

The year women got beat up

The Phoenix

12/20/2006 5:41:28 PM

By: DAVID S. BERNSTEIN

Over the past 12 months you have been bombarded with stories of brutalized women. Chances are, you didn't notice.

You don't have to play *Grand Theft Auto* to be blind to violence against women. The local TV-news and print media feature so many dead women, they barely register as much more than cartoons. The *Herald* alone put pictures of 20 individual female victims of violence on its covers this year. And one of every five of the paper's covers mentioned a story of violence against women.

All year long, stories of victimized women and girls were routinely plucked from the swarm of local and national news items that face editors each day and given front-page, talk-radio, top-of-the-hour treatment. The next one grabbed our attention as soon as we lost interest in the last: Rachel Entwistle gave way to Imette St. Guillen, who was followed by Jill Carroll and then Dominique Samuels. If we weren't guessing whether John Mark Karr killed JonBenet Ramsey, we were debating whether Philadelphia Phillies star Brett Myers should pitch the day after allegedly beating his wife outside a hotel in downtown Boston. Even long-dead victims were back in the headlines: Christa Worthington, Nicole Brown Simpson, and Aislin Silva.

Yet while most of us became caught up in the salacious details of each new story, we failed to see them as part of a greater trend. It's odd, given how quick we are to discern patterns and similarities in even the most distantly related news events.

Even worse, say those who make it their business to track and tend to violence against women, these recent storylines were often disproportionately cast as TV drama, with the victim struck down by some psycho stranger in terrifying isolation, when more often than not, domestic violence was involved.

This distorted way of looking at violence against women — when we recognize it at all — was crystallized in the controversial ads run by Republican gubernatorial candidate Kerry Healey, which made Benjamin LaGuer, convicted of rape 22 years ago, a household name. Not long after, we even learned of a rape victim within our governor-elect's close family.

Jane Doe Inc., which tracks homicides directly attributable to domestic violence in Massachusetts, has identified 31 such deaths this year — 50 percent more than the average of the previous three years. And at least 34 women have been murdered in the state under all circumstances, according to *Phoenix* research, the highest total in several years. Although violence in Boston and across Massachusetts has been a topic of constant public discussion, it has gone unnoticed that rapes in the city have climbed 15 percent this year, and a stunning 61 percent since September 1, compared with the same dates in 2005. In Allston-Brighton, rapes are up 136 percent. Meanwhile, [as the Phoenix reported in October](#), the arrest rate for rapes in Massachusetts dropped by nearly half during the past three years.

Yet most of us missed this bigger picture as we eagerly consumed the details of each new victimization — what online sexual shenanigans Neil Entwistle was up to, or where in the Ella J. Baker House the ex-con staffer allegedly raped a teenage girl.

This ever-widening gap between perception and reality has real consequences, say many in the field: it has made it harder to get public acceptance and support for programs and initiatives that law-enforcement officials and women's advocates believe would help solve the growing problem. And even as these advocates

advance their understanding of the problem — which they see as being largely rooted in domestic tensions — they find themselves understood, and heeded, less and less.

If anything, says Mary Lauby, executive director of Jane Doe Inc., “the attention and focus on keeping these practices and services and responses not just fully funded, but fully embraced, is moving backwards.”

Resisting the obvious

Advocates of women’s issues contacted by the *Phoenix* are hard-pressed to explain why the recent parade of stories about victimized women failed to register as such.

After all, it’s fairly obvious that most of these stories became big news in the first place largely *because* the victims are women. That’s why Jill Carroll’s abduction stood out among the dozens of reporters kidnapped in Iraq; why Christa Worthington’s murder still fascinates four years later; why the Dorchester murder of Nhaun Nguyen made the front pages, unlike the stories of so many young men shot down in the city.

And yet, we look for other storylines. For example, on October 2, a gunman took a group of girls hostage, killing five of them and injuring five more. You might not remember the incident by that description; the words “Amish school,” however, probably ring a bell.

Not only was that massacre transparently gender-driven, it came just a week after a remarkably similar event in Colorado, in which a gunman abducted and sexually assaulted six girls, killing one. Another school-based shooting, in Essex, Vermont, a month earlier, targeted women, leaving two dead.

As *New York Times* columnist Bob Herbert later wrote, this obvious targeting would have dominated coverage, had it been based on race or religion — and the incidents would have been labeled, properly, as hate crimes.

Instead, the coverage and discussion focused exclusively on the school-shooting and Amish angles. That was a wake-up call to women’s advocates, says Lauby. “We were stunned, and then livid, waiting for somebody to talk about violence against girls and women,” after the Pennsylvania shooting, she says.

And just then, Kerry Healey unleashed Benjamin LaGuer.

LaGuer became a central figure in the political campaign when Healey charged Deval Patrick with siding with criminals over victims, because at one time he had supported parole and re-examination of the evidence for LaGuer.

Healey launched a television ad showing a woman in a dark parking garage, apparently being stalked, while the voiceover reminded viewers that Patrick described LaGuer as “eloquent” and “thoughtful.” The ad then asked: “Have you ever heard a woman compliment a rapist? Deval Patrick should be ashamed, not governor.”

This stranger-danger stereotype is far from the norm. Yet it seems that violence against women gets our attention only if we think of it as random. We quickly lose interest if a case turns out to be — as most of them are — an act of domestic violence committed by someone known to the victim.

This was one finding in an academic study on media coverage of domestic violence, published this year in the *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*.

And it could be seen locally in 2006. Dominique Samuels, whose badly burned corpse was discovered in Franklin Park this spring, dominated headlines until police arrested an acquaintance of hers, and alleged that the attack began as a sexual assault at the end of a night of socializing. With this explanation, coverage of the story immediately disappeared.

Annalicia Perry was likewise big news when she was shot on the anniversary of her brother's murder, while visiting the spot in the South End where he died. Later, when police determined that an angry ex-boyfriend of Perry's was behind her death, interest in the story waned. The alleged shooter was arraigned last week, with no media coverage.

Meanwhile, two other women murdered in Boston this year, who were immediately tagged as victims of domestic violence (the husbands were quickly arrested), never reached the front pages in the first place.

By comparison, the story of Imette St. Guillen, a Dorchester native killed in Manhattan, made headlines — and affected policy — long after the alleged perpetrator was caught. In that case, the suspect was a nightclub bouncer, charged with abducting St. Guillen before killing her. Not only did reporters continue to delve into his story, but advocates recently introduced legislation in Massachusetts seeking to protect women from ex-con bouncers.

And when Kerry Healey wanted to scare Massachusetts residents, she chose to grab their attention with a fictionalized re-enactment of a random, unknown attacker, even though she knows perfectly well such imagery is at overwhelming odds with reality.

The fiction that women are often savaged and killed in bizarre, unique circumstances is more gripping. That's why it's so prevalent on prime-time television, which is increasingly dominated by crime shows featuring a wildly disproportionate number of female victims. For instance, brief plot summaries for the 24 episodes of top-rated *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* that aired this year reveal at least 15 women killed, few by domestic violence, according to a *Phoenix* review — and that's just one of three series in the *CSI* franchise. Similar rates can be found on the three *Law & Orders*, *Cold Case*, *Without A Trace*, and many more, not to mention true-crime shows like those hosted by Nancy Grace and Rita Cosby. But by losing ourselves in that unreality, we may be losing sight of the truth sitting right before our eyes. Many activists believe that's one reason it remains so difficult to recognize domestic violence when it is happening to someone we know, or even to ourselves.

Women's-rights activists were appalled by Healey's ads, and not just for perpetuating the false perception of stranger-danger. The ads also contradicted what they have been trying so hard to get people to understand — that because the attacker is very often someone the victim knows and trusts, she often feels conflicted about him, and might find it hard to take steps that could lead to his arrest and prosecution.

According to the Healey ad, no such conflicted women exist — and if they do, they should presumably be “ashamed.”

What's really going on?

The rhetoric surrounding Benjamin LaGuer obscured the ongoing work of serious people who address the unvarnished reality of female violence. The state legislature's joint committee on public safety held hearings and issued a report on domestic violence in the state. Jane Doe Inc. published its first domestic-violence homicide report. Quincy District Court released a study last December, a first of its kind in the country, shedding new light on re-offending by domestic batterers over time. The state opened its first multi-service Family Justice Center, on Comm Ave in Boston, to help women victims. The Suffolk County District Attorney's Office, along with the Boston Police Department, began treating underage prostitutes as victims to be saved rather than criminals to be punished. The Sexual Assault Nurse Examiners program was expanded throughout the state. And a series of programs in Newburyport to help battered women find assistance have been so successful, some officials would like to duplicate them across Massachusetts.

Taken together, it's an impressive effort, but it's been largely ignored. The public-safety committee released its report 12 days after Dominique Samuels's body was found, but only one member of the press showed up — from a weekly paper in one town that was spotlighted in the report — says State Senator Jarrett Barrios. Neither the *Globe* nor the *Herald* even mentioned it. And so there has been no groundswell to enact its recommendations.

There is a significant disconnect between perception and reality in public policy, too. Congress authorized a huge increase in funding for the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) when it passed a five-year reauthorization of VAWA, which George Bush signed early this year. But that funding was left out of the federal budget for the new fiscal year.

Likewise, despite Kerry Healey's talk, Mitt Romney recently cut victims' services, along with other "emergency" 9C programs. Healey, Romney, and the legislature made great headlines with their efforts to list more sex offenders on the Internet, extend sexual-dangerousness definitions to people caught urinating in alleys, and provide witness protection to gangbangers. Yet they have done little or nothing to implement intensive parole oversight, reform restraining-order procedures, or implement uniform dangerousness-assessment procedures.

And sadly, the state has failed to use its resources to counter misperceptions with real understanding, which could help women who are victimized, say advocates who believe that prevention depends in large part on the awareness and caring of the general public.

As an example, they point to the May 20 murder of Carla Souza and her 11-year-old son, allegedly beaten to death with a hammer in their Framingham home by Souza's husband, Jeremias Bins. Bins and Souza were both born in Brazil; domestic-abuse experts went on a local Brazilian radio program and talked about the societal norms that can lead to abuse in that culture and keep it from coming to light. Brazilian women in the area responded, calling the station seeking help.

That response could have led to a general call for more education and outreach services in minority communities. But reality, as usual, was not interesting enough to spread. When the *Herald* featured that murder on its cover, the headline blared, in typical TV-drama fashion: DID TOO MUCH RELIGION MAKE HIM KILL?

Copyright © 2006 The Phoenix Media/Communications Group