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In Domestic Abuse, a Gauge of Words and Deeds

New research on the link between threats and actual violence

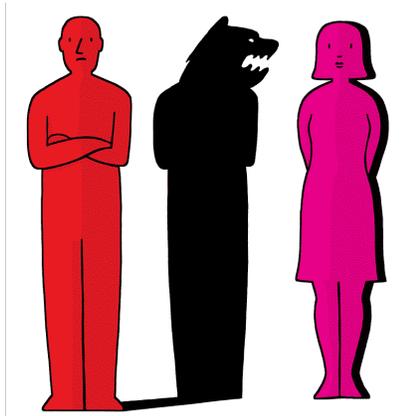


ILLUSTRATION: TOMASZ WALENTA

By MELVIN KONNER

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A persistent claim about domestic conflict, discussed in publications such as *Scientific American*, is that women can be just as belligerent as men, if not as dangerous. But sharp words and a slap are not slaughter.

The FBI reports that a third of female homicide victims in the U.S. are killed by an intimate male partner, while the reverse accounts for only a fraction of male victims. Husbands are five times more likely to kill wives than vice versa. In England and Wales, which have vastly lower homicide rates, partners or ex-partners killed 44% of female victims and just 6% of male victims.

For families and courts dealing with these issues, a key question concerns the relationship between threats and actual violence. How can you tell when words signal impending danger?

A new study by TK Logan of the University of Kentucky School of Medicine provides some answers. “‘If I Can’t Have You Nobody Will’: Explicit Threats in the Context of Coercive Control,” published in February in the journal *Violence and Victims*, looks at 210 American women who received protective orders against men in 2006 and 2007. Dr. Logan interviewed all of them within six weeks of a court’s issuing the order.

The study covered five unidentified jurisdictions, four rural and one urban. The women were age 33 on average, six out of seven were white, and four out of five were mothers. Dr. Logan gathered information from them covering the six months prior to the protective order and did a follow-up with each of them six months later.

She found that threats mattered. Her study’s title, “If I Can’t Have You, Nobody Will,” comes from a typical threat used by men to achieve coercive control. Others include “I will mess you up” and “You will just disappear.”

Women who were threatened very frequently (an average of 99 days over the prior six months) were 10 times more likely to experience severe violence and five times more likely to be raped than women who had received a moderate level of threats (6.5 days over six months). The men in the worst cases were also busy threatening others—family and friends of the victim, children, even pets.

Why is such behavior so common? Some scientists, though not justifying the violence, point to deep evolutionary tendencies. Decades ago, in a study published in *Violence and Victims*, the evolutionary psychologists Martin Daly and Margo Wilson used cross-national data to show that women are at highest risk from their abusers when trying to get away from them.

The researchers saw this in the light of Darwin’s theory of sexual selection. Across many species, they pointed out, males exploit strength and aggressiveness against other males to ensure reproductive success. Once they secure a sought-after female, however, the strategy changes. Males must entreat or cajole females into accepting their own small contribution to the process of reproduction.

But what if these efforts fail? Unfortunately, as primatologist Barbara Smuts and her father Robert W. Smuts have shown in the periodical *Advances in the Study of Behavior*, male primates may resort to threats and then force.

The good news in Dr. Logan's research is that threats of harm or death went down dramatically under the protective orders, from 83% of women experiencing them before the orders to 19% after.

Rates of rape and other violence against women have declined over time, but the problem is still enormous. Dr. Logan's research points to possible improvements in intervention. When protective orders are issued, for example, authorities could identify the women at highest risk and monitor their situation more.

"To me, threats are clues," Dr. Logan said. "We tend to dismiss them because there are so many. We should hone in, not tune out."
