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# **Husband Abuse: An Overview of Research and Perspectives**

# **Husband Abuse: An Overview of Research and Perspectives**



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*Husband Abuse: An Overview of  
Research and Perspectives* was prepared by  
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# Introduction

No issue has so divided researchers and front-line service providers in the violence prevention and shelter movements as “husband abuse”. However, even the most vocal proponents of the view that husband abuse<sup>1</sup> is not a significant social issue in Canada (e.g., DeKeseredy, 1993) do not deny that some men are abused by women partners. The existence of husband abuse is not an issue. Rather, the debate concerns how common it is and the degree of harm inflicted.

It took considerable time and effort before the issue of wife assault was taken seriously. Reportedly, when first provided with evidence that one in ten women is hit by her husband, a ripple of laughter was heard throughout the Canadian House of Commons. Now, wife battering is accepted as a significant social problem. Recently, men’s advocates have begun to ask whether husband abuse does not deserve similar attention. If husband abuse is more serious and widespread than is currently suspected, should new policies and services be developed to address men’s abuse in the same way that services for women have become available?

What do we know of husband abuse in Canada today? This discussion paper raises questions about the complex and controversial issue of men who are abused by their intimate partners. It does so by examining three sources: (1) research on husband abuse and gaps in our knowledge about this issue, (2) a summary of the few studies in which abused men describe their experiences, and (3) conversations with representatives from approximately 40 family violence treatment programs and men’s issues groups. The overview concludes with suggestions about where male abuse victims can seek help and some policy implications of acknowledging husband abuse.

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1. Although the terms “husband” and “wife” will be used throughout, the issues also apply to couples in common-law and dating relationships.

# Defining Husband Abuse

The term “battered husband” was introduced in 1977 by an American sociologist, Suzanne Steinmetz. She was reviewing several studies, including the 1975 U.S. National Incidence Study on Family Violence (Straus, Gelles & Steinmetz, 1980) and a small Canadian sample of 52 college students. In this research, nearly half of both men and women reported using some form of violent act toward their partner during their relationship. Women admitted behaviour such as throwing things, pushing and shoving, or hitting with an object, to a slightly greater degree and more often than men. In almost half of the couples, the partner returned violent behaviour. However, in 12% of the cases, women admitted being the sole aggressor. The men were not violent in return. The rates of using severely violent behaviour during the previous year showed a similar pattern: about 4.6% of women admitted using such tactics as threatening to use or using a gun or a knife, compared to 4.4% of men.

Those who argue that husband abuse is a widespread and significant social issue cite these and similar community surveys in which both women and men admit using physically aggressive behaviours against their partners. On this basis, they argue that women are equally as physically and psychologically abusive as men.

In contrast, those who argue that the relative risk of husband abuse is significantly less than that of wife assault tend to come from a feminist perspective. From this view, because men in our society are seen as having more power than women, aggressive behaviours by women against men in couple relationships

must be seen differently from men’s violence toward women. Perhaps more importantly, there is little evidence that men are as severely injured as the female victims of male violence.

Before examining the research evidence for husband abuse in Canada, the terms “violence” and “abuse” should first be defined.

The definition of violence from the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS), the instrument that has been used in so many of the studies on partner abuse (Straus et al., 1980), is as follows:

**Violence:** An act carried out with the intention, or perceived intention, of causing physical injury or pain to another person

**Minor violent acts:** To throw something at another, to push, grab, shove, slap or spank

**Severe violent acts:** To kick, bite or hit with a fist; to hit or try to hit with an object; to beat up the other; to threaten with a knife, gun or other deadly weapon; to use a knife, gun or other deadly weapon.

But is the use of violence the same as abuse? Most definitions of abuse include the broader concepts of control and power. For example, men who abuse their wives may be extremely jealous and may limit their wives’ activities or relationships or excessively control the family’s finances. Abusive behaviour also includes psychological abuse, such as verbal put-downs or threats of violence. Sexual assaults are commonly reported among women who have been seriously abused by their partners.

Hamby, Poindexter and Gray-Little (1996) suggest that the frequency of violent acts reflects abuse more accurately and fully than the severity of a single episode. That is, abuse occurs repeatedly over time, rather than being a one-time event. Often as well, the severity of violent acts increases over time. However, in

other situations the fact that serious violence occurred once may be enough to control a partner's current behaviour. It will be useful to keep the distinction between violence and abuse in mind when looking at the research suggesting that men are abused by women partners in some of the same ways that women are abused by men.

For the purposes of this discussion, let's follow a path similar to that which led to the development of services for women battered by their partners. Wife assault first became of concern because of the seriousness and chronic nature of the physical abuse reported by a large number of women. While even low levels of abusive behaviour must not be tolerated, the services and policies developed to assist abused women are primarily for those suffering severe abuse. Therefore, two essential questions relevant to the discussion are "How many men are abused by women partners?" and "Do male victims suffer similarly severe and chronic abuse?"

In writing this paper, an effort was made to present the most current and well-designed research available, with an emphasis on Canadian sources. Nevertheless, the reader is cautioned that every study has limitations. These might include small sample sizes or how variables such as violence are defined or measured. It is beyond the scope of this paper to note the limitations of each study. Rather, major problems common to numerous studies have been highlighted.

## Evidence for Husband Abuse

Those who argue that husband abuse is a significant social issue primarily point to U.S. and Canadian community survey studies. In these studies, researchers contact individuals at random, mostly by phone, asking them to answer a survey about how they deal with marital conflict. The procedures are similar to those used by polling agencies to gather information on public opinion. Most family violence surveys use the CTS or a subset of its items. The researcher begins by explaining that conflict is a normal part of couple relationships. The researcher then presents a series of items describing increasingly serious and aggressive tactics to solve conflict, ranging from calmly discussing the issue to using a gun or a knife. Three ways of dealing with interpersonal conflict can be calculated from these data: reasoning, verbal aggression and physical violence.

In 1993, Murray Straus reviewed more than 30 mostly American studies using such community survey methodology on married or college student dating couples, most using the CTS. In each, the rate of women admitting the use of aggressive acts against their partner was roughly equal to the rate of men who reported using violent acts against women.

In Canada, Lupri (1989, cited in Grandin & Lupri, 1997) conducted the only national survey that asked both men and women about using aggressive behaviours within the couple relationship. This 1986 study used a version of the CTS with 1,834 men and women aged 18 or over. Grandin and Lupri (1997) later compared these data with the 1985 U.S. National Family Violence study. The results suggest that Canadian men and women are

more likely to admit to using violent tactics than Americans. In terms of severe violence (e.g., kick, beat up, use a gun or knife), 9.9% of Canadian men admitted to at least one act (compared to 1.2% of the American men). In comparison, 15.5% of the Canadian women in the sample admitted to using severe tactics (compared to only 4.3% of the American women). Younger individuals aged 18 to 29 from both countries were significantly more likely to report using violent acts. In Canada, one in eight couples (about 12%) admitted to severe violence, whether committed by the man or the woman.

A community survey of 562 randomly selected couples in Calgary (Brinkerhoff & Lupri, 1998) asked questions of both members of each couple, looking at who committed at least one of eight violent tactics taken from the CTS scales. Of the 213 couples who reported any violence (37.9% of the total sample), a little over one-third (80 couples or 37.5%) described the abuse as mutual, while a smaller number (58 or 27.3%) reported that the husband was the sole perpetrator. However, in another 35% (75) of the couples the husband was the sole recipient of the abuse as disclosed by the women partners.

In a more recent Canadian study, Sommer, Barnes and Murray (1992) collected data from a random sample of 1,257 Winnipeg residents, focusing on the sub-sample of women (452) who were married or cohabiting. Of these women, 39% (176) admitted to using at least one of six moderately severe acts of abuse from a shortened version of the CTS. Most commonly reported (by 23.6% or 108 women) was “throwing or smashing something (but not directly at partner)”, the least serious of the items. With respect to severe violent acts, 15.8% (73) admitted hitting their partner and 3.1% (16) hit their partner with something hard. The most severe items of the CTS, threatening to use or using a weapon, were not included in the study.

In follow-up after three years, Sommer (1994) was able to contact 737 Winnipeg residents from the original study. She found that 17.3% (64) of the (369) men and 27.4% (100) of the 368 women admitted using some form of aggressive behaviour at some point in their relationships (7.1% [26] of men and 6.6% [24] of women in the past year). The only statistically significant difference between men and women was that more men reported throwing or smashing something (not at partner) than did women. For the two items used to define serious violence, six men (1.6%) and nine women (2.5%) disclosed hitting their partner and one man (0.3%) and three women (0.8%) reported hitting their partner with something hard in the past year, differences that are not statistically different.

In summary, across community survey studies in both Canada and the United States as many women admit to using violent behaviours as men, although only a small number of either uses serious violence. With the exception of the national Canadian study conducted by Lupri, both of the other Canadian studies were regional, surveying only one city apiece, Calgary and Winnipeg. More importantly though, the accuracy of the interpretation that women are as violent as men in relationships has been seriously questioned by criticisms of the research methodology used to come to this conclusion – the focus of the next section.



# Criticisms of the Community Survey Studies Related to Husband Abuse

The community survey studies used to argue the seriousness of wife-to-husband abuse have been repeatedly criticized. This is, in part, because the very high rates of reported husband abuse do not fit with front-line workers' experience in medical, clinical, legal and social service settings. Such workers report seeing few men who have been harmed to the same extent as women abused by men (Morse, 1995). Following are six criticisms of the methodology or the interpretations of the results of the community survey studies on couples' violence.

## **1. Studies that rely on the responses of both members of a couple find that men under-report their aggressive behaviours.**

Most studies of couple violence collect information from only one member. Studies that gather information from both spouses report higher levels of violence than one-partner studies (Brinkerhoff & Lupri, 1988; Bohannon, Dosser, & Lindley, 1995, Schafer, Caetano & Clark, 1998). One explanation is that both men and women are more honest about being violent if they know that their responses will be checked against their partner's. Further, violence by women is perceived less negatively, which may account for women's openness in admitting to it. Researchers such as Arias and Johnson (1989) note that when women engage in similarly violent acts as men, while these are still viewed negatively, it is not to the same extent as when men commit the same behaviour.

A recent British study (Dobash, Dobash, Cavanagh & Lewis, 1998) found that when both members of couples in which the men were in treatment for wife abuse were asked to describe the violence toward the women, the men seriously under-reported the prevalence, severity and injuries resulting from these acts. American sociologists Szinovacz and Egley (1995) asked both members of couples to describe not only the abuse that they received but also the abuse that they perpetrated. They concluded that if they had used the information from only one spouse of each couple in their research, the violence would be under-reported by both men and women, but significantly more by men. They note that "one-partner data would under-estimate violent incidents by 50% to 56% for wives and by 60% to 83% for husbands" (p. 1002). This effect is stronger when asking about injuries: "women under-report injuries by 43% (own injury) and 54% (husband's injury)" (p. 1002), whereas husbands under-report their own injury by 93% and their wife's injury by 116%.

In summary, couple studies confirm that some women behave aggressively in marital interactions. Importantly, however, they suggest a gender bias such that men are more likely to under-report their violent acts, especially with respect to more severe behaviours such as the use of weapons.

## **2. Individuals are less honest about such sensitive topics as violence.**

As we become aware of the serious consequences of abuse, we are less likely to admit to using violence. For example, Sommer (1994) reported that about 18% of men and 25% of the women in her Winnipeg study denied committing aggressive acts that they had admitted to three years previously. These 1994 rates were lower than in other Canadian studies and may reflect an increased sensitivity about partner abuse.

Canadians Dutton and Hemphill (1992) and Browning and Dutton (1986) found that men in treatment groups for assaulting their wives tend

to present themselves in a socially desirable manner, suggesting that their reports on measures of verbal and physical behaviours are under-estimates. They noted that men reported considerably fewer violent acts than their women partners. Research suggests that individuals are less willing to report their physically aggressive behaviour than other negative relationship behaviours (Riggs, Murphy, & O'Leary, 1989; Sugarman & Hotaling, 1997).

Finally, the results of the Riggs et al. 1989 study suggest that both men and women are more willing to admit to being the victims than the perpetrators of partner abuse, similar to what Canadian couples reported to Browning and Dutton (1986).

### **3. Couples often disagree in their recall and perception of aggressive acts.**

In studies with data from both members of a couple, the most agreement is in the vast majority of couples in which neither person is violent. In couples who admit violent acts, typically only one spouse makes the claim, while the other denies the use of such tactics (Szinovacz & Egley, 1995). Couples also tend to disagree about what aggressive acts occur (Brinkerhoff and Lupri in Calgary and Browning and Dutton in Vancouver both reported this in 1986).

There are several explanations for this:

- Aggressive acts such as pushing, shoving and grabbing appear to be so common in North American families that we may not see them as abusive but as a normal part of family life (Straus et al., 1980). Consequently, we may not remember them.
- The acts may have occurred, but in a non-aggressive context. In interviews with 103 couples who had completed the CTS, Margolin (1987) found they admitted to many instances of behaviour such as kicks or pushes that, rather than being violent, were intended and perceived by the recipient as

playful. Questions that simply ask whether behaviour occurred cannot assess the intention, context or result of the act.

- How questions about violent acts are worded can lead to different findings. For example, different measures of violence give different results (Hamby, Poindexter & Gray-Little, 1996), such that whether an individual is considered to have experienced violence depends on what measure is used.

### **4. Information about the context of violent acts is more important than counting the number of hits.**

Instruments such as the CTS have been repeatedly criticized because they do not report the context of the violence, such as whether injuries resulted (DeKeseredy & MacLean, 1990; Myer R.A., 1994). The need to seek medical care for injuries that are the result of partner abuse is a better measure by which to assess the seriousness of the violence than simply a count of hits.

In a number of studies, wives are significantly more likely to be injured in ways that require medical aid than husbands (Berk, Berk, Loseke & Rauma, 1983; Cantos, Neidig & O'Leary, 1994; Vivian & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 1994). In the 1985 U.S. National Incidence study, of those who were severely assaulted, "7.3% of the 137 women and 1% of the 95 men needed medical attention, a significant difference" (Stets & Straus, 1990, p. 157). An analysis by Schwartz (1987), based on a U.S. National Crime Survey, found that while the seriousness of the violent acts reported by partners was roughly equal for men (79.7%) and women (84.1%), a significantly higher number of women (981) received injuries than men (55). Even when both members engage in acts of violence (83% of 199 couples), husbands were more likely to use severely violent tactics and less likely to be injured. In Winnipeg, Sommer (1994) included a question about injury. In couples who admitted using violent behaviours (3% of the entire sample), one-third more of the women

received injuries that required medical attention than men (14% of men and 21% of women).

Bograd (1990) gives an example of how a simple listing of a violent act can be misinterpreted, noting that, “a woman slapping a husband and leaving no bruises is rated as *more* severe than a husband pushing his wife into a wall and breaking her nose” (p. 133). The only information that would be recorded on the CTS is that the woman slapped and the husband pushed, not the results of the actions.

Such measures also ignore that fact that, on average, men are larger and stronger than women. As Morse (1995) concludes, “women are more often than men the victims of severe partner assault and injury, not necessarily because men strike more often, but because men strike harder” (p. 251).

#### **5. The dynamics of wife-to-husband abuse are different from those of husband-to-wife abuse.**

O’Leary and co-authors (1989) note that “it is very likely that most male-to-female aggression has different psychological and physical consequences than most female-to-male aggression” (p. 267). For example, in a study by Jacobson and others (1994), women reported being violent only in response to their partner’s violence, but husbands admitted that their violence continued in response to even some non-violent responses by their wives, such as attempts to escape.

Several researchers have asked about the motives of aggressive behaviour in couples. For example, Hamberger, Lohr, Bonge and Tolin (1997) asked about the motivations of 215 men and 66 women arrested for partner abuse. The women were more likely than the men to use violence to defend themselves from direct physical attack, to escape from attack or to retaliate for prior physical and emotional abuse. In contrast, the male perpetrators claimed that they used violence primarily to dominate and control their partners.

Men are consistently less likely to report being afraid during mutually violent incidents with their partner (Jacobson et al., 1994; Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Neidig & Thorn, 1995). Similarly, Morse (1995) found that, while 30% of the women reported fearing for their physical safety during arguments, only 9.5% of men reported feeling afraid.

#### **6. There are different forms of couple violence, only one of which is reflected in community survey studies**

Johnson (1995) distinguishes two different forms of couple violence based on the severity and the nature of the abuse. He notes that some of the confusion in the literature on intimate partner abuse is because different research methods and sources of information tend to provide information on these different forms. Community survey researchers who contact members of the general public at random, typically describe aggressive acts as one method of resolving partner conflict, and often use the CTS. Johnson has described the relatively high numbers of men and women admitting the use of some violent acts in response to such surveys as “common couple violence”. This term does not imply that it is acceptable, but that it happens relatively often and the acts are usually “minor” rather than “severe”. Johnson suggests that in such cases a feminist analysis is less relevant to the way that “conflict occasionally ‘gets out of hand’, leading usually to ‘minor’ forms of violence, and more rarely escalating into serious, sometimes even life-threatening forms of violence” (p. 285). In reviewing the nature of the abuse in such studies, Johnson found little tendency for the violence to increase over time, citing that “94% of perpetrators of minor violence do not go on to severe violence” (p. 286). Things “get out of hand” on average about once every two months, and may be initiated by either the man or the woman.

In contrast, Johnson notes that the research describing the experiences of battered women is mostly from in-depth interviews with women who have sought safety in emergency shelters

or whose husbands are in treatment for wife assault. The violence is severe, with beatings occurring on average more than twice a week and almost entirely initiated by the husbands. The women are often abused throughout the relationship and the violence increases in frequency and severity over time. Johnson labels this dynamic as “patriarchal terrorism”, suggesting that it is a product of “patriarchal traditions of men’s right to control their women...and involves the use of not only violence, but economic subordination, threats, isolation as their control tactics” (p. 284). Marital rape is also commonly associated with such abuse.

Johnson’s distinction is important because it provides an explanation for the sometimes radically different views of violence between intimate partners that often emerge from the two groups of researchers, in a way that acknowledges the accuracy of each. They are most likely studying different phenomena with little overlap in the samples. For example, men who systematically terrorize their wives are not likely to participate in a survey on violence and their wives would be fearful to do so (Straus, 1990). On the other hand, information from women who seek help in shelters or hospital emergency rooms is likely not relevant to developing programs for women or men who are pushed several times a year.

Johnson is not the only author to argue that serious couple violence is different from that in couples who use more minor levels. Stark and Flitcraft (1996) suggest that wife battering is different from the pushing, slapping and shoving that occur so often as to be essentially “normal” in couples, especially in early marriage. O’Leary (1993) has recommended that, for clinical purposes, the use of such “lower” levels of physical aggression not be seen as “disorders”. In his 1989 research, more

than one third of men and women admitted using such behaviours; however, they did not see them as either abusive or in self-defence. Finally, a new study of a representative sample of 1599 U.S. couples (Schafer et al, 1998) concluded that:

*Given that women are more likely to be repeatedly abused, to be injured, and to die as a result of intimate partner violence, it seems adaptive for women to be especially concerned about this potential health risk. Finally, it is important to realize that the comparison of the rates of male-to-female and female-to-male partner violence may be inappropriate and misleading... These two indices of partner violence are qualitatively different from each other, with male-to-female partner violence producing in general far greater physical harm. (p. 1704)*

In summary, researchers have raised a number of questions about the validity of the interpretations of community survey studies that argue that women are as violent as men. They also suggest looking beyond such studies to understand abuse in intimate relationships. These criticisms do not deny that women use violent tactics, but suggest that the results of at least some female violence need to be perceived differently and are less likely to have the same serious consequences as those used by men.

# The Debate about Husband Abuse

Keeping in mind the above criticisms of the studies that have been used to argue that women are equally as aggressive as men, the following questions reflect the major issues of debate:

## 1. Is husband abuse a significant social problem in Canada?

**Yes:** The rates of wife-to-husband aggression documented in Canadian community studies are comparable if not higher than those conducted in the United States (i.e., Grandin & Lupri, 1997 in a national study; Bland & Orn in Edmonton, 1986; Brinkerhoff & Lupri in Calgary, 1988; Sommer in Winnipeg, 1994). Across studies, women admit to using violent tactics to approximately the same extent as men.

**No:** If husband abuse is an important social issue, as Dobash, Dobash, Wilson and Daly (1992) ask, “where are the victims?” These authors question why “the existence of an invisible legion of assaulted husbands strikes many family violence researchers as reasonable... These men are allegedly being denied medical, social welfare, and criminal justice services” (p. 74). Representatives from such services do not report high numbers of male victims. Rather, in Canadian crime statistics in 1996, women accounted for upwards of 89% of the victims when spouses or ex-spouses perpetrated sexual or physical assault (Pottie Bunge & Levett, 1998).

**Reaction:** Any violence must be taken seriously. However, although Canadian research supports the idea that women abuse some men, the abuse may have fewer consequences, such as injuries that need medical care. At this

point, we have little idea how many men may be the sole victims of partner abuse to the extent that they require specialized services.

## 2. Since much couple violence is mutual, aren't women as much at fault as men?

**Yes:** Numerous studies using community samples agree that almost 50% of the aggression in couple relationships is “mutual” (Brinkerhoff & Lupri, 1988, Saunders, 1986). In studies with couples seeking counselling, mutual violence is estimated to be as high as 80% (Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Neidig, & Thorn, 1995). This supports the idea that women are equally involved in domestic abuse and, thus, are equally responsible.

**No:** Even in cases where partners are “mutually” violent, women are often defending themselves from attack and are significantly more likely to be injured than men (Berk, Berk, Loseke & Rauma, 1983; Brush, 1990; Cantos, Neidig & O’Leary, 1994; DeKeseredy, 1992; Saunders, 1986; Vivian & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 1994). A recent Canadian study of dating violence (DeKeseredy, Saunders, Schwartz & Alvi, 1997) found that, “among those women who used violence at all (46% of 1,835 college students), those who reported higher levels of self-defensive violence (as compared to fighting back or initiating) also reported higher levels of violence committed against them” (p. 210).

**Reaction:** The majority of “mutual” violence entails minor levels of aggressive acts (Vivian & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 1994), fitting Johnson’s description of common couple violence. It is very difficult to assign blame in such cases and likely not helpful, as some aggression may be in self-defence.

## 3. Does evidence that women abuse other victims prove that they are as aggressive as men?

**Yes:** There is considerable evidence that women may at times behave aggressively (White & Kowalski, 1994). For example, a high

proportion of the physical abuse and neglect of children is perpetrated by mothers (Straus, Gelles & Steinmetz, 1980), and some lesbians are abused by their partners (Coleman, 1994; Renzetti, 1992). A recent study of 346 Canadian undergraduate university students (O'Sullivan, Byers, & Finkelman, 1998) found that 18.5% of the 130 unmarried men reported receiving one or more coercive sexual experiences from their female partners. The Canadian statistics on homicide indicate that some women do murder their partner (Wilson & Daly, 1993). As Renzetti (1994) puts it, the fact that women "do it too" is often offered as evidence that, if women are violent in one context, they can be violent in another.

**No:** Most researchers agree that although women do perpetrate abuse, they do so much less often than men. The U.S. National Incidence Studies on Family Violence revealed that women abuse their children at higher rates than men. However, Straus et al. (1980) commented that these rates "partially reflect their role as primary care takers and the fact that they spend more time with the children than fathers."

Abuse in lesbian couples generally takes the same forms as in heterosexual couples, including physical, psychological and sexual violence (West, 1998). Nevertheless, West's review of the relatively new research focus on lesbian battering suggests that power, control and autonomy issues may play a part in similar ways to the dynamics of abuse in male-female relationships.

Byers and O'Sullivan's 1998 review of studies on the use of sexual coercion concluded that about one fifth of men (18.5%) report having engaged in unwanted sexual activity because of coercion by a woman. They note, however, that such coercion is a much more prevalent problem for women with about 40% of females across studies reporting one or more coercive experiences.

In the case of homicide, Canadian researchers Wilson and Daly (1994) found that, while both partners may be at risk of murder by the other, an estimated "3.2 women have been killed by their husbands for each man killed by his wife" (p. 1). Interestingly, in the United States the rates are equal. Wilson and Daly speculate that the easy availability of handguns equalizes power so that both men and women are at about equal risk of being murdered by the other.

Wilson and Daly (1993) also note that the nature of the homicide is different for men and women:

*Men often pursue and kill estranged wives while women hardly ever behave similarly; men, but not women, kill spouses as part of planned murder-suicides; men perpetrate familicide, killing spouse and children together, while women do not; men, but not women, kill after prolongedly subjecting spouses to coercive abuse; men kill in response to revelations of wifely infidelity, while women almost never react similarly; and women, unlike men, kill mainly in circumstances with strong elements of self-defense or defense of children (p. 288).*

In cross-national studies of aggression, women represent only a small proportion of the violent offender population (Kruttschnitt, 1993). Burbank (1987) also compared cross-cultural studies, finding that, while some adult women are aggressive across cultures, their aggression tends to be directed primarily toward other women. When males are attacked, husbands are the most common victims. Even so, Burbank concludes that female aggression typically results in little injury. A recent meta-analysis of over 60 studies on aggressive behaviour (Bettencourt & Miller, 1996) concluded that men are generally more aggressive than women when there is no provocation. However, the differences between

genders were greatly reduced when provocation was introduced into the experiments. Nevertheless, these researchers found that women differ from men in their perception of whether a situation might result in dangerous retaliation, such that women were less aggressive when they expected danger to be imminent.

**Reaction:** This argument is beside the point. Whether husband abuse or other forms of violence perpetrated by women exist is no longer commonly denied. The question remains, is husband abuse widespread and serious enough to require additional or special services?

In summary, these are the commonly debated issues about husband abuse. While community studies using the CTS have been the major focus of the debate, they do not really provide information about the nature of husband abuse. Studies that focus exclusively on husband abuse are rare and are the topic of the next section.

## The Effects and Nature of Husband Abuse

*She'd provoke me, calling me names, getting right up to my face and go, "Go ahead, hit me". I'd walk away. I am not an abusive kind of guy. If she'd get mad enough, she'd kick me from behind in the scrotum. A couple of times she used scissors. (Gregorash, 1990, p. 52)*

*She was holding me away from the door so I couldn't open the locks... after an hour and a half of trying to get out of the room, my left arm was just black and blue where her fingernails dug in. I was finally able to get out of the room and then in the hallway she grabbed me by the throat and she just stood there shaking me... In the room she grabbed a glass that she threatened to break and use on my person. (Gregorash, 1990, p. 75)*

*She's screaming at me and then she starts cuffing me across the ears to get my attention. She saw that beating me across the ears wasn't working so she started using her fists on the back of my head. She jumped on the bed and started kicking me in the back. I didn't hit back. I just can't. She started hitting me and ripped the clothing off my back. She started biting me in the back. I held her by the hands. She got her right hand free, and came around with a roundhouse and caught me on the left ear. I just about fell over she hit me so hard. At that point I knew the marriage was over. So I left. I went to a co-worker's place. When I took off my shirt he sat down and started to cry. About 60% to 80% of my back, across the arms and shoulders all the way down to my belt, was black and blue. The side of my head was swollen where she hit me. I had a headache for three days. (Tutty, 1997)*

These are the words of three Canadian men who were abused by their wives. Except for the odd newspaper or magazine article on the topic, it is rare to hear such stories. These men claim that few are interested in their abuse because they are men. Further, men who admit to being a victim, especially at the hands of a woman, fear that they will be ridiculed. If these victims had been women, they could have sought help at a shelter for abused women. As men, what options did they have?

While the data from community survey studies suggest that some women abuse male partners who do not strike back, we know little of the extent and the effects of this abuse. There has been almost no systematic study of battered husbands since Steinmetz created the term (Gelles & Cornell, 1990).

Canadian data on individual crime incidents reported to the police in the Uniform Crime Reporting Survey II (Pottie Bunge & Levett, 1998) noted that, of almost 22,000 incidents of assaults on spouses, 89% (19,473 incidents) involved female victims as compared to 11% (2,428 incidents) involving male victims. Some have suggested that male victims may be reluctant to report abuse to the police because of stigma, but to date there is no concrete evidence that they are any more reluctant to do so than women. There are data indicating that even abused women do not necessarily contact the police. The 1993 Violence Against Women Survey found that almost half of the women who feared for their lives, 51% of those who had been assaulted more than ten times and 57% of women who were injured did not report the incidents to police.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> As noted by Statistics Canada, these data are not nationally representative, having been collected from police in only six provinces. The sample was largely urban and 39% of the sample was from Quebec and 38% from Ontario.

As has been the case in expanding our understanding of violence against women, research on violence in dating relationships demonstrates that some men are the targets of aggression from their female dating partners. Simonelli and Ingram (1998) reviewed U.S. studies suggesting that approximately 20% to 30% of the college men who participated in the research reported physical violence in their current relationship. Further, although women are more likely to sustain physical injuries, from 10% to 18% of the male respondents also reported being injured. The results of Simonelli and Ingram's research with 70 male undergraduate students were that 40% reported being the target of at least one violent act in the past year on the CTS. Of these, 29% were the target of severe violence, ranging from being kicked to having had a gun or knife used against them, while only 10% reported using severe violence against their female partner. Simonelli and Ingram conclude by noting that dating violence tends to be reciprocal.<sup>3</sup>

In order to argue the position that husband abuse is of serious concern, authors such as George (1994) and Pearson (1997) typically describe two or three case studies in newspapers, magazine articles and Internet sites. While such stories provide evidence that husband abuse happens, they do not indicate how serious and widespread the problem is. Further, case studies are not research. There is a danger in seeing such cases as typical when, in fact, they may be relatively rare (Schwartz & DeKeseredy, 1993).

Several studies have investigated the psychological effects when men are abused.

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<sup>3</sup> Readers are reminded about the previously described limitations of the CTS and research describing the tendency of men to under report their acts of violence.



A recent Canadian study by Grandin, Lupri and Brinkerhoff (1997) looked at the psychological consequences when men are abused. Grandin, Lupri and Brinkerhoff (1997) compared the effects of being abused for men as well as women in a randomly selected community sample in Calgary. Women victims of physical violence reported higher levels of depression and anxiety than male victims. In the case of psychological abuse, women's distress was higher than men's, although not significantly so. Both men and women who are either psychologically or physically abused in their couple relationship report emotional distress. Interestingly though, couples who were mutually violent reported levels of anxiety and depression that were higher than men and women who were only victims of violence.

Research on couples in marital counselling is another source of information on husband abuse, although typically not the major focus. For example, in Vivian and Langhinrichsen-Rohling's 1994 study of 57 couples in counselling, a sub-group of 10 couples were mostly husband-victimized. The distress shown by both members of these couples was remarkably similar to that in the highly victimized wife group.

Qualitative studies (analyzing in-depth interviews) provide more details about the experience of the respondents and have been important in helping us understand the experiences of abused women (Murphy & O'Leary, 1994; Smith, 1994). Such research may be valuable in understanding male victims as well. It could explore questions such as what kinds of injuries abused men report and whether they fear their partners. Do men feel stigmatized that they have been abused by a woman and are they, therefore, reluctant to seek help?

Two unpublished qualitative studies, both conducted in Alberta, constitute the only available research that attempts to understand the experiences of men who are abused by their wives. Gregorash (1990) interviewed

eight men, while Tutty (1997) reported on ten. Such qualitative studies are limited by small sample sizes, but the in-depth nature of the results is thought to balance the small numbers. Gregorash noted that five additional men considered participating but chose not to, some because they feared recognition and the resulting stigma. Also, men who might have participated may have been unaware of the study, even though the authors interviewed over a period of several years and were looking for more respondents.

The 18 men across both studies ranged in age from 30 to 55. Only one was still married when interviewed; the rest were either separated or divorced. The relationships ranged from several years to 25 years, and most couples had children. There was quite a range in educational background for both men and women. A number of both the men and the women had university degrees and worked as professionals.

Across both studies, much of the abuse was psychological rather than physical, although several men commented that they found the emotional abuse worse. Two men reported no physical incidents, while the others reported at least one incident of physical abuse in which their wives scratched them with fingernails, hit with an object such as a wooden clothes-hanger or fist, or kicked them in the back. Four of the men were kicked or kneed in the groin. The men described their partners as being "enraged", "destroying things with a baseball bat", "attacking with scissors" or "threatening to do damage with a hat pin". One man noted that he had lost teeth in one incident. Several of the men reported fearing their wives during these attacks.

Although 11 of the men reacted to the abuse only by restraining their wives from hurting them, nine men admitted using aggressive behaviours toward their partners at some point. Most of this involved throwing an object, pushing or grabbing, but three men admitted using more force by hitting or

punching and one man forced sexual intercourse on his wife a number of times. Half of the men could thus be described as being in mutually violent relationships.

While some men reported only one or two incidents of serious behaviour on the part of their wives, others noted that the physical attacks were more chronic, occurring throughout the relationship. None of the men contacted a doctor to treat his injuries. Eight men mentioned that at some point their partners either threatened to contact the police to charge them for being abusive or to get a restraining order, or had done so.

The men described the abuse as continuing even after the marital separation. A number were involved in custody disputes and two men complained that they had been unjustly accused of child abuse and one of marital rape.

The physically aggressive acts of the partners against these men are deplorable, yet one might question whether their severity merits the creation of specialized services for men such as shelters or support groups. This is especially important since men's advocates often argue that abuse is equal across genders.

## **A Comparison with Battered Women**

Because a central argument of men's advocates is that men should have similar services as women, it makes sense to compare their abuse with that described by women who seek emergency shelter. The next section describes the experience of 18 Alberta women whose previously conducted interviews were randomly selected from those of 65 women while they resided in a transition house (Tutty, Rothery, Cox & Richardson, 1995).

The 18 women ranged in age from 20 to 44 and had been in relationships with their partners from 2 months to 20 years. Only three did not have children. In terms of ethnicity, two were Canadians of Aboriginal origin and four were immigrants to Canada, two from Asia, one from Europe and one from the Caribbean. The rest were Canadian-born.

Three women reported only psychological abuse from their partner; however, the frequency was substantial and greater than that reported by some of the women who had been physically abused. The levels of physical abuse noted by the other women were high (11 of 16 were in the clinical range as rated by Hudson's Physical Abuse Scale). Seven women reported that their partner had sexually abused them. Overall, the women noted using very low levels of physical behaviours toward their partners (7 of 15 reported no violence, and a further 3 reported only one aggressive behaviour). In only one case was the woman's physical abuse almost as frequent and serious as the man's, in what could be seen as mutual abuse. Four women reported that the police had been involved in the incident that led them to seek

shelter. Seven of the men had a previous criminal record, and nine were violent outside the family.

The descriptions of the nature of the abuse of these 18 women fit the general profile of the 44,516 women who sought emergency shelter in Canada in 1994-95 (Trudeau,1995). Of the 79% of shelter residents who had fled abusive situations, 70% reported physical abuse, 47% had been threatened and 20% indicated that they had been sexually abused. The current partner was identified as the perpetrator in 64% of abuse incidents, an ex-partner in another 21%. Slightly fewer than 25% of the women required medical attention resulting from the latest abusive incident, with 3% needing hospitalization. Thirty-three percent of the women reported the most recent incident to the police who laid charges in 56% of the cases (Statistics Canada, 1994/95).

The nature of the abuse was very severe for 11 of the 18 women. This included one incident in which a woman and her child were kidnapped, kept in a basement for a month and fed only about half the time. Three women stated that their partners repeatedly threatened to kill them and, in some cases, the children as well. The women who were beaten described such incidents as having a head slammed into a wall, ribs fractured, being strangled but not to the point of losing consciousness in an attempt to frighten, having a nose broken and a face battered. Three women needed medical attention for the incident that led them to seek shelter. Two women reported hiding the knives in their home. One woman's husband used to stand her against the wall and throw knives at her. The woman whose ribs had been fractured reported that, as she soaked in the tub for the pain, her husband came in and urinated on her head and face. Two women mentioned that their partners had beaten other women, and one had been jailed for this. Ironically, one woman found that her partner's girlfriend was in the shelter the same time she was.

Johnson's term, "patriarchal terrorism", seems to fit the experience of most of the 18 women. Many expressed being highly fearful in a way that was qualitatively different from the despair and frustration described by most of the men who were abused by their partners. The nature of the abuse against the women extended beyond physical violence, and included sexual assault and extensive control.

In contrast, half of the 18 men in the two qualitative studies noted that the abuse was mutual, at least some of the time. Injuries occurred, but none of the men sought medical aid. More of the men fit Johnson's description of "common couple violence" than the women who sought shelter, especially in regard to the low levels of violence and the low frequency of the aggressive incidents described by the men. This is not to deny that some men are badly injured by women and may need medical assistance and counselling. However, of the small sample of men who were willing to describe their abuse, most did not seek outside resources.

# Perceptions of Husband Abuse by Canadian Family Violence Intervention Practitioners

In an attempt to assess the extent to which husband abuse is seen as a social issue in need of attention in Canada, informal telephone interviews were conducted with 40 representatives from family service agencies, family violence treatment programs such as shelters, male perpetrator treatment groups and men's issues groups. This should not be considered formal research, but rather conversations with practitioners who deal with abuse from each province and territory. One problem with this is that counsellors can estimate only the number of men needing services based on those who are willing to come forward. This may well be a small percentage of those who are actually abused.

Most of the counsellors reported either no male victims or a very small number – less than 5% of their caseload. Nevertheless, each declared that they are concerned about any form of abuse. A number noted that the abuse typically reported by male victims is largely psychological, although several had clients who were badly hurt: one woman stabbed her partner in his sleep, another pinned her partner on the ground, ready to hit his head with a rock. One practitioner reported receiving a recent telephone call from a woman asking for counselling because she had beaten her husband so badly that he was in hospital. Notably, he had not told the medical staff that his wife had caused the injuries.

None of the agencies offered specialized services such as groups for husband abuse, and only one worker suggested the need to do so. A number noted that they would include male

victims in their regular men's perpetrator groups, as the focus is on taking responsibility for one's behaviour and assuring safety. In contrast, three workers whose treatment groups took a different focus claimed that their men's programs would not be appropriate because the other men would "eat them alive". Others typically refer such men to individual or, in some cases, couple counselling, either within their agency or elsewhere.

The counsellors with one or two clients who were the sole victims of wife assault were asked how they made the distinction between them and the majority of male clients who commonly deny their abusive behaviour. Most claimed that the men whom they believed told stories that were strikingly similar to women victims of husband abuse. They tended to minimize their partner's behaviour, had low self-esteem, and admitted feeling both afraid of their partner's aggression and ashamed. They often offered the same rationales for staying in the relationship as abused women. For example, some men did not wish to leave because they feared their children would be abused, or they stated that they loved their partner and simply want the abuse to stop. Some workers mentioned that, because men tend to have more resources, such as money or jobs, than do women, they may be in a better position to leave an abusive relationship. The counsellors also noted that many of the men who were abused refused to be aggressive in return, and a number mentioned that many aggressive women have a history of childhood abuse.

In contrast, men who claimed husband abuse but were primarily abusive often had a long history of documented arrests or their wives had sought emergency shelter. They present with more bravado and blame their partners in a grandiose way, but do not fear their partner's violent acts.

The group leaders of male perpetrator treatment programs noted that at the start of each group most of the men significantly deny

or minimize the extent of their own abusiveness, or blame their wives for “being violent too”. Only over the course of the programs do these men begin to take responsibility for and to admit the extent of their abusive behaviour. For this reason, group leaders were concerned about offering special services to men for husband abuse, and worried that a number of men who are abusive might be better able to continue to deny such behaviours by claiming to be victims. Data collected in Vancouver from both members of 30 couples, the men of which were in treatment for wife assault, support this (Browning & Dutton, 1986). While half of the men admitted being the most violent partner, the other half saw the relationship as mutually violent. In contrast, the women viewed it as husband-violent. The authors noted that, in their experience, “many assaultive husbands emphasize the frequency of violence, while ignoring the fact that their actions caused severe injury or hospitalization to their wives” (p. 378).

A number of counsellors are aware that men feel a stigma about being seen as a victim and that this creates a barrier to their asking for and receiving services. When men do ask for assistance, they not only fear being mocked, they also report having been laughed at by some service providers such as police officers.

In summary, Canadian family violence practitioners report that few men are currently asking for services because their wives are abusing them. When such men do come forward, most are offered individual counselling because, at present, the numbers do not justify the creation of special group programs.

## **What Can Abused Men Do? Reporting and Seeking Assistance**

The majority of the many services developed for family violence are for women victims. Almost no resources have been developed specifically to help abused men, although there seem to be more Canadian agencies offering treatment for aggressive women. There are certainly some barriers to abused men who wish to seek assistance.

One problem is the lack of societal recognition of husband abuse. Flynn (1990), Cook (1997), Macchettio (1992) and George (1994) have all noted that effective treatment and prevention programs will not be developed without professionals and the public acknowledging the problem of husband abuse. Flynn links this non-recognition of the problems with the absence of treatment programs for abused men. This, however, is a major dilemma. On the one hand, until men are willing to come forward, we will not know whether we need specialized services; on the other hand, until we have specialized services, we are being told that men will not come forward.

The idea that men are often reluctant to seek professional help, feeling stigmatized as failures if they admit to problems, is supported in the clinical literature (Gill & Tutty, in press; Williams & Myer, 1992) and was mentioned by the family violence practitioners in telephone conversations across Canada.

Recent American research conducted by Lehmann and Santilli (1996) suggests that violence by women against men is perceived differently than violent acts by men against women. College students reacted to scenarios in which the sex of the perpetrator of partner abuse of varying severity was changed. Both male and female students blamed male victims significantly more than female victims. The researchers interpret their findings to suggest that violence towards men by women is more acceptable. If such views are held generally, this could explain why at least some men are deterred from reporting victimization.

If one looks at the development of shelters and programs for women, these grew from grass-roots women's groups that responded to the large number of women who sought safety (Hebert & Foley, 1997). A similar route for men may prove important not only in acknowledging that men may be victims of sexual abuse and wife assault, but also in developing services. Men's collectives may have a significant part in raising awareness of men's issues.

## Where to Go for Help

The phone conversations with family violence practitioners confirm that currently there are few specialized services for abused men. One exception is an emergency shelter in Alberta that is open for men as well as women clients. Even in this facility, however, women make up the vast majority of residents. The director reported only two male residents in the past nine months – both men with very few resources. Stanko (1995) noted that the one shelter for men in Britain closed for lack of use.

Across the country several private practitioners offer groups for abused men, typically in large urban centres. Notably, British Columbia has an Association of Services for Men that will provide referrals to resources.

Men's organizations are collectives that tend to acknowledge the importance of issues such as husband abuse and father's rights and may be helpful in directing individuals to services (Williams & Myer, 1992). A number of organizations offer telephone crisis services and ongoing men's groups where issues such as husband abuse and father's rights will receive a respectful hearing. Men's collectives may offer self-help groups or crisis phone lines, but they are typically staffed by volunteers and cannot address the full number of requests they receive. One crisis line specific to husband abuse operates in Alberta and reportedly receives two to three phone calls a day. Without funding, most men's organizations are limited in what services they offer. There are several Websites on the Internet that offer toll-free numbers with respect to men's issues, although many are devoted to father's rights.

If specialized services for men are developed, they might look different from those offered to abused women. Pagelow (1984) suggests that because the extent of injury is typically less, the major needs of abused men would be access to legal advice and counselling.

There appear to be more programs across Canada for aggressive women, although these women tend to abuse children as well as husbands. Sommer's recent study in Winnipeg (1994) suggests that intervention programs for aggressive women need to be different from those for male perpetrators. While similar to men's perpetrator groups, programs for women should focus on past abuse issues, particularly having witnessed mothers hitting fathers. They should also address excessive drinking and learning more effective interpersonal skills.

U.S. clinicians Hamberger and Potente (1996) developed a treatment program for women who have been arrested for abusing their partners. While the content areas appear similar to those in many men's treatment programs, the authors found that:

*Most of women who resort to violence against their partners, do so as a direct outgrowth of violence and oppression perpetrated against them in a context that has permitted or encouraged violence to be used as a problem-solving strategy. Of the 67 women treated to date, only 3 clearly exhibited primary perpetrator characteristics and battered their male partners (p. 70).*

As such, they included sessions on safety planning, children's issues and assertiveness training commonly utilized in support groups for victims of woman abuse.

Men who disclose abuse can receive counselling from most family service agencies. Professionals in such agencies tend to use a family systems view with clients. They more

readily accept that some women use violent tactics in relationship conflicts than those who work from a feminist view.

Gender-specific services for women are not typically open to men, although abused men have reportedly received assistance from some, including crisis phone lines in shelters for abused women. Generally, such men are referred to other community resources, as residential services are restricted to women. As such, transition houses are not the best resource for abused men; the staff is often overwhelmed providing services to the large numbers of severely abused women and children seeking safety.

Nonetheless, it is difficult to know what services would be necessary for abused men until we know more, through further research, about how many require and would access such programs.

## Policy Implications

A major concern of some Canadian scholars is that “proving” that women’s aggression is equal to men’s could lead to abandoning society’s support of battered women – for example, by withdrawing funding for shelters, diverting funds to “battered men” and increasing arrests of women where mandatory arrest policies exist. DeKeseredy (1988) contends that “evidence of a ‘battered husband syndrome’ may enable the state to contend that wives are more violent than husbands and therefore, new transition houses (for battered and sexually abused women) are not necessary and existing shelters do not need expansion and refurbishing” (p. 82). In fact, in 1990, Straus and Gelles admitted that their research had been used in court cases against battered women and to minimize the need for transition houses for abused women.

However, if research that supports the seriousness of the problem of husband abuse is considered credible, as Brinkerhoff and Lupri (1988) propose, then policy with respect to law enforcement, for example, must change to take it into consideration. At the moment, however, there is insufficient evidence to support such changes.

## Conclusion

The available evidence that woman abuse is a more serious and widespread social issue in Canada than husband abuse is difficult to refute. Women who live with assaultive husbands suffer violence that is both serious and chronic, and frequently results in life-threatening injuries.

Nevertheless, even the most vocal critics do not deny the existence of husband abuse or that some men are seriously injured by their women partners. At this point, however, there is no evidence that the number of Canadian husband abuse victims warrants the type of specialized services that have been developed for women abuse victims. Nor does the current research support changing the wording of family violence materials from being specific to women victims to being gender neutral.

It is essential to encourage abused men who need services to request such support. Only in this way will professionals become sensitized to the difficulties faced by men and develop services for men who have been abused by women partners, if these are needed. More research on the experiences of abused men is essential to estimate the extent and severity of the problem. The little research conducted to date raises more questions than it answers.



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