress."
2. "I didn't want to hit her. She provoked me. She kept nagging."
3. "Women lie."
4. "I don't notice the mess. You're just being compulsive. If it bothers you, you pick it up."

Note how we describe reality in ways that justify our position. Implicit in this is another male operating principle: *the rules apply to others; not to me*. Think of how we handle jealousy, anger, name-calling, expectations of service. In all we apply the notorious double standard.

What can a man do once he becomes aware of all this, of how things are? We propose that listening to women, systematically instituted, is an alternative to using power and control tactics to silence them. Listening is thus a path toward justice. In "Men Stopping Violence" we have instituted principles and practices to further this goal. We invite the reader to try these out.

1. *Listen without interrupting*. This doesn't mean "white knuckle" listening, where you're actually planning your rebuttal as she speaks. It doesn't mean "listen until you've had enough and then interrupt." It means give her your full attention and seriously consider her point of view.
2. *Believe her and take her seriously*. This means accepting her feelings, her version, her vision. It means fully recognizing her right to her opinion and acknowledging that her opinion is as valid as your own.
3. *Change what is wrong*. This is about giving up pornography since pornography reinforces our assumption that others are there for us. It's about recognizing the amount of rage she feels from being constantly endangered, from being expected to serve us, and then labeled "bitch" or "nag" if she complains about it. It's about pay equity, abortion rights and doing our share of the housework without being reminded.

Listening to women is hard for us. If we listen, we'll hear things that are hard to hear. Our lies, our injustices, our faults will be exposed. We'd like to think we can act to correct these without having to go through the ordeal of hearing about them. We can't. If we listen, and don't start acting angry ourselves to divert her, we may begin to have feelings. Somehow we must learn to feel without acting, rather than act without feeling. To do or say nothing in the face of her rage is to step into the unknown. We're likely to feel confused and scared if we don't emotionally withdraw, go numb or get angry. Our confusion and fear can be palpable. At this point we feel like we're not being a man. And in fact we aren't being the kind of man we grew up trying hard to be.

We're relinquishing control over a space so that there is room for her to live. In the process we're vulnerable, we're passive, and we're opening ourselves to all sorts of feelings we've not allowed ourselves in a long, long time. For after the guilt and shame we've warded off are not only terror and confusion, but tears, tenderness, sorrow and love. When we allow ourselves these feelings, the women and children in our lives may be able to feel a commonality and closeness with us, rather than feeling driven by us.

Some of our best moments come when we're not in control. Remember the flow between us and others when we're laughing uncontrollably, crying deeply, feeling deep love. Remember orgasms. Or even a sunset, the oceans, a gorgeous day . . . We don't make these things happen.

Becoming comfortable not being in control, being patient, listening, offering care, being of service -- if power and dominance are essential to who we are, these will always be alien. But if we want love and connectedness, rich relationships with women, children, men, other living creatures -- ourselves -- let us open ourselves to these.

## **NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> Rich Vodde, M.S.W., "Male Privilege," unpublished manuscript (Men Stopping Violence, Inc.).

<sup>2</sup> David Adams, "The Continuum of Male Controls Over Women," (EMERGE, Cambridge, MA).