

Besieged males deserve benefit of the doubt

By Bettina Arndt

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The video did a great job. For we potential jurors gathered last month in Sydney's criminal courts, it was helpful to see actors playing typical jurists, showing us what we had in store. But what was striking to me about this educational video was that the villain, the one person we were destined to hate, was male. A male in a suit, to be precise. An arrogant, impatient businessman who irritated the hell out of everybody with his pushy, obnoxious manner.

Today, men are the only standing target. It is no longer permissible to take potshots at women. A few decades of lobbying by women activists has taken care of that. But men are still fair game for television advertising showing them as bumbling and incompetent and scathing attacks in newspaper and magazine articles. Last year British novelist Doris Lessing spoke out against this continual, demeaning humiliation of men: "The most stupid, illeducated and nasty woman can rubbish the nicest, kindest and most intelligent man and no one protests. Men seem to be so cowed that they can't fight back, and it is time they did," she pronounced.

In Australia, some men are fighting back. The West Australian Equal Opportunity Commissioner is considering a complaint made by members of a local men's group against the Women's Policy Office. At issue is the WPO's "Freedom from Fear" campaign against domestic violence, which members of Men's Confraternity WA claim is discriminatory and sexist.

The Freedom from Fear campaign is based on the presumption that "the perpetrators of violence are almost exclusively male" a presumption the complainants see as hurtful, insulting and wrong. Their 102page complaint lists the substantial body of international evidence showing domestic violence is by no means an exclusively male preserve.

A new book by New Zealand academic Garth Fletcher *The New Science of Intimate Relationships* (Blackwell, 2002) sums up the evidence from more than 70 studies involving more than 60,000 people in the US, Canada, New Zealand, Britain, Australia, Korea and Israel: "The rates of violent acts (both minor and major) reported by men and women in intimate relationships are roughly equivalent; however there is a slight tendency for both men and women to report that women are more likely to be initiators of violent than men," Fletcher writes.

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The WA complaint by Brett Kessner and Ian Cugley argues that the refusal to acknowledge the extent to which women can be perpetrators of violence means male victims are frequently denied help by domestic violence services and the police. "The

sad reality is that male victims are subject to a range of social and political obstacles and prejudice when it comes to domestic violence. The Freedom from Fear campaign does nothing to encourage male victims to come forward," Kessner and Cugley write.

Last month, a date was set for a final hearing in an 11year court battle over just such a case. A Canberra man, Mr K, is claiming compensation and apologies for alleged discriminatory treatment by the ACT Domestic Violence Crisis Service. In 1990 he sought help from the DVSC, claiming he and his son had been physically abused by his wife. DVSC staff refused to assist him but instead counselled his wife and helped her to obtain court orders for Mr K to be evicted.

Mr K's initial complaint of discrimination was dismissed by Sex Discrimination Commissioner Sue Walpole on the basis it fell outside her jurisdiction, but an appeal to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission led to a determination that Mr K's "less favourable" treatment was not due to his gender but resulted from "hopelessly ineffective, unprofessional and inadequate procedures" and "seriously flawed policy". An appeal to the Federal Court determined this second commissioner to have erred in law, and the matter was returned to the HREOC for reconsideration. Last month, Mr K finally learned his case is to be heard by the Federal Court in September.

This is not to deny the great threat posed by men's superior size and strength, which means men are more likely to use violence to coerce and control their partners. But men are right to object when portrayed as the only aggressors in intimate relationships. Neither sex has a monopoly on vice or virtue. We must consider the consequences of denying men our trust. I am reminded of a conversation I had last year, after spending a week ferrying children to and from the snowfields for interschool competitions. Each day I would offer lifts to young male snowboarders hitching rides along the route. Another mother was horrified. "They could be axemurderers," she told me. True enough; axemurderers are more likely to be male. But as a mother of two sons, I hate the idea of my boys growing up in a world which assumes them to be likely predators. Hence I feel I have no choice but to act on my knowledge that most men deserve the benefit of the doubt.

Yes, there may be some sight risk in letting these scruffy big boys into the family car, but for me the price of treating all males with suspicion is far greater.

Bettina Arndt is a staff writer.

This story was found at:

<http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2002/04/10/1018333371835.html>