

Issue Brief: Politicized Violence Against Women

Key Words: women, sexism, violence, rape, abortion, domestic violence

Description: This brief will focus on different forms of violence against women in the United States, specifically on violence that has been politicized or is a product of politics. Focusing on domestic violence, rape, and the debate on abortion, this brief will give an overview of several of the many forms of violence women experience as well as providing information on violence women experience in the criminal justice system.

Key Points:

- Domestic Violence overwhelmingly affects women (85% of all reported domestic violence cases are from women being abused) and is increasingly prevalent in America (1 in 4 women have experienced domestic violence in their lifetime).¹
- Up until 1991, women in California who were incarcerated for killing their abusers were not allowed to provide evidence of a history of abuse in court.²
 - This means that women who defended themselves against this violence were convicted of crimes without being allowed to provide evidence of self-defense; many of these survivors are currently doing life sentences (another form of state violence against women).
- According to the U.S. Department of Justice, somewhere in America a woman is raped every two minutes.³
- While abortion was made legal in 1973, the long debate over it has resulted in many who oppose the legalization of abortion and protest (usually on religious grounds) the laws set in place, thus politicizing women's bodies as a topic for public debate.

Issue Brief:

Violence against women is a historical tool of oppression that has been used among other tactics in order to keep women as the minority in American society and around the world. In the United States, domestic violence is the cause of one third of all deaths among women.⁴ While domestic violence affects both men and women, the overwhelming majority of all those who experience intimate partner violence are women. The methods of physical and sexual abuse have been categorized into the domestic violence wheel that explains power and control. Within the circle, the ways of maintaining control over women are explained as: using economic abuse, using male privilege, using children, using isolation, using emotional abuse, using intimidation, using coercion and threats, minimizing, denying, and blaming.⁵ Together, these reasons create a cycle of domestic violence for many women and families. Domestic violence affects women from every community and is not specific to race, ethnicity, class, or location. While domestic violence has become a popular topic in the media, there is also a stigma associated with being a

¹ <http://www.dvrc-or.org/domestic/violence/resources/C61/#dom>

² <http://www.habeasproject.org/history.htm>

³ <http://www.paralumun.com/issuesrapestats.htm>

⁴ <http://www.abanet.org/domviol/statistics.html#prevalence>

⁵ <http://www.peacefulfamilies.org/images/Wheel700pixels.jpg>

survivor of domestic violence. The victimization of women has lead many to leave violence in their families unreported, especially when children are involved out of fear of having them taken away.

When women do stand up to their abusive partners, there is a political history of criminalizing women who take control of their relationships that have been affected by violence. For example, “In 1991, the California Evidence Code was amended to allow expert testimony regarding “intimate partner battering and its effects” (formerly referred to as “battered women’s syndrome,” or BWS) to be admitted as evidence in criminal cases.”⁶ Prior to the amended law, a woman who killed her husband who had a gun to her child’s head was labeled and tried as a woman with an illness or “syndrome,” removing all responsibility from her spouse, the man who initiated violence in their household.



Rape is not only present in many relationships with domestic violence, but is also prevalent for women and other men in their lives, whether it be another family member, a family friend, teacher, and more rarely with strangers. According to 2006 data, “One of the most startling aspects of sex crimes is how many go unreported. The most common reasons given by women for not reporting these crimes are the belief that it is a private or personal matter, and the fear of

reprisal from the assailant. The FBI estimates that only 37% of all rapes are reported to the police. U.S. Justice Department statistics are even lower, with only 26% of all rapes or attempted rapes being reported to law enforcement officials.”⁷ The stigma associated with domestic violence is also a part of our society when it comes to rape, and the sentiments many women share around fear and shame are not addressed to the public enough. While there are many programs to help women who are survivors of rape and domestic violence, there is an enormous lack of prevention and awareness programs. Like the World Health Organization states, “violence against women is a public health problem. It can be prevented.”

⁶ <http://www.habeasproject.org/history.htm>

⁷ <http://www.paralumun.com/issuesrapestats.htm>

Domestic violence and rape are two of the most prevalent forms of violence against women. Politically, the spectacle of issues related to women's bodies can also be interpreted as a form of violence. Abortion has been a topic in the public eye for decades, a debate centered around a woman's body that has become a tool for politicians to gain votes in their campaigns. Since 1973, anti-abortion activists have attempted to change the law that resulted from *Roe v. Wade*, while pro-choice activists have worked toward maintaining this law and keeping abortion as a legal right. Regardless of whether one falls on one side of the abortion spectrum or the other, the issue is discussed very publically. This form of debate rarely includes the experiences of women who have been faced with the decision to have an abortion or not. Additionally, these women are rarely considered when politicians take a position either one way or the other.



• **Works Cited and References:**

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<http://www.dvrcor.org/domestic/violence/resources/C61/#dom>
- American Bar Association's Commission on Domestic Violence:
<http://www.abanet.org/domviol/statistics.html#prevalence>
- Peaceful Families: <http://www.peacefulfamilies.org/images/Wheel700pixels.jpg>
- California Habeas Project: <http://www.habeasproject.org/history.htm>
- American Rape Statistics: <http://www.paralumun.com/issuesrapestats.htm>

• **Websites:**

- Guttmacher Institute: Abortion Statistics from October 1, 2009:
http://www.guttmacher.org/statecenter/spibs/spib_OAL.pdf
- Women In Need Inc.: Domestic Violence Awareness and Services:
<http://www.women-in-need.org/preventionsvc.html>
- Bureau of Justice Statistics on Intimate Partner Violence:
<http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/intimate/ipv.htm>