The Battered Woman’s Defense

Erin Rhode
SP.607
Women, Gender, and the Law
errhode@mit.edu
(Dated: May 16, 2004)

Battered Woman’s Syndrome, or BWS, was first explored in the late 1970s, most notably by Lenore Walker (Gagne 1998). Studies performed by Walker and other psychologists examine the affects of abusive relationships on women and have noted many common patterns in the way these women act and relate to their abusive partners. Specifically, BWS appears to be a subset of post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and is characterized by a three stage cycle of violence. However, a 1996 report put out by the U.S. Department of Justice suggests that “Battered Woman’s Syndrome” is an inappropriate label for the experiences of these women (Travis, et al 1996).

Many women in abusive relationships, specifically those seen to be suffering from BWS, are also diagnosed with PTSD. According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4th Edition, six criteria must be met to make a diagnosis of PTSD: (1) a recognizable traumatic stressor that evokes intense fear, helplessness, or horror, (2) the victim involuntarily relives past traumatic events, (3) numbed emotions leading to a disturbance in relationships with others, (4) a combination of symptoms that may include difficulty sleeping, irritability, difficulty concentrating, hypervigilance, or paranoia, (5) a duration of more than one month, and (6) the disturbance impairs larger areas of life, such as social and occupational (Gagne 1998).


ERR thanks her lab partner, C. Clarke, for all her efforts and insights during the course of this experiment and S. Sewell for his guidance.