

An Article for Women by Laura Ann Kamienski

Sexual assault and domestic violence are, by far, the most common types of violence women experience. According to a 1995 study on violence against women conducted by the United States Department of Justice:

- Women age 12 or older annually sustained almost 5 million violent victimizations in 1992 and 1993. About three-quarters of all lone-offender violence against women and 45% of violence involving multiple-offenders was perpetrated by offenders whom the victim knew. In 29% of all violence against women by a lone offender, the perpetrator was someone close (husband, ex-husband, boyfriend or ex-boyfriend).
- Women were about 6 times more likely than men to experience violence committed by someone close.
- Women annually reported about 500,000 rapes and sexual assaults to interviewers. Friends or acquaintances of the victims committed over half of these rapes or sexual assaults. Strangers were responsible for about 1 in 5.

Our culture promulgates and perpetuates massive and completely unnecessary ignorance about the violence women face. From advertising to news reporting, movies to television, violence against women (and how women respond to that violence) is flagrantly misrepresented. Rapists are most often portrayed as dirty, smelly, psychotic strangers who jump, unannounced, from behind bushes. Their physical features are sometimes exaggerated to the point of becoming huge ape like monsters with big teeth and hairy bodies. Very rarely are attackers depicted as friends or family members of their victims. In many instances it is either directly or indirectly implied that the victim secretly wanted to be raped. Women are rarely seen fighting back against their attacker and when they do they are usually ineffectual and are ultimately rescued by another male character. Sometimes the rapist himself turns out to be the hero.

While stranger attacks do happen, the effects of which are nothing short of devastating and traumatic, the overwhelming majority of sexual assaults do not happen on the street or in an alley. Furthermore, assailants are usually not strangers. The overwhelming majority of assailants know their victims -84% of all sexual assaults are committed by someone the victim knows. Furthermore, victims of sexual assault are very often young girls as indicated by a study reported in *Body Politics* by Nancy Henley:

Florence Rush, a social worker who has worked for the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, has been concerned with sexual abuse in children, and has written papers on this topic. In one, presenting a survey of studies covering 2,152 cases of sexual offenses against children, she observes that the overwhelming majority of sexual offenses involving children (about 90%) are those committed by older males on young girls, and about 75 percent of these offenses are committed not by strangers, but by persons known to the victims-by fathers and other relatives, or by visitors and family friends. The pattern of such abuses, she concludes, shows "an early manifestation of male power and oppression on the female."

According to the American Medical Association (AMA), over 61 percent of female victims of assault are under age 18. The AMA also reports that three-quarters of sexual assaults are committed by a friend, acquaintance, intimate partner or family member of the victim.

Violence against women is primarily partner violence: 76 percent of the women who were raped and/or physically assaulted since age 18 were assaulted by a current or former husband, cohabiting partner, or date.

Domestic violence is the leading cause of injuries to women ages 15 - 44, more common than automobile accidents, muggings, and cancer deaths combined (Surgeon General, US. Public Health Services, (*Journal of the American Medical Association*, 276:23, 31-32, June 17, 1992). 22-35% of women who visit emergency rooms are there for injuries related to ongoing abuse (*Journal of American Medical Association*, 1990). Although more than one million women seek medical treatment each year

for injuries caused by their husbands or partners, doctors correctly identify the injuries as resulting from battering only 4% of the time (E. Stark & A. Flitcraft, "Medical Therapy as Repression": The Case of the Battered Woman, 1982).

The picture drawn by these statistics is one in which there is typically some sort of emotional connection between the victim and the assailant.

Generally, women are not encouraged to value their own unique qualities. Instead we are defined as "good" or "bad" according to male norms and standards. "Of course, the habit of seeing women's behavior as something to be explained in relation to the male norm makes sense in a world that takes the male norm for granted." These norms divide women into "good" and "bad." So it becomes an accepted idea that only bad women are assaulted. Not only is this an outright example of victim-blaming, but it also makes women feel that they are somehow to blame for being assaulted because they are "bad." It should be recognized that some behaviors are riskier than others, but assault is assault no matter where a woman is or what she was doing at the time of her attack. Socialization happens in many ways, but the end result of this kind of socialization usually includes feelings of low self-worth in women. For women, low self-worth often includes self-blame and self-hatred.

In order to defend the self, a woman must perceive herself as having value over and beyond that of an attacker. This notion goes against the very grain of women's role in society. Women's "other" orientation leaves them vulnerable because it devalues them and leaves them with feelings of low self-esteem and low self-worth. Women must first feel entitled to be safe and respected.

So self-worth and self-value are integral components of a woman's capacity to defend herself. A woman must believe that she is capable of defending herself. Learning physical technique is empowering, and is an invaluable tool for increasing women's self-esteem and self-worth. Women are routinely discouraged from any sorts of aggressive behavior. As children we are denied opportunities to learn to use our bodies in ways which are self-protective. In *Beauty Bites Beast*, Ellen Snortland describes how it would be useful for girls to be raised more like puppies:

A dog breeder would be considered insane if they separated puppies by sex, allowing only male puppies to play and learn adult survival techniques as they tumbled around "hunting" a ball. We would consider it absurd to train the females not to growl, roll around, get dirty, or fight back if attacked. Notice how dogs behave when they're playing. Their play is a gentle form of fighting, veritable rehearsal for the real thing should the need ever arise. The female pups do not sit on the sidelines watching or cheering the males; they are just as actively entangled in the pile of "fighting" dogs. A bitch that never used her ability to protect herself wouldn't be good for her litter.

Many assailants along the continuum employ tricks to gain access to us [the potential victim] and to move us to an isolated location. Assailants use tricks and ploys in many different forms. From an offer of help or apologies and reassurances to intimidation and put-downs, a sexual assailant both intentionally and unintentionally tries to manipulate his victim. The majority of assaults begin with conversation that is directed by an assailant. This conversation is directed to manipulate, coerce, and confuse the targeted victim. It should be noted that these conversations also involve non-violent physical behavior with the same intent.

The primary target of a woman's body is her heart. Like a sharpshooter, those who commit violence against women choose the most vulnerable area of their victims to attack. A woman's emotions and self-image are typically at the center of the bull's eye. How successful a woman is at defending herself directly depends on her own sense of self worth. The success of most assaults against women is determined long before the physical act of rape. In fact, physical force or restraint is often unnecessary for an assailant to succeed. Skills to protect the heart, mind and integrity surpass all others as the primary skills that need to be developed.