

## HIT MEN—AND WOMEN?

R. Dianne Bartlow

*Violent Partners: A Breakthrough Plan for Ending the Cycle of Abuse*

By Linda G. Mills

Basic Books

*In an Abusive State: How Neoliberalism Appropriated the Feminist Movement Against Sexual Violence*

By Kristin Bumiller

Duke University Press

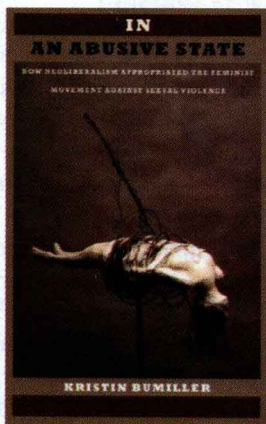
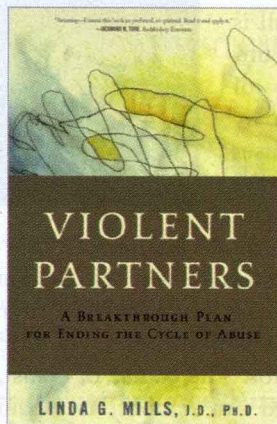
ARE WOMEN AS VIOLENT AS MEN? Can the justice system combat domestic violence effectively? Is restorative justice the solution? Linda Mills examines these questions in her investigation of the myths and assumptions surrounding intimate violence.

feminist movements have successfully framed “intimate” abuse as a one-sided problem that involves aggressive men who abuse women “because they can.” While this captures the perceived sexist nature of the abuse, it fails to acknowledge women’s contribution, according to Mills.

“Although homicide statistics report that women are far more frequently killed by intimate partners than men are, another trend suggests that a different pattern may emerge in the next several years,” she writes. Mills also points to Department of Justice statistics revealing that between 1991 and 2000, the number of girls under 18 convicted of aggravated assault crimes increased 44 percent, while the rate among their male peers decreased by 16 percent. Both male *and* female aggression must be confronted if we are to have any hope of combating the violence in our society, she writes.

Mills’ thinking has provoked hostility, but she is undeterred in her belief that solutions can be found in community-based dispute resolutions, like couples counseling, for those clients who find value in this therapeutic approach. She also endorses the more controversial “restorative justice,” which brings the parties together to discuss the effects of the crime. Used as a way to promote reconciliation after cases of extreme ethnic violence, such as in South Africa and Rwanda, its goal is to promote healing and develop insights on what happened and why, “so that everyone can come to terms with the past and alter the course of the future.”

Kristin Bumiller, on the other hand, challenges the assertion that women are as violent as men in intimate relationships. *In an Abusive State* critiques feminism’s problematic alliance with the neoliberal state, and worries about relying on the coercive



who r all well-not but Of those assaulted violently each year, 1.5 million are women—but women can be as violent as men, says Mills. Resistance to this idea is understandable. The battered-women’s and

power of government to ensure women's safety. She acknowledges that the feminist-state alliance is largely unavoidable, since battered-women's shelters rely on the police to help keep their clients safe, and agrees it's helpful that teachers, doctors and therapists must report suspected domestic violence. But one result of increased surveillance is that victims can be punished for their "failure to protect" their children from viewing the domestic violence they themselves suffered. Shelter residents must apply for state benefits to show they're taking steps to self-sufficiency, but "these requirements entangle women in an increasingly value-laden welfare program tied to the promotion of the nuclear family...and distrust of women as mothers," writes Bumiller. Additionally, in conjoint therapy models, violence is recast as a communication disorder, and traumatized women are pressed by therapists to convince their spouses to participate. And she believes the restorative justice solution can leave women at particular risk, especially when they choose to stay in violent families.

While Mills offers a heartfelt view of how forgiveness can be a tool of empowerment and healing, Bumiller highlights the unfortunate conditions under which women seek help, particularly from state institutions. She calls for a feminist vision that addresses human dignity and helps women negotiate their empowerment within a dismantled social welfare system.

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