Female Harassment after Ending a Relationship: A Preliminary Study

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ABSTRACT: While dramatic instances of male aggression directed toward women, such as rape and wife battering, have been frequently studied, a more subtle form of male aggression—female harassment—has been investigated less often. In the present study, 50 women who had terminated relationships with males and then were harassed were interviewed. In general, the harassment lasted for about a year, and episodes which occurred on a daily basis consisted of calls, letters, visits to home or work, being followed, verbal threats, and physical aggression. For the most part, these aggressive actions were perceived as both threatening and disturbing. Findings indicated that assertive female strategies were not more effective in reducing harassment than more sex-role stereotyped passive and nonassertive responses to male aggression. In the second phase of this study a sample of college undergraduates was interviewed on the topic of harassment. Fifty-six percent of the women indicated that they had been harassed by men.

A Preliminary Study of Female Harassment

The purpose of the present study is to better understand female harassment, where a male persists in attempting to begin or continue a romantic relationship even though a woman has expressed a desire to terminate it. Before exploring this type of harassment, other types of abuse directed toward women and possible reasons for it will be reviewed.

Violence or at least the fear of violence is a ubiquitous part of every woman’s life (Hirsch, 1981). Two of the more dramatic forms of violence—rape and wife battering—have occurred throughout recorded history (Stevens, 1980; Straus, 1977–78). These types of violence against women need to be understood against a background of their presumed inferior status (Symonds, 1979), the fact that they are often physically weaker and smaller than men (Lesse, 1979), and sex-role stereotyping. As an illustration of this latter concept, many

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Americans still believe many spurious rape myths. Burt (1980), for example, recently found that over half the people she interviewed believed that over 50 percent of rape cases are reported because women are either trying to get back at a man they are angry with or women are trying to cover up an illegitimate pregnancy. Sex-role stereotyping might be a precondition for targeting women as potential sexual victims.

Hutchins and Baxter (1980) have identified two principal causes of wife abuse: (1) men are physically stronger than women; and (b) the long standing subjugation of women. Abusive men are often insecure and jealous, have a past history of violence, and, when infuriated, consider women to be a safe target for their aggression. Symonds (1979) has suggested that wife battering even occurs in some marriages where violence is alien to both parties. However, these marriages are often characterized by each spouse's insensitivity to their respective needs, and after frequent bickering, husbands again find their wives as an accessible target for their aggression.

A sociological perspective looks at the relationships between the balance of power within relationships and violence. In support of this position, Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz (1980) found that violence against wives was highest in husband-dominated relationships and lowest in couples with equalitarian decision-making patterns. More recent research conducted by Yllö & Straus (1981) has found that wife beating is most common where there is an inconsistency between women's status in economic, educational, political and legal institutions, and the social norms which hold women's status within marriage in a subordinate position. In other words, in those geographic areas where women have achieved higher status and opportunities but where normative support for male dominance is also high, the most violence against women occurs. In these circumstances it is possible that as the patriarchal structure is breaking down and women assert their independence, husbands might feel most frustrated and threatened and consequently use force to vent their anger and keep women in a subordinate position.

The extent of both major and minor forms of aggression directed toward women has been vastly underestimated. In the mid 1950s Kirkpatrick & Kanin (1957) found that 56 percent of female undergraduates were offended at some level of erotic intimacy (e.g., 21 percent were offended by forceful attempts at intercourse). In a more recent study Herold, Mantle, & Zemitis (1979) found that 84 percent of females in two university classes had been victims of a sexual offense. Sixty-one percent had received obscene phone calls, 44 percent had experienced sexual molestation, 27 percent had viewed exhibitionists, 24