



# Battered Women

## A True Story

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Contributor

She gropes into a corner in her frantic search to escape. Sliding down the wall like a mechanical doll whose battery is slowly being drained, she huddles in the corner like an infant. Her muffled whining sounds like the panting agony of a hurt puppy, or like the weeping of a scolded child who has been told to either stop crying or be spanked again.

Her daughter clutches her pillow and buries her head deep into its softness, trying to drown out the screams, curses and cries. She presses her eyelids together with all the strength her fragile 7-year-old body can muster, squeezing so tightly her head begins to pound.

When she opens her eyes, all is silent. Her father is gone and her mother is on the phone making arrangements to stay at a relative's house for the night.

According to a 1989 report issued by the Orange County Human Rights Commission, assault is the most frequent crime in this country. A woman is battered every 18 seconds.

It is estimated that between one-fourth and one-third of married women experience serious violence in their homes. The same report said that four out of five murdered women are killed by men

— and nearly half are married to their murderer.

Battery is a growing concern in rural, low-income areas because the potential for violence is heightened by the use of alcohol or drugs. Some figures indicate that more than half of the incidents of battery occurs in impoverished households.

The situation is worsened by the fact that these women don't have the resources to seek help. This makes volunteer organizations that offer counseling all the more significant.

Rebecca Dare, a counselor at a battered women's home, maintains that the first step in getting out of these relationships is for a woman to define and recognize the abuse.

"Often women will come to talk to me, and they will tell me that their husband is aggressive," Dare said. "They will say that he slaps them, pushes them or grabs them. But when I ask them if they consider themselves as a battered wife, the answer is 'no'."

Apparently, these women realize that something is wrong; however, there is a constant reluctance to label their experience as battery. This is part of the denial stage. According to psychological studies, a woman will either go through denial, or she may go through the stage of blaming herself and say things such as, "It was my fault

because I always make him mad," or "Couples always argue. I'm just making a big deal out of nothing."

"Every woman has her own tolerance level," Dare said. "It isn't until she says that enough is enough that we can help her. I can only point out the signs. She has to logically put them together."

After recognition of the problem, the hard part begins — helping the woman get out of the situation. She may be faced with the reality of a husband who refuses to leave the home, meaning that she and her children may be out on the streets. Or she may leave and have to deal with her husband following her.

"Toni" was one woman who had gotten help from a woman's center. She is black, 39 years old and the mother of two. She was in an abusive relationship for eight years.

"At first I couldn't see what was happening," Toni said. "It all started so slowly. The first time he slapped me I should have left him, but I didn't."

This initial slap turned into three hospital visits, broken bones, bruises and emotional scars. And despite the fact that the same thing was happening to an estimated 300 million women all over the world, Toni felt isolated and alone.

"I had no one to turn to, and that was probably due to the fact that

no one knew. Tom never hit me in the face, so people couldn't just look at me and tell. But when I went to the hospital the second time, my sister-in-law came in my room crying. She said 'Toni, I know what's going on. I don't believe it was just an accident'."

Tom's sister knew the signs because their mother had been abused by their father. Certain studies have revealed that men who grow up in this kind of atmosphere are prone to be violent.

"She told me right then that I needed to get help, but I didn't. I just keep hoping that things were going to get better," Toni said.

About six months after Toni's hospitalization, Tom's sister convinced him to join Alcoholics Anonymous. After he entered the program, he once again became the loving man that Toni had first married. Toni was relieved that

loud, Ma. We weren't. I was furious.

"I stormed into the bedroom and told him he had no right to punish my children. He said that they were his children, too, and he would punish them any damn way he pleased. He jumped up and back-handed me. I fell to the floor and hit my head on the table. I felt a warm trickle run down my face. At first I thought I was crying, but it was blood. That was the first time he ever made me bleed. It scared me so bad that I knew I had to leave before he killed me."

Dare worked closely with Toni, who is now divorced and raising her two children without any child support. In fact, she has neither seen nor heard from Tom in four years.

"It is hard raising the kids alone, but at least I've got some peace of mind," she said. "I'm not shaking

## Feature

she weathered the storm and believed everything was going to be okay.

Everything was okay — for about a year and a half. Then Tom lost his job and the drinking started again. So did the abuse. Toni said Tom was out of work for four months, and all he did during that time was sit around the house and drink.

Toni recalls the night that she finally decided enough was enough: "I had come home from night class and the kids were crying. My oldest son came up to me and said that their father had spanked them for making too much noise. He kept saying, 'We weren't

every time I hear the front door open. I'm not afraid for my life, or for my children. It was worth it."

Statistics show that close to one-third of the women in these situations are not as fortunate as Toni. Many women simply cannot find a place to hide, or a way to escape. They either don't have the resources to pack up and leave, or cannot get police officers to enforce restraints.

Dare said the police can't take legal action unless an actual crime has been committed. Imminent danger is not enough. "Unfortunately, often by the time the police get actively involved, it's no longer a battery case—it's murder."

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