Sexual Inequality, Cultural Norms, and Wife-Beating

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The research of Wolfgang (1956), Driver (1961), Bohannan (1960) and others has made it clear that, in a great many societies, one is more likely to be murdered by a member of one's own family, and especially by a spouse, than by any other category of person. But even criminologists are not aware of the extent to which physical violence of all types occurs within families. Other papers have documented the available knowledge which suggests among other things, that a marriage license is for many people a hitting license, that physical violence between family members is probably as common as is love and affection between family members, and that if one is truly concerned with the level of violence in America, the place to look is in the home rather than on the streets (Gelles, 1974; 1975; Gelles and Straus, 1976; Owens and Straus, 1975; Steinmetz, 1974; Steinmetz and Straus, 1974; Straus, 1971; 1974b).

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The intriguing question is why the social group that the society most often looks to for warmth, intimacy, help, and love is also characterized by cruelty and violence. Gelles and Straus (1976) have identified a large number of explanatory factors which, together, constitute a theory of intrafamily victimization in respect to violence. These factors include such things as "time as risk," the semiinvoluntary nature of family group membership, the age- and sex-determined role structure of the family, the level of emotional involvement, the privacy of the family as an institution, and the frequent high level of stress resulting from all of the above factors.

Wives as victims

Whatever the validity of the factors mentioned by Gelles and Straus, by themselves they do not explain a striking aspect of intrafamily violence. This is the fact that wives are much more often the victims of violence by their husbands than the reverse. The existence of this pattern is demonstrated in a variety of studies, of which the most dramatic are those of homicide. Perhaps the starkest measure is the differences in number of deaths caused by husbands as compared to wives. Wolfgang's (1956) study of 588 homicide victims found that 41 per cent of the women victims were killed by their husbands as compared to only 11 per cent of the male victims who were killed by their wives. Some other studies cited by Wolfgang show even higher rates of wife-murder. The highest of these is Von Hentig's analysis of 1931 German data which shows 62 per cent of wives killed by their husbands compared to only 14 per cent of men killed by their wives. It can be argued that these figures overstate the case because they are based on all homicides. If the percentages are based on murders in which the victim and offender were married to each other, then about half are by husbands and half by wives (Wolfgang, 1956, 1958; Curtis, 1974). But in my opinion, the latter figures do not accurately reflect the situation. This is because whether an altercation becomes a murder is heavily influenced by whether knives or guns are used, and wives—as a result of their lesser physical strength—more often use knives and guns, and moreover, more often do so in self-defense. This can be seen from Wolfgang's data on "victim-precipitation" (defined as homicide in which the victim was the first to use physical force): Of the husband-wife homicides for which there was victim-precipitation 85% were cases of husbands who precipitated the attack. Finally, and most directly relevant for the present concern with wife-beating, is Wolfgang's data on the degree of violence involved in husband-wife murder. Wolfgang (1956) defined a violent homicide as one involving two or more acts of stabbing, cutting, or shooting, or a severe beating. He
found that "Among the 53 husbands who killed their wives, 44 did so violently." It is clear, then, that there is striking imbalance in the extent to which wives are victims of violence by husbands.

What could account for this imbalance? One factor might be the greater physical strength of men. However, that does not account for the fact that murders of wives by husbands were more brutal and more violent than murders of husbands by wives (Wolfgang, 1956:269). In fact, the greater strength and skill with weapons on the part of men would lead one to expect fewer stabs and shots if the difference was based on physical strength and skill. Much more than differences in physical strength seems to be involved. The balance of this paper is an examination of some of these factors accounting for the high degree to which wives are the victims of physical violence by husbands. Specifically, we will attempt to show that wife-beating is not just a personal abnormality but rather has its roots in the very structure of society and the family; that is, in the cultural norms and in the sexist organization of the society and the family.

CULTURAL NORMS LEGITIMIZING INTRAFAMILY VIOLENCE

The norms and values relating to intrafamily violence pose something of a paradox. On the one hand, there is what we have called the "myth of family nonviolence" (Steinmetz and Straus, 1974; Straus, 1974b) which reflects cultural norms and aspirations for the family as a group characterized by love, gentleness, and harmony. On the other hand, there seem to be social norms which imply the right of family members to strike each other and which therefore legitimize intrafamily assaults—at least under certain conditions.

Cultural contradictions and discontinuities of this type are present in every society to a greater or lesser extent (Benedict, 1938; Embree, 1950; Ryan and Straus, 1954). Physical aggression or violence is a prime example of this in American society. Although there are clear norms and values restricting violence and emphasizing the value of peace and harmony—especially between family members—simultaneously there exists a high level of actual violence and also norms glorifying aggression and violence. In respect to the family, the legitimation of violence is sometimes explicit or even, mandatory—as in the case of the right and obligations of parents to use a necessary and appropriate level of physical force to adequately train and control a child. In fact, parents are permitted or expected to use a level of physical force for these purposes that is denied even prison authorities in relation to training and controlling inmates. In the case of husband-

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1 Such cultural contradictions are by no means entirely undesirable. In fact, they help prevent society from stagnating, open possibilities for social change, and allow for a measure of individual autonomy; without them we might well be slaves to the dictates of culture.
wife relations, similar norms are present and powerful, but largely im-
licit, unrecognized or covert.

Informal Manifestations of Cultural Norms Permitting or Approving Mar-
ital Violence

Ingeborg Dedichen, who lived with Aristotle Onassis for 12 years, de-
scribes an incident in which Onassis beat her severely until he quit for
exhaustion:

The following day instead of apologizing, Onassis explained, "All Greek husbands,
I tell you, all Greek men without exception, beat their wives. It's good for them."
And then he laughed (Shearer, 1975:4).

Most of the American or English public reading this would dismiss it as
another Greek peculiarity. But, just as Onassis' statement is an exaggera-
tion for Greek men, our denial of this norm is an exaggeration in the other
direction. Once one is aware of the possibility that there are actually
norms legitimizing marital (and especially husband-to-wife) violence, in-
stances such as the above pop up constantly. One amazing example is the
ancient (and flagrantly sexist) joke told on the BBC women's program
"Pettycoat Lane" in the spring of 1974. One woman asked another why she
felt her husband didn't love her anymore. Her answer: "He hasn't bashed
me in a fortnight."

At a higher literary level, plays provide many examples of the mar-
riage license as a hitting license norm, including several by G. B. Shaw,
and the recent play about a Lesbian couple, "The Killing of Sister George,"
in which June makes threatening motions toward Alice:

Alice: Don't touch me. You've got no right.
June: I've got every right.
Alice: I'm not married to you, you know.

The above are, of course, only literary reflections of the cultural norms
which can be observed in everyday life. These range from casual remarks
such as the railway conductor who, when asked for help with a stubborn
seat, did so and remarked to the woman, "Some of these seats are just like
women: you have to kick them to make them work" (protest letter to The
New York Times, July 14, 1974:5). Other examples appear in the media
with at least tacit approval of their contents as in the following section of
the widely read column by Ann Landers (October 29, 1973):

Dear Ann Landers: Come out of the clouds, for Lord's sake, and get down here with
us humans. I am sick to death of your holier-than-thou attitude toward women
whose husbands give them a well-deserved belt in the mouth.
Don't you know that a man can be pushed to the brink and something's got to
give? A crack in the teeth can be a wonderful tension-breaker. It’s also a lot healthier than keeping all that anger bottled up.

My husband hauls off and slugs me every few months and I don’t mind. He feels better and so do I because he never hits me unless I deserve it. So why don’t you come off it? — REAL HAPPY

Dear R.H.: If you don’t mind a crack in the teeth every few months, it’s all right with me. I hope you have a good dentist.

A number of husband and wives interviewed by Gelles expressed similar attitudes so that Gelles developed a classification of types of “normal violence” including such categories as “I asked for it,” “I deserved it,” “She needed to be brought to her senses,” etc. (Gelles, 1974:58). Other examples occur in connection with family disturbance police calls, with wives as well as husbands often asserting their right to hit each other because they are married (Parnas, 1967; Yorkshire Post, May 23, 1974:9). These same attitudes are also widely shared by officials of the criminal justice system. Sometimes this presumed right to hit is linked to the race or social class of the couple, as shown in many of Parnas’ examples (1967) and in an English judge’s remark, “if he had been a miner in South Wales I might have overlooked it” (London Daily Mirror, January 29, 1974:1). This remark made headlines, but only because Welsh miners protested.

A final example is a marriage counseling case cited by Straus (1973:120) in which the husband hit his wife on numerous occasions. He and his wife felt that he could not help himself because, in the heat of the tremendous arguments, he “lost control.” The counselor, however, tried to persuade the couple that this was not simply a reversion to “primitive” levels of behavior, but in fact was under normative control. He did so by asking the husband “Why didn’t you stab her?” This conversation brought out the fact that there was an implicit, unrecognized, but nonetheless operating norm which permitted the husband to hit his wife but not to stab her. This unrecognized norm legitimizing intrafamily violence, unless it produces severe injury, is remarkably parallel to the California “wife-beating” statute cited below.

Legitimation of Husband-Wife Violence by the Court and Police

There is considerable evidence that even though laws giving husbands the right to “chastise” an erring wife are no longer with us, the underlying spirit of such laws lingers on. That spirit is now primarily extralegal, but there are important ways in which it is still embodied in the legal system.

Immunity from Suit. One of the most important of these legitimizations of husband-wife violence is to be found in the doctrine of “spousal immunity” which, to this day in many jurisdictions, prevents a wife from suing her husband for assault and battery. In other jurisdictions, the law has only recently been changed. Truninger (1971:269) cites the following example:
In Self v. Self (1962) the wife alleged that the defendant husband... "unlawfully assaulted plaintiff and beat upon, scratched and abused the person of plaintiff," and that as a result plaintiff "sustained physical injury to her person and emotional distress, and among other injuries did receive a broken arm." The husband's motion for a summary judgement was granted by the trial court.

On appeal, the California Supreme Court reversed the trial court's judgement, thus overruling several older California cases supporting interspousal immunity. The rationale of courts retaining the common law spousal immunity doctrine was that allowing the tort action "would destroy the peace and harmony of the home, and thus would be contrary to the policy of the law."

**Failure of the Police to Act.** As Truninger also points out, it is doubtful whether a wife gains much, other than the principle, from ability to sue her husband for assault and battery since the actual operation of both the civil and criminal justice system puts enormous obstacles in the way and, in any case, typically does nothing to prevent immediate repetition of the offense while the case is being adjudicated. An arrest is usually the only way in which a violent spouse can be removed from the home, but it is extremely rare for the police to make such arrests. In fact, the International Association of Police Chiefs training manual recommends that arrests not be made in such cases (1965).

The above-mentioned guideline is probably more closely followed than any other in the training manual because it so clearly fits the experience and values of the police. In general, the police seem to share the implicit legitimacy of spousal violence, provided the resulting injuries or destruction are within limits. Some police departments have informal "stitch rules" whereby the wound requires a certain (high) number of stitches before an officer makes an arrest (Field and Field, 1973:229). Parnas (1967) cites case after case of the police avoiding arrests in situations where there would definitely be one were the parties not husband and wife. Almost any policeman can cite numerous examples of husbands' claiming the right to strike a wife, and many police themselves believe this to be the law (Truninger, 1971:271; Coote, 1974).²

**Failure of Prosecutors to Act.** Despite the repeated nature and frequent severity of marital violence, it is endured for long periods—often many years—by large numbers of women. Some of the reasons why so many wives tolerate this situation follow from the variables analyzed in this paper. Other factors have been identified in Gelles' paper "Abused Wives: Why Do They Stay?" (1975). Sooner or later, however, the situation brings large numbers of women to the point of desperation. Some respond to this by leaving, or even ultimately by killing the husband; others attempt to secure a warrant for the arrest of their husband. For obviously different reasons, each of these alternatives is typically unsatisfactory. If

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² Programs to inform and train police to better deal with family disturbances have been initiated in several cities. See Bard, 1969, 1971.
Invariably, the police had told them that, in order to protect themselves, they had to "get a warrant from the district attorney." They announced typically, "I have come to get one." To them this implied an automatic process, like dropping nickels into a vending machine, and they expected a routine procedure culminating in the issuance of a warrant for their husband's arrest. Their heightened feeling of precipitate danger reinforced this expectation, and their sense of grievance and desperation was further solidified by the long wait they endured before talking with the initial screening policeman or the district attorney. Of these 7,500 women, fewer than 200 left having secured their objective (Field and Field, 1973:232).

Finally even when the circumstances are such that the police and district attorney cannot avoid bringing charges, few such cases get to trial. "A survey of the assault cases in the District of Columbia showed that over three-fourths of the cases not involving husbands and wives went to a disposition of the merits of guilt or innocence. The enforcement pattern was reversed in husband-wife cases. Only about one sixth of all arrests involving marital violence ultimately ended at trial or with a guilty plea, and the crime charged by that time was invariably a misdemeanor rather than a felony" (Field and Field, 1973:224).

Victim Compensation. Another way in which the law continues, in effect, to legitimize husband-wife assault crops up in connection with the workings of boards and commissions which have been set up in England and a few American states to compensate victims of crimes. The English board explicitly ruled against compensation when the victim is a spouse (Williams, 1975) and this also seems to be the case with the California law (Edelhertz and Geis, 1974:278; Truninger, 1971:270).

The Legal System and Cultural Approval of Intrafamily Violence. The situation described in this section is well summarized by the phrase used as the subtitle of Field and Field's article (1973) on the criminal process in cases of marital violence: "Neither Justice Nor Peace." A situation as pervasive as this is not likely to be a result of historical accident. Nor is it likely to be a consequence of the many difficulties in dealing with marital violence and the low rate of success achieved by invoking the criminal law. These difficulties and uncertainties, after all, do not deter the police and courts from invoking criminal adjudication processes for many crimes—such as prostitution—with an even lower rate of success in control. Rather, the failure to invoke criminal penalties reflects historical continuities in the cultural norms which make the marriage license a hitting license. This is almost explicit in the California Penal Code section on wife-beating, which prohibits an assault only if it results in severe
physical injury. But the most explicit contemporary legal expression of the right of husbands to use physical force is found in the immunity of husbands from prosecution for rape of a wife.

*Experimental and Survey Evidence on Approval of Marital Violence*

There is a slowly growing body of empirical research on intrafamily aggression and violence, some of which provides evidence on the cultural norms we are considering. The survey conducted for the U.S. National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence found that about one quarter of the persons interviewed said they could approve a husband or wife hitting each other under certain circumstances (Stark and McEvoy, 1970). That figure is probably a considerable underestimate because of the existence of opposite and more socially acceptable anti-violence norms and because of the implicit or covert nature of the pro-violence norms.

The contradictory and covert nature of the norms approving marital violence makes experimental and observational studies particularly appropriate because these do not depend on the willingness or ability to verbalize norms and values. Unfortunately, the observational studies have, for practical reasons, all been of parent-child violence (Bellak and Antell, 1974). But there have been experimental studies of marital aggression, or studies which bear on marital aggression.

The first of these studies also reflects the more general phenomenon of male hostility to women:

One of the least recognized indices of male hostility to females is the reaction of men who watch a violent act against women, rather than committing or initiating it themselves. Three psychologists from Michigan State University staged a series of fights that were to be witnessed by unsuspecting passersby. The researchers found, to their amazement, that male witnesses rushed to the aid of men being assaulted by either women or men, and that men helped women being hit by other women. But not one male bystander interfered when a male actor apparently beat up a woman (Pogrebin, 1974:55).

In addition to the interpretation of these findings as reflecting male hostility to women, it also seems likely that it reflects the norm permitting assaults between spouses. That is, it is possible that male bystanders did not come to the aid of a female victim of a male assailant because they inferred that he was the woman's husband. This, in fact, is the reason given for not intervening by a number of those who stood by as Kitty Genovese was murdered (Rosenthal, 1964). The plausibility of this conclusion is further enhanced by its congruence with experimental studies of "bystander intervention," such as the experiments reported and summarized by Bickman (1975). Bickman concludes that the social definition of what actions are right for the bystander is a more powerful determinant of
intervention than the severity of the crime or concern for the welfare of the victim.

Closely related is an unpublished experiment by Churchill and Straus in which the subjects were given a description of an assault and asked to indicate what punishment they felt was appropriate. In the course of the assault, the victim was knocked unconscious. In half of the descriptions the assailant was described as the woman's husband. In the other half, the subjects responded to the identical description except that the couple were described as "going together" for a year. The mean punishment score when the victim was not married to the assailant was 4.15, compared to only 2.65 when the victim was the wife. Moreover, this experiment probably underestimates the difference because it specified that the unmarried couple had been going together for a year. It is likely that the difference would have been much greater if the unmarried couple had not been described as having a quasimarital relationship.

A final set of experiments bearing on this issue is based on observing couples interact in a standardized laboratory task involving conflict. The data for couples was compared to the data for unmarried couples in the same task situation. A study by Ryder (1968) found that strangers were treated more gently and more nicely than were spouses. Similarly, using an experimental task which required the couple to reach a decision, Winter, Ferreira, and Bowers (1973) found the unrelated couples listened respectfully to one another whereas married couples were often rude to one another. Although there is a long distance between rudeness and violence, it seems likely that what is manifested in these two experiments is the beginning of the journey which for many couples ultimately ends in violence (Straus, 1974a).

SEXIST ORGANIZATION OF SOCIETY AND MARITAL VIOLENCE

The cultural norms and values permitting and sometimes encouraging husband-to-wife violence reflect the hierarchical and male-dominant type of society which characterizes the Western world. The right to use force exists, as Goode (1971) concludes, to provide the ultimate support for the existing power structure of the family, if those low in the hierarchy refuse to accept their place and roles. Nine of the specific ways in which the male-dominant structure of the society and of the family create and maintain a high level of marital violence are described in this section.¹

¹ There are, of course, many other factors which contribute to the existence and maintenance of norms permitting intrafamily violence. Owens and Straus (1975) for example, present data on the correlation of childhood experience with violence (including victimization) with pro-violence attitudes and values. See also the more general discussion of the influence of the general positive evaluation of violence in the society in Huggins and Straus, 1975; and in Straus, 1974a, 1974b.
1. **Defense of Male Authority.** In the context of an individualistically oriented urban-industrial society, the ascription of superior authority to males is a potent force producing physical attacks on wives. This is because in such a society, male-superiority norms are not clearly understood and are in the process of transition, and because the *presumption* of male superiority must be validated by superiority in "resources" such as valued personal traits and material goods and services (Rodman, 1972). If every man were, in fact, superior to his wife in such resources as intelligence, knowledge, occupational prestige and income, there would be a concordance between the ascribed authority and the individual achievements which are implicitly expected to accompany that authority in individual achievement-oriented societies. Clearly that is often not the case, despite the societal structure which gives men tremendous advantages in access to these traits and resources. Consequently, many men must fall back on the "ultimate resource" of physical force to maintain their superior position (Goode, 1971; Straus, 1974b:66-67). A graphic illustration of just this process is the case of Joe and Jennifer reported by LaRossa (1975). Statistical evidence is given by Allen and Straus (1975) who found that among working-class husbands who were high in resources, there was no correlation between power and violence. However, among those working-class husbands who were low in resources, the correlation between male power and violence was .49.

2. **Compulsive Masculinity.** Talcott Parsons (1947) has argued that in modern industrial societies, the separation of the male occupational role from the family and the predominance of the mother in child rearing creates a fundamental difficulty for males in respect to achieving a masculine sexual identity:

> The boy has a tendency to form a direct feminine identification, since his mother is the model most readily available and significant to him. But he is not destined to become an adult woman. Moreover he soon discovers that in certain vital respects women are considered inferior to men, that it would hence be shameful for him to grow up to be like a woman. Hence when boys emerge into what Freudians call the "latency period," their behavior tends to be marked by a kind of compulsive masculinity. Aggression toward women who "after all are to blame," is an essential concomitant (p. 305).

Although Parsons' emphasis is on the particular family constellation just described as partial explanation for the generally high level of male aggressiveness in Western societies, it also seems likely to be part of the reason why so much male aggressiveness is directed against women—wives in particular. Similarly, Parsons' analysis also shows the origins of female aggressiveness to be partly found in the particular structure of the family in industrial society and much of this aggressiveness to be specifically focused against men—especially husbands—as the agents of women's
The climate of mutual antagonism between the sexes which is partly an outgrowth of the factors described by Parsons provides a context which is not only conducive to attacks by husbands on wives but probably also underlies a number of other related phenomena, such as the growing evidence that in many instances, "rape is a power trip, not a passion trip" (Bart, 1975:40; Burgess and Holmstrom, 1974). Moreover, as in the typical homosexual rape in prisons (Davis, 1970) the degradation and humiliation of the victim is often a major motivating force.

3. Economic Constraints and Discrimination. The sexist economic and occupational structure of society allows women few alternatives. The jobs open to them are lower in status and, despite antidiscrimination legislation, women continue to earn less than men in the same occupations. Without access to good jobs, women are dependent on their husbands. If there is a divorce, almost all husbands default on support payments after a short time, assuming they could afford them in the first place. Consequently many women continue to endure physical attacks from their husband because the alternative of divorce means living in poverty.

4. Burdens of Child Care. The sexually based division of labor in society assigns child-rearing responsibility to the wife. She therefore has the problem of rearing the children, but at the same time society does not provide either economic provision for her doing so, or child care centers which can take over part of the burden so that she can earn enough to support her children. The combination of occupational discrimination, lack of child-care facilities, inadequate child support from either the government or the father—all coerce women into remaining married even though the victims of violence.

5. Myth of the Single Parent Household. Another of the cultural norms which helps to maintain the subordination of women is the idea that children cannot be adequately brought up by one parent. Thus, if a woman is to have children, she must also have a man. To the limited extent that research evidence supports this view, it comes about only because of the confounding of poverty and social ostracism with single parenthood. Although it seems likely that if social pressure and constraints were removed, most women would want to live with a man and vice versa, there is an important minority for whom this is not the case and who, in effect, live in a state of forced cohabitation. Thus, the fact that innumerable and (under present conditions) unnecessary social and economic constraints prevent the single parent family from being a viable social unit forces

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*See the discussion of the sex myth in Steinmetz and Straus (1974: 10–13) for other ways in which the pattern of male-female relationships built into the society helps to create antagonism between the sexes and hence the association between sexuality and violence.*
many women into accepting or continuing with a subordinate and stressful relationship.

6. Preeminence of Wife Role for Women. Under the present system, being a wife and mother is the most important single role for a woman. Indeed, American cultural norms are such that one cannot be a full woman unless married. A man, on the other hand, has the option of investing much or little of himself in the husband-father role depending on his interest, ability, and circumstances. In short, the stigma of being a divorced man is tiny compared to that of being a divorced woman—to which a special term with somewhat immoral overtones has in the past been attached: divorcée. This forced dependence on the wife role, as the basis for a respected position in society, makes it difficult for women to refuse to tolerate male violence by ending the marriage.

7. Negative Self-Image. Under the present social structure, women tend to develop negative self-images, especially in relation to the crucial trait of achievement (Horner, 1972; Truninger, 1971:260). As a consequence, they also develop feelings of guilt and masochism which permit them to tolerate male aggression and violence and in some extreme cases to seek it. Full sexual equality would eliminate this as a sexually structured pattern of behavior, even though it may remain on an individual-to-individual basis. Only a deemphasis on individual competitive achievement will fully eliminate this problem.

8. Women as Children. The conception of women as the property of men is no longer part of the legal system of industrial countries. However, elements of this outlook linger on in the folk culture. They also survive in certain aspects of the law, such as the statutes which declare the husband the head of the household and give him various rights over his wife, like the right to choose the place of abode, to which the wife must conform. In addition, there is the related conception of women as "childlike." In combination, these aspects of the sexist organization of society give husbands a covert moral right to use physical force on their wives analogous to the overt legal right of parents to use physical force on their children (see Gelles, 1974:58).

9. Male Orientation of the Criminal Justice System. Not only is much male violence against wives attributable to the sexist organization of society, but the crowning blow is that the male-oriented organization of the criminal justice system virtually guarantees that few women will be able to secure legal relief. To start with, the long delays in obtaining court orders and "peace bonds" make them useless in securing immediate relief from the danger of another assault. But even without these delays, many

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5 It is pertinent that even in a state known for its social and familial experimentation, as recently as in 1971, the California State Bar Association voted not to repeal this legislation (Truninger, 1971:276).
women cannot attend court because of the absence of child care arrangements during the long hours of waiting for a case to come up and the frequent repetition of these days when the case is rescheduled. Among other impediments to securing legal protection against assaults by a husband are those previously described in the section on "Legitimation of Husband-Wife Violence by the Courts and Police:" immunity from suit, the failure of police to act against husbands, the "cooling out" by police, prosecuting attorneys and judges of wives who attempt to bring complaints, and the denial of compensation by public compensation review boards.

SEXUAL LIBERATION AND THE REDUCTION OF MARITAL ASSAULT

Although Goode believes that force or its threat is ultimately necessary for the existence of society, he also concedes that "... the amount of force now applied in these various areas of family life ... [is not] ... either necessary or desirable" (Goode, 1971:42). One of the ways in which the amount of force necessary to maintain a viable pattern of family life can be reduced is to reduce the degree of inequality found within the family. The immaturity of children imposes a limit on the extent to which they can be given equality with their parents. But the particular economic and physical conditions which may have justified a subordinate position for women in previous historical eras are clearly no longer present.

The goals of the women's liberation movement are centered on eliminating each of the violence producing inequities which were discussed in the previous section. Since these are fundamental factors accounting for the high level of physical assaults on women by their husbands, it is clear that achievement of the goals of the feminist movement is tremendously important for any reduction in the level of marital assault victimization.

In addition to these fundamental structural changes, the objectives of the women's movement also include various short-run contributions. For example, the ideology of the feminist movement itself encourages women to resist all forms of oppression especially physical violence. In England over the past three years there has been an explosive growth of "battered-wife shelters." These provide immediate physical escape, particularly for those with young children who might otherwise have no alternative to being victimized by their husbands. Finally, the women's movement has been perceptive in recognizing that superior male physical strength and skill are important parts of the process by which male dominance is maintained. It is this recognition which partly accounts for the emphasis on karate and other self-defensive training. It is unlikely that this will, in fact, protect women from assault, anymore than the ability to respond physically protects men from assault by other men. Moreover, the karate approach serves to institutionalize the role of physical violence in social interaction and hence increase the likelihood of still further violence.
Nevertheless, the emphasis on physical self-defense training is an important symbolic step towards the eventual elimination of violent repression of women. But this eventuality will only come about if it is possible to overcome the more fundamental problems of sexual inequality described in the previous section. Fortunately, the most recent emphasis has shifted from training in the use of physical force to training in nonaggressive "assertiveness," which is an important step in the direction of sexual equality.  

At the same time, the difficulties of the period of transition cannot be overlooked. The long-run consequences of a more equalitarian society may be to lessen the frequency with which wives are victims of assault by husbands. But, as Kolb and Straus (1974) and Whitehurst (1974) have suggested, the short-run consequences may be the opposite because a sizable number of men will not easily give up their traditional sex-typed roles. Like traditionally oriented women, such men are conditioned by their culture to perceive only the prerogatives and advantages of the traditional male role, and to ignore its burdens, restraints and disadvantages. Thus, a less violent world, and less violence in the family requires male liberation as well as women's liberation.

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6 The combination of sexual equality, female assertiveness and sexual liberation might also go a long way toward eliminating rape. Many rapes are an illegitimate extension of techniques used by men to deal with culturally prescribed resistance of women to sex (Kirkpatrick and Kanin, 1957). If women were to escape the culturally stereotyped role of disinterest in and resistance to sex and to take on an assertive role in expressing their own sexuality, rather than leaving it to the assertiveness of men, it would contribute to the reduction in rape in three ways. First, and most obviously, voluntary sex would be available to more men, hence reducing the "need" for rape. Second, and probably more important, it would help to reduce the confounding of sex and aggression which is built into our culture (Steinmetz and Straus, 1974:10-13). Third, to the extent that sexism in societal and family structure is responsible for the phenomena of "compulsive masculinity" and structured antagonism between the sexes, the elimination of sexual inequality would reduce the number of "power trip" and "degradation ceremony" motivated rapes.
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