

# Counseling battered wives of Vietnam veterans

by Aphrodite Matsakis

## Who is a battered woman?

Definitions vary somewhat among researchers. However, most agree that a battered woman is one who has received at least two or three deliberate, severe and repeated physical assaults from her spouse or lover. While psychological humiliation and degradation almost always accompany physical abuse, violence or the threat of violence must exist in a relationship if it is to be considered a battering one.<sup>1,2,3,4,5</sup>

Yet, it is not necessary for a woman to be continually beaten in order to feel terrorized or be humiliated into a submissive posture. One or two beatings or threats of violence, accompanied by infrequent physical assault, are sufficient to establish a pattern of male domination in the home.<sup>6</sup> One wife, for example, was beaten twice soon after her husband returned from Vietnam. For 15 years since, she has kept quiet.

While physical and emotional abuse are the hallmarks of wife abuse, it is, more properly, a multi-dimensional phenomenon including economic, social, and sexual battering. Economic battering refers to the use of money as a coercive tool by the husband; social battering, to the husband's attempt to isolate the woman and severely limit or control her social and other interactions.

## Wife abuse is serious

More than one million abused women seek medical attention for injuries caused by battering each year.<sup>8</sup> Some studies show that at least 20 percent of visits to emergency rooms by women are the result of wife abuse. According to FBI statistics, over 30 percent of the women killed in this country are murdered by their husbands or boyfriends.<sup>10</sup>

Battered women have four times the suicide rate of other women (nine times the normal rate on the date of battering). Most suffer from severe depression and other psychological symptoms.<sup>11</sup> Four women a day in this country die as the result of domestic violence. In fact, wife abuse causes more injury to women than auto accidents, rapes or muggings.<sup>12</sup>

## Wife abuse is prevalent

Current estimates are that one-third of all married couples engage in spousal assault. The number of women being beaten (not just shoved, but beaten) by their husbands is close to 1.8 million per year.<sup>13</sup>

However, many researchers,<sup>14</sup> as well as official military and other government documents,<sup>15</sup> note that wife abuse, like child abuse, tends to be under reported. Furthermore, available statistics consider only married women. Given that wife abuse has been found to be one of the major causes of divorce, the actual rate may be even higher, as high as 50-60 percent, according to some experts.<sup>16</sup>

## Vietnam veterans and wife abuse

Men from all social groups batter--rich men, poor men, white men, black men, professors, and yes, even clergy.<sup>17</sup> To date, we do not know

whether Vietnam veterans batter their wives more or less than any other group of men. Rick Ritter reports that about one-third of veterans seeking help at the Fort Wayne, Indiana, Vet Center admit to striking their partners.<sup>18</sup> In the over 60 women who have been screened for the Vet Center women's group at the Silver Springs, Maryland, Vet Center, I have found almost an identical rate.

Almost all the women have been hit at least once. However, only about one-third fit into the battered women's category where the husband exercises a financial and emotional, as well as physical, stranglehold over the woman. In these cases, women are not just hit on occasion, but are thrown down stairs, slammed against (and through) walls, cut with knives, and locked in rooms without food or heat for hours. Some wives have been seriously sexually abused by their partners, forced into degrading situations, or punched in the stomach, even when pregnant, causing some miscarriages.

The one-third percentage is based on an extremely limited sample: help-seeking veterans at two particular Vet Centers, not on the Vietnam veteran population as a whole. The percentages from these two small, highly specialized samples cannot be generalized.

While wife abuse is not limited to any particular population of men, it has been found to be more prevalent among families experiencing financial pressures, frequent moves, and isolation from peer groups and family support systems--characteristics of some Vietnam veteran families.<sup>20</sup> Woman battering also is hypothesized to be more prevalent among men who received military training,<sup>21</sup> who learned a "quick-action" response to combat,<sup>22</sup> or who were exposed to or participated in the rape and abuse of Vietnamese women.<sup>23</sup>

In some cases, the unresolved grief and rage which underlie the symptoms of PTSD contribute to the battering. For some, it seems easier to lash out at a wife than to deal with the seemingly insurmountable pain and anger within. Hence, wives report that abuse seems to escalate whenever husbands encounter frustration with bureaucracies, on patriotic holidays, or when there is injury in the family.

## TIPS ON COUNSELING BATTERED WOMEN:

### 1. Inquire about abuse

Information about violence in the home is usually not volunteered. Most abused wives are ashamed of the abuse, feel they "deserved it," or fear retaliation from their husbands if they "betray" him by "telling". Many abused women deny or<sup>24</sup> are in a state of numbing about the abuse.

Even if the woman does report abuse, she is likely to minimize and discount it. I usually ask, "Did he do anything else to you? Were there any threats he did not carry out? Are you afraid to tell me everything?"

The battered woman may not be able to keep appointments due to her husband's interference. Hence, meetings at unusual times or telephone

counseling may be necessary. Outreach calls when appointments are missed help to ascertain if the woman has been injured.

## 2. Crisis intervention

Battered women often appear crazy. Usually they have enough psychological symptoms to keep mental health professionals busy for hours. Yet many, if not most, of these symptoms are the result of living with abuse and not the cause of it. While the woman may have significant personality problems, the central fact of her existence is that she lives in a state of constant trauma and fear. Once the violence ceases, or once she is in a safe environment, then other issues can be reviewed.<sup>25</sup>

If the woman is in immediate danger, telephone numbers of local battered women's shelters and hotlines need to be provided.

## 3. Information giving

Information about the prevalence of abuse helps assure the woman that she is not alone. Presentation of facts about the tendency of abuse to escalate over time helps women shed the illusion that each beating will be the last. According to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights and other sources, once beatings start they typically<sup>26</sup> become more frequent and more severe.

## 4. A non-judgmental attitude

Battered women are not helped by being asked what they did to "provoke" the abuse or if they (consciously or unconsciously) "enjoyed" it. Such inquiries put the responsibility for the abuse on the victim and function to humiliate her or make her feel "crazy".<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, most abused women can be helped by keeping a diary of the abuse, noting any patterns, and eliminating from their repertoire of behavior any acts or words that seem related to their husband's outbursts. This homework assignment, however, is not intended to give women the false hope that they can control the abuse. Wife abuse generally has been found to be more a function of the husband's internal, emotional state than the wife's behavior or personality.<sup>28</sup>

A listing of books and articles on wife abuse can be obtained from the Center for Women Policy Studies, Suite 508, 2000 "P" St. N.W., Washington, DC 20036; the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, 2401 Virginia Ave. N.W., Suite 305, Washington, DC 20037, telephone (202)293-8860; or the Southern California Coalition on Battered Women, Box 5036, Santa Monica, CA 90405.

Suggested readings include: **The Battered Woman**, by Lenore Walker, Harper and Row, New York, 1979; **Diary of a Battered Woman**, by Lydia Savina (includes a handbook for abused wives with a special section for wives of Vietnam veterans), in press, available from Bridge Publishers, 2500 Hamilton St., South Plainfield, New Jersey. □

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