

# Violence against women: Many terrorists' first victims are their wives - but we're not allowed to talk about that

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**The links between domestic violence and mass killings are now exhaustively documented. So why the conspiracy of silence?**

In America, they call it the Day Three Story. After a mass shooting, depending on whether the suspect is young or old, white, Asian or black, Muslim or Christian, the press speculates on his motives (and yes, it is almost always a “he”). And then on Day Three, when attention has wandered elsewhere, when he’s been deemed a “lone wolf” (white) or a “dangerous radical who hates our way of life” (Muslim), another piece of the jigsaw emerges. He has a history of domestic violence.

Who are the most likely victims of an American mass shooter, by the way? Would you care to take a guess? It’s overwhelmingly likely to be his family [1]. (Of mass killers between 2009 and 2015, 16 per cent had previously been charged with domestic violence. More than half included a partner or close family member in their death toll.) We also know that the time a woman is most in danger from our violent partner is when she tries to leave - when he feels worried that his control is slipping away.

These incidents are not often described as terrorism, despite a concerted attempt from women’s groups to draw out the parallels with other mass killers. One of the most moving statements I’ve read this year was by the sons of Lance Hart, who killed his wife Claire, along with their daughter Charlotte, after she finally announced she would leave him. On Facebook, Luke Hart wrote [2]:

*“It was the result of decades of abuse and controlling and intimidating behaviour. He was a tyrant who wouldn’t let his family live outside of his domination. Our father was a terrorist living within our own home; he had no cause but to frighten his family and to generate his own esteem from trampling and bullying us. For over a decade we had tried to leave on numerous occasions but he manipulated and threatened on every occasion.”*

Lance Hart killed himself after shooting his wife and daughter - something which is typical in “family annihilation” cases.

But if we don’t care to talk about the role that maleness and masculinity has in such cases, then we *definitely* don’t want to talk about them in relation to Islamic terrorism. But yesterday - Day Three - here it was, a story about one of the London Bridge killers’ history of wife-beating and manipulation.

Rachid Redouane kicked and slapped his wife [3], tried to make her wear the hijab, prevented her from drinking and smoking. He got her pregnant even though it appears that, for him, the marriage was more about getting residency in the UK than love. His control took the form of trying to make her more devout - whereas someone like Lance Hart, with a different set of cultural values behind

him, controlled his wife by withholding money and refusing to let her see her friends [4].

Redouane is far from the only Islamist terrorist to have a background like this. Mohamed Lahouaiej Bouhlel, who drove a truck into crowds in Nice, had a criminal record for domestic violence [5]. After Omar Mateen killed 49 people in the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, his ex-wife said [6]: “He beat me. He would just come home and start beating me up because the laundry wasn’t finished or something like that.”

Like Mateen, the Westminster Bridge attacker Khalid Masood does not seem to have any formal contact with Islamic State or other terror groups. His attack was “inspired” rather than “directed” by jihadi groups such as IS. Masood was also a convert to Islam (as many Islamic terrorists are), appears to have been radicalised in prison, and - surprise, surprise - he also had a history of domestic violence and coercive control. “He was very violent towards her, controlling in every aspect of her life - what she wore, where she went, everything,” a friend told the *Mirror* [7].

Clearly, the most extreme interpretations of Islam give succour to an impulse which is also felt by other men who are racked by feelings of rage and inadequacy and who feel they deserve more respect. They can berate and bully their wives for not eating halal food and not wearing the hijab or niqab, and tell themselves it’s not their petty control-freakery they’re displaying, but the will of God. It gives them an excuse for how they wanted to behave anyway.

Over the last few days, I have been left completely dejected by the debate which followed the London Bridge attacks. We’ve had a big public argument about greater police numbers, when the police response was exemplary. We’ve had Ukip calling for internment camps for some or all of the 3,000 people the security services believe might be actively contemplating an attack.

What we haven’t talked about, what it feels like we can *never* talk about, is male violence. And yet that threads through these stories in so many ways. Take our prisons, which the government worries are a source of radicalisation, even to the extent that Liz Truss has called for special units to isolate radical inmates [8]. Prisons are primarily a problem of men: there are 81,000 of them in British jails, compared with just under 4,000 women. Prisons are overcrowded and underfunded, and they end up being the gutter into which men who have been failed by other services wash out. And then they are released, only to wash back in again. Prisons are both boring and frightening places to be: no wonder young inmates are at risk of radicalisation there, no wonder they seek out a sense of belonging.

Then there are the red flags which are missed because we don’t take domestic violence seriously enough. The whole women’s sector is underfunded, and refuge provision is patchy. The budget cuts of the last few years have hit black and minority ethnic women’s services particularly hard [9] - see the regular protests by Sisters Uncut. The first victim of a terrorist is often his wife. If she doesn’t have anywhere to turn, if she doesn’t have anyone to tell, then we are missing chances to stop these men in their tracks. If women’s services had better contact with minority groups, we could find out earlier which men had already turned to violence - in their own homes.

Despite this, talking about male violence in the context of terrorism is treated like derailing - like you’ve mounted your feminist hobby horse when the grown-ups were talking. The people who control the discussion of Islamist terrorism don’t want to talk about this stuff. They see discussion of foreign policy, religion and “our values” like old-fashioned teachers saw Maths and English: proper, respectable subjects. Talking about male violence is a bit . . . film studies. Sociology. You know. Softer, girly, less rational, all the ways we dismiss anything associated with women. And of course elevating it in our discourse would mean ceding some ground in the conversation to the experts in the field - who are largely women.

Add to that the fact the right doesn't want to talk about male violence because feminism is seen as inherently left-wing. And finally, garnish the dish with the fact that many of us know or have known a man who behaves like these men did to their wives. Admitting that there might be a link between coercive, abusive behaviour in the home and other forms of violence chips away a little at the safe, comforting Othering we apply to terrorists.

Enough is enough, as Theresa May said in a different context. We have to take the links between domestic violence and terror seriously. The next time someone tells you that people are afraid to talk about the Real Reasons for terror, smile sweetly and agree. Then ask them what they think should be done about male violence.

**Helen Lewis**

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**P.S.**

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<http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk/2017/06/many-terrorists-first-victims-are-their-wives-were-not-allowed-talk-about>

\* For more on this subject, listen to this week's New Statesman podcast.

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## Footnotes

[1] <http://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/domestic-violence-nearly-three-u-s-women-killed-every-day-n745166>

[2] <https://www.facebook.com/Luke.hart89/posts/10211753477100030?pnref=story>

[3] <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/london-bridge-terrorist-rachid-redouane-10574196>

[4] <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/06/01/killer-shot-wife-daughter-controlling-vitriolic-bully-say-sons/>

[5] <https://www.thecut.com/2016/07/mass-killers-terrorism-domestic-violence.html>

[6] <http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2016/06/orlando-nightclub-shooting-leaves-20-dead.html>

[7] <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/ex-wife-london-terror-attacker-10094735>

[8] <http://www.bbc.com/news/av/uk-37152880/liz-truss-rooting-out-prison-extremism-is-key>

[9] ESSF (article 41244), [Britain: Osborne's budget cuts will cripple services for vulnerable black and minority ethnic women](#).