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# **‘You Have No Friends, You Have to Stand Up for Yourself’: Men Negotiating Domestic Abuse**

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## **Abstract**

Little is known of how men feel about their own acts of violence and other abuse towards women and the causes thereof. This paper sheds light on the male perspective using data from interviews between male abusers and a support counsellor. It seeks to answer the following questions:

- How do men experience intimate relationships?
- What makes them so vulnerable that they go “off the deep end” and no longer see the relevance in living for themselves or for their partners?
- What are men’s overall perceptions about domestic violence?

The male speech is analysed using discourse analysis techniques, specifically associated with critical linguistics, a discipline which unlocks the meaning potential in spoken and written language through analysis of structure and word choice.

A contradictory role is worked out by the men for their own positioning in society, for they are at once victims and heroes, condemned and marginalized but at the same time the ones who are supposed to be dominant in their relationships. They perceive that women are given

opportunities that are not open to them, that they have to give up valuable occupational space to their educated and empowered women, but yet are the supposedly stronger sex, endowed to have authority in the home. They feel the responsibility of living up to the expectations of their perceived role and have no real support in addressing the challenges of their intimate relationships. Self-respect and a sense of self-worth emerge as critical to the management of domestic violence by perpetrators.

We must re-examine our belief systems, our values, our parenting, our educational system, the legal system and popular culture in order to redefine gender relations in ways that are mutually sustaining. Only by attacking this problem on all fronts can we make some headway towards its resolution.

**Key words:** men, domestic violence, perception, control, anger.

## **Introduction**

Trinidad and Tobago has experienced an unprecedented increase in the visibility of crimes related to domestic violence within the last decade. This has been all the more troubling because of an upsurge specifically in reports of murders of wives and their children followed by the suicide of the male partner. In 1999 alone, there were some 80 cases of murder/suicide (Trinidad and Tobago Police Service 1999). While graphic reports appear in the press, concern is articulated by citizens in the media through popular call-in radio programmes and letters to the editor. Despite the expressed concern, the crisis continues to escalate.

As a society, Trinidad and Tobago has paid significant attention to legislation and improvements in the criminal justice system to respond to domestic violence issues. As a result, it has the most comprehensive legislation on domestic violence in the Caribbean, a dependable and developed grid of places of safety, vibrant organizational responses and several community initiatives. Notwithstanding these advances, however, there is no sign of real resolution of the issues.

It should be noted that the country is not singular in this respect. Domestic violence is worldwide and increasing (Counts, Brown and Campbell 1999; Green 1999; McWilliams 1998). It is not confined to so-called third world territories but is also rampant in the first world. The BBC World News of May 17, 2009, for example, reported a 20% rate of abused women throughout Austria, a territory in which a grandfather was recently arrested for keeping his daughter in a cellar for 24 years and fathering her seven children. While domestic violence appears private, it reflects the constructions of the public sphere and the global quest for power and domination. Indeed, as Holder-Dolly has argued elsewhere (2003), such phenomena in the Caribbean can be traced back to some of the earliest formations of Caribbean society beginning with the devastation of the native people, the enslavement of African peoples and the indentureship of Indian peoples (Beckles 2003; Brereton 2004). Under slavery, for example, the extreme brutalization of all; the encouragement of intra-group violence; the deliberate breaking down of family units; and the absolute subjugation of the African male to inhumane white male “owners” and overseers, all contributed to a legacy of violence through these practices’ devastating effects on the human psyche. In such an environment, women and children were particularly vulnerable and men were both the villains and the abused.

One continuing cause of domestic violence is undoubtedly the difficulty men find in managing conflict and disagreement and their own sense of powerlessness; in relationships marked by unresolved conflict between women and men, the latter often take the offensive at the expense of women and children, in their bid to maintain power and control. Further, women’s development has, of necessity, required them to take control of their lives, personally, professionally and by advancement in the public sphere, and this very advancement seems threatening to men: measures

intended to enhance the position of women are being interpreted as steps toward the marginalization of males. This interpretation, though more perceived than real, has added to the spiralling patterns of domestic violence (Morgan and Gopaul 1998). Violence, then, is exacerbated as an inevitable result of extreme male insecurity. In a study of male views carried out by the Rape Crisis Society of Trinidad and Tobago in 1993, men readily expressed their concern that the education and working sectors were hostile to their interests, and that it was “only through the sex act that they are able to display power over women” (Babb 1997, 107).

A number of fundamental questions arise and demand answers:

- What is it that men experience?
- How do they experience intimate relationships?
- What makes them so vulnerable or fragile that they lose control and operate in a way that suggests they no longer see relevance in living either for themselves or for the objects of their desire?
- What are men’s perceptions about domestic violence?

These questions formed the core of the research focus of this paper and framed it as an exploratory study into the ways in which men describe their relational issues. The male speech analysed is extracted from interviews with Trinidadian men and analysed using discourse analysis techniques, specifically associated with critical linguistics, a discipline which unlocks the meaning potential in spoken and written language through analysis of their structure and word choice.

### **Background**

Despite the significant body of work that exists on the subject, domestic violence as a social phenomenon has eluded full explanation and has not been fundamentally redressed.

Relatively little has been written in Trinidad and Tobago about domestic violence and virtually nothing about men’s views on it. Some important work has, nevertheless, emerged including that of Creque (1994), which provided a set of statistics that began to capture the magnitude of the problem. Gopaul, Morgan and Reddock (1994) also contributed to our understanding, by analysing family violence through historical and sociological lenses to demonstrate the significance of historical and sociological factors in shaping the patterns of interaction between women and men, family values and family forms.

A further exacerbating factor has been the publicity given to male marginalization, a notion introduced most saliently by Miller (1986) and expanded later in his work *Men at Risk* (1991). The male’s status as the breadwinner in the family has been considered as threatened by female success in education and the working sphere and by women’s entry into and success in a number of careers that were previously the

sole preserve of men. Economic crisis, along with further psychological bruising, is thereby added to that already engendered by historical-sociological circumstances. Miller's writing embraces traditional notions of patriarchy (cf. Mohammed 2004, 63) and may be perceived as inflammatory, particularly if decontextualized as often happens in the passing on and retelling of information. He states that "women will not only continue to progress...but will go on to assert themselves and seize power from men in some societies." (282)

Much publicity has been given to the female majority graduating from The University of the West Indies since the early 1990's and far less attention to the fact that men still hold the top jobs, that women are underpaid for what they do in comparison with men and that men still favour jobs that are not necessarily academic (Figueroa 2000; Reddock 2004). While women have simply shown more adaptability than men in pursuit of improving their circumstances, there has been considerable hostility to them in articles (cf. Rennie 1999) and letters to the press, citing their "taking over" in the male domain.

Lazarus-Black (2002) has discussed the law's response to domestic violence in Trinidad and Tobago, which has been effected most specifically by the Domestic Violence Act of 1991. She has made the point that, despite increased protective measures becoming law, women who have been battered and who have sought the protection of the law find that acquiring agency is complex and challenging as they must negotiate several, often fraught, legal processes in filing charges, contending with the police and dealing with adjournments. She has argued that, contrary to the view of women as victims, battered wives who have sought recourse through the legal process have demonstrated agency despite the difficulties inherent in the procedures. Here too, the remaining difficulties appear not to have been noticed by the males in society, who feel their marital rights are being further eroded by unjust legislation (Rennie 1999), thus contributing to their further perceived marginalization.

Most recently Morgan and Youssef (2006) completed an interdisciplinary study which explored the causes of family violence, some possible means of resolution of its traumatic effects, and also addressed squarely the ways in which representatives of the legal system, the media and the police force all exacerbate the problem in diverse ways. They examined the male view specifically through analysis of a male judge's summing-up speech in the appeal of a woman accused of murdering her common-law husband and through analysis of a male-authored newspaper article. In both cases the built-in prejudice against woman as a creature deserving of agency and self-actualization came across starkly.

All of these studies have advanced the understanding of domestic violence in Trinidad and Tobago. There has, however, been no study that explores directly the views of men who have abused women.

The literature from the North is more extensive. Research has indicated that there, also, physical, economic, and social power and control differentials are significant contributors to the battering of women (Yllo and Bograd 1988; Dobash and Dobash 1979; 1998; Johnson 1995; Kirkwood 1993; Pence and Paymar 1993; Stets and Straus 1990).

Several psychosocial causal factors have been linked to domestic violence. It has been shown that men who batter women do so out of the need to exercise personal control over their partners (Umberson et al. 1998); that battering is perpetrated by individuals with low levels of social integration (Stets 1991); and that high levels of stress and substance abuse are significant contributors (Gelles 1993; Straus 1990). Several studies have focused on the widespread societal beliefs sanctioning male dominance, which beliefs normalize the occurrence of violence within the home (Straus and Smith 1990b; Yllo and Straus 1990; Dobash and Dobash 1979), and they have highlighted the relative power differences of partners, arising from beliefs sanctioning male dominance, as a key element in the abuse of women (Anderson, 1997; Horning, McCullough and Sugimoto, 1981). Research has also focused on personality traits and the presence of mental illness or pathology as reasons why men batter women (Dutton 1995; Holtzworth-Munroe and Stuart 1994; Jacobson and Gottman 1998). Dutton (1995), drawing from his clinical experience with research subjects, asserted that “abusiveness is not a copied behavior but rather a learned means of self-maintenance” (xi) and a factor arising from “personality constellation” This is in stark contrast to Dobash and Dobash (1998), who positioned this behaviour as a complex social construction.

In the text *Men who Batter Women*, Adam Jukes (1999) asserts:

At its root, men’s abuse of women, and our need to have power over them, both individually and collectively, is a simple frustration pre-emption strategy. The intensity and severity of that abuse varies enormously in accordance with three variables: the intensity of the original frustration; the models of masculinity available to the developing infant and young male; and the extent of culturally approved and legitimized violence in the culture in which he is raised, especially in relation to women. (159)

He arrived at his conclusion from research in clinical settings also. His location of men psychologically within the socio-cultural sphere is part of the allure of this psycho-dynamic exploration and his conclusion solidifies the position that while there is a psychological dimension to battering or violence against women, the behaviour is socially constructed and thus needs to be understood within that context.

Straus (1979) identified a number of culturally held values and mandates with punishments and rewards attached to them that permit and encourage husband-on-wife violence including greater authority of men in the culture; male aggression posited as masculinity; wife/mother as the preferred status of women; and male domination and orientation in the criminal justice system.

The issue of wife abuse was also firmly located by Dobash and Dobash (1979) within the social and gender constructs that shape it. They argued that the issues of gender and gendered relationships as well as general beliefs and attitudes about the relationships between men and women in intimate relationships were central to effective exploration of the emergence and continuation of domestic violence. Their research identified four levels of exploration needed to address the phenomenon: the individual, the inter-personal, the institutional and the ideological and created a significant framework for further research on domestic violence.

Later they (1998) examined violent acts perpetrated by men within their marital relationships; they examined men's behaviours, rationales and justifications for their violent behaviour using three sources of data—the Violence Assessment Index (VAI), the Injuries Assessment Index (IAI), and the Controlling Behaviour Index (CBI). These indices were used to compare the accounts of men and women and to reflect on the similarities and differences between them. Framed within the ideological position that violence perpetrated by men needs to be understood as an “intentional act, undertaken in order to achieve ends that are deeply embedded in the circumstances of daily life”, the study identified a “constellation of violence” made up of physical acts of violence, injuries and various forms of controlling behaviours (141).

One thing which stands out in the literature from the developing world is the importance of contextualizing the phenomenon under study (Green 1999; Bradley 1994). Care is taken to locate the cultural context within which violence between intimate partners is perpetrated and to make connections between the community response to this violence and the perpetuation of the violence. Writers theorize about masculinity and male power in relation to the differences between acts of violence perpetrated by men against other men and those perpetrated against women. They argue that when men perpetrate acts of violence against women, their identity as men, social ideals about gendered relationships, personal privilege and material benefits are at stake. That is to say, the outcome of the acts is valued and at stake (such as being able to control the behaviour of women). These motives contrast with those seen in violent encounters between men, wherein processes in validation of their manhood are not the primary concern.

We are most persuaded by the argument that domestic violence needs to be understood within the contexts that shape it. Further, it needs to be understood dynamically, as conditioned by a continuous interplay of social, economic and

psychological factors that are structurally sanctioned and interpersonally based. In that case, while many of the patterns and issues of the North American context and of developing countries, such as Africa and India, may seem to find resonance in the local setting, the question arises as to what factors shape domestic violence in Trinidad and Tobago. In the specific case of this paper, we explore the way in which domestic violence is explained by “men on the street” in Trinidad and Tobago, meaning specifically the average, non-intellectualizing individual, reacting presumably out of his own life experience and personal struggles and issues.

## **Methodology**

### ***Definitions***

For the purposes of this study, domestic violence is defined as the emotional, psychological, physical, or sexual abuse perpetrated against a person by someone with whom they share or have shared an intimate relationship. The inquiry was confined to an exploration of the perceptions of men who have abused women.

### ***Informants and Data Collection***

The men in this study were mostly in the middle income range. All of them had been in some form of therapy initiated either by their partners or voluntarily because of the threat of loss of their partner. The discussion was facilitated through a focus group that dealt with the following themes:

- Why do men abuse women?
- What happens when men become abusive?
- How do men define domestic violence?
- What needs to happen for domestic violence to stop?
- Perspectives on relationships with women.

The use of focus groups as a tool of qualitative methodology has been well documented (Cherry 2000; Tutty, Rothery and Grinnell 1996; Creswell 1994). It was felt that this method was suited to the nature of the topic under inquiry and the possible sensitivity of the men to discussing and acknowledging themselves as perpetrating abusive behaviour. In addition, advice given by male counsellors who had worked with men who abused women was that a positive response would more readily be elicited from men in the context of a group than in singular interviews.

The assistance of a male therapist was solicited to interview the men since it seemed likely that they would more readily talk in his company than in that of a woman who might well have been perceived as being biased against them as perpetrators of violence. Moreover, the therapist in question had already won their confidence in his role as a counsellor. From among his clientele, 12 male participants were targeted. The sample group was chosen for its availability. What this meant for the analysis was that we had men who had already engaged in some therapeutic intervention, whether willingly or not, and had therefore had some opportunity for reflection on their behaviours.



A differently situated group of men might have yielded other results. Nonetheless, in the absence of any data on men, the exploratory nature of the study of this group was warranted and it was felt that the results were bound to offer some insights that would be useful to an understanding of domestic violence from the perspective of males, albeit males who had been through some form of remediation in that area. The other benefit of working with this group was that they had already begun the process of reflection which gave a head start to the process of engaging them in reflection about their role in domestic violence.

Once the decision had been made as to the approach, telephone calls were made by the therapist to each potential participant informing them of the study and asking about their interest in participation. Of this initial group, six men indicated their willingness and availability to participate; four men were unavailable (no personal contact made); two were not willing/available. The decision was made to reduce the sample size to six men on the basis of their availability. A date and time were established for the group meeting. The therapist was briefed on the qualitative approach to data gathering using the guided questionnaire that had been developed (Cherry 2000; Tutty, Rothery and Grinnell 1996; Creswell 1994).

At the outset of the group process, the study was discussed and the voluntary nature of the study underscored. Participants were asked to sign a consent form giving permission to have the group's proceedings taped. The initial focus group was conducted over a two-and-a-half hour period. An unexpected outcome with this group that was of particular interest was that the men decided they wanted to continue the discussion and to meet again. They articulated their need for a support group and noted that they had experienced the group in that light. This request was facilitated and the group gave permission for a second session of similar duration.

A particular outcome of the group session was that one of the men who was at risk of being a danger to himself and his partner was able to receive the immediate support of the other men during the session in which they both validated his feelings and challenged or helped him to reframe his thinking about his situation. The outcome of this engagement was that a network of support was specifically organized to see him through the crisis period "until he (was) safe". This support included the exchange of telephone numbers, visits to the home, 24-hour call access to any one of the group members and taking the troubled individual out. In short, the men met the challenge of operationalizing their position that men need support systems in respect of their domestic situations.

### ***Data Analysis***

The data were then transcribed and have been analyzed for this paper using the critical linguistics approach to discourse analysis; undergirding this approach was our

concern to validate the experience of the research subjects through listening to their voices and hearing their stories, their analyses, their frames of reference, their perceptions and problem-solving. In a discourse analysis frame attention is paid to *how* informants express themselves, in addition to the content of what they say. The data were clustered thematically and, again for purposes of this paper, salient perspectives under three main subheads were isolated and analyzed. Only typical samples were selected representing common attitudes of the group.

## **Findings**

### ***The position of men in relation to women***

The central theme emanating from the discussion of the men was the critical need for an “institution for men”. As the men shared stories about their different situations one painful fact stood out and that was the belief of the men that there was no one to whom they could turn when they were undergoing a crisis. One man put it this way:

1. *“You have no friends. Your house could be full of a lot of people and still you have no friends. You have to stand up for yourself.”*

We notice here the repetition of “no friends” in two consecutive sentences. The emphasis created by this repetition speaks to an overarching sense of aloneness in this man’s experience. The casual but impersonal “you” is used as subject to distance the individual from a sense of aloneness that is clearly very personal. The choice of the verb “stand up for” seems paradoxical in a situation where it is the female partner who is under physical threat. It raises the question of the need for self-defence, though whether against this female partner or an outside threat remains unclear. The philosophical recognition in sentence two of that aloneness which is particular to being part of the crowd is juxtaposed with sentences one and two which seem peculiarly childlike in the concern being expressed.

The participants also believed that because men did not speak about their issues, their opportunity for uniting and organizing themselves was significantly and negatively affected. One of the men made the point this way:

2. *“Dey ever had [was there ever] a march of men in Trinidad and Tobago? Men don’t come together. They will suffer in silence.”*

The initial rhetorical question speaks once again to a sense of abandonment, reminiscent of the previous statement of there being “no one to stand up for” them on the part of the male group. “Dey” is the hostile collective society that marches readily for women rather than for men. The march is used here as a symbol of collective action and, moreover, perhaps also as a symbol of the need to unite against an oppressor, for marches are called to combat injustice. This is reinforced by sentence 3 where the cliché is telling: “They (now referring to men) will suffer in silence.”

In comparing the situations of men and women on this issue of women having a cohort to whom to turn, the men noted that women seemed much more able to develop close

relationships with other women with whom they could share things. The point was made that there was a difference between the sexes even in their approach to marriage. Women seemed to be better prepared for relationships than men. One man said:

3. *“Men are still at the place where this is a nice girl and they only want to please. But women seem to have a better understanding of what they want in the relationship.”*

Again here we note a childlike simplicity in the expression “only want to please”. By implication, pleasing or not pleasing defines the goal of relating. When juxtaposed with the women’s expectations it is noted that the latter are fully cognizant of what they “want in a relationship”. The man has a simple need and expectation, whereas the woman is more knowing and, by implication, more powerful.

In furthering this discussion, one of the men finally said the following:

4. *“Men just do not have the knowledge of what is happening to men and they are afraid to come out and talk about it.”*

In claiming that men lack knowledge of their situation, there is again an implicature of helplessness against manipulation, of something “happening” of which they are unclear, alongside an incapacity to verbalize their concerns.

Taken as a subset, which represents the men’s situation in their relationships, these utterances share a commonality of perspective that is telling: their perceived innocence and gullibility as matched against an unseen oppressor, whom we can only assume is the female partner, the larger female body, and/or a nebulous society which supports them; all of these then render them vulnerable and isolated, without a voice. Their silence is mentioned twice, fear once, ignorance once, isolation twice.

The men further described the society’s treatment of them in the working sphere as distinct from its treatment of women, which latter treatment they perceived as advantageous to women. Examples included:

5. *“Women getting more jobs now. Men used to be in charge before and they didn’t care about men. Now that women in the same jobs they taking extra safety precautions.”*
6. *“Women get preferential treatment on the job. They get to do what they want to do. Even if it’s a dangerous job if she wants to do it, then she gets to do it.”*

Once again, here we sense immediately the injury felt by the men and what they clearly perceive as male marginalization. “Women” are the focus, the subject, they are getting more jobs and “preferential treatment”. Again there is a reference

to an unspecified “they”, the wider society, who victimize men in not caring about them. Whatever the woman wants to do she manages to do and care is taken for her safety. The only sentence in this subset which considers the male position, sentence 2 in example 5, not only makes the contrast as to how they are treated but laments a lost ascendancy in the habitual “used to” whose meaning excludes any present continuation.

In the social sphere also, the men believed that women were again given preferential treatment:

7. *“Yuh ever see a party advertised where men are free? Is always women free, never men—that is the power of the woman.”*

A rhetorical question again, relying for its force on the shared understanding of Trinidad “party” norms, speaks again to a perceived male marginalization. The marked front focusing on women in the following sentence brings force to the assertion and belief that women are always favoured, and the recurrent theme of female dominance surfaces again in the following clause: “That is the power of the woman.” Free access to a party could be a device to bait the woman in a male enclave, but it is not so perceived by our speaker.

The male perception of society’s bias against the male gender was further evident in their commentary on the criminal justice system’s treatment of them in domestic violence cases as well as the media’s treatment:

8. *“If you hit your wife and she report it to the police, you could get lock up. If your wife hit you and you go to the station, dey [they] will laugh at you, they will say—you go let your wife hit you?”*
9. *“Men are condemned by the media. Men are seen as bad. They never talk about the women’s role [in domestic violence].”*
10. *“Take the courts. It have a lot of female magistrates. That is why I take a female lawyer to fight my case. I feel she will talk the language that the magistrate as another woman could understand. Women express themselves differently in a way that no matter how good a male lawyer is, he will not get through.”*

A common practice in these utterances is for the speaker to juxtapose the treatment of men with that of women. We see it in both 8 and 9 above again. The parallelism of structure in 8 brings emphasis to the point, which ultimately is a weak one, because the incapacity of our police force to respond to female complaints is legendary, contrary to this man’s assertion. It nonetheless underscores the sense of intense injury and discrimination which appears to be a reality for the men. Another common theme resurfaces in Example 10, that of the incapacity of the male to combat the female psyche. It surfaced earlier in relation to the male’s relationship to his partner but now is extended to the legal profession. There appears to be a conspiracy of womanhood: “I feel she (his

female lawyer) will talk the language that the magistrate as a woman can understand” and which “no male lawyer” can succeed against for “women express themselves differently”. Clearly again the perception of disempowerment and incapacity to cope on equal terms is salient for the speaker.

*Perceptions of their role in domestic violence*

11. *“I am not an abusive man. I have done some abusive things.”*

This statement encapsulates the fundamental position of the men concerning their roles in domestic violence. They make clear distinctions between what they do (their abusive behaviours) and who they are (their essence). They consider themselves to be husbands who love their wives, as men who love their partners and as men with nowhere to turn to learn how to address their problems differently.

12. *“All I want to be,” said one, “is to be a good husband. I don’t drink, I doh [don’t] smoke, doh run women—just a good husband.”*

We note the repetition in the parallel listing here, an emphatic gesture, focusing on the series of negative virtues displayed by the speaker, presumably put forward as the antithesis of the typical “bad” husband. We notice also the concerned emphasis in prefacing the sentence with “all”.

They believed, for the most part, that they did not have the skills to work through some of the difficult situations that faced them in their intimate relationships with women. In this regard, the number one difficulty that they had was what they termed their partner’s “lack of respect” for them. The discussion on this issue seemed to be pervasive. This “lack of respect” made them feel “small”, “hurt”, “humiliated”, angry and “less than anything”. Some of the cited incidents of lack of respect included a wife leaving the home and not letting her husband know where she was going or of coming home late without explanation and in one case having an affair openly and letting him know of it.

One of the men expressed the position that he did not set out to be abusive but it sometimes “*just happens*”. He noted:

13 *“It comes down to the manner in which she responds to you as you try to correct her. I don’t set out to be in control but the circumstances would get to me. Then I lash out and then you don’t feel good about yourself.”*

This statement clearly points to the perception of this man that his role, as a man, is to be the advisor and guide to his partner, the superior in effect. Having been forced to “lash out” by his wife’s ignorance of his correction, he claims some benevolence in the self-reflexive assertion that having to do this does not make him happy. It is interesting to note how his ownership of the controlling and lashing out is personalized to the pronoun “I” before he shifts to the more impersonal “you don’t feel good about yourself”. One

assumes that the personal statement reflects an engagement with the position he describes, a lack of capacity to distance, which is itself of note. Also noteworthy is the self-concern, with no mention at all of how this behaviour affects the woman.

The men could recognize that there were others whose behaviour was very abusive but they did not put their own in this category:

14. *“I eh (ain’t) lying, dey have (there are) men who does drink and smoke and ting and get really abusive. But I not like that.”*

Again here we note the stereotype of the bad man, epitomized in drinking and smoking “and ting”, this Trinidadian generalizer being used in cases in which there is a shared understanding between speaker and hearer as to the range of negative attributes not specified. The simple statement “But I not like that” allows the speaker to separate himself from the abuser, to justify his stance.

The men discussed the negative responses of the women that followed when they “lost it” (abused their partner). They found that the women became more cautious of them and withdrew—“went into themselves”—even more and that this was really the opposite of what they wanted. One man expressed it figuratively this way:

15. *“When you have a little thing [abusive behaviours] is like the pot on fire, the pot warm. But the woman not waiting for it to boil; they start pulling back one time.”*

And another in similar vein:

16. *“When you have abused a woman, she will throw it back in your face...until eventually everything break down. The woman will cut off her feelings while you trying to make the relationship work.”*

The telling simile in Example 15 suggests that the abuse is just a stage in a situation which might lead perhaps to love-making and the men appear to resent the withdrawal of the woman in response. There seems to be a measure of surprise and blame for the bad fallout of the situation and in both cases, the responsibility is placed on the woman. Transitivity is manipulated to place her in control: “the woman not waiting for it to boil” and “The woman will cut off her feelings”. When the man is the actor, however, he is positively “trying to make the relationship work”.

If the above positioning is difficult for the reader to view positively because of a clear lack of empathy on the men’s part, one should note that one of the participants does say:

17. *“I don’t really blame them. I could see that it will be difficult to trust after you lose it and get hurt, but still.”*

In response to the question of whether men could turn off their own pots, there was some hesitation among the men and some talking around the question until one said reflectively “we have to.” He later noted: “For you to move forward you have got to get out of the situation.” Such statements evidence a desire to get beyond the abuse. However, the overriding positioning in respect of their own culpability is denial, or if not denial, at least minimization of the incidents, self-justification through alleging the women’s own causal behaviour or wrong response, and lack of apparent capacity for self-condemnation.

In the discussions regarding the men’s awareness of the feelings, thoughts and behaviours that made it difficult for them to control themselves, most had difficulty speaking directly. Rather, it seemed easier to share thoughts on the physical signs that they should look for and to discuss how to avoid the stimuli that generated the build-up of the explosion inside of themselves. It was evident from these discussions that different levels of self-awareness existed in the group and that it was often easier to suggest interventions for another than to mediate one’s own. For example, one of the men was recovering from a broken relationship and the others were trying to help him see that he might again explode if he continued in his present state. In addition, they were helping him to find ways to manage. Within this context, the behaviour of choice for the men to address the range of feelings that they experienced seemed to be avoidance of the stimuli presented by the women. Further, one of the men offered this advice:

18. *“You have to try not to lose your cool. When you abuse your woman, the society starts getting down on you. Just by your action whatever the woman does is nullified or minimized. As a man you feel like the earth could open up and take you where you are...It really is not a nice feeling.”*

It is telling in the above that the rationalization given for “not losing your cool” is that “when you abuse...the society starts getting down on you”. Once again, we see here culpability being put at the woman’s door and simultaneously the society’s exoneration of her: “Just by your action whatever the woman does is nullified.” Once again we are forced back on the failure to accept culpability and the feeling among the men that they themselves are being victimized by society.

### ***Dealing with infidelity***

Infidelity, perceived or real, is another of the significant traumatic issues for men to deal with. A great deal was said about this since one of the men was trying to deal with a recent situation of infidelity which led to a break-up in the relationship between the couple. One discourse chunk is abstracted below:

19. A: *“Sometimes, I feel like the hardest thing for a man is to accept that another man [is] with the person that you are with. I have a problem dealing with that.”*

B: *“Sometimes you find yourself competing with the outside man. He is in control.”*

C: *“That’s what you feel!! He and all in doubt.”*

A: *“I feel the outside man knows more [about the wife] than you. She always says that he makes her feel good and she could talk to him.”*

D: *“But how you will get to know more about her? ... your time [with her] is when it is convenient to her especially when children involved.”*

Within this conversation are two major concerns. First of all, the issue of “control” is clearly of paramount importance. The initial claim is that “the outside man” is in control but then speaker C suggests that it is rather the woman who is calling the shots. His exclamatory rejoinder: “That’s what you feel!” puts control in the woman’s hands; by implication she is manipulating the situation. The issue of the woman having an alternative relationship seems to be more about control than about emotional fallout from loss of affection. The other concern raised surrounds the men’s inability in communicating effectively with their women, to which they allude. There is betrayal associated with “the outside man” knowing more about her “than you” and again the perceived shortfall on the husband’s part to satisfy his wife in this area: “She always says that he makes her feel good and she could talk to him.” Speaker D is defensive, for he suggests that she calls the shots in this area too and he seems to resent the time taken up by the children.

While there is an attempt at mutual support in the above extract, it is clear that the level of subjectivity involved for all the men does not necessarily make for the positive outcome which is needed. Rather speakers B, C and D support their friend by undermining his wife on several fronts.

When real anger sets in two of the men refer to thoughts of suicide, which are of extreme concern, given the extremely high rate of murder-suicides among Trinidadian couples:

20. *“If you not careful, I could find myself thinking a whole lot of things...Let me tell you the Devil is a serious man. A serious, serious man! Man I fight the Devil for a whole night...I sit down in my gallery with a rope ready to kill myself (and my wife). Then I say no!! No, not today!! You ain’t going to get me today.”*

21. *“I driving home and I watching a lamp post on the Churchill Roosevelt (Highway). I watching that lamppost and heading towards it...Is only the will inside of me, only the will that keep me from doing it. Man you have to always be conscious of it.”*

Both men noted the intensity of the feelings that they experienced. The first in example 21 spoke of thoughts that he could not control and of a night of warring with the “Devil”. The use of the unmarked Creole verb form for foregrounding vivid events is noted here in



the three verbs “*fight*” “*sit down*” and “*say*” (Youssef and James 1999). When contrasted with a range of other forms in the stream of narrative they serve to render the events they describe as most salient to the speaker. Here, there was a clear sense that the impetus to live, to find the strength to fight the mental war (one man articulated it as a spiritual war) needed to resist undesirable actions, rested entirely with the men themselves. There was no externalizing of responsibility at this juncture other than spiritually. Both men spoke of a battle of wills and used emphatic repetition to express their ultimate resolve not to commit the acts they felt driven to. Once again in these extracts as in the one below the sense of isolation felt by the men comes through:

22. *“You have to remember that you have to stand up for yourself. You have no friends. You have to stand up for yourself.”*

The sense of a battleground on which the individual is responsible only to and for himself appears to loom large for these men, who do indeed emerge as victims themselves in their potentially life-threatening struggles.

### **Discussion**

The data indicate that for some men who have abused women, there is confusion about gender roles and relationships in a changing context and a cry for external help. The focus in collecting and subsequently analyzing the data has been to understand the experiences of men who have been in situations of abuse and battering in Trinidad and Tobago as they perceive them. Out of this analysis we would obviously want to extrapolate suggestions for positive resolution to spousal conflict and to the patterns of abuse which these men had all, to a greater or lesser extent, developed as coping strategies. We have become aware of their feelings of isolation and of failure to communicate, their sense of insecurity and inferiority vis-à-vis the women in their lives and their sense that society itself is against them.

Among the strategies they themselves identified to address the building-up of the internal stresses related to their relationships with their partners were the following:

- Development of alternative relationships: “Someone who was interested in you and someone who will listen to you and talk with you and accept you with all your faults”;
- Finding interest in other things, for example, sports.
- Rationalization; self-distraction: “I train my mind to think about other things. Sometimes I will retreat and read the papers. I try to rationalize in my own mind what I am thinking and doing—whether anything wrong.”
- Ending the relationship: “Walk away from the situation and if necessary the relationship.”
- Not expecting resolution through discussion: “Don’t look for answers when you ask questions because that is where the trouble does start.”

All of these strategies are stop-gap devices, none of which leads to a positive resolution of their conflictual relationship. They suggest coping with an ongoing problem rather

than resolving it. Indeed, there is a predisposition to avoidance rather than healthy engagement, collaboration and confrontation. Joint problem-solving, as an interpersonal relationship strategy with their partners is absent, and the relating is instead often posed in “win-lose” terms which negates productive resolution.

A contradictory role is worked out by the men for their own positioning in society, for they are at once victims and heroes, condemned and marginalized in society but at the same time the ones who are supposed to be dominant in their relationships. They perceive that women are given opportunities that are not opened to them, that they have indeed to give up valuable occupational space to their newly educated and empowered women, but yet they are the supposedly stronger sex, biologically and societally endowed to have authority in the home. They feel the weight of the responsibility of living up to the expectations of their perceived role and have no real source or structure that addresses the challenges of their role within the context of their intimate relationships. They exonerate themselves from responsibility for their actions.

Also noteworthy was the difficulty that the men had in identifying advice that they could give to a young man beginning a relationship. They advised holding back and not giving all of one’s self to the other party, again a defence strategy aimed at minimizing hurt and motivated by a fear of disillusion. Men’s advice to each other seems to convey the impossibility of pleasing a woman and of constructing a meaningful relationship with her. On the one hand, we see that men may not know what is entailed in being a man in a positive relationship. On the other, there is the tendency noted to look outward for an explanation of their behaviour, to make others culpable for their shortcomings. This often makes it difficult for them to conceptualize what they need to know or what need they are trying to meet in discussing their problems. They set up for themselves idealistic constructs which their own perceptions of their role contradict to some extent. For example they suggest, “treat her kind and she will love you to death” but never forget you have to “lead”, “supply all her needs”; “make sure she doesn’t spend all your money”. Respectful engagement in intimate relationships is necessarily disadvantaged in this context.

As noted earlier, this discomfort with the ideal can be traced back, in the case of the Afro-Trinidadian, to the earliest clashes surrounding gendered roles between European males and African men. It spawned a contestation that, given the system of enslavement, resulted in the dominant European culture becoming entrenched throughout the period of colonization by means of the colonizer’s active efforts to dispossess the African man of his family and thereby his responsibilities to it. On the Indian side, indentured men appear to have been desperately insecure because of the lower numbers of women among them and their tendency to have come to this alternative world expressly to forge their independence. The situation is compounded by the fact that women are now outstripping men educationally (Reddock 1997, 10–12) and increasingly taking up demanding but well-paid employment—achievements which directly challenge the notions of control created by men for themselves. These developments not only challenge the men by increasing their sense of insecurity but deprive them of a modern means of self-affirmation derived from their perceived role as “provider”.

An important challenge to the widespread applicability of this data for men who abuse women is that the men who volunteered to attend this focus group had each been in therapy whether voluntarily or involuntarily. This process is likely to have triggered a journey of introspection which is not necessarily typical. It is well documented also that there are a number of patterns of abusive behaviour, which make it difficult to generalize findings (Johnson and Ferraro, 2000). The concern of this research then is not to generalize the findings but rather to enter the world of some men who have battered women to understand why this has happened. It is important that we understand the vulnerability that they feel, the sense of aloneness that they experience and the lack of equippedness that they have for addressing their shortcomings. In a sense, the men feel that women are responsible and should bring about their healing and are only reluctantly becoming aware that it is they who will have to engineer the changes.

Women and men are located within a dynamic system of interrelationships, evolving out of the historical, cultural and socio-economic systems that have shaped their behaviours. The abuse is the culmination of a process of socialization that needs to be addressed. A complex fabric of issues needs to be resolved so that gendered relations are redefined along lines of equity and shared responsibility. Self-respect and a sense of self-worth are critical elements to be engaged in the management of domestic violence. Thus, we have to look at our system of beliefs, our values, our parenting practices, our educational system, the legal system and popular culture. We must stop and take heed. We must take a multi-pronged approach to addressing the problem.

The data deepen our understanding of the phenomenon of domestic violence and create a frame of reference for enhancing the quality of service delivery in an arena where established services already exist but are largely unsuccessful. At the end of the day, the data are intended to facilitate an appreciation of the uniqueness of the experiences of men in relation to domestic violence in Trinidad and Tobago. It is our hope that the experiences of the men herein described will provide the impetus for other men to confront and define their own needs and shortcomings so that they can take steps to address them; it is also hoped that the role of helping agencies will become one of fostering opportunities to facilitate this self-development.

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