

Over half of women in abusive relationships still saw their male partners as dependable

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It's well known that many women remain in abusive relationships with their male partners. A new study by researchers in Toronto and New York suggests that many who live with chronic psychological abuse still see certain positive traits in their abusers—such as dependability and being affectionate -- which may partly explain why they stay.

"We wanted to see whether survey information from women who were not currently seeking treatment or counseling for relationship abuse could be a reliable source for identifying specific types of male abusers," says Patricia O'Campo, a social epidemiologist and director of the Centre for Research on Inner City Health at St. Michael's Hospital in Toronto.

She adds that past research has underscored abused women's personal evaluations of their intimate relationships—specifically, their commitment to the relationships and [positive feelings](#) about the abuser and/or the relationship—as critical in their decisions to continue or terminate abusive relationships. "We wanted to learn more," says Dr. O'Campo, who co-authored the study with researchers from Adelphi University in Garden City, New York.

Using survey data from a project funded by the U.S. National Institute of Mental Health, the researchers explored the experiences of 611 urban-dwelling, low-income American women.

- Overall, 42.8% of those surveyed said they had been abused by their intimate male partners in the year preceding the survey.
- [Psychological abuse](#) was significantly more of an ongoing problem than [physical abuse](#), while sexual abuse was reported as least common.
- A relatively small number of women (2.3%) perceived their partners as extremely controlling, while 1.2% reported that their partners engaged in extreme generally violent behaviours.

But a considerable number of women felt their abusive male partners still possessed some good qualities: more than half (54%) saw their partners as highly dependable, while one in five (21%) felt the men in their lives possessed significant positive traits (i.e., being affectionate).

Based on the survey findings, the researchers divided the male abusers into three groups: "Dependable, yet abusive" men (44% of the sample) had the lowest scores for controlling and generally violent behaviors, and the highest scores for dependability and positive traits. "Positive and controlling" men (38% of the sample) had moderately high scores for violence and also for dependability and positive traits. However, they were more controlling than men in the first group, displaying significantly higher levels of generally violent behaviours. "Dangerously abusive" men (18% of the sample) had the highest scores for violence, controlling behaviour and legal problems and the lowest scores for dependability and positive traits.

The researchers say their findings suggest there is value in studying the problem of male violence through the perceptions of abused [women](#), including those who are currently "outside" the social services and legal systems designed to help them.

"The importance of listening to women's voices cannot be highlighted enough and needs further exploration," says O'Campo. "This is just one step toward potentially increasing our understanding of how to find additional ways to improve women's safety."

More information: The study, entitled "Profiling Abusive Men Based on Women's Self-Reports: Findings From a Sample of Urban Low-Income Minority Women," will appear in the March 2010 issue of the journal *Violence Against Women*.

Provided by St. Michael's Hospital

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