

# Why Emotionally Abusive Women Are Given a Pass in Pop Culture

Cultural commentary is usually interesting because it's easy to relate to. Even if you don't agree with the author's conclusion or any soft political message, you recognize the scenes and situations that the writer describes. Yet as I read [Karen Rinaldi's article](#) in *Motto* (an online project of *Time*), I thought she must live on another planet. Here is how she sets the stage:

*A few weeks ago, I was talking with a friend about another friend's husband who had called his wife a "stupid bitch" in front of their daughters in a moment of anger. He later apologized to the family. He'd had a hard day at the office. He didn't really mean what he'd said, and he'd humbled himself in front of his wife and kids. We knew that he was basically a good guy. Basically a good guy...*

*What is the female equivalent to that catch phrase? There isn't one. Men are forgiven for behaving badly because the assumption is that underneath it all they are basically well intentioned. They can't help themselves from being belligerent or abusive, because, well, "it's what men do." This generalization is entirely unfair: unfair to men who do not behave badly and unfair to men who do – and need help – and unfair to women.*

I don't know where she lives or who her friends are, but I cannot imagine anyone I know shrugging off a husband calling his wife "stupid bitch"—particularly in front of children, but even if they were alone—as the forgivable transgression of a good guy having a bad day. It's not that my friends wouldn't be able to forgive him, but they'd see it as a symptom, at

least, of larger anger issues that overshadow any other “good guy” traits. The verdict would be that he needs help since his behavior was completely out of bounds.

Rinaldi’s other examples—a man who makes a sexist remark at a meeting or a man who insults his date in front of his friends—might be shrugged off as anomalies, depending on their specifics. Did the man perhaps think the “insult” of his date was a teasing jest? Could the sexist remark have been careless phrasing? Those more shades-of-gray incidents might earn someone the “good guy” pass.

But Rinaldi insists that women are far less likely to have their own bad behavior excused, writing:

*When has anyone ever heard, as a pardon for a woman’s bad behavior, “She is basically a good woman?” Never. Because as frequently as we hear, “He’s basically a good guy,” we also hear, “She’s such a bitch.” Women are not so readily forgiven for their transgressions, no matter how small.*

But this doesn’t ring true with my experience either. She’s right that I’ve never heard the phrase, “She’s basically a good woman,” but I’ve heard plenty of excuses like “she’s under so much stress” or “she’s juggling so much” to explain why a woman yelled harshly at her kids, over-reacted to a perceived slight at work, or was rude to a colleague or friend.

In fact, when it comes to relations between the sexes or within couples, I’ve seen far more women treat their husbands badly in public than the reverse. Certainly there is deplorable treatment of women showcased in rap music and violent video games, but in most of society, women seem to have far greater license to mistreat and belittle men. Men in commercials and sitcoms are routinely characterized as bumbling Homer Simpson-style morons; intellectuals routinely ponder if it’s [The End of Men](#) and ask [Are Men Necessary?](#) and

appear not to feel at all uncomfortable with effectively devaluing half of our population.

This double standard is everywhere. The day after I read Rinaldi's article, I saw a sign outside of a bar that read:

*HUSBAND DAYCARE CENTRE*

*Need time to relax?*

*Need time for yourself?*

*Want to do shopping?*

*Leave your husband with us!*

*Standard package: 1 Glass of wine*

*Delux [sic] package: 1 bottle of wine & carbonara*

Granted, I was in Malta, but this kind of marketing gimmick is common in the U.S. as well. Everyone I was with chuckled when we saw it, but we all agreed that one would never see the same sign offering daycare for a wife. It would be considered entirely inappropriate to suggest, even jokingly, that an adult woman is in need of "daycare" and that it's the husband's duty to find a place to park her for the day so he can have some fun.

Rinaldi's perspective seems driven by her frustration with Donald Trump's election, in spite of the infamous Billy Bush tape, in which he made graphic, vulgar remarks about women. But this overlooks that Trump survived that scandal *in spite of* Americans' disgust with that tape and his behavior. Voters had to weigh all of the personal failings of both candidates and their different visions for the country when deciding whom to support. That doesn't mean they endorsed what he did or would accept such behavior in other circumstances.

Rinaldi also suggests that women, particularly in the wake of

Trump's election, have little power or voice in influencing society or how these debates unfold. That belittles the tremendously important role that women play in setting the boundaries of what's acceptable—as teachers, mothers, community and business leaders. She's right that we shouldn't excuse men's truly bad behavior, but we also shouldn't overlook our own responsibility to create an environment that judges both sexes fairly and treats everyone with respect.

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