

# Everyday Violence: Wife Beating

Amelia Jones

1978

I read the news today, oh boy. A million holes in American Apple Pie. Thirty-eight million to be exact; thirty-eight million battered wives in the good ole U.S.A! Thirty-eight million wife-beaters! That means that 26% of the population of the U.S. are playing this grotesque game of tackle. And those are only the reported cases. The only participatory sport in Modern America! Egg-beaters like steamirons. Strong right arms. Weak Knees. Never needed to Bring the War Home. It never left! These statistics were reported on a T.V. network program; local T.V. news, and in a speech by an LA city councilman. Can you believe it? Twenty-five percent of all murder victims are killed by their husbands! Can you believe it?

I can. For years we have been reading and writing reports on what was happening in the streets, the prisons, the White House, Vietnam, Portugal, South America, Woodstock, Anywhere but home. "Don't tell me about yer Mean Ole Man, lady. That's yer Own Problem. We're concerned with Social Issues." Embarrassment, deep dark secret, keep it in, weirdness. Whew! It's Normal American Life!

"Just leave him," they said, "Yeah, be a liberated Woman instead of an ugly rug, you dumb chick," they tormented me. I left, a million times. This time for better or for worse.

Yeah, I'm Liberated. I write "freely" in the wee hours of the morning, after the Kids are asleep and the housework is done. In four hours I will rise to do eight hours of wage work, Man's Work, Equally Paid. Yeah, I'm Liberated, "liberated from the old Mississippi to the new Mississippi. New installation, same hose. Same gas, without platformate." Now I have no lovmaker, no comfort in sweet coitus. Why do American women take those black eyes, those choking fists in the groin, the risk of death? "A million pinpricks kill as surely as one swift blow," said Vaneigem. Also said a battered wife.

How I remember the times I returned to him. Not the monster I left, but my sweet boy-man, tenderly caressing him in his tears of apology, his tales of the pain of his mother's hands, his father's belt, and their scenes. I shared the bruises of his battered childhood. Where it all begins. In the helplessly suppressed rage of the beaten baby. In the instinctual imitation of adults by the young child. In the forcibly repressed sensuality and self-determinism of the toddler and adolescent. And in the constant tension of everyday life that hounds us from the cradle to grave in a system of social relations that creates us, and that we recreate.

1) In the helplessly suppressed rage of the beaten baby:

Dr. Joshua Golden, director of UCLA's sexuality clinic, states that, "We learn what to be aroused by in highly symbolic situations early in life. The fact that many murderers were themselves victims of child abuse partially explains "their later actions."

Virginia Johnson of the Masters & Johnson sex research team in St. Louis said that the kind of physical contact experienced by a child during his formative years has an important influence on his sexual behavior as an adult. Contact that is comforting such as holding or stroking, will lead to normal sexual development, she said. But when the physical contact a child experiences is violent and forceful, his emerging erotic feelings will be linked to that.

Dr. Morris Herman, a New York University psychiatrist and head of the prison service at Bellevue Hospital, continues her line of thought in saying that the sexual satisfaction that he then seeks as an adult will be interlaced with a lust for power, and a desire to strike out at women in general, in particular the mother.

2) In the instinctual imitation of adults by the young child:

There is a film that is shown in Child Development IA classes in colleges throughout the country. It is a "hidden camera" film. A father and son sit in a room which is empty except for a bean bag bozo. Father gets up, punches bean bag, leaves room. Son gets up, and punches bean bag in exact imitation of the movements of his father. (No prior coaching has been given to the son.) This imitation is repeated in case after case, without exception. Son after son, father after father, son after father, after son, after father. Thirty-eight million punched-out bozos.

What stands out most in my mind is the shudder that enveloped me as I witnessed my young son, in a moment of stress, remove his belt and whip his playmate, in exact imitation of the movements of his stepfather in similar situations.

3) In the forcibly repressed sensuality and self-determinism of the toddler and adolescent:

U.S. Army psychiatrists have determined through studies that the ability of an individual to deal with stressful situations is rooted in his/her young life. After World War II, it was found that there were, not surprisingly, all kinds of serious psychological disturbances arising in the population that had endured heavy bombing and other types of violent warfare. Surprisingly, however, in the warfare zones of the primitive Pacific islands these psychological disturbances did not occur in the adult populations. Army psychiatrists hypothesized that this could only be due to the fact that the people there did not feel as greatly or were more capable of dealing with the stress of battle than their European counterparts.

Looking into the childhood experience of these primitive Pacific islanders they found that they had been raised in "lazy," stressless environments. They had been born during orgasmic, spiritual birth rituals; never spanked, hit, or in any way routinely physically punished; continually cuddled and gently tickled; breastfed until approximately the age of three years; and allowed to develop their own individual feeding, sleeping, and sexual patterns.

This contrasted sharply with the child-rearing practices to which the Europeans had been subjected. They had been pushed or pulled into the world during the shrieks of their mothers in painful birth rituals and immediately spanked; subjected to routine beatings as the most respected form of behavior modification; put on strict feeding and sleeping schedules from day one; required to obey the orders of their elders without question; and completely sexually repressed until the night of their marriage when they were allowed a degree of pleasurable release.

The Army psychiatrists set up a test situation where selected subjects were exposed to increasing amounts of electrical shock. Without exception, the subjects who had been raised in liberative cultures such as those of the Pacific Islands could tolerate, before expressing any sensation of pain, much greater intensities of electrical shock than those subjects who had been raised in "spare not the rod" cultures such as those of Europe. Medical sensing devices showed that this was not because they were more "straight-faced." They simply did not feel pain to the degree that the "ex-battered children" did.

Timothy Leary says that when a person experiences a sensation, all similar experiences of that sensation are restimulated from the subconscious. The Europeans were much more vulnerable to pain and overreacted, because of past experience—old wounds were simply re-opened. When a man beats up his wife for the smallest hurtful infraction, he is not merely being a "male chauvinist." He is retaliating against an accumulation of pain which began in the crib.

4) In the constant tension of everyday life that hounds us from cradle to grave in a system of social relations that creates us, and that we recreate:

Wilhelm Reich writes (*The Imposition of Sexual Morality*, 1932):

"The form in which society organizes communal life determines the quantity and quality of tension relaxation in the psychic apparatus. If there are too few possibilities in society for sexual gratification and sublimation (a free-flowing performance of work), if the psychic apparatus is so deformed by the influence of faulty education that it is not capable of utilizing the available possibilities, if the measure of displeasurable irritation due to lack and privation becomes too great, then the psychic apparatus begins to work with substitute mechanisms which have the goal of tension relaxation at any cost. The

results then are neuroses, perversions, pathological changes in character, the antisocial phenomena of sexual life, and not least, disturbances in the capacity for work.”

What is this system of social relations which causes such continuous, unrelieved tension that it creates the child abuser, and thus, the wife-beater? Does it occur primarily in broken families? In the context of the lifestyle of the working mother who does not have enough time for her kids? In the children of young, unwed mothers? In the homes of the poverty-stricken welfare recipients?—Not so!

In an article (with an impressive bibliography) entitled “Once a Battered Child, Always a Battered Child” (*Country Women*, Issue 26), Melia Shell writes, “When the existing myths are debunked, the facts show an interesting composite: The highest potential for a child abuse situation comes from the stress and strain of everyday, “normal” American life. a family with a mother and a father and children, white, working class, isolated from the world, in financial distress, with all members in the traditional roles. Even the so-called joyous family celebrations seem to produce an incredibly stressful situation and according to one Child Protective Service, ‘more abuse occurs during the Christmas seasons and on school holidays than any other time of the year.’”

She goes on to write that, “The infant is the most commonly fatally beaten child because it is unable to protect itself and because the mother is traditionally solely responsible for an infant...so there is no relief for the mother. First-born children make up a large percentage of those involved in trauma studies, probably due to the fact that the fantasies that parents place on their children are apparently as unrealistic as the expectations placed on motherhood. The ‘madonna and child’ myth that mom must be patient and loving 24 hours a day and the equally insidious ‘bundle of joy’ or ‘Gerber-baby’ myths create the expectation for the child to be a constant joy. These myths are perpetuated by TV commercials and golden ads in women’s magazines which set women up for crushing disappointment and frustration. With the amount of pressure and the rigidity of expectations every mother lives within the structure of impending disaster. Every mother is a potential child abuser in this culture.”

She’s right. I know it in my soul. When I was pregnant with my first child, my black son, I was quite young, and I had a Cause, a near-sighted vision of liberation. I knew vaguely that the way children are raised in this culture is fucked, but it would be different for us, because I knew better. I would be Mary and he would be the Savior. I was then faced with dirty diapers, not Wise Men, and teething tantrums, not “no crying he makes.” I never beat my son or my daughter, but I do throw pillows at the wall, grit my teeth, sometimes scream, and occasionally spank them. As I talk with all kinds of mothers I find that those of us who do not beat our children use varying other forms of “substitute mechanisms” for release of tension.

What I had failed to see was that, however different my mind and ideas may have been from those of the average American housewife, the external conditions of my life were the same. By letting my young son run freely, I endangered him to the traffic in the street. By not forcing him to wear clothing as a tiny child, I exposed him to the terror of the kids on the block throwing cement rocks at him and an old black lady hitting him with a broom yelling “Git yo nigga dick back in the house, boy!” By living alone with him in an urban apartment, a suburban house, and a place in the country (as married and single mothers do for most of the day), I exposed him to the frustration of a trapped young woman, isolated from social contact or experiences of “free-flowing performance of work” by the constant demands of the infant or young child. The list goes on and on.

Simple daycare is not the answer. We must redesign our living spaces, work places, lifestyles. Immediately. Even within the context of “existing capital.” It’s stupid to wait for a militaristic “revolution.” (I will write more about this later.)

The jock anarchist who maintains his “right” to indiscriminately express his rage perpetuates fascism. The “cold, calculating revolutionist” who neglects the home front deserves to have his hot stick of dynamite shoved up his frigid ass. The “terrorist” who literally or symbolically destroys a stern, murderous Patriarch, has only barely begun her work.

As I write, the radio news tells me that today the eleventh young victim of the L.A. Strangler was raped and killed while ten people passively listened to her screams. The old Hermit of Santa Ana Canyon now resides in jail after coming out of his cave to smash car windshields on the freeway. And Linda Ronstadt sings “Blue Bayou.”

We must nurture the desire for life in our everyday existence so that we may begin to play with love and not with pain.

In tears of rage, tears of grief,  
Amelia Jones

# fifth Estate

Amelia Jones  
Everyday Violence: Wife Beating  
1978

<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/289-january-24-1978/everyday-violence-wife-beating>  
Fifth Estate #289, January 24, 1978

**[fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net](https://fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net)**