

The Stereotyped Offender: Domestic Violence and the Failure of Intervention

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Scholars and battered women's advocates now recognize that expert testimony, mandatory policies, and other facets of the legal response to intimate-partner abuse may stereotype victims and harm abuse survivors who do not fit commonly-accepted paradigms. However, it is less often acknowledged that the feminist analysis of domestic violence also tends to stereotype offenders and that state action, including court-mandated batterer intervention, is premised on such offender stereotypes. Although feminism provided an important social and legal theory, as well as dedicated leadership, to spur government intervention in domestic violence, the feminist approach can be faulted for minimizing or denying the role of substance abuse, mental illness, childhood trauma, race, culture, and poverty. Moreover, those arrested for domestic violence now include heterosexual women, lesbians, and gay men; abuse is as common in same-sex relationships as in their heterosexual counterparts. Failing to take such factors into account perpetuates a one-dimensional image of the batterer as a controlling male villain—a stereotype that impedes efforts to coordinate effective responses to domestic violence and entrenches gendered hierarchies that affect men, as well as women. Drawing on historical, sociological, and psychological materials, as well as insights from masculinities studies, this paper will suggest limits to our understanding of those who commit intimate-partner abuse and to the intervention policies currently in place. It makes a case for transforming pro-feminist interventions to encourage accountability, behavioral change, and victim safety without stereotyping domestic violence offenders.