

Violence Against Women: A Review of Recent Anglo-American Research

1. The Nature and Extent of Violence Against Women in Intimate Relationships

Survey data from Canada, the United States and Britain indicate that approximately one-quarter of women report experiencing at least one act of violence while in an intimate relationship with a man, and about one in ten report several acts of violence during their lifetime (Bachman/Saltzman 1995; Mirrless-Black 1999; Wilson/Johnson/Daly 1995; Greenfield 1998; Tjaden/Thoennes 1998). Although evidence indicates that intimate partner violence may occur in all social classes, survey research from several countries suggests that there is a greater risk of such violence being directed at young women and those living in poverty. In addition, women living in de facto, non-state sanctioned relationships and those in the process of attempting to leave a relationship experience an elevated risk of non-lethal and lethal violence from their male partner (Wilson/Daly 1993; 1998). Research further suggests that excessive alcohol consumption and substance abuse by male perpetrators may contribute to an elevated risk and that a small proportion of violently abusive men may have personality traits not apparent in samples of non-abusive men (Holtzworth-Munroe/Stuart 1994; Moffitt et al. 2000).

Historical and anthropological evidence confirms the asymmetrical pattern of non-lethal and lethal violence against an intimate partner and illustrates how religious, social and legal beliefs and institutional arrangements have either condoned such violence or failed to consider it a problem worthy of serious attention and action (Dobash/Dobash 1979; 1981; Pleck 1987; Gordon 1988). For centuries, legal and religious institutions in western societies granted a husband the right to physically chastise his wife for various 'transgressions'; women had no equivalent rights. Taken together, anthropological and ethno-graphic evidence from small kinship based societies concurs with findings about western, industrial societies, which suggest that violence against women is fairly ubiquitous, is highly consequential for the victims and usually occurs in a general context of male domination. There is no evidence of symmetry in these societies. It is important to note, however, that within this body of evidence there are also a few kinship

based societies in which such violence is relatively rare (Levinson 1989; Campbell 1992; Baumgartner 1993; Descola 1996).

Homicide statistics show that women are at greatest risk of lethal violence from an intimate male partner. Research in Britain, North America and Australia reveal that every year between 40–60% of all women victims of homicide are killed by an intimate partner or ex-partner (Campbell 1986; Browne 1987; Daly/Wilson 1988, Wilson/Daly 1992; Polk 1994). By contrast, male victims of homicide are much more likely to be killed by a male acquaintance or stranger, and only 5–10% of men are killed by an intimate partner. In addition, the circumstances associated with homicides between intimates usually vary for men and women. Men often kill a woman partner after they have subjected her to a lengthy period of physical abuse and/or when pursuing her after she has left him or begun a new relationship. When women kill a male partner, it is more likely to be in a context of self-defence or retaliation in response to his previous violence against her.

Research findings based on a wide range of methods and different types of data, including in-depth interviews, surveys, secondary analysis of crime statistics, ethnographic and historical evidence, repeatedly show when men use violence in an intimate relationship, it is much more likely to be serious and consequential than when women do so. Men's violence may also include sexual violence and rape. Several studies confirm that between 10%–15% of all married women have been raped by an intimate male partner, and that approximately one-third of all rapes and sexual assaults against adult women involve an intimate male partner. Women are much more likely to be raped or sexually assaulted by an intimate than by a stranger (Russell 1990; Randall/Haskell 1995; Ullman/Segal 1993). In addition, interviews with abused women reveal that about one-half of this group have experienced at least one act of sexual assault from an intimate partner (Campbell 1999) and a recent British study found that about one in ten of physically abused women also reported repeated sexual assaults during a typical year with a violent partner (Dobash et al. 2000). Finally, when men use violence against a woman partner, it is common for women to feel intimidated and fearful for their lives and physical well-being; the obverse is uncommon or even rare (Browne 1987; Dobash/Dobash 1979; Dobash et al. 1998; Nazroo 1995; Saunders 1986; 1988).

An important strand of research in this domain has involved intensive investigations of the contexts and situations associated with vio-

lence directed at women in intimate relationships. The focus of survey research in this area has been on identification of the socio-demographic correlates of victimisation; intensive studies have extended knowledge about how specific contexts and the individual cognition and motivations of offenders are linked to violent events (Toch 1992; Athens 1997); in-depth interviews with victims have played an important role in developing descriptions and explanations of the violence itself and of the predicament of victims; and, finally, recent studies of male perpetrators have added to this body of evidence about the men themselves and their uses of violence within intimate relationships (Dobash/Dobash 1998a). Taken together, this large body of research tells a common story. In contrast to popular conceptions which characterise this violence as an expression of a loss of control, the evidence reveals that men's violence against an intimate partner is best seen as intentional, purposeful behaviour undertaken to achieve specific ends.

World-wide, conflict in intimate relationships appears to involve a number of recurring themes: domestic labour, the allocation of economic and household resources, the care and correction of children, sexual access and practices, degrees of commitment to the relationship, fidelity, and the possessiveness of respective partners. Relationships characterised by recurring episodes of men's violence seem to be plagued by persistent conflicts regarding these issues, and such conflicts are invariably played out against a backdrop of asymmetrical power between men and women. Couples argue about women's labour including housework, preparation of meals, and child care, and it is usually assumed that women are primarily responsible for these tasks. Couples also argue about the use of family resources, with women often trying to use them for necessities such as rent, food and the children as men may seek to retain them for their own personal pursuits. Real and imagined infidelities are a significant source of conflict in these relationships: men accuse women of having adulterous affairs, scrutinise their behaviour and control their movements in order to restrict access to other men. Sometimes this even extends to the point of limiting the woman's contact with her own family as well as friends and neighbours. While women are also concerned about the fidelity of male partners and the nature of their activities outside the home, they are generally unable to exert such extreme forms of control and/or physical punishment.

Intensive research provides detail and insights that enhance the understanding of general patterns uncovered in survey research. Findings

from both types of research suggest that abusers become habituated to using violence in order to settle disputes and 'solve' problems, and that acts of physical violence are linked to other forms of intimidation and coercion (Tolman 1989; Pence/Paymar 1993; Leibrich/Paulin/Ransom 1995; Johnson/Sacco, 1995; Yllo 1993; Ptacek 1999; Dobash et al. 2000). While acts of intimidation and coercion are often labelled as 'psychological abuse', we have in our own research defined them as an integral element of what we have termed the 'constellation of violence'. This 'constellation of violence' includes not only physical and sexual acts of violence but also a range of intimidating and controlling behaviours that are used within an overall nexus of power and control (Dobash et al. 2000). The list of intimidating and coercive acts is extensive and commonly includes: threatening to use violence; intimidating looks and gestures; destruction of personal property; threatening, and using, violence against pets; displaying and threatening with weapons; public humiliation; and continuous criticism of the woman and/or those close to her. Such coercive and/or intimidating acts constitute the wider context in which violence recurs.

Interviews with violent men suggest that they rarely accept responsibility for their violent and abusive behaviour. Instead, they deny they are violent and/or attempt to deflect responsibility onto others, especially the women they abuse. Such men offer rationalisations and often suggest that women provoke their violence because of faults in their personalities and behaviour: housekeeping and arguing or 'nagging' are frequently mentioned (Dobash/Dobash 1998a; Cavanagh et al. 2001). For such men, violence is 'caused' by forces beyond their control, by alcohol, drugs, unemployment, the woman's behaviour, etc. For them, violence against their partner is seen as purely reactive, caused by others, outside their control and beyond meaningful comprehension. 'I just snapped' is a phrase commonly used. Yet when violent men are asked what they hoped to achieve through their threats and acts of violence, their responses reflect action that is much more goal oriented and aimed at achieving specific ends: e. g., to silence her; to stop her from taking certain courses of action; to isolate her; to restrict her movements; to limit her social life. Thus, violence is used as a means of obtaining an end, as an expression of or a product of men's power over women and, in that sense, the violence is goal oriented and its purpose can be comprehended by the individual concerned. In a wider sense, the uses of such violence are deeply rooted

in the history of gender relations even as they become manifest in contemporary relationships.

The nature of the physical acts of violence are wide ranging, although evidence suggests that a 'typical' violent event is likely to include shoving, slapping, punching and kicking. A common pattern is to slap, shove and punch a woman on the face and body, and it is not unusual for a partner to knock her to the ground and then punch and kick her on the head and body. This is sometimes combined with acts of sexual violence (Dobash/Dobash 1979, 1984; Dobash et al. 2000). Such violence may have both physical and emotional consequences for the women concerned. Research from a variety of health and social science disciplines suggests that abused women commonly suffer severe bruising and abrasions to the face and body and many experience facial trauma, fractures and concussions as well as miscarriages and injuries to internal organs (Stark/Flitcraft 1992; Campbell 1998; Dobash et al. 2000). Sexual violence may result in genital and urinary tract related health problems, and abuse during pregnancy threatens the health of the woman and the foetus (Campbell 1998). When physically abused women are compared to women not subjected to such violence, they have higher levels of poor health and chronic pain (Campbell 1998). In addition, medical research indicates that permanent disfigurement, physical disability and damaged hearing and vision are not uncommon among abused women. Research in North America reveals that domestic violence is a major reason for both injury and non-injury visits to emergency departments, and that abused women are six - eight times more likely to use health services than non-abused women (Campbell 1998).

Evidence regarding the impact of such violence on psychological and emotional well-being, while somewhat mixed, suggests that women living in abusive relationships experience elevated levels of anxiety, depression, and stress compared to control groups (Jasinski et al. 1998; Dutton 1992). They may also be more likely to contemplate or to commit suicide and other acts of self harm. While some reports suggest that abused women may engage in substance abuse as a response to violence and suffer from low self-esteem, other studies show no difference on these factors between abused women and controls (Jasinski/Williams 1998; Hoff 1990). More broadly, violent, intimidating and coercive acts may have significant negative effects on women's employment as abusive men attempt to prevent women from seeking and

maintaining employment and as a consequence of the injuries inflicted (Lloyd/Taluc 1999; Browne/Salomon/Bassuk 1999).

2. Theoretical Accounts

Explanatory accounts of violence between intimates have emerged from a number of disciplines and theoretical perspectives. Initial feminist explanations built upon the concept of asymmetry in the perpetration of this form of violence and linked it with male domination and control. Historical, anthropological and contemporary evidence has illustrated the nature of structures within the institution of the family and other social and legal institutions that support the power of men over women in marital and familial relationships. These explanations are primarily socio-cultural in nature. They stress the importance of 'context' and of a multi-levelled analysis which includes societal, cultural, situational and interactional components as essential elements of a comprehensive explanation of the problem (Dobash/Dobash 1979, 1983; Edelson/Tolman 1992; Dutton 1996). Such accounts emphasise male power and point to evidence suggesting that violence between intimates occurs within a context of conflicts between men and women (often about domestic labour, allocation of resources and sexual possessiveness and jealousy) wherein men use violence to attempt to silence, punish and/or control women.

Explanations from evolutionary psychology also stress the importance of power and asymmetry in gender relations but locate the genesis of such social arrangements in the evolved psyche of men particularly as it relates to the control of women's reproductive capacities (Wilson/Daly 1999). From this perspective, sexual proprietariness is an evolved feature of the male psyche which is related to men's attempts to control, dominate and regulate the behaviour of women in order to prevent them from having sexual access to other men. Hence, the almost exclusive focus upon male possessiveness and jealousy. While often at odds, evolutionary and feminist accounts also have much in common: both stress the importance of asymmetry, power and gender relations, and both identify sexual jealousy and male possessiveness as important features of violent relationships. Where they are sometimes at odds, is with respect to the place and explanatory nature of these and other cultural and institutional factors.

A third perspective also focuses on power but rests on a quite different assumption, i. e. that this form of violence is symmetrical in nature with women and men equally likely to be abusers. From this per-

spective, violence is viewed as a resource used equally by women and men in their attempts to maintain order and resolve conflicts within the family unit, and both genders justify its use for such purposes (Straus 1989). Additionally, gender is deemed to be relatively unimportant within this account which focuses instead upon the 'non-gendered' effect of background characteristics, personality disorders and situational stressors.

As the study of intimate partner violence continues to develop and theoretical explanations and empirical evidence continue to expand, some of these accounts may begin to merge somewhat. This is particularly likely if current evidence and thinking continue to stress the inter-relationship between variables that are broadly 'socio-cultural' in nature and those that are more 'biological'. To date, evidence from the broadest base of sources covering the widest net of geographic, cultural, societal, anthropological and historical evidence supports the view that violence in intimate relationships is most accurately conceptualised as asymmetrical (with men the usual perpetrators and women the usual victims), that it involves the use of power within hierarchical relationships, and that this form of violence is often 'supported' or treated with indifference by numerous social/political institutions and is reinforced by popular cultural beliefs and daily practices.

While the feminist and evolutionary explanations of violence resonate most closely with the breadth of available evidence, it is important to note that not all men use violence to dominate and control their women partners, and there is considerable variation in the rates of wife-abuse between and within different countries. These variations provide a challenge not only to the understanding of 'when', 'why' and 'how' some men use violence against a woman partner while others do not, they also challenge our understanding of variations that exist among those differently located within the same society as well as across the multitude of societies in the world and, of course, at different historical points in time.

The challenge to provide a fuller explanation will, of necessity, incorporate socio-cultural, individual and situational factors rather than focus more narrowly upon a single aspect of this broad-based problem. It may be that men who use violence to try to control and dominate their partner live in a cultural milieu and within social networks that more readily promote violence as a problem solving technique in a range of circumstances including intimate relationships. A small proportion of abusers may exhibit untoward personality characteristics or

have some form of personality disorder that can be identified and treated accordingly. Some commentators suggest the puzzling and contradictory notion that while some abusers exhibit 'untoward personality characteristics' they at the same time articulate motivations for the use of violence and inclinations regarding the control of women partners that parallel those of 'normal' men without such personality problems.

More adequate evidence and explanations should help contribute to the creation of more adequate policies and practices designed to provide more meaningful interventions aimed at eliminating men's violence and providing greater safety for women (see, Dobash et al. 2000; Lewis et al. 2001). If that is so, it lends an urgency to the ever-expanding study of intimate partner violence. It also suggests the importance of exercising both care and caution in ensuring that empirical evidence and theoretical ideas are critically examined. The current state of knowledge suggests that may best be done in ways that combine a range of individual and socio-cultural variables within a dynamic contextual framework.

3. Help seeking, Interventions and Evaluations

As well as considering the genesis of this form of violence, scholars have also attempted to chart and explain the predicament of women victims and to understand their attempts to seek help in order to end the violence and/or leave the relationship. The evidence suggests that women who experience systematic and often escalating levels of violence usually engage in a range of help-seeking efforts. Evidence from several countries indicates that this process generally begins early in a violent relationship when women seek advice and assistance from family and close friends (Dobash/Dobash 1979; Hoff 1990; Bowker 1983; Chatzifotiou/Dobash 2001). Family and friends generally offer emotional and material support, such as short-term accommodation for women and children seeking safety from violent men. In western industrial societies many women also seek assistance from institutions of the state such as social services, housing authorities, and the police.

Beginning in the 1970s in Great Britain, the United States, Canada and Australia, women's groups established shelters/refuges, safe houses, help lines and a range of other systems to assist women and children. Throughout that early period of development, evidence was gathered by women working on help lines and in shelters and from a few more systematic studies. Evidence at that early stage of the 'discovery' of the problem in Britain and the USA revealed that women

were at that stage very poorly served by the traditional agencies of the state (Dobash/Dobash 1979; Schechter 1982; Bowker 1983; Pagelow 1984; Pahl 1985; Mama 1989; McGregor/Hopkins, 1991; Dobash/Dobash 1992; McWilliams/McKiernan 1993; Hague/Malos 1998; Mullender 1996). The social services generally failed to identify abusive relationships and the police either ignored the concerns of victimized women and failed to deal with perpetrators or dealt with the violence in an ineffectual manner. Subsequent studies about countries at a similar stage in their early development reveal similar patterns of provision, public awareness and official response (for an overview of many developing countries, see Heize 1994; on Australia, Stubbs 1994; on Filipino women in Australia, Cunneen/Stubbs 1997; on Sweden, Olsson/Wiklund 1997; on Greece, Chatazifotiou/Dobash 2001).

As a result of local, national and international efforts many countries enacted new legislation, embarked on public education programmes, instituted new institutional policies and procedures primarily aimed at assisting women and children but also oriented to dealing with violent men. The various social service developments are too numerous to list but include: financial support for a range of victim assistance programmes such as help-lines, shelters, support services and counselling for women and children; and, improved access to social housing and other temporary and long-term social benefits. Legal developments include: the strengthening of civil orders of protection (i. e., injunctions, interdicts, protection orders) through the inclusion of provisions for exclusion as well as arrest for breach of such orders; the strengthening and extending of powers of arrest and, in some jurisdictions, the introduction of mandatory or pro-arrest policies; an emphasis on increasing the rates of successful prosecution that also may include support and assistance to victims in order to secure more effective witnesses; and, the creation of court mandated counselling for abusive men (Dobash/Dobash 1992; Mullender 1996; Schneider 2000; Dobash/Dobash 2000).

A few of the initiatives created to assist victims and to deal with offenders have been the subject of research evaluations. Despite the existence of refuges throughout the world there have been few research studies of their impact on repeated victimisation, the general pattern of abuse and upon the women and men concerned. However, the studies that do exist reveal that shelters provide invaluable, albeit temporary, safe accommodation for women and children, and that they can pro-

vide some women with a stepping-stone to permanent housing and an escape from a violent partner (Binney/Harknell/Nixon 1981; Berk/Newton/Berk 1986; Hague/Malos 1998). Abused women report that leaving a violent man and staying in a refuge sometimes provides a context for negotiating a non-violent relationship, although these re-constituted relationships do not necessarily remain violence free. In a few countries, social, health and medical services have created innovative responses to battered women. Information gathered from these projects suggest that they have been successful in identifying victims of violence and providing services where once the problem was invisible and thus no services were delivered (Mullender 1996; Campbell 1998).

The most sophisticated research evaluations of new interventions have been in the areas of civil and criminal justice. Civil injunctions are now widely used in cases of violence against women in the home and a number of critical evaluations have attempted to assess their impact. Evidence from North America suggests that orders of protection can be useful in providing a temporary respite for women when men are excluded from the shared residence and required to restrict their contact with their partner (Harrell/Smith 1996; Ptacek 1999; Fagan et al. 1984; Schneider 2000). Although reports from Britain are more equivocal, a recent study of orders of protection suggests that a majority of abused women reported that they felt safer during the period when injunctions were in force and rated them as useful in their efforts to deal with violent partners (Lewis et al. 2000; Dobash/Dobash 2000).

In North America, the most intensively evaluated intervention has been that of arresting the offender. In the USA, several studies using randomised designs have attempted to compare the impact of 'arrest' to 'other types of intervention' such as requiring the offender to leave the residence for a short period of time. The results of these studies have been equivocal and difficult to interpret. Some suggest that arrest deters violent men, others find no effect, and a few indicate that arrest may exacerbate the problem (Sherman/Berk 1984; Berk et al. 1992; Sherman 1992; Garner/Maxwell/Fagan 1995). On the basis of such results, commentators have suggested policies which emphasise arrest while others have rejected the use of arrest in cases of violence between intimates (Sherman 1992; Stark 1993; Hart 1993). Other research on the impact of arrest, reveals that it results in greater victim satisfaction with police response and reductions in

violence (Langan/ Inness 1986; Jaffe et al. 1986). One of the most important conclusions to emerge from the various investigations of the impact of arrest is that arrest alone may not deter men who are persistently violent, and that *more* rather than *less* intervention may be needed in order to significantly reduce or bring about a cessation in the violence of such men (Fagan 1989, 1992; Berk et al. 1992). In this respect, investigations of prosecution have led to conclusions suggesting that it may be an important resource in dealing with violent men (Fagan 1989; 1992; Ford 1991; Ford/Regoli 1992). The use of the justice system in cases of domestic violence is still a controversial issue, some commentators suggest that violence against women should be dealt with through various forms of mediation and diversion away from the justice system. Others propose that a cessation of violence and changes in the attitudes of violent men will only be achieved through interventions which bring about greater costs to the offender for the use of violence and incorporate systems of control and supervision as embodied in certain responses of the justice system (Fagan 1992; Dobash et al. 2000; Lewis et al. 2001).

Treatment programmes for men who abuse their intimate partner are also proposed as a significant element of a more effective institutional response to violent men. These programmes have been operating in the USA and Canada for at least two decades and are now operating in Britain and elsewhere (Pence/Paymar 1993; Edleson/Syers 1991; Morran/Wilson 1997). While some programmes only deal with men who volunteer to participate, in North America most deal with court mandated men who participate as a result of diversion from a legal sanction or as a requirement of a probation order. The philosophy and style of these programmes are diverse. Some adopt traditional psycho-dynamic or insight approaches while others are based on feminist knowledge and scholarship and combine these insights with those of cognitive-behavioural and educational approaches. Whatever the philosophy and practice, the aims are generally the same: to break down rationalisations and deflections of responsibility and to alter behaviours and attitudes in order to enhance the possibility of intimate relationships that are free of violence. Pro-feminist approaches usually seek to extend these lessons by attempting to change violent men's sense of rightful domination and control over women (Ptacek 1988; Adams 1988).

The majority of the research evaluations of the treatment programmes for abusers have been conducted in the USA although a few

have been carried out in other countries (Dutton 1995; Edleson/Tolman 1992; Gondolf 1991; Saunders 1996; Dobash et al. 2000). Until relatively recently, most of these studies suffered from a number of methodological and procedural problems which make it difficult to interpret their results (Eisikovits/Edleson 1989; Gondolf 1997). During the last ten years, randomised and quasi-experimental designs have been used to assess programme effectiveness. In the USA, such studies have shown that abuser programmes can have important effects on the behaviour and orientations of violent men and increase the sense of safety and quality of life of some abused women (Bersani/Chen/Denton 1988; Hamm/Kite 1991; Dutton 1995; Gondolf 1999). Research on British court mandated abuser programmes suggests that twelve months after arrest and prosecution men participating on such programmes were more likely than men sanctioned in other ways to have stopped using violence, to have reduced their controlling and coercive acts and to have improved their relationships with their partner (Dobash et al. 2000; Dobash/Dobash 2000). While abuser programmes have been judged effective by some evaluators, the observed effects are often small and some commentators are not convinced by the results. In this arena, as in many others, additional research is necessary before more definitive conclusions can be reached (Gondolf 1997). Subsequent research will need to be attuned to the issues and evidence considered in this paper, including the differential patterns and levels of violence within and across societies as well as differences in communities and personalities which may effect the effectiveness of various forms of intervention.

4. Conclusion

Violence against women in intimate heterosexual relationships has now been recognised as a social problem affecting the health and well being of women throughout the world. The problem has been placed on the agenda of local, national and international organisations. In many countries, social, health and legal services have altered policies and practices in order to provide more effective interventions directed at victims and perpetrators. Research has played an important role in advancing recognition and knowledge of this significant problem. In recent years, the enhanced and refined nature of research questions, along with an increasing concern to evaluate the effectiveness of new innovations designed to end the violence, has shifted the focus of theoretical questions and research efforts in this domain. Consequently,

the research arena is now characterised by ever more sophisticated approaches to the creation of evidence that will enhance existing knowledge of the problem and the effectiveness of interventions.

While much of the earliest research was shaped within the disciplines of sociology, criminology, women's studies and law, the global expansion of interest in the problem has been mirrored by an expansion of the disciplines contributing to its investigation which now includes medicine, health studies, conventional psychology, and evolutionary psychology. In order further to advance the existing knowledge base these often disparate disciplines need to engage in meaningful dialogue in order to work toward developing more empirically adequate inter-disciplinary explanations (Dobash/Dobash 1998b). Such efforts should contribute to the continued development of policies and practices oriented to providing greater safety for abused women and help increase the possibility that they can live lives free of violence. Such investigations should also contribute to the development of sounder policies and practices directed at deterring violent men and at offering them opportunities to end their violent and coercive behaviour. Evidence from around the world suggests that efforts to reduce violence in intimate relationships should incorporate interventions aimed at assisting victims and at challenging perpetrators. Effective interventions must include a range of social and legal institutions as well as organisations within the community, all of which focus on measures that condemn this form of violence and provide positive and effective responses to those who are abused.

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