

PBS's negative picture of fathers

By Cathy Young

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CHILD CUSTODY battles are always wrenching, particularly when there are allegations of abuse. For years fathers' rights groups have complained that men face a pervasive bias in family courts, while many feminists have countercharged that the real bias is against women. The latest round of this debate is being waged over a documentary, "Breaking the Silence: Children's Stories," which has been airing on Public Broadcasting Service affiliates in the past month.

The film's point is simple: Children in America are routinely ripped from their mothers and given to fathers who are batterers or molesters. The women's claims of abuse are not believed by the courts and are even held against them when mothers are suspected of manufacturing false charges as a divorce strategy.

To fathers' groups, "Breaking the Silence" is blatant antifather propaganda. In a campaign led by the Boston-based Fathers and Families, PBS has been bombarded with thousands of calls and letters. It is now conducting a 30-day review of the research used in the film.

Film producer Dominique Lasseur told me he was shocked by the backlash. "I have nothing against fathers," says Lasseur, a father of two, "but I have outrage about children being given to abusers."

There is no question that our legal system fails children all too often. But the PBS documentary presents a skewed and sensationalist picture.

Thus, Joan Meier, a George Washington University law professor and one of the film's main experts, asserts that "75 percent of contested custody cases have a history of domestic violence" and that about two-thirds of fathers "accused or adjudicated of battering" win sole or joint custody of their children.

The website of the film's producers, Tatge/Lasseur productions, lists two sources for these claims: a study of 39 abused women involved in custody litigation in Massachusetts, and the 1990 report of the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court Gender Bias Study Committee which states that fathers who actively seek custody obtain primary or joint physical custody over 70 percent of the time.

But the 70 percent figure was not limited to domestic violence cases. It is also highly misleading, since it doesn't separate custody disputes from cases in which the father gets custody by mutual consent. In contested custody cases, mothers are two to four times more likely to prevail.

"Breaking the Silence" seems to suggest that abusers who get custody of their children are

virtually always male. In response to criticism, the filmmakers say on their site that since "women are five to eight times more likely than men to be victimized by an intimate partner," to feature one male victim of abuse alongside five women would have "overstated the problems of men."

The accuracy of their figures is questionable: the federally funded National Violence against Women Survey suggests that over a third of domestic violence victims are male. That aside, doesn't featuring *zero* abusive mothers significantly understate that problem?

Lasseur told me that if he had encountered cases in which an abusive mother was awarded custody of the children, he would have reported on them. I asked about the claim on a battered men's advocacy site that a man named Tom Gallen had approached him with exactly such a case. Lasseur conceded that Gallen had a well-documented story but explained that, relying on his "instinct as a producer," he felt that Gallen wouldn't be the right person to use.

It's difficult to assess the credibility of the stories actually used in the film, since their presentation is deliberately one-sided. (Lasseur told me that women's allegations of abuse are often "dismissed because it's he said/she said," and that he didn't want to recreate that dynamic.) In at least one case, involving a 16-

year-old identified as "Amina," there are serious questions about the film's accuracy.

Official documents supplied by the girl's father, Scott Loeliger, and posted at www.glennsacks.com, show that there were fairly serious child abuse allegations against "Amina's" mother. Moreover, the only spousal abuse mentioned in these documents is violence toward the father by the mother.

The documents also reveal a messy, complicated case in which most evaluators concluded that both parents were behaving "abominably." "Breaking the Silence" simplifies this into a straightforward story of a villainous man and a noble, victimized woman, and does so in the service of a film whose overall effect is to vilify fathers.

The filmmakers contend that their only concern was the well-being of children. Yet, if the film contributes to a climate in which fathers who seek custody are tagged as suspected abusers, it could endanger children as well. PBS should rectify this bias by presenting programs with a different point of view.

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