

I-VAWA (S. 2279): Foreign Policy Based on a Woozle?

The International Violence Against Women Act (S. 2279) was recently introduced with the goal of reducing domestic violence around the world. I-VAWA is modeled on the U.S. Violence Against Women Act (VAWA).

But advocates for such laws tell only half the story. Worse, they often misrepresent the truth of partner abuse. Family violence researcher Richard Gelles, dean at the University of Pennsylvania, dubs these factoids the “woozle effect.”

A “woozle” is a one-sided or fictitious claim designed to influence public opinion. Many woozles are found in the proposed International Violence Against Women Act:

Woozle #1: Only women are victims of domestic violence

I-VAWA repeatedly refers to women as victims of domestic violence. It never refers to men as abuse victims. So what is the truth?

Nearly 200 studies show that men and women are equally likely to engage in intimate partner abuse.ⁱ And a recent survey in 32 countries found that female-on-male violence is more common than male-on-female abuse.ⁱⁱ

“I’ll beat up Blake when I’m drunk. ... If he says one thing I don’t like then I’ll chin him.” – British singer Amy Winehouse, referring to her husband

Woozle #2: When women engage in partner violence, it is typically done in self-defense

Persons often claim that violent women are only acting in self-defense. What does the research say?

- Less than one in five cases of female-perpetrated violence involve the woman acting in self-defense.^{iii,iv}
- A recent Centers for Disease Control survey found that in cases of one-way partner aggression, women were the instigators in 71% of the time.^v

Women’s Groups Criticize Domestic Violence Laws

Women’s organizations are calling for domestic violence laws that help rather than hurt:

- *Ms. Foundation for Women*: “Unfortunately, when state power has been invited into, or forced into, the lives of individuals, it often takes over.”
- *True Equality Network*: “VAWA has spawned an abuse industry that continually expands the definition of domestic violence and condones the filing of false allegations, while ignoring the needs of true victims.”
- *Independent Women’s Forum*: “The evolving understanding of domestic violence should...embrace a broader and more nuanced view of the realities of family violence.”

Ignoring the treatment needs of abusive females does a tremendous disservice to these women and to their families.

Woozle #3: Domestic violence is caused by abusers’ need for power and control

I-VAWA claims that violence against women is caused by “power inequities.” And treatment programs lecture perpetrators to eliminate their “patriarchal attitudes.”

So what is the truth?

- Domestic violence is caused by a number of factors including anger, stress, alcohol abuse, and sometimes a desire to control.^{vi}
- Women are as likely as men to engage in domestic violence out of a need to control their partner.^{vii}

“In many ways, we turned a blind eye to many women’s use of violence, their drug use and alcoholism, and their often harsh and violent treatment of their own children.” -- Ellen Pence, founder of the Domestic Abuse Intervention Project

Woozle #4: Society condones violence against women

I-VAWA would fund “campaigns to change social norms...to change attitudes that *condone and tolerate violence against women*” (Section 2, paragraph 14).

The claim that violence against women is condoned by society is simply false.

In the United States, only 10% of persons approve of a husband who slaps his wife – *and 22% approve of a wife slapping her husband*. And the recent International Dating Violence Study found much greater acceptance of female-perpetrated than male-perpetrated minor violence by women in all but one of 32 countries.^{viii}

“Policy and practice based on these factoids and theory might actually be harmful to women, men, children, and the institution of the family.” – University of Pennsylvania researcher Richard Gelles

Woozle #5: There is no cause for concern about violence against men

I-VAWA highlights the deplorable problem of violence against women. Nowhere does it mention the problem of violence of men. But according to the WHO World Report on Violence and Health, men are twice as likely as women to die from violence-related causes.

As a caring and just society, do we worry less about violence when men are placed in harm’s way?

Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell

I-VAWA calls for the “researching, collecting, monitoring, and evaluating data related to efforts to prevent and respond to violence against women” (Section 300J). I-VAWA would not ask about violence against men.

If data about female offenders and male victims is not collected, then half the domestic violence problem will remain hidden. And years later, persons will wonder why partner violence programs have proven to be ineffective.

Programs Should be Based on Evidence, Not Ideology

Domestic violence is deplorable and victims need our help. But they deserve programs that recognize that domestic violence is not a gender-specific problem.

RADAR calls on the Congress to demand approaches to partner abuse that are based on sound research and best practices, not on half-truths and ideological woozles.

The “domestic-violence industry is a closed shop... They’re all reading from the same myth-riddled hymnbook.” – Barbara Kay, National Post, February 27, 2008



Respecting Accuracy in Domestic Abuse Reporting

A coalition of 100 organizations has come together to educate the public about the need to develop domestic violence programs that are effective and equitable:
www.mediadarar.org/docs/VAWA-Resolution.pdf

For more information, contact:
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Citations

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- ^v Whitaker DJ, Haileyesus T, Swahn M, Saltzman L. Differences in frequency of violence and reported injury between relationships with reciprocal and nonreciprocal intimate partner violence. *American Journal of Public Health*, May 2007.
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