



Intimate Partner Abuse Against Men

National Clearinghouse on Family Violence

Introduction

Domestic abuse of women has been in the public eye for many years. Many studies have examined its nature and extent, shelters for abused women have been set up, and legislation and police charging policies have evolved in response to the growing appreciation of the extent of the problem. The extent of the comparable issue of domestic abuse of men is not as well known and understood by the general public. However, recent findings have become available that contribute to a better understanding of domestic or intimate partner abuse of men.

Statistics Canada first collected data on intimate partner abuse of both men and women through its 1999 General Social Survey (GSS). Respondents were asked 10 questions concerning abuse by their current and/or previous spouses and common-law partners during the 12-month and 5-year periods preceding the telephone interview.¹ According to their responses, almost equal proportions of men and women (7% and 8% respectively) had been the victims of intimate partner physical and psychological abuse (18% and 19% respectively). These findings were consistent with several earlier studies which reported equal rates of abuse by women and men in intimate relationships.²⁻¹⁶

Some scholars suggest that the motives for intimate partner abuse against men by women may differ from those for abuse against women by men,¹⁷ and that women suffer more severe injuries than men.¹⁸ Nonetheless, the occurrence of abuse by women against men, and its consequences, warrant attention. It is important for the victims of abuse, whether they be men or women, to know that they are not alone – that is, that such experience is not unique to their personal situation. It is also important for the perpetrators of intimate partner abuse – men or women – to recognize that violence in any form is both morally and legally wrong.

This document has been prepared to contribute to the understanding of intimate partner abuse by summarizing the results of studies that have examined the abuse of men by their female partners.

Describing the Abuse

The title of this document is “Intimate Partner Abuse Against Men.” (More specifically, though not specified in the title, the document is about intimate partner abuse against men in heterosexual relationships – both marital and common-law; it does not deal with intimate partner abuse in same-sex relationships.)

Within this document the word “abuse” has been selected so as to consistently capture both physical violence (what is legally categorized as “assault”) and other, non-physical forms of abuse. Rather than repeatedly use the longer phrase “intimate partner abuse against men,” we use an abbreviated designation – “male abuse” – as the dominant label throughout. For the purposes of this document, “male abuse” refers to any act carried out by a woman with the intention, or perceived intention, of causing physical injury, intimidation or emotional pain to her intimate male partner.

Many researchers distinguish between two types of physical abuse: minor and severe. The first type refers to acts such as shoving, pushing, grabbing or slapping — acts that have a relatively low probability of causing serious physical pain or injury. Severe physical abuse includes assault that has a relatively high probability of causing serious physical injury or pain: choking, kicking or hitting with an object, “beating up” the partner, or using a knife or gun against the partner. In Canada,

behaviour falling into either of these two levels of physical abuse constitutes criminal assault.

Emotional or psychological abuse consists of behaviour intended to shame, demean, intimidate or humiliate. Examples include yelling at or insulting the other person, or limiting his contact with friends and family. Such behaviour often occurs within relationships that are also physically abusive.¹⁹

Limitations of Male Abuse Studies

Differences among studies often make it difficult to compare findings. For example, some studies ask respondents whether they have inflicted abuse on their partner, while others ask whether they have sustained abuse. A few studies measure both inflicted and sustained abuse. Definitions of abuse and measurements of abusive acts also differ among studies. Small sample sizes – some drawn from known victims and not from the general population – may make it difficult to generalize the study findings.

In many studies, the context of the abuse – such as information on the dynamics of the relationship, the events immediately preceding the abusive act, the meaning attributed to the abuse, the identity of the initiator of the abuse or the motivation for the abusive behaviour – is not documented.²⁰ In addition, the severity of the injury, pain or emotional damage is not always known.

Some research suggests that victims and perpetrators of abuse do not always report their experiences or their actions accurately in response to survey questions.

For example, some research has found evidence that men underreport the abuse that they have sustained and inflicted,²¹ while women underreport perpetrating abuse as their age and education increase.^{22,23} This makes it difficult to capture actual abuse rates accurately.

Some research shows that studies based on self-administered questionnaires may report higher rates of abuse than studies based on face-to-face or telephone interviews.²⁴ Telephone surveys are often limited to English or French-speaking individuals and, obviously, they are usually limited to people living in households with a telephone. Consequently, some populations are excluded.

How is Male Abuse Measured?

To measure male abuse, several studies done in North America and elsewhere have used modified versions of the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS).²⁵ The CTS measures rates of abuse based on specific acts of both physical and psychological abuse. The 1999 GSS measured rates of similar physically abusive acts, added sexual abuse to the measurement of physical violence, and identified different forms of psychological or emotional abuse.²⁶ Data based on these measures allow researchers to calculate, for a given period preceding the survey, rates of (a) minor and severe abuse, (b) each of the specified abusive acts, and (c) overall abuse. To determine the frequency of abuse, respondents are asked how often they committed or sustained any of these acts during a given period.

What are the Findings of Male Abuse Studies?

Rates of Physical Abuse

In the 1999 GSS, Statistics Canada surveyed 11,607 men aged 15 years and older. It reported that of those men who had a current or former partner during the previous five-year period, 7% experienced some type of spousal abuse on at least one occasion, compared with 8% of their female counterparts.²⁷ Like all previous studies of intimate partner abuse, the GSS findings indicate that abuse was not an isolated event: 54% of these male victims had experienced spousal violence more than once in the preceding period. In fact, 13% of them had experienced it more than 10 times.²⁸

It is unknown whether the rate of spousal abuse against men is changing because comparable data for male victimization had not been gathered by Statistics Canada before 1999. Available data indicate that spousal homicide victimization rates for men generally declined between 1974 and 2000.²⁹ Interestingly, on the other hand, the number of spousal assaults against men reported to the police was higher in 2000 than in 1995. This increase might reflect a variety of potential factors: greater willingness on the part of victims to report to the police; changes in the reporting practices of the police; and/or changes in legislation, policing or enforcement practices.³⁰

A Canadian survey conducted in 1987 asked 528 women, aged 18 years or older and married or living in common-law relationships, whether they had physically abused their intimate partners during the previous 12 months. Of the total sample of

women, 23.3% reported that they had physically abused their intimate partners at least once in the previous year.^{31,32}

Also carried out in 1987 was an Alberta telephone survey of 356 men and 351 women who were married or cohabiting. Of the men, 12.3% reported they had sustained abuse from their female partners in the 12 months preceding the survey; similarly, 12.5% of the women reported that they had inflicted abuse on their male partners.³³

In the 1999 GSS findings, abused men were more likely than abused women to report having had something thrown at them or having been slapped, kicked, bitten or hit.³⁴ In the 1987 Canadian survey, similar proportions of women and men reported inflicting both minor and severe physical abuse on their partners.³⁵ According to the 1999 GSS, however, abused women were more likely than abused men to report experiencing severe forms of violence, such as being beaten, sexually assaulted, choked, or threatened by a gun or knife or having had such a weapon used against them during the previous five years.³⁶

Rates of Psychological or Emotional Abuse

Psychological or emotional abuse includes various forms of demeaning and controlling behaviour. The 1999 GSS measured emotional abuse through seven different items ranging from limiting contact with outsiders to limiting access to financial information. About one out of five men (18%) and women (19%) reported having experienced some form of emotionally abusive behaviour in their current or previous intimate relationships during the past five years. Men and women

(11% and 9% respectively) were equally likely to report experiencing two controlling forms of behaviour (“he/she is jealous and doesn’t want you to talk to other men/women,” and “he/she demands to know who you are with and where you are at all times”).³⁷

In addition to appreciating the emotional turmoil and pain created by psychological abuse, it is important to realize that it can escalate to or coincide with physical abuse. According to the 1999 GSS, five-year rates of violence in current relationships were 10 times higher among men who reported emotional abuse than those who did not.³⁸ Earlier research also shows that psychological abuse and physical abuse are highly correlated, although longitudinal data are needed to establish whether there is any causal direction.^{39,40}

Who is at Risk?

Because of the complex interaction of factors and a lack of before-and-after studies, it is very difficult to identify “causes” of abuse. However, some studies have identified risk factors associated with abuse:

- Compared with older men, younger men seem to be at a four to five times greater risk of experiencing partner abuse, one study reporting 12-month rates of 4% (men aged 25 to 34) vs. 1% (men 45 and over),⁴¹ and another finding rates of 21.8% (men aged 18 to 29) vs. 4.2% (men 65 and over).⁴²
- Men living in common-law relationships seem to be at greater risk than married men (4% vs. 1%).^{43,44}

- Conflict in other areas of life seems to increase risk substantially. Women who reported high levels of conflict in five defined areas of their lives were four times more likely to physically abuse their partners than those women who reported low levels of conflict (24.8% and 6.0% respectively). Similarly, 28.8% of those who reported high levels of conflict and 9% of those who reported low levels of conflict reported that they inflicted chronic (10 times or more during the previous year) psychological abuse on their partners.⁴⁵
- Especially vulnerable are those partnerships in which roles are changing (e.g., young couples entering the work force and/or beginning families, older couples who have reached retirement). Similarly, disrupting or high stress conditions that can foster conflict – such as unemployment, low income, personal bankruptcy, career setback, working overtime to make ends meet, and sustained economic uncertainties – are additional risk factors associated with higher rates of abuse.^{46,47} While the association between conflict and abuse is strong, the causal direction, if there is one, remains unclear.

On the other hand, it is noteworthy that differences in educational backgrounds and income levels seem unrelated to the risk of spousal abuse.⁴⁸

Consequences of Male Abuse – Direct and Indirect

Abuse produces direct physical and/or psychological consequences for the victim. According to the 1999 GSS, 13% of male victims of partner abuse reported physical injury and 3% required medical attention.⁴⁹ A recent meta-analysis (quantitative review) of more than 80 studies of physical abuse between heterosexual partners found that 35% of victims injured by an intimate partner and 39% of those requiring medical treatment were men.⁵⁰

According to the 1999 GSS, 29% of abused men reported being upset, confused or frustrated as a result of the abuse they had experienced, 26% reported anger, and 21% reported feelings of hurt or disappointment.⁵¹ Other studies have found that both perpetrators and victims of physical and psychological abuse report lower levels of self-esteem than do non-victims,⁵² and men's psychological well-being has been found to suffer as a consequence of abuse.⁵³

Recent narrative analyses also shed light on abused men's emotional hurt. Whereas women must struggle against abusive men and against social customs, attitudes and structures that disempower them,^{54,55} men who are abused by their intimate female partners struggle with the maintenance of a masculine ideal (an ideal that expects them to be self-reliant and independent, as well as tougher, bigger and stronger than women).⁵⁶

An in-depth narrative study examined the experiences and effects of physical abuse for 12 married men, aged 25 to 47. The men sustained injuries such as multiple bruises and abrasions, dislocated ribs, injured genitalia, minor head trauma, numerous lacerations, and internal injuries. Weapons used by the wives included clothes hangers, steak knives, scissors, screwdrivers, cellular phones, fingernails, metal pots and pans, rolling pins, keys and other thrown objects. This study provided some insight into the respondents' feelings about their situations and the effect those situations had on their self-identity:

- Having been abused by a woman, the men felt that they had failed to achieve culturally defined masculine characteristics, such as independence, strength, toughness and self-reliance. As a result, the men felt emasculated and marginalized, and tended not to express their fears, ask for help, or even discuss details of their violent experiences.⁵⁷ During the interviews, the abused men repeatedly expressed shame and embarrassment.
- The men indicated that their disclosures of abuse were often met with reactions of disbelief, surprise and skepticism from the staff of domestic abuse shelters, legal-based institutions and hospitals, as well as friends and neighbours. These reactions may cause male victims to feel even more abused.

While these findings are not generalizable, they do point to the need for research if we are to understand the contextual factors that shape the motives, meaning and consequences of physical and psychological abuse for men.⁵⁸

Such intimate partner abuse can also have indirect consequences, negatively affecting other family members. According to the 1999 GSS, 25% of male victims of spousal abuse reported that children had heard or seen the abuse committed against them.⁵⁹ There is a growing body of research on the long-term effects on children of growing up in an abusive home, including the following:

- behavioural effects such as aggression and delinquency, and psychological effects such as anxiety, depression and low self-esteem;⁶⁰ and
- greater likelihood that, as adults, they will become involved in abusive marital relationships.⁶¹

The indirect consequences can reach out even further and be seen in terms of economic costs to society as a whole. Three studies have shown that woman abuse alone costs billions of dollars in Canada each year.⁶²⁻⁶⁴ No comparable estimates have been made for male abuse. However, there are clear indications that its cost to our society's productivity is significant – 11% of male spousal violence victims have reported that they had to take time off work as a result of physical abuse between intimates.⁶⁵

Prevention and Intervention

Effective preventive measures are based on a recognition that abuse requires intervention at three levels: the personal, the situational, and the societal.

- Prevention in the personal domain involves teaching partners how to deal with conflict without resorting to

physical or psychological abuse. It involves active problem solving, first by oneself and then with one's partner.⁶⁶

- Prevention at the situational level involves responding positively to identifiable pivotal stressful events. Of course, leaving the relationship is always a potential option, and one that is often supported by professionals,⁶⁷ though the choice must always rest with the individual.
- Prevention at the societal level involves changes in the norms of relationships that form key components of the structure of the family system and of society as a whole – changes that reduce gender inequality, couple conflict and interpersonal stress. As well, there is continuing need for efforts to increase public awareness and reduce tolerance of violence.

Conclusions

Intimate partner abuse, by males or females, is unacceptable. The abuse of men is a complex social problem that warrants close attention. Action is needed to prevent and reduce both physical and psychological abuse in their early stages.

Unlike perpetrators and victims of abuse involving strangers outside the home, those who perpetrate and experience intimate partner abuse are often tied by the bonds of love, affection and attachment. Nonetheless, acts such as assault and threats of violence, regardless of the context, are offences under the *Criminal Code of Canada*.

What Can Be Done?

The following are some means by which victims and perpetrators of intimate partner abuse, as well as their friends and families, can act to prevent or stop the behaviour.

- Ask yourself if you are in an abusive situation. Remember that you are not to blame for your partner's abusive behaviour.
- Realize that a certain amount of conflict in close relationships is inevitable. However, causes of anger, shame and conflict should be addressed promptly to prevent their escalation into psychological and/or physical abuse.
- If you suspect that someone you know is in an abusive relationship, be supportive. Try to remain non-judgmental, but let the victim know that they are not alone, that their situation is not unique to them and that there are people who can help. If you suspect that someone is a perpetrator of abuse, let them know that no one deserves to be abused. Help both people – perpetrators and victims – to find out what services are available to them.
- Seek appropriate professional help, such as that provided by psychologists, therapists or counsellors. Abuse is seldom a one-time occurrence. Once it has begun, outside intervention will probably be needed before it can be stopped.

Services for Abused Men

There are few services designed specifically for abused men. However, support may be available from the following organizations, many of which are listed among the emergency services on or near the first page of your local telephone directory:

- under “Police Service” - Family, Youth and Violent Crime Section
- in life and death situations or regarding crimes in progress, call 911
- RCMP Victim Services
- under “Provincial Government” - Provincial Mental Health Boards
- the YMCA, some centres of which have a Family Violence Prevention Program
- Community and Social Service offices
- Men’s Line
- Counseling Services

The National Clearinghouse on Family Violence has produced *A National Directory of Services and Programs for Men Who Are or Have Been Victims of Violence*, which is available upon request. Contact information is included at the end of this document.

Suggested Reading/Viewing/Web Sites

Cook, Philip W. *Abused Men. The Hidden Side of Domestic Violence*. Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 1997.

Family of Men Support Society:
<<http://www.familyofmen.com>>

Gelles, Richard J. *The Missing Persons in Domestic Violence: Male Victims*. [Online]. [accessed February 5, 2002]. Available on Internet:

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Movement for Establishment of Real Gender Equality. *Also At Risk: The Problem of Husband Abuse* (Video). Edmonton, AB, 2002.

Pearson, Patricia. “Balancing the Domestic Equation: When Women Assault Their Spouses and Lovers” In *When She Was Bad: Violent Women & the Myth of Innocence*. Toronto: Random House of Canada, 1997: 114-145.

S.A.F.E (Stop Abuse for Everyone):
<<http://www.safe4all.org>>

Young, Cathy. “The Myth of Gender Violence”, “Legislating the Gender War: The Politics of Domestic Abuse” and “Epilogue: Where Do We Go From Here?” In *CEASEFIRE! Why Women and Men Must Join Forces to Achieve True Equality*. New York: The Free Press, 1999: 85-108, 109-137 and 265-271.

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9. M.J. Kwong, K. Bartholomew, D.G. Dutton, "Gender Differences in Patterns of Relationship Violence in Alberta," *Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science*, 31, 3 (1999): 150-160.
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 19. S.M. Retzinger, *Violent Emotions: Shame and Rage in Marital Quarrels* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1991): 38.
 20. Although the context of partner abuse against men is under-researched, some findings on the bi-directionality and initiation of relationship abuse have been documented:
 - Of the 495 American couples in the 1995 National Family Violence Survey for whom one or more abusive incidents were reported by a female respondent, the husband was the only violent partner in 25.9% of the cases, the wife was the only one to be violent in 25.5% of the cases, and both were violent in 48.6% of the cases. (M.A. Straus, "Physical Assaults by Wives: A Major Social Problem" In *Current Controversies on Family Violence*, edited by R.J. Gelles and D.R. Loseke [Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1993]:74.)
 - An Alberta survey reported findings from both perpetrators and victims and found that 52% of women who reported abuse indicated that both partners inflicted abuse, 35% reported female-perpetrated abuse only, and 13% reported male-perpetrated abuse only. Of the men who reported any abuse, 62% reported abuse by both partners, 18% reported female-perpetrated abuse only, and 20% reported male-perpetrated abuse only. (M.J. Kwong, K. Bartholomew, D.G. Dutton: 155.) These bi-directional data are important methodologically because women's perpetration reports and men's victimization reports can be compared to validate the obtained rates of wife-to-husband abuse.
 - The same study shed light on the initiation of abuse. Of those respondents reporting any violence, 67% of women and 49% of men identified themselves as initiators; 27% of women and 35% of men identified their partners; and 6% of women and 14% of men identified both partners. (M.J. Kwong, K. Bartholomew, D.G. Dutton: 155-56)
- Some researchers have suggested that studies using the CTS fail to consider that women's high rates of physical abuse perpetration may be related to their attempts to defend themselves against attack. (W.S. DeKeseredy and M.D. Schwartz, *Woman Abuse on Campus: Results from the Canadian*

- National Survey*. [Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1998]: 22; and D. Saunders, "When Battered Women Use Violence: Husband-Abuse or Self-Defence?" *Violence and Victims*, 1, [1986:47-60]: 54-55.) The above studies, however, suggest that many women (and men) report being the only one to inflict physical abuse and that a large proportion of women (and men) indicate that they initiated the abuse. More research into the context of the abuse is needed to understand this issue better.
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 26. Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 2000: 17.
 27. Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 2000: 9.
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 30. Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 2002: 8.
 31. Lupri, "Harmonie und Aggression": 480 (Table 1).
 32. E. Lupri, "Why Does Family Violence Occur?" In *Everyday Life: A Reader*, edited by L. Tepperman and J. Curtis (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson Ltd., 1992): 289-300.
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