

are indeed such great doubts in adolescence and beyond about one's masculine credentials, how is it that we combat these doubts? One way is by violence.

Men's Violence against Women

In spite of the inferior role which men assign to them, women are the privileged objects of their aggression.

—Simone de Beauvoir²⁸

Men's violence against women is the most common form of direct, personalized violence in the lives of most adults. From sexual harassment to rape, from incest to wife battering to the sight of violent pornographic images, few women escape some form of male aggression.

My purpose here is not to list and evaluate the various forms of violence against women, nor to try to assess what can be classed as violence *per se*.²⁹ It is to understand this violence as an expression of the fragility of masculinity and its place in the perpetuation of masculinity and male domination.

In the first place, men's violence against women is probably the clearest, most straightforward expression of relative male and female power. That the relative social, economic, and political power can be expressed in this manner is, to a large part, because of differences in physical strength and in a lifelong training (or lack of training) in fighting. But it is also expressed this way because of the active/passive split. Activity as aggression is part of the masculine gender definition. That is not to say this definition always includes rape or battering, but it is one of the possibilities within a definition of activity that is ultimately grounded in the body.

Rape is a good example of the acting out of these relations of power and of the outcome of fragile masculinity in a surplus-repressive society. In the testimonies of rapists one hears over and over again expressions of inferiority, powerlessness, anger. But who can these men feel superior to? Rape is a crime that not only demonstrates physical power, but that does so in the language of male-female sex-gender relations. The testimonies of convicted rapists collected by Douglas Jackson in the late 1970s are chilling and revealing.³⁰ Hal: "I felt very inferior to others. . . . I felt rotten about myself and by committing rape I took this out on someone I thought was weaker than me, someone I could control." Carl: "I think that I was feeling so rotten, so low, and such a creep . . ." Len: "I feel a lot of what rape is isn't so much sexual desire as a person's feelings about themselves and how that relates to sex. My fear of relating to people turned to sex because . . . it just happens to be the fullest area to let your anger out on, to let your feelings out on."

Sometimes this anger and pain are experienced in relation to women but just as often not. In either case they are addressed to women who, as the Other in a phallogocentric society, are objects of mystification to men, the objects to whom men from birth have learned to express and vent their feelings, or simply objects with less social power and weaker muscles. It is the crime against women *par excellence* because, through it, the full weight of a sexually based differentiation among humans is played out.

This anger and pain are sometimes overlayed with the effects of a class hierarchy. John: "I didn't feel too good about women. I felt that I couldn't pick them up on my own. I took the lower-class woman and tried to make her look even lower than she really was, you know. 'Cause what I really wanted was a higher-class woman but I didn't have the finesse to actually pick these women up."

Within relationships, forms of male violence such as rape, battering, and what Meg Luxton calls the "petty tyranny" of male domination in the household³¹ must be understood both "in terms of violence directed against women as women and against women as wives."³² The family provides an arena for the expression of needs and emotions not considered legitimate elsewhere.³³ It is one of the only places where men feel safe enough to express emotions. As the dams break, the flood pours out on women and children.³⁴ The family also becomes the place where the violence suffered by individuals in their work lives is discharged. "At work men are powerless, so in their leisure time they want to have a feeling that they control their lives."³⁵

While this violence can be discussed in terms of men's aggression, it operates within the dualism of activity and passivity, masculinity and femininity. Neither can exist without the other. This is not to blame women for being beaten, nor to excuse men who beat. It is but an indication that the various forms of men's violence against women are a dynamic affirmation of a masculinity that can only exist as distinguished from femininity. It is my argument that masculinity needs constant nurturing and affirmation. This affirmation takes many different forms. The majority of men are not rapists or batterers, although it is possible that the majority of men have used superior physical strength or physical coercion or the threat of force against a woman at least once as a teenager or an adult. But in those who harbor great personal doubts or strongly negative self-images, or who cannot cope with a daily feeling of powerlessness, violence against women can become a means of trying to affirm their personal power in the language of our sex-gender system. That these forms of violence only reconfirm the negative self-image and the feeling of powerlessness shows the fragility, artificiality, and precariousness of masculinity.

Violence against Other Men

At a behavioral level, men's violence against other men is visible throughout society. Some forms, such as fighting, the ritualized display violence of teenagers and some groups of adult men, institutionalized rape in prisons, and attacks on gays or racial minorities are very direct expressions of this violence. In many sports, violence is incorporated into exercise and entertainment. More subtle forms are the verbal putdown or, combined with economic and other factors, the competition in the business, political, or academic world. In its most frightening form, violence has long been an acceptable and even preferred method of addressing differences and conflicts among different groups and states. In the case of war, as in many other manifestations of violence, violence against other men (and civilian women) combines with autonomous economic, ideological, and political factors.