Recent studies of working-class women have argued that their status within the family declined in the 19th century as a result of industrialization and urbanization. Historians such as Joan Scott, Louise Tilly, Laura Oren, and Peter Stearns have linked this decline in status to the erosion of the traditional family economy. They argue that in the traditional family, women were "working partners in the family enterprise" and thus enjoyed considerable power. Industrialization and urbanization eliminated the many small, noncash economic activities by which women contributed to the family economy; at the same time, few new opportunities for employment were created, especially for married women. Consequently, women became increasingly dependent on male wage earners.

Following from this argument, increased economic dependency on men has been linked with a general worsening of the working-class woman's lot. Laura Oren, for example, has shown that the uneven distribution of income between laborers and their wives had a ruinous effect on the wives' diet and health. Peter Stearns has written more generally of the psychological deterioration of working-class women. He finds evidence that they were "bored and confused" in their new positions as dependents in the family.

The ramifications of change in the working-class family have not been fully explored in terms of women's personal experience, however. Most studies have based their conclusions primarily on analyses of the family's economic behavior. In this paper, I want to study another index to the treatment of working-class women: violence between the sexes. By examining the incidence, context of, and attitudes toward male-female violence, I want to suggest a somewhat different interpretation of the declining status of working-class women in 19th century England. This interpretation depends on two lines of analysis: first, a descriptive typology of male-female violence which treats it in a static, ethnographic fashion, and second, a more speculative discussion of the evolution of both working-class and middle-class attitudes toward this form of violence.

Crimes of violence between working-class men and women reveal a great deal about their personal relationships. In trials for assault and murder, one can find detailed information about the issues and actions which provoked people to the most extreme resolution of conflict. An analysis of such cases locates common sources of tension between the sexes, and reveals the attitudes and expectations which shaped their relationships.

Acts of violence must have shaped even the male-female relationships in which no violence occurred. In the crowded working-class districts of London, a
beating was rarely a private act. The tensions culminating in conflict as well as the actual beating were highly visible. From the testimony of witnesses in court, it is clear that neighbors regularly watched and even participated in each other's personal quarrels. Thus, whatever their own experience, no working-class man or woman could escape exposure to violence between the sexes. Their behavior toward one another was shaped by the realization that violence was one possible outcome of a conflict.

The study of these crimes does not assume, however, that murder or assault characterized every working-class household. Those cases which came to trial undoubtedly involved circumstances of "peculiar outrage" that distinguished them from common household quarrels. Yet one can argue that the instances of extreme violence shed light on ordinary male-female behavior. The people who committed these crimes were not professional criminals. Their acts of violence were rarely premeditated. Those convicted of such crimes did not become members of an ostracized or even a clearly defined deviant group. Instead their acts were tolerated and often condoned by their neighbors. In a community where physical violence occurred frequently, these crimes were deviant not in the nature but in the level of their violence.4

The testimony of working-class witnesses includes descriptions of the community's response — or lack of response — to a particular crime. From their accounts, it is possible to see at what point other people stepped in to break up a beating and even to punish the offender. They show exactly what level of violence, and thus conflict, was tolerated. By marking off certain boundaries of acceptable behavior, the reaction to violence between the sexes reveals community values and the means by which those values were enforced on individual couples.

The trial accounts also offer a history of middle-class attitudes toward working-class male-female relationships. Through the judge's or magistrate's comments on an individual case, one learns what was considered acceptable behavior by middle-class standards, as opposed to those of the working-class community. In the sentencing of individual crimes, it is possible to see how their attitudes were translated into punishment. The magistrates and judges also offer the best-informed middle-class observations on the nature of violence between working-class women and men. Whatever their biases, they saw more of these cases any any other observers, which gives their comments a special validity.

Thus, the trial accounts tap attitudes and behavior at three levels: the individual sources of tension between the sexes that often led to violence; the working-class community's attitudes toward and responses to that violence; and the standards of the middle-class judicial system that defined the punishment for such crimes.

Before I discuss the trial accounts themselves, I would like to sketch the statistical boundaries of this study. These boundaries are necessarily uncertain, because the statistics needed for a good study of male-female violence were not kept consistently in the London police courts. Thus any conclusions about the incidence of such crimes must be advanced tentatively.

In general, crimes of violence were much less common than crimes against
property in 19th century England. "Offenses against the person," as they were termed, made up only 10% of all serious or indictable crimes, and 15% of less serious or summary offenses. Men committed crimes of violence much more frequently than women, at a ratio of 100 crimes for every 18 committed by women. As for the sex of the victim, statistics kept in the 1870s indicate that the sexes fared about the same in the frequency with which they were attacked. Assaults on men were slightly more common than assaults on women: 53% to 47%.

Women were the victims of aggravated assaults more often than men, however. The courts defined an aggravated assault as one "attended with circumstances of peculiar outrage or atrocity." An attack involving grave physical injury or use of a "dangerous or deadly weapon" constituted an aggravated assault. The number of aggravated assaults on women was as much as one-half all the other serious "offenses against the person" — murder, manslaughter, and serious assaults on men — combined. Thus, when a woman was beaten, she was more likely to be beaten severely.

Looking at the incidence of male violence against women from another perspective, one can roughly compare the number of crimes to the population density in a working-class neighborhood. On an average per year in the 1850s and 1860s, there was one conviction for aggravated assault on a woman for every two to four hundred houses, depending on the particular district. Several streets covering one to two acres of ground usually contained several hundred houses. No consistent statistics were kept on convictions for common assaults on women, but available figures suggest that the number ranged from 9 to 25 times the number of aggravated assaults. In one neighborhood, then, 10 to 20 men would be convicted of common assaults on women during the year. These estimates do not include those assaults which were never reported to the police. Other sources discussed later in this paper suggest that the "dark figure" — the number of actual crimes — for this type of violence was very high. Based on a neighborhood perspective, it is safe to conclude that whatever his or her personal experience, no working-class individual could escape exposure to acts of violence between the sexes.

The final statistical trend needed to put crimes of violence between men and women in perspective establishes the decline in convictions for such crimes between 1840 and 1890. Aggravated assaults recorded in the London police courts dropped from approximately 800 cases in 1853 to 200 cases in 1889. A parallel decline occurs in the national figures for all serious "offenses against the person." Since separate statistics for common assaults were not kept, their decline cannot be charted as accurately. The overall number of common assaults fell, from which one can conclude that the number of assaults involving women also fell. The gradual drop in all forms of assault on women seems to reflect a real change in behavior, rather than a change in the recording of crime. The sources of the decline will be discussed in more detail in the last section of this paper.

Keeping these statistical perspectives in mind, let us now turn to the trial accounts themselves. This study is based on a sample of 100 cases of violence
between men and women taken from both the sessions papers of the Central Criminal Court of London and the trial accounts published daily in the London *Times*. The trial accounts were selected from two months out of every five years between 1841 and 1875. My discussion focuses on two types of violence: assaults by husbands on their wives, and assaults by men on women outside their family.9

Wife-beating cases composed about one-half of the cases. The causes of the beating as given by either the husband or wife reveal several areas of tension in working-class marriages. A wife's failure to carry out a duty assigned to her often provoked her husband's abuse. Several wives were beaten, as a wheelwright's wife testified, "for no other reason than that I had no dinner provided for him at times when he came home." Husbands beat their wives for failing to perform a requested errand. One man sent his wife to get his boots, which were being mended. The boots were not ready, and when she returned empty-handed, he beat her. The husband told the police magistrate that he "was annoyed at the boots not being finished," so he beat his wife. Another man shattered a bottle over his wife's head because she sent a neighbor's child for his beer instead of going for it herself. He stated that "he was particular about sending her for beer to one house," and became angry when he saw her send the child. A wife also risked a beating when she interfered with her husband's actions. One man beat his wife when she tried to stop him from pulling their son out of bed and beating him. Another husband hit his wife in the head with a walking stick when she tried to prevent him from emptying the till of their coffeehouse to buy liquor.10

Pawning items of furniture or clothing to buy alcohol caused considerable conflict between husbands and wives. One magistrate testified in 1881 that "We frequently have instances of men beating their wives for refusing to take articles at a late hour in the evening to the pawnshop." The case of Ann Brick, wife of a journeyman bricklayer, illustrates such a conflict. Mrs. Brick's husband "insisted that she take her wedding ring off so he might pledge it and get more drink." She refused; he then "loaded her with a torrent of abuse" and started to break open a chest of her clothes and pledge her gown. When Mrs. Brick tried to stop him, he hit her in the head with a chopper and dragged her out of the house. He explained his action by saying that "his wife's action was so exasperating, he lost all control." A wife's attempt to pawn items also led to conflict. John Bishop testified that he beat his wife because "she had pawned everything of his except a silk handkerchief, and he was obliged to keep that in his pocket to prevent her pawning it." A wife testified, "I was obliged to pledge the things to get food for my children, and he used to beat me for doing so."11

In other ways, a wife's pursuit of her own wishes without her husband's permission might earn her a beating. After an assault that resulted in his wife's death, a laborer said, "If she had stopped at home, instead of going out drinking, it would not have happened." Another wife's insistence on buying herself a pair of boots instead of paying the rent caused her husband to stab her.12

Quarrels over money figured prominently in many cases of wife-beating. One wife said resentfully, "He earns twenty shillings a week, and out of that he gives me the odd seven shillings to keep house and find everything." Then he would beat her because she could not buy food for dinner. In a similar case, a woman
was beaten when she "mildly" informed her husband that he would get no supper because "he had left her no money to purchase anything." Mary Ann Ford felt entitled to more of her husband's wages than she received, so she stole his week's pay. Her husband was infuriated; he reproached her, "I have treated you kindly all day and you have robbed me of my week's hard earnings." After he beat her to death, he told the police, "We had a few words about money matters... I never meant to kill her, she should have kept her hand out of my pocket." 13

Situations in which the wife worked and the husband was unemployed created special tensions over the family income. A woman who worked for a shoemaker told the magistrate that while she worked, her husband "compelled her to support him." She did not like that, and it "caused them to quarrel." Another unemployed husband had "two or three rows about [the] back rent" with his wife. When he told her to pay it from her wages, she refused, saying, "No, I mean to buy myself a pair of boots." 14

The word "aggravation" appeared again and again in the trial accounts. Husbands used this word to explain why they had gotten angry and beaten their wives. "She was very quarrelsome and used aggravating words" was a typical husband's defense of his abuse of his wife. 15 Aggravating behavior encompassed nagging, taunts, insults, and any form of willful behavior on the wife's part. The most provoking form of aggravation was the wife's use of "bad language." Some form of swearing accompanied almost every case of wife-beating. An exchange of verbal abuse led up to the actual blows. The case of Benjamin and Keturah Broom provides an example of this exchange. Mr. Broom asked his son to read him an article from the newspaper. The boy complained that his mother would not help him with the hard words. Mrs. Broom replied, "If I could see it myself, I could read without his reading of it." Then, Mrs. Broom testified,

A few words passed between me and my husband. He said if I said anymore, he would slap me in the face with a piece of bacon he had in his hand — I said that was more than he dared do — he then gave me a smack in the face with the back of his hand.

The son's account gave a less favorable summary of his mother's part in the quarrel; he testified that "Mother and father had a row, mother was calling father names — she called him a b------ whoremonger... and tried to scratch his face." 16

Bad language implied insubordination on the wife's part, which may have been the reason that it figured so prominently in cases of wife-beating. Using obscenities in front of a social superior constituted insubordination in any situation, as one magistrate made clear when he reproached several women in a workhouse who had "behaved disorderly, used bad language [and] acted otherwise in an insubordinate manner." 17

Alcohol consumption frequently preceded a beating. Being "addicted to drinking and quarreling" characterized many violent couples. The use of alcohol seemed to loosen their self-control and heighten their aggressive behavior toward one another. One constable observed that when an intoxicated man became violent, "it is generally that someone has interfered with him, and excited his
Wives interfered with or aggravated their husbands more often when both had been drinking. Otherwise peaceful marriages could be transformed by alcohol. In one case, a witness said of a husband, that "he only had rows with his wife when he was in drink. He is a different man when not in drink." In a similar case, a witness described a couple as leading "a very happy sober life" but when they drank, "they didn't know what they were about." In most cases, however, a long history of drinking, quarreling and physical abuse had preceded the beating which came to trial.

Wives responded to their husbands' beatings in a variety of ways. Some submitted to an extraordinary amount of injury without fighting back. Other wives defended themselves vigorously with pokers and knives. One husband told the judge that he had "to keep all the knives and forks locked under his bed" to keep his wife from violence. Another man told the judge that it was all he could do "to restrain her violence toward him." Thus battles between husbands and wives were not invariably one-sided. But the wives tended to lose the fights, probably because their husbands were stronger physically. When overpowered, the wife had the choice of submitting or trying to escape. Some women went to neighbors for shelter; others went to the police.

Going to the police and swearing a warrant against her husband could be a very dangerous step for the wife, as several cases illustrate. When one man found out his wife had gotten a warrant for his arrest after a beating, he said, "You ----, you want to swear my life away," and stabbed her to death. Another husband said he "would be hanged for her [murder] if she appeared against him in court." A woman had acid thrown on her by an angry husband after she obtained a judicial separation from him. Going to the police and swearing a warrant against her husband could be a very dangerous step for the wife, as several cases illustrate. When one man found out his wife had gotten a warrant for his arrest after a beating, he said, "You ----, you want to swear my life away," and stabbed her to death. Another husband said he "would be hanged for her [murder] if she appeared against him in court." A woman had acid thrown on her by an angry husband after she obtained a judicial separation from him. Going to the police and swearing a warrant against her husband could be a very dangerous step for the wife, as several cases illustrate. When one man found out his wife had gotten a warrant for his arrest after a beating, he said, "You ----, you want to swear my life away," and stabbed her to death. Another husband said he "would be hanged for her [murder] if she appeared against him in court." A woman had acid thrown on her by an angry husband after she obtained a judicial separation from him. Going to the police and swearing a warrant against her husband could be a very dangerous step for the wife, as several cases illustrate. When one man found out his wife had gotten a warrant for his arrest after a beating, he said, "You ----, you want to swear my life away," and stabbed her to death. Another husband said he "would be hanged for her [murder] if she appeared against him in court." A woman had acid thrown on her by an angry husband after she obtained a judicial separation from him.
wrote in 1875 that it would "unfetter the hands of justice" in sentencing wife beaters "if there was some certainty that the home of the man would not be 'broken-up' and the wife and children sent to the workhouse, from want of support during his imprisonment."[22]

Wives also refrained from prosecuting their husbands from a sense of guilt. They often excused their husbands' violence against them by blaming themselves. On her deathbed, one wife "declared that she did not wish any harm to befall him, because she had been very aggravating to him." Another wife begged that her husband not be hurt; "It serves me right," she said, "for I struck him first." Husbands had varied responses to their abuse of their wives after the beating. Some expressed sorrow and regret, mixed with a fear of punishment. One man told the constable that "he would not have her die for a thousand pounds; if she did, he would get hung." Another husband said that he was extremely sorry that the "poor thing" was dead. Most husbands expressed no such regret, however. They insisted that their wives had deserved the beating. One laborer told the judge that "it served her right, he wished he had killed her." Another laborer swore that he "had not done with her yet." Husbands rarely blamed themselves for the beating; they felt that their wives had brought it on themselves.[23]

These cases of violence between husband and wife suggest some conclusions about the nature of working-class marriages. Tensions centered around questions of privilege and allocation of resources. In these marriages, the husband had certain privileges accorded to him because of his status as breadwinner. He gave his wife part of his wages to keep house and kept the rest to spend on himself. In return for supporting her, he expected his wife to run errands for him, prepare his food, and keep the house. The wife's own wishes were subordinate to her husband's. She had to have his permission to exercise them. In cases where the husband's control of the family money was limited, conflict was very likely. When the wife worked and the husband did not, the usual pattern of expectations did not apply. Both the husband's and the wife's use of the family money was questioned. Conflict also arose when the husband failed to give his wife enough money according to her expectations. Since he had not met his obligations to her, she was less likely to be obedient.

The cases of male assaults on women other than their wives resemble the wife-beating cases in several ways. They suggest that men may have expected women outside their family to fulfill their wishes. Men were sensitive to reproach or ridicule from women they did not know, as well as from their wives. But these crimes lacked the tension over allocation of common resources such as money or property which characterized wife-beatings. They also had roots in more public relationships, such as family and neighborhood rivalries.

A woman's refusal to fulfill a man's request was the most frequent cause of these assaults. Men beat women who refused to sleep with them, have a drink with them, go for their beer, or talk to them. For example, Elizabeth Ames refused a man in a pub "who solicited her to go and live with him." He followed her from the pub and hit her on the head with a pewter pot. A waitress in a chop house refused to serve a soldier whose bad language offended her; he responded by chasing and beating her. [24]
Women risked a beating when they reproached or ridiculed a man's behavior. One trial account described such an incident in a shop in Whitechapel. An old woman was brought into the shop after she fainted. A man in the shop said that if the woman were his wife, "he would soon punch holes in her body for 'shamming.'" The shopowner protested this comment, whereupon he "loaded her with the most abusive epithets, including the accusation of incontinence with a negro." The wife of a laborer who was also in the shop told the man that "he should be ashamed for using such language." He responded by beating her severely. Female ridicule could have an equally violent effect on a man. A porter in the St. Giles Workhouse beat one of the female inmates when she laughed at him. He told the judge that he was "very quick tempered and supposed that the laugh irritated him." In another case, a baker attacked a woman servant who called him a "stupid German ------;" he vowed to "mark her" in revenge. 

Rivalries between families led to assaults between men and women. Insult or injury to a family member often created a desire for revenge. The beating of Julia Clancey by Timothy Maloney involved such a conflict. Maloney had a long-standing quarrel with Clancey's brother-in-law. Clancey was standing on a corner when Maloney came up and began to call her names. Clancey described their exchange of insults:

I said: What sort is your mother?  
He said: I will break your jaw if you say that again.  
I said: Do it, then.  
He said: Yes, and I would do it to your brother-in-law, too.

Maloney then hit and kicked Clancey. Maloney added to her testimony, "Yes, you called me the son of a cow, and I will die for my mother." Although the tensions which led to both wife-beating and other assaults on women are not strikingly different, more dramatic contrasts emerge when one examines the community's response to them. The difference in the methods used to monitor the two types of violence reveals important community values regarding male-female relationships.

Neighbors and friends rarely intervened directly in a violent quarrel between a husband and wife. Such intervention entailed serious risks, since the husband's rage was often turned on the person attempting to aid his wife. The landlord of a beershop in Whitechapel found this out when he tried to stop a blacksmith from beating his wife. He was set upon by the blacksmith, his companions, and even the wife, who "bit his arm severely." The blacksmith defended himself by saying that the landlord had interfered in an "uncalled for manner." A middle-class gentleman received similar treatment when he placed himself between a quarreling laborer and his pregnant wife. The laborer said he would "teach him to interfere between a man and his wife," and beat the man.

More frequently, neighbors tried to prevent or moderate a wife beating by a combination of surveillance and reproach. When a fight seemed likely, they watched a couple closely. The case of William Bradford and his wife illustrates the forms such surveillance could take. One neighbor testified that she "listened at their door 'til midnight" to make sure that they didn't fight. A woman observing the Bradfords quarreling in a pub, followed them around, "fearing that
they might come to blows.” Several other neighbors checked often at the Bradford’s house to see if they were peaceful.28

Surveillance was usually accompanied by reproaches for the husband. If people heard a noisy fight next door, they would yell out their doors to ask, “For God’s sake, what are you doing?” One neighbor told a man to “leave off throwing that woman about ... you are frightening my children into fits.” The reproaches continued after the fight. Neighbors would inquire pointedly after the wife’s health and demand to know “what he had done to her.” The husband often responded by telling them to mind their own business, but the neighbors persisted in checking on the wife and attempting to head off further violence.29

The most common community response to a wife-beating was simply to help the wife, either by nursing her or offering her shelter. Mary Walker, a weaver’s wife, performed a typical service when she found her neighbor Mary Haynes “bleeding from the head at her own door.” She took her to her house and washed her wound. Female neighbors took the responsibility for tending the wife’s injuries and putting her to bed after a beating. If necessary, they would take her to the hospital. Neighbors also gave shelter to a wife seeking to escape during a beating. When “compelled to seek the protection from friends,” she could stay with them until her husband’s temper cooled.30

The police constable’s efforts to monitor wife-beating served as an extension of the working-class community’s methods. He intervened in a more official capacity, yet his techniques were very similar to the neighbors’. Most constables came from working-class backgrounds, which undoubtedly shaped their views on the appropriate means to handle such cases. The constable’s advantage over neighbors in controlling marital violence lay in his ability to back up his reproaches with the threat of jail. P.C. Cummins’ handling of William Bradford illustrates the policeman’s technique. Cummins, noting that Mrs. Bradford had been badly beaten, confronted Bradford, saying, “You vagabond, how came you to use the woman in this shocking fashion?” Bradford defended himself by accusing his wife of getting drunk and pawning his belongings. Cummins replied, “That does not justify you in ill-using her; if you don’t like her, why don’t you get rid of her?” He threatened Bradford that “if he used her anymore in the course of the night, he would lock him up.”31

Clearly, the working-class community preferred the most indirect means of controlling wife-beating. It was a basic belief in these neighborhoods that a husband had the right to beat his wife, especially if she provoked him. But the community tolerated wife-beating only up to a point. Neighbors or friends would call the police once a certain level of violence was reached. The sight of a great deal of blood, the use of a weapon, the age or infirmity of the wife, all were weighed against the prevailing custom of allowing a husband his rights. The community drew the line at murder; the fear of murder prompted action. They would call the police not because a man was beating his wife, but because they thought he was murdering her.

Quite another set of community standards applied in cases of a man’s assault on a woman outside his family. An analysis of community intervention in these assaults points up dramatic contrasts. It reveals that a husband’s violence against
his wife was tolerated to a far greater degree than other forms of male violence against women.

The participation of crowds is the most striking feature of community intervention in assault cases involving a man and woman not related by marriage. The case of William Dorgan best illustrates the vigorous action that was taken in these cases. Dorgan attacked the wife of a laborer after she reprimanded him for using bad language in front of her. According to the trial account, "[Dorgan's] conduct excited such indignation in those who had witnessed it that both he and his wife were set upon by the neighbors, so badly that he was obliged to go to bed." Other cases reveal the readiness of crowds to chase after an assailant and hold him until the constable arrived. Or he might be dragged to the police station by "persons ready and determined to defend" the woman injured.32

Knowledge of whether a quarrel was a family fight or an attack by an unknown assailant made a real difference in the way the community responded. This becomes clear in one case where the neighbors were unsure of the nature of the attack. They heard a woman's screams and ran to her door. One woman said to a man that he "had better not break the door open. It is upstairs; the woman and her husband may be quarreling." The man replied, "while we are waiting the woman may be murdered" and broke down the door.33

Swift active community protection seems to have been reserved for "respectable women" of the working class. Although there were few cases of assaults on prostitutes in my sample, the evidence suggests that they were considered fair game for violence by working-class men. The police magistrate of Worship Street Police Court wrote that the "brutal population" of his district was used to "knock[ing] down those poor creatures as if they were so many ninepins."34 There is little evidence that prostitutes received the same protection as "respectable women" of the working class.

Working-class women often showed more pluck in fighting off strangers than in fighting their own husbands. One woman who found a thief in her house took a chair (which he had thrown at her) and put it in front of her door, swearing that she "wouldn't let him out until the constable came." When the thief tried to escape, she held on to him until her husband rescued her. Another woman, a Mrs. Neale, was assaulted by "an entire stranger" who tried to pull up her clothes. She shoved him away and he ran. A few moments later, she heard "loud screams of distress." She ran a few doors down, and found the same man attacking a young woman. Mrs. Neale hit the man with her fist and gave him into custody. Women also seemed more willing to prosecute a strange man than their husbands. One woman expressed this double standard toward violence succinctly when she apologized to the police magistrate for bringing a warrant against a man who had assaulted her; "I should not have troubled to bring the man before Your Worship if he had not knocked me down as if he was my husband."35

To sum up, the descriptive analysis of the trial accounts reveals patterns of expectations held by working-class men and women that shaped their relationships. Both sexes recognized a system of male prerogatives based on the man's financial support of his family. Violence centered around breaches of those
expectations. Within marriage, violence was viewed as "normal," to use a sociological term, because it was seen as serving a disciplinary function. Thus husbands felt no regret for administering the chastising slap, while wives often felt that they had "asked for it." Similarly, the working-class community recognized violence or threats of violence as legitimate means of maintaining the husband's superiority in the family. Violence between unrelated men and women also centered around disputed male prerogatives, but such privileges were not as widely recognized by individual women or the community. A man had the right to beat — and thus force submission — from his wife but not the wife of another man. Thus the working-class community acted vigorously to prevent a man from exceeding his boundaries of authority over women.

Physical conflict between the sexes in all these cases characterized situations of male insecurity rather than complete domination over women. The working-class man became violent when a woman challenged his authority rather than when she submitted to him. This link between male role insecurity and violence tallies with modern studies of violent families, which reveal a high correlation between wife-beating and a husband's sense of strain or frustration in maintaining his superiority to his wife. Similarly, men who display a "compulsive masculinity" including physical abuse in all their dealings with women act from an aggressive need to assert their power over women, as recent studies of rapists has shown.

How then do we interpret the marked decline in violence between the sexes in working-class districts between 1850 and 1890? The trial accounts themselves give few clues to the sources of change within the working-class, for the attitudes evident in cases from the 1870s and 1880s are not markedly different from those expressed in the 1840s. There are much stronger indications of change, however, in the middle-class response to violence between the sexes, as revealed in the trial accounts. This shift in outlook provides the first insight into the declining assault rate.

The attitudes of the middle-class police magistrates and judges are especially important since through the courts, they acted as enforcing agents of middle-class values within the working-class community. The mid-19th century court system gave them a great deal of power in sentencing offenders. About 88% of all male-female assault cases were dealt with at the police court level, where no jury assisted the magistrate in his decisions. In practice, the magistrate's handling of a case depended in large part on his evaluation of the defendant's and his accuser's characters. As one magistrate wrote, "I found that instead of studying books, I had to study faces." In trying an assault case, the police magistrate relied on a thorough knowledge of the "antecedents of the convict and the general history of the case," the degree of provocation and deliberation involved in the crime, and the character references given by constables and neighbors in order to determine a sentence.

Understandably, sentencing was by no means uniform among the many magistrates. But within the years of this study, 1840 to 1875, two attitudes toward sentencing of men charged with assaulting women can be discerned. These two viewpoints were based on very different ideas of the relationship...
between working-class men and women, especially husbands and wives.

Edward Cox's handbook on sentencing, *Principles of Punishment*, typifies one attitude. Published in 1877 to serve as a guide for sentencing, Cox's recommendations correspond to the practice of many magistrates as revealed in the trial accounts. Cox described wife-beating as a crime which "varies infinitely in degree of criminality." It might be a serious crime deserving life imprisonment, but more often it was so "trifling as almost to permit of justification." There were few cases when the wife did not deserve the beating she received, according to Cox. He pictured the average working-class wife-beater as a man "tortured and taunted to the verge of madness." His wife was not a "loving wife and submissive slave brutally beaten by her brutal husband." Cox wrote:

In the vast majority of these cases the suffering angel of the sensation "leader" is found to be rather an angel of the fallen class, who has made her husband's home an earthly hell, who spends his earnings in drink, pawns his furniture, starves her children, provides for him no meals, lashes him with her tongue when sober and with her fists when drunk, and if he tries to restrain her fits of passion, resists with a fierceness and a strength for which he is no match. He is laboring all day to feed and clothe her and his children, and when he returns home at night, this is his greeting.39

"Happily for the honor of manhood," Cox concluded, there were few cases of "unprovoked brutality and cruelty to helpless and submissive women." In his view, women only got what they deserved. He pictured working-class women as powerful, provoking matches for their beleaguered menfolk.40

Other magistrates held a very different view of male-female relationships. They were far more critical of the working-class tolerance of violence between husband and wife. They characterized the physical abuse of women as "barbaric;" wife-beaters in particular were called "brutes," "ruffians," and "tyrants." These magistrates agreed with the sentiments of one *Times* editorial that declared that "these monsters outrage every law of civilized man. and violate every instinct of human nature."41

A special definition of manliness underlay the attitudes of these magistrates. They defined violence against women as "unmanly" and cowardly. As one put it, an assault was "a brutal and unmanly outrage on a helpless woman" which deserved the severest penalty. Another magistrate condemned a wife-beater as "one of those cowardly, unmanly fellows who thought he had a perfect right to knock about his wife as he thought proper." No amount of provocation justified an act of violence against a woman, according to this school of sentencing.42

The picture of the working-class woman given by these magistrates was that of a suffering victim. Wives were seen as the most mistreated group. "How their wives suffer!" wrote Thomas Holmes of the working class. "Is there any misery equal to theirs, any slavery to compare with theirs? If so, I have never heard of it. I have seen thousands of them, and their existence is our shame and degradation." Men like Holmes saw working-class women as being subjected "to every variety of cruelty by their 'natural protectors'." Police magistrate Cecil Chapman wrote that his support for women's suffrage had been only academic "until I realized in a police court what practical effect the inequality of treatment had upon women's lives in every direction."43

Both viewpoints regarding working-class women — Cox's fallen angel and
Holmes’s suffering victim — were held by different magistrates and judges between 1840 and 1875. There is evidence, however, that the second school of sentencing, as represented by Holmes and Chapman, was gaining support in the middle-class. Several legal changes indicate that their viewpoint found favor in Parliament. Between 1840 and 1882, the maximum sentence for assaults on women was increased. In 1853, Acts 16 and 17, Vic. 30, the Prevention and Punishment of Aggravated Assaults on Women was passed, giving the police magistrates the summary power to order imprisonment with hard labor for up to six months. In 1868, that Act was amended to extend the maximum sentence to one year. Finally, in 1882, the Wife Beaters Act gave police magistrates the power to have offenders flogged and exposed on a public pillory.44

Middle-class reformers also took up the cause of the suffering female victim of male brutality. Reformers expressed their views in the Times and organized a Society for the Protection of Women. As early as the 1860s, several trial accounts mention the presence of a Mr. W. Moore, who “watched the case on behalf of the Society.” In the 1870s, Frances Power Cobbe led a successful campaign to enable the victim of an aggravated assault to obtain a judicial separation from her husband, a right that was incorporated into the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1878. Thus, these reformers had an impact on sentencing through both their support for change in the laws concerning assaults on women and their presence in the police court.45

The increased middle-class concern that manifested itself in more stringent enforcement of stiffer laws may have acted as a deterrent to male violence against women in working-class neighborhoods. But any explanation of the decline in these crimes based solely on fear of middle-class punishment is inadequate. For even aside from such overt efforts, middle-class values concerning family life, including the prohibition on violence, clearly became more diffused among the English working-class as the 19th century progressed.46

In part, the decline in violence between working-class men and women may have reflected a rising standard of living that made the male’s position within the family easier to maintain. The high rates of assault in the 1840s and 1850s may have stemmed from the difficulties a working-class husband experienced in fulfilling his expected role in the family during the unstable early years of industrialization. This would have made him more sensitive to challenges to his authority; in turn, his wife would have been more willing to resist his domination if he was not meeting her expectations of support. This male sensitivity and female rebelliousness could easily have extended to relationships outside the family. Conversely, the rising standard of living for the upper and middle echelons of the labor force in the last half of the century may have lessened stress on the male’s role as economic provider and made his authority easier to uphold.

In addition, middle-class values regarding family life may have converged with a native working-class respectability evident in the trial accounts. This standard of respectability emerges clearly from the testimony of working-class witnesses, and is not an artifact of middle-class observers imposing their own words or beliefs on working-class people. This respectability was not the same as the
gentility of the middle class. A woman did not have to be legally married to be respectable. She did have to be monogamous, to avoid drinking excessively, and to provide her family with food and clothing. A respectable man had to have a steady job and bring his wages home to his wife regularly. The notion of respectability was not confined to the artisan class. In several of the trial accounts, unskilled laborers upheld the same standards. For example, one seaman became involved in a barroom fight because he reprimanded a man for using bad language: "I told him to hold his noise as there were two young women there," the man testified. In another case, the wife of a laborer reprimanded a man for using foul language "in front of the mother of seven children." This tradition of respectability could well have come to include the notion that violence against women was "unmanly." As more working class families had the desire and the funds to be respectable, they may have disdained wife-beating and assaults on women as the acts of the "ruffian" class.

There is another possibility that may explain at least part of the decline in assaults. The decline may be an artifact of the erosion of community control over individual behavior. As working-class families moved to larger homes in suburban areas, their violence may have become more private. Neighbors could not interfere as easily in family violence that they could neither see nor hear. Also, if wife-beating was increasingly defined as shameful, the wife would be less likely to seek help. Such a possibility is suggested by recent profiles of violent families, which show that they are more isolated from relatives and friends than nonviolent families, and that abused wives are ashamed to seek help.

Nevertheless, although the amount of real decline in male-female violence remains problematical, the drop in reported cases does reflect an important change in working-class attitudes. Without more detailed knowledge of individual families, the link between this change and women's power within the family remains speculative. This study does, however, present a perspective on the working-class woman's declining status that differs from those advanced by other scholars. It proposes that the assumption that dependency inevitably worsens women's treatment by men has to be subjected to more scrutiny. In fact, the analysis of the trial accounts suggests two forms of female economics dependency which incorporated very different personal realities for women. In one, women had more power but endured a high level of physical abuse; in the other, women were more passive but enjoyed greater physical comfort.

This interpretation takes as its starting point not the traditional family described by Scott and Tilly, with its economic balance of power — a family form that does not appear in the trial accounts — but rather a working-class marriage based on the male's economic primacy and prerogatives. Whether this arrangement was unique to the London working-class remains to be seen. Despite their seeming dependency, women displayed a wide range of aggressive behavior, both physical and verbal, in relation to men. Although this behavior entailed physical abuse, it guaranteed a woman a certain formidable strength in her dealings with her husband. For all its one-sidedness, Cox's picture of the battling, provoking working-class woman implied an ability to look after herself; she was not a creature who needed to be protected.
A rising standard of living and a fusion of middle-class and working-class notions of respectability may well have ushered in a new personal reality for working-class women, combining greater physical comfort with a more passive role in the family. The middle-class family style may have been all the more attractive to working-class women because it included a prohibition on physical violence. Accepting a trade-off of power for safety meant the end of physical abuse — painful, frightening, and sometimes fatal. For this reason, women may have accepted, even demanded a more passive role in the family.

Thus, in 1890, working-class women were far less likely to experience physical violence at the hands of a man than they were in 1840. This gain was not without its costs, however. As middle-class women were realizing, the definition of "manliness" and "womanliness" underlying the middle-class prohibition on violence between the sexes had its own limitations. In so much as working-class women and men accepted this definition, they imposed those limitations on themselves. Having repudiated the idea that women were aggressive, fit partners for combat, they had no alternative but to embrace the middle-class view of women as weak, fragile, passive creatures who needed "natural protectors."

In any shift of the definition of sex roles short of complete equality, there is a balance of advantages and disadvantages. In mid-19th century London, working-class women were offered relief from male violence by a paternalistic system of values and institutions, in exchange for their right to fight. In the process they gained a new image of male-female relationships, one in which men were "natural protectors" and women were in need of protection.

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FOOTNOTES

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3. As in any study based only on London sources, I must acknowledge at the outset that its conclusions cannot be easily generalized for the whole of the English working class. The people who appear in the trial accounts were casual laborers and artisans and their wives, not factory hands. Their experience of the economic and social changes of the 19th century was shaped by London's peculiar economic role as a port, a center of outwork industries, and a great population center, rather than as a great manufacturing center. Considering the
size of its working-class population, I would argue that their experience is as typical, if not more so, than that of the textile workers and miners who are usually studied as the prototype of the English working-class.


8. Gatrell and Hadden, “Criminal Statistics.” 374. The decline in violent crimes that they document is clearly evident in the returns from the London police courts (see sources cited in footnote six).

9. Assualts and murders will not be considered separately in this analysis. In all but three cases, murder was the unexpected outcome of a severe beating. Since they were rarely premeditated crimes, working-class murders do not differ significantly from assault cases except in the severity of their outcome.

10. *Times* (London), 21 February 1850, 8 (Higgins) — the same case is reported again 8 March 1850, 7; *Times*, 25 October 1870, 11 (Gill); *Times*, 27 January 1860, 12 (Bushby); *Times*, 19 October 1870, 9 (Gayford); *Times*, 2 October 1870, 11 (Bass). The name of the defendant is given in parentheses, in order to facilitate identification of the case cited. All cases appear under the headings of “Police” or “Central Criminal Court” in the *Times*.


12. *Times*, 26 February 1850, 8 (Boys); *Times*, 16 January 1860, 11 (Cantlin). A similar case can be found in *Times*, 1 November 1845, 8 (Mackie).


15. Central Criminal Court, Sessions Papers, October, 1841, 532 (Bradford).

16. Central Criminal Court, Sessions Papers, June, 1864, 126-127 (Broom).

17. Times, 30 January 1860, 9 (Travers and Regan).

18. The phrase “addicted to drinking and quarreling” is taken from Times, 26 February 1850, 7 (Boys); Great Britain, British Sessional Papers, 1877. XI, “Second Report from the Select Committee of the House of Lords Appointed for the Purpose of Inquiring into the Prevalence of Habits of Intemperance . . .” 615; Central Criminal Court, Sessions Papers, October, 1874, 467-469 (Black); Central Criminal Court, Sessions Papers June, 1864, 136-137 (Haynes).

19. Times, 18 August 1853, 10 (Gevaux); Times, 2 October 1870, 11 (Bass).

20. Times, 10 April 1850, 7 (Lovey); Times, 25 October 1870, 11 (Gill); Times, 28 October 1870, 9 (Droz). Another similar case is reported Times, 6 January 1841, 7 (Blackwell).

21. Great Britain, British Sessional Papers, 1854. LIII, “Returns of charges against Male Persons at Each of the Metropolitan Police Courts, 1850-1854,” 659-681; British Sessional Papers, 1875. LXI, “Reports to the Secretary of State . . .,” 141; Cox, Principles of Punishment, 103. For other examples, see Times, 11 November 1845, 8 (Leyden); Times, 5 November 1855, 9 (Collins); Times, 20 January 1864, 11 (Hughes).

22. Statistics are from the Lambeth Police Court (Great Britain, British Sessional Papers, 1854. LIII, “Returns of charges . . .,” 665; British Sessional Papers, 1875. LXI, “Reports to the Secretary of State . . .,” 141.

23. Times, 10 November 1870, 9 (Keazer); Central Criminal Court, Sessions Papers, June, 1864, 136-139 (Haynes); Central Criminal Court, Sessions Papers, August, 1841, 526 (Bradford); Central Criminal Court, Sessions Papers, October, 1874, 442-443 (Bishop); Times, 27 January 1860, 12 (Bushby); Times, 25 October 1870, 11 (Gill).

24. For example, see Times, 9 February 1850, 7 (Lambarthe); Times, 14 February 1850, 7 (Leggett); Times, 7 October 1870, 9 (Aigstroff); Times, 7 October 1870, 9 (Halifax); Times, 30 January 1860, 9 (Hutchinson).

25. Times, 4 March 1845, 7 (Dorgan); Times, 7 October 1870, 9 (Aigstroff); Times, 25 February 1850, 7 (Kiel).


27. Times, 20 March 1845, 8 (Purcell); Times, 18 August 1853, 10 (Walsh).

28. Central Criminal Court, Sessions Papers, August, 1841, 526-532 (Bradford).

29. Central Criminal Court, Sessions Papers, October, 1874, 442-443 (Bishop); Central Criminal Court, Sessions Papers, June, 1864, 136-137 (Haynes).

30. Central Criminal Court, Sessions Papers, June, 1864, 136-137 (Haynes); Times, 2 October 1870, 11 (Bass). See another example in Times, 29 August 1850, 97 (Webb).


32. Times, 4 March 1845, 7 (Dorgan); Times, 14 February 1850, 7 (Leggett). See other
examples, *Times*, 31 October 1870, 11 (Holmes); Central Criminal Court, *Sessions Papers*, May, 1864, 43-44 (Maloney); *Times*, 1 January 1864, 9 (Hall).


37. See Gelles, *Violent Home*, 130-131; Suzanne Steinmetz and Murray Straus, *Violence in the Family* (New York, 1974), 75; the term compulsive masculinity is defined on page 58. See also Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will* (New York, 1975), 189-229.


40. Ibid., 102.

41. *Times*, 19 August 1853, 5; see another example, *Times*, 13 January 1864, 11 (Allen).

42. *Times*, 19 February 1850, 8 (Leary); *Times*, 18 August 1853, 10 (Walsh); *Times*, 4 October 1870, 11 (Rumfitt).


46. Peter Stearns makes this point in his article, “Working-Class Women in Britain, 1890-1914,” 113, 119-120.

47. Central Criminal Court, *Sessions Papers*, September, 1874, 338-339 (Hurst); *Times*, 4 March 1845, 7 (Dorgan); see Robert Roberts, *The Classic Slum* (Manchester, 1971), 3-11, for a complementary description of working-class respectability and how it operated in early 20th century Salford.