

DAILY NEWS

Johnny Depp, Amber Heard and us: Rather than repeating #MeToo mantras, let's learn a thing or two about domestic violence.

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The surprise verdict in the Johnny Depp/Amber Heard defamation trial, in which a Fairfax, Va., jury awarded Depp \$15 million and Heard \$2 million on her counterclaim, has been met with cries of dismay and anger from progressive punditry and social media — which had already been deploring the pro-Depp drift of online public opinion as a misogynistic backlash. Some critical responses to the verdict have focused on the free speech implications, particularly since Heard was penalized for a 2018 Washington Post essay in which she talked about her fight against domestic abuse but did not directly mention Depp, the ex-husband she had previously accused of abusing her. But mostly, the focus is on the horrifying blow the mostly pro-Depp verdict is said to deal to women and to domestic violence survivors — the two being treated as interchangeable.

And there's the rub. Because, if you give at least some credibility to Depp's claim that he was the primary victim of abuse in their relationship, then you could argue that the outcome of the case is a win for male victims of domestic abuse, a "marginalized" group if there ever was one.

Interestingly, many of Heard's defenders, such as New York Times columnist Michelle Goldberg, Vox culture critic Aja Romano and New Yorker writer Jessica Winter, have grudgingly acknowledged that the pro-Depp narrative makes some valid points.

Romano writes that "it's impossible to completely absolve Amber Heard, who has her own alleged history of violence" (toward a former girlfriend). Goldberg notes that "Heard has admitted hitting Depp, and has been recorded insulting and belittling him," and that their marital counselor says there was "mutual abuse" between them. Winter concedes that Heard

has made “questionable” claims about her alleged abuse (often contradicted by contemporaneous evidence), as well as troubling comments in recorded conversations with Depp produced as evidence of her own abusive behavior.

One of those comments is particularly relevant to the question of how our culture sees male and female victims of abuse. Heard says: “You can please tell people that it was a fair fight, and see what the jury and judge thinks. Tell the world Johnny...I Johnny Depp, a man, I’m a victim too of domestic violence...And see how many people believe or side with you.” Later in the conversation, Depp presses Heard, “Do you believe you’re an abuser? Do you believe you abused me physically?” Heard responds by pointing to his superior size and strength: “I have never been able to overpower you.”

Intuitively, these assertions ring true for many people. The idea of a man battered by a woman sounds like the stuff of comic strips in which the wife chases the husband with a rolling pin.

And yet, surprisingly, there is plenty of research showing that there is far more parity in domestic violence than is commonly believed. The controversy over this began in the 1970s, when serious research on domestic violence got off the ground — partly due to the influence of the battered women’s movement that emerged as part of resurgent feminist activism.

The 1975 National Family Violence Survey by sociologists Murray Straus and Richard Gelles of the Family Research Laboratory at the University of New Hampshire found that women were just as likely as men to report physically assaulting a spouse and men were just as likely as women to report being assaulted. About half of these respondents reported mutual violence; the researchers assumed that in those instances, women were simply fighting back. Yet when subsequent surveys asked who initiated the violence, it turned out that women were the aggressors as much as men. This surprising finding has been confirmed, to date, by more than 200 studies of couple violence.

While critics have questioned these studies’ methodology, surveys using different methods have also found a picture dramatically different from the stereotype of domestic violence as nearly always being male-on-female.

Thus, in the Centers for Disease Control’s National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey, conducted in 2010 and 2012, men accounted for 37% of those who reported serious physical violence by a partner in their lifetime and 45% of those reporting such violence in the past year. And domestic violence by women was not directed only at men: In the 2010 survey, 44% of lesbians reported at least one past assault by a partner, compared to 35% of heterosexual women. While some lesbians had been victimized by male abusers in past opposite-sex relationships, two-thirds reported only female perpetrators.

Some people — not only feminists who focus on women as victims, but conservatives with strong traditional ideas about female gentleness and pacifism — may find the idea of more-equal-opportunity domestic violence preposterous. After all, violent crime outside the home is an overwhelmingly male affair (and mostly male-on-male).

But it's complicated. A 1993 paper by Israeli criminologist Sarah Ben-David argued that female violence in the home is far more common than the non-domestic kind for a variety of reasons, including the tendency to perceive such violence as justified and mostly harmless. A 2018 review of female aggression in *Frontiers in Behavioral Neuroscience* also suggests that women can be as physically aggressive as men under the "right" circumstances.

Obviously, differences in size and strength matter. Generally, a man punching a woman in the face is far more likely to cause serious damage than the reverse, and a woman is extremely unlikely to overpower a man in a struggle. But that doesn't mean female violence is non-damaging. Women can use weapons, including improvised ones like boiling water. (Or bottles: Depp has notoriously said that one thrown by an enraged Heard severed a chunk of his finger.) A surprise attack can neutralize the male physical advantage; so can cultural taboos against men using force toward women, or a man's fear of being labeled the abuser. In the CDC survey, approximately one-fifth of domestic violence victims reporting injuries were male; a 2001 review of the research by British psychologist John Archer set the number at one-third.

Yes, in all of these scenarios, men do more harm to women than vice-versa. But women do harm men, far more commonly than advocates are willing to admit.

More than 20 years ago, when working on my book "Ceasefire!: Why Women and Men Must Join Forces to Achieve True Equality." I interviewed an Illinois man named Dave Nevers, whose story as a domestic violence victim was well-documented in his divorce files (and also featured on CNN and ABC's 20/20). While Nevers was 100 pounds heavier and four inches taller than his ex-wife, she had sent him to the emergency room four times: by pushing him into a plate-glass window, by tripping him on the stairs, by slamming a hot oven door on his arm, and by hitting him in the face with a picture frame. (Eventually, she had pleaded guilty to assault and received a suspended sentence.)

With a few exceptions, feminists — despite their supposed commitment to equality — have been intensely hostile to the recognition of female-on-male violence or of mutual abuse, often minimizing or excusing female violence even toward non-violent men. Scholars studying the subject have experienced pressure to back away from it and even harassment and slander, as the late Murray Straus detailed in a 2010 essay. In academic feminist literature and in the popular media alike, discussion of this taboo topic has often been equated with anti-feminist backlash.

And so with Depp/Heard: To Heard's supporters, her violent behavior makes her simply an "imperfect victim," and the verdict that mostly favors Depp is evidence of our culture's reflexive readiness to side with a man over a woman. Never mind that Heard's earlier allegations tanked Depp's acting career, and many observers agree that it will stay tanked.

For the most part, men claiming abuse by women have not found a sympathetic reception in our culture. In the Nevers divorce case, for example, the judge refused to count domestic violence as a factor against the wife, as legally required, because he held that the husband's

occasional belittling remarks were “equally as violent” psychologically (even though the wife had also been verbally abusive).

In that sense, Depp’s victory may be good in advancing a more balanced view of domestic abuse. Obviously, Depp is an “imperfect victim,” too. He has a history of alcohol abuse and temperamental outbursts. It is likely that he was occasionally violent toward Heard. Indeed, the jury tried to split the difference, finding defamation both in Heard’s claim that Depp was an abuser and in Depp’s claim that her abuse allegations were a “hoax.” But the fact that he’s bigger, richer and more famous does not necessarily make him the primary abuser.

Team Heard is understandably concerned that both the trial and the verdict have unleashed misogynistic bile from self-styled men’s rights activists and plain old sexist trolls who portray women as manipulative liars. But if the “conniving woman” trope is sexist, so is — in a supposedly more benign way — the stereotype of female innocence and victimhood.

Perhaps the best way to defuse the misogynistic storm around the Heard/Depp case is for those who believe in equality to own the fact that women, like men, are capable of toxic behavior — and judge each case on the facts, not on gender.

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