

Breaking the Silence on Domestic Violence

Tough new laws are one way to reduce domestic violence and sexual assaults. Nothing sends a clearer message to a wife-beater -- Department of Justice statistics confirm that women are battered far more than men -- than prosecuting and jailing other wife-beaters. New laws, however, are not the only answer.

Too many people continue to believe that domestic violence is a private matter between a couple, rather than a criminal offense that merits a strong and swift response. Even today, the victim of a domestic assault runs the risk of being asked, "What did you do to make your husband angry?" This question implies the victim is to blame for this abuse. People in our criminal justice system -- police, prosecutors, judges, and jurors -- need to be educated about the role they can play in curbing acts of domestic violence.

Even when cases are brought, domestic crimes are difficult to prosecute. All too often victims are so terrorized that they fear for their lives if they call the police. Silence is the batterer's best friend. We have to end the silence and change our attitudes toward domestic crime.

Neighbors must contact the police when they hear violent fights in their neighborhoods. Don't turn up the television to block out the sounds of the drunken argument next door. Call the police.

Teachers should be alert to signs that students have witnessed violence at home. Children who grow up in violent homes are more likely to become violent themselves.

Medical professionals who see the victims of violence need to ask them about these crimes. Too often, doctors or emergency room personnel accept the statement of fearful victims that their bruises or cuts are the result of household accidents or falls. When a woman with a black eye says that she fell and hit the doorknob, doctors and nurses must ask: "Did someone hit you?"

Members of the clergy need to become more involved as well. We just can't tell a battered spouse to "go home and make it work," as was done in the past. Sending a woman back to a battering husband often places her life at risk. Of course, we can't tell a woman who lives in a violent relationship what to do, but we can make a greater effort to let her know that other options are available for her and her children. Early intervention is crucial.

These crimes are serious. Experience shows that levels of violence in these relationships tend to escalate, and many police departments cite domestic violence as their number one problem. Tough laws and effective prosecutions, combined with education and a cooperative approach among law enforcement and social service agencies, will take time to be effective. Until then, we all must take a greater role in reporting domestic abuse. Our efforts to break the silence can make a difference.