

## The Wife-Beater

Gayle Rosenwald Smith (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, in fact, 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 Web site – accompanied by the beat of a rap recording about “smashing” women – 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). Many Web sites have sprung up

condemning this business, but one of the site’s customers is a victim of domestic violence who hands out wife-beater shirts to police officers, judges, and others whose professional conduct she believes encourages domestic violence. 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.



Everybody wears them. The Gap sells them. Fashion designers Dolce and Gabbana have lavished them with jewels. Their previous greatest resurgence 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?

The name is the issue. For they are know as “wife-beaters.”

A Web search shows that kids nationwide are wearing the skinny-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 boutiques shows that these wearers include professionals who wear them, adorned with designer accessories, under their pricey suits. They are available in all colors, sizes and price ranges.

Wearers under 25 do not seem to be disturbed by the name. But I sure am.

It’s an odd name for an undershirt. And even though the ugly stereotypes behind the names 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 established 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 the 1970s, from the stereotype of the Midwestern male wearing an undershirt 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 stands and develops “wife-beater marks.” The undershirts also attained popularity at wet T-shirt contests, in which the wet, ribbed tees accentuated contestants’ breasts.

In an article in the style section of the *New York Times*, Jesse Scheidlowe, 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 subculture 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. 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 clothing that can make both men and women look sexier. You’d expect a term connoting flattery—not violence.

Wearers under 25 may not want to hear this, but here it is. More than 4 million women are victims of severe assaults by boyfriends and husbands each year. By conservative estimate, family violence occurs in a million families each year in the United States. Average age of the batterer: 31.

Possibly the last statistic is telling. Maybe youth today would rather 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 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.”

So *manly* equals *violent*? Not by me, and I hope not by anyone on any side of age 25.