

United States: Domestic violence experts lament fallout from Depp-Heard trial

Jury rules in favor of Johnny Depp

Saturday 4 June 2022, by [HELMORE Edward](#), [SALAM Erum](#) (Date first published: 4 June 2022).

Advocates for survivors of domestic violence found little to celebrate in the course of the trial or its outcome

In one of the most famous and public trials between a divorced couple to date, all eyes were on [Johnny Depp](#) and Amber Heard - two Hollywood actors once in love, claiming the other committed violence against them.

But the jury's mixed verdict was largely in favor of Depp and the court of public opinion seemed to overwhelmingly side with the actor most known for playing a mischievous but lovable pirate in the Pirates of the Caribbean movies. Internet super-sleuths and [influencers](#) went to great lengths to dismantle Heard's testimony in support of Depp.

But advocates for survivors of domestic violence called the whole trial a spectacle, causing more harm than good and saw no cause for celebration at its conclusion. Instead they warned the course of the trial - and its outcome - had caused harm to the cause of tackling domestic violence and helping its victims.

Michelle Sacks, director of training at the Houston Area Women's Center, said coverage of the trial was inescapable - visible everywhere from cellphone screens to televisions in doctors' offices to newspapers and magazines in checkout lines at grocery stores. For some survivors of domestic violence, that served as a trigger - especially for those considering coming forward with their stories for the first time.

"I'm sure, it has brought up a lot of feelings. So if you think about survivors that have been trying to heal privately - this definitely, you know, can ignite a trauma response sometimes," she said.

She said she hoped that the outcome of the trial would not affect those wanting to tell their own stories.

"Just because the jury decided that way, doesn't mean that it didn't happen. I think that's really important to kind of get across - just to believe anyone that may disclose something to you. And if you know that someone is struggling, just let them know that they didn't deserve it, that it's not their fault, and that there are services available. It doesn't have to be anything that's current."

According to the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, one in four women and one in nine men experience severe intimate partner violence while one in three women and one in four men have experienced some form of physical violence by an intimate partner.

Some online commenters on the trail suggested both parties were wrong and chalked it up to a

deeply toxic relationship, where the responsibility should be shared equally. But Sacks said violence in relationships is not always that simple.

“I’m going to tell you right now that there is always, always a primary aggressor. So sometimes, what we see is if there’s kind of maybe some violence on both sides, it could be you have the primary [aggressor] and that the secondary is just responding to what’s going on.

“It’s not easy to try to figure that out. I’m not saying there’s this magic formula. It definitely takes a lot of work to try to figure it out.”

Marta Prada Peláez, the chief executive officer of Family Violence Prevention Services in San Antonio, Texas, said it was important to take into consideration power dynamics. That power could be determined by who is physically larger, or more famous or wealthier.

“Johnny Depp is the pirate of the Caribbean. He’s [Edward] Scissorhands. He is an adorable monster. There is an element of sympathy that you develop because the character has been made to do that to you emotionally. So I think that he exploited that. In a relationship where there is domestic violence, there cannot be ever two abusers or two victims. That does not happen. That is not domestic violence. [Domestic violence](#) has only one abuser.”

Despite her best efforts to avoid the trial, Peláez called it an unnecessary spectacle in which there were no winners and the only losers were the victims of domestic violence.

She said she hoped the trial did not affect survivors or set them back emotionally and to remember this was a trial that determined if someone was defamed, not whether or not someone was physically abused.

“We cannot allow the victims to fall back on any intention to seek help and to seek resources simply because this has happened. It’s going to be more difficult.

“They already lack the trust in the system. All systems have failed them time and time again.”

Erum Salam

• The Guardian. Sat 4 Jun 2022 10.00 BST:

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2022/jun/04/depp-heard-trial-domestic-violence-experts>

Depp-Heard trial verdict: jury rules in favor of Johnny Depp

The focus of the case was a 2018 editorial Heard wrote calling herself ‘a public figure representing domestic abuse’

The jury in the Johnny Depp-Amber Heard defamation trial has ruled in favor of Johnny Depp, finding that a Washington Post editorial she wrote defamed her former husband.

The jurors’ unanimous decision on Wednesday capped a seven-week trial in a Virginia courtroom which featured dozens of witnesses and experts weighing in on whether Depp was abusive to Heard - or vice versa - during their 15-month marriage.

Jurors ruled in favor of Depp's claim of defamation across three counts, awarding the actor \$15m. The judge later reduced the amount to \$10.35m, citing a limit to punitive damages under state law. In a statement, Depp said that six years after he had been accused of domestic abuse by Heard, "the jury gave me my life back. I am truly humbled."

Heard won on one count of her countersuit, in which she demanded \$100m and argued she was defamed by a Depp press agent who called her allegations "an abuse hoax" aimed at capitalising on the #MeToo movement.

She was awarded \$2m.

Depp was not present for the verdict and watched from the UK. Heard was in the courtroom as the verdict was read out.

In his statement, issued via a spokesperson, Depp said: "My decision to pursue this case, knowing very well the height of the legal hurdles that I would be facing and the inevitable, worldwide spectacle into my life, was only made after considerable thought.

"From the very beginning, the goal of bringing this case was to reveal the truth, regardless of the outcome. Speaking the truth was something that I owed to my children and to all those who have remained steadfast in their support of me. I feel at peace knowing I have finally accomplished that."

Depp continued: "I hope that my quest to have the truth be told will have helped others, men or women, who have found themselves in my situation, and that those supporting them never give up.

"I also hope that the position will now return to innocent until proven guilty, both within the courts and in the media."

The actor signed his statement "Veritas numquam perit" - Truth never perishes.

Heard left the court without comment. But the 36-year-old actor posted soon after on Twitter that she was heartbroken by the verdict.

"The disappointment I feel today is beyond words. I'm heartbroken that the mountain of evidence still was not enough to stand up to the disproportionate power, influence and sway of my ex-husband," Heard said.

"I'm even more disappointed with what this verdict means for other women. It's a setback. It sets back the clock to a time when a woman who spoke up and spoke out could be publicly humiliated. It sets back the idea that violence against women is to be taken seriously," she said.

Outside the court, Depp attorneys Benjamin Chew and Camille Vasquez offered comments before a cheering crowd of Depp fans. The verdict, said Vasquez, "confirmed what we have said from the beginning - that the claims against Johnny Depp were defamatory and unsupported by any evidence".

Chew said Depp's legal team was "most pleased that the trial has resonated with so many people in the public who value truth and justice". The attorneys did not take questions.

The stunning verdict is a sharp reversal on a London libel court action that Depp brought against the Sun newspaper and its editor, Dan Wootton, that found it was "substantially true" that Depp was a "wife beater".

The US legal bar to prove defamation is far higher than in the UK, making Wednesday's verdict in Fairfax, Virginia, potentially a far more substantial vindication for Depp than the ruling against him in the UK.

In the Virginia case, Depp had to prove not only that he never assaulted Heard, but that Heard's article defamed him and also that she had done so "with malice" or knowing that the claim was false.

Depp v Heard: the key turning points in the seven-week trial - video

"For Heard the verdict is absolutely damning, but for Depp it's reputation restoration," said Amber Melville-Brown, head of the US media and reputation team at the international law firm Withers.

"A jury is supposed to be a cross-section of society, and all indications were that Johnny Depp was winning in the court of public opinion and the jury reflected that."

For Heard, she said, the UK ruling "doesn't cancel out for her that seven people in Virginia believed she falsified her evidence".

Brett Turnbull at Turnbull Holcomb & Lemoine said the verdict reflected that the jury found only mutual name calling and false truths to have hurt the other, not physical or emotional mutual abuse.

"We need not forget that the verdict said both intentionally used words to hurt each other that were untrue," Turnbull said.

Virginia attorney Chris Leibig said the finding was typical for jurors in the state who "tend to apply facts to the law strictly, element by element".

Depp, in his final testimony to the jury last week, said the trial gave him a chance to clear his name in a way that the UK trial never allowed.

"No matter what happens, I did get here and I did tell the truth and I have spoken up for what I've been carrying on my back, reluctantly, for six years," Depp said.

Heard, in her counterclaim over statements Depp's lawyer Adam Waldman made to the Daily Mail, said the trial has been an ordeal inflicted by an orchestrated smear campaign led by Depp.

Heard said after the verdict: "I believe Johnny's attorneys succeeded in getting the jury to overlook the key issue of Freedom of Speech and ignore evidence that was so conclusive that we won in the UK."

The case turned on a December 2018 opinion piece Heard wrote in the Post, describing herself as "a public figure representing domestic abuse".

Heard did not name Depp in the piece. The 58-year-old actor sued anyway, demanding \$50m.

In final arguments, attorneys for Heard told the panel ruling against her would mean they were telling abuse victims: "If you didn't take pictures, it didn't happen. If you didn't seek medical attention, you weren't injured."

The lawyer Benjamin Rottenborn said Heard deserved to win the case if jurors believed she "was abused by Mr Depp even one time".

Lawyers for Depp sought to convince jurors Heard lied about abuse, citing records in which the actor admits to hitting Depp and calling him "a baby".

Recordings of Depp admitting to hitting Heard were not introduced as evidence at the trial because “it didn’t happen”, Depp attorney Camille Vasquez said.

Edward Helmore

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