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The beauty of the accused unfairly affects perceptions of their culpability

A study from the University of Granada based on police surveys indicates that in domestic violence crimes in which the woman kills her abuser, if she is more attractive she is perceived as guiltier.

From a social psychology point of view, it has been noticed that physical attractiveness has an influence on how people are perceived by others in labour, academic and even legal fields. On the one hand, this creates the mental association of "what is beautiful is good". On the other hand though, when it comes to domestic violence the results are different.

"One of the most interesting conclusions of the study was that when the woman accused of killing her abuser was attractive, participants attached greater culpability, whereas if considered 'unattractive', this decreases," as explained to SINC by Antonio Herrera, Inmaculada Valor-Segura and Francisca Expósito, the authors of the study published in *The European Journal of Psychology Applied to Legal Context*.

For the purposes of the study, two types of 'mock' stories about legal proceedings were invented in which the defendant was a woman accused of killing her husband. Her defence was that she had suffered prolonged domestic violence and thus acted in self-defence when killing him. In one of the stories the description of the woman coincided with the prototypical battered woman but in the other it did not.

"Therefore, half of the participating police officers read the story in which the accused is young, battered, physically deteriorated and fragile. She has children and is financially dependent on her partner. The other half read a story in which the woman is childless, she works as a financial consultant, she has been married for 10 years and during legal proceedings she is well-dressed and resolute and calm in her interactions with the judge and lawyers," explain the authors.

The researchers asked the participants to take on the role of the jury and answer a series of questions related to their perceptions of credibility, responsibility and situation control generated by the descriptions of the women. They were also asked about their sexist ideology.

The prototype of the battered woman

The authors outline that one of the variables having the greatest effect on the woman's perceived criminality rating is whether or not she fits the stereotype of the battered woman. This is named prototypicality.

"The results showed that when dealing with a non-prototypical battered woman (in other words, someone who does not conform to society's idea of such women), they were seen to have more control over the situation, which in legal terms can translate as a higher degree of guilt," confirm the researchers.

Another variable linked to the 'jury's' judgement on the case was the level of participant's sexism. In this respect, those who scored higher in their hostile rating (also called traditional sexism or machismo) attached more situational control to the accused.

"Despite its possible limitations, this study warns of the need to increase training related to the handling of domestic violence cases for all law enforcement officers and police. Their work is fundamental in the process and can be conditioned by external variables, such as physical attractiveness or stereotypical beliefs of domestic violence," conclude the authors.

The sample used in the study comprised 169 police officers from the Spanish State Security Forces. They were taken from different cities in Spain and the majority of participants were men (153 men and 16 women).

References:

Antonio Herrera, Inmaculada Valor-Segura, Francisca Expósito. Is miss sympathy a credible defendant alleging intimate partner violence in a trial for murder? The *European Journal of Psychology Applied to Legal Context*, 4 (2), 99-196. 2012.

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