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California Mother's Triple Murders Show Cost of Ignoring Female Abusers

By Glenn Sacks

It is a well-known story--a violent husband abuses his wife and others, the wife stays with him out of fear or shame, and in the end the husband kills the wife, or the children, or both. We shake our heads and say "If only we could have protected her."

Such is the scenario of the Socorro Caro triple murders, except that this time the genders are reversed. The Southern California case is an extreme example of the price children, fathers, and our society as a whole sometimes pay for our refusal to acknowledge female domestic violence.

Socorro Caro, according to testimony by several witnesses, including her husband Dr. Xavier Caro, had violently attacked her husband or others on eight occasions prior to the night of November 22, 1999, when she shot and killed three of her four sons. In these previous incidents Ms. Caro had used weapons and the element of surprise to her advantage, and had caused several injuries, including serious eye damage to her husband.

Why didn't Dr. Caro leave her? Why didn't he tell anybody what was being done to him?

"I was ashamed. I was embarrassed," he testified recently during the penalty phase of Socorro Caro's trial. According to other reports, he was also skeptical that authorities would believe him.

Thanks to the noble efforts of women's activists, had Ms. Caro been the victim of abuse at the hands of Dr. Caro, help would have been available. Ms. Caro could have moved with her children to a shelter. Using the legal services of the shelter, she could have filed a restraining order against her violent husband, and filed for divorce. She would have received custody of her four children, their home, half or more of the family's financial assets, and substantial child support. In addition, she probably would have been able to eliminate her abusive husband's visitation rights.

Had Dr. Caro, a male victim of domestic violence, felt that the legal system would give his claims the same credence that an abused woman's claims receive, his three children would probably still be alive today.

Are female child abuse and domestic violence rare? Unfortunately not. According to the US Department of Justice, 70% of confirmed cases of child abuse and 65% of parental murders of children are committed by mothers.

Veteran domestic violence researchers Richard Gelles, Murray Straus, and Susan Steinmetz, who were once hailed by the women's movement for their pioneering work on violence against women, have repeatedly found that women are as likely as men to physically attack their spouses or partners.

California State Long Beach Psychology professor Martin Fiebert has compiled and summarized 117 different studies with over 72,000 respondents that found that most domestic violence is mutual and, in the cases where there was only one abusive partner, that partner was as likely to be female as male.

Crime statistics do not bear out what researchers know because women tend to be seriously injured more often than men, and because men, for various reasons, are far less likely than women to report the abuse against them.

As the Caro case shows, by allowing abusive women to go unacknowledged and unpunished, female abusers are encouraged to believe that they can get away with their abuse indefinitely, which frequently results in escalating violence.

Why didn't Dr. Caro seek help? Besides shame and denial, many men hesitate to report their wives' violence because they fear that once the police are involved, the wife will accuse her husband of being the perpetrator and it is she, not he, who will be believed. This is, in fact, what Ms. Caro tried to do during her murder trial, claiming that it was her husband, not her, who committed the murders. Draconian mandatory arrest laws often direct police to make an arrest, even when the abuse is mutual (as research shows is generally the case), or when it is unclear who the perpetrator is. While arrests of women account for a third or more of domestic violence arrests in some states, police generally are pressured to arrest the man, even when the evidence is scant.

What could Dr. Caro have done? There are few domestic violence shelters which accept men, though in this case he probably would have had enough money to pay for other accommodations. He would have had difficulty winning a custody battle, particularly with the well-documented willingness of women in danger of losing custody to make false accusations of abuse or child molestation. Quite possibly these accusations or other legal machinations could have led to Ms. Caro being granted custody of the children, and even to Dr. Caro losing visitation rights. Thus his children could have been in the care of and under the control of an abuser without even the limited protection he could provide by staying with her.

Thus Xavier Caro was trapped--not just by his violent wife, but by a society that refuses to acknowledge what voluminous research and simple common sense shows--domestic violence is not a male affliction but a human one.

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