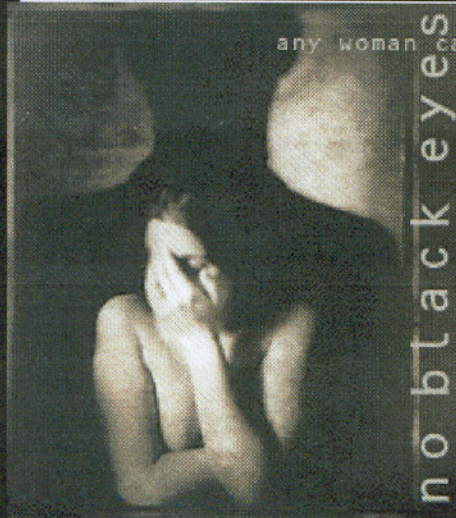


Email This Article | Printer-Friendly Version | Next Page | Previous Page **horizon**



any woman can be a victim, but domestic violence is a community-wide issue.

by monica a. coleman

She lives in a large home with her husband. They both have advanced degrees and good jobs. They belong to several community organizations that help the underclass and also offer fellowship for the middle class. They go out to dinner at fancy restaurants, and attend church together regularly. The children are enrolled in private schools.

She and her husband come from lower-class households, having scraped and studied and fought their way into a better life. Like *The Jeffersons*, they have moved on up.

Silently, she leads another life. She finds excuses to stay out late at night with the children, or at work or social activities. When she comes home, she prays that maybe, tonight, her husband will be in a good mood. Because if he's not, he'll shout or curse. He'll call her names and tell her that she will never amount to anything without him. He'll accuse her of cheating on him or not caring enough about him. He'll throw pots, pans, knives, balls – whatever he can pick up – at her. He'll push her into the wall, bruising her back (where the injury won't show). He'll grab her arm and twist it (long-sleeved shirt tomorrow). He'll punch the wall and make a hole (mental note: hang a picture there). He'll trash the house turning over the furniture (that can be cleaned up later). The children cower in their room (they are probably doing homework).

definition

Domestic violence is a pattern of repeated coercive behaviors that may include physical battering, sexual assault, psychological abuse, intimidation and social isolation perpetrated by someone who is or has been in an intimate relationship with the victim, for the purpose of physical, mental and/or emotional control

But tomorrow everything will be just like before. They will go out to dinner or maybe he will buy her a new dress. Or he will say he's sorry and they can make up. There are no black eyes and no broken bones. And she'll never call the police or tell anyone because this type of thing doesn't happen to people like her. This kind of thing cannot be happening to her. The bad times are horrid, but the good times are really good. And no one could possibly believe that this well-to-do family, this perfect woman, is a victim of domestic violence.

quiet pleas, broken prototypes

I know this story because every day I receive phone calls from women who need to talk to someone – her voice becoming a harsh whisper – about "what happens sometimes." As a women's advocate in a domestic-violence program, I have learned that *any* woman can be a victim of domestic violence, and that if you don't ask the right questions, you may never know.

I know that all my previous ideas of what constitutes domestic violence have crumbled under the testimonies of women who don't fit the media-mold. It's easy to give domestic violence the face of poverty. We imagine the victim in a free neighborhood medical clinic, or in public housing. We envision her standing outside with a rag on her head, the children tugging on her clothes; talking to the police. We see her coming to work with bruises on her face, saying for the third time this month, "I fell down the stairs." And this is part of the story.

But we rarely imagine the women who seem to have it all together. We don't often include the upper and middle classes in our mind's eye of family violence. Very rarely, do we think that our neighbors, our co-workers, our friends or our relatives are suffering from the everyday pain that accompanies abuse, in the name of love.

I know that domestic violence is not "a women's issue." Although 95 percent of

over the victim.

statistics

Every 15 seconds, a woman in the United States is subjected to violent abuse at the hands of her spouse or intimate partner, for a total of 4 to 6 million reported incidents per year.

Every year, more than 3,000 women are murdered by an intimate or former intimate partner.

Domestic violence is the single greatest cause of injury to women between the ages of 15 and 44 – more common than car accidents, muggings and cancer deaths combined.

Children who witness abuse or who are abused are 1,000 times more likely to abuse a spouse or a child when they become adults than children raised in non-abusive homes.

Of boys aged 11 to 20 years old who commit homicide, 63 percent kill the man who is abusing their mother.

(compiled by The National Coalition Against Domestic Violence)

reported domestic assault victims are women, domestic violence affects everyone in a community. From working as an advocate, I have learned that the entire community is involved in the response to the violence: health professionals, law enforcement, judicial officers, employment agencies, food banks, school teachers; the list continues. I have memorized the statistics that say 3.3 million children witness their mothers being beaten and that children who witness abuse are 1,000 times more likely to abuse a spouse or a child when they become adults than children raised in non-abusive homes.

But I confess that I never really *knew* anything about how this happened until I babysat the 3-year-old son of a client, while his mother kept an appointment in a legal clinic. I had a long rapport with this child, who, after refusing to stop running around the room, sat on my lap, nestled into my arms, and hit me directly in the eye. When he was incapable of understanding what he had done wrong, then I knew. When he mixed affection with abuse, I knew.

I know that the violence starts off in small ways among the people we'd least expect. One client flips through some educational materials after a long day in court. She sees the list of "signs of a battering personality" and sighs. "If I had known this earlier, I might have left sooner." Just like the pamphlet, she describes her relationship: first the jealousy, then the irrational expectations. In an argument, a piece of furniture is turned over. Once he raises his hand to hit, the next time it is a shove. Despite her bruised ribs and high blood pressure, she laments, "We had so many plans together. We were building a life together. I loved him, you know."

"Yes," I reply. "I know."

And she gets up so she won't miss any more classes in her last year of college.

praying at the door

I know that a lot of women never tell anyone about the violence in their homes. I know this because my mother never did. I grew up in an upper- middle-class home, attended private schools, and cried almost every night when I listened at the door of my parents' s bedroom, praying that it would not get "too bad." We never called it "domestic violence" because our life did not fit the picture from the made-for-television movies or news reports. We never called it domestic violence because there were no black eyes. Even though the scars were deep.

I know that it is difficult for anyone to call these experiences "domestic violence." Something about those words concretizes the life, and grinds it in a reality that seems much worse than we like to think it is. I think the words are scary. I know that they scare me. It means that my mother and I are a statistic. We are a statistic no one imagined, counseled or believed.

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