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I abused a man in public and no one cared

Crime

**Eline Van Der Velden**

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"I'm going to hit you again. What are you doing? I'm going to hit you in the face. Do you want a smack?"

The man I'm shouting at, in the middle of a busy afternoon in Ealing Common, is cowering. "Don't hit me," he says.

This goes on for 90 minutes. Dozens of passers-by stare at us. But only one person stops to ask if my 'partner' is okay. Nobody else bothers.

The man I was shouting at that day was Will Rastall - an actor. We were acting out a domestic violence scene for my BBC Three show, **Putting It Out There**. We staged a social experiment, with a man threatening to abuse a woman, and then a woman threatening to abuse a man. We used the same words and body language, and it happened for the same amount of time in the same place.



“ It was really encouraging to see that if you were in a dangerous situation, someone would help you. At least, they would if you were a woman.

Eline Van Der Velden

Would the reactions of passers-by be different?

When Will was shouting and threatening to hit me, barely a few seconds passed before someone stopped to help me. In 90 minutes, a total of seven people came over to ask if there was anything they could do.

"I don't want to interrupt," was the common response, "but is everything okay here?"

If I said "yes," they left it there. But if I said "no," they said, "Come with me. We can walk away, it's okay."

Clearly it was just an informal experiment. But it was really encouraging to see how compassionate people could be, and that if you were in a dangerous situation, someone would help you. At least, they would if you were a woman.

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When the roles were reversed, and I was screaming at Will, only one person stopped in 90 minutes. Most people just kept on walking.

Some teenage boys even came over and started taking photos and posting them on Snapchat. They were laughing, saying, "Look at him getting beaten up."

It was amusing to them that a woman was abusing a man. They thought it was funny he was being humiliated in public - it was worth a Snapchat.

Later, one man told us, "I thought he looked soft. I felt bad thinking that. But I had the classic thing in my head of, 'I wouldn't let a girl hit me.' That's terrible - why would I think that?"

Another woman said, "I did think it was a bit aggressive, and I wanted to say something, but I decided not to."

Will told me he felt humiliated and embarrassed. He'd wished that someone had stepped in or at least asked, "Mate, are you okay?" But instead, people assumed he could handle himself, because he's a man - even though we're of a similar height, he's not a big muscly guy, and they had no idea what else might be going on in our relationship.

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I never thought people could be so blind to the reality of domestic abuse against men - and I had certainly never expected such a stark contrast in the way people dealt with the situation.

Yes, a man could hurt me badly - maybe more badly than I could hurt him - but I am also capable of physically and emotionally harming someone.

In their lifetimes, **one in four women will be affected by domestic abuse** - but so will one in six men. On average, this leads to two women being murdered every week, and 30 men in total every year. Domestic abuse is the violent crime least likely to be reported, with victims being assaulted, on average, 35 times before calling the police.

Men are victims of domestic abuse more often than we think. We spend a lot of time discussing

female victims – as we should – but men need help too. While women never have to feel embarrassed about seeking help, men have been conditioned not to talk about their problems. And offering men help can feel awkward. It isn't seen as heroic like it is to 'save' a woman.

If I'm honest, I probably would have been one of the people who didn't intervene at the sight of a woman abusing a man. I would have been too embarrassed, worrying that they'd think I was being rude by butting in. Only now do I know that's not the case.

The sympathy I received when I was the 'victim' compared to Will was astounding. It's made me want to fight for male victims of domestic abuse, and to help end the stigma around their experiences.

I hope that by exposing stereotypes we can help diminish them. No one should ever feel ashamed about being a victim - and nor should anyone ever feel awkward about asking someone, of any gender, if they're okay.

Information and support about domestic abuse is available from **these organisations**.



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