

Domestic violence: who are the victims and who are the perpetrators?

Enormous difficulties beset statisticians in the field of domestic violence research and the absence of resources to fund large-scale national random incidence and prevalence surveys in the U.K. means that its full extent is still unknown (Mullender 1996). However, extensive research in North America and more recent small-scale studies in the U.K. have unequivocally unearthed a social phenomenon of gigantic proportions. The respected Dobash research team, for example, concluded that few victims of domestic violence ever contacted the police (Dobash and Dobash 1979) and yet went on to discover that 25% of all violent crimes reported to the police authorities in England and Wales actually took place in the home (Dobash and Dobash 1980). Home Office figures for their part reveal that between 42 and 49% of all female homicide victims between 1983 and 1990 were in fact killed by their husbands or male partners (Morley and Mullender 1994). Many others commit suicide to escape the violence (Mayhew et al 1993) whose analysis of the 1992 British Crime Survey revealed 530,000 incidents of domestic violence (80% of which involved women). In 1989 the London Borough of Islington commissioned the single largest survey of domestic violence ever undertaken in this country; results showed that 27% of the women in the random sample had at some time suffered *actual physical injury* from a male partner and 12% had experienced physical violence in the preceding twelve months (Mooney 1994). Of the men approached with marital vignettes by Mooney, 63% did not rule out using violence in one or more situations and approximately half disclosed that they *would* do so in up to two. The face validity of these shocking statistics is strengthened by McCarney's survey (1996), which further confirmed feminist assertions about men's attitudes to wife assault, by revealing that 2 out of 3 male respondents admitted that they would be prepared to use violence in conflict with a partner on certain occasions which for some included such incidents as their dinner not being ready on time.

These findings are entirely consistent with research from North America where it has been claimed that assault from someone with whom they have or have had an intimate relationship is the single most significant cause of injury to U.S. women (Kesner 1997, Uniform Crime Reports 1991, Irons 1996, Hadley 1992, Stark & Flitcraft 1988) and that Canadian women are nine times more likely to be killed by a partner than by a stranger (Wilson et al 1993). In the words of Gloria Steinem (1992) there is little doubt that: "*the most dangerous place for a woman is not the street but in her own home.*"

Violent women

However, spousal violence is not entirely a male preserve and some researchers do stress the need to discriminate between families which feature occasional outbursts of (non-gendered) violence from either husband or wife or same-sex partner ('couple violence') and those families which are dominated by systematic intimidation and abuse, referred to as 'terrorist' violence by Kantor and Jasinski (1998) and 'patriarchal terrorism' by Johnson (1995). Accounts have alluded to the prevalence of husband abuse throughout history and some point to how the current emphasis on heterosexual women as victims reinforces society's reluctance to acknowledge that men too can be targets for serious marital assault (George 1994). For the issue of victimised (heterosexual) men to be explored, Dr. Malcolm George, a neuro-scientist from Queen Mary and Westfield College, University of London, maintains that two taboos have to be confronted: one, that women are capable of violence and two, that men can be beaten up by their wives (BBC 1994). Whilst numerous reports from statutory and voluntary-sector agencies within the U.K. continue to challenge assumptions that the number of abused men in our society is small (George 1994), the issue as to whether men face *unilateral* violence at the hands of their female

partners remains among the most controversial topics in the sociological study of domestic violence (Lucal 1995). A number of practitioners working in the field (myself included) have been exposed to hostility and threats for purportedly eschewing or ignoring men as victims.

Claims were made in the literature as early as the 1950's as to the existence of wife-to-husband violence (Bates 1981) though Steinmetz's small scale study of 1978 is usually attributed with the first discovery of so-called *battered-husband syndrome*. The U.S. national incidence survey revealed that in homes where domestic violence was recorded, men were in fact the victims in some 25% of cases (Straus et al 1980). 'Couple violence' was also found to exist in another 50% of the relationships surveyed. Numerous other studies have revealed high rates of violence by heterosexual women (e.g. Hamlett 1998, Magdol et al 1997, Hamberger & Potente 1994, Busey 1993, Kirsta 1994, 1991, Burrell and Brinkworth 1994, Saunders 1986) and some findings even suggest that women are as violent as men within the marital dyad (Cook 1997, Sommers et al 1992, Moller 1991, McNeely & Mann 1990, Arias and Johnson 1989, Steinmetz & Lucca 1988, Straus and Gelles 1986) and even within courting relationships (Lane and Gwartney-Gibbs 1985). According to Moffitt and Caspi (1998), in every single epidemiological survey employing partner-violence measures, women (adults and teenagers) have reported as much domestically perpetrated violence as males. Others still (Stets and Straus 1990) compared male/female with female/male violence in couples and found the later to be significantly more prevalent.

Husband abuse overstated

These findings are frequently reified by 'men's rights' advocates, keen to portray women as equally violent to men and motivated, it seems, more by a desire to dismiss feminist analyses than to understand the issues (see Kelly 1991). Taylor and Chandler (1995) also argue that the manipulation of the 'women do it too' statistics has also been to suggest that female abusers are somehow more responsible for their crimes than their male counterparts and that it is somehow worse for a woman to be violent than a man. Moreover, the statistics themselves, or at least their underlying methodologies or interpretations, have also been hotly contested by (pro)feminist researchers who maintain that the extent of *husband victimisation* has been grossly exaggerated (e.g. Harwin & Barron 1999, Dobash et al 1998), particularly at the hands of the media (Gill and Malos 1993). For example, according to Pence and McMahon (1998) of the celebrated Duluth initiative in Minnesota, women offenders have been as vigorously targeted as men and yet have never constituted more than 7% of referrals to their mandated perpetrator programme. The Court-referred Women's Treatment Program at Counselling Services in Denver (Busey 1993) maintain that of the female defendants arrested for domestic violence, only 2 to 3% are in relationships in which *both* partners attempt to inflict injury equally on each other. Especially when injury is the primary concern, the term 'mutual combat' can also be very misleading. Though violence to male partners is rarely reported and therefore little is known about the incidence of injuries sustained, men's superior physical strength invariably means that women are at much greater risk of sustaining serious injuries in a domestic conflict (Cleverly et 1999).

The violence of resistance

Close examination of relationships in which (heterosexual) women's violence has been identified frequently reveals that their behaviour is either retaliatory or self-defensive (Hamberger et al 1997, Healey et al 1998, Daly and Wilson 1990, Saunders 1988, 1986), a reaction to their husbands' violence or abuse, whereas husbands tend to be violent in response to a variety of non-violent wife behaviours (Jacobson et al 1994). Dasgupta (1999), for example, examined the cases of 32 women who self-referred or were court-mandated to correctional domestic violence programmes in Duluth. Interviews revealed that nearly all the women were either currently being or had been 'battered' in intimate relationships. For his part, Saunders (1986) found that self-defence was the most frequently reported motive for women's use of violence. He found that this group of women invariably have a history of repeat victimisation by a male or lesbian partner and have faced threats of murder and multiple assaults often inflicting severe physical injuries. The

violence used by these women is motivated by a desire to protect themselves (or their children) rather than being a simple reaction to their abuser's violence and it may be seen as constituting an active effort to resist his attempts at domination (the violence of resistance). Violence from these women typically results in only minor injury to the abusive partner. However, in extreme cases, such violence can be fatal. On the rare occasions women do kill, they are much more likely than men to kill during an incident in which their partner was the first to use violence or to kill in an attempt to avert an incident in which they believe that they or a child will be seriously hurt or killed (Browne 1987, 1997, Maguigan 1991). For example, of the 11 cases studied by Mezey (1995) of women referred to St. George's Hospital Medical School after having killed a partner, all had been subjected to severe physical, sexual and psychological abuse over many years. Whereas, when heterosexual men kill, it is commonly the women and children they have been abusing over a long period who are their victims (Wilson and Daly 1999)..

Women also retaliate

Other women were found to have retaliated to the violence first introduced by their abusers. Women in this category tend to be those who have suffered violence and abuse from a partner and eventually begin to fight back to 'get even.' In their study of violent lesbian women, Marrujo and Kreger (1996) also question the term 'mutual combat' because of its implied equality and they identify a population of women referred to as 'participants' who do not initiate violence but will engage in a conflict and may well retaliate for the duration of a fight. Saunders (1988) also points out that 'self-defence' and 'fighting back' are not mutually exclusive in that some victims report experiencing retaliatory anger at the time of having to defend themselves. Other research suggests that for some women, this retaliatory response may be more of a reaction to violent beatings suffered in *previous* relationships. Construing life experiences as having to make a choice between the roles abuser or victim, it seems some survivors adopt violent patterns in subsequent relationships in an attempt not to be victimised again. Many women we work with express concern that they were becoming, '*just like him*'. Whilst understandable in itself, retaliatory responses can be particularly dangerous as they can lead to an escalation in violence and the increased risk of injury, particularly where the primary aggressor has superior physical strength.

As a footnote and of particular concern is the fact that the growing publicity about 'victimised husbands' has promoted a climate in which male *perpetrators* find it all too easy to present themselves as *victims*. Self-defending and retaliatory victims can sometimes display behaviours which are confusing to the police when called out to intervene. Often a woman only feels safe enough to express her anger once the police are present (by which time her abuser may well appear calm) or she may even express her frustration at the establishment's inability to protect her. Other women resort to the use of weapons to afford protection for themselves or their children, yet are portrayed as the primary aggressor by their abusive partner when the police arrive. In such cases, with pro-arrest policies being increasingly adopted by police authorities and with many male perpetrators petitioning themselves as victims, it is not at all uncommon for the woman to be arrested and charged.

Women as primary aggressors

However, claims of self-defence and retaliation have in turn been rebutted by George (1994) who points to the many accounts in which women themselves report *initiating* unprovoked assaults on their male partners, as does Bland and Orn's study of 1986. Tiff (1993), on the other hand, points out that researchers using the Physical Aggression Subscale of the Conflict Tactics Scale (C.T.S.), the most widely used instrument for measuring domestic violence throughout the U.S., count as equivalent the act of a woman pushing a man once in the chest during a single argument, causing no injury whatever, and that of a man pushing a woman many times during a conflict resulting in serious physical injury! Hamberger and Potente (1994), Brown (1992) and Kurz (1998) are also adamant that the C.T.S. cannot reasonably be used to compare male and female violence. Whilst Gelles (1993) fervently defends the C.T.S. as the best instrument available, claiming no other measure yet meets its standards of validity and

reliability, he does recognise its failure to identify gendered power relations, individual differences in motive and the sequence and consequences of violent episodes.

However, examination of the dynamic in homes where women have initiated aggression reveals that men's victimisation is rarely equivalent to women's since men's violence is invariably more severe and induces fear and women's violence is often a response to dependence, frustration or stress rather than an attempt to control (James 1996, Moffitt & Caspi 1998) (although I have argued elsewhere (Bell 1999) that practitioners should also avoid assumptions about homogeneity of motive among male perpetrators). Women's male or female victims are likely to face some verbal abuse and occasional, isolated incidents of physical aggression but are rarely exposed to a fear-inducing regime involving sustained emotional and physical abuse. After research into aggression in 393 married couples, O'Leary and colleagues (1994) concluded that violence in (heterosexual) marriage does not arise from the same causes for women as for men. Furthermore, when male victims of assault by their partners leave the relationship, the violence typically ends (Dasgupta 1999).

Nevertheless, in Busey's experience (1993), some 2% of women arrested for domestic violence are *primary* aggressors who have inflicted or threatened serious injury towards a partner, especially if the relationship itself is threatened. This small group of heterosexual and lesbian women hold the balance of power within their relationships and display many of the characteristics associated with the 'patriarchal terrorism' (Johnson 1995) which is so common among male abusers where violence and abuse are used systematically to establish and maintain control. Of the 67 women treated by the Kenosha Domestic Abuse Intervention Project (see Hamberger & Potente 1994), only three exhibited primary perpetrator characteristics and 'battered' their male partners (each of these came from severely dysfunctional and multi-abuse families-of-origin).

Of course, where women are found to be the primary aggressors, despite the similarities with heterosexual men's violence, the roles do not neatly reflect each other. Abused women face particular social and legal discrimination not experienced by abused men (Hamberger and Potente 1994, Pagelow 1985) and women's violence is not underpinned by traditional power relationships within the family or supported by institutional structures. When women use violence it also goes against stereotypes of femininity (Taylor and Chandler 1995). Male victims invariably enjoy a greater degree of financial autonomy when compared to female victims and do not face rape and severe sexual abuse from their partners. Unlike with many men, women's aggression invariably stops once the relationship is over, also making separation a less dangerous activity for men than women.

Same sex violence

Same-sex families are now indisputably here to stay (see Stacey, 1996) and domestic violence is certainly not confined to heterosexual couples. Various reports refer to its existence within both lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and trans-gender relationships (e.g. Jasinki et al 1998, Merrill 1998, Marruio & Kreger 1996, Taylor and Chandler 1995, Lie and Gentlewarrior 1991, Lie et al 1991, Kanuha 1990, Renzetti 1988) and, though definitional thresholds vary, some prevalence rates reported suggest an even higher occurrence of physical violence than within heterosexual couples (e.g. Walder-Haugrud et al 1997). However, Renzetti (1998) imputes the validity of prevalence extrapolations for lesbian populations as does Merrill (1998) for gay couples arguing that researchers are forced to draw upon small, self-selected samples in a culture where homophobia compels many same-sex couples to conceal their identities. Merrill (1998) also suggests that the gay community has been very reluctant to address homosexual domestic violence out of fear that recognition of the problem will be used to validate homophobic stereotypes about gay relationships and fuel hatred of gay people thus breeding a climate of isolation and secrecy, the very conditions that permit domestic abuse to thrive. For her part, Hart (1986) adds that denial and secrecy around lesbian violence stem from its threat to the dream of a lesbian utopia. As Mullender (1996) reminds us, it would be surprising *not* to find

homosexual partner assault since: *“.....we are still in the lifetime that is making the first real attempts at developing cohabitations of any kind on something approaching an egalitarian basis....”* (p.16). Duthu (1996) maintains that little research and few resources have been dedicated to this area, despite general acceptance that domestic violence occurs in homosexual relationships to at least the same proportion as in heterosexual ones. Some authors challenge the gendered (and allegedly heterosexist) assumptions of popular (white) feminist theory arguing that partner assault is not a gender issue at all (see Island and Letellier 1991 and Merrill 1996). Taylor and Chandler (1995) appeal for the work already undertaken with heterosexual domestic violence to be used as a starting point in studying lesbian violence but warn that uncritical comparisons to heterosexual experience are misleading and serve only to mystify the issue further. According to the Metropolitan Police ‘Day to Count’ figures of 28th September, 2000, 4% of domestic violence recorded by the police was female to female and 7% between males.

Women are primary victims

However, whatever the extent of same-sex abuse or the prevalence or motives of violent wives, there are powerful arguments that it is heterosexual women who are the predominant victims, at least of severe assaults (Hester et al 2000, Leaver et al 1999, Dobash et al 1998, Dobash et al 1992, Gelles 1997, Hamberger et al 1997, Mullender 1996, Hamberger and Potente 1994, Gelles and Cornell 1990, Lane and Gwartney-Gibbs 1985). There are unique reporting difficulties experienced by all groups of victims of domestic violence, whatever their age, sex and sexual preference and the rate at which victims report to the authorities remains low: between 15 and 24% according to researchers such as McGibbon 1989, Mooney 1993 and Dominy and Radford 1996 and more recently 30% (British Crime Survey 1996) yet according to the Metropolitan Police ‘Day to Count’ figures of 28th September, 2000, 81% of domestic violence recorded by the police was related to female victims being assaulted by male perpetrators. Whilst many heterosexual men face verbal abuse and occasional incidents of physical assault from their female partners, in my experience, they are very rarely exposed to a regime of terror involving systematic and sustained physical and sexual violence. The reverse is commonplace (Hester et al 2000, Dutton 1995, Dobash et al 1996). Even the government now, *“.....recognises that women are more likely to experience domestic violence at some point in their lives, more likely to experience repeat victimisation, more likely to be injured and to seek medical help, more likely to experience frightening threats and more likely to be frightened and upset.”* (Home Office 1998). Women are killed by their male counterparts at far higher rates than are men by women (Browne 1993, Smith 1989) (47% versus 8% based upon the 1997 Criminal Statistics for England and Wales, typically two women killed per week in the U.K.). Women are physically injured to the point of needing medical attention as much as 10 times more often and they suffer far more damaging psychological trauma (e.g. Mirrlees-Black 1999, Cleaver at 1999, Langley et al 1997, Gelles 1997, Stets and Straus 1990) (though even this finding has also been disputed by some researchers such as Cook (1997) and Smith et al 1992)). In regional random incidence surveys in Britain, as many as one in three women have disclosed experience of some form of domestic violence worse than being grabbed, pushed or shaken, most of which required some form of medical attention. Nearly a third of the cases reported to the British Crime Survey required medical attention: 59% involving injury and 13% in broken bones (British Crime Survey 1996). Other studies reveal that some 10 to 11% of women above the age of 16 will have been subjected to physical violence by a current or past partner within any twelve month period (Stanko 2000, Mooney 1994, McGibbon et al 1989). Mooney’s survey revealed that one in eight of the women interviewed had been allegedly raped by a current or ex-partner. Painter (1991) also reported that of the 1000 women interviewed, one in eight claimed to have been raped by a partner. Thus, whilst the commission of relationship violence is not a uniquely male preserve, the dominant and most destructive pattern appears to be one of its perpetration by (heterosexual) men.

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