

# Why Does He Abuse?

## Why Can He Abuse?

Domestic Violence: Men's Responsibility

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[www.stop-ferfieroszak.hu](http://www.stop-ferfieroszak.hu)



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## Preface

Fewer and fewer people continue to deny that violence against women and children is a serious social problem. It is also obvious that the reaction of Hungarian society falls behind the seriousness of this problem. This is apparent not only in the field of legislation and legal practice, which should protect victims and call perpetrators to account, but also in the ignorance of authorities, public opinion and so called professionals, and in prejudiced information. There is little professional literature in Hungarian that could help this situation. The aim of this publication is to enrich this professional literature. Society can only present a united front against any kind of violence, if the steps needed – though they are congruent in time and space – follow a certain priority in accordance with the nature of the problem:

- Effective care and protection for victims.
- Determined action against perpetrators.
- Prevention of violence at all levels of society.
- Treatment of perpetrators.

There are several preconditions to be fulfilled before the above steps can be taken. For example, it is difficult to acknowledge even the fact of violence and its extent unless there is social consent about what is violence, who commits it, and against whom. Except for the above mentioned few publications, we only have answers in Hungary today that protect perpetrators from being called to account, rather than protecting victims who suffer from the violent acts perpetrated against them.

One example of this is that the problem is named in an ambiguous way. The expression most often used in Hungary today is ‘domestic violence’, and this may easily leave one with the impression as if various family members used violence in equal ways, equal frequency or to an equal extent. At the same time, it is still not clearly defined what counts as violence and what is the difference between ‘domestic violence’ and other types of violence. A main obstacle of clearly distinguishing between victims and perpetrators is the fact that the violence is defined from the perpetrators’ viewpoint instead of focusing on its real effects on victims. For instance, public opinion regards the controlling behaviour of a jealous man a sign of love, and does not evaluate it by the extent to which the woman feels limited in her freedom. But even legal regulations, for instance on rape, evaluate sexual assault based on the extent of violence by the perpetrator and based on his intentions, and not the sufferings the victim undergoes.

There is at least as much disagreement about what the source of domestic violence is: distortions of the personality or rather the joint forces of the patriarchal social structure and a culture based on sexist values?

This publication aims primarily to answer that question and, in contrast to the literature available in Hungarian, it deals in more detail with the person of the perpetrator. The text is published under the auspices of the

Daphne Programme of the European Union. The general goal of the Daphne Programme is to support initiatives to prevent or to combat violence against children, young people and women and to help new member states acquire the theoretical and practical experience accumulated in other countries of the Union in the past decades. By informing the public and training professionals, the project under which this publications has been issued wishes to

**patriarchy = domination by men**

**sexism = gender-based prejudice, primarily women's negative discrimination**

create the foundations of a service<sup>1</sup> for violent men that has victims' safety as its foremost priority, and contributes to the elimination and prevention of domestic violence by promoting perpetrators' taking responsibility.

What is the sense in creating such a service in country where society has not taken even the first steps of the above listed societal actions?

On the one hand, as we have mentioned, action against violence is effective both in the short and the long term if it encompasses all these areas without taking financial or other resources from the primary task of the protection of victims. On the other hand, a service like this does not primarily show in the number of "improved" abusers but in clearing up the conceptual confusion described in the preface (what constitutes violence, who perpetrates it and against whom) in the most authentic way. It would be an important step in eliminating male violence against women that men break patriarchal male solidarity and relate to their own behaviour in a critical manner.

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Since an abuser can only stop the abuse in a sincere and voluntary manner, perhaps it would be an even greater step toward prevention if instead of taking his own power position he could relate to the victim's experience about the real effect of abuse in an empathetic way. That way an unprecedented

break would come about at the root of the cultural and social habits that support male violence: men would acquire the models of non-violent conflict resolution that are called feminine, men would abandon the prejudiced refusal of women's viewpoint and would become the role models of non-violent behaviour for other adult men and boys.

In the past decades, coherent theoretical and practical experiences have accumulated in several English speaking, South American and Western European countries about what is needed for a service that wants to support men who want to change their abusive behaviour to fulfil the above described role, and not to endanger existing and potential victims' safety by experimenting that only treats violence superficially without questioning the prejudices and power habits at the root of violence (unfortunately, this has also been seen in international practice).<sup>2</sup>

Before describing this model, a few things need to be repeated that have been written before. The handbook of NANE (Women's Rights Hungary) entitled "Why Does She Stay?" can justly be regarded as the sibling (that is: sister) publication of the present booklet. Therefore it is suggested that you read it, too. "Why Does She Stay" wants to answer the question of "How one can help," and is a comprehensive guide to supporting those abused for social workers and everyone interested. (This publication has borrowed some details from "Why Does She Stay," such as the definitions of the types of violence against women.)

The publication you are holding in your hands now, is seeking the answer to the same question by the tools of raising the question of men's responsibility without taboos and of dissolving prejudices regarding it. As a first step of that process, we need to clear up some basic concepts providing the reference frame of our topic.

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<sup>1</sup> The first half of the two-year programme is training for volunteers. Some of these volunteers will work for the telephone hotline for men who want to change their abusive behaviour.

<sup>2</sup> For more detail see: from page 17 on.

## Violence, that is abuse

**violence = systematic  
endeavour to control others**

In everyday usage, the words violence or abuse denote violent behaviour.

**aggression ≠ violence**

In the context of domestic violence or violence against women, violence is understood as all those abuses of one's power that aim to influence, limit or break another person's will by emotional, verbal, sexual, economic or social coercion. Violence is a systematic behaviour; a strategy that aims at rule and control over others. The often aggressive outbreaks that commonly occur within this strategy are therefore fundamentally different from quarrels and rows that happen in any relationship. The fundamental element in how systematic violence comes about is not aggression but the unequal division of power.

In everyday language, the words violence, aggression and aggressiveness have rather similar meanings. That is why it is important to clarify that violence, as described above, is not the same as aggression. The latter is a single event which can take the form of violent action in extreme cases, however it can be controlled, and its aim depends on the given circumstances. Thus it may even serve the aim of protection against attacks or the protection of some kind of value – for instance life, children or dwelling.

Mixing up these two concepts not only causes theoretical problems, but also reduces the chances of standing up for victims and action against perpetrators, as it lumps together systematic and long-term violence or abuse that aims at establishing control, and aggressive behaviour that may take the form of violent action in extreme cases. This is especially true of

Mixing up the concepts of violence and aggression reduces the chances of standing up for victims and action against perpetrators.

violence against women, which intertwines with all levels of societal existence, but which fact society refuses exactly with the reasoning of “but women are violent, too.”

## Violence against women

Violence against women means any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life. [It] shall be understood to encompass, but not be limited to physical, sexual and psychological violence occurring in the family, including battering, sexual abuse of female children...<sup>3</sup>

The function of violence against women is to maintain the hierarchy which lies at the basis of patriarchal society. All of its forms (in the area of both personal and social relations) are based on the sexist value system that uses differences derived from gender stereotypes to reinforce the power structures arising from the stereotypes. (If, for instance, a man is reluctant to take his part in child-rearing by claiming that certain tasks are feminine, he will reinforce his own power in addition to the stereotypes. The woman will be absent from her workplace, her career will suffer from the years spent on maternity leave, therefore in the end she will be less likely to be promoted, or she will have a lower salary and will be dependent on the man financially.) Women's political, institutional and professional discrimination, sexual harassment and rape, prostitution and trafficking in women, the exploitation of the female body as an object to be consumed, segregation based on religious belief and of course all forms of physical, psychic, social and sexual abuse cause immeasurable harm, it often

<sup>3</sup> United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, 1993

threatens victims' life and last but not least, it strengthens men's power position as opposed to women.

Violence against women is different from violence in general primarily in that it is what is called structural violence; that is it corresponds to the social and cultural norms and values that serve as the basis of general belief. That is why society deems it smaller than it is really, and normal, and that is why it is not condemned as unambiguously as other forms of violence. It is already difficult to bring such everyday phenomena in contact with violence that are absolutely part of dominant culture. For instance spanking children is not called abuse, and when someone has free time because his partner does all the housework is not regarded exploitation or economic violence. It makes it easier to recognize violence if one has a look at the effect it has on victims and not what the perpetrator's apparent intention is, or how much he is aware of his deeds.

**structural violence = violence that corresponds to the social and cultural norms and values that serve as the basis of general belief**

### ***Domestic violence: male violence***

All acts of gender-based physical, psychological and sexual abuse by a family member against women in the family, ranging from simple assaults to aggravated physical battery, kidnapping, threats, intimidation, coercion, stalking, humiliating verbal abuse, forcible or unlawful entry, arson, destruction of property, sexual violence, marital rape, dowry or bride-price related violence, female genital mutilation, violence related to exploitation through prostitution, violence against household workers and attempts to commit such acts shall be termed "domestic violence."<sup>4</sup>

Domestic violence is that form of violence which is present in intimate partnerships (but not necessarily within the walls of the home). It may be directed against anyone who is or was in a close or intimate relationship with the perpetrator. In principle, either of the partners may perpetrate it, but in practice it is men who perpetrate violent acts against women and children in 90% percent of the cases.

**domestic violence = intimate partner violence**

**the purpose of male violence: to ensure the man's power and the woman's submission**

This statistical imbalance is enough justification to consider violence by women against their male intimate partners as single cases in face of the trend, and to view domestic violence at the same time as a social phenomenon; the manifestation of violence against women, of the patriarchal "you are mine" point of view, a manifestation of male violence. This time it is in personal relationships (what is more, under the "either I'll have you or nobody" principle often even after the end of the relationship) that male violence has the same purpose as all other forms of violence against women: to ensure the man's power and the woman's submission. This analysis is supported by two conspicuous facts:

1. Violence by women almost never has the purpose of controlling the partner. Abusive women almost always stop being violent when the relationship has ended. (See also the above definition of violence/abuse.) However, stalking after the relationship and revenging the end of the relationship makes up a large percentage of violent acts by men. Women are almost never violent with men who do not want to have relationships with them. In contrast, male violence having the characteristics of domestic violence

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<sup>4</sup> United Nations Economic and Social Council, Resolution 1996/12, quoted in: Nők joga, az Esélyegyenlőségi Kormányhivatal, 2003.

sometimes occurs in cases where the man only thinks that the woman should be going out with him.

2. In cases of intimate partner murder, which are considered the most blatant examples of domestic violence, approximately 10 percent of perpetrators are women, based on comparisons of international data. Almost 90 percent of these women suffered from systematic abuse through many years, which was known to their insensitive environments. The remaining 10 percent kill their partner not because of the man's gender or because of a wish to control him, but for diverse and complex reasons, which are not different from the ones why men kill other men. In comparison, 80 percent of the victims of men, who make up almost 90 percent of the perpetrators of intimate partner murders, die because they wanted to get a divorce. In addition, 90 percent of these women, who have divorced their partners or who have just voiced their wish to do so, had reported their later murderer for battery, often several times.

Intimate partner violence ranges from verbal violence to sexual violence and comes in varied forms. The following is a list of only the most characteristic examples out of the wide range of abuse.

**Verbal abuse:** When someone (usually a man) threatens his partner with abuse, battery, if he threatens to take the children away or to commit suicide, when he belittles the woman, mocks her, ridicules her (for instance for her religion or ethnicity).

**Intimidation:** When he breaks and throws the woman's property, slams objects, threatens with a gun or other weapon, behaves in a threatening manner (angry looks, shouting), questions the woman in a threatening way, drives in a life-threatening manner.

**Psychic violence:** Denies important things, closes himself away from the woman while he keeps her under control, displays extreme jealousy, systematically destroys her self-esteem, regularly questions or even annuls her decisions. Blames the woman for everything, even for his aggression against her, questions her feelings and experiences (especially concerning the severity of the abuse), will not discuss problems, questions the woman's claim that there are problems.

Intimate partner violence  
takes various forms from  
verbal to sexual abuse.

**Isolation:** When he decides what she may or may not do, whom she can meet or talk to, where she can go and what she can wear. When he does not allow her to make friends with others, talk to her family, take a job, have her own money. When he locks the phone away, escorts her everywhere, continuously controls her in the home, at her workplace, in school etc, searches her pockets, bag.

**Physical violence:** When he pushes, hits, slaps, strangles her, pulls her hair, beats her with fist, kicks, bites, shakes, burns, threatens or hurts her with a weapon (for instance with a knife, razor blade, shotgun, heavy object).

**Sexual violence:** When he forces her to perform sexual acts she does not want, causes pain with sex, or humiliating her; when he rapes her, abuses her intimate body part or forces her to have sex with others.

**The denial of the woman's most fundamental freedoms, limiting her freedom of movement and fundamental needs:** When he does not allow the woman to have a life of her own independent of his, locks her up, ties her up, does not let her eat, drink or wash, hides her medicines or does not give money for them, prevents her from using a contraceptive method.

**Economic, financial violence:** Will not let the woman go to work or to have her own money, or if she has her money he takes it away and only rations out it to her according to his own will, blackmails her with joint company. Questions every expense the woman asks money for while he has money at his own disposal.



the function of violence: to keep the woman under control

The above listed forms of violence usually follow and mix with one another according to a similar script. This indicates that the nature of the violence and its development does not depend on the abusive man's character or personality but on the function of the violence, which is no other than to keep the woman under control.

***The escalation of violence:*** Violence continuously strengthens within the same relationship from mockery through verbal abuse, threats, pushing around, slaps, kicks, breaking bones, burning skin and rape to death. However, often this happens not in a straight line but through a cycle. This is true primarily of cases of severe physical and emotional violence, while in many other cases economic violence and verbal abuse are constant elements of the relationship.

***The cycles of abuse:*** Some abusive relationships are characterised by three distinct stages: accumulation of tension, violent outburst and regret.\* At the time of the accumulation of tension, friction becomes more frequent and severe in the relationship. At the top of the tension, the outburst releases the tension. Following this, the abuser often shows regret, apologises, behaves in a kind and affable way. In this stage, the victim often hopes and believes that her abusive partner will change and will not be violent again. However, the cycles of violence repeat again and again. And with time, the cycle of abuse usually becomes faster: the violent outbursts become more frequent and more violent, often with catastrophic consequences. The three phases merge, the regret phase disappears during the years.

## Prejudices and misconceptions

A whole range of prejudices and misconception surrounds violence against women, which blame victims and justify men's violence. These are present in culture not only in proverbs ("Count your money, beat your wife...") but at all other levels.

Two of these misconceptions have been refuted indirectly, namely that "violence is the same in the family just as everywhere else" and "violence is the same whether it is committed by a man or a woman, in other words violence has no gender." We have indicated the structural and systematic nature of violence against women, and the fact that domestic violence as a social phenomenon is really male violence because violence committed by women against men is not only smaller in volume but has a personal nature and is so fundamentally different from violence committed by men against women in exactly that it does not contain the element of power upheld by the outer world.

The following is an overview of some of the conceptions, voiced not only by perpetrators, that need to be changed as a precondition for a programme that ensures victims' safety and the treatment of perpetrators at the same time. One of the purposes of this publication is to describe such programmes and to create the preconditions of such programmes in Hungary.

### ***Victim blaming***

One important reason why society accepts violence against women is victim blaming and the distortions and misconceptions surrounding it.

**"It is true that men will hit but women keep their partners in psychic terror."** ♦ This reasoning is almost always heard when the question of domestic violence comes up. However, one must keep in mind that physical violence is always accompanied by psychic violence. There is not a single physically aggressive abuser who does not apply any – most of the time many – forms of psychic terror. The often quoted "balance" does not exist: by the time abuse

gets to the phase that the environment is ready to acknowledge it, the abused woman is not in a position to “abuse her partner back.” Further, it is important to make a distinction on the basis of how strongly the “terror” affects the abused party: the threatening and psychologically destructive nature of the above listed techniques typically used in abuse is true for every case – whether used by a man or a woman.

To illustrate this topic, let us see a quotation from a so-called expert (András Grád Ph.D., lawyer, psychologist, human rights expert):

It is very common in relationships that the woman is as responsible for the deterioration of the relationship as the man, she displays a sea of non physical aggression before a few slaps are heard. Of course, this is unacceptable on the part of the men who have lost their self-control, but the question can by no means be reduced to the oversimplified formula supported by women’s rights movements, which depicts women in a partial way as victims.<sup>5</sup>

Using equal measures for unequal parties: discrimination, the maintenance of power

On the one hand this reasoning calls abuse unacceptable, on the other hand it shows it to be justifiable. It maintains the picture of justifiability that it purports certain ideas as facts, while it withholds certain facts.

1. It confuses aggression, that is the controllable characteristic present in both genders which is often a (self-)defence reaction against something, with violence, which is a systematic method with the purpose of maintaining a power position.
2. Formally, it uses equal measures, which is discrimination and a further means of maintaining power between perpetrator and victim, that is, in a case of unequal positions.
3. It glosses over the fact that using violence is always a question of choice and that the basis of domestic violence is not aggression or the loss of self-control but intolerance against equality.

The basis of domestic violence is not aggression or the loss of self-control but intolerance against equality.

You may find the above three theses unfounded about András Grád’s statement, which sounds evident and is in line with public opinion. One purpose of this publication is exactly to shed new light on the circumstances of abuse and provide facts, and so make readers realise that these statements are often misrepresentations. For instance one assumes that the parties have an equal responsibility in the deterioration of the relationship, one assumes that they were in equal positions at the beginning of or during the relationship. This effaces the fact that the real context of relationships is patriarchy, that is women’s already in a disadvantaged situation, not just economically but also in decision making, both in society and the family. In the patriarchal family model, the man ensures the “order” and the (more) money; the woman has the task of taking care of the organisation of the home and its emotional balance. In these relationships, the medieval formula of “protection for obedience” usually manifests in fundamental inequalities in how independent the partners are financially, in the amount of the subjective and real space they have, and in how they think about what they can expect or demand from their partner. Given these circumstances, it is worth asking the question of how often “terror” applied by women or the “deterioration” of the relationship really means that women deny “spousal duties” automatically expected from them or what is called

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<sup>5</sup> András Grád Ph.D.: A prostitúcióról és a megvert nőkről — tárgyilagosan, Élet és irodalom, 10 Oct. 2003.

“unfeminine” behaviour.<sup>6</sup>

Often men feel that a relationship has deteriorated when the mechanisms of male power, which are accepted as everyday communication, are no longer enough to maintain power over women. The more a man identifies with the traditional male role the bigger the chances that he will feel his masculinity to be questioned in cases like this and that he will seek solutions that will remind his partner who wears the hat in the home.

Often men feel that a relationship has deteriorated when the mechanisms of male power, which are accepted as everyday communication, are no longer enough to maintain power over women.

**“Really, it is men who are abused.”** ♦ There are researchers who have come to the express opinion that the majority of the victims of domestic violence are actually men. For instance, according to Erzsébet Tamási “in cases of grave crimes (murder and its attempt) committed within the

family three out of five victims are men... And boys are twice as likely to become victims of the crime of endangering the youth as girls...” Tamási remarks that “except for adult relationships, the majority of both victims and perpetrators are men in all other relations (own child, parent, sibling, father in law, other relative).” However about crimes in intimate partnerships, she says that a yearly average of 2700 men committed crimes against their female partners between 1997 and 2002, while 478 women against their male partners.<sup>7</sup>

Although such statements would deserve a separate study on the different ways of using statistics, here we want to mention only a few reservations. Tamási’s analysis for instance does not provide clearly comparable data, and she does not attempt to uncover whether the phenomenon that authorities react more sensitively to crimes committed against men and boys than to those against women and girls distorts the data. The distinction between violent actions and systematic abuse with the purpose of creating a sustained power position was discussed above. The fact that domestic violence really has the purpose of maintaining women’s subordinated position has also been discussed. However women are in the same oppressed and unprotected situation in the whole of society as within their families. This makes them stay, however unbearable their situation in the family may be, because society neither promotes nor supports the public condemnation of domestic violence or their breaking out of it.

Currently, because of the grave shortcomings of social opinion, legislation and legal practice and the social net that is meant to effectively protect victims, a large part of abuse suffered by women remains hidden. (This will be discussed in the second part of this publication to be published later.) The general social acceptance of male violence intertwines with the repeated mistake of authorities that should act against violence that they treat each crime committed against women separately as if all instances were single events taking part at a given time. Thus, they contribute to keeping the everyday practice of male power, control over women’s everyday life or regularly repeated threats invisible. Therefore, many crimes take place that could have been foreseen and so could have been prevented, but which leave jurisprudence helpless. Violence against women interweaves the whole fabric of social existence and that is why only the most brutal cases can awaken society from time to time. However not even these result in a change of world-view that would consider the widespread and everyday violence against women as a human rights issue. Only a grievance suffered by a man counts as a real event in the male-centred world-view, and that crime is considered more

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<sup>6</sup> “it is typical female terror when the woman talks back or talks all the time, or is unfaithful in words or deeds, or does not do the housework, or neglects childbirth/childcare, unfortunately our laws leave allow forms of behaviour unpunished” user by the nickname “hima-lája” in an Internet debate on feminism. Source: <http://indymedia.hu>

<sup>7</sup> Bűnös áldozatok, BM Kiadó, 2005.

serious anyway than the countless forms of male violence suffered by women. Under such conditions, the fact that these statistics come from an analysis of applicable court decisions that disregards the considerations listed here makes these statistics questionable.

**“The common characteristics of victims.”** ♦ Making victims appear as if they were equally aggressive, just as perpetrators, is a form of victim blaming. Another manifestation of the same phenomenon is when violence is deducted from victims’ characteristics. This misconception, through stigmatizing and isolating victims, contributes greatly their not raising their voice. In reality, any woman regardless of her social or financial background or level of education can become the victim of abuse or rape. Since the process of violence, as described above, exerts its effect not through the characteristics of the victim but through its systematic destruction of the personality.

**“If she does not leave, she doesn’t mind.”** ♦ A version of the above misconception, which seeks the answer for the essential question of “why does she stay” in women’s some kind of psychological characteristic, what is more, in their perverted inclination to suffer. Many women would not entertain the vain hope of change if they were not led to believe that it is their responsibility to tame the abuser. The real reason why she stays is that society does not offer her a real way out, her economic dependence, isolation, loss of self-esteem, depression, fear and lots of other mechanisms that came about during the abuse and were acquired during socialisation into the female role.

### ***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 to the same degree as victim blaming.

**“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

Alcohol and drugs do not change the personality but bring out its already existing tendencies.

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. What is more, biological explanations contradict one another. For instance in a quite recent study, men who had high levels of testosterone in a given test had plenty of aggressive incidents in their past not because a high level testosterone (the so-called male hormone) triggers aggression but because repeated aggressive behaviour over a long period increases the secretion of testosterone in the body, both in men and women. (Note that even experts who are convinced that behaviours come from the genes sense that nature is not unavoidable and try to protect their own children from influences and behaviours “promoting” homosexuality.)

**“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.

Why do non-violent (“female”) models of relating remain unrecognised by boys and men?

**“Emotional illiterates”** ♦ Abuse is often explained by 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.

*„and finally my body is ill  
because I am a man and nobody knows,  
not even me, how much I suffer”*

A poem by ATTILA JÓZSEF in fragment, 1935.

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 away 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.

Abusive men choose who they are violent with and where.

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

Abusive behaviour is the choice of abusive men. They are responsible for it and not the circumstances or other persons.

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. They know that the abuse will fulfil its function, it is effective and it has its benefits. This benefit has a bigger weight for them than the bad feelings their behaviour causes. This is another reason why they will not refrain from using this

They know that abuse fulfils its functions, it is practical and useful. This usefulness is more important for them than any bad feelings their behaviour causes. This, among other things, is the reason why without the intervention of society they will not give up this means, which helps them maintain their dominant position. But the precondition of lasting social intervention is to reject the idea, that it is the woman's duty to be at the disposal of the dominant gender directly and indirectly (e. g. by undertaking all of childrearing and housework).

Why do some men abuse women? Because they can do it and because they can achieve what they want with it.

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

‘Source’ in this case means the origin of something, not its cause. Just as the interpretation of individual violent actions is easier when analysed as parts of the individual’s violent behaviour, the cases of individual abusers can also be more easily explained in the social context of sexism.

Earlier, when analysing the myths on abusive men, I mentioned why biology and even psychological theories describing imitation of behavioural patterns are not sufficient explanation of violence as a mainly male behaviour. I also mentioned that the ‘feminine’ models of communication / conflict-resolution remain unnoticed for boys and men, which is related to the real cause of abuse: sexism.

Sexism, as I have already defined it at the beginning of the book, 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 originates in social institutions for the most part.

Social underestimation of women’s work and opinions reinforce men that they have the right to control women.

Men’s idea that they have the right to abuse women is not merely personal. To a large extent, it roots in the very same institutions whose social task is to create cultural standards and to call the perpetrators to account. Beliefs, handed down by the dominant culture, psychology and other sciences and religion, about women being “easily influenced”, “irrational beings” or carriers of “the original sin” do not compel

any men to be violent with women, but they can be the source why men choose this behaviour.

The sexism of the institutions that create and maintain cultural standards contributes to men’s power to implement this choice. These institutions have great influence on what becomes visible or invisible in a society, what deserves an exact name and what cannot be named, what proves to be true or false. Support from these institutions is one of the sources of personal power as well, which, at the moment, is closed from women in our culture. Women’s place in public life (or rather the lack of it), the institutional and financial underestimation of women’s work and opinions<sup>8</sup>, 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

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<sup>8</sup> Some examples of women’s institutional and financial underestimation:

- Women have a smaller chance of promotion.
- Women earn less than men with the same work.
- Worldwide, women do most of the unpaid work in and outside the home. In Hungary in 2000, 75 % of unpaid housework was done by women (Central Office of Statistics, 2001).
- Women are underrepresented in parliament and other decision-taking bodies.
- Men dominate legislation, the boards of television channels and newspaper publishers, the police and the upper levels of jurisdiction.

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.

### ***Men's responsibility for equality***

The identification of sexism as the source of abuse has an effect not only on individual abusers but on all men and the whole of society. It makes it clear for the abusive man that, if he wants to change, he must act against culture. In a sexist society the tactics that serve to control women and to make control acceptable are social standards. Sometimes they take on seemingly harmless forms. Such are chivalry and admiring a woman, which are perhaps the most common manifestations of the view that reminds women from time to time not to wish to become more than *weak, soft and sexy beings*.<sup>9</sup> Really respectful behaviour towards women (by which I mean honesty and taking women seriously) is a counter-culture. In order for a violent man to become a respectful and safe partner for women he must question his own ideas ingrained since childhood, and must watch out for the institutions that provide sexist views on women. If he does not change his views he may control his violent behaviour for a while but trying to control the inclination to control his partner is not the same as working on creating an equal relationship.

The situation is roughly the same for every man. We, men, even when we are not abusive, usually have a feeling of resistance against the idea that gender roles and the sexism that justifies them are the source of male violence. Not even the most sexist men take on the label of sexism. All the more men, whether they are psychologists or lawyers, approve of and apply the blessed existence of gender roles to their own lives. Sexism is an accurate but unpleasant expression. When we expect obedience from our wife, or when the material security of the family depends on the man's salary, or if our wife has to do the housework as a second shift after her own job, or when it is always her who takes some time off work to take the kids to the doctor, we will make her dependent and defenceless just as the abusers, and this defenceless is the source of men's power which they utilise to abuse women unpunished.

**refraining from violence  
does not automatically  
lead to equal  
relationships**

**Abuse is the common problem of all men source all men profit from the extra power maintained by abuse.**

To recognize all this is to acknowledge all that is common between us and abusive men because slapping a woman and degrading or disregarding her opinion come from the same source: sexism. It is much easier to refuse these similarities if we look for other explanations why male violence exists. But abuse is really only the tip of the iceberg, and through its function to create norms, non-abused women learn about their place in a relationship. In a culture where women feel that they have been given something only because a man does not abuse them (physically, since verbal abuse is part of a number of relationships that are considered "normal"), it is unavoidable that these women should be inclined to reward this "merit" materially and to better conform to men's expectations. This way, the existence of abuse not only distorts relationships between men and women but also lowers expectations about men.

The identification of sexism as the source of abuse is to acknowledge that we enjoy undue extra power over women in our personal and social relationships with them on the basis of being male. It is to acknowledge that abuse is men's problem and that all men have a share in its advantages, just as the responsibility to eliminate it. Society would be able to prevent violence with unprecedented clarity and determination once it understood how the spirit and practice of sexism serves as the source of abuse. Since

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<sup>9</sup> Anna Betlen's wording



violence is a question of choice, society has no choice to create circumstances in which all men would refrain from violence. However, eliminating sexism can reduce men's prejudices and undue power. Through reduced prejudices, less men would choose violent abuse of women and more would be inclined to relate to women with real respect. Reduced sexism would altogether change the context in which men choose violent abuse. The first step towards this would be for institutions that create social and cultural norms, legislators, judges and psychologists, to stop justifying abusive behaviour by which they hurt only women but the whole of society. This would lead to men not being able to utilise the extra power given to them by the system when they choose to use violence to subject a woman. In a word, it is impossible to achieve any significant decrease in the area of violence against women without facing sexism as the source of the abuse men practice.

## Programmes dealing with perpetrators<sup>10</sup>

### *Approaches*

Broadly speaking, three approaches can be distinguished within the perspectives that serve as the framework for therapeutic interventions dealing with male perpetrators of violence against women:

**1. The feminist approach.** Its central theme is the analysis of power relations based on gender roles. Its starting point is that domestic violence is one of the manifestations of the patriarchal social structure in as much as the function of violence is to maintain power over the woman within the family. The most obvious support for the feminist analysis is the fact that most abusive men can control themselves and avoids violence when they are "provoked" by someone who is stronger or has more power than they do. In addition, several studies indicate that abusive men are similar in that they have the right to control their partners while they are less secure in their male identity than non-violent men.

**2. Systemic family therapy.** This model considers the problematic behaviour of individuals the manifestation of the inappropriate functioning of the family. It considers its task more to solve the hypothetical problem by improving the communications and conflict resolution skills of both parties, rather than discovering its reasons. It is based on the idea that every family member has a part in the emergence of the problem, that both parties contribute to the escalation of conflict and that both attempt to dominate the other. According to this perspective, either of them can use violence. Thus it fundamentally differs from the feminist viewpoint, which claims that only the person that uses violence is responsible for it.

**3. Psychotherapeutic approaches.** These focus their attention on the individual, and their starting point is that for some persons, the personality distortions or traumatic experiences suffered in childhood increase proneness to violence. According to this perspective, abusive behaviour is the symptom of an emotional problem lying in the background (and thus it may be related to abuse or refusal by parents unable to take care of the needs of the dependent child).

The two main approaches within the psychotherapeutic perspective are psychodynamic individual or group therapy and cognitive-behavioural group therapy.

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<sup>10</sup> This chapter is based mainly on writings by Luis Bonino, the leading advisor of the Daphne project preparing the introduction of programmes for perpetrators in Hungary ([www.luisbonino.com](http://www.luisbonino.com)), and on writings by Jorge Corsi ([www.corsi.com.ar](http://www.corsi.com.ar)).

- *Psychodynamic therapy* endeavours to bring to the fore the abuser's unconscious needs so that their conscious processing can take place. According to available statistics, this kind of therapy is more attractive to men than therapies with a feminist approach, where more men drop out. Meanwhile, psychodynamic therapy does not provide any answers to the question of what can be done to stop the abusive behaviour (that is, it allows it to continue until the unconscious problem has been solved) and does nothing to deal with the cultural acceptance of male dominance.

- *Cognitive-behavioural therapy*, which has more to do with consciousness and the present than with the unconscious and the past, attempts to change the abusers' conduct through modifying their thoughts and behaviour. This approach has been most often used in programmes related to the penal system, since it only concentrates on the modification of behaviour and involves itself neither with broader questions of social magnitude (such as the inequality between the sexes), nor with deeper problems of a psychological nature. This approach provides no explanation why men who abuse their partners are not violent in other relationships.

## **Methods**

The interventions that take place in programmes dealing with perpetrators can be divided into six different groups from a methodological perspective:

1. Skill training is based on the premise that the elements missing from and predominant in the behaviour of abusers are the result of a social learning process (socialisation). Destructive behaviours are replaced by communication tools that develop the relationship through practice based on the positive behavioural models provided by the group leader and assisted by group members.
2. Cognitive methods presume that dysfunctional thinking creates negative emotional reactions and these breed abusive behaviour in turn. According to this presumption, the restructuring of these thoughts can diminish the anger, fear and hurt feelings behind abuse. This approach can also serve to raise men's consciousness of the beliefs they acquired in their childhoods that fundamentally define their rigid ideas about relationships (such as the rigid ideas about gender roles).
3. Re-socialisation of learned gender roles helps men recognise the negative effects of rigid male roles and the advantages of equality between the sexes. This approach attributes male dominance to the already mentioned rigid socialisation.
4. Methods that make domination tactics visible wish to make men take the responsibility for their intentions to control others. This approach focuses particularly on broadening the concept of abuse to include isolation, verbal abuse, economic control or any other form of control. Raising consciousness of the effects of abuse and creating empathy with the victims is also emphasised.
5. The analysis and modification of mutual communications schemas is stressed mainly by the systemic family therapy approach, as it presumes that the partners unconsciously go through a series of repeated cyclic interactions that may culminate in abuse.
6. The method based on traumatic experiences holds that abusive men must process the shocks suffered during childhood, primarily those where they became the witness or victim of

the violence of a parent. This approach presumes that these men are unable to relate to another person in an empathetic way because they had to suppress their own painful memories.

The programmes dealing with abusive men have existed in the United States and Canada since the 1980s, and appeared approximately a decade later in other English-speaking and European or Latin-American countries (Australia, Scandinavia, France, Great Britain, Argentina, Mexico, Nicaragua, Costa Rica etc.). Their aim has been to supplement the programmes taking care of abused women or working on the prevention of violence. Their starting point is that the person who does the violence is responsible for it primarily. These programmes do not deal with the treatment of an “illness” but promote abusive men’s taking responsibility for the violence they perpetrate, which can lead to a change in their relationships with women.

The first four of the above methodological approaches may even be used concurrently in the same programme. The programme called “Emerge,” founded in Massachusetts in 1997, for instance combines making domination tactics visible with cognitive restructuring. (“Emerge had a pioneering role in creating these programmes, as it first stated the necessity of the feminist conceptual foundation for these programmes to do more than just touch on the surface of the problem.) The “Duluth” model, which has also been a source of many of the fundamental elements in programmes used today, focuses on making violent and non-violent forms of domination tactics visible and, to a lesser extent, on skill training.

However, the systemic family therapy approach is counter-indicated in all programmes. Couples therapy and mediation not only directly or indirectly shift the responsibility to the victim, they also expose her to even greater danger, should she really voice her complaints.<sup>11</sup>

An analysis of the relationship between the approaches and methods reveals the difference between a programme based exclusively on methodological considerations and one with a feminist foundation. While the first will be limited to controlling the aggressive behaviour, the latter will conduct a deep revision of sexist beliefs and stereotypes based on learned gender roles, which are the bases of domination of and control over women.

### ***The implementation of the programmes***

Several decades of international experience indicates that the efficiency of these programmes depends to a large extent on what ethical, ideological and theoretical starting point they have.

The implementation of the programmes must be based on a thorough awareness of the nature of violence against women as different from all other violence.

The implementation of the programmes must be based on a thorough awareness of the nature of violence against women as different from all other violence. It carries several dangers when programmes dealing with perpetrators follow the models of traditional psychological treatment:

**Understanding and treating abuse as psychopathology** ♦ Violence against women, in its many manifestations, stems from historical, cultural, social, institutional and family roots that have become invisible for us. Domestic violence can only be interpreted as a composite of these factors and not as a psychopathological phenomenon. In this case, the usual chain of cause and effect used in psychiatry needs to be turned around. It is not only that abuse and abuse of power are not the results of psychopathological distortions, but often they are the sources of such distortions.

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<sup>11</sup> In more detail see: Why is mediation dangerous in treating domestic violence? Habeas Corpus Working Group, 2005. Available in Hungarian on the Internet: [habeascorpus.hu/-tudja-e](http://habeascorpus.hu/-tudja-e).

**Disregarding gender roles in diagnosing the problem** ♦ In order to understand any situation where abuse or abuse of power occurs, one needs to understand two factors: power and gender roles. Where the therapeutic process does not include the knowledge on how men and women acquire gender roles and how these are related to abusive relationships, there is a danger of therapists making serious mistakes which will affect the victims again.

**Concepts of “neutrality,” “confidentiality” and “privacy”** ♦ It is exactly through the neutrality of the environment and the confidentiality ensured by private life through which abuse and abuse of power can continue unpunished for a long time. This process can only be turned around when others can have insight into the events, uncover them and in no way justify them. A therapy based on neutrality, confidentiality and the sanctity of private life is in effect the symbolic re-creation of the circumstances that are the best to breed violence.

**Inappropriate naming of the programmes and the men participating in them** ♦ Naming the programmes in question and the participating men poses several problems. If, for instance, one talks about the “treatment of abusive men” one tacitly accepts exactly what was refuted above that abuse is some kind of illness, a sort of psychopathology. Talking about “rehabilitation of abusive men” is a linguistic trap as rehabilitation means the restoration of a pre-existing state, which is actually very far from the aims of the programmes. What is more, to call the men participating in the programmes “abusers” or “violent men” is doubtful because it suggests that it is a question of identity and not their own responsibility. It is clumsier but perhaps more precise to talk about men “perpetrating violence” or “displaying abusive behaviour” and so shifting the emphasis from their identity to their actions. This would by all means be more in accordance with the aim of the programmes: taking the responsibility.

In accordance with the above, programmes dealing with men perpetrating violence need to reflect consistently that abuse is unjust, harmful, contrary to human rights and criminal. The primary goal of every such programme must be the safety of the victims. Therefore, participation in them must not be an alternative to a sentence imposed by a court, as that would equal acquitting the abuser or justifying his actions. Sentenced but not incarcerated abusers must cover the costs of the programme themselves, just as those men who participate in the programme for abuse that is not considered a crime. These programmes can only contribute to society’s addressing violence if:

- they contribute to warding off the dangers threatening victims,
- do not take away financial resources from improving the situation of abused women,
- do not instil false hopes in victims and do not encourage them to postpone decisions vital for them,
- do not attempt to achieve results at the expense of abused women’s sacrifice and endurance, do not consider it their aim to protect the man from a criminal record and do not consider it their primary task to restore “family harmony” without a divorce or the relationship by all means.

### ***The effectiveness of programmes***

Based on the experience of the already existing programmes, men drop out at a rate of 20 to 60% before programs end, especially when they can do so without sanctions. This rate decreases as soon as the programme is part of a coordinated network where both entry into and leaving the programme is controlled.

The main measure of the success of the programmes is refraining from severe physical and psychic violence.

International experience shows that the main measure

of the limited but visible success of these programmes is when participating men refrain from severe physical and psychic violence (primarily from stalking and intimidating). Based on this measure, appropriate programmes are capable of achieving good results with 30 to 60% of the men participating in them. This does not apply to men who are violent in other contexts, too, or are psychopathic, where only 5 to 10 % achieve positive results. If the rate of relapse (measured every 4 years) is used as a measure, it occurs at a rate of 15 to 20% with men who continue to participate in the programmes to the end, while this number increases to 40 to 70% with men who do not even start the programme.

The decrease in psychic violence and the increase in respectful behaviour that keeps equality in sight are more difficult to measure. When the sense of safety and trust of the woman who suffered violence earlier is taken as a measure, the results are less positive. However, the rate of these increase with the length of the programme (a minimum of one year) and where the man enters the programme on a voluntary basis.

The programmes achieve the best results when they are implemented in coordination with other social initiatives. Such initiatives are police and juridical action, the full and practical refusal of all forms of violence by society, giving priority to activities helping victims, recognising and naming abuse at all levels of the social net (for instance in health care), prevention, educating children and young people for equality, involvement of men both in the tasks of taking care of the home and others and the active combating of violence against women, etc.

### ***The education of professionals***

**The training of the professionals dealing with men must be in accordance with the specific nature of the problem.**

In order that programmes dealing with men perpetrating violence against women can meet the above criteria, it is a must that the professionals participating in them should be in accordance with the specifics of the problem to be dealt with.

University education is not enough in itself. Non-specifically trained professionals often wrongly assess the dangers faced by victims and the weight of gender roles in the creation of the problem. Therefore, before starting a programme it is necessary to:

- properly select the professionals participating in it, not just based on their academic merits but also on their sensitivity of and personal attitudes on the problem of violence against women;
- take into consideration the necessary ethical, theoretical and methodological aspects of dealing with men;
- to have continuous supervision from the starting, initial and middle phase of the programme, just as supervision focusing on the specific work of professionals all through the duration of the programme, which can avoid not just “slipping back” into gender stereotypes but also professional burnout.