

MYTHS ABOUT ABUSIVE MEN

Myths about abusive men and all the views that justify their actions and absolve them from personal responsibility prevent the recognition of the real nature of abuse. This leaflet lists and refutes these myths.

“ABUSIVE MEN ARE ILL”

The prevalence of mental illness is not greater among abusive men than among the general population. In addition, someone who is really so ill that he cannot control his actions cannot decide when, where and in relation to whom he should “loose his temper” or what body-parts he should hit so that the consequences of his actions could remain secret or in order that he could not be called to account because of them. But the majority of abusers have no problem controlling these factors.

“THEY ACT UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF ALCOHOL OR DRUGS”

This argument is not about the real reasons of violence but about how “male bravado” was elected to the rank of general culture and a quasi-scientific argument. It is well-known how society’s judgement of men’s and women’s alcoholism differs. It is worth considering why in the case of violence against women culture accepts something as an extenuating circumstance that is considered an aggravating circumstance in the case of actions endangering or harming someone else’s integrity, e.g. in the case of drink-driving. Or the fact that many people remain peaceful under the effect of alcohol or drugs – so what is the common in those people who do not? Why does society not apply the widely-known and scientifically supported observation that alcohol and drugs do not change the personality but bring out its already existing tendencies. It is apparent that abusive men drink in order to hit, rather than hit because they have drunk...

“THEY HAVE PROBLEMS ADJUSTING”

This may happen, but more as an exception. Abusive men are usually perfectly adjusted to their environments, what is more, many of them are famous for being such a charming man (as he used to be with his would be partner at the beginning of the relationship before he “came in possession”). Many of them are well-known personalities, who are others’

ideals, and can rely not just on understanding from authorities but also from their spouse’s parents.

“THEY WERE BORN LIKE THAT”

The history of psychology is a pendulum swinging between the biological and the social explanations of behaviour. However, even in ages (like the present one) when biological explanations become more prevalent, at least as many studies can be collected to prove that violence (just as gender roles) is acquired behaviour.

“THAT IS WHAT THEY LEARNED”

Despite the fact that biological explanations are in fashion, most people consider abuse a learned behaviour whose occurrence is especially probable if the abuser was a witness or victim of violence in his childhood. There is a lot of truth to this opinion. Nevertheless, sole reliance on this explanation disregards the fact that women were almost always present when abusive men grew up, and they could have served as role models of non-violent behaviour. Despite this fact, young boys and adult men usually do not copy women’s behaviour. Why do “female” models of relating remain unrecognised by boys and men? Studying this could bring us closer to the recognition of the real reasons of abuse; to the recognition of sexism, the interweaving of prejudice against women and power.

“EMOTIONAL ILLITERATES”

Abuse is often explained away by reference to men’s inner problems, their inability to recognise and express their emotions, needs and requests. True: many abusers have poor skills in this area. It is also true that what is called masculinity causes men themselves the largest amount of suffering in this area, and this is what makes the traditional male role a statistically verifiable health risk factor. However, when a man forces his will on a woman, he exactly knows what he wants and communicates that with words and actions. Abuse is then really a method to express emotions and demands and not the lack of communication skills. Abusers use their anger as an effective weapon, which they direct at women or other persons who are weaker than they are, and not for instance against the status quo or their employer.

„THEY DO NOT KNOW WHAT TO DO WITH THEIR ANGER.”

Abuse is often explained by the man’s inability to express his anger in a constructive manner. In reality, abusers use their anger as an effective weapon which they direct at women or other persons who are weaker than they are, and not for instance against the status quo or their employer. Abusers often use their anger as a pretext. After an outburst they acquit themselves with saying they were very angry and may show regret to avoid being called to account and facing the detrimental effects of their actions on victims. Abusive men do express their emotions, among others their anger, and choose when and against whom they do so.

Abusive communication and the expression of certain emotions in a certain way is really a tactic element of abuse and not an explanation for it. The fact that abusers choose where and with whom they are aggressive indicates that abuse is not a communications problem and not a difficulty in managing anger but a choice.

CONCLUSION: WHY DO MEN REALLY ABUSE?

There is no circumstance that could force a man to attack his partner in words or physically. There can be circumstances that increase the chance of a man’s becoming abusive but no circumstance makes the choice of violence unavoidable. As a consequence, all explanations that link violence with another person, for instance with the characteristics of communication with these persons or whether they are provocative, are mistaken. Men are responsible for choosing violence, not the circumstances. Therefore we need to look for the explanation of violence in the motives that make men take this choice and not in reasons external to the men that lead them to violence.

In short: men abuse because this way they can wield power and control over another person. The strength of this explanation lies in the fact that it affords the interpretation of single violent acts within the framework of a wider behaviour. At the same time, to talk about power and control has become a kind of commonplace that makes it easy to lose sight of the wider context.

Very often the even more important aspect that abuse has a function is missed, and this function is to

force the woman in the long and short term to do what the man wants, and to prevent her from doing what the man does not like. Men choose abuse systematically with the purpose of maintaining their power and control over their victims.

When a man shouts at a woman or puts her down all the time, he knows what effect his behaviour will have on the woman. Shouting causes fear and pain in the short term and breaks down her personality in the long term, and then nothing can prevent the man from ruling her and keeping her under his control. Abusive men are aware of the effects of abuse and use the abuse intentionally.

So, why do some men abuse women? Because they can do it and because they can achieve what they want with it. But why do men want to dominate and control women?

THE SOURCE OF ABUSE IS SEXISM

Sexism is a system of gender-based prejudices against women, and the negative discrimination of women built on these prejudices, in other words, women's unequal share of power, both in social and personal relationships. It is gender-based prejudice that creates the tendency in people to consider women subordinate. It works as a special pair of glasses and looking through them women's behaviour seems imperfect, improper, what is more, already bad. As soon as men agree with this, they will think it is not only righteous, but necessary to control women, even by violence or abuse. There is no conceptual difference between the behaviour of a man who tells sexist jokes over a beer, or that of a man who controls his partner with pathological jealousy and forbids her to meet her friends, "disciplines" her by beating, or rapes her saying 'I know what you really want'; these behavioural patterns are only different levels of abuse based on prejudice.

Men's idea that they have the right to abuse women is not merely personal but comes from social institutions to a large extent. The sexism of the institutions that create and maintain cultural standards contributes to men's power to wield control and to exercise violence, and to their feeling of righteousness about it. Women's place in public life (or rather the lack of it), the institutional and financial underestimation of women's work and opinions, the sanctifying of man as "the head of the family", the justification even of his

abusing behaviour by policemen, journalists, priests and judges – all this strengthens the man's belief that he has the right to control the woman, and the woman gets the message that her behaviour is the source of the problem and she deserves punishment if she does not fulfil her husband's expectations.

This leaflet is based on the following book:

Péter Szil *Why does he abuse? Why can he abuse? Domestic violence is men's responsibility.* Habeas Corpus Munkacsoport, Budapest, 2005.

You may read more on male violence against women at www.stop-ferfierzak.hu.

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Myths

About Abusive Men

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Supported by the Daphne Programme of the European Union