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Women hitting men

In 1968-69 and 1970-71. I found something that I just ignored. I was so focused on the issue of wife beating, and the feminist perspective of this, which is the way I approached it, that at first I didn't hardly recognize that I'd found about equal rates of their fathers hitting their mother and mothers hitting their father. And in my early papers I reported it. It's there as a statistic, but I didn't discuss it. I didn't think about the implications. I – my focus was about how American cultural norms tolerated this, didn't think it was a big deal. And on the use of violence by men to dominate in the family and the injuries to women. It wasn't until the 1975 national survey that we did where I got the same results, about the same percentage of women hitting their partners as men hitting their partners, that I finally took notice of it and said gee that's something I have to attend to. So – and over the years since then I've become more and more convinced that one of the many things that need to be done to end partner violence, but one of the big ones that's not being attended to, is violence by women. Women are never going to be safe in their own homes until they stop hitting as well as their partners stop hitting.

Self defense not a factor

Most partner violence is not in self-defense. Different studies show rates between five and fifteen percent. There's one that shows it as high as just under 50 percent, but every one of those studies it's about five percent of the men and about five percent of women. When it's 15 percent, in that range, it's about the same percentage for men and women. And even that one of 50 percent, it's a reflection of the American principle of: if hit, hit back. And both parties do it. So self-defense is not it. Of course in some cases it is, but in general that's it.

Criminal penalties: a last resort

I think that criminal penalties should be the truly last resort for dealing with partner violence. The first resort should be getting people help for the problems that lead to partner violence. So if in a particular case, a problem is one or the other has a personality disorder, then that needs to be treated. If they've got a drinking problem, that needs to be treated. And we should refer people to that, refer rather than referring them to prison. Prison is not going to cure it. They'll get out, they'll be in a worse position than when they went in and we'll have even more. So, while I think we need to have criminal penalties for partner violence. They should be very, very rarely used, only when nothing else works.

Excommunicated from feminism

When I finally woke up to the importance of the fact that most partner violence is symmetrical, in both who's doing it and why they're doing it. And also the fact that when women do it, they're putting themselves at risk. They increase the probability. This was treated with outrage, because the predominant way of thinking about it, which was my way until then also, is that this is a problem of male dominance. And it's part of the oppression of women. So people whose commitments are to change the oppression of women, of which this is a part, one of the mechanisms of violence against women, just were outraged, and they saw me, that I was excommunicated in effect as a feminist. I've never accepted that excommunication....But psychologically it hurt, especially for someone who thinks of themselves as a feminist. Probably the most extreme example was when I was elected president of the Society for the Study of Social Problems. When I stood up to give the presidential address, a whole bunch of people from the first two rows stood up, and walked out. As a protest. So, you know I laugh about it now, but it was pretty bad at the time.