Chapter 1

The Hidden Epidemic

Police lights pulsed off the rain-dampened street. Squad cars crowded the parking lot just outside the first-floor apartment that Miguel Chorrera shared with his wife, Guadalupe, and their two children. It was late on an otherwise quiet Sunday night in Burien, Washington, a suburb of Seattle that is home to many Latino families. The officers were responding to a domestic violence call. The call had come from Miguel, reporting Guadalupe.

Their latest fight had begun earlier that morning. Miguel had been attending mass at Emmanuel Church in Federal Way, while Guadalupe stayed home to watch their two young children, Evelyn and Bulmaro, both of whom were born with DiGeorge's syndrome, a rare cardiovascular disease. As Miguel was driving home, he heard his cell phone buzzing on the dashboard. At a red light, he began scrolling through a slew of furious texts from his wife.

"She was texting in all caps, asking where I was, accusing me of cheating, warning me not to return, and threatening to throw away my belongings," Miguel said.

Twenty minutes later, when Miguel returned home, Guadalupe was in a full-blown rage, cursing and shouting insults at him. She was certain Miguel was cheating, that going to church was a cover

for his affairs. When Miguel denied her accusations, she only spiraled deeper. That's when she demanded to see his phone. Miguel refused, so Guadalupe threatened to have Miguel deported.

Miguel had moved to the United States in 2015 from a small town in Mexico, where the rest of his family still resides. A roofer by trade, he lived in the United States on an expired work visa. Getting him deported had become one of Guadalupe's cruelest threats. Still, Miguel refused to hand over the phone, and Guadalupe attacked him.

"She began pushing me in the chest, trying to wrestle my phone away from me. Then she began clawing and scratching at my neck. Punching me. Spitting. She scratched at my eyes until I finally gave up the phone."

Guadalupe went through the texts on Miguel's phone. Even though she found no proof of him cheating, she still deleted his entire address book, including the numbers of family members and work colleagues.

Guadalupe's jealous tirades were nothing new. Early on in their relationship, Miguel had misinterpreted her jealousy as a form of caring. It took years for him to understand that her insults and controlling tactics were abuse.

Miguel was a quiet, soft-spoken man whose only defense was his silence. In his mind, yelling or fighting back was akin to struggling through quicksand. Like many victims of domestic violence, he had come to believe that the harder he fought, the quicker he would drown. He believed that it was better—safer—to remain quiet and wait out the storm. But this time was different. This time the violence had escalated and turned physical, which is why Miguel did something he'd never had the courage to do before. He called the police.

Standing in the parking lot of his apartment complex, Miguel gave his account of the incident to the cops. As he described the earlier scene of violence, a portrait of his wife emerged: a jealous, controlling woman who used various forms of physical and nonphysical violence to control him. Miguel explained that she

regularly insulted and demeaned him. She forbade Miguel from speaking to his family or friends. She texted and called him incessantly when they were apart. If he didn't want to have sex, she threatened to sleep with his friends. If he dared report her, she threatened to call immigration and have him sent back to Mexico, never to see his children again. Eventually, he said, her verbal and emotional abuse escalated to hitting, punching, and throwing things.

Though the police listened to Miguel's story, they seemed unmoved, and even a bit skeptical. Miguel works for a local construction company. He's muscular, broad-shouldered, and stands nearly a foot taller than Guadalupe—to see them side-by-side would make it difficult to believe Guadalupe were capable of hurting Miguel at all. Miguel also explained that he wasn't looking for the police to arrest his wife, which is common among partners who report domestic violence. Often, a partner calls in the hopes that the police will intervene and de-escalate the situation, rather than making an arrest. This is frequently the case when children are involved and both parents are needed at home for emotional and financial reasons. This was especially true for Miguel. Because both of his children were sick, he relied on Guadalupe to be at home to care for them while he worked. He didn't want her to go to jail, he just needed somebody to step in and help.

The police officers' indifference toward Miguel that night left him feeling cold and unsafe. They left without offering assistance. It would be the last time Miguel ever called for help.

After the police left, Miguel, shivering, retreated into his apartment. He closed the door heavily behind him. Miguel's world seemed to be fractured. His thoughts spiraled. He wondered if there was a way out, a pathway to freedom that would neither upend his children's world nor force him into the shadows of a life away from them.

Once inside, Miguel entered his children's room, tears in his eyes, ensuring they were unharmed and peacefully asleep. The innocent rise and fall of their tiny chests offered a brief respite from his agony. He hoped that someday things might change. But the system, it seemed, had failed him. Would Miguel ever find an

avenue through which his voice, suffocated by disbelief and societal norms, would finally be heard? His story became another lost to a system and a society that frequently leaves men like him overshadowed, overlooked, and grappling invisibly with the aftermath of domestic violence.

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A dangerous myth lurks beneath the surface of our society, one that tells us that domestic violence is a gendered problem, and that it only impacts women. Despite our narrow view of who is *allowed* to be a victim, there is substantial evidence that *all* genders are victims of domestic violence and abuse, and that a significant number of men have silently suffered in this role over the last century. And yet, we struggle to accept and find empathy for men as victims.

Over the years as part of my law I practice, I have spoken to thousands of frightened, isolated men every year who have stories like Miguel's—men who experience domestic violence and feel they have nowhere to turn. Often, these men come to me seeking help for their spouses, without appreciating they're even in abusive relationships. Their stories fuel my determination to shed much-needed light on the reality that men can be victims of domestic violence, too. This book is not about assigning blame to any particular gender. The purpose of this book is to compassionately amplify the voices and experiences of male victims, and to lift the veil of silence and shame that has kept them hidden for too long. But first, we must gain a deeper understanding of how we got here and where we have been.

A Brief History of Violence (and Indifference)

Intimate partner violence has always been part of our society. But how we talk about it, deal with it, and recognize it, has drastically changed. Let's turn back the clock a few centuries, to the early 19th century when domestic violence portrayed men as the

perpetrators and women as the victims. And throughout history this has largely been true. Men have long enjoyed privileged status in a society built on laws and systems designed to shield them from punishment and preserve their power.

Prior to the mid-19th century, men wrote laws that codified domestic violence against women as noncriminal, effectively shielding men from prosecution.

Then, in the latter half of the 19th century, a legal shift began. States such as Tennessee, Alabama, and Massachusetts outlawed husbands physically abusing wives, an act that until then had been perfectly legal. In 1874, the Supreme Court of North Carolina affirmed that no circumstances justified a husband's physical abuse of his wife. In 1882, Maryland enacted a groundbreaking law that classified wife beating as a crime punishable by imprisonment. The message was clear: Violence against women within marriage would no longer be tolerated.

But the road to justice was long and lined with obstacles. The laws that exist in the books don't always reflect society's attitudes. And the mere existence of these laws didn't mean the laws would be enforced, or that the abuse would end. In fact, it took decades for society to catch up. The 1970s saw the emergence of the Women's Rights Movement, which took up the cause of domestic violence against women as a rallying cry. As described by Denise Hines, a psychologist and researcher in the field of domestic violence, "The issue of intimate partner violence was revived by the feminist movement in the sixties and seventies. Finally, women were being seen, and our legislative bodies woke up and decided to start creating laws and provisions to protect them."

In the decades since, the ongoing research and literature has typically framed intimate partner violence as an aggressive act perpetrated by men against women. And there is no denying that women are, and have historically been, victims of domestic violence at a troubling rate.

There is a large body of work that validates the experiences of female survivors. But the same body of work that has supported

and empowered women as survivors has, for the most part, failed to acknowledge that women can also be perpetrators, and that men can also be victims.

In 1975, the National Family Violence Survey published a landmark study by sociologist Murray Straus, a preeminent voice in family violence research. The study found that women were also violent against men. At first, it was assumed and accepted that the violence exhibited by women was in self-defense. But when Strauss's study challenged that myth, researchers began examining "who hit whom" first—and found that women hit men first in 50% of the cases. While self-defense was one motivation, so were anger and jealousy.

Then, in 1977, Suzanne Steinmatz wrote a groundbreaking treatise called "The Battered Husband Syndrome," in which she states, "While the horrors of wife-beating are paraded before the public, and crisis lines and shelters are being established, the other side of the coin—husband beating—is still under a cloak of secrecy."

Why is it that the research into male victims of domestic violence never sparked a movement for men the way it did for women? I can only guess it was because men had lived with privilege for so long that it was hard to suddenly see them as victims. Or maybe it was the stereotypes of masculinity in our society—men are supposed to be strong, dominant, and assertive, so they couldn't possibly be vulnerable. Regardless, the reality of men as victims of domestic violence remained largely ignored.

The painful truth is this: Violence has no gender. It does not belong to any one sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, race, size, culture, religion, or age. Victims of domestic violence can be of any age, any race, any income bracket. Intimate partner violence is a violation of human rights. And yet, as a society, we have accepted the false notion that violence is tethered to masculinity. As we'll learn in this book, the conventional wisdom about domestic violence and gender is not only wrong but also dangerous.

"The startling truth is that one-third of domestic abuse victims are men," said Rita Broberg, writing for the Centre of Social Justice

in London. An estimated 835,000 men are physically assaulted by intimate partners every year, according to the US Department of Justice. The Office for National Statistics estimates that while 1.6 million women reported abuse in 2020, about 757,000 men did the same. And recent data from more than 100 published studies found that women and men report almost equal rates of partner violence.

Despite representing such a significant proportion of abuse, men as victims of domestic violence have long been ignored, and remain invisible. And what's worse, we as a society seem conditioned to indifference on the topic. I will never forget seeing an advertisement from the ManKind Initiative, a charity that helps male victims of domestic violence. In 2014, the organization released a video ad that showed bystanders reacting to staged incidents of domestic violence. When the violence in front of them was male-on-female, the bystanders were outraged, often intervening, and calling for help. But when the violence was female-perpetrated on male, nobody seemed to have any visible reaction.

I couldn't help but ask why. Why were we so quick to intervene on behalf of women in crisis, and so equally quick to turn a blind eye to men? It seemed that our society's collective complicity was itself an act of violence.

This lack of concern is also seen in social media. Videos on TikTok often show women hitting men, attacking them with purses, and kicking them, yet these are seen as funny. If we saw a video of a man doing the same to a woman, there would be a public outcry and calls for him to be arrested for domestic violence. So why do we laugh when men are the victims? These videos are often joked about in the comments, making light of the situation and dismissing the men as victims.

This double standard is even clearer in situations involving cheating. If a video shows a woman reacting violently to a man's cheating, people might say, "He deserves it!" But would we say the same if a man reacted violently to a woman cheating?

This indifference keeps male victims from being heard. Their experiences are overlooked and their stories are not told, leading us to a harsh reality. Our society's lack of action and silence toward male victims of domestic abuse is a form of violence itself.

Add to this indifference a dearth of research that has rendered male victims largely voiceless, their experiences disregarded, their stories silenced, and you begin to understand how we wound up here.

We have been manipulated and misled to view domestic violence through a narrow, myopic lens—to separate the victims and the perpetrators by gender. The result is an acknowledged, public outrage about violence against women, paired with an ignorance that men, too, experience domestic violence at staggering rates. According to the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, 33% of women and 25% of men experience domestic violence. By refusing to acknowledge the urgency of the crisis these men face, we perpetuate a system that ignores their pleas, denies their experiences, and silences their stories.

"There's four pillars that we cite as reasons we have this problem," said Mark Brooks of the ManKind Initiative. "One is about masculinity, one is about society, one is about public policy, and the other one is about the lack of visible public services."

What We Talk About When We Talk About Violence

One of the goals of this book is to broaden the ways in which we, as a society, define violence. When we talk about domestic violence, we have historically focused on bodily harm, fixating on images of black eyes, bloodied lips, and swollen, bruised faces. And while physical violence is an urgent concern and a critical public health crisis, it's only one piece of this puzzle. Violence is much more than hitting and choking. It's a sophisticated phenomenon that mutates and manifests in many ways. Most of the men I work with struggle with the effects of psychological and emotional abuse—violence that leaves invisible scars. But as a society,

we tend to ignore violence that doesn't leave bruises. This focus on physical violence overwhelms the conversation, letting other iterations of violence go unnoticed, undiscussed, and untreated. For male victims, ignoring these other types of violence has major consequences; as we saw in the case of Miguel Chorrera, violence isn't only physical.

Miguel's case isn't unusual. Nearly 60% of men report that their abuse came from nonphysical actions such as emotional, psychological, or financial abuse. In my experience, this makes nonphysical violence more difficult to recognize and address because male victims are more likely to downplay or suppress it.

Men don't always recognize that they are being victimized because, from an early age, they have often been taught to believe they should be "strong," internalizing this to mean that they should be able to handle physical and emotional abuse. And if they aren't being physically assaulted, they may not recognize emotional and psychological abuses at all. I see it all the time in my practice—when a man doesn't appreciate he is a victim of domestic violence, he remains trapped in that abusive relationship. It's easier for him to think that the problem is *him*, rather than that he is a victim of abuse. After all, that's what his abuser is telling him. It's the very invisibility of nonphysical violence that makes it so destructive.

In fact, time and again, I see verbal, emotional, and psychological violence go undetected, especially in men, for years. Some men spend their entire lives enduring incremental violence without even knowing it. "There are many ways to be physically abused that do not leave visible scars," writes Dr. Elaine Weiss, speaking exclusively to women in her book, *Family and Friends' Guide to Domestic Violence*. "Domestic abuse is never a single incident; it is a campaign to achieve control."

The psychological abuse tactics Guadalupe used against Miguel were a campaign for control. Isolation, verbal abuse, and degradation are all weapons meant to control and coerce. If domestic violence is about controlling others, physical violence is only one way to get there.

Often, it is a desperate, last-ditch effort when all else has failed. But intimate partner relationships rarely begin with physical violence. More commonly, the abuse comes in the form of a series of slow escalations.

Someone doesn't need to be hit, choked, or slammed into a wall to have experienced domestic violence. Anyone who is being degraded, humiliated, or screamed at is experiencing violence. Anyone who is being lied to, cheated on, or financially threatened is experiencing violence. For men, domestic violence commonly manifests in ways that are not talked about. So, let's talk about them.

What Is Domestic Violence?

This book delves into the many ways that domestic violence manifests. For male victims, the most common and destructive act of violence experienced is psychological violence.

Emotional and Psychological Abuse

"Physical injuries will eventually heal," said Mark Brooks of the ManKind Initiative. "But mental injuries, psychological injuries? They take years, if not decades, to heal."

Psychological violence is complicated. It's not something you can see, which makes it difficult to prove. And when dealing with a stealthy, sophisticated perpetrator, a person can be victimized without even knowing that this is what's happening to them. Psychological violence shapeshifts into so many different situations it becomes difficult to define. And a lack of a clear and consistent definition of psychological violence has made it difficult to quantify in the research.

"Physical violence is just a lot easier to measure," said Dr. Denise Hines. "Psychological, emotional, and verbal abuse are harder. Take verbal abuse for example: Yelling at your partner is a pretty common thing, so when does it become psychological violence? If your partner yells at you once a year, it's probably not violence, you just

got into an argument. If they yell at you every day, it's violence. But when exactly does that line get crossed? How do we, as researchers, quantify it? Physical violence is easier to measure. A hit is a hit. The more complicated question is, Why was there a hit?"

Psychological violence is difficult to measure, yet it is the leading form of violence experienced by men in abusive relationships, and it takes on many surprising forms rarely acknowledged as violence at all. As an attorney, the most common concern I hear from my male clients is that their kids could be taken away from them. This is the number one reason why men stay in abusive relationships—because they want to be with their kids, or to protect their kids from their abusive spouse. The father often sees himself as the child's only line of defense.

Abusive spouses can use the legal system to separate a father from his children. Our society might not think of this as an act of violence—but I do. Abusive spouses use the court system all the time as a weapon against male victims of domestic violence.

Census data from 2020 shows that custody awards are shockingly out of balance: Mothers receive custody more than 80% of the time. Many of the men who lose their children in custody disputes often attend group meetings to grieve the loss of their children. They may experience severe depression. And while many men may think they've become statistics of a biased court system, few would be willing to admit that they were the victims of violence.

Losing your children in a custody dispute is not what society recognizes as a form of violence because it doesn't fit neatly into our typical definitions of what domestic violence is. Men can be victims of a biased court system, and having your children ripped away from you is an act of domestic violence and of psychological abuse. And while I'm not suggesting that all men who lose their children in a custody dispute are automatically victims of domestic violence, but I do think it's important to recognize that the children *can be* used by abusive spouses to keep men trapped in unsafe relationships. The loss of children is an emotional injury many men never recover from.

This was true for Miguel Chorrera, who felt he could never leave Guadalupe despite her many abusive acts. If he left his marriage, he would lose his children. Miguel preferred to bear the brunt of his partner's violence than risk never seeing his children again.

Emotional abuse can also take the form of gaslighting. *Gaslighting* is a form of psychological manipulation that seeks to make the victim doubt their own reality, memories, or perceptions. The term originates from Patrick Hamilton's 1938 play *Gas Light* and its film adaptations, in which a husband tries to convince his wife she's going insane by subtly altering aspects of her environment, and then denying those changes.

The gaslighter will often deny reality, denying facts, experiences, or events, insisting that things did not happen the way the victim recalls. They will trivialize the victim's feelings—"You're too sensitive" or "You're overreacting." They'll withhold information or pretend not to understand the victim's concerns. Or the abuser might question the victim's memory of an event, even if the victim recalls it clearly, suggesting an alternative version that paints the abuser in a positive light or the victim in a negative one.

"The victim feels compelled to accept an abuser's distorted version of what's true, and that acceptance equates to relinquishing control—even of one's own perception of reality," said Bernie Fitte, a man who survived a three-decades-long abusive relationship—and wrote about it in his memoir *Men Don't Talk About It*.

In gaslighting, the perpetrator will often change the subject or question the victim's thinking, often trying to shift blame onto the victim. Projection is another tool of the abuser when they're gaslighting, accusing the victim of the behaviors that they themselves exhibit. For example, if the abuser is lying, they might accuse the victim of being a liar.

"Abusive people know where the line is," said Michael Healey, a counselor at the Canadian Centre for Men's Health, the only clinic in that country dedicated to men. "There always seems to be some cognizant aspect of plausible deniability. They will figure out where

the line is, and they go right up to it. They train you. It's called intermittent reinforcement." Healey likened this technique to the way you train a dog. You don't have to give them a treat every time they perform a trick, you just give them a treat intermittently and then they're always coming back for the treat. It's the same when you're terrorizing someone. Think about how torture in interrogation works. If you torture a terrorist often enough, then you don't have to torture them the next time to bring out a proper response. You just show them the equipment and they respond to the threat.

Over time, these tactics can erode the victim's confidence in their own perceptions and make them more reliant on the abuser for a sense of reality. This dynamic often enables the gaslighter to maintain control over the victim and can lead to feelings of self-doubt, confusion, and even mental health issues in the victim.

The repercussions of this psychic tumult reverberate deeply within the mental health of victims. Beyond the immediate trauma, the echoes of such sustained psychological battering permeate into various aspects of their lives, including interpersonal relationships, self-esteem, and their inherent sense of self. Depression, anxiety, and PTSD are frequent shadows that trail behind victims, often long after they've exited the abusive environment. Suicidal ideation is also a significant concern among men who suffer from abuse by their partners, with government statistics indicating that about 1 in 10 of these men have considered taking their own life.

This figure is sometimes estimated to be about 15%.

Acknowledging these impacts are pivotal in crafting support systems and therapeutic interventions that genuinely resonate with, and rehabilitate, male victims.

Other Types of Domestic Abuse

As we'll see throughout this book, domestic violence can manifest in many ways that aren't physical. Emotional and verbal abuse includes insults, blaming, social isolation, intimidation, and degradation of the victim. As we saw in Miguel's story, these types of

nonphysical abuse are especially dangerous for men because they are so easy to ignore or dismiss. Certain stereotypes suggest that men should be able to handle emotional injuries, which means they are more likely to overlook emotional and verbal abuse as a form of domestic violence.

Sexual abuse is another dangerous yet surreptitious form of domestic abuse for men. Taking away a person's consent violates their sexual autonomy. For many men, speaking up against sexual violence can be difficult. In my practice, many of the men I counsel have a spouse who withholds sex—a common trope of television sitcoms, so typical it's considered comical.

"The way that violence against men is sometimes portrayed on TV or in comedy programs is in the context of humor," says researcher Elizabeth Bates. "So, we might laugh at women's violence towards men, and that does really have an impact. There are a number of things that stop men from seeking help, like the fear that no one will believe them or take them seriously. And the way it's portrayed in the media and the way we talk about it can add to that fear."

For many men, withholding sex is a manipulative tactic meant to gain control over their person. It's part of the campaign I spoke about previously. Think about it: In our society, what man could go to his friends or family to complain that his partner is withholding sex and call it abuse? Our society doesn't make space for that. Or imagine for a moment a man whose wife demands sex from him. Stereotypes imply that men should always be willing to engage in sexual activity. Our society can't see that men may not want to have sex with spouses who are forcing them into it. Consent is important for men, too.

Financial and Economic Abuse

Male victims of domestic violence can also suffer from financial abuse. When we think of who controls the finances in a relationship, we assume it's the man, or husband, and that this financial

power enables him to keep his wife dependent on him and unable to leave. There are countless stories like this. But financial abuse has other faces, too. To begin, it's a stereotype that men should be the sole financial providers of a family, and some abusive spouses take advantage of this stereotype. They avoid financial responsibility, leaving the male partner the sole provider for the household. Or the spouse may threaten to leave the relationship if their financial demands aren't met. The result of financial abuse is that it limits the victim's ability to be independent.

A woman might have greater financial resources in a relationship, such as earning a higher salary, having more financial assets, or managing family wealth, giving her control over the finances. In some situations, an abusive partner exploits the traditional expectation of men as the primary provider, demanding unreasonable financial support. Not meeting these expectations can lead to consequences. Some women might also manipulate societal norms to shirk financial responsibilities.

Financial abuse can have numerous psychological effects on the victim, as it inherently involves a power dynamic that strips the victim of autonomy and control in a crucial aspect of their life. The persistent concern about financial stability and managing expenses can lead to chronic stress. Being financially controlled can result in feelings of inadequacy and lowered self-worth.

Financial abuse results in instilling fear—a fear of being unable to survive independently due to financial instability. Not having a say in financial decisions can lead to feelings of helplessness and passivity. Having your spending dictated or being denied access to finances undermines personal autonomy.

The mismatch between the love professed by the abuser and their controlling behavior can be perplexing. The abuser might lie to make the victim believe they are financially inept. Chronic stress and anxiety might lead to physical health problems like headaches and stomach issues.

If the victim is a parent, they might feel inadequate due to their inability to financially provide for their children. Perceived or real

failures in securing financial freedom can result in a pervasive sense of inadequacy. Prolonged financial abuse might make victims doubt their ability to make sound financial decisions.

Economic abuse is distinct from financial abuse. It encompasses actions like preventing someone from pursuing a job, education, or self-improvement. It might also manifest as being denied access to one's own finances. This form of abuse is a significant issue for many men.

Even if they contribute half or more of the household income, they might not have access to the bank account or any financial autonomy. Overspending and accruing credit card debt on the part of the nonworking partner are other manifestations.

Men subjected to such abuse often face pressure from their partners' excessive demands.

Yet societal norms, which portray men as the primary breadwinners, might prevent them from recognizing their predicament's gravity.

Administrative Abuse

Administrative abuse refers to tactics used by an abuser to manipulate or control a victim through bureaucratic or administrative channels. This can include dragging the victim into frivolous legal battles, like custody disputes, merely to exhaust or intimidate them. These legal processes can be both emotionally draining and financially burdensome. If the victim is an immigrant, the abuser might threaten to report them to immigration authorities or withhold necessary documents. Administrative abuse may also involve controlling access to important documents, like passports or birth certificates, making it difficult for the victim to act independently. While related to financial abuse, administrative abuse goes beyond controlling bank accounts or credit scores—it uses official channels and systems to entrap or limit the victim's autonomy.

An abuser might even prevent the victim from seeking medical care, or might control their medical decisions. Withholding children's school records or deliberately choosing schools that are

inconvenient or inappropriate just to trouble the other parent can be a form of administrative abuse as well.

The abuser might control housing agreements or arrangements to keep the victim in a dependent position, or threaten them with homelessness. The abuser could interfere with the victim's employment by causing scenes at their workplace, withholding necessary work documents, or forcing them to miss work.

Like all elements of intimate partner violence, administrative abuse is about exerting power and control over a victim through systems, paperwork, and institutional channels. It highlights the fact that abuse is not always physical; it can be covert, bureaucratic, and insidiously restrictive, trapping victims in a web of red tape and power dynamics.

False Allegations

False allegations are a weapon of domestic abusers targeting men. They can be used to control, keeping victims tethered to their abusers. The mere threat can be paralyzing: "If you try to leave or report me, I'll tell everyone you were the abuser." Such coercive control can range from threats of destroying one's reputation to more sinister threats that implicate the victim in heinous crimes, such as sexual misconduct or child abuse.

In many countries, legal systems can be unintentionally complicit in this type of abuse. For instance, in Canada, a man facing allegations can get trapped in the legal system for years. Being falsely accused is not merely a legal predicament; it's a psychological maze. Over time, consistent threats and false allegations can chip away at a person's self-belief, leading them to doubt their own reality.

An analysis of 120 cases by researcher Susan Chuang found that while a large majority of reports were filed by women, only 29% were substantiated in court. These findings suggest that some allegations may not hold up under legal scrutiny, highlighting the potential for false claims to be used as a form of abuse in certain cases.

"Enduring relentless false accusations in a relationship can cause individuals to doubt their memories, [their] sense of what is natural or adequate, or even their perception of reality," explains Kara Nassour, a licensed professional counselor from Austin, Texas. False allegations can also have a significant impact on children, potentially leading to false memories being implanted in their minds.

Feelings of guilt may arise, even when the accused knows they are innocent. They might begin to wonder if something they did, or could have done, triggered their partner's distrust.

Repeated false accusations can come across as controlling behavior, which can lead to feelings of resentment and emotional detachment from the partner, says Sara Makin, a licensed professional therapist from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

"The accused person often feels the need to plead their case to their partner's satisfaction or, alternatively, ignore the issue, which only further distances them," Makin explains.

"Over time, individuals may begin to emotionally detach from the relationship in an attempt to avoid feelings of inadequacy or being perceived as 'the bad guy.'"

Parental Alienation

Parental alienation occurs when one parent manipulates the relationship with their children to harm the other parent. This can involve speaking negatively about the other parent in front of or directly to the children, or spreading lies about their character. The primary intention is to hurt the other parent, but it does more than that: It causes emotional distress for the children as well. Children, unaware of the manipulation, may side with the alienating parent, especially if that parent has custody. Over time, this manipulation can erode the bond between the children and the targeted parent, leading the children to resist or refuse visits.

Parental alienation is rarely discussed in books like this because it's a controversial topic.

Parental alienation is not universally recognized among mental health and legal professionals. While some therapists and counselors accept it as a genuine issue, the term *parental alienation* isn't formally recognized in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5-TR).

And there are concerns among experts that claims of parental alienation can be weaponized in custody battles. An abusive parent might falsely accuse the other of alienation as a strategy to gain custody or avoid allegations of their abuse. And some argue that claims of alienation can reflect gender biases that favor mothers as primary caregivers, while others believe that fathers might be more frequently accused of being the "alienating" parent.

It's complicated. That's exactly why we need to be talking about it.

Stalking

In addition to emotional, psychological, and financial manipulations, some abusive partners may resort to stalking, a repeated and deliberate pattern of behavior over time that causes the victim to fear for their safety. According to the National Coalition of Domestic Violence, 1 in 7 women and 1 in 18 men have been stalked by an intimate partner during their lifetime to the point where they felt very fearful or believed that they or someone close to them would be harmed or killed. Stalking can take various forms, such as repeated phone calls or emails, written communication, following the victim, or showing up unannounced at their home or current location. It's a persistent and intrusive act of harassment—it's also an indirect form of control.

As we'll see more in subsequent chapters, domestic violence comes in many forms, but it's nonphysical violence that has the most devastating effects on men.

Why Men Stay Silent

Our society's history of ignoring male victims is paradoxical. Male victims exist in the shadows because they are afraid to speak up. This silence has created a vicious cycle: Men are silent about their victimhood, resulting in a shortage of research. And since men don't come forward to report the violence they experience, we as a society don't recognize the urgency of the problem. The fewer men who talk about it, the less our society is likely to believe it exists.

"Not enough men are coming forward to get help because many men don't understand that what they're experiencing is actually domestic abuse," said Mark Brooks of the ManKind Initiative. "And there aren't services available for men because nobody's going to fund something where there doesn't seem to be any demand."

In his article "Women's Violence Toward Men Is a Serious Social Problem," Murray A. Straus, a leading sociologist, writes that men are not only depicted to be the more violent sex, but in American society, they are taught to view themselves as the stronger sex. This makes them less likely to report abuse, which highlights the stereotypes that often prevent male victims from speaking out and ending the cycle of abuse. These dated beliefs prevent male victims of domestic violence from coming forward. Our deeply ingrained stereotypes surrounding masculinity play a significant role in keeping male victims silent. Stereotypes include "Real men don't cry," "Men should be aggressive and dominant," "Men should be the sole providers," "Men should always be sexually aggressive," or "Men should be self-reliant and never ask for help." Faced with these societal stereotypes, male victims of domestic violence can feel embarrassed, ashamed, and emasculated. We'll explore these stereotypes in more depth in Chapter 4. But for now, it's important to remember that these stereotypes exist, and because of them, men either force themselves to "man up" and endure the abuse, or they outright deny the abuse is even happening.

In my one-on-one work with male victims, I've seen firsthand how these stereotypes impact men. They're so afraid of becoming the dreaded stereotype (e.g., feminine, gay, weak, powerless, ineffectual) that they'll do anything to avoid it, including denying their own pain. Even when they come to me for help, I have to be careful with the language I use, for fear of triggering their fragility. Words like *victim*, *survivor*, *abuse*, or *domestic violence* can cause men to shut down, turn inward, and start to deny their experiences. They don't want to feel emasculated, and many of those words have feminine connotations.

To avoid this problem, Dr. Hines has a technique she invokes: She redirects her questions away from the man and toward the spouse. She asks questions like "Is your partner aggressive toward you?" Or "Is your partner excessively angry all the time?" Or "Do you feel like you have to walk on eggshells a lot?"

I have a slightly different approach in my own work. When men come into my law office, I often start with more relatable terms. For example, I might ask about *marital problems* or *common issues* in the relationship, such as if their partner demands to go through their phone or insists on controlling social interactions. This approach helps normalize their experiences, making it easier for them to open up without feeling they are victims or speaking ill of their partners. As we will explore in greater detail later, this technique is crucial in the early stages of dialogue with survivors, who may love their partners deeply and often do not recognize the signs of abuse.

Fear and Stigma

In 2019, researcher Alyson Huntley and her colleagues at the University of Bristol reviewed 12 studies of male victims of intimate partner violence. What they found was a litany of reasons why men don't come forward. Throughout each study, a common theme emerged: fear. Fear of not being believed; fear of being wrongfully accused; fear of losing their children; fear of being seen

as weak. For many men, this weakness, this hardwired belief that coming forward and owning their victimhood would somehow emasculate them, kept them silent.

"When men are unable to see themselves as victims, it increases their reluctance to seek help," Huntley told Reuters Health. "The issue of masculinity is a societal one. Men are not expected to be the weak ones. It is a hard stereotype to work against."

Stigma is an invisible prison; it involves a label and a stereotype, with the label linking a person to a set of undesirable characteristics. If the stereotype is that men are supposed to be strong, then the stigma would be being weak. It mistakes vulnerability and victimhood for weakness. If we were a more enlightened society, men who come forward with their stories of abuse would be viewed as brave as women who do the same. But for male victims of domestic violence, society doesn't see them as strong or brave—it sees them as weak. Drilling deeper into the psychology of this stigma uncovers roots in deep-seated misogyny and homophobia.

"From a young age, boys are told, 'stiff upper lip; don't cry; you play like a girl'" said Ryan Thomas, Community Education Program Manager at Hope's Door New Beginning Center, an organization based out of Plano, Texas. His organization offers prevention and intervention services to those affected by intimate partner violence. "So, we're taught from a young age to devalue women. Society wants us to be in the 'man box.' So, men are supposed to be dominant and aggressive and all this stuff. That sets up a hierarchy already where one gender has power and control over the other. Essentially one's dominant, one's submissive and that's the exact power and control dynamics of an abusive relationship. Society tells us that men should be dominant and women submissive. So, this doesn't line up with reality, that oftentimes men are abused."

It becomes very difficult for a man to say he's been beaten up by a woman because he's been taught that women are the more fragile sex; a "real man" should be able to defend himself with ease. Failure to do so makes him feel like less of a man.

Denial of Victimhood

If the most common reason men remain in abusive relationships is because they don't know they're in one; the second most common reason they stay is because they don't want to *believe* they're in one. Denial is one of the leading reasons men don't seek help. As a society, we are all in deep denial that there is a population of abused, stigmatized men. But those men are also in denial.

"Men are stuck in gender stereotypes just as much as women are," says psychologist Amy Launder. "But for different reasons. As a society, we push men to remain strong, to keep their emotions and their problems to themselves, and as boys and men internalize this, they lose touch with their emotions and find the idea of talking about their feelings incredibly daunting."

We believe that men are less vulnerable to violence than women because they are physically stronger. And while men on average may be bigger and stronger, it does not make them immune from abuse. Female abusers are just as capable of inflicting harm, and they may use forms of abuse that do not require physical strength, such as psychological abuse. But men know that society has a specific expectation for them, one that defines their masculinity. And victimhood is outside of the cultural norms of masculinity. We've created a culture of stigmatized men who grow up believing a lie: that being a victim of violence is akin to being weak.

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Miguel Chorrera experienced this firsthand. Because he is physically stronger than his wife, the police assumed he was more than capable of defending himself. However, when the verbal and psychological abuse escalated to shoving and hitting, Miguel, who had been raised to never hit a woman, wasn't about to fight back physically. And he did not know how to ask for help. He felt powerless.

"One of the most prevalent myths we hear is about men being bigger and stronger and women being smaller and weaker," says Jan Brown, the founder and executive director of the Domestic Abuse

Helpline for Men and Women. "If a woman is prone to violence and the man is a nonviolent person then it's pretty easy. When you consider that a lot of men as young boys hear from their parents 'you should never hit a girl,' it's ingrained in them."

Domestic abuse against men is not taken as seriously as abuse against women due to the societal belief that men are stronger and should be able to defend themselves. Being hit by someone smaller is a source of great embarrassment for male victims because it tends to imply that they are incapable of standing up for themselves, something that every man is expected to be able to do.

Carmen Pitre, the executive director of the Sojourner Family Peace Center, says men are challenged by their community of family and friends, with questions like "What's wrong with you? You can't handle your woman?" "They think they should be macho. It adds a layer of difficulty for men."

The stigma of being perceived as weak when men are expected to be strong has consequences beyond domestic violence. The language we use to discuss male victims of domestic violence is equally important. In the interviews I've conducted with men who have experienced domestic violence, I found they do not respond positively to being called *victims* or *battered husbands* or *abused men*. They need things to be reframed in a way that protects their masculinity. When medical facilities use words like *victim*, it pushes men away and prevents them from reporting their abuse.

In August 2018, the American Psychological Association approved its first set of official guidelines for psychologists and therapists working with boys and men. The guidelines posit that males who are socialized to conform to "traditional masculinity ideology" are often negatively affected in terms of mental and physical health. They acknowledge that ideas about masculinity vary across cultures, age groups, and ethnicities. But they point to common themes like "anti-femininity, achievement, eschewal of the appearance of weakness, and adventure, risk, and violence."

Judy Y. Chu teaches about boys' psychosocial development at Stanford University and is the author of *When Boys Become Boys*. She said that men sometimes avoid seeking help from others, including from psychologists, because it could make them look weak.

"When boys and men challenge patriarchal constructions of gender, they're at risk of being perceived as failures, or as weak," Chu says.

Distrust of Broken Systems

"People often won't believe that men are victims," states Nicola Graham-Kevan, an expert in partner violence at Central Lancashire University. "Men have to be seen as passive, obvious victims with clear injuries, whereas, if a woman makes allegations, they are believed much more easily."

This points to another leading reason why men remain silent: a growing hopelessness and sense of distrust in the institutions designed to protect them. The stigmas and stereotypes we perpetuate as a society are so pervasive, they have poisoned our law enforcement and judicial systems as well.

Imagine being a man—especially a man who identifies as Black, Indigenous, or a Person of Color—who has just been attacked by his wife whom he outweighs and towers over. He fears that the police who come to the door will be aggressive, racist, and not at all trained in the emotional intelligence necessary to de-escalate, or navigate, a sensitive situation. Men fear police will arrive and second-guess their claims. The police may side with the woman because they believe the cultural stereotypes. And men fear they will not only be retraumatized when they are disbelieved, but may also risk being falsely accused or arrested.

Men often choose not to contact the police due to these negative expectations of being ridiculed, of not being believed, and of being arrested themselves. As it turns out, their fears are not unfounded.

Those men who *did* contact authorities reported unfriendly and antagonistic treatment and the police's reluctance to charge abusive female partners.

In the 1980s, many states implemented mandatory arrest laws in cases of domestic violence. In some regions of the United States, this mandatory law requires police to arrest an alleged batterer regardless of evidence or the wishes of the victim. To complicate matters, most police officers are trained to perceive men as the perpetrators. For example, police trainings often include role-playing scenarios where they are trained to arrest the male perpetrator. In my opinion, these laws were an overcorrection to make up for decades of police indifference and have resulted in both men and women *not* calling the police because they don't want their spouse to go to jail. They just want police to intervene and de-escalate, not arrest.

For male victims of domestic violence, this adds a layer of shame. The last thing a man wants to admit to police is that he's been beaten up by a woman (or a partner of any gender) who is smaller than he is. And if the violence is nonphysical, the likelihood of a male victim turning to the police for help lessens even further.

Just like violence has no gender, neither does stigma, fear, or shame. Women share the same trust issues about the police and the agencies designed to protect them. While there are, fortunately, systems in place to protect and support women who report their abuse, their struggle is far from over. And if it's still a struggle for women to come forward, even with some support in place, imagine how difficult it is for men—who have no support—to come forward and admit their abuse. Men fear their abuse will be minimized or ridiculed simply because they are male. According to criminologist Yngvil Grøvdal, these fears are founded. Her research and interviews found that in many instances, police and court systems do not take male victims seriously.

If men don't report their abuse because they feel no one will ever believe them, then this lack of data and statistics will fail to

show the true enormity of the problem. This impacts how research is funded, how governments react, and how social movements gain traction.

Reframing the Narrative

One of the biggest reasons we don't hear the stories of male victims nearly as much is due to the narrative that controls our understanding of domestic violence. In a study using a dataset of Swedish newspaper articles from 1905 to 2015, researchers found that more than 90% of all crime articles focus on male offenders.[1] But a biased media is only part of the problem.

In the 1960s and 1970s, when domestic violence against women was spotlighted (with the help of the Women's Movement), women were struggling with many of the same issues men face today. They were not coming forward out of fear of not being believed. They feared speaking out would leave them prone to violence, or worse. Or they retreated into a state of denial, refusing to accept that they were victims. But as the movement to prevent domestic violence against women gained traction, support systems rose, laws were put in place, and by sharing their stories, women were able to start changing the national and global narrative.

The mid-1980s saw researchers from the University of New Hampshire present findings from two national surveys that revealed that both men and women experienced intimate partner violence at similar rates, with roughly six million individuals from each gender facing some kind of physical assault by their partners annually. However, these findings faced skepticism, especially from advocates dedicated to helping battered women.[2]

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[1] https://web.archive.org/web/20190922192111id; https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/2578983X.2019.1657269?needAccess=true

[2] Russell, B., & Hamel, J. (2022). *Gender and domestic violence: Contemporary legal practice and intervention reforms* (pp. 3–4). Oxford University Press.

At that time, much of the prevailing research and news emphasized women as the primary victims of severe IPV. Because men were the perpetrators in the majority of violent crimes and were responsible for 97.2% of reported rapes, it was too difficult to see men as victims. The IPV victim advocacy movement merged with the feminist political movement and gave rise to what is termed the *gender paradigm*.[3]

One unexpected consequence of women speaking out and telling their stories is that we began to see domestic violence perpetrators as stereotypically male. This forced the men who experienced domestic violence into silence. The result is that we resist the narrative that men can also be victims of domestic violence, because (so the thinking goes) this will somehow weaken the struggle women still face.

"There was fear from women's groups that if the focus shifted to male victims, their funding would dry up, and funding is tough to get," said Dr. Hines. "It's hard to keep that funding. But now that [we] have had fifty years of funding for women, why can't we open our doors to all victims? Maybe it's time we do."

To truly open our doors to all victims, we need to reframe the narrative completely. And reframing the narrative about male victims of domestic violence requires a collective effort from us all. The responsibility lies with us all to challenge the prevailing gendered discourse surrounding domestic violence. By recognizing that abuse can and does affect all genders, we can shift the conversation away from gender and toward inclusivity and empathy. This book aims to serve as a catalyst for this collective act of reframing. It aims to dismantle societal misconceptions and biases, inviting everyone to reevaluate their preconceived notions about who can be a victim of domestic violence.

By reframing the narrative, we not only acknowledge the suffering experienced by male victims but also create space for them to seek support without fear of judgment or dismissal. By broadening

[3] Ibid.

the conversation and dismantling the gendered lens through which we view domestic violence, we can ensure that support systems are available for everyone affected, regardless of their gender identity.

Unlearning False Narratives

The false narrative we must unlearn is that domestic violence only happens to women. It happens to men, too. This violence has nothing to do with whether a man is "strong," or with his physical size in relation to his partner or anyone else. The truth is that nothing prevents men from being victims of domestic violence. Shining a light on this silence, and bringing it out into the open, is the goal of this book, and my life's work.

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Before we can learn more about male victims, who they are, what they experience, and why they stay in abusive relationships, we must first unlearn these broken messages that got us here in the first place. We must do the following:

- Be willing to challenge the flawed conventional wisdom.
- Challenge the dangerous stereotypes.
- Broaden our minds to understand that violence isn't gendered, and it isn't always physical.
- Reconcile the dichotomy that while men have lived with an enormous amount of privilege, they have also been victims of violence at alarming rates.
- Be willing to disrupt the false narrative that men cannot be abused. If we don't, the stories of men like Miguel Chorrera will remain invisible.

Miguel Chorrera is still married to his abusive wife because he fears losing his children. He doesn't report the violence he endures because he doesn't trust police, and he doesn't think anyone will believe him. Over the past three years, he has been threatened

with deportation, isolated from his family, and degraded with verbal abuse. He has even been falsely accused of hitting his wife, which forced him into an expensive legal battle to prove his innocence. But he doesn't feel like he can leave. The safe spaces he's turned to for help have responded to him with mockery and ridicule. The police have failed him. The court systems are rigged against him.

"If I had any advice to give other men in my situation, it would be to just stay quiet," he said. "If you speak up or do anything, it will only get worse for you."

While Miguel believes that staying quiet is his only option, this book is about disrupting that silence. We must change the narrative. It's only by breaking the silence, sharing these stories, and challenging the systems that fail men like Miguel that true progress can be made. We can't afford to stay quiet any longer. Men need to know they are not alone, and they deserve the same support and protection.