



# Men's Work—To Stop Male Violence

by Paul Kivel

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“WHY DO MEN BATTER WOMEN?” “Why do men rape women?” “Why do men stalk, harass, exploit and mistreat women?” To answer such questions we must first of all discard the easy answer:

“They’re **monsters**.” In fact, research shows that most men who batter, rape, or harass women are very ordinary and not much different from most other men. In all too many “normal” households, workplaces, congregations, and schools, violence is a common family secret. Nor are they **crazy**. Most of these men are sane, rational, and lead socially acceptable lives.

Answers which portray men who are abusive as ogres put a wall around these men, separating “them” from “us.” If we’re male, we want to believe they are different from us. If we’re female, we want to believe they’re different from the men we know. But these walls won’t protect us from the reality that men who abuse women and men who don’t are not all that different in many ways.

Estimates are that men batter 2-3 million women in the U.S. every year.<sup>1</sup> Nearly one-third of the women in this country will experience at least one incident of domestic violence by their current or former male partner at some point in their lives.<sup>2</sup> Each year approximately 1,200 women are murdered by their spouses or boyfriends.<sup>3</sup> The unfortunate truth is that male violence is normal in our society: vast numbers, i.e. millions, of men participate. Any explanation which tries to explain why men abuse women through individual psychology or the pathology of particular men won’t help us understand the systematic, routine and widespread persistence of male violence.

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<sup>1</sup>San Francisco Chronicle, 6-24-94, p. A16

<sup>2</sup>The Commonwealth Fund, *Health Concerns Across a Woman's Lifespan: The Commonwealth Fund 1998 Survey of Women's Health*. May 1999.  
[http://www.commonwealthfund.org/usr\\_doc/Healthconcerns\\_\\_surveyreport.pdf?section=4039](http://www.commonwealthfund.org/usr_doc/Healthconcerns__surveyreport.pdf?section=4039)

<sup>3</sup>Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Homicide Trends in the U.S.: Intimate Homicide*,  
<http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/homicide/intimates.htm#intimates> (accessed 2/10/2007)



Boys are taught to accept violence as a manly response to real or imagined threats. At the same time, men get little training in negotiating intimate relationships. Moreover, in our patriarchal society, all too many men are raised to believe, or learn from their peers, that they have the “right” to control “their” women and children. The result is a tendency for many men to view difficulties in relationships as a threat to their manhood, and they respond with violence.

Gender roles are not foreordained by our biology or our genetic composition. We learn gender roles as part of our socialization into the culture. When a child is born the first question asked is often, “Is it a boy or girl?” Our response to the child is then mediated by our knowledge of its genitals. Children learn from our actions what behavior is appropriate for their gender identities. Boys are taught to expect girls to be pretty, sexy, emotional, clean, thin, acquiescent, and dependent, and to become caretakers and child bearers. To be sure, many young men today tend to question these expectations, but the grip of traditional role expectations remains very strong.

The definitions of masculinity provide a set of 24-hour-a-day, seven-days-a-week rigid gender role expectations that every boy is constantly reminded he must live up to so he can be a “real” man.

How do boys get these ideas about male identity and manhood? The training begins early. Many parents stop holding, kissing, and hugging boys by the time their sons are 4 or 5 in order to toughen them up. We tell them to act like a man, to be tough, aggressive, in control, not to express their feelings, not to cry, and never to ask for help. Approximately one out of every six boys is sexually assaulted,<sup>4</sup> and many, many more are hit, yelled at, teased, and goaded into fighting to prove they’re tough and can take it. Each part of the training teaches boys that they will be violated until they toughen up and learn to protect themselves through the use of force. It also teaches them to take their pain and anger out on others the way older men have done to them.

Our society trains young boys so well that by the time they are in school they can police themselves using names and fights to keep each other in line. “Wimp,” “fag,” “punk,” “mama’s boy,” “girl,” “sissy,”—each taunt acts as a reminder to hang tough. Behind each

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<sup>4</sup>Russell, Diana E. H. "The Incidence and Prevalence of Intrafamilial and Extrafamilial Sexual Abuse of Female Children," in *Handbook on Sexual Abuse of Children*, edited by Lenore E.A. Walker, Springer Publishing Co 1988

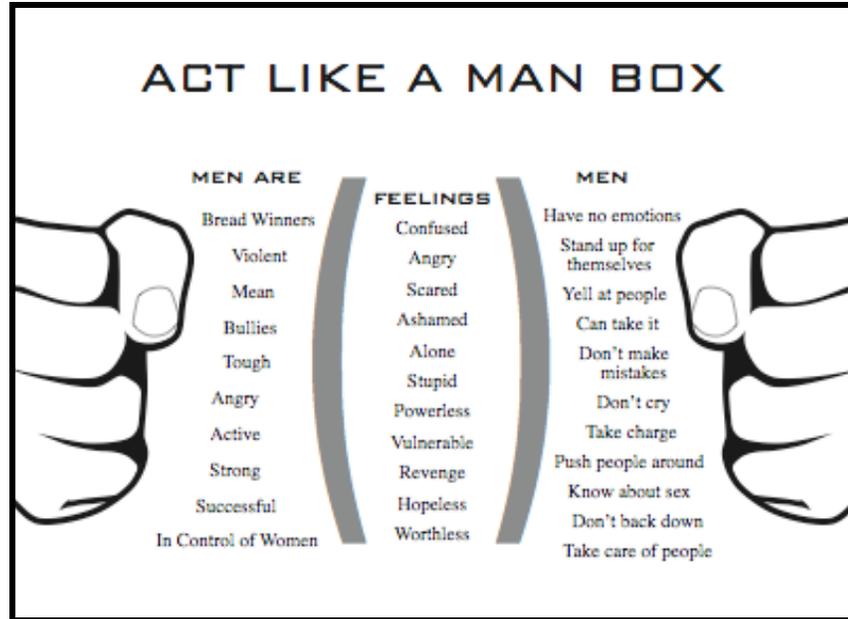


name is the challenge, “What are you going to do about it?” Often, young boys have to fight to prove they’re tough and won’t be pushed around.

Feeling powerless and constantly challenged, boys look for power and control, but over whom? Not those who have greater power than them such as parents, teachers, or police. The best targets—and usually the only ones available—for aggression are girls and younger boys. When a boy or man is challenged by another guy, he can prove he’s a man either by fighting the challenger or by finding a girl or younger, more vulnerable male to demonstrate how aggressive he is. Although anyone will do, abusing girls establishes his heterosexual credentials while relieving any anxiety that he may not be tough enough. Hurting girls becomes both a sign of his (heterosexual) interest in them (he’s paying attention to them) and a symbol of his difference from them (he’s in control).

This aggressive relationship to girls seems perfectly natural because boys are taught that women are primarily sexual objects. A boy will see literally tens of thousands of visual images during childhood of young, thin, sexy, beautiful women who are promised to him if he’s rich enough, if he’s powerful enough, if he has the right material possessions—if he’s “man” enough. In fact, many men come to see a woman as just another material possession that comes with the car, stereo, clothes, gun, education, or job.

But when it comes down to his expectation that a particular woman will provide sex for him, if he doesn’t buy her services either directly through prostitution or indirectly through pornography, he has to strategize to get what he has been taught to feel is his due. He “knows” he deserves sex because he’s a man even at the same time he “knows” that she has been trained to protest his sexual advances at first to show that she is a “good” girl, not a slut. He has been taught that women really want sex—after all, that’s primarily what he has learned they are for (besides taking care of the kids, cooking, cleaning, etc.) He has also been taught that when they say “no,” they really mean, “yes, just try a little harder, show me how much I’m worth to you.” Because of their general expectations that women are available to men sexually, many men give themselves license to use absolutely any tactics to get a particular woman to give in to sex. They might negotiate, bargain, cajole or demand, manipulate, inebriate, threaten, bribe, intimidate, or simply attack.



The toughening up process for boys includes the message that the worst thing in the world they can be is feminine, i.e. a woman. They are getting a message not only about what men should be like, but about the inferiority of women. The other strong message they receive is that they should do anything they can to prove they are not gay. Being homosexual is seen as nearly on a par with being a woman. Therefore homophobia—not just a hatred of homosexuals, but also the fear of gays or the threat of being perceived as gay—can be used to get heterosexual men to commit acts of violence to establish their male credentials. (Think of what some of our political leaders have done to prove they are not wimps.)

Men are trained to think that we need, and deserve, women to take care of us physically and emotionally, and to service us sexually. I remember thinking as a teenager that as long as I did my part, girls should do theirs. If I initiated dates, paid for our time together, arranged transportation, and protected them on the streets, then girls should show their appreciation by taking care of me emotionally, putting their own concerns and interests aside, and putting out sexually. I think this unspoken contract is one that many heterosexual men operate by.

However, we are also taught that the more powerful we are as men, the less force we should need to use to get what we want. The vast differences between men in the resources we have to command women's sexual and caretaking services depend on our race, class, job, and education.



The more “male power” we accumulate or are given by class or racial birthright, the more we can use money, status, power, and control instead of physical force to get sexual attention and other services from women. The more force we have to use, the less entitlement we feel and the more angry and impatient we become. So we always start out hoping and expecting it to be easy, with lines like the following:

- Have another drink.
- You look tense. Let me give you a massage or rub your shoulders.
- Relax, you’ll enjoy it.
- Don’t you like me?
- Show me you love me.
- You know, there are lots of other women out there.
- I spent a lot of money on you.
- It’s time.
- You got me all excited.
- You are special; you’re different from other women.
- I’m special; I’m different from other men.
- You don’t know how good it can be.
- I can’t live without you.
- I’m not leaving.

Since by definition “real” men naturally end up having sex with women, the pressure we might be willing to apply to get what we think we need and deserve is unlimited. If a woman is pretty or smart or rich, we justify what we do as a challenge with phrases like “She thinks she’s so ...” “Who does she think she is?” “She probably thinks I’m too ...” “I’ll cut her down to size.” “I’ll show her.”

If our manipulations fail, we end up hitting her or raping her. Then we have to blame her so that we can deny our aggression and keep our self-esteem and self-image intact. We might rely on rationalizations like the following: “she’s fucked up”, “she’s frigid”, “she’s too emotional”, “she shouldn’t have said that”, “she knew that would make me angry”, “she asked for it”, “she said ‘no’ but she meant ‘yes’”, “she pushed my buttons”, “she’s a tease”, “look what she was wearing”, “she was really drunk”, “she was all over me”, “she wanted it”.



If she is less educated, poorer, or not “good-looking”, or if we’re white and she is not, that alone can be a justification for treating her abusively because we’ve been taught that she doesn’t deserve any better.

In the final analysis we never do see the woman as a real, independent human being with feelings, concerns, and a perspective of her own. Because we have pre-explained women’s needs, thoughts, and actions according to our male projections, it invariably comes as a surprise to us when women are hurt by and angry about our violence. We respond by minimizing and justifying our actions with phrases like the following:

- I didn’t know.
- I didn’t mean ...
- I didn’t intend ...
- You’re too sensitive ...
- It was just normal male and female stuff
- That’s the way guys are.
- You shouldn’t be so angry.
- It wasn’t such a big deal.
- Women are just too ... anyway.
- It was just the heat of the moment.
- What can you expect?

Many men feel set up. We spend years learning a set of expectations about women’s services and think that we are just following the rules. In a sense we *have* been set up. We have been set up by the gender roles we were trained in and the expectations about women that we were led to believe were true. We end up living our lives feeling superior to women: we are condescending in our words and actions, and we feel entitled to their services. In our everyday interactions, we interrupt women by talking louder than they do; we don’t value women’s opinions about something because they are women; we make comments in public about women’s bodies and discuss women’s bodies with other men; we don’t take it seriously when we are told by women that we are sexist or abusive; we are told by women that they want more affection and less sex from us and we don’t know how to respond; we cheat on our lovers and then we lie about it; we abuse women through our use of pornography and prostitution; we use our voices or bodies to scare or intimidate women; we hit, slap, shove, or push women; and we have sex with women when we know they



don't want to. We've been set up by the sense of superiority and entitlement, and the small benefits we gain to collude with and perpetuate sexism and male supremacy.

We can't make better choices unless we understand the social framework of power and violence that constantly pressures us to be in control and on top. We live in a society based on over 500 years of violence directed towards people with less power who were considered inferior, evil, sinful, uncivilized, and less than human. An important part of our work is to look at how power and inequality are structured into social relationships. The chart below captures some of the ways that power, and therefore the ability to do violence to others, is structured in U.S. society.

THE POWER CHART	
More Powerful	Less Powerful
adults	young people/seniors
men	women
rich	working and middle class
white people	people of color
heterosexuals	lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgenders
bosses	workers
Christians	Muslims, Jews, Buddhists
able-bodied people	people with disabilities
formally educated	non-formally educated
citizens	immigrants
people in U.S.A.	the rest of the world

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<sup>5</sup> © Oakland Men's Project



These inequalities are maintained through discrimination, laws, stereotypes, rules, exploitation, and ultimately through force and violence. The violence is interlinked: violence against one targeted group encourages violence against other less powerful groups. All forms of violence are used to cover up the fact that 1% of the people in the United States control 42% of the financial wealth and the top 10% control 81% of that wealth.<sup>6</sup>

Most boys are trained to act like a “real” man as preparation for fulfilling roles in our society that will maintain political and economic structure and protect the wealth and power of the ruling class—the wealthiest and most powerful 1%. Because people are always resisting, rebelling, and organizing against inequalities of wealth and power, those in power need people to supervise, discipline, and control those who challenge the status quo. As police officers, security guards, prison wardens, immigration officials, deans and administrators, soldiers, members of the National Guard, sheriffs, and as partners and fathers—when they commit acts of interpersonal violence, men are acting as the enforcers of hierarchy and domination. Male violence is the enforcement mechanism for inequality, exploitation, and all other forms of social injustice. Men are the enforcers. Men are not only the enforcers for sexism. White men are the enforcers of racism, straight men are the enforcers of heterosexism, men who are citizens are the enforcers of the exploitation of immigrants, and well-off men are the enforcers for economic injustice. All for the benefit of the ruling class.

How can men of all races and classes be brought into the struggle against abuse and violence? There are growing numbers of men who are critical of sexism and realize that they have become enforcers of a system that is destroying all of our lives. All too often, however, these men as individuals are isolated and fearful of raising their concerns with other men for fear of themselves being targeted for violence. It is time for men who want to stop the violence to break through the fear that has silenced us and reach out to other men.

Men must understand how we also are damaged by sexism and that male violence against women keeps us from the collective action needed to confront racial, gender-based, and economic injustice.

A system that requires that we always act as though we were in control while repressing our emotions takes a heavy toll. It

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<sup>6</sup> Mishel, Lawrence, Jared Bernstein, and Sylvia Allegretto. *The State of Working America 2006/2007*. Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute, 2008, p. 249.



damages our sense of authenticity and prevents us from challenging abuses of power and authority except in self-destructive ways. It results in a loss of intimacy with women and children—and other men. It produces stress that is a hazard to our health and shortens our lives. It makes us sick in our souls and our bodies, and it turns us into the enemies of those we love and supporters of those who exploit us.

Why *do* men batter, harass, and sexually assault women? The answer is complex. Because we have been trained to. Because there are few social sanctions against it. Because men are trained not to see women as people, nor the effects that our actions have on them. Because we live in a society where it is acceptable to exploit people with less social and personal power. Because we are offered meager rewards for toeing the line and fulfilling our (often dangerous) jobs as enforcers.

Whatever the reasons for male violence, men are responsible for battery and sexual assault and for stopping male violence. Our male training and expectations of women have been defined and enforced by individual men and a male-dominated society. Therefore it is particularly powerful when men challenge other men on issues of male violence, contradicting the myth that it is natural, inevitable, or inconsequential for men to abuse women. Men must challenge each other to stop the violence. We must challenge notions of manhood that lead us to injure or kill those we love. We must confront male friends when we see them heading down the destructive path of becoming enforcers for the ruling class. We must work with women and other men to build safe, healthy and just communities.

This is truly men's work—to reclaim our own humanity and stop all forms of male violence and exploitation.

### **Men's Work Is**

**Personal**—to look in our own lives at any ways we are controlling, abusive or disrespectful towards women. Do we objectify women, tease women, tell demeaning jokes, use pornography or prostitutes, or sexually harass women? Do we expect our partners to put out for us, do what we want, and put our needs first? Do we force or manipulate women into having sex with us? Do we interrupt women, disparage or undervalue their contributions, disrespect their intelligence, dominate our conversations with them?



**Interpersonal**—to reach out to other men and challenge the culture of violence which allows abuse and injustice to go unchallenged. Too many times we are silent when the comments are made, the jokes told, the pornography pulled out, the conquests recounted, or the abuse carried out. Too often we are silent in the face of sexual harassment, wage discrimination, and male objectification and abuse of women. Part of men’s work is to challenge other men.

**Parental**—to model for and teach our sons and the other young men in our community different ways to relate to women, children, and other men which are based on respect, mutuality, equality and caring. Many boys and young men in your community are watching you as a model of how to be an ally to women. What are they learning from you?

**Socio-political**—to challenge the systematic mistreatment of women which makes them vulnerable to battery, sexual assault, incest, and date and marital rape. Job discrimination, routine sexual harassment, lack of police protection, and cultural objectification all make women less privileged than men, putting them at risk. We must understand that abuse and violence arise from a system of sexual inequality. To stop them requires us to challenge the socialization of young people into gender roles and to challenge the institutions and the unequal distribution of power upon which sexism and racism and homophobia and economic exploitation are based. Men’s work is to become allies to women in the struggle to stop the violence, challenge the mistreatment, and work for justice for all women, children and men in our society.<sup>7</sup>

This is a big task, but it is one which each of us can start in small ways—in our homes, in our schools, in our communities. We can educate ourselves, and offer our children new models of male behavior. We can support each other in finding a healing response to the pain and hurt we have suffered. We can challenge the schools to educate young people about empowering ways to counter sexism and racism. We can confront institutionalized oppression and violence in our communities. We can support movements and organizations that work for social justice. In sum, instead of colluding with injustice, by working together with others as allies we can build community responses to the system of inequality and the cycle of violence that are so damaging to our lives.

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<sup>7</sup> There are more specific suggestions for being a male ally at <http://www.paulkivel.com/resources/sexismguidelines.pdf>.



“Why are men violent?” is an interesting question. But the more important question is, “What are we going to do about it?”

Please send comments, feedback, resources, and suggestions for distribution to [paul@paulkivel.com](mailto:paul@paulkivel.com). Further resources are available at [www.paulkivel.com](http://www.paulkivel.com).