

## GAYLE ROSENWALD SMITH

## The Wife-Beater

Gayle Rosenwald Smith, an attorney, currently practices family law. She has published articles in a variety of journals and periodicals and is coauthor of *What Every Woman Should Know about Divorce and Custody* (1998) and *Divorce and Money: Everything You Need to Know* (2004). The following essay appeared in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* in 2001.

**Background on the "wife-beater" shirt** As Smith notes here, *wife-beater* is a slang term for a type of sleeveless undershirt that has in recent years become fashionable. An Internet search of the term found a number of businesses that actually market such shirts as "wife-beaters." The corresponding shirts for women are often called "boy-beaters." A Texas-based firm offers adult-sized shirts emblazoned with the slogan, as well as "Lil' Wife Beater" shirts for babies. The firm's website — which plays the song "Smack My Bitch Up" — includes a background screen showing a woman being spanked and provides a link to a "Wife Beater Hall of Fame." It also offers to send a second shirt at half price to any customer convicted of domestic violence (proof of conviction required, photos not acceptable). In another twist, a feminist retail site offered a "Wife Beater Beater" shirt with a cartoon image of a woman kicking a man in the groin. Ironically, this retail site was shut down when a *man* complained that it was offensive.

Everybody wears them. The Gap sells them. Fashion designers Dolce 1  
and Gabbana have lavished them with jewels. Their previous greatest resur-  
gence occurred in the 1950s, when Marlon Brando's Stanley Kowalski wore  
one in Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*. They are all the rage.

What are they called? 2

The name is the issue. For they are known as "wife-beaters." 3

A Web search shows that kids nationwide are wearing the skinny 4  
ribbed white T-shirts that can be worn alone or under another shirt.  
Women have adopted them with the same gusto as men. A search of bou-  
tiques shows that these wearers include professionals who wear them,  
adorned with designer accessories, under their pricey suits. They are avail-  
able in all colors, sizes, and price ranges.

Wearers under twenty-five do not seem to be disturbed by the name. 5  
But I sure am.

It's an odd name for an undershirt. And even though the ugly stereo- 6  
types behind the name are both obvious and toxic, it appears to be cool to  
say the name without fear of (or without caring about) hurting anyone.

That the name is fueled by stereotype is now an academically estab- 7  
lished fact, although various sources disagree on exactly when shirt and  
name came together. The *Oxford Dictionary* defines the term *wife-beater* as:

1. A man who physically abuses his wife and
2. Tank-style underwear shirts. Origin: based on the stereotype that physically abusive husbands wear that particular type of shirt.

The *World Book Dictionary* locates the origin of the term *wife-beater* in 8  
the 1970s, from the stereotype of the Midwestern male wearing an under-  
shirt while beating his wife. The shirts are said to have been popular in the  
1980s at all types of sporting events, especially ones at which one sits in the  
sun and develops "wife-beater marks." The undershirts also attained popu-  
larity at wet T-shirt contests, in which the wet, ribbed tees accentuated con-  
testants' breasts.

In an article in the style section of the *New York Times*, Jesse Scheidlower, 9  
principal editor of the *Oxford English Dictionary's* American office, says the  
association of the undershirt and the term  
*wife-beater* arose in 1997 from varied sources,  
including gay and gang subcultures and rap  
music.

In the article, some sources argued that  
the reference in the term was not to spousal  
abuse per se but to popular-culture figures  
such as Ralph Cramden and Tony Soprano.  
And what about Archie Bunker?

It's not just the name that worries me. 11  
Fashion headlines reveal that we want to  
overthrow '90s grunge and return to shoulder pads and hardware-studded  
suits. Am I reading too much into a fashion statement that the return is  
also to male dominance where physical abuse is acceptable as a means of  
control?

There has to be a better term. After all, it's a pretty rare piece of cloth- 12  
ing that can make both men and women look sexier. You'd expect a term  
connoting flattery — not violence.

Wearers under twenty-five may not want to hear this, but here it is. 13  
More than four million women are victims of severe assaults by boyfriends  
and husbands each year. By conservative estimate, family violence occurs in  
two million families each year in the United States. Average age of the bat-  
terer: thirty-one.

Possibly the last statistic is telling. Maybe youth today would rather 14  
ignore the overtones of the term *wife-beater*. It is also true, however, that the  
children of abusers often learn the behavior from their elders.

Therein lies perhaps the worst difficulty: that this name for this shirt 15  
teaches the wrong thing about men. Some articles quote women who felt  
the shirts looked great, especially on guys with great bodies. One woman  
stated that it even made guys look "manly."

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