



# Australian Press Council

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## Adjudication No. 875 (July 1996) [1996] APC 49

ADJUDICATION No. 875 (July 1996)

The Australian Press Council has considered two complaints against The Sydney Morning Herald over an article headlined "Battered husbands: fact or fiction?". It has dismissed, with some reservations, a complaint from John Coochey but has upheld a separate complaint from the Men's Rights Agency.

### *JOHN COOCHEY'S COMPLAINT*

The complaint is dismissed because the paper offered and, indeed, urged the complainant to write a letter setting out his views. The offer contained no guarantee of publication, which is rarely if ever given by newspapers, nor was there a promise to forgo the usual 200[Dhatch]word limit, but it was implied that sympathetic consideration would be given to the complainant's position.

Mr Coochey rejected the offer and claimed that he needed an article of equal length to correct what he said were mistakes throughout the article.

The Council's reservations concern alleged errors of fact and differences in interpretation in the article. These matters were not further discussed in the paper even though the author admits that she now believes she was misled by one of the key sources used in the article.

The argument comes down to whether husbands are as often assaulted by their wives as wives are by their husbands, and whether the present climate of opinion favours wives against husbands.

Mr Coochey claims that the article was biased and wrong in every statement. As the author himself of several articles on the subject, he is quoted as a strong critic of "cooked statistics" that favour "women victims". He particularly objects to the statement that his views are based on an American study known as "Behind Closed Doors"; his views, he says, are based on statistics from a number of reputable sources.

The author of The Sydney Morning Herald article claimed in it that the Australian Bureau of Statistics and US statistic agencies had "discredited" the study and criticised its "shonky methodology". Later in a letter to the Council she explained that an "ABS spokesperson" has discredited the study at length, and a number of American sources were given.

The Press Council points out that it would have been more neutral and less emotional to say that various agencies had "claimed to have discredited" and criticised "shaky" methodology, rather than use the loaded word "shonky".

Many other matters were raised in the complaint, and many points made in rebuttal; whether two names should have been published or not, whether a criminal record was accurately described, and, most of all, the varying interpretations of statistics and the methodology used to get them. Whatever the rights and wrongs, they could have been aired in a published letter to the paper.

## ***MEN'S RIGHTS AGENCY'S COMPLAINT***

A related complaint from the Men's Rights Agency over the same article has been upheld.

One of the alleged errors made in the article, mentioned in the reservations in the preceding adjudication, was to attribute support for one husband in a legal action to the Lone Fathers Association, when the Men's Rights Agency claimed the support came from it.

The article's author says that at the time she had no reason to doubt the information given to her by the head of the Lone Fathers Association. She says that he had retracted many one very recentcted that he had misrepresented the scale, scope and powers of the association.

The paper should have reported the disputed source of the support.

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